Going on holiday to imagine war: tourists on the battlefields of the old Western Front.

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Abstract
This paper proposes that tourists are required to use their imaginations and emotions in order to construct an empathic and historical connection to the symbolic and commemorative spaces of the Western Front landscape. The paper will also explore the tensions that exist in a foreign landscape which remains redolent with British historical association. While for visitors, this is a sacred landscape full of memory, for the hosts, this is often a mundane, day-to-day working landscape which they see as being nothing special, hence its contested nature. My discussion draws on continuing ethnographic fieldwork carried out on the battlefield sites of the former Ypres Salient and Somme areas of the Western Front.

Working paper
The First World War is now almost beyond the reach of living memory, yet it continues to wield a profound fascination over the British modern imagination. The Western Front in Belgium and France, which was the decisive theatre of operations for the Allied troops, has created its own iconic representation and mythology and has retained a firm place in modern memory (Williams 1994:19). Despite some lapses since the Armistice was declared in November 1918, Binyon's promise, "We will remember them", presciently contained in his poem "For the Fallen" written in September 1914, has largely been honoured. Now geared towards a specialised niche of the leisure industry, the Somme and Ypres Salient areas of the old Front lines continue to grow as tourist attractions. As Saunders (2001:45) observes, the region is now part of an integrated tourist circuit and its former battlefields, memorials, military cemeteries and museums are visited by hundreds of thousands of people throughout the year. All kinds of people are attracted to area: historians and military enthusiasts; people who have a literary interest in the war, stirred by the work of the "trench poets", such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen; some come to trace their family history, others have undertaken trips on the recommendation of friends or family. Due to the requirements of the national curriculum, thousands of school children have also made the journey there.

The battlefield landscape that tourists flock to see, however, now visually betrays relatively little of the momentous nature of the battles fought out across its terrain (Stedman 1999:92). Long empty of its former warring armies, its rolling and often unremarkable topography can make touring the area a frustrating experience, especially for first-time visitors. Yet paradoxically, as Franklin notes, since the publication of Urry's seminal work, *The Tourist Gaze* in 1990, many researchers have explained tourist behaviour as an activity that is primarily carried out through the medium of vision or the gaze (see Macnaghten and Urry, 1998; Rojek, 1995; Crawshaw and Urry, 1997). Yet while tourism research continues to build on Urry's notion of the gaze, new directions recognise that tourism is a more multidimensional and complex practice than just gazing (Franklin 2003:83; see also Coleman and Crang, 2002; Crouch and Lübbren, 2003; Franklin and Crang, 2001). As Crouch

suggests, "vision is not sensed and made sense of separately from other senses but in interrelation and tension with them…it is through rather than 'in front of' spaces that we experience where we are" (2002:212). Whilst it is true that tourists travel to the Western Front armed with their cameras, keen to record its images, many come to "experience" it, rather than merely to "see". The manager of Talbot House Museum[1] in Ypres, for example, commented on the experiential quality of the area that tourists find attractive:

> Young and old visit those battle sites, either here or on the Somme area. This shows that people want to know. Something happened here beyond description, beyond comprehension… I think you can learn a lot from when you visit those battlefields. Not only about the battles, but also about the pain and the dramas. It's when a headstone gets a face, or a battle site has a history, that it makes someone think (interview, 19 April 1999).

Touring the battlefield landscape requires a multi-sensual awareness and, as the geographer Relph (1976) recognises, a sense of "empathetic insideness", or a "willingness to be emotionally open to the significance of a place, to feel it to know and respect its symbols" (1976: 54). According to a member of the Tourist Board in Amiens, the First World War "had such an impact on the local area that one can feel it, even if we don't see it…the landscape has its own face, directly bound to the war" (interview 20 April 2000). For the historian Lloyd, from the outset it was not the actual sights that first attracted travellers to the battlefields, but their associations and meanings. A guidebook published in 1914 advised its readers:

> Seeing is not enough, one must understand: …a stretch of country which might seem dull and uninteresting to the unenlightened eye, becomes transformed at the thought of the battles which have raged there (Michelin, Battlefields of the Marne 1914:n.p.)

In order to meaningfully engage and empathise with its commemorative spaces and to decipher and decode its landscape of war, I propose that in combination with the gaze, the most powerful engagements practiced by tourists visiting the Western Front, whether travelling alone or on a commercial coach tour, are with and through their imaginations and emotions. Although the embodied components of bodily movement and sociality also play a central role in the experience of battlefield visitors, imagination and emotion are the triggers that allow visitors to construct an empathic and historical connection to the present day landscape that, notwithstanding the military cemeteries and memorials, can only hint of the horror and turmoil that took place during the conflict.

Many of the people who travel to the battlefields are repeat visitors, attracted to its highly evocative dimensions, or in the words of Edmund Blunden, its "peculiar grace".[2] Although much of the battle-scarred terrain has long since vanished under crop cultivation and urban development, the landscape remains resonant with traumatic historical association and there remains an almost tangible sense of appropriation and ownership over the areas where the Allied armies were stationed and fought. The military historian, Stedman, has said of its lasting appeal that, "this is where so many of our roots lie. From India, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Britain a whole generation passed through this place" (74:1999). Any visit to a military cemetery with its serried rows of headstones will soon alert tourists to the terrible human losses of the conflict. Clearly inscribed on the white Portland stone are

[1] Talbot House was also the foundation of the worldwide Toc H movement

[2] According to a study carried out by the Somme Tourist Board in 1999, over 60% of tourists make repeat visits, 35% of whom have returned more than four times.

the ages of death of the men buried below – aged 19, aged 23, aged 21 – rarely will the visitor pass a headstone which records the death of a soldier who was over the age of 40. Although the growing distance in years may have resulted in a dilution of the sense of stark tragedy and loss so keenly felt during the inter-war years, many visitors may find themselves to be deeply touched by the emotional impact of the cemeteries and memorials. As the historian McPhail acknowledges, however dispassionate we wish to be and despite the considerable span of time that has elapsed since the Armistice in 1918, it is not difficult to apply the soldiers' circumstances "to ourselves, our own families and communities…" (1998:8). One visitor making her first visit on a coach tour remarked, "Seeing all those graves really makes me feel so sad – it's impossible to stay detached from it all" (conversation, 18 August 1997).

The foreign countryside of the Western Front has effectively become established in what Anderson (1991) has called the "imagined community" of English, and by extension, British and Empire nationhood. For some visitors, the region has become a kind of nostalgic "home from home", and their trips enable them to physically enact a sense of historical connection with a place associated with an imagined collective past, untarnished by the values of contemporary society. Like MacCannell's tourists, they want to believe that "somewhere, only not right here, not right now, perhaps just over there someplace, in another country, in another lifestyle… there is *genuine* society". Entranced by the promise of the past, they long "to live in times superior to today" (Lowenthal 1985:21). The perceived simpler values that the soldiers held; the belief that most of them fought unquestioningly for the cause of freedom and peace; that service to one's country was more important than individual self; and the sense that today we seem to be floundering in some kind of spiritual and moral vacuum, are common sentiments mentioned by the tourists I have conversed with on my field trips. A guide told me that we have lost the "more noble ideals that existed then" and that for tourists, visiting foreign battlefields are a way of trying to recapture them. According to the guide, the soldiers "had a sense of duty which we don't have today" (interview, 24 June 1998). One veteran of the Korean War who was in Ypres for the Armistice Day ceremony in November 1998 told me, "the First World War is more moving to me than my own war… I have great respect for those young men and their ideals and hopes".

For many of the visitors I have spoken to on my field trips, both on commercial tours and those who were travelling independently, it was an interest in family history that initially influenced their decision to tour the Western Front and which continues to fuel their curiosity. As Samuel comments, today we live in an expanding historical culture in which history as a mass activity has probably never had so many followers (1994:25). With the distance in years, the level of family connection has widened considerably and many people today looking into their family history will inevitably find a relative who saw active service in the Great War. By retracing their ancestors' movements across the battlefield terrain, they attempt to reinforce their sense of family pride and acquire some kind of affirmation of their own self-identity. A repeat tourist said that as both sides of his family had relatives who served in the war, he "grew up with the Western Front". Although he made his first visit there late in middle age, once he discovered the place where one of his uncles was killed, "that was it, I never looked back" (conversation, 10 March 2003). In his account of his journeys to the battlefields, entitled *Riding the Somme*, he wrote:

> This had been my sixth visit to the Somme, and that alone bewilders some of my acquaintances… They think that there is something morbidly sentimental in returning to what

> was then such a cauldron of death and destruction and what is now such a memorial. Sentiment, yes: sentimentality, no (Potton n.d.:16).

The Western Front has become a place where subjective narratives can be located and brought back to life, a place where, as Shepheard suggests, "you [can] take your own stories to" (1997:216). Yet McPhail is critical of the way in which some repeat visitors focus only on the narratives and memory of their own social identities and losses. In her work, *The Long Silence* (1999) she urges visitors to "press on past this barrier of the imagination" and look beyond the fading lines of the trenches to consider the terrible sufferings and privations of the civilian population under occupation (1999:3). She also indicates in her report to L'Historial de la Grande Guerre (2001) in Peronne that it is all too easy for visitors to become nostalgic and sentimental about the events that took place on the Western Front because Britain did not suffer the direct consequences of brutal warfare. While visitors may be knowledgeable about particular battles and the heroism and sacrifices made by the Allied forces, they are too locked in their own reflective gaze to be able to comprehend the bigger picture of the consequences of war. For McPhail, visits to the battlefields enable some visitors to feed their emotional thirst for the drama of war without having to endure the drawbacks of its realities, namely the violence, carnage, mud and lice (2001:9). Although Smith comments that battlefield tourism is honorific rather than maudlin in intent, there is an element of sentimentality and romanticisation that tourists are able to exploit (1996:263).

For British visitors, the landscape of the Front is redolent with historical association and perceptions of nationality which generate emotions, memory and imagination. However, the battlefield terrain, as Saunders points out, is not a static, fossilised background to military engagement, nor is it just a setting for commemorative monumentality (2004:7). For the local inhabitants, it is their everyday, working environment. Tourists, however, can sometimes overlook this as they pursue their historical interests and commemorative activities. As Bender suggests, landscapes are never inert, they are political, dynamic, re-worked, appropriated and contested spaces (1993:2-3) and in the complex, multi-layered and multi-vocal nature of the former battle zones tensions can be triggered between the different groups who engage with it. One contentious area concerns visitor trespass over privately owned land. Urry explains that in Britain today is it commonly thought that landscapes should be communally owned, or as Wordsworth remarked, a "sort of national property" (2000:138). As a consequence, battlefield tourists will often exercise their perceived rights to walk over privately owned fields and woodlands, searching for the location of a particular battle or military action. Many tourist guidebooks remind readers to be aware that the landscape they are travelling through is a working one and it is not "open access" land based on the National Trust model. Stedman warns, for example, "it is all too easy to let our two interests clash…The farmers will not welcome the sight of your tramping the fields with little regard to crops and seeds. Please ask before you enter." (1995:14).

Souvenir hunters or "battlefield stompers" as they are commonly known, are also a cause for concern to the locals. Some bring metal detectors with them, even though the practice of using them is illegal in Belgium and in some regions of France, including the Somme area. For one owner of a bed and breakfast establishment on the Somme, they are her least favourite types of guests because they often return to the house with hand grenades and stoke mortars, oblivious to the risks they are taking, both to themselves and their hosts. Many tourists remain blissfully unaware of the

dangers of handling old, rusting ammunition, yet to all who handle it, the "iron harvest" remains dangerously proactive (Saunders 2004:18). The curator of a museum on the Somme remarked that children sometimes come in brandishing hand grenades or shells, saying "I'm taking this home to Dad for a souvenir". Although safe souvenirs can be purchased at most of the visitor centres and museum shops, according to Paul Reed, a military historian and tour guide, most relics of warfare on the Front remain "up for grabs" by visitors wanting to bring a souvenir back home:

> Farmers have stuff lying around and visitors go into their yards and I think they've had a bit of trouble occasionally with people trying to get things…I think that if the headstones [in the military cemeteries] weren't cemented into battens in the cemeteries, people would try to have those away (interview 12 April 1999).

As he points out, "tourists are thieves in their own right and have been right through the centuries". Soldiers too often returned home with bits and pieces taken from the battlefields. According to Reed, the former Salient Museum in Ypres had an entire case devoted to "bits of the town that had been lifted by soldiers during the war as souvenirs" (*ibid.*).

At times, even in areas which have been acquired by Britain and its allies "in perpetuity", namely the military cemeteries and memorial parks, tensions can arise between tourists and locals. There are varying degrees of access to these sites. In some cases, a cemetery *chemin*, or path, belongs to the Commission, but in others it does not and the Commission only has a right of way rather than a legal right to a permanent path. Even where *chemins* do belong to the Commission, however, some farmers regularly plough them up leaving tourists and the Commission gardeners to "beat a path through the crop". The Director of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) in France, Mike Johnson, explained that as the old farmers die off and hand their properties on to the younger members of the family who have no memory of either of the two world wars and "who don't have the same feel for it", conflicts are increasingly occurring. As Johnson points out, however, many of the cemetery sites are set within a day-to-day working rural landscape owned by farmers who are often under considerable financial pressure to make use of every square inch of their land. Although the majority of them are quite tolerant and helpful, some are not. The Commission, however, keeps "relatively quiet about that" and tries its best to play down conflicts because "creating a fuss doesn't get you anywhere". Yet despite its conciliatory, low-key stance, a few heated "run-ins" have taken place. A farmer who owns property surrounding the Sheffield Memorial Park in the Somme has had enough of visitors, their tour buses and cars, and has even gone as far as blocking off the road to the Park with his tractor and physically threatening people, as a tour guide recalls:

> I was stopped by him with somebody last November and he made threats of physical violence. He attempted to kick this guy's car in. He's a very foolish gentleman, but we just accepted it and parked down the road and walked…but it's a public access road and he can't legally block it (interview, 12 April 1999).

The Commission has now erected a prominent red notice which requests people to walk rather than drive up to the Park.

Paradoxically, despite the continuing success of the Western Front as a visitor attraction, an increasing number of sites are at risk of disappearing "beneath the concrete of economic progress" as new industrial parks, theme parks and urban

expansion steadily encroach upon the old battlefields. According to another tour guide, a combination of local ignorance about the past and the needs of commerce is largely to blame for the loss of many of these attractions. He observes that in the Ypres area:

> The Council destroyed Hellfire Corner, which was one of the most significant places in the war. They did it in order to enable cars to travel fast to get to the [nearby] theme park. They did not know the significance of the corner (conversation, 7th June 1999).

Of more recent concern was the proposed construction of an international airport near Chaulnes in the Somme in 2001 which would have entailed not only the destruction of at least one village, but also the removal of several military cemeteries. Although the French Government bowed down to pressure from both local and international opposition and subsequently shelved the plan, for the first time the notion of "in perpetuity" was put into serious doubt. Meanwhile, outside Ypres a new industrial complex known as "Language Valley" continues to gradually envelope a large sector of the old Front. Writing in the *Western Front Association Bulletin*, Ted Smith laments that "Language Valley and the like will not only be all that is left to represent the sites of many battlefields, but will also be the only markers of many of those fallen soldiers of the Great War with no known graves" (1999:39).

In conclusion, the Western Front now occupies a more central place in the British imagination that at any other time since the Second World War, yet today it is in many respects, a virtual place. Much of its battle-scarred terrain has long since disappeared under urban development and crop cultivation. The draw for tourists is not so much a simple desire to sightsee but rather a wish to identify and empathise with its symbolic, commemorative spaces. Although tourists travelling to the Front are eager to record pictures of its sights, they also endeavour to build an empathic, intimate awareness of a landscape long emptied of its military occupancy (Gough 2001:231). Yet it also remains a contested landscape. The activities of the growing numbers of tourists attracted to its former battlefields, its scenic military cemeteries and its impressive memorials and memorial parks, can sometimes conflict with the demands of modern day life and economic considerations of local communities.

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