Heroes of Invention: Technology, Liberalism and British Identity 1750-1914 (review)

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Christine MacLeod. *Heroes of Invention: Technology, Liberalism and British Identity 1750–1914*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xv + 458 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-87370-3, $110 (cloth); 9780521153829, $39.99 (paper).

For the past two decades, the question of defining British and/or English national identity has become a growth industry for scholars in various disciplines. In the end, as many students of the issue have concluded, national identity has multiple expressions, has changed over time, and means different things to separate social and religious groups. It is a mosaic of shifting perceptions and beliefs, and debate will continue about the relative significance of content and meaning. From architecture to an imperial race, from country dance to a genius for constitutional government, national identity has surfaced in the UK in an endless variety of expressions.

In this interesting and valuable book, Christine MacLeod has chosen the inventor to reflect on British national identity, an individual she describes as an improbable hero. The subject is well chosen because the importance of the inventor has a discernible beginning, reached a pinnacle of acceptance, and then declined with clear specificity. In the eighteenth century inventors, especially those who produced labor-saving devices, were regarded as enemies by those segments of society whose livelihood they threatened. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, however, advocates of classical liberalism sought an alternative to such military heroes as Admiral Nelson and the Duke of Wellington. In order to frame a positive model for English society, the inventor, that solitary genius, emerged as the person who fostered economic growth and an international trade that promised power and prosperity.

In the period 1850–1875, exemplified by the admiration for James Watt, the cult of the inventor reached its zenith, abetted by the lessons drawn from the Great Exhibition of 1851. Until approximately 1875, the industrial strength of the country, much of it due to technological innovation, caused society to celebrate the inventor as a greater national benefactor than the politician or military leader. The advent of such visible achievements as railways, bridges, and steamships reflected and reinforced the status of the inventor as national hero.

Watt was the most important recipient of this adulation; his reputation surpassed even that of Edward Jenner. The case for vaccination faltered when compared with the wondrous results of the steam engine. Compulsory vaccination elicited little enthusiasm among the poor who much preferred little or no government interference in their lives. Monuments to Watt proliferated in public spaces after his death in 1819, accentuating the idealization of the inventor hero. Watt epitomized the man of peace who had contributed to the overall improvement of the human condition.

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the position of the inventor suffered a dramatic decline. The paradigm of the individual inventor gave way to results from cooperative and aggregate efforts. Corporate activity made more sense than the lone person waiting for inspiration. In addition, the emphasis on science over technology and "practical application" diminished the achievements of the inventor. Skilled labor claimed that artisans had contributed to industrial advancement and that they had been unfairly treated by the emphasis on solitary individuals. Public opinion grew tired of these individuals and the rise and fall cycle was completed. Finally, inventors proved just as adept in providing for military purposes, a subversion of the heroic inventor who only promoted peace.

Adulation of the inventor also had political overtones, as was usually the case with public causes in Victorian society. The inventor was yet another argument used by middle-class proponents to furnish an alternative to traditional aristocratic social and political influence. Inventors, not landowners, created the impetus for economic supremacy. As with so many other developments in the Victorian era, recognition for inventors ultimately depended upon aristocratic acceptance, not an embrace of the values associated with the new manufacturing elite.

The author presents a nuanced explanation of this process by which invention and economic liberalism produced a new cultural icon. Industrial expansion resulted from the constitutional focus on individual liberty and the rights of property; the inventor bolstered this aspect of national identity. Issues of identity are never isolated and the author carefully traces the convoluted ways in which identity issues come together.

Inventors apparently served best to define an identity fit primarily for domestic consumption. It is not clear to what extent, if any, the inventor typified an identity that other countries admired, imitated, or rejected. Britain did indeed reign as the workshop of the world when the inventor triumphed, but foreigners perhaps noticed results, not process. In the end, however, McLeod has written an illuminating account of the way in which culture, economics, and politics converged to give to the inventor a brief hegemonic interlude.

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