

Centenary (Education, Pedagogy, Youth Programs)

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Summary

The centenary of the First World War revealed palpable anxieties around a loss of connection to an event that was now 100 years old and without any living survivors. As a result, a good degree of top-down and bottom-up activity targeted young people for they, as the next generation, have to bear the responsibility of carrying memory forward. This article examines different formats and patterns of delivery, who was involved, the methods of funding used, and the debates provoked from a range of local, national and international examples through the prisms of education, remembrance, creativity and connection.

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Introduction: Connecting a New Generation

As Deacon et al. state: “Heritage is often defined as ‘what we value’ or ‘what we wish to pass on to future generations’...heritage represents what we have almost lost and what we wish to call on as proof of who we are and where we wish to go in the future.”¹ The centenary of the First World War – understood as one of the largest heritage projects of modern times, albeit with varying levels of emphasis dependent largely upon whether a nation was on the side of victory or defeat by 1918 – might be best understood as a moment of heightened anxiety about the future of [First World War memory](#). It revealed palpable anxieties around loss – particularly a loss of connection – to an event that was now 100 years old and without any living survivors. As a result of this foreboding threat of forgetting, a good degree of top-down

and bottom-up centenary activity targeted young people for they, as the next generation, have to bear the responsibility of carrying memory forward.²

In [Britain](#) and the Commonwealth, remembrance of the war, since its inception in autumn 1919, has been understood as a pedagogical exercise for children.³ A century later, on 19 February 2019, the UK government characterised the essential purpose of its four-year national centenary programme in generational terms: “As there are no surviving veterans, the commemorations focused on connecting new, younger audiences to the legacy of the War through arts and education initiatives.”⁴ In 2005, Daniel Todman accurately predicted that, at the time of the centenary, Britons would “still be convinced that they should care about the First World War”.⁵ What was fascinating about the range of commemorative activities organised was the degree to which – through a range of educational, creative, performative, diplomatic, touristic, and sporting events – the emphasis was placed on convincing a *new* generation that, 100 years later, remembering the First World War still mattered.

Although many of the centenary projects that targeted young people (defined broadly as anyone up to the age of eighteen years old) launched in 2014 had their origins in the preceding years, the flurry of activity took flight as soon as the commemorative period officially began and grew exponentially over the four year period, with a number of activities continuing beyond November 2018. This overview cannot hope to capture all that took place across the major belligerent countries involved in the First World War. Instead, using examples of top-down activity that emerged, or were given heightened profile, during the centenary period drawn from [Britain](#), [Ireland](#), [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#), [France](#), [Belgium](#), [Germany](#), [Turkey](#) and the [United States](#),⁶ it seeks to provide a flavour of the different types of projects and programmes through the prism of their major objectives: to educate (about the history of the war); remember (the dead); create (artistic, musical, and dramatic outputs); and connect (young people with the war and with one another). It will examine different formats and patterns of delivery, who was involved, and the methods of funding from a range of local, national and international examples. With particular focus on the UK and Australia, it will discuss the contested place of First World War history in communicating ideas about the “national self” to the nation’s future – its children. Consideration will be paid, where evidence exists, to the need to recover children’s voices, rather than the scripts provided for them.

Educate

The two major educational activities aimed at creating a new sense of connection between British young people and the First World War were framed around the well-established

practice in history education of “a carefully crafted enquiry question” – an intriguing and worthwhile key question that governs a sequence of lessons or activities and which students are ultimately required to answer.⁷ The Great War Debate was funded jointly by the Departments for Education and Culture, Media and Sport and delivered by a private education consultancy firm, Hopscotch Consulting.⁸ Aimed at A-Level students (aged sixteen to eighteen years old) these interactive panel debates were held at local venues around the UK with an historical attachment to the war, such as former military [hospitals](#) and recruiting offices.⁹ Between June 2016 and March 2018, eighteen debates took place, covering topics such as the [origins of the war](#), soldiers’ resilience, [the war at sea](#), the [Eastern Front](#), the [experience of women](#), and state-controlled [propaganda](#). It reached over 2,100 students.¹⁰

The cornerstone of the British government’s youth-focused commemorative activity was the First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme, which cost £5.3 million. It was provided by the Department for Education, formerly the Department for Communities and Local Government,¹¹ in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence. Delivered by UCL Institute of Education and Equity, a specialist provider of group tours for educational institutions, it was designed to give the opportunity to at least two students, aged predominately eleven to fourteen years old, and one teacher from every state-funded secondary school in England to [visit the battlefields](#) in a four-day tour of the major battlefields and memorial sites on the [Western Front](#).¹² Just over 4,500 students from 1,811 schools participated between September 2014 and March 2019.¹³ Each coach on the tour was led by an accredited International Guild of Battlefield Guide accompanied by a serving soldier from the British Army and a member of Equity staff. The tour content was framed around three enquiry questions covering social (the impact on ordinary people), military (the [Battle of the Somme 1916](#)), and cultural (remembrance and commemoration) aspects of the conflict.

National level educational battlefield tours as a means to engage young people in the history and memory of the First World War were not invented during the centenary period. In response to concerns that the majority of Canadians did not understand the significance of the victory of the Canadian Forces at Vimy Ridge in April 1917, the Canadian charity, the Vimy Foundation/ *La Fondation Vimy*, was established in 2006. Its central mission is to educate young Canadians on “their First World War history” through domestic and overseas educational programmes in Belgium and France, notably the Beaverbrook Vimy Prize (a two-week learning experience for young Canadians aged fifteen to seventeen years of age) and the Vimy Pilgrimage Award (a week-long intensive educational programme for young people aged fourteen to seventeen years old who have demonstrated a commitment to voluntary

work).¹⁴ School groups in Australia have been undertaking pilgrimages to First World War battlefield sites since the 1920s.¹⁵ Its more recent incarnation, the Simpson Prize, which is “a national competition for Year 9 and 10 students [fourteen to sixteen years old]” that “encourages participants to explore the significance of the Anzac experience and what it has meant for Australia”. This is a twenty-year old competition (established in 1998), funded by the Australian government’s Department of Education. The prize is a week-long tour of the battlefields of the Western Front in April (incorporating [Anzac](#) Day commemorations).¹⁶ Another long-standing educational battlefield visit for young people can be found in Germany. Since 1953, the German War Graves Commission (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*) – a part government, part privately funded organisation – has organised international youth exchanges and work camps in German war cemeteries throughout Europe under the motto “Work for peace – reconciliation above graves”.¹⁷ During the centenary, the *Volksbund* education centres in Belgium, France and Germany ensured that exchanges had a specific focus on the First World War.¹⁸ Across Canada, Australia and Germany, young people have been given the opportunity to travel to battlefield sites associated with the war; these activities were given a heightened profile during the centenary.

Unsurprisingly, for all [museums](#) with a focus on the First World War, the centenary was a unique opportunity to utilise related collections for educational purposes, particularly in an effort to highlight the relevance of the museum – and the First World War itself – to a new generation of visitors. Museums, by their very nature, are educational institutions and education – although not the only function of a modern museum – has long been an important and increasingly specialised feature.¹⁹ The Imperial War Museums, in the UK, for example, has long provided for schools in the form of guided tours, learning sessions curriculum-mapped for specific subjects, and free-to-download resources; the centenary, and the newly refurbished First World War galleries which opened in the summer of 2014, breathed new life into these educational resources.²⁰ In Flanders Fields Museum – a museum dedicated to the study of the First World War housed in the Cloth Hall in the centre of Ypres, Belgium, since 1998 – drew on the expertise of their existing Education Service, working closely with its in-house Office for Peace and Development, to offer programmes and projects to young visitors from around Europe during the centenary. One example was “[Langemarck mythe](#)”, a three-day programme (including a visit to the German Military Cemetery in Langemarck and the museum itself) organised in collaboration with the city of Langemarck for 105 young people aged sixteen to eighteen years from the UK, Germany and Belgium exploring the power of propaganda, encouraging them to be “conscious of the dangers of war

propaganda” while presenting “a very strong message of peace”.²¹

Museums also saw the centenary as an opportunity to try new and innovative methods for engaging young people in the history of the First World War. *Te Papa Tongarewa’s* special exhibition, in collaboration with Peter Jackson’s Weta Workshop, “Gallipoli: The Scale of Our War/*Karipori: Te pakanga nui*” which opened in April 2015 has an accompanying learning programme for New Zealand school children aged eight to eighteen years old, running until the exhibition closes in April 2022. “Gallipoli Perspectives” begins with an educator-led tour through the exhibition where the students are encouraged to “read” the emotional state of the eight ordinary New Zealanders (portrayed in the form of larger-than-life figures) that make up the exhibition. The students then engage in a process of 3D scanning to portray these emotions, which can be converted onto simple Virtual Reality platforms to be used back at school as writing or art prompts.²² The National Museum of Ireland in Dublin hosted an exhibition on the Irish experience at [Gallipoli](#) in 1915 (which ran between 2015 and 2017) accompanied by a “site specific immersive” theatrical experience produced by Anú Productions, in partnership with the museum, the National Archives of Ireland, and the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht. Directed by Louise Lowe, “Pals: The Irish at Gallipoli” ran originally from 2 February to 30 April 2015 and told the stories of four young recruits of the 7th Battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and those that they left behind.²³ Students from across Ireland, aged between fourteen and seventeen years, found themselves at the heart of the action as the soldiers/actors fired poignant questions from the battlefield: “would Ireland be proud of us?”; “what sort of leader would you pretend to be?”²⁴

Remember

Within many of these educational activities, remembrance of those who were killed or died as a result of the war (primarily the [military dead](#)) was a significant characteristic. The first evening of the “*Langemarck mythe*” programme included attending and participating in the Last Post ceremony in Ypres.²⁵ Discussions have emerged regarding the degree to which the First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme engaged young people in the history of the war or instilled a repertoire of certain commemorative practices securing the future of First World War remembrance, or both. Whether the two are, should, or even can be, mutually exclusive, remains in question.²⁶ This speaks to wider debates in the British context about the relationship between education and remembrance, particularly in regard to Holocaust Education.²⁷ Similar concerns have been raised in Australia and New Zealand.²⁸

A number of initiatives aimed at young people during the centenary were explicitly about

remembering the dead. In January 2014, Turkey's Ministry of Youth and Sports organised a march to commemorate the [Battle of Sarikamis](#) building on the inaugural "Youth on the Trail of Martyrs" the previous year. Tens of thousands of young people commemorated the dead of the battles of Sarikamiş, Çanakkale, Malazgirt, and Dumlupinar by walking a two-hour route along the Allahuekber mountains culminating in a ceremony at the newly built Sarikamiş Martyrs' Memorial.²⁹ Describing the [losses](#) as a "renowned feat of martyrdom by the Turkish military", the Ministry anticipated 15,000 young people would honour "the sons of this land who died in their thousands" in an act of remembrance designed to "remind our country of these losses".³⁰ Traditional tropes of sacrifice, reverence and respect were accompanied by symbols of remembrance, such as [poppies](#) and crosses. In April 2014, then British Prime Minister David Cameron joined schoolchildren in planting poppy seeds, available as part of a £100,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund,³¹ to commemorate the centenary of the outbreak of the war. He described it as "a great idea that will help the next generation understand the significance of what happened during the First World War and commemorate the sacrifice of those who died".³² Six months later, the final ceramic poppy - number 888,246 - of the acclaimed installation "Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red", at the Tower of London, was planted by thirteen year old Harry Hayes, dressed in his cadet uniform of beret and fatigues, on 11 November 2014. Because of his youth, he was described in the press as "the perfect choice to complete this most powerful act of remembrance for those who died in the Great War".³³

In 2015, The Fields of Remembrance Trust - a New Zealand charity established in 2012 to honour the 18,200 New Zealanders who died during the First World War - partnered with the Ministry of Education to "support all schools and *kura* [Māori-language immersion schools] commemorating the sacrifice of our veterans in the first modern war" by providing them with the opportunity to establish their own fields of white crosses, similar to the one erected on the front lawn of Parliament in Wellington to mark the start of the centenary period in August 2014.³⁴ Each educational institution was given a remembrance kit; thirty white crosses bearing the names of local soldiers and nurses, recipients of the Victoria Cross, the youngest New Zealander killed in the war, and an All Black captain. One cross was labelled "known unto God" to commemorate the "unknown soldier".³⁵ The accompanying guide recommended that the crosses be laid out in a field before hosting a ceremony in the presence of representatives of the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services Association and members of the New Zealand Defence Force, reciting poetry such as [John McCrae \(1872-1918\)](#) "In Flanders Fields", singing hymns like "Abide With Me", and laying red poppies.³⁶ Nearly 80,000 white crosses were supplied to 2,531 Primary and Secondary schools; in 2016, mini white

crosses were supplied to 4,600 Early Childhood Centres.³⁷ For one school in Otahuhu, Auckland their White Cross Ceremony “was a visual and poignant occasion when the students could participate and remember this important part of our history”.³⁸

Create

Many youth-focused centenary activities, especially in Britain and the Commonwealth, were notable for their tradition, utilising rituals of remembrance (such as moments of silence and the red poppy) embedded in popular culture since the 1920s. But the commemorative period was also marked globally by numerous new [installations, art pieces and performances](#) commissioned specifically for the centenary. Young people were central to many of these creative endeavours encompassing music, drama, creative writing, art, film, and animation. In August 2014, two youth choirs (in Llanelli, Wales and Ulster, Northern Ireland) marked the centenary of the outbreak of the war with performances of new compositions and well-known wartime tunes.³⁹ Patrick Hawes’ “The Great War Symphony”, a new choral symphony in aid of the Armed Forces charity SSAFA, brought together a number of UK-based youth choirs at its world premiere at London’s Royal Albert Hall on 9 October 2018.⁴⁰ This was closely followed by the Department for Communities and Local Government-funded National Children’s WW1 Remembrance Concert at the Genting Arena in Birmingham where 2,000 children, dressed to resemble two giant remembrance poppies, were supported by an orchestra of 160 young musicians from across the UK.⁴¹ Drama was also a popular method of involving young people in the centenary commemorations, as seen above in the example from the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin. In Flanders Field Museum hosted a variety of theatre productions – both new performances and established texts such as [R.C. Sherriff \(1896-1975\) *Journey’s End*](#) – for young audiences.⁴²

Other activities included creative writing competitions and art installations. During the centenary, more than 11,000 young people from around the world created poetry, artwork, and songs as part of a First World War commemoration project led by the charity, Never Such Innocence founded in March 2014 by Lady Lucy French, great-granddaughter of Field Marshal Sir [John French \(1852-1925\)](#) who led the [British Expeditionary Force](#) between 1914 and 1915. According to General Sir Gordon Messenger, Vice Chief of the Defence Staff of the British Armed Forces between 2016 and 2019:

anything that connects the, sort of, youth of today to such an important part of history, anything that builds, sort of, respect for the sacrifices of the past in the young of today, and anything that can, frankly, bring out the sorts of creativity...has to be a fabulous thing to

support.⁴³

100 years after the Battle of Messines, on 10 June 2017, thousands of candles were lit in the middle of the historical crater landscape of Heuvelland by schoolchildren in West Flanders as part of a multimedia installation “the Kraterfront” by Kosovan-born landscape artist Shelbatra Jashari and Canadian experimental music collective, Godspeed You! Black Emperor, as an ode to how light – and youth – can breathe new life into the region’s war-torn landscape.⁴⁴ Perhaps the most ambitious international example of an art-based commemorative project was “ComingWorldRememberMe” or “CWXRM”.⁴⁵ Over the course of the centenary, thousands of people from Belgium and abroad created a clay sculpture – named “New Generation” – representing one of the estimated 600,000 victims who died because of the conflict in Belgium recorded on the In Flanders Field Museum Names List.⁴⁶ Not only were many young people involved in the creation of these sculptures (including those UK students participating in the First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme) but children were central to the compilation of the names themselves. In 2018, the sculptures formed the basis of a land art installation on the former battlefield of Flanders.⁴⁷

Film production was incorporated into many commemorative projects involving young people, engaging participants in the history of the war through their digital literacy. “Yours Sincerely”, created by students of Tyne Metropolitan College, North Tyneside, in collaboration with the local Voluntary Organisations Development Agency and the Heritage Lottery Fund, used a collection of letters written by Private [Ralph Daghish \(1888-1915\)](#) who served in the Northumberland Fusiliers during the war as the basis for their seven-minute film.⁴⁸ Primary school pupils from Roeselare, Belgium, explored, presented and shared their ideas on the First World War through the medium of animation. Supported by professional audio-visual artists, the children created a graphic characterisation based on a historical theme drawn from their own local history of the war. “The Great War through the eyes of a child” was viewed by the 2016 jury of the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage/ Europa Nostra Awards as

an effective way to... inspire empathy and solidarity in the children for the people who endured these hardships. This is especially useful in Belgium where the First World War’s vast legacy is so present that there may be a risk of overexposure and therefore desensitisation to this troubled history and was awarded the top prize for education, training and awareness-raising.⁴⁹

Connect

Many of the activities outlined above had a strong emphasis on connecting the past, present and future. Some projects, like “ComingWorldRememberMe”, were explicitly future facing; each person who made a “New Generation” sculpture was asked to donate to charities working with children injured in contemporary conflict. More commonly, emphasis was placed on connecting present-day generations with the First World War, transcending time itself in an effort to make the war relevant to young people today. Locality was the usual conduit for traversing the 100year time gap. Projects such as the First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme and In Flanders Fields Museum Names List both used place as a way to connect young people with those who died in the war, encouraging young people involved in their projects to “collect” names and explore the stories of those killed in the conflict associated with the young person’s town, village or school district. Similarly, “My Adopted Soldier” founded in 2015 by a history teacher in Co. Donegal, Ireland, enabled a group of thirty-two students from both Northern Ireland and the Republic to “adopt” a soldier from their individual counties and spend three days retracing their steps on the Somme

battlefields of northern France.⁵⁰ New Zealand’s “Walking with an Anzac” project was another attempt to build engagement with the history of the war at a local level. Via educational school kits distributed to over 800 schools, students and teachers were encouraged to use records available at the Online Cenotaph at Auckland War Memorial Museum to look at those who served in the war from their community. By asking the students questions like “I wonder if he walked the same route to school that you did?” it helped to build engagement and relevance.⁵¹ The degree to which these activities were successful in traversing 100 years of history is harder to gauge. In the United States, the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission (in partnership with the non-profit education organisation, National History Day) created the online presentation and mapping exercise “Who They Were”, an activity geared towards engaging young people in exploring and sharing stories of their local First World War generation. Launched on Veteran’s Day 2018 (11 November), it had only accrued ten submissions within two years, suggesting that America’s “forgotten” war remains relatively hidden from its nation’s youth.⁵²

The prevalence of place and individuals as a way of making the past seem closer to the present can perhaps be attributed to a wider phenomenon in the recent memory boom: the growth of interest in family history.⁵³ Fuelled by a democratisation of access to the [archives](#) in the global north via recent technological developments alongside increased affluence and leisure time, there has been a growing desire to locate “family stories in bigger, more universal narratives.”⁵⁴ It is also reflective of the recognition across all Humanities subjects,

but particularly History and Literature, that students should be encouraged to foster their capacity for empathy; and the First World War is an excellent context in which to develop this skill.⁵⁵ Such programmes raise additional questions: can similar activities take root in countries where records are less freely available or virtually non-existent? And to what extent does this sympathetic identification with the past eulogise certain aspects while eliding what remains uncomfortable and troubling?⁵⁶

Yet youth-focused centenary activities were also about connecting young people with each other. Emphasis was not only placed on transcending time but also space, particularly across borders. Between January and May 2015, students of TED Mersin College in southern Turkey participated in a Gallipoli remembrance project in 2015 that connected them with families of Anzac soldiers through [letters](#). The aim of this project was to “establish a bridge of peace between Turkish and Australian youth”⁵⁷ in the spirit of the contentious 1934 “Johnnies and the Mehments” speech incorrectly attributed to [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk \(-1938\)](#) but entrenched by decades of Anzac mythologisation, poor translation, and diplomatic convenience.⁵⁸ Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, in November 2015 two young person’s pipe bands, one from Northern Ireland and one from the Republic, met in Co. Mayo in West Ireland to share their research into pipe music and pipe bands in the First World War. The aim “was to form a cross border link between both bands, sharing music and culture”⁵⁹ and is testament to the significant sea change in Irish popular understanding of the war sparked in part by the Provisional-IRA bombing of Remembrance Day in Enniskillen on 8 November 1987. There is now a better understanding of the shared heritage of the sacrifice of all Irish people during the war that in itself is used – as in the example above – as a basis to help reconcile the two major traditions (nationalism and unionism) of the whole island of Ireland.⁶⁰

Local level examples, such as these, were replicated exponentially on the international stage throughout the centenary. At both the start and end of the commemorative period, large-scale youth workshops were held linking into the contemporary political agenda of a peaceful EU-orientated Europe. In May 2014, “Europe 14/14” took place in Berlin, primarily funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and co-organised by the Federal Agency for Civic Education, the Robert Bosch Foundation, and the Körber Foundation. Over five days, 400 young Europeans from forty nations came together to “look back and think forward”, investigating the significance of the First World War to national identity and modern-day Europe as a joint peace project.⁶¹ Four and a half years later, in November 2018, hundreds of young people from across Europe met again in Berlin to develop present-day ideas for peace in the light of issues raised by the end of the First World War, organised by the Franco-German Youth Office – an exchange organisation created in 1963 as part of the reconciliation

between France and Germany after the two world wars – under the patronage of the German Federal Foreign Office and France’s Mission Centenaire 14-18.⁶² “Workcamp Soltau-Costermano” was a primarily German-Italian youth exchange programme hosted by the German War Graves Commission in 2014. It brought young people together from different countries to “get to know one another in a spirit of reconciliation by learning about history and taking care of war cemeteries”, incorporating visits to Soltau Camp in Hanover – the German Empire’s largest First World War [prisoner of war camp](#) – and *Campana dei Caduti* (Peace Bell) at Rovereto, Trentino in Italy.⁶³ The Peace Village Messines, Belgium, also hosted a youth exchange programme in August 2018 (“18 in 18”) uniting 112 youngsters (who turned eighteen that year) out of the fifty-six countries that were involved in the conflict in Belgium. Over a week they visited sites linked to the Great War, attended workshops and lectures, and spent time together working collaboratively to produce creative contemporary peace messages presented at the end of the project.⁶⁴ The willingness of young people to participate in such events – to talk, exchange, collaborate, and work together towards peaceful ends – stood in contrast to the evasion of such diplomatic opportunities during the centenary by certain world leaders.⁶⁵ Less antagonistic than recent responses to environmental activism, the centenary might be understood as symptomatic of a generational discrepancy between political elites and young activists.⁶⁶ This was articulated by some young people involved in centenary projects who were increasingly cynical of remembrance if wars “just keep going and will never end”.⁶⁷

International youth exchange and cooperation was also fostered during the centenary through museums (e.g. In Flanders Fields Museum “schoolmatch.easier1418” tool),⁶⁸ creative arts projects (e.g. Never Such Innocence “Together” competition for German and British youth),⁶⁹ sports matches (e.g. Premier League Academies, Big Ideas and German War Graves Commission “Football Remembers WW1” involving young footballers from the UK, Belgium, Germany and France),⁷⁰ and joint participation at major anniversary vigils (e.g. Amiens Cathedral, 8 August 2018).⁷¹ While the majority of these encounters successfully combined contemporary relevance and engaging activities with respect for the dead and a sense of sobriety, there was one notable anomaly. In 2016, a meeting marking the 100th anniversary of the [Battle of Verdun](#) between French President François Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel was accompanied by thousands of French and German children running through the gravestones to the backdrop of drumbeats. Choreographed by German filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff as part of a large-scale exchange programme organised by the French Mission Centenaire, the Franco-German Youth Office, and the German War Graves

Commission, it was designed to symbolise the chaos of the battle but was met with widespread condemnation for its “indecent” and “bad taste”.⁷²

Proof of who we are? The UK and Australia as case studies

It is perhaps unsurprising that centenary commemorative activities led by organisations representing the governments of France and Germany – committed to European integration as a peace project – were marked by their outward looking, inclusive, and international flavour. “Commemoration for the purposes of present politics is nothing new”, whether based on “historic traditions” or created afresh for a major anniversary.⁷³ Collective remembering of the courageous deeds and heroic sacrifices of the soldiers of a nation is one of the main components of national identity.⁷⁴ As formal and informal education have proved repeatedly to be key devices for the development and transmission of a sense of nationhood, it becomes clear that the way young people were exposed to the history and memory of the First World War during its 100th anniversaries through state-endorsed educational and commemorative programmes – however broadly defined – tells us something about the types of narratives a nation-state wanted its “future” to be fully conversant in.⁷⁵ This has proved to be contentious in the UK and, particularly, Australia.

On the eve of centenary of the outbreak of the First World War, the British Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, was relieved of his duties. A controversial figure, he had taken an extremely Whiggish historical perspective on the question of curriculum design insisting on an “island story” that located a common thread of British history from the Magna Carta to the present day in liberal constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy.⁷⁶ Only a month before his departure, he had unveiled plans to ensure British schools actively promoted and respected “British values”: democracy, the rule of law, liberty, respect and tolerance.⁷⁷ A number of commentators were therefore pleasantly surprised when the centenary programme revealed in early 2014 appeared to embrace broad and inclusive activities based on a “new patriotism” witnessed during the London 2012 Summer Olympics: support for a British identity that embraced diversity and was comfortable with an ethnic and cultural mix.⁷⁸ A number of youth-focused centenary activities were reflective of this broader trend, attempting to expose young people to lesser known histories of the conflict, particularly from the perspective of colonial participation. These tended to be funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, rather than the Department for Education, who viewed the milestone anniversaries as an opportunity to promote integration and community

cohesion.⁷⁹

Through such Department for Communities and Local Government-funded initiatives, like the First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme, young Britons were encouraged to consider the multicultural make-up of the British Army during the First World War and to “remember that the mutual tolerance and respect we value was bought at a price”.⁸⁰ The Department for Communities and Local Government also partnered with Big Ideas – a company which develops and delivers projects for public participation – to deliver a number of commemorative initiatives focusing on the “forgotten histories” of imperial service in the war, such as “The Unremembered” which commemorated the Labour Corps focussing specifically on youth under the mission statement: “towards a common future, while remembering the past”.⁸¹ Local and community level projects, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, particularly through its Young Roots scheme, followed suit viewing the centenary as an opportunity to expose young people to the origins of Britain’s multi-cultural society.⁸² “Empire, Faith & War” (2014 – 2016) was a project, led by the UK Punjab Heritage Association and guided by a youth panel, that aimed to commemorate “the remarkable but largely forgotten contribution and experiences of the Sikhs during this epochal period in world history” through an exhibition, film, publications, and educational materials for schools.⁸³ British Future (an independent think-tank that seeks to involve people in conversation about identity, integration, migration and opportunity) and New Horizons for British Islam (an organisation working for reform in Muslim thought and practice) collaborated on “Unknown & Untold”, raising awareness of the “400,000 Indian Muslims who gallantly fought during The Great War as part of the British Army” in order to “honour their bravery and ensure their remembrance but also to reveal the rich legacy of Muslim contribution towards the culture and identity Britain enjoys today”.⁸⁴ Through workshops and oral history interviews with descendants of First World War [Indian soldiers](#), young people were encouraged to reflect upon their identity and place in contemporary British society.⁸⁵

At the start of the centenary, [Santanu Das](#) issued a stark warning of the need to challenge the colour of memory and avoid the impulse of reducing the complexity and diversity of colonial experience into well-worn stereotypes that serve particular political and ideological purposes.⁸⁶ A focus on memorialising the feats of “imperial heroes” risks whitewashing the brutality of British [imperialism](#).⁸⁷ Such activities are susceptible to accusations of tokenism and “imperial nostalgia”, and demonstrate a failure to appreciate that debates about the war’s legacies are deeply entangled with those of British colonialism.⁸⁸ Furthermore, it can be interpreted as part of a worrying trend in British politics – evident before the centenary but

given renewed zeal since the vote to leave the European Union in June 2016 – to celebrate the period of empire and reveals a melancholic longing for a “glorious past”.⁸⁹ As racism and [xenophobia](#) return to the centre of western politics it is concerning that particular narratives of the First World War – ones that overlook more complex and contentious issues of wartime racial hierarchy, exploitation, and mistreatment – are given a privileged position in the school history curriculum in the UK while simultaneously a focus on the history of the realities of British imperialism and colonialism is absent.⁹⁰

The centenary of the First World War was not the first time the content of the history curriculum hit the headlines in Australia. As Anna Clark wrote in 2008: “Significant national anniversaries such as Australia Day or Anzac Day trigger almost annual public discussions about the subject in schools.”⁹¹ The [Anzac tradition](#) – the mythologization of the exploits of young Australian soldiers during the First World War (particularly at Gallipoli) who performed heroically for their “new” nation formed only a generation earlier – lies at the heart of Australian national identity.⁹² As a result, it is a central feature of the nation’s “history wars” regarding the significance of the “national story” and how it should appear in classrooms.⁹³ Since the early 2000s, “a veritable tidal wave of military history” has engulfed the nation, with particular concern expressed by some of Australia’s leading historians over the role of the Department of Veterans’ Affairs in ensuring Australian schoolchildren fulfil their role as “inheritors of the Anzac spirit and its custodians” through the torrent of curriculum materials they send to primary and secondary schools.⁹⁴ Students assume that a “militarised national identity” is “intrinsically Australian” disseminated through lessons that generated nationalist sentiment rather than historical understanding.⁹⁵

It is unsurprising that the Department of Veterans’ Affairs remained a key player in shaping the memory of the First World War in Australia during the centenary, particularly since Prime Minister John Howard authorised its dedicated Commemorations branch with a substantial increase in funding in 1996.⁹⁶ As well as developing significant educational resources, they continued to hold a variety of competitions including Anzac Day Schools Awards and the Simpson Prize, discussed above.⁹⁷ In October 2017, the Minister for Veterans Affairs, Dan Tehan, sent to schools and universities the 2018 Department of Veterans’ Affairs commemorative calendar and a book *Comradeship: stories of friendship and recreation in wartime*, written by Kathleen Cusack (2017).⁹⁸ Other key institutions, such as the Australian War Memorial, the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, and the Anzac Memorial in Sydney all utilised the centenary as an opportunity to maximise their profile.⁹⁹ Australia’s main

veterans' body, the Returned and Services League of Australia, also got involved through its "Bears to School" scheme. Sponsors donated a Great War teddy bear (in replica Anzac uniform) and accompanying school pack to every Australian primary school in an effort to connect young people with "the pride and spirit that is carried in our history" through the use of a "non-threatening prop".¹⁰⁰

Perhaps no more evidence of the militarisation of school history is required than the distribution of replica "Anzac" teddy bears to every primary school in Australia. Plenty of Australian teachers have attested to the difficulty of resisting the attractive, easy-to-use, and state-endorsed education resources from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. In July 2010, the Australian National Commission on the Commemoration of the Anzac Centenary invited members of the public to submit suggestions as to how the nation should mark the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign. One response, from ten year old Daniel on behalf of his classmates, suggested that in their identification with the story of Anzac, schoolchildren have been imbued with a new sense of patriotic pride and unquestioning acceptance that their nation was "made" in war. His benign, sentimental suggestions included:

in every city in the country there should be an Anzac Day show with tours, movies, show bags and traditional customs. We could...have a family picnic for old veterans and their families... [I] hope all Australians can enjoy the Anzac Day

Centenary.¹⁰¹

But what do they really think?

This article has provided an overview of top down remembrance practices crafted by government institutions and cultural agencies using a range of transnational examples. What exactly is the response of children targeted by the commemorative assault during the centenary? This is a woefully under-researched area, although the role of education as a site of memory – and the agency of young people in these processes – is of burgeoning interest to scholars across History, Education, Sociology, Critical Military Studies, and Memory Studies.¹⁰²

Studies conducted during the centenary of the First World War in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand evidence examples of young people conforming to, reshaping, or occasionally subverting the scripts provided for them during commemorative activities. In many of the examples cited above, particularly those that are public-facing and with an "ambassadorial" role (e.g. representing their school on a government-funded battlefield tour or laying a white cross during a remembrance ceremony), the young people involved had limited agency. They

were discouraged from asking the question: why should we do things just because we always have? Little space was offered within these rituals to consider the purpose of war, military involvement in contemporary society, or which narratives of war are being commemorated at the expense of others. On the whole, young people were socialised into an established set of protocols framed by the state to maintain collective national identity.¹⁰³

Creative activities perhaps had the most potential for young people to reshape the meaning of remembrance into something more personal to them. The Ypres-based “ComingWorldRememberMe” art installation allowed individual participants to create a sculpture representing a message of their design. However, the dominant tropes that resonated with young British participants interviewed in 2015 were very traditional: loss, sacrifice, and respect. The sculptures were predominantly moulded to represent an individual soldier or group of soldiers and were seen as part of the same ritual as laying a wreath.

However, there were examples of subversion within these practices. For one British student, interviewed in 2015, the act of making a clay model was vacuous: “well it’s just a clay model at the end of the day. I mean, I’m not sure anyone is going to look at it and realise it’s a soldier on the Somme.” For another, the act of sculpting a model allowed more freedom of interpretation than laying a wreath in a pre-rehearsed ceremony; in his mind his model “could be a German or British soldier. [It] could be anyone.” Some young participants on the First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme were able to display critical thinking skills. A British student interviewed in 2017 reflected on the moral complexity of being a soldier: “they save their country but at the same time they kill another .” Others questioned the Anglo-centric nature of the tours; by focusing on the British experience and British soldiers “we were sort of given impression that it was us against them which I feel is not how you should look at it a hundred years on.”¹⁰⁴

Taken alongside studies into youth responses to Anzac Day in Australia and New Zealand, it is clear that young participants, from across these three nations, were capable of simultaneously holding a range of views on war remembrance and commemoration that were not confined by the restrictive binaries of militaristic/anti-militaristic, pro/anti-war, nationalist/internationalist, patriotic/unpatriotic.¹⁰⁵ It is worth reminding ourselves that young participants are not simply passive participants in their learning and decision making. Perhaps the more interesting – and most difficult to answer – question is that of the opinions of young people who remained on the periphery of centenary commemorations. Like the wider public, most young people who got involved in centenary commemorations did so because they already had a vested interest in the subject and its commemoration. What can we decipher from those young people who remained indifferent? What did their silence and

inactivity say about their views of wartime commemoration?

Conclusion

This article has attempted to provide an overview of the vast range of youth-focused centenary activity that took place between 2014 and 2018, taking examples from across local, national and international spaces including Britain, Ireland, France, Belgium, Germany, Turkey, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. It is impossible to provide a comprehensive picture of all that took place, but particular patterns of activity can be discerned around the themes of education, remembrance, creativity and connection. Of course, there was overlap between these categories; examples discussed above could be both educational and creative; concerned with remembrance and connecting young people; and as much about remembrance as connection, if not containing all four features simultaneously. It is difficult to find an example of an educational project aimed at young people during the centenary that does not also incorporate an element of remembrance.

What a nation-state believed to be the meaning of the war at its 100th anniversaries played a prominent part in the types of narratives communicated through associated projects. For many former belligerent nations (or nations that emerged from former empires), the centenary was an opportunity to encourage young people to reflect on the purpose, meaning, and value of the conflict. As a result, military sacrifice was often revered, feeding into existing concerns about the militarisation of childhood through practices of war commemoration. In some ways, the messages young people, particularly from Britain and the Commonwealth, were told about the purpose of remembering the First World War remained remarkably consistent over the 100-year period; there is little difference between the 1919 expression of “dear bought freedom” and contemporary rhetoric like “they died so we could be free”, routinely expressed by young Britons, Australians and New Zealanders involved in commemorative activities during the centenary. The stories a nation tells its future citizens about war (First World War or otherwise) form an important part of national identity. In Turkey, the centenary was an opportunity to stir up national pride amongst its youth around the “forgotten” Ottoman victory against the British at [Kut al Amara](#) in April 1916; in 2017, the “victory” was added to the Turkish 8th grade curriculum and the anniversary inserted into national education calendars.¹⁰⁶ The centenary also revealed, particularly in Britain, deep-seated political anxieties about national identity in the face of increasing multiculturalism.

But this overview has also highlighted how youth centenary activities offered the opportunity to challenge certain state narratives about the war, making them more nuanced. A good number of examples involving young people sought to emphasise the futility and tragedy of

the war, directly contradicting any notions that the war “had purpose”. Many activities transcended national borders (and thus commemorative navel-gazing), bringing young people together in “ambassadorial” roles working towards peace, mutual respect, and cooperation.

There is no “one size fits all” way to engage young people in the history and memory of the First World War and even questionable examples, such as the “grave dancing” at Verdun in 2016, were simply using creative methods to hold the attention of a new generation at a temporal distance from the war. Young people enhancing their understanding of history can only be a good thing; but these examples have also highlighted the “added value” of activities taking young people beyond the confines of learning about the past. They enabled participants to travel, build digital literacy, experiment with their creative flair, and develop interpersonal, communication, and research skills. In many cases, the activities provided the opportunity for young people to be recognised and rewarded for their efforts through open competitions. As a result, perhaps one of the key outcomes was empowerment and confidence-building. As one parent of a young man involved in a Heritage Lottery Fund project in the UK described: “I cannot believe my son is getting involved in a film, let alone the starring role, he would never had had the confidence before.”¹⁰⁷

It is impossible, at this stage, to quantify the lasting impact of these youth-focused centenary activities on education, pedagogy and young peoples’ understanding of the First World War more generally. Owing to the relationship between evaluations and future funding success, post-project assessments tend to emphasise the positive outcomes. Some of the projects detailed above have been deemed so successful that they are continuing, in amended form, beyond 2018. It is worth remembering that History teachers worldwide have a lot more to cover in their classrooms than the four and half years of the First World War. Intensified focus on this single event during its anniversary period risked skewing priorities within and beyond the classroom; on the eve of the centenary some English secondary school teachers even expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by the amount and variety of material available to them on the subject, particularly online.¹⁰⁸ Attention will soon be turning to the next set of major world war anniversaries. This article has demonstrated that young people – as vessels of memory – were central to the centenary commemorations of the First World War because of their roles as inheritors, custodians and disseminators of the war’s heritage and meaning. There is no reason to suspect the situation will be any different in 2039.

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Notes

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Citation

Catriona Pennell: Centenary (Education, Pedagogy, Youth Programs), in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2021-02-18. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11506

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Author Keywords

Youth; education; remembrance; creativity; connection; national identity

GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Kollektives Gedächtnis](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918 ; Collective memory](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Mémoire collective](#)

Key Person(s)

[Sherriff, R.C.](#); [McCrae, John](#); [Daglish, Ralph](#); [Kemal, Mustafa \(Atatürk\)](#); [French, John Denton Pinkstone, Earl of Ypres](#)

Key Location(s)

[Gallipoli](#); [Berlin](#); [Heuvelland](#); [Langemark \(Langemarck\)](#); [National Museum of Ireland in, Dublin](#); [London](#); [Messines](#); [Llanelli](#); [Roeselare](#); [Sarıkamış](#); [Wellington \(Te Whanganui-a-Tara\)](#); [Ypres](#); [Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa](#); [Soltau](#); [Ulster](#); [Auckland \(Tāmaki Makaurau\)](#); [Campana dei Caduti Rovereto](#)

Title

Centenary (Education, Pedagogy, Youth Programs)

Author(s)

[Catriona Pennell](#)

Article Type

Handbook Article

Classification Group

Survey Article (Thematic)

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