

Visualising emptiness: The landscape of the Western Front and Australian and English Children's Picture Books

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Abstract

Although the Great War made extraordinarily complex demands on the nations involved, it is the landscape of the battlefield which has continued to dominate contemporary perceptions of the conflict. Contemporary Australian and English children's picture book authors and illustrators, who have determinedly kept in step with their respective nation's imagining of the conflict, have similarly focused on the experience of frontline soldiers, particularly those serving on the Western Front. However, it is the illustrators who have the more complex task, for they have inherited an aesthetic issue that has challenged artists since 1914. Like the British, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand official war artists of the time, they are confronted, at every turn, by the challenge of depicting a surreally empty landscape. It was not so much a landscape as the artists may have understood it before the war, but rather an anti-landscape, as though the war had all but annihilated Nature. What was left was a dystopian wilderness that bore witness to the destructive power of industrialised warfare. This article will explore how a selection of these Australian and English children's picture book artists confront the emptiness of the battlefield landscape, or as Becca Weir so evocatively characterises it, the paradox of measurable nothingness.

Keywords

battlefield, children's picture books, Great War, landscape, Western Front

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Introduction

Although the Great War made extraordinarily complex demands on the nations involved, it is the battlefield which has remained the most 'poignant site of the war imaginary' (Chouliaraki 2013, p. 319). Contemporary Australian and English children's picture book authors and illustrators, who have determinedly kept in step with their respective nation's imagining of the conflict, have similarly focused on the experience of frontline soldiers, particularly those serving on the Western Front. However, it is the illustrators who have the more complex task, for they have inherited an aesthetic issue that has challenged artists since 1914. Like the British, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand official war artists of the time, they are confronted, at every turn, by the challenge of depicting a 'troglydte world', 'a new kind of infinity: more of the same in every direction, an infinity of waste' and a surreally empty landscape (Fussell 1977, p. 36; Dyer 1995, p. 119; Gregory 2016). It was not so much a landscape as the artists may have understood it before the war, but rather an anti-landscape, as though humankind had annihilated Nature (Hynes, 1991, p. 197). The wood, as George Mosse (1990) observes, was being murdered. What was left was a 'dystopian wilderness ... a pestilent waste of shattered trees, toxic soils and scattered bones' (Gough 2018, p. 56). This article will explore how a selection of these Australian and English children's picture book artists confront the emptiness of the battlefield landscape, or as Becca Weir (2007) so evocatively characterises it, the paradox of measurable nothingness.

The Australian and English 'war imaginary'

The illustrators of contemporary Australian and English children's picture books about the Great War, and the authors whose text their work complements, embrace an ideological position established in their respective countries during the 1960s. In Australia, the emergence of a 'kinder, gentler Anzac' transformed the understanding of the Great War from one 'grounded in beliefs about racial identity and martial capacity to a legend that speaks in the modern idiom of trauma, suffering and empathy' (Holbrook 2016, p. 19). The annual Anzac Day parade on 25 April and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra make what is arguably the most significant contribution to maintaining the war's pre-eminence in discussions of national identity. Though the campaign on Gallipoli continues to exert a hold on the public imagination, the real bloodletting was on the Western Front between 1916 and 1918. For many Australians, the photographs taken by Frank Hurley of the shattered landscape during the latter part of the Third Battle of Ypres (31 July–10 November 1917) *are* the Great War. As Andrews (1993) observes of their continuing impact on the collective memory, it is as if the soldiers are 'doomed, in a parody of the Flying Dutchman, to continue to fight their hopeless battles in the mud of Flanders for ever' (p. 3). To a modern audience 'saturated with traumatic memories and understandings of victimhood', the photographs conform to a wider construct of history that increasingly characterises it as a 'wound or scar that leaves a trace on a nation's soul' (Twomey 2015). Yet it is this evolution in the imagining of the war, marked as it is by a mix of pride, mourning, and empathy, that allows Australian children's picture book authors and illustrators to produce work that is often overtly anti-militaristic, indeed almost pacifist in its intent, while also ensuring that the courage and sacrifice of the Australian soldier remains immune from criticism (Kerby, Baguley & MacDonald 2017).

The English authors and illustrators draw on an understanding of the Great War dominated by the war poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon who have helped position the war

in the public imagination as a ‘meaningless, futile bloodbath in the mud of Flanders and Picardy – a tragedy of young men whose lives were cut off in their prime for no evident purpose’ (Reynolds 2014, p. xv). The war, as Leon Wolff (cited in Bond 1997) characterised it, ‘meant nothing, solved nothing and proved nothing’. Since the 1960s, this has been the dominant imagining of the Great War in England, one that reflected the ‘very different concerns and political issues of that turbulent decade, but [also] in part resurrecting anti-war beliefs of the 1930s’ (Bond 2002, p. 51). This imagining of the conflict is framed by the existence of a Western Front of history and a Western Front of literature and popular culture, the latter, unsurprisingly, being profoundly unhistorical (Badsey 2009, pp. 39-51). Despite being challenged by any number of respected historians, it is the literary Western Front with its ‘poets, men shot at dawn, horror, death, waste’ rather than the historical that outside academic exerts the greater influence (Todman 2005, pp. 158-160). Nothing, it seems, can penetrate ‘the popular shroud of death, waste, and futility’; indeed, no generation since the 1920s has questioned this imagining (Spiers 2015, p. 77; Hynes 1991). As Margaret Baguley and Martin Kerby (2021) found when researching children’s picture books about the 1914 Christmas Truce, whatever their claims to historical authenticity, English authors and illustrators are enthusiastic devotees of the literary Western Front.

The Art of War in Children’s Picture Books

As they are usually chosen by parents or family members, children’s picture books are an important indicator of contemporary attitudes and morals and often reveal what parents and teachers desire for children (Flothow 2007; Avery 1989). Books about the Great War in Australia and England are subsequently framed by a ‘structured configuration of representational practices, which produce specific performances of the battlefield at specific moments in time’. These representations ‘cultivate longer-term dispositions towards the visions of humanity that each war comes to defend’ (Chouliaraki 2013, p. 318). Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2007) describes this phenomenon as the parable of war, one that is not wedded to notions of historical accuracy but is instead an emotive and unashamedly literary retelling of the war. Authors and illustrators are thereby constrained by an imagining of the war that has become ‘almost immutable, encased in invented tradition and embedded in an orthodoxy of remembrance that is all pervasive’ (Gough 2018, p. 14). These traditions are not falsifications of reality, but are instead imaginative versions of it. Nevertheless, these authors and illustrators, like historical novelists, ‘declare intentions similar to historians, striving for verisimilitude to help readers feel and know the past’ (Lowenthal 1985, p. 224). Yet in domesticating this past, it is enlisted in the service of a cause firmly rooted in the present (Lowenthal 1998, p. xv). In effect, the children’s picture books become part of an historical ‘tale that confirms a set of beliefs, an idea of what the war was, and what it meant’. For though the war was without question the great military and political event of its time, it was also a great imaginative event (Hynes 1991).

The images in a children’s picture book do more than just illustrate the text. There is a synergy between the text and images, but they do not operate on the reader in the same way. As Perry Nodelman (1988) observes, words have a greater potential for conveying temporal information whereas pictures have a greater potential for conveying spatial information. Lawrence Sipe (1988) characterises this as the difference between how we experience the two mediums; we ‘see a painting all at once; but in order to experience literature or music, we have to read or listen in a linear succession of moments through time’ (p. 100). Although a

picture book is a hybrid form based on both time *and* space, the reader is nevertheless encouraged to ‘gaze on, dwell upon or contemplate’ the artwork while being “driven ever forward by the temporal narrative flow’ (Sipe 1998, pp. 100-101). The belief that an image is particularly suited to conveying spatial information is an interesting one given the reality that few paintings or photographs created during the war years succeed in capturing the immensity of the void that was the Western Front or the intensity of its emptiness (Gough 2018). How then, do Australian and English artists who illustrate modern children’s picture books visualise emptiness, while encouraging their viewers to gaze on, dwell upon or contemplate the nature of war and humanity?

The Artists

Like the official war artists, the Australian illustrators Margaret Baguley and Eloise Tuppurainen-Mason respond to this annihilation of Nature at both a literal and metaphoric level. They portray a landscape which has been physically destroyed, but their artwork operates at a metaphoric level quite different to that found in the work of their English counterparts. During and after the war, the English saw the Western Front as a disjuncture between the past and the present, ‘a uniquely terrible experience’ that could not “be understood as part of any historical process or analysis’ (Badsey 1998, as cited in Sheffield 2002, p. xiv). For Australians, the Western Front was a source of disjuncture *and* continuity, one that allowed them to ‘find ways to comprehend and then transcend or assimilate the catastrophes of the war, to make some sense of military events in light of their perceptions about Australia’s past’ (Hoffenberg 2001, p. 111). They did this by identifying ‘stunning similarities, and sometimes even mirror images, in those distant landscapes’. Both the battlefield and the Australian Outback were positioned as ‘new lands to be claimed’ as though modern war was ‘a confrontation with nature before its taming’. The destruction of the landscape and the literal disappearance of villages and towns had created in the imagination a European terra nullius, a ‘primordial world of confusion, heat, thirst and dust’. Australia’s first immigrant martyrs, the explorers, had lived and died in the Outback (Hoffenberg 2001, p. 119). Their descendants now did the same on the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East.

Baguley’s image *The Wasteland* (figure 1) of a distant barrage across the desolation of no man’s land (*Voices from the Trenches*, Kerby, Tuppurainen-Mason, & Baguley 2017) confronts the emptiness of the Great War battlefield by balancing disjuncture and continuity. A viewer operating without context might just as easily interpret her imagining of the battlefield to be a bush fire or dust storm in Outback Australia. Although Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1977) is to be used by historians with caution, his observations about the ‘sharp dividing of landscape into known and unknown, safe and hostile’, ‘the collective isolation’ of trench war, ‘its defensiveness and its nervous obsession with what the other side is up to’ are instructive in this instance (pp. 76-79). For although Baguley has drawn on the physical and implied separation of no man’s land, the absence of barbed wire and the detritus of war cannot have been accidental. Its presence would mark for the reader, as it did the soldiers, the shift from the relative safety of the trenches into a dangerous, remote and mysterious unknown: ‘the [implied] presence of the enemy off on the borders of awareness feeds anxiety in the manner of the dropping-off places of medieval maps’ (Fussell 1977, p. 76). Indeed, the inclusion of human figures would have made this

image far less threatening, for it is the landscape itself which confronts and threatens the reader.

Tuppurainen-Mason's image *The Somme* (figure 2) (O'Reilly et al. 2015) is more detailed, but draws on the same metaphorical content as Baguley's. She positions the destruction of the landscape as an allegory for the destruction of war, yet the cloud drifting across no man's land toward the ridge at Pozieres, mythologised as a site 'more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other spot on earth', is pervaded by ambiguity. Is it the smoke of battle? Is it a metaphor for the de-humanisation of war, both literally through the absence of humans, or metaphorically for the assault on civilised values that it represents? Is it a reference to Will Longstaff's iconic *Menin Gate at Midnight* that uses spectral figures to symbolise the spirit that carried the men forward, 23 000 of whom would become casualties in a six week period in 1916? Is it the Missing, the men who just disappeared in the mud and are now 'known unto God'? This ambiguity is juxtaposed against the presence of a beleaguered Australian flag on the ridge, which may reference the nation building role many Australians see as integral to their understanding of the Great War. The addition of two white crosses and the pitiful remains of the village of Pozieres remind the reader that though the landscape possesses a physical nature, it is also a construct of the mind (Tuan 1979, p. 6). For the French inhabitants of the village, it represents the loss of all 'that is familiar – the destruction of one's environment – [which] can mean a disorienting exile from the memories they have invoked' (Bevan, 2006, p. 13). For Australians the physical environment of the battlefield was, as Tuppurainen-Mason reluctantly characterises it, a hostile foe, one that both invoked memories of a mythical past and 'transmuted the unpleasant particulars of modern combat into an epic model of national achievement' (Gerster 1987, p. 15). In contrast, English illustrators, like their countrymen at the time, have sought to repress the transformation of the domesticated into the savage (Gregory 2016, p. 6).

Though Harrison-Lever did not consciously draw on Australian landscape imagery while illustrating *In Flanders Field* (Jorgensen & Harrison-Lever 2002), he has nevertheless always found the Australian Outback 'a beckoning force' (Email correspondence with artist 21 March, 2021). The two page image of the battlefield viewed from the Australian side of no man's land is a classic of its type (figure 3). The 'pitted and ruined landscape' and the protagonist dwarfed by 'the huge, desolate battle ground' reminds the reader that the landscape is the site, and the cause, of human suffering (Jorgensen & Harrison-Lever 2002). A knocked out tank sits trapped in the mud like a pre-historic animal, proof that even the machine age has not stripped the landscape of its power. Jorgensen and Harrison-Lever are nevertheless still constrained by the genre. Authors and illustrators who engage with 'unimaginable, unspeakable, and un-representable horror' must balance their art with the imagined 'demands of children's literature as sanitary, benign, and didactic' (Trezise 2001, p. 102). As Jorgensen and Harrison-Lever have done, they instead explore the underlying humanist principles of the stories they tell. Historical particularities are thereby transformed into 'universals of human experience' (Stephens 1992, p. 205). *In Flanders Field* (2002) tells the story of an Australian soldier who risks his life to rescue a robin trapped in the barbed wire. Equally important to the narrative is the complicity of the German soldiers, who allow the rescue to occur without firing. By crossing no-man's-land and approaching the German lines, the soldier bridges a seemingly impassable divide, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. The soldiers, both German and Australian, are now firmly cast as victims rather than

perpetrators. It is not *their* war. By leaving his white silk scarf and his rifle leaning against the barbed wire when he returns to his own trench, the soldier rejects the war and the empty values for which it is being fought (figure 4). The reader is encouraged to do likewise.

Harrison-Lever never loses sight of the fact that he is a war artist: dead bodies hang from the wire, the minds of the soldiers have been “damaged by the weeks of deafening noise”, and letters and parcels are returned to the rear area because the intended recipients are now dead. This is an insight into the mind of the artist. Behind the empathy, there is anger. Harrison-Lever rejects the widespread understanding that soldiers ‘gave their lives’: ‘I cannot and have never agreed with that. I believe, in fact I know, their lives were brutally taken’ (Email correspondence with artist 18 March, 2021):

From first reading, I understood, or at least interpreted the Jorgensen text, as being metaphor. I certainly used metaphor in my approach to the illustrations. Innocence trapped, deception, ignorance, the white silk scarf for example. Loss of life and loss of hope, competing with humanity and compassion on both sides of ‘no man’s land’. It was certainly not intended as ‘a work of historical non-fiction’. There is an element of fiction in all histories - can facts exist when we rely on personal subjective accounts? Figures, numbers, names even, all approximations based on information available at the time Having faith in those conclusions will only last as long as the next revelation. (Email correspondence with artist 22 March, 2021)

Harrison-Lever is English born, and one wonders how much he absorbed of the widespread rejection of the war as a futile and unnecessary bloodbath that dominates their imagining. Though neither author nor illustrator used it as inspiration, English readers might well make a connection with the Christmas Truce of 1914, which since the 1960s has been installed as a ‘historiographical touchstone for the conventional narrative of the First World War and an enticing shorthand for the view that the conflict was futile and senseless’ (Crocker 2015, p. 6). Indeed, it was the basis of a controversial advertisement for the British supermarket chain Sainsbury’s in 2014, which sought to portray the Great War, through the miracle of the Christmas Truce, as something quite beautiful. In reality, the story *In Flanders Field* owes far more of an ideological debt to Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* which the author recalled ended when Paul Baumer, the protagonist, is killed while reaching for a butterfly. To show how the imagining of the war is built by accretion, this ending occurs in the 1930 film rather than the book on which it is based (the 1979 film replaced the butterfly with a bird). In any case, for Harrison-Lever, the connection with nature pre-dated his work as an illustrator by many decades:

From my early youth the mountain country of Britain had been a magnet. It had been a joy as a youngster to pull on a pair of studded boots and wander through and over peat hags and rocky outcrops of the Peak District. Back in England for a working holiday in the 1960s I rediscovered this affinity for ‘the wild’ and spent four years climbing the mountains of the Scottish Highlands and the Cumbrian Lake District. (Email correspondence with artist 21 March, 2021)

The image of the robin as a symbol of humanity’s better nature, of a landscape that could be mutilated but not entirely destroyed, is particularly poignant. Indeed, the famed English war artist Paul Nash (1948) was surprised by the resiliency of nature when even the ‘most broken

trees had sprouted somewhere and in the midst, from the depth of the wood's bruised heart poured out the throbbing song of a nightingale' (p. 187). As Paul Gough observes, one of the cruellest ironies of the Great War was that 'amidst the devastation, human relationships with nature – and with trees especially – were forced to change':

Camouflage mimicked their elegant patterns, fake trees concealed snipers and observers, copses hid batteries of artillery, subterranean dugouts were filled with the smell of freshly hewn wood and ancient willows were bent into shape as revetments for frontline trenches. Woodlands were transformed into strongholds that were fiercely fought over by both sides. Single isolated trees became a registration point for enemy artillery. Soldiers soon learned to avoid such places. (Gough 2018, pp. 52-53)

In this sense, Harrison-Lever acts as something of a bridge between the Australian and English illustrators whose work is explored in this article. The Australians see disjuncture and continuity. Their English counterparts see disjuncture, recoil at its implications, and seek to subvert it. Like Jay Winter (1995), they see the rupture of 1914-1918 as less complete than has often been argued. For the illustrators, though not for Winter, the war is bookended by normalcy, one grounded in landscape. Yet as Hew Strachan (2001) observes, though it is a compelling image, the juxtaposition of 'a sun-dappled and cultured civilisation and a mud-streaked and brutish battlefield' has its limitations (p. 114). Just a few miles behind the frontline was an agrarian landscape, "a reassuring rurality", or in Paul Fussell's view, Arcadian Recourses, in which many soldiers took refuge while out of the line (Gregory 2016, p. 5; Fussell 1977, p. 231). These recourses were a very 'English mode of both fully gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them' (Fussell 1977, p. 231). It has been an approach enthusiastically adopted by the English authors and illustrators of children's picture books. For example, some emphasise the reinvigoration of the landscape after the war - *Where the poppies now grow* (Robinson & Impey 2015) and *Peace Lily* (Robinson & Impey 2017); others show soldiers refusing to be dehumanised by the war and the destruction of the landscape - *The Christmas Truce* (Duffy & Roberts 2014) and *The Christmas Truce: The Place where Peace was found* (Robinson & Impey 2014). Only *Dulce et Decorum est* (Owen & Impey 2018) cannot subvert the wartime understanding of disjuncture because the text used is provided, posthumously, by Wilfred Owen, the most famous of the soldier poets.

A particularly instructive example of this subverting of the view of the war as a disjuncture is *Peace Lily* which tells the story of a young girl who becomes a nurse when her two childhood friends join the army. The illustrations of the Western Front by Martin Impey are, in effect, an elegy for the death of landscape (Hynes, 1991). He refrains from making it an immutable one, for the text is bookended by a landscape that brims with life and new hope. It opens with an idealised portrayal of life in pre-war England, indicative of the widespread view that the Spring and Summer of 1914 was 'marked in Europe by an exceptional tranquillity' (Winston Churchill, in Steiner 1986, p. 215). Beyond the world of politics, it was a 'hot, sun drenched, gorgeous summer ... the most beautiful within living memory ... remembered by many Europeans as a kind of Eden' (Fromkin 2004, p. 11). Impey's imagining is likewise dominated by images of sunshine, picnics, paddling in brooks, running in the woods, and hiding in the old willow trees (figure 5). When war disrupts this idyll, the disjuncture with the past is represented in the landscape, most notably the 'slimescape' of the

trenches and the ‘diabolical agency’ of the mud (Das 2014; Gregory 2016, p. 8). Robinson and Impey do not, indeed, cannot, end the story there. There must be a unity and connection between pre and post war Britain, and it is through the landscape that this disjuncture is first introduced, explored, and then finally banished. On the morning of the Armistice, Impey provides the reader with an image of soldiers half obscured by the November frost, above ground, surrounded by shattered trees. The sun rising through the mist gives them a spectral appearance, as they merge with the landscape rather than battling it as they had done for four years. The landscape is beginning to heal (figure 6). The final image of Lily marrying her childhood friend who she nursed back to health after he lost his leg on the Western Front, is dominated by the greens, reds and yellows of the English countryside in Spring, itself a powerful metaphor of new life (figure 7). The book thus concludes with the birth of both a new day and a new world where the protagonists are again in Rupert Brooke’s (1914) idealised image, ‘breathing English air/Washed by rivers, blest by suns of home’ (figure 7). Landscapes, as David Lowenthal (1990) observes, and these illustrators implicitly understand, drip with human meaning, both ‘in our lives and in our hearts’ (p. 29).

Robinson and Impey also bookend *Where the poppies now grow* (2015) with the same type of rural idyll, in this case the repeated image of a field covered in red poppies with sunshine breaking through dark clouds (figure 8). One heralds the approach of war; the other, the return of peace. The landscape of war, however, offers no such comfort. It is an enemy; the succession of images of destroyed urban and rural landscapes, the barren nothingness, is softened only by the courage and enduring friendship of the two protagonists. Their survival and eventual return to rural England shows both author and illustrator subverting the imagining of war as a disjuncture. The landscape, like the people, has survived, and will again thrive. The obvious religious undertones are consistent with the approach adopted by most children’s picture book authors and illustrators who generally avoid explicit references to religion and instead allow it to leave ‘its residual mark in ways that are implicit rather than intentional’ (Worsley 2010, p. 162).

The Christmas Truce (Duffy & Roberts 2014) is an overt exploration of the literary Western Front. Written by Carol Ann Duffy, a UK Poet Laureate and professor of contemporary poetry, it provides the least historical context and is, in effect, an illustrated poem. Duffy’s language choices are confronting. References to the ‘dead lay[ing] still in no man’s land’, ‘an owl swoop[ing] on a rat on the glove of a corpse’, ‘frozen foreign fields [that] were acres of pain’, and ‘men who would drown in mud, be gassed, or shot or vaporised’ firmly place this work in the pity of war school. In writing poetry, Duffy is intent on revealing a truth and in this case, her truth is grounded in the ‘emotive assumption that the protest poetry of the First World War represents the “correct” moral reading of the war’ (McCallum-Stewart 2007, p. 178). It would have been surprising had it been otherwise; by the time this book was released in 2014, the history of the war had long been ‘distilled into poetry’ (Reynolds 2014, p. xv). Perhaps freed by Duffy’s approach, one which transforms the story of the Christmas Truce into a fable in verse, Roberts has eschewed realism and has instead created ‘touchingly childlike illustrations’ (Roche 2015). They are, however, unflinching in their representation of death in a landscape mutilated by war. Roberts thereby acknowledges the ‘frightful interdependence [between] human death and environmental death’ (Keith 2012, p. 77). The outline of human corpses, stripped of their identity by the horrors of mechanised warfare, lying scattered across no man’s land, are just as evocative as many of the artworks appearing in the books being discussed. They have been subsumed, perhaps even consumed, by a

landscape devoid of identifying features, a clear disjuncture between peace and war. As they bridge the divide between the trenches, the soldiers, like the readers, have now come full circle. The idealism that motivated enlistment, which was soon replaced by resignation in the face of the horrors of the Western Front, has been destroyed. It has been replaced by a more muted one, one rooted in a compassion and empathy for individuals rather than a jingoistic commitment to nation. The soldiers, and the readers, have now adopted the correct moral reading of the war: 'It was up and over, every man, to shake the hand of a foe as a friend, or slap his back like a brother would'. They exchange gifts and 'make of a battleground a football pitch', thereby reverting the landscape to a peaceful use (Duffy & Roberts 2014, p. 29). The soldiers are all victims, unwilling participants in war, surrounded by the "sprawled, mute shapes of those who had died" (Duffy & Roberts 2014, p. 20). The no-man's land rendered here by Roberts is not so much grim, but isolated, a disjuncture in in time and place (figure 9). The war artists struggled to portray the emptiness of the landscape; seeing the Wordsworthian idea of natural benevolence lying dead in the mud and filth of the Western Front (Hynes 1991, p. 199). Roberts seeks to overcome this barrier to understanding by populating the landscape. Roberts sees the corpses as clearly as anyone, but after this 'marvellous, festive day and night' these 'fallen comrades' are now buried 'side by side beneath the makeshift crosses of midwinter graves' (Duffy & Roberts 2014, p. 34). They have been joined in death in a way that war had made impossible.

The one children's picture book that fully embraces the war as a disjuncture is *Dulce et Decorum Est* (2018) a posthumous collaboration between Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) and Martin Impey. Wilfred Owen, whose poem gives the book its title, has, like the other soldier poets, been 'transmuted into the supreme truth-teller[s] of the Great War'. Yet the fact that they penned some of the most powerful anti-war poetry in modern literature should not be allowed to obscure the fact they were atypical and far from representative of the almost nine million men who served in the British Army during the war (Reynold 2014). Benefitting from the use of a poem that has been installed as the sacred catechism of the modern imagining of the war, Impey's artwork assumes a more confronting tone than is evident in the other books. Gone is the reassurance of the English countryside. In its place are images of soldiers obscured in gas clouds, half formed spectral figures that appear barely human in their gas masks (figure 10). The desolation of the landscape is complete; measurable nothingness has become reality. This reality is given individual form in the tortured dreams of the returned soldier, compelled to relive the horror each night. It is one of those men who in Remarque's words, had escaped the shells but was destroyed by the war.

Impey regularly collaborated with Hilary Robinson on Great War picture books, but the use of Owen's poem has allowed for a distinctly different approach. In being unmoored from the expectation that children's literature should be benign and didactic, Impey has created what is possibly the most visceral image to appear in any children's picture book about the Great War. The poem describes the effect of a gas attack on a group of English soldiers and the 'ecstasy of fumbling/Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time/But someone still was yelling out and stumbling/And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime/ Dim through the misty panes and thick green light/As under a green sea, I saw him drowning'. It is the description, though, of the impact on the soldier who had been too slow in fitting his helmet that draws from Impey perhaps his greatest image: 'If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace/Behind the

wagon that we flung him in/And watch the white eyes writhing in his face/His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin'. In this image, the Devil sits atop a mound of bodies, not merely exhausted but appalled at the destruction and suffering. In the background are trees shredded by shell fire, three of them an explicit reference to the crosses on Golgotha, the hill of execution outside Jerusalem. The site of Jesus' death is linked to the landscape of the Western Front, but there is no hope of resurrection or redemption, as is evident in the stories about the Christmas Truce, just nightmares, where 'before my helpless sight/He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning' (figure 11).

Conclusion

The illustrators of these books acknowledge that the landscape of the Great War battlefield was rarely neutral. It was, as Gough (2018) observes, 'divided unequally between the safe and unsafe, between refuge and prospect ... in front lay the unknowable, beyond lay the unreachable' (pp. 30 - 31). The illustrators have embraced the myopia of the infantryman. They focus on the unknowable of a small stretch of no man's land and the German trenches that oppose them, for beyond that limited world is only the diminishing hopes for victory and individual survival. The illustrators have confronted the challenge of representing this landscape, stripped as it is of identifying features, with the soldiers living beneath the surface locked in a nocturnal world, an inversion of the peacetime division between night and day. What is absent becomes more important than what is visible. In the illustrators' hands, the landscape must therefore become more metaphor than reality; its destruction is an indictment of the war and the men who direct it. The return of the landscape offers hope, if not to the soldiers, but to the readers who come to the books immersed in a modern imagining. In that sense, they find what they expect to see.

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