

---

RESEARCH NOTE

## Ypres, 1917: An Interview with Mortimer Wheeler?

Kirsten Jarrett\* and Stephen Leach†

---

In 1917 the romantic novelist Jeffery Farnol interviewed an anonymous Major in Ypres who was passionate about archaeology. This interview is reprinted with an introduction in which it is argued that the anonymous Major may very well be Mortimer Wheeler.

---

In his autobiography Mortimer Wheeler describes just a few of his war experiences not because of their exceptional nature but because – although “mine was the common lot of my generation” (Wheeler 1955: 29) – if they were omitted the resulting account of his life would be “excessively syncopated and out of proportion”. (ibid.)

The “plain facts”, as related by Wheeler, are these:

I was commissioned into the Royal Artillery (Territorial Force) in 1914, and for a few months I remained in London as an instructor in the University of London Officers’ Training Corps. (My son Michael was born in January 1915.) I was then, as a youthful subaltern, shortly to be captain, posted to command a Lowland field battery at the unfinished Colinton Barracks near Edinburgh. Thereafter, in spite of constant restiveness, I was trapped in various battery commands – field-guns and field-howitzers in Scotland and England until 1917, when at last I escaped to France. Passchendaele, Italy, the last advance on the Western Front, the march into and occupation of Germany, followed in eventful succession. In July 1919 I returned from the Rhineland to London and to civilian life. (ibid.)

Wheeler’s account of his experiences is supplemented by Jacquetta Hawkes’ biography in which she quotes from his letters to his wife Tessa. Wheeler’s autobiography and his correspondence make it clear that in terms of “physical misery” (Wheeler 1955: 53) the indisputable low point of his war, and of his entire life, was his week at the front line in Passchendaele in 1917. “In October 1917 the ridge of Passchendaele, north-east of Ypres in Flanders, was the definition of hell.” (ibid.) Wheeler had arrived in France on Tuesday 16 October 1917 (Medal roll WO/372/21 Image Ref. 21097); and on Sunday 21 October

had reported to his Brigade, where he was made Acting Major. The next day he was at the front line. (Hawkes 1982: 57) Exactly a week later, on Monday 29 October, he wrote as follows to Tessa, from a “Rest Billet” in the small village of Nieurlet, about 30 miles from Ypres:

The scene has changed, and I am writing this in a little French (or, rather, semi-Flemish) farmhouse, 20 miles from the firing line & as you see, on the French side of the Border. The Brigade has come out of the line for a few days rest, after being in the line for many months, so that my first baptism of fire only lasted a week. And ye gods! What a week! (in Hawkes 1982: 57)

On 20 November Wheeler and the gunners of the 76<sup>th</sup> Brigade took the train to Italy.

These dates are significant in that they allow Wheeler to have returned to the town of Ypres for some period between 29 October and 20 November 1917, with the rank of Acting Major. This allows Wheeler to have been the Major who was interviewed by the novelist Jeffrey Farnol in 1917 in Ypres. Moreover, the Major has, undeniably, Wheeler’s appearance and manner: “a big man, with a dreamy eye, a gentle voice and a passion for archæology.” Interestingly, he is contemplating writing a history of Ypres “as depicted by its various styles of mason-work and construction.” In Farnol’s interview, reproduced below, we cannot be absolutely certain that the interviewed Major is the young Mortimer Wheeler but we think readers will agree that it does seem highly likely.

As to Jeffrey Farnol (1878 – 1952): although he still has some devoted fans he is little read today; but in the first half of the twentieth century, as the author of swashbuckling blood-and-thunder romances, he was hugely popular. He died just before the period of Wheeler’s greatest fame.

Farnol’s article on ‘Ypres’ was published in a collection of articles about the war published in the United States in March 1918 under the title of *Great Britain at War* and in Britain, in the same year, as *Some War Impressions*. (The page numbers in square brackets in the interview

---

\* Independent Scholar, UK

† Keele University, UK

Corresponding author: Stephen Leach ([s.d.leach@keele.ac.uk](mailto:s.d.leach@keele.ac.uk))

reproduced below refer to the page numbers of *Great Britain at War*.) According to information kindly supplied by Farnol's biographer, Pat Bryan, the articles were written at the request of the Foreign Office, in the person of Hubert Montgomery C.V.O.. (Farnol had first come to the attention of the Foreign Office because of similar articles that he had written for *The Daily Telegraph*.) The articles first appeared in the United States in a magazine called *The Outlook* and they then appeared in Britain under the title 'Munitions Articles' in the *Daily Chronicle* commencing in June 1917. No charge was made for them.

### XIII [144]

#### YPRES

by Jeffery Farnol

Much has been written concerning Ypres, but more, much more, remains to be written. Some day, in years to come, when the roar of guns has been long forgotten, and Time, that great and beneficent consoler, has dried the eyes that are now wet with the bitter tears of bereavement and comforted the agony of stricken hearts, at such a time some one will set down the story of Ypres in imperishable words; for round about this ancient town lie many of the best and bravest of Britain's heroic army. Thick, thick, they lie together, Englishman, Scot and Irishman, Australian, New Zealander, Canadian and Indian, linked close in the comradeship of death as they were in life; but the glory of [145] their invincible courage, their noble self-sacrifice and endurance against overwhelming odds shall never fade. Surely, surely while English is spoken the story of "Wipers" will live on for ever and, through the coming years, will be an inspiration to those for whom these thousands went, cheering and undismayed, to meet and conquer Death.

Ypres, as all the world knows, forms a sharp salient in the British line, and is, therefore, open to attack on three sides; and on these three sides it has been furiously attacked over and over again, so very often that the mere repetition would grow wearisome. And these attacks were day-long, week- and sometimes month-long battles, but Britain's army stood firm.

In these bad, dark days, outnumbered and out-gunned, they never wavered. Raked by flanking fire they met and broke the charges of dense-packed foemen on their front; rank upon rank and elbow to elbow the Germans charged, their bayonets a sea of flashing steel, their thunderous [146] shouts drowning the roar of guns, and rank on rank they reeled back from British steel and swinging rifle-butt, and German shouts died and were lost in British cheers.

So, day after day, week after week, month after month they endured still; swept by rifle and machine-gun fire, blown up by mines, buried alive by mortar bombs, their very trenches smitten flat by high explosives—yet they endured and held on. They died all day and every day, but their places were filled by men just as fiercely determined. And ever as the countless German batteries fell silent, their troops in dense grey waves hurled themselves upon shattered British trench and dugout, and found there wild men in tunics torn and bloody and mud-bespattered,

who, shouting in fierce joy, leapt to meet them bayonet to bayonet. With clubbed rifle and darting steel they fought, these men of the Empire, heedless of wounds and death, smiting and cheering, thrusting and shouting, until those long, close-ranked columns broke, wavered and melted away. [147] Then, panting, they cast themselves back into wrecked trench and blood-spattered shell hole while the enemy's guns roared and thundered anew, and waited patiently but yearningly for another chance to "really fight." So they held this deadly salient.

Days came and went, whole regiments were wiped out, but they held on. The noble town behind them crumbled into ruin beneath the shrieking avalanche of shells, but they held on. German and British dead lay thick from British parapet to Boche wire, and over this awful litter fresh attacks were launched daily, but still they held on, and would have held and will hold, until the crack of doom if need be—because Britain and the Empire expect it of them.

But to-day the dark and evil time is passed. To-day for every German shell that crashes into the salient, four British shells burst along the enemy's position, and it was with their thunder in my ears that I traversed that historic, battle-torn road which leads into Ypres, that road [148] over which so many young and stalwart feet have tramped that never more may come marching back. And looking along this road, lined with scarred and broken trees, my friend N. took off his hat and I did the like.

"It's generally pretty lively here," said our Intelligence Officer, as I leaned forward to pass him the matches. "We're going to speed up a bit—road's a bit bumpy, so hold on." Guns were roaring near and far, and in the air above was the long, sighing drone of shells as we raced forward, bumping and swaying over the uneven surface faster and faster, until, skidding round a rather awkward corner, we saw before us a low-lying, jagged outline of broken walls, shattered towers and a tangle of broken roof-beams—all that remains of the famous old town of Ypres. And over this devastation shells moaned distressfully, and all around unseen guns barked and roared. So, amidst this pandemonium our car lurched into shattered "Wipers", past the dismantled water-tower, [149] uprooted from its foundations and leaning at a more acute angle than will ever the celebrated tower of Pisa, past ugly heaps of brick and rubble—the ruins of once fair buildings, on and on until we pulled up suddenly before a huge something, shattered and formless, a long façade of broken arches and columns, great roof gone, mighty walls splintered, cracked and rent—all that "Kultur" has left of the ancient and once beautiful Cloth Hall.

"Roof's gone since I was here last," said the Intelligence Officer, "come this way. You'll see it better from over here." So we followed him and stood to look upon the indescribable ruin.

"There are no words to describe—that," said N. at last, gloomily.

"No," I answered. "Arras was bad enough, but this—!"

"Arras?" he repeated. "Arras is only a ruined town. Ypres is a rubbish dump. And its Cloth Hall is—a bad dream."

And he turned away. Our Intelligence Officer led us over mounds of fallen masonry [150] and débris of all sorts, and presently halted us amid a ruin of splintered columns, groined arch and massive walls, and pointed to a heap of rubbish he said was the altar.

"This is the Church St. Jean," he explained, "begun, I think, in the eleventh or twelfth century and completed somewhere about 1320—"

"And," said N., "finally finished and completely done for by 'Kultur' in the twentieth century, otherwise I guess it would have lasted until the 220th century—look at the thickness of the walls."

"And after all these years of civilisation," said I.

"Civilisation," he snorted, turning over a fragment of exquisitely carved moulding with the toe of his muddy boot, "civilisation has done a whole lot, don't forget—changed the system of plumbing and taught us how to make high explosives and poison gas."

Gloomily enough we wandered on together over rubbish piles and mountains of [151] fallen brick-work, through shattered walls, past unlovely stumps of mason-work that had been stately tower or belfry once, beneath splintered arches that led but from one scene of ruin to another, and ever our gloom deepened, for it seemed that Ypres, the old Ypres, with all its monuments of mediæval splendour, its noble traditions of hard-won freedom, its beauty and glory, was passed away and gone for ever.

"I don't know how all this affects you," said N., his big chin jutted grimly, "but I hate it worse than a battlefield. Let's get on over to the Major's office."

We went by silent streets, empty except for a few soldierly figures in hard-worn khaki, desolate thoroughfares that led between piles and huge unsightly mounds of fallen masonry and shattered brickwork, fallen beams, broken rafters and twisted ironwork, across a desolate square shut in by the ruin of the great Cloth Hall and other once stately buildings, and so to a grim, battle-scarred edifice, its roof half [152] blown away, its walls cracked and agape with ugly holes, its doorway reinforced by many sandbags cunningly disposed, through which we passed into the dingy office of the Town Major.

As we stood in that gloomy chamber, dim-lighted by a solitary oil lamp, floor and walls shook and quivered to the concussion of a shell—not very near, it is true, but quite near enough.

The Major was a big man, with a dreamy eye, a gentle voice and a passion for archæology. In his company I climbed to the top of a high building, whence he pointed out, through a convenient shell hole, where the old walls had stood long ago, where Vauban's star-shaped bastions were, and the general conformation of what had been present-day Ypres; but I saw only a dusty chaos of shattered arch and tower and walls, with huge, unsightly mounds of rubble and brick—a rubbish dump in very truth. Therefore I turned to the quiet-voiced Major and asked him of his experiences, whereupon he talked to me [153] most interestingly and very learnedly of Roman tile, of mediæval rubble-work, of herringbone and Flemish bond. He assured me also that (*Deo volente*) he proposed

to write a monograph on the various epochs of this wonderful old town's history as depicted by its various styles of mason-work and construction.

"I could show you a nearly perfect aqueduct<sup>1</sup> if you have time," said he.

"I'm afraid we ought to be starting now," said the Intelligence Officer; "over eighty miles to do yet, you see, Major."

"Do you have many casualties still?" I enquired.

"Pretty well," he answered. "The mediæval wall was superimposed upon the Roman, you'll understand."

"And is it," said I as we walked on together, "is it always as noisy as this?"

"Oh, yes—especially when there's a 'Hate' on."

"Can you sleep?"

"Oh, yes, one gets used to anything, you know. Though, strangely enough, I was [154] disturbed last night—two of my juniors had to camp over my head, their quarters were blown up rather yesterday afternoon, and believe me, the young beggars talked and chattered so that I couldn't get a wink of sleep—had to send and order them to shut up."

"You seem to have been getting it pretty hot since I was here last," said the Intelligence Officer, waving a hand round the crumbling ruin about us.

"Fairly so," nodded the Major.

"One would wonder the enemy wastes any more shells on Ypres," said I, "there's nothing left to destroy, is there?"

"Well, there's us, you know!" said the Major gently, "and then the Boche is rather a revengeful beggar anyhow—you see, he wasted quite a number of army corps trying to take Ypres. And he hasn't got it yet."

"Nor ever will," said I.

The Major smiled and held out his hand.

"It's a pity you hadn't time to see that aqueduct," he sighed. "However, I shall [155] take some flashlight photos of it—if my luck holds. Good-by." So saying, he raised a hand to his weather-beaten trench cap and strode back into his dim-lit, dingy office.

The one-time glory of Ypres has vanished in ruin but thereby she has found a glory everlasting. For over the wreck of noble edifice and fallen tower is another glory that shall never fade but rather grow with coming years—an imperishable glory. As pilgrims sought it once to tread its quaint streets and behold its old-time beauty, so in days to come other pilgrims will come with reverent feet and with eyes that shall see in these shattered ruins a monument to the deathless valour of that brave host that met death unflinching and unafraid for the sake of a great ideal and the welfare of unborn generations.

And thus in her ruin Ypres has found the Glory Everlasting.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> The terminology is potentially misleading. There are no Roman aqueducts in Ypres. The Major is probably referring to a medieval canal. – KJ & SL.

#### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## References

- Farnol, J** 1918 *Great Britain at War*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.
- Farnol, J** 1918 *Some War Impressions*. London & Edinburgh: Sampson & Co. Ltd.
- Hawkes, J** 1982 *Mortimer Wheeler: Adventurer in Archaeology*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Wheeler, M** 1955 *Still Digging: Interleaves from an Antiquary's Notebook*. London: Michael Joseph.

**How to cite this article:** Jarrett, K and Leach, S 2017 Ypres, 1917: An Interview with Mortimer Wheeler?. *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 27(1): 6, pp. 1-4, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/bha-603>

**Published:** 28 December 2017

**Copyright:** © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

]u[

*Bulletin of the History of Archaeology* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 