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**Forêt de Guerre: Natural remembrances of the
Great War**

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Abstract

I will discuss the effect that the Great War had on the medieval woodland landscape of France, and how the cataclysmic destruction of the conflict is now represented, remembered and sometimes even preserved by the presence of post-war woodland. The unparalleled quantities of munitions that tore apart the landscape from 1914-1918 had both physical effects at the time, as well as longer-lasting manifestations that we see today. The first use of chemical weapons, along with the problems posed by their disbursement and disposal, also still affect the soil of the Western Front, as well as the trees and plants that traditionally grew in the region. I will also analyse the deeper and far more ancient significance of forests and trees within French culture, and how this has affected the way that people have interacted with the '*Forêt de guerre*' landscape that grew up to replace that lost during the hostilities.

Keywords

World War I; 1914-18; Archaeology; Anthropology; Folklore; Landscape; Trees; Forests; Zone Rouge; Historic Sites - France

Introduction

The landscape of Northern France at the beginning of the Great War was one of rural beauty, punctuated by rolling hills, winding rivers and thousands of acres of lush forest. Within months this idyll had been transformed into the monochrome image of hell that has become so infamous, with shattered trees and the ruins of crumbling buildings barely protruding from an almost endless sea of mud. Today, the forests now cover large amounts of the former Western Front landscape, acting as living memorials and reminders of the horror that unfolded upon the ground they now cover. Under the canopies of these vast swathes of woodland, remains of the Great War landscape are often preserved. The remains of 'Villages détruits' are now buried under the tree roots, while trench systems and shell-holes gradually decay, set in ground so full of buried munitions that the growth of woodland is the only safe use for the sites.

Here I will discuss the effect that the Great War had on the medieval woodland landscape of France, and how the cataclysmic destruction of the conflict is now represented, remembered and sometimes even preserved by the presence of post-war woodland. The unparalleled

quantities of munitions that tore apart the landscape from 1914-1918 had both physical effects at the time, as well as longer-lasting manifestations that we see today. The first use of chemical weapons, along with the problems posed by their disbursement and disposal, also still affect the soil of the Western Front, as well as the trees and plants that traditionally grew in the region. It is even a common occurrence today to find material evidence of the conflict within the fabric of trees themselves, in the form of shrapnel from shells fired during the conflict still being imbedded in the trunks (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2005: 121).

I will also analyse the deeper and far more ancient significance of forests and trees within French culture, and how this has affected the way that people have interacted with the '*Forêt de guerre*' landscape that grew up to replace that lost during the hostilities.

The impact of industrialised war on the landscape of Northern France has not only permanently altered the physical appearance of the region, but has also left deeper, cultural damage to the people and nation itself. The woodland that has reclaimed much of the shattered landscape today, the '*Forêts de guerre*', represent this physical and cultural change to the French nation, as well as raising questions as to the power and longevity of nature in the face of warfare on a huge scale.

There has yet to be any Anglophone research into this area of Great War conflict archaeology, and whilst the logistical demand upon France's ancient woodlands is touched upon in Chris Pearson's *Mobilizing Nature: The Environmental History of War and Militarization in Modern France* (2012), my focus is to look deeper into the symbolic and psychological effects of the mass destruction of the forests that held so much history and so many memories for those involved in the conflict - the same men that contributed towards the destruction of these symbolic and historic landscapes in their role as combatants.

Pearson examines the physical and mental effects of the physical scouring of landscapes during the Second World War in *Scarred Landscapes: War and Nature in Vichy France* (2008), however this article will combine this approach, along with more focus upon landscape and conflict archaeology, and anthropological study of the enormous landscape change that occurred between 1914 and 1918.

My approach will focus on symbolism of, and memory held within, the trees and the forests they form as a collective. The idea of the identity of material culture is heavily influenced by the work of Dr Nick Saunders, in *Crucifix, Calvary, and Cross: materiality and spirituality in*

Great War Landscapes (2003), whilst Annette Becker's *War and Faith, The Religious Imagination in France, 1914-1930* (1998) has approached the interaction between the rural and religious populations and the transformed and horrific conflict landscape they were faced with. I will look to build upon these ideas whilst offering new and original interpretations of the role played by woodland during and after the Great War.

Woodland sites with physical reminders of the landscape and actions of the Great War are dotted throughout the rural areas of Northern France, and now stand as both areas of preservation for the relic landscapes that lay beneath them and as sites of memory for a time period and a nation that were irrevocably transformed by human actions over 90 years ago.

Cultural Significance of Forests

Woodland has interacted with humans for as long as the memories of societies have been recorded. Across Western Europe forested areas have formed a large part of the landscape, and in Northern France, the landscape that was so badly torn apart by the Great War was little changed from the medieval period (Kohler and Tissot 2013: 1). Woodland had always been a significant source of resources for the French population, up until the widespread destruction of the landscape that began in 1914. Woodland provided timber for buildings, boats and fires, as well as being home to a large amount of plants, animals and birds that would have also been a crucial part of the everyday existence of rural, French society. As well as its practical significance, these forests also held spiritual and cultural significance, with the great size and longevity of the woodland expanses creating areas of superstition and mystery, which folklore was quick to attach itself to (Crews 2003: 37).

It is important to realise how at the turn of the twentieth century, large areas of France were still functioning as an almost medieval peasant landscape (Saunders 2003: 9). This landscape was still one of sparsely populated villages, medieval churches and vast areas of ancient woodland, and although the agricultural produce produced provided for the industrial centres and modern cities throughout France, their way of life was much as it had been for the past five or six centuries (Puyo 2004: 573). The background of many of the French men who went on to serve on the Western Front would have been a religious one, with strong Catholic traditions punctuating daily life throughout the majority of rural France (Becker 1998: 97). However, these men would have also been heavily superstitious, and the folklore and myths surrounding the immense woodlands that covered the valleys of Northern France would have

added great cultural significance to the forested areas that they encountered at the front (Delarue 1956: xvii). Troops came to the front from throughout France, and the interaction with these vast forests would have been stronger for those originating from the areas of France with rich forestry and forest folklore traditions. Brittany, where forestry, and the myths and legends that surrounded the forests, were deeply rooted within society, lost 240000 men during the Great War, and many of these troops would have lost their lives fighting over yards of decimated forest landscape in Northern France (Markale and Pellerin 1994: 46).

A country the size of France has a rich diversity in its culture and traditions, with Celtic influences forming a significant part of folklore in Brittany in particular. However, the sheer density of the forest landscape on the Western Front, and the nature of its decimation from 1914 onwards could not have failed to impact on the combatants, irrespective of their differing social and cultural backgrounds (Fleuriot 1980: 53).

There were numerous myths and legends surrounding trees and wooded area, from the deep magic and power imbued in them, to their connections to the stars and heavens. The latter because of their great size and the way they stretched their branches towards the sky (Crews 2003:42). These traditions would have still been present during the early stages of the twentieth century, and they would have become further entwined in the rich myth culture that surrounded the juxtaposition of large-scale industrialised conflict upon the landscape of Northern France.

Much in the way that the 'Forêts de guerre' today covers and preserves the remains of the trench systems, shell-craters and destroyed villages of the Great War, throughout the post-medieval period the woodlands of Northern France would have also covered medieval and even earlier remains, adding yet further layers of mystique and ritual to the use of these landscapes. Although the root action of trees can upset the stratified archaeological layers, the quality and constant nature of the soil profile in wooded areas does greatly aid the preservation of original landscape features under the ground (Crow 2001: 4).

For the thousands of French soldiers mobilised to defend their homeland in 1914, the cultural identity of the forested areas of Northern France would have been especially significant. The fate of these woodlands in the preceding months of large-scale conflict would have been deeply perturbing, as the troops saw thousands of acres of previously very productive and economically important forest being turned into a splintered wasteland by artillery fire. During the Great War, it is estimate that as many as 1.45 billion shells were fired by the British, French and German forces across all fronts, with the majority of these falling in

Northern France and Belgium (Van Miervenne et al 2008: 372). France lost more than 1250000 acres of forest through this vast, industrialised conflict, leaving the rural areas desolate and bare. In addition, military engineers were also responsible for cutting more than sixty per cent of the remaining merchantable timber in the country for military uses, illustrating the hugely significant impact the four years of conflict had on the landscape (Scheifley 1920: 379).



Figure 1: A German Officer inspects the shattered remains of a forest in the Argonne, October 1915. The expanse of woodland has been reduced to shell craters and jagged tree stumps by a heavy allied artillery bombardment. (Photo: Argonnen, zerschossener Wald, Bundesarchiv, Bild 104-0158 / CC-BY-SA via Wikimedia commons)

Human influence on the medieval natural landscape had turned life-giving areas into ones strewn with reminders of death and destruction, and devoid of any of its traditional natural benefits on the form of timber or food. For the troops, the forests that had played such a significant part in their rural and often secluded lives had been altered beyond recognition (Saunders 2009: 47). From being a landscape of nature and plentiful natural resources, where the folklore of life and rebirth conjured up superstition and myth, these vast forests were turned into a quagmire of mud, splintered trees and the debris and human remains of conflict (Krech et al 2004: 1288). The contrast between the green and plentiful landscape of pre-war

France served as a stark reminder of the suffering of country of France and the human race overall between 1914 and 1918.

Before their widespread decimation during the Great War, wooded areas served both practical and spiritual uses for the scattered, rural population of Northern France. The uses and traditions of the different types of wood and trees would have been well known by those that lived around it, and the trimming, felling and collection of kindling from these vast forests would have been a vital part of day-to-day survival for those living in rural the rural North. Forestry and woodland crafts were part of the everyday existence for the French peasant, with Mametz Wood on the Somme, which became infamous during the Somme offensive in 1916, being known before the war for its rich supply of Sweet Chestnut trees used to make pitchforks (Payne 2008).

Knowledge such as this was crucial for those who worked the land, including forests, and lived off its resources. This manipulation, crafting and re-use of trees illustrates a strong link to consumption and assimilation culture that allowed those in Northern France to feed off and manage the forest landscape in exchange for the benefits of the wood and food it produced (Moore 1919: 1115). Despite this long history of forest management and manipulation, thousands of those from rural Northern France would have joined an army in 1914 whose actions later resulted in the ruination of their livelihood in an ironic and cruel twist (Kohler and Tissot 2013: 1).

The men of Northern France had learnt to respect the spiritual power of the forest which gave them their existence, and now played their part in the unparalleled destruction of the copses and woods of the French countryside, and so undid hundreds of years of foraging, coppicing and forest management with 4 years of concentrated, industrialised assault.

Indeed, it is possible that the very same individuals were, to some extent, utilising their forestry skills while in the army for similar purposes to that of their daily, rural lives. The expertise of the French troops would have been put into use in cutting and working timber, as despite the artillery-led destruction of many acres of forest, the military needed cut timber in huge amounts with which to create plank roads for troops and artillery to travel upon, as well as the wood needed to build and reinforce buildings and fortifications along the front line (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2005: 121). However, while before the outbreak of hostilities the wood taken would have been used sparingly as part of the everyday interaction with forested areas, that taken in the war was harvested as quickly as possible without being replaced, and along with the consequences of sustained military

action, the same men who relied on the forests for their survival now took part in the organised decimation of these areas.

Military Significance of Forests

The role that wooded areas played during the Great War are an intriguing one. Throughout traditional conflict, especially in the post medieval period, the cover of woods and copses was a crucial element of military tactics. Troops or artillery could be concealed in the fringes of these areas, or large-scale troop movement could be carried out behind wooded areas, offering protection from enemy fire and leaving the enemy oblivious to unit placement. During the nineteenth century, on the verge of the transformation to modernised conflict, woodlands were used to great effect, notably at the Battle of Waterloo during the Napoleonic wars in 1815, and later at the Battle of Gettysburg, the pivotal battle of the American Civil War in 1863 (Pfanzen 2001: 60).

However, the Great War was the first global, industrialised conflict and one where truly ‘modern’ tactics, weaponry and morals were used on the battlefield (Saunders 2002: 101). This form of warfare was at odds with the use of traditional battlefield landscapes and tactics, and indeed at odds with the tactical use of woodlands. Conflict on the Western Front saw widespread use of heavy artillery, and the nature of trench warfare that became prevalent from late 1914 onwards depended on areas of open, or higher ground, which could be entrenched to provide a clear and defensible position facing the enemy. Forested areas could quite easily be viewed as obstructions, and although the timber from these was vital for the building and maintenance of trenches and other military structures, they acted as an impediment for sighting artillery, and the movement of troops and equipment. While it would not be altogether true to say that forested areas on the front line were intentionally flattened by artillery, their destruction from concentrated bombardment would not have been unwelcome for the high command of either side.

The move towards this heavily industrialised style of conflict had almost totally removed the need for covert tactical movements and placement, and with the sheer scale and ferocity of the fighting, huge areas of woodlands around the front lines were almost removed from the map. The human-influenced transformation from the rural idyll of Northern France to the pockmarked, moonscape of no-man’s land is certainly an illustration of the disintegration of nature in the face of these four years of intense hostilities (Puyo 2004: 582).

As a result of the Great War, the role of forested areas was irreversibly altered in a practical and symbolic sense. The traditional role of these forests as landscapes of natural resources for the local inhabitants, and indeed their tactical importance within warfare was forcibly diminished by the conflict, and ushered in an overall change of use for such areas (Jones and Cloke 2002: 24). Some of the lasting, and most sobering images of this period are the battlefield scenes and panoramas showing the shattered stumps and shredded timber on the sites of the once extensive forest areas. In many ways these images of shattered wood sum up the overall impact of the war in creating the shattered landscapes that nature and even human intervention have struggled to correct to this day.

At Delville Wood on the Somme, the scene of fierce fighting involving large numbers of South African troops in 1916, the effects of the conflict upon the wooded areas was personified in a single tree that was left standing after the battle. The tree had been lashed with shrapnel, but stood alone amongst the ruins of the previously extensive wood, and still stands today as a stark reminder of the actions of the site and also the lasting legacy the Great War left on the French landscape. Another level to this symbolism is the presence of the corpses of so many allied and German soldiers, which became entangled in the splintered roots and vegetation, and remain to this day (Payne 2008). This fusion of a fractured natural and the human remains of those who caused the damage exists today as a multi-layered symbolisation of the industrial power of the war. The nature of the Great War rendered all natural life as insignificant in the face of the intensity of modern conflict.



Figure 2: The remains of Delville Wood in 1916 and the cemetery in 2007, illustrating the human and natural suffering on the site. The multitude of trees was replaced with a vast field of crosses, at first temporary (see <http://www.jocks.co.za/history.htm>), then permanent. (Photos: left, Q4267 Imperial War Museum, and right, Hydeblake, both courtesy of Wikimedia commons)

With folklore and the appreciation and respect of natural sequences being so important to those that had previously lived in these war-ravaged areas, the cruel irony of the tree as a symbol of new life and rebirth cannot be ignored (Crews 2003: 37). The green shoots of growth and even the changes to the make-up of forests through the changing seasons were artificially halted by the human actions of the Great War.

The very materiality of these 'Forêts de guerre' is multi-faceted, with their identity arising from the shattered remains of a traditional forest landscape and culture, with the wanton destruction of an industrialised conflict giving birth to a new aspect of forestry, that both depends on and is a necessary result of the military actions between 1914 and 1918.

The 'Forêt de guerre' landscape

The landscapes that have become known as 'Forêts de guerre' are the direct result of the human-influenced actions of the Great War. These forests have been restored or recreated in Northern France upon the sites of the ancient woodland, and the description also covers the woods that now stand on the site of shell-ravaged fields or even the villages destroyed during the conflict. These woodlands now primarily stand in the 'Zones Rouges', the areas designated as being too dangerous to repopulate or return to agriculture due to the vast quantities of unexploded ordnance still lying below the surface (Puyo 2004: 582).

Following the cessation of hostilities, the French government were forced to classify the quality of the war-ravaged areas of Northern France, on a scale of red, yellow or green because of the hundreds of thousands of human and animal corpses, and tons unexploded ordnance that had contaminated the land beyond a workable state (Haven Smith and Hill 2010: 6). By letting these sites revert back to forest, or by intentionally planting trees as a barrier of demarcation, the French government wanted to prevent the land being used and so had to compensate the owner or heirs of these sites. Allowing trees to grow on these areas means that agricultural practices will not disturb the huge amounts of buried armaments, as the problem of farmers or even souvenir hunters being injured or killed when coming into contact with buried munitions across the Western Front is still an issue today (Saunders 2003a: 160).

These 'Forêts' de guerre' exist today as either small areas of angular and compact woods standing out amongst the monument dominated French countryside, or in areas such as the Meuse and Verdun, where 'Zones Rouges' are still prevalent today, they exist as expansive

areas of forest, completely covering some battlefield sites (Payne 2008). ‘The Zones Rouges’ themselves exist today as a landscape of remembrance in their own right, and as a landscape still bearing the physical and material scars that act as reminders of the horrors that took place upon them over 90 years ago.



Figure 3: The ‘Zone Rouge’ of the Meuse. The preservation of the Great War soil profile is illustrated, along with the vast expanses of the ‘Forêt de guerre’.
(Photo: Landscape in Verdun Forest, F. Lamiot, 2004 via Wikimedia commons)

The vast amounts of rusting metal and decaying munitions that remain in the soil today are a clear and sinister reflection of the huge scale and level of attrition of the Great War, and act as both a memorial and a warning from history about the lethal nature of modern warfare. As in the case of thousands of acres of forests being wiped from the map during the war, this saturation of the landscape through the material culture and human remains resulting from concentrated artillery bombardment had transformed the farmer’s fields of France from a workable environment to one of a land simply too poisonous and dangerous for human interaction (Puyo 2004: 578).

Since their introduction after end of the Great War, both the ‘Zones Rouge’ and the ‘Forêt de guerre’ landscapes have shared a deeper, memorial significance, and the forested areas growing from the poisoned earth of the conflict have taken on manifold symbolic meanings and roles. The poisoned earth has fed the growth of these new forests, and the trees have come to symbolise the ability for nature to fight back and once more take over the areas that were once so devastated by human-influenced conflict. The powerful metaphor of tree and plant growth symbolising new life is especially apparent in these areas, in contrast to this life being cut down in its prime by artillery shells during the four years of the Great War conflict (Jones and Cloke 2002: 4).

However, the ground that these 'Forêts de guerre' have taken over, and the conflict that triggered the advent of these areas, have certainly left a lasting mark on the trees that have come to stand as a memorial and a reminder of the human-inflicted destruction. Although located on the Belgian side of the Western Front, and having been subject to different classification at the end of the war, the land of the Ypres salient has suffered a lasting effect from the huge density of shelling that took place. The quality of the soil has recently been subject to scientific analysis by academics at Ghent University, and it is apparent that the copper concentration in the topsoil around Ypres is significantly higher than in other areas of Belgium. This factor, which affects the quality of the soil, is a direct result of the rotating band and other internal workings of artillery shells, which were composed of 90% copper, having steadily polluted the ground since their firing (Van Meirvenne et al 2008: 1).

This phenomenon is not unique to the Ypres area, and has also been documented in the Verdun Region of North-eastern France. Here, the growth of an oak and hornbeam forest has been adversely affected by the poisoning of the soil caused by chemical shells located at an ammunition depot in the area (Bausinger et al 2007: 261). Contamination of the soil, and in turn, the plants and trees in the area is caused not just by the casing of shells, but also by the contents of the countless unexploded shells that buried themselves in the ground, often to a depth of several metres.

Thousands of the shells produced in the mechanised haste of war-time production were faulty, and these shells still remain buried across the Western Front. As well as their explosive risk, they also often contain chemical munitions such as mustard gas. Over 90 years on as the metal of the shells decays, the soil, and in turn the vegetation will become further poisoned by the chemicals within the munitions (Bausinger et al 2007: 263). In this project run by the Gutenberg University of Mainz, all the survey work had to be carried out with great care due to the nature of the soil in their test area. Across the Western Front, the front lines remain lethal landscapes that can still claim victims (Saunders 2003a: 160).

Other elements of the long-lasting physical affect of industrialised warfare on natural landscapes are the physical manifestations of conflict that can affect the traditional use of trees and timber up to the present day (Rabouille 1922: 395). The physical remains of the ferocity of the Great War can remain as part of the trees themselves to this day. It is a relatively common occurrence for those areas in which trees still stand dating from the early 20th century, for shell fragments and lead shrapnel balls to still be embedded within the trunks of the trees (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2005: 121). Now these

trees are mature, and with forestry and tree-felling still a common factor in forest management, the process of cutting these trees for timber can encounter numerous problems due to these unwelcome metal inclusions. The wood itself can be rendered useless for shaping and manufacture, so much so that modern sawmills have started to utilise metal detectors to minimise damage to machinery and danger to those working it from these fragments of Great War munitions (Forestry Forum website 2010).

This problem is accentuated by reports of this shrapnel adversely affecting the health of those that have come into direct contact with products produced from the wood of these 'Forêts de guerre'. In the poisoned soil that the trees feed upon, the millions of shells and ammunition, and billions of lead shrapnel balls are inaccessible under the roots. These pollutants, seemingly have little visible impact on the flora but are nevertheless toxic to wildlife and humans even in very low doses.

This has come into the public eye with the revelation that wood from these felled trees has resulted in dangerously high levels of lead in the wood used for oak wine casks, and in turn, cases of lead poisoning in Northern France (Conférence de le saturnisme 2003). In a peculiar amalgamation, the forests that have taken over these shattered and war-torn sites have now developed their own dangers, and due to the after-effects of chemical weapons they are now almost as deadly as the original munitions and actions that led to the sites being abandoned back to nature.

However, this phenomenon remains poorly explained, and must be investigated further to interpret the genuine dangers posed. Nevertheless, these cases illustrate just how the extreme nature of the events of 1914 – 1918 can still effect the lives of those in Northern France today, and how although the scarring from the material effects of war does not affect the heritage of these sites, it can ultimately affect their future economic value.

The forested areas that stand today do not just stand as sites that retain the physical reminders of the Great War, but they also act as landscapes of memory and even as living grave markers to those that still lie beneath them. Across the Western Front, the trees in these areas stand tall and sombre, as part of a preserved landscape that preserves the trenches and shell-holes that were left by the conflict, as well as the material and human remains. For thousands of men who were lost on the field of battle, the 'Forêts de guerre' are both a cemetery and memorial, taking the form of living wood.



Figure 4: Sanctuary Wood, with craters amongst both the new trees and the shell-blasted stumps of the original wood, now used for a commemorative and memorial purpose. (Photo courtesy of Colorgrinder on flickr)

Further examples of damage to trees and the landscape can be seen at <http://bit.ly/1hyY9bw>, including a tree close to Sucrerie Military Cemetery that has been twisted and gnarled by the scars of shrapnel damage sustained during the hostilities.

The destruction of forested areas during the conflict made wood a valuable commodity both on a personal and a larger military level for the soldiers who served and died on the front. For many of those who spent their time crafting trench art while waiting between hostilities, wood held a powerful quality due to the emotive site of shattered forest landscapes, and the connection it held, having previously been a living material (Saunders 2009: 47). It is perhaps fitting then, that this material now stands, once more in its living form to symbolise the remembrance of these men who did not live to see the end of the 4 devastating years of conflict.

Another layer to this landscape of remembrance, and perhaps one tinted with irony, is the change in symbolic meaning of woodlands. The forests that now stand as a memorial landscape to the human suffering and physical damage of the Western Front had traditionally been considered a much more ‘live’ material throughout history (Muir 2005: 231). In contrast

to the countless wooden crosses that dotted the ramshackle, battlefield cemeteries during the Great War, and the mighty trees that fulfil a similar role today, wooden monuments had always symbolised landscapes of the living in past societies (Jones and Cloke 2002: 87).

Stretching back as far as the Neolithic period, the Durrington Walls site, part of the Stonehenge ritual landscape, was a wooden henge that marked the live area of the landscape in contrast to the cold stone of Stonehenge itself, which acted as the cemetery and landscape of death (Parker Pearson 2007). This ancient set of values was transformed during the Great War, as now in the fields and woods of Northern France the leafy rebirth of woodlands acts as a landscape of death and remembrance.

Other locations where the material and memorial remains of the Great War have been fused with forested areas are on the sites of the countless ‘Villages Détruits’ that have been reclaimed by nature across the Western Front. These sites are the ghosts of villages destroyed by shellfire during the conflict, and left to quietly decay, both as a memorial to the memory of those who inhabited the site and as a practical concern due to the heavy concentrations of buried munitions on these sites.

One such site is the former site of the village of Craonne on the Chemin des Dames, now known locally as ‘Vieux Craonne’ (Coombs 2010: 184). In 1917 at the opening of the Nivelle offensive the old village was in German hands, and the site was obliterated by shellfire to such an extent that a new village had to be completely rebuilt a short distance away.

Today the site is still heavily cratered, with the crumbling remains of streets and the cellars of houses obscured by tree roots and undergrowth, and the site has been turned into an arboretum. This is perhaps a unique idea for an act of remembrance across the Western Front, with the arboretum being composed of 57 different types of tree within what is quite a small area (Garden Gateways Website 2001). This arboreal variety is an intriguing concept in its own right, with the multitude of different species reflecting a variety of kinds of remembrance for the different aspects and layers of the village site. The multi-faceted nature of this memorial arboretum can be seen to reflect the multi-vocal heritage of the site. Whilst the original stone remains of the village are preserved under the roots of the woodland, the emotive and powerful shapes of the trees above ground that form the arboretum are preserving the memorial and remembrance aspects of the events on the site during the Great War.

Conclusions

Woodlands in Northern France have a unique history in their own right, as the majority of what can be seen today is a result of selective growth and intensive replanting following the scouring of the landscape by huge quantities of munitions during the Great War. Whilst this woodland landscape is often no more than 90 years old, the memories and symbolic importance it holds is second to none in the countryside of the former Western Front.

Indeed, these 'Forêts de guerre' hold even more importance than the ground of the 'Zones Rouges' from whence they have sprung. The trees that today stand as both a remembrance of past acts, and even as a warning of the still present danger left by the saturation of the countryside with munitions, are a unique phenomenon in modern conflict studies. The trees themselves are the product of poisoned land left by chemical and explosive weapons, and the woodlands that have and been reborn from the damaged and irrevocably altered ground surface in turn hold the very memories of the horrors of the conflict that led to their re-birth.

The war-scarred landscape of Northern France stands as a palimpsest of harmful human influence and the power of nature. In turn the 'Forêt de guerre' stands as a recreation of the ancient forests that meant so much to the rural population, whilst both covering the ruins of the Great War landscape whilst also acting as an arboreal reminder to the present generation of French people of the horrors that unfolded between 1914 and 1918. These woodlands held huge amounts of power and significance as landscapes of the living, aiding in the subsistence lifestyle of those who lived around them and today are still just as powerful, acting as solemn but natural areas of remembrance for the thousands who fell protecting the French homeland.

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