

# Centenary (Libraries)

By [Matthew Shaw](#)

**Libraries (local, specialist, and national) contributed in numerous and important ways to commemorative activities during the centenary of the First World War. These included making use of their collections, their spaces and monuments, the expertise of their staff, and their connections with local communities and other groups. Commemorations included digital as well as analogue projects. Many libraries provided improved access to their collections through new cataloguing projects, online exhibitions, and digitisation programmes. While at the forefront of many commemorative activities, libraries' contributions were at times overshadowed by other projects during the centenary.**

## Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Libraries and Commemoration](#)
  - [2.1 Exhibitions](#)
  - [2.2 Co-Production](#)
  - [2.3 Collections and Collection Development](#)
  - [2.4 Digitisation](#)
  - [2.5 Memorials and Other Physical Commemoration](#)
- [3 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

## Introduction

To commemorate the centenary of the First World War, libraries of all kinds made use of their physical space for a wide range of activities, developed and explored their collections, and played a particularly significant role in the digitisation of materials sourced from both their own collections and private collections held by members of the public. While sometimes overshadowed by other cultural or research organisations in terms of their wider profile and assessments of the centenary, libraries' established presence in villages, towns, and cities, particularly in Europe and North America, meant that few other institutions could engage with members of the public or provide communities with opportunities to undertake commemorative activities on a comparable scale. This article provides an overview and assessment of the types of commemorative activities libraries undertook. In terms of scope, it considers libraries of all kinds, from local public libraries to national and transnational digital libraries, as well as libraries with archival collections. While acknowledging the global range of commemorative activities, this article focuses on Australasia, [Britain](#), continental Europe, and North America over the centenary period of 2014-2018.

## Libraries and Commemoration

It is not uncommon for libraries to trace a connection to the First World War in terms of destruction and [commemoration](#). The

burning of the University of Leuven library in August 1914, for example, was a profound moment in the cultural and [propaganda](#) history of the war, as were the efforts to preserve the riches of numerous religious and other libraries in [Belgium](#) and [France](#) during the conflict. After the war, many libraries became sites of commemoration, hosting commemorative plaques or other memorials to the sacrifices of life made during the war. Others were built in honour of the war dead.<sup>[1]</sup> Libraries and library collections also emerged out of the war, especially in [Germany](#) and [Austria](#). Many of these “*Kriegssammlungen*” (war collections) were “rediscovered” in the course of the centenary.

Partly prompted by funding bodies and national commemorative committees, this tradition was revived in the 2010s, as libraries again played an important role in the memorialisation of the First World War, notably in digitisation and other online projects, but also by organising and hosting events, collecting and displaying materials related to the war, and through community engagement during the centennial anniversary of the conflict. Academic, research, and public libraries across Europe and North America also cooperated on numerous local, national, and international projects. They operated as organizational hubs for regional commemorative activity, as with the State Library of Queensland’s support for and hosting of Q ANZAC 100, which included research fellowships alongside a raft of digitisation and community projects and exhibitions as well as a focus on indigenous participation.<sup>[2]</sup> It is impossible to do justice to the range of commemorative work undertaken by libraries, given the number of events and institutions and the lack of a central register, but a number of common themes or approaches can be identified.

## Exhibitions

Libraries provided venues for exhibitions and displays of all kinds. Many of these focused on local history and the impact of the war on the village, town, or region, but other organising themes were also used, often in partnership with other organisations. In February 2016, for example, the Bibliothèque et Archives Canada collaborated with the Hockey Hall of Fame/Temple de la renommée du hockey for an exhibition on the effects of the war on wider society through the lens of its impact on the world of hockey and, in particular, the lives and careers of players and supporters. The exhibition demonstrated how male and female hockey players participated in the war and [research](#) by archivists on those listed in the hall of fame highlighted those who served. The exhibition underscored the contribution made to the war effort by Canadians and the pride that citizens should have in this contribution, as Guy Berthiaume, then librarian and archivist of [Canada](#), explained at the exhibition’s launch. Commemoration often took a national perspective, such as a focus on the special contribution to the motherland in Canada, the local, familial cost in France, the war’s contribution to the formation of national identity in [Australia](#), or the “forgotten” nature of the war in the [United States of America](#). Such concerns can be detected in the manner in which libraries framed their commemorations.

This combination of presenting new research and memorialisation within one exhibition was also seen in other commemorative projects. Many exhibits used library and archival resources to attempt to engage a public which might need guidance in understanding the connections between the present and the past: an act of [education](#) as much as memorialisation. In Canada and other countries geographically distant from the battlefields, the [memory](#) of the war’s local, physical presence was less apparent, even if families could still feel the effects generations later. Library activities in these locations tended to focus on explaining what the war was and what its consequences were. In Europe, libraries were often located geographically close to this history and thus could speak to collective memory. Conferences and talks such as “*Traces de la guerre 14-18 à Lille. Vies, mémoires, corps, rues...*” organised at the Bibliothèque municipale de Lille, which offered five conferences on the subject of the [occupation](#), underscored such physical proximity and relevance to local identity. Along with a smartphone app, the library also hosted a display of materials (November-December 2018). Similarly, the libraries of the Oise recalled the years of occupation in a series of displays, talks, workshops, and conferences.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Co-Production

In such ways, libraries underscored local collective memories, whether of region, city, or more intimate communities. As well as drawing on their own collections, libraries offered space, expertise, and facilities to display or digitise materials belonging to members of the public. On a transnational level, Europeana 1914-1918, which built on the work of the Oxford University IT Services’ community collections days, ran a series of collection days across Europe.<sup>[4]</sup> Numerous more modest, but locally significant, projects also drew on materials from the local community, such as a series of displays at Coursan libraries in the

Midi in France and drop-in sessions “along the lines of an antiques roadshow” at Argyll Libraries in Scotland.<sup>[5]</sup> This “community collection” method was adopted more systematically across France, with departmental collection days organised by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) and Les Archives de France as “*La Grande Collect*” from the autumn of 2014.<sup>[6]</sup> Other “community generated content” included creative responses to the conflict, such as the Motherhood, Mourning and Loss project in the United Kingdom (UK), which concluded with a display of poems, [artworks](#), and other responses in the Wohl Library of the Institute of Historical Research or Sefton Library’s “Beyond the War Memorials” poetry competition.<sup>[7]</sup>

Such displays, events, and other activities represented a collaboration between librarians, archivists, a broad range of local historians, members of the public and, on occasion, professional historians. Some training was offered, such as by The Word in South Tyneside and RunCoCo (Oxford) in the UK and by Europeana more widely, to local organisations or library staff; national library organisations such as the UK’s Cilip offered encouragement, but it seems safe to conclude that the majority of events relied on the existing skills or interests of library staff and their collaborators, at least in the UK.<sup>[8]</sup> While collection development and research and information skills training drew on core competencies of library staff, the running of talks, exhibitions, and other events decentralised the act of curating the centenary. Such events may have had community activities and a form of sentimental patriotism, rather than a critical engagement with history, at their core. Funding streams may also have influenced the nature of commemorating the centenary.<sup>[9]</sup> For example, Padgate Library, Warrington, a former “Blighty Club,” attempted to recreate the original “Blighty Clubs,” which offered a space for returning soldiers to socialise at the end of the war. Participants were provided with a “Blighty Club Box,” which contained bunting and memorabilia, installed a “Tommy” statue at the centre of the library display, and created a “curtain of poppies.” Like other cultural organisations, libraries may have seen the centenary to some extent as an instrumental activity, as much about supporting a set of strategic aims or existential challenges as understanding the past and building a more peaceful future. Self-reflexivity among libraries could, however, be found [online](#), as blog posts gave librarians and curators the space to explore collection items and their institutional history in more depth than provided by exhibitions and displays. The Wellcome Library in London, for example, examined its approach to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war exhibition through a blog post in 2014 on its catalogue published in 1964, which offered “insights into collection and display priorities at the Wellcome Institute 50 years ago.” It highlighted the academic audience to which exhibitions were directed at that point, in contrast to the broader publics of the centenary.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Collections and Collection Development

The Wellcome Library’s blog post also underscores the factors that influenced collection development (in this case, British material was retained by the military for future use, but German material could be acquired and the output of war artists and photographers was key in presenting British history). Libraries also drew on their existing collections, developed over time, and reflecting the assumptions and biases of librarian predecessors, legal deposit, or collection development policies. Many collections containing original [letters](#), diaries, or other materials reflected the aims of donors, or in the case of the India Office Materials held at the British Library, the national concerns and agendas of earlier bureaucracies. Exhibitions had to draw on these existing collections, or on occasion augment by loan or purchase, and resulting displays were shaped in some way by these constraints. Similarly, curators were mostly likely drawn to the most visual or novel materials to display, such as photographs, illustrated volumes, and visual materials. An example of this is the posters that provided the basis for a series of exhibitions based on the Roger N. Mohovich Collection at Georgetown University Library in the United States, focusing on [propaganda](#) such as “First Call: American Posters of World War One” and “Take Up The Sword Of Justice: British Posters of World War One.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Libraries also turned to their own collections and their potential use by researchers and members of the public, drawing attention to existing collections through displays, blog posts, and cataloguing enhancements, as with the index to the roll of honour in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow, as well as through collection development work and the creation of special guides and bibliographies.<sup>[12]</sup> Training sessions on researching the war, often with an emphasis on family history, were also offered by a number of libraries. More specialist training was also provided, drawing on the expertise of academics, such as the Women and Trauma Workshop held at the Glasgow Women’s Library in 2019.<sup>[13]</sup> Libraries could also organise reading groups around the theme, such as the “Great War | Great Read” at Kansas City Public Library, which partnered with the National World War I Museum to organise readings and discussions in 2014 of works including [Erich Remarque’s \(1898-1970\) \*All Quiet on the Western Front\*](#) and [Barbara W. Tuchman’s \(1912-1989\) \*The Guns of August\*](#).<sup>[14]</sup>

## Digitisation

Drawing on their collections, technical experience, and expertise allowed libraries to make a significant contribution to the legacy of the centenary by making materials available online through bespoke and mass digitisation projects, such as Cymru’N Cofio - Wales Remembers 1914-1918.<sup>[15]</sup> Such work posed certain challenges, particularly in relation to copyright: although a significant amount of time had passed since the war began, many items remained under copyright or had uncertain copyright status. In the UK, unpublished manuscript material remains under copyright until 2039. Libraries responded to these issues with attempts to clear copyright, publishing on a risk-based approach, and, in the case of the British Library and Europeana Collections 1914-1918, making use of the new EU Orphan Works exception, a legal innovation allowing, with certain conditions, libraries and archives to digitise materials after attempting to locate their rights holders, which was introduced during the course of the centenary.

As with the assumptions and factors that lay behind libraries’ collection development over the years, selection of material also needs to be considered. Projects such as Europeana Collections 1914-1918, which digitised over 400,000 items, sought to be as inclusive as possible, deliberately included materials in numerous languages from all sides of the conflict, and attempted to represent colonial involvement. As well as seeking items from across Europe, the project was able to explore the war’s global dimension, notably by digitising materials originally held by the India Office and including the censors’ transcripts of thousands of [letters](#) sent by soldiers from the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, gaps in relation to the African experience remain.

Recognising the difficulties to users and the limits of non-mediated mass digitisation for potential public engagement, digitisation was often combined with curatorial activity, such as the creation of themed collections, online exhibitions and guides, as well as significant effort placed on identifying users and, in particular, young people and schools.<sup>[16]</sup> Many sites, including Europeana Collections 1914-1918, created websites aimed at these groups, along with specialised teaching resources.<sup>[17]</sup> Many digitisation projects also sought to provide a range of means of searching and discovering materials online, adding metadata to online “union catalogues” such as Europeana and the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). Wider awareness of these sites, compared to the leading search engines, however, remains limited, even among researchers. The long-term preservation of and access to these sites also remains a question. The possibility of a UK-exit from the EU without a withdrawal or transition agreement put materials using an Orphan Works exception at risk and, although the institutions involved in Europeana Collections 1914-1918 were asked to sign a letter of intent to continue to support and make the digitised materials available, it remains to be seen how institutions provide long-term support and digital preservation for these resources. Various web archiving projects, such as the Internet Archive, the UK Web Archive, the French e-legal deposit, and others provide a safety net of sorts, although these are sometimes limited in terms of access to material, and give a certain amount of hope and even expectation that these projects will still be useful in a hundred years’ time, despite the political, environmental, and technical challenges that they will no doubt face. Libraries, of course, are also critical partners in the digital preservation efforts that increasingly underpin our digital infrastructure.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Memorials and Other Physical Commemoration

Libraries explored their physical and architectural heritage during the centenary. Many libraries are memorials in and of themselves, built or renamed in memory of the war, or containing memorials of various kinds, notably rolls of honour for the war dead, such as that in the foyer of Hove Library, Sussex, UK. The Hove Library roll consists of a brass plaque listing 631 names, with associated records and photographs held in the library, along with an online record.<sup>[19]</sup> The staff and visitors’ entrance to the British Library contains a memorial to librarians who perished in the First World War, created by the Library Association and formerly kept in the British Museum. Staff gathered in front of the memorial for two minutes of silence on 11 November through the centennial period. The names on the memorial have also been linked to records and photographs online through a crowd-sourced project.<sup>[20]</sup> In addition, libraries have long been the location for the sale of commemorative [poppies](#) in the UK.

In these ways, libraries might be a site of memorial and of reflection. The British Library, for example, in common with many other British libraries and cultural institutions, fell silent after an official announcement on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of November and put on display the fair copy manuscripts of “For the Fallen” during the Lights Out memorial in 2014, marking the outbreak of war between the Entente and Central Powers. Libraries continued to contribute to the memorialization of the war

across the centenary, with activities taking place at least until 2018, such as the marking of the centenary of the 1918 armistice when NATO deposited a copy of the organisation's founding Washington Treaty in the Peace Library in Paris after the international ceremony of remembrance at the Arc de Triomphe on 11 November 2018.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Conclusion

As these examples suggest, libraries made an important contribution to centennial commemoration in terms of public engagement and understanding and also in reflecting on the nature of commemoration and its preservation. The British Library, in its capacity as a member of the UK Web Archive consortium, curated an extensive collection of legacy commemorative websites and encouraged Heritage Lottery Fund grantees to give permission for their related sites to be harvested and made available. In France, the BnF worked with its partners, Direction des patrimoines, de la mémoire et des archives du Ministère des Armées; the Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg; and the Bibliothèques d'Amiens Métropole, to identify a "large number" of internet sites and blogs within the French internet legal deposit collection, which are made available in a number of libraries across France and its external departments.<sup>[22]</sup> Efforts to collect materials related to the centenary, such as by the Wohl Library of the Institute of Historical Research, have created lasting collections for the future study of how the centenary was commemorated and, in particular, how authors and publishers responded. Along with contributing to the four years of the centenary, libraries have created a legacy of online and physical archives and catalogues which will continue to serve as a memorial in the future.

Matthew Shaw, The Queen's College, Oxford

Section Editor: [Bruce Scates](#)

## Notes

1. ↑ Bibliothèques de guerre, in: L'Influx 22 (November 2012), online: <http://www.linflux.com/monde-societe/histoire/bibliotheques-de-guerre/> (retrieved: 11 March 2021). Gerdes, Aibe-Marlene: Ein Abbild der gewaltigen Ereignisse. Die Kriegssammlungen zum Ersten Weltkrieg, Essen 2016; Westerhoff, Christian (ed.): 100 Jahre Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, 1915-2015, Stuttgart 2015; Hiller von Gaertringen, Julia (ed.): Kriegssammlungen 1914-1918, Frankfurt a. M. 2014; Didier, Christophe (ed.): Orages de papier, 1914-1918. Les collections de guerre des bibliothèques, Paris 2008.
2. ↑ Q ANZAC 100, issued by State Library of Queensland, online: <http://www.qanzac100.slq.qld.gov.au/home> (retrieved: 3 June 2020).
3. ↑ Cent ans plus tard les bibliothèques se soutiennent..., issued by Médiathèque départementale de l'Oise, online: <http://mdo.oise.fr/la-mdo/a-la-une/2435-decouvrez-le-programme-des-commemorations> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
4. ↑ Prytz, Ylva Berglund: Running a WW1 School Digital Collection Day, online: <http://blogs.it.ox.ac.uk/runcoco/2018/04/04/school-digital-day/> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
5. ↑ La Bibliothèque et la commémoration 1914-1918, in: Midi Libre (26 November 2013), online: <https://www.midilibre.fr/2013/11/26/la-bibliotheque-et-la-commemoration-1914-1918,788446.php> (retrieved: 11 March 2021); "We Will Remember Them": The Legacy of Argyll and Bute's Centenary Commemorations, issued by Argyll and Bute Council, online: <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/%E2%80%98we-will-remember-them%E2%80%99-legacy-argyll-and-bute%E2%80%99s-centenary-commemorations> (retrieved: 4 March 2020); In Their Own Words: Kent Voices of the First World War, issued by Kent County Council, online: [https://www.kent.gov.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0015/31308/In-Their-Own-Words-Kent-Voices-of-the-First-World-War-exhibition.pdf](https://www.kent.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/31308/In-Their-Own-Words-Kent-Voices-of-the-First-World-War-exhibition.pdf) (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
6. ↑ La Grande Collecte, issued by la Bibliothèque nationale de France et les Archives de France, online: <http://www.lagrandecollecte.fr> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
7. ↑ Shaw, Matthew: Motherhood, Loss and the First World War, issued by the Institute of Historical Research, online: <https://blog.history.ac.uk/2018/10/motherhood-loss-and-the-first-world-war/> (retrieved: 3 March 2020). Competition: Pen a Poem to Commemorate the End of WW1, issued by Sefton Council, online: <https://mysefton.co.uk/2018/08/06/competition-pen-a-poem-to-commemorate-the-end-of-ww1/> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
8. ↑ South Tyneside Remembers World War One, issued by South Tyneside Council, online: <https://www.southtyneside.gov.uk/article/57054/South-Tyneside-Remembers-World-War-One> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
9. ↑ For example, the Belgian and Flanders approach to the centenary: Wouters, Nico: The Centenary Commemorations of the Great War in Belgium, in: BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review 131/3 (2016), pp. 76-86.

10. ↑ Nurse, Julia: A Commemoration of Armistice Day, issued by Wellcome Library, online: <http://blog.wellcomelibrary.org/2014/11/a-commemoration-of-armistice-day/> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
11. ↑ Barringer, George M.: Take Up The Sword of Justice. British Posters of World War One from the Collection of Roger N. Mohovich, issued by Georgetown University Library, online: <https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/take-sword-justice-british-posters-world-war-one-roger-n-mohovich> (retrieved: 3 March 2020); Barringer, George M.: First Call. American Posters of World War One from the Collection of Roger N. Mohovich, issued by Georgetown University Library, online: <https://www.library.georgetown.edu/exhibition/first-call-american-posters-world-war-one-collection-roger-n-mohovich> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
12. ↑ Family History at The Mitchell, issued by The Mitchell Library, online: <https://www.glasgowfamilyhistory.org.uk/ExploreRecords/Pages/Evening-Times-Roll-of-Honour.aspx> (retrieved: 3 March 2020). Canterbury Cathedral Archives and Library also undertook research on its holdings relating to the war: World War I, issued by Canterbury Cathedral Archives and Library, online: <https://www.canterbury-cathedral.org/heritage/history/remembering-world-war-i/> (retrieved: 3 March 2020). World War One, issued by Aberystwyth University Information Services, online: <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/is/library-services/collections/special-collections/ww1/> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
13. ↑ Women and Trauma Workshop at Glasgow Women's Library, issued by The Centre for Hidden Histories. Community, Commemoration and the First World War, online: <http://hiddenhistorieswwi.ac.uk/uncategorized/2019/10/women-and-trauma-workshop-at-glasgow-womens-library/> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
14. ↑ Great War | Great Read, issued by National WWI Museum and Memorial, online: <https://www.theworldwar.org/greatwargreatread> (retrieved: 3 March 2020). Great War | Great Read, In Conversation [sic]: Crosby Kemper and Linda Trout, issued by YouTube, online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M75-\\_BikhhQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M75-_BikhhQ) (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
15. ↑ Cymru'n Cofio/Wales Remembers 1914-1918, issued by People's Collection Wales, online: <https://cymruncofio.org/> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
16. ↑ See for example Sammlung Erster Weltkrieg, issued by Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, online: [https://www.dnb.de/DE/Professionell/ProjekteKooperationen/Projektarchiv/2015/sammlungErsterWeltkrieg/sammlungErsterWeltkrieg\\_node.html](https://www.dnb.de/DE/Professionell/ProjekteKooperationen/Projektarchiv/2015/sammlungErsterWeltkrieg/sammlungErsterWeltkrieg_node.html) (retrieved: 11 March 2021); Themenportal Erster Weltkrieg, issued by Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte in der Württembergischen Landesbibliothek, online: <https://www.wlb-stuttgart.de/sammlungen/bibliothek-fuer-zeitgeschichte/themenportal-erster-weltkrieg/> (retrieved: 11 March 2021).
17. ↑ World War One Teaching Resources, issued by British Library, online: <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/teaching-resources> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
18. ↑ LibGuides. History. Commemorating World War I 1914-2014, issued by Rhodes University Library, online: <http://ru.za.libguides.com/c.php?g=174155&p=1147787> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
19. ↑ Roll of Honour, issued by Hove Library, Sussex, online: <http://www.roll-of-honour.com/Sussex/Hove.html> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
20. ↑ Young, Lynn: Valette fratres - Librarians and the First World War, issued by British Library, online: <https://blogs.bl.uk/untoldlives/2011/11/valette-fratres-librarians-and-the-first-world-war.html> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
21. ↑ Secretary General Joins World Leaders in Paris to Commemorate the End of the First World War, issued by NATO, online: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_160218.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_160218.htm) (retrieved: 3 March 2020).
22. ↑ Arnold, Marianne: Mémoire et commémorations de la Grande Guerre. Parcours guidé du "Web 14-18", et bibliographie, issued by L'Histoire à la BnF, online: <https://histoirebnf.hypotheses.org/8041> (retrieved: 3 March 2020).

## Selected Bibliography

Didier, Christophe (ed.): **Orages de papier 1914-1918. Les collections de guerre des bibliothèques**, Paris 2008: Somogy.

Hiller von Gaertringen, Julia: **Kriegssammlungen 1914 - 1918**, Frankfurt am Main 2014: Vittorio Klostermann.

Poulain, Martine: **Les bibliothèques durant la Grande Guerre**, in: Bulletin des Bibliothèques de France 3, 2014, pp. 114-131.

## Citation

Shaw, Matthew: Centenary (Libraries) , 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 2021-03-11. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11518.

## License

This text is licensed under: CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works.

