

The story of the Hartlepool monkey: turning an apocryphal into fiction.

Word Count: 3082

Jurgen Wolff and Kerry Cox state 'people seem particularly drawn to finding out the behind-the-scenes facts regarding events they've read about or followed in the news' (Wolff & Cox, 2011: 24). The apocryphal of the hanging of a monkey in Hartlepool during the Napoleonic wars has long since been synonymous with the town. It's one of the few things that people instantly recognise about the town. In developing this project, I knew that I wanted to write about the folk tale. However, difficulty struck when I realised that the story itself wasn't enough to write about for ninety pages. When I stepped back for a while, I realised that I could use this as a basis for an epic journey to save the monkey from death.

The legend of the monkey hanging is embedded in the culture of Hartlepool. At school during music lessons, we'd sing 'Old folks, young folks, everyone and each, Come and see the Frenchie that's landed on the beach' (Songfacts, n.d.). Over the years, the story has been reclaimed from something that was once a derogatory term for someone from Hartlepool to something that is to be celebrated. The extent of its reclamation can be seen through two of our sports teams. The mascot for our football team is 'H'Angus the Monkey' and a hanging monkey is featured on the logo of the Hartlepool Rovers Rugby team (Pearce, 2010). Furthermore, the mascot for Hartlepool United did at one stage become mayor of the town, running on the platform of free bananas for school children (Pearce, 2010).

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The story however is not without its controversy. In 2021, the monkey statue on the town's marina was given an explanatory sign to avoid upsetting visitors to the town (Sky News, 2021). A Hartlepool Borough Council spokesman said of the statue 'We are currently working on an interpretation of the Hartlepool monkey legend with the intention of installing an explanatory sign on the monkey statue at the Hartlepool Marina lock gates for the benefit of visitors' (Sky News, 2021).

The Hartlepool monkey is integral to the history of the town and its collective identity. As a Hartlepudlian myself, I felt that there was really no one better than a Hartlepudlian to write the story. In having personal knowledge and links with the town, I could best write in a way that the people of Hartlepool would speak and make references to things from the town. For example, in the scene where Bram is introduced, I refer to savoury patties. These to the best of my knowledge are specific to our region. These are potato patties with stuffing, battered and deep fried. You could say they are a local delicacy. When Hartlepool is portrayed in the media, it is often portrayed incorrectly. A recent example of this is *The Thief, His Wife, and the Canoe* (ITV, 2022). The show was criticised by the people of Hartlepool for the use of the Geordie accent when the show was based in Teesside (Northern Echo, 2022). It wasn't only the accent that offended, it was the location of the show. The story takes place in Seaton Carew, one of the many beaches in the town, however, the show was filmed at the Headland (Tonks, 2022). Hence, I felt that if I was going to represent my town, that I was going to do it in the way that I wanted it to be represented.

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To best understand the changes that I made to the story, it's best to describe the story itself.

During the Napoleonic wars off the coast of Hartlepool Headland (Old Hartlepool), a French ship was spotted sinking. Suspicious of enemy ships and under the threat of enemy invasion, the people of Hartlepool rushed down to the beach (Historic UK, n.d.). While under the wreckage of the ship, they found the only survivor of the wreck, the ship's monkey, which was dressed in a French military uniform (Historic UK, n.d.). At the time, the people of Hartlepool had not seen or even heard of a monkey or a Frenchman. Satirical cartoons of the time often depicted the French as monkey-like creatures with tails and claws (Historic UK, n.d.). There was a trial to determine whether the monkey was guilty of espionage but being as it was a monkey and unable to answer the court's questions, it was found guilty (Historic UK, n.d.). The townspeople then dragged him to the square, where the monkey was hung (Historic UK, n.d.). Throughout the research process, I contacted both the Royal Navy Museum and the Museum of Hartlepool. Both didn't really have much on record when it came to the Hartlepool Monkey and couldn't really point me in the right direction to find out the origins of the story.

Over the years, the story of the Hartlepool monkey has changed depending on where you have heard it from. Personally, for me the iteration that I am most familiar with is that of a French ship crashing off the coast of Hartlepool and the monkey was the sole survivor of the wreck. The monkey was then hanged because it was wearing a French uniform, so the people of the town suspected that it was a French spy. However, there are other iterations such as the monkey being part of a traveling circus. With a story like this it gave me a lot of free reign to play around with several ideas.

I tried my best to play around with ideas and include aspects of the different stories. For example, the scene in which the children are on the road and stumble across a pub. I made it a nod to the idea of a monkey and organ grinder which was a nod to another version of the original story.

Conversely, there could be a darker side to the tale of the Hartlepool monkey, it could be that it was not a monkey that they hung but instead a powder monkey (Historic UK, n.d.). Powder monkeys were small boys employed on warships to place gunpowder into cannons (Historic UK, n.d.). My original idea for the story was to have Eloise (the protagonist) befriend the powder monkey. The story would have revolved around her trying to save him. I thought that it would be a different perspective on the original story that would be a breath of fresh air. However, I struggled to form a consistent plot line with the idea which led to being scrapped. I didn't want to scrap the idea of the powder monkey all together which led to the creation of the character Eugene as a nod to my original idea.

When conceptualising the original idea for the story, I had my heart set on saving the monkey. As I knew that I wanted the film to be aimed at children, I thought that it would be best to see the monkey live another day. However, it was made apparent to me that this undermined the story that I was trying to tell. In saving the monkey, it limited the growth that Eloise could have. So, in a redraft I decided to play around with the idea of hanging the monkey and the repercussions it would have on the main cast. In doing so, I felt that it gave Eloise a stronger

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need in act three as things did not end up turning out the way that had planned. She could evolve in not only herself but her relationships such as growing closer to her Mother and distancing herself from her Father and his expectations of her.

Something that I found difficult when writing the story was writing about life during the Napoleonic wars. There were quite a few hurdles that I had to overcome about life and people that I wanted to include. In an early iteration of the story, I wanted Eloise and Bram to use a train to get to Edinburgh but as the story was set in 1815 and the first public railway did not run until 1825 (Sinfin, n.d.) which was ten years too late for the story. Ultimately, I decided on the use of horses and walking as I felt that it fit the period more suitably. I think the biggest hurdle in terms of the period that I had to overcome was finding a scientist/naturalist that I could base Joseph Cook on. Most scientists or naturalists became popular within the latter half of the 18th century such as Charles Darwin and Gregor Mendel. Upon conducting some research, I learnt about Joseph Banks. Banks was a botanist who sailed with Captain Cook and collected samples of plants and animals (Natural History Museum, n.d.). Moreover, in 1778, he was appointed president of the Royal Society (Natural History Museum, n.d.). I found the inspiration for my scientist character, so I combined the names of Joseph Banks and Captain Cook to create Joseph Cook.

Something that I wanted to be an integral part of the story was that Eloise was a strong female protagonist. When writing dialogue for interactions between her and her father (Albert), it quickly became difficult. Not only as I had to write how they would have spoken during the

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Napoleonic wars, but I also had to avoid being too on the nose with the sexism. The sexism at the time was more indirect than how I originally wrote it. I had a lot of redrafts with interactions between these two characters as I had to imply rather than out right tell the audience what Albert was thinking in regards to his daughter.

When conceptualising ideas, I knew that I couldn't really have a monkey as the protagonist unless it spoke, but I didn't want it to speak. I knew that I wanted a determined character which led to the creation of Eloise. Her journey to prove herself and her knowledge I thought was inspiring and a good role model for children. However, in having a female protagonist in a film set in the Napoleonic wars there was some trouble. Even as late as 1840 sixty percent of women were still illiterate (Oxford Royale Academy, 2017). That cemented the idea that I wanted a female protagonist, and it was also a piece of the inspiration for Dorothea Cook being the brains behind Joseph Cook.

However, as Eloise is living in a period and town dominated by men, I knew that I needed a male sidekick character which led to the creation of Bram. I knew that she couldn't go on the journey on her own as it would be dangerous for her to go alone so this led to Bram going with her. The characters balance and bounce off each other well as Eloise is determined but can often let her emotions get the best of her and Bram often places the needs of others above his own to his own detriment. In one draft, I had Simon helping them out towards the end of the script, but I felt that it didn't work. So, in a later draft, I decided to have Simon help them out but only to certain extent. Also, that he would report back to his father what had been

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discussed by Eloise. This also helped to have a reason to have Eloise restraint whilst Barnabe was being hung.

Something else that is important to the history of Hartlepool is its naval history. The HMS Trincomalee is docked at the naval museum. Again, this was something that I would have loved to feature in my script but the construction of the Trincomalee was not completed until 1817 (Administrator, n.d.). Moreover, due to the date in which it was built it was not used in the Napoleonic wars (Administrator, n.d.). Hartlepool is also known for mermen. These did not rise in popularity until the late 1800s, they were made of the body of a monkey, a wooden centre, and a tail of a fish (BBC, n.d.) There is a history of mermen being used in folk tales in Hartlepool from around the 1860s (BBC, n.d.). Moreover, Hartlepool ship builders were often labelled as Aquatic Monkeys when they dressed for important meetings (BBC, n.d.). I did originally want to use the legend of the merman as a part of the story but ultimately, I ended up just using it as a passing phrase. Ernest and a few townspeople are trying to decide what Barnabe was. Ernest makes a passing comment about a monkey being half fish which was a nod to the legend of the merman.

A key plot of the script is the French searching for Eugene and Eugene searching Barnabe. At first, I attempted to have the French speak French but as someone with GCSE level French and google translate it didn't seem right. I asked my supervisor for advice on the topic, and he suggested that I checked out *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* (ITV, 1983) and *Blackadder the Third* (BBC, 1987) for how they represented the French to an English audience. After watching a few

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episodes of each show, I decided that the best course of action would be to have the French speak English with a French accent. Also, the English would not be able to understand the French. It still wasn't all plain sailing as I had to find a way for the French and English to be able to communicate in part. This led to both Eugene and Joseph Cook being bilingual. Joseph was simple to create a reason why he was going to be bilingual as he wanted to secure funding from Napoleon. As for Eugene, I struggled to find a reason that he was bilingual so I asked my supervisor who suggested that he could read books in English so he would be able to understand the language which fit perfectly into the story I wanted to tell.

One thing that kept coming up was to try and make the journey more difficult. My first draft of the story was straight forward, and one thing kept happening after another, but it wasn't challenging nor entertaining. For example, when Simon finds the horse tracks for Mabel and can point the military in the direction that the children have gone was originally completely different. In an earlier draft, I had Simon saying that he knew where Eloise had gone because it said Edinburgh in her book. Albert corroborated this as she was always talking about going to Edinburgh. Except in the script, there was never a mention of Edinburgh before this point.

Robert McKee states 'Never force words into a character's mouth to tell the audience about the world, history, or person' (McKee, 1999: 334). This scene was too expositional and didn't add any conflict to the journey.

McKee further states 'Rather, show us honest, natural scenes in which human beings talk and behave in honest, natural ways...yet at the same time indirectly pass along the necessary facts'

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(Mckee, 1999: 334). When I redrafted the scene, I decided that a more plausible reason as to where they would find out where the children went was by following horse tracks. It depicted a more natural sense of how people would have acted at the time.

I found it hard to consult different sources for inspiration in which direction I could take the story in as there have only been a few iterations in popular culture. There was a radio play released by the BBC on Christmas day in 2018 entitled *The Hartlepool Spy* (BBC,2018). The only other iteration was a short film which completely changed the story entitled *The Monkey* (2021). This changed the setting from England to Ireland and from the Napoleonic wars to the Anglo-Spanish War. Whilst I was researching, I stumbled across *The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists!* (2012) a film that I had seen many years ago but was extremely relevant to the story I was trying to tell. When writing the story, I knew that I could see it being an animated feature as you could achieve more and not have to use a real monkey on set. *The Pirates! In an Adventure with Scientists!* (2012) gave me an excellent jumping off point.

During preliminary meetings with my supervisor, I had asked if they had any other suggestions for media that I could use as an inspiration for my story. Initially, they suggested that I look at *The Emperor's New Clothes* (Hans Christian Andersen, 1837) or *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000) which was a little bit of a more modern take on the story. These stories revolve around children and adults in the case of the modern adaptation who can see things for what they truly are but are not believed by those around them. I knew that in order for there to be conflict in my story the protagonist (Eloise) would have to face some form of resistance from those

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around her. This led to her being the smartest in the town and the catalyst for her journey to save the monkey. My supervisor had also suggested that I take a look at *E.T the Extra-Terrestrial (1982)* which would help me add humour to the story. The way in which the children in *E.T the Extra-Terrestrial (1982)* disguised E.T helped escape capture from the scientists served as inspiration for me. The scene in which the children are stacked on top of each other to escape the pub in which their father's and George are waiting outside of. I know that this is a comedic trope used in many things such as the running gag of three children in a coat on *Bojack Horseman (2014)*.

Overall, I'm proud that I managed to complete the script even though it's not perfect by any means. The whole journey wasn't about getting a master's degree for me, it meant much more than that to me. In 2017, I attended York St. John for a month before dropping out due to mental illness. Now five years later, I have two degrees to my name, one of which from the University of York. It's been a tough year. Doing this degree was a lot more isolating than I expected as I didn't really have the sense of community that I had at my previous university. Have I learnt a lot about myself this year? I have, I've learnt that I need to know when to stop. Moreover, it only harms you when you keep writing when you've got nothing left to say in your system.

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