Unrelenting Sadness – War Memorials as places sustaining the memories of loss from the Great War

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Proceedings of:
In a speech at Horsham on 31 July 1914, the Opposition Leader and soon to be Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, committed Australia to help the Mother Country ‘... to our last man and our last shilling’. He also noted that Europe was potentially about to be ‘... convulsed in the greatest war of any time’ (The Age, 1 August 1914:14). Sadly he would be proved correct. At its conclusion in November 1918, the Great War - as it became known – though not for its victories, but for its unprecedented magnitude, in terms of the number of combatants, in the brutal nature of the conflict and in the carnage and loss of life that resulted. For people living at that time the title expressed this sad reality in brutal simplicity. The physical reality and the psychological impact were immense and extended across the globe.

The Great War sits within a period termed the ‘first memory boom’, from the 1850s to the 1920s, when the memorialisation of the common man and the life of the common people begins to intersect with that of the ‘nation’ (Winter 2006). The most obvious examples of this are in the monuments to wars of that time - the Crimean War, the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War. But perhaps it is the Great War that has most come to symbolise the connection, and enormity, of individual loss inextricably tied to a national struggle.

Across the world, the impact of the Great War found expression across the landscape of so many countries through the construction of war memorials in a multitude of forms - artistic, symbolic, civic and utilitarian. Perhaps the most lasting expression of the war was shown in the construction of hundreds of thousands of graves in countless cemeteries laid out over the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East. Today these are tranquil and serene places, where row upon perfect row of headstones have created, literally, cities of the dead.

For Australia and New Zealand, the tyranny of distance in sending men to fight and die so far away from their homes was expressed eloquently on the New Zealand memorial near Ypres in Belgium - ‘From the Uttermost Ends of the Earth’. Perhaps it was our geography that brought
even greater poignancy to the creation of memorials in cities, towns and rural communities (Ziino 2007:4). One mother mourned after her son, John Fothergill of Collingwood, died at the Gallipoli Landings on 25 April 1915: ‘If only I could see your grave I would die happy’ (Inglis 2005: 270). For so many Australians, this was the reality, that they would never be able to visit the grave of a lost husband, son, brother or sweetheart. Ironically Fothergill has no known grave and is commemorated on the Lone Pine Memorial at Gallipoli.

Thus war memorials became the repositories of memory, places that offered a tangible connection to a real grave or commemorative inscription far away. But they became more than that; they offered a collective as well as personal response to the loss felt across the nation. And memorials come to provide some comfort in that collective mourning, a physical place that was associated with a shared loss across entire communities.

And in Australia, there was another powerful force behind the creation of war memorials. Throughout the Great War, Australia’s army was made up entirely of volunteers. In fact the Australian Imperial Force was specifically created to allow volunteers to enlist and serve overseas. So many of the war memorials and honour boards that were crafted and built around the country listed those volunteers who served, not just those who died. This may be a reason why Australia, in comparison, produced so many memorials and why unveiling ceremonies and commemoration services, especially on Anzac Day and Armistice Day were so well attended (Luckins 2004: 146).

In many communities a simple honour board would often be crafted listing the names of those who served and died. The local council, school, church and even businesses would sponsor such memorials, but always in conjunction with the families of soldiers. The most basic would list the names with little fanfare, perhaps painted lettering on a wooden board, headed with the phrase ‘Roll of Honour’ and sometime more patriotically ‘For God, King and Empire’.
The honour board in the Mechanics Institute in Little River, north of Avalon in Victoria, is a good example. It has 39 names listed, twelve of whom are listed as being killed – 30 per cent. For a farming community of only 300, such losses would have been felt deeply. The list also includes one nurse – Sister Catherine ‘Kit’ McNaughton – who served in Lemnos, France and Britain. When she died in 1953, a guard of honour at the cemetery was formed by local nurses in Werribee. Nearly 40 years on, her service had still not been forgotten (Atkins et al 2014:160).

Other honour boards were more ornate, with carved surrounds and motifs including flowers, gum leaves, scrolls, columns, the army’s rising sun badge, or symbols of peace, nationhood and empire. Sometimes the Australian flag and Union Jack would be painted on. In Tasmania, Ellen Nora ‘Nellie’ Payne, a gifted woodcarver trained in England, came to epitomise the quiet beauty of these honour boards with the creation of some truly beautiful pieces in her distinctive style. Some honour boards were created in stone and marble, often those in churches or for larger organisations able to afford the cost. Major post offices around Australia often bear such memorials, listing their staff members who had ‘done their bit’.

Left: The Little River Roll of Honour, (in Atkins et al, Remembrance: 100 Years, 100 Memorials, 100 Australian Stories)
In Geranium, South Australia, a small town on the edge of the Mallee district first established in 1908, the local honour board tells two stories – one of the men who enlisted and served, but also of the Griffen brothers. Jack and Bert came to Geranium to make a living building homes and water tanks. Bert’s handiwork is still seen across the town, especially the hand-cut metal lettering on the church and the arch over Soldiers Memorial Park; but perhaps none more poignantly than in the copper soldier’s name plates he made and screwed onto the simple wooden honour board. It is headed, ‘GERANIUM BOYS WHO ANSWERED THE CALL’. For Bert, this was his way of honouring two older brothers, Clem and Reg, who never returned from the Western Front (Atkins et al 2014:122). Geranium only has 60 residents today, but its links to the Great War are still powerful.

The most ubiquitous forms of memorials raised in Australia after the Great War were obelisks and statues raised on a column or pedestal. The Norwood Primary School in Adelaide is a good
example, with a simple white obelisk standing 5 metres tall. But the inscription in marble tells a
deeper story behind the memorial, one of local communities seeking to have some permanent
commemoration, but in their own way: ‘IN MEMORY OF THE BRAVE LADS WHO
ATTENDED THIS SCHOOL AND DIED FOR LIBERTY AND COUNTRY IN THE GREAT WAR
1914-1918. ERECTED BY THE CHILDREN OF NORWOOD SCHOOL AND BUILT WITH
THEIR OWN HANDS.’ This was the headmaster’s idea, but the children raised all the funds as
well as building it. The impact of the war would have been very raw for the school’s community
for many years. The Roll of Honour lists over 500 old scholars who enlisted during the war, with
over 100 paying the ultimate price.

Above: The Norwood Primary School memorial (John Wadsley)

The Winton War Memorial in central Queensland is a three metre high dark grey granite obelisk,
originally constructed in 1926 to commemorate 518 local men and women who served. Two of a
those men played a key role at the battle of Beersheba in October 1917, which helped force the
Turkish forces out of Palestine. They were Troopers Alfred Healey and Thomas O’Leary of the
4th Light Horse. Both men won the Military Medal for their bravery during that famous charge.
However, O’Leary ended up in an unmarked pauper’s grave in Townsville, almost forgotten
until local researchers using the Winton Roll of Honour tracked his final resting place down.

Without these memorials, individual stories would be incomplete and other connections lost for all time.

Statues of soldiers, or ‘digger statues’ as they were often know, are found all across Australia. Although Queensland seems to have the greatest number in comparison to other forms of memorial. In Cairns, the Sailors and Soldiers War Memorial is in the style of a column surmounted by a clock and on top of that, a statue. Originally the memorial had a 4-faced electric clock; however for some reason the clock went missing, so clock dials have since been painted to represent 4.28am, the time of the original landing at Gallipoli. The memorial cost over £2,000 and was one of the most expensive built in Queensland. It crossed the divide between a traditional monument and something with a more utilitarian purpose, albeit there was much debate at the time about the decision to install a non-striking clock because of space constraints.

Left: Soldier statue on the Latrobe War Memorial (Australian War Memorial, H17734)
The matter of creating ‘useful’ memorials, rather than merely a symbolic gesture, gained traction following the Great War. Many communities debated the suitability of having a memorial as a public building or facility. Some towns were vehemently opposed to such a concept, such as at Ariah Park in the NSW Riverina district and a soldier statue on a pedestal was built. But in Maryborough Queensland, people boycotted the laying of the foundation stone for the local war memorial, because they considered such objects were ‘relics of barbarism’ (Inglis 2005:139). The varied response to this debate by communities across Australia have given us a kaleidoscope of symbolic monuments and public buildings dedicated to service and sacrifice in the Great War. Most are simple in their design and message; others designed to inspire, especially the large state memorials, such as the Anzac Memorial in Hyde Park, Sydney. Officially opened in 1934, it is not only a remarkable piece of commemorative architecture in the Art Deco style, but is also considered by many to be a work of art in its own right. But it may not have been; there was a long and drawn out fight by the RSL who wanted the state memorial to be designed as their new headquarters building.

And of course, there were the thousands of memorials to individual soldiers; often seen as a brass plaque or dedication on a stained glass window in the local church, sometime a soldier’s name inscribed on a family grave, or perhaps a framed photograph at the local RSL club. These had specific significance to the families, but they added to the way in which Great War commemorations permeated Australian society in so many ways.

War Memorials in Australia also provided an egalitarian response to war service. A hallmark of the myriad war cemeteries of the Great War is the equality of treatment given to those buried, no matter what rank or social standing. This would also become the hallmark of so many war memorials, and in particular the commemorative avenues that grew up, literally, across Australia, where individual trees commemorated specific soldiers.
Commemorative avenues – often termed avenues of honour based on enlistment or memorial avenues for those who died - were often planted in places of prominence in townships or rural areas and became a source of much pride for these communities. These avenues were, at first, an expression of the sense of patriotism as local men went away to war. Yet increasingly as the war progressed they became an expression of the grief felt by communities as an outcome of death and injury caused by war.

Importantly, memorial avenues also provided a tangible and accessible place for families, friends and colleagues to come and pay homage to a loved one who had died, compensating in part for the actual grave that most people would never be able to see. They were almost seen as ‘surrogate gravesites’.

The concept of a tree as a living memorial for a soldier rather than a stone or brick marker seems to have been an important and defining element for many communities. The notion may have been that a living tree represented the youth and vitality of a loved one, albeit that the tree would eventually die. There was also some symbolism in the choice of tree species planted, based on foliage colour, traditions, or even derived from classical history. However, whatever tree was chosen, it represented something of importance to the particular community at that time.

The planting of these avenues around Australia should also be seen as a populist and vernacular response to the tragic consequences of the Great War with at least 400 planted following the Great War. Stirling, just south of Adelaide, can possibly lay claim to having Australia’s first avenue, consisting of 43 oak and 18 birch trees, planted in September 1915, just after the August Offensive at Gallipoli. Victoria had, by far, the greatest number of avenues - approximately 250; due in no small part to the impact of the Ballarat Avenue of Honour which was created over two years from June 1917 and eventually contained some 3,800 trees over 23 kilometres. Today it
remains as Australia’s longest commemorative avenue of the Great War and possibly the longest surviving such avenue in the world. Tasmania had at least 50 avenues, although New South Wales had a much smaller number given its population, perhaps, only 40 or 50.
Avenues have also been identified in the United Kingdom, Canada, the USA and New Zealand. Germany planted memorial groves, while Italy had ‘Parks of Remembrance’. At Turin, a park was planted in 1925, with over 4,700 trees each named for a soldier who died.

The War Memorial at Lawson in the Blue Mountains has a small arch set with panels listing 27 locals who enlisted from the area, including 10 who died. Designed by the war veteran and architect Major General Sir Charles Rosenthal, the arch acts as a formal entry to the ‘Honour Gardens’ with an avenue of trees leading out behind the memorial. In September 1918, it was reported, ‘When completed, the Avenue will form a permanent reminder of those heroes who sacrificed all for their country, and as the trees grow, future residents of Lawson will see before them, written in Nature's own handwriting, the memorial of their soldiers and townsmen who wrote such a brilliant page in the history of the world. (The Blue Mountain Echo, 27 September 1918:3). This exemplified the life of a tree representing the life of a soldier and perhaps a local boy whose life was cut short.
In Hobart on 3 August 1918, nearly one quarter of the city’s population, approximately 8,000 people, turned out for the planting of trees in the Soldiers Memorial Avenue on the Queens Domain. It was reported, ‘At every tree there were touching incidents … along the winding and undulating course of the avenue little knots remained till dusk like groups of pilgrims.’ The Chief Justice, Sir Herbert Nicholls, led the commemoration, noting that, ‘as the trees to be planted gradually grow up perpetuating the memory of the men who were once like strong young trees, they will remind us of those heroic patriots, whose bones are now lying on foreign shores.’ (The Mercury, 5 August 1918:2). Once again, trees symbolising the life of a soldier, and referencing the distance separating families from the battlefields.

Above: The Soldiers Memorial Avenue, Queens Domain Hobart c.1920s (Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office)

As with honour boards, the trees and plaques along memorial avenues each have their own story to tell. Private Walter Alfred Hurst is commemorated at Tree #147 on the Soldiers Memorial Avenue in Hobart. Walter enlisted late in the war in December 1917. He joined the 12th Battalion in April 1918. But his war would be short, being killed in action on 18
September 1918 at Jeancourt in France. Walter was the youngest son of James and Lavinia, one of their 10 children. The family was deeply affected by the death of Walter and a family tradition developed to reflect that. Every year on Anzac Eve, the family would gather at 12 Arthur St, each bringing a flower. Lavinia would then make this into a wreath to be placed at the tree on Anzac Day. ‘Jeancourt’ became part of a niece’s name and as in many families, his name was also preserved in subsequent generations. Their sense of loss was also reflected in the care and attention they paid to the tree on the Domain.

The Hurst family lived in Arthur Street, North Hobart. This part of the city was hard hit by war. Some 24 men, commemorated on the Memorial Avenue, lived in the immediate vicinity of Arthur Street. All their families would have known each other and suffered, not only their own devastating loss, but the collective loss of all those young men. A generation of women lost their fathers, brothers, husbands, cousins and sweethearts. For the latter, the pain was often so great they never married.

Another of those North Hobart families was the Halls. A living descendant, Graham Hughes, recalled his mother telling him how she and other members of her family had to walk from their home in North Hobart to the Domain carrying containers of water. They were trying to keep alive trees dedicated to brothers Eric and Norman. Norman was killed at the age of 23 near Pozieres in France in August 1916, after earlier surviving Gallipoli. His brother, Eric was killed at Broodseinde Ridge in Belgium aged 22 years in October 1917. Graham thought how his grandmother, Emily, must have been so distraught on receiving the news of the death of Norman and then a year later a message would have arrived telling her of the death of Eric. ‘I’m sure it was enough to have broken her heart.’ These two young men had already lost their father, John ‘Joker’ Hall, who was drowned tragically on the Derwent River in March 1897.
The sitting room in Graham’s grandmother’s house was a virtual shrine to Norman and Eric; there were photographs of the brothers, their framed medals, a photograph of the troopship ‘Themistocles’, the Hobart Honour Roll and other photographs of the two with their mates and numerous books and magazines on the Great War. There was also a framed citation from Eric’s Sergeant-Major detailing his death. In the lounge room was a framed satin tapestry, which had the words ‘Souvenir of Egypt 1915 – To Mother with love Norman’. After Emily died in 1965, numerous cards, letters and photographs, including diaries and other memorabilia of Eric’s and Norman’s were found in the attic of her North Hobart home.

A wife and mother had lost everything, but those memorial trees helped sustain her through the dark times. And for the family today, they still honour those boys by ensuring the trees on the Avenue are well-cared for. And memories of a family home turned shrine are as strong now as ever.

War memorials exhibit a number of layers in the heritage values they represent. The most obvious is the physical presence of the memorial itself, its design, materials and its state of preservation. At a broader level, the civic space or landscape that has been created by the memorial represents something important from a heritage perspective – a place or space that is used, often for activity not related to the memorial, but yet the memorial is always there, quietly reminding people what has gone before. There is also a layer of historical commentary and imagery – official events, newspaper articles, service records of the soldiers, seamen and nurses commemorated, private letters and photographs in family collections - which describes the development of these places over time and the people they represent. And to this can sometimes be added a whole suite of popular iconography in the form of art works, souvenirs and collectables – as has occurred with some of our more significant civic memorials, such as the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne. At the
same time there is a layer of more intangible values, the continuing acts of private and public mourning, and an unstated belief in the minds of many people that these places ‘matter’.

Article 24 of the *Burra Charter* states: ‘*Significant associations between people and a place should be respected, retained and not obscured.*’ This lies at the heart of why war memorials are so important to communities. They are the portal by which the individual memory and the collective memory of war can be accessed, maintained and understood.

During the Centenary of Anzac, we have been overwhelmed with the Gallipoli story, the ill-fated campaign and the gallant defence against the odds. But this hides the bitter truth for families across Australia and what they were about to endure in the years ahead. The year 1916 would see the AIF begin its fight in France, first at the debacle of Fromelles and then the unremitting fighting around Pozières and Mouquet Farm. But it was 1917 that would be the black year for the AIF and the families back home. This year would see so many men die. The war memorials would need a lot more space to hold all the names of those who died. Finally in 1918, the end was in sight, and the AIF played an important role in stopping the last desperate German offensive and the final ‘Hundred Days’ campaign.

With the Armistice in November 1918 the men could come home, although it would take a year before they had all returned. By then the impetus to build war memorials had grown to almost a fever pitch. Every community was raising money to provide a form of remembrance on a main street or park, in the town hall or at the local school. This would go on into the 1930s. In fact, Australia’s major memorial to the losses on the Western Front - the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux in France – was not completed until July 1938, just a year before the world was engulfed in another global conflict.
Today all those memorials across Australia have become fixed in our landscape, a permanent reminder of the losses caused by the Great War and the unrelenting sadness that still permeates our society.
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