Remembering, Commemorating, and Preserving the History of World War I

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History 323

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December 3, 2014

“The two offices of memory,” said 18th century poet and essayist, Samuel Johnson, “are collection and distribution.” In this hundredth year since the start of the First World War, nations across the globe have endeavored to collect and distribute the memory of the 20th century’s first deadliest global battle, and one that set in motion many of the power struggles that exist today.

In reading WWI books and articles, watching documentaries, and listening to podcasts produced by various countries over the course of this year, it has been both amusing and fascinating to observe controversies that have lingered over the century: who or what started the First World War? Is Germany solely to blame? Was America the “Hail Mary” savior of the Allies? Can we trace the origins of WWII to WWI? In less academic corners of the WWI community exists controversies sparked by various attempts by governments and museums to bring the war to public consciousness. Primarily: is the First World War too sacred to commemorate through documentaries that present the war in general, bite-sized parts, or through period dramas and novels? Are the only voices allowed to speak about the war those of veterans and survivors? Does the use of WWI history by major corporations desecrate memory? [[1]](#footnote-1)

Yet, in sifting through the memory of the First World War—in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States in particular—one finds wildly different perspectives, which in turn leads to wildly different interpretations of how to accurately preserve, interpret, and commemorate the war. Or, in the case of the United States, how to preserve, interpret, and commemorate a war the greater populace doesn’t even remember and indeed, conflicts with the narrative of a nation forged in a melting pot.

One hundred years after its beginnings (and ninety-six since its end), there are no more living veterans on whom to rely for first-hand accounts, thus allowing their descendants and unrelated parties the privilege of shaping the memory of WWI and even, as historian Eliah Bures states, using the war to shape “broader beliefs about the truth of warfare in the modern age.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* picks apart the lasting influence of WWI on British society and its memory of the war, commenting that “at the same time the war was relying on inherited myth, it was generating new myth, and that myth is part of the fiber of our own lives.” [[3]](#footnote-3) Early in the text he quotes from Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, published in 1929, where the American hero Frederic Henry bitterly declares “abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.” Thoughts more accurate to the decades after the war and tightly entwined with the new myth about the memory of the war also fostered by the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*.

In mid-2013, English journalist Harry Mount stressed that the truth of the war wasn’t as simple as triumph and pride, or tragedy and sorrow; “there is no correct default attitude…the only people who could justifiably have a claim on it—those who fought in the war—are all dead now. And so are nearly all of their children.” [[4]](#footnote-4) Yet, segments of the British public, many of them distant descendants of WWI veterans, continue to lay claim to what is and what is not the correct attitude, with an almost fetishistic reverence similar to that seen in Tony Horowitz’s *Confederates in the Attic*.

At the forefront of this “amateur” remembrance is The Western Front Association, founded in 1980 by a military historian “to educate the public in the history of The Great War” and to “perpetuate the memory, courage, and comradeship of those on all sides…during the Great War.” [[5]](#footnote-5) The 6,000+ strong membership of the WFA boasts of professional historians and enthusiasts, as well as academics and museum professionals, many of whom have shaped the commemoration of WWI over the past thirty years.

When in late 2013, the BBC unveiled ambitious plans for 10,000 hours of commemorative and celebratory programming over the course of 2014-2018, the expertise and artifacts of WFA members and regular Britons alike were sought. Director-General Tony Hall declared “This season is going to have a profound impact on the way we think about World War One. On television, on radio and on digital, we’ll be exploring how this conflict, above all others, shaped our families, our communities, our world – and continues to influence us today.” [[6]](#footnote-6)

The televised debates offering differing perspectives on the war, radio broadcasts and podcasts, and period dramas shown throughout 2014 educated and entertained, but visibly struggled to move beyond the myths promulgated in the decades after 1918. The striking art installment of over 880,000 ceramic poppies in the Tower of London’s moat, entitled Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red, [[7]](#footnote-7) only reinforced Britain’s memory of WWI as the tragedy of men killed in the flower of youth, of lions led by donkeys, and of senseless slaughter. Indeed, any deviation from popular memory of war was met with a barrage of criticism—made easy to share and build upon via social media—, of which war nurse drama *The Crimson Field* fell afoul in early 2014, prompting the BBC to axe it (in what was assumed to be shame) after six episodes.

In stark contrast with British preservation of memory is the Australian and New Zealand view of the First World War. Their combined forces were called ANZAC, or Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, and called up in 1915 to fight on the Mediterranean Front. In Britain, the Gallipoli Campaign is generally regarded as an unmitigated disaster; in Australia and New Zealand, the role played by the ANZAC troops has formed a strong, distinctive part of their national identity. Their “bravery at Gallipoli is seen to exemplify idealised virtues that lie at the heart of [Australian] self-identity.” [[8]](#footnote-8)

Academic deconstruction of this myth is hampered by the public *and* by the government, whose official commemoration website reflects the Australian memory of war. It is estimated that over $600m AUD is to be spent on Australia’s four-year commemorative efforts, of which half is expected in private donations. The official voice of the commemoration, The Australian War Memorial, was created in 1916 by Charles Bean, an historian and journalist appointed official war correspondent to cover the ANZAC contribution to the war. The current director, Dr. Brendan Nelson, expresses the vision for the events, building upon the Australian myth about the war and “the scars it left and the pride we felt when we emerged from the other side. The events that took place 100 years ago meant a lot to us then and means a lot for our future… The sacrifices of the past reflect who we were then, who we are today, and who we want to be for the future.” [[9]](#footnote-9) (The main branch of the Imperial War Museum in Britain, which was established immediately after the Armistice, offers a broader perspective of war).

In even greater contrast to the somber reverence of the British and the aggressive bombast of the Australians is the memory of the First World War in the United States. On September 10, 2012 a bill was introduced to Congress for the World War I Centennial Commission Act. It was quickly passed in late December, and was enacted after being signed by President Obama on January 14, 2013. The absolute lack of fanfare surrounding this bill or the upcoming commemoration characterizes the memory of WWI in the US, and the emphasis on fostering local and individual memory over national is peculiarly American. The ending line of the bill: “No Federal funds may be obligated to carry out this Act”[[10]](#footnote-10) is almost comical beside the $300m AUD apportioned by the Australian government for their commemorative activities (compare the American Expeditionary Force’s 100,000+ casualties to the ANZAC’s 60,000+ [[11]](#footnote-11)).

America’s faded memory of the First World War is longstanding, beginning with the unfinished construction of a National Victory Memorial in Washington, D.C. President Harding and WWI General “Black Jack” Pershing laid the cornerstones in 1921, but public interest disappeared, as did government funds, and plans were forgotten.[[12]](#footnote-12) Art historian Mark Levitch has estimated there may be 10,000 WWI memorials neglected, vandalized, and forgotten in the United States, of whom 2,000 he has recovered by his own time, interest, and funds. [[13]](#footnote-13)

Alex Byrne, a PhD student in the Department of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Nottingham, critiqued the American commemorative effort, opining that “it is as if present day events are mirroring the initial reaction of the past, in that the ‘European War’ holds the nation’s interest but is not to be engaged with directly; only the American experience will be taken into account.” [[14]](#footnote-14) Byrne notes Levitch’s project, as well as an upcoming exhibit at The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia plans to open a new exhibition “which aims to demonstrate how the war impacted upon the work of artists within the United States.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Byrne’s critique offers a fascinating perspective of an outsider, particularly in addressing how the United States plans to remember their neutrality until April 1917, but it is doubtful that the US knows how to preserve and commemorate the First World War. Primarily when local and national memory is so poor (as publishers discovered when releasing novels and non-fiction about WWI—“we don’t have the same immediate grasp of the iconography of World War I…the Great War has never been well understood by Americans and has been traditionally overshadowed by…WWII.” [[16]](#footnote-16)).

However, the steps taken by the West Virginia University Reed School of Media to commemorate and preserve the Kimball War Memorial is promising, though its initial decline and destruction by fire in 1991 is indicative of America’s habit of forgetting the past—particularly the past shared by minorities. The building was erected in 1928 in the heart of Kimball’s African-American community to memorialize the 1500 African-American soldiers who served in WWI, and “housed an auditorium with a small stage, a library, meeting rooms, kitchen facilities and a trophy room with displays of plaques dedicated to veterans.” [[17]](#footnote-17)

In recent years, the local community and WVU have dedicated their time and efforts to the restoration of the Memorial. Dr. Joel Beeson of WVU has assisted his students in conducting oral histories of life in McDowell County and recovering photographic evidence of the Memorial’s use from the late 1920s to about 1980. [[18]](#footnote-18) “The world needs to know about this,” said Ellis Ray Williams, a combat veteran of World War II and resident, in response to Beeson’s project. “The world hears the ‘bad things’ about West Virginia. This building is a symbol.” [[19]](#footnote-19)

Just this past summer, historians of WWI have attempted to connect the First World War to current events that resonate in the American consciousness. In a symposium presented by The History Channel, The National WWI Museum in Kansas City, and the Centennial Committee, Dr. Chad Williams, Dr. Graydon Tunstall, and Dr. Mitch Yockelson placed the war in the context of the troubles in the Middle East and present acts of terror, and the early segment with a war correspondent on location in the midst of the Israel-Gaza conflict almost revised the war, compressing it into in a post-9/11, America-as-heroes narrative. [[20]](#footnote-20) This, the aims of the federal commission, as well as Byrne’s critique of US memory, presents a similar conundrum faced by the committee of the National Holocaust Museum, where they struggled against non-Jewish interpretations of the Holocaust as another story in the history of genocide and not as a uniquely Jewish experience. [[21]](#footnote-21) Yet, compared to Britain and Australia’s heavily nationalized myths, which have become the standard attitude and response to WWI (at the risk of censure for deviating from this), perhaps the localized, individual remembrance and preservation *is* America’s method of interpreting the war.

Memory and preservation of a great event like war is often used to assert national identity—think America’s reverence for the Civil War and WWII (out of which came the “Greatest Generation” according to Tom Brokaw), or the aforementioned ANZAC pride. Even Britain’s somber view of the war mirrors the popular cult phrase “keep calm and carry on.” As the plans for commemorative events and exhibits moves in 2015 and beyond, it will be fascinating to watch how modern-day historians, museum professionals, governments, and even entertainment corporations adjust their concept of “memory” to shape the desires and interest of their audience. Or, will the impact of the internet and social media, both of which allows us to cross geographic and technological boundaries, draw each commemorative event into a global context over an individual, nationalized one? By 2018, the framing of the war in each county will be less murky and piecemeal; it shall hopefully reflect both who we are in that day and who we were in the past.

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