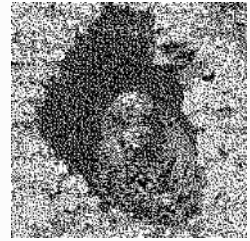


Snapshots from No Man's Land

Curatorial Essay by **Pippa Oldfield**

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Abstract

No Man's Land: Women's Photography and the First World War is a national touring exhibition curated by Pippa Oldfield of Impressions Gallery in Bradford, and co-produced with Bristol Cathedral, The Turnpike, and Bishop Auckland Town Hall, supported by Arts Council England Strategic Touring. The exhibition was held at Impressions Gallery between October and December 2017 and tours to the venues mentioned above in 2018 and 2019. In this essay, Pippa Oldfield reflects on curating an exhibition of war photography by women and the research involved in recovering the work and experiences of women photographers.

In 1914, a war correspondent working under the auspices of the British Army published a collection of stories in which the phrase “No Man’s Land” appeared for the first time. The author, Lt. Col. Ernest Dunlop Swinton, had recently returned from the Western Front where he witnessed “that wilderness of dead bodies—the dreadful ‘No-Man’s-Land’ between the opposing lines”.¹ The term No Man’s Land, signifying a desolate wasteland or indeterminate territory, became widely used during the conflict. The term is still being used a hundred years later, although its meaning has expanded beyond the context of war to indicate any area that is unclaimed, barren, or ill-defined. It became a pertinent metaphor for me when researching and planning an exhibition of women’s war photography. Much of that material is virtually unknown, and has conventionally been treated as peripheral to the canonical aesthetics of war photography, which emphasise combat action.

Most people tend to have a specific idea of war photography as something made on the battlefield by a risk-taking photojournalist: a very masculine, even macho, undertaking. Women’s contributions do not fit neatly into this genre. Due to professional, educational, and cultural reasons, women have been less likely than men to venture into combat zones, either as photographers or soldiers.² In 1917, the British military admitted women in auxiliary roles, but the ban on women undertaking close combat roles was not lifted until 2016. Consequently, women’s participation in war has been less thoroughly documented than that of men. I wanted to draw attention to women’s experiences and viewpoints in the exhibition.

My approach as a curator has been to bring historical material into dialogue with contemporary photographic practice. The show features three historical photographers—Mairi Chisholm, Florence Farmborough, and Olive Edis—and three contemporary artists—Alison Baskerville, Dawn Cole, and Chloe Dewe Mathews. I was interested in seeing continuities and connections across the century, and exploring how gender issues and the legacies of the First World War might affect us today. For this reason, the photographers featured in the exhibition are not separated into “then” and “now”, but placed as if they were in conversation with each other. Rather than attempt an exhaustive survey of women’s photography from or about the First World War, I chose six powerful bodies of work by six women working on different topics from distinct viewpoints. Their work explores an array of themes and approaches—portraiture and women’s work; public and private histories; landscape and memory—and ranges from France and Belgium to Russia and Afghanistan. Collectively, their work demonstrates that war photography can be an incredibly broad endeavour, made by anyone who has something to say on the subject of war.

This essay focuses on pictures from photo albums made by Mairi Chisholm (1896–1981), a volunteer first-aid worker at the Western Front.³ Their digital publication here allows an opportunity to reflect on Chisholm’s photography, as well as present unpublished material that was not included in the exhibition. Chisholm was just eighteen when she volunteered as a driver for The Flying Ambulance Corps, a medical unit in Belgium, along with Elsie Knocker, whom she had met on the British competitive motorcycling circuit. Knocker, a forceful and brilliant woman in her thirties, recognised that many injured soldiers were dying of shock while waiting to be transferred to hospitals. She and Chisholm decided to set up their own independent first-aid post just yards from the trenches, initially in the cellar of a bombed-out house in Pervyse, a village in West Flanders. Over the course of the next few years, they ran several first-aid posts in abandoned buildings in the area, serving the Belgian Army in an entirely voluntary capacity.



Figure 1

John Hassall, *The Kodak Girl*, 1910, advertisement poster for Kodak cameras. Digital image courtesy of National Science and Media Museum/Science & Society Picture Library (all rights reserved).

Like many other female volunteers going overseas, Chisholm took a camera to record her experiences. Snapshot photography, made possible by cheap, lightweight, and easy-to-operate cameras such as the Kodak Brownie introduced in 1888, had become hugely popular with women prior to the War. Photography was marketed as a suitably feminine pastime through advertisements featuring the Kodak Girl (fig. 1).⁴ This chic and modern figure used her camera to record her adventures and travels, encouraging women to make photographs in which their own viewpoints were central. The pictures made by women working on the Western Front, however, seldom resembled the pleasant seaside strolls and motor excursions envisaged by the Kodak adverts. Chisholm's images record her intense life under fire and are startling in their range, veering from humorous and domestic to graphic and disturbing. Freed from the restrictions imposed upon British soldiers and press photographers, Chisholm recorded the corpses and casualties of war,

which were rarely seen in newspapers of the period.

But Chisholm also demonstrated a mischievous sense of fun and vitality: a kind of gallows humour. Some of her most striking and unusual images show her friends and colleagues passing time in the tense interim between offensives. She captured "Gypsy" (her nickname for Elsie Knocker) pulling faces and peeking over walls. She photographed colleagues in a makeshift playground constructed by soldiers: the see-saw became a rite of passage for visiting top brass who rarely experienced bullets flying over their heads. Pets were clearly important to Chisholm, and many of her photographs record the antics of cats and dogs—such as Dunkie, Gros Gris, and Shot—that shared her temporary homes in bombed-out buildings. She also seems to have been friends with a number of African soldiers from the French and Belgian colonies, perhaps sharing an affinity for being "out of place" in a world dominated by white men.



Figure 2

Unidentified photographer, possibly Elsie Knocker, *Self and Jean-Batiste*, Mairi Chisholm with Jean Batiste, a Belgian Congolese soldier, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 3

Mairi Chisholm, *'Winkie Spaight' Irene 'Winkie' Gartside-Spaight in No Man's Land*, ca.1916. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 4

Mairi Chisholm, *Helen Gleason, Pervyse 1914*, Gleason, posing with a snapshot camera, met Chisholm while working for Dr Munro's Flying Ambulance Corps, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 5

Mairi Chisholm, *'Gypsy'*, Chisholm's nickname for Elsie Knocker, Pervyse, 1915. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 6

Mairi Chisholm, *Lt. Aertz, Gypsy and Dr Lejeune, Elsie Knocker and two Belgian soldiers, Pervyse, 1917*. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 7

Mairi Chisholm, *Dunkie and Gros Gris, Pervyse, undated*. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

Chisholm later compiled a number of photo-albums, which are now conserved in the National Library of Scotland (Figs. 8, 9, 10)⁵ The collision of material in these albums—corpses and exploding shells juxtaposed with gramophones and rowing boats—perfectly reflects the incongruities of her life. Her diary records,

*I don't think I shall ever forget my life at Pervyse, it is all so strange and weird and at times so lonely, and yet there are moments when you forget everything and laugh and giggle like children.*⁶

Not all the images that Chisholm carefully captioned and pasted into the pages were made by her. Pairs of images depict Chisholm and Knocker in identical settings, indicating that Chisholm passed her camera to her colleague to register her own presence at the scene. She also collected photographs made by others: one such snapshot shows her in a rowing boat nicknamed “the Punt at Henley”, another example of the ways in which soldiers and volunteers made the best of incredibly hard circumstances. Such muddled authorship would trouble traditional art historians, but I argue that questions of attribution are not necessarily useful or even relevant in this case. Whether Chisholm herself took the photograph, asked someone else to make it on her behalf, or collected it from a third party, her albums demonstrate a clear engagement with her material and the creation of a narrative in which her own viewpoints and experiences are central. Although we cannot know Chisholm’s motivations for compiling the albums it is likely that—like many other women and men after the First World War—she intended them as tools of remembrance that might vividly recall the extraordinary events of wartime, years later.⁷



Figure 8

Mairi Chisholm, Double-page spread from one of Mairi Chisholm's photo-albums, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.

Figure 9

Mairi Chisholm, Double-page spread from one of Mairi Chisholm's photo-albums, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 10

Mairi Chisholm, Double-page spread from one of Mairi Chisholm's photo-albums, undated. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland.



Figure 11

Unidentified photographer, *Elsie Knocker and Mairi Chisholm on the cover of Home Chat magazine*, 13 April 1918. Digital image courtesy of National Library of Scotland

Although she began making photographs for her own interest, Chisholm soon put them to good use in the UK, promoting the work of the two women to raise funds for their medical work. A number of bulging albums of press cuttings have survived, attesting to the growing celebrity of the two women, who became known as “The Madonnas of Pervyse” and appeared in national newspapers in France, Belgium, and Britain (fig. 11). Chisholm and Knocker were also photographed by official war photographers and press photographers.⁸ These images tend to be formal and posed, and very different from the personal and anarchic character of Chisholm’s own photo albums. For the *No Man’s Land* exhibition, I wanted to convey Chisholm’s own experience of war, and so the images on display have all been reproduced directly from her photo albums. The exhibition also includes facsimiles of the pages themselves, revealing how she sequenced and captioned her images. One of the most extraordinary photographs made by Mairi Chisholm shows a woman

standing atop a burnt-out tank, wrapped in a heavy coat caught by a gust of wind. It became the signature image of the *No Man's Land* exhibition, even though, like a number of other photographs I included, it had never before been publicly shown or published. At first the identity of the woman was a mystery but by deciphering the caption in Chisholm's photo album, and with the help of Professor Alison Fell at University of Leeds and Catherine Shanahan at Rugby Art Gallery and Museum, we were able to identify her as Irene Gartside-Spaight, known to her friends as "Winkie", who was a volunteer at the Western Front. This striking image of Spaight surveying No Man's Land is an apt metaphor for the recovery of women's histories through their photographs, and for the compelling ways in which women have persistently surveyed and commented upon the effects and experiences of war. Chisholm and her colleagues not only depicted No Man's Land in a literal sense, but their work also demonstrates that the terrain of war photography has long been occupied by women.

Acknowledgements

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About the author

Pippa Oldfield is Head of Programme at Impressions Gallery, Bradford, a charity that helps people understand the world through photography. She is also an Honorary Research Fellow at Durham University and a member of the research group CVAC (Centre for Visual Arts and Culture). She has curated numerous national touring exhibitions on the theme of war, and has a particular interest in the ways in which gender and photography intersect. She is the author of *Bringing the War Home* (Impressions Gallery, 2010) and is currently working on the monograph *Photography and War for Reaktion*.

Footnotes

1. The term appears in a short story called "The Point of View" in *The Green Curve and Other Stories* by Ole Luk-Oie (Lt. Col. Ernest Dunlop Swinton), published in 1914 by Garden City New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, p.243.
2. I discuss war photography as a gendered practice in greater depth in my doctoral dissertation "Calling the Shots: Women's Photographic Engagement with War in Hemispheric America, 1910–1990", available online at <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk>.
3. The albums are conserved in The Chisholm Papers, National Library of Scotland, reference Acc.8006. IWM (Imperial War Museums) holds Chisholm's diary, written between 1914 and 1916, and a number of photographs which are available to view online as part of the Women of Pervyse collection at www.iwm.org.uk/collections. For a period account, see G.E. Mitton (1917) *The Cellar-House of Pervyse: A Tale of Uncommon Things from the Journals and*

Letters of the Baroness T'Serclaes and Mairi Chisholm, London: A&C Black. The foremost biography is by Diane Atkinson (2010) *Elsie and Mairi Go to War: Two Extraordinary Women at the Western Front* London: Arrow.

4. For more on the Kodak Girl, see John P. Jacob, Alison Devine Nordström and Nancy Martha West (2011) *Kodak Girl: From the Martha Cooper Collection*, Göttingen: Steidl. For Kodak marketing campaigns in wartime, see Nancy Martha West (2000) *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia.
5. The Chisholm Papers, National Library of Scotland, reference Acc.8006.
6. Cited in Diane Atkinson (2010) *Elsie and Mairi Go to War: Two Extraordinary Women at the Western Front*, London: Arrow, p.72.
7. There is an outstanding collection of First World War albums, including many by women, in the Liddle Collection, Special Collections, University of Leeds, reference LIDDLE/WW1. Some of these are featured in New Focus (eds) (2017) *No Man's Land: Young People Uncover Women's Viewpoints on the First World War* Bradford: Impressions Gallery. For an excellent discussion of snapshots and albums by male soldiers in the First World War, see Janina Struk *Private Pictures: Soldiers' Inside View of War*, London: I.B. Tauris.
8. Images of Chisholm and Klocker by British official photographer, Lt. Ernest Brooks can be found in IWM (Imperial War Museums), Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection, available to view online at www.iwm.org.uk/collections.

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