

The Chelsea Artist on the Wandsworth Salient

As the commemoration of the centenary of the First World War gets formally under way, *Pippa Sharp* reflects on the unique contribution made in Wandsworth towards the cultural legacy of that period.

The Royal Victoria Patriotic Building on Wandsworth Common is not an obvious reminder of the Great War. The immaculate Commonwealth War Graves in Wandsworth Cemetery on Magdalen Road offer a clearer catalyst for remembrance, but they also raise the question of how and why so many imperial casualties from Gallipoli and the Western Front were buried in Wandsworth.¹ Evidence is scattered: the aloof Scottish baronial building, nearby roads named after mostly long-forgotten artists, and a magazine, the *Gazette of the 3rd London General Hospital*. This publication – referred to in the remainder of this article as ‘the *Gazette*’ – connects these fragments while providing an astonishing narrative of a hospital which brought the magnitude and devastation of the First World War from many miles away into the very heart of Wandsworth.²

On 5 August 1914 the Royal Victoria home, originally designed for orphans from the Crimean War, became the 3rd London General Territorial Field Hospital. Designated as a General Hospital in the event of war as far back as 1908 the hospital was swiftly transformed in less than five days and declared itself ready to receive casualties on August the 8th.³ At the same time the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Bruce Porter, walked into the bar of the Chelsea Arts Club (CAC) to announce that men were wanted for war work. Perhaps to his surprise the response was immediate as twenty-five members promptly enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC). Porter later tells how Alfred Withers and Tom Roberts were the first to join, and that Roberts was followed by his long-time friends and fellow Australian artists, George



Sergeant Luff with his facial injuries, sketched from life by Tom Roberts.

Coates, James Quinn, J. Arthur Fullwood, and Arthur Streeton.⁴ Famous as the Heidelberg School of *Plein-Air* Australian Impressionists in the 1890s, Roberts and Streeton were by then aged 58 and 48 respectively.⁵ There was no obvious reason for any of them to volunteer; age and family commitments would naturally have excused them from the draft, so why did they enlist?

War presented an opportunity for redemption. This group had by 1914 lost much of the lustre which had clung to their reputations even into the first decade of the twentieth century. They were often derided in the press as scruffy bohemians and worse, ‘colonials’; and so with some of them gaining a growing renown for penury and banal work, they had nothing to lose and war offered the certainty of a regular income and occupation. Quite how this decision to enlist would redeem and enhance some reputations could not have been foreseen as they crossed the river as a large group of ageing ‘pals’ well before the end of the

year. As a contemporary periodical observed, 'Members of the Chelsea Arts Club are serving their country in a double capacity.... They are fulfilling the ordinary duties of hospital orderlies.... The doctor as artist is not a new thing but the artist as hospital attendant is something of a novelty.'

The CAC recruits were a diverse group. Among them were the novelist, William Pett Ridge, the Newlyn artist, Percy Craft, George Pirie (later to become president of the Royal Scottish Academy), and the potter, Edwin Martin. With several veteran Australians they were all billeted together in Hut 6 in the grounds of the Royal Victoria Patriotic Building.⁶ The twenty-one occupants of the hut would be joined by other artists, such as C. R. W. Nevinson for several months in early 1915, and J. H. Dowd⁷ in 1916, as others like Stephen Bagehot de la Bere and Frederick Wilcoxson left for active service abroad.

At first they worked only as orderlies. Tom Roberts was initially an Officers' Mess Orderly before joining Edward Stott and Arthur Fullwood in the Pack Store. He soon found his place in the Dental Reconstruction Room. Others like Coates, Nevinson and Fagan⁸ found themselves in a 'Chain Gang' led by Mulock (another CAC member), digging ditches and preparing roads and paths for the new bungalow hospital huts. Orderlies served as stretcher bearers, initially forming parties to collect the wounded from trains at Clapham Junction and then, as arrivals became a nightly ritual, unloading ambulance columns and sorting the injured soldiers. Hard labour, tedium and long hours characterised much of this work but they soon found an opportunity to use their skills as artists and writers.

In the autumn of 1915, Ward Muir and Noel Irving launched the *Gazette*, and this remains perhaps the most remarkable record and testament to the work of the hospital. At first a magazine created entirely by and exclusively for hospital staff, it went on sale at threepence a copy. Soon it was being sold at the gate, and in local shops in Trinity Road and at Clapham Junction station. By 1916

the *Gazette* had a worldwide circulation of over 15,000 copies in places as far away as Australia, South Africa, Canada and Newfoundland. The hospital magazine was a phenomenon of the



'The Light that Failed' by George Coates. A wounded soldier reads aloud to two of his blinded colleagues in 1915.

war just as the gallows humour of the trench magazine has become an iconic parody of laughter in the face of adversity at the front.⁹ The typical hospital magazine (and there were almost as many magazines as hospitals) was, in general, a primmer affair.¹⁰

These magazines characteristically reported on the business of the hospital, staff and patients in a generally upbeat tone, focussing on getting on with the job of survival, recovery and recuperation. The *Gazette* certainly included much of this type of material, and yet it is exceptional in that it offers considerably more than most of the others as a documentary source to the historian and art historian. Humour, jokes, cartoons, poems and domestic comment are juxtaposed with a developing narrative of a hospital at war, struggling under a burden of shock and horror at the unprecedented nature of the arriving casualties. Worry and stress that the war seemed to have no end in sight begins to permeate the magazine in late 1916. While making no particular reference to actual military

events (a 'big push' is as close as it gets), jokes and cartoons are printed alongside more poignant images: night arrivals in the rain, hopeless cases, maimed and broken men. A cheery tone and



'At the Concert: a Comic Song' by the futurist, C. R. W. Nevinson.

a perceptibly false gaiety are underpinned by editorial admissions of hardship and suffering. The *Gazette* is not just a recreational work; it tells a graphic and moving story. Created entirely by the staff of one hospital it is a unique document of the war.

In the September of 1915 George Coates persuaded the CO, Bruce Porter, to allow the recreation room to be used to exhibit art. The first exhibition showed an eclectic collection of landscapes and sculptures alongside the splint moulds which were beginning to be shaped and developed by Frances Derwent Wood in the Splint Room. Critics like the *Observer*'s Paul Konody, and Charles Marriott from the *Times* reported the event and in doing so kept the names of the artists in the public eye, exposure which would be significant for later commissions.

Some artists, like Tom Roberts, felt no such imperative and did not paint. 'I saw the boys in the trenches between me and my canvas', he said.¹¹ He found, instead, inspiration and purpose from his patients with shot-up faces in the dental room, portraying them with simple line drawings often

accompanied by a short passage describing the man and his injury. Coates too did not flinch from portraying men damaged by war and often dying. His sketch 'The Light that Failed' portrays men blinded by war, and his subjects include critical and hopeless cases. Notions we may still have of concealment and propaganda are refuted by the candid and illuminating images of war casualties which feature in the *Gazette*. Nevinson's futurist style also found substance, critics noted, in his stark lithographs of the receiving hall at the hospital, the ambulance driver, and the pack room where the officers' kits were stored, and he illustrated the drama of hospital work as much as the tedium. Nevinson parodied the art-form of the cartoon; he clearly found nothing funny about the hospital or the war.

Work at the 3rd was hard and tedious, with duty starting promptly at 6 a.m. and often only concluding late at night after the last convoy of wounded soldiers had been sorted and settled. Nevinson was excoriating about his experience at the hospital: building roads, unloading hospital trains, emptying bedpans, and he even feared 'shell shock' contamination. He also disliked many of the older Chelsea artists with whom he was forced to share a hut, later ascribing a bitter jealousy to the teasing he received from them. As the novelist, Ward Muir, wrote at the time, 'Practical joking only found favour in the case of one ultra-modern painter who became a subject on at least one occasion which produced the inevitable turmoil'.¹² That Nevinson felt bullied is likely, but he continued to contribute to the *Gazette* long after he was invalided from the RAMC, and his friend Muir referred to him fondly as 'our only futurist'.

By 1917 the hospital was struggling for survival, and writing an editorial the senior matron, Edith Holden, lamented the loss of staff to service abroad, as military service tribunals repeatedly reviewed men of questionable health in a gradual denudation of strength and capability to deal with any new challenges from the front.¹³ Mulock and Withers had left for commissions overseas by the end of 1917 together with Wilcoxson who left the splint room for the Royal Field Artillery

and returned badly injured in 1917. Stephen de la Bere and J. A. S. Grant had taken commissions in the Artists' Rifles. Among the oldest orderlies, Coates and Roberts remained, though the debilitating work and unceasing stream of damaged men with unimagined wounds and injuries took a traumatic toll on all of them. Edith Holden wrote at the close of the year, '1916 has gone taking with it our joys and sorrow; more sorrows than joys for most of us, I fear. Days have been dark and prospects often gloomy but ... we live from day to day.' She continued, 'Many of our staff have left us [to set up the 40th General in Mesopotamia] in the past year and so many of us wondered if we should go under but we struggled on and in spite of many dark days still keep the flag of no 3 flying'. By the end of 1917 most B1 and B2 orderlies had been sent overseas leaving the C category orderlies to shoulder the burdens.¹⁴

Coates himself had a nervous collapse in late 1917 (diagnosed then as neurasthenia), and his wife, Dora Meeson, described how on his discharge on 7 April 1919, 'George was no longer fit for war service; he was emaciated, a mere scarecrow and a mass of nerves. There is no doubt the war had taken toll on everyone's health and nerves though perhaps not so much then in the first relief of peace as afterwards.'¹⁵ Tom Roberts, now aged 62, took over a year to recover his strength and appetite for painting when he too was discharged in 1919.

The older artists in Wandsworth were also keenly beginning to feel that opportunity was passing them by. By the end of 1916, younger artists like Nevinson and Dyson were finding commissions as the war art schemes began to develop. The Australian Imperial Force (AIF) had, after some persuasion, commissioned Dyson and then Fred Leist to paint the war, a decision which Arthur Streeton, doing hard and mostly menial work in Wandsworth, took strong exception to, writing to the Melbourne *Argus* from Wandsworth that these men 'do not fairly represent the best of Australian Art'.¹⁶ The polemical cartoonist, Dyson, was younger than the old grandees, Roberts and Streeton, and the latter felt spurned

by his fellow Australians when they were invited to join Beaverbrook's Canadian art scheme.¹⁷ His early contacts with Paul Konody at the hospital, like those of Nevinson, would cement



J. H. Dowd pictures Arthur Fullwood suspended from a balloon with his sketch pad over the 3rd London General and its acres of bungalow huts.

this working and commercial relationship. Streeton's persistence succeeded, however, and he was given a commission attached to the Second AIF in May 1918. Coates also applied to the Australian Government and was rejected. 'He felt this injustice keenly,' wrote his wife, although he was eventually commissioned to paint two generals, and then the group portrait of the AIF artists, Streeton, Dyson, Leist, Fullwood and Quinn.

By 1918 things were tougher still. In March 1918 food rationing started at the hospital, and the price of paper sharply increased the cost of the magazine from fourpence to sixpence. The *Gazette* had by now lost much of its innate cheeriness. An unexpectedly candid column entitled 'Let's Talk of Graves' appeared, in which a surprisingly frank Private Buchanan Taylor wrote, 'The military funeral has lost its lure and become commonplace.... To have died for one's country is now no exceptional achievement. It approximates to a national hobby.' By May most of the hospital was being converted to officer-

only accommodation with the exception of the Newfoundlanders, whose continuing presence in all ranks was clearly cherished. 'This is the only hospital in England for the Newfoundlanders and for many all they have known and will know of England'.

Colonel Bruce Porter, with a constitution enfeebled by service in Mesopotamia, commented as the men left of 'the roaring chorus of the concert hall dying as the men, alas, died out'. A Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse sounded equally heart-felt in May: 'I tried to unravel the mystery of today, the reason why this barbarousness is permitted, the hideous maiming of men's bodies and deadening of their minds – the seemingly utter hopelessness of it all. Is it possible that ever again one could say, "God's in his heaven; all's right with the world"?'

Dora Coates was another unequivocal eyewitness. While visiting George at the hospital in 1918 an air raid began and she was sent up to the shell-shock ward to help. 'It was a pitiable sight,' she wrote, 'to see strong men cowering and shivery and weeping with every fresh explosion ... in an awful state and too frightened and remote to be cheered. The noise of the huge anti-aircraft gun was awful enough; it was so close and gun after gun was fired.... The noise was deafening'.¹⁸

In conclusion, there is still a widely held perception that events on the Western Front left most participants unable to voice or render intelligible their experiences. A similar idea prevails that, on the home front too, the war was endured by a largely silent majority. The *Gazette* suggests we

reconsider this belief. Offering a commentary on life in a military hospital, the magazine provided an increasingly open forum for soldiers and staff, men and women from right across the British Empire, damaged or otherwise, to make sense of their experiences in the Great War. The *Gazette* also allowed artists and writers who worked at the hospital to articulate and underline something of those experiences, which included terrible and mutilating wounds, shell shock and loss, using art and humour, parody and pathos.

Ward Muir wrote in April 1917, 'The *Gazette* will put into permanent form a record of one aspect of just that side to the First World War which, to many future students, will be in its way, more illuminating

than official histories'. This comment shows his faith that the quality of this record, the *Gazette*, would ensure that we would read and remember. He was right, but it is worth underlining that the *Gazette* was created for an institution in Wandsworth and is therefore culturally informed by this, and by its specific local surroundings, as well as the range of people and nationalities working there. The *Gazette* offers us a unique insight into lives within an institution in a capital city enduring global war; but also, of equal significance, it gives us a remarkable opportunity to discover something new and profound about Wandsworth during the Great War.

About the author

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The first Christmas of peace. A touching cover-sketch by J. H. Dowd.

in Naval History from Exeter University. She has lived in Wandsworth for thirty years, in succession to her family who first moved to this particular spot in 1851.

Notes

The title of this article is taken from the caption to a cartoon by J. H. Dowd which originally appeared in the *Gazette of the 3rd London General Hospital* in July 1919. All the illustrations and, unless otherwise referenced, all quotations come from the *Gazette*.

- ¹ The cemetery contains the remains of thirty-four Australian, eighteen Newfoundland, three Canadian, five South African and three New Zealand casualties. Notably they often fell at the same time at Gallipoli, Pozières, Beaumont Hamel, Vimy Wood, and other well-known locations where imperial forces were heavily engaged. An exception is Bertha Bartlett, a Newfoundland nurse at the 3rd, who was a victim of the influenza pandemic in 1918.
- ² Complete runs of the magazine from 1915 to 1919 can be found, bound in three volumes, at the British Library and the Wellcome Collection. Copies are also available for consultation in the Wandsworth Heritage Service archive at Battersea Library.
- ³ In August 1908 the Surgeon General, Sir Alfred Keogh, recommended the provision of 12,000 beds to be found in the twenty-three Territorial Field Hospitals which he had selected. Matrons and senior staff were identified at this time for all twenty-three hospital centres, and provision for volunteers was also made by 1908. Lt Bruce Porter would have been appointed to the 3rd London at this point. Professional staff were supplied by the Middlesex, Chelsea Infirmary, St Mary's and University College Hospitals. Later groups of doctors and dentists would join from Australia and the Empire.
- ⁴ This is referenced several times in the *Gazette* by Bruce Porter and others such as Ward Muir and Dora Meeson Coates.
- ⁵ Heidelberg is a suburb east of Melbourne. In 1889 McCubbin, Roberts, Streeton, Walter Withers and others held the *9 by 5 Impression Exhibition*, now regarded as a watershed moment for Australian Art. The ongoing relationship between Streeton and Roberts during the Great War is barely known, overshadowed by the legacy of the '9 by 5' exhibition and its influence on Australian art and film. Tom Roberts's early work influenced the art direction and composition of Peter Weir's 1975 film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.
- ⁶ At first they lived in tents and then took over Hut 6 – 'the artists hut' – in early 1915. It was one of many bungalow huts in the grounds which extended as far as Neal's Farm (later Neal's Lodge and now Common Ground) and the 'nurses' tennis courts', now public courts.
- ⁷ A celebrated cartoonist for *Punch* and *Bystander* with a distinctive style, Dowd also produced the illustrations for the first Winnie the Pooh stories published in the London *Evening News* in 1926.
- ⁸ The architectural sculptor, William Bateman Fagan (1860-1948).
- ⁹ There were several hundred trench magazines produced by both French and British regiments. Some like the *Ypres Times* changed names as the editors moved. Others like the *5th Gloster Gazette* maintained a fairly unbroken record of publication until the close of the war.
- ¹⁰ In the vicinity of Wandsworth Common alone, Springfield Hospital and the Weir Red Cross Hospital both produced magazines, as did all five of the main London Territorial Field Hospitals similar to the 3rd in Wandsworth.
- ¹¹ Robert Henderson Croll, *Tom Roberts: Father of Australian Landscape Painting* (Robertson & Mullens, 1935), p. 99.
- ¹² Ward Muir, *Observations of an Orderly: Some Glimpses of Life and Work in an English War Hospital* (Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1917).
- ¹³ Edith Holden was devoted to the hospital and her patients. She left when the hospital finally closed, too old by then to find a comparable post. She died in 1930 and was buried alongside her Newfoundlanders in Wandsworth Cemetery.
- ¹⁴ These were conscription categories introduced in January 1916 and applied to men between 18 and 40. B1 was defined as 'able to march five miles, and see to shoot with glasses and hear well'. B2 was defined as 'able to walk five miles to and from work, and see and hear sufficiently for ordinary purposes'. B3 was designated 'suitable only for sedentary work', and C 'able to withstand service conditions at home'. See www.westernfrontassociation.com: 'Conscription Categories in the Great War', accessed on 12 Jun. 2014.
- ¹⁵ Dora Meeson Coates, *George Coates: His Art and Life* (J. M. Dent, 1937).
- ¹⁶ *Argus* (Melbourne), 17 Dec. 1917, p. 4, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au/> on 12 Jun. 2014.
- ¹⁷ The first, best resourced, and most successfully organised of the imperial forces art schemes and underwritten by Lords Beaverbrook and Northcliffe.
- ¹⁸ Wandsworth Common was one of an inner ring of gun stations lying between Dulwich and Putney Heath. The gun station (probably on the slight rise next to the Lady Allen playground) was served by two searchlight stations known as 'fighting lights'. The armament was a battery of 75mm French guns. The noise of the Wandsworth Gun was infamous and it was locally referred to as 'Big Bertha', in an almost jocular reference to Dicke Berta, the Krupp 42-inch Howitzer deployed by the Germans at Verdun.