

# A NOTE ON ISO RAE

*from Pip Williams*

This story began in the archives of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. I was writing a different book and looking at the art of Iso Rae for some insights into the army base at Étaples during WWI. Her drawings were perfect for this purpose – detailed, precise and usefully annotated. Unlike photography from the time, they were also coloured, giving me details about uniforms, buildings, woods and skies. I lingered on a picture of players on a stage, an audience of pencilled heads in the foreground. Iso had labelled it NYD at Lion d'Argent, YMCA, Étaples, August 1919. Ten months after the war had ended these men were still in France – Not Yet Diagnosed. There was a reluctance back then to admit that the mind could break just like the body, but most of these men would have been diagnosed with neurasthenia, war neurosis, traumatic hysteria, shell shock. I thought about the trauma of that war, then I thought about the trauma of all the wars since and the wars that are ongoing. I thought about all the ways people try to cope, all the ways they fail and succeed.



Then I noticed that this picture of men, Not Yet Diagnosed, was only secured to its backing board by two bits of tape at the top edge. The assistant curator, wearing blue rubber gloves, lifted the picture to show me something on the underside.

It was another drawing, in pencil, of a woman.

She was standing fully clothed in a long-sleeved shirt, the top buttons undone, a wide belt cinching her waist and a skirt falling to just above her ankles. Her head was uncovered and her hair had a curl, it was loosely gathered to reveal a long neck. I stared at her and she stared back. Her gaze was direct and unwavering, her hands were on her hips, her feet were planted wide. Iso Rae had not signed this sketch and there was no description of time or place. But the length of the woman's skirt put her in that war and I began to wonder who she was and what she was bracing for.

That is where the fiction began, and my first act as a novelist was to reimagine the drawing I was looking at. What if that same woman had been drawn naked, crouching, stretching her back? How would that drawing have come to be? What story might it be telling – about the woman, about the artist, about



the time and the place?

This novel I have written is in conversation with the work of Iso Rae. It is not biography, history or art criticism because I am not a biographer, historian or art scholar. I am a novelist and this book is a form of ekphrasis: an attempt to describe and understand the art of Iso Rae and imagine the world that surrounded it.

While I have stayed true to much of what is known of Iso Rae's life during the years of the Great War, I have made one significant diversion – I have placed her in the German Ward and given her a fictional friend called Tilda. From there I have imagined a life for the artist and her art that may or may not resemble any true experience. In this sense, the fiction extends the contemplation of one woman's art during wartime to a contemplation of any woman's art during wartime. The art I describe in this book, both real and imagined, helped me think about how the past is recorded, for whom it is recorded and for what purpose. It helped me imagine a story about women in war that I have not read, but which I think is possible. I could not have done this without the work of Iso Rae and I am indebted to her and to all the people who have seen the value of her war art and decided it worthy of preservation.



German prisoners working, 1917  
Accessed online via the Australian War Memorial



Street cleaning, Sanitary Corps, Chinese and Negro, 1917  
Accessed online via the Australian War Memorial



A farewell, 7th Canadian, Étaples, 1918  
Accessed online via the Australian War Memorial



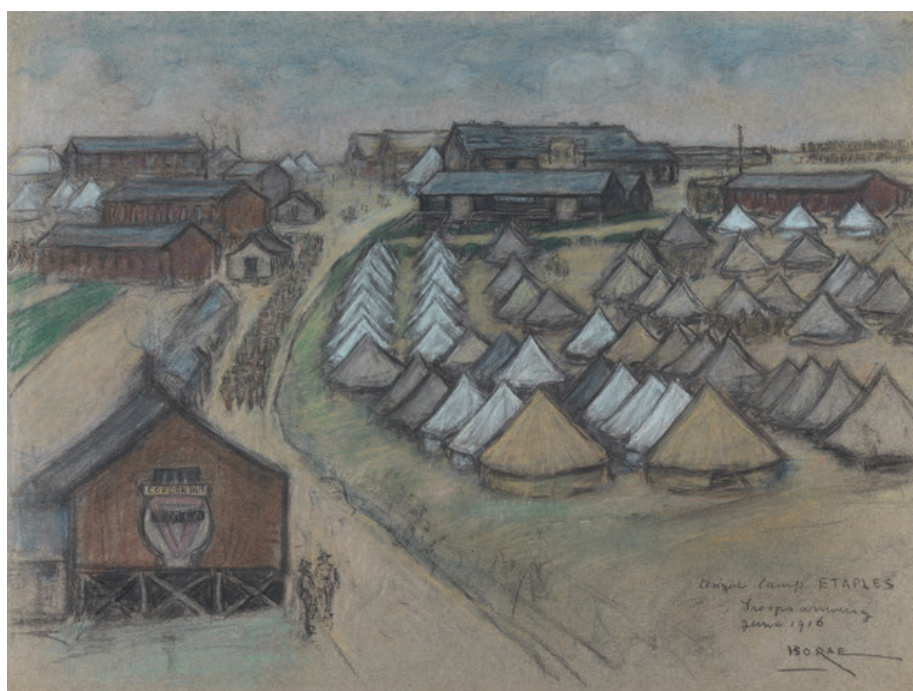
NYD at Lion d'Argent, YMCA, Étaples, August 1919;  
verso: Figure of a French woman, with hands  
Accessed online via the Australian War Memorial



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART19599

Infantry returning from training ground (Bull Ring), 1917  
Accessed online via the Australian War Memorial



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART19601

Troops arriving at Anzac Camp, 1916  
Accessed online via the Australian War Memorial



Iso Rae photographed with British soldiers outside the Cinema Office  
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