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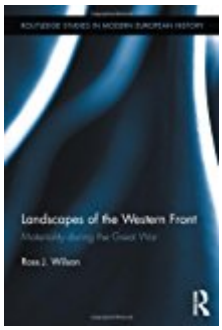

Wilson Ross. *Landscapes of the Western Front: Materiality during the Great War.* London: Routledge, 2011. 244 pp. $125.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-80805-7.

Reviewed by Claire Barnes (UCLA)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

This book examines a particular place, the western front, and the way it was perceived by a particular group, British soldiers, during World War One (1914-18). As author Ross J. Wilson points out, the western front, despite its centrality within our collective cultural memory, was only part of the war zone, and the trenches were only part of the front. The fighting was truly global in scale, occurring on battlefields as far afield as Russia and German East Africa. The front itself, however, was vast, stretching from the North Sea to the edge of Switzerland, a distance of over seven hundred miles. It was the site of an extraordinary concentration of people and resources. Britain and Ireland alone sent almost five million men. Millions more arrived from the empire, Portugal, and China. For every fighter on the frontline, five to ten more were working behind the front to supply and support him.

Popular literature about the war tends to describe the soldiers' lot in terms of the immediacies of the trenches and the terrors of battle. Military histories often take the long view, focusing on

grand strategies and "great men." Borrowing the techniques of ethnography from anthropology and applying them to history, Wilson moves beyond these traditional forms to produce a "historical ethnography," an on-the-ground reconstruction of the experiences of British troops as they occurred. In addition to mining diaries, letters, oral accounts, and memoirs from the war, Wilson uses official documents and more recent archeological evidence to reconstruct the physical conditions soldiers actually experienced. Drawing on theoretical approaches that problematize the production and acquisition of knowledge, he also attends to the intellectual frameworks, the habits of mind, and the culture that worked to filter and trellis their perceptions of war. What is innovative about Wilson's work is that these perceptions are organized through the matrix of landscape. The term "landscape" as Wilson uses it here is more than a visual tableaux of one's natural surroundings. It encompasses built environments, interior spaces, and manmade objects. Wilson draws together all of these elements at the western front to create a study that is both immediate and significant.

The book's central insight is that to understand how war happens one has to understand "war culture," what it is like to be immersed in an entirely new way of thinking and existing. Investigating how the troops lived within the material world of the war landscape, Wilson argues, allows a fuller understanding of how men tried to survive within the war culture with which they were confronted, and also how they in turn, altered it to suit their own needs. To do this, Wilson sets out to accomplish three things: to learn the material and physical conditions of the front, to describe the men's reactions and perceptions, and to ask how the men's surroundings and interpretations of their surroundings led to their sense of place. Although the aim is straightforward there is a dense thicket of theoretical justification through which he works in order to present his case for using landscape in this way. Wilson uses the introduction and the first chapter to locate his work within a "new wave" of war scholarship that incorporates geographic, sociological, and anthropological dimensions.

In his second chapter, "Representing the Western Front," Wilson turns to First World War literature and historiography, giving a nod to theorists who have encouraged attention to the materiality of history: Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, and Martin Heidegger. The move to materiality is made tangible with the addition of fresh archeological evidence. A spate of recent excavations has made new data available, and as a result, First World War material studies are experiencing a surge of interest. Wilson describes the recently unearthed sites, including Allied trench systems, battlefields, and graves, that have contributed to an understanding of actual wartime conditions.

The middle chapters, 3 through 6, form the heart of the work. In chapter 3, Wilson sets the front within a wider geographic context. He also provides an interesting overview of the way the British Army was structured and a description of trench architecture and construction. In chapters 4 and 5, the author delves into the experiences that enlisted men had behind the lines, at the front, and in the trenches. Chapter 6 focuses on the objects that troops in the British Army used, particularly weapons.

"I do not think I saw or sensed another such rotting scene of slaughter," wrote Private I. L. Read of the trenches at Delville Wood in the Somme (p. 133). Anyone who reads this book will be struck by the fact that Wilson's extensive use of archival materials yields vivid descriptions of the immediate realities of war. That he links these observations to place allows the author to present overlapping, complex, and even contradictory observations without losing coherence. He is able to show, for instance, that when the troops were not under heavy bombardment being in the trenches could seem "homely, safe, nice and pleasant" (p. 131).

The sheer number of archival sources that Wilson consulted to be able to offer this level of detail about the men's experiences and the meanings they gave them is the book's principle strength. Those interested in firsthand accounts of what British soldiers at the western front heard, saw, smelled, and thought will be rewarded, as will those looking for an overview of what has been accomplished so far in the developing field of wartime archeology. But it is this inclusiveness, the desire to be multidimensional, that is also the book's greatest weakness. Wilson incorporates ideas from a wide range of theoreticians, ranging from Pierre Bourdieu to Bruno Latour, but he is unable to integrate these disparate ideas into a single overarching framework. This theoretical complexity makes it difficult for the reader to go beyond descriptive accounts of events that happened in order to draw conclusions about why they happened. Wilson succeeds in his aim, to understand how the troops created a sense of place for themselves at the western front, but there is still work to be done to fully integrate the significance of landscape into the western historical cannon.

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