



The Blitz, Crete, Crete, area defended by New Zealanders, May 1941 (625 x 740mm) National Archives Ref. NCWA 338

**PETER MCINTYRE'S**

# WAR

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There are, in the dodgy business of art and war, occasional concatenations of events and people that fix visual concepts indelibly in the mind. One thinks of a great painting such as the *Surrender of Breda* by Velazquez. Small wonder that a monarch, fighting a battle for the control of Europe, should choose to commission from a court painter with such talents, not only a memorial of desperately needed victory, but also of a compassion for the defeated that lay in the gift of the artist's patron. Legions of adventurous spirits have advanced, brushes in hand with, the regiments to catch a fleeting view through the fog of war of a cannonading or a cavalry skirmish.

These, for the want of something better, constituted the visual record until the camera and its electronic successors drowned us in agonies of war. The *Surrender of Breda* is an unrepeatable masterpiece by one of the dozen or so supreme practitioners of the



*The Kiwi* c. 1940-45 (557 x 404mm)  
National Archives Ref. NCWA 355

great age of painting. There will be no successors to record any future *Surrender of Breda*.

Thus it seems to me, that in justly celebrating Peter McIntyre's work, we are serving two useful purposes. One is to examine a notably successful exercise in a genre which is unlikely to survive the present generation. The second is to record the circumstances under which the artist was empowered to build up his body of work and adapt a style to serve the iconic and pictorial demands of a given task.

Peter McIntyre is one of the most versatile individuals anyone is likely to encounter in a lifetime but there was never any real doubt that he would become a painter. Unlike his father who prudently set himself up as a printer although he had the same love of art as his son, the bold young McIntyre set off for the Slade School of Art in London. In a sense this fixed the direction of his life. His values were British, his skills those of the London arts professional. All that was needed was to solve the fine arts graduate's perennial dilemma – how to find a way of making a living.

Two men had a hand in solving the problem. Adolph Hitler adopted the old Prussian strategy and set out to undermine Britain by closing off the Middle East. General Freyberg, VC – Churchill's "Salamander of the British Empire" – was given the command of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force sent to join the British Armies in Cairo. Hitler and his resolute soldiery made certain that the task of expelling them was bloody and protracted. What was the proper part in this game for the Slade graduate at that moment demonstrating his professional accomplishments by painting the grease nipples on the battery vehicles?

Freyberg solved the problem in a few brief words. After he had made enquiries about McIntyre, he called him in and said, "Go down to the camp tailor and put your pip up. I've decided to make you my war artist". The possessive should be noted. As McIntyre was to discover from the Prime Minister himself, he (McIntyre) was not "... the man (Fraser) had in mind". When McIntyre raised this with Freyberg, he records that the General replied, "Don't worry. They would have to publish their reasons for firing you. That always stops them. In any case, you're my appointment". Shortly afterwards, Freyberg promoted McIntyre from Second Lieutenant to Captain. In effect,



McIntyre painting *Tank battle on Belhamed (Matilda tanks) – a phase of the Second battle of Sidi Rezegh, Libya* in 1942

this was a warning. Touch McIntyre without reasonable cause and you must expect to deal with the General. Not too many soldiers, nor, for that matter, too many politicians faced this fate lightly.

The General left McIntyre largely to his professional devices although from time to time Freyberg could shatter the most carefully guarded *sang froid* with a breathtaking order. McIntyre records that,

The years go by, new faces appear, new voices are heard, but there is no voice that can so enliven the earth and shatter the dullness of the sleepy afternoon as his did. "McIntyre, go to Rome and paint the Pope!"

And he went. And he painted Pope Pius XII as Velazquez had painted Innocent X before him.

No artist can live without patronage and none can flourish unless the patron understands at some level the creative gift that enlivens the relationship. Freyberg grasped that McIntyre could express the spirit of a hastily assembled corps of citizen soldiers in dynamic but unpretentious images. The technique was shaped by McIntyre's experience at the Slade and seems to owe something to the cubist techniques adapted by the First World War artists most notably C.R.W. Nevison. In his own way also, Paul Nash provided an example of the stark simplification that seems to represent the indifferent brutality of war. It seems clear however that McIntyre followed most readily the modest romantic realism that dominated English painting in the years between the two wars.

Perhaps the greatest single case of art influencing attitudes to war, at least in this century, is the painting

by Picasso inspired by the attack on Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. For McIntyre this was no option. He set out neither to denigrate nor to advocate war. The purpose was to make an intelligible record that would convey something of the experience of manoeuvre and sudden encounter. Mostly these were minor engagements within a larger context. But in the case of Crete, McIntyre was present at one of the most significant battlefield innovations when the Germans launched their successful airborne assault on the airfields and developed the attack that led to the surrender of the island. It seems to me that McIntyre's account in the painting *Parachutists landing on Galatas*, 1941 captures the overwhelming surprise of this attack in a way that speaks volumes for his presence of mind and devotion to the job in hand.

This theme of dramatic stroke and counter stroke is taken up again in *The breakthrough, Minquar Qa'im*, 1942 where the drama is heightened by the contrast of the dark night and a blazing vehicle. There is of course a special characteristic of military encounters during the desert war. The battles were fought on empty terrain and with great mobility. McIntyre obviously enjoyed the challenge of recording the incongruity between the ageless quality of the landscape and fleeting irruption of machine age battle.

All wars are horrid, but if they must be fought, let them be fought where innocent civilians are not likely to be involved and the cultural capital not at risk. There



*Wounded, Cassino, March 1944* (398 x 490mm)  
National Archives Ref. NCWA 285



*The breakthrough, Minqar Qa'im 27-28 June 1942 (651 x 905mm)*  
National Archives Ref. NCWA 20

is a telling contrast between the Desert War and the Cassino campaign where one of the treasures of civilisation was at stake. Interestingly, McIntyre uses the style made familiar by the artists who recorded the First World War. The rubble, the pain and, above all, the sense of offended humanity is compelling in the painting *Wounded, Cassino, 1944*.

Though these large considerations arising from the war artist's desire to capture the essence of the strategic moment are important, another aspect of his work takes precedence. The vast proportion of soldiers sign on 'for the duration' and regard the military process with suspicion. How well the command understands the aspirations of the rank and file not only determines how well the soldier will fight, but also how firmly the society will stand behind the strategy. Through defeat and victory there seems to be no doubt that in this war there was trust and sympathy based on civilian gratitude towards the soldier.

No one did more to give shape to this relationship than Peter McIntyre. It was not the image of victorious legions but the endurance of ordinary beings pressed

by extraordinary circumstance. This quality is brilliantly captured in *The Kiwi*, c1940-45, a drawing of a soldier who might well be the archetype of the 'grim dig'. Not young, nothing of the haughty athlete, but the model of endurance and resolution.

We were lucky then to have such fellow citizens when they were needed and we are fortunate now to have Peter McIntyre's brilliant record of their exploits.

John Roberts, Professor Emeritus  
Victoria University, Wellington  
July 1995

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Peter McIntyre was born in 1910 in Dunedin, the son of a Scottish-born lithographer. After finishing high school, McIntyre went on to study journalism at Otago University before deciding to follow his artistic aspirations. McIntyre's father, believing that his son would never make a career as a painter in New Zealand, sent him to the Slade School of Art where he studied from 1931 to 1934. After completing his studies he worked as an illustrator and in stage decor at Sadlers Wells and The London Coliseum until he joined the New Zealand Army in 1939 in London, and subsequently became New Zealand's Official War Artist. When the war drew to a close in 1945 McIntyre returned to New Zealand where, contradictory to his father's beliefs, he forged a successful career as a fulltime artist. McIntyre combined his painting with writing and produced several books including *Peter McIntyre's New Zealand (1964)* and *Peter McIntyre: War Artist (1981)*, all of which were best sellers and made Peter McIntyre a household name. In 1970 McIntyre received an OBE for his achievements. Peter McIntyre, who is now 85, lives in Wellington.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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City Gallery | WELLINGTON  
*Te Whare Toi*

Civic Square, Wellington, New Zealand  
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