Ecclesiasticus, War Graves, and the secularization of British Values

It is curiously difficult to articulate exactly what alterations in memorial practices occurred as a result of the First World War. Battlefield burials have a long established, though not uncontroversial, history, as does the practice of the state assuming familial guardianship over the remains of deceased soldiers;[1] the first village memorials to soldiers who never returned from fighting overseas appear in Scotland after the Crimean war;[2] the first modern use of lists of names in a memorial dates to the French Revolution.[3] We see an increase in memorial practices that were previously rare, but very little wholesale invention.[4]

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[1] See discussion in Alana Vincent, *Making Memory: Jewish and Christian Explorations in Monument, Narrative, and Liturgy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), especially ch. 2, 32–44.

[2] Monument located near Balmaclellan Parish Church. See "Balmaclellan Crimean War," Imperial War Museums, accessed 27 July 2017,
http://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/44345

[3] See Joseph Clark, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[4] A possible exception to this is the two-minute's silence, which was instituted in the British Empire by George V at the first anniversary of the Armistice in 1919; see Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014; Berg, 1994) 8–12. However, this practice had some precedent, most notably in a ten-minute silence held in the Portuguese Senate on the occasion of the death of José Maria da Silva Paranhos Júnior in 1912 (see the parliamentary record of the day at "Debates Parlementares," Assembleia de República [Portugal], accessed 24 July 2017, http://debates.parlamento.pt/catalogo/r1/cs/01/01/02/039/1912-02-13/2). Popular articles detailing the history of the silence are prone to cite Quaker silent worship as a precedent (e.g., Rose Troup Buchanan, "Minute's silence: When, where and why do we hold a silence to remember those who died?" The Independent, 3 July 2015, accessed 27 July 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/minutes-silence-when-where-and-why-do-we-hold-a-silence-to-remember-those-who-died-10363290.html); although the documentary record of the institution of the silence does not appear to support this derivation, the suggestion is interesting in light of my argument here that the driving

This is fitting, as the War marked neither the beginning nor the end, but an important point along the way in the long transition of Britain's self-understanding from an empire to a single nation at the centre of a less tangible and considerably denser web of cultural and political influence. This shift was apparent in the identities of the field forces which fought in support of Britain: by the end of the war, both Canada and Australia/New Zealand had developed a consciousness of themselves as military and diplomatic powers in their own rights, although all three entered the war at the beginning in support of what they viewed as their parent nation. This tension is reflected in the design of the Imperial War Graves cemeteries (now, of course, renamed Commonwealth War Graves); soldiers from the colonial regiments are still part of the empire, buried side by side with soldiers from the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish regiments, but marked out as distinct through the inscriptions and regimental insignia upon their headstones. It is not just particularities of geography and citizenship with which the design of war graves cemeteries had to contend, however, but also religious difference—and it is the way that cemetery design has navigated religious difference which I wish to discuss in this article. I will pursue a brief history of the cemeteries and the design choices made in their construction, followed by a more focussed discussion of the Biblical text used in

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principle behind the commemorative culture of the British Empire at this time was to produce memorial forms which drew on the aesthetics of religion without containing enough religious content to provoke unease among the ethnically and religiously diverse publics who comprised the Empire.

the cemetery design, and conclude with some reflections on how the war graves design helped to construct a sense of post-Imperial British identity.

I. War Graves Cemeteries: Origin and Design

The seeds of the war graves cemeteries were planted in 1915, when the British government determined that no soldier's body should be repatriated, whether they be English, Canadian, or Australian; instead, the soldier was to be "buried on the spot where he falls", as the Mishneh Torah puts it (Hilkhot Melakhim 6:12).[5] Samuel Hynes notes that "the spot where he falls" was a rough guideline only; "there were more than twelve hundred patches of soldiers' graves in France alone at the end of the war, and these were eventually consolidated."[6] Phillip Longworth dates the decision against repatriation to a March 1915 order issued by Marshal Joffre "banning exhumations during the period of the war", which later took on a more permanent force.[7] At first, this practice was simply a practical response to the realities of combat; the mobile ambulance unit headed by Fabian Ware, who would eventually become the first head of the Imperial War Graves

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[5] It is, of course, highly unlikely that the British authorities were referring to Maimonides in making this decision—as a doctoral student I did spend a very long time trying to find a connection, because it seems so obvious that there ought to be one, but to no avail.

[6] *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991) 271.

[7] Philip Longworth, *Unending Vigil: A History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission 1917–1984* (London: Cooper, 1985) 14.

Commission, began its work of registering graves simply to have a record of where bodies were, so that when hostilities ceased they could be interred in a more permanent fashion—either at a site chosen by the families of the deceased or, should the deceased lack a family of sufficient means to care for their remains individually, in a common ossuary; this was the common British practice at the time.[8]

However, as the war progressed from a race to capture territory into the trench warfare that characterised the majority of action on the Western Front, "burials became concentrated rather than scattered",[9] and Ware began to feel pressure to seek a more permanent solution to the problem of burial. He eventually negotiated a permanent grant of land from France for British cemeteries: the death of British soldiers bought the Empire the right to the land on which they fell.[10]

The negotiations over the land France granted for cemeteries reveal the importance accorded to gravesites in both the civilian public imagination and in international diplomacy. The French government originally proposed to provide both the land and the maintenance of the cemeteries; Ware—speaking in his capacity as head of what was then the Graves Registration Commission—objected to this "since, in providing for upkeep it might have prevented Britain from caring for the graves of her own

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[8] Longworth, *Unending Vigil*, 1–2, 11, 14.
[9] Longworth, *Unending Vigil*, 11.
[10] Longworth, *Unending Vigil*, 11–12.

soldiers".[11] The activity of tending a grave was understood to be significant enough that ensuring that those who did the tending were of an appropriate relation to the deceased (even if the relation was no stronger than "fellow citizen") entered into an international negotiation as a major concern. However, there does not appear to have been a similar drive to ensure that those whose particular relationship to the deceased (i.e., familial) would, by custom, entitle them to tend the grave were able to do so.[12]

The public reaction was mixed. At least one body was disinterred and repatriated during the war, in spite of the general order to the contrary; Ware became concerned that this might set a precedent that "would increase the demand at home for repatriation". Likewise, the cultural historian Jonathan F. Vance recounts two separate instances of Canadians attempting to reclaim their relatives' remains after the war.[13] In both cases, the bereaved relations (parents of the dead soldiers) eventually travelled to France to dig up their sons' graves in the hopes of personally transporting their remains back to Canada; both attempts failed.

While public demand for repatriation may have been high enough to concern Ware, the majority of public concern was directed at

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[11] Longworth, *Unending Vigil*, 12.

[12] This is an abbreviated summary of an argument I rehearse in much greater depth in *Making Memory*, 72–6.

[13] *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997) 62–3.

the gravesites, rather than the bodies themselves. Providing photographs of graves—images of names—became part of the Graves Registration Commission's regular work from March 1915 onwards. By August of that year, demand was such that the Commission had developed a standard system for responding to such requests: letters of enquiry were answered with a photograph that showed four graves, one of which would be the grave of the soldier enquired about (photographing the graves in groups of four permitted a more efficient use of time and film than would photographing individual graves), and a card on which "were given certain particulars, including the best available indication as to the situation of the grave and, when it was in a cemetery, directions as to the nearest railway station which might be useful for those wishing to visit the country after the war."[14] The demand for these photographs indicated a concern for the care and upkeep of the graves, but also points towards the development of a system of substitutionary mourning. Where a body and grave were physically unavailable, mourners compensated with artefacts, such as letters and photographic images of the grave.

This system was, I argue, foundational to the civic imagination of what would shortly become the commonwealth as a multinational, multi-ethnic, multi-religious community, due to the manner in

[14] Fabian Ware, "Introduction," in *The Silent Cities* by Sidney C. Hurst (London: Methuen, 1929) vii, quoted in Longworth, *Unending Vigil*, 15.

which soldiers from different parts of the empire were buried side by side, so that the headstone of a Sikh soldier from the Punjab would become part of the mourning process for a Presbyterian family in Leaskdale, Ontario—and the headstone of the Canadian Expeditionary Force soldier would become part of the mourning process for the Sikh family.[15] As the mythic memory of the war as a grand sacrificial gesture in defence of broadly humanistic values gained traction in the 1920s, [16] the framing of the memorial photographs and the radical integration of the gravesites themselves made clear to those who possessed them that the sacrifice, and the motivations behind it, was not bounded by religion, ethnicity, or national origin. The photographs of war graves thus played a vital early role in constructing the sense of shared history and shared values that underlie the modern Commonwealth of Nations.

While the memorial cards sent during the war would have depicted a fairly ramshackle row of improvised grave markers, after the war this sense of shared values was heightened by the design of the gravesites themselves. When constructing the permanent battlefield cemeteries, the Imperial War Graves Commission strove (not uncontroversially) to maintain a uniform treatment of

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[15] The precise details of this juxtaposition are invented, and a reader familiar with the design of War Graves cemeteries will be quick to protest that for the most part, Sikh regiments occupy separate cemeteries or sections of cemeteries; however, such intermingling certainly can be found, for example in the cemetery at Lijssenthoek, and the possibility of it occurring could not be overlooked by the cemetery designers.

[16] This transition is investigated in detail in Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, and Janet S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

every grave in every cemetery, obliterating any differences in rank or social standing between the men (and they were almost exclusively men) buried there, emphasizing the equality of each soldier's sacrifice, as well as the commonality of their service to the Empire.[17] Thus, not only were the headstones absolutely uniform in size and shape (though their inscriptions varied widely), the cemeteries themselves each contain roughly the same elements. Graveyards of 1,000 occupants or more include the Stone of Remembrance, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, the same architect responsible for the London Cenotaph. The Stone is large, about twelve feet long, and in both its horizontal orientation and its situation on top of three steps is meant to resemble an altar. It bears the simple inscription, chosen by Rudyard Kipling: "Their name liveth for evermore."[18]

II. Scripture in the Cemetery Design

The inscription is from Ecclesiasticus 44:1–14 (KJV):

> Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us.
> The Lord hath wrought great glory by them through his great power from the beginning.

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[17] Frederic Kenyon, "War Graves: How the Cemeteries Abroad will be Designed," Report to the Imperial War Graves Commission (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1918) 7

[18]

Such as did bear rule in their kingdoms, men renowned for their power, giving counsel by their understanding, and declaring prophecies:

Leaders of the people by their counsels, and by their knowledge of learning meet for the people, wise and eloquent are their instructions:

Such as found out musical tunes, and recited verses in writing:

Rich men furnished with ability, living peaceably in their habitations:

All these were honoured in their generations and were the glory of their times.

There be of them, that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported.

And some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never been, and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them. But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.

With their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance, and their children are within the covenant.

Their seed shall remain for ever, and their glory shall not be blotted out.

Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name liveth for evermore.

The context of the quote chosen for the Stone is nearly as important as the quotation itself; the parallel drawn between "famous men" and those "which have no memorial" in Ecclesiasticus finds concrete expression in the design of the cemeteries put forth by the Imperial War Graves Commission, which does not differentiate between the graves of generals and those of soldiers "Known", as the standard inscription has it, "Unto God". While the quotation is drawn from scripture of Jewish authorship, it is not part of the canon of Jewish scripture, and it is not strictly recognised as a canonical text by the Church of England, but is one of those apocryphal books which 'the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners'. [19] Readings from it nevertheless would have been familiar to many around the time of the First World War as they appeared in the Book of Common Prayer as lessons for daily Morning and Evening Prayer at certain weekdays of the year.[20] The book is recognised as canonical within the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The requirements set out for the inscription by Sir Frederic Kenyon, in his initial 1918 report on the design of the war graves cemeteries, were as follows:

> With regard to the inscription on the stone, I do not venture to make a recommendation. It must be left to the inspiration of one of our masters of literature. I would only suggest that it

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[19] The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1562), Article VI.
[20] This was the case prior to the 1922 revision of the prayer book, which added texts from Ecclesiasticus/Sirach to the Sunday lectionary.

must be short, and that its effectiveness must not depend upon literary associations, which do not exist for the majority of those who will read it. A phrase from the Bible, or some words which will of themselves strike the right note in the hearts of those who read them, is what is required. One member of the Commission might be appointed as a committee of one to supply this need.[21]

The member of the commission thus appointed was Kipling, and if he ever commented upon his rationale for selecting this particular quotation, it was not within his published letters—but in a letter to Lord Arthur Browne dated 5 May 1921, he offers a list of scriptural quotations that might be chosen as inscriptions for individual grave markers: 2 Maccabees 6:28; Ecclesiasticus 44:10; Ecclesiasticus 44:11; Wisdom [of Solomon] 3:15; Wisdom 4:7; Wisdom 8:10; Wisdom 12:1; Wisdom 18:25; Ecclesiasticus 2:2—he is careful to note that these are *all* from the Apocrypha.[22]

There is room here for an interesting digression into the massively under-discussed subject of Kipling's own religious life, in which one might well note that inscriptions in war graves cemeteries are not the only time he makes reference to the text of Ecclesiasticus—it also appears in the fifth chapter of his autobiography *Something of Myself*, where he "earnestly commend[s] to the attention of the ambitious young a text in the thirty-third

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[21] "War Graves," 11.
[22] Rudyard Kipling, *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling*, ed. Thomas Pinney, vol. 5 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004) 75–6.

chapter […] which runs '*So long as thou livest and hath breath in thee, give not thyself over to any*'".[23] There is clearly scope for a study of intertextual referencing in his written *oeuvre* which has not yet been undertaken in any systematic fashion—but his private interaction with the text is rather beside the point; the topic before us is, rather, the *public* use to which the text is put. Kipling's choice to confine himself to the apocrypha is significant only insofar as the rest of the committee accepted it as an appropriate choice and passed it into official policy; Kipling's comment on his choice is significant in that it reveals that choice to have been both considered and openly acknowledged. As such, we are within bounds to treat the choice to confine texts used in the war graves cemeteries as a politically strategic decision.

I am not the first to note the absence of any identifiably Christian content from the texts of the war graves cemeteries; the lack of reference to any promise of future resurrection is, in comparison to what had been up to this point normal memorial design, glaring. Alan Wilkinson has suggested, in fact, that the verse on the Stone of Remembrance "omitted a previous sentence that might have offended Hindus" who practise cremation rather than burial.[24] Sir Frederic Kenyon's 1918 report introduced the need for a monument which "must have, or be capable of, religious associations, and while it must satisfy the religious emotions of as

23 Rudyard Kipling, *"Something of Myself" and Other Autobiographical Writings,* ed. Thomas Pinney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 74.
24 *The Church of England and the First World War* (London: SPCK, 1978; Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2014) 303.

many as possible, it must give no reasonable ground of offence to any."[25] the report went on to commend the design of the Stone in the following terms:

> It would meet many forms of religious feeling. To some it would merely be a memorial stone, such as those of which we read in the Old Testament. To others it would be an altar, one of the most ancient and general of religious symbols, and would serve as the centre of religious services. As an altar, it would represent one side of the idea of sacrifice, the sacrifice which the Empire has made of its youth, in the great cause for which it sent them forth.[26]

The sparse geometry of the Stone and the uniformly shaped headstones were the occasion of ongoing controversy, beginning as early as 1917 and stretching out past the end of the war; while a desire to avoid causing distress to the general public meant that most of this debate was carried out in private committee meetings, it did spill over onto the floor of the House of Commons during 1919, and particularly notably on the 17th of December, when Lord Hugh Cecil read out several letters he had received from British families protesting their lack of access to and control over their loved ones' remains. The ensuing debate encompassed objections to the policy of non-repatriation; objections to the practice of re-interring bodies buried in isolated spots within larger

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[25] "War Graves," 10.
[26] Frederic Kenyon, "War Graves," 10.

cemeteries; objections to constraints placed upon families who might wish to erect memorials of their own design at grave sites; objections to the alterations of existing grave markers (crosses made from aeroplane propellers are mentioned several times, and considerable concern is shown for the treatment of crosses after they are removed from graves); and several (unsuccessful) instances of special pleading that more permanent cross-shaped markers be permitted variations to the standardised headstone design.[27]

The content of this debate gives some flavour of the careful balancing act the design committee was engaged in: the British public was largely unaware of the issues of cultural and religious diversity with which the committee contended; the nearest acknowledgement in the public debate was Clifton Brown (MP for Hexham)'s observation that "All tastes are not alike, and stones put up by some people would perhaps be very distasteful to the relatives of some of the men lying near by".[28] So the choice to take inscriptions from the Apocrypha had the virtue of compromise, in that it was likely to render all interested parties (except, perhaps,

[27] House of Commons Debates 17 December 1919 vol. 123 cc 485–512. A search of Hansard will show that discussion over latitude or lack thereof for marking graves continued in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords through much of 1919 and into 1920, and also featured in formal written responses to questions. The debate revolved most vociferously around the expressed desire for some to have the ability to erect cruciform headstones (as shown in House of Lords Debates 9 April 1919 vol 34 cc 223–40) though it does seem at times that the opposition was attempting to suggest that the members of the War Graves Commission, and by extension the government, were against crosses.
[28] I note as an aside that from at least 1835, the discourse of "taste" had been used in parliamentary discourse to convey concerns regarding moral decay.

the Catholic ones) equally unhappy: members of the Established Church recognised the quotes as not really scripture, and non-Christians recognised them as rather more Christian than not.

In its religious ambiguity, the Stone of Remembrance is unlike the Reginald Blomfield designed Cross of Sacrifice, "a tall finely proportioned stone cross, with a symbolic sword of bronze attached to its face, thus emphasising both the military character of the cemetery and the religious affiliation of the majority of the dead."[29] More importantly, however, the conflation of sword and cross emphasizes the sacrificial narrative that undergirded much of the recruitment propaganda in the war. To the Christian citizens of the Empire, the suggestion of a link between the soldier's sacrifice and that of Christ served both a justificatory and a consolatory purpose. The justificatory purpose aligned Britain and the Allied nations with the side of God, transforming what may have otherwise been a rather obscure political conflict into a Holy War, in which Germans and their allies ceased to be viewed as human but instead represented the sin from which Christ died to cleanse the world. The consolatory purpose did not simply align the soldier's sacrifice with that of Christ, but also the soldier's reward; the soldier, like Christ, willingly gave up his earthly life, but in so doing gained the rewards of resurrection and life eternal. This latter treatment of the sacrificial theme grew quickly beyond a mere consolatory gesture and transformed war service into a religious and moral purification. In a debate in the House of Lords on 9 April 1919, Lord Balfour of

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[29] Philip Longworth, *Unending Vigil*, 36.

Burleigh[30] argued that the War Graves Commission's rejection of cross-shaped grave markers constituted a failure to acknowledge that "the dead who have died in so great and so noble a cause, died with the very ideal of self-sacrifice so inseparably connected with the Cross of Calvary."[31] The suggestion that the eternal life promised by both the Christian faith and the inscription on the Stone of Remembrance was directly linked not just to the soldiers' ostensibly voluntary surrender of their lives, but to the militant context in which that surrender occurred has become an important interpretative key for the spatial arrangement of the War Graves cemeteries.

The Cross of Sacrifice is present in every cemetery, regardless of size, and in the larger graveyards, where the Cross of Sacrifice and Stone of Remembrance are both present, there is usually an area of tension between them, a line of sight from which the headstones radiate outwards—a wide spread of death between resurrection and eternal life. In the Tyne Cot Cemetery at Passchendaele, the largest of the Commission's cemeteries, there is a clear line of sight between the Stone, the Cross, and the entrance gate. The Cross stands at the centre of this configuration, clearly visible from either end of the cemetery, but obscuring the view between the Stone and the entrance. In smaller graveyards, where placing the Cross in the centre is impractical, it nevertheless occupies a similarly

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[30] Not to be confused with Arthur James Balfour, the 1st Earl of Balfour, whose political career has had rather longer historical echoes.
[31] House of Lords Debates 9 April 1919 vol 34 cc 223–40.

prominent position, accomplishing what Kenyon termed "recognition of the fact that we are a Christian Empire, and this symbol of the self-sacrifice made by those who lie in them."[32]

III. Conclusion

The position of Ecclesiasticus outside the canon of the established Church permitted the Stone to pass, in the view of its creators, as a religiously neutral memorial, suitable for commemorating people of all faiths and (though it was not yet a fashionable to include in the 1920s) none. The position of the Cross of Sacrifice within the Imperial War Graves cemeteries reassured the general British public of the ultimately Christian character of both the commemorative apparatus and the war itself; it ensured that the neutrality of the Stone, when noted, was perceived by the voting public as supplemental to the dominant Christian sacrificial narrative. Kenyon notes that "The Jews are necessarily intermixed with their Christian comrades; but it is believed that their feelings will be satisfied by the inclusion of their religious symbol (the double triangle, or 'Star of David') in the design of their headstones, and that they would not be offended by the presence of the Cross in the cemetery."[33] In short, what I am wanting to suggest here is that the design of the war graves cemeteries is a perfect portrait of the cultural imaginary of the British Empire at

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[32] Frederic Kenyon, "War Graves," 11.
[33] Frederic Kenyon, "War Graves," 11. In debate in the House of Lords, when Lord Balfour asked which representatives of churches were consulted, Viscount Peel claimed that "the Chief Rabbi [gave advice] on behalf of the Jewish community" House of Lords Debate 09 April 1919 vol 34 cc 223–40.

this time, admitting of diversity in small ways, but with a still militant Christianity at its centre. I conclude with the suggestion that this cross-centred pluralism remains characteristic of the civic religion of the Commonwealth today.