**Unstuck: ‘War artists without a war’**

**Paul Gough**

#### **Chapter in: Photography in Alter Space**

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1

Like any other profession, the armed services have their own terms and typologies, some more terse than is customary. However, perhaps more than others, the military employ a euphemistic turn that blends understatement with colourful irony: shooting one’s own side in error is called ‘friendly fire’; ‘fatigue duty’ is labour assigned to men that does not require the use of ‘arms’; running away is never ‘retreat’ but ‘strategic withdrawal’. Military conflict, asserts the indomitable Paul Fussell, is laced inevitably with irony:

Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends. (1)

Understandably, the diction of command and instruction firmly eschews irony. Instead, written battle orders employ an active, instructive tense that exudes authority. It is a language where the passive or conditional simply does not exist, instead: '*Brigade will commence at ..., Objectives shall be taken by ..., reinforcements will be moved to ... etc'.* Maps and charts drawn up before offensives bear a similarly affirmative, even optimistic, code; barrage lines are clearly marked in minutes of advance, in June 1944 the objectives beyond the Normandy beachhead were marked out in time - D Day plus one, plus two, etc - as well as in space. Instruction manuals in military sketching equate clarity of line with clarity of purpose. Ambiguity and doubt is (quite literally) ruled out. The margins of failure (like estimated casualties rate) are clearly prescribed and then codified in the clipped diction of command and in the crisp lines required of military mapping. As one assertive drawing instructor expresses it:

A line should be as sharp and precise as a word of command. A wavering line which dies away carries no conviction or information because it is the product of a wavering mind. Every line should be put in to express something. Start sharply and finish sharply. Press on the paper. (2)

Meanwhile, back to irony. An officer found wanting in the face of the enemy is said to be ‘relieved of his command’. Senior officers in the French Army who were thus relieved were usually sent in disgrace to the city of Limoges, far from the Western Front. They were thus described as ‘Limoged’. Anecdotally a sacked senior commander in the British army was said to have become ‘unstuck’, or in the clumsy translation of the British, ‘de-gommed’.

Billy Pilgrim, the central character in Kurt Vonnegut’s "Slaughterhouse Five" (3) becomes "unstuck in time", experiencing moments from various points in his life, and soon after the war is institutionalized with post-traumatic stress disorder.

2

Were artists immune from such slippage in the use of language? How might a writer or artist draw on the existing language to depict the calamity and depravity of modern war? As Eliot famously wrote, words crack ‘and sometimes break under the burden, under the tension, slip, slide, perish.’ (4) John Masefield, writer and future poet laureate, had no available vocabulary to describe his first sight of the Somme battlefield in 1916. ‘To say that the ground is “ploughed up” with shells is to talk like a child’, he ventured, ‘to call it mud would be misleading’

It was not like any mud I’ve ever seen. It was a kind of stagnant river, too thick to flow, yet too wet to stand, and it had a kind of glisten and shine on it like reddish cheese, but it was not solid at all and you left no tracks in it, they all closed over, and you went in over your boots at every step and sometimes up to your calves. Down below it there was a solid footing, and as you went slopping along the army went slopping along by your side, and splashed you from head to foot. (5)

Almost every battlefield visitor, every commissioned artist, called the battered landscape of the Western Front ‘indescribable’. And yet, every visitor and artist attempted to picture it in words; indeed many thousands of pages were filled trying to define and describe the trauma that had been visited upon this vast swathe of northern France and Belgium. The spectacle of abject ruination drew pilgrims and painters, just as it draws visitors today, to dwell on it in dread fascination.

To explore these challenges let us look briefly at several of those painters, and even posit a number of archetypes of artists, who attempted to capture the sublime awfulness of the European Great War, but who inevitably failed, or who quickly became ‘unstuck:

-       those who craved front-line experience but were repeatedly denied a sketching permit to wander the battle zones;  
  
-       those who were granted official permission then painted inappropriate subjects for the wrong audience;  
  
-       those who were identified for their creative turn, but failed to understand or modify their ‘style’ to fit the military needs;  
  
-       those who tricked their way to the Front, adopted fugitive practices and assumed an indeterminate commission and a collaged appearance.

3

One who craved access to the devastation, another who proposed the ‘wrong’ subject.

In the 1920s, Rowland Hill was an amateur painter based in Yorkshire, England. He had served out the war as a Lance-Corporal on Home Service (‘a very unimportant item’, as he described it) in the Royal Defence Corps. Two months after the Armistice he wrote (as did many hundreds of other artists) the first of many letters to the Imperial War Museum pleading for 'official leave' to ‘make some record of our true battlegrounds, and of the immensely picturesque material before it is all “mended'” and tidied up’.

Despite repeated rejection letters, Hill eventually gained a pass to travel to France, but could not gain clearance to sketch in the old war zones. Undeterred he again approached the war museum, only to be rebuffed. Eventually, as restrictions were eased, he was permitted to visit the 'sacred sites' on the old front line - destroyed tanks on the Freyzenburg Ridge, the Cloth Hall at 'Wipers', the scorched woods at Inverness Copse, the heaped rubble of shattered chateaux. We know this because for the following twelve years he wrote regularly to the museum begging them to buy his work: ‘Will your people give me two guineas for this drawing of the Ramparts of Ypres", he wrote in January 1930, "It is unique in its way. I am pitifully hard up and the money would help me considerably.’ (6) Deluged with similar requests the museum pleaded lack of funds and a glut of images of ruination. He even offered one of the tank regiments a picture of two ruined British tanks near Ypres. The reply was a little frosty: ‘The only images of tanks the Regiment would be interested in are of them in action not in ruin.’ (7)

In his desperation to be paid, commissioned or at least recognized as a painter, Hill had committed the ultimate *faux pas* when dealing with the military: proposing the ‘wrong’ subject.

4

Others who were identified for their creative turn, but failed to understand or modify their ‘style’ to fit the military needs

Identified in his official paperwork as an ‘artist’, the young Vorticist painter and sometime artilleryman William Roberts was ordered to take his drawing material to the front-line to compose a panorama of no-man’s-land. However, like many of his fellow modern artists he simply could not grasp the disciplined language needed to provide the perfect military sketch:

From the OP (Observation Post) I saw a completely featureless landscape, save here and there a few broken sticks of trees. I made a pencil drawing of this barren piece of ground, but what use my superiors would be able to make of this sketch I could not imagine. (8)

It was to be his only foray into reconnaissance drawing. Hardly any of his artistic friends then serving in the armed forces could subvert their creative tendencies in the pursuit of technical objectivity. Equally challenged, the poet David Jones having already been ‘promoted sideways’ [another military euphemism] from 'Maps' to 'Observers' was soon moved on 'because of [his] inefficiency in getting the right degree of gun flashes'. (9) Reconnaissance drawing (also known as Panorama or Field Sketching) required technical control, a common graphic language and a healthy disregard for what the manuals termed 'artistic effect'. Training manuals express it rather more succinctly:

It may be premised that, from a military point of view, it is not necessary to be an artist to produce a useful panorama. Indeed, it is better almost that the artistic sense should be absent, and that instead of idealising a landscape, it should be looked at with a cold, matter-of-fact eye. Thus the sketcher would note rather the capabilities of the country for military purposes than its beauties of colouring or the artistic effects of light and shade. (10)

Few modern artists wished to subordinate their creativity to the pursuit of dull, factual reportage. Indeed, in 1802 John Constable had turned down a lucrative post as drawing instructor at the Royal Military Academy in southern England on exactly those grounds. Had I accepted, he wrote to John Dunthorne ‘it would have been a death blow to all my prospects of perfection in the Art I love’ (11) Thomas Gainsborough had been equally contemptuous of any such tame delineation of the landscape, dismissing it as little more than ‘mappy’.

5

Others who may (or may not) have reached the Front, adopting fugitive practices, their work assuming a collaged, synthetic appearance.

By all accounts Edward Harry Handley-Read was an energetic and industrious man, a painter who had studied at Westminster School of Art and at the Royal Academy where he won the Creswick Prize for Landscape Painting. Aged 45 in 1914 he was too old for active service but joined the Artist’s Rifles and exhibited with them at the Leicester Galleries in March 1916. He later transferred to the Machine-Gun Corps where he was promoted to captain. He spent much of the war at the Machine Gun Corps Training Camp at Harrowby Camp, Grantham where as Quarter Master Sergeant Instructor her ran his own studio producing instructional diagrams, landscape targets and numerous coloured diagrams.

Handley-Read produced many hundreds of charcoal and wash drawings of the Flanders battlefields, and showed them in a series of well-received exhibitions in London. In 1916 ‘The British Firing Line’ was hailed as the first exhibition of war pictures from the British Front. *The Graphic* newspaper urged its readers to ‘see this remarkable collection of pictures which, both by reason of their artistic qualities and the subjects illustrated make a unique appeal.’ (12)

In late December 1918 Handley-Read requested Official War Artist status so he might visit the Western Front ‘to get as much pictorial record before the landscape alters’. In passing he mentioned that he had ‘already visited France in the fighting zone 3 times on duty’, a claim he had made in previous correspondence. (13) Yet, at closer look there is room to doubt whether Handley-Read made many, if any, of the drawings in France and Flanders at all.

Firstly, there is a scribbled note on the front of an advert for Handley-Read’s Exhibition in 1916 which says, cryptically, ‘Mond says these not done on the spot.’ Sir Alfred Mond was Chairman of the Imperial War Museum (IWM).

Secondly, a Colonel H.E. Marsh, who had bought one of the painter’s watercolours, wrote to say that the date on the artwork was ‘wrong’: ‘it should apparently be April 1915 as there was no battle in Oct. 1915, though the first battle of Ypres was in Oct. 1914 but the Artist’s unit, a Hon. Artillery Column had not gone out then.’ Exactitude matters a great deal to the military: a painter can’t ever afford to be tactically in error.

And thirdly, there is a striking resemblance between Handley-Read’s watercolours and contemporary photographs reproduced in the popular illustrated papers of the day. For example the artist’s drawing *The Road to Loos* (exhibited in 1916) is identical in its design to a photograph widely reproduced at the time, in for example *The Illustrated London News*, of 16th October 1915, even down to the inclusion of a large staff car in the middle distance. There are other examples of work derived from images in public circulation, each one as equally symmetrical. (14)

None of these suspicions should undermine Handley-Read’s achievements. Patently, he was a prodigious worker and under considerable pressure from his gallery to produce ever more ‘war’ pictures. Indeed, he exhibited an average of 70 new pieces for three consecutive years during the war. This output was in addition to his duties and successes as an instructor for which he was widely regarded, with thousands of his expertly illustrated instruction leaflets distributed to all corners of the empire, and for which he was awarded MBE.

Instead it points to several concerns about the fear of being both ‘stuck’ in the category of ‘a war artist’ and ‘unstuck’ by the fear of lacking an authentic, eye-witness authority. The dilemma plagues our appreciation of war art, and came to a crisis in 1994 when Peter Howson’s ‘Croatian and Muslim’, was rejected for purchase by the IWM following Howson’s tour of duty as a British government-sponsored artist with the United Nations Protection Force in Bosnia. (15)

Few images in recent times have caused quite the same furore as this small canvas, which graphically depicts the alleged rape of a Moslem woman by two Croatian soldiers.

It is a truly disturbing scene, but the controversy focused not so much on the abomination itself but on the right of an artist to pass off such scenes as ‘authentic’. It brought to the fore the rumbling debate about the very role of the war artist, probing their value as independent witnesses, and questioning the validity of painting ‘imaginary’ events as opposed to ‘factual’ records.

Although the painting was actually exhibited, and reproduced in the museum’s catalogue, its exclusion from the permanent collection further polarised two schools of thought: those that felt it necessary to depict the true face of warfare using whatever means available to an artist seen or unseen, and those who argued that an artist must first bear witness, ocular not just circumstantial, to a seen scene of horror before committing it to canvas. The painter stuck to his narrative: the museum stuck to its principles. Ironically [that word again] a second painting ‘Serb and Muslim’, painted the same year and depicting an equally raw image of sexual violation was purchased by a Scottish art gallery with relatively little fuss. In more muted tones and with a loose neo-expressionist style it aroused none of the ire aimed at the neon-lit abomination of ‘Croatian and Muslim’ with its raw unflinching verisimilitude.

There is no doubt that the debate about integrity, authenticity and retinal authority will resurface. Many regard ‘war art’ as they might regard the term ‘military intelligence’ - an obvious oxymoron. However, as Jonathan Jones, astutely observed in the Guardian ‘artists often seem to say most about war when they are trying to say something broader about the human condition’ (16)

Notes

1

P. Fussell (1975)*The Great War and Modern Memory*, (Oxford : Oxford University Press)

2

W.G. Newton, (1916) *Military Landscape Sketching and Target Indication* (London: Hugh Rees), p.27.

3

Kurt Vonnegut (1969) *Slaughterhouse-Five* (New York : Delacorte).

4

T.S. Eliot, (1963) ’Burnt Norton’, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber), p.194.

5

J. Masefield, (1916) letter to his wife, 21st October 1916, cited in Smith, C.B. (1978), *John Masefield: A Life* (New York), p.164.

6 Rowland Hill, Artist’s file 156/5 part ii IWM Department of Art. See also: P. Gough, (2004). ‘Sites in the imagination: the Beaumont Hamel Newfoundland Memorial on the Somme’ Cultural Geographies, 11, 235-258.

7

There was a happy ending, of a sort. The curators at the Imperial War Museum did choose to hang Hill’s oil of *Ypres* in the great Burlington House Exhibition in 1919, and were forever after plagued by letters from Hill pleading with the museum to purchase other ‘battlefield’ pictures (letters of June 1920, Jan 1927, January and March 1930). Such letters are typical in IWM pre-1945 files and are painful evidence of a widespread desperation amongst artists in the Depression era. An obituary in *The Whitby Gazette*, 12 September 1952, rated his visit to the battlefields in 1919 as the ‘one definite step … achieved in his career.’

8

William Roberts, Memories of the War to End all Wars: 4.5 Howitzer Gunner R.F.A. 1916–1918

(London: Canada Press, 1974) pp.27–28.

9

R. Hague, ed., (1980) *David Jones, Dai Greatcoat* (London: Faber), p. 241;

10

War Office (1912) *Manual of Map Reading and Sketching*. London: HMSO, p.75.

11

John Constable to John Dunthorne, 29th May 1802.

12

*The Graphic* newspaper, 27 May 1917.

13

Handley-Read letter to the Curator, IWM of 28 December 1918 Handley-Read, He had also made the claim in a previous letter, (16 December 1918, file 109/4)

14

*The Illustrated London News*, 16 October 1915, double-page photograph, pp.484–5. A more detailed account is to be found in P.J.Gough, (201) ‘*A Terrible Beauty’: War, British Artists and the First World War* (Bristol: Sansom and Company).

15

See the article on Peter Howson in *The Herald Scotland, 23rd February 1995, available at:* [*http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/spl/aberdeen/howson-s-image-of-war-on-display-1.693251*](http://www.heraldscotland.com/sport/spl/aberdeen/howson-s-image-of-war-on-display-1.693251)

16

J. Jones, guardian.co.uk, Thursday 25 July 2013

Note

Extracts of this material were first used in P.J.Gough, ‘Calculating the future’ – panoramic sketching, reconnaissance drawing and the material trace of war, in Saunders, N and Cornish, P. (eds.) *Contested Objects: Material Memories of the Great War,* Routledge, London, 2009, pp. 237-251.

