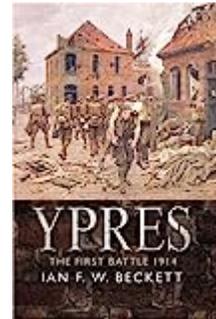




**Ian F.W. Beckett.** *Ypres: The First Battle 1914*. England: Pearson Education, 2004. xx + 221 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-50612-1.



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**Published on** H-War (December, 2005)

## Sacred Ground

The fighting during October and November 1914 around the Belgian town of Ieper (known as Ypres in English) is significant for three reasons. The first is that it was the last major battle fought on open ground on the western front before trench warfare took hold (open warfare would not re-emerge until March 1918). The second is that the desperate fighting to stop the German advance resulted in the destruction of the small regular army with which Britain had gone to war. The third reason is that Ypres became and has retained a significant place in the British memory of the First World War.

When the initial German offensive in the west was halted at the Battle of the Marne in September 1914, both sides sent armies northwards to turn the flank of their opponent. These thrusts have been termed “the race to the sea” and, while this was not their intent, they did indeed result in the establishment of a front line that stretched from Belgian coastline at Nieuport on the North Sea to the Swiss border. The Germans held the advantage in numbers and unity of command but they were halted in a series of battles around Ypres at Langemarck (22-24 October), Gheluvelt (31 October) and Nonnebosschen

(11 November). The frost and snows of winter began as this last battle was being fought. The German High Command halted the offensive and began transferring forces to the eastern front in search of greater success against the Russians. Ypres became an Allied salient surrounded on three sides by the German lines. Three more battles were fought in front of Ypres in 1915, 1917 and 1918, but the Germans never captured the town.

In this book, Ian Beckett, formerly the Horner Professor of Military History at the U.S. Marine Corps University and now at the University of Northampton, proves that academics can write popular history. Knowing the likely audience for an English-language history of the First Battle of Ypres, he understandably stresses the British part in the battle.[1] Describing First Ypres as a “true soldiers’ battle” (p. 187), he concentrates on the personal experiences of the British soldiers involved. But Beckett also brings to the narrative knowledge of the recent work on First World War tactics, discipline and the relations between senior British officers. This includes of course Beckett’s own substantial body of work on the British Army in this period.[2] The book even draws on

research on rainfall patterns—initially compiled to understand the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917—to describe the prevailing weather conditions during the 1914 battle.[3]

This approach of presenting the latest academic research to a popular readership is best exemplified in the first chapter. It provides a clear and concise description of the social background, organization, weapons and tactics of the British Expeditionary Force (which during First Ypres included the Indian Corps) and the Belgian, French and German armies.

As an account of the battle from the British perspective, the book relies mainly on British personal accounts from letters, diaries and published memoirs. This provides the reader with an insight on the battle as the soldiers experienced it, but at times the narrative is disjointed and it is hard to know where and why the fighting is taking place. A paragraph or sentence providing the broader context of particular actions would have been helpful at certain times. Some records from the French Army Archives at Vincennes have been consulted, but considering that the British fought at Ypres alongside the French and against the Germans, it is surprising that more use was not made of French or German archival sources.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is Beckett's discussion of how the battle became part of British and German popular memory of the First World War. For the Germans, the failed attack of the reserve divisions at Langemarck became known as the *kinder-mord* (slaughter of the innocents) and the legend arose that the men charged the British lines singing the German national anthem. Adolf Hitler, then serving with the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division, took part in this battle and mentions it briefly in *Mein Kampf*.

For the British, Ypres became sacred ground. Beckett argues convincingly that this belief originated following the destruction of the British regular army during the 1914 battle. This is an important point for Australians, Canadians and New Zealanders, where popular memory is attached to the 1917 battle (and, perhaps for Canadians, the 1915 battle also). In 1919, Winston Churchill,

then War Secretary, even “proposed acquiring the whole of the ruins of the town as a place of pilgrimage” (p. 182). Not surprisingly, the Belgians preferred to have their town rebuilt.

Ypres retains its significance in the British memory of the First World War. For anyone wishing to visit the 1914 battlefields in the “immortal salient,” *Ypres: The First Battle 1914* will provide an excellent travelling companion.

#### Notes

[1]. The significant English-language accounts of the battle are Sir James Edmonds' official history volume, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1914: Antwerp, La Basse, Armentieres, Messines, and Ypres October-November 1914* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1929); and Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *Death of an Army* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd., 1967).

[2]. Beckett's work includes: *The Army and the Curragh Incident, 1914* (London: Bodley Head for the Army Records Society, 1986); *The Amateur Military Tradition, 1558-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991); “Haig and French,” in *Haig: A Reappraisal 70 Years On*, ed. Brian Bond and Nigel Cave (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1999), pp. 51-63; and “Selection by Disparagement: Lord Esher, the General Staff and the Politics of Command, 1909-14,” in *The General Staff: Reform and Innovation, 1890-1939*, ed. David French and Brian Hold Reid (London: Frank Cass: 2002), pp. 41-56.

[3]. John Hussey, “The Flanders Battlefield and the Weather in 1917,” in *Passchendaele in Perspective: The Third Battle of Ypres*, ed. Peter Liddle (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), pp. 140-158.

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**Citation:** John Connor. Review of Beckett, Ian F.W., *Ypres: The First Battle 1914*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

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