

Canadian Military History

Volume 28 | Issue 1

Article 11

4-29-2019

Review of "War Beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present" by Jay Winter

Bryan McClure

Recommended Citation

McClure, Bryan () "Review of "War Beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present" by Jay Winter," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol28/iss1/11>

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Jay Winter. *War Beyond Words: Languages of Remembrance from the Great War to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xviii + 234.

In his newest book, Jay Winter examines the ways European conflicts from the first half of the twentieth century, primarily the First World War and the Holocaust, have been remembered into the present day. Using the theory of Jan and Aledia Assmann, Winter works from the premise “that language frames memory” (pp. 1-2). Pulling from selections of art, literature, film, photography, and memorials, Winter argues that “*how* we remember affected deeply *what* we remember” (p. 203). How war was remembered created a new focus on soldiers and civilians as the face of war, turning them into victims. The new face of war “helped undermine the legitimacy of war as an instrument of political life” (p. 3). The delegitimation of war was not experienced uniformly and Winter places the Great War and the Shoah (the Hebrew term for the Holocaust that he uses throughout the book) as the two defining moments that have dictated war as no longer being legitimate for Western European societies.

In the fields of memory and cultural history of war, Winter is one of the leading international scholars. His seminal study *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* has been one of the key texts since its publication in 1995. Winter has continued to publish and has mentored a number of scholars in these fields. The large number of studies exploring the memory of the First World War has allowed Winter to take a step back from focusing on exploring the practical details of creating works of art, film, or monuments. Instead, Winter tackles more theoretical issues surrounding how the memory of conflicts has shaped cultural perceptions of war. This is not to say that Winter neglects the use of empirical evidence; rather, it allows him to focus on specific case studies safe in the knowledge that the literature, and his past studies support his findings. *War Beyond Words* is meant to be read in conjunction with other works in the field to be fully appreciated. Winter’s focus on the language of silence speaks to Adrian Gregory’s *The Silence of Memory* (1994), as Winter explores

not just the practical use of silence to create memories, but the larger theoretical and social implications of such a language.¹

Winter begins his study with a section titled “Vectors of Memory” which examines various mediums of language. Each chapter explores the ways a different medium reflected the delegitimation of war. The opening chapter on art treads over ground that will not be new to anyone who has read his previous works that explore the apocalyptic theme in art. The two chapters on photography and film are vital for his analysis as these two mediums were the most popular in the twentieth century. The analysis of soldiers’ photographs is compelling as soldiers were able to take unadulterated photos of industrial death from the First World War which, Winter argues, challenges the concept that the Shoah was inconceivable. The chapter on film highlights the need for popular culture to “make terror come alive” if it was not to become “voyeurism” (p. 89). The final chapter is a literary analysis using digital history programmes to compare and contrast the usage of “glory” and “honour” in books from multiple countries (pp. 100-101). The use of such quantitative research allows Winter to clearly show the downward trend of romantic images of war as the century progressed.

The second section of the book on “Frameworks of Memory” is more theoretical as it explores the languages of martyrdom, geography, and silence. The chapter on martyrdom looks at the use of sacred language in interpretations of war. The framework of religious language to create memory is not universal as seen in the decline of martyrdom in attempting to explain the Shoah, contrasted to the use of martyrdom in explaining the Armenian Genocide. A point that should be explored in greater detail is how “when martyrdom enters the equation, there is not enough symbolic space for both communities of victims to enter into national narratives of loss” as it is “not logically impossible; it is just politically impossible” (p. 127). The political side of memory is one that Winter stays away from in the book and leaves the reader wondering how influential political

¹ Adrian Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg, 1994). Other works that Winter also speaks to include Stefan Goebel’s *The Great War and Medieval Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Daniel Todman’s *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005), and Laura Wittman’s *The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, Modern Mourning, and the Reinvention of the Mystical Body* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), to name a few.

culture is to the framework of memory. The chapter on the language of memorial geography struggles to deliver a unique analysis. The geography of a memorial plays a vital role in how a viewer interprets it. While the horizontal and vertical plane on which the memorial is viewed contributes to its message, Winter neglects to explore other geographic factors such as terrain, location, and artistic heritage. The final chapter presents silence as one of the key languages of memory. This topic is most dear to Winter as the chapter shares the same title as the book. It focuses on shell-shocked soldiers who either lied or stayed silent on their experiences to try and protect themselves or their loved ones from seeing the true side of war. Winter shows how silence created familial tensions as fear and uncertainty became the products of the silence, turning the next generation away from war. The examination of silence as a language of memory is a fascinating approach that Winter weaves into other chapters of the book, making it one of the key themes of the work.

The study is not an exhaustive analysis of each of the subjects. The pieces of art, film, and language are selective, but Winter never intended the work to be comprehensive as the material of language and war are "two unstable, even dynamic and at times volatile, variables" (p. 5). Winter's decision to address the Shoah, which he has spent most of his career skirting around, makes the book an update to *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*. While Winter stands by his conclusions in the book, he seeks to qualify that the "radical distinction between the two postwar periods I drew in 1995 is probably too sharp, and in need of qualification" (p. 206). For those who have read Winter's other works, this book continues to build on ideas and analysis he explores in earlier publications. For those who have yet to read Winter's earlier works, this study could be difficult to understand and fully appreciate. *War Beyond Words* provides a glimpse into the philosophical ruminations of an expert historian who has been a leading scholar in war, culture, and memory for several decades.

BRYAN MCCLURE, *WESTERN UNIVERSITY*