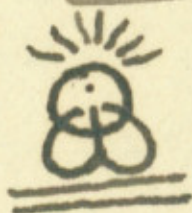


Miss St George

25 Berkeley Square. W.

9th December 1915

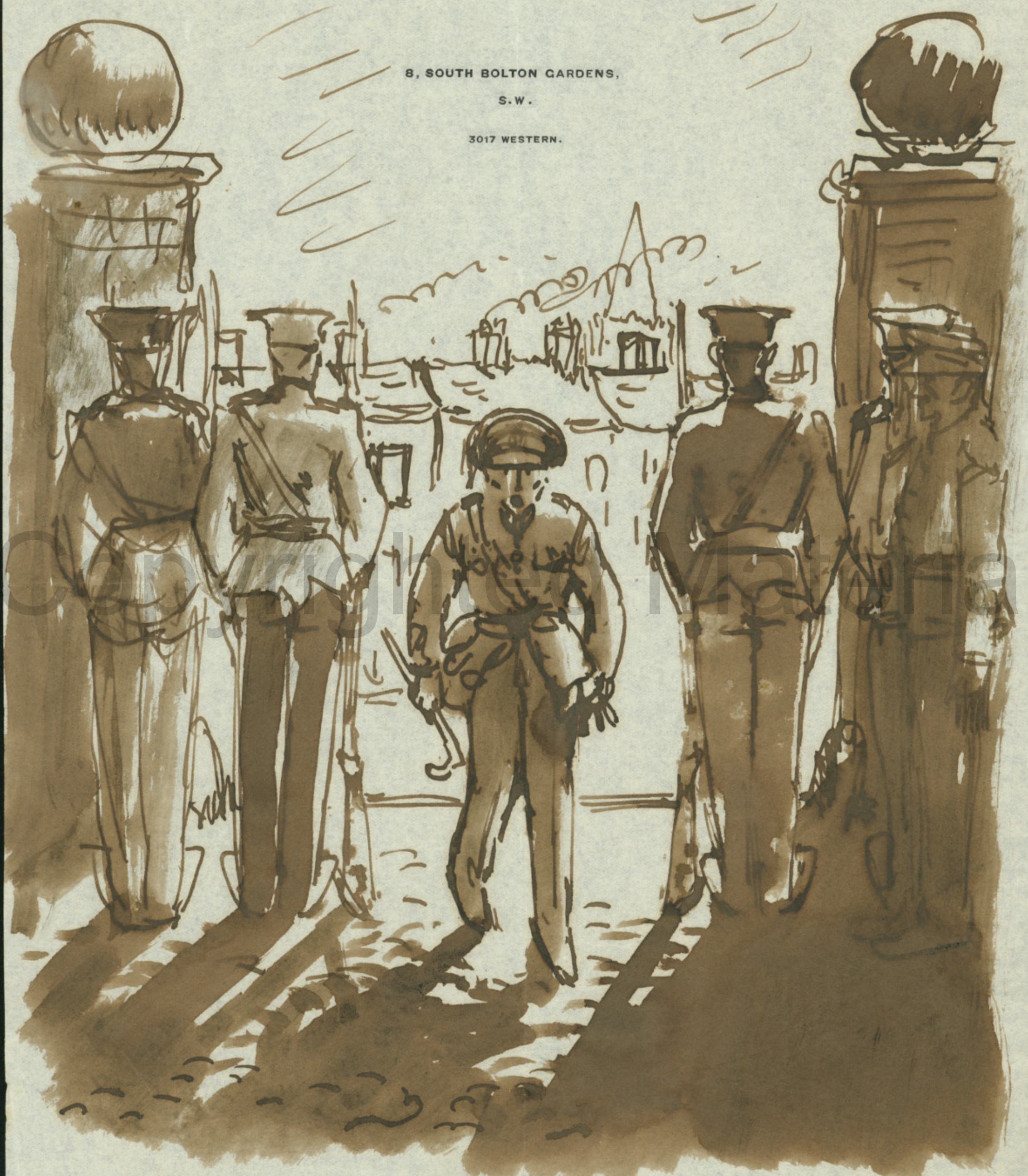


"English called her last resources
little opens joined the Forces"

8, SOUTH BOLTON GARDENS,

S.W.

3017 WESTERN.



CROSSING THE THRESHOLD..

25, BERKELEY SQUARE,

W.

What can you do?

nothing Sir!
nobody
I'm simple





1301

7630



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Saturday

my but its cold up here in the black north = and no letters
to cheer me up = and no more sunshine = and lots and lots



Monday I'm afraid I have no news today - so I have done this
 drawing of a young man in a trench instead - and its very bad
 in afraid - I was told by an Officer last night that he had seen
 an sketch of Rhys-Davids in one of the weekly papers - but he could
 not remember which - Have you come across it by any chance? - do hope
 you are feeling better. and had a good journey today
 very truly yours W. J. P.

voilà petit ami wopky
est très chaud en la
somme



ISOLATION WARD



They can't find any Pygamas to fit the miserable little woppy. as to a dressing gown it trails so I don't try one = its all very sad = but it makes some of the miserable in the place laugh - so it.

Aug 1917

I have been able to get down to Coombe today and and
rough from

then I saw very
you doing

The host has
is slush again - so
I will have any diff
to Paris than Thurs

day = only

ded from

Christmas

bridge

y)

photo-

me

up

which

ucked

most

and I

he

I

ending

are

od of

each.

cock-tail

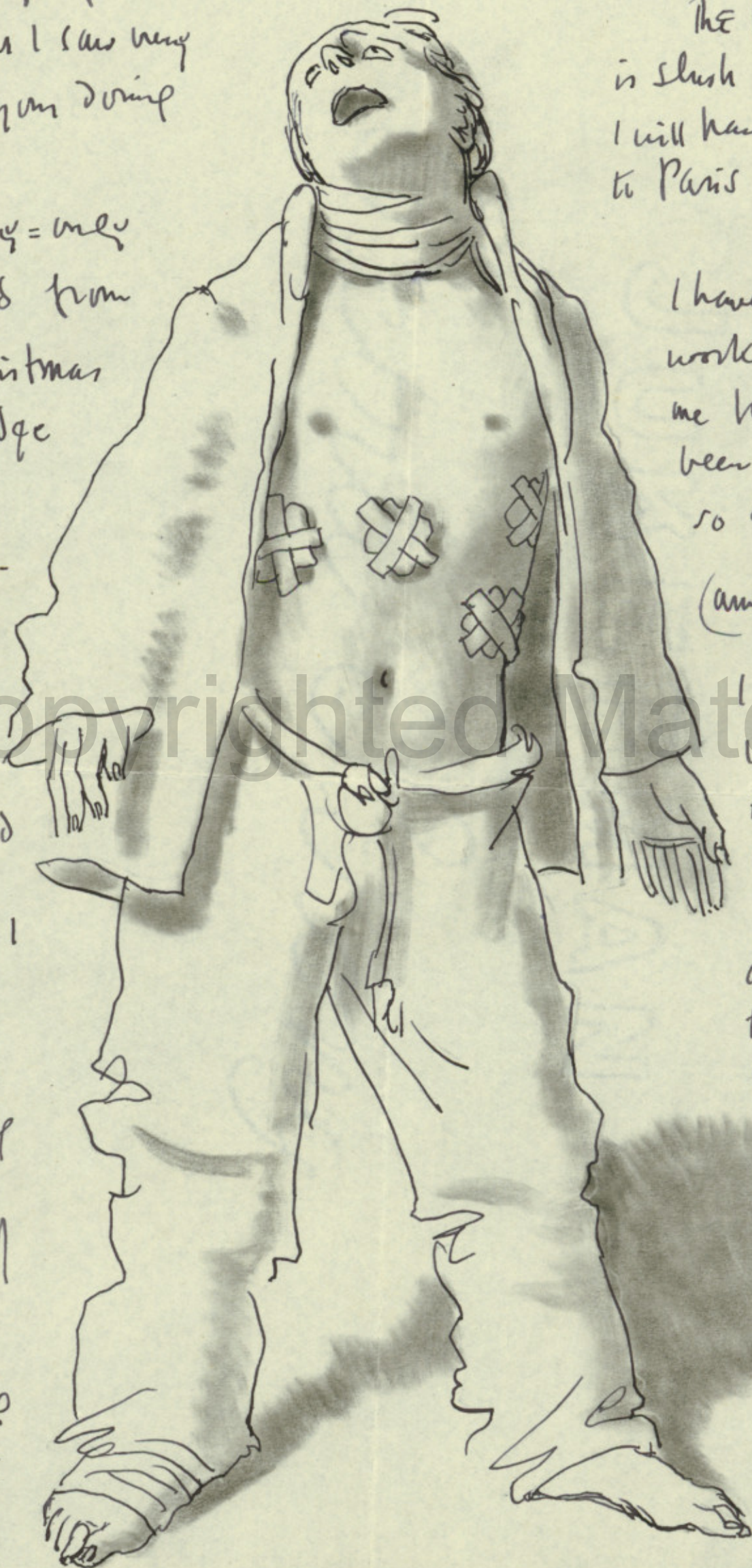
6.30 P.M.

time at

rough s

as that

it do it



I have had a 2
work - Christmas
me in working
been doing a
so all is in

(amit I please

I am going
I don't know

A.M.P. (brother)

I expect
dull = am

too much
remember I

J.H. said
be so

I am
two

each.
cock-tail

6.30 P.M.
time at

rough s

I will send you two Daily mail
books when I can get them. Vivien
wrote that her "Dad" wanted one =
so you can pass one along

How your back is much better by now
it must have given you a fright - I get
better - I won't say daily - but weekly =

But the heart
here has been
bad -



They have not yet
decided to give me
"leave" to go back
in 3 weeks yet! why

National Gallery Of Ireland

Collection Title: Orpen Collection

Document Title: Orpen's joined the forces

Document Title: Crossing the Threshold

Document Title: Speaking to a superior officer

Document Title: Sketching a superior officer

Document Title: Major Orpen

Document Title: Soldier in a Trench

Document Title: Soldier in a Trench No2

Document Title: Painting on the Somme

Document Title: Isolation Ward

Document Title: Blood Poisoning

Document Title: Painting the peace treaty

Background to the collection

War Letters - William Orpen's letters to Mrs St George during World War I

Donal Maguire

In August 1914, when war broke out across Europe, William Orpen was in Ireland. Although he had lived in London since 1909, he returned to Dublin every summer to holiday with his family. During these visits he worked as a visiting tutor at the Metropolitan School of Art where he revolutionized the schools old-fashioned teaching methods, thus influencing a subsequent generation of Irish artists including Margaret Clarke, Patrick Tuohy and Sean Keating.

Orpen's last visit to Ireland was in 1915. Britain was, by then, in the depths of war and in December of that year Orpen decided to enlist in the British Army. Sean Keating, who was now his studio assistant, pleaded with Orpen to return to Ireland stating that 'there is endless painting' to be done but Orpen refused to leave. He asserted that everything he had, he owed to England and though he would not fight he would do what he could. On the 9th December Orpen sent one of his regular illustrated letters to his patron Mrs St George. It included a sketch of a figure dressed in an over-sized soldiers uniform, the inscription below the drawing reads, 'England's called her last resources - little Orpen's joined the forces'.

Orpen had no military background and the innocence with which he approached the war is evident in the illustrated letters which he continued to send to Mrs St George.

In March 1916 he was commissioned to Kensington Barracks. He wrote a letter to Mrs St George conveying the event with his usual sense of humour. The letter includes an illustration depicting a diminutive Orpen, skulking, as he passes through the heavily guarded gates of the Barracks. He then sent her an amusing sketch of a fearsome looking superior officer who asks him, 'What can you do?' to which Orpen replies 'Nothing Sir, I s'truth I'm simple'.

In 1916 the British War Office decided to send artists to the front for propaganda purposes and in the summer of that year the War Artist scheme began.

In February the following year Orpen was appointed official war artist and promoted to the rank of Major. In a self-portrait in watercolour, commemorating his promotion, he depicts himself as a young confident soldier, full of determination and ready to do his duty.

That Easter he was sent to France and by mid April was at the Front. From the moment he arrived at the Somme and throughout his time at the front, which far exceeded any other war artist of the time, he was filled with mixed emotions and feelings towards the war and the soldiers involved. In his personal account of his experiences at war, *An Onlooker in France*, he wrote, 'I shall never forget my first sight of the Somme battlefields. – There was this endless waste of mud holes and water – miles and miles of it, horrible and terrible, but with a noble dignity of its own.' He was in awe of the massive scale of the war but also tried to understand the plight of the individual soldiers. He sent, to Mrs St George, pictures of troops hiding in trenches while planes soared overhead. In one letter he complains of the cold and of receiving 'no letters [from Mrs St George] to cheer me up'. However he was conscious that his experience of war was very different to that of the ordinary soldier. He had a personal car

and driver and returned every night to sleep in his hotel.

Despite the horrors that Orpen witnessed at war he did not lose his remarkable sense of humor. He wrote, 'It is extraordinary how funny sometimes the most tragic things can be'. In the summer of 1917 he sent Mrs St George a drawing depicting himself as the hero artist, painting on the war torn landscape. He stands impressively at his easel his shirt thrown aside in the heat of the sun. The caption reads 'Votre petit ami Woppy, est tres chaud sur la Somme' (Your little friend Woppy, it is very hot on the Somme).

In 1917, he became seriously ill. At first he was diagnosed as having lice, which was misdiagnosed again as scabies. His treatment included being boiled in water, scrubbed with a nail-brush and then smothered all over with sulphur. It was only when he developed a hole in his neck that the doctors realised, he was suffering from a severe case of blood poisoning. He wrote to Mrs St George from hospital complaining that 'they can't find any pyjamas to fit the miserable little Woppy'. He depicts the incident in a humorous sketch of himself walking around the isolation ward in a very large pair of pyjamas, which he points out 'makes some of the miseries in the place laugh'.

When the war finally came to an end Orpen's work was not yet finished. In 1919 he was commissioned by the Ministry of Information to paint three paintings to commemorate the Peace Conference in Versailles and the signing of the peace treaty, 28th June 1919.

The illustrated letters that Orpen sent during the war are among a large collection of letters to Mrs St George that are held in the National Gallery of Ireland. They are important documents as they provide valuable insight into the personal experience of one of the most significant World War 1 artists.

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