

Hugh Clout, *After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France After the Great War*

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Clout, Hugh. *After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France after the Great War*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996. xviii + 332 pp., illus., cloth, \$69.95, ISBN 0-85989-491-6.

The "Great War" still bulks large in the collective memory of the Western world.¹ Quite properly, most attention has been directed to the human experience of a horrendous conflict in which millions died and suffered in a confrontation of nationalist ideologies and geopolitical ambitions.

But there were other victims too. Along a 500-kilometre front running from Belgium, across France, to Switzerland, a society was destroyed. A dystopian war-scape replaced the former bucolic world of towns, villages, and rural communities. Indeed, it was incomprehensible. Its only analogue — ideologically and materially — was the ecological and social trauma generated by the burgeoning power of the Industrial Revolution. But the impact of the Great War was more intense, more focussed, more dramatic. Within months, a landscape of trenches, barbed wire, shell-holes, and concrete bunkers replaced a lived-in place. Homes were destroyed; the very soil was traumatized; no trees remained; no birds sang.

Perhaps Canada's War Memorial Fund (CWMF) artists — especially A. Y. Jackson, Frederick Varley, and David Milne — have provided us with some of the most evocative renderings of the killing grounds.² Milne in particular focussed on the aftermath of the conflict and the eradication of all signs of human congress, social organization, and economic production.³

This road has at one time been paved with brick. I could just trace the herring-bone formation in about two places...I suppose I needn't mention that there are no fences or hedges, no trees either. From Miraumont to Courcellette there isn't the faintest trace of human occupation except these two paths of red brick a yard long in the road — not one tree stump or bush, no pile of bricks or stones that might indicate that there had once been a farm house, no trace of squares on the plain to indicate that there had once been fields.

Operating outside of the CWMF, Mary Ritter Hamilton was also exposed to the desolate landscape of war but she chose to record the beginnings of new life in several of her works such as *First Celebration at Zillebeke After the War*, *The First Boat to Arrive at Arras After the Armistice*, and *The New Home*.⁴

This is the subject of Hugh Clout's *After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France After the Great War*: the post-war "reconstitution" of the regions of France devastated by the Great War. Arguing emphatically that this is not yet another book about the First World War, the author asserts that it is "a story of hope and achievement amid the hardships of peace." Nor is it an account of that other landscape of war: the military cemeteries, national monuments, and local memorials that constitute mental landmarks and *lieux de mémoire* for societies and individuals. Rather, Clout directs his focus to the largely untold story of the restoration of a vernacular world of houses, farmsteads, schools, hotels, town halls — and even whole villages — much of it by individuals who had suffered loss (*les sinistrés*) and the administrations of the *départements* affected.

The war had affected some 3.3 million hectares throughout (Pas-de-Calais, Somme, Nord, Oise, Aisne, Ardennes, Marne, Meuse, Meurthe-et-Moselle, Vosges). Prior to the war, the region had been home to 6.5 million people. It was a region of cities, factories, and mines that produced most of France's coal, iron and steel, textiles, sugar, and breweries. But it was also one of the most productive agricultural regions. Prior to the war, 96 percent of the war-zone had been devoted to farming and forestry, with two-thirds of the area being arable. Five *départements* (Aisne, Nord, Oise, Pas-de-Calais, Somme) produced 20 percent of the national wheat crop and 79 percent of the nation's sugar-beets. Moreover, the ten *départements* held a tenth of France's cattle, sheep, and pigs, and a fifth of its horses. And all of this production had been sustained by some 669 000 farm-units. This was the region over which the battle raged for four years and it is the reconstruction of the rural economy and rural society that attracts Clout's attention in *After the Ruins*.

The quantification of the devastation is as incomprehensible as what the artists rendered in emotive terms. A survey of 1919 attempted to classify the extent and intensity of the destruction: "blue" zones where damage had been limited and the chief problem was land abandonment amounted to 1.8 million hectares; another 1.5 million hectares were classified as "yellow" areas where considerable clearance work had to be effected; a "red" zone of utter devastation amounted to 0.12 million hectares. Raw statistics paint a vivid picture: 333 million cubic metres of trenches to be filled; 375 million square metres of barbed wire to be cleared; over 800 000 dwellings and 17 466 schools, *mairies*, and churches to be rebuilt or repaired; 1 954 settlements were obliterated or severely damaged. The population of the immediate war-zone had decreased by 57 percent, while that of the ten départements had fallen by 44 percent to 3.6 million. In summary, by 1 July 1933, 3.1 million claims for material losses had been submitted.

In addressing the *reconstitution* of the *régions libérées*, Clout addresses three essential organizational questions: Was there a grand design? Was it a state initiative? Was it done by individuals? Certainly, immediately following the invasion of 1914, the state had taken the unprecedented step of guaranteeing to compensate les sinistrés, in the spirit of "national solidarity," and reconstitution had commenced immediately in some areas and continued whenever and wherever possible. Perhaps the most enduring image is that of harvesters wearing gas masks and being subject to gunfire! During these early years, volunteer organizations such as British and American Quaker groups and the Comité américain pour les régions dévastées (CARD), a women's volunteer group, were effective in providing aid to the population and restoring some of the communities until they withdrew in 1924.⁵

But volunteers — and foreign ones to boot! — could not be expected to carry all the burden of reconstitution. Clout analyzes the role of the three principal state agencies charged with the responsibility for the restoration of the devastated countryside in the early years of rebuilding: the Service des Travaux de Première Urgence (STPU) took on the major task of clearing the land and restoring rural infrastructure; the Service de la Motoculture applied mechanized technology to the task of land restoration; the Office de Reconstitution Agricole (ORA) distributed farm machinery, seed, fertilizer, and livestock.

By 1922, the "emergency phase" was over, state intervention ceased, and the emphasis shifted to coordinating the private initiative of the individual sinistrés. It had been a controversial period. Of necessity, bureaucracy ran full force into the French peasantry's entrenched individualism and profound sense of identity with place. Nevertheless, much progress had been made by 1922. The population reached 88.6 percent of pre-war levels. Some 2.7 million hectares of land had been restored, that is, 79 percent of the amount eventually cleared in 1931. By 1922, 260 million cubic metres of trenches had been filled, 275 million square metres of barbed wire cleared, and 20 million tonnes of munitions destroyed. Incredibly, within three years of the end of the war, 1.5 million hectares of agricultural land were ready for cultivation, and production had reached 94 percent of pre-war totals.

The one black spot was in the area of rebuilding: by 1922, clearance had been completed in only 737 of the 2 874 settlements damaged by war, and only 5 524 houses had been rebuilt. Over 2 million of the returned sinistrés continued to be housed in temporary or repaired accommodation. Certainly, much of this may be attributed to a shortage of *matériaux*. But another factor was a stultifying bureaucracy committed to a centralized initiative of attempting to use the opportunity to enhance the social infrastructure and quality of life throughout the affected rural areas. What is most remarkable, however, is the degree to which the pronounced sense of individualism among the French peasantry — while chaffing at state bureaucracies — embraced the opportunity for communal co-operation. By 1928, no fewer than 163 984 sinistrés had formed 2 267 reconstruction co-operatives in some 64 percent of the war-damaged communes and were eventually to account for two-thirds of the reconstruction of settlements in the ten départements.

But despite the opportunity for a revision of past practices, the predominant outcome of the reconstruction was the restoration of the past. Little progress was made with the opportunity for the *remembrement* (consolidation) of the pre-war mosaic of dispersed land-holdings that had long been recognized as being inefficient. While the war had destroyed property markers, and even cadastral maps and registers, only rarely was there an introduction of property reform. And as with customary land-holding practices, so with architecture. Only a few of the plans for model-villages were ever realised. As one authority put it, "housing, like flora or

fauna, is a geographical element that is linked closely to the nature of the terrain, to climatic conditions, to landownership, and to the nature of farming." Not surprisingly, therefore, such a respect for tradition ensured the preservation of regional nuances of materials and styles, while still allowing enhanced living conditions by paying attention to hygiene, water supply, drainage, and the location of cemeteries.

By 1931, 305.3 million cubic metres of trenches had been filled; 345.9 million square metres of barbed wire had been removed; 21.2 million tonnes of shells had been destroyed; 3.4 million hectares of land had been cleared; 834 516 dwellings and farm buildings and 20 563 public buildings had been repaired or reconstructed; 61 382 kilometres of roads had been rebuilt; the population of the ten départements had rebounded to 6.5 million. It was a *pays rouge*. As Clout puts it, for many,

the bright red bricks, mass-produced tiles and cement-rendered walls were welcome and long-awaited expressions of recovery and renewal, but for others they were intrusions in the landscape which stood in stark contrast with the charm of the local vernacular architecture still visible away from the war-torn zones.

Perhaps, more than memorials and monuments, this reconstituted, lived-in world served as a daily remembrance of the Great War. But there were always to be other prompts. As recently as 1990, 23 tonnes of shells were recovered along the route of the TGV, while 36 farmers were killed by shells in 1991 alone.

The material culture of war is often expressed in terms of fortifications, weaponry, and other military paraphernalia. But there is a negative image too. From the salting of the ruins of Carthage to the insane strategies of Mutually Assured Destruction, ordinary people, their homes, and their landscapes of living and production have been targeted by war. Perhaps this is why I find it so distressing to read Clout's excellent chronicle of recovery and rebuilding. Of necessity, his study is couched in the voice of government policy, official reports, and statistical surveys in which the courage and resilience of the *sinistrés* is subdued. Even the official photographs are peopleless, or else two-dimensional shadows. But, as in all material culture, the people are there, as they have always been, rebuilding the fabric of their lived-in worlds after the ephemeral rhetoric of war has faded.

NOTES

1. Undoubtedly the best analysis of the Canadian context is Jonathan F. Vance's, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).
2. See Maria Tippett's *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).
3. The following quotes are taken from David P. Silcox, *Painting Place: The Life and Work of David. B. Milne* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).
4. Angela E. Davis and Sarah M. Mckinnon, *No Man's Land: The Battlefield Paintings of Mary Ritter Hamilton, 1919-1922* (Winnipeg: The University of Winnipeg, 1992).
5. I am currently engaged in researching another volunteer group, the "British League for the Reconstruction of the Devastated Areas of France," in which Montreal participated.

Harriet Dover, *Home Front Furniture: British Utility Design, 1941 to 1951*

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Dover, Harriet. *Home Front Furniture: British Utility Design, 1941 to 1951*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1991. 105 pp., 44 illus., cloth, \$55.95, ISBN 0-85967-842-3.

Harriet Dover has provided a comprehensive account of the British Utility Scheme as it applied to furniture during the ten-year period from 1941 to 1951. The scheme, which was implemented to manage shortages brought in by

the Second World War and for the postwar period of reconstruction, had a lasting effect on the design of British furniture and on the industry itself. In covering this period in depth and within a broad context, the book provides an unusual investigation of the social, political, intellectual and cultural context that created British furniture during this period and differentiated it from developments taking place in Europe and the United States.