

5 HEROES

The symbolic end of the age of heroes occurred on that night in April of 1912 when the Titanic slipped beneath the waves, carrying with it not only 1513 souls, but the traditions of chivalry and noblesse oblige and the last of that race called gentlemen. While vestiges of this classical age still surface now and then—as when a handful of knights again founded a brief Camelot riding to the jousts in the crude biplanes that flew over the Western Front in 1914-1918—in our march toward total egalitarianism, we are out to destroy all elites, heroes among them. For this reason, it may seem somewhat anachronistic for me to hold heroes as items to be put into the Ark to take into the New World. But I believe they shall have an important place there, regardless of the antihero orientation of the present transitional period.

I shall list here five of my personal heroes and profess my hope to see them all enshrined in the 'once and future' Valhalla of the New Age.

- Aristides, 530-468 B.C. Plutarch tells us that a controversy between the Athenian statesmen Aristides and Themistocles was to be resolved by exiling one of them. A vote was to be taken by having each citizen write on a sherd the name of the man he wished to be ostracized. On the day of the writing of the names, an illiterate not knowing who Aristides was gave him his sherd and asked him to write on it the name 'Aristides.' Aristides was surprised and asked the illiterate whether Aristides had ever done him any wrong. "None at all, neither know I the man, but I am tired of hearing him everywhere called Aristides the Just." Hearing this, Aristides marked the sherd with his name and returned it to the illiterate to cast his vote.
- Cincinnatus, 519-439 B.C. In 458 B.C., the Aequians threatened Rome, and there was no leadership for defense. The Senate sent a delegation to the former Tribune, Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus, to entreat him to return to Rome and assume dictatorial powers in the crisis. The delegates found Cincinnatus behind the plow on his small farm. Responding to the urgency of the situation, he hurried to Rome and took command. In the ensuing battle, he routed the Aequians in one day and removed the threat. Returning to Rome in triumph, he was implored to be Dictator and was offered great rewards, but he declined and, after a total absence of 21 days, returned to his fields.
- Johannes Kepler, 1571-1630. While the scientific work of Kepler stands as the watershed between ancient and modern times, and Kepler's Third Law ranks as the initial discovery leading to our deeper understanding of the structure of the world, Kepler also emerges as a hero. Not only because of his 17 years of involved hand calculations, which no one of the computer age can really appreciate, but because he gives us a rare paradigm, showing that persistence can be as successfully married to flexibility as to single-mindedness. Even after he disproved the results he had so fervently sought, he could continue his labors. He achieved the ultimate in open-endedness by subordinating his goals to his processes and accepting the unexpected and unsought.

- Cyrus Harding, 1827-1904. Since the heroics of our heroes are in most cases at least part fiction, it should be permissible to elect a character of fiction as hero so long as his heroics ring true for us. In Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*, Captain Cyrus Harding, the leader of a small band of Union prisoners of war marooned on a remote island, evokes from me the same wish that Churchill expressed concerning the King Arthur Legend, "Even if it were not true, it ought to have been." Harding and his friends, with no facilities but the clothes on their backs and the know-how in their heads, create a utopian monument to what dedicated, faith-inspired men can do. The island symbolizes America, Harding and his companions are the embodiment of the American spirit of self-reliance, and their accomplishments are the harmonic symbiosis of reverence for the land and the American Dream.
- The Confederate Soldier—or just as well—The Defenders of the Alamo or of Chapultepec, the Beseiged at Corregidor or at Leningrad, the Crews of the Jervis Bay or the Variag—all those who in defeat did not default their trust nor sacrifice their honor. These were those who knew they had persisted to the limits of their strength. They had fought the good fight and, though their cause was lost, they never betrayed it, and though pained by defeat, they could not be humiliated. It is only in such a defeat that we can discover the true extent of our strength and weakness—something the victor does not know. It is only in such a defeat that we can find the seeds of our transformation—a treasure the victor can never have.

Courage will not save you, but it will show your souls are still alive.

George Bernard Shaw