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John Bellany, Elsie Inglis and the Scottish Women's Hospitals

Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat (Friday 25 March 2016)

In the Scottish Parliament building at Holyrood, that magnificent structure designed by the Spanish architect Enric Miralles, punningly and happily described by the poet Kathleen Jamie as “a watershed”, there is currently an exhibition entitled “John Bellany and the Scottish Women's Hospitals”. It opened in January and will run to 16 April 2016. There is some serious provocation in this exhibition, an insistence that we do some deep thinking about the relations between politics, medicine, poetry and art.

Ezra Pound, in his essay, “The Serious Artist” from 1913, said this: “The arts give us a great percentage of the lasting and unassailable data regarding the nature of man, of immaterial man, of man considered as a thinking and sentient creature. They begin where the science of medicine leaves off or rather they overlap that science. The borders of the two arts overcross.” He went on: “As there are in medicine the art of diagnosis and the art of cure, so in the arts, in the particular arts of poetry and of literature, there is the art of diagnosis and the art of cure.”

Nowadays, we would insist on saying, “man and woman” but he has a point.

Approaching the exhibition with this in mind is revealing. In the 1890s, Elsie Inglis, who had been deeply involved and active in the suffrage movement, was pioneering her vision of medical treatment. Self-confident, her career continued in Edinburgh as doctor and surgeon specialising in treating women and children. When the First World War broke out she marched into the War Office and offered her services to do something valuable. She was dismissed with the advice, “My good lady, go home and sit still.” Instead, she offered her services to the French, who accepted them.

Liz Lochhead's poem, “The Ballad of Elsie Inglis” tells her story. Born in India in 1864, she trained in the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women when it opened in 1886. (Women students had been admitted to the Glasgow School of Art for the first time only one year earlier.) She studied at the Royal Infirmary in Glasgow, becoming one of the very first women to qualify as a doctor and surgeon in 1892, at the age of 27. She worked in hospitals across the UK and set up clinics for women and children in Edinburgh, often paying for treatment for poorer patients who could not otherwise have afforded it. She joined the suffrage movement and was a member of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies. When war was declared in August 1914, she was nearly 50 years old.

She set up the Scottish Women's Hospitals throughout Europe, in France, Serbia, Macedonia and Russia, treating soldiers from the trenches, wounded by shrapnel and suffering from gangrene, frost-bite, infections of all kinds. More than 1,500 women signed up to work in these hospitals, from all sorts of social strata, from crofters to landowners, freeing themselves from the social constrictions of Edwardian Britain to do something worthwhile in the wider world of Europe, forming friendships and making new companions in foreign

lands. These were new contexts for new priorities, very different from the ethos of the pompous conservative buffoon who had told Elsie to “go home and sit still”. These were times of emancipation for women. Margaret Morris, dancer, lifelong partner of the artist J.D. Fergusson, was of the same generation. Lochhead’s poem concludes that throughout the long years of the war, Elsie had “always known / Exactly what she was fighting / And what she was fighting for.” In 1917, she died of cancer, which she had kept concealed from her colleagues.

The exhibition charts her life – physically, she bears a striking resemblance to Hugh MacDiarmid: a high forehead, features squeezed into the lower two-thirds of the face, curly hair frizzing straight out of her skull, a terrier-like aptitude and fighting-fit stance, eager eyes that seem to spark with intelligence – and the story of the hospitals is documented with photographs, maps and objects, kit-bags, medical instruments and bits of machinery. But what lifts all this into another kind of urgency is both Lochhead’s poem and pre-eminently, John Bellany’s paintings and drawings of wounded men and compassionate nurses and doctors.

Famously, Bellany underwent surgery for a liver transplant in 1988 and his gratitude towards the medical staff who looked after him was immense. He was overwhelmed with admiration when he heard the story of Elsie Inglis and her women’s hospitals. In Helen Bellany’s words, he saw “their sheer courage, commitment and exhaustion in the relentless effort to give that vital comfort, hope and compassion to the desperately ill and dying.”

During the First World War, German artists were pre-eminent in the condemnation of the madness of what was happening: Otto Dix, Max Beckman and George Grosz produced vivid, sometimes satiric, often horrific images that have lasting effect. They had a language in painting that could represent the horrors of war in a way that was extremely unfamiliar to their audiences. There was nothing chauvinistic, heroic or simplistic about it: these were depictions of human beings slaughtering each other and no glorious fatherland was to be celebrated here. All the worst excesses of patriotism had been stripped away in a declaration of common humanity at its most vulnerable and self-destructive. Willing and ignorant people were murdering each other while bankers, weapons-manufacturers and the industries that supplied them, were raking in the profits.

Bellany never experienced the horrors of war at first hand but he did know the doctors and nursing professionals who treated him in the 1980s. This took further his understanding that the barbarous aspect of humanity most powerfully brought to his attention in the visit he made to Buchenwald in 1967, could be countered by strength of will, priorities of sympathy and compassion, hard work and humanism. His experience of what remained as a memorial to the Nazi death camps went deep, and produced some of his most distinctive, shocking works of the 1960s and 70s. These are the works that match those of Dix, Beckman and Grosz.

There is an older precedent for the depiction and response to war in paintings, stories and poems that is relevant here: Goya’s series, “The Disasters of War” from the early 19th

century. These were politicised, polemical, passionate works, unmatched by any contemporary artist. Bellamy knew them well, and his experience of the traditions of art was complemented by what he had seen on television in the 1960s: programmes about the First and Second World Wars, documentaries showing how war was an extension of particular activities and priorities in the social and business world, made at the expense of common humanity. He was able to bring his attentions to bear on the meaning and consequences of 20th-century war and his paintings show this. Therefore, after his experience as a patient close to death in hospital, he was able also to depict conditions of suffering, care, and recuperation and the value of human decency to set lasting value before our eyes. Beckman had seen death at first hand in a field hospital beside the trenches, Bellamy had been close to death himself, in hospital. In both locations, people were dying every night. The experiences of Beckman and Bellamy were threaded on the lines of their memories. After he left hospital, that personal experience and his memories of the art of the two world wars, the fact of such inhumanity and the fact of such human commitment to helping, to medicine, to caring, sustained Bellamy deeply.

In the 60s and 70s, new critical questions were being asked about the First World War and an anti-war movement spoke to the people through Benjamin Britten's War Requiem and equally powerful, desperately moving, desperately undervalued, almost unheard, so rarely performed *Dona Nobis Pacem* by the Scottish composer Ronald Center. There was republication and new familiarity with the English poets of the First World War, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. There were protests against Vietnam and the growing strength of the CND: the prioritisation of the virtues of peace came to the forefront in public discourse.

In the 21st century, to a fearful extent, this has been eclipsed. All the rhetoric of heroism, wars against terror, violence to match violence, is commonplace to a degree that probably resembles the public rhetoric of a hundred years ago more than that of the 1960s and 70s.

For example, think of the film *King and Country*, directed by Joseph Losey in 1964, on the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War One. Tom Courteney played a soldier in the trenches of World War One who is caught walking away from the conflict, tried for desertion, defended by a lawyer played by Dirk Bogarde, and executed by firing squad. The story is almost exactly parallel to that of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's Ewan Tavendale, in the novel *Sunset Song* (1932). The shock and impact of the film would remain with anyone who saw it in the 1960s, but the key questions are these: Could such a film be made in the 21st century? If not, why not? If it were, would it be shown widely? And if it were, what possible impact could it have?

Why is it that in 2016 we're being told so much that war is the solution? Even the anti-war protests that were visible when Tony Blair decided to bomb Iraq seem to have been flushed into historical oblivion. And when Labour politician Hillary Benn declared his approval of the Conservative Party initiative to bomb Syria on 2 December 2015, he was lauded and applauded as a potential leader of "the opposition". Opposition to what?

In Scotland, there is a major body of work by poets who experienced the Second World War, which in quality and range is at least as great as that more familiar body of poetry relating to the First World War. Think of the war poems of Sorley MacLean, extending to the Cold War and the outrageous wrong embodied in nuclear submarines, as described in his poem "Screapadal". Think of George Campbell Hay's "Bizerta", Edwin Morgan's "The New Divan" and Robert Garioch's "The Muir". Think of Hamish Henderson's words, in *Elegies for the Dead in Cyreneica*: "There were ourselves, there were the others... / why should I not sing them, the dead, the innocent?"

In this world, "There were no gods and precious few heroes".

Our politicians, as much as our poets, artists, composers and film-makers, need to make the diagnosis as tough as this. And compassion is only part of the cure.