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No more heroes

A debate at the London headquarters of the Royal Society for the encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce last week was discussing the proposition that public life has become so degraded by the promotion of celebrity that it has lost the ability to identify genuine heroes.

The debate, which borrowed the line "No more heroes anymore" from a song by The Stranglers, the 1980s punk rock band, was worth having because the concept of heroism appears to have become diluted in recent years by media overuse.

Just about anyone, it seems, can be described as a hero these days whereas once the term was reserved for wartime exploits and dramatic rescues.

In fact, most of the heroism discussed during the session related to warfare, partly, perhaps, because the panel included two historians and a notable army officer. Colonel Tim Collins, commanding officer of the Irish Rangers during the war in Iraq, achieved instant fame at the outset of the conflict when his eve of battle speech was quoted verbatim around the world.

His address to his troops was feted as an outstanding and rare example of modern rhetoric that stood comparison with Shakespeare's "band of brothers" speech for Henry V before Agincourt. But did this make Col Collins a hero?

"I don't regard myself as a hero," he said. "I was a chieftain of a Celtic regiment talking to his tribe, not seeking to be a hero, only to provide leadership."

Col Collins is right that a traditional definition of heroism measures deeds, not words. Gallantry medals, for example, are awarded for outstanding bravery. But Andrew Roberts, one of the historians on the panel, said that bravery alone was insufficient since some reviled figures, such as Adolf Hitler, had proved themselves capable of bravery in battle. "There has to be a moral element to an act of courage," he argued, "for it to qualify as heroism."

Tristram Hunt, another historian and fellow panellist, introduced the concept of self-sacrifice that had been stressed by the Victorian moralist Samuel Smiles, whose book, *Self Help*, defined a code of protestant commitment and hard work that underpinned late 19th century entrepreneurship. Today, he said, there was a growing cynicism over what he called "manufactured heroism".

But is manufactured heroism a modern phenomenon or is much of the heroism we have encountered in our history books merely a device for channelling national fervour and patriotism in times of conflict or deflecting attention at other times?

The Soviet leadership in the 1920s invented the concept of the hero worker as propaganda for the communist system. The British government diverted attention from an ill-advised invasion of KwaZulu when it marked the bravery of the defenders of Rorke's Drift with 11 VCs. The courage of these soldiers was unquestionable but so was that displayed by thousands more in other wars whose deeds went unwitnessed.

There used to be such an individual as the unsung hero but today it seems that the only heroism that matters is that which gets noticed. This is why the argument of another panellist, journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, that heroism is a feature of so many walks of life, not just the battlefield, held some appeal.

Heroes must be viewed as extraordinary people who perform extraordinary acts. Yet, so often, these acts are invisible and unrecognised: the donation of a kidney, perhaps, or years of devotion to a family member with some long-term illness.

It should surprise few of us that not one member of the panels or the audience mentioned anyone in corporate life as a hero. But is that fair or can we find heroes in the workplace?

In the US, at least, it is common to find hero-worship of corporate figures such as Jack Welch and Bill Gates. In the UK, if we cannot call it hero-worship, we can point to occasional populist business figures such as Sir Richard Branson - about the only business figure recognisable from the windows of the Clapham omnibus. For many years, Sir Clive Thompson, last week ousted as chairman of Rentokil, was a consistent favourite among his peers.

No matter how much we may admire such people, surely it debases the currency to describe them as heroes? But what about sports stars? Do they deserve to be described as heroes?

Two weeks ago I was listening to a powerful argument for companies to give jobs to Olympic athletes. The event, at the House of Commons, was promoting membership of the Olympic and Paralympic Employment Network (OPEN)*, a programme that encourages companies to provide work and funding to Olympic athletes.

It may surprise some employers to know that many top class athletes are not wealthy professionals but are trying to scrape a living to fund their training and competition. The argument of OPEN, partnered with Blue Arrow, the employment agency, is that the sort of focus and commitment these people bring to their sport could inspire their work colleagues in a business.

The OPEN programme is an important opportunity for athletes and allows employers to identify themselves with the Olympic movement. There is some concern that special treatment of athletes might engender jealousy but I would think this unlikely. The workplace needs heroes too, although I am not sure this sentiment is shared by many managements. It is easy to imagine management tensions over the loss of an employee at intervals throughout the year.

There is an anti-heroic vogue at the top of companies just now because so many former corporate stars have fallen out of the firmament. But the extraordinary popular reaction to Col Collins' speech should not be ignored. His balance of toughness and compassion, combined with a gifted use of language, demonstrated that it is still possible to find inspirational leadership that can make a difference.

Perhaps we have become uncomfortable with the concept of heroism, given that its definition has become blurred by celebrity. Tom Wolfe memorably wrote of the Right Stuff, in his book of the same name about the early astronaut programme. I find the complex mix of qualities that he suggests marked out people as possessing the right stuff far more appealing than the much weaker corporate notion of "talent".

I cannot get excited when executives talk of managing talent, but reading about the qualities of the finest pilots in the jet and rocket age leaves me with a sense of awe.

If only we could find examples in the office. Instead we see people constantly seeking preferment in an atmosphere that promotes self-centred ambition. Teamwork is supposed to be encouraged but in practice the workplace more closely resembles a Darwinian struggle for survival.

Do people in offices possess the right stuff? I am sure that some do. But the modern workplace does too little to find it. Offices just don't do awe.

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