

Arboreal Eloquence: First World War Memorial Avenues

L'éloquence des arbres : les allées mémorielles de la Première Guerre mondiale

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In 1915 Alexander Gillespie, an officer with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, wrote a letter in France imagining the post-war 'No Man's Land', running from the Vosges to the sea, as a long avenue of trees. He saw this corridor, having been made sacred by the blood of those who had died, as a place where the populace could visit as an act of pilgrimage and reflection (Retter, 2018). While this idea may not have been actioned, First World War memorial avenues, which first appeared in 1916, have embodied the essence of his idea. As visionary, innovative, living, community-involved memorials, they brought together local and national understandings of war and loss with the most up-to-date war commemoration concepts.

The memorial avenues of the First World War represented democratisation of memory, individualisation of sacrifice and for many, the naming of the dead. These were not traditional representations. In Britain these concepts only started to emerge 60 years prior through commemoration of the Crimean War, which recognised the role and sacrifice made by the common soldier. Exposure of leadership ineptitude and the woeful conditions faced by soldiers by newspaper war correspondents, made visible the experiences of the common soldier to the reading public; importantly, they were seen to exhibit traits previously attributed to the officer ranks and above, for example, courage and bravery. The common soldier emerged as the new military hero and ultimately worthy of commemoration (Figes, 2010). This was a complete break with the earlier tradition, that of war commemoration of celebrating victors and victories in monumental statues for example. As a result there were major shifts in responsibility for memorialising the war dead, its form and location. However, it was not until the First World War that the recognition of service, sacrifice and loss was fully democratised, individualised and named.

Contemporary with these war memorial developments was the emergence of planting trees for commemorative purposes. In Britain this was popularised by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and the practice soon spread to the British colonies and America. Multiple international, national and local events and memories were anchored in the landscape by trees, beautifying large cities and small towns alike. Arbor Day, an American concept initiated in 1872, beautifying societies and other similar groups promoted the planting of trees. By 1914 many urban and rural areas had made some progress in beautifying their places. Britain's tree consciousness was heightened further as "the woods went to war", commandeered to fulfil the insatiable demand for trees, for munitions packaging and props for coal pits and trenches (Grieves and White, 2014:26). Overall, communities with tree consciousness were likely more open to the idea of an avenue of trees for their war memorial.

The memorial avenue was one of a wide range of possible choices for commemoration. In 1919 New Zealand communities were reminded that when choosing a memorial it should capture the emotion of the day, perpetuate memory and act as inspiration for future generations (Montgomery, 1919). However, across the British Empire and America there were varying levels of debate over what was considered an appropriate war memorial (Stephens, 2010). Supporters of traditional aesthetic monuments, those looking to the past for inspiration, competed with supporters of utilitarian forms who looked to the future, to provide for the living. Others argued that a new form of memorial was required to effectively pay tribute and carry memory forward. The resulting choice of memorial reflected the effectiveness of the rhetoric (Maclean & Phillips, 1990; Inglis, 1998; Shanken, 2002). Memorial avenues rose as a hybrid form, offering both memorial and utility/amenity functions, enabling communities to draw emphasis from either or both sets of characteristics (Inglis, 1998).

During and after the war, memorial avenues were planted in Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Italy, New Zealand and the United States. The decision to plant a memorial avenue was often less acrimonious than for other commemorative types and offered a range of distinct form and organisational differences. As living memorial the avenue would grow and change with the seasons, age and die; evolving as the trees changed size

and shape and took years to mature. The trees could be used to acknowledge individualised service and sacrifice within a collective monument. Attributing the trees to individual soldiers bought private memory into public spaces. At a practical level the avenues were simple to design and implement, affordable and highly visible. Specialised knowledge and skills could be sourced locally and community participation was encouraged. Women were not marginalised, participating in all levels of planning and execution, with involvement varying by community. The best Australasian example is the Ballarat Avenue of Honour. Children also had opportunities to help and plant. The memorial avenue had a living inclusivity that was not evident with the patriarchal stone memorials, being predominantly organised by local government and other leading men in the various communities.

At a quick glance many memorial avenues look similar. However, within this convergence of form and function there was considerable variation. This resulted from a myriad of local organising committees making numerous decisions on multiple areas of consideration. These were both practical and ceremonial, such as who was to be recognised, what tree species and when to plant the trees, location, who was to plant the trees, signage and how much information, whether the trees were to be linked to soldiers, and finally, what form the ceremony would take and who was to preside. The level of democratised memory also varied due to the method of name collection and how the cost of the memorial was to be funded. This meant that not every memorial avenue was a full commitment to identification of individual sacrifice and inclusive naming of the dead (Morgan, 2008).

Local understandings of memorial avenues were generally framed and articulated through official speeches at planting and/or dedication ceremonies. Ceremonies were predominantly led by local officials and external dignitaries. At every ceremony the trees were charged with the perpetuation of the memory of the men and women who served and died. They were to act as prompts for decades, centuries or even in perpetuity. Ideals of service and tree imagery was inscribed onto the trees with phrases such as 'men who were once like strong young trees', 'emblems of sacrifice', 'tree of freedom', 'inspiration', 'reminder' and to 'memory kept fresh and green'. They talked of noble sacrifice, country and Empire. Speakers also articulated other themes. Links were made to the beautifying nature of the avenues. This function was important in many 'young' towns and cities across the British Empire and America where amenity and landscape enhancement were limited. Before the end of the war ceremonies also became platforms for propaganda and active recruitment for service.

Within the communities that planted memorial trees there were competing public and private needs and requirements. With an estimated 9 million soldiers killed from all sides of the war, a huge number of families and friends were directly affected (Kulhman, 2012). In Australia it was estimated that every Australian citizen was related to or knew someone who died (Haddow, 1988); in New Zealand it was every family (Harper, 2001). The impetus to commemorate was driven by the community and the grieving families. However, the community's aim was to appropriately pay tribute to those who had died and in doing so highlight the contribution that the community had made, whereas, mourning parents and family wanted to memorialise their loved one or multiple sons (Pisani, 2017). They usually had no body to bury and no control over how the public memory of their loved one was framed. The dead were to be remembered for the cause they died for and their role at time of death, shaped by official language, war rhetoric and official memory (Ziino, 2003). For the mourners, the trees became surrogate burial places and gravestones to remember the private memories of sons, brothers, husbands and fathers.

The First World War memorial avenues were a graceful expression of the changes in the representation of war memory that started after the Crimean War. The combining of nature and memorialisation built on individual community's ability to envisage a memorial that, at planting, look very different to a fully-fledged avenue. Avenues and their trees would speak of service and sacrifice to generations to come. Functioning as public and private memorials, they were tributes and virtual graves, constructed around individual military personas. With trees as metaphors for the once-living men and women, they were sites of reflection and comfort that emphasised democratised memory, individualised sacrifice and the naming of the dead.

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Jo-anne Morgan currently works at the University of Canterbury. Her area of interest is memory in the landscape from an historical and cultural Geography perspective. Jo-anne's PhD, *Arboreal Eloquence. Trees and Commemoration*, explores the ways that commemorative trees have been used to anchor memory in the landscape through the making and marking of place. Her PhD work, which stems from memory in the landscape research she conducted for her masters, is referred to in all studies about memorial avenues. It shows how trees planted for the likes of war memorial avenues, link the local to the national and international, and produce a landscape that is multifunctional, in which social relations support memory, remembrance, forgetting, silences, erasures, and memory slippage. Outside of work Jo-anne is a keen photographer.

Jo-anne Morgan travaille actuellement à l'Université de Canterbury, en Nouvelle-Zélande. La question de la mémoire dans les paysages, abordée du point de vue de l'histoire et de la géographie culturelle, est au centre de ses intérêts. La thèse de doctorat de Jo-anne, *Arboreal Eloquence. Trees and Commemoration*, explore la manière dont les arbres commémoratifs ont été utilisés pour ancrer la mémoire dans le paysage en créant et marquant l'espace. Ce travail, qui fait suite à ses travaux sur le paysage pour sa maîtrise, est cité dans toutes les études sur les allées mémorielles. Il montre comment les arbres plantés par exemple sous la forme des allées mémorielles de la guerre, relie le local au national et à l'international, et produisent un paysage multifonctionnel, dans lequel les relations sociales accompagnent la mémoire, le souvenir, l'oubli, les silences, les effacements, et le glissement mémoriel. En dehors de son travail, Jo-anne est une fervente photographe.