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## Paintings of War, Museums of Memory

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# Paintings of War, Museums of Memory

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the artists sent to the Western Front under Britain's official war artists initiative. The government sought to utilize artwork for propagandistic purposes, and to foster emotional connection between civilian and soldier. However, the growth of the initiative to include some ninety artists complicated this. The experiences of the artists and the truths revealed to them by the conflict were vastly different, and examination of them as a whole does little to elucidate the character of the war itself. What this paper seeks to do, therefore, is examine three artists - Sir William Orpen, Lieutenant Paul Nash, and C.R.W. Nevinson - as individuals. In moving away from aggregated narratives and comparing this small group, the importance of subjectivity in memory and representation becomes clear. By returning individuality to a crowded, multitudinous narrative, war can be seen as it truly is: a unique experience for all involved.

## **Keywords**

First World War, Britain, War Art, Official War Artists, Memory

## **Disciplines**

Cultural History | European History | Military History | Modern Art and Architecture

## **Comments**

Written for CWES 320: Aftermath: The Experience of War and 'Modern' Memory.

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## Paintings of War, Museums of Memory

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Spring Semester 2017  
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In his 1863 essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” Charles Baudelaire defines the modern artist as an individual who seeks to portray not only the happenings of the modern age, but its “gait, glance and gesture.”<sup>1</sup> More than a mimetic visual representation of the world, true modern art evinces the spirit of the moment in time to which it belongs. It is preoccupied with examining the world, redefining the artist’s relationship with it, and critiquing past methods of visualization while simultaneously pioneering new ones. In short, modern art is a new mode of expression for a new, ever-changing, present.<sup>2</sup>

In studying modern art, it is therefore common for scholars to seek the impulses to which works react. In the twentieth century, chief among these is the Great War, iconic in that it shattered the safety of the old world and brought about a concept of modern warfare as it is still known today. Scholars are assisted in the study of responses to the war by Britain’s appointment of some ninety official war artists to chronicle the events of the front.<sup>3</sup> The official war artist initiative began with Scottish artist Muirhead Bone’s appointment in 1916, before either the Department of Information or its successor, the Ministry of Information, had been formed.<sup>4</sup> What began as a small effort, however, quickly grew. War art was popular upon its arrival back home,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life,” in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (New York: Phaidon, 1964), 14.

<sup>2</sup> See Charles Baudelaire’s “The Painter of Modern Life.”

<sup>3</sup> M.L. Sanders, “Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War,” *The Historical Journal* 18, no. 1 (March, 1975), 136.

<sup>4</sup> Sue Malvern, “War Tourisms: ‘Englishness’, Art, and the First World War,” *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 1 (2001), 52; M.L. Sanders, “Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War,” *The Historical Journal* 18, no. 1 (March, 1975).

and as civilian tastes for it increased, so did its use value in the eyes of the propaganda bureau at Wellington House.<sup>5</sup> Art - produced with great emotion, unique, and deeply personal – served the goals of Wellington House to propagandize in ways which were opposite to “the German methods of a mass publicity campaign.”<sup>6</sup> Such paintings and drawings of the front were obvious in their creativity in ways that other image-making progresses, such as photography, could not be – their construction of a separate reality was honest. Therefore, they were a low-profile way of disseminating certain viewpoints. They were not, however, perfect pieces of propaganda. Disjointed by the separation of the artists, sometimes reluctant to fit to a specific message, and often difficult to prune to propaganda standards, they are far more suited to rediscovering the subjectivity of the modern artist in wartime.<sup>7</sup>

Works produced by a group of different artists, appointed at different times, with different approaches to painting and the ways in which they were to portray the war, they provide some of the clearest evidence that conflict, no matter its scope, is a deeply personal experience, tailored to the individual through the course of their representation.<sup>8</sup> Of these artists, perhaps the most varied are Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, Paul Nash, and Sir William Orpen. While certainly not alone on the front, their paintings demonstrate unique emotional and mental responses which drive home the fact that no two people experience war the same way.

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<sup>5</sup> M.L. Sanders, “Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War,” *The Historical Journal* 18, no. 1 (March, 1975), 12, 135-136.

<sup>6</sup> Sue Malvern, “War Tourisms: ‘Englishness’, Art, and the First World War,” *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 1 (2001), 52-55; M.L. Sanders, “Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War,” *The Historical Journal* 18, no. 1 (March, 1975), 120.

<sup>7</sup> M.L. Sanders, “Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War,” *The Historical Journal* 18, no. 1 (March, 1975), 127, 131

<sup>8</sup> Toby Thacker, *British Culture and the First World War: Experience, Representation, and Memory* (London – New Delhi – New York – Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Andrew Wilton, “Chapter 8 - The Great Debate: 1910-1960,” in *Five Centuries of British Painting: from Holbein to Hodgkin* (London – New York: Thames & Hudson World of Art, 2001).

## William Orpen and the Suffering Soldier

Sir William Orpen, “the little Irish Major,” was the oldest of the three.<sup>9</sup> Born in 1878, though he moved through the same circles as Nash and Nevinson, he did so before about a decade before them.<sup>10</sup> As such, Orpen’s artistic education and sensibilities are those of an earlier generation of war artist. While the younger artists are afforded artistic celebrity, Orpen is discussed somewhat less. The critic Kenneth McKonkey attributes this to Orpen’s apparent ‘anti-modernism’ in his utilization of realistic portrayal over abstraction or visual reconstruction. Andrew Wilton agrees Orpen is the more classically-minded of the three. McKonkey cites Orpen’s return to the modernist techniques of early Realists of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Courbet, as Orpen’s method of dealing with the changes of modern life. This is in direct contrast with the radical styles of both Nevinson and Nash. While they redefined visual technique in obvious ways, Orpen was given to subtle means. Ironically, he seemed to rebel against common streams of rebellion. Nevertheless, Robert Upstone, in his introductory essay to the artist’s war memoir, maintains that Orpen was one of the best-known and best-loved war artists. A review of the 1918 exhibition of “Paintings and Drawings of War by Sir William Orpen, A.R.A.,” points out his “sense of the grotesque-romantic,” and critic Richard Cork agrees that Orpen’s art was deeply unsettled, filled with the urgency of remembrance.<sup>11</sup> As such, it is worth remembering.

From long before the war, Orpen and his art possessed a “quirkiness;” many of his sketches and notes reinforce his personality as dryly sarcastic and biting ironic.<sup>12</sup> For example,

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<sup>9</sup> Kenneth McKonkey, “William Orpen’s War.” *Irish Arts Review* 31, no. 2 (June-August 2014), 112.

<sup>10</sup> “William Orpen’s War.” *Irish Arts Review* 31, no. 2 (June-August 2014), 216.

<sup>11</sup> “Paintings and Drawings of War by Sir William Orpen, A.R.A.” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 33, no. 184 (July 1918), 35; Richard Cork, “William Orpen. London and Dublin,” *The Burlington Magazine* 147, no. 1225 (April 2005), 267.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Cork, “William Orpen. London and Dublin,” *The Burlington Magazine* 147, no. 1225 (April 2005); see also ‘Censored’: *Self-portrait while ill with blood poisoning*, letter to Arthur Lee, 1 January 1919, A.N. Lee Papers, Imperial War Museum.

when he enlisted in December of 1915, he sent a letter to his mistress, the American Evelyn St. George, including a caricature with the caption “England’s called her last resources/little Orpen’s joined the Forces.”<sup>13</sup> According to Upstone, Orpen’s commission “appears to have been organized directly by influential friends” of Evelyn’s, and as a result, he “received no military training whatsoever.”<sup>14</sup> From the very beginning, he was *of* the Army, but not quite *in* it. The reason he chose to title his war memoir *An Onlooker in France* is clear. However, he was an unusually involved onlooker. In and out of trenches, moving from place to place, even ending up in hospital for “blood poisoning”, Orpen experienced more of the suffering of war than almost any other civilian.<sup>15</sup> Anecdotes in his memoir refer to the countless men he knew - even briefly - who were snuffed out, the emotional wreckage he was privy to, and the sheer devastation - physical, mental and emotional – he moved through. So when, after he had seen fields of “shell-holes with the shapes of bodies faintly showing through the putrid water”, he returned to London March through June of 1918 and heard civilians complain of their hardships, his anger was piqued.<sup>16</sup>

Their constant talk was of the terrible things they at home were going through on air-raid nights. It hurt me – their complaining about their little chances of damage, when I knew that millions of men were running a big risk of being blown into eternity at any moment, day or night.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Upstone, “‘A Sudden Growing Up’: William Orpen and the Great War,” in *William Orpen: An Onlooker in France: A Critical Edition of the Artist’s War Memoirs*, ed. Robert Upstone and Angela Weight (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008); William Orpen’s height was somewhere between 5’8” and 5’, as he had to wait for the height requirements for enlistment to drop from 5’8” to 5’. His mistress, Evelyn, however, was 6’.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-36. Though Orpen termed his illness “blood poisoning” in his memoir, evidence shows that he contracted Syphilis somewhere likely in France.

<sup>16</sup> William Orpen, *William Orpen: An Onlooker in France: A Critical Edition of the Artist’s War Memoirs*, ed. Robert Upstone and Angela Weight (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008), 154.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*.

His anger only sharpened when the delegates negotiating the terms of peace in 1919 did the same. The British soldiers had “given up their all for the sake of the people at home, gone through Hell, misery and terror of sudden death.”<sup>18</sup> And yet, as soon as victory had been reached, the “frocks” commandeered the public eye: “‘I did this, I did that’ they all screamed,” doing “all their tricks to perfection” as they toddled along towards a finished treaty.<sup>19</sup> Acerbically, Orpen remembers the Signing of the Peace:

It was all over. The frocks had won the war. The frocks had signed the Peace! The Army was forgotten. Some dead and forgotten, others maimed and forgotten, others alive and well – but equally forgotten. Yet the sun shone outside my window and the fountains played, and the German Army – what was left of it – was a long, long way from Paris.<sup>20</sup>

Orpen, however, “had been given the chance of looking on,” and as such, “had seen and worshipped.”<sup>21</sup> In the preface of *An Onlooker in France*, he states “the only thought” he intends to impart is his “sincere thanks for the wonderful opportunity that was given [him] to look on and see the fighting man, and to learn to revere and worship him.”<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, he knew two artistic strategies for striking that selfsame awe he felt into the hearts of civilians: stately portraiture, and caustic terror.

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<sup>18</sup> William Orpen, *William Orpen: An Onlooker in France: A Critical Edition of the Artist's War Memoirs*, ed. Robert Upstone and Angela Weight (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008), 193.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 200, 223.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.



Figure 1: William Orpen, *The Manchesters, Arras*. Just out of the trenches near Arras. Been through the battles of Ypres and Somme untouched. Going home to Sheffield to be married. Charcoal on paper, 508 x 444 mm. 1917. Collection of Imperial War Museum.

His sketches of ordinary infantrymen are especially poignant in his dedication to achieving this goal. Of one subject, whom Orpen drew in 1917, he recalls he “was quite happy. He had ten days’ leave and was going back to some village near Manchester to be married. He showed me her photograph, a pretty girl. Perhaps he was killed afterwards.”<sup>23</sup> That sketch, now the property of the Imperial War Museum, is captioned in Orpen’s writing with a list of this nameless “Tommie’s”[sic] soldierly achievements, having come “just out of the trenches near Arras”, he had “been through the battle of Ypres and Somme untouched.”(Fig. 1)<sup>24</sup> By affording

<sup>23</sup> William Orpen, *William Orpen: An Onlooker in France: A Critical Edition of the Artist’s War Memoirs*, ed. Robert Upstone and Angela Weight (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008), 83.

<sup>24</sup> Inscribed in the mid-right field of the sketch, by Orpen.



the average “Tommy” the same attention paid to prominent figures such as Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, he bestowed equal regard upon any member of the services he perceived as doing his duty.<sup>25</sup>

The most iconic of his war paintings are those which contain “a fateful message which rivals Goya,” matched in all their baleful clarity with his heroicising portraits.<sup>26</sup> While his sketches, busts, and portraits speak to a tradition of honoring the soldier, these works belie them. Returning to a stark, unflinching realism that ties his work to Goya’s series of etchings “The Disasters of War,” Orpen allowed his biting wit reign over these testimonials of the battlefield. Full of grotesque horrors, bloated bodies, lurking corpses, churned expanses of viscous and putrefying mud, these works do not represent any bravery or nobility. They speak to the horrific experiences of war, to the anecdote of the officer who told Orpen he could paint the Somme from memory, “but one could not paint the smell.”<sup>27</sup> Chiefly, however, they thrust a violent reality into the face of civilians back home.

In the end, Orpen’s most controversial work was not an image of the war, but the third of his commissioned paintings of the Peace Conference. He had drafted a sketch of men who had fought in the war, including Field Marshals Sir Douglas Haig and Ferdinand Foch, standing grouped together outside of the signing at the Hall of Mirrors.<sup>28</sup> The absolute futility, however,

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<sup>25</sup> Field Marshall Haig also sat for Orpen, the incident is detailed: William Orpen, *William Orpen: An Onlooker in France: A Critical Edition of the Artist’s War Memoirs*, ed. Robert Upstone and Angela Weight (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008), 80; and the portrait is in the possession of the Imperial War Museum.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth McKonkey, “William Orpen’s War.” *Irish Arts Review* 31, no. 2 (June-August 2014), 113; Andrew Wilton, “Chapter 8 – The Great Debate: 1910-1960.” In *Five Centuries of British Painting: from Holbein to Hodgkin*. 192-229 (London – New York: Thames & Hudson, World of Art, 2001), 204.

<sup>27</sup> William Orpen, *William Orpen: An Onlooker in France: A Critical Edition of the Artist’s War Memoirs*, ed. Robert Upstone and Angela Weight (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008), 72.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Upstone, “‘A Sudden Growing Up’: William Orpen and the Great War,” in *William Orpen: An Onlooker in France: A Critical Edition of the Artist’s War Memoirs*, ed. Robert Upstone and Angela Weight (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008), 38-39.

of presenting an inappreciative public with images of men they distantly cared about seems to have gotten to Orpen before he could paint this image.

And then, you know, I couldn't go on. It all seemed so unimportant somehow. In spite of all those eminent men, I kept thinking of the soldiers who remain in France forever ... So I rubbed out all the statesmen and commanders, and painted the picture as you see it – the unknown soldier guarded by his comrades.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 2: William Orpen, *To the Unknown British Soldier in France*. Photo reproduction, oil on canvas, 1542 x 1289 mm. 1923. Picture courtesy of Imperial War Museum website.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Upstone, “‘A Sudden Growing Up’: William Orpen and the Great War,” in *William Orpen: An Onlooker in France: A Critical Edition of the Artist’s War Memoirs*, ed. Robert Upstone and Angela Weight (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008), 39.

“The picture as you see it,” *To the Unknown British Soldier in France*, was the coffin of an unnamed, unknown British soldier, draped with the Union Jack and guarded by two naked, emaciated, ghoulish ‘Tommies’ and two floating putti.<sup>30</sup> (Fig. 2) At the end of a long, dark hallway going back from the coffin was Christ on the cross. The darkness of the hallway emphasized not only the coffin, but the pallor of the two figures flanking it. It was a bare representation of the war’s aftermath, and it was not appreciated by many of its audience.<sup>31</sup> Orpen’s bitterest response to the war was not for men who fought needlessly, but for the people who ignored them willfully. The “Tommie” as he was marched, conscripted, or blown into the modern age was always the true symbol of the war in Orpen’s mind.

### **Paul Nash and the Living Landscape**

Paul Nash, the longest lived of the three, is often discussed in relation to his role in the Second World War, during which he was again an official war artist. As the man who, in his 1943 essay “Art and War,” admitted that “the most convincing character of reality is the *unreal* quality of the scene,” his brand of painting was inherently romantic.<sup>32</sup> Michael Prodger in his essay “Old Gods, New Monsters” attributes Nash’s lasting and wide-spread popularity to the fact that he embraced both Modern and British artistic identities, adapting traditional English subjects to their situation in the modern age.<sup>33</sup> The traditional subject that became his focus was the English landscape. This focus strengthened into a life-long love affair with that landscape, as

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<sup>30</sup> Putti are small naked cherubim, common in Rococo and Baroque motifs.

<sup>31</sup> *To the Unknown British Soldier* caused so much complaint that the Imperial War Museum refused to accept the piece until the soldiers had been painted out. Orpen finally acquiesced in 1927. The story is detailed on the object label page on the Imperial War Museum’s website, accessed here:

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/20880>

<sup>32</sup> David Boyd Hancock, *Paul Nash* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Prodger, “Old Gods, New Monsters: Famous for his First World War Paintings and landscapes, Paul Nash was the greatest British artist of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” *New Statesman* 145, no. 5338 (October 28, 2016); David Boyd Hancock, *Paul Nash* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002).

well as its history and mysterious complexity. While Nash may not have painted ‘pretty’ pictures, he was constantly aware of the sublimity of nature, in awe of it for its power.

From his very birth in Kensington in 1889, he would seek out places in nature which captivated him, finding his own small corner of Kensington Gardens which was different from the rest and special to him for reasons he struggled to articulate.<sup>34</sup> Drawing and painting places such as this was Nash’s method of elucidating the “inner life of the subject”: he did not create images, he merely revealed them.<sup>35</sup> As such, the pre-Raphaelites, especially “Rossetti’s dreamlike visions,” spoke to the young artist when he first put pen to paper.<sup>36</sup> For the “inward-looking, spiritual young man,” “the whole damnable war [was] too horrible” when it broke out.<sup>37</sup> His correspondence indicates he was deeply distressed by the war, and though he was “against killing anybody,” the pressure to aid the effort led him to enlist in the Territorial unit the Artists Rifles in September of 1914.<sup>38</sup> In December, he married Margaret Odeh, and his war experience was not to sharpen until 1917, when he was sent to Flanders as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Hampshire Regiment.<sup>39</sup> In the trenches at the Ypres Salient, however, Nash “was admitted No. 14 General Hospital Boulogne 28<sup>th</sup> May with dislocation 7<sup>th</sup> rib slight.”<sup>40</sup> He had fallen in the trenches, and was soon back home in London – his regiment, however, continued the fight without him, and on June 15<sup>th</sup> were decimated in an attack.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> David Boyd Hancock, *Paul Nash* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Wilton, “Chapter 8 – The Great Debate: 1910-1960.” In *Five Centuries of British Painting: from Holbein to Hodgkin*. 192-229 (London – New York: Thames & Hudson, World of Art, 2001), 220; David Boyd Hancock, *Paul Nash* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 13.

<sup>37</sup> Toby Thacker, *British Culture and the First World War: Experience, Representation, and Memory* (London – New Delhi – New York – Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 23, 64.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 113, 164.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to Margaret Odeh Nash from the War Office S.W. London, 30 May 1917. Letters and Papers of Paul Nash, Tate Britain.

<sup>41</sup> David Boyd Hancock, *Paul Nash* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 26.

After these experiences, Nash's dreamy romance with the land transmuted into an exercise in the futility of trying to protect it. Upon his appointment as an official war artist, Nash was returned to the front lines as an observer. What he saw there - the ancient land, once beautiful and mysterious now pockmarked, scarred, subject to all sorts of vicious depredation at the hands of modern man - thoroughly disgusted him. The intrinsic spirit of the landscape, its *genius loci*, was beyond the reckoning of men, and to see these "beautiful legendary [countries] haunted by old gods long forgotten" so degraded caused him great pain.<sup>42</sup> He wanted desperately to portray that spirit and the effects the war had had upon it, which were manifold and often terrible. But when, having "seen the most frightful nightmare of a country ever conceived by Dante or Poe," a country made so by and at the hands and tools of men, something far more than a rib dislocated within him.<sup>43</sup> On 13 November, 1917, after seeing the battlefield at Messines, Nash's brush failed him, just as pens had before failed so many soldiers writing home from the front.<sup>44</sup> His own words mirror those of the "just DEAD BEAT" Captain H.J.C. Leland, who wrote his wife from the Western Front that "there is no romance in this war ... it is nothing but murder, pure and simple."<sup>45</sup> He wrote Margaret despairingly that

no pen or drawing can convey this country – the normal setting of the battles taking place day & night, month after month Evil and the incarnate Fiend alone can be master of the ceremonies in this war: no glimmer of God's hand is seen. Sunset & sunrise are blasphemous mockeries to man; only the black rain out of the bruised & swollen clouds or thro' the bitter black of night is fit atmosphere in such a land. The rain drives on; the stinking mud becomes more evilly yellow, the

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<sup>42</sup> David Boyd Hancock, *Paul Nash* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002), 20.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Nash, Letter to wife, Margaret Odeh Nash, November 13, 1917, somewhere on the Western Front. Letters and Papers of Paul Nash, Tate Britain.

<sup>44</sup> See the works of Michael Roper, including: "Between Manliness and Masculinity: The 'War Generation' and the Psychology of Fear in Britain, 1914-1950," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 2 (April 2005); "Between the Psyche and the Social: Masculinity, Subjectivity and the First World War Veteran." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2007); "Re-Remembering the Soldier Hero: The Psychic and Social Construction of Memory in Personal Narratives of the Great War." *History Workshop Journal* no. 50 (Autumn 2000).

<sup>45</sup> "Between the Psyche and the Social: Masculinity, Subjectivity and the First World War Veteran." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 255, 257; Captain H. J. C. Leland, Letters to his Wife, August 8 and July 10 1917, Private Papers of Captain H J C Leland DSO, Imperial War Museum (IWM).

shell holes fill up with green white water, the roads & tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black dying trees ooze & sweat and the shells never cease. They whine & plunge over head, tearing away the rotting tree stumps, breaking the plank roads, striking down horses & mules; annihilating, maiming, maddening; they plunge into the grave which is this land, one huge grave, and cast up the poor dead.<sup>46</sup>

In the face of such “unspeakable, Godless, hopeless” absurdity and destruction, Nash’s romantic streak gave way to the aspect which would define his work for the rest of his career: Surrealism.<sup>47</sup> A visual vocabulary which finally allowed Nash to realize the full intensity of the tumult which now characterized the relationship between man and nature, Surrealism was shocking in Nash’s hands. Perhaps most strikingly deployed in Nash’s famed *We Are Making a New World*, his brand of Surrealism assaulted the viewer with the fact of the tortured landscape. (Fig 3) What he had seen and felt as a soldier and artist brought him to a precipice, where he could look out and see the ruin humanity might reap in the next years of the war. As a result, he became, “no longer[,] an artist interested & curious.” Instead, he was “a messenger, who [would] bring back word from men fighting to those who want the war to last forever. Feeble, inarticulate will be my message but it will have a bitter truth and may it burn their lousy souls.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Paul Nash, Letter to wife, Margaret Odeh Nash, November 13, 1917, somewhere on the Western Front. Letters and Papers of Paul Nash, Tate Britain.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



Figure 3: Paul Nash, *We Are Making a New World*. Oil on canvas, 711 x 914 mm. 1918. Collection of Imperial War Museum.

Much can be said of *We Are Making a New World*, but it can hardly be called feeble. The acrid sky and the cratered ground, stabbed by the husks of trees, is aggressive and accusatory. Nash's work presents a (sur)reality; his title presents its creators. During his war, he saw fields deflowered by entrenchment, woods disemboweled by explosives. The same periodical which reviewed Orpen's 1918 show also reviewed "Pictures by Lieut. Paul Nash, an official artist on the Western Front" on the very same page, saying that Nash insisted on portraying "devastated nature and tortured earth" in order to "convey his feeling" on the war.<sup>49</sup> The world as he knew and loved it was becoming alien and grotesque, deformed by the actions of insignificant men and

<sup>49</sup> "Pictures by Lieut. Paul Nash." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 33, no. 184 (July 1918), 35.

their prolonged destruction. What better way for Nash to convince the world of this tragedy than to do as he did, and “paint trees as though they were human beings”?<sup>50</sup>

### **C.R.W. Nevinson and the Mangling of Modernity**

While Orpen and Nash were both focused on the effects of modernity upon deeply historical aspects of life – the soul of man, and nature – C.R.W. Nevinson was instead focused upon modernity itself. Born in 1889, the same year as Nash, Nevinson would attend art school at the Slade alongside him.<sup>51</sup> Where Nash was dreamy and spiritual, however, Nevinson was filled with the urgency of the future. Modernity and technology were coming, they were already present in many respects, and Nevinson, even from his childhood, was transfixed. Exacerbating Nevinson’s disillusionment with a romantic view of the past was his father, Henry Woodd Nevinson’s role as a war correspondent during his childhood and adult life. With his father the man who “brought warfare to British breakfast tables” and professed it was “always rather hard for [him] to live in peace unless there is war,” C.R.W. was exposed to a view of the world as a place of warfare.<sup>52</sup> These sensibilities are overwhelmingly present in discussions of him and his work. Michael J.K. Walsh discusses the origins of the artist as an “*avant-guerre* rebel,” turning against the establishment.<sup>53</sup> Through his schooling and youth, he had a “passion for engineering, and a capacity for painting imaginary and historical subjects.”<sup>54</sup> Nevinson’s tenure in Public School, however, was hardly one he would remember fondly, especially after being publicly

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Prodger, “Old Gods, New Monsters: Famous for his First World War Paintings and landscapes, Paul Nash was the greatest British artist of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” *New Statesman* 145, no. 5338 (October 28, 2016), 40.

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Wilton, “Chapter 8 – The Great Debate: 1910-1960.” In *Five Centuries of British Painting: from Holbein to Hodgkin*. 192-229 (London – New York: Thames & Hudson, World of Art, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> Angela V. John, *War, Journalism, and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century: The Life and Times of Henry W. Nevinson* (London – New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 1.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Walsh, “C.R.W. Nevinson: Conflict, Contrast and Controversy in Paintings of War,” *War in History* 12, no. 2 (April 2005), 3.

<sup>54</sup> C.R.W. Nevinson, *Paint and Prejudice*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 6.



flogged for rule-breaking at the age of seven.<sup>55</sup> In his own words, it was both his “plethora of artistic training and [his] revolt against public-school traditions” which led to his own contrarian streak of Modernism focused upon the dismantling of outdated artistic institutions.<sup>56</sup>

When Nevinson was first introduced to it, Filippo Tomaso Marinetti’s Italian Futurism seemed very near to, if not *the* answer to his struggle against the grain in his depicting the character of the modern age which surrounded him. Marinetti’s Futurist Manifesto proclaimed “that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed” and technological advancement, and Nevinson had been drawn in by that beauty.<sup>57</sup> “We stand on the last promontory of the centuries! ... Why should we look back,” inquired Marinetti, “when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the Impossible?”<sup>58</sup> Nevinson joined with him to publish their own Futurist manifesto for England, the “signal for battle” against “that most grave of all maladies – passé-ism.”<sup>59</sup>

When war – which Marinetti dubbed “the world’s only hygiene” – really and truly broke out, however, Nevinson wanted no part in the fighting. He “regarded [himself] as having no patriotism, although [he] preferred the English”, and as such desired more to escape the reach of the war rather than run headlong into it.<sup>60</sup> Caught up in the whirlwind of action, however, Nevinson ultimately joined the Quaker-formed Friends Ambulance Unit in October of 1914, and he was shortly thereafter off to Dunkirk to care for the wounded.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> C.R.W. Nevinson, *Paint and Prejudice*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Filippo Tomaso Marinetti, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism,” in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 147.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> C.R.W. Nevinson, *Paint and Prejudice*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 79.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>61</sup> Toby Thacker, *British Culture and the First World War: Experience, Representation, and Memory* (London – New Delhi – New York – Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 65.

What he found when he got there would cure him of his belief in Marinetti's Futurism. He was met with "a shed full of dead, wounded, and dying," which had been nicknamed the Shambles.<sup>62</sup> He would viscerally describe the scene in his memoir years later:

They lay on dirty straw, foul with old bandages and filth, those gaunt, bearded men, some white and some with only a faint movement of their chests to distinguish them from the dead by their side. Those who had the strength to moan wailed incessantly.

"Ma mère – ma mère!"

"Que je souffre, ma mère!" [Mother, how I suffer!]

The sound of those broken men crying for their mothers is something I shall always have in my ears.<sup>63</sup>

The breaking point of Futurism was found, for Nevinson, in the agonized cries emanating from those machine-mangled men. From then on, looking back, his association with Italian Futurism and the Fascism it descended into became a "black thought".<sup>64</sup> "Here our ways part," he wrote in 1915, "I do not glory in war for its own sake".<sup>65</sup> Without Futurism, however, without the artistic style and the visual syntax it afforded Nevinson to express his thoughts, he would have been stranded. Though he could not abide by its ridiculous worship of war, ignorant of the suffering and the debris such violence caused, it was still useful for his ultimate goal as a war artist. As Wilton states, Nevinson's utilization of Futurist style "demonstrates the value of abstract experiment in realizing the violence of the war."<sup>66</sup> The aftermath of Marinetti's ultimate health-giver was a charred, bloody, and suppurating mess, brought about by, as Nevinson portrayed, the blind groping advances of technology.

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<sup>62</sup> C.R.W. Nevinson, *Paint and Prejudice*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 96.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>65</sup> C.R.W. Nevinson, "Painter of Smells at the Front: A Futurist's Views on the War," in *Daily Express, The* (UK). (February 25, 1915), pg. 8.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Wilton, "Chapter 8 – The Great Debate: 1910-1960." In *Five Centuries of British Painting: from Holbein to Hodgkin*. 192-229 (London – New York: Thames & Hudson, World of Art, 2001), 208.



Figure 4: C.R.W. Nevinson, *La Patrie*. Oil on canvas, 60.8 x 91.5 cm. 1916. Collection of Birmingham Museums Trust.

In the face of such disgusting scarification and slaughter fueled by Marinetti’s beautiful speed, Nevinson found that the “Futurist technique [was] the only possible medium to express the crudeness, violence, and brutality of the emotions seen and felt on the present battlefields of Europe.”<sup>67</sup> He saw sacrifice, yes, but he saw it as baseless and preventable, and his art reflected this.<sup>68</sup> *La Patrie*, painted in 1916, is sharp and assaultive – the bodies of wounded soldiers morphed into jagged shapes. It follows Nevinson’s trend of pointing out the dehumanization of the soldier in an increasingly mechanized world. In his hands, the abstraction of human forms mirrored the physical disfigurement of the soldiers in the name of industrial warfare. By lambasting the “machinery/technology of misapplied industrial ‘progress’” in a visual method

<sup>67</sup> C.R.W. Nevinson, “Painter of Smells at the Front: A Futurist’s Views on the War,” in *Daily Express, The* (UK). (February 25, 1915), pg. 8.

<sup>68</sup> Debra Lennard, “Censored Flesh: The wounded body as unrepresentable in the art of the First World War,” *British Art Journal* 12, no. 2 (September 2011), 27.

which amplified the disfigurement of humanity, Nevinson was able to evoke the jarring horror of his days at the Shambles and push it into the view of the men and women back in London.<sup>69</sup>

Nevinson's disgust at the fate of man doomed to be viewed with as much reverence as machine colored all of his work as a war artist. Continuing as a painter, however, he found that people were too distracted by the sheer presence of abstraction within his work.<sup>70</sup> To truly show them the indignity of it all, he would end up stripping away abstraction and utilizing a brutal realism similar to that of Orpen. Nevinson's highly controversial *Paths of Glory*, which showed two dead Tommy's face down in the mud and muck, dropped unceremoniously like spent bullets, provoked no small amount of anger. While Nevinson wanted that anger directed at the war, there were those who directed it instead at him, for showing their soldiers so brutally.<sup>71</sup> While Nevinson was a blunt man, intent upon creation of "an English Art that [was] strong, virile, and anti-sentimental," his bluntness should not be mistaken for callousness.<sup>72</sup> He condemned even himself for the beliefs he had once held, and nowhere is it more obvious than his art.

## Conclusion

While each of these artists individually is the subject of much scholarship, together as a group of Official War Artists, they have rarely been discussed. Nash and Nevinson are often pitted against each other for the title of the 'best' war artist, but the differences in how they understood and depicted the unrelenting newness and now-ness of the conflict and their everyday

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Walsh, "C.R.W. Nevinson: Conflict, Contrast and Controversy in Paintings of War," *War in History* 12, no. 2 (April 2005), 190.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Debra Lennard, "Censored Flesh: The wounded body as unrepresentable in the art of the First World War," *British Art Journal* 12, no. 2 (September 2011); Michael Walsh, "C.R.W. Nevinson: Conflict, Contrast and Controversy in Paintings of War," *War in History* 12, no. 2 (April 2005).

<sup>72</sup> C.R.W. Nevinson, *Paint and Prejudice*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 80.

lives remain largely untouched. Three men, three painters, experienced one war. Together, they were horrified, but they were horrified in their own ways for their own reasons. The modern conceptions of subjectivity and individuality allowed them to be both part of a group and remember their experiences individually. It is thanks to recent scholarship and the accumulation of multiple contrasting points of view that viewers today can approach all memories of war as ‘true’ in their own ways, demonstrating the multifarious ripples one event can cause.

Orpen, Nash, and Nevinson latched on to varied aspects of the Great War in their remembrance, reconstruction, and representation of it. For each one of them, hundreds of thousands of other people performed the same processes within their own experience and memory. War is, and always has been, a collage, a collection of stitched-together stories. The patchwork it becomes does not, however, mean that individual experiences are unimportant to the whole, let alone unimportant in their individuality. Through the eyes, hands, and brushes of the three artists discussed here, humanity’s struggles, faults, and sacrifices are preserved. Their efforts – to honor men who were ignored, to reveal the cost of such terribly destructive war, to argue that to be modern can also mean to be brutal – remain. Their messages, as art on a gallery wall, linger.

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