The object of all schools is not to ram Latin and Greek into boys, but to make them good English boys, good future citizens.¹

The above quotation is taken from Tom Brown’s School Days, the famous public school novel by Thomas Hughes, which first appeared in 1857. Published more than a decade before mass elementary schooling was introduced throughout England and Wales and a training in citizenship came to play a central role in the education offered to millions of working-class children, Hughes suggested that the primary aim of all schooling was not instruction in particular subjects but the formation of good citizens. In the historiography of English elementary education the *public schools have attracted relatively little attention; indeed, they have usually been treated as a separate, unconnected system of education restricted in significance to the middle and upper classes.² This tendency reflects the important role that class distinctions have played in the analysis of the history of English education. When the public schools and universities are mentioned within the context of the development of elementary schooling, they tend to be seen as part of a somewhat cynical effort by the English middle and upper classes to use mass education as an agent of social control.³ Here, by contrast, it will be suggested that despite catering to very different sections of the population, the public schools nonetheless acted as an important model for the development of elementary schooling in England between 1870 and 1900. It was only after the turn of the century, in particular after the end of the First World War, that the maintenance of class distinctions came to play a significant role in education policy and the influence of the public school model declined.

As the first section will show, the Newcastle Commission, which reported in 1861 on the ‘state of popular education in England’, and which was the starting point for the 1870 Elementary Education Act, drew significantly on the experience of the public schools and the recent reform of the elite universities in a number of ways. The second section goes on to consider the growing importance
of the public schools and universities as a model in the reform of elementary schooling after 1870. In particular, it will suggest that a certain ideal of national and imperial citizenship, promoted at the public schools from the late 1860s onwards, was drawn upon when designing both the academic curriculum and the provision of physical exercise in the elementary schools after 1870. The assumption that those directing reform of the elementary system in this period deliberately separated the curricula of the elementary and public schools in order to control working-class access to higher education is also challenged. Rather, it is suggested that moves were increasingly initiated in both types of school to adopt a modern syllabus with a view to improving the overall quality of education provided; likewise the distinction between military-style drill and team games, which is often insisted upon by scholars when comparing the curricula of the public and elementary schools, is shown to have been nowhere near as rigid as is often assumed. The third section examines the various personal connections between elite and popular education, which developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Instead of seeing such connections in terms of a rigid power dynamic between the middle and working classes, it is suggested that middle-class educators and government officials sought, particularly in the Cross Commission of 1886–7, to establish a variety of new connections between the two levels of schooling in an effort to raise both the quality of teaching and the educational achievement of elementary pupils. Of particular interest was the possibility of involving the ancient universities more directly in the training of elementary school teachers and pupil teachers. Ways to render the existing scholarship and exhibition system more accessible and effective were also discussed in more detail than ever before.

In the years after 1900, however, the public schools were increasingly criticised as failing to serve the needs of the British nation and empire. Against a background of growing rivalry with European and extra-European powers and mounting anxiety about racial degeneration at home, they were often charged with failing to provide a sufficiently scientific or military education. Elementary education began to assume a more vocational character in an effort to remedy this apparent lack. After the end of the First World War, the influence of the public schools and ancient universities upon the reform of the elementary system continued to decline. The elementary curriculum continued to become more practical in nature, while the expanding secondary sector, confined largely to the provision of free places in the traditional grammar schools, was characterised by a middle-class classical curriculum modelled on that of the public schools. Although it was argued at the time that this type of education was simply the best available, it also ensured that those working-class children who received free grammar school places would be socialised in a middle-class environment. In the very different post-war climate, with growing fears about the spread of socialist ideas among the urban poor in particular, this was considered far from undesirable by Conservative government ministers and civil servants at the Board of Education.