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The Western Front 100 years on: Contemporary artists take stock

by **Brad Manera**

"The hell where youth and laughter go", was how [poet and infantry officer Siegfried Sassoon](#) [MC](#) described the Western Front. The Western Front is the most well-known and infamous battlefield of the Great War (1914-18). It was a battlefield that ran over hundreds of kilometres in a continuous shell-torn strip from the Swiss frontier, through France and Belgium, to the North Sea. It was where the great armies of the Central Powers, led by Imperial Germany, were locked in deadly combat with those of the western allies including France, Britain and her dominions and eventually the United States.

Between late 1914 and the Armistice in November 1918 some 13 million soldiers and civilians were killed or badly wounded on the Western Front. It was there that much of a way of life that had existed in Europe for centuries fell before modern weapons that were the products and processes of the Industrial Revolution.

For the soldiers who fought there, the Western Front was remembered for trench warfare with its horrors of massive artillery barrages, [clouds of poison gas](#), the incessant deadly chatter of machine guns and belts of impenetrable barbed wire. They lived and died in holes in the ground connected by deep corridors carved in the earth. They froze in winter, baked in summer and spent the between months mired in mud. It was a landscape of unspeakable horrors where men and animals were mutilated, homes and cities obliterated and verdant farmlands turned to a stark moonscape.

It was also a place of extraordinary acts of courage and self-sacrifice.

Those who survived found it difficult to tell to those who had not been there what it was like. The questions could not be silenced. The families of those who fought and fell demanded answers.

A generation of artists, official and unofficial, offered their interpretation. German veterans like [Wilhelm Otto Dix](#) and [Ernst Ludwig Kirchner](#) painted nightmare scenes that would be banned by the Nazis. The Frenchman François Flameng would earn the Legion d' Honneur for his paintings of scenes from the front. Henry Eric Kennington served in the British Expeditionary Force before being wounded then returned to the front and contributed to the work of dozens of British official war artists that included talents like [William Orpen](#) and [CRW Nevinson](#). Theodore Joseph Bastien served with the Belgian Army and painted the Canadian Expeditionary Force as they fought on his homeland. American illustrator Frank Schoonover made images of the doughboys arriving in France.

Australia sent some of its finest artists. A fortnight after the Armistice a group of Australian artists opened an exhibition at the Royal Academy with the title *Peace and War*. In a review of the exhibition in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on January 25, 1919, *The British Australasian* was quoted saying "no purely imaginative battle pictures can move us as do these careful portrayals of the daily life for over four years of the young manhood of Australia, and the places that they have carried with them into history. If Australia had nothing but Streeton's [paintings] of France and Flanders, and Dyson's lithograph of the Western Front, she would still possess a collection unique for its historical and artistic value. In Will Dyson's powerful drawings we have pre-eminently the spirit of the war and the spirit of the AIF [Australian Imperial Force]. His is the personal note, and nothing could give us a more vivid impression of the burden and misery of war, and the inexhaustible dog-patience of the men who fought in it."

Places of pilgrimage

The guns fell silent on the Western Front a century ago and the last of the men who heard them is long dead. Most of the trenches have been filled in and ploughed over. The towns have been rebuilt and the land is productive again. All that remains is the occasional concrete emplacement and the too frequent Commonwealth War Graves commission cemeteries. But the names of these places – Ypres, Passchendaele, Flanders, Arras, Pozieres, Villers-

Bretonneux, Amiens, Mont St Quentin, Peronne and the Somme Valley – live on and have become places of pilgrimage.

It is right that they call to a new generation of artists from Australia and New Zealand who have returned to interpret this landscape and its ghosts again.

This group of artists have studied in their own way the events of 1914-18. They have investigated the lives of ancestors they never knew, some of whom still lie beneath these foreign fields. They have walked the green rolling hills of Picardie, seen the languid trickle of the Somme and explored the ancient battlements around the rebuilt city of Ieper, heart of the deadly Salient. They viewed these bucolic vistas burdened with the knowledge of the great tragedy that had befallen this land. They battled with interpreting a balance between France and Belgium in the 21st century and the France and Belgium that is remembered on war memorials in the antipodes. This is their work.

This exhibition reminds us that the echoes of the Great War generation have not died and that there is always worth in revisiting the places on which great deeds were done.

This is an edited extract of an essay The Hell where youth and laughter go by Brad Manera, senior historian/curator at the Anzac Memorial that appears in the catalogue of Salient, Contemporary artists at the Western Front. [The exhibition](#) is at the New England Regional Art Museum in Armidale until June 3. It will then travel to Bathurst (August 10-October 7), Sydney (October 22, 2018-February 17, 2019), Moree (May 11, 2019-June 30, 2019), and Murwillumbah (November 21, 2019-February 16, 2020).

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