THE OLD FRONT LINE: RETURNING TO THE BATTLEFIELDS IN THE WRITINGS OF EX-SERVICEMEN

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Soon after the outbreak of war, a Red Cross section under the command of Fabian Ware (later Major-General Sir Fabian Ware) began, in addition to its normal task of transporting and ministering to the wounded, to make a record of the locations and identities of war graves. With increased casualty lists, by 1916 this section had grown into the Graves Registration Committee (and the Prince of Wales’s Committee for the Maintenance of Military Tombs) and the following year became the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission.1 It was notified of burials by chaplains, medical and army units and, where possible, had crosses made to mark the graves. A great deal of the administrative time of the Committee was taken up with responding to the steady stream of enquiries from bereaved relatives. Wherever possible the Commission would supply a photograph of the grave as well as information regarding its location and, when in a cemetery, directions as to the nearest railway station. Ware explained later that this “might be useful for those wishing to visit the country after the war.”2 Travel to the sites of graves was prohibited for bereaved relatives during the war, but with its end, Ware knew that many such pilgrims would be travelling to the old Western Front.

Indeed, Thomas Cook lost no time in advertising such tours. The day after Armistice Day, the company’s secretary informed The Daily Telegraph that arrangements were already “in a practically complete form for visits to the various battlefields by those who have lost relatives.”3 The same newspaper, a few days before the Armistice, featured an article calling for a massive state-funded pilgrimage to be organized. This was not

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2 Major-General Sir Fabian Ware, “Preface” to Hurst (1929), pp. vii–ix, vii. It is worth noting that R.H. Mottram, former infantry officer and author of the The Spanish Farm Trilogy, 1914–1918 (1927), considered that when this book was published it marked “the real end of the War” for him. “That was really the end, there is no longer anything to be done.” Mottram (1932), p. 23.
3 “Visits to Battlefields” (12 Nov. 1918): 10.
a pilgrimage for the bereaved but, it was implied, for the complacent young women who might be in danger of forgetting the tragedy of the war, and, importantly, who were responsible for perpetrating it:

Some day a less squeamish authority will tell what these daughters of these countries [France and Belgium] have endured, and the women and maidens in this country may thank God for their island home, their Fleet and Armies. Send women, young women from every county and every town in the United Kingdom, from the Greater Britains beyond the seas, from every State of the United States, from all neutral countries, organize these parties officially, let the States pay the expense, let armies of them be taken over the shell-shattered soil of France, that they may tell their children’s children of the Hell of the Hun. I don’t want the tea-gossipers of the West-end alone to go. I want the women from every class to see these things. Then they will know what war is in all its fearful brutality.4

The anonymous writer envisages an endless procession of the future mothers of the world witnessing the panorama of destruction that was the Western Front. The old battlefield is imagined as a mute witness to the horrors and traumas of the war which can nonetheless impart its profound and tragic lesson to those who simply see it. The destroyed landscape is both visual metaphor for the damage done to the manhood of Europe and geographical text which has the history of monstrous violence written on every trench and shell-hole and grave. The body of land, more than the body of the ex-serviceman, is cast as that which has been most horribly mutilated by the war and the one objective and absolute witness of the war experience.

Civilian visitors were generally classed as tourist or pilgrim depending on their motivation in travelling to the battlefield. Tourists were considered curious and disrespectful day-jaunters, sallying out from their comfortable hotels in fast motor-cars to ‘do’ the battlefields and pick up over-priced fake souvenirs. Pilgrims, conversely, were bereaved relatives of dead or missing soldiers travelling somberly and reverently to see the areas in which their loved ones had fought and died, and, if possible, lay flowers on their graves in the newly created cemeteries. Added to these was a third class of visitor to the old battlefields: the ex-servicemen, who were neither tourists nor pilgrims but, in their complex relationship with the scenes of old battles, acted in turn as both. This chapter will be principally concerned with uncovering and investigating

4 “When We Talk of Peace” (5 Nov. 1918): 4.