



During The First World War, Irish-born Major William Orpen, a successful portrait artist, took up a posting as an official British war artist. He headed to war with a Rolls-Royce, a driver, a batman and an aide. Nothing in his privileged life prepared him for the horrors he encountered, rendering him incapable of painting. In an effort to fulfil his commission, he visited several war zones. In this exclusive extract from her biographical novel Orpen at War, Patricia O'Reilly details the scenes the Major would have faced.

Portrait: The Thinker on the Butte at Warlencourt

PAT EGAN & SPOTLIGHT PRODUCTIONS PRESENT

Ireland's Funniest Panto!

OLYMPIA THEATRE

James Patrice Ryan Andrews Maclean Burke

Olly, Polly and the Beanstalk

SPECIAL OFFER: ALL SEATS €22.50* ON SELECTED SHOWS

Zoe Talbot Erin McGregor Michaela O'Neill Rob Vickers

21 DEC 2022 - 08 JAN 2023

TICKETS FROM €22.50* *SERVICE CHARGES MAY APPLY ticketmaster.ie

Classic Hits

/OllyPanto @OllyPanto

by Patricia O'Reilly

WREATHED in mist, the village was a serene-looking place of cobbled streets, with two-storey stone houses swathed in ivy. William took a deep breath of the icy, nectar-like air.

'Not sure about this, Major. It's the kind of place that could've Boche hiding out,' said his driver, Howlett, who sounded worried and glanced skywards. 'Looks like it'll be snowing again before long.'

Howlett was a worrier. William let his predictions pass without comment, but his sensation of tranquility was short-lived as three soldiers in torn and ragged uniforms shuffled out from the doorway of a shop. What the devil were fighting men doing in a place like this?

One of them came forward, freckle-faced and baby-cheeked, cradling his right arm against his body; the flittered sleeve of his uniform exposing flesh lumped from shoulder to elbow in a bloodied mass.

With a cigarette dangling from between his lips, he jerked his head. 'That your Rolls, Major, sir?'

William gave a sketchy nod. That he was being driven around war zones in a Rolls-Royce had already raised many an eyebrow — eyebrows he considered better ignored.

As he drew closer to the soldiers, the stench of their wounds mixed with blood, sweat and dirt came at him in waves. Yet despite their injuries, they held themselves straight and had about them an air of suffering dignity.

'How are you?' William felt foolish asking what was a ridiculous question, but in the circumstances, it seemed the only one to ask.

A herring-thin man, who looked too old for battle, gave a half-hearted salute. 'We're wounded. Badly enough, Major.' He hauled a grubby blanket around his shoulders while blackened blood and pus oozed through the inadequate bandaging on his thigh. 'But we're all right. Could be worse.'

Confirming Howlett's prediction, fat snowflakes several shades lighter than the pewter-coloured sky stung William's cheeks.

'How can you say you're all right?' He shook his head in disbelief, 'you couldn't be much worse.'

The freckle-faced boy spoke in a youthfully sturdy way. 'Likely you don't know, but the trenches are the most dangerous places for a soldier to be. They're full of rats and lice, stinking baths of mud, and water as high as our waists. And so, Major, sir, it's good to be anywhere else.'

The third man had a long, bony head and a narrow jaw. A grubby-looking bandage slipped down his forehead. He pushed the bandage up to his hairline, speaking of how they spent hours crouching in the mud in the trenches. 'Trench foot, do ya know of it?' His voice was firm, emotionless.

William said yes, that he'd heard of it.

'Pray God, you'll only hear of it, Major. Blisters, open sores, infections, gangrene. Then amputation. Poor buggers. I tell ya, despair takes over.' His long nose curled under at the tip.

Weeks later, as Howlett drove into camp, William noticed a young soldier, cigarette dangling from his lips, standing a little to the side.

As William stepped from his motor, he removed his cap and moved forward. 'Remember us, Major, sir? The village?'

It was the boy from the village. The arm of his uniform was intact. He had recovered from his wounds. But he was older in looks and manner. Mature. No longer with that appealing aura of boyishness.

'When I saw the Rolls drive in, I

ised, were granted a few days furlough, usually spent hanging around on the edges of villages, hoping to have their wounds treated, and if lucky, be given a hot meal or two. Medical care depended on the unlikely availability of doctors or nurses, or increasingly locals who were courageous enough to ignore the repercussions if caught by the Germans. As soon as the men were considered well enough to fight, they were sent back to the trenches.

'You a fighting man yourself, Major? Have you seen much action? It was the soldier with the bandaged forehead, his tone sardonic.

William admitted that he was not a fighting man. 'I'm here to draw and paint what I see.'

'You an artist, Major, sir?' the youngest asked.

'Official like?' Now the soldier sounded more interested than sardonic.

'Yes, War Office official from London.'

'Paint us, sir. You can paint us. We're the real McCoy.' The young lad had an irresistible Cockney perkiness, assuring William that he would not find anything better to paint and telling how he was writing down what he saw, so he would never forget. To confirm what he was saying,

he patted at a notebook sticking out of the pocket of his uniform.

The lad was probably right. The three wounded men were perfect subjects for a study of the war. In their company William felt a lurch of exhilaration followed by a rush of creativity.

Surely there could be no more pertinent images than these three injured soldiers who had sampled the horrors of war but were not in despair.

He retrieved his equipment from the motor car, and with his waterproof cape draped across his shoulders, pencil between his fingers and his sketchbook propped on his knee, as the village furred with snow, he drew a quick sketch of the boy and a separate one of his two companions.

'Thought you'd be paintin' us? Colours, like?' It was the boy come to stand alongside him.

'I will when I get back to my rooms. I couldn't do a painting of you justice here.'

'Will you be able to remember the colours?'

William looked the boy in the eye. 'I won't ever forget.'

William said yes, that he'd heard of it.

Pray God, you'll only hear of it, Major. Blisters, open sores, infections, gangrene. Then amputation. Poor buggers. I tell ya, despair takes over. His long nose curled under at the tip.

But us lot are all right. For now. We look out for each other. The boy spoke optimistically. 'We won't be going back for a while. Maybe never. If we're luck on our side.'

His companions nodded. William knew that front-line soldiers who were too injured to fight, but not bad enough to be hospital-

A graphic new novel details the terrifying life of an artist in the trenches - and those he sought to memorialise



The painter who committed war to canvas

told the others you'd come back to paint us lot.'

'Your friends, how are they?' As William spoke, he wondered and hoped — these days it was not safe to ask about the wellbeing of a fighting man.

'The fellas I was with that day. Paddy and Joe. They're good. We look out for each other. It makes us happy to see you drawing, Major, sir. We feel like you're doing it for us — like as if you're expressing in paint what we're thinking of in our heads. I'm still writing things in my diary. So's I won't forget.'

He groped in his breast pocket and pulled out a notebook and pencil. He waved an embric arm around the camp.

'I know you're going to say it's not allowed. But if us lot don't write down what's happening, it'll be lost. And, sure, aren't you keeping a painting diary?'

During the night, William woke to the sounds of gunfire roaring in his ears. Beads of sweat crept out from under his hair and trickled down his forehead. At daybreak, his senses felt charred as he looked at the suffering landscape with the blackened stumps of trees gouging deep shadows on the ground.

'I hope we're not in a trap.' The boy from the previous evening spoke jauntily, as though being in a trap was inconceivable.

William's attention was caught by a young soldier in full kit sitting on a rock against the backdrop of the sky. With his hand held pensively to his chin, his pose evoked Rodin's Thinker.

William pulled out his sketch pad, and in a few minutes, he had captured The Thinker on the Butte at Warlencourt.

A short time later there were barked commands, and the Allied artillery began its bombardment of the enemy trenches. The boy thrust his notebook into William's

He offered a prayer to a god he did not believe in

hand. 'Mind this for me. I've to go.' William waited, knowing that after the barrage had ceased the first wave of officers in the trenches would blow their whistles. Sure enough, the sound travelled on the breeze. He could hear the officers urging their men up ladders and over the top to struggle across no man's-land, through sheets of rifle and machine gun fire.

He touched the notebook as though it were a talisman and offered a prayer to a god he did not believe in for the safety of the boy.

As the sky was bruising dusk, a private approached William. 'I'm to get Liam's notebook off you, Major.'

William hadn't known the boy was called Liam. 'Where is he?'

'He didn't make it. Halfway across no-man's-land he was mowed down.'

William covered his grief with. 'What about Paddy and Joe?' He was glad he remembered their names. 'They went back for him. Copped it too.'

ORPEN at War by Patricia O'Reilly is published by The Liffey Press and available now