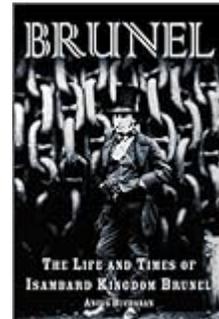




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## The Napoleon of Engineers

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In a now-famous exercise in popular history-making, the BBC in 2001 conducted a poll to establish the Top 100 Great Britons of all time. More than 30,000 people responded and the long list of luminaries that was initially reported was a very mixed bag. Eric Morecambe made the list, but Ernie Wise did not. Princess Diana was there, but Prince Charles was not. John, Paul, and George made the list, but predictably Ringo did not. A second poll reduced the field to Britain's top ten personalities and last November viewers were asked to vote for the Greatest Briton of all time. Winston Churchill eventually outpaced the field with nearly 450,000 votes, but not before the poll was tainted by charges of vote-rigging and corruption. Students from Brunel University in west London engaged in what the BBC diplomatically described as "tactical voting" to put their University's namesake, the engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, into the lead for much of the campaign. In fact, the University was not ashamed to admit that it gave great prominence to the contest on campus and featured a link to the BBC's online voting page on the University's home page. The

Brunel lobby, however, was not limited to these University students. Apparently, the President of the Institution of Civil Engineers, an organization to which Brunel himself was extraordinarily dedicated, e-mailed the members of that organization to get out the vote as well.

While Brunel's candidacy eventually fell short by more than 55,000 votes, the entire scenario seemed to have been designed to lay bare historians' ambivalent attitudes to both their professional and their public roles. Those who argued that the vote trivialized history by turning it into a spectator sport were countered by an equally earnest group who considered any popular interest in matters historical a worthwhile endeavor. Regardless of such internecine warfare, there was a notable sigh of relief from both sides of the dispute when Churchill pulled ahead in the final moments of the race and garnered the title of the "Greatest Briton." Brunel settled comfortably into second place well ahead of Shakespeare, Darwin, Newton, and others who were more or less worthy. Those who continue to worry about the merits of these results may take some solace from a different set of rankings published by Google, the Internet search en-

gine. Based on the number of search inquiries conducted through their website, Brunel ranked a mere 92nd out of the top 100 Great Britons.[1]

Several people have tried to explain Brunel's success in the BBC poll in more sociological than psephological terms. Hugh Brogan, writing in *History Today*, explained that the voting results represented the "revenge of the nerds"; a bitter cry of outcast engineers who felt unappreciated by their culture and underused by their government.[2] A poll conducted by the Institution of Structural Engineers found that only a slim majority of their members who responded thought that Brunel's success in the BBC poll indicated that engineers were highly regarded in Britain. The Institution was moved to ask rhetorically, "Why is a fireman seen as an essential service whilst an engineer is not but has the responsibility for [the] safety of the built environment in every aspect of a persons [sic] living and working lives?"[3] Several exchanges in the e-mail archives of the Institution of Civil Engineers questioned whether the paucity of living engineers on the list of Great Britons indicated that the profession itself had declined since the nineteenth century.[4]

Such questions are naturally raised in a society that apparently has long exhibited an ambivalent relationship to engineers, engineering, and technology. Any British historian trained in the late 1970s or early 1980s will almost certainly remember the outline of this academic debate. However, the depth of popular interest in technology and the history of the built environment should by no means be underestimated. As a result of the BBC poll, Brunel's reputation may have been slightly tarnished, but he was never far away from popular historical consciousness. Brunel's hold on the British imagination is revealed in such events as the retrieval and resurrection of his *Great Britain* steamship, which began in 1970, as well as the iconic stature that has been attained by the photograph of Brunel standing before the huge chains of the *Great Eastern* in dirty shoes, his hands in his pockets, and a cigar stuffed in the corner of his mouth. As Raphael Samuel so brilliantly observed, these artifacts of Brunel are themselves elements of unique historical genres that have their own aesthetic language, whether it be that of "living history" or that of the historical photograph. In both cases, it is an aesthetic that is based in part upon the perception of an immediate and tangible contact with history, an "experience" of touching history that has both mass appeal and mass support.[5]

Perhaps surprisingly, Brunel's standing among his own contemporaries may have been somewhat less au-

gust than has been suggested by any of the BBC polls. Although Samuel Smiles seems to have held his inventiveness and ingenuity in high esteem, he nonetheless did not see fit to lavish the same attention upon him as he did upon the likes of George Stephenson, Thomas Telford, James Watt, and others. As R. Angus Buchanan notes in his new biography of Brunel, this omission is puzzling. Smiles, after all, created the "cult of the heroic engineer" and often drew upon the lives of engineers as exemplars of what we now call Victorian values: individuality, hard work, thrift, and self-help.

Buchanan suggests that Brunel's omission from Smiles's pantheon was not necessarily intentional. Brunel's family, he notes, exhibited a degree of "mild paranoia" over the fate of the great engineer's reputation and may have refused to cooperate with Smiles when he was compiling material for his *Lives of the Engineers* (1861-62). However, this may not fully explain Brunel's omission. There is, in fact, good reason to believe that this omission was not an accident. Indeed Brunel himself may have been to blame largely because his character could not measure up to the new moral standards being elaborated by Smiles and other Victorians.

Buchanan's book once again shows that, in terms of engineering accomplishments, it is extraordinarily difficult to judge Brunel without the adjectives "genius," "brilliant," "heroic," and "visionary." With clarity and precision, Buchanan carefully takes the reader through Brunel's great engineering triumphs as well as his failures. Yet these were not necessarily the only terms upon which Smiles based his judgments. In *Self-Help* (1853), Smiles had established a set of gentlemanly standards that Brunel apparently found unattainable. One of Smiles's most well-known propositions was the relatively new equation between gentlemanliness and inner character, not outward status or wealth. Smiles explained that the crucial test of a gentleman was both in how he exercised power over his subordinates and how he conducted himself. "How does he conduct himself towards women and children," Smiles asked. "How does the officer treat his men, the employer his servants, the master his pupils, and those who are weaker than himself?"

In these situations, gentlemanly behavior was characterized by consideration, forbearance, and kindness. "Gentleness," Smiles wrote, "is indeed the best test of gentlemanliness." A true gentleman "will be forbearant of the weaknesses, the failings, and the errors, of those whose advantages in life have not been equal to his own.

He will be merciful even to his beast. He will not boast of his wealth, or his strength, or his gifts. He will not be puffed up by success, or unduly depressed by failure.”[6]

Buchanan’s admirable efforts to place Brunel in the context of his times reveals just how difficult a personal project this may have been for this great Briton. In a rare insight into his own character, Brunel wrote in his diary of his “self conceit and love of glory or rather approbation the latter so strong that even of a dark night riding home when I pass some unknown person who perhaps does not even look at me I catch myself trying to look big on my little pony” (quoted on pp. 33-34). One certainly may wish to ascribe this observation to the type of introspective chastisement typical of Victorian self-consciousness. However, these very same character traits, which coincidentally contributed to Brunel’s “visionary” engineering accomplishments, may also have marked him for exclusion from Smiles’s list of heroic engineers. As Buchanan describes it, Brunel’s technical achievements were majestic and towering but they also “demonstrated an overweening self-confidence, almost amounting to megalomania” (p. 133).

Indeed Smiles’s own cryptic references to Brunel suggest that he admired the engineer’s creativity and ingenuity but distrusted his character. As Buchanan reveals, in a piece attributed to Smiles and published in the *Quarterly Review* in 1862, Smiles noted that Brunel’s “ruling idea was magnitude; he had an ambition to make everything bigger than he had found it” (quoted on p. 211). Of course, Smiles was no enemy of ambition but it is clear that he distinguished between two manifestations of this quality, the first restrained by frugality, temperance, and “richness of spirit,” and a second far less admirable manifestation that was an expression of greed and selfishness. In *Self-Help*, Smiles unfavorably compared the character of Napoleon, who, he claimed, was consumed by an ambition born of the lust for power and glory, to that of Wellington, who was “a far greater man” because he was “untarnished by ambition, by avarice, or any low passion.” Smiles appears to have found these very same “low passions” in Brunel. In fact, his damning indictment of Brunel was framed precisely within the terms of this very same historical reference: Brunel, he wrote in that 1862 article, was “the very Napoleon of engineers, thinking more of glory than of profit, and of victory than of divi-

dends.”

Buchanan’s biography succeeds in more fully fleshing out Brunel and giving full and equal weight to both his accomplishments and failures, his attributes and faults. Moreover, Buchanan exhibits a conscious desire to more fully situate Brunel within the context of Victorian society by including several chapters focused on Brunel’s family life, his politics, and his professional associations. Yet lurking behind these portraits is Smiles’s omission, an omission that may not have been understood by those who voted for Brunel in the BBC poll, but necessarily affects the biographer and historian. This omission speaks volumes not only of the nature of Victorian morality but also of the difficulties attendant upon the construction of an entrepreneurial character within the social conventions of gentlemanly propriety. The term “gentlemanly capitalism” may have been well understood by most Victorians, but its meaning to them may have been far different from its current use among the historians of the Victorian era.

#### Notes

[1]. “100 Greatest Britons According to Google.” Available online at =<http://infomesh.net/2002/topbritons/>.

[2]. Hugh Brogan, “Historians and the Great Britons,” *History Today*, 53:1 (January 2003), pp. 46-7. Available online at =<http://www.historytoday.com/index.cfm?Articleid=19114>.

[3]. See =<http://www.istructe.org.uk/Vote/pastquestion.asp?SID=1&QID=2>.

[4]. See the e-mail exchanges of August and October 2002 on the topic “Greatest Engineers” at the Institution of Civil Engineers website, =<http://www.ice.org.uk>.

[5]. Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. 1, *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994).

[6]. Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help: With Illustrations of Character, Conduct, and Perseverance* (Chicago, 1881), pp. 214, 215.

[7]. *Ibid.*, p. 122

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<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

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