

Don McCullin at Tate Britain in London

Veteran photographer calls on young people to chronicle today's "social wars"

Paul Mitchell
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Don McCullin, *Tate Britain, London until May 6, 2019*

Tate Britain in London is holding a retrospective of British photographer Don McCullin, 85 years-old and still working. Over 250 of his self-printed black-and-white images are on display in ten rooms of the gallery.

The exhibition is the largest yet of McCullin's work and features most of the war photographs that have made him famous. However, it is clear that McCullin would like to be remembered for his images of the social conditions in Britain and wants young people to continue his work.

He says, "Many people, young people, tell me they want to become a war photographer. And I say, 'Look, there's nothing stopping you. There are plenty of wars going on in all our cities in England ... there are plenty of social wars. There isn't a city in England you can't go to and find some poverty and unhappiness and tragedies.'"

McCullin considers his "best" work to be "the homeless story I did in the 1970s, in Aldgate, on the periphery of the great moneymaking part of this country, the City."

"Yes. I'm more proud of those pictures and I'm more proud of the social pictures I did of poverty in the north of England than I am any of my war pictures. I'm not proud of my war pictures at all."

McCullin's attitude is understandable; he is arguing that war is shameful and not picturesque, but nonetheless he is wrong to downplay the importance of his war photographs. Without his work and that of other dedicated photojournalists, much of the terrible death and destruction inflicted on the poor and oppressed in the last half of the 20th century would have never seen the light of day. Their images helped politicise millions of young people around the world.

McCullin once declared, "If you're a decent human being, war is going to offend you because it has no purpose other than to satisfy someone's desire for power and profit. And it is the little people who suffer. At the first whiff of trouble, the rich and the informed get into their Mercedes-Benzes and off-road vehicles and leave. The poor people, the very last of the dregs of society, can't escape. They get the bill."

McCullin's empathy for humanity permeates his images. He puts this down to his lowly origins. "It's because I know the feeling of the people I photograph. It's not a case of 'There but for

the grace of God go I'; it's a case of 'I've been there'."

McCullin was born in 1935 in Finsbury Park, London, into an impoverished working-class family. Following his father's early death, the 14-year-old Donald had to leave school to take up various odd jobs to support the family.

He never received any formal photographic training, but acquired basic skills as a darkroom assistant developing reconnaissance flight prints during his National Service abroad with Britain's Royal Air Force.

The Tate exhibition begins with the image that launched McCullin's 50-year career as a photojournalist—a striking photograph published in the *Observer* in 1958 of a local Finsbury Park gang called "The Guvnors," following their murder of a policeman.

McCullin was chronicling major economic, political and social changes in the aftermath of World War II. Even though Britain's world position was deteriorating in the 1950s and 1960s, the majority of workers were experiencing a rise in living standards, for the first time in decades. This encouraged self-confidence and militancy, and a general expansion in outlook. The "winds of change" swept the country.

McCullin was one of those working-class young people able to enter into what was a middle-class cultural world and help make the period one of the most significant and creative in UK history.

In 1961, McCullin travelled to Germany to photograph the building of the Berlin Wall. This was an attempt by the Stalinist bureaucracy in East Germany to stop the exodus of workers to the "economic miracle" in the West. Following the brutal suppression of the 1953 workers uprising, the Stalinists had sought to control travel within East Germany and abroad. In 1958, the utterly fraudulent "completion of socialism by 1965" was proclaimed, ushering in a wave of purges.

McCullin's Berlin photographs won him awards and a permanent contract with the *Observer*. He was sent on his first international assignment in 1964 to cover the civil war in Cyprus, which resulted in some of his most compelling images, including "The Murder of a Turkish Shepherd" in which a young boy reaches out to comfort his distraught mother after the brutal killing of her husband.

But it was the 18 years spent at the *Sunday Times* magazine—initially on the invitation of arts editor David King (now

better known for his vast collection of Russian Revolutionary and Soviet-related imagery) in 1966—that McCullin really established himself. He called it “the best place in the world, full of genius.”

There are many unforgettable images from his years at the *Sunday Times* on display, including those from 1968 when McCullin spent eleven days with young and inexperienced American troops in the South Vietnamese city of Hue, which had been captured by the National Liberation Front during the Tet Offensive. The military uprising stunned the administration of US President Lyndon Johnson and proved a turning point in the protracted struggle against imperialism—Japanese, French and American—by the Vietnamese workers and peasants.

Images such as those by McCullin contributed to the development of an anti-war movement. Behind the heroic pose of a soldier throwing a grenade, the caption reveals the brutal reality of war. According to McCullin, “He looked like an Olympic javelin thrower. Five minutes later this man’s throwing hand was like a stumpy cauliflower, completely deformed by the impact of a bullet.”

In 1971, the *Sunday Times* sent McCullin on the first of many assignments to cover the Northern Ireland “Troubles,” during which more than 3,500 people were killed and up to 50,000 were injured, mostly civilians.

McCullin also covered the conflicts in Biafra (Nigeria), Bangladesh and Lebanon, including the right-wing Christian Falangist slaughter of thousands of mostly Palestinian and Lebanese Shiites in 1982 in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, which Israeli troops had surrounded, preventing those inside escaping.

The significance of McCullin’s work is displayed in 52 magazine spreads, which include examples of his colour photography.

The exhibition says little about the abrupt ending of McCullin’s career at the *Sunday Times* following Rupert Murdoch’s purchase in 1981. The timeline in the catalogue merely says, “McCullin criticises Rupert Murdoch in 1984 and leaves the *Sunday Times*.”

His departure from the newspaper must be seen in the context of the response of the global ruling elite to the revolutionary crisis of 1968-1975. Across the world the interaction of economic contradictions with working class struggles had produced political upheavals, and a growth of left-wing and socialist sentiment. But these struggles were betrayed by the Stalinists, social democrats and bourgeois nationalist movements, with the vital political assistance of the Pabloite and state-capitalist tendencies.

This created the conditions for a sustained counter-offensive by the bourgeoisie internationally against the working class and youth. Margaret Thatcher’s election was the expression in Britain of a right-wing shift in international politics aimed at removing any obstacles on the accumulation of private wealth at the expense of the working class. Murdoch, with Thatcher’s approval, was able to establish a near-monopoly over the UK newspaper industry that has been used over the decades to manipulate public opinion and prop up successive right-wing governments.

How Murdoch purged the *Sunday Times* to achieve this is set out in the 2012 documentary *McCullin*, directed by Jacqui and David Morris. The film also explains the background to many of the wars

McCullin covered.

McCullin reveals that he was “pushed out” of the *Sunday Times* by Murdoch’s “ambitious” new editor, Andrew Neil, who stated point blank that “there would be no more wars” in the magazine and that it would be devoted instead to “life and leisure to attract the ads” selling “luxuries.”

“I was one of the first casualties,” McCullin concludes.

Neil’s predecessor, Harold Evans (who was also forced to resign) explains that Murdoch “was very bad news for British journalism... and for Don McCullin. The precious independence that he’d had and the ability to go and tell an unvarnished truth through the medium of film was now at risk. And so it proved to be.”

McCullin was “barred” from covering Thatcher’s 1982 war in the Malvinas.

Following his departure from the *Sunday Times*, McCullin has had the occasional war assignment including Iraq in 1991 and Kurdistan in 2015 but he seems dispirited on the whole. He says wistfully, “Photojournalism has had its day... When did you last see a really serious great set of pictures? Newspapers, even great newspapers, they’re almost running tabloid-type material of film stars and footballers and crap like that.”

McCullin is particularly scathing about the embedding of journalists in military newsrooms, warning, “As in 1991, reporters and photographers will have to decide whether to toe the military line (assuming they win a place in the pool...) or to try to make their own way to the action, without protection and in constant danger of arrest.”

In search of “peace,” rather than war, McCullin has travelled through Indonesia, India and Africa and published wonderful photo-essays of his experiences including the 2010 Southern Frontiers, described as “a dark and at times menacing record of the Roman Empire’s legacy in North Africa and the Middle East.”

He has spent three decades photographing the English countryside, particularly the enigmatic landscapes around his home in Somerset, British eccentricities and carefully assembled still-lives.

Perhaps the last word should be left to Don McCullin about how he wants his life work to be remembered:

“I want people to look at my photographs. I don’t want them to be rejected because people can’t look at them. Often they are atrocity pictures. Of course they are. But I want to create a voice for the people in those pictures. I want the voice to seduce people into actually hanging on a bit longer when they look at them, so they go away not with an intimidating memory but with a conscious obligation.”



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