

Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History

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Author:

Jay Winter

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David Fitzpatrick

The experience of grief is one of history's most universal yet elusive themes, ever present even in peacetime but generated with almost intolerable intensity and frequency by wars. The practice of mourning, both public and private, provided essential consolation for those bereaved as a result of the Great War. Jay Winter admits that "how healing occurs, and what quiets embitterment and alleviates despair can never be fully known". Yet "not to ask the question . . . is both to impoverish the study of history and to evade our responsibility as historians" (116). If directed to every scholar individually, this injunction would indeed be outrageous – some of us must be allowed to indulge other interests in, say, laughter, labour, railways, sex, incunabula, or diplomacy. In fact, Winter is addressing historians of the Great War as if they were a team, an ideal rarely achieved in scholarship but to some extent realised in the conferences and collaborations associated with the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Péronne, which he helped establish. The collaborative approach suffuses this book, and the endnotes are strewn with warm and deserved acknowledgements of help from numerous colleagues. The effect is to suggest a series of lively and speculative seminars, complete with sometimes indistinct and half-explored images flashing onto the whiteboard from an overheated projector: the 31 illustrations are often dark and dim, in contrast to the splendidly sharp reproductions in Winter's *The Experience of World War I* (1988). This is history in the making: inconclusive, uneven, but consistently exhilarating.

In assembling the material for his grand tour of wartime and post-war grief, Winter bursts through national

boundaries with missionary impatience, promising to guide the reader past sites of memory and mourning throughout "the cultural history of Europe", so repudiating "the distorting effects of a narrowly national approach" (10–11). Despite his intention to "avoid the scattered approach of eclecticism . . . through an exploration of the comparative method", the result is refreshingly unsystematic. Illustrations, counter-examples and local variations are plucked with gleeful erudition from a vast if unavoidably selective range of published and archival sources mainly relating to France, Britain and (more haphazardly) Germany. Although the European experience is explicitly central to the book, some of the most illuminating examples are taken from the magnificent archives of the Australian War Memorial, which underpin the second chapter on "communities in mourning". Far from applying any "comparative method", Winter boldly asserts that "one particular case, that of the Australian Red Cross, . . . can stand for the support networks which sprang up in every combatant country" (44). Perhaps – but how do we know this? In some ways, the eclectic approach is preferable to rigorous and systematic analysis of comparable evidence in several national contexts. The outcome of a multinational study after the fashion of political science is often dry, schematic, narrowly focused and didactic; whereas Winter's restless wizardry tantalizes, challenges and provokes the reader to test out the myriad hypotheses and speculations in other contexts. If this book generates a spate of "narrowly national" monographs on grief and mourning, it will in any case promote the desired comparative outcome. Through the device of quoting, thrice, a triplet from Apollinaire (18, 217, 228), Winter seems to beg readers to judge him mercifully as a pioneer rather than a technician: "Pity on us who are always fighting on the frontiers / Of limitlessness and the future / Pity our mistakes pity our sins."

Winter's tour of western Europe and Australia encompasses many sources of consolation for the bereaved: public and private, demotic and hieratic. The author admits no clear functional separation between the humble village memorial and the responses of literary or artistic genius: all were moulded by the need to re-imagine "the postwar world as composed of survivors perched on a mountain of corpses" (17). Part I, "Catastrophe and Consolation", selects several strategies of psychological adjustment to personal loss which helped define postwar popular culture. Successive chapters elaborate the themes of resurrection, "fictive kinship", spiritualism and war memorials, all of which drew heavily upon prewar forms, images or rituals in order to mobilise "tradition" in the service of healing. An eloquent account of the 1918–19 version of Abel Gance's film *J'Accuse*, with its unsettling vision of the re-embodied dead returning reproachfully to their villages, introduces a fine, French-focused analysis of the significance of corpses for survivors. The ultimately successful campaign for reinterment of the fallen French in village graveyards, and the symbolic representation of the unidentified dead through the Unknown Warrior, provided essential consolation through repossession of the corpse. The longing for immediate contact was further appeased by the wartime and postwar eruption of spiritualism, which offered the hope of communication with dead or absent relatives or intimates. In this third chapter, as elsewhere, Winter's enthusiasm for the theme sometimes overflows in fascinating but irrelevant digressions – the discussion of "spiritualism at the front" (64–69) concerns the psychology of fear rather than grief, and seems misplaced here.

The remaining chapters in Part I concern the social organization of mourning rather than the motifs of private consolation. The second chapter, entitled "communities in mourning", provides sketchy but suggestive evidence of "mutual help" among bereaved civilians, and of the insistent demand for factual detail about casualties (often satisfied by Red Cross investigators overcoming dogged military resistance). Whole cans of cultural worms are momentarily opened by the casual observation that the news of death was carried home by a clergyman in Australia, the mayor in France, and in Britain by letter or telegram, depending on rank. Leaving the worms to wriggle unattended, Winter dashes forth to raid personal testimony of bureaucratic insensitivity, blithely declaring that one such story was "repeated millions of times" (34). Hasty inferences from the particular to the general abound, as in a later depiction of wartime *images d'Epinal* which announces that "in these examples (and in thousands more) we see all the components of this form of art" (131). The footnote names a library and a helpful guide, but no catalogue in which such works are analysed. Winter has certainly moved a long way from being the cautious data-collector and statistician so widely acclaimed for *The Great War and the British People* (1986). Not that his movement has been backwards – there are brilliancies, lateral connections and insights in this work which would never have survived the narrow scrutiny of more pedestrian scholarship.

The engrossing discussion of war memorials treats them "as foci of the rituals, rhetoric, and ceremonies of bereavement" (78), developing the research and ideas of scholars such as George Mosse for Germany and elsewhere, Bob Bushaway for England, Ken Inglis for Australia, and Antoine Prost for France. Following the admirable example of Prost's *In the Wake of War* (1992 edn.), Winter emphasises that the "initial and primary purpose" of memorials was not political manipulation of the survivors, but "to help the bereaved to recover from their loss". While not denying the political uses to which many memorials were subsequently put, he rejects the "Foucaultian" notion that the memorials were devised to prepare Europeans for another war through deploying abstraction as a pain-killer (94–6). Winter's insistence on primary function rather than secondary appropriations is a welcome corrective to the approach adopted by Bushaway and also Mosse, whose *Fallen Soldiers* (1990) depicts commemoration as a concerted attempt to mask the realities of war. In the absence of full inventories for memorials in most countries, the iconographic survey is necessarily provisional: for example, there seems little foundation for the claim that "Celtic crosses are less prevalent in Northern Ireland" than in the Irish Republic (247, n. 58). The focus of the chapter flickers somewhat, reflecting the dualities of the memorials themselves (catering for ex-servicemen as well as the bereaved, and commemorating the war as well as its casualties). Oddly, very little attention is given to the rituals of commemoration associated with anniversaries such as Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday, the subject of Adrian Gregory's engrossing study, *The Silence of Memory* (1994). Nevertheless, this wide-ranging and often moving account of the intersection between public commemoration and private grief will leave every reader better informed and more curious than before.

A major theme of Winter's study of the forms of collective consolation is their "traditionalism" (115), reflecting an atavistic response to bereavement far more powerful than mere nostalgia. Part II, "Cultural Codes and Languages of Mourning", detects similar reactivation of archaic forms and motifs in film, the graphic arts, fiction and poetry. Each of these chapters is individually rewarding, showing the author at his most animated as he darts from story to story and image to image. As in Part I, the flood of information is not always relevant and the connections are often loose. A tenuous link between the film *J'Accuse* and the "mythical or mundane" tradition of the *images d'Epinal* justifies a long digression on the proliferation of these demotic religious posters in the form of war propaganda, a phenomenon tangential to bereavement (122–33). Likewise, the three chapters on apocalyptic imagery are only sporadically related to the theme of bodily resurrection as a source of personal consolation. The connotations of the apocalypse, ranging from the fear of class warfare or urban collapse to the hope of redemption and salvation, clearly draw upon a multiplicity of emotions and forebodings to which wartime bereavement was merely a contributing factor. Despite its incomplete integration in the ostensible topic of this book, Winter's analysis of the apocalyptic imagination is fascinating and cogent in its own right. Part II provides a powerful rejoinder to the thesis, advanced by Paul Fussell and his successors, that the war unleashed "modernity" through a cumulative repudiation of established artistic forms. As Winter concludes, "it is the central contention of this book that

the backward gaze of so many writers, artists, politicians, soldiers, and everyday families in this period reflected the universality of memory on Europe from 1914" (223). Equally at home with Otto Dix and Stanley Spencer, Karl Kraus and Maurice Barrès, Winter almost convinces us that the preoccupations of wartime and postwar imaginative art reflected and served the thirst for consolation among the uncultivated masses of bereaved Europeans.

Sites of Memory surveys a vast territory by offering innumerable close-ups, without pretending to provide a comprehensive map indicating the precise relationships and linkages between the selected sites. As in most free-wheeling cultural history, the connections drawn between personal grief, collective consolation and imaginative representation are suggestive, but seldom conclusive. Typically eloquent and persuasive, Winter is oddly incurious about the permutations and complexities of personal loss, taking it as self-evident that grief is a universal and uniform response to the death of a close relative. In distancing himself from murkier responses (anger, relief, apathy), Winter calls to mind Prost's dismissive remark about the emotional impact of killing on the killer: "It matters little . . . if some soldiers did or did not experience some kind of primitive pleasure in killing, as some maintain . . . The task itself was guilty" (*In the Wake of War*, 11). Concentration upon the purer themes of sorrow and consolation is appropriate for decoding public memorials, but surely inadequate for the analysis of imaginative art or literature. War was sordid not only as experienced by participants, but as a moral and emotional pollutant for the survivors. At times, Winter's analysis of grief and commemoration seems too high-minded and generous for its subject. Yet this flaw, if it is one, is surely outweighed by his unswerving respect for both the dead and the testimony of those surviving the war. All in all, this is an innovative, exciting and humane essay in the history of emotion.

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