



THE BRITISH CENTENNIAL COMMEMORATION OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

La conmemoración británica del centenario de la Primera Guerra Mundial

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This article reviews the course and development of British planning to commemorate the First World War. It highlights the fact that any commentary on that war in Britain has to take account of the prevailing cultural norms. These norms have evolved through much of the poetry, literature, theatre and film of the past century, and have come to represent the war as essentially futile, with an horrendous loss of life, best commemorated through the annual acts of remembrance for the fallen. As this national memory paid scant attention to the many works of revisionist military history written over the last generation, military historians were among the more sceptical when the UK government belatedly announced plans (and derisory levels of government funding) to commemorate the First World War. However, the Heritage Lottery Fund has filled the funding gap with £57 million, enabling all manner of projects to flourish whether of national, regional or local significance. By 4-5 August 2014, over 2,330 events, including 519 exhibitions, had been held, and numerous events marked the outbreak of the war. Poppies were again to the fore, most notably the 800,000 ceramic poppies, one for each fallen serviceman, at the Tower of London.



Abstract

National memory; British government; remembrance; Heritage Lottery Funding; poppies.

Memoria nacional; gobierno británico; recuerdo; Heritage Lottery Funding; amapolas.



Key words

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Fechas

Este artículo repasa las medidas y evolución de la planificación británica para conmemorar la Primera Guerra Mundial. En él se pone de relieve el hecho de que cualquier comentario sobre esta guerra en Gran Bretaña debe tener en cuenta las normas culturales predominantes. Estas normas han evolucionado a través de gran parte de la poesía, la literatura, el teatro o el cine del siglo pasado, y han pasado a representar la guerra como algo esencialmente vano, con una tremenda pérdida de vidas, que se conmemora mejor a través de los actos anuales de recuerdo por los caídos. Puesto que esta memoria nacional ha prestado escasa atención a tantos trabajos escritos a lo largo de la última generación repasando la historia militar, los historiadores militares se encontraban entre los más escépticos cuando el gobierno del Reino Unido anunció de modo tardío planes (y niveles irrisorios de financiación gubernamental) para conmemorar la Primera Guerra mundial. Sin embargo, la Heritage Lottery Fund ha completado el vacío en la financiación con 57 millones de libras esterlinas, permitiendo que todo tipo de proyectos florezcan, tanto de importancia nacional, regional o local. A 4-5 de agosto de 2014 se habían celebrado más de 2.330 acontecimientos incluyendo 519 exhibiciones y múltiples acontecimientos señalaron el estallido de la guerra. Las amapolas fueron de nuevo lo más destacado, en particular las 800.000 amapolas de cerámica en la Torre de Londres, una por cada militar caído.



When Maria Miller in her capacity as the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the department charged with leading Britain's centennial commemoration of the First World War, was asked on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme on 10 June 2013 why the war was fought, she replied:

At that point in Britain's history, it was important that there was a war that ensured that Europe could continue to be a set of countries which were strong and which could be working together. (Mason, 2013, June 10 and Sheffield, 2013)

While this bizarre affirmation earned understandable mockery on Twitter, and in the columns of the press,¹ Professor Gary Sheffield was more sympathetic. After twenty years of battling the prevailing *zeitgeist* in Britain, namely that the First World War was futile and its massive death toll the product of horrendous battles, conducted by callous and incompetent generals, he understood the reluctance to offend contemporary norms (and voters). Nevertheless, he feared that the "non-judgmental" approach of the UK government towards the centennial commemoration of the First World War, with its focus on remembering the dead, would miss a golden opportunity to showcase the fruits of a generation of scholarly research.²

This contretemps underlines not merely the delicacy with which Britain's coalition government has approached the centenary but also the grip that popular culture has upon the "national memory" of the First World War in Britain. Ever since the ten-year commemoration of the ending of the war in 1928, and the "war-books boom" that followed, many of the ensuing novels and memoirs shaped modern British mythology about the Great War. They included examples of grief-stricken mourning in Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933), where she helped to establish the first day of the battle of the Somme (1 July 1916) as a symbol of national tragedy. In this elegy for a lost generation, including her brother and fiancé, she described

1 For more information visit Norman (2013, June 11).

2 For a more comprehensive approach read Sheffield (2013, p. 6), Sheffield (2000, 2001, 2011) and Sheffield & Bourne (2005).

the first day of the battle when 57,470 casualties occurred, of whom 19,240 died, as a “singularly wasteful and ineffective orgy of slaughter” (p. 276).³ Just as florid and critical were many individual accounts of the war, such as Edmund Blunden’s *Undertones of War* (1928), Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), the first part of his trilogy, *Memoirs of George Sherston* (1937), and Robert Graves’s *Goodbye to All That* (1929). Following these literary accounts were the polemical *War Memoirs* of David Lloyd George, the former prime minister (1916-22). Incorporating advice from Basil Liddell Hart, an influential military critic of the wartime strategy, the multi-volume memoirs, published with advance serialisation in the *Daily Telegraph* over the years from 1933 to 1936, unfolded an excoriating attack on the wartime high command in general, and on the recently deceased Field Marshal Earl Haig in particular. While supporters of Haig rallied in his defence, others broadened the base of criticism until the Second World War erupted.⁴

Unlike the Great War, the Second World War seemed easier to comprehend in its causes, campaigns, and outcome. In popular culture it emerged as unambiguously a “good war”, fought against a direct threat to Britain and justified subsequently by the revelations of the Holocaust and the Japanese treatment of prisoners of war. Despite the litany of botched British campaigns, the fall of Singapore – “a disaster that dwarfed anything Britain suffered in 1914-1918” (albeit one that barely resonates in post-imperial Britain) – and some controversial military methods like strategic bombing, (Gregory, 2008, p. 4) the positive memory of a decisive victory in 1945 over heinous enemies found reflection in a floodtide of post-war memoirs, films, and popular commentary. As Mark Connelly observed, the Second World War with its perceived moral purpose, and its clear and beneficial outcome, altered memories of the first by providing a “yardstick of futility” (2002, p. 8).⁵

As the fiftieth anniversary of the First World War loomed on the horizon, and there were still veterans alive who could recount their experiences, a profusion of works appeared that reshaped memories of the conflict for another generation. Leon Wolf’s “emotive diatribe against the Passchendaele campaign”, *In Flanders Fields* (1959), and Alan Clark’s irreverent, *The Donkeys* (1961), depicted the generals as “mindless butchers” and the war as meaningless (Bond, 1991, p. 6 and Holmes, 1995, p. 137). Meanwhile John Terraine valiantly defended his hero, *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier* (1963),⁶ and served with Correlli Barnett and others as scriptwriters for *The Great War* (1964), a remarkable television documentary, co-produced with the Imperial War Museum. In a series of twenty-six forty-minute episodes, using archive footage and still photographs, eyewitnesses talked directly to camera. Screened on BBC Two and then rebroadcast on BBC One, the series exceeded all expectations in its mass popularity. Ironically audience surveys revealed that viewers, far from understanding Terraine’s appraisal of the British generals, and his message that the war, if not a good one, was at least a necessary one, focused instead on the futility of the war and the “waste of young manhood” (Danchev, 1991, pp. 280-281). Another hugely popular production was *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1963), directed

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3 See also Strachan (2003, p. 188) and Beckett (2007, pp. 624, 648). As Beckett explains, it still required some popular histories, using oral testimony, before the Somme (and the fate of the Pals’ battalions) became deeply etched in the popular consciousness. These works included Middlebrook (1971) and MacDonald (1983).

4 For further information read Todman (2005, pp. 91-2, 155, 183) and Bond (1999, pp. 13-24).

5 See also Todman (2005, pp. 8, 135).

6 For subsequent reappraisals of Haig, see Bond and Cave (1999); Harris (2008) and Sheffield (2011).

by Joan Littlewood for the Theatre Workshop, which satirised the British high command, lauded the stoicism and good humour of the ordinary soldier, and debunked the war itself. In 1969 Richard Attenborough directed a film version of the play that perpetuated the potent image of a war bereft of meaning, conducted by supercilious and foolish generals (Ibid. pp. 284-286 and Connelly, 2002 p. 2).

The emerging orthodoxy then received a powerful reinforcement, and a veneer of academic respectability, from Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). An American professor of literature and a former infantry subaltern, Fussell interpreted military service through his own experience (and anger about America's involvement in the Vietnam War). He found supportive texts from the vast literature on the First World War, and wrote with passion and sarcasm to bolster popular myths about the war. Despite its highly selective use of evidence,⁷ and many errors of fact, date and geography,⁸ the book became a key text for a new generation and influenced a wave of popular fiction that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, the most successful of which was Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong* (1993), which sold a million and a half copies in paperback. Reviewers of *Birdsong* summarised its view of the Great War as "pointless, foolish, unnecessary", and the whole literary genre, as Dan Todman observes, summed up the First World War as "poets, men shot at dawn, horror, death, waste" (2005, pp. 121, 158-160). The poetry element even assumed a place of predominance in the revisionist history, *A Pity of War* (1998) by Niall Ferguson, who claimed that he had been influenced powerfully in his youth by Wilfred Owen's poem, "Dulce et Decorum est". Ferguson (1998) argues that Britain should have remained apart from this "evil war", and that in choosing the title of his book from Owen's twice-used phrase, the war was worse than a tragedy: "It was nothing less than the greatest error of modern history" (pp. xxiii, xxvi-xxxiii, 462).

Finally, the satirising of the high command reached new heights with the BBC comedy television production of *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989), an immensely influential series. The comedy required hardly any scene setting because it reflected a shared national understanding about the incompetence of British generals and bloody failures in battle (Sheffield, 2001, p. 2). If the whole series bolstered preconceptions about the rat-infested trench warfare, and caricatured chateau generalship, the last episode in which the entire cast, other than "General Melchett", goes over the top to certain death to be replaced by a field of poppies – the traditional symbol of British remembrance of the fallen – was voted in 2000 as among the top ten television moments of all time (Todman, 2005, pp. 116-17 and Beckett, 2007, p. 643). The fact that this comedy series incurred hardly any censure at the time (and has since passed into the classroom as a text on the war) underscores how deeply embedded the popular mythology has become (Todman, 2005, p. 117). Jeremy Paxman quite rightly claims that it has become "much easier to laugh at – or cry about – the First World War than to understand it" (2014, p. 9).

The only aspect of the national memory that seemed immune from criticism, revision, and satire were the rituals associated with public remembrance of the war. As established in the inter-war years, the key points of national commemoration included the two-minute silence, mass participation and wreath laying on Armistice Day, 11 November (renamed Remembrance Sunday after the Second World War), with a focus on the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in

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7 For a very different approach showing how the war, and particularly the form and content of mourning for the dead, could be interpreted in different ways from the surviving evidence, see Winter (1995).

8 For further information consult Pryor & Wilson (1994).

Westminster Abbey and the Cenotaph in central London, and at other war memorials across the country. The Poppy Fund, established by Earl Haig and the British Legion for the benefit of disabled soldiers, enabled the living, by buying poppies, to participate in the remembrance of the dead, a ritual that began on 11 November 1921. Even the tone of the annual proceedings became standardized, emphasising suffering and sacrifice for the peace of future generations, and not as some had tried to do in the 1920s, emphasise peace as the legacy of heroism and victory. The two-minute silence, as observed on Remembrance Sunday, was also restored on the actual day of 11 November from 1995 onwards.⁹

Ironically the national memory of the First World War has become so deeply entrenched in popular consciousness that it has survived the publication of some excellent histories of the war over the past thirty years. Virtually every facet of the diplomatic, military, social, economic, intelligence and propaganda dimensions of the war has attracted scholarly attention. The quality and depth of recent scholarship is such that it almost fulfils Brian Bond's expectation of 1989 that one day the war could be studied "simply as history without polemic intent or apologies" (1991, p. 12).¹⁰ Nevertheless, all too little of this fresh understanding, despite the accolades and prizes earned by these works,¹¹ has penetrated the popular shroud of death, waste, and futility. So when Gary Sheffield took issue with the "futility" thesis in *Forgotten Victory* (2001), and described the First World War as "a just and necessary war fought against a militarist, aggressive autocracy" (p. 280), he was still arguing that "the first world war was far from futile" in the *Guardian* on 17 June 2013, and earning vituperative criticisms from its readers.

On 11 October 2012 David Cameron, the British prime minister, unveiled the plans by which the coalition government wished to mark the centenary of the First World War. Speaking at the Imperial War Museum (IWM), which was first built in 1917 to collect the artefacts of the conflict, he indicated that the investment already made in refurbishing the atrium and the First World War galleries of the museum would enable it to become the "centrepiece of our commemorations for the centenary of the First World War". He justified the government's support for the centenary, with events running through the period from 2014 to 2018, on the sheer scale of the sacrifice; the impact of the war upon the development of Britain, military technology, and the geopolitics of the twentieth century; and the "very strong emotional connection" that so many Britons had with the war: "Current generations are still absolutely transfixed by what happened in the Great War and what it meant" (Cameron, 2012, October 11).

Having placed the direction of the commemoration plans under the remit of Maria Miller at the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Cameron had provided the minister with a special advisory board. This included Dr Andrew Murrison, MP, a Royal Naval doctor, as his special representative, two former secretaries of state for defence, Tom King and George Robertson, Menzies Campbell, a former defence and foreign affairs spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, two former senior military officers, Lords Stirrup and Dannatt, Hew Strachan, the Chichele Professor of Military History, Oxford, and Sebastian Faulks. The board was left in no doubt about the thrust of the government's approach: "Remembrance", declared Cameron, "must be the hallmark of our commemorations". The scope should be "truly national", with commemorations for "the first day

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9 For more information read Gregory (1994, pp. 9-10, 27, 34, 36-7, 185, 226) and Beckett (2007, p. 607).

10 See also Beckett (2007, p. 648).

11 Philpott (2009) and Harris (2008) are both prize-winning books; Strachan (2001), Stevenson (2005), Sheffield (2011) and Beckett (2007) are among the best reviewed and reprinted volumes.

of the conflict, on 4th August 2014, and for the first day of the Somme, on 1st July 2016”, and with “further events to commemorate Jutland, Gallipoli and Passchendaele, all leading towards the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day in 2018” (Cameron, 2012, October 11).

In addition to these national events, Cameron declared that £5 million of new government funding would be channelled through the Imperial War Museum to establish a growing network of over 500 organisations that would supposedly help “millions of people across the world to discover more about life in the First World War and its relevance today”. A further £5 million of new government funding would be earmarked for a centenary education programme, enabling a teacher and two pupils from every state secondary school to visit the First World War battlefields. This would complement the support of community heritage projects by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to conserve, explore and share local heritage of the First World War. Finally, the premier pledged to double the £5 million already given to support the transformation of the IWM, thereby matching contributions from private, corporate and social donors. Overall he affirmed that £50 million was being committed to the commemoration, whose purpose was “to honour those who served, to remember those who died, and to ensure that the lessons learnt live with us forever” (Cameron, 2012, October 11).

If this statement at least determined the three areas in which the government was preparing to mark the centenary, the lack of any detailed amplification soon incurred a range of criticism and commentary. The fact that the announcement had only been made in October 2012 underscored the lack of advance planning by successive British governments, and the preoccupation of the coalition government with the London Olympics and the Golden Jubilee of 2012. Hew Strachan revealed that it had taken two years’ of lobbying by “bodies associated with the commemoration” to awaken the coalition government “to its responsibilities. It cannot be accused of malign intent, only of incipient neglect” (Strachan and Kennedy, 2013, May 25). Gary Sheffield claimed that the previous Labour government should have emulated its counterparts in Australia and New Zealand and begun preparations a decade ago. The belated initiative, and the “disproportionate concentration on [British] defeats” without equal prominence being accorded to victories such as the battle of Amiens (1918), suggested that the government was “simply floundering” (Copping, 2013, May 5). Even worse was the paltry commitment of new government resources. The Australian government had pledged an expenditure of £72 million towards Australia’s centennial commemoration, a sum that was larger in both absolute terms and in per capita spending than the sum announced by David Cameron. In fact, although the press seized upon the £50 million mentioned in Cameron’s IWM speech as the headline sum, Hew Strachan confirmed that only £10 million of that sum was “new money”, the remainder had already been committed to existing projects, principally the refurbishment of the IWM.¹² Of the “new money” from the Treasury, £1.1 million was channelled through the National Heritage Memorial Fund towards the restoration of *HMS Caroline*, the last surviving light cruiser from the battle of Jutland, which has been in Alexandria Dock, Belfast, since 1923. However the National Museum of the Royal Navy has had to secure additional development funding of £845,000 from the HLF, and will need £12.2 million from the HLF before it can fully preserve, restore, and open the ship to the public for the Jutland centenary on 31 May 1916.¹³ In short, the Treasury’s “new money” was not nearly sufficient, and the lottery players had to bridge the shortfall.

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12 For more information read Copping (2013, May 5) and Strachan & Kennedy debate (2013, May 24).

13 Consult “HMS Caroline ‘can be key WWI commemoration project’” and “Boost for historic warship HMS Caroline”.

On 11 January 2013, Hew Strachan broke ranks from the advisory board and publicised his concern about the predominant theme of remembrance. Concerned about the imminent “media blizzard”, and the publishers hoping to “pre-empt the market” by bringing out books in 2013, he worried lest the forthcoming centenary would become no more than a “Remembrance Sunday writ large”. He feared that the commemoration, if it simply reworked “the familiar themes of remembrance”, would become “repetitive, sterile and possibly even boring”. While he was glad that the government had included an educational dimension, he doubted that sending teachers and pupils from English schools over to see the battlefields would “change very much” (2013, January 11). More substantive educational contributions would come from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which launched an online presence and released 300,000 documents to make it easier for families to find relatives killed in the war,¹⁴ and from the IWM by refreshing its First World War galleries, which are three times the size of their predecessors and house 1,300 objects, and by revamping its central atrium, which is much less cluttered but somewhat grey and sterile in appearance.¹⁵ While Strachan (2013, January 11) anticipated these developments, he still favoured a commemorative approach with a sense of progression through the various years of the war. He suggested that at appropriate times the UK could reflect upon whether it was right to fight and when not, on whether a war could be simultaneously necessary and wasteful, and on how to interpret its conclusion, combining elements of victory (Armistice Day) and mourning (Remembrance Sunday).

Six months later the Department of Culture, Media and Sport provided more detail about the form of the commemorations and discreetly confirmed that the battle of Amiens would now be included.¹⁶ The department indicated that the opening day of the centenary, 4 August, would involve a service of commemoration at Glasgow Cathedral for Commonwealth leaders on the day after the closing day of the Commonwealth Games (and forty-six days before the referendum on Scotland’s independence). There would also be a candle-lit vigil of prayer and solemn reflection at Westminster Abbey, finishing with the last candle being extinguished at 11.00 pm – the moment Britain declared war on Germany (only the department had to express this action in the passive tense so as not to offend the Germans, i.e., “the moment war was declared”). Similar events would be held all over the country, with householders exhorted to turn off lights and leave only a single light or candle burning in honour of Sir Edward Grey’s purported remark on the previous evening – 3 August 1914 – about “the lamps going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime”. Finally, at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission St Symphorien Military Cemetery in Mons, Belgium, where an equal number of British and German soldiers are buried, a reconciliation event¹⁷ would be held. In addition the department clarified that the “education” visits of teachers and children to the western front would only apply to those in the secondary schools of England, that the accompanying programme of cultural events would be funded by £10 million of lottery money and supposedly matched amounts

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14 To mark the centenary, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission launched two websites and placed 300,000 documents online for public viewing. See Norton-Taylor (2014, July 8).

15 See Jury (2014, July 16) and Sooke (2014, July 17).

16 See “Battle of Amiens 1918 to be commemorated as part of great war centenary”.

17 The UK government is fortunate that all veterans of the Great War are now dead. When the administration of President George H. Bush tried to invite the Japanese to the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor in 1991 in an act of reconciliation, members of the Veterans’ Association said “we didn’t invite them 50 years ago and we aren’t going to invite them now” (Essoyan, 1991, September 19).

raised by fundraising, and that the HLF had once again raised the monies available for heritage projects, making another £6 million available beyond the £12 million already awarded.¹⁸

Unfortunately whenever the educative dimension raised its profile, all manner of controversy ensued. Some of the recent books reviewing the causes of the war¹⁹ used many of the same primary sources, reflected knowledge of the same secondary literature, and tried to minimize any potential bias, but all focused on divergent causes, different actors, varying timelines, and interpreted the outbreak of war quite differently. Reviewing this historiography, one commentator doubted that there would ever be “a consensus” on “the causes of the First World War”, and if scholars like Christopher Clark, the author of *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to war in 1914* (2013) go “to Olympian efforts to avoid the blame game” (thereby feeding the popular view of the war as a tragedy that happened by accident or miscalculation), then the commemoration is unlikely to secure any educational advances (Gavin, 2014, pp. 321, 325, 330). Even worse, Professor Sir Richard Evans, the Regius Professor of History at Cambridge University, chose to refer to the “magnificent study” of Clark in a vitriolic attack on military historians for daring to criticise the government’s plans for the commemoration, and on Michael Gove, then the Secretary of State for Education, whom he accused of “tub-thumping jingoism”. Writing in *The Guardian*, Evans firmly supported the “broad and inclusive attitude of the culture secretary, Maria Miller” (apparently unconcerned about her understanding of the war), and dismissed the war as simply a “seminal catastrophe”, which was a “victory for no one” (2013, July 13).

Instead of ignoring this tirade, and letting scholars such as Nigel Biggar, the Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at the University of Oxford, debunk the “strawman” arguments of Evans, and make a clear and logical case for the conflict as a just war (Biggar, 2013), Gove responded in kind. Somewhat unwisely he chose to cast the debate in terms of right and left (not that Evans had hid his political predilections), and hoped that the nation, in commemorating the war, would “not succumb to the myths which have grown up about the conflict”. By endorsing the views of Sheffield, Philpott, Biggar and Margaret Macmillan (somewhat misinterpreting her account), castigating the Blackadder myths, and attacking Evans personally, Gove set himself up for another broadside from Evans.²⁰ Into this unedifying spat strode Elizabeth Truss, then the childcare minister in the Department for Education, who received plaudits from the Labour opposition for seeking to rely upon the insights of the teaching fraternity. Schoolteachers, argued the junior minister, should decide how they taught the conflict but inform pupils that there are varying views on the war (overlooking the point that some of them had already brought *Blackadder* into the classroom).²¹

Given this outbreak of “History Wars” (Biggar, 2013, p. 40), which were replicated in a more genteel manner on BBC Two, where Max Hastings debated the causes of the war with Niall Ferguson (Lowe, 2013, February 25), it was understandable that the government wished to rely on the rituals of remembrance as the main form of commemoration (with reflection and reconciliation reserved for Mons and Westminster Abbey). Poppies, so integral to the annual Remembrance events in Britain, became a source of controversy. The Royal British Legion

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18 See “Maria Miller sets out how government will mark First World War Centenary in 2014”, press release.

19 These books include Clark (2013), Hastings (2013), MacMillan (2013) and McMeekin (2013).

20 See Shipman (2014, January 2) and Evans (2014, January 6).

21 See Boffey (2014, January 25).

championed a proposal, which originated in its Greenhithe and Swanscombe branch, to promote the planting of poppy seeds. Initially this was to be undertaken in Kent but the HLF, which was inundated with other applications, chose not to fund it. Bolstered by outrage expressed in parliament and sections of the press, the Legion gained endorsements from Prince Charles, David Cameron, and former military chiefs, like Lord Charles Gutherie. It soon received practical backing in the provision of poppy seeds from the retail firm, B&Q, to persuade public and local authorities to purchase these seeds (with a pound from each packet going to the Legion) and to plant millions of poppies nationwide.²² Subsequent representations of the poppy theme, beyond the traditional wreath laying, included the raining down of a million poppies at Bovington Tank Museum, Dorset, on 4 August, and the planting of 800,000 ceramic poppies, one for each fallen serviceman, in the moat at the Tower of London, a site opened formally on 5 August 2014.

On 3 and 4 August 2014 “Remembrance-style” services were held across the country, wreaths were laid at war memorials, old and new, and Prince Harry opened an arch at Folkestone on 4 August, which commemorated the millions of people who passed through Folkestone on their way to the front line in the Great War. “Lights Out”, organised by “14-18 Now”, the body formed to co-ordinate the centenary’s cultural programme, was the most ambitious of the national events. The government ensured participation from government buildings, the Houses of Parliament, every British embassy and high commission. Television coverage of the event was facilitated by the participation of institutions such as the Eden Project (Cornwall), the Millenium Centre (Cardiff), St Paul’s and Durham Cathedrals, Lincoln Castle, Old Trafford (Manchester), Blackpool Tower, the Royal Albert Hall, several West End theatres and City of London businesses, City Hall Belfast, and up through various sites in Scotland to Britain’s most northerly cathedral, St Magnus in Kirkwall, where a candlelit vigil was held.²³ The central events at the St Symphorien Military Cemetery and Westminster Abbey were not classic Remembrance ceremonies but highly telegenic vigils, with the Royal duchesses not wearing black. Reflection and reconciliation were among the themes, even if much of the television and press commentary could not move beyond the “millions” dead.²⁴

According to *1914.org*, the website of the First World War Centenary Partnership, over 2,330 events marked the centenary of the outbreak of war in Britain. Among the 519 exhibitions were “Remembering the Great War” (Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh), “Truth and Memory: British Art of the First World War” (IWM), “Forgotten Fighters: the First World War at Sea” (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich), and “From Street to Trench: a World War that Shaped a Region” (IWM North). There were numerous local exhibitions, reflecting the enthusiasm and engagement of community groups, in many cases aided by HLF funding, including “Herefordshire in the Great War: telling the story of 1914-18”, “Kent Voices of the First World War”, “Bucks Lives in the Great War”, and “For King and Country: Calderdale’s First War Centenary, 1914-18”. Prominent among the 667 talks and lectures were several conferences, notably the Army’s “The First World War Conference: the British Army on the Western Front, 1914-1918” (17 July 2014) and a Leeds conference, “First World War in Retrospect” (28 July

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22 See Sinmaz & Doyle (2013, September 11).

23 See Brooks (2014, August 3).

24 See Brown (2014, August 5) and “100 years on ... the lights go out again to remember the millions of lives lost” (2014, August 5, p. 1).

– 1 August 2014). There were, too, 684 festivals, re-enactments and tours, including a surge in battlefield visits, as companies offered guided tours of the battlefields of both world wars with “specialist guides” in order, as one firm claimed, to “visit, understand, never forget”.²⁵ The organising body, “14-18 Now”, received £5 million from the HLF, £5 million from Arts Council England and £250,000 from the Department of Culture Media and Sport. By 4 August 2014, the HLF had invested £57 million in centenary projects since April 2010 (Atkinson, 2014, August 4).

In summary the UK government may have responded belatedly to the prospect of the commemoration, and hardly overdid its investment of “new money”, but it found a way to mark the British declaration of war on Germany. This was not “Remembrance writ large” but it employed all the organs of state, the royal family, the armed forces, and many of the traditional religious and memorial arenas. Organised as a series of ceremonial events, across every part the UK, this was a co-ordinated spectacle of remembrance, reflection, and reconciliation that television could choreograph and the media approve. Whether any clarity of message emerged amidst the colourful imagery is possibly moot, but the government set a tone that chimed with the local, community and family events that blossomed across the nation. Investment remained an issue, but the HLF spent £5 million on 500 small community projects, another £6.5 million on the IWM’s First World War galleries, and contributed the lion’s share of the funding to *HMS Caroline*. By its four-year investment of £57 million, the HLF emerged as the great enabler of the centenary; it maximised the scale of the commemoration, rejected some of the weaker proposals, and enabled many of the projects to achieve fruition by 4 August 2014.

How far all this activity has enhanced understanding of the war is much less obvious. Many of the projects focus on individuals, particularly their records of service, uniforms, kit, and, in rare cases, letters or diaries, or on life at home and in the local community during the war (where material is nearer to hand), or on cultural events, the restoration of war memorials, re-enactments, and festivals of various sorts. Doubtless this has met desires to discover more about distant and deceased relatives, to find ways of not forgetting about the service and sacrifice of a past generation, and to empathise with perceived experiences during the Great War. If all this commendable activity simply embeds existing cultural myths, and fails to generate new insights about how people responded to the causes, context and course of the war, it will be disappointing. If it fails to add nuance to existing perspectives (even, as a start, accepting that 88 per cent of British servicemen survived the war (Beckett, 2007, p. 440)), then the commemoration will remain a missed opportunity.

The UK government may have responded belatedly to the prospect of the commemoration, and hardly overdid its investment of “new money”, but it found a way to mark the British declaration of war on Germany

25 Leger Holidays, *Battlefield tours with specialist guides, 2014-2015*.

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