Reality in War Literature

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A Group of Soldiers

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The illustration on the cover of this issue, possibly the preparatory drawing for the well-known oil painting 'A Group of Soldiers' by the official war artist C.R.W. Nevinson,[1] is a most powerful evocation of the First World War.

Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson was born in 1889, the son of H.W. (Henry Woodd) Nevinson, the well-known writer and war correspondent (Africa, Ireland, Russia etc) and his wife, Margaret Wynne Nevinson, almost equally well-known for her suffragette activities in politics and Poor Law Reform. Meiron and Susie Harris refer to them as an 'aggressively Bohemian' family.[2] Nevinson attended the St. John's Wood School of Art in 1906, aged 17, and from 1910-12 was at The Slade, where he made himself a conspicuous 'leading light', clashing with the redoubtable Professor Tonks who advised him to give up art and proceeded to hinder his career wherever possible. (Tonks's treatment was to haunt him throughout his life.) Nevinson then studied further at St. Julien's in Paris, where he shared a studio with Modigliani, met Picasso and became involved with the work of the Cubists.

Nevinson's self-portrait of 1911 and a similar one four years later show a most passionate face with full sensuous lips, large dark eyes – a brooding mediterranean look that apparently went with a 'latin' temperament. (Nevinson was renowned throughout his life for his flamboyant and fiery character.) The only difference between these two paintings is that in the later one the subject has lost the innocent steadfast look of youth and looks out with an ironic gaze.

In 1913 Nevinson became an adherent of the controversial (at that time) Futurist movement and the right-hand-man of the important Italian Futurist, F.T. Marinetti. In April 1914 he assisted Marinetti with a 'performance' on the theme of War. Two months later he was co-signator with Marinetti of a manifesto entitled *Vital English Art: A Futurist Manifesto* published in *The Observer*, 7 June 1914 (and later elsewhere). The Manifesto was an eleven point denunciation of conservative Academics ('passéist filth'), stating the case for a strong, virile English Art with strength, adventure and sport as an essential element in Art. This alienated Nevinson from Wyndham Lewis and the Vorticists, (the movement of which Richard Aldington was a primary instigator) who were working in a very similar mode and were considered *the* foremost radical group pre-war, although he contributed to the Vorticist organ *Blast*.

When war broke out Nevinson, whose poor health made him unfit for the Army, immediately joined the Red Cross and took a course in motor-engineering, and embarking to Dunkirk was attached to the French Army as an ambulance driver and mechanic, gaining the Mons Star. His work was to expose him to horrific scenes of death and suffering. In February 1915 he wrote to the Editor of *The Times*: 'Sir, I have spent the last three months at the Front in France and Belgium amongst wounds, Blood, Stench, Typhoid, agony and death and ... resent your critic writing about "The sowing of wild oats, and managing to enjoy myself despite the war."'

He witnessed the fighting in Flanders, and the entrenchment that led to stalemate. He was making sketches and notes of the war from the very beginning, working them up into full drawings and paintings whenever there was opportunity. The early works show very clearly the influence of the Futuristic style. e.g. *Return to the Trenches*, 1914 and another of the same title in 1916 – rifles pointing upwards and movement suggested by marching feet swept into characteristic futuristic curves.

In 1915 Nevinson was transferred to the Royal Army Medical Corps. During that year, whilst on leave to get married, he painted *La Mitraillaise*, a powerful closeup view of three French soldiers manning a machine gun in a trench, a dead comrade beside them. Sickert called this 'the most authoritative and concentrated utterance on the War in the history of painting', and a columnist on the *Daily Mirror* wrote on 25.10.16 that General Haig thought Nevinson's futuristic war pictures 'the most expressive interpretation of war' he had come across. (In later years Nevinson himself became very anti-war and denied the worth of *La Mitraillaise*, writing to the Tate Gallery in 1925 asking them to withdraw 'the world's worst picture' from exhibition. 'I hope you will burn it'.)

After a serious bout of rheumatism in 1916 Nevinson was discharged from active service and then worked for a while in the RAMC at the 3rd London General Hospital in Wandsworth working with shell-shocked and mentally deranged soldiers. By the spring of 1917 he was applying for permission to return to the Front as an official War Artist and was back in Flanders at the end of June 1917 as an artist attached to the Bureau of Information, writing back to C.F.G. Masterman, one of the officials, that he was 'all about the line North and South, in trenches, balloons, aeroplanes, batteries, dugouts and most of the roads behind the line'. He was very aware of what was due to his official employers and documented the war in a plain, technically accurate and less directly expressive style than hitherto. The reproduction of War paintings in such publications as the war magazine *Land and Water* and the productions of lithographs and drypoint etchings of War subjects for distribution by the Ministry of Information were part of his conditions of service as a War Artist.

One of Nevinson's best known war images is *The Road from Arras to Bapaume* (1917). In earthy shades of ochre and sepia it depicts a stark straight road in an equally stark landscape at dawn, the slight undulation of the road shown by lines across the work, a few tents loom from the haze and there is a little movement of troops, transport and a limber along the road. The sense of disaster and nothingness is intense. Bapaume was the scene of intense fighting and changed hands many times in successive bombardments. Henry Williamson was part of this scene. It could well have been his limber that was travelling the road in that desolate landscape. Other well-known pictures from this period include *Swooping down on a Taube* (1917), *La Patrie* (1916 – bought by Arnold Bennett), *Column of March* (1915) and *A Group of Soldiers* (1917), for which the drawing owned by Henry Williamson may be the original study.

Nevinson and Williamson were friends for several years but I have been unable to establish exactly when the work was exchanged. They were both habituées of the Café Royal but it would seem that they actually met at a party given by Nevinson at 1, Steele's Studio at Haverstock Hill, to which Henry was invited as the guest of his friend John Heygate in 1928. Henry had just won the Hawthornden Prize for Literature and was enjoying a more prominent social life at that time. An account of this party can be found in *The Power of the Dead* (Vol II of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*), chapter 9, 'Bottle Party' where it is shown that the two men did not like each other on sight – the bridling of two male stags – but obviously this soon changed to friendship. There are not many references to Nevinson within Williamson's archive but Henry referred to him as his friend in an article in 1929, drawing on Nevinson as an excuse for his prank over the village sign at Georgeham[3] and showed his respect for the artist by dedicating *The Wet Flanders Plain* (1929) to Nevinson.

Nevinson stayed with the Williamsons at Shallowford in 1932, signing the visitor's book on the same page as C.F. Tunnicliffe[4] who two days previously had drawn there a sketch of himself and Henry at Lydford Gorge (which they had visited for 'Tunny' to prepare the illustrations for Williamson's book *The Star-Born*). Henry wrote a letter to T.E. Lawrence later that week in which he mentioned that he had just had a 'grand week' with Nevinson, who had been staying with him whilst recovering from pneumonia which had set in after a stomach operation. 'A sad but inspiring semi-wreck of a man. And what a gift for telling stories, always with his gargantuan laughter. Nothing petty, nothing mean, nothing unjust, as I in my niminy, pimminy way am inclined to be. ...'[5] However, three years later, the two men quarrelled irrevocably over Williamson's portrayal of Nevinson as 'Channerson' in his novel *The Gold Falcon*, to which Nevinson took violent offence, although Henry insisted none had been meant.[6]

Henry Williamson also knew Nevinson's father, although probably not very well. They both attended

the ceremony to unveil a Memorial sarcen stone to Edward Thomas on the Shoulder of Mutton Hill at Steep near Petersfield in Hampshire on 2 October 1937, for Williamson recorded in his diary that he spoke with 'John Masefield, Walter de la Mare and H.W. Nevinson', and that he gave a 'jolly lunch' for Ann and Bronwen Thomas and their brother Merfyn.

The Imperial War Museum own the actual oil painting of *A Group of Soldiers*, one of several of Nevinson's work in their collection. They were unaware of Williamson's copy until I approached them for information. Jan Bourne, Documentation Manager in the Department of Art at the IWM, informed me that Nevinson was very proud of the painting as he had drawn all the faces from ordinary soldiers he had seen on the Tube returning on leave. Some controversy arose as the official censor did not approve of its subject matter considering it an unworthy representation of the British Army, which incensed Nevinson who retorted that he would not paint 'castrated Lancelots'. John Buchan, at that time Director of the Department of Information, intervened and the painting was passed for censorship.[7]

Without seeing the original of the Williamson version, the Imperial War Museum staff suggest that it is probably an early-state drypoint etching (as this was a usual method for Nevinson to employ) but there are several slight differences between the work owned by Henry Williamson and the finished oil painting, for instance a different number of buttons, slightly different puttee binding, etc. and I personally think it is an original pen and ink drawing – but this must be resolved by experts in due course.

But whatever its technical composition it is a very powerful and haunting work. What is remarkable is that the figure looking out towards us is extraordinarily like Henry Williamson as a soldier in 1917. A copy of the work appeared on the back cover of the first edition of Henry Williamson's book *A Test to Destruction* (Macdonald 1960). A letter in Williamson's archive to the publisher shows that he tried to soak the work off its mounting at that time (presumably for ease of transportation) and thus caused damp damage which can clearly be seen round the edges. Further letters show that Henry was very concerned that the work should not appear with any titling or lettering superimposed, hence its appearance on the back cover only.

There are two books in Williamson's archive connected with Nevinson: *C.R.W. Nevinson* (in Contemporary British Artists Series) ed by Albert Rutherston and introduced by 'O.S.' [Osbert Sitwell] (Ernest Benn, 1925), inscribed 'To Harry Williamson Xmas 1932 from C.R.W. Nevinson & Kathleen' which also has a Christmas card inside of a tipped-in photograph of Nevinson's painting of 'Pan Triumphant' and with printed greetings. Sitwell's introduction is a masterpiece of a mannered 'essaie politesse' – much more concerned about its own literary merit than about Nevinson's life and work, yet if the bones are picked there is some meat. His discussion of the 'war pictures' is certainly worth reading.

The other volume is less personal and covers a range of work: John Rothenstein's *British Artists and the War* (Peter Davies, 1931) inscribed in holograph 'Henry Williamson, Shallowford, 1931'. This reproduces six of Nevinson's more famous works and a similar selection of all the major war artists – including Sir William Orpen *Portrait of an Airman* and paintings by John Sargent – though not the one referred to by Williamson in the *Chronicle* (as already discussed in my 'Spectre' West article).

NOTES

1. Background information on Nevinson is taken mainly from *C.R.W. Nevinson: Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings and Prints. Catalogue*. Kettle's Yard Gallery, 1988, which was kindly lent to me by Mrs. Anne Patterson, (Nevinson's niece, her mother and Nevinson's wife were sisters) owner of the Copyright of his paintings.
2. Merion and Susie Harries, *The War Artists*, (IWM & Tate Gallery, Michael Joseph, 1983). Copy of information provided by Jan Bourne, Documentation Manager, Department of Art, IWM. This book gives important information not just on the war artists of both the First and Second World War but also the background of the role of the Ministry of Information War Artists Department.
3. See Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic*, Sutton Publishing, 1995, p/b ed. 1997, p.124-5: also HWSJ, No.29.
4. See illustration of this entry in my biography, op cit., p.148.
5. Letter from Henry Williamson to T.E. Lawrence, 12 December 1932, copy in the HWLEA. See reference in my biography, op cit., p.156.
6. Ibid. pp.156-7.
7. Information in *The War Artists*, op cit.

I am grateful to Mrs Anne Patterson for permission to use the drawing reproduced on the cover. I am also grateful to the staff at the Imperial War Museum for their help and courtesy on this matter.