

# **From Hero to Celebrity?: Authority and Exposure since 1945**

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## **A. Summary**

Many scholars have studied the making of heroes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, alongside state formation, imperial expansion and the emergence of new print cultures. The changing forms and functions of heroes in the twentieth century, however, have been largely neglected by historians. Daniel Boorstin's *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, first published in 1961, provides a starting point for this investigation. Boorstin's perceptive study contrasted heroes with celebrities, "marketable human models" manufactured by the media. Boorstin suggested that it was only in wartime that modern society could make new heroes. This paper will challenge Boorstin's rigid distinction between heroes and celebrities, drawing attention to the changing role of the state, to explore the proliferation of non-military heroes since 1945.

## **B. Outline**

### **1. Introduction**

- Discussion of choice of terms: "hero", "celebrity", "authority" and "exposure".

### **2. Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961)**

- Remains a seminal text in celebrity studies, cited by authors such as Graeme Turner and Charles L. Ponce De Leon. However, Boorstin's critique of modern culture sits uneasily in his large body of work, which is generally much more positive about US history and culture.
- Boorstin was a particularly astute analyst of the workings of modern media industries, and many of his insights remain pertinent today.
- However, Boorstin's analysis of the shift from "hero" to "celebrity" is built on a series of oppositions, which require further analysis. He invests heavily in the idea that "real" heroes existed in the past. Geoff Cubitt's definition of the hero offers a useful alternative approach.
- While very astute about the media, Boorstin also has little to say about the changing role of the state in the creation of heroic icons. I argue instead that the state's withdrawal from the promotion of certain individuals as models for emulation is one of the key changes of the last century.

### **3. Pride of Britain, 1999-2009**

- The final part of the paper examines the Pride of Britain awards, which were initiated by the *Daily Mirror* in 1999 and have become a major annual, media event. The awards dramatise many of the features addressed by the "My Hero" conference.
- The ceremonies have drawn attention to some outstanding examples of courage and self-sacrifice.
- The awards show the persistence of certain features of heroic discourse, in particular the value attached to those who place themselves in danger to help others.
- The awards also expose the centrality of "celebrity" in modern culture, for, while the awards' declared intention is to honour ordinary men and women, both the staging of the event, and its media coverage, consistently foreground the "celebrities".
- At times, the awards have been framed in a narrowly nationalistic discourse, even though the outstanding qualities displayed by the award-winners clearly transcend national boundaries.