

Ypres: Great Battles

Review Number: 2342

Publish date: Thursday, 10 October, 2019

Author: Mark Connelly
Stefan Goebel

ISBN: 9780198713371

Date of Publication: 2018

Price: £18.99

Pages: 259pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/ypres-9780198713371?cc=us&lang=en&>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Matthew Haultain-Gall

A Guide to the History of the Salient

Ypres! Langemarck! Dixmude! Passchendaele! Once sites of fierce First World War battles, these are now must-see stops on battlefield tours for the thousands of visitors who flock to West Flanders every year. Armed with guidebooks and military histories explaining the events that occurred at these places 100 years ago, these tourists traipse over the former killing fields to pay respect to long lost relatives in beautifully tended cemeteries or to gaze upon war memorials erected in honour of combatants from dozens of nations. With their excellent *Ypres*, Mark Connelly and Stefan Goebel have written another type of guidebook for the infamous salient. *Ypres* is not concerned with the military campaigns fought in West Flanders. Or at least not in the same way that conventional or even social military historians would be. There are no blow by blow accounts of army manoeuvres or descriptions detailing the horror of combat based on soldiers' experiences. In fact, in the aptly titled prologue, 'The salient facts', Connelly and Goebel rush through the military history of Ypres – medieval and modern – in a handful of pages. The main objective of this study is to provide readers with a 'transnational interpretation of the *meaning* of Ypres' (p. xi) from the turn of the 20th century to the First World War centenary. In order to stay true to their transnational scope, the authors do not sharply define the geographical limits of the salient but defer to how the combatants themselves viewed their different sectors in the vicinity of the town. This approach allows Connelly and Goebel to cover German commemorative efforts at Langemarck as well as Belgian and French interest around Dixmude, which can be easily overlooked given the high concentration of British activity during and after the war in Ypres and its immediate surrounds. This 'media' or 'mediation history' (p. xiv) of Ypres draws on a remarkable variety of sources, including tourist guidebooks; press reports; official histories; photographs; paintings; memorials; and cemeteries. For readers well versed in the field of First World War memory studies, these are familiar objects of analysis. What is novel here is that no one before Connelly and Goebel has really considered how these forms of media have shaped our understanding of one of the densest and most contested sites of memory on the Western Front, and certainly not from such an ambitious, transnational perspective.

Many previous studies based on the battles in the salient have little to say about Ypres before the fighting started, apart from noting that it was a quiet, medieval town in west Flanders that few people outside of

Belgium had ever heard of. It is therefore refreshing to see an entire chapter dedicated to ‘Ypres before Ypres’ in which Connelly and Goebel unpick this idea that the town was virtually unknown before 1914. Instead, they demonstrate that, thanks to the development of more efficient transport infrastructure and the increased interest in tourism this entailed, as well as the Victorians’ fascination with the medieval world, Ypres was gradually becoming a recognised tourist destination in Belgium. Naturally, the town’s major drawcards were its imposing Cloth Hall and St Martin’s Cathedral. Even though only the wealthier members of British, German and French society could afford to see these magnificent structures firsthand during this period, images of the town made their way into art galleries as well as illustrated newspapers, talks and histories back home. There was even an eerily prescient aspect to how visitors and guidebooks noted that Ypres, once home to 200,000 people in its medieval prime, was now an empty, melancholic city of the dead. According to Connelly and Goebel, such imagery infiltrated popular imagination before the war and would go on to underpin the rhetoric surrounding the bitter struggles for the town between 1914 and 1918.

Of course, it was during the First World War that ‘Ypres’ – or ‘Wipers’ in the British case – truly became a household name, although each belligerent country to experience fighting in west Belgium had its own imagined ‘microgeography’ (p. 21) of the sector, which elevated certain sites above others. The third chapter, ‘Ypres during Ypres’, identifies these microgeographies and examines the language used to describe them primarily in press reports and books published before the end of the war. In doing so, Connelly and Goebel skilfully trace how the pre-war rhetoric of Ypres as a city of the dead gradually became infused with the sacred. This was particularly the case in British commentary, which cast the Flemish town as having been sanctified by the spilling of so much imperial blood across three major battles, each of which reinforced Ypres as the epicentre of death and destruction on the Western Front. Admittedly, the events of 1916 on the Somme briefly wrested attention away from Flanders, but Passchendaele forced the spotlight back north ensuring that ‘Ypres’ would become the shorthand for Britain’s war experience after 1918. For the Germans, on the other hand, it was not Ypres, which remained frustratingly out of reach throughout the war, but Langemarck that came to symbolise their trials and tribulations in Flanders. Various other studies have already debunked the tale of young student soldiers advancing on the enemy while singing ‘Deutschland über alles’ during the first battle of Ypres. In the context of this study, however, it is more important to show how a single sentence in a hazy army communiqué become a powerful myth in inter-war Germany. Connelly and Goebel also touch on several other nations’ representations of the battles in Belgium – including France, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – but the strength of this chapter clearly lies in the far more detailed juxtaposition of popular British and German interpretations of Ypres and their evolution throughout the war.

The final two-thirds of *Ypres* deal with various acts of commemoration in and around the town from 1919 until the beginning of the First World War centenary. The first of these post-war chapters considers the period from 1919 to 1927 when British inter-war activity was at its height. Covering the shortest time span of the three post-1918 chapters, but arguably the period of most concentrated commemorative activity, ‘The new battle for Ypres’ kicks the analysis into overdrive. As a result, there are moments when this chapter reads like one of the guidebooks Connelly and Goebel cite; events and places are ticked off in double time ensuring that nothing significant is left out, but further detail can be lacking. Notably, the reader never quite gets a sense of the limits to Britain’s intense commemorative activity in the salient. For example, while it is asserted that certain Britons, including Winston Churchill, wished to see the ruins of Ypres preserved as a memorial, it is not quite clear whether this plan had popular backing, nor how people reacted when they learned that the Empire would have to settle for an arch at the Menin Gate instead. In another instance, we find out that the Dominions were keen to erect their own monuments at sites that were closely linked to their forces’ endeavours in Belgium, but that they were initially reluctant participants in the Imperial War Graves Commission’s Menin Gate Memorial project. This reluctance – in New Zealand’s case, complete refusal – seems to suggest an inherent tension between the Dominions’ commemorative aims and the British Empire’s, but this is not really explored further. Still, in spite of these gaps in the analysis, the wealth of material discussed in this chapter certainly achieves its aim of reinforcing just how central Ypres was to the British memory of the war as well as the Empire’s dominance in stamping its memorial footprint onto the

former salient.

By the time the British had finished work on their major monuments in and around Ypres, the Germans, French and Belgians were only beginning to establish their own memorial toehold in the region. The activities of these three nations are at the heart of *Ypres*'s fifth chapter, which spans the period from 1928 to the town's liberation in 1944. This is not to suggest that the British were bit-part players at this time. But, as Connelly and Goebel point out, their emphasis had shifted from ensuring the dead were properly commemorated to providing services for Britons visiting or living in the region. Although it draws on an eclectic range of material, this chapter feels more cohesive than the previous one because it pays particular attention to the politics of memory underpinning the fascination with the Langemarck myth and what came to represent for various groups in Weimar then Nazi Germany. It helps that the Germans were clearly more determined to glorify the student volunteers' struggle for Langemarck in 1914 above all other engagements in the salient, as opposed to the British, whose commemorative efforts were spread across the three battles of Ypres. In any case, this narrower focus allows Connelly and Goebel to parse the significance of the Langemarck cemetery's design as well as Langemarck's internal contradictions, which were still not resolved by the time the Nazis elevated it to a state-sponsored myth.

While the town had only suffered superficial physical damage during the Second World War, Ypres's position as a key site of war commemoration was considerably shaken as contemporaries came to grips with the events of 1939–45. As Connelly and Goebel demonstrate in the final chapter of *Ypres*, the Germans and French would never show much interest in the former salient again. This was hardly surprising for the French given the relatively limited nature of their commemorative activity in the region during the interwar years. As for the Germans, even though they had poured considerable effort into remembering Langemarck, the myth was now tainted by its association with Nazi Germany. Conversely, the Flemish town never completely faded from British memory, but the focus had changed. Whereas imperial inter-war commemoration had been split between the three eponymous battles fought over the town, Passchendaele came to dominate popular imagination as it best captured the new orthodoxy of the First World War as a futile waste of life. This shift has been discussed before, but Connelly and Goebel also deftly sketch out how local Belgian agents – notably the town council during major anniversaries and the In Flanders Fields Museum more generally – have played (and continue to play) an increasingly important role in shaping war commemoration in the region. Moreover, the authors note how the erection of several new monuments – like the Island of Ireland Peace Park and the Indian memorial at the Menin Gate – has served as a way to engage with contested pasts or draw attention to previously marginalised groups. The result is that Ieper/Ypres is an even more diverse and complex site of memory than before.

With *Ypres*, Connelly and Goebel have produced a fascinating, deeply researched and thoroughly readable book. There is no other English language publication out there that considers Ypres as a site of memory in such detail, which is amazing considering the transnational turn in First World War studies and the convergence of commemorative activity around this small Flemish town over the last 100 years. The transnational aspect of the analysis is especially eye-opening for readers who may be more familiar with British, rather than German, approaches to First World War commemoration, or vice versa. Admittedly, at only 200 pages, *Ypres* is a rather lean publication for the amount of material it covers. As a consequence, certain elements, like the intricacies of imperial and post-imperial commemoration, can feel a little rushed at times. Nevertheless, there is more than enough in *Ypres* to satisfy casual visitors to First World War memory studies, who will put down this guide with a sense of having checked all the boxes, while those wishing to learn more about this dense site of memory have a solid base from which to plan further adventures into the salient's history.

The authors are very happy to accept this review and the insightful critical comments.

Other reviews:

New York Journal of Books

<https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/ypres-great-battles> [2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2342>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/301383>

[2] <https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/ypres-great-battles>