

“No Dead Wood”

Henry Lamb and the Canadians

Brian Foss

Of the artists employed as official war artists, Henry Lamb (1883-1960) was one of the very few to work in both world wars. Born in Australia, he moved with his family to Manchester, and subsequently studied at the Chelsea School of Art (1906) and the Ecole de la Palette, Paris (1907-8). During the first decade of the century he became associated with the emerging Bloomsbury Group, and in January 1913 his portrait of Lytton Strachey was included in the crucially influential *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* - a landmark exhibition intended to introduce British audiences to recent developments in European art.

Lamb's contribution as a First World War artist was his large *Irish Troops in the Judaeen Hills Surprised by a Turkish Bombardment* (72" x 86"; oil on canvas; Imperial War Museum, London), a bravura and dramatic demonstration of his distinctive and somewhat conservative version of Post-Impressionist art. It was painted in 1919 for the British War Memorials Committee (BWMF), established in 1918 by Lord Beaverbrook, Britain's newly-appointed (and first) Minister of Information. Beaverbrook, as Minister responsible for propaganda in neutral and Allied countries, established the BWMF to sponsor records of British wartime history, much as his Canadian War Memorials Fund (established in 1917) had hired artists to record Canada's war effort.

Lamb had served with the Royal Army Medical Corps in Macedonia (1916-17) and Palestine (1917-18). During his service he was caught in a gas attack. *Irish Troops in the Judaeen Hills* was commissioned when he was forced to relinquish his duties in the RAMC.



Irish Troops in the Judaeen Hills solidified Lamb's reputation as an artist, and during the interwar years he built a career as a painter of portraits, still lifes, genre scenes and landscapes. By the start of the Second World War he was a noteworthy fixture of the British art scene, although his days as a member of that country's avant-garde were well in the past. His return to government work came when the Ministry of Information, revived during the months leading up to the Second World War, became the home of the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC), established in November 1939 under the chairmanship of National Gallery Director Kenneth Clark. The WAAC supervised what quickly became a war art project of substantial proportions, acquiring almost 6,000 paintings, drawings, sculptures and prints by more than 400 artists by the end of 1945. The Committee approached Lamb in February 1940 to become a full-time, salaried, official war artist under the direction of the War Office, on the understanding that the WAAC would have first refusal of all his war-related art. He happily accepted the proposal.¹

Lamb at first asked to be assigned to paint the portraits of Cabinet Ministers. The WAAC, however, felt that "it is more important to have portraits of soldiers, sailors and airmen at the present time [April 1940] than of civilians."² (This policy would later be rethought as the Blitz and the demands of home-front war production increasingly emphasized the degree to which the home-front population was involved in and affected by the War.) Lamb therefore embarked on a series of portraits of British soldiers and officers, and was still working on them when in October 1941 a meeting was arranged between himself and Vincent Massey, Canada's High



(CWM CN 7835)

Figure 1 (left): "Sergeant J.C. Wall"



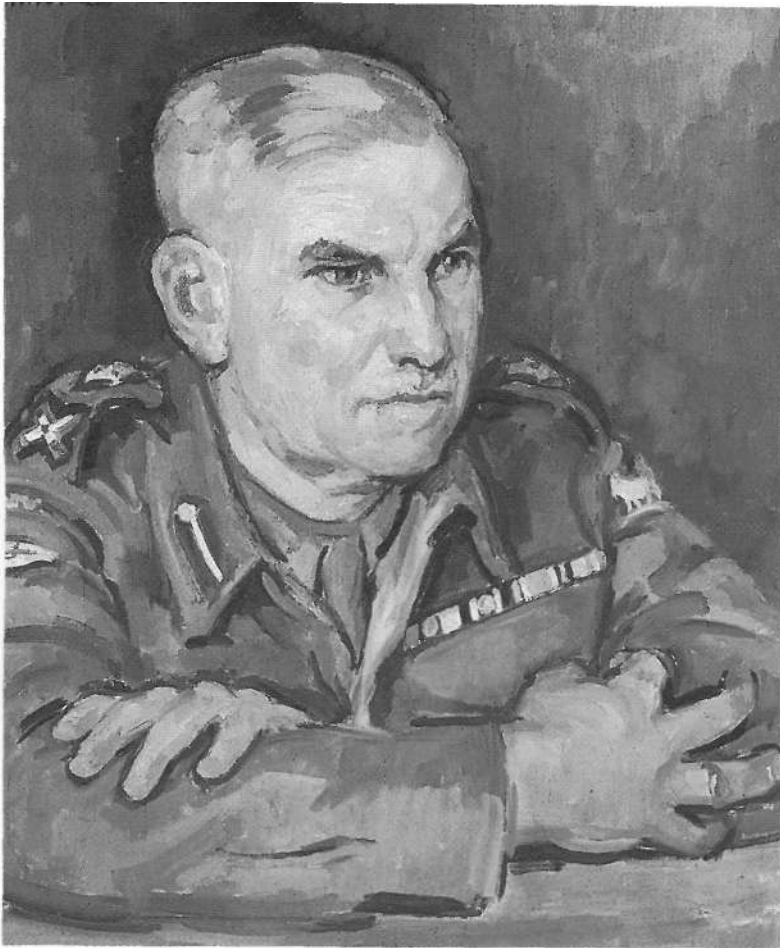
(CWM CN 7821)

Figure 2 (above)" "Trooper D. Baillie"

Commissioner in London. Sensitive to the need to emphasize imperial solidarity, the WAAC assigned Lamb the job of painting and drawing portraits and subject pictures to record the presence of Canadian troops in Britain. Certainly the presence of Canadian troops was difficult to ignore. Before the end of 1941 the entire Canadian Corps as it then existed was ensconced in Sussex - a substantial and tangible reminder of Canadian readiness to support the British war effort, and one that seemed to call for some form of official recognition by the WAAC. By 11 November Lamb had been attached to the 12th Canadian Army Tank Battalion (Trois-Rivieres) of the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps, which he followed to various sites in southern England. He continued working on Canadian subjects for more than a year, producing at least 50 works for the WAAC's collection. Of these, 34 (24

portrait drawings, eight portrait paintings and two scenes showing troop activities) were allocated to Canada at the end of the war and are now in the collection of the Canadian War Museum. This was in keeping with the WAAC's intention to take geographical appropriateness into consideration in the dispersal of its collection throughout Britain and the Commonwealth.

Sgt. J.C. Wall (1942; coloured pencil on paper; fig. 1) is typical of Lamb's Canadian portraits allocated to Canada. The sitter, a member of the 2nd Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment of the Royal Canadian Artillery, is shown in a relaxed but alert pose far from the tradition of rigidly formal military portraiture. Detailed attention is given only to the head, the pose is casual (body twisted slightly to the side; left hand lightly clasping right wrist), and the overall effect is one of immediacy and informality. Not being a high-ranking officer, and having no particular claim to military fame, the subject - and Lamb's informal portrayal of him - typified the artist's



(CWM CN 7832)

Figure 3: "Major General Frederic Franklin Worthington."

1942), avoids the austere stiffness and formality that had often plagued portraits, by society portraitists, of senior officers. Instead, Lamb's portrait insists that the sense of immediacy that informs the likenesses of Trooper Baillie and Sgt. Wall is equally appropriate for a Major-General. Worthington is thus seen in what appears to be a spontaneous pose of attentive concentration that suggests his military prowess without sacrificing the sense of accessibility.

Supposedly "exotic" sitters, too, were of interest both to the WAAC and to Lamb. From the Committee's point of view "exotic" or "type" portraiture implied the harmonious unity of the ethnically and racially diverse British Commonwealth in its struggle against intolerant Fascism. For example, four of War Office artist William Coldstream's nine portrait paintings were of soldiers in the Indian Army, and a series of Anglo-Indian group portraits was sent from Burma by War Office artist Anthony Gross. Unusually large in scale among Lamb's war portraits is a half-length close-up view of a Royal Canadian Artillery gunner named Moore (30" x 25"; oil on canvas; fig.4). The sitters for this and

desire to paint sitters whom he found attractive and engaging, regardless of rank, and his reluctance to paint even generals if they "did not appeal to him as sitters."³ Thus *Sgt. J.C. Wall*, and the unpretentious *Trooper D. Baillie* (1941; coloured pencil on paper; fig.2) not only drew attention to Canadian-British solidarity, but also accorded well with the popular assumption that "the people's war" was a watershed dividing pre-1939 society (structured according to rigid class divisions and expectations) from what was anticipated to be a more genuinely democratic post-war society.

The War Office, however, wished to commemorate individuals and heroes with distinguished Army careers, and thus most of Lamb's Canadian portraits were of officers, albeit many of non-commissioned rank. The most senior officer represented in the Canadian War Museum collection is Major-General Frederic F. Worthington who, as a brigadier, had arrived in Britain in command of the First Canadian Army Tank Brigade in 1941 and who in 1942 was promoted to major-general and placed in command of the newly-created 4th Armoured Division. Lamb's oil on canvas portrait (fig.3,

(CWM CN 7833)



Figure 4: "A Redskin in the Canadian Royal Artillery"



(CWM CN 7826)

Figure 5: "Maintenance in the Forest"

its pendant portrait showing Moore's father (also serving with the Canadian Army in Britain) intrigued Lamb because both were of aboriginal ancestry; "this must be a unique case," he wrote in March 1942.⁴ More tellingly, he wrote to the WAAC Secretary the following June: "[The portrait of] Gunner Moore... might perhaps better be designated as that of a redskin," on the grounds that "there seems to be not much feeling or prejudice about colour bars in Canada so I don't suppose he would mind."⁵ The Secretary subsequently titled the portrait *A Redskin in the Canadian Royal Artillery*. The omission of the sitter's name from the title is almost unique amongst Lamb's portraits, the only other such case being *A French Canadian* (1942; oil on canvas; Canadian War Museum), although several other francophone sitters are identified by name in their portraits. The erasure of the sitters' names in these two portraits - and the fact that in both cases Lamb produced highly finished oil paintings rather than his more usual pencil drawings - was intended to recognize the unity of the Commonwealth in support of the war effort. Thus Gunner Moore's principal point of interest, for the WAAC, was his ethnic

background, just as the principal interest of Lamb's Canadian pictures as a whole lay in the fact that the sitters were *Canadian* soldiers. However, neither Lamb nor the WAAC seems to have considered the unsavoury implications of the use of reductive "type" portraiture for Gunner Moore and the anonymous French-Canadian sitter, both of whom lost their names in the process of becoming exotic symbols.

In addition to the 32 Lamb portraits in the Canadian War Museum there are two views of troop activities dating from his work with the Canadians, both produced in 1941: a watercolour study (*Instructions, Canadian Forces*) and an oil painting (*Maintenance in the Forest*; fig.5). The fact that these works recorded undramatic daily routines was hardly surprising; Lamb worked with Canadian troops in Britain only, and thus did not get anywhere near the front lines. "I must face the fact," he wrote in 1940, before being assigned to Canadian troops, "that my contact with [army life] is just that of a journalist and the experiences can hardly come from within as they did in my pictures of the other war."⁶ In any case the workaday subjects

seen in watercolours and paintings like *Maintenance in the Forest* struck a chord with soldiers and civilians whose experience of the War was largely grinding rather than thrilling, predictable rather than dramatic, and pedestrian rather than heroic. Indeed, for whatever reasons (including a lack of exposure to battle, and a modern war that looked so little like past wars and war art), most artists attached to the War Office produced work that, in its concentration on the mundane and the everyday, echoed Lamb's pictures.

Working in southern England on such subjects as *Maintenance in the Forest* was certainly less complicated for Lamb than it would have been on the Continent, but logistical problems nonetheless repeatedly arose. Obtaining petrol coupons from the Public Relations division of the War Office was difficult at the best of times, although Lamb regarded them as more or less essential to his work with the Canadian troops. "...The difficulties of travelling in crowded trains when one is a perfect Xmas tree of easel, paint box, canvases, portfolio suitcases valise & all the rest are altogether too formidable," he complained to the WAAC Secretary in November 1941.⁷ Adequate supplies of quality canvas could be difficult to obtain, as could paint and other supplies, and Lamb's correspondence with the WAAC is littered with remarks on this subject. Nor were Lamb's local contacts necessarily helpful. "...The greatest obstacle," he groused in February 1941, "is the very group of local people whose whole raison d'etre presumably is to help the likes of me."⁸ However he had nothing but praise for Major C.P. Stacey, who was attached to Canadian Military Headquarters in London, for assisting him in the production of his war pictures. "He looks after me at CMHQ & pilots me to various units. Nothing can exceed the kindness & cordiality and efficiency of the Canadians in general or of this little man in particular."⁹

Thanks in large part to Stacey's assistance, Lamb was able to submit at least 50 drawings and paintings of Canadian subjects to the WAAC. These were enthusiastically received not only by the Committee, but also by visitors to the several

exhibitions of war art that were circulated throughout Britain and to the ongoing exhibition of war art at London's otherwise denuded National Gallery (1940-45). In addition, of the 50 illustrations in *War Pictures by British Artists: Soldiers* (1943; one of eight booklets published by the Oxford University Press to publicize the work of the war artists), five were of Lamb's Canadian pictures, including *Maintenance in the Forest*, *Trooper D. Baillie* and *Mqjor-General Worthington, M.C., M.M.* "I have got almost 100% enthusiastic about the Canadians," Lamb had written to the WAAC's Secretary in December 1940. "They are incomparable soldiers - no dead wood - & I wish, I wish...there were more as good. *All ranks.*"¹⁰ That admiration is clearly manifested in the resulting drawings and paintings which document an important aspect of the experience and contribution of Canadian Army troops during the Second World War.

Notes

This article grew out of research for a forthcoming book by the author on the subject of the Second World War British war art programme, to be published by Yale University Press.

1. Of the 37 official war artists, Lamb was one of 11 who worked directly for the War Office. His tenure there (1940-1944) was exceeded only by that of Edward Ardizzone (1940-1945).
2. All quotes are from documentation in the Department of Art, Imperial War Museum, London, file #WA 55/33 ("Henry Lamb"). Photocopies of those letters dealing specifically with Lamb's work with Canadian troops are in the collection of the Canadian War Museum.
3. E.M.O.R. Dickey (Secretary, WAAC) to Lamb, 2 April 1940.
4. Lamb to Dickey, [7?] March 1942.
5. Lamb to Dickey, 22 June 1942.
6. Lamb to Dickey, 12 July 1940.
7. Lamb to Dickey, 8 November 1941.
8. Lamb to Dickey, 28 February 1941.
9. Lamb to Dickey, 22 June 1940.
10. Lamb to Dickey, 3 December 1941.

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