THE WARS OF DON MCCULLIN

Michel Guerrin & Alain Frachon, "Les guerres de Don McCullin" *Le Monde*, 15 -19 August 2018, various pages.

A suite of articles written for the summer edition of *Le Monde* by Michel Guerrin and Alain Frachon, journalists with *Le Monde.*

DON MCCULLIN, PHOTOGRAPHER

1 | 6

From his poor childhood to his landscapes, passing through Vietnam, for this British master of photography, all is conflict. *Le Monde* went to visit him and retraces the journey which led him from the gangs of London to his fame.

Batcombe, Somerset (UK) - Special correspondents

The photographer closes the door of his darkroom – the room of his "ghosts." It is from there which they emerge, the "ghosts," from a prefabricated cabin behind the house. They come from four immaculate white bins – developer, bath, fixer and wash. Beside these are the enlargers, and on shelves there are reams of paper, all of which float in a putrid smell of potassium iodide. *"You know that almost everything happens here, in this darkroom,"* says Donald McCullin: sixty years of photography of which eighteen were devoted to war. *"Soon, I'm going to get rid of all of it. I am at the end of my journey."* It is hard to believe. This man risked a thousand deaths in wars. In 2016 again, he was in Iraq. He was injured in Cambodia, beaten up in prisons in Idi Amin Dada. A price was put on his head in Lebanon. In Palmyra, Syria, only two years ago, his lung was pierced from a fall. *"I paid a good price,"* he says, but in half a century of reportage in the form of 'extreme journalism', McCullin was never K.O.

The two other great names with whom he worked, the French Gilles Caron and the British Larry Burrows, were both killed in then Indochina. There is a McCullin phenomenon. His fame is beyond the world of photography. Right or wrong, he embodies his profession and he is solicited widely. We have poisoned the environment of his retirement home in Somerset – for questions he considers inappropriate; he shut the door on Jean-Luc Godard. When a helicopter flies over the house, he thinks of the Vietnam war. Hollywood is preparing a 'biopic' representation of his autobiography – *Unreasonable Behaviour*, 2007. One name is being considered to play him – the excellent Tom Hardy, who pilgrimaged here as well.

THE GOYA OF MODERN WARS

At 82 years old, McCullin is in great form, full-bodied, tall and upright like a solder, clean-shaven, strong, with high cheekbones and gray-blue faded eyes. His ID card is succinctly worded. The Briton is one of the greatest photographers of his time. Henri Cartier-Bresson baptized him: *"You are the Goya of modern wars."*

Artist, journalist, reporter of war, image craftsman? *"Just say photographer, that is enough for me, I do not like my work being wholly reduced to war."* Photographer, then, and he is there throughout the process. He controls his projects from beginning to end; didactically. From the ground, to the plane which bring him back to London, to the darkroom and publication. He has always defended his right to develop and print his own pictures. He takes no assistants. *"There are tens of years that, for five hours a day, I take care of all my prints. On my feet, in the dark, my hands in chemicals; even listening to Wagner it's exhausting."*

McCullin explains that he took too many risks on the battlefields to give his work to just anyone – when the rule in photojournalism at the time was to entrust one's pictures to all the airlines for the newspapers and agencies to receive them on arrival. This way of working by hand in his home is not the only thing that makes it unique in photography today.

In the digital age, in the time of Instagram; in short, with the fluidity of images for which the internet is the vehicle for Speed, with a capital S, McCullin runs the risk of being side-lined. For the great names of contemporary photography who despise black and white, the labour of printing, the dramatized or pictorial, McCullin would seem outdated. He knows that it is said his style is 'old fashioned' and that it will 'disappear'. He returns the volley against this society of banal images where *"any idiot takes pictures."* McCullin, old fashioned? His images are more demanded than ever. His strength is in not having changed. The specificity of his work is due to its conservatism. He avoids emails, the telephone, and social events; the evolution of technology has not downgraded his pictures - on the contrary.

In beige canvas trousers and a white collarless shirt, McCullin goes to the garden. A garden in fact, and for peace and quiet he purchased the valley that descends smoothly in front of his house, which is a great 19th Century farm in solid rock from the land. The hamlet is called Batcombe Hill and is perched on a hill in Somerset between the elegant village of Bruton and the small town of Shepton Mallet. From London it takes a minimum of two trains and a taxi to find oneself in the middle of this picturesque landscape of England: wild hedges, white fences, trees and ponies in the distance. He has been living in Batcombe for over thirty ears and in this haven of peaceful nature which is exactly the opposite of that to which he dedicated his life: the visual chronicle of turmoil in time. From the end of the 1950's to today, he was always in conflicts, from urban riots to civil wars. He experienced some of the Swinging Sixties in London as well as the fracturing of the classes and the devastation of the landscape of his country from industrialization.

One of the prefaces of his thirty-or-so publications featuring his pictures observes: "From the 1960's to the end of the century, the photographs of Don McCullin punctuate the majority of major events. They are iconic symbols of the time. This is a truly unique case in the history of photography." His photographs are landmarks, references, markers. They

belong to the narrative of history. They express the power of the still image, in black and white, taken with precision, in front of a cacophonous, globalised world. Like literature, they are a miracle born of subjectivity that esteems value in universal witness.

When we met him for three days in the end of May at Batcombe, he has just returned from the Middle-East and was about to leave for Los Angeles where one of the most important contemporary galleries, Hauser and Wirth, devotes an exhibition to him. A retrospective is also in preparation in London for February 2019 at the Tate Britain, which offers its walls for the first time to a living photojournalist. Within the 260 prints to be shown, all chosen by Sir Don, there are some which he holds dearer than all others: his landscapes, his haunted English *paysages*, stilled in the early morning, in winter and when the fields are flooded, frozen or snowed over.

MISERY OF A POOR AREA

McCullin has learned to live with his popularity, and he is not falsely modest – others are responsible for taking his portrait.

He knows the breadth of his work. Success for him was almost immediate. He speaks very well. He is the best narrator of his own adventure – in newspapers, on the radio, on television and even in an elegant short-advertising film made for Dunhill. This was not, he believes, *"a vocation"*, but as soon as he started to gain success in the illustrated press, photography became *"a passion"*. McCullin pays homage to the medium: *"I did not discover it, photography… she discovered me, or rather, she permitted me to discover her."* She is *"my drug"* and is a powerful drug that finishes by possessing your body and soul, she can destroy your family but *"good God, she saved me."*

John le Carré met McCullin at the end of the 1970's. The novelist prefaces one of the most beautiful collections of the already great photographer, titled *Hearts of Darkness* (Robert Laffont, 1981). "What seems to me obvious as a fellow artist – but what was not at all for him – is that his work is an externalization of his fractured identity" – wrote le Carré.

In this case, the story begins in the miserable district of North London, Finsbury Park. McCulln's parents – of distant Irish origins – and their three children lived in a two-room basement apartment. It was council housing and suffering from terrible asthma attacks, his father could only work occasionally, and his mother at a fishmonger. Don McCullin was 5 years old when the Blitz added fear of alerts and bombings to their poverty. He is dyslexic, poor in class but he draws well and paints on walls.

At the age of 14, he won a scholarship for a fine arts college. In a Dickensian twist, his father passed away at 40 years old requiring Don to give up his studies for work. Small jobs,

returning at night to Finsbury Park, where the most violent gangs of the neighbourhood congregated. The "Guvnors", as they were called, belonged to the urban group the "Teddy Boys". *"it was worse than just fighting, we attacked other gangs to maim. Some of my friends had scars down their throats. I saw a guy with his nose sliced… but wait! All this and on Saturday evenings we went to dance the fox-trot and the first tunes of Bill Haley, 'sporting' the Teddy Boy style – collar jacket, black velvet or frock coat, fine tie and platform shoes."*

"DID YOU TAKE THAT, REALLY?"
The Guvnors could have led McCullin to prison, but they were the chance of his lifetime. McCullin worked in an animation studio where he developed film. He finished his military service as a photographer to the Royal Air Force. The army judged him incapable of being a military photographer and used him instead to take aerial photographs. On a base, he bought a Rolleicord that he had to load on his stomach just before every shot.

The first puzzle pieces fit perfectly and McCullin belongs to this troupe of photographers who, without diplomacy or culture, have their name by clinging to life. At the end of 1948, one of the Guvnors is accused of being involved in a fight which ends with the death of a policeman. This fact impassions the press. In his studio, McCullin says that he has already taken numerous photographs of the gang. His colleagues advise him to show these to the papers. He chooses *The Observer,* a weekly Sunday paper and one of the oldest names in local news: on Fleet Street, poor, left, serious, "intellectual", which questions Don: "Did you take that, really?".

The 15 February 1959, *The Observer* publishes a snapshot of the Guvnors which has become emblematic of McCullin's work. The picture shows a gang wearing Sunday suits on different floors of an abandoned, partially demolished buildings amidst the ruins of Finsbury Park. McCullin is 23: *"This picture changed my life."* He is grateful but realistic and adds *"You can say that my life in photography started in violence, with this image, linked to the death of a policeman, and after that, it has continued for sixty years."* But, *"it was the best thing that has ever happened to me."* And so, McCullin escapes his fate of battling across the district. He is quickly hired by *The Observer*.

He is quickly noticed by the other journals. He is lauded as the best photojournalist the moment his pictures from Berlin appear only days after the construction of the Berlin Wall: then his documentation of the civil war in Cyprus in 1964 for the cover: then a series of 18 journeys to Vietnam in the middle of war the same year: he had 70,000 visitors to his first exhibition in 1980 at the prestigious Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and several times he is elected photographer of the year. McCullin was knighted in 2017 and laughs when he receives post addressed to 'Sir Donald'… None of these accomplishments adorn the walls of his home in Batcombe, if not, perhaps they are in the toilet on the ground floor.

This child of war built his fame from it. He overhauled his social environment and travelled the entire world. Still, it was not so simple. Could one ever leave Finsbury Park altogether? The marks of violence and poverty; of childhood trials that stuck to him. These have a great influence on his work. They have given all of his pictures a brutal tone and a composition that shoves the ugly and painful under your nose: the frontline of a battle, the opposite of the beautiful neighbourhoods in town. McCullin is a photographer of the margins. *"The forgotten, the left behind, the humiliated,"* he says, *"I photograph them well because I know them – not as strangers…I was in their place."*

He likes to laugh, to joke, and he is incredible company; he doesn't lack humour, but he also confesses: *"I am a sombre man."* He has a powerful desire for social revenge – against misery, against the injustice of the death of his father, against his background and against the stupidity of diminutive authorities – all this fed the rage and work of McCullin from the 1960's and 1970's. He is the photographer of the fragile and of those who do not cheat. He is too intelligent to suffer what he calls "lack of education." *"At* The Observer*, I worked with graduates and writers, some of whom were the most reputable of the time. They took me out of my ignorance."* The hard man does not always have armour: there is no trace of cynicism in him as he confesses to have cried. Finally, Britain which he feels to still be a land of gentry, has 'betrayed' Finsbury Park, even if he is happy with its outcome.

THE BEATLES, BACON, ANTONIONI

Describing McCullin 2006, The British writer Aida Edemariam spoke of his life of 'dislocations': a career made of back and forth between the racists brutes of Finsbury Park and his cultured colleagues at the papers, "a dislocation that would run throughout his career, as he ping-ponged between Finsbury Park friends and newspaper colleagues, war zones and fashionable London parties, the urban homeless and his own growing family." (*The Guardian, 5 August 2005)*

"Guilt, insecurity, indignation," writes Le Carré, are parts of this "fractured identity." *The Observer* was the first newspaper to trust this young man, with the build of an athlete, timid and lacking in confidence in both himself and the world. But, McCullin would not have become what he is with *The Sunday Times.* This other weekly Sunday paper was the dream, directed at the time by a legendary editor. From a working-class family, also from Norther England, Yorkshire, Harold Evans was the most inventive media man of his generation. At his side was Michael Rand, an art director who was sensitive to photographs. The pair upset the mould: the newspaper and its colour supplement published full-page images, portfolios of ten, twelve, fifteen pictures. *The Sunday Times* welcomed long editorial, fearless writers and investigators, and the most talented reporters of the moment.

This heavyweight of a weekly paper, "*It was the Rolls-Royce of journalism*," recalls McCullin. He worked with the celebrities of the genre, the Bruce Chatwins, Eric Newbys, Norman Lewises. He travelled the world with them, and they became friends. Evans was the protector of the team. They would take six weeks to cover a topic. McCullin is the star photographer of *The Sunday Times* and he once risked his career to fashion photography. He took the portrait of the great V. S. Naipaul and of the painter Francis Bacon, and of the Beatles. For Michelangelo Antonioni, "always in a bad mood," he takes all the photographs with the Yardbirds (and Eric Clapton) which appear in the movie *Blow Up* (1966).

There are brief excursions into the Swinging Sixties in London. But his deep explorations are elsewhere. He travels to Vietnam, Biafra, the wars in Lebanon and back home he works amongst those who have lost their way, tribes of beggars, and those living in the margins which populate his transformative book *Homecoming* (1979). Then, as a way to decompress and to chase away the nightmares, his "ghosts" of war, come McCullin's landscapes, "his" landscapes: he tours the Mediterranean and the ruins of the Roman Empire, and the charming hills of his home in Somerset. This life as an image hunter has resulted in over 9,000 pictures; pictures often engraved into our memories because they have that secret ingredient: the McCullin style.

-Alain Frachon & Michel Guerrin.
Next essay: *Between Obscurity and Terror*

The McCullin Style: Between Obscurity and Terror

DON MCCULLIN, PHOTOGRAPHER
2|6
By introducing the portrait into the hard reality of current affairs, this British photographer revolutionized photojournalism. Before McCullin, one had to still a moment. McCullin chose instead to halt the event to touch the spectator even deeper.

Batcombe, Somerset (UK) - Special correspondents

When we meet David Bailey in his vast, white atelier in London in 2003, he has no reason to speak about Don McCullin. How could the photographer of the jet-set 1960s, of pop culture and fashion, who lived with models like Penelope Tree or Jean Shrimpton, who married Catherine Deneuve, who did nights with Mick Jagger and partied with everyone, who shot the portraits of the rich and famous, loved nakedness, cigars – how could he have anything good to say about his exact opposite, a puritan who has trudged on the lands of war? Alright, they are both major English photographers of this period, are both about the same age, are dyslexic and come from poor backgrounds, but otherwise, everything else separates them. Bailey photographs the elite, McCullin the damned. Bailey loves London and noise, McCullin the countryside of Somerset and silence. They pose together in 1977 in the Cap d'Antibes. Bailey stands at the foot of a eucalyptus while McCullin is in the branches.

If Bailey respects McCullin, it is for one reason and one reason only. When we ask him why he chose fashion and portraits rather than photojournalism, he gives this response, which is worth writing a book about: "*In a photograph of a dead kid, it's not the photograph's author that counts, or even the image – it's the kid. But if Man Ray takes a photo in this studio, it's Man Ray that counts.*" And then he adds a nuance to his statement: "*If it's a war photo signed McCullin, it's McCullin that counts.*"

Bailey likes photographers who have style – and McCullin does. First, his persona: He mesmerises the room. A robust body, a firm hand, a warm voice, gestures that are almost in slow-motion, a deep gaze. You sense that he is not passively subjected to his life, but that he controls everything. In part, it is thanks to this that he is still alive while so many of his fellow colleagues were killed. "Would you like to accompany me to a lunch for the vernissage of an exhibition in Bruton?" McCullin proposes during our interview at his house in Somerset in late May 2018. A vernissage in a small town of 3,000 inhabitants at the heart of the English countryside – we fear the worst. It turns out to be the Hauser and Wirth gallery, one of the most well reputed in the world, that, in an immense building and a countryside setting, is opening a Calder exhibition of a calibre similar to those of the Centre Pompidou. The crème de la crème of globalised art is there. McCullin, without any

boastfulness on his part, fills the gallery. Everyone wants to see him, to touch him; everyone greets him like when the family pledges allegiance to Marlon Brando at the beginning of Coppola's *The Godfather*.

KEEPING CONTROL

McCullin calls the shots wherever he is, be it in a gallery or in war. "*I trust no one.*" In Vietnam he does not work in a pack with his fellow colleagues, but alone. He did flirt, for a time, with the famous photo agency Magnum, that of Capa and of Cartier-Bresson, before pulling out to go solo. "*I don't like gangs."*

This obsession of control can be felt in his images. Indeed, this is what seduces David Bailey as well as John le Carré in the book *Hearts of Darkness* (Secker & Warburg, 1980). Most often, in war photographs we see the dead, the wounded, tears, movement and disorder. But not the photographer. It is impossible to put an author to an image because the latter is conditioned by the terrain, by danger, by urgency. These elements, McCullin controls them. "*Anyone can take pictures in war by just pushing the button. That's impossible for me. When bullets are flying, I'm not thinking about the danger, I'm thinking about the composition, the light. So, of course, there is a risk of transforming a tragedy into an iconic image, a* Mona Lisa*. But I take that risk. That's how I've created my own style.*"

When we ask him to define his style, he prefers to zero in on the feeling that he wants to introduce into his images and spark off in the viewer: "obscurity and terror." He delivers very black photos, tragic, whether the subject is war, deindustrialised England or a Somerset landscape. But this blackness must be "acceptable" to the spectator. That is? "*When I was 10 or 15 years old, just after the war, I saw photographs of the Holocaust – mounds of corpses. It was so horrible that you turned your gaze away. What I want is to show the atrocity of war, but so the reader looks and feels uneasy. That happens through the composition. A composition that makes the image acceptable.*"

McCullin's framing is simple, direct and clear-cut, whether his images are narrowly focused on a person or more broadly on a landscape, but without dramatic gestures, without a blurred foreground or any other decorative titbits that distorts the reading. The only thing that counts is the photographic power, and it is undeniable. He is not the only one with this quest, but he is unique for the way he controls every stage of the profession to achieve it: framing of the shot, producing the prints in the darkroom, publishing them in the newspaper, the exhibition, the book. For 60 years without compromise. "*Keeping control means having the maximum freedom possible.*"

Keeping control entails a multitude of "unreasonable behaviours" to take the title of his 1990 autobiography (*Unreasonable Behaviour*, ed. Jonathan Cape Ltd.) McCullin shows us a contact

sheet of Vietnam where the thirty-six negatives of a film roll are printed in small positives. An object of valuable work that Cartier-Bresson qualified as "*épluchure*" ("dissecting") and that serves to make one's choice. First surprise: McCullin takes very few shots of the same scene – three or four – while others dedicate an entire roll to a single motif. McCullin is certain about his composition; he does not repeat. You may even find four important images on one single sheet. "*I think that everything that I did was very precise. Composed. So, I didn't waste film. Some photographers would come back from Vietnam with fifty rolls in fifteen days. For me it was twenty-five."*

What strikes one next is the proximity. McCullin is not an observer, he is in the image. Within just one or two metres of the combatants or victims. Not only that, but he speaks to the photographed people. His is with them. He resembles them. In the portrait that Nik Wheeler took of him in 1968, nothing distinguishes him from the combatant behind him except that he has a camera around his neck. Sixty years on, he can take any photo from Vietnam and identify those present and say a word about each one. "*He is of Scottish origin, he was killed a few days later; this guy here, I carried him on my shoulders when he was wounded.*" His autobiography overflows with similar remarks.

These are not mere anecdotes of military service; this is the heart of the McCullin method. In contrast to the countless images where the protagonists are reduced to anonymous figurines that serve the photographer to frame the shot, McCullin gives an identity and flesh to the people he prints on film, even when he captures them in full flight, in action. To capture a decisive moment, as Cartier-Bresson would say, is a prerequisite of a reporter. McCullin does this marvellously in Cyprus in 1964, at the time of the civil war, a story with which he won his international notoriety, or in Northern Ireland in 1970. In Vietnam, too, in the middle of combat. Each time, the men, women or children who appear in the frame carry a physical burden; we grasp what they feel. They exist.

PORTRAIT IN ACTION

Yet the trademark of the McCullin style is still elsewhere. In the portrait. He imposes a small aesthetic revolution: "*I invited the portrait into the information format.*" The portrait in action is something he repeats in every war zone. His portraits are so powerful that they seem posed – which they are not. One exception is his first photo, which shows the Guvnors gang in London. He is 23; photography is not yet his vocation. Any beginner would have taken photos on the spot, but he sets the image up, placing his seven models in Sunday clothes on the first floor of a building in ruins.

In the photojournalism of the 1960s and 1970s, posed images were a heresy. At that time, an unwritten rule, stupid, imposed instantaneity and the erasing of the photographer to the point where the subject should not look at the camera (some poorly digested Cartier-

Bresson). "*I set my own rules; I don't want to be like the others,*" responds McCullin, who speaks less of portraits than "*still moments."*

The portrait is his way of slowing down the action – "*I slow my body down,*" he says, in order to put himself in the same timeframe as the reader and viewer and to set up a confrontation with them – always the obsession of moving and unsettling them. In this logic, McCullin looks to capture the eyes of the soldier, the combatant or the victim; they have to stare at the camera. "*I want the gaze, I want their eyes to speak to me. Their eyes are these people's voice, who are in such shock they cannot speak a word. They tell you their story, their suffering, their terror. Their eyes will tell you everything.*" Back then, says McCullin, when he was in London, his timidity prevented him from looking people in the eye. But in war "*even the dying I looked in the eye.*"

The dead, too. One of his most famous photos, taken in Vietnam in February 1968, shows a Vietcong soldier. He his dead, his eyes are half-open, and he is looking at us. He must be about 17 or 18 years old. Next to him, his personal objects are scattered about: a small bag, some bullets, a photo of a young woman, some medicine, a letter. Dead people appear in press photos, but the portrait of a dead person, as if he were alive, as if he were resting at a picnic, that is a rare. On the contact sheet, we see first some marines who are stealing the soldier's things. McCullin is scandalised, and as soon as they are gone, he gathers the belongings of the dead man and, to give him back some humanity and dignity, visibly places them around his head. This staging got McCullin the sharpest criticism of his career. Such orchestration is a gross misconduct in moral code of the profession. "*I did it for him and his family*." To put a face on the anonymous enemy.

WORK IN THE DARK ROOM

Making his images come to life is a project that McCullin continues in his laboratory in Batcombe. "*Taking photos, that's going half way. Printing them is going all the way.*" He adds: "*If I don't go 100%, I am committing treason.*" He has never entrusted the dark room work to just anyone. And neither has he ever separated himself from his film rolls. "*I risked my life in battles. I didn't do that to play Russian roulette with my work.*" He wants his prints just as black and terrifying as his images. "*I always want things blacker and more contrasted. A photograph is not a flat piece of paper. You have to give it some dimension, some thickness. It has to come at you like a high-speed train. It has to talk to you, to persuade you, to make you think.*" As if to help with the dramatization of the images, he listens to Wagner.

Here we must go back to his contact sheets to assess the task. They are grey and lifeless; they do not catch the layman's eye. At this stage, we do not "see" the future photographs. These are a far cry from those we admire in his exhibitions. Take his most famous photograph, the portrait of a soldier under shell-shock in Vietnam. It figures on the cover of *Don McCullin* (Jonathan Cape, 2001, re-edited in 2015), which has been deemed his

"defining" book. On the contact sheet the eyes of the soldier – the obsession of the photographer – do not appear in the shadow of the helmet. It is he who has to make them come out with the enlarger. "*It's the most difficult photo to print in the world. To make the eyes come out all while conserving some of the definition of the helmet, the combat fatigues, the gun – it's impossible. The helmet becomes almost white. It's so difficult that when I came home from Vietnam with this soldier, I did not publish him in the* Sunday Times*. It was only a year later while having a good look at my negative that I found the solution: to make two different prints, one for the eyes, the other for the rest of the image. And then I put everything together.*"

Once he has his prints, Don McCullin has to publish them in his newspaper, the *Sunday Times Magazine*, which employs him for £2,000 per month. We know hundreds of stories of photographers frustrated by the publications – poor choice, photos that are too small or too big, not enough pages…McCullin is so in line with the team at the paper that he does not know this frustration as old as the illustrated press. "*I was on the most magical carpet in journalism. You can be the best photographer in the world, but if you don't have a team that believes in you, that pushes you, your superb photos will remain locked away in archive boxes.*"

"BLACK AND WHITE IS MY STRENGTH"

Sometimes the artistic director Michael Rand tells him, "Please, go have some coffee," and he replies, "No, I want to watch." In fact, he does not watch, he dictates his choice – shared by the paper. "*I was the one who made the selection; it was a rare privilege.*" McCullin did not want to keep pretty pictures, but those that would establish his reputation as the hardest, the rawest photographer ever. The *Sunday Times* even published photos of dead people despite an unwritten rule in Great Britain that was opposed to it. "*The* Sunday Times *had the courage to do away with this custom.*" Michael Rand was so shocked at the photo of the Vietcong soldier that he hesitated to publish it, but he said yes.

In the end, the most difficult thing for McCullin is to resist against the orders for war photos in colour. He took many, some of which were published in the *Sunday Times*, but none figure in his books or exhibitions. Once again, colour is an impediment to his global project. "*It seduces you too fast, it `glamorises.' It's liking offering a bouquet of flowers to a girl you hardly even know. It transforms information into a Rembrandt painting.*" He repeats again and always: "*Black and white are my strength.*" A strength magnified by the *Sunday Times*, which prints the photographs in black and white in CMYK printing – a hint of blue, red and yellow injected into the black in order to enhance the impact of the subject.

In sixty years McCullin has produced 60,000 negatives in black and white, 20,000 in colour and 9,000 prints. Everything belongs to him. His contract with the *Sunday Times*, atypical of the period, mentions that he remains the owner – an obsession with control that extends to

his posterity. We turn the pages of his books, and we ask him, in his house at Batcombe, about what influenced him. "*Classical painting,*" he replies. "*We photographers pick up the crumbs of the painters who were here a thousand years before us.*" Of course, McCullin is a classic – one who could not go to the school of drawing he dreamed of.

He invites us to admire his imposing library. He knows his history of photography by heart. He cites dozens of names that have influenced him, but he quickly settles on four, picked out of the bunch for their radicalism, their blackness, all the way to their work in the laboratory. This quartet almost forms a self-portrait of McCullin. In the 19th century Hill and Adamson publish a news story on Scottish fishing villages using portraits – the first of its kind in the history of photography. At the turn of the century, the American Alfred Stieglitz ushers the photograph into the arts. The Englishman Bill Brandt takes very black images of England in the 1930s. The American Eugene Smith is an enraged, uncompromising author who creates two legendary visual "experiments," one on the American city or Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) in the 1950s, the other on mercury pollution in Japan in the late 1960s.

McCullin is another enraged artist, and to grasp his engagement, one has to relive with him the eleven days he spent in Huê, Vietnam in 1968.

- Alain Frachon & Michel Guerrin
Next essay: *Eleven Days of Apocalypse in Vietnam*

Eleven Days of Apocalypse in Vietnam

Don McCullin, Photographer
3|6
In February 1968, the British photographer joins the marines during the battle of Huê. At the heart of horror, he takes his most memorable photographs.

Batcombe, Somerset (UK) – Special correspondents

February 1968, the battle of Huê, central Vietnam. In the rain, in the mud, pummelled by mortar and rockets, the company of marines led by Myron Harrington, age 24, suffer heavy losses: having set off at 120 men in early February, only 39 remain at the end of the battle one month later. Don McCullin meets them at the foot of the citadel of the ancient imperial capital of the country. He spends eleven days with them. Without leaving them. "*There comes a moment when my profession no longer resembles anything. In Huê, I was not a war photographer, I was at the edge of the extreme,*" he says. "*In those moments, reporting is a journey to insanity.*" Along the Perfume River, the marines are to take back the old city of Huê, a patchwork of pagodas, moats and lakes surrounding the imperial palace.

The North-Vietnamese army and its southern allies, the Vietcong, take possession of Huê during the major offensive that they started at Têt, the celebration of the new lunar year, from the 30 to the 31 January. They are entrenched behind the ramparts of the citadel. They have a solid hold on the city. They stop the marines' advance. The weather is cold, the sky hangs low, and there are torrential showers. McCullin's company is glued to the ground by continuous firing. Night and day, the marines hide in holes and ruins.

"WHY DIDN'T HE KILL ME?"
How does one take photographs under enemy fire? Any reporter would say that he does what he can. McCullin, though, has a very personal way of positioning himself in time and space and observes a precise protocol. First, the light. "*One of the most perilous phases is taking measure of the ambient light,*" he explains in his memoire. "*Unless you're just shooting like crazy, you have to go through this moment of stillness and calculation, which makes you an ideal target.*" Flat against the ground, you then have to change your film. "*That's another high-risk operation. As the back of the Nikon F which I used for my first photo stories in Vietnam was not set up on hinges, I had to - lying on my back, my camera held on my chest – remove the lid and then feel around blindly quite a bit, knowing that if I were to lift my head to see what I was doing, I would probably be a dead man.*"

In Huê, from the top of the citadel, the North-Vietnamese snipers had Harrington's men in the crosshairs. Two marines collapsed just a few metres from McCullin. Not him. "*Because I was carrying my two Nikons on top of my thorax?*" he asks himself today. "*Why am I still*

alive? Why didn't he kill me?" In just a few days, the photographer witnessed dozens of American soldiers killed or wounded – "*their flesh cut to the bone*" – around him. One marine gets his jaw ripped off by a bullet. Another, his throat slit, is drained of his blood. "*Hollywood has made war glamorous; it's not glamorous, it's ugly and it stinks,*" says McCullin.

He put his life on the line in Huê for that: to show the barbaric profile of war. Half a century later, when the Tate Britain in London, while preparing a retrospective of McCullin's work for 2019, asks him to withdraw a photograph considered too harsh, the photographer responds, "No way – or no exhibition." In a film by Jacqui and David Morris devoted to McCullin and broadcasted by the BBC in 2015, Harrington, the officer of the marine company in Huê, recounts, "Arriving from behind the lines, some photojournalists would come and go in less than a day." They left with the helicopters evacuating the dead and wounded. "For some reason Don stayed with our unit. On more than one occasion, taking extreme risks, he helped carry wounded men."

The battle of Huê will remain the longest infantry battle of the American-Vietnamese conflict: one month of almost hand-to-hand combat, with grenades and guns. "*Just as frightening as the immediate mortar attacks of the North Vietnamese and of the Vietcong, was the American naval fleet, at 25 kilometres off the coast in the South China Sea, who retaliated by throwing its bombshells right in front of us (…) And it was no less terrifying to see the enormous droves of Phantom bombers passing above our heads with the napalm containers that they were about to drop on the citadel.*" Harrington talks of "total chaos." McCullin admits, "*I went nuts, running from one side of the battlefield to the other like an animal. (…) All of a sudden, I was an old, bearded man with sunken eyes. I slept directly on the floor, my helmet within arm's reach, completely dressed, shivering with only a blanket and a bullet-proof vest that I had picked up on site.*"

SATURATED OF HORRORS, DISCONNECTED

The paradox of this major war photographer is that McCullin, in the "total chaos" of Huê, takes his most memorable images. One of them has become emblematic of the American war in Vietnam. A marine sitting in a state of shock in filthy battle-dress, his eyes staring, his gaze empty, grips his hands around the barrel of his M16 rifle. He is not physically injured, but mentally he has passed to another world, saturated with horrors, disconnected. "*I took him five times. Five photos of his face. The five negatives are absolutely identical. His eyes don't move,*" says the photographer.

McCullin does not "shoot like a machine gun" in Huê; he composes in the urgency of the moment. He captures the instant where a marine throws a grenade. The North-Vietnamese are less than 20 metres away. A good shot requires mastery of technique – fast shutter release and an adapted zoom lens. He remembers it vividly – "*it was a 250/F8*" – just as he

remembers that, in the following seconds, the marine's hand is "*blown to smithereens*" by an AK-47 bullet. Years later the marine with the grenade, Harrington, and others of the company reunite with the photographer. But among the survivors of the battle of the ramparts, one man never came to the reunions. They never saw him again. He is alive, but he has disappeared. The marine in a state of shock, the man with the empty stare, remains to this day a face without a story other than that of the battle of Huê. "*After those two weeks,*" McCullin recounts, "*I took a helicopter back to the press office on the big American base of Da Nang,*" a coastal city in central Vietnam. "*I hadn't changed my clothes. I threw them away. I took a shower, and in the shower, I started to cry.*" The citadel falls on 26 February. Two-thirds of Huê has been destroyed, the imperial city is reduced to ruins. Thousands of civilians have been killed. The Têt offensive has affected almost every town in South Vietnam. It ends in a military defeat for North Vietnam and the Southern Liberation Front. In less than three months, the American military and that of South Vietnam regain control of the towns. The North was counting on a sort of general insurrection of the south Vietnamese population. Hanoi reckoned with massive defections in the Saigon army. Nothing of the sort occurs – quite the contrary.

Half a century later, in the bucolic serenity of the Somerset hills, McCullin analyses himself aloud. Does the reporter take part by joining a unit of marines? Does he make some heroes but not others? Does he choose a side? McCullin dissects the way he reported at length. "*In North Vietnam, a foreign photographer could not work freely (…). In South Vietnam we were completely free; we went where we wanted to,*" without the least bit of censorship.

Convinced of having the support of public opinion for this intervention of the Cold War against the communists, Washington gives the press considerable leeway. Duly accredited by the American military, journalists choose to go where they wish and, equipped from head to toe, get on the helicopters of the cavalry with the rank of officer. The press holds a Priority 3 card; priority 1 is for the wounded, or Priority 2 during the Têt offensive (South Vietnam) in February 1968. On the left, a marine hit in the legs; on the right, a soldier throwing a grenade just seconds before being injured. For the political leaders, soldiers are only a Priority 5. McCullin observes that "*Never again did I find such liberty in any conflict that followed, that liberty that allows you to show the pain and to capture, in real-time, the death of any young soldier.*"

No other war was so intensely photographed as that of Vietnam – so close to the combats, with the consequence that the images are dominated by soldiers rather than victims and civilians, unlike the conflicts of the last thirty years. The price of this liberty given to the press: the number of deaths among photographers is high (135 killed or reported missing during the French war in Indochina). Their story is told in *Requiem* (Jonathan Cape, 1997), a book co-written by two press veterans who served in Saigon, Horst Faas and Tim Page, both photographers.

Requiem is the tale of a war that, for an entire generation of young journalists, bears the mark of the 1960s – times of libertarian advocacy with the slogan, in its abridged form, "sex, drugs and rock 'n roll." You went to Vietnam for a grand adventure, existential and sensorial, to cover the war, of course, and also, as Faas and Page crudely write, "to drink, fuck, and smoke weed and opium" while listening to the Rolling Stones.

"AN INDEPENDENT WITNESS"

This surprising cocktail permeates the lines of another book, one of the best on the conflict, *Dispatches* (Albin Michel, 1980) by the American Michael Herr, special correspondent for *Esquire* magazine in Saigon. McCullin sympathises with Herr; he likes his book. But he does not belong to this school of journalism, fascinated by the delirious aesthetics of the American war machine, which sees the Vietnam experience like a hysterical extension of the rock and roll culture of the era. Coming from his proletarian London, McCullin is too "puritan" for that, says John le Carré in the preface to one of his photography books.

If McCullin goes to war, it is to face the facts, not for the music. If he takes risks, it is to be on the front lines of the combats, not for the atmosphere of Saigon. "*The prostitutes, the bars, cheap sensations – I tried to keep my distance from all of that,*" he says. Most of the time he works alone. "*I am a lone wolf, in competition with death, not with my fellow colleagues*." To be fair, he admits having "*liked being in war,*" but without looking for the "*the big thrills.*"

Journalistic honesty in the torment of war? "*I never saw the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese soldiers as enemies; I may have arrived in Huê looking like a marine, but I was not sent by the United States,*" the photographer says in his memoires. "*I was what I tried to be every time: an independent witness – but by no means indifferent.*" He talks about the solidarity that takes hold in a group of men under fire. In the same breath, he expresses his admiration for the unbelievable courage and self-sacrifice of the soldiers in the North: "*The heavy B-52 bombers were dropping their bombs over a narrow area so that you would swear that nothing was left alive within kilometres in all directions,*" but no more than five minutes after that planes had left did those soldiers come out from under cover to fire at the enemy.

An incontestable military victory, Têt was a political defeat for the United States. The images of those battles show an unshaken combativeness in the North. After three years of a war that begins in 1965 and mobilises half a million Americans, in 1968 the public begins to wonder. America does not always win? Why? Photographs and TV reports touch the general public. The number of dead and wounded does not cease to rise in an army that includes numerous conscripted soldiers among its ranks. Elected in 1968, the new president, Richard Nixon, orders the beginning of the withdrawal.

In war, McCullin says that fear does not leave you. He experiences moments of pure panic. "*In a battle in Cambodia, I, who has always proclaimed myself atheist, surprised myself by pleading, 'Please, God, don't let me die. Give me another chance.'*" It is precisely in Cambodia in 1970 that his eardrum is punctured, and he receives several pieces of shrapnel in the groin and legs. McCullin often talks about his fellow colleagues, the old ones that he admires – the Robert Capas, the Alfred Aisenstaedts, the Margaret Bourke-Whites, the Carly Mydans and notably those that he met in Vietnam: Philip Griffiths, David Douglas Duncan, Larry Burrows, his friend Gilles Caron, Henri Huet or Kyoichi Sawada, among others.

NEITHER CYNICAL NOR PACIFIST

His first contact with war is not Vietnam, where he goes as early as 1964, but the clashes in Cyprus, the same year, between the Greek and Turkish communities of the island. "*That was my baptism by fire, the beginning of a long journey through war,*" he says. "*I learnt that I could keep calm, that I could take photos in chaos and danger.*" Throughout the course of the conflicts that he documented – in Northern Ireland, in the Middle East between Israel and its Arab neighbours, and then in Lebanon, in Africa in Biafra and in the Congo, in Central American in El Salvador, in Iraq in 1991 – McCullin establishes his guidelines. "*My rules,*" he says.

Not everything is allowed. When you work so close, when you meet armed men, there is a risk of inciting even more violence. At the very least, the presence of a photographer can, paradoxically, trivialise or normalise violence. In Saigon, he refuses to photograph public executions. "*They weren't 'executions;' they were murders, pure and simple. Accepting to photograph them would have trivialised those murders in the eyes of those who were committing them. It was a way of granting them a kind of imprimatur, to tell the executioners 'It's OK, it's normal to do that.'*" There are other, subjective limits that are more difficult to define. McCullin takes picture of the dead and the wounded – military or civilian. He knows it is stealing their intimacy. – "*The photo, it's stealing,*" he repeats. In Huê he crawls close to a marine who had received two bullets in the bottom of his face. The soldier applies a large compress on his wound. Blood and saliva are running down his face. "*His eyes were like two hells screaming his pain. I aimed my camera, but he shook his head no, asking me to abstain. I moved away.*"

"McCullin doesn't protect himself," observes John le Carré. It is not just that he works at the front – you never see him without his telephoto lens. It is also that he does not block any of his "emotional buttons." "*I never put my emotions aside.*" It is abnormal if war does not evoke "*pain, terror, horror, revolt, disgust,*" he tells us. "*I try to master my fear more or less, but there is no reason to control my emotions; they have shaped my perspective.*"

"The fiery hells that he never ceased to visit," continues John le Carré, have made of him neither a cynic nor a pacifist. He photographs war first and foremost as if to say, "We know

that it is atrocious, but we will know it even better while we look at it." His first volume of photographs is entitled *The Destruction Business* (Macmillan, 1971). He focuses on combat, which is the hard core of war: men looking to kill others who are looking to kill them. He has created a black and white monument to photojournalism on this subject, which remains an exceptional documentary work. Everything is here, he says in Batcombe, "*I live with my ghosts,*" those of Huê and the others, neatly kept outside the dark room. He explains this in a courteous tone, controlled, almost light-hearted. And then, going into a permanent and tormented introspection, he forever wonders: Is there any point to photographing war?

- Alain Frachon & Michel Guerrin
Next essay: *Why Photograph War?*

Why Photograph War?
DON MCCULLIN, PHOTOGRAPHER
4|6
Famine, epidemics, conflicts – this British photographer has captured the atrocities of his time without looking to soften them. He wonders about his role and that of his images but draws a conviction: to show it, whatever the cost.

Batcombe, Somerset (UK) - Special correspondents

"What the heck am I doing here?" In the jungle of Vietnam, amidst the tribal wars in Lebanon or amidst upheaval in Africa, it was not long before Don McCullin asked himself this question, which is a pretty direct way of wondering about the importance or futility of photographing war. A vast debate.

The McCullin of the mid 1960s is a thirty-some year-old young man fitted in his multi-pocket safari jacket, his chest covered with his three Nikons, sunken cheeks, poorly shaven, with a Steve McQueen look, running up and down the battle grounds of the Cold War – which, as its name does not suggest, had many hotspots. "The war photographer" – an expression that McCullin assures he detests – incarnates one of the heroes in Western imagery of the second half of the 20th century. In the family of war correspondents, the photographer is the star. He works the closet, including with a bullet-proof vest.

McCullin believes in his role. "*I made myself this stupid promise to become the best war correspondent of my time,*" he says today. His was a militant. He would take all the risks in order to show war in all its horror. He would make no compromises. He wanted to become the new Robert Capa, author of cult images of the Spanish Civil War and later the Normandy landings. His fellow colleagues of the time attest to a fearlessness that sets him apart. British essayist, journalist, and historian William Shawcrow recalls the McCullin of the so-called Easter Offensive in Vietnam in 1972. "He was someone absolutely terrifying to work with because he took so many senseless risks (…). We went back up a part of route 13 together, and then Don continued. Not me. It was terrifying where we were going, but he kept going."

The man in question confirms, "*I wanted my images to stay with you, with those who looked at them as they opened the* Sunday Times *at breakfast,*" in the kitchen on Sunday morning, "*I wanted them to hit hard.*" To the writer Aida Edemariam, who interviews him for *The Guardian* in 2005, he further explains, "*I wanted my images to contaminate your thoughts – because they contaminate mine.*" The photographer implicitly expresses the wish that his work be a warning against war.

NIGHTMARISH PROCESSIONS

Starting with his work in Biafra, Africa in 1969, McCullin tempers his first illusions. He buries the image of the photographer flamboyantly going up to the front line. He moves away from the "macho" type that jumps down from the helicopter into the jungle in Vietnam with a Wagner opera playing in the background, like in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. He becomes less the photographer of combat and more of suffering – that of the civilian victims and refugees.

This transition happens far from the front, with the starving children of the Biafra forest in the province of south-eastern Nigeria, which from 1967 to 1970, attempts to achieve its independence. Here, famine is nothing natural. It is organized by the federal Nigerian army that besiege the secessionists. It is a weapon of war, and it kills by the thousands. It decimates the young children found near a clearing in a school turned into a rural hospice. McCullin takes a picture of one of them, an albino, martyr among martyrs, with an enormous head and endless legs that are nothing but skin and bone. This image, one of the most widely circulated of McCullin's work in Biafra, will remain the sinister banner of what this war was.

Yet he is far from being done with tragedies of the human condition, which became the full-time subject of this angry man. In 1971, Bangladesh, the eastern province of Pakistan, secedes. This war is a sub-conflict of the confrontation between India and Pakistan. It is thrown into the lives of millions of Bangladeshis, who are already miserable and become a bit more so. They flee towards the Indian border. The monsoon has arrived and spreads a terrifying cholera epidemic. The refugees die by the tens of thousands.

McCullin joins the nightmarish processions of the living dead, walking under the pouring rain. "The readers had to see them (…) the suffering of these people," he writes in his *Memoires*. "They needed to see this woman who, after carrying the corpse of her child in her arms all day, can finally sit down come nightfall and lay him down next to her. The saddest of all was to see her hang on to that little body." Harold Evans, who runs the *Sunday Times* at the time, confides to the BBC that "McCullin is at his best when his work brings together a calm look at the victims and yet one full of sympathy." Evans also says, "I call him a conscience with a camera."

The "conscience" asks himself many questions. "*I was never in the action without asking myself what I was doing,*" McCullin explains in his Somerset home. "*I am in Biafra, in a school transformed into a sort of hospital, in front of these kids who are dying of hunger. They see me arrive. They think I'm going to cure them, to feed them. And I'm there, with my Nikon around my neck: helpless, futile. You can't eat Nikons. What the heck am I doing here? I'm useless. Is it really necessary to photograph? (…) You might say that I was going to exploit the fate of these miserable people, but my only reason for being there was to take an image.*"

The early 1980s marks the end of McCullin's incursions into the armed tragedies of the Cold War – and the end of quite a few illusions he held about his profession. A series of events forces the photographer to reposition himself. In 1981, the *Sunday Times* changes hands: the Australian Rupert Murdoch buys the *Times* and its Sunday supplement. An era that saw the best of a certain type of photojournalism comes to an end. The new owner does not want any more "*misery or war in the colour supplement, but lifestyle and leisure,*" McCullin protests. That will neither be completely true nor completely false. But the weekly paper refuses to publish his report from El Salvador, one of the last ones he does.

A new disappointment in 1982: for supposedly bureaucratic reasons, the British army does not take the most well-known war photographer on its campaign on the Falkland Islands. This operation, in which Great Britain takes back a contested archipelago in the south Atlantic from Argentina, will be told by journalists, but hardly "seen." The author of the most published photo of the Falklands is not a photographer, but an Argentinian soldier. Immediately afterwards, McCullin leaves the *Sunday Times*. War itself begins to change. The 1990s mark the coming of so-called "intelligent" armies that are more precise, more targeted. What the Pentagon has called the RMA – Revolution in Military Affairs – will progressively transform the battlefield. The appearance of drones and then cyber warfare give birth to a form of remote armed conflict. The photojournalist searches for his place.

This is all the more difficult for McCullin as the arrival of the internet, the digital, impoverishes the profession. A form of democratic illusion sets in: with the mobile phone, everyone – including those fighting in the conflicts – can takes pictures and then release them to the general public on platforms. A culture of free photos imposes itself as the digital revolution makes the printed press suffer. Without a paper to publish in, with no remuneration, how does one hold on?

"GO FOR THE MUSEUM"

The McCullin miracle is that he escapes this gap of air. Even better: while so many of his fellow colleagues founder, he continues to shine. If his images are no longer published in the press? He shows them elsewhere. The quality of his photos made him famous; they will find a new medium. The transformation begins with two master strokes. In 1980, he publishes his most well-known publication, *Hearts of Darkness* (referring to Joseph Conrad's masterpiece), in which he rewinds to his first life: from that of his portrait of the Guvnors gang in 1959, to the poor children of Bradford (a town in northern England) in 1978, passing through different wars in between. The collection begins with a long introduction penned by John le Carré. The partnership is unprecedented. No press photographer has ever been associated with a writer of such stature. Le Carré is a star who has just published one of his best books, *Smiley's People*. His preface is marvellous. It sets McCullin up as an artist. The photobook, published in several countries, has had an enormous impact.

Hearts of Darkness is made into an exhibition that same year, 1980, at The Victoria and Albert Museum (The V&A) in London. The curator of the exhibition, Mark Haworth-Booth, is a very influential figure in the world of photography. Until then, no photographer, *a fortiori* no reporter, had ever had the privilege to be invited in his or her lifetime to The V&A. The McCullin "phenomenon" proves steadfast: 70,00 people admire the London exhibition, which is taken to New York the following year. A parade of books and exhibition follow, up until the one announced for February 2019, at the Tate Britain in London, and not to forget are the prestigious orders. All these events establish McCullin in his status as an artist.

However, despite his success in the art world, questions that have gnawed at him for a long time catch up. Can he exhibit war and war reporting just like that? Commenting (in *The Guardian)* the images McCullin brought back of the tragic events of the time, writer Aida Edemariam questions what she describes as a "slight discomfort." "His photos are so powerful that they acquire an artistic value in the sense that art touches the universal, which is going to win out on their value as a specific document. The press photo, which is taken in the urgency of the event, the news story, becomes, here, the subject of a passive and distant contemplation" amidst the silence of the museum.

This "slight discomfort," which does not just concern Don McCullin, gives rise to multiple debates as the press photograph leaves the journalistic realm behind for the cultural sphere – festivals, museums, art centres, galleries and even auction houses. McCullin acknowledges that there is a debate and that it is, in part, justified. "*I understand the criticism, but, you know, my obsession is to show,*" he says. "*If I can't do it in the press anymore, I have to find other places. So, go for the museum, even if I would love to exhibit in a station like Waterloo in London, where 10,000 people would walk by my photos.*" And he adds, "*My only limit is not to allow myself to sell images that show dead people to collectors.*"

"THE PHOTO HAS THE DEEPER BITE"

In the debate on the medium to exhibit war photography – a newspaper would be appropriate; the museum is questionable – intersects another point: that of the "aesthetics" of images of war. In an article published by *The New Yorker* on 9 December 2002, essayist and novelist Susan Sontag (1933-2004) bravely confronts the issue in order to denounce a form of purism present in certain critiques. "Whether we like it or not," she says, "the press photo has a double essence: it is both a documentary tool and a visual expression at once" (more or less successful). To condemn reporters who witness "calamities" of their time based on the argument that their images have an "aesthetic" that is a bit too lyrical or emphatic is barking up the wrong tree. If we are attracted to an image by McCullin – wherever it is presented – it is because of the fact that there is a distinct and very personal style, but also because the breadth of the information is not diluted in formal effects.

A long mediation on the photography of war, Sontag's article, entitled "Looking at War," is later published in French in a book with the very beautiful title *Devant la douleur des autres* ("*Regarding the Pain of Others*," Christian Bourgeois, 2003). Sontag takes up McCullin's question "What the heck am I doing here?" in order to question the utility and efficiency of images of pain and chaos. "The war photo is not in itself an argument against war," she writes. "Do these images teach us something we do not know?"

In the same line, but more fiercely, the philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) affirms in an interview for *Le Monde* in 2003, that these images serve the photographers more than the people who look at them. "People act according to what they are and not to the images they see," he says. He then moves on to the "moral" illusions that both the takers of images of war or catastrophes, as well as those who go to see them, may have: "War photographers, *a priori*, stand in solidarity with the victims and with human suffering, but their natural place is on the other side, with those who look and let happen. All these people who are dying of starvation and give their photo – we will never be able to repay the debt we owe them."

Not sure whether it is necessary to pose the question in such radical terms, Susan Sontag responds that photographs give a reality to war and suffering even if they cannot prevent them. They belong to a historical narrative. Photography has its own assets. When it comes to remembering an event, "the photograph has the deeper bite," Sontag says, because our memory "freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image."

As McCullin is a charming raconteur, lost in a worldly form of self-denigration, he keeps bringing up the question and never ceases to doubt. "*My work has made no difference,*" he voluntarily hammers. It is difficult to know whether this assertion comes as a continuation of sincere scepticism or from a heavy blow of depression. Whichever it is, nobody really knows if the images of Vietnam alone explain the turnaround in American public opinion – a whole batch of literature is divided on the question. One thing is certain: his photos have an impact.

McCullin holds the chronicles of the bad days. That is, what counts and what he has done as a person - or almost. He pays the price. He suffers mood swings and moments of depression. His mind carries the memories of a collection of atrocities, those that he caught in his viewfinder and that can come back to haunt him at any moment, even in the soothing peacefulness of Somerset. How to protect oneself? Perhaps forget a little? Still as a photographer, but this time by capturing images of nature – around his home, then in Scotland, around the Mediterranean, in Ethiopia – in the silence of daybreak. This is another part of the life of Don McCullin: landscapist, as therapy.
-Alain Frachon & Michel Guerrin
Next essay: *Don McCullin, A Tormented Landscapist*

Don McCullin, A Tormented Landscapist

DON MCCULLIN, PHOTOGRAPHER
5|6
In the 1980s, a decade of war and pain, the British photographer roams the hills of the English countryside before glorifying the vestiges of the Roman Empire in Arab lands. Images that strangely resemble battlefields.

Batcombe, Somerset (UK) - Special correspondents

At the back of his house set in the middle of the English countryside, in an annexe topped with a glass roof, Don McCullin has found the ideal place to store his negatives, contact sheets, and exhibit prints. On a dark wooden chest of drawers, an image catches our attention. A nude of a pretty girl. We get closer. It is the English model Kate Moss, muse of the fashion industry and the jet-set. We ask him who the author is. "*I am.*" What? The photographer of war and hardship, of whom we know of no nude, "did" Kate Moss? "*We talked, she said, 'Why not?' I met her in her house in Gloucestershire. She let her dress fall without any inhibition. Her boyfriend was there. It was uncomfortable. For such a photo, it is preferable to be the model's lover. There, I was a visitor.*" Then he adds, "*I would like to take a nude of my wife Catherine, who has an incredible body, in the dark, without showing her face. She said yes, but we haven't done it.*"

These words adequately reflect a photographer who speaks as he photographs – without kid gloves– and who looks to expand has palette. Most photojournalists, often the best, have no intention of remaining prisoners of the newspaper page. They fear the labels that come with their reputation. For McCullin, it was to be the war photographer that replaced the legendary Robert Capa after his death in 1954 in Indochina. "*Yes, I filled that void. But I didn't only do war! I tried out all genres. I undertook a long journey with the goal of being taken seriously.*"

McCullin wants to construct a work of art. Because of his classical conception of the art, he has not delved into the conceptual, nor the decorative arts, but he has worked in the all classical genres of photography – the same ones as of painting – but quickly discards what he does not like. "*Creative people are hungry. Me, I'm hungry for visual impact. If I'm moved by the urge to turn over rocks to see what's underneath, I photograph. If I don't feel that urge, I say no.*"

So, he took drastic measures. There is not one nude in his books. A few still lifes. Not one fashion photograph – one day he did a story on the stylist Alexander McQueen in Paris. Very rarely a celebrity portrait. "*I don't like to photograph famous people.*" His session with the Beatles in 1968, barely a few weeks after having been in the battle of Huê in Vietnam,

entertained him and he published a book about it: *A Day in the Life of the Beatles* (Jonathan Cape, 2010). He rubbed shoulders with Al Pacino. "*He's a very good actor, but I left hating him.*" He met Yasser Arafat in 1979 without producing any noteworthy portrait. He has only one good memory of taking a portrait – that of the painter Francis Bacon in his atelier in 1982. "*I liked his irony, the way he floated above society.*"

McCullin is an egocentric person, yet he has never taken a self-portrait. So, taking portraits…He also considers that there are too many commercial stakes that escape him in fashion as well as with the stars – so he rejects both genres. Yet in fact, he has taken a great deal of portraits, but in war or in industrial England. Suffice it to say that if you are one of McCullin's models, things are going pretty bad for you…

No nudes, no fashion, few portraits, a few still lifes…What, then, is left? Landscapes. For more than forty years, Don McCullin has photographed landscapes. Not in the city. In unspoilt nature. He began in the early 1970s, between two wars. The result was insignificant – McCullin is never good when he does things half way. He increased his trips to India as early as 1964, to Indonesia, to New Guinea, and elsewhere, closer to anthropology than to current events, but it is still humans that make his images come to life.

TO WASH HIS EYES AND BRAIN

Don McCullin intensely plunges into landscape photography in 1985. He is exactly 50 years old, an age where going out there on the tormented terrain becomes difficult for him. He also feels that his profession as a photojournalist is on the decline. "I suddenly found myself without any ideas, without anywhere to go." Landscape is an ideal terrain to write a new chapter in his life. Photographing war is sown with hazards, all the way until the imperative appointment to close off the deal with the paper. With landscapes, he can do what he wants, when he wants. "*A landscape never tells me that I'm not allowed to photograph it.*"

At age 50, he also needs to settle some scores with himself. When your neighbours are the wounded, the dead, the poor and the marginalised and when every second counts to stay alive, seeking out the peacefulness of nature, beauty, silence and contemplation (as others do with easel painting), you become another man. Here, a dramatic event intervenes: his first wife, Christine, dies of cancer in 1988. Landscape will be his therapy – ideal to wash his eyes and brain of all the horrors he has seen and carried like a virus. "*I don't want people to see me just as the photographer of bad news, as if I were an assassin or slaughterhouse worker. There is beauty in me. Landscapes transforms me into a decent human being,*" he tells us.

In photography we often forget the time it takes to take a picture, only retaining the result, which one admires or not. That time, for the man who goes from war to nature, marks a dizzying change. Miraculous, too. McCullin does not miss a thing, not a second. He savours

an unprecedented happiness, especially since he loves the countryside where he has lived for ages.

He gets up at 5 or 6, has some tea, crunches an apple, relaxes by listening to the BBC, chooses a camera, goes out the door, walks straight ahead into the fields and photographs the land that embraces him. He walks slowly. "*My legs are those of a turtle.*" Sometimes, he goes up into the hills, often returning to the same places. Then, he goes a little further, always a little further. He leaves Somerset behind. Once, in the same day, he takes his car, puts together his itinerary, travels 500 kilometres, praying that the sky stays dark and grey, stops, takes two rolls and goes back home to Batcombe.

Sometimes he comes back from an outing without photos, like a hunter with an empty game-bag, but he is not disappointed. "*Photographing is not looking, but feeling.*" When one day his wife says to him, "Don, I want to come with you," he replies, "*Out of the question. I don't want anyone to talk to so that my spirit can travel into the depths of the imagination.*" He wants no one next to him, no one in the picture. He curses the tourists who, more and more, like sites promoted by advertising campaigns. "*Fifteen years ago, these places were empty.*" He remembers a man who appeared out of nowhere. "I go see him, I ask him where he's from. From Kazakhstan. We have coffee together. Photography favours marvellous encounters."

LYRICAL BLACKS

To stop there would be to believe that landscape photos are the result of a bucolic stroll. But being a good masochist, Don McCullin imposes Spartan constraints on himself. He takes photographs in the morning at dawn or at dusk – especially in winter, when it is very cold, when there are storms, when the countryside is covered in snow, the sky hangs low, the trees are bare, and the grass is soaked or frozen. Sometimes the wind is so icy that he has to use a tripod in order not to shake. We met him under a radiant sky. "*I never photograph on a day like this. The sun overpowers everything. I need a dark, metallic sky – a Wagnerian sky.*" McCullin can wait hours for the right light, the kind that makes the sky vibrate, when the clouds have won, and the agonizing sun throws its last rays.

The result is pictorial. The landscapes are timeless. Not a sign of the time period, no event whatsoever. Always in black and white. But quite a bit more blacks than whites. Blacks with infinite nuances that he sculpts in his laboratory. Lyrical blacks that resonate. The images are empty – or rather, they are inhabited by feelings, by a multitude of contours and tormented contrasts. The sky takes up half of the image. "*Without the sky, you don't have the voice of the image.*" The voice of the sky is as menacing as the earth beneath, in a dark, resounding but harmonious continuity.

One thing is obvious: McCullin's landscapes are war photos without the combatants. From a broader point of view, everything is landscape, and everything is war in a McCullin photo. The hedges or the streams are trenches. The ground seems to be strewn with bombshell craters. Every foggy hill appears impregnable. Even when he comments on an apparently peaceful photo, he corrects it with words of war. He shows us a landscape at Glencoe, an area in Scotland he has roamed up and down a great deal and cherishes for its wilderness. "*The site is famous for a massacre during the war with England.*" Regarding the hopes for the Scottish nation's independence, he adds, "*The Scots try to get away, but I don't want them to leave.*"

We are reminded of the words of John le Carré: "Everywhere he goes, he makes a battlefield of it." McCullin's reaction: "*I don't do it on purpose, but it's true. I want drama in my landscapes. People who dream of postcard sceneries can't understand.*" And yet he knows the postcard scenery well. Every summer he spends some vacation time on a Greek island and goes swimming in a dreamlike cove. But that will never make a photograph signed Don McCullin. The same goes for the Italian landscape that he is so fond of. His ultimate reference – one that haunts him – is an image taken by the Englishman Roger Fenton in 1855 during the Crimean War. It is entitled *Valley of the Shadow of Death*. A lunar landscape, a dirt road that cuts through the valley and that, if you look closely, is strewn with bombshells. An absolute landscape, an absolute war. McCullin pays tribute to Fenton in a photo taken in France – a rarity. A frozen dirt road that mars the flat land – a field of the Battle of the Somme.

OBESSION WITH HISTORY

McCullin updates the British photography of the 19th century: that of pictorialists who, with sophisticated prints, propose landscapes that resemble paintings; and that of the naturalists like Peter Henry Merson, who idealised rivers and lakes in Norfolk County. If you cite Emerson, McCullin's eyes light up. "*He's a god. A Millet of photography.*" McCullin is a conservative who loathes the popularity of the "social landscape" in contemporary photography: anchored in the period and everyday life, urban or suburban; made commonplace, at times repulsive; inhabited by high-rise blocks of council housing or duplicated detached houses, draped in colours as grey as the places. His exact opposite. Next to his British landscapes, McCullin undertakes an ambitious project at the turn of the century: to photograph the vestiges of the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean. This subject speaks to his obsession with history and conquered territories.

He was a historian in the making when he left for war. The idea comes from far back, during a trip to Marseille with the writer Bruce Chatwin in 1974. McCullin has fed off writers he travelled with. With Chatwin, their mission is to tell the story of the daily life of Algerian immigrants in France. They realize just how much this population is torn between their home country and their host country. "*I said to Chatwin, 'Why don't we jump on a ferry and*

go to Algeria?' And we did it, arrived in Constantine, where we came across the traces of a small roman city. I took some photos until a man shouted at me: 'We are not the slaves of France anymore! Stop taking photos!" I understood that I was walking on their territory, just like the Romans two thousand years before." McCullin reiterates that "*That idea of trace, it's an idea from Chatwin.*"

It sprouted a bit later when, on an adventure outside of Somerset, he comes across a site that would become one of his favourites: the Hadrian Wall, a stone and earth fortification built around 120 BC by the Roman emperors. It runs a good 100 kilometres, more or less along the border between England and Scotland. McCullin walked on the wall – which is prohibited – and photographed it. "*I have a passion for this wall; it has captured my imagination. I always go back, only when it's snowing. Once, there was such a blizzard that I hid in a hole. It was marvellous.*" Through his vagabond spirit, he imagines the Mediterranean invader hostilely imposing its monumental mark.

THE GREAT INNER JOURNEY

This slow reflection materializes with the hundreds of photographs he takes of the vestiges of the Roman Empire in the Maghreb, in Libya, in Lebanon, in Jordan, in Syria…Even more so than in England, he photographs early in the morning or at nightfall, before the sun squashes everything. He masters the sun – his skies in the East are grey. He works with a large format camera that allows him to achieve great precision in the details. He puts everything together in an imposing book called *Southern Frontiers: A Journey Across the Roman Empire* (Jonathan Cape, 2010). The images are of an absolute classicism. The temples, where there are any left, stand like the battered combatants of his war photos. These are portraits of tired combatants – just like in Vietnam. Inhabited by a hopeless feeling of guilt, McCullin cannot help but think about the slaves who built them and of he who watches them. "*Why am I here, dumbstruck in front of such beauty?*"

Eventually, current events catch up to the photojournalist. In 2006, within the framework of his big project, he arrives in Palmyra, Syria, which has not yet been engulfed by the chaos of civil war. He photographs the famous Temple of Bel; he speaks with the curator. In 2015, the organization Islamic State destroys the temple with explosives and slits the curator's throat. This story haunts McCullin. "*Going back to Palmyra and photographing the destruction of Daesh is the last thing I want to do before I stop photographing,*" he tells our fellow colleague Claire Guillot in May 2017. And when McCullin wants to do something…A few months ago, at age 82, he finds himself in front of the temple, almost all of whose stones are now on the ground. He shows us the images and says nothing. This ellipsis of time and history in a "before and after" effect speaks for itself.

The Hauser and Wirth gallery in Los Angeles dedicates a summer-long exhibit to McCullin, exclusively on landscape. In the coming years he will surely continue to dedicate himself to

this genre, principally in his own country. It will be a great inner journey. He could claim the first line of *Triste Tropiques* by Claude Lévi-Strauss (English title: *A World on the Wane*, translated by John Russell). "*I hate travelling and explorers.*" McCullin does not at all like adventurers who play Tintin and then project their exotic images to an audience in want of sensations. He has photographed landscapes to get to know himself and to understand his country better, after so many years spent abroad. "*I don't know it.*" Yet, this man is hopelessly British – even English, he himself says. From head to toe.

-Alain Frachon & Michel Guerrin
Next essay: *Sir Donald and His Country*

SIR DONALD IN HIS COUNTRY

DON MCCULLIN, PHOTOGRAPHER
6|6
Born in a poor neighbourhood of London, McCullin has become a renowned and ennobled artist. He has a love-hate relation with the United Kingdom, where it is not easy to escape one's social class. Relentlessly, he has chosen to photograph the excluded. And he voted Brexit.

Batcombe, Somerset (UK) - Special correspondents

On 16 March 2017, Don McCullin carries out a movement that is not familiar to him. He kneels down on the ground with one knee – the right one (on a cushion). The scene takes place in the Ballroom of Buckingham Palace with a thick red carpet while Prince Charles, heir to the throne, dressed in formal uniform, places the sword of his grandfather George VI on the reporter's left shoulder and knights him for his outstanding service to photography. McCullin becomes Sir Donald.

A wonder of the British social ladder, the Teddy Boy of northern London – king of brawls and the Saturday-night dance halls – accedes, by merit, to the aristocracy. He whom the army did not want as a photographer – for a very military bureaucratic reason – pockets one of the highest honours of the kingdom. He looks slightly embarrassed in his smart grey-blue suite, but he is not displeased. In 1993, the Crown had already named him Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE). For the child of proletarians of Finsbury Park in London, this is a small first step towards the gentry – even if the Empire has, for many years already, ceased to exist, drowned in the vast Anglophone club of the Commonwealth.

Proclaimed a 'monument' of British photography – as the Beatles were in the realm of pop – Don McCullin wonders: What is a British photographer? "*After seeing national identities forged in the heat of conflict throughout my war reporting, I began to ask myself who I was. What does it mean to be English?*" he writes in his *Memoires*. Of distant Irish or Irish-Scottish origin, McCullin presents himself as 'English' with an Anglican family. "*We were Church of England*," he says.

PERSONAL INSULT
He has an old score to settle with 'his' government. In the early spring of 1982, the press service of 'his' army does not select him to accompany the armada launched by Margaret Thatcher to the Falkland Islands. In April, a junta of Argentinian soldiers in want of glory had the audacity to invade this archipelago lost in the South Atlantic while London and Buenos Aires were still in negotiations about its future. If he has one major regret, he tells us at Batcombe, it is this one: "*I didn't cover the Falklands.*" He did not go with 'his' army. It is

almost a personal insult. "*It really hurt not to be one of the first people they* [the bureaucrats of the Ministry of Defence] *turned to. Me, who, for 20 years, had accompanied all of the most seasoned armies on the planet and who had more experience in combat than any officer or soldier who left for that war in the South Atlantic.*"

And yet he had thought of everything. Not having recuperated well from a fall during some reporting in El Salvador – a broken arm –, he intended to embark on the campaign's hospital ship, the SS *Uganda*, and have himself treated during the crossing. His paper, the *Sunday Times*, had indeed given his name. But the British army did not take the most reputed photographer of the time along. McCullin has the feeling that his version of 'Britishness' was rejected. He writes a letter of protest in the widely read and highly respected 'Letters to the Editor' section of the London *Times*.

The Falklands War was brief but brutal: more than 600 died on the Argentinian side, 255 on the British. The latter drove their adversaries to a cease-fire on 14 July and recovered the kingdom's sovereignty over the islands and their sheep population. For a time, McCullin and a part of the journalistic association suspected something foul. The photographer is said to have been excluded deliberately: it was out of the question to risk demoralising the British public opinion by showing photos "à la McCullin" at the breakfast table, with the young paratroopers of the kingdom shot down by the Argentinian fighter pilots under the rain of the austral winter. The explanation would end up being more mundane: a big blunder on the part of the military administration.

McCullin 'consoles' himself by going to Lebanon, which the Israelis have just invaded, but he has still not swallowed the Falklands. "Don is a raconteur, like a real Cockney," says Andrew Alexander, one of his fellow colleagues. McCullin politely goes on about the spirit of the times. Things were often better before, though not always. He does not like rock music, only classical. He laments the Hong Kong of days gone by. He curses the American influence. He is not crazy about football, but out of solidarity with his youngest son, he supports Chelsea, one of the oldest London clubs. He did not miss one bit of the Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's wedding. He is worried that the English countryside is being destroyed, and he hates wind turbines. Does that make him a Conservative? Maybe. But he also votes liberal ("independent") and even Labour out of nostalgia for the welfare state.

"*I am a complex person*," he explains before adding, a little embarrassed, almost whispering, "*And I voted for Brexit*." Why? McCullin puts forward a general explanation. "*We adhered to the European Union for economic reasons, for defence and security – not so that Brussels can tell me what to put in my rubbish bins (…) We didn't join Europe to be asphyxiated, for our sovereignty to be abused.*" Today, he appears much more hesitant. Things are not going the way the leaders of the pro-Brexit campaign promised. Of course, it is all the European negotiator's fault for making things difficult. "*I don't like that Michel*

Barnier." His agent, Robert Pledge, explains, "Don is a big traveller, but for him, [Continental] Europe is another world which England does not belong to." He has travelled all over the world but assures that he could not live anywhere but in his country, England.

PASSAGE FROM ONE WORLD TO ANOTHER

The citizen-photographer has a political battle to wage. England's countryside is threatened by urbanisation. The most beautiful part of the British Isles is supposedly in jeopardy. The conservation of this heritage, he tells Jenny McCarty of the weekly conservative paper the *The Spectator*, is a question of attitude. We need to be able to continue roaming the Northern parts of the country during blizzards, along the Hadrian Wall that separates England from Scotland, in the solitude of a winter morning.

Everything began for the Englishman McCullin with another type of "promenade" in the heart of London on the Piccadilly metro line in the late 1950s. This was perhaps one of the most difficult journeys for him – the passage from one world to another. "*I am English, but I was born on the wrong side of the class barrier, which, at that time in Great Britain, was a still a determining fault line*." His England is that of North London, in the grime and destitution of a two-room family apartment. Once back from military service, where he first comes into contact with the world of photography, McCullin starts making films for an animation company in the Mayfair neighbourhood. Ten metro stations separate him from his workplace. In the morning, he takes the tube near his home, in Finsbury Park on the northern outskirts of the capital city, near Islington. In the 1950s, the neighbourhood is home to an underprivileged, working-class population amidst vacant lots, public housing and the carcasses of buildings gutted during the Blitz. Ten stops later, he gets off at Green Park, in the Western part of the city.

This is Mayfair. A dream district, bordered by Hyde Park, an ensemble of semi-detached houses, private mansions, churches, luxury stores, red-brick façades and white Victorian colonnades, skilfully landscaped, tree-filled squares, and, no doubt, over several square metres, the highest concentration of Bentley vehicles in the world. (The brand provides the standard car model in the neighbourhood.) "*I began to become very conscious of my social situation on the Piccadilly Line. When I took it again on the way home, after work, I was going back to an apartment without a bathroom.*" He continues, "*On the way to Mayfair, I carted a bit of Finsbury Park around with me, an inferiority complex, a mix of shame and social anger,*" – a cocktail of depression and the dogged desire "*to get out of there,*" to change classes.

The mark of one's origins was strong in the Great Britain of those days. Ten metro stations were an ocean. Belonging to a certain class is something you would exude. "*You deliberately speak 'working class' – 'popular' – you live 'working class,' you wear your class like a branding that you inflict upon yourself*." Luckily, McCullin continues, the 1960s and the

surge of pop culture and rock shook up these borders. The middle class wanted to talk 'like the street.' The selection by accent ceded in front of the wave of the Beatles and then that of the Rolling Stones. McCullin, a frequent television and radio guest, expresses himself in a select English, precise and elegant, but people do still ask him, "Did you change your accent? "

THE FEELING OF BEING A BIT OF A TRAITOR

He changed classes, yes. It was a long affaire. "*With the publication of my first photos in the* Observer, *I got the feeling that I had just, with great difficulty, lifted the first stone that was blocking my path.*" When he sees his signature in the captions of his photos, he felt an immense pride, that of having avenged the 'name' of his family. Social revenge. He had pushed back the class barrier. In thirty years he has passed over to "the other side": he has become one of the stars of British journalism, celebrated, invited, decorated with honours – even if he swears to us that "*this thing of class in England, I still feel it sometimes, it's hiding behind me, it's always there, you never totally get rid of it.*" His youngest son is studying in one of the poshest educational establishments in the country. "*You're asking yourself why a man like me, who comes from a neighbourhood of misery of North London, sends his son to one of the most expensive schools in England? You know why? It's to get over the stigmas of my past*."

Don McCullin is wrong. This 'thing of class,' as he says, is doubtlessly something that springs from his journalistic work, of his creativity. Of this passage from one class to another he seems to harbour a form of guilt – informal and tenacious. He is not nostalgic of Finsbury Park, where violence reigned along racism, the crassest prejudice and a lack of culture as narrow-minded as it was arrogant. But he acts in a way that suggests that he has been plagued by the feeling of having been a bit of a traitor – and he must pay. When he returns from the far-off lands at war, he does not go sit in a bar with his peers of the big reporters' club to recall their adventures. McCullin puts on his Doc Martens, hides his cameras under his parka and patrols Northern England, threatened with deindustrialisation.

Even if he has ventured to take a few pictures of the rich (most notably at the Ascot Racecourses near London), McCullin leaves it to others to tell the story of the rise of the middle class and economic success, Great Britain's "Glorious Thirty." It is Martin Parr, another major English photographer, younger than McCullin, who points his lens at that particular country. His work is exactly the opposite of McCullin's. Without naming him, it was he, his tormented senior colleague, at whom Parr was aiming when he explained to *Le Monde* in 2005 that "The photojournalist goes for the exceptional. He looks at war, famine, the homeless (…) which only represent 1% of those who surround us. I, as a documentary photographer, I am interested in the remaining 99%, in what is familiar, in the consumer and service society that Great Britain has become after Thatcher. I do not want to change the world, I want to understand it. I am part of it."

As in war, McCullin does not cheat when he is on the frontline of social reporting. He sleeps in his car, Salvation Army shelters, and the most miserable hotels in order to capture, always at daybreak, scenes of despair. He scrutinises the wastelands of the "old" economy, the end of a world, when the mines and the blast furnaces have closed down. McCullin is part of the tradition of "social photography" – that of his older colleague, Bill Brandt, for example, whom he admires. "*Poverty, I feel it before seeing it*," he says. "*It has an odour of wallpaper eaten up by dampness*."

The Thatcher years (1979-1990) both enriched and weakened Great-Britain. The new economy also created a population of outcasts. "*Having returned to London, coming from third world countries, I began to see people who were sleeping outside, lying in the corners of store entrances*." In 1989, the BBC solicits McCullin for a long story on the homeless. For him, the transition from the proletariat to the educated middle class has not put out the old social anger that manifested itself on the Piccadilly Line, one day in the late 1950s.

THE OUTCASTS OF THE MODEL

In London, he hangs around in the slums of the East End, where the glass towers of the branches of the City have not yet made an incursion. In the 1970s between Aldgate and Whitechapel, a collection of the excluded, the homeless and sometimes mentally ill people – a whole colourful family of marginalized misery – survive in a world of suffering amidst abandoned houses and squatted buildings. Why them? asks McCullin's propensity for the poor, the rejected, the outcasts of the model.

The photographer defends himself from any misplaced exoticism. His photographs are taken in complete empathy with their subjects. They are a way of saying: I could have been in their place, you know. He confides to BBC 4 that "No one has practised the privilege of photographing in these streets with more respect and attention than me (…) I approached these people cautiously, I looked for eye contact, I wanted to obtain their consent to take a picture of them." From that period, he has printed two books: *Homecoming* (St. Martin's Press, 1979), featuring an old man swallowing a white mouse on the cover, and *In England* (Jonathan Cape, 2007).

McCullin's London is no more. In fact, he rarely goes there. The East End and the North of the city have changed their social make-up. They are now multi-ethnic neighbourhoods done up by a progressive gentrification. Coming out of the Finsbury Park metro, one finds the brand-new store window of the Arsenal football club; next to it, a Prêt-à-Manger, an organic, Italian-style natural sandwich and seasoned salads chain. A little further, on Saint Thomas's Road, the local mosque provides shade for the second-hand Volvo estate cars of young couples who have come to settle down with their children in the rows of small houses in the area. The Arsenal stadium, The Emirates Stadium, is one metro station away,

not far from a block nicknamed “Little Algiers” due to its high population of people of Algerian origin. A champion of the left faction of the party, the head of the Labour party, Jeremy Corbyn, is the local representative.

In the so eminently civilised countryside of Somerset, Don McCullin lives far from his native land – the grey London of the 1950s. He remains loyal to the battles of his youth. He has carried the flag of the lost and isolated of his country; abroad, he has borne witness to the inhumanity of war. He looks at nature with the same raw anger, in black and white, capturing the low skies of the desolation of winter. Over the course of his image taking, he has learned to live with his darkest side, which has not been the easiest of tasks. In 1980 John le Carré writes, “As far as I am concerned, I have no doubt about what he is (…) He is an artist and that’s too bad for him.”

Alain Franchon & Michel Guerrin
END