

**Claire Bowen**

**PAUL NASH  
AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR OFFICIAL WAR ARTISTS SCHEME**

***Art and the British Propaganda Effort***

Formal British propaganda activity began within weeks of the declaration of war. By August 1914, Lloyd George had personally asked Charles Masterman, his Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, to look into ways of countering the propaganda campaign already begun by Germany in the U.S.A. By September, the Propaganda Department had been established in Wellington House in Central London, under the aegis of the Foreign Office and with Masterman as its Director. It was the first time that such a department had existed in Britain and it was the first war in which all the belligerents came to possess such an institution.

The purpose of the Department was to gain the sympathy of influential neutrals and reinforce home support for the war. A good deal of its work, therefore, involved the production and distribution of material presenting the war from the Allied point of view. At this stage the material in question included articles, write-ups of interviews, photographs, maps, lantern slides, posters, post-cards, etc.—essentially information that lent itself to easy reproduction by mechanical means and that, generally speaking, echoed the type of didactic entertainment so appreciated by the late Victorians and Edwardians.

The Department was staffed by distinguished academics, civil servants, journalists and museum personnel organized into sections dealing with specific activities or targets. From the first, it was clear that the Department was to be the preserve of the intellectuals. This was to be an extremely important factor in determining the nature of the British propaganda machine. The conception and the successful evolution of the Official War Artists Scheme depended very heavily on the existence of Wellington House's network of what the late twentieth century would call "cultural workers." Long before art was adopted as a propaganda tool, the Department possessed the contacts and skills necessary to attract, sponsor, show and publish almost all the British artists of the period. Almost more important, perhaps, was the fact that this particular government agency was staffed by people that creative artists felt they could trust. For example, the correspondence between Paul Nash, Masterman

and Alfred Yockney, his main contacts at the Department, makes it clear that relations between the artist and patron were extremely cordial and that no pressure was ever put on Nash (or any of the other British Official War Artists) to do anything but represent their vision of the Front as they thought fit. Other, similar, organizations had other ways of doing things—the Canadian War Memorials Fund was distinctly more coercive and actively encouraged the Vorticists, for example, to tone down their style in pictures made under contract. The British left well alone! Although there were clearly personal tensions between individual artists and Yockney, Masterman and other members of the Wellington House team, the civil servants manifestly saw themselves in a protective role, acting as an interface between “their” painters and sculptors and representatives of more Philistine government departments like the War Office and the Treasury!

The first official suggestion that artists be used for the purpose of making pictorial propaganda was made in May 1916 (over a year and a half after the creation of the Department) by Ernest Watt, a literary agent by profession and one of the Wellington House team. He told his superiors that the eminent artist, Muirhead Bone, was about to be called up and indicated that, in his opinion, Bone’s talents would be of more use to Wellington House than to an infantry regiment. Watt’s judgement was influenced by two factors. Firstly, at this stage of the war there were simply not enough official war photographers on the Front taking pictures for journals at home. Secondly, there was a clear British tradition of magazine publication of drawings made at or near the Front and purporting to show battle action. The Boer War had been reported extensively in this way and there was no reason why the public of spring 1916 should prefer the photographer’s account of events to an artist’s impression. In any case, artists were already at work in the European theatre—albeit on an unofficial basis and with a tendency to concentrate on ceremony and heroic reconstructions rather than recording.

Masterman was delighted to take on Bone, hoping for a new approach to reporting the war. He commissioned eye-witness accounts of events, to be sketched on the front and then worked up back in the studio in Britain. Campbell Dodgson, another member of the Wellington House team who was also Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, agreed to purchase a selection of the resulting work from Museum funds which, in turn, encouraged the Treasury to agree to finance the experiment for at least six months and set a useful precedent.

Bone was appointed on a contract which became standard for the Official War Artists for some time. He was commissioned Second Lieutenant and gazetted to the General Staff, which was requested to facilitate his work and

movements, and he was given a salary and travel expenses. A relatively brief period in France to make sketches would be followed by longer studio time in Britain during which whatever working-up he chose to do could be accomplished. In return, Bone was to work only for Wellington House and to place all his drawings and work made from them at the Government's disposal for display or reproduction for the duration of the contract. Wellington House (by extension, the British Museum and later the National Portrait Gallery) was to have first refusal on work done under contract.

The first results of the Bone initiative were published in December 1916. The first of ten monthly publications leading up to the two-volume book, *The Western Front*, which contained two hundred and fifty drawings, was put out to considerable public acclaim by the well-known publisher Edward Hudson, who had been brought into the Wellington House network by Masterman.

The success of Bone's visit to France encouraged the rapid development of the Official War Artists Scheme, well before the first part of *The Western Front* appeared. The appointment of Alfred Yockney, the former editor of the *Art Journal* and a man with a vast experience of pictorial publishing, in summer 1916, made it clear that Wellington House intended to devote a considerable amount of energy to the visual arts in the propaganda effort. Yockney remained with the Official War Artists' Scheme until the closing down of the propaganda machine shortly after the end of the War and was responsible, with his Wellington House colleagues, for dispatching some ninety artists to the front and acquiring for the public an art collection of around 1,200 works before November 1918.

With the approval and support of G.H.Q. France, Bone was replaced by Eric Kennington and Francis Dodd. Paul Nash and C. W. R. Nevinson followed and, until the end of the war, representatives of every current in British art, from Vorticists like Wyndham Lewis and William Roberts to established society painters like William Orpen, found themselves on the front. There was no difficulty in finding volunteers. The majority of young artists were already serving in the Forces and recording their experiences in off-duty moments. Like Nash, they welcomed the opportunity to put their painting and drawing of the War on an official basis.

The period from late 1916 to December 1917 was one of intense activity, particularly for the members of the Wellington House team involved with the Official War Artists Scheme. It was responsible for a number of volumes of drawings and portfolio collections of lithographs on theatre of war and home front subjects by, among others, Bone, Augustus John and William Rothenstein. It also initiated work on *British Artists at the Front*, a five-part project with a volume each on Nevinson, Paul Nash, Lavery, Kennington and McBey

containing a narrative, a portrait of the artist and at least fifteen colour reproductions. Postcards of the artists' work, to be sold in forces' or Y.M.C.A. canteens at home, were also produced. Finally, the team organized exhibitions, usually in aid of war charities or to finance further Wellington House group operations, around the production of an individual or small groups of war artists.

The nature of the Official War Artists Scheme altered radically from December 1917 with the change in status of Wellington House which was brought under the control of the newly created Department of Information. It continued to exist for two months until the final dispersal of the team throughout the new Ministry of Information in February 1918. The end of Wellington House, as such, did not indicate the end of the Official War Artists Scheme, but it did confirm a radical change in the official attitude to the nature and function of art. From March 1917, when the Cabinet approved the creation of a National War Museum, it had been clear that the government was beginning to consider the need to preserve an official, collective memory of the War. Practically, the immediate effect of the Cabinet's decision was to encourage the purchase of works of art by various Museum Committees from studios and exhibitions. By March 1918 when the institution became the Imperial War Museum, it already had some two hundred and fifty works of art and added the commissioning of pictures to an aggressive purchasing policy. A new sponsor of war art had appeared, therefore, but with a rather different view of its function. While the Wellington House collections were meant to have an "active" role in shaping opinion and were moved around the country and the Dominions for exhibition and reproduced for purchase by the public, the War Museum collection was intended for retrospective propaganda, for the constitution of a pictorial memorial to the victims of the war to be lodged, virtually enshrined, in one place.

A second commemorative scheme—more important from the Official War Artists' point of view inasmuch as it took over almost all the Wellington House contracts as well as initiating new ones—was that of the British War Memorials Committee. The Committee was established in March 1918 and consisted almost entirely of ex-Wellington House team members. It was formed at the behest of Lord Beaverbrook, the Head of the new Ministry of Information, and was intended to better the example of the Canadian War Memorials Fund which had been sending artists into the field to record the war (in order to commemorate and constitute a collective memory of it) for some time. Until May 1918, when it became a registered charity, the Committee operated within the Ministry of Information.

The last months of the war saw an extraordinary amount of activity in the purchasing and commissioning of commemorative works of art. The British War Memorials Committee decided to collect works of art to be lodged in a Hall of Remembrance which would be filled with paintings and sculptures on the theme of sacrifice. These were to be acquired by purchasing work done in the war and still on the market or in the hands of private collectors willing to sell, or by commissioning material specifically for the Hall. The Hall (which was never built) was to be divided into four galleries (on the Army, the Home Front, the Navy and the Air Service) which, in turn, were to contain different sorts of pictures. There was to be a single “super-picture” hung in the Army gallery (in fact John Singer Sargent’s *Gassed*), surrounded by three sizes of “large” pictures and a number of “smaller” pictures. The Committee gave directives on detail—on the nature of the frames and the quality of the paint that were to be used and the order in which the pictures were to be hung. However, in Wellington House tradition, it gave no instructions on form or content. Works were commissioned under three types of contract which varied according to the category of picture required. The contracts were essentially the same as those of the original War Artists Scheme except that the works were to become the property of the State.

Some forty pictures were commissioned between the creation of the Committee and the Armistice, most of them in the “large” category. They included work by the Nash brothers, Wyndham Lewis and Stanley Spencer. In June 1918 a new body, the Pictorial Propaganda Committee, was created to fuse the collecting efforts of the Imperial War Museum and the British War Memorials Committee. It expired with the Ministry of Information in November, weeks after the end of the war, leaving some 1,200 works in the joint collections. Alfred Yockney, as the first Keeper of Pictures, continued to collect for the Imperial War Museum, with Treasury support, until 1920.

The Museum’s first catalogue of *Paintings, Drawings and Sculptures of the First World War*, published in 1924, listed 3,335 works, produced by virtually every significant British artist of the first two decades of the century, acquired at a cost to the Treasury of some £30,000. The “War to end all Wars” had produced the most significant effort of public sponsorship and collection of pictorial art in British history!

#### ***An Official War Artist—Paul Nash***

The case of Paul Nash is particularly interesting for two reasons. Firstly, he was connected with the Official War Artists Scheme from its earliest days and saw, at first hand, all the changes of strategy and status the various

propaganda departments experienced. (He served again as an Official War Artist with the R.A.F. in World War II!) Secondly, the development of Nash's career as an artist owed an enormous amount to the Scheme. For over a year he was given the money and opportunity to work in an environment which manifestly altered his perception as well as his technique. He was also given an exhibition and a book on his work which contributed enormously to his reputation. Nash started the War as a relatively unknown artist working with a limited number of subjects and media; he ended it as one of the country's most significant painters, exploring a range of possibilities in form, colour and texture.

At the outbreak of the War, Nash was at the beginnings of his career as an artist. After a year at the Slade he had had his first one-man show of drawings in London in 1912 and then a joint show with his brother, John, also in London, the following year. He had attracted a certain amount of attention in the art world as a landscape artist who attempted to produce "the spirit of a place," "something more than (a landscape's) natural features seem to contain" [Nash 106]. The early works indicate the importance which Nash already attached to drawing and to the geometric composition of the picture. Most of them are of landscapes containing trees, drawn with what Arnold Bennett called a "semi-Oriental pursuit of certain detail" [Bennett]. There is very little colour—in his autobiography Nash says that he worked entirely in monochrome with tints of only one other colour until 1912, the year after leaving the Slade.

In 1914 Nash volunteered for home defence in the Artists' Rifles. He spent two years in Britain, continuing to work as an artist and showing in four exhibitions, including one by men of his regiment. In February 1917, newly commissioned and at the age of 27, he was posted to the Western Front. He arrived in the Ypres Salient during a relatively peaceful period and reacted to his first experience of travel abroad and a new environment with considerable delight. His main interest, of course, was the landscape—his letters to his wife constantly describe nature's ability to recover from man's assault and cause dandelions, lilac, and grass to grow in places recently shelled and drenched with poison gas [Nash 187]. While in France he made a number of drawings which he sent home. In May Nash broke a rib and was invalided back to London. He worked up his drawings and organized an exhibition of some twenty of them at the Goupil Gallery in June 1917. The exhibition, *Drawings made in the Ypres Salient*, was successful and Nash was encouraged to use his growing reputation and his connections to obtain a post as an Official War Artist. An extensive correspondence from figures in the influential art world to Wellington House pressing for Nash's appointment is on record and, despite some

conflicts of opinion (Nash, like Nevinson, was perceived in some circles as being outside Academy traditions) he was seconded to the Ypres Salient in November 1917, initially for four weeks. In fact Nash never ceased to work as an Official War Artist, despite periodic uncertainties about a possible recall to active service. He stayed with the Department of Information until its transformation into the Ministry of Information and was then immediately re-employed by the British War Memorials Committee until the end of the War. Nash arrived in the Salient just after the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele):

I have seen the most frightful nightmare of a country more conceived by Dante or Poe than by nature, unspeakable, utterly indescribable. . . Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man, only the black rain out of the bruised and swollen clouds all through the bitter black of night is fit atmosphere in such a land. The rain drives on, the stinking mud becomes more evilly yellow, the shell-holes fill up with green-white water, the roads and tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black dying trees ooze and sweat and the shells never cease. They alone plunge overhead, tearing away the rotting tree stumps, breaking the plank roads, striking down horses and mules, annihilating, maiming, maddening, they plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave, and cast up upon it the poor dead. It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless. I am no longer an artist, interested and curious. I am a messenger who will bring back word from the men who are fighting to those who want the war to go on for ever. [Nash 210-11.]

What Nash saw was nature translated and it was logical that, as a landscape painter, he should seek to record the translation and that he should require a new style to do so. After the calmer forms of southern English woods and meadows, Nash was introduced to the colours and geometry of desolation. He now saw the War from the point of view of one who was firmly opposed to it and, in this, shared the position of all the Official War Artists. It is the first paradox of the Scheme that it financed and gave free rein to people who were not prepared to make heroic, inspirational, propaganda pictures of the Victorian school but who painted what they saw in a variety of styles that uniformly communicate the waste and desolation of the War.

Nash completed fifty drawings of this new landscape, all done very quickly and mostly on brown or grey paper using chalk, pastels, ink or water-colours. Generally speaking, detail vanishes in these drawings to be replaced by a concern with pure form. The geometrical shapes of the early drawings become sparer and more pronounced with all hint of Bennett's "semi-Oriental detail" banished. The landscape is systematically divided into related planes within which everything, including light, is reduced to pure circles, curves, triangles, rectangles. The regularity of and the internal relationships between the destroyed trees, rusting corrugated iron, puddles, wire, duckboard convey a geometry of chaos. Already in these rapid drawings it is clear that the

next preoccupation will be with mass and that, to interpret it, the logical step for Nash will be to look to the strength and texture of oil. Much of what appears in these drawings is prefigured in the early work but there is an austerity in these pictures that owes something, perhaps, to the influence of the Vorticists. Nevinson, one of the leading figures of the movement, had been at the Slade with Nash (who appears to have felt no special personal sympathy for the man) and accompanied him to France as an Official War Artist.

He returned to England in December, after a brief visit to Vimy Ridge, to work up the drawings, making a number of lithographs and moving, inevitably, into oils. This he described as “a piece of towering audacity. . . a real adventure” and it transformed his interpretative potential and placed him among the painters who could later be commissioned to produce the larger, deliberately striking works for the Hall of Remembrance. The medium was imposed by the subject and Nash clearly saw no difficulty in attacking something he did not know. He had always been convinced that “it was possible to learn to draw and paint by drawing and painting” [Nash 112] and, for him, learning to use oils would be a perfectly natural process.

In January 1918 the Department of Information arranged for an illustrated article on Nash to appear in *Country Life* (another of the publications in the Wellington House network). In May he was given an exhibition (also organized by the Wellington House team) entitled *Void of War* at the Leicester Galleries in London. The preface to the catalogue was by another friend of Wellington House, Arnold Bennett and a volume on Nash of the *Country Life* series, *British Artists at the Front*, coincided with the show.

Both book and exhibition met with considerable success. Reactions to them indicate, however, the degree of discomfort that even sympathetic critics were beginning to encounter in discussing the work of the more abstract war artists. Nash’s pictures were a far cry from the original propaganda commissioned by Wellington House in May 1916, when Charles Masterman had wanted eye-witness accounts of the Front with which to inform the British public. The 1918 work was clearly more to do with the recording of sacrifice and, in this sense, was appropriate to an official policy of seeking to fix and commemorate the war rather than ask artists to produce work that could be read in terms of an immediate military future as well as a past and present. In this sense, Nash’s painting, not, as Andrew Causey says, of A Flanders landscape but of *THE* Flanders landscape is perfectly logical [Causey]. What Nash felt the need to paint and what needs to be hung in a Hall of Remembrance is the sense of place and events, not, as it were, a photograph in oils.

However, the pictures in the Nash volume of the *British Artists at the Front* series, are consistently treated by C. E. Montague in his accompanying

text as “realistic” representations of the Flanders battlefield which is perceived as being so abnormal in itself that nothing pictured as being part of it can be an aberration. This bizarrely sought realism is entirely consistent with the logic of the early days of the Official War Artists Scheme when, even allowing for considerable divergences in style, the painters were broadly supposed to produce recognisable situations. Seen in the light of this demand, Nash’s work presents considerable problems. Unlike most of his fellow war artists, he is very rarely concerned with human figures. Soldiers are depicted in remarkably few of the pictures and then as a more or less significant part of a geometric composition. (*A Howitzer Firing* is a case in point!). Nash is not interested in portraits; he is interested in the effects of military activity reduced to their most austere terms. A Nash battlefield is an arrangement of inter-related forms and planes with the eye drawn to intersections and/or to blocks of colour. It is not, in any sense, “realistic.”

It is interesting, therefore, that, even at the end of the War, when the need for some sort of documentary style was officially tending to disappear, that Montague should feel himself required to invent a “real” model for Nash. Of *Crater Pools Below Hill 60*, for example, in which Nash’s pools are shapes of yellow and blue-green, he says “Shell-hole pools are often of the queerest and most dissimilar colours - yellow, green, blood-red, rust-red and many more” [Montague]. In the same way, he explains the waves and curves of browns, greys and reds of *Landscape. Year of Our Lord 1917* with the proposition that ground that has been fought over does in fact look just like this [Montague]. Similarly, Bennett, in his preface to the *Void of War* exhibition catalogue, expatiates on the didactic value of the pictures: “The sketches are first-hand documents and they have that value in addition to their interpretative value. . . They are, in an extreme degree, educational.” [Bennett.]

These are curious reactions, weeks away from the end of the war, all the more so as some of Nash’s work of the period is highly abstract. *We Are Making a New World*, for example, which is essentially an arrangement of triangular masses of colour, acquires specific significance as a war painting in function of its title, the place in which it is shown (today the Imperial War Museum), and the pictures shown with it (in the event, works by other First World War Official War Artists). It contains absolutely no “realistic” elements that overtly connect it with any war.

This being said, the efforts to impose “realism” on Nash are understandable. The general public, if the opinions expressed on its behalf in the popular press are to be relied upon, wanted representations of events and individuals, caught at a particular moment and recognisably drawn. At the same time, the official British art community, still reeling from its 1911

introduction to Cubism, was itself scarcely prepared to take much innovation seriously. The violent public attacks on Wyndham Lewis' work and the forced efforts to interpret Nash's pictures in terms of established critical models, for example, give some indication of the distance between public expectations of art and the artists' own conception of their work. The Official War Artists Scheme, in its various phases, not only underwrote the making of neutral or negative images of the war by generally anti-war artists in the name of propaganda, it also financed experiments which would have had extreme difficulty in a peacetime, market and gallery-dominated context—and that is its second paradox!

The British War Memorials Committee commissioned oils by Nash for the Hall of Remembrance. These were *A Howitzer Firing* and *The Menin Road*, both worked up from drawings made at the Front. The latter fell into the biggest section of the Committee's "big picture" category (72" x 125"), its sheer size creating practical problems of transport and studio space. It is based on a sketch of countryside near Gheluvelt village, described by Nash as "the most dreaded and disastrous locality of any area in any of the theatres of war." *The Menin Road* (originally *A Flanders Battlefield*) is a summary of Nash's technique at the end of the war. The painting is organized into three planes with connections established by shapes that cut across them. The eye is drawn to the points of intersection of the planes and shapes, emphasized by blocks of colour or by extraordinary figures. These include the four human forms which are focal points in the composition, but dwarfed by their surroundings and possessed of no individual interest. The landscape is composed of the standard elements of Nash's battlefield vocabulary—shattered trees, water-filled shell-holes, rusted corrugated iron, plumes of smoke, duckboards, shafts of sunlight, the shafts of search-lights. The entire composition is drawn onto the canvas before being blocked in with a palette in which browns, greys and white dominate. To misquote Andrew Causey, the picture is not of *A Battlefield* but of *THE* battlefield. It is a picture, not of a place but of the spirit of a place. It is also the most spectacular of Nash's pictures as a First World War Official Artist and it is a work that prepares the ground for later experiments and changes of direction.

The crucial importance of the opportunities afforded Nash by the Official War Artists Scheme is undeniable. His own remarks, made days after completing *The Menin Road*, confirm the debt:

My war experiences have developed me—certainly on the technical side. I think they have almost discovered my sense of colour which was very weak before the War. I have gained a greater freedom of handling due largely to the fact that I had to make the rapidest sketches in dangerous positions, and a greater sense of rhythm. I have been jolted. [Nash, *Weekly Dispatch*.]

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The correspondence between Nash and the various Official War Artists Scheme administrators and a number of catalogues and press cuttings are kept in the Department of Art at the Imperial War Museum, London. A limited number of his paintings are on public view in the First World War art gallery at the Museum. The rest of the considerable collection is kept in reserve.s