

WILSON, JASON. *Soldiers of Song: The Dumbells and Other Canadian Concert Parties of the First World War*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012. Pp. 239.

In this study Wilson simultaneously pursues two complimentary aims, surveying the Canadian concert party from developmental and cultural perspectives. Developmentally, he traces concert parties from their origins as impromptu soldiers' "evsmokers" to the emergence of well-established divisional concert parties, of which the Dumbells were the most famous. He also follows the Dumbells' post-war successes as they toured nationally and performed in London and on Broadway. Culturally, Wilson examines the context and content of these performances to explain how concert parties tried to "[disable] the nightmare of the war through song and humour" (p. 35) and why the Dumbells remained popular in the decades following the Armistice. These are ambitious tasks to undertake in such a short work.

Although the Dumbells emerge as *the* concert party of the Canadian Corps by the end of the war and in Wilson's analysis, he is careful to point out the importance of other troupes, particularly the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry's Comedy Company (PPCLI CC) and the YMCA's Y-Emmas. The PPCLI CC was the first Canadian semi-permanent concert party, formed in May 1916, and they, along with other concert parties, premiered many of the acts, along with a number of the performers, that would later become associated with the Dumbells. It is this treatment of the structural development and of the personalities that is the strongest aspect of this work. The brief treatments of key figures sprinkled throughout demonstrate the variety of paths taken by the soldier-entertainers from service in the trenches to the stage and sometimes back again to the front. As Wilson repeatedly points out, it was because the members of the concert parties were soldiers first that they were able to address their audiences as comrades during some of the most difficult periods of the war, including the 1918 German Spring Offensive and the Last Hundred Days, when the troupes performed daily for soldiers going up the line (p. 67). It also allowed them to serve in the post-war period as bridges between the trenches and the home front by allowing all to share in comedy borne of the situation at the front.

Perhaps the most striking section is where Wilson explores the incredible post-war appeal of the Dumbells. The post-war group was an amalgamation of performers from other Canadian concert parties, a situation which may have facilitated identification with the troupe (p. 71-73). Before disbanding in the early 1930s, the Dumbells undertook twelve national tours in fourteen years, playing close to 1000 shows in communities large and small (p. 142). The appendices contain the demanding tour itineraries and list the sheet music and recordings released in the years following the Armistice, testaments to the immense cultural legacy of the concert party in general and the Dumbells in particular in the inter-war period. A splinter group, the Originals, also toured between 1923-1928, and they are briefly acknowledged (pp. 138-140). The brevity of this discussion is

perhaps a missed opportunity to explore even more fully the legacy of the concert party memory and experience in the decade following the war's end.

It is not only here that the opportunity is missed to explore the cultural aspects of the Canadian concert party as, perhaps unfortunately, it is in the cultural analysis that this work fails to deliver on its considerable promise. Wilson begins with the British music hall tradition and an explanation of the difference between the satirical adaptations of well-known songs sung at the front and the patriotic sentimentality of those popular at home (p. 17ff). This discussion is separated by several chapters from the presentation of material performed by Canadian concert parties, where a few examples of this kind of adaptation are given (pp. 84, 97-98). The lyrics quoted and the description of concert party skits are limited—almost an equal amount of space is devoted to quotations from Monty Python skits which draw upon similar material—and the discussion of those examples provided is sometimes only perfunctory, sometimes leaving a number of questions unaddressed. Although the Ross rifle appears as a key feature of the Canadian experience, to give one example, when were these songs performed? To what extent did soldiers who served after Canadians were re-armed with Lee-Enfields and/or post-war audiences respond to the material? The brevity of these discussions also leads to difficulties. At one point, the author states that Canadians were “the first intended targets of German chlorine gas” (p. 105), a statement which is not supportable and obscures the continued importance of gas warfare as a psychological weapon until the end of the war, even as Wilson acknowledges that concert parties avoided the subject of gas because there was nothing funny about it (p. 108-110).

The cultural analysis may have been rendered more difficult by the treatment of some of the sources. Primary documents written during the war or shortly after it are distinguished from interviews given decades later only in the footnotes; they are treated identically in the text, a problem when trying to sort out the various war-time and post-war developments. While this lack of distinction is problematic, the impressive variety of sources employed include sheet music, post-war recordings, films, interviews, and the private family collections of the performers. This array of sources also goes some way to make up for the difficulty of capturing the vitality of a performance, particularly a comedic performance or a female impersonator, on the page. The work is generously illustrated with photographs, many of them from the family collections.

The flaws in this work, and they must be acknowledged, serve to throw into relief the importance of this area of study in understanding the culture of the Canadian Corps overseas and the transposition of that culture to Canada. As this appears to be a revision of the author's M.A. thesis, hopefully it is a dress rehearsal for a more thorough analysis and presentation of the content of the performances themselves.

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