

“The Great Sacrifice” and “The White Comrade”

The two prints placed in the Ely War Memorial in 1917 were there to comfort the bereaved with the promise of Christ’s love and care for their lost ones.



The Great Sacrifice was a painting by James Clark which was first seen by the wider public as a fold-out in the 1914 Christmas issue of “the Graphic”. The original was bought by the King and now hangs in the church at Whippingham on the Isle of Wight where it is a memorial to Prince Maurice of Battenburg who was killed at Ypres.

The soldier who has died appears unscathed, almost sleeping. His hand rests on the foot of Jesus – linking his own sacrificial death to free the world from an evil force with Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross for the sin of mankind. The light of Christ shines on the young man’s peaceful face and there is a promise of the resurrection of the dead. The painting was later renamed simply “Duty”.

The Great Sacrifice allowed the bereaved to believe that their own sons and husbands had died peacefully and doing their duty for a just cause and for king and country.

This became a very popular image and copies of the print could be found in churches, hospitals and other public places across the country. It was an image that no soldier who fought in the mud of the trenches would recognise, nevertheless variations of the scene can be found in memorial windows across the world.



The White Comrade (1915) was another much duplicated painting, this time by George Hillyard Swinstead. The artist used two injured soldiers who were in the Maudsley Hospital as his models – as the medical orderly supports his wounded comrade both are supported by Christ. The painting was reproduced in the “Illustrated London News” following the Battle of Loos and went on public display at Prince’s Skating Rink in London.