



The First World War in History

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2012-12-20 12:35:46

This is a keynote lecture that I gave at a conference at the University of Birmingham under the auspices of the British Commission for Military History. It was one of two (the other delivered by Professor David Stevenson) in which we were asked to address the subject of 'The First World War in History'. I was asked to address in particular developments in the cultural and social history of the war over the last decade, and I tried to put these in the context both of military history and of the approaching centenary of the war, and to make an argument about what some of the biggest challenges and most appropriate forms of remembrance might be.

Memory

I'd like to start by considering the boom in memory at the end of the twentieth century. There were two parts to this. The first was the remarkable interest in questions of remembrance, commemoration and the uncovering of family history and eyewitness testimony which permeated much of Western culture during the 1990s. This has been put down to the growth in disposable incomes, the increased accessibility of archival materials, the continuing dislocation that typified the modern world, and the collapse of deferential culture.^[1] Together, these made it both more attractive and less hazardous to ask 'Who do you think you are?' - and to have the emblematic sob with which all celebrities are contractually obliged to offer when discovering that the past was horrid. The second was a particular interest amongst historians in issues of memory and the history of commemoration. That can be put down both to the academy's responsiveness to that wider popular moment and to the wider influence of the 'cultural turn' - the shift, thanks to insights from studies of anthropology and literature, towards the study of representations as constructions, rather than realities, which affected history more broadly in this period.^[2]

One result of the latter was that for a period in the late 1990s, if you wanted to be at the cutting edge of First World War studies, you looked at memory. I myself, when I was first thinking about graduate work at that point, was advised that a study of pals battalions would probably attract less interest than looking at remembrance. And in working, for my PhD, on the ways in which the British had thought about the First World War since 1918, I was already in a junior cohort of PhD students relative to a recently published set of theses turned monographs, most of them under the aegis of Jay Winter, whose own work on the remembrance of the war, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* was published in 1995.^[3] These included Adrian Gregory's study of armistice day, *The Silence of Memory*, Rosa Mario Bracco's examination of middle-brow literature, *Merchants of Hope*, works by Alex King and David Lloyd on British war memorials and battlefield tourism respectively, and Stefan Goebel's stunning transnational study of medievalism in British and German remembrance.^[4]

This concentration on memory - part of what Stephen Heathorn has called the 'mnemonic turn'^[5] has certainly

not entirely petered out, but it has fallen back in recent years. There's a great deal still to be written - indeed, Heathorn's shortly forthcoming work on representations of Kitchener and Haig during the twentieth century adds a great deal to the field^[6] - but one of the effects of that the study of remembrance was to point scholars back to re-examining how the war had been constructed and understood as it was being fought. Memory was not something that began with the armistice - rather, the roots of how the war was thought about in the years after 1918 could be traced back at least to 1914.

That broader shift towards the study of culture is something to which some military historians reacted with a mixture of discomfort and antagonism. Despite our success in the UK in establishing ourselves in universities and embedding ourselves in the curriculum, like many sub-disciplines there is always a tendency to revel in feeling embattled, singing Men of Harlech behind the mealie bags of academic separatism. Anglophone military history has traditionally been strongly empirical in approach and allergic to theory: I remember that, as a PhD student, when I used the words Foucauldian discourse analysis at the military history seminar at the IHR, I was pretty sure it wasn't going to come up in the questions. But at the same time some cultural histories of war - not the ones I have name-checked I should emphasise - deserved their obloquy because they were very poorly rooted in the evidence, paying too little attention to the ways in which contemporary experience was particularised by the chronology and mode of operations. The effect of military participation is still too often discussed as if [involvement in the armed forces inevitably meant service as an infantryman in the front line trenches of the Western Front](#).

But overall the effect of that cultural turn has been immensely positive in terms of how we understand the First World War. If you want evidence of that, I'd contrast histories of the home front written nearly fifty years apart - Arthur Marwick's *The Deluge* and Adrian Gregory's recent *The Last Great War*.^[7] In some ways this is of course an unfair comparison - standards of scholarship have changed, *The Deluge* is a more populist book - but their understanding of the source material is fundamentally different. Marwick looked for, and found, evidence of people describing the war as a key moment of social change and presented these as proof of what had happened, rather than asking why they might have chosen to construct that meaning from the conflict. Gregory's work, in contrast, is highly sensitive to the way in which contemporaries used language to describe their experiences and to exert power over the range of meanings that could be ascribed to the war. In the process, he helps us understand how the language of sacrifice initially applied to dead servicemen could be conscripted by a wide range of actors on the home front and how a conflict initially justified in some quarters as a defence of liberty against barbarism became increasingly illiberal and barbaric as it went on - and simultaneously retained overwhelming popular support.

Motivation

This brings me onto my second key theme, which is motivation - by which I mean more broadly the question of how people reacted to the war as it went on and the question of why, in Britain, there was no breakdown in popular consent. This is I think one of the areas in which recent scholarship has done most to open up interpretations of the war. Although it's now almost forty years since Jean-Jacques Becker's work on French reactions to 1914^[8] - which demonstrated that, in the countryside at least, 'enthusiasm' was definitely not the right word - it has taken much longer to start to unpack [the highly complex range of ways in which Britons responded to the war](#). As that has happened, we have started to replace what is still a very strong myth of irrational enthusiasm or deceitful propaganda with a much more nuanced picture of confusion, mixed emotions and people trying to make the best of their circumstances. If not quite rescuing the poor stockinger from the condescension of history, this has at least begun to save the poor Tommy from the suspicion of stupidity.

[Catriona Pennell's](#) groundbreaking and excellent work *A Kingdom United*, published earlier this year,

demonstrates the [huge variety of different ways in which the outbreak of war was greeted by the British population](#).^[9] Catriona's work - drawing on research in more than seventy local archives across the country, emphasises the importance of rumour, uncertainty and locality to the experience of the outbreak of war. Crucially, she has also worked to [write Ireland back into the story of Britain](#) - and the story of how Irish nationalists were willing to fight for the freedom of small countries in pursuit of their own hopes of independence within the Empire is a vital part of understanding how the beginnings of the war could be perceived. Catriona's undermining of the myth of war enthusiasm was prefigured by Gregory, whose findings were broadly similar - that even where there were excited metropolitan crowds, this was as much to do with the bank holiday as any great desire for war, and that if there was naivety about what would follow, it was grounded as much in the expectation that any war would be so horrible and costly that it could not long continue. Adrian's insistence on the importance of chronology in understanding the 'rush to the colours' in late summer 1914 offers a brilliant example of recent re-examinations of the historical record: he points out that the surge in enlistments came not at the start of the war, but rather after news of the supposed destruction of the original BEF had already come through.^[10] In other words, many of those joining up did so not only with an awareness that Britons were being killed, but also with the idea - shared with many other populations throughout Europe - that they were fighting a war to defend their homes.

The question of why working class servicemen in particular joined up is one that had also been examined in some depth by David Silbey, in his *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916*.^[11] Silbey's work emphasised the diffuse patriotism which permeated much working class culture at the time, which underpinned contemporary understandings of the conflict and which largely surpassed any sense of class loyalty across the nation rather than within individual industries or communities. But he also pointed out the degree to which men - far from being swept away on a tide of emotion - took what appeared to them to be rational decisions and attempted to exert agency over their own, and their family's situations. Silbey pointed to evidence of men 'gaming' the system of enlistment and reservation as a means to support the war, maximise their financial gains and protect themselves - a finding which fits interestingly with Gregory's identification, in *The Last Great War* of the degree to which local conscription boards maintained consent by exempting men - not because of their objections to military service, but because of their domestic burdens or their important role in the local economy. The absence of similar work for the Second World War - perhaps because it is wrongly presumed that conscription removed any opportunity for individual agency, but also because that war is seen as undisputedly 'good' - is a telling indicator of the different ways in which Britain has remembered the two conflicts.

To return to the first of them: meaning and motivation changed as the war went on, both at the level of strategic decision-making - see the UK's developing policy in the Middle East - or at the level of popular understanding. Total war by its nature generated its own emotional momentum. One of the trends in recent history has been to highlight the degree to which military contingencies served to restock both the moral and the defensive rationale for the war as it went on: German attacks on the homeland not only proving their barbarity but also proving that Britain really was under threat. In the UK, as in nearly all the European nations, one of the ironies of the conflict was that despite the exhaustion that had set in by 1917, the concomitant mobilisation of minds had made it extremely politically difficult to pursue a compromise peace even if one could have been arranged.

Crucial to that dynamic was the connection that was maintained between front and home - by the movement of letters and newspapers, by the transition of personnel and by the actions of the enemy in submarine and air attacks. Helen McCartney's excellent work on the Liverpool Scottish has provided one much used example of how those connections were maintained at a unit and individual level despite the churn of war^[12] - generation of interpretation tended to concentrate on the alienation between the front line and the folks at home, more recently, British historians have tended to emphasise the degree to which - however much there was anger against targets as various as politicians, profiteers, trade unionists and shirkers - actually what was more important was the degree to which soldiers remained part of a domestic as well as a military community. That

does not mean that those who had seen the worst of combat chose - even if they could find the words - to tell all to their families, although Michael Roper's work on soldiers' letters to their mothers indicates the importance of plaintive encouragements for care as a theme.^[13] But it does mean that most servicemen were not separated from their civilian lives. That link was a point where consent might have been fractured - note the government's concern at censored soldiers' letters expressing concern at food shortages on the home front which preceded the introduction of rationing. But the sense of connection also provided an ongoing justification for the continuation of hostilities. For instance, my students working on the experience of the First World War in South London found an example of a trench raid by 1/23rd London Regiment which was launched just after news had reached the battalion that some men's relatives had been killed in a bombing raid on Southwark - the divisional historian reported with satisfaction the low ratio of prisoners to dead subsequently inflicted on the enemy and the raiding party left a board in the German trenches with the words 'we'll teach you to bomb London'.^[14]

That brings us to the question of combat motivation. Alexander Watson's recent study, for example, provides evidence both of the similarities between British and German armies in this regard - the coping mechanisms men used to cope with fear and the prospect of horrific injury, the presence of humour, the idea that men were fighting for their mates - and the differences, for example in command culture, that help to explain the way in which German morale crumbled in 1918. A key difference there - less important in motivating action, but crucial in underpinning resilience to the prolonged deprivation, obedience and frustration of war - was the belief that victory could be won - if not quickly then at least eventually. Watson contrasts the growing sense amongst German soldiers that the war would last for another year and still not be won, versus British soldiers' lack of surprise at the Armistice - they had still believed that the Entente was going to win, even if they were sometimes taken aback that they weren't going to have to fight for another year.^[15]

The relationship between home and fighting front is central to Gregory's work - building on previous explorations, notably in Winter and Robert's edited collection *Capital Cities at War* on the 'economy of sacrifice' created by the war - that is to say the degree to which wartime loss and suffering were employed to articulate the demands of different groups within society. In the mainland UK, a potential crisis developed within that economy during the second half of the war, when the need to maintain production and domestic cohesion ran up against pay demands and strikes as workers began to demand greater recompense for their efforts. The mix of repression, concession and remobilisation of effort that resulted in 1917 kept the home front together - but it also contributed to a ratcheting up of tension and a developing divide between the urban middle class and non-unionised workers - hard hit by taxation, food shortages and the burden of bereavement - and increasingly powerful unions who - without opposing the war, were also seeking to make the best of the circumstances for their members. *The Last Great War* demonstrates very clearly what a nasty place Britain had become by 1918, with the lurking potential for extremist violence from the right rooted in the sense of unequal sacrifice.

Meanings

Of course, meanings which had changed during war were not static in its aftermath. During the inter-war period what had happened during the conflict and what it had meant were subject to contestation from innumerable different directions and at different levels. Parts of this narrative arc are now quite well known - the disillusionment that followed the massive slump of the early 1920s which put paid to the most extensive plans for post-war reconstruction; the fears of ex-servicemen's potential for violence - but actually their remarkably swift reintegration into society; the further wave of horrendous war literature which followed after the success of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. And we could continue to follow that arc through the rest of the twentieth century, although I'd rather you bought my very good book on the subject, still available at reasonable prices online and on the high street, and a perfect Christmas present.^[16] Joking aside, one of the problems with my interpretation of the course of British remembrance in *The Great War, Myth and Memory* was that to a large

degree its a story with the politics left out. And I increasingly think that it is the political utility of the war, and the way its remembrance could be adapted to different political needs, which is a key element of the complexity of ways in which the war has been represented. Heathorn's forthcoming book on Kitchener and Haig is particularly good on this.

Fascinatingly, as Jon Lawrence has pointed out, a key aspect of reaction to violence of post-war world was insistence by politicians on peacefulness as a central character trait of Britishness - a prophylactic against domestic unrest and never ending barbarity which itself helped to sideline more violent reactionaries during the transition to democracy.^[17] The enshrining of peace also reflected the continuing contestation of other aspects of the war's meaning - one of the few things that almost everyone could agree on was that the dead had given their lives to stop another war happening. If this dedication to peace is sometimes seen - wrongly I think - as a reason for the UK's supposed slowness in rearming in the face of another threat from Germany in the 1930s. More important, I would suggest, is the degree to which Hitler was seen by 1939 as the man who was breaking the peace - an absolutely vital factor in ensuring that the UK could declare war much more united that September than it had been twenty five years before.^[18]

Turning to more modern understandings of the war, there are two 'meanings' that, although they are difficult to resolve, it's particularly important for us to try to address. The first is the question of the war's and usefulness. Its associations in British popular culture are still horror and futility and it still serves, in contrast to its successor, as a definitive example of a bad war. It is extremely hard to get past that ancestral myth-kitty to examine contemporary understandings. One response of historians seeking to revise popular opinion has been to reach back to what are essentially contemporary arguments - first geostrategic - that an aggressive Germany posed a threat to British national interests - second moral - that German forces carried out deeds of sufficient barbarity that opposing them was, to borrow Sellars and Yeatman, A Good Thing.^[19] But this is to run the risk of replacing one false narrative of futility and disaster with another - no less a construct - of validity and national triumph. Popular though this may be - not least because the increasing sense of family connection with the conflict encourages a desire that all should be heroes - it does a disservice both to the range of ways in which Britons experienced the war and to our duty as historians always to say 'it was more complicated than that'.

The second modern meaning is I think actually even more pernicious because it is less seldom contested, and that is the extraordinary connection of war with social change. Here was an idea often attributed to Marwick, but which he of course picked up from contemporaries to whom everything was different after the war.^[20] And the notion that war shaped modern British society is deeply embedded in our narratives of the twentieth century - including the school syllabus. It seems likely to be the starting point of at least one of the BBC's major documentary series for the centenary. But this too is something that as historians we should be unpicking. Of course, the effect of the war was substantial - arguably the changes after the First World War - the change in the franchise, the provision of the dole - are more fundamental than those that happen in 1945. But we should also be making the argument that in international comparison, what was remarkable about the conflict for Britain was how little it changed. The dramatic expansion of voting rights was the carrying through of an Edwardian liberalism not totally demolished by the war, not the result of it, even if it did shape the nature of that change, and how it was explained.^[21] Constitutionally, even bearing in mind the subsequent departure of the Irish Free State, the extent of change was far less for Britain than it was in Russia, Germany or Austro-Hungary. And above all, contrary to what I still read in first year essays, the war was not a good thing for British women - unless separation, bereavement and exploitation as a cheap and easily dismissed labour force are counted as boons to the human condition. Or rather, the war was a good thing for some women - for instance where it brought greater earning power, a greater share of the household food budget and the departure of abusive husbands - just as it was a good thing for those men who made use of the opportunity to gain leverage over their employers or who profited successfully from the wartime economy. But as this might suggest ['women' and 'men' may not be the most useful categories through which to approach the war experience.](#) Of course, when it

comes to grabbing the attention of TV commissioners or audiences, 'things would never be the same again' is a much more gripping line than 'lots of things remained remarkably similar to how they had been before' - but the latter probably makes a more interesting point about Britain's distinct path in the twentieth century.

Media, museums and memorials

I'd like to close by drawing this keynote full circle and returning to the issue of memory in considering the current preparations for 2014. The centenary comes at an interesting moment in three ways.

It will of course be the first major anniversary at which no combatants are present, the last veterans having died. This might be thought to open up a new sphere of discussion and debate, in that the need to avoid offending former participants will no longer be present. But in practice, even the most media-prominent veterans really ceased to be loud voices in determining the boundaries of discussion of the war back in the 1970s, when they began to die off in large numbers. Rather, the key issue that shapes much contemporary debate is the connection which many Britons have established to the war either through their recollections of other's memories of the war or through family history research. This is a somewhat ambiguous development historically. At one level, it means that a real sense of involvement in the war remains to be exploited, particularly amongst the baby-boomer generation. At another, it means that many Britons who are not professional historians or even interested amateurs are brought into contact with some aspects of the conflict's complexity. But it can also serve to inhibit historical discussion - much as questioning the war's utility was difficult in the 1920s in the face of widespread bereavement, so familial connections now justify the place of the war in modern Britons' sense of their own political and national identity - deep held beliefs that can impede a balanced reassessment of the past. More seriously, connections to the war are modelled through an [existing mythic framework, with its concentration on male military service](#) - people say 'I have no connection to the war' when what they mean is that they have no ancestor who was a soldier, rather than no family member who lived through it, and their image of what soldier-antecedents experienced is often drawn from *Birdsong* or *Oh! What a Lovely War*, rather than more academically respectable texts.

The second feature of preparations for 2014 is the political context - national and international - within which they will take place. Under the last Labour government, there was an effort to manufacture a new multicultural British identity out of the shared experience of war - always a rather peculiar message, given Britain's exploitation of its empire in both conflicts and the fact that the key lesson seemed to be not that we can all rub along together because we share a nice set of liberal values, but rather that we co-exist best when we're busy really hating someone else. Given that it will coincide with the Scottish referendum, the 2014 anniversary will inevitably be associated with discussions and assertions of national identity - ones that will come more easily to a unionist tradition than to a separatist one. Internationally, the last few years have seen an impressive effort to align remembrance of both total wars of the twentieth century with support for British troops in their current endeavours overseas. We could read in two ways - either as a movement from below, which gives people the chance to assert their backing for the forces despite their involvement in unpopular wars - and which coincides with the particular dynamics of modern charity, as seen in the remarkable Help for Heroes phenomenon - or as a calculated attempt to win the battle of hearts and minds at home by a Ministry of Defence which was not shy in allocating decorated Gulf War veterans to push Britain's last surviving Tommies to the Cenotaph. Perhaps the key political facet of the centenary will however be a different international phenomenon - the stuttering of the European project in the face of economic calamity. Whereas in the late 1990s it was possible to predict that Britain would be incorporated within a European wide commemoration of 2014 which would focus on togetherness - a Franco-German interpretation of the war as the demonstration of the need to avoid conflict - this looks much less likely in current circumstances. As a later addition - in the speech later on the same day as this keynote, Dr Andrew Murrison MP, the Prime Minister's lead on the centenary, took the opportunity of

laying out plans for the 'non-political' commemorations to make a set of explicitly political points about the UK's relationship with the European Union. Whatever one's stance on that issue, it does seem clear both that British remembrance of 2014-18 will take a separate path to that in mainland Europe, and that this divergence is rooted not only in longer-running national differences, but also in contemporary economic and political developments.

This leads me on to the third facet of the 2014-18 commemorations: that they will come at a point of prolonged austerity and economic stagnation, if not renewed depression. The huge government investment which has been announced in them (albeit much of it already allocated) is very welcome, but it will be subject to scrutiny and criticism (either for being too much or not enough) as the anniversaries approach. Only the current warmth of feeling for creating national moments and of affection for the armed forces can explain why that investment has not already attracted greater negative comment. As recipients of public funds who are daily required to demonstrate our economic and social utility, those academic historians who are involved in this process must not only try to ensure that the maximum good emerges from them, but that we articulate how that is being achieved.

We can already predict that 2014 will see huge media interest in the First World War and a swathe of commemorative activities. Indeed, there is some risk that remembrance fatigue may already have started to set in by that summer - publishers already have their lists for 2013 planned on the basis that no-one wants to produce the third major book on the July crisis. [This focus offers two remarkable opportunities for historians](#). The first is simply to promote better understandings of the past. Here we have to be realistic and say 'better?', rather than 'perfect' - but there is the chance I think to interest a new generation and to make the public think anew about what they know about the war. I am both optimistic and pessimistic about this. Optimistic because I have been hugely impressed by my contacts with the Imperial War Museum in its redesign of its First World War galleries and its preparations to become a national leader in 'centenary partnerships?', which disseminate good practice and resources around the country. The country's major museum of twentieth century conflict will be presenting a version of the war that is much more international and poses more [complex questions about morality](#) and meaning than it has ever done before. It will not focus on the expected clichs and visitors - whatever their country of origin - will leave with a deeper understanding of why the conflict started, why it went on so long and why it stopped. This is all to the good. Pessimistic because my contacts with television producers have indicated both a desperate desire to find something new to say about the war, an almost total ignorance of what has been done before, and a depressing tendency to revert to received wisdom in the cause of not frightening viewers away. As another later addendum, a similar list of received wisdoms made up the basis of historical reference in Dr Murrison's speech: but it is perhaps politicians' fate to use history rather than to write or read it.

The second opportunity [for historians](#) - and one that comes about because they have been written into preparations for the centenary from the start - lies in the chance to involve the public in new forms of research. The War Museum's project to crowd source the gathering of data on as many as possible of those who served during the war will produce a new body of data not only on those participants, but also on the connections between them and Britons today. That use of popular enthusiasm for the individuals who fought will be distinctly British - although the interest in family history exists elsewhere in Europe, it has taken a distinctly military path in the UK.

Is there a route here to make a broader contribution to national life? It depends to a degree on what we think the purpose of history is. The risk is that the schools visits, the commemoration of tragedy and sacrifice, and the repetition of the traditional, much-loved, moving forms of remembrance will encourage a sort of totalitarian inculcation of a set of shared historical myths: the First World War as an episode in Our Island Story, in which each child is taught that they died to make us free. Almost as poorly thought out will be the exploitation of a set of myths about 'under-recognised' groups as a gesture towards forging contemporary social cohesion.

Celebrating munitonettes, Walter Tull and the victims of the SS Mendi disaster might be a useful sop to the idea that we're all in it together, but it's patronising and partial history and no substitute for an investment in progressive social or economic policy. The history of the British Empire and home front and the involvement of minorities in the war effort badly needs to be written back into British remembrance, but in a way that acknowledges that the past was different, rather than recasting it to meet contemporary needs.

The British celebration of individual servicemen's experience sits comfortably in a story of eventual military victory - they were all not only heroes, but heroes in a triumphant cause - but less happily into a positive narrative of the twentieth century. Much though we might appreciate the geostrategic rationale for expanding the Empire in the Middle East or maintaining the balance of power in Europe, are we really willing to argue as informed historians that Britons fought for a morally absolute 'good' cause? If we turn to the domestic scene, should we accept the historic implication that Britain turned into a better place because of the sacrifice of its servicemen, or would we do better to point out that the greatest improvements in British democracy and society came because of the political system's attempts to adapt to the disruption of war? These improvements were not given as a reward to dead soldiers, but conceded out of fear of what their live comrades, returning home, might do.

Personally, I'd side with Clausewitz in believing that the point of studying history is not to teach you a set of lessons for the present, but rather to exercise your critical functions so that you can cope with the new challenges yet to come. One might hope that these were also the interests of governments which profess their commitment to the new knowledge economy. If the First World War was really passing into history, these would be the sorts of discussions that we could have at a national level - doing those who experienced it at first hand the honour of exercising our critical privilege. Instead, the risk is that commemorating their service - and not offending their descendants - will instead block any attempt to place the war in its historical context or to use its commemoration to make modern Britain a better place.

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