

A vast range of fields. Small woods, sunken creeks, dispersed and silent villages and farther, low rounded hills from north to south, encircling the old town of Ypres.

A quiet, humble landscape. A place where nothing never happens.

October 2014 marked the centenary since when British and French forced the German Army to stop in his march towards the Channel's ports. It was the end of the First Battle of Ypres.

On those days of autumn, shortly after I've moved to Belgium, I was walking along a muddy path, in that sector of the front.

The Kaiser's army stopped just above the edge of the ridge that surrounds the town. The Germans were tired but, all things considered, satisfied of their position and they began to entrench themselves and to construct strong defenses, waiting for a better moment to attack again.

British and French, taking advantage of that providential pause, took the opportunity to do the same, trying to protect as their best, the strongplace of Ypres. Strongplace that they had defended at great cost. A salient was created in the Western frontline.

A **salient**, also known as a bulge, is a battlefield feature that projects into enemy territory. The salient is surrounded by the enemy on multiple sides, making the troops occupying the salient vulnerable. The extremely tough conditions and the practically uninterrupted sequences of fierce fighting, earned to this area a terrible reputation and the name of « *The Salient* ».

One hundred years after, dozens of graveyards, memorials, mausoleums dotting the countryside. The years of the hundred anniversary raise the touristical appeal of that places and many were the initiatives for the valorisation of this territory. New monuments were built, trenches were restored and many paths of remembrance were traced. Tourists and guides of the Battlefields Tours, pupils in school excursion or normal traveller coming from all over the world, walk everyday on the small alleys of the white graveyards or makes « selfies » in front of the bunker where John MacCrae wrote the immortal « In Flanders Fields ».

On the edge of a muddy pond, I found a big fragment of rusty iron. I picked it up and weight up for a while. It was large as my hand but incredibly heavy. A splinter probably. Still today, even after a huge rehabilitation of the land, hundreds and hundreds of fragments like that one – shrapnels, shells, bullets, bombs – emerge from the ground. Iron Harvest they call it.

The landscape, apparently so gentle, still reveals his ancient and terrible secrets. And a strange inquietude, a sense of sadness, an uncanny feeling of melancholy, floating in the air. Like ghosts.

Since that first walk around the paths of the Salient, the sentence of the american landscape-artist Robert Smithson, guided my steps and my vision of the world : « *each landscape, no matter how calm and lovely, always conceals a substrata of disaster* ».

Those places, even if at first might seem the opposite, have not forgotten that disaster. They were marked forever. Starting with toponimy. The road towards the hills were renamed Suicide Road or Hun's Walk and the small woods Battle or Sanctuary wood. The hedges of the fields chase the lines of the trenches, the ponds where the frogs croak are bomb's craters. War had created a new geography.

The prophecy that General Plumer pronounced before the Battle of Messines : « *Gentlemen, we may not make history tomorrow, but we shall certainly change the geography* », has come true.

Not too far from one of this crater, while the day, slowly faded away, I found a small photography, tied up to a tree. It was printed on normal paper and even if it was plastified, the rain had almost totally erased it.

It showed the face of a man in uniform. Few meters farther, on a piece of paper, tied up to a tree too, was written :

Pte (Private) John William Ogley 21 years old

2nd battalion York and Lancashire Regiment

Disappeared near this spot in Railway wood on the night of 21st/22nd april 1916. He and 35 other men were on a routine reconnaissance patrol. None of the patrol returned and no bodies were ever found. His name is commemorated on Menin Gate.

Who knows if the man in that fading picture was Private John William Ogley, disappeared on the night of 21st/22nd april 1916 ?

And who knows who put his picture at the foot of a tree in a small flemish wood ?

A path ran towards the shadows of the wood. I took them.

Since that day I've walked more than 1000 km along the Salient.

I choose to go walking because I've considered necessary the act of walking in itself. As a way of seeing, as a way of feeling.

My journeys were also a sort of small sacrifice to whom that have died. Journey made sometimes following the paths of some famous soldiers that fought in the Salient : L.F.Céline, Robert Graves, Ernst Jünger, Erich Maria Remarque, Edmund Blunden, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler and many more. Sometimes following the battles routes, sometimes simply wandering into the woods, where the forgotten bunkers slowly fall to ruin.

At the beginning were the diaries and the words of Céline and Jünger to bring me here. Ernst Jünger, that survived to the hell of Passendale (maybe the most atrocious battle ever fought) wrote : « *Nature seemed to be pleasantly intact, and yet the war had given it a suggestion of heroism and melancholy* ». *A description still appropriate today.*

With this sort of « pilgrimage » I've tried to understand something more about « memory » and landscape, and how these two elements are strictly interconnected.

Walking I've tried to travel ant to visit « the space » where those facts took place and that made the Salient so tremendously notorius, but also to travel « in time », back to the war.

To borrow the words of Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst : « *Since to follow a trail is to remember how it goes, making one's way in the present is itself a recollection of the past...onward movement is itself a return* ».

Walk to remember. Walk as a way of research memories.

The resilient memory of the landscape, that still reveals the scars of the war. The memories of the splinters that still remember us the horror of the *Attrition warfare*. The private memories of whom that, in the most moving manner, are still paying respect to those who had fallen.

And maybe even the memory of whom who in that war died and that, like a ghost, still hangs in the blue air, around the birches planted near the cemetery, in a summer twilight.

This work is mainly a map of that pilgrimage. A map of the landscape and the memories of **the Salient**.