**‘TOMMIFYING’ THE WESTERN FRONT, 1914-1918**

The First World War on the Western Front (1914-1918) is still accorded a high degree of solemnity and reverence in Britain. To mention the names of the battlefields of the Somme, Passchendaele or Ieper (Ypres) is to evoke an image of blasted landscapes devoid of humanity and civilisation, industrialised warfare and mass death on an almost unimaginable scale. Similarly, the soldiers of the British Army are routinely cast as ‘victims’ of this maelstrom; as unwilling or unwitting participants of a tragic and unavoidable conflict. Whilst this ‘popular memory’ of the Western Front serves to remember the suffering of those who fought it nevertheless clouds the lives of the thousands of individuals who served on the battlefields. The passive status as a ‘victim’ of the war obscures the actions of those who inhabited the war-torn landscape both at the front and behind the lines. This is particularly limiting as it is through the actions and habits of British soldiers that a distinct ‘sense of place’ on the Western Front was created: an area which was imbued with meaning and associations.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is most evident in the process of naming, narrating and renaming the landscape of the Western Front. In a process dictated by official army policy or undertaken by the soldiers themselves, the British trench system was provided with a series of titles and epithets which formed a means to both understand and manoeuvre through the warzone. Behind the lines, in the towns and villages of northern France and Belgium, a corresponding alteration in geography occurred as British soldiers altered French and Flemish names to ‘Tommify’ or ‘Anglicize’ the foreign country. Whilst this process was not unique to the soldiers of the British Army the values and links conveyed in these names were specific to their experience. By examining how soldiers, through the actions of naming and narrating the Western Front, created a comprehensible world in the uncertainty of the industrial conflict a new dimension to the experience of the war can be obtained. This can act to modify the perception of the soldiers as ‘victims’ of the war fighting in a desolate space and substantiate the role of troops as individuals coming to terms with the violence and insecurity of a hostile landscape. Using the extensive archives of soldiers’ letters, diaries and memoirs at the Liddle Collection (University of Leeds), the Alfred J. Peacock Collection (University of York) and the Imperial War Museum (London) the process of narrating, naming and renaming the Western Front will be examined to analyse the process of ‘localisation’ amongst the British soldiers.

Naming and Narrating the landscape

The use of place names and narratives has an established role in the social sciences as scholars have utilised this evidence to detect cultural ties, habitation and increasingly issues of power and modes of governance.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, the actions of groups or societies in stating a title, story or a specific moniker to a site, region or space has been classed as a fundamental process in developing a relationship with that locality, as a mode of ‘emplacement’.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is often interpreted within human and social geography as a step towards coming to terms with an immediate environment or within phenomenological interpretations as a sense of ‘being-in-the-world’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Whether the act of appellation or narration is afforded towards a locality that has positive or negative connotations it necessarily signifies a degree of interpretation and understanding of that particular, delineated space.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, that act of interpretation also takes place in the nexus of social, political and cultural relations within societies.[[6]](#footnote-6) In these circumstances, the politics of place are played out in geographical space as the imposition of new names, stories and associations upon established and settled areas alter and reinterpret a landscape.[[7]](#footnote-7) Attributing names, narratives and values onto places can also be a means of unbalancing the dominant order, establishing alternative world views and creating a ‘counter-geography’.[[8]](#footnote-8) In this respect, epithets and stories attached to a landscape form a reciprocal relationship with their inhabitants; as individuals use these devices to shape the world around them, these same devices also act upon individuals to structure their experience of that landscape.[[9]](#footnote-9) Naming and narrating a landscape signifies an attempt to shape and comprehend the world thereby revealing the cultural and social frameworks used to understand a ‘place’ and an agent’s relation to their environment.[[10]](#footnote-10) These actions are the basis of ‘localising’ space into place.[[11]](#footnote-11) Associating names and stories with a locality evidences a process of adaptation to create an awareness of an area.[[12]](#footnote-12) As agents build an understanding of a ‘place’, names and narratives are used to anchor and substantiate their experience of the immediate environment and are reference points in their comprehension of the locality.

The British Army on the Western Front, 1914-1918

This process of adjustment and reorientation was a key feature of the naming and renaming of the areas, towns and villages by British troops on the Western Front, 1914-1918. Indeed, the scale of the British Army’s operations on the Western Front would perhaps ensure that such an activity would be inevitable. The war was fuelled by an unprecedented mobilisation of British society to meet the demands of an industrialised conflict. As the size of the British Army increased from the initial expeditionary force of 125,000 in August 1914 to approximately 1,764,000 by 1918, large areas of France and Belgium became effectively occupied by British troops and transformed into a highly militarised zone (Figure 1).[[13]](#footnote-13) To support such a large number of soldiers, the British Army developed an extensive supply network across the region using a series of main bases at Boulogne, Rouen, Dieppe, Le Havre and Calais and supported by a series of regional depots, supplies were distributed by rail, automobiles and horse-drawn carts.[[14]](#footnote-14) Similarly, complicated networks of trenches were constructed at the front line as the Allies and Central armies dug in creating fortifications running from the border of Switzerland to the coast of the North Sea. Whilst the British troops were initially entrenched in these positions around a small area near Ieper, by April 1915 this had expanded to thirty-six miles of the front line. After twelve months this total had increased again, so that by June 1916 the army had spread along the front line, holding eighty-five miles of the battlefield, from Boesinghe, near Ieper, to Mericourt near the River Somme. This would rise again, so that eventually, by early 1918 the British army held the entirety of the front line from Ieper to the Oise, in Picardy. French forces held the majority of the front line from the Swiss border to the Oise; Belgian forces occupied a small sector from Nieuwport to Ieper and American troops were drafted into the French held sectors after 1917.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The front lines varied in structure and design depending on the geography and climate of the region, but in general they were divided into a series of three lines of trenches; front; support and reserve. These trenches, dug deep enough to provide cover from sniper fire and shrapnel blasts and traversed at regular intervals to prevent enfilade fire, would contain dug-outs, mortar-pits, gun emplacements, ammunition dumps and stores.[[16]](#footnote-16) Interlinking these trenches was a series of ‘communication trenches’ which would also be used to bring soldiers up from behind the lines to the front. Troops were rotated through these trenches, with detachments spending time in the front, reserve and support trenches before being relocated away from the front during periods of ‘rest’. Whilst out of the trenches, soldiers would be in direct contact with civilian life through occupying billets in farmhouses, visiting cafés and brothels and marching through the countryside and towns of northern France and Belgium. These troops represented Britain’s ‘Citizen’s Army’ with waves of volunteers arriving at the front from 1915 and conscripts from 1916 supplementing the initial Regular and Territorial soldiers of 1914. For many of Britain’s ‘Citizen’s Army’, this would have been their first experience of life and language abroad. With the operation of a large-scale war effort, the material imposition onto the region, the relationships between the General Staff of the British Army, the citizen soldiers and the local civilian population, a particular means of mapping the area emerged amongst the troops which redefined their experience of the landscape. It is the combination of these factors which produced the distinctive geographical understanding of the British soldier on the Western Front. This was the process of ‘Tommifying’ the Western Front – a term which derives from the sobriquet for all British soldiers since the nineteenth century – ‘Tommy Atkins’ or just ‘Tommy’.[[17]](#footnote-17) As troops moved through the war landscape, encountering a ‘foreign’ culture, witnessing the war-ravaged scenes and experiencing the precarious nature of life at the front a distinct sense of place was formed – evidenced in the nicknames and tales that were attributed to the area.

However, such processes were not unique to the British Army. Soldiers from all combatant nations acted to attribute meanings and values to the war landscape and the conditions they encountered. Through soldiers’ letters, diaries and memoirs a number of studies have highlighted this process of acclimatising to the warzone. For instance, these analyses have demonstrated how American troops sought to identify and reconcile perceptions of France and French culture with the shattered buildings and devastated regions they witnessed.[[18]](#footnote-18) Similarly, Australian soldiers reflected on the ‘empty’ landscape of the front lines with the perception of imprinting their identity on the Outback of their homeland.[[19]](#footnote-19) French and German troops also sought to come to terms with the war landscape and readjust to the environment through references to mythical idylls, religious similes and cultural allusions.[[20]](#footnote-20) The associations and values of these frameworks for understanding the war landscape were, therefore, reflective of shared experience and cultural identity amongst the soldiers. Troops from each of the combatant nations developed references, links and ‘mental maps’ in response to their experiences of the conflict. Each of these specific responses served to attribute meaning to the war landscape and formed a means of enduring the effects of the conflict.

To assess the construction of a ‘sense of place’ which was forged by British soldiers as they named, renamed and narrated the areas of the Western Front they experienced, the archives of soldiers’ letters, diaries and memoirs contained at the Liddle Collection (University of Leeds), the Alfred J. Peacock Collection (University of York) and the Imperial War Museum (London) can be examined. These collections contain primary source material of letters and diaries as well as the memoirs and oral testimonies of veterans. To complete this analysis, a sample of over 150 individual accounts was taken from these collections. These accounts were transcribed, searched and cross-referenced for the epithets and narratives attached to particular places and sites by British soldiers on the Western Front during the four years of war. The analysis demonstrated how troops used a variety of names and stories in relation to the war landscape and how these were communicable; describing a locality and its values and associations was carried out in association with fellow soldiers. This social construct of place though language is, therefore, the basis of this assessment.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, this perception of the landscape was not fixed and altered during the course of the conflict as the scale of the war intensified and the numbers of troops increased. This process was also subject to control as the General Staff of the British Army also imposed a military geography on the region designed to facilitate the effective pursuit of the war and mobilization of the troops. It is in this manner that the names and narratives used by soldiers to give meaning to their environment can be considered as a practice of adjustment. This process of ‘emplacement’ as fluid and it responded to the events, actions and routines of the soldiers as they moved through the war landscape over the course of the conflict.[[22]](#footnote-22)

This investigation builds upon the ‘new wave’ of First World War Studies which has created a interdisciplinary agenda that addresses the experiences and perceptions of all of those involved in the conflict as they sought ways to adjust and to endure the war. This mode of analysis has encompassed various studies of religion, art, violence, discipline and masculinity.[[23]](#footnote-23) This itself draws upon the seminal works in the field of First World War studies which have sought to explain how the war was incorporated into everyday life at a variety of levels and shaped cultures, ideas, art and literature.[[24]](#footnote-24) Central to any discussion of the British troops during the war is Fussell’s thesis that an ‘ironic culture’ developed in response to the conditions of the conflict.[[25]](#footnote-25) In this assessment, British soldiers responded to the privations and dangers of the war through the development of a sardonic stoicism which structured the perception and interpretation of the conflict. Criticism of Fussell has focused on the over-emphasis of the officer-class perspective and the tendency to grant observations by the soldier poets such as Owen, Graves and Sassoon the status of common fact.[[26]](#footnote-26) These criticisms raise the difficulty of defining cultural responses, as socio-economic background, education and rank would all shape an individual soldier’s response to the conflict. However, the repetition and commonalities of place names and narratives within the archival evidence indicates that the creation of ‘place’ and ‘emplacement’ in the war landscape were social entities; they were shared amongst soldiers as a means of expressing identity and common purpose.[[27]](#footnote-27) These aspects of trench life have not received any sustained analysis within the recent development of ‘military geography’ within First World War studies.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, the ‘new wave’ of studies encompasses a multidisciplinary agenda and seeks to overturn the notion of soldiers as passive victims who merely endured the conditions of the front. Following this objective, this investigation reveals that those stationed on the battlefields and behind the lines participated in a variety of meaning-making activities that served to attribute the environment around them with associations and values.

Behind the Lines: Acclimatising and Anglicizing

For British soldiers, the locations behind the front lines, the sites and sights of the towns and countryside of northern France and Belgium, offered a perplexing combination of the recognisable and the distinctly ‘foreign’. Within the larger urban areas and the low-lying countryside there would have been many opportunities for soldiers to reflect on the similarities between their current location and their pre-war lives in Britain. Indeed, the urban architecture, small industry and rural settlements could be strongly reminiscent of many areas in Britain. However, the unfamiliar language, the strange pronunciations, the peculiar habits and customs of the local citizens were wholly alien to many within the ranks. What accentuated this disturbing sense of dislocation from the familiar was the visible effect of the war on the landscape, buildings and people. As soldiers moved across the war landscape the sight of refugees, the ruins of houses and businesses as well as the abandoned or depopulated farms and rural villages were scenes that could be particularly distressing. The dislocation of local civilians served to ‘frame’ the war landscape for the soldiers emphasising the cruelty and barbarity in the region. Sergeant A.G. Chambers recorded in a diary entry in August 1914 that he had witnessed a ‘pitiful sight’ of refugees from ‘France and Ypres’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Nearly four years after this observation the sight of civilians fleeing the conflict could still remind soldiers of the brutality of the conflict. Lieutenant H.S. Hopthrow wrote in his diary during March 1918, regarding the sight of French refugees, ‘I think that is the cruellest part of the whole show’.[[30]](#footnote-30) In this manner, the experience of the war behind the lines could on occasion be as traumatic and as difficult for the soldiers as the front line trenches. Fleeing civilians would also create ‘ghost towns’ as farms, buildings and entire villages were left almost deserted (Figure 2). The lack of visible traces of human occupation in these areas could create a haunting and unsettling perception of the area.[[31]](#footnote-31) For example, Private D.J.B. Wilson wrote in his memoirs:

...again we had to look more closely to take in the ruination of the farms, the shattered remains of the cottages. The desolate roads, the neglected fields, the absence of animals, to realise that this was a country given over to stagnation...[[32]](#footnote-32)

Although the deserted farmsteads and barns often provided billets for troops, the occupation of the sites was noted in soldiers’ letters and diaries as contributing to a sense of displacement from the familiar notions of home and ‘civilization’. Private W.D. Jones wrote in his diary in January 1916 that he had been billeted in the small town of Courcelles, Belgium; a place where there was, ‘desolation everywhere; broken-down houses, struggling soldiers...’[[33]](#footnote-33) In this war-ravaged landscape, troops were frequently met with a physical reminder of the damage wrought by the war on both materials and peoples’ lives. In an environment which had seemingly been swept clear by the force of the conflict soldiers could assume they had entered an empty space; a foreign landscape, thrown apart by the conflict. This space could appear to hold no evident meaning or attachment for the soldiers; a perception which was increasingly familiar as the war progressed and subsumed larger areas of the region. Private I.W Browning described this awareness upon entering Authuille, north of Albert, on the Somme, near the front lines:

We were now at Authuille, which would seem to be the name of a village, through to us it was just a name, unattached to any particular place.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The absence of human habitation, the scenes of destruction and the seemingly alien places of the villages, towns and countryside of France and Belgium served to dislocate soldiers from their surroundings. As a means of responding to this alienation, a subtle process, enacted by British soldiers, acted to familiarise and to an extent ‘stabilise’ the hostile and foreign landscape. This process was conducted through the renaming of the region, adding new titles and stories to places to ‘anglicize’ the unfamiliar words and environment which the soldiers encountered. Through this redefinition places became ‘known’ to the troops through their new names and connotations.

This process is most immediately apparent in the names given to the billets which were frequently located in the local farmsteads. Private H. Oxley described in his memoirs how the farms which were used as billets were ‘inevitably’ given English names by the troops.[[35]](#footnote-35) Private I.W. Browning described how the places near Armentières, north-west of Lille, had been labelled ‘Isolated farm’ and ‘Burntout farm’ by the soldiers.[[36]](#footnote-36) Names for these particular billets largely reflected the sparse, empty associations perceived by the troops. Colonel J.G.H. Budd noted this tendency amongst the soldiers in his own battalion:

Smells were quite in the ordinary run in the neighbourhood as may be appreciated from some of the local names given to various places about the front. Smell Farm, Dead Cow Farm, and so on...[[37]](#footnote-37)

The titles that solders provided these locations could be humorous or humdrum. However, all of these acts of renaming served to describe a distinct place for the soldiers and ensured a means of connection with the world. These names were the basis of the ‘emplacement’ experienced by soldiers as they responded to their location and locality within the war landscape.[[38]](#footnote-38) They acted to neutralise the anxiety and alienation that the scenes of war could evoke whilst they also served to communicate to other soldiers the habits or perceptions of a particular area. Colonel J.G.H. Budd also reflected on this action as he described how his unit used the French names to create new titles and associations for places behind the lines:

I started off to the battalion, whom I found were in the sector...They were at the moment billeted in a village called Estrees Couchez (sic: Estrée-Cauchy, north-west of Arras**)**, which was always referred to by the men as ‘extra cushy.[[39]](#footnote-39)

As the war progressed this utilisation of French and Flemish place names was developed by the successive waves of troops to create a new landscape in the region. The place-names of northern France and Belgium were recast to create ‘Armenteers’ for Armentières, ‘Wipers’ or ‘Ee-pre’ for Ypres (Ieper), ‘Eat apples’ for Étaples, ‘Ballyall’ for Balleul, ‘Frizzles’ for Flesselles, ‘Hazy-Brook’ for Hazebrouck, ‘About Turn’ for Hébuterne, ‘Ocean Villas’ for Auchonvillers, ‘Funky Villas’ for Foncquevillers and ‘Plug-Street’ for Ploegsteert, whilst almost any site of a Calvary behind the lines instantly became known as ‘Crucifix Corner’. The names were descriptive, evocative but also indicative of the values which individuals held towards the particular areas they knew. These names could identify the danger, revulsion and boredom of the soldiers in the areas behind the lines. Names could also reveal the havens away from the front where soldiers could resume ‘normal’ or ‘civilian’ activities during ‘rest’ periods out of the line; none so more than the town which was labelled ‘Pop’ (Poperinghe), outside Ieper.

The process of renaming emerged not only from the troops themselves and their pre-war cultural references but from the relations that developed between soldiers and civilians, as troops attempted to comprehend an unfamiliar language and its ‘unusual’ vowels, constants and accents. Captain A.P. Gillespie described this process of communication taking place:

There’s a new language growing up in NE France which would surprise you – the language in which the British soldier addressed his hostess in billets.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Whilst the anglicizing of the names of French and Belgian towns and villages aided the British soldier, by creating a ‘known’ landscape and attributing places with meanings and values, it ensured that British troops created their own ‘sense of place’ within this foreign landscape. By imposing this system of naming upon the world around them soldiers would become part of the local environment where they lived and fought. Such a process inevitably drew criticism from Belgian and French civilians who were anxious that this re-naming constituted a military occupation of their homeland. However, as soldiers moved through the areas of the Western Front they engaged in this process of naming and renaming the places and objects they encountered.

Enemies, Stories and Soldiers: Imagining the Landscape

The renaming of the landscape was also a response to the sense of disgust that the ruination of war had brought to the region a perception that increased with the pursuit of the conflict. Lieutenant A.D. Looker wrote in August 1918 that he hoped to be able to secure leave as quickly as possible, ‘because this rotten country is getting me fed up more and more each day’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Looker confessed in the same letter that he had become, ‘very depressed by the ruins and detritus of war’. Private J. Jacobs in a letter written in December 1915 stated unequivocally that, ‘this country is not worth winning back’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Similarly, Corporal R. Chambers, writing whilst stationed in Flanders in August 1917, was moved to express his surprise at the continuation of the war; ‘fancy fighting Germans for land like this. If it was mine I’d give up the whole damn rotten country’.[[43]](#footnote-43) Such revulsion at the surrounding area was a common response to the war landscape. Private K.R.B. Kershaw described the Western Front as the, ‘filthiest place I ever was in my whole life’.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Whilst this perception could serve to disengage the British soldiers from the region it also formed a means of understanding and interpreting the war landscape and was incorporated into the soldiers’ notion of the area as a distinct ‘place’. As soldiers witnessed the filth and destruction wrought upon the region they attributed these dire circumstances to a brutal and savage enemy. The devastated and abandoned area chronicled a ‘space of death’; a map where soldiers could read the attitude of the enemy and understand the appropriate force by which to respond.[[45]](#footnote-45) For these soldiers the enemy was the ‘Hun’, ‘Allemands’, ‘Bosche’, ‘Jerry’, ‘Krauts’ or simply, the ‘Enemy’; a variety of names which all became bywords for a violence, destruction and hatred. Such attitudes were seemingly written into the war landscape. Captain R.H.D. Tompson wrote in October 1917 that within each Belgian refugee, ‘there seems to be a terrible sorrow, all due to that accursed Hun’.[[46]](#footnote-46) Whilst Private L.E. Eggleton writing in a diary entry, dated August 1917, referenced the village in northern France, Hendecourt-lès-Ransart:

This village was once in the hands of the Huns so of course there are no houses left standing and all the fruit trees are cut down.[[47]](#footnote-47)

The havoc and destruction that soldiers witnessed in the region appeared in this way to evidence the presence of a monstrous, uncivilised enemy. The blasted landscape of both town and country could evoke anger and hatred toward the enemy. Captain H.A. Ryott wrote in his diary that, ‘this must have been a lovely country before the Allemands turned their attention to it’.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The perception of a barbarous adversary was further enforced by the stories that flowed between soldiers and the local population that further defined the war environment by giving meaning to the battlefields and the nature of their enemy. Tales of atrocities and cruelty towards prisoners quickly spread amongst British troops during all stages of the conflict. Seemingly, the more horrific the story the more believable the account; an attitude reinforced by the ‘strange’ landscape soldiers occupied.[[49]](#footnote-49) Lieutenant R. Macleod writing in November 1914, listed several ‘eye-witness reports’ of a case where two Royal Army Medical Corps orderlies had their feet cut off by their German captors.[[50]](#footnote-50) Whilst many of these accounts originated from the actions of German troops during the first advance of August 1914 they demonstrated soldiers’ perceptions rather than reality. These rumours were significant for the troops as they affirmed their fears of a terrible, monstrous enemy presiding over a hostile, dangerous landscape. Sapper F. Allcroft, writing in a letter of October 1915, described the way in which these stories came to circulate amongst the soldiers:

A Brigade came here for rest directly after that battle (Second Battle of Ypres) and I heard their tales of friends crucified on barn doors and of wounded men bayoneted whilst lying on the ground.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Although such stories were shared behind the lines as troops were circulated or drafted into new section, these accounts were shared almost as soon as soldiers crossed the Channel and they continued to be part of daily existence throughout the war. Private T.E. Bourdillion in his memoirs, reflected that his battalion were almost constantly, ‘accompanied by all sorts of rumours as to what could be going on up front’.[[52]](#footnote-52) The stories of great battles, ‘myths’ and atrocities were part of the ways in which soldiers imbued the landscape with meaning and significance. Through these accounts places became ‘known’ to the soldiers. This knowledge could inspire excitement, wonder or dread amongst soldiers who were fresh to the Western Front. References to the names of towns, cities and battles evoked a sense of satisfaction and community amongst the soldiers, that they were ‘taking part’ and ‘doing their bit’. Wade recounted these feelings in his memoirs, detailing the desire of soldiers wanting to experience the conflict:

...the battalion had its first sight of the ‘promised land’. At last it was really on active service and was to take its place side by side with the men who had made history at Mons, the Marne, Ypres and a score of other battles.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Conversely, the same names that sparked a sense of camaraderie became synonymous with fear, mutilation and death as soldiers experienced these places for themselves. When Private I.L. Read and his unit moved into the commune of Vermelles, they made connections between the place name and the fighting that had taken place there:

We made for this village, finding upon our arrival that it bore the somewhat sinister name of Vermelles. I say sinister because most of us remembered it in connection with accounts which we had read of the Battle of Loos (1915).[[54]](#footnote-54)

Names were important in this respect as they communicated the nature of the war. Bales described that amongst his battalion ‘the Ypres Salient bore a very evil reputation – not without cause’.[[55]](#footnote-55) As the war progressed, it was the name of places such as Ypres (Ieper), Somme, Arras, Vimy that were spoken of by the soldiers in reverence, reluctance and fear. Lawson indicates this process of association when he recalled that before his experiences at the front, ‘I had heard of the Ypres Salient and the savagery there but Passchendaele was only a name, not yet a byword’.[[56]](#footnote-56) Soldiers who had seen action in the major areas of the war would retell their experiences to new troops. Sergeant Major A.J. Rixon noted how when his unit met with men who had been with a group of Regular soldiers who had been stationed on the front since 1914 they were regaled with tales of ‘Ypres and Givenchy’; ‘Hope we don’t have to go there if accounts are reliable as must be hell itself’.[[57]](#footnote-57) It was Ypres (Ieper), known simply as the ‘Salient’ or ‘Wipers’ that many soldiers recounted in their diaries and letters written behind the lines. Stories of the city and its battlefield were told to new recruits and soldiers making their way to the line. Private T. Martin described the strange power merely mentioning the name had amongst the troops:

Ypres – that most dreaded of all fronts, even the most hardened toughened of old soldiers went strangely quiet when Ypres was mentioned.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The fearful quality that the name of Ypres held for soldiers is also reflected in Captain R.J. Mason notes of how the minds of his troops were focused elsewhere when drafted into the area:

Many men must have wondered what Ypres had in store for them when the regiment moved…for memories of the mud and gas were still uppermost in the minds of many.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Names held an almost programmatic status for the troops – place names revealed a shared history and a means of understanding the hostile and strange war landscape.

Up the line and in the trenches

The process of renaming and narrating the landscape present behind the lines was also continued within the spaces of the trenches, the dugouts and the battlefields as soldiers moved through these areas. This war landscape was imbued with values and associations that reflected the soldiers’ lives, their experiences and their perceptions. These processes were also framed by the military authorities as the front line was a highly organised arena. At the outset of trench warfare in November 1914, the British General Staff responded to this new stage in the conflict by embarking on a complex and detailed process of mapping trenches and positions.[[60]](#footnote-60) A series of ‘trench maps’ were produced throughout the war for officers to develop knowledge of their positions and to assess the field prior to attacks or raids.[[61]](#footnote-61) To aid classification of these areas and to maintain a degree of secrecy in case these maps fell into enemy hands – the trench system in each area was labelled with names with the same first letter, such as ‘Charlie’, ‘Cheese’ and ‘Chalk’.[[62]](#footnote-62) In a letter home, Private H. Old remarked how this particular system of naming could foster a sense of confusion or disorientation:

...certain trenches are marked up with names, such as ‘Caledonian Road’ and ‘Clarendon Road’. It is very easy to lose one’s self…[[63]](#footnote-63)

The names could provide a confusing maze for soldiers as phonetic similarities and meaningless titles disorientated troops. Private A.J. Abraham wrote in his memoirs of the incongruity of these names with the lived experience of the troops:

All the trenches had names, many of them singularly inappropriate, as in this case. I am quite sure no nun ever went near this alley. The other advanced posts were Nestor, Netley and Nelson. This latter was the only one whose name made any sense in an ironic sort of way, because it included an observation post where a sniper sat all day observing the enemy lines through a telescope.[[64]](#footnote-64)

As the war developed and the trench system at the front became ever more complex soldiers began to name their own surroundings in the trenches and the battlefields, a process which acted as a framework to understand the hostile landscape. Therefore, trench names developed firstly as a strategic necessity, then as a practical response and finally as an emotional tool.

The confusion that official trench names could engender was compounded in some sectors by the heavy artillery bombardments and subsequent reconstructions which could render the front into a confusing warren. Troops regularly used titles in these circumstances to gain a hold on the geography of the broken and battered trenches. Carrington observed that due to the ‘dog-leg’ style construction of the trenches or the quick repairs after a bombardment, soldiers would often need to turn a corner every few yards which ensured that many considered navigating the trench system akin to walking through a maze.[[65]](#footnote-65) To be in the trench system could be a wildly disorientating experience, as the similarity of construction and layout gave no indication to the soldiers of a distinctive place. The comparison between the trenches and a maze or labyrinth is an important consideration as it is frequently asserted within the letters, diaries and memoirs of the soldiers. This perception served to emphasise the confusion and bewilderment that soldiers would encounter upon entering into the trenches. In April 1915, Private L.M Edwards wrote home that, ‘the trenches are pretty intricate like a maze’.[[66]](#footnote-66) Whilst this analogy to a feature of a landscape garden was predominant, such a comparison did not serve to diminish the threat to life and limb in these trench systems; ‘trenches are a maze only a trifle more dangerous’.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Troops that had recently been rotated into an unfamiliar section of the front line, and thus as yet unfamiliar with the intricacies of that particular trench system, could easily find themselves separated from their unit and hopelessly lost. Moving a new battalion up to the line was a complex procedure which relied heavily on those familiar to the idiosyncrasies of the trenches. As Private H. Oxley stated in his memoirs, in these contexts ‘you simply followed the guide who knew the locality’.[[68]](#footnote-68) Groom also recalled how their guide to the front would provide a constant stream of messages to the troops as he took them to their post, acquainting the troops with the area by calling their attention to the obstacles around them such as ‘loose boards’, ‘hole’, ‘loose telephone wire’, ‘head down – snipers’.[[69]](#footnote-69) This form of narrating the war landscape to new troops was supported through a system of signposts which were erected by the army to direct the troops to their location. These became essential tools in areas which had witnessed heavy fighting or where the trench system had developed in a disjointed pattern. In March 1917, Lieutenant G.A.A. Willis noted in letters home that in the line near Arras, ‘name boards’ provided helpful assistance and were placed in the trenches to help new troops ‘find their way’.[[70]](#footnote-70) Whilst the General Staff gave these trenches original names which corresponded to the location on official plans soldiers developed their own informal and shifting system of naming. Just as the names of the towns and villages of France and Belgium became anglicised, the trenches were also attributed names and titles to reflect their status, place and values amongst the troops.

Renaming the front

Trench names such as ‘Jacob’s’ Ladder’, ‘The Great Wall of China’, ‘Windy Corner’, ‘Dead End’, ‘Old Kent Road’, ‘Shrapnel Corner’, ‘Clapham Junction’, ‘Tower Hamlets’ were all frequent references in soldiers letters and diaries. Associated trench structures such as dugouts, latrines and gun emplacements were also titled in this manner. Naming the trenches and other structures at the front ensured a sense of familiarity with their surroundings, a means of understanding the hostile, threatening landscape in which they were situated. The most common means of ensuring that familiarity was through using names from their civilian life and titles from their home towns and cities. In his diary, Private J.C. McLeary described how his unit had moved into a length of trenches in good condition whose previous occupants had been a London Brigade and consequently ‘all the trenches had London names’.[[71]](#footnote-71) In his memoirs, Howcroft described in his memoirs a trench system built by the 51st Highland Division which was labelled with Scottish place names, ‘Campbell Avenue, Elgin Avenue even Sauchiehall Street, lest Glasgow be neglected’.[[72]](#footnote-72) Seeing familiar names and labels was largely reassuring and comforting experience for troops. It emphasised a sense of connection with an area which would otherwise be an ‘empty’ or ‘valueless’ space. For example, a trench sign indicating ‘Bury Avenue’ on a stretch of communication trench near Authuille could indicate for troops that the previous occupants hailed from East Lancashire, thereby providing a context for an otherwise meaningless space (Figure 3). Writing after the war, Eberle remarked on his delight on moving up to the front when he was provided with regular reminders of the city of Bristol. The section he arrived in had been previously occupied by a battalion from the south west and the trenches had been suitably renamed after the streets and places of the city:

...among the names marked upon boards are ‘Tramways Centre’, ‘Bristol Hippodrome’ a big dugout, ‘Wine Street’ – a very narrow stretch – and ‘Gloucester Lane’, the last named being a most unhealthy short communication trench.[[73]](#footnote-73)

In some sections, where the General Staff had applied titles to trench systems, soldiers would reinterpret and re-imagine these names as monikers chosen by the soldiers who served in them. The landscape of the front thereby became an ‘inhabited’ place which was imbued with associations and narratives. The particular use of London place names for trenches by the General Staff was soon subsumed by the soldiers as they witnessed the names as indicating habitation and connection by others. Private L.M. Edwards, in a letter dated April 1915, considered how officially named areas of the front revealed a far more intimate relationship with the landscape:

They are all named (and duly labelled) mostly after some London street – Cheyne Walk…Baker Street, Bayswater, Waterloo Bridge (planks across a mouldy little ditch) were some of them.[[74]](#footnote-74)

The names soldiers gave to the trenches could also reflect their lives and their relationships within the army. For example, troops could name areas of the line after comrades who had died in the trenches. Captain J.R. Tibbles reflected on this activity whilst noting how a section of trench was named after a Colonel Wing as ‘Wing’s Way’: ‘I don’t know what he did, or what his battalion was, but it’s a great memorial for any man to have’.[[75]](#footnote-75) One veteran recalled how a communication trench was named ‘Stuart Trench’, after a popular officer was killed by sniper fire whilst it was being constructed, during the Battle of Hooge (1915).[[76]](#footnote-76) This memorialisation given to the trenches by the soldiers reflected their presence in the landscape, their witnessing of the events of the war and a way of placing meaning and permanence upon their surroundings.

Trench names also revealed the perceptions and experiences of the front and acted as a means of cautioning others moving in the line. The frequently used ‘Suicide Corner’ would often indicate where troops had fallen due to the attention of snipers in the area or where the natural geography exposed the individual to enemy fire.[[77]](#footnote-77) The epithet ‘Death Valley’ or ‘Valley of Death’ would also indicate to troops the history of an area and the threats they could face. Private H. Sibley in his memoirs described how his unit reached its post in the front line which was located in a valley, named the ‘Valley of Death’.[[78]](#footnote-78) Just such a title was deemed quite appropriate: ‘well it earned its name...it was absolute Hell’. In February 1916, Private J. Jacobs described how this particular title served to raise the concern and anxiety of troops:

Matters were perhaps a little more lively but that may have been due to the nature of the section of trench we occupied (Death Valley, I believe is its unofficial title).[[79]](#footnote-79)

Similarly, Private R.G. Ashford described encountering a section of trenches known as ‘Death Valley’:

...truly this place had earnt (sic) its name for it had been the scene of a most bitter struggle and was now a mass of shell holes.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Such titles, whilst describing past or present conditions, were capable of evoking emotions amongst the troops who passed through these areas. Areas of the front line could live up to their names and reputations creating an ‘experiential geography’ amongst the troops. Major A.J. Rixon described how he narrowly avoided a bullet at ‘Windy Corner’ resulting in ‘uneasy’ feeling and ‘a presentiment something was going to happen’.[[81]](#footnote-81) Captain U. Burke stated in his memoirs that a cross-section in the front lines was ‘suitably’ named ‘Vindictive Crossroads’ as it was a ‘terrible place’.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Trench names were a means to create a context and a sense of understanding for the soldiers, so meanings, warnings and sentiments could be expressed within landscape. This network of named and experienced places was constructed through the soldiers’ habitual activities, experiences and interactions. The titles could be used to describe, identify and understand the hostility of the landscape, and the threats it posed to them. As the war landscape was named and attributed with characteristics and histories it also became navigable and understandable in a manner which the official titles provided by the General Staff could not hope to engender. The soldiers were able to create a distinct mode of emplacement through this process of naming. Indeed, these names anchored soldiers into a place where their very existence was continually threatened. Soldiers could navigate the trench system using these titles creating a landscape which could familiarise and ‘domesticate’ the war experience.[[83]](#footnote-83) Sapper Victor Eberle described this process of adjustment as he made his way through a familiar stretch of trench:

We pass under a low arch erected as a screen, with a narrow trench leading of it, and labelled ‘This way to Dover’, presumably because it would deposit us in the little River Douve. Two more arches are labelled ‘Post Office Bridge’ and ‘Marble Arch’ ...On our left we notice ‘Rose Dale’ and various other similarly named cottages – I should say dugouts...We next hurry past a notice ‘Catch’em Corner. Beware!’, a point which is unhealthy, being a favourite aiming mark for a German sniper...but ease up to have a chat with the Infantry Officer in charge near ‘Snipers’ Rest’...A board proclaiming the ‘King’s Head Hotel – Good dinners etc...’ As we get near ‘Warm Corner’ where our sector of the line ends, we hear the now familiar whistle, as a small shell comes over and pitches close to our neighbour’s parapet.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Despite the distinctions of class and education amongst the British Army the process of naming and renaming was enacted across the ranks. It acted as a vital means to build attachments and values to areas which could be razed of all traces of civilisation or where the distinctions between areas of the trench system were minimal. The names within the trench system were significant points in the comprehension of the war landscape and represented a means of survival and security both physical and mental in a threatening environment.

Conclusions

Today, beneath the Menin Gate, in Ieper, the names of over 50,000 soldiers of the British and Commonwealth Army can be seen inscribed into the sides of the monument. These are the names of ‘the missing’ of the battlefields from around the area; those who have no known grave, whose remains were not located or remained unidentified during the reconstruction of the devastated region in the 1920s. The Menin Gate, designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield, was unveiled in 1927, is part of a wider commemorative landscape that stretches across the former battlefields of northern France and Belgium where the armies of the British Empire were stationed. Cemeteries and monuments mark out the ground which was granted to Britain by the Belgian and French governments in perpetuity making manifest Brooke’s line that these foreign fields would be ‘forever England’.[[85]](#footnote-85) In these cemeteries, the graves of those whose bodies carried no identification, or were too mutilated that any identification above the level of ‘soldier’ proved impossible, are marked with an inscription chosen by Rudyard Kipling: A Soldier of the Great War Known Unto God. Within the larger cemeteries, a commemorative monument, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, known as the ‘Stone of Sacrifice’, also bears a verse chosen by Kipling from Ecclesiasticus (44:14): Their name liveth for evermore. The names of the soldiers, whether inscribed individually on monuments, headstones or remembered collectively are thereby offered as the key for remembrance for families, communities and the wider nation. Through these commemorative schemes the significance of the ‘name’ and ‘naming’ are highly important. It is through the lists of the dead, the naming of ‘foreign’ places as ‘home’ and the remembrance of names that the memory of the war is maintained. In effect, the cemeteries and monuments name and consequently attribute this region as special and separate – an act that continues in its significance to this day in the haunting effect that the ‘Somme’ or ‘Ypres’ still possesses. As the hundredth anniversaries of the conflict approach, this commemorative practice of naming appears increasingly important, as with the death of the last British ‘Tommy’ the war has ceased to be part of lived experience. However, whilst the process of ‘naming’ and the function of ‘names’ has dominated commemorative practice it has somewhat obscured the same processes undertaken by British soldiers during the conflict itself. Just as the cemeteries and memorials have brought new meanings, values and associations to this region of northern France and Belgium, the citizen soldiers of the British Army also constructed a ‘sense of place’ on the Western Front through names and naming. By creating new names, bastardising the French and Flanders pronunciations and through narratives and stories of the front a new geographical understanding was formed amongst the troops. This geography was a key feature of the soldiers’ identity and their lives on the Western Front. This understanding of the war landscape enables another means of remembering the soldiers of the conflict not as passive victims but as individuals coming to an understanding of an unfamiliar and hostile war landscape.

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