

# Iso Rae in Étapes

another perspective of war

Betty Snowden

The work of an Australian woman artist in France during the First World War gives us a unique insight into the life of a vast army camp.

It was not until 1918 that sixteen men were appointed as Australia's official war artists for the First World War. No women were chosen. Yet there was an Australian woman artist who lived in France for the whole war, and who since 1915 quietly documented the activities of the Étaples Army Base Camp. Her name was Iso Rae.

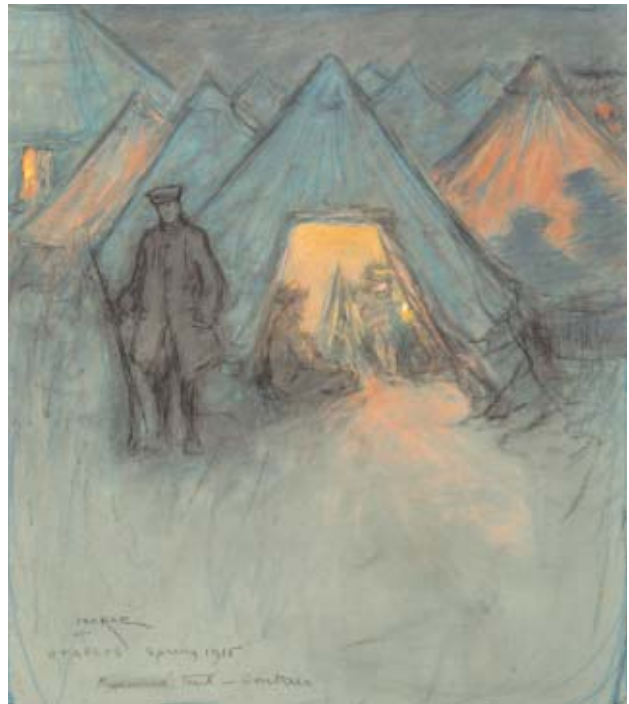
Rae was born in Melbourne in 1860. At 17 she became a student at the National Gallery School in Melbourne, along with students who were to become household names in Australia: Tom Roberts, John Longstaff, Frederick McCubbin and Rupert Bunny. Ten years later, in 1887, Rae moved to Paris together with her mother Janet and her sister Alison. During the three years in Paris, Rae was influenced by the French Post-Impressionist artists. In her drawings she uses black outlines filled with flat areas of colour, a post-impressionist technique reminiscent of some of the French poster artists of the late nineteenth century.

In 1890 the three women moved to Étaples in Picardy, where an artists' colony of Australians, British and Americans had congregated. Working from Étaples, Rae exhibited and sold her large oil paintings in the Paris Salon and in London, and was favourably reviewed by art critics. A quarter of a century later, the outbreak of the First World War found the group still settled in Étaples. The war drove most of the Australians either home or to England, but Rae's mother was ill and it was thought best not to move her. In one of her last letters to get out in 1914, Iso's sister explained,

*I cannot write of all the things we have been through since [the outbreak of war]. We are, I believe, the only English in this town now. . . . Many people went. But we do not want to break up our home unless absolutely obliged to do so.*

And so the family remained. Iso Rae became one of only two Australian women artists to document the war in France. (The other was Jessie Traill, who was working in a military hospital in Rouen.)

Étaples is a very old fishing town and port, which lies at the mouth of the River Canche in the region of Pas de Calais in Picardy. The Étaples Army Base Camp, the largest of its kind ever established overseas by the British, was built along the railway adjacent to the town. It was served by a network of railways, canals, and roads connecting the camp to the southern and eastern fields of battle in France and to ships carrying troops, supplies, guns, equipment, and



thousands of men and women across the English Channel. It was a base for British, Canadian, Scottish and Australian forces.

The camp was a training base, a depot for supplies, a detention centre for prisoners, and a centre for the treatment of the sick and wounded, with almost twenty general hospitals. At its peak, the camp housed over 100,000 people; altogether, its hospitals could treat 22,000 patients. With its vast conglomeration

**Opposite page:** Iso Rae, *Rue de la gare* (Station street) (January 1918, pastel, watercolour, pencil on cardboard, 63.1 x 48 cm, AWM ART 19597).

**Above:** Iso Rae, *Sentries at prisoners' tent* (Spring 1915, pastel and gouache on grey paper, 50.8 x 44.5 cm, AWM ART 19594). The sentry is British. The sense of colour combined with boldly drawn figures and outlines creates an extraordinary atmosphere of warmth and male companionship.

**Below:** Iso Rae photographed with British soldiers outside the Cinema Office. This is the building depicted by Rae in *Cinema queue*. Rae may well have been involved in organising the film evenings as part of her work in the YMCA Hut. (© Musée Quentovic d'Étaples. Coll° A. Caron)







**Above:** Iso Rae, *23rd General Hospital* (November 1915, pastel and gouache on grey paper, 48.7 x 47.4 cm, AWM ART 19596). This may be the hospital in which Iso Rae's sister, Alison, worked. Drawn at night from an elevated viewpoint, and lit by glowing lights, the hospital and camp are imbued with a sinister quality.

**Below:** Iso Rae, *Troops arriving at ANZAC Camp* (June 1916, pastel on grey paper, 50 x 65 cm, AWM ART 19601).

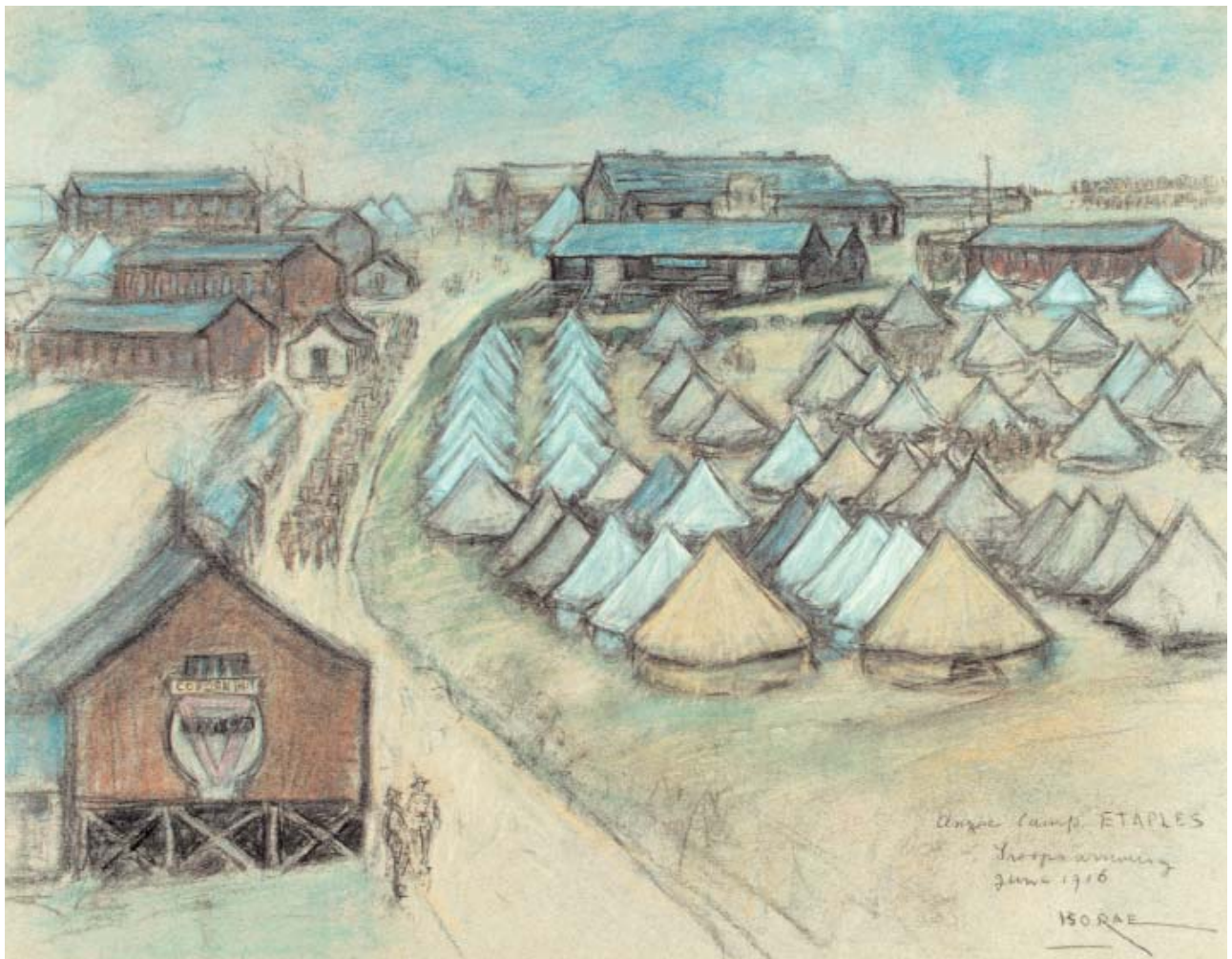
**Opposite page:** Étapes in 1917. This rare map of the Étapes Army Base Camp shows how large and complex the camp had become by 1917. There were nearly twenty general hospitals. (Courtesy J. Putkowski)

of the wounded, of prisoners, of soldiers training for battle, and of those simply waiting to return to the front, Étapes could appear a dark place. Wilfred Owen described it as,

*A vast, dreadful encampment. It seemed neither France nor England, but a kind of paddock where the beasts are kept a few days before the shambles ... Chiefly I thought of the very strange look on all the faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England; nor can it be seen in any battle, but only in Étapes. It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's.*

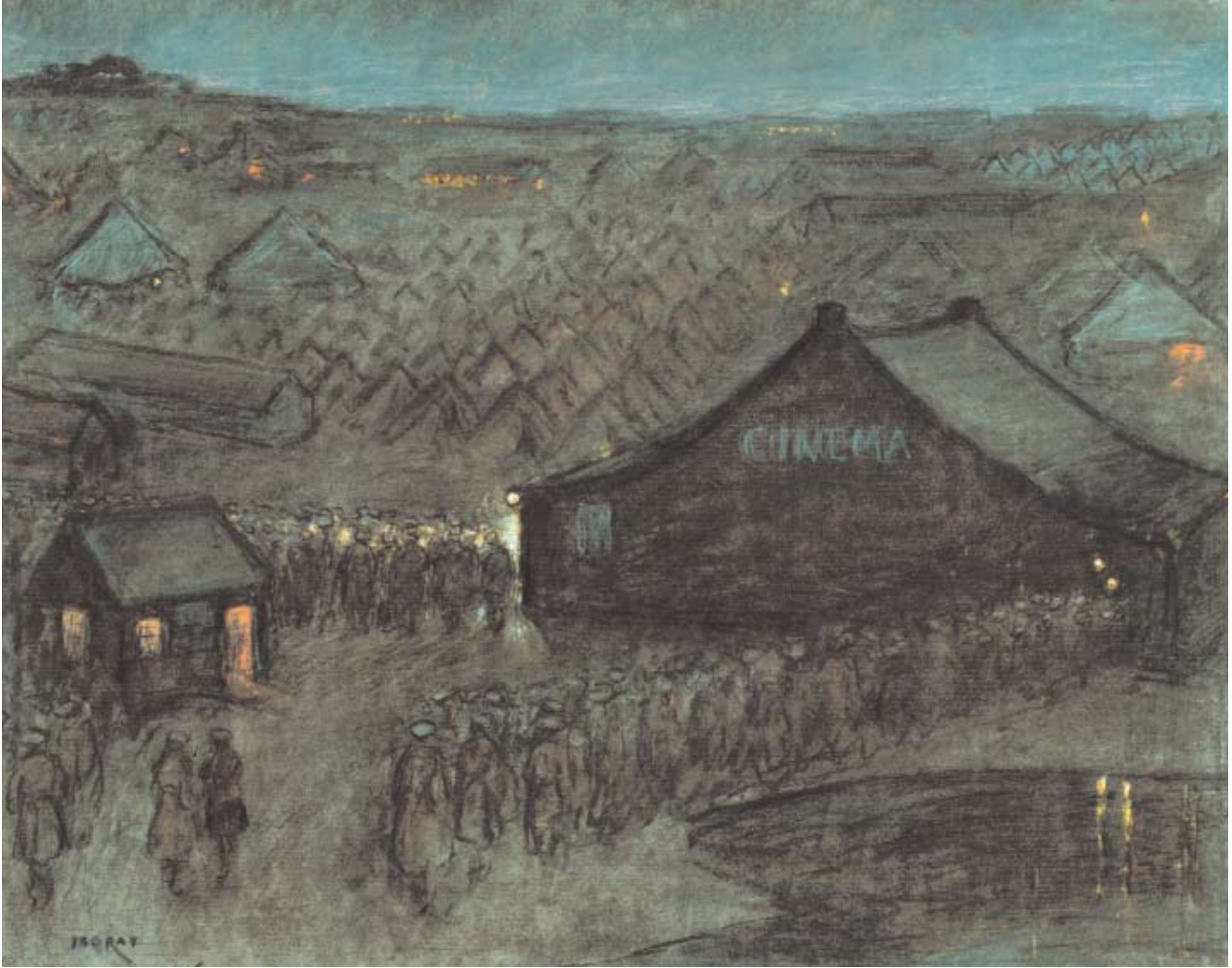
During the war, Rae worked for the Voluntary Aid Detachment of the British Cross (VAD) in one of the YMCA Huts of the Camp. Working as a VAD meant little time to work in her studio, and canvases and oil paints may have been difficult to obtain. Instead she produced small-scale and intimate drawings with pastels on paper. It may have been easier to work at night, hence the predominance of night-time scenes. During this time she produced at least two hundred drawings.

The drawings depict the life of the camp in all its great variety: the different nationalities, Australians lounging in the background while German prisoners work, romance in the streets, the neatly ordered buildings of the hospital where her sister also worked as









**Above:** Iso Rae, *Cinema queue* (January 1916, pastel on paper, 47.8 x 60.6, AWM ART 19600). Here Rae has created another dramatic elevated night scene, with her use of strong glowing light against the deep black of the night, and gouache over pastel used to highlight the glow of lights in the dark. The long line of men waiting reflects a general mood of waiting prevalent in the camp – and suggests that here even entertainment is dark and regimented.

**This page (below left):** Iso Rae, *German prisoners working* (April 1917, pastel, white chalk and charcoal on paper, 60 x 47.5 cm, AWM ART 50285). The view is from the Rue de la Gare, looking towards the railway station and beyond it to ANZAC Camp. The German prisoners are working on a new platform at the station. There is no special sense of animosity towards the prisoners. Note the relaxed attitude of the Australians in the background.

**Opposite page (top left):** Iso Rae, *Football game* (November 1915, pastel on paper, 47.6 x 61.9 cm, AWM ART 19595). Sport, films and theatre had a significant role to play in entertaining the troops and the wounded. The football game, probably a game of soccer, was played with all the seriousness of combat in war. The crowd includes soldiers and “boys in blue”, patients from the hospitals.

**Opposite page (top right):** Iso Rae, *Infantry returning from training ground* (November 1917, pastel and gouache on paper, 48 x 62 cm, AWM ART 19599). Rae creates an intense atmosphere of light and dark with the figures of the exhausted returning troops. The soldiers are marching home through the dark from the “Bull Ring”, a training ground with a reputation for harshness, rigour and bullying officers. Tough as it was, experienced officers complained that it still did not prepare men for the reality of trench warfare.

**Opposite page (bottom):** Iso Rae, *NYD at Lion d’Argent, YMCA, Étapes* (August 1919, watercolour, pencil and crayon on grey cardboard, 23.6 x 31.3 cm, AWM ART 19593). Nine months after the war’s end, these soldiers had not been demobilised and were still in Étapes. “NYD” means “not yet diagnosed”: most will have been shell-shock cases. The drawing, of a performance of Pierrot and Columbine, is a lively and spontaneously executed watercolour, but the view from the back of the audience allows Rae to leave faceless the forgotten men, waiting in Étapes to be sent home.







a VAD, soldiers playing football and queuing to see movies. The regular patterning of men, tents and buildings in many of the works suggests the control that was imposed by the vast machine of men and modern war. In many drawings there is a strong sense of waiting: waiting to move into battle, waiting for the war to end, waiting to be sent home.

Rae's mother died in 1916, but the two sisters stayed in Étaples until 1932. Two years later, alarmed by Hitler's rise to power in Germany, they moved to



England, where Rae died, as a new war began, in 1940. Since she spent most of her life overseas, Rae has not received the recognition she deserves in Australia. But seventy-five of her pastel drawings were brought to Australia in the late 1970s; of these the Memorial holds eleven. Their value lies not just in their insight into life behind the lines: they are also exceptional works of art in their own right.

**Betty Snowden** is an assistant curator of art at the Australian War Memorial.

