

INTRODUCTION

By Lyn Macdonald

It is a strange and inexplicable fact that the strains of *'Keep the Home Fires Burning'* induce a poignant sense of nostalgia in people born half a century or more after the First World War ended. But – especially when combined with the plaintive tones of a mouth organ – that melody automatically conjures up an image of weary Tommies in the trenches, just as a rousing rendering of *'Tipperary'* or *'Pack up Your Troubles'* evokes a mental picture of cheery Tommies on the march.

Clichés, to be sure, and perhaps the empathy they induce is also a cliché of a kind. Old Soldiers sang them as lustily as any at post-war reunions but although, with hindsight, such songs seem to epitomise the Great War, during the war itself they were associated far more closely with the Home Front. But the variety of music was boundless, ranging from those well-known commercially written war-songs, through music-hall choruses, popular songs from stage musicals and sentimental ballads, to the bawdy, ironic parodies that were current in the Army. Music loomed large in the First World War and, by its very diversity, still strongly reflects the spirit of its time.

And what a time it was! Until 1914 the British Empire was still ensconced on the high moral uplands of the Victorian age, girded by solid virtues, complacent in its certainty of its place in the world, with a God-given right if not to rule that world, at least to govern a significant part of it, spreading the light of its superior civilization to the


far corners of the earth. The Victorian era did not die with the demise of the old Queen-Empress in 1901 at the birth of a new century: it began to skid to a halt in 1914 at the start of the Great War. By the time it ended, a new era and a new world had been born and the music of the First World War can be a pungent reminder that this was a society in transition.

The generation that fought it were Victorians to a man. Men of the Regular Army were even mid-Victorians – those legendary *'Soldiers of the Queen'* who had served her in the furthest reaches of her Empire or fought at Omdurman or Spion Kop. Even the youngest of the adventurous youths who joined Kitchener's Army by the hundred thousand had been born while the Queen still occupied the throne and were nurtured and moulded by the long-accepted mores and disciplines of what was generally accepted as an age of enlightenment.

It was certainly an inventive age. In the lifetime of lads who joined the Army in 1914 at the age of 19 (or not infrequently younger) they had seen Bleriot fly across the English Channel, the birth of film as a popular entertainment, the development of the pneumatic tyre and the explosion of cycling as an everyday means of transport. A fortunate few even owned motor-bikes. People had become accustomed to the sight of motor-vehicles in the streets and aeroplanes in the sky. Wireless was emerging from its experimental infancy, telephones were no longer new-fangled devices, gramophones were commonplace for those who could afford them. Pianos could be purchased 'on the never never' for as little as a shilling a week, and every respectable household which aspired to an aspidistra in the window wanted a piano in the parlour. There was an upright piano in every church hall, every boys' club and in



almost every saloon bar where the popular Saturday night sing-song could be enjoyed, even by the poorest, for the price of a ginger ale, sipped slowly to last the evening. There were thousands of accomplished pianists and many who could play by ear so, one way or another, in any gathering there was always someone who could strum out a tune on the piano.

But even the music was changing. Gramophone records were not expensive, sheet music could be bought for a few pence and ragtime, which had crossed the Atlantic a few years earlier, was still the rage. 'C'mon and hear, c'mon and hear, Alexander's ragtime band...' Every messenger boy could whistle or warble it. 'C'mon along, c'mon along, It's the best band in the land, You can hear a bugle call like you never heard before, So natural that you wanna go to war...'. By an odd irony it was not long before those words inspired one of the earliest of the many parodies of the war. 'C'mon and join, c'mon and join, c'mon and join Lord Kitchener's Army...'.


The troops had much in common with the legendary preacher, the Rev. Rowland Hill, of whom it was said, 'He did not see any reason why the devil should have all the good tunes.' In the case of the Army the soldiers saw no reason why good hymn tunes should not serve equally well for less reverent purposes – especially those which required very little adaptation to suit the circumstances. So many men had accepted the invitation to 'c'mon and join Lord Kitchener's Army' that, even with textile and armaments factories working flat out and round the clock, it was impossible either to kit them all out or arm them immediately. Tens of thousands of recruits who were still training in ignominious civvies and drilling with wooden 'rifles', long after they had expected to be marching to the front in

heroic khaki, found that one familiar hymn fitted the bill: *There is a happy land, far, far away; Where saints in glory stand, bright, bright as day; O how they sweetly sing, Worthy is our Saviour King; Loud let his praises sing, Praise, praise for aye.* Every child could sing it, for it had a catchy tune and was a favourite Sunday school hymn, but now some impatient would-be-warriors hit on a better version:

*Where are our uniforms?
Far, far away.
When will our rifles come?
P'raps, p'raps some day.
All we need is just a gun,
Then we'll chase the bloody Hun.
Think of us when we are gone,
Far, far away.*

Most had been brought up to attend church regularly. The strictest families might attend church or chapel as often as three times on Sundays, most children were sent to Sunday school, and the older ones to Bible Class. Religious observance was a sign of that much-prized 'respectability' which was a hallmark of the disciplined Victorian age. There was religious instruction in schools, as well as morning prayers and hymn singing, and children were encouraged to join organisations affiliated to the churches. The Boy Scouts with their code of clean-living morality had strong religious overtones, though the uniform was not cheap and only boys of fairly well-off families could afford to join. Still, for the price of a pill-box hat and a belt, which cost only coppers, The Boys' Brigade and The Church Lads Brigade were open to all, and they too had their annual



camp, their football teams, their sports, good company and jolly sing-songs in the Church Hall which always ended with a hymn and a prayer. The Band of Hope, one of many Temperance organisations, was also popular, for there were exciting lantern lectures luridly illustrating the evils of the demon drink, with free tea and buns and jolly hymn-singing at the end of the evening. *'Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin/ Each victory will help you, some other to win'* trilled the inveterate young sinners to whom a glass of lemonade represented the height of dissipation, *'Shun evil companions, bad language eschew/ Look ever to Jesus, He will carry you through.'*

All in all, it made an enjoyable evening and, as with Sunday school, for those who qualified by 'regular attendance', there were the annual treats of the Summer Picnic and the Christmas Social. The Salvation Army with its oohm-pah-pah bands and even jollier hymn tunes provided free entertainment on the street corners of any sizeable town, and small boys would follow them for miles. It was hardly surprising that when some irreverent ditty required a tune, a so-familiar hymn tune came easily to mind – and if, at first, they struck the more strait-laced new arrivals as sacrilegious, it was seldom long before they were singing away as lustily as the rest. *'We are Fred Karno's army/ What bloody use are we...'* – (That was 'The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord'). *'When this bloody war is over/ Oh how happy I shall be/ When I get my civvy clothes on/ No more soldering for me...'* (That was, 'What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear...') And, as the war went on, the lugubrious chant which more than any other summed up the universal mood of the resigned, but fed-up Tommy: *'Marching, marching, marching/ Always*

bloody well marching... Raining, raining, raining/ Always bloody well raining... Grouching, grouching, grouching/ Always bloody well grouching...' The variations were infinite, it could carry a company over miles of monotonous march, and the original ('Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty') was not half so expressive. By the later stages of the war many soldiers were a little less inclined to reverence and a good deal more cynical. *'Onward Christian Soldiers, marching as to war/ With the Corps Commander, safely in the rear'*. That particular ditty was disapproved of by authority, even if some battalion officers had a sneaking sympathy with the half-jocular sentiment. But it was clearly not good for morale.

The Army laid great stress on morale and went to considerable lengths to keep it high. Regular leave was important and the passage of mail from home, through the Army Postal Service, was given the same precedence as the shipping of rations and ammunition. Parcels and letters from England sometimes arrived at the front two days after they were posted, although those from the north took just a little longer. After the first frantic months, when the war had 'settled down', Regimental bands which had stayed behind when the Army went to war, were sent out from Regimental Depots in Britain. But, as the war gained momentum and the Army grew, there were not nearly enough of them to go round. Later, when well-wishers were able to raise the substantial sum necessary for the purchase of instruments, and a Brigade (or even a Battalion) could find musicians in its ranks, new bands were even started in France with the blessing of the Army. One patriotic father, whose son was a Captain in the 5th Lancashire Fusiliers, even met the entire cost of a band for the battalion out of his own pocket. It



cost a pretty penny, but he could well afford it for his name was Tickler, the manufacturer who supplied his famous – or infamous – jam to the entire Army, and Captain Tickler's men were doubtless of the opinion that he owed them a favour! The Captain remembered:

They were very cheeky! They came and said, Do you think we could have a band? The one we had was left behind! They'd got a catalogue and everything from Boosey and Hawkes. With the instruments marked on it, and all the extras too! So I wrote to Father and sent the catalogue and asked him. Less than a week later I got a wire from Father which said 'Bought band and it is on its way'. As quick as that! Well it came while we were out of the line. The first morning the men we'd picked to play went off and practised in woods somewhere, so that we wouldn't hear them until they were ready. Then we got going. We used to play for the whole Brigade and for parades when they were presenting decorations, and field days and so on – and, my word, what a difference it makes! It's lovely. It puts a swing into you. They did enjoy it, of course. They loved it! They used to swagger through villages and all the French and Belgian people came out to watch them. After Passchendaele it did a lot for the morale of the Battalion. Of course they knew where it had come from – and I don't know if they thought they'd got a bit of their own back for this eternal plum and apple jam they all complained about. Before the war we had no sale for

apple mixtures unless there was a slump when people wanted something for fourpence. But the firm had to produce so much to supply the Army that there was no alternative.

The fame of the ubiquitous 'Plum and Apple' even reached the London stage in a musical play written by Bruce Bairnsfather. Arthur Bouchier played the part of his character 'Old Bill'. His rendering of '*Plum and Apple, apple and plum... We've all had some...*' drew roars of appreciation from the audience, particularly from soldiers on leave, and it was soon taken up, and sung even more feelingly, by the troops at the front. Though the men of the 5th Lancs. – or at least the men of Bill Tickler's company – in appreciation of their band, tactfully avoided singing in his hearing a more vulgar song favoured by the troops. It was sung by the 5th Lancs., unsurprisingly, to the tune of '*A Lassie from Lancashire*'. '*I've seen maggots in Tickler's jam/ filthy maggots in Ticker's jam/ I've seen maggots in Tickler's jam/ crawling round...*'

For obvious reasons, there was not much singing in the trenches where it was wise not to attract the attention of the enemy. But occasionally in quiet sectors, where the lines were close together and the night was clear and still, the sound of a mouth organ or voices singing would drift across No Man's Land to the trenches opposite. Eventually orders came from on high that absolute silence must be observed. German newspapers could be obtained by British Intelligence through neutral Switzerland, and one carried a fairly accurate translation of a song that was frequently heard rising from the British trenches: '*I want to go home, I*



want to go home/ I don't want to go in the trenches no more,
where coalbox and whizz-bangs they whistle and roar/ Take
me over the sea, where the Alleyman can't get at me/ Oh my!
I don't want to die, I want to go home.' The report came to
the triumphant conclusion that the morale of the British
Army was so low that the war was bound to end soon.

For the three years that were to elapse before it did, the
morale of the British front line troops remained remarkably
high, and despite the perils and discomfort of their stints
in the trenches, and the weary monotony of labour in the
hinterland, off-duty – even in a draughty barn – they
contrived to enjoy themselves as best they could. There
was usually an *estaminet* or a canteen hut within tramping
distance, where there were warm surroundings, cheap beer
and *vin blanc*, and if there was no piano to accompany the
inevitable sing-song, it was often a simple matter to
acquire one which, even if slightly battered could be
patched up sufficiently to produce a tune. The back areas
were so frequently shelled that (so the Tommies reasoned)
it was not so much looting as 'rescuing' something which
might easily be 'lost by enemy action'. Someone would pay
for it in that almost never-never-land of 'After the War'.
Officers turned an indulgent eye, though 'looting' was a
punishable military offence, and even connived at it, since
a piano was also a desirable addition to the Officers' Mess
– and the Transport Officer could be relied on to find a
place for it in the baggage train when they moved on. In
any event, it was all good for morale.

One thing which could be guaranteed to uplift the spirit of
the troops, and a highlight of rest periods behind the
immediate front, was a visit to a concert party. They start-

ed in a small way, but eventually almost every Division had
its own entertainment troupe – *The Diamonds* of the 29th
Division (the Divisional insignia was diamond-shaped), *The
Jocks* of the 15th (Scottish) Division, *The Balmorals* of the
51st, *The Anzac Coves* which was obviously Australian, *The
Tykes* which plainly belonged to Yorkshire and *The Jesmond
Jesters* to Tyneside. There were *The Pedlars*, *The Barn Owls*,
and *The Follies*. There were *The Shrapnels*, *The Duds*, *The
Tivolis*. The Canadians had *The Dumbbells*, and there were
literally scores of others up and down the line. One of the
most popular was *The Verey Lights*, whose fame spread far
beyond the 20th Division. It was run by Captain Henson,
Captain Gilbey and Bandmaster Eldridge of the 11th Rifle
Brigade. Henson was a natural impresario, Gilbey was not
only a war hero who had won the M.C. at Loos but a tal-
ented performer and a prolific composer of songs and
musical sketches, while Eldridge coached the orchestra to a
high professional standard. The opening number performed
by the entire company, set the scene.

*Verey Lights – Verey Lights – V-E-R-E-Y.
Carnoy Camp may be damp,
But the Colosseum's dry.
Now you know where to go
To enjoy yourselves at night.
As you are near us,
Just come and hear us
For we are the VEREY LIGHTS.*

*You can leave the war outside the door
When you come to our show.
Forget the Huns, their shells and guns*



*We'll make your troubles go.
Fritz may send up his S.O.S
Lots of green and white.
But the lights they send up best
Are the VEREY LIGHTS.*

The words precisely summed up the purpose and the value of concert parties, and the reason the Army encouraged them. There was never a shortage of performers, for the age of mass-entertainment had not yet dawned and there was a wealth of talent among the soldiers, brought up in a society in which people provided their own amusement and anyone who could play an instrument, or who had a passable voice was expected to entertain. If they could neither play nor sing they would be called on to recite, and bookshops did a steady trade in collections of comic or dramatic 'recitations', to be learned by heart and declaimed at the next local concert, church 'social', or family gathering. There were many professional entertainers in the Army. Nat Ayer was a star of the musical theatre of the day, so too was Basil Hallam, better known, as a result of his smash-hit comic song, as *'Gilbert the Filbert'*; Leslie Henson was serving in the Army; Ronald Coleman, who later became a Hollywood star, was in the London Scottish and the youthful 'Duggie' Jones, who would also find fame in Hollywood as 'Aubrey Herbert', was in the Rifle Brigade. There were literally thousands of lesser lights who were more than willing to perform – though not all of them found favour with the concert party organisers, who could afford to be fussy. Corporal Jim Pickard, who was with the 76th Winnipeg Grenadiers had a humiliating experience when he tried to join the Dumbbells:



The first time I saw them was after the Battle of Vimy Ridge when we were out on rest – and what a reception they got. The men went wild when they heard these old songs. Some of the artistes were outstanding. Red Newman used to sing *'Oh, it's a lovely War'*, and it brought the house down. We had another comedian, Bud Rafferty, and his speciality was *'Lips that touch kippers shall never touch mine'* and *'Where do flies go in the winter time?'* Everyone was singing these songs, you know, and we picked them up on the mouth organ. It was really a wonderful evening to see the Dumbbells. The regulations were supposed to be that the chaps performing had to be unfit for front line service, but Captain Plunkett ran it and he talked to me about joining them. I said, Well, I'd be glad to get out of this front line business. So I did take part in some of these Dumbbell evenings. There was a lad in our section and he was quite a pianist and we'd been entertaining our own units. I and this other fellow used to sing these old tear jerkers, *'Love me and the world is mine'* and *'When the field is white with daisies I'll return'*. Well the Dumbbells thought we were all right, but our pals in the audience offered us no honour. They gave us the bird, and no mistake. So that was that. But we didn't hold a grudge. Whenever we were out on rest and we heard that the Dumbbells were in the locality, we'd walk miles to hear them, and every performance it seemed they got better. Of course, when Marjorie came on there was pandemonium,



it was so very life-like. She was a wonderful impersonator, or rather, he was. They used to do shows for some British Units and a lot of those young British officers wanted to make a date with Marjorie. She was so good that they couldn't be convinced she was a female impersonator.

The big snag for concert parties on Active Service was the lack of females at the Front. Fortunately, it was largely a youthful army and the deficiency could often be made up by some slim, fresh-complexioned youth who seldom, if ever, needed to shave and the charms of 'Marjorie' of the Dumbbells were not unique. On the evening of his debut, the subaltern who took the role of 'leading lady' with 'The Pedlars' had the unusual experience of being ogled amorously by his own Colonel, seated in the front row, and his wicked brother officers even arranged a formal introduction at the interval. Fortunately the Colonel had a sense of humour.

'Female' performers were eagerly sought after, and the Balmorals of the 51st Division, with the connivance of their Colonel contrived to kidnap a desirable lovely from the 32nd Division. They were due to leave Senlis and the 32nd Division were staying on. They had no concert party and no plans to start one. A young soldier of the H.L.I named Connel had seen *The Balmorals* show and wanted to join them. He had been a professional impersonator before the war and was a first-class performer, but the 32nd wouldn't hear of transferring, or even loaning him. So, with the collusion of their senior officers, *The Balmorals* kidnapped him. The 32nd Division did not take this kindly, but the 51st had no intention of giving up their prize. The

Divisional Commander solved the problem by inviting the Army Commander and staff to dinner and taking them to the show with 'Isabelle de Hotstuff' in the starring role. What was the good of wasting such talent, he pointed out. So, 'Isabelle', with the Army's consent became officially one of the 51st Division's gunners and continued to wow her audience for the rest of the war!

Nowhere were shows more eagerly anticipated and appreciated than in prisoner of war camps – and nowhere were men more starved of female company. With none of the hazards of Active Service to distract them, and ample time to rehearse and polish their shows, the officers incarcerated in Freiburg P.O.W. camp in southern Germany ran what amounted to a repertory company. The F.A.D.S – Freiburg Amateur Dramatic Society – put on regular shows ranging from Shakespearean melodrama to light comedy and variety shows. They too had their 'lovelies' to fill the female roles and the flirtatious performance of one subaltern was habitually greeted with such an uproar of cheers and whistles, that he literally stopped the show. He also inspired a ditty, performed in the style of a Victorian ballad, that went down almost as well.

*'Tis true she hath a face that's fair,
And lip and cheek rose-red,
And golden tresses, rich and rare,
In silken waves be-spread;
True that with sweet seraphic smile
A soft love song she'll sing;
And to the gallant's heart awhile
A sense of yearning bring*



*But oft I've caught a glimpse of her
In careless disarray –
And things are not what they appear
Behind the footlights gay.
Though sparkling eyes and rouged cheek
Bespeak a goddess fair,
'Tis fools alone such shadows seek,
they'll find no substance there.
Therefore beware this bold FAD lass,
Though it seems more than kind,
Strive not the closed stage door to pass –
I know! I've been behind!!*

In far-off Salonika, where the troops fighting the 'sideshow' on the Balkan front felt almost as cut off as the prisoners of war, they did manage to find the genuine article for one show that toured the back-areas, and in which a comedian dressed as a Greek labour-gang foreman sang a hilarious song entitled 'Hi there, Johnny'. Then someone had the felicitous idea of recruiting a genuine labour-corps Greek for the part. Captain Seligman was in the audience.

An elderly man of dignified appearance with white whiskers, he trod the boards with the stateliness which can only be acquired by a ten-year study of the part of Hamlet. Suddenly he discarded his dignity and, with a wink at the delighted audience, advanced gallantly towards the leading 'lady' and kissed her hand. Encircling her slim waist with Victorian courtesies, he accompanied her in a Macedonian gavotte. Then, with the same old-world grace, he



took leave of his partner and danced by himself. Never have I seen an audience so convulsed with laughter! He played the part for six nights before he retired from the stage and went back to breaking stones on the Seres road.

The musical theatre was thriving on the home front, not only musical plays like *Chu Chin Chow* which ran for almost the whole of the war years, but traditional music hall and the ever-popular revues like *The Bing Boys* starring the pin-up Violet Loraine singing 'If You Were the Only Girl in the World', and the even more glamorous Teddy Gerard whose photograph, like that of Gladys Cooper, was pinned to a muddy wall in a thousand dug-outs. Teddy's theme song made much of the fact that her surname, given a slight alteration in spelling, was also the designation of a London telephone exchange and, before the introduction of automatic dialling, both name and number had to be given to connect the call.

*Everybody calls me Teddy,
T-E double D-Y,
Naughty, sporty, never, never haughty,
With an R.S.V.P. eye.
All day long the telephone,
Keeps on ringing hard;
Are you there, little Teddy bear,
Naughty, naughty one Gerard?*

Soldiers on leave in their home towns went, as a matter of course, to the theatre or the music hall and when they returned to the front the songs they had heard went with



them, either by means of gramophone recordings, sheet music, or simply happy recollection. Many a signaller, who was unfortunate enough to be working on a telegraph pole when a bunch of soldiers passed by, was regaled with a raucous chorus of either *'Naughty, naughty one Gerard'* or another, equally popular song celebrating Kitty the telephone operator, *'Kitty, Kitty isn't it a pity that you have to work so hard...'*

But there was also nostalgia and moments of longing that were hard to bear. Dorothy Nicol, who was nursing at a Base hospital on the coast, remembered one particular evening.

The wounded had their own hospital concerts, so this one was for 'Troops Only' and the Tommies came from all the base units for miles around. Apart from two rows in front reserved for nurses, there wasn't a square inch of the rest of the hall that wasn't khaki. They sat on shelves, they stood on window-ledges. When there were no chairs left, they sat on the floor. The atmosphere was unbelievably excited as the audience waited, and then absolute silence when the concert itself began. They roared with laughter at every allusion, they joined in every chorus and brought the house down with thunderous applause. One little man came on and sang *'Old King Cole'* in the manner of an ordinary soldier, then various ranks (*'The Colonel has a very fine swear, and a very fine swear has he, and he blankety blanks, and blankety blanks and calls for his subalterns three'*, and the Adjutant calls for his horse, and the captains demand three months leave, and the

subalterns complain that they do all the work). In between the turns there were always choruses of popular songs and everyone joined in. It was terribly moving to hear these hundreds of men singing in unison, and sometimes it cut you to the heart. There was such tension, such emotion, such nostalgia. The pianist started to play *'The Long, Long Trail.'*

*There's a long, long trail a-winding
Into the land of my dreams,
Where the nightingales are singing,
And a white moon beams...*

I looked out of the window and saw a stream of ambulances going very slowly along the dusty road. At the same time, through the other window overlooking the railway line, I could see a train full of men with horses and guns going up the line. It wasn't the first train of the evening – it was just before Passchendaele, and they'd been rumbling past all through the concert – but that one going by, just when they were singing that song, overwhelmed me. It was too much, seeing the ambulances coming in and the train going up at the same time – too much to think of all the pain and hurt and suffering.

So many years on, to a generation which looks back with compassion on the horrors of the Great War, that description strikes a sympathetic chord. It is harder to appreciate the lighter side, which was so important to the soldiers



themselves. They were not callous. Of course they were not – and the few survivors do not see themselves as victims any more than their comrades did. Their attitude is best summed up in the lines; *'And still we laughed in Amiens, as dead men laughed a week ago/ What cared we if in Delville Wood the splintered trees saw Hell below?/ We cared. We cared! But laughter runs/ The sweetest stream a man may know/ To rinse him from the taint of guns.'* (From *Song of Amiens* by T. P. Cameron Wilson.)

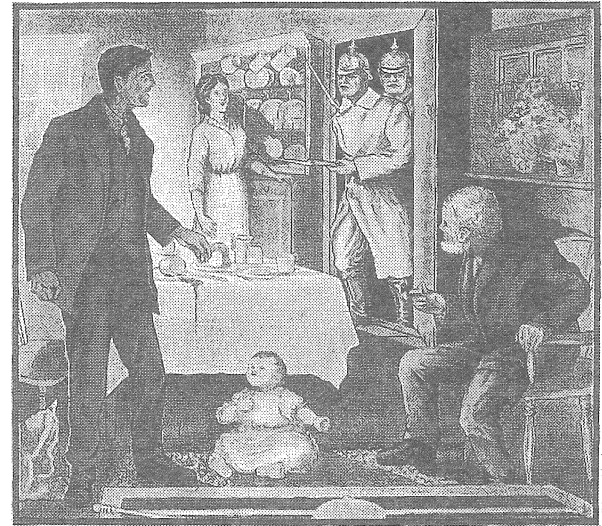
The music, the laughter and, above all, the songs of the First World War, have been described as 'a protest of life against death', but perhaps they merely represent the ascendancy of the human spirit over the cruel inhumanity of the war itself. The songs are still remembered, and some still sung almost a century after the start of that 'Great War' that still haunts succeeding generations. That surely is a kind of immortality and, in a sense, a fitting memorial to those men who marched to war in a forgotten world.



1914: PATRIOTIC SONGS



**IS YOUR HOME
WORTH FIGHTING FOR?**



**IT WILL BE TOO LATE TO FIGHT
WHEN THE ENEMY IS AT YOUR DOOR**

SO JOIN TO-DAY