

William Hall V.C., Race, and Empire

Catherine Hutt

On October 28th, 1859, William Hall was awarded the Victoria Cross, making him the first Canadian sailor, first Nova Scotian, and first black man to receive this honour.¹ This essay will explore the ways that a racialized existence intersects with Empire and its self-memorialization. William Hall's usefulness to Empire will be juxtaposed with the Empire failing to fulfil its promises of usefulness in terms of both material income and immaterial fame. Hall was useful to the British Empire as a subject but in turn the Empire was not useful to him. As a racialized subject as his race barred him from benefitting immaterially from the Cross. The actions that earned him the Cross were delivered with bravery, marrying the material to the immaterial as the physical actions of the body were informed and compounded through bravery. An award is a mixture of both the material and the immaterial and the Victoria Cross is no exception. The Cross is a material award given to recipients and it carries its immaterial value through the valour required to receive it as well as its role in Empire's self-memorialization. In this essay, I have chosen to use the word "black" to describe Hall's race as it is the most commonly used term by modern sources. However, this is not to indicate how Hall may have described his own racial identity and it is important to be aware of using modern identity categories to discuss historical figures.

William Hall was born in 1824 in Nova Scotia to Jacob and Lucinda Hall. His parents had escaped slavery and fled to Nova Scotia during the War of 1812.² Harvey Amani Whitfield offers insight into the historical context of Nova Scotia at that time, arguing that the ending of slavery in the province, which would have been around the time of Hall's birth, was "only to be succeeded by a persistent racism."³ Whitfield cites the isolation of black populations in the province on

¹ Bridglal Pachai, "HALL, WILLIAM (1829-1904)," in Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 13, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed January 31, 2020, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/hall_william_1829_1904_13E.html.

² "William Hall, V.C." Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. Accessed February 2, 2020. <https://maritimemuseum.novascotia.ca/collections/william-hall-vc>

³ Harvey Amani Whitfield, "The Struggle over Slavery in the Maritime Colonies", *Acadiensis* XLI, no. 2 (2012): 17

poor lands as well as the strong rejection from white Maritimers of “anything resembling equality with their black neighbours.”⁴ Hall grew up in this climate, working in shipyards before enlisting in the Royal Navy in 1852.⁵

In the inception of the Victoria cross, it was “an award for ‘conspicuous’ bravery displayed in battle.”⁶ First awarded to after the Crimean War (1854-1856), this was the first award which recognized the valour of every rank.⁷ During the Siege of Lucknow in 1857, William Hall was a member of the naval brigade which landed to assist ground forces. He and his co-gunner Thomas James Young were the two surviving gunmen in the two teams of twenty four-pound gun crew. Although the teams were meant to be composed of six men each, Young and Hall continued to fire their gun with only the two of them remaining.⁸ It is worth noting that Young was white and that it would not have been unusual to have a black and white sailor working alongside one another as the Royal Navy was a racially diverse institution.⁹ Each member of the naval brigade was a representative of the Crown’s power, regardless of their individual identities. Young and Hall each rallied the strength of three men and did so under the immense pressure of active combat. The material actions of reloading the canon, moving forward, and continuing to fire all contributed to the British Empire successfully maintaining control over India. These actions are a marriage of the material and the immaterial. In this way they “contributed materially to the lifting of the siege.”¹⁰

Hall and Young’s actions were displays of ‘valour’ and ‘devotion’ and for this reason they were recommended for the Victoria Cross exemplifying the intersection of material and immaterial in their valorous actions.¹¹ Hall is being rewarded by the Empire itself,

⁴ Whitfield, “The Struggle over Slavery”, 43

⁵ “William Hall, V.C.” Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. Accessed February 2, 2020. <https://maritimemuseum.novascotia.ca/collections/william-hall-vc>

⁶ Lara Kriegel, “The Transforming Power of the Victoria Cross, 1856–2010.” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 56, no. 4 (2016): 871

⁷ *Ibid.*, 872

⁸ “William Hall, V.C.” Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. Accessed February 2, 2020. <https://maritimemuseum.novascotia.ca/collections/william-hall-vc>

⁹ Martin Hubley, “Mass desertion and mutiny - The case of HM Brig Columbine” Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. Accessed February 3, 2020. <https://maritimemuseum.novascotia.ca/mass-desertion-and-mutiny-case-hm-brig-columbine>

¹⁰ Pachai, “HALL, WILLIAM (1829-1904)”

¹¹ “William Hall, V.C.” Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. Accessed February 2, 2020.

which is materialized through the Cross and the people creating the chain of command which rewards it, and his brave actions being marked as useful and contributing both materially and immaterially to the Empire, beyond Hall's single moment of use in the battle. The immateriality of his actions are useful in the Empire's "production of new heroes for a new age"¹², signalling the rank-and-file soldier representative of the age which democratized wartime honours. It could be speculated that Hall being awarded the Cross speaks directly to the 'democratizing' of honours, yet he is omitted from the material commemorations of the award. Hall's emotional attachment to the material Cross did not match the fervour felt by other recipients who allegedly refused to be parted from their Crosses even for engraving.¹³ When interviewed, Hall lamented that "It's nothing to have a Cross now; they're as thick as peas."¹⁴ The Cross fails to provide the sense of valour for Hall which it seeks to evoke by the bold lettering on it which reads 'FOR VALOUR' it has stamped onto it.¹⁵ The material Cross fails in reminding Hall of his immaterial valour, despite it being so boldly stamped onto it.

Kriegel describes the positive reception of this 'democratization' in newspapers and describes how the Cross "held out not only the promises of military distinction and financial security but also those of cultural acclaim and pecuniary fortune."¹⁶ But Hall was not met with "pecuniary fortune". Hall himself said, when asked about the Victoria Cross: "It isn't worth very much . . . after all, only ten pounds a year. If it wasn't for my regular navy pension of forty pounds a year besides, I don't know how we'd get along here. The farm is small, and my two sisters live with me."¹⁷ The Cross had a monetary value attached to it equalling an extra ten pounds a year, but Hall's lived experience denies the claim that this small amount could create financial stability. It is unlikely that the addition of the Cross sum was significant in his life materially as he continued to work even as he received with this

<https://maritimemuseum.novascotia.ca/collections/william-hall-vc>

¹² Kriegel, "Transforming Power", 876

¹³ Kriegel, "Transforming Power", 877

¹⁴ Blakeley, "Canada's First", 258

¹⁵ "William Hall, V.C." Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. Accessed February 2, 2020. <https://maritimemuseum.novascotia.ca/collections/william-hall-vc>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 879

¹⁷ Phyllis R. Blakeley, "William Hall, Canada's First Naval V.C." *Dalhousie Review*, Volume 37, Number 3, (1957): 258

pension. For example, Hall did not retire from the navy until 1876, which was nearly 20 years after the siege of Lucknow.¹⁸ His entire naval career lasted 24 years. Hall continued to work after receiving the Cross; he was not catapulted into an early and comfortable retirement. Even when retirement from the navy did come, he returned home to work. Although Pachai notes that between his actions at Lucknow and actually receiving the cross he moved up to captain of the foretop, he was not met with financial security during his life.¹⁹ However, his promotion could represent an instance of the Cross benefitting as it would have both increased his earnings and potentially added to his sense of self-worth.

Race is consistently brought up in regards to William Hall. Phyllis R. Blakeley, in *William Hall, Canada's First Naval V.C.*, quotes the speeches delivered in 1945, four decades after his death, at the unveiling of a monument erected in his honour. Rear-Admiral C. R. H. Taylor described Hall as a “brave coloured seaman, whose devotion to duty in the finest tradition of the navy and the British race resulted in the saving of many British lives.”²⁰ Here Hall is being depicted as a devoted and faithful servant to the ‘British race’. Although it could be imagined that the language used here to describe Hall as saving ‘British lives’ and serving the ‘British race’ implicitly includes him within those categories, it is unconvincing as this description is proceeded with signalling Hall as black by using the adjective ‘coloured’. Using this language brings Hall’s material and racial existence to the forefront, excluding him from the ‘British race’ by separating him through the use of the word “coloured”

A prime example of the potential for ‘cultural acclaim’ which Kriegel describes was the *The Victoria Cross Gallery*, a fifty oil painting series by the British artist Louis Desanges.²¹ Paintings are tools with which Empire creates memory and extols its own virtues and successes, as Keith Mercer describes.²² Joany Hichberger considers the series as

18 Pachai, “HALL, WILLIAM”

19 Pachai, “HALL, WILLIAM”

20 Blakeley, “Canada’s First”, 258

21 Hichberger, Joany. “Democratising Glory? The Victoria Cross Paintings of Louis Desanges.” *Oxford Art Journal* 7, no. 2 (1984): 42

22 Keith Mercer, “Colonial Patriotism to ‘Mystical Chords of Memory’: The Halifax Celebrations and Commemorations of The Shannon-Chesapeake Battle”, *Acadiensis* XLIV, no. 1: (2015): 49

having “constructed memorable images of young officers from the upper middle class, and articulated the claim of that group to command the Army through their possession of the qualities of ‘efficiency’ and ‘valour’.”²³ Desanges’s works contribute materially to the creation of the immaterial memories of Empire by establishing the Victoria Cross as “the most prestigious of all military accolades.”²⁴ Kriegel describes the recipients of the Victoria Cross as “collective points of reference for the British nation” which “offer[ed] up set of heroes [...] fixing in time the actions of battle”²⁵. Yet Hall is blatantly omitted from this memory-creating material. Kavanaugh was awarded the Victoria Cross for “disguising himself as an Indian and creeping through enemy lines to guide the army relieving Lucknow.”²⁶ This included wearing charcoal on his face to darken his light skin, to play the role, which is the scene depicted in Desanges’ work of Kavanaugh. It is a striking visual marker for the viewer to have the action of darkening one’s face be so significant in the part of pretending to be the enemy that it is this particular action which Desanges chose to illustrate. The viewer is given a binary representation of good and bad which parallel the lines of dark and light. To include Hall in this series would mar the narrative of white valour relieving the British Crown in India.

With his small additional pension of ten pounds a year, Hall did not achieve financial stability after receiving the cross and working a long career in the Royal Navy. He was omitted from the visual representations in Desanges’ collection as the binary visual representations of “good” and “bad” which refused to be complicated by the inclusion of a non-white hero. Although Hall was launched into a sort of Hall of Heroes, as seen by the monument erected in his honour, these are not things that Hall experienced while alive. He was useful to the Empire with his actions that were compounded by the immaterial values that the Cross was created to reward. However, the racialized materiality of his body interrupted, in the eyes of Empire, his immaterial valour and bravery, thus barring him from being a stronger part of Empire’s self-memorialization.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Hichberger, “Democratising Glory?”, 44

²⁵ Kriegel, “Transforming Power”, 873

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48

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