**Paul Nash (1889 - 1946)**

**By Professor Phil Hubbard**

Paul Nash was a war artist and photographer who became an important influence in British inter-war surrealism and Modern Art. Suffering post-traumatic stress disorder after World War One, Nash moved to Dymchurch where he recuperated whilst repeatedly painting seascapes in which the sea wall was a central motif. His three years in Dymchurch saw his style become increasingly abstract, and surreal in its imagery. After Dymchurch, Nash moved to Rye, and then later Swanage, dying in 1946 of a long-standing asthma problem.

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Nash was a formidable painter of ‘soil and sea’ whose sometimes abstract and surreal landscapes provide an important link between the British Vorticists and the European \_*avant garde\_*.[i] During the First World War, Nash tripped and injured himself in the trenches, returning to England while his comrades were slaughtered at the Battle of Passchendaele. Returning as official war artist, he produced some of the most haunting images of the conflict. Few of these paintings depicted combatants, as this was art emphasising desolation and despair through a focus on the primal qualities of landscape: these were elongated, near-architectural images of flooded trenches, broken tree stumps, and brooding skies.

Renting a former Dymchurch pub, Rose Cottage, with his wife Margaret in 1920, Nash found himself a war artist with no war to paint. Instead, he turned to the sea wall as subject matter, producing a remarkable series of sketches and paintings that pitched nature against culture in an elemental battle of sea against land, as if opponents in a war. These were remarkable, perspectival images, Dymchurch wall frequently viewed as if from above, an angular, massive modern structure attempting to hold out the more fluid sea. Often the sky is dark and threatening, holding portents of impending disaster. For Nash, this landscape clearly resonated with the battlefields of the first world war, as Andrew Causey notes:

The waterlogged Flanders landscape had been a danger apart from the fighting, with the risk to men and horses of becoming trapped in mud and even drowning, and at Dymchurch there is a possible reading of the wall both as a defensive and protective element against the sea and also as a reprise, more solidly constructed, of the fragile lines of duckboards across the Flanders wastes.[ii]

Given these intimations of conflict, and his own fear of water (he reportedly nearly drowned as a child) it is perhaps not surprising that Nash referred to Dymchurch as the ‘strange coast’, rendering it a stark borderland between life and death.[iii] For Nash, the sea wall stood on the threshold of past and present, his paintings alluding to the ways that the sea threatened to return him to the nightmares of his youth. In his autobiography, Nash described the seas off Dymchurch as ‘cold and cruel waters, usually in a threatening mood, pounding and rattling along the shore’.[iv] He left for East Sussex in 1925, writing of his time documenting the Dymchurch shoreline that ‘I shall never work there anymore... a place like that and its effect on me – one’s effect on it. It’s a curious record formally and psychologically when you see the whole set of designs together.’[v]

After his Dymchurch sojourn, Nash turned his gaze towards other landscapes, and increasingly towards the threat from the sky. During the Battle of Britain he produced powerful images of German bombers crashed in quintessentially English rural landscapes.[vi] Nevertheless, he continued to work on some of his Dymchurch paintings until his death in 1946. In these later pictures, monochromatic imagery emphasising the stark geometry of the wall was replaced by a more colourful and complex renderings inspired by surrealism of Giorgio de Chirico. \_*Nostalgic Landscape\_*, for example, was started in 1923 as a simple perspective of the wall, but was changed by Nash in the 1930s through the inclusion of a (now-demolished) sluice gate, with its doorway leading to a seemingly endless, dark, tunnel beyond.[vii] The sluice gate in this painting resembles a watch-tower, but it also appears to serve as a repository of Nash’s memories at the point where the fluidity of the sea met the solidity of the sea wall. Paul Hendon offers a Freudian interpretation of the painting, arguing that ‘the watch-tower on the sea wall is so represented that it offers a path that evades the sea/land dialectic of the [\_*earlier\_*] Dymchurch paintings and its associated oppositions of feminine and masculine, erosion and resistance’.[viii] This hints at an alternative reading of the threat of coastal inundation, one that suggests that we should ‘not put too much faith in the stability and dependability’ of the distinction between land and sea, and recognise that land reclamation is fragile and temporary. The sea wall has been extensively and expensively renovated since Nash’s time, whose paintings have taken on new relevance in the face of climate change and sea level rise that continues to threaten this low-lying corner of Kent.

[i] Cardinal, Roger. 2013. \_*The Landscape Vision of Paul Nash\_*. London: Reaktion.

[ii] Causey, Andrew. 2013. \_*Paul Nash: Landscape and The Life of Objects\_.* London: Lund Humphreys, p. 29..

[iii] Nash, Paul. 1988. \_*Outline – An Autobiography\_.* London: Lund Humphreys, p. 143.

[iv] Cited at [https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/paul-nash/paul-nash-modern-artist-ancient-landscape-room-guide-1](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.tate.org.uk%2Fwhats-on%2Ftate-liverpool%2Fexhibition%2Fpaul-nash%2Fpaul-nash-modern-artist-ancient-landscape-room-guide-1&data=05%7C01%7Ccarolyn.oulton%40canterbury.ac.uk%7C5d971e026f1447527e1008da6a4cb0f5%7C0320b2da22dd4dab8c216e644ba14f13%7C0%7C0%7C637939174904377564%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=0AorEFIYwPnf5MUOXD7UHpOHtuUsBqKrBJoTlMCXhi0%3D&reserved=0)

[v] Nash, Paul. 2016. \_*Outline – An Autobiography\_.* London: Lund Humphreys, p 47.

[vi] Gruffudd, Pyrs. 1991. "Reach for the sky: the air and English cultural nationalism". \_*Landscape Research\_.* 16 (2) 19-24.

[vii] See [https://dymchurchworldnews.wordpress.com/2012/07/03/village-of-the-surreal-32/](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fdymchurchworldnews.wordpress.com%2F2012%2F07%2F03%2Fvillage-of-the-surreal-32%2F&data=05%7C01%7Ccarolyn.oulton%40canterbury.ac.uk%7C5d971e026f1447527e1008da6a4cb0f5%7C0320b2da22dd4dab8c216e644ba14f13%7C0%7C0%7C637939174904377564%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=aA75PH2qR6QM6uqdNa0jb60ukmeo8CDRuysS4uQjrto%3D&reserved=0)

[viii] Hendon, Paul. 1997. "Paul Nash: Outline – The Immortality of the ‘I’". \_*Art History\_* 20 (4). 589-610.