

The birthday boys by beryl bainbridge

Life



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BUSTER**

Through the 'Birthday Boys' Beryl Bainbridge has written the accounts of five very different men and their heroic fight to achieve indissoluble greatness. Fascinatingly this straightforward expedition reveals some of the most complex revelations about Edwardian society and its misplaced British class system. Even more interesting is the morals and opinions of the five men and how their desire, whatever it was, drove them to their deaths. We see how Captain Scott, possibly one of the most well-known British heroes, miscalculated time and time again, and learn through the other narrations how he begins to lose the initial trust of his men.

Heroism and the values surrounding it were somewhat different then to what they are now. Heroism was far more special and idiosyncratic as the final narrative of captain Oates reveals to us. When reading the book it never feels like a team effort. It is one where the reader follows each individual and their plight for what they wish to achieve. I think the heroism present in the 'Birthday Boys' is so idiosyncratic because there does not appear to be a common goal. With the exception of Dr. Wilson, these men were not going to the South Pole for Scientific Research, they were there for the glory, and they were there for the chance to be a hero.

This drove them on. Temperatures in the Antarctic reached below -60i?? C, which was more than most of them had ever dreamt of suffering. It took more than just physical strength to survive those conditions; it was their mental strength, courage and belief. Each man had different ideas of what this heroic status would mean. Taff Evans explains how when he returns from the pole he will be in a position to quit being a sailor and 'buy a little

pub in Cardigan bay'. He saw this simple, honest ambition as being an ample reward for becoming a hero.

Scott of the Antarctic', perhaps one of the most controversial of British Heroes, is very carefully examined by Beryl Bainbridge. Those readers who thought he was an unlucky explorer, caught out by nature but a great leader, are refuted. Those who thought that he was an inhumane, terrible leader are shown his good points. Bainbridge manages to bring a certain realism to the portrayal of a hero whom many have formed strong opinions with very little foundation. He is a very determined and positive leader yet when setting out to an unexplored continent he needs a lot more than determination and a will to succeed.

It is easy to feel that Scott has overlooked this. He lacks carefully planned routes and he never has a backup plan when the least he should have is a backup plan for the backup plan! His optimism, in my opinion, is his greatest downfall. He opens his narrative: Having to sail on past Cape Crozier came as a frightful blow. I'd banked on establishing our winter quarters there, but it proved impossible to land owing to the swell. These two sentences sum up Scott's inadequacies. Firstly, we see there's no direct self-blame.

He affirms this constantly through his narrative - when it is obviously his fault no-one holds responsibility, and when it is not clear who is to blame he would use names: I blamed Gran, Oates, Meares - especially Meares. Secondly, he doesn't particularly worry about the fact that they will have to locate a new Winter Camp. It was merely a frightful blow, that's all. He does not dwell on it, in fact by the next paragraph he is already talking about their new

location. Finally, perhaps the most unforgivable examples of Scots' lack of preparation was that they were unable to moor at Cape Crozier was because the sea had waves on it!

Scots idiocy was one of the main reasons for the fate of the Polar Party. For two years he had been setting up supply camps for their return journey to cater for four people, and then decided that five could go along. One would hope a child would not make that sort of mistake let alone an experienced explorer. Despite this no one made any objections. There was a clear hierarchy amongst these men. This hierarchy meant that few decisions were questioned and inevitably when people disagree with a decision, like dropping the skis due to a change of terrain, they lose confidence in their leader and morale drops.

The Birthday Boys' by Beryl Bainbridge is a carefully written analysis of the Edwardian society, picking up on their naivety, their disjointed class system and their wish to gain respect through becoming a hero. The book is called the birthday boys because the author has captured the child-like qualities of the 1910 expedition so perfectly. It is clear that the death of these men was not needed - yet, by dying, they did achieve the indissoluble greatness they desired and one can only feel that this temptation may itself have contributed to their fate.