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## Fighting History – Antony Beevor on paintings of conflict and catastrophe

The death of Captain Cook, Amelia Earhart's aeroplane, the miners' strike ... the new Tate Britain show ranges widely in its exploration of disputes, patriotism and martyrdom in history painting



The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781 by John Singleton Copley, from Tate Britain's Fighting History exhibition.

A painting at the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1771 caused a sensation. Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe*, which depicted the moment of victory in the battle of Quebec 12 years earlier, helped break the convention that soldiers in historical scenes should be shown wearing classical costume.

West, from Pennsylvania, was an ambitious young American making his way in London with paintings of historical and mythological subjects. Two commissions from George III had already marked an important step in his

professional and social ascent. The success of this new painting was critical to his career. His decision to paint his characters in modern dress, rather than in togas, disturbed the old guard of the art establishment and several of his supporters, including Joshua Reynolds and the king. Yet West had rightly sensed that it would appeal to the public and win over the doubters.

Rather like Hollywood directors in the late 20th century, painters of history scenes often genuflected in a form of ancestor worship, their works deliberately echoing earlier great art. West's depiction of the sacrificial hero of empire invoked religious images of Christ's descent from the cross.

Few people really expected such paintings to be an accurate account of the event. Reynolds himself referred to "the vulgar idea of imitation". Among those who attended the exhibition, the actor David Garrick and William Pitt, the former prime minister, studied West's painting of Wolfe. Both men felt that he had made Wolfe appear too sad. In their view, he should have made the hero look ecstatic as he died, knowing that victory was his on hearing the cry: "They run! They run!" Garrick even demonstrated to an admiring crowd in front of the painting what Wolfe's expression should have been.

The exhibition was a huge success, with more than 20,000 catalogues sold at a shilling each. Pall Mall was impassable. Members of the aristocracy were the chief buyers, but patriotic art was also about to become the social currency of the manufacturer and the nabob aspiring to join the landed gentry. The seven years' war, with Wolfe's capture of Quebec at its symbolic summit, accelerated the development of British nationalism in time for its epic struggle against the French revolutionaries and the "Corsican tyrant".

West's most famous work is not in the forthcoming Tate Britain exhibition, *Fighting History – 250 Years of British History*; instead there is an even more dramatic work: *The Death of Major Peirson, 6 January 1781*, which was painted by his protégé and fellow Anglo-American John Singleton Copley. This painting, which commemorates the successful counter-attack against a small French force invading Jersey, raised British morale after all the humiliations in the American war of independence. It purports to show the moment when Peirson's black servant shoots dead the rifleman who had killed his master, but once again there are considerable doubts about the veracity of the story. Nationalist propaganda was never scrupulous with the truth.



📷 Colonel Tarleton's portrait, by Joshua Reynolds. Photograph: The National Gallery

The exhibition also presents the shamelessly dashing portrait by Joshua Reynolds of the controversial Colonel Tarleton, who was portrayed in Mel Gibson's film, *Patriot*, as a war criminal. (This was at the time when Hollywood, as Gibson acknowledged, felt that it was time "to give the Germans a break"). But as was rightly pointed out at the time, the film was "a stinker" in its corruption of history, showing black volunteers fighting alongside their white American brothers, when in fact their only hope of escaping slavery was to reach British-held territory.

Singleton Copley is also represented with what one can only call another *tableau mourant*, *The Collapse of the Earl of Chatham in the House of Lords, 7 July 1778*, which is shown with two studies. Chatham – William Pitt – although sympathetic to the American colonies, has just had a fatal stroke while making a speech against granting them independence. To make the incident more dramatic, Singleton Copley has painted the peers in their ceremonial robes, which they had not been wearing on that day.

There is also a compulsion, particularly in battle paintings, to telescope the action so that everything can be shown at the same moment. Peirson, whose body is shown emerging from the *mêlée*, was killed well beforehand. In Philip James de Loutherbourg's *The Battle of the Nile* (1800) we see the volcanic explosion as the French flagship L'Orient blows up, but also the survivors of other ships sunk subsequently clinging to wreckage at the same time. George Arnald's painting in Greenwich of the same instant, but with a different perspective, uses the same device.

Richard Eurich, an official war artist of a very different era, attempts to resolve the problem of telescoping in *The Landing at Dieppe, 19th August 1942* by dividing the canvas into a triptych, with the left-hand portion showing the preliminary bombardment, the central section the landing itself, and the right-hand depicting the demolitions at the end of the raid. What his picture fails to show is the appalling human disaster for the mostly Canadian troops, with

a casualty rate of 60% in a single day. It does not even manage to convey the horrific chaos of battle, which even the most inaccurate depictions usually manage.

Johan Zoffany's *The Death of Captain James Cook, 14 February 1779*, was influenced by West's *Death of Wolfe*. In this unfinished painting, Zoffany did not bother to recreate accurately the chaotic incident at the water's edge in Hawaii. He seems to have been more interested in depicting a tragic clash between a British hero and the idealised "noble savage" of the Enlightenment.

History paintings of the late 18th century and the Victorian era were usually a narrative version of a dramatic event, suggesting moral or patriotic lessons. *The Boyhood of Raleigh* by John Everett Millais makes one think of a GA Henty novel. The sailor on the beach pointing out to sea while the two boys listen in rapt attention could almost be the high Victorian predecessor to Kitchener's poster, only in this case the message was "Your Empire Needs You". The painting of which Millais was most proud is also included, although critics never regarded it as one of his best. In "*Speak! Speak!*" a young Roman, in a suspiciously Tudor four-poster bed, awakes at dawn after reading the letters of his lost love during the night. The curtains of the bed are parted and there she stands silently, either in spirit form or mysteriously resurrected. In the scene – created in his own house but based on the turret room of a Perthshire castle – Millais was clearly carried away by his own imagination.



John Minton's *The Death of Nelson*. Photograph: [www.bridgemanart.com](http://www.bridgemanart.com)



John Minton's *The Death of Nelson* (1952), on the other hand, is a clever reworking of the original by Daniel Maclise. Minton's picture is another *tableau mourant*, but avoids both the ancestor worship of the neo-classicists and the sarcastic pastiche of the angry young painters who came after him. He creates a theatrical effect on the quarter-deck of HMS Victory, with a spotlight on the dying Nelson and Captain Hardy while all the other characters around are left in the shadows.

*Fighting History* is not just about military events – in fact the subject constitutes only a small minority of the paintings included. Tate Britain is taking a very broad view. Their use of the word “history” means almost any painting telling a story, whether theatrical, classical, biblical, mythological or political. West is represented by one of his earlier classical paintings, *Cleombrotus Ordered into Banishment by Leonidas II, King of Sparta*.

At a rapid glance it might be a biblical scene, but the armed men on the left watch as their king gives in to the tearful pleas of his daughter to spare her husband, who has conspired against him. He is to be exiled instead of executed. Edward Poynter's *A Visit to Aesculapius* depicts Venus showing the thorn in her foot to the god of medicine, while her attendants, the Three Graces, pose naked beside her. By 1880, the art establishment seems to have been more robust about confronting the Victorian public with the human body in more detail than the blurred water-nymphs of a decade earlier.



The Poll Tax Riots by Dexter Dalwood. © Dexter Dalwood

There are five paintings of the Biblical flood, ranging from Turner at the start of the 19th century through to Dexter Dalwood's work of 2006. The subject of Stanley Spencer's lesser known painting, *The Centurion's Servant*, appealed

to him from the story in St Luke, and tempted him to reset it in his own house giving his own features to the youth on the bed.

An interesting departure, even by the standards of this heterogeneous exhibition, is Walter Richard Sickert's *Miss Earhart's Arrival*, which ostensibly commemorates Amelia Earhart's transatlantic solo flight. But Sickert's real interest was in her sudden celebrity. He used photographs from the popular press, and within seven days produced his painting of a crowd packed round her aeroplane, with the rain pelting down diagonally.

he most recent creations, some of which veer towards the agit-prop, deliberately fight all notions of patriotic history. Jeremy Deller's installation *The Battle of Orgreave Archive (An Injury to One Is an Injury to All)*, tries to portray the 1984 miners' strike as another English civil war. He uses documents, objects, videos and other archival material to recreate the most dramatic clash of the strike by the National Union of Mineworkers. His *The History of the World* is essentially a four-metre flow chart depicting recent history as stemming from acid house and brass bands, once again bringing in the miners' strike. In many ways it is a lament for a lost industrial age and its tribal solidarity.

Other modern works include *The Poll Tax Riots* by Dalwood, Rita Donagh's *Reflection on Three Weeks in May 1970* and Richard Hamilton's *Kent State* (a screenprint of a shot student), and *The citizen*, a diptych about the dirty protest by republican prisoners in the Maze, with excrement smeared all over the walls. The moderns are, no doubt, supposed to be shockingly juxtaposed against not just the heroic pictures, but also the elegant and romantic Roman scenes of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

The clash between the scarlet-uniformed battle pictures of the 18th century and Deller's obsession with the miners' strike highlights an overlooked link. The collective loyalties, both of the traditional officer class and the trade unions, collapsed at the same time. This was no mere coincidence. Margaret Thatcher certainly did not bring this about single-handed, but her policies accelerated the process during the mid-to-late 1980s, along with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the cold war, the financial big bang, the end of exchange controls, the invention of the internet, the "less deferential society", the new individualism and, above all, globalisation. This alone should provide plenty of material for reflection, along with a number of powerful but bewilderingly varied pictures.

• *Fighting History* is at Tate Britain from 9 June to 13 September, [tate.org.uk](http://tate.org.uk). Antony Beevor's most recent book, *Ardennes 1944 – Hitler's Last Gamble*, is published by Viking.