Re-thinking remembrance

Hew Strachan reflects on four years of commemorating the First World War

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When on 11 October 2012 David Cameron announced the government's plans for the centenary of the First World War, he stated his determination 'to build an enduring cultural and educational legacy, to put young people front and centre in our commemoration and to ensure that the sacrifice and service of a hundred years ago is still remembered in a hundred years' time'. Some responded with cynicism. For Scots, facing a referendum on independence, this was the Westminster government draping itself in the Union flag; for socialists, where were the references to Red Clydeside or to the growth of the trades unions, rent control and progressive taxation which the war had promoted? Some, including originally the government itself, had doubted the public stamina for a four-year commemoration. They thought it wiser to postpone national involvement until 2018, to mark the war's end and not its beginning. Six years on, at the centenary of the armistice with Germany, it is time to take stock, both of the last four years and of how Cameron's aims have been fulfilled.

At the outset, the government was clear that its role was not to engage with the controversies around the war's causation, conduct or conclusion. Although fine in theory, that is much harder to achieve in practice. How events are popularly interpreted today does more to shape their commemoration than do the perceptions and preoccupations of those who experienced them at the time. In 2014 Britain had to allay German worries that the centenary of the outbreak might lead it to reprise the issue of war guilt. In 2016 the national commemoration of the battle of the Somme did not mention Douglas Haig, still a national hero at his death in 1928. (Ferdinand Foch, whose appointment as allied commander on 26 March 1918 was honoured by an event in London, is the only general the government has formally recognised.) However, the biggest challenge always lay ahead: how to approach 11 November 2018, simultaneously Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, a day of celebration in 1918 and a day of reflection and solemnity ever since. All involved in the programme of the last four years have been determined to avoid any note of triumphalism, but the risk seemed to be particularly great at its culmination.

Part of the answer was in part to separate victory from remembrance. During the hot summer of 2018 I accompanied an international group of school pupils on a battlefield tour organised by UCL's Institute of Education, the body responsible for the Westminster government's package of English school visits to the western front. The trip's high point was the event in Amiens Cathedral on 8 August 2018 to commemorate the allied victory a hundred years before. Here the threat of national tub-thumping was conspicuous only by its absence: the occasion was conciliatory, international and resolutely secular, although staged in a great house of worship. Nobody asked whose side God was on. On the return I asked the pupils what they had drawn from the previous four years. Their answers, which echo those given at other events for schools, spoke of the need for 'more remembrance'. Rather than feeling satiated by such a protracted programme of events, they were still hungry.

This was random sampling among the already committed, not a scientific anal-

ysis, but it may surprise some. Today's students do not even remember the Cold War, let alone the First World War. The prevailing assumption in 2012, both in government and in organisations like the BBC, was that the centenary of the First World War would appeal not to youth, connected by the internet and social media, and both ethnically and culturally more diverse than British society in 1914, but to older, white males of a middle-class background. However, to the more reflective, that too could look counter-intuitive. Today's 70-year-olds were the students of 1968. In France at least they had refused to honour the sufferings and sacrifices of their grandfathers, and by the 1970s the rituals of remembrance were losing support, not least in Australia and New Zealand where they were linked to the Vietnam War. For reasons that are not self-evident, the trend went into reverse from the mid-1980s, and today the commemoration of the First World War is not the monopoly of any one group, and certainly not the exclusive preserve of the state and its armed forces. Its power lies in its capacity to unite more than divide.

The original energy in the 'remembrance' of the Great War came from bottom- up, not top-down. The government's national programme responded to local groups, based around villages, towns and churches, which were determined to mark the centenary, and which used local war memorials as their departure points. They embraced schools, many of which also have war memorials. Although the First World War is not a mandatory element of the national curriculum in England or Scotland (unlike France), school-age children read the books of Michael Morpurgo and have been visiting the battlefields with their teachers since the opening of the Channel Tunnel. Nonetheless, the point remains: what do school pupils mean by 'more remembrance'? What is it that they are remembering, and what will they achieve if they do more of it?

Nobody now alive remembers the First World War; what we remember is how we remember, or rather how we commemorate. Remembrance is individual and reflexive (in French 'je me souviens'), rarely collective, and certainly (as Jay Winter has pointed out) not national. It is prompted in each of us by such associations as sight, sound and especially smell. Even if we were all surviving veterans of the First World War, we might find those cues elusive today. We have lost the sounds of the war because we have no recordings of artillery fire at Verdun or on the Somme. The odours of cordite, gas or urine are absent from the surviving and sanitised trenches of today's western front. Even the visual stimuli lack a direct connection. The war's film and photography, although abundant, are overwhelmingly monochrome: the luminescence of the Autochrome colour prints taken by French army photographers are stunning exceptions. When today's students visit the western front, they see not so much the battlefields as cemeteries. The prompt to 'remember' is the built landscape created in the aftermath of the war by the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission. Back in Britain, what we experience collectively are the rituals of mourning, the Cenotaph, the two minutes' silence, the Unknown Warrior, and the wearing of poppies, all established amidst deep controversy after the war, in the early 1920s. They have lasted and, because they have been extended to all subsequent wars, they are annually renewed. They are now vehicles for remembrance for those who have lost relatives in more recent wars; what they do for the First World War is not remembrance, but memorialisation, and they venerate those who died (12 per cent of those who served in the British armed forces) over the majority who fought and who may have been wounded, but survived.

What we call 'remembrance' is therefore the single most effective and affecting cultural artefact left from the First World War. In 2014, given the sedate pace of a four-year commemoration, it threatened to turn the centenary into a cycle of successive Remembrance Sundays, and it seemed more sensible – at least to historians – to approach the war chronologically. In 1914, nobody knew what lay ahead. But in 2014 the public – and the state – did what was familiar. It rushed to 'remember', so taking the narrative from the beginning to the end of the war and inverting the experience of those whose lives we were memorialising. On 4 August 2014, the Commonwealth service at Glasgow Cathedral to mark Britain's entry to the First World War was followed, at the behest of Glasgow City Council, with a service in George Square at the Cenotaph. Designed by John James Burnet and unveiled in 1924, none of those it memorialised was dead on 4 August 1914. It had nothing to say of the uncertainties and apprehensions of the war's outbreak. It replaced the open-endedness of ignorance with the finality of certitude.

That point applied with equal force to *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, an installation designed by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper, which culminated in November 2014, when the last of 888,246 ceramic poppies, one for each serviceman from the British empire killed in the

In 2014, the public queued to view the 'Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red' installation by ceramic artist Paul Cummins and theatre stage designer Tom Piper in the Tower of London moat. *Photo: Loop Images/UIG via Getty Images.*

war, was placed in the moat of the Tower of London. It ignited the public imagination as did no other centenary moment, and it both confounded the historical purists and silenced those who doubted the appetite for a four-year programme. The prime minister reacted to the mood by opposing the original intention that it be dismantled after Remembrance Sunday 2014. Over the next four years parts of it toured the country, from Kirkwall to Plymouth, and it has been given a permanent home in the Imperial War Museum.

The poppies at the Tower demonstrated that 'remembrance', not history, was the path into mass public engagement. Memory can be an unreliable source, as historians know only too well. In the 1920s the veterans of the First World War established their authority as witnesses to events which others could not understand because they had not directly experienced them. They claimed to speak the truth, but sometimes they chose to be selective and at others they glossed their reminiscences with the wisdom of hindsight. Knowledge of these inadequacies has not dimmed the power of their testimony, but they present a challenge which the centenary has had continuously to confront. The voice of Britain's last surviving veteran of the war, Harry Patch, was projected onto the wall of the Cloth Hall at Ypres at the national commemoration of Passchendaele in 2017. He said that this was the worst experience of the war; what he meant was that it was *his* worst experience since he had no other, as he was only in the front line for six weeks.

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The distinction between memory and history, while clear, should not lead historians to dismiss the cult of 'remembrance'. Not only has it become the route by which many enter the study of history, but it is also a powerful educational tool in its own right. The questioning of received wisdom or of an imagined past can become the path to deeper understanding. In its ideal form, remembrance leads to engagement and then to enlightenment. As a result of the four-year centenary, the public has acquired a deeper and more nuanced knowledge of the First World War than it possessed in 2014. School children returning from trips to France have challenged the knowledge of their parents; analyses of the names of local war memorials have raised awareness of other theatres. The notion of a single 'memory' of the war has been replaced by the realisation that there were many memories because the war contained multiple events, experienced in divergent ways.

'More remembrance' has also achieved something more significant than greater historical understanding. The memory of war can be used to perpetuate and deepen enmities, as it is in the Middle East. Neither the Sykes-Picot agreement nor the Balfour declaration is responsible for all the current ills of the region, whatever ISIS and others may say. In Europe, however, the memory of the First World War has become a vehicle for international reconciliation. France and Germany have seen Verdun as a focus for joint 'remembrance' since 1984; not until the centenary was Anglo-German commemoration of the Great War formalised, most movingly at the service for the battle of Jutland in 2016. In Ireland, where the memories of the Easter Rising and the battle of the Somme were appropriated for sectarian purposes, the decade of conflicts from 1912 to 1923 has today been reworked to create a joint 'remembrance'. We may be right to remember in ways which meet our own needs more than they honour those who have gone before.