# Introduction

Years after the war, Vera Brittain recalled that in the weeks following the Armistice of 11 November 1918: 'I could not remain blind to the hectic reactions of my generation, frantically dancing night after night in the Grafton Galleries, while pictures of the Canadian soldiers' wartime agony hung accusingly on the walls.' A London exhibition intended to illustrate the heroic sacrifice of imperial troops had become, at night, the backdrop to a frenetic celebration of survival and victory. The older generation, Brittain observed, 'held up outraged hands in horror at such sacrilege, not understanding the reckless sense of combined release and anti-climax which set my contemporaries, who had lived a lifetime of love and toil and suffering and yet were only in their early twenties, dancing in the vain hope of recapturing their lost youth that the War had stolen'.[1] As Brittain instinctively saw in the disjunction between the wartime agony on display, the euphoric desperation of the dancing young, and the horrified outrage of others, reactions to war and to images of it could not be curbed or controlled. These depictions of the conflict had been exhibited with one purpose, but with the end of the war their context, and thus their meaning, changed. What, then, did it mean to display war, both during the conflict and afterwards? What motivated people to exhibit violence? How did those displayed objects and images contribute to the ways in which people understood war's nature and meaning?

This book examines a wide range of representations of the First World War in Britain and two of its Dominions, Canada and Australia. It particularly focuses on the design of national or imperial war museums, and the collection and display within them of artefacts and objects associated with the war, between 1914 and 1942. How groups curated and exhibited war for an audience of their countrymen and women is an essential part of the story of how different societies constructed images and thus conceptions of war during and after the conflict of 1914–18.

[1] Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* (London: Penguin, 2005 (1933)), 468–9.

Stephen Greenblatt has given us a useful set of terms to help probe the power of such museums to convincingly frame and disseminate images of war. Museums, he tells us, show us objects that carry 'resonance' or 'wonder', and sometimes both.

> By *resonance* I mean the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand. By *wonder* I mean the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention.[2]

These terms help us to understand the affective power of museums to convey messages and images of war. In viewing uniforms stained with mud and torn by barbed wire, or objects damaged by bullets or shellfire, audiences imagined or emotively connected with the 'complex, dynamic' forces of the war itself: its apparent horror, pathos, excitement. *Resonance*. In gazing upon a new, frightening technology, like the tank or the *Minenwerfer*, or a particularly disorienting or stirring artwork or photograph, crowds were stopped in their tracks, paying 'an exalted attention' to the object's arresting uniqueness. *Wonder*. Wartime and post-war exhibitions and museum displays simultaneously elicited both these responses; therein lay their particular power. Exhibition organisers worked to create such responses for a number of purposes, and this book explores both these purposes and the ways in which museum and exhibition displays supported or undermined them. It employs a comparative framework; one in which the three connected cases within the British Empire highlight the different political contexts and configurations of personalities whose work was decisive in shaping three national collecting and exhibiting projects, and three museums of the First World War in London, Ottawa, and Canberra.

This effort began early in the war. It was only with the First World War that such concerted attempts to collect and exhibit comprehensive records of the war began to occur at a national – and imperial – level. Officially sponsored bodies commissioned war art, war photographs, films, and models, as well as collecting war trophies and ephemera. That is, soldiers and military authorities collected military objects taken from the enemy as 'trophies' according to the accepted military procedure for trophy capture, such as artillery pieces and regimental badges. The

[2] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and Wonder' in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1991), 42.

capture and display of such objects as booty and symbols of victoriously emasculating the enemy was a practice ancient in origin; during the First World War, complex bureaucracies arose to manage it.[3] 'Ephemeral' objects – small items related to the war experience such as postcards, placards, and soldier-produced trench art – were also collected as tangible traces of soldiers' activities in foreign regions.

These objects and representations reflected both the power of the modern state, and the scale and novelty of the war. Participants perceived this 'Great' war – a term coined as early as 1915 – as unlike anything seen previously. Recording and remembering the war seemed not only desirable, but essential. Individual soldiers collected objects as witnesses of their own war experience. Combatant nations commissioned officers to write histories, collect artefacts, and organise artists and photographers to record the conflict. Historical units formed to minutely document all facets of the conflict, thereby transforming the event into history whilst it was still occurring.[4] For nations like Canada and, even more so, Australia, this impulse to amass, record, and remember became an integral part of the founding myth of the country.

These efforts at collecting and recording the experiences of the nation at war reached their logical conclusion in the staging of numerous wartime exhibitions and the foundation of museums dedicated to representing and commemorating the war in Britain, Canada, and Australia. War museums as we would now describe them did not exist in these three national contexts in 1914: exhibiting war objects was largely limited to the display of arms in specialised armoury collections according to a nineteenth-century desire to classify technology and

[3] Although armies had traditions of trophy-taking dating back to antiquity, and entrepreneurs had, for example, taken and exhibited photographs of war from the mid-nineteenth century, this comprehensive, centralised state effort was new – and particularly striking in its novelty given that these schemes were begun when the outcome of the war was by no means certain.

[4] This is of course not to say that such activities were unknown in earlier conflicts, merely that this (like many other things about the Great War) was more marked, and more organised. For example, Britain, Canada, and Australia all established official historical units during the war, connected with or as a part of their armed forces. Some works describing this are Anne-Marie Condé, 'Capturing the Records of War: Collecting at the Mitchell Library and Australian War Memorial' *Australian Historical Studies* 125 (2005): 134–52; Anne-Marie Condé, 'John Treloar, Official War Art and the Australian War Memorial' *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 53 (2007): 451–64; Tim Cook, 'Immortalising the Canadian Soldier: Lord Beaverbrook and the Canadian War Records Office in the First World War' in Briton C. Busch (ed.), *Canada and the Great War: Western Front Association Papers* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

celebrate scientific progress.[5] The Imperial War Museum (IWM) in Britain and the Australian War Museum (later Memorial) were founded in 1917, and opened as museums in 1920 and 1922, respectively. Canada likewise planned a war museum during the war, and after a hiatus in the 1920s and early 1930s, the vast materials and war trophies collected by the Canadians during the war were amalgamated with an older, but defunct, collection of militaria to create the Canadian War Museum, formally opening in 1942.

The story of collecting and exhibiting the war was not one of blunt state coercion. People, be they members of the armed forces or the general public, *wanted* to see images and objects which provided them with as authentic a connection to the war as possible. War relics in particular provided this sense of authenticity through proximity to the experience of war. 'Relics', a term broadly used, referred to objects which had been part of or physically touched by the war, as a relic of a saint is part of or has been touched by the saint. They possessed an aura of the sacred, and had been physical witnesses to the deeds, be they glorious or tragic, of British and Allied troops and their enemies. Direct contact – viewing them or touching them – created a sense of connection to the dramatic events of the war, and to friends, sweethearts, and family members at the front.

This volume examines parallel and connected histories, but also addresses divergences. For instance, one central question posed is why memories of the First World War diverge so greatly between Britain and their former settler colonies the British Dominions, despite their cultural, political, and institutional similarities. The shape and structure of each nation's war museums provide us with clues as to possible answers. Drawing on a range of documentary and visual materials located in Britain, Canada, Australia, and the United States, it analyses the historical development of exhibitions and museums of the war, and how they

[5] In Britain, these were the Royal Artillery Collections at Woolwich, the Royal United Services Institution in Whitehall, and the Armouries at the Tower of London. Gaynor Kavanagh, *Museums and the First World War: A Social History* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1994), 8, 19. In many ways, these reflected the nineteenth-century conceptualisation of the museum as an educational institution in which collected objects were to be displayed in an organised fashion according to categories of 'scientific' knowledge. In this sense, 'The wonders of technical and scientific accomplishments were put on view to be admired and to celebrate "progress".' Edward P. Alexander and Mary Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums*, 2nd edn. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 10. See also the discussion of the development of natural history museums in this manner in Susan Sheets-Pyenson, *Cathedrals of Science: The Development of Colonial Natural History Museums during the Late Nineteenth Century* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).

formed spaces in which official, academic, and popular representations of the emotionally charged violent past intersected. Initially, war exhibitions in all three countries acted both as propaganda and recruitment tools, and as sites where community groups searched for an 'authentic' connection to the experience of war. Popular memory, defined here as a broadly accepted account of the war's course and meaning, was developed in these dynamic spaces. In the interwar years, exhibitions of war became entangled with official mourning practices and the production of official histories within different imperial and nationalist narratives. Over time, these images were seen differently in Britain than they were in Canada and Australia, a contrast which has many sources. Reaction to war exhibitions was one of them.

Crucially, the processes of collecting and exhibiting the war created entrenched popular narratives of national birth through violence in Australia and Canada. A centralised approach to the exhibition of war in Canada, and an even more concentrated scheme in Australia, allowed officials to create a remarkably homogeneous and celebratory myth of the war. In Britain, a much more eclectic approach emerged, without a single guiding hand, giving representations of war a much more varied character. This work also demonstrates, contrary to contemporary narratives in both countries, that the Dominions' nascent nationalism was not extra-imperial: participation in the war was seen as gaining them the right to become equal partners in the British imperial project.[6] The positive Canadian and Australian embrace of a part in the British imperial and military tradition was at odds with the narrative developed over time in Britain of the war as a disastrous and, indeed, pointless caesura which permanently ruptured that tradition. This negative view yielded in Britain a reaction not against soldiers but against positive images of war presented in wartime and immediate post-war exhibitions. By employing a comparative approach, this book is able to question established assumptions in each nation about the impact of war on society, the relationship of national identity to the imperial project in the early twentieth century, and the ways in which myths of the past are created.

[6] Mark Sheftall discusses other cultural manifestations of the Dominions' 'collective memory of the national war experience . . . as a rite of passage in which the Dominions' costly contribution to Allied victory helped solidify their identity as nations, rather than colonies, loyal to, but not subordinate to, the British Motherland' in *Altered Memories of the Great War: Divergent Narratives of Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 5.

The representation of the First World War and the construction of collective or national memory has been the subject of a rich literature.[7] Studies have focused on the creation of war memorials and their place in individual nations' public imagination and civic landscape, such as Ken Inglis' study of the Australian case, Alex King's analysis of war memorials in Britain, Robert Shipley's work on Canada, or Antoine Prost's research on French memorials.[8] Further studies, like those of George Mosse or Nicholas Saunders, have focused on the effect of the quotidian, such as souvenirs, self-made 'trench art', and mass-produced household items in creating a particular idea and afterimage of the war.[9] Others have contemplated mourning practices, such as Adrian Gregory's analysis of Armistice Day in Britain, Joy Damousi's work on bereavement in Australia, or David Lloyd's work on British and Dominion pilgrimages and tourism to First World War battlefields from 1919 until the beginning of the Second World War.[10] Still others have written at great length on the impact of the war on art and literature, arguing for (Paul Fussell) or against (Jay Winter) the war as a cultural rupture with the past or a harbinger of cultural modernity.[11] All are concerned with history and

[7] Some works which offer analyses of the creation of national myths or group memories of the war include Daniel Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Dan Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005); and Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

[8] K. S. Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, 3rd edn. (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2008); Alex King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998); Robert Shipley, *To Mark Our Place: A History of Canadian War Memorials* (Toronto: NC Press, 1987); Antoine Prost, 'Memorials to the Dead' in Prost, *Republican Identities in War and Peace: Representations of France in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, trans. Jay Winter and Helen McPhail (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002). There is also considerable discussion of monuments and memorials in Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[9] George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Nicholas J. Saunders, *Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003).

[10] Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946* (Oxford and Providence, RI: Berg, 1994); Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada, 1919–1939* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998).

[11] Works focused on literary and artistic representations include: Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge

memory, and the creation of a particular popular memory of the conflict. By 'memory' I mean the sensation of a *proprietary, emotional connection to the past* and the community of the dead, buttressed by broadly accepted impressions of that past, as opposed to 'history', which requires the recitation of facts based on verifiable evidence.[12] Due to its emotional content, the popular memory of the past, and particularly of war, violence, and mass death, has powerful implications for future politics. The contours of war memory may shape a population's willingness or reluctance to go to war in the future.[13]

Each of the writers discussed above has written about remembrance and the production of a particular view of the past, but none before now has adopted a comparative perspective in studying the genesis of the *institutions* – the national and imperial museums – dedicated to preserving and actively disseminating narratives of the First World War.[14] This study

University Press, 1995); Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: Bodley Head, 1990); Kenneth E. Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-garde and the First World War, 1914–1925* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[12] This is obviously a very brief description made to distinguish the two terms for my purposes. History and memory do, of course, have a significant overlap. As Jay Winter puts it,

> History is memory seen through and criticised with the aid of documents of many kinds – written, aural, visual. Memory is history seen through affect. And since affect is subjective, it is difficult to examine the claims of memory in the same way as we examine the claims of history. History is a discipline. We learn and teach its rules and limits. Memory is a faculty. We live with it, and at times are sustained by it. Less fortunate are people overwhelmed by it. But this set of distinctions ought not to lead us to conclude, along with a number of French scholars from Halbwachs to Nora, that history and memory are set in isolation, each on its separate peak.

Jay Winter, 'The Performance of the Past: Memory, History, Identity' in Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winter (eds), *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 12. The Halbwachs and Nora pieces Winter refers to are: Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and Pierra Nora, 'Between Memory and History. Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations* 26 *Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory* (Spring 1989), 7–24. Pierre Nora coined the term 'site of memory' or 'Lieux de Mémoire' in Nora (ed.), *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1984–92).

[13] See Reinhart Koselleck's thesis that within a framework of historical modernity, past experience shapes future expectations and therefore the imaginative possibilities. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

[14] One partial exception to this is Keith Wilson (ed.), *Forging the Collective Memory: Governments and International Historians through Two World Wars* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996). This volume in part examines the debates about war guilt in the 1920s and 1930s, and looks at how state institutions shaped the debate, and thus their role in the creation of memories of the war. As Wilson notes in his Introduction, 'governments prefer to see the production of patriotic history . . . they try to ensure that anyone

offers a tripartite comparison of the development of such institutions as a means of analysing the formation of such memories: whose view of the war was represented in the museum, how the form of representation used altered the viewer's understanding of the war, and whether the museum was a location for narrating history, or rather, a locus of memory, or 'site of mourning'.[15] Comparison of the kind presented in this book is the only way to isolate the unique features of each case. It does not provide a comprehensive view of the entire British Empire or all of the Dominions, but the inclusion of three cases, instead of just two, eliminates the possibility that the differences observed are solely due to an historical aberration. Comparing these three cases makes clear the extent to which the ways in which the war was represented and remembered was a function of deliberate editorial action, rather than the organic result of the nature of the war itself. The apparently most egalitarian society of the three – Australia – had the most authoritarian pathway to the construction of a national sacred site, at which the sacrifice of those who died in the First World War has been visualised, honoured, mourned, and politicised.

This study makes these comparisons using a wide range of evidence: official histories and documentary sources, military and government reports and plans, correspondence, memoirs, newspaper reports, soldier newspapers, exhibition catalogues, posters, advertising material, objects such as weapons and personal effects, paintings, sculptures, dioramas, and photographs. It uses documents and contemporary accounts to reconstruct the intentions of the people who collected, commissioned, and created these representations. Further, it offers both textual and visual analysis of the representations of war created through these exhibitions and state-sponsored museums. Finally, where possible, it uses newspaper accounts, attendance figures, internal documents, and photographs of audiences interacting with the exhibitions themselves to make inferences about popular reactions to these displays.

granted (and "granted" is still the operative word) special access, or the status of "official" historian or editor of official documents, is a patriotic historian', and 'in the forging, or shaping, of the collective memory, the role of governments has always been greater than that of historians, and is likely to remain so'. Wilson (ed.), *Forging the Collective Memory*, 2. For further detail, see within this volume, Keith Hamilton, 'The Pursuit of "Enlightened Patriotism": The British Foreign Office and Historical Researchers during the Great War and Its Aftermath' in Wilson (ed.), *Forging the Collective Memory*, 192–229.

[15] I use the term as developed by Jay Winter in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Winter's usage encompasses specific physical locations imbued with cultural significance regarding the remembrance of the past and especially war and the dead – sites such as memorials and monuments, and cultural objects like war art and *images d'Epinal*.

This volume is organised in three parts. Part I considers grassroots and private exhibitions of the war from 1914 to 1917, and the gradual expansion of state involvement in collecting and displaying the conflict. 1917, as the crisis year of the war, prompted concerted state efforts to mobilise not only the political system and the economy, but also social and cultural life behind the war effort. Part II describes state-sponsored temporary exhibitions designed to encourage popular investment in the war, and then in celebrating victory, between 1917 and 1920. Part III examines the establishment of national and imperial war museums and the relationship of exhibiting violence to war memory between 1920, when the Imperial War Museum was officially opened, and 1942, which saw the belated inauguration of the Canadian War Museum.

In the first part, Chapter 1 addresses the search for the 'authentic' experience of war, analysing the first stages in collecting and exhibiting war trophies and representations of war in Britain, Canada, and Australia between 1914 and 1917. It examines the popularity of collecting among both soldiers and civilians, and traces the assertion of official control over possessing and displaying representations of war during this period. It argues that the war exhibition acted as both a propaganda tool and a recruitment tool during the war, and as a site where community groups searched for an authentic connection to the experience of war. Governments used this search to create new mythologies of nation and empire.

The second part, consisting of three chapters, focuses on the theme of exhibiting for victory, and deals with travelling and temporary state-sponsored war exhibitions between 1917 and 1920. State involvement in collecting and exhibiting the war accelerated from 1917, as part of what John Horne has termed 'cultural remobilisation'. That is, the state and civil society used culture in an effort to mobilise exhausted populations to continue supporting and prosecuting a bloody and costly war.[16] Exhibiting war aimed to help to win the war, and to immortalise it at the same time. Chapter 2 describes the reception and contents of war photograph exhibitions, with a special focus on Canadian exhibitions mounted in Britain, Canada, and the United States in the last year of the war. It is particularly concerned with the public's willing participation in the 'false reality' of photographs, and the processes by which war was sanitised in exhibitions that purported to represent an unvarnished, 'actual' vision of the front. It examines the creation of faked 'real' battle

[16] John Horne, 'Remobilizing for "Total War": France and Britain, 1917–1918' in John Horne (ed.), *State, Society, and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 195–211.

photographs and photomontages, and how they were marketed as windows into the reality of the front, as well as the more subtle creation of a heavily slanted vision of the nature of the war through the suppression and selection of images to display using implicitly understood codes of propriety, good taste, and the picturesque. Finally, it analyses the promotion during the war in Britain and Canada of photograph exhibitions as places where relatives at home might be able to see what their still-absent family members were doing at the front, and possibly recognise people they knew in the images. It then notes the reorientation in focus of post-war photography exhibitions, and how after the war in Australia photograph exhibitions were promoted as a place in which soldiers could view *themselves* prosecuting the victory, which had already been secured.

Part II then moves to an examination of the exhibition and impact of the products of official war art schemes in Britain, Canada, and to a lesser degree, Australia. Chapter 3 examines how officially sanctioned schemes of artistically representing war were constructed in the three cases within highly charged cultural and political environments. In these contexts, the acceptable types, roles, and meanings of war art were disputed by numerous figures in the realms of art, government, the armed forces, and the general public. War art was viewed as both representing current events and creating a vision of national achievement and experience for posterity. The chapter analyses the differing degrees of control over the content and composition of artworks exerted by officials in different places, and how that control contributed to striking differences in the artistic vision of the war found in Britain, Canada, and Australia.

Chapter 4 addresses the exhibition of trophies and relics, and how they were used as tools for remobilisation. It describes the ways in which, during the war, British, Canadian, and Australian military and official bodies exhibited war trophies, such as captured German artillery pieces, and war technologies like tanks and aeroplanes, with the aim of encouraging financial, emotional, and physical commitment to the war and war-related causes.[17] This extended after the war into solidifying narratives of valour and victory in order to garner support for repatriating soldiers and rebuilding wartime economies for peace. Trophies were a particularly effective category of object to exhibit, as they possessed the unique power to seem to manifest the danger and power of war *itself* in civic

[17] There was, during the war, a very different emotional relationship to such technologies than the pre-war perception of, for example, the *Dreadnought* as embodying 'innovation and progress' as 'an icon of the rationality and efficiency of the machine age'. Jan Rüger, 'The Symbolic Value of the *Dreadnought*' in Andrew D. Lambert, Robert J. Blyth and Jan Rüger (eds), *The Dreadnought and the Edwardian Age* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 9–18, 14.