Biography of Sir Alfred Munnings

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Alfred John Munnings (1878-1959) achieved renown as one of England's finest painters of horses. During the First World War his engagement by Lord Beaverbrook's Canadian War Memorials Fund led to a series of prestigious post-war commissions that made him a wealthy man.

The Early Years

Alfred Munnings was born into a miller's family at Mendham, Suffolk, on October 8th, 1878. At fourteen he was apprenticed to a Norwich printer, designing and drawing advertising posters over six years. In his spare time he attended the Norwich School of Art.

When his term of apprenticeship was up, he threw himself wholeheartedly into making his way as a painter. He frequently painted rural scenes, gypsies, and horses.

Art dealers and connoisseurs noted him as a promising painter; his works sold well and from 1899 onwards they were hung occasionally in the Royal Academy. The young artist lived boisterously, sometimes paying debts with sketches.

The First World War initially complicated his life. He preferred to paint outdoors, an activity that then required an official permit from spy-conscious bureaucrats. Even with this document, an artist sketching outdoors risked falling under suspicion of being an enemy agent. Money for art purchases dried up.

Munnings attempted to enlist in a Hampshire regiment, even offering the army two horses that he owned in the hope he would be accepted. In 1917, he secured a position examining remounts at Calcot Park, near Reading, Berkshire. Horses, many of them arriving from Canada, were checked for diseases and parasites, treated, then sent off to artillery, cavalry, or supply units.

The Canadian War Memorials Fund

Canadian history and art owe much to Sir Max Aitken (from 1917 onwards, Lord Beaverbrook), an expatriate New Brunswick newspaper baron who combined in one personality both Canadian nationalism and British imperialism. As a friend of Sir Sam Hughes, Canada's Minister of Militia, Aitken had been given charge of overseas military records. His organization had assumed more than archival duties; intent on publicizing Canadian achievements, he produced a three-volume account of Canadian operations (Canada in Flanders), launched a program of military photography that included the sale of prints, pioneered front-line cine-photography, and published a daily newspaper (The Canadian Daily Record) for the soldiers themselves.

Beaverbrook was disturbed that some Canadian achievements, notably the crucial role they played in the Second Battle of Ypres (April 1915), had gone unrecorded by photographers. In 1916, he commissioned a British artist, Richard Jack, to recreate it on canvas. The project expanded, however, with more artists being despatched under the auspices of Beaverbrook's Canadian War Memorials Fund. Ultimately his war art program would involve more than 100
artists - Belgian, British, and Canadian - operating in Canada, England, the Near East, Russia and France. It would bring Canada some 800 military paintings and sculptures, many of them executed by distinguished figures. Yet the Dominion would not formally thank Lord Beaverbrook until April 1928, and the building which he had intended should house the collection was never erected.

Alfred Munnings joined the Canadian War Memorials Fund art program in 1918 to paint the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and Canadian Forestry Corps. He took with him to France three stretchers (one 30 x 25 inches, two 24 x 20 inches), plus numerous canvases cut to fit these. The whole, together with sketching papers, watercolours, oils, and brushes, was packed into a light, narrow box.

**Painting the Canadian Cavalry Brigade**

Throughout the history of warfare, horses had played important roles - as pack animals, transporting infantry, hauling artillery, and in cavalry operations. This latter task entailed the use of horse and rider - the man fighting from the saddle using sword and lance - as shock forces. European armies included specialized cavalry units; generals and strategists had doted upon these formations, even when it was clear that massed mounted charges against entrenched infantry meant horrendous losses.

The Canadian Cavalry Brigade was an anachronism. It was formed in January 1915 with elements of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, Royal Canadian Dragoons, Lord Strathcona’s Horse, and 2nd King Edward’s Horse (the latter, an Imperial unit, was replaced in February 1916 by the Fort Garry Horse). It went into action in May 1915, not on horseback but as dismounted infantry, a role for which it had not been trained. For most of the war the Canadian troopers either served in the trenches or waited for an opportunity to fight on horseback. A few occasions did allow mounted operations, although the men were as likely to dismount and charge with rifle and bayonet. Such was the case during an organized German withdrawal in March 1917, in the Battle of Cambrai (November 1917), and during the German offensive of March-April 1918 (Moreuil Wood and Rifle Wood). Attempts to use cavalry and tanks jointly in the Battle of Amiens (August 8th-11th, 1918) were unsuccessful. Only once did the brigade fight an essentially textbook cavalry action. On October 9th, 1918, at Le Cateau, the Canadian mounted units advanced eight miles and captured 400 prisoners. It was, however, a bloody action: 168 troopers were killed or wounded; 171 horses also became casualties.

Munnings’ first work was an equestrian portrait of the commander of the brigade General the Right Honourable J.E.B. Seely, painted less than a mile from the lines and in full view of the enemy. The artist stood on duckboards to keep from sinking into the mud while the general posed on his horse Warrior for more than an hour. When Seely went off to conduct other duties, his batman, wearing the general’s uniform, became the model - and cheerfully accepted the salutes of passing officers.

**Painting the Canadian Forestry Corps**

France and Britain sought to reduce timber imports by tapping their own forests. However, logging skills were more readily available in Canada. In February 1916 the British government requested that a forestry battalion be raised in Canada for overseas service.
The Dominion acted quickly; 1,600 men were recruited in six weeks; $250,000 was spent on logging and milling equipment. The 224th Canadian Forestry Battalion, as the new unit was designated, was sent overseas in several drafts. The first sawn lumber was produced in England on May 13th, 1916.

Three more forestry battalions were raised, but this form of organization proved unwieldy. Ultimately the Canadian Forestry Corps was organized into 101 companies operating in Great Britain and France. The foresters numbered some 22,000. Attached personnel (Canadian Army Service Corps, Canadian Army Medical Corps, Chinese labourers, employed prisoners of war) brought the total strength to approximately 31,000. Many Canadians who would otherwise have been ineligible for military duty, owing to age or physical problems, served in the forestry units.

By Munnings’ own account, it was Canadian Forestry Corps officers who, in April 1918, took the initiative in having him assigned to paint their work. He first went through the Normandy logging camps at Conches, Dreux, and Bellême. From there he travelled to the Jura region of eastern France.

**The End of the Assignment**

In the early summer of 1918, Alfred Munnings was recalled to London. He was to complete various works for the Canadian War Memorials Fund. For what he described as a ”small sum“ (the figure is not known even approximately) he transferred 44 paintings to Lord Beaverbrook’s organization.

The artist considered his experiences with Canadian units to have been among the most rewarding events of his life. He did not doubt that when Richard Jack (the British painter who had been the first artist hired by Lord Beaverbrook) sponsored him for associate membership in the Royal Academy in the spring of 1919, it was due to his contributions to the Canadian War Memorials Fund art collection.