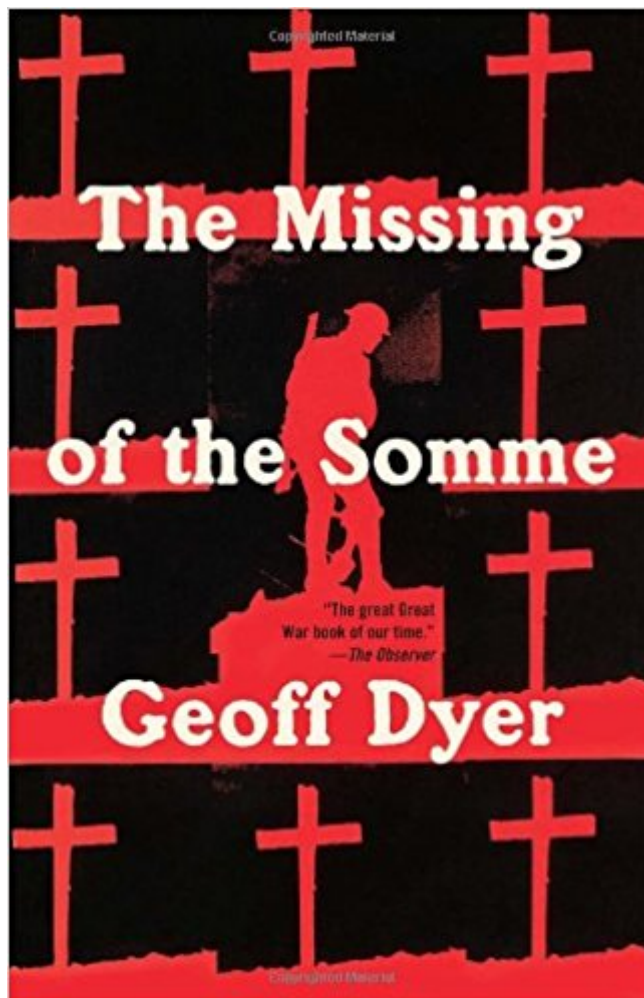


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# The Missing Of The Somme



## Synopsis

The Missing of the Somme is part travelogue, part meditation on remembrance—and completely, unabashedly, unlike any other book about the First World War. Through visits to battlefields and memorials, Geoff Dyer examines the way that photographs and film, poetry and prose determined—sometimes in advance of the events described—the way we would think about and remember the war. With his characteristic originality and insight, Dyer untangles and reconstructs the network of myth and memory that illuminates our understanding of, and relationship to, the Great War.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A lyrical meditation on memory and the meaning of World War I. . . . [A] thoughtful and thought-provoking pilgrimage through the war’s bibliography and battlefields. . . . Illuminate[s] how thoroughly memory and history are interwoven with literature.” The Wall Street Journal “A strange and wonderful meditation on the cultural legacy of World War I. . . . The Missing of the Somme shows us that stark simplicity isn’t the only way to talk about war. . . . [It is] a lovely, alive work.” San Francisco Chronicle “The Missing of the Somme . . . looks back at the unfathomable destruction of [World War I] through the fogged, distorted lens of collective memory, which can only deteriorate further with the passing of time. . . . How do we bring ourselves to acknowledge such awful events? And what purpose do memorials really serve? They are, Dyer implies, inherently insufficient.” The Boston Globe “Fresh and often unsettling. . . . Sophisticated and nuanced. . . . Quirky but often brilliant. . . . The timing could not be more

appropriate. . . . For Americans, as for Britons, memory of World War I is now entirely a matter of secondhand information. Only the films, books and monuments remain. Dyer poignantly and at times playfully examines the way these objects shape his countrymen's mental picture of what happened between 1914 and 1918. . . . As [his] meditation on remembrance demonstrates, reminders of the past do have a life of their own, shaping and reshaping the vision of history we carry in our minds. . . . The Missing of the Somme will not disappoint [Dyer's] fans. "The Kansas City Star" instant classic. . . . Dyer supports his point with an impressive survey of poems, letters, memoirs, and novels, combined with a perceptive analysis of British war memorials, and utilizing extensive citations. "Publishers Weekly" Brilliant. . . . The great Great War book of our time. "The Observer" Dyer delights in producing books that are unique, like keys. "James Wood, The New Yorker" penetrating meditation upon war and remembrance. "The Daily Telegraph" No contemporary writer blends genres like Geoff Dyer. "Time" A loving book . . . about mourning and memory, about how the Great War has been represented "and our sense of it shaped and defined" by different artistic media. . . . Its textures are the very rhythms of memory and consciousness. "The Guardian

A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Geoff Dyer has received the Somerset Maugham Award, the E. M. Forster Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, a National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism, and, in 2015, the Windham Campbell Prize for non-fiction. The author of four novels and nine works of non-fiction, Dyer is writer in residence at the University of Southern California and lives in Los Angeles. His books have been translated into twenty-four languages.

...to reverse the word order of the title of the famous World War II novel by Herman Wouk. Geoff Dyer's work concerns another war, once known as "The Great War," and now more commonly referred to as a World War with a singular Roman numeral. Important to keep the wars straight; a difficulty on more than one occasion for non-participants, as Dyer underscores with his quip "wrong war mate." But even more troubling is how the participants themselves, and those closely related to them, can't keep things straight, and instead of truly remembering events as they occurred, they adopt a mythical version of events. Dyer "drew me in" right at the beginning by mentioning his families "received wisdom" concerning the enlistment of his maternal grandfather, who was an almost illiterate farm laborer, in 1914, at the commencement of the war. Based on real incidents of underage boys signing up, the family had claimed as their own that he was underage when he

enlisted, and was told by the recruiting sergeant "to come back in a couple of days, when you are a couple of years older." Yet they possessed his birth certificate that said he was 20. And from another "wrong war mate," my favorite is how returning American soldiers from the Vietnam War were spat upon by a hippie in the San Francisco airport. Dyer has written a relatively short, but quite dense work. In terms of remembrance, he focuses on both the immaterial and the material. For the English, it is remembered most by the words of two poets, Wilfred Owen, who died in combat one week before the end of the war, and Siegfried Sassoon who lived to a relatively old age. And I knew the concluding lines: "At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them." But I didn't know that Laurence Binyon had written those words in September, 1914, in astonishing anticipation of memory, which is another of Dyer's themes. The author also discusses how the dead are commemorated in post-war ceremonies, with one of the most profoundly simply being the two minutes of silence, when all activity stopped, at the 11th hour of 11 November (later this commemoration was eventually changed to the nearest Sunday). The author says that the war was the greatest stimulus for sculpture since the Renaissance, and notes that in such an expansion of "commissions" not all was first rate. Dyer's extended essay also contains numerous black and white photos, perhaps half are the resulting sculptures from those commissions. Of the others, two of the most moving are on pages 116 and 117; British Tommies walking on a boardwalk through an utter wasteland, and the ruins of Ypres cathedral. "There is no one else here." Thus Dyer commences his description of his experience at the Thiepval memorial to "the missing of the Somme," which contains the names of over 73,000 British and French soldiers who died in the four month battle commencing in July, 1916, and who have no known grave. There were some mindless remarks in the guest registry, which included how they had really given it to "the Nazis," with the rebuttal mentioned in the first paragraph of the review. Throughout his work he had laid the groundwork for this visit, starting with how Robert Scott was made a national hero for dying, incompetently, but in adversity, after his return from the South Pole. And he provides a wonderful quote from D.H. Lawrence, who said: "They are all so brave to suffer, but none of them brave enough, to reject suffering." Dyer goes on to mention a few who did... who did revolt, and were shot for their efforts. I thought the author missed a wonderful opportunity to consider why the Russian and French armies did revolt in mass, but the British didn't. I also thought there was a lack of focus on that inexpressible calamity that was the first day of July, when British soldiers "went over the top," to relieve the pressure on Verdun, and more than 20,000, in that single day, were killed. Cattle to the slaughter, as Wilfred Owens somewhat poetically put it ("...for those who die as cattle"). Even today, almost a hundred years after, there is much denial that it ever really happened, except, of course, in some

fuzzy abstract way, that is not quantitative. I've toured my share of battlefields, including those in northern France. Serendipity has taken me to Normandy and Verdun on several occasions, but never to the area of the Somme. I had to check on the sites to realize that Thiepval is in France, and Ypres is now called Leper, and is in Belgium, along with Passchendaele. Finally, another small index in the remembrance area is the number of reviews at . This work was published almost 20 years ago, and there are now 16 reviews at in America. I thought SURELY there would be more in the UK. It is now 8... as I add my 5-star review.

That is Geoff Dyer's caption for a photograph by William Rider-Rider of the devastated battlefield of Passchendaele. "The scene is divided evenly between land and sky. A line of blasted trees separates the shattered foreground from the land-ocean, the sea of mud, which \* \* \* reaches to the horizon. There is no perspective. The vanishing-point is no longer a more or less exact point, but all around. A new kind of infinity: more of the same in every direction, an infinity of waste." If I had been Geoff Dyer (please pardon the presumptuousness), "An Infinity of Waste" would have been the title of this book. Instead, the title, *THE MISSING OF THE SOMME*, is taken from the letters high on the Thiepval Memorial, on which are recorded the names of 73,077 men who lost their lives in the Battle of the Somme but whose remains were never identified. Thiepval and the site of the Battle of the Somme were the last places Dyer visited in his tours of the cemeteries of the Great War, as preparation for this book of meditations on the Great War, the ways it has come to be remembered, and its influence on Western humanity today. Originally published in 1994 and recently re-issued, it is a superb book. It is not a history of World War I, but nonetheless it is a must for any serious student or scholar of WWI. Rather than history, it focuses on the ways the War has become history - the ways it is remembered. Still, *THE MISSING OF THE SOME* contains plenty of historical factoids or anecdotes of note. For example, in the first months of the war "football [soccer] was used as an incentive to enlistment"; the recruiters advertised that the war offered men the chance to play "the greatest game of all" and by the end of 1914 half a million Englishmen had enlisted through sporting organizations such as football clubs. As matters developed, early in the war the British were completely unprepared for the massive number of corpses generated in this glorious game of War, and burial of the dead was haphazard and inefficient. "By the time of the great battles of attrition of 1916-17 mass graves were dug in advance of major offensives. Singing columns of soldiers fell grimly silent as they marched by these gaping pits en route to the front-line trenches." Dyer is British (both his grandfathers fought in the Great War), so the book has a decided British orientation. And its geographic scope is limited to the Western Front (though, of course, that provides more than

enough material for any meditation on the Great War). Much of the book deals with the cemeteries and memorials to the dead (of which there are a handful of photographs), or with the Great War in literature and poetry (including, of course, Wilfred Owen). This is territory previously explored by others, most notably Paul Fussell in "The Great War and Modern Memory", to which Dyer pays tribute. But Dyer adds much that is original, at least to me. And with a subject as rich and expansive as this one, even the occasional repetition is welcome. If you have read any of Dyer's other books, you know that he can be willfully eccentric. THE MISSING OF THE SOMME is no exception. On occasion I found his idiosyncratic and mildly self-absorbed narrative annoying and/or flippant. Likewise, a few of the observations he offers are badly wayward. They, however, are offset several times over by the number of astute insights. It is a brief and intelligent book, well worth the several hours required to read it. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in the Great War, provided you are not looking to it as a conventional history.

An extremely emotional and moving Hymn to Courage; calls out abysmal senior military leadership throughout; helpfully explain how Sacrifice is really a euphemism for Slaughter. The details & accounts of military statuary and cemeteries are informative and lend special dignity throughout. The same goes for poetry and literature dating from the time & dreadful events. We have advanced, arguably, and unevenly, maybe, over the past 100 years but this depends on who is talking & who is listening.

This book is a lyrical tribute to the lost men of World War I, as counterintuitive as that may sound. I haven't read too many books about war that describe its effects on society the way this one does - it describes the men departing for war as those "already dead," for example, and proceeds to describe why that was true. It's a very short, impressionistic book with haunting images. It's hard to believe that the "war to end all wars" began over 100 years ago, but this book will make it sound immediate and real without dragging the reader through battle plans and descriptions of strategy over rough terrain. It is an impressionistic view of war and its effect on society but it is not preachy. It's sad but not maudlin. It does show that patterns are repeated over time.

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