‘Stamp has described how Lutyens designed the Memorial to the Missing of the Somme. His book is as restrained, and as “saturated in melancholy” as the monument itself. Far more than a work of pure architectural history, this beautifully poignant book illuminates the tragedy of the Great War, and tells us much about its aftermath. It is a truly classical piece of prose, a tragic chorus on the Somme which reverberates on the battlefields of today’ A. N. Wilson

‘A brilliant achievement … I felt instantly at one with [the] approach and treatment. It was such a clever idea … to treat Lutyens through Thiepval.’ John Keegan

‘An invaluable, detailed and illuminating study of how the memorial came to be built and how its effects are achieved’ Geoff Dyer, *Guardian*

‘Stamp’s book is devoted to a single one of the thousands of memorials that now dot the battlefield, Lutyens’s stupendous arch at Thiepval that records the names of over 73,000 British and South African soldiers who were killed on the Somme but have no known graves. As a piece of architectural analysis, it is impressive’ M. R. D. Foot, *Spectator*

‘A passionate and unusual book … [an] eloquent account of the genius of the vision of Lutyens … who created in the Monument to the Missing at Thiepval the central metaphor of a generation’s experience of appalling loss’ Tim Gardham, *Observer*

‘Moving and eloquent’ Nigel Jones, *Literary Review*

'A book of remarkable emotional restraint'
Jonathan Meades, *New Statesman*

'Gavin Stamp considers the building both as a piece of architecture and as a monument of profound cultural resonance' *London Review of Books*

'Succinct and masterly … [a] remarkable book'
Kenneth Powell, *Architects Journal*

'Brilliantly lucid … Stamp is a marvellous writer, and brings every aspect of this monument and its story under lively scrutiny' Jeremy Musson, *Country Life*

'A poignant reminder' Mark Bostridge, *Independent on Sunday*

'*The Memorial to the Missing of the Somme* distils the first world war into the story of Lutyens's great but under-celebrated monument at Thiepval. Stamp's sympathy and clarity make this much more than a monograph of architectural history' Ian Jack, *Guardian*

GAVIN STAMP is an architectural historian and writer, and was made an honorary professor by both the Universities of Glasgow and Cambridge. His books include *Edwin Lutyens' Country Houses*, *Gothic for the Steam Age*, *Alexander 'Greek' Thomson*, *An Architect of Promise*, *The Changing Metropolis*, *Anti-Ugly* and *Telephone Boxes*.

WONDERS OF THE WORLD

THE MEMORIAL TO THE MISSING OF THE SOMME

GAVIN STAMP

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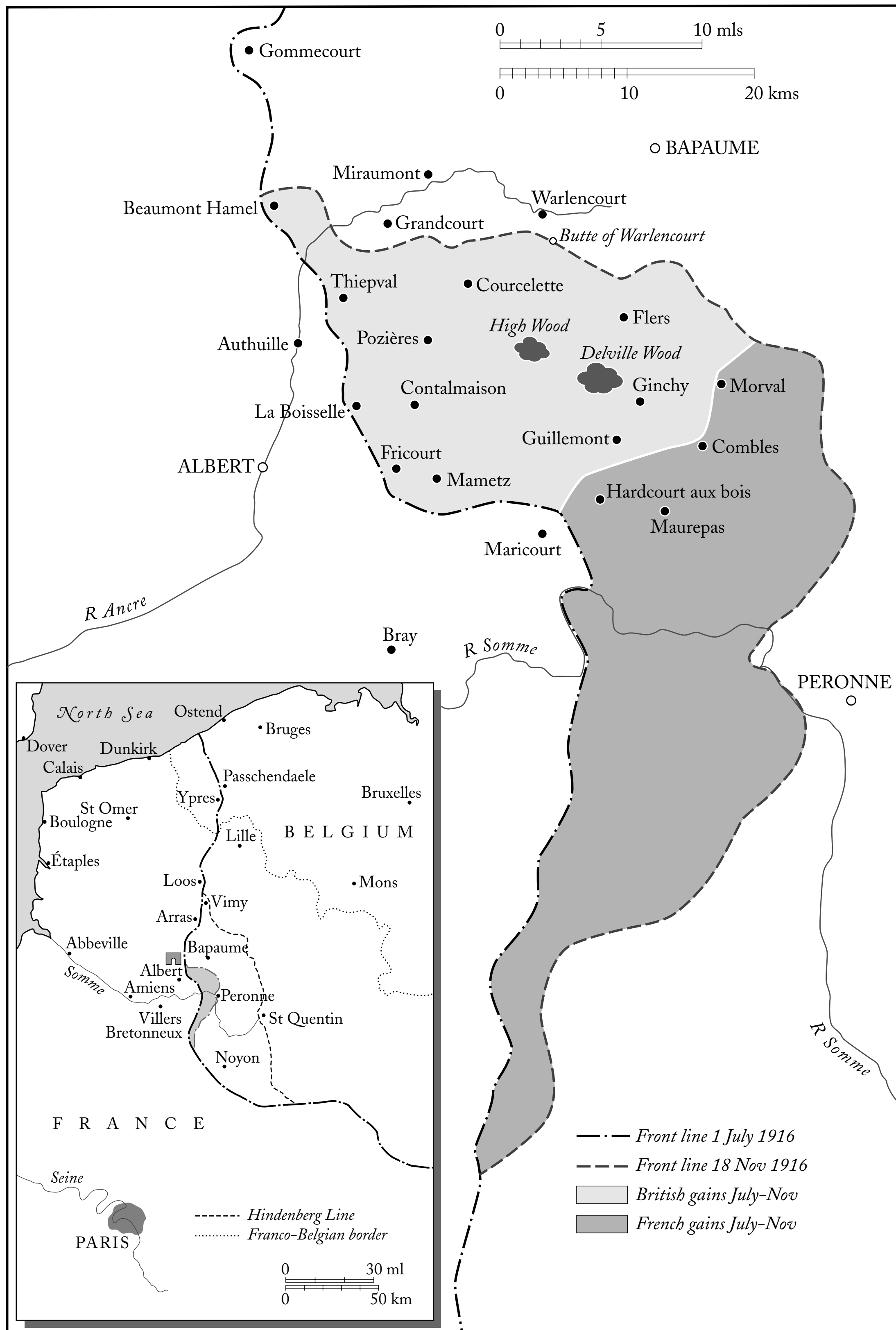
PREFACE

The Memorial to the Missing of the Somme was first published in 2006 in Profile's 'Wonders of the World' series. This second, revised edition is published a decade later to coincide with the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. The original text has been corrected and updated but is largely unchanged. An Afterword has, however, been added which explores the continuing significance of the extraordinary monument the British raised at Thiepval on the Somme – social, historical and architectural – in the context of the hundredth anniversary of the catastrophic struggle whose resonances never seem to fade: the Great War of 1914–1918.



The areas fought over during the Battle of the Somme

INTRODUCTION

The village of Thiepval lies some four miles north of the town of Albert in the *département* of Somme, part of what was once the province of Picardy in northern France. It stands 490 feet above sea level on a ridge on the chalk plateau which rises above the east bank of the valley of the river Ancre, a tributary of the languid Somme, which it joins at Corbie to the south-west. A century ago, there was a small, semi-feudal farming community here with a population of about two hundred living in some sixty houses, and the village could boast, as well as its modern church, a large seventeenth-century *château*, the home of the Comte de Bréda. Summer visitors, who came to fish or swim in the Ancre or to walk or ride in the quiet rolling, rural downland, came to Thiepval principally for its renowned *pâtisserie*.

Today, some seventy people live in the commune of Thiepval, but there is no trace of the *château* or of any building older than the 1930s: everything above ground was wiped out during the Great War of 1914–18. There is now a new church, a small brick building with a rugged war memorial built into the south-west corner of its saddle-back tower. Completed in 1933, it is appropriately dedicated to Our Lady of Peace. But the principal landmark in the village – indeed, the structure which dominates the surrounding countryside

1. The Thiepval Arch as newly completed.

– is not a church steeple but an extraordinary pile of red brick and white stone. From some angles, it looks like a tall tower rising above the trees; from others it looks like a massive stepped ziggurat; but seen from the east or from the railway which runs along the valley from Arras to Albert – once part of a main line from Brussels to Paris before the advent of the TGV – it is revealed on its principal axis as a tall, thin arch rising into the sky, poised high above flanking blocks of masonry.

From closer to, it is seen that the structure consists not of one arch but is penetrated on all sides by a series of arched tunnels, all of different sizes. Above the giant arch rises a tower, on the top of which are two poles, flying the *tricolore* and the Union flag. Just below, framed between piers of brick flanked by stone wreaths, is a large stone tablet which bears the inscription, cut in fine Roman capitals, 'AUX ARMEES FRANÇAISE ET BRITANNIQUE L'EMPIRE BRITANNIQUE RECONNAISSANT'. Below this is a band of stone, bearing the dates 1914 and 1918 each side of a carved crown. And, further down, running along a stone string course at the level of the springing of the largest of the arched tunnels which penetrate the mass in two directions, more Roman capital letters explain that this most complicated and awesome structure is dedicated to 'THE MISSING OF THE SOMME'.

For what stands at Thiepval is a war memorial – perhaps the ultimate British war memorial. It commemorates a terrible event which changed the course of British history. Carved on the stone panels which line the inner faces of the sixteen massive piers formed by the interconnecting tunnels are the names of over 73,000 British soldiers most of whom disappeared in the desperate struggles which took place around

here a century ago in 1916 – men whose bodies could not be found or identified. They were but some of the huge casualties (420,000 British dead and wounded) in an unresolved exercise in industrialised slaughter which we have learned to call the Battle of the Somme – victims of one extended campaign in the four-year-long struggle between Christian nations of Europe waged with unprecedented ruthlessness by their governments.

When viewed on one of the principal axes, the Thiepval Memorial can be appreciated as a composition of open arches, yet when seen from an angle, up close, it seems intimidatingly solid, with cubic masses of masonry building up on alternate axes to create a vast, pyramid-like structure of brick and stone. Nothing could be more massive and powerful, rooted to the ground. Yet at the very centre of the monument, where the largest tunnels converge and where wreaths of artificial red poppies always seem to lie on the steps that lead up to a great stone altar which bears the inscription 'THEIR NAME LIVETH FOR EVERMORE', mass is somehow dissolved. The visitor stands beneath a high stone vault resting on solid brick walls but is mostly conscious of space and sky as he, or she, looks out through the arches in each direction – north, south, east, west – over the placid, rural landscape which was once pulverised by weeks and weeks of shell-fire and soaked in the blood of tens of thousands of young men – British, French, German – who died in and around this spot in horrible and inexcusable circumstances. Thiepval surely ought to be haunted; as it is, the place is saturated in melancholy, and the monument reverberates with a sense of tragedy.

Below the high stone vaults, the brick walls carry large carved stone wreaths containing names of the nearby villages

2. The pyramidal, ziggurat profile of the Memorial seen on the diagonal through newly planted trees in the 1930s.

and woods where bloody battles took place in 1916: Beaumont-Hamel, Morval, Courcelette, Pozières, Flers, Delville Wood, Mametz, and so on. But these walls are also penetrated by the smaller arches, or tunnels, so that the visitor eventually appreciates that the compact, rectangular plan of the monument is formed by a grid of two intersecting sets of three tunnels – of different sizes – which separate sixteen solid piers of masonry. And, below the brickwork, every wall of these piers is faced in Portland stone, imported from England, into which are carved names: thousands and thousands of names, like wallpaper, listing some of those British soldiers who were not just casualties in this area between 1915 and 1918 but who simply disappeared, who have no known grave, whose bodies could not be found or identified: 73,357 names.

Almost all these names are of volunteers. Many of the men who went over the top on 1 July 1916 – the First Day of the Battle of the Somme – belonged to those battalions of 'Pals' or 'Chums': men who enlisted together from all over Britain and who had been promised that 'those who joined together would serve together'. They had all responded to the call for volunteers made by Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, in August 1914 to augment Britain's small professional army already fighting in France and Belgium. It was this 'New Army' of civilians – idealistic and enthusiastic – that first went into battle on the Somme, and was decimated. The Thiepval memorial therefore also commemorates a loss of innocence. The date 1 July 1916 is one of the defining, polemical moments in British history, when that volunteer army, educated and skilled, containing many of the brightest and best in their country, was tested – and wasted. Everything was changed by the failure and slaughter of that day. As the

historian John Keegan has written, 'To the British, it was and would remain their greatest military tragedy of the twentieth century, indeed of their national military history. […] The Somme marked the end of an age of vital optimism in British life that has never been recovered.'

The Memorial to the Missing of the Somme rises to a height of 140 feet above its basement terrace. It is therefore, and quite deliberately, fractionally smaller than the Arc de Triomphe, the colossal arch, 152 feet tall, in the Champs Elysées in Paris commissioned by the Emperor Napoleon and begun in 1806 to celebrate his victories over the rest of Europe. Consecrated to the glory of the French armies and designed by J.-F.-T. Chalgrin on the model of a Roman triumphal arch, the Arc de Triomphe is an essentially crude conception, if elegant in detail. It is but a giant slab of masonry, cut through by a large arched tunnel, with a smaller lateral tunnel running cross-ways; the composition is solid, static. The Memorial to the Missing of the Somme, in contrast, is a dynamic structure and one without precise historical precedent; its form is created by a carefully composed building up of cubic masses, governed by a most subtle aesthetic sensibility and by complex geometry, while the carefully arranged hierarchy of arches aligned on two axes seems properly structural, fulfilling a purpose and carrying weight.

More to the point, perhaps, is that there is no triumph about the arch at Thiepval because there was no triumph, no real victory, on the Somme in 1916. After five months, some six or seven miles of pulverised muddy territory had been gained, at a cost of 420,000 British and 204,000 French casualties. The German front line had been driven back, but remained almost as impregnable as before. The breakthrough,

3. The Arc de Triomphe de l'Etoile in Paris: a colossal slab of masonry with arches cut through it begun by Napoleon to glorify his military conquests.