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IHR review

Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen A. Ritzenhoff (Eds.), *Humour, Entertainment, and Popular Culture during World War 1* (London: Palgrave, 2015).

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Review by Pip Gregory (University of Kent)

The general outline for this project, when the call for papers first appeared in June 2013, requested contributions for essays on the entertainments and popular culture of the First World War, offering a lot of promise for the study of humour in an historical context, which has, it would seem, only recently become of interest to cultural historians.⁽¹⁾ As a self-proclaimed 'transnational' work, it called for international contributions that highlighted elements of the sometimes-unseen 'light-hearted discourses' of the war. As a result there are a number of new names writing about less than obvious topics, related to the entertainment industry, which has resulted in a refreshing take on the war overall. As an edited collection of essays, there can be questions of continuity between articles; nonetheless, the strength of the material has been maintained by the editors Clémentine Tholas-Disset and Karen A. Ritzenhoff. Contributions within the book come from scholars the world over, discussing entertainment cultures and how they were affected by the war. The variety of perspectives discussed is entertaining, which seems an inappropriate word to use in the context of an academic book, yet seems the most suitable given the subject matter.

The collection opens with a preface from Karen Randell of Bedfordshire University, which provides a comfortable and friendly welcome to the ideas expressed through the rest of the book. She relates personal anecdotes of her father and his war memories from Korea, and how, as a child, it was only the humour that she knew about (p. xiii). Although short, the uncertainty and discomfort of talking about war is highlighted, but it is simultaneously outweighed by the open acknowledgement of humour as a coping mechanism for soldiers during and after war. Such brief comments are further explored through the coherent introduction provided by the editors for each of the chapters that follow, separated out into relevant sections of focus. There are 16 chapters in this book, effectively divided up into four thematic sections discussing movies, literature, the stage and propaganda, with three to five chapter articles in each section.

Following the brief preface is an introduction from the editors, which opens with a quotation from the *Wipers Times*, which seems a little too obvious a choice for this book, particularly when considering the obscurity of some of the chapters within it. Nonetheless, it is an understandable option, asking the eternal question: 'are you a victim to optimism?' Such a quotation is easily

recognisable, and may be interpreted as an opening for those less aware of the topics related to wartime humour that are to be discussed in the book. Further to this, the editors also discuss the recent death of Robin Williams and the humour that he provided, and how there was always a 'dark and lonely side to his humour' (p. 2). This discussion again welcomes the reader in and successfully relates the material being discussed to the reader's personal experiences. They then discuss the broader historiography of war and humour with which they plan to engage, and in this way, the book is preparing for both the academic audience as well as the more popular historian. Through this, the editors make it clear that their volume looks at international culture and popular heritage as a way to recreate little known aspects of the war, moving away from the traditional views of trauma and horror (p. 4).

To this effect, part one offers contributions from Lawrence Napper, Giaime Alonge and Francesco Pitassio, Fabrice Lyczba and Clémentine Tholas-Disset, an already broadly international selection who discuss aspects of film throughout and after the war. These film analyses incorporate elements of political identity and performance, as well as aspects of styles of humour utilised by specific nationalities and identification of cultural stereotypes, including how these were used to invoke humour for film viewers. Through these chapters, it becomes clear that humour is not an individual entity, but rather is something that can be manipulated in a variety of different ways, and this is well demonstrated through the films discussed. Napper's chapter, 'Alf's button', offers clear examples of self-deprecation and irony which provide the humour, while Alonge and Pitassio's, 'Maciste alpino' focuses on national stereotypes and slapstick comedy. Lyczba's chapter then illustrates how the humour of 'Hoaxes, [and] ballyhoo stunts' were used in film advertising, and Tholas-Disset again returns to the use of irony teamed with romantic comedy to form the humour in the entertainment even though that romance is doomed to fail in order to create the romantic comedy. Overall, forms of humour clearly specific to different countries are illustrated through some interesting choices of film studies.

Part two moves away from the cinema and towards images, predominantly cartoons, and newspapers with a focus on literature. Each of these literary and visual examples offer insights to the mood of the time, as well as the way in which people responded to the war around them, particularly with humour in mind. This includes chapters by Jakub Kazecki, Koenraad Du Pont, Renée Dickason, Anne Cirella-Urrutia and Laurent Bihl, once again maintaining the international flavour. Kazecki discusses a German memoir written by a novelist, which casts questions on his motivation for writing. There is then a consideration of Italian, French and Belgian trench journals by Du Pont with reflections on British and German examples, and Dickason appraises the *History of the Great*

War according to Mr Punch. Added to this are considerations of other visual and cartoon personalities, including the child heroine Becassine from French and Belgian comic strips by Cirella-Urrutia, and the iconography of the French Marianne for Bihl. Different forms of humour emanate from different cultural origins in the work of Kazecki and Du Pont, yet at the same time humour of some form or another is maintained by all the authors, whether they are novelists trained to write for an audience, or soldiers writing effectively for one another. Through the rest of the section, changing public and artistic attitudes are highlighted in *Punch* and the stories of Becassine as the nature of what their characters do and who they interact with alters as the war progresses. The iconography of Marianne is interestingly manipulated by artists using it before, during, and after the war, which reveals to a certain extent their motivations. We are shown that even Marianne, an iconic symbol of France, can be manipulated to create humour for the viewer in the same way as all of the other characters presented through this part of the book.

The stage in wartime is addressed more closely in part three, which looks at aspects of comedy performances on stage and their reception by respective audiences. This is the shortest of the sections, with chapters provided by Felicia Hardison Londré, John Mullen and Jenna Kubly, who each take a slightly different approach to the overall theme of the theatrical stage in wartime. Londré proposes to look at reports from entertainers and the reception they garnered in France when entertaining the troops. From the title, it may be inferred that she will highlight different types of laughter – those just before a battle, those just after and those found among men recovering in hospital. However, the material in the chapter in fact tends to concentrate on the types of American volunteers who did the entertaining, rather than on their reports and letters home, that might have detailed the different types of laughter. Although some elements of this are touched upon briefly, this seems a sad oversight, as different types of laughter would have been a very interesting aspect of entertainment to consider (p. 170). However, the chapter is highly enlightening with regards to the entertainers of the Over There Troupes supported by the YMCA, and the way they drew upon a vast skill set in order to entertain everyone. Mullen and Kubly look towards more British theatrical offerings from the music hall, and J. M. Barrie, respectively. This provides insight into public moods generally, but also more specifically soldier's moods through Mullen's work, and social and familial relationships in Kubly's. Humour is maintained throughout both chapters, and Mullen's insertion of song lyrics reinforces the historical, as well as entertainment, value of the songs being discussed.

In some ways part four seems like a collection of 'left over articles', as it does not hang together as well as the other parts of the book. The editors suggest that chapters in this section are looking at values and routines, yet a quick overview of the chapter titles and their content indicates a

concentration on advertising and propaganda. Amy Wells, in 'Sugary celebrations and culinary activism: sugar, cooking, and entertaining during World War 1', looks at the political advertising of food and the agendas imposed upon sugar during the war. Robert Crawford then addresses the character of Chunder Loo with 'Chunder goes forth: humour, advertising, and the Australian nation in the *Bulletin* during World War 1'. Next T. Adrian Lewis considers 'Mobilizing morale: at the front in a flivver with the American *Ambulanciers*', which offers insights to ambulance drivers' diaries that were published for their moralising influence on the public. Then finally, and potentially more tenuously, Karen Ritzenhoff speaks of 'Silencing laughter: pioneering Director Lois Weber and the uncanny gaze in silent film'. If propaganda and advertising are understood synonymously, then the first three essays highlight the effects advertising and moralising had on the public, influencing them to buy particular products, or selling the idea of war, as Lewis effectively describes the publication of ambulance drivers' diaries doing. Ritzenhoff's chapter, however, seems separate, as she demonstrates the anomalies of male-dominated culture through the pioneering female Hollywood film director Lois Weber. This chapter seems intent on highlighting cultural differences, certainly not negatively, but still the emphasis feels at times a little forced. Regardless of this, her work on Weber is fascinating and highly original and the features she draws out illuminate a different aspect of the war.

Many of the articles engage with the available literature on their specific topic, discussing humour and entertainment through history as well as in relation to the Great War. There are strong connections drawn with the works in the *Journal of European Studies* Special Edition from 2001, which focused on humour and war.⁽²⁾ Articles from this journal are discussed in terms of moralisation, and the use of humour as a strategy or weapon of war in various chapters. There are times, however, when these articles and other secondary material are spoken of as passing references, rather than the authors interacting and debating with them. There is a lack of real historiographical debate, which might have offered more substance to some of the chapters. Others focus on primary material, which any historian will naturally appreciate, but do not necessarily provide sufficient context and evidence of secondary reading. This could leave the reader assuming that the articles are less well researched than they might have been. Crawford's article can be seen as an example of this, with reams of primary references from the *Bulletin*, for which he should be complimented for extensive research, but little references from elsewhere. It must, though, be remembered that the call originally sought unusual material that had not previously been considered, and as such, this can offer a potential excuse for the apparent lack of wider reading. In addition, there are some occasions when incorrect references appear – for example, Marc Weinberger's article 'The use and effect of humour in different advertising media' is unfortunately

referenced as the 'Use of effect of humour', only a small oversight, but one that is frustrating and which should have been spotted before publication.(3)

For the most part this collection of essays fulfils the original brief, coming as it does from a variety of international sources, and discussing aspects of entertainment and popular culture less commonly considered by historians. The obscurity of some of the topics makes them harder to engage with initially, yet the reader is drawn into new experiences and research with each chapter, and this has the potential to inspire further research in the future. Overall, this is a thoroughly enjoyable book offering insight and interest for cultural historians of the Great War the world over. Refreshingly, it deals with a number of topics otherwise overlooked in relation to the conflict, and offers contributions from a mixture of new and established academics.

1 See *Journal of European Studies* 31 (2001); Fred Beard, *Humour in the Advertising Business: Theory, Practice and Wit* (Lanham, 2008); Linda Henman, 'Humour as a coping mechanism: lessons from POWs' *Humour*, 14, 1 (2001), 83–94; Adam Douglas, *War Memory and the Politics of Humour the Canard Enchaîné and World War I* (Berkeley, CA, 2002); Corrine Francois-Deneve, 'Every man in his humour: sur la piste de l'humour "Anglais"', *Humoresques* (2013); Edward Madigan, "'Sticking to a hateful task": resilience, humour, and British understandings of combatant courage, 1914–1918', *War in History*, 20, 1 (2013), 76–98.

2 Valerie Holman and Debra Kelly, 'Introduction. War in the twentieth century: the function of humour in cultural representation', *Journal of European Studies*, 31 (2001), pp. 247–63; Jean-Yves Le Naour, 'Laughter and tears in the Great War: the need for laughter / the guilt of humour' (2001), 265–75; Andrew Robertshaw, 'Irrepressible chirpy cockney chappies? Humour as an aid to survival' (2001), 277–87; and Christie Davies, 'Humour is not a strategy in war', (2001), pp. 395–412.

3 Tholas-Disset and Ritzenhoff, pp. 239, 243, Marc Weinberger, 'The use and effect of humour in different advertising media', *Journal of Advertising Research*, 35, 3 (1995), 44–57.