

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Mary Paulson-Ellis | What makes a hero?

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[23:07]

Mary Paulson-Ellis:

Hello my name is Mary Paulson-Ellis and I'm an author of two novels. One, *The Other Mrs Walker* and the second, *The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing*. Both of these novels are set in contemporary Edinburgh, where I live, and explore the world of those who die with no next of kin. But they also have historical narratives that dive into the past and dig into the story of the person who has deceased. Today, I am going to chat about *The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing* in relation to a talk I was due to give at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery about the question: what makes a hero?

The word 'hero' is being used a lot right now. It is normally applied to people going about their everyday jobs; nurses, doctors, delivery drivers and supermarket checkout staff. These are all people who are doing ordinary, everyday things but they are putting themselves at risk because of our current global pandemic. We think of heroism today as something like these people. Selfless, doing a service for others, putting themselves in potentially dangerous situations with no expectation of reward. But when the idea of a portrait gallery was first mooted in the nineteenth century by the historian and writer Thomas Carlyle, there was a completely different idea of heroes and heroism. Then, it was much more about military, or individual, prowess. They were people driven by moral imperative, pursuing glory and honour in their field. Carlyle himself wrote a famous essay on heroes and hero worship, in 1840, where he outlined his 'great man theory' of history.

"As I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. Their manner of appearance in our world's business, how they have shaped themselves in the world's history, what ideas men formed of them, what work they did." (From *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History* by Thomas Carlyle, first published by James Fraser in 1841).

Carlyle outlined what he called his six classes of hero. The God, the Prophet, the Poet, the Priest, the Man of Letters and the King. They were all men, of course, bar a few monarchs, perhaps. And it's men who fit this idea of what makes a hero. That often populate, or that we see represented in our portrait galleries today. Here are some from a recent exhibition at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery called *Heroes and Heroines*.

The first is William Ewart Gladstone. Gladstone was MP for Midlothian and was also four times Prime Minister and five times Chancellor of the Exchequer. He brought in electoral reform, responsible for near universal male suffrage in Britain, though not for women. But his family, who came from Leith, built their wealth from slavery and the Atlantic slave trade including his father's own plantation in Virginia, which had 400 slaves*.

Another great man of history is the missionary and explorer, David Livingstone. Livingstone dedicated his life to the eradication of the African slave trade, but he was also a man who believed that Christianity drove civilisation.

Industrialist Andrew Carnegie made his fortune in steel and in railroads. He was a great man who used his fantastic wealth to advance various philanthropic causes. These included public libraries and also pacifism. He established a hero fund for peaceful, as opposed to military, individual acts of heroism. However, when the First World War broke out in 1914, he was absolutely devastated. He took ill and died shortly after it ended in 1918. And that brings us to another great man, Field Marshal Douglas Haig. Haig was the man in charge of the army during the First World War whose strategy in the later years of the war led to the breaking of the Hindenburg line and the Allied victory in 1918. However, he was also the man known as 'the butcher of the Somme'.

Solomon Farthing is a book all about men and boys, including those who go to war. Its protagonist is an antihero, a down-at-luck heir hunter who is 66 and one of the lucky generation who never was called to fight. He is chasing a fast buck by pursuing the estate of an old soldier who has died in a nursing home with no known next of kin. The foil in the story is his grandfather, Godfrey Farthing, a captain in the First World War, a hero with a bullet wound in his chest, or so his grandson imagines. Here is Solomon trying to get to know his dead client, and musing on his grandfather, the soldier:

"Solomon's first attempt to get to know his dead client had taken place early that morning - by the bins, round the back of the nursing home, once DCI Franklin had abandoned him to await the arrival of PC Noble instead. A small gathering of care-workers indulging in an early morning smoke, happy to tell Solomon Farthing what they knew. They'd begun with introductions. Kassia. Pawel. Nico. Estelle. They all remembered Thomas Methven, a veteran of particular charm and erudition, who slid away as Edinburgh's cherry trees began to drop their flowers. 'Everyone wanted to sit next to him at the card table,' said Kassia. 'They used to argue about who would play his hand in bridge.' 'He only did it to be polite,' said Estelle. 'Didn't really approve of gambling.' 'He liked to watch though. Write up the odds.' 'He was old style,' said Nico. 'A gentleman. Made sure the debts were paid.' The women nodded as Nico puffed out a cloud of dewberry smoke, the memory of Mr Methven suddenly shiny in their eyes. Solomon wondered if he could fake a soldier's career so that these people might take care of him, too, at the end. He hadn't been to war, of course, one of the lucky generation who never had been called to serve, But there was always his grandfather's legacy to lean on, Captain Godfrey Farthing, an officer whose job it had been to blow the whistle and send all those young men to their deaths. Up and out. trench to trench. Look the other man in the eye as you stab him in the gut with your shiny bayonet. That might do, Solomon thought, if he had to make something up." (From *The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing* by Mary Paulson-Ellis, published by Pan Macmillan in 2019).

The story then continues with Godfrey and his Company in November 1918, 11 soldiers stranded in a farmhouse billet gambling and playing games as they wait for the end to come or for their orders to arrive, whichever appears first. It is what happens between these men that determines the narrative of the novel and the answer to Solomon's riddle about the dead client and his fortune. But it also asks a question: what makes a hero? The man who does his duty or the man who disobeys?

This section looks at Godfrey Farthing with his men in the farmhouse knowing the war is about to end, asking exactly that question:

"In the parlour of the farmhouse Godfrey laid the contents of his pockets on the table. A pencil and a blank postcard, a half walnut shell he had meant to set sail on the pond. Another, still whole. Also, the orders. Smooth now with the heel of his hand. With two fingers he pressed at a spot above his heart, felt the ache begin. He could tell the men about the orders later, that was what he thought. Tomorrow, perhaps. Let them have the fun of a new recruit first, someone to distract their attention with stories of where he had come from and what he had got up to. Godfrey would take a moment

to consider, before it all came down. He went to the settle pushed back against the parlour wall and lifted its seat, to reveal a wooden lockbox hidden underneath. There was a real tremor in his left hand as he lifted the box out and laid it on the parlour table. Just like Hawes, he thought, as bad as it had ever been despite the absence of the guns. In the kitchen, there was a sudden *clank* and *clatter* of pans as George Stone began his preparations for their evening meal. The old sweat knew how to turn out a feast, that was something. Winter cabbages cooked to a soupy broth. Eggs, warm and speckled. A store of wizened potatoes recovered from the cellar, fried in small batches to a sort of hash. Even that first night Stone had produced a meal the likes of which none of them had seen for months. Roasted walnuts. Potatoes mashed and served with gravy. Chicken turned on a spit. The men had competed for the wishbone when the meat was done, dice tumbling over and over on the table from Ralph's wooden cup. Bertie Fortune had won, of course. Fortune always had the luck. 'Got to live up to my name,' he'd said. Grinning as he swept his treasure into his hand. The men might grumble but Godfrey knew they didn't really mind. Bertie Fortune had a way of spreading his luck around, you only had to ask. The little brass key Godfrey had taken from a string around his neck rattled in the matching hole on the lockbox, refusing to turn for a moment until he heard at last that soft click as the mechanism released. The flutter in Godfrey's fingers was still there as he lifted everything out. The men's pay books. The pouch with the tobacco ration. His cigarette tin, all scratched and dented, ten Capstans neatly lined inside. Then there was the map with the river they were meant to be crossing marked in blue. Godfrey took out his service notebook, flipped open a clean page and wrote the date, 5 November, stared at the blunt tip of his pencil as he wondered what to write next. That the orders had arrived? That they were ready? Forty-eight hours till he must lead an attack across the river, one last stand. Then he laid the pencil down. At the bottom of the box lay the letters every soldier was made to write, just in case. A missive from a petty thief to his girl. From an A4 boy to his mother. From a lucky man to his wife. Beneath them were Godfrey's own letters to his parents. We are all going along fine here... And underneath that, the one Archie Methven had written to his son. Godfrey remembered that second night at the farmhouse after the rain had stopped, a thin layer of silver running across the surface of the yard. How he'd stood in the cold outside the barn and heard them talking. Arthur Promise, the A4 boy who wanted to be a teacher. Alfred Walker, with his dreams of sailing to the promised land. Bertie Fortune, of course, who was going home to become a rag-and-bone king. And Archibald Methven, the section's accountant, who wanted nothing more than to see his son grow up. Interrupted by a boy who would rather march them to the top of a hill to be shot than see them all live to fight another day. Godfrey Farthing had never understood it before, the certainty that there would be life, when before there had only ever been the certainty of death. But as he'd listened to his men whispering about the future, he had felt his own heart spin at the thought that one day he, too might leave all this behind and start somewhere afresh." (From *The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing* by Mary Paulson-Ellis, published by Pan Macmillan in 2019)

So war and soldiering often invoke the idea of heroes. It is a job that seems to satisfy many of the criteria we understand to be relevant for the concept. It requires putting oneself in personal danger. It involves seeing great acts of courage or bravery on behalf of others, as well as oneself. It is driven by a sense of duty, to one's leaders, to one's comrades, to one's cause. And it might involve the ultimate sacrifice, death.

Today soldiers are regularly described as heroes. But just like Carlyle's 'great men', soldiers as heroes has also been a contested area. In 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo, Wellington was hailed as the hero of the day, the saviour of the nation. But by 1855 and the disaster of the Crimean War, military leaders were never regarded in such uncritical terms again. Public perception of soldiers has swung over the generations from seeing them as destitute, subservient layabouts and brawlers to highly

trained professionals, making good careers. In fact, rather like our modern soldiers now, and our modern heroes now, they are all ordinary men and women with their flaws and ambiguities, their loves and their joys.

There is a painting in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery that captures some of these ambiguities. It is by the artist Cecile Walton and was painted in 1912. It shows Walton's husband, the artist Eric Robertson, on the left, with another artist, Mary Newbery, on the right. They are beautiful young people. They look louche and androgynous, even. Beautiful, relaxed and bohemian, a vision of what life might have been for their generation, if war had not intervened. But when it did come, it was not a simple thing for Eric Robertson to do his duty and sign up. He was a Quaker, so he could not take up arms. When he left for France in 1916, it was to join the Friends Ambulance Unit instead. He put his own life in danger, but he also found the experience of war exhilarating. Speaking of the curious glamour of the front, finding beauty in the sight of star shells, bursting in the evening sky at night. Today we might call him a hero for going to war despite his religious views. But then men like him were sometimes called cowards, or imprisoned. War, and the men who serve in it, are always complex and contradictory, where heroes and heroism is concerned.

When I was writing my novel, *The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing* I attempted to get inside the heads of these men, thinking of them as contemporaries, rather than archetypes. Men and boys who had set off on an adventure, only to find disaster. Men for whom being a hero was doing one's duty, was not showing fear, was never flinching in the face of almost certain death. But who, by the time we meet them in the book, have already been through the most profound experience of their lives. Men who, on their return, were expected to hide their scars, to not talk about their experiences, to behave as though it was something that they could put behind them, but who are marked by it, nonetheless. In my book, Solomon Farthing's quest takes him deep into the heart of his own grandfather's experiences. But what he finds is not what he expects.

"His grandfather's service record had been blank, or as good as, given the information relayed. No dates or details of enlistment, no dates or details of discharge. No personal correspondence or information about wounds. Originally in three parts, the record has been decimated over the years. Filleted first by judicious civil servants who had needed the space then the remainder obliterated by enemy action in the second war. Bombs falling in the very place where the information about a country's previous heroes had been kept. Even from this distance, Solomon had felt the irony in that. There had been nothing left of his grandfather but a name, Farthing, Godfrey, and a rank, Captain. And a regimental number, 3674. Sent out to war as a young man to make sure his men did their duty. Came back an old man, never did know how to keep a lost boy warm. Solomon had looked for secondary evidence, of course. First among the Silver War Badge rolls - those men discharged for wounds or illness - thinking of that pucker of scar tissue hovering over his grandfather's heart. But there had been no sign of Godfrey Farthing amongst the sick. Nor on the campaign medal index. A star. A War medal. One for Victory, too. Decorations doled out like sweeties to all men who had fought. 'Probably didn't apply for them.' That was what the expert he spoke to said. 'Not every man did.' Godfrey Farthing, the hero, fought for four years and came out standing, didn't even want the honours to show. An old man who wore flannels until they were baggy at the knees. Who washed in the bowl at the sink every evening, rather than in the bath. Someone who raised Solomon to know exactly how to behave, but barely spoke a word himself. A mystery to Solomon when he was a boy. And still a mystery now. Solomon had the sudden sense then that everything he had ever understood about his grandfather was not quite right. That perhaps he never had been in the war to end all wars, or at least not in the way Solomon had imagined, a hero rushing the enemy's barbed wire. But still, Solomon could not forget how his grandfather marked the end of the cataclysm year

after year. Lit a candle in the little chapel at the side of the great grey church by way of remembrance. Our Father who art in heaven, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those... Never wore a red poppy, only ever a winter rose.” (From *The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing* by Mary Paulson-Ellis, published by Pan Macmillan in 2019)

There is no one definition of a hero. It could be you, or it could be me. Heroism can manifest in anybody, so it is difficult to categorise. Most of the people who we would call heroes today, would not describe themselves like that. They would simply say that they were ordinary people who happen to have done an extraordinary thing, whether they were trained for it or not. ‘Hero’ is a simple word, but not a simple concept. Sometimes the greatest coward can do something heroic, and vice versa. Sometimes a hero is the only person around when there is no-one else to help. To end, I will leave you with Solomon Farthing, considering all of this, after his quest to find out the real truth about his grandfather and the heroes of the past.

“Solomon returned from his walk by the river to sit in the chapel, waiting for the service to begin. That annual commemoration of the boys who left for war and never returned. He sat at the back listening to the rustle of his pupils as they entered, the creak of wood joists easing as they pretended to close their eyes. As he waited for the service to begin, he thought of the name newly chipped on to the war memorial outside, the letters bright now compared to all those that had gone before. Old Mortality, Solomon had thought as he watched stone dust blown from the plinth by a man wielding a chisel. People love to mark things, that was what he’d learned. A gravestone. A bench. An honours board in a school, boys’ names written up in gold alongside their cricketing scores. Solomon had never thought that it mattered before, leaving behind something that couldn’t just be washed away. But even men like Private William Beech had their memorials now. Solomon touched the pew in front, ran his fingers along its underside, could feel it still even after sixty years, S. F. His own initials. I was here. The boys around him bowed their heads then and Solomon felt that familiar stillness take hold. He looked for a moment out of the stained-glass window, beyond the quad, beyond the field, beyond even the river, towards where those who had been lost lay now. There was always a before, he thought. And an after. But it was what you did at the time that mattered the most.” (From *The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing* by Mary Paulson-Ellis, published by Pan Macmillan in 2019).

*Factual correction: Sir John Gladstone (1764-1851), father of the British Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone (1809–1898) is briefly referenced in this video as owning a plantation in Virginia. In fact he owned eleven plantations in Jamaica and Guyana and received the largest single pay out made by the Slave Compensation Commission: <http://ow.ly/LYjv50Arye3>