

In Kipling's shadow

Famous for his friendship with Rudyard Kipling, photographer George Charles Beresford deserves recognition for his own contribution to the arts, as Sarah McDonald, of Getty Images explains



Above Beresford takes us beyond the clichéd view of Edwardian society. This group of friends enjoying their cigarettes look startlingly modern, both in pose and expression

Photographer George Charles Beresford was the model for Rudyard Kipling's witty character M'Turk in the author's public schoolboy adventure stories *Stalky & Co* (1899). Kipling and Beresford were great friends, having been contemporaries at the United Services College at Westward Ho! in Devon – 'the school made for the sons of officers' – upon which the book is based. Beresford was also a founding member of the Kipling Society (1927), and in 1936, the year Kipling died, published his book *Schooldays* with Kipling. Unfortunately, these literary connections have overshadowed Beresford's photographic career to such an extent that his obituary in *The Times* talked almost exclusively of his association with Kipling, adding only fleetingly that Beresford, 'carried on business in London as a photographer, in

which he achieved great artistic success'.

In reality, Beresford deserves much greater recognition for his legacy of excellent portrait photography. Born in Ireland in 1864, and related to the Marquis of Waterford, Beresford was the grandson of the Archbishop of Armagh and cousin of Admiral Lord Charles, the first Baron Beresford (1846-1919). Beresford trained as a civil engineer, leaving college in 1882 and travelling to India in this capacity. But the climate did not suit him, and he soon returned to England suffering badly from malaria, and greatly disappointed, it is said, with his failure to become an engineer. In 1902 he set up a portrait studio in Yeoman's Row, off the Brompton Road, in London's Chelsea – a business he ran with great success for the next 30 years.

Beresford specialised in platinotype portraits, producing beautiful soft focus studio shots which flatter the sitter, and he was in great demand. His work appeared regularly in contemporary publications such as *The World's Work*, *The Sketch*, *The Tatler*, and *The Illustrated London News*. Unavoidably, a large portion of his sitters came from the middle classes or officers of World War I, and this rather dull procession tinged Beresford's reputation as being a rather dull photographer. Indeed, by today's standards, there is a certain monotony to the poses – a lack of creativity or edge – and it is also true that later photographers rebelled against this formal, studio-bound format, preferring the more dynamic and candid style of portraiture that

emerged in the 1920s. However, Beresford takes us beyond the clichéd view of Edwardian society – confident in its privileged position, untainted by the horrors of war to come, where rank and title still held sway. His recurrent use of top-lit daylight and shallow depth-of-field draws us to the eyes of the sitter, establishing rapport beyond mere confirmation of their status. Look past the uniforms, the ruffles and pearls and we see real people, startlingly contemporary in their expressions. Stately old ladies peer out haughtily, perhaps disapproving of Beresford's ribald wit; young lads grin cheekily in appreciation; and devastatingly fashionable women betray a nervous anxiety in front of the camera.

A rich mix of writers, artists and politicians are also sprinkled among the military and society types, and here again Beresford's talent shines through. His studio was just along from the Bloomsbury artist Dora Carrington, and Beresford took several whimsical portraits of this artistic set, including his most well known and captivating pictures – those of Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell. Today, his catalogue reads like a *Who's Who* of London's bohemian intelligentsia, as well as more conventional political figures. But, whoever Beresford was shooting, he established a very real connection that can still arrest the



Left This portrait of Miss J L Gloag wearing a high-collar dress and a fur stole with lace trimming is typical of Beresford's style – his more formal studio portraits were later criticised as being rather dull

viewer today.

In his later years, Beresford dealt in antiques, having specialist knowledge of old furniture and a great affection for Victorian papier-mâché! He died in Brighton in 1938, aged 73, and, though remembered chiefly as the inspiration for a fictional character, the likeness is perhaps apt. Described by a friend as, 'witty as Wilde, as full of jokes as Shaw, and as obscene as Petronius', Beresford also demonstrated a public schoolboy patriotism. During the Great War he supported the war effort by donating all of the profits of his photographic business to the Red Cross, denying himself even the most basic of luxuries. Stalky & Co would have been proud. ○

The Hulton Picture Collection acquired the collection of 71,500 half plate glass negatives in 1959 from Miss Gertrude Toplis, Beresford's personal assistant and photographic retoucher. Fine-art prints of these unique images, and many others, can be purchased through Getty Images Gallery by calling 020 7376 4525 or e-mailing hulton.gallery@getty-images.com. Other images from the collection can be viewed on the Hulton Archive's web-site at www.hultonarchive.com

Left Beresford's subjects included writers, artists and politicians as well as members of the military. He was perhaps best known for his portraits of Virginia Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell (pictured)