

Debunking

BY [BARBARA KORTE](#)

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1. Hero-debunking

Debunking of heroic figures is a form of deliberate de-heroization with the aim of destroying an existing heroic reputation. The means of debunking can be the direct revelation of characteristics or deeds that contradict the heroic reputation of a figure (e.g. in a biography), but debunking can also make use of elements of satire and parody.

Debunking aims to expose not only the individual heroic figure's weaknesses and flaws, but also their ideological environment, i.e. the underlying conception of the heroic as well as, in a broader sense, the system of thought and values from which the [heroization](#) emerged. As the historian Max Jones suggests, [heroes](#) are figures of social projection that reveal the values, desires and needs of the time in which they are being admired.^[1] Or, as Geoffrey Cubitt states: heroes are "endowed by others, not just with a high degree of fame and honour, but with a special allocation of imputed meaning and symbolic significance".^[2] The phenomenon of debunking tends to occur when the values connoted with heroic figures become fragile or obsolete in new contexts, when traditional heroic figures are no longer compatible with a new temporal and/or social context, or when a post-heroic mood has developed. Bernard Bergonzi discussed this in his influential study of First World War literature. In *Heroes' Twilight*, he observes for many British and American novels of the interwar period "a savage debunking of the whole concept of heroism" and sees in this the symptom of a general collapse of heroic ideals^[3], especially those heroic concepts that had been handed down from the 19th century. These, as well as the values and ideologies associated with them, were questioned after the First World War, and by no means only in direct reference to the war. The iconoclastic biographies in Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), for example, not only took General Gordon off his pedestal as a

(tragic) hero of the British Empire (Gordon failed to defend Khartoum in the Sudan in 1885 and was killed by the Mahdi's troops); they also criticised other Victorian icons such as Florence Nightingale, Cardinal Manning and the educator Thomas Arnold. As Max Jones demonstrates regarding General Gordon, however, the debunking of his heroic reputation in the context of modern imperial criticism is only one line of its reception and runs parallel to continued acceptance of heroic traits in Gordon's character and actions.[4] In this sense, Bergonzi's thesis of widespread hero-debunking after the First World War has also been relativised in recent times.[5]

Within research on heroes and heroizations, the phenomenon of debunking has been observed as being particularly prominent in British culture. This may be connected to the fact that a special disposition has been identified for this culture to see heroic greatness even in failure and defeat[6]: if the basis of a heroic reputation is precarious, debunking can become all the more easy to apply. What is more, the satirical view of the heroic has a long tradition in British culture, from at least since the 18th century where it was manifested, for example, in *mock-heroic poetry*[7], up to popular historical comedy on television (a well-known example is the comedy series *Blackadder*[8]). The 1960s to 1980s, with their preference for anti-heroic figures (rebels, underdogs etc.)[9] are a particularly prolific period for hero debunking, as can be demonstrated by the example of the polar hero Robert Falcon Scott.

2. Case study: The debunking of 'Scott of the Antarctic'

Scott became a great, if tragic, hero of British culture in the early 20th century. He came at the end of a long tradition of explorer heroes who contributed to the expansion of the British Empire (and thus to the glory of their nation). Scott, however, could not realise his goal of being the first to reach the South Pole as the Norwegian Roald Amundsen beat him to it. Scott and four companions did reach the South Pole on 17 January 1912, but the arduous return journey, plagued by many adversities, cost all five men their lives. Scott described the painful path to death in his diary, drawing on traditional notions of heroic death. Thanks to the cultural disposition to interpret death and dying as heroic, Scott and his companions were immediately declared heroes when their fate became known back home. To their contemporaries, the brave and dignified encounter with death seemed to demonstrate not only their personal but also a national character and to guarantee the continuity of traditional values even in the face of an unsettling modernity. This helped Scott to achieve extraordinary resonance[10]: 'Scott of the Antarctic' became a heroic icon and a myth, although there were always voices that attributed the tragic failure of the undertaking to Scott's weaknesses in organisation and leadership. Nevertheless, Scott's heroic reputation lasted until after the Second World War (see, for example, his portrayal in the feature film *Scott of the Antarctic*, 1948), but then underwent a striking debunking, especially from the 1970s onwards. As Stephanie Barczewski summarises: "In 1912 many people saw Scott as a hero. Today many people see him as a bumbling idiot whose incompetence resulted in his own death as well as the deaths of his four companions." [11]

The background to this reassessment is not only a generally anti-military mood (Scott was a captain in the Royal Navy) and anti-imperial sentiment, but also concrete developments in Britain such as the economic decline in the 1970s, the return to Victorian values proclaimed by Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher after 1979, and the imperial habitus with which the brief Falklands War was fought in 1982. In the process of Scott-debunking, the heroizing potential of a sacrifice of life was

increasingly faded out; instead, death became part of a narrative in which Scott became a bungler whose weakness in leadership made himself and his companions avoidable victims. Criticism of the Scott myth was voiced above all by politically anti-conservative artists, as in the sketch “Scott of the Sahara” (1970)[12] by the comedy troupe Monty Python or in the play *Scott of the Antarctic* (1971)[13] by the left-wing playwright Howard Brenton, which was conceived as a popular show and written to be performed on an ice rink in the working-class town of Bradford. The play, which is emphatically anti-elitist and anti-imperial, dismantles all the set pieces of the myth and leaves its protagonists at the end as a sad “heap of heroes”. At the end of the 1970s, the Scott destruction reached a climax with Roland Huntford’s double biography *Scott and Amundsen* (1979).[14] The bestseller contrasted Scott with the more competent and efficient Amundsen, who came from a non-imperial nation, and spread the thesis that Scott’s failure prefigured the disintegration of the British Empire and the decline of Britain. Huntford’s view gained particular influence when the portrayal of his biography was given even wider exposure through a popular television mini-series. The script for this series, *The Last Place on Earth* (1985)[15], was written by Trevor Griffiths, another critical left-wing playwright who saw Scott as an “essentially *little man*” who embodied the weaknesses of late-imperial Britain.[16] Griffiths very clearly projected onto the Scott narrative his frustration with Thatcher and the Falklands War. Max Jones characterises Huntford’s book as tendentious, but concedes that it had a lasting impact on Scott’s reception: “Debunking Captain Scott has become something of a national pastime since Huntford’s intervention.”[17] Scott’s biographer (and admirer) Ranulph Fiennes – who himself crossed Antarctica – felt called upon in 2003 to firmly contradict this debunking and especially Huntford’s transformation of Scott from a hero to a fool.[18] In the 21st century, however, there seems to be a shift away from debunking to a new appreciation of Scott. While satirical and ridiculing accounts of ‘Scott of the Antarctic’[19] continue to be found, there are signs of a positive view of Scott. A relevant context here is the new conservatism of the post 9/11 era, which has led to a renewed appreciation of heroes and heroism in Britain generally, both present and past. ‘Scott of the Antarctic’ is thus clear evidence that the debunking of heroes is just as cyclical as heroization itself.

3. References

- 1 Jones, Max: *The Last Great Quest. Captain Scott’s Antarctic Sacrifice*. Oxford 2003: Oxford University Press, 10.
- 2 Cubitt, Geoffrey: “Introduction”. In: Cubitt, Geoffrey / Warren, Allen (Eds.): *Heroic Reputations and Exemplary Lives*. Manchester 2000: Manchester University Press, 1-26, 3.
- 3 Bergonzi, Bernard: *Heroes’ Twilight. A Study of the Literature of the Great War*. London 1965: Constable, 173-174 and 17.
- 4 Jones, Max: “‘National Hero and Very Queer Fish’. Empire, Sexuality and the British Remembrance of General Gordon, 1918–1972”. In: *Twentieth Century British History* 26.2 (2015), 175-202.
- 5 See for example Einhaus, Ann-Marie: “Death of the Hero? Heroism in British Fiction of the First World War”. In: Korte, Barbara / Lethbridge, Stefanie (Eds.): *Heroes and Heroism in British Fiction since 1800. Case Studies*. Basingstoke 2017: Palgrave Macmillan, 85-100.
- 6 Barczewski, Stephanie: *Heroic Failure and the British*. New Haven 2016: Yale University Press.
- 7 On forms of heroic satire in English literature, see for example Terry, Richard: *Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper*. Burlington 2005: Ashgate.

- 8 On the satire of history and its protagonists in *Blackadder* (BBC 1983–1989), see for example Korte, Barbara: "As cunning as a fox who's just been appointed Professor of Cunning at Oxford University". 'Blackadder' (1983-1989) as a Picaresque of the National Past". In: Ehland, Christoph / Fajen, Robert (Eds.): *Maskerade und Entlarvung* (Beihefte der GRM). Heidelberg 2007: Winter, 375-388.
- 9 See for example Calder, Jenni: *Heroes. From Byron to Guevara*. London 1977: Hamish Hamilton, 173.
- 10 On the heroization of Scott from the time his fate became known until after the Second World War, see in detail Jones: *The Last Great Quest*, 2003.
- 11 Barczewski, Stephanie: *Antarctic Destinies. Scott, Shackleton and the Changing Face of Heroism*. London 2007: Hambledon Continuum, xvii-xviii. Barczewski provides a detailed overview of the developments sketched out here, especially in chapters 11 and 12. Above all, she shows how the depreciation of Scott was accompanied by a countervailing appreciation for his competitor Shackleton, whose background and unconventionality were more in keeping with the contemporary post-heroic zeitgeist.
- 12 Monty Python, "Scott of the Sahara", *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, BBC 1970.
- 13 Brenton, Howard: *Scott of the Antarctic*. In: *Plays for Public Places*. London 1972: Eyre Methuen, 71-103.
- 14 Huntford, Roland: *Scott and Amundsen*. London 1979: Hodder and Stoughton.
- 15 *The Last Place on Earth*, Central Television 1985.
- 16 See Jones, Max: "The Truth about Captain Scott". *The Last Place on Earth, Debunking, Sexuality and Decline in the 1980s*". In: *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42 (2014), 857-881, 863.
- 17 Jones: *The Last Great Quest*, 2003, 7.
- 18 Fiennes, Ranulph: *Captain Scott*. London 2003: Hodder and Stoughton, 404.
- 19 See, for example, the comedy series *Horrible Histories*, which in its television version (BBC 2009) featured Scott in the 'Potty Pioneers' section.

4. Selected literature

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Kontakt

Sonderforschungsbereich 948
„Helden – Heroisierung – Heroismen“
Albert-Ludwig-Universität Freiburg
Hebelstraße 25

D-79104 Freiburg im Breisgau

www.compendium-heroicum.de
redaktion@compendium-heroicum.de