

Introductory Note

Grave stones tell the truth scarce forty years,
Generations pass while families last not three oakes. (Sir Thomas Browne)

The guest-edited 2018 number of *Anglo Saxonica—In Remembrance of the Great War: Re-Working Myths* brings together a selection of essays that developed from papers originally presented at the October 2016 Conference in Lisbon (<https://inremembrancegw.wordpress.com/home/>). The volume aims at expanding some of the fundamental issues which were raised during the encounter, and which stimulated quite a few scientific debates between the participants and the audience. It resumes the diverse dialogues then initiated and will hopefully contribute to ongoing discussions in related fields.

By way of an introduction to this Introduction, it seems appropriate to recollect the most significant passage of the Conference Call for Papers. It highlights the organisers' deliberate choice of a manifold approach that would invite different inroads into a 100-year old topic.

“A century later, our view of the First World War, relabelled ‘First’ after its sequel number Two, is the product not only of eyewitness accounts, historical documents and memorabilia, but of the multiple discourses which have continued over the years to assess and re-assess an event that determined the course of the twentieth century. To the people who lived through that war, it was ‘the Great War’—by its dimension (involving nations worldwide for the first time in history), by its initial idealistic definition (‘the war to end all wars’), and by the enduring nightmares it engendered, and for which no one had been prepared. To make sense of these traumatic experiences, no single narrative would suffice, for such a war

is simply too frightful, too chaotic, too arbitrary, too bizarre, too uncanny a set of events and images to grasp directly. We need blinkers, spectacles, shades to glimpse war even indirectly. Without filters, we are blinded by its searing light. Language is such a filter. (Winter ix)

There have been many and varied narratives. From the early ones, the collective sought to distil the myths that conveyed acceptable meanings, and to re-establish a sense of order and stability where disruptive changes and new insights had become too unsettling. Meanwhile, the generation that provided the original representations of lived experience has gradually died out, other sources have come to light, and different perspectives have been explored, revealing a more complex relationship between wartime experience and its expression in English literature and culture.”

Aiming at re-working some of the myths of the Great War and re-considering the roles they have played in British culture, the International Conference *In Remembrance of the Great War: Re-Working Myths* was fortunate to draw a number of researchers that were quite conscientious. Two of the scholars who actively participated in the Conference have in the meantime published their own papers, six others could not elaborate on their respective contributions in time for the current volume. Deadlines being as merciless as we all know they are, we regret that this was the case. And as the centenary of the Great War draws to a close, completing its long cycle of international commemorations, the editors consider it opportune for this issue to be published.

The present volume is meant to be a testament to the Conference and its quality. This number of *Anglo Saxonica* is necessarily indebted, above all, to its contributors.

The diversity—as well as the intertextual coherence—of the different approaches (aimed at deliberately when the 2016 Conference was first designed) is definitely substantiated by the essays in this publication. They not only explore some of the topics raised by the diverse re-readings and re-writings of War myths, but also reflect on the roles these have played and continue to play in British culture. The collection emphasizes a fabric

of complex relationships between wartime experience and its re-cycled variations as successive generations have made use of the past. By offering the dialogues here established among contributors from six different backgrounds (England, France, Germany, Portugal, Scotland, Spain), the editors hope to kindle the readers' curiosity and invite further enquiries.

The emotional links between past and present, the myths of the Great War, the relations between memory and history or the significance of remembrance for later generations have been among frequently addressed, often polemically debated questions in cultural and literary history.

In "Against Oblivion. Remembrance, Memory and Myth in Julian Barnes's 'Evermore' (1995)", Luísa Maria Flora builds on Jay Winter's research into sites of memory, to argue that the myth of war—as indisputably established by Fussell's 1975 *The Great War and Modern Memory* and reprocessed by recent (and not so recent) poetry and fiction—must be re-examined, both through the arguments of scholars such as Winter and Lynne Hanley and through contemporary revisionist approaches to Great War history. In "Evermore", the resistance against death and oblivion represented by Miss Moss, the story's protagonist, as well as the vital issue of any unattainable persistence of war memories are reminders of the fact that, no matter how solid the sites of memory may seem to be, oblivion will of necessity be everybody's destiny. The short story is read as a thought-provoking vindication of the role of literature and literature's imaginable meaning as an ultimate site of memory.

If Miss Moss's obsession represents one example of the lasting traumatic effect of the Great War on individuals and families away from the front, Randall Stevenson's essay, "What the Soldier Said: Silence, (Bad) Language and the Great War", addresses aspects of "silence" and "silencing" in the way war experience could, or could not, be communicated. Faced with severe censorship and propaganda at home, soldiers often relied on reporting their experience "directly, in their own voice". To no avail. As the author explains, what the soldiers could *not* say was channelled into the kind of language, "hoarse oaths", considered blasphemous and obscene. It constituted an essential part of the soldiers' "self-protection against the terrible assaults of reality". Ignoring "what the soldier said" in written accounts is represented as a central omission in studies concerning the

Great War. To quote the author, “Recollection of hoarse oaths offers twenty-first century readers a crucial addition even to the best of written history and literature in which the Great War is preserved”.

Gilles Couderc’s contribution to these selected essays brings another innovative dimension to the topics represented in the volume. In “Bliss and Britten: Building up Wilfred Owen as Myth”, the author examines two distinct musical compositions on the First World War—Arthur Bliss’s 1930 choral symphony *Morning Heroes* and Benjamin Britten’s 1962 *War Requiem*—and how the composers had different purposes in mind when integrating their respective visions of the poet and his work. By detailing the musical and dramatic characteristics of each *opus*, Couderc explains how Bliss created *Morning Heroes* “worthy of Homeric fame and universal homage” in vindication of his dead brother and comrades, while at the same time celebrating “the heroism of the fallen and the unfallen”. In likewise manner, the author shows how Britten’s *Requiem*, which stands to this day as an indictment of War, undeniably established Owen as a myth. Britten’s experience with war began in the aftermath of World War I, was reinforced by his witnessing the destruction and consequences of World War II, and included the Cold War with its nuclear threat. Against this background, Britten’s re-working of Owen in his 1962 *opus* can already be considered a re-cycling process by a generation that had not served in the Great War.

This brings us to another iconic literary and cultural presence of the First World War, which is the study object of Teresa Gibert’s “Revisiting John McCrae’s ‘In Flanders Fields’ (1915)”. Gibert focuses on how the tremendously popular war poem performed “an important consolatory and healing function in the immediate aftermath” of the Great War, making a long-lasting impression on Canada’s collective memory. The essay provides a compelling panoramic view of how successive generations of Canadian writers and artists have sensibly re-worked or alluded to “In Flanders Fields” in innovative and intertextual ways, either to support or to challenge some of the myths of the war. Its canonical status has also led to its misuse for pro-war propaganda. The fame of Canada’s best-known poem spread worldwide when its symbol, the poppy, became universally recognised as an emblem of war remembrance. However much imbued with public meaning associated with a specific event in History, such symbols offer

a vast space for personal memories. There are, though, other memory deposits, such as autobiographies, that aim to keep historical memories alive and try to convey to later generations what it had meant to live through war.

In “Seeking Freedom and Finding War: A Case Study of Two Pacifists, Vera Brittain and Dora Russell” Michaela Schwarz S.G. Henriques reflects on two well-known pacifists who were born less than half a year apart, and whose Edwardian middle-class upbringing and access to university education would suggest that their dedication to women’s rights and questions of peace followed the same or similar agendas. Of both, Vera Brittain is the better-known campaigner because her bestseller *Testament of Youth* continues in print and has been adapted to different media. In either case, key experiences during the Great War were invoked to explain the roots of their pacifist attitudes. By looking at how each tried, in their various (autobiographical) narratives, to make sense of that experience and act accordingly, this essay intends to show how varied and personal the way to peace can be, and hence how hard it may always be for peace-minded people to achieve collectively what most people desired in 1918: No More War.

The nature of film representation of the Great War is the main objective of the last essay in this collection. In “From Court-Martial to Carnival: Film’s Recreation of the Great War Fifty Years on”, Anthony Barker focuses on four films—Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory* (1957), Joseph Losey’s *King and Country* (1964), Richard Attenborough’s *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969) and Dalton Trumbo’s *Johnny Got his Gun* (1971). Their actual conditions of creation and their particular production values are considered. During a period that privileged neutralist positions in documentary treatments of the conflict, these films convey leftist representations of the war, building one prevailing case: the war had abetted the muddying of the actual realities of class struggle. Each director presents his own distinctive mode of dealing with the realities of war on film. Circumstances of (unjust) death as the result of either court-Martial procedures and consequent sentences, or of the terribly harsh conditions common soldiers had to endure are described; the futile stupidity of the whole mission is particularly emphasised. “As the Great War passes from living memory and memorial into the history books, it will be harder to

retain the anger and frustration that its participants and their immediate children felt so keenly about the first technologized and industrialized war. The evidence would seem to suggest that anger and indignation have about the same life-span as a man.”

This volume closes with an interview by Paula Campos Fernández with David Leighton, nephew of the British poet Roland Leighton, which includes reflections on the Great War and the poetry of that period, as well as on the “need to remember how easily disagreements can lead to violence that goes for beyond any sensible resolution of cultural and economic conflict”.

In remembrance of the Great War, we trust that this volume will be a worthwhile opportunity for our readers to travel to less-known sites.

The Editors

Luísa Maria Flora,
Michaela Schwarz S.G. Henriques,
Randall Stevenson
July 2018

Works Cited

Winter, Jay. “Introduction.” *The Great War and Modern Memory*, by Paul Fussell, OUP, 2013, pp. ix-xiv.