



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

## Digital sites of memory - have we remembered them?

by Kate Lindsay

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*A post reflecting on the work on digital archives. Shared by Kate Lindsay, founder and project manager of the Continuations and Beginnings site and other digital projects. Originally posted at <https://katelindsayblogs.com>.*



Tyne Cot Cemetery, Belgium. Photo by me, 2007. (CC-BY-NC)

10 years ago this week, at London's Imperial War Museum, I stood before an audience of historians, literary estates, relatives of war poets, and colleagues to launch a [new digital archive](#) to support the study of First World War poetry. The archive contained over 7000 carefully selected and digitized poetical manuscripts and primary source material (letters, diaries, photographs etc.) related to some of the [best known poets](#) of the War. For the first time these manuscripts, which are dispersed across the globe in archives, libraries and private collections, were brought together into one place. They were accessible to anyone with an internet connection and made available

under an open licence for use in education and research.

In terms of manuscript studies the release of these items into the public sphere was significant. It not only reveals the poets' lesser known works, but enables us to look at the much anthologised poems with new perspectives. Some of the poets never saw their work published in their lifetime as they lost that life to the War. Editors posthumously pieced together drafts of poems to create their interpretation of the final work. Now the student or academic can study these drafts and question why decisions on words and form were made. In addition, to be able to see the workings of the poet on their drafts raises insights into their experiences and writing. For instance in a poetical draft of ['Dulce et Decorum Est'](#) we see Owen struggle to find the appropriate word to describe what it looks like to watch a man die from a gas attack, as he crosses out each word we feel his struggle to watch a man die so horrifically. In many cases the manuscripts held additional symbolism to the poem itself. In the case of Rosenberg, dried trench mud fell from a draft of ['Daughters at War'](#) as I unfolded the flimsy Salvation Army paper. The draft was frayed and stained with water and dirt. The materiality of War was literally etched upon the poetry.

For the poets whose lives stretched beyond the War, their manuscripts provide insights into a continuing battle between what can and can not be remembered, for whilst they survived the War it never let them return. Edmund Blunden, one of the greatest poets of memory, when interviewed poignantly expressed 'my experiences in the First World War have haunted me all my life and for many days I have, it seemed, lived in that world rather than this'. There are three items I still think about often in relation to these poets. Two maps sketched by [Edmund Blunden](#) and [David Jones](#) years after the War as a result of dreams they had had 'their memories of events were vividly intense but their recollection of things like place names were not' the missing pieces in the need to remember which they searched for in their subconscious. The third is Robert Graves' first edition of his war memoir *Goodbye to All That*. Held in the Berg Collection in New York Public Library, the text is littered with corrective annotations by Sassoon and Blunden who disagreed with Graves' interpretations and memory of events. Sassoon's own personal copy of the text has been revealed to show rather more brutal asides: 'rot?', 'fiction?', 'faked?', 'skite'.

The availability of these primary sources, and the various tools we employed to allow users to explore them has not only made them available to enhance curriculum and research, but has provided an opportunity to understand the writers and their work more deeply and release them from the commemorative role to which they have so often been appropriated. At a deeper level their poetry does not sit comfortably with the military-style remembrance ceremonies hosted by the church and state, as [there is no place for 'pity' or 'never agains' in today's political and economical campaigns](#). I'm not convinced that Owen would have enjoyed last week's 'Wilfred Owen Commemorative Edition' of *Songs of Praise*, or even been a fan of poppies to be honest. It was good to see Owen's ['Anthem for Doomed Youth'](#) and Siegfried Sassoon's ['Aftermath'](#) featured in last night's televised *Festival of Remembrance*. It is rare that the poetry of the soldier poets feature in Remembrance events, it was one of a few striking moments that brought humanity to the 'celebration?', although they were flanked by uplifting military parades and hymns. As well as the literary related manuscripts, the archive also contained some 6500 digitized historical items to provide further context to the War covering themes such as the homefront, women in war, propaganda, the war in the Middle East, etc. What is significant about these items is

that they were not digitised from collections in the Imperial War Museum or The British Library, [they were contributed by members of the public during a three month crowdsourcing initiative](#). From our teacher and academic workshops we knew there was a need for more contextual resources, but digitisation costs were high. We also knew that we were sitting on an untapped archive of hidden materials that resided in the general public's attics and bottom drawers, objects relating to their families and their communities. Each object with a story to tell. We designed a campaign to ask the public to share the histories passed down to them, asking them to photograph any objects they had and upload the images with descriptive information to a specially-built website. We also held a series of [Community Collection Days](#) in memory institutions across the UK. In the style of the *Antiques Roadshow*, people could bring in their items, speak to experts about their significance, and then have them digitised and uploaded by our team. We put together a portable digitisation studio that we could transport by train, plane and automobile and that was cheap and easy to reproduce by any group that wanted to run their own event (How To's were made available [on the website](#)). The model was a success, and in 2011 it was picked up by the European Digital Library (Europeana) and rolled out across the continent. The team continued to work with partners in over 20 countries including extensive work in Germany, to continue to collect the hidden memories of World War One, both online and over 200 collection day events. Hundreds of thousands of items and their stories have been recorded and are now [openly available for reuse online](#).

The community collections include everything from letters to medals, trench art to uniforms, and even a postcard from the young Adolf Hitler about his dental treatment in 1916. Fascinating as this is, it's reasonable to ask what use or meaning such an eclectic collection actually has. For me the value lies in their potential to provide rich sites of exchange between academia, cultural heritage, and the public. Knowledge is not just the property of the University it resides in the wider community and the two can complement each other 'providing leads for new research, and new understandings. The collections hold the raw material of school projects, essays, enlightened browsing, and informative relaxation. The images are often bold and interesting. Teachers can take and use them at all educational levels and carefully selected they have something to say to both adults and children. You can find examples that relate not just to your country, sometimes even your home town. You can tap into experience across nations, move the War beyond the Western front, beyond the experience of the British Tommy, examine its impact across nations and cultures. It is a European (web) site of memory for a shared experience.

Other initiatives fell out of these collections? [Wikipedia edit-a-thon](#) to update and add new articles; [transcribe-a-thon](#) to provide searchable text of the digitized letters, diaries, and other documents; [data visualisation](#) to present the War in new and engaging ways; [social media role play](#); the development of [resource packs](#), [virtual world simulations](#), [agent-based models](#) to explore how history may have changed if events had twisted and turned in other directions. There have been inter-generational workshops, reminiscence work, [multimedia](#) and [theatre](#) productions, [a podcast series](#), and teacher development days. The collections and their interpretations were supporting the 'battle of academia' to challenge the collective memory of the First World War 'a shared set of ideas and values about what it was like and what it meant for those involved: that it was all fought in the muddy trenches of France and Belgium, it was futile, most soldiers died and those who survived went mad or wrote poetry. Oh and we mustn't forget the women, for they won the vote as the result of their war service. None of these things are whole truths. In particular the British experience of death and grief looks quite different in a global context. This is not to downplay the tragedy of loss of life or the pain of those left behind, but to turn a lens upon a 'world' war where fighting took place in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and Far East, in the air and at sea. A war where troops were enlisted from across the globe and fought far from home, where in villages across Asia and Africa the lives of hundreds of thousands of women and children were changed forever when they lost their sons, husbands, or fathers.

One of the most powerful resources we created were [a set of interactive maps](#) using location data provided by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The user can spin the earth and see the sheer number of cemeteries there are in the UK with a war grave. Why are they here? Why are there 9 war graves in a tiny

cemetery at Trekkopje in northern Namibia' What happened there?

Consider the following:

- New Zealand lost 5% of its male population aged 15-49, which makes it the nation with the largest percentage of deaths during the conflict.
- 140,000 Chinese contract labourers were hired by the British and French governments, forming a substantial part of the immigrant labour force working on the Western Front during the war.
- Upon joining the War, 200,000 African-American troops were inducted into the US forces and served in Europe.
- The largest explosion of World War One occurred on December 6, 1917 when a munitions ship blew up in the harbour of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Nearly 2,000 people died and some 9,000 were injured in the disaster.
- France recruited between 1914 and 1918 nearly 500,000 colonial troops, including 166,000 West Africans, 46,000 Madagascans, 50,000 Indochinese, 140,000 Algerians, 47,000 Tunisians and 24,300 Moroccans.
- 2 million African troops were recruited during the War to serve as soldiers and labourers. Out of those men it is estimated that 157,100 labourers lost their lives, and 97,900 soldiers. When African civilian losses are added to those of the military, African fatalities during the war probably exceeded 1 million lives, or more than 1 per cent of the population. On a par if not more than Britain's loss.
- In the Battle of Gallipoli, where out of a total of 3000 Indian combatants, some 1624 were killed, a loss rate of more than 50 per cent.
- 1/3 of military deaths in the War were a result of the Spanish Flu, its rapid spread enabled by the conditions of war, movement of troops and supplies, and the gathering of crowds during the armistice. The Spanish Flu killed more people than the death toll across nations of the two world wars.

These are not facts that will be revisited on our national day of remembrance, for they do not fit our notion of 'we-ness' and what it means in terms of our national identity to have been the country who fought, who suffered and who won the War.

Many of these ideas and materials are recorded in an open educational resource we set up called [World War I Centenary: Continuations and Beginnings](#), a sort of *The Conversation* for the subject of the First World War, but not restricted to academic writers. The new perspectives presented can be controversial. There are over 200 articles and resources from over 70 contributors available.

From a 21st century perspective, digital has been key to a more extensive engagement with the World War One. It has unlocked content and provided channels for more effective forms of knowledge exchange. Licensing content openly is deeply important to enable this engagement, to allow history and memory to collide and challenge each other, to make high quality resources available to not only answer questions but to raise them. The web has the potential to democratise the study of the past. Online it belongs to everyone.

So have we played a part in the Centenary? Have we remembered them? In answer to the first, it's a yes, the user stats on the websites speak for themselves. But in answer to the second it's a no, for to remember surely means we should reflect on the past to influence our present day actions and attitudes. The problem with opening up new material and perspectives is that it does not always fit the model of Commemoration which largely rests on notions of Tribute and Honour. Open strategies depend on being able to talk critically and honestly about the War, those who took part in it, and those who wrote about it. I think we are still a generation too close to the conflict to be able to achieve this.

I experienced this. I spent years surrounded by primary source material filled with accounts of horror and grief, and whilst there were also many accounts of friendship, love and humour, overall I found it desperately sad and helpless. On my work trips to France and Belgium I could reach into the soil of the battlefields and pull out bits of shrapnel, bullets and barbed wire like they were left there yesterday, not 100 years ago. I spent full days talking to the sons and daughters of those who experienced the War. Working with these projects, like the search for family history, one can't help but be shaped by modern preconceptions of the War, and this creates a barrier to deeper engagement. For some time the most important thing to me was to pay tribute to those who fought and those who were left behind, not to engage with the deeper questions about the War, unsimplify it, and question how we remember. It was only when I started working more with historians such as Dan Todman, Catriona Pennell, Santanu Das, Pierre Purseigle, the literary editors of the War poets, the contributors to *Continuations and Beginnings*, started creating powerful data visualisation, that I truly started to understand what it means to remember. To live in peace, with good international relations, where there is no threat of nationalism.

100 years is not long enough.

?Notes?

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[First World War Poetry Digital Archive](#)

[The Great War Archive](#)

[Europeana 1914-1918](#)

[Running a Community Collection Online](#)

[World War I Centenary: Continuations and Beginnings](#)

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