



DID OWEN SPEAK FOR ALL SOLDIERS?

Narrated by Ian McMillan

[Ian McMillan walks into a pub]

Wilfred Owen's poems were a deeply personal reaction to the horrors of war. But it might come as a bit of a surprise to learn that not all soldier poets were so disturbed by the conflict.

After all, there was the rum ration to worry about, and the cold, and the hunger, 'ey?

[Asks barkeeper] Am I too late for lunch?

Take Woodbine Willie for instance, a popular frontline chaplain. His poem called 'The Spirit' shows what really was bothering the soldiers.

"When ye've got an empty belly,
And the bulley's rotten smelly,
And you're shivering like a jelly,
Carry on.

"When the Boche has done your chum in,
And the sergeant's done the rum in,
And there ain't no rations comin',
Carry on."

If thinking about your stomach or trying to keep warm didn't inspire the soldiers to great things, there was always a bunch of cold, tired and hungry people just across the way in the trenches who were there to take the mickey out of: the Germans.

This is a poem from The Wipers Times, a satirical newspaper published in the trenches.

"There was a little Hun, and at war he tried his hand,
And while that Hun was winning war was fine you understand,
But when the others hit him back he
Shouted in alarm,
A little drop of peace wouldn't do me any harm."

The soldier poet's pen wasn't always aimed at the enemy. They also poked fun at the officers and generals. Here's one from a popular World War One song 'Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire'.

"If you want to find the sergeant,
I know where he is.
He's drunk up on the dugout floor.
If you want to find the captain,
I know where he is.
He's home again on seven-days leave."

[Images courtesy of Getty Images and Mary Evans]