

The Process of remembrance and commemoration in Britain was an agent for political order and stability following 1914-18. Discuss.

With the anniversary of Armistice Day fast-approaching, the discussion which is to proceed from this essay, will no doubt be one, intensely replicated throughout our country, continental Europe, and perhaps even more distant areas of the world, both at the present time, and largely, throughout the coming weeks. But before we explore the question at hand, let us ponder now, most especially given the current time-period, where we ourselves might be witness to a commemorative redress that seems to unleash itself wholly, upon the public eye, each and every year? Only a moment ago, I myself was in the presence of such “remembrance” whilst cashing a cheque at my local branch, and again, across the way, when purchasing a sandwich. I was greeted in both instances by the famed ‘Poppy Appeal’ - no-doubt for some of us, a reminder of past and distant conflicts, and their contributions to moulding the world as we know it; an understanding perhaps gained, chiefly as a consequence of educative address, military service, and/or personal affiliation? However for many of us that knowledge may be absent, and yet strong evidence suggests that even with a population increasing in diversity - such symbolism can be viewed and shared today, more than it ever has been, and without signs of slowing down. Subsequently, with the relevance of this subject very much appropriate to the ‘here-and-now’ it will be the object of this essay to ascertain whether or not the process of remembrance and commemoration in Britain was an agent for political order and stability following 1914-18 - or perhaps rather...it still is? I aim to achieve this through consulting a number of sources including; ‘Memory Studies: Seven Types of Forgetting’ by Paul Connerton, a psychological expansion on the processes of memory, as well as several sources relating to the exploration of remembrance and commemoration, which shall suffice to supply my narrative, notably, ‘War And Remembrance In The Twentieth Century’ and ‘For ever England: The Western Front and the politics of remembrance in Britain’ by Sivan Emmanuel, Jay Winter, and Michael Hefferman respectively.

So to begin, what exactly is meant by remembrance? To simplify such to that of a ‘passive’ or ‘collective’ form; remembrance could be defined in respect to the former ‘as the personal recollections of a silent individual’ and for the latter as a ‘group that produces, expresses, and consumes it.’ i.e. the general public¹, as indeed Sivan and Winter explain:

In all combatant countries there has been a proliferation of monuments, understood as literary, visual, or physical reminders of twentieth-century warfare. Many are self-serving tributes; most go beyond state-sponsored triumphalism to the familial and existential levels where many of the effects of war on the lives of ordinary people reside.²

Through acknowledging the fluidity of commemoration as Sivan and Winter seem to abide, and whether or not expressed in passive or collective form, mentally or physically, government aided, or via personal sponsorship, through apolitical, or political means, is it not

¹ E. Sivan and J. Winter, ‘*War And Remembrance In The Twentieth Century*’ (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1999), p. 6.

² Sivan and Winter, ‘*War and Remembrance*’, p. 8.

the case that all methods of such expression lead inevitably to that of a collective output? For whether one is consciously aware or not; all those that are complicit in an act of known ritual, albeit, singularly, passively or individually, are still engaging themselves in a collective uniformity. Indeed often unknowingly, but nevertheless unavoidably; and thus these replicated forms of “individual” expression are indeed homogenizing, consequently alleviating division through the cohesiveness gained from ritualistic commonality.³

Forms of idolatry that were utilised, in-line to the events which were rupturing throughout the 1914-18 period have been replicated throughout time-immemorial as a method for implanting selective memories. The Ancient Greeks provide us with a prototype of this kind, for they were acutely aware of the dangers intrinsic to remembering past misdeeds, through that of revenge and vendettas, as potent potentialities threatening to sow division amongst whole communities, with the plausible eventuality of civil strife; they therefore acknowledged that a greater part of the populace had a stake in not remembering. Thus they erected on the acropolis overshadowing the city, an altar in their most important temple, dedicated to Lethe, that is, to forgetting.⁴

Fast forward to the era in question, where seemingly, these objects and methods appear all too familiar, for ‘In British communities the word “cenotaph”, meaning empty tomb, gained a singular resonance’⁵ deliberately taking an ancient Greek and hence non-Christian form to commemorate the Empire’s dead, and seeking sanctuary in the national and imperial hub; that being, the capital city of London; the dedication on the tomb includes the assertion that ‘he died for King and country, for loved ones, home and Empire’⁶. These words themselves carry weight in defining the laws of kinship, as attributable to Western monarchistic cultures at the very least, and unquestionably throughout the global framework of self-proclaimed “states” disavowed from traditional hereditary governance. This web of prioritisation lands the male at centre stage as the traditional provider and defender of the home, housing his immediate family; from which follow; other loved ones (extended family and friends), then King and Country, and lastly ‘Empire’ - the outreaches of “our” “civilised society” - the imperial realm as it were. This web of kinship is fairly commonsensical as it condones the idea that those with whom one shares the most intimacy, likely hold more favour in the sequence of importance to oneself - and is it not the case that intimacy stems primarily from shared values and emotions; common attributes, or in-short, culture?

Macleod’s review highlights that; ‘what is interesting from the point of view of national identity is how completely any distinct sense of Englishness has been subsumed within this imperial Britishness’⁷ with Sivan and Winter stating that ‘these national memorials unveiled in 1920,

³ Sivan and Winter, ‘*War and Remembrance*’, p. 7.

⁴ Paul Connerton, ‘Memory Studies’, *Seven Types of Forgetting*, 1.1 (2008), 59-71 (p. 62) <DOI: 10.1177/1750698007083889> [Accessed 02 November 2019].

⁵ Ken S. Inglis, ‘War Memorials: Ten Questions for Historians’, *Guerres Mondiales Et Conflits Contemporains*, 167 (1992), 5-21 (p. 9) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25730853>> [Accessed 02 November 2019].

⁶ Jenny Macleod, ‘Britishness and Commemoration: National Memorials to the First World War in Britain and Ireland’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48.5 (2013), 647-665 (p. 650) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24671826>> [Accessed 02 November 2019].

⁷ Macleod, ‘*Britishness and Commemoration*’, p. 650.

reflect the confused nature of national identity.⁸ I would however seek to dispute the latter claim and instead relate the projects “confused” temperament to rather explicit intention, formulated on the grounds of asserting wholesomeness in order to engender new imperialism; as Macleod accords: ‘Those who sought to construct these national war memorials did not seek to contribute to this unravelling of Britishness: quite the contrary.’⁹

‘The Great War was initially and fundamentally remembered as an event of family history’¹⁰; the most impactful reminders deriving of course from the casualties; both injured and deceased; who were on the whole, men of sons, fathers, and brothers, or in-short; a network of genealogy, but also economically imperative as primary providers, through source of income, as well as social standing for an entire family. Since a physical relatable set of memories is indeed all the more powerful, and ‘there is overwhelming evidence that the First World War increased the strength of family life’¹¹, an opportunity would have been keenly observed for quelling dissidence, whilst simultaneously reinvigorating a much hampered sense of imperial pride, especially since that although families may have united under their fallen kin initially, support for the war was widely met with a trending vapidly throughout the country with resentment for the crown and often one another. Thus ‘the ‘big words’ which seemed so powerful in 1914 - honour, duty, patriotism - were far less imposing moral forces after 1918.’¹² Wartime experiences of urban dwellers in Manchester would have been quite different from those in other towns or cities such as Belfast, Dublin, or Glasgow; and as such, the ‘work’ versus ‘service’ debacle was quick to transform itself into competing war memories, entrenched in the dichotomy of ‘worthwhile’ versus ‘pointless sacrifice’. ‘Britons talked about their war in different ways, as *they* were in fact, ‘fighting *entirely* different wars’, not able necessarily to comprehend or empathise with those of opposing “factions”.¹³ Adrian Gregory and Annette Becker in Pennell’s ‘British Society and the First World War’ compound the point here rather effectively:

The concept of ‘war culture’ is ‘too monolithic, too unified for the variegated and chameleon-like cultural practices it is meant to describe ...no one voice out-shouted them all.
14

Post 1914-18 official policy and popular taste leaned towards equality, notably in death.¹⁵ ‘Death became both concrete and abstract, provoking intense personal mourning as well as new forms of collective, public commemoration’ whilst ‘private, familial forms of mourning were quickly overwhelmed by a sense of collective loss which bound together virtually every family in the country.’ A prime example of state enforced death-protocol, would be ‘the cultural landscape of the Western Front *which* demonstrates...the ideological authority of the

⁸ Sivan and Winter, ‘*War and Remembrance*’, p. 42.

⁹ Macleod, ‘*Britishness and Commemoration*’, p. 648.

¹⁰ Sivan and Winter, ‘*War and Remembrance*’, p. 42.

¹¹ Sivan and Winter, ‘*War and Remembrance*’, p. 42

¹² Michael Hefferman, ‘For ever England: The Western Front and the politics of remembrance in Britain’, *Ecumene*, 2.3 (1995), 293-323 (p. 312) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44251772>> [Accessed 02 November 2019].

¹³ Catriona Pennell, ‘British Society and the First World War’, *War in History*, (Review of ‘*The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*’ by Adrian Gregory), 16.4 (2009), 506-518 (pp. 511,517). <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26070655>> [Accessed 02 November 2019].

¹⁴ Pennell, ‘*British Society and the First World War*’, p. 517.

¹⁵ Inglis, ‘*War Memorials: Ten Questions for Historians*’, p. 7.

British Empire over the rights of the individual citizen.¹⁶ The active intervention of the state in the grieving process with its creation of unprecedented official rituals of remembrance aimed to inter connections between each new generation and the war dead.¹⁷

Fabian Ware who headed the War Graves Commission was adamant that 'under no circumstance could individuals reclaim the remains of their dead relatives'¹⁸, convinced that such invidious distinctions between rich and poor would develop into a source of political and/or social unrest.¹⁹ 'Families would therefore have to surrender their normal rights and allow an official organization, comprising senior politicians, civil servants, and military personnel, to decide where and how bodies would be' settled.²⁰ Ware was anxious that his authority should have the rights over all British and empire graves,²¹ enforcing that sense of Imperial precedence, as a rite of passage, eclipsed from the mortal world; and far higher than government or majesty. Such policies went unnoticed with little public debate,²² from which 'the commission sought to maintain a dignified silence, which seemed only to confirm its image as a distant, insensitive bureaucracy assuming powers to which it had no right.'²³ The dead were thus entombed with little reference to patriotism, and valor, but with emphasis placed rather on common sacrifice.²⁴

The reasons for such are somewhat unchanged to this very day, Great Britain as a conjoined entity was still divisive for many, with some Scottish and Welsh more openly omitting hostility, ambivalence, or indifference to the concept of "Britishness".

The North Wales Heroes' Memorial in Bangor, which was initially described as the 'National Memorial to the Men of North Wales' is a distinct example of rebellious sentiment. The scheme was launched by all the public bodies of Northern Wales, raising approximately 3.5 times that of the 'national' memorial in Cardiff and from a far less wealthy region. Raising funds for the Cardiff's 'national' memorial proved much trickier however, due in part to a lack of enthusiasm outside the immediate area, since the city was viewed by many as being too anglicized to be truly Welsh. Macleod's review, although insightful in places, does however fail to assert logical correlation between inner-Welsh disunity and a Welsh sentiment of disapproval, disengagement and indifference towards an English-led British identity as a form of British disunity. Macleod's review, by bringing to light the evidence of such strong division, openly contradicts itself through the later assertion that: 'the memorials in Wales reflect inherent divisions within the society, yet these were essentially cultural and apolitical, deflecting disunity in the country but not disagreement over the relationship to Britain'.²⁵

¹⁶ Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 313.

¹⁷ Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 293.

¹⁸ Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 299.

¹⁹ Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 297.

²⁰ Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 287.

²¹ Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 297.

²² Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 300.

²³ Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 302.

²⁴ Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 312.

²⁵ Macleod, *'Britishness and Commemoration'*, p. 654,5,7.

Concerningly, the review administers a bizarre understanding of what is meant by 'apolitical', perhaps encouraging the belief that the division which entailed between more cosmopolitan areas of southern Wales and those of the North were in no way shaped by a heightened feeling of autonomy on the part of the latter. Evidence was highlighted displaying the lack of support for a memorial in a so called "anglicized" area, along with the decision made by all the public bodies of Northern Wales to disassociate their losses with those of the South and confer instead to Bangor, a capital-like dimension with the initial 'national' status to which they branded their memorial. Moreover the National memorial in Cardiff had few trappings of Welshness compared with its Northern compadre, further strengthening the evidence of the difference in outlook between each region. Thus 'If we can infer anything about Welsh national identity from its national war memorial, it is the absence of national unity.'²⁶

In Scotland, events were also corroborated similarly, with the Duke of Atholl making a public statement to the effect of:

"If the people of Scotland wished to have a national war memorial to commemorate their own dead it would not be in Hyde Park, London, and put up with government money, but it would be put up by Scottish hands, with Scottish money, on Scottish soil."²⁷

'Where Englishness was completely submerged within Imperial sentiment; the Scots were able to use Imperial sentiment to assert a separate, equal Scottish sentiment within British identity.'²⁸ By reducing the emphasis of "Britishness" across-board, and instead pursuing more egalitarian-like policies under the banner of imperialism (the precursor of globalism), the heat so to speak was less focal to Great Britain, which was, as is still the case today, a Kingdom dominated by England, in terms of both populace and consequently economic standing; thus any animosity on the part of the Welsh, Scottish or Irish, was rarely, if ever directed towards one another, but the conquering authority of England herself - thus England and Great Britain were often thought of as one.

This new wave of imperial remembrance and commemoration was seemingly on a rampage, reinventing ideals of personhood, whilst 'new toponyms, inspired by the Russian revolution, tended to abolish all diversity, whether regional or cultural.'²⁹ The 1917 call for a national war memorial led to the establishment of the Imperial War Museum in London, which was in-fact initially termed 'national' but was quickly renamed the following year under the auspices of this new imperial policy³⁰. The unknown warrior, laid to rest in Westminster Abbey was also name cast in preference to 'soldier' on the grounds that he represented sailors and airmen alike;³¹ as well as 'warrior' being synonymous to the mythical, and everlasting; the immortal; again, perhaps as a strong metaphor for imperial power? 'In a word, ideology replaced memory by imposing the imaginary notion of a uniform'³² wherever it seemed possible and profitable (socially speaking) to do so.

²⁶ Macleod, *'Britishness and Commemoration'*, p. 654, 7.

²⁷ Macleod, *'Britishness and Commemoration'*, p. 651.

²⁸ Macleod, *'Britishness and Commemoration'*, p. 651.

²⁹ Sivan and Winter, *'War and Remembrance'*, p. 7.

³⁰ Macleod, *'Britishness and Commemoration'*, p. 647.

³¹ Inglis, *'War Memorials: Ten Questions for Historians'*, p. 11.

³² Sivan and Winter, *'War and Remembrance'*, p. 7.

Hefferman summarises with the following:

By remembering the dead on this vast, collective, and spiritual level, and by creating special, unprecedented landscapes for their remembrance, the living tended to forget or ignore the material political realities which precipitated the war and generated this scale of death and destruction.³³

The more we explore the contexts within which remembrance and commemoration has asserted itself, the more we can establish the extent to which its agency proved an effective method for political order; for as Paul Connerton articulates, certain truths 'in all these cases *may have provoked* too much cognitive dissonance: *therefore it may be* better to consign some things to a shadow world.'³⁴ Hefferman further elaborates that:

Thus memorialized, Britain's war dead imposed a powerful block on the development of popular moral or political criticism of the Great War, the political and military leaders who organised it, and the post-war world which these same leaders constructed.³⁵

As "official" property, the dead were not allowed to pass unnoticed back into the private world, for to do so would dramatically diminish their cultural impact, and thus, they were instead preserved in solemn monuments of official remembrance³⁶, to be used as deflective grains against the friction that may have erupted communities as a result of this far from democratic, and resultantly despotic act of authoritarianism.

Remembrance as was often the case was a private gathering of intimate hands, over a casket, often led by clerical figures to the denomination of many a faith; either from tradition or dedicated belief - such things were of modesty as etiquette would have it - or rather 'kindividual' if the English language would have it? The lack of an authentic domestic burial to which respects could be paid for all victims, necessitated communal tribute, and through the commonality sparked by such, social division was minimised, as well as questioning theat. These agents of remembrance worked in the borderlands, consoling, families and civil society with the state³⁷. Nonetheless with primary experiences of the events of 1914-18, the remembrance and commemoration expressed by many individuals of the period was not necessarily of consciously political derivative. Undoubtedly however, 'powerfully articulated rival claims to the bodies of the dead and to the process of commemoration, is evidence that a bureaucracy, of imperial, collective commemoration triumphed over personal and private desires.'³⁸

'Such complex structures of commemoration tend to escape from the inventions of their original architects as values and ambitions of new generations impose themselves and

³³ Hefferman, 'For ever England', p. 314.

³⁴ Connerton, 'Memory Studies', p. 63.

³⁵ Hefferman, 'For ever England', p. 313.

³⁶ Hefferman, 'For ever England', p. 313.

³⁷ Sivan and Winter, 'War and Remembrance', p. 40

³⁸ Hefferman, 'For ever England', p. 313.

'reinvent' the meaning and significance of remembrance and commemoration.³⁹ Despite receding into the past, rituals of remembrance that originated with the Great War are more relevant than ever, with poppy appeals acquiring, decades later, yet more political significance. The British Legion divulged that its appeals have nearly always been more voracious when expounded during ongoing conflicts, and that its poppy-based income remained relatively static at approximately £21m at the beginning of the millennium, however; with the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, that number virtually doubled, thus legitimising the paradigm of imperial exploitation; reformulating itself as a symbol that commemorates all allied dead.⁴⁰ Consequently, it is 'important to separate any notion of 'collective memory' from historical knowledge, for such memories go beyond the limits of truthfulness; these acts may draw from professional history, but they do not depend on it.⁴¹ New sets of memories are often accompanied and indeed accredited to a set of tacitly shared silences; for what is allowed to be forgotten provides living space for present projects.⁴² Just as acts of celebratory remembrance, are covert in acts of editing out and erasure. 'And thus for all its pacifistic associations today, the poppy was a thoroughly bellicose symbol from the start: a medal of honour as well as a bleeding wound.'⁴³

To conclude, I believe that remembrance and commemoration were undoubtedly agents for political order during the aftermath of the Great War, both as a result of government orchestration as well as through familial mourning. However fast-forwarding to the present, the latter familiarisation has all but vanished, with the current generation inheriting a series of nationwide ceremonial events that are often the most obvious and poignant reaffirmations of our national identity.⁴⁴ 'Here too the struggle of humanity against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting' says 'Duncan and Wallach, 1980' in Connerton, *'Memory Studies'*⁴⁵ as a compliment to the following thought provoking passage from Sivan and Winter's, *'War and Remembrance'*, which will lay this essay to rest:

Milan Kundera tells the story of a photograph of the political leadership of the Czech socialist republic in 1948. One man in the photo was later purged. That individual had been removed from the photograph; all that remained was his hat, in the hands of a surviving colleague. The snapshot - an image of a past event - had been reconfigured; those who 'remembered' that the hat had once had a man under it, had to think again.⁴⁶

³⁹ Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 313.

⁴⁰ Fox, James, 'Poppy Politics: Remembrance of Things Present.' In Sandis C. (Ed.), *Cultural Heritage Ethics: Between Theory and Practice* (2014), 21-30 (pp. 25-26) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1287k16.8>> [Accessed 02 November 2019].

⁴¹ Sivan and Winter, *'War and Remembrance'*, p. 8.

⁴² Connerton, *'Memory Studies'*, p. 63.

⁴³ Fox, *'Poppy Politics: Remembrance of Things Present'*, p. 25.

⁴⁴ Hefferman, *'For ever England'*, p. 294.

⁴⁵ Connerton, *'Memory Studies'*, p. 61.

⁴⁶ Sivan and Winter, *'War and Remembrance'*, pp. 6-7.

Connerton, Paul, 'Memory Studies', *Seven Types of Forgetting*, 1.1 (2008), 59-71 <DOI: 10.1177/1750698007083889> [Accessed 02 November 2019].

Fox, James, 'Poppy Politics: Remembrance of Things Present.' In Sandis C. (Ed.), *Cultural Heritage Ethics: Between Theory and Practice* (2014), 21-30 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1287k16.8>> [Accessed 02 November 2019].

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