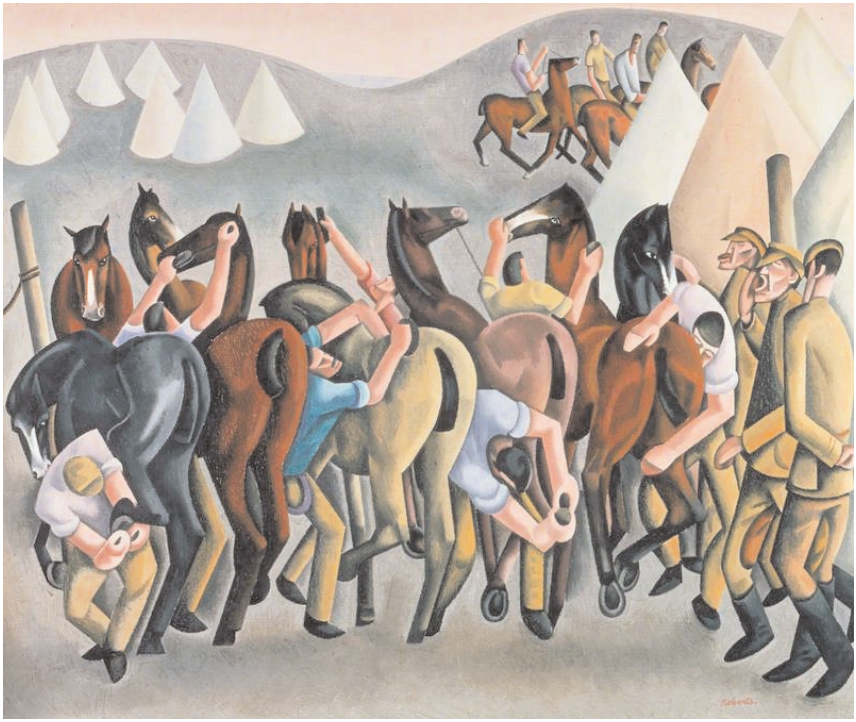
WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

Newsletter, October 2014



'Feeds Round!' Stable-time in the Wagon-lines, France 1922

'On the order "feeds round", each man would collect from the stable orderly a bucket of chaff and oats, placing it behind his horse … After "feeds round", the next order was "feed". At this the men standing behind the restive horses seized their buckets and darted quickly between the animals to empty the food into the mangers, getting away as fast as possible to avoid any sudden kicks.'

WR in the First World War … *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres* … WR: an artist in the ranks … WR on display … *TV* in Aberdeen … Pigeon Song … Auction news

WILLIAM ROBERTS SOCIETY

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October 2014

WILLIAM ROBERTS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

As he noted in *4.5 Howitzer Gunner R.F.A. 1916–1918*, the laconic account of his war experiences that he published in 1974 (now on the WRS website via http://tinyurl.com/wr45hg), William Roberts had initially 'paid more attention to matters of art and picture-making' than to the war that had begun in August 1914, though he had 'worked some weeks making bomb parts in a Tufnell Park munitions factory' (untraced). But on 4 April 1916 he was called up and became No.123744, a gunner in the Royal Field Artillery.

After training at the Royal Ordnance Depot in Weedon, Northants – his account of his time there will form part of an exhibition with associated talks at Weedon over the weekend of 8/9 November, commemorating the men named on the local war memorial following the First World War – in the autumn of 1917 Roberts joined D

No. 123744 Gunner William Roberts, Royal Field Artillery
'In this beginning of 1918, it was quiet in the Somme country. D. Battery was encamped behind the line near the village of Etinehem. In this place a photographer was doing a brisk trade among our men who were lining up to have their photos taken. I too joined the queue.'

Battery of the 51st Brigade of the 9th Division in France. At full strength D Battery would have numbered 198 officers and men, including 85 gunners, 10 of them acting as batmen to officers – as for a time Roberts did himself – to operate four (later six) field howitzers. Places where Roberts served include Vimy Ridge, Ypres, Arras, Neuport, Albert, the Somme and Messines. In November 1917 in a letter to Sarah Kramer, his future wife, he described his existence as 'absolutely monotonous, repetition always, every day lived to order; the only excitement being to dodge and duck for your bloody miserable life', as some of the captions to the illustrations in this newsletter describe. Then in April 1918 Roberts was loaned as an artist to the Canadian War Records Office to execute a commission for the Canadian War Memorials Fund, after which he served as a war artist for the British Ministry of Information.

In this newsletter we reproduce a number of Roberts's depictions of life at the front – most of which were unlikely to have been executed on the spot – together with extracts from his war memoirs which seem to relate to similar incidents.

Below, David Cleall, who has recently been in Ottowa, discusses *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres*, the picture that WR painted for the Canadians – described as 'his masterpiece' by Richard Shone in the September 2014 *Burlington Magazine* – which is on show there, and Pauline Paucker reflects on Roberts's experiences as a soldier and a war artist.

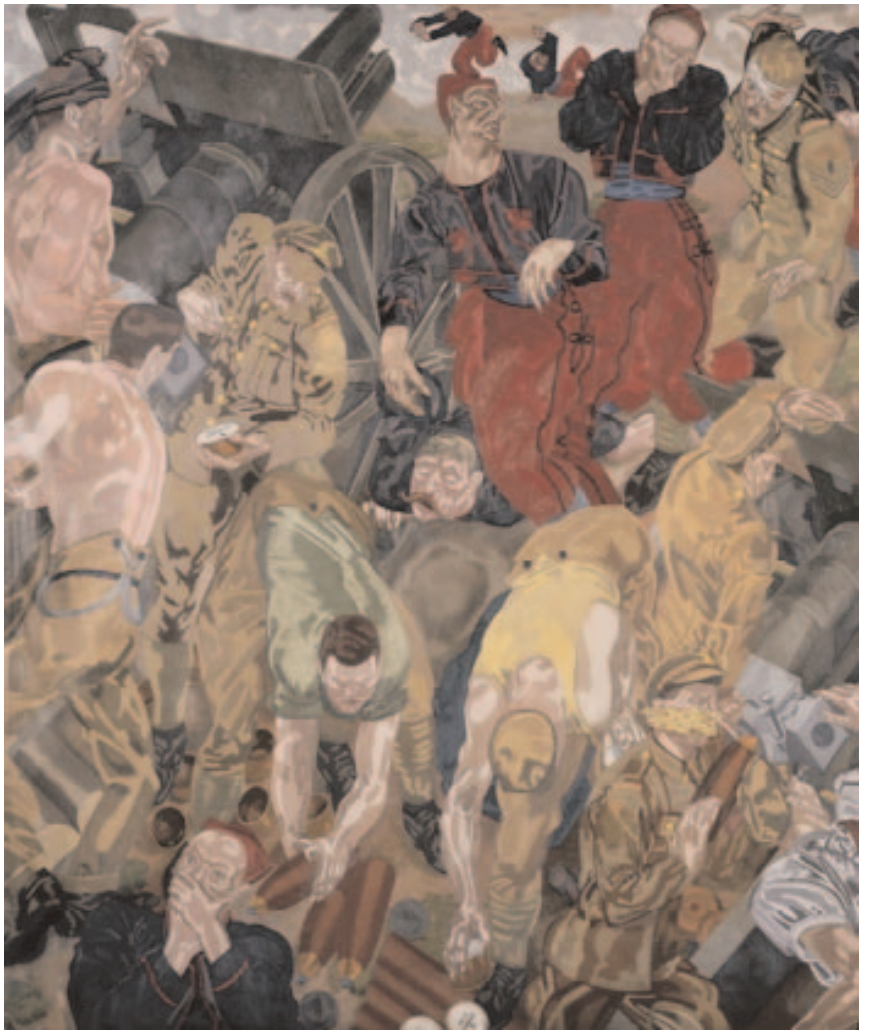
THE FIRST GERMAN GAS ATTACK AT YPRES

by David Cleall

After 18 months of active service in northern France, in April 1918 Gunner Roberts returned to London with a commission via Paul Konody, the art adviser to the Canadian War Memorials Fund (CWMF), for a large-scale work on the subject of the first German gas attack at Ypres, three years earlier. Although, as he noted, he was 'without experience of that kind of cloud gas warfare, and told Konody so', based at a studio in Chelsea in the summer of 1918 Roberts clearly worked on the project with an intensity that must have been fuelled by his own war experiences.

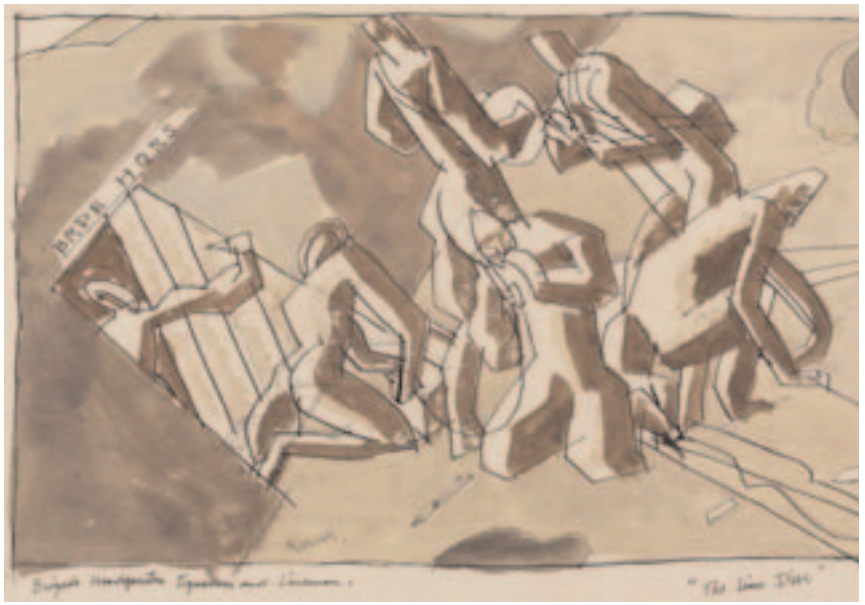
Roberts, along with David Bomberg – and presumably the other avant-garde artists commissioned: Wyndham Lewis, Edward Wadsworth and C. R. W. Nevinson – was warned that only 'representative' work would be acceptable, and indeed Bomberg's first version of his *Sappers at Work* was rejected by the CWMF as being 'too cubist'. Nevertheless, Roberts's *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres* is a huge, uncompromisingly modernist picture.

Its size (10 feet x 12 feet) was dictated by the commission – 40 of the CWMF commissions were intended as monumental works. In her book *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War* (University of Toronto Press, 1984, p. 70), Maria Tippett suggests that the success of Roberts's painting lies in his decision to focus on the specific moment in the Battle of Gravenstafel



The First German Gas Attack at Ypres 1918 (detail – for the complete composition see http://tinyurl.com/wrngc). Oil on canvas. Transfer from the Canadian War Memorials 1921. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo © National Gallery of Canada

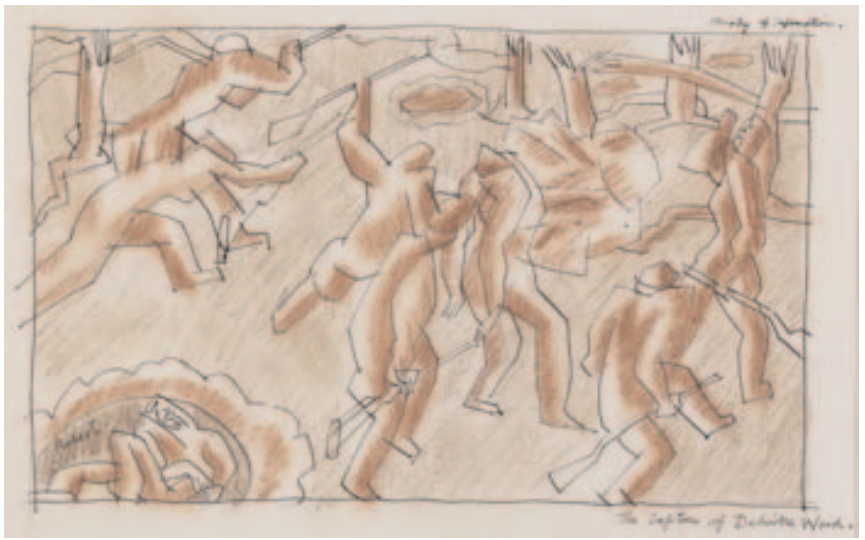
Ridge when chlorine gas forced the mainly Turco and Zouave soldiers in the French front-line units to retreat from their position through the Canadian support trench: 'the twisted faces and writhing bodies of the 45th Algerian Division meet the surprised soldiers of the First Canadian Brigade … Like no other painting in the CWMF collection, *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres*



Brigade Headquarters: Signallers and Linesmen c.1918
© IWM (Art.IWM ART 1888)
On arrival in France, Roberts initially trained as a signaller. 'An important part of a signaller's work is to see that contact is kept between the batteries, and also with the headquarters of the brigade; in addition there is the wire to the artillery observation post in the front line. The infantry also had their telephone cables. These thin insulated cables of different colours, with their identity tags, crisscrossed the ground in all directions. They were continually getting broken or cut by shell bursts. When this happened, the line was said to be "diss", and this meant signallers turning out. Putting the broken ends together again was hard enough in daylight, especially with "Jerry's" shells dropping around. However, it was far worse to leave your dug-out at night and grope about in shell craters and mud, searching for the damaged wires with the "D Battery 51st Brigade" label attached, while the enemy's guns did their best to destroy them again.'

conveys the confusion and the horror of modern war.' Aside from its size, what strikes one immediately about the canvas is the brilliance of the colour, with unsettling clashes of reds, pinks, yellow and lime green reminiscent of Roberts's 'Vorticist' *Theatre* and *Two-step* of 1915. While the colours of the Turco and Zouave uniforms are historically accurate, they provide a startling contrast to the necessary muddy khakis of most war art. And Roberts adopts a characteristic 'impossible' high-angle point of view, creating a claustrophobic picture space packed with disturbing details and bold expressionistic elements.

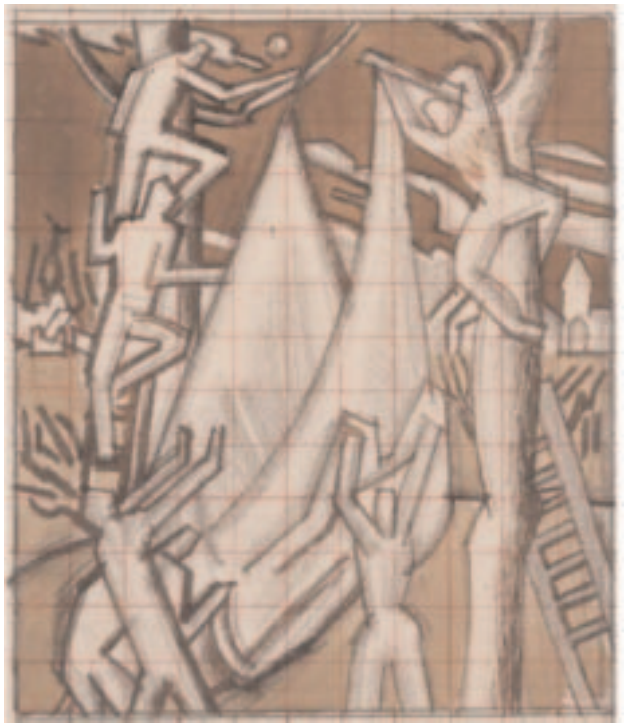
Following exhibitions of the CWMF paintings in London, New York, Toronto



An Attack – The Capture of Delville Wood c.1918
© IWM (Art.IWM ART 1887)
'Continuing our journey the 51st Brigade moved to a sector of the line covering the town of Albert. Many of the men had been in this part before during the fighting of the summer of 1916. They talked of the heavy fighting around High Wood and Delville Wood and of their dead or wounded comrades.'

and Montreal in 1919, there were very few opportunities to view *The First German Gas Attack*, especially since Lord Beaverbrook's plan to display the CWMF collection in a purpose-built exhibition space in Ottawa collapsed in the early 1920s. The whole collection of nearly 1,000 works by 100 artists (a third of whom were Canadian) was given to the National Gallery of Canada. A number of the 'super-paintings' – including Roberts's – were shown in New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1941 in 'Britain at War' – an exhibition presumably intended to contribute to the debate about America's then neutrality in the European war. In 1965 Ronald Alley arranged for Roberts's painting to be brought back to London for the Arts Council's Roberts retrospective at the Tate Gallery, but, aside from these rare outings, the canvas generally remained in store, rolled on to a drum, and became in need of considerable restoration work.

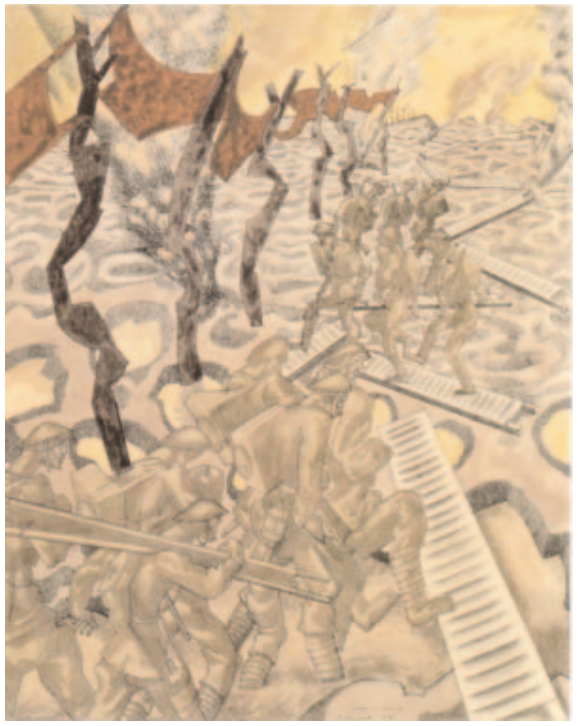
When, in 1988, the National Gallery of Canada moved into a striking new building opposite the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa it had an opportunity to display a group of the super-paintings from its CWMF collection, and a large hall had been identified for this purpose. But initially the hall was used for a temporary exhibition of post-war American art centring on the loan of an enormous



Soldiers Hanging Up Camouflage Screens 1918
'We were employed in the vacant offices of the "Mairie" making camouflage screens. This consisted in tying strips of various coloured bits of canvas to string netting, or painting large spreads of canvas with jig-saw patterns. These we took at night and hung on trees or wood supports, the intention being to hide from the Germans a portion of road which would be used by our guns and transport in the event of an advance. But whether the enemy were deceived by this contour that had arisen overnight, there was no means of knowing.'

abstract painting, Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire*, and when in 1989 that picture was controversially bought by the gallery, for $1.8 million, it remained in place there with other large abstracts. Currently Lewis's *A Canadian Gun-pit*, Bomberg's *Sappers at Work: A Canadian Tunnelling Company* and Paul Nash's *Void* are exhibited at the gallery in a 'modern British' room, while Wadsworth's *Dazzle-ships in Drydock at Liverpool* is dramatically displayed nearby.

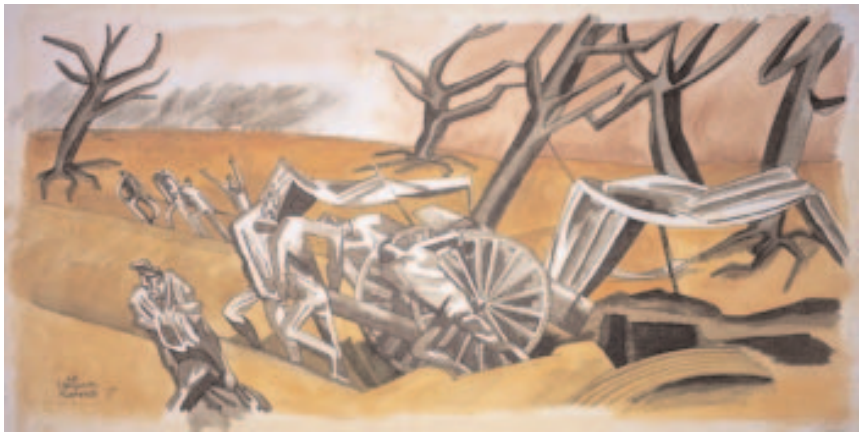
Roberts's *First German Gas Attack at Ypres*, now beautifully restored, has had an arguably more interesting fate. In 2005 the Canadian War Museum also moved into new premises, in a prominent location on the Ottawa River, and Roberts's painting is now on permanent loan there, installed in galleries covering



Searching and Sweeping 1919
'"Fritz's" artillery was especially active at night, firing with a method known as "searching and sweeping", aiming first in a direct line, then so many degrees left and right, seeking to cut our supply routes, as it was under cover of darkness that our ammunition and food reached us.'

Canadian involvement in the trench warfare in France and Belgium from 1915 to 1918. Roberts's huge work confronts all visitors to these galleries, and is placed in an educational context, alongside exhibits such as gas masks and information on gas warfare. Opposite it is Richard Jack's more conventional painting *The Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April to 25 May 1915*, and a caption invites visitors to 'Notice the heroic nature of Jack's subject matter and compare it to Roberts's *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres*. Which painting better conveys the brutal nature of war?'

Back in 1919 *The Times*'s art critic, reviewing the CWMF exhibition at the Royal Academy, commented that 'It is a pleasant, but perhaps unprofitable, speculation, what the future generations of Canadians who will look on these pictures [the CWMF paintings] will make of the allegories … Apart from any artistic importance it may possess, they will



Soldiers Hauling a Howitzer 1917

'When the Germans had been forced to fall back, they had abandoned some of their field guns which now stood isolated in no-man's land. The commanders of the 51st Brigade batteries arranged among themselves to try and salvage these guns. D. Battery's task – and it was rumoured that our major had chosen the hardest – was to bring in two field howitzers that had been left a short distance beyond our front lines. On the night fixed for the undertaking, our salvage party having been given a double tot of rum, then set off with two six-horse teams, to do the job. The horses were left behind our own line while we crept out. Fortunately there was no barbed wire to tangle with and we endeavoured to free the gun wheels embedded in the hard earth. Without arousing any hostile activity from the opposite trenches, we manhandled the two howitzers to where we had left the horses.'

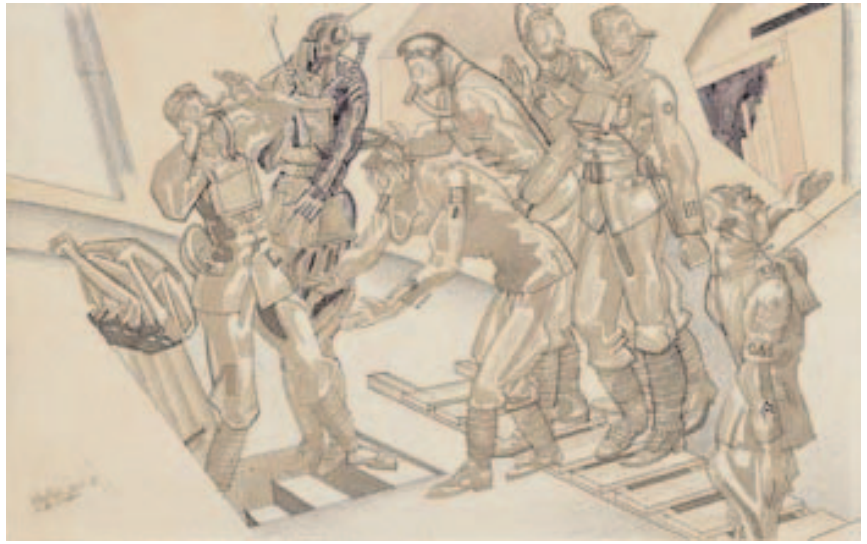
not learn very much of "The First German Gas Attack at Ypres" from Mr. W. Roberts's picture.' However, almost 100 years later, Roberts's painting is being used exactly for that educational purpose – with no photographic record of the gas attack at Ypres, Roberts's work has value as an informed depiction. And, perhaps even more significantly, the painting's powerful expressive quality is being used to ask visitors to consider the chaos and question the horrors of warfare.

I can't help thinking that Roberts might have preferred to have his painting hung alongside Bomberg, Wadsworth and Lewis in the National Gallery of Canada – but, with average annual visitor numbers of almost half a million to the Canadian War Museum, *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres* may have now become Roberts's most often seen work.

WILLIAM ROBERTS: AN ARTIST IN THE RANKS

by Pauline Paucker

In his First World War memoir, *4.5 Howitzer Gunner*, William Roberts describes how he got off on the wrong foot when interviewed for a possible recommendation for a commission. After the first few questions he leaned forward confidentially, resting his hands on the table where sat the commanding officer. There was a terrific explosion of wrath, and a yell of 'Stand to attention man when you address an officer.' A prompt dismissal was the end of that. So Roberts, like Stanley Spencer, who treated the wounded, was to see modern warfare from a position in the ranks, and it shows in his work, his choice of subject.



The Gas Chamber 1918

'By way of a change we did gas-mask drill. Wearing our gas-masks, we had to pass through a narrow covered trench or dug-out blanketed at both ends and filled with poison gas. These practice sessions helped to pass the time.'

Isaac Rosenberg, a fellow student at the Slade, wrote his poems from the point of view of a private in the infantry: the men on the march, or at rest, looking for lice in their shirts, huddled on troopship decks. Roberts, in his turn, shows the ordinary soldier at work, drawing from his own experience: he's not looking at 'the men' from above; like Rosenberg, he's one of them.

The Artillery – not his choice but that of the recruiting sergeant – was less exposed to danger than the infantry, but nonetheless suffered heavy casualties. In his memoir he describes, in a matter-of-fact style, not only death and destruction but also the hard day-to-day labour required: feeding and grooming the horses, loading the guns, putting up camouflage, burying the dead; in his paintings we see the daily grind of war.

'There's someone who knows what it is to carry a heavy weight,' said a builder looking at a reproduction of Roberts's

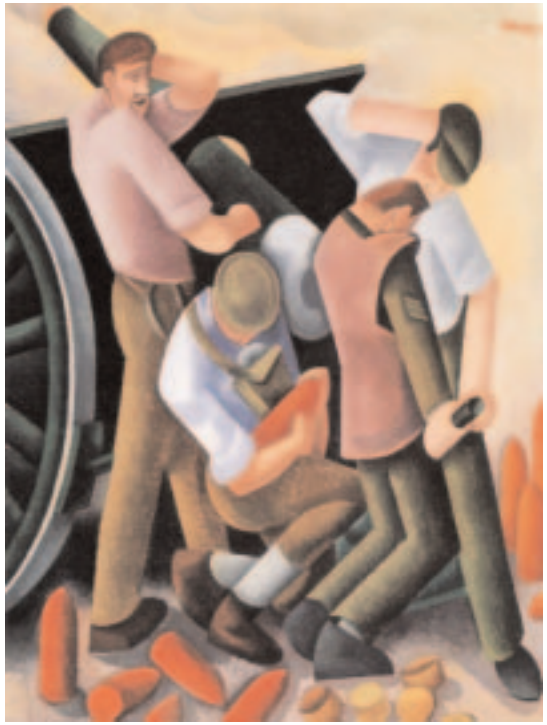
painting of men loading the guns, and certainly Roberts, in his return to figurative painting, albeit formalised, gives us the feel of the daily stress endured by the troops, their tensed bodies, the physical strain they underwent.

'We buried our own dead … ' he writes, 'shoulder to shoulder … in a wide shallow grave, each in his blood-stained uniform,' as he shows in his drawing of a burial party.

He had great admiration for the regular army officer who looked out for his men, describing Major Morrison searching by candlelight for survivors after a direct hit on a gun-pit; but, like his fellow privates, he had little respect for the officers on horseback with their gleaming boots, especially one whose boots and equipment had 'a mirror-like sparkle' and who 'seldom had to put his feet on the ground, preferring to be mounted, seated well above the mire'. Roberts could not get the same shine on the boots of the officer for whom he served as a batman for a while and who later, 'mounted on his horse', even ordered him to rescue two puppies he had left behind in a retreat under fire.

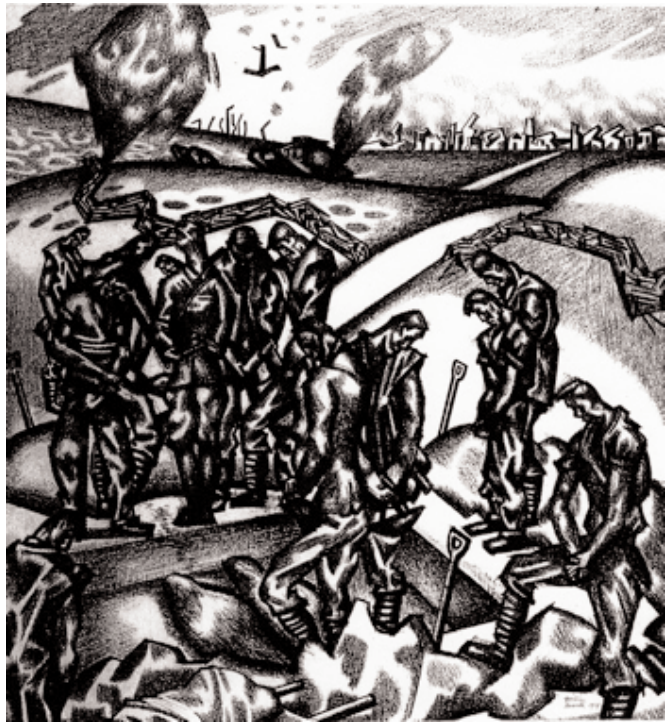
So it was a novel experience, as he writes, on leave and dining at the Tour Eiffel restaurant, 'having for a year or more taken orders from sergeant-majors, sergeants, corporals, bombardiers … to find myself associating with majors, captains, lieutenants, actors and art critics' – the last group soon to be his bugbear!

Official war artists usually held commissioned rank: Paul Nash, after seeing active service, found himself with a chauffeur and a batman to tour the battlefields; C. R. W. Nevinson and William Orpen also held commissions as war



4.5 Howitzer 1918

'Besides kit inspection, the gunners' chief occupation [during training at Weedon] was gun drill. This took place on the parade ground, and consisted in gun-laying and rehearsing at the double, the positions to be taken when firing the piece. But this last part of the business was postponed until we arrived in France.'



Burying the Dead After a Battle 1919

'We buried our own dead, together with some left over from the infantry's advance, shoulder to shoulder in a wide shallow grave, each in his blood-stained uniform and covered by a blanket. I noticed that some feet projected beyond the covering, showing that they had died with their boots on, in some cases with their spurs on too.'

artists in the field. Correspondence in the Imperial War Museum suggests that a commission was requested for Roberts when he became a war artist for the Ministry of Information, but nothing seems to have come of this as his rank on demobilisation was noted as 'Gunner'.

A final anecdote in his memoir, shortly before this, shows him, still in uniform as a private, upbraided by an Irish sergeant as he watches a Guards parade: 'Jesus Christ man stand to Attention.'

WR ON DISPLAY

Three works by WR – *Soldiers Hauling a Howitzer* 1917 (see p. 8) and two studies (one double-sided) for *The Theatre* 1915 form part of the exhibition '20th Century British Art from Private Collections' at Osborne Samuel, 23a Bruton Street, London W1, on now until 15 November.

WR's watercolour *Grooming Horses c*.1916 is among the works included in a forthcoming exhibition at The Lightbox, Woking, which will explore how the horse was depicted in war, both heroically and as a beast-of-burden, by some of the leading British artists of the early twentieth century. The exhibition, from 25 November to 1 March, will also include a display of documents, newspaper reports and other items recalling the role of horses and other animals both at the front and at home during the First World War.

TV IN ABERDEEN

At the end of June a reproduction of WR's *TV* 1960, in the collection of Aberdeen Art Gallery, was used in a project with the city's Northfield Amateur Boxing Club to promote discussion and awareness of the works in the gallery's collection – it is a boxing match that is being watched on the television shown in the painting.

PIGEON SONG

WR's 1928 watercolour *Pigeon Carriers*, in The Hepworth, Wakefield, has provided the inspiration for composer Cheryl Camm's lullaby 'Pigeon Hands', which has been performed in various contexts and can be heard on http://cherylcamm.co.uk/song-stories-pigeon-hands/.

AUCTION NEWS

On 26 June Christie's sold the oil *Swimmers Resting c*.1925 for £48,750. On 16 September Bonhams sold the 1970 watercolour *The Dancing Bear* for £18,750.

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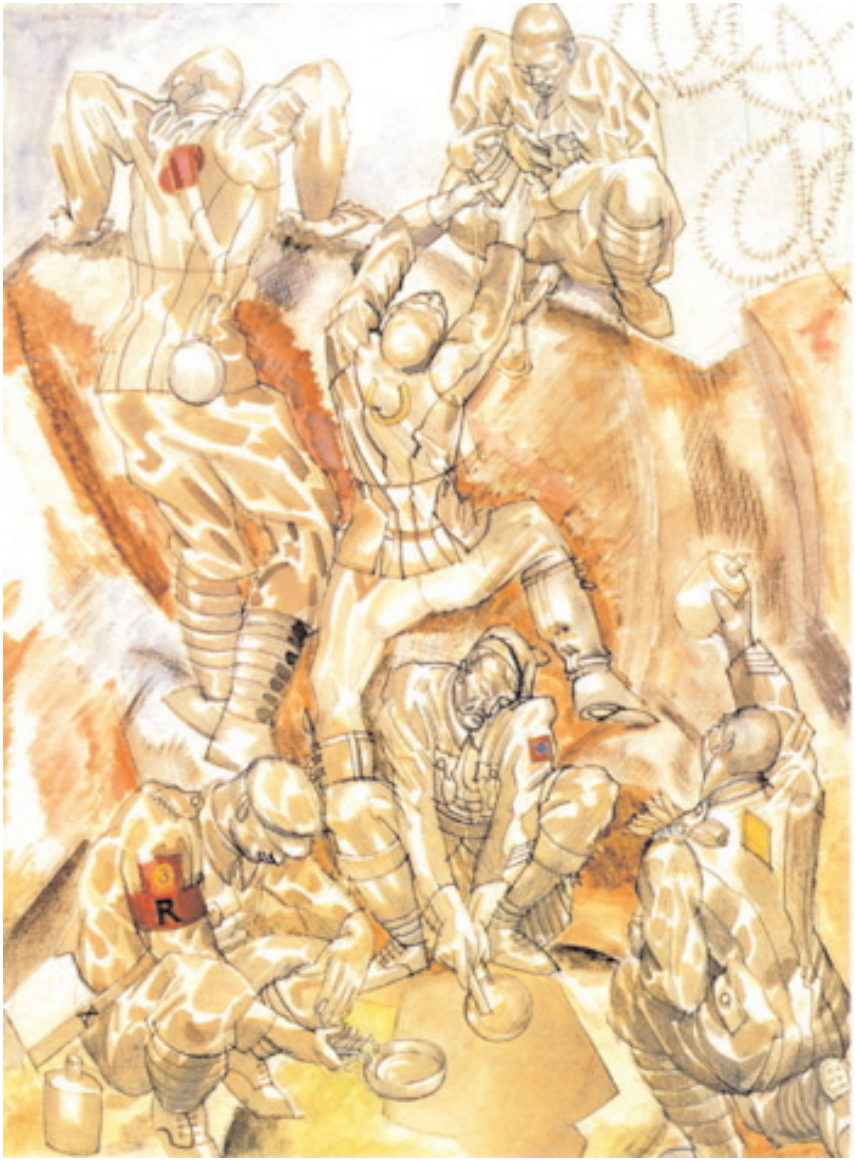

Tommies Filling Their Water Bottles with Rain from a Shell Hole 1918
'Once upon the Somme last winter, I had so many Gogol's and Dostoyevski's, etc, that when we were about to move away, I threw them into a shell hole filled with rain water, no doubt they are there still.'