A First World War soldier's vision moved Sir Anthony Seldon to walk across Europe, **Sarah Meyrick** reports

ANTHONY SELDON

The *Dodengang* (Trench of Death) memorial site, on the banks of the Yser Canal, near Diksmuide, in Belgium

Long walk of peace

A DECADE ago, the historian and former head teacher Sir Anthony Seldon was researching a book on the First World War and its impact on public schools. About one fifth of the public schoolboys who fought in the war died, and it had a devastating impact on the survivors.

The book's co-author, David Walsh, showed him a letter that a young officer, Douglas Gillespie, had written in 1915 to his former headmaster at Winchester College. Gillespie, a Second Lieutenant with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, was stationed on the Western Front between Vimy Ridge, in northern France, and the Belgian border — just a stone's throw from the place where his beloved brother Tom, who had rowed for Britain in the 1912 Olympics, was killed in October 1914.

Although it would be another three years before the war was over, Douglas Gillespie had a vision for the future. "I wish that when peace comes, our government might combine with the French government to make one long Avenue between the lines from the Vosges to the sea," he wrote.

"The ground is so pitted, and scarred, and torn with shells, and tangled with wire, that it will take years to bring it back to use again, but I would make a fine broad road in the 'No Man's Land' between the lines, with paths for pilgrims on foot, and plant trees for shade, and fruit trees, so the soil should not be altogether wasted. Then I would like to send every man, [woman] and child in Western Europe on pilgrimage along that Via Sacra, so that they might think and learn what war means from the silent witnesses on either side."

Douglas Gillespie was killed in September 2015, in the opening hours of the Battle of Loos. His body was never recovered. His devastated parents published some of the letters they had received from both sons in a volume, *Letters from Flanders*, which brought the proposal of a Via Sacra to public notice. The concept attracted some interest — *The Spectator* described his "great Memorial Road idea" as a "brilliant suggestion" — but it was never taken up.

The idea lay dormant for the best part of a century. Then Sir Anthony read Gillespie's letter, and, as he writes in his new book, *The Path of Peace: Walking the Western Front Way*, he "sensed something substantial and potent" in the scheme. "I had one of those rare moments when time stands still," he says now.

He wanted to know more about Gillespie, and soon discovered that his niece, great-nephews, and great-nieces were alive and were just as enthusiastic about the vision. The BBC *Countryfile* presenter Tom Heap is a great-nephew, which gave the project a boost. Supporters emerged, and the Western Front Way charity was formed.

But further exploration soon cast doubt on the viability of the project. Most people think of the Western Front as the area in Belgium and northern France. Typically, visitors "to the trenches" go to Tyne Cot, at Passchendaele, the world's largest British cemetery, or the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing in the Somme, where the names of the 73,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers who were so badly disfigured that their bodies were never be identified are commemorated. Indeed, these are the places that Sir Anthony was most familiar with, having led more than 50 educational tours there over the years.

IN FACT, the Western Front is a staggering 1000km long, stretching from Nieuwpoort, on the Belgian coast, south through France all the way to Pfetterhouse on the Swiss border, not far from Basel. It was immediately apparent that there was nothing approaching a walkable track. Less than one per cent of the lines of trenches remains, the rest having long since been reclaimed and ploughed over.

"Creating Gillespie's vision now would be seriously hard work," Sir Anthony writes.

Life was also very busy. For all the enthusiasm of a handful of interested individuals — given greater poignancy by the Brexit vote in 2016 — no one had time to dedicate the uninterrupted attention the project needed.

At around the same time, Sir Anthony was approaching a crisis in his life. He had left Wellington College, where he had been head or "Master" for a decade, in 2015, to become Vice-Chancellor of Buckingham University. But his wife Joanna had cancer; she died in December 2016, something that he describes as "ripping him in two".

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He threw himself into his job, working harder than ever, but felt that without Joanna he had lost his touch. "Now, almost overnight, nothing seemed to work out as I would have liked," he writes. In late 2019, he contracted shingles and pneumonia, and realised that something had to change. He left the university the following summer, and found himself with no job, no home, no wife — and no idea what to do with the rest of his life.

The answer seemed to be to walk: "I would walk all the way from Switzerland to the English Channel, just as the young Douglas Gillespie had envisaged. And I would shout about it and lobby everyone I knew to ensure that his idea for the path came into being."

Sir Anthony hoped that by walking the entire route he would help to raise awareness of the project and its value. In particular, he was hoping for backing from France, which lagged behind its neighbour Belgium in realising the economic, social, and cultural benefit of establishing a permanent waymarked Western Front pathway.

The Covid pandemic threw all the planning into disarray, and his departure date — originally 9 June 2021 — kept being delayed by the evolving restrictions. He finally set off in August that year, just after his 68th birthday. He walked the route almost entirely alone, but with some back-up by car.

Left: "Kilometre zero", the Swiss border, in wartime. *Above*: Sir Anthony at the same spot, 2021

The Path of Peace documents his journey. The book is a compelling mix of travelogue and history, nature-writing and reflection. He describes walking through the stunning rural scenery of Picardy, Champagne, the Ardennes, and the Vosges, travelling alongside the rivers Somme, Oise, Aisne, Meuse, and Moselle, and staying in historic towns such as Ypres, Arras, Rheims, Verdun, and Colmar.

He writes about visiting the final resting places of the poet Edward Thomas, the musician George Butterworth, and the novelist Alain-Fournier, author of *Le Grand Meaulnes* — all victims of the war.

IT IS also an intensely personal story. Sir Anthony travelled to the very spot where his grandfather Wilfred Willett was shot in the head. Willett survived, but was seriously injured, and had to give up his hopes of becoming a doctor, something that had a ricochet effect down the generations.

He writes about his Jewish grandparents, who fled Ukraine a century ago in search of peace, and the crippling anxiety that was passed down the family. He reflects on the loss of Joanna, and whether he could move on, into a new relationship. He explores a lifetime of drivenness, a nagging fear of failure, and his desire to move into a less manic way of living.

The walk was clearly very tough going, both physically and emotionally. On a practical level, he suffered the pain and indignity of a dog bite, heat exhaustion, and blisters that were so badly infected that friends consulted by phone insisted he went to A&E in case of sepsis. ("After two hours I emerged with heavily bandaged feet and an instruction not to walk for at least seven days. I pleaded with the doctor. Short walks, please? He nodded his assent, and I interpreted this as permission to walk 15km a day.")

"Not since my twenties have I had more highs and lows," he has said of his walk.