‘Ivor Novello and the Poetry of the People’
by Phil Carradice

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The First World War, which erupted in August 1914, was a war of many things – intense brutality, horrendous casualties and amazing technological advances. It was also the first literate and literary war in history, a war where virtually all of the participants could read and write.

Prior to 1914 the soldiers of the British Empire were, to use the words of the Duke of Wellington, “The scum of the earth.” As he remarked to Lt Col de Lancey, his aide, as they sat on their horses at the crossroads of Quatre Bras and watched the retreating British Army file past them in the rain – “I don’t know what they do to the French but they scare the Hell out of me!”

Most of the soldiers from Wellington’s time and throughout the nineteenth century chose to join the army rather than spend time in jail – or starve. That was particularly the case in Ireland during the lean famine years.

But the First World War was a volunteer war, fought by men who had chosen to join up because they felt it was their duty. In 1914 the British Army numbered barely 250,000 men and most of those were serving in distant parts of the Empire. The German Army was nearly a million strong, the Russians 1,350,000. Britain had always been reliant on her navy for defence; now she needed men and needed them quickly.

Enter Lord Kitchener and his famous recruiting poster – Your King and Country Need You. He expected 100,000 volunteers. By Christmas 1914 he had got nearly a million. Men thought it would be an adventure, something that took them out of the same old dreary routines. It would break the shackles of geographical and social immobility that had kept them in their places for so long. It would also help Britain to give the Kaiser his thoroughly deserved “bloody nose”.

Thanks to Forster's Education Act of 1870 which had made primary education compulsory, by 1914 all men had been through the new educational process and could read and write reasonably well. It meant that the fighting force was a well-educated and capable group of individuals, many of whom were intent on recording their experiences. As someone once remarked, books were as common in the trenches as parcels from Fortnum and Masons – officers only, of course!

And what that resulted in was a plethora of poetry written by the men in the trenches and their families at home. Why?

The teachers and managers of Forster's new Board Schools were invariably the privileged product of Public Schools – paid for and sent there by wealthy parents. When they came to create a compulsory educational system for the children of Britain they simply re-created the schools and the learning processes of their own lives. So, like the Public Schools, there was virtually no emphasis on science, technology or maths but a great deal of poetry and literary prose.

The pupils learned poetry by heart; they could recite Tennyson and Virgil, Homer and Browning at the drop of a hat. And when they came to record their own observations and experiences it was inevitable that they turned to verse.

Reading and writing poetry were, however, very different things. They could recite and read poetry, they could enjoy declaiming it but trying to reproduce the metrical intricacies of Tennyson et al was, largely, beyond the men in the trenches. The whole idea of metre was an alien concept. And so, for their inspiration they turned to three very different sources.

Firstly there was the church or chapel. It was a religious age and everyone knew the hymns of Charles Wesley, William Williams (Pantycelyn) and the rest. They enjoyed the rolling rhythms, the cadences of power and strength. They may not have been able to write like them but those powerful words were certainly an inspiration.

And then, of course, there was the influence of someone they could emulate, a man whose sentimental tunes and words of heartache and longing reached out to touch nearly everyone. He was Ivor Novello.

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Ivor Novello, real name David Ivor Davies, was a fascinating man. Born in Cardiff in January 1893, his mother was Madam Clara Novello Davies, one of the most renowned singing

teachers and choral conductors of the age. Ivor grew up in a house of music where famous singers and performers like Clara Butt and Adelina Patty were regular visitors.

From an early age Ivor performed in Eisteddfodau and other musical events. He loved dressing up in his mother's clothes – which should have given an indication of future propensities – and once entered a competition for girls – dressed as a girl. He won but was disqualified when the judges discovered the truth.

Ivor was educated at Cardiff, Oxford and Gloucester. He was an articled pupil of Gloucester Cathedral organist Dr Herbert Brewer. Other renowned students at the time were the composers F. W. Harvey and Herbert Howells and the war poet Ivor Gurney.

Ivor Novello hated the church music he was forced to play and learn, preferring lighter and catchier tunes. He left with Brewer's words ringing in his ears – "You will never make a living out of music, boy!" It was not dissimilar from the man at Decca Records who was later to turn down the Beatles, declaring that the day of singing pop groups was over or the nine publishers who turned down J. K. Rowling's first Harry Potter novel!

By 1914 Ivor was building a reputation for himself as a singer/songwriter/teacher but then came the war. Clara – always known to Ivor and many others as Mam – decided he should write a tune for the troops, to encourage them. Ivor refused so Mam sat down to compose one.

It was awful and Ivor quickly realised that to publish and perform it would damage her reputation – and his! He had to act and duly produced the piece of music that would be known to the troops as "We'll Keep the Home Fires Burning".

Ivor wrote only the music. In fact he rarely ever wrote lyrics, employing people like Christopher Hassell to produce the words to most of his famous songs. And now he turned to American poet Lena Guilbert Ford. They sat together at the piano in Ivor's London flat but the appropriate words would not come.

The story is probably apocryphal but legend declares that the maid then came in to stoke up the fire. "Got to keep the fires of home burning brightly," Ivor declared – and they had it, the refrain for the song. Lena went home, wrote the words and telephoned them through to Ivor.

The first performance came a few nights later at the Alhambra Theatre, Sybil Vane singing and Ivor accompanying her on the piano. The response was immediate and over-whelming.

Four times they had to perform the piece as an encore and at the end the audience knew "Home Fires" – "Till the Boys Come Home," as it was officially called – by heart.

It all meant instant fame for Ivor Novello and instant popularity for the song in the trenches and back home. Sadly, Lena Ford did not live to enjoy celebrity. She was killed in a Zeppelin raid in 1915. But for the next two or three years "Home Fires" was the most popular of all soldiers songs, sung every night by the men around their cooking fires and in their dugouts.

Not everyone liked it, however. The poet Siegfried Sassoon vowed that if he survived the war he would find the man who had written "that bloody song" and shoot him. He did survive, did search and find Ivor Novello but instead of shooting him fell in love with the handsome young man. They had a brief affair. It did not last long – as John Stuart Roberts has written "Ivor was a consummate flirt who gathered lovers as he gathered lilacs."

Ivor Novello was conscripted in 1916. He chose to go into the Royal Naval Air Service, mainly because he liked the uniform and could personalise it with items like silk scarves and velvet gloves. Unfortunately he was a bloody awful pilot. He crashed his plane over and over again and was eventually grounded, the government declaring that he was doing more to hinder the war effort than all of the German air force lumped together.

He was saved by Eddie Marsh, personal private secretary to Winston Churchill and a well-known protector of handsome young men like Rupert Brooke – and including, now, Ivor Novello. Through Eddie Marsh, Ivor was posted to the new Air Ministry in London where he remained as a clerk until the end of the war.

Marsh undoubtedly saved Ivor's life as it was only a matter of time before one of his crashes proved fatal. He also greatly aided British light music. At the Air Ministry Novello had the time to write songs and the musical "Theodore and Co" with Jerome Kern.

After the war Ivor's fame continued to grow. He became a matinee idol – despite his known homosexuality – enthralling women with his good looks and personality.

He acted in silent films, working with people like Alfred Hitchcock, most famously in the thriller "The Lodger," based on the Jack the Ripper murders. When talkies came in Ivor effortlessly made the switch, even re-making "The Lodger."

He went to Hollywood where he wrote scripts for the burgeoning movie industry. Tongue in cheek he later commented that the favourite of his scripts was for the first "Tarzan" film. His contribution consisted of just four lines – "Me Tarzan – You Jane".

Ivor Novello continued to write songs – "We'll Gather Lilacs" and so on. Despite being sentenced to four weeks in prison during the Second World War, for the illegal procurement of petrol, he retained his popularity to the end – which in his case came suddenly in 1952.

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The third of the great influences on the poetry of the trench poets – peoples poets would be a better description – was the Music Halls. They developed from the Song and Supper Clubs of early Victorian London where a man or woman could pay their shilling and receive a hot meal and an evening's entertainment. The entertainment was of a wide variety, from acrobats and speciality items like a woman who smoked a pipe under water to renowned singers and reciters.

Poems like "The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God," as recited by Bransby Williams and Barebone Tree were hugely popular and were guaranteed to reduce the rowdy halls to absolute silence. Only rarely did the offerings – songs or poems – scan, but that did not matter. A good performer could always hide the inadequacies of the piece.

The Music Halls were the entertainment venue for the recently emerged middle classes, the very men who now found themselves in the trenches before Ypres and the Somme. They were desperate to avoid slipping back into the poverty trap they had so recently avoided and so the songs and poems they enjoyed were sentimental pieces about noble sacrifice, dying infants and the perils of the demon drink.

The men in the trenches quickly discovered that it was very difficult to write good comedy – something that William Shakespeare had discovered back in the sixteenth century! What came considerably easier for the troops was sentiment, *à la* Ivor Novello and the Music Halls.

Of course the people's poets took the sentiment of Novello to the extreme. They longed for home – which was invariably a cottage in the countryside with roses around the door and an old silver haired mother who was waiting for her son to return – and were desperate to escape the Hell in which they had suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves. The fact that most of them came from lodgings or city tenements was quickly and conveniently forgotten.

But it was all heartfelt and their emotions were genuine. When they wanted to invoke pathos they wrote of nightingales and larks and rainbows. They probably cried as they wrote them – and their relatives certainly cried when they received copies in the post.

Many of the poems written by the soldiers and those produced by their families found a welcoming home for themselves in the local and national newspapers of Britain. In those papers they were read by thousands – Sassoon, Graves and others were read by a few hundred, if they were lucky. Neither Wilfred Owen nor Edward Thomas ever saw one of their poems in print.

The ordinary man and woman – in the street and in the trenches – had found a voice, a forum where they could be read and appreciated. And all because of Ivor Novello, the little man from Cardiff, and the Music Hall reciters like Bransby Williams. Not bad, not bad at all!

Phil Carradice, February 2019