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# Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen (Great Britain and Ireland)

By [Ann-Marie Foster](#)

The commemoration of the First World War in Britain and Ireland has a complex history. Immediately after the war, the dead were memorialised in a range of public and private spaces. Next of Kin Memorial Plaques were created by the government, and war memorials formed the core of local and national commemorative initiatives. However, following political upheaval in Ireland, the memory of the war in Unionist and Nationalist communities diverged. Increasingly, in both Britain and Ireland, the First World War has become politicised, with contemporary politics linked to its commemoration.

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## Introduction

Commemoration of the First World War took place in a range of different spaces, from private family home and local communities, to national settings. An estimated 722,785 British and Irish [soldiers](#) [died](#) during the First World War.<sup>[1]</sup> Of these, the vast majority were under the age of thirty and unmarried, meaning that in many instances, parents, not wives, were the primary mourners.<sup>[2]</sup> However, if we consider not just immediate family, but more distant relations and friends, most households were likely to have been affected by the death of a serviceman or woman.<sup>[3]</sup> Despite a widespread understanding that the deceased deserved public recognition, commemoration of the dead was not uncontested, and tensions arising from divergent British and Irish attitudes regarding the significance of the conflict over the last century have led to a complex memory of the First World War.

Commemoration in [Ireland](#) has a particularly complex history due to its political past: between 1912 and 1923 Ireland experienced mass political upheaval, civil conflict, and rapid social change. This resulted in the creation of the Free State, splitting the country into what is now the Republic of Ireland, which formed a new government, and Northern Ireland, which remained within the [United Kingdom](#) ruled by a devolved Unionist government. Ireland went to war as part of the United Kingdom in 1914 and between 35,000 and 50,000 Irish soldiers died.<sup>[4]</sup> While in the interwar period the war dead were commemorated in both the Free State and Northern Ireland, memory of the war became increasingly politicised throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, escalating from the late 1960s onward, due, in part, to differing Nationalist and Unionist cultural and political loyalties. Memory of the wartime period in Nationalist communities has tended to focus on the [Easter Rising](#), obscuring the First World War from public memory. In Unionist areas of Northern Ireland, the [Battle of the Somme](#) has become a focal point for the cultural memory of the war.

## Repatriation

In 1918 the [British government](#) announced that they would not repatriate the bodies of the war dead who were killed overseas, meaning that the bodies of nearly 600,000 servicemen and women would not be returning home. Approximately 130,000 servicemen and women who were wounded and invalided died on British soil. They were granted a war grave, and so a minority of those who died in the war, or because of war wounds, were ultimately buried on British or Irish soil.

For those who died overseas, the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) was given the task of burying their bodies and creating cemeteries to give them a final resting place.<sup>[5]</sup> The IWGC's aim was to find all Imperial war dead, including those who fought on behalf of the British from African and Indian colonies, and [the dominions](#) of [Canada](#), [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#), and [South Africa](#). They were tasked with providing these soldiers with either a grave or, when no body could be found, a name on a memorial constructed to commemorate the missing. This was a monumental task. The destructive nature of war meant that bodies were hard to locate and identifying the dead was often an impossible task. Despite their efforts, approximately half of the war dead have no known grave.<sup>[6]</sup>

For those whose bodies were found and interred, the IWGC decided on a policy of uniform gravestones for the dead, with the deceased's name, rank, regimental crest, and a symbol denoting their religion. Personal inscriptions of up to sixty-six characters were allowed, originally at the family's own expense, although the fee was dropped after some families refused to pay. The IWGC regulated the inscriptions, and requests for lines which could be interpreted as critical of the war could be refused.<sup>[7]</sup> It is unknown exactly how many families inscribed a personal message on the gravestone, but certainly not every family availed themselves of this opportunity. It is clear that the graves were important to families, and many were able to acquire a photograph of their loved one's grave. Some were able to visit, and pilgrimages to see war graves were popular in the 1920s and 1930s, with the [YMCA](#) and the Salvation Army organising trips to the battlefields of the [Western Front](#). Although this was of comfort to the families that could afford these subsidised trips, travel to see graves on the [Eastern Front](#) was often restricted, and only a limited number of bereaved families were able to visit the grave of their loved one.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Domestic Memorialisation

Due to the lack of a nearby burial site at which to mourn, private, local, and national commemorative practices assumed an enhanced emotional role for the bereaved. The British government realised that domestic commemoration would be important, and decided to create a small, personalised, memorial item to disseminate to the deceased's next of kin. It was decided that a plaque would be an appropriate memorial and a competition to decide the plaque's design was announced in 1917. The rules of the competition stated that all who entered should contain the words "he died for freedom and honour" on their design and that a small space for individual names to be inscribed should be included. The winning design, by [Edward Carter Preston \(1885-1965\)](#), featured Britannia holding a laurel wreath standing over an imperial lion biting the German imperial eagle. Preston's design was decidedly secular, and comprised patriotic images and classical overtones. It is estimated that the British government produced between 800,000 and 1,150,000 Next of Kin Memorial Plaques in the immediate aftermath of the war, with 600 of these granted to the families of [nurses](#) who were killed.<sup>[9]</sup> Sometimes labelled "dead men's pennies" or "widow's pennies", the Next of Kin Memorial Plaques were particularly popular as a display item within homes, and were often framed alongside medals, although some families did not like these state-sponsored memorials and chose to hide them away in a drawer or refuse them altogether.

## Community Commemoration

Popular memorial forms at a community level included street shrines, bronze plaques, rolls of honour, and stained-glass windows in churches and synagogues. Across Britain and Ireland community memorials consisted of both individual memorials, erected by wealthy families in a public space, or wider community efforts commemorating all men who died from a certain location, be it a church, school, or local area.<sup>[10]</sup> Religious memorial services for the deceased, in remembrance of

individuals and all who died, were arranged by a variety of religious groups. In both the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland, throughout the interwar years, local war memorials were erected, street signs were changed, and children were named after famous battles.<sup>[11]</sup>

War memorials proved one of the most popular and enduring forms of public memorialisation for the dead. Tens of thousands were constructed during the interwar period; in towns and villages, in workplaces, and in local religious centres. The majority of stone war memorials were constructed by the mid-1920s, although they continued to be unveiled throughout the 1930s. These monuments could take a range of forms: stone crosses, obelisks, sculptures of soldiers, or an engraved list of the names of the dead were all popular types of memorial, and were often funded by private and public donations to war memorial funds. The design of the monument differed depending on the war memorial committee behind the design, and the place of construction.

The decision-making process was not always smooth, and disagreements over the form memorials would take were common. Working class calls for practical memorials, such as hospitals or houses for veterans, were often overridden by local elites who determined that a monument would be more fitting.<sup>[12]</sup> Within the Free State, memorials to the dead, constructed in the mid-1920s, were often hidden from public view within Church of Ireland buildings to protect against vandalism by radical republicans.<sup>[13]</sup> National commemoration within Unionist communities focused on the memory of the success of the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. In 1921, the Ulster Tower, paid for by public subscription, was erected at [Thiepval](#), the village that had been temporarily captured by soldiers from Ulster, marking the first memorial on the site.<sup>[14]</sup>

Memorials commonly used traditional imagery, adapted for the new context of the war. Public memorials were often associated with Christian symbolism, and crosses were a common memorial design, sending a message of hope, redemption, and a meeting in the afterlife. Secular memorials were also common, with cenotaphs, obelisks, and wall-tablets being particularly popular. These forms of memorial, taken from funerary customs, touched with classical allegory, allowed individuals to freely interpret their meaning while indicating their sombre purpose. These war memorials became a focal point for local commemoration, and formed the core of memorial events on Armistice Day. They were at once an expression of collective grief, but were constructed in a way that allowed people to ascribe individual meaning to them.<sup>[15]</sup>

Civilian war dead were also locally commemorated, although they never received the national recognition of their military counterparts. Aerial bombardments resulted in the deaths of 1,239 civilians over the course of the war, and coastal bombardments in December 1914 killed a further 127 civilians.<sup>[16]</sup> There were also over 15,000 non-military casualties in the [war at sea](#).<sup>[17]</sup> Accidents and explosions in munitions factories, and other war industries, led to further loss of life. In Hartlepool, those who died in the 1914 coastal bombardment were commemorated in a panel on the town war memorial which was dedicated to "Those who Fell in the Great War and in Grateful Appreciation of Those who Shared its Dangers". Mass deaths resulting from war work were also

locally commemorated. In 1919 [Mary, Princess Royal and Countess of Harewood \(1897-1965\)](#) laid the cornerstone of St Barnabas' Hall, in East London, which was built as a memorial to the seventy-three victims of the 1917 Silvertown Explosion.<sup>[18]</sup>

## National Remembrance

Immediately following the cessation of war, a range of national civic commemorative actions, which largely reflected the perceived wishes of the parents of deceased soldiers, were created to memorialise the dead. The Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, which saw the repatriation of the body of an unidentified serviceman who fought with the British forces, buried in Westminster Abbey on Armistice Day 1920, became a focal point for national mourning. The body, as a representative of all who died, allowed families to believe that this man could be their loved one, and became a powerful symbolic figure to which individuals could ascribe personal meaning. Major monuments, such as the [Cenotaph](#) at Whitehall in London, and similar large memorials in Edinburgh and Cardiff were constructed to serve as focal points for national commemoration. The Cenotaph is notable for its secular overtones, also found in the Next of Kin Memorial Plaques, that sidestepped religious memorialisation. Yet the language of Christian idealism was also used to help soothe mourning parents, and in the early 1920s the war was articulated as a fight for peace and a fight against militarism, which offered the consolation that the dead had not given their lives in vain, but for a higher purpose.<sup>[19]</sup> This sacrifice could be understood along religious lines, but could also be interpreted as a more general fight for good against evil.

Sound, or the absence of it, has also been integral to national commemoration. The British government introduced the two-minute silence on 11 November 1919, which has proved a mainstay of commemorations ever since.<sup>[20]</sup> Conversely, memorial concerts were performed as a highly resonant means of commemorating the dead. The Festival of Remembrance, which has taken place in the Royal Albert Hall since 1923, was broadcast over radio, and later television, reaching audiences far greater than those who could attend a ceremony in person.<sup>[21]</sup>

Following its split from Britain, the newly formed national government in the Irish Free State was unsure how to officially commemorate the war dead.<sup>[22]</sup> It was recognised that there was a need for some official recognition of the war dead and a national memorial, designed by [Edwin Lutyens \(1869-1944\)](#) who had designed the Cenotaph, was constructed in Dublin. Recognising the needs of the families who had lost members in the war, until 1939 there were mass memorial ceremonies held every year on the Sunday nearest 11 November, as well as practical memorials, such as the construction of 4,000 houses built with funds gifted by the British government in 1919.<sup>[23]</sup>

The [poppy](#) constituted a more ephemeral symbol of national commemorative practices. Inspired by the poem "In Flanders Fields" by [John McCrae \(1872-1918\)](#), the poppies were originally used as a symbol of remembrance by American ex-servicemen. Following this example, [Anna Guérin \(1878-1961\)](#) began producing poppies in France and in 1921 convinced the Royal British Legion to use the

poppies as a means of fundraising. [Adrian Gregory](#) has estimated that by the 1930s between 20 to 30 million poppies were sold annually, suggesting that the majority of British adults supported the appeal.<sup>[24]</sup> The white poppy, produced by the Women's Co-Operative Guild and first sold in 1933, was created as a symbol of peace, becoming a highly politicised alternative to the red Royal British Legion poppy.<sup>[25]</sup>

## Divergent Memories?

The Second World War, in which the Irish Free State was neutral, marked a split in the memory of the First World War. The 1940s were crucial to the memory of the First World War as the majority of the parents of soldiers who died in the earlier conflict passed away, changing the composition of the memorial audience and allowing new narratives of the war to emerge.<sup>[26]</sup> In Britain, the official observance of Armistice Day was suspended during the Second World War and reinstated as Remembrance Sunday (the closest Sunday to 11 November) in 1945. Commemoration of the Second World War was subsumed into that of the First World War; names of the dead were added to pre-existing memorials and extra meaning was added to the national ceremonies on Remembrance Sunday.

The late 1960s saw the construction and consolidation of the memory of the war as bloody and futile, a narrative which was to dominate war memory from then on.<sup>[27]</sup> In Northern Ireland, the start of The Troubles in 1969 saw the intense politicisation of the split between the imagery of those who had fought in the Easter Rising against those who had fought in the First World War. The 1970s and 1980s saw the deaths of the majority of veterans, and within families this period represents a moment of intense generational transmission of the memory of the war, as this living link to the conflict ended.<sup>[28]</sup>

## Contested Remembrance

Commemorative events over the last thirty years have seen the war explicitly tied to contemporary conflicts and plural remembrance practices. In Northern Ireland, the 1987 bombing of the Enniskillen war memorial on Remembrance Sunday, which killed eleven people, shocked both communities and prompted an increase in attendance of Remembrance Sunday events.<sup>[29]</sup> The Somme Association, a cross-community group founded in 1990, was created to ensure that Irish soldiers who died in the First World War were remembered, and marked a decade which saw the brokerage of the memory of the war in Nationalist communities across Ireland.

In Britain, the Royal British Legion began to repopularise the two-minute silence in the mid-1990s, reinstating its observation on 11 November, instead of the closest Sunday to the date. By the late 1990s the commemoration of the First World War grew in popularity and inclusivity, although the war also became increasingly linked to contemporary conflict.<sup>[30]</sup> As Helen McCartney has highlighted,

commemoration of the war between 2001 and 2014 in Britain was linked to conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, leading to joint remembrance practices. [Harry Patch \(1898-2009\)](#), the last surviving soldier from the First World War, died in 2009, and was mourned with a large remembrance service in Westminster Abbey where contemporary Victoria Cross winners lay a large poppy wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, linking the First World War with modern conflict in a highly visual public ceremony.<sup>[31]</sup>

The poppy has proved a popular commemorative symbol within Britain, however, it has been increasingly seen as a political statement, especially in Northern Ireland where it is regarded as a symbol of loyalty to Britain and closely associated with the modern-day army. Alternative versions of the red/white poppies have been increasingly visible since the mid-2000s. In 2006 the purple poppy, commemorating the death of [animals](#) in the war, was created by Animal Aid and black poppies, remembering contributions to the war effort made by servicemen and women from African, Black, and West Indian communities were launched by BlackPoppyRose, led by Selena Carty, in 2010.

The [centenary](#) has prompted discussions about inclusivity and marginalisation. In the [Republic of Ireland](#) and Northern Ireland, the centenary of the First World War was commemorated as part of the wider decade of centenaries, a periodisation which questions how the memory of the past, refracted by the later conflict, can be understood. In 2014, commemoration of the war in the Republic of Ireland was seen to have brokered a new and more open conversation about the role of Irish Nationalists who fought in the British army during the First World War.<sup>[32]</sup> Commemorations in 2016 similarly emphasised the need for plural remembrance, with Dublin, Belfast, and London co-ordinating to present a nuanced understanding of the different memories of the war.<sup>[33]</sup>

The centenary highlighted other disparities in commemorative practices, and the focus on the white soldier figure as a symbol of commemoration was questioned. The lack of public remembrance of servicemen from black and minority ethnic backgrounds was criticised in the national press, and attention was drawn to civilian victims of the war, as well as the gendered memory of war.<sup>[34]</sup> The polarising influence of Brexit, and British separatism from wider European centenary remembrance practices also entered into debates about the memory of the First World War between 2014 and 2018.<sup>[35]</sup> The uncertainty of the land border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, caused by Brexit, led to tense commemorative events between 2016 and 2018.<sup>[36]</sup>

## Conclusion

Commemoration of the First World War in Britain and Ireland has a complex history. Immediately following the war, families, communities, and the nation mourned through a series of invented memorial practices. From the 1940s onwards, highly contested memories of the war emerged, and in the Irish Free State the Easter Rising began to eclipse the wider memory of the First World War. The 1960s saw the emergence of a narrative of the war as bloody and futile, and in Northern Ireland the memory of the Battle of the Somme became cemented within Unionist narratives. By the early



2000s the complex legacy of the war was apparent. The last decade has revealed a lack of understanding in the UK about the various actors involved in the conflict, including the role of Irish soldiers, and commemorative events have become interlinked with contemporary political issues.<sup>[37]</sup> At the time of writing, both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland are still in the midst of the decade of centenaries. While the centenary of the First World War has ended, the complex legacy of the period, and the war's role within it, is still being publicly navigated.

Ann-Marie Foster, Queen's University Belfast

Section Editor: [Edward Madigan](#)

## Notes

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17. ↑ Winter, *Great War* 2003, p. 71.
18. ↑ *Daily Mail*, 14 July 1919, p. 4.
19. ↑ Gregory, *Silence* 1994, p. 36.
20. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
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24. ↑ Gregory, *Silence* 1994, p. 108.
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26. ↑ Todman, Dan: *The Great War*, London 2005, p. 61.
27. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 221.
28. ↑ Foster, Ann-Marie: 'We Decided the Museum Would Be the Best Place for Them'. *Veterans, Families and Mementoes of the First World War*, in: *History & Memory* 31/1 (2019), pp. 87-117.
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