

“WE WILL REMEMBER THEM” MEMORY AND COMMEMORATION IN WAR MUSEUMS

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ABSTRACT

David Lowenthal has observed that in today's museums, “nothing seems too horrendous to commemorate” (Lowenthal 1985). Yet museums frequently portray a sanitised version of warfare. The twentieth century saw the development of commemorative traditions: customs and narratives by which individuals, groups and nations remember, commemorate and attempt to resolve memories of the traumatic experience that is war. These conventions often also govern museum interpretation of war.

This dissertation examines the representation of war in two very different museums: Britain's national Imperial War Museum, and the regional In Flanders Fields Museum at Ypres, Belgium. The Imperial War Museum tends to follow established commemorative traditions. In its recently-opened Holocaust exhibition, however, it has made use of a different style of commemoration. In Flanders Fields has consciously attempted to avoid traditional forms of commemoration, which could be seen as glamorising or sanitising war. This museum focuses on the experiences of individual soldiers of all nations, and tells visitors that they must learn from the First World War to work for peace.

“They shall not grow old,
As we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them,
Nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun
And in the morning
We will remember them.”
– Laurence Binyon (1869-1943)

INTRODUCTION

Museums play a significant role in commemoration. Their displays confer legitimacy on specific interpretations of history, and attribute significance to particular events (Noakes 1997). This dissertation aims to consider the extent to which museums of war act as memorials to those who were killed or served in war. Who exactly do they commemorate, and why do they take a commemorative approach to interpretation? Are military museums using outdated commemorative imagery and narratives of glory and sac-

rifice, which are no longer widely accepted by society?

The commemorative aspect of war museums directly affects their style of interpretation, particularly in relation to a number of related but distinct themes. Commemoration may focus on individuals, or may focus more on a group, whether the nation or a specific military unit. War museums have often been accused of sanitising or glamorising war, for example through their depiction of “heroes” and their portrayal of death. The museum's interpretation of technology can also play a part in creating a sanitised version of the past, and its portrayal of former enemies can reinforce wartime attitudes, both of which are part of traditional patterns of commemoration.

The two museums considered in this study are the Imperial War Museum's main museum at Lambeth Road, London, and the In Flanders Fields Museum at Ypres, Belgium (hereafter IWM and IFF respectively). The organisational differences between these two museums make them suitable for comparison. The IWM is a national war museum, covering twentieth-century conflicts involving Britain and the Commonwealth. In contrast, IFF is considerably smaller, and focuses on its immediate locality and a much narrower period of time (1914-1918).

This study draws on literature from museology, social studies, history and other disciplines. As far as I am aware, only two major books have been written in recent decades about military museums in general (Kavanagh 1994; Thwaites 1996). Both primarily cover institutional histories, without analysing interpretation in detail.

A variety of books have been published on war memorials and the commemoration of war (for example Mosse 1990; Gregory 1994; Winter 1995; King 1998, to name some of the more analytical studies). They include analysis of the imagery used in memorials, consideration of the processes through which memorials were created, the purposes they were built to serve, and the meanings which they have subsequently been given.

Holocaust museums and memorials are a related theme (Young 1993). Studies of Holocaust commemoration are relevant not just because such memorials also commemorate mass death and traumatic events, but due to the position of the Holocaust in memories of twentieth century warfare. A consider-

able amount has been written more generally about the representation of the Holocaust (Huysen 1995; Bartov 1996; Hayes 1999).

Other studies have examined issues of memory and commemoration in public traditions, museums, literature, film, popular culture and so on (Evans 1997; Winter 1999a; Forty 1999).

There is a growing awareness in museum circles that museums are sites for contesting power and defining the identities of members of society. The range of literature on this subject is considerable, but works on museum interpretation and controversial exhibitions in museums have been particularly useful (Macdonald 1996; Linenthal 1996; Henderson 1997).

SETTING THE SCENE: WAR, MEMORY, COMMEMORATION AND MUSEUMS

War is a controversial subject, not only because of the death, destruction and suffering involved. Memory of war often forms part of a nation's self-image. Taking a critical attitude towards past wars may therefore provoke accusations of being unpatriotic. War is an event that naturally tends to have radically changed the lives of people who have been affected by it, whether as civilians or as members of armed forces. Soldiers may nevertheless have enjoyed parts of their service, such as the experience of comradeship, and taking pride in personal and unit capabilities (Ellis 1990). Some individuals may even have enjoyed the experience of killing (Bourke 1999). At both a group and an individual level, war can produce a huge range of emotional responses: "sorrow, sacrifice, shame, pain, pride, suffering, victory, loss and genuine confusion about patriotism and the nation" (Hass 1998).

Attitudes to war, commemorative traditions, memory and indeed the academic study of history all develop over time as they are re-evaluated or contested. For example, Germany – a country which has a specific word for "coming to terms with the past," *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (Bartov 1997) – has been said to have undergone successive phases of either repressing or attempting to come to terms with its Nazi and Cold War history (Knischewski 1997). Changing memories are reflected in memorial construction. A memorial, whether it is a simple monument or a museum, "contains within it not only the superficial gesture towards remembrance and the dead but a wealth of information about the priorities, politics and sensibilities of those who built it. A memorial will tell us more about its builders than about those to whom it is dedicated" (Heathcote 1999).

Memory is a subject which has excited considerable academic interest in the past two decades (Huysen 1995). It is seen as a complex construct, a process used "to connect the past with the present and the future" (Evans 1997). It provides "security, authority, legitimacy and...identity in the present" (David Thelen, quoted in Hamilton 1994b). Memory

is intimately connected with present concerns: "the motives of memory are never pure" (Young 1993).

Memory functions both at an individual and a group level. Since a particular historical event may have different meanings for different individuals, the terms collective or collected memory are used to describe the construction of memory within groups (Young 1993; Hamilton 1994b). Group memories are formed through a process which reflects the power structures within those groups, and which can be reflected in the imagery of memorials (Hamilton 1994b). Memorials and memory have a symbiotic relationship. While a memorial is only given meaning through interaction with its viewers (Young 1993), in addition "a memorial gives shape to and consolidates public memory" (Hass 1998).

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a boom in the construction of war memorials in the United Kingdom (Rowlands 1999). The commemoration of the fiftieth anniversaries of the Second World War (1989-1995) saw "a sustained and popular expression of remembrance [which] has no precedent within British history" (Evans 1997). The British government was strongly criticised by veterans' associations for planning "celebrations" on the anniversary of D-Day (Noakes 1998), and it has been said that veterans' groups "have assumed ownership of national martial memory" (Gough 1998).

Other countries have commemorated events which had particular meaning to each: for Russia the Battle of Stalingrad, the Allied bombing of Dresden for Germany, and the Warsaw Uprising in Poland, for example. The same period saw renewed controversies over a number of aspects of the Second World War, including calls for apologies for Japanese treatment of prisoners of war and use of women from occupied states as prostitutes, and for the use of nuclear weapons against Japan. (Evans 1997) The fall of communism in Eastern Europe has allowed some memories of war to be publicly commemorated for the first time, or at least without being given a communist interpretation (Munk 1998).

The period since the Second World War has also seen the construction of Holocaust memorials and museums throughout the world, especially in the 1960s and the 1980s (Heathcote 1999). In the United Kingdom, one of the most recent examples is the Holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum.

The experience of military service is increasingly alien to today's Western European population, even at one generation's remove. War is increasingly associated with imperialism, racism, nationalism, patriotism and unquestioning sacrifice of life, which are regarded as morally ambiguous at the least. Some war museum curators may be out of step with large sections of society in this respect. For example, Peter Thwaites begins his book on military museums with the words "The British armed forces have a long and glorious tradition," suggestive of a more traditional attitude than may be held by much of the population (Thwaites 1996).

As a Museums and Galleries Commission review observed, British military museums “have the function (and this is particularly true of the regimental and corps museums) of acting as memorials, not simply to the wisdom or folly of particular foreign or domestic policy decisions, but also to individual courage, suffering and death” (MGC 1990). There are many types of military, war and armed forces museums, and it is unwise to make generalisations covering all of them. National war museums probably attract the greatest number of visitors. Another common type are museums relating to a single military unit. Others are under the control of local government, or are run by independent groups.

Museums have sometimes been created specifically to commemorate war dead, and many of these include the word “memorial” in their title. To take just one example, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum portrays the 1945 atomic attack on the city and its people (Wallace 1996).

A notable example of the controversy that can be caused when a museum departs from commemorative displays was that over the plans of the US National Air and Space Museum (NASM) to display the aircraft which dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, *Enola Gay*. In the early 1990s, NASM began designing an exhibition which would attempt to show this event from both American and Japanese perspectives, whilst also placing the event in the context of threat of nuclear destruction during the Cold War (Linenthal 1996).

NASM became embroiled in a controversy with several large US veterans’ associations over how the aircraft should be displayed, and what meanings the bombing should be given. NASM was accused by veterans of “hijacking” or “distorting” history through “politically correct curating” (Hogan 1996; Engelhardt 1996). They said that the museum’s job was “to tell history, not to rewrite it” (Dower 1996). Raising questions about the decision to use nuclear weapons in 1945 was seen by veterans’ groups as questioning the morality of their own war service, and as an attack on the memory of American war dead (Hogan 1996). NASM was forced to scale down the exhibition, and the Secretary of its governing body observed that, “In this anniversary year, veterans and their families were expecting...that the nation would honor and commemorate their valour and sacrifice. They were not looking for analysis...” (Boyer 1996). Academic historians subsequently accused the museum of producing “patriotically correct” history (Linenthal 1996).

HISTORIES OF THE TWO MUSEUMS

A museum’s history directly influences its approach to commemoration. The IWM was created in wartime, and may initially have been conceived simply as a means of sustaining support for the war effort. Although the suggestion of the museum’s director that the IWM should also be the national war

memorial was rejected, the committee charged with the establishment of the museum envisaged it as “a record and memorial” of all aspects of the conflict (Kavanagh 1994). Quite apart from the meanings it may have had for individual visitors, the museum also became a site for commemoration in another sense. During the inter-war years, the museum held memorial services on Armistice Day at the original plaster and wood Cenotaph (used in the Armistice Day commemorations in Whitehall in 1919, and replaced by the stone Cenotaph still in place today) which was part of the IWM’s displays (Kavanagh 1994).

From the start the IWM was “a consciously ‘national’ museum, with the aim of creating a sense of inclusion and membership of the nation amongst its members” (Noakes 1997). At its opening ceremony, The King said the IWM was not “a group of trophies won from a beaten army nor...a symbol of the pride of victory, but...an embodiment and lasting memorial of common effort and sacrifice” (quoted in Noakes 1997). The museum was intended to reinforce images of national unity and shared experience.

The speech of the First Commissioner of Works at the opening ceremony referred to the IWM as “not conceived as a monument to military glory, but rather as a record of toil and sacrifice; as a place of study to the technician in studying the development of armaments; to the historian as an assembly of material and archives to instruct his work; and to the people of the Empire, as a record of their toil and sacrifice through these fateful years” (quoted in Kavanagh 1994). Yet the museum’s message was ambiguous and controversial from the start. At the time of its opening, the museum was criticised in Parliament for being likely to perpetuate wartime attitudes (Kavanagh 1994).

The IWM’s oldest displays relate to the First and Second World Wars. More recently-opened exhibitions include Conflicts Since 1945, Victoria Cross and George Cross winners, The Secret War (espionage and special forces), The Holocaust and The Korean War. There are also several art galleries, and the Large Exhibits Gallery which contains aircraft, artillery other large artefacts.

IFF is located in Ypres’ Cloth Hall, a building which was destroyed during the First World War and later rebuilt (Martin 2000). Its displays cover the First World War on the Western Front, with a particular focus on the area around Ypres itself. The In Flanders Fields Museum opened in 1998, replacing the Ypres Salient Remembrance Museum, which it was felt had become outdated. The latter’s displays followed a more traditional war museum approach, and were described by a guidebook to the battlefields of the region as “displays of equipment, weapons, badges and insignia, medals and documents, photographs and maps...” (Coombs 1977).

IFF’s visitor numbers have increased considerably since the new museum opened. About half the

visitors are Belgian, and slightly over a third are British. The redevelopment was funded by town, provincial and national government, the European Union and private sources. The displays will be redeveloped once more in 2010, to ensure that the museum communicates effectively with the next generation of visitors (Martin 2000).

COMMEMORATION AND THE STATE

The custom of paying respect in public to ordinary soldiers killed in battle dates from the emergence of ideas of nation and citizenship during the second half of the nineteenth century. The First World War was the first conflict whose dead were consistently buried and commemorated on memorials as individuals, establishing the commemorative traditions which are still in use today (Mosse 1990). The commemoration of war dead serves two purposes: "affirmation and propagation of political ideas about wars and the nations which fight them" and "the need to express and resolve emotional traumas caused by war" (King 1998). The former is generally associated with the state, whereas the latter applies to individual mourners and veterans as much as to groups. Both communities and individuals need to give meaning to (make meaningful) their service in war and the suffering and losses they have undergone (King 1998).

In the twentieth century, war – and death in war – has been closely linked with the image and power of the state. In many conflicts, states have compelled individual citizens to serve in the armed forces, for example. The state shapes its relationship with the war dead through commemoration. The dead are presented as "the courageous, the heroes who made the supreme sacrifice. There is nothing to raise questions about the appropriateness of this sacrifice, or its necessity, or the conditions under which it occurred" (Hamilton 1994a).

George Mosse argues that after the First World War, "those concerned with the image and the continuing appeal of the nation worked at constructing a myth which would draw the sting from death and emphasise the meaningfulness of the fighting and sacrifice...The aim was to make an unpalatable past acceptable, important not just for the purpose of consolation but above all for the justification of the nation in whose name the war had been fought" (Mosse 1990). The state needs commemoration to justify death in war, not least so that it can call on its citizens to risk their lives in future wars (Bartov 1996).

War deaths represent the state's failure to protect its citizens. In its representation of war dead, the state therefore internalises the occurrence of their deaths: "the crime committed by enemies as an act of humiliating violence to the nation is symbolically inverted and claimed to be instead an expiatory sacrifice made on behalf of the nation for its own survival and renewal" (Rowlands 1999). In other

words, the nation is said to have sacrificed its young people, deriving regeneration as a result. Having been sacrificed on behalf of the nation, the dead gain the status of morally cleansed icons. Much of the controversy over the *Enola Gay* exhibition was because veterans believed that NASM was questioning the moral status of the war dead.

As will be discussed, in many of its displays the IWM follows relatively traditional commemorative narratives, and exhibits relatively unquestioning, pro-establishment views. This not necessarily surprising, since the museum is funded by central government, many of its Trustees are drawn from "the establishment," and it relies on government and military co-operation for the acquisition of many of the items it displays.

IFF, on the other hand, questions the traditional image of the benevolent state, governing wisely even in wartime. A focal point of IFF's first section is a display depicting two pairs of soldiers shaking hands through a "wall of prejudices," represented by a sheet of glass. Adjacent to this is a large text panel about the Christmas Truces which occurred spontaneously at many points along the Western Front at the end of 1914. Contrasted with these two displays are quotations from orders issued by the different armies concerning the maintenance of "offensive spirit" amongst the troops, such as: "every officer must be made to realise that he has an individual duty in repressing pessimistic talk and in encouraging the fighting instinct." The museum guidebook states that the panels on which these orders are displayed "are coloured red for shame... They tower above the soldiers who put aside their prejudices and hatred of the enemy for a brief moment... While identifiable as British and German, [the figures of soldiers] are all the same..." (IFF 1998). IFF implies that individual soldiers had more in common with each other than with their leaders; that although "the anonymous masses" (IFF 1998) had initially given their consent to go to war, the conflict was unnaturally prolonged by political and military leaders, beyond the point at which popular hatreds had worn off.

Despite its intention to promote peace, IFF is not a peace museum. The majority of the displays are about the effects of war, although the guidebook does discuss causes of war such as misplaced patriotism, popular enthusiasm for war or for revenge, and the influence of political and military leaders (IFF 1998). Examining the aspects of modern societies which lead to war could be uncomfortable, as it could lead to questions about the continued presence of such aspects in contemporary society. Omer Bartov argues that the displays of military museums reflect "one of the most characteristic components of Western civilisation: its obsession with and relentless utilisation of war and violence" (Bartov 1996). Bartov criticises museums for failing to admit that the industrial killing of the world wars and the Holocaust are "a product of modernity", of the modern bureaucratic state (Bartov 1996).

TECHNOLOGY VERSUS REALITY

One aspect of the memory of war in military museums is the focus on technology rather than other aspects of warfare, just as traditional commemoration is selective in the way it portrays war. Technology has played a considerable part in warfare in recent centuries, since the possession of sophisticated technology can confer a major military advantage. However, war museums also tend to focus on technology because it is considered an uncontroversial and “safe” subject (Lubar 1997). Technological parameters can be measured precisely, and are not open to moral debate. Technological achievements are equated – whether consciously or not – with social progress, and are not put into context (Kohn 1995; Kavanagh 1990).

Technological capabilities and advancement have been said to form a major part of modern militarism, replacing more traditional militarist concepts of bravery, masculinity and glory (Jabri 1996). Focussing on technological performance inevitably neglects many other – often negative – meanings, and divorces objects from their original usage and from the people associated with them. War museums frequently also focus on uniforms, “as if the most remarkable thing about so many thousands if not millions of people killed in battle is the clothes in which they died” (Uzzell 1989). Many military objects, connected as they are to human tragedy, possess “a potentially powerful emotional aura” (Liddle 1997), which nevertheless museums rarely explore.

Some of the multiple meanings that can be given to a technological artefact are illustrated by the case of NASM’s Second World War German V-2 missile. For many years, the missile was displayed in accordance with NASM’s custom of interpreting objects in terms of the ever-improving development of aerospace technology. In 1990, however, the display was re-designed to describe the civilian deaths these weapons caused, and the suffering of the slave labourers who were forced to construct them. This display also included the first photograph of a dead body to appear in NASM (Linenthal 1996).

Much of the Imperial War Museum’s displays are technology-focused, especially in the museum’s Large Exhibits Gallery. Here, guns, tanks and aircraft are displayed clean and undamaged, presenting a sanitised version of war, which emphasises technology rather than the context in which the objects were used, the people who made and used them, and the effects they had on their intended targets. The artefacts’ captions concentrate on their technical details.

In places, the IWM does attempt to portray the reality of war. The ramp leading down to the First and Second World War galleries is flanked by photographs and quotations illustrating the suffering caused by war, contrasted with the militaristic, aggressive or naïve attitudes which contribute towards conflicts. The First and Second World War galleries

include references to individual suffering, such as examples of the last letters written home by soldiers before they were killed in battle. The Trench Experience, a walk-through mock-up of a First World War trench, conveys some idea – to the extent that it is possible in a museum – of the appalling conditions of trench warfare. However, the attempt at realism is reduced and trivialised by a notice at the exit, stating “This way to the rest of the war.” The Blitz Experience, a walk-through reconstruction of bombed Second World War London, is sanitised to some degree. For example, direct references to people being killed are very few, and the air-raid shelter in which visitors start the Experience is warm and dry, unlike the originals often were (Noakes 1997). Yet the reconstruction does at least convey the damage caused to property and the disruption inflicted on civilian lives.

These relatively realistic portrayals of war are eclipsed, however, by many of the other exhibits. Many of the displays are chronological or thematic narratives, which are illustrated using relevant uniforms, weapons and other items of equipment. The uniforms are all as clean as the day they were issued to the troops. The weapons are displayed neatly in rows, each item neatly labelled. A display on First World War medical services, for example, comprises medical instruments and other equipment, several dummies wearing pristine nurse’s and soldier’s uniforms, and non-graphic photographs of (apparently lightly) wounded men. A nearby display on “The cost of the war” uses traditional commemorative images, such as a standard tombstone. In the more recently designed galleries, such as those on Conflicts Since 1945, more graphic images of war have sometimes been included, but the main visual impact is still made by display cases stuffed full of weapons and uniforms.

It may not be possible to create a museum of war that is anti-war, since such museums tend to “display the tools, not the destruction wreaked by those tools” (Bartov 1996). IFF has attempted to avoid emphasising technology and glamorising or glorifying war. The main exhibit about the weapons of the First World War includes items such as machine guns, helmets and a trench mortar. In contrast to the IWM’s freshly painted and shiny exhibits, many of these objects are displayed in a rusty condition, which prevents them from being considered in purely aesthetic terms. No captions are given for these items, so that the visitor is not prompted to view them simply as examples of technological achievement. The display is surmounted by a model of a horse, wearing on its back a pannier for carrying artillery shells. The mud-splattered horse is rearing in pain, its leg caught in barbed wire, conveying the suffering caused by war. Also included is a large exhibit about gas warfare.

TEACHING THROUGH COMMEMORATION

IFF’s chairman writes that “The City of Ieper [Ypres] hopes that this museum will contribute to

the world-wide pursuit of peace and tolerance” (IFF 1998). The museum tries to achieve this through showing the impact of war on the lives of individual soldiers and civilians. IFF’s advertising flyer urges the visitor to “Discover what it feels like to be a victim of the conflict... You can dig deep into the past and draw lessons from it for the future. Because in war, everyone is a loser. The message is: continue to work for peace” (IFF 1999b). IFF is also described as “a warning against self-delusion and an exhortation to constant vigilance” (IFF 1998).

This is quite a contrast to the IWM, and it may be the case that “recovery of the past” primarily takes place in countries which were defeated or occupied in war (Hamilton 1994b). With the exception of attacks on London itself, the IWM is located at a distance from the events it interprets. Geographical distancing from sites of trauma may assist in the mourning process in the same way that gaining emotional distance – traditionally provided through war memorials – is necessary to resolve traumatic memories (Rowlands 1999).

IFF’s location on the site of the conflict that it recalls may therefore be significant. Ypres has been designated as a Peace City. IFF’s chairman points out the contrast between Ypres’ quaint peacefulness today, and the locals’ knowledge that during the First World War the town was destroyed (“nine centuries of history was wiped out in the space of four years”) and half a million people killed in the region (IFF 1998). The impact of the war is still evident in the Belgian landscape, most notably in the form of cemeteries, which are still sites of pilgrimage. Every evening, the Last Post is sounded at Ypres’ Menin Gate, the British memorial to missing soldiers, reviving memories of the war (Derez 1997).

IFF’s themes of European unity and the need to work for peace are echoed in other continental museums of war, such as the following French examples. The guidebook of La Coupole (a museum at a Second World War German V-2 rocket launching site) states that “this history is the collective memory of all Europeans, it is a common heritage of a Europe which has learnt over the last fifty years to live in peace and friendship... Designed by the Nazis to contribute to the destruction of democracy, [La Coupole] springs back to life today as a place of remembrance and education for the peaceful Europe of today” (Le Maner 1997). The Caen Normandy Memorial aims to be a “beacon for peace,” through its portrayal of the outbreak and consequences of the Second World War (CNM 1989). The Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne aims to represent individual war dead of the First World War and to break down barriers of nationality, rather than perpetuating traditional divisions and animosities (Bartov 1996).

One of the messages of the IWM’s Holocaust exhibition is similar to that of IFF: that people should ensure that such an event never occurs again. This belief is stated by several of the Holocaust survivors whose video testimony is shown in the exhibition.

In the Holocaust exhibition guidebook, the IWM’s Director-General urges the visitor to “ponder its deeper meaning and the lessons it offers for the future” (IWM 2000a). In 1996, announcing the creation of the exhibition, the Chairman of Trustees of the IWM stated that “students of human nature will realise only too well how... these ghastly manifestations of hate, cruelty and indifference can come to the fore and be stirred up, which is why it is so vital that the truth about this particular tyranny, brutality and genocide should never be forgotten by future generations” (quoted in Charman 1996). The Beit Hashoah Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles takes the concept of learning from the Holocaust to a further degree, using it as an example to teach against the evils of prejudice and intolerance in modern America (Young 1993; Patraha 1996).

One could ask why the IWM’s other displays do not emphasise the need to prevent war, to the same extent that its Holocaust exhibition does relating to genocide: As early as the late 1940s, comparisons were being drawn between the Holocaust of the Jews and the threat of nuclear holocaust (Coker 1994). The IWM’s Director-General states that the main displays “exist to record and explain the two world wars and the many other conflicts fought since 1945” (IWM 1996). These conflicts are not offered as events from which lessons can be learnt, but as part of a common past: “all our stories” (IWM 1996). Apart from a few small displays about pacifism and conscientious objectors, the only real anti-war message at the IWM is in the Peace Garden outside the building, where a memorial records the text of a speech made by the Dalai Lama when opening the garden: “human survival depends on living in harmony and on always choosing the path of non-violence in resolving our differences.”

In the context of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Vivian Patraha suggests that the Holocaust can be used as a justification for American participation in the Second World War: “the conferring of liberation [to concentration camp internees] becomes the story of American democracy. To assert this story entails backgrounding the masses of people who died before liberation... It entails foregrounding the assumption that waging war can actually accomplish something and, more precisely, that saving Jews, Gypsies, Leftists, Catholic Dissenters, Homosexuals, and Polish forced labour from the Nazis was one of the goals of World War II, rather than a by-product of winning the war by invading the enemies’ territory” (Patraha 1996).

This means that the Second World War can be remembered as a moral war, what has been called “The Good War.” The Good War is said to be “one of the few remaining anchoring points of [American] national mythology” (Young 1996). It is part of a narrative which states that America’s conduct of the Second World War was just and moral, legitimising America’s 1990s self-image as the leader of the world. Yet the two world wars could also be remem-

bered as occasions when states (on all sides) involved their citizens in conflicts which cost millions of lives. The IWM's traditional commemorative role prevents such a direct interpretation.

NATIONAL IMAGE, MYTH AND DEPICTIONS OF THE ENEMY

Benedict Anderson argues that all nations are "imagined communities" (Anderson 1991). War is "a constitutive element of collective identity, reproduced in collective memory through national 'narratives' of past glories in the face of threats against national sovereignty and survival" (Jabri 1996). As Britain's national museum of war, the IWM plays a part in the creation of a sense of nationhood, and consequently commemorates war in a traditional manner.

Constructed national narratives are myths, in the sense that this word can be used "not [as] a synonym for falsehood...[but as] a term to identify the simplified, dramatised story that has evolved in our society to contain the meanings of the war that we can tolerate, and so make sense of its incoherences and contradictions" (Hynes 1999). Myths about war are constructed from a variety of sources, including wartime propaganda, veterans and society as a whole (Kohn 1999). For example, a historian notes that "Americans have long believed that how they have behaved in [military] service and in battle reflected their character as a people and their virtue as a nation" (Kohn 1999). Commemorative traditions add to the construction of myths, through the virtues such as patriotism and bravery which they attribute to war dead, and by association, to other veterans.

Myths are notably present at the IWM. The IWM's flyer for its Spitfire Summer exhibition, marking the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Battle of Britain, provides an example (IWM 2000b). Described as a "commemorative exhibition" about "Britain's 'finest hour'" (a phrase from wartime propaganda), its very title alludes to one of the mythic icons of the war, the Spitfire. The flyer is illustrated with famous images such as propaganda posters of Sir Winston Churchill and members of the RAF and WAAF, a London bus in a bomb crater, and Tower Bridge with smoke billowing in the background. Surmounting the images is an extract from Churchill's famous "We shall fight them on the beaches" speech.

The IWM's Blitz Experience exhibit – part of a related myth – has been said to present a sanitised version of the Blitz, in which Londoners survived through unity and cheerfulness, representing on a smaller scale the image of the unity of whole nation during that conflict (Noakes 1997). Given that the IWM has to interpret a broad range of history, both chronologically and in subject matter, it is perhaps not surprising that it uses mythical imagery. Myths are by definition comparatively well known to the public, and it therefore makes sense for the museum to use them in its advertising literature. The museum

does not create these myths, but – consciously or not – finds it hard to escape from them.

National myths or narratives rely on a duality of remembering/forgetting (Anderson 1991). "Defining groups or nations always necessitates a dual process of inclusion and exclusion...forgetting is one of the most powerful forces that shape national remembering." (Hamilton 1994b) It is notable, for example, that while the IWM has an exhibition commemorating the anniversary of the Battle of Britain, the museum does not have an equivalent exhibition commemorating RAF Bomber Command's bombing raids on continental Europe. Bomber Command has been marginalised in representations of the Second World War, with a statue controversially being erected to its commander-in-chief, Sir Arthur Harris, only in 1992 (Noakes 1998). The commemoration of war requires a relatively simple, morally uncomplicated narrative (Young 1996).

In contrast to the IWM, IFF tries to portray the First World War equally from Belgian, British, German and French points of view, as well as from a range of perspectives, of the soldier, nurse, ordinary civilian or politician (IFF 1999b). There is no single, national myth that can be used. However, the peace message of IFF's displays may reflect the way that Belgian society has come to terms with the First World War. A Belgian historian writes that for a long time, Belgium's memory of the First World War was overshadowed by that of the Second, with its debates about resistance and collaboration. More recently "a young generation has come to the fore, wanting to rescue the war from oblivion, to stress its local importance...Yet there is no patriotism involved; the preoccupation with 'fatherland' and *patrie* has lost all its meaning. Ypres is now associated with other martyred cities such as Mostar and Dubrovnik. This is a new, popular pacifism that nevertheless has its roots in the war experience of previous generations in the Ypres Salient" (Derez 1997).

Wartime morale and "fighting spirit," whether of small bodies of soldiers or of the entire nation, depend on maintaining particular images of the friendly and enemy sides. On the friendly side, identities of individuals are effaced through polarising identity in terms of inclusion and exclusion (Jabri 1996), represented visually by the wearing of uniforms. In order to legitimise the use of violence against the enemy, the latter must be dehumanised, and portrayed as evil and inferior (Jabri 1996). Warring states need to retain this self/other polarity: "Any representation which blurs the inclusion/exclusion boundary breaks down certainties constructed in the name of war and forms a counter-discourse which deconstructs and delegitimises war and thereby fragments myths of unity, duty and conformity" (Jabri 1996).

These attitudes often persist after wars end. A visitor survey conducted in the mid-1990s at Australia's national war museum, the Australian War Memorial, found that visitors who either had or had not been personally involved in the Second World

War had very different attitudes towards former enemies of Australia, specifically the Japanese (Ferguson 1997). Veterans and others affected by war believed that any attempt to humanise the former enemy would be inappropriate, and might have the effect of trying to excuse Japanese maltreatment of Australian prisoners of war. In contrast, the other group of visitors wished to understand the “motivations, culture and behaviour” of former enemies, to be able to see the war from the enemy’s point of view, and to “focus on the humanity” of the enemy (Ferguson 1997). With this survey in mind, the museum has decided to humanise the enemy, for example by referring to individual enemy soldiers by name, and by “using artefacts, objects and photos that communicate our shared humanity” (Ferguson 1997).

In its *Enola Gay* exhibition, NASM intended to humanise Japanese casualties of the atomic bomb attack, but was accused by veterans’ groups of attempting to manipulate visitors’ emotions (Dower 1996). Plans in 1997 for The Peace Memorial Museum of the War Dead in Tokyo visualised that only Japanese war dead would be commemorated. This ignored the countries occupied by Japan during the Second World War, and by implication could glorify or legitimise Japan’s aggressive foreign policy during that conflict (Duffy 1997).

Perhaps unsurprisingly – given its prerogative – the IWM focuses primarily on British and Commonwealth forces. The uniforms and equipment of foreign armed forces are displayed, but little attempt is made to enable visitors to empathise with former enemies. For example, although the number of German civilians killed by Allied bombing during the Second World War is briefly mentioned, the only specific references to personal suffering and death are of British and Commonwealth personnel.

In contrast, IFF takes pains to portray all nationalities equally, without concentrating on Belgian or Allied soldiers. IFF’s database of individual life histories (described below) includes people from both the Allied and German sides, for example, and it is not possible for the visitor to choose the nationality of the individual they are allocated. The “wall of prejudices” and Christmas Truces displays, mentioned above, attempt to break down pre-conceptions about former enemies.

PORTRAYAL OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN COMMEMORATION: AS VICTIM, HERO OR MARTYR

State commemoration of war dead tends to deprive individual soldiers of their individuality. This is typified by war cemeteries, in which uniform gravestones are placed in regimented lines (Mosse 1990). This loss of individuality is part of the process by which the state takes control of the memory of death in war: “nationalist war memorials...turn traumatic individual deaths into

acts of national celebration and assertions of collective value” (Rowlands 1999).

Drawing on other commemorative practices, there are three main ways that individual war dead can be represented in museums: as heroes, as victims, and as martyrs sacrificed for the nation. Military museums traditionally focus on two types of individuals: those who have won awards for bravery, and those who have reached high rank. Such displays are shrines to the elite of the nation or military unit. “Heroes” play an important part in national memory, each being “a cluster of national meaning, in the sense that meaning is imputed to particular persons in order to serve as figures of national bravery, sacrifice and unity” (V. Hedetoft, quoted in Jabri 1996). Heroes represent the qualities attributed to both those who have died in war, and to the nation as a whole.

Alternatively, war dead can be portrayed in traditional commemorative terms, as martyrs who have made a sacrifice for the nation (Rowlands 1999). This acknowledges loss, but implies that the dead did not die in vain, and that something has nevertheless been gained: a “sense of collective loss” is transformed into “an object of devotion and passion” (Rowlands 1999). A third portrayal is as victims. Generally the three categories are mutually exclusive, although heroes and sacrificed martyrs can form different parts of the same narrative.

The IWM has a gallery dedicated to winners of the Victoria Cross and George Cross, the highest British military decorations. There is a small display about each individual, with a caption recounting the deeds by which the individual won their medal, sometimes with medals and other relics displayed. George Mosse argues that after the First World War, military cemeteries and war memorials became “the sacred spaces of a new civic religion” (Mosse 1990). Medal galleries are in the same tradition of civic shrines, whether to the regiment and its traditions in the case of regimental museums (Jones 1996) or to the nation in the case of the IWM.

The IWM’s first permanent exhibition on the Holocaust was about Bergen-Belsen camp, and opened in 1991 (it is currently being revised). This display removed the individuality and humanity of Holocaust victims, and concentrated on their victim status. This is said to be representative of the wider portrayal of the Holocaust in British society, in which for many decades the Holocaust was typically used primarily as an indictment of the Nazi regime, with an emphasis on the British as liberators. (Kushner 1997)

IFF asks the visitor to “Discover what it feels like to be a victim of the conflict.” (IFF 1999b) Yet IFF’s portrayal of First World soldiers as victims is as much a construction as the IWM’s more traditional commemorative narratives. As one historian suggests, “No man with a weapon in his hand can be entirely a victim...every [author of war memoirs] believes himself to have been to some extent an agent in his personal war and agents aren’t victims.

The victim-view is a later reaction to wars by persons who weren't there; understandable and humane, but wrong" (Hynes 1999).

Although IFF does display some artefacts which were once owned by or relate to "heroes" (medal-winners and commanders), these are concentrated in a single display, which the guidebook calls "traditional icons of war" (IFF 1998). These include a sword belonging to the King of England's cousin, who was killed in battle, a British general's cap, and the tea set of British commander Sir Douglas Haig. As with the objects in the remainder of the museum, these items are uncaptioned. So too is a nearby case containing medals for bravery, including the highest British and German awards.

Prior to the recent re-display, these objects were exhibited in a more traditional manner. A 1977 guidebook describes how "Relics of some of the personalities connected with the war are included: Sir John French... is represented by his banner and a pair of shining boots; Lord Plumer's hat rests nearby; the travelling tea service presented by Lady Haig in memory of her husband, and the sword of Prince Maurice of Battenberg presented by his sorrowing mother" (Coombs 1977).

IFF's new display deconstructs the traditional narratives of war. Deprived of the usual caption information about these objects, they are viewed in a different light. For example, Haig's tea set is the centre-piece of a display of four soldiers sitting down to a "picnic," an ironic reference to the comparison of war to a picnic made in 1914 by British Captain Julian Grenfell (IFF 1998).

The European Museum Forum awarded IFF the 2000 Council of Europe Prize for presenting the First World War as "a European tragedy, rather than a stage for the performance of heroic deeds" (quoted in *Museums Journal* June 2000). IFF consciously focuses on "ordinary people." The museum guidebook states: "We want to show the war as it was experienced by ordinary soldiers, young men and women, mothers and fathers of this region. Your visit will provide you with a clear account of the historical events, but more than that, you will share the company of people who were involved in one way or another in the Great War. They will walk beside you and tell you their moving stories" (IFF 1998).

Rather than focussing on the large-scale narrative of the war, which is dealt with on separate touch-screens, most of IFF's exhibits cover the everyday necessities of life, such as what soldiers ate, and aspects of life behind the front line. One caption asks: "How did ordinary people survive?" Text panels are dominated by quotations from letters, diaries and published books of people involved in the war. These quotations mostly describe emotions and day-to-day events, from a variety of points of view. With their ticket, each visitor receives a booklet containing all these quotations, so that one of the main things visitors take away from the museum is about the experiences of individuals. In contrast,

chronological and national narratives are emphasised at the IWM.

IFF is constructing a database of life histories of individual people who were in some way involved in the First World War near Ypres, including civilians and soldiers of all nationalities. The museum's intention is to compile a representative selection of biographies of ordinary people from that period, whose testimony would otherwise be lost. The museum guidebook appeals to visitors to provide suitable information which they may have about their relatives who were involved in the war. Thus this archive will be constructed by the museum's visitors as an exercise in collective memory (IFF 1998), mediated, of course, by museum staff.

On entering the museum, each visitor is given a token bearing the name of one of the people on the database. This token can be used at each of three sets of terminals, which provide information on successive stages of the individual's life. This is a technique used in other museums, such as The Beit Hashoah Museum of Tolerance and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, to enable visitors to empathise with individuals caught up in huge events (Young 1993). IFF's biographies describe each individual's life before and, if he or she survived, after the war. The war often dominates the narrative of each individual's life, but their war experiences are put into context, enabling the visitor to empathise with them as a fellow human being rather than someone whose life is only given meaning through having experienced the war.

In one of the first parts of IFF, the visitor walks underneath a collage of photographs of individuals and small groups of people. They include soldiers of several nationalities, including Germans, and men, women and children in civilian clothing. The display reinforces the fact that these were all individuals, whether in military uniform or not, with their own concerns and experiences. The display perhaps invites comparison with the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Tower of Faces, a collection of over 1,000 photographs of the inhabitants of a Jewish town, who were murdered in 1941 (Martin 1998). This display represents the people as they wished to be remembered, rather than simply as victims (Patraka 1996), although it is on a much greater scale than the display in Ypres.

DEALING WITH MEMORIES: TO REMEMBER OR FORGET?

IFF's guidebook states that "This museum permits the voices to be heard of those who have gone through it all" (IFF 1998). One of the museum's managers states that "Now that the generation of the First World War is disappearing, a museum must come in its place" (IFF 1998). IFF's predecessor, the Ypres Salient Remembrance Museum, in some ways resembled the IWM in its treatment of its subject, if not its size, through its concentration on the technol-

ogy and detritus of war. In contrast, IFF seeks to bear witness to the experiences and effects of the First World War.

The implication is that IFF is giving voice to previously unknown individuals who have been denied the opportunity to make public their experiences of the First World War. This could be seen as a counter-memorial in the way that it restores their individuality and humanity. As a comparison, the counter-memorial Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington uses various devices to ensure that individual deaths are not subsumed within a national or state narrative (Hass 1998).

The concept of enabling individuals to bear witness, or give testimony, is particularly associated with representation of the Holocaust. Annette Wieviorka calls the period from the late 1970s to the 1990s "the era of the witness" in that this has been a period of intensive recording of Holocaust survivors' memories (Wieviorka 1999). By the year 2000, Steven Spielberg's Visual History of the Shoah Foundation will have collected 50,000 interviews with Holocaust survivors, which will be made available in digital format, for example (Wieviorka 1999).

The act of testifying is often of considerable personal importance to Holocaust survivors (Wieviorka 1999), who may only have found themselves able to talk about their experiences in recent times (Young 1993; Bartov 1996). It is also an attempt to preserve memories which will otherwise be lost. The use of oral history in museums, in spite of its known shortcomings and frequent inaccuracies, reflects the special status given in the commemorative tradition to war dead, and by extrapolation to veterans and Holocaust survivors (Finkelstein 2000).

The IWM has an extensive oral history collection (IWM 1996), and makes frequent use of oral history recordings, particularly in its most recent exhibitions on the Holocaust and the Korean War. The museum has video-recorded interviews with Holocaust survivors. At various points in the exhibition, video monitors show extracts from a number of interviews relating to a particular subject, such as experiences in the ghettos. As the visitor moves through the exhibition, the same interviewees are seen several times, talking about different topics, making them familiar to the visitor and increasing the visitor's ability to empathise with them.

Museums of war sometimes imply that today's citizens have an obligation to learn about their subject, just as the museum has an obligation to tell it. The posters advertising the IWM's Holocaust exhibition state: "You need to know." IFF's chairman writes that "The generation of eyewitnesses has gone. It has fallen to us [IFF, and his generation of Belgians as a whole] to pass on their testimony of what war is really like" (IFF 1998). IFF's advertising flyer tells the visitor that "This is a visit that you will remember for a long time, and in one sense you owe it to yourself" (IFF 1999b). At one point, IFF even suggests that the message is coming from the dead

themselves: the museum is "A message from the people who fought and were brutally killed to those who would like the war to go on forever" (IFF 1998).

Not only does "time heal" (Uzzell 1998) but it also leads to fading "twilight memories" as generations die (Huysen 1995). Ensuring the dead will not be forgotten is one function of memorials (Rowlands 1999), yet forgetting is part of the process of healing and renegotiating memories. The purpose of a memorial is as much to resolve traumatic memories as to preserve them. For both individuals and for societies affected by death in war, commemoration needs to achieve a degree of closure and resolution of suffering as part of the mourning process, through "the creation of an appropriate memory" (Rowlands 1999), or what Michael Rowlands calls "remembering to forget" (Rowlands 1999).

Commemoration in museums, such as in the IWM's Holocaust exhibition and IFF's displays, therefore may represent (potentially contradictory) attempts both to come to terms with the past and to recall a past which is in danger of being forgotten; possibly even an attempt by new generations to claim the past – from survivors and witnesses – as their own.

External representations of memory, such as memorials and commemorative exhibits, may reflect fading memories or a desire to forget, since the building of memorials may decrease one's perceived obligation to remember (Young 1993; Hamilton 1994b). Building more memorials may therefore not be a solution to the problem of remembrance, particularly if it trivialises those memories or reduces them to clichés (Huysen 1995). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington caused controversy when it was built, however, because it did not use traditional heroic imagery. Instead it had a "capacity...to recall rather than resolve painful memories" (Rowlands 1999). In the case of the Vietnam War, which for many Americans was still an unresolved issue, this kind of memorial was widely needed (Hass 1998).

One aspect of the commemorative tradition is that the reality of death is not directly mentioned. This partly has its origins in the codes of euphemisms used by the military in war to cushion the psychological impact of violence (Keegan 1976; Coker 1994). Calling for the use in museums of what he calls "hot interpretation" (Uzzell 1989; Uzzell 1998), or interpretation which makes emotional impact, David Uzzell comments that "the injury and death of men, women and children in civil and international wars ought to make us sad, angry, upset and all the other emotions which make us human beings" (Uzzell 1998). Yet museums often portray war in relatively unemotional terms, in line with the commemorative traditions referred to above.

IFF specifically seeks to make an emotional impact on its visitors: "We have avoided the traditional lists of names, facts and dates. We want you to become

actively involved and above all, to be touched as a human being. We hope that this emotional approach will help you to understand what it is you are really seeing..." (IFF 1998).

The use of hot interpretation could interfere with the creation of "appropriate memories" and the duality of remembering/forgetting. NASM tried to use hot interpretation in its *Enola Gay* exhibition, but found that this transgressed national myths.

Museums may feel more able to use hot interpretation in interpreting the Holocaust than in interpretations of warfare because wars are part of national traditions and constructed heroic narratives, but it is very difficult to portray the Holocaust in a heroic or triumphant light, even in the case of resistance to the Nazis (Huysen 1995). This is why Holocaust memorials tend to be anti- or minimalist memorials (Forty 1999; Rowlands 1999).

Museums of war have to tread a difficult path. The most common exhibition practices present an image that may sanitise or glorify war, or at least inadequately consider its consequences. Yet dealing with the dark realities of war in a museum may mean questioning some of society's iconic, commemorative narratives. Military museums may be pandering to the voyeuristic tendencies of their visitors by exhibiting the brutal realities of war – to the extent that it is possible to recreate this in a museum. Realistic interpretation of war may be tasteless (Wilkinson 1991) or may be incompatible with museums' role to entertain as well as educate (Uzzell 1998). Representations of conflict may in fact simply decrease people's sensitivity to violence, especially in the context of other media representations of violence, both real and simulated (Bartov 1996).

The IWM's representation of the Holocaust is very graphic in places, with considerable a number of photographs and several films showing piles of naked corpses. On several occasions, the museum shows photographs or film of people actually being murdered. Philip Gourevitch (many of whose family were killed in the Holocaust) writes concerning similar graphic images at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, that "I cannot comprehend how anyone can enthusiastically present this constant recycling of slaughter, either as a memorial to those whose deaths are exposed or as an edifying spectacle for the millions of visitors a year who will be exposed to them. Didn't these people suffer enough the first time their lives were taken from them?" (Gourevitch 1999).

Elsewhere in the IWM, little comes near matching the graphic images of the Holocaust exhibition. Graphic portrayals of death may be considered acceptable, even necessary, given this exhibition's didactic function, but similar images seem to be thought inappropriate in more conventionally commemorative displays on war; unless – it seems – it is enemy suffering that is being portrayed. The *Conflicts Since 1945* exhibition includes video footage of the Gulf War. This includes footage of Iraq tanks and positions being destroyed by Allied fire. One of

the most graphic film sequences is from the perspective of a machine-gunner who is firing at several people running on the ground. Seen through a thermal imaging camera, they are visible only as person-shaped blobs, while the gunner's fire shows up as streaks of light. The viewer watches in appalled fascination as the men fall dead or wounded; will the last man manage to get away? This truly is modern war as a "spectator sport" (Shaw 1997).

One of IFF's most graphic sections is an audio-visual display, "No Man's Land," which attempts to reproduce some of the emotions experienced in battle. The visitor stands in a room, which has original and re-enacted film projected on the walls, accompanied by sound effects of gunfire, explosions and voices. A representation of muddy ground is visible through glass panels in the floor. There is perhaps a risk of over-dramatisation, however. Accustomed as many visitors will be to simulated images of war in films and on television (Bartov 1996), the exhibit could simply be compared to a poorly-made war movie.

CONCLUSION

Memory and commemoration are constructed according to the social, cultural and political nature, as well as the needs and experiences, of the society and individuals producing them (Winter 1999b). This applies to museums (and their staff) no less than it does to other individuals and groups of people. When interpreting war and wartime history, museums therefore have a tendency to follow traditional customs of commemoration, which have developed over the course of the twentieth century.

Despite the fact that there are "commemorative traditions," like all aspects of memory commemoration is often contested, or at least is subject to a variety of meanings. Memorials have often been constructed in an attempt to bring together the varied meanings that death in war has for those left alive, or at least to provide a focus for commemoration which can be given different meanings by different people (King 1998). Memorials are intended as much to consolidate and draw together (i.e. construct) current shared memories of societies – to create a common past – as to remember those commemorated (Young 1993).

After the First World War, commemoration of war, expressed nationally through Armistice Day, was often intended to validate the war, and veterans were increasingly sidelined (Gregory 1994). Since the Second World War, veterans have come to hold perhaps the dominant influence over how the memory of war is represented in public places (Gough 1998). The decades to come will see further changes in commemoration, as war veterans (and Holocaust survivors) decline in number. Their place will be taken by new generations of today's so-called "post-military society" (Shaw 1997) who have very different attitudes to war (Ferguson 1997). The latter may increasingly expect anti-memorials rather than memo-

rials to war, and may expect museums to deconstruct the representation of war. More traditional attitudes will persist, however, in people who will seek memorial forms – including war museums – which can act as “surrogate experiences” so that they can “remember a world they never knew [and]...locate themselves in a continuous past” (Young 1993). In the future, memory of war is therefore likely to become more contested, rather than less.

What implications does this have for war museums? As has been related, the Imperial War Museum uses traditional forms of commemoration, formed by society in order to deal with an often traumatic past and create “an appropriate memory” (Rowlands 1999). The war dead are portrayed *en masse* and accorded respect, but individual war dead and individual suffering are rarely mentioned. The exception is in the cases of “heroes” (leaders and the brave), whose suffering is portrayed in their role as martyrs for their nation. Wartime attitudes are maintained: to do otherwise could be seen as disrespectful. This is manifested in the use of “myths,” or national images, and in the continued dehumanisation of former enemies. Finally, technology and uniforms play a major part in the narrative, interpreted in ways that do not raise difficult questions about war.

In Flanders Fields Museum has attempted to break away from these commemorative traditions, and in many ways has been successful. War dead and all those who served are portrayed as individuals, whichever army they belonged to. The dead are still considered respectfully, but the reality of their suffering and death is not disguised. As in the Imperial War Museum’s Holocaust exhibition, those who experienced past events pass their testimony on to the visitor, bearing witness to the past. In Flanders Fields uses their testimony to illustrate the horrors of war and the need for peace. Perhaps such didactic styles of interpretation could not be used to cover more recent wars. For the majority of people in Western Europe, the First World War now seems very distant in time, and the Holocaust is such an unimaginable event that it too is very distant from the experiences and conceptions of modern generations.

Over the past decade, the Imperial War Museum may have begun to move away from traditional methods of commemoration. Possibly in another decade or two, it will bear more resemblance to In Flanders Fields, yet as a national museum, this will depend to a high degree on national attitudes to war and commemoration. Whatever happens, one can be certain that war will never be an easy subject for museums to deal with.

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