

Book Review

Ross Wilson, *Cultural Heritage of the Great War in Britain*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, hardback £65.00, pp.245

In this thought-provoking monograph, Ross Wilson examines how the Great War is deployed in contemporary Britain and what this tells us about its cultural heritage. It is a fascinating book that provides an insight into the appropriation of the Great War in our language and media imagery and the utility of referencing the Great War in modern Britain, but which could do more to situate this analysis within a wider context of literature on the memory of the Great War and public perceptions of the same.

The first discursive chapter examines the contemporary associations and meanings attached to slang and sayings used in public discourse that evoke the Great War, such as 'in the trenches', and 'behind the lines'. Drawing on newspapers and political debates in particular, Wilson convincingly illustrates how these phrases, and associated understandings of class and authority in the popular memory of the Great War, are utilized within political discussion; examination of the usage of 'Over by Christmas' and 'Blighty' is particularly interesting. Wilson successfully contends that this war discourse is part of the cultural heritage of the Great War, and that these phrases have remained in usage because they facilitate comment on current events while bringing to bear the symbolism of popular understandings of the Great War.

The same argument is well supported in the following chapter, which explores how three dominant images of the conflict - soldiers in trenches; the battlefields; and the cemeteries - are mobilized by groups on both sides of the political spectrum to 'communicate issues of politics, society and identity across modern Britain' (p 57). Discussion of the mobilization of images of non-white soldiers to make points about contemporary diversity and the legitimacy of belonging in British society is fascinating. The association of the soldiers in trenches and battlefields with victimhood, and the position of battlefields and cemeteries as symbols of shared sacrifice and trauma, enables these images to encourage reflection on shared experiences and thus to be used to foster local and national identities. The cemeteries, Wilson argues, have been problematized over time, shifting from an official discourse of the war as worthwhile sacrifice to a symbol of soldiers as victims of a futile war and a support for pacifist messages, and the usage and rejection of the poppy provides interesting discussion. The association of the image of the soldier in the trenches with victimhood and with class division, and of the battlefields with official incompetence, enables these images to be deployed to critique authority and the state, a usage of the Great War that is identified in varied frames throughout the book.

The primacy of the soldier's perspective in the way that Britons consume and understand the Great War is highlighted in the third chapter. The apparent authenticity and 'truth' of representations from the soldier's perspective bestows them with an unchallengeable authority. This leads to the use of soldiers' voices to frame comment on current conflicts and politics. The war poets retain power here when criticizing those with responsibility. The perspective of the Witness is also observed to be significant; the public is instructed to remember, but how the war is interpreted might differ. Wilson shows that witnessing and remembrance are used to demarcate particular local and national communities, but also ideological communities; remembrance has become increasingly focused upon the cost of the war and is used to 'consolidate dissonant or anti-authoritarian identities' (p 127), but it is also mobilized by right-leaning groups.

The fourth chapter examines the usage of some of the dominant myths about the Great War. Wilson argues they have retained cultural capital because they have utility for the groups who deploy them, regardless of their accuracy. The myth of the 'lost generation', for example, both calls the public to remember and serves as a tool to highlight the betrayal of the working class by the ruling class. This association enables its deployment not only as comment on the Great War but also the problems of contemporary economic recession. Criticism of power and accusations of official culpability is also behind the usage of 'Lions led by Donkeys', which Wilson shows is deployed not just in relation to the military but the state more widely. Crucially, it is shown that such usage of myths to assess the present occurs on both sides of the political spectrum.

While Wilson is correct to argue that representations of the Great War have retained currency because of what they communicate about the present, there is little discussion of how, when and why representations of the Great War became and stayed prominent in the popular memory and gained the meanings that cause contemporaries to interpret them as they do today. The chronological trajectory of these representations could have been explained using existing literature, which is mischaracterized. Wilson contends that existing scholarship neglects why the Great War has been remembered as it has, but this overlooks significant works, notably Dan Todman's *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (Hambledon and London, 2005), an excellent text centered on that very question. In addition, while the interpretations of the actors deploying representations of the Great War – often politicians or the media – are well discussed, their reception by the general public might have been given greater consideration.

The fifth chapter assesses how the Great War is displayed in museums and memorials, including the cultural value of the witness perspective, and how forms of display can engage the visitor in active and passive acts of witnessing and remembrance and construct regional and national identities. Indeed, Wilson's overall illustration of the contemporary power of representations of the Great War highlights that museums must consider what they communicate when exhibiting the Great War.

Wilson makes an important contribution to understandings of the popular memory of the Great War by demonstrating that individuals, communities and groups, often with opposing political ideologies, continue to utilize representations of the Great War to comment on, to validate ideas in, and to activate identity in, the present. It is used subversively, to critique power relations, authority and the state, but it is also used in conservative ways: to fashion (potentially exclusionary) regional and national identities and to advocate (potentially threatened) traditional values. This utility has maintained the Great War's place within public discourse and, Wilson argues, made the popular memory of the war resistant to revision. Wilson's illustration of the power of selective and often inaccurate representations of the Great War in contemporary society indicates the necessity of encouraging public engagement with more historically-informed interpretations in order that they might more actively negotiate the Great War's cultural heritage.

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