

Frank Rambert

# GARDENS OF WAR

BRITISH CEMETERIES ON THE WESTERN FRONT



EPFL PRESS

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After five years of conflict, the Great War is over. The British do not repatriate their soldiers who have died on French soil, neither do they gather together their cemeteries, leaving them instead wherever the war has killed. There are 967 of these cemeteries still present today, revealing the history and geography of the conflict and delineating in the fields the frontline which has now disappeared on a territory re-conquered by agricultural life.

British cemeteries are gardens: trees and flowers gather around white headstones laid on impeccable lawn and around the visitors' shelter. Each cemetery is a piece of England laid on foreign soil. Designed by the greatest architects of the time, such as Edwin Lutyens and Charles Holden, their architectural quality is exceptional.

*Gardens of War* invites us to discover these unique places and approaches them in two ways: as a project, based on archive documents and testimonies from the main participants in this vast enterprise, including politicians, diplomats, and above all, architects; but also from the visitor's point of view upon discovering the cemeteries, travelling along the roads linking them together and rendering impressions through sketches, photographs and drawings, as closely as possible to the experience of senses and emotions.

*This book talks about humanity, revealed by these stigmata left behind by an extraordinary event in places that have since been stripped of their ordinariness. We are moving over land marked by imprints, from the apparently tenuous traces left buried by war to those revealed by cemeteries. We should like to know how all this combines to create a human territory that is at once physical, historical, cultural and emotional. Like all living beings, people mark their territories in the knowledge – conscious or intuitive – that these things will live on when they are gone, and that they want it to be so. – Frank Rambert*



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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY CÉCILE MENON AND TRISTA SELOUS

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The virtues of boredom cannot be overemphasised.

One rainy Sunday as I was browsing the French geoportal website,<sup>1</sup> I decided to look for the cemeteries of the Great War designed by the English architect Edwin Lutyens. I knew of them from an issue of the Italian review of architecture *Casabella*,<sup>2</sup> which had been on my bookshelf for several years. As I looked through the photographs, the names of architects such as Carlo Scarpa immediately came to mind, and two things struck me: one, that these fabulous cemeteries were unknown to the French public in general and to architects in particular; and two, that these military cemeteries were devoid of the funereal atmosphere and, more especially, of the warlike sentiment found in the French cemeteries and monuments I was more familiar with.<sup>3</sup> This is what legitimised my undertaking of this work: to present in-depth knowledge about these places dotted around the north of France, places that we know so little about. There was not a single Francophone book on the subject.

I am a practising architect, and it is in this capacity that I write these words. Although not strictly part of my professional practice, they are nevertheless a fundamental element of it. This book thus aims to bring new knowledge to architects, of course, but also to reach a wider audience. The subject is vast and can shed light on many other disciplines. For the benefit of a broader public, one motivated solely by how interesting the subject is, I have deliberately removed certain specialised aspects of my writing so that it is not exclusive to the practitioners of a single discipline.

I knew very little about Lutyens, one of the dominant architects in the story that follows; I knew nothing at all about his cemeteries and had never set foot in Flanders, in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais or in Picardy. All of it was new to me, and all I had for reference was a list of village names and cemeteries I had never heard of.

The experience of learning about a new territory through searching for dispersed cemeteries was a revelation: firstly, because I had to create a body of work that did not previously exist, which was a vital part of my project;<sup>4</sup> and later, because I came to discover these cemeteries at the same time as I discovered their surroundings. Throughout this adventure, it may well be that what I was most familiar with was the history of the war, whose trace was somehow invisible. This situation has, at least in part, informed the structure of my research. It is directly linked with the way I familiarised myself with these places – by taking on the role of a character: that of a visitor who accompanies the reader in the journey through the text.

This book takes the reader onto the war lands of Flanders, Picardy, the Somme, and of Champagne too. The British held only the northern part of the front, from

the North Sea to Saint-Quentin. These farming lands were struck by the hammer blows of the Great War for four years; they were changed forever. Agriculture has returned in due course, occupying the land again by rights, making the war invisible, almost. Yet history is not far from the surface, lying beneath ploughed fields. What you can see are the cemeteries the war left in its wake, marking the former front line through the towns and fields.

Another aspect of this project, one which grew in intensity as the work developed, is the autobiographical element. I am from the last generation of those who have known, within their own families, soldiers of the Great War.

I knew them as a child. Now they are dead.

It was not until I read Pierre Bergougnieux's book *Le Bois du Chapitre* that I understood how fecund this loss could be: "As is often the case, what they had been remained hidden from me for as long as they existed. And when I could have asked, could have heard the words that need the same air we do to breathe and live, so that they could seed and spread, they were dead."<sup>5</sup>

These soldiers include Monsieur Blachot, who on his moped looked nothing like a hero, but whose decorations I discovered in a drawer, long after his death: the War Cross and Military Medal, which I took when no one else wanted them. Like a muffled noise one wishes to forget, they were old things from an age that is gone yet somehow still present, old things not ancient enough to become antiques. They were left for children to play with and include in their games; children who would have felt the weight of the metal in their hands and realised how serious the game really was.

A sense of the medals' importance.

And then there is my uncle George, who used to let me and my cousins run our fingers up his wooden leg to see how far up it went. We were a little shy at first but were encouraged by the infinite kindness of a smile below the large brim of his hat; his brother Maximin was buried at Cormicy under a concrete cross. I owe these people an acknowledgment, which is what Pierre Michon speaks of when he says that "literature must not be an exercise for talent, it must be an exercise of rehabilitation of our own lives – always."<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to those I have known and who returned from the furthest shores of my childhood at the same time as they emerged from the deepest of shadows.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.geoportail.gouv.fr> developed by the Institut National de l'Information Géographique et Forestière.

<sup>2</sup> *Casabella*, no. 675, February 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See J. M. Busscher, *Les folies de l'industrie*, Brussels, AAM Editions, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> During the course of my research, in early 2007, two books about Edwin Lutjens were published: Tim Skelton and Gerald Gliddon, *Lutjens and the Great War*, London, Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2008; Je-

roen Geurst, *Cemeteries of the Great War by Sir Edwin Lutyens*, Rotterdam, O10 Publishers, 2010.

The second book is mainly a catalogue of all the cemeteries designed by E. Lutyens.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bergougnieux, *Le Bois du Chapitre*, Orléans, Editions Théodore Balmoral, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Michon and Colette Fellous, second interview, in *Entretiens*, radio broadcast on France Culture, 25–29 July 2002.







## THE IMPERIAL WAR GRAVES COMMISSION<sup>1</sup>

“Here we go again! Just like in 1914.”

*On 28 June 1914, the heir of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Franz Ferdinand, and his spouse are assassinated in Sarajevo. The murderer is Serbo-Croat nationalist, 20-year-old student Gavrilo Princip.*

*On 28 July 1914, the Austro-Hungarian Empire declares war on Serbia; on 1 August, Germany declares war on Russia; on 3 August, Germany declares war on France and Belgium; on 6 August, the Austro-Hungarian Empire declares war on Russia; on 11 August, France declares war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire; on 13 August, the United Kingdom declares war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire; on 23 August, Japan declares war on Germany; on 1 November, the Ottoman Empire declares war on Russia, France and the United Kingdom.*

On 4 August 1914, the United Kingdom declared war on Germany following the latter's invasion of Belgium. The nations of the British Empire, including Canada, South Africa, Australia, India and New Zealand, followed suit. Although the war became global through a series of multiple alliances, no one imagined it would last longer than a few weeks. Everyone was expected to be home again by Christmas. Men got ready for the fray but not its consequences, and although help was organised for the wounded as the war developed, there were no graves planned for the soldiers killed in battle. As troops advanced or retreated, bodies were buried in communal or single graves, in fields or gardens. There would be a rifle stuck in the ground or a cross with a name, and that was it.

By the end of the year though, there were over 835,000 dead on the Eastern and Western fronts.

*1914. On the Western Front, the Germans pass through Belgium and attack France. This offensive movement brings their forces right to the outskirts of Paris, but the French army unexpectedly pulls itself together and pushes back the German army in the battle of the Marne valley. In Belgium, the battle of the Yser breaks out, the first battle of Ypres. When winter arrives, the Germans choose to dig themselves in and block further progression, leading to a war of attrition and putting an end to hopes for a short-lived conflict.*

The Red Cross organised help for the wounded. To travel along the front a “Red Cross Flying Unit” was created by a volunteer, Fabian Ware,<sup>2</sup> aged 45 when he embarked on a project that would take him to the summit of his career. This autonomous unit navigated along the front line and its fluctuations. Even though this



FABIAN ARTHUR GOULSTONE WARE  
1869–1949

Born in Clifton, Bristol, he studied in London and in Paris, and then spent a few years as an assistant master at several secondary schools. He began writing articles for the *Morning Post*. In 1900 he obtained a job as Assistant Director of Education, then was promoted to Director of Education in the Transvaal (South Africa). Returning to Britain in 1905, he was appointed editor of the *Morning Post*, where he remained until 1911 when he became a director of Rio Tinto Limited.

Aged 45 in 1914, and by then considered too old for the army, he enrolled in the Red Cross to run a mobile unit that provided assistance to the wounded. From then on, his life history became indistinguishable from the history of the Imperial War Graves Commission, which he initiated, founded and organised as its indefatigable, irreplaceable administrator.

Apart from his talent as an administrator, he was good at hiring people whose competence and knowledge lied outside his own; he knew where to find the right persons and to delegate responsibilities in line with their expertise. He thus called on Frederic Kenyon to set up the cultural policy which he was not qualified to develop himself, and which he knew to be essential to the work at hand.

The IWGC would not exist in its present, coherent and long-lasting form – both the organisation

itself and the values it embodies – without this clear-minded, generous man. A tenacious and charming negotiator, he believed in obtaining what he wanted by dint of negotiation and persuasion rather than by coercion. These qualities earned him the friendship and respect of the people he dealt with.

He had strong, even harsh imperial leanings, yet at the same time he deeply respected different cultures and religions. He believed in the civilising virtues of the Empire and its ability to help the development of the countries that were part of it. This viewpoint might seem a little naive but thanks to it the IWGC was an organisation that really did integrate, on an egalitarian basis, the countries affiliated to the Empire.

Between the two worldwide conflicts, Ware remained sensitive and attentive to social progress and organised the Commission according to a paternalistic nineteenth-century model: providing work for veterans and their descendants as a priority and setting up a welfare-state policy including social, educational and health benefits, under the control of the Commission. This social vision of another era would inevitably be modified after the Second World War, when Ware left his post in 1948, only a few months before his death.

was not part of its brief, it started keeping a record of the locations of graves as well as of the names inscribed on them.

Through General Nevil Macready, Fabian Ware soon approached the army to argue the importance of maintaining the graves and recording names. Macready, a well-known and well-liked general, was a Boer War veteran and remembered the indignation caused by the failure to properly bury bodies in that conflict. He was convinced that there was a moral duty to take care of the graves of soldiers killed on the battlefield and to acknowledge them as individuals as much as to satisfy the relatives and public who demanded respect for the graves. British soldiers serving in the army were all volunteers.<sup>3</sup> The nation was indebted to these soldiers and was duty-bound to honour their memory and to ensure the permanence of their names.

*1915. On the Western Front, the antagonists become engaged in so total a war that each nation's entire resources are mobilised, giving rise to war on an industrial scale, with more power allocated to artillery and aviation. Attacks on the regions of Artois and Champagne, and the battle of the Argonne are both murderous and ineffective as they fail to unblock the front. In Belgium, the second battle of Ypres breaks out, with Germans using toxic gas for the first time. The Dardanelles landings, and Gallipoli for the British, are further failures. The Adrian helmet is distributed in the French army from September onwards, followed by the Brodie helmet in the English army.*

The "Flying Unit" carried on its work of noting down the graves as best as it could; however, it was not possible to get close to the more dangerous military zones. Unable to find relatives' graves, the public had started expressing its distress, which was relayed by the press.



OTTO DIX, *DER KRIEG*  
2.2.12 STURMTRUPPE GEHT  
UNTER GAS VOR, 1924  
(© 2013, PROLITTERIS, ZÜRICH).



CECIL FREDERICK NEVIL MACREADY  
1862–1946

General Macready was erstwhile known as *Make-Ready*. He was a very competent army officer, who had been decorated many times. He was a Knight of HRM, and had the perfect mastery of rigour and eccentricity that made him the stereotype of an English officer – except for the moustache. As he detested this mode of facial hair, he abolished its nearly compulsory custom in the English army. His father was an actor; his wife was Irish.

From 1882 onwards, his post in the army took him all around the world, starting with Egypt, then Ceylon, India and South Africa, where he took part in the second Boer War. Back in England in 1906 he was appointed to the personnel department of the War Office. He was a singular character in the army, as he expressed liberal tendencies and gave his support to, among other things, the right to strike and Irish Home Rule. In March 1914 he was sent to Ireland as General Officer Commanding Belfast District in the event of civil war breaking out, an event averted in August with the outbreak of the First World War.

Back in the War Office, first in France, then in London, he was an enthusiastic proponent of the employment of female labour in order to free men to go to the front. He provided Fabian Ware with

the army's support to help carry out his mission. His experience as a Boer War veteran made him particularly open to Ware's arguments in favour of the necessity to provide the dead soldiers with decent graves, for themselves as much as for their loved ones.

The war brought him medal after medal.

In 1918 he was appointed head of the London Metropolitan Police. In spite of his aversion for trade unionism, the social policy he implemented was progressive and made him popular in the force. He was a member of the IWGC from 1917 to 1921. In 1920 he returned to Ireland as General Officer Commanding-in-Chief with the mission to 'crush rebellion by any means'. Although he was not outwardly fond of that country, he refused to head the local police and openly criticizes the Auxiliary Division and the Black and Tans (paramilitary organisations that recruited Irishmen to fight against those who were pro-independence). He oversaw the implementation of Irish independence in 1922 and the orderly withdrawal of English troops in 1923.

By 1924 he was back in the London Metropolitan Police. The end of his career was revitalised when he published his memoirs.

Macready decided to formalise Ware's link to the army by naming his unit the "Grave Registration Commission" (GRC). Ware's work was acknowledged by General Haig, Commander of the British Expeditionary Force, who recognised that although the work of the organisation did not contribute directly to the war effort, it did have a moral value, to which the soldiers and public were very sensitive. Furthermore, he knew that once the conflict was over, the public was bound to ask about the conditions in which the soldiers' graves were maintained.<sup>4</sup>

The GRC set up a record that included comprehensive information about the deceased and their graves (location, accessibility). The classification was twofold: by geographic area and by regiment. Inaccessible graves were also catalogued.

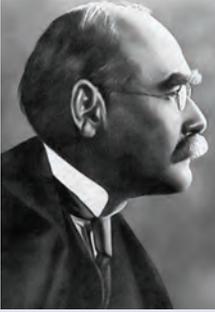
This at least was the theory; but the reality was infinitely more complex. The chaplains in charge of burials moved around; officers' notes were often scribbled in haste, sometimes unclear to the officers themselves. Graves were marked by a simple stick in the ground and were not identifiable until the chaplain or the ambulance man who kept the list of the buried was present. Sometimes there was no information at all: "Thirty men were buried in this spot." Old graves were not marked out and inaccessible bodies were numerous in the combat zones, a no man's land where the priority was protecting soldiers from the stench and effects of putrefaction rather than carefully registering the dead.

Of the 750,000 soldiers killed on the Western Front during the war, only 400,000 were identified.<sup>5</sup>

When a soldier died, his family received a photograph of his grave, together with directions to get there and the location of the nearest train station. All families were entitled to this, regardless of the conditions in which the soldier died and regardless of the soldier's rank or social class.



OTTO DIX, *DER KRIEG*  
1.6.6 VERWUNDETER, 1916  
(HERBST 1916, BAPAUME)  
(© 2013, PROLITTERIS, ZÜRICH).



JOSEPH RUDYARD KIPLING  
1865–1936

A writer and poet, Kipling was a prolific author of a collection of short stories that are now inscribed in humanity's literary heritage – *The Jungle Book*. Henry James once wrote to his brother that “Kipling strikes me personally as the most complete man of genius that I have ever known”,<sup>1</sup> for others, such as George Orwell, he was “the prophet of British imperialism”.<sup>2</sup>

As a fervent proponent of the English imperial tradition he was opposed to Irish independence and would speak of “Home Rule” as “Rome Rule”. Born in Bombay, he lived in several countries of the Empire and for a time lived in the USA. He enjoyed a towering notoriety: he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1907, but refused a knighthood.

In 1910 his famous poem “If” was published, with the line, “You’ll be a Man, my son!” His son John was not eligible to enter the army because of short-sightedness, but with his father’s help was

enrolled aged 17 and integrated the Irish Guards. He was killed on his first day in the army, on 27 September 1917, in Loos, Artois.

“If any question why we died, tell them, because our fathers lied.” (*Epitaphs of the War*, Common Form)

He sought John’s grave for a long time but never found it.<sup>3</sup>

Kipling’s contribution to the IWGC was major, as he selected the extremely limited range of words and sentences to be found in the cemeteries, such as “Known unto God”, “Their name liveth for evermore.” He was an assiduous visitor of the cemeteries, which inspired, among other things, the short story “The Gardener” (in *Debits and Credits*, 1926).

“By the way, the next time you are in town would you get me an identification disc as I have gone and lost mine. [...] Just an aluminium disc, with a string through it like this.”<sup>4</sup>