CHAPTER 2

In Flanders with No Baedeker:
Beaman, Forster, and Ford

[The British] have long since surrendered at discretion to the value of [Karl Baedeker’s] unfailing exactitude; and Fliegende Blätter has a picture of an English paterfamilias finding the picturesque castle on the right and the foaming waterfall on the left, instead of vice versa as asserted by his infallible Baedeker, and exclaiming to his flock, “Why, this scenery is all wrong!”
—Review of Baedekers in Travel (1908)1

[In Richard Ford’s Gatherings from Spain (1846)] you have a picture of human life which is none the less exciting because it has ceased to be true to actual fact. After all, the best guide-books to read are guides to nothing but themselves.
And so we may rule out the actual facts as irrelevant to our pleasure.
—Review of Baedekers in the London Times (1925)2

Three weeks into the Great War, a list of German casualties in the London Times included this improbable notice: “It is reported that Herr Karl Baedeker, the publisher of the famous guide-books, has been killed in action” (“German News” 5). The most famous Karl Baedeker (1801–1859) had started publishing in Coblenz in 1827. By 1914, the family business had passed to his youngest son, Friedrich (Fritz). The man killed in 1914 was Fritz’s son, also named Karl, while the guidebooks still appeared under their founder’s name (Mendelson 394–95, 401). Evidently the Times had confused one Karl with another. Yet this report, however erroneous with regard to the youngest Baedeker, metonymically foretold a more widespread trauma—for the books themselves would become war casualties. In January 1916, Findlay Muirhead (coeditor of Baedeker’s English-language volumes with his brother James F. Muirhead) announced a new series of guidebooks
to replace the German ones, which, it was supposed, would have no postwar readership in Allied countries (“British Baedekers” 3).

More importantly, the war called into question the Baedekers’ positivist methodology of narrative physical place. Certain prewar fiction records the stakes of this methodology, and several postwar texts chronicle its apparent demise. In between, Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* (1915) prophetically encodes the war’s challenge to Baedekers. Writing on the cusp of the war and before his military service, he posits an alternative method of topographical representation, one based on material signifiers and relational knowledge, asserting the inscrutability of experience and the inadequacy of narrative deixis. The key to his method is a belt of wampum beads. This key, when recontextualized to the war and the trajectory of the Baedekers’ literary reception, unlocks a larger story about the position of the modernist material object in the topographical contours of modernity’s Great War.

“*Infallible Baedeker*”

Much of the Baedeker story has become familiar thanks to the seminal work of Paul Fussell, continuing through that of James Buzard, Edward Mendelson, and Rudy Koshar, among others. As they have observed, Baedekers were in their heyday before the war, providing highly popular travel guidance in an age of burgeoning travel. According to Mendelson, Karl Baedeker had seen how guidebooks of the early 1800s typically offered either simple lists of tourist destinations without any historical or practical context, or overly elaborate discussions of what to see and how to feel when seeing it. “Karl Baedeker chose a middle way,” Mendelson explains; “he gave his readers precisely the information they needed to find their way cheaply and conveniently, and precisely the information they needed in order to appreciate what they saw. He trusted them to provide their aesthetic and emotional responses for themselves” (389). Additionally, Baedeker addressed the reader traveling without a human guide, by giving crucial data on foreign customs, transportation fares, room and meal rates, tipping, and a wealth of like subjects. For example, the 1913 edition of *Northern Germany* begins with twenty-seven pages of advice on languages; currency; passports and customs; railways; motoring and cycling; sample itineraries; hotels; mail, telegraph, and telephone services; and a nineteen-page essay on North German architecture and painting from Romanesque to rococo (xi–xxxviii).

Baedekers owed their phenomenal popularity, however, to more than the scope of their information. Early evaluations attributed their success to an empirically based, objective narrative framework. Karl Baedeker personally verified the accuracy of his books, researching the first volumes himself. For