



Shattered earth

Conflict archaeologist **Matt Leonard**, explores the The Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont Hamel, and the mythological landscape of the Somme.



Top The remains of the battlefield share the same space as those that died on it. Here Hunters Cemetery is seen amongst the old trenches and shell-holes

Above Opened in 1925, the Newfoundland Park is a unique memorial on the Somme battlefield.

The representation and conservation of 20th century battlefields is a difficult and contentious issue. The balance between a realistic perception of modern industrial warfare and the fact that these traumatic events are on the fringe of living memory raises multiple dilemmas. The Somme's identity is grounded in a bewildered palimpsest of history. Some events are portrayed over others and the victories and successes are clouded by the human cost of waging an attritional war.

John Masefield, perhaps the first Great War tourist, visited the Somme battlefields before the fighting was even over. In his book *The Old Frontline* he describes a landscape of destruction and a world without form or shape. But he also writes of hard won triumphs, the valour and the heroism of the soldiers, and crucially, the necessity of the attacks. Since Masefield's visit in 1917, the Somme has changed dramatically. From 1918 to this day the area has been vigorously contested. Tourism, national identity, preservation and legitimization have all challenged each other for dominance. But perhaps the over-riding factor is one of remembrance. The butcher's bill from the war meant that the death of so many was always going to dominate the region, but at what cost?

Cemeteries and imposing structures of

Left Set in concrete and preserved, this tree was a meeting point for the soldiers during the attack on Y Ravine. Today it is a popular spot for contemplation and thought.

remembrance such as Lutjens's memorial at Thiepval began to dominate the rapidly reclaimed farmland of the Somme. Today they form part of a landscape layer that was deliberately created to cope with the traumatic events that occurred there. After the war the public needed justification for the massive loss of life and the many thousands of dead became seen as lambs led to the slaughter. For people to grieve there had to be monuments on which to focus that grief. Accordingly, by 1934, 242 immaculately kept cemeteries, containing some 150,000 individual memorials, carpeted the blood soaked battlefield. This sacred landscape began to cover over the true nature of the battles and skirmishes. The horrific character of modern warfare was hidden, too awful to appreciate, and so the mythological landscape of the Somme was born.

The Newfoundland Memorial Park at Beaumont Hamel shows how difficult it is to balance the reality of modern industrial war with mass suffering and loss of life. The park attempts to preserve the site of the forlorn attack by the Newfoundland Regiment against Y Ravine, a heavily defended German redoubt that bristled with defences and underground fortifications. Within half an hour the regiment had effectively ceased to exist. It was a devastating loss of life and worthy of remembrance.

The Park is an admirable monument to the doomed Newfoundlander's, although due to the nature of industrialized warfare, the preservation of the land as it was when the Canadians attacked, was already illusory before that fateful summer's day had





Above The shattered and scared landscape at Beaumont Hamel highlights the violence of the battle and the murderous power of modern weaponry.

even ended. The incessant use of heavy weaponry immolated the landscape on a continual basis and it changed in nature from hour to hour. Trenches were destroyed and new ones were created, shell holes were utilized and the dead and detritus of previous battles were violently thrust back up to the surface.

In affect, the park tries to represent only half an hour of the entire war, bypassing or ignoring anything else that occurred there. The first to attack Y Ravine that July morning were the 1st Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, who suffered some 568 casualties in just a few minutes. After the Newfoundlander's, the 1st Essex followed and they too were decimated. Over the next two and a half years of war countless lives were lost on this very same patch of Northern France, yet the Newfoundland Regiment is remembered over many others. Such is the dynamic and multi layered nature of Great War battlefields.

The park's memorials and cemeteries encircle the still scarred terrain, focusing the attention on the cost of the tragic attack. Opposite Y Ravine is the imposing statue of a caribou, the emblem of the Newfoundland Regiment, from which visitors can view the desolate fields of Beaumont Hamel. What they see from the feet of the grand statue is not the view of the Newfoundlanders in 1916, or indeed the shattered and victorious landscape witnessed by Masefield a year later. Trenches have been filled in and the land remodeled. Much of the barbed wire had to be removed as farmers' sheep were being trapped on its barbs.

Y Ravine is no longer open to the public, danger of unexploded munitions is the reason given, although this was not the case in the Park's early life. Perhaps restricted access to what is a mass grave serves the dual purpose of protecting the sacred nature of the area while impressing visitors with the raw and real qualities of the site.

Thousands of young saplings were brought to the park from Scotland, Newfoundland and Holland after the war, further attributing to the artificial nature of the landscape. These new additions blend with relics from the war, creating a fictitious and surreal landscape. Amongst these newer trees is an older one that carries particular significance. The Danger Tree, as it is known, has long since died but was a gathering point for the soldiers on 1st July. It is now a common location for remembrance and reflection



Left As with all the CWGC cemeteries on the Western Front, Y Ravine Cemetery is immaculately kept. The cemetery is situated next to Y Ravine itself and tells of the inordinate cost of capturing heavily defended locations on the Somme.

and a strangely powerful piece of material culture, concreted into a metal tin.

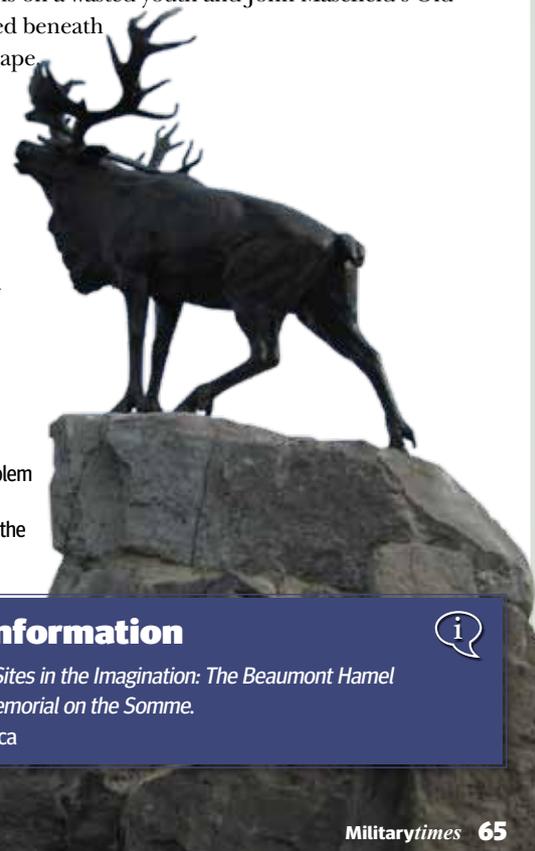
Whatever the shortcomings or compromises of the Newfoundland Park, it does incorporate the sacred within a conflict landscape. However, the burying of the Somme's horrors and glories beneath an archaeological layer of remembrance means that the story of the battle has become diluted.

Y Ravine was eventually taken with great courage in November 1916 and the Battle of the Somme was a victory - a costly victory, but a victory nonetheless. The loss of life was not in vain. The back of the German army was broken, the French were probably saved from defeat at Verdun and the British began the slow learning curve that would allow them to comprehensively beat the Germans some two years later.

While the focus is on a wasted youth and John Masefield's Old Front Line is buried beneath a memorial landscape,

the magnificent achievements of the brave men, who turned the tide of the war, will be marginalized. And the Somme will continue to echo with the sound of their despair. 

Right The caribou emblem of the Newfoundland Regiment towers over the park.



Further information

Gough P (2004) *Sites in the Imagination: The Beaumont Hamel Newfoundland Memorial on the Somme.*
www.veterans.gc.ca