

# Letting Loose the Doggerel of War

Humorous and Satirical Journals in Britain, France and Germany 1914-1918

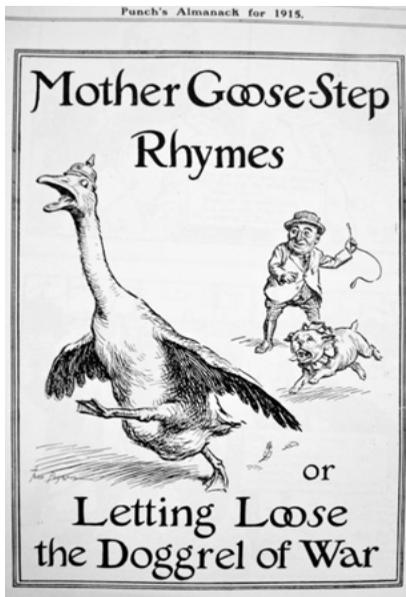
---

LESLEY MILNE

*Close in the wake of capering Time  
I pant and still I pant in vain;  
I cannot catch him in a rhyme  
Nor snapshot in a passing strain.  
»Plaint of a topical bard«,  
Punch, 25 December 1918*

This essay surveys aspects of the First World War as »fought« in the leading humorous/satirical journals of Britain, France, and Germany, represented by the journals *Punch*, *Le Rire* and *Simplicissimus* respectively. Cartoons and drawings are often used by historians because they condense a complex idea into one striking visual image, but the focus here will be on verbal humour, specifically light verse, or »doggerel«, because these forms of written text can also, as the epigraph above suggests, provide a memorable snapshot, capturing a moment in a line or rhyme in the same way as a cartoonist does in a drawing. A pictorial image from *Punch*'s Almanack for 1915, which was published in December 1914, highlights this role of verbal humour.

Figure 1: »Punch« Declares Intent to Hound the Enemy in Comic Verse



Source: Punch's Almanack for 1915  
(Reproduced with the permission of Punch Limited)

Mr Punch unleashes his faithful dog Toby in a deliberate misquotation from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (where the phrase is »let slip the dogs of war«), while Mother Goose, associated with fairy-tales, nursery rhymes and the British pantomime tradition, is co-opted into the mockery of the German marching step and pointed helmet.

Laughter is most often deployed today to decry the very idea of war, which is regarded as a failure to resolve conflict by other means. But when war is engaged, it is perceived by those who fight as something that »has to be done«, and in this context laughter becomes an adjunct of war, a coping mechanism for soldiers and societies under stress. World War I was a total war, mobilising all available resources of combatants and civilians alike, a context that intensifies every function of humour. Mocking laughter asserts superiority over the enemy, but can also mask secret anxieties and fears. The incongruity that so often provokes laughter can be found at every step, as war-time ways jostle with the remembered modes of peace-time. Irony comes into play as a means of reconciling incompatible forces at their most extreme, matters of life and death becoming everyday reality. Laughter is a

release, a safety-valve for suppressed emotions, while at the same time insulating and anaesthetising against both pity and horror. In its social function as a corrective to undesirable behaviour, laughter is deployed against those who are viewed as offending against the patriotic consensus. Within the consensus, laughter promotes social cohesion, raising the spirits and helping to maintain morale. The years 1914-1918 were a historical watershed, the world's first experience of industrialised carnage. After that, in the words of Philip Larkin's poem *MCMXIV*, there was »never such innocence again«. The aim of this study is to assist our imaginative understanding of the war-time mentalities in a conflict that is so relatively near to us in historical time and yet so very distant from us, across that great watershed of historical trauma.

The three selected journals were all published weekly, with both cartoons and written contributions: sketches, stories, quips, and verse. *Punch* was an old-established satirical review that had been founded in 1841, on the model of the French *Charivari*, as indicated by its subtitle: *Punch, or the London Charivari*. The name *Punch* referred to the rowdy puppet of the Punch and Judy show, but by the 1900s *Punch* had become an institution, part of the establishment, Mr Punch himself acquiring in the illustrations a respectably bourgeois aspect, albeit still with a twinkle of mischief in his eye. *Punch* represented the world of the leisured middle or upwardly middle classes, its ethos that of the public school and sport, with its codified rules of behaviour and fair play. *Le Rire*, founded in 1894, belongs to a different tradition of humorous illustrated journalism. In France censorship had been lifted from drawings in 1881, which gave freedom to treat light and risqué subjects (cf. *Histoire générale de la presse française* 1972: 385). In its title *Le Rire* offered quite simply »Laughter« and represented an image of Paris as the city of gaiety, its ethos that of the »*belle époque*«, the two-decade golden age of peace, prosperity and pleasure that came to an end in 1914. There was a break in the journal's publication between 1 August and 21 November 1914, when production was disrupted by mobilisation of the totality of the male population fit and of age to bear arms (those between 20 and 40), which emptied the printing works and editorial offices. When the journal resumed, it was under the war-time title of *Le Rire Rouge*, »red« indicating martial rather than politically radical intent. Targeted on an urban and urbane readership, it continued with its traditional themes and stock situations, but now in military uniform (cf. Lethève 1961: 165). *Simplicissimus* was founded in 1896, its mission to restore sharpness and radicalism to humorous-satirical journalism in Germany. The journal took its title from the novel of the same

name by Grimmelshausen, published in 1669 and set in the Thirty Years' War, where the simpleton narrator observes the grotesque depravities of the warring armies. Satire in the journal was aggressive, symbolized by its chosen mascot, a red, belligerent bulldog. Published in Munich, one of the magnet cultural cities of the time, *Simplicissimus* boasted a cosmopolitan array of artists and quickly secured an international reputation. As befitted its title it was strongly anti-militarist, right up to the summer of 1914, and when war broke out it was faced with a dilemma. However, along with the German Social Democratic Party, it took the decision to support the »*Burgfrieden*« – a truce among the social and political factions to ward off the external threat. During the war, according to a contemporary, the journal expressed the opinions and tendencies across a wide spectrum of educated German public (cf. Avenarius 1972: 221-222).

*Punch*, *Le Rire* and *Simplicissimus* all lent their unstinting support to the national war effort in their respective countries, and were, to that extent, organs of governmental propaganda. However, as Christopher Clark has explained, in each country there was a mood of »defensive patriotism, for the aetiology of this conflict was so complex and strange that it allowed soldiers and civilians in all the belligerent states to be confident that theirs was a war of defence, that their countries had been attacked or provoked by a determined enemy« (Clark 2012: 553). The war was thus perceived on all sides as a war of national survival, and it has been pointed out that in such a situation people might be perfectly aware that they were being propagandised, but not actually care; they wished to believe the best of themselves and the worst of the enemy. The key was that the propaganda had to be credible and not too much (cf. Bourne 2001: 47-48).

Humour, of course, is an excellent vehicle for such propaganda. Among the various functions of humour as deployed by societies under stress, the most basic is the need to dispel fear. This was identified by *Le Rire* in early November 1918 on the topic of Spanish flu (which reached its apogee in France in October 1918, when there were 200,000 deaths, half of whom were soldiers). The journal mentioned that »*la grippe espagnole*« was being joked about in song and cartoon because »people don't want to be afraid of it« (on ne veut pas en avoir peur). Each journal met this same human need: in circumstances that most people could do nothing about, they wanted to laugh so as not to be afraid. This was vital for the maintenance of morale, the role that the journals formulated for themselves in order to justify their continued existence as purveyors of laughter while the nation was engaged in the stern task of war.

Each journal adopted an attitude of defiance. The mode of *Punch* is defiant levity, subsequently defined in *Mr Punch's History of the Great War* as »that peculiar and blessed birth-right which enables [an Englishman] to overthrow the Giant Despair with the weapon of whimsical humour« (231). For *Le Rire* the mode of defiance is constantly affirmed as Gallic *gai  t  *, again seen as part of a national birth-right. The laughter of *Simplicissimus* is that of defiant challenge, against encirclement by a whole world of enemies but specifically against Britain (almost always, however, referred to as »England«); this is challenge to the old order, the old empire that seeks to deny the new young nation its rightful »place in the sun«.

Expressing in comic form the language of national pride and defiance of the enemy, the journals continued an ancient tradition: that of »flyting«, the word commonly used in English scholarship to refer to the stylized boast-insult contests found throughout Norse literature. The tradition has been summarised as follows: »The flyting is [...] a ›voice war‹, and the disputants [are] ›word warriors‹ or ›speech champions‹« (Clover 1987: 172-173). There is a parody of flyting in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (a fine example of history and humour). In an early scene, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table approach a castle held by the French, who shout insults, such as »I wave my private parts at your aunties« and »I fart in your general direction«. The insults are effective, forcing Arthur and his knights into bewildered retreat. An echo of flyting survives in living traditions, such as football chants, for instance the famous boast of the Millwall supporters: »Nobody likes us, and we don't care«. Interestingly, this obeys a central rule of flyting, which is that »the facts are not disputed, but their importance is diminished« (Clover 1987: 174). It may be a fact that »nobody likes us«, but that is not important because »we don't care«. The rule that facts are not contested but instead are deflected or diminished has a classical antecedent. Herodotus in his *Histories* relates the anecdote of a Spartan soldier at the Battle of Thermopylae who, when told of the Persian boast that their arrows would block out the sun, responded: »Then we shall fight in the shade«. The acceptance of a threat, boast or insult in order to diminish its significance thus has a long lineage as a device for sustaining morale in the face of military hazard.

Acceptance of an enemy's boast can be seen in »The Cockerel on the Bell-tower« (*Le Coq du clocher*), which appeared in *Le Rire* on 8 May 1915, referring to the German conquest of Belgium and the German flag flying on the cathedral of Notre Dame in Antwerp. A passing German proudly observes: »That's my flag you see up there, / *Und   ber alles* the most fair«

(Cela, monsieur, c'est mon drapeau, / Und über alles le plus beau). The Belgian rejoinder acknowledges the presence of the flag, but continues:

But you in turn must now admit	Mais veuillez aussi reconnaître
The only place you've found for it	Que celui-ci n'a pu se mettre
Is right beneath our ancient cock	Qu'au-dessous de notre vieux coq,
Staunch and solid as a rock.	Solide au poste comme un roc.
As he cannot come down from there,	Jamais on ne le vit descendre,
Upon my soul, I do declare,	Et c'est ennuyeux, à tout prendre,
Without a pot, and here's the snag,	N'est-ce pas? N'ayant pas de pot,
He'll do his business on your flag!	Il doit faire sur ton drapeau!

In other words: yes, the flag is there, but not quite *über alles*; the cockerel (emblem of France) is still up there with ammunition to dump on German pride.

One German example that expresses the essence of flyting, in its language of national pride and defiance, is the »Hymn of Hate against England« (Haßgesang gegen England), written by Ernst Lissauer. In its opening lines the poem states that for the French and the Russians there is neither love nor hate: it is simply a matter of holding the borders against them. The rest of the poem affirms and reaffirms in its refrain: »We have all but a single hate, / We love as one, we hate as one, / We have one foe and one alone – England!« (Wir haben nur einen einzigen Haß, / Wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint, / Wir haben nur einen einzigen Feind: England!; Lissauer, tr. Henderson 1915). Lissauer also created the phrase »God punish England« (Gott strafe England). This Hymn of Hate and the slogan were obvious targets for satirists on the Allied side. The British armies, with stoical acceptance, jokingly diminished the morning and evening bombardments by referring to them as »the morning hate« and »the evening hate«. This hatred fixed solely on England seems to take France slightly aback, however. On 23 January 1915 we find *Le Rire* in its survey of the week ironising over the »franco-mania« in Germany: »All right, concession for concession: [...] We do not detest Austria. [...] We haven't the time. And she is so insignificant anyway!« (Eh bien, concession pour concession: [...] Nous ne détestons pas l'Autriche. [...] Nous n'avons pas le temps. Et puis, elle est si insignifiante!). This suggests a suspicion that France also is being viewed as insignificant, and the focus on England as sole enemy can therefore be interpreted as an insult to France. The insult, however, was avenged in a satirical chanson »Dieu punisse l'Angleterre!«, published in *Le Rire* on 7 August 1915:

If the Boche is out a-walking and  
 A brick falls on his bonce,  
 »This is all the fault of England«,  
 Is the German's first response.  
 Not seeking further explanation  
 For his each and every pain  
 »God punish the English nation«,  
 Is the German's sole refrain.

Are his feet cold?  
 Do his teeth hurt?  
 Is his chair hard?  
 Is he dying of thirst?  
 Has he lost his  
 Shirt-collar stud?  
 Did he forget  
 To turn off the gas  
 Before leaving the house?  
 Every hitch in his day  
 Translates by this one  
 Imprecation:

– May God punish England!

[...]

If his pipe is stuffed with herbage  
 And his butter tastes all wrong,  
 And his bread's all crap and garbage,  
 Always it's the same old song;  
 When he's sick of food that's ersatz,  
 And his stomach moans and wails,  
 It's »God punish England!« that's  
 The rumble of his entrails.

From duodenum  
 To jejunum,  
 From pancreas  
 Into pylorus,  
 Down through the nooks  
 Of digestive loops;  
 The colon next groans

Quand le Boche sur la tête  
 D'une tuile reçoit un coup,  
 C'est de la faute à l'Angleterre;  
 L'Angleterre est cause de tout.  
 Sans vouloir percer le mystère  
 De ses moindres désagréments,  
 C'est »Dieu punisse l'Angleterre!«  
 Le refrain de tout Allemand.

A-t-il froid aux pieds?  
 Souffre-t-il des dents?  
 Est-il-mal assis?  
 Crève-t-il de soif?  
 A-t-il perdu son  
 Bouton de faux-col?  
 A-t-il-oublié  
 De fermer son gaz  
 Avant de partir?  
 Chaque ennui qu'il a  
 Se traduit par cette  
 Imprecation:

– Que le Vieux-Dieu punisse  
 l'Angleterre!

[...]

S'il ne fume pas sa bouffarde  
 Et si son beurre a goût de suif,  
 Si sa table s'empainkakarde,  
 C'est toujours l'Anglais qu'est fautif.  
 De sa misère alimentaire  
 Quand son ventre se plaint tout haut  
 C'est »Dieu punisse l'Angleterre!«  
 Qui court le long ses boyaux.

Du duodénum  
 Dans le jéjunum  
 Du pancréas au  
 Pylore aussitôt,  
 Dans tous les recoins  
 Des deux intestins,  
 Dans le coecum creux

»God«, upon which  
A »punish« intones  
From the appendix;  
And from sphincter the grand  
Finale: »Eng-land!«...

– May God punish England!

The Boche in bed with his missus  
His limbs stretches out beside hers,  
And their mouths seek with their kisses  
To light the fire that stirs.  
Alas, no passion ignites it,  
He's tired, and torpor prevails;  
So to rouse himself he recites it,  
The mantra that never fails:

– May God punish

.ay God punish

..y God punish

... God punish

... .od punish

... ..d punish

... ..punish

... .. . unish

... .. . nish

... .. .ish

... .. .sh

... .. .h!

– May God punish England!

On entend »Que Dieu«,  
À quoi l'appendice  
Ajoute »punisse«,  
Enfin le sphincter  
Conclut »l'Angleterre«...

– Que le Vieux-Dieu punisse l'Angle-  
terre!

Le Boche, le soir, dans sa couche  
S'allonge auprès de sa Gretchen,  
Et pour s'allumer leurs deux bouches  
Se font des ... delikatessen.  
Hélas! morte semble la bête!..  
Il est vaseux, c'est énervant!..  
Et pour s'exciter il répète  
Jusqu'à ce qu'il soit triomphant:

– Le Vieux-Dieu punisse

.e Vieux-Dieu punisse

..Vieux-Dieu punisse

...ieux-Dieu punisse

....eux-Dieu punisse

.....ux-Dieu punisse

.....x-Dieu punisse

.....-Dieu punisse

.....Dieu punisse

.....ieu punisse

.....eu punisse

.....u punisse

.....punisse

– Que le Vieux-Dieu punisse l'Angle-  
terre!

The shape of the last verse here is replicated in the refrain of the English bawdy song »Oh, Sir Jasper!«, suggesting an affinity of form for ribald versification of the sexual act. In *Le Rire*, the characteristically French genre of the satirical chanson is a constant feature, and this example from August 1915 covers many targets. The mention of gas is not accidental (gas was first used by the German army on the Western front in April 1915). The mockery of the enemy's sexual performance, while one of the traditional flyting mo-

tifs, here masks anxiety over the declining birth rate in France as compared to the steady pre-war population growth in Germany, a demographic imbalance catastrophically exacerbated by the war, which it was feared would bleed France white (cf. Becker 1985: 6). The verses jeering at the German's upset stomach contain a derisively inventive coinage: the verb *s'empainkarder*, which refers to the war-time German »K-brot« (K-bread, K standing for Krieg) – an unfortunate name, because doubling of the K produces KaKa, and *caca* is a nursery word in many languages denoting excrement. So the German's war-bread is *pain-caca*, spelled with the »German« letter k, and his table is thus heaped with crap (or krap): »Si sa table s'empainkarde...«. The jibe not only affirms French culinary superiority but also, in the context of the war, expresses the hopes pinned upon the naval blockade by Britain, the aim of which was to starve Germany into submission through shortages of food and raw materials.

The blockade, and the battle between »England« and Germany for naval supremacy, is an area where the war of invective reaches its heights. The main focus of taunts, on both sides, was the fact that the British Grand Fleet kept to harbour in the north of Scotland, in Scapa Flow, while the German High Seas Fleet likewise kept to harbour in the Kiel Canal. On 16 February 1916 *Punch* referred to this in a »Modest Suggestion for a New Hunnish Canticle«, couched as a parody of the British Royal Navy Hymn, with its refrain: »Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee, / For those in peril on the sea!«. In *Punch's* new German anthem this becomes: »Omnipotence, we need thy hand / In air, on sea, canal and land!« – the word *canal* mockingly incongruous with the aspirations of a »High Seas« fleet. However, the British Grand Fleet was also keeping to harbour, which exposed it in turn to taunts from the German side. In a witty piece of satirical verse, entitled »The British Sea Lion« (Der britische Seelöwe), published on 11 May 1915, *Simplicissimus* finds a housewifely metaphor for this hiding in harbour. If you want to preserve something, what do you do? You marinade it. That's why the British have »marinated their marine« (Drum haben sie [...] ihre Marine marinert). Meanwhile, the cautious Anglo-Saxon sits »And sings with feeling on the harbour pier, / My heart's in the highlands, my heart's not here« (Und singt gefühlvoll am Hafenpier: / Mein Herz ist im Hochland, mein Herz ist nicht hier).

On 31 May 1916 the British Grand Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet finally clashed, in their only engagement of the war, at the naval battle of Jutland, known in Germany as the Skaggeraksschlacht. The British Fleet was commanded by Admiral Jellicoe, of whom Churchill said that he was the

only man, on either side, who could lose the war in an afternoon. There were 150 ships on the British side, 100 on the German, and the battle was over in a few hours. When a tally of losses was taken, the German fleet had won the day, having sunk 14 British ships, with a loss of only 11 of their own. The Skaggerakslacht was immediately celebrated in Germany as a victory. In Britain, accustomed to and expecting naval success on the scale of Trafalgar, the battle was not reported until some time after it was over (cf. Ferguson 1998: 235). Had the war indeed been »lost in an afternoon«?

Jutland was not the only blow to Britain at this point. On 5 June Field Marshal Lord Kitchener died when the ship on which he was sailing on a mission to Russia hit a mine. In *Simplicissimus*, Jutland and the death of Kitchener were brought together on 20 June 1916 in a *tour de force* of satirical verse, »Nelson und Kitchener«, a dialogue between Nelson and Kitchener in the underworld. The verses as they appeared in the journal were set as three eight-line stanzas, each printed as a block, and with the speakers identified only by context. In the translation given below the lines are split into dramatic dialogue to make the exchanges easier to follow. The names of British ships sunk at Jutland are italicised, and there is a reference to Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary.

NELSON	Whence come you, spirit?
KITCHENER	England.
NELSON	And so wet?
KITCHENER	I took a cooling bath.
NELSON	Up there it's hot?
KITCHENER	Yes, hot.
NELSON	So scant of words? What hide you yet?
KITCHENER	The whole world knows the story, so hide what?!
NELSON	What, then?
KITCHENER	We have ill luck.
NELSON	Do you know why?
	Were I not spirit, you should feel my blow.
	The public has grown weary of your lie,
	And sterling's stock has sunk to all-time low.
KITCHENER	Just like your fleet.
NELSON	What tale is this you tell?
KITCHENER	A tale that starts: »Once on a time there was.«
NELSON	Was what?



Bei Tisch, sagt die Prinzessin, präsidieren.  
Herr *Krieger* kommt und Herr von *Schlachtgeroll*.  
Herr *Hitzkopf* mit Herrn *Sperber* wird servieren.

Herr *Unbesieglich* hält den ersten Toast;  
Er redet fast so schön wie Mister Grey –  
Drob ist Herr *Unermüdlich* ganz erbost,  
Weil er – doch still! Sie kommen, wie ich seh!

NELSON! Ha! Bei Trafalgar! Sagt, zu welchem Zweck  
Der Faschingsulk zu mitternächt'ger Stunde?  
Alle Mann auf Deck und hißt den Union-jack!  
KITCHENER Er liegt zerfetzt mit uns im Meeresgrunde.

These verses brilliantly capture that moment of German exultation: the humbling of British naval pride at the battle of Jutland. However, although at Jutland the British had lost more ships than had the Germans, the losses did not alter the balance of naval power. Britain still had more ships, 136 as against the German fleet's 89, and could still maintain the blockade. Thus while Germany could and did hail the Skaggerakschlacht as a victory, it was not of strategic significance.

In autumn 1918 Germany was completely unprepared for defeat. *Simpli-cissimus* expresses the pain of national tragedy at this point, with particular sympathy for the front-line soldiers who had fought heroically for over four years against a world of enemies. There was, however, a new focus for patriotic aspirations. The overthrow of the Hohenzollern monarchy and the establishment of the Weimar Republic accorded with the journal's pre-war political tradition, and a front-page drawing on 12 November 1918, entitled »Hoffnung«, carried a caption beneath expressing that hope: »The German eagle will drink new strength from freedom's fountain of youth« (Aus dem Jungbrunnen der Freiheit wird der deutsche Adler neue Kräfte trinken). The country, however, was war-weary, internationally isolated, utterly depleted of resources and still in the throes of revolutionary unrest. The front-page drawing on 31 December 1918 entitled »Naked into the New Year« (Nackt ins neue Jahr) showed the German Michel, barefoot in the snow and naked but for a red Phrygian cap and a pair of red underpants. Underneath the drawing are two stanzas of verse:

Now I am free,  
From fabrics and soap and from trusting and hope,  
From commerce and trade by sea,  
From armchairs and sweaters, punishment and fetters,  
Religion and clerisy,  
From ham and gold rings and from sausage and kings,  
And bitterest tyranny  
I am now free.

From work and from striving and peaceable living,  
From sugar and eggs and tea,  
From auspicious star signs and comfort and rail lines  
And Fatherland Party,  
From arms and befrienders, esteem and defenders,  
From Mitteleuropa spree,  
I am now free.

Nun bin ich frei,  
Von Kleidern und Stoffen und Glauben und Hoffen,  
Von Handel und Kauffahrtei,  
Von Möbeln und Betten und Strafen und Ketten,  
Religion und Klerisei,  
Von Schinken und Würsten, von Gold und von Fürsten  
Und bitterer Tyrannei  
Bin ich jetzt frei.

Nun bin ich frei  
Von Arbeit und Streben und ruhigem Leben,  
Von Zucker und Fett und Ei.  
Von Eisenbahnwagen und Glück und Behagen  
Und Vaterlandspartei,  
Von Freunden und Stützen und Ruhm und Geschützen,  
Von Mittel-Europageschrei  
Bin ich jetzt frei.

With its galloping rhythm, inventive rhymes and juxtaposed categories, this is a verbal snapshot using the devices of doggerel to encapsulate a moment of hiatus. The citizen hailing the new republic is rid of monarchical tyranny

and right-wing expansionist politics, but is bereft of all comfort and certainty.

Throughout the war, from the early advances of August 1914 to late May of 1918, Germany had been able to celebrate repeated military successes. *Punch* adopted a lofty tone with regard to the German culture of celebration – a disdain that surely masks anxiety at not having cause for similar rejoicing. (The celebratory bells were rung for the first time in Britain after the ballet of Cambrai in November 1917, but the Germans recaptured the ground ten days later; cf. Stevenson 2004: 338-339). When given cause for pride, *Punch* drew a pointed contrast between German and British behaviour:

We are not good at shouting in the street,  
At waving flags, or tossing caps in air;  
We take our triumphs as we take defeat  
With scarce a hint of having turned a hair;  
And so our pride today  
Declines to boom itself the German way.

The first two lines express scornful superiority over the Germans, who do behave in this, by implication ridiculous, way: The next two lines by way of contrast assert »our« behavioural code. One feature of *Punch* was its use of metaphors from sport, and these lines contain implicit reference to the sporting ethos of restraint in both victory and defeat. There is also here an echo of Rudyard Kipling's aphorism in his poem *If*: »If you can meet with triumph or disaster, / And treat these two impostors just the same«. The last two lines of the *Punch* stanza reaffirm the superiority of this British behavioural code.

What triumph, then, was *Punch* celebrating with such studied decorum? A specific feature of *Punch* was that its »leading article« every week was normally in verse, and this poem was the leader on 12 July 1916. It refers therefore to the start of the Battle of the Somme, the opening day of which, 1 July 1916, is universally regarded as »the most notorious day in British military history« (Sheffield 2011: 170). »On that day there were 20,000 British dead, and 37,000 other casualties, for almost no gain at all« (Stone 2008: 103). So how on earth could this be a cause for pride? Of course, it takes time for the scale and volume of such casualties to become known, and when this issue of *Punch* went to press, the day would not yet have acquired its notoriety. But in the book *Mr Punch's History of the Great War*, which collected together the journal's month-by-month mirror of events and was first published in July 1919, we still find the assertion, made even more

strongly: »The victory, for victory it is, has not been celebrated in the German way. England takes her triumphs as she takes defeats, without a sign of having turned a hair« (107). *Mr Punch's History* then goes on to quote the second verse, which provides the beginnings of an explanation:

Yet we are proud because at last, at last  
 We look upon the dawn of our desire;  
 Because the weary waiting time is passed  
 And we have tried our temper in the fire;  
 And proving word by deed,  
 Have kept the faith we pledged to France at need.

The last two lines of the stanza reflect the fact that the Battle of the Somme was engaged in July 1916 in order to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun (cf. Sheffield 2011: 164, 171, 194). But there is also a wider context. Until 1916, the British had, in comparison with France, very few soldiers in the field. Indeed there were mutterings abroad among allies, and jibes in the enemy press, that the British would fight »to the last Frenchman« (cf. Bourne 2000: 480; Ferro 2002: 151; *Simplicissimus*, 29 Dec 1914: 513). In the Musée de l'Armée in Paris there is a video projection of troop movements during the Battle of the Marne in September 1914, and any British visitor must be struck by just how tiny the British contingent is in comparison to the long lines of the French armies stretching out on either side. Unlike France and Germany, Britain in 1914 had no compulsory military service. It had a small professional army, and a Territorial Army which it was able to mobilise, but until conscription was introduced in 1916, the British were reliant upon the volunteers who flooded to Lord Kitchener's call to join a new national army. Civilians with no previous military experience at all, they could not be put into the field without training, which took time. The New Army had made a first appearance at Loos, in autumn 1915, but the Somme was its first major offensive: hence the title of the *Punch* verses, which is: »The Test of Battle«. This was the moment that would demonstrate whether this deeply civilian assortment of men could perform as an army. The answer from the Somme was that they could. Hence the pride, and perhaps relief, that rings out in the third verse:

But most because, from mine and desk and mart,  
 Springing to face a task undreamed before,  
 Our men, inspired to play their prentice part

Like soldiers lessoned in the school of war,  
True to their breed and name  
Went flawless through the fierce baptismal flame.

The first two lines of the stanza evoke the recruitment of this volunteer army from all walks of civilian life. In the third line the words »play their prentice part« emphasise that these men are still apprentices, not yet masters of the art of war. The military historian Gary Sheffield, while refusing to endorse the word »victory« with regard to the Somme, does agree with the »prentice« reference, seeing the British civilian volunteer soldiers of July 1916 as serving their military apprenticeship there and arguing that it was on the Somme from July to the end of the battle in November that the British amateur force took its first steps to becoming the war-winning army of 1918 (cf. Sheffield 2011: 5, 197, 377). Thus, however shocking it is now to find the opening days of the battle of the Somme presented as a cause for pride, the *Punch* verses do capture that defining moment when the newly formed British national army took to the field »at last, at last«, stoically accepting both triumph and disaster as it »kept the pledge made to France«, and proved itself, sacrificially, in the »baptismal flame« of its first real »test of battle«.

Those British citizen volunteers knew themselves to be amateurs, facing what was regarded as the best military machine in the world. Although the middle-class sporting ethos of the time vaunted the amateurs (the »gentlemen«) over the professionals (the »players«), this assumption of superiority did not necessarily apply to actual warfare, and there was therefore an anxiety inherent in the situation. One staple of the *Punch* tradition provided a ready-made template to capture such anxiety and provide a means of expression through defensive self-mockery. This was the tale of personal incompetence and misadventure, identified by a historian of *Punch* as one of the journal's dominating forms since the 1860s (cf. Price 1957: 90, 149). The pre-war genre now adapted to a new context, as in these verses by A.P. Herbert, which appeared in the journal on 18 July 1917 under the title »A Lost Leader«:

The men are marching like the best;  
The waggons wind across the lea;  
At ten to two we have a rest,  
We have a rest at ten to three;  
I ride ahead upon my gee  
And try to look serene and gay;

The whole battalion follows me,  
*And I believe I've lost the way.*

Full many a high-class thoroughfare  
 My erring map does not disclose,  
 While roads that are not really there  
 The same elaborately shows;  
 And whether this is one of those  
 It needs a clever man to say;  
 I am not clever, I suppose,  
*And I believe I've lost the way.*

The soldiers sing about their beer;  
 The wretched road goes on and on;  
 There ought to be a turning here,  
 But if there was the thing has gone;  
 Like some depressed automaton  
 I ask at each *estaminet*;  
 They say, »*Tout droit*«, and I say »*Bon*«,  
*But I believe I've lost the way.*

I dare not tell the trustful men;  
 They think me wonderful and wise;  
 But where will be the legend when  
 They get a shock of such a size?  
 And what about our brave Allies?  
 They wanted us to fight today;  
 We were to be a big surprise –  
*And I believe I've lost the way.*

This is high foolery indeed, controlling within the tight form of the light verse a flood of insecurity: the front-line officer leading his »trustful men«, awed and appalled by his own responsibility to them, to »our brave Allies« and ultimately to winning – or losing – the war. Lurking unspoken in the background is the age-old proverbial rhyme about »the want of a horse-shoe nail«, as a result of which the horse, the rider, the battle, and then the kingdom are lost. The *Punch* verses tread the edge of hysteria, the humour of incompetence shaping the stuff of nightmares and providing release from them.

British comedy of military incompetence runs through the much-loved TV series *Dad's Army* to the sit-com *'Allo, 'Allo*, set in occupied France during the Second World War. In *'Allo, 'Allo*, the British, the French Resistance and the Germans – all alike are bumbling buffoons, the war fading into non-existence behind the sit-com plot. Some cannot watch *'Allo, 'Allo*, seeing in it a travesty of events too terrible for laughter. From another perspective, however, its buffoonery provides release from historical nightmares. It could almost be seen as a gesture of European integration, blessing all sides in the conflict with the same ludicrous incompetence.

Can anything be deduced from these journals about »national« characteristics of humour? It would surely be strange if such a fundamental human response as laughter observed geo-political frontiers within what was, after all, the shared Graeco-Roman / Judaeo-Christian heritage of the educated classes that were the journals' readers and contributors. While it would be true to say that the profile of the journal – each of which served as a model in its respective culture – encouraged humour of a particular type and provided a means of its dissemination, this does not mean that any nation had a monopoly on a specific type of laughter. *Le Rire* enjoyed latitude to treat risqué topics, but this does not mean there were no sexual or scatological jokes in the other countries; in France they just had greater currency in print. Although in *Punch* the tale of personal incompetence and misadventure was developed into a journalistic form, it is also a staple joke for clowns and stand-up comedians the world over. *Simplicissimus* was a literary as well as a satirical magazine, which gave it scope to include serious prose and poetry that in Britain and France would have appeared in other periodicals, but its pages also included virtuoso displays of topical verse. What can be said in summary is that types of laughter depend on circumstances rather than national characteristics; a joke that is a jeer from one side can be the ironic stoicism of gallows humour on the other. The journals used different modes and metaphors, but taken together they express a commonality of experience during the first of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's great traumas.

## LITERATURE

### Primary sources

*Punch*: Magazine volumes online.

<<https://sites.google.com/site/punchvolumes/>>

*Simplicissimus*: Die historische Satirezeitschrift als Online-Edition.

<<http://www.simplicissimus.info/>>

*Le Rire* (from 21 November 1914 to 28 December 1918 under the title of *Le Rire Rouge*): Print edition only.

### Secondary sources

Avernarius, Ferdinand (1972): *Das Bild als Narr*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. Reprint of the original publication (1918), Munich: Georg Callwey.

Becker, Jean-Jacques (1985): *The Great War and the French People*, tr. Arnold Pomerans, Leamington Spa: Berg.

Bourne, John, Peter Liddle and Ian Whitehead (eds.) (2000): *The Great World War 1914-1945*. Vol 1. *Lightning Strikes Twice*, London: Harper-Collins.

Bourne, John, Peter Liddle and Ian Whitehead (eds.) (2001): *The Great World War 1914-1945*. Vol 2. *Who Won? Who Lost?*, London: Harper-Collins.

Clark, Christopher (2012): *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London: Allen Lane.

Clover, Carol J. (1987): »Norse Flying«. In: *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, vol 9, 172-175.

Ferguson, Niall (1998): *The Pity of War*, London: Allen Lane.

Ferro, Marc (2002): *The Great War 1914-1918*, tr. Nicole Stone, London: Routledge Classics.

*Histoire générale de la presse française, vol. 3: 1871-1940* (1972), Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Lethève, Jacques (1961): *La Caricature et la presse sous la III-e République*, Paris: Librairie Armand Colin.

Lissauer, Ernst: »Hymn of Hate against England« (Haßgesang gegen England), tr. Barbara Henderson, as it appeared in *The New York Times*, 15 October 1914.

<<http://www.hs-chamberlain.net/kriegsaufsaeetze/hassgesang.html>>

Accessed 25 January 2013.

*Mr Punch's History of the Great War* (2007), Stroud: Nonsuch Publishing Limited.

Price, R.G.G. (1957): *A History of »Punch«*, London: Collins.

Sheffield, Gary (2011): *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army*, London: Aurum.

Stevenson, David (2004): *1914-1918. The History of the First World War*, London: Penguin Books.

Stone, Norman (2008): *World War One. A Short History*, London: Penguin Books.

## **Acknowledgements**

Illustration

Figure 1: »Mother Goose-Step Rhymes« from Punch's Almanack 1915

Reproduced with the permission of Punch Limited.

A.P. Herbert »A Lost Leader«

Quoted with the permission of AP Watt at United Agents on behalf of the Executors of the Estate of Jocelyn Herbert, MT Perkins and Polly MVR Perkins.