

Review Article

Tools of Memory

TIM COOK

JONATHAN VANCE. **Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War.** Vancouver, 1997. 319 pages. GEOFF DYER. **The Missing of the Somme.** London, 1995. 157 pages. MICHAEL McKERNAN. **Here Is Their Spirit: A History of the Australian War Memorial 1917-1990.** University of Queensland Press, in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1991. 388 pages.

The slow production of official histories, the closing of essential high-level documents for fifty years, and, as Denis Winter¹ has pointed out in Great Britain, the actual vetting and destruction of sensitive and incriminating files precluded any sustained critical writing about the Great War in the decades after the Armistice. As these conditions were passed by in the 1960s, a renewed historical focus on the war became possible, including several harsh critiques. A major step in this broader re-evaluation occurred in 1976 with the publication of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, in which he analyzed how people after 1918 remembered and struggled to understand the war. Relying primarily on such famous anti-war poets and writers as Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfrid Owen, and Robert Graves, Fussell developed a literary view of the war and its significance. His book remains an essential work for all subsequent studies of how the war has been conceptualized and commemorated.

The study of memory has become a popular topic in recent years, and military history has been a central focus of such work. This is not surprising; with its nine million dead, twenty-seven million injured and, on average, more than 5,600 soldiers killed on each day of the war, the direct memorial legacy of the First World War is astounding.² Yet the need to memorialize goes well beyond those agonizing figures. Each of those dead had loved ones who mourned their loss, an intricate, international web of sadness that crossed battlefields and oceans to settle in hearths and homes. How did the survivors deal collectively with this culmination of grief and privately with their own bereavement? Canada alone, a country of not yet eight million, had over 60,000 dead

and another 170,000 injured, out of some 619,636 who enlisted, or an almost forty per cent casualty rate. Some 9.3 per cent of all Canadians who served were killed, with, of course, much higher figures for those who actually made it to the Western Front.³ There were very few citizens who did not have a husband, father, son, brother, uncle, cousin, or friend fighting for King and country – in effect, the total war meant that everyone, in one way or another, was shaped and affected by the war. When news of a dead or missing person (which usually meant the same thing) arrived in the form of telegrams or letters, that may have been the end of the fighting war for that family, but there continued a war that would forever rage in the No Man's Land of the mind. There was no chance to say goodbye and few comforting traditional methods for grieving without a body. In fact, mourning in the supercharged patriotism of the home front, where men were not killed but sacrificed for the good of the nation, was not always socially acceptable. As a result of that legacy, the unresolved pain carried on for years – especially with the stark, daily reminder of the absence of a breadwinner, and thus of widows raising orphaned children on their own, aged parents left without support before the age of government pensions, or children passed on to surviving relatives. The void was ever-present, and so therefore was the need to address the loss through appropriate commemorations and constructed memories.

The three books being reviewed here, Jonathan Vance's *Death So Noble, Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*, Geoff Dyer's *The Missing of the Somme*, and Michael McKernan's *Here Is Their Spirit: A History of the Australian War Memorial 1917-1990*, all focus, in one way or the other, on the memory of the Great War. Singularly, they pose intriguing questions about various aspects of the war, and combined, their varied nature – a scholarly work, a philosophical piece, and an official history – illustrate that the memory of the dead can be approached in many ways and in a cross-disciplinary process. At the heart of the matter is an analysis of how the memory of the Great War has been constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed to fit necessary national myths and create an accepted social memory for a nation's citizens. In this process, archives as records, institutions, and ideas have a significant part to play, especially in the Australian story. Canada awaits a similar analysis of the impact of the war on its archives. But beyond specific archives-war connections is the broader concept of the construction of memory. Archives and archivists actively construct the memories of their communities or jurisdictions. They shape the past to reflect the needs, policies, or politics of the present.⁴ By analogy, then, archivists will be intrigued by a parallel exercise in the institution of memory that followed the Great War, which these three books reveal.

Jonathan Vance's second offering in as many years is a monumental addition to Canadian historiography.⁵ Not only does he fill a gaping hole in understanding the war, he does it so masterfully that his book will remain, one

suspects, the starting point for all future Canadian studies on memory and war, will stimulate new interest in the topic, and will rank with the classic works of Paul Fussell, Modris Eksteins, Jay Winter, and Samuel Hynes.⁶ Vance argues that our understanding and conception of the First World War and the cataclysm of destruction it wrought have largely been shaped by the anti-war poets and writers that emerged during the war and gained popularity in the late 1920s. Through their angry narratives, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Wilfrid Owen, Erich Remarque, and Charles Yale Harrison created, in Vance's view, a distorted image of the war that failed to discern the nuances of collective memory and commemoration among the general public. An evaluation of the varied sources, and not just those created by the "highbrow" artists, but also the trench doggerel of the infantryman or the patriotic jingles produced on the home front, as well as photographs, war posters, art, ephemera, advertising, architectural and monument designs, sermons and stained glass windows, and rituals and tradition, reveal a different war, or at least a different memory of the war, than prior historians have offered. Employing a cultural analysis while reading these tools of memory, Vance argues that they ultimately gave meaning to the war and shaped the process of how it was to be remembered.

At the heart of Vance's book is the notion of the construction of memory. This is not a work about the Great War battles *per se*; in fact, it begins on the last day of the war, 11 November 1918. Rather, Vance focuses on how the war experience was later perceived, and the subsequent development of myths and meanings to help ease its deep scars. The "war to end all wars," did not, then, end with the war. There would also be a struggle over how the war was to be conceived: just or unjust, conflict or necessary struggle against evil, patriotic duty to the mother country or the forging of a new Canadian identity? Mirroring recent work by Jay Winters, Vance notes that, with almost every family in Canada losing a loved one, or seeing them crippled or maimed in the conflict, or else knowing someone close who did so suffer, it was simply unacceptable to conceptualize the war as a useless bloodbath. Too much had been sacrificed by the men at the front and those in the rear: for a father shot to death on the Somme, an uncle blown to bits by a high explosive shell at Passchendaele, or a son blinded by gas at Cambrai, it was simply not possible for most people to accept the nihilistic interpretation of the trench poets. The war had to have meaning, it had to be worth something; for it to be remembered as an empty slaughter meant that tens of thousands of Canadians died for nothing. As one veteran wrote after the war: "Mine's a harder life, for I didn't die / But I live to envy the happy dead. ..." How many more survivors – combatants and non-combatants – felt this guilt and emptiness, and how did they deal with such losses? For those attempting to cope, the high diction of sacrifice and valour still rang true, even if the grim reality of the Western Front had blasted such notions from most trench soldiers.

The war over memory, what was remembered, and what was forgotten, are corollaries to the central issue on the construction of memory. Vance's reinterpretation centres on the pragmatic creation of social memory by the common people, those whose views and attitudes up to now have largely been muted. While the famous writers' critical works have endured, for every *All Quiet on the Western Front* there were dozens of now-forgotten, then-popular screenplays like *Under the Black Eagle*, a melodrama that followed the adventures of a police dog on the Western Front. These patriotic and often simple works vastly overshadowed the anti-war novels in sheer numbers and popular appeal, and helped to shape the accepted view of the war. In fact, many of the most vitriolic "anti-war" novels or poems were condemned as coming from diseased minds and not representative of the general soldier's experience. After reading the most damning of such Canadian novels, *Generals Die In Bed*, written by displaced American Charles Yale Harrison – which described the mass-murder of the trenches while chateau-generals ordered unending fruitless attacks, and the killing of prisoners and the pillaging of Arras by drunken Canadian soldiers – Sir Archibald Macdonell, the 1st Canadian Division's commanding officer for the last half of the war, wrote to Sir Arthur Currie, his old Corps commander: "I hope I live long enough to have the opportunity of shoving my fist into that s- of a b- Harrison's tummy until his guts hang out his mouth!!!" Veterans (and not just generals) reacted so angrily to the book partly because it conflicted with their accepted memory of the war. They – and especially their bereaved or burdened family or friends – wanted the veterans to be remembered as holy crusaders, not as barbaric warriors or passive sufferers. The accepted image was eventually forged as one of holy warriors: fathers and sons dying for King and country while defending western civilization against the unholy actions of the "barbarious Hun." Their sacrifices would be remembered in religious and patriotic tones, not in the starker colours of drunken rioters or the senselessly slaughtered.

Based on a comprehensive list of sources, *Death So Noble* offers a fascinating narrative as well as a keen analysis into the contrasting struggles for memory. Accompanying the major themes are such intersecting topics as the Dominion Archivist Arthur Doughty's quest for memorial military artifacts; conflicts over postwar interpretations in school textbooks; the attempt by civilians, soldiers, and politicians to use the memory of the war to help change and unite the country; the symbolism, language, and structure of war memorials; and the importance of postwar battlefield pilgrimages. These and other factors combined to produce a new interpretation of the war. Employing an array of visual evidence, the University of British Columbia Press must also be complemented for the lavish photographs throughout the work. With his bibliographic essay, Vance has included a web page address for additional references, more detailed notes, and suggested readings (<http://www.ubcpres.ubc.ca>).

Vance performs a fine balancing act in his work, outlining the accepted ver-

sion of history and then responding with a sometimes controversial or revisionist interpretation. Insightful as he is, the evidence is occasionally forced in order to fashion his argument. One gets the feeling that Vance is stretching when he claims that the most important metaphor for the soldier was the estaminet – the cafe and rest areas in the rear staffed by French women ready to serve eggs and thin beer. At reunions after the war, the estaminet no doubt became a fond topic for wartime memories, but it was certainly not the central focal point of the war. That must surely remain the unimaginable squalor of trench warfare. Indeed, the Western Front remained the barrier between surviving veterans and those on the home front who could never fully understand the effects of the war on those who experienced it at the sharp end. The estaminet was symbolically important because, just as the annual veterans' reunions provided a chance to escape into the past with old friends, so too had the estaminets been a welcomed rest from the front during the war. It was a useful, even reassuring tool of memory, but that does not mean it was the essential tool. Just because soldiers did not want to stand in wet ditches when meeting their mates after the war, did not mean that the mud, rats, sleeplessness, and cold, the stench, gas, thundering shells, and death of the trenches did not continue to haunt their subconscious.

Equally important, Vance's reinterpretation on the act of commemoration – the need for citizens to cast aside the views of the war poets and embrace the prewar words, themes, and connotations of valour and sacrifice – is strongly argued and no doubt was the true majority opinion, but surely there were bitter parents, wives, and children who did blame the butchering generals or aloof politicians for the loss of their loved ones. There is little sense of their outrage in this work, perhaps because they kept their agony and grief silent – acts of bereavement that did not involve sharing with others in verse, or the building of monuments, or erecting stained-glass windows or memorial panels in countless churches, or joining formal pilgrimages and public dedications. "Memory" itself has more than its majoritarian, public face.

These points notwithstanding, Vance's work is extremely able and largely even-handed; perhaps more praiseworthy, it is a truly enjoyable read. This work will become a milestone in Canadian writing about the First World War, as important as Desmond Morton's social history of the Canadian soldier and Bill Rawling's analysis of the Canadian Corps' tactical evolution.⁷ With *Death So Noble*, Vance has staked out new territory in the growing field of social memory and military history, and added significantly to the larger field of memory historiography.

A less definitive but equally stimulating work is Geoff Dyer's *The Missing of the Somme*. Dyer also approaches the Great War through the act of memory and understanding, and although one can be critical of Dyer for failing to have read the latest academic works on memory or his "Fussellish" interpretation of the war, this small book is best approached as a philosophical essay. It is one

person's attempt to come to grips with a war that ended forty years before he was born. Dyer ponders if the war matters anymore, except to historians, archivists, veterans, or other keepers of memory. He begins the book by trying to understand the war through the faded photographs of his grandfather – in essence, to provide a context to that distant young man, now dead from old age, who has stared out at him for years from his worn albums.

Struggling with the Great War has led Dyer to grapple with the act of memory through such topics as the concept of history, the missing in action, the act of commemoration, the role of cenotaphs, and the writings of contemporaries. Dyer seems torn by his subject. He alternately is infatuated with the anti-war writers, from whom he has selected some particularly juicy quotations, and then is truly moved by his experience of visiting the sprawling cemeteries of France and Belgium. Dyer's work is an odyssey of understanding, a sensitive search through fading photographs, old texts, and weatherworn graveyards, while attempting to unravel the mysterious sway the war holds over him and others.

Although very different from *Death So Noble*, *The Missing of the Somme* provides insights into the act of memory beyond the constraints of a purely academic work. The ability to offer first-hand observation and inject emotive reactions helps to put a human face on the tragedy, and broaden the conception of memory. Although accounts of the massive cemeteries by contemporaries appear in Vance's work, Dyer provides his personal observations about memorials for the fallen – where in France alone, thirty thousand were raised between 1920 and 1950. The strength of *The Missing of the Somme* lies in its ability to challenge the reader to accept or question Dyer's own observations and feelings, and therefore reflect on his or her own.

Meditating about the Great War, Dyer places it in context through the writing, poetry, photographs, and memorials constructed to represent it, and then finishes with a personal battlefield and grave tour in order to ascertain if he has succeeded. To come back to the question of whether understanding the war has any relevance today, Dyer argues that it is necessary because the past continues to seep into the present and form not only our understanding but also our culture, society, and language. As the *Missing of the Somme* suggests, the clues concerning the war's meaning are not only to be found in a Wilfred Owen poem, the vast "silent cities" as Rudyard Kipling called the row upon row of graves, or the war art of an A.Y. Jackson – perhaps the importance of the Great War can be found in the act of questing itself.

Michael McKernan's *Here Is Their Spirit* is the fiftieth anniversary official history of the Australian War Memorial (AWM), a combined archives, museum, and national sanctuary that marks the sacrifice of Australian soldiers in this century's wars. Of the 60,000 Australian dead in the First World War, only one (the first commander killed at Gallipoli) was brought back to Australia for interment. Men were buried where they died or close by after burial parties went through the area. As with Canadian boys, in their home towns

there were no graves to visit every Sunday. In short, there was no closure. And due to the geographical isolation of the continent, most families would never be able to make the expensive trip to France, Belgium, or Gallipoli to see their loved one's final resting place. The eventual creation of the AWM serves as a monument to those who fought for their country and failed to return home. Envisioned as a building housing their living memory, it is also a national cenotaph, an archives and museum, and a place for pilgrimage, reflection, and consolation for those left behind.

McKernan is, as one would imagine, only interested here in the Australian story, but this book is useful to Canadians for the juxtaposition with our experience. Vance has gone a long way to filling a gap in our knowledge, but as he is largely focused on the role of memory for the First World War, there remain more questions than answers concerning how Canadians have dealt with the concept and memory of war over the centuries.

Canadians have always viewed themselves as the gentle country to the north of the aggressive Americans, believers in peace, order, and good government; Canadians are the peacekeepers of the world, not its policemen. Yet Canada is a country built on war, from the early aboriginal conflicts with French and British settlers and their militias and armies, to numerous British and French colonial wars that were fought in part in Canada; American invasions in 1775 and 1812, which solidified Upper and Lower Canada; the perceived need for a Confederation by British and Canadian officials in light of the American Civil War and Fenian threats from the south; the Boer War, which strengthened ties to Great Britain while planting seeds of nationalism; the First World War, which dragged Canada from colony to country; the Second World War, from which Canada emerged as a strong middle power; and finally, varied international peacekeeping operations, which for many Canadians created a strong sense of identity. For an allegedly unmilitary people, we have a country replete with military history. Yet as a nation and in the creation of its myths, Canadians have clearly chosen to portray themselves and their nation in a peace-like image. For a diverse country of many "limited identities," memory is contested terrain, with regional, ethnic, and gender rather than national heroes.

Canadians now have a difficult time conceptualizing and giving value to the First World War, because nobody can agree on what it means. French and English views over the war, crystallized by the conscription crisis, with accusations of shirking of duty and the emphasis on making sacrifices for Great Britain, not to mention the rounding up of immigrants and visible minorities as agitators and potential fifth columnists, have confused the image of the war as it has been reflected through time.⁸ As a result, military history has been relegated to the sidelines. While Australia, a nation similar to Canada in many ways, has created a house of memory consisting of a cenotaph, museum, archives, and an integrated academic community, Canada has a poorly-funded

War Museum, a steadily-dwindling historical section at the Department of National Defence and a still smaller military archival component within the National Archives of Canada. What nations choose to remember, and to forget, is not only a reflection of its citizens' collective aspirations, but also helps to form them. Therefore, the history of the Australian War Memorial is, in effect, an analysis of how one nation has attempted to deal with its past wars and its past dead. It provides a sounding board against which future Canadian historians and archivists may wish to examine the role of war and memory within the Canadian context.

Eight years after her son's death at Gallipoli, one mother's pain still rang through on ANZAC Day (25 April), when she printed in a small newspaper: "if only I could see your grave, I would die happy." That unresolved pain, and that of the thousands of others experiencing similar turmoil, was the impetus for the creation of the AWM. McKernan's book, itself another act of commemoration, is a good official history of the institution, documenting both the successes and failures, the decades-long struggle to bring the memorial to fruition, and the role of several important individuals who passionately kept the flame of memory burning even during unfavourable political times. The roles of Charles Bean, Arthur Bazley, and J.L. Treloar were integral to the institution's opening and success.

By comparison, Canadians had also hoped to create a similar "archival" war memorial not only to house the military artifacts collected by Arthur Doughty, but also the thousands of war diaries and the multitude of commissioned official war paintings created through Max Aitken's (later Lord Beaverbrook) Canadian War Records Office (CWRO). During the 1920s, however, such aspirations fizzled due to financial limitations and the ambivalent or divided attitude of the general public towards the war. The Australian dream was kept alive until it was once again acknowledged as important by the Australian people, and the institution finally opened in 1941, during a Second World War when Australia's sons were again fighting and dying on another continent.

Here Is Their Spirit is an institutional history and thus somewhat conventional in terms of writing and interpretation. There is very little analysis exploring aspects of new intellectual or cultural history, but perhaps it is the telling of the tale, the displaying of the accomplishments of the AWM and the honouring of the dead that are more important. Despite this, McKernan has not shied away from some of the dirtier aspects of the backroom scheming involved in the decades-long struggle to create the AWM. Yet the strength of the work is certainly the initial chapters dealing with the First World War.

Most interesting is the role of collecting archival records and material artifacts that would form the core of the AWM collection. A former journalist, Charles Bean (the Australian Official Historian and early driving force behind the AWM), was a combination of his Canadian equivalents, Arthur Doughty

and Max Aitken; yet unlike the well-established Canadians, Bean was in the trenches with the men and conceived of the AWM during the grim fighting on the Somme where the Aussie “diggers” were massacred at Pozieres in 1916. With the Australians suffering 4,000 more casualties than even the 24,000 Canadians, who fought over the same ground after the Australians were pulled out, Bean rightly described Pozieres as “some ghastly giant mincing machine.” Surviving the struggle, Bean decided afterwards that the story of the war had to be told and documented for future generations.

While collecting notes for a series of official histories, Bean mirrored the successful work of Aitken and the Canadian War Records Office by attempting to document the total experience of the Australian war effort. McKernan describes in detail how Bean and his assistants actually went about acquiring records (textual, photographs, art, and war trophies) and how they raised money after the war to house their collection and make it accessible for the public. Bean and Treloar realized that Australian control of their own military records ultimately meant control over their own history. The recorded evidence of their actions, out of which the Australians (along with the Canadians) quickly fashioned a reputation as fierce fighters – the “stormtroopers” of the British Expeditionary Force – could have been lost if the British, as initially proposed, had stored the records in England. First viewed as an almost insignificant cog in the military behemoth, the Australian War Records Section allowed the Australians to oversee and direct their history, something that grew in importance (as did their nation). The records and trophies remained heavily contested after the war, with Bean and his small band often referring to them in almost religious terms. These sacred trusts were more than just paper and steel; they were the tangible reflections of the deeds and sacrifices of the Australian soldier.

Despite certain obvious similarities, the parallel Canadian equivalent remains only half-told,⁹ and one wonders what hardships and controversies lay behind the Canadian experience; the fact that it took until 1962 for a small, single-volume, official history of the Canadian Expeditionary Force to be published is but one example. The complete Canadian account remains locked within the records.

For Bean, the archival records were the lifeblood which would keep the Australian war memory alive:

I have often thought that many a youngster when he was hit out there on the Passchendaele heights ... during the last few minutes of his life, when all his prospects and illusions as to the future had suddenly faded out and he knew that the end had come – must have thought to himself: “Well at least they’ll remember me in Australia.”

Although this was a romanticized view of death and memory, it remained an important *raison d’être* for the AWM. The battle over the record and con-

trol of the memory of the war raged on for another twenty-five years. In the end, the AWM was constructed to honour those men who would never return home. But it was also for the survivors and subsequent generations attempting to understand Australian history. As a consequence, the Australian soldiers' sacrifice has remained a central focus in Australia and in their house of memory, and has formed a critical element of their national myth and identity. The question remains, what place do the Canadian fallen have?

As these three works illustrate, social memory and the construction of "reality" are distorted mirrors of the past. The struggle against historical amnesia, which threatens to blot out the rich, diverse Canadian heritage, must be engaged with vigour, for the past makes sense of our lives and offers a basis for understanding the future. Conceptions of the past and of memory are worth re-examining, as individuals and as a society. Relevant to archivists, and more difficult to fathom, we must analyze the multitude of tools and methodologies which result in such contrasting views of history.

These three books have shed some light on acts of memory and commemoration, forcing a re-evaluation of the records by presenting them in a new context and enabling archivists to sharpen the image of the society we are documenting. The act of memory, for us and our forbears, remains ambiguous and malleable, never static and always in conflict. For archivists attempting to capture the best record, the most succinct snapshot of society, memory remains, for those reasons, a difficult but necessary concept to wrestle with.

By their very existence, their own memorial significance, these three books also help us to understand the Great War. War memorials are a way to remember all of the fallen by not singling out any one individual. The tombs for an anonymous, symbolic "unknown soldier" are an obvious example. One person's life made little impact to the overall war effort, and each now remains only a name on a monument. But as these works have shown, those engraved names were once living fathers, husbands and sons, and their loss forced whole societies to learn how to remember anew.

As one who has walked among those vast European graveyards and read the moving cenotaphs erected in scores of villages and cities, I find it eerie how the dead continue to haunt the living. As these works illustrate, though, it must also be said that the living continue to haunt the dead.

Notes

- 1 See the review of Winters, Tim Cook, "Haig's Command" *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 193-97.
- 2 Martin Gilbert, *The First World War* (New York, 1994), p. 541.
- 3 G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919* (Ottawa, 1964), p. 535.
- 4 See Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), for a thorough examination of these themes.

- 5 Jonathan Vance, *Objects of Concern* (Vancouver, 1994).
- 6 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975); Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and Birth of the Modern Age* (Toronto, 1989); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War in English Culture* (New York, 1987).
- 7 Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up* (Toronto, 1993); Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps* (Toronto, 1992).
- 8 See Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver, 1997) for a recent discussion on Canadian myths.
- 9 There is no official history of the National Archives of Canada, no official history of the Canadian War Museum, and no official history of the Army Historical Section/Directorate of History. The story is partially covered in Maria Tippett's *Art in the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War* (Toronto, 1984).