

MILITARY PORTRAITS OF AFRICAN-CANADIANS

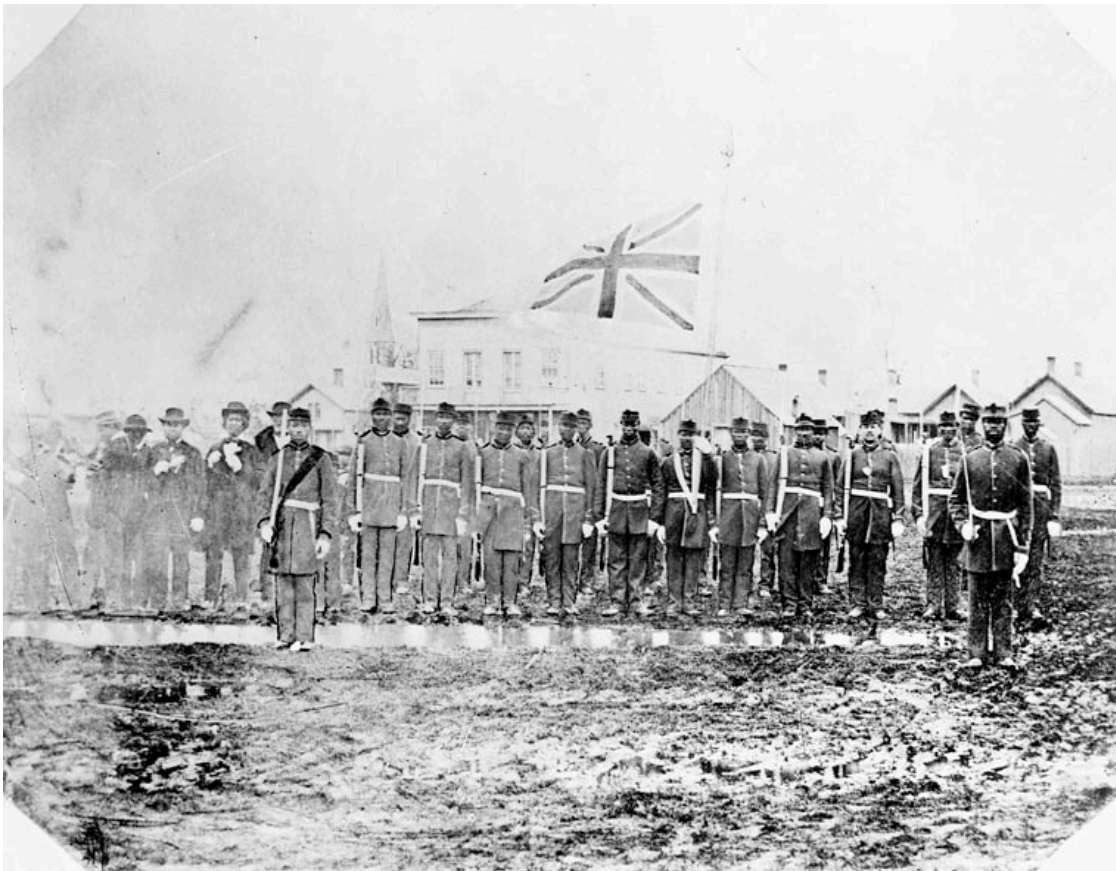
Amanda Burstein

This exhibition examines military portraits of African-Canadians from the 1860s to the 1940s. The images presented here serve to reveal how representations of African-Canadian soldiers that commemorate their military contributions can also tell a different story when closely analyzed. Images that seem to depict blacks in a sympathetic and natural—or in this case, heroic manner—can often subtly reinforce the contrary. Art historian Albert Boime argues, “Images of black people exemplify the strategies of cultural practice in addressing societal conditions.”

¹ The images of black soldiers considered here reveal the societal conditions in which African-Canadians/Americans sought equality—in particular, through military service—and the extent to which the racism and prejudice of the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century that pervaded both American and Canadian culture challenged their “[struggle] for recognition, power, and control over their lives.”²

African-Canadians have volunteered, in several capacities, in Canada's military, from the time of the American Revolution, through to the First and Second World Wars to the present. However, despite their desire to defend the country's interests and their military contributions, African-Canadians often faced restrictions in enlistment and participation due to racial prejudice.³ Blacks were the subject of numerous stereotypes that “pervaded popular anecdotes, jokes, cartoons, and narrative stories in the popular press,” portraying them as “lazy, improvident, child-like, irrepressible ... immoral and criminal.”⁴ Such damaging prejudice extended even to those African-Canadians and African-Americans who volunteered their service—and often sacrificed their lives—to defend the very state or country that offered them but marginal, subordinate social and military positions.

The images featured in this virtual exhibition reveal some of the strategies used in visual culture to express and maintain oppressive and even racist views about black people, as well as some images which construct a black identity counter to those which re-enact and reinforce prejudiced views.



Volunteer Military Company (c. 1860-1864)

Charles Gentile (Italian, 1830-1893)

Photograph

Library and Archives Canada/C-022626

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3194357>.

This image depicts the Volunteer Military Company, formed in Victoria, British Columbia in 1860 by a group of African-Canadian men, mostly literate business people who had immigrated to the British colony from California on the invitation of the mixed-race British Columbia governor James Douglas (1803-1877).⁵ Serving during the American Civil War, these men formed and financed the only lasting militia force in the colony before 1864.⁶ This group faced significant prejudice while active, being barred from public parades and refused participation in volunteer fire brigades, their children also subject to segregation from other students in school.⁷ The organization came to an untimely end that year when Governor Arthur Kennedy (1809-1883), appointed governor of Vancouver Island in March of 1864, had the group disbanded, to be replaced by a volunteer company of white men.⁸ In addition to its historical value, this image is interesting for the colonial relationship it represents between Britain and its colonized peoples. The row of black soldiers juxtaposed with the large British flag overhead prompts us to consider that these soldiers of African descent, though colonized by the British, now voluntarily defend the Empire.⁹ It is also noteworthy that Gentile chose to construct this grouping of black soldiers around an expanse of muddied terrain, with a large puddle at its centre. Though we cannot be certain if this was an intentionally disrespectful act, Gentile had previously expressed a racist attitude towards African-Americans.¹⁰ While this photograph documents the African-Canadian men who took part in the Voluntary Military Company, it simultaneously denigrates their contribution by representing them in a disrespectful manner.



William Hall (c. 1859-1904)

(Photographer unknown)

Photograph

Warner, D.V. "A Canadian Negro V.C." *Canadian Magazine*. 17 (May-October 1901): 112-16.

<<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/black-history/index-e.html>>.

This photograph depicts William Hall (1827-1904), born in Nova Scotia to formerly enslaved parents who had emigrated from America as refugees of the War of 1812.¹¹ An experienced seaman, Hall worked on the crew of a merchant ship from age fifteen, later serving for three years in the American Navy, and finally joining the British Navy in 1852.¹² For his gallantry under fire in the siege of Lucknow in 1857, during the Indian Mutiny, and one of the mission's few survivors, Hall was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1859, the Empire's highest award for bravery.¹³ We see this award pinned to his coat in this image alongside the navy man's other decorations, making Hall not only the first African-Canadian to receive this honour, but also the first Canadian sailor.¹⁴ This portrait may have appeared initially in an article about Hall from a 1901 edition of *Canadian Magazine*, "A Canadian Negro V.C.," who was largely unrecognized before that year when he drew the attention of the Duke of Cornwall and York during a parade of British veterans in Nova Scotia.¹⁵ Despite this proud and strong image of Hall and the due recognition it afforded him, the *Canadian Magazine* article portrays the Navy man as a simple and careless man who lacks value for the honour bestowed to him.¹⁶ This photograph was also the model for a stamp released by Canada Post in 2010 for Black History Month, depicting Hall "against a seascape with the HMS Shannon in the background ... wearing his Victoria Cross, the Indian Mutiny Medal, the Turkish Crimea Medal, and the Crimea Medal."¹⁷



William Hall V.C. Stamp (Released by Canada Post February 1, 2010)

Illustrator, Suzanne Duranceau

<http://www.canadapost.ca/cpo/mc/personal/collecting/stamps/2010/2010_William_Hall.jsf>.



Three soldiers in a German dug-out captured during the Canadian advance east of Arras
(Oct. 1918)

William Rider-Rider (British, 1889-1979)

Photograph

Canada Dept. of National Defence/Library and Archives Canada/PA-003201

<[http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem
&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3194350&rec_nbr_list=3194350](http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3194350&rec_nbr_list=3194350)>.

This photograph taken by official war photographer William Rider-Rider (1889-1979) depicts three black soldiers in a German dugout captured in 1917 during the First World War.¹⁸ It is undetermined whether these soldiers had fought in the war, though the Canadian advance was in April of 1917, and by 1918 the Arras cemetery was being built.¹⁹ African-Canadians were initially turned away upon attempting to enrol in the military, due to non-formal restrictions on military participation based upon prejudice, and it was only when there became a growing need for new soldiers to replace those injured and killed that they were enlisted to serve in all-black battalions, segregated from white soldiers.²⁰ Often, these black soldiers were not permitted to fight, and were instead assigned other duties including the construction of roads and bridges, diffusion of land mines, and tending to the wounded, such as the all-black No. 2 Construction Battalion.²¹ The soldiers in Rider-Rider's photograph are depicted smiling broadly at the cameraman, not unlike the subjects of many of his other wartime portraits of civilians and soldiers. Art historian Tanya Sheehan argues that prior to the early decades of the twentieth century, broad, toothy smiles were reserved for socially marginalized subjects and were often ascribed to black people in order to make them look humorous and silly, and to portray them as a less intelligent, less sophisticated race.²² Given the number of photographs taken by Rider-Rider in which his subjects are smiling, both black and white, it seems unlikely that his intention was to demean the black soldiers represented in this photo; it may be misleading however in that it suggests that these men played some part in the capture of the dugout in which they pose, when in fact it occurred the year before.



French Gleaners Talking to Canadians (1917)

William Rider-Rider (British, 1889-1979)

Photograph

Imperial War Museum London / CO 1832

<<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205194735>>.



Private Roy, Canadian Women's Army Corps (1946)

Molly Lamb Bobak (Canadian, 1922-)

Oil on masonite

76.4 x 60.8 cm

Beaverbrook Collection of War Art/Canadian War Museum/19710261-1626

<<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/feature/blackhistory/photo-gallery>>.

Molly Lamb Bobak, among the few Canadian women artists assigned a position as an official war artist, was posted overseas during World War II. Here she represents an African-Canadian member of the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC), an all-female organization established in 1941 which began performing traditional duties working as cooks, cleaners and medical assistants and later expanded to include jobs such as truck drivers, mechanics and radar operators.²³ Most members of the CWAC served in Canada, though towards the latter years of the war in 1943 three companies were posted overseas in Europe, among them the female soldier represented here in Bobak's oil painting of Private Roy. This is clearly an individualized portrait, that is, a representation of a particular individual, an African-Canadian soldier. Though we do not know much more about this woman beyond what Bobak's painting reveals or why the artist chose to represent this lone black, female soldier, when the majority of her wartime art focuses on groups and crowds, as in *Victory Over Japan Celebrations* (1945). As a woman and someone “attuned to the reality of Canada's multicultural state,” Bobak's representation of Private Roy does not seem critical of this African-Canadian's role in the war effort, but rather seems to capture the struggles faced by this woman of colour, psychologically and physically distanced from the viewer by her distant yet pensive gaze and her crossed arms.²⁴ Given that “representations of people of visible minority active in duty were entirely uncommon for the vast majority of works produced by Canadian war artists,” it is notable that unlike many other of Bobak's paintings, this soldier is represented in an inactive state, speaking to the struggles of black Canadians, especially black Canadian women, who wanted to participate in the country's military efforts.²⁵



Victory Over Japan Celebrations (1945)

Molly Lamb Bobak (Canadian, 1922-)

Watercolour

(Dimensions unknown)

Canadian War Museum/19710261-1650

<<http://www.journal.dnd.ca/vo6/no3/history-histoire-02-eng.asp>>.

NOTES

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- 1 Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) xiv.
 - 2 Boime, xiv.
 - 3 Rosemary Sadlier, "Forgotten Stoies," Black History Canada, Toronto Dominion Bank, n.d. <<http://blackhistorycanada.ca/index.php?lang=en>>.
 - 4 Boime, 206.
 - 5 James Douglas, the son of a Scottish father and West Indian woman, was the governor of Vancouver Island from 1858-64; and Margaret A. Ormsby, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, "Sir James Douglas," <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0002373>>.
 - 6 "National Historic Persons," *Black History Portal*, Parks Canada (10 Mar. 2010) <<http://www.pc.gc.ca/culture/mhn-bhm/page2.aspx>>.
 - 7 "National Historic Persons."
 - 8 "Black Immigration to Canada and Black Contributions to the Building of the Canadian Nation," *Some Missing Pages: The Black Community in the History of Quebec and Canada*, Ministere de l'Education de Quebec (1996) <http://www.learnquebec.ca/en/content/curriculum/social_sciences/features/missingpages/unit4/u4p79.htm>.
 - 9 Despite being taken from their home countries in Africa, under British Imperial expansion, and brought to America where they were enslaved by the colonialists settled there, many freed black slaves fought for the British during the American Civil War.
 - 10 Cesare Rosario Marino, *The Remarkable Carlo Gentile: Italian Photographer of the American Frontier*, ed. Rosemarie Mossinger, Nevada City: Carl Moutz Publishing (1998) 47.
 - 11 Sadlier.
 - 12 Sadlier.
 - 13 Sadlier.
 - 14 Sadlier.
 - 15 D.V. Warner, "A Canadian Negro V.C.," *Canadian Magazine*, 17 (May–October 1901) 112–16; and "William Hall VC," Nova Scotia Museum <<http://museum.gov.ns.ca/infos/william-hall-info.pdf>>.
 - 16 The author, D.V. Warner, claims that Hall had carelessly lost the blue ribbon attached to his Victoria Cross medal, which he supposedly kept in a "cardboard spool box," and attached it instead to a watch chain with a piece of wire. Warner also claims that Hall only valued the medal for its monetary value, quoting the seaman as saying, "It isn't worth very much to a man after all, only ten pounds a year," 116.
 - 17 "Canada Post Honours William Hall as Part of Black History Month," Canada Post (1 Feb. 2010) <<http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/Canada-Post-Honours-William-Hall-as-Part-of-Black-History-Month-1110190.htm>>.
 - 18 Rider-Rider was the official war photographer of the Canadian corps, documenting their various actions.
 - 19 "Arras," World War One Battlefields (2009) <<http://www.ww1battlefields.co.uk/others/arras1.html>>.
 - 20 Charmaine A. Nelson, *Ebony Roots, Northern Soil: Perspectives on Blackness in Canada* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010) 191.
 - 21 Rosemary Sadlier, "No.2 Construction Battalion," Black History Canada, Toronto Dominion Bank, n.d., <<http://blackhistorycanada.ca/events.php?themeid=8&id=8>>.
 - 22 Sadlier.
 - 23 "Introduction," *Canada Remembers Women in the Canadian Military*, Veteran Affairs Canada, <<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/feature/women/history/military>>.
 - 24 Raina-Clair Gillis, "Artistic Impressions of War," *Canadian Military Journal* (Fall 2005): 79.
 - 25 Gillis.

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