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**“When You Wish Upon a Star”**

Nostalgia, Fairy Stories and the Songs of World War II

*La nostalgie, les contes de fées et les chansons de la Seconde Guerre mondiale*

**Sheila Whiteley**

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# “When You Wish Upon a Star”

## Nostalgia, Fairy Stories and the Songs of World War II

by

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**Abstract:** While myths and historical memory provide distinctive ways of shaping national identity, not least in times of conflict and war, fairy stories “relate to day-dreams and wish-fulfilment fantasies, in which the questing self meets helpers and enemies, and in which the ending is always happy” (Byatt, 2004: pxx). As such, it is not too surprising that so many war time songs, like fairytales, are optimistic, encouraging us to think of a future world where bombed cities will rise, like a phoenix, from the ashes. My chapter explores songs from World War II which draw on fairy tale imagery and the characterisation associated with heroes, heroines, and the homeland. These include “Comin’ in on a Wish and a Prayer”, “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square”, “We’ll Meet Again”, “I’ll Be Seeing You” and “There’ll Always Be An England”.

**Keywords:** *World War II – Fairy Stories – Heroes – Heroines – Optimism – the Blitz – Spitfire – Songs and Narratives – Imagery.*

**Résumé :** Tandis que l’identité nationale puise dans les mythes et la mémoire historique pour y trouver des formes spécifiques, notamment dans des contextes de conflits et de guerre, les contes de fées « renvoient à la rêverie et aux fantasmes d’accomplissement des désirs, dans lesquels le soi curieux rencontre des aides et des ennemis et dans lesquels la fin est toujours heureuse » (Byatt, 2004, xx). Ainsi, il n’est pas si surprenant que tant de chansons des temps de guerre, à la façon des contes de fées, soient optimistes, nous encourageant à imaginer un monde futur où les villes bombardées renaîtront, tel le phœnix, de leurs cendres. Mon article explore les chansons de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, qui s’inspirent de l’imagerie des contes de fées et des créations de personnages associés aux héros, aux héroïnes et à la mère patrie. J’analyse notamment « Comin’ in on a Wish and a Prayer », « A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square », « We’ll Meet Again », « I’ll Be Seeing You » et « There’ll Always Be An England ».

**Mots-clés :** *Seconde Guerre mondiale – contes de fées – héros – héroïnes – optimisme – le Blitz – Spitfire – chansons et récits – imagination.*

My chapter is dedicated to Joy Astrup, my granddaughters Luisa, Bella, Molly and Alaysia, and my grandsons Alex, Dan, James, Karl and Ali.

**With** “homesickness” as the root meaning of nostalgia, it is not too surprising that songs from World War II relate to wish-fulfilment fantasies. Enriched by myths and historical memory, they create “a world where our daydreams are not only possible but inevitable”<sup>1</sup>, one in which the ending is always happy. Not least, they provide distinctive ways of shaping national identity at times of conflict, where imagined heroes such as Robin of Locksley and King Arthur sit alongside Nelson and Drake and can be evoked as the spirit of England, encouraging its people to have faith. More contemporary images, such as the popular television series “Dad’s Army” (Whiteley, 2010: 123-126), and the rousing nationalism associated with such anthems as “Land of Hope and Glory”, “Jerusalem” and “Rule Britannia”, sung every year at the last night of the Proms,<sup>2</sup> suggest that images of Britain at war come to us filtered by films, journalism, books, music and tv series. But as the BBC web Archive “The People’s War” revealed, nostalgia continues to occupy a key place in creating and organising personal memories and experiences. Many of its stories showed considerable pride in Britain’s record of standing alone during 1940-1, and nostalgia for the cheerfulness and cohesion of society during the war time years.<sup>3</sup> As a myth of origin, World War II remains a potent signifier of “who we are” and our memories, whether of personal, national or international events are not copies of the “real” past, but rather

can be made and remade according to changing needs. The destructiveness of war, for example, can be set in opposition to often homely images, family snaps, shared cups of tea, a red pillar box, the sound of Big Ben. In contrast, national myths draw “on commonly shared heroic or subjugated backgrounds and serve as focal points around which people can rally to a good cause, not least in times of war when killing and self-sacrifice become the means to a greater end”.<sup>4</sup> It is here that music assumes its significance, and as Richard Middleton once observed, “At the level of popular assumption, the belief that music produces sense, or conveys meaning, is unquestioned” (1990: 172).

While it is tempting to simply interpret songs/music as somehow reflecting the experiences of a nation at war, it is rather how they produce, create and construct the quality of those experiences that is significant. With emotions heightened by five and a half years of dockside and station farewells and the hope of leave-time reunions, a song’s promise that “we’ll meet again”, where good magic always triumphs over bad, is not simply about boosting morale. The “blissful relief that comes with the words ‘And they lived happily ever after’” (Tatar, 2004: xxviii) also defines the ways in which both individuals and groups made sense of, and negotiated everyday life across and beyond the duration of war, describing “the social in the individual and the individual in the social ... and so providing an experience of the *self-in-process*” (Frith, 2007: 294). As research shows, “fairy stories ceaselessly migrate from one medium to another, shape-shifting to suit audiences both young and old, and morphing into variants that crackle with

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renewed narrative energy” (Tatar, 2004: xxvii). This is equally true of the songs discussed in my chapter, which I have grouped under “Heroes”, “Heroines”, “Blitz Spirits, Blythe Spirits”, and “V for Victory”, where narratives freely extemporise on key themes while promising that the tribulations of resourceful heroines and suffering heroes “will result in safety and reconciliation” (Byatt, 2004: xxiv). The musicalisation of such war-time signifiers as partings (“We’ll Meet Again”), home-centredness (“The White Cliffs of Dover”) and returning safely from missions (“Comin’ in on a Wing and Prayer”) thus rely on the pertinence of the text, its social context, and the ways in which the listeners’ needs are built into the words/music. “Magic functions as the matrix of action ... bringing good fortune to those with whom we sympathise and disaster to their adversaries.” Yet as Tatar observes:

“Despite our association of fairy tales with innocence, good fortune, and the satisfaction of desires, the conflicts between protagonist and persecutor mean that fairy-tale plots are fraught with merciless aggression, vicious brutality and deadly hostility. Danger lurks in every corner of the world” (2004, xxix),

and for the allied forces of World War II this was symbolised by the black swastika of the Nazi regime.

In common with the adult oral storytelling culture of fairy tales, the narratives of war time songs draw on everyday language and, as such, there is a sense of identification through which the listener is located in the text, and hence the experience communicated. The music/lyric relationship in ballads, for example, where “words and music merge

into unified emotive phrases” to become “a vehicle for the singer’s intimate, conversational address to the individual” provides one such example (Middleton, 1990: 229), suggesting a form of structural relationship between the social experience and the text. “The aesthetic thus describes the quality of the experience” (Frith, 2007: 294) and the music “in so far as it is a cultural activity ... is also communicational activity” (Stefani, 1973: 21). It both shapes and mirrors the experiences of those involved in war, weaving a cultural discourse that builds a sense of unity and fortitude in the face of foreign domination.<sup>5</sup>

The identification of “story” in relation to war time songs is important, and there is invariably a narrative that concerns the relationship between two or three individuals. Words structure the experience of the song, they “tend to govern the rhythmic/harmonic flow” (Middleton, 1990: 231) as well as providing pertinent comments in the hope that listeners will relate to the feelings expressed, while remaining simple and easy to memorize.<sup>6</sup> The words also “agree to work within the spaces of tonal music’s phrases, and the potential expressive intensity of music’s melody is held back for the sake of the clarity of verbal communication” (Griffiths, 2003: 43). As such, the vocal melody, or tune, is simply a part of the raw material of the song, and the lyrics are given additional colour and intensity through the texture of the musical accompaniment/arrangement, the vocal gesture, the sound mix, and the recording. The chorus is particularly important in providing a space for “joining in”, either communally or individually while, for example, listening to a radio broadcast.

It is also apparent, that the vocalist takes on the persona of the character and/or storyteller, communicating the feel of the song, both in live performance and on recordings. Even so, while it is tempting to conflate the experiences described with the author or singer, within the context of the song the analogy is more with a short drama or novelette in which the singer takes the leading role: it may relate to observation, to personal experience, or to a character taken from mythology, a novel, a play, or a poem, but it is nevertheless fictionalised.

## Heroes

“The red glow of a false dawn indicated a massive fire in the east. The barrage in Hyde Park cracked and flared and the anti-aircraft guns closer to home were doing a good job of keeping up their own cacophony, shells whistling into the air like fireworks and *crack-crack-cracking* as they exploded high overhead. And beneath it all was the horrible throbbing drone of the bombers’ unsynchronized engines, a sound that always made her stomach feel pitchy. The enemy, and in opposition, the spitfire pilots.” (Atkinson, 2013: 351)

The role of the hero is most recognisable in the romanticism surrounding the spitfire pilot.<sup>7</sup> In common with the hero in fairy stories, his was a way of dealing with the enemy and the possible fate that lay ahead: Nazi domination. Characterised by “heroic optimism”, reality was nevertheless tempered by fatalism: “If it’s got your number on it...” Comparable to “the double vision of the [fairy] tales”, the mission of the pilots was on the one hand, to psychologically manage “perennial drives and terrors, both conscious and unconscious, and

on the other [to confront] actual, volatile experience” (Warner, 1995: xvii). Context is important. By 1941 “the Luftwaffe had failed to crush the allied airmen of the RAF [Royal Air Force] and as the pressure on the Home Front was gradually eased as Britain’s military planners moved over to the offensive” (Leitch, 1985: 40). As Marina Warner explains, while the thought of victory and living happily ever after is consoling, it gives scant help compared to the nostalgic “Listen, this is how it was before, but things could change—and they might.” (Warner, 1995: xvii) Faith, then, was not so much in the happy ending as in the restoration of justice and peace to the world. As such, fairy tales and the realities of war have an underlying moral purpose: both represent a practical dimension to the imagination, one that can unlock possibilities. The so–termed “Lords of the Air” were also known as “the few”, a description that came from Winston Churchill’s phrase, “Never, in the field of human conflict, was so much owed by so many to so few”, a reference to the casualties incurred during the Battle of Britain, and an allusion to Shakespeare’s play, *Henry V*: “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers.”<sup>8</sup> With an average age of twenty years many “were not old enough to vote, yet not too young to lay down their lives”.<sup>9</sup> Outnumbered 5 to 1, they nevertheless had a motivating advantage over their adversary—they were defending their homeland.

“Lords of the Air”, with words and music by Michael North and David Burnaby was published in 1939, and draws on the mythical “days of old”, situating Britain nostalgically as “our island home, land of the free”, the “Motherland” in opposition

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to the “Fatherland” of their adversary. Drawing on the patriotic song “Rule Britannia”<sup>10</sup>, and set in a similar declamatory style, the verse recalls how “our fathers fought o’er land and sea”, while anticipating a future battle in the skies: “Should enemies attack our land from out the skies above.” The new battle cry, “Britannia rules the air” also establishes the traditional alliance between religion, country and the crusading warrior with right on their side: “Lord of the heaven’s above” keep “Britannia’s sons Lords of the Air”. A year later, in the summer and autumn of 1940, the “air battle for England” became a reality, the first major campaign fought entirely by air forces. It was also the Luftwaffe’s most sustained aerial bombing campaign. Statistics show just how dangerous the pilots’ missions were. “Of the nearly 3,000 aircrew who fought in the Battle of Britain 544 lost their lives and of the remainder a further 814 died before the end of the war.”<sup>11</sup> As such, the popular perception of pilots as “carefree and out for a good time, doing a bit of flying within a club setting and able to impress the ladies on a Saturday night with the lads ... is far from the truth... Wartime flying was in fact a deadly serious business requiring a cool head and a steady, calculating nerve. Only a fool would treat it casually as, if he did, he would be bounced by an Me 109 and become another name on a war memorial”.<sup>12</sup>

The Spitfire and the Supermarine Spitfire were in use by the Royal Air Force and many other Allied countries throughout the war, but as the strategic bombing offensive over Europe gathered momentum, the Lancaster became the main heavy bomber used by the RAF<sup>12</sup>. Only half of all bomber crews

survived their first tour of duty. The brutal fact that so many failed to return and the anxiety felt by those tracking their flights in the Observer Corps is reflected in “Comin’ In On A Wing And A Prayer”.<sup>13</sup> With words by Harold Adamson and music by Jimmy McHugh it was sung by Anne Shelton, with the Ambrose orchestra.<sup>14</sup> Opening with an on-the-beat, recitative-like narrative in F major that follows the rhythmic cadence of the words, the legend<sup>15</sup> tells that:

“One of our planes was missing, hours overdue...  
The radio sets were humming  
They waited for the word  
Then a voice broke through the humming  
And this is what they heard...”

The orchestral arrangement lifts, and the tempo accelerates with the magic words “Coming in on a wing and a prayer”. Limping home, with one motor gone, but with a full crew it was mission accomplished.

## Heroines

The songs of World War II are intriguing as historical documents: they reflect and resonate with lived experiences. As such, it is interesting to note the way in which the war opened up a space for women, “one where existing prejudice and patronising attitudes towards ‘the fair sex’ had no logical place”. As Leitch also notes, “in the so-called Phoney War of 1939-40 unofficial groups of women were formed with rather self-conscious titles like the Women’s Amazon Defence Corps. By 1945 all need for fantasy names was gone, buried under the incalculable weight of wom-

en's war time achievements" (Leitch, 1985: 65). During the 1914-18 War, "the total number of working women had risen to some 7,500,000; after it, women had secured the vote. [In World War II], their effort was to prepare the way for much broader social freedoms" (*Ibid.*: 58).

In 1941 the War Cabinet introduced conscription for single women aged between 20 and 30. They had the option of going into industry or the auxiliary services. Their history, sociology and psychology is largely unknown, albeit the focus of countless films, books and plays.<sup>16</sup> In common with her fairytale counterpart, the wartime heroine had to deal with actual, urgent dilemmas as well as the commonplace and, by drawing on tradition, songs could include a mixture of tragedy and comedy, including the unlikely and the incongruous. The perception that women were simply cogs in the machinery of war, aware that for every "home" job filled, a man could be freed for convoy and combat work was common. Strongly encouraged to "Come Into The Factories"<sup>17</sup>, the relationship between a female war worker and her machine is reflected in the comic song, "The Thing-ummy-bob (That's Gonna Win the War)". Written by Gordon Thompson and David Heneker in 1942, it was performed by music-hall star Gracie Fields<sup>18</sup> and opens with a spoken:

"I can't pretend to be a great celebrity  
But still I'm quite important in me way  
The job I have to do may not sound much to you  
But all the same I'm very proud to say..."

before moving into a upbeat, tongue-twister explanation of her wartime role:

"I'm the girl that makes the thing that drills the hole /  
that holds the ring that drives the rod that turns the  
knob / that works the thing-ummy-bob." Despite the  
comic nature of the song, it nevertheless makes a key  
point: "it's the girl that makes ... the thing-ummy-  
bob / That's going to win the war."

As so many records of wartime Britain reveal, laughter was an important weapon in maintaining morale and Gracie Field's iconic Lancashire Lass accent, self-deprecating jokes, comic songs and monologues had attracted a devoted following from the working-class culture of music hall and variety. Her "no airs-and-graces" Northern working class style was also evident during the war when she signed up for ENSA (The Entertainments National Service Association), travelling to France to entertain the troops: the first artist to play behind enemy lines. Having started her life as a cotton mill half-time worker, spending half a week in the mill and the other half at school, her working-class credentials provided a strong point of identification, organising and evoking a feeling of shared roles, while signalling attitude and humour. Her bantering "It's a ticklish sort of job making a thing for a thing-ummy-bob / Especially when you don't know what it's for" was a sentiment shared by many factory workers where the monotony of their jobs was relieved by the thought that their contribution was important to the war effort.

The tedium of factory work was recognised by the government who rightly considered that music could also make a contribution to the war effort. Choir and brass band concerts were broadcast regularly by BBC radio; for workers in factories and munitions there was *Music While You Work*, and



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the popularity of big bands led to regular broadcasts by Henry Hall, Billy Cotton, Mantovani, Victor Silvester, Ambrose and Ivy Benson with her “all-girl” band. It was very much a case of “where words fail, music speaks”, and as Leitch reports, a correspondent who joined the WAAF in 1943 recalls her first days of training:

“As we were herded from hut to hut we were encouraged by our officers and NCO’s to sing ‘You Are My Sunshine’. Hundreds of very young, very homesick, very cold and miserable girls sang this song lustily.” (1985: 63)

With words and music by Jimmie Davis and Charles Mitchell, and originally a country and western, or as Davis subsequently explained, a hillbilly song, “You are my Sunshine” became a war-time favourite, frequently orchestrated as a medium slow fox-trot. The upbeat chorus with its revelation “You’ll never know dear, how much I love you” and the supplication “Please don’t take my sunshine away” appears at first a common sentiment for all those whose loved ones were leaving on war-time missions. It is not until the second verse that the listener is confronted with the realisation that this is no ordinary war-time parting. Rather, it is revealed that “now you’ve left me to love another”, while the third verse plunges deeper into despair, “if you leave me ... never more I’ll breathe your name”.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting, then, that the most popular version by country singer, Jimmie Davis with the Pine Ridge Boys, self-accompanied on acoustic guitar and mouth organ, contains only the first verse, sandwiched between the choruses, so giving it a more appropriate war-time feel<sup>20</sup> of partings coloured by more happy memories.

## Blitz Spirit, Blythe Spirit

In common with fairy stories where the hero and heroine confront extreme obstacles in their journey towards a happy ending, the nightly bombing raids by the Luftwaffe created both terror and a blitz spirit, characterised and nostalgically remembered as camaraderie and optimism. Everyday songs became associated with the everyday situation of wartime Britain, the blackout, air-raid sirens and, especially, love and partings. While countless bombing raids flattened cities across the UK, London, as the capital of England, was a key target and at the height of the blitz there were fifty-six nightly bombings in a row. The “steady bombardment and the timpani of the big bombs, the whistling of shells and the thunder of nearby mobile artillery—the *donner und blitzen* of the Luftwaffe [created] a terrible, endless storm” (Atkinson, 2013: 266). For those living in houses with cellars, these provided makeshift air-raid shelters but while

“it is true that millions of ordinary people made terrible sacrifices in the war [...] sacrifice was far from evenly shared. The wealthy escaped the blitz by spending their nights in country houses. East Enders had to sleep in the Essex fields because no proper bomb shelters had been built. It was only action by left wing militants that forced the authorities to open up the tube stations at night for shelter” (Lyneham, 1994: 1).

While it is true that the underground provided respite, camaraderie and a feeling of safety, it is evident that there was also a sense of confinement.

“There had been an incident of a bomb falling on an underground entrance, the blast had travelled down and into the tunnels and the result was pretty awful.



It didn't make the papers, these things were so bad for morale." (Atkinson, 2013: 258)

Nevertheless, the sense of transience that characterised the often brief encounter of love affairs—"this might be the last time—"appeared also to heighten romanticism, as suggested by popular songs of the period. At the same time, Lynham's observation that "it was business as usual at the Savoy" that "restaurants, which were mainly used by the rich, were not subject to rationing" (1994: 1) is a reminder that despite the myth of "ordinariness", which along with patience and good humour, cheerfulness and resolution were drawn into association as typically English qualities, class distinctions remained.<sup>21</sup> "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square", with its Mayfair venue and dancing at the Ritz suggests at least a middle-class romance,<sup>22</sup> reminding the reader that for every situation, for every class, there was at least one special song that would conjure up and heighten emotions. With lyrics by Eric Maschwitz and music by Manning Sherwin, the appeal of the song lies in its subtle harmonic shifts which colour the sentiments of the lyrics, so relating the experience to the musical form.<sup>23</sup> Introduced by "the legend", which tells the listener that "when true lovers meet in Mayfair ... song birds sing", the Eb major harmonies of the verse, the rising vocal phrase on "that certain night" when "there was magic abroad in the air" (from Bb below middle C to Eb, a vocal span of an octave plus perfect fourth), the harmonic tension of the G7 (*a-broad*; a *dream*), the descending vocal sequence ("angels dining at the") and the final intervallic jump of a 5<sup>th</sup> on "Ritz" so focussing its special significance,

all effect a musical narrative that is heightened by the memory of "dancing cheek to cheek" and her lover's smile (verse 2). The shift into G minor for the bridge effects a change in mood, with the scalar rise and fall of the vocal ("when dawn came stealing up ... to interrupt our rendezvous") colouring the sentiments of the words; while the "was it true?" over the Fm7-Bbm7 harmonies create an underlying hesitancy, a musical pivot-point which encourages the listener to want to know more, so effecting a lead back to the ongoing narrative of the verse and the "goodnight" kiss when the "streets of Town" seemed "paved with stars". The sense of a personal narrative is finally confirmed in the coda, the acknowledgment "I know, 'cause I was there" confirming the song's intimate mode of address.

The performative "intimacy" in the song's recording is further created by the way in which the vocal is placed central,<sup>24</sup> creating what Philip Tagg calls the "monocentric mix:"

"This not only implies that the singer is, as usual, the central 'reference point' of the piece but also that she has had her mouth placed nearer the listeners' ear, not only by proximity to the recording mike, but also by the relative volume accorded to the main vocal channel(s) in the mix. This technique creates an actual or imagined distance between two persons (the singer and the listener) which is that of an intimate and confidential monologue (or potential dialogue)." (1991: 60)

The effect is to prioritise attention on the singer and her identity, while suggesting that she understands herself to be expressing something she has personally experienced—hearing the nightingale sing, the "I know, 'cause I was there" of the song's

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Coda. Vera Lynn, the singer in my recording<sup>25</sup>, is a further example of the importance of entertainment during World War II, with her songs providing a link between the men fighting abroad and their wives and girlfriends at home. Within the context of gender at work, her role as an intermediary—sending messages from and to troops in her radio show, “Sincerely Your’s”, her recordings, films and live performances both in the UK and with the troops—including tours to India, Egypt and Burma, whilst under occupation by the Japanese—provides an insight into her significance during World War II. She was “the forces sweetheart”. Awarded Dame Commander of the British Empire in 1975, she remains an iconic figure in national culture.

While the Ritz and the Savoy provided a venue for the wealthy, the wider musical context of dancebands and their performing situations (nightclubs, dance halls, movies and radio) were significant in boosting morale. Ted Heath had formed his own big band on D-Day, 1944<sup>26</sup> and had previously played trombone with Geraldo’s orchestra, performing in numerous concerts and broadcasts during the war, as well as travelling to the Middle East to play to the Allied Forces based there. In 1941 Geraldo had asked his band members to submit a favourite tune to include in their broadcasts. Heath had composed “That Lovely Weekend”, after his wife, Moira, had written him a poem about a rare weekend spent together during his war travels. It was orchestrated with Dorothy Carless on vocals and was an immediate wartime hit.<sup>27</sup>

The legend again sets the scene, “I’m writing through my tears” with thanks for “that lovely weekend”. The shared experience of brief leave-time reunions and tearful farewells, the tug between “the laughter, the music, the wine” and the “now you have gone” is inflected with momentary lifts of major harmonies before the poignancy of the minor chords, which characterise the overall feel of the song. Memories of moments shared are coloured by the knowledge of imminent partings. “You had to go”, for example, is given a poco accelerando, which together with its Dm harmonies provides an awakening sense of urgency and sadness; the “sorry I cried” is sung softly over Gm-Fm, and the hope that “someday we’ll spend, a lifetime as sweet as that lovely weekend” has an underlying optimism, resolving finally on a Bb7-Eb major cadence. Like many love songs of the time, the mode of address, the personalised “I” provides the female listener with a sense of identification, the male listener that it is his wife or sweetheart who is addressing him. It is also interesting that the male, like the Prince in fairy stories, is never given a name. That, surely, was for the listener to fill in, so creating a personal reminiscence of the “thrill of your kiss” and “those two days of heaven you helped me to spend”.

The importance of optimism, that longing for the happy ever after, is characteristic of many love songs of the period. “My heart travels with you till we meet again” is echoed in “We’ll meet again” with its caveat “don’t know where, don’t know when”. Most famously sung by Vera Lynn,<sup>28</sup> the optimism of the refrain is reflected in the rising sequence of the opening words, which moves into

the declamatory “I know we’ll meet again some sunny day”. It is a song that was adopted by families and couples across war-torn Britain.

“I was waiting on Dartford station with my little daughter, aged 4. It was in the blackout and spirits were low when without prompting she sang the chorus of ‘We’ll meet again’ right through the darkness. When she stopped singing a naval officer standing near said, ‘Bless her—let’s hope she’ll always be free to sing.’” (Leitch, 1985: 24)

While the foxtrot feel of romantic ballads provides a context for dancing romance and flirtation, Allie Wrubel’s song, “Cleanin’ My Rifle (And Dreamin’ of You)” (1943) situates separation from loved ones on the battlefield itself, “hangin’ round camp that night, wond’rin; what tomorrow’d bring”. Sung originally by Lawrence Welk and later performed by Clive Dunn of “Dad’s Army” fame,<sup>29</sup> the upbeat song is accompanied by banjo and reminisces about “beautiful mem’ries”, “her goodbye kiss” and the “dream you left in my heart [that] will some day come true”. It is the song of an ordinary soldier, feeling “a little bit lonesome, little bit blue” and reminds the listener once more of the music hall tradition, which as part of Britain’s cultural heritage, has been recognised as “a truer reflection of the life and culture of the urban classes than was to be found in any other artistic form” (Hall and Wannell, 1964: 56). Its legacy—the concept of wartime entertainment’ and its associations with optimism, attitude, and “serving the country” was important in mediating not only “what happens”, but also “how it happens”. In particular “certain patterns of life and feelings are strengthened affirmed and expressed” (Hall and Wannell,

1964:46) through the special relationship between performer and audience.<sup>30</sup>

## V for Victory

“The rubble that comprised the mound was all that was left of a house, or rather several houses all ground and mashed into one another. The rubble had been homes half an hour ago, now those same homes were just a hellish jumble of bricks, broken joists, floorboards, furniture, pictures, rugs, bedding, books, crockery, lino, glass. People. The crushed fragments of their lives never to be whole again.” (Atkinson, 2013: 352)

A Mass Observation Survey, compiled in September 1941, had asked participants to “write freely on ‘What Britain Means To You’ ... At the top of the list came the countryside [England’s] fields, her woods, her homes, her Wordsworth”. In other words, the underlying sentiment is one of nostalgia: the nation is imagined as a place we have always inhabited, small-scale, homely and rural, so constructing a potent ideological discourse of “the people” that emphasises, continuity, permanence, stability and ordinariness. Against the background of the Blitz, and the possibility that London could be erased like Pompeii and Herculaneum, England remained characterised by its countryside and village life. The fact that until the middle of 1944 there had been more civilian deaths than among those who were in the fighting services underpins the importance of the mythscape of an unchanging England. Like the homesteads, forests, distant and nameless kingdoms of the fairytale, its purpose was to reinforce the ties that bind people together, rather than question them. As such it was resolutely utopian rather

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than questioning, and infinitely resilient: “We can take it” in the heart of disaster. It is also apparent that this sense of nostalgia was predicated on something that never existed: an Arcadia in the past, albeit underpinned by a dream of a future free from hostilities and characterised by a sense of healing, whereby the bombed cities would “rise from the ashes of the old like a phoenix” (Atkinson, 2013: 367). Underpinned by a fierce sense of patriotism, the image of Britain ringed by an “uncrossable sea” was, perhaps, the most enduring of England’s ethnoscapes, both as a military bastion and as a peaceful idyll, as invoked in John of Gaunt’s eulogy (Richard II, Act II, Scene 1) (Smith, 2005: 4):

“This fortress build by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war...  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England”<sup>31</sup>

It was a sentiment that resonated with the fervour of “There’ll Always Be An England”, which summed up the country’s mood at the onset of hostilities: “And England shall be free.” Composed by Ross Parker and Hughie Charles and “sung by a boy soprano, dressed in a midshipman’s uniform’ it went straight to the top of the bestseller’s list and became the first great hit of the war”.

## Postscript

The relationship between fairy stories, nostalgia and the songs of World War II could have explored many tales of war time heroics: the road

to Dunkirk, spies, agents, The Red Cross, the Battle of the Atlantic, digging for victory as poultry and rabbits joined the domestic gardens and allotments and, of course, the arrival of the GIs (“overpaid, oversexed and over here!”). I will end, however, with the saga of “Lilli Marlene”, a song first recorded in 1939 by Lale Andersen in Germany<sup>32</sup> and subsequently taken over by a propaganda unit answerable to Dr. Goebbels. Having invaded Yugoslavia in 1941 and taking over Belgrade Radio, the unit appealed to Vienna Radio for some suitable songs and were sent a batch of old records, among which was “Lilli Marlene.” It became popular with both Rommel’s Afrika Korps and the Allied Eighth Army, who produced both parodies and bawdy versions of the song. The British Government then commissioned Tommy Connor to write a “straight” English Language version, which was recorded in 1944 by Anne Shelton with Stanley Black and his Orchestra.<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere Marlene Dietrich recorded her version in the USA,<sup>34</sup> and in Italy it was sung by operatic tenors to Mussolini’s reluctant troops (Leitch, 1985: 76). It is a reminder, that while my narrative explores British heroes and heroines, the horrors of war were extensive and while it is easy to identify the villains, it is also a sad fact that “there is no sharp boundary between humans and monsters—the capacity for pure evil lies in all human agents without distinction” (Cole, 2006: 15). Small wonder, then, that nostalgia, both during and after the war, focussed on the positive: camaraderie, heroics, optimism and faith.

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## Notes

1. Discussion of Max Lüthi’s description of fairytales (Byatt, 2004: xx).
2. The Proms, held annually from July-September at the Royal Albert Hall, London continued throughout

the war, “enjoying unprecedented success, and such well-staged coups as the premier of Shostakovich’s *Leningrad Symphony* in June 1942 (smuggled out of Russia by diplomatic bag) maintained the Music Department’s high profile” (Hayes & Hill, 1999: 76).

3. "The People's War" web archive contains 47,000 personal recollections, "a legacy of people who lived and fought in World War II". Bill Purdue and James Chapman, *The People's War*, Open University Study Pack, <http://www.open2.net/history/whosewar/html> [Accessed 15 September, 2013].
4. Neil Kelly, *Mythology*, <http://knol.google.com/k/neil-kelly/the-use-of-mythology-in-the-creation-of/nu0k105zuhiv/2#> [Accessed February 4, 2009].
5. See my earlier discussion of the BBC web Archive, *The People's War and nostalgia*.
6. The use of the vernacular is integral to meaning in pop music and many wartime songs tend to voice hopes as well as facts "by transposing the world on to an imaginative plane, not trying to escape from it, but colouring it with fantasy, turning bitter, even brutal facts of life into something beautiful, tragic, honourable, so that when singer and listeners return to reality at the end of the song, the environment is not changed but they are better fitted to grapple with it" (Palmer, 1974: 8).
7. The Spitfire was designed by Reginald Mitchell of Supermarine Ltd., in response to a 1934 Air Ministry specification calling for a high-performance fighter with an armament of eight wing-mounted 0.303 inch (7.7 mm) machine guns. The version of the Spitfire that fought in the Battle of Britain was powered by a Merlin engine of 1,030 horsepower. Its speed, high altitude performance and manoeuvrability provided the margin of victory over the German fighters. John F. Guilmartin, Jr. "Spitfire", <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/560558/Spitfire> [Accessed September 21, 2013].
8. A speech made to Parliament by Prime Minister Winston Churchill on 20 August, 1940 as the Battle of Britain raged overhead.
9. "Who Were the Few", <http://www.raf.mod.uk/history/whowerethefew.cfm> [Accessed September 16, 2013].
10. "Rule Britannia" originated from the poem by James Thompson and was set to music by Thomas Arne in 1740. It is sung each year at "The Last Night of the Proms" See Last Night of the Proms 2009 where the mezzo soprano, Sarah Connolly is dressed in a costume styled on one worn by Nelson. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB5Nbp\\_gmgQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB5Nbp_gmgQ) [Accessed September 20, 2013].
11. "Who Were The Few", <http://www.raf.mod.uk/history/whowerethefew.cfm> [Accessed September 16, 2013].
12. The raid on three dams in the Ruhr Valley, the industrial heartland of Germany, armed by scientist Dr Barnes Wallis's bouncing bombs on May 16, 1943 is one of the Lancaster's most famous missions.
13. While the phrase originated in World War II, it also appears in the 1942 film, *The Flying Tigers*, with John Wayne as Captain Jim Gordon. "Comin' in on a wing and a prayer" was published in 1943 by Robbins Music Corp., New York and London, a date when Britain had moved into the offensive and was embarking on regular bombing raids on Germany.
14. "Coming in on a wing and prayer" is illustrated by photos of the bombers and their pilots. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B69CquvLHgY> [Accessed September 18, 2013].
15. The legend sets the scene in songs and in many cases assumes almost a recitative-like narrative.
16. For example, Kate Atkinson, *Life after Life*, 2013; Sarah Waters, *The Night Watch*, 2006, both of which explore the blacked-out streets, air-raids and chaos of the Blitz and Sebastian Faulks, *Charlotte Gray*, 1999, who runs an apparently simple errand for a British special operations group in occupied France, while searching for her lover, an English airman missing in action.
17. A poster of the period which shows a statuesque woman, arms uplifted against a background of fighter planes zooming out of a distant factor, flanked by tanks.



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18. “The Thingummy-bob”, <http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/t/thethingummybob.shtml> [Accessed September 20, 2013]. Gracie Fields was born on 9 January 1898 and had an extensive career in the British music halls and was the highest-paid actress in Britain during the 1930s. She died on September 27, 1979.
19. All three verses appear in the 1940 Southern Music Publishing Co piano transcription printed in Leitch, 1985: 142-3.
20. “You Are My Sunshine”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcNyfaM1mTU> [Accessed September 21, 2013].
21. These characteristics are commonly drawn into association by contemporary films, broadcasts and the press. As a construction of national identity, the myth of “ordinariness” through which class divisions were forgotten as the nation pulled together to defeat the common enemy in what was commonly termed “The People’s War” was, perhaps, unrealistic. Such propaganda posters as “*Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution Will Bring Us Victory*” were greeted with a certain scepticism by those hardest hit by the 1930s Depression, and for whom the obligations of war meant even greater deprivation.
22. Embedded class deference was, at the time a defining characteristic of British social relations. For culturalist Marxist historian Edward Thompson (1963), class remained an enduring product of nineteenth century modernity.
23. My discussion of the song provides a suggested approach for analysing similar genres.
24. The introduction of the microphone in the 1930s allowed the voice to be amplified above other sound sources, so facilitating a softer and more intimate mode of address. This was important for those listening to records at home or at other venues where the original singer was not present.
25. “A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aK70h4kVd88> [Accessed September 15, 2013].
26. Ted Heath led Britain’s greatest post-war big band from 1944 until 2000 and recorded more than 100 albums, selling over 20 million records.
27. “This Lovely Weekend”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11TwyQkuec> [Accessed September 15, 2013].
28. “We’ll Meet Again”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cHcunREYzNY> [Accessed September 22, 2013].
29. “Cleanin’ my rife and dreaming of you”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrUgeqvHa1M> [Accessed September 21, 2013].
30. Regular performers included Bud Flanagan with his partner Chesney Allen, Arthur Askey and Gracie Fields.
31. The foregrounding of England relates historically to the separation (at the time) and, hence, independence of Scotland and Ireland.
32. Lale Anderson, “Lili Marlene”, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DXruigKRRc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DXruigKRRc) (Accessed September 25, 2013)
33. Anne Shelton, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VV2kVzIwtes](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VV2kVzIwtes) (Accessed September 21, 2013)
34. Marlene Dietrich, “Lili Marlene” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q56QzGcAKZc> (Accessed September 21, 2013)