

Recalling the Ghosts of War: Performing Tourism on the Battlefields of the Western Front

Jennifer Iles

The Great War battlefield landscape of the Western Front still exerts an enormous potency for tourists even though much of its geography requires significant decoding to understand its now hidden narratives. Thousands of British visitors travel to the area throughout the year, drawn to empathize with its symbolic commemorative spaces. This essay explores the ways in which tourists embarking on commercial coach tours engage with the battlefield landscape by examining contemporary tourist performance, as well as the role of the tour guide in setting and directing their imaginative and emotional encounter with the area.

Keywords: Battlefields; Tourism; Performance; Tour Guides; Enclavic Tourist Space

The trauma and magnitude of the First World War continue to exert a profound impact on the British imagination. The mass slaughter of young men caused by four years of industrial trench warfare on the battlefields of the Western Front in France and Belgium touched almost every household in Britain, and by 1918 virtually all the towns and villages in Britain had effectively become communities of the bereaved (Winter 6). Today, however, only a handful of veterans are still alive, and the conflict now occupies the furthest edge of living memory. Yet battlefield tourism, which began even before the fighting ended, still exists. Despite some lapses since the Armistice was declared in November 1918, the promise, “We will remember them,” perceptively contained in Laurence Binyon’s poem “For the Fallen,” written in September 1914,

Jennifer Iles is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Business and Social Sciences at Roehampton University. This essay draws on and develops a portion of the author’s PhD thesis, “Memorial Landscapes of the Western Front: Spaces of Commemoration, Tourism and Pilgrimage” (University of Surrey, Roehampton, 2003; Prof. John Eade, dir.). An earlier version was presented as a seminar paper for the conference, “Tourism and Performance: Scripts, Stages and Stories,” July 14–18, 2005, at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. The author thanks Dr Garry Marvin at Roehampton University for his insight and comments. Correspondence to: Jennifer Iles, Senior Lecturer, School of Business and Social Sciences, Roehampton University, 80 Roehampton Lane, London SW15, UK Tel: 020 8392 3621; Fax: 020 8392 3518; Email: J.Iles@roehampton.ac.uk

has largely been kept. Although interest in commemorating the conflict evaporated during the first two decades after the Second World War, commercial tours have gradually become more popular with British visitors since the 1970s. Now geared towards a specialized niche of the leisure industry, the Somme and Ypres Salient areas of the old Front lines continue to grow as tourist attractions, and their former battlefields, military cemeteries, and memorials are visited by hundreds of thousands of people throughout the year and in all weathers. The sizeable tourist market now supports at least ten travel firms as well as a growing number of individual operators.

Tourists, however, come to see a landscape which now visually betrays relatively little of the events which took place during the war. Most of the pulverized and battle-scarred terrain has long since disappeared under crop cultivation and urban development. Now empty of its former military occupancy, its geography requires significant decoding to understand its hidden narratives (Gough, "That Sacred Turf" 231). Yet paradoxically, as Franklin observes, since the publication of Urry's seminal work, *The Tourist Gaze* in 1990, many researchers have explained tourist behavior as an activity that is primarily carried out through the medium of vision or the gaze (Franklin 8; see also, Macnaghten and Urry; Rojek; Crawshaw and Urry). Urry builds on Foucault's analysis of the medical and juridical gazes and explains tourist behavior in terms of the pleasurability of sightseeing or gazing upon the unusual or different, as a contrast to the familiarity of everyday life of home and work (Franklin 8). Certainly, tourists come to the Western Front armed with their cameras, eager and ready to record its images. Although the omnipresence of the camera has given the impression that tourism is essentially an activity carried out through the medium of viewing (Franklin 9), for battlefield tourists in particular this aspect was never central to the way that the landscape was related to and perceived. From the outset, the battlefield terrain of the Western Front was essentially a landscape of all the senses. During the war, skirmishes in the pitch darkness of underground tunnels and blind advances across smoke-filled stretches of No Man's Land meant that soldiers were often deprived of their visual sense (Saunders 9). In order to survive the chaos of combat, vision had to be replaced or complemented by other types of sensory experience, such as touch, smell, and hearing. In the deafening noise of battle, for example, the troops became sensitized to the sounds made by different types of artillery, as this soldier relates: "I am getting familiar with the different shells used but have no wish to become closer acquainted with them. Whizz bangs are small shells, that don't give you time to say Jack Robinson. All you hear is a whizz and a bang" (qtd. in Macdonald 131).

For visitors arriving at the Front after the Armistice, the destruction and devastation along the battle lines was so complete that there was very little to see. It was a countryside of former places, of missing woods and obliterated villages. As Dyer wryly comments in his work, *The Missing of the Somme*, the Great War "ruined the idea of ruins" (120). For Lloyd, the landscape that first attracted travelers to the battlefields was largely an imaginary one, and it was not the actual sights that drew them there, but their associations, such as feelings of excitement and horror

(112–14). Today, the rolling and unremarkable topography of the region has now almost completely obscured the momentous nature of the battles fought across the terrain (Stedman 92). Yet, the area still has the power to evoke often intense emotional reactions from visitors. A member of the tourist board in the Somme region remarked, “The war had such an impact that we can feel it, even if we don’t see it.”¹

While tourism research continues to build on Urry’s notion of the tourist gaze, new directions now recognize that tourism is a more multidimensional and complex practice than simply gazing (Franklin 83). As Crouch suggests, “vision is not made sense of separately from other senses but in interrelation and tension with them” (212). Instead of regarding the tourist as a disembodied sightseer, increasing attention is now being paid to the embodied and performative nature of tourist practices (see, e.g., Bowman; Coleman and Crang; Crouch and Lübbren; Desmond; Edensor, *Tourists*, “Performing”, “Staging”; Franklin; Franklin and Crang; and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett). Although, as Bowman observes, performance metaphors have been employed in tourism research since MacCannell’s work, *The Tourist*, first extended Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective to propose the idea of a tourist site in terms of a staged performance, more recent studies have moved forward a step to suggest that what tourists see “isn’t merely *like* a performance, it *is* a performance” (104, italics in original). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s work, *Destination Culture*, for example, uses a performance-oriented approach to explore the various ways in which both objects and people alike perform their meaning for the tourist audience. There is no necessity, however, for this audience to be passive. As she points out, many of the staged tourist productions are driven by avant-garde sensibilities in which the segregated boundaries between performer and audience become blurred. Within the shifting scenes a liminal space is opened up, and spectators “yield to. . . sensuous immediacy, to presence, energy and actuality. . . . They are open to chance operations, indeterminacy, and improvisation” (232). Chaney, however, goes further and sees tourism itself as a performance. He states that as tourists “we are above all else performers in our dramas on stages which the industry has provided” (164). Tourists are audience and performer at the same time. In his work, *Tourists at the Taj*, Edensor adopts the same view, but believes that the extent to which tourists are directed and supervised on their visits is “a crucial determinant” of their performance (64).

This essay, which is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out around Ypres in Belgium and the Somme region in France, also seeks to explore the constraints and opportunities that influence tourist performances.² It will examine the various ways in which tourists embarking on organized commercial coach tours engage with the battlefield landscape of the Western Front, and in particular it will focus upon the role of the guide in setting and directing the tourist encounter. It will argue that in a terrain now characterized by emptiness and absence (see Gough “Inconnu”), present-day visits to the battlefields by tourists traveling on commercial coach tours are more properly understood in the context of embodied, sensuous performances rather than in terms of the primacy of the gaze.

The draw for tourists is not so much a simple desire to sight-see but rather a wish to identify and empathize with its symbolic, commemorative spaces. As the geographer Relph recognizes, in order to embrace the richness of meaning of a place and to identify with it, tourists are required to develop a sense of “empathetic insideness” (49). A landscape is not simply a cultural image, surveyed by the mind’s eye or, as Cosgrove describes, “a way of seeing” (13). It is also a way of feeling and a way of doing.

Presently, the Western Front, after having been largely neglected by tourists for nearly thirty years, now occupies a more central place in the British imagination than at any other time since the end of the Second World War. All kinds of people are attracted to the area. There are the historians and military enthusiasts; others may have a literary interest in the war, stirred by the work of “trench” poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon; others have undertaken the trip on the recommendation of friends or family; many are there solely to accompany spouses or friends. Due to the national curriculum requirements, tens of thousands of schoolchildren also make the journey there. For others, the now quiet towns and fields represent an important part of their family history. With the distance in years, the level of family connection has widened considerably, and many people looking into their family history will inevitably find a relative who saw active service in the war.

Although part of the area’s attraction is that it is easy to reach and explore and a good destination for a three- or four-day break, this was not always the case (McPhail, “Thiepval” 14). Before the advent of organized tours in the 1970s, visiting the area could be a frustrating experience, even for military historians armed with regimental histories and maps. It was a husband and wife team, Major Tonie and Mrs Valmai Holt, who largely established the post-war dimension of commercial battlefield travel. From the beginning, the Holts were aware that visits to the Front entailed more than simply driving their clients around its pleasant but unremarkable countryside and pointing out sites of former skirmishes and troop movements. In order to offer visitors a truly insightful experience, they believed that visitors must be helped to construct not only an historical connection to the landscape, but also an emotional and imaginative one. Exemplifying Fussell’s observation in *The Great War and Modern Memory* that the British have a tendency to fuse memories of the First World War with theatrical imagery (197), the Holts regarded their tourist coach as a “mobile theatre.”³ Each tour script was written as a short story, designed to encourage visitors to try to judge events from the eyes of 1914 rather than by today’s standards, because “it was a different world then.” To help their clients to “get into the spirit of the tour,” they also played oral history tapes on the coach and passed around various First World War ephemera, such as contemporary news-essay clippings and photographs. Sociality was also an important element of the experience. The Holts were keen to promote the idea that the comradeship and camaraderie many soldiers experienced in the trenches could be replicated to some degree in their tours. Above all, they wanted to “make their travelers feel”—to talk, to enjoy and sometimes “to be moved to tears.” When they retired and sold

the business in 1993, their style of battlefield touring, which recognized the need for an empathic approach to the present-day landscape, very much established the template for other commercial operators to emulate and incorporate in their own tour packages.

Central to the construction of an imaginative and sensuous engagement with the commemorative landscape and central to the success of any commercial battlefield tour are the guides. As Quiroga states, their performance is an essential element of the tourist experience (189). Their role is a multifaceted one, which includes acting as group leader, entertainer, information giver, and promoter of group interaction. Typically, the elements of social engagement and mutuality are the first things that the guides actively encourage. From the moment they board the coach, they connect with the clients by telling jokes and making small talk, endeavoring to break down the boundaries between strangers and encourage a sense of what Turner and Turner term *communitas* or social bonding within the group. As Fine and Speer observe, once the initial contact between guide and tourists is made, the negotiation process, which determines the degree of communal creativity, is set in motion (82). But while an egalitarian relationship among the passengers is encouraged, the structural boundaries between the guide and passengers generally remain fixed. As the predominant speakers, the tour guides are often openly intolerant of people indulging in casual chit-chat above their commentary. Even so, their scripts are prepared to take in both light-hearted banter and serious debate, and within the constraint of their fixed time schedules, they welcome questions and readily discuss opposing viewpoints. Off the coach, the development of a sense of camaraderie through debate is further encouraged through the sensual activities of eating and drinking. To this end, the breakfasts and evening dinners are usually very social occasions in which the clients, seated at large tables in the hotel, are encouraged to converse and interact with each other. On most occasions either the tour guide or a guest speaker will give an after-dinner talk that focuses on a contentious topic that was touched on during the day. Again, the clients are invited to ask questions and to join in discussion, and some will gather in the hotel bar afterwards to continue drinking and talking.

However, on introductory tours where there are few repeat visitors, the brief duration of the tour and the diverse nature of the clients means that overall the sense of friendship and closeness amongst the passengers is generally subdued. For example, on one three-day introductory tour of the Front there were people of all ages and from different walks of life, including a young family from Canada, a retired couple from Australia, a secretary and her teenage son, a nurse, an actor, an engineer, a postman, and a local historian. Although people did converse at times with each other, most people tended to mix primarily with the friend, partner, or family member with whom they came. The fellowship that exists among the passengers on the more specialized tours, though, appears to be far more significant. The majority of passengers on these types of journeys had traveled with the company many times previously, and many of them had a passionate interest in the First World War, either because they had relatives who had fought on the Western Front or because they were military enthusiasts. On one such tour, which examined the subject of executions

carried out by the British army, nine of the twenty-eight travelers (both male and female) had made over thirty trips with the company. Two had traveled on over sixty. An elderly widow, who had in the past accompanied her late husband on battlefield tours, said that she liked traveling with the same company because “it’s a good way to make friends and you don’t have to worry about eating alone in hotels and restaurants. We enjoy the company and the laughs and we feel safe.” Because many of the people on board had known each other and the guide for several years, the atmosphere on the coach was very different and much more relaxed. The guide, confident in his performance as the tour leader, openly acknowledged the depth of knowledge of one familiar repeat client and handed him the coach microphone for about twenty minutes in order to initiate a debate about the subject of blanket pardons for the executed soldiers.

Most commercial battlefield tours pack in a great amount of information within a short period of time, and they very much underline the comments made by Urry, who remarked that the postmodern trend in tourism increasingly places more emphasis on the need to be an educated traveler (96). A guide observed that during his early years with the company in the 1980s the clients were taken on what would now be considered as superficial tours. However, “today it is different because people are much more demanding. They want a reading list and as much information as they can get their hands on before the tour.” By accentuating the educational nature of their journeys and by promoting the quality and expertise of their guides, many tour companies have sought to distance themselves from the usual criticism of the shallowness of the package tour experience. Again, following the trend set by the Holts, clients are offered a mixture of presentations: readings from selected texts, video clips, music tapes, brief walks, and visits to military cemeteries, memorials, and museums. This gives the guides plenty of scope to engage the tourists’ imagination by explaining and dramatizing in depth the events that took place in a complex landscape heavily fashioned both by destructive warfare and subsequent agricultural and urban development. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, a site is limited in its ability to tell its own story and guides must try to show more than can otherwise be perceived in order to access its “invisible heart and soul” (167–68). By providing their clients with a variety of descriptions and accounts of the battle history of particular areas, the guides try to prompt the tourists to look beyond the landscape’s broad outline in order to “see” and relate to its topography and places in a different light. While at one level their gaze and their cameras may perhaps be focusing on a wood at the crest of a ridge on the Somme, on another level they might also be “seeing” and imagining the explosion of the mine that signaled the beginning of the Allied attack on the morning of July 1, 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

From the outset the guides have considerable influence on the tourists’ perception of the places visited and, as Neumann contends, they are “rarely left to draw their own conclusions about objects or places before them” (24). One area in which they routinely seek to challenge the commonly held assumptions of their clients concerns the “butchers and bunglers” view of the conduct of the war. Here, the performance of

the guides has moved away from the long-nurtured and negative assumption that the war was a futile and badly managed event, and instead they have adopted the approach made by revisionist military historians who are attempting to redeem the reputation of the British High Command. On an Armistice anniversary tour, for example, the guide pointed out that many historians today were endeavoring to move away from “the public perceptions of the Great War, that it was only fought by brilliant young poets.” On an introductory tour of the Western Front, another guide commented, “I hope I give them a more balanced approach and try to show the war in a more whole way with the difficulties everyone faced—not only those at the sharp end but those making the decisions only on the information they had before them at the time. . . . It makes for some interesting discussions in the bar afterwards.” Yet for the time being, as the historian Bourne notes, the gulf between popular understanding of the war and the recent burgeoning academic scholarship on the British army’s performance remains vast.⁴

Using Halbwachs’ formulation of collective memory, in which all individual memory is a social construct that changes when social bonds are diluted or replaced by new bonds, the memory and stories of the soldiers and “middlebrow” authors who believed that the war was worth pursuing until victory have, since the Second World War, been supplanted by a widespread belief that Allied lives were sacrificed for nothing. This view of the ultimate futility of the war is illustrated in many of the comments made in the visitor books in the military cemeteries. The simple question “why?” or statements such as “an unnecessary waste of young lives” occur frequently. The tour companies themselves could be seen to contribute to this longstanding tendency to focus on the bitter, antiwar sentiments of the war poets. For example, a tour guide for 2005 lists fifteen tours of the Somme and Passchendaele battlefields of 1916 and 1917—the sites of enormous casualties for the British and Allied armies—and only three that cover the 1918 battles that led to the defeat of the German army. In spite of the importance of these latter campaigns, which demonstrated an effective mixture of meticulous planning and sound generalship, they remain relatively unexplored by coach tours and experienced battlefield tourers alike.

At times the amount of detailed information that is given by the guides can be overwhelming, because they tend to assume that all their clients have occasionally in precise accounts of military actions. This is not always the case, and occasionally people drift away, both in the mental and physical sense, while the guide is still talking. MacCannell, who questions Urry’s unidirectional, deterministic notion of the gaze, suggests that tourists are reflexive and often adopt a skeptical second gaze that enables them to defiantly disregard the guide’s attempts to manage and direct how sites are appropriated and used (“Tourist Agency”). On one occasion, as we were standing at a particularly cold, windy corner of a muddy field on the Somme listening to the guide explaining the tactics used in a gas attack, a client complained that she was cold and uncomfortable and that she could not understand the details of the battle plans. Out of earshot of the guide she remarked, “It doesn’t mean anything to me—just get me back inside the warm coach.” Despite the meticulous planning that

goes into arranging an itinerary, as MacCannell contends, tourists are active agents who “remain free to look the other way, or not to look at all” (“Tourist Agency” 24).⁵

As many of the guides are ex-military officers, the tours are run with military precision. On one tour, “battle briefings,” conducted by a Lieutenant Colonel, took place every morning at “0815 sharp,” and he politely but firmly made it clear that he expected everyone to attend on time. A typical day on the tour reflects its hectic tempo:

- 0730 Breakfast
- 0815 Battle briefing
- 0830 Depart hotel (bags packed, bills paid, passports available) for: Pilkem Ridge, Langemarck German Cemetery, Sanctuary Wood Museum, Passchendaele Ridge, Tyne Cot.
- 1230 Find lunch in Ypres. Visit to St George’s Memorial Church
- 1430 Vimy Ridge tour to include: preserved trenches, craters and tunnels and the Vimy Memorial
- 1830 Arrive hotel, Peronne-Assevillers
- 2000 Dinner and overnight

As the itinerary reveals, on a battlefield tour it is not only the guide who is expected to work hard and perform, but also the tourist. The client is expected to wake up early, pay close attention to the guide both on and off the coach, move en masse, risk being told off for tardiness and bad time-keeping, and socialize with the other clients. As Edensor pointed out:

Tourism is often considered to be a time of play and fun, a ludic and liminal spell away from the quotidian, yet such assumptions are apt to ignore the sheer work that goes into being a tourist much of the time. The performance of expected and “appropriate” actions, and the enaction of duties (things which *must* be seen, photographs which *have to be* taken, souvenirs and postcards which *need* to be acquired, the *imperatives* to sample a range of cultures and commodities) speak of the routines and compulsions of much performance. (“Staging” 334, italics in original)

When I commented on the often strenuous pace of the tours to one of the guides on an introductory tour, he was unapologetic and said that “if they want leisurely holidays they go on a boat trip down the Rhine, not to the battlefields.”

As the coach wends its way around the countryside there is a sense of traveling through the former battlefield landscape in time rather than in distance. As Edensor comments, all tourism performances vary and depend on the regulation of the stage and the players (“Staging” 324). Listening to the original versions of “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” and “Pack Up Your Troubles” on the coach’s stereo-system while being driven around the French and Belgian countryside, becoming immersed in the history and ephemera of the British involvement in the First World War, the clients gradually become enclosed within a pocket of their own culture. Battlefield coach tours are typical of a mode of tourist travel that Edensor terms “enclavic space,” in

which tourist spaces are highly regulated and staged managed (“Staging” 328). For most of the journey, travelers are fairly isolated from the environment outside of the coach and remain within their own “environmental bubble.” Although they leave its confines to walk around cemeteries, memorials, and museums, a substantial part of the day is spent in air-conditioned comfort with onboard toilet, drinks, snacks, and entertainment all provided. As Sheller and Urry observe, “the sights, sounds, tastes, temperatures and smells” of the public world beyond the windscreen become “an alien other,” kept at bay through the technologies incorporated within the coach (13). The guide, who is ever-present from breakfast until after-dinner drinks in the hotel bar, keeps the hazards of an unfamiliar culture to the barest minimum. Even outside the coach, almost every facet of the passengers’ lives is determined—where they eat, what they eat, where they sleep, what they see, and with whom they see it. The local population, which is of little interest for most people on a coach tour, is kept at a comfortable distance for most of the journey.

Heightening this sense of leaving home without really going is the similarity between parts of the English countryside and particular areas of the Western Front. Veterans returning from the battlefields often compared the French countryside around the Somme with the Kent and Sussex landscape. In 1930, Maskell recalled, “it was a typical Wealden landscape. . . . The hedge banks were yellow with primroses and . . . the bluebells mingled into a dreamy sapphire glow. . . . I woke out of my reverie and remembered that this was not southern England, but the very heart of Picardy” (13). There also remains an almost tangible sense of appropriation and ownership over the areas where the Allied armies were stationed and fought. A sign posted at a cemetery on the Somme shortly after the war, which reads, “The Devonshires held this trench; the Devonshires hold it still,” captures this sense of ownership.⁶ Still intertwined in the historic and spatial configuration of the terrain are traces of the soldiers’ vernacular landscape. Even today, much of the Western Front abounds with the wartime names soldiers gave to particular places and areas, ensuring a lasting British presence in the region. Hundreds of green and white Commonwealth War Grave Commission signs point to cemeteries bearing names such as “Crucifix Corner,” “Owl Trench,” and “Blighty Valley.” At Ypres, a typical tour takes in places called “Hell-fire Corner,” “Clapham Junction,” and “Sanctuary Wood,” and in the Somme area, tour guides routinely gather their clients at Lochnagar Crater and point out the “Sausage and Mash” valleys, which lie on either side.

The Western Front, resonant with traumatic historical association, is also a commemorative landscape. Even for first time visitors who may know little about the events of the war, the presence of the thousands of military cemeteries and memorials dotted around the fields and villages cannot fail to impress on them that they are traveling across sacred ground. As Laqueur notes, “the pyramids pale by comparison with the sheer scale of British—let alone German, French, Belgian, Portuguese—commemorative imposition on the landscape” (155). Their variety is almost limitless. There are the headstones (which are in effect small monuments), national memorials, regimental memorials, memorials to the missing, private

memorials to individual soldiers, and memorials to troops of a specific area or province. Their sheer number mark out that the war was something exceptional. For the military historian, Griffith, the marking of a battlefield with monuments fulfils a natural human need to understand, possess, and to some extent control what took place there, “to classify it in a pigeon hole, so that it is manageable, even if not wholly explicable” (n.p.).

The monuments also exemplify the process of “sight sacralization,” a term formulated by MacCannell, who sees tourism as a type of modern ritual and argues that tourist spaces develop in response to the tourist’s “quest for authenticity.” For MacCannell, sight sacralization is a communicative process through which places and objects are transformed into sacred attractions and presented to tourists by means of marking, a practice that involves the stages of naming, framing, enshrinement, and reproduction (see *Tourist* ch. 5). And it is the monuments and military cemeteries that are the focus of commercial battlefield tours. All the tours include these sights/sites in their itineraries, particularly the better-known ones, such as the Tyne Cot Military Cemetery near Ypres in Belgium and the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing in the Somme in France. Yet, as Bowman notes, the very process of sight sacralization can also undermine a sight/site’s specialness or authenticity (115). Some military historians, including Griffith, are critical of the scale of memorialization and maintain that the profusion of monuments has overshadowed the interpretation of the battlefields. Griffith argues that although monuments have been erected on battlefields since ancient times, they were always limited and restrained, unlike the “frenetic” activity that took place during the decade after the First World War. The trouble, he contends, is that the tourist’s attention is taken up with “snapping” the cemeteries and memorials rather than studying the battle terrain itself (n.p.). Others though are more conciliatory and, as one tour guide and military historian readily recognized, for the modern visitor, when all around is farmland or urban areas, “if you took the cemeteries and memorials away, the point would be lost. They are crucial for battlefield tourism.”

Visitor experience remains dominated by an often intense degree of emotional engagement. War is a harrowing experience, and the stories related by the tour guides are packed with tales of dramatic actions which illustrate almost superhuman feats of heroism and, of course, tragic events. As Fussell perceptively notes, the dramaturgic provides a useful dimension “within which the unspeakable [can] to a degree be familiarized and interpreted” (199). Most tours include stops at Pilkem Ridge, the site of the first gas attack; Tyne Cot, the largest British military cemetery in the world; and the Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont Hamel on the Somme, where a thirty-minute military action led to ninety per cent casualties suffered by the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. Although today when touring the Western Front, the differences between tourism and pilgrimage are blurred because neither category is an isolated realm of activity, visitors who have no family link to the battlefields may often find themselves to be deeply touched. They may even unwittingly find themselves becoming—to use Turner’s phrase—“half a pilgrim” (Turner and Turner 20).

Belloc's comment that "when the soul is seized with such sudden and positive conviction of the substantial past, it is overwhelmed; and Europe is full of such ghosts" (168), is reminiscent of the sentiments commonly expressed by tourists who were surprised by the emotional impact of the cemeteries and memorials. One person making her first visit remarked: "Seeing all those graves really makes me feel so sad—it's impossible to stay detached from it all. I didn't know what to expect. It's my husband who has the interest in the war." Some people take the opportunity to interact with the dead. On the army executions tour, a client set up his music stand and played the flute at the gravesides of some of the executed men, because he wanted to replace "the sound of bullets with pieces by Bach and Mozart." A tour guide commented that she frequently lit up a cigarette when she was in a military cemetery because she knew "the boys wouldn't mind, they would enjoy it." For those who do have a personal connection to the region, many carry with them tangible links with the dead, such as photographs, diaries, service records, or letters. Often there is also the sense that they are there to realize an individual or family goal. Entries in the visitor books of the military cemeteries are replete with messages reflecting the completion of this purpose. A comment made at the Thistle Dump Cemetery on the Somme is typical and reads simply: "For Rifleman William James Lindsay—a promise kept." At Lijssenthoek cemetery near Ypres there is a sense of satisfaction, and even relief perhaps, in the message: "The family made it at last to see you Uncle Francis."

Many travelers to the Front will perform some kind of commemorative ritual during their visit, whether it is simply planting a poppy cross at the base of a headstone, or attending the nightly and increasingly popular *Last Post* ceremony at the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing in Ypres.⁷ The performance of the salute to the Allied dead at the Gate has now become a regular "must see" and is on the itinerary of many coach tours. Most commercial tours, though, will also conduct their own brief, secular remembrance ceremony, usually at a memorial or in a military cemetery. While the interactions among the passengers on some tours may not be particularly deep and the bonds of *communitas* may appear to be muted, there are collective moments that, as Turner and Turner describe, become "richly charged with affects" (251). The commemorative ceremonies are deliberately held at times that coincide with these "magical" moments of *communitas* (or, in the jargon of the guides, "emotional troughs"). The ceremonies typically consist of the laying of a small poppy wreath, the reading of the fourth stanza of Binyon's poem, "For the Fallen," which begins with the line, "They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old," and a one-minute silence.⁸

On the introductory tour of the Western Front, the deepest "trough" is saved for the last day during the visit to the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing on the Somme (see Figure 1). This immense, evocative memorial, which sits high on a ridge and is visible for many miles across the French countryside, has been a place of pilgrimage since it was unveiled in 1932. Built as a series of arches, it has at once a vertiginous ethereality and an earthy, solid presence, described by Dyer as a stubborn and stoical construction which stands its ground "like the deadlocked armies of the war" (126–



Figure 1 Visitors arriving at the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing in 2004 to attend the July 1 Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme Remembrance Ceremony. Photo by author.

27). Its cathedral-like spaces dwarf the visitors as they scan the stone panels, reading the names of the dead. It is here, at the heart of the place, which for many people represents the core experience and expression of the Great War, that the guide ushers everyone together so that they can formally pay their respects to the dead (Dyer 127). When they have gathered around the memorial's stone altar, one client is asked to lay the wreath at its base and another to read Binyon's lines before the moment of silence is held.⁹ The performance of this brief but solemn ceremony within the monument's exposed, wind-blown walls draws everyone together, including the guide, into what Fine and Speer might call "a concert of kindred spirits" (86), joined in empathy for the vast numbers of men who remain missing or unidentified. The enactment of these rituals, conducted in the sacred spaces of the battlefields, has the effect of "rounding

off” a visit by engendering within a group what Connerton terms the sense of a “collective autobiography”—a process that conveys and sustains the collective memory and knowledge of the past (70). And like a funeral these rituals provide people with a suitable vehicle through which they can both commemorate the dead and absorb the emotional impact of traveling through a landscape that is visibly (and invisibly) saturated with bodies.

Yet, as Edensor points out, all performances have involuntary effects, and one can never predict how a performance is likely to be read (“Performing” 78). As he notes, on occasions, this can lead to disorientating effects among both audience and performer (78). In recent years, one unintentional effect of the *Last Post* ceremony at the Menin Gate has been to produce a burst of applause by the crowd when the buglers have finished. For some people, particularly the locals and the buglers themselves, this has become a source of irritation. According to the chairman of the Last Post Association,¹⁰ such behavior is inappropriate:

Clapping at the Last Post? We feel embarrassed about it and the buglers do as well. . . . And we try to stop it—it is put on several information sheets. I say it is in memory of the people who were killed and who fought here, so it’s not appropriate to cheer and applaud. It’s not a performance.

Tour guides have been asked by the Association to instruct their clients not to applaud, but as one pointed out in a tone of resignation, “all it takes is for one wally to start and everyone thinks they should follow. I assumed it was kids who knew no better, but it isn’t, it’s adults.”

The ceremonies conducted by the tour guides themselves can also produce effects at variance with their intended meaning. Some guides include a prayer, but the incorporation of a religious script can sometimes alienate rather than draw people together. A guide recounted how he routinely used to include the Lord’s Prayer from the *Army Prayer Book*, because he considered that a prayer was an act of remembrance for the soldiers, who would often call out to God as they were dying and, on burial, would have a prayer said over their graves by the padre. In one instance, however, a couple abruptly left the group and walked away, complaining that “they did not believe in that sort of thing.” Although the guide used the recital of a prayer as a means for the group to pay their respects to both the dead men and the beliefs they died for, his clients perceived that it was a mark of disrespect towards their own present-day secular convictions.

Although the passage of time may have eroded some of the sense of tragedy and loss so keenly felt during the interwar years, many repeat visitors feel a deep attachment to the area and travel there to capture an intensity which is lacking in their ordinary, everyday lives. 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 life-style. . . there is *genuine* society” (*Tourist* 155). They come to a landscape that has been imbued not only with the physical traces of their society, such as the detritus of war and the bodies of soldiers, but also with the perceived values of British (or more usually English) nationhood.

For some tourists, the region has become a kind of nostalgic “home from home,” and their trips enable them to physically enact a sense of historical connection to a place associated with an imagined collective past, untarnished by the values of contemporary society. By retracing their ancestors’ movements across the Western Front terrain, they attempt to reinforce their sense of family pride and acquire some kind of affirmation of their own self-identity. The perceived simpler values that the soldiers held in the 1914 era; the belief that most of them fought unquestionably for the cause of freedom and peace; that service to one’s country was more important than individual self; and the sense that in the present day we all seem to be floundering in some kind of moral and spiritual vacuum are common sentiments expressed by the visitors I have talked to on my field trips. A veteran of the Korean War who joined an Ypres Anniversary tour remarked that “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.”

However, as Lowenthal comments, it is the essence of nostalgia to yearn not for the past as it was, but for a time when life was different. The condition of “having been” endows the past with an integral completeness that is lacking in any present (211). The historian McPhail is critical of some of the motivations of some repeat visitors. In her report to *l’Historial de la Grande Guerre in Peronne on the Somme* (“La Grande”), she indicates that it is all too easy to become sentimental about the events that took place on the Western Front because Britain did not suffer the direct consequences of murderous warfare. Unlike France and Belgium, the country was not invaded and occupied by enemy forces, nor did it witness the terror, mayhem, and wanton destruction of battles taking place around its farms and villages. McPhail argues that tour guides and visitors may be very knowledgeable about the battles, the heroism, and the sacrifices made by the Allied forces, but they fail to consider the terrible suffering and privations that the civilian population had to endure. Yet, as Clifford points out, it is a difficult task to present a balanced and inclusive representation of history in areas where there is an overlay of different and conflicting stories (341). In the multilayered landscape of the Western Front, not everyone’s history can find its proper place (338). For British tourists, its terrain has become soaked with the exclusive memory of their own social identities and losses.

Undoubtedly, there is an overlay of a dubious sentimentality in the motives of a few of my fellow visitors, whose interest in the past seems to have become obsessive and whose performance appears to be not so much honoring the soldiers as trying to recapture and appropriate their forefather’s experiences for themselves. One repeat client makes a special visit to his grandfather’s grave each time he travels through the Ypres Salient area. On the way to the cemetery, he routinely takes the coach microphone and relates his grandfather’s exploits to his fellow passengers. On arrival, he invites them to accompany him to the graveside, and then, before laying a wreath, he reads aloud a letter sent to his grandmother by the commanding officer, recounting his grandfather’s bravery and expertise. The commemorative landscape of the battlefields is certainly conducive for British visitors to reaffirm their heritage and feel pride in the specific contribution of their forefathers. However, the facilities and

comfort of modern-day travel make it easy for some to turn away from the complexities of their lives by repeatedly returning to the Front to indulge in nostalgia for a former era. As Smith observed, although battlefield tourism is honorific rather than maudlin in intent, there is an element of sentimentality, which some tourists and tourist operators are able to exploit (263).

Yet at the same time that tourists may be looking wistfully backwards, haunted by their fascination with the war, their performances also ensure that the conflict remains contemporary. As Taylor notes in her work, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, performance provokes emotions, evokes memories, and makes visible the ghosts and scenarios that continue to structure our individual and collective lives (143). Today, the traces or specters of the dead soldiers incarnate all sorts of issues, ranging from the recent public campaign to pardon the men who were executed for cowardice to the promotion of peace and reconciliation between the Protestants and Catholics on both sides of the Irish border.¹¹ A repeat tourist, who says he suffers from “withdrawal symptoms” if he is unable to return to the Front every year, maintains that, to him, the significance of the battlefields lies with his Anglo-Irish background:

I am the product of an Irish background and an English background. . . . I am very proud of my Irish background, I am very conscious of it, but I'm also very conscious of my English background. . . . When I visit my relative's grave I want all the time to recognise him, but I want to couple him with the Irish whose contribution to the war was never recognised.

On a special visit made during a coach tour to the recently opened Island of Ireland Peace Park in Messines, Belgium, which owes its existence as much to the peace process in Northern Ireland as it does to the Great War, the tourist said, “I feel so emotional about it. I can hardly believe how I feel. I didn't think it would happen. I just feel it is so fitting, so absolutely fitting.”

In conclusion, battlefield tour companies provide trips that go beyond sightseeing. The Western Front, long empty of its warring armies but steeped in memory, is now in many respects a virtual place. When the English veteran and novelist, Mottram, returned to the region twenty years after the Armistice, he found that “all semblance is gone, irretrievably gone” (44). In a landscape in which even the most visible symbols of the carnage of battles, namely the military cemeteries and memorials, require background information to fully interpret their now hidden stories and dramas, tourists are not really asking “what am I looking at?” but “what am I trying to understand here?” The tourist gaze is only one aspect of tourism, while an emphasis on its performative aspects produces a more realistic and less constrained representation of what tourists do (Franklin 279). Tourism practices, as Crouch indicates, are embodied and multidimensional, and as in everyday life, people discover and encounter the world “with both feet” (213). Such practices and performances are also transformative, which the restless, disembodied gaze, seeking out and interrogating the pleasures of the new and the unusual, tends to overlook (Franklin 269). Visitors to the Western Front, reconnected to personal and family

memory as well as a sense of collective identity, commonly experience feelings of personal change or transition, whether or not they consciously set out to do so before they embark on their journey.

Playing a central role in shaping the visitor encounter on the battlefields is the performance of the tour guides, who attempt to influence not only their clients' historical perception of the conflict, but also their imaginative and emotional engagement with the area. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett contends, tourism deals in "the intangible absent, inaccessible, fragmentary, and dislocated," and in order to unlock the significance of the sites, the guide must "animate a phantom landscape on the back of the one toward which attention is directed" (167). The meaning of places, however, as Edensor notes, is rarely determined solely by official versions. Despite the regulation and organization of the tourist stage in a coach tour, tourists are still able to subvert and challenge the guide's scripts and, to some degree, improvise their own performances (*Tourists* 200). While the understandings and performances that tourists bring to the battlefield landscape may vary, within the enclavic space of a tour and through the direction of the guides, they endeavor to absorb the echoes of the landscape and build an empathic, intimate awareness of a place that today can only hint at the horror and turmoil that unfolded in its fields and villages.

The preceding account has considered only one aspect of battlefield tourism to the Western Front. As Crouch suggests, "the world toured and the world of the tourist are not hermetically sealed" (215), and a study focusing on the commemorative practices, sacred spaces, and tourist attractions in one particular area of the Front would reveal more understanding of the ways in which tourists and locals recollect and commemorate their different pasts within the same landscape. Meanwhile, since the mid-1990s, coach tours to Second World War battlefield sites are now also increasing each year, particularly to the Normandy area in France where the D-Day invasion in June 1944 took place. Research into this area would be a useful addition to battlefield tourism studies.¹²

The current level of interest in the Great War, however, probably will not last forever, but for the time being, the memory of the men who were physically and symbolically woven into the battlefield landscape continues to cast long shadows (Saunders 9). The fields and narrow lanes of the Somme and the former Ypres Salient remain crammed with their brooding absence. The people who once went to battle there have disappeared, yet their spaces remain, as Belloc describes:

More than dust goes, more than wind goes; they will never be seen again. Their voices will never be heard—they are not. But what is the mere soil of the field without them? What meaning has it save for their presence? I would wish to understand these things. (171)

Notes

- [1] Unless otherwise acknowledged, quoted remarks were made to me in personal communications during fieldwork and interviews I conducted between 1997 and 2003. See note 2 for further details.

- [2] The essay is based on a continuing study of battlefield tourism to the Western Front which began in 1997. It draws on my PhD thesis, "Memorial Landscapes of the Western Front: Spaces of Commemoration, Tourism and Pilgrimage." Overall, I have traveled on five coach tours to the Western Front. Four of these trips were conducted by a leading battlefield company, which is the focus of this essay. My data is based upon carrying out participant observation on the coach tours which varied from covert (as a complete participant) on my first tour, to overt (participant-as-observer) on subsequent tours, where I slipped between the roles of researcher and group member as the occasion determined. On the first tour I believed that by remaining anonymous I could mix freely with the other clients and share exactly the same experiences. In addition, at this time I was aware that my lack of detailed knowledge about the battles that took place on the Front could impact upon my role as a researcher. Because the area is a mecca for military historians, many people make the blanket assumption that all researchers are (or should be) experts in military history. As a result, I reacquainted myself with the history of the major battles on the Front, and on subsequent tours I was happy to reveal the extent and details of my research to my fellow travelers and to the guides. Far from hindering my research, both travelers and guides alike were usually very helpful and responsive. I have also made about a dozen individual research trips and on these occasions I interviewed visitors, the sponsors of battlefield travel and their guides, the guardians of the cemeteries, visitor center, and tourist office managers, and museum curators. The interviews ranged from being highly structured, with a set of written questions, to informal, unstructured ones that took the form of conversations. These methods were supplemented by historical and archival research. I recorded my data by taking extensive notes, audiotaping the majority of interviews, and taking photographs.
- [3] The writer and artist Gough also employs the theatrical metaphor in his essays about war and commemoration. See his "War Memorial Gardens as Dramaturgical Space" and "'That Sacred Turf': War Memorial Gardens as Theatres of War (and Peace)."
- [4] In addition to Bourne, authors such as Terraine; Keegan; Neillands; and Bond and Cave have also taken a more positive view of the conduct of operations on the Western Front and the achievement of the Allied armies.
- [5] Along the same lines, Bruner proposed the idea of "the questioning gaze" to describe the doubts that tourists may entertain regarding "the credibility, authenticity, and accuracy of what is presented to them in the tourist production" (95).
- [6] The original sign disappeared many years ago, but the wording is now preserved on a memorial stone erected outside the cemetery gate. The military cemeteries in Belgium and France were ceded to Britain and its Allies in perpetuity as the "free gift" of those governments.
- [7] The *Last Post* is one of a number of bugle calls in military tradition which mark the phases of the day. Where *Reveille* signals the start of a soldier's day, the *Last Post* signals its end.
- [8] According to one of the company's tour guides, although it is generally taken for granted that the silence lasts for two minutes, on most trips it only lasts for one because people find it difficult to remain still for the full two-minute period.
- [9] The stone altar is formally known as the Stone of Remembrance, designed by the memorial's architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens. Stone altars also stand in all the Allied military cemeteries which contain a minimum of 400 graves.
- [10] The Last Post Association was established in 1929 as a voluntary and independent body charged with the daily organization of the sounding of the *Last Post* under the Menin Gate Memorial.
- [11] On November 11, 1998, the Island of Ireland Peace Park was opened in Messines, Belgium, dedicated to the memory of the 50,000 men from Ireland who died on the Western Front. Its founders, Paddy Harte, a member of the Irish Parliament, and Glen Barr, a Protestant from Northern Ireland, established the Park in order "to promote peace and reconciliation between all the people of the Island of Ireland" by encouraging tourism from both sides of

the border to those areas in Belgium and France where Catholics and Protestants fought and died together.

- [12] To date I have undertaken one tour to the Normandy beaches in July 2005. Although my own investigation to these sites is at its infancy I discerned a notable difference in the atmosphere of the journey. There was not the overwhelming sense of tragedy and loss that often pervades the Western Front sites, even though the casualties incurred during the landing phase in the summer of 1944 were of Great War proportions. Perhaps this is because the Allied invasions were ultimately accompanied by the scent of victory, unlike the battles of the Somme and Passchendaele which are still perceived as symbols of futility and wanton sacrifice.

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