

November 2001 – February 2002



Will Longstaff
Menin Gate at midnight
(*Ghosts of Menin Gate*)
1927
oil on canvas
140.5 x 271.8 cm
(9807)

Will Longstaff's *Menin Gate at midnight* (*Ghosts of Menin Gate*), painted in 1927, is undoubtedly one of the best-known paintings in the Australian War Memorial's art collection. In the years following the First World War, the tribute to sacrifice evoked by this painting, combined with its spiritualist overtones, struck exactly the right chord with many Australians who had lost family and friends in the war.

Will Longstaff painted *Menin Gate at midnight* after he had attended the unveiling ceremony of the Menin Gate memorial at the entrance of the Belgian town of Ypres on 24 July 1927. This memorial was dedicated to the 350,000 men of the British and Empire forces who had died in the battles around Ypres. Longstaff was so moved by the ceremony that, during a midnight walk along the Menin Road, he imagined a vision of steel-helmeted spirits rising from the moonlit cornfields. It is said that, following his return to London, he painted the work in one session, while still under psychic influence. He may have been influenced by Mrs Mary Horsburgh, who had worked in a British canteen during the war. She had met him during this evening walk, and told him that she could feel "her dead boys" all around her.¹

Longstaff painted the scene almost entirely in hues of blue, which helps suggest a midnight scene. He constructed it on a traditional, land-sky format, placing the pale memorial boldly on the horizon, and portraying the host of ghostly soldiers through an impressionistic outline of bodies and helmets. In the immediate foreground, he depicted a cornfield strewn with blood-red poppies and in the far distance he placed a small, silhouetted building with windows ablaze. He used well-known motifs to trigger emotion. The scarlet poppies are flowers that could be found in the Flanders fields, but they also carry the traditional connotations of blood and remembrance; they represent a floral blanket covering the bloodied bodies of unknown soldiers and at the





Will Longstaff
Immortal shrine
(Eternal silence) 1928
 oil on canvas
 137 x 270 cm
 (14196)

same time, like the paper poppies worn on Remembrance Day, they are a tribute from the living to the dead.² The steel-helmeted soldiers rising from the cornfields extend the range of visual emblems: the harvest of men, the steel-helmeted crosses covering the graves of many soldiers, and the helmeted bayonets raised in cheer and victory.³ These symbols add resonance to the image. Some people see and respond to one motif, others to another, and this contributes to the wide appeal of the painting: it is many things to many people.

In his wartime sketch book Longstaff depicted a mutilated human leg lying in a poppy field, a poignant conjunction of a brutal fact of war with one of the delights of nature. In another sketch he drew French children placing flowers beside the helmeted grave of an unknown British soldier at Villers-Bretonneux. This shows us that Longstaff was interested in the juxtaposition of war dead with floral tributes even before he painted *Menin Gate*.

In the 1920s, when Longstaff painted *Menin Gate*, spiritualism was in vogue, and many who wished to communicate with relatives and friends who had died in battle found consolation in its tenets. One of Longstaff's subsequent patrons, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, visited Australia in 1920 to promote the spiritualist message, and he received many letters of thanks from mothers who had lost their sons in the war and to whom he had given courage.⁴ Longstaff was by no means the first artist to portray spiritualist ideas. On ANZAC Day 1927, the *Melbourne Herald* published a cartoon by Will Dyson, *A voice from ANZAC*:

"Funny thing, Bill—I keep thinking I hear men marching!", which portrayed the spirits of two Australian soldiers seated on the shore at Gallipoli, a graphic visualization of survival after bodily death. This cartoon had a powerful emotional impact at the time and, as a result, the *Herald* printed a thousand reproductions which they presented to the Victorian branch of the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA) to distribute to its members. In 1929, Dyson produced another variation on this theme, *Xmas memories*, which portrayed a swagman and his dog accompanied by two ghostly diggers.⁵ In February 1927, before either Dyson or Longstaff created their images of existence after death, Stanley Spencer caused a sensation in London with *Resurrection, Cookham* [1924–26]. It differs from Longstaff's and Dyson's works in that the scene was intended as a metaphor, to suggest that paradise can be experienced on earth: to affirm the joys of life after the horrors of war. Nonetheless, Spencer's painting was a product of a period in which there was intense interest in spiritualism, the same environment that fostered Longstaff's painting.

Lord Woolavington purchased Longstaff's painting in 1928 for 2000 guineas and immediately presented it to the Australian Government. The price was considerable: Streeton sold his celebrated *Golden Summer, Eaglemont* of 1889 just four years earlier for half the price of the Longstaff painting; and the British Government bought Stanley Spencer's *Resurrection, Cookham* in 1927 for £1000.

After displaying *Menin Gate* in London, Manchester and Glasgow, in 1928–29 the Memorial toured it to capital and regional cities around Australia, where it was seen by record crowds.⁶ They produced one thousand reproductions of the painting under Longstaff's direction, which were signed by the artist. In October 1929 the Memorial produced a cheaper version that was distributed widely, door-to-door, through a marketing company. They provided the salesmen with a text they learned by heart which reminded those who had friends and family that "He is not missing. He is here".

Following the success of *Menin Gate*, Longstaff painted several other works on a similar theme. In *Immortal shrine (Eternal silence)* [1928] he depicted ghostly soldiers marching past the Cenotaph in London on Remembrance Day 1928. Mrs Trevor Hedberg and the Misses Winifred and Hope Kellow, daughters of the late Mr Charles Brown Kellow, who was a schoolboy contemporary of Longstaff's in Ballarat, presented this work to the Memorial in 1943. He based *Immortal shrine* on a watercolour depicting the Cenotaph on a rainy day. In the watercolour he represented similar reflections on the paving, but he peopled it with silhouetted figures of ordinary men and women rather than with ghostly soldiers. In *Immortal shrine* he depicted the Cenotaph itself as a ghostly presence, gauntly white in front of the somber blue-black buildings that dissolve into the horizon. In another work, *Ghosts of Vimy Ridge* [1931], Longstaff portrayed the spirits of servicemen of the Canadian Corps. This work

clearly resembles *Menin Gate* in its composition: the memorial on Vimy Ridge stands dramatically on the summit beneath which the shimmering spirits of Canadian soldiers gather in the silvery moonlight. In a fourth work, *Carillon* [1932], he showed the ghosts of New Zealand soldiers on the beaches of Belgium listening to carillon bells in their own country.

Longstaff is also said to have painted two other works depicting phantom soldiers near a coast. The first, *The rearguard (The spirit of ANZAC)* [1929], presents a ghostly array of soldiers lining up near the beach at Gallipoli in the bleak dawn, with departing transports and warships barely visible on the misty horizon.⁷ The second, *Drake's drum*, is said to have been painted in response to the evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk in 1940, and to show the Sussex coast haunted by the spirits of servicemen rising to answer "Drake's drum".⁸ As the present whereabouts of *The rearguard* are unknown, and given the similarity of the descriptions of the image of the two works, it is possible that Longstaff changed the title from *The rearguard* to *Drake's drum*; that is, it may be that the two works are one and the same. (Such re-titling of works was common among Longstaff's contemporaries).

The fame accorded *Menin Gate* did not spread to Longstaff's other spiritualist works, partly because they were not publicly displayed. *Ghosts of Vimy Ridge* remained in seclusion for many years in a parliamentary committee room. *Carillon* was given to the New Zealand Government in 1934 but has rarely been displayed since then.

Will Longstaff
Ghosts of Vimy Ridge
c. 1931
oil on canvas
138 x 270.2 cm
Canadian House of
Commons Collection
(AN: O-4714)





Will Longstaff
Carillon c. 1932
 oil on canvas
 137 x 268.9 cm
 Archives New Zealand
 / Te Whare Tohu
 Tuhituhinga
 O Aotearoa
 (AAAC/Q203)

However, even if the Canadian and New Zealand works had been displayed, they might not have evoked a strong public response. *Menin Gate* has a bolder composition and more powerful imagery than do Longstaff's later paintings. His evocative means of depicting the war dead gradually became little more than a formula. The ANZAC tradition, the belief that the First World War was a watershed in Australian history, and that those who died on foreign soil did so to create a greater Australia, gave this painting an added, almost religious, significance. The painting's dramatic display at the Memorial and the publicity it received during its Australian tour, as well as the wide distribution of colour reproductions in aid of charitable causes, also contributed to its reputation. The spiritualist interest gave it an immediate appeal, but it was the particular emotional climate in Australia that made *Menin Gate* a favourite with the public.

Nonetheless, Longstaff's imagery was important to the appeal of *Menin Gate*. Reproductions of it are still popular, whereas the Dyson reproduction was limited to one thousand copies and is now out of print. Dyson created specific characters rather than an anonymous mass of ghostly figures. Dyson's figures are too clearly perceived to be successful as spirits: they are ghosts because the text tells us so, but they could be taken for living beings. By contrast, Longstaff's painting is like a dream; his impressionistic soldiers hover in the cornfields like a mirage.

Menin Gate at midnight has undeniable power: it brings to life the many nameless heroes, the men on whom the ANZAC legend was based, and who exist as part of our national memory. It has understandably remained popular with a large portion of the Australian public for over seventy years, and has become a national icon.

ANNE GRAY

ENDNOTES

1. "Menin Gate, Mr. Longstaff's Inspiration", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 June 1932.
2. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York and London, 1975, pp. 246–8.
3. "Armies of the Dead and the Living: Coincidence in Two Scenes of Uplifted Helmets – A Notable Memorial Painting and a Memory of Armistice Day", *The Graphic*, London, 23 December 1927.
4. Humphrey McQueen, *The Black Swan of Trespass: The Emergence of Modernist Painting in Australia to 1944*, Sydney, 1979, p. 98.
5. Ross McMullin, *Will Dyson*, Sydney, 1984, pp. 247–8.
6. McQueen, *The Black Swan*, p. 98, estimates that more than one million, of a total Australian population of six million, saw the painting during its tour. However, exact figures are difficult to obtain. The Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery of Western Australia recorded that the estimated total attendance during its showing in Perth from 3 to 30 July 1928 was 105,281. The Melbourne *Argus*, 1 March 1929 noted that 50,000 people had already seen the work, which suggests that in total around 100,000 saw the painting in Melbourne. It was also shown in Adelaide and Sydney and toured to country centres.
7. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 March, 9 May and 15 September 1928, and 4 October 1929. The present whereabouts of this work are unknown. Although some newspaper reports identify this work as being the same as *The eternal march*, another Longstaff painting from the same period whose present whereabouts are also unknown, the descriptions of these two works are quite different: *ibid.*, 15 September and 3 November 1928.
8. The pupils of Buckingham College gave *Drake's drum* to Princess Elizabeth and Prince Phillip on their wedding day.