

Life beyond death: an environmental perspective on post-conflict landscapes of the First World War

Dr James Wearn

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

Landscapes are multidimensional and dynamic – both in the physical space they occupy and in the minds of those who perceive them. The study of post-conflict landscapes is being transformed by increasing collaboration across disciplines. The landscapes of the First World War were greatly modified by the implementation of industrialised warfare. Subsequent visitors to the former Western Front have become familiar with the ‘centres of memory’ which developed. However, the unmistakable death and destruction resulting from war remain the prevailing characters in public perception, mediated by the rise of battlefield tourism. Reconsideration of this post-conflict landscape in a multidisciplinary setting is now allowing a more complete understanding of post-war regeneration and the mosaic of remembrance sites which evolved. A landscape-scale approach is especially important now that the last survivors have passed into history, because the landscape is the final witness.

Plants were and remain the principal setting and striking adornments within the First World War landscape, and the botanical legacy of the First World War is present above- and below-ground: in commemorative plantings and in archaeobotanical materials. Linking the study of these two spatially distinct systems provides a holistic landscape perspective to aid archaeological investigation, inform heritage management, and help mediate future infrastructural planning. Polemobotany – the study of plants impacted upon during the course of, or utilized for, military activity – is essential to such research.

Rapidly rising numbers of deaths during the First World War quickly necessitated the formalisation of military burials. Less than a year into the war, the Graves Registration Commission (forerunner of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission) was created to ensure proper recording of war graves. For the first time, commemoration of individuals became a significant concern. Purposeful architecture went hand-in-hand with carefully considered planting to create sites of tranquillity and solemnity. In an ironic parallel – alongside being adopted as symbols of remembrance – plants and their products were fashioned into instruments facilitating death; the majority of non-ferrous war materiel during the war being made from plant materials.

Research by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in collaboration with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission has identified three distinctive components of the post-war botanical landscape – the wild, the managed, and the planted. Each plays a clear role in the transmission of memory. This research forms a novel contribution to the environmental legacies of the First World War and the understanding of socio-political influences on war cemetery development and international commemoration.