INTRODUCTION

Britain and the Centenary of the First World War

Introduction: We Will Remember Them

Each year, on the Sunday closest to 11 November, Britain remembers its military war dead. Around the country people gather together at local war memorials, laying wreaths of poppies, and observing the two-minute silence at 11 a.m. In London the same ceremony is held at the Cenotaph in Whitehall, watched by crowds who line the street, and followed by audiences on national television and radio. Each element of the ceremony of remembrance is carefully choreographed, and follows, so far as possible, the programme established at the first commemoration of Armistice Day on 11 November 1919. Apart from a pause in commemoration during the Second World War, with the service moving to the Sunday closest to 11 November in its aftermath, the rituals of remembrance have been a widely observed element of the national calendar for over a hundred years. However, 2018 saw a significant difference in this ceremony: the formal participation of some of the descendants of those who had fought and sometimes died in the First World War, and of others who wished to commemorate them.

This 'people's procession', also known as 'the nation's thank you', attracted ten thousand participants, selected by ballot from the far larger numbers who had originally applied to take part. Interviewed afterwards, many of these participants expressed their desire to be part of a public event marking the centenary of the Armistice, and also to make the experiences and legacies of individuals caught up in the conflict visible on the public stage. Many were marching in memory of family members that they

Figure 0.1. The Cenotaph on 11 November 2018. Image courtesy of James Wallis, reproduced with permission.

had never known. One man was there to commemorate his grandfather, a stretcher bearer who had worked to bring the wounded back behind the lines, often under fire, while a woman was there to honour her grandfather who had lost his left arm just before the war's end, and 'what he did for freedom'.[1] Some wanted to commemorate individuals with whom they had no direct familial relation but to whom they nonetheless felt a sense of connection: one woman marched in memory of John Parr, the first recorded casualty, killed aged just 16, and who had been a pupil at the primary school where she worked.[2] Another group marched to collectively remember the Labour Corps, one commenting that 'it's so great that everyone is being remembered, not just the soldiers'.[3] As they marched, members of the public lined the route, applauding and calling out 'thank you' as the parade passed.

We open this study of Britain's commemoration of the centenary of the First World War between 2014 and 2018 with this description of an event that came towards its close, because it encapsulates the ways the centenary captured the imagination and the feelings of so many of the British people, drawing upon and (at least for its duration) strengthening the cultural memory of the conflict that is a key element in the national narrative of British history. The centenary may have been planned by the state, but its success lay in the importance that many individuals and communities attached to the experience and legacies of the First World War. As Ronald Quinalt noted in his study of the growth of centenary commemorations in the nineteenth century, such events can be rich sources for the study of

contemporary preoccupations.[4] In Britain, the First World War was understood as significant for multiple reasons, which we will explore later in this introductory chapter, but alongside its perceived historical significance was a widely shared emotional attachment to the war and its legacies for individuals, households and communities. The People's Parade of 2018 gave voice to the deep emotional resonance of the First World War for many people in twenty-first-century Britain, and helps to illustrate why so many chose to participate in the wide-ranging programme of events that marked the centenary period. Indeed, the emotive power of the First World War could be heard in Prime Minister David Cameron's speech of 2012, in which he confirmed that the government planned to mark the conflict's centenary. Describing his own fascination with the First World War, and despite his own family's stories of conflict stemming from the Second, Cameron argued that commemorating the war was important because 'it matters not just in our hearts but in our heads; it has a very strong emotional connection. I feel it very deeply'.[5] Individual and collectively shared understandings of the First World War at its centenary were often fashioned and driven by this emotional connection, which itself shaped not only participation but also the form and nature of many of the events and projects that, together, made up the centenary. While the history of the First World War, and particularly the history of combatants on the Western Front, remains popular in Britain, it is the strong feelings that this history often engenders that underpinned the centenary and, we argue, mean that it is best approached through the lens of critical heritage studies.

This introductory chapter explores both the dominant cultural memory of the First World War in modern Britain and the relationship between history and heritage. With Laurajane Smith, we argue that heritage can be understood as 'a set of practices tied up with the activities of remembering and commemoration' that draw upon the past in order to 'help make sense of the present'.[6] The centenary itself then can be understood as a period of remembering, which had the potential to help make sense of the present and, by so doing, to shape the future. Unlike acts of commemoration and remembrance that take place at the level of the nation state, such as the wave of commemorative rituals and national symbols that Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger associated with the creation of modern European nation states in the nineteenth century, many of the events and projects that collectively made up the centenary were created at the level of community, of neighbourhood, school, and interest group.[7] They were often experienced as a leisure activity rather than a formal learning event, and focused on what UNESCO has termed 'intangible cultural heritage' alongside and often in place of more traditional 'tangible' heritage sites such as buildings, monuments and battlefields. As such, they tell us about contemporary collective

understandings of the past, and the ways in which this past has the potential to 'contribute to social cohesion'.[8] We go on now to give an overview of some of the key organisations and events that shaped British centenary commemorations of the First World War.

'The Nation Remembers': Commemorating the First World War

While a shared remembrance and commemoration of war has long been a part of British public life,[9] the number and scale of events to mark the centenary of the First World War far outstripped anything that had been seen previously. Commemorative events took place across the four nations that make up Great Britain and Northern Ireland, encompassing separate histories and identities, and different relationships to the history and heritage of the First World War, ranging from local community activities to formal, state-level commemoration. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) commissioned over 2,500 hours of programming across television and radio, both national and local.[10] Museums across the country, from Stornoway in the Western Isles to Brighton on the south coast of England, held popular exhibitions recounting the local experience of war. New educational programmes were organised for schools, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded five public engagement centres in British universities to enable links between academics and community partners exploring the war.[11] In contrast to the traditional ceremonies of war remembrance enacted every November across the country, the First World War centenary attempted to touch on the experiences of civilians who had experienced the war as well as members of the military, and thus set itself the task of not only involving as many people as possible, but also of extending historical knowledge of both the conflict and its aftermath.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which oversaw the British state's programme of centenary activities, worked with 'a broad ecology of public and civil society organisations' to deliver an ambitious programme of events to mark the centenary.[12] These included, but were not limited to: 14–18 NOW, a commissioning body for arts and culture projects; the AHRC; the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC); the BBC; the Imperial War Museums (IWM); and the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF).[13] The national governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales all had their own centenary programming bodies, with the Community Relations Council in Northern Ireland working with the governments of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to develop a programme of events that marked the 'decade of

centenaries' between the Ulster Covenant and Home Rule Bill of 1912 to the division of the island and the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. The DCMS estimated that around £230 million was spent on the centenary by the government and the NLHF, with other government departments and civil organisations also providing funding for activities.[14] At a time of public spending cuts, and an overall policy of 'austerity', which saw cuts in welfare, education and local authority spending, the decision to fund a programme of commemorative events is a clear indication of the importance attached to the First World War centenary by the British government.

The national programme of commemoration began with a series of events that marked Britain's declaration of war on 4 August 1914: a Service for the Commonwealth at Glasgow Cathedral; a ceremony at St Symphorien military cemetery, which holds the graves of the first and last British soldiers to be killed in the conflict, attended by representatives from Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany; and a Service of Commemoration at Westminster Abbey, London. On the same day '14–18 NOW' sponsored the first large-scale participatory event, *Lights Out*, which, echoing the words of the then-foreign secretary, Lord Grey, on the eve of war, invited people to extinguish all but one light or candle between 10 and 11 p.m. This focus on formal and sometimes less formal remembrance of the war's dead continued to mark centenary events organised at the level of the nation state. Dates understood as central to the experience, legacy and memory of the war were chosen for acts of remembrance and commemoration, usually marking the centenary of battles that had a particularly high casualty rate, such as the disastrous landings of the Gallipoli Campaign of 1915 (marked on 24–25 April 2015), commemoration of the Battle of Jutland (31 May 2016) and the Third Battle of Ypres, more often known as Passchendaele (30–31 July 2017). The marking of the Battle of Amiens (8 August 2018) was an exception to this rule, the battle being remembered as an offensive that helped to bring an end to trench warfare, rather than a moment of especially high loss for the British.

Key amongst these national acts of commemoration was the centenary of the first day of the Battle of the Somme, observed on 1 July 2016, when almost twenty thousand British and imperial troops were killed. This remains the highest loss recorded by the British military in one day, and was marked by a series of events, including an overnight vigil at Thiepval, where many of the dead are buried and where those whose bodies could not be recovered are remembered on a memorial. As the first day of the Battle of the Somme is so central to British cultural memory of the First World War, symbolising for many the scale and impact of wartime loss at home as well as on the military front, it was also marked by a two-day Festival of Remembrance in Heaton Park, Manchester. The city and its surrounding

mill towns saw heavy losses amongst the 'Pal's Battalions' from the area who were fighting on the Somme that day; the festival included historical talks, opportunities to research family history, and re-enactments. The Halle Orchestra and Choir, based in Manchester, provided an evening concert of wartime music from Britain and Germany; and a 'pathway of remembrance', made of tiles designed by members of the public, was refashioned in 2018 to create a permanent crowd-sourced memorial to the dead of the Somme in Heaton Park. Alongside remembrance of the British dead, the centenary of the Somme thus included events designed to reach across national borders, and to incorporate individual acts of remembrance into the formal, state-led commemorations.

14–18 NOW commissioned 107 artistic and cultural events throughout the centenary.[15] Some, like *100: The Day Our World Changed*, a collaboration between Wildworks Theatre and the Lost Gardens of Heligan, which remembered the men from Cornwall who went to war, had a local focus, whilst others were experienced across Britain, with events taking place simultaneously in different locations.[16] The individual acts of remembrance that made up *Lights Out* on 4 August 2014 were accompanied by light sculptures in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and London, and the Battle of the Somme was marked by Jeremy Deller's *We're Here Because We're Here*, which saw the soldiers of the Somme 'reappear' in sites across the country. The centenary of the Armistice was commemorated by Danny Boyle's *Pages of the Sea*, in which members of the public traced the faces of some of the dead onto beaches around the country, for them to be washed away by the incoming tide.

One of the most widely visited and well-known artistic installations commemorating the First World War was organised not by 14–18 NOW, but by Historic Royal Palaces. *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*, an installation at the Tower of London by Paul Cummins and Tom Piper, marked the outbreak of war by filling the moat around the Tower and its walls with 888,246 ceramic poppies between July and November 2014. Each poppy marked a life lost in the British and imperial forces, and the Tower of London estimated that five million people visited the installation during the four months it was on display, with many more seeing part of the installations as it toured the country during the centenary. Each day at sunset the names of 180 of the dead, nominated by the public, were read out, the roll call followed by the Last Post, which is traditionally played at British military funerals and acts of remembrance.[17] Although *The Guardian*'s art critic dismissed it as a 'fake, trite and inward-looking . . . UKIP-style memorial' it was exceptionally popular, with many of the ceramic poppies being purchased by the public.[18] Respondents to a visitors' survey reflected on both the significance of the centenary as a point at which firsthand memory

vanishes, with the 'duty' of remembrance being passed on to the next generations, and the legacies of the war for families being discussed:

> I am seventy-one. I never knew my grandparents; my mother never saw her father as he was at the Western Front and died there. We are the last generation to really feel the effect of losing our loved ones and the consequences of it. The centenary of the war is a great time and the last time our generation have of passing on the truth, the stories, the horrors and senselessness of it to the next generations.[19]

Public remembrance and family legacies came together in public responses like this, demonstrating how the afterlife of the First World War in families, households and communities helped to drive participation in the public events designed to mark the centenary. If, as Rodney Harrison has argued, heritage can be understood as 'a creative engagement with the past in the present' that can help to shape 'our own "tomorrow"', such responses demonstrate the importance of individual and collective investment in engaging with the past, and the 'tomorrow' that is hoped for.[20]

As 'theatres of memory and places of heritage making' that have a particular cultural authority as conveyors of an 'authorised heritage discourse', museums were key sites for the commemoration of the First World War.[21] More prosaically, they are places that people visit for entertainment and leisure, but also sites of education and trusted providers of information. As Britain's leading museum for the history of both world wars, the IWM was central to the centenary, both at its physical sites and via digital sites and networks. The IWM was central to the First World War Centenary Partnership, a network of 4,159 organisations from around the globe that the IWM, in collaboration with Arts Council England and Culture24, ran. The museum provided resources, including access to their digital archives and networking events, to these diverse organisations, and helped them to reach a wider audience.[22] It also ran the *Lives of the First World War* project, a crowd-sourced history site that it managed in conjunction with the genealogy organisation Findmypast. Over 160,000 people participated between 2014 and 2019, contributing family histories, stories from newspapers, and archival research to build a freely accessible database, hosted by the museum, that told 'the stories of individuals from across Britain and the Commonwealth who served in uniform and worked on the home front'.[23] A widely shared understanding of the IWM as an 'official' site of memory originally imagined as 'an embodiment and lasting memorial of common effort and common sacrifice' undoubtedly drove participation in the centenary projects it oversaw. Perhaps for many of those who participated in *Lives of the First World War*, the inclusion of family or local stories was both a means of reaching a wider audience and a means of

legitimisation, a way in which the wartime lives recounted there 'become part of "our" history'.[24]

But the best-known means by which the IWM marked the First World War centenary was in the opening of new First World War galleries at its main London site in July 2014; within a year, over 1 million people had visited.[25] These new galleries, which were double the size of those they replaced, took a narrative form, guiding the visitor from the outbreak of war to its aftermath, and focusing on the experiences of some of those who had lived through, and sometimes died in, the conflict. The IWM was careful to include representations of the lives of those who experienced the war in the Empire as well as in Britain, as civilians and workers, and as combatants whose war took place away from the Western Front, while keeping the Battle of the Somme, with its 'dominant position in our memory of the war', as its centrepiece.[26]

The emphasis on personal experience tells us something of British understanding of the First World War at its centenary; that it is largely taught and communicated through individual accounts, such as those of the war poets whose work is widely taught in British secondary schools. As the review in the *New York Times* commented, this approach can be an effective means of immersing and engaging the visitor, but comes with the risk of failing to communicate wider political issues: 'Why did the German High Command decide to go to war when it did? We won't learn that from soldiers' letters home'.[27] With its incorporation of a range of voices and experiences, its positioning of the Battle of the Somme at its centre, and the use of individual experience to convey the totality, and brutality, of the war, the exhibition both reflected the knowledge and expectations of its British visitors, and attempted to tell them something new about the war's global reach.

The range of commemorative events at the level of the nation and the state, discussed further in Chapter 2, were important both as ways for people to engage with the centenary and as a means of shaping the four-year period of commemoration, marking out key events of the war and demonstrating what was deemed worthy of remembrance at the level of the nation state. However, many people's experience of the centenary took place within their community. Although 'heritage often tends to conflate community with place', many of these projects were not primarily shaped by geography, but by communities of identity, bringing together people with a shared sense of self or heritage.[28] The NLHF, the body that distributes income from the National Lottery in order to 'conserve the UK's diverse heritage, to encourage people to be involved in heritage and to widen access and learning', supported First World War centenary projects 'on an unprecedented scale'.[29] By October 2018, the organisation

estimated that it had awarded £96.5 million in grants to 2,155 community heritage projects marking the war, involving approximately 9.4 million volunteers.[30] While some of these projects ensured the restoration of sites understood to be of national significance, such as HMS Caroline, the last surviving ship of the Royal Navy's First World War British Grand Fleet, the majority were far smaller and not necessarily focused on the restoration of 'tangible heritage', considering instead topics as diverse as food on the home front, women workers in munitions factories, and the experiences of Belgian refugees.[31]

One of the key aims of the commemorative programme, announced by David Cameron in 2012, was to ensure that future generations recognised the significance of the First World War for British society.[32] With this in mind, a national education programme was created, with battlefield tours for schoolchildren as a central activity. Led by the Institute of Education at University College London, this £6.3 million programme saw 8,500 pupils and teachers, from two thousand English secondary schools, undertake guided tours of battlefields in France and Belgium. Upon their return the pupils were expected to reach out and 'engage with at least 110 people in the local community'.[33] This number was chosen in order to reach 880,000 people, close to the number of British and imperial combatants killed during the war. Visits to battlefields have been a central means for British people to engage with the First World War, almost since its conclusion.[34] The bereaved were the most frequent visitors in the interwar years, visiting the graves of their loved ones who had been buried in the Imperial War Graves Commission's new battlefield cemeteries, or the memorials to the missing that commemorated those whose bodies had never been recovered or identified.[35] The largest of these 'pilgrimages' was that organised by the British Legion in 1928, which saw over 11,000 participants, with some 26,000 day trippers joining them for a ceremony of remembrance at the Menin Gate memorial in Ypres, itself dedicated the previous year.[36] Remembrance and tourism always overlapped in visits to battlefields, with a growth in British battlefield tourism prompted by the 'memory boom' of the late twentieth century, and thousands visiting the Menin Gate on 11 November 2018 alone.[37] The popularity of battlefield tourism during the centenary, and the decision to focus schools' activities on the battlefields of France and Belgium, together demonstrate the centrality of the Western Front, and the soldiers who fought and died there, to British cultural memory of the First World War at its centenary. However, it must be acknowledged that the focus on the 'British experience' at the expense of placing it within the sorts of transnational frameworks that many academic historians now examine, ran the risk of solidifying a very insular understanding of the war within a more constrictive cultural memory. It is to this cultural memory, and the

ways that it both shaped, and was shaped by, the centenary of the First World War, that we now turn.

'Blackadder Goes Forth'? Cultural Memory and the First World War

Helen McCartney has argued that British cultural memory of the First World War[38] focuses on 'the image of the. . .soldier as victim' with the war itself widely understood as 'a byword for futility'.[39] This emotionally powerful and widely shared perception of the conflict, dominant in Britain since at least the early 1960s, worked to ensure extensive engagement with, and participation in, commemorative events and projects. Indeed, in his 2012 speech announcing the government's centenary plans, David Cameron gave voice to the affective power of this memory when he stated that 'this matters not just in our heads but in our hearts'.[40] By thus positioning the emotional appeal of the centenary at its heart, the speech both articulated the dominant cultural memory of the war in early twenty-first-century Britain, and helped to set the tone for the coming commemorations.

However, cultural memory can never be simply 'imposed'; even when it is found in cultural texts with significant power and authority, such as a speech made by the British prime minister on the eve of the First World War centenary, it must still resonate with its audience. For the cultural memory of an event like the First World War, now moving out of lived experience to become part of history and memory, to gain purchase, individuals and communities have to recognise something of it in their own histories, memories and stories. Cultural memory gains power not only from a familiarity with its narrative acquired through cultural texts and sites of heritage, but also because it resonates with the stories told in more personal and private spaces. As Marianne Hirsch has shown in her work on the legacies of the Holocaust within families, family history can sometimes compel people to engage with the past, and the First World War was popular with family historians long before its centenary.[41] The centenary was perfectly positioned to benefit from the growth of family history and genealogical research that has been seen in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A range of searchable databases, such as the CWGC's *Find War Dead* facility, and the National Archive's *British Soldiers of the First World War*, together with popular commercial family history sites like *Ancestry* and *My Heritage*, have made genealogical research into the lives of ancestors during the First World War accessible to many. As an event that forced the state to take an expanded interest in people's lives, not only recording births, deaths and marriages, but also assessing pension rights and family structure, the First

World War has left a legacy of formal records, accessible through local and national archives, that complement the war stories often passed down through generations and have long been 'a boon for amateur historians embroidering family trees with details of individual lives'.[42] *Lives of the First World War*, discussed above, together with a multiplicity of other commemorative projects undertaken by individuals, by community groups and by arts and heritage organisations, and discussed in the pages of this book, were beneficiaries of this interest in family experiences of the conflict.

Individual lives that were often unknown outside of their immediate family or community thus found a place in the wider commemorative projects that marked the centenary. Some of these worked to disrupt the focus on soldiers' experiences on the Western Front, which has been so central to British understandings of the First World War. An exhibition at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery for example, *War Stories: Voices from the First World War* (12 July 2014 to 1 March 2015), told the story of the city in conflict through the lives of thirteen individuals, including 'a young girl born in 1914 . . . and a gardener imprisoned for his pacifist beliefs', alongside 'an Indian soldier wounded on the Western Front and taken to hospital in the Royal Pavilion, soldiers from Brighton, including a Brighton and Hove Albion footballer (and) nurses'.[43] Family and individual histories such as these have both shaped, and been shaped by, representations of the First World War that circulate on the public stage; as Tanya Evans has noted, 'family historians' affective engagements with the past provides us with insight into how history is understood, imagined and discussed'.[44] Despite the appearance on the public stage of the wartime experiences of civilians like Emma Glass, who died with three of her children in an air raid on Camberwell, South London in 1917, and Ella Howitt and Clara Butt, munitions workers from Bolton who were found drowned in 1918, their bodies having 'the appearance of having walked into the canal', the majority of those whose stories were recovered and shared during the centenary had seen military service.[45]

The dominant cultural memory of the First World War has endured in Britain since at least the early 1960s, and is described by Daniel Todman as: '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'.[46] Despite efforts by family historians, heritage professionals and academic historians, it continued to dominate public understandings of the conflict at its centenary. Cultural memory is never simply a straightforward retelling of the past. Instead, it is shaped by contemporary needs, interests and preoccupations. In 1960s Britain, when the memory of the war as tragedy began to dominate public understandings, anti-war and anti-establishment attitudes coalesced

around both opposition to the Vietnam War and to the threat of nuclear conflict, while the growth of social history and an interest in 'history from below' combined to produce an understanding of the First World War that focused on the experiences of soldiers in the trenches rather than political aims or military strategy, both of which were understood to have failed to prevent war, and to protect individual lives. The 1960s saw the fiftieth anniversary of the conflict, marked by the BBC's landmark 1964 documentary series *The Great War*, which drew heavily on interviews with veterans, and the increasing popularity of Wilfred Owen's war poems, nine of which were set to music by Benjamin Britten in his 1962 composition *War Requiem*. The satirical musical *Oh! What a Lovely War*, created by Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop at Stratford East Theatre in London, with the 1969 film version directed by Richard Attenborough, further embedded the idea of the First World War as a conflict in which the 'lost generation' were sacrificed to the ambitions of an unimaginative and uncaring military and political elite. This cultural memory of the war thus provided a 'usable past' for critics of the social order, and political leadership, in the present day.

This resilient cultural memory of the war as tragedy continued to dominate popular British understandings of the conflict in the following decades. The popular BBC situation comedy *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989), adaptations of Vera Brittain's 1933 autobiographical *Testament of Youth* (1979; 2014), the novels *Birdsong* (1993) and the *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991–95), individually adapted for television and film, and the children's novel *War Horse* (1982), adapted as a Hollywood film and an award-winning National Theatre production, all drew upon and amplified an understanding of the war as a tragedy with multiple legacies of trauma and loss for those who survived, and for the bereaved. In a 2014 Mass Observation Directive on understandings of the First World War commissioned by the five AHRC Public Engagement Centres, respondents listed 'mud', 'blood', and 'futility' as the words that most often came to mind when thinking about the war.[47] Found both in public sites of representation, and in more private reflections and histories, this understanding of the war as tragedy dominated cultural memory of the conflict as Britain began to mark the centenary.

At times this cultural memory not only shaped the kinds of stories that were told, and representations of the war during its centenary, but served to occlude historical fact. For example, Maggie Andrews, recounting a local history exhibition, described how it told of the trauma of a mother whose son was conscripted to fight in 1915, aged just sixteen.[48]

While there are records of under-age children fighting in the war, conscription was not introduced in England, Scotland and Wales until 1916, and until 1918 it applied only to men aged between eighteen and forty-one.[49] Another historian, looking back over the centenary in 2019, commented

Figure 0.2. WITV Plumlines Exhibition, Croome Park. This exhibition focused on the home front during the war. © Maggie Andrews, reproduced with permission.

that 'an essentially fictitious version of the First World War continues', a narrative summarised by another historian as 'futility and trenches . . . tragedy and death'.[50] This focus on futility and tragedy was understood by the then-education secretary, Michael Gove, writing in the *Daily Mail* in 2014, as meaning that Britain had failed to learn what he understood to be the correct lessons of the conflict: the perils of globalisation and migration, the potential of swift technological and social change to disrupt the social order, and – perhaps most tellingly – the dangers of a 'fragile confidence in political elites'. For Gove, the centenary offered an opportunity to counter what he saw as 'an unhappy compulsion to denigrate virtues such as patriotism, honour and courage' with the Battlefield Tours programme for schools singled out as a means of enabling 'young people from every community the chance to learn about the heroism, and sacrifice, of our great-grandparents'.[51] Michael Gove's misunderstanding of the power of cultural memory, and the deep purchase that legacies of loss and grief during the war and in its aftermath still maintain today, meant that his hope that a new understanding of the conflict as a just war that Great Britain and its allies won through a combination of individual bravery and strong leadership was doomed to failure. The emotional power and wide reach of an understanding of the war as a period of largely tragic and futile loss

ensured that this cultural memory would not change substantially during the centenary.

The power of this cultural memory shaped many of the commemorative events and projects that made up the First World War centenary, but it also drove participation in them. Smith's idea of heritage as 'a cultural and social process, which engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways that understand and engage with the present', is a useful means of approaching the relationship between cultural memory and heritage during the centenary.[52] Smith understands heritage as something active, in which meanings are made and changed not only by heritage professionals, but also by those who engage with it, both as audiences and as active participants. Both 'tangible' and 'intangible' heritage can thus be understood as sites of active meaning-making, in which the concerns, interests and needs of the present shape social understandings of what elements of the past are valuable and meaningful. This idea of heritage as active, as something that emerges from 'the relationship between people, objects, places and practices', allows us to move away from the idea of historical objects and events having an *inherent* value, and instead to interrogate the contemporary forces that imbue them with this value, and insist on their importance.[53] At the start of the centenary Cameron's speech at the IWM clearly set out why his government believed it was important: its emotional and affective power today, the necessity that future generations recognised its importance, and its role in shaping the modern world in its aftermath.[54] The centenary of the First World War was thus envisaged as a nation-building event, in which a shared understanding and appreciation of the nation's past would help to ensure social cohesion in both the present and the future.

The enormous number of centenary projects, performances, exhibitions and other events, created by individuals, by communities, by organisations and at the level of the local, the nation and the state, demonstrate the ability that the First World War had to capture the imagination and interest of people across early twentieth-century Britain. But they also demonstrate the active nature of heritage, and the ways that the meanings of the past in the present cannot be controlled or contained by those who hold power. While Michael Gove may have hoped that the centenary would provide an opportunity to recalibrate knowledge and understanding of the First World War as a just war, fought by 'conscious believers in King and country, committed to defending the Western liberal order' and commanded by patriotic leaders 'grappling honestly with the new complexities of industrial warfare', the cultural memory of the war as a futile tragedy both dominated commemorations and motivated the participation of many.[55] At the same time, the centenary enabled a widening of public knowledge about the war: heritage projects that focused on topics such as Sikh soldiers, munitions

workers, and Belgian refugees served to include groups whose wartime experiences were less well known in the shared programme of commemoration. The tensions that we can see here, between the desire to create new histories and research lesser-known areas of the war, the hope that the centenary would be a nation-building event, and the enduring affective power of the dominant cultural memory of the war ran throughout the centenary, and are traced through the pages of this book.

Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War

In 2017, towards the end of the First World War centenary, most of the authors of this work were the recipients of funding from the AHRC to undertake a project designed to chart the activities and impacts of the centenary in Britain. Our project had, as outlined in an article by two of our authors, multiple aspects.[56] We examined the ways that academic 'experts' interacted with public researchers, with particular importance given to the aforementioned AHRC-funded Engagement Centres. Additionally, we charted the wider cultural memories and understandings of the conflict by focusing on 'how existing ideas shaped centenary projects, and how these projects might impact upon the war's cultural memory in the future'.[57] To achieve these goals, the authors undertook a range of data collecting and analytical activities:

> 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 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.[58]

Our initial conclusions from this project, 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' are now greatly expanded upon within the pages of this book.[59] In its detail, this book contributes to and expands other recent academic studies of the First World War centenary. By taking a 'full centenary' perspective, looking at collaborations and activities across the period 2014 to 2018, it goes beyond existing literature that focused either on the eve of the centenary or its final Armistice moment.[60] Examining a

broader range of examples and case studies from across the British Isles, it can test assumptions revealed by more discreet studies into visitor behaviour at centenary-related museum exhibitions in one English region.[61] As the first in-depth exploration of Britain's centenary experience, it complements other international case studies, enabling comparison and cross-reference.[62] It enables a deeper interrogation of provocations made by scholars of Human Geography and Critical Military Studies around the processes and implications of (mis)representing, remembering, and forgetting race and empire, and uncritical militarised expressions of gratitude to British military dead.[63] Finally, it shares calls made by Jenny Macleod to use the centenary of the First World War as a basis for future-facing discussions about lessons learned for forthcoming national war anniversaries, and underscores the need for scholars to 'work together, to reach beyond the academy, and prepare to help to shape events for the better'.[64]

* * *

The first chapter surveys the relationship between the First World War centenary and national identity through a focus on events and projects at three distinct but interwoven levels: the nation state of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the 'four nations' of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the multiple and overlapping communities that make up these larger collectives. It argues that the endurance of family memories and stories of the First World War helps to explain both the emotional appeal of the First World War which underpinned the scale of the centenary in Britain, and also its relationship to histories of the war. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of national identity, it considers and problematises the ways in which the First World War was imagined at these separate but interconnected levels as a means of identity and community building, following Smith's assertion that 'the idea of identity tends to be unproblematically linked with concepts of heritage'. Furthermore, it concludes that while a shared sense of the past can be an effective means of building community identity and cohesion, this did not necessarily equate to a unifying sense of national identity during the First World War centenary.

Chapter 2 examines the work of organisations who planned, funded, created and disseminated public commemorative activities in Britain and on the Continent. It explains how the British government's DCMS sought to coordinate with key organisations such as the Royal British Legion, the CWGC, the BBC, and the arts organisation 14–18 NOW, to produce commemorative activities and events. It discusses concepts, politics, and transculturalism, the importance of storytelling, the use commemorative art as both counter-monument and anti-monument, and of how public

participation and voluntarism in local communities were key to many national initiatives.

The third chapter provides an overview of the engagement, output and outreach of museum and heritage institutions across the United Kingdom during the First World War centenary period. Spanning the work of national organisations to temporary (or more piecemeal) local initiatives, it outlines some of the ways in which museums and organisations sought to encourage new audiences – visitors as well as volunteers – to interact with themed historical subject matter. As a result, this chapter considers pertinent questions around the renewed purpose behind exhibiting First World War-era objects in different settings, the use of memory and witnessing as an act of remembrance, and community projects that addressed colonial experience during the conflict, alongside issues of funding and the (digital) longevity of created resource content.

Chapter 4 provides an in-depth examination of the different ways the First World War centenary was either portrayed, represented or stored within digital forms. Many of the activities undertaken across the United Kingdom were either partially or totally contained online or in other digital mediums. Public projects, research outputs, and museum exhibitions all found themselves, to varying degrees, placed in both physical and digital spaces. This chapter charts both the nature and processes through which the First World War centenary appeared within these spaces, as well as addressing some of the concerns regarding the long-term viability and survival rates for material that only ever existed online. There remains an ongoing, and justified, concern that much of the digital material created during the centenary has either already been lost or may not have a long-term future. How can we hope to retain this knowledge, and benefit from its examples in the future, if we cannot guarantee its survival?

Overall, this book is designed to make its readers think about Britain's commemoration of the First World War moving forward, and it draws to a close by looking towards the future. The final chapter, Chapter 5, focuses on the experiences and importance of young people during the centenary years. Between 2014 and 2018, youth in Britain played a prominent role in commemorating the First World War. Against an overview of the educational backdrop, this chapter reviews a selection of top-down and bottom-up centenary activity aimed at young people. Through the prism of their major objectives – to educate, remember, create and connect – it examines different formats and patterns of delivery, who was involved, and the methods of funding from a range of examples. Despite greater opportunity for alternative perspectives of the war to emerge from bottom-up activities, too much deviance from the accepted narrative of the war led to push-back against what were perceived to be potentially 'radical' and

disruptive approaches, thus confirming the hierarchical power relationship between adult and child and an established cultural memory of the First World War.

As this book's Conclusion will outline, the aims and purposes of our research are multifaceted. The focus upon understanding and recording the activities during the centenary is obvious. This was a public history event that will impact how historians undertake their work for decades to come. But we are also keen to make clear that none of this took place in a vacuum. This work can potentially be read as a social and cultural history of public history work during a time of great political upheaval. Furthermore, with the centenary of the Second World War now distinctly on the horizon, this work also serves as a potential blueprint for those who will seek to undertake similar work between 2039 and 2045. At its heart though, this book is a monument to the importance of collaboration – collaboration between historians and the public, between local and national institutions, and between diverse communities. It is for this reason that we all appear here as co-authors as we reflect on how the country experienced the centenary events individually and collectively. An emphasis on collaboration also explains our broad approach towards methods and approaches. The collaborative and engaged nature of so much of the centenary work was one the defining features of the period 2014 to 2018. This book is testament to the co-produced nature of the centenary, not only in the way it has been written but also in the rationale for why we focused on the areas that we did, shining a spotlight on the range of different participants, audiences, professionals, and community and family historians working together, and the projects that came from their interactions. Certainly, there was a range of television, radio, and state-sponsored public art that was part of the centenary, and while such traditional outputs of course respond to audience interest and demand, this relationship is harder to unpack. This book sets out to specifically evaluate and critically reflect on the community–academic collaborations that came out of the centenary, rather than provide an overview of how the First World War appeared across a vast array of cultural outputs during the centenary. As such it is both a look back on the centenary but also a contribution to discussions and considerations of such a pronounced period of national commemoration. We are excited by what analysis and critical reflection this book inspires regarding commemoration of the First World War and – more importantly – of other national commemorative events more generally.

Notes

1. Jackson, 'Remembrance Day'.
2. Ibid.
3. 'The People's Procession – A Nation's Thank You'.
4. Quinalt, 'The Cult of the Centenary'.
5. Cameron, 'Speech at Imperial War Museum'.
6. Smith, *Emotional Heritage*, 1.
7. Hobsbawn and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.
8. For the UNESCO definition of intangible cultural heritage, see UNESCO, 'Intangible Cultural Heritage'.
9. DCMS, '100 Years on from the Armistice'.
10. Ellison, 'World War One on the BBC', 125.
11. 'World War 1 Engagement Centres'.
12. Centre for Strategy and Evaluation Services, 'First World War Centenary Programme', i.
13. Each of the authors worked with the First World War Public Engagement Centres during the course of the Centenary. The AHRC funded us to examine the work of the centres, and our report, 'Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War: Learning and Legacies for the Future', can be found at https://reflections1418.exeter.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Reflections-on-the-Centenary-of-the-First-World-War-Learning-and-Legacies-for-the-Future.pdf, last accessed 24 June 2025.
14. CSES, 'First World War Centenary Programme', ii.
15. The original 14–18 NOW website is no longer available but information on the initiative can be found here https://artinpublic.art/programs/14-18-now, last accessed 13 June 2025.
16. Wildworks Theatre, *100: The Day Our World Changed*.
17. 'The Tower of London Remembers'.
18. Jones, 'The Tower of London Poppies'.
19. Cited in Kidd and Sayner, 'Unthinking Remembrance?', 74.
20. Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, 4.
21. Smith, *Emotional Heritage*, 2; Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 4.
22. Imperial War Museum, 'First World War Centenary Partnership'.
23. Imperial War Museum, 'Lives of the First World War'.
24. King's Dedicatory Speech, Crystal Palace, 9 June 1920. Cited in Condell, 'The Imperial War Museum', 149; Noakes, *War and the British*, 34.
25. Todman, "Something About Who We Are", 518.
26. Cornish, 'Imperial War Museums', 515.
27. Rothstein, 'Revisiting the Nightmares'.
28. Berger, Dicks and Fontaine, '"Community"', 337.
29. National Audit Office, *Heritage Lottery Fund*, 4; Brookfield, 'The People's Centenary', 119.
30. Brookfield and Weber, 'HLF Evaluation Methods'.
31. For a selection of projects supported, see National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), *First World War Centenary Projects*.
32. Cameron, 'Speech at Imperial War Museum'.

33. First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours Programme. One of the co-authors of this volume, Catriona Pennell, served on the programme's Academic Advisory Board and led the pupil evaluation from 2014 to 2019.
34. Pennell, '"To Leave a Wooden Poppy Cross of Our Own"', 173–89.
35. See Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*.
36. Connelly and Goebel, *Ypres*, 111.
37. Winter, *Remembering War*; Boffey, 'Thousands Gather'.
38. *Blackadder Goes Forth* was the fourth and final series of the popular BBC sitcom *Blackadder*. It was largely set in the trenches of the Western Front, and originally aired in 1989.
39. McCartney, 'The First World War Soldier', 219.
40. Cameron, 'Speech at Imperial War Museum'.
41. Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory'.
42. Ziino, "A Lasting Gift to His Descendants", 125.
43. Brighton and Hove Museums, *War Stories*.
44. Evans, 'Emotions of Family History', 311.
45. Imperial War Museum, 'Lives of the First World War'.
46. Todman, *The Great War*, xiii.
47. 'Mass Observation First World War Directive', November 2014.
48. Andrews, 'Tropes and Trench Cakes', 509.
49. The upper age limit for conscription was raised to fifty-one in the final months of the war. Conscription was never introduced in Ireland, although many Irish men fought as professional soldiers and as volunteers.
50. 'Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War', historian interviews, 2019.
51. Gove, 'Why Does the Left Insist on Belittling True British Heroes?'.
52. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, 2.
53. Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, 4.
54. Cameron, 'Speech at Imperial War Museum'.
55. Gove, 'Why Does the Left Insist on Belittling True British Heroes?'.
56. Noakes and Wallis, 'The People's Centenary?'.
57. Ibid., 57.
58. Ibid., 57–58.
59. Ibid., 58.
60. Mycock, 'The First World War Centenary in the UK'; Sumartojo, *Experiencing 11 November 2018*.
61. Cubitt and Moody, 'Centenaries, Museum Audiences and Discourses'.
62. Monger and Murray, *Reflections on the Commemoration*.
63. Haigh, "Every One (Re)Membered"; Wellings, Sumartojo and Graves, 'Commemorating Race and Empire', 7–20.
64. Macleod, 'Looking Forward'.