

# The bureaucratization of death: the First World War, families, and the state.

FOSTER, A.-M.

2022

© The Author(s) 2022. Published by Oxford University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

 Ann-Marie Foster\* *Northumbria University, UK*

.....

# The Bureaucratization of Death: The First World War, Families, and the State

## Abstract

After the First World War the British state tried to show the families of the dead their thanks, and memorialize the dead, through the two-minute silence and the creation of the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior. However, before families of deceased servicepeople encountered the state through national commemorations they encountered it through the administrative paperwork of death. Other than brief mentions in wider works, the bureaucracy of death is remarkably absent from discussions of death, yet the paperwork associated with death was a significant part of family experiences of bereavement, particularly in wartime. This article argues that state bureaucracy played a key role in defining people's experience of wartime bereavement, both practically, through the paperwork sent, but also temporally, by controlling when and how families could carry out grave-related elements of mourning, such as choosing an epitaph. Over the course of the early inter-war period, the bureaucracy of death encountered by the families of the war dead could profoundly shape their experience of loss.

On 11 November 1920 the body of an unidentified serviceman was laid to rest in the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey. Within a week between 500,000 and 1 million people visited the tomb, and a commemorative edition of the Daily Mirror produced to mark the occasion sold nearly 2 million copies.<sup>1</sup> After the carnage of the First World War, in which an estimated 722,785 British soldiers died, the state attempted to frame their deaths as a sacrifice that could be valued by families reeling from their loss.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of bodies were lost during the conflict and the names of the missing were engraved on large memorials, one monument assuming the role of hundreds of individual graves. For those whose loved one had no grave, the Unknown Warrior was to be

\* ann-marie2.foster@northumbria.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946* (Oxford, 1994), 24, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Jay Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Basingstoke, 2003), 70.

their representative body, located and reburied by the state. Yet the state was responsible for more than the public commemoration of the dead. While the state controlled national commemorations of war, through the creation of the two minute silence, the Cenotaph, and the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, they also regulated individual death through newly created bureaucratic structures designed to identify, register, and locate the war dead. Before families encountered the state through national commemorations they encountered them through the administrative paperwork of death.

A perennial question among both historians of war and death is how the First World War disrupted pre-existent death practices. David Cannadine and Pat Jalland argue that mourning styles were deeply impacted by the First World War, whereas Jay Winter and Glennys Howarth point to the Second World War as a watershed moment for British death practices.<sup>3</sup> As Julie-Marie Strange notes, a paucity of research about common death practices in the early twentieth century poses significant problem for historians who speak to claims of continuity or change in their work.<sup>4</sup> Despite calls for a comprehensive history of everyday mourning practices in the twentieth century over twenty years ago, Pat Jalland is the only historian to have attempted such a feat.<sup>5</sup> There is still much to be done on the experiences of the bereaved in the early twentieth century. Not only is there a general lack of work on how the war changed private family mourning practices, but a complete absence of discussion about the bureaucratic dimensions of this. This is a problem more generally across death studies. Other than brief mentions in wider works, the bureaucracy of death is remarkably absent from discussions of death, yet the paperwork associated with death was a significant part of family experiences of bereavement, particularly in wartime. This article argues that the state bureaucracy played a key role in defining British people's experience of wartime bereavement, both practically, through the paperwork sent, but also temporally, by controlling when and how families could carry out grave-related elements of mourning, such as choosing an epitaph.

<sup>3</sup> David Cannadine, 'War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain' in Joachim Whaley, ed., *Mirrors of Mortality: Social Studies in the History of Death* (London, 1981), 230; Pat Jalland, *Death in War and Peace: Loss and Grief in England 1914-1970* (Oxford, 2012), 8; Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge, 2014), 3-5; Glennys Howarth, 'Professionalising the Funeral Industry in England, 1700-1960' in Peter C. Jupp and Glennys Howarth, eds, *The Changing Face of Death: Historical Accounts of Death and Disposal* (Houndmills, 1997), 126-7.

<sup>4</sup> Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, 2005), 265.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Walter, *On Bereavement: The Culture of Grief* (Buckingham, 1999), 39; Julie Rugg, 'Lawn Cemeteries: The Emergence of a New Landscape of Death', *Urban History*, 33 (2006), 214.

State violence towards other nations, in the form of war and colonization, often prompted increased amounts of bureaucratic and state activity. The British bureaucratic state experienced periods of growth during wartime, with administrators and administrative systems rising to the logistical challenges brought by overseas fighting. One of the earliest periods of mass bureaucratic expansion was during the mid-seventeenth century, when a series of successive wars led to the British state increasing its bureaucratic capacity to absorb the new work created by fiscal and military expansion.<sup>6</sup> British colonization constituted the need for vast bureaucracies to be built and maintained to control local peoples, which worked in dialogue with growing national administrations.<sup>7</sup> James Cronin has drawn attention to the uneven patterns of state growth in twentieth-century Britain, where it was only in times of war that the state expanded significantly, retracting again after the conflict had ended.<sup>8</sup>

Closer to the twentieth century, the Second Anglo-Boer War saw a spike in expenditure on government administration, rising from around 0.4–0.6 per cent GDP to 1.1 per cent, to reflect the growth of state expansion during the war.<sup>9</sup> The spike in wartime administrative activity at the turn of the century occurred at the tail end of administrative state growth in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century. The expansion of local government to regulate the everyday life of its constituents through education, hygiene, and basic welfare provision, all hallmarks of the mid-nineteenth century, increased the numbers of local bureaucrats and increased the amount of governmental paperwork.<sup>10</sup> These new bureaucrats were generally from lower-middle and middle-class backgrounds, which

<sup>6</sup> John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1989), 64–5; for the construction of central government workers before 1688, see G. E. Aylmer, *The Crown's Servants: Government and Civil Service under Charles II, 1660–1685* (Oxford, 2002). For more on the fiscal state and the First World War see M. J. Daunton, 'Payment and Participation: Welfare and State-Formation in Britain 1900–51' *Past and Present*, 150 (1996), 169–216; 'How to Pay for the War: State, Society and Taxation in Britain, 1917–24' *English Historical Review*, 111 (1996), 882–919.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the development of bureaucracy overseas, and its relationship with the British state see:

James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley, 2014), 66–95 also see Patrick Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013), 144–84; Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago, 2007); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, 2009); Christienna Fryar, 'The Narrative of Ann Pratt: Life-Writing, Genre and Bureaucracy in a Postemancipation Scandal', *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (2018), 267; Asheesh Kapur Siddique, 'Governance through Documents: The Board of Trade, its Archive, and the Imperial Constitution of the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic World', *Journal of British Studies*, 59 (2020), 264–90.

<sup>8</sup> James Cronin, *The Politics of State Expansion: War, State, and Society in Twentieth Century Britain* (Abingdon, 1991), 2–3.

<sup>9</sup> Clive Lee, *The Growth of Public Expenditure in the United Kingdom from 1870 to 2005* (Houndmills, 2012), 79.

<sup>10</sup> David Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy: Britain, 1832–1998* (Oxford, 1998), 30–32.

prompted a crisis in Whitehall about the professional conduct of the civil service, leading to a professionalized culture of civil servants with their own discrete conduct.<sup>11</sup> These positions too grew during and retracted after war. Staff in the War Office rose from 1,926 on 4 August 1914 to 22,279 on 11 November 1918, falling to 4,500 by 1922, returning to its pre-war levels of staffing by 1926.<sup>12</sup>

In practice, by the time of the First World War most citizens were touched by bureaucracy in one form or another. While soldiers' details had long been recorded by the War Office, as Nadja Durbach shows, by the early twentieth-century civilians could not escape civil registration in Britain.<sup>13</sup> This control of the people by the state intensified during the 1910s. Hallmarks of the modern surveillance state, such as passports, identity cards, and birth certificates, all had their origins in the First World War.<sup>14</sup> An early foray into this was the 1915 National Registration Act, which sought to record the details of all people between the ages of fifteen and sixty-five in Britain. National Registration was explicitly designed to provide a full account of the nation's manpower, after the rush of volunteers to the war in 1914 left the government with no clear idea of their national resources nor the availability of men for conscription.<sup>15</sup> Opposition to the register and to the introduction of conscription in January 1916 was couched in terms of civil liberties, though it was ultimately decided that the threat of war was enough to overcome these concerns.<sup>16</sup> By 1924, the growth of new state bureaucracy was so much that the Interdepartmental Committee on Administration of Public

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Moran, *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2013), 25; Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy*, 45–6; 167–9.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Roper, *The Records of the War Office and Related Departments 1660–1964* (London, 1998), 110–11.

<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Macdonald and Rebecca Lenihan, 'Paper Soldiers: The Life, Death and Reincarnation of Nineteenth-Century Military Files Across the British Empire', *Rethinking History*, 22 (2018), 375; Nadja Durbach, 'Private Lives, Public Records: Illegitimacy and the Birth Certificate in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 25 (2014), 306.

<sup>14</sup> John Torpey, 'The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Passport System', in Jane Caplan and John Torpey, eds, *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World* (Princeton, 2001), 256–70; Rosemary Elliot, 'An Early Experiment in National Identity Cards: The Battle over Registration in the First World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17 (2006), 145–76. For work on the surveillance state see Christopher Dandeker, *Surveillance, Power, and Modernity: Bureaucracy and Discipline from 1700 to the Present Day* (New York, 1990); Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter, eds, *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History* (Oxford, 2012); Edward Higgs, *The Information State in England: The Central Collection of Information on Citizens since 1500* (London, 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Elliot, 'An Early Experiment in National Identity Cards', 149–50.

<sup>16</sup> Elliot, 151. Also see André Keil, 'The National Council for Civil Liberties and the British State during the First World War, 1916–1919', *The English Historical Review*, CXXXIV (2019) 620–45.

Assistance recommended a citizen's advice service should be created to help people navigate these new structures.<sup>17</sup>

These new bureaucracies were not necessarily coherent, and the state relied on voluntary associations to augment its services. It has been well established that by the early twentieth-century the boundary between the state and civil society was decidedly porous. This 'mixed economy' of state and voluntary service had its roots in the first decade of the twentieth-century, where the implementation of Liberal social legislation, and the creation of the proto-welfare state, led to an increasing recognition of the value of charitable services as complementary to government provision.<sup>18</sup> Peter Grant argues that the war acted as a catalyst for developing the relationship between state and civil society, with the sheer amount of aid generated during the conflict leading to a professionalized charitable sector which increasingly appealed to the state.<sup>19</sup> But this was not necessarily a coherent process, and, as a direct result of the war, the National Council of Social Service was established in 1919 to reduce duplication of charities and work with developing statutory bodies.<sup>20</sup> The War Office relied heavily on the Red Cross for assistance when registering graves, and the formation of the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), discussed in the latter half of this article, began as an arm of this voluntary organization.

As the modern state grew and merged with the mechanisms of civil society so did the bureaucratic apparatus to support it, often through the production and dissemination of paperwork. As Patrick Joyce has written, the history of state formation through bureaucracies is a plural one. The state is the centre from where power emanates, expressed through institutions in the form of state power, and in different departments, people, and other forms of power that often conflict with each other.<sup>21</sup> In Joyce's work with Chandra Mukerji, they claim 'the distinguishing feature of the state is its impersonal and diffuse character that results from the turn to logistical power in its different domains'.<sup>22</sup> In their reading of

<sup>17</sup> Oliver Blaiklock, 'Advising the Citizen: Citizens Advice Bureaux, Voluntarism and the Welfare State in England, 1938-1964', Unpublished PhD thesis, King's College London (2012), 29.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Prochaska, *The Voluntary Impulse* (London, 1988), 72; 82; M. J. Moore, 'Social Service and Social Legislation in Edwardian England: The Beginning of a New role for Philanthropy', *Albion*, 3 (1971), 37. Also see Pat Thane, *The Foundations of the Welfare State* (Cambridge, 2008), 143.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Grant, *Philanthropy and Voluntary Action in the First World War: Mobilizing Charity* (London, 2014), 168-72.

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Finlayson in 'A Moving Frontier: Voluntarism and the State in British Social Welfare 1911-1949', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1 (1990), 202.

<sup>21</sup> Joyce, *The State of Freedom: A Social History of the British State Since 1800* (Cambridge, 2013), 10-4.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick Joyce and Chandra Mukerji. 'The State of Things: State History and Theory Reconfigured' *Theory and Society*, 46 (2017), 2.

state power, it is regulated through materials, which allowed administrators, as those storing and moving the materials from site to site, a small amount of limited power, given the right circumstances.<sup>23</sup> These bureaucrats were also constrained by the system, and processes of bureaucracy were designed to work as a collective whole. As Matthew Hull writes, ‘the challenge is to understand collectivization and individualization as simultaneous functions of the same bureaucratic processes’.<sup>24</sup> Bureaucrats inhabited a world where they both embodied power conferred through their status, but at the same time acted as part of a corporatized collective.

Paperwork and bureaucracy are intrinsically linked—if bureaucracy is the organization and regulation of the information constrained in paperwork, then paperwork is the medium of bureaucracy. If we follow Joyce’s understanding of the state as diffuse, homogenous, and impersonal, in part taken from Max Weber’s assertion that the modern state should remove human bias from its workings, Ben Kafka’s reading of the ‘psychic life of paperwork’ shows the human influences which impact modern bureaucracy by explaining that people’s reactions to paperwork are symptomatic of wider feelings of frustration, want, and other needs which may not be conscious or articulated.<sup>25</sup> Kafka argues that paperwork’s primary function, as a means of written communication, collapses into its imaginary realm, where human emotion and (un)conscious thoughts are unleashed.<sup>26</sup> As Lisa Gitelman argues, it is what documents represent that is so powerful, they are afforded a cultural, and emotional, weight that is often used as a means of control.<sup>27</sup> The paperwork of death was particularly important during the First World War, as the IWGC interacted with the bereaved through paper-based interactions. The management of death was relegated to a paper exercise, making it easier for families to feel personally attacked by the decisions made. The human component of the decision-making process was hidden, and family’s only recourse lay through appealing to the person on the other side of the paper.

The manner in which state power was enacted through paper documents places these ephemeral pieces of paper within a broader exchange which characterized the ways families were able to negotiate with the British state in the modern period. The growth in the civil service from the late seventeenth-century was married with a general increase in the

<sup>23</sup> Joyce and Mukerji, ‘The State of Things’, 9, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew S. Hull, ‘The File: Agency, Authority, and Autography in an Islamabad Bureaucracy’, *Language & Communication* 23 (2003), 288.

<sup>25</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 3 (New York, 1968), 975; Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork* (New York, 2012), 10–6.

<sup>26</sup> Weber, 108, 111.

<sup>27</sup> Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Towards a Media History of Documents* (Durham, 2014), 5.

number of bureaucratic communications, forms, letters, pamphlets, and other official ephemera that people interacted with on a daily basis.<sup>28</sup> Naomi Tadmoo's study of print and manuscript forms in the eighteenth century highlights that these items were shaped by local printers and users, as well as by the state.<sup>29</sup> David Vincent's work has shown how print items, such as newspapers and the Penny Post, altered the way the British public engaged with state power.<sup>30</sup> By the twentieth century printing processes were set, and official paperwork, although it could be spoiled or adapted by the user, formed an official means of correspondence, sent through the Post Office, in itself a soft reminder of the reach of the bureaucratic state.

So how did people react to these increasing demands to make themselves accountable to the intrusion of the state during wartime? And how did the First World War, which saw the first mass volunteer army, and then conscription, alter the relationship between state and people, especially in death? This article begins to tease apart how people reacted to imposed state bureaucracy surrounding death practices during and after the First World War. In particular, it asks how ordinary families engaged with new bureaucracy surrounding death in war. Although in previous wars the state had laid the bodies of those who perished to rest, those who were registered by the Army had been career soldiers, with the exception of the small number of volunteers who fought in the Second Anglo-Boer War.<sup>31</sup> As Helen McCartney argues, many of the men who served in the First World War were not career soldiers, but civilians in uniform, which had immense repercussions for how the families of men who died in service understood their deaths.<sup>32</sup> During the First World War, the state wrested control from the families of the dead and assumed a familial role. Laura Tradii suggests that the renegotiation of dead bodies after the First World War reimagined soldiers as members of Empire whose bodies were laid to rest among soldierly kin instead of along traditional familial lines.<sup>33</sup> But families did not necessarily agree with this,

<sup>28</sup> Michael Twyman, 'Printed Ephemera', in Michael F. Suarez and Michael L. Turner, eds, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, Vol. 5 (Cambridge, 2009), 68; Michael Twyman, 'The Long-Term Significance of Printed Ephemera', *RBM: A Journal of Rare Book, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, 9 (2008), 39.

<sup>29</sup> Naomi Tadmoo, 'The Settlement of the Poor and the Rise of the Form in England, c.1662-1780', *Past and Present*, 236 (August, 2017), 91.

<sup>30</sup> David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture, England 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1989), 32-9; 228-58.

<sup>31</sup> Over 30,000 middle-class men volunteered to enlist during the Second-Anglo Boer War. In total, 22,000 soldiers (professional and volunteer) died in this conflict. Peter Donaldson, *Remembering the South African War* (Liverpool, 2013), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Helen B. McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge, 2005), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Laura Tradii, '"Their Dear Remains Belong to us Alone": Soldiers' Bodies, Commemoration, and Cultural Responses to Exhumations after the Great War', *First World War Studies*, 10 (2019), 256.



and tried to influence bureaucrats who, they believed, had the power to find and re-bury their dead in a respectful, and individualized, manner.

This article first discusses practical changes in death registration brought about by the First World War, before examining how individuals and families tried to negotiate the increased bureaucracy of death they were facing through correspondence with the IWGC. Through the IWGC records there is an opportunity to understand how men and women reacted to and tried to influence bureaucratic decisions. As Angela Smith has shown, war widows were particularly vulnerable to financial difficulties and proved remarkably bold in using coercive tactics to manoeuvre through the bureaucratic apparatus of state assistance when pensions were refused.<sup>34</sup> Pierre Puseigle has argued that petitioning allowed the public to articulate their commitment to the war effort, and indeed, the limits of their acceptance in a society enveloped by war.<sup>35</sup> We rarely hear women's interactions with the state in the early twentieth century, unless they were elite women who had some level of influence and a vast personal correspondence, or poor women who were criminalized and whose words were filtered through court and other official documents. Although there was still a power imbalance in the ways women interacted with the state through letters to the IWGC, these letters show how men and women of different class backgrounds interacted with local and national state representatives to try and navigate the increased bureaucracy they encountered during and after the First World War, and how this bureaucracy in turn dictated how and when certain commemorative rites could take place.

### Preparing for Death

The scale and confusion of the First World War brought with it a host of bureaucratic problems tied to sudden state expansion: whole sections of civil society had to be mobilized, troops trained, and supplies moved. This movement of the living was contrasted with the stillness of the dead, who, once no longer living, became an object for the Army to regulate. Soldiers and officials were highly cognizant of the problems that could hinder the processes of death notification and registration. Death was prepared for both by officials who had to deal with paperwork following the event, but also by individual soldiers and their families, who were aware of the complications which could arise after their death.

<sup>34</sup> Angela Smith, *Discourses Surrounding British Widows of the First World War* (London, 2014), 10–2; also see Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge, 1999), 78–84.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Puseigle, 'The First World War and the Transformations of the State', *International Affairs* 90(2014), 260. Also see Emily E. Pyne, 'Peasant Strategies for Obtaining State Aid: A Study of Petitions during World War I', *Russian History/Histoire Russe*, 24 (1997), 41–64.

Identifying the dead was fraught, and both officials and individuals sought to ensure that information pertaining to bodies could be collected. Before the First World War, Army practice was to bury soldiers without individual grave markers. If the information about the dead, such as the list of names, or the Officers with the knowledge of who was buried, were lost so were the identities of the dead in these unmarked graves. During the Second Anglo-Boer War, unless the dead were of a particularly high rank, or had been privately commemorated, soldiers who died were not buried with any form of identification, with simple iron crosses serving as a grave marker.<sup>36</sup> Aware that this was a problem, single identity discs were introduced by the Army in 1906 as an attempt to record the men who died in combat. The disc was designed to be removed as proof of death. This was, in many ways, an improvement from the previous system, as the disc gave some proof that the bureaucratic measures put in place could begin, but was a far cry from a perfect system of identification.

For its immediate bureaucratic benefits, the single identity disc posed significant problems during the First World War, when upheaval to the battlefield and reburials meant that while the individual was marked as dead through official paperwork their body was uncoupled from the items and documents which located their body after death. Soldiers, aware of these problems with the single-identity disc, asked their families to send durable ones made out of metal. This was a potentially traumatizing experience for the family, who realized the significance of this request. In a memoir written after the death of her son, Marie Connor Leighton vividly recalled sending him a silver identity disc:

I knew what it stood for as I looked at it. It stood first and foremost for the fact that the boy who in himself was all earth and all heaven to me was in the army only one among many thousands – perhaps hundreds of thousands. It stood for a fearful confusion in which masses of men might get inextricably mixed up so that none could know who his fellow was; and it stood for a field on which there were many dead lying, and for grim figures walking about among those dead and depending for their identifications on some token worn by the still shapes whose lips would speak no more.<sup>37</sup>

It became readily apparent to the War Office that families would not be satisfied if their loved one's body was lost within the milieu of the dead, unable to be located in a particular grave if, indeed, they had been lucky enough to be buried at all. The single identity discs were not fit for

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, 2018), 458.

<sup>37</sup> [Marie Connor Leighton], *Boy of My Heart* (London, 1916), 196.

purpose, and so a new two-disc system was devised. Fabian Ware, by this time heavily involved in identifying the dead through his work with the IWGC, was partially responsible for the design of duplicate identity discs, where one remained on the body to aid future identification of the corpse.<sup>38</sup> These were circulated from late 1916 and, although not a fool-proof system, ensured that more bodies than under the previous system could be tracked, and paperwork as to their whereabouts updated.

This preparation for death through identity discs was married with systems to ensure that after death the individual's next of kin would be notified, however, much like the development of the discs, the bureaucratization of death during the First World War was a slow process. It was not imagined that the war would last for as long as it did, or result in such a high number of casualties. When a soldier enlisted, he gave the details of his next of kin, to be informed if he was taken ill, wounded, or died. In this seemingly innocent exchange of information lay a powerful transformation: the state assumed the role of the family and relegated them to the status of bystander, unable to do anything but observe as the War Office assumed their bureaucratic role.

In peacetime, families, sometimes aided by medical professionals, informed local registrars of deaths in the home. The 1836 Registration Act established the General Register Office (GRO) which centrally recorded all births and deaths in England.<sup>39</sup> Registrars oversaw the compulsory notification of deaths within the district they oversaw, and sent this information to GRO, based at Somerset House, where public and other records were kept. Following the 1874 Births and Deaths Registration Act, within five days of the death the closest family member to the deceased, or, failing that, a housemate, had to notify the registrar of a death in the home, with this extending to people included in the burial if the death occurred elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> If the person died in a hospital, or in a charitable institution, the head of the organization reported the death.<sup>41</sup>

Both the 1836 and the 1874 Acts mention the importance of the paper forms which helped facilitate the burial of the dead, as clergymen and undertakers needed proof that the death had been registered, or, in the case of a hasty burial, had to provide written evidence of the event within seven days.<sup>42</sup> Sections 43 and 44 of the 1874 Act insisted that registrars used the forms supplied in an appendix to the Act, which could be

<sup>38</sup> Sarah Ashbridge, 'Military Identification: Identity Discs and the Identification of British War Dead, 1914-18', *British Journal for Military History*, 6 (2020), 21-42.

<sup>39</sup> Julie Rugg, 'From Reason to Regulation', in Peter C. Jupp and Clare Gittings, eds, *Death in England* (Manchester, 1999), 216.

<sup>40</sup> Births and Deaths Registration Act 1874, Chapter 88, 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> Births and Deaths Registration Act 1836, XIX.

<sup>42</sup> Births and Deaths Registration Act 1836, XXVII; Births and Deaths Registration Act 1874, Chapter 88, 17.

adapted to make them fit for use at a local level.<sup>43</sup> If the deceased had been visited by a medical professional during their final illness, a certificate detailing cause of death needed to be produced, however, if there had been an inquest into the cause of death, the paperwork with from the jury was substituted in lieu of the formal certificate.<sup>44</sup>

Army regulations for death notifications also emphasized the importance of orderly record keeping. One third of the Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Army) Act 1879, was dedicated to the importance of good record keeping when abroad. If a soldier or one of their family members died, the death was authenticated and the details transmitted to the GRO, which kept a permanent register of all military deaths overseas.<sup>45</sup> The Commander-in-Chief was responsible for the lists and paperwork of Army deaths within their control, but once these records were sent to England, they became the legal property of the GRO.<sup>46</sup> If the soldier died on home soil, death registration followed usual regulations. When under Army care overseas, the responsibility of informing the GRO fell to the state, when at home or on leave, responsibility once more fell to civilians.

At the start of the war, the Army used burial regulations published in 1909. In 1914, no states had plans to document the dead in as much detail as was eventually given, preferring to rely on procedures developed after previous wars, which proved a thoroughly inadequate system as the war developed.<sup>47</sup> The 1909 regulations instructed that details about military deaths were given to the Adjutant-General's office, which provided administrative support for the Army at the base they occurred. Those involved in burials removed the soldier's single identity disc and pay book, and sent them to the Adjutant General's office at the base.<sup>48</sup> After receiving this information, the officer in charge at the base was to 'telegraph the government concerned with the least possible delay the names of all officers and men who have been reported to him as dead, wounded, or missing'.<sup>49</sup>

Once war began this proved an inadequate system of recording the names of the dead, and both military and voluntary bodies were involved in recording and burying the dead. By 1916, the War Office Casualty

<sup>43</sup> Births and Deaths Registration Act 1874, Chapter 88, 43–44.

<sup>44</sup> Births and Deaths Registration Act 1874, 20.

<sup>45</sup> Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Army), 1879, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Army), 1879, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 460; Anne-Marie Hughes, 'Death, Service and Citizenship in Britain in the First World War' Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester (2009), 30.

<sup>48</sup> HMSO 'Field Service Regulations Pt. II Organization and Administration 1909, Reprinted with Amendments 1913' (London, 1913), 165.

<sup>49</sup> HMSO 'Field Service Regulations Pt. II Organization and Administration 1909, Reprinted with Amendments 1913', 166.

Branch was responsible for the bureaucracy of the death, issuing individual death notices sent to the next of kin as well as newspaper lists to alert wider communities. The Casualty Branch were informed of deaths by the servicepeople's units and the Red Cross, who created lists of the dead, which were married with the next of kin information held at the Branch.<sup>50</sup> Over the course of the war the office grew from several clerks to a staff of over 700, although the Red Cross continued to supply the department with names and information.<sup>51</sup> Red Cross involvement intervened in what was previously the dual responsibility of the family and the state. On occasion, Red Cross members became stand-ins for families who were unable to search for the missing.<sup>52</sup> Here, they provided a stand in for both the families of the dead who would usually register a death, and as support to help ensure that as many war dead as possible were recorded by the state.

Families were informed of the death of their loved one by a letter or, in the case of an officer death, a telegram sent by the War Office. Often these moments became points of family memory. Writing decades after the event, J. H. Armitage recalled the day that his mother found out that her son, Armitage's older brother, had been killed at Gallipoli:

I shall always remember the morning that the long buff coloured envelope came by the early post. Mother sat down and opened it then her face seemed to freeze like a mask. I remember asking her what the letter was about, after a while she said in a strange quiet voice – 'George is dead, he's been killed.'<sup>53</sup>

Marie Connor Leighton also described the impact that seeing a notification telegram had on her. When waiting for her son to return on leave the telegram was delivered. Her husband opened the door and came back into the room where Leighton was sitting, looking ashen:

for the first time I noticed that the boy's father had a bit of pinkish paper crushed up in his hand.

"Is that a telegram?" I cried eagerly, putting out my own hand. "Oh, give it to me! What does it say? Is he coming to-night?"

One of my husband's arms was quietly put around me.

"No. It's no good our waiting for him any longer. He'll never come any more. He's dead. He was badly wounded Wednesday at midnight, and he died on Thursday."

<sup>50</sup> Hughes, 'Death, Service and Citizenship', 30.

<sup>51</sup> Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 461.

<sup>52</sup> Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 30.

<sup>53</sup> Burnett Archive, J. H. Armitage, 'Twenty Three Years or The Late Way of Life and Living by "The Exile"', 59.

For minutes that were like years the world became to me a shapeless horror of greyness in which there was no beginning and no end, no light and no sound.<sup>54</sup>

The paper-based notices of death, be they a letter or a telegram, became physical signifiers of death and formed a part of family narratives of bereavement.

Although receiving a death notice was the sharpest pain that a family would experience, from then on they became embroiled in systems of the bureaucracy of death that were new to them. The notification of death that was sent from the War Office was not the same as the death certificate, which had to be issued by the GRO. Many families did not understand that the death notice did not occupy the same legal status as the death certificate, but for the deceased's estate to be settled a formal notification of death needed to be shown. Anne-Marie Hughes has written about the delicate situation that the government found themselves in when issuing death certificates, as that they were trying to rapidly process deaths in chaotic wartime circumstances, while hiding this from the families of the deceased, who needed to maintain some kind of morale as the war was still ongoing.<sup>55</sup> Such was the delay in certificates being issued that in 1915 middle and upper-class families lobbied for a shorter gap between the death notice and death certificate being produced.<sup>56</sup> Even after the war ended, relatives could find themselves struggling to access a death certificate, and there was clearly still some confusion about who issued it. Solicitors, writing on behalf of Major A. G. Staveley's wife had to appeal to the IWGC for details of a death certificate seven years after his demise as none had been issued in the interim.<sup>57</sup> For families who needed this legal necessity, confusion over where to request a death certificate could last a considerable time.

Thus far, the British Army and the War Office assumed control of the registration of the military dead, superseding the peacetime norm of family registration. It was only at the moment of death, and the official notification from the War Office, that families began to be involved in the paperwork, but this was still in a passive role. However, this changed with their involvement in the soldier's grave and families became embroiled in new systems designed to facilitate the individualization of mass graves. They suddenly entered into a new world of forms and bureaucratic measures which were designed to bring the state and the family into dialogue.

<sup>54</sup> [Leighton], *Boy of My Heart*, 219.

<sup>55</sup> Hughes, 'Death, Service and Citizenship', 31.

<sup>56</sup> Hughes, 'Death, Service and Citizenship', 32.

<sup>57</sup> CWGC (Commonwealth War Grave Commission) efile AA365339.

### Beyond Death: Families and the IWGC

The First World War reconfigured the relationship between families and the state through the regulation of dead bodies. Joanna Bourke has shown how the state increasingly claimed men's bodies over the course of the war, through conscription, fitness, and, ultimately, in death.<sup>58</sup> Conventionally, the family of the dead controlled the body of their loved one, and the state would only intervene if there was nobody to claim the corpse of the deceased. It was only in the case of the very poor, who had no family or whose families were too poor to afford burial, or the very wealthy, whose bodies could be taken away for state funerals, that control by the family was regularly superseded by the state.<sup>59</sup> During the war this changed, and the state laid claim to the bodies of men who, although in the Army, were not of it. Servicemen were primarily civilians and remained closely connected to their local communities when serving abroad.<sup>60</sup> While in previous wars the state had laid the bodies of those who perished to rest, these were generally men whose whole careers had been in the Army. The First World War was to change that and wrest control from families to create uniform cemeteries of the dead.

It was during this drawn-out process, of initial burial and particularly through reburial, that the family were in direct contact with the state through the IWGC. The IWGC created ledgers and memos tracing deceased soldiers' whereabouts. When the family of the dead sent a letter asking if they had found the body of loved one, information pertaining to a person's grave, or asked for updates about how quickly the IWGC was working an 'enquiry file' (efile) was opened. Although many efiles have been discarded over the years, and the ones that were kept focus on cases where the IWGC felt they set some kind of precedent, they nonetheless offer rich insight into the sorts of correspondence the IWGC had with bereaved families. While the outcomes of the efiles are skewed, they are broadly representative of the type of information circulated, and patterns of help given, during the inter-war years.

Burying the dead was a drawn-out process which was hampered by the atrocious conditions on the fighting fronts: graves could be hastily dug, paperwork concerning their location lost, and areas where soldiers had been laid to rest earlier in the war were later destroyed. Wherever possible soldiers were buried, although often this was a hasty affair undertaken by comrades, religious personnel, or pioneer troops who

<sup>58</sup> Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London, 1996).

<sup>59</sup> For example, Emma Darwin wanted her husband Charles to be buried in the family vault, instead of in Westminster Abbey. See Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family* (Oxford, 1996), 198.

<sup>60</sup> McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers*, 95–99.

followed the main infantry specifically to bury the dead.<sup>61</sup> From 1915 bodies were interred in cemeteries, giving some semblance of order to the chaos, although changing lines of war and the carnage wrought upon the battlefield could easily destroy graves. After the war ended, the IWGC worked to concentrate the bodies in these scattered graves into larger cemeteries where they could be cared for properly. In some ways, the families who dealt with the gravestone paperwork were lucky. At the end of the war, 170,000 British soldiers were missing in France and Belgium alone and, unless their bodies were later discovered, families of these men had to be content with the name of their loved one engraved on a memorial to the missing.<sup>62</sup>

The IWGC began as a voluntary British Red Cross Unit, led by Fabian Ware, in 1914. His Unit began to collate the graves of the dead, slowly becoming incorporated into the Army. By early 1915, the Unit used Red Cross vehicles and personnel, but were supported by military supplies, before becoming formally incorporated into the Army later that year.<sup>63</sup> In February 1916, the Unit became the Directorate of Graves Registration & Enquiries (DGRE) and in 1917 it was transformed by Royal Charter into the Imperial War Graves Commission.<sup>64</sup> The IWGC organized the battlefronts into seven zones, and Grave Registration Units (GRUs) were formed to record the dead in individual areas. In its early days, two junior registration officers began a card-index register of the graves. This bureaucracy was slowed by Army units and clergymen who moved around, or lost records which gave details of the graves of the soldiers they had buried.

Gravemarkers became an important way for the IWGC to locate the graves they marked on maps and through paperwork. When a soldier was buried in haste, random objects close to the grave could be used as a gravemarker, and graves were initially marked with bayonets and other war detritus. In 1916, it was decided that temporary wooden crosses would replace as many of these makeshift markers as possible. Army Form W. 3314 was issued to chaplains on the Western Front and highlights the precision of the exercise by this point in the war:

The G.R.U. responsible erects crosses on the site of the grave as soon as practicable. Crosses are at the same time kept ready at each G.R.U. office, and can be obtained with metal inscriptions, with only a few minutes delay. In cases where it is desirable for battalions, etc., to erect the crosses themselves, it is requested that the Chaplain or other

<sup>61</sup> Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, 214.

<sup>62</sup> Ross Wilson, 'The Burial of the Dead: The British Army on the Western Front, 1914-1918', *War & Society* 31 (2012), 23.

<sup>63</sup> Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil* (Southampton, 1967), 1-28.

<sup>64</sup> Peter Hodgkinson, 'Clearing the Dead', *Journal of the Centre for First World War Studies* (2017), 35.



Officer filling up this form shall name in space B. any convenient place where the crosses can be handed over by the G.R.U. to transport going up to the position.<sup>65</sup>

Travelling photographers sent images of the markers to the families of the dead, often for a fee, and the photographs became a treasured memento in many family collections. But these wooden crosses were always intended to be a temporary measure. The real headstones would come after the war, when the bodies of the dead were reinterred into purpose-built cemeteries on foreign soil.

The decision not to repatriate the war dead was announced in 1918 and led to a vicious public debate over who should get to choose where soldiers were buried. Sarah Ann Smith, whose only son died in 1918, founded the British War Graves Association in 1919 to lobby for the repatriation of the war dead. By 1922 the association had over 3,000 members.<sup>66</sup> One of the key ways the Association tried to get this decision overturned was through a petition sent to King George V. The history of petitioning is a long and rich one, which does not need repeating here, other than to note that petitions were a vibrant area of political contact between people and their representatives in the early twentieth century.<sup>67</sup> Those who signed the petition did not only put their name but noted their relationship to the dead, with wives, mothers, sisters, brothers, husbands, and nephews all appearing in the document.<sup>68</sup> By listing their relationship to the deceased the families of the dead attempted to demonstrate their claim through blood. Ultimately the petition was ignored, although the IWGC was forced to produce literature to support the decision. In 1919, they commissioned Rudyard Kipling to write a pamphlet sent to every next of kin which explained that moving the bodies would be 'a violation. . . of the desire of the dead themselves'.<sup>69</sup>

Finding the graves of the dead was fraught with difficulty, and both during and after the war families wrote to the IWGC asking them for information about the location of their loved one's body. During the war, if the IWGC received a request for a grave location that it could not answer, a 'Form H' was sent to the Commanding Officer of the battalion the soldier was from to ask if they could give any information or a map reference of the place where the deceased was last seen. If this was not possible, the officer was to give details of the Unit that relieved them, so

<sup>65</sup> Public Record Office Northern Ireland, D3019/1/5.

<sup>66</sup> Alison S. Fell and Susan Grayzel, 'Women's Movements, War and the Body', in Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, eds, *Women Activists between War and Peace* (London, 2017), 232.

<sup>67</sup> See Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller, 'Petitions, Parliament and Political Culture: Petitioning the House of Commons, 1780-1918', *Past & Present*, 248 (2020), 123-4.

<sup>68</sup> CWGC, WG 783 Pt 1. Petition [1919].

<sup>69</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *The Graves of the Fallen* (London, 1919), 15.

the IWGC could continue searching for the grave.<sup>70</sup> At the end of the war, before bodies could be reinterred, a vast search for the missing took place. Now aided by the Army, GRUs systematically searched for individuals whose graves might have been overlooked or unrecorded while the fighting happened. This continued until 1921, when the Secretary of State for War, Sir Laming Worthington-Evans, said that owing to the difficulty of finding 'invisible graves' special searches would, from then on, only be carried out if relatives or friends could produce 'from their own knowledge evidence where the body of an officer or soldier may be found'.<sup>71</sup> Once the dead had been found and recorded the IWGC faced the enormous task of reintering the dead into formal cemeteries, so the land could be returned to French and Belgian farmers, a task that would take them years.<sup>72</sup>

While the GRUs swept the battlefields immediately after the war they also acted on family information about the dead. In September 1918 the IWGC received a letter from Major General E. A. Wardrop asking for information about Cpt H. E. Chapman, who was 'seen to be knocked out by a machine gun bullet'.<sup>73</sup> It was said that two German soldiers had picked him up and placed him under cover, but that no more had been seen or heard of him, although as he had his identity discs it was possible that someone had buried him and marked the grave. No further correspondence regarding Chapman was received until 1919, when his mother began to make enquiries. Chapman's parents were able to afford travel to France to attempt to find the grave of their son. In October 1919 Cpt Chapman's mother gave a blistering attack on the bureaucracy she encountered there:

No communication has been received at the office of the Graves Registration Camp Roizel [sic] respecting him . . . I had begged you to forward details of clothes etc, which I gave you, that would help them identify the body if found. You speak in your reply of 21<sup>st</sup> Aug 19 of the information I have having been noted, but it is quite useless to keep such information on the shelves of the [Law] Office when the only place it could be of any use wd [sic] be in the hands of the officer working on the spot. If other cases are treated as negligently as mine it is not to be wondered at that so many are still 'missing'.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>70</sup> See for example, the case of Lt. J.D.C. Dennis. CWGC efile AA10103.

<sup>71</sup> 'Battlefields' Search Ended', *The Times*, 10 November 1921, 14.

<sup>72</sup> Romain Fathi, "'We Refused to Work until we had Better means for Handling the Bodies": Discipline and the Australian Graves Detachment', *First World War Studies*, 9 (2018), 37.

<sup>73</sup> CWGC, efile AA10143.

<sup>74</sup> CWGC, efile AA10143.

Her complaint highlighted the lag in information flow between the central offices in London and the regional ones where the searches were taking place. In many ways this is not surprising, the sheer amount of logistical paperwork necessitated by moving the graves undoubtedly meant that some people's cases were missed, but Chapman's mother went further, suggesting that it was a symptom of widespread bureaucratic neglect.

Once the dead had been found they were permanently laid to rest. The state control of the space that the dead were buried in disrupted peacetime norms of families owning, or renting, plots of land where their immediate kin could be buried.<sup>75</sup> Ownership of a grave allowed families to install a headstone, however, a minority of grave owners chose not to purchase one, because of cost, or because they did not see it as important.<sup>76</sup> Having a permanent grave was of importance to many families, as it allowed them some sense of closure in the knowledge that their dead were being cared for. As Carol Acton notes, some families were overwhelmingly pleased with IWGC cemeteries, noting that one family could only 'grieve spontaneously' once the grave was in front of them.<sup>77</sup>

After the bodies were interred into their final resting places the families of the dead were asked to provide details of an epitaph which would be engraved on the serviceperson's headstone. This was the only individualization that the graves could have. The uniformity of war graves was paramount to the IWGC's mission: the remains of those who died should rest, undifferentiated from one another; class, race, and religious boundaries minimized through the distinctive IWGC headstone, although in reality only white European troops were guaranteed these promised graves.<sup>78</sup> This policy stemmed from the 1918 Kenyon Report, which outlined the cemetery recommendations of Sir Frederic Kenyon, Director of the British Museum and adviser to the Commission, which emphasized that 'equality of treatment' was paramount.<sup>79</sup> The Commission, following his recommendations, provided uniform headstones decorated with the relevant regimental crest and with the soldier's rank, name, and date of death, which were installed after the war, in many cases several years after the fighting ended. As Sarah Tarlow writes, these headstones had the effect of reducing the 'complex modern individual to an almost pre-modern, substitutable person, remembered only as a soldier and in the

<sup>75</sup> Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London, 2003), 89–90.

<sup>76</sup> Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty*, 179.

<sup>77</sup> Acton, *Grief in Wartime*, 44–5; David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919–1939* (Oxford, 1998), 46.

<sup>78</sup> Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead*, 463–4; See Michèle Barrett's work for more about discrimination against colonial troops and their graves.

<sup>79</sup> Frederic Kenyon, *War Graves: How the Cemeteries Abroad will be Designed* (London, 1918), 7

same way as any and every other soldier'.<sup>80</sup> To combat this, personal inscriptions of up to sixty-six characters were allowed at the family's own expense. For the families who could afford an inscription, these could be highly personal, such as the gravestone of Pte G. H. Pratt, whose wife requested that his last words to her 'God be with you till we meet again' be engraved.<sup>81</sup> The cost barred some families from participating in this commemorative action, such as the wife of Pte J. B. Slipp, who could not afford the extra expense this incurred.<sup>82</sup>

As much as the IWGC insisted that families could choose their own epitaphs, in practice, inscriptions were heavily monitored by the IWGC, and requests for epitaphs not in keeping with the Commission's outlook were regularly refused.<sup>83</sup> In 1920 the IWGC contacted the parents of Jack Mainwaring to ask if a headstone could be erected over his grave. The parents agreed to this on the condition that his rank be excluded from the headstone.<sup>84</sup> After several internal discussions it was decided that, as there was an existent precedent of a family omitting rank, it would be accepted in this case, and a letter was sent to Mainwaring's parents informing them of the decision.<sup>85</sup> However, in June 1921, just before the gravestone was about to be engraved, a letter from the Principal Assistant Secretary asked them to consider the matter further, arguing:

The impression gathered by anyone visiting the cemetery, reading the inscription as you propose to have it, might be that he [Mainwaring] was reduced in rank and it was desired to conceal this fact. At best the omission of the number and rank, particulars which appear on all other headstones erected over War graves, might be regarded as due to carelessness in engraving the headstone. I feel myself it is hardly fair to the memory of your son himself, nor to his comrades, to suppress what might be called his military identity.<sup>86</sup>

This complete reverse in attitude towards the parents' autonomy and their control over the gravestone led the parents to change the inscription. Mainwaring's father explained 'although both my wife and myself would prefer our sons [*sic*] rank not to appear on the headstone on reading your letter we think it only right to leave the matter entirely in your hands'.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Sarah Tarlow, *Bereavement and Commemoration: An Archaeology of Mortality* (Oxford, 1999), 157.

<sup>81</sup> CWGC, CWGCYP/1411.

<sup>82</sup> CWGC efile CDEW17150. The fee was often waived if families could not afford it, however, not all families seem to have been told this.

<sup>83</sup> Sonia Batten, 'Memorial Text Narratives in Britain, c.1890–1930', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2011, 196.

<sup>84</sup> CWGC, efile SL18509.

<sup>85</sup> CWGC, efile SL18509.

<sup>86</sup> CWGC, efile SL18509.

<sup>87</sup> CWGC, efile SL18509.

The Secretary replied, saying that 'this is a matter to which the Commission has given serious thought' and further attempted to legitimize their decision by invoking the ghost of their son by concluding it was 'in the interest of the dead themselves'.<sup>88</sup> This official reaction to the personal wishes of the parents signalled that although the parents were the private holders of their son's memory, publicly and bureaucratically the state, through the Commission, decided that his military status trumped the parental decisions made.

In extreme cases, the families of the war dead could be refused IWGC headstones. The IWGC made the decision not to erect a war grave over the burial place of any soldiers who died after 31 August 1921, or to those whose death was not directly caused by serving during the conflict.<sup>89</sup> Sgt. C. C. Poole was one of the approximately 130,000 servicemen who, as a result of wounds received in service, died on British soil. Sgt Poole died in September 1921 due to heart failure, having been discharged from the Army in 1919 with gun shot wounds and 'valvular disease of the heart'.<sup>90</sup> He was buried in an IWGC plot and his widow, Mabel Poole, was determined to establish a suitable memorial to her husband after his death in accordance with wider family wishes. In 1922 Sgt Poole's father wrote to the IWGC to request a memorial to place on his son's grave.<sup>91</sup> The IWGC responded that because he had died after their deadline, and it was unclear whether his death was due to war wounds, they could not place a memorial stone on his grave.<sup>92</sup>

In 1922 Mabel Poole commissioned a headstone from a local sculptor, who wrote to the IWGC, as owners of the grave, asking them to approve the design.<sup>93</sup> After receiving no reply, Poole, assuming that this meant that, after their initial refusal, her husband was after all to be given a Commission grave, wrote again to the IWGC. In February 1923 she wrote to the Commission explaining that she understood other relatives of soldiers buried in an IWGC plot in Gloucester Cemetery had been asked to fill in a form with details of the epitaph they wanted engraved on their IWGC headstone. She explained that, because she had been overlooked, she was enclosing the information she wished to be carved on the headstone.<sup>94</sup> Poole not only knew that forms were being sent to other families, but knew enough about them to replicate the information requested. The IWGC, as they had done with her father-in-law, again refused her request

<sup>88</sup> CWGC, efile SL18509.

<sup>89</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

<sup>90</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

<sup>91</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

<sup>92</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

<sup>93</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

<sup>94</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

for an IWGC headstone for her husband. Poole wrote a controlled but critical reply:

I was more than surprised to hear that my late husband is not entitled to a memorial stone. He died in 1921 & death was directly attributed to War Service & wounds or he wouldn't have been in receipt of full Pension. I was refused permission by the W.G.H. to have a stone erected at my own expense & was informed that memorial stones were being erected to every soldier buried on that plot. It is rather like the "Dog in the Manger" kind of treatment.<sup>95</sup>

This 'dog in the manger' treatment, a reference to Aesop's fables, suggested that the IWGC was wilfully blocking access to something that she needed even though it gave them no benefit.

Caught between the cemetery's insistence that all the headstones were being replaced with IWGC ones, and the IWGC's insistence that this was not the case, she turned to the Mayor for assistance and the Town Clerk, on behalf of the Mayor began to act as a mediator. The Clerk believed he had found a suitable answer to the problem, and proposed that a headstone be erected in the same style as the other IWGC headstones but at Poole's expense. Unbeknownst to him, the Land and Legal Advisor for the IWGC had been contemplating a similar proposal, and an internal report recommended that they 'let her erect one at her own expense as [the] grave [is] at edge of plot and probably wouldn't be noticed'.<sup>96</sup> Both the Town Clerk and the IWGC were happy with this proposal and the IWGC contacted Poole in mid-March to tell her that due to the 'special circumstances of this case' they would allow a headstone of the Commission's standard design to be constructed for £3.10.0.<sup>97</sup>

This proposal should have ended the dispute, however, Poole refused their offer, arguing that because she would be 'paying for it I might be allowed to erect one according to my own choice as there are other stones on the plot not of the standard design'.<sup>98</sup> Different IWGC departments approached this problem with different solutions: the Land and Legal Advisor suggested it would 'be the simplest course to allow her to do so' but the Controller and Financial Advisor instead argued that 'the best way of dealing with this matter would be for the Commission to put up the headstone at their own expense'.<sup>99</sup> The IWGC as a whole were strongly opposed to individual memorials on their plots, which seems to have influenced their final decision. This was also a time sensitive matter, as the IWGC gravestones in the plot for those who were entitled to them

<sup>95</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

<sup>96</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

<sup>97</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

<sup>98</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

<sup>99</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

were set to be unveiled in June so it was desired that Sgt Poole's headstone should be ready by this date so they could present a uniform landscape of graves.

In May 1923 the IWGC informed Poole of their decision to construct an official headstone, adding 'the Commission hope the course will meet with your approval'.<sup>100</sup> Ultimately, Poole was granted her wish, although at the expense of a protracted argument which exposed bureaucratic weaknesses in the IWGC. Her appeal to people in authority to act as mediators was all that she could do to add weight to her claims and, ultimately, these tactics bore fruit. Yet it is clear that this was done somewhat reluctantly and her perseverance paid off because the IWGC did not deem her husband's grave to be in a particularly focal part of the gravesite. Her case begs the question of what happened to those who were not as persistent, and who did not manage to reach bureaucrats with sufficient powers to make decisions about matters such as this.

Families encountered the IWGC's complex set of rules through instances like these. As the efiles expose the IWGC was formed of multiple departments in various stages of working through the implications of various rules and regulations. That the efiles were kept, as proof of precedent, is indicative of a vast organization with many moving parts, which had the power to disrupt and contradict each other. It is through these instances of family dealings with the IWGC that we glimpse the profound impact that the bureaucracy of the dead could have on the living. While families were able to control some aspects of their loved ones' graves, others entered into protracted disputes with the IWGC, which influenced their understandings of whom this bureaucracy was supposed to benefit.

## Conclusion

One of the most remarkable changes which the war brought about was the impact on the registration of death and the legal status of the grave. Families of the new civilian army were suddenly relegated to waiting for an official notification of death. Far from the norm of the family registering the death of a loved one with the state, now the state registered the death with the family. After the war, people were once again buried in family plots, and families were able to choose gravestones for their loved ones. For the families of those who were buried in an IWGC grave, however, control of the site remained in the hands of the state.

Over the course of the early inter-war period, the bureaucracy of death encountered by the families of the war dead could profoundly shape their experience of loss and their relationship to the state. The gap between the perceived power of the state by the families and the reality of this were

<sup>100</sup> CWGC, efile AA49102.

stark. They imagined state led bureaucracies which could mobilize whole sections of society, supply vast armies, and keep track of its soldiers. Once these soldiers were no longer living, families were confronted with a vast bureaucracy developed throughout the war to try and trace their army of the dead, but which could not possibly satisfy all individuals. From the outset it was an impossible task. For the families lucky enough to know where their loved one was buried, they were then confronted with a slow-moving system of burials and reburials, which resulted in letters asking the IWGC where their loved one was and when they might get a permanent headstone.

Family and bureaucratic time did not always work in tandem, and different priorities characterized interactions between the bereaved and those who controlled the body. Waiting for news of a grave being created or confirmed could seem like a lifetime to some. Once the IWGC forms were sent, the Commission were working to a deadline to create headstones for the dead, and internal memos reminded members of staff to prompt families for their choice of memorial words.<sup>101</sup> While to the IWGC this was a bureaucratic necessity, for the families this was a considered and debated choice of words to engrave on the final resting place of their loved ones. Perhaps this is where the core problem with IWGC bureaucracy lay. What was a simple piece of paperwork for the War Office was a death notification for a family. A simple form requesting an epitaph for the IWGC could be days and weeks of emotional decision making for the deceased's next of kin. The bureaucracy of death had the power to shape family mourning, protracting grief through the slow progression of irregular paperwork, and casting a long shadow over those who had to deal with these paper-based reminders of death.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks go to the anonymous reviewers, and to James McConnel, Michael Roper, and Rowan Thompson for discussing the ideas in this article with me. My thanks also to Hanna Smyth for alerting me to the efiles, and to Andrew Fetherston, for facilitating this research.

<sup>101</sup> CWGC AA36539.