



[World War One Centenary : Continuations and Beginnings \(University of Oxford / JISC\)](#)

Erster Weltkrieg : What is it Good For '

by Stephen Bull

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In 2008 Oxford University launched [The Great War Archive](#). This publicly sourced online collection of documents and artefacts funded by [JISC](#), sat alongside [The First World War Poetry Digital Archive](#), containing images of manuscripts and biographies of poets. The idea was subsequently taken up by [Europeana](#), Europe's digital library and museum, as a major project to 'crowdsource' material across the Continent relating to 1914 - 1918. In Germany in 2011 this became known as Erster Weltkrieg in Allertagsdokumenten ; the 'First World War in Everyday Documents'. By mid- 2012 the scheme had extended to Luxembourg; Ireland; the UK; Slovenia, Denmark, Belgium and Italy, with a current total of nearly 3,000 stories and 30,000 images collected and uploaded to a freely accessible website - Europeana 1914-1918. The public can still contribute their stories and photographs on the [Europeana 1914-1918](#) website, or at 'family history roadshows' in the lead up to the centenary of the War.

The assemblage includes everything from letters to medals, trench art pieces and uniforms, and even a postcard from the young Adolf Hitler about his dental treatment in 1916. Fascinating as this is, it may reasonably be asked what use or meaning such an eclectic 'collection' actually has. Analysis is as yet in its earliest stages, nevertheless it is already clear both from the material, and from the contributors, that Europeana 1914-1918 has more than one form of 'value'.

Perhaps most obviously ephemeral documents, if not already housed in permanent public collections, are at risk from loss or casual destruction. Photographing and adding to a public database may not guarantee preservation of the actual artefact, but it does maintain a useful record of content and physical appearance. It also brings accessibility. Moreover there have already been instances where an owner has decided, as a result of participation, to donate original pieces to an established public collection, archive or library. This is clearly a two-way process, for not only have collections gained new material, but the public has gained new insights into their libraries and archives. In this sense the Europeana 1914-1918 project serves as a friendly face for many institutions.

New material is of course grist to the academic research mill, and whilst the collection holds many familiar types of artefact, this is arguably the first time that such a collection has been formed through pieces that the public have chosen to preserve, and wish to preserve for the future. What is here has not been selected or weeded to meet a pre-planned organisational agenda, and in this sense is genuine raw material. From it can be mined many stories, perhaps ultimately drawing from across the whole of Europe, to take a new look at subjects such as war weariness, patriotism, propaganda, personal experience, loss, art and imagery, and postal history. The social historical element may be the strongest, but there are many sidelights to political, military, and economic history.

The Europeana 1914-1918 project is also being used as an 'educational resource' in the widest sense for in the collection can be found the raw material of school projects, essays, enlightened browsing, and informative relaxation. Moreover, as far learning is concerned, the collection holds many local examples of artefacts or

documents hitherto not easily found. From autumn 2012 a pilot project in the UK with Lancashire Schools and Museums will seek to explore and exploit the collection in a more structured way. Perhaps unexpectedly it is also becoming obvious that contributors to Europeana 1914-1918 are themselves using it in new ways. Some upload material as part of genealogical study, or a way to make their family history accessible to others without parting with the original document or object. Others, perhaps the children or grandchildren of the people who feature in the material, are using the collection as a memorial, a retrospective online 'in memoriam' of those who died in the war, or after.

Last, and perhaps not least, the project in its latest guise also serves a new purpose for Europeana and its European sponsors. It has become European, covers Europe, and gives something back to European citizens who support it. For it engages very directly with the individual participant, showing an interest and a value, both in collective and individual memory. It also compliments the digitisation of existing public 1914 ' 1918 collections. In this way it is itself becoming a valuable part of centenary commemorations.

Illustrations



Image from Europeanan 1914-1918, licensed as CC-BY

'Captured' during the war these four little toy bears once belonged to British officers, Colonel Sir Guy Campbell and Major David Campbell. They were contributed for photography during the family history roadshow at Frankfurt. The bears are in British colours, red, white and blue, and a natural brown, and were carried as mascots in the pockets of soldiers.

Cross in a bottle. This Calvary is a piece of Russian prisoner of war art photographed at the family history roadshow in Nova Gorica, Slovenia[\[AE10\]](#) . Interestingly similar German pieces have been contributed, and prisoner and 'trench art' material features strongly in the collection.

This large and remarkable collection of field post is a potential research project in its own right. Submitted by Christian Strauss to the Munich family history roadshow day it represents the war time correspondence of members of an academic choral society from the town who met in a local caf. It is good to be able to report that as a result of the project the collection is actually being donated to the library, so the originals will be preserved and available to researchers whilst images are more widely accessible on the internet.

This 1915 Pickelhaube is typical of a Prussian infantry regiment, but also demonstrates what the public can achieve with a resource like *Europeana 1914-1918*. The pictures were taken and uploaded by Jens Walko together with the description, the item itself never actually appearing at a family history roadshow.

The log book of Captain Giles Blennerhassett RFC was submitted to the Dublin family history roadshow by his son, now aged 92.

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