THE WESTERN FRONT

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DRAWINGS BY
MUIRHEAD BONE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
GENERAL SIR DOUGLAS HAIG
G.C.B., G.C.V.O., K.C.I.E., A.D.C.

GARDEN CITY, NEW YORK:
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1917.

I have been asked to write a foreword to Mr. Muirhead Bone's drawings. This I am glad to do, as they illustrate admirably the daily life of the troops under my command.

The conditions under which we live in France are so different from those to which people at home are accustomed, that no pen, however skilful, can explain them without the aid of the pencil.

The destruction caused by war, the wide areas of devastation, the vast mechanical agencies essential in war, both for transport and the offensive, the masses of supplies required, and the wonderful cheerfulness and indomitable courage of the soldiers under varying climatic conditions, are worthy subjects for the artist who aims at recording for all time the spirit of the age in which he has lived.

It has been said that the portrait and the picture are invaluable aids to the right reading of history. From this point of view I welcome, on behalf of the Army that I have the honour to command, this series of drawings, as a permanent record in pencil of the duties which our soldiers have been called upon to perform, and the quality and manner of its performance.

D. Haig. Gen.

GENERAL HEADQUARTERS,
November, 1916

THE WESTERN FRONT

THE British line in France and Belgium runs through country of three kinds, and each kind is like a part of England. Between the Somme and Arras a British soldier often feels that he has not quite left the place of his training on Salisbury Plain. The main roads may be different, with their endless rows of sentinel trees, and the farms are mostly clustered into villages, where they turn their backs to the streets. More of the land, too, is tilled. But the ground has the same large and gentle undulation; and these great rollers are made, as in Wiltshire, of pure chalk coated with only a little brown clay. There are the same wide prospects, the same lack of streams and ponds, the same ledges and curious carvings of the soil; and journeys on foot seem long, as they do on our downs, because so much of the road before you is visible while you march.

A little north of Arras there begins, almost at a turn of the road, a black country, where men of the South Lancashires feel at home and grant that the landscape has some of the points of Wigan. It is the region of Loos and Vermelles and Bully Grenay, most of it level ground on which the only eminences are the refuse-heaps of coal mines. Across this level the eye feels its way from one well-known stack of pit-head buildings and winding machinery to another. They are, to an English eye, strangely lofty and stand out like lighthouses over a sea. The villages near their feet are commonly "model" or "garden," with all the houses built well, as parts of one plan. As in Lancashire, farming and mining go on side by side, and in August the corn is grey with a mixture of blown dusts from collieries and from the road.

The next change is not abrupt, like the first; but it is as great. Near Ypres you are on the sands, though yet twenty miles from the sea. Here you have a sense of being in a place still alive but pensioned off by nature after its work was done. You feel it at Rye and Winchelsea, at Ravenna, and at any place which the sea has once made great and then abandoned. The wide Ypres landscape drawn by Mr. Bone was all mellow on sunny days at the end of July with the warm brown and yellow of many good crops. Almost up to the British front it was farmed minutely and intensely; in spring I had seen a man ploughing a field where a German shell, on the average, dropped every day. But all this countryside has the brooding quietude of a sort of honourable old age, dignity and pensiveness and comfort behind its natural rampart of sand dunes, but not the stir of life at full pressure.

Into this vari-coloured belt of landscape, some ninety miles long, and into its cities and villages, the war has brought strange violences of effort and several different degrees of desolation. Some villages are dead

and buried, like Pozières, where you must dig to find where a house stood. There are cities dead, but with their bones still above ground: Ypres is one—many walls stand where they did, but grass is growing among the broken stones and bits of stained glass on the floor of the Cloth Hall, and at noon a visitor's footsteps ring and echo in the empty streets like those of a belated wayfarer in midnight Oxford. "How doth the city sit desolate that once was full of people!" Again, there are towns like Arras, whose flesh, though torn, has life in it still, and seems to feel a new wound from each shell, though there be no man there to be hit. These are the broader differences between one part of the front and another. In any one place there are minor caprices of destruction or survival. Mr. Bone has drawn the top of the Albert Church tower, a building that was ugly when it was whole, but now is famous for its impending figure of the Virgin, knocked by artillery fire into a singular diving attitude, with the Child in her outstretched hands. Of the two or three buildings unharmed in Arras one is the oldest house in the town and another was Robespierre's birthplace.

In the fields, as you near the front line, you note an ascending scale of desolation. It is most clear on the battlefield of the Somme. First you pass across two or three miles of land on which so many shells fall, or used to fall, that it has not been tilled for two years. It is a waste, but a green waste, where not trodden brown by horses and men. It is gay in summer with poppies, convolvulus and cornflowers. Among the thistles and coarse grass you see self-sown shoots of the old crops, of beet, mustard and corn. Beyond this zone of land merely thrown idle you reach the ultimate desert where nothing but men and rats can live. Here even the weeds have been rooted up and buried by shells, the houses are ground down to brick-dust and lime and mixed with the earth, which is constantly turned up and turned up again by more shells and kept loose and soft. The trees, broken half-way up their trunks and stripped of leaves and branches, look curiously haggard and sinister.

It is hoped that Mr. Bone's drawings will give a new insight into the spirit in which the battle of freedom is being fought. An artist does not merely draw ruined churches and houses, guards and lorries, doctors and wounded men. It is for him to make us see something more than we do even when we see all these with our own eyes—to make visible by his art the staunchness and patience, the faithful absorption in the next duty, the humour and human decency and good nature—all the strains of character and emotion that go to make up the temper of Britain at war.

G.H.Q., FRANCE,
November, 1916

I

GENERAL SIR DOUGLAS HAIG

G.C.B., G.C.V.O., K.C.I.E., A.D.C.

II

GRAND'PLACE AND RUINS OF THE CLOTH HALL, YPRES

The gaunt emptiness of Ypres is expressed in this drawing, done from the doorway of a ruined church in a neighbouring square. The grass has grown long this summer on the Grand'Place and is creeping up over the heaps of ruins. The only continuous sound in Ypres is that of birds, which sing in it as it if were country.