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Splendour and Sorrow – Dundee’s Newspaper Artists during the Great War

Matthew Jarron and Emma Halford-Forbes

When the journalists from Dundee’s newspapers rushed to enlist on the outbreak of the First World War, they quickly became celebrated as the ‘Fighter Writers’.¹ Less well remembered are the artists who went with them, and less well still those artists who remained in Dundee, many of whom contributed to the war effort in other ways. This paper will shed some light on these overlooked commercial artists, with a particular focus on two artists who went to the front, Joseph Lee and Joseph Gray.

Since the late 19th century, Dundee had built up one of the largest newspaper empires in Britain. Outwardly there were two large companies responsible for this – D.C. Thomson & Co Ltd published the *Dundee Courier*, the *Evening Post*, the *Red Letter*, *My Weekly*, the *Weekly Welcome* and the *Weekly News*, while John Leng & Co published the *Dundee Advertiser*, the *Evening Telegraph*, the *People’s Journal* and the *People’s Friend*. In fact, since John Leng’s death in 1906, Thomson had acquired a controlling interest in the Leng company, which would ultimately lead to the two firms merging in 1926.

Dundee had also been a notable pioneer in newspaper illustration.² In 1880 the *Dundee Advertiser* became the first daily paper in Britain to employ a staff artist to produce regular illustrations. Martin Anderson (later renowned as the satirical cartoonist ‘Cynicus’) was the artist in question, and many more joined him on the Leng or Thomson payroll, including others who would find greater fame working on illustrated papers in London, such as Max Cowper and David Burns Gray. By the 1910s, photographs had started to replace the more conventional illustrations in the Dundee papers, but artists were still much in demand for cartoons, story illustrations and fashion items. There was evidently a strong sense of camaraderie among these artists, as demonstrated by a cartoon published in local magazine *The Wizard of the North* by the *Advertiser* artist Tom Ross, which shows ‘Dundee’s Press Artists Outing’ with a number of artists identified only through the punning remarks in their speech bubbles.³

The war would break up this close-knit group. The younger men left for the front, and there were no longer enough staff left to fulfil the requirements of all the city’s papers. The weekly titles such as the *People’s Journal* thus took priority, while the dailies dealt with the shortage in different ways. The *Advertiser* began sourcing most of its cartoons from other publications – usually *Punch*, though it is interesting to note that they sometimes

reprinted German cartoons as well. By 1916 there were actually more illustrations in the paper than ever before, but none of them by a local staff artist! A frequent feature was work by the Glasgow cartoonist Dyke White, who supplied regular football and political caricatures. White also produced some striking propaganda images for the Leng press – one example from the *People's Journal* of 15 August 1914 invoking the 600th anniversary of Bannockburn as a way of aiding recruitment (Fig.1).

The *Courier* downsized dramatically to just four pages for the duration of the war and generally avoided illustrations altogether. The greatest number of images was to be found in a new title introduced by Thomson in 1914 as a direct result of readers' insatiable desire for war news – the *Post Sunday Special* (later renamed the *Sunday Post*) had a regular feature called 'How the Cartoonists View the War' which reprinted cartoons from around the world.⁴

Of those artists that remained in Dundee, two were particularly notable for their cartoon strips. One was William McMann, who had come to Dundee to work in the lithographic department at Leng's around 1897, becoming a newspaper artist about 1903.⁵ His distinctive cartoons were usually accompanied by his own doggerel verse, most notably in two popular and long-lasting features – 'Kirsty at the Council' in the *Evening Telegraph* and 'Granny's Gossip' in the *People's Journal*. Both were well-established before the war – 'Granny's Gossip' featured a female narrator describing the misadventures of her disaster-prone son. He gets involved in various wartime exploits, such as making his own bombs in the case of enemy invasion.⁶ 'Kirsty at the Council' was far more topical, featuring a typically forthright Dundee woman attending meetings of the Town Council and speaking her mind on the various issues discussed. The war certainly did not prevent her from continuing with this, albeit in a more patriotic vein. In one example from 3 September 1915, Kirsty meets an invalided soldier on her way to the council meeting who tells her of a proposal by a Dundee councillor to start charging servicemen to use the public baths (Fig.2):

'A Dundee Councillor at that!

Weel, Heaven help Dundee.

If she's got ony mair like him,

Ye've got my sympathy.'

[...]

We treat oor German prisoners in

A far mair generous way
Baths are provided, hot and cold,
For which they never pay,
But when it comes to ‘Tommy’ here
It’s charge the brute for fear
The might perchance the tuppence spend
On half a pint o’ beer!

Several similar verses later, Kirsty gets to the council meeting where the proposal is thankfully turned down.

The other artist producing regular topical cartoon strips was Alfred E Morton, known to readers only as ‘AEM’. Morton introduced the *People’s Journal’s* first regular cartoon strip, ‘Haw Wull’ in 1912. Wull was a hapless loafer always accompanied by a little imp character, and the pair proved so popular that within a year they had been promoted to page one. The format was simple – Wull was constantly out of work and each week saw him try his hand at some kind of gainful employment, with disastrous results. The war knocked Wull off the front cover but his exploits continued unabated, generally featuring his attempts to enter military service – with equally unfortunate consequences! Much of the humour relied on wordplay, as shown in Fig.3 from 29 August 1914:

Sweepin’ mines at sea wudna be sae dusty [...] An I’m burstin’ tae hae a
brush wi’ the enemy [...] This is anything but a clean sweep [...] an’ I feel
just about sufficiently sooted on shore.

Strips like this allowed Morton to poke fun at the war and often the military authorities, while at the same time appearing to support the patriotic drive for recruitment. Although Wull never once manages to do anything remotely useful for the war effort, it’s not through want of trying and he never seems remotely deterred by his consistent failures. Wull continued to appear until July 1918. The following March, Morton attempted a new series, ‘Private Smiler’, about a soldier returning from the war and trying to re-adjust to civilian life. Possibly the humour was too close to painful reality (or too politically sensitive for its publishers), since the strip only lasted five weeks and was then replaced by the return of Haw Wull.⁷

Many press artists were recruited to provide other wartime illustrations besides their newspaper duties. Tom Ross, one of the most versatile of artists working in Dundee at the time, created delightfully illustrated ephemera such as the programme for a social event held for staff at the Dundee National Shell Factory (Fig.4). It is notable that Ross and Alf Morton would both have been eligible for conscription in 1916, so presumably there were health reasons why they weren't enlisted. Ross would have seen many of the traditional male roles at Leng's and elsewhere taken over by women, which may have helped prompt a cartoon featuring two soldiers invalided home and looking for the pension office, one saying to the other "I say Bill, I doubt we've quite got into no-man's land."⁸

Both Leng and Thomson were already employing a number of 'lady artists', as they were called, a few years before the start of the war, as part of a general desire to attract more female readers. Both the daily and weekly papers featured regular fashion and society sections as well as romantic serial stories, and by the time the war started the *Courier* had at least three lady artists on its staff – Ruby Scott, Agnes Nicoll and Meta Mitchell. As well as working together the three also studied at the new School of Art in Dundee Technical College, as had Leng's best known lady artist, Jean C. Rollo. Although the war gave women many new responsibilities, none of these lady artists was ever allowed to illustrate any serious war topics or draw political cartoons like their male counterparts.

The second half of this paper will consider some of those artists who left Dundee to go to the front. Among them was probably the city's best known illustrator in the years before the war. Joseph Lee was born in Dundee in 1876 and began work in a solicitor's office.⁹ It failed to inspire him, however, and in 1890 he enrolled in evening art classes at the YMCA. After a few years travelling he attended Heatherley's School of Art in London, and began to submit his drawings to magazines.¹⁰ Returning to Dundee, he began writing and illustrating his own periodicals before joining the staff of Leng's in 1909 as artist and art and music critic. He soon rose to become editor of the *People's Journal*, and was also becoming established as a poet – his first book, *Tales o' our Town*, was published in 1910 and contained many of his distinctive line drawings.

Lee was 38 when the war started and suffered from bronchial asthma, but he joined his younger colleagues in signing up to the 4th Battalion of the Black Watch, known as 'Dundee's Own'.¹¹ At Neuve Chapelle, Loos and the Somme he experienced first-hand the horrors of warfare, and found expression for his experiences in poetry and art, both of which he sent back to Dundee for publication in the *People's Journal*. His first book of war poems, *Ballads of Battle*, was published in 1916 while he was still at the front, and received

favourable reviews both in Britain and in the United States.¹² Undoubtedly a major part of the book's powerful sense of authenticity came from Lee's own illustrations, twelve of which he also sent to the Dundee Art Society for their 1916 exhibition. They included *Dawn in the Trenches* (which Lee left unfinished on the first morning of the Battle of Neuve Chapelle) and were praised by the *Courier* for their 'intense pathos... drawn with a firm hand and much keen characterisation.'¹³ In December that year the *Scotsman* named Lee along with Rupert Brooke and A.P. Herbert as the most popular poets of the war.¹⁴

Lee was able to send further drawings for the 1917 Art Society exhibition, including a 'sympathetic drawing of "German Prisoners"',¹⁵ and his second volume of poetry, *Work-a-day Warriors*, was published later that year.¹⁶ In November, however, Lee and many of his comrades were taken prisoner during the Battle of Cambrai. Their destination was Karlsruhe camp in Germany; despite numerous attempts, no one ever managed to escape from Karlsruhe. *En route*, Lee had persuaded one of his captors to buy him a sketchbook and pencil, and after careful scrutiny he was allowed to keep these and use them freely within the camp (see Fig.5).

At Karlsruhe, Lee joined officers from seventeen different nationalities, many of whom he sketched. A notable feature of the illustrations from all his war books was his interest in depicting soldiers from other countries – including India, Nepal, Serbia, Italy, France and Australia.¹⁷ His portraits of his fellow prisoners soon attracted attention. As Lee later recalled:

One day I found the Commandant looking over my shoulder. He was keenly interested, suggested that he might give me a sitting, and reverted several times to the question of price. Finally I hinted that while I could not dream of accepting monetary recompense, he could, if he cared to be so complaisant, connive at my escape by way of part payment!¹⁸

In July 1918 Lee was moved to another camp at Beeskow. Here security was much more lax – a parole system was introduced which allowed Lee to wander unaccompanied into town and sketch his surroundings. Many of these illustrations later featured in his autobiographical book *A Captive at Carlsruhe*, published in 1920.

Before his capture the Dundee papers had followed Lee's progress with both pride and apprehension. On 27 November 1915 the *People's Journal* devoted a full-page spread to "Dundee's Own" Artist at the Front', reporting on his whereabouts and reproducing

fifteen of his sketches along with two poems. But Lee was just one of many newspaper artists fighting overseas, and the female illustrators who remained anxiously awaited news of all of them.¹⁹ Ruby Scott kept an album in which she pasted cuttings relating to her friends and colleagues from D.C. Thomson's art department at the front. They tell the stories of Sergeant-Piper Dan McLeod of the Black Watch, a process blockmaker who was awarded the Military Medal; of Private Walter Auld of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders, a linotype operator awarded the DCM but then reported missing in action; of Private Alex C Brown of the Black Watch, a *Courier* artist killed in action at Aubers Ridge; and of Private George Rushworth of the Fife & Forfar Yeomanry, a *Weekly News* artist who died at Gallipoli.²⁰

Scott's main concern, however, was her husband-to-be Sergeant Frank Coutts, serving with the 5th Black Watch. Coutts had studied at Dundee School of Art then spent five years training as an architect with Leslie, Ower & Allan before joining the Artistic Department of the *Courier* in 1907. One of his letters to her survives, in which he tells her to 'Beg, borrow or steal Bairnsfather's "Bullets & Billets"'.²¹ Bruce Bairnsfather was a hugely popular artist whose 'Old Bill' cartoons became the most famous comic depiction of the war, adapted for both stage and screen. Coutts goes on to describe his own billet, somewhere in France:

This one is built over with sandbags and contains two beds, a table and some shell boxes used as shelves. It might stop a direct hit from a very tiny shell, but I hope it isn't tested during my tenancy [...]. If you want to know about dug-outs and such, ask Joe Grey, or go to his exhibition.²²

'Joe' was Joseph Gray, a press artist who, like Lee, sent his war sketches home to be exhibited. Born in South Shields, Tyne and Wear in 1890, Gray was the son of a master mariner and, as a result, trained as a marine engineer before studying at South Shields School of Art. Gray later became assistant art master at the school and travelled widely during this period, visiting France, Holland, Russia, Germany and Spain.

Aged 22 Gray joined the staff at D.C. Thomson as a black and white artist for the *Courier* and other papers, beginning his long association with the city.²³ The bonds of comradeship formed during his early years in Dundee inspired Gray to join his colleagues in signing up to the 4th Black Watch at the outbreak of war. Gray was

later mentioned in the autobiography of one of Dundee's 'Fighter Writers', William Linton Andrews:

Presently, to my immense joy, some of my office colleagues joined. We kept together as much as we could and called ourselves "the Fighter-Writers"[...]. By those who met me for the first time it was regarded as one of my peculiarities that I spoke with an English accent. My occasional reading of foreign newspapers inspired rumours that I must be a German agent. A company commander, Captain Boase, sent for me to put these suspicions to the test [...]. A friend who joined a little later, Joseph Gray, an English artist, fell under the same suspicion because he had a Northumbrian accent and could speak German.²⁴

Gray later recalled the transformation of the Battalion from a disparate group of men coming from all walks of life:

The entirely new conditions of life, with its strict discipline different in every detail from those under which we had previously lived, made an indelible impression, but above all was the subtle feeling, almost undefinable at the time, that we no longer lived each for himself. We had become members of a brotherhood-in-arms.²⁵

Upon arriving at the Front, Gray's ability as a draughtsman were put into use. In addition to duplicating trench maps, he was attached to the Intelligence Staff to draw plans of the German positions. In 1916, however, he was invalided home suffering from bouts of trench fever and being wounded by sniper-fire. While recovering, he managed to find a new role as war artist and correspondent to the London magazine *The Graphic*.²⁶ He began work on a series of pictures documenting the life of the 4th Black Watch, which were exhibited at Robert Scott's gallery in Dundee in February 1917. The *Courier* hailed them as 'a vivid panorama of life on the Flanders front, its squalor, its perils, its moments grim and gay, and its extraordinarily varied and picturesque accessories.'²⁷ Gray later presented several of

his pictures (and their copyright) to the Scottish branch of the Red Cross, to be auctioned to raise funds.

During 1917, Gray wrote a detailed account of the 4th Battalion, which was serialised in the Dundee Advertiser.²⁸ Like his artworks, Gray worked from his own memories and those of others, and was ‘a stickler for accuracy [...] intending it as both a history and a tribute to the men with whom he had served.’²⁹

Gray thought of himself as old school; his intention was to illustrate the war as he and his comrades saw it. His sketches of the Front and his portraits were detailed, accurate and emotive. After the war, many of his portraits were used as studies for large-scale oil paintings, including *Ration Party of the 4th Black Watch* (1919, Imperial War Museum) and *The 4th Black Watch in the Attack* (Fig. 6). His most ambitious work was *After Neuve Chapelle* (1921, Dundee Art Galleries & Museums), a depiction of the Battalion on the day of their first engagement with the enemy on 10 March 1915. The *Evening Telegraph* claimed: ‘It is a work vivid with the glow of personal experience and surcharged with the tragedy of a great and disastrous day.’³⁰ The painting was begun in Gray’s Barnhill studio in 1921 and presented to Dundee’s permanent collection the following year by the few surviving officers of the battalion. A print of the painting was made for sale, with proceeds going to The Black Watch Memorial Home in Broughty Ferry.

Gray’s large-scale group portraits, of which he did several, were highly detailed and accurate pieces of work. All of these paintings, even those illustrating action, had a detailed key to name each individual depicted. Gray was determined to do justice to his fallen comrades, whose presence he continued to feel after their deaths. In a letter to Mary Meade (later his second wife) in 1941, Gray said:

In the last two years of the war most of my best friends were killed alongside of me. As they went, one by one, all in their early twenties – all men of subtlety and imagination – intellectuals – or ‘intelligents’ with the supreme and trained bodies of the first armies – really the best in the country – I remember the conviction that I formed that it was ridiculous and absurd to assume that because their bodies were shattered and finished that they were finished too. Of course they went on.³¹

After the war, Gray continued to work with great success as both a painter and as a printmaker. While Joseph Lee largely abandoned art in favour of journalism (settling in London to work on the *News Chronicle*), Gray continued to receive commissions for large-scale group portraits akin to *After Neuve Chapelle*. When the memorialisation period ended and such commissions dried up, he became well-known as a printmaker and was acclaimed for his drypoint etchings, which often depicted architectural and landscape subjects. In the run-up to the Second World War, Gray was involved in developing and creating camouflage. He was recruited into the Royal Engineers and was sent all around the country visiting sites of national importance, working out ways to hide them.

Lee died in 1949, and Gray in 1962. Their legacy is a body of work built out of an intense feeling of brotherhood-in-arms, achieved despite the adversity and loss suffered by the men of the 4th. Gray captured the significance of the Battalion for Dundee in one of his *Advertiser* articles: ‘it is the Fourth Black Watch that essentially personifies for us both the splendour and the sorrow of our sacrifice. Individually we may follow the fortunes of other units, but in the Fourth the whole city finds glory in victory and grief in adversity.’³²

In the decade following the war, Dundee’s newspaper cartoonists turned away from reality altogether, targeting young readers for the first time. Leng scored a surprise hit with the long-running serial adventures of Billy and Bunny, introduced to the *Advertiser* in 1919 by staff artist James Crichton, formerly a Lance-Corporal in the King’s Liverpool Regiment, invalided in April 1918.³³ In 1921, Thomson introduced its first boys’ paper, *Adventure*, whose instant success led to *The Rover* (1922), *The Wizard* (1923), *The Skipper* (1930) and *The Hotspur* (1933). Known as the ‘Big Five’, these internationally popular comics included thrilling wartime exploits, stories which bore no resemblance to the genuine experience of the conflict borne by their creators.

Illustration captions

1. Dyke White, Recruiting advertisement printed in the *People’s Journal*, 1914

By kind permission of DC Thomson & Co Ltd

2. William McMann, Illustrations from ‘Granny’s Gossip’ printed in the *Evening Telegraph*, 1915

By kind permission of DC Thomson & Co Ltd

3. Alfred E. Morton, 'Haw Wull' cartoon strip printed in the *People's Journal*, 1914

By kind permission of DC Thomson & Co Ltd

4. Tom Ross, Illustrations for National Shell Factory Staff Social programme, 1918

Libraries, Leisure & Culture Dundee

5. Joseph Lee, *Beeskow*, 1918. Pencil on paper.

University of Dundee Museum Services

6. Joseph Gray, *The 4th Black Watch in the Attack*, 1922. Oil on canvas.

The Black Watch Castle & Museum

Author's Biographies

Matthew Jarron is Curator of Museum Services at the University of Dundee and a former Chair of the Scottish Society for Art History. He is the author of several publications including *David Foggie: the Painters' Painter* (2004) and *A Glimpse of a Great Vision: The D'Arcy Thompson Zoology Museum Art Fund Collection* (2014). He has edited or co-edited issues of the *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History*, *Museum Management & Curatorship* and *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* and is about to publish a major study of Art in Dundee c.1867-1924.

Emma Halford-Forbes is the Manager and Curator at The Black Watch Castle & Museum, one of the few financially independent and sustainable regimental museums in the UK. She worked in community and museum development before joining the Museum in 2007. Since then, Emma has led the Museum through a major redevelopment project, including the reinterpretation and redisplay of the Museum and the building of new stores for the reserve collection.

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- ¹ They are described in, among others, Andrew Murray Scott, *Dundee's Literary Lives Vol. 2: Twentieth Century*, Dundee 2003, chapter one.
- ² This remarkable story will be told in detail in Matthew Jarron's forthcoming book '*Independent & Individualist: Art in Dundee 1867-1924*', Dundee 2015.
- ³ *The Wizard of the North*, May 1912.
- ⁴ For example the *Post Sunday Special* of 29 November 1914 features French, American, Canadian and Australian cartoons.
- ⁵ His first signed work in the *People's Journal* appears on 9 April 1904, but a series of five unidentified cartoons illustrating a poem called 'Fiscalitis' on 19 December 1903 look like his style.
- ⁶ *People's Journal*, 27 February 1915.
- ⁷ Political historian Dr Kenneth Baxter of the University of Dundee has observed (in personal communication with Matthew Jarron) that this was not long after the Bloody Friday riots in Glasgow, scenes which neither Leng nor Thomson would have wanted to see repeated in Dundee.
- ⁸ The original drawing is held by Dundee Central Library, Local History Centre – it is not certain whether it was ever published.
- ⁹ The story of Lee's eventful life is told in greatest detail (though not entirely accurately) in Bob Burrows, *Fighter Writer*, Derby 2004. Part of the text given here is drawn from the introduction to Caroline Brown & Matthew Jarron (eds), *Joseph Lee: Poems from the Great War*, Dundee 2014.
- ¹⁰ Burrows (n.9) p.30 incorrectly claims that he studied at the Slade during this period
- ¹¹ The story of the 4th is described in Julie Danskin, *A City at War: The 4th Black Watch, Dundee's Own*, Dundee 2013.
- ¹² Joseph Lee, *Ballads of Battle*, London 1916.
- ¹³ *Dundee Courier*, 13 April 1916.
- ¹⁴ *The Scotsman*, 5 December 1916.
- ¹⁵ *Dundee Courier*, 13 April 1917.
- ¹⁶ Joseph Lee, *Work-a-day Warriors*, London 1917.
- ¹⁷ Many of his original drawings are held by the University of Dundee Museum Services, the University of Dundee Archive Services and the Black Watch Castle & Museum.
- ¹⁸ Joseph Lee, *A Captive at Carlsruhe*, London 1920, pp.39-40.
- ¹⁹ To give an idea of the numbers involved, the *Dundee Courier* 29 November 1915 published a list of some 300 Dundee newspaper men serving in the war.
- ²⁰ The album is owned by Ruby Scott's daughter; the cuttings are all undated.
- ²¹ Letter from Frank Coutts to Ruby Scott, 31 March 1917, owned by their daughter.
- ²² See n.21.
- ²³ Much of the information from this section is drawn from A. Harvey and F. Weir, 'Fighter-Writer', on the authoritative website <http://www.josephgray.co.uk> (accessed 8 January 2015).
- ²⁴ W. Linton Andrews, *Linton Andrews: The Autobiography of a Journalist*, London 1964, pp.82-3.
- ²⁵ *Dundee Advertiser*, 3 December 1917. More of Gray's account of the 4th Black Watch can be found in Danskin (n.11).
- ²⁶ *Evening Telegraph*, 18 October 1916.
- ²⁷ *Dundee Courier*, 27 February 1917.
- ²⁸ *Dundee Advertiser*, 3 December 1917 to 7 January 1918.
- ²⁹ Harvey and Weir (n.23).
- ³⁰ *Evening Telegraph*, 23 July 1926.
- ³¹ Taken from a letter from Joseph Gray to Mary Meade, dated 6 January 1941, courtesy of the Gray family.
- ³² *Dundee Advertiser*, 3 December 1917.
- ³³ The daily single-panel stories would transfer to the joint *Courier & Advertiser* in 1926 and went on to run for decades, alongside the best-selling *Billy and Bunny Books* from 1921 to 1949. Crichton (1892-1962) would go on to create Korky the Cat for *The Dandy*.