

Donald McCullin: An artist “shaped by war”

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The renowned British photographer Donald McCullin’s exhibition *Shaped by War*, in collaboration with the Imperial War Museum (IWM), was recently on display at the IWM North in Manchester. It will now be shown in Bath from September and in London from October 2011.

Launched to mark his 75th birthday, it is the largest exhibition of McCullin’s work to date. Accompanying the 200 prints are various objects, magazines and personal memorabilia. On show are many of his easily recognisable photographs—indeed his photographs of almost every major conflict from the early 1960s until the Falklands War in 1982 are some of the most potent images of the 20th Century—as well as a few newer and some lesser known prints.

Although this allows the viewer to grasp the varied aspects of Donald McCullin’s career, as is obvious from the exhibition’s title, most of the display centres on the wars and conflicts he covered for a variety of newspapers and magazines.

McCullin was born on 9 October 1935 in Finsbury Park, London, into a working class family, who, like the majority in the 1930s, lived in poverty. His father was an invalid and after his death the 14-year-old McCullin left art school to work at odd jobs to keep the family from falling deeper into hardship. His last job before National Service was as a messenger for a cartoon animation studio in Mayfair.

He was conscripted into the Royal Air Force (RAF), serving in the photography service, developing prints from reconnaissance flights over the Canal Zone in Egypt, from Kenya and from Cyprus. He failed the written examination to become an aerial photographer—he was later to be diagnosed with dyslexia—but he did buy his first camera, a twin lens Rolleicord.

When he became a professional, he exchanged it for a single lens reflex Pentax, later taking up one of the photojournalists’ favourite cameras, the Nikon F7, which was developed in 1959. One such camera was to save his life in Cambodia in 1970 by stopping a bullet. This camera is on show in the exhibition. He was also shot in the groin during the same assignment. He suffered multiple fractures to his arm when he fell off a roof under crossfire in El Salvador in 1982.

The exhibition begins with the images that launched McCullin’s 50-year career as a photojournalist. His first photograph to appear in print was of a gang named “The Guv’nors” from Finsbury Park, London. As a 23-year-old, he occasionally hung around with them, taking photographs with his Rolleicord. He had pawned this camera after leaving the RAF, but his mother redeemed it. His shots of “The Guv’nors” were published by the *Observer* when the gang gained notoriety through the murder of a policeman by one of its members, Ronald Marwood, in February 1959. Marwood confessed to the killing and was hanged in May of that year.

The *Observer* photo editor thought McCullin had some raw talent

and took him on as a freelancer for the paper. McCullin later moved to the *Sunday Telegraph* and then again, on the invitation of David King, to the *Sunday Times*, which in the 1960s developed the magazine format for photo coverage of the week’s major events. He became a valued member of the *Sunday Times* magazine staff, working under Editor Harold Evans and Arts Editor King. McCullin rates his years at the *Times* under Evans as the best of his career.

His career would see him move out of the tenement environment of North London and take him on a self-financed trip to Berlin to cover the building of the Berlin Wall. This brought him his first award, a British Press Award for a series of photos on the Wall.

Next came his first official assignment for the *Observer*, the civil war in Cyprus. It was followed rapidly by several assignments in Vietnam, Northern Ireland, Israel, Lebanon, South America and Africa.

Cyprus brought him his first international awards, the World Press Photo Award of 1964 and the Warsaw Gold Medal. The shot that won the awards shows a Turkish woman surrounded by her distressed family mourning her dead husband. This scene is mirrored in many similar photographs: different women separated by geography and time, but connected through their grief and despair. A dramatic shot of a Turkish fighter rushing out of a cinema into the sun-drenched street while gripping a machine gun is a classic early McCullin shot. This style is also evident in his work covering the British occupation of Northern Ireland.

Don McCullin had no formal training as a photographer. His early technical education came from books purchased with the money he received for “The Guv’nor” photographs. He developed his own compositional style.

The video facility at the exhibition is a welcome addition. With precise narration by McCullin himself, the viewer is brought ever closer to the action. You can sense the genuine emotion he still carries for the subjects in his photographs. The narration on a print of a skeletal albino boy in Biafra is particularly harrowing. He recalls his distress looking into the dying boy’s eyes.

As McCullin explains, “Photography for me is not looking, it’s feeling. If you can’t feel what you’re looking at, then you’re never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures”.

Walking through the exhibition you become aware that, for McCullin, conflict is about the impact it has on people, fighters or civilians. Their anguish and fear and the carnage are captured through his camera’s lens. They are never glorified, sentimentalised or commercialised for the benefit of a photo editor back in Fleet Street. Through these dramatic images, he brought the madness and misery

created by the violence of war to the rest of the world.

In the book that accompanies the exhibition, also named *Shaped by War*, the photographer writes “I have my own code of conduct, I’ve kept it to this day. It’s about being a decent human being.... It’s about simple respect and common decency”.

He confesses to feeling like an interloper taking images of other people’s misery. He recalls being attacked and beaten ferociously by a Palestinian woman after capturing her distress with his camera. Listening to him recounting this incident many years later, his compassion and humanity are unmistakable. His quiet, almost apologetic voice makes you begin to understand how his work affected him. There are many such examples in the exhibition. They express the feelings of a human being who refused to be separated from what he was witnessing.

But for his work and that of other dedicated photographers, such as Phillip Jones Griffiths, Nik Ut and Eddie Adams, among many others, the horrors of the death and destruction meted out to the poor and oppressed people around the world during the latter part of the 20th Century would have remained hidden from view. Their work helped to bring home the terrible reality that tens of thousands of young men were being sent around the globe to kill and be killed, or to become mentally and physically damaged, not on some noble crusade as the politicians would have the world believe, but to satisfy the greed of the ruling classes. Millions of youth around the world were politicised by the Vietnam War and McCullin’s images played a part in that.

One cannot but be struck by the sharp contrast between McCullin’s work and that of today’s journalists and photojournalists embedded with US or NATO forces in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Western governments and military experts were quick to address their mistake in allowing certain freedoms for journalists. McCullin was barred from entering Vietnam after his coverage of the retreat by the South Vietnamese Army. In 1972 he was expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin. He was also denied a place on the selected list of journalists to cover the British-Argentinean war for the Falklands in 1982.

With the takeover of the *Sunday Times* by Rupert Murdoch, work began to dry up—but not by accident. As McCullin explained in his autobiography, a friend of his who went to a meeting with Andrew Neil, the editor, summed up the new modus operandi as: “No more starving Third World babies; more successful businessmen around their weekend barbecues”. “And that was the direction things took”, wrote McCullin, who left the *Sunday Times* after 18 years with the newspaper.

The starkest and most striking images are in McCullin’s favoured black and white format, although, he says “I can use colour very well too”. While he is better known as a war photographer, a title he detests, his work has varied from the Beatles and brilliant landscapes of Britain and India to social deprivation in 1970s Britain.

The exhibition ends with his prints from his latest project produced using large format photography. The images are published in *Southern Frontiers: A Journey Across the Roman Empire*. His turn to this format at a relatively late age only underlines his desire to keep learning his trade.

McCullin’s renowned photographic style is matched with an equal ability in the darkroom. This side of his talent is less known to the

public. In the exhibition there is a raw print showing a close-up head shot of a shell-shocked US marine taken during the Hue offensive in Cambodia. It is covered with yellow sticky notes, denoting how much of this or that part of the print needed to be dodged or burnt in. The work done to expose clearly the look in the eyes of the marine makes the photograph outstanding.

Taking a shot was just the beginning for McCullin. In his day, it was not possible to review and edit on camera a finished photograph. Long hours sifting through contact sheets, then selecting and working with a few frames was an art in itself. Indeed, the ease of digital photography today makes McCullin’s art all the more impressive.

At 23, he had a budding gift. At 75, although he would be the last to say it, he is a master of his craft. In 1987, in an interview with Frank Hervat, he said, “I am tired of guilt, tired of saying to myself: ‘I didn’t kill that man on that photograph, I didn’t starve that child’. That’s why I want to photograph landscapes and flowers. I am sentencing myself to peace”.

Donald McCullin deserves any peace he can find. Reading through his autobiography, *Unreasonable Behaviour*, you are struck on each page by the harsh mental consequences his extraordinary career has had for him. If the outcome of a peaceful life for McCullin is more work of the calibre of his latest landscapes, all the better for the rest of us.

Shaped by War is at the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath, from September 11-November 21, 2010, and at the London Imperial War Museum from October 2011-January 2012.

There is an informative BBC audio slideshow of *Shaped by War*, with optional captions, and commentary by Rebecca Jones and Dan McMillan available on the Internet.

The author also recommends:

Henri Cartier-Bresson: From a higher reality to a respect for reality [5 November 1999]



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