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# Centenaries, museum audiences and discourses of commemoration: Remembering the First World War 2014–2018

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## Abstract

This article explores public attitudes both to the First World War as a historic event and to its Centenary as a commemorative occasion. Through an analysis of exit interviews with visitors to two contrasting Centenary-related museum exhibitions in 2014 and 2018, we place these attitudes within the larger context of the War's evolving meanings and representations in British society, and the immediate circumstances of the Centenary period. Our research reveals the varying levels of connectedness people express to the First World War and to wider cultural assumptions about the meanings and place of commemoration. This is expressed in sometimes specific and nuanced ways, but more often through a more repetitive symbolic vocabulary. We argue that it is the mechanism of the Centenary itself as a cultural process that facilitates the easy adoption of an established discourse of war – evoking tropes of sacrifice, futility, a duty to remember or learn lessons – and for referring to the War and its significance for today's society.

## Keywords

centenaries, anniversaries, First World War, commemoration, museums, interviews, First World War Centenary, war memory

'We've reached a hundred years and it's time to remember'

(Interviewee, York, 2014)

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## Introduction

The contemporary era is, more than ever, an 'era of commemoration'. Centenaries, bicentenaries, half-centenaries and other 'round-number' anniversaries figure prominently in the repertoire of symbolic practices by which today's societies organize relationships to the past, to history, and to temporality. Critical commentators are divided in their view of this. For some, commemorative events have, as their public rhetoric usually implies, a unifying and stabilizing function, allowing societies in an era of rapid change and endemic uncertainty to keep a grip on their past, to affirm their identity and to maintain a sense of collective purpose. Others are more inclined to see, beneath these ostensible celebrations of commonality, a less harmonious reality, in which commemorative strategies enact exclusion, division and ideological manipulation. Influential voices have also suggested that the cult of anniversaries (Johnston, 1991), and the larger 'memory boom' (Klein, 2000; Winter, 2001) of which it is a part, embodies a disabling neurotic reaction within societies disorientated by the breakdown of organic memory cultures and the erosion of once confident historical visions (Nora, 1989). As one critic has put it: 'We are kept so busy remembering to remember that we have no time and energy left to do anything memorable' (Gillis, 1994). This article presents research into public attitudes towards the marking of the First World War Centenary (2014–2018) in Britain as gleaned through semi-structured interviews with museum visitors undertaken at the beginning and at the end of the four-year Centenary period. Analysis of these interviews reveals a range of attitudes supportive or critical of the Centenary, but also, we argue, the salience of a formulaic commemorative language, rooted in an established culture of First World War memory, through which interviewees of varying opinions negotiate the meanings of the War and its commemoration.

A substantial body of scholarship exists dealing with round-number commemorations. Until very recently, the emphasis of such studies has been on the analysis of official commemorative agendas and public commemorative activities, and sometimes also on the active resistances and contestations that these have given rise to (Garcia, 2000; Johnston, 1991; Quinault, 1998; Spillman, 1997; Summerhill and Williams, 2000). Relatively little work has considered how the business of commemoration has been perceived and experienced by ordinary members of society.[1] Yet, any assessment of the cultural functionality of commemorative events must surely depend partly on understanding the significance and the meanings that are attached to commemorative practices and processes within a broader public. Anniversary commemoration works by bringing a familiar set of cultural practices to bear on the public recollection of specific historical events. Grasping the significance of an event like a Centenary thus requires a dual lens, focussing attention both on attitudes to the specific events and on the general resonances of commemorative activity. This is the dual perspective that frames the current study.

## Remembering the Great War in Britain

The First World War Centenary should be understood in the context of longer-term developments in war remembrance within British society. The first of these is the long embedding, stretching back to the war itself and its immediate aftermath, of an established symbolic vocabulary of remembrance, which was later extended to encompass the Second World War and other conflicts. Focussed on war cemeteries and war memorials, the Cenotaph and the Unknown Soldier, Remembrance Day, the two minutes' silence, poppies, the naming of the dead, the Last Post and stock poetic phrases ('we shall remember them', 'they shall not grow old'), this vocabulary supplied a kind of common currency of remembrance, or 'war discourse' (Wilson, 2015), channelling its forms along familiar pathways, and sometimes obscuring differences in interpretation (King,

1998; Todman, 2007; Winter, 1995). A second contextual element was the cultural accreditation of what has been called the 'futility' thesis (Sheffield, 2001). Initially, in competition with more patriotic narratives in the 1920s and 1930s, this reading of the War as a brutal and essentially pointless experience of slaughter and suffering inflicted on ordinary people by callous and incompetent military and political leaders had become more popular by the late 1950s. This framing of the war drew heavily on literary and cultural outputs such as poetry and television (Fussell, 1975; Hynes, 1990). A third element, in reaction to this, was the growth, in the decades leading up to the Centenary, of a revisionist historiography geared to affirming a more positive vision in which the War, though costly and brutal, had been – from the British point of view at least – neither pointless nor mindless nor fruitless: the war had been worth fighting, society in general had been patriotically supportive of the war effort, generals had not been criminally incompetent, and the ultimate allied victory was an achievement to be recognized (Bond, 2002; Sheffield, 2001). Through the layering of these different elements, the situation as the Centenary approached was a complex one: while certain ways of evoking the War were deeply established, conflicting interpretations were also in play.

The period culminating in the Centenary witnessed a sustained attempt on the part of the British government to use commemorative events as a means of building and celebrating a certain sense of national identity. While the First World War was not the only focus for this attempt, it became its principal vehicle. Introducing his Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government's plans for the Centenary in 2012, Prime Minister David Cameron hoped that the commemoration of the First World War would continue the work which he believed had been commenced by the Queen's Diamond Jubilee of that year: it would be 'a truly national commemoration', which would capture 'our national spirit, in every corner of the country, from our schools to our workplaces, to our town halls and local communities', and say something positive and inspiring 'about who we are as a people' (Cameron, 2012). This patriotic consensualist tone would remain powerful in official governmental rhetoric as 2014 approached. Even among those broadly supportive of the line, however, significant differences of emphasis emerged. Interviewed at a conference held in anticipation of the Centenary at Wellington College in 2013, the Prime Minister's official spokesman on the Centenary, the Tory MP and former naval officer Andrew Murrison drew a firm distinction between commemoration and celebration, asserting that the Centenary would be about the former and not the latter, while another member of the government's advisory committee, the prominent historian Sir Hew Strachan, argued that the two attitudes were not incompatible and that the one should not 'elbow out' the other. Rather, as Strachan had already argued elsewhere, commemoration and celebration, the latter grounded in recognition of the fact that those who had fought the war had not regarded it as pointless, might legitimately be combined in a Centenary whose value would ultimately be judged on its ability to generate a 'deeper and more varied' understanding of the War as a historical event. A Centenary which simply endlessly repeated the standard motifs of remembrance – 'Remembrance Sunday writ large' and spread over four years – would, Strachan suggested, be 'barren and sterile' rather than meaningful (Murrison and Strachan, 2013; Strachan, 2012). Away from the relatively decorous world of advisory committee statements, however, the finer nuances of such positions were apt to be lost: Education Secretary Michael Gove pronounced the War to have been 'plainly a just war' and denounced an 'unhappy compulsion on the part of some to denigrate virtues such as patriotism, honour and courage' (Shipman, 2014), while the artists and literary figures who signed the 'Remembering the War to Promote Peace' letter, printed in *The Guardian* in May 2013, reaffirmed the futility thesis: the War had been 'a military disaster and a human catastrophe', the commemoration of which could be justified only if utterly geared towards the prevention of future conflicts (Law et al., 2013).

As 2014 dawned, many of the possible ingredients for a culture war with the First World War as pretext were in place. Yet, such a culture war never quite materialized. The four years of the

Centenary were to see a Britain damagingly disturbed and divided by the Brexit debate and its aftermath, but the First World War did not become a primary battleground in those divisions. The British Future think-tank, whose research tracked public opinions to the War and its commemoration, found extensive public agreement in 2014 with the proposition that the War was a key event in shaping modern British society, and with seeing the Centenary as an important opportunity for finding out more about it and communicating an understanding of it to a new generation, but found relatively 'little support for more politicized interpretations of the centenary's meaning' (Hough et al., 2016: 25). Two years later, in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, British Future found that Brexiters were more likely than Remainers to agree with the proposition that the War had been a just one, which Britain was right to fight, but even among the Brexiters, a slightly higher proportion disagreed with the proposition (Hough et al., 2016: 18). Tracking public opinion across the period from 2014 to 2018, British Future found that public approval of the prevailing tone of the Centenary commemorations, already high at the beginning of the Centenary, was still higher by the end (Buckerfield and Ballinger, 2019). While respondents may have differed in their understanding of that tone and their reasons for approving it, it does not appear that the Centenary was widely experienced as divisive. It is also notable that in the further wave of cultural confrontations over Britain's histories of race, enslavement and empire triggered by Black Lives Matter and other movements from c. 2020 onwards, the First World War has seldom been a major point of reference, despite its obvious imperial context.

Historians were involved in debates over the Centenary from the beginning, and a substantial body of scholarly literature now exists analysing, contextualizing and critiquing its commemorative forms, agendas and orientations in national and international perspective (Noakes and Wallis, 2022; Pennell, 2012; Sheffield, 2014).[2] Following on the heels of the British Future survey research just referred to, a number of studies have begun to delve more deeply into public attitudes by investigating the views articulated by different audiences or groups of participants in a range of Centenary-related activities. Lucy Noakes (2018) has shown how Mass Observation diaries produced by women on the occasion of the Centenary were shaped by gendered cultural memories, privileging references to the male war dead or soldier veteran, while also reinforcing the role of women as keepers and transmitters of family memory. Kidd and Sayner (2018), analyzing public responses to the Bloodswept Lands and Seas of Red installation at the Tower of London, have detected a similar resistance to a pluralization of narratives, and a common adoption of familiar tropes of 'unthinking remembrance', while Catriona Pennell (2018) has shown how the influence of these tropes is also reflected in the responses of schoolchildren participating in the government-sponsored First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours programme. Work by Shanti Sumartojo (2021) on the Centenary of the Armistice similarly seeks to reframe the study of commemoration by focussing on the subjective experiences of participants. Our research on museum visitors brings another audience into view, and reflects from a fresh angle on some of the insights and conclusions emerging from this wave of studies.

## Museum visitors, interviews and memory

In 2014, we conducted exit interviews with visitors to First World War-themed exhibits at two Yorkshire Museums: '1914: When the World Changed Forever' at the Castle Museum, York in July, and 'Remember Scarborough' at Scarborough Art Gallery in August. In total, 125 interviews were conducted, embracing 186 individual interviewees, 130 in York and 56 in Scarborough (88 and 41 interviews, respectively). Although the Scarborough exhibit was temporary, timed to commemorate the German naval bombardment of the Scarborough coastline on December 16, 1914, York's was envisaged as a new permanent installation, enabling us to conduct a further round of

interviews (131 people, 108 interviews) in November 2018 (also the end of the Centenary period) for comparison. The collective profile of the interviewees differed between the two museums, reflecting differences in the character and location of the museums – a large and multifaceted museum in one of Britain's leading tourist destinations, with a substantial student population (York), and a smaller provincial gallery in a smaller coastal town, with more limited road and rail connections (Scarborough). The age profile of 2014 interviewees in Scarborough showed a preponderance in the upper age ranges, with 79% over 55; in York, it was more varied, with 49% over 55, but a significant contingent (14%) in the 18- to 24-year-old band, which in Scarborough was almost entirely absent. A significant number of York interviewees, but none in Scarborough, were visiting in family groups including children. Gender breakdown was less differentiated, with an even split of male and female in Scarborough and only a slight female bias in York. Breakdown by (self-described) ethnicity was significantly more varied in York, though at both sites, variations on 'white' and 'white British' accounted for the majority. 32.1% of Scarborough and 25% of York interviewees came from within a 10-mile radius of the museum, but York predictably had more visitors from further afield in the UK, and 18.9% from overseas, compared with none in Scarborough. A few of the Scarborough interviewees, though coming from elsewhere in the UK, identified themselves as regular holiday visitors to the town. Variations between the collective profiles of 2014 and 2018 York interviewees were relatively small, though the number of overseas visitors was significantly lower in 2018, when interviews fell outside the tourist season.

While a description of the two museums and a content analysis of their First World War displays fall outside the main purposes of this article, certain differences between them may be relevant to understanding interview responses. Some of these relate to size and layout. Most of those we interviewed at the Castle Museum will have encountered the First World War exhibit roughly half-way round a longer visit to a museum with many sections and a predominantly linear layout: it is significant that only 34% said they had come to the museum that day specifically to visit the First World War display (a similar proportion in 2018; 36%). In Scarborough, where 'Remember Scarborough' took up, for its limited duration, almost the whole of a much smaller institutional site, the figure was 60%. This difference may also have affected the interview experience. Interviews were conducted, in both museums, at the point and moment of exit from the First World War exhibit. In Scarborough, this was usually also the end of the museum visit – a relatively convenient moment to stop and reflect. In York, with more of the museum still to visit, and with impressions of the First World War exhibit jostling with impressions of earlier galleries, focussing reflectively on the First World War specifically may have been harder for visitors.

The two exhibitions also differed significantly in scope and content. The Castle Museum's '1914: When the World Changed Forever', whose opening in July 2014 coincided with the anniversary of the War's commencement, was wide-ranging in scope, embracing not just the outbreak and opening stages of the War, but the whole period from 1914 to 1918. Indeed, its key structural feature, serving as a corridor through the heart of the exhibition space, was a Western Front trench reproduction, surmounted by a tank and fitted out with such evocative objects as a gasmask, a trench periscope and a model rat – an installation more redolent of the middle and later stages of the conflict than of its opening moments. Though foregrounding the Western Front experience specifically (other fighting fronts were mentioned only in passing, though subsidiary sections dealt with the war at sea, in the air, and on the Home Front), the exhibit covered social and geopolitical aspects of the War in framing narrative sections. It also, as its sub-title implied, delivered a strong message about the War's transformative impact on the postwar world, summarized in the last room of the display under titles like 'Women in the workplace', 'Mechanised transport' and 'The Jazz Age'. In all of this, the museum aspired to tell a story that was national and international rather than merely local. Local materials were harnessed to this purpose: references to York and Yorkshire

people and places, to local experiences – for example of recruitment and of aerial bombardment – and objects with a local provenance, were woven through the display, and visitors were encouraged to follow a 'Yorkshire People Trail' tracking the personal war experiences of five people from the region. But these localized elements were subordinated to the rhythms of a larger narrative. Scarborough Art Gallery's exhibition, by contrast, was essentially local in focus: homing in very specifically on the moment of the War's most dramatic and immediate impact on the local community: the dawn attack on the town by German ships on 16 December 1914. Fragments of shrapnel picked up after the bombardment, an illuminated street map showing the points in the town hit by German shells, and a large display panel quoting at length from the novelist Winifred Holtby's eye-witness account of experiencing the bombardment as a schoolgirl, were prominent among the exhibits. Contextualizing elements detailed Scarborough's pre-war emergence as a seaside resort, and framed the attack of 16th December, less within a general narrative of the War as a whole, than within a more specific narrative of Germany's emergence as a naval power and strategic naval aims: notable attention was in fact paid to the German perspective on the event. The exhibition also touched on the later propaganda uses of the bombardment ('Remember Scarborough') and their effects on morale and recruitment. Where the York exhibition used local materials to illustrate and develop a broader narrative of the War as a transformative experience, the Scarborough one focussed on how the War came to Scarborough.

The interviews we conducted were semi-structured, with six core questions, but latitude given to interviewers to prompt further elaboration of responses. Following transcription, responses were encoded using NVivo, applying categories derived from our preliminary reading of the corpus of interviews as a whole. Our interview method aimed to give interviewees considerable discursive freedom in responding to our questions, and our coding method reflected our aim of registering fluidity, diversity and even sometimes inconsistency within as well as between responses: rather than assigning each response to a single descriptive category, we often coded them under several headings simultaneously. The statistical information presented in this article does not, therefore, pretend to a rigid kind of analytical value; its function is simply to highlight the recurrence of different themes and ideas across the corpus of interviews, and to support a qualitative analysis of how these themes and ideas were deployed and combined.

Our interview questions fell into two groups. Questions 4–6 invited interviewees to comment on the specific content and presentation of the exhibitions; responses to these are not the object of analysis in this article. Questions 1–3 were more general in character:

1. This year [2014] is the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War. Do you think it is important to remember this history? If so, why?
2. Is it a history to which you feel a particular connection? If so, why?
3. Do you think the anniversary can make a difference to how we remember the War?

The responses to these questions are analyzed in this article. Our 2018 York interviews used the same questions as in 2014 (only adjusting the wording of Question 1 to refer to the end rather than the beginning of the War), and a comparison of 2014 and 2018 findings reveals, in statistical terms, only minor – if occasionally telling – differences between the two. The bulk of this article will therefore focus on analysis of the 2014 interviews; differences encountered in 2018 will be briefly discussed in the later stages.

One effect of the discursive freedom we tried to give interviewees in responding to our questions was that responses to different questions often overflowed into or repeated each other. This was so particularly between Questions 1 and 3, and responses to these are therefore considered together in what follows. Between them, these questions prompted a range of thoughts from

interviewees on the significance of anniversaries in general and of commemorating the First World War in particular. Not surprisingly, given the significant proportion of them who had deliberately committed time to visiting a First World War exhibition, virtually all of our interviewees (99.1%) stated that remembering the First World War was important. A smaller but still significant majority (73%) also felt that the Centenary could make a difference in this remembering, though 20.2% gave a more negative or sceptical response to this question. A handful of respondents expressed some concern that the prevailing forms of commemorative culture might have a tendency to glorify the war experience: there was mention of 'macho posturing' on the part of government, of commemoration 'tipping over towards celebration', and at least one interviewee felt that war was 'very much glorified' in the exhibition just visited. The great majority of interviewees, however, expressed no obvious misgivings on the general tone of the commemoration.

## Attitudes towards the Centenary, commemoration and the First World War

The minority of respondents who, in response to Question 3, felt that the Centenary would make no difference to how the War was remembered, were by no means homogeneous in their responses. A few (5.4%) felt that the War was sufficiently established in public consciousness not to need the assistance of special commemorative occasions ('It's still as important as it used to be, isn't it'); others, by contrast, felt that it was bound to recede in people's awareness now that it was no longer in living memory ('It will gradually fade, just like the Crimean War'). Some simply sensed a general public indifference ('we're a selfish nation now, I think a lot of people don't really care') or the beginnings, even in 2014, of commemoration fatigue: 'there has been so much media stuff about it, and [. . .] most people, except the older generation, they just want to forget all about it'.

The majority of interviewees, however, seemed to feel both that remembering the First World War was important, and that the Centenary could help with this process. The reasons given were, however, at least initially, often general and formulaic. Quite a few, especially in younger age groups, simply stated, in replying to Question 1, that it was important to remember history generally ('Just because it's history'; 'you've got to remember what's happened'). Others, only slightly more specifically, subsumed the memory of the War into generalized assertions of history's importance for national identity ('It's all part of a nation's history: it gives you a sense of identity'; 'It's part of our heritage, we are here because of it'). Responses to Question 3 were often equally formulaic: the Centenary was valued as a 'trigger' or 'marker' or 'reminder' or 'milestone', a moment that 'brings things to the fore', often without further elaboration. Almost 40% of responses used this kind of language. Some took the cultural appeal of anniversaries for granted: 'The British people like anniversaries, don't they?', or, in a slightly more thoughtful formulation: 'People are used to anniversaries and they know they demarcate or mark something particular. Does it make a difference? It can't not do because that's how we function, isn't it, we work in anniversaries, and hundreds in particular'.

When respondents moved beyond this formulaic level of response, it was generally in ways which revolved around one or more of these thematic ideas:

That the War should be remembered because there were vital lessons to be learnt from it

That there was a duty to remember the suffering and/or sacrifice of the War

That the War should be remembered as a crucial transformative event in history

> That it was important to ensure the passage of knowledge and/or awareness of the War to present and future generations.

Many answers to Question 1 (38.5%) suggested that the War should be remembered because there were 'lessons' to be learnt from it. Formulations of this idea were, again, often fairly vague: the War must be remembered 'so that we don't make the same mistakes again'; 'those who do not remember history are condemned to repeat it'. Clear statements of what exactly these lessons were are noticeably absent, but it seems implicit in most of these responses, first that the learning envisaged was a learning from mistakes, and second, that it had to do with the avoidance of wars in future (rather than, e.g., how to win them). Though the theme of lessons to be learnt was encountered across all age groups, older interviewees (55 to 75 especially) sometimes added an undercutting note of scepticism or disillusionment: 'Lessons to be learnt – not that they ever are'; 'You hope people would learn the lessons, but it still goes on'. Some pointed specifically to recent conflicts to show both the enduring need for lessons to be learnt and the continuing failure to learn them:

> Because it looks like Europe and America are trying to engineer [. . .] a war in 2014 with Russia, for as stupid reasons as we fought in the First World War and if everybody tries to wake up maybe we can stop people from starting it all over again.

> [. . .] and it's mad people like Putin that cause mad wars that cause ordinary people to suffer in the way they do, and in a sense that story of the First World War is the same as what we're doing today, we're watching big people play big games with ordinary people's lives, and it's devastating and you feel helpless, but you need to keep telling the story because one day we will learn.

One Scarborough interviewee drew a direct parallel between Scarborough's ordeal in 1914 and contemporary experiences:

> [. . .] this is about military bombardment of civilians, and we have exactly the same situation in a different country and on a different scale, but it's the same issue and I think that's poignant and very significant.

Alongside the theme of 'lessons to be learnt' and sometimes conjoined with it, another line of response (found in 18.8% of interviews), posited a duty of remembrance. Elaborations on this theme keyed into an established commemorative language whose flexibility of application has already been mentioned. In our coding, we distinguished two different, though not mutually exclusive, thematic emphases: Remembrance (Horror) and Remembrance (Sacrifice). Responses in the Remembrance (Horror) category grounded the duty of remembrance in the need to remember the sheer awfulness and destructiveness and brutality of the war experience. Stress fell on the colossal casualty rates of military action ('it's just the total loss of life'), or on generalized descriptions of front-line experience, in the trenches of the Western Front especially – 'the horrors of hand-to-hand combat'; 'it was so bloody and so horrific'. A significant subset of these responses (37.5%) explicitly articulated the 'futility discourse', whose salience in cultural representations of the War has already been highlighted. Interviewees evoked the 'needless suffering of millions of people', the shedding of countless lives 'for a senseless argument'. More than half of those answering in this vein explicitly laid the blame for senseless slaughter on military and political leaders or elites:

> I think to recognize the sort of the [. . .] approach that a lot of the generals and the senior officers took, which showed a disregard of human life – just keep on sending people over the top and so on – I think we need to be reminded of how horrible that was.

> [ . . .] the common men were just cannon fodder in those days really, weren't they?

Not all of those who stressed the appalling loss and suffering of the War read this in terms of futility. Those we have classified as giving a 'Remembrance (Sacrifice)' response used a language of sacrifice, which while recognizing the scale of bloodshed and suffering that the War entailed, seemed to assign it a more positive value. Here again, however, the meanings attached to this emotionally resonant idiom were by no means fixed and immutable. Often, when interviewees affirmed that it was 'important to remember' the 'sacrifice' or 'sacrifices' of the wartime generations, 'sacrifice' seemed to function as little more than a general synonym for death or suffering or bereavement, possibly with an implication of these being stoically borne or voluntarily accepted, but with no clearly articulated idea that the sacrifice had been for anything specific or had achieved anything in particular. In other cases, there was a clearer intended reference either to the traditional notion of patriotic sacrifice ('what they gave for their country') or to a less explicitly nationalistic idea that those who suffered and died in the First World War had done so to secure the freedom, security and well-being of future generations – often described, in present-minded terms, as the freedom and prosperity that today's generation enjoys and takes for granted. Traditional patriotic and contemporary freedom-focussed notions of sacrifice were sometimes blended together:

> [. . .] those people can't just be forgotten, that they sacrificed, they thought they were doing the right thing, they thought they were fighting for their country. Fighting for freedom, and we've benefited from that haven't we?

Past sacrifice established a debt, conferring a duty of recognition on present generations:

> I think we owe it to the people at that time, particularly those who served and those who died, to remember what they did, and also that the general population, particularly younger people, should be aware of what happened and what their ancestors did and what they contributed to the war effort and to really eventually the prosperity that they now enjoy.

Just as a belief in 'lessons to be learned' could be undercut by disillusioned reflections on the perverse contemporary failure to learn them, so, in a small minority of cases, evocations of a duty to remember past sacrifices slid into embittered commentary on today's society. One interviewee railed against immigration and the failings of the school curriculum: 'look at the state of the country now, all they fought for [. . ..] Let's face it, the country's gone, and what they died for. Not for us to let foreigners in here'. Most interviewees avoided such contentious particularities: the implications of the idea of sacrifice remained vague and general, for all its emotional resonance.

Alongside the prudential rhetoric of learning lessons and the ethical rhetoric of a duty to remember sacrifice and suffering, a significant number of responses (11.7%) suggested that the First World War should be remembered for its profoundly transformative historical effects – as an experience which had initiated changes that had helped to constitute the world we now live in. Statements to this effect were commonest among York interviewees (77.26% of the responses in this category), a fact which probably reflects not only the wider focus of the York exhibit but the specific emphasis on change that was present both in the way the exhibition title heralded 1914 as 'the year the world changed forever' and in the final room of the exhibit which focussed on some of the specific changes that the War had been instrumental in bringing about. While many interviewees confined themselves to generalities ('You see modern history and it starts from here'; 'it was a massive change in this country'), others gave more detail on the war's effects. In some cases, the emphasis was geopolitical: the War '[redrew] the boundaries of Europe'; it 'resulted in the Second World War and more recently the creation of the European Union'. In others, it was a social change,

especially in relation to class and gender, that drew attention. Two interviewees separately articulated this from their own subject positions:

> [. . .] so I think it [. . .] certainly changed society for us. You know, as working class people if you know what I mean. No longer, er . . . vassals, shall we say, to the er, the higher excellence you know what I mean.

> [. . .] and it changed the face of, well Europe and [. . .] the world altogether. Some for the better, I mean it brought us women out of the kitchen [laughs]. Unfortunately we're back in the kitchen again and we're having to do two jobs.

Finally, many interviewees linked the importance of commemorating the War to a need to ensure a transgenerational passing on of knowledge and awareness. This idea featured, in some form or other, in 10% of responses to Question 1 and 19.6% to Question 3. A thread of concern with the passage of time and with generational differences ran through answers to both questions. The need to transmit memory to 'younger generations' (or, in more personal terms, to 'our children' or 'my grandchildren'), and the increased difficulty of doing so in a world now bereft of First World War veterans as symbols and witnesses, were recurrent themes: 'It's very important that we remember, so our children will remember as well' was a typical response.

Members of older generations did not necessarily take their own remembering for granted. One interviewee (male 65–74 years) reflected on how the process of ageing had affected his own generation's perspective:

> I think it's because we're getting older that it seems to have more of an impact on me definitely. When you're younger you're busy getting on with your life, and when you're really young as children you've heard all about it, your parents have talked about it and you just accept it as one of the things that happened in your parents' life. You don't realise till later, much later.

More often, however, interviewees offered a fairly static reading of generational differences. The young were perceived to be lacking both in interest and in awareness. 'I don't think the younger people are all that interested, to be honest', one interviewee remarked. Another, speculatively comparing today's young people to the youth of 1914, clearly suspected a decline in capacity for patriotic engagement: 'you think, would they do that nowadays, would 17-year-olds nowadays voluntarily go and sign up and go and do that?'

For some, it was absence of personal contacts that explained young people's indifference or non-engagement:

> Yes, because a lot of people, people of my generation remember because their parents or grandparents have spoken about it but the next generation, for them it's a past history [. . .]

> [. . .] a lot of them haven't got any [. . .] inkling of it, have they? Any contact. You know, I mean, my dad fought in the Second World War, got hit a couple of times and all sort [. . .], so . . . erm . . . we've always had that sort of history and [. . .] link to it but they've thankfully been war-free for [. . .] generations haven't they [. . .]

Some saw schooling as part of the problem. One interviewee offered an explicitly nationalist reading of the issue:

> 'Cause, well, I would say, as things are going, we're losing our identity I think. It's not taught in schools as much as it used to be. When I was young at school I mean all the history and everything was all British

> history. Whereas now it's social history and stuff like they, which is [laughs] they've watered down our Britishness I think [. . .]

Another respondent, from the same age-group, saw deficiencies in their own educational preparation: ' [. . .] when I was at school we did the causes of the First World War but we didn't do the War, and the causes I must admit I remember in just little snippets'. Another, herself a schoolteacher, queried whether schools could really live up to the challenge of promoting engagement with First World War history among children. Asked what she found challenging, she replied:

> I think the immensity of it all. They don't understand what was going on then, what the reasons – why there was a war. I don't . . . a lot of people don't understand why there was a First World War, so getting that idea across is quite difficult for young children. But we've been told that we have to teach about the Centenary, so interesting for me . . . because I don't know what to do!

Others were more optimistic about the possibility that the Centenary might jump-start an engagement of the young that had previously been lacking. 'Because it's the one hundredth anniversary, a new generation of people will see it as they've never seen it before', one suggested. Another put it more trenchantly; 'The younger generation, they didn't give a monkey's. But I think now they think, hey I didn't know that'. One couple, however, found themselves in open disagreement in mid-interview:

> I think it [the Centenary] has brought it home; I mean for younger people now, I mean [they] have a lot more idea of what it was, or what happened or what sacrifices were made than they did before.

> I don't think that. We have four sons, and I don't think they give a toss about it.

Most of the concerns over memory's vulnerability to generational indifference were expressed by interviewees in the 55–64 and 65–74 age brackets towards younger generations (though some older and younger interviewees also expressed these views, these were in the minority). Born between 1950 and 1959 and between 1940 and 1949, respectively, these groups would not have had any direct living experience and memory of the First World War or the Second World War (bar perhaps some very early memories in the older of the 65- to 74-year-olds). However, for many in these age brackets, their proximity, and second-generation familial connections to the Second World War ('my dad fought in the Second World War') stood out as an experience not matched by younger generations and therefore performed a kind of 'cultural currency' through which to claim a 'truer' understanding of war and its remembrance. For some, this was expressed as an anxiety about shifting historical frameworks and consequences for identity ('they're watering down our Britishness'), or as (and perhaps alongside) wider generational conflict and divisions in society through which the memory of the First World War could be used to play out general tensions and criticisms. This was especially poignant in the run-up to the Brexit vote where age was a key correlating factor in the leave/remain divide.[3] It is notable from these responses how far the Second World War could 'stand in place' of the First World War in establishing generational claims to experience.

## Connections to the War

Some of the responses to Questions 1 and 3 just cited offered clues as to how far interviewees felt personally connected to First World War experiences. Question 2 was designed to explore these

issues more directly. Most responses to this question were positive (67%). It must be noted from the start that most interviewees clearly interpreted our wording about whether they felt a 'particular connection' to the War as being a reference specifically to family connections. Of those who replied negatively to Question 2, 46.2% gave an unelaborated negative answer, but a roughly equal proportion indicated specifically that they felt no connection because they knew of no close relatives who had been involved. Perhaps not surprisingly, younger interviewees were less likely to feel personally connected: roughly half of those in the 25–34 age group gave a negative response. However, only 7.7% of interviews (curiously all at Scarborough) explained their un-connectedness simply in terms of the War being so long ago: the existence or otherwise of family connections seemed a more significant determinant. Among those giving a positive response to the question, only a small handful cited personal connections of a non-family kind – through locality, or education, or personal experience of military service, or a specialist interest in military history, or through the horror of war naturally experienced by a mother. Far more often – in 69.4% of cases – family was the dominant frame of reference for connections.

Equally clear was a tendency to prioritize experiences of front-line combat – especially on the Western Front – over other kinds of wartime experience. The overwhelming majority of those who cited a family connection to the War were referring to male family members with combatant experience. A few referred to relatives who had served in less obviously frontline capacities – a cook, a despatch rider, a royal bodyguard. Some cited more tenuous connections – a mother believed to have been conceived on Armistice Day, or family members whose Second World War experience supplied a kind of loose connection to the earlier conflict. A handful referred to industrial war-work, generally in the munitions industry – the only area in which women's connection to the war experience was recognized by respondents beyond being a bereaved family member, or the mere fact of having been alive at the time. But it was striking that several interviewees stated that they did not feel a personal connection to the War because their ancestors had been in reserved occupations – as farmers, railwaymen or miners – rather than in the armed forces: 'I'm from a mining background and we all were down the mines', one reported, adding that a lot of miners had served as soldiers 'but none from my family'. The recent movement among historians (Chickering and Förster, 2000) and Centenary planners to emphasize the diversity of participatory experiences that formed part of societies' mobilization for mass industrialized warfare left little mark here: the image of the fighting soldier remained dominant (McCartney, 2014).

Responses indicating a family connection to the War were not always very specific – brief references to fathers or grandfathers or other relatives who were believed to have served, possibly with mention of particular battles or of a relative having been wounded or killed in action. Sometimes there was a greater accumulation of still fairly basic detail: 'My great-grandfather died on the Somme. My grandfather served in [. . .] Mesopotamia, and a couple of his brothers were in it as well'. Such snippets of information did enough to suggest that the War had some residual place in narratives of family history, but did not necessarily imply much continuing emotional connection.

In some cases, however, interviewees, without providing much more information, spoke in ways which seemed to endow the very absence of transmitted knowledge with a deeper personal significance:

> My father was in the First World War, and he never talked about it. He never told us anything about it. I never knew, except that he had been wounded in it.

> I didn't know him [great-grandfather] or anything like that, but I can see his medals on the wall and I wish I'd asked some more questions now.

Around half of those who mentioned family connections to the War did, however, offer responses that were richer in remembered detail, and that spoke to a continuing sense of how the War had shaped the lives of earlier generations.

> I had an uncle who died on the first day of the Battle of the Somme and we . . . he was never found. Erm, it's my father's brother. And he was never found, and it's on the monument out there.

> Obviously that [a grandfather's death at Ypres] sort of shattered the family above my dad, because he never saw him again and I never met him at all and then his mother had to marry again and so a lot happened because of the War really, didn't it?

> My grandfather on my mother's side, and I know my grandmother, she never believed he was dead, she would always leave the door open thinking he would come back, and she was left to bring up six children on a very meagre war pension.

> My father was in the War. My uncle died, but before he died he wrote home to his mother and father and said: 'Please don't let my baby brother came to this hellhole', but my Dad had to go when he was eighteen. Luckily he came back but he never talked about it, which is what everyone says.

As several of these examples make clear, the memories through which interviewees felt themselves connected to the First World War were often less the remembered recollections of surviving soldiers – whose silence is more often mentioned – than the memories of loss and bereavement, communicated within the family, by women especially. Among our interviewees, too, it was women more often than men (especially in Scarborough with its older visitor profile) who articulated these more detailed family memories, an observation which tends to confirm Lucy Noakes's (2018) description of the role of women as keepers of 'informal family traditions' and family history narratives.

In some cases, personal connections to the War were developed or reinforced through the presence of material objects (medals, relics, photographs) passed down within the family. Perhaps responding to specific prompts within the exhibition itself – the bombardment map or the fragments of shrapnel – a small number of our older Scarborough interviewees produced responses in which family experiences, material impressions and memories of specific locations were closely woven together:

> Well my mother and father were both schoolchildren during the bombardment and we did have a piece of shrapnel come through our outside toilet, which I collected many years later and showed to school in the 1930s.

> When I used to come [on holiday] with my mum and dad they used to show me the bits missing out of the buildings where the shrapnel had hit, and that's more or less what got me interested, to think what caused that and how it's not been filled in.

These responses illustrate some of the unique local narratives our interviewees brought with them. As outlined in one cabinet in the gallery, shell fragments were already being bought and sold in Scarborough in the afternoon of the bombardment day, and in the days that followed a trade developed in shrapnel, pieces of which were mounted to wooden plinths and display boards, and sold as mementos, tangible reminders of the bombardment's significance in local memory.

## 2018: the end of the Centenary

Our 2018 interviews at York Castle Museum yielded results which are generally consistent with those of four years earlier, but which are marked in a number of ways by an increased tendency towards anxiety, scepticism or negativity. This may in part be attributable to commemoration fatigue but probably also to the unsettlement and instability generated across the years of the Centenary, by the political fallout of Brexit, the ascendancy of Donald Trump, and the rise of Far Right populism, both in Britain and globally.

Responses to Question 2, concerning feelings of connectedness to the First World War, differed little in their general tendencies from those of four years earlier, with 64% (as compared with 67% in 2014) claiming to feel a personal connection. Responses to Questions 1 and 3, exploring attitudes to the Centenary and to commemoration more specifically, were also broadly in line with 2014 responses but saw a few new variations and some notable minor divergences. In response to Question 1, most interviewees still felt that it was important to remember the First World War, and the most frequent reason given for this (seen in 29.4% of responses compared to 27.8% of York responses in 2014) was still that there were 'lessons to learn'. One interviewee emphasized the particular necessity of contemplating these lessons under present circumstances:

> I think it's wise to look at history and remember that one false step and we could have another world war. I mean, you look at Trump, you look at Europe. You look at Russia being belligerent, Saudi Arabia. I think the world's a more dangerous place this year than maybe it was five years ago.

While the proportion of interviewees emphasizing the horrors of the First World War remained fairly consistent, the number evoking the idea of sacrifice rose from 6.8% to 17.5%, possibly reflecting the repeated use of this trope in official commemorative rhetoric across the Centenary years. Responding to Question 3, on whether the Centenary could make a difference, the proportion answering in the affirmative was down slightly (from 75.51% to 64.23%), which may reflect a measure of commemoration fatigue, but may also simply reflect the fact that 2018 interviewees had had greater opportunity to see what the commemorative activity for the Centenary actually amounted to. It is not clear from responses, either at the beginning of the Centenary or at the end, how far respondents actually believed that public attitudes to the First World War needed to be revised. At any rate, the majority of interviewees still seem to have viewed the Centenary as valuable. Most still gave a fairly banal account of why this was the case, though significant numbers still referred to the role of the Centenary in transmitting awareness of events that had now fallen out of living memory, and to the need to communicate it to youngster generations.

Among the 34.15% who were sceptical about the Centenary's likely efficacity, there were references to general public indifference, or to a desensitizing 'war overload'. One interviewee felt that while the Centenary would make a difference, it should not: 'It will do, I'm sure, but it shouldn't. Not really. But it will, it's the Centenary, it's forced to be different, it will always be different'. Although still confined to a minority of responses, notes of negativity, pessimism or scepticism as to the importance or effectiveness of commemorative practices were more common in 2018 than in 2014. Three interviewees (as opposed to none in 2014) gave straight negative answers to the question of whether it was important to remember the War, with three others criticizing the glorification of war, and one observing in a negative spirit that 'we don't half harp on about the past a lot'. Most of these negative responses came from male respondents. On the question of whether the Centenary would make a difference to the way the War was remembered, more people than before responded negatively on the grounds that we should 'remember anyway'. The numbers in these categories are small, but together they represent an increase in sceptical or critical feelings about the Centenary and its potential impact at the end of the commemorative period.

## Conclusion

Interviewing people who had chosen to visit First World War exhibitions in museums at the beginning, and at the end, of a very publicly marked Centenary period elicited perspectives which were restricted in terms both of the kind of audience surveyed, and of responses that could be given. While we acknowledge that this was not a true cross section of British society, it usefully sought responses from an already, though variably, engaged public, people who were at least interested enough in the history of the First World War to go to a dedicated exhibition and to answer our questions about their views on this and commemoration more broadly. Conducting interviews at the immediate point of exit meant that there was no long period of reflection and contemplation, and this in part may account for the largely formulaic nature of responses. However, we believe that there is value in this finding.

Much of the language used by our interviewees foregrounded common tropes seen elsewhere in the cultural memory of the First World War (the 'futility discourse', the dominance of the fighting Tommy and the Western Front). The consistency in these tropes across the four years considered speaks to the strength of their presence in popular memory and the challenges therefore of trying to disrupt dominant narratives and older established understandings of the War. However, it also reflects broader patterns of public engagements with the past in commemorative contexts. The idea that the First World War should be remembered so that people today might 'learn lessons' speaks to a general assumption about the value of history and the use of the past in the present. The idea that this was a history that should be 'passed on' to generic future generations is a common trope in heritage discourses. It also brought to the fore the distinct conflicts and tensions expressed between generations seen to have had very different experiences, and therefore apparently attitudes, to war. This is notable given that, as many of our participants noted, this is a war which has since passed out of living memory, a fact that the Centenary and its marking perhaps emphasized. Even in answer to our second question concerning the connections interviewees felt towards the war, the answers were often generic and formulaic, concentrating largely on connections to the front line and to the experiences of male fighting soldiers themselves. By and large these responses did not encompass broader connections, even where family members were in reserved occupations directly connected to warfare (e.g. mining and industry). Both the efforts of various public history projects within the Centenary itself and recent historiographical shifts to broaden out our understanding of the experience of the war which affected all kinds of people and their families were not borne out in our data. Equally, our responses showed a distinct gendered restriction in what our interviewees saw as a 'valid' connection, that the male/combat experience was *the* experience of the war, and women's experiences largely emerged only as relative to the male experience (as wives and mothers, as mourners and as keepers of family history). Even within the limited examples of alternative, deeper and more complex connections articulated, these were still understood through the discourse of war, often as alternative examples of bravery and sacrifice. We argue here that the Centenary, as a commemorative form and structure, directly encouraged such formulaic responses, distilling and funnelling complex family histories through an established war discourse which encouraged the promotion of particular established patterns and narratives above others.

The relative consistency of responses in 2014 and 2018 reveals the elasticity of a commemorative language which could mean very different things to different people, and the ways the framing of the long centenary shaped and facilitated this. The word 'sacrifice', for example, was used by our interviewees both as an expression of patriotic duty, and as a critical point about needless death. The largely uncontroversial symbolic language of the War could embrace a spectrum of political standpoints, and their fluctuations, across the centenary period. This fluidity has developed through the reinforcement of common memory tropes, imagery and symbolic expression

within media, arts and culture, but also through an accumulative commemorative practice across the last 100 years. The creation of a standardized symbolic culture of remembrance, developed in response to the War has since been extended to other, more recent conflicts, performed across a geography of national sites such as the Cenotaph and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and through a layering of common symbols such as the poppy. The Centenary itself, as an officially orchestrated cultural mechanism, invoked and imprinted this common discourse of remembrance through which our interviewees could navigate their responses even if they were approaching the War and its commemoration from quite different perspectives.

While there were notable critical voices in relation to the Centenary and centenaries generally, and several of our interviewees expressed concern about the use of centenaries for political ends, overall the public attitudes and responses in our interviews revealed how far a fairly set discourse of remembrance continues to dominate public engagements with the history of the First World War in a relatively unproblematised way. This remained relatively stable across a long Centenary programme, which had played host to a varied range of events, exhibitions and activities seeking ways to nuance this popular understanding. Our research has shown that it was the invocation of the Centenary itself that acted to strengthen and heighten this language of commemoration; boiling down possible responses into stock formulations, which were relatively easy and accessible for people to reach for while negotiating the meaning of the First World War and its memory. This is at odds with some of the more optimistic interpretations of centenaries as opportunities to nuance public memory and challenge orthodoxies and mythologies about the past and reveals the extent of the underlying challenges around navigating history and memory during the large-scale public marking of round-number anniversaries.

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## Notes

1. An exception to this trend, however, has been the research around engagement with the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade in 2007 (see, for example, Smith, 2010; Smith et al., 2011).
2. See also special editions of *Twentieth Century British History* Volume 27, Issue 4, December 2016; *War & Society 36*, no. 4 (2017), and *Cultural Trends* 27(2), (2018).
3. The proportion of those who voted to leave the European Union rose with each age bracket. See https://www.statista.com/statistics/520954/Brexit-votes-by-age/ (accessed 7 February 2024).

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