

War Memorials on the Western Front: British tourists and the embodiment of memory

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←The Menin Gate, Ypres, Belgium (1927)

↓ Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme, France (1932)

↓ Private memorial to Captain the Hon. James Boyle, at La Bassee



Photo courtesy of the Western Front Association/ Souvenir Français



The Western Front 1914-1918

- 6 million dead
- 14 million wounded
- 750,000 British and Commonwealth dead
- > 1000 military and > 2000 civilian cemeteries
- 300,000 dead with no known graves (Menin Gate, Ypres has the names of 54,896 and the Thiepval Memorial 72,191 British and Commonwealth missing)



French tourists at the Aussichtsfelsen, Hartmannswillerkopf, Vosges, Western Front - Spring 1919

The Growth of Battlefield Tourism

- Thomas Cook tours during the war (ceased in 1915)
- Michelin guidebooks to the battlefields started appearing in Britain as early as at the end of 1917!
- As many as 30 guidebooks to the WF battlefields were published between 1919 and 1921.

Table: Visitor Numbers - Western Front Battlefield Visitor Centres/Museums (2009/10)	
In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres (Belgium)*	198,542
Thiepval Memorial and Visitor Centre (France)	133,987
Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne (France)	73,551
Mémorial Terre-Neuvien, Beaumont Hamel (France)	106,882
Somme Circuit of Remembrance (France)	150,000-200,000 (estimate)

*February – November 2010

Sources: Internal survey data tables e-mailed from the management of the sites

Western Front: Visitor Numbers

- 326,000 battlefield visitors to the Westhoek (Maritime Flanders) area of Belgium per year
- 40.3% are British
- Of these 52.5% are in groups (mostly coach tours)

Source: Vandaele, Darline & Magda Monballyu (2008) Understanding battlefield tourism in the Westhoek. In: Proceedings of the Annual Travel and Tourism Research Association Conference 'Competition in Tourism: Business and Destination Perspectives', Helsinki. pp. 539- 546, pg. 542.

Who are the Visitors?

- Only two-thirds on coach tour had a direct ancestral connection with someone who had fought in the WF
- 'Communities of memory' – whether related or not (Jay Winter, 2006)

Memorials as an aid to propinquity

‘I lost two great-uncles in the First World War and whilst they have no known grave I just wanted to be somewhere where they may have been...ironically I found both their names on the Menin Gate’ (male, 60).

The re-inscription of memory

- Nation state central to politics of war memorialisation
- ‘Hegemonic official narratives’ (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper, 2000)
- Political and nationalistic identity *versus* private grief
- But commemoration can be renegotiated and revised in the face of popular demands

A moralistic discourse

‘...there were so many tens of thousands of young men who were being almost deliberately sent into certain death in the battlefields and the sense also that people were just manipulating battalions of men to gain small acreages and yards of ground. I think the sheer enormity of it and the sheer wastage of human life was just overwhelming’ (male, 66).

Tourism and continuing re-inscription

- ‘Without frequent reinscription the date and place of commemoration simply fades away as memory atrophies’ (*Gough, 2004*).
- ‘Vicarious pilgrims’ as the new ‘memorial activists’ reinscribe meaning

In Conclusion

- Museums and Visitor Centres as aids to memory
- The presence of tourists at memorials is important in the formation and reiteration of memory