

Ring Lardner's Comic War

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Ringgold W. Lardner (1885-1933) is still best known for writing about golf, boxing, and baseball¹ and for short stories, such as "The Golden Honeymoon" (1922) and "Haircut" (1925), that continue to appear in anthologies. When more fully recognized, Lardner's contributions to American letters include adding a "'mordant wit'" (Silverman and Silverman 387) to humor writing, conveying the unique American vernacular as a craftsman of the short story and an innovator in sports writing, satirizing the naïve American abroad, and devising hilariously absurd plays.² To this list of literary accomplishments should be added Lardner's writing about the First World War, which scholars have only recently made more available. Ron Rapoport includes the section "Ring Goes to War" in *The Lost Journalism of Ring Lardner* (2017); and Jeff Silverman provides an expansive selection in *Lardner on War: The Wit, Wisdom, and Whimsy of America's Premier Journalist* (2003). Examined closely, Lardner's war fiction and journalism provide unique insight into American views of the First World War. In his columns for *The Chicago Tribune*, in his brief stint reporting from France for *Colliers*, and in his short fiction, Lardner wrote about the war to cast light on what Americans thought and to offer prompts on how they could think better. The humor in this war-related writing, sometimes satirically and always slyly, challenges many of the American public's false ideas about the war. Although he was not anti-war – indeed, he was a member of the pro-U.S. involvement group of writers known as the Vigilantes (Van Wienen 67-8)³ – his irony-laced humor refuses to normalize some of American society's mistaken views of the war. The object of Lardner's humor is frequently the gap between outward appearance and inner character, between what people say

and the thoughts that motivate their actions. Although Lardner did not object to America's involvement in the First World War, he could not help but observe American hypocrisy and self-delusion about it.

Lardner's comic take on the war may surprise readers who might expect American writing to be blandly conformist and without nuance given the official repression of national dissent while pro-war propaganda amassed in print, blazed from posters, and sounded in speeches. After the U.S. entered the war, the Committee on Public Information, created by the Executive branch and headed by George Creel, built a tentacular communication network that stretched throughout what we would now call the media. The CPI relentlessly disseminated President Woodrow Wilson's stated war aim of "making the world safe for democracy." Alan Axelrod writes that the CPI "controlled virtually every scrap of information America and much of the rest of the world received concerning the war. It did not rely on the censorship so much as the total monopolization of information, shaping images, shaping emotions to create a reality in which Wilson's war emerged as not merely desirable but inevitable" (xi). Creel, Axelrod writes, "proclaimed himself a propagandist – a propagator of the faith. His mission was to urge victory for the sake of Wilson's ideologically established gospel of democracy" (81). For Creel and presumably the workers within the CPI itself, there was nothing wrong with propaganda. In this environment, moreover, it would have been almost impossible for any American writer, Ring Lardner included, to publish in the U.S. mainstream press – and be paid to write – without being at some level propagandists for the war.

Initially, propaganda did not need to support the war itself. Axelrod asserts that even before the CPI was created "the vast majority of the American people rallied to the war effort" (73). Creel's job, then, was not to convince Americans to back the war but to ensure that the

press did nothing to counter a pro-war view (Axelrod 74). Given that broader aim, within the efforts of the CPI it was possible for a certain measure of individuality to emerge in pro-war messages. For example, the CPI did not write speeches given by the "Four-Minute Men," the public orators who spoke in favor of the war, often in the four minutes between the change of film reels in movie theaters. No speaker "was assigned canned talks," though they were "issued model speeches and lists of approved talking points" (Axelrod 121). The goal was for these speeches to come across as original, spontaneous expressions. In this effort, Axelrod discerns Creel's avoidance of mere advertising: "Advertising delivered a message. Propaganda created or shaped reality" (122).

Lardner's war writing did not overtly undermine the Wilsonian "gospel of democracy."⁴ Yet neither was it woodenly conformist and rigidly ideological. Skeptical of an overly shaped "reality," especially if it defied actual human experience and impulse, Lardner directed his humor at false ideas about the war while maintaining overall support for it. His ironic war writing exposed human foibles, the messy and mixed motivations inherent in lived experience, leaving to other writers the creation of fantasies that insisted upon noble purpose and unwavering principle. By exposing human flaws, Lardner diluted the official view that cast Americans as pure patriots in staunch defense of democracy.

In the Wake of the News: Daily Columns

Lardner's ability to both support the war and question certain ideas about it can be seen in his newspaper columns. From 1913 to 1919, Lardner wrote a column, "In the Wake of the News," for the *Chicago Tribune*. Rapoport calculates that Lardner published in the *Tribune* "more than 1600 . . . columns and other articles" in this period, "which is to say he wrote virtually every day" (xxiii). "In the Wake of the News" offered an almost daily dose of Lardner's witty take on

current events. Often made up of short passages in which jokes rapidly set up and pay off and in which puns perform unabashedly, Lardner's columns ranged widely. He of course took note of America's attitudes toward the Great War.

Lardner clearly approved of certain war initiatives. For example, Rapoport notes that Lardner "support[ed] the [U.S.] government's liberty bond campaign" (151). One endorsement of government bonds appeared in the vernacular voice of Jack Keefe, the baseball-playing protagonist of *You Know Me Al* (1916).⁵ In a more straightforward fashion, Lardner promoted the Liberty loan effort in "Serve Your Country with a Minimum of Effort" in which he wrote pointedly: "Your neighbor who is killed at the front gives his life for his country and his country gives him credit. You who buy a Liberty bond give your country nothing but your support and confidence and your country gives you 3½ per cent" (Rpt. in Rapoport 159). In a later Keefe letter to his friend Al, published in the *Tribune* as "Yes, Sir" in May 1918, Lardner favored donations to the Red Cross. Further support for behind-the-lines workers appeared in his report on an instance of genuine bravery. In "On Being Bombed," published in September 1917, Lardner writes about a "Dr. Smith of Neenah, Wis." whose transport ship narrowly missed being torpedoed and who later survived a German air raid on his hospital. Conscious of the censors, Lardner called the physician "Smith," while accurately identifying the man's hometown. Lardner quotes Doctor Smith to emphasize his courage: "'I'm too lucky to be badly hurt and I don't believe I'll ever be scared again'" (Rpt. in Rapoport 166). In addition to such overt support for the U.S. war effort, Lardner offers more subtle endorsement. For example, he frequently mocks the enemy by joking about the German high command, including Kaiser Wilhelm and the generals Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg.

Within this general approbation, however, Lardner displayed a biting disapproval of Americans' swaggering self-confidence and superficial patriotism. Soon after the United States declared war on April 6, 1917, Lardner suggested that Americans remain wary of war reporting that appeared to be unbiased. In "Neutrality" published on April 10, 1917, he explained:

It was noticeable in our "Pennant Dope" Sunday that the scribe who picked Boston to win the American league flag was a Boston scribe, the one who selected Cleveland was a Clevelander, and the one who chose the Tigers works in Detroit. You have probably observed that most of the war stuff from American correspondents with the entente armies has given our allies the better of it, while reports from the scribes assigned to the Teut forces have had a distinctively German odor. The presumption is that an expert on baseball, war or any other sport writes his judgment. But the fact is that his judgment is more or less colored by his associations.

Lardner was even more pointed in his criticism of wealthy Americans for their posturing and self-aggrandizement. In "Society Does Its Bit," published on April 26, 1917, he mocked wealthy people ostentatiously "doing their bit" for the war effort:

G. Worthington Smith-Smith-Smith. 1126 West Randolph, announced that he would donate his share of the County Hospital to America and its new allies. "And, of course," said Mr. Triple Smith, who was smart in a new business suit, "I'll give one-hundredth of my fortune to the Government in this crisis, with no security except non-taxable U. S. bonds. Also, I will send my chauffeur to the front and get another one."

Manufactured patriotism was also the point of a joke that appeared in "The Friend of the Lender" on May 8, 1918. Under the sub-heading "How to Keep Loyal," Lardner expressed his weariness with incessant patriotic displays:

R. W. L. writes: "I have an office in The Tribune building. I am all alone in it. Nobody can see me. But I can, and do, hear things, chiefly music from the nearby theater and the music department of neighboring department stores; also, during Liberty loan or other drive the bands that parade the street. At least six times a day the country's national anthem is clearly audible. In the midst of typewriting, and invisible to the whole world, must I stand up? I find it very difficult to write from a prone standing position." REPLY
Put cotton in your ears.

After a year of U.S. involvement, the nation's constant need to express its wartime fervor received Lardner's ire. On April 24, 1918, he published "Editorial: Don't be a Song Slacker" in which he spoofed pervasive, and ridiculous, pro-war songs. Earlier in 1918, Lardner alluded to a well-known anti-war song in a caustic quip that questioned the sincerity of pre-war American attitudes. Under the sub-heading "Missing" in a column titled "An Interview with Mr. Kabenawawwoyvence" (January 24, 1918), appeared this single sentence: "What has become of the patriot who wrote the song 'I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier'?" With lyrics by Alfred Bryan, "I Didn't Raise My Boy to be a Soldier" sold 650,000 copies in the first months of 1915, a time when many in the United States were opposed to entering the war in Europe. As the Great War entered its second calendar year, A. Scott Berg notes that in the United States Bryan's "song expressed the majority opinion at the time" that America should remain neutral (*World War I* 61). Evoking the sentimentality of motherhood, "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier" included pacifistic lyrics such as "Let nations arbitrate their future troubles, / It's time to lay the sword and gun away." In 1918, Lardner recalls the song and the time before the U.S. entered the war. He reminds readers of that clear before-and-after, and his humor has at least two targets: the naivete of that earlier pre-war American innocence and the current song-filled, raucous support

for the war. In 1915, the message in "I Didn't Raise My Boy to be Soldier" was not universally approved as the song was often parodied and derided. Nonetheless, it also expressed a widely held view. By referring to this song, Lardner registers the fickle nature of national opinion. Both pre-war neutrality and at-war gusto may be equally short-lived.

Through irony, Lardner makes apparent that ideas about the war were created and that some of them could be objected to. His crusade against calling American soldiers "Sammy" offers another illustration of how his humor encouraged precision, at least about certain aspects of American war thought. Emmet Crozier writes that in the summer of 1917, as the first U.S. troops began to arrive in France, reporters "searching for a suitable nickname for the U.S. infantryman to match the British 'Tommy Atkins' and the French '*poilu*,' tried out the term 'Sammy.' No one knows who first started it, but the *nom de guerre* derived from America's classic cartoon figure 'Uncle Sam.' By common consent the newsmen put it to work" (146). The nickname "Sammy" began to appear in the *Chicago Tribune*, and Lardner began to ridicule the appellation and the writers who would use it. In his column on December 15, 1917, for example, Lardner unleashed the following:

Certain employés of this and other papers either do not read our writings, or do not believe what we say, or are so arrogant as to be unwilling to take our tip. American soldiers, here and overseas, are still frequently referred to in the prints as "Sammies," and one publication, sponsor of a, no doubt, worthy scheme to make army life more enjoyable, seeks the public's support of the exhortation, in large type, to "Be a Sammy Backer!" How inspiring a phrase! How catchy!

If any user of the nickname Sammy can show us one soldier who likes it or two who are not made positively ill by it, we'll quit this job and go to work.

In February of the next year, Lardner continued his objection to “Sammy,” writing: “[I]f the railroad engineers want to call themselves Sammies, well and good, as the saying is, though we’d recommend Caseys as more appropriate and less nauseating. . . . However, we’re not crusading against the use of the term by youse. What we aim at is to have it banished from The Trib, where the soldiers may see it” (“Sammies” 14).

Indeed, the soldiers apparently disliked being called “Sammies.” Crozier notes that reporters eventually decided that “[i]n print, ‘Sammy’ was completely phony. Officers and men grumbled about it, and no one mourned when ‘Sammy’ was quietly dropped overboard, the first American casualty of the war” (146). Editors for the American military’s overseas newspaper debated whether “Doughboy” should be used for American servicemen other than those in the infantry, but according to Alfred E. Cornebise, “from the spring of 1918 or so” *The Stars and Stripes* used “doughboy . . . to refer to American troops whatever their branch of service” (103). Lardner’s objections to Sammy were an attempt to align the public with a truth, however small – to insist on an idea that was not imposed upon Americans by clever writers at a distance from the views of those fighting the war. In his newspaper columns about the home front during the Great War, Lardner made fun of the gap between public posture and actual motivations and behavior, undercutting those who would “sell” the war with falsehoods.

My Four Weeks in France: Reporting for Colliers

In the summer of 1917 Lardner went to France on assignment for *Colliers*, sailing six weeks after the first troops in the American Expeditionary Forces arrived at St Nazaire on June 26th. Between September and February, he published eight articles in *Colliers* that were reprinted in a volume titled *My Four Weeks in France* (1918). In general, these pieces suggest

Lardner's frustration at having to cover the war from behind the lines while getting to see the front just once and then through binoculars (Caruthers 114). Clifford M. Caruthers describes these reports as "noteworthy only because they reflect Lardner's view that the backwash of war is boring" (115). Specifically, Caruthers finds the *Colliers* articles "reflect [Lardner's] boredom with military bureaucracy and strain to find humor in his struggles with the French language" (114).

Although *My Four Weeks in France* is seen as one of Lardner's minor books,⁶ a closer reading of it reveals skepticism about the confidence Americans had in the war information they received. Privately, Lardner extended that skepticism to himself making fun of being taken seriously as a war correspondent. In a letter, dated January 21, 1918, to Hewitt H. Howland, the general editor for the publisher bringing out *My Four Weeks in France*, Lardner confessed that he was "dissatisfied" with "A Reporter's Diary" as the title *Colliers* used for his articles: "My own title was 'A Neophyte's Diary,' but *Colliers* changed it" (Caruthers 116). Publicly, in the *Colliers* articles and *My Four Weeks in France* Lardner alerted readers to war-time censorship of the news and warned them against accepting misinformation.

Like any war correspondent in France, Lardner endured restrictions on what he could witness and report on.⁷ Moreover, having departed from France on September 16th, Lardner could not have reported on American troops in combat as the first U.S. military units deployed to the front on October 21st. Lardner tried to see and write about as much as he could but bureaucratic requirements for the proper passes and credentials along with censorship and even a lack of reliable transportation stymied him. If *My Four Weeks in France* now seems overly full of jokes about the French language and Paris taxi drivers, the space Lardner devoted to

describing the minutia he could report on suggests the unfortunate extent of his war correspondent's access.

In the *Colliers* articles Lardner makes recurring reference to the official censorship that limited his reporting. For example, he was not able to name the officers he met, writing, "it is interdicted by the censor to mention the names of any officers save General Sibert and General Pershing" (59). Moreover, sometimes these unnamed officers related information that Lardner also could not report. At one point, he meets "two American naval officers" who tell him and another reporter "the most interesting stuff I've heard yet. But, like all interesting stuff, it's forbidden to write it" (161-162). Lardner often expressed the war reporter's frustrations with censorship: "The correspondents have a tough life. They are quartered to a good – judged by French standards – hotel, and are not what you call overworked. There is nothing to write about, and if you wrote about it you probably couldn't get it through [the censors]" (76-77).

Given that access to military operations was strictly controlled and that news reports were heavily censored, Lardner warns his readers to be questioning of what they do learn about the war. An exchange with an American officer he calls "Captain Jones" cautions against certitude:

This war, [Jones] said, should be called the War of Rumors. The war will be over by Christmas. The war won't be over for ten years. The boche is starving. The Allies are getting fat. The boche has plenty to eat. The Allies are dying of hunger. Our last transport fleet sank five subs. Our last transport fleet was sunk by a whole flotilla of subs. Montenegro's going to make a separate peace with Bosnia. There is talk of a peace negotiation between Hungary and Indiana. Ireland, Brazil and Oklahoma are going to challenge the world. They're going to move the entire war to the Balkans and charge

admission. The Kaiser's dying of whooping cough. You can learn anything you want to or don't want to know. Why— this to me —don't you fellas print the truth?

And where, I asked him 'would you advise us to go and get it?

The same place I got it, said the captain.

And what is it?

I don't know. (93)

Lardner's last reports for *Colliers* describe his stay in London and his passage to New York City. In one shipboard encounter he meets "a doctor, a D. D., who intends to lecture in America on the war" (175). This doctor claims to have been "only twenty yards" from the German lines. Lardner discovers, however, that D. D. saw the same part of "the front" to which the British Army escorted him, the front that Lardner had to use binoculars to see, and from the same vantage point in the same recent time period. Lardner then tells the doctor that he is mistaken about having been so close to the Germans, or even to the British front line: "But honest, Doc, somebody was kidding you or else your last name is Cook" (175). Lardner concludes his *Colliers* work by emphasizing the importance of factual, first-hand observation – which he has indicated all along has been in short supply to American reporters. He insists, "truth may be stranger than fiction, but it's also a whole lot duller" (186). His answers to the usual questions put to him by curious Americans insist on that dull truth. To the question "How close did you get to the front," Lardner answers, "A mile and a half, on the observation hill." To "How many men have we [Americans] got over there," he replies, "That's supposed to be a secret." To "How long is it [the war] going to last," Lardner admits, "I don't know" (186-187). Those words – "I don't know" – are

the last before *My Four Weeks in France* signs off with "The End." In his reporting from France, Lardner maintained an honest position.

Epistolary Fiction: Jack Keefe Joins the Army

In fiction Lardner enjoyed greater latitude for his humorous exposé of Americans' false notions of the war largely because his short stories featured his most famous literary character. Beginning in March 1918, Lardner published 10 stories in *The Saturday Evening Post* that depicted his Jack Keefe character as a soldier. Four years earlier in "A Busher's Letters Home," readers first encountered Keefe as a minor league baseball player who becomes a member of the Chicago White Sox. Told in the first person as letters from Jack to his friend Al Blanchard, some of these stories were collected under the title *You Know Me Al* (1916). Lardner biographer Jonathan Yardley writes that readers immediately loved the Keefe stories, appreciating their American vernacular and thrilling to their mixture of real baseball players, such as Ty Cobb, with the fictional Keefe. As a narrator, Keefe – who has been called the "classic American rube" (Yardley 166) – exhibits a steady lack of self-awareness, and the stories' comedy arises from his consistent inability to see himself and others around him with genuine understanding. Summing up Keefe's character, Louis Hasley called him "a pitcher [with] enviable talent" who exhibits "arrogance, naivete, [an] affinity for drink, women, and overabundant meals, [and a] chip-on-the-shoulder sensitivity [that leads] to boasting of his successes and . . . elaborate self-exonerations for his failures" (221). Readers mostly laugh at Keefe but rarely with him, feeling a knowing superiority as they fill in the insights that Keefe's self-pleading omits.

By putting his popular character into military service, Lardner could have alienated readers who could accept a "wise boob" (Hilton 16) as a professional baseball player but not as an American soldier about to fight in the Great War. As a professional writer, however, Lardner

possessed a keen sense of his audience and of what would sell. When he took Keefe to war, he knew readers would follow. Moreover, for Lardner the artist, Keefe provided a vehicle for commentary on a war that Americans at first resisted getting into but, once joined, were expected to embrace uncritically. Jack Keefe is an American simpleton, to be sure, but he is also, as Merritt Moseley writes, a “complex character” that “we are not supposed to see entirely through . . . in order to adopt some position the opposite of his. Our response is more complicated than that: we laugh at him, perhaps despise him at times, but may ultimately pity him” (51). When Jack Keefe mouths received ideas about the war and America’s participation in it, readers likely did not agree with him; after all, readers – then and now – are smarter than he is, which is why he is funny. Instead, readers could perceive those ideas as fodder for Keefe’s inflated sense of himself. In that way, he becomes the boob that might make readers wiser about a war that much in American news coverage and popular culture reduced to simple formulas.

The stories with Jack Keefe in the army were later collected in two volumes: *Treat ‘Em Rough: Jack the Kaiser Killer* (1918) and *The Real Dope* (1919). The first volume covers Jack’s experiences in training camp and the second takes him to France. In both books, Keefe swaggers through and misinterprets practically every situation he’s in; he flirts with women not his wife and is inevitably exposed as deluded about his personal attractiveness; and he invents pitiful excuses for his behavior to remain always and almost blissfully self-important. *The Real Dope* is funnier than *Treat ‘Em Rough*, I find,⁸ and readers who encounter the stories only in these two collections might agree. For *Treat ‘Em Rough* leaves out the first story in the magazine series, “Call for Mr. Keefe,” in which we learn that Jack was drafted into the army and did not enlist. In fact, he tries to avoid the draft, and this knowledge makes the subsequent stories more

cutting because in them Jack presents himself as a patriotic volunteer who is “fighting for Uncle Sam” (*TER* 13) and as a physical and moral superior to the other men in his outfit.⁹

Moreover, if readers do not know, though they may suspect, that Jack the Kaiser Killer was drafted, the book loses some of its satiric bite. In the end, about to ship for France, Jack writes Al, “when it’s a question of duty I am not the kind that would back out” (159). Then he rubs it in, suggesting that by staying home Al is a lesser man: “I will say good bye to you now and say good bye to Bertha [Al’s wife] for me and she ought to be thankful she has got a husband that stayed at home and didn’t enlist” (160). Though meant as a barb, Jack’s swipe at Al might leave a reader wondering if Bertha does indeed feel thankful that her husband will not be sent to war – and maybe even that he is not a superior jerk like Jack Keefe.

More broadly, *Treat ‘Em Rough* deflates the contrived patriotism that made heroic icons of the real baseball players who joined the armed forces. One significant part of the history of baseball players serving in the military in World War I is how they were seen by the public. Jim Leeke has collected newspaper and magazine stories that demonstrate how the popular press most often celebrated the players who enlisted. For example, some of the more admiring stories report on former major league player Eddie Grant who joined the army in May of 1917 and was killed in action in October of 1918. Others who are praised include Christy Mathewson and Ty Cobb who joined the army and served as captains in the Chemical Warfare Service. One of the most celebrated baseball-players-turned-soldier was Hank Gowdy, a catcher with the Boston Braves who enlisted in an Ohio National Guard unit in June 1917, becoming the first active major leaguer to volunteer for the army. During the war and after it, Gowdy was the subject of numerous newspaper accounts that lauded his service; this praise included articles and even poems by Grantland Rice that were published in *The Stars and Stripes* and stateside

newspapers.¹⁰ Leeke notes, however, that most baseball players in the armed forces “waited for the draft” (Preface 1) while others took jobs in the defense industry to fulfill their obligations. “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, for example, joined the Harlan and Hollingsworth Shipbuilding Company and played baseball for the company’s team.

Ex-baseball players who were drafted or who took jobs with defense contractors made for less-than-patriotic news copy. Indeed “some sportswriters grumbled that [these] ballplayers should have done more, simply because they were athletes” (Leeke Preface 2). Such grumbling was in keeping with a general dissatisfaction with major league baseball for not doing its part to help win the war. In 1917, for example, the league played its full schedule of games, under the premise that baseball was the national pastime and so necessary to home-front morale. And in 1918, though the league shortened the season, the owners and players were still seen as self-interested and public mistrust persisted. In this context, the story of someone like Eddie Collins improved baseball’s image. Collins – a star second baseman for the Chicago White Sox – joined the Marines in August of 1918. Stories about his enlistment made much of his trading a baseball uniform for a Marine one. A story in the *Washington Herald* praised Collins: “There’s been a lot of criticism about ballplayers seeking bomb-proof jobs, but this can scarcely be said about a man who voluntarily joins the ‘teufel hunds’ who have a reputation of always being in the middle of it when there’s dangerous work to be done” (rpt in Leeke 151). A reporter for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* put Collins’s self-sacrifice into monetary terms: “Giving up a \$15,000 job for one that pays \$30 a month would be a severe blow to many persons, but not to Eddie Collins. He not only gave up his baseball career, but did it cheerfully. . . . Eddie is lucky to have gotten in the marines and the marines are lucky to have gotten Eddie” (rpt in Leeke 153). It is not a diminishment of Eddie Collins and his military service that he never saw combat but spent

the war in Philadelphia, where he sometimes got his name in the papers for playing ball with “the U. S. Marine team from the Signal Training Camp Edward C. Fuller” (153).¹¹ As these examples from the newspaper coverage of Collins’s enlistment show, however, reporters were not interested in the complex realities military service posed for baseball players who were often portrayed as either shirkers or heroes.¹² Shirkers sought draft deferments or took state-side defense jobs; heroes bravely enlisted.

Ring Lardner, in contrast, made fun of the simple view fellow reporters and newspaper readers had of baseball players in the military, and he did so by employing the established tropes of donning different uniforms and taking a cut in salary. Early in *Treat ‘Em Rough*, Jack Keefe writes about an upcoming leave to Chicago, on which he plans to see his old team play: “I can’t get there for the first game but I will see the Sunday game and won’t Gleason and them pop their eyes out when I go down to the bench with my cocky suit on and shake hands with them and I bet Rowland will wish I was wearing the White Sox uniform instead of Uncle Sam’s uniform” (TER37). Later, Keefe, who did not take this planned leave, reveals that the White Sox are winning games without him. The team does not seem to miss him, and he will not get to pose heroically for photographs in his army uniform on the field with his former teammates – as Hank Gowdy did when he was photographed in his army uniform with members of the New York Giants at the 1917 World Series for pictures that were distributed by the Bain News Service to papers across the country.¹³

Later Lardner undermines the heroic baseball player narrative by having Keefe make an issue of his pay. Envious of his former teammates who have won the World Series without him and stinging from having missed out on the Series bonus money, Keefe brags to Al: “Well Al the world serious is over just like I said it would be with the White Sox winner and each one of the

boys gets \$3600.00 and that would of been my share only I love my country more than a few dollars and I bet the boys feel kind of ashamed of themselves to think I was the only one that passed up all that jack to work for Uncle Sam at \$30.00 per mo." (*TER* 69-70). Keefe further weakens this noble posture a few pages later when he writes about his plan to get an extra half-month's pay out of the army, a scheme based on a camp rumor and his own faulty reasoning.

Another source of humor in both books is Keefe's equating of baseball and war. Lardner's broad humor in these episodes challenges this common trope, one that normalized and trivialized war by comparing it to a game. In *Treat 'Em Rough*, for example, Keefe objects to being taught to throw hand grenades with a straight arm, the only way the heavy American WWI grenade could be thrown. Naturally, however, he wants to throw grenades like baseballs by bending his arm – an action that at least one recruitment poster also depicted.¹⁴ Jack complains to Al,

you ought of have seen the officer that was trying to learn us how and if they all throw like he its a wonder they hit Europe to say nothing about the Germans. He kept his arm stiff like he didn't have no elbow joint and he was straight over hand all the while like Reulbach and you know what kind of control he had. . . . [T]he way he throwed he couldn't of took a baseball and hit the infield from second base and finely I told him and he said yes but if you crooked your arm you would wear it out because the regular bombs weighs almost 2 lbs. and you had to use a easy motion. How is that Al for a fresh bum trying to talk to me about easy motions and I had a notion to tell him to go back to France with his motions but I kept my temper and throwed a few the right way till my arm got to feeling sore. (77-78)

In *The Real Dope*, another comic bit portrays Keefe's insistence that baseball and war are similar. Believing he is writing in response to General Pershing (only later does he discover that the letter supposedly from Pershing was concocted as a practical joke), Keefe explains that both baseball and war require strategy and that generals should think like managers and pitchers. Keefe, who would of course modestly accept a position on Pershing's staff – though by no means does he want AI to think he is afraid of trench warfare – plans to offer the General four pieces of advice drawn from his baseball expertise:

- 1) In baseball and war one should take advantage of the other side's weaknesses, "For inst. suppose the Germans is weak on getting out of the way of riffle bullets why that's the weapon to use on them and make a sucker out of them";
- 2) Getting the jump on your oppts. is more then ½ the battle whether its in the war or on the baseball field;
- 3) Sometimes in baseball a team plays with fewer than nine players and in war it is an advantage to have more men than the other side; and
- 4) Though baseball is played during the day and when both sides know the time of the game, generals can attack at night and "don't half to tell the other side when he is going to attack them." (89, 89) (*RD* 87, 89)

Keefe's comparisons of baseball and war are silly, of course – but this association was not Lardner's invention. Rather, he is spoofing an analogue promoted by the press. *The Stars and Stripes*, for instance, often used sports terms to describe, and downplay, war. For example, on the front page of its February 22, 1918, edition it published a long poem that played with the metaphoric connections between war and baseball. The poem appeared under the headline "World Series Opened – Batter Up" and was accompanied by a picture of an American soldier

throwing a hand grenade – like a baseball (Corneise 140).¹⁵ For Lardner, the foolishness of such comparisons was comic gold, but the humor in this case is pointed at the reader who might be tempted to believe such nonsense.

Lardner's mockery of the war-as-baseball metaphor represents the way he plays jokes on Keefe to make fun of views this "wise boob" might share, though of course in exaggerated fashion, with other Americans. Undermining foolish notions is characteristic of Lardner's humor. Michael Oriard categorizes Lardner as both a humorist and a satirist "at the same time but in varying degrees" (188). Lardner's stories, Oriard finds, often lean toward one or the other mode, though Oriard also discerns in "[t]he shape of his career . . . an increasing tendency toward [overt] satire" (187). Detecting the difference between the two is a matter of apprehending tone – "relatively genial amusement in Lardner's humor, various degrees of outrage in his satire" – with "an essential difference in dominant intention between the two types [being] easily recognizable" (Oriard 188). Oriard locates "Lardner's best satire . . . in the humorous stories (in first-person dialect), in which it is indirect and understated, with none of the fury that undermined many of his more overt satiric works" (188).

Alert to the tonal variations in Lardner's first-person World War I stories, readers will notice moments of satire that expose specific, pernicious ideas in public discourse. For example, in *Treat 'Em Rough*, Keefe encounters a conscientious objector named Castle, who is seen – as conscientious objectors were generally seen – as a coward. Lardner corrects this misperception when Castle is confronted about his beliefs: "So Shorty says 'You ain't the only one that objects to war but we got to make the world safe for Democrats and you shouldn't ought to object to getting your head blowed off in a good cause.' So Castle spoke up and said he didn't object to getting killed but what he objected to was killing other people" (40). The insistent syntax and

lack of dialect humor in this concluding sentence registers Lardner's anger or "outrage" as Oriard terms it. It is a moment of clarification, one that sounds more like author Lardner than character Keefe. Even though narratively it concludes the exchange between Shorty and Castle, thematically the target is outside the story: the American public's ridicule and misunderstanding of conscientious objectors. Several pages later Lardner employs humor when he turns the joke on the army, which we can laugh at genially, as we learn that Castle has been put into a noncombatant role: "And oh yes Al they have sent Castle over to the quarter masters dept. and he won't have a chance to kill nobody there except when they come after a pair of shoes" (55).

Lardner throws another satiric dart in *The Real Dope* when Keefe tells Al about the medals the French have been awarding to American soldiers: "The Americans that's all ready in the trenches has pulled off some great stuff and a whole lot of them has been sighted and give meddles and etc. by the Frenchmens" (64). Lardner has Keefe spell medal "meddle," a pun that would resonate with readers in an American populace that before April 1917 entertained doubts about the United States meddling in a Europeans' war. While in this passage Lardner praises the valor of U.S. soldiers who are pulling off some great stuff, he also cuttingly exposes the easy patriotism of Americans who remain safely on the home front. "[S]ometimes," Keefe tells Al, "the French pins a meddle on them . . . if you don't do nothing but die only then of course they send it to your family so as they will have something to show their friends besides snapshots of Mich. City" (*RD* 64-65).

The stories in which Jack Keefe goes into the army expose some of the public's false ideas about virtuous Doughboys and America's principled involvement in the First World War. For Oriard the Keefe stories about the army are "less successful" than the baseball stories "in large part because they were not rooted in that world of professional baseball Lardner knew

best" (175). These Keefe stories may also be less amusing because they are not about baseball, which after all is an entertainment and of course far less consequential than war. Furthermore, for the most part the baseball stories turn the humor inward on narrator Jack Keefe; the humor is directed less at ideas held by the public and more at the foibles of Keefe as a "busher" or rube. When he comes to write about the army and war, however, Lardner moves toward satire as he directs his humor at society's views. The joke is on us and not just on Keefe, perhaps making the laughs more painful. The stories with Keefe in the army are among the least known in Ring Lardner's canon, while his baseball stories are still widely read and enjoyed. Editions of *You Know Me Al* are still in print, and editors like George W. Hilton and Matthew J. Bruccoli have collected all of Lardner's baseball fiction. In his praise for these stories Bruccoli insists, "Great fiction is always great social history. Ring Lardner provided a trustworthy record of American society" (xiii). What Americans thought of the First World War is part of the record Lardner left. Moreover, what Americans should have thought better about the war is an effect of Lardner's war-time humor. For when the "wise boob" Jack Keefe has something to say about medals, or conscientious objectors, or seeing war like a baseball game, readers may very well laugh at their own simple ideas.

The war in Lardner's other fiction

In May of 1919, Lardner returned Keefe to a baseball uniform in the first of five more short stories. From 1922-1925 Keefe the ball player appeared in a syndicated comic strip, "You Know Me Al," with Lardner writing the copy for "some 700 strips" (Layman x). In these strips, which are set in the 1920s, the war is alluded to only when Jack and his wife visit Paris and Keefe jokes about the German army never entering the city. The war was not much on Keefe's mind. Nor was it for segments of American society, an indifference that Lardner subtly satirizes in two

short stories from the 1920s. In "Liberty Hall" (1928) Ben Drake, a famous Broadway composer, is staying with Mr. and Mrs. Thayer, a couple eager to impress the Drakes with their cultural superiority. The Thayers make a prominent display of their books, and when Ben picks one out to read, Lardner offers this exchange:

"What book is that?" asked Mrs. Thayer.

"The Great Gatsby," said Ben. "I've always wanted to read it but never got around to it."

"Heavens!" said Mrs. Thayer as she took it away from him. "That's old! You'll find the newest ones there on the table. We keep pretty well up to date. Ralph and I are both great readers. Just try any one of those books in that pile. They're all good."

Ben glanced over and selected *Chevrons*. (60)

In this passage, Mrs. Thayer compounds her boorish ignorance and philistinism. To her a "new" book is automatically better than an "old" one. Significantly, she does not object to Ben's reading *The Great Gatsby* on grounds of judgment or taste. Ben selects *Chevrons*, a novel about World War I soldiers written by veteran Leonard Nason and published in 1927. *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925. It is suggested that the Thayers have read neither novel, especially *Chevrons* which is in a "pile" of books all equally ignored.

A similar lack of interest in the war appears in "Zone of Quiet" (1925) in which Miss Lyons, a 23-year-old nurse, tells her mostly silent and never named patient that she plans to see the play *What Price Glory?* (1924).¹⁶ Written by Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings, *What Price Glory?* portrayed Marines in language that was shockingly realistic for its time. After seeing "the show" (69), however, Miss Lyons has nothing to say about it. Instead, she rattles on about the night club she went to afterward. Dancing, drinking, and being noticed are her only concerns. "The show's" portrayal of U.S. Marines in a war that ended just six years prior registers

not at all. Like other writers in the 1920s, Lardner recognized that many Americans were eager to “move on” from the Great War. Significantly, it is the self-absorbed characters in his stories who have adopted this view. Once again Lardner’s incisive humor exposes a failing. If during the war Americans did not think sensibly about it, afterwards some of them did not think about it at all. For readers today, Lardner’s writing about the First World War demonstrates not only what Americans thought about that war but also what they might, in similar fashion, think about any war.

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Notes

¹ Indeed, his baseball writing is pioneering. As Scott D. Peterson asserts, Lardner's 1916 story collection *You Know Me Al* is often considered "the first instance of literary baseball fiction" (Peterson 82) in America, which puts Lardner at the head of a long line of extraordinary baseball writers. A short and not entirely subjective list of those baseball writers would include Bernard Malamud, Mark Harris, Robert Coover, Philip Roth, Eric Rolfe Greenberg, W.P. Kinsella, and Mark Winegardner. A compendium of baseball novels and short story collections can be found on Tim Morris's excellent *Guide to Baseball Fiction*: www.uta.edu/english/tim/baseball/.

² It may seem unfair, therefore, that Lardner often remains on the margins of literary history, outshone by his contemporaries, the lions of American literary modernism in the 1920s. One reason for this relative lack of critical attention is his own attitude toward his work. Lardner portrayed himself largely as a mere comic writer, as a producer of diversions. Ross Tangedal notes that he consistently "refused to become an author of serious fiction" (11). One astonishing illustration of Lardner's diffidence is the difficulty encountered by Maxwell Perkins at Scribner's who wanted to publish a collection of Lardner's short fiction. While working on the collection, Perkins discovered that "because Ring thought so little [of his stories] he did not even keep copies for himself." As A. Scott Berg writes, relying in part on Lardner's recollections, Perkins then had "to search library vaults and magazine morgues" for the stories republished in the 1924 volume *How to Write Short Stories* (Max Perkins 51).

³ Naturally, pro-war writing by the Vigilantes varies by author in tone and subject matter. Lardner's work is nothing like, for example, that by fellow Vigilante Hamlin Garland. Lonnie E. Underhill reprints eight of these "baldly patriotic oriented articles" (78) in which Garland emerges as an earnest declaimer of absolute positions. For instance, Garland supported the draft and called upon Americans to support their "citizen army" (80). He advocated for "universal military training in the schools, from the primary grade up to the great university" (82). He called for increased agricultural production and reduced food consumption, and he decried war profiteering. Perhaps most controversial, especially for readers today, is Garland's vehement denunciation of "our alien press" by which he meant the "hundreds of weekly and daily newspapers whose language is alien to us and in many cases hostile to our government" (81). Chillingly, Garland wonders if "[p]erhaps we have made a fetish of Free Speech" (81), and he casts suspicion on immigrants who speak and read in languages other than English because they may have "mixed but not fused in the melting pot of our social order" (82).

⁴ Indeed, Clifford M. Caruthers insists Lardner never accepted Wilson's ideological rationalization: "On April 6, 1917, the United States entered World War I 'to help make the world safe for democracy.' Lardner entertained no such illusions" (114).

⁵ "A Good Tip to Friend Al" October 22, 1917, in Rapoport, pages 160-61.

⁶ Michael Oriard dismisses it outright as "negligible" (175).

⁷ See Chris Dubbs for a fascinating account of war-time censorship and the efforts of American journalists to evade it.

⁸ At least one other critic agrees. See Hilton, page 11.

⁹ That this story was left out of the book is indicative of Lardner's rather relaxed attitude toward collected volumes of his work. His letters to Hewitt H. Howland, the editor at the Bobbs-Merrill company, about *Treat 'Em Rough* express more concern about the book's title than the stories in it (Caruthers 118). It is also possible that to appeal to readers Howland left out the story in

which Keefe seeks exemption from the draft. The book came out in September of 1918 when the American military was fully engaged in combat and U.S. patriotism was still being rigorously promoted. For Howland, then, a portrait of Keefe as a reluctant draftee may have adversely affected the book's sales.

¹⁰ Typical of the praise of Gowdy was the poem published in the *New York Tribune*, in which Grantland Rice declared: "But don't forget, as the cheers are forged, / that Old Lank Hank was the first to go" (Cornebise 24).

¹¹ Though he remained stateside, Collins served honorably until his discharge in February of 1919 in time to join the White Sox in spring training. He was not involved in throwing games as part of the 1919 Black Sox scandal, and he had a distinguished career as a player and a manager until his retirement in 1930.

¹² *The Stars and Stripes*, for example, published pieces that "became a full-scale barrage against the athletic 'slacker'" and believed that sports stars who did not serve their country in uniform were "anything but heroes" (Cornebise141). Furthermore, editorials in *The Stars and Stripes* often commented negatively on professional baseball players who did not enlist or were not drafted and who instead fulfilled their military obligations by taking "shipyard jobs" (Cornebise146).

¹³ That photo may be seen in this array published by the *Columbus Dispatch*:
<https://www.dispatch.com/photogallery/OH/20190509/PHOTOGALLERY/509009999/PH/1>

¹⁴ See "Your Arm – Your Country Needs It": <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3g10320/>
The baseball/grenade throwing comparison appeared as well in *The Stars and Stripes*. In its edition of 8 March 1918, for example, a writer insisted that "it will be very bad for the Boche to face an army of baseball-trained, grenade and bomb-tossers" (Cornebise 139). In *The Stars and Stripes*' frequent comparisons of war and sports, Cornebise discerns an ultimate reassurance: "The 'game of war' accordingly should hold no terrors for the average American soldier already trained in sports. That familiar experience of the playing field was a framework for war experiences – the parameters were set, terror circumscribed; fear and uncertainty, and even the horrors of conflict, were thus rendered familiar if not innocuous" (140).

¹⁵ That poem is reprinted in Cornebise on page 140:

"World's Series Opened – Batter Up!"

"He's tossed the horsehide far away to plug the hand
grenade;

What matter if on muddy grounds this game of war
is played?

He'll last through extra innings and he'll hit as well
as pitch;

His smoking Texas Leaguers'll make the Fritziees seek
the ditch!

¹⁶ *What Price Glory?* appeared as a play in 1924. It was made into a movie first in 1926 and later as an early talkie in 1927. "Zone of Quiet" was first published in 1925 (Brucoli and Layman), so Miss Lyons is clearly referring to the play.