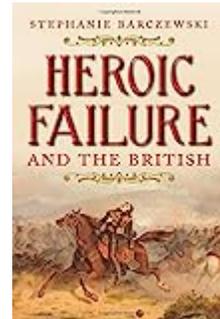




Stephanie Barczewski. *Heroic Failure and the British.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. 280 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-18006-0.



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Why did the British insist on celebrating the lives and deeds of those who, for all intents and purposes, had failed most miserably? In *Heroic Failure and the British*, Stephanie Barczewski offers an engaging, well-told narrative of iconic British "failures" throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, marking out events in which Britons "displayed physical courage and mental fortitude in the face of defeat" (p. 20). Throughout the course of her book, Barczewski argues that drastic yet noble failure on a small scale—in the army or on singular expeditions rather than in the prestigious navy—helped counter suggestions that the empire was obtained by force and oppression, making empire itself more palatable to the British. In the process, this project seeks to revise the historiographical narratives of British decline, by arguing that the trope of "heroic failure" was not a product of mid-twentieth-century decline but of its nineteenth-century dominance.

Barczewski's storytelling is exemplary, and one cannot help but be caught up in the slow and ominous development of impending disasters. Bungling, botching, and catastrophe are all narrated in a prose rich with fine details, while Barczewski's sharp analysis of the characters involved is complemented by her subtle grasp of the ironies inherent in many of these situations. Prominent

failures and debacles are woven together with lesser-known cases of heroic failure, and the social and political fallout of these is fully explored.

The book is arranged roughly chronologically and separates the two distinct forms of heroic failures identified by Barczewski: military and exploratory. Chapter 1 introduces these two in a general consideration of their sociopolitical context in the nineteenth-century British imperial world. The disasters of military conquests in Africa and Asia, Barczewski argues, helped counter early nineteenth-century fears of a bloated and repressive army, while fatal explorations into Africa and the Arctic were "ready-made" for martyrdom (p. 36). The second chapter focuses more closely on the biggest botched Arctic exploration of the era, Sir John Franklin's search for the Northwest Passage, illustrating how noble effort was vaunted and valued more than actual accomplishment or success. Chapter 3 moves to the British military and their failed charges across the globe, moving from the 1846 Battle of Aliwal and the 1849 charge of the 24th Foot at Chillianwallah in the Punjab, to the infamous charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava during the Crimean War. Chapter 4 turns to exploration, tracking the spectacular lack of success and celebration of David Livingstone's explorations in Africa, before chapter 5

study of the doomed last stand in British military engagements, from Maiwand in Afghanistan to the Isandlwana in South Africa. The final two chapters shift back to the individual, providing close looks at the biggest stars of heroic failure, General Charles Gordon's fall at Khartoum and Captain Robert Falcon Scott's fatal expedition to the South Pole.

Barczewski acknowledges that her focus on heroic failure excludes many subjects. While she does an admirable job attempting to bring one such group of women into the picture, the female figures we see are typically the wives and relatives of the failed explorers and soldiers whose narratives take up the bulk of the book. We see little of the working-class men who formed the laboring backbone of some of the exploratory missions, and many of the army's failed engagements overseas are missing. Certain institutions—military authorities, the Royal Geographic Society, the reigning media—are well represented throughout the book, but their wider relationship to the British public at large is not always developed. Barczewski fills her narrative with detailed examples of the ample body of journalism, films, and monuments that helped create a British ideal of heroic failure, but one wonders how much, exactly, the working classes bought into this ideal. And if heroic failure was a predominantly upper- and middle-class preoccupation, what does that say about how, or which, Britons reckoned with their sudden grasp over the globe?

This top-down approach also avoids questions of whether these celebrations of British heroic failure carried over to the peoples over whom they ruled and commanded. Did the Indian Sepoys fighting for the British at Chillianwallah (chapter 3) or Abdullah Susi and James Chuma, who embalmed and carried Livingston's body all the way to the Zanzibar coast (chapter 4), understand the concept of heroic failure? And did the public acknowledge their participation in it? These gaps make it harder to accept the book's claim that heroic failure was a universally accepted concept in Britain. Likewise, we are left wondering whether heroic failure is as truly unique to Great Britain as Barczewski claims.

Despite these caveats, there is an impressive breadth of scholarship on display in *Heroic Failure*. Barczewski adds to an important conversation about the memorialization of national heroes—one even wishes for another chapter to bring together her insights into these politics. The well-developed snippets of the subjects' biographies, so rarely featured side by side, will prompt scholars to consider connections and comparisons that they have not entertained before. Furthermore, the idea that the British celebration of heroic failure acted as a mechanism for reckoning with imperial success and oppression may resonate with scholars of other empires, particularly those studying the twentieth-century American self-perceptions as the perpetual underdog. Barczewski's book will prove a pleasure for both academic and nonacademic audiences to read.

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