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CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

MUSÉE CANADIEN DE LA GUERRE

"Resigned to My Sad Fate"

Arthur Nantel and the Prisoner of War Experience

TIM COOK & MÉLANIE MORIN-PELLETIER

Abstract: In September 1914, forty-one-year-old artist Arthur Nantel, from Montreal, Quebec, enlisted as a private in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Travelling overseas with the First Contingent, his trial by fire came during the Second Battle of Ypres, in April 1915. Captured during the battle, Private Nantel spent the rest of the war as a prisoner in Germany. During his captivity, Nantel left a unique visual legacy of his experiences. Based on several documents written by Nantel in 1919 and on thirty-one of his works of art held at the Canadian War Museum, this article explores his war service and works of art that provide a rare glimpse into the Allied prisoner of war experience in Germany.

Résumé: En septembre 1914, Arthur Nantel, un artiste montréalais de quarante et un ans, s'enrôlait comme soldat dans le Corps expéditionnaire canadien. Mobilisé au sein du premier contingent, Nantel subit son baptême de feu lors de la deuxième bataille d'Ypres, en avril 1915. Capturé pendant la bataille, l'artiste a laissé un héritage visuel unique, témoignant de son expérience de la captivité. Cet article, fondé sur des documents qu'il a rédigés en 1919 et sur trente et une de ses œuvres qui se trouvent au Musée canadien de la guerre, examine son service militaire et donne un rare aperçu de l'expérience des prisonniers de guerre alliés en Allemagne.

"WHEN, IN 1914, I LEFT my quiet Montreal studio, to enlist for the war, I must unwittingly have issued a challenge to the gods, and a most mischievous one having accepted it, he willed that

everything should go contrary to my desires.”¹ The artist Arthur Nantel, from Montreal, Quebec, enlisted in September 1914 with the 14th Battalion and he indeed had an unexpected war experience. Born on 22 November 1872, the forty-one-year-old artist was a surprising choice to be selected for the First Contingent and he might have felt that the gods were smiling down on him, although more likely it was his three years of militia experience that led to his acceptance in the ranks.

Private Nantel travelled overseas with the First Contingent, trained in England at Salisbury Plain and was serving on the Western Front by February 1915. His trial by fire would come in two months time at Ypres, when the Canadian Division faced a massed chlorine gas attack for the first time in warfare. It was at this battle that Nantel was captured, along with 1,410 of his comrades.² While most Canadian prisoners were captured in three major battles where the Canadians were pushed back from their original trenches—at Ypres in April 1915, at the Battle of Mount Sorrel in June 1916 and at the Battle of the Somme from September to November 1916—other Canadians were snatched in raids or overwhelmed in the confusion of battle. Many were injured and unable to pull back in see-saw engagements.³ During the course of the war, 3,842 Canadians were taken prisoner.⁴

The prisoner of war experience has been documented in books and articles and in surviving letters and diaries, but there is little Canadian scholarship related to the visual record of these soldiers who fought a very different war of survival. Private Nantel’s experiences behind barbed wire were similar to many other Canadian prisoners, but he left a unique visual legacy of that time and the Canadian War Museum holds thirty-one of his works of art. These watercolours document the Second Battle of Ypres and, more thoroughly, his captivity, providing a rare glimpse into the Allied prisoner of war experience in Germany. This article explores Nantel’s war service, situating it within the historiography of prisoners, aided by several

¹ Arthur Nantel, “Die Kultur and the Artist,” *Canadian Courier* (19 July 1919): 13.

² Desmond Morton, *Silent Battle: Canadian Prisoners of War in Germany, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester, 1992), 28.

³ On the capture of prisoners, see Aaron Pegram, *Surviving the Great War: Australian Prisoners of War on the Western Front, 1916-18* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁴ Morton, *Silent Battle*, ix.



Arthur Nantel, 1914. [Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20040082-097]

key reflective memoirs written by Nantel in 1919. It reclaims Nantel as an artist of note in documenting the Canadian war experience and offers new insight into how art was created to endure the physical and mental struggle of imprisonment.

THE BATTLE

The Western Front had stalemated in 1914, with the scything firepower of modern artillery, machine guns and rifles forcing all soldiers into the ground. The promise of open warfare gave way to the strange war of the trenches. The Germans had planned for a rapid victory against France in order to turn to the lumbering Russian forces in the east, but by late 1914 it was caught in a two-front war. There had been significant German victories in 1914, especially at Tannenberg in late August, and the Germans continued to hammer the Tsar’s soldiers in renewed 1915 offensives. But as a strategic distraction, and to dislodge the Allied system of logistics, the German high command also ordered an attack against the Ypres Salient on the northern part of the Western Front, to the east of one of the last major Belgian cities still in Allied hands. An operation was set for April 1915 and the Germans planned to unleash a massed chlorine gas cloud to break the stalemate.

The Canadian Division had marched to the Western Front in February of 1915. It was cold, wet and dangerous. From 24 February, the Canadians were apprenticed to more experienced British soldiers who told them to keep their heads down and their feet out of the mud. In the trenches, Private Nantel likely had his brushes, paint and easel and he always carried a sketch book to depict his time at the front. He painted as a soldier and later as a prisoner and there are several works that record this early period of the war. His *Cold Cheer in Fort #3* illustrates a snow-swept trench, with Canadians wrapped in great coats and huddled around a stove giving off weak heat. One Canadian crouches as a sentry and the scene is labelled as the Bois Grenier, March 1915. A second watercolour also depicts this initial trench warfare phase in March, when the battalion had over a dozen soldiers who became casualties. *Two Killed, Three Wounded* is a realistic depiction of a shell exploding amid a group of soldiers and Nantel wrote “a Jack Johnson in Fort no.3, Bois Grenier” on the back



Arthur Nantel, *Cold Cheer in Fort #3*, 1915, watercolour on paper, 31.0 x 23.7 cm.
[Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0483]



Arthur Nantel, *Two Killed, Three Wounded*, n.d. [ca.1915], watercolour on paper, 21.7 x 17.4 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0504]

of the painting.⁵ The Jack Johnson, slang for a German shell, was feared by these new soldiers to the front and both works are done in Nantel's realistic style. They are important for capturing a period on the Western Front when there was almost no visual documentation.

The Germans unleashed their huge siege guns against Ypres in the morning of 22 April 1915, while the Canadians and several French and British divisions held the large, rounded Ypres Salient to the east of the city. At 4PM, after a day of heavy shelling, the German artillery began to target the forward trenches. An hour later, the Germans released chlorine gas from several thousand metal canisters that was blown by a stiff wind through the Allied lines. The ominous swirling mass of sickly green and yellow fumes drifted through two French divisions to the left of the Canadians. Most of the French Algerian and territorial soldiers fled in horror or died of suffocation and scorched lungs and the Canadian Division, on the right flank, faced an unprecedented hole in the line. While the Germans tentatively advanced, terrified also of the chlorine gas that had left the French soldiers curled up in death with eyes bulging in terror, the Canadians—coughing and wiping away their tearing eyes—poured fire into the open flank.⁶

The Canadians stopped the German advance at Kitcheners Wood with a two-battalion counterattack in the late hours of the 22nd and were, in turn, cut down in sickening numbers on the 23rd near Mauser Ridge when two battalions attacked over open ground. By the second day of combat, almost all of the Canadian reserve units were committed to strengthening the line. Private Nantel's 14th Battalion had been in reserve but ordered to the front to take up a defensive position north of St. Julien, where its four companies were spread out in makeshift slit trenches or in shell craters. They fought in battle starting the night of the 22nd, taking heavy losses from shellfire and machine-gun fire on the 23rd and suffering most heavily on the 24th when the Canadian lines were driven in from a renewed German assault behind a second release of chlorine gas.⁷

⁵ For the incident, see R. C. Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Montreal Regiment: 14th Battalion, CEF* (Montreal: The Royal Montreal Regiment, 1927), 30-33.

⁶ For the gas attack, see Tim Cook, *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999).

⁷ For the battle, see Andrew Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers: The 1st Canadian Division at War, 1914-1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

Throughout the battle, the Canadians were outnumbered and outgunned, but the Dominion soldiers fought with great courage even as they were forced back by enemy attacks or the terrifying gas clouds. The Canadians also found that their Canadian-made Ross rifles seized up in rapid-fire. The Ross was a fine shooting rifle in ideal conditions but the rapid fire of unevenly-produced British ammunition led to many rifles jamming. It was agonising for Canadian infantrymen holding off the advancing German soldiers to find their weapons stopped working. “Men cursed the rifle and threw it away,” wrote one colonel. “I have seen strong men weep in anguish at the failure.”⁸

When most of the Canadian infantry were relieved on 25 April, about 6,000 Canadians had been rendered casualties. Depicted as a gallant stand throughout the British Empire, the staggeringly high number of prisoners was downplayed. To be captured in battle was often seen as having failed in one’s duties and a blow to one’s manhood. At Ypres, the Canadians had fought with much determination and many soldiers claimed they fired to the last bullet before waving a white flag. Others had all their officers killed and their positions surrounded. Some blamed their Ross rifle that had reduced them from riflemen to soldiers equipped with clubs. Private Nantel was one of the 265 casualties to the 14th Battalion, which included killed, wounded and missing.⁹ It was later determined that twenty-eight soldiers of the 14th Battalion were captured on 24 April, when the battalion was forced to retreat from its defensive positions.

In Canada, reports arrived of the battle within a few days, followed by the long lists of casualties that were soon published in city and community newspapers. The dead were grieved, but the many missing were in a twilight place of being neither killed nor safe. Even soldiers at the front had little idea of who was killed, wounded in a hospital or captured by the enemy. After the June 1916 Battle of Mount Sorrel, where over 500 Canadians were captured, Captain William Coleman of the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles recounted to his wife that he wished “more men will show up, but it is not very likely, and we only hope that some may be prisoners.”¹⁰ This was

⁸ George H. Cassar, *Hell in Flanders Fields: Canadians at the Second Battle of Ypres* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2010), 184.

⁹ Iarocci, *Shoestring Soldiers*, 288.

¹⁰ Coleman to wife, 4 June 1916 and 18 June 1916, 19650038-014, CWM.

rarely the case, although at Ypres many of the missing were found to be prisoners.¹¹ In the confusion of battle and with the mass casualties, Nantel was not reported missing until 5 May 1915.¹² The two-week delay in the announcement must have been distressing for Nantel's wife, Erilda Derome.

DOCUMENTING THE BATTLE

While there are many letters and diaries from Canadian soldiers who fought at the Second Battle of Ypres, with most of them remarking on the shock of combat, the horror of the gas attack and the strain of the sustained engagement, there are few visual cultural products. Cameras had been outlawed by the army, which pursued kodak-carrying soldiers with no little vengeance. And while some men kept the cameras, most were fearful of being exposed. The CWM has a handful of rare photographs of Ypres before the battle, which document the rough trench system. These photographs by unknown Canadians reveal infantrymen holding slit trenches as opposed to the sandbagged trenches that are more commonly associated with the Western Front. These four photographs, over 105-years-old, are nearly unique in depicting the Canadians at Ypres.

The expatriate millionaire, Sir Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook), a tenacious adventurer of uncommon foresight and drive, had taken it upon himself to document the Canadian war effort. A friend to powerful Conservatives in Britain and Canada, he had ached to support the war and raise the profile of the Canadians. When Aitken was left out of the British cabinet, he turned to Canadian Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden and Minister of Militia and Defence Sir Sam Hughes for an appointment. They awarded him a subtly ambiguous title of "Eye-Witness" that came along with an honorary rank of lieutenant-colonel. Aitken used his immense fortune and considerable influence to travel the front lines in a chauffeured car, interviewing Canadian soldiers and writing heroic accounts of them for his and other newspapers. After the battle,

¹¹ Australian records noted that only about ten per cent of the missing were ever found to be alive. Pegram, *Surviving the Great War*, 92.

¹² Nature of Casualty form, Private Arthur Nantel personnel record, regimental number 25980, RG 150, Library and Archives Canada.



Two soldiers in a shallow trench, Ypres, 23 April 1915. [Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 19700139-001]



Soldiers dug in behind breastworks, Ypres, April 1915. [Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 19700139-002]



Front line trenches, Ypres, 23 April 1915. [Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 19700139-006]



Yser Canal, Ypres, 1915. [Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 19700139-005]



Major Richard Jack painting his enormous work of art depicting the Canadian stand at Second Ypres. [Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 19930003-330]

his bestselling history of the Canadian stand at Ypres, *Canada in Flanders*, did much to raise the profile of the Canadians within the British Expeditionary Force and it went through multiple editions.¹³ He expanded his impact by creating the Canadian War Records Office and Aitken browbeat the British generals in early 1916 to allow him to send official artists, cameramen and painters to the front to document the Canadian forces.

Aitken's Canadian War Records Office, the administrative body for all of this work—along with the associated Canadian War Memorials Fund, which hired artists—commenced its work in the summer of 1916. The first appointment was British artist Richard Jack who was ordered to paint the Canadian stand at Ypres. On an enormous canvas of 3.7 x 6.0 metres, Jack depicted a stylised account of the heroic defence, very much in line with the interpretation in Aitken's book. *The Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April to 25 May 1915* captures the chaos of battle, the sweeping German attack

¹³ Tim Cook, “Documenting War & Forging Reputations: Sir Max Aitken and the Canadian War Records Office in the First World War,” *War In History* 10, 3 (2003): 298-303.

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Richard Jack, *The Second Battle of Ypres, 22 April to 25 May 1915*, 1917, oil on canvas, 371.5 x 589.0 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0161]



William Roberts, *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres, 1918*, oil on canvas, 304.8 x 365.8 cm. [National Gallery of Canada, IL2004007-001]

behind poison gas and smoke and the Canadians repelling the massed assault with their Ross rifles, Colt machine guns and the cold steel of their bayonets. The Canadians are battered in the fighting, with several dead soldiers in the foreground, while another appears mortally wounded by poison gas, his face ashen and gray. But still the Canadians fight on. A wounded officer, his head wrapped in a bloodied bandage, coordinates the desperate defence. Bowed but unbroken, the canvas has many of the elements of a heroic nineteenth century painting and yet Jack does not minimise the cost of the defence.

William Roberts, a former gunner in the Royal Canadian Artillery, created a second painting for the official war art collection. *The First German Gas Attack at Ypres* is a modernist work and it is a very different canvas than Jack's traditional battle study. In bright colours of red, blue and khaki, it captures the fleeing Algerian troops, their hands to their mouths and throats as they choke on the gas, while others have already succumbed to the lethal chemicals.

The Canadians in khaki continue to fight as they feed the guns and some of the soldiers have pulled handkerchiefs over their noses in this swirling scene of discipline and endurance within disorder and death. These two works are currently on display at the Canadian War Museum, in the Second Battle of Ypres section of the First World War gallery, and are used to convey two different perspectives of the battle.¹⁴

Arthur Nantel's battle watercolours are less well known than that of Jack and Roberts and certainly less frequently produced in books and publications. These works were painted while Nantel was a prisoner in captivity, which will be discussed in more detail below. *Panic in Ypres, April, 1915* presents the chaos in the city as the Germans opened their artillery bombardment in the early hours of 22 April. It was a warm and sunny day and some Canadians were even sunbathing behind the lines when enemy high explosive shells rained down, bursting among the cobbled roads of Ypres. Houses were destroyed and buildings were set on fire. There were scenes of panic and fear, as the thousands of remaining Belgian citizens in the city fled.

Soldiers recounted the bedlam, with one Canadian in Nantel's 14th Battalion writing, "Most pitiful were the civilian population – mostly women and children – all utterly demoralized."¹⁵ Throughout the war, Canadian soldiers wrote sympathetically of the plight of civilians: the farms where women and children worked because the men were in uniform, the displaced families who were war refugees and the elderly parents who grieved the loss of their sons. In *Panic in Ypres, April, 1915*, Nantel is the Canadian soldier to whom the desperate Belgian woman is clinging with terror. He wrote of this particular painting: "As I hurried back to my billet outside the town, a hysterical girl jumped on my neck, nearly bringing me to the ground."¹⁶

With the 14th Battalion ordered to the front to take up a defensive position north of St. Julien, a key strongpoint on the Canadian front, they left behind Ypres which burned through the night, casting off billowing dark smoke. In two battlefield watercolours, Nantel depicted the battle over the wide front. *7 A.M., April 22nd, 1915* and *9 A.M.,*

¹⁴ Both authors have curated permanent exhibitions in the First World War gallery.

¹⁵ Fetherstonhaugh, *The Royal Montreal Regiment*, 40.

¹⁶ Catalogue card, 19710261-0502, CWM.



Arthur Nantel, *Panic in Ypres, April 1915*, April 1915, watercolour on paper, 24.7 x 16.1 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0502]



Arthur Nantel, *7 A.M., April 22nd, 1915*, April 1915, watercolour on paper, 24.6 x 32.4 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0501]

April 24, 1915 are studies in contrast. The first painting, *7 A.M.*, captures the Belgian countryside, green and lush, with farmhouses and even livestock. In the distance, however, billowing gas clouds fill the sky, artillery shells crash down and three German planes are, according to Nantel's notes on the back of the work, "dropping coloured lights to direct their artillery fire." St. Jean can be seen on the right and in the foreground a lone line of Canadian infantrymen are situated in shallow trenches and ready with their Ross rifles. The infantry—some aiming, others sitting back—wear the distinctive blue epaulettes of the First Contingent soldiers. "The gas has been launched," wrote Nantel. "The French are in full retreat; the Germans are advancing behind the black clouds using flares to light their way."¹⁷

7 A.M. is a powerful presentation of the wide-open battlefield before the heavy shelling churned up the ground, but it is best understood in relation to the second painting two days later. This too is of the 14th Battalion and it captures the heavy fighting around

¹⁷ 19710261-0501, CWM. Written by Nantel on the back of the watercolour.



Arthur Nantel, *9 A.M., April 24, 1915*, April 1915, watercolour on paper, 24.0 x 31.7 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0498]

St. Julien. It is a scene of destruction, as farms burn, shells explode and small groups of soldiers are dug into craters. Nantel's work depicts the confusion of the battle, as the Canadians seem to be fighting in all directions, but also the cost, as several dead soldiers lay sprawled in a water-filled crater. The soldiers from Montreal were slowly driven back around 11AM on the 24th, blown out of their trenches by shellfire. Forced to retire to trenches 300 yards to the rear, but still fighting through much of the day, they again retreated at 4:30PM as German soldiers advanced on them. It was during this day of combat and retreat that Private Nantel was captured; when his position was overrun, he was left behind with a head wound or as part of a sacrificial force to cover the retirement.

Another battle work, *Come on Boys*, situates Canadian soldiers engaged in a bayonet charge. It appears to be a self-portrait of Nantel, as the soldier's older and weathered face is determinedly set. The soldier is leading several Canadians in assault, with one infantryman already having been shot down. The lead soldier has lost his soft cap in the frantic charge and holds a poorly rendered Ross rifle with bayonet that is too small. Toylike in appearance, it

appears to be a commentary on the failure of the Ross rifle in battle, especially in comparison to the shells hurled and the gas unleashed at the Canadians. And yet still the poorly-equipped Canadians push forward in this stylised bayonet charge. The imagined charge may have occurred as the 14th Battalion fought hard from the 22nd, but they were more often in prepared defences below the ground and firing at the Germans who were advancing upon them. Imagined or real, perhaps it is not surprising that Nantel was depicting himself and other Canadians in a charging attack because it made his capture easier to accept.

PRISONER EXPERIENCE

Soldiers understood they could be killed or wounded in battle, but almost none had imagined that they might be taken prisoner. Nantel described his shock at the swift transformation from fighting Canadian to a "fannigan," as prisoners were sometimes known, writing dejectedly that he was "resigned to my sad fate."¹⁸ Another Canadian snatched at Ypres wrote to his wife, almost pleadingly: "Don't think I am a poor soldier because I was captured."¹⁹

A series of watercolours have survived from Nantel's desire to make sense of the experience of being captured. Two of Nantel's most evocative works, *On The Way To Roulers And Captivity* and *Bivouacking in a Church*, deftly capture the despair of the wounded Canadians being led to captivity. In both watercolours, wounded Canadians march towards their fate, heads down, defeated and dejected. Nantel painted himself in *On the Way To Roulers* as the second figure from the front with the wound to his head, an injury confirmed by his medical records. In his left hand, he also appears to be carrying his painting kit. It was a scene that must have burned with Nantel, as he brooded over his fate during the sixteen-mile march to Roulers. Records note that of the 1,410 Canadians captured at Ypres, 627 were wounded and 87 died of their injuries.²⁰ There was also evidence of German soldiers breaking the Hague

¹⁸ Nantel, "Die Kultur and the Artist," 13.

¹⁹ "Canadian Prisoners Want Eats and Smokes," *Toronto Star*, 31 May 1915, 8.

²⁰ Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1993), 208.



Arthur Nantel, *On The Way To Roulers And Captivity*, n.d. [ca.1915], watercolour on paper, 32.5 x 25.5 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0492]



Arthur Nantel, *Bivouacking in a Church*, April 1915, watercolour on paper, 23.2 x 15.6 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0490]

Conventions—a series of internationally agreed upon laws of war, including the treatment of prisoners—and executing prisoners who were too badly wounded to make the punishing trip.²¹ In these two works, it was important for Nantel to depict the Canadian prisoners as wounded, a visual reference through the bloodied wounds and mattress in the church that provide context to the capture. These were soldiers, Nantel depicts in brush strokes, who have done their duty and their capture was no fault of their own.

Pending the arrival of other prisoners, they were held in a church for many hours on 25 April 1915. Then, the exhausted and downhearted prisoners were sent by cattle truck from Roulers to the Giessen prisoner of war camp, about seventy kilometres north of Frankfurt. This left a deep impression on Nantel, who wrote on the back of the *Bivouacking in a Church* canvas: “Sad were our thoughts as we, POWs, marched escorted by Uhlans, to the great unknown from which many were never to return.” Along the way, angry and jeering crowds of civilians stood by the tracks, shouting at the prisoners who rolled by in secure trains. George Pearson of the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry recounted how when the train stooped at Giessen, a group of women yelled at the prisoners and “one man was hit full in the face by all the spit a well-dressed woman could collect.”²²

The Giessen camp consisted of dozens of wood huts where the prisoners lived, surrounded by a double barrier of barbed wire fence and surveyed by armed guards. The food at Giessen was of poor quality and barely enough to survive upon and most prisoners became preoccupied with the poor rations. But their suffering was eased somewhat when a local university created a library in the camp and there was a canteen that sold goods when it was stocked. In fact, Giessen was known for being one of the better camps—cleaner and less crowded than most—and yet it was shattering for soldiers to be confined as prisoners and at the mercy of their captors. Prisoners were subject to beatings and verbal abuse, there was isolation cells and any resistance was harshly punished.

²¹ On killing prisoners, see Niall Ferguson, “Dynamics of Defeat: Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War,” *War in History* 11 (2004): 34-78; and Tim Cook, “The Politics of Surrender: Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War,” *Journal of Military History* 70, 3 (July 2006): 637-65.

²² Morton, *When Your Number’s Up*, 210.



Artist's workshop in a prisoner of war camp, 1916. [Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo / Alamy Stock Photo, Image ID: FD74F9]

All prisoners had to find ways to survive their incarceration and the crushing boredom that was widely known as barbed-wire disease. For some, the strict regime helped. A Canadian prisoner wrote: "We get up at 6 a.m. and retire at 8 p.m. Breakfast, 7 am, dinner, 12, supper 6:30. Exercise is 9:30 to 10:20am. Smoking is forbidden at certain hours. This routine is straitly [*sic*] adhered to except Sunday, when exercise is cut out."²³ Sports were popular among most young men, played at almost every chance. There was also no shortage of gambling to pass the time. Many prisoners turned to stimulating the mind and raising the spirit through cultural acts, from putting on theatre shows, to forming orchestras, to singing in groups.²⁴ As more soldiers were captured, they were supported by national and international aid organisations that delivered mail, magazines and books. The neutral Red Cross was particularly important in monitoring prisoners' health and in facilitating the transfer of care

²³ "Canadian Prisoners Want Eats and Smokes," *Toronto Star*, 31 May 1915, 8.

²⁴ Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum, "The Importance of Creativity Behind Barbed Wire," in *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire*, eds. Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1-15.

packages.²⁵ Most prisoners spoke of their gratitude, noting that the packages provided essential food and also indicated that they had not been forgotten by Canadians: “No one but a prisoner of war can appreciate what all the good things sent by the Canadian Red Cross means to us.”²⁶

Nantel turned to art, seeking mental solace in creating while he was confined. He was lucky to find a community of artists at Giessen and there were ample supplies of paint, canvas and brushes. A prison collective of about twenty artists was formed, including the Parisian Raphael Drouart, Lewis Renateau and a Canadian art student Alan Arthur Beddoe from Ottawa who was also captured at Ypres.²⁷ Beddoe would return to Canada before the end of the war, after he used his artistic talent to paint a full-length portrait of a German officer, who in return wrote a medical release for him to be sent to England on compassionate leave.²⁸ Beddoe continued to study art and opened a commercial art studio in Ottawa, serving during the Second World War, becoming an expert on heraldry and a government adviser on Canada’s flag design in the 1960s. But his greatest legacy project was to design and oversee the work on Canada’s First World War Book of Remembrance, which was dedicated on Remembrance Day, 1942. The small art room was given the name of Giessen Studio and a photograph reveals a sparse wooden room with a number of easels and desks, but with much natural light from windows. Artist Lewis Renateau noted that there were painters and cartoonists as well as “theatrical scenic painters to wood-carvers.”²⁹ Alan Beddoe painted Nantel as he worked in the hut, writing on the the watercolour: “Souvenir of Our Imprisonment Giessen Feb. 15. 1916.” Other prisoners would come in and sit as models, but soon the German guards asked for portraits, for which they paid a little money. “Distinguished officers vied with each other in their efforts to have the monopoly of selling my works at a profit of 7000 per cent., (a small sketch paid

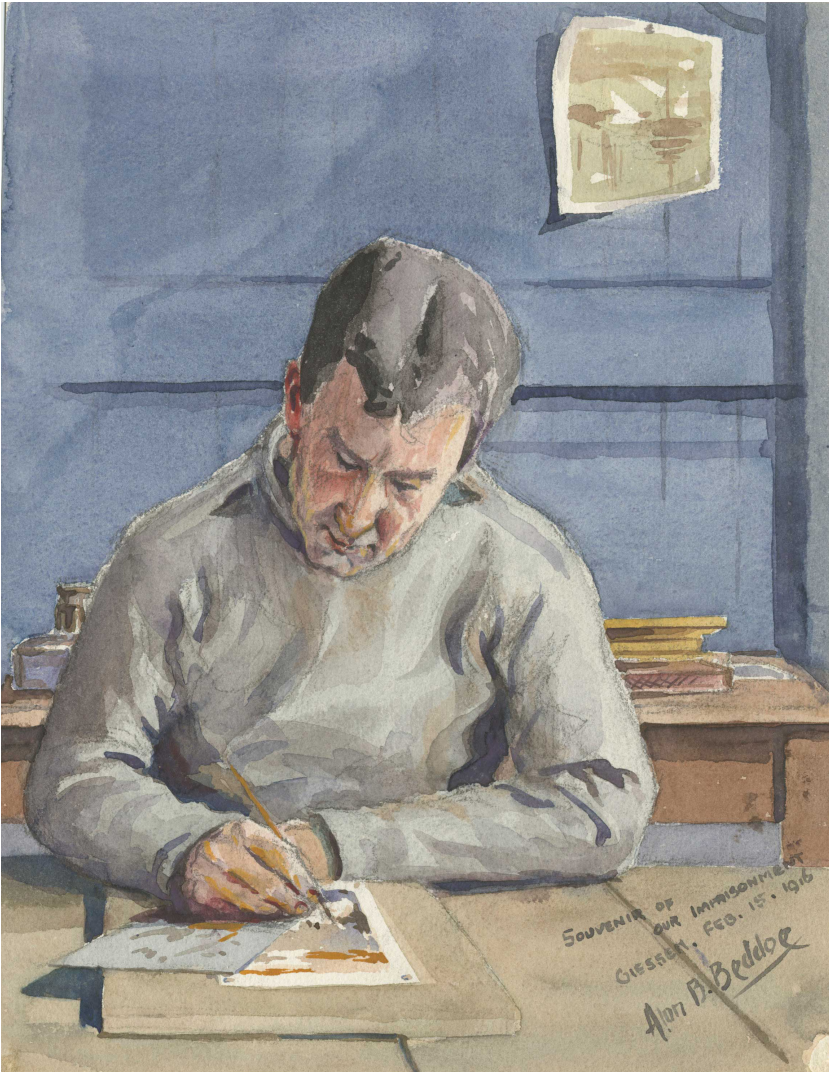
²⁵ On the importance of care packages and the Red Cross, see Jonathan Vance, *Objects of Concern: Canadian Prisoners of War Through the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994).

²⁶ Morton, *Silent Battle*, 55.

²⁷ “The Camp at Giessen, Hesse,” *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 29, 157-165 (April to December 1916): 264.

²⁸ Maria Tippett, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 12.

²⁹ “The Camp at Giessen, Hesse,” 264.



Alan Beddoe, *Private A. Nantel*, February 1916, watercolour on paper, 25.3 x 20.0 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0503]

one mark was sold seventy to the Giessen Museum),” wrote Nantel. “Famous war captains sat for their portraits, generals nodded to me as they gave instructions to their aide-de-camp to see that I had a good piece of “wrust” (sausage) in exchange for one of my famous watercolors.”³⁰ Nantel’s realistic style appealed to the Germans and he also exchanged his works of art for food and cigarettes. However, like most prisoners, he was always hungry, suffering from “hollow-eyed starvation [that] caused me to double as I sat at my easel.”³¹

The commandant of the camp showed off the artistic studio to neutral observers as a sign of the humane treatment of prisoners. Nantel recounted it “became the pride of Giessen Laager, the show place for all neutral visitors to see, in order to prove to the world at large that the Germans were not as bad as they were painted.”³² A year into his imprisonment, Nantel’s stock as an artist was raised further when, in his words, “a Prince of the House of Hessen condescended to approve of a view of a baronial castle in the neighborhood, for which he agreed to pay the handsome price of fifteen marks, and then forgot all about it. From that day, my reputation was assured and I could lord it over such small fry as German privates and corporals.”³³

Several of Nantel’s surviving paintings captured his fellow prisoners. *Every day in the week, 6 a.m. Giessen* is a vibrant canvas that depicts the prisoners starting their workday with a communal wash. It is dated “MAY – 15” and was one of his earliest works. Most of the prisoners seem to be Canadian or British as they wear khaki, but a Highlander can be seen along with the red pantalons of French colonial soldiers. A second work, *Sundays Promenade, # 3 Giessen*, also captures the mass of prisoners. The watercolour depicts the busy promenade where French and Canadian soldiers mingle, talk and walk about. A barbed wire fence divides portions of the camp and a North African French soldier in traditional garb is central to the work. Nantel’s bright watercolour offers fascinating details, including the many types of footwear and headdresses, yellow bands with the prisoner’s number on the left arm and even strange red circles on some of the Canadian uniforms. Nantel later said that the soldier

³⁰ Nantel, “Die Kultur and the Artist,” 13.

³¹ Nantel, “Die Kultur and the Artist,” 13.

³² Nantel, “Die Kultur and the Artist,” 13.

³³ Nantel, “Die Kultur and the Artist,” 13.

Cook and Morin-Pelletier: "Resigned to My Sad Fate"



Arthur Nantel, *Every day in the week, 6 a.m. Giessen*, May 1915, watercolour on paper, 22.7 x 31.6 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0500]



Arthur Nantel, *Sundays Promenade, # 3 Giessen*, n.d., watercolour on paper, 21.9 x 31.8 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0491]



Arthur Nantel, Frenstuck, *Christmas Eve in Giessen Camp, December 1916*, watercolour on paper, 25.0 x 25.4 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0493]

on the left, with the red painted circles on his breast and knees, had been marked by the Germans for a failed prison escape.

For a while, Nantel and other artists had an easier existence because of their art. Not only was the creative act an important means of passing the time in leisurely pursuit, but it was popular with the German guards. One of Nantel's most joyful watercolours, *Christmas Eve in Giessen Camp*, shows frolicking prisoners, dancing in each other's company within one of the huts. French Algerians and Canadians weave about the room, hand in hand, as music is played on an accordion. Nantel wrote on the back of the canvas, "The evening jollification which began with fairly orthodox [*sic*] dancing gradually became a wild farandola in and out around the chimneys of the hut."

However, when a new commandant took command of the camp in 1917, he almost immediately closed the art studio. The artists were



Arthur Nantel, *Cushy Job in a Straffe Commando*, n.d. [ca. 1917], watercolour on paper, 25.4 x 32.4 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0510]

forced to engage in more manual labour in the camp and outside of it. Nantel's life became more difficult. He contributed to the problem, perhaps emboldened by the success of his art. He admitted to talking indelicately with the German guards, boasting about Canada. Soon he fell out of favour with the authorities and was sent to a rock quarry in the Lahn Valley to engage in hard labour.

Prisoners other than officers were allowed to be put to work, but the Hague Conventions stipulated that they were to be paid on par with labourers. That was rarely the case and prisoners had no say over where they would work. Those who protested were usually beaten. Breaking and hauling out rock was among the most difficult of work details, especially for one like Nantel in his mid forties. He spent several weeks digging and smashing rocks, with his hands left blooded and calloused. The German foreman demanded relentless work from the prisoners, hounding and yelling at them and Nantel's health was fading. But his art saved him again. He painted a portrait of the foreman's two daughters that was much admired and his labour was lightened.



Arthur Nantel, *FASTER, YOU SCHWEINHUND*, n.d. [ca. 1917], watercolour on paper, 25.9 x 33.2 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0507]

Cushy Job in a Straffe Commando captures a Canadian prisoner hauling out a load of rocks using light rail, likely Nantel since he tended to paint himself into his own work. The ironic title indicates it is no cushy—or easy—work detail, although Nantel noted in relation to this work that, “When the buggies were loaded we were allowed to ride on them down the grade, using a stick as a brake.” A second painting, *Faster, You Schweinhund*, depicts a foreman yelling an insult at a Canadian prisoner breaking rocks, with Nantel likely drawing upon his experience with the abusive foreman.

Nantel did not only paint the prisoner experience throughout 1917. Several of his surviving watercolours depict the German landscape and villages, although he likely made more and gave them away to curry favour or sold them for extra food. Some of the surviving works show German towns in Gleiberg, Neuhoff, Marksburg and Baldmstein. There are also two delightful works based around food. *Before Soup* captures French and Canadian prisoners running through a forest, scrambling as they have heard a call for lunch or dinner. The importance of food in the life of the prisoner is evident



Arthur Nantel, *Before Soup*, n.d. [ca. 1917], watercolour on paper, 31.1 x 23.5 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0499]



Arthur Nantel, *After Soup*, n.d. [ca. 1917], watercolour on paper, 31.3 x 23.7 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0826]

in the frantic energy, just as the second work, *After Soup*, has the prisoners sauntering back to their work, in no hurry to return to the drudgery. Nantel even wrote on the back of the work, “What’s the hurry! We’ll get there when we get there.”

In February 1918, Nantel was sent to a German farm. This was not an uncommon work duty and most Allied prisoners found it agreeable to be outside and away from the watchful gaze of armed guards. Prisoners usually settled in on the farm and Nantel was no exception, soon taking his meals with the German family. He worked hard; “from early sunrise,” in his words, “to till after sunset for the good of the Fatherland.”³⁴ However, there was time for sketching and painting and several of his works in the collection depict his agricultural experience. Free to wander through the green fields and nearby villages, he was a curious oddity. When he learned some German, he began to chat with locals, occasionally drawing for them. Two of his works, *Up-to-date version of the prodigal son* and *Frenstuck, Breakfast* present the idyllic countryside and his hard work, with the first painting’s title capturing his fall from grace as an artist to a labourer.

But his conversations with locals again brought him trouble, especially as Germany was in the last desperate year of the war, with significant food shortages due to the lack of young men on farms and the Royal Navy blockade. Nantel later admitted that he boasted too loudly of Canada’s freedoms and its beautiful people. A local military officer heard of this strange Canadian farmer with perhaps too much freedom and too much confidence. Nantel was removed from the farm and sent to a dreaded salt mine in April 1918. This was the most difficult and brutal of the many jobs for Allied prisoners and all who worked deep in the ground recounted the hardship.

For seven months, Nantel was ordered into a deep pit some 1,800 feet into the earth. The claustrophobic conditions were terrible and the salt burned the hands of prisoners, creating fester sores. One Canadian prisoner wrote of the physical toil: “Practically everyone suffered a great deal from boils – I have been forced to work when I was covered with masses of them – up to 100 or more at once on legs, thighs, under the arms.”³⁵

³⁴ Arthur Nantel, “Die Kultur and the Artist, part II,” *Canadian Courier* (2 August 1919), 14.

³⁵ As quoted in Morton, *When Your Number’s Up*, 219.



Top: Arthur Nantel, *Up-to-date version of the prodigal son*, n.d. [ca. 1918], watercolour on paper, 26.1 x 33.1 cm. Bottom: Arthur Nantel, *Frenstuck, Breakfast*, n.d. [ca. 1918], watercolour on paper, 24.4 x 32.7 cm. [Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-0496 & 19710261-0509]

36 ∴ “Resigned to My Sad Fate”

“The hours seemed endless, our only light a miserable carbide lamp,” recounted Nantel. “How we yearned for the sun and trees of the outside world!”³⁶ Cut off from German civilians, he knew little of the turning tide against the German army on the Western Front, especially the steady defeats from July 1918. He and fellow prisoners were not even told of the Armistice of 11 November 1918 and he was not informed that he was a free man until 20 November. When he and his comrades fully understood the news, “We shouted, we laughed, cried, and carried on like lunatics, jumping out of our beds and dancing a wild fan-tango in our night-shirts. No more going down into hell, no more ‘sauerkraut’ and raw fish, but God’s country, the loved ones at home, and everything that makes life worth living.”³⁷

CONCLUSION

It took a few weeks for Nantel to be repatriated to England, arriving to a camp at Dover on 6 December 1918. He was one of the lucky ones, with 283 Canadian prisoners having died while in captivity.³⁸ He carried with him sketches and thirty watercolours that had survived his imprisonment. News spread of his return and he was fortunate to be alerted to the Canadian War Memorials Fund (CWMF). The CWMF gave him a studio to finish a number of his watercolours, which were purchased and displayed from 4 January 1919 at Burlington House in a major exhibition that showcased 355 artworks by Canadians, British and Belgians who painted for Canada.³⁹ Nantel’s collection was titled “Sketches of Prisoner Life in a German Internment and Canada War Incidents” in the catalogue.⁴⁰ While his artwork was overshadowed by more prominent artists, to be included in the exhibition was a significant accomplishment and the only works that provided a view into the experiences of nearly 4,000 Canadian prisoners. The exhibition travelled to New York, Montreal, Toronto and Ottawa. The CWMF collection of nearly

³⁶ Nantel, “Die Kultur and the Artist, part II,” 14.

³⁷ Nantel, “Die Kultur and the Artist, part II,” 14.

³⁸ Morton, *When Your Number’s Up*, 223.

³⁹ Lloyd Bennett, *The 1919 Canadian War Memorials Exhibition, Burlington House, London: A Contextual Study* (New York: Linus, 2015).

⁴⁰ Canadian War Records Office, *Canadian War Memorials Exhibition 1919* (London: H. Stone & Son, 1919).



Arthur Nantel ca. 1946. [Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, 20040082-095]

1,000 works would eventually be sent to the National Gallery and finally transferred to the Canadian War Museum in 1971.⁴¹

Nantel returned to Canada in early 1919 in the great movement of veterans back to their communities. He had been a prewar artist and head of the Art Department of Smeaton Brothers Photo Engravers in Montreal, but he moved to New York in 1920 and later worked as an illustrator for United Artists Studios. He had many roles with the motion picture company, including using chalk on black paper to create borders for movie credits and the dialogue boxes in the silent films.⁴² In the 1930s, he was employed as a freelance illustrator and he acquired a reputation for designing summer homes and boats.⁴³ He died on 11 June 1948 at the age of seventy-five.

While Nantel’s artwork has rarely been displayed, it offers insight into the Second Battle of Ypres and the prisoner of war experience, both of which are poorly documented by artists. This study of Nantel and his artworks shows the importance of connecting soldier-artists to their work and especially the circumstances of their war experience. It also reminds modern observers of the creative impulse of soldiers, who often turned to art to cope, endure and resist. Nantel’s work reminds us of the value of amateur or informal artists in providing a glimpse into the Canadian war experience.⁴⁴ Nantel’s depictions of battle and of imprisonment reveal how he used art to document his war experience and to make meaning of it, and they are another clue as to how he survived the harsh prison conditions during the First World War.



⁴¹ Laura Brandon, “‘A Unique and Important Asset’? The Transfer of the War Art Collections from the National Gallery of Canada to the Canadian War Museum,” *Material History Review* 42 (1995): 67-74.

⁴² Randy Boswell, “Escape to Joy,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, 23 December 2002.

⁴³ Bio file, Arthur Nantel biography, n.d. [ca. 1994], CWM.

⁴⁴ For Canadian soldiers’ art, see Tim Cook, *The Secret History of Soldiers: How Soldiers Survive the Great War* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2018); Amber Lloydlangston and Laura Brandon, *Witness: Canadian Art of the First World War* (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, 2014); Sarafina Pagnotta, “War Stories: The art and memorials collection at the Canadian War Museum,” in *Museums, Modernity and Conflict: Museums in and of War Since the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Kate Hill (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 235-253; and Heather Smith, *Keepsakes of Conflict: Trench Art and Other Canadian War-Related Craft* (Moose Jaw: Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery, 2016). This is a field of study that deserves more attention from scholars.

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