

# Whatever happened to the **British hero?**



Fourteen icons of the imperial age. But how many of them can you identify? Turn the page to discover their names and when they lived





They dominated the cultural landscape for decades but now our obsession with transient celebrity has put them firmly in the shade.

**Max Jones** traces the rise and fall of the superstars of Britain's imperial age

**T**HE DEATH OF Jade Goody from cervical cancer was one of the media events of 2009. Prime Minister Gordon Brown led the tributes to a “courageous woman”, while the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, praised her “very brave” approach to death.

What had a former dental nurse from Bermondsey done to deserve so much attention? Goody was, of course, propelled into the public eye by Channel 4's reality TV show *Big Brother*. Yet that in itself wasn't enough to make her famous. Rather, it was comments such as “Has Greece got its own moon?” and “Rio De Janeiro – ain't that a person?” that truly secured her celebrity status.

Although she only finished fourth in *Big Brother* 2002, Jade became the show's most successful product, earning huge sums from endorsements and TV appearances. Even she appears to have been taken aback by her meteoric rise to prominence, remarking: “I know I'm famous for nothing”.

The media circus around Goody's death appeared to represent the culmination of the process described by American historian Daniel Boorstin in the 1960s, in which “real heroes” were replaced by celebrities “known primarily for their well-knownness”. True greatness built on exceptional achievement had been eclipsed, Boorstin argued, as an insatiable media industry turned ordinary people into celebrities to fill newspaper columns, radio broadcasts and television shows.

Yet it wasn't always so, and for proof we need only turn the clock back to the 19th century, when Britain's cultural landscape was dominated by a very different cast of characters from those

who command the spotlight today. The hundred years or so after the battle of Trafalgar was the age of Boorstin's ‘real heroes’ – all-action imperial icons who helped make Britain *the* dominating force on the global stage. But were these adventurers, aviators, soldiers and empire-builders truly worthy of their hero status? And are they now doomed to play second fiddle to the latest subjects of our obsession with celebrity?

On 22 March 1884, 125 years to the day before Jade Goody's death, General Charles George Gordon (see box on page 37) opened a letter from Muhammad Ahmad, the self-appointed Mahdi or ‘Awaited Divinely-Guided One’. Gladstone's Liberal government had despatched Gordon to Khartoum in response to the Mahdi's uprising against Anglo-Egyptian rule in the Sudan. The letter offered Gordon a choice: convert to Islam and surrender,

## News of Gordon's death marked the high point of Victorian hero-worship

or die. Gordon refused to give in and the Mahdi laid siege to the city. His army finally overran Khartoum and killed Gordon in the early hours of 26 January 1885, two days before the arrival of a British relief force.

News of Gordon's death caused a sensation and marked the high point of the culture of hero-worship in Victorian Britain. The tragedy “pierced the heart of a nation”, as commentators elevated Gordon to the pantheon of national heroes alongside such figures as Nelson (page 38), Major-General Henry Havelock (page 39) and missionary explorer David Livingstone. Like Livingstone and Havelock, Gordon



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS/MARY EVANS/RNLI/TOFFOTO/HULTON ARCHIVE-GETTY IMAGES/BRIDGEMAN



Grace Darling, whose legacy has enjoyed something of a revival since 1980

## BRITISH HERO

### Grace Darling (1815–42)

In September 1838 Grace Darling rowed with her father through a storm to reach the survivors of the steamer *Forfarshire*, stranded on rocks off the Northumberland coast. They brought four men and one woman back to their lighthouse, where Grace remained, while her father returned to rescue four more survivors. Her memory faded after 1945, but was revived by the growth of local history in the 1980s and her inclusion on the national curriculum. She was recently voted Northumberland's 'top woman'.

An illustration shows Grace Darling and her father rescuing crew of the *Forfarshire* in 1838



was presented as a devout Christian, who displayed the highest qualities of manhood while laying down his life in the service of God and the nation. The most popular heroes could be represented in diverse, even contradictory, ways: some commentators emphasised Gordon's spirituality, while others portrayed an imperial martyr, slaughtered by savages.

### The queen's approval

Gordon's death mobilised an established repertoire of commemorative practices. Parliament voted for a new statue in Trafalgar Square, insisting on a British sculptor William Hamo Thornycroft to honour a British hero, while a Gordon tomb joined Nelson and Wellington in the crypt of St Paul's. The monarch's approval guaranteed the national status of projects and Queen Victoria herself led donations to the memorial fund which established a Gordon boys' home. Pub names, prints, songs, souvenirs and local memorial schemes testify to public interest in national heroes around the country.

While many commemorative practices had 18th-century origins – statues of military and naval heroes began to be placed in St Paul's during the Napoleonic Wars – Gordon's death coincided with an expansion of popular publishing. In addition to a plethora of

biographies, his story featured in new forms of juvenile literature, from boys magazines like *Chums*, through novels by authors such as GA Henty, to new history text books for the elementary schools established after the 1870 Education Act.

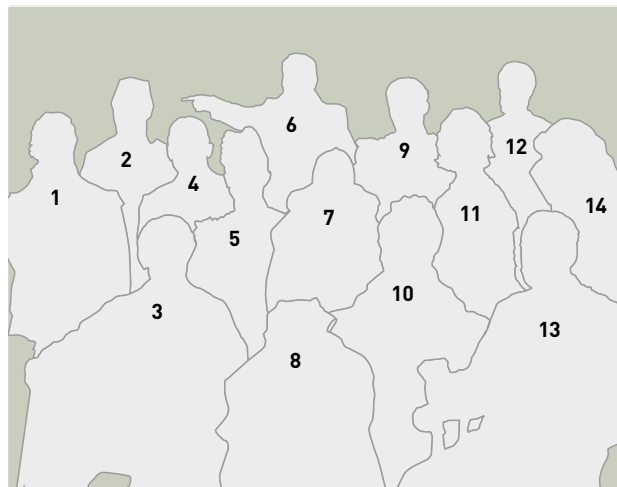
The national pantheon Gordon joined included politicians, writers and artists. Both Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner and the manuscript saloon of the British Museum celebrated the nation's literary heritage, while the 'Chandos portrait' of William Shakespeare was the first work acquired by the National Portrait Gallery, which opened in 1856.

But it was soldiers, sailors and explorers that dominated the second half of the 19th century, an age of

imperial expansion. Their exploits on exotic stages around the globe generated adventure stories which could be turned both to entertainment and to education.

The exemplary life was not a new form: Plutarch had presented the exploits of great men as an inspiration to good conduct nearly 2,000 years earlier. But the centrality of Christianity to 19th-century public life, and a preoccupation with the moral well-being of the masses, invigorated didactic literature in the Victorian period.

Most famously, Samuel Smiles's selection of character sketches to inspire respectable working men, *Self-Help* (1859), was reprinted over 50 times before the First World War, with



### Know your heroes:

- 1 Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758–1805)
- 2 General Gordon (1833–85)
- 3 David Livingstone (1813–73)
- 4 Ernest Shackleton (1874–1922)
- 5 Admiral John Jellicoe (1859–1935)
- 6 Sir Charles James Napier (1782–1853)
- 7 Robert Falcon Scott (1868–1912)
- 8 Lawrence of Arabia (1888–1935)
- 9 Admiral David Beatty (1871–1936)
- 10 Grace Darling (1815–42)
- 11 Florence Nightingale (1820–1910)
- 12 Henry Havelock (1795–1857)
- 13 Douglas Haig (1861–1928)
- 14 Amy Johnson (1903–41)





Livingstone's photograph as the frontispiece from the 1870s.

Smiles's examples were almost all men. Only a handful of women were raised as national heroes in the 19th century, most notably Florence

## The vision of lions led by donkeys in the Great War did not take hold until the 1960s

Nightingale and Grace Darling (see box page 36), who risked her life to save the crew of a steamer in 1838. History text books featured Darling more prominently than any other woman around 1900. Although her story was

told in many ways, most accounts linked Darling's courage to a traditional model of femininity, emphasising her devotion to family and home.

In the 30 years before 1914, accounts increasingly focused more on the hero's physical endurance than his inward spirituality. The Antarctic expeditions of Scott and Shackleton proved particularly popular in Edwardian Britain. Scott distilled the heroic fantasies of the previous century in his dying "Message to the Public", determined to show that "Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past."

But then, so the story goes, these dreams of heroic sacrifice shattered in the trenches of the Great War, mown down by machine-guns at the battle of the Somme.

The impact of the conflict was indeed profound. Yet the language of sacrifice was deflected, not destroyed, by industrial warfare. Victorian and Edwardian heroes retained a prominent place in national life between the wars.

The carnage left some Britons disillusioned. Sir Henry Newbolt, who had urged schoolboys in 1897 to "Play up! play up! and play the game!" whether on the cricket pitch or the battlefield, called after 1919 for an end to "war stories" which showed "men at their worst". Instead he directed children's attention to explorers like Livingstone and Scott. "If any men were ever worth your knowing, these were they". The extent of such disillusionment should not be exaggerated, however. Brian Bond and Dan Todman have shown how the public viewed the First World War positively in the 1920s and 30s.

### BRITISH HERO

#### General Charles Gordon (1833–85)

After fighting in the Crimean War, the Royal Engineers officer found fame in the early 1860s commanding the 'Ever Victorious Army' against the insurgents of the Taiping Rebellion, creating the legend of 'Chinese Gordon'. He spent much of the 1870s campaigning against the slave trade in the Sudan, before the final act of his dramatic life in Khartoum. Investigations into his personality and sexuality energised interest in Gordon in the 1950s and 60s. Some correspondents complained that Charlton Heston was too tall to play Gordon in the 1966 film *Khartoum*.



Although not without his critics, Earl Haig remained widely respected. The vision of lions led by donkeys to slaughter (a vision recently sustained by screenings of *Blackadder IV* in schools) did not take hold until the 1960s.

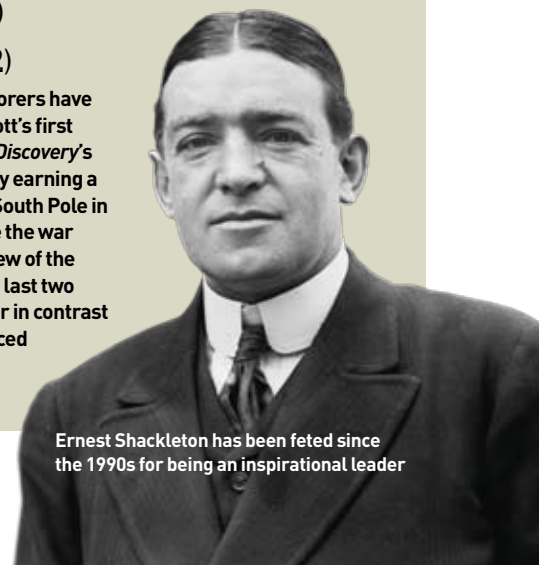
Nor should the impact of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* be overstated. First published in May 1918, ➤

### BRITISH HEROES

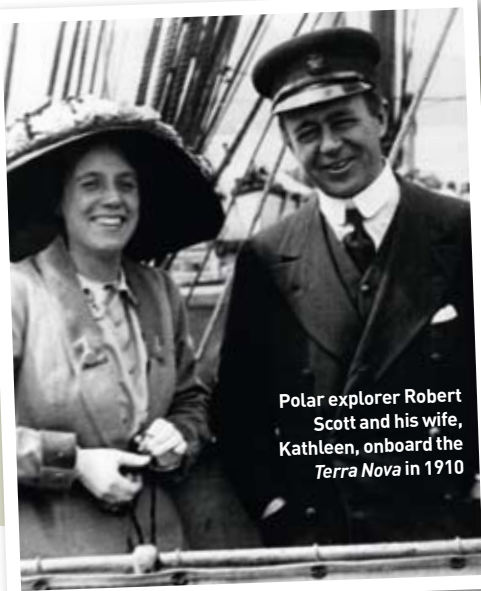
#### Captain Robert Scott (1868–1912)

#### Sir Ernest Shackleton (1874–1922)

The reputations of Britain's most famous polar explorers have been inextricably linked since Shackleton joined Scott's first Antarctic expedition in 1901. Scott was feted on the *Discovery's* return, but Shackleton trumped his former leader by earning a knighthood after marching within 100-miles of the South Pole in 1909. Scott's death again eclipsed Shackleton, while the war obscured the astonishing tale of his rescue of the crew of the *Endurance*. Shackleton has had his revenge over the last two decades, however, praised as an inspirational leader in contrast to Scott's incompetent failure, although more balanced interpretations of Scott have recently emerged.



Ernest Shackleton has been feted since the 1990s for being an inspirational leader



Polar explorer Robert Scott and his wife, Kathleen, onboard the *Terra Nova* in 1910



Strachey mocked Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold and, to conclude the book, General Gordon. Strachey's portrait of an alcoholic egotist, worthy of ridicule not admiration, certainly damaged Gordon's reputation in the 1920s and initiated a broader fashion for 'debunking' biographies.

But Strachey's accusations against Gordon were forcefully rebutted in the

sanctioned changes to Trafalgar Square to commemorate Admirals Beatty and Jellicoe, as part of a broader scheme to create a 'naval piazza' around Nelson's Column.

The expansion of the media, with radio, film, and a growing number of books and magazines aimed at a mass audience, did, however, accelerate the transformation of the mechanisms of public exposure and cultural authority.

## The Second World War saw the final flourish of the culture of hero worship

1930s. Many critics wearied of shallow Strachey-imitators and called for a revival of serious biographical study. On the centenary of his birth in 1933, the chaplain-general to the forces could still declare that Gordon was "the nearest approach to Christ, as any man who ever lived".

The state continued to celebrate national heroes between the wars. Officials erected a statue of Haig in Whitehall, arranged a memorial service for TE Lawrence in St Paul's, and

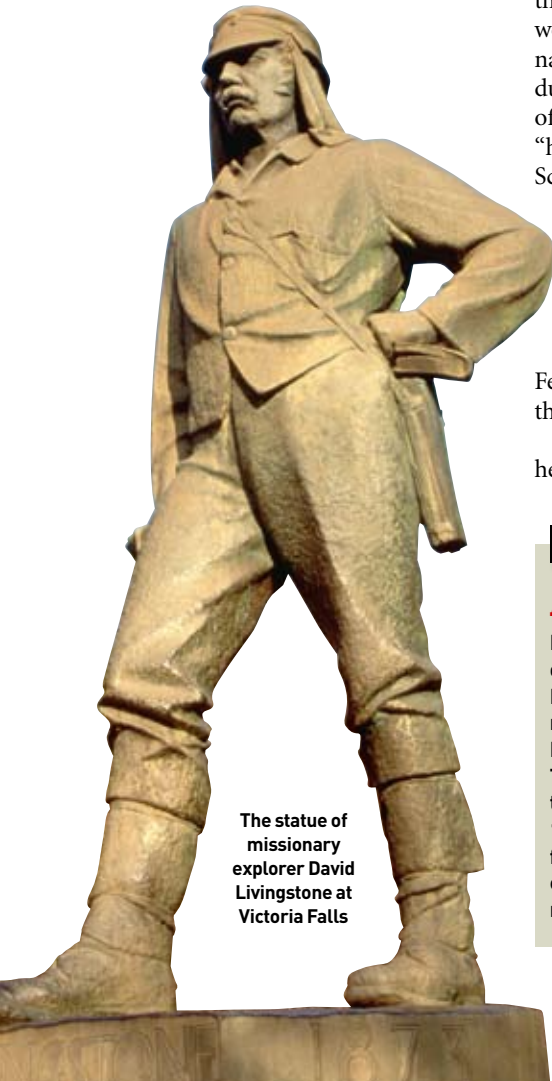
Sports stars and entertainers, who had once enjoyed mere local celebrity, began to earn national reputations. Newspapers and newsreels lionised Amy Johnson, who became the first woman to fly solo from Britain to Australia in 1930, and Malcolm Campbell, who broke a succession of land and water-speed records. Their fame, however, proved transient, reliant on the next media spectacle to keep them in the public eye.

The Second World War witnessed the final flourish of the culture of hero worship, as propagandists mobilised the national pantheon to inspire the people during the People's War. The Ministry of Information recommended making "histories of national heroes (Captain Scott)" to promote "British Life and Character". Winston Churchill had a bust of Nelson in his study at Chartwell. "The warrior heroes of the past may look down, as Nelson's monument looks down upon us now," Churchill observed in February 1940, "without any feeling that the island race has lost its daring."

The exemplary power of national heroes steadily diminished after this last



hurrah. It was no longer appropriate for the government to point the citizens of the new welfare state to old admirals and generals and exhort: "Be like them!" The erosion of a core Christian morality undermined the spiritual props that had supported many reputations, especially from the 1960s. And the self-control of Gordon and Scott looked increasingly out of date in an age that praised emotional expression.

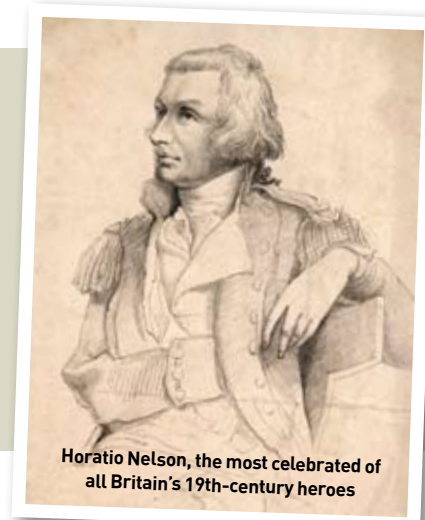


The statue of missionary explorer David Livingstone at Victoria Falls

### BRITISH HERO

#### Admiral Horatio Nelson (1758–1805)

Nelson remains the most celebrated 19th-century hero, the only one mentioned in this article to make the top ten of the BBC's *Great Britons* series in 2002. After his death his reputation was tarnished by his role in the suppression of the Neapolitan republic and by his affair with Emma Hamilton. The Trafalgar centenary celebrations of 1905 were muted by the previous year's Entente-cordiale with France. Since 1945, however, his colourful private life has intrigued film-makers and writers, while the public have been more comfortable celebrating a man known for killing Frenchmen, rather than Africans, Arabs or Indians.



Horatio Nelson, the most celebrated of all Britain's 19th-century heroes



**BRITISH HERO**

**Major-General Henry Havelock (1795–1857)**

Henry Havelock's forces are shown relieving Lucknow in 1857. Havelock's tactical nous and pious domestic life won him much praise from his contemporaries

Havelock was one of a number of officers celebrated for their role in the suppression of the Indian 'Mutiny' against British rule in 1857. He was praised for his judicious command during the relief of Lucknow. Trapped in the city by a second rebel force, he died from dysentery at the end of November, just after the siege had been lifted. Mid-century commentators emphasised his pious domestic life, but his wife disappeared from later accounts, which focused on his military exploits. Havelock has been largely forgotten since 1945, although he did play a significant role in Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth* (2000).



Comedians from *Beyond the Fringe* to *Ripping Yarns* (and, more recently, Mitchell and Webb) mocked their stiff upper lips, while critics blamed the celebration of heroic failure for national decline.

With the dissolution of empire and rise of a multicultural society, Britain's imperial past became easier to ignore than engage with. Havelock remains in Trafalgar Square, but his role in the suppression of the Indian 'Mutiny' has been almost entirely forgotten. Mayor of London Ken Livingstone called for the statues of Havelock and General Charles Napier to be removed from the square in 2000, complaining: "I have not a clue who two of the generals there are or what they did." Scottish nationalists still hail Livingstone, but attempts to rework a mainstream English nationalism after the end of empire remain muted.

**Cultural authority**

Trends that first emerged between the wars intensified after 1945 with the rise of television. Exposure in the media increasingly carried its own cultural authority. Famous people have long advertised goods – from Captain Scott cigarettes to Grace Darling hosiery. But a sophisticated media network now circulates celebrity-endorsed products through television programmes, magazines and web sites, directing shoppers from images to aisles, to assemble their own identities.

British heroes have not disappeared altogether, however. Their authority may have diminished since their 19th-century heyday, but popular interest has persisted. Book catalogues

and documentary series suggest that the appeal of Scott and Shackleton's Antarctic adventures, untarnished by the moral dilemmas associated with imperial rule, remains strong. Nelson's memory, energised by the Trafalgar bicentenary in 2005, is supported by a range of heritage sites around the country. Speculation about their sexuality sustained interest in Gordon and Lawrence longer than other heroes.

The transition from hero to celebrity over the last century is a story of change not decline. This change has partly resulted from a rise in racial tolerance, in equality between the sexes, and in greater recognition of the devastation wrought by war.

Jade Goody may have been famous for nothing, but her death inspired thousands of young women to seek tests for cervical cancer. Her example has saved more lives than Grace Darling's courageous boat journey over 175 years ago. I suspect, though, that if either is remembered in the 22nd century, it will be Grace, supported by institutions, national curriculum and local pride. **HH**

**Dr Max Jones** is senior lecturer in modern history at the University of Manchester. He is working on a book about changing attitudes to heroism and celebrity

BELOW: A 1933 poster for a racing day at Weybridge, featuring record-breaking race driver Malcolm Campbell; a 1910s advertisement for Captain Scott cigarettes; a c1930 Amy Johnson music sheet for the song, 'Amy'



**JOURNEYS**

**Books**

- ▶ **The Last Great Quest: Captain Scott's Antarctic Sacrifice** by Max Jones (OUP, 2003)
- ▶ **The Image, or, What Happened to the American Dream** by Daniel Boorstin (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961)
- ▶ **Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain** by Stefan Collini (OUP, 2006)

**Places to visit**

- ▶ You can learn more about General Gordon at the **Royal Engineers Museum** in Gillingham, Kent [www.remuseum.org.uk](http://www.remuseum.org.uk)
- ▶ The **RNLI Grace Darling Museum** in Bamburgh, Northumberland [www.rnli.org.uk](http://www.rnli.org.uk)

**TV**

- ▶ Ian Hislop profiles the people who fought for social change in Victorian Britain in **The Do-Gooders**, airing soon on BBC Two



**On the podcast**

- ▶ **Max Jones** discusses imperial heroes on this month's podcast (online from 6 August)
- ▶ [www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast-page](http://www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast-page)

MARY EVANS/ADVERTISING ARCHIVES/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS