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Witnessing the Great War in Britain: Centenaries and the Making of Modern Identities

Abstract

As the centenaries of the events of the Great War are commemorated in Britain, a wave of new memorials and commemorative practices have been developed. These are additions to an already well-established ‘landscape of memory,’ with memorials built in the war’s immediate aftermath across villages, towns and cities in Britain. This article examines these new sites of memory and mourning to reveal how social, moral and political identities within contemporary Britain are constructed through places that enable individuals and communities to ‘bear witness’ to the conflict.

1. Memorializing the Great War

The Great War possesses a prominent place within British culture and society. To even mention the war, or to refer to ‘1914–1918,’ ‘the trenches,’ ‘the Somme,’ ‘Gallipoli’ or ‘Passchendaele,’ is to immediately evoke a powerful act of remembrance that connotes death, tragedy, suffering and pity (Wilson 2013, 3–5). Over the last decade, historians have demonstrated the way in which this memory of the war is an “invented tradition” (Bond 6; Todman 5; Corrigan 5). This scholarship has highlighted how the contemporary response to the war is born out of its representation on film, television, art and literature over the course of the twentieth century. This has created an image of the conflict that focuses on the stoic British “Tommy” on the Western Front, enduring the privations and horrors of industrial conflict (Badsey 113). Scholars have lamented this bias as preventing an understanding of the conflict as a complex, international event. However, whilst the meaning and memory of the war have been exposed to greater scrutiny what is not disputed is the status of the conflict in British society.

Over a century after its outbreak, with the last veterans having passed away ensuring the war is beyond ‘living memory,’ the war still has a presence within national narratives. In part, this is derived from the way the iconography of the conflict has become part of wider remembrance schemes of wars fought during

the twentieth century (Iles 201–202). The date of November 11th, the Cenotaph in Whitehall, the two-minute silence to remember the dead and the poppy have become loaded with significance beyond the events of 1914 to 1918. Local war memorials in villages, towns and cities also reflect this extension of memory as these sites, which were built in the 1920s and 1930s, have been reused to commemorate the Second World War and the Korean War, too. The symbols of the Great War have also been used to frame the events surrounding the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War as the public, media and politicians use the conflict to interpret and understand contemporary events (Wilson 2014, 291–292). Therefore, the Great War has remained current within British society, as a point of reflection and remembrance on the past and the present.

However, despite the significance of this conflict and the prominence of war memorials and commemorative practices, the centenary of the Great War brought a new movement for memorialisation in Britain (see Harvey 107–108). Since 2014, sites of memory have been constructed or remembrance activities have been organised which mark the events of the conflict, the lives of those who were involved and seek to affirm the significance of the war for contemporary society (see Jeffery). These new sites act as places of witnessing, where the Great War and its impact can be felt and experienced by current generations. Within these locales, communities are called upon to act as witnesses, to bear testimony to the sense of loss, suffering and dislocation wrought by the war. Whilst the design and positioning of these memorials or the performance of new rituals of memory might vary from one another, the point of connection within this creation of memory is a sense of trauma (after Edkins). Whether large-scale memorials set for public display or small-scale commemorative plaques, the new sites of memory are places that emphasise mourning and bereavement.

The focus of this new remembrance on pain, suffering and loss is significant as it reveals how these new memorials are concerned with contemporary issues regarding identity across Britain rather than solely with the events of 1914–1918. The memorials and monuments that were built in the initial aftermath of the conflict were used to provide a sense of solace and meaning for the bereaved (see Heffernan). From the local war memorials, the corporate memorials for business and industries to the national sites of memory, the purpose of these places of memory was to affirm the significance of the sacrifice for ‘God, King and Country’ (King). Through their use and location at the centre of local and national life they subsequently became part of social memory. Succeeding generations have inherited this tangible and intangible legacy as the dead of the war has continued to be mourned (Gaffney). However, with the advent of the centenary this mourning was intensified with the creation of new memorials that accentuated loss. New memorials to the conflict reflect a continued engagement with the past but also a mode of expression about the present and the future as individuals witness the importance of this history and its meaning for contemporary society.

The significance of the 'witness' is detailed within a legal and religious context in western culture, which requires acknowledgement, observance and testimony from the individual (see Derrida 75–79). As a first-hand observer or as a bearer of knowledge, the witness serves to ensure the remembrance of particular events (see Douglass and Vogler). Such acts of witnessing are not neutral records, but rather performances which enable the creation of memory that acknowledges the past and addresses the present (Apel; LaCapra). Significantly, this witnessing is bound by and defined by notions of space, place and purpose:

[...] places are witnesses, locales of memory that we mark out or that simply are there waiting, traces that serve to remind us of those things that need remember, for which there is a duty of one kind or another for us to bear witness. (Booth 111)

The new spaces that mark the war which have been created in Britain since the 1990s demonstrate how the role of bearing witness to the conflict of 1914–1918 reflects issues of identity, politics and power in contemporary society. The alternative sites of memory that have been constructed enable a mode of witnessing which denotes emotional, moral, political and social duties onto the individual as they are made to bear the burden of memory and by doing so testify to its significance in the present. Through the memorials to the conflict that have been formed since the eightieth anniversary of the war's outbreak, new witnesses to the conflict are formed which have altered practices of commemoration. In modern Britain, moral, social and political witnesses have been created within these new sites of memory. In this act of witnessing, individuals and communities build identities for themselves. As they engage with the remembrance of the war, they affirm or recreate a sense of self in relation to the conflict. Through the act of bearing witness, modern identities are defined.

2. Political Witnesses and the Remembrance of the War

Memorials reflect the active choices of groups and wider society as to what should be remembered and acknowledged (Wertsch). The memorials constructed in the years immediately following the end of the First World War bore this trait as they demonstrated the official concern for establishing the deaths of individuals as a sacrifice for the nation. Such meanings are not fixed, the practice of commemoration and use has altered the meaning of war memorials with regard to private grief and mourning. However, these acts are always undertaken within the physical, aesthetic and ideological framework provided by these sites of commemoration. The modern memorials to the conflict provide a similar space through which political witnesses to the war are formed. In these locations,

memorials serve to reinforce issues of sacrifice and service for the cause of a wider purpose. These structures may emphasise local or national affiliation, but they act as sites of connection where the war extends an “imagined community” by emphasising a shared sense of loss (see Anderson). Within these memorials, the shock and suffering of the war is emphasised to establish a political link between groups within society. Rather than mobilising remembrance for social or moral action in the present, the act of political witnessing requires observance and testimony; within these sites witnesses are called forth to affirm the values held in common. In the remembrance of the Great War through the memorials constructed since 2014 in Britain, the act of political witnessing has reiterated a shared sense of self born through a collective remembrance of trauma (Alexander et al.).

The sense of shock, bereavement and grief is important as it is cements trauma and suffering as a foundation point within these new political identities. Where this has been most apparent is within the large-scale memorials to the conflict that have been constructed after 2014. Perhaps the installation of ceramic poppies around the Tower of London in the autumn of 2014 which was entitled “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red” is the most famous of the new memorials (Fig. 1). This artwork was assembled from 888,246 individual flowers to commemorate each of the lives lost by British or Dominion servicemen during the war. The formation of the memorial over several weeks, with the planting of the poppies made individually, drew widespread public and media attention. Indeed, on its completion on November 11th it had already become a collective site of mourning for the nation as an estimated 4 to 5 million visitors were thought to have attended. The overwhelming sense of scale was key to this design by the artists Paul Cummins and Tom Piper. Visitors were confronted with a material manifestation of loss, seemingly evoking a powerful emotional response from all sections of society the which was reported widely within the media:

Manifest poppies bleed from a bastion window, they arc above its medieval causeway, and surge over the top of the walls – like infantrymen at the Somme – before saturating the Tower of London’s 11th-century moat in a wash of crimson. Small wonder then that the world has been captivated by the unveiling of this astonishing artwork – part installation, part living theatre – designed to commemorate the centenary of World War One. On her visit this week, the Duchess of Cambridge was visibly moved to tears. (Lambert)

The emphasis on the commemoration of death, sacrifice and trauma was evident across the representation of the memorial. This reporting frequently referred to the significance of this site for the nation. As the project was finished with the last poppy arranged on Armistice Day, the way in which this installation reflected service to the state was apparent:



Fig. 1 – Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red, Tower of London (Photograph by author)

They were the flower of British youth and they gave their lives for our freedom in the Great War a century ago. So it seems the perfect tribute that the Tower of London, a timeless symbol of our nation, should be weeping for them today, on Remembrance Sunday. (Bletchly)

Whilst the display was intended only to ever be temporary, such was the clamour from sections of the public and the media that the then Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne responded by supporting the development of the project into a touring exhibition (Anon 2014). Elements of the artwork were dismantled and rearranged and the dramatic piece known as the “Weeping Window” where ceramic poppies appear to flow down to the ground has been particularly prominent in local displays. These aspects of the original installation are to be displayed permanently at the Imperial War Museums in Manchester and London after their tour. In this manner, “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red” created a space where a shared sense of loss could be reflected upon. Significantly, this particular place of remembrance was not offered to emphasise a moral cause or perspective in the present but as a means of establishing collective witnesses to the service for the nation. Whilst certainly emotive and aesthetically stunning, this artwork was formed as a means of generating public recognition as

to the scale of sacrifice during the First World War and thereby affixed a political identity through the act of witnessing. Through remembering trauma, a shared sense of national identity was asserted. This emphasised tradition and stability as the values of the nation were reaffirmed within these sites not brought to question or reassessment. As individuals witnessed the scale of death wrought during the war, they also witnessed the rehearsal of a core aspect of national identity.

Other temporary memorials or commemorative practices in Britain which were organised to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the war carried similar emphases on death, loss and the sacrifice of individuals for the nation. For example, the “Lights Out” programme held on August 4th 2014 where households and businesses across the country were encouraged to turn off any lights for an hour except for one single light from 10pm in a “shared moment of reflection” (14–18 Now). Inspired by the comments of the wartime Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey (1862–1933) that “the lamps are going out all over Europe,” and organised by an arts initiative funded by the Imperial War Museum, the Heritage Lottery Fund and government offices, this action served to create a provisional and intangible commemorative spaces that focused on a sense of collective endeavour. Individuals, groups and communities were able to bear witness to the sacrifices made to the nation as the extinguished lights and solitary illumination emphasised the tragic loss wrought by the war. Indeed, this was how the event was represented within the media, the collective effort of remembrance was reiterated:

On the 100th anniversary since Britain joined the First World War, millions of people across the country reflected by the light of a candle on the sacrifices made by the young men and women during the Great War. (De Peyer)

As part of this event, the art installation named “Spectra,” designed by the Japanese artist Ryoji Ikeda, was secretly unveiled. This piece, fashioned from 49 beams of light and installed by the Palace of Westminster to create a pillar of light that shone from dusk to dawn, formed a spectacle to witness and observe. Similar light shows were provided in Bangor, where the artist Bedwyr Williams presented a piece named “Traw” (from the Welsh meaning ‘to strike’), which involved the projection onto the Memorial Arch of a series of images of soldiers killed during the conflict. The site of the Memorial Arch was significant as it had been part of the memorial landscape since its construction through public subscription in the 1920s. The interior of the Arch houses wooden plaques upon which the names of the dead from the local area are presented. In creating a new memorial site where one already exists the purpose of these modern places of remembrance is revealed as an intensification of cultural trauma (Alexander 2–3). Within “Traw,” the faces of the dead serve as powerful reminders of the lives lost calling visitors to witness the dead. Significantly, there was no moral message to these displays, participants were called upon to witness and reflect on the dead but not to testify

directly on any ethical stance on issues of peace, responsibility or reconciliation. That is not to say that such acts or locations are absent of meaning. They are highly important spaces as they reiterate a political identity through witnessing the trauma of the war. Through the act of collective observance, a sense of stability and tradition are reiterated through recognising death and mourning.

3. Moral Witnesses and the Remembrance of the War

Within the new spaces of memory created to mark the centenary of the war, another modern identity has been formed which presents an alternative vision of the conflict and seeks to address moral and ethical concerns. As part of a performance of remembrance or within permanent structures, moral witnesses are formed who are asked to testify as to the effect of the war (Margalit 147). This act of witnessing is frequently focused on retrieving some neglected aspect of the history of the conflict or addressing concerns in the present through the commemoration of the war. The specific agenda of these new forms of memory distinguishes this process from the political witnessing as well as the original memorial landscape constructed in the interwar era. These reflect a contemporary desire to revisit the past, to redress and to revise opinions and reveal the construction of a moral identity with relation to the war (Booth 12). These sites may be additions to existing places of memory or mourning or could be completely original additions to civic spaces. Their purpose is to offer an alternative vision of the conflict and to remind contemporary society of a moral duty in making amends for the past. Rather than reiterate a national narrative or political identity, these sites create a new space for engaging with what the conflict means in the present for individuals as they seek to forge a different engagement with the war. Moral witnesses are formed through sites and practices that require visitors not to just observe but to bear testimony to the events of the past and how these alter who groups and communities believe themselves to be in the present (Margalit 148–149).

Where this moral witnessing can be most clearly discerned is in the creation of memorials for those who were absent from the memorial schemes created in the aftermath of the conflict. This is associated with those termed as suffering from the mental trauma of the war and specifically ‘shellshock.’ In various places across Britain, new memorials remembering those who were regarded as experiencing shellshock have emerged during the centenary which ask contemporary society to rethink the remembrance of the war. In Croydon, south London, a memorial for twenty-six soldiers from the area who had been treated in the nearby mental hospital after their return from the front was erected in May 2016. The soldiers died whilst still institutionalised and their bodies were buried in mass graves at the site of the institution. A local campaign for recognition of these individuals saw three stones placed at Croydon Crematorium East Chapel that listed the names

of those whose service had gone unrecorded on other memorials in the area. The memorial was regarded by those leading the initiative as a means of rectifying a past injustice and recognition of the pain and suffering that the individuals suffered during wartime (see Downey). As such, in the recognition of historical trauma, modern identities are formed as individuals and groups respond to the past by taking a moral stance (Margalit 148).

This formation of moral witnesses is undertaken at new sites constructed with the advent of the centenary but also through the alterations of existing memorials. In recent years, the names of soldiers executed during the war have been added to plaques and monuments as local campaigns successfully recognised the service of soldiers killed by their own army. Those individuals ‘shot at dawn’ are presumed to have been suffering from shellshock and their rescuing from obscurity or denial through commemoration is regarded as a responsibility and a duty. The war memorial arch in Guildford, located within the Castle Grounds of the town, was erected in 1921 but had not included one local individual in the list of names of the dead. Eric Skeffington Poole had been executed in December 1916 and as part of the commemorations for the centenary, in 2014 Poole’s name was added to the memorial where he had previously been forgotten. Whether it is memorials from the interwar era or more recent memorials, sites have been amended to focus on the moral obligation to remember. This process can be observed with the alteration of the Newark Memorial to the Fallen in 2014. This site was only constructed in the 2000s, but the omission of Sapper William Pride who had committed suicide in 1918 at an army camp in Britain was rectified in 2014 with the addition of his name at base of the memorial. Family members and campaigners spoke about this process as an obligation and the inclusion of the memorial ensuring recognition for all participants in the war:

Sapper Pride’s great granddaughter [...] said [...] “I always hoped that his name would be added and I am very pleased that it has been. I feel it is important that people see the names of the brave men who sacrificed so much.” Mr Stevens (Commonwealth War Graves Commission) said it had taken a long time to sort the matter out. “In the end we have done what we set out to achieve,” he said. “It is right and fitting that Sapper Pride’s name is on the memorial.” (qtd. in Parker)

Creating this new space of memory by the addition of names previously unacknowledged ensures a moral witnessing. Groups and communities are called together to remember the trauma of the war as a means of expressing a moral or an ethical stance. Similar perspectives of the moral witness have been formed through art installations which have used the issues of forgotten or neglected individuals or groups from the wider remembrance schemes of the war to create new places of commemoration. These sites specifically require visitors to re-evaluate and reconsider the experience of the conflict and impart a clear moral obligation with the

performance of memory. The large steel statue of a British Army soldier sitting and staring at the floor is known locally as ‘Tommy’ after the archetypal soldier and was created by the artist Ray Lonsdale. The work was unveiled in Seaham, County Durham, in 2014 and officially entitled “1101” (or Eleven-O-One) to refer to the moment when the Armistice was declared. The artwork captures the exhaustion and trauma of the soldier whilst the poem placed on the plinth refers to the emotional and psychological damage created by the war at home and on the battlefield:

Now adrift in the wake of this glorious slaughter, [...] as lead tore the flesh from both friend and rival, [...] but heavy in his pocket lies a small piece of card, and the note written on it will break a mother’s heart.

Art installations developed for the advent of the centenary frequently asserted a moral message for individuals to witness and engage with. In August 2014, around Chamberlain Square in Birmingham, the artist Nele Azevedo arranged 5,000 miniature ice sculptures of soldiers to represent the idea of loss. Both descendants of individuals killed in the war and relatives of those not named on war memorials were encouraged to place a frozen figurine before watching it melt away. The point of connection with the past was through a rehearsal of trauma and bereavement but the effect was to assert a moral vision of the cost of conflict. Since the advent of the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War, artists and designers have used the figure of the war poet Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), regarded as the tragic voice of the war, to emphasise the damage on bodies and minds that conflict caused but which is caused by contemporary wars, too. Sculptures, plaques and statues to Owen, both temporary and permanent, have been placed throughout Britain. In Edinburgh, where Owen was treated at the Craiglockhart Hospital for shell shock, a Peace Garden was unveiled in May 2017 at the Royal Highland Centre as part of Gardening Scotland event. The garden featured a sculpture of a soldier and a bust of Owen and it was planted by veterans of recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who have been treated for post-traumatic stress disorder. The purpose of the temporary garden was to establish a place where visitors could regard the past and the impact of this history on the present. One of the creators noted:

The sculpture of the unnamed serviceman and the bust of Wilfred Owen represent both those many thousands who lie with their names unknown to us, and those whose stories continue to be told to this day. (qtd. in McLaughlin)

In the new memorial spaces created after the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War, a moral vision of the remembrance of the conflict is forwarded to remind individuals of not just the duty of memory but a particular mode of commemoration. This represents a departure from the established narrative of the war’s place within Britain; not as a point of collective identity but as a means of considering

how the war altered the lives of individuals in the past and the implications of this for the present. Within these new spaces, moral witnesses are created that shape modern identities. These perceptions are also formed through a sense of cultural trauma to develop alternative associations to the conflict where remembrance is undertaken to actively assert a moral identity not dependent on national associations but on rectifying and redressing (after Margalit 149).

4. Social Witnesses and the Remembrance of the War

Where the most active engagement with the commemoration of the war through new memorials can be observed is within the context of social witnessing. Within this performance of memory, the conflict is used to foster civic spaces in the present, where contemporary society reconsiders issues of identity and the social connections that are made through commemoration. Social witnessing is a constructive event in this regard, establishing modern ‘communities of memory’ where individuals and groups build associations and new visions of what constitutes society. Rather than the inactive political witness or the reflective moral witnessing, the active engagement present within the social witness forms a testimony that alters ideas about identity. Within the construction of new memorials in Britain or commemorative practices that have been developed in the context of the centenary, an act of social witnessing is created that reforms the memory of the conflict and the way in which past, present and future are considered. This sense of community is still formed through the experience and evocation of cultural trauma; it is within that recognition of shared pain and bereavement that the social witness is created. The sense of trauma that is evoked within Britain in response to the war is an essential part of modern identity, it is used in a multiplicity of ways but it is the focus on mourning and suffering that is the common feature. This is the important aspect of the popular memory of the war that is misrepresented by revisionist histories of the conflict; the war is remembered as a tragedy because it is within that mode that the conflict possesses utility for contemporary society (Wilson 2013, 12).

The act of social witnessing with regard to the centenary can be observed within the local memorials or community memorials that have been constructed since 2014. These sites may draw attention to forgotten individuals but they also mobilise identities along the lines of a civic nationalism that is not exclusory and which attempts to create a new vision of society through the remembrance of the past (Mycock). This can be seen with the unveiling of the African and Caribbean War Memorial in Brixton, South London, in 2017. The memorial, designed as two plinths with one standing vertically and the other lying on its side, is dedicated to the military service of individuals of African and Caribbean heritage who served in both the total wars of the twentieth century. Whilst the memorial is not exclusively for the Great War, its initial installation outside the Black Cultural

Archives (BCA) in London in 2014 and its relocation in 2017 coincided with the anniversaries of the conflict of 1914–1918. On the occasion of its first dedication at the archives, Dawn Hill, Chair of the BCA stated that:

BCA Trustees and Director Paul Reid, are honoured to share in this commemoration of African and Caribbean Service Personnel on this auspicious day 11th November. It is indeed fitting that it will be installed in Windrush Square, Brixton. It will establish a constant source of inspiration to our Black & Minority Ethnic communities of the valuable contribution made to Great Britain and the continuing heroic role of our soldiers in the present day. (AC Memorial)

As such, the memorial serves to reform ideas about contemporary citizenship and identity by referring to the trauma of the war through the commemorative architecture of the two plinths. In this social witnessing, visitors are asked to observe and to testify to the way in which this remembrance reshapes the present. Similarly, in Telford, Shropshire, a memorial garden was opened in October 2016 to mark the service of ethnic minority soldiers within the British Army during the Great War (Anon 2016). The temporary space was intended as a place of reflection but also as a place of peace with a concern to address bias and discrimination within contemporary society as well as to remember the past. In the formation of a community of mourning, drawn together through a recognition of a shared historical trauma, a new identity has emerged. This identity is based on reflecting the diversity of past and of contemporary society. This is more than providing a moral space to engage and rectify the errors of the past but a process of reforming the present through a new understanding of the history of the conflict.

These spaces can be formed from the large-scale events or small-scale memorials as groups and communities use the conflict to express how modern society should be constituted (after Assmann and Czaplicka). This sense of civic nationalism stands in stark contrast to the romantic nationalism formed through the act of political witnessing. This process is indicated with the dedication of a commemorative plaque in Edinburgh's Central Library which brought the names of over 500 British, Irish and Dominion nurses together who had either died in service, or, as a direct result of their involvement in the conflict. The plaque served as a means by which individuals who had not known one another during the war were arranged together in the present for the purposes of remembering the significance of these lives for contemporary society. The researcher for the project stated:

Nurses in the First World War were often casualties in just the same way soldiers were – with mothers, fathers and siblings waiting anxiously at home. It is with the support of our partners that we have been able to create the memorial plaque, helping to share their narrative and reveal some of the hidden histories of these remarkable women. (qtd. in Anon 2015)

Through the focus on the trauma of the war and those who have been obscured from history, the plaque attests to the relevance of these individuals and the importance of remembering their lives and deaths together: it is a lesson in civic nationalism (after Knauer and Walkowitz). This can also be clearly discerned in the European War Memorial constructed in Woodvale Park in the Shankill area of west Belfast, Northern Ireland, and unveiled in October 2014. The memorial is made from stone quarried from the region and cut into a hexagon to replicate the structure of the basalt columns of the Giant's Causeway. Upon the memorial are dedications to those who served in the Belgian, British, French and German armies during the conflict (see Farrell). Designed as an 'inclusive' memorial it enables an act of social witnessing that extends the trauma of the war across national boundaries to find common points of connection. This issue is also central to the commemorative plaque unveiled near the People's Palace in Glasgow in April 2015. The memorial site is dedicated to the individuals and groups who campaigned against the war and promoted equality and tolerance within the city. The trauma present within the site is the repression and victimisation suffered by those dissenting individuals who refused to regard the war as legitimate. The wording of the memorial plaque provides a space for a civic identity to emerge as individuals witness the effect of the war on the past and present:

In memory of those who opposed WW1 in order to challenge the purpose of the war and the waste of lives. They also campaigned for social and economic justice and against the exploitation of those who lived in the city during the war.

Remembering those who have otherwise been obscured or forgotten is a moral act and the focus within these places of social witnessing is to act to reshape the present. Civic identities are constructed through the new memorial sites in relation to the events of the war but focused on reforming society. This has been a feature of the memorials erected to remember the lives of conscientious objectors during the Great War. Since the advent of the centenary, a number of proposals have been discussed by local charities and councils to mark the individuals who refused to participate in the war. In 2016, to mark the introduction of the Military Service Act 1916, which saw conscription of individuals and the definition of what constituted conscientious objectors, a memorial plaque was placed in the Peace Gardens in Harwicke Circus, Carlisle. This marked the experience and the suffering of those who did not participate in the war but also stated the relevance of this act for the present:

To commemorate all who have established and are maintaining the right to refuse to kill.

To be a social witness of the Great War is to look upon the memorials and commemorative practices and testify to the significance of this history and its

relevance for contemporary life. Rather than a reiteration of identity through collective acts of memory, these places create a platform for a civic identity. This is not a fixed set of principles but rather a series of sites where values and ideals are redefined and new connections are made. As the trauma of the past is witnessed, a civic identity is formed within the new places of remembrance.

Conclusion

As the centenary of the Great War was marked in Britain, the creation of new memorials ensured that a conflict that was already an established part of the national narrative, was remembered all over again. This reiteration of the memory of the war is revealing as in the construction of these new places of mourning, individuals and communities demonstrated how the war still bears meaning for contemporary identities within Britain. Whilst the purpose and connections made with these expressions and definitions may be different they are all formed out of the sense of trauma associated with the war. The popular memory of the war in Britain focuses on the loss, death and pity of the conflict as it is through this sense of mourning and bereavement that the conflict maintains a function and use within identity politics. In the context of the new memorials to the war, this trauma was emphasised as it served as the basis for political, moral and social identities to be redefined. The commemorative sites that were initiated after 2014 enabled an act of witnessing for contemporary society. This practice is central to understanding the function of commemoration of the Great War in Britain. With the death of the last veterans of the war and the end of the 'living memory' of the events of 1914–1918, the conflict has not receded in its prominence. Rather, it maintains its significance because each generation since the Armistice has sought to bear witness to the conflict themselves. The role of the modern witness is to observe and acknowledge and in the context of the centenary it was to share or affirm a set of ideas about identity within contemporary society.

The witnesses to the war that were formed with relation to the new memorials and commemorative events that were planned for the centenary reflected the desires and the anxieties of early twenty-first century Britain rather than just a concern for the remembrance of the Great War. In an era when 'British' identity is being increasingly questioned and problematised, the remembrance of the war enabled a continuation of tradition as memorials that created political witnesses required collective observance of the conflict's importance for the nation. The grand commemorative schemes or extensive artworks all created a place where a shared sorrow could be mourned. Within these spaces, identity was not questioned nor was a new testimony regarding the war's importance sought. Instead, what was required was commitment and engagement; an act of witnessing without a call to proclaim the reason for remembrance. Whilst these places of political witnessing

were some of the most prominent during the centenary of the Great War, there have been other forms of witnessing that have forged alternative identities in relation to the past and present. Moral and social witnessing have been present within the artistic works and commemorative structures that have been formed to rescue the memory of individuals and groups from a collective amnesia or to assert the importance of remembrance for a civic value. Within these places of commemoration, the trauma of the war is regarded as a means by which new communities of mourning are formed to build alternative identities, values and ideals. The commemoration of the centenary of the Great War in Britain has provided new spaces of memory for a conflict that was already well-remembered. In these locales stability is affirmed through collective acts of mourning, whilst in others, notions of identity have been redefined and alternative visions of the past, present and future have been constructed. Over a century after the outbreak, it is through the Great War that individuals, groups and communities continue to define themselves.

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