

RANDY ROBERTS

World War I: Feeling the Shadow of the Past

Author's Note from the Teacher's Edition

I have a feel for certain times in history. Certain times and places attract my interest more than others—they just feel comfortable to me. One such period and place is Europe during World War I. Many times, I've walked in Paris, London, or Vienna, wandering through old streets where famous people once lived and visiting buildings where important documents were signed, and I feel the past bubbling all around me.

Nowhere is that sense stronger than on the battlefields of the Western Front. There is one place I've returned to often: the Somme, where in 1916 the British and French fought a long, deadly battle against the Germans. Between the last week in June and mid-November, more than 1,200,000 men fell in the Battle of the Somme. In fact, on one day, July 1, 1916, when Britain began its offensive, more than 60,000 troops from the British Empire were killed, wounded, or missing in action. By the end of the day, more than 19,000 were dead. And that battle was just beginning! Britain had not yet achieved any of its major objectives.

Today, the Somme region is tranquil farmland. The Somme River is little more than a slow-moving stream. The area is dotted by graves and markers where skirmishes took place, but it is so lovely that it is easy to forget that 90 years ago a terrible battle took place there. Those months leveled villages, scarred the land, and destroyed lives.

There is one area that still retains the signs of battle. On the northern part of the Somme battle line is the village of Beaumont Hamel, where, on July 1, a Newfoundland Regiment made a disastrous assault against German forces. After the war the Newfoundland government purchased the land and kept the battle site intact. Today, you can walk through the trenches, cross "no man's land," and step on to the German position. It is the finest trench park on the Western Front, and on cold, foggy November days the past seems close at hand.

“American history is the grand story of the actions of men and women, leaders and followers, who established a nation committed to the noblest of all ideals and labored over the centuries to make the reality of the nation conform to those lofty ideals.”

Randy Roberts, Program Author

About the Author

Randy Roberts, Professor of History at Purdue University, specializes in twentieth-century American history and the history of popular culture. He has written, cowritten, or edited more than 20 books, including biographies of John Wayne, Jack Johnson, and Oscar Robertson. He has also written histories of American sports and of the Vietnam War. His books have been nominated for and won a number of national prizes. At Purdue University, he has won the University Teacher of the Year award. He has also appeared frequently on the History Channel and in documentaries for HBO, NBC, ESPN, and PBS.

