

Blood & Gold Deconstructed

By a very verbose Cairril

© 2006

All contents, unless otherwise noted, are the opinion of the author. No claim to authenticity is made. This is a personal deconstruction of a copyrighted work.

All artwork by German Expressionist artist Kathe Kollwitz, whose son died on the battlefield in 1914.

Blood and Gold

Andy Irvine & Jane Cassidy

According to liner notes I found on the Web for several different CDs, the tune for this piece comes from a Rumanian (some say Bulgarian) melody collected by Bela Bartok. I have no idea if that's true.

This song was written in the 1990s in response to the slaughter in Croatia and elsewhere as Yugoslavia was torn apart. Andy Irvine and Jane Cassidy are Irish, and they draw upon the general horror of war that underlies much of Irish folk music as well as European memories of the World Wars.

It must be remembered that, when the Yugoslavian conflict first broke out, many people commented that this was the same area of the world which had already spawned two world wars in the same century. Many openly discussed the possibility of yet another world war, this time with nuclear weapons instead of poison gas or blitzkriegs. It's difficult to remember how different the world was then, before our entire worldview was re-framed around terrorist organizations rather than warring nation-states.

It must also be remembered that this was the time when concentration camps returned to European soil. For Europeans, there is a direct line drawn from World War I to World War II, and the revelation of concentration camps in Croatia was just one more extension of that line.

I was living in England at the time (1992), in a shared housing complex. An ancient, English, gnarled nun lived down the hall from me. I remember so clearly the day she trapped me in the hallway, waving the newspaper with the chilling photo of the emaciated Croatian men staring out from behind the barbed wire fences. I'll never forget her moral outrage, her horror, and ultimately, her impotence and shame that neither her government nor mine would do a damn thing to stop this thing—this thing we'd all sworn "Never again."

European life is woven through with wars. Even with only four TV channels in England, you could almost always find a documentary somewhere about World War I or II. Germany in the '90s, the decade of reunification, seemed to be running programs 24/7 on these two wars and their effects on the nation. In Scotland there is simultaneously a fierce pride in its warrior tradition (the first Gulf War in the '90s was fought with Scottish troops in the front lines—in trenches) and a deep aversion to war.

In France, farmers still periodically turn up World War I-era land mines when plowing their fields. Every church and cathedral in Britain holds the standards and names of the dead from the local battalions. In every town in England, there is a dramatic, larger-than-life monument to the dead of the "Great War"—and nearby, a smaller monument to the dead of World War II. While the latter is inscribed with far many more names, the monument itself is inevitably smaller, less heroic. It's a testament to the fact that people really did believe that World War I was the "War to End All Wars"—and were horribly disillusioned when they realized the nightmare would start again under Hitler.

World War I was a massive blow to the psyche of Europe. It wiped out an entire generation of men—called "The Lost Generation." The generals, still stuck in the mentality of the 19th century, had no understanding of the lethality of modern weaponry, and so sent wave after wave of soldiers to be mown down by machine gun fire. In battle after battle, French and British troops clashed with German and Austrian men, only to gain a mile of territory, which would then be lost in the next skirmish. World War I was the last war in Europe where the call to battle was greeted with parades and cheering crowds. Never again would Europeans believe in war as a simplistic road to glory.

ON RIDES THE CAPTAIN AND THREE HUNDRED SOLDIER LADS

The image is of the plumed and braided captain on horseback, riding comfortably at the head of a large company of boys on foot. The contrast is one of class (officers were almost always of the aristocracy in European wars, regardless of ability) as well as age and numbers.

OUT OF THE MORNING MIST AND THROUGH THE SILENT SNOW

These boys are cold, miserable, and wet. The morning mist is a bookend image of the mist of death which will surround the boys as they die alone by the Danube at the end of the song. "Morning" generally signifies new life, but paired with "mist" it signifies the beginning of the end. "Morning" is also a homonym for "mourning." The "silent snow" paints a picture of a desolate countryside with no family, no friends, no countrymen to witness the boys' travails.

WHISTLING GAILY RIDES THE CAPTAIN AT THE HEAD

Reinforces the image of the captain who is heedless of his troops' lives. This was certainly the case in WWI, where generals far behind the lines of battle sent wave after wave of men into pointless slaughter. When officers at the front lines resisted insane orders, they were threatened with courts-martial and execution by firing squad.

BEHIND HIM SOLDIER BOYS SADLY WEEPING GO

The boys realize their fate but are powerless to stop it.

OH LADS OF MINE, WEEP NO MORE YOU ARE GONE TO KILL AND DIE

Who is speaking here? It could be the captain, telling the boys not to worry, that war is a heroic occupation and they'll be covered in glory. It could be Fate herself or the mothers of these boys, telling them there is no point to their weeping, since the end will be the same regardless.

OH WHEN YOU TOOK MY GOLD AND SWORE TO FOLLOW ME YOU SOLD AWAY YOUR LIVES AND YOUR LIBERTY

This image has parallels throughout human history. Even today, the military purposely recruits lower-income teenagers, luring them to war with promises of scholarships and high pay. What is being sold, however, is the boys' right to life and free will. Now they must kill and die at the order of their "superiors," all in exchange for money they'll never see, and which could never compensate for the loss of humanity each will suffer.

NO MORE YOU'LL TILL THE SOIL, NO MORE YOU'LL WORK THE LAND NO MORE TO THE DANCE YOU'LL GO AND TAKE GIRLS BY THE HAND

Aside from the literal meaning, these lyrics are a reference to the 1922 Irish song "Johnny, I Hardly Knew Ye," which we know (with different lyrics) as "When Johnny Comes Marching Home." The Irish version is sung from an Irish girl's point of view, who married a boy before he left for war. When he returned, he was maimed in both body and spirit. She bewails his love of "guns and drums and drums and guns, hurroo, hurroo," telling him that this mad rush to glory resulted in the stranger she now sees before her. He cannot work (how will their family survive?), nor can he dance (how will they ever know joy?). "So low in flesh, so high in bone," Johnny's "dancing days are done." All possibilities for happiness are gone; there is only suffering to endure.

OH MOTHER, WEEP FOR YOUR SON HE IS GONE TO KILL AND DIE

Addressed to an individual mother with an individual son. The repeated use of "weep" in this song reinforces the inevitability of death. To weep is to be passive; no one can escape the fate once the war machine is set in motion.



Killed in Action

YOU'LL WEEP, YOU'LL DIE BY THE KEEN EDGE OF THE SWORD

The “sword” here refers both to earlier wars and to the bayonet of WWI. In trench warfare, soldiers would clamber out of the mud and run across a shelled, muddy “no man’s land” covered in barbed wire before diving into the trench of the “enemy” (assuming they made it that far). The fighting was then a bitter slog, drowning in mud, often hand-to-hand, with a bayonet or knife giving the killer blow. Fighting was extremely personal in the confined hellhole of the trenches.

ALL ALONE BY THE MUDDY DANUBE SHORE

Again the song reinforces the idea that the boys are cut off from family and homeland. The reference to “mud” is a deliberate reference to WWI. Whenever any soldier was asked what he remembered about the war, the answer would inevitably begin with “mud.” After the first few months of the war, the armies basically hunkered down and fought over the same four- to ten-mile strip of territory for the next four years. Trees, bushes, and grasses were destroyed by the constant shelling and trampling. The fields and trenches were vast mud pits. When the army needed to advance to the next line of trenches, engineers would place wooden platforms down in front for the army to walk on. If a soldier fell into the mud and anyone stopped to pick him up, the entire column would be bogged down. So the army left him there. If a soldier went down, he would suffocate in the mud or be trampled to death by his own comrades. Even using these barbaric methods, the army could only advance a mile or two in a day. Within weeks they would be pushed back by their enemies over the same ground.

HE GAVE THE ORDER FOR THE DRUMMERS TO BEAT THEIR DRUMS

“He” is obviously the captain, giving the order for attack, retreat, regroup, etc. Before World War II, commands were given via drums, trumpets, bagpipes—anything loud that could carry above the din of screaming carnage. But here the drums are also a metaphor for death. There is a long-standing tradition in western European art to depict death as a skeleton beating a drum (the *Danse Macabre*). This refers to the heartbeat which will eventually cease, the beat of life which will eventually stop, and to Death as the master of Fate. It is Death who beats the drum; it is Death who decides when your time is up. This is wrapped in inevitability and despair, drawing on medieval experiences of the Black Death and other plagues.

THAT MOTHERS ALL MIGHT KNOW THE LIFE A SOLDIER LIVES

The song repeatedly paints a triangle where women (mothers, sisters, wives) are in one corner, “soldier boys” (the innocent pawns) are in another, and the Captain/Death/the State are in the third. It is in the Captain’s power to determine the fate of the others. Women and boys are

separated and powerless to stop that separation. Women are not spared the knowledge of how the boys die. This line (in addition to the choruses) makes clear that the women will know in detail that their men did not die heroically. This mirrors what happened in WWI, where newspaper and military propaganda painted one picture of the war, while women who received uncensored letters or who were able to talk to soldiers on leave learned what was really going on. The women of England who were inspired by the propaganda to become nurses or drivers went to France and were shocked and horrified to discover that the “glorious war” was actually butchery. A soldier’s clothes were returned to the family, giving graphic, gory testimony to his final moments.

**OH MOTHERS WEEP FOR YOUR SONS
THEY ARE GONE TO KILL AND DIE**

This chorus calls on all mothers to weep for their sons—the impassioned pacifism of post-WWI Europe was led by women who felt a common bond across nationalities and class. They felt their suffering transcended petty boundaries and they formed organizations such as the International League of Peace and Freedom rather than provincial, localized peace groups. The Great War brought suffering to all. Many women (denied the vote or any official expression in public life) found that suffering gave them common cause with those they had once considered “the enemy.”



The Mothers

UNFURL YOUR RAGGED BANNER

This is an extremely evocative phrase for Europeans. Churches and cathedrals in Britain are draped with ragged banners and standards from the local militia’s wars from all around the world. At this part in the narrative, the banner is ragged because this unit has seen intense fighting. They are no longer green recruits from a village; the soldiers have now been under intense fire. In a metaphorical sense, the “ragged banner” represents the tearing away of innocence. These boys know they aren’t fighting for king & country—they’re fighting because they’ll be shot if they don’t.

AND RAISE YOUR PALE YOUNG FACE

The soldiers had been looking down, exhausted. Their faces are pale from hunger, exhaustion, and terror. The “pale young face” is a presentiment of death as well as an indictment of a system which condemns the young to die.

**YOU’LL ALL GO IN THE FIRE
THERE’LL BE NO HIDING PLACE**

No escape from the war machine, no escape from the burning maw. The fire is both literal and metaphoric. One can almost hear the shells exploding.

OH MOTHER, HEAR THE DRUM BEAT IN THE VILLAGE SQUARE

The drum of the war recruiter as well as the drum beating the roll call of the dead

OH MOTHER, THAT DRUM'S FOR ME TO GO FOR A SOLDIER THERE

Our modern reading of "go for a soldier" means "I'll go down because I have some relationship to a soldier," but the phrase was used in England (it may still be, I don't know) by boys saying they were going to *be* a soldier. This line can be read either way. Regardless, the drum is incessant and the boys will continue to go. Note again how this is addressed to the mother.

MOTHERS, SISTERS, WIVES WEEP FOR US

In the early 20th century, European middle class families were often very affectionate and close. Many popular songs of the era (such as *I Want a Girl Just Like the Girl Who Married Dear Old Dad*) would be considered downright unmanly in today's hyper-masculine America. It was a highly sentimental age, where relationships between sons and mothers and between brothers and sisters were far more affectionate and intense than those between fathers and sons or husbands and wives. In this final chorus, the "voice" changes—this is the only time we hear the chorus from the soldier boys' point of view.

MARKED AS CAIN

This is an intensely poignant statement. (You probably know this, but just in case:) In the Christian creation story, Eve and Adam had two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain slew Abel, committing the first murder. To say these "soldier boys" are marked as Cain is a deeply disturbing remark. It again hearkens back to the sense of internationalism that arose in the wake of WWI, where the working classes realized they had common bonds across national ties. The line also damns the soldier boys to Hell for committing the most heinous sin—the most notorious sin in history after The Fall itself (according to Christian belief). Since this chorus is from the soldier boys' point of view, they are accepting their own guilt and damning themselves.

In addition, this line evokes an event known as "The Christmas Truce." It happened in December 1914, the first Christmas of WWI. In Flanders, German soldiers (who were supplied with holiday rations) set up Christmas trees and sang carols on Christmas Eve. They put up placards in broken English, to the effect of "You no shoot, we no shoot." Overcoming their initial suspicions, and perhaps overwhelmed by the need to connect in this lonely land, the British began singing along with the carols. Over the course of the next several days, the troops came out of their trenches and mingled in No Man's Land, the 60 yards or so that separated them as "enemies." They shared rations, sang songs, buried their dead, and laughed at their attempts to communicate. Some games of football (soccer) broke out. French and Belgian troops joined in.

As unlikely as it seems, this is a true case in history where the Vietnam-era question "What if they gave a war and nobody came?" was answered.

The truce, however, was not allowed to last for long. By New Year's Eve the officers cracked down, telling the soldiers to cease all contact with the enemy (except the lethal kind, of course). Each side called to the other, "We'll fire over your heads!" When the fighting broke out again, the soldiers kept their word. But the officers soon realized what was happening. They started with threats of courts-martial and ended by threatening to shoot on sight any soldier who was not pumping lead into the enemy. So The Christmas Truce was shattered. One can only imagine the toll it took on the soldiers to kill the men they had just made peace with. "Marked as Cain."

WE DIE ALONE

The bleakest ending imaginable: Every last one of the three hundred who started out lies dead, alone, in a muddy, anonymous pit.

World War I: Four years of suffering, 8.5 million dead, 21 million wounded, an entire world forever changed—for what?



The Survivors



Seed Corn Must Not Be Ground

“Gonna lay down my sword and shield...I ain't gonna study war no more.”