

## **History and Memory: World War I in British Culture**

A Four-Week Summer Seminar for School Teachers

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Dear Colleague,

We're delighted you're interested in our four-week seminar for schoolteachers, "History and Memory: World War I in British Culture," to be held in England, France, and Belgium July 2-28, 2006. This letter provides details regarding seminar content and locations as well as practical information about accommodations, course credit, and finances. We hope it will answer most of your questions about the seminar and the application process, but please feel free to contact us directly if it doesn't.

### **Rationale for the Seminar**

Some of the best-remembered utterances to emerge from the First World War are the poems by the British soldiers who served in the trenches of France and Belgium, and they remain important elements of British culture to this day. John McRae's image of poppies blowing "Between the crosses row on row" in a British cemetery in Belgium directly inspired the red poppies still seen every Remembrance Day in British lapels (including Tony Blair's during his visit in November of 2004 to Washington, D.C.). Similarly, the posthumous colonization envisioned in Rupert Brooke's poignantly prescient epitaph, "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England" ("The Soldier"), has been realized by the many British cemeteries and memorials that dominate the Western Front. Such connections between past and present, poetry and memorial, home and abroad, individual and collective have been central to the British response to the Great War since it began, and they remain so as the unresolved response continues to evolve.

Unlike the Second World War, which has taken a fairly consistent shape in British memory as a tragic but necessary sacrifice, World War I is still surrounded by tension and ambivalence. One such division has become commonplace: that between the heroic idealism of the war's early days and the jaded despair that set in as troops entrenched and the losses mounted. Although there was demonstrably more idealism in the war's early days and more despair in its later ones, it is also true that both attitudes coexisted from the beginning and still do; just as some contemporaries saw the war as tragically senseless from the beginning, so does the urge to see the huge sacrifice as heroic and worthwhile persist even nine decades later. As Niall Ferguson argues in *The Pity of War*, the popular wisdom that British crowds turned out in enthusiastic support of the war in August 1914 must be leavened by evidence that "feelings of anxiety, panic, and even millenarian religiosity were equally common popular responses to the outbreak of war." This ambivalence is as evident in modern films, novels, memorials, popular songs, and public observances as it is in the poetry and memoirs produced during the war and in its immediate aftermath. Novels such as Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (1992) and Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* (1993) exemplify this tension: they concur with historian John Keegan's assessment that "The First World War was a tragic and unnecessary conflict," but they also portray the war

as encouraging and even creating heroism, selflessness, and bravery in the men who fought in a war they viewed as ludicrous.

Of the British written responses to the Great War, the poetry from the trenches is perhaps the first to come to mind. The searing images of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, and Isaac Rosenberg, among others, are hardly less famous than those paeans to wartime death as a glorious sacrifice, such as McRae's blowing poppies or Brooke's pastoral bit of England on foreign soil. The second most familiar written responses are the many soldiers' memoirs of the war and its aftermath, especially those by Graves, Sassoon, and Edmund Blunden, all of which have been continuously in print since their first publication. Equally famous is Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, a memoir of her experience in the wartime hospitals at home and abroad. This work, which is also still in print, helped to make her a feminist icon and the war's "chief mourner" (a designation that is itself ambivalent, used as it is by those who believe she over-emphasizes the tragedy of the war).

Farther away from England are other forms of response that are well-known to the British who make pilgrimages to the Western Front: the many grand British memorials erected on the sites of great British losses, particularly along the Somme front and on the once mud-soaked terrain around Ypres in Belgium. Indeed a significant share of the tourism in Flanders and Picardy consists of British pilgrimages to the sites of the greatest World War I losses. It is common for English children to take school trips to the French battlefields, for instance, and early July sees a surge in British tourism to mark the anniversary of the first wave of the infamous Somme Offensive. Britons flock to the many memorials erected by the mourners of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, as well as of the Commonwealth countries that contributed troops to the Western Front. These memorials, which themselves are marked by the tension between celebration and mourning, are given context by the museums and reconstructed sites that dot the Western Front. The long history of the magnificent town of Ypres itself has been rendered almost a footnote to its overriding significance as a site of British martyrdom, and this hierarchy is reflected in the focus of the town's tourism industry, such as the devotion of its grand medieval Cloth Hall to a museum of the Great War with a strong British bias.

These varied memorials are themselves evolving British responses to the war as are other significant monuments along the Somme front, such as the angry Welsh dragon atop a plinth at the edge of Mametz Wood and the huge marble monument amidst the lovingly reconstructed trenches and tunnels at Vimy Ridge, where the Canadians commemorate their heavy losses. To experience these public memorials along with the wartime poetry and the post-war memoirs is to begin to understand the conflicts between individual and collective experience, a sense of meaningless loss and a belief in heroic sacrifice that are still at the unresolved heart of the British response to the Great War.

The immediate goal of this seminar, then, is to consider the continuing impact of the war on Britain. We will study the role of Britain in the Great War and encounter the British art, museums, and monuments that constitute the persistent and still conflicted cultural memory of it. We hope this seminar will awaken participants, and through them their students, to the deep, devastating, and lasting effects of war on a culture that has experienced it in a way the U.S. has not. We expect thus to develop an understanding of the British experience before, during, and after the war that will help Americans recover the First World War's suppressed importance in our own literature and culture. We also hope that an interdisciplinary, co-directed seminar will encourage teachers to use an interdisciplinary approach in their own teaching and perhaps try team-teaching when they return home.

## Content and Structure

The following is a general overview of the seminar. See the detailed schedule for a day-by-day breakdown of activities.

### Weeks One and Two

The first two weeks of the seminar will be held in London. This location will give us access to collections of significant artifacts and documents at the [Imperial War Museum](#) and the [National Army Museum](#) as well as to the unparalleled collections in the [British Library](#). The focus of these weeks will be on the history and memory of the wars. We will meet on weekday mornings to discuss the main texts of the seminar: John Keegan's *The First World War*; Angela Woollacott's *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War*; Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That*; Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*; and a selection of wartime poetry. We will also hear lectures from Professor David French of the Department of History, University College London and Dr. Alex Windscheffel, Lecturer in Modern British History, Royal Holloway College, University of London. We will also visit the Imperial War Museum in Lambeth (south London) and the National Army Museum in Chelsea.

In the afternoons, participants will be given ample time to explore the archives of the Imperial War Museum and the National Army Museum as well as do research at the British Library. Throughout the first week, seminar participants will meet individually with the directors to discuss appropriate resources in the British Library and the Imperial War and National Army Museums for their individual projects. Participants will either design a course module for implementation in their classroom when they return home or they will design a presentation on how the readings, museums, and monuments have changed how they think about the war.

### Week Three

Taking our cue from Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, the classic analysis of British literature and culture in World War I, we will spend the third week on the Western Front (France and Belgium) to see "where literary tradition and real life notably transect." This section of the seminar will allow us a better understanding of the realities of the war, which in turn will give us a greater appreciation for the various reactions to it. In addition, this week will allow us to see how Britain's engagement in the war is perpetuated by the British tourists who are evident at virtually every site. They often memorialize their own visits, either by leaving behind paper poppies to mark the names of their relatives or by writing revealing comments in the visitor books available at most memorials and cemeteries. One-hour seminar meetings will be held daily.

Transportation, lodging, and some meals will be provided by Bartlett's Battlefield Journeys, which has extensive experience conducting tours of the Western Front. Lodging sites will include [Ocean Villas](#), an inn whose reconstructed farmhouse cellar served as a British hospital during the Somme Offensive, and [Talbot House](#), an Anglican mission and clubhouse for British servicemen in the Ypres Salient that operates today as a hostel and historical site. Lodging on the Western Front will be comfortable but not luxurious; for this part of the trip, shared bedrooms and shared bathrooms will be the rule. Basic facility with French will be useful but not at all necessary. Hiking boots could be useful, particularly if it rains. There will be considerable walking on some days and participants should be advised that the terrain at some of the battle sites can be uneven.

John Keegan notes that “in every cathedral in France . . . will be seen a tablet bearing the inscription, ‘To the Glory of God and in memory of the one million men of the British Empire who died in the Great War and of whom the greatest number rest in France,’” and we will see his observation more than confirmed by the medieval cathedral of Amiens, which features not one but several memorials and even chapels devoted to remembering the British dead. A short drive away from Amiens is Albert, where we will tour the Musée Somme 1916 in the tunnels at the base of the basilica topped by the famous “reclining Madonna” knocked sideways by German shelling. We will also visit some of the main battlefield memorials on the Somme, incorporating relevant short readings on-site. We will walk the ghostly trenches of “Devil’s Wood” (Delville Wood) and view the stately neoclassical monument in stone and glass, with steles representing the sacrifice of the South African soldiers who died there. At Beaumont Hamel, the soldiers’ sense of solidarity with the German enemy begins to make sense when one sees how close the front lines were in some areas and how miserable the trench conditions were, especially in contrast to the comfort enjoyed by those on the home front. The Beaumont Hamel trenches are clustered around a majestic mound topped by the statue of a caribou grieving for the Canadian dead of Newfoundland, whose sacrifice is celebrated at a very personal level in the state-of-the-art museum nearby. We will also view the red dragon monument to Welsh forces at Mametz Wood.

A short distance away, we will visit the famous memorial to the missing of the Somme at Thiepval and the spectacular faux medieval tower commemorating the Ulster regiment. Just over the hill is the once decimated village of Pozières, over one end of whose main street looms a grieving bagpiper in stone, a memorial to heavy Scottish losses in the area. Within the village itself is another facet of cultural memory: the charmingly kitschy Tommy Café, whose interior is covered with British flags, photographs, and memorabilia, and in whose rear garden are reconstructed British and German trenches and dugouts, complete with salvaged weapons, clothed mannequins, and blaring gramophone music. In the afternoon we will journey northwards to tour the restored trenches and subterranean tunnels at Vimy Ridge. Although the most common visual image of the Western Front is the trench, the underground tunnels were a significant attempt, used by both Allies and the Germans, to break the deadlock by using underground explosives, a perspective brought to life in the novel *Birdsong* and several poems.

In Belgium, we will visit the once decimated city of Ypres, at whose town center is the grand Cloth Hall, which despite being the largest secular medieval building in Europe, is now devoted primarily to a museum of the Great War that shares the title of McRae’s poem, “In Flanders Fields.” Here we will experience representations of the British experience of the war, such as a simulated gas attack accompanied by a recorded reading of Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” and a dramatized march through the mud while under fire. Just around the corner we will visit the Anglican St. George’s Chapel, which, although a place of worship, is devoted entirely to memorializing the British dead of the Great War through monuments and memorabilia. Established in the 1920s to provide English pilgrims to Ypres a familiar place in which to worship, the chapel features many plaques and monuments that render it a shrine to the British dead as well as another example of how the British have “colonized” parts of the Western Front.

We will hike the short distance from Ypres to Essex Farm, site of the restored dugout and advanced dressing station where the Canadian field doctor John McRae wrote the war’s most famous poem, “In Flanders Fields,” which established the enduring British tradition of wearing poppies on Remembrance Day. At the Menin Gate, memorial to the 54,889 British missing of the

Ypres Salient, we will listen to the Last Post (the British equivalent of the American “Taps”), played every evening since the end of the war except during the German occupation (1939-45). We will linger there to read two poetic meditations on the attempt to memorialize the sacrifice at Ypres, Sassoon’s “On Passing the New Menin Gate” (which disparages the monument as a “sepulchre of crime”) and Ivor Gurney’s “War Books.” We will take a day trip to the surviving trenches at the infamous Hill 62 and the “Dugout Experience” of the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917. We will then return to London and our Bloomsbury lodgings.

During the trip to the Western Front, participants will be encouraged to begin reading Sebastian Faulks’ *Birdsong*, which has sold nearly half a million copies in Britain and was chosen in a British television poll as one of the top fifty books of the twentieth century. The novel treats the experience of British soldiers at the Somme and follows a modern woman’s efforts to understand her grandfather’s experience of the war. Although our formal discussions of *Birdsong* will not begin until we return to London, its descriptions of specific sites on the Somme, both during the battle and at the end of the twentieth century, will resonate with participants as they experience the same sites themselves.

#### **Week Four**

The last week of the seminar will begin with a discussion of the war’s aftermath in Britain. The starting-point will be the concluding chapters of Graves’s and Brittain’s memoirs, which describe their struggles to adjust to life in post-war Britain. Graves’s sense of post-war disillusionment and Brittain’s turn to socialism and pacifism were typical reactions, especially for those who had participated in the war. Discussion of *Birdsong* will draw together ideas and themes treated over the previous weeks, such as the tensions between immediate and remembered experience, past and present, soldiers and civilians, heroic sacrifice and tragic waste. During this last week, participants will prepare their final presentations and meet individually with us. Following the seminar, final projects and photos will be posted on the course web site. This web site will also allow us to continue the conversations begun during the seminar once we have returned to the United States.

#### **London Accommodations**

In London we will stay in Bloomsbury at [Campbell House](#), a University College London residence hall with access to a conference room. These rooms are comfortable but modest, with shared bathrooms (picture your college dorm room). There are 6 furnished kitchens available for our use; those who wish may be able to purchase meal plans at near-by dormitories. Alternatively, there is a grocery store nearby, and the neighborhood has many pubs, “cheap and cheerful” cafés, and ethnic restaurants. Seminar participants will be able to obtain a reader’s card from the nearby British Library upon presentation of a letter from an administrator from their home institution or from us.

Our London location offers easy access to Cambridge and Oxford, should participants wish to spend their weekend leisure time visiting these ancient university towns that significantly shaped the formative years of Graves, Brittain, and Brooke. Somerville College, Oxford was both the site of a military hospital described by inmates Graves (*Good-bye to All That*) and Sassoon (*Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*) and the epicenter of the dramatically contrasting pre- and immediate post-war subcultures vividly recounted in Vera Brittain’s *Testament of Youth*. From Cambridge, the medieval university town whose undergraduates enlisted in a PALS battalion specifically for Cambridge undergraduates and alumni, a pastoral three-mile walk takes

one to the poignantly preserved village of Grantchester, home of the paradigmatic war poet Rupert Brooke. Important sites in Grantchester include the Rupert Brooke Pub, the name and décor of which memorialize the poet, and the church tower immortalized in his poem, “The Old Vicarage, Grantchester.” Participants will also have the opportunity to punt on the River Cam, as Brooke did on his daily commute between Grantchester and Cambridge.

### **Finances**

Each participant will receive a stipend of \$3,000. In order to secure group arrangements for lodging at Campbell House and for a succession of overnight stays on the Western Front, participants will need to agree to a deduction from their stipends at the time of accepting a place in the seminar. Transportation expenses and museum entrance fees on the Western Front will be covered by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The stipend is counted as taxable income; we suggest you consult [IRS Publication 970](#) (*Tax Benefits for Education*) and an income tax professional. We have endeavored to keep costs as low as possible, but several factors – including exchange rates, airline fares, and one’s own spending habits – will determine how much of the seminar is covered by the stipend.

### **Selection**

We seek teachers from a variety of disciplines. We anticipate that the seminar will have the most obvious appeal to secondary school teachers of English literature and European history, but we also welcome applications from others, especially those who teach political science, economics, and art history. We hope to attract teachers with different levels of experience but with a common commitment to learning and exchanging information.

### **Course credit**

Participants will be awarded 40 continuing education units through Wright State University. They may also apply for 4 graduate credit hours through Wright State University, which would also require a more formal final project to be submitted in final form for evaluation after the conclusion of the seminar.

### **Seminar Directors**

Both of us have extensive experience in teaching and scholarship that blends Literature and History. In 2000 we co-founded an interdisciplinary reading group; today its members come from the Literature and History departments of three Ohio universities. In May 2004 we presented a panel on interdisciplinary team-teaching at the national Writing Across the Curriculum conference. We have also team-taught several courses, including the one on which this seminar is partly based, “World War I in British History and Culture,” taught in 2002 and 2005. We have both spent considerable time in London and have traveled to the Western Front to explore sites for this seminar.

Our research interests are also interdisciplinary. We have both have published independently on British history and culture. Among Barry Milligan’s current research projects is a projected book on the Artists Rifles, a regiment formed by London artists that played an important role in the First World War, including the training of artist-officers such as Wilfred Owen, Paul Nash, and Edward Thomas. Carol Engelhardt’s current research project (which she began as a participant in an NEH seminar in the summer of 2002) examines debates over the Eucharist in the Church of England from 1830-1921, with particular attention to how questions

of religious identity become especially intense at moments of national crisis, including the Sepoy Mutiny and World War I. We are beginning to research a joint project on whether World War I encouraged British participants to convert to Roman Catholicism.

### **Application Procedure**

Please see the detailed directions for submitting an application. In general, the following items constitute a completed application to this seminar:

- four copies of the completed [application cover sheet](#),
- four copies of a detailed résumé,
- four copies of an application essay as outlined below, and
- two letters of recommendation (sent separately).

Please note that filling out and submitting the on-line cover sheet does not constitute an application. The cover sheet must be submitted on-line and printed out and submitted to us, along with the other components of the application. For general information about summer seminars and institutes, please see the [NEH website](#).

Your completed application should be postmarked no later March 1, 2006. It should be sent to:

Prof. Carol Engelhardt  
Department of History  
Wright State University  
3640 Colonel Glenn Highway  
Dayton, OH 45435

Perhaps the most important part of the application is the essay that must be submitted as part of the complete application. This essay should include any personal and academic information that is relevant to your application; your reasons for applying to this seminar; your interest, both intellectual and personal, in World War I in British history and culture; your qualifications to do the work of this seminar and make a contribution to it; what you hope to accomplish by participation, including any individual research and writing projects; and the relation of the study to your teaching.

Again, thank you for your interest in our seminar. If you still have questions, please contact either of us by e-mail ([carol.engelhardt@wright.edu](mailto:carol.engelhardt@wright.edu) or [barry.milligan@wright.edu](mailto:barry.milligan@wright.edu)). We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Carol Engelhardt  
Associate Professor, Department of History

Barry Milligan  
Professor, Department of English