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### Questioning the Lives of Kings: American Class Myths

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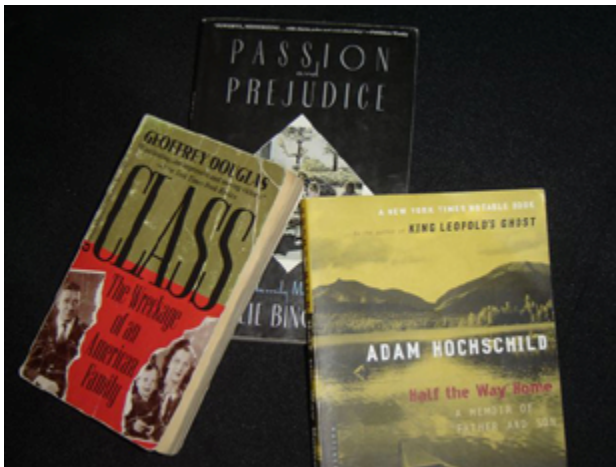


research ARTICLE

## Questioning the Lives of Kings: American Class Myths

—Lana Cook (Edited by Kristine King)

In popular culture today, celebrities take over the media limelight and CEOs are congratulated on their entrepreneurial success. It seems that we are a society that loves to look at the rich. Yet, while we may envy their privileged lifestyles, displayed on such TV shows as “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” little attention is paid to what it really means to be rich in America. Given the American ideal of a classless society with equal opportunity for all, it seems contradictory that a privileged class not only exists but is publicly applauded. How did this happen? And how did some members of the economic upper class of the late twentieth century regard their wealth and the privileges it brought them in a democratic society? Part of the answer to these complex questions lies in the various stories, or myths, of financial success, which emerged during the development of the new nation. These myths, based more on desire or belief than on logic or facts, came to be used by the upper classes to justify to themselves and to the rest of society their position of enormous private privilege.



Three memoirs from the upper class

Modern class myths create a protective aura around the wealthy just as did the myths of ancient civilizations around their royalty. They justify wealth and privilege, discourage questioning, and thereby mask the contradictions between the reality of privilege and the ideals of equality. In their basic forms, myths are stories used to explain “why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions of the rules by which people conduct their lives” (Abrams 178).

Put simply, class myths are used to explain why some are wealthy while others are not. The mythology surrounding the upper class is highly elaborate, encompassing their family legacy, the source of their wealth, the construction of personal and collective identities, the codes that uphold those identities, and the use of power. However, class myths, if believed in blindly and uncritically, can prove destructive of the very class they promote, the rich. It is, therefore, important to differentiate between myth and reality.

Three authors—Geoffrey Douglas, Adam Hochschild and Sallie Bingham—defied their wealthy families and the upper class to examine, in published memoirs, the myth and reality they saw around them. Each describes a

different version of wealth and its associated myth, but all had similar experiences in recognizing and dealing with the conflicts they found in the lives they were born into. Their autobiographies expose for us our own confusion of myth and reality and ask us to become, as they did, brave and clear-sighted.

## **Class and Memoirs**

What defines the upper class? A social science definition of class is "groups of people of similar economic social position; people who, for that reason, may share political attitudes, lifestyles, consumption patterns, cultural interests and opportunities to get ahead," or, put more bluntly, "class is rank, it is tribe, it is culture and taste, it is attitudes and assumptions, a source of identity, a system of exclusion. To some, it is just money" (Leonhardt 3). The upper class has been defined as being those individuals who have a net worth of up to \$1 million and are financially secure (Schervish 1). A large distance separates these relatively few individuals from the socioeconomic levels below them. A recent article in *Money* claimed that "the top 1% of American families ... own as much as the bottom 95% combined, the highest such gap among developed nations" (Birger 98). Wealthy families, that is, the upper class, have access to many more resources and opportunities than those economically below them. Bingham, Douglas, and Hochschild grew up in households which meet all the definitions of upper class.

Geoffrey Douglas's memoir, *Class: The Wreckage of an American Family*, published in 1992, recounts the lives of Manhattan, old-money socialites who believed in the myth of natural aristocracy. Sallie Bingham's *Passion and Prejudice: A Family Memoir*, published in 1989, exposes the myth of southern dynasty and public service that her family used to rule Kentucky through their media monopoly. Finally, Adam Hochschild's *Half the Way Home: A Memoir of Father and Son*, published in 1986, examines his family, who believed in and used the myth of the American Dream to justify their own wealth.

These myths are sustained in American society by taboos against talking about class and wealth itself, especially among the members of the upper class. To discuss the source of one's wealth is considered gauche and socially unacceptable, partly because talking openly about money would, in a way, lessen the power and distinction it gives the upper class. This atmosphere of silence surrounding wealth allows the contradictions of privilege and equality to remain unquestioned. The three memoirs are bold texts that defy taboo and break silence by speaking out.

It is important to note that Douglas, Bingham, and Hochschild each wrote their memoirs at the ages of forty-seven, fifty-two, and forty-four, respectively. Their written texts are not the product of teenage rebellion but of years of reflection about themselves, their families, and their class. All the authors followed a similar pattern in the realization of their privilege and the contradictions of their family's myth, and their eventual rebellions through writing a memoir. Their realization of their class status occurred in childhood, triggered either by family tragedy or strife or by exposure to lower class lifestyles. Seeing how their privilege contrasted with the public life around them, they looked to their parents and family to see how they saw and dealt with this conflicting picture.

## Natural Aristocracy

Geoffrey Douglas's memoir, *Class: the Wreckage of an American Family*, is a harrowing example of the destructive power of class myths. Both Geoffrey's parents died from alcoholism and suicide by the time he was nineteen, causing him to question his class and the "false promises and empty messages on which it rested" that "destroyed more lives than [his] parents" ("Author's Note" ix). His father, Archibald Douglas, was a "well-born Yale wit" and New York state legislator. His mother, Ellie Reed, was a beautiful socialite who spent her time hosting and attending top New York society functions (Douglas 95). Neither Archie nor Ellie earned the significant wealth they enjoyed; rather it was inherited from the fortune left by Archibald's great grandfather's sold-off mining corporation. The Douglas family explained their wealth and status as a birthright, a part of the natural order. The claim of natural aristocracy could justify their wealth and remove guilt or threat of criticism.

Geoffrey writes that as early as first grade, the world was "divided, I knew into two uneven groups: the Good Names and the others" (35). He saw, with unease, different ways of life outside his world "bounded by Fifth Avenue, the river, and the perfect symmetry of my father's codes" (32). Douglas' unease sharpened over the years causing him to gradually move outside his social circle and look critically at his family's explanations of their unearned privilege. However, most in his class, like his parents, never openly admitted to or reflected on this inequality. Geoffrey's father, like the Douglas men before him, believed adamantly that "the poor and uneducated—the uncultivated—were the lower rungs in a social ladder that depended as much on the bottom as on the top ... but there could be no blurring of the two" (79). Geoffrey, however, was not satisfied.

In order for the myth of natural aristocracy to sustain public scrutiny and justify their wealth, the Douglas family had to model their appearance, behavior, and values after the well-born aristocrats they claimed to be. Archie's and, later, Geoffrey's upbringing focused on "Poise [being] acquired, contacts developed (then nurtured, in Yale societies and Princeton eating clubs), a social conscience gardened sparingly" (83). Geoffrey writes, "Things were done a certain way. It mattered how you said good morning" (125). Their identities were controlled by the myth of natural aristocracy which they had to support.

Social codes of the upper class also contributed to the creation of a so-called natural aristocracy. Codes, that is, systematic rules and expectations of behavior, maintain identity conformity and keep individuals from questioning the status quo. Geoffrey learned that the "Gentleman's Code" was his father's "ultimate standard, the gauge against which all things and people were judged" (14). The Gentleman's Code dictated Archie and Ellie's every behavior: from where they vacationed to the type of nannies they hired. These systems of prescribed behavior were to create an aristocrat, with superior manners and taste, who therefore deserved his wealth because he knew how to handle and cultivate his fortune.

For the Douglas parents, however, the myth of natural aristocracy became their perceived reality, eventually replacing any authentic identities and values. Even as it was destroying them, they never broke the silence and questioned its validity. By writing his memoir, Douglas publicly rejects his family's myth by breaking the silence and exposing the upper class and its myths. In his memoir, Douglas can "re-create [himself] in the image of [his] own method," forging his own identity apart from the all encompassing family myth (Stone 102). His memoir separates him from his former upper-class identity and serves as medium of explanation, moral questioning, and identity reformation to a working writer, who supports the values of social justice and a desire for a true meritocracy.

## Southern Dynasty

Sallie Bingham's memoir, *Passion and Prejudice*, demonstrates the use of myths to justify wealth and power. She challenges American society's need of "the myth that the Rich are Better Than You and Me—or they wouldn't be rich" ("What Came After" xiv). The Bingham family was renowned for their media conglomeration, owning and operating the only newspaper in Kentucky and several television and printing companies, until their family empire was finally sold off in 1986 at more than \$307 million. As one of the richest families in Kentucky, the Bingham family was referred to by the public as "That Family, Those People, the Bingham family" ("What Came After" xv). They explained their privilege through the myth of Southern dynasty, one of public service and moral leadership. Sallie writes she was taught that her family "deserved our specialness as long as we represented a point of view more elevated, morally and intellectually, than the point of view of those we aspired to lead" (350). By claiming they were the moral leaders of Kentucky striving to educate the masses, the Bingham family could justify their enormous wealth and at the same time pursue their real motivations of profit, prestige, and dynasty. This myth of public service, passed down through generations, was so publicly accepted that even in the extreme poverty of rural Kentucky, no one challenged the Bingham family's wealth or power. As Sallie eloquently points out, the Bingham family myth ensured that "no one may raise questions about the lives of kings" (516).

Like Douglas, Sallie Bingham began early to question the family myth. While the Bingham children were taught to "notice, care about, and take responsibility for people less fortunate than we," they "never discussed why certain people were in need of help" (274). In order to maintain their position of moral superiority as Kentucky's shining example, the Bingham children were taught "rules and regulations" that guided their everyday behavior (274). Sallie was expected to conform to the family's ideal feminine image: a self-sacrificing, gracious, loyal breeder to contribute male heirs to the dynasty. When she went to Radcliff College, she found she was not the only young woman trained to fit this model. All her classmates had been molded with the "same cultured pearl necklaces and earrings, gloves, expressions, thoughts, everything stereotyped and carbon-copied from generation to generation" (309). This conformity and compliance maintained the family myth even to the extent that Barry Bingham, Sallie's brother, "believed religiously in the family myth and interpreted it literally," not understanding "it was only a myth, an elaborate justification" (388).

As a written document, *Passion and Prejudice* served to further destroy the Bingham myth by breaking the myth's strongest weapon, silence. Sallie realized that the family's myth of southern dynasty, operating under the guise of public service, did not truly serve the people of Kentucky, but rather it allowed her family to reap enormous profit and privilege without public challenge. At this public rejection, her family saw Sallie as a threat, for she "stood for the frightful forces of female power that overturn order, reveal secrets, explode myths" (479). As Douglas does in *Class*, Sallie uses her memoir to distance herself from her family and create a new identity apart from the family myth. Even more importantly for Bingham, her memoir is an acknowledgment of the responsibilities of her wealth, which she acted on when she donated over \$10 million of her inheritance to programs which support marginalized women writers.

## The American Dream

Perhaps the most well known of national myths is the American Dream. Adam Hochschild's *Half the Way Home: A Memoir of Father and Son* demonstrates how the myth of the American Dream can be used to justify privilege

in the face of economic inequality. Like the other authors, Adam became conscious of his upper-class privilege at an early age. He writes, "I did not need leftist theories to convince me that class is the great secret everyone wants to deny." He knew there was "a ruling class [for] Father belonged" (203). While Adam grew alienated from his social class because of his awareness of the inequality they benefited from, his father, Harold, lived nestled among contradictions, simultaneously admitting that inequality existed while never feeling uneasy about his own wealth. Harold Hochschild "lived out both sides of [the contradiction] all his life: aristocrat, capitalist, important figure in the American empire; but at the same time a man with a distinct sense of social justice" (207). While Adam sees his father's duality as an unresolved conflict, his father's ability to live on both sides can be explained by the myth he used to construct his public identity: the American Dream, one of the most well known and unquestioned justifications of wealth in American culture.

The core of the American Dream is the rags to riches tale of the self-made man. Harold's rag to riches tale is that, as a Jewish immigrant, he founded an international mining company, assimilated into the WASP community, and became an important figure in American politics. However, Harold's story really doesn't fit the American Dream script: his immigrant father was already very wealthy, and Harold grew up in the lap of luxury, attending the finest schools and inheriting millions, which he used to found his company. Success in the American Dream myth is to be based on meritocracy, where one's hard work and merit are the only ways to the top.

Harold, however, knew the power of the myth and attempted to create a public image of himself as the self-made rich man who is still just like everyone else. This involved blatant play-acting. In *Half the Way Home*, Adam describes "Getting the Beer" for his father's guests at their Adirondack summer home: he would bring out and serve the beer on a tray their maids had prepared and handed him. Adam notes this task was his father's deliberate "ritual denial that we were employers of servants [for] Getting The Beer was a symbolic remnant of the role of a normal host, who prepares the food with his own hands for a more humble table" (62). Yet despite Harold's attempt to mimic the average American lifestyle by "pretending they [were] not landowners at all," the Hochschilds lived their entire lives in the luxury of "houses, chauffeurs, maids, money—the whole world was [theirs]" (53,68).

Adam early became aware that few enjoyed the luxury he did. He realized that he had "been exposed to only a narrow and unrepresentative slice of the world" and was oblivious "that it was made up of classes that often resented and envied each other" (115). At twenty-one, he moved across the country to make it on his own as a journalist in California. There he found himself not trying to be part of a myth but instead wishing only to "pass, merely, as a reporter for a radical magazine" (153). He did not want his family's name or privilege to influence his new life, but to succeed on his own merit. Writing *Half the Way Home* allowed Hochschild a newfound space in which to break down some of the "barriers that riches and poverty erected between myself and other beings," so that he could live free of the myth that had alienated him from so many of his global "brothers and sisters" (204, 206).

## **The Power of Class Myths**

The three authors grew up under the influence of a family myth but were able eventually to separate the illusion of the myth from the reality of their life and the lives around them. Sallie Bingham saw that the family myth of southern dynasty provided only an illusion of values, for the "belief was more important than the reality around

us" (269). This emphasis on belief, rather than reality, is a recurring element in each author's story. Some myths become so much our perception of reality that we do not see them as fictions but rather as truths, as the Douglas parents did. The families' individual identities and lives were dedicated to maintaining the appearance of truth of the myth. Certain subjects, such as class and money, were not discussed nor was the myth itself examined or questioned. All of this was to justify to themselves and, especially, to society their privileged positions of wealth and opportunity.

In rejecting their family myth, each author exposed its purposeful use to hide the inequality in American society. The myths these families adopted to justify their wealth show that the American ideal of social equality can be just a principle without practice. In the hands of the wealthy and powerful, myths can be used to reshape the very fabric of cultural reality by emphasizing fictions over facts, hiding social and economic inequalities and conflicts, and silencing discussion of class. This makes true social and economic reform even more difficult, especially regarding the responsibilities of the rich. Douglas, Bingham and Hochschild beg the American public to begin looking critically at what it means to be rich in America and to start raising questions about the lives of our modern day kings.

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### **Editor Bio**

English major **Lana Cook** likes it that the University of New Hampshire is large enough in which to meet a diverse group of people but that the town of Durham has “the small town feeling I grew up with.” Her home is in Sangerville, Maine, three hours north of Durham. “It is a very working class town, and I think that is how I became interested in class issues,” she explained. Her article was done as an independent study in conjunction with the Ronald E. McNair fellowship, an undergraduate program that offers opportunities in research and encourages graduate education for underrepresented groups in doctoral programs. By publishing this article Lana hopes to share innovative views on class in America: “Class operates in very complex ways, and there is no one definition. I want others to see how prevalent class issues are once you make your self aware of the world around you.” Research for her “is finding those little holes in scholarship and filling them with your own insights.” Lana will graduate in May 2007 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and aspires to become an English professor and continue studying issues of class, gender and race. The most important thing she will leave UNH with is a profound sense of self, “I’m taking with me the experience of growing up and finding out who I am as a student, both in the classroom and in life.”

### **Author Bio**

Dr. **Sarah Sherman**, associate professor of English and American Studies, has been at the University of New Hampshire for more than twenty years. Even after all that time, her passion for English and teaching has not diminished: “Writing is a fascinating process. It takes you to places you didn’t expect, and that is something exciting for all of us.” When students come to those unexpected places, Dr. Sherman keeps them on track by providing structure, support and appreciation of their hard work. Her own research interests include nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature and consumer culture. When Lana’s original mentor left on sabbatical, Dr. Sherman stepped in. She found Lana a pleasure to work with and said, “You see a lot of Lana in the piece. There is a strong sense of social justice but in a thoughtful way that does justice to the text. She gives the complexity of the issue without losing sight of what’s important to her. That’s a hard thing to do.”