

1910

I have finally made it to Belgium. Not just passed through Belgium on my way to France, not just changed planes at Brussels airport while subject to the tender mercies of Sabena. No, I have actually walked on Belgian cobble stones and kept my shoes out of Belgian dog shit.

I found a snow-free weekend last winter and took the train to Ghent (Gent, Gande and so on).

Belgium is a bit of a mystery to most people, including, it would seem, the Belgians. Unlike say France or Holland, there is a lot of confusion as to why this country actually exists. France is for the French and Holland is for the Dutch. But the population of Belgium is both French and Dutch (Walloon and Flemish if you want to be picky). From what I read the two communities don't like each other much, and there is a lot of French and Flemish talk of divorce. It was this that inspired me to visit. I thought I had better get there before the country disappeared into the sinkhole of history.

It would be a shame if it does. I like Belgium. It has fine cities, excellent eating and some of the best beer in the world. And on top of all that it's got lots of language. I get a kick out of countries that have to name everything twice. It makes the linguist in me happy.

When I visited, Ghent's city centre was a bit of a building site. You had to thread your way past big holes in the ground and negotiate muddy footpaths. There was so much mud that the local tourist information office was handing out little shoe-cleaning kits.

When I was a lad the term "Flanders mud" had a special resonance and always made me think of my grandfather who dug trenches in that very same mud. So, as I stepped carefully around the modern-day trenches of Ghent, I thought of the old soldier. As I dimly recall, the British Empire entered WW1 to defend plucky little Belgium from a marauding Kaiser. In the process of driving Willy out of Flanders my granddad received a piece of Krupp's finest and lost the use of his left arm for the rest of his days.

What would my grandfather say if he were to learn that, despite travelling all the way from New Zealand to dig trenches in Flemish mud, and despite sacrificing an actual body part, Belgium had voluntarily dissolved itself? He would say, Give me my arm back.

The Belgian parliament has recently managed, in the midst of their never-ending language contretemps (excuse me Flanders, I mean *verwikkeling*), to find time for the pressing business of banning the burka. I never saw a single burka in Belgium and I guess now I never will.

Presumably Belgium will have to go the way of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. We'll have the countries of Bel and Gium squeezed between Holland, France and Germany. They probably won't want to have the despised euro as their currency so in future I'll have to pay for my *frites* with francs and my *frietten* with guilders

Or maybe they'll have spiffy new currencies to go with their spiffy new countries. Maybe they can run away with the British (also famous for fried potatoes) who are just dying to divorce the EU but haven't yet plucked up the courage to be impolite and tell the Continentals where, precisely, they can put their Lisbon Treaty.

1910 redux. Poor old granddad.