Gough Review *A Terrible Beauty*

Paul Gough

*A Terrible Beauty: British Artists in the First World War*

Sansom, 335 pages, 2010 Reviewed by Andrew Kelly, March 2010

Our view of the Great War, despite recent revisionism, remains the one that started to appear in the late 1920s: boys led by donkeys; a slaughter that wasted a nation's youth; and where all were destroyed, even those who had escaped it shells, as Erich Maria Remarque said. The art of the war is responsible for this: poetry, drama, novels, film and the visual arts have all played their part in the creation of this collective memory.

That 'terrible beauty' should result from such horror has always been the great paradox of the First World War. Though Paul Gough says that 'Britain did not produce much effective anti-war painting' the overall impact is overwhelmingly anti-war (there are only a few great anti-war films - J'Accuse, All Quiet on the Western Front, La Grand Illusion and Paths of Glory - but these are the ones that are regarded as being close to the truth). And it is all the more remarkable that, for the visual arts, it should result from state patronage, in a brutal war, when bloody conflict nurtured the creative arts.

A Terrible Beauty is a scholarly book that wears its learning lightly; well illustrated, allowing us to look at as well as read about the paintings; and mercifully free of the artspeak that denies to most today an understanding of the world of art. The key artists are covered: William Orpen, Paul Nash and his brother John; Muirhead Bone and Charles Nevinson; Wyndham Lewis and Stanley Spencer. Gough also gives us some of those less well-known: Paul Maze, Adrian Hill and Sydney Jones.

Artists were involved from the start, some welcoming, briefly, the cleansing that would result in a defeat of abstraction as well as Germany. They were free to paint what they saw, though after 1917 were not allowed to portray the dead (they could do so again after the

Armistice) and even modernism was quietly encouraged. But they had to put up with appalling conditions even though they were excused the privations of the battlefield; were seen as spies by some; had trouble keeping paper dry; and, as the war went on, had to face increasing censorship - Nevinson exhibited his great work Paths of Glory covered by brown paper with the word censored plastered over it, a protest which ended his career as an official war artist.

What resulted was remarkable. Gough looks in detail at some works with considerable insight: the 'first great painting of the war', Kennington's The Kensington's at Laventie; Paul Nash's The Menin Road (he integrates Cormac Macarthy's story of the aftermath of the apocalypse, The Road, in this discussion), Nevinson's La Mitrailleuse The Harvest of Battle and Paths of Glory as well as covering the wider work of the artist and others.

Though only one artist died at the front, all the artists were affected, many of them badly. Orpen could not forget the 'mangled corpses' in Flanders; Nevinson, who was only best when 'he painted something he hated', saw his reputation go into abeyance and he became more famous for what he said than what he did; Paul Nash complained about being a 'war artist without a war'; Spencer created one of the most moving monuments to 20th-century war on the painted walls of Burghclere's Sandham Memorial Chapel; Lewis turned to fascism: he really was mad, bad and dangerous to know. They may have achieved some financial security and were able to bear witness and create a record, even fulfil a dream that some had feared would never come (Wyndham Lewis wrote in the 1930s:

'You must not miss a war, if one is going!') but many questioned its worth.

Charles Masterman, chief propagandist from the start who commissioned many of the artists, had asked in The Condition of England published in 1910 'what will the future make of the present'? 100 years on, we look with horror at the war, and can pass judgement on those that sent men to fight for such pointless reasons. But we can also look back with some gratitude that artists portrayed it so honestly. At least some good came out of it.

Most artists once they had experienced the front, would have agreed with Paul Nash that their only justification was to help 'rob war of the last shred of glory the last shine of glamour'. They failed, as the Great War became only the First World War, but the work they created helps maintain the fascination that many have for that brutal conflict which started a brutal century and was responsible for much of its horrors. A Terrible Beauty shows why.

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/Terrible-Beauty-War-Imagination-1914-1918/dp/1906593000/ref=sr\_1\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1269251616&sr=8-1](https://owa.uwe.ac.uk/OWA/redir.aspx?C=11499b04dda940c7b3acb466c0e02643&URL=http%3a%2f%2fwww.amazon.co.uk%2fTerrible-Beauty-War-Imagination-1914-1918%2fdp%2f1906593000%2fref%3dsr_1_1%3fie%3dUTF8%26s%3dbooks%26qid%3d1269251616%26sr%3d8-1)