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Not just horsing around

by Dominic Green

The soldiers of the Western Front, Alan Clark alleged, were lions led by donkeys. Both sides used horses, mostly as transport but also, after the initial war of movement had turned into a war of stasis, in the conversion of cavalry into self-propelling infantry. This role returned in 1918, when dismounted cavalry first helped to block the German spring offensive and then hurried to position themselves for the Allied counterattack.

Alfred Munnings, the epitome of the modern equine artist, arrived in France in January 1918 as part of a deputation working for the Canadian War Memorial Fund. The forty-one canvases in "Alfred Munnings: War Artist, 1918," now at the National Army Museum, London, were last seen in the United Kingdom in January 1919.1 Age has not withered Munnings' sinuous Impressionist line. Nor have the years condemned his extraction of light from the muddy greens and browns of a French winter, and his balancing of the delicacies of his commission—as an official war artist, he could not depict killing or corpses—with the obligation to record accurately. All this despite the condemning of Munnings' memory as the President of the Royal Academy who derided the avant-garde, as exemplified by his withering remarks about Picasso at an Academy dinner in 1949.

Alfred Munnings, A Log Team Skidding in the Forest, *1918*, *Oil on canvas*, *Canadian War Museum.*

A side effect of the transformation of human experience through technology is the disappearance of animals from our social lives. The online popularity of fluffy bunnies, comedic cats, and loyal puppies is a pitiful index of our loneliness as a species. These images coexist with the other profitable category of online imagery, the pornograph. This shows the narcissism of the form. We retain cats and dogs, the former reflecting our selfishness and the latter our need for approval, both compatible with a one-person household. But horses, our constant companion in motion and supply from Genghis Khan to the Blitzkrieg of 1941, have all but vanished. Knackered by progress, they are now a luxury leisure resource.

The transforming of horses into interstitial objects for the Winnicottian development of girls in early adolescence is a tragedy for us all, and quite possibly for the horses too. To ride is to collaborate in the world of instinct with a creature whose strength balances on the wire of impulse. Nature makes the horse our four-legged frenemy, utterly dependable except when you need it, intuitively sensible when you lose the reins. Horses enjoy the double act too. Presumably they appreciate the variety of an insight into our shallow, dulled world of procedure. Hundreds of thousands of horses died in the procedural follies of the First World War.

The popularity of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse* reflects how distant the inner life of the combatants now seems, how incomprehensible their sense of fatal duty. My grandfather attended

the war on a bicycle, not a horse, with the "Gaspipe Cavalry," the Huntingdonshire Regiment. He went over the top in 1917 at what he called "Wipers," which the generals called Passchendaele and the historians call the Third Battle of Ypres. Whichever way you call it, it was a worse slaughter than the Somme.

Alfred Munnings, Charge of Flowerdew's Squadron, *1918*, *Oil on canvas*, *Canadian War Museum.*

In my grandfather's recollection, the war tended towards the horrific or the bucolic. He was showered in his best friend's brains, saw monster rats eating corpses, and disemboweled a man with a bayonet. The rest was wine, women, and song: drinking French plonk in small towns behind the lines, singing "Inky-pinky parlez-vous" in brothels, hearing jazz played by the Harlem Hellfighters. His war, not unlike his subsequent marriage to my grandmother, was comprised of infinite tedium, with occasional bursts of hedonism and violence.

There is no hedonism or violence in Munnings' paintings, and neither the naked nor the dead. The single combat scene, *Charge of Flowerdew's Squadron* (1918), relates a heroic Canadian charge in the last weeks of the war that killed most of the men and horses who attempted it, has no blood or bodies. Two riderless horses stumble in the foreground, but their riders are gone. Death is mostly offstage in these paintings, but then, so is Hamlet's father most of the time. Death, its nearing and avoidance, is also everywhere.

John Singer Sargent, Gassed, *1919*, *Oil on canvas*, *Imperial War Museum.*

John Singer Sargent's war paintings confirm the impression that war is hell except when the slow work of logistics means that it is not. In *Gassed* (1919), the blind fumble forward while their lucky comrades play soccer in the background. The stony geriatric faces in Sargent's group portraits of the generals and politicians are a world away from the sleeping Highlanders and rural scenes in the watercolors that Sargent painted in France. Munnings's war paintings lack a revelatory parallel like *Gassed*, but they communicate the same duality of experience.

Alfred Munnings, Fort Garrys on the March, *1918*, *Oil on canvas*, *Canadian War Museum.*

There are few experiences more pleasant than riding a horse, but few rides can be more unpleasant than that in *Fort Garrys on the March* (1918). You go up the line to death that much faster on four

legs. The turn of a rider's head in *Lord Strathcona's Horse on the March* (1918), another parade heading towards its end, betrays the living body inside the uniform and the humane response overridden by orders. Munnings' chivalric portraits, *Brigade Major Geoffrey Brooke, dso* and *Count Olivier D'Etchegoyen* (1918) feel like pastiches—which they were, given the way the war had gone.

In the spring of 1918, while the Germans launched their last offensive, Munnings was away in the woods of Normandy, Burgundy, the Jura, and the Vosges, painting the logging work of the Canadian Forestry Corps. Total war is a war of material, and the products of the Forestry Corps' logging became duckboards, trench underpinnings, and firewood. There is a Georgic, peaceful quality to these paintings, despite the intrusions of reality—a German prisoner of war working with the Canadians in *Log Landing (30th Company)*—and the ominous intimations of scale, because only a massive endeavor could demand such mountains of logs.

Alfred Munnings, On the Edge of a Wood, *1918*, *Oil on canvas*, *Canadian War Museum.*

What we get is more than what we see. This double sense endows the quietest paintings with a kind of terror. Munnings repeatedly depicts a horse and its human carer: working in harness in *A Log Team Skidding in the Forest* (1918) or standing together at dusk in a smashed landscape in *A Canadian Trooper (Lord Strathcona's Horse).* In *On the Edge of a Wood* (1918), a soldier and two horses stand silently absorbed in their surroundings. There is no suggestion of danger, but one of the horses has pricked its ears. Birdsong or shellfire?

1. _ “Alfred Munnings: War Artist, 1918” was at the National Army Museum, London, from November 30, 2018, through March 3, 2019. An expanded exhibition will be on view at Munnings' home, now The Munnings Art Museum, in Dedham, Essex, from March 29 through November 3, 2019.

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