Commemoration in Stone and in Silence

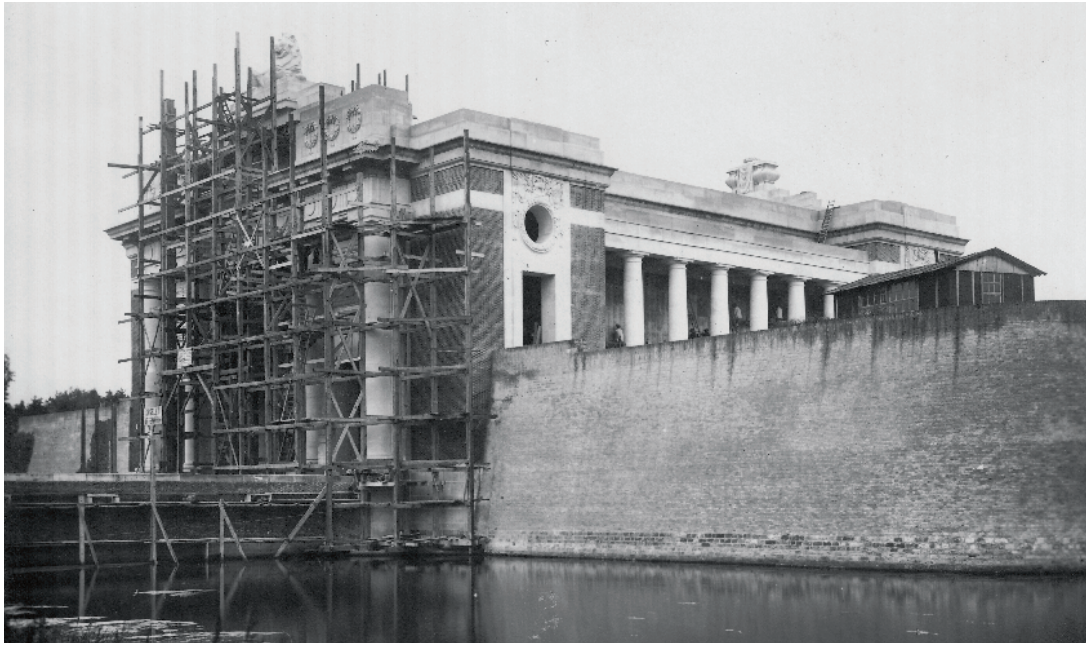
The Menin Gate and the Last Post Ceremony as *Lieu de Mémoire*

Who will remember, passing through this Gate,
The unheroic Dead who fed the guns?
Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate, -
Those doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones?

Siegfried Sassoon used these words – and much stronger ones – to express his anger on the day after the unveiling of the Menin Gate Memorial (Menenpoort) in Ypres in 1927. This most uncompromising of the war poets hated the Menin Gate. He called it a 'sepulchre of crime' that the 'Dead who struggled in the slime' might indeed 'rise and deride'. Sassoon's criticism was undoubtedly prompted by the design of the Menin Gate. In 1919, architect Reginald Blomfield had already conceived of a triumphal arch to serve as a symbol of the 'enduring power and indomitable tenacity of the British Empire'. The first designs show a classical arch adorned with a lion keeping watch towards the east. Blomfield inspected several sites at Ypres, but from the outset he favoured the present site. This preference was based on a number of practical considerations, but also had to do with symbolism: it was the only point of entry in the east rampart, and thousands of British troops had marched past it on their way to confront the enemy. Blomfield's initial design was commissioned by the Battle Exploit Memorials Committee, which at the time was working hard to preserve the ruins of the Cloth Hall (*Lakenhallen*) and St. Martin's Church, as well as working on a new great British war memorial.

Memorial to the Missing

Initially, the intention was certainly not to build a funerary monument. The original plans were for a memorial to military actions (read: victories) by the armies of the British Empire, not for a memorial to the dead. This changed at the beginning of 1921, when the Imperial War Graves Commission decided to honour the missing – who have no known grave – by recording their names on specially designed architectural memorials. Because it would have been absurd and financially irresponsible to have two British war monuments in Ypres – one to



Construction of the Menin Gate Memorial, spring 1927 © In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper

commemorate military action and the other to honour the missing – the two schemes were integrated. The Menin Gate project was transferred to the War Graves Commission. This proceeded relatively smoothly, since Blomfield was already one of the Commission's principal architects.

The Menin Gate that was unveiled on 24 July 1927 was indeed a 'double' monument – in form as well as meaning: its exterior is a triumphal arch, and the interior and sides are a funerary monument. On the east side, a watchful lion sits atop the memorial and on the side facing the centre of the town there is a cenotaph, as if to remind Ypres that all these men had sacrificed their lives for the town and its residents. Whereas a triumphal arch was the time-honoured way to commemorate military action, the concept of a monument for the missing was progressive as well as new. Never before had a memorial been erected for those who were missing on the battlefields and, in the case of the First World War, the British example would not be followed by the other belligerents. A Memorial to the Missing not only answered the needs of the families affected, who wished for a place to mourn, but is also evidence of the way in which the war was fought. The majority of the fallen were killed by artillery fire. If they had not already been literally blown to bits, it was very likely that their known grave would have been lost anyway in the later battles of this static trench war. A memorial to the missing was also the logical consequence of an earlier decision taken by the War Graves Commission to commemorate all those who had lost their lives in the service of Britain equally. This was a distinctly progressive

stance, particularly for the class society that was the British Empire. It had everything to do with the composition of the British forces in the First World War; most of the rank and file were volunteers and, from 1917 on, conscripts. In short, the aim was to commemorate ordinary citizens in military service.

Now that I have explained what the Menin Gate is, it is important to emphasise what it is *not*. It is not a victory memorial, although it has the appearance of a triumphal arch. Neither is it a peace memorial, although many consider the thousands of names recorded there to be a powerful plea for peace. The Menin Gate is officially, exclusively, a place of remembrance for 55,000 subjects of the British Empire who died at Ypres and do not have a known grave. It therefore does not commemorate the losses suffered by other Allied powers – let alone the Germans – or the fallen at any other front. The names on the Menin Gate therefore do not include those who are buried in one of the 150 cemeteries at Ypres. It is important to remember that many more British soldiers went missing than are listed at the Menin Gate. A further 35,000 names are inscribed on a long wall at the Tyne Cot Cemetery in Passchendaele, and the Memorial to the Missing at Ploegsteert ('Plugstreet') records the names of those who lost their lives south of the River Douve. All other meanings attributed to the Menin Gate are interpretations, elicited by aspects such as its architectural form, the seemingly endless list of names and/or the events that take place there.

There were also writers who were more favourably disposed towards the Menin Gate. In 1928, Stefan Zweig described it in words very different to those used by Siegfried Sassoon a year earlier:

The broad vaulted gateway, Roman in the simplicity of its mass, towers on high, a mausoleum rather than a triumphal arch. On its front facing the enemy there lies on the summit a marble lion [in fact stone], *his paw heavily planted as if on his prey which he does not mean to let go: on the reverse side facing the town stands a sarcophagus, gloomy and stern. For this monument is to the dead, the six and fifty thousand English dead at Ypres whose graves could not be found, who lie somewhere crumbled together in a common grave, mutilated beyond recognition by shells, or disintegrating in the water, to all those who, unlike the others, have not their bright white polished stone in the cemeteries round about the town, the individual mark of their last resting-place. To all of these, the six and fifty thousand, this arch has been raised as a common tombstone and all these six and fifty thousand names are engraved in letters of gold – so many, so interminably many, that as on the columns of the Alhambra the writing becomes decorative. It is a memorial, then, offered not to victory, but to the dead – the victims – without any distinction, to the fallen Australians, English, Hindus and Mohammedans who are immortalized to the same degree, and in the same characters, in the same stone, by virtue of the same death. Here there is no image of the King, no mention of victories, no genuflections to generals of genius, no prattle about Archdukes and Princes: only the laconic, noble inscriptions – Pro Rege, Pro Patria.*

In its really Roman simplicity this monument to the six and fifty thousand is more impressive than any triumphal arch or monument to victory that I have ever seen, and its impressiveness is still further increased by the sight of the heaps of wreaths constantly being laid there by widows, children and friends. For a whole nation makes its pilgrimage every year to this common tomb of its unburied and unreturning soldiers.

Last Post Ceremony on Armistice Day,
11 November 1936
© In Flanders Fields Museum, Ieper

It seems to me that the impression that the Menin Gate made on Zweig is the prevailing impression among visitors today. This partly explains why the Menin Gate, despite all its imperial pomp, has only very rarely been the target of political manifestations. However, whereas in Zweig's day the 'heaps of wreaths' were still laid by 'widows, children and friends', this is now done by a much wider range of people: relatives, school groups, associations, and so forth. The fact that the Menin Gate is still used for funerary commemoration is one reason we can refer to it as a *living* memorial. Another reason is that names are still added when it is found that someone should be commemorated there and that, in theory at least, names are removed when it turns out that someone is commemorated elsewhere, either with a known grave or on another Memorial to the Missing.

Call to Attention

However, the main reason we can refer to the Menin Gate as a living memorial is the Last Post Ceremony, which, in June 2011, was officially recognised by decree of the Flemish government as part of the country's 'intangible cultural heritage'. The ceremony was held for the first time on 2 July 1928. After an interval during the first winter, the daily ceremony was reinstated on 1 May 1929. It has continued uninterrupted ever since, except during the German Occupation in the Second World War. It is impossible to overstate the uniqueness of this continuing daily remembrance, which will take place for the 30,000th time on 9 July 2015.

Although a British melody is used – the actual 'Last Post' – and the English name, the ceremony has an entirely local character. The content of the ceremony is determined by the Last Post Association (called the Last Post Committee until 1999). Anyone can become a member of this association, but the members of the Board of Administrators are residents of Ypres and the surrounding area, and are co-opted. This principle has caused some to describe it as elitist. The ceremony itself is performed by a number of Masters of Ceremony, eight

Adolf Hitler in Ypres,1 June 1940, with the Battle of Dunkirk still raging
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buglers and, more recently, a bagpiper. The buglers were traditionally recruited from the local fire brigade and, although they take part at the request of the Last Post Association and some of them are no longer members of the voluntary fire brigade, they still wear its uniform.

Shortly before 8 o'clock each evening, the police stop the traffic on both sides of the Menin Gate. This is not only symbolic but also necessary: the memorial is situated on one of the busiest routes into the town centre and the roar of traffic echoes under the arch all day long. However, every day there is a brief period of silence, and the Gate regains the aspect of a quiet place of contemplation and remembrance. At precisely 8 o'clock, buglers on the east side of the memorial sound a Call to Attention. After a short announcement or address, the Last Post is played. The Exhortation is then recited by a member of the public or a member of the Last Post Association. The Exhortation is a verse from Laurence Binyon's poem 'For the Fallen', written in September 1914:

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

Those present repeat the last sentence. The Exhortation is followed by a minute's silence – which many feel to be the most moving part of the ceremony – and the laying of wreaths. The ceremony ends with the sounding of the Reveille. The Last Post Ceremony rarely lasts more than five to ten minutes. If a piper is present, a lament is played as the wreaths are laid. If foreign dignitaries are visiting, their national anthem may be played at the end of the ceremony, but the structure of the ceremony has remained unchanged for decades. This does not mean that the Ypres Last Post Ceremony has not evolved. In the past, a day-to-day ceremony was often limited to stopping the traffic and the sounding of the Last Post by two buglers. The fire-brigade uniforms were worn only at weekends or on special occasions. During the week, the buglers wore 'civvies',

Last Post Ceremony in grand style

Sikhs during Armistice Day Ceremony,
11 November 2009 © Tijl Capoen

later with an overcoat and beret for a more official and uniform appearance. This has not been the case since around the beginning of this century. The increase in the number of buglers (who still wear uniform), the employment of a permanent piper, and the integration of the Exhortation and minute's silence in the weekday ceremonies too, have changed the character of the Last Post. Despite being firmly anchored in the local culture and daily life of Ypres, the ceremony now seems more formal and more British. Due to the considerable increase in the number of onlookers, particularly since the 1990s, the Last Post Association continually struggles to make it clear that the ceremony is more than a tourist attraction. Today, the public have to be expressly asked not to applaud during or after the ceremony, and the hundreds of flashing cameras, smartphones and iPads do not exactly make for a serene atmosphere.

The Last Post Ceremony as a 'blank slate'

But there is more. The strength of the Last Post Ceremony has always been that it is a 'blank slate', as it were, by this I mean that everyone can attribute his or her own meaning to it. Aside from being a homage to the fallen, it can be an inspiration for military personnel to persevere in their duties, while for pacifists it is a plea for peace. For some, the Last Post Ceremony is a reminder of the purpose of the war, while for others it is a reminder of its futility. In the past, the organisers of the Last Post have had to steer a careful course to preserve its intended neutrality. In a brochure published in the second half of the 1970s, the Last Post Committee wrote that the former enemy would be honoured too, and the hope was expressed that 'by remembering the suffering that war has caused, the desire for peace will be strengthened in men of goodwill everywhere, so that the nations of the world may live side by side in mutual understanding and harmony'. On 17 May 1985, while visiting the Menin Gate, Pope John Paul II prayed for world peace. The occasion is commemorated on a paving tile on the north staircase. However, since that time it has been

ANZAC Day,
25 April 2003

Army Cadets during Last Post Ceremony,
3 August 2012 © www.greatwar.be

Calling Home Ceremony of Canadian First Nations during Last Post Ceremony, 1 November 2005 © Tijl Capoen

noticed that the Last Post Ceremony has undergone a degree of 'militarisation'; I am referring primarily to the increased active participation of armed military detachments in the Last Post Ceremony. Some members of the public object when military personnel with rifle and bayonet are given a place of honour at a Last Post Ceremony, just as others would disapprove if the ceremony were used as a platform for political statements. Given the current level of interest, among military personnel from all over the British Commonwealth and others, it is certainly not always easy for the Last Post Association to maintain the neutrality of the ceremony in this respect. In order to preserve its uniqueness and universal significance in perpetuity, it is essential that the character of the ceremony as a 'blank slate' is strictly observed, and that all participants – including military personnel – are required to observe rules in order to safeguard the perception of strict neutrality.

Despite the different possible interpretations, such as those inspired by the architectural bombast, the Menin Gate should be thought of exclusively as a place of commemoration, and the Last Post Ceremony must remain a collective act of remembrance for people of all persuasions. It is only as symbols of remembrance that are open to interpretation that they can – and will – retain their powers of unification and connection until the next Great War Centenary. ■

Translated by Yvette Mead

FURTHER READING

D. Dendooven, *Menin Gate & Last Post. Ypres as Holy Ground,* Koksijde, De Klaproos Editions, 2001, 160 p.
www.lastpost.be
www.cwgc.org

On Passing the new Menin Gate

Siegfried Sassoon

Who will remember, passing through this Gate,
The unheroic Dead who fed the guns?
Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate,—
Those doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones?

Crudely renewed, the Salient holds its own.
Paid are its dim defenders by this pomp;
Paid, with a pile of peace-complacent stone,
The armies who endured that sullen swamp.

Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
'Their name liveth for ever,' the Gateway claims.
Was ever an immolation so belied
As these intolerably nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.

Begun Brussels, 25 July 1927;
finished Campden Hill Square, January 1928