Simon Wendt (ed.)

Extraordinary Ordinariness

Everyday Heroism in the United States, Germany, and Britain,1800–2015

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Extraordinary Ordinariness

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Campus Verlag
Frankfurt/New York

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The editor gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Fritz Thyssen Foundation.

Parts of Janice Hume's essay "Narratives of Feminine Heroism: Gender Values and Memory in the American Press in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" have previously appeared in the following publications: Janice Hume, "Press, Published History, and Regional Lore: Shaping the Public Memory of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *Journalism History* 30, no. 4 (2005): 200–209; Janice Hume, "Saloon Smashing Fanatic, Corn-Fed Joan of Arc: The Changing Memory of Carry Nation in Twentieth-Century American Magazines," *Journalism History* 28, no. 1 (2002): 38–47; Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); Janice Hume, "Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Mid-Century Mainstream Media," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (2000): 9–29; Janice Hume, "Defining the Historic American Heroine: Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Nineteenth-Century Media," *Journal of Popular Culture* 31, no. 1 (1997): 1–21.

Distribution throughout the world except Germany, Austria and Switzerland by
The University of Chicago Press
1427 East 60th Street
Chicago, IL 60637

ISBN 978-3-593-50617-3 Print
ISBN 978-3-593-43519-0 E-Book (PDF)

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Cover design: Campus Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt-on-Main
Cover illustration: "With the Greatest Difficulty They Reached the Boat" © Frank Mundell, *Heroines of Daily Life* (London: Sunday School Union, 1896), 49.
Printing office and bookbinder: CPI buchbücher.de, Birkach
Printed on acid free paper.
Printed in Germany

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Introduction: Studying Everyday Heroism in Western Societies

Simon Wendt

In April 1906, in the small town of Midway, Kentucky, a retired blacksmith named Rufus K. Combs saved Richard Godson, a local lawyer whom he utterly disliked. Despite their enmity, Combs jumped into a gas-filled vault to rescue Godson, who had fallen into the pit when inspecting a leaking gas tank. Americans would probably never have heard about Combs's courageous act if it had not been for the newly established Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, which honored Combs by granting him a silver medal and $1,500. Subsequently, newspapers across the country reported about this astonishing case of altruism. Journalists lauded Combs's unselfish bravery and noted approvingly that other Carnegie awardees had similarly risked their lives to save those of others.[1] To the editors of the *Washington Post*, for instance, such noble acts represented "a pleasing record for the encouragement of our faith that the heroic impulse still greatly moves the hearts of men to courageous acts of self-sacrifice."[2]

In November 2014, more than 100 years after the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission paid tribute to Richard Combs, Tuğçe Albayrak, a young German woman of Turkish descent, tried to protect two teenage girls who had been harassed by three young men in front of a McDonald's restaurant in Offenbach, a town near Frankfurt. During a subsequent altercation, one of the young men punched Tuğçe, who fell on her head and died a few days later. After her death, many commentators lauded what they called Albayrak's civic courage, and some even called her a heroine. One of those comments appeared in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a center-left newspaper from

1 "Note and Comment," *Daily Springfield Republican*, October 20, 1906, 8; "Stories of Heroism," *Anaconda Standard*, November 18, 1906, 17; "His Enemy Fights Fair," *Duluth News Tribune*, December 2, 1906, 1; "Too Good To Lose," *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, July 17, 1907, 3; "Too Good To Lose," *Morning Olympian*, July 13, 1907, 3.

2 "Brave Acts of Humble Heroes," *Washington Post*, October 13, 1907, 3.

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Bavaria. In December 2014, the paper published a long article on the case, in which the author stated: "What those people who dared to oppose the murderous system of Nazi Germany did, from the … Communist workers who smuggled comrades out of the country, to the resistance of July 20– for that, the word civic courage is too weak a word anyway. Even if the term has so often been misused: it was something that one can call heroism. ... Tuğçe will now also be celebrated as a heroine and as an idol."[3]

These two examples occurred in different countries and in very different historical contexts. Yet in both cases, ordinary people's courageous behavior was regarded not only as praiseworthy, but as heroic. More importantly, their deeds were infused with particular meanings that reveal much about the societies in which they occurred. In the case of the United States, praise for ordinary citizens' heroism around 1900 reflected people's hope that the greedy selfishness that was believed to characterize American society had not yet destroyed altruistic self-sacrifice. In the case of Germany, the praise for Tuğçe Albayrak's "heroism" revolved around a particular understanding of democratic civic-mindedness, which many deem essential to post-1945 German identity and which is inextricably intertwined with anti-Fascism.

This volume probes the complex history of such examples of everyday heroism (*Alltagsheldentum* in German). On a general level, everyday heroes and heroines can be defined as ordinary men, women, and children who are honored for actual or imagined feats that are considered heroic by their contemporaries or by succeeding generations. Scholars have devoted countless pages to war heroes, heroic leaders, and superheroes as well as to the blurring distinctions between heroes and celebrities, but they have said little about the meaning and impact of ordinary citizens' heroism.[4] For this

3 "Tochter Courage," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 6–7, 2014, 49 (my translation).

4 On the history of heroism in the three countries that this volume examines, see, for example, Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (1945, reprint; New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992); Orrin E. Klapp, *Heroes, Villains, and Fools: The Changing American Character* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962); Harold Lubin, ed., *Heroes and Anti-Heroes: A Reader in Depth* (San Francisco, CA: Chandler, 1968); Marshall Fishwick, *The Hero, American Style: Changing Ideas of Greatness from John Smith to John Kennedy* (New York: David McKay Company, 1969); Theodore P. Greene, *America's Heroes: The Changing Models of Success in American Magazines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Mark Gerzon, *A Choice of Heroes: The Changing Faces of American Manhood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982); Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in America: A History of Popular Symbolism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982); Barry Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of

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publication, the few scholars who have studied everyday heroism kindly agreed to elaborate on their previous research, while a number of other contributors probe hitherto unknown aspects of the topic.[5] This book thus constitutes the first comparative effort to bridge the historiographical gap that continues to characterize scholarship on heroism. Comparing the United States, Germany, and Britain from a multidisciplinary perspective, it asks when and how everyday heroism emerged, how it changed, and how it was discussed and depicted in public discourse, mass media, film, and other forms of popular culture between 1800 and the early twenty-first century. It also draws attention to the various social, cultural, and political functions that this new hero type served, including the norms, values, and collective identities ordinary heroes were believed to embody. Focusing on

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Heroic Leadership," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (1983): 18–33; Susan J. Drucker and Robert S. Cathcart, eds. *American Heroes in a Media Age* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1994); René Schilling, *"Kriegshelden": Deutungsmuster heroischer Männlichkeit in Deutschland, 1813–1945* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002); Anuschka Albertz: *Exemplarisches Heldentum: Die Rezeptionsgeschichte der Schlacht an den Thermopylen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Oldenbourg, 2006); Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert, eds., *Heroes in a Global World* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2008); Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Andrew J. Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Melvin Smith, *Awarded for Valour: A History of the Victoria Cross and the Evolution of British Heroism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House, 2012); Jason, Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013). On the tensions between heroism and celebrity, see, for example, Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961, reprint; New York: Vintage Books, 1992); Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick, eds., *The Hero in Transition* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983); Joshua Gamson, "The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9, no. 1 (1992): 1–24; Charles L. Ponce De Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

5 There are only three scholars who have explicitly addressed everyday heroism in the United States, Britain, and Germany, and all three have kindly agreed to contribute essays to this volume. See John Price, *Everyday Heroism: Victorian Constructions of the Heroic Civilian* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); William Graebner, "'The Man in the Water': The Politics of the American Hero, 1970–1985," *Historian* 75, no. 3 (2013): 517–543; Silke Meyer, "Helden des Alltags: Von der Transformation des Besonderen," in *Die Helden-Maschine: Zur Aktualität und Tradition von Heldenbildern*, ed. LWL-Industriemuseum (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2010), 28–40.

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this long-neglected phenomenon, the following essays shed fresh light not only on heroism, but also on the history of everyday life in Western societies.

Defining heroism – let alone everyday heroism – constitutes a major challenge for those trying to study its history, and there are two main strategies that scholars can employ to tackle this vexing problem. One strategy would be to focus on the myriad functions that heroes and heroines serve in Western societies. In general, they tend to embody the norms, values, and beliefs of particular social groups. They also contribute to the formation of collective identities and become role models that people seek to emulate. As symbols of dominant norms and identities, they constitute central sources of authority and are used to legitimize social, political, cultural, and racial hierarchies. Yet, although heroism tends to be a stabilizing force in society, it is a social and cultural construction that is subject to constant debate, reevaluation, and revision. As people's norms and values change over time, so do heroes' attributes and the functions they serve.[6] Relying solely on this strategy, however, can be frustrating, since it can be applied to a multitude of illustrious figures, whom contemporaries might or might not regard as heroes or heroines. The second strategy, proposed by anthropologist Silke Meyer – who is among the very few scholars who have examined everyday heroism in Germany – could therefore be the more fruitful one. Meyer rightfully laments the arbitrariness of universal definitions of heroism and suggests that methodological insights from cultural anthropology might offer a solution. Rather than utilizing universally applicable concepts, cultural anthropologists take seriously the terms that are used by the ordinary people they study. When viewed from this perspective, people themselves define what heroism is, by employing such terms as "hero," "everyday hero," and "ordinary hero," or

6 Orrin Klapp, "The Creation of Popular Heroes," *American Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 2 (1948): 135–141; Janice Hume, "Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Midcentury Mainstream Media," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, no. 2 (2000): 9; Susan J. Drucker and Robert S. Cathcart, "The Hero as a Communication Phenomenon," in *American Heroes in a Media Age*, 3–5; Tristram Potter Coffin and Hennig Cohen, "Introduction," in *The Parade of Heroes: Legendary Figures in American Lore*, ed. Tristram Potter Coffin and Hennig Cohen (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1978), xxiii; Lance Strate, "Heroes: A Communication Perspective," in *American Heroes in a Media Age*, 15; Lance Strate, "Heroes and/as Communication," in *Heroes in a Global World*, 19; Roger R. Rollin, "The Lone Ranger and Lenny Skutnik," in *The Hero in Transition*, 30–34; William J. Goode, *The Celebration of Heroes: Prestige as a Control System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 7–8, 151–152.

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by labeling ordinary citizens' behavior as "heroic."[7] For scholars of everyday heroism, such an approach not only makes it easier to identify what Western societies considered examples of "ordinary extraordinariness," but also allows us to trace the idea of the heroic and how it has changed over time. Ultimately, however, it will be necessary to use a combination of these two strategies to fully understand heroism and its multiple meanings and uses in Western societies.

As suggested by cultural anthropology's usefulness in defining heroism, only multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches will lead to scholars developing a methodological toolbox that allows them to fully probe the complexities of everyday heroism. Media studies and communication studies probably provide some of the most important methodological insights. Already in their 1994 introduction to the edited volume *American Heroes in a Media Age*, Susan Drucker and Robert S. Cathcart emphasized that heroes and heroines are "communication phenomena," meaning that studying heroism primarily entails studying communication about those persons society deems heroic.[8] In the same publication, Lance Strate pointed out that "different kinds of communication will result in different kinds of heroes," reminding us that the construction and impact of what he calls "oral," "typographic," and "electronic" heroes differ significantly and, therefore, require analyses that take into account these differences.[9] While such a communication perspective is crucial to enhancing our understanding of how information about everyday heroism was interpreted and disseminated in different media, historians of everyday life caution us not to forget that heroism is more than merely discourse. In fact, as John Price has pointed out in his comprehensive study of everyday heroism in Victorian Britain, media accounts that celebrate the exploits of ordinary citizens provide important glimpses into the lives of people who tended to leave no written sources for scholars to consider.[10] Psychologists can also add much to our understanding of ordinary people's heroism. By focusing on questions such as why some people risk their lives to save those of others, or what role gender plays in their decision to do so, psychological research not only directs our attention to those individuals who are hailed

7 Meyer, "Helden des Alltags," 34.

8 Drucker and Cathcart, "The Hero as a Communication Phenomenon," 5.

9 Lance Strate, "Heroes: a Communication Perspective," in *American Heroes in a Media Age*, 15.

10 Price, *Everyday Heroism*, 11.

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as heroes and heroines, but also suggests new ways of understanding the interrelationship between their motivation to act "heroically" and the norms and values that society sees confirmed or strengthened in those actions.[11] This volume's contributors – who include historians, literary scholars, media scholars, film scholars, sociologists, cultural anthropo-logists, and Americanists – utilize these and other methodological ap-proaches to provide crucial insights into ordinary people's heroism in the past and the present.

While the various case studies that are assembled here do not constitute a definitive history of everyday heroism in Western societies, they suggest at least partial answers to the questions this volume seeks to answer. With regard to its origins, the idea that ordinary citizens were capable of heroic behavior appears to have emerged around 1800, at least in the case of Britain, and became more widespread and accepted over the course of the nineteenth century. A cursory look at press coverage of everyday heroism in the American print media after 1865 suggests that the development in the United States closely mirrored that in Britain, reflecting a general democratization of heroism in the nineteenth century.[12] Significantly, only pro-social behavior elevated ordinary people to heroic status and, thus, clearly distinguished everyday heroism from entrenched traditions of warrior heroism. Especially those kinds of rescues that were daring, and in which people risked their lives to save those of others were called "everyday heroism" in the nineteenth century, although even simply enduring the tribulations of everyday life could be enough to earn the label of hero or heroine. In general, it appears that use of the designations "everyday hero" or "ordinary hero" underwent an increasingly inflationary

11 See, for example, Selwyn W. Becker and Alice H. Eagly, "The Heroism of Women and Men," *American Psychologist* 59, no. 3 (2004): 163–178; Douglas M. Stenstrom and Matthew Curtis, "Heroism and Risk of Harm," *Psychology* 3, no. 12 (2012): 1085–1090; Philip G. Zimbardo, James N. Breckenridge, and Fathali M. Moghaddam, "'Exclusive' and 'Inclusive' Visions of Heroism and Democracy," *Current Psychology* 32 (2013): 221–233; K. J. Jonas and V. Brandstätter, "Zivilcourage: Definition, Befunde und Handlungsempfehlungen," *Zeitschrift für Sozialpsychologie* 45 (2004): 185–200.

12 See, for example, "Rewards for Bravery," *Boston Daily Globe*, April 2, 1875, 3; "Burned to Death," *New York Times*, September 27, 1875, 10; "A Horrible Holocaust," *Boston Daily Globe*, November 16, 1878, 1; "Two Brave Farmer Boys," *New York Times*, October 10, 1881, 2; "A Father's Heroism," *New York Times*, July 3, 1883, 1; "A Boy's Heroism," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 14, 1885, 1; "Bishop Whipple's Bravery," *New York Times*, October 29, 1886, 1; "Johnnie Curley's Heroic Act," *Boston Daily Globe*, June 7, 1888, 1; "Out of the Jaws of Death," *New York Times*, August 8, 1890, 8.

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growth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, ultimately, came to encompass a wide range of pro-social behavior by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the mass media – followed by radio and film in the twentieth century, and the internet in the twenty-first – became the main "hero makers," praising ordinary citizens' exploits and familiarizing readers with their heroic deeds. However, philanthropic organizations, local communities, as well as national governments also recognized civilians' feats as heroic, and did much to spread the idea that common people's actions could be as praiseworthy as those of valiant soldiers. In light of the fact that so many different groups and people helped disseminate stories about everyday heroes, it is not surprising that such stories served a number of different functions at different points in time. For the mass media – and that holds true for the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century – the thrilling stories drawn from everyday life became a journalistic technique of storytelling that helped sell newspapers and magazines. For middle-class organizations and the state, by contrast, the idolization of everyday heroism around 1900 was primarily intended as a means of social control, since they presented working-class people thus honored as virtuous citizens who neither intended to challenge social inequality nor questioned the authority of the state. If heroes tend to be a stabilizing force in society, this appears to have been particularly true for everyday heroes. In general, ordinary heroes and heroines were especially in vogue during times of perceived crises, when societies seemed to lack the type of social solidarity that was believed to have characterized them in the past. Perhaps even more so than in the case of traditional hero types such as military heroes and political leader heroes, everyday heroes tended to become both reflections of people's anxieties about a perceived lack of unity, as well as a sign of hope that not all was lost, since incidents of heroic rescues were interpreted as evidence that the nation's citizens still cared for one another. In fact, praise for and the popularity of everyday heroes and heroines at particular moments in time appear to have been inextricably intertwined with longings for a sense of community. If heroic civilians generally reflected dominant social and political norms, they were also frequently utilized to strengthen traditions of gender difference – at least in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. While women could attain heroic status, their heroism was depicted as gender specific and became a means to highlight accepted notions of femininity that revolved

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around passivity and submissiveness. The example of the German Democratic Republic, whose ordinary "heroes of labor" were mostly male, suggests that such forms of gender discrimination continued well into the twentieth century.

If the following essays allow us to draw at least a few generalized conclusions, each case study offers additional insights into the complexities of everyday heroism in Western societies. The first three chapters shed light on various aspects of its history in Britain. In "'Our Heroes of To-day': The Royal Humane Society and the Creation of Heroes in Victorian Britain," Craig Barclay discusses an organization that became crucial to the dissemination of the idea of everyday heroism in Britain in the nineteenth century. Founded in 1774 by private citizens and supported by the British Crown, it primarily honored ordinary citizens who had rescued others in life-threatening situations, mostly on rivers and at sea. Initially, the Royal Humane Society awarded most of its medals to the upper echelons of the British nation but, over the course of nineteenth century, an increasing number of working-class citizens were also recognized as heroes. Since medals of distinction had traditionally been bestowed only upon the country's nobility, the organization's recognition of the bravery of the lower rungs of society by awarding medals resulted in considerable social status for their wearers. In general, however, the Society's upper middle-class leaders, as well as Victorian writers who used its awardees to pen riveting stories about ordinary heroism in everyday life, intended their work to encourage working-class citizens to adopt and refrain from challenging middle-class norms and values. In addition, the organization perpetuated class distinctions by reserving most of its silver medals for members of the upper class, while laborers not only tended to receive primarily bronze medals but also needed eyewitnesses of social standing to corroborate their accounts. Thus, although the Royal Humane Society sought to stimulate pro-social behavior and contributed to a public discourse that valued such behavior, its work can also be interpreted as a form of social control that sought to ensure society's stability in the face of class tensions and social unrest.

In the second chapter, "Everyday Heroism for the Victorian Industrial Classes: *The British Workman* and *The British Workwoman* (1855–1880)," Christiane Hadamitzky and Barbara Korte provide additional evidence that Britain's upper classes considered the idea of everyday heroism a discursive means of social control during the second half of the nineteenth century.

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Focusing on two popular educational monthlies that were created by middle-class editors, but aimed to reach a working-class readership, Hadamitzky and Korte show that while these publications reflect an increasing democratization of heroism, they were also intended to foster class harmony by constructing exemplars of moral and social responsibility who shunned political agitation intent on challenging economic and political inequality. As part of this attempt to prevent social unrest, *The British Workman* and *The British Workwoman* honored the same types of heroic rescues that the Royal Humane Society deemed praiseworthy, but they also introduced the new category of "moral heroism," which was used especially for describing women's brave and selfless efforts to protect the domestic sphere and to encourage their men to lead a morally unblemished life. The two magazines thus also sought to influence working-class people's ideas about gender by stressing middle-class notions of femininity that revolved around women's "silent," "restrained," and largely passive "heroic love," while generally neglecting war heroes, sports heroes, and famous labor activists, since such traditional heroic figures were believed to incite working-class men toward violent upheaval. In many ways, the type of everyday heroism lauded by these two periodicals reflected a sense of social crisis among middle-class citizens rather than a genuine belief in the ubiquity of heroic qualities in all strata of society.

The following chapter, John Price's "Everyday Heroism in Britain, 1850–1939," shows that such efforts to honor ordinary citizens for what people deemed heroic behavior were far from exceptional in the British Isles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, "everyday heroism" was a widely used term – generally connoting daring rescues undertaken by civilians in everyday life – with numerous organizations, communities, as well as the state recognizing such exploits, rewarding rescuers, and commemorating their deeds. Reflecting a gradually growing democratization of heroism in the nineteenth century, news media widely reported about everyday heroes and heroines. In addition to inspiring poets, writers, and artists, these people also became the subjects of intellectual debates about what heroism actually stood for. Price identifies three specific contexts in which ordinary citizens' life-risking behavior was praised as heroic and the different purposes each served. In what he calls the "establishment context," it was primarily the state that championed a version of heroism revolving around civilian pro-social bravery that was intended to strengthen citizens' allegiance to the nation and the British

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Crown. In the "organizational context," philanthropic organizations such as the Society for the Protection of Life from Fire also heaped praise on intrepid rescuers and publicized their stories because such public recognition was believed to help make people aware of, and possibly teach them how to prevent, the many perils with which modern British society was confronted around 1900. Finally, progressively-minded individuals and organizations who operated in a "radical context" deemed civilian heroism important because its public recognition might help improve working class people's lives and provide exemplars of morally upright and respectable behavior that laborers could emulate – not only to improve their lives as individuals, but also to foster a more deeply-felt class consciousness within the context of economic inequality. Price argues that this group of reformers, writers, and artists was radical because they proposed alternatives to those state-sanctioned and educational hero-making efforts that did not challenge traditional notions of heroism because they were intended to promote social and political stability. The "radicals," by contrast, called into question such entrenched traditions by highlighting working class heroes' contributions to the welfare of the nation and by introducing pacifist ideas that were at odds with military heroism. Significantly, Price suggests that World War I, while generally believed to mark the decline of the ideal of heroism in Britain because of the conflict's shocking carnage, did not tarnish the idea of everyday heroism. In all three contexts described by Price, ordinary citizens' heroic exploits continued to be widely recognized in the interwar period.

In chapter four, "Volunteers and Professionals: Everyday Heroism and the Fire Service in Nineteenth-Century America," Wolfgang Hochbruck examines what can be regarded as the most visible civilian hero of the nineteenth century: the firefighter. Hochbruck sheds light on the gradual shift from volunteer to professional firefighting and on what this process reveals about the discourse of everyday heroism in the United States before and after the American Civil War. As was the case in Britain and other countries, U.S. firemen were widely admired for bravely facing the blaze while selflessly risking their lives to rescue men, women, and children from the flames. However, in the case of volunteer companies, their heroic status was undermined in the 1850s and 1860s by media reports about these firemen's unruly behavior and purported inefficiency. Hochbruck argues that this temporary fall from grace can be explained, at least in part, by the growing influence of working-class volunteers who tended to join

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fire companies because of their interest in male fraternity rather than in protecting their home communities. Ultimately, however, despite the fact that firefighting became less "everyday" due to its growing professionalization, the heroic image of both volunteer and professional firefighters endured, as can be seen in the immense popularity of lithographs that depicted firefighters and their heroic struggle against the flames in American cities in the 1850s and 1860s. Even the increasing use of technology – such as steam pumpers – did not erode firefighters' heroic status in U.S. society, which remained intact throughout the twentieth century and experienced a new boost at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The fifth chapter, Janice Hume's "Narratives of Feminine Heroism: Gender Values and Memory in the American Press in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," examines the multifaceted ways in which journalists covered women's everyday heroism in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on the intricate interrelationship of the memory of heroism and dominant gender norms in the American press. Hume explains that the emergence of mass media and new journalistic techniques in the post-1850 period fostered the increasing coverage of ordinary people and their "heroic" deeds. Although heroism thus became more egalitarian, those heroic figures that the press primarily wrote about were white men whom journalists portrayed as symbols of American nationalism. Yet, some women and their exploits did find their way onto the pages of U.S. newspapers and magazines, and journalists' stories about them reveal important connections between changing interpretations of femininity and the depictions of American heroines. Throughout the nineteenth century, mirroring the coverage in *The British Workwoman*, American publications such as the *Lady's Book* confined the label of heroism to those women who had selflessly and silently suffered hardships as faithful wives and mothers, notwithstanding the first stirrings of women's activism in the 1840s. By the mid-twentieth century, the heroic qualities attributed to women had changed considerably, albeit some continuities remained in place. In the 1950s, female heroism and wifehood or motherhood continued to be inextricably linked in the women's magazine *Ladies' Home Journal*, and only in the wake of second-wave feminism in the 1970s did the publication allow for a larger number of independent heroines that were noted because of their intellect outside the home. Nevertheless, heroic wives and mothers remained a staple of the magazine's gendered heroism discourse. In general, then, female heroes

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were rarely acknowledged publicly, and their heroism tended to be associated with the private sphere and female submissiveness. Only through obituaries did stories about women's "heroic" lives reach a wider audience, although the term "heroine" was rarely used to describe the deceased. As Hume shows, this form of commemoration reflected the same norms and values that were perpetuated by newspaper reports about living heroes and heroines. In the nineteenth century, the few women thus remembered were commended for qualities that tended to be associated with traditional notions of femininity, including patience, obedience, piety, and tenderness. Only in the early twentieth century did obituaries begin to list character traits normally associated with men, including their business acumen and wealth. In general, however, obituaries reflected and preserved entrenched gender dichotomies, reminding us that the media expresses dominant norms and values when reporting about ordinary heroes and heroines while simultaneously shaping and reinforcing them.

Chapter 6, Matthias Grotkopp's "Heroic Ordinariness after Cavell and Capra: Hollywood Cinema and Everyday Heroism in the Interwar Period and World War II," complicates our understanding of the interrelationship of the ordinary or the everyday and the idea of heroism in the United States in the 1930s and early 1940s. Relying on Stanley Cavell's philosophy of moral perfectionism as a point of departure, Grotkopp defines everyday heroism as behavior that aims to create or uphold a certain moral ideal in everyday life. This ideal revolves around efforts to preserve both democracy and a sense of community in Western societies, which, according to Grotkopp, are prone to subvert their own idea of egalitarian freedom. Grotkopp regards American director Frank Capra's films of the interwar period, in particular *John Doe*, which was released in 1941, as prime examples of the ways in which this notion of everyday heroism was interpreted in U.S. culture. In Capra's interwar films, ordinary citizens initially fall prey to corrupt elites who seek to use them for attaining their dubious goals but, then, ultimately reject their evil overtures. Grotkopp argues that their struggles can be read as lessons of Cavell's philosophy and the idea of everyday heroism in American society, but he also emphasizes that the dialectic of the ordinary and the heroic tends to be a conservative means to preserve the social status quo.

Chapters 7 and 8 turn to the history of everyday heroism in Germany in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In "Everyday Socialist Heroes and Hegemonic Masculinity in the German Democratic Republic, 1949–

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1989," Sylka Scholz examines how post-World War II East Germany utilized so-called "heroes of labor" and other heroic, but otherwise ordinary figures to strengthen people's allegiance to the socialist nation, to legitimize its authority, and to present socialist role models that East Germans were expected to emulate. Given that most of these heroes were men, Scholz argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity helps to understand how the idea of the socialist everyday hero served not only political ends, but also perpetuated entrenched gender inequalities, the emancipatory rhetoric of socialist elites notwithstanding. Since the defeat of Nazi Germany had largely discredited military heroes and heroic political leaders, seemingly ordinary heroic figures, especially workers, took on a particular significance in post-war East Germany in the second half of the 1940s – the attempt being made to portray them as epitomizing the egalitarian vision of socialism. Solely constructed by the state, this idea of ordinary socialist heroism also informed the country's film industry, which was encouraged to depict strong and resourceful men and women in everyday life. Despite the fact that the "heroes of labor" were no longer in vogue by the 1950s and had not necessarily enjoyed widespread popularity to begin with, the German Democratic Republic's leaders continued to give awards to those workers who had proved particularly resourceful until the regime's collapse in 1989. By the 1970s, the socialist hero in general and the socialist everyday hero in particular were in crisis, and despite the fact that the GDR's successful athletes briefly rekindled people's heroic imagination, East German authorities were unable to produce new heroic figures that would help them revive people's trust in and support for the socialist nation.

Silke Meyer's "Everyday Heroes in Germany: Perspectives from Cultural Anthropology" focuses on West Germany, pointing out that the terms "hero" and "heroism" are omnipresent in twenty-first-century German popular and everyday culture. Echoing Sylka Scholz's observation that World War II marked a fundamental break with long-standing traditions of military heroism, Meyer argues that the void that the absence of such traditional hero figures created was filled by various forms of what was regarded as civic heroism, including such behavior as helping fellow citizens in need of assistance and engaging in similar tasks deemed beneficial for society in general and local communities in particular. But not only such forms of pro-social behavior were regarded as heroic by German society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Simply being

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able to endure and cope with the daily struggles of everyday life elevated many to the status of hero or heroine. Interviews with German teenagers revealed that the label hero is applied rather loosely today, since interviewees named athletes as well as family members when asked to name heroes they admire. Their answers also complicate our understanding of the character traits people deem heroic, since especially male adolescents considered "coolness" a noteworthy attribute that they said was part of athletes' heroism. Paradoxically, then, everyday heroism could stand for seemingly conflicting qualities: pro-social behavior that benefits society, as well as an artificial pose that professes distance from and seeming indifference to society. Since ordinary heroes and heroines permeate contemporary German culture, they reflect a growing heroic pluralism and a certain ambivalence with regard to the norms and values they seem to represent. At the same time, such character traits as endurance, perseverance, loyalty, morality, and fair play tend to dominate in contemporary debates on, and media representations of, everyday heroism, suggesting that the pro-social elements of what people regard as heroic behavior continue to reign supreme in twenty-first-century Germany.

The last three chapters return to the United States and examine the political and cultural dimensions of everyday heroism between the 1970s and the present. In "After Watergate and Vietnam: Politics, Community, and the Ordinary American Hero, 1975–2015," William Graebner probes the politics of the everyday hero in the post-Vietnam War era, showing that ordinary heroes became ubiquitous in political discourse as part of a longing for traditional values and a sense of community in the face of military defeat, the ascendancy of liberalism and hedonism, as well as the highly visible cultural and ethnic pluralism of the post-civil rights era. Especially conservative pundits and politicians lamented the seeming disappearance of traditional heroes and utilized the ordinary hero discourse to convince white working-class men to support the Republican Party in their attempts to fend off the fundamental social changes brought about by the social movements of the 1960s. Significantly, this American embrace of everyday heroism continues to the present day, although it has become more inclusive in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. Despite the flexibility of the concept of ordinary heroism – which could include hero types ranging from everyman rescuers to police officers and firefighters – as well as the changes that this discourse has undergone since the 1980s, it continues to reflect a deeply felt concern about what many observers

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regarded as the fragmentation of America's social fabric. Through their praise of the heroic exploits of ordinary citizens, numerous journalists, politicians, and other commentators criticized the lack of social solidarity that they said had characterized U.S. communities in the past, while simultaneously offering a reason for hope and a potential solution to this predicament in the present.

The tenth chapter, Michael Goodrum's "'It Must Have Been Cold There In My Shadow': Everyday Heroism in Superhero Narratives," offers important insights into the interrelationships between everyday heroism and super heroism, focusing on fictional stories offered in comics and Hollywood movies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Although superheroes outshine almost everybody else in these narratives, Goodrum shows that other seemingly ordinary protagonists are shown as being capable of heroism as well. In doing so, he introduces the important conceptual differentiation between heroic conduct and heroic goals, but also identifies two major "flows of everyday heroism" in the narratives he analyzed. Through "in-flows," real-life examples of ordinary citizens' exploits are integrated into superhero stories, while "out-flows" refer to the fact that flesh-and-blood people draw inspiration from these narratives and engage in heroic behavior in the real world. This observation is significant because such flows are not necessarily confined to the U.S. context in which most superhero narratives are created. Rather, they become part of a globalized notion of heroism that attracts and inspires readers around the world. Ultimately, superhero narratives limit the range of behavior deemed to be heroic and tend to serve a regulatory function that aims to preserve the social and political status quo. However, as Goodrum shows, they also allow for considerable heroic pluralism, which reveals that super heroism and everyday heroism frequently operate in tandem and in tension in twenty-first century popular culture.

In the final chapter, "After the Working-Class Hero: Popular Music and Everyday Heroism in the United States in the Twenty-First Century," Martin Lüthe examines the ways in which notions of everyday heroism permeate popular music in twenty-first-century America, arguing that it is characterized by a reappearance of a particular working-class folk hero type that had first emerged in the post-World War II era and was most conspicuous in the 1960s. According to Lüthe, the combination of a new form of capitalism, the changing ways in which popular music is produced and consumed, and the impact of the terrorist attacks of

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September 11, 2001 prompted many musicians to praise and highlight the exploits of white working-class people who not only played a crucial role in the rescue operations during 9/11, but also contributed to U.S. society through hard, manual labor. Using the singers Bruce Springsteen and P!nk as examples, Lüthe's essay shows that song lyrics, as well as artists' performances of particular songs, reveal much about the manifold ways in which ordinary people were elevated to heroic stature in the post-9/11 United States.

Addressing a vast array of topics in three different countries, this collection of essays makes an important contribution to the study of heroism by shedding light on the long-neglected history of everyday heroism. However, this volume makes no claim to geographical or topical comprehensiveness and raises as many questions as it answers. Indeed, there are a number of important aspects of the topic that future research could and should address. First and foremost, this volume reveals that there are a number of time periods that still await scholarly attention. Even though we appear to have a fairly good idea of the emergence and significance of everyday heroism around 1900 in Britain, for instance, we know only little about its history in the United States during the same time period and virtually nothing about it in Germany. This last point exposes a surprising blind spot that calls for a thorough historical examination of ordinary heroism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The immediate post-World War II period and the 1960s also constitute a historiographical lacuna that should be of interest to historians and other humanities scholars. For example, although we know that the Cold War influenced East Germany's decision to use "heroes of labor" to legitimize the ideal of a socialist nation, there is no research on the reactions of West Germany, Britain, and the United States to such uses and interpretations of ordinary heroism, nor are there studies on alternative constructions of heroic civilians in these three countries during the 1950s and 1960s.

There are also a number of additional analytical perspectives that would help us better understand the genesis and the various functions of everyday heroism in Western societies. What role, for instance, did religion play in the evolution and growing popularity of ordinary heroes and heroines in the nineteenth century? Could ordinary people who risked their lives to save other human beings become heroic only after 1800 because such rescues had previously been believed to be God's providence, and did Enlightenment thought help legitimize the idea that the agency of ordinary

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Christians was praiseworthy? And how did traditions of Christian compassion influence people's interpretations of everyday heroism? Another analytical lens that a few of this volume's contributors only hinted at is race. How was everyday heroism used to make the case that ethnic and racial minorities could be heroic as well? Or was it rather employed to confirm people's beliefs about white superiority and help legitimize entrenched racial hierarchies?

Finally, historians need to go beyond mere comparisons and probe the transnational dimensions of everyday heroism to fully understand its complexities. How, for instance, did British interpretations of heroic civilians influence the United States and Germany in the nineteenth century? Or was it rather the United States that shaped European representations of ordinary heroes and the efforts to honor them? The Carnegie Hero Fund Commission, which was mentioned at the very beginning of this introduction, suggests possible transatlantic connections. Founded in 1904 by American steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, the Commission honored ordinary people who risked their own lives to save those of fellow citizens. Encouraged by the lavish praise that the Hero Fund Commission received in the United States during the first three years of its existence, Carnegie decided to set up similar Hero Funds in Europe. Beginning with the United Kingdom in 1908, he offered generous endowments to several European nations to provide them with the means to organize commissions that would emulate the example of the American Hero Fund. European governments and rulers reacted enthusiastically to the proposition and gladly assisted in the organization of such institutions in their respective countries. By the beginning of World War I, Carnegie Hero Funds had been established in ten European countries, including Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Sweden, and Switzerland.[13] While historians, among them John Price, have begun to examine the Hero Fund's history in Britain and Germany, much remains to be learned about its impact in Europe as well as the similarities and differences between the meaning of civilian heroism in the United States and other parts of the

13 "New Carnegie Hero Fund," *New York Times*, September 25, 1908, 6; "Adds to Long Reward Roll," *Boston Daily Globe*, June 6, 1909, 4; "German Carnegie Fund," *Baltimore American*, April 9, 1911, 45; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *A Manual of the Public Benefactions of Andrew Carnegie* (Washington, DC: Rumford Press, 1919), 124.

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world.[14] Examining the work of philanthropic organizations such as the Carnegie Hero Fund could help historians to discern the transnational intellectual and organizational processes of exchange that shaped Western interpretations of everyday heroism. Related to this need for transnational perspectives on the topic, scholars should also examine whether and how non-Western societies praised ordinary people as heroes and heroines, and what functions such adulations served. Was there – as suggested by Michael Goodrum in this volume – such as thing as a global idea of everyday heroism, and what role did colonial conquest, trade, and globalized transfers of knowledge play in its dissemination? It is to be hoped that this volume's findings, as well as the blind spots it has revealed, will prod scholars to delve deeper into a topic that promises to help us to better understand the history of heroism and its interrelationship with everyday life.

14 See Price, *Everyday Heroism*, 125–165; Olaf Wittenberg, "Die deutsche Carnegie Stiftung für Lebensretter: Auszeichnungen, Anerkennungen, Beihilfen," *Militaria* 30, no. 3 (2007): 84–97.

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“Our Heroes of To-day”[1]: The Royal Humane Society and the Creation of Heroes in Victorian Britain

Craig Barclay

Medals that preach with beams of sterling truth
Acts of true greatness to our gallant youth
And telling plain the noble exploits raise
In noble hearts the highest tide of praise,
Their young souls brace and fortify to and steel
To dare great deeds with death-defying zeal.[2]

The nineteenth century was an age of heroes. Statues and other monuments commemorating the brave deeds of the Empire’s gallant sons were to be found in almost every city in Britain. With few exceptions, these commemorated the lives and deeds of the nation’s leading men – sailors, soldiers and politicians – whilst the bravery of the less exalted members of society went un-remarked and unrecorded. An exception to this general rule is to be found in London, where the Watts Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice in Postman’s Park records the deeds of those from all walks of life who gave up their own lives in an effort to save others.[3] The memorial was the brainchild of the artist George Frederick Watts, who had recognized the need to create a monument that could act both as focus for national celebration and as a source of inspiration for others, explaining in the *Times* of September 5, 1887 that “The character of a nation as a people of great deeds is one, it seems to me, that should never be lost sight of. … The material prosperity of a nation is not an abiding possession; the deeds

1 Title of poem by W.C. Bennett, *Penny Illustrated Paper*, February 1, 1873, 73.

2 Edward Dalton, “The Sea,” originally published in Edward Dalton, *The Sea, the Railway Journey and Other Poems* (London: Dalton & Lucy, 1866). Reprinted in J. Cumming & C. Vince (eds.), *The Life-boat in Verse* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 23–24.

3 John Price, “‘Heroism in Everyday Life’: the Watts Memorial for Heroic Self Sacrifice,” *History Workshop Journal*, 63, no. 1 (2007): 254–278; John Price, *Heroes of Postman’s Park: Heroic Self-Sacrifice in Victorian London* (Stroud: History Press, 2015).

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of its people are."[4] In choosing to commemorate the deeds of those who sacrificed their lives to save others, Watts envisaged a new type of inspirational public memorial that celebrated worthy heroic individuals, irrespective of their social background. Even as Watts' memorial was being constructed however, the medals of the Royal Humane Society[5] were already performing a similar purpose: celebrating and memorializing brave deeds performed by individuals drawn from across the spectra of class, age, gender and race.

This essay explores how the work of the Royal Humane Society and its kindred organizations fitted into the broader cultural framework of Victorian Britain. In particular, it examines how the process of celebrating the deeds of lifesavers morphed with time to mirror wider changes in class relations and how – building upon the practices pioneered by the Royal Humane Society – the systematic granting of medals as a visible means of recognizing bravery (both in the civil and military spheres) came to be widely accepted both by the state and the public. It also throws light upon the processes whereby the priorities of the Royal Humane Society shifted over the course of the nineteenth century from solely rewarding members of the middle and upper classes towards establishing systems that also allowed for the recognition of members of the lower social orders. Parallel to this, it examines the motivations and backgrounds not only of those who recommended, validated and approved the granting of rewards, but also of the men and women who exploited and embellished tales of "Every-day heroes" as tools for encouraging "worthy" behaviors and social compliance in the aspirational working classes.

The Royal Humane Society

The Royal Humane Society was established in 1774[6] as a result of the work of two English doctors, Dr. William Hawes and Dr. Thomas Cogan, who

4 G. F. Watts, "Another Jubilee Suggestion," *Times*, September 5, 1887, 14; reprinted in John Price, *Postman's Park: G.F. Watts' Memorial to Heroic Self Sacrifice* (Compton: Watts Gallery, 2008), 9.

5 Craig Barclay, *The Medals of the Royal Humane Society* (London: Royal Humane Society, 1998).

6 P. J. Bishop, *A Short History of the Royal Humane Society* (London: Royal Humane Society, 1974), 4.

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drew their inspiration from the Amsterdamse Maatschappij tot Redding van Drenkelingen, which had been established in 1767 with the aims of publishing guides for treating people who had apparently drowned and awarding prizes to lifesavers.[7] The Humane Society proved an immediate success, swiftly attracting the support not only of non-conformists such as Cogan and Hawes, but also leading members of the London elite, including both the Lord Mayor and the Bishop of London. The Society's star rose even further in 1783 when King George III became its patron. In 1787, the organization was formally renamed the Royal Humane Society (RHS).

Although the saving of life was a core driving force behind the Society's activities, it was not its sole motive. During its formative years, the saving of souls – and money – were likewise deemed by the Society to be of paramount importance. Accidents could place a great burden upon the state and society, depriving employers of valued labor and leaving grieving wives and children dependent upon the parish for support. These risks were recognized by the RHS which, as a patriotic body, made it very clear that,

> it is our duty as well as interest to replace the industrious poor in their sphere of usefulness, that they may again work for their wives and families; whereby they are snatched from misery and want, and the community relieved from a troublesome and expensive burden. These are a part of the important benefits to the publick, (sic) by the establishment of the Humane Society.[8]

The saving of souls was also recognized as a priority with W. Poutney, for example, celebrating in verse his successful resuscitation of an "industrious man with numerous family":

> Ours is the joy, the heartfelt joy, to save
> Friend, lover, parent, from th' untimely grave
> To snatch from death the victims of despair,
> And give the means of penitence, peace and prayer.[9]

From the outset, the Royal Humane Society recognized the desirability of establishing a framework of rewards to recognize the efforts of those who had contributed to the achievement of its aims. Building upon the practice

7 K. Hines, "The Royal Humane Society," *Pre-Hospital Immediate Care* 3 (1999): 38.

8 Royal Humane Society *Annual Report* 1785–1786, 82.

9 Letter sent by W. Poutney to W. Hawes (Treasurer of the RHS) on February 28, 1803, *Gentleman's Magazine*, January–July 1803, 222.

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of the Amsterdam Society that had served as the role model for its foundation, the RHS established a medal with which to reward those who contributed to the success of its activities. The medals, often bearing the words "Go Thou and Do Likewise" inscribed on their edge, were intended to be desirable and to inspire emulation. The RHS was in full agreement with Napoleon Bonaparte, who noted that "I defy you to show me an ancient or modern republic in which there are no distinctions: You may call these baubles, well, it is with baubles that men are led."[10]

The wearability of the Society's medals was of paramount importance. At the time of their inception, no outward badges of distinction were available to those who did not occupy the very uppermost strata of civil or military society. The association with royal patronage imbued these rewards with a rare aura of status and respectability, and ensured that they would be desired and coveted. To possess and to wear such a medal was to mark a man out as a person of virtue and significance. In the society's early years, these silver medals were presented primarily to doctors and medical assistants to recognize successful resuscitations, whilst members of the working classes who recovered bodies or rescued drowning individuals were granted monetary rewards. As the eighteenth century progressed, however, the medal of the RHS came to be used more commonly to recognize acts of individual bravery and, by the early nineteenth century, had effectively evolved into a device used exclusively for recognizing courage. An early example of the award of a RHS medal granted for bravery is provided by an account of the presentation of a silver medal to Mr. Peter Quibilingo of the Royal Marines, in recognition of his having saved no fewer than eight seamen from drowning in a rescue that resulted in his own hospitalization. The medal was most definitely intended to be worn and displayed since, as the description noted: "A silver chain has been added, apprehensive that so fine a Medal would risque (sic) being lost, if suspended only from a ribbon."[11]

Class boundaries were further broken down following the introduction of a cheaper and more widely awarded bronze medal in 1837. Thus, although in its earliest years the RHS had restricted the granting of its

10 Speech of Bonaparte to Council of State, May 4, 1802. Quoted in Colonel Vache, *Napoleon at Work*, trans. G. F. Lees (Stroud: Nonsuch, 2007), 118.

11 See A. J. Henderson, "The Presentation of Medals," *Orders & Medals Research Society Journal* 33, no. 2 (1994): 122–125; J. Wilson, "Peter Quibilingo – An Early RHS Medallist," *Orders & Medals Research Society Journal* 35, no. 3 (1996): 208–211.

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medals to its more respectable supporters and sponsors, by the latter part of the century this was certainly not the case. The Society's awards were widely distributed and had gained a status and desirability that extended far beyond the borders of Britain. Indeed, even an American writer such as Mark Twain could write with some justification of "that reward which a sailor prizes and covets above all other distinctions, the Royal Humane Society's medal."[12] Thus, the RHS had come to be inextricably associated with the rewarding of courage and the celebration of bravery.

There is ample evidence to support the conjecture that, during the nineteenth century, lifesaving awards were held in high regard by the general public. Popular poetry recorded the gallantry of lifesavers, whose bravery was readily and favorably compared with that of the soldiers who defended Britain's Empire. For example, Clement Scott's *The Lay of the Lifeboat* (1880) proclaimed:

They talk of battles and rank and file;
they call the roll, count cannon and loss,
And Tom he wears a Corporal's stripe,
and brave little Jim the Victoria Cross.
They march to the front with fife and drum,
and follow the beat of the regiment's band;
They see their flag as it waves,
and hear the jolly old Colonel's clear command.
But there's never a sound in the battle at sea,
but the howling storm and the scream afar;
And it's only duty points the way when
the ships break up on the harbour bar.[13]

The medals received – and proudly worn – by rescuers were likewise specifically referred to in verse:

Praise to the men whose well-earned medals rest
On many a storm-scarred brave and manly breast,
And tell the tale of noble efforts made,
Of hard brought succour and triumphant aid,

12 Mark Twain, "Perils at Sea," *The New York Times*, November 26, 1872, 1. Reproduces letter written by Twain to the RHS on November 20, 1872, highlighting the gallantry of several seamen of the Cunard steamship *Batavia* who had risked their lives to rescue the crew of a sinking ship in mid-Atlantic.

13 Reprinted in Cumming & Vince (eds.), *The Life-boat in Verse*, 13–15.

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