George Louis Steer is the subject of Nicholas Rankin’s most recent book, *Telegram from Guernica*, and the topic of the talk Rankin gave at the Mershon Center.

An often forgotten journalist of the early twentieth-century, Steer was a complicated and capable journalist who covered many of the world’s most significant events. He should also be remembered, said Rankin, as the man whose work inspired one of the last century’s most famous and influential painters and one of his most powerful works: Pablo Picasso and his tour de force, *Guernica*. The massive painting was, said Rankin, a reaction to the powerful piece Steer wrote about the bombing of the Spanish Basque town and an artistic reaction to history.

Steer was born in East London, South Africa, in 1909 and died six weeks before the United States dropped the Hydrogen bomb on Hiroshima. It was a time of enormous gains in flying power technology, which fascinated him.

Educated in England, Steer was a highly accomplished student who nevertheless was fundamentally formed by his colonial roots. One of his most defining moments as a journalist, said Rankin, was witnessing the elaborate crowing of a Rastafarian king in Addis Ababba, a ceremony that was closely modeled on the crowning of Japanese emperor Hirohito a few years earlier. He was always fascinated by global culture and history.

In 1932, Steer began work for the BBC World Service. It was also the year that South Africa got its first phone and two years before the world’s first passenger planes. He freelanced along London’s famous Fleet Street, home to the nation’s most respected newspapers. Steer’s desire to be an international correspondent eventually took him to Saarland, and in 1935, he lobbied for an assignment in Abyssinia. An African himself, Steer monitored the conflict on his home continent and what became a prescient act by Italian dictator Mussolini.

Abyssinia was governed by Heile Selassie and was an independent nation sandwiched between two Italian colonies. When Mussolini decided to invade Abyssinia, he unleashed an enormous Italian fleet against an African nation that had only twelve planes, five of them broken. Rankin saw that war as a laboratory for air power and became fascinated by the “mystique of the air.” He saw that it was devastating in a combat situation and that even ineffective air power had a devastating psychological effect on civilians.

Rankin had been invited by Selassie to join him on what turned out to be a momentous day: not only did the journalist experience his first flight that afternoon, it was the same day that witnessed the beginning of a devastating campaign in which the Italians unleashed 300 tons of mustard gas on the Abyssinian people, who were largely fighting a conventional war. At that point, the Italian policy was to kill all people—including foreigner witnesses to atrocities.

In 1925, partially in response to this horror, the Geneva Convention made it illegal for countries to use chemical weapons against their adversaries.

After that, Steer went to Spain to cover the Spanish Civil War. According to Rankin, Franco had approached Germany’s Adolf Hitler to build up an army of planes and fortify his Fascist troops; 14,000 men came to Spain from Africa to support Franco’s regime. As was the case in Abyssinia, new air fighting technology had found a battle ground to test its new weapons.

The fiercely-independent Basque people of northern Spain had been experiencing a state-supported level of independence, but in 1937, Mahler was sent to this area to “squash the little republics,” said Rankin. Bilbao was bombed heavily and then blockaded by nationalist forces and constrained by the border of France and a continually raging battle line. The town was starving and in their frustration, Basque citizens stormed the prisons and murdered the inhabitants. Rankin said that in a move that proved to Steer how just and independent the Basque leaders were, the officials dealt swift and fair justice to the murderers, all the while protecting their culture from Fascist forces.
On March 31 of that year, the cathedral in Durango was bombed. There were no foreign journalists to tell the story, which included the deaths of two priests, fourteen nuns, and hundreds of others. The nationalists said that communists had locked them in the sanctuary and assassinated them. According to Rankin, this was indicative of Franco’s pattern: commit atrocities and then lie to cover it up.

On April 20, fascist forces began a land fight in the Basque region, and on April 24, planes, under the direction of Franco’s government, began spraying the forests with incendiary devices to flush people out. On April 27, 1937, the town of Guernica was bombarded with incendiary bombs, fragmentary bombs, and massive blasts of air power.

Germany’s Luftwaffe was illegal after the end of World War I, but ultimately, that didn’t matter, said Rankin. Franco, Hitler and Mussolini had entered into an informal alliance. But the latter two had also signed a non-interventionist treaty that precluded their formal involvement in Spain. Nevertheless, Hitler loaned Franco his illegal air force. Although Germany officially denied involvement, fragments of bombs that Steer was able to collect proved that on that day, German planes had dropped innumerable incendiary bombs on the largely-wooden, ancient Basque town.

When the bombing began, Steer was outside of Guernica, having dinner with three other English journalists. By the time they made it to the town, it was burning and they stumbled over dead bodies of people who had attempted to flee the fires only to be machine-gunned down as they ran. There are conflicting reports on the number of deaths—the consulate said 1,600 died; Steer reported “several hundred”—but Rankin emphasized that it was not the number who died, it was the heinous way in which they died.

Two days later, after interviewing many inhabitants of Guernica and crafting his report, Steer’s account of the “Tragedy of Guernica” appeared on the front page of the *New York Times*. His account was more detailed than any other, and even without the benefit of photos, Steer’s story caused a worldwide fervor: a translation of his article into French was read by Picasso and inspired him to paint *Guernica*.

The Fascist response was predictable, said Rankin. They claimed that Communists were responsible for the bombings, that German planes were not flying despite Steer’s collection of German bomb fragments, and that there were, in fact, no planes and no bombs: the fire spread rapidly because of windy weather. Steer’s presence and ability to collect evidence and interview victims refuted the Fascist’s claim.

For Rankin, Steer’s experience in Guernica emphasizes the importance of strong journalism. Without an outside account of action, governments can manipulate facts and history can be distorted, ignored, or forgotten, as happened at Durango. Further, Rankin emphasized that reality, even devastating reality, can inspire powerful art, and that through the telling and remembering of history, people are forced to confront terrible events and remember atrocities.