[GEORGINA BOYES]

They Went with Songs to Battle

Songs as *Lieux de Mémoire* of the Great War

'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' – Sheet music cover B. Feldman & Co., England (Copyright 1912). The wartime cover highlights the song's use for marching

It was called 'the Ragtime war'. Soldiers sang as they marched; gramophones 'passed the time along' in every British Officers' Mess and the deepest German bunkers; composers provided songs that were sentimental, satirical, topical or bellicose for the Home Front and the theatre of war; Concert parties, with old favourites and hits from the latest shows, urged the men behind the lines to join in 'altogether now'; and the troops themselves created their own mordant musical commentaries on the conflict. The First World War exists with and in its own soundtrack. Each time 'Tipperary' or 'Pack up your Troubles', 'There's a Long, Long Trail' or 'Blighty' play, there's an intertextuality that immediately calls up blotched and flickering film of Tommies waving to the camera as they march through Flanders' fields - just as the jauntiest of the songs are now almost inseparable from a sense of desolation at our foreknowledge of what awaited those same Tommies at the Front. And their own words, stating the truth unvarnished 'Oh my, I don't want to die, I want to go home', equal the greatest of the Great War poets. Uniquely, the First World War is evoked by song.

How did song become the pre-eminent *lieu de mémoire* of this war? The songs that are its signifiers are disparate – some composed before 1914 with no military content, others so full of longing for home that they seem designed to foster nostalgia rather than battle. Even the wartime creations lack significant jingoism; the soldiers their texts describe are more humorous than heroic. These paradoxes are clearly present in the most famous of all the lieu de mémoire songs, 'It's a long way to Tipperary'. Despite its later status as 'the immortal ... marching anthem on the battlefields of Europe', initially 'Tipperary' had no bellicose associations – it was composed more than two years before the war and was reportedly written only to win a bet. On 30th January 1912, Jack Judge (1872-1938), a prolific songwriter and singer, was appearing at The Grand Theatre in Stalybridge, in the north west of England. A large, genial man who enjoyed a drink, Jack made a practice of offering a challenge to the company in pubs he visited during his theatre tours. He would bet five shillings (about a quarter of a skilled man's weekly wage at the time) that he could write a song overnight and sing it on stage the next day. That evening he took a bet and the following night sang 'It's a long way to Tipperary' to great applause. And though evidence of an earlier piece of his called 'It's a long way to Connemara' suggests the Stalybridge work was not such an impromptu composition as first appears, this performance at The Grand fixed the song's text and – as Jack could not write music – it was arranged with these lyrics by his friend Harry Williams, who became co-author as a result. Jack advertised the song and caught the attention of Bert Feldman (1875-1945), a major London music publisher. By September 1912 Feldman had the music in print (adding an extra 'long' to the chorus) and by 1913 it was featuring in the repertoire of the music hall star, Florrie Forde (1875-1940). Florrie and Jack sang 'Tipperary' around the halls and the sheet music sold well, but it was not until a reporter for the mass-circulation newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, wrote that the Connaught Rangers sang the song as they disembarked with the British Expeditionary Forces at Boulogne in August 1914 that it took off to become an international hit, indelibly associated with the Great War.

'There's a Long, Long Trail' – Sheet music cover West & Co., England (1913)

Pre-eminently of - but not about - the war, 'Tipperary' exemplifies the discontinuities that mark several of the popular songs which became its *lieux de mémoire*. For soldiers pounding along the narrow roads of rural France and West Flanders with full military pack, the 'long, long way' of its chorus made a particularly apt accompaniment. But the lyrics of 'Tipperary's' verses consist of elements from an existing comedic format, the 'Irish Mother's Letter to her Son', re-cast in the form of a love letter:

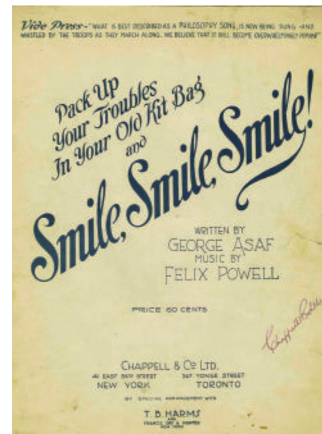
Paddy wrote a letter to his Irish Molly-o
Saying if you don't receive it, write and let me know
If I make mistakes in spelling, Molly dear, said he
Remember it's the pen that's bad, don't lay the blame on me.

'There's a Long, Long, Trail' – Postcard with drawing illustrating first verse and use in the war. Inter Art Co. 'Artistique Song' Series, England [ND]

Like their own endlessly repeated rationalisation 'We're here because, we're here because, we're here...', perhaps the troops only marched to the insistent, foot-raising beat of 'Tipperary's' chorus rather than the irregularly-timed old jokes of its verses. And given that the infantry were frequently expected to cover twenty kilometres per day to get to or from the line, despite a promising title, it seems unlikely that another early favourite, 'There's a Long, Long Trail' was often sung en route. Written

by American students Stoddard King (1889–1933) and Alonzo Eliott (1891–1964) for a concert at Yale University in 1913, the gently swaying rhythm of its tune and the moonlit dreamscape of nightingales and reunited lovers in its text offer a refuge from reality rather than encouragement to stride out in step to face the enemy.

'It is a peculiarity of British humour to be derogatory to its own dignity,' wrote Royal Flying Corps Lieutenant Frederick Nettleingham (1893-1976), characterising the wartime songs soldiers made up for themselves. And satire was also the response to conflict of many of the songs composed in Britain during the war. Successful music hall writers like Robert Weston (1878-1936) and Bert Lee (1880-1946) echoed the troops' own irreverence with songs about the Home Front like 'Do You Want Us to Lose the War?' or 'Lloyd George's Beer' that were an antidote to jingoistic posturing. A marked absence of heroics also characterised 'Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty', one of the wartime *lieu de mémoire* songs dealing directly with soldiering. Written 'in four hours' by Arthur J. Mills (1872-1919), Bennett Scott (1875-1930) and Fred Godfrey (1880-1953) after they saw a poster for a show called 'Blighty' outside the Oxford Music Hall in London in 1916, the song's verses portray a genial, amateur army. Featuring an airsick pilot, infantrymen taking tea and a soldier attempting to shave under enemy shelling, its tone is established in its opening verse by 'Jack Dunn', 'doing his bit' in the mud by day but spending his evenings listening to his gramophone. All the characters are depicted at war in France and each is named, but none is identified by military rank or role in combat. Even more significantly, 'Blighty's' extremely catchy chorus consists of a heartfelt plea to return to 'anywhere' in England and the comfort of sweethearts and home. Composed at precisely the time when the requirement to 'be offensive' was the subject of repeated orders from Douglas Haig, the Commander of the British Expeditionary Force, 'Blighty' highlights the gap between official zeal for 'an active Front' and the aspiration of individuals attempting to survive.



'Pack up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag and Smile, Smile, Smile' – Sheet music cover Chappell & Co. (1915). The cover highlights the song's use for marching

Although they now act identically to evoke the Great War, the songs that are its *lieux de mémoire* were created under varying circumstances. Favourites from the music hall, written only months apart, reflect changing attitudes as the war became prolonged and the volunteers of 1914 had to be replaced – from January 1916 – by an army of conscripts. Unsurprisingly then, 'Private Perks' of 'Pack up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag', an enthusiastic warrior with a disturbingly fixed grin created in 1915, contrasts markedly with the civilians in uniform of 'Blighty' in 1916; just as the insouciant 'Smile, smile, smile' of 'Pack up Your Troubles' chorus transformed into a damning title for Wilfred Owen's (1893-1918) poem of the 'sunk-eyed wounded' in September 1918.

Like other English *lieu de mémoire* songs, 'Pack up Your Troubles' was composed by professional songwriters and performers – the brothers Felix Powell (1878-1942) and George Asaf [Powell] (1880-1951). To catch the excited patriotism of the outbreak of war, the pair had written a form of the song but then discarded it as 'piffle'. In 1915, however, a revised version won a competition for morale-boosting pieces organised by the international publishers, Francis, Day and Hunter. Their sheet music proclaimed:

> 'What is best described as a PHILOSOPHY SONG is now being sung and whistled by the troops as they march along. We believe that it will become overwhelmingly popular.'

According to family sources, however, the success of the song became problematic for its writers. None of the composers of these English lieu de mémoire songs had personal experience of war at the time of their publication, but as ever greater numbers of men were needed to replace battle casualties, all were called up. Subsequently, both Powell brothers found their role as musical recruiters disturbing, and Felix - who served on the Western Front - suffered 'a kind of nervous breakdown' as a result.

Oh my I don't want to die

But troops did not need to rely on professional composers for songs to accompany marching or rest. Reportedly, famous *lieux de mémoire* like 'Tipperary' enjoyed only temporary favour - what was actually sung by soldiers were their own words set to the famous chorus:

'Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty' – Postcard with posed photograph illustrating first verse – and gramophone. Bamforth's 'Song' Series, England [ND]

That's the wrong way to tickle Marie
That's the wrong way to kiss
Don't you know that over here, lad
They like it better like this
Hooray pour la France!
Farewell Angleterre!
We didn't know the way to tickle Marie
But now we've learnt how.

As well as music hall favourites, to a generation where church-going had been the norm, hymns provided a common fund of music for their own songs. 'What a friend we have in Jesus', 'The Church's One Foundation' and 'Holy, Holy, Holy!' lent their tunes and even parodied texts to 'When this Ruddy War is Over', 'We Are the Ragtime Army' and 'Grousing, Grousing, Grousing'. The latter was sometimes 'sternly suppressed by company commanders ... as being detrimental to good discipline' noted Lieutenant Nettleingham, who included all of these in his collections of *Tommy's Tunes*, published when he was on active service in 1917.

Concert parties formed by soldiers also created their own music. In Ypres with 1st Canadian Contingent, Lieutenant Gitz Rice (1891-1947) played the piano and wrote songs for military troupes like Princess Patricia's Canadian Comedy Company. The verses of Rice's 'self-satire', 'I Want to go Home' (1915) complained about Flanders' rain and mud giving him measles, 'flu and 'rheumatism in my hair', so that -

Tomorrow when the officer asks 'What would you like to do?'
I'm going to stand right up and say, 'If it's all the same to you –
CHORUS: *I want to go home, I want to go home*
The "Whizzbangs" and Shrapnel around me do roar
I don't want this old war any more
Take me far o'er the sea
Where the "Alleman" cannot get me
Oh my I don't want do die [sic]
I want to go 'ome.

The music hall patter of Rice's verses faded, but his jokey waltz-time chorus – an update of a song current in the Boer War - was poignantly taken up by British troops. Arriving in Ypres at night near enemy guns, William Cushing of the 9th Norfolk Regiment remembered:

> '... someone started to sing *sotto voce* that haunting, nostalgic cry, taken up by all: "Oh my, I don't want to die, I want to go home." I can still hear that murmured wish and longing.... I wonder how many had their wish.'

It was even sung in the trenches, 'when strafe was at its hottest,' wrote the composer and poet Ivor Gurney (1890-1937) in June 1916 - 'a very popular song about here; but not military ... Nor a brave song, but brave men sing it.

I want to go home. I want to go home
The whizzbangs and shrapnel they whistle and roar.
I don't want to go in the trenches no more.
Take me over the sea
Where the Alleman can't catch me
Oh my! I don't want to die.
I want to go home.

Singing in the trenches was very important, remembered Corporal George Coppard (1898-1984), author of *With Machine Gun to Cambrai*. But asked if *lieux de mémoire* like 'Tipperary' were as popular with the troops as was believed, he replied 'Not so much as those which suggest something spicy.' From the merely racy to the downright obscene, the appeal of 'spicy' songs is well attested by contemporary sources. In fact, one 'famous heirloom of the British Army' provided the tune for over sixty songs of different subject, length and lewdness. A major key version of the tune for 'Johnny I Hardly Knew You', it already had military associations when it was fitted to 'Three German Officers Crossed the Rhine' - a parody of Johann Uhland's sentimental poem 'Der Wirtin Töchterlein' (1813) which replaced Uhland's three students sorrowing over a Rhenish innkeeper's dead daughter with three hyperactive Prussians and the obliging 'daughter fair' of a French innkeeper. A narrative song with 'about forty verses', its content meant that Tommy's Tunes could only offer 'a well-purged and diminutive' form. Other uses of the tune include the picaresque 'Mademoiselle from Armentières', which has the virtue of a verse commemorating the role of laundry maids behind the lines; 'Farmer Have You Any Good Wine?', in which an English 'soldier of the line' replaces the Three German Officers; and 'The Sergeant Major's Having a Time', other ranks' perennial complaint about the venality of their NCOs. 'Unprintable for general consumption', almost all the troops' 'spicy' songs form *milieux de mémoire* of the First War – a shared evocation of involvement that was only fully available to those who had experienced it directly for themselves.

From August 1914 and reports of the Connaught Rangers arriving in France, songs began their development into *milieux de mémoire* of the War. This was reinforced across contemporary culture. Sheet music publishers advertised the success of their wares as accompaniments to marching. Postcards depicting verses from popular songs were produced in sets and exchanged between home and the Front. Folklore grew up around songs – 'Roses of Picardy' (1916) was believed to portray the factual romance of its writer, a young lieutenant and a French widow. Although he was 68 and working as a lawyer in the south west of England during the war, its composer, Fred Weatherley (1848-1929), was happy to foster this battlefield mystique. Most resonantly, however, songs echoed through the poetry of the War – as clearly in Laurence Binyon's (1869-1943) poem 'For the Fallen' in 1914, proclaiming troops 'went with songs to battle' as in Siegfried Sassoon's (1886-1967) 'Song Books of the War' (1918), where 'a snatch of soldier-song' holds the risk of re-kindling young men's enthusiasm for fighting.

This process continued and diversified after the Armistice. Wartime concert parties took their songs and sketches on tour to a wider public into the 1930s. Composers revived their hits – an appearance by Fred Godfrey, co-writer of 'Take Me Back to Dear Old Blighty' at Exeter Hippodrome in November 1930 producing 'scenes of remarkable enthusiasm' as audiences 'revelled in the popular war-time chorus, the singing of which, however, was tinged with a feeling of sadness.... the atmosphere engendered by the appearance on the stage on Armistice Night of the man who wrote a ditty that will always be associated with memories of the war.' And different media began to assert the identity of songs and war. English feature films about the war frequently took their titles and inspiration from *lieu de mémoire* songs, including 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' (1914), 'Mademoiselle from Armentières' (1926) and its follow-up 'Mademoiselle Parley Voo' (1928), 'Blighty' (1927) and 'Roses of Picardy' (1927). Later, even more complex intersections were created when the radio programme, 'The Long, Long Trail' (1961 and 1962), which used contemporary songs to provide a narration about the war, became first the musical drama 'Oh! What a Lovely War' (1963) and then a film (1969). Listeners today say that the songs offer them a brief, near-direct experience of the soldiers' war; the concerts and recordings planned for its centenary can only renew and intensify this unique fusion of the 'war to end all wars' and its music.

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John Stuart (left) as 'Johnny' in behind the lines concert party scene. Publicity photograph from the English feature film *Mademoiselle from Armentières.* Directed by Maurice Elvey (1926). Elvey directed a number of films with *lieu de mémoire* song titles – mainly after the war