A TRIBUTE: THE STORY OF DORA MEESON

(1869-1955)

ARTIST

WOMEN'S WAR ACTIVIST

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WHO WAS DORA MEESON?

It is startling to discover that our own Australian Dictionary of Biography does not accord Dora Meeson her own biographical entry, although it does include her as a sub-reference to her husband, the conservative artist, George James Coates (1869-1930). Her biography reads thus:

"In Paris Coates renewed an acquaintance with a fellow art student, Dora Meeson (1869-1955), who arrived in 1898. She was born on 7 August 1869 at Hawthorn, Melbourne, daughter of John Thomas Meeson, schoolmaster, later barrister, and his wife Amelia, née Kipling, and grew up in New Zealand. A student at the Melbourne National Gallery School, and later the Slade School, London, Dora studied in Paris under Benjamin Constant and Laurens. The couple was engaged in France but could not afford to marry until 23 June 1903, some three years after their move to London. They resolved not to have children but to devote themselves to their artistic careers.

Coates and Meeson established themselves in Chelsea where they became members of an extensive circle of Australian expatriate artists. To earn money they contributed black and white illustrations to Dr H. S. Williams's Historians' History of the World

and the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Coates had exhibited 'on the line' at the Old Salon in Paris in 1898 and continued to show there and at the Royal Academy. Recognition did not come until after 1910, with an honourable mention at the Old Salon, prominent public notice at the 1912 Royal Academy exhibition and success at the 1913 New Salon when he was elected an associate (a member in 1927). Numerous commissions followed and soon established him as one of London's leading portrait painters. He was a member of the Chelsea Arts Club, the International Society of Sculptors, Painters, and Gravers and the Royal Society of Portrait Painters. Meeson had the distinction of being the first Australian woman artist elected a member of the Royal Institute of Oil Painters.

Despite physical prowess Coates lacked a strong constitution; when Meeson visited Australia alone in 1913 to accompany an exhibition his health collapsed and she had to return to nurse him in Italy. In 1915 he enlisted in the Territorial Royal Army Medical Corps and served as an orderly at the 3rd London General Hospital, attaining the rank of sergeant. He was discharged in 1919 as physically unfit. While never an official war artist, he produced many portrait commissions for the Australian War Memorial. These included portraits of World War I heroes and a large group portrait of Major General (Sir William) Bridges and his staff in Egypt—on which Coates and Meeson worked after returning to Australia in 1921-22. Coates also painted portraits of Canadian war heroes.

Neither artist responded to developments in art after impressionism and their work remained firmly wedded to strictly representational modes. Primarily a portrait painter, the diffident and unassuming Coates was temperamentally disinclined to challenge accepted assumptions about art despite his admiration for Whistler, Dégas and Puvis de Chavannes. His realism emphasized a harmonious range of low tones and his approach was painstaking and obsessive. While able to handle large-scale works, his best portraits were more intimate such as 'Arthur Walker and his brother Harold' (1912) which reveal a sensitive response to character. Meeson is best known for her many fine impressions of the River Thames, a number of which were acquired after 1945 by the Port of London Authority.

Coates died suddenly in London of a stroke on 27 July 1930. A memorial exhibition of his work was opened in May 1931 at the New Burlington Galleries by Lord Birdwood. His wife continued an active artistic career until her death in London on 24 March 1955. The two were buried together in Rye cemetery."[1]

It is intriguing that this article reveals some lack of familiarity with Meeson's work when it states, inaccurately, that *"Neither artist responded to developments in art after impressionism and their work remained firmly wedded to strictly representational modes."* In the case of Meeson, at least, this is not strictly correct, although it certainly does apply to Coates. She, at least, did progress to a modernist style that might broadly be called Post-Impressionist. Indeed, her own memoirs suggest that her stylistic liberation might possibly have caused some disagreements between her and her husband, and may even have prompted her move out of the studio to her *plein-air* sketching on the Thames Embankment. She wrote: *"Neither did he (George Coates) understand my struggle to express light and colour, but always wanted me to lower my*

[1] Richard Haese, 'Meeson, Dora (1869–1955)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/meeson-dora-6318/text9579, published first in hardcopy 1981, accessed online 25 April 2018.

work in tone, whereas I would urge him to lighten his. But we went our separate ways quite harmoniously. The crampedness of painting and living in a studio drove me out to study the river and the multitudinous forms of water, and to try to give it weight and movement and glorious, ever-changing colour, while George concentrated more and more on figure painting."[2]

Indeed, the cultural historian becomes alert to her story precisely because of the anomalous contrast between the modern style in her later work, and an apparently inexplicable return to a traditional academic style in *1916. Leaving for the Front*. This work is, in a word, an anachronism, and does not strictly make sense, but historians relish things that don't make sense, because they can often make *other* things make more sense. In the case of Meeson, one of her paintings will open a window upon a whole area of women's experiences and agency in wartime.

In terms of context, we now know - thanks to Victoria Hammond's pioneering research - that Dora Meeson was born in Hawthorn, Melbourne, in 1869, and that her family lived variously in Australia and New Zealand, before moving back to England permanently.[3] Artistically, she was a competent painter: she had studied at the Académie Julien in Paris, and had had works accepted for the Paris Salon annual exhibition.

DORA MEESON, PAINTER OF BRITISH LABOUR

View a sample image at: https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/heart-of-the-river-thames-captured-by-artist-dora-meeson/news-story/04a972e6aaa655c3bf702f464171ac26

Meeson was also an artist who broke boundaries. In Australia, as in Europe, there was still a pervasive conservative prejudice that if women were to paint, then they should properly restrict themselves to demure subjects fit to women's domestic experience, preferably floral studies, babies and children, genteel social gatherings and so on. It was considered somehow indelicate for a woman to treat beefy subjects such as masculine labour, although some, like Emma Minnie Boyd, forged ahead and blithely did so anyway. What use, after all, are conventions, if not to be defied?

In England, for example, Meeson deliberately painted scenes of labour on the Thames embankments, and scenes of shipping on the river itself, arguing that the very choice of such subjects was political, because she had claimed subjects traditionally reserved for men. Indeed, Victoria Hammond has discovered that she insisted on going out on a boat on dangerously stormy days, and on painting away amidst dangerous wind storms. She asserted that, in doing so, she had established her equal right with men to have a vigorous male point of view – on the surging river – rather than a 'tame' point of view from the river bank.

[2] Dora Coates, *George Coates. His Art and Life.* (London: Dent, 1937), p. 62.
[3] Victoria Hammond and Juliet Peers, *Completing the Picture. Wome Artists of the Heidelberg Era* (Melbourne: Heide Art Gallery, 1992).

Moreover, it was during her forays into the London docklands that another dynamic began to occur: she started getting to know the working-class families of the area. After the declaration of war in 1914, she was more aware than most of the economic hardship that these families almost immediately suffered once the breadwinner was gone, be it because he was still on active service or reported killed in battle.

DORA MEESON, SUFFRAGETTE

At present, the teaching of Australian History requires that we study wars also on the home front, and that we trace their impact on civilians. On the whole, though, it is almost inevitable that the focus would be on women valiantly 'making do', making household economies, and the rather more fraught issue of women in Australia who steppeed into men's places in wartime factories (the 'Thanks Girls and Goodbye' issue).

All of the above is perfectly legitimate history, but one suspects that there are far more extraordinary stories to be told. Dora Meeson's is one of them.

We discover that our artist was also an activist for women's rights, and a great suffragette. She was in charge of the London Branch of the Australian and New Zealand Voters' Committee.

IMAGE: MEESON: ***Banner of the Aust/NZ Voters' Committee***

View image at: http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/drive/historyonics3a-women27s-suffrage-rpl/4692292

She painted the union banner for the great Suffrage March of 1908 in London. Her husband marched with her on this occasion. He was clearly of a like mind, politically, to her. Meeson wrote: *"George and I both threw ourselves heart and soul into the suffrage movement [...] he was keen on fair play and believed in granting the same facilities to women as to men to further their natual abilities, nd he had the very human wish to support anything that would improve the condition of the masses."* [4]

Meeson also designed posters to publicise these marches. (View example at https://www.wikitree.com/photo/jpg/Meeson-6-2).

[4] Ibid., p. 50.

DORA MEESON, HOME FRONT ACTIVIST FOR WOMEN

When the Great War broke out, she realised that the conflict entailed real and serious deprivation for the women left behind in Britain. She noticed that many women and children were being left in poverty by the departure of their menfolk to the front, especially when government separation allowances took months to come through. Accordingly, Meeson worked to help establish the Women's Police Volunteers, which attempted to help women who were often so desperate that they were forced into prostitution. These volunteers were, on the whole, educated middle-class women who used their greater resources and agency to assist Belgian refugees, and British women of working-class families.

(View photograph of this group at: http://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/blog/files-film-women-policing-women/).

IMAGE:

DORA MEESON
1916. Leaving for the Front
c. 1916
Oil on canvas, 162.0 x 122.6 cm.

BALLARAT FINE ART GALLERY, VICTORIA

View image at: https://www.thecourier.com.au/story/2736716/responses-to-painting-sought/

Dora Meeson's painting *1916. Leaving for the front* would not, today, be considered a great painting in terms of what we now understand to be modern art, but it provides a superb opportunity to investigate the experiences of Australian women in war.

When asking students to investigate an image, I suggest that there are three levels upon which we might work.

The first level is the **context**: we try to discover something about the artist, and the circumstances in which she produced the work.

The second level is the **text** itself: we try to read the image closely, and to draw conclusions about what the artist intended us to understand from it.

This work depicts the dramatic moment at which a soldier leaves for the front in full kit, but it is neither the proud recruit nor his equipment that holds our attention. His departure is placed in the context of the women he is leaving behind, mother, wife and children. The study of the four faces is a rich text of emotions; the elder daughter stands staunchly holding the soldier's greatcoat and Lee Enfield .303 Rifle. Note that this is

not 1914: it is specifically and significantly dated to 1916, by which time the great slaughters of 1915 had established what going to the front really meant.

So we have looked at the context, and we have looked closely at the text. There is a third possible level, which I like to call the **super-text**: as we research further, we often discover details which make us reinterpret the text of the painting.

The super-text of this painting emerges when we realise that it is painted in a far more conservative style than most of Meeson's work.

DORA MEESON
In a Chelsea Garden
1913
Oil on canvas, 87.5 x 61.0 cm.

CASTLEMAINE ART GALLERY, VICTORIA

View im age at: https://maryannadair.com/2017/07/30/how-many-kinds-of-sweet-flowers-grow-in-an-english-country-garden/dora-meeson-garden/

Victoria Hammond correctly points out that *1916. Leaving for the Front* is a sentimental genre picture of the sort painted in the 1880s and 1890s, but that it was totally out-of-date by 1916. Admittedly, elderly collectors with more traditional tastes might still have bought works in this style.

Meeson herself, however, was by then actually quite modernist in her use of bright colours and free brushstroke. We can clearly see this is a work that she donated to the Castelmaine Art Gallery in 1922, *In a Chelsea Garden.* This work establishes beyond doubt that as early as 1913 she had already progressed to a modernist style – in the sense of bold colours and free brushstroke – *before* the war broke out, and that three years later *regressed* to her more traditional style of painting in this work. In general, artists do not usually go backwards in their personal stylistic development in this manner, unless some external factor, such as a lucrative commission, compels them to do so.

The solution to the mystery is that Meeson wanted not only to alert people to the difficulties that these women would face, but to actually alleviate these problems financially. She painted this work for ready sale, because she knew it would appeal immediately to conservative art collectors, whereas her own modernist work would probably not. Meeson did indeed this work profitably, and immediately used the money from the sale of this painting to directly finance her relief work.

There is another quietly radical aspect of this painting, although we will not see it if we just view the work in photographic reproduction in an art book. It is very large in format, and its unusual size is itself subversive. If we view the work in the flesh at Ballarat, we immediately notice that it is truly a monumental painting. This too is radical, because these large canvases were still usually implicitly reserved for 'noble' subject (like historical paintings), not for humble topics (such as this genre scene, or

scene of everyday life.) As modern viewers, we are now altogether heedless of the significance of size of a canvas: a big canvas is simply physically big because the artists chose it to be large, and this now has no accrued connotations. To an older viewing public in 1916, however, this transgression of size and genre would have been a little shocking and unsettling.

WHAT DOES THE PAINTING *MEAN*?

We might further pursue this *sondage* with an apparently obvious question: What did Dora Meeson actually *mean* when she created this image?

We already know that this is a genre picture, intended to inspire a certain sentimental reaction in the viewer. But is it a patriotic war picture? Is Meeson valiantly celebrating the heroic British tommy and the three generations of women who fondly wish him well and farewell?

We may not immediately notice that Meeson has handled this matter very cleverly and adroitly. A hasty reading might intially suggest just such a patriotic reading. Victoria Hammond confirms that people may well have been misled as to its meaning, having discovered that this work was routinely reproduced as an engraving in Australian newspapers during the 1920s, as an illustration for ANZAC day activities.

If the painting is a subterfuge, then we know that the trick worked, since it passed muster and sold. But let us look again. As best we can tell from the stark room and the plain clothing, this appears to be a home of quite modest means. It may be a depiction of the very type of working-class family that Meeson knew well in the Thames area. Indeed, it would be fascinating to discover whether Meeson might even have asked a real family, or a collection of real individuals, to pose for her, either in their own home or in her studio. We do know that the grandmother and mother depcited here may well suffer deprivation for two more years, and that the children will go hungry.

Victoria Hammond argues convincingly that the emotion on the women's faces is not merely love and loyalty, but a sense of helplessness and anxiety. If Hammond is right, then this is, in the purest form, a feminist painting, because it explores women's experiences in depth. Notice the contrast between the happy, smiling, excited child and the drawn look of dread on the young woman's face directly behind the child: her eyes express foreboding, and the terrible sense that the man may be seeing the infant for the last time. That look of Terrible Knowledge is, in turn, reiterated on the face of the older womean behind her. The reason is that this is not 1914, but 1916, and there could be no mistaking the man's probable imminent fate in some of the most massive and pointless slaughters in modern military history. It is not clear whether he has volunteered or been called up – probably the latter – but his fate is most uncertain.

EPILOGUE

It is gratifying to learn that this courageous, humane and proactive woman did prosper. In 1919, she was honoured by being the first Australian woman artist to be admitted to the Royal Institue of Painters in Oil in London.[5] Meeson and her husband did return to Australia in 1921, and held multiple exhibitions in Melbourne and in regional cities such as Castlemaine, where she donated a canvas to the city's art gallery. Ever the entrepreneur, she discovered that her English scenes of the Thames sold very well in Australia; at the same time, she realised that Australian scenes would sell well back in England, so she industriously knocked off a whole range of Australian landscapes while touring Victoria. Her husband died in 1930, but she continued to paint and to exhibit during the 1930s. She lived to see the Second World War in England, and painted watercolours to depict the damage caused by German bombing of Chelsea. This body of work is now in the collection of the Australian War Memorial.

Dora Meeson died in Chelsea aged 86: a long and worthy life, and still richly deserving of an appropriate biography. Victoria Hammond concludes: *"Dora Meeson is the most complex and intriguing of this group of women: painter, illustrator, author, suffragist, breadwinner and loyal wife, she juggled her professional career as an artist with her pioneering crusades for the women's movement, while at the same time supporting and protecting her gentle husband, the artist George Coates. Curiously, although formiddable on the subject of equality for women, and although it was largely income from the sale of her paintings that supported the household, she regarded Coates' career as more important than her own."* [6]

[5] Ibid., p. 52.
[6] Ibid., p. 50.

FOR TEACHERS OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

QUESTIONS FOR VISUAL ANALYSIS

DORA MEESON'S *'1916, LEAVING FOR THE FRONT'* (1916)

Facts on file:

Artist: Dora Meeson (Australian, 1869-1955)
Title: *1916, Leaving for the Front*
Date: c. 1916.
Medium: Oil on canvas, 162.0 x 122.6 cm.
Collection: Ballarat Fine Art Gallery
Reference: Exhibition catalogue, Melbourne (Heide), 1992, *Completing the Picture. Women Artists and the Heidelberg Era,* number 33.

FOCUS: WHAT ARE THE MEANINGS THAT ARE WRITTEN INTO THIS PAINTING?

1. Dora Meeson's painting avoids heroicising the role of the male soldier alone: she attempts to place his departure for war in the broader context of the family as a whole. How does her painting remind us that war affects all members of society in some way? How might you predict that the various members of this family might be affected by the soldier's absence?

2. How does Dora Meeson remind us that the experience of separation - and of managing at home - has in a sense traditionally been a significant part of women's role over the generations?

FOCUS: HOW DOES THIS PRIMARY SOURCE FIT INTO THE CONTEXT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR?

3. When this soldier was departing for the front in 1916, the situation was quite different to the hopeful, optimistic conditions of 1914. What was the nature of the war to which this man was going?

4. Dora Meeson's painting reminds us that war forces women to endure separation and to take over full management of the 'home front'. In what other ways were Australian women able to participate more directly in the war effort?

DORA MEESON (1869-1955)
In a Chelsea Garden
1913
Oil on canvas, 87.5 x 61.0 cm.
CASTLEMAINE ART GALLERY, VICTORIA

DORA MEESON (1869-1955)
1916, Leaving for the Front
c. 1916.
Oil on canvas, 162.0 x 122.6 cm.
BALLARAT FINE ART GALLERY
Reference: Exhibition catalogue, Melbourne (Heide), 1992, *Completing the Picture. Women Artists and the Heidelberg Era,* number 33.

DORA MEESON (1869-1955)
The Thames
c. 1915
Oil on canvas, 30.0 x 38.0 cm.
AT AUCTION

This canvas allows us a glimpse of Meeson's work on the Thames Embankment. These are views of a distinctively industrial riverscape, with steamboats, possibly tugs, on the turbulent waters of the Thames, and looming factories on the bank. This is also a study of a powerful effect of light, with sunlight breaking through the murky foggy atmosphere of London. The thick, gestural application of apint is very muscular indeed, attesting to the use of a heavily loaded brush and possibly a palette knife.

MARIE BASHKIRTSEFF
The Academie Julien
1881
oil on canvas, 154.0 x 186.0 cm.
STATE ART MUSEUM, THE UKRAINE

In this monumental canvas, the painter Marie Bashkirtseff depicts a life study class apparently held exclusively for women. The young male model, modestly clad, is posing as a youthful John the Baptist.

DORA MEESON (1869-1955)
View of the Thames Below Tower Bridge
1950
Oil on baord, 58.0 x 46.5. cm.
AT AUCTION

This small oil on board allows us a glimspe of Meeson's style late in her career. She is still working on scenes of the Thames, and emphasising its true quality as an industrial waterway, even though she was here quite close to a famous historical landmark. She appears to have reverted to a slightly more naturalistsic way of painting, and to rather

more sombre tones with a cool palette, but she continues to study effects of light in the foggy sky over the city.

HERBERT H. SMITH (1875-1957)
The Art Students
1898
Watercolour, 62.5 x 46.o cm
BALLARAT FINE ART GALLERY, VICTORIA

This watercolour by Herbert Smith depicts the sort of art school studio in which women typically studied art in the later 19th century. Dora Meeson would have trained in conditions very similar to these. While the artistic training was not difficult to acquire, the ensuing career certainly was; Meeson's great achievement was to have successfully pursued her career in a male-domianted art world.