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Yme Kuiper

Landed elites, landed estates and lifestyles in Europe (1880-2000)

A historiographical balance and a research agenda

Historical facts are, in essence, psychological facts.
Marc Bloch, *The historian's craft*

24 September 2014. A headline in *The New York Times*: 'Last Mitford Sister and Savior of Estate Dies at 94.' The obituary includes a nice photograph: the stately home of Chatsworth, its surrounding gardens and in front a thoughtful, stylish, elderly grand lady. The caption reads as follows: 'Deborah Cavendish, the Duchess of Devonshire, at her home Chatsworth, in 2003. She transformed Chatsworth, a sixteenth-century mansion, into a self-sustaining family business.'

As one of the six Mitford sisters, daughters of Lord Redesdale, Deborah lived a remarkable life. Her eldest sister Nancy wrote satirical novels about the upper classes and for many years had a French high military officer in Paris as her lover; Diana, the beauty, married a British fascist and her wedding was attended by Hitler and Goebbels; Unity Valkerie was even in love with Hitler and tried to kill herself after Britain declared war on Germany; Jessica, on the other hand, was a communist and fought in the Spanish Civil War against the fascists; Pamela was fond of horses and married a famous jockey. And Deborah? She became an expert on fine poultry and enjoyed hunting with hounds as much as the shooting parties. She was twenty-one when she married Andrew Cavendish, the second son of the tenth Duke of Devonshire. His elder brother was killed in the Second World War and Andrew became the eleventh Duke. He inherited the ancestral possessions in 1950, including a castle in Ireland and Chatsworth, a 35,000-acre estate in Derbyshire, with about 105 acres of gardens, originally designed by Capability Brown, with many meadows and wooded

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English 'national' heritage. The Duchess of Devonshire (Deborah Cavendish, born Mitford) and the privately owned and managed Chatsworth estate, Derbyshire (*coll. Chatsworth House*)

hills. Chatsworth itself has about 300 rooms, 26 bathrooms and 32 kitchens and workshops. The inheritance tax was staggering: nearly £ 20 million. The country house was then outdated and rundown. The new Duke and Duchess were also confronted with high maintenance costs, but the couple found a solution for all this trouble: they sold off artworks and land, 'to pay taxes totalling eighty percent of the estate's value: $ 285 million in today's money'. It would become the lifelong project of the Duchess in particular (the Duke was too busy with booze and mistresses): transforming Chatsworth from a dead duck into a future-proof, sound family business. She invented the Duchess's Marmalade and the Duke's Favourite Sausages; she gave lectures on farming; and, for a time, she mothered the young artist Lucian Freud. She opened restaurants, catering establishments and two hotels nearby. At last, in 2002, Chatsworth was fully self-sufficient for the first time in its history. Deborah and her duke (who died in 2004) lived in 24 rooms in the house. Their son inherited the estate and became the twelfth Duke of Devonshire. When Deborah handed over the keys of Chatsworth to her son and his wife, she wrote: 'They are now at the heart of the Chatsworth *business* – that is what it is all about, country houses nowadays.' More than 600,000 people have visited the complex in recent years.[1]

Is this an exceptional story in the most recent history of the English country house? Yes and no. Yes, if we compare the scale of business and visitor numbers to most of the other English country houses and gardens. With Castle Howard (*Brides-*

1 The Duchess of Devonshire has European equals. Just one example: in November 2014 one of Spain's best-known public figures, the eighteenth Duchess of Alba (aged 88), died. The duchess was superb rich and Spain's greatest private landowner and had palaces throughout the country. Her main residences were in Seville and Madrid and she usually spent the summer in Ibiza or Marbella. The Alba art collection include paintings by El Greco, Velázquez, Goya, Titian and Rembrandt; *The Guardian*, 20 Nov. 2014.

head Revited), Highclere Castle (*Downton Abbey*), Blenheim (Churchill and the Marlboroughs) and some other stately homes, Chatsworth is top of the bill in the heritage (and gardening) industry of England's great houses, still owned and exploited by 'old families' today. Nowadays many country houses are owned by rich people or institutions, and no longer only (or mainly) by the offspring of the nobility or gentry.

A paradigmatic study: the English country house today

The answer is 'no' if we read Peter Mandler's fascinating *The fall and rise of the stately home* (1997). This in many respects revolutionary book deals with the history of England's stately homes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The most surprising and crucial period that the author has deeply researched is that between the Great War and the 1990s. This was also the period of a more or less slow rise in popularity of the National Trust (founded in the UK in 1895) in the 1950s, its steady growth in the 1960s and its spectacular rise in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1920s it had about 1000 members; by 1960 100,000 and in 1970 that had doubled to 200,000 members. By 1990 it had become a real mass movement, with more than two million members.[2] The 1920s and 1930s were especially difficult times for the great aristocratic and gentry landowners and their country houses. Many among this landed elite sold off parts of their estates to their tenants; about a fifth of them even 'fell out of the caste altogether by selling the whole of the heartland'.[3] Between 1914 and 1927 the proportion of English and Welsh arable land held by owner-occupiers rose from eleven to 37 per cent. This partial withdrawal of the old landed elite from the land went hand in hand with an urban rediscovery of the charm of the countryside during the interbellum. A much greater part of the urban population could now identify with the image of the England of the Arts and Crafts movement. Mandler: 'Out went the glamour and collectivism of urban life; in came the quiet and contemplation of the country cottage.'[4] The growing urban presence in the countryside contributed strongly to the disintegration of the old rural order in which the landed elite once had hegemony in all respects. Great estates were breaking up, followed by country houses coming down. Evelyn Waugh's 1945 novel *Brideshead revisited* predicted the definitive blow for the stately homes of England that was just around the corner.

Mandler's book amply shows how things actually went in quite another direction. Firstly, many landowners, both large and small, became farmers again; secondly, after reinventing themselves as agricultural entrepreneurs, they had the time and the money to present themselves as the keepers of 'national heritage'. Of course, this is a much simplified summary of Mandler's rich reconstruction of how the sons and

2 P. Mandler, *The fall and rise of the stately home* (New Haven-London, 1997) 411.
3 Ibidem, 228.
4 Ibidem, 226.

grandsons of 'the old families' in England managed to improve and beautify their estates and country houses in the course of the second half of the twentieth century. The huge staffs of servants, still prominent in the houses before the Second World War, had gone and labour-saving technology came in their place.[5] But the real key to this success story was the market value of commercially well-exploited land. This is quite another story than David Cannadine's account of postwar English aristocracy in his much-cited *The fall and decline of the British aristocracy* (1990).[6] In Mandler's view Cannadine is 'too pessimistic', suggesting that only one-third of the peerage still owned estates in 1956. According to Mandler, a survey of surviving great estates in the mid-1950s shows that more than eighty per cent were still in hands of their pre-1900 owners. A survey in the 1970s makes clear that over half of the historic landowners still owned estates, and that in 1980 half of the families who had owned great estates a century earlier still held great estates, though reduced in size.[7] To summarize the Mandler thesis: during the greatest part of the nineteenth century (until the Agricultural Depression of the 1880s) the aristocratic landed elite held economic and political power in England; the depression dramatically reduced the value of land and the proportion of landed elite MPs in the House of Commons declined rapidly after the 1880s. Figures in Ellis Wasson's *Born to rule. British political elites* make this trend quite clear: from seventy per cent in 1880 to twenty per cent in 1914; the nobility saw the same downward trend: from 25 per cent in 1860 to ten per cent in 1914.[8] From now on the persistence of the aristocracy was no longer the struggle of a corporate group (not even as landed elite) but the strategies and decisions of individual men and women with an aristocratic or landed elite background. Two new roles grew in importance for them in the course of the twentieth century: celebrity in the public sphere, and heritage keeper or promotor, and even fusion and synergy in playing both these roles. In the long run, however, aristocratic visibility became significantly reduced in society at large.

Mandler's book has a paradigmatic attraction for interdisciplinary research on the history of stately homes, country houses, manors, and all other kinds of historic and impressive houses of landed elites, not only for modern England, but also for modern Europe, especially for post-1914 Europe. It is written from the perspective of a *cultur-*

5 James Lees-Milne, the big man of the National Trust, visited his friends 'Debo and Andrew' at Chatsworth in August 1948 and wrote in his diary: 'Neatness and order are the rule although, Andrew says, there are fourteen gardeners instead of forty before the last war.' J. Lees-Milne, *Some country houses and their owners* (London, 1975) 87.

6 D. Cannadine, *The fall and decline of the British aristocracy* (London, 1990).

7 Mandler, *The fall and rise*, 356 and 463 (notes 3 and 4). The proportion of owner-occupied acreage in England and Wales was 38 per cent in 1950 and rose to 49 per cent by 1960. However, as farms were taken in hand, more estate-owners were becoming owner-occupiers. Mandler admits in this context that records of landownership are 'so poor' that varying conclusions about the 'scale of retention' by the aristocracy are hard to avoid. R. Perrott, *The aristocrats* (London, 1968) gives this outcome: 43 per cent of the peerage owned estates in 1968; two-third held more than 5.000 acres.

8 E. Wasson, *Born to rule. British political elites* (Strout, 2000) 101, 155.

al historian, but the study is multi-layered and shows the importance of the dynamics of economic, social, political and artistic aspects for the transformation of the 'landed elite' – once the great aristocratic landowners, England's ruling class – and the country houses that are widely accepted as a crucial part of England's national heritage nowadays. This is one of the riddles of the English country house culture that Peter Mandler wanted to solve with his book: how has *aristocratic* heritage become *national* heritage? Even critics of country house heritage often argue that an elite of country house owners and admirers has succeeded in imposing its taste, its heritage on the nation, he rightly observes. The promotors of country house heritage suggest a strong continuity between aristocratic taste and Englishness. Both critics and promotors share the view that country house 'culture' (lifestyle) and 'heritage' are matters shaped by the rich and the powerful. Challenged by urbanization, industrialization, middle class democracy, and mass culture, these elites had to share economic and political power with the masses in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, in the cultural sphere elite hegemony could be maintained – so the argument goes. Mandler:

> This book tells a very different story about the emergence of a 'national heritage' and the aristocracy's contribution to it. It does so by putting both heritage and the aristocracy back into the wider frame of English history. Elite culture is not something apart from or floating above the social, economic, political and cultural history of the nation. (...) For the country house on its estate has never been solely a matter of taste: it is also an economic unit subject to the vicissitudes of agriculture and the land and art markets, an asset subject to taxation, a target for political attacks on the rich and privileged and an object of planning law and government intervention.[9]

Towards a comparative history of landed elites

Mandler's study is completely in line with the trend in some recent comparative studies on nobility and aristocracy in modern Europe: the period between the French Revolution and the Great War is no longer interpreted in terms of noble or aristocratic decline, decay and decadence. Arno Mayer's *The persistence of the Old Regime. Europe to the Great War* (1981) paved the way by highlighting two points: the importance of agriculture for the tenacity of noble and aristocratic power in the nineteenth century, and the complexity and ambivalence of the relationship between the aristocracy and the middle classes. Unfortunately, he strongly overstressed the aristocratization of the bourgeoisie and, above all, underestimated the rich diversity of forms of landownership in Europe and the variety of the influences of the middle classes on the nobility and aristocracy in different European countries, and even in different regions within these countries.

9 Mandler, *The fall and rise*, 2.

Ellis Wasson's comprehensive study *Aristocracy and the modern world* (2006) is a balanced review of recent research on the transformation of the aristocracy in different European countries (not only Britain, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Germany, France and Russia, but also Italy, Spain, the Low Countries and Scandinavia) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[10] Wasson's inspiring exercise in comparative history focuses especially on the period 1880-1945. Only one chapter deals with the era 1945-2005, with the striking title: 'Where are they now?' The beginning of the answer to this intriguing question can be found in two other studies in comparative history: *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocracies de 1880 à nos jours* (2007) and *Nobilities in Europe in the twentieth century. Reconversion strategies, memory culture and elite formation* (2015). Both collections of essays, full of rich, empirically based case studies, are theoretically inspired and framed by the work of the French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. His reproduction theory and heuristic concepts of 'reconversion of different forms of capital' (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) and 'fields and formation of habitus' are very useful to interpret and explain the transformation of the aristocratic and landed elites of European 'de-nobled' societies during the twentieth century.[11]

In Bourdieu's view, paying a lot of attention to the problems of defining 'nobility', 'aristocracy' or 'elite' is not the most inspiring aim in historical (and sociological), anthropological research; in his eyes this positivist, scientific ritual ignores the most interesting questions about these groups. These refer to their dynamics, the processes of adaptation and reconversion, individual and family strategies, which always imply, to a certain degree, unintended social and cultural consequences for their position in society. How did individual nobles, aristocrats, great landowners, etc. use their social, cultural and symbolic capital in different countries in Europe, in an age of turmoil, revolution, dramatic changes, ethnic cleansing and traumatic wars? Did they still succeed in persuading the rest of society of their specific qualities and abilities, or could they only convince their peers in other European countries of their shared ethos and world-view?[12] In many respects Bourdieu is the French Max Weber. Both share a sociology of agency, structural and cultural processes, and life chances of individuals and groups. Max Weber uses more the intertwined concepts of status consumption and lifestyle (*Lebensführung*, *Lebensstil*), while Bourdieu stresses more habitus (embodied disposition) and the reconversion of different forms of capital.[13]

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10 E. Wasson, *Aristocracy and the modern world* (Basingstoke-New York, 2006).

11 D. Lancien and M. de Saint Martin, eds, *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties de 1880 à nos jours* (Paris, 2007); Y. Kuiper, N. Bijleveld and J. Dronkers, eds, *Nobilities in Europe in the twentieth century. Reconversion strategies, memory culture and elite formation* (Louvain-Paris, 2015).

12 P. Bourdieu, 'Postface. La noblesse: capital social et capital symbolique', in: Lancien and De Saint Martin, eds, *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties*, 385-397.

13 Compare R. Swedberg and O. Agevall, *The Max Weber dictionary. Key words and central concepts* (Stanford, 2016) 192-193; P. Bourdieu, *The logic of practice* (Stanford, 1990).

The French collection of essays from 2007 refers to a conference held in Toulouse in 1994. Given the dominant position of British research in the European historiography of nobility, aristocracy, gentry and landed elite in the last quarter of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that nine of the 22 essays in this book are about Britain (and published in English; the remaining articles are in French), and some of them about English landed society (by F.M.L. Thompson) and Britain's great landowners (by Barbara English). A biographical sketch of Winston Churchill (by Roland Quinault) even had the explicit aim to correct David Cannadine's lively portrait of Churchill as at heart 'an aristocrat and a dynast' (his habitus, to borrow the Bourdieu label) – Churchill had adapted himself to the new democratic ethos and believed that he had succeeded in his career on his own efforts and abilities.[14]

The core argument in the article by F.M.L. (Michael) Thompson, the great inspirer of research on English landed society in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, is that from a purely British, insular view, the remnants of its old landed aristocracy in the 1980s were less wealthy, less powerful and less prominent than their forebears in the 1880s. Viewed in a European context the whole period looks more like an 'amazing success story'. Where, for example, the Russian, Habsburg and German aristocracies had been impoverished, forced into exile, expropriated or liquidated, the British aristocrats survived in large numbers, many still living off profit-generating portions of their ancestral lands, profiting also from a good education and easy access to lucrative positions in business, banking, and the cultural sector. Even in the broader category of 'today's elite', descendants of the old noble and aristocratic families are a significant element – more by virtue of their property and possessions than their peerages. In 1880 the correspondence between 'nobility' and 'landed aristocracy' (the great landowners) was as close as it had ever been. After the influx of industrialists into the peerage, the gap between these groups widened more and more. As the generations have passed – Thompson writes – 'it has become borne in on the landed aristocracy that there are no particular rewards or benefits, beyond the sentimentality of family pride or the speculative off chance that land might in the future outpace other assets in capital appreciation, in striving to hold on to the greatest possible acreage.' So here we are: in the 1990s the owner of 5-6,000 acres, or even of 3,000 acres, is a great landowner, and, do not forget, the lineal descendant of the 10,000 acre landed aristocrat of the 1880s.[15]

So, what about the *country houses*, then and now? Thompson makes clear that just as the selling off of parts of the family estates did not cause a general collapse of the landed element in the old landed aristocracy, it is equally misleading to interpret the

14 R. Quinault, 'Winston Churchill and the aristocracy', in: Lancien et De Saint Martin, eds, *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties*, 279-288.

15 F.M.L. Thompson, 'English landed society in the twentieth century', in: Lancien et De Saint Martin, eds, *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties*, 16.

selling and demolition of country houses, often loudly lamented by the heritage lobby, as the end of aristocratic country house culture – on the contrary. 'The fate of the country houses since 1880 confirms the picture conveyed by looking at the fate of the ownership of land: most of the landed aristocracy have survived, it is the gentry who have gone to the wall.' And the houses now owned by the National Trust? Even these houses, in which the original owners frequently live in parts of the grand houses of high architectural quality, include few that were handed over by the front rank of the landed aristocracy.[16]

Another collection of essays, published in 2004, deals with the *Werdegang* of the nobility in Germany, contextualized by German and European history in, again, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of the fifteen essays are in German and only two 'national' case studies are in English: one about the over-representation of Dutch nobles (born in the twentieth century) in elite positions in twentieth-century Dutch society, and the other about the fall and rise of the British aristocracy, written by (who else?) Peter Mandler. It is the only article in the book that focuses on the landed elite. Even more explicitly than in his monograph, Mandler states the following about the relationship between land and lifestyle: to save the country house in private ownership, you need the land; many aristocrats even consider the land a higher good in its own right. Interestingly, the Historic Houses Association represents 1500 owners of historic houses, but only 350 of these country houses are regularly open to the public. Obviously, invisibility and privacy are highly valued in this 'new landed elite' of country house owners in the twenty-first century.[17]

This German collection of essays focuses on two topics: first, the different strategies of the nobilities in Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, France, Poland and, of course, Germany to stay on top in society, and, second, how did the men and women within these 'traditional' elites experience the major transformations and ruptures in society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. Relatively new here is the shift in perspective from an economic-social approach to a cultural-historical approach, including a history of mentalities, based on research on personal documents and memoirs. We do not meet in this book the Prussian Junkers as great landowners, but more as disillusioned nationalists and 'men of power', who thought that their world had been completely smashed in November 1918 when Germany lost the war and *der Kaiser* fled to the Netherlands. For this account of the development of the political and economic hegemony of the Prussian landed elite between the 1880s and 1945, we have to go back to Hans-Ulrich Wehler's collection of essays (all in German) published in 1990: *Europäischer Adel 1750-1950*.[18]

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16 Thompson, 'English landed society', 23-24.

17 P. Mandler, 'The fall and rise of the British aristocracy', in: E. Conze and M. Wienfort, eds, *Adel und Moderne. Deutschland im europäischen Vergleich im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Köln, 2004) 57.

18 H.-U. Wehler, ed., *Europäischer Adel 1750-1950* (Göttingen, 1991).

Rittergut Sellendorf in Brandenburg, Germany, around 1860 (*coll. Alexander Drucker*)

Connoisseur of Prussian history Francis L. Carsten wrote a contribution about the Prussian nobility. Of the 15,000 estates (*Güter*) in the East Prussian provinces in the 1880s, 52 per cent had bourgeois owners and 48 per cent were in noble hands. But the nobility owned 68 per cent of the estates with more than 1000 ha. At the top we find the Fürst von Pless with 83 estates (70,000 ha) and, in second place, the Dohna family with 34 estates (47,000 ha). Only a small part of the estates was entailed, mostly by noble families; in 1910 only seven per cent of the total amount of land was entailed (*Fideikommisse*).[19] Paradoxically, the transfer of many noble estates to bourgeois families in the course of the nineteenth century made the position of the nobility even stronger in Prussian society. Bourgeois *Gutsbezitzer* identified themselves with the nobility and were very cooperative in the new agricultural societies, in which nobles usually took the lead. In the same period (1871-1918) many bourgeois families were ennobled. During the Third Reich the nobility lost their political influence, Carsten wrote, and the year 1945 sounded the definitive end of the Prussian *Junkertum*.[20]

In his 2003 *Vom Rittergut zum Grossgrundbesitz* René Schiller makes an impressive reconstruction of the process of economic and social transformation of the landed elites of the Prussian province Brandenburg during the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. On the one hand his long term perspective is in line with Carsten's view that the Prussian nobility (especially the big landowners) showed much tenacity in staying on top of Prussian society (in 1918 two-third of all *Rittergüter* – manors; 'feudal' estates – were still in noble hands); on the other hand Schiller makes clear that this nobility faced hard times during the first half of the nineteenth century, and

19 F.L. Carsten, 'Der Preusische Adel bis 1945', in: Wehler, ed., *Europäischer Adel*, 119-120.
20 Ibidem, 125.

– perhaps even more important with regard to Carsten's essay – the new great bourgeois landowners did not really assimilate with the noble landowning families. Only the ennobled bourgeois families came much closer to the old *Junker*-families.[21] The *Rittergut*-world of the nobles stayed a very different one from that of the rich and educated bourgeois landowners. Even prominent industrial entrepreneurs or bankers (actually only representing about ten percent of all bourgeois great landowners around 1900) did not give up their urban lifestyle and orientation. Another crucial result of Schiller's research is his refutation of the hypothesis (Schiller himself uses the term *topos*) that the new bourgeois landowners were responsible for agricultural innovation and modernisation. Not only bourgeois owners but also noble ones, and the technical staff of both groups, were involved, he argues. And there was one important aspect of the lifestyle of the landed nobility that could function as a bridge for the noble and bourgeois families in the countryside since the last quarter of the nineteenth century: the passion for hunting.[22] Schiller's book shows a good balance between quantitative research and prosopography. Besides it highlights the important intertwinement of inheritance laws (in particular the *Familienfideikommiss*), marriage patterns and career perspectives. Research on inheritance patterns and practices will always remain, of course, crucial themes for a comparative history of landed elites.

An overview of the European field: differences and resemblances

So far I have not made explicit the problems of studying a comparative history of the landed elites in Europe between 1880 and 2000. Let us face them now by making some comments about two inspiring studies in this field of comparative research. My first example is *The European way. European societies in the 19th and 20th centuries*, published in 2004 and edited by the German social historian Hartmut Kaelble. The essays by Jürgen Kocka on the 'middle classes' and by Maria Malatesta on the 'landed aristocracy' are particularly relevant for this historiographical contribution.

In Kocka's view the 'middle class' is not just a category but a social formation, 'whose members share situational characteristics, a sense of belonging together, common attitudes and values, as well as a disposition for common behaviour and actions'. Nothing really changes if we substitute 'middle class' with 'landed elite' – it is a perfect, rather open definition of the term. However, the English concept of 'middle class' is not identical to its equivalents in French, German or Italian: the *bourgeoisie*, the *Bürgertum*, the *borghesia*. It is a chameleon among definitions, Kocka admits immediately. Descriptive, analytical and normative layers are intertwined and sometimes hard to differentiate.[23] In the context of this article, it is very clear that Kocka's 'mid-

21 R. Schiller, *Vom Rittergut zum Grossgrundbesitz. Ökonomische und soziale Transformationsprozesse der ländlichen Eliten in Brandenburg im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2003) 489-490.

22 Ibidem, 496.

23 J. Kocka, 'The middle classes in Europe', in: H. Kaelble, ed., *The European way. European societies in the*

dle class' does not include the aristocracy, the nobility or the peasants (or farmers). But what about the *landed elite*? For example, bankers, merchants, industrialists, professors, judges, politicians, and so on, who bought estates, built country houses and, after some time, enjoyed hunting in the countryside. Have they – with an eye to their landed possessions and lifestyle – joined the ranks of the landed elite? Of course, they have. All over Europe we can find plenty of examples of this process of appropriation of a landed lifestyle in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

There is another terminological puzzle: should it be middle class or middle classes? Landed elite or landed elites? It all depends. Historians who want to stress the heterogeneity of both social formations prefer the plural form. Thus the plural term has great advantages in reflections on regional and national differences. But that is just one side of the coin in comparative history, highlighting differences. Comparative historians are not only interested in differences but also in resemblances. To demarcate our field of interest, for example, we do not need perhaps strict definitions; what we need is a sort of enumeration of striking characteristics (aspects) – to stick to our examples – of the terms 'middle class' or 'landed elite'. Perhaps terms that are even a little more concrete than Kocka's provisional definition of 'middle class as social formation'. Wasson defined the concept of 'aristocracy' in his experiment in comparative history, *Aristocracy in the modern world*, using the indicators: *noble* status, substantial *landed* wealth, political power, high social position, living nobly, and 'noble' values. A mixture of qualities, he writes, that makes it possible to identify aristocrats in the nineteenth century.[24] The most radical aspect of this definition is the exclusion of – in Wasson's own terms – 'the provincial gentry'. His argument for doing so is not the strongest that we can imagine: 'due to limitations of space'. The gentry played a vital role, he admits, 'but they were often at odds with the aristocracy, and their story deserves its own historian' (in my view, this is a much stronger argument). To return to Kocka: 'The middle classes' relation to the nobility is a crucial factor that varied substantially from country to country', he remarks. Even more important is his observation that the permeability of the upper class (compare Wasson's 'aristocracy', my 'landed elite') did not weaken its standing, power and consistency. Kocka is referring here to the British situation.[25] The gulf that separated the nobility and the gentry on the one hand and the upper middle-class groups on the other was obviously less significant than on the Continent.

But what about the Scandinavian countries, the Low Countries, France and Northern Italy in this late nineteenth-century context? This is the last puzzle in Kocka's article. In post-revolutionary France, society and culture were dominated in the nineteenth century for a long time by a relatively new elite: *the notables*. In contrast to

19th and 20th centuries (New York-Oxford, 2004) 37 (note 10).

24 Wasson, *Aristocracy*, 11-12.

25 Kocka, 'The middle classes', 19-20.

Central and Eastern Europe, Kocka argues, there was a tendency towards the blending of aristocratic and middle class politics. The differences between their cultures were certainly still there, but the proximity and interconnectedness of aristocracy and high bourgeoisie is undeniable. A similar sort of tendency towards blending (but with some striking differences) was also manifest in England and Italy, Kocka hypothesizes.[26]

Maria Malatesta's article on the 'landed aristocracy' in Europe (between 1800 and 1914) is complementary to Kocka's essay. In her view one of the most crucial developments in nineteenth-century Europe was social mobility. In contrast to Eastern (and Central?) Europe, parts of the urban and rural bourgeoisie of Western Europe were attracted by the lifestyle of the landed elites in many countries (or specific regions within these countries) and had purchased land for recreational reasons or as an investment, or for a combination of both. The concept of 'landed aristocracy' refers here to two basic dimensions; first, a notion of restricted mobility (via landownership, a sort of prerogative of the upper classes), and second, this social formation acted as a composite elite with noble and bourgeois elements. In other words, as a 'landed elite' these landed aristocracies exercised economic and political power and had to cope with processes of economic and social change. In order to defend their identity as landed aristocracy, these elites developed reproductive and corporate strategies, which became manifest in practices such as restricted inheritance, preferential marriage and exclusive lifestyle.[27]

All over Europe the landed aristocracy was usually identified with large estates in the nineteenth century. However, landownership with large estates did not always imply a concentration of landed possessions or large-scale (commercial, market-oriented) farming with innovative tenants. So there were also the Sicilian and Andalusian *latifundia*, noted for the absenteeism of their landlords and their oppression of the peasantry.[28] Large estates of landed magnates (as in England, Scotland, Prussia, Russia, Austria, Hungary, Poland) hardly existed in Scandinavia or in the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands). Industrialization and commercial farming could go hand in hand in Western Europe. Around 1900 the southern and eastern zones of Europe still had an agricultural population ranging from 65 to 90 per cent; in France and Germany this population had declined to about forty per cent, while in England and Belgium agriculture represented an even smaller portion of the national economy at that time. Undoubtedly, Northern Europe held the lead in further developing

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26 Ibidem, 21.

27 M. Malatesta, 'The landed aristocracy during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', in: Kaelble, ed., *The European way*, 44-61; see, for the concept of landed aristocracy, ibidem, 45.

28 See for Spain: E.E. Malefakis, *Agrarian reform and peasant revolution in Spain* (New Haven, 1970). The nobles with great estates in Southern Spain owned complexes of around 6000 or 7000 acres; compare also H. Driessen, *Agro-town and urban ethos in Andalusia* (Nijmegen, 1981). And for a *longue durée*-study of a Sicilian estate (*latifondo*): A. Blok, *The mafia of a Sicilian village 1860-1960. A study of violent peasant entrepreneurs* (New York, 1974).

rent capitalism based on innovative, commercial farming, strongly stimulated by urbanization in different countries and regions. The Great Agricultural Depression of the years 1873-1896 was a watershed that had a tremendous impact on the landed aristocracies all over Europe. One of the strategies to soften its effects was the conversion of agricultural rent into urban rent. Nevertheless, the landed elites of Italy and Spain, at that time still agricultural nations, did not leave the countryside *en masse*. In Northern Italy the landed elite even demonstrated a new entrepreneurial impetus, accompanied by land reclamation in the Po Valley.[29] Finally, landed aristocracies in several European countries were involved in the rise of the agronomy and the foundation of agrarian associations in the second half of the nineteenth century. Both can be interpreted as aspects of a defence strategy that was successful for quite a long time.

Kocka and Malatesta refer in their essays most of the time to processes and transformations that characterised the nineteenth-century situation. So what about the landed elites (including landed aristocracies) and their lifestyles (here broadly defined as the possession of 'stately homes', 'country houses', 'manors houses' or 'historic houses') in the course of the twentieth century? Here we can also introduce three watersheds that had important repercussions for landed elites and the ownership of large (more than 5000 ha), medium-large (between 1000 and 5000 ha) and smaller (between 500 and 1000 ha) estates in Europe: the Great Agricultural Depression of the late-nineteenth century, the Great War and the Second World War.[30] Of course, these proposed estate sizes are in many respects arbitrary, but when practising comparative history we have to make some choices. As for the nineteenth century, there is considerable consensus among historians that the (landed) aristocracy stayed rich, and many even stayed rich into the twentieth century. But who, where and until when? It is also true that aristocratic incomes declined relatively in comparison to those of the great businessmen and captains of industry, and also probably in comparison to many members of the high bourgeoisie. Wasson is completely right when he writes in this context that most of the data are very tricky, because for the wealth of aristocrats often only the acreage owned has been calculated and not their urban properties, shares in banks and portfolios of stocks and bonds.[31] We really need more regional case studies to sharpen our insights here.

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29 Malatesta, 'The landed aristocracy', 56.

30 In the British situation in the nineteenth century, entry into the landed elite ('landed society') could start with ownership of roughly 1000 acres (with a landed income of £ 1000 a year) and membership of the landed super-elite referred to 5000 acres and a very grand country house. F.M.L. Thompson, 'Aristocracy, gentry, and the middle classes in Britain, 1750-1850', in: A.M. Birke et al., eds, *Middle classes, aristocracy and monarchy* (München-London, 1989) 17.

31 Wasson, *Aristocracy*, 112.

Case studies

A very rich and inspiring case study is Anthony Cardoza's *Aristocrats in bourgeois Italy. The Piedmontese nobility, 1861-1930.* The nobles of Piedmont contributed greatly to the process of unification in Italy, were famous for their service ethic, and Piedmont itself led economic modernization and industrial development in Italy. Regarding the historical and regional differences between aristocracies in Italy, the Piedmontese nobility seems to be one of the most homogeneous. Were these nobles just not ready for a process of fusion with the middle class in the late nineteenth century? Cardoza shows convincingly that the answer has to be 'no'. Using probate inventories and by reconstructing educational and career data, the author argues that the Piedmontese nobility remained a landed elite for a long time, and the wealth of these nobles came almost exclusively from their estates.[32] Many among them made military careers and their social lives were very exclusive, avoiding contact with non-noble families. In their marriage patterns they cherished their endogamy and were very attached to the Church. Contact between the old and new elites was limited to the public and political spheres before the Great War. However, important changes happened around 1900, triggered by the Agricultural Depression. The traumatic effects of war, rapid industrialization, agricultural problems and the rise of mass politics forced noble families to convert their economic, social and cultural capital: they shifted their investments from farming to urban properties and stocks, gained positions on industrial boards, married more non-noble partners and attended university more often. Even in the first decades after the Second World War, these old families were still a relatively rich and prominent component of Piedmontese high society, but at a high price: they had abandoned many of the customs and traditions that had once distinguished them in town and country – even their gentlemen's club *Società del Whist* had to merge with the bourgeois *Accademia Filarmonica*. Most of the noble families in Turin now earn their money in the worlds of finance, industry, and commerce.[33]

This Piedmontese case study of a landed elite that adapted to radically changing political, economic and cultural conditions in the twentieth century has many points of similarity with the transformation of landed elites and their lifestyles elsewhere in Europe. Around 1850 the landed elite of the province of Frisia (Friesland; most of them nobles) was the most successful and rich group of landowners in the Netherlands. They could profit from a highly commercialized and specialized agricultural economy that strongly flourished in the nineteenth century due to the rising urban demand in England for dairy products.[34] During the Great Agricultural Depression

32 A. Cardoza, *Aristocrats in bourgeois Italy. The Piedmontese nobility, 1861-1930* (Cambridge, 1997).

33 A. Cardoza, 'Strategies of social reproduction and reconversion within the Piedmontese aristocracy (1880-1940)', in: Lancien and De Saint Martin, eds, *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties*, 184.

34 Y. Kuiper, *Adel in Friesland 1780-1880* (Groningen, 1993) 459, 563-566. Of the hundred greatest landowners of the Netherlands 34 lived in Frisia in the mid-nineteenth century, while only eight per cent of

in the 1880s and 1890s this Frisian elite of great landowners did not sell their landed assets, but just waited for better times. Many families migrated to other parts of the Netherlands in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but the portfolios of their possessions show that they had stayed great landowners in this period. A century later this landed elite, which like the one in Piedmonte had for a long time stuck to lands that they rented to relatively large tenant farmers and to a sort of landed lifestyle at their manors, had totally changed: only a handful of their most prominent country houses are still there and the offspring of these once so enormously rich noble Frisian families now live in other regions of the Netherlands or abroad; a relatively high percentage have reached elite positions in current Dutch society.[35]

The same kind of overall trends can be found in the Scandinavian countries.[36] Take for instance Finland. From 1900 onwards, in the Savo region we can see a process of restructuring of the landed society. Most of the manors once owned by the gentry were taken over by well-to-do Finnish farmers, and other manors gradually became summer residences. Some noble families, however, showed a sort of devotion to their estates and were involved in intensifying agricultural practices, with some of their members holding university degrees in agriculture. This devotion was combined with the introduction of modern, international fashions, in particular tennis or motor cycling. Things changed drastically after the Second World War. Gone was the dominance of nobles in the manor-owning group; their individual careers were strongly attached to the new professions and the care for a manor became more and more a kind of sacrifice, depending on family obligations.[37]

Finally, for a recent and promising *cultural* historical approach in the study of landed elites we have to go back to England. In their 2012 *Man's estate. Landed gentry masculinities 1660-1900* Henry French and Mark Rothery argue that male dominance on the English landed estate continued more or less for a period of about two and a half century. Research on masculinity is, of course, next to a focus on femininity, core busi-

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the total Dutch population lived in this northern region of the country at that time. Next was the province of South-Holland with 21 landowners; most of them were absentee landowners, living in or near the town of The Hague.

35 J. Dronkers and H. Schijf, 'The transmission of elite positions among the Dutch nobility during the 20th century', in: Conze and Wienfort, eds, *Adel und Moderne*, 65-86.

36 See for Sweden: G. Norrby, 'Nobility under transformation. Noble strategies and identities in nineteenth century Sweden', *Virtus. Yearbook of the history of nobility*, XIV (2007) 157-175. Noble landowners had an easy access to Swedish parliament since 1866 and they were already involved into the trends of innovation in agriculture. Around 1900 many nobles 'seem to have grown tired of rural life' and went over to business and industry. And for Denmark: J. Erichsen and M. Venborg Pedersen, eds, *The Danish country house* (Aarhus, 2015). The authors rightly stress: 'The [Danish] manor is clearly a historical phenomenon that has meant something in the past and still means something today, although what it means has changed repeatedly throughout history.' Following Girouard, they characterize the Danish manor as a *power house*; they estimate that Denmark has about 700 manors nowadays; Ibidem, 20-21.

37 A.M. Åström, 'Continuity and change. The case of the Savo gentry in Finland', in: Lancien and De Saint Martin, eds, *Anciennes et nouvelles aristocraties*, 173-186.

The Magic of the English Garden: Sissinghurst Castle Garden, now owned by the National Trust (*coll. National Trust*)

ness in gender history. The authors investigated the social practices of the reproduction and adaptation of masculine values and norms on four crucial fields: schooling, university, foreign travel (including the Grand Tour), and marriage and family life. Their most important primary sources were thousands of letters, that were written and exchanged by parents, children, siblings, and other persons who were involved into this group's culture. Notwithstanding big intellectual transitions like the Enlightenment and the Romantic Period, at heart the masculine hegemony did not disappear. Citing here the authors: 'The deepest components of the *habitus* of elite masculinity were the least susceptible to change. (...) They included all the principles of classical *virtù*, and the "hounour culture" by which it was sanctioned, defended, and policed.'[38] Alas, Bourdieu has crossed the Channel too. Did nothing change then? The authors rush to add something to their core argument: in fact (and now playing the card of the Annales School in French history), change was visible at the *conjectural* and *surface*

38 H. French and M. Rothery, *Man's estate. Landed gentry masculinities 1660-1900* (Oxford, 2012) 245.

layers. After 1850 British society changed rapidly; the landed elite became increasingly accommodated within a broader upper class with professionals, educated business-men, lawyers and officials. Part of the ruling classes the spokesmen of the landed elite more and more tried to position themselves as the country's 'natural leaders' – including 'shifting discourses of "politeness", "sensibility", "sincerity", and [even; YK] "chivalry".'[39] Referring to recent research (including their own) the authors suggest that 'the First World War did not quite mark the end of the aristocratic and landed elites (...). As the "elite" widened, so did the normative bounds of the habitus in which they were located (...). They were swamped within a larger, more homogenous "moneyed" upper class.'[40]

As the Duchess of Devonshire experienced – and she was certainly not the only one to whom the business of gardening and garden architecture offered a way out of the misery of managing stately homes – the rose garden (and all those other garden attractions) could attract an endless stream of mostly urban, female visitors to these houses.[41] Gender history and garden history seem to be a promising match for a cultural history of lifestyle of 'landed' elites. Indeed, with quotes – how 'landed' did the landed elites stay in England, on the Continent, and all over Europe in the course of the twentieth century? This is, of course, not a plea to interpret the garden as an essential female domain but to have a keen eye for the changing role of women in gardening and garden design in elite circles in early-modern and modern times, including their female images and representations.[42]

Final remarks

In this article I have discussed landed elites even more than their corresponding lifestyles. For the general public – and here we go again – the stately homes of England, and also, of course, the *chateaux* in France, the *Schlösser* in Germany, the Palladian *ville* in Italy, the *castillos* in Spain, and so on and so on, are of much more interest than professional reconstructions of great and smaller landownership in Europe's history. At first sight heritage studies seem to have a more prominent future than historical elite studies or the comparative history of landed elites. However, heritage studies which are not based on scholarly cultural history (including especially research on lifestyle and material culture) carry the risk to become blind or even to digress into nostalgia or myth-making. More than in any other European country it looks as

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39 Ibidem, 247.

40 Ibidem, 248.

41 See also D. Cannadine, 'Portrait of more than a marriage. Harold Nicholson and Vita Sackville-West revisited', in: idem, *Aspects of aristocracy. Grandeur and decline in modern Britain* (London, 1994) 210-241.

42 Compare S. Bennett, *Five centuries of women and gardens* (London, 2001); A.M. Backer, *Er stond een vrouw in de tuin. Over de rol van vrouwen in het Nederlandse landschap* (Rotterdam, 2016).

if in Britain a sort of common ground for the professional historian and the cultural tourist has developed. The former is constantly debating with one another about how open (or not) England's landed elite was in the nineteenth century, or how much the attraction of this landed society has been an obstacle to the development of the British economy in the twentieth century, or how typically 'English' the stately home (the great country house) was and is.[43] The latter category is longing – we hope – not only for drama series in and around country houses, but also for well-researched documentaries and books about these houses, of which there seems to be about 4000 in England (included not only the great ones but also the more modest historic houses and manors). Coffee table books abound nowadays, but few of them have the qualities of Mark Girouard's books on the life in the English country house (or French castles), published almost four decades ago.

'What were country houses for? They were not originally, whatever they may be now, just large houses in the country in which rich people lived. Essentially they were power houses – the houses of a ruling class.' These are Girouard's famous opening lines of his 1978 *Life in the English country house*. His next paragraph starts as follows:

> This power was based on the ownership of land. But land was not important to country-house owners because they were farmers. There were many exceptions over the centuries, but on the whole they did not farm for profit and often did not farm at all. The point of land was the tenants and rent that came with it.

See here not only a perfect start for research on the English country house, but also on the European country house. Certainly if we read further:

> Land, however, was little use without one or more country houses on it. Land provided the fuel, a country house was the engine which made it effective. (...) Country houses were designed for pleasure as well as power. (...) During the nineteenth century the upper classes lost their monopoly of power. They were increasingly ruling in partnership with the middle classes from the towns.[44]

Girouard is still a good read for researchers who feel involved in building up a comparative history of landed elite and lifestyle in twentieth century Europe. Particularly relevant is his epilogue on the Indian Summer of the English country house culture in the period 1900-1940. Land was no longer a safe investment and out went the mystique of the possession of land. But the magic of the country house remained and was

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43 L. Stone and J.C. Fawtier Stone, *An open elite? England 1540-1880* (Oxford, 1984); M. Wiener, *English culture and the decline of the industrial spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge, 2004); Cannadine, *Aspects of aristocracy*, including the beautiful miniature: 'Portrait of more than a marriage. Harold Nicholson and Vita Sackville-West revisited', 210-241, and the sharp, pointed conclusion 'Beyond the country house', 242-245.

44 M. Girouard, *Life in the English country house. A social and architectural history* (New Haven-London, 1978) 2-3.

even revitalized after the Second World War, as we have seen earlier in this article. It looks as if power houses are transformed now into treasure houses in Europe. Nowadays many people are longing for seeing behind the scenes of the living culture of the (old) rich and famous. Movies and television series triggered this collective curiosity enormously. Modern aristocratic culture, like modern monarchy, has become a platform for celebrities, who know that not only their public performance but especially their private life are good food for a hungry big audience, sharing 'society news' at high speed with one another in the new media. What is also very intriguing now is the mass phenomenon of a sort of romantic love for the countryside all over Europe, the interest in landscapes as part of the heritage industry, the acquisition of farms and cottages as new residences.[45] The British 'cult of the country house' since the 1980s, as (ironically?) criticized by Cannadine and Girouard, is part of the rise of 'the heritage movement' (including an impressive portion of nostalgia) in the western world.[46] It all started in the gulf of urbanization in many countries around 1900, but it seems to be achieving a new impetus in our times. How interesting to see that in such a 'bourgeois' country as my own, the Netherlands, many private estate owners have been indispensable in the promotion of nature conservation during the twentieth century. The Nature Scenery Act of 1928 freed many of them of heavy taxation pressures and their endangered estates (most of them also including forests) could be saved. Thanks to the careful registration of these estates protected by law, we now know that in the interbellum nine of the ten (or seventeen of the first 25) estates were held by noble families; all of them were more than 1000 ha. in size. In 1970 the noble share in the total of protected acres had dropped from 61 to 47 per cent, but the ten greatest estates were still in noble hands.[47] This demonstrates the remarkable tenacity of the relationship between land and lifestyle in this 'landed elite'.

This brings us, at last, to the inevitable question that we always will meet in research on landed elites, including their rich diversity of lifestyles, in twentieth-century Europe when we are confronted with a case study: is this really so exceptional? Only by comparing we will know.

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45 See for the heritage industry: D. Lowenthal, *The heritage crusade and the spoils of history* (Cambridge, 1998) 65: 'Stately Home and Grand Tour legacies turned private owners [from the landed elites; YK] into public curators. Exhibiting treasures built at home and bought abroad, great houses opened their doors on occasion even to the hoi polloi.'

46 M. Girouard, *Town and country* (London, 1992) 9; D. Cannadine, 'Nostalgia', in: idem, *The pleasures of the past* (Glasgow, 1990) 256-271; D. Cannadine, 'Beyond the country house', in: idem, *Aspects of aristocracy*, 242-245.

47 W. Verstegen, 'Adel en natuurschoon in Nederland 1928-1973', *Virtus. Yearbook of the history of nobility*, XIX (2009) 177-194; see also, idem, 'The Nature Scenery Act of 1928 in the Netherlands', *Forest history today* (2015) 4-12.

Yme Kuiper

Landed elites, landed estates and lifestyles in Europe (1880-2000)

A historiographical balance and a research agenda

The landed aristocracy of Europe was usually identified with large estates in the nineteenth century. The growing twentieth-century urban presence in the countryside contributed strongly to the disintegration of the old rural order in which the landed elite once had hegemony in all respects. But how adequate is the popular image of great estates that were breaking up, followed by country houses coming down – a process that should have taken place all over Europe, especially after the Second World War? The goal of this article is to evaluate the recent historiography of European landed elites, their estates and lifestyles in the twentieth century. Using the study of Peter Mandler on the recent popularity of the English stately home as a paradigm for a cultural historical approach of life style and heritage, the article continues with studies on several developments of the landed elites in other European countries. This experiment in comparative European history shows a rich diversity of research results, but is also a plea for a cultural history on landed society and lifestyle that has a keen eye for the chimera of myth-making and nostalgia that sometimes emerges on the field of heritage studies.

Professor Yme Kuiper holds the endowed chair Historic Country Houses and Landed Estates at the Department Art History / Centre for Landscape Studies of the University of Groningen. He is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology and Anthropology of Religion at the same university.

University of Groningen, Oude Boteringestraat 34, 9712 GK Groningen, The Netherlands – y.b.kuiper@rug.nl

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