



Shaped by War: Photographs by Don McCullin
Imperial War Museum North , Manchester

Reviewed by [Jane Turner](#) ☐ May 2010

I am immediately a little sceptical whenever I hear the words “internationally acclaimed architect” as I spent many years living opposite some of the ugliest concrete housing ever designed by one such award-winning architect - the housing only lasted around 15 years before becoming inhabitable and getting bulldozed in a momentous expression of tenant power. The Imperial War Museum however, designed by Daniel Libeskind, is though destined to last a little longer. Clad in a suitably war-like colour of grey aluminium, it is designed to represent a globe shattered by war, conflict, and man’s self-destruction with three shattered shards forming the building representing earth, air and water and has been described as a “visionary symbol of the effects of war”.

Housed in the museum are some powerful exhibitions that reveal how war has shaped and affected the lives of British and Commonwealth citizens since 1914. A perfect setting therefore, for the work of Don McCullin, considered to be one of Britain’s greatest war photographers and acclaimed worldwide for his grainy black and white images captured at the heart of many dangerous conflicts and perilous areas of wars.

On display to mark his 75th year, is the largest UK exhibition ever about his life and work, showing over 200 photographs, objects, magazines and personal memorabilia from wars across the globe during the last 50 years, including a wealth of personal material such as passports, army boots, helmet and many cameras one of which was fractured by a snipers bullet in a life-saving moment in a rice field in Cambodia in 1970 just as he held it up to his face to take a photograph.

Such is the power of his black and white images, that I can still recall the first time I saw one in a newspaper; shot in Vietnam and vivid in it's message, it was a waking moment in my own awareness of the ever-present horror of war around the world and it's devastating impact on life and I have been impressed by the moving power of his photographs ever since.

Don McCullin famously said "Photography for me is not looking, it's feeling, if you can't feel what you're looking at then you're never going to get others to feel anything when they look at your pictures". And he has certainly been successful in conveying feelings of shock, terror, horror and compassion in many. There's nothing like a stark and uncompromising image of the reality of war, death and destruction in countless battles and conflicts to make one question the futility of such destruction and look to other solutions, or maybe as McCullin has had to do in later life, retreat; finding peace in the serenity of the landscape of England where he now lives and works in stark contrast to where he formerly spent most of his life.

He recalls his early life as "difficult and turbulent", and describes himself as "a product of Hitler,

born in the 30's and bombed in the 40's" living through violent times that included a period of National service; which with hindsight seems a fitting start for someone destined to live and work on battlefields. Whilst on National service, he was introduced to photography when working as a photographer's assistant initially processing aerial photographs in Suez, Kenya and Cyprus where his interest in photography was born. Failing to pass any exams in the subject, he almost gave up, but although un-qualified, McCullin later realised his natural ability to capture the most remarkable images in extremely difficult and dangerous situations.



He worked in many war zones and is quoted as saying "war is war, war means death. If you go and come back, you are lucky", and indeed he was, as quite a few of his friends and fellow-journalists were captured, tortured and murdered by the Khmer Rouge "in the most appalling way". McCullin himself was hit by fragments of a mortar shell in Phnom Penh and captured by Idi Amin's soldiers in Uganda, where he was held prisoner for days, living in fear of his life.

Closer to home, McCullin created some of the most memorable images of the early “Troubles” in Northern Ireland. Blinded by CS Gas in Derry, and caught between the Provos and the British army on many occasions, some of his images from this period are quite bizarre in their depiction of the existence of normal day-to-day life alongside the prolonged and savage war; one image captures a well-dressed young man going about his normal business, carrying a parcel whilst walking calmly past a soldier aiming fire at rioters, and another of a woman taken by surprise in her hallway as she opens her front door to see soldiers rushing past in full riot gear; McCullin clearly captures how the locals managed to co-exist alongside the British army for so long that violence and horror became part and parcel of the fabric of their everyday life.



Amongst the war photographs, which for me are the most riveting, there is one entitled "*shellshocked US Marine, Hue, Vietnam*"

taken at just the right moment, encapsulated in the gaze of the soldier's eyes the message McCullin feels is reflected there and which he wants us all to see. The quiet intensity and stillness depicted in this portrait of a dazed American soldier is chilling. His eyes deadened by what you can only imagine he has seen and experienced just stare out vacantly from beneath his blackened helmet, right through the camera lens and beyond.

A picture of a starving Biafran child clutching an empty corned beef tin is particularly heart-wrenching and not only a testimony to the horror of war, but also to the sheer will and spirit of the victims to survive despite the hopeless odds. Taken on one of what McCullin describes as his "killer days", when walking away was difficult and painful and caused him many sleepless nights agonising about the ethics of taking photographs of those dying or dead and then just walking away. He had just witnessed over 800 dying children, when he came across this near-death boy trying to support himself. It was at times like this he says, with his camera around his neck, when he felt he "was carrying pieces of human flesh back home with me, not negatives; it's as if you are carrying the suffering of the people you have photographed".

There are plenty of equally moving images like these on display, providing a vivid and sometimes shocking testimony to the horror and suffering McCullin witnessed in war zones, and is one of the reasons why in 1982 the British Government refused to grant him a press pass to cover the Falklands War; his work was considered too powerful and provocative.

Alongside his photos of conflicts in Cyprus, the Belgian Congo, Vietnam, Cambodia, Lebanon, El-Salvador and beyond there are magazine spreads from his days at the Sunday Times magazine in the early 1970's and many from his newest work on the Roman empire.



As well as the history of many wars captured in black and white, this exhibition also explores McCullin's own interesting story too, including his early days in teenage gangs, a honeymoon trip to Berlin as the wall was going up in 1961, then the hard-core war photography, shot as seen in Cyprus, Vietnam, Biafra, Northern Ireland, Cambodia and El Salvador. His work is set in context, being arranged over five parts:

1. Early Years

2. Discovering photojournalism

3. The Sunday Times magazine (where he later worked)

4. Changing times

5. A new direction

Tortured by the human misery and suffering he saw and by guilt at walking away from those dying with his photographs intact, McCullin says he constantly had to remind himself that he “didn’t start the war, didn’t starve the child and didn’t kill the man in the photograph”. He got some satisfaction and pride from what he saw as his efforts to “de-Hollywoodize war” and show it in its violent reality, but became scarred in the process, admitting that “At first he was seduced by war, but then traumatised by the barbarities witnessed”. He now lives quietly and peacefully in England where he continues to work on the more serene topic of the English floral landscape.

McCullin has published many books which include photographs of his award winning work, but this display at the Imperial War Museum North is not just a collection of photographs but also a tribute to the man and the courage and integrity he showed in his work and is a must for anyone with an interest in using images honestly to capture reality, send a message and depict the world as it really is.