

Gateways to the First World War presents

VISITING AND REVISITING THE WESTERN FRONT 1919-39: THE EXPERIENCE OF AUSTRALIANS



Image: Philip Woets



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People from across the British Empire visited the former battlefields on the Western Front, and as with UK visitors, brought their own distinct national and regional interests and identities with them. As is well-known, Australians (and New Zealanders) built up a special relationship with Gallipoli, but this did not mean that France and Belgium were overlooked, as the research has revealed most clearly. Indeed, certain sites were regarded with just as much veneration and aroused a great deal of interest among Australians.

The issue of distance and logistics

Of course, for Australians (and others in the Empire), visiting the battlefields was logistically much more of a challenge in terms of time and finance. Nonetheless, as in the UK, firms were soon advertising tours of the battlefields. In May 1919

the *Maitland Daily Mercury* (NSW) carried an article noting preparations for tourism by Thomas Cook.

In the same month both the *Warwick Daily News* (Qld), rapidly followed by the *Brisbane Daily Mail*,

speculated on the looming visitor boom as the pre-war travel arrangements were restored, which also shows that Australia shared with the UK the issue of definition: was a visitor a pilgrim or a tourist? Given the sheer effort required to visit the French and Belgian battlefields, it is not surprising to find that most Australians combined it with a wider trip around UK and continental Europe, and often with the battlefields of Gallipoli and Palestine, too.

As soon as conditions permit there will undoubtedly be a flood in Continental visitings. Already Messrs. Cook are forming their plans for conducting parties of sightseers to the battlefields, ruined cities, and desolate villages of France and Belgium, and already hopeful people in whom the wanderlust is strong are pouring themselves with inquiries. To all such the only answer is "Wait." The war is not yet over.

Maitland Daily Mercury, 5 May 1919.

Source: National Library of Australia, Trove Collection (trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/)



Image: Philip Woos

The *Manilla Express* (NSW) reported that Mr and Mrs VJ. Byrnes had included a visit to the battlefields as part of their 1934 tour of Europe. But, they had ensured that they were back in the UK for attendance at every one of the test matches in that year's Ashes series.

The difficulties of logistics perhaps also explains why so many of the articles seen in the Australian press seem to be accounts undertaken by individuals or families rather than larger groups. Although such people probably represented those slightly better off than the majority, the pieces they sent to their local papers reveal a strong sense of wider responsibility. At one and the same time, they seem to write as surrogate mourners on behalf of those whose loved ones lay buried so far from home, and to reassure them of the peace and beauty of the cemeteries. A Mrs Nesbitt travelling the battlefields with her husband had excerpts from a letter home printed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. For her 'the saddest part was the graves of our dear Australian boys dotted all over the battlefields'. By 1925, with the work of the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission (IWGC) maturing, a visitor was able to inform the *Geelong Advertiser* (Vic) that 'I saw the graves of many of our boys, and was pleased to find all the cemeteries and graves in beautiful order'. 'The mothers and relatives of our dear ones can rest content in the knowledge that the graves are not allowed to be overgrown with weeds, but have flowers and a cross on every one', Mrs E.W. Pride informed the readers of the *Nambucca and Bellingen News* (NSW). Similarly, Mr and Mrs R.J. McNab travelling the battlefields with their son, told the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* (Qld) that 'to know that their loved ones are lying in such beautiful, well-kept spots' must serve as 'a source of satisfaction to relatives'. While in 1937, F.J. Tregoworth reported that 'the cemeteries are wonderfully cared for, and the work of the Imperial War Graves Commission is worthy of the greatest commendation'.

When we passed through Lamoille, Hantover, Proport, and Chignol, near the last-named place we saw what remains of "Big Bertha," the celebrated German super-gun, which, as everybody is aware, was captured by our gallant boys, but not before the Germans, seeing the case was hopeless, had disabled the monster. The gun was fixed so as to fire directly at Amiens, a distance of over twenty miles. Only a few shells were fired, and two of these landed close to the cathedral, breaking a large number of the stained glass windows, but not damaging the building. We were told that "Big Bertha" was 68 ft. long, but that the Australians lopped off 10 ft. as a memento. The remainder of the barrel still is lying on the ground, together with various small portions broken off by the charge of dynamite, with which the gun was destroyed. The pit in which the gun was laid is from 19 to 15 ft. deep. The gun was fixed in such a way as to admit of its being worked only in a semi-circle, with the muzzle facing the French forces, and so that it could not be turned on the Germans themselves, if captured. In fact, the gun is marked as having been made by Krupp, in 1914, and is embedded in concrete and hidden in a small wood.

Morning Bulletin, 1 February 1924.
Source: National Library of Australia, Trove Collection
(trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/)

But, just as with visitors from the UK, Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State, those making the trips represented many different groups. As well as families, veterans and other groups made the long journey. For the Young Australians League, a battlefield visit was an integral part of its trip to Britain and Europe. And, as younger people motivated by a sense of adventure, they appear to have taken a slightly different approach to others. In an article published by many Australian newspapers, readers were told that the group had 'penetrated to uncleared areas [of the battlefields] which have not been visited by tourists' and in the process 'they found wrecked aeroplanes, guns etc.'

Unlike many from the British Isles, the climate of north-west continental Europe could come as a great shock to Australians. In January 1919 Reverend C.T. Forscutt of Brexley Ladies College, Rockdale (NSW), suggested that tours of the battlefields be organised, but added that they should 'leave in April so as to ensure good weather'. Weather conditions could also deeply affect the spirits of visitors especially in cemeteries awaiting their final architectural and horticultural treatment by the IWGC. This is highly perceptible in a letter from a Miss Grant of Brushgrove (NSW) published by her local newspaper. She told of 'the rain descending in torrents' at Etapes, and that 'our first sight of a cemetery brought tears to our eyes.

The wooden crosses, soaking wet, touched the heart as nothing else could'. Such was the impact of the weather that she decided she could not face the visit to her brother's grave 'unless on a sunny day'. Assuming that the publication date of February 1921 was shortly after it had been forwarded to the newspaper by its recipient, then she had visited the battlefields during the depths of the north-western European winter.

Villers-Bretonneux seemed to us the saddest place we had been in. Broken-down, roofless houses everywhere. Some of them were actually occupied and a tarpaulin sheet was over the top to keep out the weather. The Amiens road from Villers-Bretonneux is long and straight, first down hill and then up. An avenue of trees border the road which runs through a wood. The sight of these broken-down trees, torn and partially uprooted, but still growing in parts, brought tears to our eyes. There were fully twenty trees altogether in the avenue, absolutely dead, the result of gas I suppose. There are still unexploded dug-outs and marks of shell holes in the roads. The roads are in excellent condition. Some people must have been working strenuously. The debris of many "dumps" was strewn around here. Remembering the terrible fighting that had taken place here in March and April 1918, one's thoughts were much too deep for words. Looking back on Villers-Bretonneux through the wood and with the brilliant sun shining on the red roofs of houses it was impossible for me to believe that it had been such an inferno. Just as impossible as it will be for many soldiers to think it could look beautiful.

Daily Examiner, 16 February 1921.
Source: National Library of Australia, Trove Collection
(trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/)

Expressing Australian pride and distinctive features

In the immediate post-war years before the IWGC took over all services relating to the war dead, the Australian Graves Registration Unit was still present, and meeting Australian soldiers living and working on the old battlefields was often very reassuring. After being struck by the beauty of the cemeteries, Mrs E.W. Pride very much appreciated an invite to lunch by Major Baker of the unit, and was then 'treated with every courtesy and even offered the use of a car and the services of a driver'. An April 1924 article in the *Sydney Sun* recommended the services of a former captain in the AIF now running motor tours of the battlefields from Amiens taking in the 'principal points and cemeteries that Australians are interested in'.

Veteran Arthur Falks returned to the Western Front in August 1937 and was delighted to find possibly the same Australian entrepreneur of Amiens: 'We stayed two nights at Amiens, at an hotel run by an Australian, late of the 27th battalion. He is a fine fellow named Edwards, and gave us great help.'

Pride at Australian achievements and distinctiveness is often detectable in these reports, but occasionally such sentiments reveal slightly more ambiguous statements about national characteristics. The *Freeman's Journal* (NSW) covered the battlefields visit of (Roman Catholic) Bishop O'Connor under the stirring headline, 'Where the Diggers won immortal glory'. An Amiens resident praised the Australians as 'great fighters' before adding 'but wild boys'. With wonderful understatement the article then notes, 'Of course, they were frequently in Amiens and, as a matter of course, they had a very good time there'. By interpreting the comment in this way, any hint at Australian excesses was neatly repackaged as nothing more than high spirits, and the already well-established Anzac stereotype was maintained. C.F. Hart, president of his local branch of the Returned Soldiers' League, interpreted French sentiments in a similar way.

It is understood that several thousand Australians are arranging, through a well-known agency, to visit Paris and the battlefields whilst over here for the Empire Exhibition. Australians need not fear the language difficulty—English goes everywhere, and ready money has a vocabulary of its own. The trip to Paris from London is comfortable and easy, whilst porters and taxi-drivers are most courteous and helpful. Tours to the battlefields are well organised by various agencies, and several of them can such be made in one day. Australians will probably concentrate on Amiens and district. This trip can be made in one day, but two days should be devoted to it.

Sun, 5 April 1924. Source: National Library of Australia, Trove Collection (trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/)

He noted that French people 'spoke appreciatively of "les Australiens." Their attitude does not seem to have changed at all, for they spoke of the Diggers as "good soldiers and beaucoup brigands" – the latter phrase being commonly used to impute roguishness.' The happy-go-lucky, larrikin Anzac was a brand recognised, acknowledged and celebrated way beyond Australia according to this view, and it must have brought immense pride and comfort to both veterans and the bereaved.

Amiens was crucial for many Australian visitors for two interlocking reasons relating to the experiences of the AIF. First, the village of Villers-Bretonneux, so stoutly defended by Australian troops in April 1918, was just beyond the city limits. Secondly, Amiens was the gateway to the Somme front and such sacred sites as Mouquet Farm and Pozières. Thirdly, from Amiens it was possible to get to Péronne, where the Australian 2nd Division had advanced up the slopes of Mont St. Quentin in August 1918. Unsurprisingly, visiting these specific sites within wider battlefields became a highly important part of Australian itineraries. When the prominent Tasmanian citizen, G.C. McKinlay, returned home after visiting Europe and the battlefields, his focus was made clear by the *Launceston Daily Telegraph*: 'Naturally, those [battlefields] where the Australians played such a prominent part claimed most attention' with Amiens, Péronne, Pozières, Villers-Bretonneux, Bapaume, Albert and Mont St. Quentin listed as the focal points. Miss L. Nicholson penned a series of articles describing her tour of France and Belgium for the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (NSW) in which she described 'the battlefields of the Somme – country sacred to the memory of so many of Australia's sons'. When the Australian trade minister, J.E. Fenton, visited Villers-Bretonneux in 1930, he was delighted to report to the Australian press that 'the Mayor received him most cordially, and asked him to convey to the Australian people the everlasting gratitude for all that had been and was being done for the town'.

In Belgium, Ypres naturally attracted attention as the crucial pan-imperial battle site, but as with British visitors, the micro-geography was important, leading Australians to Hill 60, Messines and Polygon Wood in particular. Frederick Stubbs told the *Brisbane Daily Telegraph* of visiting Polygon Wood 'where the Australians fought so bravely, and where their biggest memorial is situated'.

This refers to the 5th Australian Division obelisk in its commanding position on the buttes (a large soil embankment), which must have stood out all the more prominently in 1924 due to the absence of mature trees. For T.H. Schofield, writing to the *Horsham Times* (Vic) in August 1937, the 5th Australian Division memorial 'appealed to me for beauty of setting as well as design' made all the finer by the planting of Australian gum trees.

ists. Our own memorial near Villers Bretonneux, not yet finished, will be a fine structure on a commanding site overlooking many places where Australians were engaged in battle. But the two which appealed to me for beauty of setting as well as design were the South African memorial at Delville Wood and our own 5th Divisional one at Polygon Wood. At the latter place some Australian guns have been planted and appear to be doing well. Although the trenches and dugouts are almost totally obliterated, concern is sometimes caused by huge holes appearing where deep dugouts have fallen in owing to the rotting of supporting timbers. One such occurred just beside one of the largest monuments in France, the combined French and British one at Thiepval. Near the Lille Gate at Ypres, where the ancient earth ramparts had been honey-combed during the war and on top of which there is now a cemetery, huge holes have appeared from time to time. This and the occasional accidents, some fatal, from old shells which are amazingly efficient, are constant reminders of the terrible upheaval that took place 20 years ago.—Yours, etc.,
T. H. SCHOLFIELD,
London, July 10.

Horsham Times, 27 August 1937.
Source: National Library of Australia, Trove Collection
(trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/)

Combining identities through commemoration

At the same time, Australian distinctiveness sat in close harmony with an over-arching imperial identity, which was evident in the comments on the Menin Gate memorial and the 1928 British Legion pilgrimage. After exploring the cemeteries of the salient and the Menin Gate memorial, Alice Grant Rosman was able to conclude that 'beauty there is of Britain's making' in a December 1927 article for the *Adelaide Southern Cross*. Elsie Brickhill struck a remarkably similar note in an Armistice Day 1929 article in the *Perth Daily News*: 'Britain always does things well', she noted, 'and the Menin Gate is a masterpiece of art and beauty'. The sense of an imperial brotherhood and family with a common interest in the battlefields was underlined by the coverage of the British Legion pilgrimage. Many Australian newspapers published the British Legion's hope that Australian veterans would join the visit to France and Belgium.

locked down a long path with lawns on either side and there with its beautiful cross standing right in the centre, surrounded by hundreds of little white headstones, each of which marked the grave of some dear brave soldier, was one of the British war cemeteries. Just a pretty little garden of England planted in France and tended so carefully by British men, who had fought with many who are resting quietly after those weary days of desperate fighting. This little cemetery with its beautiful roses growing on each grave and its stone of remembrance was to me a very sacred spot, for here were buried men of our Australian forces, many of them unknown.

Through the kindness of members of the Imperial War Graves Commission, I was quickly taken to the centre, surrounded by hundreds of little white headstones, each of which marked the grave of some dear brave soldier, was one of the British war cemeteries. Just a pretty little garden of England planted in France and tended so carefully by British men, who had fought with many who are resting quietly after those weary days of desperate fighting. This little cemetery with its beautiful roses growing on each grave and its stone of remembrance was to me a very sacred spot, for here were buried men of our Australian forces, many of them unknown.

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Daily News, 11 November 1929.
Source: National Library of Australia, Trove Collection
(trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/)

Similarly, many Australian papers took a syndicated article referring to the pilgrims visiting the 'places which the valour of the Empire's armies made memorable'. While the Melbourne *Argus's* London correspondent filed an article noting that 'Eleven thousand Britons, from all parts of the Empire [made the pilgrimage]... not a few of the pilgrims are Australians, mothers or fathers, sisters or brothers of men who lie in the cemeteries of France or Flanders'. Gunner F.J. Tregoworth, was a member of the 1937 Australian coronation contingent, and after fully embracing his imperial identity – 'how wonderfully the mother country had welcomed her children home' – he went on to France and Belgium. Although it is not quite clear, Tregoworth was probably a veteran, but unlike many other ex-servicemen, he was not dismayed to find the former battlefields transformed. He delighted at the sight of people contentedly drinking in the estaminets of Ypres and it 'struck me as the happiest little town I have seen'.

Frequency of visits

As with people from the British Isles, Australian travel to the former battlefields followed a pattern. There was a good deal of activity in the early 1920s slowly rising to a peak before a marked downturn in the 1930s. Unlike in Britain and Ireland, the evidence from the newspapers does not appear to reveal a gradual recovery during the later 1930s. However, patriotic Australians who went to London for the coronation in 1937 clearly saw it as an opportunity to tour the battlefields at the same time. The reasons why Australian travel dropped-off are probably related to the lingering effects of the 1930s depression and currency exchange issues which affected the financial flexibility of many. This certainly affected the unveiling in 1938 of the main Australian memorial on the Western Front, that at Villers-Bretonneux, when only UK-based Australians attended due to government economy measures. However, the mystical grip of the battlefields as the site of pride, grief and glory remained firmly fixed in Australian culture throughout the twenties and thirties, and the people who visited them were clearly regarded as a special breed who had a duty to communicate their experiences to others.

Notes

Quotations were taken from the following newspapers:

Argus (NSW), 25 October 1927
Argus (Qld), 15 September 1928
Bunyip, (SA), 6 August 1937
Coffs Harbour Advocate, (NSW), 3 September 1937
Daily Examiner, (NSW), 16 February 1921
Daily Mail (Qld), 6 June 1919
Daily News (WA), 11 November 1929
Daily Telegraph (Qld), 20 December 1924
Daily Telegraph (Tas.), 14 December 1920
Freeman's Journal (NSW), 30 September 1920
Geelong Advertiser (Vic), 14 July 1925
Horsham Times (Vic), 27 August 1937
Maitland Daily Mercury (NSW), 5 May 1919
Manilla Express, (NSW), 7 December 1934
Mercury, (Tas.), 9 April 1930
Morning Bulletin (Qld), 1 February 1924
Nambucca and Bellingen News (NSW), 23 June 1922
Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate (NSW), 19 April 1930
Southern Cross (SA), 16 December 1927
Sun (NSW), 5 April 1924
Sydney Morning Herald (NSW), 2 January, 1919; 8 December 1919; 14 July 1923
Warwick Daily News (Qld), 28 May 1919
Western Australian (WA), 22 May 1924; 6 August 1928; 18 August 1934

The project: team members and methods

Funded by Gateways to the First World War through the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), *Visiting and Revisiting the Battlefields*, is a crowd-sourcing project devised by Professor Mark Connelly. The method for exploring the phenomenon of battlefield visiting was to search for stories in two digital collections: the British Newspaper Archive and Irish Newspaper Archives. Nineteen people volunteered to take part in the project, and the first step was a group session allowing the team to meet each other, hear more details about the aims and objectives of the project, and familiarise themselves with the research methods and processes. The volunteers were given the option of working at home through a subscription to the British Newspaper Archive or joining Mark Connelly for a research week at the British Library where they accessed digitised newspapers through the terminals in the Newsroom. Connelly devised a reporting sheet divided into chronological sections with a series of key-word themes for investigation. One volunteer was based in Australia and undertook to follow the project outline through the National Library of Australia digitised newspaper collection, Trove. The results of the research were discussed at a group meeting in which Mark Connelly undertook to write a text drawing together the conclusions creating two booklets, one exploring the position in the British Isles, and the other in Australia.

The research team consisted of:

Peter Alhadeff, Mark Allen, Hazel Basford, James and Susan Brazier, Mark Connelly, Steve Dale, Charles Davis (Australia), Malcolm Doolin, Valerie Ellis, Tim Godden, Simon Gregor, Jan and Richard Johnson, Andrew Johnston, Gill and Roger Joye, Pat O'Brien, Stephen Miles, Jon Palmer, Julie Seales, Jonathan Vernon.

Illustrations

Newspaper extracts taken from National Library of Australia, Trove Collection (trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/):

Daily Examiner, (NSW), 16 February 1921; *Daily News* (WA), 11 November 1929; *Horsham Times* (Vic), 27 August 1937; *Maitland Daily Mercury* (NSW), 5 May 1919; *Morning Bulletin* (Qld), 1 February 1924; *Sun* (NSW), 5 April 1924.

British visitors at Hill 60, Ypres (courtesy of George Godden and Philip Woets).



Image: George Godden



Visitors at the Queen Victoria Rifles memorial, Hill 60. This memorial was destroyed in the fighting in 1940 and replaced with a monument of a different design after the Second World War.

