**Spencer letters**

**Introduction**

Stanley Spencer wrote copious letters back to family and friends in England during and after the War. He wrote himself that war tore him away from the life he knew in Cookham, which was the world of his childhood and safety. The impact of the War changed the way in which he painted, which he was clearly aware of. For *Swan Upping*, which he started in 1915, the upper part was inspired by the paradise in which he had lived and the lower part, completed after the War, was a vision that he felt had forsaken (abandoned) him.

Most of Spencer’s letters are yet to be published, but his Cookham life and wartime experiences have been published in a volume entitled *Stanley Spencer: Looking to Heaven*[[1]](#footnote-1). In one letter written during the War, he raises the idea of painting images from his experiences at the Beaufort Hospital. His letters reflect his aspiration to paint after the War, and the memorial chapel gave him the canvas to express what he had dreamt of while suffering in the hills of the Macedonian battlefront.

The three following letters reveal the impact of war on Spencer and how his religious and literate education helped to shape his observations. When reading these letters, think about:

1. How has his opinion perhaps changed?
2. What does he say about war?
3. What observations does he make of the men and situation surrounding him?
4. Is there anything that surprises you?

**Letter 1**

‘When I left the Slade and went back to Cookham I entered a kind of earthly paradise. Everything seemed fresh and to belong to the morning. My ideas were beginning to unfold in fine order when along comes the war and smashes everything.’

Letter written by Spencer, unknown date, presumably at the start of the War: [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/stanley-spencer-and-his-holy-box-sandham-memorial-chapel](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/stanley-spencer-and-his-holy-box-sandham-memorial-chapel)

**Letter 2**

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Image © Estate of Stanley Spencer / Stanley Spencer Gallery

<https://stanleyspencer.org.uk/>

Transcript:

‘He had his head in a wonderful position. Later. Another man slept with his hand mysteriously appearing behind his head. It is so wonderful to see all these things in actual life. I have just got the book of Duccio di Buoninsegna [an Italian painter].’

Written while Spencer was at Tweselhurst in Surrey, waiting to be sent to Macedonia, in 1916. Image © Estate of Stanley Spencer / Stanley Spencer Gallery

<https://stanleyspencer.org.uk/>

[www.apollo-magazine.com/stanley-spencers-endless-autobiography](http://www.apollo-magazine.com/stanley-spencers-endless-autobiography)

**Letter 3**

The recipients of the following letter were Jacques and his wife Gwen Raverat, painters who had known Spencer from his time at Slade Art School.

 ‘… Gil when he is with me and since I have been in the army looks at me in such a worried way as he looks at a burden, and I am sure there is no need as I am quite happy. And although I am not actually putting things on canvas or paper, I am still “making, praising and giving thanks” more than ever I was before. Everything I do for anyone is as ointment poured forth and it is an exercise creating joy, which is eternal; and it is the army has caused me to learn that by being happy in the present state I am satisfied. But what is wonderful is that by praying for the power to love purely or absolutely you get that power. I feel ashamed of what I would do when I first came out here, compared with what I would do now. The army ought to make any man an artist, because it ought to give any man these feelings which I have just expressed and which are essential to an artist…

Could you send me some sweet biscuits Patacakes or niece [meaning Nice, the brand] biscuits but not ginger nuts or ginger of any kind. That Claude book is an extraordinary comfort out here.

Love from Cookham’

April or May 1917 at Salonika: [www.bl.uk/eblj/1977articles/pdf/article16.pdf](http://www.bl.uk/eblj/1977articles/pdf/article16.pdf)

1. Spencer, S. (2016) *Stanley Spencer: Looking to Heaven*, Unicorn Press Ltd. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)