

Seduction or Instruction? First World War Posters in Britain and Europe. By James Aulich and John Hewitt. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008. xx + 218 pp. \$49.95 cloth.

In the past decade many scholars have reconsidered World War I as a cultural and social, not just a military, event. In that vein, James Aulich and John Hewitt's book, *Seduction or Instruction? First World War Posters in Britain and Europe*, describes the war poster as more than just a link between government and populace, more than an instrument by which belligerent nations waged war by mobilizing the home front. Instead, they recover the wider discursive context in which posters were produced and consumed, locating them in a nexus of "government, commerce, special interest groups, . . . the advertising industry," and viewers who were consumers as well as citizens (5). Their attention to the war poster's relationship to advertising, in particular, brilliantly reconfigures the disciplinary boundaries that have limited our understanding of the medium. Aulich and Hewitt provide an excellent and detailed account of how British war posters were produced and disseminated during the war, how their meanings may have appealed to different sectors of the British public, and how they were ultimately collected by the institution that became the Imperial War Museum.

Aulich and Hewitt's insistence on the proximity between posters and advertisements represents a methodological shift in the approach to the poster. Most available books on war posters are glossy illustrated volumes drawn from museum exhibitions. Essays frequently focus on particular images or campaigns and their illustrators, and frequently consider how or whether posters advanced aesthetically during the conflict. While some of these foci are obvious, useful, and reappear here, the effective canonization of particular images and illustrators has created an impression that posters can best be understood within categories familiar to art historical investigation such as author, aesthetic movements, painterly traditions,

and histories of the poster. Aulich and Hewitt self-consciously move away from such an approach, and consider posters not primarily as art-objects but as advertisements that reflect assumptions about popular taste and class formation.

From this vantage point, we get a new appreciation of the cleavages in British society that posters were designed to, but did not necessarily, transcend. During the war and specifically through the war poster, advertising firms and the billposting trade gained new access to the streets and to public opinion. The industry sought new legitimacy, and tried to leave behind its controversial past (in which its wares, particularly theater posters, were seen as vulgar engines of a decline in public taste). Yet in war posters, the vulgarity of the market place coexists uneasily alongside calls to service and elevated national imperatives. Poster images “conflated the freedom to consume with democracy.” “Easy-going advertisements for the nation and manpower” catered neither to the “older monied classes who relied for their status on cultural distinction, nor organized labour,” which could see in the poster a reflection of a decline in “political radicalism” brought on by “increasing prosperity and access to mass-produced goods” (28). Posters proffered heterogeneous messages to a shifting public, and in them we glimpse the compromises brokered between a state seeking to “instruct” its citizenry and a private industry trained to “seduce” consumers.

Aulich and Hewitt ground their methodological approach in archival research, with particular reference to the origins and evolution of the institution we now know as the Imperial War Museum. That institution, which houses one of the world’s largest collections of World War I posters, was initially conceived as part of the effort to win, not just record, the war: it “was conceived to promote the appetite for the war at home” (13). From the beginning, Keeper of War Publicity L. R. Bradley understood the war’s massive reach into the lives of everyday citizens, particularly through a variety of material ephemera—printed text, advertising, and visual media. Bradley collected far more than just posters, and sought to preserve a material record that would allow the future scholar to study the war’s transformation, in particular, of advertising. (Not all of that record has survived; Aulich is currently at work on a project that will publish some of its remains.) Aulich and Hewitt identify Bradley’s as one of the first “systematic collections of advertising and graphic design anywhere in the world” (15), and its wide scope informs their study of the poster.

Although *Seduction or Instruction* has many beautiful color illustrations, its primary purpose is not to bring the images to the reader but rather to interpret them in their social context. Readers interested in the images themselves can profitably consult Aulich’s recent exhibition catalog, *War Posters: Weapons of Mass Communication* (Thames and Hudson, 2007), which contains stunning color illustrations from the Imperial War

Museum. Indeed, despite the promise of “Europe” in the book’s title, Aulich and Hewitt focus primarily on Britain. Five of their six chapters are devoted to British posters and their cultural contexts: the institutional place of the poster in the curated, public memory of the war; the recruitment poster, produced before the institution of conscription in 1916; war loan and charity posters that appealed to the home front; the place the poster occupied in public, outdoor spaces and hence in the public’s mind; and the debates over advertising and its unprecedented and, to many, unwelcome role in government-sponsored initiatives. A sixth chapter considers poster design in French, German, and Austro-Hungarian posters. Posters produced in other combatant nations, such as the United States, are not discussed. This focus on Britain (and, on occasion, its colonies) allows the authors to develop a nuanced account of the complicated place posters occupied in British culture. But this one comparative chapter also suggests that more research remains to be done before we fully understand the poster’s broader social origins and meanings in other national contexts.

—Pearl James, University of Kentucky