ERNEST BROOKS

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THE ROYAL BRITISH LEGION

The war photographer

There are few people whose contribution to the war effort would have been more noticeable that Ernest Brooks, a photographer who broke the mould when it came to reporting on a war so very far away for people back home.

Yet little is often reported of the life of the man behind the camera and how it was that he developed a style of working that gave us so many of the memorable images of the First World War that we can view today. His legacy? A bank of over five thousand images, making up over 10% of the known images taken during the war.

Biography

Brooks was a farm labourer's son and grew up in Windsor, on the royal estate where his father worked. After a short spell working freelance for the newspapers he became a royal photographer and before the war had already travelled extensively, joining George V on hunting tours all around the globe. In 1915, shortly after the war began, Brooks joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, becoming an official war photographer and being given the rank of lieutenant. Always wanting to get close to the action, Brooks found himself wounded at the notorious battle at Gallipoli in Turkey and was noted by his officers as being exceptionally brave.

"Brooks has no nerves at all…he seems to go through his work with as little concern as a boy. Day after day he goes poking his camera's nose into places which any normal man would shun by as many miles as possible"

After the war Brooks returned to Royal Service but managed to get himself into trouble on a number of occasions taking candid shots of the royals in informal situations – including one of the Prince of Wales in the bath! He was relieved of his royal duties although continued working until 1936. It is thought that Brooks suffered with post-traumatic stress disorder and he battled with alcoholism until his death in 1957.

Style

Brooks was exceptionally controversial during his career, often being accused of using 'staged' shots rather than capturing the action while it was going on. This was often welcomed by newspaper editors (and some members of the military) but was condemned by fellow journalists as not representing the 'true' nature of the war.

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Amidst the furore, the military banned the use of staged photographs thus giving the First World War the status of being the first conflict where 'documentary photography' had really been used.

His pictures themselves were thoroughly engaging and he often used the silhouette as a running theme in his work. This gave those featured in the picture a sense of anonymity and created helped developed the idea of the 'ordinary Tommy' (the nickname given to British soldiers on the front line in the war).

Years later, his work is still regarded as some of the best photography from the period and his work is featured in the collections of the Imperial War Museum, the National Library of Scotland and the National Portrait Gallery.

Questions

1. How many images is it thought that Brooks produced? (1)
2. Whereabouts did Brooks grow up? (2)
3. What year did Brooks join the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve? (1)
4. Can you give an example of how Brooks was considered to be a 'controversial' photographer? (1)
5. Why do you think that newspaper editors and the military may have liked 'staged' photographs? (2)

Extension questions

6. What is a silhouette? (1)
7. Do you think images of 'ordinary Tommies' were important during the war? (2)
8. What do you think the term 'documentary photography' means? (1)
9. Name two locations where you can now find Brooks' photographs. (2)
10. Was Brooks a 'good' photographer? Can you give some evidence to back up your opinion? (3)