

History

In Flanders Fields Museum Revisited

While Flanders prepares to devote the years 2014 to 2018 to large-scale commemoration of the First World War as part of a touristic-economic strategy designed to put a region and a brand (Flanders) on the map, the In Flanders Fields Museum has already set the ball rolling with a completely new scenography and a total area 50% larger than when it opened in 1998.^[1]

The visitor is called on to “experience direct confrontation” with the First World War. For some years now there have been no surviving veterans of that conflict. Those who still have direct memories of the Great War – call them the last eye-witnesses – are now dying off. For instance, my mother, who was born in 1915, remembers the final Allied offensive in the autumn of 1918. She was then three years old, living near Kortrijk/Courtrai, and she remembers the German retreat and seeing British soldiers in kilts in the street. Now we shall never get closer than that. Very soon that war will slip away once and for all into the past and become as much a part of history as the Franco-Prussian conflict of 1870 or the Napoleonic wars.

The First World War began with a chain reaction of words and actions which everyone could see unfolding and nobody could get away from, and was greeted with euphoria on all fronts. Rarely has a war changed its features so rapidly: beginning with horses and chivalry, it ended with gas, tanks, utter degradation and horror. It was the first *Materialschlacht*: the machine-gun, together with artillery (responsible for two-thirds of all fatalities), changed the nature of warfare, in that from then on the advantage lay with the defender. This was the war in which for the first time fire was directed not at people but systematically and unremittingly at places, as the clear-sighted German writer Ernst Jünger commented. In the Great Mincing Machine individual acts of heroism no longer made any difference. In the slaughterhouses that were the field hospitals,



The burning Cloth Hall on November 21st 1914

constantly amputating and staunching the flow of blood, medicine advanced by leaps and bounds. And in 1918 Spanish ‘flu, which would unleash a new genocide on Europe, was in the offing and the seeds of the next war were being sown.

At the end of the reorganised museum is a list of all the conflicts the world has known since the war which was to end all wars. The last item reads: “2011 – Révolution Syrienne” (sic).

The In Flanders Fields Museum, housed in Ypres’ rebuilt Cloth Hall, tells the history of the First World War in terms of the West Flanders front: the invasion of Belgium and the early months of mobile warfare, the four years of static warfare in the Westhoek (from the beach in Nieuwpoort to the Leie in Armentières), the end of the war and its subsequent enduring commemoration. Over half a million Commonwealth troops died in the Ypres Salient: *a pars pro toto* of the Great War, which claimed approximately ten million victims.

To enhance the ‘direct experience’ element, on arrival every visitor receives their own poppy armband. A chip in the armband automatically



The Ypres Cloth Hall houses the In Flanders Fields Museum.

selects the appropriate language, enabling the visitor to discover four personal stories in the permanent exhibition. For instance, I was given among others the biographies of the curate Camille Delaere, who rendered exemplary service during Ypres' death-throes; a Canadian soldier killed near Ypres on his twenty-second birthday; a Belgian soldier killed just before the Armistice who was exhumed by his brother and transported on a barrow to his birthplace, the village of Oostvleteren, where the coffin had to stand for three days in the church porch because the pastor refused to reinter it.

At the end of the museum circuit Ypres seeks to promote itself as a town of peace. A message is sneaking into the museum. That doesn't bother me, but there is no need for it. Besides, learning *about* a war is not the same as learning *from* a war.

Compared with the original exhibition, there are more objects and less focus on war poetry. But the texts are well chosen: Stephan Zweig (who speaks critically of "Die great show Belgiens" that Ypres became after the war); John McCrae's inevitable poem 'In Flanders Fields'; and Ivor Gurney's heart-rending 'Memory, Let All Slip'. As for the images, paradoxically enough it is the non-'authentic' testimonies, those performed by actors, which make the greatest impression: a Flemish refugee telling his story;

four soldiers from four armies talking about the Christmas Truce; a curate from Dikkebus who fled to Reningelst and evokes life just behind the front in all its chaos and moral confusion; Fritz Haber, the chemist who perfected gas as a weapon of war and clinically demonstrates exactly what he planned and executed. But the testimony that most sticks in the mind is that of a doctor and two nurses. That was so, too, in the museum's original display. During my visit, this was the one thing that really impressed a chattering horde of fifteen-year-old English school-girls. Were they listening to the soundtrack composed especially for the museum (by Stuart Staples of the British group Tindersticks) which you hear (and don't hear) throughout your visit?

Now that the landscape has become the last surviving witness to the war, the museum is taking on the confrontation between the present day and the desolate, shell-torn countryside of the war years. Images of then and now jostle each other: today's modern piggeries, the green, well-tended meadows with idyllic round pools which are actually the flooded craters of old mines. It is astonishing to see how quickly a landscape recovers from total devastation (the agricultural areas were restored by about 1930; the urban areas took longer). The resilience of these landscapes and the shortness of human memory are preconditions for survival and continued exist-



An inside view of
the In Flanders
Fields Museum

ence. Fortunately Ypres has not remained the ruin (“holy ground”) which Churchill had wanted to acquire for the British Commonwealth after 1918. And even the Menin Gate, described as a “sepulchre of crime” by Siegfried Sassoon on its dedication in 1927, has developed a patina which makes it an impressive commemorative monument. Not least because the ‘Last Post’ is sounded there every evening, a ritual that survives, and is stronger than ever, precisely because it has become meaningless, so that everyone – from firebrands to pacifists – can make it their own.

It was a good idea to incorporate the Cloth Hall’s bell-tower into the museum circuit. This building, once the largest civil structure in Western Europe, came to symbolise British resistance in the Ypres Salient – especially after it had gone up in flames and been gradually reduced to rubble by the German artillery. Via a kind of Google Earth one can look at an aerial photo of the building as it is today and then gradually zoom back to the gaping ruin of 1917. These days, from the top of the rebuilt tower one can take in the landscape for miles around: from the Menin Gate to the ridge with Mesen church (once painted by Hitler) over the Flemish hills (Kemmelberg, Rode- and Zwarteberg, Catsberg and Cas-selberg, from which the French Marshal Foch observed Ypres), to Boezinge, the Ijzertoren, Langemark (where in 1914 the flower of German

youth was cut to pieces by the British machine-guns) and Passendale. (“I died in hell - / (They called it Passchendaele)”, Sassoon).

“The In Flanders Fields Museum requires an attentive spectator and reader. It is a museum of peace that, dedicated to all wars, selects just one of them and puts it on the map: Ypres, so methodically laid waste, as the perfect *pars pro toto*. It is rooted in the region but is nowhere provincial, if only because you constantly hear and read four languages.” That is what I wrote of the museum in 1998. And that judgment stands. More than that: In Flanders Fields has become the ideal starting point for a visit to the front line around Ypres. The Australian couple I met on the tower, who had come to Ypres straight from the American war cemeteries in Normandy, agreed with me on that.

LUC DEVOLDERE

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www.inflandersfields.be.

NOTE

1. LUC DEVOLDERE, *Emotion at the Museum. In Flanders Fields*, in: *The Low Countries* 7, 1999, pp.273-275.