

## 2.4 Professions and professional classes

*From Henry Byerley Thomson, The Choice of a Profession, 1857.*

*H. B. Thomson (1822-67), a colonial judge, gives advice to parents wishing to establish their sons in one of the older or new professions.*

Everybody will be ready to acknowledge that the first most important step in a man's life is the choice of his future calling. On the circumstance of his having chosen one adequate to his powers, not hostile to his tastes, parallel to his interests, and the pursuit of which is within the range of his capital, not only his chance of failure or success, but, even if successful, much of his happiness depends. There can scarcely be a greater social misfortune than the erroneous choice of a profession. It is an error that is often not discovered until it is too late to change or to retreat. How often is a talented, but mild and retiring man, found getting grey as a brief-less barrister; the rough, though good-natured physician, unable, with all his experience, to gain patients; or the man of energy and worldly wisdom, in the garb of the priest, wasting his irritable powers in parish squabbles. In choosing a business or a trade the same difficulty does not occur; the operations of the mind are much the same, whether a man sells cotton or corn; and therefore a father, in determining whether his son shall be a cotton broker or a corn factor, looks to considerations not immediately dependent on the intellectual capacity of the future business man. Business is nearly the same kind of thing in all its branches; and if a lad is fit for one kind of mercantile operation, he is in general fitted (with the addition of the necessary knowledge and experience) for any other. It is far different with the choice of an intellectual calling, -that is, a profession. There is scarcely any resemblance between any two, and success in any depends in no small degree on natural fitness, and the grant of a fair opportunity.

In attempting to define a profession, according to the modern acceptance of the term, it is almost impossible to set out the limits where a profession merges into a business. At no great length of time back, the term was limited to the learned professions -divinity, law, and medicine, and the professions of the army and navy. Even all these have not at all times held the position and dignity they now hold as professions. The professors of divinity, and the law, always have held a superior position in virtue of their connection with the State; but it was not until after the establishment of the College of Physicians, or, indeed, until the time of Sydenham, that medicine achieved the position of a profession. It was even later that the profession of arms, in the person of the army, began to assume a form; and the separation of the king's naval officer from an equality of position with the privateer captain, and merchant skipper, was of date yet later.

The advance of education, and the liberality of an improved social condition, have extended the honourable term to other callings not originally included in it. The first admitted were the artists, sculptors, and architects: then the civil engineers. Still more lately have actuaries, and other scientific men claimed, and been readily accorded, the denomination of professional men, and endeavoured, with more or less success, to unite themselves into a professional body. Quite recently have a most important body, long looked down upon, but now of necessity pushing their way, endeavoured to mould themselves into a professional class -namely, the professors of education. It is to be hoped that the gradual obliteration of ancient prejudice, and narrow views, will at no distant period enable these useful members of the commonwealth to assume their right

position. By the followers of music, and the stage, the term has always been claimed, and has been by society accorded with a degree of reluctance, if not at first even with ridicule.

With so many examples it might be supposed to be easy to define the term 'profession', yet almost any general definition presents many exceptions, and difficulties. It is far easier to enumerate than to define. With much doubt it is suggested that that calling is a profession, according to the present meaning of the word, in which 'a man for a reward places at the public service his intellectual labour, and the fruits of intellectual knowledge, and experience' . . . . It is more than probable that on a close examination of the definition, many persons may be included that are not generally included in professions, or at least in the higher professions. It is the latter order, that it is the intention of this work to touch upon, and they may be enumerated as follows:-

Divines, lawyers, medical men, officers in the army, officers in the navy, persons in the higher branches of the civil service of the crown, painters, and sculptors, architects, engineers, actuaries, &c., musicians, and actors, educators, and men of letters. There are many callings, professional in character, but too confined in their operations to be noticed here - such as linguistics, average calculators, agricultural chemists, &c.

The professions naturally divide themselves into two principal classes - the *privileged* and the *unprivileged* professions. Amongst the privileged professions are reckoned: 1. the church; 2. the law; 3. the medical profession; 4. the army; 5. the navy; 6. the mercantile marine; 7. the public service. The entrances to these professions are regulated by law, and are closed (except partially in the case of the medical profession) to free competition from without.

The unprivileged professions are those of the painter, architect, sculptor, civil engineer, educator, parliamentary agent, actuary, average calculator, &c. To these professions there is no legal restriction of entrance.

The privileges granted to the first are less in the light of benefits to themselves than as a protection to the public. Some public evidence of competency being required before permission to practice is granted, all are excluded who have not passed through the regulated curriculum. The privileged professions (except the mercantile marine) take a higher position than the others. They are more, or less connected with the State; their importance is recognised by the law; they excel the others in numbers and wealth, receive a superior education, and are generally drawn from a superior class. Yet the unprivileged professions are not the less difficult to enter, the less arduous to succeed in. In the privileged professions, the candidate has but to enter his name at the proper institution, to pay his fees, and, in due course of time, by no very extraordinary exertions, to obtain his diploma. This diploma, in some cases, gives him almost an absolute right to employment, and in all is an authorised warrant to the public of fitness. Except as to the place of education, little minute inquiry is made with regard to a person so coming before the public; - he is so far supposed to be competent, and he has only his character for experience, and intelligence to make. In the unprivileged professions it is generally different. The neophyte here comes before the public with no guarantee of competence, or even of a regular education. Whatever name he assumes, he has dubbed himself by that title, whether worthy, or not to assume it. Those, then, who are the client, or employers of his particular calling, having no institutional education, public examination, or diploma, to look to as a declaration of fitness, are more particular in their inquiries, and require a more personal knowledge of the individual than in the privileged professions. The character, and reputation of the teacher takes the place of the fame of the institution in the other case; it is not enough to have even a good teacher, but that teacher must himself be a man of reputation, in order that his certificate may carry any weight with it. So that it happens, that the student of the unprivileged profession seeks for his instructors

men of acknowledged ability, and established reputation alone. The number of masters are therefore of necessity small, the number of students they can take few; consequently, the premium is high, and the expense of professional education, of a good order, not much less than that required in the privileged professions. Much of this is modified in those professions in which public exhibition admits of free competition; but, nevertheless, the natural anxiety to attend the schools, or classes of only the first-rate, confines the means of education, and imposes difficulties in the progress of their undertaking.

The importance of the professions, and the professional classes can scarcely be over-rated, they form the head of the great English middle class, maintain its tone of independence, keep up to the mark its standard of morality, and direct its intelligence. The best estimate of them is obtained by their numbers.

In referring them to the numbers of the professional classes, taking the learned professions first, it is found that the clergymen of Great Britain of the established churches amount to 18,587; that is, 17,320 in England and Wales, 143 in the isles of the British Seas, and 1124 in Scotland; the other Protestant ministers to 8251; the Roman Catholic priests to 1093; theological students, and various real or pretended religious teachers to 1477. The total number is 30,407.

The lawyers comprise 18,422 persons, or, exclusive of lawstudents, 16,763; namely, 85 superior or local judges, of whom, generally, 60 are fifty years of age, and upwards; 3111 are barristers or advocates, practising, and not practising inclusive; 13,256 are solicitors, attorneys, or writers to the signet. These are assisted by 19,159 persons; 1'. e. 1436 officers of courts of justice; 16,626 law-clerks, of whom 9270 are under twenty-five years of age; and 1087 law-stationers.

The medical profession has not, like the professions of divinity, and law, any direct connection with the state; its numbers are 22,383, or, exclusive of students and assistants, 18,728: of whom 2238 are returned as physicians, 15,163 as surgeons or apothecaries. The best oculists, aurists, and dentists have the licenses of surgeons, and are so returned. But many of the 1167 dentists are mechanists. Those who supply the drugs, and instruments which the medical profession use are 16,460, of whom 15,333 are druggists, and 430 are surgical instrument makers. A large number of empirics of various kinds, - worm doctors, homoeopathic professors, herb doctors, and hydropathic practitioners, add a doubtful aid to the profession.

The members of the profession of the law are the least numerous body, and sustain no competition from without, such as that to which the clergy, and medical men are exposed - a competition which, however, chiefly affects the income of the latter class only, as the incomes of the clergy are generally secured. The clergy of the Established Church (18,587), the lawyers (16,763), and the medical men (18,728), differ little from each other in numbers, and in the aggregate amount to 54,078. The three professions, with their allied and subordinate members, not differing greatly from the average of 37,000 to each, amount to 110,730, and their importance cannot be over-rated; yet, in point of numbers, they could be out-voted by the tailors of the kingdom.

The poet, the historian, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect, and the natural philosopher, as well as the professors and teachers of literature and science, may next draw our attention. To these belong the Shakespeares, Humes, Handels, Raphaels, Michael Angelos, Wrens, and Newtons, of the present day, and the humblest as well as the highest teachers of mankind. In the middle ages they formed a part of the clergy, and enjoyed endowments; but, except fellows of colleges, the members have latterly had, as an order, no rents or settled incomes from such sources. They, therefore, often derive their income from other sources than

their profession, and their numbers are, therefore, difficult to estimate. The authors, writers, and literary men, number 2866, of whom 436 are authors, 1302, or writers.

The artists, in the wide sense of all who devote themselves to the fine arts, are returned at 8600: including, however, 4915 painters, some of whom generally call themselves artists, but are often called by others, drawing-masters. Many of the 2971 architects are, undoubtedly, builders.

The professors of science are singularly few, according to the last census the number is 466, but many of them are returned among the learned professions. The actuaries number only 45. The civil engineers, 3009.

Turning to the profession of education, we find the fair sex appearing as an important element, inconsiderable in number in other professions. This calling includes 34,378 men; namely, 23,488 schoolmasters, 4371 general teachers, 3149 music-masters, 1530 professors of languages, 554 professors of mathematics, and a few more. The ladies number 71,966: including 41,888 school-mistresses of all ages, 5259 general teachers, and 2606 musicmistresses.

In the histrionic profession, also, the ladies assert a position. There are in all 2041 actors and actresses - 1398 of the former, and 643 of the latter.

The profession of music (not including teachers) musters 11 music-composers, i.e. persons living by that art only; 4200 musicians, of whom 3688 are men, and 432 women; as well as 370 vocalists, 114 being men, and 256 women, which speaks in favour of the popularity of the female voice.

The Civil Service of the country assists in its government, and consequently even in number occupies a prominent position. 71,191 men of the age of twenty and upwards are employed in this important function, or one per cent of the men of the country; 37,698 are in the civil service of the nation; 29,785 are in offices of local government; while 3,708 are officers in the East India Government residing in Great Britain. The civil offices have 105 heads of departments, comprising commissioners; 109 secretaries and chief clerks; 378 special professional and other officers; 1893 heads of particular branches; and 3982 clerks, of whom 506 are temporary or extra clerks.

The army and navy, of course, vary much; but in 1852, previous to the last war, their numbers stood as follows:- Officers in the army, 806 cavalry; 5066 infantry; in all, 5872 officers; 943 artillery and engineer officers. In the navy the numbers were - 198 admirals, &c., and **their** staffs. 31 dock-yard officers, and 3746 ship-officers. 260 marine officers, 37 marine artillery officers.

These numbers represent the professional classes *in* England, but not professional classes of England, born in this country, and established on an English professional education. We have no means even approximate of estimating the numbers (especially of divines, lawyers, doctors, and engineers) that annually leave the country in search of wider fields of enterprise; yet they are not to be left out of consideration in estimating the amount of opportunity presented by a professional career. With the extension of the empire has extended the colonial church, and with it there is a constantly increasing call for English divines. English physicians find no want of opportunity in the colonies, and even on the continent of Europe. The rapid extension of the colony of Australia has lately called away many a hopeless and briefiess barrister to employment and prosperity in Melbourne and its vicinity; and the necessity of reforming the Suddar courts and local jurisdictions of the Presidencies seems to be opening a new field for this class in India. The continent of Europe attests to the foreign employment of the civil engineers, in numerous railroads and public works, wrought by English genius. Even the small and select profession of

the actuaries are beginning to find profitable arenas for assurance in countries beyond the four seas.

When, in addition to these numbers, it is remembered that the majority of those contained in them are heads of families, the importance of the professional classes, even in point of number, is not inconsiderable. .

In point of social position the professions have vastly, the superiority over the business world. The man of business has, as a rule, no position in respect of his occupation. If *in society*, his position is the result of his wealth, his education or the accident of his birth, and breeding. He has not gained it by his mercantile pursuits, and he will not lose it should he abandon them. The member of the higher professions on the other hand, at once takes a place in society by virtue of his calling; the poor man of business is nowhere in social position, yet the poor curate is admitted readily to that coveted country society that the millionaire has even to manoeuvre for. It is true that some merchants and manufacturers have been raised to the peerage, and that some professional men are not even gentlemen, but the former circumstance is as incapable of raising the general mercantile body in social position, as that the latter is able to bring any general degradation upon the professional body. I refer always to the plateau, and not to the lofty mountains, or deepest valleys, in estimating the general level. No doubt the mercantile classes have much advanced of late years, and the distance between the trading, and professional communities has been very much lessened, and numerous points of contact established; nevertheless the professions still maintain that superiority which their nature must ever give them.

On the whole it will be perceived that the entrance to a business is not so expensive as to a profession, that it gives an earlier return, but that only in the form of a small independence. Unless a man is possessed of capital, or is early adopted into an established connection, from motives of relationship, or otherwise, the man of business will be longer rising to a position to command a good income, or acquire a fortune than in a profession; that the man of business will be obliged to commence life with a defective education, and to assert a position in society, by means of his own force only.

The entrance to a profession is no longer delayed, but the education is completed, and a social position at once acquired. Success is independent of any capital beyond the necessary support until success arrives, and depends more on the man himself, and less on surrounding accidents, than in a business. That of a position attained in a profession is easily maintained, and is independent generally of the defalcations of others. The objects of a profession are nobler, more intellectual, of wider range, and confer more happiness than those of a business.