



## That's Entertainment: Showbusiness and the Great War

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In 1914, the troops marched away to patriotic airs that reflected the mood of the times and the prevailing optimism that the war would be 'over by Christmas'. The tune that best captures the spirit of the period, at least for a modern audience, was written by Jack Judge and Henry Williams in 1912: *It's a long, long way to Tipperary*.

A worldwide hit, the song was translated into 17 languages and had sold over eight million copies by 1919.<sup>[1]</sup> Other pieces that reflected a sentimental view of the Empire and the military were *Goodbye Dolly Grey?* (a popular tune from the Boer War), *Fall in and follow me* and *Are we downhearted*; these pre-war songs easily crossed from the Music Halls to the men on the march, who enjoyed community singing as a form of entertainment and found in the songs many of the manly virtues that they aspired to. In 1915 this mood still prevailed, and a competition to find a 'rousing wartime song' was won by Felix and George Powell's famous *Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile*.

By 1916, however, long lists of war wounded and dead had removed any hope that the conflict would soon be over. Volunteer recruitment could no longer be relied upon, enthusiasm waned, and conscription was introduced in May of that year. There was a dawning realisation that the songs that had captured the spirit of 1914 so well were no longer appropriate. As Bennett Scott, a writer for the music halls (*Ship Ahoy*; *All the nice girls love a sailor* etc.) observed, 'The flag waving ballad so popular two years ago is rapidly on the wane; so is last year's 'Bravo, Tommy!' type. The great change that is taking place in public taste is that it is identifying itself with the taste of the Army and Navy. The public wants the things the soldiers and sailors want; they prefer real fun and real sentiment to wordy boasts and disconcerting praise'.<sup>[2]</sup> A song that epitomises this sentiment is *Take me back to Dear Old Blighty*, written by Scott and his collaborators A. J. Mills and Fred Godfrey in 1916. 'That

song comes straight from the trenches. Two years ago it could not have existed'.[\[3\]](#)

Although King George V had decreed that the Royal Household would be teetotal for the duration of the conflict, his subjects declined such abstemiousness and still flocked to the music halls and musical theatres, where the escapist fantasy *Chu Chin Chow*, premired on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1916, became an instant hit. The show was described as a combination of musical comedy and pantomime, a big-budget spectacle costing 5,300, with over a dozen scene changes, fantastic sets, big dance routines and exotic costumes. [\[4\]](#) Loosely based on the story of Ali Baba, critics praised the show's visuals: the acting and plot were almost entirely incidental. Nevertheless, many of the songs became hits, and *The Cobbler's Song* and *Any Time's Kissing Time* entered the popular repertoire of ballad singers .

It was a post-war boast of *Chu Chi Chow's* producer, Oscar Asche, that tickets for the show had been particularly sought after by troops on leave, though one critic wryly commented that men 'gladly' returned to the trenches to escape it.[\[5\]](#) Perhaps one of the attractions was the chorus of pretty slave girls who, for the period, were very scantily dressed. Following complaints of 'near nudity and non controlled breast movement?', the play was investigated by the Lord Chamberlain's Office.[\[6\]](#)

*Chu Chin Chow* became, with *The Bing Boys are Here* and *The Maid of the Mountains*, one of three hit shows most associated with the London musical stage during the conflict. Surprisingly, each of the three belonged to a very different genre. *The Bing Boys* was a revue, starring George Robey and including the sentimental hit song *If you were the only girl in the world*. By contrast, *The Maid* was essentially an operetta, and *Chu Chin Chow* is often considered an adult pantomime.

Audiences clearly wanted light-hearted escapism, and most shows directly touching on the war were at best only moderately successful. Notably, however, when Bruce Bairnsfather's comic character Old Bill was transferred to the London stage, he became an instant hit. The *Better 'Ole*, praised by a contemporary critic as 'the only product of the stage that can be directly traced to the influence of the war?',[\[7\]](#) premiered in August 1917. Its depiction of the troops' cheery optimism was a welcome relief in a particularly bleak period of the war on the home front. The show ran until after the Armistice, enjoying over 800 performances;[\[8\]](#) in the spring of 1918 it was even made into a film, sadly now lost.[\[9\]](#)

Many of the big stars were active in their support of the fighting man; Robey raised thousands of pounds for various Armed Forces charities, while the equally famous Harry Lauder established his eponymous Million-Pound Fund for Maimed Scottish Soldiers and Sailors, and went to France to entertain the troops, writing a memoir of his experiences.[\[10\]](#) Lauder's only son, Captain John Lauder, 8<sup>th</sup> Bn. Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, was killed on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1916 at Poiziers, and the song *Keep right on to the end of the road* was written by his grieving father. One of the most enduring songs of the conflict, the chorus epitomises the sacrifice and stoicism of a nation confronted with the calamity of The Great War:

*Keep right on to the end of the road*  
*Keep right on to the end*  
*Tho' the way be long, let your heart be strong*  
*Keep right on to the end*

Edited by Richard Marshal.

[1] R.A. Baker, *British Music Hall: An Illustrated History* (Stroud, 2005), pp. 169-170.

[2] Interviewed in *The Era*, 13<sup>th</sup> December 1916.

[3] Baker, *British Music Hall*, p. 169.

[4] R. Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (London, 2003<sup>2</sup>), pp. 206-208.

[5] B. Singleton, *Oscar Asche, Orientalism, and British Musical Comedy*, Lives of the Theatre Series (London, 2004), p. 110.

[6] See D.B. Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology* (Oxford, 2003), p. 173.

[7] *Daily Express*, 28<sup>th</sup> November 1917.

[8] K. Gnzl, *The Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1994), p. 120.

[9] See M. Warby, 'The Better 'Ole' or 'The Romance of Old Bill?'. Accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2012, from: [http://www.brucebairnsfather.org.uk/index\\_files/page0010.htm](http://www.brucebairnsfather.org.uk/index_files/page0010.htm)

[10] H. Lauder, *A Minstrel in France*(London, 1918).

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