



## Critic's Choice

Stefan Boness' photography reveals the impermanence of tragedy's scars, says **Andrew Mead**

In his superb book *In Europe: Travels Through the Twentieth Century* (Vintage, £9.99), the Dutch historian Geert Mak criss-crosses the continent, visiting sites of momentous events, creating a subtle dialogue between past and present. His travels take him to places of tragedy or horror that today look unexceptional, perhaps even benign, as evidence of the past dissolves or becomes indecipherable. 'The cars race by, the birds sing songs of spring. This is how oblivion works,' says Mak.

I was reminded of Mak's book by a sensitive new volume of photographs, *Flanders Fields* (Bildschöne Bücher, £28), by Berlin-based photojournalist Stefan Boness. His subject is the Ypres region in Belgium, where so many Allied and German soldiers died in the First World War. Like Mak, Boness scrutinises the landscape for signs of the past. Alongside conscious reminders in the form of cemeteries with their serried graves, or marble slabs with their roster of names, are ominous structures like the concrete bunker at Langemark (*pictured below*), which now serve as surrogate memorials. While you soon realise that a pool of water in a patch of woodland was once a shell crater, some scenes seem to be simply agricultural – until the caption explains their significance. Perhaps the farmer still finds evidence of past conflict in them, but not the passerby. Fields are ploughed, crops flourish, and a golf course springs up by a graveyard. As Mak says, 'This is how oblivion works.'

