With the outbreak of war, Britain drastically altered its image of Belgium. Under Leopold II, Belgium had become a colonial power of note, especially in Africa from the 1880s onwards (Bandeira Jerónimo and Costa Pinto 2015; Poddar, Patke and Jensen 2008). However, in Britain the disgraceful and inhumane rule of Belgium over its colonies was exposed in reports by Roger Casement and Edmund Dene Morel. As a consequence relations between Britain and Belgium had become sour in the first years of the twentieth century. Although they improved after the death of Leopold II in 1909, the public image of Belgium still had to undergo a dramatic change in order to move from the oppressor to the oppressed in August 1914. However, the image of Belgium continued to be a difficult one to grasp for the British, not least in newspaper articles on Belgians. This paper covers insight into the at times awkward understanding by the British of Belgian matters during the war, taking into account also the preceding confused impressions and how these were met by the Belgians in Britain.

On 28 February 1896, the *Sheffield Independent* printed many literary and art notices, including a review of the contemporary *Magazine of Art*. Emile Verhaeren’s account of the ‘French artist Feliccen [sic] Rops’ was reviewed. The talent of Felicien Rops, who during the First World War was a refugee himself, had ‘dwelled so strangely on the hideous side of the life of Paris’ (*Sheffield Independent*, 28 February 1896: 7). And strange it was: Felicien Rops was a Belgian artist, not a French one, who was born in Namur, one of the main cities in Wallonia, the entirely French-speaking part of Belgium.1 Admittedly, he had moved to Paris in 1874 and gained notoriety there through his often salacious printwork for French authors such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé.
and Alfred de Musset, so an assumption of his being French appeared to make sense, but Rops was also one of the founding members of the Belgian Society of Fine Arts and the renowned art movement ‘Les XX’. The record in the British press was all the more worrying because Verhaeren was also positioned in a semantic framework that was entirely, and erroneously, French. Moreover, Rops had provided etchings for Charles de Coster, generally viewed as one of the prime early Belgian authors (Chisholm 1911: 915). Soon the Sheffield Independent rectified this error of judgement to some extent by recording in its review of the poem ‘The Fortnightly’ that Emile Verhaeren was a ‘new Belgian poet’. Verhaeren’s poem had been translated by Alma Strettell and was accompanied by a brief biography of the author (Sheffield Independent, 4 March 1896: 7). In 1899, Poems of Emile Verhaeren, translated by Alma Strettell as well, was published by John Lane (London and New York). The book was re-issued in 1915. When one looks into the pre-war cultural circle of Strettell, it becomes clear that many of many of those involved, not the least of whom was Edmund Gosse in 1913, became crucial in the commemoration in Britain of the Belgian poet after he died unexpectedly in exile in Rouen, France, in November 1916.

Between 1896 and the start of the war, Emile Verhaeren’s work was increasingly published in Britain, in translation. However, with few reviews in the British press (The Times listed Verhaeren only once before the war) most coverage remained relatively low-profile. The outbreak of war changed the reception of Verhaeren, who along with his fellow Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck, 1911 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, was about the only ‘celeb’ of the time whom press and politicians alike could use to provide a ‘face’ of the nation that had been invaded by the Germans. The only pre-war reference of note to Verhaeren came in the fourth volume of the Collected Essays of Edmund Gosse (1913). Although Gosse grouped Verhaeren along with French poets, he distinguished Verhaeren’s national identity from theirs:

Among those poets who have employed the French tongue with most success in recent years, it is curious that the two whose claims to distinction are least open to discussion should be, not Frenchmen at all, but Flemings of pure race. M. Verhaeren has risen slowly but steadily to a very high eminence. He has proved that genius is its own best judge of what is a good ‘subject,’ and imperceptibly we have learned to appreciate and respect him. He is true to himself, quite indefatigable, and we are beginning to realise at last that he is one of the very small group of really great poets born in Europe since 1850. (Gosse 1913: 324)