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Ritual, remembrance and war: Social memory at Tyne Cot

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ABSTRACT

One of the social memories of the Great War of 1914–1918 focused on soldiers killed in battle, with military cemeteries forming important sites for remembrance. This paper reports the results of an analysis of the visitor books at Tyne Cot Cemetery in Belgium, that was built by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to hold almost 12,000 graves, most of which contain unidentified remains. Tourist's comments in the books evidenced a strong linguistic ritual, expressing sadness, gratitude, approval of the site and promises to remember and never forget the dead. Very little critique of war, or overt nationalistic sentiment was indicated. While some national preferences for ritualized phrases were shown, there was also an indication of a globally shared memory.

Introduction

Social memory can be conceived as the expression of society's highest ideals—"a register of sacred history" (Schwartz, 1982, p. 377). Such memory results from complex processes involving the way in which past events have been remembered or forgotten. In the 1914–1918 Great War, a total of 9.5 million men were killed and they, rather than the survivors, have formed the basis for the social memories of that war. Civilian deaths have not been commemorated at all in most official ceremonies. To help people make sense of the enormous military casualties and perhaps to encourage the belief in a just war, death was framed within notions of honour and heroic self-sacrifice (Larsson, 2009;

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Morris, 1997; Vance, 1997). Within these memories, there was little place for the "ruined veteran in the myth of the war" (Vance, 1997, p. 53) and such was the veneration of those killed in battle that Larsson (2009, p. 247) refers to the survivors as those who were "unsuccessfully killed". Thousands of these men suffered serious psychological and physical injuries as a result of their war experiences, yet they were virtually forgotten in the post war myths, and together with their families who cared for them, they endured years of hardship. Understandably, the mass death created widespread grief at all levels of society, and at the time, people promised to remember these 'fallen' forever. To this end, society literally set their memories of the dead in stone, where they were most visibly articulated in monuments dedicated to the missing and in national tombs of unknown soldiers. Mosse (1990, p. 80) argues that the dead were memorialized in a "cult of the fallen soldier" where the military cemeteries played a central part. This paper is concerned with the broad issue of tourists' involvement in creating and maintaining social memory of the Great War, through their practices of remembrance at military cemeteries on the Western Front.

After 1915, the policy of the (current) British Commonwealth countries (including Britain, Canada, Australia, India, New Zealand and South Africa) regarding the dead, was to ensure that as far as possible, whether identified or not, all recovered bodies would be given individual graves, with standardized headstones that did not distinguish between rank, social class or religion. Most of these men were not professional soldiers, but citizens who had either volunteered or had been conscripted for military service. In death, all would be remembered equally, regardless of their pre-war social status and position. The names of men whose bodies could not be located or identified were listed on great stone memorials and classified as missing (Laqueur, 1994). These were new practices, developed by Sir Fabian Ware, who began work on the battlefields as part of the British Red Cross. A Graves Registration Commission was set up in 1915, and established by Royal Charter as the Imperial War Graves Commission in 1917 (CWGC, 2014a).

The proposal made by the Imperial War Graves Commission to bury all of the Commonwealth dead close to where they fell, was fiercely debated at all levels of society. The British Treasury persistently contested applications for regular funding to maintain the cemeteries, the public objected to the design of the headstones and families demanded the repatriation of their sons for private burial (Longworth, 2003). Ultimately, the Imperial War Graves Commission (now the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, (CWGC)) designed and built the cemeteries on all of the battlefields, and over time, persuaded the British and 'Dominion' governments and the public to accept their ideas of burial practice (Longworth, 2003). The results of the CWGC work now present one of the dominant memorials on the battlefields, particularly around Ieper in Flanders and on the Somme in France, where the main British campaigns were fought. In these areas there are also many dead from Germany, France and Belgium but as a result of different burial practices their visual impact is somewhat less compared with the number and spread of the CWGC cemeteries. It is fitting to remember that the war dead for the main combatant nations comprised: France (1.4 m), the British Empire and its Dominions (0.9 m), Russia (1.8 m), Germany (2.0 m), Austro-Hungary (1.1 m), Turkey and Bulgaria (0.9 m), Italy (0.6 m), and others (0.7 m) (Stevenson, 2004).

As Shaw (2009) and Schwartz (1982) have shown, social memories do not necessarily 'progress' in linear fashion, but can be disrupted, move back and forth across generations, and may be re-invented and re-prioritized. Each generation remembers historical events from its own perspective in order to satisfy its own needs, and the memories which are encoded to memorials may be interpreted with new meaning, and according to different priorities by generations that follow (Halbwachs, 1992; Schwartz, 1982; Winter, 1995). Hutchinson (2009, p. 415) observes that "memorials can be inactive until they are reinvigorated or transformed by a new need or political situation." The societies that fought the Great War are now different in many ways from those of today yet there is an increasing interest in the war (Winter, 1995). It is not well known how today's generations may experience and interpret the memorials that were built a century ago by a society that had endured four years of total war (Dyer, 1994; Hunt & McHale, 2008). In addition to the effects of time, technology and experience, the memory of war can be manipulated, both deliberately and inadvertently by any number of organisations and institutions including governments, remembrance associations, the military, tourism, and the media, particularly film and television (Iles, 2006; Todman, 2005). Analysis of these influences is beyond the scope of this study, but tourists are sensitive to them and in addition, their attitudes and