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"Daring and Heroic Actions": The Albert Medal and the construction of non-military heroism

The 23rd March 1866 was a dark and stormy night. Off the coast of Devon, the cargo ship, *Spirit of the Ocean* lost its battle with the force eleven gales and was torn apart as it was swept onto the notorious Start Point rocks. In complete darkness and battered by the wash and the wind, the situation was grave for all those on board and indeed, only four of the forty two passengers and crew survived. Those four were saved by Samuel Popplestone, the tenant of a nearby farm, who having witnessed the accident paused only to raise the alarm before setting off alone for the wreck, armed with just a small coil of rope. Popplestone clambered out onto the rocks and although swept off several times, he eventually managed to lift four men out of the water and drag them up the cliff to safety. He then conveyed them to his farm where he fed them, provided them with dry clothes and housed them overnight until the Coastguard arrived to assist them. As the story of Popplestone's bravery became known through the press he was universally and understandably hailed as a hero and as a result of his heroism he became the first recipient of the Albert Medal; the first Crown sanctioned award for civilian gallantry.

As this is only a twenty minute paper and there is a great deal of interesting material I want to talk about, I don't want to get bogged-down in detailing the long administrative history of the medal. The timeline in appendix one outlines the key points in the development of the award and, I hope, will provide sufficient background context for what follows. Because, what is far more interesting than the history of the decoration itself is the manner in which it was administered and, more importantly, what we can learn from that with regard to furthering our understanding of non-military heroism.

This paper will show that the Albert medal was not only introduced to encourage exemplary behaviour but, more importantly, it was intended to bond civilian heroes and heroism to the nation in a similar way to the Victoria Cross and other military heroism decorations. However, this placed an implicit pressure upon those

administering the medal to ensure that they only rewarded individuals who were worthy of such accolades. Consequently their evaluation of nominees became focussed more on the personal character of the individual rather than the act of heroism they had undertaken. Furthermore, because no official regulations or guidance was produced, the administrators, when making their decisions, had no benchmark to apply other than their own ideas and perceptions of what constituted heroism. Consequently, they unwittingly shaped a construction of heroism that was implicitly and subjectively linked to their own understanding of the concept, rather than being able to approach it in a more objective way. Ultimately, there was relatively little public engagement with the Albert medal, partly because of the unfeasibly high standard but also, I would suggest, because the particular construction of heroism being rewarded did not equate with how the concept was more generally understood by the public at large.

As a Crown-sanctioned decoration, the Albert medal was introduced to serve several purposes. Firstly, it was a government reaction to alarming levels of death and injury during shipwrecks and it was designed to encourage acts of lifesaving amongst mariners. Its extension to cover acts on land was similarly motivated against a backdrop of concerns about loss of life in mining accidents. More importantly, however, the Crown endorsement of civilian heroism was also intended to cement the connection between Royal benevolence and loyalty to the throne. Military heroism could already be interpreted as heroism on behalf of the nation and recognising it underlined a serviceman's allegiance to the Crown. However, providing national State recognition and endorsement of civilian heroism extended this idea into a wider public domain. Thus, any or all of the Queen's subjects could now potentially be heralded as national heroes and, as an inevitable consequence, they would be viewed as examples of Crown endorsed qualities.¹

This mechanism was not, however, without its difficulties and it would appear that even the Queen herself was not blind to one particularly important issue. In 1864 when the decoration was first proposed, she wrote, 'it might frequently happen that these daring acts might be performed by men of irregular life and immoral habits'

¹ These ideas are outlined and discussed in, Prochaska, F., *Royal Bounty: The Making of a Welfare Monarchy*, (London, 1995), chaps. 3 & 4

and, clearly, rewarding such people would not reflect well upon the Crown or the nation.² Measures were put in place to help guard against the problem, such as a clause in the warrant that allowed a medal to be revoked for criminal or disgraceful conduct, and each recipient had to sign a form to agree to the terms. Of course, the best solution to the problem was not to award the decoration to such people in the first place and the responsibility for this lay with the secretaries and ministers of the Home Office who were charged with investigating each nomination and making the ultimate recommendation to the Monarch.

Now, it might be imagined that some rules or guidelines would have been set in place to assist the Home Office secretaries in making their decisions, especially as the Royal warrant itself gave little indication of exactly what constituted an act worthy of recognition. However, the creation of any guidelines was considered to be unworkable, as one under secretary stated, 'it would be well if we could draw up some rules for the Albert Medal; but I suppose it will be rather difficult'.³ Instead, the department adopted a system whereby all the evidence for an award was collected together into a file, and this was then circulated to the upper-division clerks and to the Private and Parliamentary undersecretaries, who after considering all the facts, added their own opinions as to the suitability of the individual. Finally, the file was sent to the Secretary of State who, with regard to all the comments, made the final decision. Ultimately, then, the Home Office secretaries were left to adopt their own set of qualifications and standards as to what constituted an act worthy of recognition.

Equally, of course, they also had to decide what did not constitute an act worthy of recognition and this is where the Albert medal really comes into its own with regard to examining the construction of heroism. Because, not only have the Home Office files for awarded cases been preserved, but those for refused cases have also been retained and, as you might imagine, these make for particularly interesting reading. Refusing a nomination was effectively saying that the individual did not qualify for the award, and therefore reasons for refusal can be interpreted as inverse qualifications. For example, if an individual was refused because their rescue attempt was unsuccessful and the victim perished then we could interpret 'saving the victim'

² The National Archives: Public Record Office: MT9/288/M17381

³ TNA: PRO: MT9/29/W3202

as an implicit qualification for the award. Furthermore, by examining the explicit reasons stated for refusing a nomination, it is possible to gain an understanding of the more implicit judgements that were being applied when assessing the incidents.

What, then, were the reasons given for refusing to award an Albert Medal?

By far the most common reason given for refusal (just under 30%) was that the rescuer did not incur a sufficient amount of risk to their own life in undertaking the act. For example, in the case of Charles Putnam and Arthur Ruben, who both jumped into the River Thames off Victoria Embankment, during a fast running tide to rescue a semi conscious woman who had attempted to commit suicide. The decision of the Home Office was that,

‘This was a gallant action and both men seem to have jumped into the river without hesitation. They were, however, good swimmers and it seems doubtful if the risk run by them quite reaches the Albert Medal standard.’⁴

There can be little doubt that Putnam and Ruben undertook a singularly brave act and one that was subsequently recognised by the Royal Humane Society. However, the fact that they themselves were not perceived to have been in any great danger led to the refusal of the Albert Medal.

How much risk to their own life was sufficient for an individual to be worthy of an Albert medal was, from the start, a contested issue between the Home Office staff. Eventually though, after much debate, they settled upon the following criteria.

To qualify for a second class medal, ‘risk to life was not only great but exceeded the chances of safety’, while the first class was reserved for acts where the risk to life ‘was so overpoweringly great that there was practically no chance of safety’.⁵ In short, to receive a medal at all you had to stand a good chance of losing your own life

⁴ TNA: PRO: HO45/10650/211533

⁵ TNA: PRO: HO45/10682/221805

and to receive the first class medal, it had to be almost certain that you would perish in the act of rescue.

Another key aspect was that life not only had to be risked, but it had to be *knowingly* risked at the time of the incident. So, in the case of a railway porter, Edward Battersby, who saved a woman from the path of an oncoming train, his case was refused because he remained on the platform while he lifted the woman from the tracks. It was suggested that Battersby was not aware at the time that he could have been hit by the train and therefore was judged to have not knowingly put his own life at risk.⁶ The inference here appears to be that Battersby only undertook the action because he believed it was safe to do so and although he did ultimately risk his life, it could not be proven that he would have done so had he known the risks. It would appear that to receive the Albert Medal, you had to stand up and **face** death and not simply be at risk of it.

Staying with these judgements regarding the risk to life, it was not only prior knowledge that was taken into consideration, but also the circumstances in which the risk was incurred. In the case of Francis Ward, who in 1908 assisted in saving his fellow workmen while trapped with them in a well, the decision to refuse the award rested on the fact that,

‘the rule is to give the Albert Medal only to a person who to save life, voluntarily puts himself in a position of extreme danger. In this case, Mr Ward found himself involuntarily in the position of danger’.⁷

The suggestion here is that Ward may not have committed the act if he had been given a choice not to. These two cases suggest that there were to be no ‘accidental heroes’ with regard to this decoration. The risking of life had to be a conscious decision and one that was positively entered into as opposed to simply being in the wrong place at wrong time.

⁶ TNA: PRO: HO45/10349/146953

⁷ TNA: PRO: HO45/10378/162976

Another key reason for refusing the medal was because individuals in certain civilian positions had a professional duty or responsibility to undertake acts of heroism. As with the case of PC William Wootton who saved five people from a fire at a workhouse in Devon. Wootton was refused on the grounds that, 'it was more or less in the discharge of his duty that the risk was encountered'⁸ Awards to fireman were also refused on similar grounds of professional duty and perhaps it was only to be expected that individuals such as policemen and fireman who were professionally paid to undertake risk to protect life would be excluded.

However, 'professional duty' in the very widest sense of the word had a significant bearing on the decision to award or refuse a claim for the medal. Transport workers, such a tram drivers, railway guards and station porters were all viewed as having a duty to protect the life of the general public. The fact that Railway Guard Sullivan, who pulled a man out of the way of an approaching goods train, was, 'a railway servant and not an ordinary member of the public who in removing the passenger in question was merely carrying out his duty' led to the refusal of the application.⁹ The burden of professional duty also took its toll in the case of Tram Driver Wilton, who stayed with his vehicle and attempted to stop it after it careered out of control on a hill in Bournemouth, Dorset. In a memo to the Home Office, a Board of Trade inspector who investigated the incident wrote,

'I have no wish to belittle driver Wilton's behaviour under trying circumstances. He remained at his post until the car left the rails as was his duty. But I have no doubt that 99 per cent of tramcar drivers would have done the same.'¹⁰

It would appear that undertaking an act of civilian gallantry within a working role where you were presumed to have a professional responsibility to save life was unlikely to win you the Albert Medal.

⁸ TNA: PRO: HO144/345/B13436

⁹ TNA: PRO: HO45/10382/167940

¹⁰ TNA: PRO: HO45/10382/167115

Other reasons for refusal included actions that were undertaken impetuously or not thoroughly thought through, as in the case of a Mrs Connolly who was severely burned as she tried to carry a leaking paraffin lamp out of an Edinburgh tenement building. The general feeling was that this act was simply not a suitable Albert Medal case, but one under secretary was particularly critical, writing, 'this is not an act up to the Albert Medal standard and though courageous was probably a very foolish thing to do. The sensible thing would have been to throw a rug or mat on it'.¹¹ It would appear that a hurried or ill-prepared course of action negated any sense of heroism in the eyes of those making the awards. Also, the use of safety equipment or the fact that an individual was assisted by others through the use of a rope or other means of ensuring their own safety, also, more often or not, led to the refusal to award. As one under-secretary summed it up 'medals must be reserved for those who go toward the danger promptly without stopping to find means of rescue which will involve less risk to themselves'.¹²

So then, to summarise, it would appear that to be worthy of an Albert Medal, an individual had to voluntarily and knowingly put their own life in extreme danger to save another. Furthermore, they also had to do so without any outside assistance, when they had no professional duty to do so and they had to approach the situation in a calm and calculating manner. This was a strict regime and one in which acts had to conform to very exacting standards in order to be considered worthy.

However, why did it matter whether or not an act was impetuous or that the full danger was unknown to the rescuer at the time when they were still risking their life to save another? Why were acts refused when the rescuer was assisted by others or when a rope or other piece of safety apparatus was used during the act? And surely, an act was still heroic irrespective of whether or not the individual had any sort of duty towards the public? None of these issues diminish the bravery of the act so why were they so central to the refusal to award the Albert medal?

The answer, it can be argued, is that those administering the Albert Medal were not just occupied with rewarding civilian heroes they were obsessed with ensuring that

¹¹ TNA: PRO: HO45/10700/236176

¹² TNA: PRO: HO45/10594/186677

they only rewarded the correct type of civilian hero. This stemmed from the need to defend the integrity of the decoration and ensure that individuals perceived to be unsuitable or undesirable were not recognised. Thus, elements in an act of heroism that hinted at anything less than the purest of motives or the best of intentions were seen as indicative of weak or immoral character and consequently the individual was deemed unworthy of receiving such an important reward. However, in doing this, those in the Home Office unwittingly created their own particular construction of heroism and one which subjectively privileged a certain type of behaviour rather than objectively judging the act itself.

Furthermore, once created, this construction was then disseminated out to the general public through those individuals who were awarded the medal and who were intended to act as exemplars to others. Essentially, then, the Home Office effectively, and to some extent unconsciously, created and then publicly endorsed a particular construction of heroism that it wished the public to embrace and emulate. The question then, of course, is did they?

Unfortunately, there is not sufficient time in this paper to satisfactorily engage with that question but you can rest assured that I do so at great length in my thesis.

However, if we are to conclude that those in the Home Office applied their own perceptions and understandings in creating their own construction of heroism, it surely stands to reason that others may well have done the same. This idea is further substantiated by the fact that the Albert medal failed to really embed itself in the affections or thoughts of the general public, as indicated by the fact that relatively few people were put forward for it. Perhaps this was partly due to the exceptionally high standards set by the Home Office. But I would also suggest that it was partly because people did not engage with the heroism that they saw being rewarded through the Albert Medal because it was constructed along different lines to their own understanding of the concept.

Thus, we begin to see that, rather than it being a single and rigidly static idea, heroism was actually a flexible and fluid concept and, what is more, one that could be understood and appreciated in different ways by different groups of people. Consequently, shouldn't we, as historians, be looking to identify and investigate, for

example, working-class constructions of heroism or indeed others, perhaps shaped along lines of gender or race?

I believe that the late Victorians and the early Edwardians had a far more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of heroism than has generally been concluded and what is required now required is for us, as historians, to adopt a similarly sophisticated approach to studying it.