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“The result can scarcely fail to amuse even the most gloomy of war pessimists”:

The Strand Magazine and the First World War

MINNA VUOHELAINEN

“It will doubtless be a satisfaction to the Proprietors, Staff, and Readers of ‘The Strand’ to know that Thomas Atkins, when wounded and in hospital, prefers that excellent publication to any other,” an anonymous correspondent “responsible for the distribution of books and magazines in one of our Military hospitals” informed readers of the *Strand Magazine* in November 1915.¹ “I have developed such a yearning for ‘Strands,’” the writer confesses, “that when I see one being read in a train or at a station I can hardly restrain myself from asking for the reversion of it when finished.”² The correspondent concludes by “urg[ing] everyone who buys a ‘Strand’ to pass it on, when read, to a Military hospital.”³ The following month, the *Strand* marked its twenty-fifth birthday with a bumper number of 200 pages that concluded with a sombre yuletide “Reminder” to readers: “Do not forget that ‘The Strand’ may now be sent free of all charge to British soldiers and sailors at home or abroad. All you need do is to hand your copies, without wrapper or address, over [t]he counter at any post-office in the United Kingdom, and they will be sent by the authorities wherever they will be most welcome.”⁴ In December 1916, the magazine even reproduced an image of the cover of a prison-camp magazine closely modelled on its own to provide evidence that it was indeed fondly remembered by soldiers (figure 1).⁵

Despite the *Strand*'s appeal to readers to forward used copies to frontline soldiers, a perusal of the magazine's contents suggests that its primary wartime consumers were in fact non-combatants. As the *Strand*'s original target reader, the commuting middle-class office worker, found himself in the trenches, the magazine had to adjust to cater for new home-front reading

communities. Chief among these were women with new-found spending power, boys still too young to be sent to the front, and older men who may have been *Strand* readers ever since the magazine's appearance in 1891. This challengingly diverse home-front readership was not subject to any official propaganda until the establishment of the National War Aims Committee in 1917, the British state instead relying on the press and the cultural industries, including the *Strand*, for the maintenance of morale amongst civilians—a “weaponisation of ... writers” as Jonathan Cranfield puts it.⁶

After a brief overview of the *Strand*'s war coverage, I examine four instances that demonstrate how and to what effect the magazine, still under the exceptionally long editorship (1891–1930) of Herbert Greenhough Smith, adjusted to total war: its tried-and-tested fictional, factual, and human-interest formulas mutated generically in recognition of new realities; it used illustration and page layout to reinforce propagandistic messages in ways that did not unnecessarily alarm home-front readers; it ambivalently acknowledged its female readers in the provision of female-centred stories that simultaneously gave women a role in the war effort *and* deplored the necessity of such a step; and it frequently deployed humour, particularly comic sketches satirising the home-front experience, in an attempt to foster communal resilience. Drawing on David Monger's analysis of the multiple “sub-patriotisms”—civic, proprietorial, communal, sacrificial, adversarial, supranational, and aspirational—present in the propaganda of the National War Aims Committee in the final months of the war, I argue that the *Strand*'s wartime content represents a range of sustained, persuasive, but multivalent middlebrow patriotisms designed to persuade home-front readers of the necessity of the war effort.⁷ Far from representing “a single text” with “many voices speaking as one,” as Cranfield argues, the wartime *Strand* gave voice to a spectrum of patriotisms from the xenophobic to the progressive.⁸

The Wartime *Strand*

As Ann-Marie Einhaus observes, the angry, proto-Modernist trench poetry of combatant authors such as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and Isaac Rosenberg has come to typify the canonical literary response to the First World War; by contrast, the “ephemeral” prose printed in magazines and intended for immediate consumption “rarely features in the war’s literary memory.”⁹

However, “the ‘great casualty’ narrative” set in “the muddy, rat-infested trenches of the Western Front” is just one form of First-World-War writing, with the popular press representing, as Adrian Bingham argues in his analysis of popular newspapers, a significant untapped historical resource.¹⁰ Although the *Strand* has been described as a “national institution” that offered “a timely and appealing response to the particular needs of its audience,” it has also been viewed, like the popular newspapers Bingham analyses, as “predictable, trivial, unsophisticated, usually politically and socially conservative and prone to episodes of irrational sensationalism,” its middlebrow agenda tending to “distract popular attention away from politics to entertainment, celebrity and consumption.”¹¹

Paradoxically, such responses date back to the *Strand*’s founder George Newnes, who famously described his journalism as “humble and unpretentious,” “giving wholesome and harmless entertainment to crowds of hardworking people, craving for a little fun and amusement” rather than attempting to “direc[t] the affairs of nations” or “buil[d] up Navies.”¹² While the bulk of critical material on the *Strand* focuses on the magazine’s first decade, the few critics who have written about the wartime *Strand* have taken their cue from Newnes. Reginald Pound, for example, describes the wartime magazine’s “editorial policy” as a combination of

“diversion” and “humour.”¹³ For Cranfield, the monthly responded to the “upheaval” of the early twentieth century in “rather unspectacular ways,” becoming “a vehicle for propaganda” during the war.¹⁴ For Einhaus, the *Strand*’s war coverage is “essentially formula literature ... clearly aimed at a mass audience, and written for commercial purposes.”¹⁵ Implicit in all these definitions is a sense of disappointment at the nature of the magazine’s middlebrow, home-front-oriented war coverage, so different both in shape and in tone from canonical trench poetry.

That coverage is, however, both extensive and intertextual, pervading all elements of the *Strand* during the war years and presenting the reader with a range of patriotic sentiments. Einhaus notes that the magazine typically printed at least one war story per month, but the conflict also featured in its factual and human-interest features and even influenced its page layout.¹⁶ Since the *Strand* “went to press five weeks ahead of publication,” it was never a particularly agile vehicle for addressing sudden change.¹⁷ The autumn 1914 issues, though including general military themes and backdrops that hint at the conflict looming on the horizon, contain very little to mark the beginning of a real war. The actual conflict was first acknowledged in combat-themed puzzles and human-interest features in November 1914, and then in fiction and popular-science articles from January 1915. The *Strand* continued to print war-related material well into 1919, indicating how early publishing decisions were taken.

If the *Strand*’s readers suffered losses during the war, the magazine itself did not escape unscathed, shrinking due to “the growing scarcity of paper” from 120 pages at the beginning of the conflict to 112 pages in January 1916, 104 pages in May 1916, 96 pages in May 1917, 88 pages in February 1918, 80 pages in March 1918, and just 76 pages, less than two-thirds of the size of the pre-war magazine, in June 1918.¹⁸ Since the magazine strove to provide excellent value for money, this reduction in size mattered. Figure 2 provides a sense of the extent of and

fluctuations in the *Strand's* war-themed contents between the beginning of the conflict in August 1914 and January 1919, an issue likely to have been sent to press soon after the Armistice. During this period, approximately 28 percent of the pages of an average issue were war-related, but the contents of monthly issues varied widely and some variation is also evident between different phases of the conflict. In 1915, the war took up on average 23 percent of the monthly pages, this figure rising to 32 percent in 1916 and 36 percent in 1917. Autumn 1917, a period of concern over civilian morale following the disastrous Somme campaign the previous autumn, shortages of food and other necessities, increasing hours of labour, and enemy air raids, saw a particularly heavy concentration of war-themed content to encourage morale.¹⁹ By 1918, with the end of the war in sight, the monthly's war coverage fell back to 27 percent. While my focus below will be on the *Strand's* war-themed contents, variety remained the magazine's watchword. Throughout the conflict, war and spy fiction, illustrated portraits of military figures, factual articles about British military successes, and pseudoscientific and comic interpretations of German psychology mingled with Sherlock Holmes stories, comic fiction by P. G. Wodehouse and W. W. Jacobs, and trivial human-interest features.

Generic Mutations

The *Strand* had in the years since its inception built a loyal following amongst readers of genre fiction. In this market, Ian Small notes, "success depended ... upon identifying a *community* of taste" with shared socio-cultural values.²⁰ During the conflict, the *Strand* remained a magazine of genre writing, but generic hybridity was key to its responses to total war. As Cranfield observes, the wartime *Strand* drew "upon existing discourses and styles from the magazine's

own past,” with the tried-and-tested generic formulas of crime and adventure fiction, popular science, and illustrated interviews now often taking a military turn.²¹ By continuing to print “Perplexities,” “Portraits of Celebrities,” articles about latest science, and extensively illustrated crime and adventure stories, the *Strand* provided its readers with pleasurable continuity amidst flux; however, by giving these features a military twist, it also reconfigured them for new realities. As Ailise Bulfin suggests, popular military and invasion narratives may have served simultaneously to “mitigate anxiety” and “fue[l] security concerns and undermin[e] confidence.”²²

The first items to acknowledge the war appeared in November 1914, when the monthly’s regular “Perplexities,” brain-teasers that could be commissioned at short notice, took a military turn. The monthly offering includes “Exercising the Spies” (a chess problem), “The War-Horse” and “The Despatch-Rider” (mathematical puzzles), “Avoiding the Mines” (a geometric or visual puzzle), and “A Battle-Scene Charade.”²³ The conflict continued to feature in “Perplexities” for the duration, presenting war as a glorious game that could be won through logic and perpetuating stereotypes about the “enemy,” for example when challenging the reader to convert “KAISER” into “PORKER” by changing one letter at a time.²⁴ The magazine even issued its own “Strand War Game,” with a colonel’s endorsements, and noted the “similarity between chess and the great art of war.”²⁵ In inviting the reader to solve these puzzles, the magazine deployed New Journalistic reader-bonding strategies to involve home-front readers in the “perplexities” facing the military.

The first human-interest feature with a world-war theme appeared in November and December 1914, when the two-part “Our Friends the Fighting Rajahs” introduced readers to Indian princes who had placed their armies and their financial might at the service of the British

Empire. The feature, illustrated with photographs to emphasise the reality of these valuable allies, concludes with the reassuring statement that “in possessing the co-operation of these powerful personages the British Empire has an asset whose value cannot be over-estimated.”²⁶ Factual human-interest features, typically illustrated with photographs, would later follow on all manner of military themes, from discussions of military medals and trophies to articles about the training and daily life of the troops, while educational and historical articles explored British military successes, culminating in Arthur Conan Doyle’s lengthy serial history of the war, “The British Campaign in France.” The monthly’s established “Portraits of Celebrities” increasingly focused on military figures, whether depicting Field Marshal Hindenburg as “the beaten leader of a beaten people” or noting the “qualities of genius and insight” that had made General Foch “The Great Victor.”²⁷ Meanwhile, the magazine’s pre-war interest in popular science mutated into pseudoscientific analyses of the criminal responsibility of the Kaiser, the brutality of the German military, and even the degeneration of the entire German nation, such as Sir Ray Lankester’s analysis of “Culture and German Culture” in January 1915 and the medical symposium “Is the Kaiser Mad?” the following April. These scientific interests were also evident in features on the latest advances in military technology, with aerial flight and the tank topics of special interest. These human-interest and factual articles, which deploy existing generic formulas familiar to the magazine’s pre-war readers, sought to educate the audience in the causes of the conflict and its likely outcome, the defeat of a “degenerate” enemy by Britain’s superior fighting power.

Fiction underwent a similar generic transformation. Cranfield argues that “the *Strand*’s traditional modes of fiction were inadequate for dealing with the horrors of the war,” but *Strand* authors were not struck dumb by the ineffability of trench warfare.²⁸ Instead, the magazine’s established, confident adventure and detective genres mutated with relative ease into frontline

heroics, paranoid invasion tales, and spy stories in recognition of Britain's new position.²⁹

Immediately preceding Lankester's pseudoscientific analysis of *Kultur* in the January 1915 issue, the reader would have found the *Strand's* earliest significant investment in world-war fiction, the first instalment of Richard Marsh's propagandistic "Sam Briggs Becomes a Soldier." In this twelve-part serial, Marsh, a regular contributor to the monthly, transformed an existing Edwardian comic character into an unlikely war hero whose trench adventures combine humour with a *Boy's Own* bravado, spattered with propagandistic messages about German brutality and British values of "honour, liberty, justice and democracy."³⁰ After Marsh's death in 1915, a writer calling himself "Sapper" (Cyril McNeale) took up a similar ideological position in stories published in 1916 and 1917. In Morley Roberts's May 1915 story "Spink and the Submarine," the Germans are ridiculed when the enemy attempts to take over a British vessel—"“Stop!” said the submarine skipper, very angrily. ‘Stop your engines. I vill on board come and your papers examine. You are Englisch!’”—only to have his submarine converted into a colander by the plucky Captain Spink.³¹ These propagandistic narratives combine stories about German brutality and incompetence with reminders about British values and citizenship duty, while seeking to relocate adventure at the front.

However, not all of the *Strand's* war stories were upbeat confirmations of Britain's certain victory. By 1917, when catastrophic losses and food shortages were contributing to civilian war-weariness, F. Britten Austin was beginning to introduce more sombre themes into the monthly's war fiction, acknowledging the possibilities of imperfection, mental disintegration, and defeatism amongst soldiers. "The Other Side" (July 1917), for example, considers the possibility of telepathic communication with the dead in recognition of a wartime upsurge in spiritualism, "They Come Back" (October 1917) discusses the levelling effect of the war on class

relations, “In the Hindenburg Line” (April 1918) approaches the question of shellshock, this controversial subject perhaps made acceptable by the story’s setting in the German lines, and “Peace” (September 1918) chillingly imagines the bleak homecoming in store for German troops. Intriguingly, this sense of gloom is also present in the most famous of the *Strand*’s war stories, Doyle’s “His Last Bow: The War Service of Sherlock Holmes,” which appeared in September 1917. This paranoid story, in which detection mutates into counter-spy fiction, sees Holmes return from retirement as beekeeper to help Britain prepare for “the impending European tragedy,” a veritable Dusk of Nations, and takes place on the night of “the second of August—the most terrible August in the history of the world. One might have thought already that God’s curse hung heavy over a degenerate world, for there was an awesome hush and a feeling of vague expectancy in the sultry and stagnant air. The sun had long set, but one blood-red gash like an open wound lay low in the distant west.”³² Helped by Watson and the trusty servant woman Martha, Holmes defeats the German spy Von Bork, who has been amassing intelligence that would enable a speedy German invasion on the following day, but not even Holmes can prevent the war. The story suggests that all the internal problems that the country (and the *Strand*) had struggled with in the preceding years—“a devil’s brew of Irish civil war, window-breaking Furies, and God knows what”—had been of German manufacture, and that Germany had been preparing for the coming conflict for some time, while Britain had been slumbering.³³ Appeasement would be futile, as Holmes’s antagonists explain: “It is to-day or to-morrow with Mr. John Bull. If he prefers to-day we [the Germans] are perfectly ready. If it is to-morrow we shall be more ready still.”³⁴ While Holmes defeats Von Bork’s immediate plans, the story concludes on an uncharacteristically gloomy note, with “Holmes point[ing] back to the moonlit

sea” and predicting that “There’s an east wind coming . . . , such a wind as never blew on England yet.”³⁵

Einhaus describes the *Strand*’s war stories as “entertaining tales that employ the war as a setting for standard plots and often formulaic conflicts and resolutions” and that “cater for home-front needs, provide a welcome distraction, reinforce a sense of the justness of the British cause and address the realities of war in a manner designed to reassure readers.”³⁶ However, the magazine’s readjustment of its contents to new wartime realities also provides a powerful indication of the persistence, flexibility, and usefulness to authors and readers alike of successful generic formulas. In particular, the war years saw the spy thriller, specifically the counter-espionage narrative about sleeper agents on British soil, firmly established as “a close but distinct variation of the tale of detection.”³⁷ Given genre writing’s appeal to particular socio-cultural communities of readers, Einhaus is therefore wrong to dismiss the *Strand*’s contents as lightweight: instead we should read these features as enabling the creation and maintenance of what Monger terms “a ‘conrescent community’ growing together” in the imaginary space of the magazine through shared narratives of heroism and watchfulness that bridged the war years with the pre-war world.³⁸

Illustrating the War

Robert T. Tally likens genre to “a guidebook” that can “organiz[e] knowledge in such a way as to make things meaningful.”³⁹ As an illustrated magazine, the *Strand* reinforced such meaning-making visually by repeating propagandistic messages and shoring up home-front morale without unduly offending readers’ sensibilities—a difficult task given the casualty figures at the

front. In her analysis of the coverage of the Franco-Prussian War in the illustrated press, Michèle Martin argues that “The production of journalistic illustrations ... in wartime ... always involves an attempt at creating” documentary “images of reality.”⁴⁰ The *Strand* was not, of course, a newspaper, but it had nonetheless sought to educate its readers about the modern world through instructive factual articles, some of its illustrators were official war artists, and the war provided opportunities for fact-based reportage drawing on “autopsy or firsthand experience.”⁴¹ However, its wartime visual practices cannot be said to agree with Martin’s assessment of the documentary quality of war reportage, demonstrating instead some of the tendencies identified by Christopher Pittard and James Mussell as characteristic of the *Strand* of the 1890s.

In an analysis of the “close symbiosis of image and text” in the Sherlock Holmes stories, Pittard argues that the *Strand*’s effort to provide “wholesome” reading matter led the monthly to “suppress sensational elements” by avoiding illustrations of gruesome crime.⁴² These “remarkably restrained” illustrations, according to Pittard, “make crime narratives safe ... by refusing to portray crime head on.”⁴³ Mussell, meanwhile, has examined the *Strand*’s innovative use of half-tone photographs to illustrate factual and scientific articles but “rarely ... fiction because of their claims to authenticity.”⁴⁴ These analyses illuminate the wartime magazine’s selective visual reporting, which mixed “factual” photographic visualisations with exciting, action-packed, and remarkably bloodless pen-and-ink sketches. Explosions, gunfire, and aerial bombardment were depicted abstractly, in starkly beautiful, long-distance black-and-white illustrations that failed to reference human suffering.

The *Strand*’s most sustained investment in war fiction, Marsh’s twelve-part “Sam Briggs Becomes a Soldier” (January–December 1915), depicts a previously hapless clerk’s transformation into a heroic soldier in order to hammer home propagandistic messages about

German brutality, British values, and the importance of enlisting. The accompanying illustrations by Charles Pears, official War Artist to the Admiralty, chart Sam's unlikely evolution from an undersized, featherbrained figure of fun to a Victoria-Cross-decorated war hero. In keeping with Pittard's analysis of the restraint apparent in Paget's Holmes illustrations, Pears's semi-photographic illustrations avoid overt depictions of bloodshed. In the course of his "adventures," the diminutive Sam single-handedly confronts gigantic German soldiers, is gassed, engages in sniping, blows up trenches, and is himself blown up so that he has to be joined together out of "ten or a dozen pieces" (figure 3).⁴⁵ The nurse in charge of Sam's recovery describes him at the conclusion of his adventures as "a mass of bandages" with "parts missing," unable even to feed himself because "it wasn't clear where [his] mouth began and ended."⁴⁶ While these glib descriptions encourage readers to visualise Sam's horrific injuries and "willingness to engage in explicit, methodical violence," Pears's entirely bloodless black-and-white illustrations refuse, even in the partially colour-printed Christmas 1915 number, to depict either, focusing instead on scenes of adventure and hiding Sam's disfigurements behind bandages as he enjoys tea in bed (figure 4).⁴⁷

Pears's illustrations of Sam's wholly unlikely adventures also visually reinforced readers' sense of conflict by pitting the English against the enemy across the opening, with Sam and his allies most commonly placed on the left under the running header "*THE STRAND MAGAZINE*," and the enemy soldiers on the opposite page, seen from a greater distance and denied facial features. The positioning of the header serves to align the monthly with the British cause, with the reader's viewpoint placed behind Sam. In illustrations of the enemy wearing gasmasks, the Germans appear machinelike, barely human, intriguingly uncovering commonalities between the middlebrow *Strand* and Modernist depictions of mechanised warfare (figure 5).

Doyle was responsible for the most extensive of the *Strand's* non-fictional war features with his lengthy “factual” account of “the great adventure of the German War,” “The British Campaign in France.”⁴⁸ The series, which promised readers “The FACTS AT LAST! The Inside Story of the War,” commenced in April 1916 and ran for fifteen monthly instalments until being put on hold in July 1917 because it was felt that its painstaking detail and maps “might prove to the advantage of the enemy,” and was picked up again in 1918.⁴⁹ The *Strand* paid Doyle a staggering £5000 for the serial, but, as Pound wryly remarks, “It was felt with considerable unanimity that he had not distinguished himself as a war historian.”⁵⁰ The relative failure of the series is apparent from its demotion from flagship status and in the reduced number of pages allowed to Doyle.

Doyle’s “history” was extensively illustrated with a variety of visual means, including drawings, maps, photographs, and diagrams. The series mixes battle-scene drawings, some of which claim to be “*Drawn from material supplied by one who was present*” (figure 6), with photographs of distinguished officers and diagrams of actual battles (figure 7).⁵¹ This combination of “factual” maps and photographs with “fictional” drawings suggests a slippage between reportage and storytelling: the serial’s narrative elements question the authenticity of the supposedly factual images, but the presence of maps and photographs also invests the fictionalised images with authenticity. While war artists typically worked up hastily made battlefield sketches at greater leisure, the fictional quality of the battle-scene drawings is evident in their depiction of cavalry charges and hand-to-hand combat and in their relative—if not total—avoidance of injury and death (figure 8). As in the adversarial images of Sam Briggs’s wartime adventures, the British side tends to feature in the foreground, often on the left under the

header “*THE STRAND MAGAZINE*,” while enemy soldiers are placed at the back of the image where the reader will find it more difficult to sympathise with their suffering (figure 9).

While, then, the *Strand*'s wartime illustrations were not entirely devoid of battlefield injury or death, they prioritised scenes of action over the stagnation of trench warfare, portraying war as an exciting game told in bloodless black-and-white. These generically hybrid images reinforce the ideological rifts between the Allies and the Central Powers and envisage opportunities for civil duty and military heroism. One can imagine them meeting the reading needs of a number of non-combatant readerships by encouraging new recruits, reassuring young men approaching the age of conscription, satisfying older male readers who had grown up devouring the *Boy's Own Paper* before graduating to the *Strand*, and comforting female readers whose husbands, brothers, and sons were at the front.

New Female Reading Communities

While the *Strand*'s unrealistic portrayal of frontline heroics and its deliberate confirmation of national stereotypes demonstrate its complicity in war propaganda, as its traditional male readers left for Flanders the monthly also had to attract a new community of purchasers: women. Prior to the war, the *Strand* had been a vocal opponent of women's suffrage: as late as 1915, Lankester had compared German militarism to the “mad women” demanding the vote in Britain, while Doyle claimed flippantly that “Half-a-dozen able-bodied Suffragettes would cause more damage to property than all the Zeppelins that have ever come out of Germany.”⁵² However, during the war, women came to play an increasingly important role as authors, artists, and protagonists in the *Strand*. This readiness to grant work to female writers and artists may have been dictated by a

shortage of available contributors. However, the monthly's willingness to accord fictional women a greater role in war work, resistance, and espionage may also signal an awareness that home-front copies were increasingly being acquired and consumed by female war workers—a significant concession given the monthly's previously conservative gender politics and hostility to feminism—and a desire to involve war-weary women more closely in the war effort.⁵³ However, the ideological message of these stories that at first sight appear to broaden the *Strand's* readership community is significantly ambivalent.

Several short stories acknowledged the difficult position of continental women. Alongside the familiar comic figure of the English Sam Briggs, Marsh introduced a “powerful,” “broad and strong” Flemish woman, Netta Swerts, whom Sam had previously known as a London waitress, a role immediately recognisable to readers.⁵⁴ Netta and her mother are initially given traditionally feminine roles as they nurture Sam back to health following an encounter with the enemy, serving to personalise and feminise the plight of their country in keeping with the contemporary, “highly gendered image of an innocent female Belgium at the mercy of a powerful and brutal Germany” (figure 10).⁵⁵ However, it soon becomes apparent that the war has forced Netta into unconventional action as an excellent sniper and reconnaissance worker who proves an “equal to the average strong man.”⁵⁶ “So long as a German remains on Belgian soil it is the duty of a Belgian woman to carry a gun—and to use it when she can,” Netta explains, adding that “There is a piece of ground on the other side [of her home] which we call the ‘Graveyard’ ... full, just a little way under the surface, of dead men.”⁵⁷ While Netta's actions depart significantly from accepted gender roles, the series represents this transgression as simultaneously understandable *and* as to be avoided at all costs. Sam explains: “Nearly everyone she held near and dear had been killed before her eyes by the ruthless invaders ... The happy,

thriving home had been turned into a ruin from which even hope was banished. Neither age nor sex had been spared. Brutal, senseless cruelty had usurped the place of law and justice ... I did not wonder that it was always of the rifle she was dreaming ... One fact was sure—no sacrifice could be too great which would keep an unfriendly German foot from being set upon English ground.”⁵⁸ The war has literally forced Netta out of the domestic sphere by destroying the very “roof to cover” her.⁵⁹ Her position as a resistance fighter is not, however, natural.

Other atrocity stories set in occupied Belgium and France similarly presented readers with instances of feminine predicament, endorsing the message that women’s encounter with a brutal military conflict had forced them into abnormal roles in which they could, however, excel, and calling for “compassionate sympathy” and “chivalry.”⁶⁰ In the French author Marcelle Tinayre’s June 1916 story “The Soul of France Was in her,” the would-be postmistress Marie defends her office against all odds, while in J. J. Bell’s August 1915 story “For Belgium,” a young woman helps her soldier lover destroy a German convoy, for “One must take risks for Belgium.”⁶¹ Both stories equate the female protagonist’s plight with that of her occupied country. In Mrs Belloc Lowndes’s December 1916 story “The Parcel,” a loving French wife loses her mind after unexpectedly receiving her executed husband’s clothes in the German parcel-post—but not before turning her rage against the German prince who is quartered with her. The women have all been forced into unbearable situations and unfeminine actions by the brutality of the German invader.

The ambivalent illustrations accompanying these stories depict women trapped in cramped, claustrophobic spaces, threatened by brutal Germans, and compelled to act in self-defence. However, while the women are shown at the point of taking action, the images seldom depict the outcome of unfeminine violence. Thus, Marsh’s Netta is shown taking aim at German

soldiers (figure 5), while Bell's Louise points a sword at a German officer. Lowndes's unhinged Madame Bissonet is visually arrested in the act of attacking a German officer with a knife, the reader positioned behind her in support but her face hidden from view (figure 11). The illustration accompanying Tinayre's story shows a German officer clutching his neck, but not the knife buried there by Marie, whose posture in the background displays extreme agitation, even madness (figure 12). Each of these stories, then, while detailing the plight of continental women, serves as a propagandistic warning of the possible consequences of a German invasion of Britain. The *Strand's* readers, like Marsh's Sam, are invited to "pictur[e] English women at the mercy of German soldiers," forced to "make use of any weapon on which they could lay their hands."⁶² Paradoxically, then, while these atrocity stories present the reader with images of female agency and heroism, they are also designed, particularly in the run-up to the introduction of conscription in January 1916, to encourage hesitating men to enlist so that their womenfolk would never have to take up arms to defend themselves.

Counter-spy stories set at the home front suggested positive opportunities for women to support the war effort through feminine watchfulness and intuition. In Harold Steevens's June 1915 story "The Sentry Post at Cowman's Curl," a soldier guarding a crucial rail crossing saves a young woman's life, only for her subsequently to save his when a German spy attacks him. Steevens's March 1916 story "Schmitt's Pigeons" follows Mrs Egerton as she travels by train to visit her naval-officer husband. The protagonist sees a fellow traveller preparing to release homing pigeons, only to conclude that "he was almost certainly a spy, and it was her duty to checkmate him."⁶³ Although the story acknowledges that "A woman's chances of striking directly at the enemy are few," Mrs Egerton's "woman's lightning wit" ensures that the naturalised German's weather reports fail to reach their intended audience and a planned air-raid

on Britain fails.⁶⁴ While the illustrations visualise Mrs Egerton's bewilderment at her courageous action, her intuitive, non-violent heroism does not transgress the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, for the spy is physically tackled by men (figure 13). In both stories, the woman's war effort is rewarded romantically, with the promise of future marital happiness with a partner to whose survival she has contributed. While they afford centrality to female agency, therefore, these stories could be seen to conform to the *Strand's* pre-war conservative gender politics in conflating husband and country as woman's true missions.

As the war continued, the *Strand* acknowledged the public's growing war-weariness in spy stories that appear to recognise male military incompetence. In Doyle's February 1916 story "The Prisoner's Defence," the supposedly French Ena Garnier is revealed to be a German spy whose "exquisite combination of beauty and intelligence" tricks Captain John Fowler into revealing a crucial military secret.⁶⁵ Luckily, Fowler places his "honour as a soldier and a gentleman" above his love for this woman "of a very independent spirit," whose "strange moods and fancies" have repeatedly driven him to fits of jealousy.⁶⁶ It is therefore excusable that he should shoot Ena dead when she attempts to flee with the secrets that he has carelessly revealed. Male failure is also a theme in Edgar Wallace's April 1916 story "Code No. 2," in which an unobservant Security Service allows a foreign agent to copy a secret code, only for the perceptive female agent May Prince to save the day.

While the *Strand* may have granted women an increasingly visible role as authors, artists, and protagonists during the war, at least partly in acknowledgement of their increasing importance as consumers, it was never entirely comfortable with that visibility or the departure from conventional gender roles that it implied. Women on the war-torn continent were shown to be capable of action and violence, but such behaviour was also depicted as unfeminine and

dangerous, and these atrocity stories may have been primarily aimed at men hesitating to enlist. Stories about the home front, by contrast, encouraged women to play their part in the war effort by remaining vigilant and by accepting wartime discomforts, imagining the nation as an increasingly inclusive community; by the end of the war, the magazine appears even to have come to accept female suffrage.⁶⁷ This attempt to create and maintain broad-based middlebrow readership communities is also apparent in the *Strand*'s comic take on the war.

A Comic Turn

As a middlebrow magazine, the *Strand* sought to provide its readers with humorous entertainment, as evidenced in its interest in comic fiction, cartoons and caricatures, and “Curiosities,” short features about all manner of weird and wonderful occurrences. During the war, the magazine appears to have decided that humour would ensure the nation’s survival over “that rather vague and indefinite period known as ‘the duration of the war.’”⁶⁸ Throughout the conflict, the *Strand* continued to print non-military comic fiction by Wodehouse and Jacobs but also invested heavily in sketches that illustrated “The Lighter Side of War,” conflict furnishing artists with unlikely humorous opportunities “to amuse even the most gloomy of war pessimists.”⁶⁹ Einhaus’s observation that “the special ‘Humour Number’ of the *Strand Magazine*, published in March 1917 and expressly recommended as ideal reading material to be posted to the trenches, includes no war story whatsoever,” thus ignores the issue’s non-fictional war-themed contents, including two sets of comic illustrations.⁷⁰ These features serve multiple purposes: they ridicule and satirise the enemy, hone in on the dogged humour of British troops, and identify shared British characteristics and wartime experiences. “Not without reason are the

British regarded as the most tolerant of people, and the slowest to anger,” the magazine declared: “We prefer to laugh at our enemies rather than hate them.”⁷¹ For James Sully, such ridicule of another group of people serves a “self-protective” purpose that confirms “our own superiority.”⁷²

A significant strand of comic sketches featured trench humour, produced by artists with military experience. These sketches, which depict British soldiers doggedly cracking grim jokes in their dugouts, deploy incongruity, self-deprecation, and understatement to prove that Britons’ “invincible gaiety” and “incorrigible surface levity” mask their “tenacity of purpose.”⁷³ In March 1916, “A Great Humorist of the Trenches” introduced readers to the war drawings of Captain Bruce Bairnsfather (figure 14). “There goes the blinkin’ parapet again,” a British soldier mutters as a trench that has taken hours to shore up is blown up.⁷⁴ In another sketch, two soldiers reluctantly share a shell-crater during bombardment; “if you know of a better ’ole, go to it,” one wryly remarks.⁷⁵ In the March 1917 Humour Issue, “A Sketch-Book from the Trenches” prints similarly understated sketches by Lieutenant Walter Kirby. A sketch titled “Optimism,” for example, depicts a soldier cooking dinner in a filthy trench, soaked by rain and harassed by shellfire, while humming “When you come to the end of a perfect day.”⁷⁶ These understated sketches, which hint at the discomforts and horrors of trench life, were perhaps the most subversive of all the military-themed items the *Strand* printed, and closest in spirit to the irony of canonical war poetry. However, their implied criticism of trench warfare is transformed into a self-protective, cynical chuckle.⁷⁷

The great majority of the *Strand*’s war humour was, however, unambiguously aimed at the home front. September 1915’s “The Lighter Side of War” and December 1915’s “As Funny as They Can” provide multiple sketches by diverse artists, culled from various illustrated

publications and set at the seaside, in the city, in museums, and in barbershops—places where ordinary Britons attempted to live their lives despite the war (figure 15). In “The Patriot’s Sacrifice” by Ricardo Brook, for example, a bald customer whose two remaining tufts of hair resemble the Kaiser’s moustache, asks a barber to “trim [his] hair a little less Kaiserish,” while Hesketh Daubeny’s sketch likens slow progress on a golf course to the stagnation of trench warfare.⁷⁸ In Alfred Leete’s “Spy” sketches German spies’ imperfect cultural grounding leads them to assume that Londoners are reduced to eating boiled wood when they are in fact enjoying asparagus, and to mistake a recruitment office for general servants for one recruiting army generals, resulting in the conclusion that the British war effort must be about to collapse with women at the helm; the unspoken suggestion is, of course, that women would not make good generals and that their true sphere is the domestic. By selecting such scenes of everyday life, the cartoonists simultaneously sympathetically acknowledge the war’s impact on the home front and suggest that life continues despite shared sacrifices for the war effort. In identifying this common ground between readers, the magazine affirms the arguments of James Sully and Henri Bergson that laughter is a communal activity based on shared experiences and social values that “will tend to consolidate the group.”⁷⁹

Unlike the features discussed above that appear to repress uncomfortable truths about the war, the comic sketches also afforded readers temporary relief in keeping with Sigmund Freud’s contention that “humorous pleasure [comes] from savings in expenditure on feeling[s]” such as “pity, annoyance, pain, [or] sympathy.”⁸⁰ W. Heath Robinson was a regular contributor of distinctive home-front comic sketches to the *Strand* that find humour in hardship. His “When Peace Comes Along” in the March 1917 Humour Number imagines the uses to which military equipment might be put after the war (figure 16). Tanks, for example, might be redeployed as

omnibuses, submarine mines as stairlifts for the elderly, and torpedoes as foot-warmers. The sketches deplore the waste of the war and acknowledge that its effects would be felt for a long time, but also optimistically look forward to a post-war life in which wartime technology could be used for the good of the public. In June 1917, Robinson's flagship feature "Untraining the Army" imagines humorous ways to rehabilitate soldiers, brutalised by life in the trenches, to domestic habits, for example by making them spend time with lifeless female statues before being allowed back into the company of real women. In May 1918, Robinson again featured at the beginning of the issue with "War-Time Economies," the grim humour of which imagines how the nation might do without clothes given the scarcity of textiles, and how oxtail could be stretched—quite literally—to go further. In December 1918, Robinson's sketches that must have been produced before the Armistice envisage "The Militarization of Christmas," as Christmas dinner proceeds according to military order and Father Christmas calls children to attention when delivering presents. This final set of images was, significantly, subtitled "If and When We Become a Military Nation," the suggestion being that the scenes envisaged were too ridiculous ever to be enacted in Britain.

While, then, the *Strand's* comic features contain some adversarial elements hostile to the enemy, particularly caricatures of the Kaiser and the German mindset, their overall effectiveness relies on their successful identification of everyday experiences shared by middlebrow home-front readers. These shared experiences of hardship included food shortages, the militarisation of society, and anxieties pertaining to the end of the war. The resulting comic bias suggests, in agreement with near-contemporary theorists of humour, that laughter played an important role in releasing threatening anxieties, cementing communal values, and supporting home-front morale. A characteristically middlebrow response, this comic turn represents a primarily non-adversarial

response to the conflict that stands in striking contrast to some of the more xenophobic propaganda also printed in the magazine's pages.

Middlebrow Home-Front Patriotisms

Often seen as a Victorian institution, the *Strand* survived the First World War and maintained its circulation of 500,000, demand outstripping supply.⁸¹ This suggests that the magazine's recognisable brand and its "strong and coherent set of cultural values" were resilient enough to support readers through total war.⁸² Cranfield argues that during the war the *Strand* "effected a difficult balancing act by preserving old certainties while appropriately representing the conflict and its upheavals."⁸³ The magazine adjusted its generic contents to wartime realities, provided illustrations that supported Britain's war aims without unduly unsettling readers, made limited adjustments in tone to encourage female backing for the war effort, and supported the creation and maintenance of home-front communities by identifying and humorously depicting shared experiences of hardship.

My analysis suggests that the wartime *Strand* was a multi-vocal text, the success of which relied on its ability to articulate a wide range of home-front sub-patriotisms. Marsh's "Sam Briggs" series, for example, promoted a sense of citizenship duty amongst men by extolling British values and by depicting German brutality, Charles Pears's illustrations effectively reinforcing readers' sense of adversarial cultural conflict. However, by providing the English Sam with a Flemish female co-fighter, the series also depicted Britain as the saviour of small, victimised nations, identified shared European values that crossed national boundaries, allowed women a meaningful role in the war effort, and warned against the threat of a German

invasion of the British Isles. By involving Sam in dangerous frontline ventures, the series articulated the need for individual sacrifices, but by allowing him to survive and prosper, it reassured home-front readers and depicted war as an aspirational pursuit. Not all war-themed features articulated such a range of sub-patriotisms, of course: shorter and generically less diverse items typically offered less scope for expansive patriotic messages than a year-long serial. Nonetheless, each wartime issue of the *Strand* allowed a number of different patriotic voices to emerge, seeking to involve the multiple reading communities who consumed the magazine.

As a middlebrow publication, the *Strand* was not invested in the irony of Sassoon and Owen or the feminist pacifism of Vera Brittain, but neither was it jingoistic. It supported the war effort without fanaticism, “mediat[ing] between conflicts and extremes” and seeking to provide a balanced platform for “all tastes and cultures.”⁸⁴ Thus, the *Strand* allowed readers to follow Sam Briggs’s incredible journey to a Victoria Cross and to visualise the conflict through innovative layout, to cheer on Mrs Egerton and to feel compassion for Netta, to ponder over the potential insanity of the Kaiser and to chuckle knowingly at home-front deprivations: its responses to the conflict vary from the stereotypically xenophobic to the progressive, from the fanciful to the grimly realistic. While this multi-vocal stance is often read as a sign of equivocation, it is precisely such tolerance of multiple, not always complementary viewpoints that makes middlebrow journalism a valuable historical resource.

City, University of London

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¹ "Tommy's Taste," 481.

² "Tommy's Taste," 481.

³ "Tommy's Taste," 481.

⁴ "Reminder!," 800.

⁵ "Old Friend," 729. The design for the cover was suggested by one of the prisoners, Ernest W. Boot, whose father W. H. J. Boot had been the *Strand's* art editor until 1910 and whose brother J. Sydney Boot was the wartime art editor.

⁶ Sanders and Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 31, 39; Cranfield, *Twentieth-Century Victorian*, 143.

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- ⁷ Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda*, 86.
- ⁸ Cranfield, *Twentieth-Century Victorian*, 2, 105.
- ⁹ Einhaus, *Short Story*, 3, 2.
- ¹⁰ Korte, "Introduction," ix; Tate, "First World War," 162; Bingham, "Ignoring the First Draft."
- ¹¹ Pound, *Strand Magazine*, 9; Jackson, *George Newnes*, 117; Bingham, "Ignoring the First Draft," 311, 313.
- ¹² Friederichs, *Life*, 116–17.
- ¹³ Pound, *Strand Magazine*, 127.
- ¹⁴ Cranfield, *Twentieth-Century Victorian*, 5.
- ¹⁵ Einhaus, *Short Story*, 48–49.
- ¹⁶ Einhaus, *Short Story*, 47.
- ¹⁷ Pound, *Strand Magazine*, 122.
- ¹⁸ "Important," 417. August and December issues tended to be heftier.
- ¹⁹ Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda*, 1, 21–22, 26.
- ²⁰ Small, "Economies," 14. Original emphasis.
- ²¹ Cranfield, *Twentieth-Century Victorian*, 137.
- ²² Bulfin, *Gothic Invasions*, 211.
- ²³ Dudeney, "Perplexities," 589.
- ²⁴ Dudeney, "Perplexities," 538.
- ²⁵ "'Strand' War Game," 15; Watts, "Chess-Board," 119.
- ²⁶ Singh, "Our Friends," 620.
- ²⁷ "Hindenburg," 49; "The Great Victor," 24.

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- ²⁸ Cranfield, *Twentieth-Century Victorian*, 148. On the ineffability of war, see McLaughlin, “War and Words.”
- ²⁹ Cranfield, *Twentieth-Century Victorian*, 142; Hitchner, “Edwardian Spy Literature,” 413.
- ³⁰ Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda*, 140.
- ³¹ Roberts, “Spink and the Submarine,” 489.
- ³² Doyle, “His Last Bow,” 230, 227.
- ³³ Doyle, “His Last Bow,” 229.
- ³⁴ Doyle, “His Last Bow,” 229.
- ³⁵ Doyle, “His Last Bow,” 236.
- ³⁶ Einhaus, *Short Story*, 49.
- ³⁷ Seed, “Spy Fiction,” 115.
- ³⁸ Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda*, 86.
- ³⁹ Tally, *Spatiality*, 56, 55.
- ⁴⁰ Martin, *Images at War*, 43.
- ⁴¹ McLoughlin, “War in Print Journalism,” 48. Original emphasis.
- ⁴² Pittard, ““Cheap, healthful literature,”” 10, 6.
- ⁴³ Pittard, ““Cheap, healthful literature,”” 12.
- ⁴⁴ Mussell, “Science and the Timeliness,” 205.
- ⁴⁵ Marsh, “On the Way Home,” 582.
- ⁴⁶ Marsh, “On the Way Home,” 582.
- ⁴⁷ Bartlett, ““The crowd would have it,”” 119.
- ⁴⁸ Doyle, “British Campaign,” 340.
- ⁴⁹ “Important Notice,” 13.

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- ⁵⁰ Pound, *Strand Magazine*, 126.
- ⁵¹ Caption, Doyle, “British Campaign,” 466–67. Original emphasis.
- ⁵² Lankester, “Culture and German Culture,” 34; Doyle, “Outing,” 374.
- ⁵³ On women’s war-weariness, see Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda*, 43.
- ⁵⁴ Marsh, “Sanctuary,” 219.
- ⁵⁵ Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda*, 116.
- ⁵⁶ Marsh, “Sanctuary,” 219.
- ⁵⁷ Marsh, “Sanctuary,” 219; “In their Own Gas,” 260.
- ⁵⁸ Marsh, “Sanctuary,” 221.
- ⁵⁹ Marsh, “In their Own Gas,” 258.
- ⁶⁰ Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda*, 115.
- ⁶¹ Bell, “For Belgium,” 162.
- ⁶² Marsh, “In their Own Gas,” 258.
- ⁶³ Steevens, “Schmitt’s Pigeons,” 310.
- ⁶⁴ Steevens, “Schmitt’s Pigeons,” 313–14.
- ⁶⁵ Doyle, “Prisoner’s Defence,” 117.
- ⁶⁶ Doyle, “Prisoner’s Defence,” 117–18.
- ⁶⁷ Powell, “Girls,” 400.
- ⁶⁸ “Great Humorist,” 317.
- ⁶⁹ “Lighter Side of War,” 345; “As Funny as They Can,” 794.
- ⁷⁰ Einhaus, *Short Story*, 48.
- ⁷¹ “Artist with the Funny Ideas,” 98.
- ⁷² Sully, *Essay*, 271.

⁷³ “Great Humorist,” 317.

⁷⁴ “Great Humorist,” 318.

⁷⁵ “Great Humorist,” 318.

⁷⁶ Martindale, “Sketch-Book,” 222.

⁷⁷ Freud, *Joke*, 226.

⁷⁸ “As Funny as They Can,” 347.

⁷⁹ Bergson, *Essay*, 6; Sully, *Essay*, 255.

⁸⁰ Freud, *Joke*, 228, 225.

⁸¹ Pound, *Strand Magazine*, 127.

⁸² Cranfield, *Twentieth-Century Victorian*, 11.

⁸³ Cranfield, *Twentieth-Century Victorian*, 147.

⁸⁴ Bracco, *Merchants*, 12; MacDonald and Singer, “Introduction,” 4.