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Humours¹ of the Great Strike



In reality the spirit in which the strike was faced was amazing. There was a sort of picnic feeling in the air. No one minded inconveniences ... all were taken as 'jolly good fun.' Perhaps this was partly because everyone was sure that the stoppage would not be of long duration ... there was certainly no doubt as to the sporting spirit in which every discomfort and difficulty was met and conquered ... Young men ... became ticket collectors or porters and filled the bill as to the manner born. ('The Humours of the Great Strike', 1926: 10)

I am frequently hearing from friends of witty things scrawled in chalk on buses and tubes during the strike. Here are some new ones:

'To stop bus, wring conductor's neck – once only' ...

'None but the brave deserve the three penny fare.'

On Friday: 'Positively our last appearance.'

'Gentlemen are requested to throw their matches on the lines, as I have been detailed to sweep the platform each night.'

('Humours of the Volunteers', 1926: 5, *Star*)

The defining features of the General Strike were its good humour and the ways in which all involved used a variety of comic forms of speech and behaviour to frame the event and express particular visions of the national community.² Contemporary accounts of activities during the General Strike very clearly delineate Britishness for different status groups, institutions, and individuals. Reference to generic stereotypes – frivolous, sometimes reckless, but sincere Varsity men and society women, misguided yet well-behaved strikers, and brave and loyal average citizens who simply carried on – appeared in headlines, quips, slogans, conversation, poems, photos, cartoons, published 'true tales', and parodies.

The latter two genres, true tales and parodies, provided more elaborated descriptions of undergraduates who drove trains and served as bus conductors, ladies who served tea in Hyde Park, middle-class men and women who gave rides to office girls and clerks, strikers who played football with village constables or volunteers. The shorter speech forms, quips and slogans, function as what I call 'collapsed narratives', a form of speech totally

dependent upon understanding the contemporary context and significance of the reference – as well as the point if not the details of the longer stories (Kalčík, 1975; Bauman, 1986: 76). These collapsed narratives refer to two types of tales: 1) the fully elaborated and detailed personal experience story and, 2) the less detailed but far more widespread urban legends of the day (i.e. those topics that retained a common theme and thread but got attached to a variety of actors and places) (Brunvand, 1981).

These verbal art forms particularly relied on the transparent ambiguity of puns (Green and Pepicello, 1984 and 2000) to indicate who was not a part of the polity of good Englishmen. The media were particularly partial to bus slogans. Though volunteer drivers were no doubt responsible for most of these one-liners, the slogans' appearance in newspaper columns and their word-of-mouth repetition increased their spread and popularity. Those I interviewed presented these joking comments, quite similar to one-liners that also appeared in university and society publications, as examples of typical English humour in the face of adversity (Nicolson, 1946; Freedman, 1999). Bus slogans used humour to point explicitly to class and political differences, and the triumph of one political system over another.

In particular, the national media gave attention to slogans that focused on how upper-class volunteers claimed the mantle of Englishness and transformed a Labour-controlled transportation system into a Tory stronghold, for example, 'The Red Bus with the Blue Blood' ('Strike Diary', 1926: 3). A *London Opinion* reporter noted, 'a volunteer bus conductor claims that at Highgate, Hendon, Holborn, Hampstead, Hackney and Haringay he dropped passengers but not aspirates' ('Whipped Topics', 1926: 259). A *Daily Chronicle* reporter further commented on those volunteers, who were

quite likely up at Oxford in the same destination and year as the conductor who demands my fare in the accents of the university and wears plus fours and a pull over. They are both humorists of a sardonic vintage. They have 'christened' the vehicle 'Soviet Sue' and chalked up on the other flank is the announcement 'By permission of nobody' ...

Wonderful this English humour that is exclusively English ... There is proof of this quality writ large on bus after bus. ('London's Day of Disillusion', 1926: 2)

The *Children's Newspaper* interpreted the slogans in a similar vein, though it raised the stakes by referring to the buses as 'a brave little army, each with some kind of peculiar badge'. Bus slogans thus became military insignia and invoked other battles. 'One ... which had been in the wars and lost its glass, had a card fixed where the window should have been, and on it was written: *I have no pane, dear mother, now*' ('The Good Side of it All', 1926: 2), an unintentionally ironic quotation from Edward Farmer's 'The Collier's Dying Child', a much parodied story (Roud, Letter, 1987), and a not-so-subtle

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reference that framed the volunteers' behaviour as a selfless (Christian) sacrifice. But it also was a very conscious parody of that characterisation, as evidenced by the reaction of the 'thousands of people [who] saw that card and went on their way laughing'. The Duke of Richmond reported, although 'it got very ugly at times especially with the bus-driver volunteers ... [that chalked comment] shows the type of wit this extraordinary country of ours can produce when things are in crisis!' (Richmond, Letter, 1986a).

Newspapers also noted the ability of sloganeers to turn injuries into joking puns. The *Children's Newspaper* reported that those people who had had a laugh at the one bus, 'presently ... had another laugh. A bus which had also been in the wars drew up to the kerb, and over a hole was written, *All stones this way*' ('The Good Side ...', 1926: 2). And the *Daily News* noted, 'A rolling 'bus gathers no stones' and 'A board put across the vacant space left by a shattered window bore the words: "Emergency Exit"'. The columnist commented: 'Fortunately, we have not lost our national gift of turning our discomforts into jokes' (London Calling!, 1926a: 2). Two days later, the same column explained that such bus slogans have 'the characteristic English quality of giving a comic twist to an incident which in other countries would lead to torrents of solemn rhetoric, or even to a riot' (London Calling!, 1926b: 2).

Yet these comments were not only the response of those able to turn injury to sarcastic insult; they also displayed a black humour that more than hinted at the threat some felt the strike posed. In both the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* the following story appeared:

A privately owned omnibus, which was plying between Liverpool-street and Victoria yesterday, was 'protected' with wire and boarding. The driver was encased in wire netting of fine mesh, which extended over the engine-bonnet, while the windows on each side of the vehicle were strongly covered with long thick boards. The driver, who was humorously hailed in the Strand as the 'Surrey Fowl,' declared that he was 'taking no chances'. ('The "Surrey Fowl"', 1926: 4; "'Surrey Fowl" Bus Driver', 1926: 1)

Although the *Daily Mail* printed no other examples of such humour, the *Daily Telegraph* was so taken with this image that it printed another story on the subject in which 'the London humorist rose to the occasion and promptly chalked "The Hen-Coop" on the sides of these particular vehicles' ('London in Strike Time', 1926: 2).

But such interpretations focused on the dangerous nature of the volunteers' job and missed the point. Both creators and consumers of those puns used them to collapse oppositions by remarking on the strike and the volunteers' performance, their social status as opposed to that of the usual workers (and their knowledge of sayings that could easily be parodied), practical matters

and the placards that directed everyday life, and the relationship between playful anarchy and Armageddon. See, for example, those quips at the beginning of this chapter ('Humours of the Volunteers', 1926: 5).

Of course not all publications printed all comments. University magazines noted sarcastic quips about the volunteers (most often made by Varsity men themselves). Women's magazines, more expensive journals, and national newspapers cited this genre to comment on the problems caused by the strike itself, the politicians in charge, the strike leaders, and the strikers or regular workers. A number of these weak puns, perhaps not accidentally, indexed a sick society; the *Sunday Pictorial* noted 'A Strike Time Epidemic. Rumour-tism'.

Even leftist papers such as the *British Worker*, *Daily Herald*, and *Scottish Worker* joined in the joke-making, though theirs more explicitly disparaged volunteer efforts. Some of the nicknames given to the OMS were the 'Order of Mugs and Saps', the 'Order of Mugs and Scabs', and the 'O'Messers' (Everard, 1926a: 4 and 1926b: 4; Gadfly, 1926: 5). More common than those sobriquets were short, biting quips. One, entitled 'Cannibalism?' observed, 'One of the sights of London yesterday [11 May] was an exquisite limousine labelled "For food", and bearing a cargo of substantial men and women' (1926: 4). A similar cartoon in the *Bystander* pictured a lorry containing only women and labelled 'for food only' (Cottrell, 1926: 421). The *British Worker* and other Labour papers used this image to aim its venomous humour at well-to-do blacklegs, presumably from the upper classes, whereas papers that catered to a middle-class or higher status group used it to denigrate women. In fact, there was a great deal of hostility against working women's usurping the places traditionally reserved for men; numerous anecdotes and quips complained about women in silk stockings getting all the rides and women workers' trapping unwitting and generous car drivers as husbands (e.g. Tristram, 1926b: 327). Unsaid yet implied, however, was the point that while certain types of people used the strike as an excuse for missing work, meals, and so on, those unaccustomed to responsibilities were volunteering for them – the back-story behind those collapsed narratives.

Other topics of humour included class and political differences as well as contemporary political and economic issues. The mainstream press ridiculed both strikers' slogans and upper-class status customs (e.g., the *Sunday Pictorial* noted 'Our Milk Headquarters [was] Cow-Hyde Park' and 'Road Traffic: The Common Wheel'). Mr Mayfair reported, 'Pour Encourager Les Autres. An official says that the names of all who have created disturbances should be displayed publicly. A sort of 'Who's Hooligan,' in fact' (Mayfair, 1926b: 5). Churchill's militant empire building attempts were a particular topic of jibes, e.g. 'In Peking [*sic*] Dr. Yen has formed a Cabinet of one. How Winston must envy him this accomplishment of his ideal' ('Asterisks', 1926: 8; cf. Tristram, 1926: 327). Government workers also came in for some attacks,

for example, ‘during the strike many public officials slept at their offices. “Business as Usual”’ (‘Asterisks’, 1926: 8).

Besides those pointed comments, others simply picked up on the more obvious and easy puns that the strike situation made available. Mr Mayfair of the *Sunday Pictorial* seemed especially fond of this genre, typical British humour of the period, hence his reports of the ‘Hopeful Walkers’ song: “Any Lorry”, and ‘The Times we Live in: Sole Stirring’ (Mayfair, 1926a: 3).

Stories and jokes about the volunteers also proliferated among individuals and in the media, which not only recirculated anecdotes that might otherwise have been lost but also offered a prize for the best strike story (‘Strike Diary’, 1926: 3). In fact, so many stories about the undergraduates’ role were circulating during and just after the strike, that editors of university magazines such as the *Cherwell* felt compelled to state, ‘We feel that care should be taken not to overstress reminiscences of the strike, as these are bound to pall in time ... Let us begin to talk about something else and pick up again the threads of our life here’ (‘Strike Reminiscences’, 1926: 122).

Near and actual accidents with trains and buses were a common topic among former volunteers and their contemporaries, though the frequency of accidents was far less than the number of such tales would indicate. Percival Mannassi told of a real life version from his days as a University of Liverpool engineering student. Mannassi wrote that he himself impersonated his tutor on the telephone in order to volunteer at the Liverpool Central power station. Mr Pryce-Jones, another student, ‘was allowed to take a train from Liverpool Central to Warrington (The C.L.C. Railway) but as the signalling was not too safe they only allowed the one train to run. On reaching Warrington, it was reversed and he drove it back to Liverpool.’ The rest of the students played a joke on Pryce-Jones and put a notice in the entrance hall of the engineering building, which stated, “We the undersigned do not want to hear how you saved the C.L.C. Railway.” It had about fifty signatures on it. He was annoyed but as the case was locked he could not get at it to take it down’ (Mannassi, Letter, 1987).

The general media, if not always the university and society journals, focused on the glamour jobs and the glamorous or well-known participants, emphasizing exciting episodes and parodying mundane ones. Possibly because detailed and humdrum accounts would have bored those accustomed to reading society magazines, such narratives did not appear in more expensive journals, which tended instead to publish accounts regarding certain aspects of the strike or lighter, more humorous stories and parodies of strike doings, especially ones emphasizing the volunteers’ upper-class identity.

Here are two perfectly true stories about volunteer workers:

An omnibus stopped outside the Constitutional Club. The conductor, who had been scrupulously professional in his ‘Yes, Madam,’ . . . vaulted lightly off, hurried in to the club and came out reading a telegram that had been awaiting him. The omnibus then continued.

Passengers in another ’bus were amazed to find themselves being diverted from Park-lane down Mount-street, where the driver got out and rang a front door bell and swiftly drank a cup of tea handed to him with much ceremony by his butler. (London, Mr. 1926b: 2)

Even the dailies, which reached a much broader cross-section of society, published only a few first-hand narratives, surprisingly, given the number of journals and extended letters home that I came across (e.g. those of Edward Benn, Robert J. Cogswell, C. H. Drage, Lady Phyllis MacRae, and Jack Verdin).

Although similar in form to the personal narratives people wrote or told to me, published versions tended more frequently to adhere to a certain tale type: they emphasized the successful completion of a difficult task, usually associated with a near accident – as if a rag or prank had been pulled off successfully. In one typical article, ‘a volunteer docker’ told his tale about ‘Raising the Dock Siege’ in the *Daily Mail*:

It was just getting dusk when our convoy of twelve lorries and two armoured cars, each filled with volunteers, swung smartly out of Hyde Park gates on their way to ‘Somewhere in Dockland.’ . . .

Inside the scene was reminiscent of 1914. Hundreds of men crowding together, each eager to know what they were going to do; the sharp command ‘form fours!’ then the numbering off and the roll call, a hot supper, and so to bed.

We sat down to a substantial breakfast at seven o’clock, and marched to one of the great dock sheds, alongside which lay the S. S. ‘Starling’ and ‘Rock’ – both laden with food.

In a few minutes we were at work. An Oxford undergraduate at the ship’s steam crane. Oxford and Cambridge men jostled shoulder to shoulder with porters and clerks, every man doing his utmost to expedite the unloading and to excel at his new job.

First came the unloading of the cargo of freshly killed meat, . . . while . . . hundreds of kegs of butter and boxes of cheese were being unloaded with equal rapidity . . .

All this time patrols of the Guards were constantly moving about, and the proceedings were watched by a huge crowd of strikers and women from the connecting bridges and other vantage points.

* * *

. . . The vim and zest displayed by the volunteers were marvellous; hands unaccustomed to toil were torn and bleeding; clothes were dirty and stained; backs were strained; but not one man so much as thought of deserting his post. (‘Raising the Dock Siege’, 1926: 2)

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Such detailed and lengthy accounts were rare, however, and most media reports focused on the anecdotal, contrasting tedious with amusing and holiday-like aspects of volunteer life. As the *Morning Post* explained:

Strike duty is monotonous work, but ... systematic efforts, on the old-time lines, were made to keep them amused ... With characteristic generosity the members of the theatrical profession threw themselves into the work of providing programmes and excellent concerts have been given at all the barracks, at Deptford, at Victoria Park and even at the docks ... The military authorities are full of gratitude to these volunteers; and as for the troops themselves, the uproarious welcome given to each performer has been sufficient proof of their appreciation. Cinema shows have been given at many stations. ('How London was Made Safe', 1926: 4)

Full-blown strike narratives, whether published or privately related, usually began with an account of where the speaker or writer was when he or she first heard of the strike and his or her motives for volunteering; the latter vary somewhat. Next was the protagonist's removal to the strike's temporary and potentially chaotic world, which generally involved the exchange of usual occupation and clothing for a strike-time job and work or leisure apparel. Once the narrator joined a volunteer corps at the local Guild Hall, police station, or whatever, he was sworn in, given an assignment, and, in some cases, special markers of his new status, such as overalls, tin hat, armband, truncheon or even a chair leg when the batons ran out, depending upon the task to follow. As political journalist David Walter put it, 'final examinations were postponed as mortar boards were exchanged for peaked caps' (Walter, 1984: 60–1).

In contrast to what the mainstream print media conveyed, many of my correspondents and interviewees related that the next step was waiting and more waiting. It was often necessary to travel several miles to port towns or to London, where officials provided minimal instructions at the docks, in barracks, or in underground railway stations, bus and tram depots, and in railway sidings, print works, offices, and electrical plants. But in spite, or because, of their amateurish confidence, the volunteers plunged in and did the jobs, though not necessarily as the regular workers would have. Photographs and captions in the *Illustrated London News* explained, emphasizing the playful aspect of the strike, especially for the volunteers. 'However inconvenient and menacing the General Strike may have been, it certainly varied the monotony of life and led to many unwonted scenes ... Not least remarkable ... was the way in which the love of our national game showed itself among the volunteer workers in Hyde Park, where an improvised game of cricket took place in Rotten Row, with boxes for wickets and sticks as bats' ('Curious Effects ...', 1926: 866; see figure 2.1(c)).

Like the bus slogans, most of the shorter, published anecdotes were meant

to be funny and focused on just a few topics – the social class of the volunteers, the ability of the undergraduates to beat the strikers at their own ‘game’ (albeit in a rather eccentric fashion), the failure of the strike to turn into a revolution, and scepticism regarding the value of what the volunteers had actually accomplished. Women volunteers were most frequently the focus of the last subject.

Humorous anecdotes about social class centred on absurdities that resulted when the leisure class took on workers’ jobs (but also implied the latter’s superiority) or emphasized the social status gained by doing jobs as ‘lowly’ as possible, for example, ‘The Editor of *The Isis* wishes to contradict the rumour that he was driving a lorry of vegetables. Nothing so bourgeois! Milk, yes; and newspapers. Vegetables, No! ... The Sub-Editor, on the other hand, has sunk so low as to be a mere dockyard labourer ... Mr. Barnes has not been heard of, but it is rumoured that he has joined the looters ...’ (‘Our Staff’, 1926: 4). The *Cambridge Gownsmen and Undergraduate* commented in a section on ‘strike reflections ad nauseam’ that ‘we went to the slums to discover the University’ – again, that emphasis on a reversible world, at least for the elite. ‘Nearly everyone one meets starts talking about his strike experiences, and all are unanimous in their opinion that they were with the scum of the University. Men grow heated, arguing as to whether the beer-swilling set he was with were worse than the ardently religious set someone else was with’ (‘Flotsam and Jetsam’, 1926: 2).

Individuals’ tales of this type tend to demonstrate how undergraduates shocked locals with their habits (see also Mitford, 1960: 14–15). Girton alumna Lady Smith, a retired physician, told me, ‘My future husband drove his 2-decker bus very fast and dangerously and didn’t know exactly where he was supposed to be going. He had to keep on stopping to ask his passengers which turn to take. After a bit they all asked him to stop and let them out as they were too alarmed by his driving to trust themselves with him any longer’ (Smith, Letter, 1986). Another Girton alumna, expanded on this tale type: ‘There were many jokes going round Cambridge, e.g. ... the tales of rival Oxford and Cambridge men driving the trains of the London Underground Circle [line] having races ...’ (Atwood, Letter, 1987a). ‘Cambridge drove the trains one way round and Oxford the other (clock and anti-clock wise), racing each to be the quicker; consequently on the one way (we of course said the Oxford way!) a driver raced his train through a station packed with people, leaving them stranded for hours’ (Atwood, Letter, 1987b).

There was also a more elaborated version of a similar story about the trains that ran between cities. Brenda S—, who grew up in Rugby, told me ‘a delightful story ... very much appreciated at the time’ (S—, Letter, 1986a), in which student volunteer drivers ‘arrived at Euston Station in record time – indeed 3 hours faster than the usual crack drivers – amazed, the station master

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asked the two students how they did it – to receive the answer that they had not known how to stop it until a few miles from its destination' (S—, Letter, 1986b; see S—, Interview, 1987). Joan Bedale, a Girtonian living in Paris during the strike, reported a variant (presumably told by one of her brothers, who was in the Royal Navy and Stationmaster at Glasgow Central):

The story goes (I cannot swear that it is true) that a young volunteer was allowed to drive an express train from Glasgow to Euston Station London. He arrived, very pleased with himself, five minutes ahead of schedule. The temporary Stationmaster at Euston, no doubt my brother John's superior officer, congratulated him on his achievement. 'But there is one thing that was wrong,' he said, 'You should have made a stop at Rugby Junction on the way.'

'I know Sir,' said the young man. 'I know I should have stopped at Rugby, but it was not until I reached Watford (a London suburb) that I found out how to stop the damned thing.' (Bedale, Letter, 1987)

These accounts took on the features of those specific dramatic forms characteristic of upper-class leisure activities detailed in Chapter 3, that is, rags, larks, jokes, and treasure hunts, which were elaborate, pre-scripted activities often planned for some social purpose; in effect, they filled in the stories encoded by 'collapsed' slogans and quips. Such stories are essentially 'trickster' tales³ in which a fool (the trickster) triumphs over his or her seemingly bigger, cleverer, or more powerful opponent (e.g. 'Jack the Giant-Killer'; Paredes, 1966). Alternatively, the trickster can outsmart himself and end up victim to his own pranks. Lady Lindsay (Interview, 1985) and the Reverend Adeney (Letter, 1986) related variants of the train driving undergraduate story in which someone chastised the young man involved for having almost caused an accident, instead of praising him for having managed to arrive earlier than usual. The indirect criticism contained in such accounts points to an undercurrent beneath the rag-like atmosphere that, according to the standard interpretation, prevailed among undergraduates.

In those sorts of narratives, focus is on the amusing aspects of narrow escapes (Freud, 1960; Brunvand, 1981), which tend to cluster around a few iconic experiences, such as nearly crashing a train or bus or just missing injury at the docks, and turning such an experience into a joke. The Hon. John Jones, who volunteered as a London bus driver, related,

There was one most amusing chap there, whom I knew because I'd been quite keen on racing at Brooklands in these days ... Perry Thomas ... was an absolute mad man, wild devil ... He had a jolly good drink before he started and he came along, ...

'I want to drive a bus! I want to drive a bus!'

Everyone else took his turn and the inspectors there who were looking after selecting the people to do it ... didn't know who he was. I kept quiet – I knew Perry. Anyhow, when his turn came, he was so drunk he could hardly stand, but

they hoisted him up into the cab of the bus . . . You had just a seat in front and a windscreen. They had nothing at each side at all . . . And he got hold of this bus – they were in those days pretty ramshackle things, the buses . . . And he started off with this and he drove this bus without any trouble at all, . . . got right round the skid track without hitting anything! It was amazing! Everyone else had knocked down two or three of them. Anyhow, he finished it off there. So then he wasn't satisfied with that. He went and reversed the thing and he did it! (Jones, Interview, 1987)

That structure – detailing the daring deed and then making light of it – was typical of volunteer accounts, of the British gentleman amateur in a crisis. In another instance, Clare alumnus G. Murray Burton, who volunteered to unload vessels at Hull, explained how undergraduate ingenuity generally applied to pranks was transformed into a (somewhat) more pragmatic use: 'The food was so bad we brought our own food as far as possible and made good use of broken crates of oranges. If a crate of butter was broken on one occasion we would grease the planks (on which the crates were slid down) to increase the speed of movement (more broken crates I expect)!' (Burton, Letter, 1986).

Shortened versions of the trickster type were also popular, and those I interviewed reported the excitement that came from small outbreaks of violence, evening drinking and games sessions, and occasional accidents caused by volunteer pranks or their ignorance of machinery. Many tended to recall the non-traditional work habits of the volunteers, particularly their incompetence. According to Lady (Enid) Oatley, a Girtonian, 'An undergraduate acting as a conductor . . . when asked the way to a certain destination of which he hadn't the answer, would reply firmly "change at Charing Cross! Change at Charing Cross!"' (Oatley, Letter, 1987). Sylvia Baron, another Girtonian, reported that undergraduates she knew 'come back with stories of how, not being familiar with the route, they had gone the wrong way, or obliged a pretty girl-passenger by taking her to her house which was off the route, or calling on a girl friend and leaving the bus outside her door during his call. Not one of them had any political convictions and volunteered solely as a lark and a nice change from academic life' (Baron, Letter, 1986). G. Murray Burton also reported hearing that 'I don't think buses' scheduled routes were adhered to. If someone of the Female sex asked nicely I rather think they would be driven to a particular destination' (Burton, Letter, 1986).

A related type of story depicted a more rag-like scenario, in which student volunteers were assumed to be real workers. Joan Bedale related one incident in which an elderly servant behaved charitably and a volunteer student porter acted the cad.

My mother was staying in London when the Strike began. But she had to try to get home to Coventry. So she went out with her case and stood in the empty

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street (Belgrave Road) hoping that she might be given a lift. Soon a car drew up beside her and an old chauffeur got out of a magnificent Rolls and asked if he could help. She told me, but I am very old and my memory fails, that he was Lord Robert's chauffeur ... He took her to Euston Station where a young student looked after her and put her in a train which he said would go to Coventry when they found a volunteer to drive it ... She offered the young man a large tip by the way, which he accepted with a broad grin and slapped in his pocket. I expect he was much richer than she was! (Bedale, Letter, 1987)

The *Isis* also printed joking anecdotes about Oxford undergraduates that emphasized the more rewarding aspects of social role-switching. 'Those who went off on Tuesday filled with a burning desire to do their bit for their country and join the Territorial Reserve Force appear to have spent a quiet two weeks in barracks, and have returned in good order, with £2 5s. in their pockets' ('Our Staff', 1926: 4).

The *British Worker*, which published longer and more anecdotal commentary about stereotypical volunteers (Everard, 1926c: 8) than did the papers and magazines aimed at the middle and upper classes, was particularly fond of alternative trickster tales, which proved just how incompetent the volunteers were. One story focused particularly on their foolishness. A group of strikers was caught in the rain on their return to London from South Wales. They stopped for shelter in an inn and met up with 'an elderly lady of severe and haughty aspect. With her was a young man, evidently her son ... [He] wore a pair of the plusiest plus fours I have ever seen.' After several minutes of listening to the woman's lamenting the strike and trying to figure out what her son could do, one of the strikers asked Lady Camelia Fotheringham, 'a Primrose dame, a member of the Women's Imperial anti-Socialist Club, and the vice chair-woman of the Anti-Vegetarian League', if she could help with 'a matter of high political importance'. She agreed, and he asked her to deliver some important papers

to Jones of High Pringleby ... 'The utmost secrecy is needed. It is for the cause of England', I added in thrilling tones. 'After explanations – somewhat prolonged, owing to [her son's] rather attenuated [*sic*] power of understanding, a bulky package ... was transferred ... to the care of Lady Fotheringham ... They set forth ... on one of the worst roads in England. There was a look of patriotic consecration on Lady Fotheringham's face. And that's how we got our stock of revolutionary pamphlets to Comrade Jones' ('England Expects—', 1926: 4).

Individuals also reported such instances, though theirs were far less elaborated than the media versions. For instance, Jim Newmark's account had the working-class protagonist (himself) effectively 'tricking' a volunteer. Newmark, who volunteered at TUC headquarters 'tying up and parcelling stacks of newspapers and leaflets to be distributed by motor cycle dispatch

riders to various centres,' recalled 'one memorable day at the centre of the movement' when he 'actively took part in the stirring events of those days'.

I set out from North London to walk the six miles or so [to Eccleston Square] as all public transport was at a standstill. Fortunately, I was able to get a lift in a car driving by a Conservative MP, Derwent Hall Caine,⁴ son of the famed author [Hall Caine]. I did not mention my destination to him, but on reaching the vicinity I thanked him for his help in getting me to the strikers' Headquarters. He must have felt very uncomfortable in giving unwitting support to one of the 'other side' and his face certainly showed it. (Newmark, Letter, 1985)

Parody was the real forte of both workers' and university publications. As the Cambridge *Gownsmen and Undergraduate* noted,

There were many disquieting and conflicting rumours during the recent unpleasantness, and not the least distressing of these concerned the movements of the Oxford and Cambridge lacrosse team. Jim had been seen by William driving a tram in the great Metropolis. James had seen Bill inciting the workers of North Battersea to rise. Others maintained that the whole team had formed itself into a band of rougns and was supporting whichever faction seemed in the majority at the moment of action. ('Our Staff', 1926: 4)

For many volunteers, the strike turned out not to be at all what they expected, yet there was more to it than just a feeling of discomfiture. University reports display an overt recognition too broad to miss that the country was in the midst of one of those dramatic Great Moments of British History. One article in the *Cherwell* even complained about

the peaceful and orderly conclusion of the strike ... Something a little more showy should have been 'staged' for the benefit of the many 'Sons of Liberty' whose dry throats were ready to shout applause on witnessing a thrilling drama enacted within the bounds of our shores – something coloured with the glory of British pageantry, and showing the 'boys of the Bull Dog Breed' with their 'backs to the wall' ... But what did they find? Not a shot fired – and strikers playing with policemen at football! ('Wanted: Flamboyance', 1926: 122)

To compensate for such disappointment, university magazines and Society journals indulged in playful satires of strike experiences. They amused their readership with rhetorical flights of fancy, which had little actual content, and spoofs of their usual gossip columns or diaries, letters to the editor, poems, and plays. While such efforts were not examples of upper-class folklore in the same ways that larks, rags, fancy dress balls, and so on are, they similarly co-opted popular imagery and traditional symbols for their social critiques. And of course they were derivative of the masquerades, charades, and ragging pranks that occurred more spontaneously during university life and country house weekends.

Punch and most of the undergraduate publications that featured these

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parodies were well known for this particular genre. The most popular forms for the university magazines were play scripts and poems with the plays unfolding like ‘shaggy dog’ stories – a lot of build-up for a groaner of a pun, or an obvious joke. An *Isis* sketch, entitled *The Strike-Breakers: A Drama in Three Driblets*, detailed the foul language, hard work, and dangerous mission of two undergraduate volunteer dockers. Mourning the ruin of their Oxford bags and tiring after just a few hours of work, they went off to the canteen. In the last ‘driblet’ the first two undergraduates contemplated passing through some dock pickets. This was particularly dangerous because they were dressed in plus fours and look nothing like strikers. Giving a fine example of how rumours and urban legends grow beyond themselves, the first declared,

Don’t you realise we’re going into the hottest district in East London? I hear a volunteer docker was lynched outside these very gates last Wednesday.

2nd U.V. I never heard that. You know two Specials were stabbed on Friday?

1st U.V. Two! Six you mean. They don’t patrol this street now. It’s too costly. (“The Strike-Breakers”, 1926: 10)

Having found an explanation for the absent patrols, the undergraduates decided they must still serve their country. But the second UV thought they should go back. The first declared, ‘Never! Think what headlines it will make – “Undergraduates Heroic End”. “Torn in Pieces by Infuriated Mob”. “Not Wearing Oxford Trousers”’. And going to the heart of the matter: ‘We can’t disappoint the Press’. So the two lads proceeded and met up with a fearsome picket, who politely asked them “‘Well, young ’uns, ’ow d’yer like shiftn’ butter?” Before the curtain fell, they replied in unison, “‘Not bad, old son”’ (“The Strike-Breakers”, 1926: 10).

University magazines aimed their jibes at the hypocrisy inherent in the Englishness promoted by the government, the press, and those undergraduates who took themselves too seriously. Society journals tended to parody letters and diaries that detailed social events. Like undergraduate texts, they caricatured volunteer patriotism as well as the media’s attempts to turn mundane, if unusual, efforts into heroic battles.

Punch’s satirical methods, though amusing, were not terribly complex or creative and relied on the structures of well-known tales. The little piece ‘What did you do?’ transformed the mundane details of volunteering into a fanciful tale of heroism that managed to skewer Mr Cook, the *British Worker*, and the general populace as well as the volunteers. Truthfully answering the patriotically loaded question, ‘What did you do in the Great Strike?’ would not do, so the narrator persuaded his brother to agree to his revised account of volunteer bus-driving. When his son asked the pre-ordained question, the father responded with a stirring tale of how the two fought off a dangerous mob by reading to them Mr Cook’s statement in the *British Worker*, which

claimed how peaceful and sportsmen-like the strikers were. Faced with such a challenge, the crowd rushed off singing and dancing. “All except one, who hit Uncle Alan on the head again with another piece of coal”, added John quickly. But I soon dealt with him. “Will you stop that, Harold, or must I slap you? Wasting coal at a time like this . . . He burst into tears and went away . . . And that’s how I won my stripes”, he finished, producing a blue-and-white armlet [the special constable’s insignia] from his pocket’ (‘What did you do?’, 1926: 568). Faced with a giggling boy and a stern-looking woman, the heroes walked off.

Where this satirical account differed from most, however, was in its disparagement of war-time service. The tale concluded with one volunteer’s commenting to the other, ‘Very disappointing . . . just as sickening as the War. You do your best to make it sound interesting and then you get looked at like that. Most disappointing’ (‘What did you do?’, 1926: 568). Instead of the Great War’s hallowing the events of 1926, the paradigm was stood on its head: the volunteers’ activities in 1926 were used to question British soldiers’ involvement in the First World War, a literary theme that began to emerge during the war and which was becoming even more evident by the mid-1920s (Fussell, 1975).

Exaggeration for humorous effect was also a favourite technique of *Punch* essayists who, like other satirists, used this tool to make explicit the humbuggery of schoolboys eager to volunteer for a new adventure. One letter from ‘Smith Major’ detailed this brave lad’s disappointment with ‘the absolutely rotten way in which the General Strike came to an end’. Smith was unable to volunteer immediately because, as a schoolboy, he needed to have his parents’ permission to do so. His letter took longer than usual to reach ‘the Pater’, who did send a telegram

saying O.K. . . . As I am in the Cadet Corps I did not see why I should not convoy food lorries from the docks. I have never driven anything, but I was quite willing to have a shot and to run over anyone who tried to stop me.

And then on Wednesday afternoon the Government let them call the strike off . . . I call it rotten that just when a fellow is ready to go out and has got permission and everything is practically fixed up, they let the strikers chuck it, and a fellow has to start prep. again instead of giving the country a leg-up.

There are a number of us here who will be much obliged if you will let Baldwin have the tip that, unless he gives the next strike a decent run, we shan’t bother about it, and he can save the Constitution by himself. (Evoe, 1926b: 541)

Undoubtedly there were many people who felt similarly to Smith Major, though few were willing to express themselves so bluntly.

While there were obviously plenty of tales that pointed to male volunteer incompetence, media stories that most actively denigrated volunteer efforts were frequently aimed at women, particularly at those who took on tasks

ordinarily associated with men or with working-class women. The *Evening Standard* rather cattily reported that ‘many ladies, royal and otherwise, who having discovered the satisfaction of doing real work during the war, have since been loath to leave their “jobs”’ (‘A Modern Princess’, 1926: 6). More direct in its attack than middle-of-the-road media could afford to be, the Labour-oriented *Sunday Worker* published a photograph of two well-dressed women presiding over frying pans with a pointed caption, ‘Lady members of the idle class “caught” doing something useful in Hyde Park’ (‘Lady Members’, 1926: 8), which other papers also published but with different commentary, as in figure 5.15 (e).⁵

The *Queen*, *Punch*, *Sphere*, and *Tatler* featured a series of parodies, giving the distinct impression that female interest in the strike rested solely in the benefits women could derive from it (see figure 5.16). *Punch*’s ‘Diary of a Mondaine’ recorded, ‘It was easy to see what was in the wind that blew Lady Manœuvre (*sic*) in on me the other day looking so chirpy . . . “To mothers of daughters one general strike is worth five hundred dances . . . April and I helped with the milk in Hyde Park. Dear Lord Sideshire was one of the milkmen; and so – and so – overalls and milkcans and a crisis did what three seasons of dance-frocks and foxtrotting failed to do, and darling April’s engaged”’ (Mayfair Mansions, 1926: 572).

This characterisation’s significance was not just the ‘woman catches man thanks to the strike’ theme. Typical debutante tactics had failed to secure a husband for April. Her appearance in overalls – women’s work clothes – and her performance of maid’s work were what won her a man – and a lord at that. Traditional motifs regarding disguised lords, challenges met, and rewards won were recycled for a modern folk tale. And the moral was clear: if young women acted like ‘real’ women and attended to appropriately maternal and domestic tasks (dealing with milk and helping men), rather than wasting their time at dances, they would receive their well-deserved reward. And if upper-class folks engaged in physical labour, their lives would be both more enjoyable and more satisfying. Only the temporary nature of this particular dramatic encounter and the popularly acknowledged victory of the volunteer forces enabled magazines to discuss explicitly the advantages of a society in which the leisure class did the jobs of idle workers.

The sheer amount of satirical comment directed at this topic gives some hint as to just how disturbing such a possibility actually was in the mid-1920s. It also pointed to the very real anxiety that middle and upper-class young women had about finding husbands at a time of increased competition for those men who had survived the Great War. Such narrative genres foreground both the threat and absurdity of such a topsy-turvy world.

At the universities, another level of critique emerged, along with a more profound mysogynism. The male publication staff of the *Isis*, *Cherwell*,

Cambridge Gownsmen and Undergraduette, and *Oxford Magazine* often attached feminine pen names to their columns, a fairly transparent practice of gender switching also common to charity rags and the popular parties of the 1920s. The 'Letters from Ermyntrode' column in the *Isis* was 'a weekly letter about Oxford society gossip [by] a well-known society lady, [who] having rolled up *his* shirt sleeves and lit *his* pipe will now commence' ('Letters ...', 1926: 11). As in similar Society magazine columns, the thrust of this 'gossip' was that women were far more interested in the romance (adventure), the 'divinely fetching uniform[s]' ('Letters ...', 1926: 11), and the shortage of rouge occasioned by the strike. According to Aunt Ambrosia of the *Isis*, 'undergraduettes' at Oxford spent 'a large portion of the week annoying the officials at the Town Hall by vainly demanding jobs'. To keep them under control, 'the policy was initiated of sending one in every hundred applicants to take a message somewhere on her bicycle – the message was usually to her college Principle [*sic*] – to beg her to restrain the ardour of her students'. When others proposed to start a free canteen in order to draw the crowds away from Labour meetings, the authorities turned it down because 'such action might be interpreted as showing that its originators had taken up an almost definitely political view. The dangerous conditions of the Oxford streets during the past week has [*sic*] been due to the patriotic action of the undergraduettes' (Aunt Ambrosia, 1926b: 13).

Only male undergraduates, those with the most acknowledged licence in British society, had the power to make such critiques. Although Society women and Bright Young Things might have attempted to co-opt this role, they were more frequently the targets of such jibes. As Marion Massey of Girton explained to me:

This was still a time when women were tolerated at Cambridge but not particularly welcomed, certainly not by some of the older academics. A story went round about a particular lecturer, I think in Philosophy. Each time his lecture came round during the strike, the men attending diminished in numbers, but the number of women remained the same. One day he came in to the hall – looked round and saw no men there. So he announced 'since no one is here, I will not give my lecture today'. Whether this is true or not, I don't know, but the story went round as a good joke. (Massey, Letter, 1986; see also Aunt Ambrosia, 1926b: 13)

Gender switching for public performances, which was and is part and parcel of mummers' plays, Carnival, and Mardi Gras performances, formed the basis for much of the type of humour found in *Beyond the Fringe* or *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, and is still the practice in Christmas pantomimes popular in present-day Great Britain. It is no coincidence that tricksters are often characters of ambiguous gender identity. During the French Revolution, the Rebecca Riots in early nineteenth-century Wales, the Irish Molly McGuire

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uprisings, and in a variety of ‘blood and bread’ protests throughout the eighteenth century, men disguised themselves as women to censure or attack perceived violations of tacit inter-class obligations. By masquerading as women, men could criticize without fear of personal reprisal – and, not coincidentally, relinquish responsibility for attacks on the dominant culture and its leaders, enabling all concerned to blame frivolous and emotional women if their words or deeds backfire. Characteristic of this technique of disguise, however, is the almost total lack of pretence, making clear the source of the critique but making it impossible for anyone to complain about the ‘joke’. Drawing on such play traditions further emphasized the non-ordinary aspects of life during the strike, the upside-down world both volunteers and strikers had created. More to the point, such a conceit enabled male undergraduates to praise the volunteers’ efforts and, at the same time, to ridicule the new women who were encroaching on their turf.

What all those humorous accounts and comments from various sources have in common is that all describe undergraduate volunteers and similar types doing what young men and women with few obligations do – commit reckless and even dangerous acts just because they can. As an article in the *Cambridge Gownsmen and Undergraduates* commented, some people ‘treated the crisis as a form of amusement kindly staged by the T.U.C. for the amusement of the undergraduates’ (‘Strike and Service’, 1926: 1). Sophia Baron, at Oxford in 1926, affirmed: ‘All the strike volunteers were male and regarded it as a great lark’ (Baron, Letter, 1986). Some of their reckless abandon might be attributed to a 1920s’ ethos of post-war anomie, or even Dadaesque bursts of creativity. But I suspect the primary source of their pleasure in such rags at the expense of others stems from the fact that these young people could afford to take life and work lightly. Girton alumna Lady Bullard noted that, ‘young upper-class undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge regarded the volunteer work in the strike as a lark and a change from their ordinary lives’ (Bullard, Letter, 1987). They were simply of an age when they did not yet have to take much of anything seriously. And not incidentally, they had an explicit licence to pull such pranks and be subject to no penalties.

Such licence and related dramatic activities dated back to an earlier time, to the days of the Swing, Rebecca, Luddite, and other uprisings noted above. This particular kind of social protest tradition, which relies for its inspiration on models derived from folk dramas that mark calendar customs, rites of passage, and other holiday quêtting⁶ traditions, included fancy dress or cross-dressing and demands for money, free food and drink from middle and upper-class land and business owners (e.g. Alford, 1959; Rose, 1962; Smith, 1966; Williams, 1971; Thompson, 1971, 1974, 1991; Hobsbawm and Rudé, 1975; Burke, 1983; Pattison, 1977; Peel, 1978; Simms, 1978; Hay *et al.*, 1975;

Hebdige, 1979; Green, 1980 and 1981; Russell, 1981; Bushaway, 1982; Pearson, 1983; Pettit, 1984; Underdown, 1985). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the English upper classes were highly involved in enacting public symbolic ceremonies that marked the structural relationships between classes and the rules for appropriate behaviour for different status groups. Much of the ritualized behaviour of power and deference occurred during everyday life – in the marketplace, at home, on the streets, within the politico-legal bureaucracy, and in more formally designated public places such as churches and theatres. Calendar festivals, however, tended to be more symbolically loaded with both expressive and functional representations of communal obligations. Because the participants expected Christmas and Harvest Homes, as well as the various forms of ceremonial house visiting that occurred between Christmas and Oak Apple or Empire Day at the end of May, to demonstrate the actual existence of such relationships, the highly dramatized behaviour that characterized such occasions was intended to convince everyone that the ideal and the reality were one.

At these events there were certain ceremonial ways of marking class distinctions. Abundance, elaborate settings, dramatic costumes, and public enactments of ideal relationships usually occurred during calendar festivals as well as rites of passage celebrated by the aristocracy and gentry. As interconnected communities grew into industrial villages, the more elaborate and privately controlled dramatizations of the obligations implicit in a hierarchical small community faded and were replaced by increasingly public displays of ‘good works’ performed throughout the year, as well as on holidays (Laslett, 1971; Houghton, 1979; Cohen, 2002: 51). In the twentieth century, such dramatic public exchanges tended toward more pragmatic representations of hierarchical structures (Cohen, 2002: 51); there were few opportunities to express the reciprocal relationships of obligation – only those of power. In 1930, for example, when the Duke of Westminster married his third wife, Loelia Ponsonby, he remitted a week’s rent to all his tenants, while others in similar situations invited ‘coach loads of tenants up to London for their weddings’ (Pine, 1956: 44).

These various social rituals were much more than just ceremonial survivals; the world-turned-upside-down motif provided a highly functional way to enact and preserve the social order (Gluckman, 1964). While the workers or servants were waited upon during designated times and places, the upper classes were doing the waiting. They did not merely ‘allow’ their workers to be on top. Acts such as serving one’s tenants punch and food at an heir’s coming of age party, presenting gifts to servants on Boxing Day, and distributing blankets, coal, soup, and unwanted advice to the needy became highly foregrounded occasions designed to demonstrate to those whose destiny it was to serve how to do it properly: cheerfully, politely, and

enthusiastically. Similarly, youthful members of the establishment and Society women acted as happy workers during the 1926 General Strike and in innovative and symbolic ways every bit as meaningful as the holiday patronage their parents and grandparents had performed for their servants and tenants.

In May 1926, the Bright Young People and others were able to put their games and their humour to serious purpose. They applied what they knew to a social crisis and thus played out their own war-game fantasies of saving their country from the chaos of a General Strike. In a rather neat structural inversion, the volunteers, undergraduates and Society women in particular, defended their right not to do manual labour by doing it – temporarily. They countered the accusations of the socialist Labour movement that they were the idle, incompetent rich by demonstrating their ability to ‘come through’ in a crisis. They worked, together and as a temporary community, to ‘keep the nation going’. They rallied to fight a limited, safe war against a known enemy designated as disorder and chaos, which attacked the Constitution and challenged the basis of their social hierarchy.

Of course, a great many of those who volunteered realized, albeit after the fact, that the General Strike did not pose the threat to democracy and civilization that the government and media made out to be the case. Somervillian Rosamund Tosh noted, ‘things would be very different if a similar crisis occurred now-a-days. I should perhaps add that my own attitude has changed a good deal over the years, and that I now feel slightly ashamed of my then failure to appreciate the plight of the miners ... I would say that my generation was much less politically aware than are modern students’ (Tosh, Letter, 1987b). But the volunteers, every bit as ‘English’ as the soldiers during the First World War, felt honour bound to perform their duty, to display their patriotism. Their verbal response in the form of the puns, parodies, anecdotes, and jokes permitted the activities of the volunteers to be reframed as play. Because their own identity was so tied up with role-switching and play acting, with trying to become what they were not, the volunteers could reflect and embrace the double image that British society imposed on them, which was part and parcel of their role as tricksters. Their complicity in this ambiguous identity enabled them to be at once heroes and buffoons, patriots and fools.

Notes

- 1 As per the title of an article in the popular press, ‘The Humours of the Great Strike’, 1926: 10.
- 2 Bruley found that striking miners, miners’ wives, and family members also engaged in a fair amount of comedic, playful, and parodic behaviour during the strike and subsequent lockout (Bruley, 2010: 60–85).

- 3 Tricksters in other cultures include Coyote and Raven for American Indians in the southwest, Brer Rabbit for African Americans, or Monkey (Hanuman) for Southeast Asians.
- 4 Newmark had confused the Caine brothers and was actually referring to Gordon Ralph Hall Caine, elected as an Independent Conservative MP in East Dorset in 1922 and Conservative Whip in 1923. In 1929, his brother, Derwent Hall Caine, was elected a Labour MP in Everton.
- 5 The *Sketch* and the *Sphere* featured that same photo but with a different purpose and different captions. The *Sketch* caption read 'Armed with their frying pans: Lady Betty Butler (left) and Miss Collett Doughty' (1926: 13).
- 6 Quêtings are traditional house visits (frequently at Christmas); those of lower social status travel from house to house, perform skits or songs, and request something in return for not wreaking havoc. The children's custom of trick or treating at Halloween fulfils a similar function, as do Mardi Gras performances and subsequent demands in southern Louisiana.