The First World War and British Comics.

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Introduction: 'If we don't shoot him, someone else will!'[1]

Fig. 1. Charley's War[2]

Comics and the Great War are uneasy bedfellows. The war is a much used but infrequently reinvented topic for popular fiction, presenting a fixed series of representations that conform to the vision of the war poets. In clear opposition to these ideals, the comics genre is apparently obsessed by violence, its ethos one which seems in direct contradiction to the ideas commonly held about wars of the twentieth century.

Is it possible for comics to overcome the difficulties of portraying World War One? Can they provide subversive and unusual readings, or are they doomed to failure by the constraints of genre and the contemporary paradigm of warfare?

Comics are neglected by academics, which explains the dearth of critical sources discussing them. Comics are regarded as a medium which typically requires little originality and poor standards of production, often relying on repetition and low quality artwork. In addition, the short format and soap opera style narrative presents few intellectual challenges to the reader. Thus run popular perceptions of comics. Deviations from this pattern, such as Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer winning *Maus* (1986), or the critically acclaimed *Ghost World* (1999) are excused as aberrant and unique, or are distanced from the traditional comics genre through differing sales patterns, binding and presentation.[3] Comics have a long history of political expression

and consciousness, much of which has been used to effectively exploit dominant ideas of the status quo. This paper does not seek to exhaustively discuss the many texts available, rather it investigates the ways in which the British war comic has not only continued to express ideas of patriotism and sword-rattling long after supposedly 'anti-war' themes had established themselves in mainstream culture, but has then found ways to subvert these ideas, producing dissident texts which provide original and challenging voices.

British comics are direct descendants from serialised children's papers of the early Twentieth century such as *The Magnet* and *The Gem*.[4] Although comics already existed alongside these magazines, there is a direct correlation between falling sales in serials and their growth in popularity. When the paper shortages of the 1940s were lifted and the improvement of printing techniques allowed larger, clearer pictures to be produced, the comic began to replace the more outmoded format and presentation of the serialised story. The American demand for pulp fiction; sold on newsstands and corner shops, spread to the United Kingdom, where increased literacy amongst the lower classes additionally created a greater demand for inexpensive and accessible reading materials.[5]

Pulp fiction and serials also presented another new facet; their distinctive short format. In comics this size and shape was translated into a journal comprising a twenty eight page layout. This provided a short space in which to present punchy, dynamic stories which had great success with the growing mainstream of new readers. With the obvious bonus of imagery, the war comic in particular became popular, with strong emphasis on adventure, action, and the technical detail involved in drawing the machines of war. The comics' format also capitalised on this innovative use of illustration and succinct format by inventing the distinctive 'splash page' introduction. This was an illustration which encompassed the entire first page and thus presented a far more vital introduction to the narrative[6]. Another essential element in the rise of the war comic, this device highlighted large-scale drawings of combat and machinery in action.

The highly distinctive attitudes of early twentieth century idealism towards warfare and combat were continued in comics long after they had been contained and diluted in other mediums.[7] Although this severed them ideologically from many other elements of popular writing, it helped to reinforce their popularity within the genre, in particular amongst a younger audience. It is still possible to identify reflections of this idealism in many modern narratives. War discourses are frequently relocated in science fiction or fantasy settings whilst continuing to express ideas which bear strong comparison to the idealism of the Great War generation.[8] War comics therefore became a self-perpetuating sub-genre which has largely remained unchallenged by its peers as well as by more general critique from academic and popularist critics. Pre-war ideals of courage, nobility and chivalry remain dominant within their narratives. This ethos is easy to reproduce and well suited to the nature of war stories. For this reason war comics have always held a specific position within the genre, involving rigidly defined narratives and art based around a formulaic, unchallenging structure.

British war comics from the 1940s onwards often directly transferred ideas and stories depicted in the serials. The ethos of early twentieth century writers such as G A Henty, and children's authors during the war such as the self-titled Lt-Col F S Brereton, were carried over into these comics, which continued to expound the well established 'public school' or pre-war honour systems.[9] Although the War Books Controversy of the late 1920s put pay to these sentiments in mainstream and adult writing, the extremism of these concepts in children's fiction was still tolerated. Authors used these notions as strong grounding elements for their readers, introducing them to a series of ideas that were deliberately posited in an exaggerated capacity. This idealism provided elements of heroism that appealed both to children and their parents, who wished to engender strong understandings of morality in the younger generation. Most importantly however, there also seems to be an underlying implication that as children reached adulthood, they would be encouraged to put aside such childish ethos, undergoing a process of disenchantment that correlated directly to the loss of innocence experienced by the generation of 1914-18.

'Die Slant Eyes!' – Traditionalism in War Comics [10]

High moral concepts were therefore encouraged and tolerated in children's writing, with the moralities that the post-war nation now largely constructed as simplistic still regarded as commendable in moderation within this context. Children's writing, however, was not an arena in which complicated ideals held sway – instead action and daring deeds were accompanied by similarly over-inflated discourses of thought and speech; namely the 'high diction' identified by Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory.*[11]

From these optimistic and strongly enforced ideas, a fixed war comics narrative evolved. This contained a series of highly distinctive features which were rarely deviated from. Figure 2 shows a typical example, and its publication in 1986 demonstrates the tenaciousness of the war comics discourse throughout the twentieth century.

The war story had a regimented structure. Firstly, most stories were based around the Second World War.[12] This was a recent conflict which had ended conclusively and could therefore also be constructed as a victory. It provided easily identifiable villains (the Nazis) and could be easily reconfigured within the war comic story. It was a war of movement that, unlike the Great War, had not seen extended periods of entrenchment or attrition. It was global; involving exotic and unfamiliar locations and races. Importantly for the readership, it was a recognisable war; one in which propaganda had encouraged active mobilisation of the Home Front as well as in the fields of war. Crucially, World War Two was a predominantly mechanised conflict, involving interesting types of transport and artillery (tanks, planes). Conversely there was the anticipation of battle casualties, but in the event a far lower death toll for soldiers. This meant that the war for a soldier was largely constructed by popular writing as being a war in which survival was possible and even likely. All of these elements added potentially exciting aspects to youthful conceptions of the conflict.

The figure of the dominant hero was an essential component of the war story. Traditional coming of age narratives established characters who were young, naïve and brave. These figures clearly encapsulated pre-war ideals within a distinctive figure and simultaneously provided an empathetic figure for the reader. This remains a common facet of war stories in popular genres. Bernard Cornwell's Richard Sharpe novels, the army of light in Stephen King's *The Stand*, or Will Smith's character Steve Hiller in *Independence Day* all demonstrate how this understanding is still an ongoing trope for narratives of conflict.[13] In figure 2, Joe Two-Beans assumes this role and the caption explains that, 'Today Joe Two-Beans must also run the Gauntlet. He is ready –'. Literally leaping out of the page across the borders of each panel into the vision of the reader, Joe is proportionally gigantic in comparison to the cowering Japanese; bare-chested and with arms so widened with muscle that they are bigger in ratio than the other men's heads. British heroes typically followed this standard configuration of lantern jaw and muscled physique – and comics often dramatised this conversion form zero to hero as a character moved from soft wimp to manly-chested paragon through a scant page or so of 'hard training.'[14]

Fig. 2. 'Joe Two-Beans' [15]

For the hero to win, and to win well, was seen as crucial to the success of war narratives. Clear divisions between good and evil were established quickly within each tale in order to make this achievement both conclusive and justified. The villain, especially in the form of the Nazi, was easily demonised. Compartmentalising and alienating these villains were the twin stereotypes of stupid grunt soldiers and evil 'cunning' officers. Nazis were rarely individualised and referred to in the deliberately limiting capacities of 'Fritz', 'Jerry', 'Bosche' and 'Hun'. Their speech was monstrous and clumsy, restricted to 'Himmel!' (surprise) 'Rarg' (attack) 'Urg', (death), 'Aiiee!' (more death and some pain). Deliberately reducing speech to onomatopoeic terminology intentionally distanced the reader and invited comparison to animalism. For the chief villain and remaining itinerant evil officers the more vocally challenging but no more individualising 'For you my Frent, the var iss ofer', and 'Now you vill die, Englander scum' were also standardised utterances. By reinventing the German accent, comics writers deliberately

removed ideas of realism, instead providing a eugenically inferior, fictive race who lacked speech, independence and imaginative action.

In *The Popularisation of War in Comics Strips 1958-1988*, Edwards notes that this trend meant

> The vast majority of British men whose middle-school years lay between 1959 and 1988 will recall being able to issue orders, profanities and blaspheme in German. The very frequency of their appearance in the narrative of war-books readily prompted children to add '*achtung*', 'schnell', 'Gott in Himmel', 'Donner und Blitzen' to their vocabulary.[16]

Joe Two-Beans demonstrates this technique. His description is intentionally heroic. He is an orphan. His name implies poverty (literally, he doesn't have Two-Beans to rub together). In his past, Joe was trained by 'Buffalo Old Man'; connoting hereditary strength, wisdom through a figure of guidance, diligence and learning. In the conflict depicted he imitates his grandfather by wearing the painted 'Death Mask'. This mask is an even more potent symbol since it enables a magical transformation – from young man to warrior/slayer and back again.[17]

All of these qualities combine with physical action in the comic strip to depict a traditional hero figure. Two-Beans fights standing straight up whereas his enemies are bent over and crouch below him. His attack is single-handed, individualising him. The unsavoury war-cry 'Die, slant-eyes!' reduces the enemy to a caricature, emphasising alienating features rather than personal characteristics. Responding to this, the Japanese soldiers act en masse, dehumanised by their group behaviour and their speech 'aaagh' (twice), 'aah' and 'uggh'. Finally, whereas Joe's companions provide group support, 'Give him some cover!', the Japanese respond with a confused attack, 'Slay the American warrior!' and 'Kill him!'

The war comic usually provides the hero with loyal friends. These people enable secondary plot, and as with the device of 'The Death Mask', they also help justify the hero's rightness in entering the field of war. The band of followers concept was particularly useful to war narratives as stories could be located around the exploits of a small battalion or platoon. These characters strongly resembled the standard figures identified by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folktale*, and enabled a technique that Frank Richards had already identified through the 'Greyfriars Boys' of *The Magnet*.[18] One size does not fit all, but by surrounding the hero with a small group of contemporaries, there would always be one person with whom the reader would strongly empathise. Thus the group within any given war comic usually contained variations of the following: hero, best friend, unreliable friend (usually a coward who redeems himself), father figure (often a home front guide or a crusty sergeant), mentor (another officer, usually a trusted subaltern or captain and frequently an older relative), disposable hero

(angelic or morally pure figure), and comic relief (typically a working class private often related to the central character either geographically or educationally).[19]

The hero and his band of friends usually spoke in high diction, separating them from the bulk of both army and enemy by their obvious adherence by default to codes of honour and positive moral behaviour.[20] Whilst strong emphasis was placed on the role of the individual and the actions of one against many, the elements of teamwork and cooperation posited within this band were also clearly enforced.

The ease with which this formula could be reproduced meant that war stories became a staple ingredient of most regular boy's comics. To writers they provided a quick and easy option, requiring little original content to keep readers happy. Due to the strictness yet simple formula involved, the war comic was published in a virtually unchanged manner until the 1990s.

'You Ain't no Hero Out of a Penny Comic! You're a Soldier!' - Problems with the Great War. [21]

Although the war comic was a successful and relatively unchanged formula, within this rigid structure constructions of the Great War become highly problematised. The central problem is that they involve two clashing ideologies. For a comic about the First World War to succeed, it has to overcoming both the morally encoded problems surrounding the mythologies of the war, and the antithetic comics perception of warfare.

Great War stories have extreme difficulty fitting into the formalised structure of war comics. Previously established ideologies of the war myth make amalgamation particularly thorny. The war is seen as a slaughter ground for innocent youth, in this case the target audience. The War Myth gives the pervasive impression that the war was only fought across the Western Front: therefore constricting it, not only in terms of geographic location, but situating conflict within a claustrophobic domain of many entrenched together. The First World War quickly became a war of attrition, a static ongoing conflict lacking points of definite closure. Again this poses difficulties with the construction of narrative. Crucially, the Great War does not fit into a formula demanding heroism, militarism, and a conclusive battle at the end of day, preferably with a large and satisfying explosion to indicate a moment of definite closure.

Another problem was the changing perception of the war both in adult writing and culture. By the 1940s, in the aftermath of both the Second World War and the War Books Controversy, the ideals perpetrated in children's fiction about the war were coming to be regarded as highly unsavoury. This was especially true of narratives concerning WW1; although serials such as Hammerton's *The Great War I Was There!* were still in circulation until 1939[22], the second war put pay to such popularist understandings which encouraged positive visions of the conflict. From this point the coda of the war poets became dominant. Now, the common understanding of the Great

War has become an almost singular vision, the ethos of which is described precisely by Hynes in *A War Imagined*:

> A brief sketch of the collective narrative of significance would go something like this: a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstracts like Honour, Glory and England went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance.[23]

Deviations from this sacrosanct myth are now regarded by the majority of readers as offensive and in poor taste, arguably providing an extremely restricted forum for exploration of the war in contemporary writing. [24] The ideas inherent within the war comics discourse therefore directly contradict this perception, posing grave problems for anyone considering involving the Great War within such standardised tales of action and adventure.

Fig. 3. 'The Mill'[25]

A typical example of how the First World War struggles to fit into the war comic structure comes from figure.3. 'The Mill' (*Victor*, 1968). The story immediately removes the main character from the front lines and therefore avoids static entrenchment. Bill Borden is left behind in the retreat from

Mons, and is deliberately standing clumsy and motionless in the first panel, whilst the other soldiers move around him. His passive stance is emphasised by the movement away from the battlefield – the action moves from right to left, back towards the reader rather than onwards into the strip and distant explosions (top right). Bill is introduced as a harmless character, a bootless clerk who has a gun physically forced into his hands. His speech and the openness of his expression connote simplicity and naivety. These elements all bring an unusual level of containment to the war story not seen in Second World War stories. Bill is portrayed as representative of the average Tommy, yet his description is intentionally harmless and stupid. This idea continues throughout the story, as Bill meets a wounded Scottish soldier ('Jock'), and they hide together in the nominal mill to avoid detection by the Germans. When they are discovered it is made clear through both the discovery and subsequent attempts to capture and kill the British soldiers that the Germans are unsporting, cowardly and devious. They repeatedly attack the wounded, bootless twosome without success, eventually resorting to a stealth raid from an 'innocent haycart'. Despite this they are no match for the British; 'three shots ring out' and the Germans fall dead.

A common motif with Great War stories is their use of the Second World War in direct counterpoint to the events unfolding in the narrative. Stories such as 'To The Death', 'False Heroes' and 'Bad Blood', all use a two part formula which relies on comparison of the two wars: 'What they (two friends) didn't know was that a very odd chain of coincidences bound them together which went back to the First World War.'[26] Second World War scenarios are often transposed to the Great War using father/son synchronicity. This transposition demonstrates similar attempts to justify human actions as happened in 'The Mill'. The ideas of repetition; either in upholding family honour or unintentionally replicating actions, is used to displace aspects of killing seen as commonplace in Second World War stories. Whereas 'The Mill' made its characters retreat from war, reminiscence and flashbacks are ascribed the hindsight of retrospection. For example, 'False Heroes' begins with two men discussing their parts in each war, their actions immediately contained by the following conversation:

> Rene: Two plates [plaques on the village war
> memorial] and two wars, Alec. Let us hope we
> shall never see another again.
> Alec: I heartily agree with that, Rene. Let us
> hope peace is here to stay this time.[27]

The authors have clearly tried to enable the more traditional types of war story – the Great War foreshadowing the actions of the younger character rather than taking centre stage in the narrative. The difficult ideas surrounding young men going to war (especially the common perception of the First World War where the myth informs us that ALL the young men died and became The Lost Generation), are justified as both traditional and filial, and if their elders were ideologically mistaken when they enlisted in 1914, this is remedied by acts of closure within the Second World War narrative.

Both displacement and hindsight avoid the most obvious problem of Great War stories - the trenches. The trenches were the most problematic area for comics writers, and in the handful involving the First World War, trench warfare is exceptionally unusual. Figure. 4. shows a rare example of this.

Fig. 4. 'Flames of War'[28]

The trenches are a difficult area to draw. They are dark and muddy, requiring large quantities of inking per page. They are small and cramped, making individual action difficult to draw. Most importantly however, they are static. In a normal war comic, killing is immediately removed from the reader's sight as the action moves away from it. This cannot happen in the trenches. Logistically it is simply not possible, and by illustrating this situation the reader is also exposed to a far higher level of moral questioning, forced to confront the consequences of what was hitherto portrayed as an adventurous and noble situation.

'Flames of War', shows extreme discomfort with the proximity to death and killing enforced by the trenches. The first technique is the lengthy discussion of weaponry: 'A club's better'n a bayonet/I prefer my revolver'. In this case the visceral bayonet is discarded in favour of a club – a blunt weapon less likely to actually kill. The preferred weapon is the revolver, in

this case a gentleman's (officer's) ballistic that connotes a quick and relatively painless death. This discussion is incredibly clumsy, interrupting the narration before conflict happens. When it does, both the fight (top panel, bottom left) and the grenade thrown into the trench (second panel) result in confusion. The fight is ethereally drawn – there is no sense of physical contact or clear outcome. The bottom panel is particularly astonishing, instantly converting the destroyed soldiers into amorphous speedlines and flying paraphernalia. All bodies immediately disappear, suggested only by the helmet thrown clear.[29]

The extract demonstrates both intense anxiety with depictions of trench warfare and the ways in which comics deliberately shut down avenues of ethical investigation. The concept of murder is artistically removed and verbally sanctified; the author and artist spend little time on the action and employ highly contrived devices, enabling the protagonists to move away from the scene of conflict both actually and aesthetically. This containment is almost automatically deployed, demonstrating how difficult war comics writers find depicting the Great War without considering the subsequent cultural reconstructions. This is a factor they need pay scant regard to within their usual domain of the Second World War. Great War stories in general therefore suffer a series of self-imposed restrictions including displacement (both geographical and historical), the separation of individual heroes, support groups of peers who morally enforce the actions of the hero, a reversion to high diction (*Victor* identifies itself as 'The Top Boy's Paper for War, Sport and Adventure', suggesting the three aspects are synonymous) and an overall tendency to subsume the war within discourses of later conflict, especially World War Two. Overall, these motifs demonstrate intense difficulty and discomfort in presenting stories about the First World War.[30]

'It Should've Been Me' - Later Responses to the War in Comics. [31]

Although war comics have traditionally used tightly regimented modes of production, the genre has strong potential for subversion. During the 1980s, the British industry produced several unusual, deviant readings of cultural behaviour.[32] However, as with any medium, there is never one single discourse running through every article at one given point, and although trends in comics have lead towards darker, more politically and culturally aware interpretations, this is by no means true for every issue on sale at the same time. The majority (as with the bulk of popular discourses) follow set patterns. Comics additionally rely on a high turnover of artists, writers and inkers for any one title.[33] Therefore a run of exceptionally high quality may be interrupted, replaced or subsumed by different individuals with weaker talent, or a poor grasp of what has gone before. Writers, artists and inkers do not always work together or with compatible style. Hence a good quality writer can be disappointed by the low standard of the artist illustrating their ideas, or vice versa.

Fig. 5. *Enemy Ace*[34]

The problematic nature of writing and illustrating First World War stories led to an understanding that they were taboo, and in an industry that feasted on positive visions of confrontation, the anti-war messages resulting from the Great War were potentially useful objectives. Whereas traditional war comics struggled to contain the Great War, several modern writers saw potential in this idea. George Pratt's *Enemy Ace* is a clear example of this. Instead of confining the war to simplistic narratives, *Enemy Ace* sought to intellectualise the war, fully embracing the ideas of the war writers. Unfortunately it also swallowed wholesale the overwritten symbolism of the war. Because of this, it suffers from terribly earnest over-writing. The elevated tone is problematic because it tries too hard to present the ignorant comics reader the 'truth' of the war. As an author, Pratt is informed almost solely in this endeavour by the mythological construction of the war, rather than a more realistic depiction from an individual perspective. Although the narrative focuses on the Great War, Pratt compares a journalist suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after Vietnam, and a dying pilot from the Great War (resurrecting the need for closure through generations). Each chapter of his graphic novel is preceded by a worthy quotation from the war writers exemplifying his point, complete with a self contained sepia pen and ink sketch depicting images of conflict in the style of Otto Dix.[35]

One of the problems with *Enemy Ace* is its inaccuracy. It misquotes Kipling as saying 'If any question why we died/Tell them, because our fathers lied' *on hearing of his son's death*, and it describes the Christmas truce viewed from the air by a German pilot (strongly implied to be Richthofen).[36] This imprecision is further confused by the overall construction of the comic, which is both visually and verbally disorientating. As figure 5. demonstrates, the art is a blurred mass of colour from which it is difficult to determine what is happening. Pratt falls into the same trap as earlier war comics by creating an amorphousness to his art which leaves the reader unsure of what they are looking at and renders the depiction of corpses and violence indistinct. Another method is the retrospective narration of the old man, whose monologue tends to be worthy but indecipherable:

> 'The War had changed me. I would never again be the same…On that field of death and introspection…my faith in humanity was restored'[37]

By reproducing the mainstream ideology of the Great War, *Enemy Ace* makes a brave but ultimately futile attempt to reinvent the war comic. This is compounded by its rather hectoring attitude: this is the comic to end all war comics, telling the truth about the war in a clever, artistic manner (not like all those other, nasty comics for violent children). It is this pretentiousness which arguably makes it fall into the same rut as its predecessors.

'The Only Way Back is Over the Top'— *Charley's War*. [38]

Happily, there is an exception to these failures. By the 1970s, the rising popularity of science fiction prompted a crisis in the war comic, and with the release of *Star Wars* in 1977, British comics publishers realised that drastic action was needed to retain sales. *Battle*, the leading fortnightly comic drafted in Pat Mills as their new editor to remedy this problem. Mills was a British writer who had cut his teeth at American rivals *DC*, a company who specialised in the creation of narrative-driven stories involving darker, more complex heroes (the best example of this being Batman.)[39] Mills was a Marxist, keen to upset the simplistic, sentimental notions of the British comics industry, and it is probably fair to claim that over the next ten years he was largely responsible for revolutionising narrative technique in the UK comics industry, co-founding *2000AD* and co-creating its most enduring character, Judge Dredd.[40]

One of his earliest stories was *Charley's War*, which ran in *Battle* from 1979-86.[41] Spanning the First World War, it starred Charley Bourne, a working class Kitchener volunteer. He was an extraordinary character because unlike his predecessors, he was neither exceptionally heroic nor right all the time. He was merely there. Charley's story was intentionally problematic; it was multifaceted, ideologically complex, used original and often deviant characters as its central protagonists, and discussed many issues of morality within deceptively simple storylines. Mills wanted his readers to re-evaluate their preconceptions of the war myth and standard war comic discourses, and he did this through the purposely challenging figure of Charley.

Mills' partner in crime was acclaimed war artist Joe Colquhoun. He too was willing to subvert traditional techniques of comics illustration to produce a far darker vision of war. Both wanted to emphasise two major issues implicit within understandings of the Great War. The first was class. Charley's personalised war was essentially class driven; his major enemy was the quasi-aristocratic Lieutenant Snell and not the inaccessible, rarely seen German army. This in itself provided a major deviation from standard narratives towards a far more politic reading of war. The other facet was an emphasis on moral issues, both writers realising that key to this was the depiction of killing.
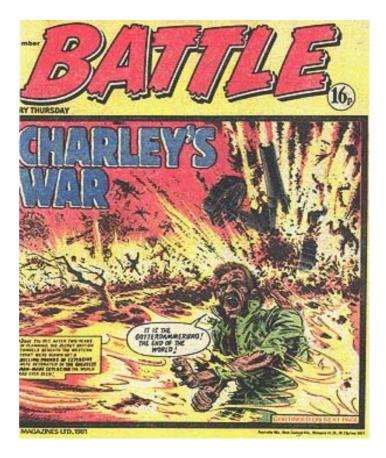
Fig. 6. Cover to *Battle*[42]

Colquhoun rigorously avoided the amorphous vagueness favoured by his contemporaries, opting instead for heavy inks, messy backgrounds and stark facial expressions to depict an exceptionally dark atmosphere. The synthesis between Mills' writing and Colquhoun's illustration can be seen in the story 'Gotterdammerung' (figure. 6.) The plot involves a pacifist who is forced by Snell to detonate the Messines mines. When one fails to explode, he is shot for disobeying orders. The cover presents a similarly disturbing perspective. Not only are bodies clearly visible as a result of the explosion, but the foreground shows a man being burned alive. His speech 'it is the Gotterdammerung' is not only extremely powerful, but crucially identifies the soldier as German.

These techniques were intentionally shocking, meant to shake the comics reader into a new appreciation of the medium. By using provocative stories with multiple perspectives, Mills was cleverly angling the reader towards reassessing their reading. He often did this through Charley himself, depicting an unreliable and often morally incorrect hero. Unlike his peers, Charley was not an innocent bystander. He had chosen to enlist and frequently used violence to achieve his objectives (albeit unwillingly). His reactions of frustration, boredom and anger to situations previously depicted by comics as heroic shed new light on the behaviour of soldiers at war. His reaction to Lonely, a shell-shocked companion, is typical of this 'You want your boy to be proud of you, don't you? Why don't you start actin' like a man

for a change?', or a conversation to a friend 'All the dead bodies round 'ere don't arf pong...Reckon I should've kept me gas mask on!' demonstrate the ways Mills continually forced the reader to evaluate what they read.

Fig. 7. 'Escaped Prisoners' [43]

Shifting perspectives of this kind were extremely common within *Charley's War*, Mills and Colquhoun formulating techniques that worked against the grain of traditional war comics. Multiple narratives on each page deliberately divorced the art from the writing. This technique of alienation made *Charley's War* a groundbreaking comic. In figure 7, three distinct narratives work at tangents. The traditional blurb in the top left 'Charley Bourne with his friends...are in the hands of a German who is intent on revenging himself on all British troops. Just as the German is about to shoot them, Charley acts with lightning speed...' is a typical war comics introduction, connoting heroism and bravery on Charley's behalf. However the art shows him disembowelling the German with a piece of barbed wire, although this is fruitless – the alarm is raised regardless. In the top centre is the most contentious aspect of this strip. This is an extract from Charley's letter home: 'Tell Aunty Mabel I'll have a word with Genral Haig when I sees him. But its funny, you never sees no genrals in the trenches'. This bears no relation to the story, and serves to highlight the unreliability of Charley, exposing him as a liar who is deliberately misleading his parents. It additionally implies that his naivety is comparable to stupidity – reversing the war comic ideal that traditionally saw this as a positive asset. Throughout the stories, Mills continued to portray Charley in this way, often ensuring that he was utterly unable to respond correctly to a situation, lacking both the initiative and the intelligence to behave in the expected heroic manner. Figure 7a. highlights this response within the panel – Charley is posed in a stance of

aggression (animalism is implied in the clawed hands), whilst his friend 'Weeper Watkins' appears to be laughing at the situation.

Fig. 7a. Detail from 'Escaped Prisoners'.[44]

Mills and Colquhoun used an exceptionally brave and unusual technique in doing this, one which ultimately led to the censorship of *Charley's War* when it was reissued in 1986.[45] Not only do the two authors intentionally subvert the genre, but throughout the series this was a continuous process without closure. The comic created impossible situations and irresolvable paradoxes, but unlike its predecessors, it refused to contain them.

The impact of distorting the vision of both the war comics and Canonical perceptions of the First World War were enormous, enabling a fresh generation of comics writers free to experiment within the genre. The late Eighties and early Nineties became a period in which the comic was dramatically reinvented. However, First World War stories still remained almost unique, and the industry itself gradually subsided into business as usual, prompted by the recurring interest in the superhero genre after films such as *X-Men*.[46] Competitors tried similar ideas such as *The Victor*'s 'Cadman The Frontline Coward', but these all fell once again to containment and cliché. Subsequent comics such as *Enemy Ace* proved that even after *Charley's War*, narratives still fell foul of the overriding influence of the war writers. In the words of Osbert Sitwell, and despite the work of Mills and Colquhoun, it was still 'Very bad form/To mention the war.'[47]

Conclusion: ''Arf A Mo!!'[48]

World War One is an immensely problematic discourse for war comics, clashing with the established ideas that war and fighting are a matter of course. The moral and political implications of warfare are rarely mentioned, with readers encouraged not to question what they see but instead to enjoy

notions of militarism, masculinity and nationalism. The established body of war writing refutes this, centring instead on the loss of life and innocence and a close proximity to death. Comics can only succeed in portraying WW1 successfully if they subvert both genres, and this is a monumentally difficult task. *Charley's War* was a genuinely original and deviant attempt to do so. Mills knew that little mainstream critical attention would focus on his comic and this enabled him to circumvent both ideologies, providing a highly subversive and darkly funny alternative. His black comedy and irreverence for the subject made the reader continually question their own attitudes to war, the reliability of narration and the nature of heroism. In this way *Charley's War* stands above its medium as a highly unusual and subversive reading of the Great War, and in a genre which has now come to expect shock tactics, he is still praised for the innovative steps *Charley's War* took to enable this.

Fig. 8[49]

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The First World War and Comedy examines the role of humour through a variety of mediums both during and concerning the 1914-18 conflict and can be accessed from http://www.whatalovelywar.co.uk. An extended version of this paper is also available.
E-mail est_ms at hotmail

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[1] Mills, P & Colquhoun, J, *Charley's War Book II,* (Titan, 1986) p.67.

[2] Ibid. p. 43.

[3] Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (Panthean, 1986), Clowes, D *Ghost World* (Jonathan Cape. 2000)

[4] Howarth *Play up and Play the Game. The Heroes of Popular Fiction.* (Eyre Methuen, 1973).

[5] Sabin,R . *Comics, Comix And Graphic Novels.* (Phaidon, 1996).

[6] For a more detailed explanation of the mechanics of comics construction and terminologies, see McCloud, S, *Understanding Comics* (Harper Collins, 1992)*, Reinventing Comics* (Harper Collins Perennial, 2000) and Lee & Buscema, *How To Draw Comics the Marvel Way* (Simon and Schuster, 1978).

[7] De Groot, G *Blighty, British Society in the Era of the Great War* (Addison Wesley Longman 1996)

[8] See for example the Marvel ongoing series *Uncanny X-Men,* which encourages the importance of teamwork and self-sacrifice, for example in the story arc 'The Dark Phoenix Saga' (Marvel Books, 1990) where a central character sacrifices herself in combat to save her teammates, or the *Spiderman* series, which coined the motto 'With great power comes great responsibility' (*Amazing Fantasy* #15, August 1962).

[9] Henty was a pre-war writer who produced historical and educational fiction such as *The Young Colonists, A story of the Zulu and Boer Wars* (Blackie and Son. 1885) and *Held Fast For England, A Tale of the Siege of Gibraltar* (Blackie and Son, 1892). Lt-Col F S Brereton produced an immensely popular wartime series in the same vein as G.A Henty, starring Captain James 'Jim' Fletcher, whose trademark catchphrase was 'jingo!' Titles in this series included *With French at the Front,* (Blackie & Son 1914) and *Under Haig In Flanders,* (Blackie & Son 1917). Mangan, J A "Noble specimens of manhood: schoolboy literature and the creation of a colonial chivalric code" in Richards, J, Ed. *Imperialism and Juvenile Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).

[10] 'Joe Two-Beans' in *Battle*, (Fleetway, 18th October, 1986).

[11] Fussell, P *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (Oxford University Press, 1975), p.22.

[12] Edwards, B 'The Popularisation of War in Comic Strips 1958-1988' in *History Workshop Journal #42*, 1996. p184.

[13] Cornwell, B. The Sharpe Books, beginning with the publication of *Sharpe's Rifles* (Collins, 1988). The most recent in the series is *Sharpe's Havoc* (London: 2003) are a series of historical adventures featuring the Napoleonic wars as experienced through the eponymous hero, Richard Sharpe. King, S *The Stand* (Doubleday, 1978). Emmerich, R *Independence Day* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1996)

[14] '...the superhero is larger, with broader shoulders, more muscular arms and legs, a heavier chest, and even a more impressive stance...a superhero simply has to look more impressive, more dramatic, more imposing than an average guy' Lee & Buscema (1978) p.46

[15] *Battle*, 18th October, 1986.

[16] Edwards, 'The Popularisation of War in Comic Strips 1958-88' p183.

[17] Vogler, *The Heroes Journey – Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (M. Wiese Productions, c1992)

[18] Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (University of Texas, 1928), Tucker, N, ed. *NCRCL PAPERS 4: School Stories From Bunter To Buckeridge* (Roehampton Institute, 1999)

[19] This role was most famously reprised by Tony Robinson's character Baldric in *Blackadder Goes Forth*, (BBC 1989).

[20] Privates however, always had a comedy comic book accent: usually a combination of unreadable phonetics and stereotypical phrases.

[21] *Charley's War* at http://charleyswar.tripod.com/

[22] Hammerton, *The Great War, I Was There!* (London: Amalgamated Press, 1935-1939)

[23] Hynes, *A War Imagined* (The Bodley Head, 1990) Introduction, x.

[24] See for example, letters to *The Express* about the television docu-drama *The Trench* (Colthurst, BBC2, March 2002). Although the programme followed the myth rigorously, the format in which it was presented came under great censure, often before the programme had been aired. One complainant wrote 'The whole exercise makes a mockery of what the soldiers went through at the time' (letter to *The Express* March 19, 2002). Attempts like this to represent the First World War in a fresh perspective are often criticised simply because they apparently stray from conventional depictions, even if their intent is to disabuse some of the more exaggerated or literary constructions of the conflict.

[25] 'The Mill' in *Victor #365,* (D. C Thompson, 17th February, 1968).

[26] *Commando*, #2304, (D.C Thompson & Co. 1989), *Commando,* #2432, (D.C Thompson & Co 1990), *Commando* #2649, (D.C Thompson & Co 1993), Ibid.

[27] *Commando* #2432, p.4.

[28] *Commando* #2918, (D.C Thompson & Co. 1996) p. 34.

[29] Lee & Buscema, *How to Draw Comics The Marvel Way.* Ch. 9 'Composition'.

[30] *Victor #365*.

[31] Pratt, *Enemy Ace*, (DC Comics, 1990). pp. 60.

[32] For example, Alan Moore's groundbreaking *Watchmen* (Moore & Gibson, Titan 1987), and the more cerebral writing of authors such as Neil Gaiman (*Sandman* DC Vertigo – Dec 1988 – March 1996 all of which investigated mature subjects and emotions through the traditional comics genre. Publication of these comics was through American distributors, however all were produced in the United Kingdom by British writers.

[33] See for example, *Wolverine* (1988 - present day), which has had 41 authors to date (http://www.angelfire.com/ns2/wolv15/writers/writers.html)

[34] Pratt, *Enemy Ace*. pp 2.

[35] A graphic novel is a comic ultimately intended for print in book form, although it may first be released in sections. It was made popular in the 1980s when comics such as *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller & Varley, D C Comics, 1986) and *Watchmen* (Moore & Gibson, 1987) were produced as stand-alone stories. This format enabled authors to hone in on one subject or storyline, rather than concerning themselves with the entire "universe" of characters and situations.   See http://www.art-ww1.com/gb/peintre.html#D for examples of Dix's work.

[36] Pratt, *Enemy Ace*, pp 75. Ibid, pp 76-79.

[37] Ibid, pp 9.

[38] Caption from image in 'Interview with Garth Ennis', *Comics Journal* # 207, 1999.

[39] Detective Comics.

[40] Barker, M. *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (Manchester University Press, 1989).

[41] Mills, & Colquhoun. *Charley's War* in *Battle* (IPC – 1979-86).

[42] *Battle,* 12th Dec. 1981.

[43] Mills, & Colquhoun. *Charley's War, Book II,* p. 14.

[44] Ibid..

[45] Overstreet, R. *Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide, 33rd Edition* (House of Collectibles, 2003)

[46] Singer, *X-Men* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2000)

[47] Osbert Sitwell, 'The War-Horse Chants', *Out of the Flame* (Chatto & Windus, 1923), p.57

[48] Charley Bourne's catchphrase, from *Charley's War*, Episode 1. http://charleyswar.tripod.com/battle/id34.html This was possibly borrowed from the famous wartime cartoon by Bert Thomas; 'arf a mo, Kaiser'. However, the phrase became so popular as a result of this that it is still a common phrase and is used as an ironic device in *Charley's War*. In the story of the escaped prisoners, Charley calls "arf a mo!" as he is bayoneting the German soldier with the barbed wire (Mills, & Colquhoun. *Charley's War, Book II,* p.15).

[48] Mills & Colquhoun. *Charley's War, Book II,* p.33.