

Marc Connelly, Postcards from the Western Front. Pilgrims, Veterans, and Tourists after the Great War, Montréal, QC (McGill-Queen's University Press) 2022, 424 p., 24 fig., 1 map (Human Dimensions in Foreign Policy, Military Studies, and Security Studies, 17), ISBN 978-0-2280-1189-7, CAD 42,95.

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Mark Connelly's study, »Postcards from the Western Front«, provides a meticulously researched and vividly detailed analysis of the impact of war on the landscape and society of the battlefields of the Western Front in France and Belgium. Through examining different sub-communities and their perceptions of battlefields, memorials, and cemeteries, Connelly provides a comprehensive understanding of the Great War's memory. He confines his theoretical analysis to the introductions, where he contextualises the scholarship on the subject and later delivers his findings through a laudable narrative style.

The author structures his book based on the reflections of the visitors, which are captured through postcards, photographs, and souvenirs. Through these sources, the author presents their interpretation of the sites, thoughts, and emotions associated with the battlefields. Firstly, the author highlights the landscapes and scenery where the battlefields were located. Secondly, he examines the visitors themselves and their motivations for visiting these sites. Finally, the author explores the places that were impacted by the war and the experiences of those who visit them in the aftermath.

The study focuses primarily on British visitors to the Western Front's battlefields, tracing their motivations, beliefs, and reasons for visiting the battlegrounds. By using various sources such as newspaper cuttings, personal diaries, letters, and postcards, Connelly conveys the individual and societal impact of war on the landscape and the people. He highlights three primary visitor groups: veterans, tourists, and pilgrims, each with unique motivations and diverse relationships with the former battlefields.

Only a few people, especially journalists, visited the battlefields during the war. However, after the armistice, the battlefields were inundated with visitors who came to pay their respects at the graves and gain a sense of the war. Before establishing official organisations, such as travel agencies, visitors faced the daunting task of locating scattered graves and finding suitable accommodations and transportation. The roads and towns were in a state of devastation, making visiting the battlefields even more challenging.



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As interest in visiting the battlefields grew, so did the need for professionalization. The practical considerations involved in organising such trips, such as the need for guides, transportation, accommodation, rest stops, and supporting infrastructure, including petrol stations, signposts, routing administration, and visa applications, led to the emergence of a new sector of tourism and entrepreneurship: battlefield tourism. In addition to institutional professionalization, Connelly also explores the motivations of the diverse communities with differing interests and priorities in visiting the battlefields. While some visitors were primarily focused on finding the graves of their loved ones, others were more interested in visiting battlefield sites as excursion destinations.

The author also explores the emotional impact of grief and the mourning process by examining the practice of travelling to the graves of loved ones (p. 202). In this context, organisations – mostly Christian – played a crucial role in providing solace and comfort to the bereaved (p. 206). Institutions like YMCA and the Salvation Army were approached in different ways. While pilgrims seek a union between the living and the dead (p. 222), tourists are often driven by a morbid curiosity. However, both groups benefit from the services provided by these organisations and agencies which have also had economic consequences for the regions, such as the establishment of restaurants, hotels, and cafes catering to British visitors.

In addition to examining the impact of visiting battlefields, the author delves into how these sites became a meeting point for a diverse range of groups, including families, veterans from both Germany and Britain, and locals from Flanders and France. Moreover, the former battlefields also served as a melting pot for encounters among people from various nations, such as Chinese workers, soldiers from India and other parts of the British Empire, and German POWs who played a crucial role in the reconstruction of the countryside and cities. Using the concept of »cosmopolitanism« in this context, Connelly analyses the different encounters and interactions among these groups.

Although Connelly acknowledges the growth of professional battlefield tourism, he also highlights the criticism aimed at visitors for their disrespectful behaviour towards the dead, such as picnicking on battlefields and collecting skulls as souvenirs, dating back to the aftermath of the war (p. 244). Such actions have raised many ethical questions about treating war, which is still relevant today when visiting battlefields or concentration camps. As the tourists were criticised soon after the war for photographing everything from battle spots to tanks, we can see an echo of the contemporary issue of whether selfies or photos should be allowed at Auschwitz's »Arbeit macht frei« gate. The debates about the correct treatment of battlefields, the dead, and the destruction, initiated soon after the First World War, reflect the concerns of bereaved individuals, patriots, and nationalists. As Connelly points out, some visitors were saddened that many destructions were



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no longer visible as cities and roads have been rebuilt. These discussions demonstrate the need for sensitive treatment and the questions that arise about how to deal with the effects and consequences of war on humans, the landscape, and nature, which can also be transferred to current discussions about the correct treatment of memorial sites of places of war and violence.

In summary, Connelly's study provides valuable insights into the motivations and significance of visiting battlefields and the first mass tourism to former sites of war and violence, as well as the emergence of a whole new industry. Visitors' reflections based on »Postcards from the Western Front« illustrate the diversity of attitudes to these visits, ranging from the spiritual to the macabre, and Connelly shows the continuing importance of these sites to our understanding of a violent past. Overall, the study makes an important contribution to the ongoing discourse on the importance of commemoration and memory in modern society.



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