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Paper for Conference, Ottawa, April 2016

‘On The Edge of Two Worlds’: Conquerors or Victims? Eric Kennington (1888-1960), National Identity and the Depiction of the 16th Battalion, Canadian-Scottish (Highlanders of Canada), 1919-20.’

Kennington described the Canadian Highlanders he depicted in 1920 to a British newspaper as being ‘on the edge of two worlds’; evident he found the men in a liminal space between the unfamiliar and the familiar (Kennington had found men in the unit who were: ‘white, brown and red’ as he was to put it, who thought of themselves as English/Scots/British and Canadian); they were also between life and death (the men with ghostly white complexions were already dead – they had survived 1-2 years on the Western Front but not a fortnight of the Spanish Flu caught early in Cologne late in 1918), between war and peace (Kennington had marched with them into Germany in November-December 1918, lived with them January-March 1919 at Huy in Belgium by the River Meuse, placed them on canvas in the spring of 1920 after the formal end of the Great War with the signing of the Peace Treaty at Versailles late in June 1919. However, for the British other wars raged in 1920 – including a vicious campaign against Irish nationalists. The tam o’shanter, so prominent in Kennington’s canvas had lost its innocence and positive connotations as by the spring of 1920 it was associated in the British press with the brutal, transgressive military figure of British war veterans, the ‘Black and Tans’ and The Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary who had volunteered to crush Irish nationalists rebels by any means necessary however brutal and illegal.

Kennington was to deploy a key phrase at the time – the men of the Canadian-Scottish were killers and yet they were saviours; they were essentially British and yet had been transformed by the fires of combat. What I find intriguing is that his British audience expected Canadian soldiers and particularly Canadian-Scots to look like ‘killers’, implacable and unstoppable ‘stormtroopers’ (the term was first applied to them by Lord Beaverbrook’s Canadian War memorials scheme when the canvas when was exhibited in Ottawa in July-August 1920) – disturbing precisely because they evoked German counterparts who had been constructed from the Spring of 1918 as embodying German militarism incarnate – ruthless, pitiless and all too characteristic of Total Warfare.

Slide: *EHK – Self-Portrait (1918)*

Who was the artist? Born March 1888 in Fulham South-West London into prosperous, professional late Victorian middle class household. Father was respected genre painter Thomas Benjamin Kennington (1856-1916). Important that he was a public school boy – St Pauls, for 4 years (1900-1901) and his concept of admirable masculinity was inextricably bound up with his favourite authors as a

teenager: Kipling, Jack London, Henty and Robert Service (Service significantly shaped his perception of Canada and Canadians – when he first encountered the Canadian-Scottish he was surprised to discover few had been hardy lumberjacks in the vast frozen wastes but one man at least who place in the foreground of his composition for *The Conquerors* on their first meeting immediately summoned the shade of ‘Dangerous Dan McGrew’).

He studied at the Lambeth School of Art and the City and Guilds schools, confusingly situated in the south London suburb of Kennington. Before the war he first came to critical and public attention 1912-14 with a series of hyper-real paintings of itinerant street traders, Costermongers, on the margins of Edwardian urban society. They constituted his ‘urban exotic.’ Were they originally Irish, gypsies, Italians or as Henry Mayhew fancifully mused an off shoot of the lost tribe of Israel?

Examples: **Slides:** *Light-hearted London* (1912) and *The Costardmongers* (1914).

His view of them was also shaped and infused by a phase of Christian Socialism he was experiencing at the time.

Despite his sincere Anglicanism Kennington never personally inclined towards pacifism; 6 August 1914 he volunteered as a private in the 13th Battalion, the London Regiment – commonly known as ‘The Kensingtons’. He spent mid November 1914 to mid January 1915 in and out the front line in north-eastern France, in the vicinity of the town of Laventie. He was wounded in his left foot and lost his middle toe (the wound became infected and for a while it was touch and go whether he lost the entire foot). He was given a honourable medical discharge from the army in June 1915: devoted the rest of the year to paint in reverse of a large sheet of glass the amazing, totemic **Slide:** *The Kensingtons at Laventie: Winter 1914*. Here heroism and manliness lies in endurance, stoicism, refusing to collapse despite exhaustion, wounds and the bitter cold.

The painting created a sensation when exhibited at the Goupil Gallery in central London in April-July 1916 (one admiring visitor to the Gallery was future Lord Beaverbrook – accompanied by his Anglo-Hungarian art advisor Paul George Konody). Unsurprisingly, Kennington was employed as an official war artist by the new Department of Information in August 1917 with a brief to go to France and draw portraits of the men of Britain’s citizen army. **Slides:** *The Linesman* (1917) and *The Raider with a Cosh – London Rifle Brigade* (1918) and *The Ration Carrier* (1918 – EHK always attracted by the figure of the marching man). His images were exhibited June-July 1918 at the Leicester Galleries in Leicester Square with an admiring introduction in the catalogue by no less than soldier-poet Robert Graves. Kennington’s Tommies were ‘the real thing’: not sentimentalised, or infantilised, or presented as victims but as ‘warriors for the working day’ – skilled, matter-of-fact, self-assured, undaunted.

Kennington felt out with his employers in what had been expanded to become a Ministry of Information (headed by Beaverbrook though Kennington's immediate superior was future Governor-General of Canada, John Buchan – who intriguingly did not care for Kennington's work); he resigned in September 1918. A month later Paul Konody snapped him up to come to work for the CWMS (also headed by Beaverbrook! He offered better pay and temporary ranks as a Captain in the CEF).

Kennington joined the First Canadian Infantry Division in mid November 1918, only about a week after the Armistice, marching to Cologne and the German Rhineland. Konody wanted him to draw senior officers and generals – Kennington, as early winter snow fell (**Slide**) was much more interested in the veterans in the ranks who had fought as part of the impressive Canadian contribution to the victories of the One Hundred Days (August-November 1918). The British artist was readily impressed by the 16th Canadian-Scottish formed at the outbreak of war from elements from four Canadian Highland units under the inspired leadership of its formidable CO – Lt. Col Cyrus Peck VC (medal awarded for his leadership under fire in September 1918). Peck wrote poetry (WB Yeats was a favourite of his), devised the Battalion's badge, motto and tartan in 1914. Can see it worn by the rugged **Slide Sergeant Smith** (the man who immediately made Kennington think of Dangerous Dan McGrew).

From the outset Peck was determined his battalion would have a superb pipe band – with a West Indian bandmaster/stretch-bearer – even though some Canadian-Scottish units would not admit 'black negroes' into their ranks. Kennington's eye was also caught by the distinctive figure of a native Canadian in the battalions uniform – a private 'MacDonald' who presumably had volunteered under an assumed name? A popular man in the Battalion he had won the Military Medal for courage and resourcefulness in the Battle of the Canal du Nord in October 1918 (where the Battalion had suffered its heaviest losses for 1918 in this its last major engagement); he was known to his comrades as 'The Fighting Eskimo.'

Kennington marched with the Canadian-Scottish – a piratical, rough and no-nonsense crew according to the artist – to Cologne which they reached in December 1918. Their Division then marched back into Belgium early in January 1919; the battalion awaited a move to the UK and shipping back to Canada in a camp at Huy where men began to fall ill from Spanish Flu which Colonel Peck was convinced the men had contracted in Cologne – where the disease was running unchecked among the civilian population (Kennington had seen a softer side to the men of the Battalion in their inter-actions with starving German children). The battalion was now an amalgam of veterans who had survived three pitched battles in which the battalion had participated with distinction in 1918 and recently arrived replacements. Both the veterans and new boys fell ill, sickened and were dead from the flu in days.

In mid March 1919 the battalion marched to Antwerp to take ship to England, from thence in June to Canada and a hurried demobilisation in a Winnipeg in the grip of

the General Strike (the authorities apparently feared some of the battalions rank and file might join the strikers taking their arms with them). Colonel Peck and the battalion's first historian, Percy Godenrath, were disgusted with the way the battalion had been broken up with such little ceremony and the most perfunctory thanks.

Kennington moved to meet a fellow artist employed by the CWMS, William Rothenstein, sketching in the vicinity of the much fought over French town of Cambrai. There Kennington drew abandoned trench systems, bunkers, dugouts and disturbed battlefield graves **Slides** – especially German graves with white bones exposed to the sun. (one of these studies so impressed TS Eliot when he saw it in Kennington's exhibition of his work for the Canadians held in London at the Alpine Club Gallery in October-November 1920 that he bought it and displayed it above his desk. He later claimed it had inspired him while musing on the theme of the 'hollow men').

Kennington combined the portraits drawn in Belgium early in 1919 and the sketches made around Cambrai in March-June 1919 in the composition for what the CWMS ordained was to be titled *The Conquerors*. Kennington worked on the huge canvas during the spring of 1920. He had not quite finished all the background by the time the work was despatched to Ottawa to be exhibited in July-August 1920. Colonel Peck was delighted by the painting but puzzled why some of the men had chalk-white faces. The painting was described by the CWMS as depicting 'battle-hardened stormtroopers of the 16th Canadian-Scottish marching to the relief of battered and withdrawing British troops.' Kennington was known to have been nettled at the implication that the Canadians had effectively won the war on the Western Front in 1918. He had taken note that over half of the men of the battalion he had drawn had been born in the UK and thought of themselves not as Canadian but as British [Interesting that JL Granatstein in 2014 quoted figures that of the 26 battalions of the EF with Scottish/Highland designations by 1918 up to 40% had been born in England/described themselves as 'English' in origins when they volunteered while between 7 and 22% had been born in Scotland and or claimed Scottish ancestry].

Peck and the battalions Old Comrades Association were pleased with *The Conquerors*; they were very unhappy with what Kennington did next. He reclaimed the painting early in September 1920, put finishing touches to it during the first three weeks of October 1920 and it was the centrepiece of his solo show at the Alpine Club Gallery which opened at the end of the month. The canvas was now displayed as *The Victims*. Kennington informed several papers from the London press that: 'this could be the only possible and accurate title.' Yes, they had played a distinguished role in the defeat of Germany in 1918 but a year later their own government had treated them in the most shabby and flint-hearted manner (Peck felt this sentiment was accurate but did not care for Canadian dirty linen to be washed in the full glare of the British public).

In the background the London press were also full of stories about the marauding activities of the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries in Ireland (by the time Kennington's show had closed the latter had infamously burnt down half of Cork as a reprisal after one of their patrols had been ambushed and cut to ribbons by Irish nationalists).

Certain British art critics acknowledged that the Canadian-Highlanders as perceived by Kennington looked suitably formidable but they were also disturbed. One even likened them to a 'Frankenstein's Monster' – a terrifying and ungodly hybrid of the familiar and the totally new, men forged by the modern fires of the first global war.

The painting was admired by Kennington's friend Robert Graves, though he hoped the artist would present a more 'spiritual' image of the British soldier in the war memorial Kennington had started work on in 1920 – **slide** *The Twenty Fourth Infantry Division Memorial* unveiled in Battersea Park in October 1924. Graves advised Kennington, as he modelled for one of the memorial's three figures, that it was all very well presenting the Canadians as a band of rough and ready hard-cases, happiest wrestling bears and other creatures in the wilderness, but the British Tommy had to be more 'lovable and approachable' which was Kennington attempted to carve into his three soldiers.

Parting proof that his time with the Canadian-Scottish held considerable significance for him. In 1919 **slide** he produced a pastel/watercolour of a snowy Belgian landscape. Back in London he thought of adding some Canadian-Scots marching in the foreground. He initially decided to remove all the figures he had sketched in but his wife to be, the Hon Celandine Cecil. Insisted he keep one ghostly figure clearly wearing kilt and bonnet of the Canadian-Scottish. The work was displayed in their bedroom until Kennington's death from cancer in April 1960.