

United Artist

Murray Dixon, 2nd Lieut, United Artists Corps, died in the Battle of Arras. **Alexandra Henton** tells of a life unfinished

HENRY Edward Otto Murray Dixon died after receiving a mortal wound on the first day of the Battle of Arras – one of more than 150,000 brave men who had felt the tug of duty and walked willingly into those deathly maws. He died on 10 April 1917. What warrants plucking his story from the quagmire of those bloody trenches is his artistic talent. He was published widely during his short life, but has since played second fiddle to the ubiquitous Thorburn.

Every *Field* reader with a wall to adorn should be able to pick out a Thorburn. The Scottish artist was renowned for his paintings of gamebirds and mammals in delicately rendered landscapes. He was at the vanguard of a fascinating change in wildlife art, his paintings highly realistic and finely detailed. He painted from real life and observation, not in the studio from stuffed examples. His scientific knowledge of birdlife made him a master in his field. His talent was singular and highly regarded. Murray Dixon revered Thorburn with the devotion of a Deep South evangelical – unthinkingly and unswervingly. He was a pupil of his but was sometimes criticised for being more copyist than artist. He based his style on Thorburn explicitly but to follow a master is not plagiarism and the charges should be dismissed.

Murray Dixon was the eldest son of five children born to the Reverend James Murray Dixon and his wife Etheldreda

Left: Stock Dove dated 1914. Below left to right: pheasants painted in 1914; Black Grouse on the Crofter's Oats; Overlooked (dead cock pheasant in the snow)

Trevelyan. The family home was the Old Rectory (which fell down) and then the new rectory (now demolished) at Swithland in Leicestershire. A traditional family bred a sensitive yet traditional son, “an all-round man; fond of hunting, a cautious stalker, good shot and keen fisherman”. A *Field* man. In Swithland these seemingly natural accomplishments of a turn-of-the-century gentleman could be achieved with ease. The Quorn regularly drew the Swithland side of the country, and the abundant Charnwood forest and Swithland reservoir played an essential role in his pastimes and art. The plethora of nature, woodland, hedge and water on his doorstep was ripe for his razor-sharp observations.

RHYTHMS OF NATURE

Where his genius lay was never in question. He attended Leicester Art School and then Calderon's School of Animal Painting, honing a talent that was still looking for a unique style at his death in 1917. Devoting his life to artistic pursuits and natural history, he used his surroundings as inspiration for his blank pages. He remained at Swithland with his parents, aside from frequent painting trips, until he joined up.

An interest in the natural world was the foundation of his body of work. His art relied on the rhythms of nature. In summer and autumn he drew gamebirds and pigeon, in winter duck and woodcock and in spring the returning migratory birds. There is honesty in his work that belies effort, made possible by the osmotic nature of his knowledge. He could draw a woodcock in a sunny spot so well because he understood the woodcock; he had observed them for years and frequently drawn them in detail. ➤



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In a copy of *The Vertebrate Animals of Leicester and Rutland Museum*, Murray Dixon made annotations over several years when he saw particular birds and animals. He was also a great nest-hunter. On 10 April 1903 he found a just completed nest of the long-tailed tit in a thick wild rose bush in a spinney. On 16 April he returned to find six eggs and took the nest and eggs to Leicester museum. His observations are not extraordinary. In fact, it is their complete ordinariness that best demonstrates the wealth of knowledge and learning behind Murray Dixon's drawings. In 1904 he notes that the fieldfares have been scarce in the district over the winter. In 1908 he hears their last song before migration. His annotations exemplify a gentle time and a gentle man. As one of his obituarists observed, "wild flowers filled his soul".

WORTHY OF RECOGNITION

JG Millais, who commissioned the ambitious young artist in 1913 to provide some drawings for his book, *British Diving Ducks*, remembered that, "At all times he was of the artistic temperament, alternately enthusiastic or depressed." Whatever he may have been in temperament, Thorburn observed correctly that he "always seemed very keen and enthusiastic for his art". These pillars of the art world, alongside H Frank Wallace, who wrote a tribute to the late artist in *The Field* in March 1918, all agreed that the talent he had shown, whatever fault-lines lay therein, was worthy of recognition. They affirmed that he would have been an artist of the front rank had he lived.

At the outbreak of the First World War, Murray Dixon volunteered to join the United Arts Corps. He was soon commissioned into the Seaforth Highlanders. He felt a strong



Clockwise from above: pheasants, hen unfinished, not signed or dated; *Elsdon, Otterburn, Northumberland* (dead fox), signed and dated 1913; woodcock and wren, holly berries, signed and dated 1915



affinity to everything Scottish. When visiting relatives in the western and northern Highlands he would draw grouse, blackgame, ptarmigan and deer, as well as drawing in guest books at lodges he visited.

RESPIRE FROM THE TRENCHES

In France and at the front, his observations were still as keen. In a letter from France in winter 1916 he writes: "It is a blessing having a memory for natural objects. I can recall the wild flowers of any month to mind in every detail, butterflies and birds too, and often I do so when I get to bed – it is such a rest." In the midst of constant bombardment and soul-shattering horror, Murray Dixon's love of nature left him better prepared than many. So often we conceive of the trenches and the surrounding area as void, barren and devastated. His letters home are full of the birds he had seen and the trees, hedges and flora that grew.

His last letter – to Colonel McFarlane – is poignant, written three days before his death. Murray Dixon refers to three works he has drawn, and they confirm his powers of observation and an ability to visualise natural objects and scenes. They are rendered mostly in grisaille. *Hooded Crows on a French Corn Stack* is a stark study. *Partings in No Man's Land* is a particularly evocative work, the partridges massed in front of a tangle of barbed wire. It appeared in *Sporting and Dramatic Illustrated* with the following comment: "On many parts of the British front coveys of partridges are often seen right up to and even in 'No Man's Land'. It is a strange and cheering thing to hear their well-known call at dusk, mingling with the thunder of heavy guns and exploding shells, by which they now seem to be so little disturbed." *Rats in the Trenches* was published posthumously and is beautifully drawn.



EXHIBITION

Christopher Hamilton, Otto Murray Dixon's great-nephew, is compiling a catalogue of his work for an exhibition to coincide with the centenary of his death. If you have any works by the artist, letters, diaries or information on him, please email christopher. omd@gmail.com



To have these few works drawn at the front by an artist of distinction, who would have developed into one of the first rank, is exciting. We can see that he found solace in the creatures around him. They lifted him from the horrors of the trench. "The larks continue to sing right through shelling and kestrels hover about, not at all concerned by all the noise; it is very cheering to see them." He sees snowdrops and daffodils and that the tragedy of war is the tragedy of nature – a decapitated sparrowhawk and the dead barn owl.

Hugh Gladstone in his 1919 study, *Birds and the War*, wrote: "I must not omit to record the loss to ornithological art in the death of 2nd Lieutenant O Murray-Dixon." After the war, H Frank Wallace overlooked the pictures from the front in favour of those showing "the sunlit moor, the shaded woodland and the spring hedgerow". His gentle paintings are more carefully drawn but his works from the front are unique.

"We have seen that the birds were indifferent to the noise of battle, and that migration went on uninterrupted by the struggle of mankind," wrote Gladstone. I like to think Murray Dixon's art shows us just this. In sight of tragedy the natural world can provide solace, joy and hope. His works deserve to be remembered. ■

Clockwise from left: *Turtle Dove and Dog Roses*, not signed or dated; *When Guns are Few and Far Between*, which appeared in *Sporting and Dramatic Illustrated*; Peregrine stooping at cock teal, not signed or dated; *Rats in the Trenches*, which was published posthumously

