

Les Jeunes

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David Boyd Haycock, *A Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War*. 386pp. Old Street Publishing. £20. 978 1 905847 84 6.

The Slade School of Art, founded in 1871, was by 1910 a curious mixture of the conservative and the bohemian: with its insistence on drawing from life and from Classical sculpture it offered the pre-eminent training for fine draughtsmanship; yet its prominent alumni Augustus John and Wyndham Lewis were scandalizing London with both their art and their behaviour, while its young female students courted opprobrium, being among the first to cut their hair short, and campaign for suffrage.

Instruction was largely provided by the legendary Henry Tonks, Professor of Drawing, a practising surgeon before he became an artist, whose knowledge of anatomy, as well as his own technical insecurities, came together in an uncompromising eye and savage tongue that would leave many doubting their artistic futures. Such one-sidedness was clearly not for everyone, nor was it always a reliable indicator of future success: Ben Nicholson, for example, who attended briefly, was dismissed as a 'poor draughtsman', and would later say that he learnt more about structure, form, and colour from playing billiards round the corner. Moreover, this was a period when the Slade was losing its stronghold on the promotion of the Old Masters, under threat first from Roger Fry's championing of the Post-Impressionists, then from the various modernisms, both imported and native to the city. But the greatest disruption of all, of course, came with the Great War; even Tonks was said to have returned from his hospital service a little more sympathetic to struggling students.

David Boyd Haycock's study focuses on no fewer than five of Modern British Art's most significant Slade graduates, charting their studies, early careers, and involvement with the War, between 1910 and 1919. Despite their frequently overlapping and mutually inspirational lives, the artists are distinctly drawn, delineated by their abiding interests: Stanley Spencer's personal interpretations of Christianity, Mark Gertler's expressionism, C.R.W. Nevinson's obsessions with technology, Paul Nash's mystical understanding of nature, and Dora Carrington's involvement with design projects. Though little of this is groundbreaking in the context of the many existing individual biographies and monographs, the work gains a freshness in its use of manuscript letters and diaries.

The contention is that these were artistic lives irrevocably disturbed by the pressures of art and war, amounting to a tragic generation: it is the story of how *les jeunes* (as Fry christened them) came of age in the most changeable of periods. Though all five survive, many of their peers die in the trenches, while a drama that inculcates the rife personal tensions is that of the promising artist John Currie, who eventually kills himself together with the mistress he couldn't live with or without: it is the melodramatic version of Gertler's relationship with Carrington. The most

touching, but also most illuminating, moments here come not from grand overviews, but in miniature: Spencer describing the agonizing way success can transform into failure in a matter of brushstrokes; Nevinson on his motorbike, driving under the influence of Marinetti and the Futurists, to the astonishment of the New English Art Club; Gertler being advised by a bemused patron to see an oculist.

But *A Crisis of Brilliance* fails to exceed the sum of its parts. Where it might have made a real contribution, in studying mutual and divergent influence and development, we instead find a piecemeal approach in which potentially interesting topics such as inter-class relations, anti-Semitism, and Bloomsbury's bisexuality, make fleeting appearances, never to be developed. Only in the last few chapters, dealing with Nevinson's and Nash's roles as Official War Artists, is there some sense that the material begins to be synthesized. If the intention is for scholars to develop the material, they are liable to be deterred by the inconsistent referencing and editing; whilst those seeking an expressive exploration of the milieu might better enjoy Pat Barker's *Life Class*.

Quotation is this study's heart, mind and soul; it continually defers to others' words, without interpretation or development. The artists are always taken at their words; yet artists' words are often many-hued, coloured with contingency. And what words they are: Paul Nash, bringing his experience of poetry to his metamorphic visions of landscape, producing an eidetic prose; Nevinson, with his bravado that can segue sometimes into new ways of seeing, sometimes into paranoia. These are charged words that might reveal so much about the art, demanding live engagement, not neglect or passive paraphrase.

Most perplexing of all, the author refuses to look at works directly, merely fluttering a stray eyelash at the odd painting; just when a canvas appears to be brought into focus, it is instantly blurred by a careless coating of editorial adjectives: paintings are 'beautifully finished', 'subtle', 'engaging', 'intense', 'mysterious', 'strikingly modern', and even 'rather abstract'. This may not make claims to being a work of art criticism, but can art history ever justify neglecting its *raison d'être* to such a degree?

The subjects crave closer scrutiny, and a good place to start might have been to parse Tonks' ambiguous phrase which lends the book its title, throwing into sharper focus the various crises that are at stake here (of new movements, the War, of making ends meet, of individuality); moreover, it is precisely the nature of these artists' brilliance that demands serious analysis. Despite these missed opportunities, *A Crisis of Brilliance* might be taken as a highly readable chronicle; it has as its merits concision and lucidity, and may serve as a useful introduction to these artists and to the period: not bad, but not brilliant.