Warrior Nation Images of War in British Popular Culture 1850-2000

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Writing in the weekly journal the *New Statesman* on 17 March 2003, the columnist Cristina Odone praised British troops in the Gulf for enduring the privations of active service without complaint. Quoting Henry Newbolt?s invocation of British chivalry in *Vitai Lampada*, in which British soldiers remember their schoolboy selves and resolve to 'Play up! Play up! And play the game', Odone comments that the contemporary soldiers 'have unearthed a mould we thought had been lost and broken for ever: the stiff-upper-lipped Brit'. However, as Paris shows in this interesting and well-researched book, the image of the brave and chivalrous British soldier has long been a familiar characteristic of popular culture. Despite a small number of ?dissenting texts?, such as the films *Tumbledown* (1989) and *Resurrected* (1989), both of which focus on the infantry experience of the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War and the difficulties of re-integrating ex-combatants back into civil society, the heroic, brave and daring British soldier is an easily recognizable figure in many popular representations of war. From the poetry of the First World War, in which valiant troops are undermined by a gung ho public and ineffectual leadership, through to the plucky civilian soldier of Second World War films and the macho, fearless special forces of Andy McNab's *Bravo Two Zero* (London; Bantam, 1993) in the popular fiction of the 1991 Gulf War, the 'stiff-upper-lipped Brit' has been an enduring feature of British popular culture. Tracing images of war in popular culture between 1850-2000, with a particular emphasis on that produced for, and primarily consumed by, boys, Paris argues that the

ongoing representation of war as an exciting adventure has helped both to legitimate war as a means of settling international disputes; and to ensure the longevity of a militarised masculinity as an important model of British masculine identity.

Warrior Nation sets out its arguments chronologically, tracing the development of what Graham Dawson has identified as a ?pleasure culture of war? in British popular culture between 1850 and 2000.(1)Drawing on a wide range of sources, ranging from adventure stories to comic books, novels and films, Paris demonstrates the emergence and ongoing popularity of this pleasure culture of war as a feature of mass entertainment from at least the mid nineteenth century onwards. The book argues that British popular culture, particularly that produced for boys, has a long history of glamorising and romanticising warfare, repeatedly representing war as a chivalric, heroic and exciting alternative to the mundanity of everyday civilian life.Arguing Declaring that ?in much of the popular entertainment created for the nation?s youth, the over-riding national image is of an aggressively militant warrior nation? (p. 11), this richly illustrated monograph examines the privileged position of representations of war in British popular culture. The 'pleasure culture of war', it appears, has a longevity and popularity undimmed by the repeated experience of actual warfare: wars which, Paris argues, wereensured assured of both willing combatants and a supportive public at home by the dominance of these exciting and romantic narratives of war in the popular imagination.

A central feature of Paris? book is his contention that a ?jingoistic patriotism? was in place in Britain by 1850. Following the earlier work of Anne Summers and Hugh Cunningham ? both of whom have examined the growth of a popular patriotism during the nineteenth century ? Paris argues that the aggressive and warlike mentality which spread throughout Europe in the last years of the century was apparent in Britain by a much earlier date.(2) Tracing the popularity of dramatic reconstructions of distant battles and heroic episodes from British history amongst the working and middle classes, together with the numerous reviews, parades and royal ceremonies in which the armed forces took part, Paris demonstrates that the 'pleasure culture of war' was deeply embedded inthe extent to which war became a widely shared and enjoyed feature of British popular culture by the middle of the nineteenth century.

However, despite their appetite for reconstructions of famous battle scenes,the a certain sector of the British public retained a curiously ambiguous attitude towards the army, with popular narratives of military heroism existing alongside far more negative beliefs. The radical working class and the radical press of the mid nineteenth century frequently expressed misgivings about the potential role of the army as a force to quell civil unrest. Paris shows how this attitude was, in part, a response to the civil nature of British society; a society in which the army has historically had no formal place in the political life of the nation. It was also a reflection of the separation of the army from the everyday lives of most people.; sSmallpeople. Small in number and playing little part in public life, the army of the mid-nineteenth century was largely segregated from civil society, with recruits into the ranks often seen not as potential heroes but as unlucky, desperate or foolish individuals unable to make a living as a civilian. Yet this largely negative attitude towards the army was not reflected more widely in popular narratives of war which focussed upon the heroism of the aristocratic ?officer class?, the exploits of whom were recorded in numerous paintings, prints, ballads and poems. Paris argues that the two key military campaigns of the 1850s ? the Crimean War, which was the first military campaign to be covered by war correspondents, and the Indian Mutiny and its aftermath ? helped to extend this image of the heroic soldier to the army as a whole, ensuring that by the end of the century a popular militarism would be not only a deeply embedded feature of British society,and but a key facet of a *shared* national culture.

Central to the cultivation of this more positive image of the army was the growth of a popular evangelicalism in British culture. The evangelical desire for a moral revolution at home was matched by a belief in the British as a ?chosen people?, with a missionary duty to export both Christianity and British values to all corners of the world: , a belief which was utilized to support and sanction an imperialist world view. The British military were at the heart of the imperialist movement, responsible for maintaining the Empire, policing its borders and ensuring the safety of British colonialists. Individual soldiers, most notably Henry Havelock, came to embody the evangelical ideal of a Christian soldier, in common with General Gordon of Khartoum, both of whom were frequently represented as warriors who were willing to make the

?ultimate sacrifice? for the interwoven figures of God and Empire. These figures provided powerful models icons of masculinity, representing all that was best in the British, or perhaps more particularly English, character. Drawing upon Mark Girouard?s work on the ?rediscovery? of chivalry in nineteenth century literature, Paris demonstrates how the 'pleasure culture of war' which developed during this period not only disguised the horrors of actual warfare behind a set of moral certainties, but provided the outline for a popular militarism which was to teach generations of British boys across all social classes that the soldier-hero was a desirable and achievable model of masculinity.

Indeed,One one of the most helpful features of Paris?s research, both for students of gender studies and for historians of British national identity, is the overview that he provides of the enduring nature of what could be called the ?heroic warrior? narrative in popular cultural representations of war for boys. Paris shows how the figure of the heroic warrior, originating in the evangelical imperialism of the mid nineteenth century, appears again and again in this body of popular culture; and indeed, how little his essential characteristics have been effected by the experience of actual warfare and the changing nature of battle throughout the period. Biggles, W. E. Johns? popular inter-war airman, retained many of the qualities of the chivalric heroes of nineteenth-century juvenile fiction, being a sort of ?flying knight errant? whose struggles against the enemyenemy forces, whetherit be Prussianism, Bolshevism or Nazism, always ended in victory for the British empire and its fundamentally altruistic aims of spreading civilization and progress. (*Warrior Nation*, p. 160) The same qualities, Paris argues, can be seen in post-1945 fiction for boys in comics such as *Lion, Hotspur* and *Eagle*, where lantern-jawed young heroes such as Dan Dare heroically battled against enemies ranging from aliens to Nazi commandos. Interestingly, when these texts began to draw on the Second World War as a site of adventure, from the early 1950s onwards, they mirrored the changing popular cultural representations of the war from the same period for adults, in which the contemporary wartime picture of a people?s war, where civilians and importantly, women, defended the nation, and fought and suffered alongside warrior heroes was replaced by a narrative which focused once again on the activities and adventures of the individual, male, soldier.

This monograph demonstrates the enduring appeal of the pleasure culture of warRepresentations of warrior heroes did, of course, shift slightly across the decades. , fFictional warriors after the First World War for example were notably more likely to break rules and question authority than their Victorian and Edwardian counterparts, whilst still maintaining their belief in an innate British superiority. However, despite these slight shifts in representation, popular cultural accounts of war seem to demonstrate the durable nature of heroic war narratives; narratives which are notably more absent from elite representations of war, particularly the literature of the late 1920s which was produced by disillusioned veterans of the conflict.

Unlike Samuel Hynes, whose focus on this literature led him to conclude that British inter-war culture was dominated by a largely negative memory of the war, Paris argues that in fact the majority of young readers and viewers of war comics, war novels and war films in this period were surrounded by heroic and exciting images of warfare.(3) Indeed, Parisargues contends that , it is the continuing dominance of the pleasure culture of war in popular culture that may help to account for the willingness of so many young men to voluntarily enlist for military service in 1938-1939. Similar images of warfare and soldiers can be seen in more recent, tabloid accounts of war, such as the *Sun?s* collapsing of sexual and military potency in its coverage of the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War and the 1991 Gulf War.(4) Paris?s well-researched monograph helps to provide a context for such images, demonstrating the long and popular history of heroic images of warfare in British popular culture.

Whilst the main focus of Paris? research is upon popular novels and comic books for boys, he also examines the representation of warfare in other sites of popular culture, demonstrating that quasi-military organisations such as the Boy?s Brigade and the scouting movement, war toys, war games and war films have, again and again, helped to reproduce a sanitised, pleasurable version of war, destined to encourage the maintenance of a martial spirit amongst boys and young men. Although Paris acknowledges the existence of a sizeable body of anti-war literature, he rightly emphasizes the continued existence of popular, pleasurable representations of war, both in romanticized images of past wars and in the fantasy and science fiction genres, narratives of which continue to generally frequently revolve around war. Although a didactic desire

to inculcate military values amongst young men as a means of maintaining the Empire and defending the home may have waned, the trivialization of war as entertainment may well, as Paris argues, ?help to foster a society which accepts conflict as normal behaviour?.(p. 259) Although total wars, and wars of empire may be things of the past, war is self-evidently still seen as a valid means of settling differences. Whether the warrior hero remains a dominant figure in contemporary models of masculinity is perhaps more open to question.

With the current popularity of figures such as David Beckham, who in some ways transgresses gender boundaries, and the visibility of female combatants in recent conflicts, the naturalised linkage between militarism and masculinity is perhaps more open to question than at any time in the recent past. Whilst Paris documents the connection between the warrior hero and masculinity since 1850, and provides examples of representations of the far rarer ?female warrior?, he does not really discuss the alternative images of masculinity which existed contemporaneously, nor the extent to which images of female combatants challenged or disrupted dominant models of masculinity rooted in warfare. Perhaps the very rarity of such images suggests that they do, in fact, provide a very potent threat, illustrating the underlying fragility of the apparently strong, naturalised bond between militarism and masculinity. However, this point is not intended as a criticism of Paris? achievements here. Rather, it highlights the questions that such an illuminating and well-researched work opens up. This is a publication to be welcomed, not only by scholars of modern British history, but also by anyone interested in the relationship between popular culture, war and gender.

Notes

The author is happy to accept this review

1. G. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinity* (Routledge; London, 1994).Back to (1)
2. A. Summers, 'Militarism in Britain before the Great War', *History Workshop Journal*, 2 (1976), 104-23; H. Cunningham, *The Volunteer Force. A Social and Political History 1859-1908* (Croom Helm; London, 1975).Back to (2)
3. S. Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (Bodley Head; London, 1990). Back to (3)
4. J. Taylor, *War Photography: Realism in the British Press* (Routledge; London, 1991); L. Noakes, *War and the British: Gender and National Identity 1939-1991* (I. B. Tauris; London, 1998).Back to (4)

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