

Commemorating the Crimean, South African and First World Wars: A Case-study of the Royal Engineers, 1856–1922.

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The First World War is often held to be a watershed in the memorialisation of war in Britain. This article, through an exploration of the Royal Engineers' commemorative space at their headquarters in Chatham, argues that the post–1918 war memorial boom displays not only divergences from, but also continuities with, Victorian and Edwardian practices. Thus, although the mass volunteerism and conscription of 1914–1918 resulted in both the rank and file and the bereaved being drawn into the memorialisation process for the first time, memorial forms and messages, nonetheless, retained firm links with commemorative rituals of the late nineteenth century.

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At the dedication of the war memorial to the 19,655 officers and men of the Royal Engineers who had fallen in the First World War, the reporter from the *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News* was taken with the emotional power and permanency of the commemorative space that this addition to the Corps' memory sites had created: 'When every member of the crowd who watched the unveiling has returned to dust, the obelisk will continue its work. Its dignity and beauty are increased by the setting. On one side lies the Crimean Memorial, and on the other is the South African War Memorial, the obelisk completing the picture'.¹ These three memorials – Digby Wyatt's Crimean Arch, Ingress Bell's South African Arch, and David Bateman Hutton's and Thomas Lumsden

¹ *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, 21 July 1922.

Taylor's Great War obelisk – certainly do form an impressive landscape of remembrance at the Corps' headquarters at Brompton Barracks.² They also provide a fascinating insight into the changes and continuities in commemorative practice in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain.

Since the 1990s there has been a dramatic growth in the literature dealing with memory and conflict. As part of this movement, memorials to the fallen have, with increasing frequency, become the focus of attention. In much of this work, the First World War has been identified as a critical moment in the evolution of war memorialisation in Britain. Bob Bushaway has located the desire to commemorate all losses, regardless of rank, in the volunteerism of 1914, while Thomas Lacqueur has viewed the creation of the Graves Registration Committee in March 1915, with its remit to identify and mark the burial places of the fallen, as a 'new era in remembrance'.³ Occasionally, efforts have been made to trace the roots of the post-1918 war memorial boom. In his exhaustive study of memorialisation in the interwar years, Alex King has highlighted the South African War, 1899–1902, as an important transitional stage, noting that, 'Commemoration of those who died in the Boer War foreshadowed that of the Great War'.⁴ Both Alan Borg and Ken Inglis have gone a little further back. Borg has contended that in form and function war memorials altered over the course of the nineteenth century.

² The space continues to be used for the Corps' commemorative activity. In September 2018, panels naming those killed in action since 1945 were added to the First World War memorial. (I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this information.)

³ Bob Bushaway, 'Name upon Name: The Great War and Remembrance', in *The Myths of the English*, ed. by R. Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 138–40; T. Lacqueur, 'Memory and Naming in the Great War', in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. by J. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 152.

⁴ Alex King, *Memorials of the Great War in Britain: The Symbolism and Politics of Remembrance* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 42–44 and 68–70. See also Angela Gaffney, *Aftermath: Remembering the Great War in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998), 23–24 and Stefan Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 20–21.

Having initially focused on the glorification of individual commanders or celebration of specific victories, a shift towards the lionisation of ordinary soldiers occurred in the wake of the Crimean War.⁵ For Inglis, army reforms triggered by the war in the Crimea rather than the conflict itself instituted the move towards democratisation in remembrance. Noting the significance of the emotional bonds forged between regiments and their parent communities by the Regulation of the Forces Act of 1871, he has argued that commemoration of the war dead became, for the first time, a matter of civil as well as military pride.⁶

The Crimean War, the South African War and the Great War have, then, all been viewed as important stepping stones in memorialisation. All three conflicts saw greater civil engagement with the army and a greater interest in the life and death of the common soldier. The events in the Crimea, brought to the attention of the British public by the reporting of William Howard Russell in *The Times*, provided the first important step in this shift in attitudes. With many of Britain's emerging middle-classes volunteering to serve in the popular cause, and with Queen Victoria showing an immense regard for her soldiers, encapsulated in the striking of a new medal, the Victoria Cross, for supreme bravery on the battlefield, the army acquired a patina of respectability.⁷ This new-found interest in the fate of the nation's armed forces was reinforced during the war against the Boers at the end of Victoria's reign. Once again, a faltering start to the war effort saw volunteers rush to the colours, this time in their tens of thousands, and, once again, a revolution in communications technology enabled a public, well-educated in popular

⁵ Alan Borg, *War Memorials. From antiquity to the present* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991), 104–124.

⁶ Ken Inglis, 'The Homecoming: the War Memorial Movement in Cambridge, England', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 27 (1992), 587–588.

⁷ Olive Anderson, *A Liberal State at War. English Politics and Economics during the Crimean War* (London: Macmillan, 1967).

patriotism and imperialism, to receive an endless supply of war stories from the fighting front.⁸ Finally, the emotional attachment of civil society for the military was bolstered further by the demands of total warfare between 1914 and 1918. Mass volunteerism in the early stages of the war followed by conscription from 1916 brought about a revolution in the social composition of the armed forces.⁹ For the first time, the demographics of the military closely reflected those of the civilian world. This, combined with an unprecedented death toll and the government's decision not to allow the repatriation of bodies, gave rise to an all-consuming public interest in commemorating the fallen.

The period from the Crimean War to the First World War was also a critical time in the evolution of the Royal Engineers. Although a Corps of Engineers had been in operation since the early eighteenth century this consisted solely of officers, with non-commissioned ranks serving in the Corps of Royal Sappers and Miners. It was only as part of wider reforms to the army in the wake of the Crimean War that the two Corps were amalgamated in October 1856 and the headquarters transferred from Woolwich to the present-day site in Chatham.¹⁰ The scope and nature of the war in South Africa, with a brief opening phase of set-piece battles followed by a protracted and brutal guerrilla endgame, led to an extension of the Corps' establishment and duties. Over 8,000 Royal Engineers were mobilised, providing a wide range of services from telegraphy and photography to the construction of vast railway and blockhouse networks designed to ensnare Boer *Bittereinders*.¹¹ By the eve of the First World War the Corps' strength had grown to 25,000 men and, over the next four years, was to increase tenfold. The Western

⁸ John Gooch, ed., *The Boer War. Direction, experience and image* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 187–244.

⁹ Mark Connelly, *Steady the Buffs! A Regiment, a Region, and the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 233.

¹⁰ Whitworth Porter, *History of the Corps of Royal Engineers, Volume II* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1889), 147–148.

¹¹ *Bittereinders* was the name given to Boers who fought on until peace was signed in May 1902.

Front's unique admixture of modern destructive technologies and traditional siege conditions placed an enormous burden on Chatham to speed up the provision of trained men. Specialist units increased from just over two hundred in 1914 to nearly two thousand by 1918, but the diversification of tasks was so great that moves were taken by the end of the war to remove responsibility for communications from the Royal Engineers' remit, and the Royal Corps of Signals was eventually established in 1920.¹² The seven decades spanning these three major conflicts were, therefore, critical in the formation of the Corps' sense of identity. During this period, it became an all-ranks service, moved to its new headquarters at Brompton Barracks, and underwent a dramatic expansion in personnel and duties, yet it also faced some uncertainty as the increasing technological demands of war saw it shed some of its key responsibilities.¹³

In their work on Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in Cambridge, Elizabeth Hammerton and David Cannadine highlighted the dangers of examining rituals of memorialisation in isolation at the national level, and instead called for more contextualised discussions focusing on the practice of tight-knit communities.¹⁴ It is the aim of this article to answer this call. Through a detailed study of the construction of the memorial landscape at Brompton Barracks, light will be shed on how the Corps of Royal Engineers responded to local and national narratives surrounding the Crimean, South African and First World Wars to shape and rework its sense of self. The approach will go beyond the simple deconstruction of memorial iconography and, instead, look at the often

¹² Peter Kendall, *The Royal Engineers at Chatham, 1750–2012* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2012), 93–118 and 140–144.

¹³ As well as losing responsibility for communications, the Corps also handed over control of mechanical transport to the Army Service Corps in 1914. Michael Young, *Army Service Corps, 1902–1918* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books Ltd., 2000).

¹⁴ Elizabeth Hammerton and David Cannadine, 'Conflict and Consensus on a Ceremonial Occasion: The Diamond Jubilee in Cambridge 1897', *Historical Journal*, 24 (1981), 111–146.

tortuous and lengthy gestation of the three sites of memory, from the formation of committees through the raising of finance and debates over form to the rituals of unveiling and dedication. Finally, by tracing the trajectory of commemorative work undertaken by the Royal Engineers over the course of nigh on seventy years, it is hoped to reach a greater understanding of the importance this foreshadowing, to borrow Alex King's phraseology, played in the war memorial movement of the 1920s.

The first step in the construction of a commemorative site was the formation of an organising committee to oversee the project. For the military this was, in the vast majority of cases, a relatively straightforward matter, with the composition reflecting the existing command structure.¹⁵ Certainly, this held true for Royal Engineers in the aftermath of the Crimean War with the memorial committee comprising a colonel, three majors and a captain. Appointed rather than elected, it was, in the words of T.W.J. Connolly, the quartermaster at Brompton Barracks, these 'great men who brought the memorial to a finish', retaining control of all decision-making throughout the process.¹⁶ Initially, oversight of the South African memorial appeared to be progressing in an equally seamless manner. In May 1902, Lord Kitchener, who had been commissioned into the Royal Engineers at the start of his career and gone on to command the British forces during the latter stages of the war against the Boers, presented Sir Richard Harrison, the Inspector-General of Fortifications, with the offer of 'four bronze statues and four bas-reliefs for use in a war memorial to the fallen'.¹⁷ Harrison quickly formed a committee of senior officers which, unsurprisingly, unanimously agreed to press ahead

¹⁵ See Mark Connolly and Peter Donaldson, 'South African War (1899–1902) Memorials in Britain: A Case Study of Memorialization in London and Kent', *War & Society*, 29, 1 (May 2010), 23–24.

¹⁶ Royal Engineers Museum (hereafter REM), no accession number, 'The Diary of T.W.J. Connolly, 1848–1864', 1 February 1862.

¹⁷ REM, RO270, letter from Kitchener to Sir Richard Harrison, 21 May 1902.

with ‘Lord Kitchener’s generous offer’.¹⁸ However, Kitchener’s involvement, rather than providing an official imprimatur, proved to have a destabilising effect. As will be seen, his proposal contained some controversial aspects, and a series of letters, which appeared in the *Royal Engineers Journal*, criticising the design and the committee’s unquestioning adoption of it, persuaded Harrison to reconsider his position. A general meeting of the Corps was convened in June 1903 tasked with electing, rather than appointing, a new committee to ensure ‘the wishes of the entire Corps are carried out’.¹⁹ Interestingly, dissatisfaction with the work of the original committee did not translate into the election of a radically different membership. Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Grant, Inspector-General of Fortifications until 1898 and senior serving officer, was voted in as president of the new committee with the remaining four places being taken by two major-generals and two colonels.²⁰ The only dissenting voice to these new arrangements came from the commandant of Brompton Barracks, Sir Theodore Fraser, a supporter of the original scheme. In a bad-tempered letter to the *Royal Engineers Journal* demanding the reimbursement of his subscription to the memorial fund, he cuttingly pointed out that the new committee contained, ‘only one officer who served in South Africa’.²¹ Grant responded by gently reminding Fraser that the new members were ‘elected from a list of officers of whom twenty out of thirty-seven had served’. This exchange provides a telling insight into the rigid stratification of the British army at the turn of the twentieth century for at no point did either Fraser or Grant, or for that matter their respective supporters, consider the inclusion on the committee of other ranks a possibility.²²

¹⁸ REM, *Royal Engineers Journal*, (November 1902), 191.

¹⁹ REM, RO270, Royal Engineers War Memorial Committee, minutes, 6 June 1903.

²⁰ REM, RO270, Royal Engineers War Memorial Committee, minutes, 6 June 1903.

²¹ *Royal Engineers Journal*, (October 1903), 241.

²² REM, Royal Engineers War Memorial Committee, minutes, 11 November 1903. For more on the rigid separation of the officer corps from the rank and file, and the near impossibility of bridging the divide, see

The early steps in the process to commemorate the Royal Engineers who had fallen in the First World War bore striking parallels with the South African experience. Yet again a committee of senior officers was hastily appointed to rubber-stamp a predetermined scheme. In January 1917, the Corps had decided to construct a memorial building in honour of Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, who had died on route to Russia the year before. Within a month of the Armistice being signed the unilateral decision was taken by a committee of two major-generals and two majors to extend the project to incorporate the memorialisation of all Royal Engineers who had been killed.²³ However, having been informed by a working group tasked with canvassing opinion across the entire Corps that this move was proving to be unpopular with the rank and file, Major-General Sir Robert Maxwell, the chairman of the memorial committee, was forced to accept that he lacked the full mandate of the Corps. As things stood, he informed his fellow committee members at a meeting in January 1919, ‘the senior ranks of the regular Royal Engineers are very largely represented, but there are no junior officers and comparatively few representatives of the Special Reserve, the Territorial Forces, and New Army or Temporary Commissioned Officers. Also there are no serving Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, or other ranks’. Maxwell’s concerns were clearly shared, and it was unanimously agreed ‘to co-opt the services of a temporary commissioned officer, a regular warrant officer, a New Army non-commissioned officer and young officer and a Territorial Force sapper’.²⁴ The committee’s decision to extend its membership reflects the revolutionary upheaval that the military experienced between 1914 and 1918. The rapid shift from a small professional force to a mass citizen army had

Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training, and Deploying the British Army, 1902–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 29–32.

²³ *Sapper*, 24/281 (December 1918), 65.

²⁴ *Sapper*, 24/284 (March 1919), 114.

a profound effect on the social and cultural make-up of British forces, as volunteers from Kitchener's New Armies and former NCOs were absorbed into the ranks of the officer corps.²⁵ This move towards democratisation inevitably had an impact on the memorialisation process. As the editor of *The Sapper*, the in-house journal of the Royal Engineers, noted in March 1919, 'The war memorial is for the *whole* of the Corps, irrespective of whether Old Army, New Army, Territorial or Special Reserve'.²⁶

One of the most pressing tasks for memorial committees was the raising of funds. An awareness that both the memory of the fallen and the prestige of the living were at stake could lead to ambitious and wholly unrealistic targets being set. The Crimean War memorial committee established an initial financial goal of £7,000, which proved to be more than three times higher than the sum eventually raised, while in 1918 the assumption that £150,000 could be achieved was out by a factor of four.²⁷ Even reaching the relatively modest £2,800 required for the South African commemorative site took repeated calls for subscriptions and a last-minute donation of £50 from a retired officer.²⁸ The stuttering financial progress of the Royal Engineers' schemes points to one of the key challenges in funding memorials, namely that contributions had to be voluntary. Even in a rigidly hierarchical institution like the army, compulsion was avoided. Although guides for pro-rata subscriptions according to rank were issued in 1902 and 1919, these remained recommendations only.²⁹ Spontaneity and selflessness were considered to be the cornerstones of giving. For a memory site to embody truly a community's gratitude

²⁵ Connolly, *Steady the Buffs!*, 233–234.

²⁶ *Sapper*, 24/284 (March 1919), 113. Original emphasis.

²⁷ A. T. Moore, 'The Crimean Arch', *Royal Engineers Journal*, (September 1903), 112; *Sapper*, 24/281 (December 1918), 65.

²⁸ REM, Royal Engineers War Memorial committee, minutes, 25 April 1903, 21 July 1903, 11 November 1903, 11 December 1903; *Royal Engineers Journal*, (April 1904), 86.

²⁹ REM, Royal Engineers Memorial Committee, minutes, 24 October 1902; *Sapper*, 24/282 (January 1919), 81.

donations had to be of a genuinely voluntary nature.³⁰

The difficulties of fund-raising were frequently compounded by an insistence that donations should be kept within the boundaries of community. Both the Crimean and South African War memorial committees limited subscriptions to those currently serving in the Corps, with, in the case of the latter, a further restriction of officers only initially being imposed.³¹ Although it was agreed, at a committee meeting in October 1902, to cast the financial net wider to take in retired officers and serving other ranks, the offer of £20 from a bereaved mother was still thought to be a step too far. It was only when a general meeting of the Corps was convened four months later that somewhat grudging approval was given to ‘accept the gift on this occasion’.³² By contrast, the memorial committee in 1919 adopted a much more inclusive approach. Having inherited a highly expensive scheme, and aware that there was a ‘good deal of sentiment in the matter’ from within and without the Corps, it determined to send out appeals not only to ‘past and present members’ but to ‘others connected with it’.³³ However, despite this loosening of the eligibility criteria for donations, regimental control over financing was still fiercely guarded. A proposal to hold ‘a fund-raising entertainment’ was only ratified when assurances were given that all the performers would be ‘closely connected with or friends of members of the Corps’.³⁴ The close attention paid to who could or could not contribute to a memorial says much about the issue of ownership. Subscribing to a commemorative site might well have been a charitable act but it was also an unequivocal statement about

³⁰ This held true in the civilian world as well. Suggestions that expenditure on memorials to the fallen of the First World War could be defrayed from council rates were invariably rejected. See Peter Donaldson, *Ritual and Remembrance: the memorialisation of the Great War in East Kent* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 36, 130.

³¹ *Manchester Times*, 3 March 1902; REM, Royal Engineers War Memorial Committee, minutes, 24 October 1902.

³² REM, Royal Engineers War Memorial Committee, minutes, 11 February 1903.

³³ *Sapper*, 24/289 (August 1919), 15.

³⁴ *Sapper*, 24/285 (April 1919), 131.

belonging and identity.³⁵ Quartermaster Connolly was not being entirely facetious when he noted in his diary that his two guineas towards the construction of the Crimean Arch now meant that he had, ‘at least, the interest of a little stone in it’.³⁶ In a similar vein, the reluctance to accept money from the bereaved in 1902 stemmed from the belief that subscriptions had a proprietorial sub-text, as the Corps looked to retain control over the men even in death. The correlation between donation and possession was even more starkly revealed in 1919 by the lacklustre response to appeals of two distinct groups. For signallers their future careers as Royal Engineers appeared, by the end of war, to be uncertain. Communications had become an increasingly specialised and important aspect of modern mass warfare and the establishment of an independent signalling corps seemed only a matter of time. The effect this uncertainty had on the commitment to the remembrance project of the men at the Signal Service Training Centre Headquarters in Bedford was made abundantly clear by the unit’s commander, Brigadier-General Godfrey-Faussett, at a memorial committee meeting in March 1919. Excusing his inability to generate any interest in the repeated appeals for funds, he explained that efforts at canvassing were always ‘met with the question: “What is going to happen if Signals becomes a separate branch of the Army?”’³⁷ Of even greater concern than the disengagement of the signallers, at least in terms of financial impact, was the indifference of a second group; the tens of thousands of citizen-soldiers who had swelled the ranks of the Royal Engineers since 1914. Having met their patriotic obligations by defeating Germany and her allies, the vast majority were anxious to resume their pre-war lives. As Major Webb, the secretary to the memorial committee, despondently noted in May 1919,

³⁵ Catherine Moriarty, ‘Private Grief and Public Remembrance: British First World War Memorials’, in *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Martin Evans and Ken Lunn (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 129–130.

³⁶ REM, no accession number, ‘The Diary of T.W.J. Connolly, 1848–1864’, 1 February 1862.

³⁷ *Sapper*, 24/284 (March 1919), 114.

these men showed ‘a general lack of interest in the Corps or anything not directly concerned with demobilisation’.³⁸

Although fund-raising was time-consuming and not-infrequently problematic, it was, in fact, the choice of form that usually received the greatest attention. This is hardly surprising for, as Alex King has noted, this was an age in which it was assumed that iconographical symbolism was fixed and that monuments contained immutable messages which would be preserved and passed down, unchanging and unchangeable, from generation to generation.³⁹ Thus, those tasked with organising the construction of commemorative sites invariably felt burdened with the responsibility of upholding the reputations of their communities. This was, undoubtedly, the case for the Royal Engineers’ memorial committees in the wake of the Crimean, South African and First World Wars, when discussions over design were unfailingly informed by Corps’ prestige. The members of the Crimean committee, keen to celebrate victory over the Russians while simultaneously beautifying their new Brompton Barracks headquarters, took it upon themselves to invite the distinguished architect, Digby Wyatt, to come up with a suitable proposal. His idea for a ‘Triumphal Arch of Portland Stone with white marble panels, the Italian style of architecture being selected in order to harmonise with the Barracks’, was clearly thought to satisfy both criteria and was unanimously accepted.⁴⁰ To accentuate the heroic motif, the archway was fitted with bronze gates ‘formed from the guns taken from the Russians’, and ‘two enemy shells recovered from the trenches at Sebastopol’ were placed in front of the memorial.⁴¹ On completion, the arch was thought

³⁸ *Sapper*, 24/286 (May 1919), 146.

³⁹ King, 11–15.

⁴⁰ Moore, ‘Crimean Arch’, 65. The fact that Digby Wyatt’s first cousin twice removed, Sir James Wyatt, had designed the original barracks might have had a part to play in the committee’s choice of architect.

⁴¹ *Manchester Times*, 3 March 1860; REM, J.A. Borer, *The Memorials, Historic Buildings and Artefacts within Command Wing R.S.M.E. and Brompton and Kitchener Barracks* (unpublished, 1999). The figures

to have successfully fulfilled the brief of reinforcing the Corps' standing. A reporter from the *Kentish Gazette* deemed it to be 'appropriate and imposing', while even the habitually jaundiced Quartermaster Connolly considered it a 'monument of magnificence and power'.⁴²

Although equally committed to statements about status through the erection of grandiose monuments, the South African and First World War memorial committees found the process of finalising designs much more demanding. Lack of support forced both committees to abandon schemes they had inherited and to reconfigure their memberships in an attempt to reach consensual viewpoints. As has already been mentioned, in 1902, opposition centred on the unconditional acceptance of Lord Kitchener's commemorative plan. The four statues of Boers and four bas-reliefs, which were the focal points of the plan, had originally been intended to adorn a monument honouring Paul Kruger, the former president of the Transvaal, and had only fallen into British hands because of the imposition of a trade embargo at the outbreak of hostilities. Such a contentious history was too much for many. In a flurry of letters to the editor of the *Royal Engineers Journal*, a series of retired officers made plain their disapproval of the committee's actions. General Sir James Browne, colonel-commandant of the Corps from 1890–1894, set the tone. Having reminded readers that, 'these undesirable images were made to honour Mr. Kruger, the man above all others in this world responsible for the deaths we wish to honour', he concluded with the bleak warning that, 'their use would be a monument to bad taste, never to be effaced'.⁴³ Equally strident views were expressed

on the Guards Crimean Memorial in London were also made from the metal of Russian guns. For more on the practice of using captured enemy weapons as trophies and memorials, see Borg, 41.

⁴² *Kentish Gazette*, 21 August 1860; REM, no accession number, 'The Diary of T.W.J. Connolly, 1848–1864', 1 February 1862.

⁴³ REM, RO270, Royal Engineers Memorial Committee, minutes, 6 June 1903. Letter from Sir James Browne, May 1903.

by Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Grant and General Sir Richard Harrison, both former inspectors-general of fortifications. Grant insisted that any admiration for the fighting capabilities of the Boers should not be allowed to mask their culpability for the Corps' losses: 'We may respect the Boers as a brave nation, but at the same time we cannot but remember that it was through what we hold to be their mistaken views and their mistaken actions that we lost the officers and men to whom we wish to erect the memorial'.⁴⁴ For Harrison the sensibilities of the bereaved were all-important. The use of 'statues representing an armed enemy' would, he felt certain, 'appal the relatives of our gallant dead'.⁴⁵ Even those with a more conciliatory attitude towards the Boers were unconvinced by the committee's proposals. M. Hildebrand, a retired major, anxious that the post-war reconciliation in South Africa should not be jeopardised, made plain the disastrous repercussions pressing ahead with Kitchener's plan would have:

Having lately been in the Transvaal, I learned that the idea [of using the statues and bas-reliefs on the RE monument] had become known to the Boers, to whom, I was assured, it would give immense annoyance and pain. My informant, who broached the subject with me asked if it were true, which he did not until then believe, had exceptional opportunities of learning the Boer sentiments, though himself a supporter of the new order of things. He said to make such use of what had been intended for Mr. Kruger's statue would cause the keenest feeling of resentment amongst our new fellow subjects.

To press his point home, Hildebrand outlined just how serious the diplomatic fall-out

⁴⁴ REM, RO270, Royal Engineers Memorial Committee, minutes, 6 June 1903. Letter from Sir Robert Grant, May 1903.

⁴⁵ REM, RO270, Royal Engineers Memorial Committee, minutes, 6 June 1903. Letter from Sir Richard Harrison, May 1903.

could be: ‘The choice of design ... might become more than a corps matter; it might go beyond this and affect the army and perhaps the country generally, if we were to give offence to our new fellow subjects’.⁴⁶ With dissent threatening to derail the scheme, the committee quickly devolved the choice of form to the care of an established professional architect, Ingress Bell.⁴⁷ His choice of a victory arch to mirror the Crimean arch, was reassuringly uncontroversial and the project proceeded to completion without any further hitches.⁴⁸ At the unveiling of the memorial on 26 July 1905, the organising committee diplomatically ordered that the Boer statues should be ‘temporarily erected on pedestals’ at the ‘angles of the square’.⁴⁹ This move deftly ensured that while Kitchener’s gift did not go unacknowledged, the memory site itself remained unsullied by any immediate and permanent symbolic association with the statues.⁵⁰

The plan for a commemorative Institute in London, originally conceived to honour Kitchener but later extended to encompass all the fallen of the First World War, was quickly dismissed by the memorial committee in 1919. Again, it was dissent from within that forced a change of heart, but this time the pressure came from the rank and

⁴⁶ REM, RO2070, Royal Engineers Memorial Committee, minutes, 6 June 1903. Letter from Major Hildebrand, undated. For more on post-war reconciliation, see Iain R. Smith, ‘Capitalism and the War’, in *The Impact of the South African War*, ed. by David Omissi and Andrew S. Thompson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 63–72.

⁴⁷ Ingress Bell had previously worked as a surveyor for the War Office and was a partner of Aston Webb, the president of the Royal Institute of British Architects. See A. Stuart Grey, *Edwardian Architecture: A Biographical Dictionary* (London: Duckworth, 1985), 46–47.

⁴⁸ The use of triumphal arches as memory sites dates back certainly to Roman times, if not before. Such traditional heroic motifs were generally accepted as suitable ways to honour the fallen. See Borg, 56–59.

⁴⁹ *The Times*, 26 July 1905.

⁵⁰ An interesting footnote to this contentious issue occurred fifteen years after the unveiling of the memorial arch. A decision by the South African government to proceed, somewhat belatedly, with the construction of the Kruger memorial in Pretoria once again brought the political significance of the Boer statues into high relief. In December 1920, General Jan Smuts, the South African prime minister and former Boer guerrilla commander, approached his old adversary, Sir Alfred Milner, the secretary of state for the colonies, requesting the return of the statues. Before Milner could accede to the request, he first had to seek permission from the Royal Engineers, who retained ownership of two of the statues, and Kitchener’s son, who had removed the other two figures to the family home in Broome Park. Having received no objection from either party, in March 1921 the statues were handed over to the South African government for, in Milner’s words, ‘political reasons as an act of goodwill’. *Sapper*, 26/307 (February 1921), 99.

file still under arms rather than retired officers. A consultation of all ranks and every branch of the Corps, carried out by representatives in advance of a committee meeting in January 1919, indicated there was ‘almost unanimous opposition to the memorial building’, with, instead, an educational fund being ‘generally favoured’. An ineffectual rearguard action, by the Secretary of the Royal Engineers Old Comrades Association, in support of the original plan, did little more than confirm the declining influence of former members of the Corps. As Brigadier-General Schrieber, the commandant of the School of Military Engineering, sadly reflected, there was ‘unfortunately no interest from the men of the New Armies in the R.E.O.C.A.’.⁵¹ Confronted by such overwhelming disapproval, the committee was left with little room for manoeuvre, and it was agreed that, ‘a sum not exceeding £10,000’ would be earmarked for a memorial, with all additional monies being ‘utilised for an educational scheme for the benefit of all ranks of the Corps’.⁵² The decision to fund the education of soldiers’ families is particularly revealing, for it not only reflects the philanthropic drive of charitable society in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, but also provides an insight into the gradual drift away from monumental commemoration and towards utilitarian projects in the interwar years.⁵³

Although now restricted in the amount that could be spent on the monumental component of the scheme, the First World War memorial committee remained determined to forge ahead with some aesthetic, plastic expression. A suggestion, at a meeting in February 1919, that the best location would be at the Brompton Barracks headquarters,

⁵¹ *Sapper*, 24/284, (March 1919), 114.

⁵² *Sapper*, 24/283 (February 1919), 97.

⁵³ See Andrew S. Thompson, ‘Publicity, Philanthropy and Commemoration’, in Omissi and Thompson, 106–113 for more on the workings of philanthropic society during the South African War, and Borg, 136–137 for the utilitarian movement in the aftermath of the First World War.

where a ‘memorial could furnish example and inspiration, especially to the youth of the Corps at its most impressionable age’, was dismissed in favour of London.⁵⁴ Unsuccessful attempts were then made to secure prestigious spots on either side of Marble Arch, in Green Park opposite the Naval and Military Club, in St James’ Park alongside Horse Guards Parade, and on the newly proposed Charing Cross Bridge. The committee finally admitted defeat in October 1919 and decided to allocate £8,000 for a monument in Chatham.⁵⁵ However, when the opportunity of an enormously significant site opposite Marlborough Gate on the Mall arose in March 1920, this decision was immediately reconsidered. At a hastily convened committee meeting, Major-General Sir Robert Maxwell, insisting that the prospect of ‘an excellent position in the heart of London must not be lost’, tabled a motion calling for existing budgetary constraints to be lifted and ‘the necessary amount to be expended on the erection of a war memorial on the Mall’, which brought forth murmurs of approval from around the committee table. This proved too much for Colonel Harvey, who had been seconded onto the committee to represent the views of the men still serving in Germany. He reminded those present that there had been a ‘majority in favour of the educational scheme’ and warned that persevering with a London site would ‘lay ourselves open to complaints from the demobilised Territorials, and other members of the Corps’. Confident he had the backing of the other committee members, Maxwell simply noted that it was well within the powers of ‘a representative committee’ to revise its plans and proceeded to the vote, which provided him with the ringing endorsement he had anticipated.⁵⁶ For a second time, however, discussions with the Office of Works proved fruitless. With little progress having been made over the

⁵⁴ *Sapper*, 24/284 (March 1919), 115.

⁵⁵ *Sapper*, 24/287 (June 1919), 162; 25/300 (July 1920), 186.

⁵⁶ *Sapper*, 25/300 (July 1920), 187.

course of twelve committee meetings and two years, it was agreed in March 1921 to follow the pattern set almost two decades earlier and bring in the help of a professional. Sir Reginald Blomfield was employed to oversee an open competition, the only provisos being that the memorial must cost no more than £9,000 and be ‘in the open space between the South African Memorial and Crimean Archway’.⁵⁷ The winning design, by the well-respected Glaswegian partners David Bateman Hutton and Thomas Lumsden Taylor, of a traditional obelisk was sufficiently triumphalist to deflect any further dissent.⁵⁸ The convoluted gestation of the Royal Engineers memorial to the fallen of the First World War reveals some of the tensions inherent in military commemoration in the interwar years. The committee found itself torn between a desire to advertise the Corps’ proud history of service and self-sacrifice and a need to fulfil the more prosaic expectations of a newly expanded constituency. Its persistent efforts to obtain a prestigious site in the capital made abundantly clear where its priorities lay.

An integral part of all three schemes was the naming of all those who died, although in the aftermath of the First World War the number was so great that inscribing the list on the memorial was thought to be impractical and a separate Roll of Honour was produced which was kept in the Royal Engineers Institute at Brompton.⁵⁹ The unwavering commitment to this aspect of commemoration points to the growing visibility of the ordinary soldier from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards.⁶⁰ No longer was memorialisation to be the preserve of an aristocratic officer corps. The divergences in

⁵⁷ *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, 13 May 1921. As a key figure in the artistic establishment, Blomfield was a reassuringly conformist choice. See Borg, 79–82.

⁵⁸ *Sapper*, 28/325 (August 1922), 273. See Borg, 3–6 and 86–89 for more on the obelisk’s history as a symbol of victory and its extensive use in interwar commemoration.

⁵⁹ *Sapper*, 24/287 (June 1919), 162; *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, 21 July 1922.

⁶⁰ See Olive Anderson, ‘The Growth of Christian Militarism in Mid-Victorian Britain’, *English Historical Review*, 86 (1971) and Steve Attridge, *Nationalism, Imperialism and Identity in Late Victorian Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 65–75 for more on the idealisation of the ordinary soldier in the second-half of the nineteenth century.

practice further underline this shift. The decision by the Crimean committee to have a separate name panel for officers was reversed in 1902, although it was still considered important that the fallen should appear in rank order.⁶¹ This latter stipulation was abandoned in 1920 when it was resolved that the Roll of Honour would be ordered alphabetically, with Lord Kitchener's name 'appearing in its due sequence among the Ks'.⁶² In this movement towards equality in listing the fallen can be seen the influence of Britain's increasing democratisation. The middle and working classes were gradually emerging from the shadow of the elite and were playing a more active part in the country's political and cultural life. A similar transformation was occurring in the military, as more and more volunteers from all sections of society were required to sustain the national war effort. These forces made the public recognition of wartime sacrifice an issue of ever greater sensitivity.

The final critical moment in the memorialisation process was the unveiling ceremony; it was during this elaborate ritual of remembrance that ownership was signalled and meaning disseminated. Carefully choreographed dedication ceremonies were held for the three memorials covered in this study, although for the Crimean Arch this was to mark the laying of the foundation stone rather than the completion of the monument. In all three cases the rites, as one might expect, were essentially military

⁶¹ REM, RO2070, Royal Engineers War Memorial Committee, minutes, 7 November 1902. Although there is no extant record to provide an explanation for the memorial committee's move to have a separate name panel for officers on the Crimean Arch, it is worth noting that this decision to differentiate the commissioned from the non-commissioned coincided with the amalgamation of the Royal Engineers, a preserve of the officer class, with the Royal Sappers and Miners, a corps composed solely of NCOs and privates.

⁶² *Sapper*, 26/304 (November 1920), 58; *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, 21 July 1922. Equality of sacrifice may have been rigidly adhered to in the listing of names, but the committee was, nonetheless, keen to single out Kitchener and insisted that the frontispiece of the Roll of Honour made 'some special reference to the late Field Marshal'. *Sapper*, 26/304 (November 1920), 58. In this can be seen the enduring legacy of the Victorian cult of personality. See Cynthia Behrman, 'The After-Life of General Gordon', *Albion*, 3/2 (Summer 1971), 47–61.

affairs, with the involvement of the wider public peripheral at best. In 1860, the six thousand troops garrisoned at Brompton were drawn up on the parade ground to witness the Duke of Cambridge, the commander of the British Army, fix the first foundation stone. The only civilians in attendance were a ‘few officers’ wives and a small number of people connected with the works’.⁶³ The organisers of the unveiling of the South African memorial in 1905 were equally determined that the day should remain exclusively in-house. With widespread public interest being generated by the announcement that the King, in his capacity as colonel-in-chief of the Corps, would officiate, it was resolved that the barracks would remain off-limits to civilians during the ceremony. Indeed, even the demands of the national press were not allowed to detract from the uniformed pageantry. *The Times* correspondent was unable to provide an account of the royal address, because, as he deferentially explained, ‘It had been felt, rightly perhaps, that the inclusion of anybody in plain clothes would have spoilt the brilliant effect of the military picture’.⁶⁴ Martial grandeur was also the dominant motif in the news coverage of the Duke of Connaught’s dedication of the First World War obelisk in July 1922. A lengthy report in the *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News* was full of admiration for the precision with which the ‘vast assembly of troops’, accompanied by the Corps Band ‘in their blazing uniforms’, had carried out their duties. ‘The arrangements had’, the piece concluded, ‘evoked all the splendour of a military pageant’.⁶⁵

Yet, inevitably, civilians had a great interest and emotional investment in these memory sites, and were keen to participate in the dedication ceremonies. In 1905 and 1922 the Royal Engineers’ apparent failure to acknowledge this fact bruised local

⁶³ *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, 3 March 1860.

⁶⁴ *The Times*, 27 July 1905.

⁶⁵ *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, 21 July 1922.

sensibilities. An editorial in the *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, although full of praise for the panache with which the unveiling of the South African Arch had been performed, nonetheless, concluded on a note of discord:

In one respect only could there have been an improvement suggested. One would liked to have seen a further recognition, on the part of the military authorities, of the fact that it was a civic as well as a military function, for if the event of the day was a tribute paid to military faithfulness and valour, it was paid by civilians no less than by their comrades.⁶⁶

In 1922, the same paper observed that ill-feeling had again been caused because ‘the non-ticket holding general public had not been admitted to the ceremony’. However, this time the editor leapt to the Corps’ defence. Pointing out that admission had been ‘granted to those people who were in any way connected with those who had served or who were serving’, and that the mayors of the Medway towns had been given positions of honour at the unveiling, he assured readers that ‘the people who did take part made a completely representative gathering’. The decision to abandon the exclusivity of 1905 was attributed to the fact that the South African memorial ‘commemorated the death of hundreds compared now with thousands’.⁶⁷ The scale of losses between 1914 and 1918 did, undoubtedly, intensify public engagement with military memorialisation and, in so doing, help persuade senior commanders that civilian sensibilities needed accommodating. Yet, even in the coverage of the dedication of the Royal Engineers’ Crimean Arch in 1860, there was a fleeting recognition that the memory of the war dead was not the sole preserve of the army. Under an artist’s impression of the completed

⁶⁶ *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, 29 July 1905.

⁶⁷ *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, 21 July 1922.

monument, the *Illustrated London News* noted that it would be ‘so situated as to have one half in depth within and the other without the existing boundary of the parade ground. The memorial will thus be as it should be, equally military and public’.⁶⁸

The extensive death toll of the First World War also had an effect on the tone of commemorative rituals. At the dedication ceremonies for the Crimean and South African arches, the mood at Chatham was largely celebratory. In March 1860, Brompton Barracks was ‘decorated with evergreens and coloured flags’ for the visit of the Duke of Cambridge, who, after carrying out his official duties, was treated to ‘an agreeable and plentiful luncheon’ in the officers’ mess.⁶⁹ Forty-five years later, the presence of the King for the unveiling of the memorial to the fallen of the South African War was, as a report in the local paper made clear, excuse enough for the local populace to turn the day into a patriotic carnival. Greeted by ‘huge and rejoicing crowds’, the royal cavalcade passed through streets en fête: ‘Flags! Flags! Flags! Flags here, flags there, flags everywhere – nothing but flags of all colours, all sizes and all descriptions, the whole combining to make a bright display’.⁷⁰ Again the wider timetable of the day signposted the generally lighter atmosphere. After the unveiling, the King was served lunch with the officers of the Corps followed by a programme of popular music. For the warrant officers and non-commissioned officers in attendance, formalities also quickly gave way to regimental sociability. A ‘reunion lunch for past and present members’ was accompanied by a smoking concert at which there was ‘an excellent programme including over thirty items, made up of toasts, recitations, songs, and instrumental solos’.⁷¹ By contrast, solemnity

⁶⁸ *Illustrated London News*, 10 March 1860.

⁶⁹ *Kentish Gazette*, 6 March 1860; REM, no accession number, ‘The Diary of T.W.J. Connolly, 1848–1864’, 1 February 1862.

⁷⁰ *The Times*, 27 July 1905; *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, 29 July 1905.

⁷¹ REM, RO2070, ‘War Memorial Unveiling Supplement’, *Royal Engineers Journal* (September 1905), 108.

was the leitmotif of the local press coverage of the unveiling ritual in 1922. In a special souvenir edition, the *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News* insisted that any pride neighbouring communities took from their ‘close association’ with the Royal Engineers was overshadowed by ‘feelings of love and reverence for the brave dead’. Not even the pomp surrounding the Duke of Connaught’s visit, the paper gravely observed, was enough to lift the mood, for, ‘royalty cannot check the reminder that sceptre and crown form no defence against the great leveller who spares neither victor nor vanquished’. To underline the all-consuming sense of grief, the minute silence was given particular emphasis. A passage, dripping with sentiment, painted a vivid picture of the emotional intensity of the moment:

Was there anyone among the great crowd who could forget the one minute of silence that followed the unveiling of the memorial? Was there a single heart that did not throb responsively or a brain that did not thrill during that period? Surely not. The circumstances, associations, and symbolism of the occasion were calculated to produce an emotional maelstrom in the hearts of many. There were women who quietly sobbed. Some tragic and pathetic stories lay behind their tears. War is grim ... The minute of silence seemed almost crushing in its effect. Would it never end? It was like glimpsing over the precipice of eternity. There was something uncanny about it. One felt a strange thrill. Perhaps the spirits of the departed were haunting the spot. There may have been an army of phantom soldiers on parade. Who knows?⁷²

The three memory sites abutting the parade ground at Brompton Barracks do,

⁷² *Chatham, Rochester and Gillingham News*, 21 July 1922. For more on the centrality of grief in the interwar commemoration of the fallen see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 29–53.

therefore, provide evidence of continuities and discontinuities in commemorative practice from the Crimean War, through the South African War to the First World War. In all three instances, a small clique of non-elected senior officers attempted to assume sole responsibility for, and retain full control over, the memorialisation of the Corps' war dead. Only in the aftermath of the Crimean War, though, was such an attempt successful. In 1902 and 1919, the controversial nature of inherited schemes aroused sufficient opposition to force through both a reconsideration of the form the memorials should take and a reconstitution of the committees to ensure greater representation. It was not, however, until widespread volunteerism in 1914–1915, and compulsory military service in 1916, had eroded the rigid stratification of the Victorian and Edwardian army that the rank and file were consulted. In a similar vein, although there was tacit acknowledgement that the Crimean and South African arches were not exclusively the property of the military, it was only during the construction of the First World War obelisk that civilians were invited to contribute to, and participate in, the process. This divergence points to the more emotionally charged atmosphere of remembrance in the interwar years. Although, in the absence of bodies to mourn over, all three memorials served as surrogate graves, the substantially higher death toll of 1914–18 meant that the demands of the bereaved could not be entirely ignored.⁷³ In turn, this resulted in the displays of triumphal military pageantry at the dedication ceremonies of 1860 and 1905 giving way to a ritual in 1922 in which the overriding emotion was grief. That is not to say that pride in the sacrifices of the fallen was absent in the wake of the First World War. The memorial committee's persistent efforts to obtain a prestigious London site are ample proof that Corps prestige acted as an important stimulus to commemoration after 1918, just as it had done twenty

⁷³ Lacqueur, 160–164; Moriarty, 126.

and sixty years earlier. The blurring of the boundaries of the civil and military worlds caused by the mass mobilisation of total warfare did, therefore, alter the way the Royal Engineers approached and implemented their memorialisation plans. However, the threads that link the practices in the wake of the Crimean, South African and First World Wars mark this shift as evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The next task is to undertake additional longitudinal studies to throw further light on the process of alteration in this period.

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