

GAVIN STAMP, THE MEMORIAL TO THE MISSING OF THE SOMME (LONDON: PROFILE BOOKS LTD., PAPERBACK EDITION 2007).

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214 + PAGES, 32 BLACK AND WHITE ILLUSTRATIONS.

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More books like this need to be written. The book is nominally about Edwin Lutyens's Memorial to the Missing of the Somme at Thiepval in northern France. Yet, in one 190-page pocket-sized paperback, Gavin Stamp has also captured the futility, the carnage, the loss, the devastation, and the general horror of World War I as well as the infrastructure of commemoration that emerged even before the war was over. Stamp draws upon a range of academic scholarship and infuses it with his own superlative knowledge of architectural forms and history to write a lucid, limpid book for a general audience.

The Memorial to the Missing of the Somme is a dynamic brick and stone monolith intersected by arches that looms quietly alone in the landscape that was the site of the four and a half month long battle of attrition. In the end, when Field Marshal Douglas Haig declared the campaign officially over on 18 November 1916, there were over a million casualties on both sides and fewer than seven miles of pulverised land had changed hands. Lutyens's Thiepval Memorial commemorates the 73,357 British soldiers who disappeared in that putrid muddy hell. As a figure on paper 73,357 is enormous but when each of the names is inscribed on the inner stone walls of the sixteen massive piers that are the bases of the multiple arches, the scale of the loss becomes unimaginable. Every direction one turns, one sees name after name after name.

Stamp pulls no punches in his condemnation of the Somme offensive and the war in general. On page 4, he sets the tone, describing the Battle of the Somme as an

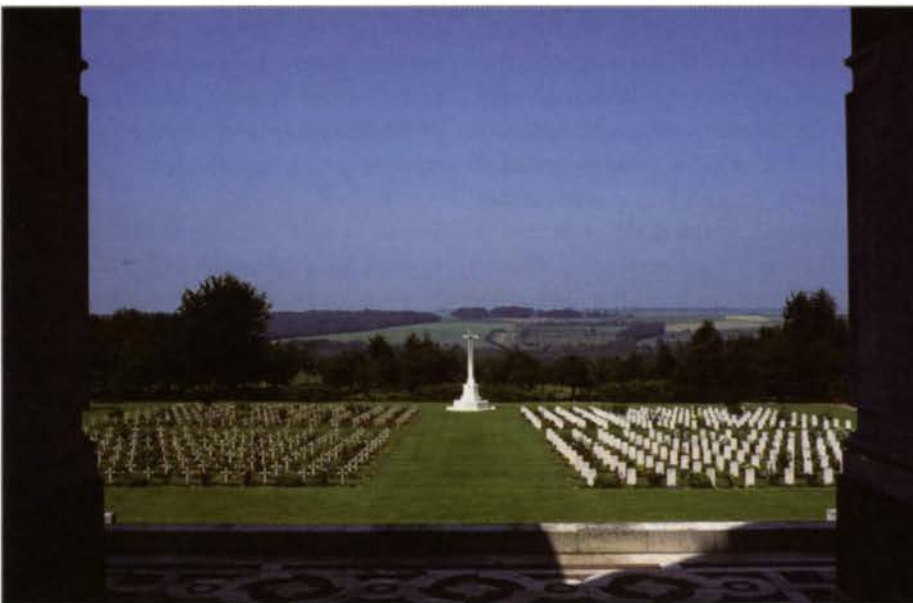


FIG. 1. MEMORIAL TO THE MISSING OF THE SOMME AT THIEPVAL, FRANCE: EDWIN LUTYENS.
VIEW LOOKING OVER HEADSTONES. | PIERRE DU PREY 1987.

exercise in “industrial slaughter” perpetrated “with unprecedented ruthlessness by [the] governments” of Europe. Haig, the architect of the British offensive, is portrayed as the aloof military technician bent on success no matter the cost involved. This is reinforced by David Lloyd George’s disparaging description of Haig as “brilliant to the top of his Army boots”. Stamp’s sources are recent revisionist histories of World War I that move away from the biographies of great men and great battles to examine the tactical disasters of the war and the life and death of the common soldier. Likewise, he has little time for ‘trainspotting’ military historians who, in their obsession with tactical plans, turn the war into a tabletop display of military games thereby missing the *gravitas*, or solemnity, of the occasion.

Stamp has organized the book in a manner that knits together the disparate threads of war, commemoration, and architecture. He starts with a harrowing account of the Battle of the Somme which is followed by a discussion of the war memorial in general, exploring the paucity of such monuments in London in contrast to other European cities and Britain’s former colonies prior to World War I. Lutyens’s Cenotaph in Whitehall is situated against this backdrop. The Cenotaph, in turn, sets the scene for a biographical chapter on Lutyens. He is characterized as a brilliant architect (countered by the apparently not so brilliant Herbert Baker) whose penchant for cracking terrible, often painful, jokes earned him a rather sad public persona. As Stamp sees Lutyens, however, his religious beliefs and philosophical interests – the rather guarded appreciation of theosophy he gained from his aristocratic wife Lady Emily Lytton – add depth to his character and underpin the pantheistic stance of the Cenotaph and the Thiepval Memorial, especially in the face of opposition from the established Church.

The subsequent chapter examines the infrastructure of commemoration during and immediately after the war with the creation of the Imperial War Graves Commission and the establishment of the military cemeteries. Comparisons are made with other nations’ cemeteries and, here again, the pantheistic, non-sectarian quality of the British cemeteries is emphasized. This chapter offers a counterpoint to the next which deals with the memorials to the thousands of dead whose bodies were never found; known simply as the missing. Stamp broadens this discussion by articulating the French government’s disquiet at the prospect of numerous monuments – at least twelve from the British Empire alone – that were to be erected on French territory. The number was ultimately reduced to four which, in the end, had the effect of significantly reducing the obtrusive grandiose British presence in a place where France had suffered as much as Britain and where France was burdened with the financial costs of rebuilding.

The last of the chapters narrows the discussion to Thiepval and the monument itself. Stamp describes the trenches, the tunnels, and the battle, and thereby highlights the curious pride of place that had developed amongst the German soldiers who had built by hand such a complex (however odious) infrastructure. As such Stamp repopulates and gives depth to the quiet plain that is Thiepval today. He proceeds to a discussion of the actual design of the Memorial, with only the occasional dry passage. He reinforces our appreciation of Lutyens’s architectural abilities, recognizing his fundamental understanding of the subtleties of the Roman arch design, and he sees in the Memorial’s display of rich geometry and proportions, an example of Lutyens’s “architectural logic and intellectual control”. Again, Baker suffers by comparison.

As with the Cenotaph and the cemeteries, the Memorial conveys *gravitas*. Its strength lies in its absence of sentimentality.

The final chapter is about the legacy of the Thiepval Memorial. Stamp addresses the lack of critical commentary at the unveiling of the monument, connecting it to the shift in perceptions of the war; by 1932 the true tragedy that was the war was finally being acknowledged and the Memorial belonged to an earlier ethos of “faith in the value of sacrifice”. Perhaps, simply, the unveiling was not the time for critical commentary. Stamp then tracks the subsequent life of the structure, the problems with the poorly made bricks and downpipes that were too small. As such, it is another case of sacrificing aspects of the structural integrity in favour of overall design. The chapter ends with almost panegyric praise of the “supreme importance” of the memorial; that it stands as a “universal monument”. Stamp takes his cue from Geoff Dyer’s elegiac musings on the Memorial at the end of his *The Missing of the Somme* (1994). It must be said that the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing does not stand alone. In Dyer’s words it casts “a shadow into the future ... beyond the dead of the Holocaust, to the Gulag, to the “disappeared” of South America, and of Tiananmen”. Surely the Vimy Ridge Memorial and the other monuments to the missing of World War I stand together, casting an extremely long and ponderous shadow.

The book ends with appendices that help to plan for a future visit to Thiepval and to prepare for it with further reading. Throughout the book there are numerous illustrations. Unfortunately, the quality of reproduction was sacrificed to achieve a moderately priced paperback. A central signature of photographs on better quality paper would be preferable.

Is the Memorial to the Missing of the Somme a wonder of the world? Architecturally,

it is hard to place it on a par with the Parthenon, the Colosseum, the Temple of Jerusalem or the other structures that form some of the subjects in the 'Wonders of the World' series. But architecture alone does not make something a wonder; the inclusion in the series of the Rosetta Stone makes that clear. The Thiepval Memorial is really about death, loss, commemoration, and, ultimately, about colossal human folly. Ironically, a little book like this can focus one's attention on these bigger issues. As we approach the centenary of the war to end all wars, it is useful to remind people of the monuments to the missing of that war. Monuments are built to be constant reminders. Yet, by virtue of their constant presence they are often forgotten, ignored, and neglected.