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## **War Memory in British Soldier Songs of the First World War**

*La mémoire de guerre dans les chansons de soldat britanniques de la Grande Guerre.*

**John Mullen, senior lecturer, University of Paris East Créteil**

### **Biography**

John Mullen is senior lecturer at the University of Paris-East Créteil. He has published widely both on the history of trade unions and the history of British popular music. Articles include a reflection on “ethnic” music festivals and immigrant identity in Britain (1960-2000), and on racial stereotyping in music-hall songs from 1880 to 1920. His full-length work on popular song in Britain during the First World War was published in French by L’Harmattan in 2012, and in English by Ashgate in 2015. His most recent work has been about the British music industry in the year 1900, and about the use of voice in British wartime music hall.

### **Biographie**

John Mullen est maître de conférences habilité à diriger des recherches à l’Université de Paris-Est Créteil. Il a publié de nombreux articles sur l’histoire du syndicalisme, puis sur celle de la musique populaire britannique. Ceux-ci comprennent une réflexion sur les festivals musicaux « ethniques » et l’identité immigrée au Royaume-Uni dans la deuxième moitié du XXe siècle, une histoire de la grève dans les music halls de Londres en 1907, et une analyse des stéréotypes racistes dans les chansons populaires britanniques de 1880 à 1920. Sa monographie, *La Chanson Populaire en Grande Bretagne pendant la Première Guerre mondiale* a été éditée en français en 2012 par L’Harmattan, et en anglais en 2015 par Ashgate.

**Abstract**

The anonymous songs sung by British soldiers during the Great War have frequently been revisited over the last eighty years, and often presented as the true voice of the Tommy. Conservative newspapers have recently republished collections, while, for the centenary, theatre groups have re-staged the anti-militarist musical comedy *Oh What a Lovely War* in which the soldier songs play a key role. The songs are sometimes accompanied by an “antimilitarist” discourse and sometimes by a “patriotic” one. This article explores how this cultural object comes to be so malleable that, a hundred years later, the songs can be sung by radical punk rock groups as well as by Military Wives’ choirs.

**Keywords:** War memory, popular song, popular culture, First World War, appropriation

**Résumé**

Les chansons anonymes des soldats britanniques de la Première Guerre ont souvent été utilisées dans la présentation de cette guerre. Leur statut de production populaire et anonyme garantirait l’authenticité de la mémoire communiquée.

Depuis au moins 80 ans, ces chansons ont été remémorées, parfois accompagnées d’un discours « antimilitariste », parfois par un discours « patriotique ». Notre chapitre vise à examiner comment et pourquoi les chansons de soldats ont pu devenir un objet historique malléable, utilisé jusqu’à nos jours à la fois par des groupes de rock contestataire et des chorales de femmes de militaires.

**Mots clés:** Première Guerre Mondiale, chanson, culture populaire, appropriation

In what is no doubt the biggest wave of commemoration events in British history, the myriad activities organized for the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War have made it clear to more people than ever that “remembering” is not simply recalling the past, but seeing the past, in the words of Paul Fussell, “remembered, conventionalized and mythologized”.<sup>1</sup> In this contribution I would like to look at how one particular cultural object – the soldiers’ song – has been used over the last century to revive a memory of the war, for particular and varying objectives.

### **The major characteristics of soldiers’ songs**

Soldiers’ songs are generally anonymous, invented by troops to sing in groups, whether on the march or at rest behind the lines. They are sometimes referred to as “trench songs”, though in front-line trenches they may not have been much used. They were not written to be sold, and so are distinct from commercial music-hall songs performed at a theatre, such as “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” or “Oh, What a Lovely War!” They are normally only a few lines long, and are set to well-known tunes, since their inventors were rarely trained musicians. The tunes come from music hall hits or from hymns, and the songs often exist in a series of variants, since each group of singers might add or change a verse or two.

Soldiers’ songs have existed since well before 1914,<sup>2</sup> but the fact that First World War armies were exceptionally large, and immobile for long periods, made for a much richer production. There was even, during the war, a certain popularization of some soldiers’ songs among civilians via the music hall: a few singers, such as male impersonator Hetty King, produced on-stage medleys of “songs the soldiers sing”.

The First World War soldier songs are available to us because of collections published either at the time, often by officers (since they had more access to publishing)<sup>3</sup> or by veterans after the war, who collected them through associations such as the British Legion, or through appeals in the press.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes collections of “songs the soldiers sang” do not distinguish between music hall songs and soldiers’ songs.<sup>5</sup> This is unfortunate, because the filters the two genres needed to pass through to become popular were quite different.

I have previously worked on a corpus of 160 soldiers’ songs. Most of these were in published collections, although some were quoted in the press during the war or appeared in personal diaries. The repertoire for such an ephemeral type of singing was varied and unstable. A local newspaper, *The Burnley News*, declared in 1919:

nearly every unit in the British army has songs in its repertoire that are their own peculiar treasure and are not sung by anyone else. These are usually composed by the company ‘funny man’... These songs however, have often only quite a short reign of popularity and are soon discarded and never sung again.<sup>6</sup>

The British soldiers’ song repertoire is widely recognized as dissenting in character, and in this very different from commercial music hall songs.<sup>7</sup> Dissenting music hall songs were rare because of the centrality of singalong to the music hall experience. The singer was expected to persuade almost the whole of the audience to sing along with the chorus. If half refused to sing, the turn would be deemed a failure, and the singer might well find themselves without further bookings. Thus anti-war songs are not sung, since they would neither achieve consensus among the audience nor be favoured by generally conservative theatre managers anxious to gain valued respectability by showcasing their patriotism.<sup>8</sup>

The soldiers' songs, if they were to catch on, had also to be consensual, but within a much more restricted social group: the lower ranks of the army, solidly made up of working class men. Superior officers were likely to be absent during the singing, or "turning a deaf ear". It is very significant, then, that the soldiers' songs are uncompromisingly dissenting and reject warmongering, hatred of Germans and glory of war discourses. They almost never go so far, however, as to be pacifistic or mutinous, for the same reason: the need to achieve consensus within the immediate groups who are being expected to sing along.

It is essential to remember that the soldier songs do not represent the only group-singing activity of the lower ranks. They also sang, in unison, music hall hits and religious hymns. The soldiers' songs constitute in fact a supplementary repertoire, used to express sentiments which are not provided for by the other repertoires. Thus, none of the soldiers' songs are love songs, because recruits' knowledge of music hall songs was sufficient to provide any love song required: there was no need to invent any. Similarly, the sentiment of trusting resignation in God or destiny, well-provided for in popular hymns, is not found in the soldiers' songs. The two main types of sentiment not provided by other repertoires are the vulgar and the dissenting, as briefly illustrated by these two extracts from songs:

**1. Do your balls hang low**

Do they dangle to and fro

Can you tie them in a knot

Can you tie them in a bow?

Can you sling them on your shoulder

Like a lousy fucking soldier

Do your balls hang low?<sup>9</sup>

## 2. Greeting to the Sergeant

You 've got a kind face you old bastard

You ought to be bloody well shot

You ought to be tied to a gun wheel

And left there to bloody well rot<sup>1</sup>

### “Patriotic” War memory and the soldiers’ songs

The repertoire of soldier songs becomes, after the war, a part of war memory which can be either forgotten or (selectively) revived and used for different ideological purposes. There had been collections of soldiers’ songs published while the war was still going on, but two ex-soldiers decided in 1930 they wanted a more comprehensive collection. This was the now classic publication edited by John Brophy and Eric Partridge: *The Long Trail: What the British soldier sang and said in 1914-1918*. Brophy had joined the army as an under-age volunteer at the age of fourteen in 1914, and later in his life became a journalist on the *Daily Telegraph*. Partridge, who was somewhat older, had been a schoolteacher before the Great War, served in the Australian army, and would later become known as a writer, producing, in particular, a series of dictionaries of slang. Indeed, the 1930 volume contained, in addition to a few dozen songs, a dictionary of soldier slang, and a substantial explanatory introduction. The songs were sorted into categories “Songs sung on the March” “Songs sung either on the march or in the billets” “Songs rarely if ever sung on the march”. The categorization shows the almost anthropological interest of the editors in transmitting some of the texture of the ordinary frontline soldiers’ lives. It also suggests the nostalgic revival which was part of the writers’ objective.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Brophy and E. Partridge, *The Long Trail*, p.67

Sadly, it is not the case that a dozen different ex-soldiers collected songs and published their views about the meanings of the songs. We have just the one book, with just the one viewpoint. It is valuable and interesting, but we must take into account that an ex-soldier who becomes a journalist with the *Daily Telegraph*, a British newspaper with a very precise political orientation, may well not be representative. The question of why only one such book should appear is likely to be linked to the fact that, before the Second World War, publishing interest in the first war focussed on general questions of strategy and battle tactics, or on diplomatic and political analyses: the experience of the ordinary soldier was thought an unsuitable subject for study. It is also well-documented that a large proportion of ordinary soldiers preferred not to discuss their war experience, often not even with close family members.

Brophy and Partridge's book was well received: the work was republished, in 1930, 1931, 1965, 1969, 1972 and 2008. The collection did not only circulate the memory of the songs, but also a discourse on the nature of the repertoire. This discourse insisted firstly on the authenticity of these "grass roots" songs, representing the war memory of the ordinary soldier, very distant from either official anthems or high culture musical productions such as Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* or Ravel's *La Valse*. As the *Evening Telegraph* declared, these pieces "come from the ranks, especially from the private soldiers without ambition to bear office or special responsibility..."<sup>10</sup> Brophy's introduction to a later edition also stressed authenticity:

They are the songs of homeless men, evoked by exceptional and distressing circumstances; the songs of an itinerant community, continually altering itself under the incidence of death and mutilation.<sup>11</sup>



Secondly, the dissenting tone of much of the repertoire was underlined:

One of the major themes of the soldiers' songs was the theme of satire, on the war, and on all kind of mock heroics. They blatantly denied the sugary patriotism, the 'let me like a soldier fall' attitude, and brought out all the bitterness, the disillusionment, in a spirit of jocular irony.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, sentiments such as the following are quite typical:

What did you join the Army for?

Why did you join the Army?

What did you join the Army for?

You must have been bloody well barmy!

Of the song "I Want to Go Home",<sup>13</sup> the 1930 reviewer commented:

I think there is infinite pathos in that song. It marks the first disillusionment of the volunteer when he discovered that war is not romantic, and that the Germans were not subhuman.<sup>14</sup>

Establishment commentators have regularly seemed ill-at-ease with the dissenting content, and attempted to find ways to reduce its impact. A Scottish journalist in September 1939 (no doubt a time when the eventuality of cynical soldiers was a sensitive subject) insisted:

Tommy loved ‘safety valve’ songs. Anyone unaccustomed to the workings of the British mind might have thought melancholy ditties were an indication of a weakening morale. But it was only the British way of keeping ourselves cheery by exercising our traditional right to grumble.<sup>15</sup>

This term “grumbling” will be heard right up to the present day from those who wish to insist that the dissenting content of soldier songs is not to be taken seriously. The term, however, is problematic: to grumble is, according to the *New Oxford Dictionary*<sup>16</sup> “to complain or protest about something in a bad-tempered but typically muted way”. Can the bitter and even murderous tone of some of these songs<sup>17</sup> really be reduced to being “bad-tempered”, a question of individual mood? And is public group singing a “muted” form of protest? This definition of soldiers’ songs as “grumbling” is an example of the conventionalizing and mythologizing of which Fussell speaks. The tremendous popularity, once the war was over, of a song like “Pop Goes the Major”, a 1920s music hall song whose subject is the joy of finding one’s superior officer from wartime and burning him alive,<sup>18</sup> suggests a more solid content to the dissent in soldiers songs, as does the tremendous force within war memories of a “Lions led by donkeys” view of hierarchical relations inside the army.

Along with dismissal as “grumbling”, a more sophisticated opinion frequently encountered is that which sees dissenting singing as a deliberate way of exercising one’s own cynicism and demoralization. This is suggested already in the 1930 review:

But, although [the soldier song repertoire] expresses the soldiers’ war weariness, it also conquers it with ridicule, and that was how they kept going [... ] Messrs Brophy

and Partridge have produced a most unusual book that brings back the spirit of the war, and the spirit that won the war.<sup>19</sup>

Malcolm Brown, author of a dozen titles on the First World War, writes in the introduction to the 2000 edition of Brophy and Partridge's collection a similar view:

Oh yes, there's anger and cynicism, and a world-weary longing for the whole damned thing to be over, and couldn't we all go back to dear old Blighty? But there's also a strong sense that by slagging off the war, and finding ways of laughing, even jeering, at it, the men deputed to fight it could find a courage that gave them the determination to win through.<sup>20</sup>

John Brophy, in his own introduction to the 1965 edition, seems to go even further:

... when the romantic conception of war proved false, out of date, useless, the man in the line was helped in his daily endurances if he could ridicule all heroics and sing, with apparent shamelessness "I Don't Want to Be a Soldier" or "Far Far from Ypres I Long to Be". These songs satirized more than war: they poked fun at the soldier's own desire for peace and rest, and so prevented it from overwhelming his will to go on doing his duty. They were not symptoms of defeatism, but strong bulwarks against it.<sup>21</sup>

So the memory of war presented in these largely dissenting songs is reinterpreted in a way that the traditional narrative of determined troops who do not doubt can be maintained. His rhetoric seems effective, and allows conservative opinion to embrace the soldiers' songs in war memory. It is notable that the newspaper which republished recently in 2008 the

Brophy and Partridge collection should be the *Daily Telegraph*, generally recognized as the most conservative of the serious daily newspapers. It was not *The Guardian* nor *The Independent*, who might be expected to be more open to antimilitarist sentiment.

Although it is obviously true that the songs helped the soldiers survive, it by no means follows that their main effect was to increase the determination to fight of the troops in question. As Tony Ashworth's work comprehensively shows,<sup>22</sup> soldiers frequently had other priorities, such as working out how to avoid fighting without being caught by superior officers. Even if, as ex-soldiers themselves, Brophy and Partridge deserve their voice to be heard, does this discourse not represent a case of dominant ideology reinterpreting the voice of the dominated? Through their songs, the soldiers seem to be showing their hatred of their superior officers and their cynicism about official patriotism, but we are told that this only appears to be the case. Popular grassroots expression is reduced by post-hoc cultural revisionism to a simple means of psychological relief aiming at reinforcing fighting spirit.

My analysis does not of course imply that the dissenting tone of the British soldier songs shows a structured pacifist ideology or a reasoned political opposition to Empire war aims. In a situation where practically all the available political leadership – union leaders, feminist leaders and influential intellectuals – campaign in favour of the war, a politicized opposition was simply not available to most rank and file soldiers.

### **“Antimilitarist” war memory and the soldiers’ songs**

After this patriotic/ nostalgic configuration, the second major way in which these songs have been used to revive and create memories is by antimilitarist groups, singers or writers. By far the most important example of this has been the series of artistic productions of which the musical show *Oh What a Lovely War*, first produced in 1963, is the most well-known.<sup>23</sup> This production was inspired by a radio documentary, *The Long Long Trail*. Its

creator, Charles Chilton,<sup>24</sup> whose father had died at 19 years old, a private in the First World War, began searching for more information about his father's experience. He said he was looking for "the true songs of the trenches", which would show, he believed, an authentic expression of grass roots experience. The resulting programme was broadcast on the BBC in 1961, and contained a mix of historical information, music hall songs, and soldiers' songs. The tone was one of disgust with the war.<sup>25</sup>

After hearing *The Long Long Trail*, Joan Littlewood and her theatre workshop worked with Chilton and others to produce their innovative musical production. Littlewood was an influential experimental theatre director, best known for her productions of Brecht's plays, and for that of *A taste of Honey* by Shelagh Delaney. In *Oh What a Lovely war!*, the Great War is presented as an Edwardian end-of-the-pier Pierrot show. In the first act the audience is encouraged to sing along with jingoistic music hall songs from the first few months of the conflict, such as "We Don't Want to Lose you, but We Think You Ought to Go". In the second act, they sing along mostly with the soldiers' songs which represent the disillusion and anger of the ordinary soldiers crushed by a military machine serving elite interests. The bitterly sarcastic presentation of the war as a *pierrrot* show is intended to echo the tone of the dissenting soldiers' songs, though unlike the soldier song repertoire, the show communicates a coherent political critique of the war as the result of a society divided between ordinary people, just good for cannon fodder and an extremely rich elite who profit from the division and re-division of the world between competing empires.

From the point of view of war memory, it is important to note that Littlewood does not only propose to audiences a particular discourse on the war, presenting soldier songs as particularly suitable vehicles to transmit a truth she considers hidden by official discourses. She also proposes a war memory *activity*: that of singalong. Singing in unison has been defined by musicologist Philip Tagg as "a rather obvious aural icon of individuals sharing

(supposedly or actually) a common cause, or identity, or set of values and beliefs”.<sup>26</sup> That is to say that, as the soldiers’ songs were in their original contexts, the songs of *Oh What A Lovely War* are proposed in the theatre for group singing. In each situation, the attempt to build a public emotional expression of anti-war consensus is the aim.

The theatre production, which was a tremendous critical success, soon moved to the West End.<sup>27</sup> Littlewood was keen that the anti-war message should be the most prominent element: a scoreboard on stage showed the rising death toll throughout the war. On the US stage it was replaced by a count of US citizens who became millionaires by selling arms during the war, an addition which caused frequent walkouts from the more expensive seats.<sup>28</sup> In the French production in Paris in 1963, the well-known antimilitarist song from 1917, the *Chanson de Craonne* was sung on stage, although at the time the song was still banned.

Those who have the dough, they ’ll be coming back,  
 ‘Cause it ’s for them that we ’re dying.  
 But it ’s all over now, ‘cause all of the grunts  
 Are going to go on strike.  
 It ’ll be your turn, all you rich and powerful gentlemen,  
 To go up onto the plateau.  
 And if you want to make war,  
 Then pay for it with your own skins.

There is conventionalizing and mythologizing in *Oh What a Lovely War!* too of course, notably in the presentation of the soldiers songs as a relatively pure authentic voice of the lower ranks to be contrasted with the jingoistic music hall. In fact a mix of music hall songs and soldier songs is used. The title song, “Oh What a Lovely War” is not a soldier song,

but a music hall hit, and its existence underlines the fact that the dichotomy of music hall songs/ soldier songs has been much exaggerated. If there are practically no jingoistic soldier songs, there is significant dissent expressed in the music hall repertoire.<sup>29</sup>

Despite Littlewood's determination that the radical message not be lost, not all antimilitarists were happy with the production. Some were very conscious of the complexity of presenting an anti-war message through singalong: Littlewood's husband, communist singer and actor Ewan Maccoll accused the show of leaving audiences "feeling nice and comfy, in a rosy glow of nostalgia".<sup>30</sup>

Littlewood, for her part, comments on the effects of her presentation of war memory:

*Oh What a Lovely War* awakened race memory in our audiences. At the end of each performance people would come on stage bringing memories and mementoes, even lines of dialogue which sometimes turned up in the show.<sup>31</sup>

Littlewood's claim is that her production revived and revealed important truths about the war at this time when veterans were still common. This claim has recently been vigorously contested by important commentators, such as the present British Education secretary Michael Gove, who claimed :

The conflict has, for many, been seen through the fictional prism of dramas such as *Oh! What a Lovely War*, *The Monocled Mutineer* and *Blackadder*, as a misbegotten shambles – a series of catastrophic mistakes perpetrated by an out-of-touch elite. Even to this day there are Left-wing academics all too happy to feed those myths.<sup>32</sup>

Mr Gove is not alone: the play has become a frequent target for historians who have chosen the label “revisionist” and who wish to defend different aspects of empire policy in 1914 to 1918. Brian Bond in his 2002 book writes: “For a new generation in the 1960s the play and film of *Oh What a Lovely War* had a dramatic effect ... Until ... recently, historians had either reinforced the myths, or had failed to counter them.”<sup>33</sup> Others go further: “Who will not have seen the scurrilous 1960s film *Oh What a Lovely War!* or the equally reprehensible and more recent BBC production *Blackadder*”<sup>34</sup> writes Frank Davies, while Wolfson history prize winner, Andrew Roberts, in his *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples since 1900*, also denounces its “outrageous lampooning”.

The stage show was succeeded by a film version, directed by Richard Attenborough and starring Susannah York, John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Vanessa Redgrave and Dirk Bogarde. Richard Attenborough was able to get the funding to produce the film by impressing the financiers with a star studded cast. The film was the 16th most popular movie at the UK box office in 1969.<sup>35</sup>

Given the fact that the film’s Box Office results were not those of a smash hit, and also the fact that the theatre show was not shown professionally in the theatre for over twenty years, and the first DVD release of the film was in 2006, ten years after DVD film formats became common<sup>36</sup> it seems highly unlikely that the musical had the decisive effect on popular views of the war which some have claimed. Its lasting influence in some circles, though, is attested by its prominent presence in 2014 on the BBC History website.<sup>37</sup>

### **The songs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and tensions within discourses**

We have seen, then, the soldiers’ songs used by two politically dissimilar traditions. The question of why this is possible will be dealt with in the conclusions, but first I would



like to present some very recent uses of the songs, which sometimes reveal tensions inside the two discourses.

The development of the internet and particularly of YouTube has made visible uses of the soldiers' songs in local or marginal events which would previously have been invisible. I have collected a few examples, which involve some of the most well-known of these songs. The one most frequently sung is "Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire", one of the most bitter of the pieces, which includes the following lyrics:<sup>38</sup>

If you want to find the Sergeant

I know where he is (x3)

He's lying on the canteen floor

I saw him, I saw him

Lying on the canteen floor I saw him,

Lying on the Canteen floor

The brass hats...Drinking claret at Brigade HQ.

The general: pinning another medal on his chest.

The politicians....Drinking brandy at the House of Commons bar.

If you want the old battalion

I know where they are (x3)

They're hanging on the old barbed wire.

I saw them, I saw them

Hanging on the old barbed wire I saw them

Hanging on the old barbed wire.

Cover versions of such songs constitute a commemorative activity, and in most cases it is part of an antimilitarist and anti-establishment activist discourse. The highly successful Leeds rock group Chumbawumba included the song in 2008 on their album *English Rebel Songs 1381-1914*, alongside songs about the fourteenth century peasants' revolt, radical Diggers during the English civil war, and the Chartist movement of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup>

The songs fit most readily into musical genres which have been constituted as dissenting, in particular folk genres and punk rock. Frank McConnell produced in 2007 a folk version (few instruments, regional accent) of "Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire" accompanied by two other somewhat suggestive soldiers songs: "That's the Wrong Way to Tickle Marie" and "Mademoiselle from Armentiers".<sup>40</sup> The CD also contains readings of a series of war poems of which the dominant theme is antimilitarist. Peter Rothstein produced in 2007 a theatre show *All is Calm – the Christmas Truce of 1914*, a recounting of the 1914 truce, with several soldiers' songs, including "We're Here Because We're Here", "I Want to Go Home" and "Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire", as well as a series of carols and quotations from interviews with soldiers. The show went on stage in the United States between 2007 and 2014, and was also produced for the radio. In the United Kingdom, Folk at the Oak, a series of local folk concerts in Crick Northamptonshire, used both "Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire" and "I Don't Want to Be a Soldier".<sup>41</sup> David Olney, a folk singer, in concert in 2011, sang an *a Capella* version of "Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire". The US punk group "Sucker Punched by Christ" produces an accelerated version with prominent drums, and angry punk voicing, the singer stripped to the waist, a style perhaps particularly suited to the bitter tone of the song.<sup>42</sup>

Not all uses of the soldiers' songs in recent years are in antimilitarist or anti-establishment contexts, however. The version by The Spinning Jennys,<sup>43</sup> whose band name evokes "the olden days" and who sing dressed in Edwardian clothing, with a Union Jack draped on their piano, is followed by singing of music hall songs such as "A Long Way to Tipperary" and "Pack Up Your Troubles". The general tone of the concert seems to be nostalgia, so the cynical soldiers' song might seem out of place.

More distant still from antimilitarism is the case of the Military Wives choir. This singing group is a pro-military initiative aiming at raising public support for British soldiers and ex-soldiers, particularly in the context of the first ten years of the twenty first century when mass public opposition to British military interventions, actual or potential, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and Syria has been so vocal.<sup>44</sup> The choir sang the following soldiers' song at a number of their concerts.

The Bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling  
 For you but not for me:  
 For me the angels sing-a-ling-a-ling,  
 They've got the goods for me.  
 Oh! Death, where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling?  
 Oh! Grave, thy victory?  
 The Bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling  
 For you but not for me.

This soldiers' song, initially reported as being sung sardonically by soldiers leaving the trenches to their replacement regiments, was part of the Military Wives Choir concert in York in October 2013.<sup>45</sup> The singers sang in evening dress, in a traditional choral style

accompanied by a grand piano, and the song was inserted into a medley with “The Bells are ringing for me and my gal” a 1917 wedding song used in the 1942 musical comedy of the same name.

Another use of a soldiers’ song by institutions close to the military establishment is contained in the poetry reading organized in April 2014 by the Royal United Services Institute conflict war and culture event, in partnership with the Josephine Hart poetry foundation. The Royal United Services Institute presents itself as “an independent think tank engaged in cutting edge defence and security research. A unique institution, founded in 1831 by the Duke of Wellington.” Other recent RUSI events included “General Stanley McChrystal on Operational Leadership”, the “Chief of Defence Staff Lecture” and “Anders Fogh Rasmussen on NATO and Missile Defence”. At their event, “I Don’t Want to Be a Soldier” was read in formal poetry reading style, by top British actor, Rupert Evans, complete with cravate and leather-backed chair.

I don’t want a bayonet up my arsehole  
 I don’t want my bollocks shot away  
 I’d rather stay in England  
 In merry merry England  
 And fuck my bloody life away.

These examples bring up the question of appropriation, of who the soldiers’ songs might be seen to belong to. As a number of commentators have pointed out, military policy in contemporary society requires ideological campaigns at home. “Given that wars tend to be unpopular, the government and military try to recast appeals for war as support for individual troops.” writes Lindsay German of the Stop the War Campaign.<sup>46</sup> The use of soldiers’ songs

to showcase concern for the lives of individual soldiers can be part of attempts to defend British military policies. For antimilitarists, on the contrary, the songs are presented as belonging to the tradition of opposing elite plans which are against the interests of the mass of the people.

Tensions in antimilitarist uses of the soldiers' songs can also appear. In Derby, for the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, the musical play "Oh What a Lovely War!" was produced. This might appear to be a clearly antimilitarist choice. Nevertheless, one sees the following note: "Tickets are priced £6, with £1 from each sale being donated between The British Legion and Help for Heroes". The choice of charities, in particular "Help for heroes" participating in the opposite discourse, since a "hero" is necessarily someone wounded or killed in a worthwhile cause (brave serial killers are not called heroes). The "Help for heroes" website is clearly not antimilitarist, the founder making it clear "I loved my time in the army"<sup>47</sup>. The choice of these charities is likely to be a response to common opinions of which tradition the songs should belong to, and the naming of two charities is probably a sign that there was some disagreement involved. Another production of the show, in late 2014, has announced that profits will be given to a hospital for military veterans.<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion**

One of the reasons the songs speak to us today is because of what they say about human beings faced with extreme, life-threatening situations. This is, perhaps, just one more aspect of a more general characteristic of cultural production: the preference of cinema, television and even visual art for extreme situations – murders, kidnappings, catastrophes – is well-known. For creating and communicating war memories, we have shown that soldiers' songs are highly flexible objects. The French historian, Nicolas Offenstadt, categorized discourses on war memory as made up of three major strands: genealogical or family

discourses, local pride discourses, and activist discourses.<sup>49</sup> Soldiers' songs can be seen as belonging to two separate activist discourses. Antimilitarists who stage or support the production, in 2014, of the musical comedy *Oh What a Lovely War*, are hoping it will encourage anti-war feeling and activism, which, in the Britain of the last fifteen years has been at its highest point for several decades, in reaction to British interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. For the Military Wives Choir or the *Daily Telegraph*, the celebration of these songs of "modest heroes" fits with campaigns of solidarity with "our soldiers" in these twenty first century wars. This celebration is part of a right wing populist discourse which takes for granted the general correctness of the military policy of the British state, and campaigns for more recognition of the cost to ordinary soldiers; such discourses also hope to mute opposition to British foreign policy.

How can many of the same songs be used in such radically different ways? In fact, the anti-militarists and the military populists have some things in common. Both share, along with a large section of the population, a desire to explore close-up the texture and feelings of life in the trenches. This experiential approach to the war has been dominant in the centenary, as witness the new galleries at the Imperial War Museum, or their campaign "Lives of World War One".<sup>50</sup> Both groups want to privilege the voice of the ordinary soldier. For the military populists, the heroes who fought for the Empire deserve listening to and having their life in wartime vividly recounted, despite the dissenting tone of much of the soldier song repertoire. At the end of the day, these soldiers won, and clear victories for Britain have been much rarer these last decades, leading to an increased concentration in conservative circles on past glories. The fact that the dissenting tone of the songs had often been toned down even in the trenches, in order to please a mixed group of other ranks makes this process of re-appropriation easier.

For the anti-militarists, the victims of a bloodbath which in no way served their interests deserve to have their voices heard, in particular in order to underline the huge gap between their viewpoint and that of the military authorities. The fact that the soldiers sing about suffering and sometimes about dying, but not about killing, facilitates both the initial popularity of the songs among frontline soldiers, and the incorporation of the songs into each of these two discourses

The importance of popular song in war memories, I think, will bear further exploration, which to be fruitful needs to bear in mind that popular music must be analysed as a mass activity and not just as a corpus of texts and melodies. For a particular repertoire, such as the soldier song, understanding the songs also means understanding the selection mechanisms which allow a song to join the repertoire. There is also a need for further research on the “nostalgia” aspect of the use of these songs. Nostalgia was considered a danger for some of the team producing *Oh, What a Lovely War*, and is often a sentiment difficult to identify and analyse. A number of researchers have worked on nostalgia and popular music, and the application of some of their conclusions to the case of soldiers’ songs would certainly be productive.<sup>51</sup>

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*

<sup>2</sup> See for example R. Palmer and L. Macdonald, *What a Lovely War: British Soldiers' Songs*

<sup>3</sup> F.T. Nettleingham, *Tommy's Tunes*, 1917 and *More Tommy's Tunes*, 1918.

<sup>4</sup> J. Brophy, and E. Partridge, *The Long Trail*

<sup>5</sup> For example M. Arthur, *When This Bloody War Is Over: Soldiers' Songs of the First World War*, and M. Pegler, *Soldiers' Songs and Slang of the Great War*

<sup>6</sup> *Burnley News*, 20 September 1919.

<sup>7</sup> Also, indeed, different from German or French soldiers' songs, but this cannot be covered here. A full analysis of British soldiers' songs can be found in chapter 6 of J. Mullen, *The Show Must Go On! Popular Song in Britain in the First World War*.

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, music hall songs about the glory of war, or calling for men to volunteer, almost completely disappear after the first few months of the war.

<sup>9</sup> M. Arthur, *When this Bloody War...* p.89

<sup>10</sup> *Evening Telegraph*, 2 July 1930.

<sup>11</sup> From Brophy's introduction to the 1965 edition.

<sup>12</sup> *Evening Telegraph*, 2 July 1930.

<sup>13</sup> "I want to go home. I want to go home/ I don't want to go in the trenches no more/ Where whizzbangs and shrapnel, They whistle and roar./ Take me over the sea/ Where the Alleyman can't get at me/Oh my! I don't want to die./ I want to go home."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Dundee Courier* 12 sept 1939.

<sup>16</sup> Oxford University Press, 2001.

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<sup>17</sup> The song about General Shute, which ends “A shit would be shot without mourners/ if someone shot that shit Shute” comes to mind.

<sup>18</sup> B. Adams et al, “Pop Goes the Major” London: Francis, Day & Hunter, 1920.

<sup>19</sup> *Evening Telegraph*, 2 July 1930

<sup>20</sup> J. Brophy and E. Partridge, *Daily Telegraph Dictionary of Tommies’ Songs and Slang*, p. viii.

<sup>21</sup> J. Brophy and E. Partridge, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> T. Ashworth, *Trench Warfare 1914-1918, The Live and Let Live System*, London, Pan, 1980.

<sup>23</sup> J. Littlewood and Theatre Workshop, *Oh What a Lovely War*.

<sup>24</sup> Chilton had already made radio documentaries on other subjects, including the American Civil War and The Salvation Army, in each case using songs from the subject periods to bring his documentaries to life

<sup>25</sup> In January 2014, a BBC radio documentary about Charles Chilton’s original show was broadcast.

<sup>26</sup> P. Tagg, *Music’s Meanings*, p. 451.

<sup>27</sup> H. Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, p. 127

<sup>28</sup> M. Sweet, "Oh What A Lovely War – why the battle still rages"

<sup>29</sup> Textes et Contextes N° 6 (2011) <http://revuesshs.u-bourgogne.fr/textes&contextes/>

<sup>30</sup> H. Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*, p. 128.

<sup>31</sup> J. Littlewood, *Joan’s book*, p 694.

<sup>32</sup> *Daily Mail*, January 2, 2014.

<sup>33</sup> B. Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*, p .i.

<sup>34</sup> F. Davies and G. Maddocks, *Bloody Red Tabs*, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Sunday Times*, September 27, 1970

<sup>36</sup> B. Newman, “Another opening, another show: *Kat and the Kings* and *Oh what a lovely war!*”

<sup>37</sup> <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zws9xnb>>.

<sup>38</sup> All the examples which are quoted here were easily found on YouTube, in November 2014.

<sup>39</sup> <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_K1BdDVvV9Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_K1BdDVvV9Q)> (November 29 2014).

<sup>40</sup> M. Arthur, *When This Bloody War is Over...*, p.76

<sup>41</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yL2NqXZITLY>> (November 29 2014).

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<sup>42</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfbnKwB19So>> (November 29 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Not to be confused with the Swedish rock group, the Spinning Jennies

<sup>44</sup> The anti-war demonstration in London on the 15th February 2003 was estimated by organizers to count 2 million people, while police estimated 750 000. <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-161546/Anti-war-protest-Britains-biggest-demo.html>> (retrieved 10 October 2014).

<sup>45</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSjeEcv-IHY>>.

<sup>46</sup> *The Independent*, October 23, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> <<http://www.helpforheroes.org.uk/news/>>, October 14 2014.

<sup>48</sup> <[http://www.walterpaulproductions.co.uk/page\\_3019948.html](http://www.walterpaulproductions.co.uk/page_3019948.html)>.

<sup>49</sup> N. Offenstadt, *14-18 Aujourd'hui*, p.11.

<sup>50</sup> <<http://www.iwm.org.uk/exhibitions/iwm-london/first-world-war-galleries>>, October 26 2014.

<sup>51</sup> See for example, Frederick S. Barrett et al. "Music-evoked nostalgia"