

REVIEW / COMPTE RENDU

Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art and the Great War

Maria TIPPETT

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The subject of Tippet's book, *Art at the Service of War*, is the Canadian War Memorials (C.W.M.), that impressive collection of British and Canadian paintings, graphic arts and sculpture numbering more than eight hundred works of art. Assembled by Lord Beaverbrook and his Committee, it commemorated the efforts of Canadians on the home front, at the training camps, and on the European battlefields of the Great War (1914-1918).

As a collection of twentieth-century art, the C.W.M. is unique not only because the work is "united by theme, time and place,"¹ but because the collection surveys the broadest spectrum of British and Canadian painting of this important period, from academic to avant-garde. At first glance, then, it would appear surprising that Tippet's book represents the first effort to study the C.W.M. collection and its history in its entirety. However, such a study has been virtually impossible until recently. The sheer scale of the collection, both in terms of actual sizes (many of the paintings exceed eight by ten feet) and sheer numbers, the problems of simply conserving and properly storing such a collection, and, until lately, the relative inaccessibility of the work, either first hand or through reproduction, have been the major obstacles. Fortunately, through the efforts of the staff of both the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian War Museum (the principal caretakers of the C.W.M.) the collection is,

in fact, secure. Given these facts, Tippet's achievement is indeed considerable.

Tippet notes in her introductory remarks, "This book is a study in cultural history...concerned with the institutional framework of an organization, the Canadian War Memorials Fund...[The] book is...as much about how a work of art gets done as about what is actually produced."² One hundred and twelve pages later, in her concluding paragraph, the author reflects that "the project's significance lies not so much in what finally happened to the work it inspired, as in the process by which that work was created and brought together." Drawing essentially on archival sources in Toronto, Ottawa, and London, Tippet's thesis asserts that while the privately created, London-based Canadian War Memorials Fund (C.W.M.F.) was responsible for commissioning an important body of work, its true importance rests not only in the quality of the work produced, but in the creation of an "infrastructure of artists, patrons and critics, which enabled a national [Canadian] school of art to flourish." Such a thesis infers that but for the commissions given to the C.W.M.F., there would have been no post-War Group of Seven; or more succinctly put, the machinery of recognition (dealers, critics, curators, eventual acquisition) would not have come into play. While partially true, the extensive ground which Tippet covers does not seem to this reviewer to allow sufficient argument or evidence to substantiate such a claim. Instead, what the author presents, in six carefully crafted chapters, is the scope and breadth of this unique project and a convincing picture of the efforts of all individuals involved: pa-

trons, government officials, and, of course, the artists.

Tippett commences with a survey of the varied responses British and Canadian artists had to the War itself, noting the inevitable disruption such an event had on exhibitions, acquisitions, and art societies. The creation of the C.W.M.F. in November 1916 came as a welcome relief from this disruption. It attracted artists for a variety of reasons; first and foremost, as Eric Brown, Director of the National Gallery of Canada observed, was the opportunity to "take big subjects and make big pictures of them." The focus of the second chapter changes from the point of view of the artists to that of the principals associated with the creation of the C.W.M.F.: Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook), Bertram Lima and Harold Harmsworth, Lord Rothermere, the latter conceiving of the idea to list the Fund under the War Charities Act. Art advisor to the project and a close friend of Lord Rothermere was Paul Konody, a London art critic, principally responsible for choosing the artists. However, it was the energy and efforts of Lord Beaverbrook that Tippett presents so convincingly in the chapter appropriately entitled "Canada's Impresario of Art." A fresh and new picture of the personality of Lord Beaverbrook which was not drawn in A.J.P. Taylor's biography is provided by Tippett.³ The story told here is well researched and documented and, to Tippett's credit, in spite of the complexity of affairs, is eminently readable. His diplomacy was evident in administering the C.W.M.F. and his ability to gain access to the Western Front for his artists in spite of the complications created by the military bureaucracy. It extended to his cooperation with, and co-opting of, Arthur Doughty (the Dominion Archivist who was also charged with securing records of the War) and his delegation of responsibility to,

and procurement of advice from, Sir Edmund Walker (Chairman of the Canadian Arts Advisory Council) and Eric Brown.

Having successfully set up both the Canadian War Records Office and the C.W.M.F., Beaverbrook's next task, upon appointment by Lloyd George to head the British Ministry of Information, was to create a British War Memorial Scheme modeled after that of the already established C.W.M.F. By so doing, Tippett argues, Beaverbrook unknowingly insured that neither the British nor the Canadian scheme would be completely realized. For example, Tippett argues that Augustus John's twelve by forty foot mural, *The Canadians Opposite Lens*, remained in cartoon format "partly because he [John] was sent by the [British] Pictorial Propaganda Committee to paint portraits at the Paris Peace Conference." John later claimed that there was no need to complete the painting because the building projected to house the Canadian War Memorials was not built. It was during this period that Beaverbrook placed under the administration of Sir Edmund Walker and Eric Brown the commissions of Canadian artists to document the activities on the home front, "the first time...that public art patronage in Canada had been directed exclusively towards Canadian artists," Tippett asserts.

In Tippett's analysis of the major iconographical themes of the work done for the C.W.M.F., she leans heavily on Paul Fussell's model established in *The Great War and Modern Memory*.⁴ This is not surprising, as Fussell's observation that the literature associated with the Great War reveals the "inadequacy of language itself to convey the facts" of modern warfare has particular relevance for art historians. Even such radical visual languages as Post-Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism were somehow inadequate when faced with the "paranoid

melodrama," (to use Fussell's phrase) created by extended trench warfare.

In her analysis of specific works of art, Tippetts seems on less familiar ground. Although she juxtaposes a compelling Canadian War Records photograph with Varley's *The Sunken Road*, the obvious inspiration for the painting, the author observes that the artist is "using the foreshortening technique of another war artist – the Renaissance painter Mantegna." Her observation that Ivan Meštrović's relief sculpture, *The Canadian Phalanx*, can be viewed as if it had been created "a few years later... as a prime example of socialist realism," misses the mark and the opportunity to relate it compositionally to C.R.W. Nevinson's *Marching Men*. Indeed, Tippetts's belief that William Roberts' *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres*, "like no other painting in the C.W.M.F. collection... conveys the confusion and the horror of modern war" contradicts A.Y. Jackson's observation that "if the critics had looked carefully [at the C.W.M.F. exhibitions], they might have discovered the little thirty-inch canvas by Paul Nash entitled *Void*, which expressed more about War than all of the big twenty-foot canvases put together."⁵ The most extensively researched work which Tippetts analyzes is Francis Derwent Wood's controversial sculpture, *Canada's Golgotha*, a response to the supposed atrocity which involved the supposed crucifixion of a Canadian soldier by the Germans.

In her final chapter, the author summarizes the fate of the C.W.M.F. collection, offering evidence as to why the projected building to house the work was never realized. In the end, Tippetts observes, the "war trophies, the town memorial, and Cook's tours to the remains of Ypres and to Vimy Ridge took precedence over paintings and sculptures as a means of commemorating Canada's achievement in the war." Tippetts

is correct in viewing John Pearson's Main Tower of the new Parliament Buildings, designated by the Prince of Wales at the cornerstone laying ceremony of Sept. 1, 1919 as the "Tower of Peace," as a kind of "unofficial" surrogate War Memorial. Being seen as such in the eyes of the public and government officials, it displaced Beaverbrook's magnificent gift to the nation. It became even more a surrogate memorial when, by the summer of 1921, Pearson embarked on his own imaginative scheme to house an elaborate Memorial Chamber in the "Tower of Peace," as well as to add the sculpted figure of a Canadian soldier with reversed arms on the exterior of the Tower.

Surprisingly, Tippetts omits any discussion of the National Commemorative War Memorial, *The Great Response*, designed by the English sculptor Vernon March, begun in 1923 and officially unveiled in 1939. This monument also can be viewed as "displacing" the C.W.M. project. (Ironically, Prime Minister Mackenzie King later confided to Beaverbrook that had he been aware of the scope and nature of the C.W.M. collection, he would have erected the building to house the collection rather than going ahead with building what he referred to as "The Great War Monument.") In the aftermath of the Great War, the preference for more conventional, concrete forms of commemoration became obvious: the extravagantly theatrical Egyptian temple pylon used by Walter Allward in his *Vimy Ridge Memorial* (1921-1935); the most understated of War Memorials, Lutyens and Francis Derwent Wood's *Cenotaph* (1919-1920) in Whitehall, London; or the decision to take Meštrović's *Canadian Phalanx* out of storage in the early 1920's and to publicly display it, first outside the Victoria Museum, Ottawa, and later between the East and West Veterans Memorial Buildings, Ottawa, where it is permanently

placed today.

Unfortunately, it is not within the scope of Tippet's book to reflect on the public preference for the architectural and sculptural forms of commemoration rather than for the pictorial. A quick guess as to why that should be the case perhaps can be found in Barker Fairley's review of the C.W.M. exhibition in 1919: "Men do not live with line and colour as they live with words." By that, I suspect Fairley meant that words are more concrete, line and colour more elusive. If to the organizers of the Canadian and British War Memorials projects, the very scale and scope of the Great War demanded a parallel form of visual commemoration, they failed to take into consideration that pre-War division in painting between form and content. This tendency, which, as William Rothenstein later observed, inevitably resulted in "a great opportunity for making painting a vital part of social and religious life [being] missed."⁶

Indeed, one of the chief theorists of that school of thought somewhat prophetically observed in his 1914 essay entitled "Art and War," that "there is no such thing as patriotic art. The qualities in a poem, a picture, or a symphony that lead people to describe the work as patriotic are purely adventitious, and have nothing to do with its aesthetic significance."⁷ It is this schism and dichotomy which Tippet does not convincingly address and which is central to any serious discussion of the C.W.M., whether seen in the related but distinctly different goals of Beaverbrook and Doughty in documenting Canada's role in the War, or in the very descriptions of the work which appeared in the catalogue exhibitions of 1919. In what one imagines was a collaborative catalogue entry to Wyndham Lewis' *Canadian Gunpit* written by Percy Godenrath and P.G. Konody, we are told

that:

This picture deals with the zone of the heavy guns. Two gun emplacements are visible, of which one makes the central fact of the picture. The moment chosen is that of laying the gun. The terraced group of figures along shells are not intended to be anything but rugged in the matter of physiognomy. The painting is furthermore a *decoration*, essentially, and its treatment subordinates to the great lines of balance and arrangement – the impressionistic truth of modern pictorial art. It is an experiment of the painter's in a kind of painting not his own.⁸

Clearly, the description would have us believe that Lewis' painting is both a historical record of a specific time, place, and event, and an aesthetically significant example of modern ("decorative") art. Trying to do both, one suspects the work falls short of being either. If there is any general criticism to be made of *Art at the Service of War* it is that the author attempts too much in too short a book, thus overlooking the kinds of issues which I have cited above.

Obviously, with such wealth of archival materials to draw upon, there will be multiple and differing interpretations of specific works, individual roles, and major events depending upon the bias and methodology of the scholar. For example, Tippet views the reluctance and final refusal of Lawren Harris to work for the Walker/Brown home front section of the C.W.M. as being founded in the belief on the part of that "wealthy young painter," that "work ought to be done [instead] by less established and less financially well off artists." However, one could also advance the argument that Harris did not participate because of the ambivalence and indecision of Eric Brown

in matching subject to artist. Brown had first recommended that Harris undertake a series of studies and a final picture that would document War work in munitions plants. In fact, a permit was issued to the artist on September 18, 1918, for that purpose. Yet, less than a month later, Brown changed his mind and asked that Harris instead consider a picture "of the lumbering of aeroplane spruce." Tippet overlooks other plausible answers in discussing the principal reasons why Beaverbrook turned from a photographic and cinematic record of documenting the Great War to the more conventional medium of painting. It was his suspicion that photographs at that time "had a life-span of only twenty-five years."

One suspects that the enormous London reception given to Eric Kennington's *The Kensington's at Laventie* and C.R.W. Nevinson's *La Mitrailleuse* in 1915 had some bearing on Beaverbrook's direction to move from photographic records to memorials in paint and stone. Indeed, the decision of the Contemporary Art Society in 1916 to purchase the Nevinson painting and to present it to the Tate Gallery in 1917 was largely influenced by Walter Sickert. His enthusiastic praise of the work claimed that "*it [La Mitrailleuse] was the most authoritative and concentrated utterance of war in the history of painting. This must be for the nation.*"⁹ Such public praise and institutional support for these first efforts at war painting by Kennington and Nevinson, even though at opposite stylistic poles, must provide a clue to the catholic approach that the C.W.M. Committee was later to take in commissioning artists from a broad spectrum of stylistic modes.

There are other minor points which I would raise with the format of Tippet's book. Unfortunately, neither is there a bibliography, all the more surprising as *Art at the Service of War* is a reworking of the

author's Ph.D. dissertation, nor, unhappily, are there any colour plates. Yet in spite of the concerns aired above, this is an important, well-written book which is necessary reading for any scholar interested in the field of twentieth-century British and Canadian art. In addition to her clear delineation of the infrastructure which made the Canadian War Memorials collection possible, one of Tippet's most important contributions is in redressing the balance that has been too long tipped in favour of the British artists who contributed to the Canadian War Memorial Scheme.

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Notes

- ¹ R.F. WODEHOUSE, *Checklist of the War Collections* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1968), p. 8.
- ² TIPPETT, p. xi.
- ³ A.J.P. TAYLOR, *Beaverbrook* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), especially chapter 5.
- ⁴ P. FUSSELL, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, London: Oxford University Press, 1977), chapter 5, "Oh What a Literary War."
- ⁵ A.Y. JACKSON, *A Painter's Country* (Toronto, Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd., 1976), p. 50.
- ⁶ W. ROTHENSTEIN, *Men and Memories* (New York: Tudor Publ., n.d.), vol. II, p. 350.
- ⁷ C. BELL, *Potboilers* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1918), p. 239.
- ⁸ *Canadian War Memorials Exhibition* (London, Canadian War Records: Jan./Feb. 1919, 3rd edit.), p. 7.
- ⁹ W. SICKERT, "O Matre Pulchra," *Burlington Magazine*, 29 (April 1916), p. 35.