

PRAISE FOR HIS WORK

Corpus Christi. A hefty name for a primary school. When sat in a lesson at the age of nine – as far as my memory serves me – and being instructed that we children would spend the following afternoon rendering an image of our choosing, I was drawn to the black and white photograph, in an unspectacular historical text-book, of a character named Winston Churchill, whose identity and historical standing at that time, and for many years later, I had no knowledge of. Quickly becoming fixed into a stupor of concentration, I faithfully scribbled the rotund jowls and raised Victorious fingers, stood in front of iron railings and a solid black door. Before long a self-conscious twinge impeded on my new experience, as a tapping on the shoulder told me to continue, despite my fellow class-mates moving to the carpet area for the recital of a story.

On and on I transferred from surface to surface, until being interrupted by a knock at the classroom door, preceding the entrance of the revered Ms Gorey; the one whom all the boys muttered naïve sexual intents about. Searching for a piece of equipment, or perhaps simply a reprieve from her own children, Ms Gorey's attention was quietly ushered to my solitary desk, my own educator audibly wording his pride at nurturing the new found skill. I dared not stop filling in the background brickwork, despite the graphite implement's increasing smudginess. The heat and hug of perfume wrapped round my shoulders, overtly pungent and whorey, as a quiet praise was heaped in my right ear.

For the following ten years I copied the realism of photographs for the potential respect gained, a vaguely carnivalesque endurance of minute detail, slowly losing the natural impulse of an original image-making. These conquests, mounted from the privacy of my small lamp-lit bedroom desk – hours spent whittling away at pencil nibs – were spurned on by recalling the pedantic maxim, “Blunt pencil, blunt mind”, passed down to me by the finger-tapping teacher. I was forever attempting to regain the blush of innocent fancy I had achieved during that first foray, before the possible turmoil of unwanted public erections

“When I left the Admiralty, at the end of May, 1915, I still remained a member of the Cabinet and the War Council. In this position I knew everything and could do nothing. The change from the intense executive activities of each day's work at the Admiralty to the narrowly measured duties of a councilor left me gasping. Like a sea-beast fished up from the depths, or a diver too suddenly hoisted, my veins threatened to burst from the fall in pressure. I had great anxiety and no means of relieving it; I had vehement convictions and small power to give effect to them.... I had long hours of utterly unwonted leisure in which to contemplate the frightful unfolding of the War. At a moment when every fibre of my being was inflamed to action, I was forced to remain a spectator of the tragedy, placed cruelly in a front seat. And then it was that the Muse of Painting came to my rescue - out of charity and out of chivalry, because after all she had nothing to do with me - and said, 'Are these toys any good to you? They amuse some people'.”¹





Walter Sickert was impotent, childless, and suffered from a fistula on his penis; according to at least to crime writer Patricia Cornwell, in her 2002 best-selling *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper – Case Closed*. It is true that Sickert had no children, and was most likely impotent due to several surgeries early in life to correct a “fistula of the penis.” This impotence Cornwell believes was a major cause of his intense hatred of women, which may have hence motivated the Ripper murders. Serial killers today are often found to be impotent; the act of murder becoming their only means of sexual fulfillment. However, there is no conclusive evidence to prove that Sickert’s fistula was on his penis. There is, to the contrary, abundant evidence that Sickert was quite a virile man who possibly sired several illegitimate children. The only source for Walter Sickert’s penis fistula is the testimony of his nephew-by-marriage, John Lessore – now an elderly man. The fact that he was treated by Dr. Alfred Duff Cooper of St. Mark’s Hospital suggests otherwise, as both Dr. Cooper and the Hospital were known for performing surgery of the rectum, anus and vagina. No records suggest that they were ever involved in, or qualified to perform, surgeries of the penis. General consensus points to Sickert’s fistula being located on his rectum or anus – possibly a Horseshoe fistula, in which the anus is connected to the surface of the skin after going around the rectum. A kind of fecal motorway diversion. Highly inconvenient.

Assuming for a moment that the fistula was on his penis, there is still no evidence to suggest that he was impotent due to it. He was rumored to have sired at least one child by his Dieppe mistress, Mme. Villain, and a man named Joseph “Hobo” Sickert still contends to this day that he was Walter’s illegitimate son. Sickert was known to have had several mistresses, and was cited as being an adulterer by his first wife. Indeed, a close friend, Jacques-Emile Blanche described Sickert in 1902 as an “immoralist... with a swarm of children of provenances which are not possible to count.”

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“History will be kind to me for I intend to write it.”

Carl Akeley, the ‘father of modern taxidermy’, was an explorer, scientist, sculptor and photographer, famed for his dynamic approach to the presentation of formerly wild animals of Africa and North America. Straying from the despondent facsimiles proffered by his contemporaries – who would merely stuff the departed creatures skin with straw, resulting in an exotic, but largely disappointing menagerie of shabby, hooped scarecrows – Akeley pioneered new techniques in modeling. Often starting with a number of the original skeletal features, he would slowly build up with clay, sinew and muscles in turn, a true scale model of the beasts. Casting these models in plaster, the artist would be presented with a faithful mannequin for the redundant fleeces, and would simply stitch them on as a bespoke tailor may.

These newly rejuvenated animals, in all their life-like glory, now deserved an environment befitting. Akeley is credited with creating the first diorama in a public museum, a marvel of scenery painting, taxidermy and stage management; a splendid approximation of nature that would set the standard for future creation.

Conversely, the man reported to have once killed a leopard with his bare hands and survive a vicious altercation with a charging elephant, went on to add conservationist to his professional roster by founding the worlds first Gorilla preserve, in the Virunga mountain range near Rwanda. In 1926, whilst on an expedition sponsored by the Belgian Government, Akeley contracted dysentery – a relentless disease also known in Western societies as ‘the Bloody Flux’ – and died. Despite not living to see the completion of his dioramas in New York, the location of his untimely demise was depicted in the Mountain Gorilla diorama, serving as an appropriately scenic memento mori. Noted in a 1921 journal, upon his virgin sighting of a mythical male mountain Gorilla, Akeley had exclaimed, “I envy that chap his funeral pyre.”



When the German-born Sickert – a key member of the Camden Group of English Impressionist artists, and best remembered for his painting of matrimonial despair, “Ennui” – a long time friend of Clementine Churchill, whom he hadn’t seen for 27 years, read in a newspaper that she had been knocked down by a bus in June 1927, he rushed to number 11 Downing street – traditionally the home of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The old friendship was revived and Walter and Winston soon became close. Sickert was generous with his time and advice, some of it given in detailed letters of instruction. The two men often worked together, both at No. 11 and at the Churchills’ country residence Chartwell, Sickert teaching Winston his techniques in the preparation of canvases. In what was to be probably the most marked and lasting effect of their collaboration, Sickert taught him the way to use photographs as aide-mémoires and the method of using a magic lantern to cast a photograph on a canvas. Such devices were much used by Sickert, and would prove particularly useful to Winston who, having had no formal artistic training, was weak in draftsmanship.

ⁱ Lady Soames quoting her father, in ‘Winston Churchill the Painter’, her introductory speech to the Annual Meetings of the Sir Winston Churchill Society, Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver, May 1989.

ⁱⁱ Photograph taken by Curtis Carman. ‘The Founder’ sculpture, courtesy of Curtis Carman, New York, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Photograph taken in the Akeley Hall of African Mammals, The American Museum of Natural History, New York, 2009, by Curtis Carman.