
Article 5. Museum as Propaganda: War Exhibitions in Britain during the First World War*

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Abstract

Research on the commemoration of the First World War (WWI) has grown considerably since the 1990s, with a boom in war memories. War historians have focused on military museums, television programmes, films, and war tribunals that emerged after WWI as ‘theatres of memory’. This article focuses on the Imperial War Museum (the IWM), which was opened to the public in 1920, as one of the ‘theatres of memory’ in Britain. This paper examines the characteristics of the multiple functions of the IWM as media of propaganda.

The IWM was not just an archive to record and commemorate WWI but an open space for the people who fought a total war. It was a means to support wounded soldiers and the families of the war dead, as well as a means of boosting morale. It was a place where respect was paid to the war dead and a space to acknowledge them officially. Various war exhibitions were held to raise awareness of wartime organisations and promote recruitment when many of them were short of workers. When the IWM was planned, it was acknowledged by the committee that exhibitions of women’s work were indispensable in depicting various aspects of a total war and highlighting the contribution of prominent women, such as female doctors or soldiers; however, they were described within conventional gender norms. Those who lived during this era experienced the war in their own way, but individual experiences acquired meaning only after they were situated within the overall framework. The IWM was an instrument to locate various war experiences in the ‘history of WWI’ and give them meaning. A certain historical perspective was presented by exhibitions into which various war efforts were integrated.

Introduction

According to Jay Winter, a historian of the First World War (WWI), the twentieth century was an age of memories. Since the 1990s, research on the commemoration of WWI has dramatically increased¹. There is a sense of crisis that the people who had experienced WWI no longer exist, hindering the transmission of national memories. War historians are not interested merely in cemeteries or war memorials that were built in each parish, city, and foreign battlefield during and after the war. They focus on TV programmes and films on WWI and a ‘journey’ into the past through tours and pilgrimages to battlefields, described by Winter as ‘theatres of memory².’

The boom in war memories opened up a new phase of research in this subject area. Some historians try to explore views of war that are peculiar to each country and region through comparative history. For example, Jen-

1. Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, London: Yale University Press, 2006, p. 18.

2. Winter, *Remembering War*, 2006, pp. 183-271.

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nifer Wellington analysed WWI from the perspective of the British Empire³. She argued that, in contrast to the war museum in Britain which interprets WWI as a rupture in the past, other museums in Canada and Australia represent the war as the first step to state building. Suzanne Brandt compared war museums in Britain, Germany, and France, and Gaynor Kavanagh traced the development of the Imperial War Museum (the IWM), which was opened just after the war in Britain⁴. Both regard war museums as devices to ‘create’ war history.

The common element in these studies is the understanding that the museum is not a mere container for storing material but a device that presents a certain historical perspective and disseminates it through exhibitions. When a museum is planned, the curator decides what to collect before considering how to exhibit the collection: that is, artworks are collected first to present a historical message through the exhibitions. Thus, depending on the curator’s decisions on what to exhibit, a war museum is not only a place where certain experiences are commemorated but also where many experiences are deliberately overlooked⁵.

This article focuses on the collections and exhibitions of the IWM, which was established in 1917 and opened to the public in 1920. Why was the museum created? What function did it perform? How was the first total war described in the IWM? It is important to note that the concept of national war museums was designed before the Armistice was declared. In fact, the collections assembled by the IWM were publicly displayed in various war exhibitions before the opening of the museum. This reflects the fact that the IWM was intended to benefit not only future generations but also everyone who had supported the total war effort; it was therefore considered as being of significance as much for the current era as for the future. This study makes a novel contribution to the history of WWI by exploring the characteristics of the multiple functions of war exhibitions during and after WWI in Britain.

1. The Imperial War Museum

The process of establishing the war museum

The initiative to build a museum to commemorate the war was taken during WWI in Britain. The plan emerged at the end of 1916 after the heavy casualties incurred in the Battle of the Somme, when fear and frustration about the prolonged war became widespread. The museum was intended as part of a campaign to convince people that the sacrifices made for the war were worthwhile. The establishment of the National War Museum was proposed by a Liberal MP, Sir Alfred Mond, and was approved by the war cabinet on 5 March 1917, which agreed to provide a grant of 3,000 pounds to enable Mond to begin collecting materials⁶.

On 26 March 1917, the membership of the museum committee and its plan were revealed to the public⁷. The committee was chaired by Mond, and Sir Martin Conway was appointed as the first director of the museum. It was determined that the museum would be run by an independent executive committee through public funding⁸. The first meeting took place on 29 March 1917, and the basic policy of ‘completing a comprehensive and systematic collection before the opportunities to collect materials are lost’ was confirmed. Six sub-committees—the Admiralty, Ministry of Supply, War Office, Red Cross, Records and Literature, and Women’s Work—were set up, and each was given the responsibility of collecting relevant material. Later, the Red Cross Sub-Committee was disbanded, and three more sub-committees for the Royal Air Force, the Dominions, and Special Exhibitions were formed⁹. Because of a request from the newly established Dominion Sub-Committee, the name was changed to the Imperial War Mu-

3. Jennifer Wellington, *Exhibiting War: The Great War, Museums, and Memory in Britain, Canada, Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

4. Gaynor Kavanagh (ed.), *Making Histories in Museums*, London: Leicester University Press, 1996.

5. Kavanagh, *Making Histories in Museums*, 1996, p. 5.

6. George Robb, *British Culture and the First World War*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002, p. 214.

7. Gaynor Kavanagh, *Museums and the First World War: A Social History*, London: Leicester University Press, 1994, pp. 121-122.

8. *Times*, 26 March 1917.

9. Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 2017, p. 209.

seum (the IWM) in January 1918. In April 1920, the IWM Act was passed, and in the following month the opening ceremony was held with King George V in attendance.

Function of the war museum and exhibitions

When the IWM was established, several meanings were attached to it. First, it was a place to commemorate soldiers responsible for the glorious victory and a place to pay respect to the war dead and their families. Over time, the aspect of commemorating victory gradually faded, and the IWM contributed to intensifying militarism by repeatedly sending out the message that the peaceful world today was built on soldiers' sacrifices. As Stephen Goebel has accurately pointed out, 'memorialisation and mobilisation are inextricably intertwined'¹⁰.

The IWM was not established solely to transmit memories of WWI to future generations. It was also a place for recording the overall picture of the war by means of a comprehensive collection of materials. The reality of war was revealed to those who had no experience of a battlefield, and the overall picture of the war was shown to those who fought as soldiers. According to the IWM's annual report, many museum visitors were men and women who had experience with the military or with wartime organisations¹¹. It was perceived as a space open to people who had contributed to the war in various ways. Given that WWI was a total war, not only soldiers but anyone who had contributed to the war in some way was worthy of being commemorated in the museum, a point made by King George V in his address at the IWM's opening ceremony¹².



Figure 1: The British Home Front, 1914-1917 (©IWM, Q54381)

During WWI, several limited-period war exhibitions were held in large British cities. They aimed to boost wartime morale and serve as charitable activities for invalids and families of the war dead. In wartime Britain, Tank Banks featured the tank, the cutting-edge weapon of the time, and attracted many visitors. Some photographs of Tank Banks are archived at the IWM. Figure 1 shows one of the Tank Banks which was held in Trafalgar Square, London, from 4th to 9th March 1918¹³. A Mark VI Tank 130, called 'Nelson', was used in this exhibition. Beattie and Babs, who were famous singers at that time, sang a song on the top of the tank and bought £1,300 of war bonds. The organisers of Tank Banks, sometimes women, would take to the podium on a huge tank to promote the sale of war-

10. Stefan Goebel, 'Exhibitions', in J. Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, volume 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 167.

11. Gaynor Kavanagh, 'Museum as Memorial: The Origins of the Imperial War Museum', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 23, 1988, p. 92.

12. *Third Annual Report of the Committee of the Imperial War Museum*, 1st April, 1919, to 2nd July, 1920, London, HMSO, 1920, p. 4.

13. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205287436>

time bonds¹⁴. A long queue of those wishing to purchase bonds formed in front of the tank's cockpit, which served as the purchase window. Tank Banks encouraged the purchase of wartime bonds and performed in a show to publicise Britain's latest technology. They were a propaganda device for maintaining public opinion in support of the war.

2. Exhibition of 'sacrifice'

The layout of displays in the IWM shows that it was designed to be a place where visitors could pray for the war dead. When the IWM opened in Crystal Palace in 1920, there was a nave that was reminiscent of a cathedral, where visitors could commemorate the war dead at the entrance of the museum. The space, named the Cenotaph Court, clearly referred to the Cenotaph in Whitehall designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1919 for the victory parade. In 1922, the Roll of Honour—the list of soldiers who had sacrificed their lives for the Empire—was enshrined in the IWM. Since then, every year on 11 November (the anniversary of the signing of the Armistice) a ceremony to commemorate the war dead takes place in the IWM¹⁵. In other words, the museum functions as a place of secular worship.

While war memorials built across the country inscribed only the names of the war dead, the IWM carried out a different form of commemoration. In July 1917, an appeal was issued from the IWM, calling on the families of all war dead for photographs to be displayed in the museum. By the end of 1919, about 15,000 photographs had been sent¹⁶. The IWM also sometimes purchased photographs from newspaper companies. One such photograph was of a captain holding his daughter, which had appeared in *The Daily Sketch* in August 1917¹⁷.

One of the reasons the IWM began to collect photographs while the war was still ongoing was that there were many unidentified soldiers who had lost their lives in the fierce battles. It was important that the war dead and missing soldiers who were identified by name, date of birth, and face be given hero status in the museum as a public space. The collection of portrait photographs was meant to sublimate the private—the deaths of soldiers and munitions workers—to the national memory.

At the IWM, exhibits associated with violence, destruction, and killing were removed. The soldiers—heroes or victims—who had bravely fought for their country and lost their lives, could at the same time be considered killers who had attacked the enemy. This inherent aggressiveness of the soldier was concealed by exhibiting weapons (e.g. guns) as technology separate from the human beings that used them. In the IWM, death was not exhibited in any context other than as the heroes who had given up their lives for their country.

The war dead were not only men (both soldiers and civilians) but also women. The Women's Work Sub-Committee (WWS), which was one of the IWM six sub-committees, systematically collected portrait photographs of women who had sacrificed their lives for the country. The photographs included a variety of women who contributed to the war, regardless of whether they worked in official capacities or for voluntary organisations. Photographs were collected not only from military organisations but also from those who worked in munitions factories and those who were engaged in relief and nursing activities. By April 1920 the WWS had collated a list with photographs of 800 women whose deaths had been confirmed¹⁸.

During the war, up to 100,000 workers, mostly women, were engaged in the production of artillery shells. Filling shells with TNT powder (trinitrotoluene) was particularly dangerous work¹⁹, and 109 women died from poisoning. The IWM archives contain 56 photographs of women employed in munitions factories who died on duty. The

14. Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*, Humanities-Ebooks, 2nd ed., 2013, pp. 140-141.

15. Sue Malvern, 'War, Memory and Museums: Art and Artefact in the Imperial War Museum', *History Workshop Journal*, 29, 2000, p. 185.

16. Catherine Moriarty, "'Through in a Picture Only': Portrait Photography and the Commemoration of the First World War", Gail Braybon (ed.), *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914-18*, New York: Berghen Books, 2003, p. 38.

17. IWM, HU127622.

18. Kavanagh, *Museums and the First World War*, 1994, p. 138.

19. Susan R. Grayzel, *Women and the First World War*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 27.

photographs are accompanied by descriptions, such as ‘Maria Haverly who died of TNT poisoning. 28/5/17²⁰’ or ‘Mrs. Margaret Armer Bradshaw, who was killed by the explosion of a shell on duty²¹.’

3. Women’s war efforts

The Women’s Work Sub-Committee

The WWS mainly focused on women’s military organisations in the Army, Navy, and Air Force, munitions factories, the Red Cross, and various voluntary organisations. The WWS collection policy on women’s war work was determined on 15 April 1917, and the first meeting was held on 26 April of the same year²². The WWS was chaired by Florence Priscilla Norman, the wife of a notable Liberal MP, Sir Henry Norman. Agnes Conway, the daughter of the IWM’s director, Sir Martin Conway, was appointed the WWS’s secretary and supported Florence Norman.

Before the war, Norman had participated in the movement for female suffrage as a member of the Women’s Liberal Federation, which was part of the Liberal Party. With the outbreak of the war, she voluntarily began to run a field hospital for wounded soldiers in France. Agnes Conway was a member of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies and an active suffragist who served as the branch chair. During WWI, she was fully engaged in wartime service, such as sending bandages to the front lines and rescuing and supporting Belgian refugees²³.

Norman’s and Conway’s backgrounds as suffragists significantly influenced the collections and exhibitions of women’s war work. The WWS was credited as being the most active in collecting material among the six IWM sub-committees²⁴. Norman and Conway exchanged letters often and collected material related to wartime work in which women were involved with a special interest in the activities of women who advanced to the front lines. When they planned a photo-shooting trip to France in October 1918, their aim was to photograph the activities of women’s organisations on the battlefields, where few photographic records had been captured for the museum. Norman, along with Olive Edis, a professional woman photographer, went to Belgium and France immediately after the Armistice. They made a pilgrimage to major WWI battlefields and visited the camping sites of women’s organisations which were winding up their remaining work²⁵. In the chaos just after the war, the WWS tried to prevent the loss of war materials and made a comprehensive collection of various kinds of items.

This WWS collection was displayed publicly in war exhibitions on several occasions. The first official exhibition was held in January 1918 at Burlington House, London, where the Royal Academy was housed. A collection on women’s work was exhibited, which attracted tremendous attention because of the visit by Flora Sandes, who had joined the Serbian army and fought as a female soldier. Members of the royal family also visited²⁶. The exhibition was not only an instrument for charity but also served as a recruitment drive for the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, which was much in need of additional staff at that time.

Total war and women

The WWS collected not only official documents and pamphlets, but also visual material including posters, photographs, paintings, and models. The IWM presented an overall picture of the war by making use of documents as well as artefacts, such as weapons, uniforms and equipment, and maps. From time to time, a three-dimensional

20. IWM, WWC M39.

21. IWM, WWC M55.

22. Mary Wilkinson, ‘A Closer Look at the Women’s Work Collection’, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/a-close-look-at-the-women>, p. 4.

23. Deborah Thom, ‘Making Spectaculars: Museums and How We Remember Gender in Wartime’, Gail Braybon (ed.), *Evidence, History, and the Great War*, 2003, p. 54.

24. Diana Condell, ‘The History and Role of the Imperial War Museum’, Barbara Korte and Ralf Schneider (eds.), *War and the Cultural Construction of Identities in Britain*, Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B. V., 2002, p. 29.

25. IWM, Private Papers of Miss O. Edis, Documents 140.

26. Samantha Phlo-Gill, *The Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps in France 1917-1921: Women Urgently Wanted*, Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2017, p. 146.

exhibition method using models and dioramas was employed. In particular, dioramas made of wood and plaster were a special feature. During and after the war, the IWM asked famous artists to create dioramas representing the main battles of WWI, such as the battles of Gallipoli, Ypres and the Somme²⁷. They became the centrepiece of war exhibitions and attracted visitors.

The WWS also asked some artists to make dioramas representing various women's war activities. Mrs Alice Meredith Williams, who was a famous sculptor, created a diorama of women working at the Hayes Filling Factory and the 'Soldiers' and Sailors' Free Buffet²⁸. The munitions factories and free buffets for soldiers were representative of war efforts by women on the home front. During WWI, when large-scale military mobilisation was sustained for a long period, women were given the chance to participate in 'the man's world'. A typical man's job involved being a doctor or a soldier. It is to be noted that, during WWI, female doctors were not allowed to join the Royal Army Medical Corps, nor were women permitted to enlist in the British military.



Figure 2: Dr Elsie Inglis Operating in a Hospital Tent in Serbia (©IWM, MOD34)

Figure 2 is a three-dimensional wood and plaster diorama, featuring Dr Elsie Inglis, a Scottish doctor, operating in a hospital tent in Serbia²⁹. It was originally made by a famous female artist, Nell Foy, and remade by Alice Meredith Williams in 1918. Before the war, Inglis was engaged in the suffrage movement. When WWI began, she founded the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service. After the Hospitals Committee's proposal for sending units was rejected by the British Red Cross, the French and Serbs accepted them³⁰. This diorama depicts Inglis examining a wounded soldier on a stretcher. Although she was a doctor, she holds no medical instruments in her hands, she seems to be monitoring the patient's pulse or just holding his hands. She is depicted as a nurse or mother tending soldiers, which was a typical feminine duty at that time.

27. IWM, MOD506, 688, 735.

28. IWM, MOD158, 366.

29. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30018100>

30. Catherine M. C. Haines and Helen M. Stevens, *International Women in Science: A Biographical Dictionary to 1950*, California: ABC-CLIO, 2001, pp. 143-144.



Figure 3: Sergeant-Major Flora Sandes and Troops in Serbia (©IWM, MOD109)

Figure 3 shows a diorama representing an English middle-class woman, Flora Sandes. After the outbreak of WWI, Sandes volunteered as a nurse with a Serbian ambulance unit. When the Serbian army began to retreat through Albania, she enlisted in the army as a private, and was eventually promoted to corporal³¹. This diorama was created by Miss Foy in October 1918 for the IWM. It depicts Sandes on a higher level than the Serbian soldiers, which shows her superiority. It was critically important that her nationality was English, because the Serbian army, which was retreating to Corfu, needed the support of allied countries. The man on the left in the diorama, who is wounded in his right arm, is contrasted to Sandes, who does not hide behind the rock. Sandes joined in some actions against the Bulgarian army while retreating. She wrote in her autobiography that she was good at shooting and sometimes enjoyed it. She was very famous in Britain at the time, wearing a uniform of the Serbian army with her hair cut short. In the diorama, Sandes has a rifle in her hand; however, her rifle is not aimed at the enemy and her back is turned towards them. The trousers she wears were perceived as ‘men’s clothes’ in Britain at that time; however, they were hidden under her coat. Her head is covered with a hood, so we cannot see her hair. While Sandes’s courage is emphasised in the diorama, her gender as embodied in the style of her hair and her clothes is somewhat blurred. Her eyes are gently directed at a wounded soldier crouching beside her, which shows her femininity. This diorama does not reflect the reality of Sandes’s war. It emphasises that her actions, though unusual, followed conventional gender norms.

Conclusion

The IWM’s collection was quite exceptional, women as a category were clearly recognised, and women’s war work attracted considerable interest. Although there was a movement to found museums in France and Germany during WWI, no executive committees focusing on women’s work were established, unlike in Britain. The war museum in Australia did not entertain the idea of looking at WWI from the women’s perspective. In Canada, women

31. Julie Wheelwright, ‘Flora Sandes - Military Maid’, *History Today*, 39:3, 1989, p. 43.

were completely excluded from the dominant and masculine discourse on war³², whereas Britain acknowledged that a collection on women's wartime work was indispensable in depicting various aspects of a total war. The IWM aimed to integrate various aspects of war efforts into war exhibitions. However, although women were important actors in the first-ever total war, they were consistently described in ways that showed them conforming to existing gender norms. The WWS positively focused on prominent women such as female doctors or soldiers; however, they too were described within the conventional gender norms.

When the first step towards the establishment of the IWM in Britain was taken, the Allies were not sure of victory. Four years of a seemingly unceasing war encouraged people to establish a museum to praise their war efforts³³. It is significant that the IWM was established during and not after the war in Britain. First, the IWM was a device for charity to support wounded soldiers and the families of the war dead, as well as a means of boosting morale to endure the prolonged war. Second, it was a place for respecting and officially acknowledging the war dead. Last, various war exhibitions held during the war were intended to raise awareness of wartime organisations and promote recruitment when many of them were short of workers.

It is important to note the function of the IWM in the contemporary era. As Wellington has pointed out, we tend to regard a museum as a device to conceptualise the past by collecting and exhibiting records³⁴. However, during WWI, it was a place where people faced the reality of war and comprehended its aspects as a whole. Those who lived during this era experienced the war in their own way, but individual experiences acquired meaning only when situated within the overall framework of WWI. As long as it remained separate from other experiences, the individual experience would remain 'a fragment³⁵.' The IWM would provide order to numerous fragments. People who visited the limited-period exhibitions held during the war and the IWM after it had just opened—whether they were soldiers or civilians—could learn where they fitted into the overall framework of WWI and recapture their experiences in the context of the whole. A war museum was a device that located various fragmented war experiences in a 'story' it created and gave meaning to them.

32. Laura Brandon, 'Looking for the "Total" Women in Wartime: A Museological Work in Progress', Amy K. Lenvin (ed.), *Gender, Sexuality and Museums*, New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 111.

33. Nicholas J. Saunders (ed.), *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 35.

34. Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 2017, p. 17.

35. Wellington, *Exhibiting War*, 2017, p. 18.