

SACRIFICE AND REMEMBRANCE

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In this 100th Anniversary period of World War1 (WW1), the thoughts of the nation are not just on the scale of the sacrifice made in that war and subsequent conflicts but how that sacrifice is now commemorated. The Literary and Philosophical Society has a proud tradition in remembering the fallen emanating from the then President of the Society 1912-13, Dr Astley Clarke, who advocated the establishment of a University in Leicester. His idea was initially rejected on the grounds that it would be difficult to attract the numbers required to sustain a university but it gained increased support during WW1 when it was decided to establish a university to remember the fallen in that war. Dr Clarke made the first donation of a £100 to the appeal to found the university.

Although the sacrifice made in both world wars is mainly associated with men, women have made sacrifices both on the home front and behind the front line and most recently in conflicts on the front line. The Battle of the Somme encapsulates the scale of that sacrifice. On the first day of that battle (1st July 1916) 19,240 British soldiers were killed. Losses that would be totally unimaginable in today's society.

During the Battle of the Somme relatives were asking where their loved ones were buried and, even if the truth were known, the authorities could not tell them. Fabian Ware, who was in charge of the Red Cross Mobile Ambulance Service which was responsible for moving the wounded from the front line to field hospitals, persuaded his superiors to enlarge his mission to that of recording and registering where the dead had fallen and were buried. Hence was born the Imperial War Graves Commission which in 1960 adopted the new name of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC).

Fabian Ware surrounded himself with a team of experts which included Sir Frederick Kenyon, the Director of the British Museum, responsible for the founding principles of the Commission. These principles stated that the fallen should be commemorated individually, headstones should be uniform and should remain in perpetuity and there was to be no distinction made on account of military or civil rank, race or creed. Most importantly the fallen were to be buried near where they fell on the Western Front. Other experts included the architects, Reginald Blomfield who created the Cross of Sacrifice and the Menin Gate and Sir Edwin

Lutyens who designed amongst many memorials the Thiepval memorial to the missing on the Somme, the Cenotaphs in London and in Victoria Park Leicester. The words of the CWGC were provided by Rudyard Kipling in particular on the Stone of Remembrance "*Their name liveth for evermore*" and for those who could not be identified, the wording "*A soldier of the Great War – Known unto God*" was placed on their headstones.

The Commission decreed that absolutely none of the fallen would ever be a statistic and their names would be recorded either on a headstone or, if missing, on war memorials. When soldiers were killed and the course of battle allowed, their bodies were centralised and, if wood could be found, temporary wooden crosses were made and placed over the bodies to ensure that, when they were eventually buried in a permanent graves, there would be no doubt about their identification. Once permanent headstones were erected these wooden crosses were offered to the next of kin and many can be found on display in churches across the United Kingdom.

Naturally these principles caused enormous anger amongst the British people as they were being told that their loved ones would not be returning home for burial and they would have no say on the type of headstone marking the graves. Lady Cecil, the wife of the Bishop of Exeter who had lost 3 of her own sons, drew a petition of 8000 names signed by relatives seeking to have more say in the commemoration of their loved ones. It was submitted to the Prince of Wales.

One mother, Anna Durie, defied the CWGC and arranged for the body of her son to be exhumed and smuggled back to Canada where it was subsequently reburied in Ontario. Such was the emotion concerning these principles that the proposals were debated in the House of Commons. The MP for Westminster Mr Burdett Coutts gave an impassioned plea in support of the Commission quoting from a letter from Rudyard Kipling who lost his only son Jack at Loos. Churchill, Chairman of the Commission, summed up the motion and approval was given for cemeteries to be constructed as we know them now,

Cemeteries began to be built in 1920 and it was not until the eve of World War 2 (WW2) that the work of the commemoration of the fallen in WW1 was complete. The period of commemoration for the fallen was extended to 1921 in WW1 and to 1947 in WW2. Many of the wounded were sent back home for treatment and if they died from their wounds within these periods they were entitled to be commemorated by the Commission.

The location of death and its cause is immaterial to their qualification for commemoration. They could have been killed in action, died of wounds, illness, accident, suicide, homicide or suffered judicial execution. In the latter case those shot at dawn are commemorated in the same way as those killed in action. The rationale for this is that the CWGC felt that soldiers shot at dawn had paid their dues and should be commemorated equally.

Those who were killed in action and whose bodies were never recovered totalled over 320,000. These are remembered by placing their names on war memorials such as Tyne Cot 32,000, Menin Gate 55,000, and the Thiepval 72,000.

Not all those buried in cemeteries were combatants. The British Army recruited 145,000 Chinese who formed a labour force to carry out administrative tasks such as road building, erecting tents, moving ammunition and other stores to free up British soldiers to fight on the front line. 10,000 of this labour force died in the course of their duties and are buried in CWGC cemeteries with the same headstones as others.

The role of the Commonwealth in supporting the war effort in both World Wars cannot be overestimated. India had one million soldiers under arms in WW1. Many of these soldiers were fighting a war in which many had probably no idea for what they were fighting. This took place in conditions totally different from their home country.

The first British soldier reported to have been killed in WW1 was Pte John Parr of the Middlesex Regiment aged 17. The last is Pte George Ellison of the 5th Royal Irish Lancers aged 40. The last Commonwealth soldier reported to have been killed is Pte George Price of 28th Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force aged 25 who died 90 secs before the Armistice came into force. All three are coincidentally buried in the same cemetery in St Symphorien, near Mons in Belgium. Eight hundred and sixty two service personnel died on the 11th November 1918. Since the Falklands War in 1982, relatives have been offered the choice in repatriating their loved ones as logistically it is now possible to do so. Of those killed in that war only 18 are buried in the Falkland Islands as the majority of relatives asked for the bodies to be returned for burial in this country. In 2010 the CWGC built the first new WW1 cemetery after the initial commemoration of that war; a mass grave of 250 mainly Australian soldiers was found in Fromelles Pheasant Wood. After excavating the grave these soldiers were buried with full military honours in a new cemetery. Seventy five of these headstones have since been named as a result of DNA matching of relatives in Australia. A fitting tribute to the CWGC that regardless of the passage of time they have fulfilled their pledge that all the fallen will be remembered and commemorated. As Rudyard Kipling wrote “ *...the work of the Commission is greater than the Pharaohs and in building the pyramids they only had to do so in one country.*” The CWGC’s work spans 26,000 memorials and sites in over 153 countries. Despite the initial anger over their founding principles, the vision of Sir Fabian Ware and his team undoubtedly has withstood the test of time and is an enduring legacy that the 1.7 million fallen in two World Wars will never ever be forgotten.