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Some Corner Forever: The Imperial War Graves Commission and the Meaning of the Great War

Abstract

This paper argues that sites administered by the Imperial War Graves Commission played a significant part in the British public's mourning and understanding of the meaning of the Great War. Pilgrimages, due to their popularity, size, and accessibility, allowed the countless bereaved families to grieve the losses that they suffered during the war. Their visits to cemeteries were powerful experiences because of the painstaking work done by the IWGC to bury identified bodies, honor unidentified remains, and enshrine names for those whose remains could not be identified. The IWGC was a bureaucratic organization that overcame the cultural challenge posed by the question of how to memorialize hundreds of thousands of war dead. IWGC Director Fabian Ware oversaw the commission and was instrumental in creating a bond amongst the dead that redefined them to be an extension of the empire, in effect creating a constituency where the tombstones and memorialized names became grasped as a single entity. The IWGC relied on planned cemeteries and accompanying funerary, centered around the complex web of meaning that families, the nation, and the Empire assigned to the Great War. More than 100 years since the creation of the first IWGC cemeteries, the cemeteries remain a powerful reminder of the cost and meaning of the Great War.

Keywords

WW1, Death, Mourning, Historical Tourism, Meaning

Some Corner Forever: The Imperial War Graves Commission and the Meaning of the Great War By Cameron Sauers

From a trench on the Western front, John William Streets grappled with the seeming inevitability of his impending death on the field of battle. In his poem “A Soldier’s Cemetery,” Streets wrote “There is a yet unmarked and unknown shrine, / A broken plot, a soldier’s cemetery/ ... When war shall cease this lonely unknown spot/ Of many a pilgrimage will be the end.”¹ Streets was killed at the battle of the Somme and is presumed to be buried at Euston Road cemetery.² Streets’ poem foreshadowed the widespread post-war pilgrimages to the cemeteries and graves of the Great War. The death of hundreds of thousands of men created a logistical and cultural problem for Britain that was solved through the creation of the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), a government organization tasked with ensuring that each soldier killed while serving Britain would be properly buried or memorialized if their remains could not be identified. To meet the challenge of burying more than one million men, the IWGC established more than 15,000 cemeteries. The newly created cemeteries would, as Street

¹ John William Streets, “A Soldier’s Cemetery,” *The Great War*, <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/poems/john-william-streets-soldiers-cemetery.htm>.

² “Search Result” Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/58400/EUSTON%20ROAD%20CEMETERY,%20COLIN%20AMPS>.

predicted, become popular destinations for pilgrims searching for meaning in the mechanized death of the war. Pilgrimages provided an opportunity to visit the graves of those who had paid the ultimate sacrifice. Through funerary architecture, monumentation and symbolic designs, the IWGC renegotiated mourning practices for Britons and Imperial subjects, subsequently redefining the way that war dead were mourned.

This paper argues that sites administered by the IWGC played a significant part in the British public's mourning and understanding of the meaning of the Great War. Pilgrimages, due to their popularity, size, and accessibility, allowed countless bereaved families to grieve the losses that they suffered during the war. Their visits to cemeteries were powerful experiences because of the painstaking work done by the IWGC to bury identified bodies, honor unidentified remains, and enshrine names for those whose remains could not be identified. The IWGC was a bureaucratic organization that overcame the cultural challenge posed by the question of how to memorialize hundreds of thousands of war dead. IWGC Director Fabian Ware oversaw the commission and was instrumental in creating a bond amongst the dead that redefined them as an extension of the British Empire. Ware created a constituency of the dead where the tombstones and memorialized names became grasped as a single entity.³ The

³ Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2015), 463.

IWGC relied on carefully planned cemeteries and accompanying funerary architecture, centered around the complex web of meaning that families, the nation, and the Empire assigned to the Great War. After more than 100 years since their creation, IWGC cemeteries remain a powerful reminder of the cost and meaning of the Great War.

Pilgrimages to the battlefields of the Great War began even as the conflict raged on. The specific use of language of pilgrimage originated from prominent voices related to the IWGC, including poet Rudyard Kipling, who played a noteworthy role in the Commission. Most notably, King George V, himself a visitor to the cemeteries created during the 1920s, referred to his journey as a pilgrimage. This paper uses the term according to Maurice Walbach's definition on which Brad West elaborated in his study of Gallipoli tourism: pilgrimage is

the act of visiting a distant site that is held sacred by the traveler's own society. This allows us to identify a diversity of pilgrimage traditions within both religious and civic spheres. International civil religious pilgrimage, for example, involves visiting historical sites abroad that are sacred to the traveler's nation.⁴

Pilgrimages are “mass, public phenomena performed in large groups as well as being a private communion between the pilgrim

⁴ Brad West, "Enchanting Pasts: The Role of International Civil Religious Pilgrimage in Reimagining National Collective Memory," *Sociological Theory* 26, no. 3 (2008): 259.

with the person they had lost. Visitors to these sites today remain pilgrims in search of meaning.”⁵ Middle class and wealthy Britons in the 19th century made pilgrimages to the graves of great figures, with Percy Shelley finding John Keats’ grave in Rome to have powerful natural views.⁶ The pilgrimages of the 1920s were not simply leisurely vacations. Rather, they were ordinary Britons searching for the graves of loved ones and confirmation that their sacrifice had not been in vain. The IWGC had an obligation to Britons to validate the mass death of the war. The pilgrimages were thought to be a temporary development, an addition to the stages of mourning as even famous poet Siegfried Sassoon dreamt of a day when visitors would be strictly tourists, not pilgrims, but as this paper will demonstrate later, modern day visitors remain pilgrims in search of meaning.⁷

In the interwar period, anyone could have been a pilgrim. More than 700,000 British soldiers were killed during the First World War and most of them left behind loved ones who mourned. Historian Jay Winter indicates that each married British soldier left not only a widow, but an average of two children, as well as any

⁵ Joanna Scutts, “Battlefield Cemeteries, Pilgrimage, and Literature after the First World War: The Burial of the Dead,” *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 52, no.4 (Fall 2009): 400.

⁶ Andrew Keating, “The Empire of the Dead: British Burial Abroad and the Formation of National Identity” (Phd Dissertation, University of California, Berkley, 2011), 23.

⁷John Stephens, “The Ghosts of Menin Gate’: Art, Architecture and Commemoration,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 44, no. 1 (2009): 8.

number of parents, siblings, and other relatives.⁸ The decision of the IWGC to not repatriate remains meant that family members were unable to directly take part in the burying and memorializing of the deceased. Instead, these tasks were performed by IWGC. The inability to memorialize the dead in the traditional ways necessitated a new way of finding closure, causing some families to enshrine objects and designate local places as memorials. Photographs, uniforms, and letters all provided a vital function in mourning, but there was no substitute for visiting the grave of the departed.⁹ For many, pilgrimage was the way to alleviate grief.¹⁰ Charitable organizations organized trips at little or no cost for those who could not afford them. The largest trip organized by the British Legion delivered 10,000 mourners to France in August 1928, while smaller ones happened constantly. Similarly, the St. Barnabas Society's sole purpose was to make pilgrimages possible, including financing a large group of women to attend the unveiling of the Menin Gate in July 1927. Even some veterans returned to the places where they had once fought. Many were traumatized by the experience of seeing battlefields and graves of comrades,

⁸ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 46.

⁹ Aidan Barlow, "Mixing Memory and Desire: British and German War Memorials after 1918," in *the Silent Morning: Culture and Memory after the Armistice*, ed. Trudi Tate and Kate Kennedy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 309.

¹⁰ John Stephens, "The Ghosts of Menin Gate': Art, Architecture and Commemoration," *Journal of Contemporary History* 44, no. 1 (2009): 9.

thereby demonstrating the deep power landscape has in conjuring emotions.¹¹

Pilgrims found solace in each other, memorials, and landscapes while visiting sites related to the Great War. Historian Jay Winter notes that those who went on pilgrimages to sacred sites and cemeteries “also developed affinities with parents, widows, sons, and daughters like themselves, who were there to remember the dead.”¹² There was a strong sense of kinship between those who made the physically and emotionally difficult journey with others like them who also mourned fallen soldiers. Together, they remembered the fallen and created a domain of memory beyond individual memory.¹³ These trips were both communal and individual, as groups arrived at the cemeteries together but split off to visit individual graves.¹⁴ Burying bodies in concentrated areas near where they fell imbued the surrounding landscape with a powerful meaning to the bereaved who could survey the landscape that may have been the final view of a

¹¹ Tom Lawson, “The Free-Masonry of Sorrow : English National Identities and the Memorialization of the Great War in Britain, 1919–1931,” *History and Memory* 20, no. 1 (2008): 101-102, 106.

¹² Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 56.

¹³ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 2006), 22.

¹⁴ Adrian Barlow, "Mixing Memory and Desire: British and German War Memorials after 1918," ed *The Silent Morning: Culture and Memory after the Armistice*, ed. Trudi Tate and Kate Kennedy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 311.

deceased loved one.¹⁵ Trenches remained visible on battlefields stand as memorials themselves and serving as a silent witnesses to the mechanized death of the Great War.¹⁶ Curated gardens adjacent to cemeteries expressed “order, peace, nation, empire, militariness and sacrifice through architecture and horticulture.”¹⁷

Turning war scarred landscapes into pastoral cemeteries reminiscent of Britain was no small task. Through architecture and horticulture, there was a “continuity and rootedness, masking death and destruction, transfiguring the horrors of war which always threatened to surface.”¹⁸ The cemeteries were universally on land given to Britain so the dead could be buried on British soil. By using British trees, shrubs, and flowers, the IWGC made the cemeteries seem like a traditional British cemetery. On a deeper level, the landscape assured the bereaved that, though their loved ones were buried abroad, they would not be forgotten. By extension, they became a new dominion of the Empire, one “of the slain, insistent in both its existence and its silence.”¹⁹

British cemeteries also allowed the nation to express its status as a leading empire. The figurehead of the Empire, King

¹⁵ Bruce Scates, “In Gallipoli's Shadow: Pilgrimage, Memory, Mourning and the Great War,” *Australian Historical Studies* 33, no. 119 (2002), 2.

¹⁶ Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 486.

¹⁷ Mandy S. Morris, “Gardens ‘Forever England’: Landscape, Identity, and the First World War British Cemeteries on the Western Front,” *Ecumene* 4, no. 4 (October 1997): 412.

¹⁸ Morris, “Gardens ‘Forever England’”, 429.

¹⁹ Laqueur, *Work of the Dead* 483. Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*, (New York: Knopf, 2008), 249.

George V, while on a pilgrimage to the Western Front, draped the cemeteries in Imperial language:

the graves of the Flanders battlefields told triumphantly of [an] august imperial assembly—the dead of the mother country having around them those of [the empire] ... at every point the voices of the dead bespoke ... the single hearted assembly of nations and races which form our empire.²⁰

Within the cemeteries, there was no distinction based on rank, class, or country. Rather than emphasizing religious motifs, none of which would have been universal throughout the empire, the IWGC decided to use secular imagery of the state in cemeteries.²¹ Religious practices traditionally dictated burial and mourning practices, but the diversity of religions in Imperial forces required that the Empire reign supreme in memorializing the war dead. Thomas Laqueur argues that “perhaps nowhere else is Britain, as the world imperial power it was then, more evident than along the battle lines [where most IWGC sites are] of the Great War.”²² As director of the IWGC, Fabian Ware oversaw the creation of an empire of the dead as the masses of tombstones and memorialized names became grasped by Britons as a single entity.²³ Rudyard Kipling, whose only son was missing and presumed dead on the

²⁰ Lawson, “The Free-Masonry of Sorrow,” 102-103.

²¹ Ron Fuchs, “Sites of Memory in the Holy Land: the design of the British War cemeteries in Palestine,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 30 (2004): 646.

²² Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 483.

²³ Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 483.

Western Front, used his prominence to emphasize Imperial symbolism within the cemeteries. From his position of literary advisor to the IWGC, Kipling used imperial mourning language on monuments and in print. While writing about his pilgrimage with King George V, Kipling hoped “the bereaved from all parts of the Empire might find...occasion to make the same pilgrimage.” Kipling believed that such a trip would be a powerful experience for all citizens of the Empire, even if they suffered no loss.²⁴

IWGC monuments were less powerful than Kipling hoped. For example, the All-India memorial was unveiled in 1931 to amidst the rising wave of Indian nationalism. Despite Fabian Ware’s dedication speech attempting to emphasize the bonds between Britain and India, the memorial did little to improve Indian perceptions of the Empire.²⁵ India, like many colonies and dominions, felt their sacrifice during the Great War demonstrated that they no longer needed the guiding force of empire. The colonies and dominions of the British Empire tended to view their sacrifice through a national, rather than an imperial lens. In Canada and Australia, there was a strong sense of pride in their soldier’s wartime achievements. After scarce organized pilgrimages during the 1920s, organized pilgrimages from Australia and Canada to the

²⁴ Keating, “The Empire of the Dead: British Burial Abroad and the Formation of National Identity,” 113-114.

²⁵ David A. Johnson and Nicole F. Gilbertson, “Commemorations of Imperial Sacrifice at Home and Abroad: British Memorials of the Great War,” *The History Teacher* 43, no. 4 (2010): 579.

battlefields became more common in the 1930s. On these voyages, Australians frequently visited the war cemetery in Jerusalem and placed sprigs of wattle, a popular national symbol, on the graves of their war dead.²⁶ Australia's and New Zealand's sacrifice at Gallipoli also made the memorials and cemeteries there popular destinations reinforcing the idea that the war gave a new sense of identity to these nations. Pilgrimages to Gallipoli "filled a psychological need in this time of crisis and helped New Zealanders to cope with their losses, by making them feel part of a nation united in its determination to keep faith with the dead."²⁷ The cemetery, funerary architecture, and landscape at Gallipoli became foundational to the national myths of Australia and New Zealand, despite attempts by the IWGC to use the cemeteries to solidify the bonds of the Empire.²⁸

Dominion governments were entitled to reserve battle sites for national monuments, something that many of them did in conjunction with the IWGC, but Canadians asserted themselves by refusing to use an IWGC architect for the Canadian monument at Vimy Ridge. Vimy Ridge was an important national site as it was

²⁶ David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia, and Canada*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 118, 120.

²⁷ Maureen Sharpe, "Anzac Day in New Zealand 1916-1939," *New Zealand Journal of History* 15, no. 2, 99.

²⁸ Ahenk Yilmaz, "Memorialization on War-Broken Ground: Gallipoli War Cemeteries and Memorials Designed by Sir John James Burnet," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 73, no. 3 (2014): 334.

the first place where Canadian soldiers fought together under Canadian command. The battle played a crucial role in awakening Canada's national identity. The IWGC had attempted to avoid any specific religious symbolism in their cemeteries to represent all facets of the Empire, but Canada dramatically broke from that tradition.²⁹ Canada used Christian imagery throughout the monument, including depicting a crucified Christ in reference to the successful assaults made by in the days following Easter. Canadian forces lacked the religious diversity that could be found across the Empire, therefore Christian symbolism was acceptable. The monument reflected Canada's national identity, not its identity as a part of the broader Empire. Canadian blood had been shed; it was only proper that Canadian monumentation followed.

The Great War's high number of dead bodies that could not be recovered or identified necessitated the creation of new mourning practices and funerary architecture. As a monument to the missing, Menin Gate serves as a useful case study. In the early twentieth century, bodies were seen as the keepers of memories and identity. If the body was not present, the identity subsequently disappeared.³⁰ John Stephens notes that death rituals had to be

²⁹ Jacqueline Hucker, "Battle and Burial: Recapturing the Cultural Meaning of Canada's National Memorial on Vimy Ridge," *The Public Historian* 31, no. 1 (2009): 93-94, 99.

³⁰ Winter *Remembering War*, 56-57. For an explanation of the link between identity, body, and memorials in the nineteenth and twentieth century, see Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 388-488.

suspended in the case of missing remains, and mourners took a long time to grasp, if they ever did, that the remains they desired would never be recovered.³¹ Since the IWGC refused to have graves without bodies in them, monumental lists of names were compiled to provide a symbolic resting place for those whose remains could not be identified. Jay Winter argues that these lists helped the bereaved recover from their loss by providing a space away from daily life to reflect and mourn.³² In lieu of a grave to visit, running a hand over a name would suffice in letting the dead have their eternal rest. The Menin Gate memorial functions as an “empty tomb” where the families of all 56,000 men listed on the wall could grieve.³³ IWGC director Fabian Ware noted the inscription on the monument was fundamentally important to its purpose. The gate’s inscription is specifically for those whose did not receive a traditional burial: “Here are recorded names of officers and men who fell in Ypres Salient, but to whom the fortune of war denied the known and honoured burial given to their comrades in death.”³⁴

Pilgrimages to the Menin Gate were a substitute for a grave as a way to find meaning. For those too far away to travel, such as

³¹ John Stephens, “The Ghosts of Menin Gate: Art, Architecture and Commemoration,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 44, no. 1 (2009): 11.

³² Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 95-96.

³³ Stephens, “The Ghosts of Menin Gate”, 10.

³⁴ Fabian Ware, “Building and Decoration of the War Cemeteries,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 72, no. 3725 (1924): 352.

Australians, artistic representations of the monument provided closure. Painter Will Longstaff's paintings *Immortal Shrine* and *Menin Gate at Midnight* took on important value in Australia because they transported viewers to what they desired to see. Subsequently, the paintings became a tool to ease Australians through their grief. In the form of a mini-pilgrimage, Australians flocked to museums to see the paintings.³⁵ Even in the present, pilgrims in search of meaning voyage to the Menin Gate each night to hear the playing of "Last Post" in search of the same answers the bereaved first sought almost 100 years ago.³⁶

Pilgrimages to the cemeteries of the Great War remain popular and powerful in the twenty-first century. Jay Winter incorrectly asserts that "war memorials have become the artefacts of a vanished age, remnants of the unlucky generation that had to endure the carnage of the Great War."³⁷ Winter's correctly estimates the memorial's purpose of healing and mending communities, but he fails to fully appreciate the powerful, lasting nationalist message that the spaces set aside by the IWGC have. Bruce Scates' 2002 study of twenty-first century pilgrims to the battlefields and cemeteries of Gallipoli demonstrate their enduring and lasting nationalist meaning. Scates interviewed 200 pilgrims to

³⁵ Stephens, "The Ghosts of Menin Gate," 21, 22; Laqueur, *The Work of The Dead*, 420.

³⁶ Stephens, "The Ghosts of Menin Gate," 7-8.

³⁷ Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 98.

Gallipoli and discovered the emotional power universally felt by those who made the trip. At the graves of the dead, these pilgrims found themselves aware of “some presence” as the symbols of significance became “denser, richer, more involved.”³⁸ Young people especially were struck by the power of the sights that memorialize those who at the same made the ultimate sacrifice for country. To them, being in Gallipoli for the annual dawn service to commemorate the first wave of landings is a “spiritual experience as close to a sacred day as Australians ever get.” In the post-Vietnam generation, Scates observes an increase in “patriotic fervor” that verges on “the most chauvinistic kind of nationalism.”³⁹ What Winter did not realize, but Scates’ pilgrims did was that memorials were not just erected for the bereaved of the Great War, they were erected so that future generation may understand the meaning of the War's sacrifice.

More than 100 years since the Armistice, cemeteries and memorials cared for by the now renamed Commonwealth Graves Commission remain vital to public memory of the First World War. The Great War posed a challenging feat of how to memorialize so many killed over such a large space, so far from their native lands. The creation of the IWGC guided the public through the bereavement of the interwar period through its careful

³⁸ Scates, “In Gallipoli’s Shadow,” 16.

³⁹ Bruce Scates, *Return to Gallipoli: Walking the battlefields of the Great War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 196-197.

construction of cemeteries and memorials. Pilgrims have consistently found solace and meaning by visiting the curated landscapes where loved ones fought and died. The sites they visited were and remain imbued with personal, national, and Imperial meanings that disseminated throughout popular consciousness as individuals grieved, nations emerged, and an Empire slowly faded.

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