

What does remembrance mean today, and how and why should we do it?

A public debate, Buchanan Lecture Theatre, University of St Andrews

19 June 2018, 7.30-9.00 pm

Chair: Magnus Linklater

Named participants (each to speak for about 5 minutes only to set up the debate): Sebastian Faulks, Hew Strachan, Jenny Waldman, others to follow

Possible participants include students (to represent the views of school pupils who will have attended the Michael Morpurgo/NSI event earlier in the day).

The First World War established patterns of commemoration and remembrance for those killed in war, which were both novel and controversial. One hundred years on, however, they have become hallowed by repetition and familiarity. The centenary of that war has been accompanied by a surge in their observance, despite the fact that almost none of those taking part have any conscious memory of the events that they are marking – and none actually fought. Moreover, many of the forms which commemoration takes reflect what was possible or impossible in 1918. By 2018 we have other alternatives and other preoccupations. If we were beginning again from scratch, we would probably not do what we currently do.

Historical background

The commemoration of those who died in battle can trace its roots to antiquity, but memorials were focused either on singular heroes or – just possibly – the undifferentiated mass they led. As late as 1815, the dead of the battle of Waterloo were buried in mass graves, and only the great were individually commemorated. The remembrance of common soldiers is conventionally linked to the decline of absolute monarchs, the rise of democracy and the growth of literacy. It has also been associated with increasing longevity: parents ceased to be hardened to the idea that they might outlive their offspring. These processes did not necessarily begin with the First World War. In Britain memorials were erected to those killed in the Crimean War (1854-56) and especially the South African War (1899-1902), and in the United States similar responses on a much greater scale emerged out of the American Civil War.

The military losses for all nations in the First World War, 9 million in round numbers, eclipsed those of earlier wars, and were sustained by armed forces made up of citizens, soldiers and sailors for the duration, not professionals for whom death in service was part of an unspoken contract. The deaths in the British empire were roughly a tenth of the whole, and the Imperial War Graves Commission, led by Fabian Ware, established in 1917, adopted three core principles:

1. All would be individually and identically commemorated. For those whose bodies could not be found or formally identified, there would be memorials to the missing. Those killed would be memorialised once: so, if a body was found and identified, that name would be removed from a memorial to the missing. This principle did not prevent the erection of private memorials by

schools, parishes, universities, regiments and communities. In practice, many did receive multiple commemorations.

2. The dead would be buried in the countries where they had fallen. The refusal to repatriate bodies caused a great deal of anger and sorrow, especially among those who could afford to bring a body home for interment in a family plot. Many, however, could not – and in global war, with Australian dead buried in France, and British dead buried in Iraq, the costs would have been both high and unequal. Both France and Belgium gifted the land for cemeteries to the British, but Britain's war dead from the two world wars are buried in 153 countries of the world, and not all those were or are as well disposed to fixed and permanent reminder of British military intervention as its nearest neighbours. The republic of Turkey only agreed to the British cemeteries at Gallipoli because it was required to do so by the peace treaty signed at Lausanne in 1923.

3. Given the absence of the dead, either because they were buried overseas or because their bodies could not be traced, those at home found comfort in two solutions. The first- the Cenotaph or empty tomb, designed by Lutyens and set up as a temporary structure in Whitehall – proved so popular that it was replaced by a permanent building and was widely emulated elsewhere. The second – the Unknown Soldier – similarly allowed those who mourned to project their loss on a single focus, in this case by imagining that the warrior was their nearest and dearest. France and Britain led the way in 1920, but again others have followed suit. Australia did so in 1993 and New Zealand in 2004, despite the fact that the person buried in Westminster Abbey could be an Australian or a New Zealander, and was originally chosen to represent the whole of the then-British empire.

The patterns of commemoration also consolidated other practices, such as the two minutes' silence (it was very noisy at 11 am on the original Armistice Day). In 1921 the selling of poppies around the period of Remembrance Sunday and the centenary of the armistice with Germany was adopted in 1921 by the British Legion as a method for raising funds for those veterans in need of financial and other support. In this sense their purpose is to help the living – not grieve the dead. But poppies have since become symbols of remembrance in their own right – and initially were only worn on Remembrance Sunday itself.

Other countries did not adopt the same principles, having to reflect their own inheritances, different faith practices, and varying experiences of the war. However, most – even when they bemoan war, and wish for peace – have reflected national narratives.

After the Second World War, the British empire took the decision to continue to commemorate the lives of those who had been killed on the lines established after the First World War. So the dates for commemoration, the flowers that signified remembrance and the memorials themselves all mirrored the precedents of 1914-18. The wars fought by Britain since 1945 have been added in, although poppies carry another significance for those who were in Afghanistan after 9/11, and those who were imperial partners in both world wars have fought wars subsequently in which Britain has not taken part – and vice versa.

Some social and political changes affecting the pattern which we have inherited

Some of the more obvious changes since 1918 include the following:

1. The sense of victory on 11 November 1918 has been stripped out of the First World War by subsequent wars, and also by a more general hesitation about suggestions of triumphalism.
2. Other less visible memorials established at the time, and designed to be more utilitarian than stone memorials – like public or educational buildings or scholarships, have lost the connections to their origins. So the stone memorials dominate both our imaginations and our landscapes.
3. The dead of the wars since 1945 are not formally cared for by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Britain's recent war dead are buried in the UK and the care of their graves is not a public responsibility.
4. The armed forces of Britain have been voluntarily enlisted since 1960, when conscription was phased out, and so are not citizen forces, but professionals with the rights, pension arrangements, etc, not enjoyed by those who served in two world wars.
5. The 'unknown warrior' is dated concept: warriors killed in action are no longer unknown thanks to DNA testing, better casualty evacuation and improved recording keeping.
6. The roles of the churches in commemorations were contentious after 1918 – given that the empire embraced many faiths as well as those of no faith. However, organised religion remains at the heart of British commemorative observance despite the decline of church attendance. Other faiths – Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism to name those best represented in British society – take little part in what happens.
7. The empire has gone, although the patterns we have inherited were designed in part as a celebration of empire.
8. The empire may have gone but many of the peoples which formed it in 1914-18 now live in Britain, as well as others who are descended from those who fought against Britain. The cultural diversity of today's society presents a fresh challenge in terms of commemoration.
9. Civilians were killed in both world wars, although we have no firm idea of how many in either. Today's wars are more associated with loss of non-combatant lives than those of the past, and yet the patterns of remembrance are largely military. How and where should we be commemorating the dead of terrorist attacks? Paradoxically France has done so at the Invalides, a military shrine. Are the victims of such attacks victims of war?

The impacts of new technologies, the arts and cultural change

1. photography, painting, musical composition, dance, poetry and fiction have all played their part in patterns of commemoration and remembrance since 1918, but only some of these (especially music and poetry) have been regularly incorporated in remembrance services. Those media that provoke and challenge can be too unfamiliar and raw for those who seek to be comforted. What traditional forms work well today? What new forms might work better?
2. In 1918 public broadcasting was not yet established. Do radio and television provide the opportunities for different forms of commemoration, not just outside broadcasts of traditional services? Do digital communications, twitter, social media, etc provide platforms for more effective forms of remembrance in the 21st century?

What is remembrance good for?

1. Is remembrance a means for reconciliation? Many veterans' organisations in the inter-war period thought so and many of the centenary events have succeeded precisely because they have enabled that to happen. But memories of past hurts can prevent us forgetting and so moving on. In the Middle East the legacy of the First World War is manipulated to inflame passions, not to soothe them. Is remembrance unhelpful? Or does it root us in our past and give us the context to shape our future direction?
2. What is it we 'remember' when we are addressing events, like the First World War, which we have not directly experienced? That applies even to the wars since 9/11 in the case of most of us. We tend to view the past through the prism of those who lived through the events but through prism of the present and of our current concerns. Is remembrance really a way of addressing the present through an imagined sense of the past?

Hew Strachan