Archaeology on the Battlefields: An Ethnography of the Western Front

by Ross Wilson

The archaeology of the battlefields of the Western Front has provided an alternative perspective in the development of a new agenda in Great War studies. Excavations provide a viewpoint into the materiality and spatial dimension of the world’s first industrialised conflict. This however is not the only way in which the interests of archaeology can be served. The vast amount of archive material available forms an as yet untapped source of data to examine the landscapes, spaces and material culture of the war. This information which has already been rigorously studied by historians, can be reinvigorated by using archaeological research questions which address unexplored aspects of the conflict. This paper will demonstrate this potential by using archive material from British soldiers who served on the battlefields to construct an ethnographic study of the Western Front. Utilising postprocessual landscape theories, this ethnography will explore how soldiers reacted to the trenches, weapons and the threat of death and mutilation in the war landscape. This not only contributes to the development of archaeology in the study of the Western Front but by viewing the war in a different manner, archaeology can also construct a different remembrance of the conflict.

Keywords: Western Front, ethnography, ethnohistory, materials, landscapes

As the ninetieth anniversaries of the events of the Great War are commemorated without the vigour reserved for remembering the Second World War, and as the last of the veterans who fought in the conflict pass away, a war which appears to have played such a pivotal role in the history of the twentieth century may seem to be on the verge of slipping from memory. Contradiciting these assertions, there has been the recognition in recent years of the lasting pain and trauma of the conflict within Europe, as the memory of the soldiers who fought in the world’s first industrialised war still impacts upon contemporary society (see Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 2002: 6). This situation is best illustrated in Britain by the calls in 1998 for the pardon of soldiers executed by the British Army during 1914-1918 (Corns and Hughes-Wilson 2001: 5). Fuelled perhaps by the realisation of this continuing fascination and the almost obsessive interest, emotion and poignancy which surrounds the Great War, scholars from a number of disciplines have begun to transform the approach, nature and content of the study of the First World War and especially the Western Front (see Braybon 2003). History, literature, anthropology and archaeology have all contributed to this endeavour, and in recent years those involved in these separate fields of enquiry have begun to search for common ground, heralding a new multi-disciplinary approach in the study of the Great War (Schnapp 1998). This has enabled new avenues of investigation to be opened up, inspired by the work of fellow scholars.

Innovative perspectives have been explored within analyses of social and cultural history (Bourke 1996), memory (Winter 1995), material culture and landscapes (Saunders 2001). It has been the advent particularly of an anthropological and archaeological agenda, which has occurred over the last decade on the former battlefields of Northern France and Belgium that has proved to be of enormous value (Saunders 2002). Anthropologically informed studies and archaeological excavations have enabled new conclusions to be drawn, different considerations of traditional sources of evidence, and importantly created new areas of study.

Archaeology on the Western Front

Archaeology has been uniquely prominent in this new agenda within Great War studies as excavations of the former battlefields of the Western Front have revealed startling glimpses of the material and physical conditions of the soldiers, which have remained undisturbed since the end of hostilities (Saunders 2002). Far from the post-war process of reconstruction destroying the evidence of the war, the strong desire by local inhabitants to recover their former land has ensured that archaeologists working in the region are often confronted with plentiful examples of the lives of the soldiers (Desfossés
et al. 2000). As Saunders (2001: 48) has observed, excavations uncover ‘trenches, dugouts, material and human remains often perfectly preserved, just centimetres beneath the surface.’ The archaeological study of the battlefields of northern France and Belgium can be considered to have received prominence and recognition from the excavation of the mass grave of twenty-one French soldiers at Saint-Rémy-la-Calonne in 1991 (Hill and Cowley 1993). Since this excavation the subject has received critical scrutiny (Schnapp 1998) and has developed into a subject area which has fascinated public and academia alike (Barton 2003). Groups of both professionals and volunteers from France, Belgium and Britain have been involved in archaeological investigations (NML 2007; AWA 2007). Although methods and objectives vary widely in these projects, there have been moves recently to build a more professional agenda in the study of the archaeology of the Western Front (see Price 2004). This objective has been aided by the thorough work carried out by a British team of archaeologists at the Ocean Villas site, at Auchonvillers near the Somme (see Fraser 2003), Alain Jacques’s work in the city of Arras (Desfossés et al. 2000), and particularly the establishment in Belgium in 2003 of the Department of First World War Archaeology, part of the Institute for the Archaeological Heritage of the Flemish Community (IAP) (A.W.A., 2005). This may mark a new era of archaeology on the Western Front, one which coordinates its work across national and disciplinary boundaries, to develop the methodologies and research objectives needed to examine the complex and unique archaeological evidence presented by the excavation of the battlefields. Despite these advances, many regard the subject as still in its infancy, and yet to achieve an established place within the wider study of archaeology, or enter into a period of what could be termed ‘normal science’: which could be defined as a period of agreed principles and methods (Saunders 2002: 101).

Excavations which have occurred along the former trench lines and no man’s land of the Western Front have been limited in scope, due to costs and the potential hazards of working in a former warzone, including unexploded ordinance. They have often been undertaken in advance of development, or in common with the study of military structures from the twentieth century in Britain, focused on issues of preservation and presentation, rather than an examination of how people may have encountered and used these sites. As such archaeological projects have remained quite site-specific, and an examination of the wider battlefield landscape has been neglected. Despite calls for innovative interpretive archaeological projects on the Western Front incorporating postprocessual theory, archaeological excavations have been concerned with developing the field of study before utilising archaeological ideas and approaches which may appear ‘to go too far’ (see Fleming 1999). This is perhaps entirely appropriate when considering the deep emotions evoked by the mere name of the Western Front, or the mention of the names of some of the more famous battlefields, such as the Somme, Ieper (Ypres) or Vimy. The memory of the battlefields still haunts contemporary society across Europe, and a study which may appear to detract from the cherished memory of the soldiers, to challenge ‘the myths of the war’ (Bond 2002: 12), or to take their memory too lightly would inevitably attract public criticism. As such archaeology has been restricted so far to limited interpretations of the sites, and development of methodologies (Price 2004). Such a position cannot be maintained however, as it inevitably restricts and limits our appreciation of the endeavours of these men. To fail to use archaeology as an interpretative tool to examine the processes and events which shaped the soldiers’ lives, and how they acted and adjusted to their environment, is to ‘deny them their humanity and to belittle their achievement’ (Fuller 1990: 180).

Such a restricted approach can be observed with the work at the site of Auchonvillers, where the remains of a British reserve trench and a cellar used as a dugout have been excavated as part of an ongoing project (Fraser 2003). Whilst this work represents part of the development of a professional archaeology of the battlefields, and has contributed significantly to a multi-disciplinary approach by utilising historical documents, both private and official, as well as photographic records, it still relies on a ‘traditional’ archaeological approach to the data. It has focused on the examination of the stratigraphy of the trench, so a presentable story of the site can be relayed to the public (Price 2004: 183). Seven phases have been identified in this stratigraphic study, spanning the initial construction, possibly undertaken by French troops, to the final levelling and clearing of the site after the war. It has been argued however by Dunnell (1992) that the analysis of stratigraphy from a single site, let alone a single stratigraphic section such as this, can never provide more than a limited and localised view of the far wider
human activity which occurs across a landscape (Dunnel 1992: 29). Indeed, for this reason postprocessual landscape archaeology developed partly from a concern to move away from limited, individual excavations, to observe how sites across a landscape were experienced (Thomas 1993: 23; Ashmore and Knapp 1999: 3). Such a wider landscape approach has yet to be applied to the sites on the Western Front, although the Ocean Villas Project does aim in future to study the impact of the war across the battlefield spectrum, including the British trenches, the village of Auchonvillers and the German positions (Fraser 2003).

A landscape perspective

The archaeology of the Western Front can be enriched by incorporating the theories developed within postprocessual landscape archaeology. By utilising the developments made within landscape archaeology by Tilley (1994; 2004), Thomas (1993; 2001), Gosden (1994) and Bender (1993; 1998), a new approach to the study of the battlefields can be created. These archaeological studies have placed at the forefront of their analyses the examination of a 'sense of place': a study of how individuals in the past operated and formed a being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962). 'Place' has become a topic of concern within anthropology and human geography as well as archaeology over the last two decades. Although studies which invoke 'place' in their analyses are diverse, a 'sense of place' can be loosely described as how human involvement with the world brings about an attachment to a particular area, an evocative response to a specific space (Relph 1976: 15). Following these examples, this new approach to the battlefields can begin to examine how soldiers in the trenches and no man's land experienced their surroundings of the material of war, the battlefield landscape, and how they came to an understanding in this hostile landscape (Tilley 1994: 10). Such a study will further the development of a multidisciplinary agenda, as a study of 'place' incorporates not only the corporeal sensations of the agent's immediate surroundings, but also the emotions felt as they encounter these situations. In these circumstances the large amount of data available in archives, of official documents and personal papers can contribute to this assessment. In fact, archaeologists interpreting the military structures and landscapes of the twentieth-century have already realised the value of combining postprocessual landscape archaeological theories with a wide range of sources, including memoirs and oral history (Anderton 2002: 189).

Taking these theories and placing them in an actual example of what postprocessual landscape archaeology can really achieve in an examination of the Western Front, this paper will assess the manner in which the British soldiers created a 'sense of place' within the trench system and no man's land of the Western Front. Taking evidence from the beginnings of trench warfare in November 1914 to the return of more open forms of warfare in late 1918, this paper will examine the actions and experiences of the British soldier as they reacted to their surroundings, with the focus of the study upon the soldiers 'being-in' the landscape (Tilley 1994). By using the material housed in the Liddle Collection (2004) at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds (hereafter LC), which contains the documents and personal papers of British soldiers who fought on the battlefields of Northern France and Belgium, this paper also aims to contribute to the growing body of work which aims at both developing a new agenda in studies of the Great War and at being part of the growing calls for a multidisciplinary approach and awareness (Braybon 2003: 5). This particular source of archival evidence has been utilised by historians for the last forty years especially in Britain, and has provided material for a vast array of descriptive histories detailing the lives of the soldiers and the conditions in which they served (Winter 1978; Middlebrook 1971; Macdonald 1983). Such a tradition of study does not entail that the information available from these sources is depleted. However, by using this already well-researched material to examine a new perspective in the experiences of the soldiers on the Western Front, a different approach is needed to access the particular data required, one which is befitting to the new agenda in the subject area. Examining the letters, diaries, and oral testimonies of British soldiers on the Western Front at the Liddle Collection therefore can be classed as an ethnographic study (after Reverchon and Gaudin 1998). To term this study of the archival evidence of the British soldiers of the Great War an ethnographic investigation entails that a number of points need to be clarified. Ethnography in this respect should be thought of as basically a method of studying a culture or group of people from their own perspective, the production of an emic viewpoint: a study of human life (Fielding 2001: 46; Punch 1998: 157).
This approach is similar to the work which has been conducted under the approach of ethnohistory (Sturtevant 1966). It also complements Saunders’s (2002; 2004) call for an anthropologically informed archaeological study of the Western Front, and Audoin-Rouzeau’s (1998) discussion of an ‘anthropology of combat’ on the battlefields. This project can certainly draw upon the work undertaken within ethnohistory, as such studies regularly employ documentary materials, ethnographic and archaeological data, within a framework derived from historical and anthropological approaches (Sahlins 1985: 72). Such an approach attempts to show not merely what people thought but how they thought...how they construed the world, invested it with meaning and infused it with emotion’ (Darnton 1984: 3). This ethnohistoric methodology assesses the materials and documents of the past in the manner of an ethnographic study; it examines these sources to derive an impression of the actions of individuals in the past, and it is the analysis of these actions which form the basis of inquiry (Isaac 1982: 347). This method of examining the past from the perspective of those who experienced it entails a different approach and agenda to the documents and sources of the past, to ask new questions of data which may have already been well studied by other scholars (Isaac 1982: 324; Dening 1988: 99). Not only must the ethnohistorian search for new facts, he must dare to be innovative and creative in working with the facts. He must search out new ideas, explore their ramifications, and develop their theoretical implications’ (Schwerin 1976: 323). Ethnohistory combines the innovative use of documents and archives, with the study of the material and physical conditions of those in the past, to produce an interpretation ‘in the ethnographic grain’ (Darnton 1984: 3).

In the construction of an ethnographic analysis of the British soldiers of the Western Front, the abundant evidence available ensures a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973: 5) is possible, but there remains the possibility of being overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of the evidence. This paper will address how by examining the construction of a ‘sense of place’, a greater insight can be obtained into the lives of the men who fought on the battlefields and how soldiers inhabited a hostile landscape. Therefore archive material will be researched with two specific research objectives:

i. How did the soldiers react to the material and physical conditions of the battlefield landscape?

ii. In what way did these reactions foster a sense of belonging and emplacement in the landscape?

**The Western Front, 1914-1918**

Before such an analysis can take place, a number of factors must be brought to attention: the landscape of the Western Front in the British sections must be contextualised. The years of static trench warfare, which prevailed after November 1914, were fought along the Western Front which ran from the Swiss border to the North Sea (Ashworth 1980: 3). The Western Front was nearly 475 miles in length and formed a shallow reversed ‘S’ shape across France and Belgium (Keegan 1999: 199). Its overall form inevitably varied with the ebb and flow of the war (Winter 1995: 10), as enemy trenches could be taken and reused, with opposing troops constructing a new line of defence further back (Ashworth 1980: 7). During the four years of war several major battles were initiated in vain by British forces to break the deadlock, such as at Neuve Chapelle in 1915, the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and the Battle of Passchendaele in 1917 (also known as the Third Battle of Ypres). The failure of these operations to secure a noticeable advance ensured that the overall picture of the Western Front in November 1914 was not vastly dissimilar from that of September 1918, with positions of all sides being relatively static during 1915 and 1916 (Keegan 1999: 199). Steadily these positions were consolidated so that after only a few months, there emerged a complex system of three trench lines, front, support and reserve, linked by a series of communication trenches, as well as casualty clearing stations for injured troops, support units, field hospitals, billets and training camps through which soldiers would pass through on their way to and from the trench system (Winter 1978: 85). Soldiers were not permanently stationed in the front line trenches, but were rotated in and out of the trenches (Brown 2001: 43-45). The soldiers would move between the three trench lines, front, support and reserve, and then back to their billets away from the front (Winter 1978: 80-82). Six days in each of the lines was the usual amount of time the soldiers spent in the trenches (Winter 1978: 80-82).

The British army steadily increased the amount of front line it held during the conflict. Initially British and Commonwealth troops...
were entrenched in a small area near Ieper, but by April 1915 they held thirty-six miles of the front line (Ashworth 1980: 4-11). By June 1916 the army had spread further along holding eighty-five miles from Boesinghe in the Ieper Salient, to Mericourt near the River Somme (Ashworth 1980: 4-11). Eventually by early 1918 the British army took over the front line from Ieper to the Oise, in Picardy (Holmes 1999: 11). French forces held the majority of the front line from the Swiss border to the Oise, whilst Belgian forces occupied a small sector from Nieuport to the Ieper Salient (Ashworth 1980: 4). The expansion of the British army along the Western Front was coordinated with the rise in the number of troops. In Britain between August 1914 and December 1915, 2,466,719 men enlisted for service, and from January 1916 to the end of the war 2,504,183 men were conscripted into the army (Winter 1985: 68-69). The majority of these soldiers were organised at various times into four and five separate armies on the Western Front, each holding their own section of front line (Simpson 1984: 140).

The ‘space of death’

The war-torn landscape of the Western Front was not merely viewed by the soldiers as an empty space or an ‘anti-landscape’ (see Hynes 1990: 196). For soldiers it became a definite, fearful place, and significantly a way of seeing and being-in the world. To examine the ways in which British soldiers constructed a sense of place in this hostile landscape is to study their actions and how the scenes of war and soldiers’ experiences of brutal conflict contributed to the definition of their surroundings and consequently their own being and identity. In this manner, to consider ‘place’ on the Western Front is to evoke the work of Taussig (1987) and his definition of how brutal and hostile places acted to delineate a ‘space of death’ in the landscape. ‘Place’ in this study is not considered in the conventional form of an area where an individual is established, secure and has a sense of sanctuary (see Tuan 1977). ‘Place’ is used to describe a process of human agents becoming immersed in the landscape, of acting upon it and being acted upon (Heidegger 1962: 207). In the formation of a sense of place, soldiers imagined, observed and constructed a landscape of fear, through a lingering threat of death, their own violent actions and the scenes of devastation along the front line (Taussig 1987: 133). The ‘space of death’ in the landscape is pre-eminently a place of transformation, as ‘through the experience of death, through fear, through loss of self and conformity to a new reality, the individual experiences a radical shift in understanding and behaviour’ (Taussig 1987: 7).

Actions in the war landscape

The actions of the soldiers were strictly governed and ordered along the Western Front (Fuller 1990: 61). It was central to British army policy throughout the war to create an aggressive front line, encouraging the soldiers to attack and harass the enemy at every available opportunity (Keegan 1999: 198; Ashworth 1980: 12). Fighting in the trenches and the battlefields was therefore believed to require an army steeled, disciplined and inspired by the idea of the attack (Englander 1997: 126), capable of ‘crushing the enemy...armies...in the open’ (HMSO 1916: 5). The orders of the military hierarchy shaped the actions and the perceptions of the war landscape for the soldiers (Tilley 1994: 12). Through these orders they were encouraged, and largely accepted their roles to act brutally and to kill (Bourke 1999: 4). Some relished the opportunity to participate, Private W.H. Gardner (LC) wrote in 1916 that, ‘at last I have achieved my ambition, I must also say my main aim, during the last 18 months, i.e. I have got to the trenches’. In the landscape that had been created by war, a new concept of identity was demanded by the authorities, and assimilated by the soldiers (Leed 1979: 148). Through the performance of these orders, the soldiers were expected to come to possess the qualities of the aggressive soldier demanded by the military authorities (Bourdieu 1977: 72). This maintained that, above all, the soldiers of the British army were to uphold what the War Office defined as the ‘fighting spirit’ (1914: 9).

These actions, legitimized by the authorities, forged a new perception of the surroundings. Soldiers were encouraged and adjusted to act in a brutal and violent manner (see Tausig 1987: 7). J.C.B. Wakeford (LC) in April 1918 wrote how through the experience of death and violence ‘one gets curiously callous in this country.’ These violent and hateful attitudes were also encouraged by war propaganda, which emphasised the ‘barbaric’ acts of the enemy against civilians, and opposing soldiers (Ferguson 2004: 158; Horne and Kramer 2001: 196). The actions of the men were also created and conditioned through their memory and perception of experiences (see Giddens 1984: 377). Captain R.L. Mackay (LC) in his diary in October 1916 referred to a German gas attack, which ‘made me wild. Don’t want to take prisoners after this’. Private J. Gerrard
(LC) in his memoirs recalled how, ‘the Germans asked for it and Proctor gave them what they asked for’. He described this as ‘getting a bit of my own back’. This harsh and brutal environment created a set of understandings for the soldiers. The war landscape can be claimed to be an ‘extension of the social self providing a series of principles for living and going on in the world’ (Tilley 1995: 5-6), and it is through this frame of reference that the soldiers acted and re-created the violent landscape which they occupied (Werlen 1993: 6).

The actions of the soldiers mirrored in effect the savagery and brutality they witnessed and experienced around them (see Taussig 1987: 133). R. M. Luther (LC) described the following scene in his memoir: ‘when we tumbled in, I fell on top of some of the enemy, and one put his teeth in my cheek and held on. I was dragged close to him, but my arms were free, and I tried to get my thumbs into his eyes and push out his eyes, but found his throat instead, and squeezed his windpipe. I felt my cheek being released, and my enemy struggled no more. Immediately I grabbed my rifle and clubbed him with the butt’. Lieutenant K.A. Townsend (LC) wrote in a letter in October 1917 that ‘to kill Germans with my own hands would be my greatest joy’. This violent and hostile landscape confronted soldiers with moments of brutality, where the regulated use of weaponry was ignored, and the soldiers reacted to the world in which they inhabited (Bourke 1999: 7-8). Weapons such as rifles and bayonets lost their official purpose and were re-used by the soldiers as clubs and knives, picks and spades became weapons as well as ‘any physical object which could harm the enemy’ (Smith et al. 2003: 91-92). Notes for bombing units issued by the General Staff (1916: 20), recommended that soldiers should be ready to use ‘a bayonet or special stabbing knife or weapon for hand-to-hand fighting, such as an axe or knobkerrie (trench club)’. Sassoon (1940: 302) recalls in his memoirs, his preparation for a raid on the enemy’s trenches: ‘it was time to be moving; I took off my tunic and men were lying about dead…And there was a great big horses shoe nails all around the top and a lump of lead drilled into the top.’ Wilfred Owen (1963: 52-53) subtly refers to this violence in his poem Spring Offensive when he speaks of, ‘immemorial shames’ and ‘superhuman inhumanities’.

A landscape of fear

Fear in the war landscape was prevalent (Bourne 1989: 214), as the war created a landscape of terror for the soldiers (Taussig 1987: 7). This awareness of the war environment is described by Rosenberg (1962: 80), who illustrated the anonymous fear and terror present, when he wrote how ‘death could drop from the dark’. The threat in the landscape was certainly evident as even to raise their heads above the parapet in some sections of the front line was to recklessly invite the sniper’s bullet (Griffith 1994: 38). ‘We were all told to keep our heads down. A boy named Prendergast took a look over the top and a bullet hit him on the forehead blowing his brains out at the back’ (J.C. McLeary, LC). Besides the anonymous threat of death the soldiers on the Western Front were also confronted with an ‘otherworldly landscape’, containing ‘a bizarre mixture of decayed bodies, spent ammunition and the presence of the dead amongst the living’ (Winter 1995: 68-69). Although some sections of the battle zone were not as badly affected, the soldiers arriving at the main areas of fighting, Ieper and the Somme, were confronted with a ‘panorama of devastation’ (Eksteins 1989: 146). Graves (1982: 211) later recalled these scenes, describing the horror of corpses in no man’s land, ‘after the first day or two the bodies swelled and stank’. H.L. Carrall (LC) wrote in September 1917, that ‘this war defies description...no words or photographs can picture the awful scenes’. The desolation of the battlefields framed the ‘space of death’, as intense moments of brutality and violence were witnessed within the destroyed landscape (Taussig 1987, 4). These war-ravaged scenes acted to instil the violent and brutal values, actions and associations within the soldier (Ferre 2001: 25). This ruined landscape deeply affected the soldiers. R.G. Ashford (LC) described the battlefield at Trones Wood, France: ‘there was no green anywhere. The meadows were just seas of brown craters, there hardly remaining a square yard anywhere without a shell hole’. The visual impact of the battlefields was striking. J.C. McLeary (LC) wrote that in the Ieper Salient, ‘shell hole was touching shell hole, all with water in, duckboards were blasted all over the place, and men were lying about dead’. Private, later
Corporal D.F. Stone (LC) described the soldiers’ perceptions of the war landscape, when he wrote in his diary in October 1918, that ‘death seemed to lurk in every yard of the ground’. This wasteland was captured by the war artists such as Nash and Nevinson, who accurately depicted images of intense anxiety and uncertainty (Gough 1997: 409).

These features of this hostile space formed understanding and meaning for the soldiers, which in turn influenced their behaviour and actions (Werlen 1993: 6). This landscape held a programmatic status for the soldier (Leed 1979: 37), as the horrifying events, acts and images served to create and maintain the space of death (Taussig 1987: 57). Private H. Old (LC) described these dreadful scenes with which soldiers could be confronted in a letter from June 1915 recounting the sight of a captured trench: ‘mangled and mutilated bodies, pools of blood, all amidst a most obnoxious smell, were strewn all over the place. The trench itself...was battered about in a terrible manner’. While the soldiers’ actions assisted in the creation of this war landscape, the landscape acted recursively creating the soldiers who belonged to it (Tilley 1995: 5-6). Private Hall (LC), who was killed in action, wrote in August 1916, ‘I am able to stand almost anything now that its possible to stand’. A further letter in May 1917 describes how his company made a raid on the enemy’s front line, ‘though it was hell while it lasted I felt happier than I have ever felt since being in this God damn country, you ought to have seen [me]...throwing bombs and rapid firing’.

Resisting the war landscape

The General Staff issued orders and directives to its soldiers at a prodigious rate. Rather than revealing that soldiers were not performing their duties, this demonstrates the desire of the authorities to control the soldiers’ behaviour. It must be remembered that Britain’s army in the Great War was composed largely of the working classes from the most hierarchical and deferential industrial society in the world (Winter 1985). This factor certainly explains how soldiers may have willingly taken on their prescribed roles, forming a ‘technology of the self’, transforming themselves into subjects (Foucault 1988: 44-45). This control was not complete however and a postprocessual landscape perspective of the Western Front requires that these issues of contestation and resistance are addressed (Thomas 1993: 28). The soldier must be considered as an agent, in relation to the General Staff and the political powers, who acted to continue the war and command the soldiers (see Jabri 1996: 3). Following this, it can be seen that some soldiers rejected the war outright; M. Ward (LC) wrote in December 1915, that he did ‘not want to see any more fighting or hear any more shells coming over’. This rejection has been described by Ashworth (1980: 15) in his analysis of how soldiers were able to control and radically alter their situation, reducing the danger within their surroundings. This was accomplished through the ‘live and let live’ policy, described by Blunden (1956: 167) as one of the ‘soudest elements in trench war’. Live and let live was defined as a truce where enemies stopped fighting by agreement for a period of time (Ashworth 1980: 19). R.J.T. Evans (LC) in a letter dated November 1915 illustrates this when he wrote that whilst in a trench German soldiers called out, ‘you no shoot, we no shoot’. Relieving troops moving into the front line were able to take on the trench and possible truce, and acquaint themselves with the potential hazards in the area (Ashworth 1980: 48). This is illustrated by A.J. Abrahams’s (LC) memoir which described such a manoeuvre, when soldiers would enquire about the attitude in the area by asking, ‘any shit about?’ This exchange of ideas was also enabled by the architecture of the trenches (Ashworth 1968: 408). The transverse structure of the trenches, which was designed to prevent enfilading fire, along the whole length of the trench, also acted to group men together along a line (Smith 1994: 82). Usually these positions were held by a small group of soldiers from the same section performing a tour of duty (Ashworth 1980: 5). This distribution allowed the soldiers, to some extent, to avoid surveillance by the commanding officer, which facilitated the live and let live principle, as well as encouraging the communication between men of attitudes, actions and principles (Ashworth 1968: 408). Some junior officers may have also connived in this policy of sociability, and of keeping aggression to a minimum (Englander and Osborne 1978: 598). Live and let live was therefore a refusal of the values and outlook dictated by the military hierarchy, and it alleviated the violence and danger in the landscape, altering the ‘space of death’ within it.

Although the actions of the soldiers created the landscape, these actions were still subject to certain social conditions (see Werlen 1993: 4). The prescribed method of the General Staff to encourage an active front was to keep the soldiers in close groups, to encourage ‘mutual surveillance, emulation and cohesion’ (Griffith
1994: 69). The soldier’s battalion or company formed this close group, as most of its members would know each other at least by sight (Ashworth 1980: 7). The longer a battalion lived and fought together as a distinct group, the more they accumulated a common identity amongst themselves and reputation within the army (Griffith 1994: 80). Battalions that were more inclined to harass the enemy, whether encouraged by a commanding officer or not, were considered ‘elite’, and these battalions would spurn tacit truces such as live and let live for the purposes of creating an ‘active’ section of the front line (Griffith 1994: 80). More often than not, a sector was active or quiet according to the attitudes and actions of the units involved, and soldiers would, on the whole, assume the outlook of their units (Ferguson 1999: 352). The soldiers when confronted with the reality of the war, the hostile landscape and the attitude of their comrades, were called upon to act accordingly (Ashworth 1980: 29).

The military hierarchy were aware of the development of such truces, and attempted a variety of methods to create an ‘active front’ mentality amongst all troops (Ashworth 1980: 76). These methods increased substantially after 1916, marking the ‘institutionalisation of the conflict’ (Winter 1978: 19-20). This process was indicated for Jones (1968: 114) by the introduction in 1916 of the steel helmet: ‘it all went west with the tin-hat, that harbinger...of a more purposed hate’. The formation of specialist weapons groups, as well as the ordering of an ‘active front’ policy on all sectors, led to a greater control of the soldiers’ behaviour (Ashworth 1980: 76-98). Ashworth (1980: 176-183) also cites the development of the policy of raiding, as used by the military authorities from early 1916, as destroying the live and let live truces. Trench raids were officially designed to familiarise front-line units with assault tactics and to encourage decentralised initiative within the ranks, as well as encouraging the policy of pursuing an active front (Simkins 1996: 52). Raids were organised from small groups of men, who ‘would conceal rank badges, blacken faces, and arm themselves with clubs, knives, bayonets, pistols and bombs’ (Winter 1978: 92-93). It was this policy of raiding which inhibited any tacit truces from occurring, ensuring the creation and maintenance of violence along the front line and a space of death within the landscape.

**War technology**

Tactics, military procedure and the soldiers’ own actions were also shaped by the military technology of the war, a subject all too often neglected by scholars (see Saunders 2003). There remains a great tradition of the British army being characterised by the equipment its ordinary ranks carried, and the British soldier of the Great War was no different, for example, the short magazine Lee Enfield rifle (SMLE) was firmly associated with the British ‘Tommy’ (Richardson 1997: 333). The Lee Enfield was issued to each soldier, and formed part of the basic equipment carried by the combatant (Winter 1978: 107). The British General Staff (1917: 11) called for confidence in its use, necessitating ‘a high standard of skill at arms’. Weighing just over nine pounds and fitted with magazines of ten bullets, with a twenty-one inch sword bayonet attached, the upkeep of the rifle in a man’s possession was strictly observed, with rifle inspections advised daily in the trenches (Winter 1978: 107-108; HMSO 1916: 43). This technology should be considered as acting upon the individual, creating ‘a dramatic and vivid effect on the social actor’ (Tilley 1999: 272). The operation orders for the 8th Division bomb throwers, called for the ‘rifle to be carried over left shoulder for right handed men and over right shoulder for left handed men. Rifle not to be slung across the body’ (Second Lieutenant R.E.M. Cherry, LC). Over the whole surface of contact between the body and the object it handles, power is introduced, ‘fastening them to one another’ (Foucault 1979: 153). This constitutes a ‘body-weapon, body-tool, body-machine complex’, creating a ‘coercive link with the apparatus of production’ (Foucault 1979: 153). Careful handling, familiarity and repetition of the place and value of the rifle was almost guaranteed by the frequency and rigour of rifle inspection (Winter 1978: 107).

The weapon in effect became an extension of the body, as it represented for men a symbol of their security in their own hands. The soldiers were more than aware that the rifle held a capacity, indeed a dictated purpose to maim and kill, in this way soldiers made sense of the world through the physical objects that surrounded them (see Miller 1987: 85). ‘We went in with our rifles without bayonets fixed or with bayonets only. Using bayonets in the form of a dagger and rifles as clubs and they were much more effective that way’ (Captain Watts-Moses, LC).

The soldiers’ identity and actions developed through a process of continual interaction with the material objects contained within the
landscape (see Gosden 1999: 120). Soldiers of the Great War were conditioned by the technology around them which could form and control actions, purpose and the perception of their surroundings. This is demonstrated in the primacy accorded to the use of the bayonet, derived from the belief that this would encourage the offensive and fighting spirit amongst the men (Griffith 1994: 67). 'In a bayonet fight the impetus of a charging line gives it moral and physical advantages over a stationary line' (War Office 1914: 222). This attitude persisted within the army throughout the war as orders issued by the General Staff (1918: 15) late on in the war state, 'the use of the rifle must become an instinct and the aim and object of all ranks must be to come to close quarters with the enemy as quickly as possible.' The rifle was believed by the General Staff to be easier to harass the enemy with (Griffith 1994: 69). This apparent characteristic of the rifle and the prescribed use of the rifle and bayonet in close combat situations, were considered by the General Staff to be ways in which the orders of the creation of an 'active front' would be embodied by the men. Embodiment explains how culture is incorporated into the body, how it becomes naturalised in actions, behaviour and belief (Attfield 2000: 241). 'The rifle and bayonet being the most efficient offensive weapons of the soldier, are for assault, for repelling attack or for obtaining superiority of fire. Every N.C.O. and man in the Platoon must be proficient in their use' (General Staff 1917, 7). Productive practise links the body and technology, so that one will always shape and influence the other (Gosden 1999: 160).

Alongside the rifle and the bayonet, the bomb or grenade was also considered to be the most effective, offensive weapon for an attack on enemy positions (General Staff 1917: 4). Initially, improvised grenades fashioned from jam tins, or slabs of guncotton wrapped around a detonator and six-inch nails were used on the Western Front. By 1915, these devices had been replaced by the introduction of the Mills grenade (Saunders 1999: 2-6). Private S.A. Lane (LC) recalled how the 'Mills bombs were beautiful little things, and effective. They fitted the hand perfectly and were thrown like a bowling a cricket ball'. Nearly seventy-five million had been used by the war’s conclusion, and it had replaced the rifle in the minds of some infantrymen as the main offensive weapon (Winter 1978: 110). This position was strongly opposed during the later years of the war by the military hierarchy, who believed that the use of the Mills grenade in the initial encounter with the enemy should not be encouraged (Griffith 1994: 67). It seemed that to many in the General Staff the bomb could too easily be used as an excuse by soldiers lacking the offensive spirit and who wanted quietly to 'forsake the offensive' (Griffith 1994: 67). Far from charging toward the enemy line as the General Staff believed the bayonet would encourage, soldiers using the Mills bomb were thought of as more willing to take cover in a shell hole or trench traverse rather than take the battle forward (Ashworth 1980: 68-69). This relationship was indeed recursive, as individuals invest their identity and sense of preservation in material objects, thus contributing to the actions and behaviour that moulds the individual and their perceptions (Strang 1997: 177). Material objects must therefore be considered part of the way soldiers understood and conceptualised this hostile space, and as such they influenced the soldiers’ actions and sense of place.

Conclusions

Today, across the landscape of Northern France and Belgium are the British and Commonwealth cemeteries and memorials, erected in the aftermath of the war by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (Bushaway 1992; Longworth 1982). This memorial landscape along the Western Front has created a powerful symbol of nationality and sacrifice (Heffernan 1995). These constructions also attempt to explain, to assist in remembering those who fought and died in the Great War of 1914-1918. As the generation that fought in the war passes away, perhaps these constructions will no longer enable an understanding, as ‘history deprives architecture of meaning’ (Eco 1987: 298). An arrival of thought and memory that allows an understanding to take place may be unattainable (see Nora 1989: 7; Gregory 1998: 227). Archaeological enquiry as an active production of the past, an intellectual and cultural labour, can act to construct memory for society (Shanks and Tilley 1987; Shanks and McGuire 1996). Such an approach has enormous resonance, not only contributing to a new agenda in Great War studies and an interdisciplinary agenda, but through this postprocessual landscape perspective, archaeology acts as a form of remembrance, by placing the soldiers and their actions within the context, of a harsh, violent and brutal war landscape.
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of the AHRC whose assistance enabled the thesis from which this article is derived. I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. Kevin Walsh, Professor Richard Bessell and Dr. Laurajane Smith. I would finally like to thank my family for their patience.

Bibliography

Abrahams, A.J. Western Front Recollections (Liddle Collection).


Ashford, R.G. Western Front Recollections (Liddle Collection).


Carrall, H.L. Western Front Recollections (Liddle Collection)

Cherry, R.E.M. (Major) General Section (Liddle Collection)


Evans, R.J.T. General Section (Liddle Collection).


Gardner, W.H. (Private) General Section (Liddle Collection).


General Staff, 1916. Notes for bombing units issued by the General Staff, London: HMSO.


General Staff, 1918. The Division in Attack. London: Harrison and Sons.

Gerrard, J. (Private) Western Front Recollections (Liddle Collection).


Hall, B. (Private) General Section (Liddle Collection).


Lane, S.A. (Sergeant) General Section (Liddle Collection).


Lewis, Private, Western Front Recollections (Liddle Collection).


Luther, R.M. Western Front Recollections (Liddle Collection).


Mackay, R.L. (Captain) General Section (Liddle Collection).

McCleary, J.C. General Section (Liddle Collection).


Old, H. (Private) General Section (Liddle Collection).


Stone, D.F. (Corporal) General Section (Liddle Collection).


Townsend, K.A. (Lieutenant) General Section (Liddle Collection).


Ward, M. Western Front Recollections (Liddle Collection).

Watts-Moses, E. (Captain) General Section (Liddle Collection).


The archaeology of the battlefields of the Western Front has provided an alternative perspective in the development of a new agenda in Great War studies. Excavations provide a viewpoint into the materiality and spatial dimension of the world’s first industrialized conflict. This however is not the only way in which the interests of archaeology can be served. Utilising postprocessual landscape theories, this ethnography will explore how soldiers reacted to the trenches, weapons and the threat of death and mutilation in the war landscape. This not only contributes to the development of archaeology in the study of the Western Front but by viewing the war in a different manner, archaeology can also construct a different remembrance of the conflict. Item Type: Article.