

Book Review:

*National Myth and the First World War in Modern Popular Music* by Peter Grant, London, Palgrave, 2018

Peter Grant has gathered together and studied meticulously a large number of popular songs from a wide variety of genres in several countries, which speak of the First World War., and he has shown that such songs are more common since the beginning of the new millennium. From *chanson* to punk to Flanders and Swan, he gives an account of the different ways they treat the theme, treatments which, naturally, are more rooted in the imaginary-emotional musical worlds artistes are providing for their listeners than in attempts to transmit historical knowledge of the Great War.

The vast number of angles which popular songsters have chosen –from a folk piece about a World War One execution to an extreme metal work where the narraor is War itself - is well-presented, and as an encyclopedia of song on the subject, the volume is very useful indeed. Many of the explanations of the mechanisms of the songs are fascinating, and the fact that most of the music is easy to find on the internet makes the reading of this work so much more enjoyable. Music fans may have a long playlist by the time they get to the end of the book. Only occasionally does the survey fall into that fantalk which is a permanent pitfall in writing about popular music (p104: “Dylan seems to be trying too hard to be Woody Guthrie”). And Grant takes on board that key fact that ambiguity is central to popular song, and successful imaginative tension rather than clear historical explanation is often the aim. His references to the positioning of the First World War in popular song in each country are intriguing – the absence of widespread public discourse about the First World War in Germany, for example, means that the songs he finds on the theme generally belong to marginal musical currents such as extreme metal (p32). The reworking of the “Christmas Truce” theme as a neutralist anthem with some international success by Israeli band Orphaned Land is another fine example.

Nevertheless, the basis of his criticism of some songs can be weak. One song is decried because it “adds nothing that has not been said many times before” (p59), a second is taken to pieces to show that details which the song says are from 1914 did not exist until 1915 (p59), while another is praised for “greater political balance”. This is not really how popular music works. In addition, though he is familiar with both the historiography and popular music studies theory, he can be somewhat dismissive about the work of certain key founding scholars in popular music studies (p130, p204, notably).

Once one has such a corpus of songs, what does one do with it, given that the choice has been made to concentrate on the lyrical content of the songs rather than the role they may have played for fans and other listeners? Here the book is less satisfactory. Grant aims to tease out what “popular myths” are contained in the different songs, and, to some extent, what different myths are communicated in songs of varied countries and varied genres. But the account of national mythologies and commemorations, if it includes plenty of information, is very simplistic. The page and a half on the UK, for example, says little about the multitude of varied, local commemorations organized by local press or voluntary organizations, including the many, sometimes contradictory, revivals of “Oh What a lovely War?”;<sup>1</sup> nor are the “No Glory in War” or white poppy campaigns even mentioned, nor the various high-profile debates, sometimes between revisionist historians and others, such as the one organized by the British Library.<sup>2</sup> The situation in France (where I live) concerning myth, memory, history and commemoration of the First World War is dealt with in 32 lines, and its truly contradictory nature does not come out at all.

In addition, it is unclear how the target “myths” are chosen, and it is easy to accuse the author of cherry-picking them. So “futility” (p16) and widespread trauma (p24) are breezily classed as myths, without, for the latter question, any real attempt to engage with the serious historical work he is disagreeing with.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, such ideas as “sacrifice” or “national interest” are not counted as myths, whereas a discussion on their mythical elements might have been fruitful. The work appears to amount to denouncing a series of (carefully selected) misconceptions which can exist. The choice can seem strange. That many people exaggerate the role of football in the Christmas truces (p183ff) may be the case, but is it really one of the main problems of historiography? We all have our favourite “facts that people should know” - most people, for example, are not aware that the majority of British soldiers in the First World War did not volunteer – but contradicting common mistakes is only a small part of our job as historians.

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<sup>1</sup> **John Mullen**, « Experiences and contradictions », *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* [Online], XX-1 | 2015, on 06 September 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rfcb/307> ; DOI : 10.4000/rfcb.307

<sup>2</sup> Available as a video on the British Library YouTube channel.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Jay Winter’s lecture at the British Academy in 2014, « Shell Shock and the Emotional History of the First World War », available online at [www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/video/shell-shock-and-emotional-history-first-world-war-lecture-professor-jay-winter](http://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/video/shell-shock-and-emotional-history-first-world-war-lecture-professor-jay-winter)

It seems that one of the aims of the book is to continue with where his previous book<sup>4</sup> left off, in its claim that the First World War was more of a people's war than has been thought. Grant regrets that "revisionist historians" have not had much influence on cultural history (p27). This is largely though not completely true (see for example Smith and Cowman<sup>5</sup>). Certainly, the revisionist current has been around long enough now to see that its influence in the media has been stronger than its influence among British historians (as can be seen by looking at, for example, the focusses of UK doctoral theses on the First World War over the last twenty years or so<sup>6</sup>). This may be inevitable for an approach which does not define itself by new questions it wishes to ask nor by new sources it exploits, but by a desire for different answers to old questions.

Grant ends his conclusion by defending historians against the claim made by Elie Wiesel that "any survivor has more to say than all the historians combined". He is right to do so, but we historians are only as good as the questions we are asking, and, despite the huge bibliography, the questions asked in this book are disappointingly narrow.

John Mullen is Professor of British Studies at the University of Rouen in France. He has published widely on the history of British popular music, and on the history and historiography of the First World War. Much of his research can be found on [univ-rouen.academia.edu/JohnMullen](http://univ-rouen.academia.edu/JohnMullen)

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Grant, *Philanthropy and Voluntary Action in the First World War*, Londo, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Angela K. Smith and Krista Cowman (Eds), *Landscapes and Voices of the Great War*, London, Routledge, 2018

<sup>6</sup> <https://ethos.bl.uk/>