The Age of Nature: Tracing the influence of Émile on the representation of boyhood in *The Brummell Children* and the opening chapters of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*

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No summary can do justice to the diversity of formative experience available in the late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century to the children of the ruling élite. In this article, I hope to explore the influence of Émile, or *On Education* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the representation of three pre-adolescent boys from two distinct eras. Joshua Reynolds’s portrait of The Brummell Children, commissioned in 1781, depicts the two sons of the senior civil servant William Brummell. The comparative text is the semi-autobiographical recreation of the boyhood of Thomas Hughes in his novel *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, first published in 1857.

Boyhood: n.f. [from boy.] The state of being a boy; the part of life in which we are boys. This is perhaps an arbitrary word. - Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)

The publication of *Émile*, or *On Education* in 1762 by Jean-Jacques Rousseau remains a significant milestone on the journey towards the more enlightened view of childhood that had emerged by the publication of Thomas Hughes’s famous school story. Before 1762, to breastfeed your own child was ‘swinish’, babies were tightly swaddled, and parents of means would keep their young children at a distance. Until the age of three or four years old, children of wealthy parents living in town were typically sent to a wet nurse in the country, or, if based in the country, cared for by specialist domestic servants on the family estate to be protected from the twin evils of fresh air and exercise. The absence of any mention of the infancy of ‘little Tom’ Brown suggests that this practice remained typical well into the nineteenth century.

Child portraits of the eighteenth century tend to share the optimistic tone and moral simplicity of children’s novels from the nineteenth. Hughes concedes the main lesson of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* in his Preface to the Sixth Edition (1869): ‘My sole object in writing was to preach to boys’. The novel reflects the author’s hearty plainness: ‘Be straightforward, honest, and self-reliant, and use your strength and power under God in the service of others’. This simple message was shaped to appeal to his intended audience of mid-

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3 Hughes, 2008, p. xl.
Victorian public schoolboys boys who he named, ‘England! Young England!’\(^5\) Boys like his own son:

Thinking over what I should like to say to him before he went to school…I took to writing a story, as the easiest way of bringing out what I wanted.\(^6\)

Hughes was offering them the kind of direction he had received from his Headmaster, Thomas Arnold when he was at Rugby: a guiding hand, a word of encouragement, an ‘unwearied zeal in creating “moral thoughtfulness’\(^7\) Sir Joshua Reynolds also believed his profession had a higher calling. The ‘genuine painter…instead of endeavoring to amuse mankind with the minute neatness of his imitations, he must endeavor to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas’\(^8\) Painting for Reynolds, like writing novels for Hughes, was a moral as well as creative vocation.

The portrait of William and George Brummell, aged five and three respectively, was commissioned by their father, William ‘Billy’ Brummell, in December 1781 (fig. 1). The picture is an idealistic statement of playful innocence, a précis of eighteenth-century attitudes towards children as well as a theatrical representation of two young boys over the three months of their sittings. Just as Tom Brown’s Schooldays is now a social and educational document and manifesto for the muscular Christian Socialism of Thomas Hughes in print.

Master William would follow his father into the Tory squirearchy, attending Eton and Oriel College, Oxford, before marrying the daughter of a senior civil servant and settling down to a life of public service on the Wivenhoe Estate in Essex. Master George would follow a less traditional path after Oxford. Better known as ‘Beau’ Brummell, he too went to Eton where he began a celebrated friendship with the Prince of Wales, later George IV. Master George began to establish himself as the bachelor monarch de la mode even at school, gaining his first sobriquet ‘Buck’ as a result of ‘the anxiety with which he eschewed the dirty streets on a rainy day, his white sock with a bright gold buckle behind, and the measured dignity of his step’.\(^9\)

At the time of the painting’s commission, Billy Brummell was Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, Lord North, a position he held until the administration ended in March 1782 following the defeat of the British forces at Yorktown and the resulting loss of the American Revolutionary War. Despite the government’s downfall, Brummell’s ‘unremitting attention to business, strict integrity and amiable disposition’ secured him a sufficient number of sinecures to retire to The Grove, an eighteenth-century Gothic house neighbouring Donnington Castle, in the real Berkshire, about 20 miles south of where the young Tom Brown takes his first fictionalized steps in Hughes’s cherished Vale of the White Horse.\(^10\)

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\(^5\) Hughes, 2008, p. 6.
\(^6\) E.E. Brown, True Manliness: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Hughes (Boston, 1880), p.xvii, ebook <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101023487844>.
\(^7\) Hughes, 2008, p.xlii.
\(^10\) Gentlemen’s Magazine quoted in Campbell, 1948, p.16.
Figure 1. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *The Brummell Children*, 1781-82, oil on canvas, 142.3 x 111.8 cm, Kenwood House, London. © English Heritage
Traditionally, between the ages of about four and seven, boys from the family of former senior civil servants like Brummell, or the character of Tom’s father, Squire Brown, were home tutored. Though there is no record of the early years of William and George, Tom Brown’s nurse does make an appearance. Charity Lamb is ‘a good hearted, tearful, scatter-brained girl’ against whose ‘yoke and authority’ Tom was already agitating by the age of four. Unlike the urban upbringing of their father, the early life of the Brummell boys was spent, like Tom Brown, among the sights and sounds of a rural shire, sons of a country squire.

Previously the Brummell family had lived in London’s Bloomsbury district for at least two generations. Billy Brummell’s childhood remains lost. All that is known of his father’s occupation is that he was ‘in business in Bury-street, St. James, and might have been a confectioner’: a trade that would place him at the heart of the metropolitan ‘middling sort’, a term coined to ‘describe the independent craftsmen or tradesman who stood between the civic élite and the urban poor’. Billy must have received some childhood tutoring as Lord Hawkesbury, then Joint Secretary of the Treasury and lodging in the Brummell family home, picked Billy to be his amanuensis because of his ‘perfect penmanship [and] active disposition’. Whatever Billy Brummell’s education had been, it led to an opportunity to exceed his father’s tradesman background and elevate himself into this ‘civic élite’. Billy’s promotion is paralleled not only in the family’s relocation to their Berkshire estate, one that they enlarged and extended over the next four years, but also in leaving Bloomsbury behind. If Billy Brummell’s migration west to the more fashionable Berkeley Square exposes the virtues necessary for advancement in the heart of the metropolis, the Browns are rooted in the heart of England and are in possession of idealized English virtues.

The opening three chapters of Tom Brown’s Schooldays follow the life of the eponymous lead ‘from his earliest babyhood…till he first went to school when nearly eight years of age’. It is a period of innocence, an apprenticeship to prepare the child to become a man, away from parental influence at public school. Hughes foregrounds that Tom was ‘a hearty strong boy from the first’ and ‘exhibited the family characteristics in great strength’. The Browns are combative, hard working, clannish, argumentative, resolute, and ‘scattered over the whole empire on which the sun never sets [and] the chief cause of that empire’s stability’. In the introductory chapter Hughes carefully maps the landscape the Brown’s have inhabited for generations, tracing, like a contour line, their breeding and unheralded, but central place in England’s social and military history. Berkshire is ‘sacred ground for Englishmen’ and indeed the Browns are their representatives, a Saxon ‘Everyman’ who has fought in British wars from America to Australia, and in English battles since ‘Cressy and Agincourt…doing

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11 Hughes, 2008, p.22.
12 Jesse, 1844, p.18.
14 Jesse, 1844, p.19.
15 Hughes, 2008, p. 17.
16 Hughes, 2008, p. 17.
17 Hughes, 2008, p. 5.
18 Hughes, 2008, p. 10.
yeoman’s work’. It is within this landscape that the young Tom Brown will be permitted to follow Rousseau’s advice to ‘receive no verbal lessons [and] be taught by experience alone’.  

The pastoral setting of *The Brummell Children* is typical of a Reynolds portrait. The parkland stretching away to the dawn light on the blue hills is indeterminate, but provides focal depth. The strong vertical of the birch tree over hanging on the right allows Reynolds to create the effect of dappled sunlight, here fashioned by applying rapidly worked firm paint across a surface of broken brushstrokes. He used this technique extensively in his society portraits and Reynolds’ mastery in handling paint here is evidence of his mature style at the beginning of his last decade as an artist.

Once Squire Brown decides Tom is the right age to be sent to Rugby, Chapter IV takes us immediately to the Peacock Inn, Islington, about two miles north-west of the Brummell’s former home in Bloomsbury. It is Tom’s first time in London and all that can keep him from roving ‘those endless, mysterious gas-lit streets…with their glare and hum and moving crowds’ is the excitement of becoming ‘a public school-boy as fast as possible’. We get a glimpse, like Tom, of the great metropolis and the network of coaches, roads, and inns that united town and country before the arrival of affordable rail travel. Neither the growing influence of London, the arrival of the Great Western Railway reshaping the Ock Valley, nor ‘the red brick cottages multiplying’ as a result of industrialization coming to the Vale seem to sit comfortably with the narrator of *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*. He bemoans the ‘young cosmopolites, belonging to all counties and no counties’, with ‘their hearts in London Club-life, or so-called Society’ and the loss of social cohesion brought about by the growing consumer society following ‘twenty years of buying cheap and selling dear’ that has led to ‘Too much over-civilization, and deceitfulness of riches’.

Rousseau also offered ‘the rustic simplicity of the country’ as a palliative to the threat of towns on children ‘that will give rise to fevers, and eventually kill them’. Both Rousseau and Hughes share a dislike, even a fear, of the damaging effects of town life on the individual. Rousseau goes as far as suggesting that children brought up in towns will ‘acquire [a] hesitating stammer’. Despite subordinating the educational aspects of his text, viewing *Émile* as ‘a philosophical work on the principle…that man is naturally good’, in it Rousseau reasons that mothers should breastfeed their babies, swaddling should be abandoned, cold water baths were stimulating, and that children should be allowed to develop in the countryside, and lead a vigorous, active life; adding his voice to a chorus that had been growing for

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19 Hughes, 2008, p. 2.
21 Hughes, 2008, p.70.
24 Hughes, 2008, p. 41.
26 Hughes, 2008, p. 43.
27 Rousseau, 1995, p. 46.
29 Rousseau, 1995, p. 46.
decades. To comment On Education at this time meant not only opining on a child’s academic curriculum but the whole process of child rearing, and it is to this holistic view that the opening chapters of Tom Brown’s Schooldays subscribes. Tom is allowed to roam ‘the quiet old-fashioned country village, under the shadow of the everlasting hills’ free from any scholastic influence.

Though Hughes also shares an anti-intellectual attitude with Rousseau, at times he seems closer in spirit to Locke’s view of the mind as a tabula rasa than a Wordsworthian vision of nature as moral paradigm. Nevertheless, Hughes direct quotes Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood: “The child is father to the man;” à fortiori, therefore, he must be father to the boy. Where Hughes’s novel definitively departs from Wordsworth’s and Rousseau’s thinking on ‘natural education’ is in the details. One example is indicative; Rousseau strongly advocates ‘one tutor [who] should be young’, whereas Hughes views a variety of formative influences as essential. Tom has a series of guiding hands included those offered by ‘a couple of old boys, Noah and Benjamin by name, who…expended much time upon his education’. Noah ‘a keen dry old man of almost ninety [while] old Benjy…was scarce seventy years old’.

Broadly speaking, until the publication of John Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693), little consideration was given to a child’s physical education, or to the idea of education being an enjoyable process connected to the different developmental stages of childhood. Small children, born sinful as a result of mankind’s ‘Fall’, were at the mercy of fragile health and an active and vigorous devil. Viewed as:

[O]nly a simple plaything, as a simple animal, or a miniature adult who dressed, played and was supposed to act like his elders…Their ages were unimportant and therefore seldom known. Their education was undifferentiated, either by age, ability or intended occupation.

True, Locke’s treatise was ‘self-consciously snobbish…designed implicitly for males from upper social groups’ but it was perfect for the upwardly mobile Brummells and the ‘true blue Tory to the backbone… Squire Brown’. Locke’s key message was hugely influential:

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31 Hughes, 2008, p. 17.
33 Rousseau, 1995, p. 22.
37 One exception is Sir Thomas Elyot’s The Governour, first published in 1531, where Elyot recommends different inducements, directed at different age groups, to avoid ‘the childe to be fatiguate with continuall studie or lernying’, vol. I (London, 1883), p.38, ebook.
38 James Axtell, The Educational Writings of John Locke (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 63-64.
40 Hughes, 2008, p. 52.
‘aiming to produce an English gentleman’, childhood was an apprenticeship, and his central image of the child as a plant to be cultivated was innovative and hugely popular.41

In the 1750s Reynolds, as part of his apprenticeship as a portrait painter to the English élite executed ‘at least half a dozen unpretentious and wholly charming portraits of children’,42 all of them stiff, formal, posed and influenced by Van Dyck’s little adults.43 Yet, by the 1780s, ‘This deaf middle-aged man seems to have been one of the first people to understand that children have private and separate minds’.44 His portrait of the Brummell boys is suggestive of all the playful innocence Rousseau insisted be encouraged in the young. Reynolds’s gift was his ability to capture ‘the vitality of children and their spontaneous but telling gestures’.45

The painting captures a moment when the conventional pose of a boy, here the younger George sitting on a log with his fluffy white dog, has been interrupted by a playful Blenheim spaniel, jerking his pink sash, a century and a half before the colour became gender specific, and forcing his smock off his shoulder. The older brother William has come to George’s rescue and protectively shields his head of blonde curls with one hand whilst tugging on the sash to prevent the spaniel disappearing with it into that grassy panorama. ‘Refreshing and spirited as it appears, the romping composition in fact forms a perfect stable triangle, with both boys facing the viewer’.46 The two brothers attended thirteen appointments over three months before their mother, Mary, visited Reynolds’s studio to see the finished painting. Reynolds had been painting portraits for over forty years to be able to make spontaneity seem so artless. His assistant James Northcote gives us an insight into how he managed it:

[GR]and rackets there used to be at Sir Joshua’s when the children were with him! He used to romp and play with them, and talk to them in their own way; and, whilst all this was going on, he actually snatched these exquisite touches of expression which make his portraits of children so captivating...It was a beautiful sight to see Sir Joshua paint, for he did it with such a graceful facility.47

Locke’s views only began to lose traction in the mid eighteenth century when, after Rousseau, Romanticism became a more dynamic influence and childhood began to be associated with increasingly positive meanings, attributes that are implicit in Reynolds’s portrait of the Brummell children: ‘innocence, freedom, creativity, emotion, spontaneity.’48

What could be natural than two boys, caught playing with their two dogs in a pastoral

landscape, unfettered by breeches. Certainly, the painting is striking in its nonconformity to current expectations of clothing and gender. The boys radiate a sense of freedom, not only in their age and aspects, but also in their free flowing nursery skirts.

The idea of loose clothing for open-air play suggested by both Locke and Rousseau is exemplified here. The lack of breeches signals these are still children rather than boys, or at least young boys fulfilling a less prescribed version of masculinity. Breeching ‘might occur at any time from the age of three’ and was a rite of passage for boys as irrevocable as being sent to school, both signifying masculinity and maturity. It was a moment to signal and lament, not, like Reynolds’s portraits of adults, simply a chance to role-play, but a change in role that was permanent, and worthy of record.

Wealthy families like the Brummells and Browns would breech later than the lower ranks, dependent on when and if a boy went to school, on their toilet training and, as breeches were costly, if the family could afford to replace them as the child grew. Clothing is ‘itself a kind of discourse [reinscribing] a person’s sex, rank, age, occupation—all the distinctive features of the self’. By the time of Émile, many of Locke’s ideas had become accepted; what made Rousseau’s work stand out was that it focussed not on details of education like utility or reasoning clarified by Locke, but on ‘an overall conception of man and of the development proper to him’, and dress was just one part of that development.

The first two books of Émile take us from birth, where Rousseau broadly concurs with earlier religious opinion that infants are not yet truly human, up to the age of about twelve; what he called in his manuscript plan ‘the Age of Nature’. At this age, to contrast with the extensive academic training to which children were then subjected, Rousseau aligned himself with many mid to late eighteenth century educationalists. In rejecting the rationalist, Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas, he reasserts Locke’s theory that ‘sense experience is the ultimate source of all our concepts and knowledge’. Rousseau suggests you should suspend the education of a boys’ intellect and instead: ‘Exercise his body, his limbs, his senses, his strength, but keep his mind idle as long as you can’. The irony of the mind remaining idle as the boy is sent to school could not have been lost on the ‘almost pointedly anti-intellectual’ Thomas Hughes or his intended audience. Hughes makes clear on several occasions: ‘The object of schools is not to ram Latin and Greek into boys; but to make them good English boys, good future citizens’.

53 Rousseau, 1995, p. 68.
55 Hughes, 2008, p. 63.
The end of Lord North’s administration proved to be a watershed for the aristocracy in Britain as a ‘British army led by a succession of patrician generals…and an administration under the leadership of the eldest son of a peer… suffered a humiliating defeat’. Yet, between 1783 and 1857, the ruling élite regrouped in a remarkable way, and Billy Brummell’s ascent seems indicative of this recovery. The seventy years that followed the cessation of the American Revolutionary War was a turbulent period in modern British history. Despite industrialization, urbanization, demands for political reform, revolution in France, and a European war: ‘Britain’s ruling class would actually increase in size, in homogeneity, in wealth and in range of power…From the 1780s onwards, its members would set about re-ordering their authority, their image, their ideas and their composition’. The public school system of Dr. Arnold at Rugby may have helped ensure its homogeneity, but the piecemeal inclusion of smart, ambitious, individuals like the Brummell family into the civic élite, alongside the continued commitment of the fictional Brown clan ‘scattered over the whole empire on which the sun never sets’, helped ensure that, for a while at least, the sun continued to shine.

Just as Tom Brown is sent to Rugby at around ten years old, and into literary history, the Brummell boys were also dispatched to public school: William in 1786, aged ten, followed by George in 1790, aged eleven. Brummell had retained an impressive list of contacts after departing the capital. Guests of the calibre of Charles James Fox, Old Etonian and leading Whig politician, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Old Harrovian and Irish playwright frequently visited him at The Grove. Reynolds painted both men at about the same time as he completed *The Brummell Children*. This was the society that the Brummells now moved in, remarkable considering he began his career in a servant’s flat at Hampton Court.

Though Rousseau advocated an extended ‘age of Nature’ to allow for his model pupil to develop appropriately before instruction should begin, both he and Locke, and Hughes and Billy Brummell are all complicit, in diverse ways, in prohibiting girls from this formative process. But their prohibitions extend also to class: Émile, Locke’s young gentleman, The Brummell boys and Tom Brown, are all wealthy, and to follow Rousseau’s model, they would need to be. Hughes writes to public schoolboys ‘old and young’, even those ‘who have belonged, or do belong, to other schools’, about a separate world, accessible to approximately 1 in 250 children. It is access to capital that allows Rousseau’s Émile to be cultivated, for Tom Brown to ‘wander all over the neighbourhood’, and the Brummell boys to be depicted in their bucolic idyll. Nominated by their father’s patron, Lord North, it seems remarkable that the grandsons of a tradesman were able to gain access to the public school not of the landed gentry, but the nobility. This, and the exhibition of his sons’ portrait

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57 Colley, 1992, p. 149.
58 Hughes, 2008, p. 5.
60 Hughes, 2008, p. 59.
at the 1783 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition ‘may be seen as his crowning achievement, setting the seal on a remarkable career by using art to launch his family into society’.61

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Figure 1. Sir Joshua Reynolds, *The Brummell Children*, 1781-82, oil on canvas, 142.3 x 111.8 cm, Kenwood House, London © English Heritage