

Empires of the Dead, by David Crane published by William Collins UK £16.99 - reviewed by Andrw Mackinlay

For those increasing numbers who now make a pilgrimage to the close - by battlefields of the Somme and Ypres ,or much further afield in North Africa ,or a railway line in far-off Burma, David Crane's book is compelling if not 'essential' reading.

It chronicles the immeasurable debt owed, world-wide , to Fabian Ware , the father of what is today ,the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

From a small British Red Cross 'mobile unit' and Graves Registration Commission headed up by Ware , there has emerged the iconic worldwide Commonwealth War Graves Commission responsible for over 1.7 million graves as well as the names recorded on memorials to the missing ;such as at Thiepval and Tyne Cot . The Commission are charged by their Royal Charter to commemorate the legions of British Empire casualties of the two great global conflicts of the twentieth century.....into a final great muster.

Ware and his small cadre of Red Cross workers truly had to battle to cope with recording the first deaths in 1914 of the Old Contemptibles, as well as their places of interment. The initial instructions for those conducting the 'temporary' burial of a fallen combatant was to record the grave's occupant by use of a note left in a tin or bottle.

I confess to having been largely unaware of Fabian Ware, prior to reading David Crane's book . I am guilty along with so many others , of simply 'taking for granted ' not only the immense beauty and treasure of the cemeteries , but also of being entirely ignorant of the management, vision and resolve that Ware ,and a few others, brought to the struggle to create them in the first place !

Hitherto, 'the Empire' had never been good on battlefield war graves 'Commemoration' . " Remembrance " , throughout the long reign and many conflicts of Victoria, was invariably left to the families of the officer class and funded by the bereft and mourning parents of the upper middle class casualties , whose gallantry and élan were recorded by brass plaques on the walls of ,predominantly , English village Churches. Repatriation of the dead was exclusively for the very rich and powerful. For others there was ,in most instances , a mass grave at the battles' locations ,unrecorded and soon forgotten . By the time of the Boer War, with increased media coverage and its Empire implications, attempts were made to emulate the cemeteries which had become a feature of the then ,relatively recent conflict of the American Civil War. What ,however , was lacking was a coherent , Empire-wide policy ,for the maintenance and funding of battlefield war graves.

The story of Fabian Ware , and the three great architects of the cemeteries and accompanying monuments (Lutyens, Baker and Bloomfield) is one of struggle , persistence and diplomacy. Not only was there the logistical challenge of the unprecedented volume of the deaths ,and their world wide extent, but also there was the cost and continuing commitments , that some of 'the establishment ' was to balk at! It is worth reflecting that in the nine months after the opening of the battle of the Somme on the 1st July 1916, 100,000 graves were added to the register. Such was the scale that by 1917, Ware was counselling about "the serious trouble" . His limited staff were being overwhelmed by the numbers of still unburied bodies ; including many from the opening Somme advance on the 1st July 1916. There were "attractive alternatives " including the building of colossal ossuaries ,(much favoured by the French) or a network of giant crematoria along the entire western front. Temptingly, these were much cheaper options that could have easily been adopted by the cash strapped 'Imperial' government in London and by the Governments of Australia, Canada, Newfoundland, New Zealand ,South Africa, and India. It was a politically sensitive time , when much of the ruling class were increasingly concerned about being 'called to account' for their conduct of pre 1914 defence and foreign policy and their subsequent prosecution of the war with all of its harvest of death. To have places of perpetual commemoration and pilgrimage could , it was feared by some , further aggravate those demanding to know who was to blame for the loss of their husbands, brothers or sons.

One other man of compassion and vision emerges from this tale ably related by Crane. It is the Adjutant General , Sir Neville McCready who shared Ware's determination that each casualty would have a final and permanent resting place , and , if missing, his name would be recorded on a memorial in perpetuity . General McCready was resolved there would not be discrimination either by the repatriation of the remains by wealthy families ,nor should rank ,ethnicity or religious creed be "elevated" in any way. It was McCready who gave Ware the army's resources and the rank of Major . This decision took the responsibility away from the Red Cross and made it an indisputable duty of the Army. This meant that Ware had at last, tangible resources to do his work . McCready's decision gave Ware a dedicated organisation of supporting officers and

soldiers at the most critical time of the Great War . It was also timely for one other reason. It was just when the debate about what would be the nature of the cemeteries and monuments ,post-conflict was at its height.

It is a measure of the compassion and character of these men that those "shot at dawn" were not discriminated in death but were rightly deemed worthy to be included as "casualties" of the conflict 1914 -1918 ; with equal reverence and respect as afforded to the million others. (The CWG Commission was ahead of the House of Commons by nearly 90 years on this 'most sensitive ' of issues).

I recall how I was able to accompany a proud and indefatigable Gertie Harris, (the daughter of Harry Farr executed in the autumn of 1916 and whose grave was "lost"), to find Harry's name at the Thiepval monument . It was a matter of great solace to find that this brave , but shattered soldier was recognised in death with equality and dignity ,before God and his comrades thanks to Ware and McCready.

This book rightly records that it was the Dominion Governments who greatly drove the creation of the wonderful , enduring monuments that straddle the hundreds of kilometres from the Channel to the Swiss border ; much more so than the British Authorities.

It also reminds us of the French Parliament's generosity who , in approving "Law 29" , (at the prompting of the War Minister and later Premier , Alexandre Millerand) assigned to the British "the perpetuity of sepulture " in respect of the title deeds of the cemeteries. I have little doubt that Ware's fluency in French greatly helped the advancement of this generous legacy, granted by the people of France to the British Empire.

Certainly , Ware was "the sole intermediary between the French civil and military authorities " in respect of the graves and the monuments , not just during the conflict but for many years afterwards. His capacity to manage political opinion in France has something of the skilled diplomat and accomplished lobbyist.

This is a great book both as an 'immediate read ' and also a volume to take with you , on a tour or pilgrimage to any of the Commonwealth War Graves' cemeteries.

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