
The Living, The Dead and the Imagery of Emptiness and Re-appearance on the Battlefields of the Western Front

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Taking as its field of enquiry the trenches of the First World War, this chapter explores the processes of death, burial and exhumation on the Western Front. Deserted by daytime, yet crowded with action at night, the Great War battlefield was a lethal tract where death was often random and anonymous. However, the battlefield could also be a phantasmagoric, at times enchanted place, replete with myth, superstition and sublime moments of dread and fascination. By looking at the war through the eyes of a number of artists this chapter examines the role of painting and photography in appearing to bring the dead, the disappeared and the dying back to figurative life. Possibly the best known work of this kind is Stanley Spencer’s vast panorama of post-battle exhumation *The Resurrection of the Soldiers*, a mural-scale panorama of earthly redemption which was painted in the 1920s at the same time as vast tracts of despoiled land in France and Belgium were being brought back from apparent extinction, and planted with thousands of military gravestones. While salvage parties recovered and re-buried thousands of corpses, Spencer and such artists as Will Dyson, Otto Dix, Max
Beckmann and Will Longstaff were conjuring up images of barren and blighted landscapes populated by phantom soldiers emerging from shallow graves.

The chapter opens with an examination of how soldiers populated an apparently emptied landscape which was actually teeming with subterranean activity, how they died, how they were buried, and how they were made to ‘re-appear’ through art, film, and poetry. Having examined the crowded emptiness of No Man’s Land, the chapter briefly explores the complex processes and iconography of remembrance, including the ritual surrounding the exhumation and re-burial of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. Focusing on Stanley Spencer and his fascination with the ideas of redemption and resurrection, the chapter explores how different artists created images that appeared to revive and resurrect the battle-dead. Finally, through a reflection on Jeff Wall’s epic photographic battle-scape ‘Dead Troops Talk’, the chapter connects Spencer’s ontology of reconciliation with Wall’s bleaker montage of debacle and death.

**Dying**

One was tall, gaunt Tom Gunn, the Limber-gunner of F. Sub-section. As we stood by his corpse someone lifted the blanket that covered his face. It was emaciated and the colour of pale ivory. The other man had died from shell shock. He stood upright by the wheel of his gun unmarked but quite dead. Just a short while before he had invited some of us to share in a parcel of food he had just received from home, but the party had to be cancelled. (Roberts 1974: 13)

Presented statistically, the loss of young life in the First World War is quite overwhelming. Even when broken down into smaller numbers the scale of loss is numbing; in 1916, Richard Tawney went ‘over the top’ on the Somme battlefield with 820 fellow Manchesters; 450 men died in the initial attack; after the second, just 54 answered the roll-call (Tawney 1953: 78). During the same battle the 1st battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment – 801 officers and
men – were reduced to 68 uninjured men after a single day’s fighting (Gough 2004: 238).

However, as many historians warn, these raw and terrible statistics must be treated with some care. Figures for the hardest hit units must not be projected onto the whole war, nor should one battle be regarded as typical of the experience of every foot soldier. While it is estimated that four and a half percent of British fighting soldiers died during the Second World War and five percent in the Boer War, some ten percent died during the Great War. The daily attrition rate on the British stretch of the Western Front was over two hundred soldiers (Terraine 1980).

Death came in various guises. For many it came anonymously and suddenly. Artillery was the most lethal killer. While front-line soldiers dreaded the prospect of hand-to-hand fighting, it was the awesome power of cannon and mortar that was the real killer (Sheffield 2001: 110). A wounded man was three times as likely to die as a result of a shell wound to the chest as of a bullet wound. Not only could distant guns pound a specific tract of earth for hours, sometimes days on end, but a direct hit from a heavy metal shell would completely obliter ate the body, reducing a living being to little more than a putrid whiff of air (Conrad 1999: 215). To troops under sustained heavy shelling, artillery destroyed not only the body, but the mind, inducing new depths of fear by its random anonymity.

Death by bullet was equally hideous. Sniper fire nearly always targeted the head. Machine-gun fire was less clinical, tearing capacious holes in the body. Obscene and random, death was like black magic:

..bodies continued walking after decapitation; shells burst and bodies simply vanished. Men’s bodies “shattered”: their jaws dropped and out poured “so much blood”. Aeroplane propellers sliced men in to pieces. (Bourke 1996: 213).
Death from gas brought an entire new realm of suffering. Chlorine gas acutely irritates the lungs and bronchial tubes, causing vomiting, violent coughing and breathing difficulties. Heavy doses would cause the lungs to deteriorate in seconds, the victim would cough up blood and die in minutes, ‘doubled up, fists clenched, in agony’ (Slowe and Woods 1986: 28).

Many, however, died without any visible sign of death, perhaps from shell percussion or from a hidden wound, though experienced soldiers would be able to detect the ‘tell-tale blood drips on lips, in ears or lungs’ (Winter 1978: 206). Siegfried Sassoon came across one unmarked body which he lifted upright from its prone state in a ditch:

> Propped against the bank, his blond face was undisfigured except by the mud which I wiped from his eyes and tunic and mouth by my coat sleeve. He’d evidently been killed while digging, for his tunic was knotted loosely about his shoulders. He didn’t look to be more than eighteen. Hoisting him a little higher, I thought what a gentle face he had. (Sassoon 1930: 112)

What happened next depended entirely on the ebb and flow of the battle, and the specific conditions pertaining at the moment of death. Individual soldiers killed by sniper fire or shell explosion whilst holding a front-line post or near a road behind the lines would be easily identified and buried in small or individual plots near the front or reserve lines. Artilleryman William Roberts’ drawing *Burying the Dead after a Battle* captures the poignant scene of gunners, heads bowed gathered around their comrades grave, while in the near-distance a town burns, an aeroplane falls from the sky, and tanks pitch about under billows of shellfire.

> ‘We buried our own dead’, he wrote, ‘together with some left over from the infantry’s advance, shoulder to shoulder in a wide shallow grave, each in his blood-stained uniform and covered by a blanket. I noticed that some feet projected beyond the covering, showing that they had died with their boots on, in some cases with their spurs on too’ (Roberts 1974: 14). During the
static years of siege warfare on the Western Front graves were dug in advance, some regiments setting aside plots of land for their own dead, even barring others from ‘trespassing’. Many of these regimental plots would later be retained by the Imperial War Graves Commission as small and compact cemeteries dedicated to particular units – Gordon’s Cemetery near Mametz, for example. Most of these small and isolated plots would later be dug up; the bodies exhumed by Graves Registration Units and brought into one of the vast ‘concentration’ cemeteries, located nearer villages and roads so as to allow ease of access by visitors after the war (Longworth 1967: 14).

Not all of the dead would be buried intact. Souvenir hunters would strip a body of its every article, especially if the dead were the enemy, and the further from the front-line the more cleanly picked. As Guardsman Stephen Graham later recalled: ‘Those (bodies) nearest our encampment at Noreuil all lay with the whites of their pockets turned out and their tunics and shirts undone by souvenir hunters.’ He remembered in particular, a well clothed six feet three inches tall dead German, whose boots were taken first, then his tunic, ‘A few days later he was lying in his pants’ (Graham 1921: 67).

After a major set-piece battle, the work of the burial parties was unrelentingly grim. Those who had been killed during an attack or patrol might be less easily identifiable, having lain in No Man’s Land or other parts of the battlefield exposed to enemy fire. Mass clearance was attempted even when a battle was in progress or where a front was still strewn with the recent dead. In the aftermath of the Battle of Loos in autumn 1915 Scots officer George Craike spent nights with groups of his men scurrying into No Man’s Land to hastily cover the bodies of East Surrey soldiers who had died in large numbers a week earlier.
We crawled out of the trenches with caution in small parties, and dealt with the dead simply by putting them into depressions in the earth, or into shell holes. This was not a pleasant task and occasionally the arms disengaged from the bodies. However, the bodies were placed as far as possible in these holes and covered over with a light layer of earth, this earth being brushed or dug in by the entrenching tools. All the work had to be done on all fours, for to stand erect was courting disaster. … The work was slow, laborious and difficult. (Arthur 2002: 105)

Once the worst of the fighting had passed over, larger burial parties would be organised. Often consisting of soldiers from different units, motivated by the need to maintain morale, to achieve some modicum of hygiene and out of common humanity, they combed the former battlefield, their noses and mouths covered by fragments of gas masks, removing the identity discs if they could be recovered, the red disc destined for the orderly office, the green one left on the body to ensure accurate identification. Pockets would be searched to uncover paybooks and other personal effects. There was little time for niceties: ‘you put them in a hole ready dug with boots and everything on. You put in about 10 or 15, whatever the grave will hold, throw about 2 feet of earth on them and stick a wooden cross on top’ (Winter 1978: 206).

Fragments of British dead were collected in empty sandbags and buried in mass graves as quickly as possible; their grave markers often listing little more than ‘an unknown soldier’, or possibly some indication of the regimental or unit title. Sapper Richards remembered gathering the remnants of one ghastly bombing accident, rescuing ‘bits from telegraph wires where they’d been blown at great velocity’, and burying them in a common grave (Arthur 2002: 106).

Sometimes the interval between death and discovery was too long and bodies had literally fallen to pieces ravaged by rats, weather, and biological processes:
As you lifted a body by its arms and legs, they detached themselves from the torso, and this was not the worst thing. Each body was covered inches deep with a black fur of flies, which flew up into your face, into your mouth, eyes and nostrils as you approached. The bodies crawled with maggots. There had been a disaster here. An attack by green, badly led troops who had had too big a rum ration – some of them had not even fixed their bayonets – against a strong position where the wire was still uncut. They hung like washing on the barbs, like scarecrows who scared no crows since they were edible. The birds disputed the bodies with us. This was a job for all ranks. No one could expect the men to handle the bodies unless the officers did their share. We stopped every now and then to vomit… the bodies had the consistency of Camembert cheese. I once fell and put my hand through the belly of a man. It was days before I got the smell out of my hands. (Cloete 1972: 121)

Under these extreme circumstances every effort at conventional decency was attempted. Burial parties tried to give ‘these poor bleeding pieces of earth’ a Christian burial by reading sections from the Book of Common Prayer. Even if a Minister, chaplain or priest could not attend all combatants felt it important that ‘you buried your comrades and saw to it that their graves were marked with a wooden cross and a name…’ (Carrington 1965: 127-28). The hope of creating a more decent burial improved with distance from the front; whereas a loose covering of earth might be all that was possible at the trench lines, ‘some old sacking’ was considered an adequate and appropriate covering further from the front, while canvas sheets were regarded as a suitable substitute for coffins in the military hospitals located in the rear zones (Bourke 1996: 215-16).

Enemy dead were often left until last to be cleared from a battlefield. As Charles Carrington (1965: 128) coolly noted they ‘came last in priority, and more than once I have cleared a trench of its defunct tenants by throwing them over the parapet where someone might or might not find and bury them.’ Experienced soldiers could estimate the date of death
from the colour and condition of corpses left out in the open, Caucasians turned from yellow to grey to red, and then to black. In death, white soldiers turned black and black Senegalese soldiers turned white (MacDermott in Bourke, 1996: 214).

Official War Artist William Orpen was astonished at the weird colours of the enemy corpses he stumbled across while roaming the abandoned Somme battlefields in 1917, and made a number of precise drawings describing the polished skeletons of German soldiers ‘bleached white and clean’ by the fierce summer sun. As he wandered over the emptied downlands of the Somme everything shimmered in the heat; abandoned clothes were baked into strange combinations of colour, ‘white, pale grey and pale gold. The only dark colours were the deep red bronze of the “wire”, wild flowers sprouted everywhere… in the evening, everything golden in the sunlight’ (Orpen 1923: 23–4). His only companions on these sojourns were distant burial parties who were diligently digging up, identifying, and re-burying thousands of scattered bodies in the larger concentration cemeteries. Orpen passed one such group near Thiepval Hill, resting from their unpleasant work, and trying to identify the dead from their meagre finds – a few coins, pocket knives, an occasional identity disc – garnered from their long labour. Perhaps it was only artists who, commissioned to seek out the novel and unique faces of war, sought the imagery of death in extremis:

Then suddenly round the bend in the trench I came to a great bay which was full of dead Germans, but they weren’t a bit horrible. They had been dead for about six weeks and weather and rats and maggots and everything else had done their stuff. Now they were just shiny skeletons in their uniforms held together by the dry sinews, that wound round their bones... It was a most weird and extraordinary picture and I was absolutely fascinated. (Talbot Kelly 1980: 5)

**The Desert: Deserted but ‘Populated’**
Not far from where Orpen sat drawing the picked remains of soldiers in foul-smelling trenches, Charles Carrington scanned the scorched earth of the southern battlefield, its few remaining trees snapped short with splintered ends ‘like monstrous shaving brushes’, everywhere the smell of burnt and poisoned mud, every yard of ground ‘ploughed up by shell-fire and …tainted with high explosive, so that a chemical reek pervaded the air … and through it one could distinguish a more biotic flavour – the stink of corrupting human flesh.’ In fact, Carrington reckoned that the best part of 200,000 men had been killed in the last few months somewhere in the 30 square miles around his trench. Buried hastily in shallow graves, or buried and subsequently blown out of those graves, he estimated ‘7,000 corpses to the square mile [was] not much of an exaggeration, ten to the acre shall we say, and your nose told you where they lay thickest’ (Carrington 1965: 127).

To the scrutinising eye the landscape may have seemed deserted but the dead lay just beneath its ruptured surface and the living led an ordered and disciplined existence in underground shelters and deep chambers (Redmond 1917: 39). It was one of the greatest contradictions of modern warfare, a landscape that gave the appearance by daylight of being empty but was emphatically not: it teemed with invisible life. Few paintings have captured the immensity of that void; even words failed to convey the intensity of its emptiness. Faced with the phantasmagoric lunar face of the Western Front, the imagination froze:

It seemed quite unthinkable that there was another trench over there a few yards away just like our own …Not even the shells made that brooding watchfulness more easy to grasp; they only made it more grotesque. For everything was so paralysed in calm, so unnaturally innocent and bland and balmy. You simply could not take it in. (Farrer 1918: 113)

One writer who visited the Western Front - Reginald Farrer - suggested, that it was quite wrong to regard the ‘huge, haunted solitude’ of the modern battlefield as empty. ‘It is
more’, he argued, ‘full of emptiness… an emptiness that is not really empty at all’ (Farrer 1918: 25). Paul Nash visualised this idea - borrowing Farrer’s phrase the ‘Void of War’ and populating its emptinesses with latent violence. The very concept of space as an undifferentiated, homogeneous void which surrounded solid objects had already been challenged by contemporary artists; cinema was revolutionizing the visual arrangement of time; the act of film editing fractured continuous events, reshaping and compressing story-lines into new patterns of narrative. Just as geographers were developing regional approaches on the interrelationship between people and their local environments, (Baker 1988) so scientific research pioneered by Einstein argued for a number of distinct spaces equal to the number of unstable reference systems. Braque and Picasso smashed forever the belief in a neat pictorial system based on the single static eye of one-point perspective. It was a period of extraordinary innovation, as if ‘an earthquake had struck the precisely reticulated sidewalks of a Renaissance street scene’ (Kern 1983: 179). War accelerated these changes: when Picasso saw trucks heading out of Paris towards the Front he is said to have pointed at their camouflage and exclaimed ‘yes, it is we who made that, that is cubism’ and to a degree he was right. Deceptive and disruptive camouflage is the perfect exposition of the new way that the world’s spaces had to be seen, or to be more exact, not seen (Stein 1938: 11).

By contrast, the benighted battlescape was always busy as troops set to work repairing their entrenchments, reinforcing the wire, bringing forward fresh troops, food and provisions, or setting out into No Man’s Land on raid or patrol. The tract of land between the trenches was a ‘debatable’, fluid and near-mythical zone that soldiers learned to fear, but which also exercised a dread fascination with many. The poet David Jones captured its liminal qualities, the threshold between two different existential spaces:
The day by day in the wasteland, the sudden violences and long stillnesses, the sharp contours and unformed voids of that mysterious existence profoundly affected the imaginations of those who suffered it. It was a place of enchantment. (Jones 1937: x)

At the intersection of these two worlds – the dangerous emptiness of the daylight battlescape and the crowded busy-ness of the benighted No Man’s Land - came one of the critical moments of any soldier’s experience of war: the moment he left the relative safety of the front-line and stepped up into the danger zone. One soldier remembered it thus:

The scene that followed was the most remarkable that I have ever witnessed. At one moment there was an intense and nerve shattering struggle with death screaming through the air. Then, as if with the wave of a magic wand, all was changed; all over ‘No Man’s Land’ troops came out of the trenches, or rose from the ground where they had been lying. (Stuart Dolden 1980: 39)

Moving from the horizontal to the vertical, from subterranean security to maximal vulnerability, was an ultimate transformation for every combatant. It compounded the central tenet of militarised service; the transformation from civilian to soldier, from innocence to experience, and, in many cases, from youth to adult. Indeed, every level of the military experience seemed to be permeated by the rhetoric of transformation and conversion. One officer, for example, relieved from an exposed front-line outpost, described how marvellous it was to be out of the trenches: ‘it is like being born again.’ (Plowman 1927: 54) Another described those who survived one particular battle as ‘not broken, but reborn’ (Williamson 1988: 10). Throughout the memoirs of the Great War, (and perhaps maybe all wars) there is a common language of initiation, of ‘baptisms of fire’, of inner change and transmutation brought about by ecstatic experience, of ‘immense exultation at having got through the barrage’ (Owen in Fussell 1975: 115). Edmund Blunden, returning to his lines after a desperately dangerous patrol in no-man’s-land, recalled how ‘We were received as Lazarus was’
When Siegfried Sassoon discovered that his friend Robert Graves was not dead and had in fact survived an artillery barrage, the news was celebrated as though he ‘had risen again from the dead’ (Sassoon 1930: 128). As Paul Fussell has written, it was this plethora of ‘very un-modern superstitions, talismans, wonders, miracles, relics, legends and rumours that would help shape the dominant mythologies of the war.’ It was a world of ‘conversions, metamorphoses, and rebirths in a world of reinvigorated myth’ (Fussell 1975: 115). The transformation of the body through moments of extreme tension was matched by the transformation of the pulverized landscape both during and after the war. Hampshire’s officer Paul Nash saw how war wreaked its havoc, but was astonished that nature should prove so extraordinarily resilient. He wrote of walking through a wood, or at least what remained of it after the shelling, when it was just ‘a place with an evil name, pitted and pock marked with shells, the trees torn to shreds, often reeking with poison gas’. Two months later this ‘most desolate ruinous place’ was drastically changed. It was now ‘a vivid green’:

..the most broken trees even had sprouted somewhere and in the midst, from the depth of the wood’s bruised heart poured out the throbbing song of a nightingale. Ridiculous mad incongruity!

One can’t think which is the more absurd, the War or Nature… (Nash 1949: 33)

Re-membering

In 1919 Paul Nash and his brother John, were provided with a truck load of shards from the Western Front – metal fragments, sheets of corrugated roofing, concrete blocks and other detritus – delivered to their studio in the Chilterns to jog their memories as they embarked on paintings commissioned by the British War Memorials scheme. Both were encouraged to revisit the old battlegrounds, but having served on the front-line they chose not to, accepting that its cruel complexion was impressed indelibly on them. How could they forget the state of northern France and western Belgium after years of siege warfare. Objective measurements
attest to the utter scale of desolation across a great tract of northern Europe where some 333 million cubic metres of trench had to be back-filled, barbed wire covered an estimated 375 million square metres, over 80,000 dwellings had been destroyed or damaged, as were 17,466 schools, public buildings and churches, and the population of the devastated regions had diminished by 60 per cent (Clout 1996). A map drawn up by the British League of Help for Devastated France superimposed the scale of war damage onto the Shires of England with the startling prediction that no fewer than twenty-one English counties would have been severely blighted by war - a swathe of destruction that reached from Kent to the north Midlands (Osborne, 2001).

While the native populations in France and Belgium toiled to reconstruct their homes and land, pilgrims and veterans roamed the former battlegrounds to locate places that might contain the memory of significant events. Outwardly there was nothing to see; the landscape that drew them was an imaginary one. It was a place of projection and association, a space full of history, yet void of obvious topography, where physical markers had been obliterated but the land overwritten with an invisible emotional geography (Gough 1993). When the painter Stanley Spencer travelled to the Balkans in 1922 he was undertaking a journey made by thousands, indeed tens of thousands, of travellers who were uniting intense memories with places that no longer existed; indeed the wasted landscapes in France, Belgium, the Dardanelles and Macedonia were outwardly empty places ‘you take your own story to’, bereft of identifying landmarks except for painted signposts indicating where things once were – former villages, churches or farmsteads – and littered with war refuse and unspent ammunition (Shepheard 1997).
By 1920, some 4,000 men were daily engaged in combing the battlefields in the search for human remains. On the Western Front, the ground was divided into gridded areas, each searched at least six times, but even ten years later up to 40 bodies were being handed over each week to the French authorities (Middlebrook and Middlebrook 1991: 3). In France a ten franc bounty was given for each corpse returned to the authorities. A systematic method to identify graves and locate shallow burials had been put in place by the British as early as September 1914, although initial attempts to co-ordinate the burial and recording of the dead were somewhat haphazard. It was the zeal of Fabian Ware and his Graves Registration Unit that laid the foundations of a systematic audit of British and Empire dead and their place of burial (Longworth 1967). Once it had been decided that bodies would not be exhumed and repatriated, Ware began to establish a method for graves registration and a scheme for permanent burial sites. He also arranged that all graves should be photographed so that relatives might have an image and directions to the place of burial. By August 1915 an initial 2,000 negatives, each showing four grave markers, had been taken. Cards were sent in answer to individual requests, enclosing details that gave ‘the best available indication as to the situation of the grave and, when it was in a cemetery, directions as to the nearest railway station which might be useful for those wishing to visit the country after the war’ (Ware in Hurst 1929: vii). Nine months later Ware’s makeshift organisation had registered over 50,000 graves, answered 5,000 enquiries, and supplied 2,500 photographs. Little over a year later the work to gather, re-inter and individually mark the fallen had become a state responsibility. The dead, as Heffernan states, were no longer allowed ‘to pass unnoticed back into the private world of their families’. They were ‘official property’ to be accorded appropriate civic commemoration in ‘solemn monuments of official remembrance’ (Heffernan 1995: 302).
Ware’s band of searchers took to their work with zealous diligence. One described it as requiring the patience and skills of a detective ‘to find the grave of some poor fellow who had been shot in some out of the way turnip field and hurriedly buried.’ After the war, local people, especially young children, joined in the searches with sometimes grisly outcomes:

It occasionally happens that the grave which we believe to contain the remains of a certain person is, in fact, a pit into which large numbers of dead bodies have been thrown by the enemy. When such a grave is opened we are able not only to identify the body for which we are searching, but also by their discs, the bodies of many others. One example - the latest – will suffice. The trench containing the bodies of Colonel _, Captain _, Lieutenants __ __, held also the bodies of 94 non-commissioned officers and men. Of these 66 still wore their discs, etc., and thus their deaths were certified, and their graves ascertained. The trench was then prolonged, the bodies laid side by side, and the burial service read over them. (Report in Longworth 1967: 4-5)

According to Longworth, a good registration officer quickly came to know intimately the ground allotted to him: he knew its recent military history, every raid, skirmish or significant action, the regiments involved and in which fields unmarked or unrecorded graves were likely to be located. Following up every scrap of information, sometimes gleaned from veterans who had served on that part of the front, he pieced together the scanty evidence so as to identify burials. Graves Registration staff had actually undertaken such work during the war, often within range of enemy gunfire, but after the death of one staff member working in an Ypres cemetery they were ordered back from the front-lines into the safer areas where battle had moved on. This necessary, but unfortunate, decision may explain ‘the extraordinarily high proportion of unidentifiable graves when the count came after the war’ (Longworth 1967: 10).

Known and Unknown
Between 1921 and 1928 some 30,000 corpses were dug-up from their last burial place, and re-interred. Each body was marked by a standard stone headstone, which carried a modicum of military detail, as much as could be gleaned from the corpse or from its first grave marker, usually name, rank, regimental number (except for officers) military unit, date of death, and age (if supplied by next of kin). Personal inscriptions paid for by the family of the dead man were allowed to a maximum of 66 characters, including the spaces between words (Batten 2009). It is reckoned that only a quarter could be identified because fibrous identity discs issued before 1916 had disintegrated. In those instances the headstone would simply state ‘A Soldier / of the Great War / Known Unto God’. In some cases the inscription indicates that the body was known to have belonged to a particular unit, but could be identified in no greater detail, or that the body lies not directly beneath the stone but somewhere within the plot of the cemetery. Despite the occasional attempt to have an individual body brought home for private burial, the principle – approved by the Imperial Conference of 1918 and endorsed by the British government in May 1920 – that all bodies were to be buried near to where they fell was rigorously applied. There was, however, one notable exception - the exhumation and burial in Britain of an ‘Unknown Warrior’.

Many individuals have been credited with the idea of exhuming the body of an unknown soldier and entombing it in the sacred centre of the British State, ‘the Parish Church of the Empire’, at Westminster Abbey. Most scholars agree, however, that the idea originated with a young army padre, the Reverend David Railton MC who wrote first to Sir Douglas Haig, and then to the Dean of Westminster, the Right Rev Herbert Ryle (Inglis 1993) in August 1920. Our Empire later explained his motives:
He was worried that the great men of the time might be too busy to be interested in the concerns of a mere padre. He had also thought of writing to the King but was concerned that his advisors might suggest some open space like Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park etc ... Then artists would come and no one could tell what weird structure they might devise for a shrine! (Our Empire in Gavagan 1995: 9)

The popular press railed against ‘weird artists’ and were aghast at the exhibitions of official war art that were being shown in London. Railton’s letter, however, struck a popular chord, and the Dean soon gained the approval of the Prime Minister, who in turn convinced the War Office and (a rather reluctant) King. Cabinet established a Memorial Service Committee in October. It was hoped that the entombment would take place at the unveiling of the permanent Cenotaph in Whitehall that November.

Necessarily a sensitive act, the selection of a single British body was clouded in secrecy. Historians differ as to the number of bodies actually exhumed, whether four or six. (Wyatt 1939) Whichever, a number of unknown bodies were dug up from the areas of principle British military involvement in France and Belgium – the Somme, Aisne, Arras and Ypres. The digging parties had been firmly instructed to select a grave marked ‘Unknown British Soldier’, one who had been buried in the earlier part of the war so as to allow sufficient decomposition of the body. The party had to ensure the body was clad, or at least wrapped, in British khaki material (Inglis 1993).

Funeral cars delivered four bodies in sacks to a temporary chapel at military headquarters at St Pol where at midnight on 7th November 1920, Brigadier General Wyatt, officer commanding British forces in France and Flanders, selected one of the flag-draped figures (described later by Wyatt as ‘mere bones’) by simply stepping forward and touching one of them. Before this ultimate selection each sackload had been carefully picked through to
confirm that they were British (or at least British Empire) remains and that no name tags, regimental insignia or any other means of identification remained.

While the single selected body was made ready to embark on its highly ritualised journey, the others were quietly reburied. Other countries followed suit: having chosen their ‘Warrior’, the Americans returned three bodies to the soil without ceremony; in France, at precisely the same moment that the single chosen body was being buried to great ceremony under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, seven other bodies that been dug up but not chosen, were re-interred under a cross in a Verdun war cemetery.

After an extraordinary choreography of ceremony and ritual the coffin - freshly constructed by the British Undertaker’s Association from an oak tree that had stood in the parks of Hampton Court Palace - reached Westminster Abbey. After the clamour of the crowds that lined the railway lines from Dover to Victoria Station, and the masses gathered on the streets and squares of central London, the Abbey was hushed, if not tense with anticipation. Here, as Geoff Dyer has observed ‘the intensity of emotion was reinforced by numerical arrangement’: one hundred winners of the Victoria Cross lined the route to the burial place; a thousand bereaved mothers and widows stood behind them. (Dyer 1995) Lowered into a grave dug in the entrance of the abbey, the coffin was sprinkled with soil from Flanders. Later the earth in the six barrels would be added - ‘making a part of the Abbey forever a part of a foreign field’ - and the grave sealed with a large slab of Belgian marble.

On Armistice Day that November over a million people passed by the Cenotaph in Whitehall in the week between its official unveiling and the sealing of the tomb. By way of lending a sense of proportion to the nation’s loss, it was estimated that if the Empire’s dead could march four abreast down Whitehall it would take them over three days to pass the
monument, a column stretching from London to Newcastle. Not long after, this incredible idea was rendered actual as endless columns of troops marched past memorials all over the country. *The Times* intoned: ‘The dead lived again’. In these memorable images it seems as though the soldiers are the dead themselves ‘marching back to receive the tribute of the living’. (Dyer 1995: 24) It is an insight that provokes memories of Eliot’s lines in *The Waste Land*:

> A crowd flowed over Westminster Bridge. So many,
> 
> I had not thought death had undone so many.

In post-war Britain it would have been almost impossible to avoid the intensity of remembrance. One authority declared it the greatest period of monument-building since Pharaonic Egypt, (Ware 1937) and Stanley Spencer’s painting of the unveiling of Cookham war memorial captures an event that was repeated countless times as the nation sought to mourn the common man. Indeed the line of young men who crowd the foreground of Spencer’s painting seem less concerned with paying homage to the dead as vicariously acting out their missing townsmen, a surrogate army of ghosts returned home.

**The Dead Rising**

In the decade after the war, the image of the dead rising from the tortured landscapes of the old battlefields became a familiar part of the iconography of remembering. During the war, artists had created occasional images of a ghostly figure wandering wraith-like across no-man’s-land; poets and the popular press had played with the notion of guardian angels or spectred hosts. There were many legendary (and largely apocryphal) tales of ‘mysterious Majors’, or benevolent phantoms who return to help, warn or merely stand alongside comrades in the twilight hours of stand-to. Many combatants found this entirely understandable; sudden departures and unexplained absences were common experiences, in battle soldiers literally
vanished into the air, dematerialised before their comrades’ eyes, every trace gone. Sudden absences, emptiness and invisibility became the hallmarks of the war. Despite the scale of commemoration in stone, many of those who returned to the former battlefields craved some form of spiritual connection with their vanished loved ones. In part this explains the upsurge in séances and similar activities in the years after the war, (Winter 1995) and perhaps also the fascination with battlefield pilgrimage and the need to gather ‘mementos’ or relics from the same landscapes that had apparently swallowed whole the sons, brothers and fathers of the massed armies, and which persists today (Gough 1996).

In film, in painting and even in photography, however, the disappeared and the dead could be made to live again and images of the dead rising from the earth gained a wide currency. In 1927 the *Melbourne Herald* published a drawing – *A Voice from ANZAC* – by war artist Will Dyson, which depicted two Australian soldiers on the shores of Gallipoli, one of them asking, ‘Funny thing, Bill. I keep thinking I hear men marching.’ That year another Australian artist, Will Longstaff, had attended the unveiling of the Menin Gate at Ypres – with Plumer’s rhetorical message ‘the dead are not missing, they are here’ – and in response had painted *Menin Gate at midnight* which depicts a host of ghostly soldiers emerging from the Flanders battlegrounds and walking, as one, towards the massive monument through fields strewn with red poppies. So struck had Longstaff been by the ceremony at Ypres that he later had a vision of ‘steel-helmeted spirits rising from the moonlit cornfields around him’. He returned to London and, it is said, painted the canvas in a single session while still under ‘psychic influence’ (Gray 2006).

Reproduced in tens of thousands of copies the painting had an extraordinary reception. It was displayed in London, viewed by Royal Command, toured to Manchester and Glasgow
and then sent to Australia where it is still exhibited in a darkened chapel-like room at the Canberra War Memorial. Its appeal was strong in part because spiritualism was in vogue, but mainly because those who wished to communicate with the war dead found some consolation in its pictorial verity. His work was championed by the likes of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who endorsed the spiritualist message it evoked. Longstaff’s work carried none of the venomous acrimony of Siegfried Sassoon’s post-war poetry, which by comparison was populated with ‘scarred, eyeless figures deformed by the hell of battle … supernatural figures of the macabre’ whom he pitied for the loss of their youth (Dollar 2004: 235). The poets’ bitter realism was perhaps more fully shared with the filmmaker Abel Gance, whose 1919 film *J’Accuse* ends when vast hordes of French soldiers - the unjustly dead - materialise out of the tortured earth intent on terrifying the complacency of those who could, if they wished, have ended the war (Gance 1937, Van Kelly 2000).

Having a studio in London, Longstaff may have been aware of Stanley Spencer’s *Resurrection, Cookham* (which was on show during February 1927). Spencer had been 23 at the outbreak of war, a student-prodigy and an inspired innocent who would go on to become one of Britain’s greatest twentieth century painters, famous (indeed infamous) for two things: the celebration of his home town of Cookham – his ‘heaven on earth’ as he lovingly called it, and the fusion in his paintings of sex and religion, love and dirt, the heavenly and the ordinary (Hauser 2001).

Spencer’s visionary imagination was realised through many hundreds of paintings, endless drawings and thousands of letters, written to both the living and the deceased. They exposed a complicated reading of his world and an ability to transform the menial and the banal into intense images of joyous delight. Through his work Spencer transformed Cookham
into a visionary paradise where his family and neighbours would daily rub shoulders with Old Testament figures; and where it seemed entirely appropriate that Christ would wander in the garden behind the local schoolyard.

In 1915 he had left his protective homestead to serve first as a medical orderly in a converted asylum in Bristol, then in a Field Ambulance on the Macedonia Front – a forgotten theatre of war, where a hybrid Allied force faced a strong Bulgarian army reinforced by German troops. Spencer served at the front until the Armistice, joining an infantry regiment in the latter stages of the war (Carline 1978). Some seven years later, as Longstaff was having his vision of exhumed troops marching on Menin Gate and German artists such as Otto Dix were revisiting their Flanders nightmares, Spencer translated his war experience into an extraordinary series of murals on the walls of a private memorial chapel in Hampshire, which are ostensibly about war, but where death is the ‘absent referent’ lingering in the wings, not even relegated to a walk-on part (Hauser 2001: 64).

The Sandham Memorial Chapel is perhaps the most complete memorial to recovery and redemption ever completed in the aftermath of the First World War. There is nothing like it anywhere in Europe. Spencer referred to it as his ‘Holy Box’, an affectionate reference to the Renaissance chapels in Padua and Florence, whose simple exteriors and busy interiors he revered. Commissioned by two patrons of the arts as a memorial to a relative who died of illnesses contacted on the Macedonian campaign, its panelled interior depicts Spencer’s tedious chores as a medical orderly in Bristol; his field ambulance work near Salonika, and on a vast endwall – some 4 m wide by 7 m high – an epic panorama of recovery and redemption, the ‘Resurrection of the Soldiers’. For nine months Spencer toiled on this endwall, his small, tweed-suited figure lost high in the scaffolding amongst the dozens of animated painted
figures. After the chapel was opened in 1932 a visitor was heard to pronounce: ‘My dear, the Resurrection is not in the least like that!’ (Behrend 1967: 27). However, Spencer’s idea of resurrection was not one of judgment, nor of the revival of the dead, or the re-appearance of Christ. Instead, it embraced the more holistic idea of the Resurrection of the body and the mind. Spencer’s social background and his concern for the ‘common man’ (and woman) meant that his interest lay in an egalitarian and inclusive notion of the body, one that was indifferent to social hierarchy and ignorant of external trappings and trophies of wealth and position. The Oratory was not a resurrection solely of the dead, nor for that matter a resurrection merely of the soul, rather it was ‘resurrections of his state of mind at different times’ (Glew 2001: 11). For Spencer it was a time of ‘release & change’ whereby even the mules & the tortoises come in for some sort of redemption, or re-finding of themselves from their experiences. Even the soldiers under mosquito nets seem to be caught in an act of spiritual transubstantiation, altering from one state to another, and everywhere soldiers emerge from the earth to return their now-redundant crosses to the Christ-figure, just as they had, at the end of hostilities, returned their blankets and kit to the Quarter-Master. ‘In the resurrection’, said Spencer, ‘they have even finished with that last piece of worldly impedimenta’ (Carline 1978: 190-191).

In a complicated accumulation of ideas Spencer thought of Resurrection as a ‘Last Day’, a time of reconciliation, not judgment. It was without doubt momentous, but it was entirely peaceful and calm, with no need for clarion calls or lofty pronouncements. In his interpretation, Resurrection was a redemptory act, a re-finding of oneself freed of the burden of experiences, and a reconciliation of friends, lovers, peoples of all creed and colour, and of course, their belongings. One soldier, for example, takes a small red book from his pocket, identified by Spencer as ‘a little red leather-covered Bible’ that he had been given by his sister
Florence but which he had lost. ‘Being the Resurrection’, he writes simply and matter-of-factly, ‘I find it’ (in Hauser 2001: 153). However, despite his protestations of innocence, there is an air of apocalypse about elements of the chapel, traceable in its sombre mood, inexplicable incidents and suppressed fears. Not easily could Spencer ignore the terrible past and the recent present, with tens of thousands of displaced and maimed veterans wandering the land, stranded by the fiscal gloom of the late 1920s.

During the war Spencer had buried dozens of soldiers. He painted the chapel during the years when the former battlefields were being combed for the dead and concentrated into cemeteries. In the early 1920s, when he was originating the murals in Dorset, quarrymen in nearby Portland were hacking out vast slabs of the shelly, coarse white stone to be chiselled into tens of thousands of headstones bound for the battlefields. The Resurrection wall at Burghclere is a testament to those thousands of unknown soldiers who were blown into pieces and who are remembered only in their names carved on panoramic slabs of stone.

Spencer’s figures emerge from the torn earth intact, unsullied and calm, almost beatific; very different from the homunculi embedded in the Flanders mud as devised by Otto Dix. In his apocalyptic canvas, Flanders, the dawn may be epic, but the demise of the small troupe of soldiers is tawdry and banal, their bodies enmeshed in a thicket of webbing, wire and waste. Far from emerging from the glutinous mud, the soldiers are immersed in the land, becoming a part of its subsoil, embedded in their totenlandschaft – the dead landscape - where there may be biological metamorphosis, but there is absolutely no hope of resurrection (Eberle 1985: 30). At least the skyscape holds an element of tentative promise, however ironic; in Jeff Walls vast panorama of an Afghanistan ambush even the redemptive possibility of a horizon is stripped out (Wall 1992, Chevrier 2006). Instead, in place of Spencer’s serene and demilitarized figures,
we find a platoon of traumatized soldiers with bulging eyes and contorted faces, tearing at each other, horsing around and stuffing their spilled entrails back into their soiled uniforms. Wall’s dystopia shares more in common with Sassoon’s bitter verse or Abel Gance’s film in which the dead don’t merely wander the earth, they are disgorged in rotting uniforms with mutilated bodies and torn faces, or Max Beckmann’s savage panorama ‘Resurrection’, which is dominated by a black-sphered sun. In their common scale, their subdued tonal range and their powerful sense of camaraderie there is some common ground between Wall and Spencer. But Wall’s gurning and abandoned infantrymen appear to bear nothing in common with Spencer’s mute and elegiac armies. Dead soldiers don’t talk; but in Wall’s visionary photo-piece they do. In fact it’s hard to shut them up. His thirteen slaughtered soldiers cavort, play with strips of flesh, smile knowingly at each other, and chat from casual slouching positions. But their pain is palpable. How far is this from Spencer’s notion of a reverential resurrection? In its unexpurgated depiction of pain it draws from Callot and Goya, whereas Spencer takes his inspiration from the Italian Primitives. Yet, like Spencer, there is no eye contact with us; no accusation outwards, no one turning into our world. As Susan Sontag says:

There’s no threat of protest. They are not about to yell at us to bring a halt to that abomination which is war. They haven’t come back to life in order to stagger off to denounce the war-makers who sent them to kill and be killed. … Why should they seek our gaze? (Sontag 2003: 112)

Perhaps Wall, like Spencer and Dix before him, knows that we are unable to fully empathise with these wretched souls; we will never understand the dreadfulness of war. We can only peer in and glimpse these momentarily reprieved lives. However, where Wall re-imagines the Day of Judgment as something horribly Sisyphean, Spencer dreams a vision of reconciliation and arbitration, even though the figures in his haunted Macedonian hillside
appear isolated, disengaged and rather sedated when compared to the livid lunacy of the
doomed Russian platoon capering in their cruel crater.

**Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has addressed some of the key visual and phenomenological tropes of the British
experience of the Western Front during the Great War. By focusing on the apparent
emptiness of the face of the battlefield, I have been able to deconstruct the nature of absence,
invisibility, and the void, suggesting instead that both during and after the conflict the
battlefield was in fact a crowded emptiness, crowded with soldiers hidden in noisome
labyrinths and ‘occupied’ for ever after by the bones and bodies of the dead. Quite literally
there is many a corner of some foreign field saturated with their limbs and blood and these
‘memoryscapes’ became the figurative contexts for a succession of artists, photographers and
film-makers who brought the battle dead back to ‘life’. This approach to re-visualisation has
many parallels in the literature of bereavement with its fascination for absences, presences and
continuing bonds of place, body and tragic narratives. In re-visualizing the dead, I have offered
a brief background to the cycle of death, dying, disposal, and in some cases, the ritual
exhumation for national causes. Many of those images still resonate today, even if the work of
Jeff Wall is unrelentingly dark, the work of Stanley Spencer in particular is highly regarded as
an unparalleled icon of redemption, recovery and reconciliation.

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