

Culture, conflict and materiality: the social lives of Great War objects

War is the transformation of matter through the agency of destruction, and industrialised war creates and destroys on a larger scale than any other human activity. Modern war has an unprecedented capacity to remake individuals, cities and nations, and thus to shape conceptions of individual and collective identity. The unparalleled production of material culture during industrialised conflict embodies and provokes the extremes of human behaviours, and nowhere is this more evident than in the world's first globalised industrial war of 1914–18 and its many diverse consequences – of which, in different ways, the Second World War and the early twenty-first century's global 'war on terror' are two examples.

A new approach

Until recently, twentieth-century conflict (and especially here the First World War) has been the domain of military history¹ and of analyses concerned with the economic, social and political consequences of individual wars.² Apart from art history's interest in war painting³ and a broader concern with post-conflict commemorative monuments,⁴ the audits of war have ignored or avoided an anthropological–archaeological focus on the materialities of conflict and its aftermath.

Nevertheless, much first-hand memory of the twentieth century's many conflicts is fading, and perforce our views of and reactions to these events are increasingly determined by interpretations of material culture with which we have no personal connection, in design, production or original use. As those who took part in, or were directly affected by, these conflicts pass away, it is the postwar generations who become the custodians not only of their memories, but also of the 'afterlife' of the many and varied materialities of war. As generations change, along with technology, academic disciplines and the philosophy of knowledge develop, so new ways of engaging with the remains and consequences of conflict emerge.

Today, there is a clear and urgent need for an explicitly anthropological–archaeological approach to the materialities of modern conflicts, large and small – a process which, while it has only just begun,⁵ is rapidly gaining momentum. In particular, we need to re-evaluate the role of material culture as multivocal representational embodiments of war and its aftermath. The fact that modern conflicts are defined by their technologies as wars of materiel is an unequivocal

invitation for such an approach – an invitation unspoken but inherent in several recent publications by cultural historians.⁶

Anthropology and archaeology, by their focus on material culture, are singularly well equipped to deal with these aspects of conflict. The objects of war are not anonymous weapons, scrap or ephemera, but rather different kinds of matter that can be seen as embodying an individual's experiences and attitudes, as well as cultural choices in the varied technologies of production. Such objects occupy a dynamic point of interplay between animate and inanimate worlds, inviting us to look beyond physical form and consider the hybrid and constantly renegotiated relationships between material culture and people.⁷

Conflict-related objects are endlessly ambiguous and varied, despite their often apparently straightforward nature in military terms. They can be small, e.g. a bullet or piece of shrapnel, intermediate, e.g. an artillery piece or a tank, or large, e.g. an aircraft or a whole battlefield landscape. They also include what are perhaps the most poignant, often tragic, 'artefacts' which are not usually conceived in such terms, i.e. the war-maimed and, in a different way, the war-bereaved – both of whom possess distinctive relationships with various kinds of material culture (see below).

All are united by virtue of being artefacts rather than naturally-occurring objects, though natural processes may alter their nature and appearance and our engagements with them over time. For the First World War, the 500-mile-long Western Front can be considered as much an artefact as a bomb-shattered town, the wreckage of a Zeppelin airship or a small talismanic bullet inscribed with its maker's name in the trenches. For other conflicts artefacts may include a V2 rocket, underground tunnel systems used by North Vietnamese soldiers, the symbolic terrain of war memorials or the temporarily empty space once occupied by the World Trade Center in New York. By identifying and engaging with artefacts of all sizes we can construct a 'biography of the object'⁸ and explore its 'social life'⁹ by assessing the changing values and attitudes attached to it by different people over time.

Like all artefacts, the material culture of war embodies a diversity – though perhaps a unique intensity – of individual, social and cultural ideas and experiences. The analysis of such objects reveals the social origin of artefact variability¹⁰ and the fact that simultaneously they are part of, and constitute, the physical world.¹¹ Battlefield landscapes, memorials, cemeteries, reconstructed buildings and towns, museums and memorabilia are all material representations of memory, spirituality, ethnicity, politics and emotion that link the living with the dead in a complex interplay of past and present.

If we accept that an individual's social being is determined by his or her relationship to objects that represent the individual, that objects are a way of knowing oneself through things,¹² then we must also acknowledge that objects make people just as much as people make

objects.¹³ Nowhere is this more true than in modern war. The sheer quantity of artefacts produced for and created by modern conflict represents a material medium within which we are immersed and with whose constituent parts we constantly interact, both consciously and subconsciously.¹⁴

The transformational power of industrialised conflict is evident at every scale of human activity, and the study of its material consequences is a slippery endeavour as it migrates across disciplinary boundaries. How, for example, are we to assess the 'social life' of First World War memorabilia, identical items which were, variously, displayed as 'memory objects' in the home for 80 years, are stored or exhibited in museums and are being excavated (legally and illegally) from Great War archaeological sites – some of which subsequently excite and feed the international trade in military collectables? In this instance, attention is focused on a set of issues that have hardly been recognised, let alone problematised or investigated by the range of disciplines whose territories they traverse.

Here, we are faced with another unique aspect of modern war: the ubiquity and similarity of its industrially produced material culture, which can appear in a range of locations from a munitions factory to the home, museum to battlefield, antiques showroom to car-boot sale and Internet auction site. In our attempts to understand such objects it seems that such traditionally-important indices for investigation as material, shape and function will be less important than the relationship between the individual, time, place and conditions – in other words, context.

Any attempt to explore the meanings of such objects has to adopt an approach that moves back and forth between anthropology and archaeology. This is far easier today than even ten years ago, but is still problematic. Nevertheless, by maintaining a focus on the material nature of objects – on their physical presence in the world, and thus their altering of our perceptions and emotions (agreeable or not) – we are able to initiate a new kind of debate on the nature of war which will also have consequences for archaeology and anthropology. In his posthumous book *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell makes a statement concerning art objects that serves equally well for the material culture of conflict, that objects represent 'the visible knot which ties together an invisible skein of relations, fanning out into social space and social time'.¹⁵

Case studies in materiality

Small scale: making memorabilia

While the material culture of conflict is deliberately broadly conceived, as noted above, only a few examples of small-scale objects will be given here. I will focus mainly on personal items, the majority of which can be called memorabilia. I include shrapnel fragments,

bullets, artillery shells, military paraphernalia (badges and uniforms), wood, stone, minerals and pieces of buildings. Each of these is a potential memory object, connected in the mind of its owner with the circumstances surrounding its acquisition – a process which I shall also explore. It is important to note in this respect that soldiers and civilians (during and after the war) did not regard these items in the same way, even when they embodied life-threatening events.

The example of shrapnel and bullets illustrates this point. In the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres, Belgium, is a wartime identity card and bullet belonging to Henri Janssens, a volunteer wounded in 1918. Janssens survived, and when the bullet was removed from his chest he decided to keep it as a talisman for the rest of his life.¹⁶ An even more remarkable story is that of Vincent Sabini of the 18th London, 47th Division, who was wounded in the leg at Messines, Belgium, in 1917. Sabini, a devout Catholic, also survived, but when the bullet was removed he carved it into a crucifix, had it gold-plated and wore it around his neck until he died in 1981 (Colour plate 3).¹⁷

Counterpointing these two examples is the case of Harry Patch, who fought as an 18-year-old in a machine-gun platoon of the Duke of Cornwall's 7th Battalion at the Battle of Third Ypres (Passchendaele) in 1917. Still alive in 2004 aged 106, Patch recalled how he had been wounded by a piece of shrapnel, hospitalised and the metal shard removed from his groin. The doctor then asked 'if I wanted the shrapnel as a souvenir and – officer or not – I swore at him: "I've had that bloody stuff long enough. Throw it away."' ¹⁸

These examples illustrate the diametrically opposed reactions of soldiers towards one kind of war-related object. Such diverse attitudes were also held by civilians, at the time, and still today. No meaningful analysis of such objects can afford to homogenise their meanings for the individuals associated with them in the beginning – either as always 'sacred relics' or as nothing other than scrap or 'dreadful kitsch'. To do so would be to conflate their original meanings, elide their role as (hitherto ignored) three-dimensional narratives of the Great War, and to deny or at least make more difficult the possibility of an afterlife in personal associations between these items and those who would engage with them today, not least the legions of schoolchildren who visit the Western Front in ever-increasing numbers.

One corpus of war-related objects illustrates well the potential of an anthropological approach to investigating the material culture of war. First World War 'trench art' is a seemingly amorphous group of three-dimensional objects made from various materials including war scrap, materiel, stone, textiles and wood. Millions of items were made between 1914 and 1939, and each one was unique. What permits a meaningful classificatory framework to be constructed is not a straightforward description of material, shape, function or production

process – though this can be done – but rather who made what, when, where and why.

Trench art was made variously by soldiers, prisoners of war, civilians (often refugees) and internees at different times during the war and interwar years. The objects, the materials from which they were made and the techniques employed to produce them are often similar if not identical throughout this period. However, while all such objects are a consequence of war and its aftermath, either directly or as a legacy, they all objectify and memorialise the very different experiences of their makers and those who purchased and used them.

What appears at first as a confusing mass of war-related kitsch is revealed instead as a uniquely informative body of materials, narratives of the war experience inscribed in three dimensions. There are many categories and subcategories of Great War trench art,¹⁹ but two main kinds suffice to illustrate my main point here: (1) objects made by soldiers between 1914 and 1919, and (2) items manufactured by civilians between 1914 and 1939. What follows is a brief exegesis of how complex these objects are and an outline of the issues which they embody and represent.

Trench art made by soldiers was produced in the front line, behind the lines, by the active soldier, the wounded, and by prisoners of war (Figure 1). Each of these is in fact a subcategory, as each possesses different contexts of production and meanings.²⁰ Soldiers carved in chalk, wood or bone, and made objects from bullets and artillery-shell cases. Objects were made by a variety of nationalities, with French, British and Belgian objects differing not only from German examples, but also from items made by Senegalese and Indian soldiers and Chinese labour-corps battalions – the latter three examples

Figure 1 French soldiers making trench-art vases from artillery-shell cases. (Nicholas J Saunders)





Figure 2 Detail of an unusual chromed artillery-shell vase showing a Chinese dragon, probably made between 1919 and 1922 by a member of the non-combatant Chinese Labour Corps who helped clear the battlefields. (Nicholas J Saunders)

encapsulating culturally distinctive ideas and imagery, albeit mediated by the experience of industrialised conflict (Figure 2).

While some examples, such as aluminium finger rings, were made in the trenches, others, such as sophisticated shell-case vases, were made in safer rear areas (Colour plate 4). Some were made by experienced craftsmen with professional tools (such as blacksmiths and the Royal Engineers), and others by men with little or no artistic ability. However, all are equally valuable in an anthropological assessment of such objects.

Some items were made to order and for sale, others for barter and exchange, and some as personal mementos or souvenirs sent home to families. Still others were made as mental and physical therapy in hospitals. The terrible conditions of combat made a lasting impression on soldiers who lived in landscapes whose unprecedentedly awful sights included an inexhaustible supply of raw materials for trench art. Acquiring the raw materials, itself often a potentially lethal process, and sometimes technically illegal, all but guaranteed that the objects themselves would be deeply ambiguous even before they were made. This aspect of the nature of the raw material was meaningful only or mainly to the maker of the trench-art object, and was elided in the appearance of the finished piece. Trench-art objects made by soldiers embodied experiences and emotions impossible for civilians to understand, in the same way, as we shall see, that civilian 'attraction' to such objects was mainly not shared by soldiers who survived the war.

Trench art made by civilians is far more numerous, if less varied, than that fashioned by soldiers. While soldiers made objects between 1914 and 1919, civilians made these items for 24 years, between

1914 and 1939. Wartime refugees made trench art to sell for money, as did civilian internees, and during the postwar years such activities continued due to harsh economic conditions. However, between 1919 and 1939, such objects were sold not to soldiers but to battlefield pilgrims and tourists eager to draw close to the places and experiences of their loved ones through the purchase of souvenirs. What differentiates wartime and postwar trench-art objects made by civilians is not raw material, or finished forms, but rather the temporal shift from war to peace. This is a pivotal issue for understanding how the meanings of objects for members of the same generation can shift dramatically while shape, form and technology remain the same.

Objects made by civilians between 1919 and 1939 were sold to war widows on battlefield pilgrimages as poignant memory objects. These items helped authenticate the pilgrimage experience, and enabled pilgrims to take home a tangible link with the dead. When these objects entered domestic space they became an integral part of the house-worlds of their owners, reordering the symbolic terrain of memory. They ornamented the home, mediating between the past and present lives of families who had lost a brother, father or husband. They objectified and stimulated memories for widows, and for a wider informal community of the bereaved. Such objects were a constant reminder of missing loved ones – a presence of absence. Decorated shells on a mantelpiece, a bullet letter-opener on a desk or a shell dinner gong sounded at meal times, were examples of where the memory of the body had been replaced by the memory of the object (Colour plate 5).²¹

Those objects that arrived ultimately in the realm of domestic space played an important but uninvestigated role in the ways in which the war was regarded during the interwar years. Yet, despite anthropology's concern with the home as a centre of emotion and as an articulatory focus between individuals and family and between household and community, it has never concerned itself with this category of memory objects. What is required is an interdisciplinary analysis of the multiple trajectories through social space that these objects can take, and their effect on the lives of those with whom they come into contact.

Large scale: encounters with landscape

In modern war, perhaps to a greater extent than in any other kind of cultural activity, every kind of object is embedded in a larger scale of human activity and physical location. First World War memorabilia illustrate this point particularly well, and investigators find themselves moving back and forth between different scales of objects and their analysis, rather than attempting to compartmentalise an item into one rigid category – the approach taken by militaria collectors and sometimes also museum curators.

The physical forces unleashed by industrialised war may distort or breach the boundaries of classificatory schema, one consequence of which is that investigations need to be reoriented towards the varied acts by which individuals acquire objects that they regard as meaningful.

The process of acquisition is a focal point for analysis, as it forges a link between objects, individuals and landscape. In part, this is due to the visceral relationship between memory object and memory landscape, which associates people with places in the minds of the living, and also, for those inclined to think this way, in the imaginary realms of the dead.

The study of landscape has been revitalised in recent years, and has drawn together anthropology and archaeology.²² The study of battlefield landscapes – as some of the largest and most complex artefacts known – has benefited from this development, regardless of whether such places have been reconstructed, memorialised or left undisturbed.

Battlefields and war zones are no longer thought of as inert and empty backgrounds for the conduct of war, but as prime examples of socially-constructed landscapes – that is, landscape as ongoing process where individuals are redefined, or redefine themselves, by their experiences of place. Battlefield landscapes, like any landscapes, are palimpsests and cultural icons. A battlefield landscape is neither a single concept nor a solely-historical entity, but rather something political and dynamic, and always open to renegotiation.²³

First World War battlefield landscapes, indicating this multi-layered complexity are, as I have noted elsewhere, composed variously of industrialised slaughter houses, vast tombs for ‘the missing’, places for returning refugees and contested reconstruction, popular tourist destinations, locations of memorials and pilgrimage, sites for archaeological research and cultural heritage development, and as still deadly places full of unexploded shells and bombs.²⁴

Here we see that an anthropological assessment of battlefield landscapes is a hybrid undertaking which acknowledges the many associations between different scales of artefacts. Small artefact and landscape, meaning and memory, came into play via large and small cruciform objects, in the shape of wayside calvaries and talismanic crucifixes worn by soldiers, such as that already mentioned for Vincent Sabini. Great War soldiers observed how calvaries – while stationary, and larger and more visible than a human being – seemed to survive battle intact. It occurred to many men that these monuments were protected by the sacred image of a crucified Christ (Figure 3). Such observations appear to have forged a connection between landscape and human body mediated by large and small cruciform objects. By analogy, it was believed that the protection afforded the calvaries could be transferred to those who carried or wore small amuletic crosses and crucifixes.²⁵

Figure 3 A postwar battlefield calvary on the site of Maltz Horn Farm near Guillemont on the Somme. (Nicholas J Saunders)



A different kind of relationship between landscape and smaller objects was that which saw landscape images captured on the surface of decorated artillery-shell cases. The ironies here are clear. Shells were definitive icons of the war and modernism,²⁶ and the agency bestowed on them by women (in munitions factories) and by men (in firing them) destroyed old landscapes and created new ones, and killed,

maimed and remade countless men against whom they were fired. Images of these landscapes and such lethal activities were engraved, hammered and painted onto the surface of empty shell cases. This appears to be a visceral example of Gell's point that 'Decorative patterns attached to artefacts attach people to things, and to the social projects those things entail.'²⁷

A pair of these decorated shells from the Eastern Front depict a common theme: the before and after of war. One shell shows a peaceful and bucolic farmhouse scene while the other depicts a destroyed building with a biplane flying above. Both have the identical painted inscription '1917. Osmihowicze. Russl.'²⁸ Another example from the Western Front is a blue-on-white painting depicting a snowy winter landscape and a bomb-shattered house, with a black painted inscription, 'Yser. 1914-1918', and signed 'H.J.' (Colour plate 6).²⁹ Other examples show bomb damage to the Medieval Cloth Hall at Ypres and to the Basilica at Albert on the Somme. In the latter case, the scene represents the famous leaning Golden Madonna and Child atop the Basilica of Notre Dame de Brebrières. The leaning Madonna was a common sight to soldiers between 1915 and 1917, and was finally destroyed by British artillery fire between March and August 1918.

Identity and landscape were also manifested in another kind of object: windmills made from empty artillery shell cases. Windmills were common in France and Belgium before the war, where they had often embodied a town's economic and political identity since the Middle Ages. In Belgium they were highly visible monuments on the flat plains of Flanders, and acted as a secular counterpart to churches – the two kinds of buildings matching each other in prominence and visibility, and representing secular and sacred power respectively. A town's windmill was often regarded as the symbol of the community.

The body of such items was usually a single artillery-shell case which had part of its surface engraved into a design imitating brickwork, sometimes with a door added. The sails tended to be of brass and copper, though sometimes of thick copper wire inset with pieces of shrapnel and copper drive-band, and often incorporated a clock.³⁰ One well-documented example was made in Belgium by Jules and Camiel Versavel between 1916 and 1917 – not for sale but as a commemorative object, keeping alive the memory of their historic town of Passchendaele's own windmill, destroyed during the war, and inspiring the building of a new one after 1918.³¹

Acquisition and memory-making

At the heart of the relationship between small- and large-scale artefacts, that is, memorabilia and landscape, and, in a sense overlapping archaeological and anthropological concerns, is the process of acquisition.

In war-zone locations there exists a nested hierarchy of artefacts, small-scale objects embedded within larger ones such as trenches, dugouts or shell craters, which themselves are framed by the larger artefact of the battlefield landscape. It is through, rather than over the surface of, this thick multi-layered palimpsest of artefacts that soldiers move and are wounded, killed or survive. Each of these potential outcomes creates a distinctive relationship between the individual and the various scales of object that are encountered.

For those who survive, their experiences may be embodied in a piece of shrapnel, a talismanic item of trench art, a souvenir taken from a dead comrade or enemy, a smell, a sound or a fragment of the earth itself. No kind of object is privileged, as it is the experiential process of acquisition that defines significance – a process whose unpredictability and randomness is a unique consequence of modern warfare, and which was widely commented upon by soldiers of the Great War.

Of the many processes of acquisition that occurred between 1914 and 1918, it was the one called ‘souveneering’ – a common euphemism for stealing³² – which best illustrates how objects become attached to people in memory-making events. So common was this activity that it was noted at the time that ‘This war will undoubtedly go down to posterity as a “War of Souvenirs”.’³³

Souveneering could take a variety of forms, from picking up a piece of stained glass from the ruins of Ypres Cathedral en route to the front line³⁴ to risking one’s life to acquire a fragment of battlefield debris. There are many wartime accounts of soldiers taking life-threatening risks to acquire an unusual souvenir or trophy.³⁵ In fact, so commonplace was it for a soldier to be killed or wounded in such activities that it was reported almost nonchalantly. One officer who was sniped and killed while looking for souvenirs was described simply as ‘a lovely young fellow’³⁶ and in another incident ‘Napper was found dead, bayoneted in several places; he was a great souvenir hunter.’³⁷

Apart from such risks, the process of souveneering could be nauseating. Soldiers rifled through putrid decaying bodies, covered with flies, contorted in their death throes. Yet there was also ‘a fascination in going from dead to dead, seeking and looking with great intensity’.³⁸ On 8 March 1916, Captain P H Rawson wrote a letter home in which he asked:

Has that Bosche button arrived? Mind you don’t lose it as I cut it off with my own hands, the only real hun I have been close to and an awful brute he looked to [sic].³⁹

Even wounded soldiers could not escape the consequences of this obsession with acquiring such objects. On one occasion, splinters from anti-aircraft shellfire rained down on soldiers in the trenches and broke the wrist of one man. ‘He had barely exclaimed when half a dozen men scrimmaged for the nose-cap that hit him, and two grovelled

between his feet to get it.⁴⁰ Similar events also occurred behind the lines, such as that at the Locre Hospice, a wartime orphanage run by nuns near Ypres. On 17 July 1916, shell shrapnel crashed through the roof of a building onto a bed vacated just minutes before. In gratitude to God, Mother Claudia permitted soldiers to collect the shell fragments, not as personal souvenirs, but to work them into a flower container for the chapel.⁴¹

Sometimes, an artefact could be representative not of one but several acquisition events and its significance for the maker perhaps magnified as a result. An insight into this process is given by the unusual repertoire of items made by Sapper Stanley K Pearl of the Australian 5th Field Company Engineers. Pearl kept detailed notes of where, when and under what circumstances he acquired the raw materials for making his trench-art souvenir objects.

In his account of the making of an inkstand, we see his experiences materialised in a variety of items belonging to different technologies from three armies (British, French and German) and also, via toponymy, a miniaturised embodiment of the local military geography (above and below ground) of the Somme battlefield.

[The item was] completed on the Somme in February 1917. The base and pen handles are of oak and were cut from a table in a German dugout in Contalmaison and polished with boot polish. The bowl is from a propeller of a Vickers biplane wrecked at Le Sars. The ends are German anti-aircraft shell fuzes, one from Martinpuich, the other from Bazentin-le-Grand. The brass bands, standards and lid were souvenired from an 18-pounder battery near 'Needle Dump', and the French buttons on the base were exchanged for cigarettes in Albert. The ink container is a flare cartridge from Eaucourt-l'Abbaye.⁴²

For civilians also, souvenir hunting often verged on obsession, though the context-driven associations were different. As early as 1914, *The War Illustrated* published photographs of civilians searching for German bullets in the grass, with the prescient comment that:

Souvenir hunting has become quite an industry where the fire of battle has raged, and it is certain that the traffic in war souvenirs will flourish in the years to come when battlefields are the haunt of summer tourists.⁴³

The associations of civilian-acquired objects, however, mainly derived from postwar battlefield visits and pilgrimages, and in this sense direct wartime meanings were absent. Yet, in seeking to authenticate their own experiences, civilians also forged distinctive relationships with artefacts of different scales. They may have repeatedly walked a particular route across a battlefield, annually laid a wreath at a battlefield memorial or Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery, purchased a souvenir from a local shop, or drunk and eaten in the same battlefield café-museum (Colour plate 7).

For those ex-servicemen who revisited the battlefields, as part of civilian tour groups or on their own, purchasing memory objects was not common practice. These individuals had no need to authenticate second-hand experiences. German battlefield visitors during the interwar years were especially harsh in their condemnation of the civilian process of acquiring objects (and memories). In 1927, Gerhard Schinke returned to Ypres, where he was shocked by the profusion of war souvenirs for sale in shops and peddled by children on the streets.⁴⁴ Gerhard Weixler was equally disgusted and regarded the whole business as sacrilegious.⁴⁵

These opinions reveal that such objects were highly contested kinds of material culture – objectifications and miniaturisations of a contested terrain where attitudes and reactions continued to confront each other in peacetime just as the armies had a few years before. Soldiers and postwar pilgrims had (sometimes identical) battlefield souvenirs in their homes, and it was thus not the shape, size or kind of the object which was contested, but rather the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the item (and that generated meaning) which were considered important.

Towards an archaeology of conflict

The study of Great War objects has recently benefited from the beginnings of a professional archaeological engagement with the First World War,⁴⁶ itself part of a wider multidisciplinary concern with twentieth-century conflict (Figure 4).⁴⁷ The relationships between objects and landscapes have taken on added significance as a result. Not only can the embedding of an object in a landscape be an explicitly archaeological event, but also this relationship is at the nexus of the creation of meanings between war and memory from 1914 to the present (and for the public as well as for professionals). This nascent archaeology of twentieth-century conflict can be considered and theorised, at least in part, as but one of the many and appositely termed ‘archaeologies of the contemporary past’.⁴⁸

Significantly in this regard, Great War battlefields are some of the most comprehensively documented, personalised and spiritualised areas ever to be subject to archaeological investigation by virtue of descriptions in letters, memoirs and regimental war diaries which describe events on a day-by-day, sometimes hour-by-hour, basis.⁴⁹ Probably no other kind of archaeology has the quantity and quality of detail with which to contextualise its investigations, which suggests that First World War archaeology will, as its methodologies mature, have a significant impact on its parent discipline.

The political, ethical, ethnic and technical challenges of creating an archaeology of the Great War are significant, as they cut across issues such as the excavation of still lethal battlefields, and the recovery, identification and reburial of the multifaith and multiethnic dead. There is also the need to build methodologies for this new kind of



Figure 4 Belgian archaeologists inspect an excavated duckboard at the Crossroads site, part of the A19 excavations outside Ypres in 2004. (Nicholas J Saunders)

archaeology as well as for coping with the management of battle-zone landscapes as national and transnational cultural-heritage locations and tourist destinations. The increasing memorialisation – including the establishment of new museums – of the old Ypres Salient battlefield illustrates these issues particularly well (Figure 5). In Europe these concerns extend from 1914–18 to the Bosnian conflict of 1992–95, Kosovo and beyond.

Figure 5 On the site of the infamous Battle of Third Ypres (Passchendaele) in 1917, a billboard advertises a new war museum at nearby Zonnebeke. The words 'dugout experience' appear bottom right, highlighting the display's sensorial dimension. (Nicholas J Saunders)



The anthropological nature of this kind of archaeology is evident in many aspects of the study of the material culture of war. For example, small and portable items such as soldiers' souvenirs, personal effects and equipment move back and forth between anthropology and modern archaeological practice and discourse. These kinds of objects are often attached – literally and figuratively – to bodies and body parts, and are sometimes the only way to identify the remains. It is ironic that despite uniforms, badges and a vast literature on the actions and whereabouts of particular regiments and battalions, identification may depend on a name, initials or service number scratched onto a miscellaneous object. Such items are not necessarily conclusive proof, but they may help in the process of permitting official and private closure during the subsequent reburial in a Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery.

Yet, it is these same items which are coveted by militaria collectors who, particularly since the 1960s, have sought to acquire them through a shadowy network of contacts or directly from illegal covert digging. Here is a direct association between the archaeology of the First World War and such anthropological issues as personal and social identity, the study of consumption, art in its broadest sense, economics, memory, trauma and loss. If professional excavators cannot find any identifying objects on human remains, then they are unable to reclaim the individuals from the list of 'the missing'. In other words, identification is rendered impossible through subordination to local and transnational commercial imperatives. These imperatives seal an individual's identity within the object, alienating it for ever from its rightful owner.

At the same time that archaeology is engaging with the First World War and such issues are being recognised, so the commercial pressure is increasing through the advent of the Internet, which is stimulating the market in such objects to the extent that potential purchasers of these items can now provide a wish-list of items to unscrupulous battlefield looters.⁵⁰ What is more heartening is that, since about 1999, the activities of battlefield scavengers and of illegal diggers have increasingly attracted public and official opprobrium. In this sense, it seems, what was an amateur's free-for-all even in 1999 has today become more sensitised and more scientific, a consequence in part of the move towards an anthropological and archaeological engagement with the many landscapes of war and the objects within them.

This development is most marked in and around the old Ypres Salient in Belgian Flanders. The In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres was once home to a traditional (albeit magnificent) collection of objects. Since 1998 it has transformed itself into a popular multimedia experience with special and temporary exhibitions and artists in residence. Even more significant are its plans for a dramatic expansion in the coming years and a concept-driven philosophy which envisages an essentially anthropological approach to large-, medium- and small-scale artefacts – a dynamic relationship between the surrounding landscape, the museum and its objects.

Conclusion

Excavating the social lives of Great War objects provides opportunities for exploring the ways in which the dead and the living find proximity via materialities and places.⁵¹ In part this is because such objects play with ideas of moral intent, acquiring meanings that often go to the furthest limits of the human imagination and endurance.

Hidden within the cultural life of such objects are stories of how human beings are defined by their own technologies and the technologies of others, of how their bodies and minds are shaped and reshaped by their experiences of conflict and its aftermath, and how they dealt with these experiences by materialising them in material culture.

In keeping with empirical and theoretical developments in anthropology and archaeology more generally, the objects of modern conflicts are being conceptualised and investigated in new ways – ways that conceive artefacts as self-reflexive embodiments of human experiences rather than the trash or ephemera of war. Such an approach is one way in which generations that have no (or very limited) experiences of war can come to understand, preserve, conserve and represent conflict to themselves and subsequent generations.

Notes and references

- 1 See, for example, Gilbert, M, *First World War* (London: HarperCollins, 1994) and Keegan, J, *The First World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1998).
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