Humor, Entertainment, and Popular Culture during World War I
This page intentionally left blank
Humor, Entertainment, and Popular Culture during World War I

Edited by
Clémentine Tholas-Disset
and
Karen A. Ritzenhoff
HUMOR, ENTERTAINMENT, AND POPULAR CULTURE DURING WORLD WAR I
Copyright © Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen A. Ritzenhoff, 2015.
Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2015 978-1-137-44909-2
All rights reserved.
First published in 2015 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®
in the United States—a division of St. Martin’s Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.
Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world,
this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited,
registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills,
Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.
Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies
and has companies and representatives throughout the world.
Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States,
the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.
DOI 10.1057/9781137436436
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Humor, entertainment, and popular culture during World War I / edited by
Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Clémentine Tholas-Disset.

Summary: “This collection explores how humor and entertainment were used
internationally as strategies to help survive the chaos of the Great War by the
soldiers in combat as well as civilians. The contributors in this volume analyze
how wartime escapism expressed through recreational activities, the media or
artistic creation served as tools of diversion, triggering national pride and hope,
among the countries of the Entente or the Alliance powers. These mechanisms
of survival also provided a way to unite the general public behind the war effort
as well as to strengthen the bonds between the home and the battlefront”—
Provided by publisher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. World War, 1914–1918—Humor. 2. World War, 1914–1918—Social
aspects. 3. Popular culture—History—20th century. 4. Entertainment events—
II. Tholas-Disset, Clémentine. editor.
D526.2.H86 2015
940.3’1—dc23 2014044277
A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.
Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.
First edition: May 2015
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
In memory of my grand-mother who told me many family war stories, stories I will pass on to my son Jacques.

(Clémentine Tholas-Disset)

For Dominik. My warrior who keeps me laughing.

(Karen A. Ritzenhoff)
This page intentionally left blank
Contents

List of Illustrations ix

Preface xi
Karen Randell

Introduction Humor, Entertainment, and Popular Culture during World War I (WWI) 1
Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen A. Ritzenhoff

Part I Movies to Please? Laughter, Diversion, and Nationhood in Great War Films

1 Alf’s Button (1920): Comedy in the Trenches 23
   Lawrence Napper

   Giaime Alonge and Francesco Pitassio

3 Hoaxes, Ballyhoo Stunts, War, and Other Jokes: Humor in the American Marketing of Hollywood War Films during the Great War 59
   Fabrice Lyczba

4 Johanna Enlists (1918): An Elliptic and Comic Portrayal of the Great War in Motion Pictures 77
   Clémentine Tholas-Disset

Part II A War of Witty Words and Images: Novels, Newspapers, and Illustrations

5 War Memoir as Entertainment: Walter Bloem’s Vormarsch (1916) 91
   Jakub Kazecki

6 Nature and Functions of Humor in Trench Newspapers (1914–1918) 107
   Koenraad Du Pont
The Nuanced Comic Perspectives of the Cartoons in Mr. Punch’s History of the Great War
Renée Dickason

World War I in Bande Dessinée: La Semaine de Suzette and the Birth of a Breton Heroine at War!
Anne Cirella-Urrutia

Marianne in the Trenches: Typology and Iconographic Polysemy of Marianne between 1914 and 1918
Laurent Bibl

Part III Entertaining on Stage: Pleasurable and Political Live Performances

The Range of Laughter: First Person Reports from Entertainers of the Over There Theatre League
Felicia Hardison Londré

“You Can’t Help Laughing, Can You?” Humor and Symbolic Empowerment in British Music Hall Song during the Great War
John Mullen

J. M. Barrie and World War I
Jenna L. Kubly

Part IV Promoting War Values and Routine, Coping with a Different Social Order

Sugary Celebrations and Culinary Activism: Sugar, Cooking, and Entertaining during World War I
Amy D. Wells

Chunder Goes Forth: Humor, Advertising, and the Australian Nation in the Bulletin during World War I
Robert Crawford

Mobilizing Morale: At the Front in a Flivver with the American Ambulanciers
T. Adrian Lewis

Silencing Laughter: Pioneering Director Lois Weber and the Uncanny Gaze in Silent Film
Karen A. Ritzenhoff

Notes on Contributors

Index

123
135
151
169
181
197
211
225
245
257
269
275
Illustrations

Figures

P.1 Picture of Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red (2014), an installation by Paul Cummins at the Tower of London xi
P.2 Picture of Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red (2014), an installation by Paul Cummins at the Tower of London xii
2.1 Maciste’s fencing style 45
2.2 Turning social codes upside down: enemies as a sled 48
2.3 A clash for civilization: Gli Unni...e gli altri front cover (1915) 50
2.4 Bodily energy and national space: Maciste in the Alps 52
3.1 “Kaiser smashed in the jaw” and other film-related “news,” Motion Picture News (May 11, 1918) 62
3.2 “The Thing [...] 9 feet high:” war-horror entertained through lobby displays in Montreal, Motion Picture News (May 25, 1918) 64
3.3 Realistic frisson: real soldiers on stage in Seattle, Moving Picture World (July 3, 1918) 68
9.1 Georges Bertin Scott, Marthe Chenal, singing La Marseillaise (1914) 155
9.2 Adolphe Willette, “Le coup dans le dos,” Le Sourire (July 9, 1914) 158
9.3 Adolphe Willette, Le Chevalier Noir (1914) 160
14.2 The Bulletin (November 16, 1916) 236
16.2 Guilt-ridden confrontation. A scene from Where Are My Children? (1916) 261

Table

13.1 Formal dinner menu suggestions from The Art of Entertaining 1917 220
This page intentionally left blank
Preface

Karen Randell

War stories have always been a part of my life. I saw cardinal red paper poppies in my local newsagent today and it reminded me of that legacy. All over the United Kingdom, they will be on sale, a symbol from Flanders fields adopted by the Royal British Legion, and in Canada and the United States\textsuperscript{1} since 1920, to honor the fallen of World War I (WWI). This year, to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the start of the war, a developing sculpture of ceramic ruby poppies has been installed around the Tower of London on the Thames.\textsuperscript{2} It is a sprawling blood red carpet that sweeps meters along the grass moat and up the tower walls: it is an arresting and dramatic sight (Figure P.1 & Figure P.2).

Remembrance of this war is steeped in drama; it is memorialized in dozens of monuments in cities, towns, and villages across Europe and the United States. The narrative of a lost generation is a pervasive and persuasive one, just under one million British men died, for instance, during the four years. Like all wars, this war was a tragic loss of life and the account

Figure P.1 Picture of Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red (2014), an installation by Paul Cummins at the Tower of London.
of these losses has been rendered mythological by the war poets and memoirs published since the 1920s. Brian Bond suggests that studying WWI as history is often negated in favor of a cultural history where teachers of English literature are more likely to educate generations of young people about this war than those teaching History.

Whether we learn about the Great War in our English or History classes, the tragic rhetoric of this war has remained firm in the public psyche and as Ian F. W. Beckett points out, is still “routinely invoked in the British national press.” The way that we discuss this war in the twenty-first century is solemn, respectful, and most certainly humorless. How then can we contemplate reading a collection that engages with entertainment and humor, comedy and fun? We benefit from hearing competing voices to tell our histories. What is clearly articulated in this volume is that there was a narrative during and after the war that did not rely on tragedy but rather engaged with the ordinary experiences of ordinary people who served, who waited, who entertained and who, as Lawrence Napper suggests in the first chapter, spoke “in the language of their time,” a time before the mythology.

I started by saying that war stories have always been a part of my life: amusing war stories told by ordinary men with ordinary voices without a hint of tragedy or melodrama. My father “fought for King and Country” during the Korean War. In fact, although he used this phrase, my father did not actually fight: he was instead an army nurse. During my childhood he amused my brothers and I, usually during mealtimes, with stories of his military service. These were always hilarious accounts of “jankers,” usually peeling potatoes or running around parade grounds, and times spent with his mates in off-limit bars. Dad’s most vivid account was of the night of his twenty-first birthday, when he had to stand guard duty and his mate went to get drunk for him. On returning to the barracks, Dad and his friends had to sober the poor guy up so that he would not be put on a charge for his raucous proxy celebrations.
What dad did not tell us was what it was really like to be in the War. Much later, when I was writing my doctoral thesis about war, its aftermath, and film, he did agree to talk to me about what he did in the war. As part of his national service, my father was stationed at the Military Base Hospital in Kure, Japan, between December 1951 and April 1953. As Private Nursing Orderly Richard Randell, he served on rotation in all parts of the hospital from triage to surgical wards. He described it as being very like any other hospital, but that the men that came in were “pretty bad” and had usually been “patched up” in the field hospitals. Many men died but “you just had to get on with it, you didn’t get counselling in our day.” There were no jokes during this conversation, no anecdotes, many pauses, and very little detail. His comment about having to “get on with it” identifies the gap between his comic performances of being at war for “King and Country” encountered in his stories of fun and friends and the visceral realities of “patching” men up that had been fighting in Korea. My mother told me later that he was exhausted after our discussion and thought that he had told me (and her) “too much.”

My father’s oft repeated and much loved stories, which he delivered as if he were a stand-up comedian, were a constant re-telling of not being in the war, they were amusing tales to hide the realities of his witness to death and injury. Whether dad was sparing us, or himself, in not revealing the details of his life during this period, I cannot tell. What I do know is that I still do not know what it was like to be there; but what is it I want to know? Male histories, that I cannot access, have been a constant fascination and frustration to me. However, the vicarious (dis)pleasure that I have from watching war films, in particular those in American popular cinemas, has allowed me a fantasy interaction with the experiences of men at war and of my father’s history. My experience, then, is that men find creative and amusing ways to mask their experiences of war. Thus, war stories and traumas in my family are narrated through performance and ritual, through comedy and sadness. There is a duality for me about the narration of war, one in which factual evidence is masked, screened, by comedic performance. This same duality is expressed in Matthias Alfen’s sculpture, a Janus-faced head that was chosen as the cover of this book.

These personal experiences have kept me drawn to those narratives. A WWI soldier who used comedy to understand his experiences was Buster Keaton, who signed up in July 1918. Keaton fairly quickly made himself indispensable to his commanders by forming the Sunshine Players, with 21 players and 36-piece military band, who regularly entertained his Infantry troop company and other corps. Keaton said of his time there,

I spent eleven months in the army, seven months in France. I was close enough to hear it, but by the time I hit the front, the Germans were in retreat, which was a great thing. I was tickled to death at that.\(^6\)

This entertaining take on his experiences pepper his biographies where he relates tales of being an insubordinate soldier, but who ultimately had an amusing time of it. His tales are hard to take seriously when we consider the
discipline necessary to keep the hundreds of men in a company in line and on target. Those moments, retold by Keaton in the 1960s, feel rehearsed and replicate the scenes in his 1930 film *Doughboys* by director Edward Sedgwick so well that one wonders which came first, the scenario or the war experience? Two tales in particular suggest that the narratives were collapsed over the years of re-telling.

Keaton tells the story that he turned the wrong way in his first drill and the whole squad fell over him. Blesh puts it thus:

> He was down. The soldier in front of him, swinging around like a revolving robot, but suddenly faced him, and his fist, clutching the rifle butt, had caught Buster square on the chin. Orders are orders; the whole company began walking over him; then a man stumbled over him, cursed, fell, and the ranks began piling up. Orders or no orders, forward movement halted. The rest is a 40th Division legend. Corporals, sergeants, even shavetails, working like football referees, untangled the pile up.

> Someone fanned Buster's face. Slowly he came to, then, faintly, he asked, “Did we win?”

And another from his crossing to France on the Santa Fe:

> Buster was in the shower [covered in lice soap] when the submarine alarms began ringing all over the ship. He heard the rush of feet all around. Covered from head to foot with green germicidal lather, he pondered. Was it another drill? Or was it really a sub this time, and all hands to the lifeboats? … Out on deck he dashed and into his place in line, clothed only in soap. It was another drill of course.

Both these scenes can be found reproduced in *The Doughboys* which was advertised then and discussed in all biographies of Keaton as being based on his war experiences. What is disconcerting is the detail of the re-telling in the 1960s and the faithful recreation of these incidents of 1918 in 1930. These stories seem to me to be a more likely remembering of the film scenario than any quirky and humorous attempt by Keaton to brighten up his army days.

Such re-telling reminds us that it is important to look at immediate narratives too in our desire to piece together the war stories that we find so compelling. Archive work can illuminate the representations that we see on screen and enable us to place these texts within their cultural context, to see the films as perhaps they were understood at their time of production and distribution. Letters home, such as those I read this summer reveal ordinary voices that add a layer of meaning to the cultural artefacts: ordinary voices telling ordinary voices. Voices such as Charles Acker, a soldier from Chicago who wrote nearly every day to his father or his wife from France on YMCA headed paper to tell them that he had “nothing much to say” offer an ordinary narrative to complement the star performance of Keaton’s narratives. He goes on to describe normal daily life, often writing
about food, “I would give anything for one of them dinners Ethel cook Sunday”9 or about the shows that were put on to entertain the troops, even once the war was over. Felicia Hardison Londré details in this collection10 how troop entertainers such as the “Over There Theatre League,” formed at the Palace Theatre, New York City, arrived in France as late as summer 1918 and stayed until the troops were all home. These entertainment groups were very important to the morale of the men, most, particularly after November 1918. This is possibly why—in Keaton’s view—he needed to remain in France with his Sunshine Players until July 1919. A letter sent in January 1919 by Acker demonstrates that the travelling entertainers not only provided joy to the men but also made them feel home sick:

Well babe they had a show over in our barrack this afternoon there was three lady and a man one of the ladys [sic] and the man was from NJ but I never knew them but they gave a good show they are the first American lady I have seen since we have been over there and it sure did make me feel like being home with you. A girl from Chicago sang my little girl and I was thinking of you all the time. You said you are getting lonesome for me. Well babe I will bet you anything, you ain’t any more lonesome for me than I am for you [sic]. Well babe I didn’t mind it so bad when the war was going on but since the war has stopped I feel just like coming home it is a good thing there ain’t any bridge across the pond. Well babe I guess my turn will come when I will soon be home sooner or later again.11

His comment that is wasn’t so bad when the war was “going on” reminds us of those thousands of troops who remained on the ground in France until July 1919 because of a lack of transport and the time it took to cross the Atlantic. Also, the American Expeditionary Forces were signed on for one year and those that joined last got shipped home last. Acker was classified A1 in Chicago on February 18, 1918, and shipped out two months later. His experience was common and mirrors that of silent film star Buster Keaton. While Acker remained in France long after the war ended, feeling lonesome and forgotten, Keaton stayed upbeat in his narration in ways that Acker clearly is finding difficult to maintain by the end of his time in France. Performance and storytelling enabled Keaton to discuss his “career at the rear” when he got “back from the back,” and to keep that version of his service alive throughout his lifetime. Humor not only saved Keaton’s composure but also informed his film performances, casting a different light on the Great War.

Thus the duality about war that I see in my own family narratives is also articulated through the films of the 1920s. It is difficult for Keaton to narrate his own service without defaulting to the only language that he knew; comedy pratfalls and stunts. What he felt about being in the war can be, perhaps, understood though the memories that he wove and the melancholic gaze that stares out at us from the screen in every film that he stars in from 1920 to Doughboys. The processes by which ordinary people negotiate grief, losses, and fears—though laughter and through silence—is
played out over and over. The ways in which traumas are negotiated is a cultural act. Men of my father’s generation did not talk about their memories and fears, did not “need counselling,” did not consider what they had done brave or even particularly exceptional. The ways in which wars are remembered is culturally specific, and relies on the narrative aptitude of those telling the story. Cultural histories such as those contained within this collection are vitally important narratives to add to and counter the mythological and historical accounts already so prevalent. What my experience can shed light on is that the articulated memories of war will only provide a partial recovery of history. It is a history of ordinary behavior, of humor and of emotional survival and you will not find it in the history books alone.

Notes

1. This has now disappeared from popular practice in the United States.
5. See chapter 1, Lawrence Napper, “Alf’s Button (1920): Comedy in the Trenches.”
8. Ibid., 115.
9. Charles Acker: Correspondence received October 26, 1918. Box 3K/35: World War One Soldiers Collection by Kind Permission of the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.
10. See chapter 10, Felicia Londré, “The Range of Laughter: First Person Reports from Entertainers of the Over There League.”

Works Cited


Films

The Doughboys. Directed by Edward Sedgwick, USA, 1930.