

The Muted Voice: The Limitations of Museums and the Depiction of Controversial History

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Abstract

In a thorough discussion of military museums – and in this particular instance, the National Army Museum – there must be a frank and realistic assessment of the limitations that factor into how military history can be depicted. This perspective paper considers two specific aspects of this process. First, it discusses the challenges confronting the National Army Museum when the history it covers cannot be fully depicted in the sterility of a museum setting. Second, it considers how the museum should deal with controversial histories. After all, the history of the British Army is to a large degree a history of war and imperialism, and an entire range of ethical and political perspectives are inevitably involved in the portrayal of that history. This paper examines these challenges – the limitations which can mute the museum’s voice – and concludes that once these factors are acknowledged, the National Army Museum’s strengths and successes can be clearly understood and better appreciated.

The National Army Museum is tasked with a deceptively simple undertaking – to tell the story of the British Army. Easy enough, one might think, until the full particulars of this mission are taken into account. Substantial challenges confront those who are responsible for the museum’s depiction and interpretation of the army’s history, and in this paper I wish to focus on two issues in particular: first, factors that limit the museum’s ability to carry out its charter; secondly, some of the controversies that arise from changing perceptions of warfare and an ever-evolving understanding of the army’s history.

In a 1956 book entitled *De la Connaissance Historique*, the French historian Henri-Irenee Marrou wrote ‘The massive intrusion of the historian’s personality – his thoughts, intentions, inclination – shapes his historical knowledge, and gives it form and countenance.’ I mention this by way of preemptive acknowledgement, because my own personality and experiences are going to intrude into this paper in some deliberate and carefully considered ways. I am a professional historian now, but I was also once a soldier, and I have chosen to approach my topic from a soldier’s perspective rather than that of an academic.

It is an old truism that one should not present a problem unless one is also ready to propose a solution. With apologies, I am going to violate that stricture. I am going to pose numerous questions, and I simply do not have answers for all of them. Nor do I presume that the answers I do offer are necessarily the only ones to consider. But this is precisely the venue in which to raise the difficult and sometimes divisive questions which defy simple answers, especially if the questions can spark the sort of discussions which produce well-considered answers and equitable solutions.

The Limitations of Museums

A good place to start is with a frank assessment of the inherent limitations that are a part of this process. After all, recognizing what museums cannot do well may enable us to do better those things which *can* be done well, and in the case of the National Army Museum, this might thereby help to focus its finite energies and resources on those aspects of the army’s story to which it can do full justice. So what, then, are some of the limitations facing this museum?

For one, it cannot show war as it actually is. I say this with the full understanding that the National Army Museum's primary focus is the history of the British Army and not specifically the history of war, but warfare provides the context and setting for so much of the army's story. War is the thematic element that runs throughout the army's entire history, and yet even here in this place dedicated to portraying that history, we cannot show that part of the story as it actually is. We cannot even come close. The cloister-like sterility of a museum can present a one-dimensional depiction of war, but most of the reality of the experience is necessarily lost in the distillation.

In its depiction of war, the museum is restricted not by limited intentions but by the limitations of its medium. Thomas Carlyle, considering the problems of depicting historical events, asked, 'Is it even possible to represent them as they were?' In this case, I believe the answer must be 'no.' No museum can show the viewer more than a shadow of the reality of war. This is probably not a great revelation to many observers – indeed, it is perhaps a self-evident concept. But this matter impacts directly on how the museum portrays this part of the army's history and it is a vitally important point, so at the risk of stating the obvious, let me be clear as to what I mean by the undepictable realities of war.

A cursory reading of military history ranging from the Peninsular War through the Crimea, the First World War and into the present day is enough to show that the experience of war is frequently described in terms of mud, lice, filth, shells, fear, noise, exhaustion, horrific wounds and violent death. This is generally understood on an intellectual level even by people who have no personal experience of war, but these are just surface details. Beyond these descriptions, war is also an appalling waste of blood and treasure in the midst of which occur the most amazing acts of bravery, loyalty, compassion and fraternal love. To this list we should also add those things which are less often remarked upon but which are every bit as much a part of the reality. War is drudgery, monotony, loneliness, and boredom – stultifying, crushing boredom. War is suffering on a horrendous scale, and too often it is civilians who suffer more than soldiers. It is dehumanizing on more levels than just the moral consequences of killing. Being a soldier in the field means defecating into an open slit latrine if you are fortunate enough to have one, or an empty bully beef tin or ration bag if you aren't so lucky. War is having to urinate on yourself because you are lying motionless for six hours in an ambush position without moving or talking. War is an olfactory assault of unforgettable smells – burning diesel fuel, human excrement, decomposing bodies and the appalling stink of your own filthy self after weeks without bathing. War is dehydration and diarrhea and jungle rot and bad food and skin fungus and immersion foot and frostbite and heat stroke.

All these things and more are war, and it is utterly beyond the capacity of any museum to show them in such a way that viewers who have not personally experienced them will then see them, feel them, and smell them as if they had. We can show a representation of these things, but we cannot show the thing itself. For an example of this, I would recommend the trench exhibit in the First World War section of the National Army Museum – it is an incredibly well done display, but it is certainly not a true-to-life depiction of soldiers' experience of trench warfare, as it is altogether too clean, too dry, too comfortable, and too safe. Ironically, for realism one of the best displays in this museum might well be the new exhibit known as IED Alley, but its realism probably only registers on military veterans of modern war. IED Alley is a corridor in the museum which has been artfully designed so as to replicate a village street in Iraq, complete with a few hidden IED spots. IED, of course, means Improvised Explosive Device, that dreaded modern incarnation of the booby trap which, perhaps more than any other weapon, has come to represent the nature of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. I doubt whether the general public is even aware of how profoundly unsettling this small, contrived space in the museum can be to soldiers who have encountered the actual thing in real life – upon stepping into that exhibit a veteran instantly finds himself recognizing the suspicious objects, the blind spots, and the dead ground that in another time and place would mean that something terrible and deadly was lying in wait, very close by. It was not an exhibit I lingered in for very long.

In spite of well-designed exhibits such as this, however, the fact remains that that a museum setting can achieve no more than a mere suggestion of the hardships and deprivations, the physical and emotional strains of an infantryman's life. In short, we cannot create a true-to-life display of soldiers' experience of war. Modern armies go to great lengths and considerable

expense to create training scenarios that replicate the experience of combat as closely as possible, but even these fall short of the final reality. The National Army Museum cannot give its visitors more than the remotest sense of what war is actually like, unless it were to first deprive them of sleep for several days and then require them to belly-crawl through darkened exhibits in several inches of stinking mud while curators fire the odd shot in their general direction. A tempting idea, perhaps, but alas, impracticable...

So what does it mean, that war cannot be depicted as it actually is? Should the museum therefore make no attempt at portrayal? On the contrary – it only means that we must be all the more mindful of these factors as we endeavor to show the public this part of the army's story. When it comes to the experience of war and the hard truths of how soldiers have lived and died, I think the National Army Museum has struck the correct balance in the tone of its exhibits. Better to have limited, restrained and understated portrayals rather than garish exhibits which go too far in the other direction and make clumsy mock-ups of the bitter reality. Not everyone agrees with this idea; at least one recent visitor's comment on the museum criticized the lack of 'wow' factor in the exhibits. Very well, then; let us have the 'wow', by all means, but not at the expense of the men and women who died in this country's service. Soldiers' deaths should never be reduced to tawdry tableaux of manikins posed in sham attitudes of conflict and death, in a London Dungeon-style sideshow of macabre titillation, entertaining viewers but utterly lacking in dignity. As currently designed, the exhibits in the National Army Museum are educational, informative, interesting and respectful; so they should remain and so should new ones be.

I would suggest that a better course is to identify those elements of the soldier's experience which *can* be depicted in a museum setting, to acknowledge the realities which we are unable to accurately depict, and to then endeavor to present as honest a portrayal of the whole as is possible. This, I think, the National Army Museum already does well.

Photography can perhaps help to bridge this gap of undepictable reality better than most other mediums, but even there the limitations are unavoidable. For one thing, photography as a technology encompasses barely more than a century and a half of the army's history, and cinematography even less than that. Also we should remember that while a photograph can impart something of the moment to the viewer, and can sometimes even prompt a profound emotional reaction, it is still a mere shadow of the thing itself. As one British soldier wrote of the horror of Gallipoli, 'No photograph could show the misery of those trenches...' But if we cannot show, at least we can tell. Well-written narratives, especially ones that draw on the voices of soldiers themselves, can explain some portion of the things we cannot show.

Another area in which the museum's voice is muted is that the story it is charged with telling is simply too large. The history of the British Army is too vast for easy encapsulation. It spans more than four centuries and hundreds of battles, it encompasses the individual stories of millions of men and women, it covers enormous changes both in its own structures and in the society from which it has been drawn, and it is so much more than just stories of war. It is also stories of peacetime service, of those men and women who never heard a shot fired in anger but who dedicated years of their lives to the nation's service. It is the story of lonely garrisons on the fringes of empire, of expeditions that fought no battles but instead built railroads and bridges, it is a story of explorations and civil governance and hard training. It is the story of great traditions and bitterly resented amalgamations, of soldiers' lives at home and abroad through good times and bad. It is far more history than one museum has time or space to tell.

So then the question becomes, whose story will be told? How should the museum sift the vast trove of the army's experiences and select from it the few details which will be depicted in these exhibits? The epic moments and the heroic personalities deserve their places in the pantheon, of course, but so too do those vignettes that show what it was like to serve in an army which was not always at war. The day-to-day experience of soldiering is also part of the history, even if not so exciting as stories of battle, and it may actually show more of what a soldier's life was like in centuries past.

The museum cannot hope to please all visitors, perhaps especially not the old soldiers who would each like to find something of their own experiences depicted in these halls. John Strawson prefaces *Beggars in Red*, his excellent but narrow history of the British Army, by saying that his book is 'necessarily selective...' but that 'it also strives to be representative.'

So it must be with the National Army Museum's portrayal – selective, but as representative as possible. Sadly, some parts of the story that deserve telling will remain untold, and thus the voice that tells the story is muted once more.

The Changing Face of Warfare, and the Handling of Controversial History

When the museum's voice is not muted, it is sometimes obscured by arguments over the interpretation of controversial history, and this brings us to the matter of how difficult histories are to be handled. War has long been with us and may always be, but warfare and the armies that fight wars are always changing. (I stand by this statement, even though I acknowledge that conventional armies are often criticized, with good reason, as being hide-bound bastions of inflexibility, clinging to outmoded traditions and doctrines and prone to enter new wars by trying to fight the *last* war.) It is an old truism that the passage of time often changes the perception of the event; thus, the ways in which we think about war change, certainly across generational divides, and so too do perceptions of the army change.

Samuel Johnson once quipped that no man would enlist in the army who could get himself into prison instead; 'a man in a jail,' he said, 'has more room, better food, and commonly better company.' Doctor Johnson was not the only man in his day to have a low opinion of a soldier's life – from its inception Britain's Standing Army was variously regarded as a drain on the treasury or a potential tool of tyranny, and was even more frequently viewed as the last resort of reprobates, drunkards and syphilitic degenerates. Fortunately, the army's treatment of the soldier and the British public's view of its army have both changed for the better, but changing perceptions can themselves create other controversies along the way.

British military history provides an apparently inexhaustible supply of these points of contention, particularly in the cases of some of the nation's wars. Without becoming entangled in a bramble thicket of philosophical debate, I would venture to say that there are good wars and there are bad wars, recognizing that all wars involve violence and death, destruction and suffering. We cannot pretend that it is otherwise. And therein lies the first thorny patch of at least one perpetual controversy, because some might argue that *any* discussion of military history that does not focus solely on the horrors of war is, by default, a glorification of war.

This point of view was made very clear to me recently when I was having a pint with some friends in Edinburgh (all of whom were fellow academics) and the subject of military museums came up. One young woman said that when she visited such a museum it so offended her that she felt ill with disgust. 'All those rooms full of medals and badges and all this military rubbish,' she said. 'Not a single mention of all the poor people those soldiers killed just so they could win a medal.' In her view all military museums are inherently immoral, and she is not the only one to hold this view.

Such an opinion is an egregious generalization, to put it mildly. After all, the National Army Museum's purpose is to tell the story of the British Army and the men and women who served in it, and the glorification of war has nothing to do with it. It is absolutely possible, I contend, to present the army's history in a straightforward, factual manner that allows for discussions of its multi-faceted realities without yielding to the narrow bias of anti-war diatribes, while at the same time avoiding the diametric sin of wrapping the soldier in a cloak of patriotic adoration that admits no faults. Kipling wrote that 'Single men in barracks don't grow into plaster saints', and that is true of all soldiers, men and women alike. But while Britain's soldiers might not be fit for canonization, it is right to commemorate their contributions to British history; though they should not be idolized (for as idols, soldiers truly *do* have feet of clay), their service to the nation still merits sincere respect. Of the many things the National Army Museum already does well, achieving this delicate balance is perhaps one of the things it does best. But this balance does not come about automatically, and it can only be maintained through continual review, evaluation and vigilance.

What reply, if any, does the National Army Museum need to make to critics who would charge it with aggrandizing the history of British arms while failing to acknowledge what some might argue is the army's complicity in immoral wars? Should such a question, which I believe levels an inaccurate accusation, even be justified with a response? The museum's directors, curators and historians will need to consider this question as they guide the museum's redesign,

and decide if there is a place in the forum for such a discussion.

This brings us to the matter of historical controversies. Is there a place in the National Army Museum's depiction of the history for such debate? I would say that there is, but these debates should be approached carefully. I do *not* mean by this that the museum should avoid direct confrontations with the difficult parts of the army's story. After all, history which does not confront and rigorously examine its subject is no longer history, but becomes instead an accomplice in the perpetuation of myth. Rather, what I am saying is that as much as possible the museum's portrayal of the army's history ought to be kept out of the mire of political argument. The National Army Museum's mission is to depict the army's experience in controversial wars, and not necessarily to be the final arbiter of the validity of the wars themselves. For an example of a persistently controversial subject which illustrates this problem, one through which the museum must continually steer a path, we need look no further than the matter of British imperialism.

There is no place in the world today for colonial empires won by conquest and maintained by force of arms, but that does not mean that a mantle of shame should be draped over Britain's imperial history, or that we ought to castigate the army that fought the empire's wars. After all, this is not the Museum of Sackcloth and Ashes, nor is it the Museum of National Contrition for the Sins of an Imperial Past. This is the National Army Museum, and no offense is committed by commemorating the history of Britain's soldiers in the venue which was created specifically for that purpose. Furthermore, I would contend that no apology is necessary for doing so.

There are certainly places and times appropriate for discussion of the relative merits or iniquities of British imperialism, but I suggest that such debate is not the National Army Museum's primary purpose or concern. Britain's soldiers have rendered honorable service to their sovereign and their nation even when the wars which they fought were unworthy of their service and sacrifice, and it is possible to recognize the worthiness of the service even when we believe that the war itself was worthless. For instance, we can commemorate the valour of the 44th Regiment of Foot's last stand at Gandamak in 1842 even as we criticize the military debacle that sent them to their deaths on that cold Afghan hilltop. For this reason I argue that even when we are justified in criticizing the mismanagement or the dubious *casus belli* of some of the wars which the army was called upon to fight, it is still possible and appropriate to commemorate the service.

Even in those wars now regarded as national embarrassments or misadventures of ill-advised foreign policy, there are still stories of selfless service, loyalty, and bravery worth preserving. It is appropriate that debates arise over the political machinations that led to old wars, and it is right that we take a critical view of the justifications offered for any war, but these disputes should never obstruct the National Army Museum's telling of the army's story and thus shift its focus from the army itself.

But the question remains, what is to be done with those issues which incite emotionally-charged disagreement? How should the National Army Museum handle the controversies that arise from an ever-evolving understanding of a past that is now regarded much differently than it was in years gone by, especially considering that it will no doubt be perceived differently again in the future? It is appropriate for the museum to discuss the controversial episodes in the army's history, and to show how perceptions of those events have changed, but this comes with an important caveat. It is one thing to create a narrative derived from modern, and yes, perhaps we can even say 'enlightened' understandings of past events, but it would be another thing altogether to create a narrative of the army's story which was entirely dependent on modern and revisionist interpretations. We would be guilty of considerable intellectual hubris if we were to assume that our modern understanding of the past is better simply *because* it is modern.

Anthony Babington, in his study of capital courts-martial in the British Army during the First World War, made an observation on this matter which is worth heeding. 'It is always a temptation,' he wrote, 'to pass judgement on the events of recent history according to the outlook of the moment.' If museums are to be kept free of the ever-shifting vagaries of current opinion, then the handling of controversial history should be one which marshals the historical evidence and debunks outright myths and fallacies, but which also avoids smug judgments. This is particularly important when we consider that whatever interpretation this museum puts

on any given subject is likely to be seen by many viewers as the 'official' version of events. Fortunately, the National Army Museum already recognizes this. Its intent, in its own words, 'is to provide the facts that may help our users to form their own opinions...' This is a policy worth holding onto as the museum sets its course going forward, bearing in mind all the while that there will always be those issues on which the museum must take a position and issues on which the museum must make an interpretation of the evidence, and whatever storms of debate ensue will have to be weathered as they come.

It is an old truism that the whole truth is comprised of both good news and bad, and this brings us to yet another question: does the National Army Museum have any responsibility to present both sides of the British Army's history? After all, for every Rorke's Drift there is an Isandhlwana; for every El Alamein there is a fall of Singapore. Is there a place in this venue for the less-than-shining moments – stories such as the disastrous retreat from Kabul in 1842, or the needless loss of lives at Spion Kop in the Boer War, or the surrender to the Turks at Kut in 1916? What are we to do with the stories of British soldiers who did not die as heroes but who just died? After all, there is nothing heroic about dying of cholera in the Crimea or dysentery in the Dardanelles, nothing glorious in succumbing to fever on a troop ship en route to India, and nothing at all patriotic about being killed by a short round fired in error by one's own artillery. Do these stories belong in the museum's depiction of the army's history? I would say that they do, since the army's story would be incomplete without those chapters and others like them. Here again, though, acknowledging facts such as these does not mean that they must therefore dominate the narrative. On the contrary – a frank discussion of those moments when the British Army experienced disaster and loss can lend even more credibility to the exhibits that depict the army's legitimate triumphs.

What about the arguments that sometimes attach to displays of war trophies? There is a very understandable and sometimes emotional reaction to seeing an object once venerated in your own army displayed as a trophy in another army's museum, and some people find such displays objectionable. I am not one of them, as long as certain conditions are met. As long as the exhibits are not designed in such a way as to deliberately denigrate the people who were Britain's enemies in its past wars, then no offense is committed by displaying trophies captured from them in those wars. Every army, I would argue, is entitled to display its trophies fairly fought and fairly won, whether they be battle standards, regimental colours, Imperial eagles, or the weapons and accoutrements of the enemy's soldiers – even Joseph Bonaparte's silver chamber-pot captured at Vitoria was a legitimate, albeit rather odd, prize of battle. I would not say, however, that this absolutism extends to the display of objects which might more accurately be described as stolen loot or the booty of quasi-official brigandage – for example, the pillaging that accompanied the destruction of the Qing Summer Palace in 1860 at the end of the Second Opium War seems more a case of rampant thievery than anything else, and the display of objects taken in such circumstances is undeniably problematic.

Finally, how should the museum deal with the subject of old animosities and new alliances? One of the conundrums presented by the ever-changing face of war is that today's friends are sometimes yesterday's enemies. What responsibility, if any, does the National Army Museum have for being sensitive to the feelings and opinions of people whose nationalities or backgrounds place them on the side of Britain's former foes? Is the museum guilty of insult or affront by commemorating the army's past victories over those people? I think not, and I say this from the perspective of one whose own country has twice been Britain's enemy. I remember very clearly what I felt the first time I saw the United States referred to as 'the enemy' on a British military monument. It did not offend me, but it broadened my perspectives a bit. So I pose the question again: what responsibility is owed to those people who are the other side of the army's story? The list of nations and peoples who have been Britain's enemies is a long one – does the National Army Museum have any obligation to tell their side of the story, or give their version of events?

I think not. After all, this is the British Army's museum, not a museum of international military history. If the material here is presented accurately with due diligence to scholarship and does not stoop to vilifying old enemies, then I would say the museum has fulfilled its responsibilities and it need not fear criticism from that quarter or any other.

The challenges inherent in a faithful depiction of the army's history are considerable, and the limitations cannot be ignored, but I believe the potentials are greater than the limitations. There is so much that the National Army Museum can do well, and so much it already does well, that it need not be hobbled by the restrictions and controversies which are an inevitable part of the process. The museum's voice may be muted in some aspects, and there will always be controversies that cloud other parts of the story, but when it comes to honouring the service of the men and women who have been Britain's soldiers past and present, I believe there is nothing to mute its voice then. And as the United States is finally, belatedly, constructing its own national museum for the US Army, I very much hope that it will take a close look at the commendable example of the National Army Museum as a model for how to devise a sensitive, informative and well-considered commemoration of a nation's army.

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