

In Flanders Fields

The Landscape of War as *Lieu de Mémoire*

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[PIET CHIELENS]

We are sitting with a beer and some Turkish snacks at the only outdoor café on the bay. Young Turkish mothers are playing with their children down by the water in front of us. About thirty metres out to sea, a fisherman is gutting his catch on some flat rocks that show just above the water surface. A few rocks along, three seagulls wait impatiently for him to finish, so they can scavenge for entrails. It is the height of summer, the sea is smooth, with just the occasional ripple breaking almost silently on the narrow sandy beach, which turns into rocks after just a few metres. On the side of the bay with the café and the village and its medieval ruin, the land is a flat stretch of grass and stones. The opposite side of the bay is a sheer cliff face. A British burial ground nestles at the point where the flat land meets the cliff: V Beach Cemetery. The village is Seddülbahir, the Sud-el-Bar of the Irish folk songs, and the beach is V Beach, the deadliest of the Gallipoli landing beaches of 25 April, 1915. Turkish Fort No. 1 stands on top of the cliff with a memorial beside it that dates back to the 1960s and a statue with an Atatürk slogan from 1992. At the highest point is the Cape Helles Memorial to the Missing, erected in 1926. This site makes it easy to see how just a handful of Turkish defenders were able to offer such resistance to a landing force. Here, on V Beach, that landing force consisted of a converted collier, the SS *River Clyde*, and a number of smaller vessels. The collier's hull had openings cut into it to allow two battalions to emerge and go ashore. The strip of flat rocks is what remains of the landing stage that was constructed alongside the beached cargo ship. The first Munster Fusiliers who climbed out of the cargo hold were met with rapid fire from the Turkish forces, and so the rest wisely stayed put until darkness fell. Their fellow soldiers from the Dublin Fusiliers, in their launches, fared even worse. Their names fill V Beach Cemetery and the Cape Helles Memorial. After the landing, both units combined could muster barely one battalion, which they called the Dubsters.

Almost one hundred years later, this scene can still clearly be read in the landscape: the bay, the beach, the cliff and the monuments fix the crucial elements of the story, at least from the British perspective, or the Irish-British perspective, which was the same thing at the time. Almost nine months later, when the British and the ANZACs left Gallipoli, they had achieved nothing, at the expense of nearly 50,000 lives: a humiliating defeat.

Beach Cemetery at Anzac Cove, Gallipoli, the beach where the ANZAC troops (Australian and New Zealand Corps) landed on 25th April 1915



When the Ottoman Empire finally lost the war, the Imperial War Graves Commission returned to construct the cemeteries and monuments. The area where the Australians and New Zealanders had landed was effectively ceded by the new Turkish government under the Treaty of Lausanne, and became known as ANZAC. All of the roads on ANZAC were originally constructed by the War Graves Commission. Thirty-seven cemeteries and five memorials to the missing proved that dead men can still be used to demonstrate their leaders' cause. Many years after the British Empire's memorials, Turkish monuments were also installed. Gallipoli is, of course, also part of the epic tale of Mustafa Kemal, later known as Atatürk, the father of the modern Turkish nation. In 1992, a large part of the peninsula became a national park, and a third wave of monuments advanced across the former battlefield to mark the Turkish victory, with a religious significance that has been increasingly obvious since the rise of Erdogan.

Anthropological landscape

I know of no WWI landscape that is more extensive, better preserved and more clearly legible than Gallipoli, this final point of the Southern Front through Europe. However, it differs in very few respects from the region known as Flanders Fields, the most northerly section of the Western Front. The Westhoek, or the front zone within it from the beach at Nieuwpoort to the French border at Armentières, is certainly one of the less well-preserved battlefields. After the war, when it was suggested that the rubble of the city of Ypres should be preserved as a British monument, and later, when the idea was put forward that restricted areas should be created, based on the example of the French *zones rouges*, the returning population rejected these proposals. Stubbornly, they set to work on the soil, which had been poisoned with gas and weighed down with tons of ammunition and the debris of war, and made it fertile once again. Ypres, Diksmuide, Nieuwpoort and their hinterland were rebuilt, even without the aid of German reparations; only rarely could any traces of the new, post-war era be seen in this reconstruction. If the Belgians had their way, it would look as if there had never been a war there. Generations of local politicians combated the economic

consequences of the war with plans and construction projects, refusing to be thrown off course by the remnants of war. The war had put the region far behind the rest of the country, so the only true victory over the war was progress. Motorways, industrial estates and new residential districts were constructed without the layer of war being permitted to impinge – until the late 1980s.

And yet the Westhoek is just as recognizable as a layered landscape of war as Gallipoli. All of the elements of such a landscape are still present: not only the remnants of the war, the features of the landscape where the fighting took place, the cemeteries and monuments marking memories that are almost a century old, but also countless narrative threads that extend into the present day. The anchoring of this last layer within the first three is the most important requirement for a fully-fledged landscape of war.

The features of the Flemish landscape that determined the location of those wartime positions are less dramatic and unambiguous than in Gallipoli, but they are just as visible. In the Westhoek, these key features are the polders and drainage systems of the Yser Plain, the bare land in one direction and the low ranges of hills to the east and south of Ypres, where the remains of forests, country estates, rows of trees to break the wind, and a multiplicity of hedges and small fields filled the landscape with backdrops for war. A century later, these two basic landscapes remain essentially unchanged. The water to the north and the slopes to the south resulted in two fundamentally different forms of defence and warfare. Their continued presence allows us to read the landscape and see how the war was fought in this place. However, recent developments in the agricultural industry, with its huge fields, massive fertilizer plants, greenhouses and deforestation, threaten the historical footprint of the old small-scale agricultural landscape where the war descended in 1914. Fortunately, there is an ecological countermovement urging farmers to plant new hedges and trees, while forests and nature are increasingly important for recreational purposes, particularly in the southern part of the Ypres Salient. If the literally linear dimension of the front lines could be highlighted more effectively in this region, we would literally still be able to read the war in the landscape,

Chunuk Bair, the highest point of the battlefield at Gallipoli, where the New Zealand National Monument and the statue of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founding father of the modern Turkish Nation, both demand our attention





as in Gallipoli. Some farmers, however, persist in seeing any such attempts as an attack on their freedom, sometimes wilfully destroying what has been part of their own heritage for decades or even centuries. Flemish law is ill-equipped to deal with such destruction, and lags behind the facts. This is because the landscape is still generally viewed as a utilitarian matter, particularly in agricultural areas, and rarely seen as part of a cultural-historical heritage that is of equal value to our patrimony of urban architecture.

Graves and monuments have naturally appeared in the immediate surroundings of the relatively narrow front zone too, stops on the many evacuation routes for the casualties of war, sometimes parallel, sometimes perpendicular to the front lines. More than just the historical trail of the medical services, these graves and monuments bear meaning for the post-war generations: how the grief of a generation that had sacrificed its husbands and sons was allayed by the honour and glory of the nation; and the subsequent generations, which either rejected this honour or reclaimed it for coming generations and for future wars. Following the 1918 armistice, commemoration of the war soon became an element of group identity and nation-building, in all the countries and for all the groups that had taken part in the conflict. However, commemoration is equally the private domain of every person. Etymologically speaking, the English *commemoration* and the French *commémoration* both involve remembering something together, a social act. The Dutch *herinnering* and the German *Erinnerung*, however, refer to our inner selves, an intimate process of internalization. In that sense, every landscape of war is also an anthropological landscape, a place where our relationship to the war as a phenomenon, both as individuals and as a society of people, is manifested over and over again.

Oblique photo of Kanaaldijk (Canal dike) close to Essex Farm (where John McCrae wrote the poem *In Flanders Fields*) and its surroundings. Note the cemeteries at Essex Farm, Bard Cottage and Marengo Farm, where Alexis Helmer was probably buried. Both the Marengo Farm cemetery and his grave have disappeared

If ye break faith with us

The landscape of war plays an important part in this relationship. Flanders Fields are a point of anchorage for our thoughts and actions about the war, for

In Flanders Fields

Hugo Claus

De grond is hier het vetst.
Zelfs na al die jaren zonder mest
zou je hier een dodenprei kunnen kweken
die alle markten tart.

De Engelse veteranen worden schaars.
Elk jaar wijzen zij aan hun schaarse vrienden:
Hill Sixty, Hill Sixty One, Poelkapelle.

In Flanders Fields rijden de maaldorsers
steeds dichtere kringen rond de kronkelgangen
van verharde zandzakken,
de darmen van de dood.

De boter van de streek
smaakt naar klaprozen.

In Flanders Fields

Here the soil is most rank.
Even after all these years without dung
you could raise a prize death leek here.

The English veterans are getting scarce.
Every year they point to their yet scarcer friends:
Hill Sixty, Hill Sixty-One, Poelkapelle.

In Flanders Fields the threshers
draw ever smaller circles round the twisting
trenches of hardened sandbags, the entrails of
death.

The local butter
tastes of poppies.

Translated by John Irons

A Pat of Butter

after Hugo Claus

The dodderly English veterans are getting
Fewer, and point out to fewer dodderly pals
Hill Sixty, Hill Sixty-one, Poelkapelle.

My dad's ghost rummages for his medals
And joins them for tea after the march-past.
The butter tastes of poppies in these parts.

Michael Longley

our rituals and our attitudes to war. They are the inspiration, the point of departure or the destination of all those narrative threads. The fields of Flanders are, in short, a *lieu de mémoire*, as is the poem "In Flanders Fields".

Canadian military doctor John McCrae wrote his famous poem on the night of 2 May, 1915⁽¹⁾:

In Flanders Fields

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields*

Ypres in the winter of 1917





Kanaaldijk (Canal dike)
close to Essex Farm
Cemetery in 2003

McCrae was prompted to write this poem by the death of his friend and fellow soldier Alexis Helmer. Tradition has it that Helmer was buried in a meadow near a dressing station that the British had named Essex Farm, alongside a high canal bank just to the north of Ypres. McCrae conducted the graveside burial service, and then returned to the medical station, where he set about writing this poem.

The first two strophes are elegiac, words to console the poet. Starting with his experience of trench warfare, and what he saw and heard around him – the poppies, the larks, the guns – McCrae turned his focus on death: “the crosses, row on row...” Like anybody who has to bid farewell to a loved one, he realized that death strikes us with despair, though we might ignore it in the midst of life, as it represents the destruction of that life, of our aspirations and our loves. All that remains is a grave, somewhere, nowhere, or here, in a field in Flanders.

However, this particularly private place, the hole beside which McCrae had read those last prayers, and into which he had seen his friend descend, was to become a public place, only a few hours after the funeral, in the third strophe of his poem “In Flanders Fields”: the soldier’s tomb, on the field of honour. Hold high the torch of our righteousness, so that these horrific deaths might serve a purpose, and these “failing hands” might yet prevail in “our quarrel with the foe”: a heroic death for a sacred common cause, against enemies who must be sent to their deaths.

In those 15 lines, a personal relationship (you and I, we, the dead) becomes a very public fact (we, ye, the living); this shift is about immortality, victory over death, and keeping “faith with us who die”.

Landscape as heritage

Throughout the commemoration of the First World War, the process within these fifteen lines has been repeated over and over again. The public space of Belgium, and the Westhoek in particular, is packed with similar exchanges between private and public commemoration – and therefore with meaning, identity and purpose. It is a peculiar process. The hole into which Helmer was lowered has been filled, and the field where – once again, as tradition has it – he was buried has since been known as Essex Farm Cemetery. High on the canal bank a monument is elevated, as is, given the lack of a marked grave, The Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, where Lieutenant Alexis Helmer’s name is engraved on panel 10 - for all eternity.

I emphasize “as tradition has it”, as recent analysis of aerial photographs of the canal bank during the period when John McCrae was based at the medical station reveals that it is unlikely that any burials had taken place there at that time. There is, however, a site a few hundred metres to the north along the same canal bank that had been used for burials, but no burial ground exists in that location now. The Imperial War Graves Commission transferred the graves to another British burial ground, Bard Cottage Cemetery. Even there, however, there is no evidence of any Canadian presence during that phase of the war. So even the first grave has been lost.

But no *lieu de mémoire* is concerned about such details. The story of the doctor-soldier-friend-poet is so strong, the tradition so persistent and the interaction between private and public so successful that the detailed photographic analysis only adds mystery to the story. The more likely location of Alexis Helmer’s

Right
The historic centre of Ypres is rebuilt, 1923. Reconstruction of the cathedral has started. At the Menin Gate the foundations of the first Memorial to the Missing in the world are laid

grave has long been built over, and is now the site of a matress and duvet factory. Grant them eternal rest, indeed.

Clearly, however, we cannot allow ourselves to build over everything and to leave it all to tradition. On the contrary. The very fact that the war can still be read in the landscape even today has anchored these events within the culture of the front zone. It is estimated that Essex Farm Cemetery and Dressing Station receives over a hundred thousand visitors a year. The story is embedded in the landscape of war, the circumstances of the poem are tangible, and so remain accessible; those fifteen lines have a place where we can continue to visit them.

Visitor numbers are expected to increase over the next few years. We need to seize the opportunity of the centenary commemorations to culturally embed the legacy of the First World War. There are literally hundreds of texts, thousands of stories, both large and small, with a similar origin and destination. It is our responsibility both to draw attention to these stories and to preserve them. We can do so by approaching the landscape of war as a *lieu de mémoire*. It may be more effective from a political point of view to use the term “heritage”. Just as history and the teaching of history were an important catalyst of nation-building in the 19th century, so heritage, the modern mix of history, culture and participation, is an important instrument within the much broader and more positive process of identity formation – from the local to the global, from the individual to the universal. With this in mind, the Westhoek is potentially one of the most international and fascinating war landscapes in the world. It is more complex than many other sites; our task is to ensure that this heritage is not lost. ■

Translated by Laura Watkinson

(1) “In Flanders Fields” was first published in *Punch* on 8 December, 1915, but it is generally accepted that McCrae started his poem at the dressing station at Essex Farm, shortly after Alexis Helmer’s funeral.

