

Extract from:

Tank; the Progress of a Monstrous War Machine,

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1. Big Joke – from chapter 3

On 15th September 1916, the Heavy Section of the Machine Gun Corps went into action in the Battle of the Somme. Forty-nine machines were available for the attack, but some broke down, or sank into craters and collapsing dug-outs. Others lost their direction and one is said to have failed because its driver refused to plough down a narrow sunken road full of dead bodies. Rather than being used in the concentration that Swinton had advocated from the earliest days, the thirty-six tanks that did reach their starting points were directed against strong-points in 'driblets' or 'penny packets' of two and three.

The results of those first engagements were modest. A tank named 'Crème de Menthe' took the heavily manned sugar factory at Courcellette. Another advanced on the village of Martinpuich, reputedly to a chorus of 'Mercy! Mercy!' sung by a hundred horrified German soldiers. Various tanks 'enfiladed' trenches successfully or took large numbers of prisoners, but the popular triumph belonged to Lieutenant Hastie, whose Tank 'Dinnaken' went on to take Flers. As an airman announced in a famous wireless message: 'Tank seen in main street Flers going on with a large number of troops following it'. Enhanced by the press, this soon read: 'A Tank is walking up the High Street of Flers with the British Army cheering behind'. The tank was also said to be flying a piece of paper on which was written: 'GREAT HUN DEFEAT. SPECIAL!'

Fantasy becomes reality, but it doesn't immediately become prosaic in the process. When those huge lozenge-shaped objects first loomed into view on the front, they were greeted with a convulsion. The tank that advanced on Martinpuich, was watched by an official cameraman, Lieutenant Geoffrey H. Malins:

For the life of me I could not take my eyes off it. The thing – I really do not know how else to describe it – ambled forward, with slow, jerky, uncertain movements... It waddled, it ambled, it jolted, it rolled – well it did everything in turn and nothing long or wrong. And, most remarkable of all, this weird-looking creature with a metal hide performed tricks which almost made one doubt the evidence of one's senses.

It came to a crater. Down went its nose; a slight dip, and a clinging, crawling motion, and it came up merrily on the other side. And all the time as it slowly advanced, it breathed and belched forth tongues of flame, its nostrils seemed to breath death and destruction, and the Huns, terrified by its appearance, were mown down like corn falling to the reaper's sickle.

Presently it stopped. The humming ceased. The spell was broken. We looked at one another, and then we laughed. How we laughed! Officers and men were doubled up with mirth as they watched the acrobatic antics of this mechanical marvel – this Wellsian wonder.

That laughter was recorded by many witnesses. Stephen Foot, who first saw tanks at a place called the Green Dump on September 13th, noted that 'the predominant emotion excited in anyone seeing them for the first time was a feeling of hilarity. One wanted to laugh... standing still they were funny, moving along they were a scream'. And the laughter had many constituents: 'pride in a British invention, anticipation as to what the tank might achieve, amusement at the horror these great machines would strike in the heart of the enemy.'

Here was monstrous unreality itself, conscripted as a life-saving device for an infantry that was already horribly familiar with the carnage of General Haig's offensives and couldn't now believe its luck. As manufacturers William Foster and Company recounted in a celebratory book published after the war, the tank quickly became 'the new topic', spreading 'a smile throughout the land' and giving the Tommy 'a new peg on which to hang his chaff'.

Reminded of pantomime animals, British soldiers dubbed the tank 'Old Mother Hubbard' and laughed at it: 'there she was groanin' and gruntin' along, pokin' her nose here and there', as a wounded soldier recalled for Clough Williams-Ellis. And by all accounts they laughed again as they imagined the enemy – who had, in John Buchan's words, always prided himself on 'the superior merit' of his own 'fighting "machine"' – quaking in his well-organized boots and crying out 'Kamerad! Kamerad!' as the tank bore down on him. In the jaunty and victorious estimate of William Foster and Company, the tank 'terrified the German to his wit's end, while equally and appositely it cheered, delighted and amused the troops who found themselves in its company'. Captain D. G. Browne, who joined the Heavy Section after these first appearances, also understood the appeal of the old Mark I tank:

Its shape, unlike that of any other example of man's handiwork, its deliberate but at times curiously active and disconcerting movements, its obvious weight and power, even the two ports, like lidded eyes which ornament the front of the cab, combine irresistibly (as all journalists will testify) to suggest some huge prehistorical animal – some giant sloth or toad. Indeed, to visit a training-ground in the evening when some dozens of these creatures are rolling home to their stalls or hangars is, for all the world, like being at a Zoo during the Pleistocene Age. The striking pattern of colours with which the machines were painted in the early days only aided the illusion. The British soldier, whose great merit it is to see the comic side of everything, could not fail to be exhilarated by these gorgeous monsters'.

The impressions recorded by soldiers who saw those first tanks as they went into action, reveal that this laughter was mixed with awe, and perhaps a little slow to build too. On September 11, 1916, a certain Captain Foxell, who was serving with the Royal Engineers, noted the coming of the tank: 'In evening saw a new horror of war arrive – an armoured 'caterpillar'. Describing the still untested tank as 'a fearful looking article manned by desperadoes', he noted that 'hopes are built upon its action. It seems to move slowly with considerable noise and smoke'.

J.H. Price, an NCO with the fifth battalion of the Shropshire light infantry, described a general coming up the night before the attack, on September 14th) to brief the troops as they took up positions close to Delville Wood. When he remarked that 'we would have the help of three tanks, Price asked 'Did the General think we would be running short of water?' He was soon to see one of these engines of war 'spitting bullets from the top of it. We had never seen anything like it before, and I think it attracted more of our attention than the enemy. It certainly looked a monster and it is a job for me to explain its shape, and I can only say it had huge caterpillar tracks and a large wheel behind. It went forward rather slowly and I should think it must have struck terror in many of the enemy'.

Captain D. H. Pegler, a Battery Sergeant Major with the RFA, recorded his recollections after the event on September 18, 1916.

I have forgotten the 'Land Crabs' – the great armoured cars that took part in the battle of the fifteenth – some are lying on their backs, mangled masses of twisted and broken iron, others are back in their repairing yards, all are more or less crooked, but Gad the execution they did

was awful. It struck me as I saw them from the corner of Leuze Wood how symbolic of all war they were. Then one saw them creeping along at about four miles an hour, taking all obstacles as they came, spluttering death with all their guns, enflaming each trench as they came to it – and crushing beneath them our own dead and dying as they passed. I saw one body on a concrete parapet over which one had passed. This body was just a splash of blood and clothing about two feet wide and perhaps an inch thick. An hour before this thing had been a thinking breathing man, with life before him and loved ones awaiting him probably somewhere in Scotland, for he was a kiltie.

Nothing stops these cars, trees bend and break, boulders are pressed into the earth. One had been hit by a large shell and the petrol tank pierced. She lay on her side in flames, a picture of hopelessness but every gun on her uppermost side still working with dogged determination. The firing gradually slackened and she lay silent, the gallant little crew burned to death each man at his gun.

The Revd. Canon C. Lomax, chaplain with the 151st Infantry Brigade, had only heard of the new weapon. 'The tanks were a great success. I did not see them in action but our men were full of them. They certainly put the wind up the Bosche. His favourite strong places were as nothing and they crossed trenches with ease'.

This laughter became a subject for speculation among the five independent war correspondents who, under an arrangement proposed by the Newspaper Proprietors' Association, had taken up positions on the Front after Swinton's withdrawal as official 'Eyewitness'. For the Daily Mail's William Beach Thomas, the soldier's guffaws seemed to imply a dismissal of the new machines. Indeed, they were connected to the infantryman's assumption that tanks were 'a jest, a cause of cheerfulness; possibly faithful creatures, but no rival to the bayonet'. Philip Gibbs, the Liberal journalist and pro-Suffragette novelist who worked as special correspondent for the Daily Chronicle and Daily Telegraph, noticed the same chronic outbursts of laughter – in his account of the exploits of the tank known as 'Crème de Menthe' British infantrymen were laughing 'even when bullets caught them in the throat' – and conjectured more deeply on their psychological origins some years after the war. He compared the mirth which greeted the tank on the Western Front with the ribaldry of the Decameron, laughter which had rung out in the midst of plague:

I am not strong enough in the science of psychology to understand the origin of laughter and to get in touch with the mainstreams of gaiety. The sharp contrast between normal ethics and an abnormality of action provides a grotesque point of view arousing ironical mirth. It is probable also that surroundings of enormous tragedy stimulate the sense of humour of the individual, so that any small, ridiculous thing assumes the proportion of monstrous absurdity. It is also likely – certain I think – that laughter is an escape from terror, a liberation of the soul by mental explosion, from the prison walls of despair and brooding.

A similar trench humour was found among German soldiers, although not necessarily one that was provoked by the approaching British tank. It was on this side of no man's land, however, that a young soldier called Wilhelm Reich realised that this laughter was itself a form of armour. Looking back in the 1930s, he wrote that 'I, like most others, experienced the war as a machine, which, once set in motion, works senselessly according to its rules'. And again: 'One developed a gallows humour, protecting oneself from the thought of one's own death. One armored oneself. This humanization the German warmongers called "front experience". By using it to promote war enthusiasm, they reversed its meaning'. In this sense, perhaps, those who laughed at tanks had themselves already become like tanks: the armoured self apprehended its own image and roared.

The 'mental explosion' that greeted the tanks may also have been triggered by the new weapon's promised reformation of war. If it was possible to break through the stinking void of No Man's Land, restoring movement where an apparently endless immobility ruled and bringing back the prospect of a decisive 'offensive' that wasn't just another bloodbath, then where indeed did the limits of the new machine lie?

Onlooking soldiers gave the tank all sorts of nicknames but their humour, threaded as it was with hope, also carried over into fantastic stories which stretched the capabilities of the tank to ludicrous extremes. For some, the tank was like one of the comic and imaginary 'Terrible Machines' of war drawn by William Heath Robinson in 1914-15: indeed, one 'agriculturally minded' major wrote from France to this famous cartoonist, proposing that he draw 'a new Terrible Machine – a tank with an enormous Self Binder attached, which mows down Bosches, ties them up and throws them out in bundles of ten'. The same frantic spirit animated Private C.E. Dukes of the Bedfordshire Regiment who, in a letter written to his fiancé from the front, went far beyond anything Heath Robinson was prepared to dream up:

They can do up prisoners in bundles like straw-binders, and, in addition, have an adaptation of a printing machine which enables them to catch the Huns, fold, count, and deliver them in quires, every thirteenth man being thrown out a little further than the others. The Tanks can truss refractory prisoners like fowls prepared for cooking, while their equipment renders it possible for them to charge into a crowd of Huns, and by shooting out spokes like porcupine quills, carry off an opponent on each. Though 'stuck up', the prisoners are, needless to say, by no means proud of their position.

They can chew up barbed wire and turn it into munitions. As they run they slash their tails and clear away trees, horses, howitzers, and anything else in the vicinity. They turn over on their backs and catch live shells in their caterpillar feet, and they can easily be adapted as submarines; in fact, most of them crossed the Channel in this guise. They loop the loop, travel forwards, sideways and backwards, not only with equal speed, but at the same time. They spin round like a top, only far more quickly, dig themselves in, bury themselves, scoop out a tunnel, and come out again ten miles away in half an hour.

In reality, the tank certainly did come to owe a lot to the printing machine. H.G. Wells may have mistaken some of the new machine's technical details, but it was with clairvoyant insight that he had brought his 'Land Ironclads' into the public eye through the stunned prose of an onlooking war correspondent.

Based with their censors at a small chateau in Tatingham near General Headquarters at St. Omer, the five 'Special' correspondents were uniquely placed to project an idea of the new machines into the wider national imagination at home, traumatised as it was by the terrible slaughter being suffered by British infantrymen in the Battle of the Somme. For weeks past these journalists had, in the words of Brigadier-General C. D. Baker-Carr, the founder of the Machine-Gun Corps who went on to command the First Tank Brigade, been 'confined to writing solely of "the roar of the barrage," "the calm heroism of our gallant men," the mud and the ruined villages. This sort of stuff is all very well two or three times, but, after a while, it begins to pall'. So the tank was 'a perfect God-Send', and, as Clough Williams Ellis recalled, the correspondent's 'threw up their hats' in unbounded delight.

Leaving measured prose to General Haig's official Somme dispatches, they rushed to adorn the new machines with fantastic devices of their own. In their coinage the tanks became Behemoths, Juggernauts, Elephantine Tractors and anything else that came to mind. They 'ransacked their

dictionaries for octosyllables in which to describe the new "All British" destroyer of Germans.... It was "Diplodocus Galumphant", it was "Polychromatic Toad". It was a "flat-footed monster" which performed the most astonishing feats of agility as it advanced, spouting flames from every side'.

The impact of the correspondents's descriptions was only increased by the absence of literal images of the new machine. Neither photographs nor accurate drawings were allowed into circulation until a full two months after the first written reports had been printed, and the first public impressions of the tank were therefore conjured in words alone. Illustrated journals like *Punch*, *The Weekly Dispatch* and the *Illustrated London News* had been able to print entirely fantastic line drawings which showed tanks as the strange creatures that seemed to emerge from the war correspondents's prose.

Many of these drawings, including the first one produced by Heath Robinson, assumed the tank was mounted on saw-toothed wheels, and at least one postcard imagined it had a pincer like 'Hun-catcher' on the front. Desperate to keep up with the war correspondents, the magazines also reviewed the prehistory of the tank and featured drawings of 'Tanks of Other Days', such as the medieval belfry. It was not until 22 November, that the *Daily Mirror* was able to print its famous (and exorbitantly expensive) front page photograph of a camouflaged tank going into action; and by this time the literal image was subordinate to the fanciful cult that had preceded its delayed appearance: it could only be used to illustrate, confirm and justify the extravagant vocabulary of the war correspondents. The *Illustrated London News* followed a few days later, but here too the newly permitted photographic images were surrounded by quotations from the correspondents who had already set the scene. The moving pictures came later, with 'The Battle of the Ancre', a tank-starring film that was screened in 107 cinemas in London alone and seen by an estimated 20 million people in all.

The press reports had started to appear in newspapers immediately after the tanks first went into action on September 15th, and the growing contrast between the prose of the 'official' dispatch and that of the special correspondents is easily traced in the *Times*. On 16th September the dispatch from GHQ made passing mention of 'a new type of heavily armoured car' which had proved of 'considerable utility' in battle. By the 18th, the *Times*'s special correspondent was offering a more vivid account of the story. The new 'fortresses on wheels' – which correspondent Percy Robinson claimed to have seen with his own eyes – were of an 'extraordinary and ungainly shape' and readers were asked to imagine them 'thrusting themselves with all their spines out, like the hedgehogs into a nest of snakes'. By the 19th, the official dispatch had quickened slightly, stressing the 'indescribable demoralisation' that the tanks were producing in enemy ranks. But Robinson was back on the 21st: by this time he had seen tanks 'trundling' about in previously impossible terrain and 'sitting down' on enemy trenches like 'huge tame pachyderms'. As he said, 'it is difficult to speak of the things quite seriously, because they are so preposterous, so unlike anything that ever was on earth before'.

Lord Northcliffe's *Times* may have felt obliged to bury its amusement under this respectable sigh of wonder, but the *Daily Mail* knew no such inhibition, and William Beach Thomas' report on the camouflaged tanks which he had seen gathering for the attack on the night of 14th September was considerably less restrained:

A gibbous moon and brilliant stars, shining in an almost frosty night, lit with fantastic shadows and crescent patches of light the earth-craters and parapet ridges of the bare highland; and as the night yielded to the dawn, the colours on the backs of the monsters shifted like a chameleon's...

They looked like blind creatures emerging from the primeval slime. To watch one crawling round a battered wood in the half-light was to think of 'the Jabberwock with eyes of flame' who

'Came whiffing round the tulgey wood
And burred as it came' . . .

With ludicrous serenity they wobbled across the gridiron fields and shook themselves as if the bullets were flies that bit just deep enough to deserve a flick. Those who had inspected these saurias in their alfresco stalls beforehand or followed their lethargic course over impossible roads in the moonlight gasped with humorous wonder at the prodigy. Munchausen (sic) never approached the stories imagined for them by soldiers. But their pet name will always be 'Tanks' and they were chiefly regarded as a practical joke. Whales, Boojums, Dreadnoughts, slugs, snarks – never were creatures that so tempted the gift of nicknaming. They were said to live on trees and houses and jump like grass hoppers or kangaroos.

Thomas was happy to surrender the tank's crew to his sense of humour as well. Like their machines, the men of the tank were a comic species apart: 'it is a pity the Tanks were not invented in the time of the Little Picts. They are made for tough little men, who can stow themselves away anywhere'. He felt honoured to have been inside one of these 'humorous Juggernauts', to 'enter their cribbed cabin and talk with the little men, wearing their padded leather helmets, who inhabited them'. Since the Tanks were whales as well as 'jaundiced Batrachians', their crews, predictably, were also 'Jonahs', cramped up inside their monster and 'seeking the obscurity of the latest camouflage'