

The Material Culture of Remembrance and Identity

South Africa, India, Canada & Australia's Imperial War Graves Commission Sites on the Western Front

Sites of Identity

Beyond being sites of memory and sites of mourning, the memorials and cemeteries representing South Africa, India, Canada, and Australia on the First World War's Western Front also have a significant function as sites of identity. They are perennial testaments to those who died, those who missed them, and the emerging nations who lost them. Between 1917 and 1938, identities were shifting, unstable, and overlapping within the British Empire. Imperial War Graves Commission sites were expressive and emotive locations where intersections between individual, collective, national, and imperial identities manifested and were negotiated. The 'absent dead' were at the heart of the British Empire's material culture of remembrance, and the nature of these absences (including missing bodies, non-identification, illicit exhumations, cremations, and distant grief), positioned them as a nexus of identities for the Dominions and India.

Sacred Ground

Memorials, cemeteries, and their landscapes were linked conceptually as well as spatially by the dead. The boundary between 'missing' and 'buried' was not a static dichotomy in the 1920s-30s, as new bodies were found, mistakes were discovered, and commemorative decisions were made. The meanings of these sites were thus doubly informed by their locations, due to the relationships between site and body, and site and battle. Proposals to commemorate the missing with empty graves further complicated the three intertwined elements of memorial, cemetery, and landscape.

Representations

The memorials and cemeteries representing India and the Dominions were not merely backdrops against which identities were performed; they also performed identities themselves. The material culture of these sites is itself a primary source, and is fruitful when combined with archival research into the decision-making processes behind their creation. These objects have agency, from their ability to convey and reinforce identities through their forms and functions. The national Western Front memorials of South Africa, India, Canada, and Australia are rich case studies.

Inscriptions

Inscriptions and epitaphs— the language of material culture— are particularly revealing representations of identity not just for the dead, but for the living left behind who commemorated them. Inscriptions, on memorials and on cemetery elements like the Stone of Remembrance, had to marshal and define collective identities; whereas epitaphs had 66 characters to evoke individual identities. The vocabularies of loss, sacrifice, and glory they employ vary, and reveal the values and relationships of both their writers and the dead.

Functions & Intentions

These memorials and cemeteries represented multiple aspects of identity, rather than functioning exclusively as nationalist messages; however, the meanings and intentions ascribed to them were not 'set in stone', unlike the sites themselves. There were no single national identities for these sites to represent during the interwar period. To understand their shifting meanings, both then and in our contemporary societies, the concept of the 'gaze' is crucial: who was seeing these sites, who was not, and how this has changed over time.

Hanna Smyth
University of Oxford
hanna.smyth@exeter.ox.ac.uk
twitter: @hannamsmyth

