On the Road to Nijmegen—Earle Birney and Alex Colville, 1944–1945

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Introduction¹

That the Canadian army played a significant role in liberating the Netherlands from German occupation between D-Day (June 6, 1944) and the unconditional surrender of Germany on May 5, 1945 has been well-documented by historians, diarists, and even—if to a lesser extent than the contributions made by the British and American forces—by novelists and poets (Bosscher; Davey; Zuehlke). The carefully maintained Canadian Military Cemeteries in the Netherlands— at Bergen op Zoom (968 graves), Groesbeek (2,400 graves) and Holten (close to 1,400 graves)—form a compelling memorial to the sacrifice of many Canadian lives. The Canadian war effort was decisive on at least three major fronts. In November 1944, in the Southwest, Canadians fought the Germans at the battle of Walcheren, to keep control over the Scheldt estuary and thus ensure open access to the Antwerp harbor for the Allied forces. In September 1944, in the Southeast, the Allied forces, predominantly American, marched through a narrow corridor from Belgium into the Eindhoven area and on to Nijmegen, as part of Operation Market Garden—its aim being to secure the two strategic bridges, one at Nijmegen across the river Waal, the other at Arnhem, across the Rhine. The city of Nijmegen was technically liberated by the Allied forces on September 20, but with Operation Market Garden grinding to a halt just north of Nijmegen—the bridge at Arnhem proving, in Cornelius Ryan’s famous words “a bridge too far”—the city remained under German fire and shelling through the winter and spring of 1944–1945. In November,

1 I thank the following people for helping me to locate poetic and visual representations of Nijmegen by Canadian poets and painters: Sherrill Grace, University Killam Professor, Department of English, University of British Columbia; Laura Brandon, Historian, Art and War, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa; Amber Lloydlangston, Historian, Art and War, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa; Jane Naisbitt, Head, Military History Research Centre and Collections Information, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

Canadian troops took over defending and protecting the city from the British; they effectively stayed until the spring of May 1945. After February 8, they pushed into the German Rhineland, as part of Operation Veritable. As a third front, from March 23 to the end of hostilities in May, the Canadian army moved back into the Netherlands and was crucial in liberating the regions north of the rivers Waal and Rhine (Rosendaal; Zuehlke).

During their long presence in the Nijmegen area Canadian soldiers largely enjoyed cordial and friendly relations with the local population. Welcomed as liberators and defenders, they could count on sympathy and cooperation, and were often warmly received into Nijmegen homes. That is not to say their behavior was at all times beyond reproach. If fraternization with the Nijmegen people was allowed, and even—within limits—encouraged by the military authorities, Canadian soldiers were as vulnerable to human weakness as others and not always willing or able to be cast in the role of exemplars of heroism, nobility and morality. As Michiel Horn has noted, “the Canadians were no saints; they were mostly young men who had fought, faced death, and lived” (Horn 158). They had trouble maintaining morale; under the pressure of ongoing counterattacks and shelling by a German army which proved a great deal more resilient and persistent than expected, they were ready for pleasure and relief; in interaction with a local population starved, pauperized and deprived, a black market economy of bartering cigarettes, food, liquor, and chocolate flourished; destruction and looting were regular occurrences (Horn, 156–73 *passim*). A vivid glimpse into the conditions of everyday life in frontline-city Nijmegen and the struggles of its inhabitants to survive—often in basement bomb cellars—amidst the shelling and burning buildings, is offered by the diary of Jan Hendriks, then a nineteen-year-old Nijmegen pianist. In exchange for cigarettes, chocolate, tea, hard liquor (which he then traded) or cans of corned beef, pork, and sardines, he regularly performed American jazz and dance music for the Allied forces, in local bars, societies, homes and concert halls like De Vereeniging which, under its temporary new name of “Wintergarden,” was a central place for relaxation and congregation of Canadian military personnel. The Canadians, Hendriks noted in his diary on November 16, were fierce drinkers, especially when they had to go into battle the next day (“Pleasure and death are close companions” [71]); being strong, healthy and (comparatively) wealthy, they were also serious competitors for Nijmegen boys for the graces—and sexual favors—of Nijmegen girls:

Nijmegen is a Catholic, conservative bulwark, but at present the clergy has no grip on this unexpected, new situation. We read in the papers that the Nijmegen girls must preserve their honor, but there is no way that going out with Canadian soldiers or visiting dance parties can be

forbidden. The population will not keep to the regulations. This is not a good time to be engaged to a Dutch girl. Many engagements are broken. The girls go out dancing with the Allied soldiers, and the Nijmegen boys have nothing to offer. The soldiers give the girls cigarettes, chocolate and nylon stockings, a product we did not know yet. Dresses are made out of parachute materials, and the soldiers stationed in the Nijmegen area bring goods from empty houses in the frontlines and present these to the girls. (Hendriks, entry November 21, 1944, 73)

Unwanted pregnancies, illegitimate births, venereal diseases, and a massive number of Dutch-Canadian war brides (as well as broken-off relations) were the long-term result—according to Horn (170), the Canadian government paid the passage to Canada of 1,886 Dutch war brides and 428 children, the second largest contingent, after the 4,868 British war brides.² The Canadian poet Raymond Souster captured some of these realities in his poem “Nijmegen, Holland, 1944” showing how reputed misbehavior on the part of Canadian liberators preceded their actual arrival on the scene, and could be misconstrued—and misused—by German propaganda:

“The Canadian Indians are coming,”
the German troops warned us solemnly,
that afternoon they left our city
for the last time.

“You’ll know them by their faces
painted red, blue and yellow,
from the way they loot your houses,
steal your food, rape your women.
So keep your blinds well down,
don’t show fire-smoke,
hide your daughters in the attic,
and perhaps do some extra praying.”

That’s what the Germans told us,
so we trembled all night in our beds,
not wanting to wake in the morning.

2 As both Horn and Bosscher have noted, reliable figures in these matters are particularly difficult to come by. See Horn 167–70 and Bosscher 172–76 for a balanced discussion of the relations between Canadian soldiers and Dutch women.

Then peeked out through our front windows
 very early to see slowly working their way
 first down one street then another,
 the white, nervous faces of young boys
 trying almost too hard to act
 like tough, devil-may-care fighting men,
 and just barely missing in the part.

I wept openly with joy
 looking at each uncomplicated face
 knowing Holland was free at last,
 knowing Holland was both safe and free. (Colombo and Richardson,
 161–62)

It is against the background of the Canadian military presence in Nijmegen, that in this essay I want to examine the representation of war-torn Nijmegen in the art of two Canadians who—each in his own way—marched “the road to Nijmegen”: poet Earle Birney (1904–1995) and painter Alex Colville (1920–2013). Specifically I want to try and understand why in particular Nijmegen became a central symbolic motif in their artistic rendering of their war experience. What was it about the location, strategic importance, or “spectacle” of Nijmegen that made it a challenging and significant topic for artistic rendering by these two Canadian artists? How did their experience of Nijmegen as frontline city reverberate with larger philosophical or metaphysical concerns? What explains the special appeal of Nijmegen to their artistic imaginations?

Early Birney, “The Road to Nijmegen”

During the 1930s poet and novelist Earle Birney (Fig. 1), ambitious to be a professional medievalist and university teacher, had foregone the writing of verse to give priority to what he then felt was the more pressing obligation of commitment to the world revolution as advocated by Leon Trotsky. But by 1939, the outbreak of the war, and Trotsky’s support of the Russian invasion in Finland, had not only disillusioned Birney with Trotskyism, it had also made him take up the concentrated art of writing poetry as a kind of “safety valve,” as he said in a 1946 radio interview: “the pressure of world events made me feel that there were things I wanted to say, and I didn’t have time to say them in any lengthier way” (Davey 239). In 1940, after the German invasion in Russia, he joined an army officers’ training camp, and by 1942 he

had become a personnel selection officer as well as a published poet: his first collection, *David*, won the Governor General's Award that year. In March 1943 he arrived in England in the rank of captain, and he spent much of 1943–1944 in England, enjoying his work as a personnel selection officer, as well as the sexual freedom that for him came with being away from his wife and son, and the making of new women-friends in London. As Davey notes, Birney's actual period of service on the continent was relatively brief: he was sent to the Dutch-Belgian border in November 1944, to offer moral and psychiatric support to the Canadian troops that had fought to protect the Scheldt estuary. He was stationed in Ghent and, in December, travelled “the road to Nijmegen” where he stayed during the turbulent and bitter winter of 1944–1945. In March he was hospitalized in Ghent, suffering from dysentery and diphtheria, and wrote his poem “The Road to Nijmegen,” before being sent back to Canada in mid-July (Davey 240).

Though Birney was not the only Canadian poet to incorporate Nijmegen into his work—besides Raymond Souster, Alden Nowlan references Nijmegen in his poem “Ex-Sergeant Whalen Tells This Story” (Colombo and Richardson, 162–63)—“The Road to Nijmegen” is without a doubt the Canadian poem that

FIGURE 1

Earle Birney in the 1930s. IMAGE APPEARS COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS MSC 13.9.1.21.

explores the meaning of “Nijmegen” with deepest resonance and complexity.³ Birney travelled his road to Nijmegen not as part of Operation Market Garden in September 1944, but later, most probably in December 1944, when the road functioned mostly as a wartime supply road, connecting the Canadian troops on the Nijmegen frontlines with support to the back. For Canadian soldiers the “road to Nijmegen”—or, in Canadian military parlance, the “Maple Leaf Up” or “Maple Leaf Highway” or “Maple Leaf Route” (Davey 243)—in effect signaled the route from Ghent to Turnhout and, by way of Eindhoven, Son and Grave to Nijmegen. Here is the poem in the more succinct revised version as included by Birney in his 1975 *Collected Poems*:⁴

The Road to Nijmegen

December my dear on the road to Nijmegen
between the stones and the bitten sky
was your face

Not yours at first
but only the countenance of lank canals
and gathered stares
(too rapt to note my passing)
of graves with frosted billy-tins for epitaphs
bones of tanks beside the stoven bridges

and old men in the mist
hacking the last chips
from a boulevard of stumps

These for miles and the fangs of homes
where women wheeled in the wind
on the tireless rims of their cycles
like tattered sailboats,
tossing over the cobbles

3 In the following analysis I am indebted to Frank Davey, who has offered a compelling in-depth reading of “The Road to Nijmegen” in “Earle Birney in Holland” (Davey 2005), contextualizing the poem in light of Birney’s references to Nijmegen in his fiction, in particular his novel *Turvey: A Military Picaresque* (1949), and letters.

4 Quoted from *The Essential Earle Birney* (2014), 22–23. Birney included an earlier more elaborate version in his 1945 book of poems *Now is Time*.

and the children
 groping in gravel for knobs of coal
 or clustered like wintered flies
 at the back of messhuts
 their legs standing like dead stems out of their clogs

Numbed on the long road to mangled Nijmegen
 I thought that only the living of others assures us
 the gentle and true we remember as trees walking
 Their arms reach down from the light of kindness
 into this Lazarus tomb

So peering through sleet as we neared Nijmegen
 I glimpsed the rainbow arch of your eyes
 Over the clank of the jeep
 your quick grave laughter
 outrising at last the rockets
 brought me what spells I repeat
 as I travel this road
 that arrives at no future
 and what creed I can bring
 to our daily crimes
 to this guilt
 in the griefs of the old
 and the graves of the young. (Colombo and Richardson, 160-61)

In an accompanying note Birney explained the locale and genesis of the poem: "Nijmegen was in 1944–5 the town at the tip of the Canadian salient in Holland, connected with rearward troops by a single much-bombed highway. The area had been the scene of tank battles, artillery duels, air raids, buzz-bombs and V-2 rocket attacks. It had also been denuded of trees, coal and foodstocks by the retreating Germans. The winter was in all Europe one of the coldest of the century." Though ostensibly set in the immediate environs of Nijmegen, in effect—as Davey convincingly demonstrates from Birney's fiction and letters (243–45)—the poem artistically conflates images that Birney may well have witnessed along the entire stretch of road.

The poem is cast in the mode of a letter or address to a beloved woman ("my dear")—presumably Gabrielle Baldwin, a young married woman with whom Birney had had a brief affair in the spring of 1943 while still back in

training camp in Canada (Davey 241)—the memory of whose face offers sustenance and comfort to the poet as he travels the devastated road in an army jeep, while flashes of war-ravaged scenes of bitter cold, starvation and death pass him by: graves with tin markers (wooden crosses presumably having been stolen or used for fuel), dismantled tanks and broken bridges, trees lining the road reduced to stumps being hacked at by old men for chips of fuel, women riding bikes without tyres “like tattered sailboats” against the blistering wind, children desperately in search of food and fuel, begging at the back of messhuts, “their legs standing like dead stems out of their clogs,” or “groping in gravel” for bits of coal to keep warm. The images of the war-torn and sleet-lacerated Nijmegen environment are harrowing and bleak, suggesting an almost apocalyptic landscape, populated by old men, women and children. The poet himself feels implicated and guilty (“our daily crimes”) for this war-inflicted, dehumanizing and de-individualizing (“like wintered flies”) misery of “grief of the old” and “graves of the young.” In his state of feeling “numbed” on “the long road to mangled Nijmegen” he cannot but desperately search—or at least long—for the possibility of hope and redemption: in the midst of a landscape of meaningless suffering it is the memory of “your face” and its associated remembrance of the “gentle and true” in human love and tenderness which holds out the frail possibility that the “light of kindness” may offer reprieve in this “Lazarus tomb.” For all the poet’s intense effort to see (“peering through sleet”), the possibility of transcendence or religious grace seems absent: instead of the magic “spells” of religion (or make-belief) and a “creed” to hold on to, the poet finds himself on a road “to no future”—on which whatever salvation, hope or redemption there is must be looked for—fleetingly, ephemerally like a rainbow—in human relationships, in “the rainbow arch of your eyes,” in “your quick grave laughter” (a laughter quick and alive, yet also knowing of death) “outrising at last the rockets.” The poem thus, as Davey pertinently suggests, offers “a meditation on the moral and metaphysical emptiness of war” (240)—and possibly of life itself. Using the specifics of his Nijmegen experience to articulate a deeper, more general vision of human life and nature, Birney’s poem thus bespeaks a stark existentialist humanism, deprived of the possibility of religious grace, in which only inter-human love offers at best a “glimpse” of hope. Fittingly, just as militarily the Nijmegen salient proved the dead end to Operation Market Garden, for Birney personally it proved the final point in his advance on the road he was travelling: in March 1945, having fallen ill of dysentery and diphtheria, he was sent back to recover in a Ghent hospital—and composed “The Road to Nijmegen.”

Alex Colville: Canadian War Artist

First and foremost among Canadian artists who have represented wartime Nijmegen is Alex Colville (1920–2013), one of Canada's premier and most popular realist painters who has attained both national and international stature. A 2015 catalogue to a posthumous retrospective of his art at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto spoke of him as “a towering figure in the history of Canadian painting” (Teitelbaum 14). His reputation was not always uncontroversial; in particular during the postwar years when abstract expressionism was in vogue, he was condescendingly dismissed by some in professional art circles as a realist relic of bygone times. And as late as 1983 his popularity raised some art critics' suspicion of commercial compromise, leading John Bentley Mays to proclaim Colville's importance exaggerated in a dismissive verdict in Canada's premier national newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*: “[T]he art he has made is of virtually no creative consequence. ... Its widespread popularity and potential as a crowd-pleaser apart, Colville's art is worthy of inclusion in a small didactic group show of realists from Canada's Atlantic region, nothing more” (qtd in Cheetham 79). Today, Colville's reputation has outlasted such niggardly appreciation, and he is recognized as an artist who continued to explore the resiliency of imaginative realist painting, even when it meant going against the grain: “He renewed the relevance of figurative painting during the postwar period, when abstraction was gaining importance. He offered an alternative voice at a time when figuration was out of favour.” (Mayer 16)

The real nature of Colville's art and achievement have thus become more properly appreciated. His meticulous exploration of the daily scenes and dimensions of small-town Maritime Canada make his images seem both intimately familiar and hauntingly disturbing, and his art's ability to elicit audience identification has come to be seen as a strength rather than a liability, leading Matthew Teitelbaum to diagnose its “fascinating contradictions: his paintings are both difficult and accessible, both private and deeply resonant, both real in depiction and imaginary in association” (14). More pertinent to my present concern is the growing recognition that the seeds of Colville's mature artistic achievement are to be found in the work he produced during his formative years as a war artist (cf. Brandon, 1995): Colville's aesthetic, as Marc Mayer of the National Gallery of Canada observed in 2015, was “borne of the residual scars of his experience in war” (16).

Colville enlisted in the Canadian Army in May 1942, a month before he graduated from Mount Allison University, where he had met Rhoda Wright, a fellow art student from Wolfville, Nova Scotia; they were married in August

of 1942. Colville rose from corporal to infantry 2nd lieutenant, training other soldiers. Though his artistic talents had been recognized as early as high school and a poster he had done for the War Information Bureau had drawn the attention of Colonel A.F. Duguid, head of the army's Historical Section, Colville was wrapped up in the daily routines of soldiering and did no painting during his first two years of army service; as he noted in his diary, "[b]eing an artist while being a soldier is just impossible" (Colville, *Diary* 25 [hereafter: *Diary*]). Then, in the spring of 1944, he was jolted into action—and into being a war artist (Fig. 2). In a November 1980 interview he recalled the moment:

Suddenly I was sent overseas in a very dramatic way. My wife and I were living in a little place near a camp in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. The assistant adjutant arrived at our home in a jeep, and said the Colonel wanted to see me. I got into the jeep, and as soon as I got there the Colonel said, "You're leaving at 3:45 on a Canso aircraft and you're being flown to Halifax and Montreal and England," then he said "Mr. Churchill wants you." I didn't know what it was all about. When I got to London, I was told to report to

FIGURE 2 Lieutenant D. Alex Colville, War Artist, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division, Keppeln(?), Germany, 4 March 1945. LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA, MIKAN 3586369, PA 142087.

Canadian Military H.Q., to a Colonel C.P. Stacey, I reported to Stacey and he said, "You've been made a war artist." That was it, just like that. I was a war artist. ("Alex Colville on Alex Colville" 23)

By June 1944 he was spending two weeks with a reinforcement unit in Yorkshire, and making his first watercolor drawings: soldiers at work in a Mechanical Transport garage, at improvised stoves or building field kitchens (*Diary* 24–25). After two years, "it seemed wonderful to be painting again," as his wife Rhoda recalled, "It was like postgraduate work for him. A great discipline to work in the field. It was like a reward for having given it all up" (*Diary* 25). Colville's years as a war artist—he was in Europe from June 1944 till his return to Canada in October 1945, and was formally discharged as a war artist in June 1946—took him to London, Yorkshire, and the Mediterranean (Gibraltar, Corsica, Naples), before he returned to London to be re-embarked to Belgium, the Netherlands (Nijmegen, Groesbeek, Berg en Dal), the German Rhineland (Kleve, Zyfflich, Wyler, Bedburg, Sonsbeck, Uedem, Wesel, Xanten), and the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

The Canadian War Art Program had first been established during the First World War, when New Brunswick-born Lord Beaverbrook, riding a wave of emergent Canadian nationalism, in 1917 had created the Canadian War Memorials Fund to finance British and Canadian artists in the field. During the Second World War the program was resuscitated through the efforts of Vincent Massey, Canadian High Commissioner in London and a trustee of the National Gallery of Canada, to become a new agency named Canadian War Records, in January 1943 (Milroy). Official war artists held commissions as officers, wearing the same uniforms and drawing the same pay. They were not combatants, yet shared many routine discomforts and war hazards with other servicemen—torpedos at sea, war raids, V-1 buzz bombs, V-2 rockets, artillery shelling (Halliday 12). Even so, serving as part of the Historical Section, war artists enjoyed considerable freedom and independence of movement, as they were given leeway to embark on the search for suitable subjects. The formal instructions they received specified subjects and approach, yet also allowed for ample liberty of artistic choice and orientation:

You are expected to record and interpret vividly and veraciously, according to your artistic sense, (1) the spirit and character, the appearance and attitude of the men, as individuals or groups, of the Service to which you are attached—(2) the instruments and machines which they employ, and (3) the environment in which they do their work. The intention is that your productions shall be worthy of Canada's highest cultural traditions,

doing justice to History, and as works of art, worthy of exhibition anywhere at any time. (qtd in Oliver and Brandon, 167)

Under the War Program artists were expected to produce two types of work: field sketches and finished paintings. The former required the ability to produce with speed and accuracy; the latter allowed for revisiting, revising, and imaginative interpretation, reconstruction and rearrangement. Laura Brandon believes that Colville had an uncanny ability to “identify and capture the complete content of a final composition in minutes” (Brandon 1995). Typically, as his diary testifies, he would make quick first-hand observer’s sketches on site, rework some of them into watercolors (often later the same day, once he had returned to camp), then revisit these at his leisure once he was back in his studio in London or in postwar Ottawa, where he would rework a selection into full-fledged oil paintings: “I would improve upon and dramatize the composition, possibly embracing details from other sketches, and aiming at a more powerful effect” (*Diary* 82). For his well-known painting of *The Nijmegen Bridge, Holland* (1946; CWM 19710261-2094)⁵ he made sketches and watercolors which show “a continuous development from the initial sketch to the finished work,” major changes in composition involving the size, type and placement of military vehicles, while fifteen different sketches preceded the finished *Infantry, Near Nijmegen* (1946; CWM 19710261-2079) (Brandon 1995). Given the time lapse (sometimes more than a year) between a first sketch and the finished painting, documentary recording took a back seat to imaginative interpreting and re-vision, as Colville moved from “literal rendering” to “imaginative rearrangement” and a deeper understanding of the implications of what he had witnessed, as in *Bodies in a Grave* (1946; CWM 19710261-2033), his rendition of a mass grave at Bergen Belsen (Brandon 1995).

Colville’s war diary testifies that even at the time he was aware that his work as a war artist, attached to the Historical Section, was of a different nature from that of the army’s documentary film and photography unit, whose members were “shooting footage all the time.” The difference, he noted, “is a conceptual one.” “The camera can record, can make extraordinarily good, affecting records, but a painter is more likely to select and reject, to edit, to interpret. You are not a camera, you are doing essentially different things. There is a certain subjectivity, an interpretive function” (*Diary* 123). His

5 CWM numbers refer to the paintings as catalogued by the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa which holds most of the drawings, watercolors and paintings referred to in this essay. Digital reproductions can be accessed at <http://collections.civilization.ca/public/pages/cmccpublic/emupublic/Query.php?lang=o>

ensuing statement—"I wasn't a mature artist. I was a young, bright person. I had been a good student, and I was technically competent. I considered my job essentially to record" (*Diary* 123)—is somewhat misleading; it must first of all be understood as reflecting the discrepancy between a young man's naïve and somewhat innocuous lack of full self-understanding and the insight of an older artist. Yet the very presence of a Canadian Film and Photo Unit sharpened his artistic self-awareness: "One had the sense that knowing that this was being covered photographically that one should be trying to get something else. I'm not quite sure but I think I was young enough not to worry about that. I simply thought I will do something each day. If it's good, fine; if it isn't good, that's too bad" (*Diary* 136). Laura Brandon has pertinently observed that the *de post facto* and often long-distance revisiting of what war artists had witnessed made their imaginative reconstructions more dramatic, and to a degree fictional:

In many ways, Canada's Second World War artists were essentially "embedded" with Canadian forces. Limited in much the same way as journalists have been during the recent war in Iraq, the artists' field sketches record only what they saw, and what they saw was a very limited slice of a much greater subject. This raises the question of whether their studio canvases and watercolours, completed many months - even years - later, and with the benefit of more knowledge, greater reflection, and understanding, convey more fully the meaning and implication of what they sketched. The evidence suggests that the long view, tempered by a wider contextual standpoint, is the more valuable testimony of events. That the canvases contain elements of imagination, rearrangement, and synthesis, which sometimes led to charges of their being "faked," should not detract from their overall value as expressions of the true experience of the Second World War. They may, in fact, represent an artistic truth and, in this sense, provide a more valuable record of the historical experience of the war than the field sketches. (Brandon "Doing Justice to History")

Though, in being transferred to the European theater of war, Colville had been wrenched away from a quiet domestic and marital life in Nova Scotia, his diary shows few signs of the proverbial artistic alienation. Rather, he thought of himself as the recording voice of a communal experience and felt accepted and appreciated by his fellow soldiers, who might have been less gifted in articulating or communicating how they felt; in Colville's *Diary of a War Artist*, the painting *Infantry, Near Nijmegen, Holland*, is accompanied by the following

observation: "In a certain sense I was writing letters home for these people, depicting their lives, the dugouts, tanks, where they lived" (*Diary* 90). Writing from Nijmegen on November 16, 1944, he noted: "This day was my first experience of working with a unit, and I enjoyed it tremendously. The subject matter was interesting and the people in the unit were interested, friendly and cooperative. The following day ... I visited the squadron commander who almost overwhelmed me with his hospitality" (*Diary* 66). In an entry for December 29, he observed how Lieutenant General Simonds had shown sincere and more than superficial or perfunctory interest in his work: "During this interview I was greatly impressed with the intensity bestowed upon each watercolor, the piercing logic of each question, and the alternative reception to each answer" (*Diary* 82). It was only rarely that he was met with suspicion and had to prove his credentials (*Diary* 88). More typically, he was met with sympathy:

There was no resentment. Most artists of this century are said to feel estranged from society; that is, they feel that they're a kind of outcast, that people don't understand them. It is said that there is a gap, that there is a barrier between the artist and society in general. Well, you see through this experience as a war artist, I never felt much of this gap business. I didn't feel that I was misunderstood or not sufficiently appreciated. (*Diary* 158)

In the face of danger and possible death, the very idea that lives were being recorded for posterity in artistic representation was welcomed as a form of consolation: "There is always this element in art. 'Life is short, but art is long.' A lot of these people were killed. They would be very interested in what I was doing, kind of astonished at it in a way" (*Diary* 90). "During the war the people who are involved have the feeling that they are likely to be killed and they like the idea of someone making a record of their activities, what they are doing, what life is like and so on" (*Diary* 100).

Colville was one of 32 artists appointed in the Canadian War Program (Fig. 3). "The artists themselves," observed Hugh A. Halliday, "represented a cross section of the Canadian art community. Some had been well established before the war; others had shown promise and were chosen on that account; a few were virtually discovered by the armed forces" (Halliday 12–13). They served in all branches of the Canadian Army, across the European theater of war. Among those better known (besides Colville) were Aba Bayefsky (who also visited the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp), Charles Fraser Comfort, Lawren P. Harris (whose father had been one of the Group of Seven), and William Abernethy ("Will") Ogilvie. Among those who served and painted in wartime Holland was Donald

FIGURE 3 *Official war artists, Canadian army, 1946. Standing, left to right: Orville Fisher, George Pepper, Will Ogilvie, E.J. Hughes, Molly Lamb Bobak, Charles Comfort, George Stanley (historian), Alex Colville, Campbell Tinning and Bruno Bobak; sitting, left to right: H.O. McCurry, National Gallery director and A.Y. Jackson. CWM 20040082-117. Canadian War Museum.*

Anderson (1920–2009), attached to the Royal Canadian Air Force, whose moving 1945 watercolor and ink painting “Dutch Refugees” (CWM 19710261-1323) showed RCAF airmen helping Dutch refugees over a broken bridge outside Roermond (also reprinted in Olivier and Brandon, 133). Several passed through, or stayed for longer periods in the Nijmegen area, recording scenes of military operation or wartime devastation in the wake of the September 1944 failure of Operation Market Garden. George Douglas Pepper painted scenes of “Bomb Damage in Nijmegen” (1944; CWM 19710261-5239) and “Bridges in Nijmegen, Holland” (1945; CWM 19710261-5242). On November 16, 1944 Gilbert Emil Bretzlof made a watercolor of the “Tower Bridge, Hatert, Near Nijmegen” (CWM 19770225-004), upheld by barges and cables as it spanned the canal connecting the rivers Maas and Waal. Paul Alexander Goranson’s oil painting of the Nijmegen Bridge towering above a cityscape of destruction (1946; CWM 19710261-3688) testified to the mesmerizing attraction the bridge held for

many Canadian war artists, among them Alex Colville, who was self-admittedly “fascinated by the possibilities of the bridge, river and wrecked town” (*Diary* 64). The only female Canadian war artist, a member of the Canadian Women’s Army Corps, Molly Joan Lamb Bobak (1922–2014), was not posted to Holland until after V-E (Victory in Europe) Day. She was married to Canadian war artist Bruno Jacob Bobak and painted several scenes of social relaxation among Canadian soldiers in Nijmegen, among them the oil canvas “Canteen, Nijmegen, Holland” (1945; CWM 19710261-1561) (Fig. 4), worked up from an earlier sketch entitled “Canada Club Nijmegen” (September 22, 1945; CWM 19710261-1559). But, as the digital catalogue of the Canadian War Museum testifies, among those who painted Nijmegen scenes Alex Colville was by far the most prolific: of 26 images showing Nijmegen, 17 are by Colville.

Colville’s “road to Nijmegen” (and beyond) started in late October 1944 when—after having served in the Mediterranean—he was sent to the Continent from England to join the Third Canadian Infantry Division; he hooked up with them on Halloween in Ghent, Belgium, and would stay with

FIGURE 4 Molly Joan Lamb Bobak, “Canteen, Nijmegen, Holland” (1945; CWM 19710261-1561). Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum.

the Division until the end of his war service. In his diary for late October/ early November he registered how at Breskens the subject matter was “fascinating: complete devastation under a cold, blue-gray sky. We didn’t stay there long as one of our aircraft dropped a stick of bombs in the area.” At Westkapelle, he noted the dyke broken through by the Germans and witnessed “prisoners of war being carried in vessels through a flooded, flag-draped street,” before moving on to devastated Oostburg, which he found “most interesting” (*Diary* 64). As Colville, like other war artists, was not engaged in combat duty, he mostly drew, sketched and painted post-battle scenes of havoc or destruction, or scenes depicting military men stalled in moments of inaction or engaged in everyday routine-like jobs—such as “Painting the Ship” (August 29, 1944; *Diary* 54), showing soldiers engaged in everyday, “ordinary” maintenance activity. As he noted in his diary in 1981:

It’s very difficult to describe what war is like. Much of nothing happening. The Germans are over there, about three or four hundred yards away in houses and weapon slits, and we were here. At night there would occasionally be patrols and some shooting. I would sometimes go up in these static conditions to an infantry position and make drawings and watercolors.

The conditions of work were extraordinarily civilized and humane. We all had a completely free hand. I used to sometimes wonder what I should be doing and I soon settled into a kind of routine. Every day I would go out with this jeep and driver. Anything I saw that was kind of interesting I would make a drawing or watercolor of it. So it was a kind of genre painting of everyday life in the army. (*Diary* 59)

Indeed, it is almost with a faint tinge of guilt or inadequacy, that on December 30, writing from Nijmegen, he observes: “I realize that my front-line works may be criticized as lacking action, and appearing quiet and peaceful but it is my experience of static warfare that during daylight the front line is a deserted expanse of country with live figures very much out of sight” (*Diary* 82).

If the formal instructions for war artists had enjoined Colville to focus on “(1) the spirit and character, the appearance and attitude of the men, as individuals or groups, [...] (2) the instruments and machines which they employ, and (3) the environment in which they do their work,” it is interesting to observe that Colville’s artistic priorities seemed to have been different. In many of his images actual soldiers take a backseat to machinery: typically Colville will foreground tanks, airplanes, ships, guns, anti-aircraft, trucks, or display his

fascination—from childhood on (his father was a steel bridge worker and as a boy he was fond of building models of ships and airplanes)—for bridges and other multi-dimensional infrastructural designs. One of Colville's persistent themes in his war art (as in his later, mature, art) is the interaction between technology, human beings and nature. Often, he will draw soldiers in the process of interacting with machinery (cars, tanks, motorcycles, planes, ships, or gear), or even merging with machines to the point where man and machine become almost indistinguishable: in *Tanks in a Workshop* (February 5, 1945; *Diary* 124; CWM 19710261-2125) the men on the tank engaged in repair work appear to have become one with the vehicle (Fig. 5).

Numerous images show tanks or trucks as almost autonomous agents, manifestations of technological power independent of human agency. Images of vehicles or machines stranded, destroyed or mutilated become eloquent symbolic manifestations (disconnected from a human presence) of the havoc and tragedy worked by war. Landscapes, likewise, are often singularly devoid of human beings—post-apocalyptic images of emptiness and desolation (cf *Abandoned Munitions*, February 7, 1945; *Diary* 93; CMW 19710261-2023). Typically, in his sketches and drawings Colville will present individual soldiers from the back, looking into the distance at the spectacle of war, with faces averted or walking away. Or else humans will be vague, non-individualized, shadowy. They may appear in large numbers (as

FIGURE 5 *Tanks in a Workshop*. (May 2, 1955. CWM 19710261-2125). Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum.

in *The Deploy*, August 4, 1944, depicting a landing near Naples; *Diary* 42–43; CWM 19710261-1675) but the overall impression is: do individual human beings count in a landscape in which they are overwhelmed by the larger more powerful forces of military vehicles or operations? Even the individual portraits of soldiers at rest are often drawn from the back (*Soldier Reading a Newspaper on Foc'sl*, July 30, 1944; *Diary* 36) or depicted in outfits underlining their interaction with machinery (*Motorcycle Instructor*, June 12, 1944; *Diary* 29; CWM 19710261-2092).

Despite Colville's retrospective observation that the conditions under which he was allowed to work were "extraordinarily civilized and humane," (*Diary* 59) the practical circumstances under which he had to make his on-site sketches often included powerful hindrances. The cramped spaces in which he had to work were one obstacle, if one that stimulated an improvisatory search for new technical solutions. Thus, thinking back to his drawing *Platoon Position in an Orchard*, in the Nijmegen area on December 10, 1944, he observed:

What you could do in the field was clearly limited. What we did were watercolors and drawings which were portable. I actually did some in my pup tent on a rainy day. I would make watercolors from rough drawings. I had brought a reducing glass which allowed me sitting in my pup tent to look at what I was doing as if I was twenty feet away. In my studio I always sit back at the other end of the room to look at what I am doing. The reducing glass served to overcome this technical problem. Limitations like this are actually intriguing and stimulating. (*Diary* 68)

Mostly, however, it was the weather conditions which proved a most forceful obstacle. The Dutch winter of 1944–1945 was excessively harsh and cold, leading to acute and widespread shortages of food and fuel, both in the regions north of the rivers Waal and Rhine that were still under German occupation and in the areas to the South that had technically been liberated. All through the winter months the Nijmegen area in actual fact continued in a state of war, as the city found itself on the frontline between the German forces to the east and the British, American and (from November 1944 on) predominantly Canadian Allied forces. As Birney's poem also testified, although conditions in the North during this notorious "hunger winter" were unspeakable, the Nijmegen region too suffered from severe cold, sleet, rain, fog—making the obstacles for artistic work at times seemingly insurmountable. Colville's diary offers vivid glimpses of the war artist facing the special physical and technical

challenges of working under circumstances of bitter frost and bone-chilling wetness, as in this entry from late December 1944:

Painting in cold weather presents several problems. On the average winter day I find it impossible to work outside for more than an hour at the time as after that my hands are numb. Watercolors will not dry outdoors, and sometimes even freezes on the paper or in the pans. One solution to these problems is to drive the jeep to a selected point of view and paint from inside the vehicle, warming the interior with an oil heater. Another, in places where the jeep cannot be taken, is to paint outdoors, but to go into a dugout or house at intervals to dry washes before a stove. A third solution is to make quick drawings on the spot and paint large works in billets from these sketches. At present I find this last method most satisfactory, for, although it is slow, my impressions cohere immediately after being registered. (*Diary* 76)

Recurrent entries show Colville being interrupted at work by heavy rains or violent hailstorms—and snow. On January 10, 1945, shortly after he had completed work on *Dugout Near Nijmegen* (*Diary* 84; CWM 19710261-2057), which he deemed “one of my most finished works,” and had begun to work up *The Barrier* (*Diary* 78; CWM 19710261-2028), a watercolor impression of a barricaded border crossing between Germany and the Nijmegen hinterland (possibly near Wyler or Groesbeek), he noted:

That afternoon I painted *An ME [Messerschmitt] 109 in Snow* [*Diary* 80; CWM 19710261-2090] from inside the jeep. The roof was covered with ice, which melted and leaked through after we lit the oil heater. It was snowing furiously outside and flakes infiltrated through the curtains, spotting the sky on my watercolor. In spite of these trials, the subject was so good (very bleak and colorless) that I felt fairly satisfied with the finished work. (*Diary* 84)

As the above suggests, however, more often than not the weather conditions were less a hindrance than a source of artistic challenge and inspiration. For Colville, one of the particular attractions in painting the Nijmegen bridge—and perhaps his ultimate justification for having it figure in the foreground or background of so many of his images—was not so much its acknowledged strategic importance in Operation Market Garden, as the interaction between the bridge’s powerful shape and structure with the natural environment, the river-scape, the weather and the light. For Colville,

as for many painters before him, the Dutch landscape and the light in and of themselves posed aesthetic challenges which, even in the midst of war, provided stimulus and pleasure. Thus, on December 31, as he set to work on his watercolor painting *Flak over the Nijmegen Bridge* [*Diary* 83; CWM 19710261-2065], positioning himself south of the river Waal so he could offer a view of the bridge with barges (no humans) in the foreground, he observed: "Numerous flying bombs passed over and I included one in my painting. It was unusually cold and clear and I was struck by the effect caused by the low sun. I have done numerous paintings of this bridge; it is an interesting subject and, I believe, an important one from a documentary point of view" (*Diary* 82) (Fig. 6).

Another painting, *Anti-Aircraft Gun Near Nijmegen Bridge* (December 20, 1944; *Diary* 83; CWM 19710261-2024) imagines the artist positioned behind a soldier, seen from the back, manning an anti-aircraft gun, but the spectator's gaze is inevitably directed to two misty shapes in the background: to the left, the old fortification Belvédère (dating back to Charlemagne times) and to the right the Nijmegen bridge, both shrouded in mystifying fog. The dramatic move intrinsic to the painting thus directs the eye from the clear and lucid foreground of the anti-aircraft gun, the guarding soldier and the spidery tentacles of the shrubs sharply outlined, to the middle ground of army trucks slowly moving from the fortress

FIGURE 6 *Flak over the Nijmegen Bridge* [December 31, 1944; CWM 19710261-2065]. Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum.

FIGURE 7 *Anti-aircraft gun near Nijmegen Bridge* (December 20, 1944; CWM 19710261-2024). Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum.

onto the bridge, and into the fog-blocked possibility of seeing into the beyond. Such metaphysical implications intensify the power of Colville's war art (Fig. 7).

An entry in his diary testifies to the special aesthetic appeal the Nijmegen bridge held for Colville:

On 12 November [1944] I returned to Nijmegen (the shelling and mortaring there is not frequent enough to be a real danger) to look for subject matter. I was unable to work because of rain, but was fascinated by the possibilities of the bridge, river and wrecked town. This silver-gray atmosphere appeals to me; the natural haziness of the atmosphere is increased by the presence of smoke generators, and the effect is beautiful. (*Diary* 64)

As we follow the genesis of the final oil canvas from the preliminary sketch and watercolor versions, we note the progression of Colville's interpretative vision and the compositional rearrangements he made. Though the basic geometrical compositional design is firmly in place from the start, both sketch drawings—"Sketch for Nijmegen Bridge—Late Afternoon (Nov 15, 1944)" [*Diary* 58–59; CWM 19820303-205] (Fig. 8a) and "Sketch for the Nijmegen Bridge" [CWM 19820303-206] (Fig. 8b)—show the artist experimenting with changes in the number and positions of vehicles crossing the bridge. Both

drawings, also, retain the sign reading “Speed Up Over Bridge” and feature the row of electricity posts drawing the spectator’s gaze onto, almost into, and beyond the bridge, where the eye comes to rest on the spire of the church at Lent, on the northern side of the river Waal—in the former, presumably earliest sketch, there is a blank sky; in the latter the sky has been filled in with strokes suggesting lowering darkening clouds. In the watercolor version—“Nijmegen Bridge—late Afternoon” [*Diary* 60; CWM 19710261-2315] (Fig. 8c), which Colville worked on on November 25 and December 1, the threatening

FIGURE 8A *Sketch for Nijmegen Bridge—late afternoon (Nov 15, 1944), sketch drawing* [CWM 19820303-205; Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum].

FIGURE 8B *Sketch for the Nijmegen Bridge (sketch drawing)* [CWM 19820303-206; Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum].

FIGURE 8C *Nijmegen Bridge—late afternoon (Nov 15, 1944; painted Nov 25, Dec 1), painting/ watercolor [CWM 19710261-2315; Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum].*

FIGURE 8D *The Nijmegen Bridge, Holland (1946)—oil painting [CWM 19710261-2094; Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum].*

shapes of the (now) whirling clouds have been enhanced, the sign removed, and the tank in the foreground of the second sketch has been removed, to return to the empty foreground of the original sketch. In the final oil painting—"The

Nijmegen Bridge, Holland" [*Diary* 60; CWM 19710261-2094] (Fig. 8d)—which Colville completed in his studio on his return to Ottawa in 1946, we note the introduction of a select few individual soldier figures, seen from afar and from the back, the reduction of the number of vehicles passing across the bridge to a single truck (moving away) and a single tank (approaching). The overall suggestion is one of quietude, almost peace—an impression reinforced by another new element: the addition of a few slants of hazy sunlight breaking through the clouds, suggesting at least the possibility of transcendence, hope or redemption as we cross to the other side of the bridge. Here, too, we see how revisiting his war art from the perspective of postwar Ottawa allowed Colville to introduce touches that revealed a deeper understanding of what he had witnessed and to spin out metaphysical dimensions that had remained implicit or unnoticed in the preliminary on-site versions. To underscore his enhanced perception, when he came to edit his war diary in 1981 Colville printed Earle Birney's poem "The Road to Nijmegen" side by side with his oil painting *Nijmegen Salient* (December 1944; *Diary* 74–75; CWM 19710261-2095), as if to underline the communality of vision underlying poem and painting.

Other images that came out of Colville's Nijmegen area period show that his artistic search for suitable or effective subject matter was slowly moving beyond the aesthetic appeal of light and color to more disturbed and disturbing observations. If the aesthetic gaze remained paramount—as when he relished the sight of abandoned munitions for having "rusted by exposure into beautiful orange and red color combinations" (*Diary* 93)—his aim was widening: on December 30, as he was working on *Parachutes in No Man's Land* (*Diary* 73; CWM 19710261-2100), he noted: "I felt that I wanted to do something expressive of war, rather than of local atmosphere" (*Diary* 82). Some such sentiment may have inspired what is perhaps Colville's most famous and effective painting from his Nijmegen period, *Infantry, near Nijmegen, Holland* (1946; *Diary* 90–91; CWM 19710261-2079) (Fig. 9), showing a line of soldiers, heads bowed and eyes cast down, marching single-file on a dyke through a desolate snow-covered and flooded river landscape, most probably the Ooij polder to the Northwest of Nijmegen. As Laura Brandon (1995) has noted, easily fifteen sketches can be associated with the final oil painting—ranging from details of uniform or anatomy, such as a separate sketch of the left hand prominently in the foreground of the painting (*Diary* 19), to an early water color composition, *Troops of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Near Nijmegen* (February 2, 1945), in which the file of marching soldiers, seen from the back, moves away from the viewer, across a bridge over a dyke towards a cluster of houses (*Diary* 103). The final oil painting, contrary to Colville's usual practice, reverses the direction of the (now seemingly endless) line of soldiers marching *towards* the

FIGURE 9 *Infantry, near Nijmegen, Holland* (1946; CWM 19710261-2079). Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum.

viewer, whose gaze is drawn to the sharply etched soldier first in line, his head bowed down, his eyes downcast, his lips in a somber straight line, his right arm listlessly hanging down, his left-hand thumb hooked behind a shoulder belt, so that the hand—prominently foregrounded—hangs limpidly. To the left and right of the soldiers marching in file stretches a watery, frozen, uninhabited landscape; to the right a naked bush with snake-like branches rises up; above them all, a bleak sun struggles to shine through yellowish clouds. Whereas the line of soldiers slowly blurs into a vanishing horizon, posture and facial expression of the first soldier, closest to the viewer, articulates the reality of the war experience: instead of drama, heroism or glory, we witness monotonous drudgery, overwhelming fatigue, exhaustion, tedium, emptiness and, perhaps, the ultimate senselessness of war, before which the possibility of light and redemption fades—or is the sun about to break through?

Such impressions of exhaustion nearing hopeless tragedy and ultimately death intensified as Colville, following the Canadian First Army in Operation Veritable (which lasted from February 8 to late March, 1945), moved into the German Rhineland, across the border to the east of Nijmegen, where the

Canadian troops fought to liberate the Reichswald area and push through to the Rhine. The German hinterland of Nijmegen offered even more startling images of destruction and defeat, as Colville saw himself confronted with large numbers of German soldiers taken war prisoners or left dead by the roadside. "With the prisoners one was conscious of immense fatigue," he noted retrospectively. "They were simply exhausted and relieved that they were still alive" (*Diary* 104). Other than his Nijmegen images, the impact of defeat—psychologically and bodily—inspired several sketches and paintings foregrounding the sufferings and deaths of individual German soldiers, such as the sketches *Prisoners Taken by the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division* (21–23 February 1945; *Diary* 104–5) and *Young Prisoner Near Udem, Germany* (March 5, 1945; *Diary* 109), or, most impressively, an oil painting he worked up from sketches after his return to Ottawa, *Exhausted Prisoners* (1946; *Diary* 142–43; CWM 19710261–2059). The sight of dead bodies wrapped in blankets which he saw on the road from Kleve to Hasselt on February 23 inspired a powerful watercolor, *Bodies on a Road* (*Diary* 106–7; CWM 19710261–2035) which he finished on March 1; his diary entry shows that Colville now more consciously strove to make his aesthetic effect serve the larger aim of giving expression to what war meant: "In this work I strived for a mood of tragedy through simplicity of design and color, and somberness of tone" (*Diary* 103). One day later, on March 2, he finished a watercolor of the German city Kleve, *Dead City* (*Diary* 98–99; CWM 19710261–2048), "again interested in simplicity and mood rather than detail" (*Diary* 103). On February 24 he had climbed to the top of the ruins of Kleve castle and from there sketched a somber panorama, in shades of dark brown, bluish-grey and purple, of "a scene of complete devastation" (*Diary* 97). As he made his way through the corpse-strewn German hinterland, death seemed all-pervasive, with countless civilian and military dead lying around—among them, inevitably, Canadian fellow soldiers, one of whom inspired *Grave of a Canadian Trooper* (March 22, 1945; *Diary* 116–17; CWM 19710261–2071), a watercolor which shows a disabled yet large-looming Sherman M4A4 tank shadowing, or perhaps protectively hovering over, the freshly dug grave of a member of New Brunswick's North Shore Regiment at Keppeln, near Udem, Germany. The images of exhaustion and death-in-defeat continued to haunt Colville even after he had left the Rhine as the Canadian army pushed liberation into the Northern Netherlands: the encounter with a dead German soldier near Deventer inspired *Dead Paratrooper, Near Deventer, Holland* (April 11, 1945; *Diary* 138–39; CWM 19710261–2051): "He was about twenty. They would fight right to the very end; they had put up a tremendous fight until they were all killed" (*Diary* 138).

The spectacle of death would leave indelible impressions on the mind and memory of Colville, as in late April 1945 he was commissioned to visit the newly liberated German concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen, and saw himself facing the aftermath of unspeakable horrors: "We arrived in late afternoon and we looked around. There were huge graves full of thousands of bodies, there must have been at least 35,000 bodies in the place" (*Diary* 147). The mass grave, seen against a backdrop of barracks, inspired the watercolor drawing *Belsen Concentration Camp* (April 30, 1945; *Diary* 147; CWM 19710261-2032), as well as a sketch of *Dead Women* (April 29, 1945; *Diary* 150; CWM 19710261-2052). The memory led Colville to reflect in 1981 on the numbing effect of being a witness, even in the full awareness that "it was a profoundly affecting experience": "This being in Belsen was strange, [...] the thing one felt was one felt badly that one didn't feel worse. That is to say, you see one dead person and it is too bad, but seeing five hundred is not five hundred times worse. There is a certain point at which you begin to feel nothing" (*Diary* 150). The long diary entry Colville made in late April describing his first reaction to Bergen-Belsen may be quoted in full:

On April 27 my instructions were to spend several days sketching Belsen, then if possible to visit 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion. I was given a letter of introduction to the Governor of the concentration camp. On April 29 I drove to this camp at Belsen, saw the authorities there, was dusted (as protection against typhus) and set up camp in a nearby barracks. That afternoon I visited No. 1 concentration camp. I will make no attempt to describe the conditions there as they have already been adequately described by others. The subjects were not of a sort which can be executed expressively at the time, on the spot. I felt that I would get most out of this visit by making sketches, then returning to these sketches at some later time. On the first day I made a drawing of some women, dead from starvation and typhus, lying outside one of the huts. While I drew, the group of bodies was added to as more people died and were feebly dragged out of the hut by the inhabitants, who were themselves more dead than alive. On April 30 it rained all morning. In the afternoon I began a watercolor of one of the huge open graves, with the camp in the background. I finished this the next morning. This afternoon I made a drawing of the bodies lying in a grave. These were soon obscured by other bodies which were being thrown from the back of a truck. (*Diary* 147)

Colville's visit engendered his perhaps most moving and disturbing oil painting, worked up from a preliminary sketch in his Ottawa studio in 1946, *Bodies in a Grave, Belsen* (*Diary* 148–49; CWM 19710261-2033) (Fig. 10).

FIGURE 10 *Bodies in a grave, Belsen* (1946; CWM 19710261-2033). Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum.

The painting shows four emaciated corpses stretched out in a pit, three of them naked, one partly clothed in the concentration camp's striped uniform. As the spectator's eye zooms in on the four bodies, the possibility of orienting oneself in space is precluded by the painting's compositional lack of depth—so that it almost appears as if the corpses, spirit-like, are floating horizontally upwards in space rather than lying down in a grave, a paradoxical motion reinforced by the gentle yellowish, brownish shades of color used in depicting a scene of inexpressible horror.

After Bergen-Belsen, Colville returned to the Netherlands, following the Canadian Infantry into the central and northern provinces, to record scenes of joy and liberation: "When a unit would move into a Dutch town that had just been liberated the people were out in hordes, fathers holding little children up in the air, people waving flags; it was all quite emotional and moving. Sometimes the local people would jump up on the armored cars and trucks. You'd see an armored car with ten or twelve kids on it" (*Diary* 155). He lingered on in the Netherlands for several more months, helping to stage an exhibition of War Art in Amsterdam, then returned to England in September. In October 1945 he was shipped back to Canada, to be reunited with his wife Rhoda, and his 15-months' old son Graham, who had been born during his absence; as the

final entry in his diary reads: "I came home on the *Isle de France* with 11,000 other people. We sailed into Halifax harbor on a Sunday morning, the 21st of October. It was a very beautiful morning, clear and sunny. I had never thought of myself as a patriot or even as a sentimental person, but I was very moved by the experience" (*Diary* 159).

As critics have testified (Brandon, Cheetham), and as his diary bears out in both word and image, his experiences as a war artist were crucially formative for Colville, as a human being and as an artist. In his own words: "The war had a profound influence on me. There was some technical influence. The parallel I would make would be for a novelist to be a police reporter doing factual reporting, physical, sordid, and concrete rather than philosophical or abstract. The immediacy had a philosophical effect on me" (*Diary* 158). Colville's analogy of the police reporter may have its point, yet also seems to belie and belittle the actual complexity of his war art: certainly, as I have argued above, he was more than a factual recorder, and strove to convey the mood and atmosphere, the emotional coloring and metaphysical implications of what he witnessed. The drawings, watercolors and oil paintings that came out of his war experience speak more eloquently, subtly and complexly than his somewhat reductive verbal comments or self-analysis. Though there is, unmistakably, a degree of detachment and aloofness to Colville's diary observations about war—as witness his understated comments upon entering Bergen-Belsen quoted above—critics like Richard A. Perry have perhaps overstated the case against Colville by criticizing his war art for its presumed "emotional sterility" (qtd in Cheetham, 38). Rather, as Cheetham pertinently qualifies, "Colville's proclivity is for philosophical formulations rather than immediate emotional involvement. We see this trait in his diary writing and his art alike" (39). Colville's focus on the unspectacular, ordinary, sometimes numbing everyday routines of army life; his rendering of dehumanized, de-individualized and machine-governed sites and sights of war and destruction; his tendency (apparent even in his Bergen-Belsen paintings) to let the aesthetic prevail and leave the moral impact of horror and the human capacity for evil largely implicit and, if anything, underemphasized—all this may be less an exemplification of Colville's lack of empathy or feeling than a manifestation of a war aesthetics which Colville shared with others of his generation. As he observed in his diary: "I was born in 1920, this was the year [in] which most of the people who were killed in the Second World War were born. They were in their early twenties. A great many of people I went to school and university with were killed" (*Diary* 114). A surface semblance of unemotionality may well have served as a protective shield or shelter to keep the darker demons of war and war memory at bay. In an interview quoted on the website of the Canadian War Museum, Colville

comments on his experiences at Bergen-Belsen: "In such situations, [...] the body seems to have its own defense mechanism. My experience was voyeuristic. I was like someone who watches a sex film, but doesn't have sex" (CWM 19710261-2033). We see a similar mechanism at work in an early diary entry for August 15, 1944, when Colville—still anchored in the Mediterranean—observes the capture of nine German prisoners of war: "They were burned and looked shocked. An unpleasant sight. Some had skin hanging down from their hands. I shaved after seeing them, to restore my morale" (*Diary* 52).

Colville's responses are not unlike those of a death-haunted war artist of an earlier generation, Ernest Hemingway, who developed his own aesthetics of elimination, implication and understatement to give expression to emotions without explicitly articulating them, presenting a façade of cynical aloofness as a strategy of keeping emotionality at bay, a "spectatorial attitude" (to borrow Malcolm Cowley's well-known phrase) evidenced by Frederick Henry, protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) (Cowley 38). If for Hemingway the sports of bullfighting presented a metaphorical analogy for man's capacity to test strength and courage in confrontation with the possibility of death, in his diary Colville, too, resorted to a sports metaphor to explain the curious "spectatorial" unemotionality of soldiers: "Soldiers don't have very strong feelings, deep enmity or malice toward the enemy. It is a curious relationship which in some ways could be compared to that of sport, a very serious kind of sport, in which if you lose you get killed" (*Diary* 139). Like Hemingway, and others of his generation, Colville, too, writes about war in a deliberately deflated, anti-rhetorical style which resists glorification or heroization and downplays whatever deeper or higher effect war art may have: "I can't see that war art serves any moral function in depicting the horrors of war" (*Diary* 158).

In light of the above, then, Perry's 1985 verdict that in Colville we see "a painter who lacks spontaneity, improvisation, and subversiveness, and who extols discipline, structure, and 'elaborate systems of convention'" (qtd in Cheetham, 87) requires qualification. As Cheetham poignantly observes, many of those who lived through or served in the Second World War, found their subsequent lives marked by "a special keenness about the value and evanescence of life" (59). Colville, too, has repeatedly spoken of his sense of the fragility, ephemerality and contingency of human life and civilization—and his hope that art could form a strategy of compensation, an antidote: "Life is characterized by its lack of permanence. Art, I think, tries to compensate for this. Art tries to be permanent, tries to extract from the transitory, that which is durably meaningful" (qtd in Cheetham 59). In this sense, Colville's ongoing aesthetic emphasis on order, precision, exactness of geometrical design,

minutely detailed mimesis—virtues incipient in his war art that would grow into hallmarks of his mature art (see Hunter 2014)—is ultimately less symptomatic of the embrace of a traditional figurative realist aesthetics, than of an affinity of spirit with a modernist aesthetic creed exemplified in Robert Frost's adage that art might offer "a momentary stay against confusion" (Frost in Barry, 126) or Wallace Stevens' pursuit of art as a "blessed rage for order" ("Idea"). Such affinity of purpose is confirmed by Colville's observation that, when the artist's "attention to the continuous buzz and flicker of experience and his struggle to transmit these into forms results in an authentic work, other people will experience from it a kind of ordering, fulfilling, illuminating sensation" (qtd in Cheetham, 78). Perhaps even more than Birney's, Colville's aesthetics was rooted in the experience of the chaos of war, his exposure to the horror of evil, his initiation into the frailty of life, of mortality and death. It was on "the road to Nijmegen" that the seeds of Colville's future artistry were sown.

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