Remembrance in Perpetuity: the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

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Respect for fallen servicemen is a relatively new phenomenon and, shocking though it might now seem, public opinion of the Army in the pre-Crimean era was low. Wellington described his men with contempt: 'Our Army is composed of the scum of the earth – the mere scum of the earth.' Ordinary soldiers were buried in mass graves and usually only officers were accorded dignity in death and might be commemorated by a headstone or memorial if the regiment or family were prepared to fund it. A small number of senior officers were embalmed, or pickled in brandy, and brought back to the United Kingdom for burial at home. This had as much to do with expediency and hygiene; disease was an ever present threat to the armed forces and up to the Great War more men died of disease than were killed in battles.

Some garrison or cantonment cemeteries have become associated with battles of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries and this has led people to assume they are war cemeteries, when they are not. It was not until the Boer War, when for the first time volunteers were recruited to the Armed Forces, that the whole question of burial of the dead became an issue in the public's mind. No longer was it acceptable to bury soldiers in mass graves. The families and the public demanded more respect.

During the Second Boer War (1899-1902) the Royal Engineers were tasked with recording the location of all British Military graves of the war. In all there were some 25,000 burials in 356 cemeteries. It was an enormous task to care for so

many sites and without proper funding and an organisation to oversee the work the cemeteries soon fell into disrepair.

In 1914 everything changed. The Great War resulted in deaths on a hitherto unimagined scale. The result was the biggest outpouring of public grief ever witnessed and resulted in a major public arts programme in Britain and the founding in May 1917 of one of the most remarkable organisations of the twentieth century, the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission. Several things happened simultaneously. First, the growing awareness amongst the public since the South African wars that something had to be done about the disposal of the Army's dead was compounded with disquiet over the dilapidated state of the war cemeteries in the Transvaal. Secondly the Great War was fought on land not thousands of miles away on a different continent but at its closest just tens of miles from home in France and Belgium. People felt much closer to the battles than they had done in the past. Thirdly, and probably most significantly, this was the largest volunteer army led into battle in British military history.

Throughout the First World War, military burials were the responsibility of the Army in the field. In the less dangerous areas they would be undertaken by burial parties made up of men from pioneer or labour units under the direction of an appointed burial officer and an army chaplain. Most of these burials would be made in reasonably well-established burial grounds, often attached to dressing stations, casualty clearing stations or field hospitals. The grave would be marked with a wooden cross bearing the casualty's details and a careful note made of the position of the burial.

In times of advance or heavy fighting, field burials could not be so easily regulated. Frequently, they were carried out in isolated positions by front line troops in haste, often under cover of night and under fire. Again, the grave would be marked with a peg or, if none was available, with a written note placed inside

a tin or bottle that was pushed down into the grave. The exact position of the burial would be noted with the aid of a large-scale map.

The man with the vision to create permanent resting places for the dead of the Great War was Sir Fabian Ware (Fig 1). Neither a soldier nor a politician, Ware devoted his life from 1914 to his death in 1949 to the commemoration of the Commonwealth war dead. Prior to the war, Ware had enjoyed a successful career in education and newspapers in both South Africa and Britain. Too old to fight, in 1914 he volunteered to command a fleet of volunteer drivers for the Red Cross in France. One of his jobs was to take the wounded and stragglers to field hospitals and it was on these journeys that he and his men became aware of the scattered nature of so many of the burials.

Fig 1. Ó CWGC 1

As the war progressed so his work to record the sites of all these burials became officially recognised and its value was appreciated by the higher echelons of the Army. Over the course of the next two years, Ware's unit became recognised by the Army and praised by Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig, as the unit responsible for the locating, recording, photographing and care of soldiers' graves in France and Belgium. So successful was their work and of such value to the morale of the soldiers in the field and to the relatives back home that the work was extended to places far away from Britain: in Palestine, in Mesopotamia (Iraq), in the Dardanelles and in Italy.

After the Armistice, the systematic job of clearing the battlefields of human remains began. This was undertaken by special units formed within the Army, called Graves Concentration Units (Fig 2). Theirs was a grim but vital task. Barely half the dead on the Western Front had been given a proper burial in a designated military cemetery and the landscape was strewn with hundreds of hastily made soldiers' cemeteries which were often little more than clusters of graves beside a road or canal.

Fig 2. Ó CWGC 1

As the work to clear the battlefields progressed, so Ware's vision of commemoration for the fallen began to be realised. He brought together a powerful group of experts in various fields, including Sir Edwin Lutyens, Reginald Blomfield and Herbert Baker, who were appointed leading architects on the Western Front, with Sir Robert Lorimer responsible for Italy and Greece and Sir John James Burnet working further afield in Palestine and Gallipoli. Gertrude Jekyll and Arthur Hill, Assistant Director at Kew Gardens, amongst others advised on horticulture, while Sir William Garstin, the engineer of the Aswan Dam, was also a Commissioner. He had lost a son in the early years of the Great War, as had Rudyard Kipling who was appointed literary adviser to the Commission. Kipling's influence is still felt in the language of mourning engraved on the Commission's headstones and memorials. It was Kipling who chose the expression for Lutyens' great Stone of Remembrance: 'Their Name Liveth For Evermore', and for the headstone of the soldiers who could not be identified: 'Known Unto God'.

The Commission worked fast. By February 1921 they had responsibility for 2,400 cemeteries on the Western Front (Fig 3) alone but it was not until the summer of 1938 that the last of the Commission's First World War Memorial was unveiled – Thiepval on the Somme that commemorates 72,000 men who died but whose bodies were never found. Less than eighteen months later the world was at war once again and the Commission had to extend its work to include new and far flung countries as well as the 67,000 civilian dead which Churchill asked them to commemorate. These names are in a book of Remembrance in St George's Chapel in Westminster Abbey.

Fig 3 Tyne Cot, Belgium. Ó Julie Summers

Today the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is responsible for 23,000 burial sites in 150 countries but by far the largest concentration of its cemeteries and burial grounds are to be found in the United Kingdom, some 12,000 in total. Why are they here? The answer is simple: many of the men buried in this country had been brought back to hospital in the UK and died of wounds or disease. Some died in training accidents, others in the routine of Army life. Qualification for burial in an Imperial War Graves Cemetery after the First World War was that the man or woman had been a member of the armed services between 4 August 1914 and 31 August 1921. The reason why the First World War period extends to 31 August 1921 for Commission purposes is that the 'Termination of the present war (Definition) Act' laid down that the war would officially end when an Order in Council under that Act declared the war ended. This duly occurred on 31 August 1921. As with the First World War, the cut off date for the Second World War for burials in Commission cemeteries was extended, this time to eighteen months after the end of hostilities.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission is charged with the care of its cemeteries and memorials in perpetuity. Many challenges face the horticultural and architectural experts including climate change, subsidence, storms, earthquakes and, of course, new wars. Since 2003 it has not been possible for the Commission to look after its cemeteries and memorials in Iraq and it is known that they are in a state of disrepair. In 2008 the Commission opened a book of Remembrance at their headquarters in Maidenhead that records the names of all those buried and commemorated in Iraq from the First and Second World Wars. The pages are turned regularly. However the Commission can afford to take a long view and in due course it would be possible to reconstruct the cemeteries and memorials from the plans and records that have been carefully kept. In this country the task of upkeep of the cemeteries and burial plots is a large one, since many are very small and maintenance is difficult. A small number of Commission burials are spread throughout Woodstock Cemetery, so that it does not have the appearance of a large CWGC cemetery such as one might see in Oxford (Botley) Cemetery (Fig 4) or in the burial plot in Kidlington Burial Ground. But each headstone is cared for and in the case of Woodstock the maintenance of the graves has been subcontracted by the Commission to children of the Marlborough School. Thus the link with the community is kept.

Fig 4. Ó Julie Summers