

Commemorations and controversies

'They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, We will remember them.'

These familiar words, repeated all over the English-speaking world in remembrance services each year, will have a particular resonance (over the next few years) as we mark the centenary of the First World War. They were written by Laurence Binyon in a poem first published in September 1914, after just a month of the conflict, when the author can have had no idea of the scale of sacrifice that would be demanded of all the nations involved. The debates about how we should commemorate that sacrifice over the next four years raise interesting questions about how we can and should engage with the past; and about the part historians can play in the process. This article examines some of these issues.



The idea that we should commemorate the centenary in some way has received broad support. Inevitably, there are some who either see no point in remembering such a long-ago event or equate doing so with glorification of war. You wouldn't expect a historian like me to have much sympathy with the former view. The second objection, however, is more interesting. It's tempting to dismiss it: the assumption that commemoration equates to celebration is clearly simplistic. It does, however, raise a useful point: commemoration is a public act, which involves making choices. Obviously, deciding how to commemorate an event such as the First World War involves decisions that may provoke controversy, perhaps along political lines. Also, though, the decision to commemorate at all is inherently political: why mark the anniversary of one event rather than another? We all know that the beginning of the Great War will be widely marked throughout Great Britain. In Scotland, at least, the 700th anniversary of Robert the Bruce's victory at Bannockburn will no doubt attract attention. But will anyone, even in Windsor Castle, mark 300 years of Hanoverian rule?

That the UK government was alive to the possibility of controversy was perhaps a factor in its initial hesitancy. While countries such as Belgium and France pushed ahead with plans for national events to mark the centenary, British planning initially lagged well behind. Only under pressure from retired military men and senior historians, such as Professor Sir Hew Strachan, of Oxford University, did the Government move away from its early position that the centenary should be led by local communities, rather than central government, and by organisations such as the Imperial War Museum. In November 2012, Prime Minister David Cameron committed £50 million, some of it new funds, to support the centenary and laid out the mission: 'Our duty with these commemorations is clear: to honour those who served; to remember those who died, and to ensure that the lessons learnt live with us for ever.'

It's hard to argue with Cameron's purpose. How it should be executed, however, is more contentious. In part, this is because the memory of the war itself remains contested. The popular view remains that of Blackadder's war (without the jokes); a futile tragedy of mud, blood, incompetence and poetry. Over the last 30 years, however, Britain's First World War has been subject to radical revision by a generation of academic historians.



Three key insights animate their revisionism. First, it's called a 'world war' for a reason: it extended far beyond the trenches of France and Flanders, touching the lives of people all over the globe. In both absolute and proportional terms, many countries suffered greater loss in blood and treasure than Britain. Both Germany and France, for instance, did so, yet both are almost entirely absent from popular narratives of the war.

Secondly, even when one considers only the British experience, there's much more to the war than the Western Front. Less than five per cent of the British population ever served there¹. Yet the war touched nearly everybody, and there's still much research to be done to deepen our understanding of, say, the Home Front.

Thirdly, the soldiers who endured the trenches were not mere passive victims, as the myth would have it. They were brave and resourceful men, many of them volunteers fighting for a cause they believed in, who found ways to express their individuality and agency even amidst the carnage of war. Even the generals, so often derided as 'donkeys' incapable of grasping the realities of modern warfare, over time learnt, adapted and eventually triumphed, defeating the vaunted German army in battle.

These new perspectives, however, seemed at first to have passed the Government by. Ideas for major national commemorative events almost all centred on clichéd disasters of the war such as Gallipoli, the Somme and Passchendaele. Some historians have suggested that one or more of the undoubted victories of the war, such as the Battle of Amiens (8–11 August 1918) should also be marked. There are hints that such suggestions might be gaining some traction in Whitehall. If the intention is thereby to restore some balance, however, the true point is getting missed. The centenary offers an opportunity for us, not only to honour and pay tribute to the men and women who made sacrifices on our behalf, but also to leave a legacy of better understanding of this complex and controversial conflict. Rather than splitting the war into Bad Days and Good Days, historians need to provoke, and participate in, debate throughout the warp and weft of the centenary. They must provide the context so often and easily lost in popular memory. They need to explain, for example, why battles like the Somme had to be fought; that the well-known disaster of its first day was merely the start of a long campaign, punctuated by notable British and French successes, which nearly broke the German army; and that the lessons learnt, even from defeats, contributed to later progress.

Of course it'll be difficult to strike the right balance between sorrow and pride, tears and triumphalism over the next four years. But if historians at universities like Birmingham do our jobs right and show the war, and the men and women who fought it, in the proper historical context, we will have made a lasting contribution to how society views its past, comprehends its present and envisages its future. We will contribute also to a no-less-important end: By making the effort properly to understand the humans of the past on their own terms, not on ours, we honour their sacrifice all the more.

Further reading

For a fascinating exploration of how popular perceptions of the war have been formed, see Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005). A good introduction to revisionist literature on the First World War is Gary Sheffield's *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2001). My favourite three single-volume histories of the war, all of them reflecting the latest scholarship, are Michael Howard's beautifully concise *The First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Hew Strachan's *The First World War: A New Illustrated History* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003) and David Stevenson's *1914–1918: the History of the First World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2004). No doubt many more books about the war will be published over the next four years.