Heroes of Invention

This innovative study adopts a completely new perspective on both the industrial revolution and nineteenth-century British culture. It investigates why inventors rose to heroic stature and popular acclaim in Victorian Britain, attested by numerous monuments, biographies and honours, and contends there was no decline in the industrial nation’s self-esteem before 1914. In a period notorious for hero-worship, the veneration of inventors might seem unremarkable, were it not for their previous disparagement and the relative neglect suffered by their twentieth-century successors. Christine MacLeod argues that inventors became figureheads for various nineteenth-century factions, from economic and political liberals to impoverished scientists and radical artisans, who deployed their heroic reputation to challenge the aristocracy’s hold on power and the militaristic national identity that bolstered it. Although this was a challenge that ultimately failed, its legacy for present-day ideas about invention, inventors and the history of the industrial revolution remains highly influential.

Christine MacLeod is Professor of History in the School of Humanities, University of Bristol. She is the author of Inventing the Industrial Revolution: The English Patent System, 1660–1800 (1988).
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Heroes of Invention

Technology, Liberalism and British Identity,
1750–1914

Christine MacLeod
For My Friends
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Abbreviations

BJHS  British Journal for the History of Science
BPP  British Parliamentary Papers
EHR  Economic History Review
HJ  Historical Journal
HT  History of Technology
ILN  The Illustrated London News
JHI  Journal of the History of Ideas
JSA  Journal of the Society of Arts
NPG  National Portrait Gallery
PD  Parliamentary Debates
P&P  Past and Present
T&C  Technology and Culture
TNS  Transactions of the Newcomen Society
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