



## How we remember them: the 1914-18 war today

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The annual commemoration of the fallen in the world wars and small wars Britain has been involved in takes place on the nearest Sunday to "Remembrance Day", 11 November. On that day in 1918, at 11 o'clock in the morning, the guns fell silent on the western front for the first time since August 1914. The fact that this year is the ninetieth anniversary of that event means that it is being marked with especial intensity. But in Britain at least, there is also something of the routine about the way that the first world war has become the principal [focus](#) of the "festival of remembrance". It can seem even that the British are obsessed by this conflict above all others.

The remembering of major national events is bound to change over time. What makes the [current](#) British memorialising of the 1914-18 war fascinating is the way it combines fairly fixed concerns and narratives with novel voices and forms of inquiry. That makes it too an interesting case of how societies in the process of exploring their past can resist as well as embrace a deeper encounter with it.

### Two discourses: fluid and fixed

The interest starts with the disjuncture between public and academic discourses about the 1914-18 war. The public image of what the war was like (bloody and muddy) and meant (pointless) has remained strikingly constant over the last four decades. Yet for a large part of this period - since the late 1980s - there has also been a remarkable boom in [scholarship](#) about the war which has introduced new methods. The increasing expectation that work will cross disciplinary and national boundaries has produced new understandings.

The process of digging into the huge [archival deposits](#) on the war - which remained untapped until recently, despite all the books published on the war over these nine decades - has generated a much more complex and nuanced view of many aspects of the war. These include military tactics, the connections between the battlefield and the "home front", popular mobilisation, and the phenomenon of "war enthusiasm". This work has also highlighted the degree to which earlier academic generations took post-war rhetoric as evidence of wartime realities - over, for example, such matters as the meaning of the war for women, the belief that the war was "futile", and the nature of mourning:

- The long-held idea that war service had brought women the vote obscured pre-war debates about suffrage, and concealed the tactical decision to enfranchise older women in an effort to stem political extremism. The notion may have enjoyed wide currency after 1918, but it cannot be taken as evidence, that the war was a watershed - let alone "a good thing" - for British women
- The [bereavement](#) of millions in the war, and the [mutilation](#) of many who survived it, did make many Britons question whether the war was worth the effort. Their response seems often to have been that it

was. This was a war that enjoyed widespread popular support, and probably more so towards its end than at its beginning. It was only a significant period after the war, initially as a result of the economic slump of the early 1920s, that a belief in the war's futility gained wide acceptance.

- The British experience of death looks different in a European perspective - in particular, it makes clear that Britain escaped relatively lightly from its brushes with total war. This is not to downplay the tragedy of young lives cut short or to dismiss the grief that overwhelmed some of those left behind. But it might suggest that one of the key problems for [post-war remembrance](#) was not to heal the trauma of bereavement but to resolve the gap between those who had lost their close kin and those who had not.
- This academic revolution has had a minimal effect on popular remembrance. The version of the war [recycled](#) on television, in editorials and on message-forums is consistent. The war was futile, both in the way it was fought and in its outcome. It was uniquely horrible: a British tragedy (any other European nation tends to get left out). A generation was lost. Their experience is best evidenced by the work of the [war poets](#). The war changed everything.

## The bad war

None of this is a complete misrepresentation of what happened or what was felt at the time, but it is both selective and partial. These symbols and interpretations can be traced back to actual wartime experiences, and were certainly current in the inter-war period (see "[World War One: Misrepresentation of a Conflict](#)" BBC History). Only from the late 1970s, however, did they become uncontested. They have now become the default setting for public responses. For Britons, the first world war is the "bad war" - in contrast to its successor - and it fulfils that function so well that no amount of improved scholarship will shift its symbolic position. The somewhat melancholy implication - for a society obsessed with the war as well as for the historian - is that a deeper understanding of its history cannot be used to inform our actions in the present.

A singular aspect of this orthodoxy is that as the war has been judged ever more uniquely horrible and pointless, so its veterans have been ever further sanctified. All those who served are deemed to have been heroes [by definition](#) of their service; and those who served and have [survived](#) are now regarded as particularly heroic and exemplary.

There could be no more striking evidence of the difficulty of comprehending and representing the scale and nature of industrialised total war. The effect of mass armies and modern munitions was to render any equation between service and heroism largely redundant. Half the adult male population served in the forces during the war - amongst them, inevitably, numerous cowards, thieves, rapists, fraudsters and murderers. Many soldiers performed administrative tasks far from the frontline. Death by artillery-fire was no respecter of whether soldiers were running towards or away from the enemy.

After the war, however, the problem of reintegrating into society both those who had served and those who had lost, and finding a narrative that could contain both, found one answer by an emphasis on the universality of heroism. A British society that has since the 1960s grown increasingly distant from the realities of military service - whilst remaining dedicated to it as a location for fantasy - has been unable to move on from this rhetorical standpoint (see *The Great War: Myth and Memory*<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Great-War-Myth-Memory/dp/1852854596>, Hambledon, 2005).

## The personal past

If the war's public meaning now seems set in stone as permanently as its [memorials](#) and headstones, the format in which the meaning is represented reveals some important changes. The war's portrayal has always been shaped by contemporary cultural mores, and commemorative documentaries demonstrate just how much the

relationship between the creators and consumers of popular culture has changed over the last fifty years.

For the fiftieth anniversary of 1914, the BBC commissioned the twenty-six part series [The Great War](#), based around archive footage and featuring interviews with veterans. There was an authoritative narrative voice, but no presenters. For the eightieth anniversary, it collaborated with an American television company on a six-part series littered with academic talking-heads. For the ninetieth anniversary, it has had ' a range of TV presenter-celebrities - among them Michael Palin, Dan Snow, Natalie Cassidy and Eamonn Holmes - on a journey of discovery of their families' military connections. These invariably culminate next to graves and memorials in a display of the right kind of televisual emotion at the moment the formula demands and the audience has come to expect.

The focus of these programmes - [family history](#) as a means of understanding the past - is worthy of note in itself. It is indicative of the dramatic growth of family history as a leisure interest, perhaps in response to the sense of dislocation inherent in modernity. The bureaucratic tidemark left by the great war has made it a frequent point of departure for those on a search for (as the zeitgeist-capturing title of a popular BBC TV [series](#) has it) who they think they are.

This obsession with the familial past also demonstrates a demographic shift in people's relationship with the war. As those who experienced it as children also fall prey to the ravages of time, it has passed over the boundary of lived memory. Often, the traces are reduced to the memory of others' trauma - the widow who never remarried, the grandfather who still bore his wartime scars. Thanks to the combination of a consumer culture and the growth in home ownership, many families have been left with isolated [artefacts](#) of an ancestor's military service. These can serve as a site for storytelling or an inspiration for investigation.

These activities can be enriching, but - contrary to the impression that is given in books such as Sebastian Faulks's [Birdsong](#) and on 'Who Do You Think You Are' - they are seldom practically or emotionally easy. Many people simply have no viable connection to the war. Many had ancestors who left little or no trace - whether for reasons of poverty, education, personal preference or because families deliberately chose to forget them at the time.

The need to re-establish a connection between those living in Britain today and their first-world-war antecedents is a powerful motivating factor amongst many of those who seek to preserve the "memory" of war. But the notion that inheritance is the only, let alone the best, way to approach the past is arrant nonsense. To present the war only in these terms both excludes those who do not have family relics or handed-down stories, and actually inhibits the recasting of the national narrative. A society that is busy grieving for fallen heroes finds it much harder to question its assumptions about the world in which they lived and the legacy it bequeathed to later generations.

The search for family history is usually shaped by modern preconceptions, and as such it seldom results by itself in a deeper understanding of the past. The modern experience of finding someone who shares your surname on the [Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#) website, taking a day trip to France and finding his grave (perhaps with a cathartic tear or few) might increase a person's or family's sense of emotional connection to the war, and may bring other satisfactions. Insofar as it is led not by a direct connection with a loved one, however, but by what television has "taught" as right conduct, it can seldom encourage a more profound appreciation of what the war meant for those who fought it, why they kept fighting, or why they died.

## **Beyond the trenches**

The web is frequently celebrated as a key [route](#) to more extensive engagement. It holds out the potential to democratise the study of the past, both by making expert knowledge (not always from within the academy) available and by making primary evidence more widely accessible. In large part, however, it has yet to fulfil that

promise. The desperate desire for interactivity that drives much of the BBC's web presence, for example, gets large numbers of visitors, but tends to result in more interesting or better informed voices being drowned out in the rush to rehearse the "facts" that the war was a futile tragedy directed by donkeys.

Moreover, online remembrance projects are usually shaped by cultural concerns and received wisdoms - so that, for example, they concentrate on the resources of most use to family historians or receive submissions from those with a story to tell about a soldier, and exclude those who were exempted from service on medical grounds or who objected on grounds of conscience.

The communities formed around discussion forums are frequently close and to a degree replicate the "fictive kinships" that grew up around remembrance immediately after the war, but they are often similarly exclusive and can pose significant entry barriers for the uninitiated.

Yet the web also offers grounds for hope. Projects such as [The Great War Archive](#), which combine popular interest in the war with specialist expertise, and which recognise that an archive is different from a tribute or a memorial, suggest that it is possible to create high-quality content based on user submissions.

As academics increasingly post their research and teaching online, not least to attract students in a competitive market, they will be forced to work out strategies to engage directly with wider audiences which can circumvent the division between mass market and elite history. A key element of that is likely to be the exploitation of popular enthusiasm to encourage thought, rather than to enforce the "correct" opinion. Such strategies, however, depend on being able to talk critically and honestly about the soldiers of the great war. It is only when the conflict has receded by at least one more generation that that will become possible.

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