

## Shaped by War: Photographs by Don McCullin

The Don McCullin Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, Lambeth is on until 15<sup>th</sup> April 2012

*“Now that I have stopped going to wars I still struggle with the meaning of all those experiences. Wars have dreadful differences, but also a dreadful sameness. You sleep with the dead, you cradle the dead, you live with the living, who become the dead. Seeing, looking at what others cannot bear to see, is what my life as a war reporter is all about, and I have been criticised for forcing horrors into the view of complacent people.”*

This is from the first chapter of Don McCullin's autobiography, *Unreasonable Behaviour*. As you enter the gloom of the exhibition you are forced into viewing those horrors and your own complacency. Having said that, perhaps the very act of being there, paying the entrance fee and exposing yourself to the images and the narrative of this man's life you are one of the not-complacent.

Every room apart from the last, which is “the New Directions” aspect of the exhibition, is muted. The light is so subdued you must confront each image closely and in so doing become intimate with McCullin's people: the grenade-throwing black American soldier in Hue, his shell-shocked compatriot, the Albino orphan in Biafra who clutches onto his prized possession (the empty French corned beef tin). You see in this poor lad's eyes the inevitability of his death; the life he's suffered so far full of bullying and misunderstandings. It is almost too painful to look at, but you do look because that is the magnetism of McCullin's imagery.

In Hue, during the long siege and *Tet Offensive* battle, McCullin took some of the most compelling war photographs ever captured. They are as iconic as Capa's many images from Spain and as powerful as Larry Burrows' *Reaching Out*. 1968 saw the North Vietnamese initiate the Tet Offensive, with the ancient city of Hue one of their prime targets. Here, the horrors of urban warfare became a reality for McCullin: the snipers' constant presence, the use of hand-thrown grenades (indicative of the closeness of the enemy), the pain and fear and exhaustion on the faces of those around him. In a telling sequence from the contact sheet of one of the 35mm Tri-X films McCullin captured the moment when one of the US Marines is hit in the leg. Unable to walk the man is cradled by two comrades. McCullin took his photographs and then carried the man to the aid post. Out of the four he made of the man McCullin chose the one most reminiscent of the Pieta, the moment when Christ is taken down from the Cross and cradled by his mother.

McCullin made several images of a shell-shocked Marine with classic *the thousand-yard stare* of the mentally scarred. With his hands clasping the barrel of his rifle he is oblivious to all around him. Seeing the various images we, the audience at the exhibition, are allowed

into the process of choice and can participate in the decision-making as McCullin selects from a handful of images that differ from each other only by degrees. There is no doubt that the final choice is the strongest of the collection. From this we are treated (if that is the right word) to the process of making the final print. McCullin's eye is skilful in the way he *works* an image. Most of the prints are his own, *made* by him in his darkroom. We can see the intricate detail and the methodical way he works in his instructions to the commercial printmaker. The shell-shocked soldier is printed in A2 size. Over the surface of this A2 version are affixed post-it stickers instructing the printer how to dodge one part and burn another, timings are crucial and given in very precise seconds. The shadows cast by the neb of the helmet are particularly crucial. Next to this "rough" A2 version is a larger-than-life sized final print. Only look into the soldier's eyes if you feel strong enough to be exposed to the shock of his pain.

Overpoweringly large are the images of *The Guv'nors*, standing amidst the ruins of the building, the Bangladeshi mother comforting her traumatised child and the old Vietnamese man with his rheumy eyes and patient sadness. They tower over us standing there, humbled by the controlled violence of *The Guv'nors*, the London gang Don McCullin stood on the fringe of. Their fame, especially when one of its members was imprisoned for his involvement in the killing of a police officer, led to McCullin being published in *The Observer*. That was in February 1959, over 12 years before his emotional visit to Bangladesh.

Across from the Bangladeshi mother and child is one of the most haunting images of the whole exhibition: the aged man, a refugee from Hue (1968). The country-cottage scarf around his neck is at odds with the expression of disappointment, pain and confusion in his eyes. His life has been one long sequence of conflicts from the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, to the defeat of the French by the Viet Minh in 1954 and the involvement of the USA in the civil war between the North and the South. In this one image McCullin has captured the essential plight of the innocent in any war. This is the face of *Collateral Damage*.

For all his war-fuelled images McCullin remains in that tradition of Humanist photojournalists. Ranking alongside Capa, Chim Seymour, Abbas, Jones Griffith and Burrows, McCullin offers us the face of the participants. It is in their eyes, through their eyes and in their reactions that we see for a brief moment the reality they experienced. Their faces become part of our consciousness, our lives. We share, however vicariously, the pain and grief of the new-made widow of the murdered Turkish Cypriot; the fear of the elderly Palestinian couple struggling to escape the overwhelming violence that hunts them; the terror of the cowering children in their ragged vest and pants in Stanleyville; the agony of the wounded civilian carried away on a chair during the civil war in El Salvador.

14 kilometres from Pnom Penh, while travelling with Cambodian Paratroopers, he was wounded by a mortar fragment. Carried to safety and treated in a Pnom Penh hospital there to be photographed by the Japanese photographer Sawada (later, Sawada was

murdered by the Khmer Rouge) he slowly recovered. Leading a charmed life McCullin recovered but war has a habit of effecting change and McCullin was not immune. Many of his colleagues died in Vietnam: Larry Burrows; Sawada; Errol Flynn's son; Dickie Chappel and many more. Tim Page lost a large part of his brain but survived only to be immortalized in the book "Dispatches" and the film "Apocalypse Now".

Perhaps an incident that happened a short while before the wounding should have warned McCullin: a round from a Khmer Rouge AK-47 damaged one of the three Nikon Fs he frequently took with him. The camera saved his life but McCullin (in a short piece of film looped for the exhibition) treats it as if it is an artefact from another's life, from another time. The damaged camera is there, along with other artefacts, dusty and now irrelevant to his life, exhibited behind glass like items from a Roman Centurion's field kit. There are press cards and passports, one photograph of him as a family man with his first wife, Christine. Small pieces of paper, innocent enough until the full importance hits you when considering their accumulated meaning.

The two bronze, Khmer dragons McCullin has used in his still life photographs hide around a corner, innocent figures ambushing you after seeing so much war, and one of their appearances along with the wooden table and the flowers. Like George Rodger, McCullin has moved away from war to use his incredible skills and pin-sharp eyes to record people and more often places whose future is uncertain. Amidst the Roman ruins of North Africa and the lowing cows of the Somerset Levels there is still that persistent need to help mankind. Though he now thinks his work has had little effect he remains committed to record the human condition and bring it to our attention. Ever-hopeful that he will change someone, sometime he travels to Sub-Saharan Africa for a charity or captures the face of a homeless Irishman living rough in London. We can only stand in awe of his work and complete the circle; we can absorb his images as we have always done and let them become part of the narrative of our time, the visual language of our consciences.

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