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The heavily damaged cathedral at Armentières, on the French-Belgian border

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Ruins of the Cloth Hall in Ypres, West Flanders, destroyed by artillery fire

It was a journey of exploration and discovery, but also, importantly, a pilgrimage. It was a pilgrimage, because it was about honouring that one soldier. . . I was doing something for Gillespie that he couldn't do himself," he says now. Fittingly, Gillespie carried a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress* with him.

Sir Anthony was able to take stock. "With my life as it was, I needed this pilgrimage as much as anyone," he says. "Doing something so radically different is what helps me to move towards God, towards something more elemental."

The long walk was also lonely. "While I loved the quiet, and not reading the papers daily for the first time in my adult life, the burden of hourly decisions and worries took a toll," he says. "Life is much easier when there's someone to share it with."

That said, the silence also fed him. He found solace in the withdrawal from the daily routine. "I found myself meditating on the word 'Maranatha' [Come, Lord]. I say that twice a day, ideally for 30 minutes, and it takes me to a place beyond fear, beyond striving," he says.

He hopes others will experience the route this way. "At one level, it's a walk . . . something to knock off and say you've done, but it's much more than that. It's an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of life. To ask, what is my life, the life I'm living? How can I change it? How can I make use of the time?"

IT IS very easy to lead "blunt" lives, he believes. "One thing I've noticed, writing about

Prime Ministers, most people don't really think through what it is they are doing. Life just happens." (His books include biographies of Winston Churchill, John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and David Cameron.)

"Every Prime Minister I've written about has said they regret they didn't have more time to reflect. And, for me, the heart of reflection is faith."

He believes making the journey along the Western Front Way would pay dividends for anyone. "It's partly about the difficult physical challenge, and partly the withdrawal from the conventional life and conventional meals and predictability," he says.

"There's something about doing things deliberately, and intentionally finding things which are going to be challenging at the end of your life, and taking them on."

As a historian, he was also struck afresh by the suffering of the First World War. "I think the historical takeaway was in terms of understanding that the war was about much more than just what happened on the Somme and Ypres," he says.

"There was this huge Western Front, all the way down into Switzerland, through Alsace and Lorraine. And the war ripped the soul and confidence out of the French people."

One thousand kilometres represents a mil-

lion steps, he says. "For each step, ten soldiers had died or were badly wounded. So there was a sense there of really being in the presence of death."

The walk has changed his life, enabling him to find greater peace personally. He married again earlier this year. Now, the ambition of Sir Anthony and his fellow enthusiasts is that the Western Front Way should become one of the great long treks in Europe: a northern equivalent of the Camino de Santiago de

Compostela — something that offers a mix of physical challenge and camaraderie alongside the possibility of spiritual growth.

The Western Front Way's patrons hope that the new route will provide a new way of interacting with the past and of "re-booting remembrance" as living memory fades. The project website and app offer maps and guidance,

in an attempt to link together all the trails, networks, museums, tourist offices, and national sites along the way, so that people can travel the route on foot or by bicycle. Tom Heap recently completed the route on a 1920s upright bicycle.

The leg through Belgium has been way-marked with the Western Front Way logo, and more than 300 communes in France have now pledged to support the scheme.

Sir Anthony is clearly delighted. "There are things in life that feel like an ideal project from the moment you start," he says. He pays tribute to the colleague who first gave him the letter, and others who have become part of the team.

"This is the world's biggest commemorative project," he says. There is interest in Germany, and he would love to see if it is possible to extend the route from Canterbury Cathedral to Freiburg. "That would be an extension to join two of the greatest Christian centres in Northern Europe."

Sir Anthony will mark Armistice Day at a service and a ceremony at the Cenotaph, and, on Remembrance Sunday, he will be at church in Windsor, as usual.

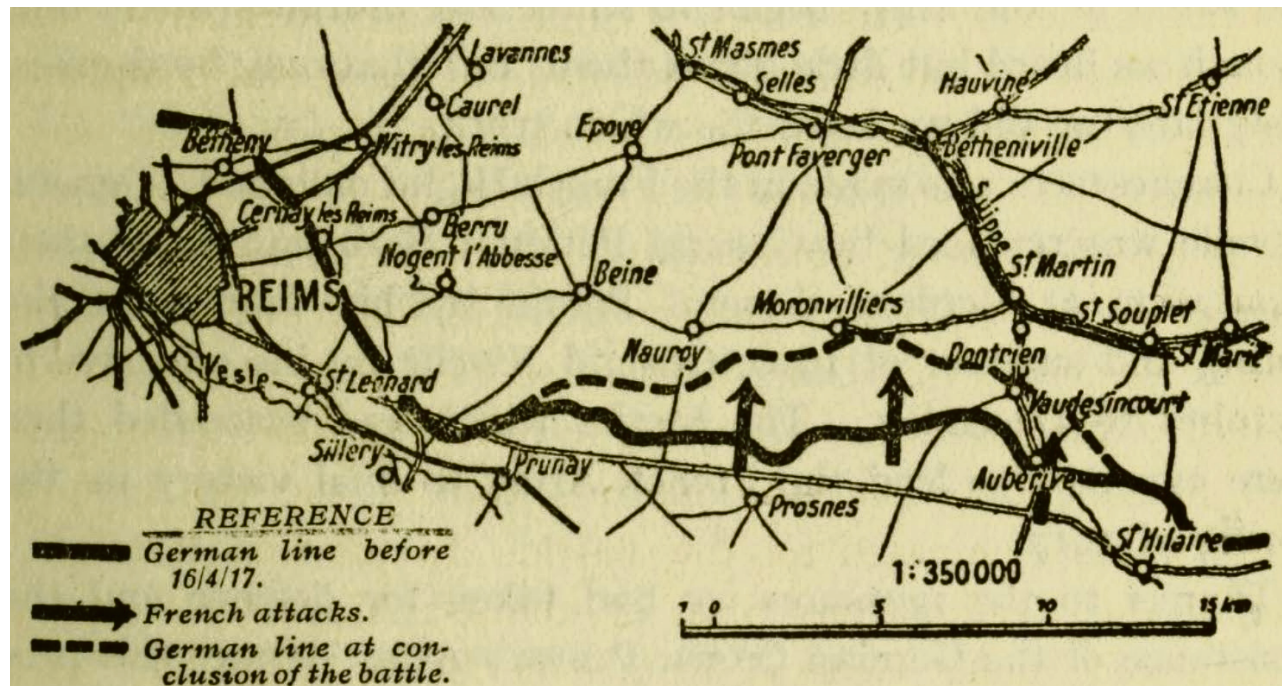
"I for one am happy to devote the rest of my life to seeing Gillespie's magnificent roaring dream become a reality," he ends the book, before quoting from Matthew 5.9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God."

Sir Anthony Seldon will be talking about his book at the Church Times Festival of Faith and Literature in February. thewesternfrontway.com



The Path of Peace: Walking the Western Front Way by Anthony Seldon is published by Atlantic at £20 (Church Times Bookshop £18); 978-1-83895-740-7. Profits from the book will go to the Western Front Way.

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND



Left: a map of the Franco-British Nivelle offensive in April-May 1917. Above: the ruins of Chaulnes, in the eastern Somme