

Representing the Unseen

The Primacy of Visual Testimony in Official British War Art

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IN 1917, AFTER THREE YEARS OF CONFLICT, the British government became increasingly anxious about the corrosive impact of unrelenting war. It feared that the home population was becoming numbed by the scale of casualties, depressed and dispirited by the debilitating news from the static front lines. Battle fatigue by proxy was setting in. By August 1917, a National War Aims Committee (NWAC) comprised of Members of Parliament from the three main political parties was constituted to counteract war weariness and defeat pacifism. As part of this campaign, the government determined to eradicate any image of dead British troops from popular visual culture. News material was closely vetted, images and film footage was subject to censorship, and the representation of corpses in fine art by officially sponsored artists strictly forbidden.

This represented a momentous shift in the authority that had long been claimed by artists addressing the actualities of war. In a 1917 painting by Gilbert Rogers, sponsored by the Royal Army Medical Corps, which depicted the wounded after the Battle of Messines, Ridge articulates this new code of representation.

The British wounded lain on stretchers are intact and whole in body; they are cared for tenderly and with respect. By contrast, the enemy dead are presented as little more than bodily parts—legs, hands and feet, fragments, disembodied and dis-aggregated, poking from the pulverized earth. Similarly, William Orpen, another government-sponsored war artist, faced little censorship for his depiction of dead and decaying German troops dumped in the crevasse of a bleached trench.¹

Few NWAC records survive, but it is clear that the decree was an attempt to stage manage the truth. The concept of “fake news” and “post-truth” may seem notions of this century, but in 1917 officially appointed painters, printmakers, and photographers tasked with recording the face of war were required to reimagine it through creative processes, which were considered at the time to be pictorially transgressive—collage, montage, images reordered out of sequence—because they



Figure 6.1. Gilbert Rogers, *The Royal Army Medical Corps at Messines during the 1917 Offensive* (1919). Imperial War Museums (Art.IWM ART 2757)

flouted accepted conventions of linear narrative. Many devised innovative concoctions, “faking truth” to achieve greater authenticity and devising novel pictorial processes to convey their desired narratives of the actualities of war. Frank Hurley’s infamous collaged and photo-montaged “combat” photographs are perhaps the most notorious.² By overlapping negatives in the darkroom he tried to reimagine the face of modern warfare, arguing in his defense that the face of modern war was impossible to condense into a static photograph via a single lens.

Official Australian historian Charles Bean was deeply troubled by composite imagery, rejecting them as distortions of the truth that concealed the actualities and suffering of war. Conformist by instinct and forensic by training, he insisted on an indexical account of appearances. For Bean, documentary evidence was the only antidote to imaginative speculation.³ This tension between the indexical and interpretative persists. Despite eighty years of artists reimagining war, the problem of perceptual authority has not diminished. In 1994 the Scottish Official War Artist Peter Howson had a piece of his work refused by the Imperial War Museum in London, which had sponsored his commission to the Balkan War.⁴ They objected that the painting, the scene of a violent rape, had not been “witnessed” by the artist. Its “exclusion” caused upset in the art world and a strong reaction in the national press, bringing into sharp focus a rumbling debate about the role and contribution of a war artist. Commentators questioned their value as independent witnesses, probing the validity of painting “imaginary” events as opposed to “factual” records. The debate focused not so much on the abomination itself (which,

despite its dreadful subject, was largely ignored) but on the right of an official artist to pass off such scenes as “authentic.” Not so much fake news as phony realism. Its specter still hangs over the very nature of “war art” and the management of pictorial truth. The marginal decision by the museum not to select the painting for its permanent collection further polarized two schools of thought: those that felt it necessary to depict the awfulness of warfare using whatever means available to an artist and those who argued that an artist (and by extension photographer, reporter, writer) must bear witness—ocular not just circumstantial—to a scene of horror before committing it to canvas.⁵ The representation of war atrocities has generated a sizeable and well-articulated literature in recent decades, with Susan Sontag’s treatise, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, providing an eloquent frame for the interrogation and interpretation of extreme violation and suffering in war.⁶ In “Cruel Visions,” the historian Joanna Bourke also draws on Howson’s paintings to examine the challenges facing official artists seeking to represent atrocities such as rape. In a departure from much of the literature, she accentuates the role of embodiment in artistic constructions of suffering. Through three lenses— affective performativity, trauma, and empathy—she embraces an embodied approach to picture-making, emphasizing the artist’s movements and gestures through “agitated brush marks, broad strokes, thick scrapings of pigment, and frenzied jabs” to provide forms of knowledge, which help connect with the “poetics of revelation” and “the aesthetics of destruction.”⁷ Bourke also highlights the tension in the brief handed to Howson by *The Times* who co-commissioned him and expected him to reinforce the papers’ commitment to the arts, as well as adding to their coverage of the war. This pragmatic requirement paralleled an aesthetic one in that Howson was to acknowledge not only war’s traumas but also, according to the newspaper, the heroism and dignity. For the painter, these irreconcilable tensions played out badly: His personal and artistic integrity was compromised and his claims for authenticity were openly challenged in public.⁸

The dilemmas faced by Howson might have been recognized by any number of government sanctioned artists in the First World War. Both C. W. R. Nevinson and Orpen produced memorable and searing accounts of their time on the Western Front. Their work offers insightful case studies into how two different, indeed diametrically opposite, artists by background, temperament, and style would willfully expose themselves to grueling experiences so they might test their practice, stay true to their vision, and remain relevant in the face of dystopia.

“Paint and Prejudice”: The Plurality of C. W. R. Nevinson

As a young and vigorous modernist, Christopher Wynne Richard Nevinson sensed a reputation could be forged from the front line. In 1914 he took a course in motor engineering and joined a Friends’ Ambulance Unit posted overseas. Within weeks he was in Dunkirk, northern France working in “The Shambles,” a vast railway shed turned into a dressing station, which was teeming with wounded and dying

soldiers from the routed French Army. Overwhelmed by this abrupt exposure to human suffering his “former life seemed to be years away. I felt I had been born in the nightmare. I had seen sights so revolting . . . shrieks, pus, gangrene and the disembowelled.”⁹ One of the first British modern artists to witness the impact of warfare in its grimmest form, it gave him unassailable authority, an authentic edge, which harrowing sights he soon committed to canvas.

When *La Mitrailleuse* was exhibited in London in 1916 crowds thronged to see it. Critical and popular acclaim was unanimous. “The best and the most ruthless illustration of the menace of this deadly machine war . . . produced to date,” wrote Charles Lewis Hind saluting the “self-sacrificing automata” depicted so efficiently by Nevinson.¹⁰ The eminent painter Walter Sickert regarded it as “the most authoritative and concentrated utterance on war in the history of painting.”¹¹ Queues gathered: Soldiers home from leave applauded its integrity while appreciating its quasi-modernity. Nevinson certainly knew how to create a taut image. *La Mitrailleuse*, a small but powerful canvas of a French machine-gun crew proved the synthesis of his precocious talents.

It combined cold metallic color, a tight geometric framework, and a bold design to proclaim an unprecedented vision of modern warfare. Not merely is the soldier “dominated by the machine” as modernists predicted would happen, the soldier has *become* the machine. Men and machine have merged into *automota*: Each soldier sacrificed as integral components in the industrialized and mechanized forces of war.

Given his popularity, it was inevitable he would be commissioned, and in July 1917, he was sent back to France as an official artist. Nevinson’s energy was boundless: He toured the battle zones, flew over the enemy line on reconnaissance, visited artillery batteries, took a hazardous balloon ascent, and made an unauthorized visit to Ypres on the eve of the Passchendaele offensive. His renditions of aerial combat broke new frontiers of representation, depicting the land from above, airplanes swooping, locked in combat. Yet, he had done little to address the human misery witnessed during his time in Belgium and France. To do so he had to review the very aesthetic that had brought him such acclaim. Just as other painters were busily embracing the Vorticist aesthetic and radically expanding their diction of war, Nevinson stepped away from his modernist *brio*, opting for a realistic, almost illustrative idiom that he felt might better embrace the suffering he had witnessed. Ironically, this work was poorly received by those who expected more radical visions. One dismayed official at the Ministry of Information went so far as to suggest that the new work even had a touch of the pavement artist about it.¹² Nevinson brushed aside such criticism celebrating his eclecticism, arguing that the individuality and personality of the artist should take precedence over intellectual mannerisms.

Arguably, some of Nevinson’s most controversial images in his new idiom were those that depicted the atrocities of war. Paintings such as *The Doctor* (1916) showed emergency medical interventions on badly wounded soldiers, capturing



Figure 6.2. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *La Mitrailleuse* (1915). Tate. Presented by the Contemporary Art Society 1917.

the scale of suffering at the Shambles. Eschewing painterly playfulness or wistful exercises in artful geometric abstractions, he confronted his audience with harsh and uncomfortable lessons in pictorial *realpolitik*: Pain is palpable, agonized soldiers scream, and medical attention is necessarily brisk, even brusque. In *A Taube* (1916), a young child lies face down in a cobbled street: deadened sound, dead body, deadpan figuration stripped of bombast and pictorial nicety. Nevinson was a

master of clipped concision. He courted controversy, for himself but also for those he depicted, drawing attention to the plight of people he felt had been cheated, ignored, or exploited. Those who commissioned his paintings were divided in their views. From the start, the selectors at the British War Propaganda Bureau had insisted on the pursuit and promotion of truthfulness, a necessity for candor whatever the critical cost.

However, there were those who thought that the pursuit of ugliness was gratuitous: His deadpan style was dismissed by many and he wrangled noisily with army censors. Long suspecting an establishment plot to ruin him, he eventually bowed out as an official war artist, preferring to nurture his self-avowed status as “the soul of indiscretion.”¹³

Orpen: Looking on at the Pain of Others

Despite his showmanship and clever manipulation of the press and the patrons who funded his escapades, Nevinson stood apart as an artist capable of rendering the human suffering of war. As well as depicting the banal realities experienced by the common soldier, of any nationality, he was one of a few official artists who openly depicted the impact of the war on the civilian population. Unafraid to challenge the military and political authorities, yet with one eye always on popular news coverage, Nevinson’s reputation soared during the war, giving him the opportunity to produce some of the most memorable paintings and prints of his entire career, but it also stunted his development and it took many decades for him to shake off the restrictive label of “war artist.”¹⁴

Much the same could be said of William Orpen, later to be knighted and elevated to the Royal Academy, an artist more accustomed to rendering pricey portraits of the rich and the glamorous in opulent Edwardian drawing rooms. For a society painter like Orpen, the battlefields of the Somme seemed the most incongruous destination. Yet, he reveled in the challenge and remained the longest serving official British War Artist, producing an enormous catalog of works many created en plein air in the most debilitating of conditions.

Orpen thought the old battlefields and the devastated war zones places of infinite pictorial possibilities. He was drawn—like many artists during and after the war—by a dread fascination with the impressions of war. There was a terrible beauty to be guiltily witnessed, a dystopic terrain where (his rival portraitist the American painter John Singer Sargent noted with irony) sunlight could render ruins picturesque, even rather magnificent. However, Orpen’s ebullient mood could not last. Turning down an opportunity to visit and paint the fighting in Italy, Orpen embarked on an almost self-destructive mission to record what he held to be the hidden suffering at the heart of the war, focusing on the plight of the refugees, the displaced peasants, and those left dispossessed by the seemingly endless conflict. Turning from the front line of suffering fighters to the flotsam behind the front, he labored under a self-inflicted mission to describe every aspect of the grim lives of the civilians still clinging to the ruins. Faced with a panorama of pain, his famously

assured crisp draftsmanship became loose, even ragged; his figures, previously replete with telling detail, lapsing into weak caricature. His narrative compositions, although not lacking in tonal drama, now appeared forced and melodramatic, even when seen together as a suite of connected episodes in an elaborate tableau. Despite their heartfelt sense of empathy, compositions such as *Bombing: Night* (1918) and *Adam and Eve at Peronne* (1918) seem labored in their moralizing, mannered in their pictorial arrangement, with a feverish theatricality that found little support among those who had commissioned his previous work.

However, amid the rather banal sequences of mawkish narratives, Orpen proved capable of producing extraordinary pieces. In the British canon of war art, there are few such loaded images as *The Mad Woman of Douai* (1918), an elaborate and garish canvas, which seems to focus on German brutality but is in fact a thinly veiled representation of the aftermath of a rape. In its harsh symmetry and bleached coloration the composition is rather brazen by Orpen's standards: the scene is set in the ruins of a church in the northern French town of Douai.

An east-facing wall of the apse is all that still stands of the church, although the large crucifix is untouched and intact. A group of peasants stand around the central figure of a woman seated by a wooden table. Two of them lean in close, peering directly into her unseeing face; another pair stand behind, their heads close together as if sharing a secret. To the right three figures stand in theatrical expressions of sorrow. By contrast, to their right a British soldier leans nonchalantly on his rifle, while the apparent corpse of a gray-faced soldier lies on the broken ground at the front of the composition, a foot and boot poking rudely out of the torn earth. Despite the animated theatricality of this troupe of attendants and observers, the primary motif is the seated woman, gripped in an expression of horror, a ghastly rictus frozen across her features, gnarled grey hands clasped tightly in her lap.

"There she sat," Orpen noted with a mixture of disgust and fascination, "silent and motionless, except for one thumb which constantly twitched."¹⁵ In this frank composition there is little comfort in the faces and postures of those who stand around peering pitilessly at her; their compassion as irreparably shattered as the ruins that surround them. As if to emphasize the point that Flanders had endured not one but two invading armies: the soldiers are rendered in a different painterly language than the other figures; they are intruders arbitrarily borrowed from other pictures, placed like cutout figures in a scene of misery to which they do not appear to belong. However, for all its discordant theatricality, Orpen was attempting to describe a face of the war that few others were willing to acknowledge, let alone broach in paint.

Historians have not been overly sympathetic to Orpen, taking a bleak view of his late war narratives, even questioning his sanity as he struggled to make pictorial sense of the collapse of moral order around him. Although allegedly based on incidents seen and experienced, it is clear that his suite of "parable paintings" had become an expression of his own exhausted mental state. However overstylized and clumsy, Orpen proved—at least to himself—that he could shove aside the leg-

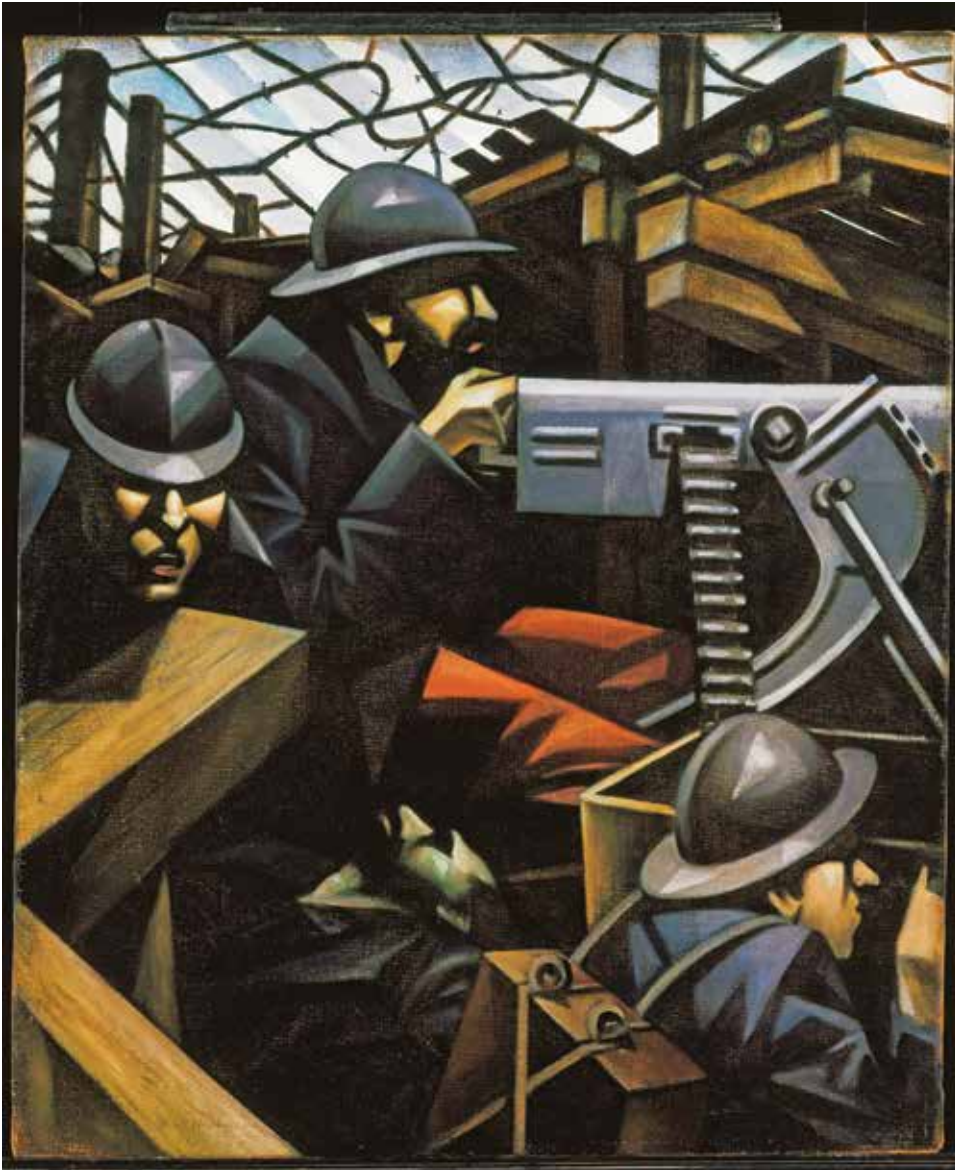


Figure 6.3. William Orpen, *The Mad Woman of Douai* (1918). Imperial War Museums (Art.IWM ART 4671)

acy of hagiographic portraiture, and his infatuation with the glittering opulence of Edwardian wealth to embrace human suffering at its most bleak. His palette, once tonally subdued and subtle, had instead gained a “urid, acidic, even unwholesome quality that was wholly of the twentieth century.”¹⁶

Concluding Remarks

As has been argued, ocular authority was regarded as a prerequisite for officially sanctioned artists during the First World War. To have been personally present, to have witnessed an event, an action, an individual—even if only fleetingly—bestowed on any artist an authority that was held to be irrefutable, even more so when they were regarding the pain of others. Ironically, this degree of retinal agency also awarded artists significant license by way of aesthetic interpretation. Facts could be passed through their artistic filters; interpretation was allowed, even encouraged, although certain caveats applied. Nevinson's adoption of modest abstraction was regarded favorably for its fetching blend of realism and the modern. Likewise, the bleached tonality and raw realism of Orpen's late war narratives was tolerated, even rated as innovative in an artist associated so closely with Edwardian pictorial propriety. Furthermore, it was accepted that the suffering of the wounded, the dying, or the abandoned had to be experienced viscerally and literally and then reimagined within acceptable aesthetic boundaries. However, as later generations of war artists were to discover, it was vital to document the origins of an idea, to track and trace their veracity so as to ensure an immutable provenance. In 1916, one reviewer attempted to tease out the apparent contradictions and moral dimensions of having to render war truthfully but also creatively:

we know that the dead and dying, the agonized in Mr Nevinson's picture "La Patrie" never existed in fact. we [*sic*] know that the picture was painted after he reached England—no matter. We do not turn to this picture as if it were a document; the non-existence of *his* sufferers does not make it a forgery, for it is a synthesis. "This is war," cries the camera, "as I see it." "This is war," says Mr Nevinson, "as I understand it." And herein lies the difference.

Art was understood to be necessarily selective and interpretative, a product of authentic experience put through the sieve of an artist's reordering of realities. The artist selected, emphasized, and created pictorial order out of the material around him (the commissioning process was heavily gendered, and no British female artists were sent into the Great War active battle zones). This was not necessarily a form of manipulation, rather a form of truth-telling shaped by stylistic interpretation. In so doing, the artist might educate the viewer's perception by drawing attention to what was easily overlooked by an untrained and inexperienced eye. By contrast, the impassive gaze of the camera lens was held to produce little of any artistic value, being regarded as little more than an uncritical document—a transcription of reality, rather than a translation. Creative embellishment, it was argued, could lead to deeper insights, even if this concept seemed rather tautological. The "untruthfulness" of Orpen's work was the result of him producing rich and varied subject matter from the very squalor, the drabness and the monotony of the war. Indeed, it was richly argued that his unique artistic individuality engendered an "ingenuity in manipulating material [which was] simply endless and yet he is never tempted to falsify the material."¹⁷

There were risks in freely adopting this stance: Artists needed at times to be reminded who was their paymaster. Furthermore, the blue pencil of the military censor hovered closely over many artworks. Above all, an artist's practice had to be located within the context of an underlying nationalistic cause. As patriotic citizens as well as independent artists, they ought not to have needed reminding where rested their innate loyalties. A small number chose to ignore such guidance. Nevinson openly appeared to flout it. However much an artist felt distressed by the ugliness and brutality of war and however much he might wish to draw attention to innate injustices, he had to temper their reactions with a sense of national obligation, which accepted and recognized the wider Allied cause and understood categorically that the continuance of the war was a matter of necessity and national honor.¹⁸ By 1917 Nevinson's acerbic images of the dead were regarded as part of a dangerous pattern of serious social disintegration that had to be actively countered. Despite his eminence as a contemporary painter and his reputation for portraying the brutal actualities of war in the trenches and on the home front, he was subjected to the British government's tactics intended to address war weariness and defeat pacifism.

Recognizing Nevinson's power of truth-telling, the critic Crawford Fitch lauded the painter's authenticity and his resilience, arguing that he had managed to preserve his integrity as an artist:

He has jealously guarded the impartiality of the eye. He has minded his own artistic business. Whatever his judgement upon war may be . . . he does not allow it to dictate to his vision. He is content to appear not as a judge or advocate but simply as an uncorrupted witness. He states without rhetoric what the eye sees. Or rather he sifts the evidence of the eye, selecting from its prolix and confusing report just that residuum of form which has its vital significance.¹⁹

Seventy years later, few contemporary commentators afforded Howson such latitude. The special authority invested in both the artist and the image had become denuded by the mid-1980s. Although an independent artist working to commission, Howson's work in the Balkans was considered to have crossed the line that distinguished between impersonal witness and overzealous artist. Unlike Orpen's impartial rendition of gross personal violation, Howson was deemed to have become both judge and jury, an advocate not an artist, corrupted by circumstantial evidence rather than remaining vigilant as an uncorruptible viewer. For his part, Howson was clear that the terms of engagement had fundamentally changed since the Great War: it was no longer simply about what could be seen or not seen. "I'm not aiming to be controversial" he stated, "But I wanted to cut out all the reportage. It's not my job to do that. My job is to do the things you don't see, that the army doesn't even get to see, not to be an illustrator, not to tell stories, but to produce strong images of things."²⁰ However, as we have seen "the right to tell of suffering" was contingent on many competing conditions. Since the era of Nev-

inson and Orpen, the prerogative of reportage had shifted from canvas to camera and would not swing back again.

Notes

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2. Martyn Jolly, "Composite Propaganda Photographs during the First World War," *History of Photography*, 27, no.2 (Summer, 2003), 154–65.
3. Charles E. W. Bean, "Wilkins and Hurley recommendations," Australian War Memorial, AWM38, DRL6673, item 57 (October 24, 1917).
4. Alan Jackson, *A Different Man: Peter Howson's Art, from Bosnia and Beyond*, (London: Mainstream, 1997).
5. Julian Stallabrass, 'Painting Desert Storm', *New Left Review* (September–October 1992), 103.
6. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).
7. Joanna Bourke, "Cruel Visions: Reflections on Artists and Atrocities," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 20, no. 1 (2020), 5–22.
8. Alexandra Frean, "Briton's Bosnian Rape Painting May Go Abroad," *The Times*, September 20, 1994, p. 3.
9. C. R. W. Nevinson, *Paint and Prejudice* (London: Methuen, 1937), 72–74.
10. Richard Ingleby "Utterly Tired of Chaos : The Life of CRW Nevinson," in *C.R.W. Nevinson: The Twentieth Century* (London, 1999), 16.
11. Walter Sickert, *Burlington Magazine* (September/October 1916).
12. Hudson to C. F. G. Masterman, October 1917, Artist's file, Department of Art, Imperial War Museum, London.
13. Sue Malvern, *Modern Art, Britain and the Great War: Witnessing, Testimony and Remembrance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 10.
14. Paul Gough, *"A Terrible Beauty": British Artists in the First World War* (Bristol: Sansom and Company, 2010)
15. William Orpen, *An Onlooker in France* (London, Williams and Norgate/Ernest Benn, 1923), 93.
16. Robert Upstone, et al., *William Orpen: Politics, Sex and Death* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2005), 42–43.
17. Upstone, et al., *William Orpen*, 5.
18. Malvern, *Modern Art*, 45–46.
19. J. E. Crawford Fritch, *Nevinson: The Great War: Fourth Year Paintings* (London: Grant Richards, 1918), 5
20. *Peter Howson: BOSNIA*, exhibition catalog (London: Imperial War Museum, 1994), 14.

