

Bokfjord Fyr, Norway  
© Stephan Vanfleteren



## Shades of Grey and Steely Blue

### Two Photo Books about Two Seas

Between 1941 and 1945 a network of bunkers and casemates was built along a coastline stretching more than five thousand kilometres, from the very north of Finland (now Russia) through Norway, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and France – from a lonely fjord in the far north to the Pyrenees in the south. It was intended to protect German-occupied Western Europe from British-American attack. We know how that ended. General Patton, the hero of manoeuvre warfare, maintained that ‘fixed fortifications are a monument to the stupidity of man’. In the end, one long day in Normandy was enough to breach this coastal defence, which has gone down in history as the Atlantic Wall. The work on *Festung Europa* was carried out to the greater glory of invincible Germany using local labour, forced or otherwise, Russian prisoners of war and over 1500 Antwerp Jews even (who were then deported to Auschwitz after just a few months in Northern France).

After the war the bunkers were abandoned. In the meantime some have been demolished, while others, here and there, have actually been protected as heritage. In Raversijde, near Ostend, a complete German battery has been preserved and opened up to the public. The whole evolution of the Atlantic Wall can be deduced from this site which, with its sixty bunkers and several kilometres of trenches, is one of the best preserved sections of the Atlantic Wall.

Flemish photographer Stephan Vanfleteren (1969) was commissioned by the *Atlantic Wall Open Air Museum Raversijde* and the Province of West Flanders to reproduce the entire coastal defence from Norway to Spain in pictures, which he has done in his own inimitable fashion.

Stephan Vanfleteren does not like sun. He prefers grey, mist, starkness. And twilight. In these photos you see nothing but air, sea, rocks, concrete. Greys and blacks. Bunkers float like tankers, like whales in the sea. The tide laps at them, surrounds them, wears them away. Eroding hulks. They slide from the dunes onto the beach, stand or lie there higgledy-piggledy – *Le Temps, ce grand Sculpteur!* – like gigantic toy building blocks scattered on the beaches. Sometimes they look like meteorites that have fallen from the air and bored into the sand. Through the photographer’s lens, cliffs, rocks and concrete are often interchangeable, growing toward each other, barely distinguishable from each other: nature and culture. Their noses – like the beaks of birds of prey – stick out above the cliffs, waiting for an enemy that never comes. On land, trees break through the concrete and the bunkers are overrun by woods.

The photographer grew up with these bunkers. His first were in his native village of Oostduinkerke, on the west coast of Belgium. They look like the most humane of structures, stables, sheds. Children play in them. At the other end of the spectrum there are the architectonic constructions of the Channel Islands which – stripped now of any ornament, naked, almost minimalist – are remi-

Saint-Tropez,  
France  
© Nick Hannes



niscent of the buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier. In his introduction Vanfleteren refers to the more than fifteen thousand bunkers that the Germans built as 'pebblestones of history'. It was with a mixture of abhorrence and admiration that he viewed, photographed and immortalized them. Though nature is completely unmoved by history, the history of the Second World War and therefore these structures has not quite faded yet.

The North Sea, the English Channel and the Atlantic Ocean, proliferating in every shade of grey under Vanfleteren's lens, are a far cry from the azure blue of the Mediterranean, *Mare nostrum*, which once washed the shores where European civilisation was born and developed. Flemish photographer Nick Hannes (1974) travelled all around the Mediterranean with a remark made by the historian Ernle Bradford as his motto: 'The Pacific may have the most changeless ageless aspect of any ocean, but the Mediterranean Sea celebrates the continuity of Man.' This sea, which borders the cradle of European civilisation, seems to have become a graveyard for people fleeing from Africa and the Middle East to Fort Europe. So Hannes shows us not idylls, not famous vistas, but pictures of the mass tourism in Benidorm and La Grande Motte, the hedonism of Ibiza (dancing) and Tel Aviv (sunbathing), the luxurious tedium of cruises, the hidden opulence of Monte Carlo and Cannes, the painful cleanliness of Marbella, dingy beaches with their factories in Montenegro; and the walls, borders, demarcation lines and barbed wire of the Spanish (and therefore European) enclaves in Morocco, Ceuta and Melilla,

Nicosia, the Gaza Strip, Bethlehem and Ramallah. You can detect the crisis in Greece in the skeleton of a petrol station without pumps, or a wedding party taking place in a petrol station for lack of a real party venue. Rubbish and urban neglect; war ruins in Libya. Migrants, refugees, fortune-seekers – not to say 'illegals', since that is not a human category (only behaviour or deeds can be 'illegal') – pass before the lens, waving papers at barriers, selling knickknacks on beaches. Metropolises spread far and wide, the apartment buildings of Istanbul march onward, threatening the shepherds crouching in a meadow. The ferries are rusty (Messina) and the wrecked ships on Lampedusa tell nothing of their cargo. The huge, expensive mosque shines, the umbrella seller near the supermarket surreptitiously bends his head on his prayer mat.

The Atlantic Wall is devoid of people; the Mediterranean Sea, sewer and ravishing whore, is awash with them. Black, white and every shade of grey here; steely blue, bright colours and parched soil there. Here impotent, dumb defences; there yearning people in all their guises. We wouldn't be without either of them. The defences, I mean, and the people. And the seas.

LUC DEVOLDERE

*Translated by Lindsay Edwards*

STEPHAN VANFLETEREN, *Atlantic Wall*,  
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NICK HANNES, *Mediterranean. The Continuity of Man*,  
Uitgeverij Hannibal, Veurne, 2014, 192 pp.