

## Notes on *The Lads That Will Never Be Old*

War was declared by Britain on August 4, 1914 (the Germans having declared war on France a day earlier). Popular opinion, no doubt fostered by government propaganda, was that the war would be over by Christmas. It was supposed to be a great adventure for British farm boys and Oxbridge grads alike, but massive casualties early in the war brought the truth home pretty quickly to the British public: Troops were unprepared, war matériel was in short supply, military leadership was woefully inept, and there was no romance in trench warfare. And so, to boost morale and recruit troops, romance and heroism filled the popular songs.

(1) **Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit-Bag, and Smile, Smile, Smile**, published in 1915 in London, won a wartime competition for a marching song and was a hit in the music halls, pubs and army camps. (2) **Your King and Country** was billed as “The Women’s Recruiting Song” and surely has one of the most passive-aggressive lyrics ever written (“*Oh we don’t want to lose you...but we think you ought to go...*”).

Perhaps one of the most beautiful and lasting morale-boosting songs ever written is Sir Hubert Parry’s (4) **Jerusalem**, now a popular if unofficial British anthem sung at soccer games and Royal weddings alike. Its moving text, by William Blake, is based on the legend that Jesus walked in England’s West Country during Britain’s Roman period. Parry distanced himself from the song when it was taken over by a rightist party but took pride in its being reclaimed by the Suffragist movement.

World War I soldiers were encouraged to sing themselves, for morale, for discipline, to pass the time, for marching in rhythm, even to develop their lung capacity. One of their favorite songs was (3) **Roses of Picardy**, whose lyricist was also responsible for the words to “Danny Boy.” Shell-shocked British veterans sang the song in rehab to regain their powers of speech; Picardy is the region in northern France that includes the infamous Somme battlefields.

(5) **Sister Susie’s Sewing Shirts for Soldiers** was a hit for Al Jolson after it made the rounds of such British performers as Billy Murray. Its composer, Herman Darewski, was a staff composer for Francis, Day and Hunter, publisher of many British World War I popular songs. Just as we marvel that Belarus-born Irving Berlin could capture the American idiom as he did, it’s worth noting that Minsk-born Darewski managed to write the music for a sparkling English-language tongue twister and the stuttering hit *K-K-K-Katy*.

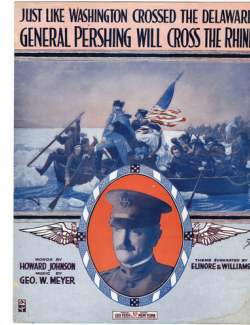
The American composer Arthur Foote set Rupert Brooke’s sentimental (6) **The Soldier** as one of three war songs in his Opus 79: “*If I should die, think only this of me: I that there’s some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England...*” It is followed by a reading of Siegfried Sassoon’s brutal account of a stretcher-bearer on (7) **Trench Duty** and Isaac Rosenberg’s (8) **Returning, We Hear the Larks**. Rosenberg, considered one of the great war poets along with Brooke, Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, was killed in combat on April 1, 1918. The fourth “art” song in this grouping is Arthur Somervell’s 1904 (9) **The Lads in Their Hundreds**, a setting of one of A.E. Housman’s poems from *A Shropshire Lad* (1896). The Second Boer War (1899) served to make Housman’s cycle of lyric nostalgia and melancholy a best-seller, and World War I saw its popularity expand still further. He writes of “*the lads that will never be old*” – never to lose their beauty or their truth. The poems’ wartime popularity, despite their dark themes, derives in part from their encouraging a belief that the lads written about have died in glory, and not in vain.

The United States entered the war on April 6, 1917. Irving Berlin’s prescient (10) **Ragtime Soldier Man**, first heard in London in 1912 in a show called *Hello Ragtime*, became popular again and was one of many “ragtime” war-era songs. Charles Ives published “Three Songs of War” in April 1917 – “In Flanders Fields” and the two included here, (11) **He Is There**, with its references to Civil War music, and (12) **Tom Sails Away**, which, among its other musical borrowings, pays homage to George M. Cohan’s megahit of the war, “Over There”. (13) **The USA Will Lay the Kaiser Away** is typical of the songs making fun of the German Kaiser; its lyric “We will take the *germ* out of old *Germany*” is priceless. The tag is my own.

So many popular American songs of the era were written in march time, yet “The March King” – John Philip Sousa – is represented by a *grand scena* of a setting of

John McCrae’s (14) **In Flanders Fields**, perhaps the most popular poem of the war. McCrae, a Canadian polymath, was a surgeon during the Second Battle of Ypres, in Belgium. He died of pneumonia, age 45, in Boulogne in January 1918.

Soldiers used to write parody versions of hit songs. While this CD doesn’t represent that genre, (15) **Oh Johnny, Oh Johnny, Oh!** is an example of how a “patriotic version” adds a martial stanza to a number most people would have known.



General John J. Pershing led the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in Europe and was a truly heroic – and paternal – figure to Americans, as shown in our (16) **General Pershing Medley (Just Like Washington Crossed the Delaware, General Pershing Will Cross the Rhine and Hello! Gen’ral Pershing)**.

Rather than include Irving Berlin’s great WWI hit, “Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning”, we’ve included three other songs from its source, *Yip-Yip-Yaphank*, the show Berlin wrote at Camp Upton in Yaphank, Long Island: (17) **Kitchen Police**, **I Can Always Find a Little Sunshine in the Y.M.C.A.** and **We’re on Our Way to France** (to which we’ve added a counter melody from “La Marseillaise”).



Once we land in France, we pay tribute to Elsie Janis – sweetheart of the AEF and one of the first performers ever to perform at the front – with (18) **When Yankee Doodle Learns to Parlez-Vous Français** and, representative of the falling-in-love-with-a-war-nurse song genre, **I Don’t Want To Get Well**, in which a dough-boy plans to go to war to be shot, just to fulfill that romantic mission.

Elsie Janis



The mood changes abruptly with (19) **Mesopotamia**. Kipling began by being one of the war’s greatest boosters and propagandists; the poem reflects his bitter disillusionment after his son was killed in the fighting.

(20) **Strike Up the Band** is often sung on patriotic holidays, but not with its original 1927 lyrics, included here. It was the title song of a show in which an imaginary war over cheese is made to appear no more absurd than the war America had fought a decade earlier. **Yankee Doodle Rhythm** (with some now politically incorrect lyrics) was originally written for their show *Rosalie*.

We end with the always stirring (21) **Keep the Home Fires Burning**, by the British Ivor Novello and American Lena Guilbert Ford...and may the boys, indeed, come home. – *Andrea Axelrod*