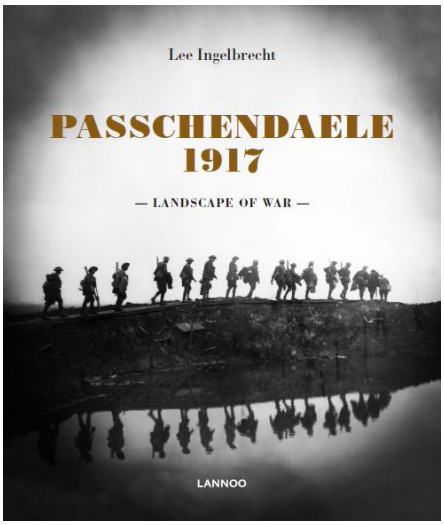
The final witness



The text below is derived from 'Passchendaele 1917 - Landscape of War, a book of the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 published in 2017 by Lannoo. The book approaches the Great War and the Battle of Passchendaele from a unique angle. The focus lies on the interaction between war and landscape and the destruction of 1917, which had a crucial influence on various aspects of warfare. It also gives a good overview of the Battle of Passchendaele and four years of warfare in the vicinity of Ypres. The book is available in our museum shop.

Today the cemeteries and memorials are components of the landscape, reminding us of the tragedy of the First World War.[1] Visiting places of remembrance and seeing the landscape in which the tragic events took place is for many people a way of dealing with the past. The landscape has therefore acted as an important vehicle of commemoration and memory ever since the war ended.

The motives for visiting are various. For one thing, the former battlefields attract travellers who have no links with the area, a phenomenon that emerged shortly after the war with the development of what has in recent decades come to be known as ‘dark tourism’. At first visitors stared at the ruined landscape from still almost impassable roads. Gradually the stream of tourists came to be organized by travel bureaux, with tour buses. As reconstruction progressed, the number of disaster tourists declined, although ever since then the region has continued to attract visitors, especially since the commemoration of the Great War became a focus of attention again recently. Along with the landscape, a wide range of war heritage draws tourists today.

For others, and they are many, a visit to the region is a deeply personal experience. Family members of the dead visit the places where their loved ones died or disappeared. They pay their last respects at the cemeteries or monuments as a way of coming to terms with their loss. After the war several civil organizations made it

possible to make the crossing, including the British Legion, which organized special pilgrimages for relatives.[2] In the 1920s tens of thousands travelled to Ypres. They were mostly women, sometimes accompanied by a husband, father or son, but more often a mother, sister or daughter, because their son, brother or father had never returned. One of the most famous people to go on such a pilgrimage was King George V of England, who visited the former battlefields of the Western Front in May 1922. In the Westhoek the king visited Ypres and Tyne Cot Cemetery, where he paid homage to some of the dead. The recently laid out cemetery made a profound impression on him.[3]

For a long time visiting the former battlefields was a way of dealing with the past for those who had fought there as well. Thousands went looking for the spot where they looked death in the face, and they too had often lost friends or family members. Just how personal the experience was for all former soldiers is poignantly summed up by the German Ziese brothers, who as early as the 1930s cited the importance of the landscape as an 'invisible monument':

> 'They all went home, leaving the devastated land lonely and scorched: dead land. Today it seems as if no one here thinks about that amid the daily hustle and bustle. Yet melancholy flares up in all those men sometimes, in their lonely hours. In the wounds that the war made in their souls they feel the pain of recollection come knocking, the memory of the dead land. For one it is a steep slope, for another the edge of a village and for a third a crossroads or a hill. Little patches of ground they are, sometimes no more than a few square metres, but in the minds of those men sacred ground. Sacred for individuals, because there they looked into that dark abyss that a civilian sees only once in his whole life – a memory they carry with them to their deathbed. Every one of the millions of old soldiers has a place in the great, wide landscape that lies as close to his heart as his mother's grave. [...] Every bit of land on the battlefield is a silent sanctuary for one of those soldiers.'[4]

Today all the old soldiers of the Great War have gone, but descendants still visit the places where their relatives once fought or died. As well as the cemeteries and monuments, less well-known sites often have great emotional value for them. If their relative has no known grave, it is often important to determine as precisely as

possible where that person was killed or was probably buried, so that they can visit the spot.

There are various ways of determining such locations. Regimental histories and war diaries are an extremely valuable source. Sometimes a Burial Return Sheet is available for a deceased Commonwealth soldier with a known grave. The coordinates on this document show exactly where a man who died during the war was initially buried. This gives more insight into how he met his death, and we can fix the position in the modern-day landscape using trench maps and modern technology. One project that helps relatives in this sense is known as Passchendaele Archives, an attempt by the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 to put a face to the names in the cemeteries and on monuments, and to tell the stories of those individuals. Missing details are added and the memory of a deceased relative is thereby kept alive.

The contemporary landscape near Ypres is imbued with memory and meaning by these countless stories. It is an integral part of the identity of the countries that once fought here.[5] While the plentiful archival material and the testimony in letters, memoirs and recordings enables the story to be passed on from one generation to the next, the landscape can be seen as another important witness to the history of the war. Replete with significance, it rounds out the story.
Now that the last survivors have gone and the Great War is history, the landscape is more than ever the final witness. We can call upon it for material and emotional testimony, to help us understand the written descriptions left to us from those times.[6] The present-day landscape not only contains references that remind us of the war, it helps us to explain the many tragedies that were played out here across four years of conflict.

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[1] Delepiere A., Huys M., *De Westhoek en "de Groote Oorlog" – restanten, toeristen en de officiële erkenning*, M&L, 33, 1 (2014), p. 51
[2] Delepiere A., Huys M., *De Westhoek en "de Groote Oorlog" – restanten, toeristen en de officiële erkenning*, M&L, 33, 1 (2014), pp. 50-53
[3] N.N., *The King's Pilgrimage*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1922,, pp. 17-18
[4] Ziese-Beringer H., Ziese M., *Das unsichtbare Denkmal - heute an der Westfront*, Berlin, Frundsberg, 1930, pp. 7-8
[5] Barton, *Passendale - slagveld van Wereldoorlog I*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2007, p. 11
[6] Chielens P., *De laatste getuige – het landschap meer dan ooit*, in: Chielens P., Decoodt H., Dendooven D. e.a., *De laatste getuige: het oorlogslandschap van de Westhoek*, Tielt, Lannoo, 2006, p. 10