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Gaynor Kavanagh

Museum as Memorial: The Origins of the Imperial War Museum

On the eve of the Great War, museums in Britain were both diverse in form and well-established as public institutions. They were stoutly middle-class, and perceived as an important credential of civilized and sophisticated nationhood. But with the war, the very purpose and worth of museums in society were tested and met a response as diverse as the institutions themselves. While some museums were able to adapt and support the war effort through patriotic exhibitions and education work, others could not or did not change: either the initiative was absent or the medium of the museum proved inflexible or inappropriate for contemporary social and political needs. The official view of the worth of museums was perhaps best expressed in the decision to close the national museums and galleries to the public in March 1916. This was not done through concern for the safety of collections, but as a political gesture, a public example of economy in wartime. It is ironic, therefore, that the war itself created the most important war museum in the western world, the Imperial War Museum (IWM), the origins and early development of which, between 1917 and 1922, we shall now consider.

The foundation of the National War Museum (known after January 1918 as the Imperial War Museum), has to be considered principally in two contexts: the need and common anxiety, evident from the earliest stages of the war, for the conflict to be chronicled and remembered; and the particular circumstances in which the War Cabinet decision of 5 March 1917 was taken.

During the war, the literate public had access to a reasonably wide range of newspapers, from the tabloid *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Graphic* and from March 1915 *Sunday Pictorial* to the so-called quality press, in particular *The Times*.¹ Newspapers sought to provide pictures of

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the action (albeit very limited and heavily censored), maps of the front and diaries or 'histories' of the events in the war to date. The war gave a stimulus to newspaper circulation, but particularly to papers which relied heavily on pictorial features. Nevertheless, there was a significant loss of confidence in the medium of newspapers, mainly on the part of those who experienced the war at first hand and saw the distortions and omissions in the reports published.² But, for the home readership, newspapers were the only medium of news readily and regularly available and were therefore read avidly. The chronicle or contemporary record of the war was seen to be on the news-stands every day.

In the early stages of the war, a vogue in war books and pamphlets was soon generated.³ Publication was to some extent spontaneous, but more often the product of one of the propagandist groups. This was stimulated by, and supplemented with, the work from the government's propaganda agency under the overall control of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. This was based at (and known as) Wellington House, and was under the astute leadership of C.F. Masterman. The role of Wellington House from late 1914 until February 1917 was to form opinion abroad. Its work was both secret and subtle, aiming at quality as well as quantity. The methods of distribution of propaganda and information employed by Wellington House and by other agencies further stimulated the need to record and remember.⁴ For instance, John Buchan, working for Masterman, suggested that every regiment should have its own official historian. Literary figures of the calibre of George Bernard Shaw and John Masfield were sent to prepare eye-witness accounts of life at the front.

The most impressive and influential initiative in the early recording of the war experience was that taken by the Canadian War Records Office, founded in 1916 by Sir Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook and from February 1918 Minister of Information). Its purpose was to amass and preserve documentary material of historic value. Other similar bodies were established such as the Committee for the Medical History of the War, set up by the Royal Army Medical Corps.

By late 1915, the importance of visual images in opinion-forming was generally recognized. *Britain Prepared*, the first propaganda film, was issued to electric cinemas and picture-houses throughout Britain. Illustrations, maps and photographs were published more frequently in the popular press. In April 1916, Wellington House was sufficiently

confident of the value of visual propaganda to establish a pictorial section, which regularly published *War Pictorial*, dependent on photographs from the front. The results were staggering. Masterman commented: 'The enormous circulation of pictorial papers reveals, as much as the crowds at the cinematographs, that there are millions of voters who will not read the letterpress but from whom the demand for war pictures is unlimited.'⁵ However, there were too few photographers at the front and their range of subjects was limited by the censor. There was a case for supplementing the photographs available with line drawings. Recognizing the impact that paintings were already making, in particular Eric Kennington's 'The Kensingtons at Laventie', Masterman took the bold decision to employ cartoonists and artists at the front, rather than illustrators at home. The first official war artist, Muirhead Bone, accepted his appointment on 15 July 1916.

On a more local and personal level, there were touching attempts to record the war, such as the rolls of honour established in streets, homes and workplaces, which as the years progressed took the form of shrines.⁶ These recorded the names of enlisted or conscripted men and also the names of the dead. The lists of names were sometimes decorated with regimental insignia, candles, flowers, press cuttings and mementoes.

The effectiveness of visual images used by the press and propagandist agencies depended on the public's need to know, record and remember: the two became mutually dependent. The idea of a national museum to commemorate the war answered this need, as was demonstrated by the enthusiasm with which the announcement of the foundation of the war museum was met.⁷

However, a review of the political events of the period leading up to the decision to found the museum suggests that in Cabinet circles the museum was seen as fulfilling a different purpose. On 5 March 1917, the War Cabinet agreed to an outline proposal from Sir Alfred Mond, MP and First Commissioner of Works, for the formation of a committee to establish a national war museum. The date and timing of this decision is significant.

In the final months of 1916, a carefully orchestrated campaign resulted in a political coup which toppled Asquith as Prime Minister and replaced him with a very willing David Lloyd George. The new Prime Minister wasted no time in trimming and redefining Cabinet structure, establishing new departments and reorganizing old ones. Lloyd George sought and effected the redirection and reorganization

of the war effort. He was in no doubt about the importance of opinion-forming. He recognized that morale was low following the Somme campaign and reduced by the effects of submarine warfare. Enthusiasm in recruiting campaigns had waned and there were popular fears of yet another year of war.⁸ Propaganda became an integral part of the Prime Minister's 'total war' policy.

Mierion and Susie Harries question whether the National War Museum was part of a larger initiative on propaganda, aimed at combating war-weariness.⁹ Coinciding as it did with the new Department of Information and, ten weeks later, the National War Aims Committee, a war museum could have been intended (as in Germany)¹⁰ as a focus for patriotism. If this argument is accepted, then the formation of a National War Museum was dictated by 'operational factors'. After all, Mond was suggesting a relatively inexpensive enterprise, requiring only £3000 to fund it. In political circles, therefore, the War Museum may well have been born out of a need not to record and remember, but to bolster and maintain the war mood.

A far more pragmatic version of the reasons for founding a war museum in 'these strenuous times' appears in a note written on 6 May 1917 by Commander Walcott, the Admiralty's representative on the National War Museum Committee, to the Assistant Secretary of the Admiralty Board, O. Murray. This was a response to the Admiralty Board's criticism that the whole scheme was premature. Walcott's reasons included:

1. Relics and exhibits etc. were being overlooked and in some cases irretrievably lost.
2. Other relics etc. were being bought, stolen or obtained by local units and private persons and some have been sent to USA.¹¹

At the outbreak of war, the only institution in existence which had traditionally concerned itself with collecting and preserving the relics, records and trophies of previous wars in which the British forces had been engaged was the Royal United Services Institute. Curiously, it took no initiative in making a record of the war. Instead, the actual idea of a national war museum seems to have come about through a combination of individual initiatives, independently from Charles ffoulkes, Curator of the Tower Armouries, and from Ian Malcolm, MP.¹²

These moves prompted Lord Harcourt to approach Sir Alfred Mond, MP, his successor as First Commissioner of Works. This

yielded effective results, as Mond had both the power and position to take the idea further. On 27 February, Mond addressed a memorandum to the Prime Minister on the subject of a National War Museum. He saw the immediate task as the collection of material 'which can be stored, if necessary until the end of the war'. He suggested a small grant of £3000 from the Treasury 'to cover purchases, where gifts are not available, and any running expenses for secretarial and record work'.¹³ The War Cabinet approved this proposal on 5 March 1917.

When ffoulkes eventually took up the appointment of Secretary on 17 March 1917, he may not have been aware that there had been a power struggle between Mond and Harcourt for the museum appointments.¹⁴ After Asquith's resignation, Harcourt served on the back benches, but still wielded some influence. He wanted the post of Director General for himself, with Sir Guy Laking, King's Armourer and Curator of London Museum, as Assistant Director. His successor, Mond, was keen to see Sir Martin Conway (mountaineer, explorer, Slade Professor of Art at Cambridge, and author) in the position of Director General. Harcourt appears to have ranged Curzon on his side, but was out-manoeuvred by Mond, who was able to secure the support of Lloyd George. The Prime Minister approved Sir Martin Conway's appointment, with the comment 'it seems to me an admirable appointment. But I suggest you give him a free hand in the matter.'¹⁵

On 26 March, *The Times* announced the decision to form a national war museum and listed the appointments to its committee. It was to consist of Sir Alfred Mond, MP (Chairman), Sir Martin Conway (Director General), Cmdr C.C. Walcott (Admiralty), Col. J.R. Stansfield, CB (Munitions), B.B. Cubitt, CB (War Office), and Ian Malcolm, MP. Professor C.W.C. Oman, Chichele Professor of Modern History, Oxford, and a distinguished military historian, was entrusted with special responsibility for the library.

The National War Museum Committee, with the authority of a War Cabinet minute (a new concept in itself), set about its work in late March 1917. The records of the weekly committee meetings are evidence of the will and considerable enthusiasm the members brought to their task. Between March and August 1917, the Committee was full of ideas and initiatives. The pattern for these first few months, and for much of the subsequent development of the

museum, can be determined from the very first meeting on 29 March 1917. The immediate priority was to form extensive and representative collections, before the opportunity was lost. To do this, a specialist sub-committee structure was devised. Each sub-committee was headed by a member of the Museum Committee and was charged with the responsibility of collecting for the Museum in designated specialist areas. Thus Admiralty, Munitions, War Office, Red Cross, Records and Literature, and Women's Work sub-committees were agreed upon. Later in the year, the Red Cross Sub-Committee was dropped and Air Services, Dominions and Loan Exhibitions sub-committees established. Members of the sub-committees were carefully selected by the chairman and chairwoman and, as a result, a wide range of skills and influence was attracted to each.

For example, the Admiralty Sub-Committee, announced on 5 April 1917, consisted of Commander Walcott (Chairman), Representative of Anti-Sub Department, Director of Naval Construction, Director of Naval Ordnance, Director of Torpedoes and Mines, Representative of RNAS, Engineer in Chief, and Director of Stores. The sub-committee had the power to add to its number as the occasion arose.¹⁶ The Women's Work Sub-Committee was equally influential and prestigious. It was chaired by Lady Norman, CBE, and included Lady Haig and Lady Askwith, CBE. Conway's daughter Agnes became its secretary. The War Office Sub-Committee was never formed as such: the War Office transferred the War Trophies Committee to service the museum. Mr Cubbitt served as Chairman and Sir Arthur Leetham of the RUSI Museum (a severe and belligerent critic of the War Museum) was co-opted as a member. Although there were acknowledged areas of overlap between Committees, for example, collecting material to represent the medical services, and munitions and 'women's work', the sub-committee structure gave the museum the opportunity to collect reasonably comprehensively on the best possible advice.

Regardless of any criticism in these early weeks, the Museum Committee saw that its work of collecting and recording would involve much activity and should be carried out with the co-operation of the Forces. The Museum Committee agreed to canvass opinion from the Fleet and some of the Expeditionary Forces and to provide an explanation of the Museum for them. Attention was to be drawn to the important considerations of 'a) regimental importance, b) localities and different war areas, c) the Esprit de Corps of Colonial troops'. Thus, the first public statements concerning the aims and

purposes of the National War Museum and the philosophy and intent behind its collecting appeared in circulars to the Forces, which received the King's 'cordial approval of this method of interesting the Services on behalf of the museum'.¹⁷ In the first of these, issued in April 1917, Conway argued that, without a National Museum, future historians would have to use German museums for their research. This exaggerated, even preposterous, claim was intended to lean heavily on the patriotic feelings of the reader. Conway identified the purpose of the War Museum thus:

When peace returns and men are back at home, the years will pass and memory of the great days and adventures through which they lived will grow dim. It is the purpose of the Museum to be a place which they can visit with their comrades, their friends, or their children, and there revive the past and behold again the great guns and other weapons with which they fought, the uniforms they wore, pictures or models of the ships and trenches and dug-outs in which weary hours were spent, or of positions which they carried and ground every yard of it memorable to them. They will then be glad to recall also the occupations of their hours of leisure. They will be able to look up the likenesses of the men they knew, some of whom, it may be, fell fighting beside them. The best possible result will be desired by all. Let all co-operate heartily and it will be attained.¹⁸

Conway also outlined the collecting interests of the National War Museum: the Admiralty, the War Office, and the Ministry of Munitions would be depositing the 'large mass of official exhibits, but such an assemblage will be a dead accumulation unless it is vitalized by contributions expressive of the action, the experiences, the valour and the endurance of individuals'. To accomplish this, the Museum would collect personal documents and publications reflecting leisure, as well as souvenirs and models. Also, a photographic record of 'persons and places' would be made and 'must be as complete as possible'. This was the first indication that the Museum was aiming to create collections which would be a total record of the war.

In June 1917, Conway took this approach further, when he presented a memorandum on the 'Scope of the National War Museum' to Mond. In this he summarized, for the information of the Cabinet, how the National War Museum Committee perceived its responsibilities.

The Committee . . . understands that the end to be achieved is the provision of a record and memorial of the war by sea and land in all parts of the world, of the raising, equipment, and transportation of armies, of munition manufacture at home and elsewhere, of the medical and other subsidiary services, of the work of women both directly for the war purposes and indirectly by substitution, and

generally of all activities called forth by the war at home, in the Dominions, and in India, at all the fronts and on the sea.

Such a museum, if wisely collected and arranged, will be unique, will make a direct appeal to the millions of individuals who have taken part in the war or in war-work of any kind . . . when they visit the museum in years to come, they should be able by its aid to revive the memory of their work for the war, and, pointing to some exhibit, to say 'This thing I did'.¹⁹

Years later, Conway referred to the disappointing and slow responses to their call for material in this early period of the War Museum, and how, although it was first imagined that the exhibits would be largely captured trophies, it was later decided that the museum should be able to show 'every nation what their own effort had been'.²⁰

At its first meeting, the Museum Committee approved the appointment of a field collector in France — a Canadian officer, Major Beckles Willson — and agreed to approach GHQ to request authority for him to 'inspect and earmark trophies etc. in France and elsewhere on behalf of the museum'. It was hoped that the War Museum would thus be able to acquire relevant material at the earliest possible moment.²¹

Thus, while the sub-committees explored the extent and requirements of their specialist areas, without, it must be said, any parameters, conditions or guidelines being laid down centrally by the Museum's Committee, Beckles Willson was collecting material in France. He visited the Blanc Museum in Paris and acquired storage space in Hesdin. Throughout his work he laboured under considerable difficulties, not least because the National War Museum Committee did not appreciate fully the nature of his task and possibly even the conditions at the front.

When Mond and Conway visited France in July 1917, they were initially 'not much impressed by what he had done'. However, later they were to revise this opinion: 'We concluded that he well understood the nature of his work, possesses a fund of energy, is deeply interested in what he has undertaken to do.'²² Mond and Conway had to admit that one of the problems was that Beckles Willson's position was not regularized. He lacked the rank and position with GHQ to carry out his work effectively. His financial position was also somewhat precarious; the source of his pay and expenses became a matter of dispute, the National War Museum claiming it had not the funds to support him.²³

In these early months, the Museum Committee was very active. Besides the specialist sub-committee work and the collection of material in the field, it considered the use of war artists, the amassing of photographic and medical collections, and the recording of railway work and the inland waterways. A separate section dealing with children's exhibits was planned. Discussions were held on the possibilities of the War Museum's acquiring the Public Records from the war and receiving and housing the British Museum Library acquisitions for the war period. Specialists were invited to advise in areas such as medals and folklore.²⁴

Through the Foreign Office, the Museum Committee opened up relations with 'British Embassies, Legations and Consulates in all the allied and neutral countries'²⁵ for the purpose of acquiring material. An invitation was issued to the High Commissioners of the Dominions and the Secretary of State for India to appoint representatives to an India and Dominions Sub-Committee which would deal with Indian and colonial matters. As the Museum Committee had already agreed to limit the scope of the Museum 'as far as possible to the British effort', the sub-committee would appear to have had little more than a liaison role. In fact it had a difficult task. Canada and Australia were both establishing their own war museums and there was the possibility of conflict arising from an 'Imperial' collecting policy. The first matters the sub-committee had to deal with arose from requests made to the Admiralty for exhibits by Colonel Doughty of the National War Museum of Canada.²⁶

As early as 12 April 1917, the date of the Committee's third meeting, the type and size of premises needed to house the Museum were under active consideration. ffoulkes had hoped the Tower would house the collections. However, the troops could not be moved and the Constable, Sir Evelyn Wood, refused to have any exhibits except perhaps a few placed outside on a temporary basis. The Committee was aware that it needed a very big site, one that could perhaps also accommodate naval and military tournaments in its precincts. C.R. Peers, Inspector of Ancient Monuments and Frank Bains, Principal Architect, both from Mond's Ministry of Works, were invited to advise on possible sites. On 26 April, they presented a choice of nine locations for the Committee's consideration. The Earls Court Exhibition would provide a site of about fourteen acres. The Committee was concerned that the site was inconveniently divided by the railways, had no real fronting and already had an established

tradition of holding exhibitions. Moreover, the site would be expensive to acquire. Then there was the White City, but as this comprised 130 acres it was considered too large. On the other hand, a three-acre site behind the British Museum was considered too small. The site of Charing Cross Railway Station, about five and a half acres, was ruled out as being too small, far too costly and not likely to be obtainable for some years. The Tower of London, Burton Court and the Duke of York’s School could not be considered seriously, nor could the Chelsea Hospital, owing to difficulties ‘being foreseen with the present occupiers (the Chelsea Hospital’s Commissioners, Guards, etc.)’.

The most satisfactory suggestion was an eleven-acre site in Hyde Park with a frontage onto Bayswater Road. All the important exhibits could be shown in buildings or in glazed courtyards. A temporary exhibition of material might be put up while building operations progressed.

It was urged that the above site would provide a worthy and dignified memorial to those who have fallen and those who have fought in the Great War and that this fact should weigh with the public as against the encroachment of open space.²⁷

The floor area required for the various exhibits was calculated at a meeting on 17 May 1917. The initial figures were:

Navy	127,000	sq feet
Army	65,000	„ „
Munitions	60,000	„ „
Trophies	10,000	„ „
Records	12,000	„ „
Women’s work	5,000	„ „
	279,000	sq feet

Space for expansion, for greater quantities of material if the war was a prolonged effort and for egress and access was also considered. Conway calculated the cost at £2 per square foot, giving an approximate total cost of £600,000. Comparable figures were found and used to support their case: the British Museum Reading Room was 42,000 square feet, the Victoria and Albert Museum 330,000 square feet.

With the plans for the building drawn up, the Committee arrived at the conclusion that the National War Museum should be the nation’s official memorial to the war. This became central to their submission

to the War Cabinet and an abiding hope of the Director, Sir Martin Conway.

... the very heart and focus of the building should be of a memorial character. This might take the form of a Hall of Honour as rich and beautiful in character as artists can devise, and adjacent to it a Gallery devoted to the separate memorials of the Navy and the Army by ships, regiments, and contingents. The Hall of Honour could be designed to bear on its walls painted portraits and on its floor pedestals carrying busts or sculptured figures of such eminent individuals as the people as a whole may delight to single out for special honour. In the Memorial Gallery the name of every individual who fell in battle or died of wounds should be legibly inscribed on bronze plates, suitably framed, with the arms, badges and honours of each regiment; here also the special mementoes of particular units would find place in the neighbourhood of the regimental or other collective material.

It is therefore suggested that the proposed Museum be adopted as the War Memorial. If that step is taken, all difficulties connected with finance will fall away; neither will there be any impediment to selecting as central and costly a site as may seem desirable. The public might resent what could be represented as extravagance in connection with a Museum; but the same public would insist that the memorial to the countless dead who gave their lives for its salvation should be costly in sacrifice, splendid in character, and central in position.²⁸

Preliminary estimates for the museum building now reached £750,000.

Mond placed before the Cabinet on 21 August 1917 two documents: a memorandum from Conway to himself as First Commissioner of Works, outlining the proposed scope of the Museum; and his own memorandum requesting Cabinet approval for the following features:

1. the adoption of the National War Museum as the National War Memorial
2. the sanction of the estimated expenditure
3. the approval of the proposed site.²⁹

The Cabinet was in no mood to accept this grandiose scheme: the carnage at Passchendaele was at its height. Clearly, the war was going very badly indeed. Curzon expressed his objections in the strongest terms. Although an early supporter of the War Museum,

he had never contemplated a plan that would involve the erections of a building or buildings covering 5 acres of ground, and probably costing over one million sterling, in Hyde Park, that would apparently attempt to commemorate almost every incident and feature of a war which we have not yet won and which it was quite conceivable in the future we might desire as far as possible to forget . . .³⁰

The feeling of the Cabinet was that a museum was quite unsuitable as an Imperial War Memorial — 'it would be an unjustifiable

extravagance now and a white elephant in the future'. Its views on the collections were equally damning: 'A vast and heterogeneous collection of models or memorials even, as suggested of munitions workers, boy scouts, and girl guides, would in a few years time interest nobody and merely encumber space.' Furthermore, pledges had been given that no building could begin during the war. It was inconceivable that public space could even be considered for one. The idea was seen as premature and therefore formal decisions were shelved. Instead, a Ministerial Committee under Lord Crawford and Lord Balcarris was appointed to examine the proposals of the National War Museum Committee.

This was the conclusion of the first phase of the National War Museum. The Committee was faced with a reversal. Conway was very depressed by the rebuff and by the prospects for the future.³¹ Shortly after this, Sir Henry Maxwell Lyte, the Keeper of the Public Record Office, decided against giving custody of the War Records to the Museum.

A higher public profile was needed in order for the Museum to develop broad-based popular support. On 13 September, it was agreed that the British Red Cross be invited to hold an exhibition of war material from the War Museum. In October, an illustrated booklet outlining the scope and aims of the Museum was approved and published. The Dominions Sub-Committee canvassed for the title of the Museum to be 'Imperial War Museum'.³² Beckles Willson was made Deputy Inspector of Trophies, on General Butler's recommendation, with Major-General Donald placed in charge.³³ Arrangements were under way for war artists.³⁴ But all this activity was under the shadow of the Crawford Committee's deliberations. The War Museum's Committee was informed of some of the matters arising from the Crawford Committee meetings and knew that their proposals for space requirements were being drastically cut. The one comfort was that the Treasury, through Parliament, had agreed £21,000 towards the Museum's costs under a Class IV vote, enabling the Museum to take over its own accounting.³⁵ This was, at least, some recognition of the Museum's status as a formal, government-funded institution.

The Interim Report of the Crawford Committee, published in December 1917, brought little clarification to the War Museum's overall position. It offered general approval of the proposals for the

Scottish National War Museum,³⁶ which were seen neither as contrary to the interests of, nor as antagonistic to, the War Museum. It also recommended to the War Cabinet, on a resolution received from the India and Dominions Committee of the War Museum, that the War Museum should be titled the 'Imperial War Museum'. The Museum began 1918 with this title.³⁷

Throughout its deliberations, the Crawford Committee had sought to temper and restrain the Museum Committee's proposals. The significant figure in the moderation of the Museum plans was H.A.L. Fisher, Minister of Education and a distinguished historian, who sought to make the Museum 'selective, not exhaustive' and to see implemented 'a plan less ambitious and less costly than the project which is outlined to us in Sir Martin Conway's memorandum'.³⁸

The principal recommendation of the Crawford Report was that the IWM should be built on a three-and-a-half-acre site on the south bank of the Thames, opposite Westminster.³⁹ The Committee had reduced the space required by 28 per cent from the original estimates. The cost of the Museum would amount to £665,000. The memorial proposal was not acceded to, although it was recommended that the National War Memorial should be positioned near the Museum. Although the recommendations were not unanimous (Dr Addison strongly dissented from the recommendation to purchase the river site for £486,000), it was not the total rebuff that might have been expected after the Cabinet's criticisms of August 1917. Mierion and Susie Harries see this as evidence of a rearguard action.⁴⁰ However, the Cabinet received the report on 11 April 1918 and deferred a decision, angered by press leaks about the report before it had been discussed.⁴¹

In the absence of any firm commitment from the War Cabinet on the Crawford Report, the IWM Committee kept its options open, by organizing a series of temporary exhibitions.⁴² The Red Cross exhibition of War Museum material at Burlington House in January 1918 was not a success and indeed raised controversy when one of the exhibits, a parachute, was found to be wrongly labelled. The manufacturer threatened to sue, but dropped the action when a correction was made. Instead of raising money for the Red Cross, the exhibition made a loss. It did, however, show the IWM Committee how temporary exhibitions could and should be organized. A loan exhibition sub-committee was formed to deal with these problems and prepare temporary exhibitions for the provinces. One of the problems it faced was that exhibiting war material was a difficult

business. The objects had to be carefully selected and handled. Sketching and photography had to be explicitly banned and notices of the relevant section of the Defence of the Realm Act displayed.

In the spring of 1918, the IWM organized its first loan exhibitions of British official photographs for the provinces. Not only did the temporary or loan exhibition keep the Museum in the public eye, through the attendant publicity, but also afforded Conway opportunities to articulate again and publicize his philosophy for the IWM. This he did by reissuing forewords to catalogues which were little more than a slight rearrangement of his June 1917 memorandum on 'The Scope of the National War Museum', with emphasis on the potential of the Museum as a National War Memorial.

An exhibition of Women's Work was staged at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in October 1918. This proved a great success and was visited by 82,000 people, including the Queen. A 'Sea Power' exhibition was opened at the same time, with material borrowed from the IWM. This incurred the IWM Committee's wrath, as they were neither invited nor mentioned in the exhibition's publicity. One exhibition took place abroad: Beckles Willson organized an exhibition in Alexandria of the collections he had amassed there before he resigned with the Armistice.

The IWM Committee continued to acquire collections, in spite of the uncertainty about the Museum's future. The First Annual Report of the Museum records the considerable progress made between March 1917 and late March 1918. The library, publicity, records and photographic sections had made substantial acquisitions. But the service sections, that is the collections of weapons and equipment, were not developing so coherently, although in the circumstances this is understandable. The war, which was exacting heavy losses of life, was draining the country of resources. The prospects of victory had never looked bleaker.

The IWM's most successful period of collecting was from spring 1918 until the early 1920s. The Museum was able to earmark material while it was still in use, and collect all that was deemed suitable at the end of the conflict, when it was given up gladly. Particularly important art acquisitions were made in 1918 by the Art Section and by the various sub-committees through the employment of artists on commissioned work. Whether by design or accident, much of this complemented rather than duplicated the subject matter of works amassed by the Department (later Ministry) of Information. In spite of a period of uncertainty, the gamble paid off and in December 1918

the IWM acquired the Ministry of Information's works of art, and thus became the possessor of an astonishingly rich and varied collection.

By the end of 1918, the IWM had extended its committee structure to include a Religious Work Committee and a Medical Section Committee. Lady Norman (Women's Work Section) and the now Brigadier-General MacLean (Air Services Section) had been co-opted onto the IWM Committee. The Museum had a staff of around twenty, accommodated in at least nine different premises.⁴³

When the war ended, the Museum was inundated with material (earmarked or otherwise) from the services and elsewhere. ffoulkes commented in his autobiography: 'With the end of the war exhibits began to pour in. Departments were closed down, munition works and women's organizations ceased to be. Every government department was only too pleased to unload examples of their war activities.'⁴⁴ The Second Annual Report provides evidence of the extensive acquisitions made at this time.

With the conclusion of the war, the Museum Committee hoped for some official confirmation of its status and future provision. The War Cabinet met on 4 December 1918 and, following further consideration of the Crawford Report and a letter from Mond to the Prime Minister requesting action, it decided that the question of the Museum's future should be postponed until after the general elections. Even then, there was no progress.

By March 1919, Conway was entertaining real fears for the Museum. In a letter to R.P.M. Gower of the Treasury, he wrote:

England is filled with botched institutions due to the fact that before they were set up their scope and purpose were not sufficiently examined by the responsible authorities. The Imperial Institute is a standing memorial of this kind of white elephant. I am terribly afraid that the War Museum may become another white elephant.⁴⁵

He saw the central problem as one purely of finance: 'If a war museum is to be a living organism of continuing utility to future generations it will involve a large initial expense, certainly not less than one million sterling.' Conway still clung to the possibility of the War Museum being a war memorial. Clearly he saw this as a means by which money for the IWM could be raised. The stunning success of the Kitchener Fund had much influenced Conway, and others, into this way of thinking.

There were drastic cuts in public spending in the immediate post-war period and a turning-away from the war experience; the lack of government response to the Museum's needs has to be viewed partly against this background. Frustrated by the lack of any move on their position, the IWM Committee responded to an approach from the Trustees of the Crystal Palace to lease part of their building. Ironically, when the Committee had viewed the Crystal Palace in 1917 (by that time a rotting, leaking hulk at Sydenham), it had ruled it out as quite unsuitable. In spite of the fact that the building was totally inadequate for displaying the collections, particularly paintings, negotiations progressed and agreement was reached that the IWM would take over the lease in April 1920.

In a secret memorandum to the Cabinet on 16 March 1920, Mond raised the question of the permanent organization and administration of the Imperial War Museum, arguing that it was now necessary to create a corporate and legal body for the Museum.⁴⁶ With his memo, he submitted a draft bill, prepared in consultation with Conway and the Treasury, based 'on the lines of that dealing with the national collections'. Mond had already acquired the Prince of Wales's consent to be the first President of the Board of Trustees. As he was asking for no money in the bill, 'its purpose being merely to regularize the existing position', he did not anticipate opposition at any of its stages.

The Cabinet did just as Mond asked and placed the draft bill before the Home Affairs Committee. Mond steered the bill through the Commons, but its passage was not trouble-free. The Museum was criticized by Commander Kenworthy, MP, for being likely to perpetuate the war spirit. Tom Myers, MP, argued that there was no public demand for such an institution which would familiarize youth 'with all the barbarism of warfare'.⁴⁷ The division on the second reading was passed by 110 votes to 14. Some sections of the popular press joined in the protest.

On 9 June 1920, the King and Queen attended the opening of the IWM at the Crystal Palace. The collections on view were by no means the total of those amassed by the Committee. Some material simply failed to arrive, while Professor Oman flatly refused to move the library. The building had posed many problems: screens had to be built, platforms erected and the floor straightened. ffoulkes reported that the staff had 'worked assiduously and loyally, but were entirely unable to cope with the rush of exhibits which approximated four or five hundred tons in five weeks'. In the weeks that followed the

opening of the collections, pilfering and theft became a problem. There was, moreover, dissatisfaction with the displays. Beckles Willson wrote to Mond:

I felt that you ought to be personally appealed to in order to save this great project from becoming what is bound to become, in its present hands, an inglorious fiasco. Every officer and man with whom I have spoken on the subject who has visited the exhibition is of the same opinion as myself concerning it . . . but the whole plan or want of plan of the show and its undignified and irrelevant surroundings and accessories, are truly deplorable.⁴⁸

There is little doubt that Beckles Willson as field collector had a very raw deal from the Committee. His relationship with it would seem to be one commonly experienced, that is a clash of ignorance and insensitivity between those who knew only the home front and those who had experienced the war at first hand. The extent of Beckles Willson's grievances with the Museum cannot be told as his file at the IWM is closed to researchers. However, his comments on the displays, found in a misfiled letter, are those of a person who had seen action and now came to find the equipment, dress and detritus of that experience arranged bizarrely in a massive glass mausoleum, where they nestled incongruously amongst potted plants.

ffoulkes himself admitted that he was 'very much dissatisfied with the present scheme, and thought that drastic alterations, compressions and rearrangements should be made as opportunity occurs'. He considered himself capable of grouping the collections for serious study by the student and cited his work at the Tower Armouries in support of this claim.

ffoulkes throughout appears to have failed to understand that the Museum's purpose and future lay in an intimate and sensitive relationship with the public and its various experiences of the war. He embodied the 'home front' view of the war, seeing it as a very distant affair: in many respects the reality of it was perhaps beyond his imagination. His personal interest in the study of weaponry completely deflected him from any sensitive, compassionate, even intellectual view of the war itself.

At the official opening of the Museum at the Crystal Palace, however, the disorganization of the collections displayed and the unsuitability of the building were not discussed. Years of inadequate funding, poor accommodation and some disposal of collections lay ahead, but these had only suggested themselves to the Committee, who still hoped for appropriate recognition for the Museum.

However, this was the moment to celebrate the achievement of forming the collection. Mond, in his speech, said:

The Museum was not conceived as a monument to military glory, but rather as a record of toil and sacrifice; as a place of study to the technician in studying the development of armaments; to the historian as an assembly of material and archives to instruct his work; and to the people of the Empire, as a record of their toil and sacrifice through these fateful years.⁴⁹

The King, in his speech formally opening the Museum, spoke of the IWM as a memorial to the common sacrifice of men and women, soldier and civilian: 'It was a "democratic victory" . . . the work of a nation in arms.'

Several weeks later, Robert Cecil, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the League of Nations Union, wrote to Mond that an opportunity had been afforded by 'the Victory Exhibition at the Crystal Palace' to bring the principles of the League of Nations into vivid contrast with the machinery of war'. He asked for a space at the Crystal Palace to erect a League of Nations stall. Mond refused permission, but did suggest that the Trustees of the Crystal Palace might be able to find space in some other part of the building.⁵⁰

Of the two and a half million people who visited the Museum at the Crystal Palace in its first year, a 'considerable proportion' had served in the fighting and ancillary forces during the war.⁵¹ For them at least, the meaning and significance of the amassed collections on view may not have been lost. Nor could they have overlooked the extent to which the Museum was the home front perspective on their experiences.

The most dramatic museum development during the Great War was the founding of the Imperial War Museum; partly a propaganda move, partly a sincere attempt to record the war. The IWM Committee approached reasonably systematically the tasks of documenting the war and collecting objects representative of the experience. Its achievements in terms of contemporary collecting and its pioneer work in this respect have never been fully acknowledged by museum curators, nor have their methods of collecting and recording been adopted by other museums in Britain.

The IWM was as much a creation and victim of war mood as was the initiative to found local war museums, through the Local War Museums' Association.⁵² This never got off the ground, although its

inception and intent in many ways parallel those of the IWM. While the IWM struggled to survive, the local war museums failed completely.

The IWM's extreme difficulties in the post-war years can be attributed largely to changes in public and political attitudes. However, the Museum's competent and committed Committee had ensured a foothold from which the IWM could not be shaken. The quality of the collections and their continued use by the public and researchers alike, as one of the two main archives on the Great War,⁵³ are testimony to the Imperial War Museum Committee's achievement.⁵⁴ Moreover, the IWM has gone on and developed the role of official archive of most subsequent conflicts in which Britain has been involved.⁵⁵

Notes

1. A. Marwick, *The Deluge* (London 1965), 146–7.
2. P. Knightley, *The First Casualty* (London 1975), 83.
3. An obvious example is the work of John Buchan. Duodenal ulcers prevented him from joining up. Instead, as director of the publishing firm Nelson's, he initiated Nelson's *History of the War*, much of which he wrote himself. In 1915, Buchan's novel *The Thirty-Nine Steps* was published, followed in the next year by *Greenmantle*. M. and S. Harries, *The War Artists* (London 1983), 21.
4. M. and S. Harries, op. cit., 3–6.
5. Quoted in M. and S. Harries, op. cit., as Second Interim Report on the work conducted for the government at Wellington House (1.2.16): IWM C/F.
6. C.R. Grundy, *Local War Museums: A Suggestion* (London 1917), 8.
7. M. and S. Harries, op. cit., 3.
8. M. Saunders and P.M. Taylor, *British Propaganda during the First World War 1914–1918* (London 1982), 66.
9. M. and S. Harries, op. cit., 118.
10. *Museums Journal*, 15, 14 (1916), 376.
11. Note Walcott to O. Murray, 6 May 1917: IWM C/F Walcott.
12. C. ffoulkes, *Arms and the Tower* (London 1939), 85–6. C. ffoulkes, 'Origins and Beginnings of the National War Museum (Copy of Notes from My Diary of 1917)', dated 15 March 1917: IWM Committee Minutes, vol. 0: IWM C/F. 'The Armouries of the Tower. A Survey of Recent Changes', *The Times*, 15 February 1917. Copy of letters from Mr Ian Malcolm, MP, to Lord Harcourt, Lord Curzon and Lord Stamfordham, 20 February 1917: IWM Committee Minutes, vol 0: IWM C/F.
13. National War Museum. Memorandum by Sir Alfred Mond, First Commissioner of Works, 27 February 1917 (CAB 24/6 GT83): IWM C/F A1/3. War Cabinet Minutes 87, Minute 15, 5 March 1917 (Works 17/108): IWM C/F A1/3.
14. C. ffoulkes, 'Origins and Beginnings', op. cit. Joan Evans, *The Conways*. A

History of Three Generations (London 1966), 227. G.M. Bayliss, 'An Account of the Foundation of the Imperial War Museum and its Reference Library' (unpublished essay), 1971.

15. Lloyd George papers, Beaverbrook Foundation Library, F/36/6/14, Lloyd George to A. Mond, 23 March 1917, cited in Bayliss, op. cit.

16. National War Museum Second Committee Meeting Minutes, 5 April 1917: IWM C/F.

17. National War Museum Committee Minutes, 5 April 1917: IWM C/F.

18. *National War Museum*, (B72 7 9) 24 4/17: IWM C/F A1/2.

19. Memorandum on the Scope of the National War Museum. Sir Martin Conway to the First Commissioner, HM Office of Works (Cab 24/22 GT1650): IWM C/F A1/3.

20. 'Imperial War Museum', Notes: IWM C/F A1/3.

21. There was already a large store of captured enemy material held at Croydon under the Ordnance Branch.

22. Letter to Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig from Sir Martin Conway, 23 July 1917: IWM C/F A1/3.

23. National War Museum Committee Minutes, 16 August 1917: IWM C/F.

24. National War Museum Committee Minutes, 29 March; 5 April; 3 May; 7, 14, 28 June; 5 July 1917: IWM C/F.

25. *First Annual Report of the Committee of the Imperial War Museum 1917-18*, PP, 1918, Cd 9061 xiv 761.

26. National War Museum Committee Minutes, 17 May, 7 June, 2 August 1917: IWM C/F.

27. Ibid., 26 April 1917.

28. Memorandum on the Scope of the National War Museum. Sir Martin Conway to the First Commissioner, HM Office of Works (CAB 24/22 GT 1650): IWM C/F A1/4.

29. Memorandum of the National War Memorial and Museum by the First Commissioner of Works (CAB 24/22 GT 1650): IWM C/F A1/4.

30. War Cabinet Minutes 221 minutes, 2 August 1917 (Works 17/108).

31. Conway papers. M. Conway diary, 21 August 1917, cited in Bayliss, op. cit.

32. National War Committee Minutes, 27 September 1917, IWM C/F.

33. Ibid., 1 November 1917.

34. Ibid., 22 November 1917.

35. Ibid., 2 August, 4 October 1917.

36. The Scottish War Museum and Memorial are now housed in St Andrews Chapel, Edinburgh Castle.

37. *Lord Crawford's Committee on the War Museum Interim Report*, 14 December 1917 (GT 3016): IWM C/F A1/3.

38. Letter to Lord Crawford from H.A.L. Fisher, 20 September 1917: IWM C/F A1/3.

39. *Imperial War Memorial and Museum, Report of Lord Crawford's Committee*, 14 March 1918 (G 202): IWM C/F A1/3.

40. M. and S. Harries, op. cit., 120.

41. War Cabinet Minute 383, 5 and 11 April 1918: IWM C/F.

42. War exhibitions in general were very well attended and were often used to raise money. In the early months of 1918, the whole of Trafalgar Square was transformed into a 'model battlefield to stir the imagination of those at home in order to increase

contributions to the War Loan'. *The Story of 25 Eventful Years in Pictures* (London 1935), 178.

43. *Second Annual Report of the Committee of the Imperial War Museum 1918-1919*, PP, 1919, and 138 xxii 1187.

44. ffoulkes, op. cit., 123-26.

45. Letter from Conway to R.P.M. Gower, 6 March 1919: IWM C/F A1/3.

46. Mond considered that by March 1920 the task of collecting had almost reached its end. *Memorandum by First Commissioner of Works Covering Draft Bill*, 16 March 1920, CP880: IWM CF 141/2.

47. Opinion that there was a case for a Peace Museum rather than a Museum of War had already been offered by Professor J.L. Myres to the museums' profession at the Oxford Conference in 1919, *Museum Journal*, 19, 5 (1919), 73-6.

48. Letter from Beckles Willson to Mond, 2 July 1920: IWM C/F A1/2.

49. *Third Annual Report of the Committee of the Imperial War Museum*, PP, 1919-1920, and S44 xvciii 37.

50. Letter from Lord Robert Cecil to Sir Alfred Mond, 24 June 1920: IWM C/F A1/2.

51. *Fifth Annual Report of the Imperial War Museum (Second Report of the Board of Trustees)*, 1921-22: IWM C/F.

52. G. Kavanagh, 'Museums, Memorials and Minenwerfers', *Museums Journal*, 84, 3 (1984), 65-70.

53. The other being the Public Records Office.

54. The University of Leicester aided the research undertaken on this subject through a grant awarded by the Research Board.

55. For a more detailed and recent account of the Imperial War Museum, see D. Condell, 'The Imperial War Museum 1917-1920' (unpublished MPhil thesis, University of London, 1985).

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