



Lot-o?-Fun: Comics for children published during the Great War

Article Author:

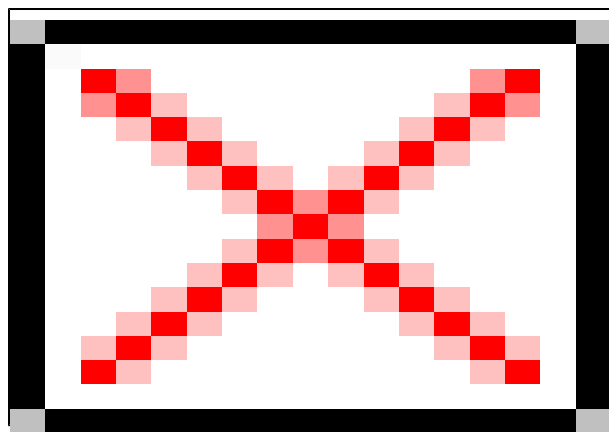
[Geoff Fox](#) [1]

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Byline:

Little known texts published for young readers during the Great War.

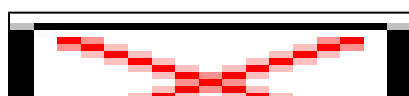
In his third article on little known texts published for young readers during the Great War, **Geoff Fox** turns to comics, arguably the most popular medium by which those readers followed the conflict.



In the November 14 1914 issue of their weekly comic **Lot-o?-Fun**, publishers James Henderson and Sons invited readers to enter a ?NEW COMPETITION. Doubtless you have read many good stories or jokes about the war lately, or they may have been told to you. Write your story on a postcard and send it to Lot-o?-Fun ? 5/- will be given to the sender of the best war story or joke. 25 other useful prizes in order of merit.?

British pluck and humour characterised the comics? version of war in the early months of the conflict, despite the realities of the Battle of Mons, the Great Retreat and the first Battle of Ypres. Readers were also urged to stay abreast of events; **Lot-o?-Fun** suggested, ?Keep well informed of the war by reading the vivid, realistic War Serials appearing in **Comic Life, Big Comic and Sparks**?. The December 26 1914 issue of its rival, **Picture Fun**, noted that ?Boulderby Bouncer, War Correspondent, Appears Weekly in Funny Cuts?. Several factual papers reporting the war for young readers appeared soon after hostilities began. One aspect of the war must have seemed very immediate; ?Khaki Fever? was rampant and in the first week of September, some 200,000 men volunteered to fight. Information and stories were unashamedly propagandist. The Huns were seen as ludicrous idiots or savage beasts, bloated with sausage and beer; at the same time, they were terrified of cold British steel and thought nothing of using women and children as Human Shields to save their own ?pallid skins?.

Lot-o?-Fun and **Picture Fun** shared the ubiquitous ?tabloid? format of the times (c. 14 x 11 inches). Each ran to 8 pages, divided in roughly equal measure between very short picture strip jokes and short stories ? in effect, anecdotes ? and longer stories in densely printed pages relieved by a single illustration. The typeface is minute (smaller than the smallest available on a PC), so that more than 4000 words crowd each five column page.



the comic had chronicled since 1908, two years after its first issue). In Issue 453 Paul is somewhere close to the fighting. Two pickel-helmeted, tubby German officers are bullying a poor innkeeper into serving them 'free grub'; 'Bring a roast goose, all the champagne you have, some sausage etc?or!!!?' (exclamation marks worked hard in comics of the day). A bombed cottage burns in the background, the tiny outline of its occupant racing from the ruins. Paul sneaks under the table, ingeniously robs the Germans of their feast and ropes their legs together. ('Von Sneezer, None of Zat pulling mine leg!?' 'Your chokes vill lead to a duel mit us Von Vinkle!') Over the horizon, cheerily singing 'I saw Yer! I saw Yer!?', march some Tommies and Paul hands over his prisoners to them, along with vital information about troop movements ('He had kept his ears open while under the table ? you can trust him.')

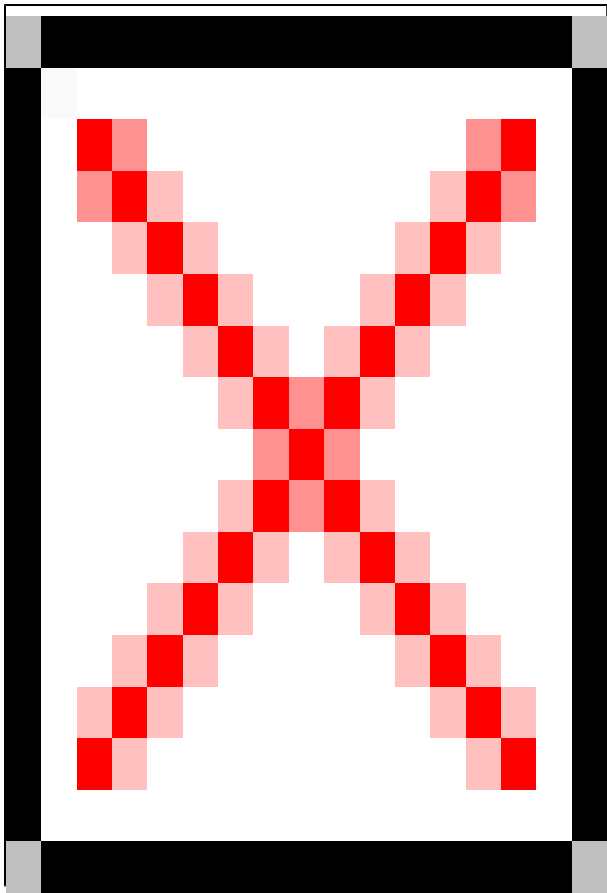
The centre double page spread of short strips includes a couple of illustrated jokes about the war ? perhaps contributed by readers in an earlier competition:

Swaggering German Officer: Don?t talk to me, fellow. Do you know I belong to one of the Kaiser?s crack regiments?

German Private: Yes, no doubt: but when the British Tommies get at you, it?ll be one of the cracked regiments.

Kaiser Bill and his son Little Willie (always caricatured as a chinless weakling) were regularly ridiculed in the comics of those early war years. In the front page story in the Christmas 1914 Issue of **Picture Fun**, they are outwitted and humiliated by our heroes, 'Brimstone Bobs and That Brick Billy Belgium?'. What?s more, Bobs and Billy capture Professor von Swank, the great German scientist and drive him at bayonet point back to the British lines, 'where they had a great reception from our lads, who gave them a rousing British cheer!'

Two of the four longer print stories in **Lot-o?-Fun** are about the war. Their length and vocabulary ? to say nothing of the size of the typeface ? suggest quite able readers, begging the question of the age of the comic?s readership. **The Great Coup** features 'The Adventures of Pontifex Shrewd at the War?'. The famous detective, now engaged in special missions as an Army Captain ? though still accompanied by his faithful Chinese servant, Feng Wo - has been wounded ('a little scratch?') in last week?s action near Cracow. Despite Dr Michaelovitch?s warning that he needs three weeks rest, Pontifex flies to Paris in his Taube monoplane (on this occasion, owing to Shrewd?s injuries, piloted by Feng Wo - 'All li?, me can do?'). Pontifex is taken to meet General Joffre, who removed 'from his breast the Cross of the Legion of Honour and pinned it upon that of Shrewd.? Two days later, Shrewd is back in Britain, tackling this week?s adventure involving a German spy, an indispensable character in early war stories. Shrewd is not deceived by his disguise, spotting a tell-tale duelling scar on the spy?s cheek ('some brawl in Heidelberg,?' speculates Shrewd). The detective, Feng Wo and some action-hungry Territorials foil an attempt by several thousand Germans and a couple of Zeppelins to free hundreds of German prisoners from a camp near Maidenhead. At least, I think that?s what happens ? the plot is a little convoluted towards the end.



The final war story in **Lot-o?-Fun** is a serial entitled **For Britain?s**

Honour. Our heroes are ?Jack Buller, the only son of Sir Ronald Buller, a wealthy newspaper proprietor,? together with a number of companions, all ?Varsity men?, known as Buller?s Bull Pups. All are expert horsemen. Jack is commanded to hold a bridge ?at all costs?. His response is steadfast. ?Rather than count the cost, they must fall and appreciate the signal honour which had been paid the youngest troop in the British Army?. They make it to the bridge before the German cavalry, though the Pups are outnumbered 5 to 1. The Germans ?arrive in a frenzy they would assuredly not have shown if an equal number of men had been guarding the bridge?. Their commander is none other than Lieutenant Wilhelm Von Loan, a ?despicable brute? who had once blackened the name of Jack?s father ?one of the finest gentlemen in England!? After a ferocious hand-to-hand combat on the bridge, Jack is unluckily taken prisoner and Von Loan promises to end his war by cutting off his hands. Worse than that, Jack discovers that Von Loan intends to practise some unspecified evil ? that very night ? upon ?the beautiful French girl, Renee de Margny, who [Jack] had grown to love in the first moment he saw her?. Women and girls, apart from the occasional gallant nurse or helpless victim, feature rarely in the comics, where a male readership seems implicit; though one editor did once make a point of welcoming ?fellows? sisters??. Thanks to Jack?s ingenious courage, matched only by his author?s ingenious plotting, he escapes on a German horse which, ?Heaven be praised?, is tied to a post nearby.

The humorous tone of these early comics, perhaps derived from a confidence in the absolute superiority of British troops (?all over by Christmas?) was not to be sustained. Letters and newspaper reports from the Front, the later evidence of newsreels and films, the mounting death toll and the return of desperately wounded men, shifted public opinion. **The Boys? Friend** was famous for its high spirited school stories (**Greyfriars, Rookwood, St Jim?s** and the rest, largely written by Charles Hamilton under the names of Frank Richards, Owen Conquest, Martin Clifford et al); but in the Christmas Issue of 1917, the annual message from ?Your Editor?s Den? made sombre reading:

I feel that it is incumbent upon me to commence my Chat this week by wishing all my loyal readers the greetings of the season. I trust that every one of my chums will have a good Christmas, unaccompanied by any form of revelry. These are no times for gaiety of any description.

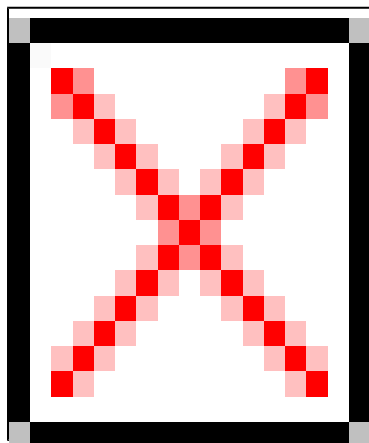
There is serious work on hand. We have to carry on with the task of defeating the unspeakable Hun. It is a formidable task, but if we have not the grit and the determination to carry the job through to the end, we are not worthy of the name of Britishers.

Thousands of our countrymen have given their lives in the great cause. They leave friends and relations at home who

showing an utter disregard to the sufferings of others.

Let us rather spend our Christmas in a quiet, orderly manner, observing all the while the injunctions of the Food Controller. When we have achieved the victory for which we are fighting, when the Prussian military machine has been crushed for ever, then may we all spend our Christmas as of yore.

A confession: This series of articles is based on material from my own collection and I was especially pleased about twenty years ago to find Issue 453 of **Lot-o?-Fun** in almost mint condition. It seemed incredible that a comic, of all things, should have lasted so well. It was indeed incredible; only as I was exploring the Web when drafting the article above did I discover that this issue must surely have come from a pack of facsimiles of six Great War comics from the early Seventies. Several copies are currently available on the Internet, so the good news is that an interested BfK reader might well be able to pick one up. GF



Geoff Fox taught in schools and universities and abroad. He has written extensively about literature and drama, including reviewing regularly for **Books for Keeps**. With Kate Agnew, Geoff wrote **Children at War** (Continuum, 2001).

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