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# Lena Ashwell's Modern Troubadours – Entertaining the Troops, 1915-1919

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*This article describes one aspect of actress/manager Lena Ashwell's war time work, organising concert parties to entertain the troops in France, Egypt and elsewhere between 1915 and 1919, based on her account in Modern Troubadours (1922) and press comment at the time. How artists were selected and the repertoire they presented are considered in the light of performance conditions and audience responses, alongside Ashwell's aim of making the arts accessible to everyone, which she carried on in her work post war. Dr Margaret Leask is an oral historian and researcher for the Sydney Theatre Company, National Film and Sound Archive and other organisations in Sydney, Australia. Her biography, Lena Ashwell, Actress, Patriot, Pioneer, was published by the University of Hertfordshire Press and the Society for Theatre Research in 2012 and was short listed for the 2013 STR Theatre Book Prize.*

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## ***Introduction***

**W**orld War 1 saw the organisation and deployment of concert parties on an unprecedented scale, intended to boost the morale of troops on all fronts: the Western in France, the Eastern, based around Salonika, and in Egypt. It

became virtually an industry that involved civilian companies as well as those generated by the troops themselves. J. G. Fuller focusses on the ubiquity and significance of those concert parties generated by the troops, often spontaneously at a battalion level, or more deliberately and with greater attention to the provision of resources at a divisional level.<sup>1</sup> For example, he lists 59 divisional concert parties that existed during the war, let alone the 23 at a battalion level,<sup>2</sup> and points to the response of a machine-gunner who found that while resting near Arras:

within five minutes walk of our Camp, no less than four large concert halls had now been erected, and every night Concert Parties, belonging to the various divisions stationed on the Arras front gave first-rate concerts to which all troops were admitted for the sum of half a franc. These concerts were greatly appreciated by our soldiers, especially after a long dreary spell of duty in the 'trenches.'<sup>3</sup>

It reinforces the ubiquity but typically understates on the part of an active soldier the horrific conditions for which the concert parties compensated.

The first military concert party at a divisional level seems to have been formed in December 1914. It therefore coincides with the arrival in France of the first civilian party organised by Seymour Hicks and his wife Ellaline Terriss. Yet it was obvious that given the nature of the war, there was scope for a more organised arrangement that might include both touring parties as well as permanent ones located at the various base camps, which inevitably included hospitals, to cope with the increasing numbers of wounded returning from the front lines. As L. J. Collins points out:

Ad hoc, individual contributions, weekend theatrical sorties and short tours were very welcome to the troops; but in a static...conflict such as the Great War there was a need...for a wider and more permanent theatrical provision. The organization of this was to be the prerogative of one person - Miss Lena Ashwell.<sup>4</sup>

In 1922 Lena Ashwell published *Modern Troubadours*, subtitled *A Record of the Concerts at the Front*, in which she draws on her experiences, the diaries of entertainers she engaged and letters from soldiers, officers, medics and others who experienced World War 1 at close quarters. From the outset she acknowledges the impossibility of her task, not least because much of the overwhelming experience "of seeing a world in arms...is beyond description." The 600 artistes she engaged between early 1915 and mid-1919 were asked to remember, note and write descriptions of what they experienced but most found it "so moving, so terrible that one's littleness was stunned and could not find expression."<sup>5</sup> Ashwell's account, nevertheless, provides considerable insight into the motivation, repertoire and responses to the Concert Parties, an early initiative of the Women's Emergency

Corps and the Three Arts Club Employment Bureau, following the outbreak of war in August 1914. Although authorities needed considerable persuasion, once the Women's Auxiliary Committee of the Y.M.C.A. embraced the idea of troop entertainment, Ashwell quickly found some initial money from a generous friend and selected artists to travel to France with a mixed concert program for presentation in Y.M.C.A. huts and hospitals. Ashwell was not alone in wanting to help the war effort—there were many others offering, mostly on an *ad hoc* or celebrity basis, entertainment for the troops and for fund-raising events for charitable organisations.<sup>6</sup> She believed passionately in the importance of the arts in national life and wanted performers, particularly women, to feel they could contribute their talent in a positive, supportive way.<sup>7</sup> Her 'modern troubadours' would show the way.

### *Looking for team players*

In January 1915, pianist Theodore Flint, described by Siegfried Sassoon in his poem about the concert parties, as "the chap in brown...some actor bloke from town," headed to France to begin making arrangements with Y.M.C.A. staff and assessing concert venues, transport and artist accommodation. Each concert party would comprise six performers—a soprano, contralto, string instrumentalist (violin, cello or banjo), a male voice (tenor, baritone or bass), entertainer/story teller and accompanist. Over time, depending on circumstances and availability of performers, parties reduced to three, and later, for firing line events, to a male solo performer. The first party left England on 15 February 1915 and gave 39 concerts in 15 days. Most subsequent parties stayed for three to four weeks giving up to 18 concerts a week in hospitals, on hospital ships, in and around Y.M.C.A. huts, outdoor arenas, in theatres and veterinary camps. By October 1915, Flint calculated "on average he played about 50 songs per day [and since arriving in France] had played nearly 25,000 songs and pieces."<sup>8</sup>

Initially Ashwell called on London based artists she knew or contacted through the Three Arts Club Employment Bureau with its extensive register of women available to work for the war effort. Ashwell had co-founded the Three Arts Club, which opened in December 1911, providing accommodation for female artists working in London away from home. In late 1915, after internal Club disagreements, she resigned as a Governor, taking the management of Concerts at the Front to a small, tightly run office in South Molton Street. Ashwell had many theatre and music contacts, having developed chamber music programs at the Kingsway Theatre she managed in London from 1907. She was a graduate and Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music which gave her knowledge of, and access to, many instrumentalists and singers.



*Figure 1. Lena Ashwell, 1911. (Photo: Matzene, courtesy Stuart Gough)*

Ashwell was looking for professional artists who could perform familiar repertoire, who were resilient, not seeking personal promotion, work opportunity or ego satisfaction, who could work in a team, perform well under difficult conditions (including cold, heat, rain, noise), deal with less than ideal, uncomfortable accommodation, food and modes of transport, work hard, have strong constitutions and good health, understand the Y.M.C.A. ethics and be responsive to the men's need for conversation and encouragement but maintain respect, responsibility and decorum at all times. They had to be brave, able to confront and endure the horrors of injury and remain cheerful and positive:

The first requisite, of course, was a good artist, but one had always to consider suitability for the work, which required a certain amount of stability of character, and also a desire to be of use...sometimes one would choose a rather less efficient artist because of the atmosphere the singer or player created. In some ways selecting a party can be compared to making up a bouquet of flowers, or selecting a number of colours which would not interfere with each other, and the most successful parties were those in which there was a great differentiation but equally great harmony. Sometimes one would put in a singer principally for the fragrance of goodness and sweetness of character.<sup>9</sup>

At one stage, a Y.M.C.A. leader complained about an artist he considered too attractive; he was sure every man must have wanted to kiss her, someone Ashwell thought “always gave me the impression of a wild rose in spring.” He compiled a list of party members meeting his ideal (selected from parties he’d seen), to ensure “no member of it should have awakened such a reprehensible desire.”<sup>10</sup> Ashwell’s response was: “Frankly, his party would have been rather a chilly affair. I feel the audience should love the artists, and the appeal to beauty and goodness should be so great that the longing to kiss one of them need not necessarily be an ignoble thing.”<sup>11</sup>

Although many of the artists she selected undertook a number of tours during the war, she cast the net wide, involving around 600 performers from all over the country. She recognised artists from different regions had a personal connection with many soldiers and their involvement would be seen as a gift from an area. Selection of local artists also encouraged local financial support and donations.

### ***Auditions***

Ashwell identified potential artists via such organisations throughout the country as the Leeds Concert Artistes’ Association. Some artists were already performing for soldiers at training camps and depots in England. She auditioned in towns where she was fund-raising and whilst on tour with *Iris Intervenes* in 1916. Auditions were arranged by locals, often with representative musicians or leading members of the community present to provide observations on the artists. She continued to select new artists well into 1918. Short news items appeared in local papers, including her appeal in the *Liverpool Daily Post*, on 27 February, for “Liverpool vocalists, instrumentalists, elocutionists and entertainers of repute who are able and willing to proceed to the Front in her Firing Line Concert parties.” Those interested were advised she would be at the Rushworth Hall on the morning of March 2 and they should apply in advance to the Rushworth and Dreaper Concert

and Entertainment Department, 11-17 Islington,” who made the arrangements on her behalf.

Ashwell writes that while she enjoyed some auditions, mostly it was stressful because she had to make decisions on suitability and artistic value very quickly. She felt proud that “in dealing with 600 people, in spite of the tremendous temptations and difficulties of our work, we were let down in only three or four cases.”<sup>12</sup> There was one “fine soprano who was abnormally stout [with] a rather wandering eye” whom she selected despite reservations, hoping she would contribute with her singing while her size would work “as a make-weight to the levity of mind.”<sup>13</sup> Ashwell was asked to withdraw this singer as she was sitting on officers’ knees in public restaurants—something Ashwell found hard to imagine! Although not encouraged, some genuine romances flourished between artists and artists and soldiers: a soprano and a violinist married British officers in Egypt and remained there after the rest of their party moved to Palestine.

Ashwell auditioned a “feeble looking youth” who played the violin “very indifferently.” He’d obviously been rejected by the army but when she asked if he’d like to go to France, she realised sentimentality must not influence selection decisions when he declared, “Oh, I shouldn’t like to go where there’s any fighting!” Another candidate was a well-dressed woman accompanied by a beautiful Chow dog. While other musicians auditioned, the dog was quiet,

but when his mistress got up to sing, which she could not do, he sat in front of her and howled his protest, and the higher she went, the louder he howled, and the duet was excruciatingly funny. If only they could have repeated it in France together, it would have been a wonderful turn, but it was quite unintentional. She was the only person at the audition whose self confidence was such that she asked “what clothes she would need for France.”<sup>14</sup>

Ashwell did not want economic necessity to be the principal reason for selecting artists, she sought the best artists who were prepared, for out of pocket expenses only, to undertake this ‘war work.’ A leading musician in Manchester was angry and vocal about this approach (giving her some bad press), but she remained resolute. While most cities quickly responded positively, Edinburgh, prompted by *The Thistle*, resented Ashwell’s role in the selection of artists. The Y.M.C.A. Ladies’ Auxiliary Committee, through their arrangement with the War Office, was obliged to insist that on all printed matter their official designation be used, with Ashwell named as honorary organiser. “It would be impossible for the Committee to accept responsibility for concert parties without the authority to veto any artist they, with their two years experience of the difficulties to be surmounted in France, would know to be unsuited to the unique conditions existing at the Front.”<sup>15</sup> It appears Edinburgh never really got over this issue, although the rest of Scotland participated and later in the war Scottish parties entertained the troops, who presumably were

unaware of this storm in a tea-cup. Ashwell's apparent 'vanity' over the insistence of her name appearing on Concerts at the Front printed material was determination to ensure performers were recognised as professional artistes and not subsumed into the Y.M.C.A. organisation. Ashwell was adamant artists should receive recognition (everyone knew she was a professional actress), even if individuals could not use the experience for self promotion.

### *Conditions for the performers*

Ashwell acknowledges her colleague, the actress Dorothy Dundas as one of the reasons, "besides the goodness of human beings," why the artist selection and experience was effective. Dundas made all the arrangements for passports and travel and settled "innumerable disputes and difficulties...with faithfulness, tact and wisdom."<sup>16</sup> No doubt it was she who briefed and de-briefed artists on what to expect and how to behave. It is unclear as to how long and what Ashwell did to prepare new concert party members for the experience; she usually engaged at least one or two senior or experienced artists (older men) who led each party, but issues such as counseling before or after were not considerations at the time. Programs were 'tried out' or presented to camps of troops awaiting embarkation in England before the concert party left for the front and often presented at fund raising events or celebratory occasions when it returned home.

Artistes received advice about concert dress, traveling clothes and footwear; many were issued with high boots to deal with walking through mud and uneven terrain. They were provided with gas helmets and instruction on their use. It was not a glamorous experience: performers had to deal with their own hair and makeup; they had to protect their string instruments on rough journeys and deal with extreme temperature changes which impacted on sound quality. While there were pianos in some Y.M.C.A. huts and halls, they were most likely to be out of tune and the two traveling pianos were unpredictable:

One was called 'Little Peter' [with no legs], because it could not grow up; and the other was nicknamed 'Wee Donal' by the Scottish party. He had no pedals, so was supplied with a fearful contraption constructed with a window pulley, two boot laces, a block of wood with a swivel, an armature supplied with a nice penny hook, and two gimlets with which to attach it to the floor. It had a Heath-Robinson appearance, and excited unseemly mirth.<sup>17</sup>

Playing instruments or singing in extreme cold or heat is not easy or kind on the vocal chords, but there was no chance to be precious when a concert party found itself "in a great tent, bedecked with coloured, shaded electric lights [with] 2000 men and officers assembled...a blue haze from at least a thousand cigarettes and pipes was rising to the roof, an incense from all the blends and brands of all the tobaccos of the British Empire, Egypt and America filled the air."<sup>18</sup> And, since it was

not unusual for a whole battalion to be called out and to leave during a concert, artists had to 'carry on regardless.'

Ashwell writes:

It was always immensely interesting to watch the fate of different artists in France. There were, of course, no advertisements, no newspaper criticisms, nothing to tell the men by whom they should be impressed. There was no possibility of a star entrance, or any trick by which it was possible to establish one's position as an artist. There were no lighting effects, no friends to direct appreciation, no decorations to enhance the appearance. The artists all sat in a row, rather like the old-fashioned Nigger Minstrels, and the leader of the party, or more often the officer who took the chair at the concert, would merely announce that Miss So-and-so would sing a certain song, and the singer advanced and sang. An unreal reputation just collapsed.<sup>19</sup>

Early on Ashwell recognised that even if artists wanted to stay longer, "the continuous strain of such work does tell after four weeks, and we found, whether in the front line or at the Base, four weeks was the limit of endurance for the artists, who traveled long distances, and gave two, and often three, concerts a day."<sup>20</sup> Later, a firing line solo performer described a cheerless and fearful night in a hotel dugout next to a church which, as a landmark, attracted German gunners. He confessed that, "nights of this kind made the next day's performance difficult; to keep up to the mark and hold your audience, a man needs a certain and regular amount of rest." After a six week stretch he felt he "would fall below concert pitch and be unable to hold and amuse an audience as he did at the beginning of the tour."<sup>21</sup>

Some artists made a long term commitment to the Concert Parties: the Egyptian party remained there for two years from November 1916 before four members went on to Palestine in mid 1918. Spare time was spent adding to their repertoire of English folk-songs and music-hall successes. The concert party often worked with local musicians (officers and soldiers), and sometimes produced plays. "The pleasure these people give to men so long exiled from home, and stationed in remote, lonely camps, is incalculable."<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly they were as homesick as the men; the contralto had not seen her children for two years, but they knew if they returned to England, given difficult travel conditions, it would not be possible to get back to Palestine and they wanted to continue for the duration.

### ***Those selected and their repertoire***

A young 22 year old Welsh composer and aspiring actor, Ivor Novello [Davies], was a member of the second concert party in March 1915. His memorable contribution was *Till the Boys Come Home*, known as *Keep the Home Fires Burning*, which he composed in 1914, and it became one of the most popular war-time songs



in the U.K. No doubt this song and his all-round ability as an entertainer responsive to his audience was the reason for his selection. Another ideal Concert Party artist was operatic and oratorio soprano, Carrie Tubb, whom Ashwell admired greatly. After the war they presented concerts together.

Of course the men adored her, with her beautiful voice, joyous manner, splendid vitality, and all-pervading good humour. She was a joy to be with; she never minded when or where she sang, and never wanted to be treated differently from others less gifted and well known, but just joyfully gave her best for the love of helping to kill care and grief of heart.<sup>23</sup>

All efforts were made to cheer up the men: *Musical News* sent supplies of mouth organs for distribution by Concert Party 'alleged funny man' William V. Robinson (also with the second concert party), who would finish his act giving imitations on the instrument and then present it to the camp. Expressing appreciation, Edward G. Harvey, Wessex Field Ambulance at No. 2 Territorial Base, wrote:

The condition was that the mouth organ be given to the man who could play it best, and plenty of amusement was got out of the competitors' efforts. The man who was lucky enough to get it is playing it as I write this, so we get all the latest airs for nothing now...the little present proved all the more acceptable as there is a scarcity of musical instruments here. As it is made in Germany it will have to go back there, so we shall take it with us and give them Tipperary on it when we march through Berlin.<sup>24</sup>

Ashwell chose some less conventional 'entertainers' including Dr Houston Collisson who was the preacher at St Stephen's Church, East Twickenham. He had been a child prodigy pianist, composer, conductor, actor and Doctor of Music for 25 years. He told Irish stories, sang and played the piano, performing in concerts in England as well as spending a month in France in September 1915. A year later, Bradford salesman and commission agent, 'The Yorkshire Wizard of Mirth, Music and Mystery,' J. W. Swithenbank, went to the firing line as a 'freelance' solo performer for six months from August 1916. He wrote to Dorothy Dundas on 1 May 1917 to thank Ashwell for selecting him. He was fortunate:

in getting away without injury, although badly shaken... During my wanderings I have seen sights never to be forgotten, some I could like to forget, others that I could like to forget, and others that I could like to see repeated. If our people at home could see the way Tommy enjoys (sic) our poor efforts to take his mind away from terrors that surround him they would be more generous in their offerings to a big fund to send out others into the front firing line where the boys only want, and are entitled to, the best talent that can be sent to them.

After his return he raised about £130 giving six concerts for the Y.M.C.A., thereby covering his fee to go to the Front. He wrote that he was in good health and his “spirits have always been of the best. When I get my rest back and over my heavy season [his work] I shall be ready to go back about the first of August.” At the end of his letter he lists all the places he performed, including for the Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney camps in France.

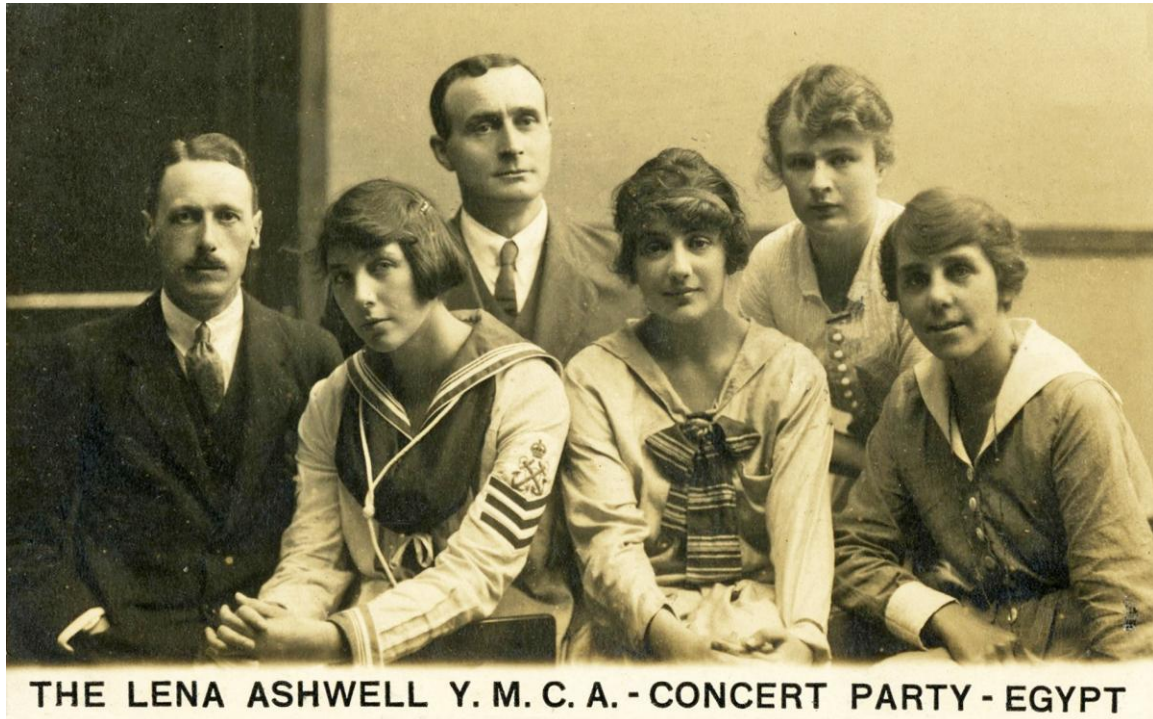
Alfred Capper’s Exhibition of Thought Transmission, presented to 500,000 soldiers, “was as mysterious as it was entertaining. Blindfolded, he picked out certain persons in the audience, and placed them in the form of tableau arranged when he was out of the room.”<sup>25</sup> Capper published his recollections of working in Y.M.C.A. huts:

The most irresistible influence you can bring to the crowd is absolute sincerity... Simplicity and sincerity! Those are the two great touchstones of worth that the crowd always applies to the individual or the entertainment. Miss Ashwell...is of exactly the same opinion. In speaking of songs and music the men love most she declares they like anything simple and beautiful. Every singer, every actor, every reciter, every entertainer who goes to the Front to help to brighten the dull, cruel monotony of the lives of our brave and self sacrificing soldiers is doing a far greater thing than either he or she imagines. For they are helping forward a human soul in the great battle of life. Until these terrible bloody years of war I never realised the enormous ethical value of the purely entertaining side of life. These entertainments are of real spiritual and intellectual value to fighting men at the Front. Without [these] our men, from the spiritual point of view, would indeed have been in a bad way, and from the physical point of view too. Any chaplain or medical man will tell you that. Miss Ashwell tells us a chaplain confided to her that the music of her concert parties was worth as much physic and not a few sermons to his charges, whilst a RAMC doctor told her ‘one concert party out here is worth half a dozen nerve specialists at home’ to his.<sup>26</sup>

Reviews Ashwell collected from newspapers such as *The Egyptian Gazette* give an idea of how programs were shaped around each party’s talents and repertoire with an understanding that audiences anticipated and expected to hear popular, familiar songs they could join in with. At the first concert in Cairo’s Sultanieh Opera House,

Miss Grace Ivell and Miss Marjorie Ffrangcon Davies opened, singing with great delicacy and charm, Somewhere a Voice is Calling Me, with violin obligato by Miss Sylvia de Gay, followed by a very finished rendering of The Hills of Donegal by Miss Ivell. Miss Yvette Pienne recited, with much dramatic insight, Lizzie ‘Arris, A Boy’s Idea and The Highway Man, while Mr Brett

Hayden's well-told stories and ventriloquist imitations raised storms of applause. Of Miss de Gay's conspicuous ability as a violinist, it would be difficult to speak too highly. Her technique was admirable, and her performance revealed a quite unusual power of expression. The high qualities of her playing were given the fullest scope in her Variations on a Theme of Corelli by Tartini and in the simple, melodious Chopin Nocturne. Miss Ffrangcon Davies was at her best in Grieg's Solveig's Song, making an instant appeal to the audience. Mr Theodore Flint did wonders at the piano.<sup>27</sup>



*Figure 2. 1916. (Photographer unknown, courtesy of Stuart Gough)*

As Ashwell knew:

It was necessary in our work to strike a balance, not only that the men might individually hear something they liked and understood, but there are singers who can sing classical music, and singers who are quite valuable in a different way, but are quite incapable of adequately performing the greater works. There are singers who are quite delightful in *The Perfect Day*, who become a misery to themselves and the audience when they attempt *Madame Butterfly* or *La Tosca*, [so] it was wiser to encourage artists to do the work that was natural to them, for the audience knew with a horrible certainty when the performer was going beyond his powers.<sup>28</sup>

*The Era* described a London performance of 'A Memory of France,' a sample Concert Party program as "a bright little affair which can appeal to every shade of taste. Breezy, anecdotal, operatic excerpts, tuneful ballads, and cheerful ditties are ingeniously interwoven and there is about it a pleasantly intimate note making it very acceptable to Tommy's heart." Constance Wentworth, pianist Eve Dickson and Frederic Lake, "who enter splendidly into the spirit of the thing, and made the entertainment so complete a success," were praised. Lake apparently was particularly versatile. He could:

sing a tenor ballad, troll a swinging ditty, and chortle a breezy anecdote with the best of them. His song concerning the phantom regiment which marched on for ever should strike a chord of humour in every mind.<sup>29</sup>

### ***Artists' accounts of their experiences***

Many artistes were interviewed by the press on their return from France and their comments provide insight into repertoire, performance conditions and responses. Young Gwendolyn Teagle, who had studied violin from the age of nine and was still a pupil of Maurice Sons, was a member of the second party. She described traveling in motor ambulances, covering long distances between concerts seeing many wounded and ill men. On one day they witnessed thirty funerals. "Frequently she received requests to 'play something nippy, miss,' which being construed means a piece lively in character and obviously tuneful. The Tommies love a song with chorus," and she observed the most popular numbers were *Till the Boys come Home* and *Here We Are Again*. They were especially appreciative of ballads. Of her solo repertoire, favourite numbers were Haydn Woods' *Slumber Song* and *Elfin Dance*, the last movement of Mendelssohn's *Concerto* and the popular *Intermezzo* from *Cavalleria Rusticana*. She recalled sadly a soldier dying during a performance of the piece he had specially requested. She described muting her violin, playing soft, soothing music while moving through hospital wards where serious cases were being nursed. One badly wounded soldier in severe pain "fell into his first refreshing sleep after hearing music... The men are most enthusiastic, and if physically capable, will walk miles to a concert. On an average there are three encores demanded after each piece, a habit that eclipses even the most hardened frequenters of ballad concerts." She described the soldiers' gratitude expressed through "loud and prolonged" cheers and the artists being "pressingly offered" whatever little souvenirs the soldiers had to hand.<sup>30</sup>

W. H. Brereton, one of the Westminster Singers, shared his experiences which were no doubt read by artists auditioning and preparing to work with a Concert Party.

It is the most wonderful experience an artist can have... It is a strenuous life: we generally left our hotel at about midday and rarely got back before

midnight, having given three concerts at least and traveled perhaps 40 miles. It is not only hard work; it is a great emotional strain. The enormous audiences of soldiers who fill every corner of the huts and halls, their immeasurable delight at all they hear, their simple and heartfelt expressions of gratitude and their tense silence during the music, give one a lump in the throat. We often felt we could hardly go on. If it was sometimes an effort to sing in the camps, it required more self-restraint to keep one's self-control in hospitals. To see a wounded man try to smile during comic bits was often more than we could bear. Often we were told there were some cases in a ward too ill to be moved who would love to hear a song, and we would sing just one or two songs, and their pleasure and gratitude are things we shall never forget... When we were driving between camps we would be recognised by soldiers who had heard us and they would sing our songs to us, or shout some catchwords after us; and if our car stopped would crowd around and tell us they wanted us back. One day a boy from Leeds told us 'we could sing a bit,' and I'm sure all of us felt prouder of that than of most good notices we had ever had.<sup>31</sup>

The memories of Gordon Williams, well known Harrogate banjoist, included persistent requests for encores, candle footlights and blanket curtains, having to wrap up well and keep fit, meeting his brother by chance at one of the camps and preparing a Christmas program in anticipation of giving at least six concerts on that day.<sup>32</sup> Fellow artistes in Egypt, where Royal Engineers fixed up wires so the concert could be heard by men ten miles away nearer the firing line, were performing in the desert to audiences of 5000 men and finding their voices carrying with great clarity over the sand, provided they could avoid swallowing locusts, attracted in myriads by acetylene flares lighting up the tiny stage. Members of the Scottish Firing Line party were, on one journey, overcome by petrol fumes in a transport lorry. The tenor was taken to Doullens hospital so the others had a good rest—the first in three weeks—“in a comfortable hotel, where they got fresh beef for dinner, which was a great treat.”<sup>33</sup> Another party gave two concerts at Albert, “an obligato to the programs being furnished by guns in position within bow-shot of the concert centre. Thunderous and insistent, they never ceased to fire for longer than three minutes... To the sound of guns was added the scream of the shells as they passed overhead.”<sup>34</sup> This was often the case, as one performer wrote in his diary:

Our concert took place in a small glade in the open at the foot of an important hill, and the nearest trenches were about a mile away. Our audience consisted of Yorkshire Tommies, who are daily in the actual firing line... A lot of them were going on duty immediately after our show. The concert was going splendidly, and Charles Tree was singing *O No, John! No, John! No, John!* Precisely on the last note a 9.2, about one hundred yards behind us, spoke, and over our heads. Lord! What a crash! I am proud to say not one of us so much as blinked. It sent the Tommies into torrents of laughter and cheers.

The artists made light of this situation whenever possible incorporating off the cuff jokes and comments, such as one addressed to the guns “Oh, shut up! You’re spoiling the show,” which brought down the house!<sup>35</sup>

One concert party member described a terrifying post concert experience near Calais:

all the lights went off and the warning siren sounded. Then began, and continued for four hours, such a bombing and firing as we had ever heard before, and the knowledge that we were entirely surrounded by ammunition dumps and poison-gas shells did not help us to enjoy the situation. We walked about a mile to the officers’ quarters during which, and all through supper, the shrapnel was falling all around us. Shells were shrieking, bombs dropped continually with deafening explosions, and the sound of the guns at the Front was drowned by the noise of guns around us – guns of all kinds, it seemed, including the angry ‘rat-tat-tat tat’ of the Lewis guns, all doing their best to bring the Hun raider to earth.<sup>36</sup>

The last firing line party went out at the end of February 1917—it was not possible to find suitable men to go, although in January 1918 permission was given to send mixed parties along the line. During this period, Ashwell found “a few single-handed entertainers” who could give shows “when and where [they saw the] opportunity... One, a ventriloquist and story teller, found that dressed in civilian garb, men would often stop...to stare at him...sometimes calling out jesting offers to purchase his garments.” He gave 36 ninety-minute performances in all sorts of places including a disused tobacco factory to an audience consisting of:

infantry out of the first line of trenches, which was succeeded by an audience of transport men who had just left their ammunition lorries; at ammunition works, which for months attracted the attention of German bombers, were filled with enthusiastic crowds; and casualty clearing stations were cordial in their thanks and applause.<sup>37</sup>

His strangest experience was entertaining Portuguese soldiers. Neither side spoke the other’s language so he varied his program, doing card and other tricks and imitations, “not of the mannerisms of actors of the London stage, but the more familiar tones of the gramophone, aeroplane, the cock heralding the dawn etc.” They found his imitation of horses particularly amusing and he was asked to do a second performance.<sup>38</sup>

By late 1918 there were ten permanent concert parties in France, staying for up to four months at a time, there were seven repertory dramatic parties, while the

number of visiting parties varied according to the exigencies of military movements; sometimes up to six concert parties were touring the firing line at the same time. The Eastern Concert Party had been in Egypt and Palestine for two years, after an initial period in Malta. Concert parties were also visiting naval bases, entertaining the Fleet including crews of mine sweepers, submarines, cruisers and Royal Navy battleships. Given the conditions, it is extraordinary that only two concert party members lost their lives while performing in the war zones. Two young singers drowned in the Somme one evening in 1918 when the car they were traveling in, slid into the freezing river and disappeared.



*Figure 3. Photographer unknown, courtesy of Stuart Gough*

### ***Audience Responses: What did the boys really like?***

Throughout the war, Concert Party programs provoked discussion in the press, often led by Ashwell, and assumptions were made about their 'value' or relevance to the serving men. Most entertainments provided distraction and boosted morale, that was self-evident, but as artistes and Ashwell herself (giving recitations of poetry) observed their mostly youthful audiences under stress and in considerable discomfort, they were convinced good performances of good words and music pieces were appreciated most. Gervase Elwes, the 51 year old

distinguished lieder and English art-song tenor, led one of the parties. Ashwell was delighted with his reception. "He sang his usual repertory, and had to respond with encore after encore." At a camp outside Boulogne, for his fifth encore he accompanied himself on the piano, singing:

a quaint little funny song. It was not only his singing which made [him] such a power, it was his radiating goodness. He made everyone feel there was splendour in simple goodness and his singing was the expression of the beauty of his character... His reception was especially interesting to me, because so many times I heard people say the Army would not understand his songs or appreciate his fine work. It was supposed by these critics to be above their heads.<sup>39</sup>

Always at pains to break down barriers, Ashwell observed: "There is a tendency of the superior person, or there was before the war (there aren't so many superior persons about now), to imagine the best in literature, art, music and drama was rather above the heads of the people, and that an expensively cultivated mind was necessary for real appreciation. There never was a greater mistake."<sup>40</sup>

Officers and Y.M.C.A. leaders were always keen to make suggestions. Ashwell writes that the program presented by Charles Tree's party at Abbeville contained some classical items, including Mozart songs. Afterwards, a colonel "urged the advisability of a higher standard and expressed a wish to be allowed to choose a program." When Ashwell asked him for ideas, he immediately mentioned *The Perfect Day*, *The Old Fashioned Town*, *Donegal*, *Roses in Picardy*. "Apparently everybody had a different idea as to the meaning of the word 'classic.'" One Y.M.C.A. leader "urged the necessity for a high standard of classical music, and begged me to send immediately the Fisk Trio. They were the noted coloured singers of negro melodies."<sup>41</sup> Ashwell quoted a letter she received after one concert party's visit:

The whole tone of your entertainment, the class of music, and entire absence of vulgarity are a liberal education to the men. I feel convinced this is what is sadly wanted for our men... Everything should be done to elevate them and alter their tastes ...it's good to hear *good music*; one gets very sick of the piffle of the camp, and God's greatest gift is so refreshing and uplifting. Looking around, one can see we men are lower than when we enlisted, mainly because we are shut off from all refining influences, unable to get away from the filthiness of conversation in the huts... we have to be very careful to try and always look for the gems in life, which seem so few and far between. Might I offer you a word of advice: don't in anywise lower the tone of your music. I know there are hundreds like myself, who hunger for the riches which your great gift can supply, and it's so helpful.<sup>42</sup>



There were some negative views. Paris based commentator, John Raphael, reported on a conversation with soldiers in a café who apparently considered some of the camp entertainments “too straight-laced and patronising.”<sup>43</sup> Compared to Parisian entertainment for off-duty soldiers, it may indeed have been so. F. G. Waldock writing about ‘The Music That Soldiers Like’ was of the opinion that, “The best items met with lukewarm or hostile reception, the comic element being loudly applauded. Friends in different parts of France tell me of similar experiences.” He found the same during three months in an English war hospital.

Those who wish for nothing but the best are in the minority. One day hearing several men denouncing classical pieces who, by the way, apparently applauded at the concert, I asked why they clapped. Some of them said: “We suppose they were good as the sisters and nurses enjoyed them! Others replied: ‘We clapped because we were glad the singer didn’t give us any more!’”

He went on to say he was indebted to Ashwell’s Parties but couldn’t agree with her view, although the concerts were “magnificently performed.”<sup>44</sup> The *Sheffield Telegraph* had a different spin on this, describing two fund-raising concerts given in the city:

simple, familiar and favourite songs, solos etc, which, with wise judgment, the programs had been made up. This program-making was vital to the success of such a scheme. British soldiers – the most appreciative audience in the world – applaud everything, for they are grateful, polite and essentially fair. But their hearts go out to a few things, and that performer is most successful who can sense their tastes and foresee their preferences.

Amongst the performers:

it was hard to guess which would be prime favourite. Each had his or her trait, which made its point, and the whole combined in an ensemble peculiarly happy and obviously successful... One of the successes was a reproduction of the soldier-audiences *Retiring Chorus*, an endless affair, half *Lincolnshire Poacher* and half *Mary*, which only terminates – and hardly then – when the last man has left the concert hall.<sup>45</sup>

For Ashwell, the soldiers’ response was the most relevant and important for her cause. She found that different ‘Dominions’ responded differently. At an Australian camp in France: “They were a very good audience, but rather disconcerting, as they do not laugh as much as the other troops, but make strange noises, whistle, ‘coo-ee’ and cheer.” The New Zealanders gave “their thrilling and inspiring Maori war-cry,” the English “always gave three cheers” and the Canadians, “their Razzle dazzle, razzle dazzle, zis boom pah! Canada Canada, Ra! Ra! Ra!”<sup>46</sup>

She treasured a letter from the soldier son of a Canadian school friend, written in December 1916 after a concert in an old brewery.

It was bitterly cold, and the poor performers were absolutely blue in spite of an oil stove, which they hugged when not doing a 'stunt.' This in no way interfered with the party's spirit, and they certainly put their whole hearts into it. I wish you could have heard the way the coughs and sniffles died away when the tenor sang *Somewhere a Voice is Calling* in his beautiful clear voice, and the violinist held them in the same way. There is no doubt music means more than can be realised, even to men who have never troubled about it before, when it comes under these circumstances as a beautiful thought from home.

He was sure everyone felt more positive and that their work was worthwhile after the concert—something they were apt to lose sight of “amid all the rottenness and discomfort and fed-up-ness of life out here.” He observed “it acts as a tonic and uplift to us, which does not wear off in a hurry.”<sup>47</sup>

There are many examples of letters home which provide unsolicited responses to the Concert Parties, letters Ashwell is unlikely to have seen but which speak volumes. Margaret Williams, after the death of her officer husband, volunteered to work in Calais for the Y.M.C.A. She published her letters to relatives and friends in a small booklet entitled *Letters from a Wooden Hut*. On 29 January 1918 she wrote:

I can't tell how splendid the 'Lena Ashwell' party has been. They are all nice and friendly – they are pretty, they are great artists. The other night (what a raid it was that night!), I found an entire staff of red-tabs surrounding them. I ventured to suggest, if not too tired, the ladies should get to work. There was great applause and encouragement. It really was a wonderful scene. These three women, giving of their best, the tabs crowding around (just the best type of our soldier-man), laughter, clapping, the occasional glimpse of a French face from below stairs, and the murmur of wonderment at 'these foolish English' who fervently chanted their choruses and drowned all Hun sounds by revelry's din.<sup>48</sup>

### ***'Art is Not a Luxury'***

The war over and with demobilisation underway, Ashwell maintained concert parties in the devastated areas until mid-1919 while working on her post-war project, The Lena Ashwell Players, motivated by her wartime experience. In an article, 'The Artistic Growth of the Soldier,' she wrote of the vital need for recreation and entertainment. The concert party program had:

proved - and this is a lesson of the war that must not be forgotten in peace – that art is not a luxury, something external that may be done without, but part of the very fibre of our national life, neglect of which is fatal. My own experience, reinforced by that of all fellow-workers, is that the health, the spirit, the morale of the troops were benefited enormously by the entertainments furnished; that music and the drama played an undeniable part in securing victory... As the war went on the standard among the men went up steadily. Light chorus songs of *The Long, Long Trail* type gradually yielded in popularity to better music, till, at last, the works of the great composers were preferred to all others, and listened to with breathless attention, and who shall say with what spiritual refreshment?<sup>49</sup>

Military concert parties recognised the enduring benefits as well. A number of them like *The Splinters*, *The Diggers*, a New Zealand concert party, and the Canadian *Dumbells* enjoyed a lengthy career well into the 1930s<sup>50</sup> but it was undoubtedly Lena Ashwell's example which inspired Basil Dean and Leslie Henson (themselves involved with World War 1 concert parties) to launch the *Entertainment National Services Association* (E.N.S.A.) in 1939 which would carry on the tradition of morale boosting concert parties with which she had been identified.

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 186-193.

<sup>3</sup> A. Russell, *With the Machine Gun Corps* (London: Dranes, 1923), 135, quoted in Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 97.

<sup>4</sup> L. J. Collins, *Theatre at War 1914-1918* (Oldham, Jade Publishing Limited, 2004), 154-5.

<sup>5</sup> Lena Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours* (London, Gyldendal, 1922), 2.

<sup>6</sup> See Collins, *Theatre at War*, 155-7, 178-82.

<sup>7</sup> On Lena Ashwell's perceptions about herself see Maggie B. Gale, "Lena Ashwell and the auto/biographical negotiations of the professional self," in Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner eds. *Auto/biography and Identity: Women, Theatre and Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 30 October 1915.

<sup>9</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 122.

<sup>11</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 122.

<sup>12</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 125.

<sup>14</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 124.

<sup>15</sup> A. Barnard Cowtan, *Glasgow Herald*, 24 October 1916.

<sup>16</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 151.

<sup>18</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 154.

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- <sup>19</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 136.  
<sup>20</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 166.  
<sup>21</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 169.  
<sup>22</sup> *Glasgow Evening News*, 30 July 1918.  
<sup>23</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 135-6.  
<sup>24</sup> *Musical News*, 25 March 1915.  
<sup>25</sup> *Era*, 19 June 1918.  
<sup>26</sup> *Evening News*, 18 October 1917.  
<sup>27</sup> *The Egyptian Gazette*, 11 December 1916.  
<sup>28</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 136-7.  
<sup>29</sup> *Era*, 10 September 1919.  
<sup>30</sup> *Queen*, 17 July 1915.  
<sup>31</sup> *Daily News and Leader*, 6 September 1915.  
<sup>32</sup> *Harrogate Herald*, 26 December 1917.  
<sup>33</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 165.  
<sup>34</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 162.  
<sup>35</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 152.  
<sup>36</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 171.  
<sup>37</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 167-8.  
<sup>38</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 169.  
<sup>39</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 139.  
<sup>40</sup> *Era*, 27 December 1916.  
<sup>41</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 137.  
<sup>42</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 138.  
<sup>43</sup> *Era*, 23 August 1916.  
<sup>44</sup> *Musical Herald*, March 1919.  
<sup>45</sup> *Sheffield Telegraph*, 28 September 1917.  
<sup>46</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 145.  
<sup>47</sup> Ashwell, *Modern Troubadours*, 153.  
<sup>48</sup> Margaret Williams, *Letters from a Wooden Hut* (London, self published, 1959), 10.  
<sup>49</sup> *Sunday Evening Telegraph*, 2 March 1919.  
<sup>50</sup> On the Canadian concert parties and their longevity, see Jason Wilson, *Soldiers of Song: the Dumbells and other Canadian Concert Parties of the First World War* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012.).