

# The People's Centenary? Public History, Remembering and Forgetting in Britain's First World War Centenary

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Lucy Noakes and James Wallis

**ABSTRACT:** Between 2014 and 2019, Great Britain and Northern Ireland undertook the largest public history project ever seen there. To mark the centenary of the First World War (1914–18) thousands of public arts projects, community histories, and acts of commemoration and remembrance took place across the country. This article explores a range of public arts projects, commemorative events, and community heritage projects to see what these widespread and diverse public histories can tell us about the cultural memory of the First World War in early twenty-first century Britain.

**KEY WORDS:** First World War centenary, Britain, cultural memory, public arts, commemoration, community histories

## Introduction: Remembering the First World War in Twenty-First Century Britain

Between 2014 and 2019, Britain engaged in the largest public history project ever seen in the country. The centenary of the First World War was marked by over 107 public arts projects in 220 locations, with multiple national acts of commemoration and remembrance taking place in cities and places of worship and at First World War cemeteries and battlefields overseas. Thousands of individual community history projects explored the impact of the war at a local level, alongside hundreds of hours of specially commissioned television and radio programming and a £6.3 million (\$8.3 million) battlefield tours program for secondary-age schoolchildren.

Unsurprisingly, the reach of these public histories was huge. 14-18NOW, the government-funded national initiative which commissioned many of the major public arts projects, judged that 35 million people had engaged with their program.<sup>1</sup> Research showed that 82 percent of British adults had watched, heard, or read material on the war produced by the BBC between 2014 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> Having supported the majority of community history projects, the National Lottery Heritage

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1 14-18NOW, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/>.

2 Jane Ellison, "World War One on the BBC," *Cultural Trends*, 27 no. 2 (2018): 125–30, here 129.

Fund (NLHF), estimated that “millions of people of all ages and backgrounds” had participated by 2018.<sup>3</sup> By this same year 8,500 students and teachers from 2,000 secondary schools had taken part in the government-funded “First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme.”<sup>4</sup> To use the historian Raphael Samuel’s definition of public history as “the work . . . of a thousand different hands,” this was a truly democratic exercise. It involved vast numbers of people across different communities, regions, and identities who not only researched and produced histories, but participated in, and thus helped to shape, large-scale acts of commemoration and remembrance.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the multitude of public history projects that constituted Britain’s First World War centenary saw the conflict’s position as a touchstone for contemporary British reflections on the twentieth century not only reaffirmed but strengthened.

In 2017 the authors were funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) as part of a project team that undertook a study of the centenary of the First World War in Britain.<sup>6</sup> Our project, *Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War*, investigated two key aspects of the centenary. First, it examined the interaction between academic “experts” and public researchers during the centenary, especially through the work and outcomes of five First World War Public Engagement Centres funded by the AHRC to enable the development of networks of support between academic researchers and community history projects between 2014 and 2019.<sup>7</sup> Second, we explored wider cultural memories of the First World War during its centenary, considering both how existing ideas shaped centenary projects, and how these projects might impact upon the war’s cultural memory in the future.<sup>8</sup> The study used a range of different research strategies to investigate these fields: an online survey (126 respondents); seven focus groups with adults who participated in First World War public history projects and eight with teachers

3 Karen Brookfield, “The People’s Centenary: A Perspective from the Heritage Lottery Fund,” *Cultural Trends*, 27, no. 2 (2018): 119–24, here 120.

4 First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme, <https://www.centenarybattlefieldtours.org/>.

5 Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory Volume One: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), 8.

6 The AHRC (the British state funding body for academic research in the arts and humanities) funded *Reflections on the Centenary: Learning and Legacies for the Future* between May 2017 and July 2021.

7 The five First World War Engagement Centres were funded by the AHRC to facilitate collaboration between academic and community researchers working on the history of the First World War between 2014 and 2019. For further details see <https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/worldwaroneanditslegacy/worldwaroneengagementcentres/>. To view our report on co-production during the centenary, please see: <https://reflections1418.exeter.ac.uk/>.

8 AHRC World War One Engagement Centres, <https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/worldwaroneanditslegacy/worldwaroneengagementcentres/>; “Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War: Learning and Legacies for the Future,” <http://reflections1418.exeter.ac.uk/>. For more detailed insight into the work done by one of the Engagement Centres, see Larissa Allwork, “‘Sedimented Histories’ and ‘Embodied Legacies’: Creating an Evaluative Framework for Understanding Public Engagement with the First World War,” *Research For All* 4, no. 1 (2020): 66–86.

and schoolchildren; two reflective workshops, one held with members of the public and one with heritage professionals; forty interviews with project representatives and community history research groups; one Mass Observation Directive on the centenary in November 2018; visits to numerous public history events such as talks, exhibitions, and performances, and participant observation conducted at a number of remembrance events.<sup>9</sup> As a result, the commemorative activities that we have studied range widely over numerous fields. Their forms include films, theatrical and musical performances, exhibitions, books and booklets, talks, artworks, websites, discussion, seminars, and conferences, and topics include Belgian refugees, gardening and food production in wartime, Zeppelin raids, Indian soldiers and women's work in munitions.<sup>10</sup> What seems clear from our initial research findings is that these public histories were both highly participatory and diverse, bringing together large numbers of people to research and communicate the experience and legacies of the First World War.

In this article we consider why, given the wide-ranging and inclusive nature of these ambitious public history projects, the cultural memory of the First World War in Britain in the immediate aftermath of the centenary remains stubbornly focused on what Helen McCartney has termed “the image of the First World War soldier as a victim,” with the war itself retaining its status as “a byword for futility in Britain.”<sup>11</sup> Given how this image has shaped family stories, public representations, and acts of remembrance of the conflict, we argue that the affective power of the “soldier as victim,” embedded in British cultural memory since at least the 1960s, worked effectively to mobilize the involvement of so many in the making of public history during the centenary.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, at the same time, this has acted as a powerful block to the integration of the wider and more diverse histories that were produced within the dominant cultural memory of the conflict, which included projects

9 Further details of the project can be found at <http://reflections1418.exeter.ac.uk/>. The Mass Observation Project is a qualitative social survey organization, which recruits a volunteer panel of authors to write long-form responses to a range of Directives issued each year. We commissioned the Autumn 2018 Directive, asking the panel to both provide a “Day Diary” for November 11, 2018 (the centenary of the First World War Armistice), and also to reflect more widely on their experiences of the centenary, particularly their understandings of the First World War one hundred years on. For more details about Mass Observation see <http://www.massobs.org.uk/about/mass-observation-project>.

10 For a sense of the breadth of projects created within local communities during the centenary, see <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/hub/107879/project>.

11 Helen B. McCartney, “The First World War Soldier and His Contemporary Image in Britain,” *International Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2014): 219–315, here 219.

12 For an overview of the impact of the 1960s on cultural memory of the First World War, see Daniel Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon, 2005). This is part of a rich historiography examining the memory and legacies of the war. Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975), and Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1993), both trace the impact of the war on artistic and literary cultures, while Adrian Gregory's *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919–1946* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), and Jay Winter's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural Memory* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), trace the impact of the war on, respectively, British and European society.

focusing on the experiences of colonial soldiers, of refugees, and of women.<sup>13</sup> Over the course of the centenary, historical interest in exploring lesser-known aspects of the First World War helped to raise the profile around some of these themes, not least through David Olusoga's 2014 book and BBC television series, *The World's War*, along with investigative ventures such as "Belgian Refugees in Rhyl."<sup>14</sup> Karen Brookfield of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the primary funder of community heritage projects during the centenary, commented in 2018 that one of the key aims of the funding body was to "encourage a broad range of perspectives and interpretations of the FWW and its impacts."<sup>15</sup> Of the £94.2 million (about \$124 million) the HLF awarded to projects by 2018, 37 percent looked at the contribution and experiences of people from colonies and Dominions. Flagship HLF-funded projects including "Breaking the Myths: First World War and Africa," led by the charity Diversity House, and the "Away from the Western Front" initiative both sought to address existing exclusions by highlighting the experiences of non-European countries and overlooked aspects of the conflict.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, after the end of the centenary commemorations, a "Legacies of the First World War Festival" held in Birmingham over two days in early 2019 considered the broader theme of diversity in the conflict.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, such projects and activities appear to have made limited impact upon the wider cultural memory of the war as a conflict (primarily) of white men in the trenches of the Western Front.<sup>18</sup> We begin by outlining this dominant cultural memory of the conflict in Britain.

#### Cultural Memory: We Will Remember Them

In 2012 the British Prime Minister David Cameron made a speech at London's Imperial War Museum (IWM), announcing government funding to mark the centenary of the First World War. Explaining "why this matters so much," Cameron emphasized three factors: "the sheer scale of the sacrifice," the war's geo-political

<sup>13</sup> For more examples of NLHF-funded projects which explored these histories, see <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/hub/107879/project>. Key examples include "Empire Faith and War: the Sikhs and WWI"; "No Game for Girls: A History of Women's Football in WWI"; and "Lest We Forget: First World War Refugees Then and Now."

<sup>14</sup> David Olusoga, *The World's War – Forgotten Soldiers of Empire* (London: Head of Zeus, 2014); "Belgian Refugees in Rhyl" website, <https://refugeesinrhyl.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> Brookfield, "The People's Centenary," 122.

<sup>16</sup> For more information about these respective projects, see *Diversity House's* Summary Report on the "Breaking the Myths" project, <https://www.diversityhouse.org.uk/portfolio-items/breaking-the-myths-first-world-war-africa/#single/o>, and also <https://awayfromthewesternfront.org/>.

<sup>17</sup> This event was organized by the "Voices of War and Peace," First World War Engagement Centre at the University of Birmingham. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jt3wxssX6sE>.

<sup>18</sup> Brookfield, "The People's Centenary," 119 and 122. Similarly, a UK Government-commissioned report published in 2019 endorsed that "Diversity should be included as an explicit criterion in any future commemorations," in light of the fact that the overall approach to disseminating less well-known histories "could have been more systematic and better embedded in all strands of activity." "Lessons from the First World War Centenary," *Department of Culture, Media & Sport*, July 10, 2019, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/2001/2001.pdf>, 14.

legacies, and its impact on families. The overarching aims of the centenary were similarly threefold: to be a shared, national period of commemoration, to ensure remembrance of the dead, and to involve young people, so that “the sacrifice and service of a hundred years ago is still remembered in a hundred years’ time.”<sup>19</sup> Seeking to describe the emotional legacies of the war, he claimed that: “There is something about the First World War that makes it a fundamental part of our national consciousness. Put simply, this matters not just in our heads but in our hearts; it has a very strong emotional connection. I feel it very deeply.”<sup>20</sup> In positioning sacrifice at the heart of the centenary by emphasizing the ongoing emotional impact of the war in modern Britain, Cameron’s speech both articulated a dominant cultural memory and set the tone for the forthcoming centenary.

The emotional importance attributed by Cameron lay less in its impact on subsequent geo-political history than in the “scale of the sacrifice.” The dominant memory of the First World War, with, in the words of historian Dan Todman, its images of:

Men stuck, for four years, in the most appalling conditions, living in trenches scraped into the ground, surrounded by mud, rats and decaying corpses . . . thrown forward in ill-conceived assaults that achieved nothing.<sup>21</sup>

has endured in Britain since the early 1960s. Cultural memory, of course, is never a simple retelling of the past; it is shaped by the concerns, interests, and values of the present. In 1960s Britain antiwar and antiestablishment sentiments coalesced around opposition to the ongoing Vietnam War and fears of nuclear war, combined with the rise of social history and a subsequent interest in “history from below,” to popularize the belief that the war was a futile waste of lives, with the soldier in the trenches betrayed by unimaginative and uncaring military commanders and politicians.<sup>22</sup> The 1960s witnessed the fiftieth anniversary of the conflict, marked by the BBC’s landmark 1964 documentary series *The Great War*, which foregrounded interviews with veterans of the trenches, as well as the increasing popularity of Wilfred Owen’s war poems, nine of which were set to music by Benjamin Britten in his *War Requiem* from 1962. *Oh! What A Lovely War*, a satirical musical created by Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop at London’s Stratford East theater in 1963, and subsequently filmed by Richard Attenborough in 1969, further encapsulated and popularized the belief that the First World War resulted in a generation lost to the ambitions and inadequacies of the ruling politicians and military leaders.

<sup>19</sup> David Cameron, “Speech at Imperial War Museum on First World War Centenary Plans,” <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-at-imperial-war-museum-on-first-world-war-centenary-plans>, October 11, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Cameron, “Speech at Imperial War Museum.”

<sup>21</sup> Todman, *The Great War*, xiii.

<sup>22</sup> On this see Todman, *The Great War*; Emma Hanna, “A Small Screen Alternative to Stone and Bronze: The *Great War* Series and British Television,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 1, (2007), 89–111.

This memory of the war as tragedy has proved to be remarkably resilient; in the decades preceding the centenary popular representations including the BBC television comedy *Blackadder Goes Forth*, the novels *Birdsong* and *The Regeneration Trilogy*, and the novel, film, and stage play *War Horse* all served to reinforce the position of the tragic Western Front soldier at its heart.<sup>23</sup> Appearing across a wide range of cultural sites, including television, radio, film, and novels, and in the national calendar's annual marking of Remembrance Sunday, in family stories, and in school curricula, the cultural memory of the war as tragedy provided a powerful framework through which people experienced its centenary. In retrospect, the concerns of the *No Glory in War* campaign, launched in 2014 to oppose "jingo style celebrations" and insist that the war "was a military disaster and a human catastrophe" seem unnecessary.<sup>24</sup> At the centenary's outset this view of the war as tragedy predominated in Britain, much to the dismay of some public commentators and politicians, who had hoped to mobilize a very different memory of the First World War—one that could act to both support contemporary military interventions, as well as help to build a more inclusive sense of national identity at a time of internal political divisions and instability.<sup>25</sup>

At the outset of the centenary, the cultural memory of the First World War in Britain was remarkably stable. Despite attempts by revisionist historians to provide a more complex and nuanced history and also by some politicians to mobilize the war as a symbol of pride and patriotism, the image of the "First World War soldier as victim" still dominated.<sup>26</sup> Crucial to illuminating how this cultural memory operated so centrally over the course of the centenary was the resonance of the conflict's impact for family memories, stories, and histories. As historian Bart Ziino has noted, family history is "characterized by private storytelling among a series of family actors, by the individual particulars of a mass experience and by the

23 *Blackadder Goes Forth* (BBC, 1989); Sebastian Faulks, *Birdsong* (London: Hutchinson, 1993); Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (London: Viking, 1991); Michael Morpurgo, *War Horse* (United Kingdom: Kaye & Ward, 1982). *War Horse* subsequently became a long-running National Theatre production (2007–) and a Hollywood film (Spielberg, 2011).

24 Jan Woolf, "No Glory—A Campaign," *Open Democracy*, August 1, 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/no-glory-campaign/>.

25 In October 2014 British troops were ending their military role in Afghanistan, and the majority of British forces had been withdrawn from Iraq in 2011. In 2013 British MPs rejected the government's plan for military intervention in Syria. In 2015 Scotland held a referendum on independence and in 2016 the United Kingdom voted narrowly to leave the European Union. During the Centenary there were three Prime Ministers, three leaders of the Opposition and two General Elections (2017 and 2019).

26 See Daniel Todman's appeal for an understanding of the war that embraced its nuances and complexities; Todman, "Did They Really Die For Us?," in *Do Mention The War: Will 1914 Matter in 2014?*, ed. Jo Tanner (British Future, 2013), 16–20. For a political attempt to "reclaim" the war as victory and source of contemporary pride, see Michael Gove, "Why Does the Left Insist on Belittling True British Heroes," *Daily Mail* (January 2, 2014), <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2532923/Michael-Gove-blasts-Blackadder-myths-First-World-War-spread-television-sit-coms-left-wing-academics.html>.





The Armistice Sunday remembrance service held at the Cenotaph in Whitehall, London, on November 11, 2018. (Reproduced courtesy of the authors)

resonance of ancestor's experiences in one's own life."<sup>27</sup> Thus the resonance of this cultural memory lies not only in the fact that it feels recognizable, but also that it is rooted in personal and private spaces. In turn, public representations of the past act to shape the kinds of family stories being recounted and retold. This "complex entanglement" of "private" and "public" memories acts to shape both individual and shared imaginings of the past.<sup>28</sup> The "resonance" of ancestral experiences was duly heightened during the centenary, often appearing to underpin involvement in the visible public histories of the First World War. For example, family history formed the basis of the IWM-led online database *Lives of the First World War*, a crowd-sourced initiative to represent "the life stories of more than eight million men and women who made a contribution" to the war effort across the British empire. The act of submitting individual stories for upload onto the website assured a sense of digital conservation, in addition to prioritizing family and community-focused stories on a broader public stage. Meanwhile, the BBC's landmark 2014 series, *Britain's Great War*, chose to recount the history of the war years largely "from below," by focusing on individual narratives and family stories

<sup>27</sup> Bart Ziino, "A Lasting Gift to His Descendants': Family Memory and the Great War in Australia," *History and Memory* 2, no. 2 (2010), 125–46, here 126.

<sup>28</sup> T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, "The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration: Contexts, Structures and Dynamics," in *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, ed. Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper (London: Routledge, 2000), 14.

already endorsed and championed by the popular BBC series *Who Do You Think You Are?*<sup>29</sup>

Women in particular cited family history as a reason for becoming involved in a centenary project when asked about this in our 2017–18 survey—indeed it was the third most-often cited motivating factor, after “remembrance” and “research.” One respondent described how she had written a novel “based on the experiences of four real characters, including my Grandfather,” whereas another described the commemoration of her grandfather by “his granddaughter and two great grandchildren . . . there will be a written account of what we did in his honor for his great, great grandchildren to read.” The novelist went on to explain how “using my family archive material has changed 2D history into 3D reality for me. The names of the battles are real places to me now, where real people my Grandfather cared about died.”<sup>30</sup> The emotional power of family history can serve to link past, present, and future generations through intimate bonds of experience, and also can drive participation in public histories, as individuals seek a voice on the public stage and a wider audience for their family’s stories.

The importance of family histories of the war and their legacies within households were further demonstrated in a survey commissioned for Mass Observation by the five AHRC First World War Engagement Centres in 2014. Responses showed how the “strikingly stable” set of beliefs about the experience and meanings of the First World War in Britain that were circulating at the outset of its centenary were supported by and reflected in family memories, as well as public acts of commemoration.<sup>31</sup> One man described the impact on his mother of her cousin’s death during the war, recalling that, as a child he “didn’t understand why my mother always shed tears on Remembrance Day.” The family had published a book of her cousin’s poems in 2000, placing their own story in the public sphere, and the respondent recorded having a photograph of his relative and the book of poems on hand during the two-minute silence on Remembrance Day.<sup>32</sup> A ninety-year-old woman remembered “My father’s sadness. Next door neighbor’s shrine on their dresser,” while a seventy-five-year-old woman explained how after her uncle was listed as “missing” at Passchendaele in 1917, her grandmother “for years, cherished the hope that he might return.”<sup>33</sup> The emotional power of the war duly enabled some respondents to identify with those who had experienced it in a form of

29 Imperial War Museum, *Lives of the First World War*, <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.iwm.org.uk/>; *Britain’s Great War* (BBC, 2014).

30 *Reflections on the Centenary* Online Survey, 2017–18.

31 Michael Roper and Rachel Duffett, “Family Legacies in the Centenary: Motives for First World War Commemoration Among British and German Descendants,” *History and Memory* 30, no. 1 (2018), 76–115, here 78.

32 Mass Observation Project, *First World War Directive* (November 2014), Respondent number C3603.

33 Mass Observation, *First World War* (2014), Respondents E174, H2637.



“fictive kinship” with the dead.<sup>34</sup> One woman explained that although there were no stories of the war in her family:

I do like to remember a soldier—William Worsfield—who I discovered lived in my house prior to being killed . . . I imagine how his parents must have felt when they received the news . . . I bought one of the Tower of London poppies in remembrance of him.<sup>35</sup>

This affective, personal investment in the often intimate and tragic histories of the First World War was to shape the kinds of recounted stories during the centenary, driving engagement with a wider public commemoration of the war.

The very prevalence of such stories, however, meant that other aspects of the war and its legacies were less visible, and correspondingly less well-known.<sup>36</sup> According to a *British Future* poll of 1,955 British adults in 2013, although 81 percent knew that Germany was one of Britain’s enemies in the First World War, only 44 percent knew that Indian troops fought in the war, and only 7 percent were aware that women first won the right to vote in 1918.<sup>37</sup> More than half of the four hundred people asked by *British Future* what they most associated with the war replied trenches, death, and loss of life. Emphasis on these elements of the war was further mirrored in the 2014 Mass Observation Directive, where respondents listed mud, death, and futility most often as words that came to mind when thinking of the war.<sup>38</sup> Key acts of commemoration organized at a state and national level in Britain strengthened these associations and helped to frame the war at its centenary.

#### National Remembrance and Commemoration of the First World War: Lest We Forget

The centrality of sacrifice, loss, and the death of combatants in the public memory of the war at its centenary shaped all of the major national public artworks created to mark this significant event. Indeed, as we will demonstrate, commemoration was at the heart of many centenary activities and impulses, including education, already highlighted as one of the key aims of the centenary by David Cameron in 2012. What was to become the best-known of these was Paul Cummins and Tom Piper’s *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, an installation of 888,264 red ceramic poppies embedded across the walls and in the moat of the Tower of London. Each poppy

34 “Fictive Kinship” is the term originally developed by Jay Winter to describe the sense of affinity between the bereaved in the postwar era. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 30.

35 Mass Observation, *First World War* (2014), Respondent F5576.

36 There is not the space here to discuss the debates among academic historians regarding the perceived narrowness of British memories of the First World War. For an overview of historical research on the war just before its centenary see Heather Jones, “Historiographical Review: As the Centenary Approaches, The Regeneration of First World War Historiography,” *The Historical Review*, 56, no. 3 (2013) 857–78.

37 British Future, *Do Mention the War*, 4.

38 Mass Observation First World War Directive, November 2014.

represented one British military life lost during the war. *Blood Swept Lands* proved extraordinarily popular, attracting over five million visitors while in situ at the Historic Royal Palaces' site, and then many more in the following years when parts of the installation toured around the UK.<sup>39</sup> The individual elements of the piece had a participatory function, through the fact that, on a weekly basis, members of the public could nominate names of Commonwealth soldiers to be read aloud at sunset. One hundred and eighty were chosen for each daily ceremony, enacting a process of being able to personalize and individualize the otherwise anonymous but highly symbolic poppies.

The importance of family stories would also manifest here in the form of individual soldier dedications left by visitors. Many were to family members, such as Harry Emberson "who perished before his daughter . . . was born" and "Great Uncle Arthur W Berry . . . Parents Emma and Thomas. Wife Jane. Father of four children."<sup>40</sup> In their survey of visitors to the installation, Kidd and Sayner found that sacrifice was one of the key reasons given when respondents were asked why the centenary was important.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the concept of sacrifice was used to suggest links between the soldiers of the First World War and the contemporary British military.<sup>42</sup> At the height of the installation's popularity in the late summer of 2014, the volunteer-installed individual poppies had already been sold to members of the public for £20.00 each, with the money raised shared between six service charities.<sup>43</sup> In its uniformity and uncritical usage of the poppy of remembrance, a familiar symbol of wartime loss in Britain since the 1920s, it set a somber tone right at the outset of the centenary period.<sup>44</sup>

Although there was a degree of material permanence to the poppies installation, due to the fact that the individual flowers became highly coveted symbolic possessions, the two other major creative arts responses to the centenary instead emphasized the ephemeral nature of remembrance, and the impermanence of human life in wartime. Loss, rather than the more ideologically weighted idea of sacrifice, was central to Jeremy Deller's 2016 artwork *We're Here Because We're Here*. Created to mark the centenary of the first day of the Battle of the Somme on July 1, 1916, *We're Here* saw hundreds of young men in First World War army uniforms congregate on the streets, at beaches, in shopping centers and in the public transport network of

39 Jenny Kidd and Joanne Sayner, "Unthinking Remembrance? *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* and the Significance of Centenaries," *Cultural Trends* (2018), 1. Elements of the iconic installation are due to be exhibited at IWM North, Manchester in 2021.

40 Poppy Dedications, <https://poppydedications.hrp.org.uk/>.

41 Kidd and Sayner, "Unthinking Remembrance," 5.

42 For expansion on remembrance practices for more recent conflicts, see Anthony King, "The Afghan War and 'Postmodern' Memory: Commemoration and the Dead of Helmand," *British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 1 (2010), 1–25.

43 "Tower of London Remembers," *Historic Royal Palaces*, <https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/tower-of-london-remembers/#gs.genowm>.

44 The annual "poppy appeal" has been held by the Royal British Legion each year since 1921. Poppies sold raise funds for military veterans, while individuals wearing poppies, and poppy wreaths at war memorials, are all familiar sights around Remembrance Sunday in November each year.

Britain. Silent except for occasional refrains of “we’re here because we’re here”—a tune originally sung by soldiers on their way to the trenches—the volunteers responded to questions from passersby by handing out cards that detailed the name, age, and regiment of the soldier they represented who was killed on the battle’s first day. Members of the public were invited to upload their photos and comments to a social media hashtag on the card, meaning that what could otherwise have been a form of recontactment became a shared exercise in commemoration and remembrance.<sup>45</sup> Central to these responses was remembrance: “never forget” and “we will never forget” appeared in numerous tweets alongside multiple comments on the emotional power of the piece, such as describing it as “the most amazing and poignant memorial of war I have ever seen” and “such a powerful and moving tribute.”<sup>46</sup> Appearing fleetingly in the midst of everyday life, the men formed a living memorial to the dead that underlined their links with the present and the physicality of loss, death, and absence.

The final major artwork of the centenary, Danny Boyle’s *Pages of the Sea*, took place on the one-hundredth anniversary of Armistice Day 1918 (figure 2). This multisite installation likewise focused on the impact of war upon the individual, with volunteers working to create portraits of some of the war’s well-known and lesser-known dead on beaches around the UK, which would eventually be washed away by the incoming tide. Again, this proved a popular piece of participatory remembrance, shown by the numbers involved and the volume of responses shared on social media that demonstrated the continued emotional power of the figure of the tragic soldier of the war.<sup>47</sup> Drawing a link between past and present, one participant in the east of England described the experience as “very emotional,” continuing “we still have wars, so there is a lesson for us all.” In Wales one woman explained how a recent personal loss had driven her desire to participate:

It’s a poignant day for me . . . I chose to do it because a young friend recently passed away . . . so many young people that have gone away to war or died in a war, so I just thought, yeah, I want to be a part of this.<sup>48</sup>

Others clearly understood *Pages of the Sea* within the dominant framework of British remembrance; one Twitter user simply quoted the final lines of Wilfred Owen’s poem *Dulce et Decorum Est* and another replied with “The old Lie,” the

<sup>45</sup> Ellison, “World War One on the BBC,” 126.

<sup>46</sup> @Rob-Coastal; @domisatwit; @AmyinLondon; @DJack\_journo. All tweeted using the WeareHere hashtag on Twitter, July 1, 2016. For more analysis of this artwork, see Kristin O’Donnell, “We’re Here Because We’re Here”: Participatory Art and the Mobilisation of First World War Memory in Post-Brexit Britain,” in *After the Armistice: Empire, Endgame and Aftermath*, ed. Michael Walsh and Andrekos Varnava (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>47</sup> For further discussion on this artwork, see Emma Hanna, “*Pages of the Sea*: A UK Case Study,” in *Experiencing 11 November 2018: Commemoration and the First World War Centenary*, ed. Shanti Sumartojo (London: Routledge, 2020), 123–35.

<sup>48</sup> 14-18NOW, *Pages of the Sea*, <https://www.pagesofthesea.org.uk/gallery/page/4/>.

preceding line from the poem.<sup>49</sup> The disappearance of these portraits beneath the waves echoed the disappearance of many from Britain during the war.<sup>50</sup>



The “Pages of the Sea” installation at Folkestone Beach, November 11, 2018. (Reproduced courtesy of Emma Hanna and Helen Brooks)

Notably, none of these three major artistic cultural responses to the centenary provided any historical context for the work of remembering that audiences were being invited to undertake. The same could indeed be said about the “Lights Out” campaign orchestrated by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. Between ten and eleven o’clock on the night of August 4, 2014, households were encouraged to leave a single light on as a tribute to the wartime words spoken by Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, who had said on the outbreak of war that “the lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.”<sup>51</sup> An

49 @songstory; @ichythisaur, Twitter, November 11, 2020.

50 *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red* was commissioned by Historic Royal Palaces, while *We’re Here Because We’re Here* and *Pages of the Sea* were commissioned by 14-18NOW. Historic Royal Palaces commissioned another installation at the Tower of London titled *Beyond the Deepening Shadow* in 2018.

51 Grey’s words were quoted at the top of the 14-18NOW webpage in their encouragement for people to turn off all but one light in order to take part “in a shared moment of reflection,” supported by light-based public artworks, each designed by one of four leading international artists. 14-18NOW worked with the Department of Digital, Culture Media and Sport and the Heritage Lottery Fund to organize and advertise the event, though its overall justification seemed more for the collectively

estimated 16.7 million people took part in this collective act. These ventures all relied, successfully, on their audiences interpreting the war as a tragedy that could be best understood through a focus on the personal cost of the conflict—a mantra that extended into a wider series of centenary-based events that foregrounded the loss and sacrifice of British combatants as the conflict’s major legacy. For example, to mark Britain’s entry to the war in August 1914, members of the royal family and the prime minister attended a memorial service at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) Saint Symphorien cemetery in Mons, Belgium, while a service of Commonwealth commemoration took place at Glasgow Cathedral, alongside a candlelit vigil in Westminster Abbey. By marking the outbreak of war in this manner, with acts of remembrance for combatants killed during the conflict, the tone for the centenary was set; commemoration, rather than education, would continue to shape state-level anniversary events.

This focus continued over the next few years of commemorations. The centenary of the 1915 Gallipoli landings was marked through ceremonies of remembrance at Helles, Turkey. In May 2016, services at St. Magnus Cathedral in Orkney and on-board HMS Duncan commemorated the naval Battle of Jutland.<sup>52</sup> In London, the first day of the Battle of the Somme was observed by a ceremony of remembrance and an overnight vigil at the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing. The 1917 Third Battle of Ypres, or Battle of Passchendaele, saw British royalty and the prime minister attend a commemorative service at the CWGC Tyne Cot cemetery in July 2017, while Amiens Cathedral hosted a remembrance ceremony the following year to commemorate the Battle of Amiens. The war’s end in November 1918 was marked with the traditional ceremony at the Cenotaph, a war memorial on Whitehall (figure 1)—this included “A Nation’s Thank You: The People’s Procession” of ten thousand people marching past the memorial, accompanied by church bells ringing. It was followed later in the day by a ceremonial event at Westminster Abbey, attended by royalty and the British and German heads of state.<sup>53</sup> Honoring sacrifice and marking the loss of predominantly male combatants, primarily on the Western Front, were accordingly at the heart of national and state level centenary events.

These occasions were marked in other ways as well, especially via educational and cultural activities. These, however, did not carry the same cultural weight or have same reach as the recurrent commemorative ceremonies. Some of the more prominent examples of other ways of marking the centennial were the two days of commemorative activities that took place in Manchester’s Heaton Park for the Somme anniversary, culminating in a concert of British and German wartime music performed by the Halle Orchestra. The Passchendaele commemorations

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shared experience than its fairly obscure historical grounding. <https://www.i4i8now.org.uk/lights-out/what-is-lights-out/>.

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.jutland1916.com/>.

<sup>53</sup> Details of all these events, and others, can be found at [https://www.gov.uk/government/latest?topical\\_events%5B%D=first-world-war-centenary](https://www.gov.uk/government/latest?topical_events%5B%D=first-world-war-centenary).



also included an evening concert held in the Market Square of Ypres, which featured readings, poetry, and performances. In June 2018, a mass procession coordinated by the organization 14–18 NOW across Belfast, Edinburgh, Cardiff, and London marked one hundred years since the “Representation of the People Act,” when the first British women won the right to vote.<sup>54</sup>

Most initiatives organized at the level of the nation-state during the centenary situated the remembrance of the dead as a core part of their activities. A national education program was created to enable schoolchildren to learn about the First World War, with a Battlefield Tours Program as its centerpiece. Visits to the battlefields, and later cemeteries, have been a central means by which British people have engaged with the First World War since 1918.<sup>55</sup> Approximately 8,500 secondary school children (aged eleven to eighteen) and their teachers took part in tours of key sites, cemeteries, and memorials, as well as museums in Belgium and France over the centenary period. The program highlighted the impact of the war upon local regions, through visits to historic sites that had a particular resonance for their local area, such as the Sheffield Memorial Park for Yorkshire Pal’s Battalions in Serre, France. Upon returning, the pupils were expected to “engage with 110 people in the local community,” a figure chosen so that eventually 880,000 people would be reached, “a number symbolically equivalent to those British and Commonwealth soldiers who lost their lives in the First World War.”<sup>56</sup>

These activities sat within a broader framework of remembrance, commemorative practice, and learning in schools that foregrounded the experience and memory of the British soldier on the Western Front. Although there were some times educators hoped to use these structures to encourage critical thinking on war and its legacies, visits to the First World War cemeteries primarily had a powerful emotional impact for many students.<sup>57</sup> For the vast majority of the 681 students who responded to a post-tour survey, the purpose of visiting the battlefields was “to remember the dead.”<sup>58</sup> Positioned as witnesses, whose duty it was to ensure that future generations understood the “service and sacrifice” of those who fought in the battlefields and lay in the cemeteries, it is no wonder that for many, an uncritical “remembering” took precedence over a more critical history of the conflict.

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-44427627>.

<sup>55</sup> David Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919–1939* (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme, 2020. <https://www.centenarybattlefieldtours.org/legacy>. For more on this program, see Catriona Pennell, “Taught to Remember? British Youth and First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours,” *Cultural Trends* 27, no. 2 (2018): 83–98.

<sup>57</sup> On remembrance and education in British schools, see Annie Haight, Susannah Wright, David Aldridge, and Patrick Alexander, “Remembrance Day Practices in Schools: Meaning Making in Social Memory during the First World War centenary,” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* (November 2019), online.

<sup>58</sup> Pennell, “Taught to remember?,” 93.

Furthermore, research conducted just before the centenary verified that all exam boards used by English schools offered the history of the war as an optional element of their Modern British History curriculum, and that 96 percent covered trench warfare, 94 percent the origins of the war, and 85 percent war on the Western Front. As research conducted by Catriona Pennell has demonstrated, relatively few covered other aspects of the war, such as women's labor, the Chinese Labor Corps, or the experiences of colonial soldiers and civilians.<sup>59</sup> Traditional practices of remembrance typically framed the teaching of First World War history in schools, with teachers using the names of those listed on local war memorials as a starting point for the study of the war. Conversely, between 80–92 percent of schools that responded to surveys in 2013 and 2016 marked formal structures of remembrance in the form of the two-minute silence or held special remembrance assemblies.<sup>60</sup>

Although the desire to commemorate dominated the centenary, some activities and programming prioritized education and learning over commemoration. The BBC recruited historians to research and share the “stories of people who did not feature very strongly in the kind of programming made fifty years ago.”<sup>61</sup> Programs such as *Forgotten Soldiers of Empire* (2014) and *Women of World War One* (2014) conveyed these experiences and stories to a wider audience. The BBC Radio 4 series *Home Front*, which ran throughout the centenary, told the story of the war from a determinedly civilian viewpoint, covering episodes that had little representation elsewhere, such as the bombing of Folkestone, the Spanish flu, and women's work in munitions factories. Public talks, conferences, and workshops invited the public to explore diverse histories such as popular music in the war, the impact of food shortages on cooking and diets, and wartime farming practices. Even activities that focused on remembrance rather than education sometimes worked to incorporate the representation of individuals or experiences usually marginal to the cultural memory of the war: *We're Here Because We're Here* included non-white soldiers, and Danny Boyle's *Pages of the Sea* memorialized Walter Tull, the first Black officer in the British Army, Scottish Women's Hospitals founder Dr. Elsie Inglis, and Dorothy Mary Watson, killed in an explosion in the munitions factory where she worked.<sup>62</sup> All of these, however, took place within a wider framework of commemoration that emphasized, again and again, the sacrifice and suffering of those fighting on the Western Front. But whereas this particular cultural memory

59 Catriona Pennell, “Learning Lessons From War? Inclusions and Exclusions in Teaching First World War History in English Secondary Schools,” *History and Memory* 28, no. 1 (2016): 43.

60 Pennell, “Learning Lessons from War,” 47; Haight et al., “Remembrance Day Practices in Schools: Meaning-Making in Social Memory During the First World War Centenary,” 7.

61 Ellison, “World War One on the BBC,” 127. The approach of working formally with historians to research and develop programming on the local histories of the war manifested as the 2014 *World War One at Home* series. The Arts and Humanities Research Council funded thirty historians to work with the BBC as regional academic experts. AHRC, <https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/worldwaroneanditslegacy/world-war-one-at-home/>.

62 14-18NOW *Pages of the Sea*, <https://www.pagesofthesea.org.uk/beach-portraits/>.

continued to shape the ways that the war was perceived at its centenary, it undoubtedly acted as an entry point for those keen to explore wider histories and more varied experiences. In the next section, we examine some community public history projects as sites where more diverse histories became visible.

### Remembering the First World War in the Community: Then and Now

The emotional power of the centenary, which both drew upon and strengthened the centrality of the tragic, sacrificial Western Front soldier to British cultural memory, served as a powerful driver for participation in centenary public history projects.<sup>63</sup> By 2018, over 7.1 million people had been involved in projects supported by the NLHF *First World War: Then and Now* scheme, the primary funder of community history projects during the centenary.<sup>64</sup> Participants came from all over the country: from the Western Isles of Scotland to inner London to Cornwall in the Southwest. The majority of projects focused on an element of local history, exploring the impact of the war on their neighborhood, town, or region. Of these, around 60 percent focused on a local war memorial, often researching the lives of those named there, while food, agriculture, medicine, healthcare, women's role in war, and its impact on children all proved popular themes, as did dissent and opposition to war.<sup>65</sup> Projects further benefitted from assistance proffered by the First World War Centenary Partnership, an IWM-led network funded by Arts Council England and Culture 24, which supported thousands of national and international organizations between 2014 and 2018.<sup>66</sup>

Participants in research for "Reflections" often revealed a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between history and memory, and between past and present, than studies that focus solely on the range of commemorative activities produced during the centenary might suggest. Many were critical of what they perceived as a focus on remembrance, rather than history, during the centenary. One survey respondent criticized projects that were "repetitive, same-y and focus on the usual stories of (e.g.) slaughter on the Somme," while another disparaged events that "recycle the whole Blackadder mythology" (referring to the British sitcom).<sup>67</sup> Others were well aware of the ways that the present shapes our understanding of the past. Forty one percent of survey respondents believed that remembrance of past wars was shaped by the present, most commonly through the

63 For relevant discussion regarding the emotional experience of commemoration, see Shanti Sumartojo, "Reframing Commemoration at the End of the First World War Centenary—New Approaches and Case Studies," in Sumartojo, *Experiencing* 11 November 2018, 1–16.

64 Brookfield, "The People's Centenary," 121. Brookfield observed that "it remains a challenge for projects to engage non-white people as volunteers: only 7% have been involved in comparison with 13% in the population."

65 Brookfield, "The People's Centenary," 122.

66 For more details see *First World War Centenary Partnership*, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/partnerships/first-world-war-centenary/centenary-partnership>.

67 Reflections on the Centenary Online Survey, November 2017–July 2018.

growth of those supporting a “right wing patriotism” and a sense that “the symbolism of the Great War (poppy, soldier silhouettes) has been appropriated for their purposes.”<sup>68</sup> A member of one focus group reasoned that the centenary was a missed opportunity for wider social inclusion and education, commenting that “there were a lot of black people involved . . . they should be integrated as part of British history . . . Britain is not just white . . . So it’s not just about the war. It’s about our society.”<sup>69</sup>

The nuanced understanding of the relationship between history and memory displayed by respondents did not, however, mean that the emotional appeal of the centenary was lessened. When asked to outline how they became involved in projects, participants frequently cited interest in the local war memorial as a springboard to recruit people into public history projects, but equally noted perceived limitations of a focus on wartime loss. One focus group contributor in Inverness, northern Scotland, explained that the decision to clean up the village war memorial and make it more visible had people “coming from all over” to help and then to view the memorial.<sup>70</sup> In Leeds, West Yorkshire, a contributor reflected on their sense of connectedness to the men named on the local war memorial:

We have a Grade II listed World War One memorial . . . and all we had was 48 initials and surnames. They weren’t people to us until we started out on this project, when they became real.<sup>71</sup>

One participant in a 2017 focus group in Kent in southern England explained how the place of war remembrance in British public life had spurred their interest in the war as:

I do a lot of work with the British Legion in schools, particularly around remembrance time. And in order to do that effectively I researched all the names of the men on the wall.<sup>72</sup>

As was the case in classrooms, interest in knowing more about lists of those killed within local communities provided an emotionally engaging gateway for broaching the large and complex topic of the First World War.<sup>73</sup>

Such an approach could shape wider public histories as well. As several participants went on to discuss, the act of researching names on a war memorial could both spark the sense of connectedness with individuals who lived a century ago, much as Deller’s *We’re Here Because We’re Here* set out to do in 2016, and also could

68 Reflections on the Centenary Online Survey, November 2017–July 2018.

69 Reflections on the Centenary Focus Group, University of Leeds, Leeds, May 2018.

70 Reflections on the Centenary Focus Group, Highland Archive Centre, Inverness, April 2018.

71 Reflections Focus Group, Leeds, May 2018. The public body *Historic England* lists English buildings that should be protected because of their historic status. A Grade II listing refers to a building of special interest. See Historic England website <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/what-is-designation/listed-buildings/>.

72 Reflections on the Centenary Focus Group, University of Kent, Canterbury, October 2017.

73 Pennell, “Learning Lessons from War?,” 45.

provide an entry point for further research. The participant from Kent cited above explained:

From that, that led me to other things, like the Belgian refugees . . . that led me to school books, and how the school—and, the implications for the children of raising money for these refugee children and knitting socks for the troops on the front line.<sup>74</sup>

For another contributor in Inverness, however, the centenary's focus on the dead and the legacies of loss was frustrating.

We're having these pieces in the newspaper, or whatever, about men who were killed . . . There's a story about women up here I think. But there's also a story about the people who came back, like my Grandfather, how were they treated? . . . I do think that we need to balance the commemoration side with some kind of reality fact checking.<sup>75</sup>

The artistic director of *Age Exchange*, which produced three public history projects during the centenary (with one discussed in more detail below), explained how their first project had used family artifacts of the war to spark reminiscence work amongst older participants. This in turn had led to “thinking about remembrance, commemoration, nostalgia, truth,” which coalesced in the form of subsequent projects which aimed to build links with German descendants and work with present-day veterans on war-related trauma.<sup>76</sup> Therefore in some instances, the cultural memory of the war as a tragedy in local and familial legacies both enabled further research and led to critical reflection on the ways that this memory framed and shaped understandings of the war. These entry points for engaging with wider histories brings us to three case studies, each of which illuminate the ways that the cultural memory of the conflict as tragedy provided a stimulus for further research encounters.

### Engaging with Empathy: Community History Case Studies

*The Boys on the Plaque*, a project supported by the NLHF between 2015 and 2017 in Brighton, on the south coast of England, researched the stories of the men whose names were listed on a recently uncovered war memorial in the Fabrica Gallery, a modern art gallery housed in a former church.<sup>77</sup> About 140 volunteers worked with the gallery, the local library, and *Strike a Light*, a community arts and heritage company, to research the names on the memorial. A series of “conversation cafes,”

<sup>74</sup> Reflections Focus Group, University of Kent, Canterbury, October 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Reflections Focus Group, Inverness, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Reflections on the Centenary Focus Group, University of Cardiff, May 2019.

<sup>77</sup> As with many war memorials, this one lists everyone associated with the church that served during the war, not just the names of the dead.



walking tours, and graffiti workshops took place, alongside the volunteer-led production of postcards, a book, and a website recording the stories of the listed men. In describing the lives of some of those on the plaque, volunteer blogposts revealed the emotional links that individuals began to feel with these men, some of whom had died over a century beforehand. One post explained that “genealogical resources (never) really told me anything about who Gerald was.” It wasn’t until the researcher visited a local archive and found a book of the soldier’s poetry that “I felt I gained some insight into that,” and chose to share some of the poems on the website.<sup>78</sup> The life and death of Albert Stanhope, a professional soldier killed in 1915 in the Second Battle of Ypres, was recounted online in detail, perhaps in an attempt to recover something of the life of one of many thousands whose bodies were lost and have no known grave.<sup>79</sup> Another volunteer discovered that the father of the man she was researching had lived in her house in the nineteenth century, while the man himself had lived in her partner’s previous home.<sup>80</sup> As Ludmilla Jordanova has argued, the past’s strong emotional appeal acts to motivate audiences to become participants in public histories. When there is a perceived linkage between the researcher and their subject, “emotional bonds” can be nurtured, strengthening the contemporary researcher’s interest in the past.<sup>81</sup>

Many of the volunteers who worked on *The Boys on the Plaque* went on to participate in another centenary public history project in the city also led by *Strike a Light*. Again funded by the NLHF, *The Orange Lilies* explored the “forgotten history” of the Battle of Boar’s Head—a battle that just preceded, and was subsequently overshadowed by, the first day of the Battle of the Somme—in which many men from the city and surrounding area were killed and injured.<sup>82</sup> Between 2016 and 2017 *The Orange Lilies* combined historical research into the lives of some of those lost, with commemorative educational and creative activities “memorializing soldiers fighting during this epic part of the Great War . . . the ordinary, forgotten heroes.”<sup>83</sup> So while the initial entry point to this project was a desire to commemorate the dead, culminating in a successful campaign for a civic memorial to the Battle of Boar’s Head, it equally allowed scope for more varied histories of the war to be incorporated into its remit, as participants in *The Orange Lilies* went on to research the wider impact of the war on the area, including the employment of

78 “Remembering those that have fallen: Gerald H.V. Burghope,” *The Boys on the Plaque*, <https://boysontheplaque.wordpress.com/2015/11/11/remembering-those-that-have-fallen-gerald-h-v-burghope/>.

79 “Remembering Albert Stanhope,” *The Boys on the Plaque*, <https://boysontheplaque.wordpress.com/2017/11/14/remembering-sir-john-french/>.

80 “Catch Up and a Curious link,” *The Boys on the Plaque*, <https://boysontheplaque.wordpress.com/2016/07/19/catch-up-and-a-curious-link/>.

81 Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Hodder & Arnold, 2006), 186.

82 The Battle of Boar’s Head was planned as a diversionary battle just preceding the attack on German lines on the Somme. A German trench was briefly captured, the South Down Regiment lost 366 men.

83 *The Orange Lilies*, <https://theorangelilies.wordpress.com/>.



The Orange Lilies. Brighton and Hove in World War One Community History Event, Brighton Jubilee Library, June 2017. (Reproduced with kind permission from Strike a Light, Arts and Heritage Community Interest Company)

female munitions workers in the city. Public memory of the Somme Battle, with its focus on the casualties of the first day, shaped volunteer interest and the original project idea—as the organizer reflected in 2018, “everybody knows about the Somme, and the devastation brought because of that.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, the connection to

84 Interview, *Strike a Light Community Arts and Heritage Company*, November 2018.

the cultural memory of the war as a tragedy, here fostered through local geography, enabled the project to open up new areas of research and wider war-time histories.

The power of a local geographical immediacy with the past also underpinned the *Six Streets Derby* project in the English Midlands, where an imagined sense of community and shared identity spanning the decades post-conflict underpinned the project (see figure 4). *Six Streets* is a volunteer-led community organization that administers a range of different services and activities within one of the city's neighborhoods, including befriending, a food bank, and an arts trail (befriending refers to the initiation and support of social relationships by organizations, with the aim of reducing social isolation and loneliness). Volunteers had already researched and shared the history of the area when, in 2014, they successfully applied for two years of NLHF funding to research the impact of the First World War on the local area. The coordinating volunteers all had particular areas of interest; these included conscientious objectors, women's work, zeppelin raids, and the presence of Belgian refugees in the town. They therefore went about creating a wide-ranging public history project, which employed a variety of different tools to engage local people and to develop wider knowledge of the war's impact. The project included a performance of *The Second Minute* (a play by the Nottingham Playhouse Theatre based on letters home from a local soldier), history talks, and trips to national museums. Although the project explored a wider history of the war, remembrance and commemoration of the dead remained central to its premise, especially in the case of the project work involving young people. One volunteer worked with a youth group around the theme of remembrance, encouraging an emotional connection with the war's dead through the artistic practice of drawing life-size outlines of bodies and then writing "their experiences of what war meant."<sup>85</sup> The centrality of young people to the government's original aims (as delineated in David Cameron's 2012 speech), ensured that they formed a key part of many community projects—but again, an emphasis on "emotional connection" with soldiers as a means of engagement ran the risk of "smoothing over the complexities of First World War history," replacing critical engagement with an imagined connection.<sup>86</sup>

Motivated by both the research process and by sharing their findings with the wider community, the volunteers created a pop-up exhibition, *Lest We Forget*, which posted information panels outside the houses where their subjects had lived, to explain the ways that the conflict had shaped their lives. Stories included those of twelve women who worked as Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses, a man who had served at home with the Royal Engineers Inland Waterways Division, and female members of Red Cross Working Parties, who worked from home to knit, sew, and prepare hospital supplies. However, although the exhibition uncovered a wealth of information both about the area during the war and the multiple ways that the war shaped lives on the home front, it was the battlefield, and especially men who were

85 Interview, *Six Streets Derby Volunteers*, February 2019.

86 Pennell, "Taught to remember," 91.



A member of the public studies a pop-up display boards from the “Six Streets Derby” First World War centenary project. (Reproduced with kind permission from “Six Streets Derby.”)

injured and killed, that were at its heart. The volunteers worked to not only identify these men, but to trace the ongoing impact of their loss on their families. Ellen Draper, whose husband Robert was killed in 1917, lost the house that went with his chauffeur’s job soon after his death. Her children continued to live with her until 1936. The widowed mother of John Hodgson, who died of influenza just after the 1918 Armistice, died herself, aged just fifty-two, seven years later.<sup>87</sup> These stories proved very popular amongst the local community, providing a shared sense of connection with past residents. One householder wrote “[W]e are thrilled to have the story of someone who actually lived in the house that we have just moved to.” Someone else reflected that: “It is so good to see the people near the actual house where someone lived, to think of them stepping out of that door to go to war . . . it does make it feel so real.”<sup>88</sup> The result meant this act of “engaging with empathy” helped to strengthen a sense of a historical community, of links between the people who lived in the neighborhood a century ago and their twenty-first century counterparts. This sense of understanding, so central to many public history projects during the centenary, works effectively to strengthen community ties in the

87 “Lest We Forget,” Six Streets Derby, <https://www.sixstreetsderby.org/local-history/lest-we-forget>.

88 “Arts and History Trail,” Six Streets Derby, <https://www.sixstreetsderby.org/local-history/hlf-project>.



present, but also risks collapsing the historical specificity of the war experience into an ahistorical set of beliefs about the universality of human suffering.<sup>89</sup>

One of the very few community-history projects to explore the legacies of the war for Germany (and indeed, a rare example of a project that crossed national borders) was *Meeting in No Man's Land*, organized by Age Exchange, a charity that specializes in reminiscence arts. Running from 2016–17, and also funded by the NLHF, *Meeting in No Man's Land* brought twenty-four descendants of British and German soldiers together to share information of not only their ancestors' wartime experiences, but the legacies of the war within their families. Once again, the combatant soldier was positioned at the heart of the project from its outset. Material outputs included a documentary film of the conversations and the digitization of over seven hundred family artifacts from the war years, but a key outcome came to be a sense of "reconciliation" which, although not an original aim of the project "became for all the descendants a hugely important reason for being together and sharing the stories of their parents and grandparents." Project resources were used to develop work with secondary schools that enabled "moving" artistic responses to the conflict from students, subsequently utilized in the creation of a smartphone app used by children touring First World War battlefields.<sup>90</sup> The project hence worked actively to develop an empathetic relationship with those who experienced the war and its legacies in Britain and Germany, thereby building links between Britain and Germany and communicating the shared nature of war and its legacies across national borders.

A sense of camaraderie between participants imbued the project: as one stated, "the war from one hundred years ago still lives within each of us."<sup>91</sup> Historians working with one of the First World War Engagement Centres were funded to observe the meetings, noting that the project "had a particular emotional power and generated reactions in its observers that felt different from those typically experienced in historical study."<sup>92</sup> The raw potency of the shared stories to provoke emotional reactions among historians of the war is notable, demonstrating the connections that many "feel" with those that experienced the war, but in this instance, further strengthened by the sharing of family stories and family legacies within an international group. The narrative produced by the project understood the war in terms of shared experience, of shared legacies and, as the historian-observers argued, drew participants into "a fictive family."<sup>93</sup> This process of developing a common identity, based on the experience and impact of war, may have been further shaped by the timing of the meeting—shortly before the British

89 On this see Ashplant, et al., "The Politics of War and Commemoration," 3–16.

90 "Meeting in No Man's Land," Age Exchange, <https://www.age-exchange.org.uk/what-we-do/arts-projects/current-projects/meeting-in-no-mans-land/>.

91 *Meeting in No Man's Land* film (Age Exchange: 2016). The film can be viewed at the Age Exchange website: <https://www.age-exchange.org.uk/what-we-do/arts-projects/current-projects/meeting-in-no-mans-land/>.

92 Duffett and Roper, "Making Histories," 14.

93 Duffett and Roper, "Making Histories," 24.



referendum on European Union membership. Participants were described as being “pretty European minded,” a position that could encourage a focus on experiences and identities shared across national borders.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, the mutual nature of this reminiscence work, while highlighting and communicating the common elements that can shape the experience and multiple legacies of total war, at the same time risked obscuring the differences in the subsequent histories of both nations. Memory of the First World War remains less evident in Germany, overshadowed by the subsequent trauma of the Nazi period and Second World War—meaning that the German participants articulated their memories in a very different national memory framework to that of the British participants. The stories circulated in the group were overwhelmingly of the horror of the battlefield, and the ongoing impact of this experience on survivors and their descendants—enabling the emotional power of accounts to bring participants together in an act of reconciliation and solidarity, but at the same time, adding weight to the centrality of the tragic Western Front soldier to British narratives of the conflict.

Each of the community history projects outlined above successfully worked to illuminate varied aspects of the war’s history, not least in championing stories that are less visible on the public stage of memory in Britain. The projects led by *Strike a Light* recovered stories of women’s wartime labor and the local impact of war, *Six Streets Derby* produced research on the experiences of women and men on the home front, demonstrating the multiple ways that the war was experienced, and *Meeting in No Man’s Land* gave voice to the all-too-often absent experiences and legacies of the war in Germany. However, despite their success in recovering and communicating lesser-known aspects of the war, all three placed the combatant soldier at their heart. Each was thereby shaped by, and inevitably contributed to, the dominant cultural memory of the tragedy of war within Britain.

### Conclusion: Back to the Trenches

In the early months of 2020 Britain returned, once again, to the trenches of the Western Front. Told through the eyes of two young soldiers, audiences for Sam Mendes’s film *1917* were invited to empathize with the horrors facing men on this most iconic of battlefields. *1917* was hugely successful, both at the box office, where it took in £26.3 million (\$34.3 million) in its first three weeks. It was also successful with critics, described by the influential film critic Mark Kermode as showing “the pitiable plight of a young generation, old or lost before their time.”<sup>95</sup> Almost every trope of British cultural memory of the war—mud, bodies, rats,

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Rachel Duffett and Michael Roper, May 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Ben Dalton, “*1917* tops UK Box Office again, *David Copperfield* opens third,” *Screen Daily*, January 27, 2020, <https://www.screendaily.com/news/1917-tops-uk-box-office-again-david-copperfield-opens-third/5146555.article>; Mark Kermode, “*1917* Review: Sam Mendes’s Unblinking Vision of the Hell of War,” *The Observer*, January 12, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jan/12/1917-review-sam-mendes-first-world-war-wwi-unblinking-vision-one-shot>.

sacrifice, violence, and cynicism—was present. The sense of the war as a time when young men's lives were sacrificed on the battlefields of Europe additionally shaped both narrative and characterization of the film.

*1917* followed closely on the successful mold of Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018). This film used digitized and remastered documentary film footage of soldiers created during the war itself, accompanied by oral history recordings held by IWM, as a way of reemphasizing both the sacrifice of the combatants for a new generation of viewers, and also to persuade this audience of an affinity with them, effectively bridging the gaps of both time and black and white film. Both films invited viewers to situate themselves "in the shoes" of the soldiers, to "experience" the trenches and their attendant horrors, and by so doing, foster empathy with the suffering of those who truly did experience the trenches of the First World War.

Released in the immediate aftermath of the centenary so widely commemorated by many across Britain, it should not be surprising that both films gained large, and largely uncritical, audiences. But what is notable is that neither of these extremely popular representations of the war reflected the new histories and the previously marginalized voices found in the many community history projects that had been uncovered during the centenary. As the historian Susan R. Grayzel commented of Jackson's film:

Little . . . would help you to understand that this was a global conflict that reshaped local, national, regional and world politics . . . Almost nothing would help you to comprehend that this was a modern, total war in which the unprecedented mobilization of men in arms was matched by one of civilians of all ages, classes, ethnicities, genders, and races.<sup>96</sup>

Despite the richly diverse stories revealed by local public history projects, the two most popular and arguably influential representations of the war at its end could, in narrative terms, have just as easily been made at any point in the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries.

The centenary of the First World War in Britain was marked by wide-ranging public histories created by multiple researchers and enabling manifold voices to tell a range of diverse and often previously marginalized stories. However, taking place within a framework dominated by acts of remembrance, and shaped by a deeply embedded, enduring cultural memory of the war focused on the tragic figure of the trench soldier, these histories have had little purchase on popular understandings of the conflict. As this article has shown, efforts to widen knowledge of the conflict amongst participants and audiences in local public history projects have had some impact through prompting new conversations and recording (among others) the stories of women, of Belgian refugees, of colonial soldiers, and of German families.

<sup>96</sup> Susan R. Grayzel, "AHR Roundtable: Who Gets to be in the War Story? Absences and Silences in *They Shall Not Grow Old*," *American Historical Review* 124, no. 5 (2019): 1782–88, here 1782–83.

But it seems that when it comes to how these might co-exist with longstanding remembrance practices, the experiences of these groups still await their blockbuster films, their commemoration through major acts of public art, or remembrance at state level ceremonies.

What is more, the enduring emotional appeal of the First World War for contemporary Britain proved to be the key factor in limiting the reach of public histories that told these different stories. This affective power shaped not only the large-scale commemorative and public arts projects that punctuated the centenary. It highlighted which events were worthy of mass recognition and participation, aided by family histories and stories often acting as a spur for involvement. The collective strength of these enduring understandings did function to engage people in the making of public histories. And as we have shown over the course of this article, an emotional investment in the war's history, shaped by both cultural memory and the place of war remembrance in national culture, often underpinned community history projects even as many moved beyond them. Both driven and limited by the emotional power of the war's memory, many of the stories uncovered by public histories at the war's centenary remain marginal to its memory in early twenty-first century Britain.

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*Lucy Noakes* is Professor of Modern History at the University of Essex, UK, where she holds the Rab Butler Chair of History. She led the AHRC funded *Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War: Learning and Legacies for the Future* research project between 2017 and 2021. Her work focuses on the experience and memory of warfare in twentieth-century Britain and her most recent monograph is *Dying for the Nation: Death, Grief and Bereavement in Second World War Britain* (Manchester University Press: 2020).

*James Wallis* currently works in the Commemorations Team at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. He is also an Associate for Imperial War Museum's Institute for the Public Understanding of War and Conflict. Between 2017 to 2021, James acted as Research Fellow for the AHRC-funded *Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War: Learning and Legacies for the Future* project at the University of Essex. Supported by additional work as a freelance researcher, his interests cover First World War heritage and commemorative practice.

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