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The Past and Future Hero: the Henty boy in the Twenty-first Century? (Published in The Henty Society Bulletin. 2006).

The purpose of this paper is to address the question ‘Can the Henty hero be transferred into the twenty-first century?’ In order to investigate the question I will begin with a brief introduction to G. A. Henty and his work before examining the construct of the Henty hero. The results of this examination provide an answer to the immediate question, whilst foregrounding other significant areas for enquiry.

Henty - “the one who is there” (Fenn 339)

Henty’s biographer George Manville Fenn¹ described George Alfred Henty as “like a diplomat the one who is there”, referring to his profession of war correspondent. Henty’s official role as one of the first war correspondents, or ‘specials’, began in 1865 but his journalistic writing began as early as 1855 when his ‘letters home’ from the Crimea described the struggle to organise provisions, medical help and transport which had been sent out to alleviate the poor conditions under which the soldiers were existing. Henty’s letters were published in the *Morning Advertiser* and resulted in his appointment as the official representative of the paper until he was invalided back to England. His life after recovery took on a routine of travel and reporting as he subsequently covered colonial wars as the correspondent for the *Standard* newspaper. He remained on the staff of that paper until his retirement from journalism in the late 1870s, after which he wrote adventure stories targeted at an audience of boys.

Henty’s early life gave no premonition of the kind of life he would lead. Born in 1832, he was an invalid as a child and only became strong and active in his ‘teens. As if to compensate for his early weakness, he trained and practised

¹ 1831-1909

boxing, rowing and fencing and emphasised the importance of such physical training in the lives and upbringing of his boy heroes. Physical activity features prominently in the stereotypical view of the Henty hero. This view leaves out the equally strong interests the fictional hero has in reading and the observation of natural phenomena as chosen activities. Both of these interests bring an autobiographical element into Henty's stories.

Thus Fenn's description of Henty as "the one who is there" is not only true in his reports for the *Advertiser* and the *Standard*, but also in his stories for boys. However, Henty's fiction, interwoven as it is with 'copy' gathered from his travels as a war correspondent, transforms what has been critically appraised as realism² into the realms of romance, dissolving established genre boundaries in what he himself described as "an attempt to mix instruction with amusement" (Henty, Young Buglers Preface).

Henty continued writing stories for boys until his death in 1902.

What did Henty write and why?

Firstly, as a war correspondent, Henty wrote reports for his papers, reports that were predominantly investigative as defined by Hugo de Burgh and which "married rational observation with moral empathy" and developed from "the increasing rationalism of intellectual discourse in the period (de Burgh refers to the nineteenth century) and from that scientific approach of finding truths from facts" (26). He refers to investigative journalism as one among "a variety of genres". Though Henty sometimes commented on the events he reported, he rarely analysed them, leaving such analysis to the editor of the paper. His remit was to send eyewitness copy as rapidly as possible, by telegraph, to his editor.

I have included this information about his journalistic writing because when he began to write novels and stories, his emphasis was on 'telling what happened' rather than on analytical or philosophical discussion within the

² See, for example Guy Arnold, Held Fast for England: G. A. Henty Imperialist Boy's Writer (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1980). and Hugh Walpole, Reading: Being One of a Series of Essays Edited by J. B. Priestley and Entitled: These Diversions, ed. J. B. Priestley, vol. 1926 (London: Jarrolds, 1926).

story. Although he published five adult novels³ Henty is critically cited as a writer of boys adventure stories⁴.

However, an article in *The Gem*, December 16, 1899, states “No living writer of books for boys and girls is more widely popular”, thus acknowledging Henty’s popularity with girls as well as boys, as is also evidenced by Henty’s reception of letters (fan mail) from girls as well as boys.⁵ *The Gem* continues “His sympathy with the young and earnest desire to inspire them with noble aims is apparent in all he writes” (“A Favourite of Our Boys: Mr. G. A. Henty” 209), a statement which begins to answer the question of why he wrote and leads on to why he created that particular blend of character known as ‘the Henty hero’. As is the case with other such descriptive terms, it is understood to portray a character or concept, and in the same way as the term ‘victorian’ is used to portray a number of undefined characteristics, it is distorted and simplistic.

Henty gave two major purposes for his writing and sometimes spelled these out in the prefaces to his stories in which he addressed his readers. The first purpose was to

“interest the reader because of the characteristic English pluck and doing of its of the hero” (The Young Colonists: A Story of the Zulu and Boer Wars Preface).

and the second was to interest his readers in history. This focus of this paper is on the construct of such a hero.

The preface to his story *Condemned as a Nihilist* begins

“There are few difficulties that cannot be surmounted by patience, resolution and pluck” (Condemned as a Nihilist Preface)

and in *Sturdy and Strong*.

³ These were *A Search for a Secret*, *A Hidden Foe*, *Rujub the Juggler*, *Colonel Thorndyke’s Secret* (*The Brahmin’s Treasure*), and *Dorothy’s Double*.

⁴ See for example Arnold, Held Fast for England: G. A. Henty Imperialist Boy’s Writer.; John Cargill-Thompson, The Boys Dumas.; and Walpole, Reading: Being One of a Series of Essays Edited by J. B. Priestley and Entitled: These Diversions.

⁵ Letters held in the Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana and by private collectors, see Henty Society Bulletin 54 Winter 1991, p. 15-17.

“for success in life it is necessary not only to be earnest, steadfast, and true, but to have the faculty of turning every opportunity to the best advantage,”

he concludes

“If similar qualities and similar determination are yours, you need not despair of similar success in life” (Sturdy and Strong: Or How George Andrews Made His Way Preface).

The hero of these stories of course demonstrated such qualities. That Henty anticipated reader identification with his hero is evidenced by an article in *Answers. Christmas Double Number, December 13th, 1902* in which Henty noted “of course the hero must be British” and pointed out that his stories with non-English heroes had not sold as well as his other books (“Writing for Boys” 105). Referring to his intention to interest and instruct his readers in history, he writes

“I remember that, as a boy, I regarded any attempt to mix instruction with amusement as being as objectionable a practice as the administration of powder in jam; but I think this feeling arose from the fact that in those days books contained a very small share of amusement and a very large share of instruction.”

He continues “I have endeavoured to avoid this “ and concludes

“any one who has read with care the story of *The Young Buglers* could pass an examination as to the leading events of the Peninsular war” (Young Buglers Preface).

Henty indicates that he was also aiming to fill a gap by providing more adventure and less moralizing than, according to Bernard Davin, writing in 1932, “the earlier pioneers” of adventure stories (11-12). Robert Leighton, writing in the periodical *Boys of Our Empire* stated of Henty “He was a teacher as well as an influence.” (224) This verdict on the apparent fulfilment of Henty’s stated purpose is equivalent to a comment in *The Sunday Times World News section* in May 1998, which cites the marketing message of one of the American reprinters of Henty’s stories as to their value as

“lessons in honesty, pluck, strength of character and religious tolerance” (“G. A. Henty, Boy's Own Hero Saves Dumb-Down America” 24).

This comment comes after the reporter has quoted the publisher’s observation that the books teach “real history”, an undefined, unexplored statement, which invites volumes of discussion but which is beyond the remit of this paper.

The consideration of what Henty wrote and why he wrote it has provided the first link between the past and the present. Henty’s stated purpose, to create a character to be emulated and to interest his readers in history has been corroborated by nineteenth century comment and has reappeared in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century statements.

In the next section I will investigate the origins and construct of the Henty hero.

The Henty Hero

The introductory section of this paper established Henty’s “desire to inspire (boys and girls) with noble aims” (“A Favourite of Our Boys: Mr. G. A. Henty” 209) partially through the creation of an exemplary protagonist. The resulting character is a construct drawn from the major categories of classical hero, active hero, adventure hero and fairy tale hero. The hero as victim and outsider is not prominent in Henty’s stories. I will investigate each of these categories, starting with the classical hero.

MacIntyre writes “in those cultures where moral thinking and action is structured according to some version of the scheme I have called classical, the chief means of moral education is the telling of stories.” (121) MacIntyre refers to Greek, Medieval and Renaissance cultures, all of which have influenced the development of Western thought and were therefore part of Henty’s mental landscape. Having studied Latin and Greek at school, as did all Public School boys of his time, Henty would have been familiar with the classical hero as found in classical literature.

In MacIntyre’s discussion of Aristotelian ethics, he notes that in classical, heroic societies, morality and the social structure cannot be divided. Likewise

there is no discrimination between the social and the political, so the heroic is inextricably linked with activity in the public sphere of life, that is, how a person lives in society. According to MacIntyre, the foundation of all other virtues in this context is courage. Linked to courage are reliability, faithfulness, honesty, friendship, self restraint, wisdom and justice, without which the fifth century Greeks believed public order could not be sustained. Moving from public life to the battlefield, D. A. Russell discusses how Plutarch's concept of the 'great man' was influenced by connotations of the Greek view of the heroic and states "they (that is the connotations) have directly helped to shape the concept of the heroic in European thinking." (24) Homer used the word 'heros' in reference to warriors who play a part in the action, their honour was, Russell notes "the yardstick of every action." (24) They were fully human, had leadership qualities and "won contests of skill and bravery." (24) So far, examples of all these characteristics, both those found in the public man and those found in the warrior can be demonstrated from the Henty hero. Frank Hargate in *By Sheer Pluck*, having made his fortune, still chooses to take his place in society in his chosen profession

"He worked hard and steadily and passed with high honours." (By Sheer Pluck 352). Other heroes, such as Percy Groves, (*Through the Sikh War, 1894*) takes his place in parliament.

An example of the warrior hero can be found in *The Young Cathaginian*. Malchus, the son of a soldier who trained him from boyhood in anticipation of war with Rome.

"Malchus had been an apt pupil He could wield the arms of a man, could swim the coldest river, endure hardship and want of food, traverse long distance at the top of his speed, could throw a javelin with unerring aim" (The Young Carthaginian: A Story of the Times of Hannibal 14) and so on.

Where the classical hero differs from the Henty hero is noted succinctly by Russell when he states that the Homeric hero is not "an officer and a gentleman" (25)

In her study *Deconstructing the Hero* Margery Hourihan observes that the hero is above all things "a man of action", the 'active hero' whom Hourihan cites as representative of "the intrepid British lad" found in the "flood of adventure stories" produced by "the age of imperialism." (2-3) Henty's stories

are critically perceived⁶ as prime contributions to this 'flood'. Hourihan associates the active hero (always male) exclusively with the glorification of violence as the definition of manhood. The active hero may be the most clearly analogous with the 'Victorian hero' as depicted by Michael Brander in his biography of the Samuel White Baker, an explorer admired by 'the Victorians', that is people living in England during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1900), but the 'Victorian hero' is too simplistic a description since the Victorians, though pre-occupied with heroism, had a variety of views, from Carlyle's emphasis on 'the great man' whose outstanding achievements set him apart, to Carlyle's 'sincere man' who could be everyman.⁷

The Henty hero is also more complex, as his character is a composite construct. The active hero of the Henty story includes the concepts of the muscular Christian, the Arnoldian boy, the English gentleman, everyman and the leader of men. Masculinity as advocated by F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley in the form that has been termed 'muscular Christianity' promoted physical exercise "as a means of bodily purification and practical Christianity." (Hignell 49) Kingsley encouraged cricket on the basis that it encouraged respect, discipline and obedience to rules, but the Henty hero, though a competent games player as demonstrated by Frank Hargate in *By Sheer Pluck*, showed his physical dominance when necessary, through the skill of boxing.

There is some discrepancy between the active 'Victorian' hero and the muscular Christian games player which needs to be clarified at this point by outlining the construct of the Arnoldian boy.

The muscular Christian emphasis on physical activity was well suited to the institutional life of the English Public Schools. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of the Arnoldian boy, exemplified in Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown*, was familiar and is recognisably present in the image of the Henty hero. He demonstrated 'manly virtues' not only in terms of physical

⁶ For examples of critical assessment of Henty see Arnold, *Held Fast for England: G. A. Henty Imperialist Boy's Writer*, Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Pritchard, *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), Margery Fisher, *The Bright Face of Danger: An Exploration of the Adventure Story* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986).

⁷ See Carl Niemeyer, ed., *Thomas Carlyle on Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).

proWess but also by his truthfulness and unselfishness.⁸ These two characteristics are always present in the persona of the Henty hero and are found in, for example, Frank Hargate of *By Sheer Pluck* who is noted as a cricketer who “played a steady rather than a brilliant game” (Henty, By Sheer Pluck 10), but whose integrity and selflessness was unquestioned.⁹

In the ethos of the Public School the Arnoldian boy was trained to act in a team situation, to obey the team captain and present a united front. This training was ideal for boys entering the military and there are a number of examples of battles being likened to a game of cricket, the foremost being Sir Henry Newbolt’s *Vitae Lampada*. The embryonic hero present in the ideal Arnoldian team player was the character accused by Luigi Barzini of operating by a limited set of fixed ideas, inculcated by his schooling and from which he did not have the imagination to deviate.¹⁰ This limited interpretation does not correlate with the fundamental resourcefulness and ability to act on his own initiative found in the Henty hero. The discrepancy between the active muscular Christian public school ideal and the active hero found in Henty’s stories is personified in the character of Samuel White Baker, cited by Brander as a prototype for the Henty hero (16, 52) where Brander specifies “he was by no means a typical Victorian Englishman.” The characteristics emphasised by Brander in this context are those of individualism, leadership in the sense of acting decisively on his own initiative and the ability to behave calmly in dangerous crises. The correlation Brander draws between Baker and the Henty hero in itself demonstrates the versatility of that hero. He cannot be categorised so easily because, as Arnold comments, “he is an ideal.” (41) Incorporating the classical virtues of courage and honour and combining the active virtues of physical fitness with the muscular Christian virtues of truthfulness and unselfishness, the Henty hero is building into a paragon. And there are more.

Mikhail Bakhtin describes the hero of adventure as one who reacts in the correct way to further his fortunes when the opportunity arises. (116) He specialises in being in the right place at the right time. This opportunity is not

⁸ See G.A. Henty, "True Heroism: A Talk with the Boys," The Home Messenger XII.. (1903).

⁹ See for example the episode described in G.A. Henty, By Sheer Pluck (Glasgow: Blackie and Son, n.d.) 54-64.

¹⁰ Luigi Barzini, The Impossible Europeans (London: Penguin, 1983) 53-54.

just a matter of coincidence, action has to be taken. Examples of such opportune coincidences can be found in *By Sheer Pluck* when Frank grasps an opportunity following an overheard conversation to offer his skill to the speaker and in *For Name and Fame* when Will Gale arrives in the same camp as his lost father. The second characteristic of the adventure hero according to Bakhtin is that he is not significantly changed by his experiences. The Henty hero displays the same virtues as a boy that he displays at the culmination of the story. In the majority of stories the story ends as he reaches maturity and returns to England after his adventure, though there are exceptions.¹¹ In most of the stories the hero has gained experience and expertise through his adventures, but his character, though strengthened is essentially the same.

“His spirits were as high and he was as full of fun as of old;

But the experience he had gone through had given him self-reliance and confidence” (Henty, Condemned as a Nihilist 349).

This was said of Godfrey Bullen who had just spent three years escaping from a Siberian prison.

Lastly, there is one category of hero not usually associated with the work of Henty, that of the fairy tale hero. In traditional tales, the fairy tale hero is often found in the persona of the youngest or only son, a character described by Max Luthi as “one of the true folk tale heroes” (65) and viewed as one of the disadvantaged. He is often an orphan or at least has lost his father and his inheritance. The remit of this paper does not include an examination of the differences between folk and fairy tale, but the character is universal. The youngest or only son operates in the fairy tale world in which, as Maria Tatar states “compassion counts.” (79) He is characterised by unselfishness and a desire to help in response to immediate need and is not motivated by the expectation of a reward, though his actions usually result in good fortune.

An example can be found in *With Kitchener in the Soudan*. Gregory Hilliard, an orphan, leaps over the side of a ship to rescue a drowning woman who turns out to be the wife of his greatest enemy. Consequent events lead him to discover his true identity and aristocratic inheritance. Frank Hargate, an

¹¹ For example *Young Buglers* and *The Young Franc Tireurs*

orphan, shares what little he has with a friend who has lost everything in a fire, the first of many sacrificial acts and ultimately he receives an unexpected inheritance. Though the Henty hero never falls into the category of the ridiculed and despised in the same way that the fairy tale hero in both traditional and literary tales does, he demonstrates enough elements of the fairy tale hero in his circumstances and behaviour for this category to be included in his construct.

From the categories of the classical, active, adventure and fairy tale hero, the composite character displays the following major characteristics:

Classical – courage and honour

Active – initiative, courage, coolness in the face of danger, intelligence (but not cleverness), patriotism (but not nationalism), sincerity and integrity

Adventure – ability to seize opportunities fortuitously encountered and development of character without significant change

Fairy tale – compassion, self-sacrifice from and disinterested action.

Can the Henty hero be transferred into the twenty-first century?

Given this mix, what is the appeal of the Henty hero to the purchasers of the recent reprints of Henty's works?

In 1983 Stuart Hannabus wrote "An author like Henty is not going to appeal to most modern children." (89)

In the World New section of The Sunday Times May 1998, Henty is cited, to use Hannabus' terms, "emerging phoenix-like to appeal in a wholly unexpected way to a new market." (91) The appeal in the Sunday Times report focuses initially on Henty as a teacher of history, a separate, complex and emotive area of discussion in itself and one I do not address in this paper. The viewpoint quickly changes from the publishers' comment to the reporter to information on the publishers' website, on which, the reporter continues, "the books are hailed as 'lessons of honesty, pluck, strength of character and religious tolerance.'" ("G. A. Henty, Boy's Own Hero Saves Dumb-Down America" 124) So far, all the appeal is to the parent who might purchase the books, though there is a comment about sons and fathers scrambling to be the first to read the newly arrived Henty story.

In December 1999, the Economist carried a short article beginning

“America is not only suffering from a shortage of heroes in its’ public life. It is suffering from a shortage of heroes in childrens’ literature too.” (“Henty's Heroes" 58)

This comment makes the assumption that readers will understand what the writer means by heroes. It transpires later in the article that the writer narrowly defines heroes in terms of John Wayne and Errol Flynn and equally narrowly defines Henty as purveying “British imperialism and Victorian manliness” without exploring either term. The article is actually about the republication of Henty’s works by the Lost Classics Book Company based in Florida and PrestonSpeed publishers based in Pennsylvania. The latter is the most active in marketing the reprints to the growing number of home-schooling families, which, after the publicaton of the first title in 1995, was selling the books “at a rate of several thousand a month to readers of all ages in several different countries”, according to a report by Julia Duin in the Washington Times in 2001. PrestonSpeed was closely followed by another publisher of material for homeschooling, Robinson Books, based in Oregon, whose website again majors on “the examples set by Henty’s heroes of honesty, integrity, hard work, courage, diligence “ and so on.

In a 2005 update on the growth of home-schooling in the United States published in The Wall Street Journal, Mark Oppenheimer devotes one third of his short article to the unexpected popularity of Henty. Having established earlier in the article that parents of disparate political and religious persuasions “want a heavy emphasis on values”, and children enjoy books “about kids ... figuring things out for themselves”, he draws the two appeals together in the work of Henty in which, he writes “every few chapters a boy’s honour and courage are tested.” (Oppenheimer)

It seems that the core values of the Henty heros’ appeal has not essentially changed in the last one hundred and thirty years. By the core values of the Henty hero I refer to his character traits outlined in the second part of this paper in terms of the classical hero, the active hero, the adventure hero and the fairy tale hero.

At this point I need to emphasise that these core values do not constitute the ideology out of which the Henty hero operates. That is another question, and,

I believe one that is not addressed on the websites of Lost Classics, PrestonSpeed and Robinson Books and only superficially in William Potter's *The Boys' Guide to the Historical Adventures of G.A. Henty* which begins with a chapter on 'Why boys should read the magnificent adventures of G. A. Henty'. Potter concludes this chapter

“the best reason why boys should read G.A. Henty has already
Been alluded to the character of Henty's boy-heroes” (28).

A recent publication entitled *The Wisdom of Harry Potter* includes a section on Harry Potter's morality in which the author examines some of Harry's characteristics, such as endurance and perseverance, self-discipline and reason, empathy, solidarity and sacrifice (Kern 110-19). These are all characteristics that have been mentioned as exemplary attributes of the Henty hero and follow the line of heroic characteristics traced in this paper. There is no shortage of other children's literary characters to bridge the time gap between Frank Hargate and Harry Potter. Harry's situation replicates that of the Henty hero in a number of ways, notably his lack of parents and his inability to obey school rules.

The difficulties of such transference lie in the nineteenth century cultural freight the Henty hero brings with him. That this has not been addressed by the American publishers of Henty partially lies in what Klein has described as

“a ubiquitous American political tradition: the rhetorical construction
of political figures as 'heroes', leaders with extraordinary abilities
..... and a singular commitment to defend (the values of the
community) in mortal combat with those who would oppose
the community” (139).

It may be that Henty's imperialism does not pose a problem for the publishers, or that the perceived value gained for children from identification with the Henty hero eclipses the historical and cultural difficulties in their view.

Conclusion

It would appear from the above evidence that the character of the Henty hero, meaning his values in terms of Aristotelian 'virtues'¹² as derived from the categories of heroic characteristics examined has already transferred to the

¹² See Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

twenty-first century. These characteristics illustrate the construct of the 'past and future hero' and hold echoes of Sir Philip Sidney's vision of the hero as a "virtuous man in all fortunes" (Dorsten 33)

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