



History:

Topic: Penny Readings & Jingoistic Songs
1878

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Penny Readings and Jingoistic Songs - 1878

Who would have thought that a simple evening of entertainment in Hargrave in 1878 should have such resonance in our country today?

Before the building of the village hall in the 1920's the school room in Hargrave was often used as a meeting point for important village business and recreation. On two social events on consecutive evenings in late February early March 1878, one performer Mr. Layton accompanied by his sister on the piano is reported to have metaphorically 'brought the house down' with his rendition of 'his war song'. This was in fact 'MacDermott's War Song' part of the repertoire at that time of Gilbert MacDermott a famous music hall performer. Its contents had within it references to the Crimean War (1854-56) and Russia's subsequent aggression and annexation of parts of Poland and Uzbekistan, along with their declaration of war against Turkey in 1877.

A line from the song introduced the word jingoism in to common usage, as a way of expressing extreme patriotism and aggressive warlike foreign policy. In today's world the vast majority would probably prefer peaceful coexistence to the stark consequences of the alternative.

The following item was printed in the Bury Free Press on the 9th March 1878

HARGRAVE

PENNY READINGS

— Two most successful entertainments were given in the School-room Thursday and Friday evenings, February 28th and March 1st. The room was crowded, and indeed overcrowded, each evening. Great pains had been taken decorating the building for the occasion, and were the congratulations of the numerous visitors upon the great success attending the first attempt to enliven the village with one of these popular entertainments.

The following is the programme:-

Solo Piano—Mrs. Chamberlain.

Song, "Nancy Lee," Mr. Layton.

Reading, "Spirit of the Past," Rev. S. Chamberlain.

Part Song, "Never Forget," Choir.

Song, "The Fortune Teller," Miss Bell.

Song, "Let her apply to me," Mr. Layton.

Reading, "The one-legged Goose, Mr. T. Bell.

Song, "Gipsy's Warning," Miss Jackson.

Part Song, "Come, birdie, come, "Choir.

Duet Piano-The Misses Bell.

Reading, Beth Gebert," Rev. S. Chamberlain.

Song, "Katey's Letter," Miss Bell.

Song, "McDermott's War Song," Mr. Layton.

Duet, "Country Courtship," Miss J. Bell and Mr. T. Bell.

God (printed Sod) Save the Queen.

It will be noticed that "native talent" was largely represented in the various pieces, and all acquitted themselves well, and received well-merited applause, it is only to add that Mr. Layton (who was most ably accompanied on the piano by his sister) succeeded especially in his war song in fairly bringing the house down. There were a couple of acting charades, the first of which was admirably rendered by Mrs. Chamberlain, the Misses Bell, and M. T. Ball; and the second by the Misses Bell and Miss Hubbard.

Origins of the MacDermott's War Song

Born John Farrell (1845-1901), Gilbert MacDermott was born in Islington, London to Patrick Farrell (1818-1878) and Mary (McDermott) (1823-1913). He was married to Mary Ann Stradwick (1845-1908) in 1866 and with whom he had a son. However a further five of his offspring are said to have been fathered illegitimately with his partner Annie Milburn an actress who he lived with from 1883.

He had served as a youth in the royal navy, but his first appearance as a utility actor was on the stage in Dover in 1869. Moving back home he adopted the stage name Gilbert Hastings MacDermott and soon became a success as actor and playwright in the early 1870's which included a period plying his craft in New York. In 1876 he returned to London and became better known as a popular comic on the music hall scene.



Gilbert Hastings MacDermott
(The Great MacDermott)

In 1877 he purchased a song for a guinea from the well-known composer George William Hunt (1829-1904). Referencing conflicts with both the Russians and the Turks, the song soon became his signature tune and was commonly known as 'McDermott's War Song'. It contained the words

We don't want to fight.

But by Jingo, if we do,

We've got the ships, we've got the men,

We've got the money too,

So popular was the song that MacDermott was summoned to perform at a private audience with the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII.

Subsequently 'jingo' and 'jingoism' passed permanently into the English language after an article in The Daily News on 11th March 1878 which termed those who enjoyed such patriotic war songs as 'jingoes'.

MacDermott actually only sang the song for around two years, and it was only part of his far wider repertoire. He continued his successful career performing until his retirement in 1894, when he moved on to becoming proprietor of several music halls until his death in 1901 in Clapham, London.

The war song was brought back several times by other artists, particularly those with right wing leanings, hoping to influence the clientele that frequented the music halls. It became particularly popular again as an altered version during the First World War.

APPENDIX

G.W. Hunt, 'MacDermott's War Song' (1877)

The "Dogs of War" are loose and the rugged Russian Bear,

All bent on blood and robbery has crawled out of his lair...

It seems a thrashing now and then, will never help to tame...

That brute, and so he's out upon the "same old game"...

The Lion did his best... to find him some excuse...

To crawl back to his den again. All efforts were no use...

He hunger'd for his victim. He's pleased when blood is shed...

But let us hope his crimes may all recoil on his own head...

We don't want to fight but by jingo if we do...

We've got the ships, we've got the men, and got the money too!

We've fought the Bear before... and while we're Britons true,

The Russians shall not have Constantinople...

The Turk has got his faults, of crime he bears the taint,
The Russian like sly Reynard, pretends to be a saint,
'Tis all for Christianity the heathen Turk he'll fight,
Altho' when told, and pretty plain, two wrongs don't make a right;
As peacemaker Old England her very utmost tried,
The Russians said they wanted peace, but then those Russians lied,
Of carnage and trickery they'll have sufficient feast
Ere they dare to think of coming near our Road unto the East.

We don't want to fight but by jingo if we do...
We've got the ships, we've got the men, and got the money too!
We've fought the Bear before... and while we're Britons true,
The Russians shall not have Constantinople...

The misdeeds of the Turks have been "spouted" through all lands,
But how about the Russians, can they show spotless hands?
They slaughtered well at Khiva, in Siberia icy cold.
How many subjects done to death we'll ne'er perhaps be told.
They butchered the Circassians, man, woman yes and child.
With cruelties their Generals their murderous hours beguiled,
And poor unhappy Poland their cruel yoke must bear,
While prayers for "Freedom and Revenge" go up into the air.

We don't want to fight but by jingo if we do...
We've got the ships, we've got the men, and got the money too!
We've fought the Bear before... and while we're Britons true,
The Russians shall not have Constantinople...

May he who 'gan the quarrel soon have to bite the dust.
The Turk should be thrice armed for "he hath his quarrel just."
'Tis said that countless thousands should die through cruel war,
But let us hope most fervently ere long it shall be o'er.

Let them be warned: Old England is brave Old England still.
We've proved our might, we've claimed our right, and ever, ever will.
Should we have to draw the sword our way to victory we'll forge,
With the Battle cry of Britons, "Old England and St George!"

We don't want to fight but by jingo if we do...
We've got the ships, we've got the men, and got the money too!
We've fought the Bear before... and while we're Britons true,
The Russians shall not have Constantinople...

Nicholas Newman
May 2022.