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“There was a contest in heroism between Captain Oates and his comrades, Captain Scott, Dr Wilson, and Lieutenant Bowers.”¹

An analysis of the presentation and portrayal of Petty Officer Edgar Evans, the first man to perish in Captain Scott’s Pole party of 1912.

My paper is based upon my M.Phil dissertation. In this short space I cannot put forward all of my ideas and analysis and so I am going to give an overview of my findings, main arguments and how my research fits in with the wider context of scholarly analysis surrounding heroism, class, masculinity and exploration.

Between the 17 February and 31 March 1912², the five British explorers who reached the South Pole on 17 January, perished on the return journey. The news did not reach Britain, or even the closest inhabited land, New Zealand, until the following February. When the news came through, as a group of five they were raised as heroes, with particular attention played to Captain Scott, the leader of the expedition, and Captain Oates, who left the tent and went out into a blizzard with the immortal words, ‘I am just going outside, I may be some time’³. The remainder of the party consisted of Dr. Edward Wilson, Lieutenant Henry Bowers and Petty Officer Edgar Evans. P.O Evans held unique status, he was the first man to die, the only member of the Antarctic five not of officer status and the only one several contemporary press and publishers put forward as a scapegoat.

It has been assumed that Evans’ class caused the reaction to his demise. However, I contend that there is more to the understanding of Evans’ presentation than his socio-financial circumstance. Additionally, I maintain that Evans’ legacy was vulnerable from the moment Scott’s ‘message to the public’ was published.

¹ *The Daily Mail*, 12 Feb 1913

² The exact date of Scott’s death is unknown, though the last entry in Scott’s diary was dated 29 March 1912.

³ R.F Scott, *Journals*, Oxford, 2005, p.410

There has been little scholarly analysis of Edgar Evans' image construction. The only article analysing Evans is from the medical field, and concerned with the cause of his death⁴, which is still a matter of mystery. Whilst the majority of publications about the British Antarctic Expedition, (1910-13), have not been analytical studies, but biographical in approach, either of the expedition member, or, of the expedition itself⁵. However, in the last five years, Max Jones' *The Last Great Quest* (2004) and Stephanie Barczewski's *Antarctic Destinies* (2007) have analysed the presentation and the aftermath of Scott's final expedition. Both have put forward their views on early twentieth century heroism. Jones' work should be seen as groundbreaking for no scholar before had analysed the reaction to the expedition by the press⁶, when in fact the newspapers' had such a critical role in the transfer of knowledge in early twentieth century society, newspaper reports are the key component of the popular presentation of exploration.

Jones' work has guided my research, however, I think the work I've done can extend the understanding of the reaction to Evans' role in the disaster.

Scholarly work on Victorian and Edwardian heroism particularly the 'imperial heroes' has changed direction over the last twenty years. As Jones states, 'The historian's role is no longer to act as judge, asking 'How great was this individual?' Instead scholars should ask 'Why did a past society raise this individual as a hero.'⁷ To take this question a step further, why was this man not raised as a hero, in the same way as his comrades? In order to answer this question I have examined scrapbooks, un-published diaries, print culture from the archives at the Scott Polar Research Institute along with memorialisation. The newspapers examined were aimed at all levels of the social hierarchy from *Daily Mirror* and *Mail* aimed towards the lower classes, to the *Observer* and *Times Weekly* aimed towards the upper classes. These specific

⁴ Rogers, 'The death of Chief Petty Officer Evans' *The Practitioner*, 1974

⁵ For example, R. Fiennes, *Captain Scott*, G. Seaver, *Edward Wilson of the Antarctic*, D. Crane, *Captain Scott*, Lagerbom's, *The Fifth Man*.

⁶ Riffenburgh's investigation of the British and American press' presentation of exploration in *The Myth of the Explorer* stopped in 1910, thus leaving the presentation of Scott's last expedition un-examined.

⁷ M. Jones, 'What Should Historians Do With Heroes', *History Compass*, 5/2, 2007, p.441

documents and artefacts have been investigated for as Geoffrey Cubitt states, ‘formal rituals and official procedures constitute...only the most explicit part of a society’s hero-worshipping and hero-producing activity. Equally important are the ways in which heroic reputations are developed through the generally less formal practices of social, cultural and economic life – through story-telling and entertainment through gossip and news reporting’⁸.

Michael Lieven, in his examination of hero making during the Zulu War proclaims, ‘the roots of the hero are in dramatic narrative’⁹. This has clear links to the heroism of the Antarctic Five whose story was told by ‘mediators’, a term firstly used by John M. MacKenzie. Mackenzie has contributed greatly to the field of imperial heroism and has put forward the widely accepted theory that it is not so much the exploits of the individual that count, for it is the ‘mediators’, those who work to keep the hero in the minds of the public that create a hero.¹⁰ Since mediators are necessary for the establishment of a heroic reputation, they must also play a role in the creation of an un-heroic reputation. In the case of the Antarctic five, the ‘mediators’ are not individual people, they are texts, Scott’s ‘message to the public’ and press reports. Both played a significant role in the creation of Evans’ image and reputation.

The accounts of Evans’ fellow travellers before his demise show Evans as a man of skill, indicating a high level of self-control and self-discipline two key aspects of early twentieth century codes of masculinity. For example, in January 1911 Evans was told by Scott to accompany three scientists on the Western Sledge Journey.¹¹ The scientists, Thomas Griffith-Taylor, Frank Debenham and Charles Wright had never been to Antarctica before, and so Evans’ job was essentially to show the men how to sledge and camp. Evans demonstrated how to put up and pull down the tent, how to cook for four men, how to fix boots, and he kept their spirits up with a stream of

⁸ G. Cubitt, ‘Introduction’ *Heroic Reputations*, Manchester, 2000, p.4

⁹ M. Lieven. ‘Heroism, Heroics and the Making of Heroes: The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879’, *Albion: A quarterly Journal concerned with British Studies*, vol. 30, No.3, 1998, p.419

¹⁰ J. M McKenzie, ‘Heroic myths of Empire,’ in *Popular Imperialism and the Military*, Manchester, 1992, p.114

¹¹ T. Griffith-Taylor was the official leader, but as Evans was there to teach Debenham, Wright and Griffith-Taylor how to survive tent-life, Evans became the unofficial leader.

anecdotes, chocolate and card games. In Griffith-Taylor's journal he promotes Evans as, 'an ideal sledge-mate'¹², an 'expert steersman'¹³, who kept them in good humour; 'Evans as usual enlivened us with Navy yarns'¹⁴. Similarly Captain Scott promoted Evans as, "the most invaluable asset to our party"¹⁵, hailing his craftsman-like skill, 'a new pair of sealskin overshoes for ski made by Evans have been a complete success'¹⁶. There was clearly far more to Evans than simple seaman who was there for his strength and strength alone.

Likewise in Frank Debenham's unpublished diary there were frequent comments about him and Evans larking about. 'Evans and I have started a feud...Ripping chap!'¹⁷ 'Evans and I whirled away the time singing and generally acting the giddy ox. Amongst other things he proposed to me.'¹⁸

Evans was a leader, a gifted craftsman, was devoted to his leader and broke down social boundaries. Yet these virtues stated by his fellow explorers have, by and large, been lost or hidden by the mediators.

This is because from the moment Scott's 'message to the public' was printed Evans' legacy was cast.

On 10 February 1913, the news of the fate of the Antarctic five was first published. There were no accusations being put forward on this date for knowledge of the disaster is minimal.¹⁹ However, from the 11 February 1913, Captain Scott's 'message to the public' was printed²⁰. From this date on Evans was known as the 'strong man', and theories were put forward by the press concerning Evans' role in the disaster.

¹² Griffith-Taylor collection, (ed) W. Hanley, p.87

¹³ *ibid*, p.100

¹⁴ *ibid*, p.97

¹⁵ R. F. Scott, *Journals*, p.363

¹⁶ R.F. Scott, *Journals*, p.245

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 18 Feb 1911

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 26 Feb 1911

¹⁹ *Westminster Gazette*, 10 Feb 1913, Extra late *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 Feb 1913, MS 1453/40

²⁰ *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Daily Mail*, *Westminster Gazette* - 11 Feb, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Graphic*, *Daily Sketch*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Morning Post*- 12 Feb *The Times Weekly* – 14 Feb

The 'message' was written by Scott as he, Bowers and Wilson awaited death in their tent; it was an attempt to explain the reasons for the disaster. Scott blamed the loss of pony transport, the weather, the soft snow and he then claims that they would have made it home, 'but for the astonishing failure of the man whom we least expected to fail. Edgar Evans was thought the strongest man of the party.'²¹ However, Scott went on to state that the journey had shown, 'that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past.'²²

Scott's 'message' was not just a note; it was an unofficial document that became the basis for Evans' un-heroic reputation and the others heroic depiction. To be declared a 'failure' by his leader twice is indisputably not a representation of a state of heroism. However, 'failure' is not the only significant word in Scott's pronouncement of Evans' role in the disaster. Qualifying the 'failure' with the word 'astonishing', presents the notion that Evans' 'failure' was unpredicted, Evans should not have failed, and he was therefore unreliable. This is a key statement, for as self-control and self-discipline were often viewed as the epitome of masculinity, particularly for the middle to higher classes, unreliability was thus a major indictment.

The press ran stories questioning Evans' role in the disaster, *The Daily Herald* declared, 'the main trouble was Petty Officer Evans the supposed strong man...he fell on his head'²³. *The Daily Mirror*, 'had it not been for his collapse... the others might have been saved.'²⁴ And, *The Birmingham Gazette* ran an article entitled, 'No facts suppressed, theories of the failure of Edgar Evans.'²⁵

Accusations concerning Evans' demise fit within contemporary fears of the declining manliness of the nation and degeneration. For example, many newspapers, aimed at all levels of the social hierarchy ran stories that questioned Evans' state of mind, *The Observer*, *Western Mail*, *South Wales Echo*, *Daily Graphic* and *The Times Weekly Edition* all ran a very similar story expressing concerns about Evans' mental state.

²¹ R.F. Scott, *Journals*, p.421

²² R. F. Scott, *Journals*, p.422

²³ *Daily Herald*, SPRI (Scott Polar Research Institute), MS 1453/40

²⁴ *The Daily Mirror*, 12 Feb 1913

²⁵ *The Birmingham Gazette*, 14 Apr 1913

Claiming, 'it would seem from what has escaped some of the survivors that Evans lost his reason for the time being under the great stress of fatigue and privation and was incapable of obeying orders.'²⁶ Although possible, it is unlikely that one of his companions would have made such an accusation, for claiming that Evans had 'lost his reason', was a term used to insinuate insanity. The press were making a serious accusation since the attribution of mental health issues would have been seen as a major social stigma, and consequently a long way from a heroic image.

The early twentieth century was a time when the theory of 'separate spheres' for men and women was still a popular belief. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that there were views of separate spheres too for male and female mentality, since hysteria and nervous dispositions were not seen masculine traits, they were characterized as effeminate. Thus accusations about Evans' mental state were essentially questioning his masculinity.

Theories on Evans' failure continued, in an interview with the press Commander Edward Evans (no relation to Edgar Evans), declared, 'it would seem that his [Evans'] staying power was not equal to that of his tent-mates.'²⁷ The comment from Commander Evans, accusing Evans as lacking 'staying power' is not a technical or medical explanation for Evans 'failure'. It is an accusation based upon contemporary popular language that infers and implies rather than offering a definite and constructive explanation. A lack of 'staying power' implies Edgar Evans had a lack of mental strength and thus a lack of self-control.

The Daily Express ran an article entitled, 'The problem of Seaman Evans – why he "failed" the expedition – was he handicapped by his strength? – Did Seaman Edgar Evans- the cheery giant of the party fail physically or mentally?' The article quoted an 'eminent mental specialist', who asserted, 'It is the uneducated man he said who would feel most acutely the mental strain and dreary, monotonous life amid eternal snows.'²⁸

²⁶*The Times Weekly* 21 Feb 1913

²⁷ *The Birmingham Gazette*, 14 Apr 1913, MS 1957/7

²⁸ *The Daily Express*, 12 Feb 1913, MS 1453/2

The fact that the press sought out a ‘specialist’ to offer his opinions shows that the press were accepting Scott’s initial criticism of Evans, and were not looking to provide evidence that proved otherwise. The newspaper had sought an educated man, a voice of medical authority, who was effectively verifying Scott’s statement, and thus attempting to turn it from interpretation to factual analysis. *The Express*’ ‘specialist’ was evidently questioning Evans’ mental capability, asserting that Evans had a lack of education, essentially implying that Evans’ financial and social circumstances rendered him unfit for exploration. However, when Evans had returned from Scott’s first Antarctic expedition the *Discovery* (1901-04), the press declared, ‘the crew is composed entirely of absolutely picked men, each one of them noted for a high standard of intelligence.’²⁹ Whilst another claimed, ‘they have been specially selected for their physique, constitution [and] seamanship’³⁰. Additionally, Evans’ mental state was not an issue before January 1912, as Bowers stated in a letter to his sister, “in a show like this we have no scared namby pambys – Thank goodness”³¹. And Herbert Ponting recalled, “Evans, always quick-witted”³². Evidently these were a long way from the reports that Evans’ lack of education made him a liability on the expedition.

The ‘message to the public’ had essentially set the standard for criticising Evans, it also had a major contribution in the construction of Evans’ image for it put forward the notion that Evans’ strength was his key, and defining trait. In consequence, the vast majority of press reports from 11 February 1913 refer to Evans as ‘the strong man of the party’. One article from *The Daily Mirror*, entitled ‘The Strong Man Who Fell’, proclaims, ‘It is one of the paradoxes of Nature a London physician stated yesterday, “that splendidly developed, huge-framed men stand adverse conditions, such as extreme cold, starvation, or prolonged thirst, much worse than smaller men.’³³

²⁹ Unknown Paper, date is most likely 1903, SPRI, MS 735/1

³⁰ *Daily Mail*, 8 July 1901, MS 1464/31

³¹ H. R. Bowers, letter to Emily Webb Bowers, 22 June 1910, SPRI: 1501/1/1/3/89

³² H. Ponting, *The Great White South*, 1926, p.27

³³ *The Daily Mirror*, 12 Feb 1913

To be pronounced as a ‘paradox of nature’ is obviously not a representation of an ideal. Additionally as Evans was presented as being defined by his physicality, the loss of Evans’ strength could also be seen as a loss of his masculine identity.

However, one should not just examine the number of articles, as an indicator of Evans’ unheroic state. There are a number of other factors involved, specifically, a lack of iconography and a blatant absence in press reports. For example, the title quote, ‘there was a contest in heroism between Captain Oates and his comrades, Captain Scott, Dr Wilson, and Lieutenant Bowers’³⁴, shows Evans was seen and presented in a different light to his comrades. Likewise, *The Observer*, ‘it rests with us, their fellow-countrymen, whether Scott, Oates, Wilson and Bowers have died in vain or no.’³⁵ Additionally, if one considers the layout of the newspapers Evans’ portrait was frequently last, and Evans’ children were generally placed pages behind portraits of Peter Scott. In fact the portrait of Evans used by the press from 10 until 12 February was actually a portrait of another man, Petty Officer Johnson, who according to Lieutenant Bowers was thrown off the expedition in New Zealand for bullying his mess-mates.³⁶ Additionally, there was a reduced iconography of Evans, indicating a lack of interest, and that Evans was not a popular or necessary representation of Scott’s last expedition. Perhaps though, the most telling exclusion is the centrefold of *The Daily Mirror*, 15 February 1913. This is a photograph of ten members of the expedition, which the readers are informed, ‘should be kept in memory of these splendid men, and should be shown to children to illustrate the story that will never die’³⁷. Evans was not in the photograph.

As previously mentioned the press’ accusations of Evans failing, were initiated by the damning criticism from his leader. Yet Oates was also criticised in Scott’s ‘message’, and slowed down the party. Therefore, I will re-visit the same question proposed by Barczewski, ‘Why has Oates never come in for the same criticism as Evans? Why was his ‘breakdown’ not regarded as an indication of weakness or failure in the same

³⁴ *The Daily Mail*, 12 Feb 1913

³⁵ *The Observer*, 9 Nov, 1913, MS 1464/32

³⁶ H.R. Bowers, letter, SPRI 1501/1/1/2/102, 21 Nov, 1910

³⁷ *The Daily Mirror*, 12 Feb 1913

way?’³⁸ Barczewski’s response is, ‘the answer is obvious: Oates was an officer and a gentleman...Because of his class status, he was regarded as a hero for his silent suffering and self-sacrifice. What he did was to ‘play up, play up and play the game’ according to the expectations of the time for a man of his rank.’³⁹

However, Barczewski’s suggestion needs to be built upon, for class is too sweeping, there were more factors involved. Firstly, Scott did not perceive Oates’ as having as significant a role in the disaster as Evans, for Oates was not called a ‘failure’. Secondly, the manner of Oates and Evans’ deaths as offered in Scott’s assessment, allowed their deaths to be seen as, and presented contrastingly by his fellow travellers and the press. This is because Oates’ death was presented as a model. Patrick Keohane stated in his diary:

[Scott’s] Diary said that Evans P.O Died at the foot of the Beardmore Glacier he died of concussion of the brain caused by a fall on blue ice and Captain Oats [Oates] had hands and feet frostbitten and could not keep up he knew he was preventing his companions from getting on so he walked out to his death in a blizzard about 18miles south of where we found the tent so as to give his companions a chance to get home it was one of the bravest deeds ever history has known⁴⁰.

Likewise, Frank Debenham, the man who had written so favourably of Evans declared:

Taff Evans – already a little weak – had a bad fall and got concussion. He delayed the party and they were late for each depot. At the bottom of the glacier he failed and died before they reached the depot... Soldier failed next. He knew he was delaying them and in one blizzard walked out and away and he was never seen again. He did it intentionally to save his comrades – a fitting death for a real hero.⁴¹

³⁸ S. Barczewski, *Antarctic Destinies*, 2007, p.177

³⁹ S. Barczewski, *Antarctic Destinies*, p.177

⁴⁰ P. Keohane, *Diary*, SPRI, MS 825/1; BJ

⁴¹ F. Debenham, *The Quiet Land*, Bluntisham, 1992, p.161

Oates' death was viewed and presented as an act, a calculated decision, while Evans' was a breakdown. And lastly, Evans' death did not fit within an already established heroic framework. Oates committed an act of self-sacrifice whilst Scott, Wilson and Bowers were also praised for their self-sacrifice for staying with their companions, and they awaited death, like those raised as heroes following the Titanic disaster.

So why was Evans not presented in the same heroic light as an individual as his companions were? The manner of Evans' death, heroic tradition, his class, Scott's message and editorial bias all played a part. Edgar Evans had been marginalised since the publication of Scott's 'message' from 11 February 1913. Evans' demise was not presented as a model representation of an ideal and this allowed the five to become, 'the four men history will never forget.'⁴²

⁴² *The Children's Newspaper*, 10 Nov 1937