

UNSPEAKABLE LANDSCAPES

PRINTMAKERS AT WAR
1914-1918



AGNES ETHERINGTON ART CENTRE

WRITING NEAR THE ANNIHILATED village of Passchendaele, which saw more than 275,000 Allied casualties over a five-month campaign, British artist Paul Nash (1889–1946) conveys the decimated state of the countryside with his evocative words. His letters to his wife offer privileged access to the daily experience of the Great War, with Nash’s lyric commentaries presenting an important corollary to the official statements. The artist translated his personal experience into incredibly powerful prints, such as *Rain, Lake Zillebeke* [Fig. 1]. For Nash and many of his British peers who experienced the horrors of the front, landscape was the most potent and accommodating vehicle for communicating the hopelessness of war.

Such sentiments had their origins in an explicit enthusiasm at the beginning of the fighting. Many members of the younger generation of British artists clamoured with excitement, for a variety of reasons, to see the conflict. The phrase “You must not miss a war, if one is going”²—penned by the famous painter-critic Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957)—alludes to encounters with new scenery and subjects that could stimulate creative production. Others cited the need for a violent razing of the visual language employed by artists in favour of a new paradigm that more readily echoed the pace, rigours and responsibilities of modern life. The sculptor William Robert Colton (1867–1921), for example, lamented the “wave of diseased degeneracy” that had permeated the visual and performing arts in the early years of the twentieth century and pleaded for its excision in the name of continued progress.³ Many were overwhelmed by a keen sense of patriotism; Nash, like many of his artist peers, felt the call to serve shortly after the declaration of war in August 1914. Artists typically joined the 54-year-old Artists’ Rifles, a regiment of the British army known officially as the 38th Middlesex (Artists’) Rifle Volunteer Corps. A volunteer unit that trained soldiers in all aspects of infantry life and prepared them for service abroad, the Artists’ Rifles offered a sense of unity and camaraderie among artists who had pledged to serve.⁴ In short, the beginning of the Great War seemed to offer opportunities for life-enriching experiences and professional growth.

As the magnitude of the carnage increased—particularly with the Battle of the Somme (July–November 1916) and its one million casualties among all combatants—those on the battlefield felt compelled to document the horrors of modern warfare. Views of

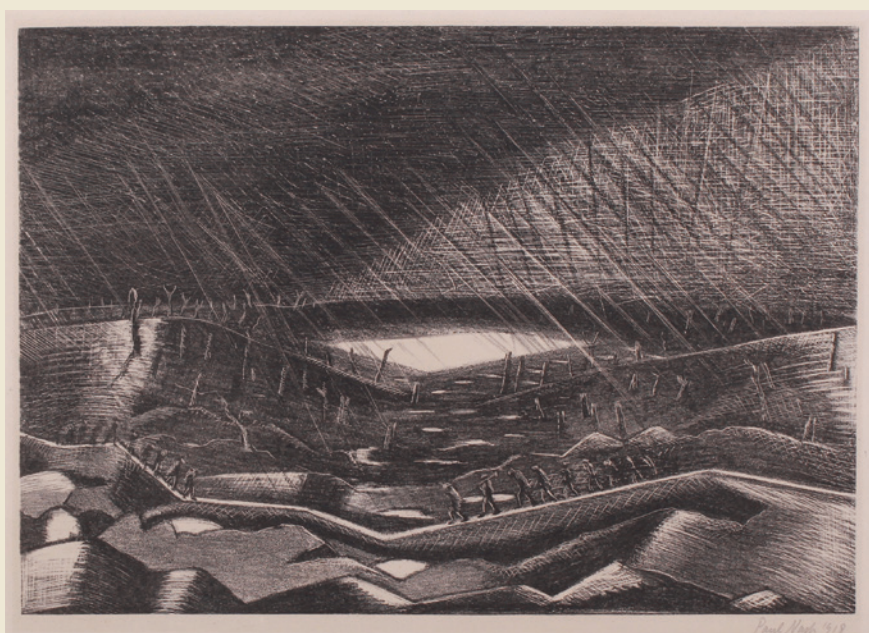


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

the countryside and cities formed an especially moving subset of imagery created at the front. Foremost, landscape was fundamental historically to the concept of war, for only with the advance and retreat across land-as-territory does war take place.⁵ Artistic portrayals of those sites of engagement thereby chronicle the war's progression in the most basic of terms. Similarly, the utterly ravaged sites of engagement made landscape an expressive genre for artists. Cities and the countryside, destroyed in horrifying ways through new technologies, offered gripping potential to communicate the horrors of war. Finally, through the manipulation of the visual principle of perspective, the observer could be tacitly invoked in ways that called to mind the conditions of individual experience.⁶ For artists and viewers alike, this aspect of landscape provided a needed corrective to the shockingly mechanized and dehumanizing element of this conflict. Photography [Fig. 2] was a first step in capturing the still ruins, wasted forests and lacerated earth of the French and Belgian battlefields, but those back in Britain craved a more personal commentary as a sign of authentic experience. Tellingly, the first official war artist was commissioned by the British government in 1916, after it was recognized that such photographic documentation had limited public appeal.

Comparisons between images from the home front and the front lines illustrate the power that the foreign wartime landscape possessed. Muirhead Bone (1876–1953), an established artist of an older generation who would become that first official war artist, captured with graphic deftness the city of London under threat of invasion. His *Piccadilly Circus* [Fig. 3] of 1915 beautifully evokes the continued hustle-and-bustle of cosmopolitan London life against the backdrop of dimmed lampposts and searchlights, the subtle indications of the wartime situation. In spite of the detail and richness of the scene, an emotional distance reigns. Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson (1889–1946), who served with the Friends' Ambulance Unit in the early months of the war and then returned to the front as a war artist in July 1917, sought to capture the routine, destructive nature of war that had become so familiar to British soldiers. His *Survivors at Arras* [Fig. 4], in contrast to Bone's distant perspective, situates the viewer in the street opposite these buildings, thereby forcing one to confront these partial ruins as if on-site. The hollows of the bombed-out windows, the roof beams exposed like spiny skeletons, and

the tooth-like profiles of the shadows falling across the facades contribute to an atmosphere of profound loss. Without the slightest hint of human presence but constructed distinctly on a human scale, Nevinson's work captures the brutality of battle with haunting beauty.

Paul Nash has been praised for creating a new "calligraphy of war" in the prints he created as a war artist.⁷ In his work [Fig. 1], he reshaped the visual language of the war into one that emphasizes the emptiness, the losses and the barrenness of destruction across the natural scene. This lithograph demonstrates with remarkable gravity the scale of the German devastation of the Belgian landscape. The rain, at once a marker of the region's distinctive weather but also a dramatic visual motif, animates the setting. The intersecting diagonals of the downpour fracture the immense sky into what appear to be thousands of pieces, conveying the artist's sense of hopelessness. The landscape here becomes an eternally scorched environment, created through the conventional means of recessive planes and contrasts of lights and darks, devoid of traditional military grandeur. In fact, one legend has it that the lake at the centre of the scene was a destination for British soldiers when enemy fire grew too overwhelming. Lake Zillebeke may thus have become a sanctuary for men in the Ypres Salient, while Nash's depiction of it can be seen as a eulogy to individual salvation.

Percy John Delf Smith (1882–1948) served as a gunner on the Western Front in 1914, and he later undertook a series of prints based on his private sketches of the battlefield. In spite of not holding the official title of war artist, he assumed the charge of depicting "war as it is" with haunting sobriety.⁸ His *Whither? Whence? A Duck-Walk in France 1916* [Fig. 5] communicates the infinite, withered terrain typical of western European battlefields of the era. The duckboards stretching into the distance recall the specifically military nature of activities that took place on this site. Their lingering presence after those activities, however, underscores the transformation of the land from a military zone to mere countryside.⁹ The abandonment of such equipment in the landscape speaks to an environment of exhaustion and despair, echoing the hopelessness of Nash's words.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

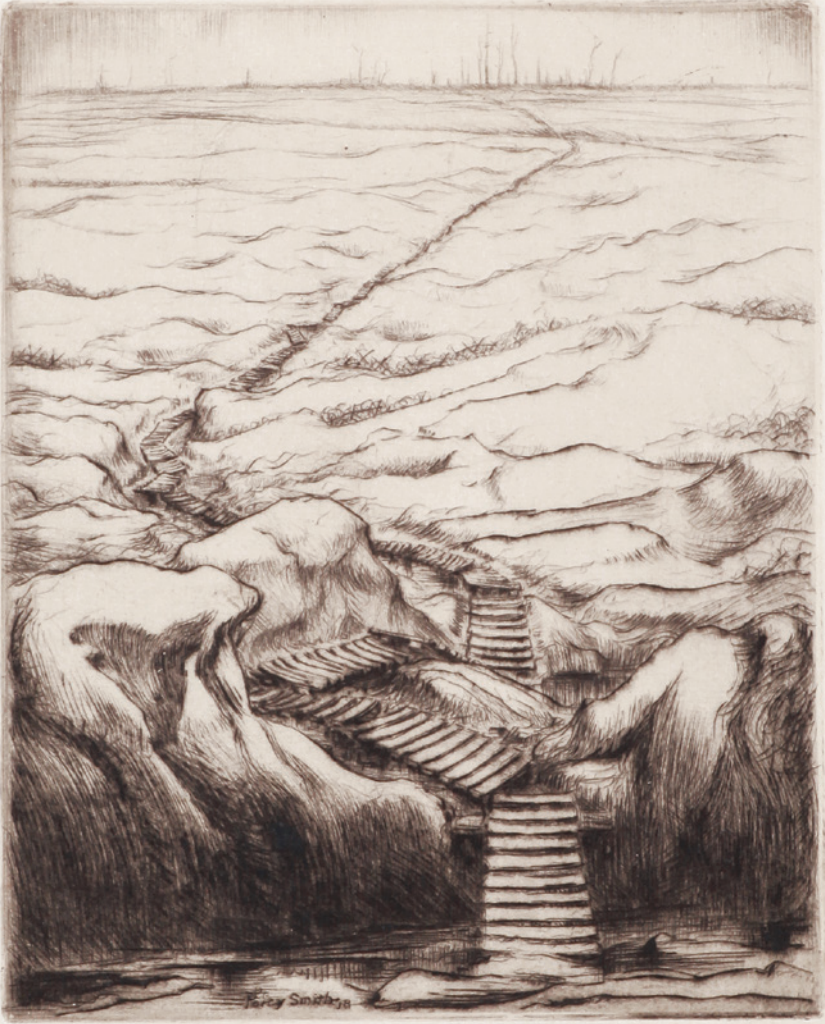
Nash concludes his 1917 letter to his wife with a pledge:

“I am no longer an artist interested and curious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. Feeble, inarticulate, will be my message, but it will have a bitter truth, and may it burn their lousy souls.”¹⁰

His charge, and that of Nevinson and Smith, was to make those on the home front grasp the magnitude of the ruin of cities and landscapes, as well as of men’s spirits. The artists who served in the war and shared their experiences through the medium of landscape captured the distinctly modern aspects of the Great War through a centuries-old genre. Their images serve as warnings for future generations and poignant markers of their lived experiences.

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- 1 Paul Gough, *A Terrible Beauty: British Artists in the First World War* (Bristol: Sansom & Company, 2010), 152.
 - 2 Gough, *A Terrible Beauty*, 32.
 - 3 William Robert Colton, *The Architect* (17 March 1916): 200.
 - 4 Antonia Whitley, “Artistic Soldiers: A Review of the Exhibition *The Artists Rifles: From Pre-Raphaelites to Passchendaele*,” *RUSI Journal* 159, no. 3 (June/July 2014): 92.
 - 5 Svend Erik Larsen, “Landscape, Identity and War,” *New Literary History* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 469.
 - 6 Larsen, “Landscape, Identity and War,” 480.
 - 7 Gough, *A Terrible Beauty*, 153.
 - 8 Paraphrase of Jan Gordon, in Sue Malvern, “‘War As It Is’: The Art of Muirhead Bone, C. R. W. Nevinson and Paul Nash, 1916–1917,” *Art History* 9, no. 4 (December 1986): 495.
 - 9 Kurt Lewin and Jonathan Blower, “The Landscape of War,” *Art in Translation* 1, no. 2 (2009): 207.
 - 10 Gough, *A Terrible Beauty*, 32.



1612
750

a Ditchwalk in France

Percy Smith

Fig. 5

All works from the collection of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, unless otherwise noted.

Cover illustration: Paul Nash, *Rain, Lake Zillebeke* (detail), lithograph on paper, 1918. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2018 (61-002.01). Photo: Bernard Clark.

Figure 1: Paul Nash, *Rain, Lake Zillebeke*, lithograph on paper, 1918. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2018 (61-002.01). Photo: Bernard Clark.

Figure 2: *Passchendaele Mud*, photograph, 1917. Canadian War Museum, Ottawa. George Metcalf Archival Collection (CWM 19930013-511).

Figure 3: Muirhead Bone, *Piccadilly Circus*, 1915, drypoint and etching on paper. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2017 (60-014.01). Photo: Bernard Clark.

Figure 4: Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson, *Survivors at Arras*, 1917, drypoint on paper. Gift of Simon and Caroline Davis, 2018 (61-002.03). Photo: Bernard Clark.

Figure 5: Percy John Delf Smith, *Whither? Whence? A Duck-Walk in France 1916*, 1918, drypoint on paper. Gift of Caroline and Simon Davis, 2017 (60-014.06). Photo: Bernard Clark.

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