



YE BERLYN

When Germany invaded Belgium

TAPESTRIE

*Panorama-style fold-out
measures over fifteen feet!*

John Hassall's satirical
First World War panorama



Ye Berlyn Tapestry

John Hassall's Satirical First World War Panorama

JOHN HASSALL

With an Introduction by Mike Webb

As the devastation of German-occupied Belgium awakened Britain to the horrors of the Great War, a group of English cartoonists responded to these events with characteristic black humor. Among the most inventive responses was artist John Hassall's *Ye Berlyn Tapestry*, an ambitious red-and-black panorama in thirty panels, measuring more than fifteen feet and modeled after the famous Bayeux Tapestry, which recorded William the Conqueror's invasion of England and the Battle of Hastings.

Ye Berlyn Tapestry adapts the format of the *Bayeux Tapestry* to depict Kaiser Wilhelm II's invasion of Luxembourg and Belgium. Hassall takes every opportunity to lampoon the German army, which is seen looting homes, marching shamefully through the streets behind women and children, drinking copious amounts of wine, and producing gas with sauerkraut and Limburger cheese. With comic inventiveness,

Hassall has appended to the borders of the original Bayeux Tapestry stereotypical objects which the British public would have associated with its enemy, from schnitzel to sausages, pilsners, and wild boar.

A fascinating example of war-induced farce, *Ye Berlyn Tapestry* became itself a source of inspiration for later works, including wildly popular parodies during World War II in the *Daily Mail* and *New Yorker*. More recently, award-winning cartoonist and journalist Joe Sacco has adapted the format for his *The Great War*, which chronicles the first day of the Battle of the Somme. The *Tapestry* is here presented in its entirety along with an introduction that sets out the historical conditions of its creation.

John Hassall (1868–1948) was a celebrated British advertising artist, as well as an illustrator of children's books.

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Introduction

Germany's invasion of neutral Belgium on 4 August 1914 was followed fairly swiftly by stories of atrocities committed by the German army. These were a mixture of truth, exaggeration and downright fiction, but since the ostensible reason for British intervention was this act of war on a non-belligerent nation, Asquith's Liberal government decided to commission an investigation and set up the 'Committee on Alleged German Outrages'. This sat from December 1914, and was chaired by Viscount James Bryce (1838-1922), the former British Ambassador to the United States. The 'Bryce Report' was published on 12 May 1915. It served a dual purpose from the Government's point of view: while there was undoubtedly a sense of outrage at the stories emerging from Belgium, here was also a propaganda

opportunity to place the Allies on the moral high ground in the eyes of critics at home, and in neutral countries, especially the United States.

Bryce's report concluded that the German officers had deliberately introduced a system of terror in the opening months of the war through organised massacres of civilians, destruction and looting of property, incendiarism, use of civilians as screens ('human shields' as they would now be termed), and firing on hospitals. By including unsubstantiated and extremely lurid personal atrocity stories, the report was ultimately discredited, and a war-weary world dismissed it as mere propaganda after 1918.

John Hassall (1868-1948) was an illustrator, and is remembered for his

designs for posters, particularly the one depicting a skipping fisherman with the slogan 'Skegness is so bracing', published in 1908 for the Great Northern Railway. *Ye Berlyn Tapestry* was one response to the sense of outrage that gripped Britain in 1915. Hassall's vision is however a light-hearted one, playing with aspects of German 'frightfulness'. Taking the most well-known pictorial representation of a foreign invasion, the eleventh-century Bayeux Tapestry, Hassall used the cartoon format to poke fun at the pretensions of the invaders of Belgium and France, drawing attention to the alleged atrocities by claiming that they were simply the inevitable result of the 'kultur' of the Kaiser and 'Prussianism' (or militarism), a theme often emphasised in British propaganda at this time in response to

perceived German claims of cultural superiority. Indeed, the widespread use in Britain of the term 'Hun' immediately associated the Germans with the epitome of barbarism. Hassall uses the stereotypes found in rather more vicious publications but with a great deal more humour. Beer-drinking, gluttonous German soldiers in spiked helmets march into Belgium and Northern France forcing women and children to march in front of them, looting property, deliberately destroying churches and hospitals; poison gas is prepared using Limburg cheese and sauerkraut; and while German officers carouse with looted champagne, the Kaiser 'giveth orders for frightfulness'. Of course the British bulldog and the French hold them up, but this provides more opportunity for dreadful deeds as

the Germans resort to sinking neutral shipping, and dropping bombs (marked 'kultur') from the air, with equally hapless results. There are borders running at the top and bottom of the cartoon-strip, just as in the Bayeux Tapestry, but these ones are filled with jocular references to objects associated in the popular mind with German life and culture such as beer and sausages.

The depiction of the sinking of a merchant ship may refer to the *RMS Lusitania*, which was torpedoed by a German submarine on 7 May 1915. The publication date for *Ye Berlyn Tapestry* would seem then to be later in 1915, after the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and after the publication of the Bryce Report. A stamp on the Bodleian's copy shows that it was acquired on 5 April 1916.

Ye Berlyn Tapestry was printed in striking brick-red and black, and comprised five sheets attached along their short edges. It includes thirty cartoon panels, folded concertina-style between its covers. When it is fully open it measures 525cm. Nearly one hundred years on, this highly unusual publication provides a fascinating insight into the culture of the times. Although it perhaps makes for uncomfortable reading in parts, it is nevertheless an authentic contemporary response to the war. From today's perspective, we recognise our shared European experience, and Hassall's preposterous stereotypes make us laugh as much at ourselves as at a people who were once the bitterest of enemies but have for a long time been our partners and friends.

Mike Webb



