

Folklore of War and Peace:

2018 Virtual Special Issue to Commemorate the Centenary of the End of the Great War

The approaching anniversary of the end of the First World War provides an opportunity for The Folklore Society to gather together articles for this podcast on folklore's role in both war and peace studies. Venetia Newall's article 'Armistice Day: Folk Tradition in an English Festival of Remembrance' (1976) deals directly with traditions of celebration on Remembrance Sunday. The article engages with the links between John McCrae's poem referring to the poppies that bloomed in the battlefield after the end of the war, memories of men who fought in the Great War, and the continuing support of injured ex-servicemen through the annual Poppy Appeal. The 'trench fraternity' created by the extreme conditions of trench warfare is explored by Graham Seal in "'We're Here Because We're Here": Trench Culture of the Great War'. He surveys the ephemeral but extensive folk culture phenomenon of the 'trench press' which flourished from late 1914 until just after the end of the war (Seal 2013, 179). These crudely produced publications expressed the attitudes of the common—largely non-professional—soldiers, through numerous folk genres including cartoons, jokes, satirical songs, gossip, and rumour. They contain accounts of impromptu sporting events and sing-alongs and provide an invaluable source for trench lore such as fear of the number thirteen, the existence of mascots as good luck talismans, and the legend of a mysterious figure called the 'Helper in White' who protected and tended wounded soldiers.

The origin of one of the most famous supernatural legends of the First World War, the Angel of Mons, is discussed by David Clarke and Jacqueline Simpson (Clarke 2002; Simpson 2003; Clarke 2004). Clarke argues that this popular belief-legend was influenced by older martial traditions of divine intervention during battles and by Arthur Machen's 1915 short story 'The Bowman', which Clarke describes as 'a timely piece of patriotic wish fulfilment' (2002, 154). However, this combination of fiction and rumour soon took hold, and Clarke and Simpson chart the resulting mixture of rumour and experience in the number of supposedly first-hand accounts and memorates of sightings of angels, St George, and strange figures in white that began to appear.

Both Richard Raskin's study of how a popular song became an anthem of the French resistance, "'Le Chant des Partisans": Functions of a Wartime Song' (1991) and Wolfgang Mieder's "'Make Hell While the Sun Shines": Proverbial Rhetoric in Winston Churchill's *The Second World War*' (1995) carry the study of language and its importance into the context of

the Second World War. Raskin charts the distribution path of 'Le Chant des Partisans', while Mieder looks at the origin of a proverbial expression that Churchill used to good effect in his writing and speeches.

Several articles deal with more general aspects of war and peace. For example, Stephen Corrsin examines the research into sword dancing in Britain and Germany in three articles on the subject: 'The Founding of English Ritual Dance Studies before the First World War: Human Sacrifice in India . . . and in Oxfordshire' (2004), "'Spectral, Dancing Hosts of War": German-language Research on Sword Dancing before World War I' (2008), and 'One Single Dance Form . . . Sword Dancing and Secret Men's Unions between the Two World Wars' (A2010). Although these articles do not deal with war directly, they chart the development of attitudes to group and national identities in Britain and Germany that help us understand how soldiers viewed their role in a global war. Both countries looked to a 'fantasised pagan past' (2004, 329) with Germans stressing how the supposed secret warrior societies detailed in Tacitus' *Germania* created patterns for modern armies (2008, 276-78), while British ideas were rooted in notions of universal ritual behaviour and the role of the individual (2004, 327).

The emergence of identity and the contrasts between elite and popular attitudes to warfare are the subject of the final two articles. Edward Gulbekian, in 'The Attitude to War in "The Epic of Sasoun"' (1984), deals with the past and how the actions of the elite warrior class depicted in the Armenian epic contrasted with actual battlefield behaviour as recorded in historical sources. Alice Gleave's 'The Female Soldier in Street Literature and Oral Culture in the German-Speaking Lands between 1600 and 1950: A Marker of Changing Gender Relationships?' (2011) is the only article to deal specifically with gender. Her account of perceptions of the female soldier in German-language popular culture encompasses the period of both World Wars and charts the changing dynamics of gender hierarchy (191).

The subjects here include phenomena such as the 'trench press' and battlefield visions that take place during war, as well as the effect of songs, rhetoric, and participation in communal customs as ways of shaping attitudes to warfare. They reflect the importance of the past, whether real or imagined, and the complexities of gender politics. However, taken as a group, the articles in this Virtual Special Issue demonstrate the importance of folklore studies in examining the history, cultural dimensions, and actual experience of war.

Juliette Wood