

'Edric is a novelist who makes his own
rules and can't be compared to anyone else'

THE TIMES

FIELD SERVICE

A NOVEL



ROBERT EDRIC

About the Book

Morlancourt, Northern France, 1920

In the aftermath of the bloodiest conflict the world has ever seen, a small contingent of battle-worn soldiers remains in Northern France. Captain James Reid and his compatriots are tasked with the identification and burial of innumerable corpses as they assimilate the events of the past four years.

The stark contrast between the realities of burying men in France and the reports of honouring the dead back in Britain is all too clear. But it is only when the daily routine is interrupted by a visit from two women, both seeking solace from their grief, that the men are forced to acknowledge the part they too have played.

With his trademark unerring precision and lacerating honesty, Robert Edric explores the emotional hinterland which lies behind the work done by the War Graves Commission in the wake of the First World War.

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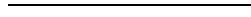
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About the Author

Also by Robert Edric

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FIELD SERVICE



Robert Edric

For

William Ivor Jones, artilleryman
1886-1959

and

Doris Copley, auxiliary nurse
1898-1986

and for their children,
Bill, Bruce and Margaret

The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.

Jeremiah 8:12

Morlancourt, Département du Somme
Summer 1920

Part One

1

EACH MORNING, THE small train from either Amiens or Péronne arrived at Morlancourt station and the men waiting for it there were formed into work parties to unload its cargo of building material, supplies and coffins. Until recently, the coffins and corpses had arrived separately, but now, as the days lengthened and finally warmed into full summer, and as the Graves Retrieval and Registration units became fully engaged, it was more usual for the bodies – especially those whose identities had been confirmed – to have already been sealed into their caskets.

Each box was labelled with an embossed metal tag, and often with the same brief details chalked on its lid. Only three months earlier the coffins had arrived polished and with all their fittings attached, but recently they had been little more than simple boxes, showing no true workmanship and none of the effort that had gone into the construction of the earlier caskets. Often – though less and less frequently almost two years after the war's end – these mass-produced caskets were accompanied by other smaller cases marked simply 'Remains', whose lids, in addition to their usual crop of chalked insignia, contained a puzzling pattern of acronyms and question marks.

James Reid stood in the station master's doorway and watched the train arrive. It came at precisely seven o'clock each morning, and he seldom failed to remark upon this precision – the final short blast of steam from the engine timed to coincide with the tolling of the Morlancourt church bell – to Benoît, the station master, knowing that it was something upon which the man prided himself. Reid

also knew that if the train left Amiens station early, having come through the night from Pozières or Contalmaison, or occasionally Péronne or Saint-Quentin – a considerably less predictable journey considering the nature of the land in that direction – then Benoît would contact the signalman at the Canal Halt and hold the engine and its cargo there to delay it. And on those rare mornings when the train was running unavoidably late elsewhere, Benoît would open the junction at Quatre Bois or Froissy to get it to Morlancourt for that precise, appointed time.

Passengers elsewhere might complain at the short delays thus created, but few who knew of the train and its sacrosanct cargo and purpose ever did.

As it pulled in this morning, the engine rattling, every linkage of its wheels visible, and slowing with every turn, Reid took out his pocket watch, rubbed its case against his sleeve and flicked open its lid. It was another of the small rituals he shared with Benoît. Reid would joke to the station master that he was checking the train's punctuality, and Benoît, in turn, would reply that this was unnecessary, and that what Reid was really doing each morning was setting the time of his unreliable English watch against the unfailing punctuality of the arriving French train.

As the locomotive finally drew to a halt, with a simultaneous release of steam and smoke from its short funnel, Reid stood erect, drew back his shoulders slightly and saluted the driver. Standing beside him, Benoît repeated the gesture a few seconds later, as though he were an unsynchronized shadow of the other man. The drivers of the train returned the gesture from where they stood on the footplate, their hands and faces black from their work, their eyes and teeth vividly white. Often, these men laughed and shook their heads at the unnecessary formality of the gesture, and their laughter released some of the morning's other small tensions.

A guard would emerge from the rear carriage – invariably Ernaux or André, his son – and a folder filled with docketts and papers would be handed over to Reid, for which he dutifully signed, and this was then countersigned by the guard.

Upon completing these formalities, Ernaux would wander away from the train, often with Benoît alongside him to discuss some other railway business, leaving Reid to begin his task of supervising the unloading of whatever the small train had delivered to him.

Three months earlier, Reid had written to Wheeler at the Commission Office in Amiens enquiring how much longer he might expect these daily cargoes of the dead, but Wheeler's reply had told him nothing. At the very least, Reid had hoped the deliveries might have been reduced to two or three a week as the larger Signal Cemetery and the surrounding smaller burial grounds, for which he was also responsible, continued to expand and be filled. Perhaps, Reid had suggested, the bodies, coffins and remains might be briefly stored elsewhere until a full load was acquired and then delivered to him. But Wheeler's curt response had made it clear to Reid that his fellow officers in Graves Registration considered this daily arrival of the train, however sparse its load, to be the most expedient method of fulfilling their task. There was nothing Reid might say in reply to this, and so he had kept silent on the matter, and the small trains had continued to come to him at this exact place and upon this exact hour.

Having lodged his satchel beneath the bench beside Benoît's door, Reid walked along the platform to where the men who had come to unload that day's cargo awaited his instructions. There would usually be twenty or thirty of them, sometimes as few as ten, sometimes as many as fifty, all increasingly reluctant participants in the work as the weeks and months passed and they awaited their return home.

When he was occasionally called upon to make short, encouraging speeches to this restless workforce, Reid invariably asked them to consider the importance of what they were doing there, remarking on the fact that, in other circumstances, *they* would expect others to perform the same unhappy duty for them. They would all be home soon enough, and so he asked them to look upon these final duties – these acts of obligation, acts of kindness – as a necessary and vital part of their severance and departure. Some understood what he was trying to say to them; others did not. The men who had been there the longest, and those whose departures lay furthest in the future, understood him best of all. Others, he knew, especially those who had recently been sent to the uncomfortable makeshift barracks at Bray to await their imminent demobilization, resented every word he said to them.

He looked at them now, scattered around the engine yard and the grassy mounds at the rear of the station. It had once been his hope that these men might feel a greater obligation to their work, and that they might even come to gather on the platform in a kind of unofficial guard of honour as the dead arrived. A few came, occasionally, in a desultory, inquisitive manner, but most did not. Most stayed out in the sun, smoking, playing cards or kicking a football until Reid shouted for them to gather together and then instructed them on their few simple tasks.

He was about to do this now when Benoît called his name, and he turned to see the station master coming back to him. Walking in unison beside him – the pair of them looking like the old soldiers they were – was Ernaux.

‘What is it?’ Reid asked Benoît, waiting until the man had regained his breath. He looked at the ribbons – some his own, some his dead son’s – the station master insisted on wearing across the pocket of his uniform.

Benoît cleared his throat and then drew out a cloth to wipe his mouth. Ernaux waited beside him and watched his

friend closely.

‘There are two passengers,’ Benoît said eventually.

‘Oh?’

‘From Amiens,’ Ernaux said.

‘Sent here?’

Ernaux handed Reid an envelope and then took a step backwards. It was all he could do to keep his hand at his side and not bring it rigidly to his temple – something he much appreciated doing, and which Reid occasionally indulged.

‘Where are they?’ Reid asked the guard.

‘Waiting,’ Ernaux said.

‘You sound anxious,’ Reid said. ‘Have they sent us a general?’

Benoît smiled.

‘A general?’ Ernaux said. And then he, too, relaxed and laughed. ‘A general we would know how to deal with. Besides, all the generals are long since gone. All that remain ...’ He left the remark unfinished.

Are men like me and these others, Reid thought, but he said nothing.

‘I only meant—’

‘He knows what you meant,’ Benoît said, but kindly.

Ernaux bowed his head and Reid put a hand on his shoulder. ‘We’ll *all* be gone soon enough,’ he said. ‘One way or another.’

Ernaux glanced at the engine. ‘Not while—’ he said, and again he stopped abruptly.

Reid finally opened the envelope he held. It was a travel authorization with a note attached, written by Wheeler, requesting Reid to give every assistance to its bearers. He folded the sheet and slid it back into the envelope.

‘Are they here?’ he asked Ernaux. ‘On the train, I mean.’

Ernaux nodded.

Seeing his friend’s discomfort, Benoît said, ‘They’re women. Two women. From England.’

‘I see,’ Reid said. They had come before – ‘Pilgrims’, they were called – and they would undoubtedly come again, and in ever greater numbers. The Commission had tried to prevent them from coming, especially at this stage in its vast and constantly expanding plan of works, but had so far been unsuccessful in its efforts.

Reid was distracted from his thoughts by Benoît, who held up his watch to him, suggesting that the task of unloading the train should now begin.

At eight, the small locomotive would be expected to begin its return to Amiens and beyond. The journey to Amiens was only ten miles, but it frequently took over an hour along the damaged track. Beyond Amiens, the timing of all journeys, especially those to the north and east, was considerably less predictable, and on the few occasions when Reid had talked to Benoît of the wider network, the station master had spoken of the distant countryside as though it were now a land completely unknown to him.

Reid started to give his orders to the gathering men, and as he spoke he saw the door of the rear carriage swing open and two women climb awkwardly down on to the platform. Both wore hats and long coats, and both carried cases, which they dropped to the ground and then dragged into the shade of the nearby wall.

2

AN HOUR LATER, Reid returned alone to stand at the far end of the platform and watch the small train depart. Usually, he was joined by Benoît, but on this occasion the man was absent, having been called into his office. Reid knew that whatever detained him was unavoidable; otherwise he would have been alongside him now to observe the last of their small rituals.

There was no sign of the two women or their cases. Reid had sent word to them explaining that he was unable to attend to them during this one vital hour, and that he would search them out later, when the train had gone, its cargo unloaded and his work at the nearby cemetery underway.

There were a dozen or so rebuilt lodging houses and cafés in the small town, and so finding the two newcomers would not be difficult. All he knew from Wheeler's note was that they had the man's permission to be there. But Reid had little time now to consider what they might expect of him as his day's work began.

The train waited, dripping scalding water, and the driver and Ernaux looked down at Reid where he stood and watched them go. Fifty yards further up the line the signal was still lowered, preventing the engine from leaving the station. There was considerably less urgency attached to this part of the day's timings compared to the train's arrival. The traffic beyond Amiens and Saint-Quentin increased almost daily, especially now that the good weather had arrived and the work of either repairing or dismantling the lines could proceed at a faster pace.

There might soon come a time, it occurred to Reid – and certainly when the cemetery and all those others closer to the river were finally completed and filled – when the branch line to Morlancourt would serve no true purpose and so be closed. And if this happened, he knew how swiftly the station and all its halts and boxes would be abandoned and then fall into disrepair. Benoît and his assistants would be forced either to move elsewhere or – and this was considerably more likely – would lose their jobs completely.

‘Are you delayed?’ he called up to Ernaux, who took the pipe from his mouth and shrugged.

‘Talk of a new bridge across the Sailly road,’ he said. ‘They’re moving the materials. Yesterday, the line beyond Dornacourt was closed for six hours to allow for “priority traffic”.’ He gave the phrase its telling note.

‘English?’ Reid asked him.

‘That’s what we heard.’

Reid tried to imagine where on the reconfigured network of tracks the new bridge was going to be built, and then how it might affect his own work.

The driver said something to Ernaux, who listened intently and then shook his head. He tapped his pipe against the open side of the cab.

‘He says we’re being delayed because the bastards at Sailly are deliberately holding up the signals while the track-layers negotiate for better wages,’ Ernaux said.

‘It’s a possibility,’ Reid said diplomatically. He guessed that somewhere, perhaps as far away as Arras or Lille, another line was in more urgent use than their own, and that countless others would also be standing and waiting as they now stood and waited – some frustrated by their unknown delay, but most, he guessed, uncaring and uncomplaining and content simply to wait in the warmth.

A further ten minutes passed like this until a note down the solitary signal wire indicated that somewhere a lever

had been thrown and that the tracks and their traffic were moving again.

‘At last,’ Ernaux called down to him. ‘We shall no doubt see you tomorrow.’

‘No doubt,’ Reid called back, relieved to return to his work.

‘Unless we return to Amiens to discover that the good earth has finally given up the last of its poor treasures and that our Herculean task here is finished.’ It was something Ernaux often said, and Reid always regretted hearing it, largely because the guard expected him to say something equally melodramatic in reply. Once, shortly after his arrival in Morlancourt, Reid had made a remark about the good earth waiting to *receive* the train’s cargo, but even as he’d said it he wished he’d remained silent. Afterwards, he had endured Ernaux’s comments largely in silence or with a simple nod.

The signal finally rattled on its hinge, and beside Ernaux the driver spun his wheel and pulled out his levers. The engine started to move, screeching as it gained traction and then drew slowly away from the platform.

Reid raised his hand to the two men. ‘Until tomorrow,’ he called to them.

‘Until then,’ Ernaux called back.

The engine moved backwards along the track, its empty carriages rattling over the rails.

Reid stood and watched as it began its turn through the gentle curve of the old brickworks cutting and was finally lost to sight.

Leaving the platform, he went first to retrieve his satchel and then to seek out Benoît.

The small office was empty. A kettle sat steaming on the stove, and Reid pushed this to one side. He called for Benoît, but received no answer.

Leaving the building, he returned to where he had watched the gathering men, and saw that though some

were still sitting around on the grass, the majority of them had already gone into the larger of the two goods sheds, where the cargo and their day's work awaited them.

Nothing would begin until Reid arrived and gave his instructions, and until his dockets and the coffins and their contents had been tallied. After that, he would direct the men in their work, and within the hour the shed would be cleared. The men who had been working there for some time would explain everything in further detail to the newcomers among them.

Entering the dim and cavernous space, Reid sensed immediately that something was wrong. The men, rather than wandering among the coffins and boxes and calling to each other of the regiments and units they recognized, were all still gathered together at one end of the building.

Several of them were shouting at each other. Jackets and caps lay on the ground and over the cases where they had been thrown.

Reid called for Drake, his sergeant, and was relieved to hear the man's immediate reply. Everyone turned to look in Reid's direction, and most fell silent at seeing him. He went to them, again calling for Drake.

Drake pushed roughly through the small crowd and presented himself to Reid. Neither man saluted.

'What's wrong?' Reid said.

'The usual,' Drake said. He fastened the buttons on his tunic as he spoke. 'Nothing another few minutes wouldn't have seen sorted out.'

'And by "the usual" you mean ...?'

'I mean some smart alec who insists he should be back at home and sipping tea from a cup and saucer rather than still being stuck out here humping corpses and digging graves all day.'

Reid considered his response to this common complaint. Drake might have recently signed on for another seven years, but most of the men now allocated to the

Commission were peacetime enlisters, none of whom had seen Active Service. And it was always these men – the men who, as Reid saw it, had the least connection and commitment to the work at hand – who complained the loudest.

‘No one is here who has not been rightfully sent here,’ he said, shouting, and hearing the distorted echo of his words in the roof high above him. Narrow shafts of sunlight fell to the bare ground through the holes where lost tiles had not been replaced.

Beside Reid, Drake turned to face the surrounding men. ‘Hear that?’ he shouted. ‘And that’s an actual officer speaking. You might not want to listen to *me*, but you’ll do yourselves no favours by ignoring *him*.’ He turned to Reid and smiled.

Rather than prolong this encounter, Reid lowered his voice and said, ‘Is it anything – anyone – in particular?’

‘Bloody newcomers,’ Drake said. ‘The usual toy soldiers getting their hands dirty for the first time.’

There was some laughter at this. The men in the shed ranged in age from recently delivered nineteen-year-olds to those like the thirty-year-old Drake who had been out there for the past six years. Reid had long since ceased trying to understand how some of these men had found their way to him via the Commission while others were sent out and then called back home without ever leaving their coastal barracks. He wondered if another of his speeches was required, but decided against this. Drake, as usual, was the key to the situation, and he knew from experience that any matter of discipline or discord was best left to the blunt instrument of the sergeant.

‘Would anybody like to add anything?’ Drake shouted after a long silence. ‘Anybody else want to come crying and telling tales to Captain Reid here?’

No one answered him. He was their sergeant. No one ever answered him.

‘Good. Because he’s a busy man. You want him to shed tears over you when he’s got all these other poor mothers’ poor bloody sons to take care of?’ He waved his arms at the building around them. Every word he shouted came back in that same distorted echo. The mounded coffins and cases lay like a barricade across the open doorway.

‘Is that all?’ Reid asked him.

‘For now,’ Drake said. ‘If you’ve got the Registration stuff then we can get started.’

‘Of course,’ Reid said, and pulled the papers from his case.

Around him, the men slowly dispersed and started their day’s work.

3

REID ENCOUNTERED THE two women later that same day. It was early evening, and he was walking along the track between his lodgings and the small wood at Depot Meadow when they appeared ahead of him, rising from the broken line of the embankment and coming directly towards him.

The younger of the two saw him first and stopped walking, reaching out to hold the arm of her companion. It was clear to Reid that his sudden appearance had alarmed her for some reason, and he paused and raised his hand to them, hoping that they might recognize him from earlier.

Having received a wave of acknowledgement from the older woman, Reid continued to where they now stood and awaited him.

‘I’m Captain Reid – James,’ he said.

The younger woman nodded.

‘We were hoping to see you,’ the older one said. She held out her hand to him.

Reid guessed her to be in her mid-thirties, perhaps five years older than himself.

‘I’m Caroline Mortimer.’ She waited for her companion to speak, but the woman said nothing. ‘And this is Mary Ellsworth.’ She motioned for Mary to hold out her own hand to Reid, which she eventually did, drawing it back after the briefest touch.

‘Captain Jessop said we should seek you out,’ Caroline said. She repeated ‘*Seek*’ and smiled. ‘I imagine you’re a very busy man.’

Roger Jessop was Wheeler’s senior aide.

Reid was about to answer her when Mary Ellsworth leaned close and whispered to her companion. After this, the younger woman detached herself and continued walking alone along the path towards Morlancourt.

Neither Reid nor Caroline Mortimer spoke as she went, and only when Mary was beyond their hearing did Caroline say, 'Her grief, her distress, remains a great burden to her. Even after all this time.'

It seemed a convoluted thing to say, but Reid made his simple guesses and understood what she was telling him.

Caroline then took out a packet of cigarettes and offered one to Reid, which he accepted.

'She's here searching for the grave of someone she lost,' Reid said.

'Her fiancé. She's on an excursion ticket. I only met her yesterday, in Amiens. It was Captain Jessop who suggested we travel here together. I've been in communication with him and Colonel Wheeler for some time concerning my own arrival here.'

'I see,' Reid said. Neither Wheeler nor Jessop had mentioned this to him. 'I can show her the Registration lists,' he said. 'Let her try to locate where her fiancé might be buried or destined.' He had done the same for others over the past months. 'Has his body been recovered and properly identified?'

'Missing,' Caroline said. 'Three years, apparently.'

'I see.' He looked along the path to the distant figure. 'Then she's likely to be disappointed.'

Seven out of ten of all the corpses currently being recovered and buried remained unidentified. It was a common average at all the cemeteries in the district. If the man had come from a field hospital or clearing station, then his identity would be known. Otherwise, everything would depend on the work of the Graves Registration units working locally.

‘I know that,’ Caroline said. ‘Colonel Wheeler could hardly wait to see the back of the pair of us. She arrived in Amiens with a party of three dozen others, most of whom were going on to the cemeteries at Bray and Suzanne. Only Mary insisted on coming here. She’d heard from one of her fiancé’s friends that he’d been killed close to Ville sur Ancre and that he would most likely be buried there or here.’

‘If he was found,’ Reid said absently.

There was a small communal cemetery at Ville, and two others already starting to take shape closer to Morlancourt itself. It was just as likely that Mary Ellsworth’s fiancé – *if* his corpse had been both recovered and identified – would be buried in one of those places.

‘It’s seldom so straightforward,’ Reid said. The smoke from their cigarettes formed a small cloud beside them, hardly moving in the still evening air.

‘I understand that,’ Caroline said. ‘But she needs to do something, to see *something* of where he was lost to her.’

‘Of course.’ It was why most of the women and families came, and the best many of them could hope to achieve. For some it was everything; for others it at least satisfied the most urgent and painful of their needs.

Neither of them spoke for a moment, and then Reid said, ‘And you?’

‘What unwelcome burden am *I* about to become to you, you mean? I can see Captain Jessop has told you very little.’

‘Nothing at all,’ Reid said.

‘I see. I was a nursing sister. VAD. I’m here because of the nurses.’ She paused. ‘Colonel Wheeler assured me you knew I was coming.’

‘He makes a great many assurances.’

A month earlier, at one of his regular meetings with Wheeler and other Commission members, the subject had been raised of the burial of twenty nurses, killed at various field hospitals and currently being gathered together so

that they might be buried and then commemorated together. The larger of the Morlancourt cemeteries had been mentioned as a likely resting place for the women, but as far as Reid was aware nothing definite had yet been decided. A great many decisions were left unmade at these meetings, and Reid often came away from them feeling he knew considerably less about what was happening in the plots under his supervision than when he'd arrived.

Caroline smiled at the remark. 'Sorry. Please don't worry, I won't get in your way. I knew most of the women personally - women, girls - and I was contacted by the Commission eighteen months ago in the hope that I might be able to help with all the gathering-in and identifications. I have almost complete records for a great number of dressing stations. I was here for over four years, on and off, and our records are better than most. I daresay Colonel Wheeler imagined it would be one less job for him - you - to have to do.'

'I daresay,' Reid said. 'There was mention of twenty women.'

'Twenty-six are currently confirmed,' Caroline said. 'I'm still searching for another seven.'

'There are discrepancies everywhere you look,' Reid said.

Caroline laughed. 'I'm sure there are. Discrepancies.' She reached out and held his arm for a moment. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean to sound so callous.'

Reid motioned to the fallen trunk of a long-dead tree and they diverted from the narrow path to sit on it.

'If I might be allowed to check my own records against the bodies the Commission has already designated for burial,' Caroline said.

'Of course.' So far none of the nurses had arrived at Morlancourt, and as yet no part of the cemetery there had been designated to accommodate them. It was something he would raise with either Wheeler or Jessop the next time he was in Amiens.

‘I do, of course, realize that the odds are heavily in my favour,’ Caroline said. ‘I doubt if our “missing” or “unidentified” will pose any real problems for you.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

He told her the proportions of each category still being delivered to him from the Commission’s depots. The numbers surprised her.

‘As many as that?’ she said. ‘I’d always imagined—’

‘I think we all did,’ Reid said. ‘The fact is, the bodies that come to us intact and identified *and* with all their relevant paperwork attached are a relative rarity. In the beginning, perhaps, but these days we struggle more and more to make any valid connection. In addition to which, the mix of reinterments and new recoveries varies every week.’

‘I see.’ She watched him closely as he said all this.

‘The Graves Registration people have teams of men still tracking and tracing and looking for every verification that might help identify someone, but all too often ...’

‘That “someone” doesn’t actually exist?’

‘“Human remains”. Perhaps part of a uniform, hopefully some attached and undamaged insignia. The uncorroborated evidence of a man’s comrades, perhaps, but that, too, is an increasing rarity.’

‘And so your priority now is simply to gather in and then to decently bury whatever might remain,’ she said.

‘We know the *names* of all the missing. They’ll be commemorated somewhere, somehow, eventually.’

‘Just not necessarily in the grave Mary wants to kneel beside and grieve over.’ Caroline put a hand to her mouth. ‘That sounded uncaring of me.’

Reid shook his head. ‘In the years to come there will be thousands like her turning up here and at all the places like it, and most of them will be searching for something they’ll never find. I imagine the real trick for them will be to shape and then to temper their expectations.’