



BOOK REVIEW

Juliette Pattinson and Linsey Robb, eds. **British Humour and the Second World War: “Keep Smiling Through”**

New Directions in Social and Cultural History. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Pp. 232. \$115.00 (cloth).

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This is a very useful collection of ten chapters by nine authors, including the two co-editors, exploring humor as a tool of historical analysis for the social and cultural history of Britain in World War II and for subsequent representations of the conflict in popular culture.

The editors' introductory overview is followed by five chapters examining wartime cultures of humor: in the reports of Mass Observation (Chris Smith), in Ministry of Information films (Lindsey Robb), on the BBC (Siân Nicholas), cartoons and visual culture (Juliette Pattinson), through the drawings of a nurse on a reconstructive surgery ward (Christine Slobogin), and in the Royal Navy (Frances Houghton). The three final chapters examine humor in post-war representations: in remembered accounts submitted to the online BBC People's War Archive (Corinna Peniston-Bird), in the Imperial War Museum exhibition, “The Real Dad's Army” (Kasia Tomasiewicz), and through the television series ‘Allo ‘Allo (Gavin Schaffer).

The introduction situates the collection within the wider historiography of Britain's war, the history of war and humor and the growth in the history of emotions as a sub-discipline within the field. It makes a good case for the case-study chapters that follow as a means to open up the range of perspectives that come from taking humor seriously. At the same time, the editors articulate a core conundrum for researchers: since humor is highly contextual and subjective, not only are some jokes that reflected contemporary mores now offensive, but almost all become unfunny once they have been explained and dissected for historical analysis. In different ways, each of the contributors takes on the resultant challenge: whether or not we chortle, understanding how and why humor did or didn't work helps us to understand the historical moment in which a joke was made.

The chapters can be read in isolation. As often with such collections, individual readers may find particular value in those that align with their research or teaching interests. Nicholas's chapter stands out as a persuasive explanation of the context that saw the runaway success of the BBC radio series *It's That Man Again (ITMA)*, probably the best example of a specific British wartime comic sensibility. Houghton's chapter on naval humor, with its focus on the artwork of Commander John Egerton Broome, and Slobogin's chapter on the art of nurse “Dickie” Orpen are both good examples of how the historical understanding developed from close and sensitive investigation of case studies enables the drawing out of broader points of social and cultural history. Schaffer situates his study of ‘Allo ‘Allo in a broader reading of the role of television sitcoms in representing and shaping ambivalent ideas of national identity, with the unifying theme of British distinctiveness pointing to a relationship with Europe that contained within it the possibility of Brexit.

There is also much value, however, in reading the collection as a whole. Above all this comes from the sense it gives of historians grappling with such a range of different source material. The book is a reminder of how many places evidence for historical humor can be found and how its study unlocks different world views. All the contributors do this in a way which—while not in itself funny—is humane in its treatment of complex historical and contemporary subjects.

Any editors bringing such a collective project to fruition—particularly, as the acknowledgments note, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic—have achieved a noble goal. Given publishing constraints, it would be unhelpful to critique the volume for what it does not contain. Nonetheless, it is worth noting thoughts stimulated by this collection about what more might be done by future work along the same lines.

While several of the chapters engage with the use of humor for the purposes of cultural and emotional mobilization—whether mocking the enemy, affirming shared values, or making training lessons more memorable—there is room for more work on the role of humor in the exercise of power. Drawing on Martin Francis's work on the emotional state of British statesmen, this might include a search for different forms of elite humor and the part this played in political and strategic culture. One example might include the mocking laughter directed by Churchill's supporters at Sir John Wardlaw-Milne's impromptu suggestion of the Duke of Gloucester as head of the army in the July 1942 no confidence debate in the Commons, a burst of humor that instantaneously undermined the parliamentary challenge to the premier. Another might be Stalin and Roosevelt's willingness to joke about the mass execution of German officers at the 1943 Teheran Conference—a bullying repartee that Churchill definitely did not find funny.

Another avenue for further exploration would be the sorts of cross-cultural comparison hinted at the introduction but impossible to follow up in the case study format of the chapters. In his study of British and German military endurance during World War I, Alexander Watson highlighted several examples where, despite their own sense of a special sense of humor, soldiers on opposing sides were in fact telling almost exactly the same jokes about the quality of their food. Following this suggestive lead, we might ask what elements of World War II British humor were symptoms of wider European or global phenomena, and to what extent they reflected specific feature of national culture, politics, and distinct war-time experience.

Finally, what about the laughter of historians? In the introduction to a 2004 article on "gender and secret dynamics of British corporatism," James Hinton explained the process by which his own shocked laughter at a piece of 1940s doggerel opened up a range of questions and explanations that had been unexplored in his previous work. The introduction to this book notes how much the participants enjoyed the 2019 colloquium that led to its creation: it would be interesting to know more about the shared humor of that event and the ways in which it shaped the resultant volume.