



CREATED IN CONFLICT

BRITISH SOLDIER ART
FROM THE CRIMEAN WAR TO TODAY



Compton Verney
ART GALLERY & PARK

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Created in Conflict:

British Soldier Art from the Crimean War to Today

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Front Cover:

Anna Redwood, *The Weight of Duty* (detail) 2014, 19 wooden signs mounted on a metal rod © Image Courtesy of the Artist

Back cover:

E. L. Douglas Fowles, *A Slight Idea of Our Cellar in Loos*, 1916
© Private Collection

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The *Illustrated London News* - incorporating content produced by soldiers, containing news of war read by families and then sent to the Crimea, re-read and creatively reused by soldiers as discussed in their letters home and in other representations of military life such as *A Welcome Arrival* - is one example of the thick connections and layers of communication between home and front.

Luard was well placed to understand the emotional and practical significance of receiving a box from home. Born into a military family, he served in the army but left in 1854 to pursue an artistic career. *A Welcome Arrival* was inspired by a four-month Crimean visit to his brother, Richard, an officer still serving in the 77th Regiment - the officers in the painting likely include a self-portrait of the artist, on the right, and his brother, standing in the centre. Soldiers' pleasure at receiving ordinary domestic objects creates a line of continuity across conflicts and time. Personal objects sent to those at the front provide a powerful conduit to home and made an important contribution to what historian Michael Roper has described as soldiers' 'emotional survival'. Examples from the First World War include an army cook who 'used his mother's recipes, and prepared his men's food with the wooden spoon she had sent him', and of a mother who sent her soldier son wallpaper samples from the redecoration of their home.³

Other connections with home also offer comfort. A letter in which Queen Victoria described her personal feeling for the troops - 'no one takes a warmer interest or feels more for their sufferings, or admires their courage or heroism more than their Queen' - was painted onto the walls of hospital wards across the Crimea, and many Victorian soldiers comment in their letters and diaries on the comfort they derived from the Queen's care for the army. A similar feeling informs Sapper Adam Williams's blast wall painting in Camp Taji, Iraq, produced during Operation SHADER 3 in 2016. Beside a black-and-white portrait of a young Queen Elizabeth II, the mural quotes her Christmas broadcast of 2008, in which the Queen connected the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War with the army's continuing service in theatres including Iraq and Afghanistan: 'When life seems hard, the courageous do not lie down and accept defeat; instead, they are all the more determined to struggle for a better future.'

Sapper Williams's work follows the format of an existing mural featuring a Winston Churchill image and quotation. Williams, who usually works with pen and pencil in sketchpads, improvised a paintbrush by taping bristles cut off a broom onto the end of a pencil. He explains: 'I have always admired how soldiers far from home seek to improve their surroundings regardless of



Christopher McHugh, *Swift and Bold Jug*, 2013, porcelain, glaze, pink lustre, decals, mixed media © Photography by Jo Howell, 2014

³ Roper, 2009, p. 11.

how harsh the environment may be... I thought it would reinforce our British area, a reminder to other nations who walked past... that we were there and proud doing our part in the coalition.' Despite the mural's patriotic British content, photographer Corporal Nick Johns, who wanted to capture Williams's large-scale art, also found it 'an ice breaker between us and the other nations as they would stop and talk to us about it, which helped build relationships between individuals.'

As well as decorating and furnishing their living quarters, soldiers have always repurposed available material, including weaponry, ordnance and even rations, for artistic and domestic purposes. Produced from a converted cartridge case during the Second World War, Trooper Cyril Douglas Goslin's tankard resonates with the most familiar form of trench art - objects made from carved shell cases. Engraved with his name, regiment and regimental nickname, 'Monty's Foxhounds', Goslin's tankard anticipates the more recent repurposing of the green plastic tubes (dubbed 'greenies') that carried 81mm mortar bombs in Afghanistan into personalised Musa Qala mugs. Often retained by soldiers and sometimes still used, these cups have both a practical and a memorial function, powerfully recalling the experiences of active service within civilian life.

Christopher McHugh's *Swift and Bold Jug* draws upon his collaboration with members of Third Battalion, The Rifles (3 Rifles), to make ceramic artworks in response to their experience of fighting in Helmand during Operation HERRICK 11 (October 2009–April 2010). The soldiers brought with them significant objects connected to the campaign, and many of them also discussed their tattoos memorialising dead comrades or family members. Tattooing, with its long military and maritime tradition, continues to be a significant practice of soldier art, in which the body itself is inscribed with war experiences, especially loss.⁴ McHugh's jug intersperses tattoos with lucky charms and other objects personalised in theatre, creating a more durable repository for these feelings and memories. As he puts it:

'My 'tattooed' jugs attempt to preserve the embodied shrines of the soldiers in a publicly accessible medium which, it is hoped, will endure longer than the flesh and carry these expressions of affection into the future.'

⁴ See also Tim Hetherington's photographs of Battle Company of the US army's 173rd Airborne, who unusually happened to have a tattoo artist, Vinnie Cantu, amongst them who worked on the men's bodies and improved his artistry over their time in Afghanistan. He inscribed some with a record of the names of fellow soldiers who died there and marked others 'Infidel', a choice one of the company explained as the name the enemy called them on the radio; on Kyle Steiner who survived being shot in the head he tattooed bullets with wings over each shoulder, *Infidel* (London: Chris Boot, 2010).

McHugh's ceramic collation of tattoos and important possessions resonates with many works created in conflict. Soldier art is often composite, a patchworking of pieces, combining the work of many hands, as registered by Redwood's gathering of signposts and illustrated in the newspaper collage of Luard's painting, in which various pieces, produced by multiple authors and artists, are brought together to form a whole. Like folk art, soldier art disrupts ideas of a single, artistic vision, instead offering an insight into the significant and available materials of the conflict in which it was produced and into the important relationships and feelings of the makers.

PICTURING HOME AND KEEPING IN TOUCH

Soldiers' sketches, small objects hand-picked to send home, and handmade gifts are a means of sharing at least some part of the experience of war with civilians, while also offering reassurance to friends and family. Soldiers often maintain relationships and a sense of shared familiarity with those at home by sending a way for them to picture their 'home' at war. Sketches, floorplans, photographs, and models of living environments enclosed in letters home and featured in personal diaries and sketchbooks have long been popular ways of keeping in touch and of recording the day-to-day experience of war. Although it is often assumed that soldiers today are too fully absorbed by games on consoles in rest time to put pen or pencil to paper or make things by hand, this perception is challenged by a range of recent highly-detailed sketchbooks and diaries in the collection of the National Army Museum like that of Major Robin Watt. The first of a series of sketchbooks Watt produced through his involvement in the Gulf War, the sketchbook resonates with examples of diaries and sketchbooks kept across two centuries, including Gordon Kell's richly-illustrated journal of his national service with the Royal Army Medical Corps from 1952 to 1954, and Brigadier General Francis John Pink's scrapbook of drawings and watercolours from the 2nd Afghan War of 1878-1880.

Letters and sketches are gathered together with small objects selected and posted home in the Lemprière family's remarkable memorial scrapbook, which also includes mourning condolences eulogies, and poetry written in response to the death of Captain Audley Lemprière in the Crimean War. Twenty years old when he died, Lemprière was the smallest officer in the British army at under five feet in height, and was widely known as 'the boy captain'. When he was shot in an attack on the Russian rifle pits, his commanding officer picked up Lemprière's little body reportedly exclaiming, 'They shall never take my child'.⁵ Compiled by Audley Lemprière's young

⁵ The powerful family feeling for Lemprière in his regiment is further discussed in Furneaux, 2016.

2006: 'Abdul I'm on fire!!!' Marking the board with date and place, including exact co-ordinates, suggests that Musa Qala, an area of intense fighting, can be navigated and survived. The proximity of life and death is similarly embedded in an Operation HERRICK 'DIY' chess set made from bullets of various sizes, and in a Crimean War patchwork draughts board made from the red and white of worn uniforms.

Soldiers' day-to-day work often requires high levels of dexterity and precision, skills which are honoured in Chris McHugh's ceramic piece *Rifleman Hiles' IED Brush*. McHugh's ceramic is a cast of the domestic paintbrush that was used by rifleman Hiles to excavate Improvised Explosive Devices during his patrols in Afghanistan; the brush is marked with a tally for each device detected. McHugh's casting of this everyday object recognises the artistry implicit in the delicate work of IED removal - the humble paintbrush becomes an object literally poised between life and death.

The artwork of military personnel produced during incarceration as prisoners of war is similarly imbued with the very precarious nature of survival. POW work was often made of necessity in exchange for food or medical supplies, or sometimes in secret as a prohibited act of resistance which, if discovered, could result in punishment. As with those whiling away the monotony of periods of inactivity in service and in convalescence, POW work could also be a therapeutic occupation for hand, mind and eye. Gunner Simon Moss, interned by the Japanese during the Second World War in Glodok Prison, West Java, where he was forced to work on the Thai-Burma railway, inscribed the material available to him as a means of asserting identity and relationship in the face of depersonalisation. In extremely harsh conditions in which prisoners were forced to labour with inadequate tools for at least eighteen hours a day, he produced pieces including a metal identity bracelet and a tin food bowl which he carved with a star and the inscription: 'P.O.W/ Glodok - Prison/ 19/ 42/ Java/ Franny/ Moss'. Moss records his circumstances, and recalls his wife, himself and his Jewish identity using the basic material available to him.

Books and papers were regularly confiscated by guards during searches of Japanese POW camps in the Second World War, so surviving work from these camps tends to be in other forms. Embroidery was seen as decorative rather than threatening, notwithstanding the documentary, sometimes secret, records made by stitching. Miss Woodman, of Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps, was a prisoner at the Salvation Army Hospital in Padang, on the West Coast of Sumatra. Here she stitched a belt as a partial record of the experience, incorporating depictions of the locals who were allowed to sell produce to the prisoners, and featuring the stitch signatures and nationalities of her fellow captives. A communal work of many hands, the belt is similar in spirit to examples of multi-authored POW magazines and sketchbooks.



Rifleman Lee Hiles's IED brush, 2011 © Christopher McHugh



Christopher McHugh, Rifleman Hiles's IED Brush, 2013, porcelain, glaze, pink lustre, decals, mixed media
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