



Arras: The Forgotten Battlefield

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During the late 1980s I interviewed several hundred British and Canadian veterans who had fought in the First World War. It will be no surprise that many of them served at Ypres or on the Somme, but a place that equally came up in these interviews was Arras. Veterans who had survived the Somme experienced Arras as their next major battle and many of them in fact almost felt that the 1917 battle was just an extension of what they had experienced the previous year. But as I began to do background research to these interviews it was clear that the historiography of Arras was severely lacking compared to those other famous battlefronts of the Great War. In fact it was while researching one of the veterans experiences in primary sources at the then Public Records Office I encountered historian Jon Nicholls. Nicholls became the first author since the official historian in the 1940s to write about Arras and following the publication of his *Cheerful Sacrifice* in 1990 the 1917 battle has attracted the attention of only two other authors, myself and Peter Barton. The 1918 operations when the German Army was halted on the Arras front have never been written about, and the final August operations have attracted the attention of a handful of Canadian academics. Why is Arras so forgotten?

In every respect, it shouldn't be. Arras perhaps more than any other battlefield gives us the First World War in microcosm. When the British Army took over the Arras sector in 1916 it was very much a static front; typical of the attritional warfare taking place along all four hundred and fifty miles of the Western Front. In this it reflected well the experience of the typical British Tommy; monotonous day to day trench warfare, but with often a high daily casualty rate with losses from sickness in times of poor weather as much as from enemy activity. The 1917 battle clearly demonstrates lessons learned from the Somme in the early phase of the 'Learning Curve'. Historians have yet to clearly explain why the Third Army commanded by Julian Byng 'the hero of Vimy the previous year' was able to largely stop the German offensive when the lines buckled on the Somme at the same time, and the following month in the Battle of the Lys. The Canadian Corps operations taking them from Arras to Cambrai in the late summer and autumn of 1918 are the epitome of the skilful fighting force the BEF had become in the final stage of the war.

Yet despite the fact that the fighting at Arras reflects almost every aspect of the experience of the BEF in WW1 it remains under-studied, if not neglected. And it is not just among historians; visitors to the Western Front gravitate towards Ypres and the Somme. Both these areas are well set up for tourism, with clear trails, numerous guidebooks and even smartphone Apps. As such they both get visitors in the hundreds of thousands with sites like Thiepval and Tyne Cot edging towards half a million people passing through each year. Arras, with perhaps the exception of Vimy Ridge (which some think wrongly as a separate battlefield), has nothing like this yet has as much, if not more to offer. Visitor's Books in the British cemeteries show that visits tend to be focussed; a family coming to visit a relative's grave. Casual tourism is rarer. Part of that is probably because there is no focussed museum for Arras; no starting point. The Wellington Quarries have attempted to breach that gap but the very nature of that site means it is too focussed. Arras cries out for an Historial or In Flanders Fields.

As we approach the centenary of the Great War one of the debts we owe to the memory of that conflict is to move away from the notion of the Somme and Ypres dominating it all; Arras needs to find its place and historians need to explain what that place might be. Until then the rolling hills around the Scarpe valley will remain a forgotten battlefield of the Great War.

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