

**Title**

Victorian Constructions of Everyday Heroism

**Synonyms**

Heroism, Bravery, Gallantry, Valour, Recognition, Commemoration

**Definition**

Everyday Heroism, within a British Victorian context, referred to acts of life-risking bravery, undertaken by otherwise ordinary civilian individuals, largely in the course of their daily lives, and within quotidian surroundings (Price 2014). To a far lesser degree, the term could also refer to the self-sacrificial or stoic endurance of poverty, deprivation, or hardship over an extended period of time (Blumberg 2013).

**Introduction**

Everyday Heroism in Victorian Britain was a prominent, visible, and well-regarded concept. The British State and numerous charities created awards to honour it; writers, poets, and artists composed works celebrating it; towns and villages erected monuments to commemorate it; scholars and philosophers debated the merits of it; and wider society, across all social classes, embraced and championed it (Price 2014). Constructions of Everyday Heroism were not static. They could be variably constructed by different bodies, for different purposes, at different times, and they altered, evolved, and were modified in relation to the social, cultural, and political landscape of the time (Price 2016).

**The Establishment Construction**

The establishment construction of Everyday Heroism was largely an adaptation of the existing model for military and imperial heroism. It was constructed by the State predominantly through the awarding of Crown-sanctioned medals, which were intended to recognise the pinnacle of pure and exemplary behaviour (Smith 2008). It was, therefore, a relatively narrow and inflexible construction. Reliant upon exacting standards, and largely limited to a particular type of individual exhibiting specific characteristics under certain circumstances, it was overwhelmingly influenced by notions of character, altruism, pure motive, integrity, and the triumphant or civilising nature of British national identity. Within the establishment construction, Everyday Heroism was the product of government departments, staffed by white, British, middle-class men, who did little to challenge or modify the existing model established by military and imperial heroism. This meant that very few women or children were recognised and, consequently, the establishment construction lacked the radical reforming edge that was increasingly informing wider and more popular understandings of heroism.

The Albert Medal, introduced in Britain in 1866 as the first Crown-sanctioned award for civilian heroism, was the foundation of the establishment construction (Henderson 1988). The belief was that publically recognising civilians for undertaking acts of heroism would stimulate patriotic attitudes and encourage civic behaviour. State endorsement of civilian heroism meant that, potentially, any of the monarch's subjects could become a national hero, which would, in turn, represent and encourage allegiance to the Crown and service to the country. Furthermore, creating a Crown

decoration for civilian heroism inferred that every citizen in the country was capable of heroism and, consequently heroism could come to be perceived as a national characteristic. The primary purpose of the establishment construction was to encourage allegiance to Crown and country, and to project, within and without, an image of a nation underpinned by high and honourable ideals.

Due to the primacy of this purpose, and the Crown-sanctioned status of the award, it was vital to the establishment construction that only the *correct* kinds of people, with the *right* kinds of personal qualities, were championed and promoted as worthy of emulation. There were no formal rules and very few guidelines to assist government officials when deciding whether or not to bestow an Albert Medal. Instead, they adopted their own sets of standards, qualifications, and judgements, based largely upon their own personal perceptions, assumptions, and opinions about the nature and relevance of heroic behaviour. They were heavily influenced by the imperative to restrict the medal to people who, they believed, exemplified the core values of the nation. As a result, they shaped an establishment construction of Everyday Heroism that focussed more on the perceived qualities and character of the individual rather than the specific circumstances of the heroic activity.

In the establishment construction, the personal character of the individual, and the way that shaped how their lifesaving act was undertaken, was crucial to determining whether or not they should be considered heroic. Standing firm, making informed decisions, being in control, facing danger, acting independently, and relying on your own abilities were all regarded as indicators of sound and exemplary behaviour in the face of adversity. Consequently, to be worthy of an Albert Medal, an individual had to consciously and voluntarily endanger themselves, in order to try and save another life, but with no outside assistance and when they had no professional duty or responsibility to do so. In the course of the rescue attempt, they needed to display a significant degree of self- control, sound judgement, and presence of mind. These were the personal characteristics that were central to the establishment construction of Everyday Heroism.

### **The Organisational Construction**

The organisational construction of Everyday Heroism was predominantly the product of private and charitable bodies, largely reliant upon subscribers and patrons, who championed particular types of Everyday Heroism as a means to project and disseminate their ideas and practices to the widest possible public audience. The organisational construction was primarily concerned with Everyday Heroism as a means of saving life, but also the prevention of circumstances in which life was put at risk. As with the establishment, within the organisational construction Everyday Heroism was used to endorse and encourage a particular set of ideas and practices which, in turn, promoted and furthered the work of the organisations. Thus, the focus remained upon living heroes and heroines, rather than those who perished in the act. The organisational construction significantly increased the public profile of Everyday Heroism in Britain in the Victorian period, and demonstrated that it could be a powerful and potent mechanism for promoting best practice and changing behaviours. Unlike the establishment construction, the organisational construction widened the field of everyday heroism and helped to make it more reflective of the society in which it existed, with far more women and children featuring within it.

The priorities and activities of a number of private and charitable bodies were the foundation for the organisational context and they distinctly shaped it. The Society for the Protection of Life from Fire (SPLF) was formed in 1836 (SPLF 1837). At that time its work involved the provision and maintenance of fire escapes at around seventy central London locations. In 1865, the SPLF was absorbed into the new Metropolitan Fire Brigade which stimulated changes to its remit. By 1908, its stated purpose had shifted to, 'the Protection of Life from Fire, by the grant of rewards for saving life from fire, to persons who shall have distinguished themselves or received injury while engaged in the rescue of life from fire' (SPLF 1908).. This definition, with the emphasis on risk to life rather than just attempting to save life, situated the SPLF as recognizing heroism, rather than simply promoting or endorsing lifesaving. This was an important distinction in the organisational construction of Everyday Heroism.

Likewise for the Order of St John of Jerusalem which, in 1869, began awarding parchment testimonials and medals in bronze and silver to 'those who had distinguished themselves by acts of personal bravery and humanity on occasions of accident and danger' (OSJJ 1876, p. 3). Nominations of potential awardees had to be accompanied by statements from eyewitnesses, and be countersigned by a clergyman, magistrate, or employer. The applicant and the eyewitnesses had to give details of 'the *precise* nature of the *exertions* used and of the danger known or *risk* incurred by the applicant' (OSJJ 1876, p. 6), demonstrating that, as with the SPLF, risk to life, rather than just saving life, was a key component.

Although wider in scope and more inclusive than the establishment model, these examples demonstrate that the organisational construction of Everyday Heroism was still relatively restricted. Because it was intrinsically linked to the ideas and practices of particular organisations, the organisational construction privileged particular types of incident. A good example of this was the Liverpool Shipwreck and Humane Society (LSHS), founded in 1840. Its purpose was 'saving human life, particularly in cases of shipwreck in the neighbourhood of Liverpool' and it gave awards to 'persons instrumental in rescuing human life from danger' (Jeffrey 1939, p. 16). As would be expected, its awards were predominantly for acts of bravery at sea: the Marine Medal (1884); the Camp and Villaverde Medal (1872); and the Bramley-Moore Medal (1872). Although there were numerous private and charitable bodies that shaped the organisational construction, rescues from shipwrecks, drownings, and fires accounting for the vast majority of awards (Price 2014). This significantly contributed to shaping what was, and was not, considered to be Everyday Heroism within the organisational construction.

The organisational construction also operated very much alongside the establishment construction, and acted more as an adjunct or reinforcement to it, rather than a challenge or alternative. All of the major organisations received Royal patronage which, as with the Albert Medal, linked the awards of the organisation with the State and nation. A good example of this was the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) founded in 1854. One of its founding resolutions was, 'that medallions or pecuniary rewards be given to those who rescue lives in cases of shipwreck' and awards were regarded as recognition of 'great risk to life' or actions undertaken, 'without consideration of the risk involved' (Cox 1998, p. 1-3). Again, this reinforced the important distinction between Everyday Heroism and lifesaving;

life had to be risked, not simply life being saved. Generally speaking, officers were awarded medals, while crewmen, or 'persons in a humble sphere of life', were given pecuniary awards (Wake-Walker 1992). Rather than a gold medal, the Institution's highest award, a crewman might receive three to five sovereigns, the equivalent of many weeks' wages for a fisherman. This distinction, based partly on experience but also on perceptions and assumptions regarding social class and expectations, demonstrates that the organisational construction of Everyday Heroism represented a good degree of continuity with the establishment model, rather than introducing anything particularly new or radical.

### **The Radical Construction**

The radical construction of Everyday Heroism was principally the creation of a network of progressively-minded individuals, keen to champion and improve the lives of the aspirational working classes, while also holding policymakers and power holders to account. Everyday Heroism, within this construction, was regarded as something generally undertaken by honourable people, of good moral fibre, who led conscientious and dutiful lives, and who strived to make a fruitful and constructive contribution to society. As such, it provided models of exemplary character which could then be utilised to teach and instil 'respectable' behaviour and morality among the working-classes as a whole. The radical construction may initially appear little different to the establishment and organisational models; the recognition and promotion of Everyday Heroism as a way to modify the thoughts and behaviour of the masses.

However, within the radical model, philanthropists, artists, reformers, writers, and public figures challenged the manner in which Everyday Heroism was constructed. By opening up new avenues in areas such as art, sculpture, literature, poetry and politics, they moved well beyond the more traditional mechanisms of honours and decorations employed by the state. Furthermore, the overarching objectives within the radical construction, including inspiring the working classes to take more control of their lives, providing exemplary working-class role-models for 'respectable' working-class behaviour, and, for some, fostering a sense of class consciousness, were fundamentally different to those in the establishment and organisation models. Finally, ultimate self-sacrifice was part of the radical construction of Everyday Heroism and, unlike the establishment and organisational models, deceased heroes were much more prominently and commonly recognised and commemorated.

The Victorian artist, George Frederic Watts was a leading and highly influential figure behind the radical construction of Everyday Heroism (Franklyn-Gould 2008). His unique Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice in Postman's Park, London, created in 1900, remains the most significant monument to Everyday Heroism in Britain (Price 2008). The memorial consists of fifty-four ceramic tablets, each providing a brief narrative about a person, or people, who lost their life while attempting to save another. Sixty-two people are commemorated; eight children, nine women, and forty-five men. The ages range from 8-year-old Henry Bristow to Daniel Pemberton, who was 61 when he died. The earliest recorded incident is that of Sarah Smith, a pantomime artist who perished in 1863, and all but one of the people who feature died between 1863 and 1927 (Price 2015). Those commemorated are predominantly otherwise ordinary and

unremarkable people, very much in keeping with the overriding ethos of Everyday Heroism.

Watts' considerable influence extended well beyond his own work, and it was the wider network of liberal-minded reformers and radicals who coalesced around him and his ideas which shaped the radical construction of Everyday Heroism. Various projects involved many of the same people, and they interweaved and drew inspiration from one another. One example is a scheme of decoration conceived for the Red Cross Hall in Southwark, the brainchild of the housing reformer Octavia Hill, who can be linked with Watts via John Ruskin and others (Price 2016). When devising interior decoration for the Hall, an associate of Hill's, Mrs Emilie Barrington, also a close friend of Watts, commissioned the decorative artist Walter Crane, who moved in the same circles as Watts, to design nine large murals depicting scenes of real-life Everyday Heroism (Barrington 1893). The most notable mural commemorated Alice Ayres, who had died close to the Hall. Ayres is highly relevant because she was explicitly cited by Watts as an archetype of Everyday Heroism, and she featured in several other projects within the radical construction (Price 2010).

In 1888, the novelist Laura M. Lane, inspired by Watts, published a book entitled *Heroes of Every-day Life* containing twenty dramatically embellished narratives of Everyday Heroism (Lane 1888). Lane was a radical, non-establishment figure, who had run charitable schools and worked with feminists and trade unionists collecting evidence of sweated female labour (Bettison 1986). Lane believed that the working classes required more than simply financial assistance to lift them from their lives of poverty. According to Lane, cases of Everyday Heroism, employed as exemplary role models of correct behaviour, provided the moral and social guidance that was required alongside the political and financial.

Another author at the centre of the radical construction was Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, who in 1895 published a collection of poems entitled, *Ballads of Brave Deeds* (Rawnsley 1895). Rawnsley and Watts were close friends who shared many common aims and ideals (Rawnsley 1923). For Rawnsley, Everyday Heroism was a chivalric concept, capturing Christian virtues of self-sacrifice and the giving of life for one's brother (Rawnsley 1900). This differed markedly from the establishment construction, which placed service to the nation above service to God in terms of self-sacrifice. Through a focus on self-sacrificial heroic acts, and the creation of exemplary martyrs rather than living figures, Rawnsley's radical approach also diverged from the organisational context.

Literature was a rich component within the radical construction, most notably focussing on women and children. For boys, there were titles such as, *Heroism of Boyhood* (Martin 1865), *Fifty-Two Stories of Heroism in Life and Action for Boys* (Miles 1899), and *Deeds of Daring: Stories of Heroism in Every Day Life* (Michael 1900). More radically, books such as *Brave little Women, Tales of the Heroism of Girls* (Trevelyan 1888), *Heroines of Daily Life* (Mundell 1886), *Noble Deeds of the World's Heroines* (Moore 1903) and *Heroines: True Tales of Brave Women – A Book for British Girls* (Michael 1904) fostered the spirit of heroism in young women. With its wider focus encompassing women and children, literature provided another element in the radical construction of Everyday Heroism conceived by Watts and employed by those he influenced.

## Integration

Everyday Heroism is not a single, static, or rigidly understood concept, but rather a flexible constellation of ideas constructed along different lines, by different groups or people. Indeed, the study of heroism is useful and important *because* it offers a window onto the social, cultural, and political atmosphere in which it existed. To identify the characteristics of a group or society at a given point in time, much can be learnt by studying those it constructed as heroic. During the Victorian period in Britain, the idea of heroism became progressively more inclusive and egalitarian, with Everyday Heroism slowly and incrementally widening the sphere in line with broader changes and reforms in society. Before 1850, there was little or no recognition or reward for the heroism of working-class men, or women and children, yet by the early twentieth-century, Everyday Heroism was almost entirely integrated into wider discourses.

## Conclusion

Everyday Heroism in Victorian Britain was a prominent and visible concept, but one that was also contested, and which was variably constructed by different bodies, for different purposes, at different times. Constructions undoubtedly interacted with each other, and some components were consistently represented, including risk to life, a lack of duty, and perceived moral integrity. However, constructions largely remained relatively distinct, with different constructions sometimes presenting challenges to one another, and each with its vocal and influential community of supporters and advocates. Heroism in Victorian Britain was constructed not solely by and about the 'Great Men of History' (Carlyle 1841), but also by and about the everyday masses of men, women and children who might otherwise have gone unnoticed, and it is all the more interesting and valuable because of that.

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