

Canadian Military History

Volume 21 | Issue 3

Article 6

4-16-2015

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Recommended Citation

Hugh A. Halliday (2015) "Algernon Mayow Talmage (1871–1939) Official Canadian War Artist," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 21: Iss. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol21/iss3/6>

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Algernon Mayow Talmage (1871–1939)

Official Canadian War Artist

Hugh A. Halliday

The Canadian War Museum's collection of First World War art, assembled under the auspices of Lord Beaverbrook's Canadian War Memorials Fund, includes works by many distinguished British painters – Sir William Orpen, Sir Alfred Munnings and C.R.W. Nevinson, to name but three. Much is known about such artists. However, the oils of Algernon Talmage represent a man who seems to have plunged into obscurity at the moment that he achieved his highest honours. Talmage is an enigma about whom little substantial is known. Today referred to consistently on the internet as "a minor British impressionist painter," in Canada, he is best known for tutoring Emily Carr during her studies at St. Ives in Cornwall, England. He also taught the Canadian artist Helen McNicoll. His criticism was important for Carr as he encouraged her exploration of

forests as subject matter, a subject that contributed much to her reputation. Carr's use of strong, contrasting colours in her early work may owe something to his admonition to seek "sunlight in the shadows," as she wrote in her autobiography *Growing Pains*.¹

Talmage was born to a clergyman's family in Fifield, Oxfordshire on 23 February 1871. Reticent about his early years, as a youth his left hand was mutilated by the accidental discharge of a gun. That did not prevent him from becoming a bold rider and a good shot. He may have had some experience as an actor before taking up painting.

He received art instruction from Sir Hubert von Herkomer (1849-1914), a Bavarian-born painter who taught at schools at Bushey and Oxford. It appears that the two men met at Bushey. Certainly by 1895 Talmage was living in Cornwall. In that year he exhibited *Fading Day* [unlocated] in the Royal Academy's (RA) summer show. He found favour with that body and for the next 34 years he exhibited there regularly; the only years he was not represented in RA shows were 1898, 1900, 1902, 1903, 1908 and 1913. In all he would exhibit 140 works with the Royal Academy, 62 with the Fine Art Society, and lesser numbers with assorted other bodies.

Talmage's career bears some resemblance to that of Sir Alfred Munnings (1878-1959). Talmage dealt with English rural scenes – as did Munnings – but he also frequented France (Picardy especially) as well as Holland. He also had a genuine affection for London, a city that Munnings loved to visit but abhorred to paint.

A.G. Follitt-Stokes, a contributor to the art magazine, *The Studio*, and an opponent of impressionism, appears to have "discovered" Talmage and to have advanced his career. The January 1908 issue of that magazine carries an illustrated article, "The Landscape Paintings of Mr. Algernon M. Talmage," in which Follitt-Stokes praises the artist.² Indeed, Talmage's studies of stream fords and cattle remind one of Munnings. It is this article that links Talmage to Herkomer's school at Bushey, and mentions that the newcomer had

Abstract: Algernon Talmage, a distinguished, but forgotten, British painter is best known for his tutelage of Emily Carr. During the First World War he was commissioned by Lord Beaverbrook's Canadian War Memorials Fund to paint scenes of the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps. His work has been overshadowed by his more famous colleagues but deserves to be featured on its own merits.

Résumé : Algernon Talmage, un peintre britannique éminent, mais tombé dans l'oubli, est davantage connu pour avoir dirigé Emily Carr. Pendant la Première Guerre mondiale, le Fonds de souvenirs de guerre canadiens, fondé par lord Beaverbrook, l'a chargé de peindre des scènes du Corps de vétérinaires de l'Armée canadienne. Ses œuvres ont été éclipsées par celles de ses collègues plus célèbres, mais elles méritent d'être exposées pour leurs propres mérites.

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**Algernon Mayow Talmage –
A Mobile Veterinary Unit in
France (above).
Camp at Agny (left).**

established his own open-air art school at St. Ives, Cornwall.

It would appear that Talmage had moved to London in the latter half of 1907. His private life at that time was turbulent but he continued to paint.³ His first one-man exhibition was held at the Goupil Gallery, London, in 1909. Entitled *London from Dawn to Midnight*, it displayed several views of the British capital. Busy squares, horse-drawn cabs, buses, trains – all appear in these works, but their overall effect is of a gentle Edwardian time. Once again, Folliott-Stokes was on hand to ring the artist's praises in *The Studio*. In "Mr. Algernon Talmage's London Pictures" he gushed over the painter; Talmage was described as having "the temperament of the true artist, together with the technical accomplishment of the trained craftsman."⁴

Even through the black-and-white illustrations appearing in *The Studio*, one can appreciate that Talmage was a skilled painter. Moreover, he used a touch of the impressionism that Folliott-Stokes claimed to dislike. The Goupil Gallery show was a success and

Talmage's work began to sell and to travel. Two works, *A Snowstorm in the Strand, London* (1909) and *The Glittering Stream, Hyde Park, London* (1908), the latter showing damp, lamp-lit horse-drawn cabs by night, were purchased by the Art Gallery of South Australia from the 12th Federal Exhibition, South Australian Society of Arts.⁵ Even more acclaim was to follow. In 1911, Talmage's *The Kingdom of the Winds* [unlocated] won him a bronze medal at the Pittsburgh International Exhibition; another work, *The Mackerel Shawl* (1910), would be honoured with a silver medal at the 1913 Paris Salon.⁶

These events were duly reported in the British cultural press, but Talmage remained a relatively obscure figure. His works were sometimes reproduced but no critic, Folliott-Stokes aside, bothered to analyse, praise or attack him. Years later, at his death, the magazine *Art Digest* would describe him as "one of the artists who colonized St. Ives, on the north coast of Cornwall, at the beginning of the century and helped make it a popular resort for artists and writers."⁷ Nevertheless, he does not figure in the memoirs

of authors and fellow artists (Carr excepted). Although a painter of some substance, he seemed to cast no shadow.

The outbreak of war in 1914 devastated the art market; we may assume that Talmage shared the hard times with other painters. In fact, nothing is known about his activities at this time; details are lacking even on the circumstances that led to his being brought into the Canadian War Memorials program, although another St. Ives painter, Julius Olsson, received a commission. All the same, in 1918, he was involved in that project, attached to the Canadian Army Veterinary Corps.

Dating from 1910, the corps was charged with the care and well-being of military horses. At home it also administered the Remount Department which secured the animals needed for all branches of the forces. Many of the officers were graduates of the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph. Each army division included a veterinary section, while advisors served at brigade levels. The sections included farriers and blacksmiths in addition to those who specialized in animal diseases and injuries.

Veterinary units sailed with Canada's first contingent to England in October 1914. Eventually a complex organisation developed overseas. A base depot was established at Shorncliffe under Major (later Lieutenant-Colonel) J.H. Wilson. This served in part as a hospital, but it also included a training centre for corps personnel. A similar hospital/veterinary school was established at Le Havre under Major S.C. Richards, OBE. These two centres trained nearly 1,400 officers and NCOs in relevant skills. Between April 1915 and December 1918 the depot at Le Havre admitted 33,921 horses; 28,425 were discharged to remount depots for further services and 1,870 passed on to convalescent depots.



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**Algernon Mayow Talmage –
Exercising in the Corral (above).
The Sulphur Dip for Mange (left).
Wounded Horses (opposite).**

Closer to the fighting front, mobile field hospitals gave first aid to wounded, sick or overworked animals. Stables were erected, together with dipping vats for animals with skin diseases. Dipping and medicated baths also served as preventive methods. Special attention was paid to equine dentistry; three-quarters of all animals handled required some dental care. Serious cases were sent back to Le Havre by train or ambulance. Frequently the field hospitals treated horses owned by local Belgian and French peasants.

Talmage may have spent some time at Le Havre, but most of his Canadian War Memorials oils were done around Quéant, close to the Hindenburg Line. Presumably he was there before August 1918, when Canadians breached that defensive complex.

The artist completed 25 works including a massive oil on canvas, *A Mobile Veterinary Unit in France*, measuring nearly 3 by 4 metres, which now hangs in the Canadian Senate chamber.⁸ Most of his paintings show veterinary activity or convalescing horses; half-a-dozen depict ruined buildings such as appeared in many First World War

pictures. Unfortunately there has been little opportunity for them to be displayed in recent years although several have been reproduced in books, notably the war museum's own *Canvas of War*.⁹ The last major showing of these works was in 1941, when six of Talmage's military oils were displayed at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto.

The artist either retained some military paintings or made copies of items that had been sent to Canada as no works bearing the following titles are found at the Canadian War Museum. Thus, in 1919 he exhibited *Mobile Veterinary Dressing Station near Bullecourt* at the Royal Academy, and in 1924 he showed *Wounded Horses Leaving the Front* in the same forum. A 1927 Royal Academy show included a military etching, *Wounded Horses Leaving the Line*, by Talmage. (He was known by now not only as a painter but as an etcher, a popular medium at this time.) These works are all unlocated at the time of writing.

He continued to shine following the war. In 1920 his *By Cornish Seas* [unlocated] earned him a silver medal – and \$1,000 – at the Carnegie International Exhibition, Pittsburgh. Etchings made after this painting

can still be purchased. He was made an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1922; in 1929, he would be made a full member of that body. In 1925, he represented Britain on the jury selecting paintings for the Carnegie show in Pittsburgh. These events should have marked him out for greater fame; instead, they signalled the end of his eminence. Talmage faded into obscurity.

The record of his works displayed at the Royal Academy indicates that he spent some time in Suffolk around 1921–1922, during which time he also visited Dedham, Essex, where Alfred Munnings had recently purchased an estate. He continued to depict country scenes, but increasingly he also painted portraits, including equestrian portraits, which probably furnished good commissions. His oils were more precise, less impressionistic than his pre-war works. A work shown at the Royal Academy in 1937, *The Founding of Australia by Captain Arthur Philip, RN, Saturday, 26th January 1788*, more closely resembles magazine or school textbook illustrations than formal painting.¹⁰ It had been commissioned by a Mr. Frank Albert, who subsequently had it shown at the Tate Gallery and loaned to Australia.

Talmage, however, was virtually invisible so far as one can judge from the contemporary art journals. Nothing is written of his professional or family life; one can only speculate on what pressures he endured. Early in 1938, he suffered a nervous breakdown. On 14 September 1939 he died at his farm at Romsey, Hampshire. The brief obituaries that appeared recalled his accomplishments between 1909 and



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Algernon Mayow Talmage – Ruins at Inchy.



Algernon Mayow Talmage – A Mobile Veterinary Unit in France.

1922, but were silent about the more recent years. One is left to speculate on what drove this academician into the shadows. Time has done little to enhance his reputation.

Notes

1. Emily Carr, *Growing Pains: the Autobiography of Emily Carr* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2005), p.314.
2. A.G. Folliott-Stokes, "The Landscape Paintings of Mr. Algernon M. Talmage," *The Studio* 42 (January 1908), pp.188-93.
3. Austin Wormleighton to Laura Brandon, 15 September 1997, Canadian War Museum artist file, Talmage, Algernon.
4. A.G. Folliott-Stokes, "Mr. Algernon Talmage's London Pictures," *The Studio* 46 (February 1909), p.23.
5. Algernon Talmage, *The Glittering Stream*, 1909, oil on canvas, 75 x 100.3 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia (0.383); *A Snowstorm in the Strand*, 1908, oil on canvas, 75 x 100 cm, Art Gallery of South Australia (0.382).
6. Algernon Talmage, *The Mackerel Shawl*, 1910, oil on canvas, 126 x 79 cm, Bristol City Art Gallery, England (K326).
7. "Obituary," *The Art Digest* 14 (15 October 1939), p.29.
8. Algernon Talmage, *A Mobile Veterinary Unit in France*, 1919, oil on canvas, 281 x 357.3 cm, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum 19710261-0596.
9. Dean F. Oliver and Laura Brandon, *Canvas of War: Painting the Canadian Experience 1914-1945* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2000), pp.10-11.
10. Algernon Talmage, *The Founding of Australia by Captain Arthur Philip, RN, Saturday, 26th January 1788*, 1937, oil on canvas, 229 x 320 cm, Tate Gallery, London (NO 4877).

Hugh Halliday served with the Air Historian and Directorate of History and Heritage (1961-68), taught at Niagara College of Applied Arts and Technology (1968-1974) and held various posts at the Canadian War Museum (1974-1995). Although best known for his aviation books and articles, he is also the author of *Wreck! Canada's Worst Railway Accidents* (Robin Brass Studio, 1997) and *Murder Among Gentlemen: A History of Duelling in Canada* (Robin Brass Studio, 1999). His last book, *Valour Reconsidered* (Robin Brass Studio, 2006) examined the politics and procedures associated with awards of the Victoria Cross and other major gallantry awards.