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Lost in the Past: A Tale of Heroes and Englishness

Abstract
Let us begin with an obituary. Obituaries are interesting texts, for they often reveal a great deal more about the writer and about the readers designate, than about the subject of the text itself, the individual who has died. English obituaries are a distinctive genre, they are often highly personal, frequently ironic, at times even critical. They rarely eulogize, they seek to contextualize the life of the deceased and they offer far more than biographical information. One such obituary appeared in The Guardian on 16 June 1993, written by Frank Keating about James Hunt, the English racing driver who had died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 45. Entitled 'Dashing to the flag', the text plays on the double meaning of those words: 'dashing' signifies both moving at speed and, as an adjective refers to exhuberance, charm and liveliness. Hunt had spent his life dashing, i.e. moving quickly, but had also been a dashing personality, flamboyant and spirited.
Let us begin with an obituary. Obituaries are interesting texts, for they often reveal a great deal more about the writer and about the readers designate, than about the subject of the text itself, the individual who has died. English obituaries are a distinctive genre, they are often highly personal, frequently ironic, at times even critical. They rarely eulogize, they seek to contextualize the life of the deceased and they offer far more than biographical information. One such obituary appeared in The Guardian on 16 June 1993, written by Frank Keating about James Hunt, the English racing driver who had died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 45. Entitled ‘Dashing to the flag’, the text plays on the double meaning of those words: ‘dashing’ signifies both moving at speed and, as an adjective refers to exuberance, charm and liveliness. Hunt had spent his life dashing, i.e. moving quickly, but had also been a dashing personality, flamboyant and spirited. The flag of the title also carries a double meaning: the flag is a fundamental signifier in racing, and victory is marked with a flag. But equally, the flag in question could refer to the British flag, the Union Jack, for Hunt had represented his country on the racing circuit as a British champion.

Keating’s obituary plays on the double meanings and depicts Hunt in mock-heroic terms:

James Hunt had a winning way with him both before and after his great successes on the racing circuits. Even in those comparatively supercharged and modern mid-70s, when his rear tyres were mischievously slicing mud up into the windscreens of his snarling Continental rivals such as Nikki Lauda and Clay Regazzoni, people’s perception in taproom Britain was that ‘our James’ was a throwback to sport’s cavalier days, before even the bow-tie twirling Hawthorn of two decades before.

Hunt was giving furious and technically trained Johnny Foreigners a hell of a beating, like it was an oldetyme sepia print of El Alamein or the Battle of Britain come to life ... and he was a Rockfist Rogan careering around in his leather helmet, short-sleeved cricket shirt, and pair of goggles, price 19s 11d from Timothy Whites and Taylors; and smelling the flowers and waving to the blondes in the crowd as he passed, and continuing to eye them through his wing mirror till he turned the next corner.1

This is a very curious text. Is it an ironic obituary, by a friend? A
gently critical obituary of a man whose lifestyle appeared to belong to another age? Is the portrayal of Hunt as an old-fashioned comic book hero sympathetic, are we being asked to accept this portrait and these values, and look nostalgically back to a time when they were believed to be commonplace? The answer would seem to be that this text is highly ambiguous, just as the media treatment of Hunt in his lifetime was by no means straightforward. He was a racing star, but also someone whose lifestyle, particularly his relationships with women and his taste for the international jet-set scene frequently made headlines in the tabloids. Transforming Hunt into a caricature figure from a bygone age isolates him from the contemporary world, makes it possible to mythologize his life, turning the sensational stories of his alcohol and sexual problems into something anodyne and hence acceptable. Keating himself acknowledges the fictionalizing process in which he is engaged, pointing out that such an image might have been the ludicrous front that he was happy to go along with 'for promotional' purposes.

Underpinning Keating's mock heroic portrait is an ideal of English masculinity. The cool, calm English hero is set against the furious and technically trained Johnny Foreigners. This is the comic-book stereotype of Englishness, promoted by the boy's adventure story and the British cinema of the 40s and 50s, often parodied but basically taken very seriously. We have only to think of the current anti-European lobby, the Michael Portillos of today who uphold heroic English traits against unsavoury Continental ones to see how powerful that stereotype remains. In contrast with the victory-obsessed continental, the English hero is not interested in winning, he is concerned just to play the game; he is somehow an innocent, with a boyish sense of mischief. 'Our James' Keating tells us, using a familiar appellative, was a throwback to the cavalier days of sport, the days before professionalism began to rear its head. Hunt is depicted as a figure from the past, 'like an oldetyme sepia print' and the text transports us back to the 1940s, to the Battle of Britain and El Alamein, to the last great moment of the English hero figure. It is a figure that we have come to know well, from the comics, the novels and above all from the cinema. This obituary firmly locates Hunt in the tradition of the idealized English hero figure.

The mythical English hero of the Second World War was always contrasted to the snarling, incompetent foreigners against whom he fought. It was a familiar pattern of contrasts, with foreignness set against the ideals of Englishness. Anthony Easthope has constructed a list of contrasts between Englishness and foreignness based on stereotypical representations expressed in a whole range of texts, most notably in political discourse: the English are objective, foreigners are self-obsessed, they are practical, while foreigners are (undesirably) theoretical, they are clear and plain speaking, not given to over-indulgence in rhetoric, they are endowed with common sense, in
contrast to the fanaticism and dogmatism of foreigners, they are sensible, not silly, hard, not soft, sincere, not artificial. In love, they are reticent but true-hearted, in sport they are amateurs, not professionals. This list of contrasts, which provides the skeletal framework of so many narratives of Englishness, is also gendered, for the ideal qualities of Englishness are equated with ideals of masculinity. Women, like foreigners, are inclined to be subjective, hysterical, emotional and silly. The values of masculinity are equated with the values of Englishness. Stuart Hall sums the situation up with his customary acuteness:

To be English is to know yourself in relation to the French, and the hot-blooded Mediterraneans and the passionate, traumatized Russian soul. You go round the entire globe; when you know what everybody else is, then you are what they are not... When I speak about this way of being in the world, being English in the world, with a capital 'E' as it were, it is grounded not only in a whole history, a whole set of histories, a whole set of economic relations, a whole set of cultural discourses, it is also profoundly grounded in certain forms of sexual identity... A free-born English person was clearly a free-born English man.

The qualities of the English hero were established in the nineteenth century, in the age of imperial expansion. J.E.C. Welldon, headmaster of Harrow from 1881-1887 was in no doubt that the training of the hero began at school and gave the Englishman a special quality that would differentiate him from Johnny Foreigner forever. Noting that Englishmen are not superior to French or Germans in brains or industry or science, or in techniques of warfare, Welldon declares that their superiority resides:

in the health and temper which games impart... The pluck, the energy, the perseverance, the good temper, the self-control, the discipline, the cooperation, the esprit de corps, which merit success in cricket or football, are the very qualities which win the day in peace or war...

Games, good sportsmanship was the key to imperial success, and the myth of the game played well even at the point of total defeat was a powerful one. Sir Henry Newbolt’s famous poem, Vitai Lampada, reads like an anthem of a period, as the voice of a schoolboy rallies the defeated British army, reminding them to 'Play up, play up, and play the game'. The honour of the school, loyalty to the team and self-discipline were the fundamental features of this world-view. Death was incidental, cowardice the ultimate horror. Sport and warfare are fused together, and the training and values of the one system elide into the other. The good sportsman is a good fighter, because although he aspires to win, he does not set winning above the game itself. Losing can therefore bring even greater honour, if the losing is done well.

Keating’s obituary for James Hunt is full of irony and affectionate humour, but it clearly belongs to a tradition of obituaries for heroes who combine personal talents with ideals of Englishness. That tradition
was consolidated during the age of empire, reaching its apotheosis during the First World War. A good example of the genre is Maurice Baring’s poem, *In Memoriam A.H.*, written for Auberon Herbert, Captain Lord Lucas, a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps who was killed in action on November 3, 1916. The poem is full of references to the skies as both the place where he met his death and the symbol of the afterlife: ‘a soaring death and near to heaven’s gate’. Describing how the young man flew out of this life and into another, Baring depicts him arriving at a kind of Valhalla, a heaven for heroes where:

Surely you found companions meet for you
In that high place:
You met there face to face
Those you had never known but whom you knew:
Knights of the Table Round,
And all the very brave, the very true,
With chivalry crowned;
The captains rare,
Courteous and brave beyond our human air:
Those who had loved and suffered overmuch,
Now free from the world’s touch.
And with them were the friends of yesterday
Who went before and pointed you the way.

Once in that place ‘of freshness, light and rest’, Baring imagines Auberon Herbert being welcomed by friends he knew and also, significantly, by knights of old, for the promised land is the place where ‘Lancelot and Tristram vigil keep’ over their dead king, Arthur. Into this warrior-heaven the newest comrade is welcomed as friend and brother, ‘to that companionship which hath no end’.

Baring’s heaven for warriors is a particularly English Valhalla. It is an Arthurian heaven, for very perfect knights. There are no women here, no Valkyries in the Germanic tradition, no houris to offer nights of endless pleasure, only men. It is also notable also that the two knights mentioned by name, Lancelot and Tristram both had deeply ambiguous relationships with women, having been involved in protracted and disastrous love-affairs with their kings’ wives. Baring draws upon a particular nineteenth century version of Arthurian legend that stressed the ideal of comradeship among men, with the Round Table as a kind of team or club and King Arthur as the captain.

The nineteenth century Arthurian revival took many forms: there was a Celtic version that saw Arthur as a model of resistance against tyranny, a figure living in an age of violence and magic who provided a safe haven for those who chose to follow his path. This Arthur can be compared to a sort of guerilla leader or resistance fighter, in contrast to the German version which stressed his sanctity, his kingliness and his position as an elite warrior. The English Arthur was less of an elitist
figure, and appeared rather as a model of manliness and leadership. Countless retellings of the Arthurian legends, particularly those versions aimed at the schoolboy readership present him in this way. This Victorian repossession of Arthur is therefore linked to the creation of an idealized image of England and Englishness. The captain (King Arthur) and his team out on quests, fighting for good and searching for the Holy Grail, defending damsels in public but living good clean lives well away from the wiles of women tied in well with behavioural models taught in the public schools.

Women did not appear favourably in this version. They were seen principally as negative influences, as cruel and adulterous queens, betrayers or evil sorceresses. It is through women that the Round Table collapses, women such as Guinevere whose passion for Lancelot led her to betray Arthur, or Margawse, mother of Mordred who precipitated the end of the ideal order. Versions for schools tended in consequence to erase women, unless they were harmless damsels or suffering maidens like Elaine. There was no place in the chivalric ideal for women. They disrupted, they weakened and, like foreigners, they did not play the game.

The novels of Rider Haggard, the hugely successful writer of adventure stories for boys in the latter years of Victoria’s reign are full of evil women and strong, resilient men. When Allan Quartermain looks for the first time on She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed he sees her perfect beauty, ‘only this beauty, with all its awful loveliness and purity, was evil or rather at the time it impressed me as evil’. She is destroyed by the flame that has preserved her for thousands of years, and since she has also disposed of her rival, the heroes are able to return to England unencumbered. Likewise, in *King Solomon’s Mines*, the noble Foulata dies trying to help the heroes escape the clutches of the evil old witch, Gagool. Haggard always manages to punish the bad women and kill off the good ones in time for everyone to get safely home again, womanless.

Haggard’s characters are models of English masculine behaviour. *Allan Quartermain*, which appeared in 1887 was prefaced by a dedication that explicitly stated that the purpose of his novel was to educate boys in models of masculinity and Englishness:

I inscribe this book of adventure to my son, Arthur John Rider Haggard, in the hope that in days to come he, and many other boys whom I shall never know, may, in the acts and thoughts of Allan Quartermain and his companions, as herein recorded, find something to help him and them, to reach to what, with Sir Henry Curtis, I hold to be the highest rank whereto we can attain – the state and dignity of English gentlemen.\(^8\)

Sir Henry Curtis is the fictional embodiment of that ideal, a plain-speaking simple man, who enjoys shooting game, who gets ‘as restless
as an old elephant who scents danger' when forced to live the life of a country squire. Sir Henry is a 'a splendid looking man ... calm powerful face, clear-cut features, large grey eyes, yellow beard and hair-altogether a magnificent specimen of the higher type of humanity'. Allan Quartermain, Haggard's alter-ego narrator, declares that he has 'never seen wider shoulders or a deeper chest'. In this novel, Quartermain, Curtis and Captain John Good, the trio who explored the Mines of Solomon in the earlier novel, unite again for another journey to the African interior, accompanied by the noble Zulu warrior Umslopogaas. This time they discover a hidden kingdom, ruled by two sister-queens, Nyleptha, the golden-haired and Sorais the dark-haired. Both women fall in love with Sir Henry, and when it becomes clear that he prefers Nyleptha, Sorais wages war against her sister, with catastrophic results. By the end of the book, Umslopogaas and Quartermain are dead, and Sorais kills herself, leaving Sir Henry to rule over the Zu-Vendi kingdom with his wife. Women have brought about the downfall of the traditional order of the realm, and have led to the death of heroes.

After Quartermain has died, Sir Henry takes up the narration, and explains that he intends to protect his kingdom from the evils of the modern world, which include gunpowder, telegraphs, steam, daily newspapers and universal suffrage. As the reader is about to leave him in this idyllic state, he suddenly adds a postscript that echoes Haggard's dedication of the novel and gives him the opportunity to note almost casually that he now has a son:

I quite forgot to say that about nine months ago Nyleptha (who is very well and, in my eyes at any rate, more beautiful than ever) presented me with a son and heir. He is a regular curly-haired, blue-eyed young Englishman in looks and, though he is destined, if he lives, to inherit the throne of the Zu-Vendis, I hope I may be able to bring him up to become what an English gentleman should be, and generally is—which is to my mind even a prouder and a finer thing than being born heir apparent to the great house of the Stairway, and, indeed, the highest rank that a man can reach upon this earth.

Sir Henry is strong and manly, and resolutely English – a model for builders of the Empire. Joseph Bristow's splendid book, Empire Boys, examines the way in which a literature for boys was also a literature for Empire-makers, a form of training in imperial ideals linked to an overt educational programme. He also examines how long that literature endured, and how pervasive it was. Sir Henry may be read as a prototype, he recurs in other guises in comics, films and novels, surviving two world wars. He is one of Baring's heroes, he is Biggles, of course, and Dan Dare and the Wolf of Kabul, and Julian, the Enid Blyton boy hero who took all the decisions for the Famous Five.

Like many women of my generation, I used to read the Famous Five books and was filled with fury at the docile Ann who washed dishes
and the tomboyish Georgie who tried (and always failed) to take the control that Julian held. The model of gendered behaviour in those books continued the model found in nineteenth century boys' adventure stories. The hero was always a gentleman, women always had to be subservient and docile if they wanted to be admired and the aggressive ones always came out of things badly. Equally, like other women of my generation, I have not wanted that model of behaviour passed on to my children, neither to my daughters nor to my son. It is significant that the late 1960s – early 1970s, which saw the emergence of the feminist movement and a healthy questioning of establishment norms in all kinds of areas also saw the demise of many of the more xenophobic and racist comics and children's books. Despite such changes, the figure of the gentleman-hero remained visible, and as Graham Dawson has pointed out, the Falklands war of 1982 saw how close to the surface the old attitudes lay:

A Task Force composed exclusively of men became the representative of the nation's will. British men and women were encouraged, as in the Second World War, to identify with it, and with them, through gendered inflections of the national myth. The 'feminine' narrative stance concentrated on the tearful goodbyes of girl-friends, wives and mothers; on their hopes anxieties and grief; on their sense of the terrible vulnerability of those they waited for, and pride in their suffering and loss. The 'masculine' version, by contrast, found the military technologies and strategies of the war fascinating, the prospect of battle exciting, and British soldiers, sailors and airmen heroic.12

One of the great difficulties for a cultural historian is to date change. Change involves process, and processes are never easy to map. The very understandable desire we all have to organize history coherently all too often leads to a distorted perspective. It has become commonplace, for example, to see 1968, the year of international student protest, as a year of great change in British society, just as it is equally commonplace to see 1956, the year of the Suez crisis, as a previous watershed, with 1945, the year of the end of the Second World War before that. Undeniably these dates have a certain significance, but in terms of mapping the shifting patterns of continuity of a myth they mean very little. What we can say, however, is that the image of the English gentleman-hero began to lose its power sometime in the 1970s, accelerating in the 1980s. It was a process that did not happen on anything like the same scale as before, and appears to be related to a crisis of English identity on the one hand, and a crisis of heterosexual models of masculinity on the other. In a multicultural society, white middle-class models of behaviour can expect to be challenged; in a society that has seen radical redrawings of class lines in the age of Thatcherism and a new emphasis on consumerism and market forces, the old idea of playing the game ceases to have much impact. The English hero is now lamented as a lost ideal; since the 1970s there has
been a discourse of nostalgia that pervades the British press, which crosses party lines and which has been specially in evidence in the 1990s with the fiftieth anniversaries of such events as D-Day, VE day and VJ day and with a series of scandals involving the England cricket team.¹³

One explanation for the continuity of such figures as the English-school-captain-hero figure resides in the power of the image at the time of its invention and the way in which it has been consciously manipulated ever since to serve a specific social purpose. For this hero figure was England, he epitomized Englishness and English values, and so long as the myth of England as a homogeneous state, a great world power, the centre of the Commonwealth stayed intact, then the hero remained unchallenged.

In the late 1940s – early 1950s the image of the English hero was still intact. Let us take, as an example, the story of one of those great hero figures, Captain Scott of the Antarctic. The bare facts about him are familiar: Scott set out to be the first man to reach the South Pole, but died in the attempt, accompanied by four members of his team: Dr Edward Wilson, Captain Lawrence (Titus) Oates, Petty Officer Edgar Evans and Lieutenant Henry Robertson Bowers (Birdie). The expedition was a failure, because when Scott and his men reached the South Pole, they found that their Norwegian rivals, led by Roald Amundsen, had been there before them. They had no option but to set off back across the Polar icecap, but ran out of supplies before reaching their nearest base.

Despite the failure of the British expedition, Scott and his men have consistently been seen as heroic figures. Indeed, so powerful is the myth of their heroism, that memory of the failure tends often to be erased. Quiz games, such as Trivial Pursuit, ask who reached the Pole first, Scott or Amundsen, because a common supposition is that Scott actually beat Amundsen to their goal, dying heroically on the way back. In the hugely successful South With Scott, first published in 1921 and reprinted six times within the first four months of publication, Captain Edward Evans summarizes the tragedy in language that reinforces the mythical ideal:

The details of Scott’s final march to the Pole, and the heartrending account of his homeward journey, of Evans’ sad death, of Oates’s noble sacrifice, and of the martyr-like end of Wilson, Bowers, and Scott himself have been published throughout the length and breadth of the civilised world.¹⁴

The myth of the martyr-like end of the British heroes began from the first announcements of the news on 11 February 1913. The Times praised the team’s idealism, noting that

This is the temper of men who build empires, and while it lives among us we
shall be capable of maintaining an Empire that our fathers builded.\textsuperscript{15}

As he lay dying in his tent, Scott had written a message to the public, which contained a powerful, emotional plea for the English heroic ideal. This was published together with the news of their deaths. ‘For my own sake’, he wrote,

I do not regret this journey, which has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another, and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past.

He went on, using language that reflects the stiff-upper-lipped sporting heroism of the English gentleman, to declare that they had all taken risks knowingly, and

things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of Providence, determined still to do our best to the last. Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman.

Scott’s message was reinforced later in the same year, 1913, when an edition of his journals, giving his account of the doomed expedition was published.\textsuperscript{16} Then, when the First World War exploded on Europe in 1914, the myth of Englishmen dying uncomplainingly in appalling conditions was adapted to serve the war effort. ‘We have so many heroes among us now, so many Scotts’, wrote Agnes Egerton Castle in 1916, in a piece that reflected upon the ‘splendour’ arising from the bloody fields of Flanders and Gallipoli.\textsuperscript{17} The story of Scott, the hero, had come at exactly the right time, and the mythologizing process that had begun before the war started, accelerated over the next few years.

The Scott myth stayed more or less intact for decades. The film version of 1949, starring John Mills as Scott illustrates how little the idealised portrait had altered. Scott is represented as a noble figure, a compassionate leader of men, speaking perfect officer-English, determinedly cheerful despite all the odds, rallying his desperate companions and dreaming, longingly, of his wife. As death approaches, the image of Scott and his wife walking together across an English beach momentarily cancels out the howling of the wind and the suffocating horror of the tent. In this version, women are helpmeets for heroes, and are rewarded with a love that transcends even death.

But the version of the Scott story told in Central TV’s six-part series, \textit{The Last Place on Earth} in 1985 was strikingly different. In this production, with a screenplay by the playwright Trevor Griffiths, based on Roland Huntford’s book, \textit{Scott and Amundsen}, and starring Martin Shaw as Scott, the idealism disappeared, to be replaced with a close, often cruel examination of the motivation of both Scott and his rival,
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Amundsen. Huntford’s biography, which first appeared in 1979, was a no-holds-barred account not only of the two Polar expeditions, but also of the personalities of Scott and his Norwegian rival. Scott emerges from Huntford’s book as a driven man, not particularly competent or well-organized, whose wrong-headedness led to the loss of his men and to his own death. But Huntford also shows the extent to which Scott was writing himself into a myth that would grant him posthumous fame during the expedition, carefully wording his reports and seeking constantly to offer an image of his own greatness and of his companions’ final heroism. Huntford noted that one of Scott’s last letters was to his friend, Sir James Barrie, better known as J.M.Barrie, creator of Peter Pan, in which he wrote proudly that they were showing ‘that Englishmen can still die with a bold spirit, fighting it out to the end’. After his death, Scott’s widow Kathleen asked Barrie to create an official reconstruction of the last hours in the tent, to ensure that there could be no doubts about Scott having been the last man to die. There had been suggestions that Wilson had outlived Scott briefly. Barrie’s response, in a letter to Kathleen Scott was to create a stage picture with Wilson and Bowers dying first, and Scott awaiting death with his head flung back and his shirt unbuttoned. Barrie insisted on the veracity of his version, claiming that ‘we know this because it was thus that the three were found’. Huntford remarks in passing that Barrie was, of course, a practised playwright, well able to manipulate an audience. Kathleen Scott also had a vested interest in propagating the myth of her husband’s heroism; Huntford reveals that ‘by a melodramatic improbability’ she had been having an affair with Nansen, the other great Norwegian explorer. His portrait of the small-minded, ambitious Scott and his domineering unfaithful wife hardly accord with the idyllic couple in the John Mills version. Huntford’s biography struck at the heart of a legend.

In an introductory interview to the published version of his screenplays, entitled _Judgement Over the Dead_, Trevor Griffiths discusses his own responses to the Scott story, the ambiguous feelings he had when first approached to dramatize Huntford’s _lese-majeste_ biography for television, and his initial refusal of the commission:

I was very suspicious of those parts of my own response which I call Boy’s Own, as it were. There was something vaguely ... that felt slightly comic strip or boy’s comic. And I wasn’t sure that I could find a politics within this piece that could be inserted into a contemporary discourse and the present struggle. So at first I refused the offer of the series.

The solution to the problem came unexpectedly. Just as the advent of the First World War spurred the Scott myth on to become an iconic legend of English heroism, so Margaret Thatcher’s decision to go to war in the Falklands in 1982 gave Griffiths the link he had been searching
for. The resurgence of a jingoistic patriotism at that time, with its antiquated discourses of Englishness, sacrifice for one’s country, imperial heritage and the importance of dying nobly could be linked to the Scott story directly, for it embodied the same values. Griffiths’ last episode was entitled ‘Rejoice!’ a reference to the statement by Margaret Thatcher when she heard of the sinking of the Argentine ship, The Belgrano, which then appeared as a headline in The Sun. Griffiths made the connection between war and patriotism that had led so many men to their deaths in the cause of the British Empire, in two world wars and now in contemporary Britain. His argument was a complex one: on the one hand, from his political perspective he presented that discourse as a continuing element in Conservative party thinking. On the other hand, by recognizing his own response to the myth, he also recognized the shaping power of that myth on generations of schoolchildren. Griffiths, as much as Margaret Thatcher, had been shaped by stories of English heroic endeavour. The difference between them lay in being able to distinguish a consciously constructed fantasy from reality.

One episode suffices to demonstrate the vast difference of perception from the post-World War II period to the post-Falklands period: the representation of the death of Captain Oates. This particular episode was presented by Scott as an example of supreme self-sacrifice. Oates, realizing that his limbs were so badly frostbitten that he had no chance of survival and would have slowed up his companions in their trek back to base, sacrificed himself by crawling out into the Antarctic winds. Wilson wrote a consolatory letter to Oates’ mother, telling her how her son had died like a soldier. Scott, in his diary, recorded that Oates said simply ‘I am just going outside and may be some time’ as he staggered out to his death. He noted that Oates took pride in thinking his regiment would be pleased with his bravery, and added that although the others knew that he was going to his death, ‘We knew it was the act of a brave man and an English gentleman’. 21

The 1949 film preserves these words and this version of events. There is minimal dialogue, Oates wakes to see the tent flapping over him and despite the resolutely cheerful behaviour of his companions, crosses the tent and walks out into the snow. As he staggers into the howling blizzard, the music swells and we gradually lose sight of him. The camera focuses on the tearfilled eyes of Captain Scott.

Huntford argues that Scott presented Oates’ death in this way to the world because he needed an alibi:

A subordinate driven to the extremity of suffering would be damaging in the extreme, so Oates simply had to have a story-book ending. In any case, Scott, who always went by appearances, may well have interpreted Oates’ action as the correct gesture. 22
Griffiths seized upon the ambiguity in Huntford’s interpretation of Scott’s account. In his screenplay, Oates does not die well, he dies desperately. In the television version, the Polar explorers are shown with their hideously damaged bodies, disintegrating before our eyes, unlike the prettified film version showing frostbite and gangrene that is obviously make-up. In a sequence that mirrors the film version, and is clearly derived from it, the jovial cheerfulness of English gentlemen of the 1940s is replaced by a mocking sequence that opens with Wilson bending over Oates with a mirror to see if he is still breathing. When Oates crawls out of the tent he drags himself across the ground, and the camera shows us Birdie, the working-class member of the group mouthing a plea, with Martin Shaw’s Scott stony faced and seemingly almost drugged, certainly not a man in control. As Oates crawls out, he responds to Birdie with one remark: ‘Call of nature, Birdie’.

In this single sentence we can see the change of emphasis that has taken place in the myth of heroic Englishness. The famous heroic statement that Oates is supposed to have made, the stoical comment that Scott claims were the last words he uttered has been replaced. And the sentence Griffiths uses instead refers not to the accepted version of Oates’ death but to the mythologizing process itself, for generations of schoolboys and boy scouts on camping trips have quoted Oates’ words when going out of a tent to relieve themselves. The last words credited to Oates by Scott entered the psyche of several generations, and this is what Griffiths means when he refers to the comic book response within himself that the Scott myth occasioned. His Oates makes an in-joke for all those who have been brought up on the official version of the myth. In his adaptation of Huntford’s book, Griffiths shows us the myth-making process in operation; he exposes the conscious construction of the myth even in extremis. These changes in representation of the Scott myth reflect the huge shift of perspective that has taken place in a relatively short time, compared to the period during which the myth remained intact. What has happened is that now it is being perceived as a fiction, an impossible image of masculinity that was bound up with the kind of patriotic ideals that have no place in a post-imperial world. The stoical English hero originated in educational policy in the C19th and served a specific purpose in an age of imperial expansion. It provided a powerful model, both of masculinity and Englishness. It had a formative influence on several generations, and the last of those generations is the one that holds power today and is determining the educational policy of the future.

Today we question that myth because we can see the myth-making as a consciously political act, just as we can see the hegemony of England and Englishness as political. The English gentleman hero was meant to personify order, coherence and British homogeneity. Today, that homogeneity is exposed as illusory, the history of British imperialism is
being rewritten, the desirability of a model of heterosexual masculinity has been called into question. The English hero lies like a fallen Colossus, destroyed by forces from within and from without. The end of Empire, the changes to the political map, all the factors that have brought Britain to its present state of economic decline, the troubled relationship with Europe and the USA – these are some of the external forces wearing away at the stonework.

Internally, the repression of emotion, the deliberate suppression of feeling, the compartmentalizing of sexuality, the deliberate exclusion of the personal may have worked as fictional devices but failed utterly as life strategies. What we can see now is the terrible price paid by individuals who accepted the myth at face value and subordinated their own emotional lives to it.

Rider Haggard’s *Allan Quartermain* is dedicated to his son, who in 1887 was 6 years old. The novel begins oddly, with Quartermain’s sadness at the death of his own son, and ends with the birth of Sir Henry’s son. Rider Haggard was only 31 when he wrote the novel, with the protagonist an old, tragic man, a curious alter-ego for a dynamic young novelist to chose. In 1891, only four years after the novel had first appeared, Haggard’s own son died, probably of meningitis. Haggard dealt with this personal tragedy by refusing ever to allow his son’s name to be mentioned in his presence. The intense grief he felt was ruthlessly suppressed, though during the First World War when many of his nephews and friends’ sons were killed, including Kipling’s only son, Haggard’s diaries reveal a man tormented by unending personal pain that he could not allow himself to show in public or even to his own family. One shocking passage in his diary records the news he managed to obtain of how Kipling’s son, reported missing in action, had died:

Bowe says ... he saw an officer, who *he could swear* was Mr Kipling ... trying to fasten a field dressing round his mouth which was badly shattered by a piece of shell. Bowe would have helped him but for the fact that the officer was crying with the pain of the wound and he did not want to humiliate him by offering assistance. I shall not send this on to R.K. (Rudyard Kipling); it is too painful but, I fear, true.²³

Haggard never saw the connection between the heroic myth, the English class system and the damage to the individual of repressing feeling, nor did he ever understand his own role in helping to shape that myth. Such was the ethic of the imperial hero. Constructed on a fault line, the hero, like the Empire was the instrument of and embodiment of repression. Today, looking back, we can see that English identity always was in crisis because it was artificially constructed on a false premise of homogeneity that erased ethnic, national, cultural and regional differences. Likewise, its symbolic hero
was also a fictional creation. What we can marvel at is how long the myth endured, for how many decades the figure of the perfect Englishman of boys' adventure stories remained in the English imagination, that figure described so succinctly by A.A. Gill in a newspaper article 1993 about England, cricket, nostalgia and the dream:

The England team of our imaginations, of our dreams, represents the whole of England from the top to the bottom ... The England team should be the personification of the nation, in white, playing in hierarchical harmony, with three leopards on their chests, not a brewery, showing Johnny Foreigner that it takes as much skill and greater reserves of phlegm ... to lose gracefully than to draw at all costs ... And the captain must be a young man from the traditional ruling class of our imagination. He should look like a captain, handsome but not beautiful. He should be intelligent but not brilliant ... He doesn't have to be any good, he can field at third man and go in at No.11. But he will be a chap we can admire. A chap who speaks softly, laughs with an easy grace in the face of a follow-on, is swift to offer a hand of congratulation, a man who walks without waiting for the finger. And he'll be a man with a floppy fringe and a smooth jaw.24

NOTES

10. Ibid., p. 10.
13. Particularly interesting in this respect is (i) the case of the England captain, Michael Atherton, admitting to having dirt in his pocket which effectively meant he had tampered with the ball during a game in the summer of 1994 and (ii) the case of an article which appeared in Wisden Cricket Monthly in summer 1995 which suggested that 'negro' players lacked the proper patriotic commitment to play for England.


18. Huntford’s book was originally entitled *Scott and Amundsen* when it appeared in 1979 published by Hodder and Stoughton. It was reissued in 1985 as *The Last Place on Earth* (London: Guild Publishing). This change of title was linked to the title of the Central TV series. However, when Trevor Griffiths’ screenplay of the TV series came out, the title had changed again to *Judgement Over the Dead* (London: Verso, 1986).

19. Sir J.M. Barrie, letter to Kathleen Scott, 10 September 1913, quoted in Huntford, op.cit., p. 564.

20. ‘Truth or Otherwise’, Introduction to Trevor Griffiths, *Judgement Over the Dead*.


22. Ibid p. 541.
