

Brutality at public Schools in the early 19th Century

Ashley-Cooper died in a fight at Eton in 1825.

Ashley-Cooper, who was killed in a savage and protracted fight against an older boy, was kept fighting for sixty rounds and for more than two hours. On the several occasions that he was knocked unconscious, his supporters revived him with brandy and pushed him back into the fight. When he finally collapsed, he was taken to his tutor's house, but the tutor was out and nobody fetched a doctor. When a doctor eventually came, six hours later, the boy was in a fatal coma. At the inquest, it was alleged that his supporters, who included his two elder brothers, had given him half a pint of brandy during the fight. Dr Keate and the other masters blamed the older boys for not stopping the fight, but seemed little concerned about the school's failure to maintain good order and reasonable conduct.⁵²

The incident, although it led to an unusually tragic outcome, well illustrates the position of boys, particularly boarders, at the public schools in the earlier years of the century and shows

what could happen when boys were left unsupervised for long periods. Masters took a limited view of their responsibilities outside the classroom. Older or stronger boys were left to establish their own dominance, but were given little formal authority. Differences were commonly settled by fighting, sometimes with some brutality. Intoxicating spirits were freely available. The responsibilities of supervision were diffused and uncertain, as at Eton: Ashley-Cooper's tutor, when absent, left no one to assume responsibility for the boys in his care; the older boys certainly assumed no responsibility. The other masters, including Keate himself, assumed no responsibility for the affair and Keate continued unaffected as headmaster until 1834.