



# Conflict, Art and Remembrance

## HA Teacher Fellowship Programme 2019

### Week 2: War and remembrance in the twentieth century

Eleanor O'Keeffe

“We have all been feeling out the edges of the shape of remembrance as a shared and constructed narrative, and the nature of the tension between the personal and the political. We've all been able to collapse this into more nuanced discussions that raise fundamental questions about truth, ownership and agency.”

How better to start off our blog than with such an effective summary from one of our own Teacher Fellows. The energetic learning environment of our residential course has now gone virtual and we are through the second week of the online course. This week, we've been looking at the multifaceted character of remembrance to gauge the spectrum of 'difficult' histories that might be told through it. Teachers were asked to address power, and the idea of ownership, to start us off. In some ways, these themes have taken a back seat in recent histories. Winter & Sivan's call to take a 'social agency' approach to war remembrance encouraged historians to look at civil society to see the human dimension of war's immediate aftermath. This call didn't side-line politics, per se, but it did refocus attention on the power of collective human emotion. Over the years, however, as we learn from the history of the Great War's memory, this powerful chorus of 'discordant' voices settled into a few key leitmotifs, ideas which have dominated public memory for decades.

So what kind of artefact is remembrance and how can we best use it in the classroom? We considered the interactions between family, state and society in the construction of 'remembrance' over the past 100 years to get us thinking about this potential. Some excellent new research on the remembrance of the Great War helped us out. In some, the role of the nation was clearer to grasp, whether it was within James Fox's critique of 'poppy politics' or Joanna Bourke's incredibly moving story of Frank Hodgkinson's postwar struggles with pain, the medical establishment, and an inadequate state settlement. In other readings, however, the interaction between public and private, familial and political, was harder to disentangle. Family archives of war and sacrifice are also archaeologies of other losses and grief, as we learned from Michele Barret and Peter Stallybrass (*History Workshop Journal*, 2013), but look closer and the nation-state is there, hiding in its delineating discourse. Dominant tropes are powerful, but not hegemonic: families incorporated them, gave them

meaning, but also transcended them through their own knowledge of the war, as Michael Roper and Rachel Duffett's work suggested to us (*History & Memory*, 2018).

These different perspectives generated a gutsy debate. Soon teachers were opening up broader themes of themes of power and agency, activism and the potential for 'counter memory'. The different power dynamics of remembrance, we found, told us how remembrance was never a unitary project, but can tell us about so many aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> century life and the impact of war.

"The idea of 'owning' remembrance is fascinating - more so for me I think, because it was a concept I had never considered before starting this fellowship. And yet, in many ways it's fundamental to it, and raises so many questions within it."

One of those questions was certainly about the power of families to control and share their narratives, either through denial by the State or, perhaps, through the burden of a family legacy:

"Perhaps it seems more accurate to say that remembrance is something that happens to families, something that families have to cope with for generations."

Discussing such questions gave us an uncomfortable feeling of the impossibility of arbitration. Teachers felt an obligation to accommodate all perspectives on 'memory' in the aftermath of a national catastrophe, particularly those that had been stifled or omitted. Here we came up against the sheer amount of misery that was faced individually and collectively – how can we recognise all stories adequately? We found ourselves back at 'myth'. National power brokers, if not always the state, might as one Teacher Fellow suggested 'limit historical grammar' when talking about the war, but sometimes by necessity to find some sort of collective settlement, however partial that might be. Myths, too, have their uses in providing entry points to start conversations, particularly in the centenary:

"I think the empathy the young have for the 'trench Tommy' is remarkably strong still. Perhaps to a degree built in myth- I too would be reluctant to throw this away."

Having just opened up some of these central aspects of 'remembrance' that we'll be returning to throughout the course, it would be premature to ask how this will inspire our Teacher Fellows. Next week we move onto discussion how students' historical consciousness of the First World War 'in the Classroom' and outside of it.