

Craig Barclay – Durham University

Go and Do Thou Likewise: The Medals of the Royal Humane Society, 1774-1900

We tend today to accept without question that an individual who has performed a brave deed ‘deserves a medal’. The notion that such deeds might be rewarded with the grant of a metallic token is however a comparatively recent one, having been pioneered in Britain by the Royal Humane Society (RHS).

Founded in 1774, with the purpose of providing ‘immediate Relief of Persons apparently dead from DROWNING’, and the ‘diffusing a general Knowledge of the manner for treating Persons in a similar critical State, from various other causes; SUCH AS Strangulation by the Cord, Suffocation by noxious Vapours &c. &c.’;¹ the development of the role of the RHS during the Georgian era was ably recorded in its comprehensive *Annual Reports*.² The Society was able to boast in its *Annual Report* of 1825 that it had been directly responsible for the saving of over 5,000 lives in the Metropolis and had thus ‘contributed... to the preservation of the lives of very many most valuable members of the community’. Furthermore, it was able to claim to have granted rewards (be they monetary or medallic) on almost 21,000 occasions, the Society viewing the granting of rewards as being of particular importance, noting that rescuers had been ‘animated... by the rewards of the Society’.³

The origins of the Society’s rewards can be traced to a meeting held at the London Coffee House in September 1775, at which the co-founder Dr Thomas Cogan raised for the first time the subject of establishing a medal to be awarded by the Society. The obverse of the medal drew its inspiration from the Rococo and neo-classical idioms; pairing a chubby *putto* with obscure symbolism and an obvious delight in the clever use of an archaic language. It was the product of a well-educated and scholarly organisation and was designed to appeal

¹ Royal Humane Society *Annual Report*, 1774, frontispiece.

² P.J. Bishop, *A Short History of the Royal Humane Society* (London, 1974). pp. 4-6.

³ Royal Humane Society *Annual Report*, 1825, pp. ix-x.

specifically to others who shared the refinement and learning of its originators.⁴ It was in every way a product of its class and of its time.

In adhering to the classical tradition, the reverse design took the form of a Civic Crown or wreath, in memory of the reward given by the ancient Romans to those who saved the life of a fellow citizen.⁵ Around this was the inscription 'He has obtained this prize for having saved the life of a citizen.' Well educated and widely read as many members of the Society were, the classical significance would not have been lost on them and, when Prince Ernest Augustus received the Society's medal in 1798, the poem penned in celebration of the award drew specific attention to the design's classical allusions:⁶

*WHAT Prince deserves more just renown
Than he who earns the Civic Crown?
Who from the dark o'erwhelming wave
The struggling victim hastes to save!
Can thus the pomp of state forgo,
To listen to a tale of woe!
Thine, ERNEST! is the just renown:
Long may'st thou wear the CIVIC CROWN!*

The formation of the RHS coincided with a moment in time when the medal as an artistic medium was becoming increasingly significant in British Society. Numerous organisations had instituted medals to be presented as prizes to those who had won competitions or promoted the interests of the awarding body. Such awards were often highly sought after, Dr John Lettsom, one of the Society's founders, commenting upon learning that he had been

⁴ T. Clifford, 'Thomas Stothard RA (1755-1834) and the British Neo-classical Medal', M. Jones (ed.), *Designs on Posterity: Drawings for Medal*, (London 1992), p. 138.

⁵ D.M. Jacobson, 'The Roman *Corona Civica* (Civic Crown) on Bar-Kokhba's Silver Coins', *Numismatic Circular* 116:2 (2008), 64-66.

⁶ Royal Humane Society, *Annual Report*, 1799, p. 11.

awarded a prize medal for his 1791 essay on urban disease that ‘though it is but ten guineas in metal, I value it above £500.’⁷

In deciding to establish a medal for presentation to those who had been instrumental in saving life, the Society set a precedent that was to be followed not only by other social groups, but also by corporate bodies, the print media and ultimately, the State. But it was not a decision that was taken in isolation. Both of the founders of the RHS were very familiar with – and drew direct inspiration from – the work of the humane society of Amsterdam and it is scarcely credible that they would not have been acutely conscious of that pioneering body’s practice of awarding medals to lifesavers.⁸ Furthermore, and closer to home, many of the grander societies had well established programmes for the presentation of medals to gentlemen who made significant contributions to the furtherance of their aims.

In its early years the Society primarily awarded medals to members of the higher social orders who had contributed – for example through the exemplary restoration of life of an apparently-drowned person – to the furtherance of the organisation’s aims. On rare occasions medals were awarded to members of the lower middle classes in recognition of brave acts, but most practical lifesavers were members of the lower orders and had to be content with cash rewards. This was a significant distinction, and one which met with the approval of Jeremy Bentham who opined that:⁹

If rewards were established for virtue, when exhibited by the indigent classes, it would be improper to seek for striking instances of its display, or to suppose that they are actuated by sentiments of vanity, which operate feebly upon men accustomed to dependence, and almost constantly employed in making provision for their daily wants.

Bentham believed that there was little point in using medals as a reward to encourage virtuous behaviour in the poor. This was however not the case with the higher social orders and, in an argument directed at a French audience, he was quick to draw attention to the

⁷ J.J. Abraham, *Lettsom: his Life, Times, Friends and Descendants* (London, 1933), p. 275.

⁸ C.P. Barclay, *The Medals of the Royal Humane Society*, (London, 1998), p. 3.

⁹ J. Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward: Book I, Of Rewards in General*, Chapter XVI, p. 4. Reproduced in digital form from Bowering edition of 1843: www.la.utexas.edu/research/poltheory/bentham/rr/rr.b01.c16.html (28/11/2007).

medal-giving activities of the RHS and to argue how they might usefully be adapted and expanded.¹⁰

The Humane Society, established in England for the purpose of affording assistance to persons in danger of drowning, and providing the means of restoration in cases of suspended animation, distributes prizes to those who have saved an individual from death...

An institution of a similar nature, for the reward of services rendered in the cases of fire, shipwreck, and all other possible accidents would still further contribute to the cultivation of benevolence; and these noble actions, brought in the same manner under the eyes of the legislators, and inscribed in their journals, would acquire a publicity of much less importance to the honoured individual than to society in general. Indeed, though the reward applies to only one particular action, the principal object designed is the cultivation of those dispositions which actions indicate: and this can only be accomplished by the publicity which is given to the example, and the public esteem and honour in which it is held.

Bentham's opinion that the presentation of medals were unlikely to act as a positive incentive to members of the lower orders was not shared by all. Lieutenant E. Medley, a Royal Naval officer, expressed the opinion of many of these dissenters when writing to the RHS in 1833. Arguing persuasively (and successfully) that a medal be granted to a rating under his command, he was unequivocal in his support for the use of medals as incentives:¹¹

Permit me to observe, that however careless British seamen may be in hazarding their lives for the preservation of their fellow creatures, it must always be satisfactory to them, in the highest degree, to know that their humble yet heroic exertions are noticed by their officers; and I am persuaded, by an experience of thirty-three years in His Majesty's service, that if seamen were rewarded by honorary distinctions instead of pecuniary grants from public societies, they would be found as careful and as proud of these tokens as any other class of people. Such a mark of distinction must be a never-failing passport to the good opinion of the officers under whom they may chance to serve, while it would operate as a

¹⁰ Bentham, p.3

¹¹ L. Young, *Acts of Gallantry: Being a Detailed Account of Each Deed of Bravery in Saving Life from Drowning in all Parts of the World for which the Gold and Silver Medals and Clasps of the Royal Humane Society Have been Awarded from 1830 to 1871* (London, 1872), p. 33.

powerful stimulus to foster exertion, and to dissipate an apathy too frequently prevailing when self-existence is required to be hazarded.

A similar emphasis on the career-enhancing benefits conferred by the granting of medals to the worthy poor was expressed by an anonymous correspondent in the late 1820s. Writing to the RHS in support of the granting of an award to a man by the name of Wilding for his role in rescuing a seven year-old child from drowning, the correspondent observed that:¹²

If it is within your regulations to award a medal, it would not only be gratifying to the object of this application, but it would be a badge which would most probably influence the benevolent in giving employment to one who has been so successful in saving the lives of his fellow creatures.

Partly in response to letters such as these, by the early years of the nineteenth century the Society was increasingly making use of its silver medal as a means of recognising courage. The move was a gradual one and, as late as 1830, the *Gentleman's Magazine* recorded the presentation of medals to a number of individuals 'who had exerted themselves, and even risked their own lives, for the preservation of their fellow creatures'.¹³ Nevertheless, as the century progressed, so the Society's medals came to be used almost exclusively as a means of rewarding bravery. It was a shift which was accelerated by the introduction of a cheaper bronze version of the award in 1837, with medals thereafter coming to be more liberally distributed amongst the members of the working classes.

The nineteenth century was an age of heroes, and monuments commemorating the brave deeds of the Empire's gallant sons were to be found in almost every city in Britain. With few exceptions these monuments commemorated the lives and deeds of the nation's leading men whilst the heroism of the less exalted members of society went un-remarked and unrecorded. A novel exception to this general rule is to be found in London, where the Watts Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice in Postman's Park records the self sacrifice of those from all walks of

¹² Young, p. 13.

¹³ *Gentleman's Magazine* 100, January-July 1830, p. 360.

life who gave up their own lives in an effort to save others.¹⁴ Watts was conscious of the transience of the press coverage afforded to such acts of self-sacrifice and was keen that such sacrifices should not be forgotten. In particular, he was eager to ensure that the willingness of the men and women recorded by the monument should act as a source of inspiration for others, observing in the *Daily Mail* of 7 July 1898 that ‘...it is our duty to encourage what is good and vigorous and noble. I hope that the memorial to humble heroes will not be without value in that direction.’

In choosing to commemorate the deeds of those who sacrificed their lives to save others, Watts envisaged a new type of inspirational public memorial. The medals of the RHS and other similar bodies were however already performing a similar function, the wearer of such a decoration being transformed into a living manifestation of his or her brave deed. As such, medallist from all walks of life could perform an inspirational function; particularly if the transient brave deed which had earned the medal were to be accepted by the viewer as the ultimate manifestation of a heroic and worthy life. Those who wore lifesaving medals might accordingly be perceived as paragons of society by an audience who built a heroic narrative around the badge they displayed. Popular literature served to underpin such generalisations, and bodies such as the Religious Tract Society published and distributed volumes celebrating not only the deeds of Britain’s heroic lifesavers; but also the worthy lives which they led. Such writing was certainly significant for, as Cubitt has observed, a hero is a product not only of his or her deeds but also of the manner in which those deeds are reported and heroic lives are an imaginative social construct:¹⁵

...lives, in short, that are not just heroic in isolated detail, but that constitute in some sense a heroic totality. Heroes may be celebrated for particular actions or traits of character, but they are celebrated in a way that implies the essential consistency of action with character, and the dramatic unity of the successive stages of individual existence.

¹⁴ J. Price, “‘Heroism in Everyday Life’: the Watts Memorial for Heroic Self Sacrifice”, *History Workshop Journal* 63:1 (2007), pp. 254-78. Published on-line at <http://hwj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/63/1/254> (6/2/2008).

¹⁵ G. Cubitt, “Introduction: Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives”, G. Cubitt & A. Warren, (eds.), *Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives*, (Manchester, 2000), pp. 5-6.

Heroes were thus afforded their special status because their heroism represented the inevitable result of their worthy and heroic lives. Indeed, even the lives of humble might nevertheless be portrayed as exemplary and perform a role in moulding the behaviour of others.¹⁶ The description of exemplary lives in their entirety was considered by some such as Dryden to be an exceptionally effective technique for encouraging a positive didactic moral effect, arguing that exemplars should ideally be individuals with whom their audience can identify:¹⁷

Exemplarity involves a perception not just of excellence, but also of relevance - and thus, in a sense, of similarity. Those whom we take as exemplars may be better than we are, but not than we might in principle become – not better in some absolute way that implies a difference of kind, but better relative to some common standard against which we hope to improve.

In the mid-1890s the Sunday School Union published a series of uplifting volumes by the writer Frank Mundell, including *Stories of the Humane Society*, *Stories of the Fire Brigade* and *Stories of the Lifeboat*. Accessible works such as these celebrated the heroism of ordinary men and women and, through their wide distribution helped to serve as their memorial. The heroes whose deeds were recorded were in no material way different from their readers and the style of writing helped to ensure that the reader empathised with the central characters. One of the tales recorded was that of William Brimelow, a Bolton man who saved a fellow workman from suffocation in a gas-filled furnace cupola. As related by Mundell, it was an act of selfless courage which earned him the silver medal of the RHS but cost him his health:¹⁸

...for since that day he performed, what has aptly been described as one of the most heroic feats of modern times, he has not known what life really is. Months of weakness succeeded long days of pain, and the occasion which found him a hero left him an invalid.

Mundell's book portrayed Brimelow as making a Christ-like sacrifice, but he is nevertheless unquestionably an ordinary man. Indeed, great emphasis was placed upon the

¹⁶ Cubitt, p. 9.

¹⁷ Cubitt, p. 11.

¹⁸ F. Mundell, *Stories of the Humane Society*, (London, c. 1895), p. 138.

unremarkable lifestyle of this 'quiet, home-loving fellow'.¹⁹ Brimelow was portrayed as the embodiment of a range of Victorian virtues: a modest and sober soul who was nevertheless capable of acting with calm and selfless courage when the need arose. His status as the son of the proprietor of the furnace where the accident occurred was referred to in passing, but the account contained no hint that this might have imposed upon him a special duty of care for those employed there. Rather, Mundell chose to emphasise his position as one of the workers, reporting that 'His fellow workmen lamented what they considered his rash action, and thought sadly that two homes would now be desolate instead of one.'²⁰

Brimelow can thus be seen to have been portrayed as an individual who, whilst not compelled by duty to act, nevertheless felt compelled to go to the aid of one of his. Such heroes were part of the normal mass of humanity, but paradoxically somehow elevated from it. As Dr. W.C. Bennett observed in his poem, 'Our Heroes of Today':²¹

*Heroes and saints! And do they say
The past had these alone?
Brothers, have we not both to-day,
And both the people's own?
Theirs may be homes in lanes and streets,
But theirs are deeds one hears
With blood that quicker, nobler beats,
And the proud praise of tears.
If e'er your heart ignobly faint
At great deeds in your way
Then think of many a living saint
And hero of to-day*

But if the writing of exemplary lives might be thought of as a specialist art, the master of the medium was perhaps Laura Lane, whose book *Heroes of Everyday Life* provided its readers with 255 pages of lives to emulate. Lane was absolutely clear as to the purpose of her

¹⁹ Mundell, p. 134.

²⁰ Mundell, p. 134.

²¹ Reproduced in *The Penny Illustrated Paper*, 1 February 1873, p. 73.

work and the audience at which it was aimed. she was acutely concerned for the moral welfare of her audience, bemoaning in the preface to her book that ‘We live in a sensational age. Sensational fiction, sensational journalism, sensational speech-making – these are the everyday features of our times.’²² Lane sought to offer an alternative to her readers which harnessed and redirected this love of the dramatic, explaining that ‘To lovers of the sensational I offer a new, and at the same time healthy, gratification of their taste.’²³ Her target audience was likewise clearly identified, the author explaining that:²⁴

Such as they are, I venture to dedicate these stories of heroism in every-day life to the working men and boys of Great Britain. Whatever may be lacking in the completeness of my work, there is certainly no lack of love, no lack of sympathy with the great working class.

The tone of Lane’s preface strongly suggests that her work was at least partly motivated by a feeling of social anxiety and by an associated evangelical desire to encourage patriotism and stability through the promotion of Christian values in the working classes.²⁵ The tales of bravery related by Lane were those of ordinary men and women who had risked all for the sake of others. But not only were the details of their deeds recorded: so also was information relating to their backgrounds and everyday lives. Lane sought to look beyond the actual acts of heroism and to record – or manufacture – a broader context which re-set them as the crowning achievements of a series of lives which were not only worthy of but also *capable* of emulation. Thus Walter Cleverly was portrayed as a man whose bravery in leaping into shark-infested waters to rescue a drowning sailor was the natural successor to the pluck he had displayed as a child when ‘thrashing the cowardly bully who was the terror of the weaker and smaller boys’.²⁶ It is not however only the childhoods of her heroines and heroes that are held up for emulation. Lane also went to considerable lengths to stress that the brave acts performed in adulthood represented consistent manifestations of the characters of the men

²² Lane, p. vii.

²³ Lane, p. vii.

²⁴ Lane, p. vii.

²⁵ Lane, pp. vii-viii.

²⁶ Lane, p. 42.

and women whose actions she was describing, the life-boatman Charles Fish and his siblings for example being portrayed as exemplarily dutiful offspring:²⁷

It is pleasant to learn that her sons and daughters proved their gratitude to their excellent parent by ministering to her in her declining years.

Accordingly, by the end of the nineteenth century, the awards of the RHS were being used not only to recognise individual acts of bravery but also to mould the behaviour of large elements of society. The careful distribution and effective promotion of the Society's awards served to ensure that they gained a status and desirability which extended far beyond the borders of Britain. Indeed, as early as 1872 even an American writer such as Mark Twain could write with some justification of:²⁸

...that reward which a sailor prizes and covets above all other distinctions, the Royal Humane Society's medal.

²⁷ Lane, p. 130.

²⁸ 'Perils at Sea', *The New York Times*, 26 November 1872. The article quotes a letter written by Twain to the Royal Humane Society recommending that it recognise the gallantry of several seamen of the Cunard steamship *Batavia* who had risked their lives to rescue the crew of a sinking Newcastle barque in mid-Atlantic. Twain witnessed the rescue from the deck of the *Batavia*. None of those recommended by Twain received Royal Humane Society medals.