

‘His six feet of ground’: The Empty-Graves Proposal for the Missing of the First World War

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When you visit the Western Front today, the distinction between the British Empire’s found and missing dead of the First World War seems straightforward. Bodies are in cemeteries, and those whose bodies were lost are listed by name on memorials instead.

However, in the war’s immediate aftermath, this distinction was not so clear. Predicated on the belief that it was a ‘time honoured idea of every soldier being entitled to his six feet of ground’, two of Britain’s dominions— South Africa and Australia— proposed to the Imperial War Graves Commission that instead of on memorials, their missing should be commemorated by entire empty cemeteries filled with individual memorial headstones.

The Commission was strongly against this, citing as their main defense their responsibility to maintain the trust of the families of the dead: the founder of the Commission argued, ‘we have always opposed anything that might lead relatives to imagine that a body is buried when it is not there.’ Though it was never implemented, this alternative proposal for commemoration of the missing brilliantly encapsulate the interconnection between landscape, cemetery, memorial, and the dead; and this request from Australia and South Africa reflects not only this interconnection, but also the complicated relationship between imperial and national control over the material culture of remembrance in the interwar period.

Drawing upon the author’s two years of doctoral archival research at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Historic Archive, the National Archives of Australia, the Australian War Memorial, and the National Archives of South Africa, this paper will argue that the concept of empty graves for the missing foregrounds the materiality of the body and its role in First World War bereavement. This refracts in both directions: the graves were an attempt to give an individual tangibility (rather than the collective tangibility of a memorial) to losses, anchoring them in the landscape with a fixed point of distinct and separate remembrance. However, the criticism it faced reveals a reluctance to accept that present and absent bodies could be identically commemorated, since that implicitly reduced or negated the validity of the body as the central component of a mourning site.

The empty graves proposal also fundamentally reflects how the landscape of the material culture of remembrance was fluid, with interconnecting elements. Its ramifications included that the missing were not confined to memorials; graves were not the sole preserve of bodies; and cross grave markers were considered ‘memorials’. The earth itself was considered a fundamental right of the dead, even when the dead could not physically inhabit it.

This paper sits at the intersection of several of the proposed conference themes, particularly memorialisation, material culture, and social history.