FIELDS OF BATTLE, LANDS OF PEACE

1914–1918

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL ST MAUR SHEIL
The Franco-German front along Chemin des Dames was the scene of some of the most destructive and demoralising fighting of the First World War. Nearly 100 years later, the great military historian Richard Holmes, on first reviewing one of Michael St Maur Sheil’s pictures of the battlefield, wrote:

I think that this is perhaps my favourite view of the Western Front ... as one stands there one cannot but be humbled by the spirit and endurance required of the soldier in battle. You cannot really understand a battle without viewing the ground on which it was fought. Part of the process is intellectual: to see how ridges provided fields of fire and woods offered cover. But, part of it, too, is emotional. This landscape was once peopled by soldiers, embedded deep in the seams of the soil. All those elements are to be found in this landscape. When I look at it my throat tightens as I think of the brave spirits who died fighting on these slopes. Here is the story of war, the essence of which we are seeking to tell.¹

It is hard to think of a more fitting tribute to the tireless work of the artist who has been photographing the theatres of 1914–18 for much of the past decade. Michael St Maur Sheil spent more than 400 days on location. From the waterlogged Fields of Flanders, over the ragged peaks of the Dolomites and across the arid plains of Palestine, he has looked to capture the now peaceful sites of battle. He has developed a remarkably nuanced perspective on the war as history and memory. Perhaps this is a product of distance. Unlike many of those who develop a fascination with the Great War, his family have no direct connection to the front lines. These are not images that look to reflect a personal connection to one of the twentieth century’s great cataclysms. Indeed, people are absent from his shots. Driven by Holmes’s sense that ‘the essential emptiness of the battlefield is rarely captured’, these photographs are landscapes, and his emphasis is on the resilience of nature over the destruction of war – the return of peace to places of death.²

With the objectivity of the documentary photographer, Sheil wants his audience to view his images unguided by anything more than context. In many ways his work reflects Jay Winter’s hypothesis that sites of memory can become ‘palimpsests’. These are places in which meaning can be overlaid by each successive generation’s historical and ethical outlook and beliefs. More than this, though, he provides colour to a history that can too often become black and white and, in some respects, wholly literary.³

Hew Strachan remarks in the introduction to this impressive published collection that his works ‘bridge the gulf between remembrance and history’.³ They represent an important pictorial guide to the conflict, which successfully embraces artistic enterprise and historical insight while providing a source for reflective memorialisation.

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You have made an effort to contextualise your work. It is clear that your aim was not only to create art but also to engage with the military history of the sites you captured on film. Did this affect how you approached your photography?

I used to be a commercial photographer, but am now studying for an MA in military history. I've totally changed direction, and I'm enjoying it. The exhibition that we have in Belfast [at City Hall] – and just had in London [in St James's Park] – includes 19,000 words of captions – I wrote every single one. This all began when I first met Richard Holmes and began discussing the project. He advised me that I had to have two things: the location. And, some hold: a person or a story that was related to that place. That would give the image relevance. There are some locations where I have actually thought: I have got to tell this story; I have got to get this picture.

With your historical insights in mind, did you ever find that your desire for the story was undermined by the aesthetic reality of your locations?

Most landscape photographers go to naturally beautiful locations, whereas I have got to work with what history gives me. A lot of the pictures have been adapted to the light. I now reckon that I could get a good picture in any landscape. If you get the graphic ingredients and then you get the right light, then you get the picture. It is a matter of waiting for the light. The longest it has ever taken me to get a shot was five days. I knew what I wanted but it took me five days to get it. Hew Strachan once pointed out that I spent more time actually in the trenches than any soldier of the First World War.

Your use of light means that many of your images were captured at dawn or dusk. Since many of the war’s offensives took place at these times, was this also an attempt to recreate a historical moment or perspective?

Three things decided the style of my work. Firstly, there is a collection by JS Cartier called Traces of the Great War, which is beautiful and in black and white. It was shot in the 1920s with a huge amount of 'heavy' light. It is a lovely book and I'm still in awe of it because he was a pioneer. I've used some of his locations. Secondly, I shoot in colour. It is important to remember that these are not battlefields. Battlefields are places where there is still a tank, smoke or a dead body. These are fields where a battle took place. When shooting in black and white you inevitably get a duller, more sombre image. Colour gives a picture a different meaning. As such, I shoot at dawn
because the light is different to anything during the rest of the day. It is beautiful. It’s important to use the light before sunrise – this was ‘stand-to’. Lastly, my photographs are taken from lower down because when we survey a First World War battlefield we look at it from the wrong point of view; soldiers were down in the ground. It’s a different world. From here the landscape changes; it gives it a different reality.

Your use of colour and focus on nature imbues your work with hope. Was this intentional?

From the beginning Richard [Holmes] and I had the words of the veteran PJ Campbell in mind:

No, they would not be lonely. I saw that bare country before me ... the miles and miles of torn earth ... the litter, the dead trees. But the country would come back to life, the grass would grow again, the wild flowers return, and trees where now there were only splintered skeleton stumps. They would lie still and at peace below the singing larks, beside the serenely flowing rivers. They could not feel lonely, they would have one another. And ... though we were going home and leaving them behind ... we belonged to them, and they would be a part of us forever.¹

This is a guy whose words rest on real – lived – experience. Why try and improve on a sentiment such as that? If the soldier does not have a feeling that some good is going to come out of all this death and misery then what is the point of carrying on?

Your pictures range from pure landscape vistas to images of sites of memory and the debris of the war. How do you decide on the subject of each particular photograph?

My pictures look to tell a story. When you walk the battlefields, you find objects because they are still there. When I photograph cemeteries it is because they are part of the story or a point in the battle. There are locations, like [the Commonwealth War Graves’ site at] Grandcourt that can tell a very specific story. In this case, that of the 36th (Ulster) Division on 1 July 1916. The division took their objectives on the day and subsequently charged on towards the German second line – where they were held. They ran out of ammunition and that is where they fell and were found. It is very poignant. Obviously many areas have been beautified, but many still retain their significance as part of the historical narrative.

You have captured many images of battlefields outside Europe and, indeed, outside British zones of operations. Was this a conscious effort to document events that are often forgotten in the United Kingdom?

I do not want a British-centric memory of the First World War, which focuses on the Somme and Passchendaele. To understand the First World War it is important to look at what occurred elsewhere. I had a multinational outlook straightaway. The
battlesfields look different and the cemeteries feel different. I would like people to look at the war in its wider context. It was a world war. Going around the exhibits at the Imperial War Museum, you would hardly even know there was a Commonwealth. Yet when you look at these other societies, you realise the war’s impact. New Zealand experienced horrific losses proportionally. The French held more of the line, for a longer time and experienced horrific losses. The Somme was their battlefield as well as a British zone. People discount the Americans, but look at their mobilisation; it was not even their war. The war was a demographic catastrophe in Africa.

You mention that you were searching for the story. Yet as time has passed much of the land has been reclaimed by agriculture and the natural landscape changed by planning and replanting. Is it possible to reveal the ‘truth’ of these sites?

There is a quotation, by Raymond Jubert, a Frenchman, who—after surveying Verdun—mused that ‘a battlefield today is just a field like any other; it’s just something to be turned over. Its soil is ploughed more deeply than in other fields; its furrows aren’t straight; you have to look very closely to get any idea of the corpses it holds.’ The First World War is no longer in living memory, it is history and that is what is should be. We should let go; we have got to stand back. The one place that the memory continues to exist is on the battlefields; it still has those shapes that you can see. The debris is still there. It creates its own landscape and sometimes you get pictures out of it that are beautiful.

As you come to the end of your project, do you remain hopeful that these ‘lands of peace’ will remain so?

Those who don’t learn the history are damned to relive it. It’s the history of mankind. I just hate to think that in 100 years’ time there might be someone like me who decides, ‘oh, let’s go and do a book about the Third World War’.

Michael St Maur Sheil began working in photojournalism in 1972 and received a World Press Photo award in 2001 for his coverage of child trafficking in West Africa. Since 2005 Michael has been photographing the battlefields of 1914–18. His work was showcased in a 2014 exhibition in St James’s Park, a special exhibition in Turkey covering Gallipoli and at City Hall, Belfast, in summer 2016. The exhibition will be on display in Dublin City Centre from 3 September for seven weeks. His collection has been published as Fields of Battle – Lands of Peace 1914–1918 and can also be found online at <www.fielsofbattle1418.org>.

Alex Mayhew is a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics, where he holds a PhD scholarship and works under the supervision of Heather Jones and Professor David Stevenson. His work focuses on the relationship between English soldiers’ mentalities and their military morale on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918. Alex maintains an interest in the military more generally and teaches on LSE100, an interdisciplinary social science course. He was recently elected a Postgraduate Member of the Royal Historical Society.

Notes
