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BOOKS AND CULTURE

Whom Should We Admire?

Paul Johnson surveys heroes from literature, history, and politics.

Daniel J. Mahoney

February 13, 2008

Heroes: From Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar to Churchill and de Gaulle, by Paul Johnson (Harper, 320 pp., \$25.95)

As he approaches his eightieth birthday, the British journalist and historian Paul Johnson continues to delight—and sometimes infuriate—his Anglo-American readership with his elegant and learned reflections. After reading his comprehensive histories of Christianity, Judaism, the twentieth century, art, and the American people, among many other subjects, readers might suspect that Johnson will soon run out of interesting things to say. But no need to worry—Johnson's latest book, a brilliant, if flawed, investigation of the ambiguities inherent in human greatness, shows that he remains a sparkling conversationalist with significant insights into history and human nature. The book's subtitle only begins to convey the impressive range that he covers.

Johnson's subjects run the gamut from warrior-kings and conquerors such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar—who inhabit the thin line between the heroic and the reckless, between superhuman courage and monstrous killing for its own sake—to biblical heroes and heroines such as Deborah, Samson, and David, who put guile, might, and deception at the service of justice and God's beleaguered people. Johnson especially appreciates "exemplary heroes" such as Henry V and Joan of Arc, who combined the Christian and martial virtues and never lost sight of the requirements of the common good. He also holds in high regard military men such as Washington, Nelson, and Wellington, who inspired their soldiers' admiration while resisting the "Napoleonic" temptation to make them cannon fodder for personal ambition or military or ideological

despotism. Johnson relates these heroes' stories with an eye for the telling detail and the memorable *bon mot*.

Johnson artfully conveys the superhuman virtuosity of Alexander and Caesar, even as he chronicles Caesar's unconscionably bloody deeds in Gaul and Alexander's slow descent into the cruelties and excesses of what used to be called "oriental despotism." He writes with admiration for biblical heroines, whose deeds reveal the limitations of a heroism reduced to brute force and shorn of poetry, beauty, and guile. The Biblical Jews, Johnson writes in a striking formulation, "were weak in the physics of survival, strong in the metaphysics." He admires medieval kingship at its best, even as he traces a "daunting necrology" of British kings who died in battle, or from disease or gastric ailments, or cruelly at the hands of rivals.

Johnson's hatred for Napoleon is palpable, as is his admiration for Washington's self-restraint and Lincoln's inimitable combination of nobility, justice, and prudent ambition. Johnson shows that the careers of great human beings can "evoke wonder or admiration or respect or in some cases sympathy," while at the same time being morally ambiguous and in some cases even monstrous. Such is surely the case with Alexander and Caesar but also—to a lesser extent, of course—with the majority of heroic men throughout human history. While no pacifist, Johnson, like his great predecessor Samuel Johnson, has no sympathy for "heroes" who are little more than killing machines.

Rare indeed is the Cincinnatus or Washington whose ambition is noble enough to know when to go home, or the Lincoln "who has brooded so long on the nature of political truth and justice, and the frailty of man in promoting them" that he can stir men to action and reflection through wise and poetic utterances that "cling to the memory," such as the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address. To the rank of those both great and good, Johnson gives pride of place to the sixteenth-century English statesman Thomas More. He admires More as a statesman, hero, and martyr because of his rare nobility in both life and death. No stranger to the ways of the world, More knew the difference between a king and tyrant, as his unfinished biography of Richard III made clear. Portraying a king who became, in Johnson's words, a "tyrant and a devouring wolf" who imperiled the bodies and souls of men, More's study also served, in Johnson's estimation, as "a theoretical preparation, a dress rehearsal for his own conflict with Henry VIII." More died in a dignified way, in defense of an ideal of Christian kingship unsullied by the lawlessness of the tyrant. Given his admiration for More's thought and statesmanship, it's perplexing that Johnson confuses More's *Utopia* with a blueprint for "ideological" despotism in the modern sense. As the best scholars

have established, More's book is by contrast a work in the tradition of classical political philosophy: the "ideal society" that transcends conflict, division, and human passion is literally *ou topos*, no-place.

If Johnson never loses sight of great statesman and warriors, he is also refreshingly idiosyncratic in his choice of those worthy of our admiration. His book even has something of a "feminist" tilt, though in a non-ideological sense. For instance, he praises the quiet determination of Emily Dickinson, who overcame a fearful nature and nineteenth-century Puritan social restraints to become one of America's most important poets. He sees a similar inner strength at work in the career of comic genius Mae West, allowing her to capitalize on her charms, wit, and sex appeal ("Mae West," in fact, was almost wholly an artifice). Johnson suggests more than once that it's a man's world, and that it takes no small dose of courage and ingenuity for women to find their way in it, especially when men habitually confuse heroism with rival displays of physical strength.

The chapter on Churchill and de Gaulle ("A Generous Hero and a Heroic Monster") should have been one of the book's highlights. Unfortunately, Johnson provides no analysis of Churchill's great wartime speeches or of his deeply insightful books on politics and history, though he does have some interesting things to say about his subject's heroic and generous character, his surprisingly superficial views about religion (he was a pagan through and through), and his *pietás* toward British history and constitutional institutions.

His treatment of de Gaulle is even less satisfactory. Johnson appreciates that de Gaulle is a great statesman who twice saved his beloved France from defeat and disgrace—in 1940 and again in 1958. He acknowledges that de Gaulle's "transcendental gift of reflecting upon the process of history" has much to teach us. Yet while Johnson never confuses this "authoritative" man with a political authoritarian or an aspiring tyrant, he makes outlandish judgments about "chronic halitosis" being the source of de Gaulle's personal austerity and aloofness. His sole source for this claim, Malcolm Muggeridge, notes in his memoir *Chronicles of Wasted Time* only that in his own experience, a de Gaulle fresh off the battlefield, with ruffled hair and slightly bad breath, still came across as an authentic hero.

Johnson calls de Gaulle an inhuman "monster," bereft of warmth and affection. He never mentions the French statesman's tender relations with his mentally retarded daughter Anne, who died at the age of 20 in 1948. He brands de Gaulle an "intellectual"

who ultimately put ideas above people (the ultimate Johnsonian insult). He never comes to terms with de Gaulle's severe criticisms of Napoleon for divorcing "grandeur" and moderation, or his condemnation of the military and political elites of Wilhelmine Germany for succumbing to Nietzsche's false cult of human greatness. German elites, de Gaulle wrote, ignored "the limits marked out by human experience, common sense, and the law." If Johnson had studied de Gaulle's revealing prewar writings—*The Enemy's House Divided* and *The Edge of the Sword*—he would have discovered powerful insights into the limits of all ideological projects that ignore the parameters established by "the natural order of things."

Johnson's final chapter focuses on "The Heroic Trinity" who brought down Communism—Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and Pope John Paul II—and he has many astute things to say about these three figures. Strangely, however, Johnson presents Reagan as largely bereft of learning and ignorant of some elementary realities of politics—even as he admires the preternatural solidity of his judgments, particularly regarding Communist totalitarianism and the role of government in people's lives. Johnson ignores all of the recently published evidence—Reagan's self-penned radio addresses from 1975-1979, his voluminous published correspondence, his White House diaries—that suggest that he was far more than the "booby" of legend. As for Thatcher, whom the author knew well, Johnson emphasizes what is rarely appreciated: that the Iron Lady brought together personal generosity and "tremendous will" in a combination "almost unknown" in public life. Johnson limits himself to four well-crafted pages on John Paul II's role in defeating the Communist behemoth. He concludes that John Paul inhabited "the borderland between the heroic and the saintly," and recognizes that saintliness is a subject for another investigation. But such a man surely belongs in any book on heroism worth its name.

Heroes steers clear of larger philosophical reflections on the meaning of human greatness, and perhaps Johnson's Englishness explains why. Tocqueville famously observed that the English have no taste for "general ideas." This is one of the strengths of Britain's moderate and free political order but, alas, one of the weaknesses of its intellectual life. Johnson's book offers no discussion, for instance, of Aristotle's or Cicero's accounts of magnanimity, or a sustained examination of the tensions between goodness and greatness. It skims over or ignores the key writings not just of Churchill and de Gaulle, but also of other democratic statesmen—Lincoln and the American Founders come to mind—who thought deeply about greatness and moderation in a democratic age. For a fuller discussion of these themes, one must turn elsewhere. A

remarkable new book by Boston College political theorist Robert Faulkner, *The Case for Greatness: Honorable Ambition and Its Critics*, is a good place to start.

Like two of Johnson's previous books, *Intellectuals* and *Creators, Heroes* limits itself to instructing through "example." Johnson is a delight to read because he writes well and understands human nature as it reveals itself in the cauldron of history. Johnson's humane voice occasionally goes awry, but he never loses sight of the intimate connection between moral courage, true heroism, and respect for the dignity of man. For this, he deserves to be revered as one of the great liberty-loving public historians of our age.

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