How to remember the victims of Covid-19: experiences of the First World War.

FOSTER, A.-M.

2022



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How to Remember the Victims of Covid-19: Experiences of the First World War

Ann-Marie Foster | 09 November 2022

Executive Summary

- When planning memorial events for those who have died during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to recognise that the bulk of memorialisation occurs in domestic spaces.
- The importance of the home in commemoration was recognised by memorial producers in the past. After the First World War, the British government sent memorial plaques to many families whose relatives had died on active service.
- Government-commissioned memorial objects were not sent to the families of people who did not die on active service. The families of East African labourers and British working-class women in munitions factories were not sent memorial items.
- For families who did receive them, these small memorial items were of great importance. Many of these items are still treasured by families today.
- During the First World War centenary, these family memorial objects were used to engage the British public with the commemoration of the war. However, these activities excluded families who could not trace a direct link to the war.
- The family connections that were highlighted during the First World War centenary emphasised a narrative of war that was white, male, and orientated around the Western Front, erasing the realities of the diverse people who were involved in the war and the mixed experiences of conflict.
- When planning future commemorations, care must be taken to sensitively and responsibly work with the histories of all involved in the events being commemorated.

Introduction

Covid-19 has brought with it a host of new ways to publicly remember the dead. The National Covid Memorial Wall created by Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, the Marie Curie Day of Reflection, set to mark the first day of the UK lockdown (23 March 2020), and the online Remember Me book of remembrance established by St Pauls Cathedral are all national, sometimes international, initiatives which commemorate mass death. While the UK government ponders an appropriate memorial response to Covid-19, academics have produced work urging policymakers to develop memorial practices which are <u>inclusive</u>, <u>accessible</u>, <u>and appropriate (http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/106739/1/Confronting the covid 19 pandemic grief loss and social order.pdf</u>). As

people begin to create memorial monuments, remembrance events and online spaces to a sudden and sustained loss of life, understanding how previous communities have commemorated the dead can provide guidance for future policy priorities.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not the first time that the nation has had to work out how to grieve – previous wars, disasters, and other mass death events all precipitated new ways of remembering the individual dead. Families, communities, and governments all adapted to such events and created objects and ephemera to send to the bereaved. These items were often cherished by the recipient, and in many cases became family heirlooms. This was recognised during the First World War centenary in (2014-2018), when commemoration initiatives urged families to rediscover their ancestors' items to connect to their war experiences. But what about the people who could not trace their lineages back to the First World War? What of families whose pasts were caught up in colonialism, trauma, and discrimination? The focus on family memorial objects, only gifted by the British government to a selection of mostly white servicepeople, excluded the families of many whose ancestors were involved in the First World War. Centenary commemorations prioritised heteronormative family connections forged through blood over broader community ones, drawing on an idealised version of the family.

Objects, Mourning, and Memorial Cultures

Although people and cultures have different death practices, rituals, and beliefs, death is a universal experience. The deceased are commemorated by the living, and intricate memorial rituals are created to remember the dead. When people think of memorialisation, permanent stone or brass monuments to the dead are often the type of memorial that immediately springs to mind. National and local commemoration, through monuments and special events, such as the two minutes' silence, are an important recognition of loss. But they are not the only way that people memorialise the dead – domestic memorial objects often form the backbone of individual and family commemoration.

National memorials to the dead after war and disaster have their roots in the proliferation of statues in the nineteenth century. By the time of the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), stone memorials in local communities and brass plaques in churches were commonly used to commemorate those who had been killed in service. During the First World War, people erected street shrines to honour the local dead. After the war, permanent plaques and memorials were used to express local and national mourning. In the 1920s, thousands of war memorials were built across the UK. Stone memorials were important. Local groups who did not get a memorial after their mass death event, such as the families of the victims of the Gresford mining disaster (1934), resolved this unfulfilled need by building one themselves, often decades later. Public and collective recognition of the dead matters to communities.

Despite this desire to commemorate the dead of the First World War, one of the other major mass death events of the early twentieth century - the influenza epidemic (1918-1919) - received no official memorialisation from the state. The influenza epidemic killed approximately 228,000 Britons. There was no national memorial to the the influenza dead. Nor USA where memory of was there in recent (https://global.oup.com/academic/product/american-pandemic-9780190238551?cc=gb&lang=en&) research (https://www.umasspress.com/9781558498129/influenza-and-inequality/) from the UShas suggested that this was because the majority of deaths were of marginalised young working-class women. This may also be part of the reason in the UK. Many of this demographic were also the ones likely to die through war work, painting an unbalanced picture of how death in the military workplace was valued by the British government in the early 1920s. In wartime, the deaths of working-class women of all ethnicities were always undervalued when compared to their working-class male counterparts.

While national recognition of loss is important, memorialisation is most commonly enacted through small domestic items. Families' <u>private items (https://academic.oup.com/hwj/article/93/1/225/6556293)</u> did (and still do) co-exist alongside these official forms of memorialisation. Objects, such as medals and personal items of the dead, and ephemera – small pieces of paper such as photographs and letters – are often used to remember the dead. Bereavement charities recommend <u>object and ephemera-based remembrance activities (https://www.cruse.org.uk/understanding-grief/managing-grief/)</u> to ease grief – from creating a photo collage to restoring a loved one's treasured possession. 'Transitional objects' – items which remind the bereaved of a loved one – are often suggested by grief counsellors as a way of bringing comfort to the newly bereaved.

Mining Disasters and Memories

After every mass death event in Britain in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, bereaved people created memorial items. After the 1866 Oaks Colliery disaster, for example, the Disaster Relief Committee gave a bible to every child who lost a father in the explosion. Many of these became family heirlooms, and people noted births, marriages, and deaths in their front cover. Similarly, after the 1938 Markham Colliery disaster the Derbyshire Miners' Association printed a memorial book to send to the families of victims, containing messages of condolence sent to the branch.

These community-based responses were married with commercial and individual ones. Printers created memorial napkins and postcards to remember the dead of specific colliery disasters, often selling them at the funerals of the victims, which received a great deal of public attention. Special memorial editions of newspapers were printed, often with reproduction photographs of the dead. Individual families also created personal items to remember the dead, from memorial plates, to engraved glasses, to simply remembering through pre-existing photographs or a death notice in the newspaper.

The First World War and State-Sponsored Family Memorialisation

These personal memorials produced by families were also created after war deaths – In Memoriam columns in newspapers, reproduction photographs, and personal objects were all used to mourn the dead of the First World War. These objects were joined by state-commissioned memorials, Next of Kin Memorial Plaques, which were established during the war and became a key way that the British government intervened in Britons' mourning and remembrance practices. This commemoration through plaques was, however, unequal. In Britain, workers were excluded from this memorial form. Across the British Empire, racist ideas of who was worthy of commemoration led to deliberate memorial exclusion.

1916 was a difficult year for the British government – conscription was introduced, the war of attrition began to take its toll, and public morale was waning after two years of warfare. It was in this context that, in October 1916, the War Cabinet began to explore the possibility of creating memorials for the bereaved. The advisory committee for the scheme was formed of representatives from the War Office, Colonial Office, India Office, Army and Admiralty, assisted by an artistic committee of the Directors of the Victoria & Albert Museum, the National Gallery, and the Keeper of the Coins and Medals at the British Museum. The committee decided that the memorial item would comprise a bronze plaque sent to the deceased's next of kin. In 1917 the committee opened a competition for its design, won by Edward Carter Preston.

The winning design was infused with imperial imagery – it showed the figure of Britannia holding a trident and a laurel wreath, a lion prowling by her side, and, in the background, a dolphin jumping from the sea (a reference to the Navy). At the very bottom of the plaque, an Eagle, representing Imperial Germany, was held in the jaws of a lion. The committee decided that the words 'he died for freedom and honour' would be on the plaque, with the pronoun changed to 'she' in the case of the limited number of nurses' families who received one. Individual names of the deceased were impressed onto the plaque to provide a strong memorial link for the families that received one.

Families who received a plaque often displayed them in their family homes. The plaques were very often framed, and commercial companies like Boots the Chemist sold mass manufactured frames for people to display their family memorial in. Bespoke frames were also made for wealthy families, by companies such as Spink and Sons, who sold silver and mother of pearl inlaid frames for families to rest their memorial. Newspapers advertised various frame styles, although there was also a trade in people taking old mirrors to framers and asking for the mirrored glass to be knocked out so the memorial plaque could be mounted.

Not everyone who had a relation who died from war work received a memorial plaque. In Britain, the families of people killed while working in manual labour for the war effort, such as munitions factories, were not given Next of Kin Memorial Plaques. Instead the families of the dead could only commemorate their dead privately in the home or, if their loved one had died in a large factory explosion, through small memorials at the sites of their death. Of the over one thousand working-class women who died in munitions accidents during the First World War, none of their families received a Next of Kin Memorial Plaque, or anything equivalent to it.

In theory, every family whose loved one died on active service were meant to receive a plaque. The memorial plaques were designed for all forces who were a part of the British Empire, and the servicepeople who fought for it but, in practice, by no means all the families of those who died on active service in the British military received one. The British Army comprised British nationals, people from the 'dominions' (self-governing nations within the British Empire), and people from countries colonised by Britain. These different troops were treated differently by the British military, both in life and death.

It has been estimated that the number of British Empire soldier deaths in the First World War were in the region of 959,000. This figure does not include the total number of Navy deaths, which total over 44,000. Somewhere between 800,000 and 1,150,000 Next of Kin Memorial Plaques were produced, with 600 produced for nurses who died through war service. Some plaques were sent abroad, and the families of the approximately 200,000 deceased who fought for dominion armies received one. However, this number was a very low percentage of the overall Empire war dead: many servicepeople went unrecognised by this personal commemoration sent by the British government. For example, in East Africa alone there were over 200,000 labourers working for the British Army who died due to poor working conditions. These men were only commemorated on a mass memorial erected far away from their graves, they received no individual headstones or memorials.

Wider British commemoration of the war explicitly excluded most people of colour from colonised countries. Black servicepeople, particularly from African countries, <u>were deliberately excluded from British memorial activities (http://www.michelebarrett.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Sent-Missing-in-Africa.pdf)</u>. There were instances of families not being told that their loved one had died, such as the families of the South African men who died on the SS Mendi in 1917. In East Africa, memorials deliberately excluded the names of Black servicepeople on war memorials in the region. This was extended to other racialised troops as well. Indian troops who fought for the British Army were sometimes named on memorials and given personalised

gravestones (the equivalent to their white European counterparts), but not consistently. Given these policies, it is unlikely that the families of many servicepeople from colonised countries received Next of Kin Memorial Plaques.

For those who received them, the Next of Kin Memorial Plaque could be a powerful memorial item, and many of these plaques were handed down to children and great-grandchildren by the next of kin who received them. But while the plaques were generally accepted and greatly valued, some families strongly disliked these state sanctioned memorials. Some refused to accept them, feeling that they were an inappropriate response to the loss of life in the hands of the state-led military. The plaques were designed to comfort the bereaved through classical allusions towards the brave nobility of sacrifice. Of course, for anyone who had an uneasy relationship with the British state, the Empire imagery contained in the plaques was not always welcome. There were also strong responses to the emotions which were brought to the fore when a plaque was received. Newspapers reported that one mother was so strongly upset at the remembrance of her deceased son which accompanied receiving the memorial plaque that she died by suicide. While hers is an unusual example, it brings with it a warning that commemoration of the individual dead is entangled in webs of politics and emotion and can produce strong reactions in the recipient.

Unthinking Remembrance and Inclusion

During the First World War centenary, public events tried to encourage Britons to engage with their family pasts through photographs and objects. Yet the memories that often emerged were white, male, and Western Front oriented. This cultural memory of the First World War has dominated <u>Britain since the 1960s</u> (<u>https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-2346.12110</u>)</u>, and has proven so pervasive that it has effectively <u>blocked diverse histories of war (http://repository.essex.ac.uk/31114/</u>)</u>, even during the centenary. There was widespread criticism of centenary events because of a focus on white British history which penetrated many of the commemorative events.

In a <u>2012 speech (https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-at-imperial-war-museum-on-first-world-war-centenary-plans)</u> David Cameron stated the importance of families and family memories for the upcoming centenary. Cameron's speech drew on ephemera-laden tropes of war to communicate its emotional impact, saying 'We look at those fast fading sepia photographs of people posing stiffly and proudly in their uniform. In many cases it was the first and last image ever taken of them, and this matters to us.' His words placed objects and ephemera back at the heart of First World War memorialisation – people's family possessions were to be a part of the emotional understanding of war which provided a shorthand for tragic experiences. Far more people lived through the First World War than died in it, but Cameron's speech misleads us into thinking that everyone who went to fight for the British Army perished.

During the centenary itself, personal connections to the war, either through family or the local community, lay at the heart of most <u>people's participation in centenary events (https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/centenary_united_kingdom</u>). However, this intimate family connection with the First World War was not necessarily appropriate for all parts of the UK. 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 government. Between 1918 and 1939 the war dead were commemorated in both the Free State and Northern Ireland, but the memory of the First World War became increasingly politicised throughout the twentieth century in Northern Ireland. It was particularly difficult to navigate from the late 1960s onward, due, in part, to differing Nationalist and Unionist cultural and political

loyalties. In Northern Ireland, family histories of war have only very recently been talked about openly. Centenary events in Northern Ireland emphasised shared but diverse experiences of the conflict and reconciliation in families that had people fighting for the British Army and the Irish Republican Army.

Family objects and ephemera were used in the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) sector to engage people in museum-based commemorations. For example, the Imperial War Museums' 'Lives of the First World War' initiative asked people to 'donate' family items to a website that became a permanent online memorial in 2019. This website explicitly linked people's family objects to permanent memorialisation through their online display. Families and individuals uploaded images of objects such as Next of Kin Memorial Plaques, medals, and photographs, all of which were commonly used to memorialise the dead in the home in the immediate aftermath of the war. Through uploading these personal and state-sponsored items to the online portal they came full circle – official objects designed to be used in family remembrance were, a century later, used in national commemorations.

Public events still use memorial items from one hundred years ago as a way of engaging families of the dead. But what about those who were excluded, whose families were never sent mementoes, who do not have a family connection, or for whom family links are painful? This exclusion particularly impacts families of servicepeople from colonised countries who were excluded from receiving memorial items in the first place. There were also other reasons that people may have been unable to link their family pasts through historic objects. Due to policies of clearing slum housing, which saw working-class families forced from their homes, sometimes their belongings were destroyed to protect their new housing from being infested by real or imagined pests. Migrants and refugees who were forced out of housing at various points over the past century and who may have not been able to keep every family item also did not necessarily have recourse to family objects

One of the core problems with relying on this personalised object-based approach was that it ignored the diverse range of people who experienced the war who may not have access to family items. The 2019 British Futures report on the centenary concluded that more could be done to tell the story of Black and ethnic minority soldiers to help 'ethnic minority Britons understand their personal connections to the First World War.' However, as we have seen, this is not a straightforward history. For British families, <u>the 1919 Race Riots (https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/post-war_societies_great_britain_and_ireland)</u>, a direct result of increased numbers of people of colour working in dock cities throughout the First World War, is a strongly negative association with the conflict. The history of the First World War is one which intersects with British racism, the complex history of which needs to be understood by more than those with a direct family link.

Over the course of the centenary there was some shift in Britons' understandings of the diverse range of people involved in the First World War, however, many felt that there had not been enough of an emphasis on British commemorations beyond the white, male, soldier. The 2019 Futures report (http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/The-Peoples-Centenary.Final-report-2018.pdf) revealed an increase in awareness of Indian soldiers from 44% of people surveyed in 2014 to 71% of respondents in 2018. However, the same report stated that people felt the centenary could have covered contributions of Commonwealth participants and women to a much greater extent. Equally, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 'Lessons from the First World War Centenary' report found that large commemorations in national institutions were accused of being too focused on the war experiences (https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/2001/2001.pdf) of white participants.

More broadly, this issue of exclusion and remembrance can be linked to the British cultural sector's reluctance to meaningfully engage with other histories. Government departments and cultural institutions are currently working out how to reckon with Britain's violent colonial history. The Rhodes Must Fall movement, the toppling of the statue of Edward Colston, and repeated calls for the restitution of all stolen objects (such as the Benin Bronzes, some of which have been restituted (https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/aug/07/london-museum-horniman-returns-72-benin-treasures-to-nigeria)) show a public desire for this history to be engaged with on a national level. Since 2002, the group Memorial 2007 (https://www.memorial2007.org.uk/) have been calling for a national memorial to commemorate enslaved Africans, but thus far <u>no prime minister has granted them funds (https://theconversation.com/britain-is-still-failing-to-acknowledge-the-legacy-of-slavery-memorialising-its-victims-would-be-a-start-124911)</u>. The failure of institutions involved in the First World War centenary to acknowledge broader global and colonial connections is part of a wider landscape of British history, in which some institutions and individuals are reluctant to engage with and acknowledge its violent past.

Conclusion

There is always tension between state-sponsored commemoration and family memorialisation following war. The same is true of other mass death events, including Covid-19. It will always be difficult for the state to memorialise the individual dead because mass death events are so politically and emotionally charged, and the experiences and lives of those who died are so diverse. However, this did not stop the government in the 1910s memorialising a section of their Empire dead.

Despite the thousands of public memorials created after war, the home remains the primary place that individuals remember the dead. Knowing that, the way that the state engaged with families following war and disaster in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, emphasised creating small personalised memorial objects to be kept in the family home. These objects have proven remarkably durable, and are now used in personal, local, and national forms of remembrance. But they were not sent to the families of all the dead, and unequal remembrance practices have meant that some histories were marginalised and publicly ignored.

Memorial objects issued after war and disaster had the power to help families in their grief, providing local and national points of remembrance in the home. First World War centenary events have shown that the memories which emerge from this can be mobilised to aid national commemoration. However, these remembrance practices privilege certain people and experiences – specifically white male soldiers – over others. Individual memorials are often used to control the memorial narrative of government-led commemoration. Any individual memorials that are produced must be sensitive to the diverse needs of those it is representing.

When planning for commemorative events, such as the First World War centenary, family objects issued a century ago were drawn on to mobilise the British public, but in doing so some families were excluded, leading to unequal national remembrance practices. Those who were insufficiently memorialised after the war were further marginalised in the centenary celebrations. While the commemoration of war and the remembrance of people who died from sudden illness is highly complex and it is impossible to satisfy the families of all involved, careful attention needs to be given to how the government responds to individuals in the face of mass death. Awareness of the ways that commemoration can be exclusionary should lead to planning which recognises the need for multiple and varied memorial responses. National and local commemoration is important, however, individual families should also be included in memorial initiatives. This must be done in a way that is inclusive, accessible, and that navigates the multifaceted experience of sudden grief.

Tags: Further Reading

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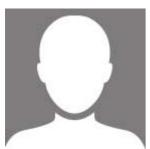
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About the author



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