



# The Missing of the Somme

*Geoff Dyer*

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## **The Missing of the Somme** Geoff Dyer

"Head bowed, rifle on his back, a soldier is silhouetted against the going down of the sun, looking at the grave of a dead comrade, remembering him..." A poetic and impressionistic tribute to those who perished in World War I--and those who lived, haunted by their memories. "Brilliant--the Great War book of our time."-Observer.

## **The Missing of the Somme Details**

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Author : Geoff Dyer

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## From Reader Review The Missing of the Somme for online ebook

### Chas says

I wish I'd known about this book when I directed *Journey's End*. Dyer is sympathetic, without being sentimental, and the result is an honest account of how we memorialize great tragedy.

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### David Carr says

"During the war the dead were buried haphazardly, often in mass graves. By the time of the great battles of attrition of 1916-1917 mass graves were dug in advance of major offensives. Singing columns of soldiers fell grimly silent as they marched by these gaping pits en route to the front-line trenches." This book is first in my own march past the graves of the Great War, my father's war. It is brilliant and contemporary, awed in aspect and perspective. It helps me to understand the words he never said.

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### Deshay says

Wanted to like this but found it hard reading. Made it through it because it was relatively short. Still trying to figure out what all those who gave it such wonderful reviews got out of it that I missed. I wanted it to be more of a travelog - when the author visited battlefields and memorials, it was interesting and well written. But the literary references and discussions, something I normally enjoy, were tedious and obscure.

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### Susan Liston says

Parts of this book are very moving, but it also gets a little dry in others. I read a book like this to cry, damn it. (of course this is my opinion, others seem to disagree) I did appreciate all the references to other books, some of which I own but haven't read. I think the a bit of a problem for me was that it sort of jumped around, there wasn't a smooth narrative, it's part this part that, which is even in its official description. But I will definitely keep it as a reference.

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### Mike Clinton says

Dyer expertly and often evocatively writes about the cult of remembrance surrounding the Great War (the nomenclature he prefers to the First World War - and which feels right to me, too.) In this case, remembrance is largely in a British idiom, although some American (Dos Passos, Hemingway, Fitzgerald) and French (Barbusse, Dorgeles) references appear now and then. Dyer goes beyond literature to consider memorials, visual art, photography, popular song, ceremonies, pilgrimages - a wide range of methods intended to imprint acknowledgment of the war from the generation that experienced it (directly or not) down through ours and beyond. He even integrates accounts of his own excursions to memorial sites in Belgium and France as part of his extended essay - an essay both personal and critical. Most impressive is the depth of his knowledge of Great War literature and culture, a massive language of remembrance that he speaks fluently. More so earlier in the book than later on, when the book's rhythm seemed to change, I was

struck by how he makes allusions to themes or phrases in one section that then get examined more directly in the next after a seamless transition that didn't seem a transition, underscoring how closely interwoven these tropes are in the vast body of culture the war produced. Themes included not only the grand ones of death and camaraderie, but also insightfully subtle ones like the prevalence of smoking or the messages left in visitors' books at memorial sites. He also provides an interesting critical section appraising more recent novels retrospectively set amid the Great War. This was a moving and engrossing book for those captivated by the war and the legacy of its remembrance.

It IS a very British book, though; while many Americans do have an interest in what Dyer writes about, he clearly writes for a British audience, and only those Yanks sufficiently versed in the British cultural references he makes might fully appreciate it. I'm not sure what to make of how Dyer integrates his own journey into the book, either - and he admits at one point that he's not sure whether to regard it as a "grim holiday or a rowdy pilgrimage" (p.102); he adopts an ironic tone throughout most of these sections, but then shifts to an elegiac tone upon visiting the memorial to the Somme at Thiepval - a visit cut off from the main account of his trip by an intervening section that reverts to a critical tone and focus characteristic of earlier parts of the (admittedly not very long) book. The book's organization, in fact, at first seemed somewhat random, moving forward through the inertia of relevant tangents; I finally realized that he was ambling implicitly through the chronology of the war, but I was nevertheless left with the questions of where he was going and why. Nor do I really know what purpose Dyer's book actually serves, aside from a personal compulsion to work through the meaning of this cultural mass that he's accumulated from his fascination with "the Great War and its remembrance"; he addresses that question himself twice in the book (pp.85 & 109), but only briefly and vaguely.

This was the first book by Dyer that I've read, but I plan to read more. Aside from the issues that I had with its organization and purpose, it engaged brilliantly with a topic of interest to me and did so with a truly talented writing style.

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## **DoctorM says**

A fine meditation on memorials for the dead of the Great War and how we construct the memories we hope to fix into stone or bronze. Dyer's essay grows out of Paul Fussell's work in "The Great War and Modern Memory" but stands very much on its own. Dyer is less interested in the literary antecedents of Great War literature than in the concrete ways England tried to hold on to a memory of the war and its losses. His account (this would be in the early 1990s, a decade or so before the issues of military graves and memories of losses would once again become something in the public eye) of visits to the cemeteries in Belgium and France that hold British and Empire dead is fine travel writing, and his account of how the great memorials were done in the first years after the war is incisive and haunting. Very much worth reading--- quiet, thoughtful, and never cynical.

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## **Aquavit says**

Perhaps that is what is meant by 'loneliness' — knowing that even at your moments of most exalted emotion, you do not matter (perhaps this is precisely the moment of most exalted emotion) because these things will always be here: the dark trees full of summer leaf, the fading light that has not changed in seventy-five years, the peace that lies perpetually in wait.

There's really no better closer in any book I have ever read - how he manages to take the stinking mess of millions dead, the forgotten fog of war, the grand and unknowable scale of destruction, and then make you feel that it will be alright in the end - that's the brilliance of Dyer.

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### **Geoff says**

To say I'm still "currently-reading" this would be dishonest. I read exactly half of it before becoming rather distracted by my reading of Roubaud, and now it has been like a month and a half, and Geoff Dyer and this book deserve better than that, because the half I read was wonderful, so I'm setting it aside until later, when I have the will to read it all in one go. Sorry Geoff, you spell your name the right way, I will do you justice another time.

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### **Caitlin Stamm says**

The Missing of the Somme is described as "part travelogue, part meditation on remembrance" and this is certainly accurate--I would say that the "meditation on remembrance" occupies most of the first half of the book, and the travelogue aspect really kicks in at the end, mingling together with the discussion on remembrance in a really beautiful way.

Dyer writes about the modes of memory surrounding and built up both by and because of World War I, focusing particularly on the war memorials and artistic and poetic renditions of the Great War. Anyone else's take on this subject could be plodding or leaden; Dyer's prose manages to handle the subject in a substantive, but never oppressive, way. There is a heaviness to what he writes, but he handles it well.

This is a surprisingly quick read, and one that felt earnest and true. There is a quietness to Dyer's book, in which he explores difficulties of the modern condition, but allows them to rest and simply exist, rather than beating them past recognition. This, to my mind, is the greatest success of his work. Vital, too, to his register is the way he presents his exhaustive research: it never feels burdensome.

I'm so pleased I read this, and I'm very thankful that it was suggested and lent to me.

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### **Izzy says**

A meandering sort of stream of consciousness, but well composed and engaging. I especially liked the critical analysis of the war poetry, and the introduction (for me) to some war artists that I hadn't previously heard of. I thought the strongest parts of the book though were Dyer's personal memories of his trip with friends to the Somme region; thought-provoking and touching at the same time. Would recommend to others who have an interest in this period of history, especially if you have a particular interest in the poetry and arts that surround the topic.

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### **Holly says**

An early book by one of my favorite writers, with that characteristic Dyer way of approaching a subject

sideways, a little differently than anyone else. It's an exploration of Great War commemoration, from Owen and Sassoon to comparatively unknown memoirists who played off those, to late 20th-century novels like Pat Barker's and Sebastian Faulks's that intentionally (Barker) and unintentionally (Faulks) echoed the memoirists (who were themselves echoing Owen) and even Ondaatje's *English Patient* ("wrong war, dude" as Dyer's companions would say), to iconic photographs and films and what they could/could not depict, to physical memorials of the war (and an account of reading a visitors' book that made me splutter with laughter since it's a Geoff Dyer story and that's *sine qua non*). Dyer called this book "reference notes for a World War I novel I have no intention of ever writing." I don't even need that novel.

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## Aaron says

History, literary criticism, and travelogue all in one. A vitally important view of a vitally important moment for framing the remainder of the 20th century.

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## Roger Brunyate says

### What passing bells?

*If I should die, think only this of me,  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever England, England's own.*

— Rupert Brooke (1887–1915)

*What passing bells for these who die as cattle?*

— Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)

Why is it that the Great War exerts such power over the European literary imagination, even as we approach the centenary of its outbreak, a power that the Second World War cannot remotely equal? Perhaps because of the sheer scale of the carnage. Perhaps because, in the popular mind, it remains a war without reason, whose causes only historians fully understand. Perhaps because, as novelist Geoff Dyer points out in this extended essay, it was a war that memorialized itself from its inception, to be fought and written about in the future perfect, with an eye to how future generations will see it. And it is a war that seems to have taken a 180-degree turn in public perception over the course of the century, without ever losing its enormity as a memorial to heroism or folly.

I have witnessed these changes for myself. At the age of ten, I was taught the structure of a sonnet, not from the works of Shakespeare or Keats, but from the poem by Rupert Brooke quoted above, then considered the epitome of English patriotic modesty. Remembrance Day in November, the red poppies in everyone's lapels, the two-minute silence observed nationwide, these were more than empty rituals. At chapel each day in my boarding school, I sat under the memorial to Rupert Brooke (an alumnus), whose complete sonnet was carved into the marble. Taking weekly communion in the Memorial Chapel, I was surrounded on three sides by the names of the fallen in the Great War (with only one wall for the later conflict). They were contemporaries, and in some cases the friends, of my father, who had gone to France as a lieutenant of eighteen, and returned a twice-decorated hero. But a scarred one, as I would later discover, unwilling to talk at all about his experiences, fleeing from almost every aspect of the England in which he had been raised. On his death, I would discover a letter written by his father in India on the occasion of his first posting, silently questioning the purpose of the War, but prevented from saying so by his position as a servant of Empire.

Then, when I was at college, Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* came out, setting the anti-heroic realism of Wilfred Owen against the Latin text. Owen was a poet entirely unknown to me, though I immediately bought his collected works with a college prize; Dyer refers to him now as "the poet everyone knows." Owen is remembered; Brooke is not. Somewhere around the middle of the century, the whole view of the War-once-called-Great had wheeled around almost completely.

Dyer writes a rather messy book, switching between personal narrative and objective analysis, between his own voice and numerous quotations from others, but it is full of magnificent insights. He too has a personal stake, trying to understand the lives of his two grandfathers, each of whom fought on the Somme. But his main focus is on how the War has been memorialized: in the poetry of Brooke, Owen, Blunden, and Sassoon; in the spate of memoirs that followed in the twenties; in official histories; in the sculpted memorials that sprang up all over Europe; in novels of the second and third generation, each trying to understand the inexplicable, to find some humanity in the inhumane, and standing on each others' shoulders to do so. Dyer himself draws heavily on Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, an influence he freely acknowledges. If nothing else, Dyer has written an invaluable reader's guide to war literature, singling out such remarkable books as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong*, and Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (in which Owen and Sassoon are characters). But he goes further, exploring how the significance of any great subject resides as much in how it is written about as in the historical facts.

The black and white photographs, the personal journey that occupies the latter part of the book, and the deep reflection all foreshadow the work of WG Sebald, whose *Austerlitz* would anatomize the aftermath of the later war. I wish he could have used the Sebald model to organize the entire book. It must be to deliberately jarring effect that he emphasizes the sophomoric quality of his first of his two trips, made with two rambunctious college friends in a ramshackle car they call the "tank" and viewing the rain-sodden landscape through the barely-working windscreen wipers, which of course they call the "Ypres." But when Dyer returns alone, his reactions are powerful, as here at the German cemetery at Langemark:

At the edge of the *Kamaradengrab* stand four mourning figures, silhouetted against the zinc sky. Up close these are poorly sculpted figures, but from a distance they impart a sense of utter desolation to the place. It is as if the minute's silence for which they have bowed their heads has been extended for the duration of eternity.

He is equally evocative at the Canadian Memorial at Vimy Ridge, treated so memorably by Jane Urquhart in *The Stone Carvers* (though after Dyer's book, which was first published in 1994). And he is soberly anti-heroic in pointing out that the brooding mausoleum at Thiepval, built without any Christian symbolism, "is a memorial if not to the death, then certainly to the superfluosity of God." My own worship in the memorial chapel is a thing of the past.

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## Mikey B. says

This is a rambling read as the author shifts gears from time to time and swings abruptly from the past and into the present. Some of the present is uninteresting, as when the author recounts his friends and the contents of their rental car.

There are, now and then, some touching observations on the cemeteries that he visits in France. Mr. Dyer discusses the writings of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Statues and memorials commemorating the Great War are featured along with some pictures of them. Of interest to Canadians, he also visits the Canadian Memorial at Vimy Ridge. The author reflects on how the meaning of the Great War and Remembrance have changed over the years. They can represent grief, the horror of war and even the nobility

of war. For many of the young men it was the culminating experience of their lives – and sadly, for many, it ended their lives.

As mentioned there is a lack of cohesion – it is like reading the author’s stream of consciousness. Amid the admittedly eloquent reflections, we have some rather jaded and even ruthless comments, which along with the diffuse writing, detract from the overall book.

The battle of the Somme and the Thiepval Memorial there are only brought up in the last few pages – so the title of the book is questionable and misleading. A more appropriate title would be something along the lines of “Literary Writing, Statues and Memorials of the Great War”. There is little on the French aspect and memorials of the war.

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### Jeffrey Keeten says

**”Crosses stretch away in lines so long they seem to follow the curvature of the earth. Names are written on both the front and back of each cross. The scale of the cemetery exceeds all imagining. Even the names on the crosses count for nothing. Only the numbers count, the scale of loss. But this is so huge that it is consumed by itself. It shocks, stuns, numbs. Sassoon’s nameless names here become the numberless numbers. You stand aghast while the wind hurtles through your clothes, searing your ears until you find yourself almost vanishing: in the face of this wind, in this expanse of lifelessness, you cannot hold your own: you do not count. There is no room here for the living. The wind, the cold, force you away.”**

### Notre Dame De Loretta, French cemetery

It starts, really, with an old photo album. One that may be found in a battered trunk in the attic or tucked away in a musty cupboard.

*”Dusty, bulging, old: they are all the same, these albums. The same faces, the same photos. Every family was touched by the war and every family has an album like this. Even as we prepare to open it, the act of looking at the album is overlaid by the emotions it will engender. We look at the pictures as if reading a poem about the experience of seeing them. I turn the dark, heavy pages. The dust smell of old photographs.”*

Geoff Dyer realizes that he passes by a World War One cenotaph every day; and yet, hadn’t really seen it in decades. It happens with everything that we see frequently. We stop seeing it. The only way we would be shaken out of our apathy is if it were suddenly missing, a hole in our vision that we know something is supposed to be there. When Dyer looks through the old family album and sees the pictures of his grandfather in uniform he really begins to notice the cenotaph for the first time. That afternoon spent thumbing through that album, hearing the crackle of stiff paper as if he were wedging open a creaky door to the past, inspires him to know more about his grandfather’s war. It sends him on a mission travelling around England, France, and Belgium visiting the monuments for the war.

For the first time he really thinks about war, not just The Great War, but all wars.

*”After The Great War people had little clear idea of why it had been fought or what had been accomplished*

*except for the loss of millions of lives. This actually made the task of memorializing the war relatively easy.”*

*”The issue, in short, is not simply the way the war generates memory but the way memory has determined — and continues to determine — the meaning of the war.”*

*”Men no longer waged war, it has often been said; **war was waged on men.**”*

Dyer appreciates the sculptures, the monuments, the memories that artists tried to immortalize out of metal and rock, but...

*”Although many had the talent, no British sculptor — not even Jagger — had the vision, freedom or power to render the war in bronze or stone as (Wilfred) Owen had done in words.”*

### **Jagger’s Royal Artillery Sculpture**

**”Down the close darkening lanes  
they sang their way  
To the siding-shed ...**

### **Ernest Brooks’s iconic photo of World War One**

But really how about more Owen

**Their breasts were stuck all white with wreath  
and spray  
As men’s are, dead.**

Is a picture worth a thousand words when the words are such as these?

**”[I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell],  
Like a Sun, in his last deep hour;  
Watched the magnificent recession of farewell,  
Clouding, half gleam, half glower,  
And a last splendour burn the heavens of his cheek.  
And in his eyes  
The cold stars lighting, very old and bleak,  
In different skies.”**

It is hard not to think of The Great War as a war without color. It is caged in black and white film, and even though we know that blood was red not grey, and that the same blue skies, and the same green grass, and the same brown mud existed then as it does today; it is still difficult to conjure up those images without the color

leached away.

*The world had had the colour bombed out of it. Sepia, the colour of mud, emerged as the dominant tone of the war. Battle rendered the landscape sepia. 'The year itself looks sepia and soiled,' writes Timothy Findley of 1915, 'muddied like its pictures.'*

As a writer it is hard to convey something as horrible as war without reducing the impact with the very adjectives and conceptions that we use to articulate the very nature of the horror. Describing war becomes the equivalent of a slasher film where the gore is not as shocking as it is entertaining.

*"War may be horrible, but that should not distract us from acknowledging what a horrible cliché this has become. The coinage has been worn so thin that its value seems only marginally greater than 'Glory', 'Sacrifice' or 'Pro Patria', which 'horror' condemns as counterfeit. The phrase 'horror of war' has become so automatic a conjunction that it conveys none of the horror it is meant to express."*

### **Gassed by John Singer Sargent**

This is a book full of cerebral reflections about the war. Dyer ties in art and literature, evoking the likes of Sargent, Fitzgerald, Sassoon, Owen, and Isherwood to make his points. He discusses the impact that the ill fated Robert Falcon Scott expedition had on the World War One generation.

*"By now the glorious failure personified by Scott had become a British ideal: a vivid example of how 'to make a virtue of calamity and dress up incompetence as heroism'."*

The commanders exploited and relied on the Scottesque inspired brainwashing that made men believe that dying for their country, even so imprudently as they were asked to in the great war, was heroic. The betrayal of that childlike innocence in such a monstrous fashion was beyond irresponsible, and bordering on criminal.

Dyer makes one final stop at Beaumont-Hamel cemetery and leaves with more hope than despair.

**"I have never felt so peaceful. I would be happy never to leave. So strong are these feelings that I wonder if there is not some compensatory quality in nature, some equilibrium — of which the poppy is a manifestation and symbol — which means that where terrible violence has taken place the earth will sometimes generate an equal and opposite sense of peace. In this place where men were slaughtered they came also to love each other, to realize Camus's great truth: that 'there are more things to admire in men than to despise'."**