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# Centenary (United Kingdom)

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**How did the British nation-state, visibly divided in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century along lines of competing national identities, political allegiances and attitudes to the European Union, commemorate the First World War? Did the centenary act to unify the nation, to provide a widely shared sense of the past and of shared values and identities? Studying a range of different commemorative activities, this article considers the motivations for widespread engagement with the centenary, the forms of commemoration that were produced, and the impact of these commemorative activities and projects on both the cultural memory of the war, and British national identity.**

## Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction: David Cameron's War](#)
- [2 Blackadder Goes Forth: the cultural memory of the war](#)
- [3 Lest we forget: formal acts of commemoration and remembrance](#)
- [4 Bloodswept Lands: centenary public arts projects](#)
- [5 Then and Now: community history and heritage](#)
- [6 The men who never returned: family memory](#)
- [7 Conclusion: We will remember them](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

## Introduction: David Cameron's War

In October 2012 the (then) British Prime Minister made a speech at the Imperial War Museum, London, announcing [government](#) support for the Museum's renovation, including the redesigned First

World War galleries. The new galleries, which opened in the summer of 2014, were designed to represent the history of that conflict in a way that encompassed both recent historical research, and an innovative means of engaging museum visitors in a complex history. As [Jay Winter](#) has shown, war museums are complex sites; partly places of pilgrimage, partly places of knowledge. Museums such as the Imperial War Museum, which seek to represent something of the history and experience of [total wars](#), also face the near impossible task of reducing these complex and differently-experienced conflicts to a coherent narrative that avoids the glorification of conflict whilst memorialising those who died.<sup>[1]</sup> However, museum visitors are also a part of this story, bringing their own histories, understandings and expectations with them when they tour the museum galleries. Museum visitors are not blank slates; they often have a sense of the story they expect the exhibition to tell. David Cameron's speech tells us something of the ways that the British audience of the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century understood the war, and the dominant cultural memory of the conflict in [Britain](#) just before the centenary.

Cameron envisaged the museum as being at the heart of the coming years of commemoration. Emphasising the male, military experience of war (an emphasis that would continue throughout the centenary), Cameron also stressed the importance of family memories, remembering his own visits as a boy, and more recent visits with his own children. Setting out the reasons for the decision to provide financial support for the centenary at a time of draconian austerity measures, Cameron identified three factors that, he argued, made the centenary important and the war central to contemporary British national identity. First among these was the scale of the sacrifice: according to Cameron, the dead numbered over 16 million, with almost 1 million dead from Britain and its colonies.<sup>[2]</sup> The numbers of dead alone made the war worthy of [commemoration](#). Secondly, he highlighted the impact the war had on the modern world, shaping national borders, providing a breeding ground for the ideologies of Bolshevism and Fascism, introducing new, and ever more destructive, forms of military technology, and their corollary, medical advances, and, he claimed, advancing the causes of both female emancipation and racial equality. Finally, Cameron emphasised the affective and familial resonance of the war. Arguing that "this matters not just in our heads but in our hearts", he positioned family histories and family memories as underpinning the ongoing fascination with the war, sitting at the heart of the forthcoming centenary.

Whilst there is plenty that historians might disagree with in this depiction of the war, the centrality of the narrative of sacrifice, and the continued emotional connection felt by many to those who experienced the conflict, is undeniable. Across a wide range of commemorative events in Britain – including thousands of community-led research projects alongside major artistic installations, museum exhibitions, talks, media programming and academic conferences - emotional connections with the past, and a widespread belief that the war saw death and sacrifice on an almost unimaginable scale, shaped both the forms of commemoration, and audience engagement with them.

## Blackadder Goes Forth: the cultural memory of the war

State funding for the centenary was driven by a desire to build “national moments”; to utilise this widespread public interest in, and emotional connection with, the First World War in order to strengthen community ties and a sense of national identity based, in part, upon a shared belief in the continued importance of honouring the dead, and of recognising the ways that the war shaped the modern world, and the modern British nation.<sup>[3]</sup> Cultural memory, such as that of the First World War, is never a simple retelling of the past; it is always shaped by the present, and by contemporary concerns and values. According to Daniel Todman, representations of the war have long “been recast to meet the needs of the moment.”<sup>[4]</sup> Commemoration, in short, could tell us as much about ourselves today, as it could about the experiences of the “war generation” one hundred years ago.

The memory of the war that informed much of the commemorative programme between 2014 and 2018 had its origins in the interwar years. As Todman has shown, the sense that lives had been thrown away in the war was popularised through the body of war writing published in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The 1960s saw this view of the conflict crystallise. This can be seen, for example, in [Alan Clark's \(1928-1999\)](#) controversial claim that lives were squandered by incompetent military leadership in his 1961 book *The Donkeys*. This standpoint struck a chord in the decade of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, and counter cultural protest. Similarly, the play and film *Oh! What a Lovely War* popularised the belief that the war was a futile waste of life. By the time that *Blackadder Goes Forth* ended its 1989 BBC series with its much-loved characters going “over the top” to their implied deaths, the dominant cultural memory of the war was of futility, loss and tragedy.<sup>[5]</sup> This memory was to prove remarkably resilient.

Before the formal period of commemoration began, some historians complained that the government had not put enough time and money into its organisation, and was not doing enough to counter what they saw as a lack of public knowledge about the conflict. Arguing that planning should have started over a decade earlier, they criticised the “tone” of the centenary, suggesting that it failed to reflect current, revisionist, historical research that saw the war as a necessary fight for survival against an expansionist [Germany](#), and which should recognise the eventual victory. Instead, they feared, the centenary would reinforce the dominant cultural memory of the war as a futile waste of life.<sup>[6]</sup> In this, they were arguing against what the (then) Education Secretary, Michael Gove, termed “the Blackadder view of the war”. In an article written for the *Daily Mail* Gove attempted to weaponize the cultural memory of the First World War in an attack on the Left in British politics. Gove argued that the centenary should be an opportunity to demolish this myth, identifying the popular comedy as a key site of “left-wing versions of the past designed to belittle Britain and its leaders.” For Gove, to criticise British military and political leadership in the First World War was to diminish the sacrifice of those who died in “a just war” against German aggression. It also, he claimed, meant that modern Britain was failing to learn the lessons of the conflict, namely the disruptive potential of globalisation, of swift technological and social change and, perhaps most pertinently, fragile confidence in political leaders. Probably unconsciously echoing the politicians of 1918, who originally favoured the

celebration of victory over the commemoration of the dead, Gove followed the revisionist historians in arguing that the coming centenary should be about praising the military victory, as much as remembrance of the war's dead.<sup>[7]</sup>

As this overview will show, the hope that the centenary would mark a changed understanding of the war, seeing it as a victory for Britain and the Allies rather than simply as a tragedy, made relatively little headway. Indeed, the “No Glory in War” campaign, which launched its campaign opposing what it feared would be a celebration of “something glorious and part of our national heritage” when “it was a total disaster that was unnecessary and destroyed a generation” with an open letter to newspapers signed by high profile actors, writers and artists, probably articulated the dominant understanding of the conflict in its description of the war as a “military disaster and human catastrophe.”<sup>[8]</sup> Cultural memory is not simply imposed from “above”; it has deep roots in personal and private spaces and, as this article will demonstrate, many family memories of the war in Britain are shaped by experiences of [loss](#) and grief. In other ways however, the cultural memory of the war was changed by the centenary. The [understanding of the war](#) that began to take shape was one that encompassed a much wider recognition of the contribution and experience of troops and labourers from around the [Empire](#), of women on the Home Front, and of the impact of the conflict on displaced [refugee](#) populations. This new knowledge co-existed with ideas of sacrifice and futility. While much of the funding for British centenary activities came from the British state, only state-level ceremonies of remembrance were directly planned or organised by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport or by regional governments across Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Further funding was granted to organisations such as 14-18 NOW, which oversaw a large public arts programme and the First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours programme, which aimed to take two children from every state secondary school in Britain to the [Western Front](#) by 2019.<sup>[9]</sup> However, the vast majority of commemorative activities were organised at the local level, and led by third sector and community organisations. Over £96 million was distributed in grants to community heritage projects by the Heritage Lottery Fund, involving many thousands of people not just as an audience for First World War commemorations, but as participants and creators. The centenary was thus experienced by many people in diverse ways at a range of different sites, both cultural, and geographic.

## **Lest we forget: formal acts of commemoration and remembrance**

Despite Gove's hope that the First World War centenary would be as much about victory as it was about loss, the major, state sponsored events that marked key points in the commemorative cycle for Britain were all, overwhelmingly, concerned with the death of combatants. Of course, this should not be surprising. Since 1920 the British state's marking of the Armistice of 1918 has focused on remembrance of the dead, with the wearing of the [poppy](#) of remembrance, the widely observed two-minute silence at 11 o'clock, and the ceremonies enacted at the cenotaph in Whitehall and around the country having the dead and bereaved firmly at their centre. As the experience of wartime [bereavement](#) itself began to pass out of living memory, the figure of the sacrificial, male, combatant

became enshrined at the heart of British war remembrance. This established part of the national calendar was to shape the major state events of the centenary period.

Britain marked the outbreak of war in 2014 with services of remembrance in London, Glasgow, and the St Symphorien Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) cemetery in [Belgium](#). The solemn nature of these events was matched by the first large-scale public marking of the centenary commissioned by 14-18 NOW, *Lights Out*, in which, echoing the words of Sir [Edward Grey \(1862-1933\)](#) on the outbreak of war, people were urged to extinguish almost all lights between 10pm and 11pm on the 4 August 2014, leaving only a single candle or lamp burning.<sup>[10]</sup> This focus on remembrance continued to shape the commemorative events directly organised at state level. Major battles were marked, in collaboration with the CWGC, at ceremonies of remembrance held in the cemeteries where so many of the dead were buried, and the names of the missing were recorded. On 1 July 2016, the centenary of the first day of the [Battle of the Somme](#), when almost 20,000 British and imperial troops were killed, an overnight vigil took place at the Thiepval memorial and its surrounding graves, the memorial alone commemorating over 72,000 men who died there and have no known grave. As the first day of the Battle of the Somme is so central to British cultural memory of the war, embodying for many the scale and the sense of loss associated with the war, it was also marked by a festival of remembrance in Heaton Park, Manchester, which included a concert of German and British wartime music performed by the Halle Orchestra, and the creation of a “pathway of remembrance” made up of tiles designed by members of the public which were used in 2018 to create a permanent memorial to the dead of the Somme in the park. Alongside the remembrance of the dead, the centenary of the Somme thus saw attempts to reach out across old wartime divisions, and to incorporate individual forms of remembrance into collective and state-level commemorations.

At the centenary of the war’s end in 2018, the traditional Ceremony of Remembrance, held on the Sunday closest to November 11 since 1945, incorporated a “People’s Procession” which saw 10,000 civilians, chosen by ballot, follow the traditional military parade past the [Cenotaph](#). Those marching, many of whom carried wreaths that they laid at the foot of the Cenotaph, were motivated by a desire to mark individual stories and individual losses. They included a man marching in memory of his grandfather and his grandparent’s baby son, who died of Whooping Cough the same day that his father died in a military hospital; a woman marching in memory of her Great-Great Uncle who died in Jerusalem, aged just 21; and a woman marching to remember John Parr, the 17 year old boy from North London who, having lied about his age to join up, was to become the first British military fatality of the war. The participants thus both represented a desire to maintain the emotional link with the past that shaped so much of the centenary, and acted to make loss, and its impact on those who survived, even more visible than usual at this, the centennial Ceremony of Remembrance.

Formal and public acts and symbols of remembrance during the centenary were, as war commemoration always is, deeply political. The British Legion poppy of remembrance in particular, came to sit at the heart of battles over its meaning. This was not a new development: when the Women’s Co-operative Guild introduced the white poppy in 1933 as a symbol of opposition to all

wars, and in solidarity with *all* war victims, wreaths of the flowers were stamped upon by [British Legion](#) members at war memorials. During the centenary the footballers James McClean from Derry in Northern Ireland, and Nemanja Matic from [Serbia](#) both refused to wear the red poppy. Both received death threats as a result of their decision. In 2016, the press erupted in anger after FIFA prevented the England team from wearing poppy armbands during an international match on the grounds that it was a political symbol, Prime Minister Theresa May describing the decision as “utterly outrageous.” Twitter users queued up to tell FIFA that the poppy was not a political symbol while at the same time, making it exactly that. Tweets from users with account names such as UKIP Poole, Ex EU Serf and Leave.EU claimed the poppy belonged to a particular form of Britishness, one that rejected the European Union, liberalism and the left. This linkage of the poppy with a resurgent right-wing nationalism thus, ironically, managed to place the poppy – imagined as a symbol of individual remembrance and sympathy - at the heart of political divisions during the centenary.

## **Bloodswept Lands: centenary public arts projects**

Against this complex and contested background, a range of public art projects sought to mark key events during the war. The most popular, and best known, of the many public arts projects held during the centenary were, in different ways, concerned with loss, absence and grief. At the outset of the centenary, *Bloodswept Lands and Seas of Red*, an installation of 888,264 poppies staged by the Royal Historic Palaces and installed on the walls and in the moat of the Tower of London, each poppy representing one British (military) life lost in the war, attracted an estimated five million visitors over the four months it was on display. Although *The Guardian's* art critic dismissed it as a “fake, trite and inward looking...UKIP style memorial” it was exceptionally popular with the public, many of whom purchased one of the ceramic poppies from the display.<sup>[11]</sup> Public responses demonstrate the continued emotional, and often familial, link that many felt with those who experienced the First World War. Respondents to a survey of visitors to the display included older people who recounted the impact of wartime loss on their own families, while others reflected on the significance of the centenary as a point from which to attempt to understand the wider significance of the war.<sup>[12]</sup>

Jeremy Deller's *We're here because we're here*, commissioned by 14-18 NOW, marked the centenary of the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Again, the war dead were at the heart of this commemorative project, as young men, who had worked with Deller and the National Theatres of England, Scotland and Wales, and regional theatres in order to perform the physicality of their militarised counterparts in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, emerged onto the public spaces of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Largely silent, except for occasionally signing the refrain “We're here because we're here,” originally sung by soldiers on their way to the trenches, the volunteers responded to questions from passers-by with cards that gave the name, age and regiment of the soldier they represented when he died on 1 July 1916. Appearing in the midst of everyday life, the men formed an ephemeral, living memorial to the dead of the Somme. They were a potent reminder that those who died were “ordinary” people, like the shoppers and commuters that they briefly joined; symbols of the physical,



human cost of war.<sup>[13]</sup>

This human cost of war was also central to the two major public artworks that marked the centenary of the Armistice. *Beyond the Deepening Shadow* by Tom Piper and Mira Calix, commissioned by Historic Royal Palaces at the Tower of London saw 10,000 torches lit in “a public act of remembrance for the lives of the fallen, honouring their sacrifice.”<sup>[14]</sup> Making an explicit link between the First World War and today’s military, civilian volunteers were joined by members of the armed forces in lighting the torches. 14-18 NOW’s commission of Danny Boyle’s *Pages of the Sea*, was, like Deller’s, a fleeting piece of remembrance that saw volunteers mark out faces of the dead on British beaches, before they were washed away by the tide on November 11.<sup>[15]</sup>

While *Bloodswept Lands and Seas of Red* and *Beyond the Deepening Shadow* were abstract works relying on symbolic objects and acts to represent a collective remembrance, *We’re here because we’re here* and *Pages of the Sea* focused on the impact of war on the individual, naming and picturing some of those lost to the war in their work. Their disappearance at the end of the artworks echoed the disappearance of so many from British society during the war years. Each of these works however, had loss, and the figure of the male “victim-soldier” identified by Helen McCartney as central to the cultural memory of the war in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, and each drew in different ways upon public participation.<sup>[16]</sup> While the emphasis on male, military loss acted to further marginalise the memory of other British losses in the war, including the many hundreds of munitions workers killed in explosions or poisoned by TNT, these powerful public works of art worked to remind the modern day inhabitants of Britain of the terrible human cost of the war, providing a space for reflection and remembrance that both drew upon, and strengthened, the affective power of the cultural memory of the conflict.

## Then and Now: community history and heritage

By October 2018, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) had awarded £96.5 million in grants to 2155 community heritage projects involving approximately 9.4 million volunteers.<sup>[17]</sup> The HLF Centenary aims were to encourage a greater understanding of the war and its impact on local communities; to broaden perspectives on the war; and to encourage children and young people to be more involved in the war’s heritage, outside of the classroom and battlefield tours.<sup>[18]</sup>

Many of the heritage projects that were awarded funding by the HLF fulfilled these aims: a large number focused on aspects of the war outside of the trenches of the Western Front, and many investigated and made visible facets of the war’s history that had previously been little-known or marginal to the dominant cultural memory. Unlike the major public art works and acts of state level commemoration, which tended to strengthen what has been termed the “combat Gnosticism” of the war, in which the experiences of the frontline soldier (and in particular the white, British soldier in the trenches of the Western Front) have an “authenticity” and authority unobtainable by those with other

experiences and stories of war, the HLF funded projects painted a wider picture.<sup>[19]</sup> The experiences of women, of soldiers and labourers from the Empire and other parts of the world, and the presence of [Belgian refugees](#) in Britain were all examined by groups funded by the HLF. Projects explored experiences as diverse as those of the [Chinese Labour Corps](#), troops and labourers from [West Africa](#) and the Caribbean, and the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh soldiers from imperial [India](#), who fought and died far from home.<sup>[20]</sup> One of the first projects to be funded was *Empire, Faith and War: The Sikhs and WW1*, awarded over £488,000 in 2012. Sikh soldiers comprised about 20 percent of the Indian army, and fought on the Western Front, in the Dardanelles, in West Africa and the Middle East. Led by the UK Punjab Heritage Association, the project recruited over 1,000 “citizen historians,” largely from Britain’s Sikh communities, to research and record the histories of their own ancestors, and of others whom they “adopted” for the course of the research. Arguing that “there’s probably not a single Sikh in the UK who doesn’t have a military connection in their family,” the project aimed to use the opportunities provided by the centenary to both rediscover and popularise the histories of Sikh soldiers, often little known outside of their communities, and to train the volunteer “citizen historians” who would “have the chance to uncover, for the first time, their own personal connections” to the First World War.<sup>[21]</sup> Familial and individual experiences and histories both provided motivation for involvement in the centenary, and a means of incorporating the “forgotten” histories of some of Britain’s minority communities into the larger, national, war story.

When Germany invaded Belgium in 1914, there was an exodus of refugees, around 250,000 of whom came to Britain. Some of the most powerful, and timely, projects between 2014 and 2018 focused on the experience of these refugees. *Lest We Forget* was an HLF funded project run by the Scottish Refugee Council, which set out to draw on the history of the Belgian refugees to aid in the integration of refugees from the war in Syria and elsewhere into their new, Scottish communities. Supported by trained volunteers, today’s refugees researched the experiences of the 19,000 Belgians who came to Glasgow during the war, making connections with their own experiences, and sharing their findings in a range of public events. As well as increasing knowledge of the existence and experience of refugees one hundred years ago, the project also helped people to build friendships, to learn English and to integrate into their new communities. At a time when public attitudes towards refugees in Britain, and in Europe more widely, are often characterised by hostility or indifference, *Lest We Forget* mobilised a little-known aspect of the war experience to try and shift contemporary opinion and build empathy, demonstrating that Britain has a long history of welcoming refugees, not excluding them.<sup>[22]</sup>

Situated in local communities, local identities and local histories were important drivers of many of the HLF funded heritage projects. In Northern Ireland, the sense of history that emerged in the “long decade” between 1912 and 1923 continues to shape identities among Unionist and Nationalist communities today. The politics of commemoration in post-conflict societies such as Northern Ireland are often complex, acting as potent symbols of opposing pasts.<sup>[23]</sup> The centenaries of both the First World War and the 1916 [Easter Rising](#) were widely anticipated as being potential



flashpoints, acting to reignite community tensions. Against this background, the Community Relations Council of Northern Ireland worked with the HLF to develop commemorative projects that could help to bridge divisions by building understanding and knowledge across political, cultural and religious boundaries. Projects such as *Forgotten Gaelic Volunteers* made visible the complex histories that underlay the rival cultural memories of the period so often mobilised within opposing political discourse, telling the stories of the men of the Gaelic Athletic Association who fought with the British army during the war.<sup>[24]</sup> In Killyleagh, Protestant and Catholic families shared stories of the impact of the war on their ancestors, creating a locally shared sense of history, while the renovation of a war memorial in central Derry helped to transform an area of the city perceived by the nationalist community as “belonging to the other side” into a shared public space.<sup>[25]</sup> Thus, centenary projects in Northern Ireland helped to make what could have been a period of further polarisation into a time when some of these cultural memories were challenged, and a shared understanding of the complex history of the period was advanced.

Themes of loss, absence and grief, however, shaped many community heritage projects. In the Western Isles of Scotland, the focus of commemoration was on the loss of the *HMY Iolaire*, a ship bringing 285 men from Lewis home from the war when it hit rocks in Stornoway harbour early on New Year’s Day 1919. 205 of the men drowned within sight of home. In many ways the disaster fits the dominant narrative of the First World War: there’s a horrible irony in the deaths of so many, at the war’s end, and so close to home. The Admiralty were insensitive, attempting to put the wreck up for sale just fifteen days after the accident, and downgrading their investigation from a court martial to a private investigation. Unsurprisingly, the Public Inquiry, held in Stornoway, found the Admiralty responsible for the disaster, for overloading the ship, not exercising due care when entering the harbour, and failing to provide sufficient lifeboats or life jackets. But what is particularly striking about the loss of the *Iolaire* is its continued resonance in the Western Isles. Abertay University in Dundee has developed an App which will map the dead to their local communities, and provide brief biographies. Stornoway Museum held a major exhibition, and the local council is creating an online exhibition which traces the multiple legacies of the disaster in the material objects the men left behind, and in the lives of the bereaved and their descendants. A local artist is painting the portraits of 100 of the dead, and a new Harris Tweed has been designed to mark the centenary of the disaster. This range of activity does not simply reflect a desire to use the centenary to build local communities, or to claim a link with the war dead. It has a much deeper resonance in the Isles, and is widely remembered at local, communal and familial levels. The shock of the loss of so many men, and the grief of the bereaved, live on in multiple and complex ways, and in a manner that bears some similarities with the memory work of the descendants of Holocaust victims identified by Marianne Hirsch. The descendants of those affected by the disaster continue to undertake the emotional labour of remembrance.<sup>[26]</sup>

The HLF-funded project *Dear Mrs Pennyman*, has funded the transcription and digitisation of a collection of letters to the Secretary of the King’s Own Scottish Borderers Widows and Orphans Fund. The nature of the collection means that they focus on the aftermath of military death; on the

bereavement, the grief and the economic hardship all too often faced by the widows and mothers of the men who died. Women like Helen Walker of Aberdeen, who lost her baby daughter at the same time as her husband was killed. Alongside her economic hardship is her grief, she 'cannot tell you how much we miss him', and a stoicism that was very much of its time, "we struggle on." Mary Smith of York wrote that the death of her son had been a "terrible blow" and that "I cannot realise that he will not come back to me."<sup>[27]</sup> Far from speaking to us of the heroism and honour of war, these letters remind us of war's human cost, functioning to break down borders between past and present by giving voice to the bereaved, particularly working class women, whose voices are perhaps particularly relevant today, in the aftermath of military losses in Iraq and Afghanistan. In projects such as this, the cultural memory of the First World War functions in opposition to the narrative of victory and modernisation articulated by Gove at the centenary's outset.

## **The men who never returned: family memory**

The cultural memory of the war as a time of loss, grief and bereavement seen in many of the community heritage projects has deep roots in family memories and family histories. As Michael Roper's research has shown, the emotional legacies of the war were felt in families long after the end of hostilities.<sup>[28]</sup> A Mass-Observation Directive of 2014 found that for many of the respondents, their sense of the war, and of the meanings of the centenary, was shaped by a sense of these legacies. Indeed, family memory and the impact of the war on families, often acted as a powerful force that drove an individual's engagement with centenary activities.<sup>[29]</sup>

Respondents to the Directive were asked to list ten words that they associated with the First World War. Overwhelmingly, these drew on the "Blackadder myth" identified by Gove: trenches, mud, [gas](#), poppies, Somme and slaughter were words that appeared again and again. But these were also often shaped by family memories: one woman recalled that two of her grandfather's brothers were gassed, and her mother-in-law's brother killed, and others wrote of an uncle killed at Passchendaele, and uncles who returned, but one "severely shell shocked, the other so badly damaged you couldn't touch his skin."<sup>[30]</sup> Many of the older respondents expressed a sense of responsibility; a belief that it was their duty to pass on their knowledge of the war's impact to younger members of their family. One woman commented that "I am now the oldest member of my family, and I realise that if I don't learn about the past and disseminate this knowledge, then it will be gone forever."<sup>[31]</sup> For these respondents, and for many others, it was the physical and emotional costs of war, and the sense that it should be remembered for its human costs, not for its geo-political legacies, that shaped their understanding of the centenary.

A striking aspect of the responses to the Mass Observation Directive was their often gendered nature. Men were more likely to make claim to military or political knowledge. For example, one man explained that "this was a war between empires...based on a paradigm of international relations that became outdated" while another made a plea for a greater understanding of the "economic, logistical,

medical or technological aspects” of the war, and for a critique of “the blinkered and sentimentalised view” that he believed prevailed. The sense of authority and composure evident here is less visible in the responses of many women, one of whom began a lengthy and knowledgeable discussion with the comment “I won’t be able to remember and place in time the names of various battles, so there’s no clue there.”<sup>[32]</sup> This shouldn’t be surprising, given the authority given to a male experience and narrative of war in the state level commemorative activities, and indeed in narratives of war more widely. A focus on male war experience is likely to enable men reflecting on the conflict, even those with no military experience themselves, to write in an assured manner on the conflict.

When women wrote about the impact of war on their families however, they wrote with a confidence that was (usually without cause) absent from their reflections on the politics or military aspects of the war. Older women of retirement age who provided many of the responses, remembered the destructive legacies of the conflict, describing “the women who never married...and the men who never returned”, and the shrine to a dead son kept for years by a neighbour.”<sup>[33]</sup> In these highly empathetic responses to the centenary, a desire to ensure that future generations understood the impact of the war in terms of human loss shaped the narratives of war produced by many women.

This family history and memory of the impact of the war was widely felt, and underpinned both the emotional connection that many felt with those who experienced the war, and wider engagement with centenary activities. In Britain, the First World War is a key site at which family histories interact with wider national and international histories. Cultural institutions recognised this: The Imperial War Museum’s *Lives of the First World War* project drew on crowd-sourced family history and the University of Oxford digitised over 6,500 personal items for its *Great War Archive*. As James Wallis has argued, the deep emotional connection many feel with the past, and the consequent grass-roots commemorative practice, “is reshaping the background of modern First World War remembrance.”<sup>[34]</sup> A survey towards the end of the centenary demonstrated just how powerful both family and community histories were as a force for engagement, and thus for the creation of new research, and new archival material, between 2014 and 2018. Of the 126 respondents to the online survey, all of whom had either volunteered for, or led, commemorative projects, the impact of the war on their family or their local community was mentioned time and again as being an initial motivator for their involvement. Among the volunteers, while 19 percent gave “remembrance” as the reason for participation in centenary activities, “family history” (13 percent) and “education” (14 percent) came a close second. 75 percent of respondents thought that their involvement in the centenary had changed their view of the war. Unsurprisingly, 99 percent thought it was important to mark the centenary of the war. When asked why they felt this was important, many reflected on the impact of the war on individuals, often discussing the experiences of their own relatives, or of people from their local community. Respondents wrote “it had a significant impact on my family,” “my family was affected by losses in the war” and “it had such a devastating effect on our local community.”<sup>[35]</sup> The war’s impact at a local, familial and personal level lay behind much of the widespread participation in centenary activities in Britain.

## Conclusion: We will remember them

Britain marked the centenary of the First World War in numerous ways, and at state, social, communal, familial and individual levels. The centenary did act to widen public knowledge of the war, with projects commemorating the contribution of non-European troops, the arrival in Britain of Belgian refugees, and the impact of the war on the home front, all working to extend a sense of the war's impact outside of the trenches of the Western Front that have for so long, been at the heart of British cultural memory of the war. Between 2014 and 2018, the centenary of the war became deeply embedded into public life: from the BBC Radio 4 drama series *Home Front*, which ran for four years and dramatised the war's impact on families and communities in Britain, to the many HLF funded heritage projects and the large-scale public arts and commemorative events, the war was highly visible and British people engaged with it in a variety of different ways. For many, participation was an active process, with many thousands viewing the major public arts events and thousands more taking part in local heritage and community history projects.

While the power of family and local memories of the war underpinned much of this participation in the centenary, the wider cultural memory, with its focus on the male "soldier-victim," reinforced by cultural texts and by the deep rooted traditions of remembrance, also shaped the centenary. The desire of Michael Gove and others, that the centenary act as an opportunity to extinguish the enduring and powerful cultural memory of the war as a futile waste of men's lives, replacing this with a sense of the war as necessary conflict that ended in victory for Britain and its allies, was probably always doomed to failure. The affective power of the war one hundred years on, together with a widespread recognition of the conflict's impact on individuals, families and communities ensured that death and loss remained at the heart of the centenary. Coming at a time of political and social division in Britain, the continued and widely shared belief that the centenary should mark the multiple losses of the war, and in particular the deaths of soldiers on the Western Front, could be seen as unifying. But while most people still share the belief that the war was a time of great loss and suffering that deserves to be marked and better understood, the political nature of remembrance was also visible, and continued to divide people. As ever, this became most apparent around Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day, as older battles over the meaning of the poppy gained a new resonance in the context of the intensified emotional environment of the centenary.

Although the centenary of the war may have failed to unite a deeply fractured nation, it did act to increase public knowledge of the war itself. For example, knowledge of Indian soldiers jumped from 44 percent in 2014 to 68 percent by 2016, but the new research, largely conducted by local and community history groups, did little to dislodge the deeply-embedded belief that incompetent and uncaring political and military leaders had led the country into a futile and deadly war.<sup>[36]</sup> We should remember, however, that while cultural memory may be about the past, it is formed in the present. Indeed, at a time when confidence in political leaders is low, it is unsurprising that the belief that political and military elites of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century let down 'ordinary' people should be so enduring.<sup>[37]</sup>

Section Editor: [Bruce Scates](#)

## Notes

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