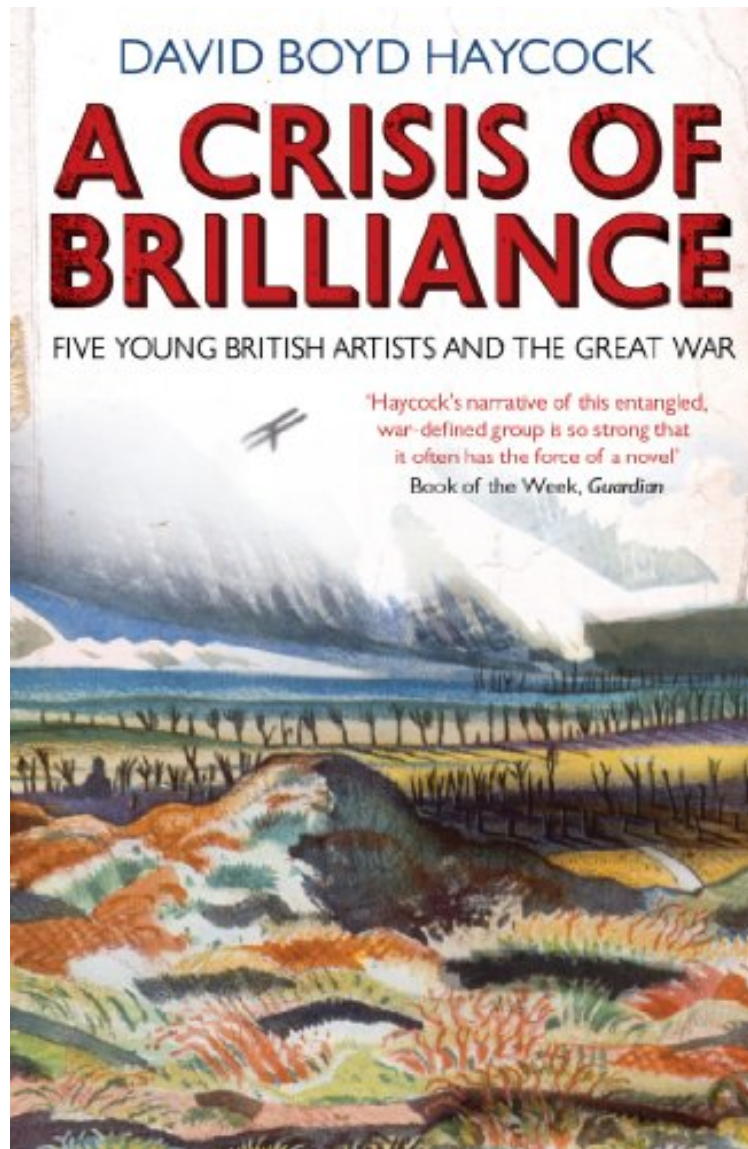


(Ebook free) A Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War

A Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War

David Boyd Haycock

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1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. The British Neo-RomanticsBy esmerelda33If you're into British Neo-Romanticism of the first half of the 20th century, this is an essential book and an excellent read.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Wonderful book!By ReaderI so enjoyed reading this wonderful book and its presentation of the important artists of the Slade. It is beautifully written and so well-researched.1 of 1 people found the following

review helpful. A Golden Generation By J C E Hitchcock This book tells the story of a 'golden generation' of British artists, and in particular of five members of that generation- Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash, C R W Nevinson, Mark Gertler and Dora Carrington. All were born during the period between 1888 and 1893, and all studied at the Slade School of Art (part of University College London) where their contemporaries included the likes of David Bomberg, John Currie and Adrian Allinson. They may have been a 'golden generation' in terms of their talent, however, but their lives were far from golden in terms of happiness. All five had particularly tangled love lives. All five made unhappy marriages, although Spencer was the only one whose marriage ended in divorce. (He promptly made an even more unhappy second marriage). Two of them, Gertler and Carrington, died by suicide, as did two of their Slade contemporaries, Currie and Maxwell Lightfoot. (Currie's was a murder-suicide; he shot himself after killing his mistress Dorothy Henry). They enjoyed varying degrees of success during their lifetimes. Spencer (the longest-lived of the five) eventually became a favourite of both the public and the art establishment and was knighted shortly before his death, but Carrington always struggled to achieve recognition and even today her work is not widely known. (The filmed biography of her from the nineties, starring Emma Thompson, concentrated more on her love life than on her work). The book advertises itself as 'The story of five artists and the Great War', and reinforces this impression by using one of Nash's wartime paintings as the basis for its front cover. This is not, however, the whole of the story, as the war does not break out until well over halfway through the book. Most of the book, in fact, is taken up with an account of the five's early lives and their student years, a period which for most of them was as dramatic and chaotic as anything which came later. Although Spencer tended to avoid emotional entanglements until his marriage to Hilda Carline in the 1920s, the other four spent the pre-war years falling in and out of love almost continually. Gertler and Nevinson were involved in a love-triangle with Carrington, which wrecked their once-close friendship. Carrington had a brief relationship with Gertler (she seems not to have returned Nevinson's feelings at all) but the great passion of her life was her curious relationship with the writer Lytton Strachey. Haycock believes that the otherwise homosexual Strachey may have taken Carrington's virginity. When war did come in 1914, Nash, Nevinson and Spencer all joined the Army. Gertler was a conscientious objector. As a woman Carrington would not have been subject to military service, but she shared Gertler's pacifist views. None of her pictures appear to have been directly inspired by the war, but Gertler, who never saw the front or visited the trenches, managed to produce a great anti-war statement in the form of that strange, terrifying allegory 'Merry-Go-Round', perhaps his best-known work. (He never sold it in his lifetime and it was found in his studio after he killed himself, a few weeks before the outbreak of the next war). The other three male artists all produced numerous works inspired by the war- indeed, all three were eventually commissioned by the government as official War Artists. In the case of Nash and Nevinson their wartime pictures are probably the works by which they are best-remembered today. Nash's haunting depictions of the war-ravaged countryside of Belgium and Northern France, such as the ironically titled 'We Are Building a New World', have always struck me as a protest against the horrors of war, a sort of visual equivalent of the poems of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Yet, as Haycock makes clear, Nash's paintings cannot be seen unambiguously as straightforward pacifist propaganda. He was no unwilling conscript, but a volunteer for military service (as were Nevinson and Spencer), and at one time expressed strongly pro-war sentiments and disapproval of those who, like Gertler, refused to fight. One patriotic critic even interpreted his war pictures as an indictment of German barbarism. It was, I suppose, possible to regret the loss of life and destruction caused by the war and at the same time to retain a belief in the justice of the cause for which one was fighting. Another thing which comes across from the book is just how interconnected Britain's cultural and intellectual elite were at this period. I would never, for example, have thought that Stanley Spencer, with his religious mysticism and his deep attachment to his native Berkshire village of Cookham (at a time when East Berkshire was far more rural and far less commuter belt than it is today) had much in common with the predominantly secular, urban outlook of the Bloomsbury Group. Nash, who also had a mystical feeling for nature and the English countryside, seems an almost equally unlikely associate of the Group, even if his mysticism was less overtly religious than Spencer's. Yet Spencer and Nash can almost be seen as 'Bloomsburies twice removed' because of their association with Gertler and Carrington, both of whom moved on the fringes of the Group. One criticism I would have of the book is that the period after the war is dealt with in insufficient detail, being covered in one brief final epilogue. The post-war era may have been 'another world', but it is a world which all five of Haycock's subjects lived to see, and I would have liked to learn more about how their outlook, and consequently their work, was affected by the return of peace. Nevinson and Nash may to some extent have been, as Haycock calls them, 'war artists without a war', but there was more to them than that, especially in the case of Nash, who produced some very fine work during the inter-war years, although this never quite caught the public imagination in the same way as the art he produced during the First World War, or even his work towards the end of his life as an official War Artist during the Second. Another criticism I would make is that I would have liked to see a greater number of illustrations, with all the reproductions of artworks in colour. (I have never understood why some publishers of art books still seem to find it acceptable to reproduce paintings in black-and-white). This might have had the effect of making the book more expensive, but from my point of view it would have made it more interesting. These criticisms aside, however, Haycock has written a work

which will be of great value to anyone with an interest in the history of British art in the first half of the last century, particularly to those with an interest in any of his five featured artists. (Spencer and Nash are both favourites of mine).

Stanley Spencer, Paul Nash, Mark Gertler, Richard Nevinson and Dora Carrington were five of the most exciting, influential and innovative British artists of the twentieth century. From diverse backgrounds, they met in the years before the Great War as students at the Slade School of Art, where they formed part of what their teacher Henry Tonks described as the school's last 'crisis of brilliance'. To the Bloomsbury Group critic Roger Fry they were 'les jeunes' -- the 'Young British Artists' of their day. As their talents evolved, they became Futurists, Vorticists and 'Bloomsberries', and befriended the leading writers and intellectuals of the time, from Virginia Woolf and Rupert Brooke to D. H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield. They led the way in fashion with their avant-garde clothes and haircuts; they slept with their models and with prostitutes; their tempestuous love affairs descended into obsession, murder and suicide. And as Europe plunged into the madness of the 'War to end Wars', they responded to its horror with all the passion and genius they could muster.