

The First World War Poetry Digital Archive and The Great War Archive

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The [First World War Poetry Digital Archive](#) [2] was launched in late 2008. The site comprises a substantially revamped version of what was previously the Wilfred Owen archive and includes Oxford University's virtual seminars for teaching literature online series. The archive has been given a massive overhaul, including the addition of several thousand more items, a more coherent search facility, compartmentalisation of the teaching resources, and the introduction of a sister archive; the Great War Archive. This latter resource consists of over 6,500 items submitted by the general public during several live sessions around the country, and has an ongoing facility for submissions to a Flickr photoset. Overall, the archive is virtually unrecognisable from its previous incarnation, with a clearer agenda to provide a museum-type exhibit online, and to upgrade the site in a more user-friendly manner. The Digital Archive has already attracted a great deal of attention, including being shortlisted for the Times Higher Education award for Outstanding ICT Initiative.

The poetry site of the archive contains a large selection of documents from some of the noisiest voices of war; featuring large collections of work from Vera Britten, Robert Graves, Roland Leighton, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and Edward Thomas. Some of these artefacts have been carried over from the previous incarnation of the archive, but the majority are new or represented here in a substantially more accessible form. The audio, filmic and photographic collections still exist, although have again been expanded and are generally more clearly inventoried (there are however some errors here – the propaganda poster section takes users straight to the photograph archive, for example). There is also a welcome splitting of the earlier site into more clearly dedicated sections – previously, the site was difficult to navigate and although it held a great deal of interesting archive material, this often gave the impression of rather haphazard presentation and it was difficult for users who did not know what they were looking for to identify specific areas of interest. An expanded search function across the entire site remedies this by providing a great deal more user autonomy – items can be searched by category, by theme, by specific title or through suggested links throughout the site. A systematic inventory throughout the site also gives clear details on each artefact with a large thumbnail image of the item, accompanied by details of title, author/subject, date and content.

The addition of facsimile copies of all written documents, which include letters, poetic drafts, photographs and sketches from both the poets and people corresponding with them or otherwise recording them makes the Poetry Archive a comprehensive site with a huge amount to browse through. All of the documents can be manipulated through an Adobe browser, meaning that even the most inscrutable of scribbles can be enlarged and examined ‘close up’, and there really is a feeling of ‘hands on’ manipulation when dealing with each document. This also makes the site incredibly atmospheric – the user has a sense of their own agency both in selecting each item, and then in the ways that they can interface with the text. There is something very vibrant about this – it is unlikely that the texts could ever be handled by so many people in the real world, and so presenting them in this format is highly desirable. For some reason a very small touch in the site’s overall composition – the soft greys in which its background pages are presented – makes the sepia and white of the facsimiles give a very earthy feel to each document in the archive.

As well as the inventories of poets, the Great War Archive aims to give a broader sense of the war by presenting a more general collection of items donated by the public. For me, this is by far the more interesting part of the site. While manuscripts and well-trodden copies of the Hydra are interesting, it is the documentation provided by the general public through the open days held to collate items that gives the site a real interest. This is because it shows both what has been remembered, as well as giving a broader picture of the war. In the Great War Archive, we are almost immediately whisked away from the trenches and the ‘endless poetry’ of the middle classes to the account currently highlighted in the editor’s picks (and therefore on the front page) of Dr W. Roy Blore, who served as a medical officer in Gallipoli. The collection, which was submitted by two members of his family, demonstrates the capacity of Web 2.0 to recreate narratives that, as in this case, were previously fractured. Artefacts include Dr Blore’s medical equipment as well as postcards, letters, a copy of his mention in dispatches, and army ephemera such as his Princess Mary tin. A more cohesive picture of life between both Front and family is much more evident here, as well as the editor’s notes which detail how the collection was submitted partially by each son – i.e., it only exists in ‘completeness’ in a virtual context. Finally, contributors are able to submit their own notes and experiences to supplement the artefacts, lending them a retrospective and often deeply personal aspect. It is also interesting here to see the war experience of relatives contextualised throughout the last century. The grandchild writing about a travel advertisement belonging to the widow of Charles Samuel Matthews [notes](#) [3] that ‘My grandmother never had sufficient money to pay a visit to France but received souvenir rolls and invitations to go on tours of the battlefields. The souvenir roll was never returned as the accompanying envelope was never used – even 2/6d was hard to come by’, and also describes subsequent visits to the battlefields.

A stray comment about the friability of the single red dog-tag worn during the Somme in this entry can then be cross-referenced with other images in the archive that show photographic examples from later in the war when green and red ones replaced this system, for example those shown [here](#) [4]. The accessibility of this part of the site means that it is easy to browse and responds well to generic keyword searches. For less

experienced users I would have liked to see an 'also recommended' function, however, which might show a selection of potentially related items – this addition would also be useful in cross-referencing. There is, though, an extremely irritating feature when searching the Great War Archive that defaults the search to the poetry vault, and this leads to my main quibble with the entire site, one that I find extremely annoying and which I also believe is detrimental to the value of the Great War Archive in particular.

I am unclear as to why the archive is still collectively called the First World War Poetry Digital Archive; although the Great War Archive is described as 'a separate archive', the banner for these pages remains that of the poetry archive and the search function (described above) defaults automatically to the poetry even when one is trying to use the other site. The practical reason for this lack of name change is relatively clear – the reputation (and bookmarking details) of the previous site remains, and the collective social clout of the joint 'First World War' and 'poetry' tags ensures a larger amount of visitors. Yet this is a real shame – the archive is described as separate but then tied to the poetry by name and by the defaulting titles and search function. This means that the archival sources provided by the general public, which detail a vast contingency of the war experience, are yet again cast into the shadow of the few poets to whom we still turn unerringly towards every November. I am very disappointed by this decision; it is a shame that the new direction of the Great War Archive to function as a public repository for First World War artefacts should be tarnished with the mythology of the war poets when it is clearly aiming for a more rounded view. I also feel that the web designers themselves underestimate the relatively short shelf life of internet sites and the memory of users – the association with the University of Oxford alone *is* enough, and an alteration of the main banner which flags both collections as separate entities, to differentiate the two separate archives here, would go relatively unnoticed. This would also have the result of not casting the majority of the artefacts available (those donated by the public and continued in the Flickr archive) into a somehow inferior light when compared to those of the poets.

There is a final addition to this site, which is at present an excellent idea but rather poorly utilised. An accompanying Flickr photostream allows those who missed any of the live gathering sessions to download and comment on any images they feel may add to the site. This informal archive is a very interesting facility, and if it is managed well, it is also potentially one of the most original. At the time of writing, 777 images had been added to the group. These vary widely; from scans of old photographs, to tasteful images of the new visitors' centre at Thiepval. As with any unregulated public forum, this is a wildly fluctuating collection. Comments are allowed under each photograph from multiple users which can either be very misleading or simply banal, lending a subjectivity to them which would not otherwise be present. Some images are simply irrelevant or confusing – the first page of a flagged series of images by the 'commander in chief' currently shows the web designers at the Times Higher Education Awards (including clustered around a casino table), as well as some images of the Iron Harvest in someone's back garden. While the second images are well explained and captioned, the first few are written in the confusing jargon of internet shorthand and seem jarringly out of place with the studied images of poppies that follow. As would be expected, the Flickr site is also bit of a martyr to this hotchpotch of images, as well as being a metonym for public belief about the war. There are a lot of poppies, and there are a lot of photographs of the 'big' tourist areas – Owen's grave and Passchendaele feature prominently. While this is not a bad thing, it does threaten to overwhelm this section of the archive with holiday snaps and to reinforce the idea that the war only took place in designated areas of 'Somewhere in France'. A brilliant idea, since it keeps the archive running and constantly in progress, this area of the site also needs at least keywords and some measure of selectivity by an editor to make it more stable.

Overall, this is one of the most comprehensive (if not the most comprehensive) archival sites on the web. It is also one of the best attempts to navigate the museum/archive/website divide that I have seen. Attempts to broaden the archive through public contributions are an excellent idea and appear to be working, but they need more careful editing in order truly to succeed. Those that already exist in the Great War Archive, which I consider the more important section of the site, are fascinating.

Websites are not museums, and sites like this also have very temporal communities – however with slightly better signposting, I feel that there is an openness about this site that will encourage people who surf in to

find a specific item to browse more thoroughly. The layout is user friendly and there is enough detail immediately to hand quickly to pique the interest. The Great War Archive and Digital Poetry Archive have a genuinely exciting level of content, and the emphasis on using original documentation wherever possible, which readers are then able to manipulate themselves, gives the site a visceral, 'hands-on' feel that many other sites lack. It is a real shame that at present, the poetry is allowed to eclipse the huge amount of original documentation in the Great War Archive which goes a long way to presenting a more diverse, original perspective on the war.

Other reviews:

[5]

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Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3691>

[2] <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/>

[3] <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa/item/6236>

[4] <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa/item/4981>

[5] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>