

Art from the First World War Review Article

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Reviewer: Ross Davies

I cannot help a passing allusion to the lack of pictorial records of this war – records made by artists of experience, who actually witness the scenes they portray.

Thus Norman Wilkinson (1878–1971), musing in the opening paragraph of his 1916 *The Dardanelles: Colour Sketches from Gallipoli* on the sights he had just seen at the Suvla Bay landings in the first year of the Great War. Our descendants, Wilkinson continued ‘will surely regret the omission when they try to gather an impression of the greatest war in history from the inadequate material available’.

He went on:

I do not lose sight of the fact that many professional artists are fighting with our army in France and elsewhere. But life in the trenches is so arduous that it is doubtful if any records will come us from this source (p.1).

Happily, as we now know, it didn’t turn out as Wilkinson feared. As a professional water-colourist and illustrator, he was aware of the importance of image as well as of text in recording and interpreting events. In 1915 Wilkinson threw up a well-paid career to enlist for active service in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, only for the Navy promptly to order him to paint where and what he liked. Image-makers, like the images themselves, have their limits. Wilkinson preferred ships to people, which may explain why, though in both his 1916 and 1969 memoirs he reproduced the watercolour *Dressing Station – “A” Beach*, which he had painted from landward, he did not show in either volume what kept dressing stations busy. In his 1969 *A Brush with Life* Wilkinson turns to text to describe ‘the living cinema of battle’ ashore that he could see from the foretop of his warship:

Glasses were necessary to distinguish the light khaki of our men against the scrub and sand. The troops marching in open order across the salt lake formed a most stirring picture as they crossed the unbroken surface of silver-white. Overhead shrapnel burst unceasingly, leaving small crumpled forms on the ground, one or more of which would slowly rise and walk shorewards, while others lay where they fell (p. 69).

As we now know, even while Wilkinson was fretting at Gallipoli, moves were afoot to capture ‘pictorial records of this war – records made by artists of experience, who actually witness the scenes they portray’. Do historians make as much use as they might of such work, of image as evidence in discourse? ‘Most text-trained historians’, asserts Vic Gatrell, ‘are uneasy about using visual evidence’ and ‘feel that words are what they should live by’ (introduction, p. 11). Even art historians feel this way, including historians of 18th-century art. Comfortable only with ‘high’ art, they sniff at the nation’s vast archive of satirical prints, ‘uneasy’ because (as Sir Joshua Reynolds wrote of Hogarth), the images are of ‘low subjects’ suited only to ‘vulgar minds’. The very number and wide circulation of 18th-century satirical prints, Gatrell asserts, is evidence that – however scabrous they might be or lofty the personages lampooned – artists and engravers (unlike writers) were virtually immune to prosecution for personal, obscene, seditious or blasphemous libel. Historians of 18th-century topics other than art may also neglect image even though satirical prints come larded with text in the form of captions and speech balloons.

It goes without saying (says Gatrell) that no historian can dispense with the verbal testimonies that put

images into context. Yet, he insists, 'squeamishness' about using pictures as evidence is 'uncalled for'. Images can be ambiguous, may distort information about the real world:

but the written word does too; texts must also be interpreted with an eye on their hidden purposes, distortions and audiences. The fact remains that texts and images are both embedded in the world that produced them, and in that sense have comparable evidential standing (Introduction, p. 11).

Any historian of any subject who shrinks from reference to images, Gatrell appears to be saying, is turning his or her back on a valuable evidential resource. What Gatrell does not say and perhaps should not go without saying is that working with images is also great fun, and (while adding to rather than invalidating the study) may just start the ambitious scholar on the road to that BBC Four series that makes of him or her 'that one on the telly', and therefore to universities, publishers and newspaper features editors a hotter property. Some publishers jib at the cost of reproducing images, of course, although scholars who look hard enough can find financial help. Collections have been reducing their charges since 2006 when Gatrell published; many images may now be viewed online, which was not the case then.

The Great War centenary year seems as good a year as any in which to revisit the question of image as evidence. There are books about the Great War image-makers and their work. Eric Kennington, John and Paul Nash, and others became official war artists in both the Kaiser's and Hitler's Wars. There was the re-opening on 19 July after a six-month remodelling of one of our biggest 'image banks', the Imperial War Museum. IWM's exhibition *Truth and Memory: British Art of the First World War* runs from 19 July 2014 to 8 March 2015, and is billed as 'the largest exhibition of British First World War Art for almost 100 years; over 120 works from the usual suspects – the Sir William Orpens, the C. R. W. Nevinsons – but also from lesser-known but still rewarding surprises, Anna Airy and Henry Lamb, for example.

Exhibitions themselves are a vital resource to the student who ventures to assess images as evidence. Few galleries or museums, including the IWM, can show more than a fraction of their own holdings at any one time. An exhibition not only brings out images from the vaults, but summons up works on the exhibition's theme from collections, or indeed vaults, elsewhere. There is commonly a brochure-cum-book, in the case of the IWM exhibition, *Art from the First World War*. Long after an exhibition closes, the tie-in publication can alert the student to the existence of a work unknown to him or her, provide basic commentary and list a borrowed work's whereabouts after its return to sender its home collection.

Such is the power of images that even the search for a 'lost' representation can disclose the seed of a valuable new study. Richard Knott somewhere came across a reproduction of a 1942 painting by R. Vivian Pitchforth, an artist of whom he knew nothing. Knott found Pitchforth's image, of Sunderland flying boats in Plymouth, so 'striking and evocative' that he set off on a trail that led to the discovery of the original, not in Plymouth but in the Bendigo Art Gallery in Victoria, Australia. Along the way, Knott had cause to examine the value of image as evidence for in his case that one picture led him to instructive text in published accounts and letters as well as to voices in the IWM archive of taped recordings. The result, *The Sketchbook War*, is a well-referenced account of Sir Kenneth Clark of the War Artists' Advisory Committee and his 'flawed' plan 'to keep artists alive during the [Second World] war, and the extent to which it failed' (Introduction, p. 9).

The image Knott has chosen to illustrate the cover of his book is a pencil and watercolour work by Eric Ravilious, although the book appears neither to say so nor to give the title; it is *Firing a 9.2 Inch Gun*, an image of coastal defence from 1941. Knott more than makes up for this apparent lapse (which may not be his own) with superbly-documented war biographies of his chosen artists, complete itineraries and a table of their works' present homes.

Wisely, Knott eschews the scatter-gun approach, adjusting his sights to zero in on nine particularly

venturesome official war artists, Edward Ardizzone, Edward Bawden, Barnett Freeman, Anthony Gross, Thomas Hennell, Eric Ravilious, Albert Richards, Richard Seddon and John Worsley. Perhaps surprisingly, it may have been riskier to be a war artist in 1939–45 than in 1914–18. Of Knott's nine artists employed on a government scheme partly designed to save artists' lives, two were torpedoed, two captured and three were killed; Ravilious first, followed by Albert Richards and then Ravilious's friend Thomas Hennell.

Vivian Pitchforth, the book's progenitor, is not one of the Knott's nine and he was to survive the war, albeit with a severe lung condition apparently contracted during the Burma campaign. He died aged 86 in 1982. Knott, alas, neither reproduces nor gives even the title of the Pitchforth Sunderland painting that sparked off *The Sketchbook War*.

Big though the IWM's exhibition *Truth and Memory: British Art of the First World War* may be, the accompanying publication, *Art from the First World War* is far less substantial than Meirion and Susie Harries' encyclopaedic 1983 *The War Artists: British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century*. Although published with the help of the IWM and the Tate Gallery, however, the Harries' book was not an exhibition catalogue, which is what the compact but unindexed and unpaginated *Truth and Memory* publication is. We see, however, contrary to Wilkinson's misgivings, that there are many professional artists who served 'in the trenches' and managed to pass on to us their 'records'. In his introduction, Roger Tolson, Head of the IWM Department of Art, shows that even as Wilkinson was fretting in Suvla Bay, the politicians were shaping plans for a 'an unprecedented act of government sponsorship of the arts', led by Charles Masterman. In fact, the Masterman scheme built upon existing public patronage, one form of which was that of Wilkinson by the Navy.

Tolson (p. 1) lists Paul Nash, C R W Nevinson and Eric Kennington, as three examples of artists bumped up to 'official' status 'after returning from front-line service'. Paul Nash, like his brother John, served with the Artists' Rifles, subsequently going onto the Hampshires. Nevinson routinely ventured within artillery range as a civilian ambulance driver, while Kennington was recruited for an eight-month army attachment as an official war artist after being invalided home from the Kensingtons. The quintessential artist of the common soldier, Kennington came to attention when he privately exhibited *The Kensingtons at Laventie* (1916), one of the Tommies depicted being himself. 'Front-line service' came in various guises; Sydney Carline was a despatch rider and then a flyer and Henry Lamb a Medical Officer. Lamb's mesmeric *Irish Troops in the Judaeon Hills Surprised by a Turkish Bombardment* (1919), portrays the apprehensive troops as seen from the shell's-eye, and might strike some historians as evidence in image form to support the argument that shellfire was the war's biggest trench killer. Of Anna Airy's [female-staffed] *Shop for manufacturing 15-inch Shells; Singer Manufacturing Company, Clydebank, Glasgow* (1918), Tolson notes:

The success of Scottish heavy industry was built on low investment and cheap labour, and Anna Airy gives some indications of this – the handling equipment is basic and the production lines disorganised.

That is what Tolson's text tells us. Might the image suggest, however, that Singer's may have been admirably organised to make sewing-machines (hardly 'heavy industry') but that there may have been neither time nor money to tool up for 15-inch shells? Perhaps on safer ground with painting manufacture, Tolson also notes that Airy was one of the first woman war artists to be employed by the newly-founded IWM in 1918, and although she was a 'well-respected female artist of her generation', the IWM tied her to a contract that gave the museum the right to refuse a work without payment (p. 35).

In 1914 as in 1939, when the war began the bottom fell out of the art market, taking with it the livelihoods of many artists, although a few fashionable 'recorders of those in public life' continued to flourish. One such was William Orpen (1878–1931, knighted 1918), Orpen was already wealthy in 1914, says the Tate's Robert Upstone in his introductory essay to a critical edition of the artist's 1921 illustrated war memoir, re-edited by Angela Weight, *An Onlooker in France*. Orpen blithely enlisted in December 1915, and was to spend two-

and-a-half years documenting life and death in and around the Western Front.

Although to the newcomer burdened with preconceptions 'Sir William Orpen' and all his works may sound like fat-cat establishment-stroking, Orpen's images of war work, as set out by Upstone and Weight, are astonishing in their range, subtlety and sympathy. Some will find it hard to look at Orpen's portrait of Haig (30 May 1917) and see in that alert, intelligent face the butchering dullard of one strain of mid 20th-century historiography.

Whatever the individual historian may make of Orpen's Haig portrait, there is textual evidence to suggest the image was created to please the artist, not to flatter the sitter. Haig gave Orpen two 'short sittings' and then, on 30 May 1917 at Bavincourt, a third of half an hour. 'He [Orpen] works quickly', Haig commented in his diary. Orpen was a 'shy little man'

but with a good sense of humour. The first sitting was not a success but he did not dare restart with a new piece of canvas at the second sitting! He said nothing, but I gather that he repainted the whole face, and at the end seemed quite satisfied. He now says that if he were to paint me twenty times he could not make a better job if it! All the same the likeness is not good.⁽¹⁾

Haig, Orpen recounts, began by saying to him 'Why waste your time painting me? Go and paint the men. They're the fellows who are saving the world, and they're getting killed every day' (p. 80).

Go and paint the men Orpen did. The women too, although one portrait, now entitled 'The Refugee' (1918) is evidence that an Orpen portrait, intelligently pursued as in Upstone and Weight, can yield fascinating evidence as to how one official war artist operated, none of it evident from Orpen's own text. Angela Weight's commentary tells us that Orpen painted and submitted to the authorities two versions of 'The Refugee', now in the IWM collection as 'Refugee (A)' and 'Refugee (B)', both of which he initially entitled 'The Spy'. On p. 156, we are shown 'Refugee A'. This rosy-cheeked young woman with what used to be called 'bedroom eyes' is Yvonne Aubic (189?–1973), subject of at least six other Orpen studies. 'Refugee' from her native Lille Mlle Aubic may have been, but she was no 'spy'. What she was was one of Orpen's mistresses. Mlle Aubicq was working for the Red Cross when he met her, Weight observing that at this time Orpen often sought medical help for what Orpen terms in his text 'blood poisoning'. Upstone suggests that in Orpen's case the condition might more accurately be categorized as 'syphilis'. Orpen's 'spy' later married Orpen's chauffeur, became a dog breeder and then a judge at Cruft's.

Upstone is perhaps unfair to Wilkinson in listing only C. R. W. Nevinson and Wyndham Lewis as artists who were to publish accounts of their war experiences (both 1937) 'as part of more wide-ranging autobiographical narratives' (n.1, p. 49). As have seen, Wilkinson did so as early as 1916, and again in 1969. Although not wealthy like Orpen, Wilkinson continued to make a good living when war broke out. A water-colourist, especially of the sea and its ways, Wilkinson (like Rex Whistler in Hitler's War) was an adept illustrator. *The Illustrated London News* kept Wilkinson busy at the beginning of the Great War illustrating other men's accounts of actions they had seen, until at the age of 35 and unable to stand it any longer, Wilkinson cast off his mooring and managed to serve, sketch and paint first aboard surface vessels at the Dardanelles, then on submarine patrol in the Mediterranean, and lastly on a minesweeper in the English Channel. He then went on to pioneer another branch of war art, camouflage, in particular 'dazzle painting', the deception by which a ship was daubed in disruptive patterns so as 'to break up her form and thus confuse a submarine officer as to the course on which she was heading'.

The government sponsorship of war art began', avers Tolson,

to meet the demand for public information from a public at home and to sway the opinion of potential allies overseas, the schemes grew in complexity and ambition as the war continued and

its impact widened.

Masterman, as head of government propaganda, had from August 1914 been authorized 'to produce images for reproduction in newspapers and books, while later projects looked to social history and commemoration' (p. 1).

Unlike in Hitler's War, there was no particular drive in the 1914–19 world conflict to pull artists out of battle to save their lives. It did not always work between 1939 and 1945. Not due for call-up until 1940, Rex Whistler volunteered for the Brigade of Guards in 1939, when he was 34; the artist was killed on his first day in action as a Cromwell tank commander in Normandy in July, 1944. As Hugh & Mirabel Cecil point out in their sumptuous-but-shrewd *In Search of Rex Whistler*, Kenneth Clark's War Artists' Advisory Committee in 1939 passed over Whistler, pigeonholing him as 'book illustrator' which his brother Laurence translated as 'fashionable lightweight'.

An accomplished practitioner of trompe d'oeil in his book illustrations as in his stage sets and murals, Whistler would have been superb at military camouflage. As it was, ignored by Clark's scheme, Whistler thereafter refused subsequent offers of official status and resolved to combine tank training in the Guards Armoured Brigade with assiduous sketching and painting wherever he might fetch up. *In Search of Rex Whistler* is a revelation, showing how much valuable work of developing realism this industrious 'lightweight' was to achieve. Whistler went off to his death with a special metal box welded to the rear of his Cromwell 'containing his paints and small canvas' (p. 240). The artist left behind a record of army life that includes *The Master Cook* (1940) and a wounded Robert Cecil (1942], and which to my mind shows Whistler verging upon Orpen's ability to seize upon and render the individuality of a sitter.

Official war artist status was also to be the death of the muralist, printmaker and watercolourist Eric Ravilious (1903–42). Ravilious grew up in Eastbourne, where there was a Royal Flying Corps flying school. He saw Zeppelins fly over the town, and one of his schoolboy sketches (1915) is of a Blackburn monoplane taking off. Ravilious the artist did not 'do people', preferring machines as subjects, preferably aircraft. His war work can appear bloodless and chilly, but Ravilious's empty rooms, seas and coasts can become somehow unforgettable by drawing in the beholder to people them, often eerily so, with tension veering towards dread. These are images that cause the beholder to imagine. Less is more with Ravilious. Even when, unusually, there are nine men in a picture, as in *Dangerous Work at Low Tide* (retrieving magnetic mines dropped by low-flying German aircraft off Whitstable, 1940), we see not one face. Ravilious reserved his warmth for the Walrus amphibious patrol biplane, or 'comic things with a strong personality like a duck' (p. 175). Yet even the 'comic' Walrus can seem ominous, as in the pencil and watercolour *RNAS Sick Bay, Dundee* (1941). We see a room, empty save for a bed and chair, while through the window three Walruses wallow at anchor in the water beyond. All is chilly, washed-out browns, yellows, blues and greys; who was last in the bed, why, how long before the sick bay is again occupied, and because of what misfortune?

In *Eric Ravilious: Artist & Designer*, Alan Powers begs to differ from Richard Knott, claiming that the Kenneth Clark programme for saving artists' lives was 'largely successful' (p. 153). Not in Ravilious's case, though. He was lost at sea over Iceland, ironically aboard an Air Sea Rescue plane looking for a seaplane missing on an operational flight. Perhaps it was one Walrus looking for another.

Powers curated the 2003 Ravilious centenary retrospective at the IWM, the largest to date. This volume expands upon 'the relatively short book that accompanied the show', and is inspired in part by works that have since come onto the market from private collections, and in part by paintings and graphics by artists of today who reflect Ravilious's aesthetic and subject matter in 'providing images of an England of the imagination' (Preface, p. 7), as well as by the invocation of Ravilious by poets and travel writers of today such as Peter Davidson, Sean O'Brien and Robert Macfarlane.

For Tolson, at the core of Great War official war artist schemes lay a desire to restate the values of British

society as liberal and socially inclusive, and not to follow the tradition of battle images of glorious victory, either real or imagined.

As a result, 'disparate and dissident images' were commissioned and acquired, but the net effect was 'to cast Britain as torchbearers [sic] of Western European liberal culture' (Introduction, p. 1). If so, then from a reading of David Coke and Alan Borg's magisterial *Vauxhall Gardens: A History* it may be possible to sense that this 'liberal' strain in images of war may have originated in this London pleasure resort in Georgian and Regency times. In Vauxhall Gardens, being 'socially inclusive' in art commissioned for public exhibition there could include a gesture of respect for a humbled French foe. As Vauxhall made such images available to the widest-possible paying audience, the resort may be said to have played a part in shaping the public apprehension of art, military, naval or otherwise. Again, if so, by 1914 this liberal strain may have migrated from Vauxhall across the Thames to Whitehall and Westminster. Vauxhall Gardens closed in 1859; much of the vast national collection of images, liberal or otherwise, now reside in Vauxhall's near neighbour, Kennington, at the Imperial War Museum.

The glory days of Vauxhall Gardens, according to Coke and former IWM director Borg, coincided with the relaunch of New Spring Gardens, Vauxhall, under the proprietorship of Jonathan Tyers from about 1732 to his death in 1767, a period neatly overlaying the Seven Years' War (1756–63). 'Vauxhall' was many things, one of them being the first place where many people saw a painting. Tyers could cram a thousand paying customers of all classes into Vauxhall nightly. He had each open-air supper booth lined with a gently-moral painting, most commissioned from Francis Hayman and associates. Yet there were also four naval pictures, *The Taking of Portobello*, *Sweet William's Farewel [sic] to Black Eyed Susan*, *A Sea Engagement between the English and the Algerines* and *The taking of the St Joseph a Spanish Caracca Ship, Sept. 23, 1739*.

Tyers, a fellmonger from the Bermondsey docks, commissioned all four from the seascape painter Peter Monamy, popular with mariners and merchants such as Tyers for his technical accuracy. The four paintings were still in place in 1774, but none of them survives except in engravings.

The Vauxhall naval pictures, Coke and Borg relate, did not excite much comment in the 1740s. It was different with another quartet during the Seven Years' War. When the weather was wet during the Vauxhall season (May to September), the strollers and the Vauxhall Band adjourned indoors to The Rotunda, a domed assembly room, in 1750–1 extended by the addition of a Pillared Saloon. It was here that Tyers put on public show four large history pictures he had commissioned from Hayman, one on the opening day of each season 1761–4. None now survives other than in oil design-sketch form, but one, the first, is of particular interest. *The Surrender of Montreal to General Amherst* was completed and installed in the Pillared Saloon only eight months after the action depicted. It is also 'The most overtly propagandic of the four military scenes', yet still

emphasising the selfless humanity of General Jeffrey Amherst: Hayman showed him handing out food to the starving and defeated population and returning to them their possessions (p. 129).

This 'humanity' was intended to be in 'stark contrast to the merciless treatment they might have expected to receive from the French, had they been victorious, and especially from their Indian allies'.

'Just in case the message was not clear enough from the picture, Hayman painted into the lower right-hand corner a stone inscribed:

POWER EXERTED,
VICTORY OBTAINED

MERCY SHEWN!

MDCCLX'

The *Montreal* victory painting was so 'powerful and emotive' an image, Coke and Borg continue, that when the French lawyer and historian Pierre Jean Grosley saw the quartet, his 'partiality' [...] was strained to breaking-point'. The Frenchman 'grudgingly observed' that

the natural antipathy of the English to the French seems to have raised the imagination and the hand of the painter above what the pencil of an Englishman is capable of producing (pp. 134–5).

In competition with the nearby Astley's Amphitheatre, ambitious anniversary re-enactments of the Battle of Waterloo were to be staged on the Vauxhall Gardens firework ground. As with the Seven Years' War paintings, these Waterloo commemorations were not all triumphalism. In 1827, one equestrian showman promised a Vauxhall 'Waterloo' of over a thousand performers, during which he would race his charger Bucephalus

up a nearly perpendicular Rock, to the Temple of Fame, at the summit of the Firework Tower, and there deposit the British and French Colours as an Emblem of Amity, in the Temple of Concord (p. 311)

An image of this 'Emblem of Amity' has yet to come to light; should it do so, who will use it?

Notes

1. Douglas Haig, *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig 1914–1919* (London, 1952), p. 234.[Back to \(1\)](#)

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