

**Paul
Gough**



Loci Memoriae

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Paul Gough

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Front cover
Unknown (no.1)
2000
chalks on paper
155 cm x 102 cm

Back cover
Red Tree
2000
chalks on paper
155 cm x 102 cm

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STONE

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Further information www.whiteflags.org.uk

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Loci Memoriae

How should we remember honestly the dead of war at the same time as warning against future war? For Phillip Larkin, memorably, the traditional tribute was 'solemn-sinister Wreath rubbish.' Recent controversy over the American Second World War memorial shows how potent the issue remains. The pointless slaughter of the First World War is the most

difficult of all wars to remember. Most survivors wanted to forget quickly, and were soon forgotten themselves, as the song says. Yet eight million died, and the suffering did not end in 1918: much of the rest of twentieth century history was affected by what happened in the four short years after 1914. So, both remembrance and warning were and remain essential.

A traditional memorial is that of the entombment of the Unknown Soldier as the symbol of all the dead. The suffering of those who fought in that unjust war (not really a Great War) has always moved me, even haunts me, as does the experience and bravery of those who fought Nazism in the only just war of the twentieth century. Yet I experience little emotion when

encountering official war memorials: only in the arts can I find the understanding, the education and the emotion. A sentence by Remarque, a poem by Sassoon, a picture by Nash, and a film like *All Quiet on the Western Front* bring home to me the suffering and the waste, more than the bricks, mortar and bronze of the official tributes can ever do.

Most of all it is cinema for me. Memorials play small but influential roles in films about the war: white crosses, statues, the Unknown Soldier (strange that this should always be capitalised when lower case would be more universal). In Bertrand Tavernier's 1989 Film, *La Vie et Rien d'Autre*, one of many great French contributions to world cinema about the war,

Philippe Noiret has to identify 350,000 dead and deranged victims of the war. He has to find also a corpse to be placed under the Arc de Triomphe as the Unknown Soldier. He must be French and not British or a Hun he is told.

Tavernier's film is powerful. But I remember more one released in 1932, made by Ernst Lubitsch, known for

comedy rather than combat. Opening on armistice day, 1919, it shows a distraught French veteran seeking forgiveness for having killed a German boy. The opening sequence is the most powerful of all war films. Bells ringing and soldiers marching in an Armistice Day parade up the Champs-Élysées are filmed, though we do not know it yet, through

the space left by a soldier's amputated leg. Nothing can say more than this.

In truth, I have nothing against war memorials. More than most, I guess, I stay silent for two minutes every November and try to remember, though in reality I can only imagine the horror. Anything that exists to warn against a repeat of this is justified. Paul Gough brings

together both memorials and art in his moving work, ensuring that a new generation, long removed from the war, can remember and learn. His work joins recent books and films that symbolise the hold, and perhaps also the fear, that this disaster of nearly ninety years ago still has on the contemporary imagination. **Andrew Kelly** 2001

**It's difficult with the weight of the rifle.
Leave it – under the oak.
Leave it for a salvage-bloke
let it lie bruised for a monument
dispense the authenticated fragments to the faithful.**

**... but leave it – under the oak.
Leave it for a Cook's tourist to the Devastated areas and crawl
as far as you can and wait for the bearers.**

From part 7, *In Parenthesis*, David Jones, (Faber, London, 1937) p. 183 – 186

Andrew Kelly is the author of *Cinema and the Great War* (1997) and *Filming All Quiet on the Western Front* (1998).

HOLY RELICS: venerated detritus

Like David Jones, many old soldiers suspected that the withered landscape of northern France and Belgian Flanders would swarm with tourists once the First World War had ended. Another war poet, Philip Johnstone, wrote a sardonic poem¹ about the sightseers who would be drawn to the killing fields out of dread fascination and morbid curiosity:

But Johnstone could not have predicted the obsessive habit of post-war battlefield tourists to claim a segment of the land blooded by their kinsmen. During the period of mass pilgrimage in the early 1920s tracts of the battlefields were scoured for evidence of wars' realities: stone, soil, seeds, shards of glass, became the coinage of remembrance, a currency that crossed all borders.

Coloured glass was highly valued as evidence of pilgrimage, especially by those who had travelled considerable distances. In Carmichael United Church in Regina, Canada, for example, a memorial window incorporates a single piece of glass bought back by a pilgrim from the Great War battlefields around Ypres. Another memorial window, in St Paul's Church, Toronto comprises over 600 fragments of glass gathered from seventy European buildings damaged during the war, as well as an altar rail from Arras cathedral, and shards of glass and exfoliant stonework from various ecclesiastical buildings on the former battlefield. Such fragments were held in great reverence and were highly valued as material proof by those

High Wood

**Ladies and gentlemen, this is High Wood,
Called by the French, Bois des Fourneaux,
The famous spot which in Nineteen-Sixteen,
July, August and September was the scene
Of long and bitterly contested strife,
By reason of its High commanding site.
Observe the effect of shell-fire in the trees
Standing and fallen; here is wire; this trench
For months inhabited, twelve times changed
hands;
(They soon fall in), used later as a grave.
It has been said on good authority
That in the fighting for this patch of wood
Were killed somewhere above eight thousand men,
Of whom the greater part were buried here,
This mound on which you stand being ...
Madame, please.**

who could not make the long journey across the Atlantic. With heightened status came an increase in the scale of the spoil: the Canadian General Arthur Currie has a grave marker in Mount Royal Cemetery which includes a stone from the chateau at Camblain l'Abbe and bags of soil from Vimy, Ypres and the Somme. Jonathan Vance² has described

**You are requested kindly not to touch
Or take away the Company's property
As souvenirs; you'll find we have on sale
A large variety, all guaranteed.
As I was saying, all is as it was.
This is an unknown British officer,
The tunic having lately rotted off.
Please follow me – this way ...
the path, sir, please,**

**The ground which was secured at great expense
The Company keeps absolutely untouched,
And in that dug-out (genuine) we provide
Refreshments at a reasonable rate.
You are requested not to leave about
Paper, or ginger-beer bottles, or orange-peel,
There are waste-paper baskets at the gate.**

² Jonathan F. Vance, *Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (UBC Press, Vancouver, 1997).

these battlefield relics as playing a fundamental part in Canada's memorialisation of the war. He argues that these bits of rubble, shards of glass and bags of dirt became endowed with a spiritual significance. As artifacts taken from the new Holy Land they were transformed into objects of veneration. Touching a lump of stone from France was the



Plates 1 & 2

closest most Canadians would come to partaking in the 'Great Crusade'.

So little of any substance survived on the worst tracts of French battlefield that considerable efforts were made to shore up and preserve symbolic features. At Beaumont Hamel, on the old Somme battlefield, the government of Newfoundland purchased for a memorial park a large stretch of pock-marked ground which was criss-crossed by deep and distinctive trenches. Here the Newfoundland Regiment had suffered appalling losses in an ill-timed attack on the first day of the Somme battle in 1916. Some yards in front of the Newfoundlander's trenches is the petrified remains of a tree, preserved – a little inelegantly – in a sunken barrel full of cement. (Plate 1) It served as a gathering point during the attack, providing little shelter from the withering rain of bullets and high explosives. Perhaps for that reason it is known variously as the Danger Tree, *l'arbre de la guerre*, the Tree of Death. Now encircled by paper poppies and wreaths – the paraphernalia of remembrance – it has always reminded me of the fable of the Upas Tree, a mythical plant that was said to have grown on the isle of Java in the midst of a desert formed by its own 'pestiferous exhalations' which destroyed all vegetable and animal life that came near it. Derived from accounts of the poisonous anchar tree discovered by the 18th century botanist Erasmus Darwin, the Upas Tree was reputed to contain a precious poison which could be obtained

¹ Philip Johnstone, High Wood, cited in Paul Fussell, *The Bloody Game* (Scribners, London, 1991) pp. 197 – 98.



by piercing the bark. 'So hopeless, and so perilous was the endeavour to obtain it', wrote Richard Redgrave in 1866, that only criminals sentenced to death could be induced to make the attempt, and as numbers of them perished, the place became a valley of the shadow of death, a charnel-field of bones.³

Five miles along the old battle-line there is another preserved tree – an one hundred year old hornbeam, which is the positive to the Danger Tree's negative (Plate 2). Despite being riddled with shrapnel, annually adorned with paper poppies and regularly caressed by pilgrims, it survives as the sole pre-war plant in the once-flattened Delville (Devil's) Wood.

In the aftermath of the Great War, while the native Belgian and French people toiled to reconstruct the *regions devastees*, individuals and groups from as far afield as Australia and Canada came to locate particular places which might still contain the memory of significant events. For most visitors there was little to see. As David Lloyd has observed, the landscape which drew them was largely an imaginary one:

'It was not the sites themselves which attracted travellers, but their associations.'⁴

One guidebook assured pilgrims that:

touring the battlefields is a different thing altogether to touring for the purpose of sight seeing, in fact I can safely say that the mere

sight-seer will probably be disappointed with the devastated zones of France and Belgium. But combined with 'atmosphere' and imagination they will draw the tourists like magnets and he will probably return to them again and again.⁵

In its desolated and noisome state, littered with war refuse and unspent ordnance, the emptied land was devoid of identifying landmarks except for painted signposts indicating the site of former villages, churches or farmsteads. Yet these were the very sites of memory that would assume an inestimable significance in national, regional and local memory. Over the next decade governments, remembrance groups, and bereaved families bought small tracts of foreign land as permanent memorials and sacred spaces. On such sites of memory, planting was a carefully considered act. The double avenue of apparently ancient oaks either side of the South African Brigade's museum on the Somme battlefield, for example, were grown from acorns harvested and sent over from Cape Colony. Maple trees were grown around Canadian cemeteries, wattle was imported from New Zealand sites. The Imperial War Graves Commission recruited experts from Kew Gardens to advise on appropriate funerary plantings for the graves of Indian and Chinese troops.⁶

In Turkey, on the notorious Gallipoli Peninsula, a solitary dwarf pine had long dominated the skyline on the slopes above Anzac beach. An obvious

Plates 3 & 4



landmark during the battles of mid-1915 it lent its name to the surrounding land – Lone Pine Ridge, Lone Pine Plateau. However, the night before one attack, Turkish soldiers cut the tree down to avoid it being used as a registration point. Long after the war its remains were discovered crammed into a dug-out on the old front-line. Inspired by its significance in their national memory, several Australian pilgrims took seeds from its pine cones and planted them in the grounds of the Canberra War Memorial. In time, a tree grew there and when mature, its seeds were flown back to Gallipoli and planted near the spot of the Mother Tree, now in the centre of a war cemetery. (Plate 3) The idea of the lonesome pine also survives in the title of a song made famous by Laurel and Hardy.⁷

On these sacred sites little is left to chance; arboreal symbolism is a powerful means of perpetuating memory, allowing a fluidity of commemoration that could not always be conveyed in stone and bronze. This was especially true in the First World War because, in the interests of standardisation, an Army General Routine Order of May 1916 banned permanent personalised memorials in any military cemetery. Uniform headstones were agreed in Parliament during a highly charged debate in May 1920. Such a rigid system occasionally resulted in acts of arboreal transgression, such as the occasion in 1922 when the father of Lt. Eric Duckworth (killed in action in August 1915) travelled from Dunsterville near Rochdale to Cape Helles on the Gallipoli Peninsula bearing a young sapling. Surreptitiously planted to one side of Redoubt Military Cemetery it is now a mature English oak which upsets the customary symmetry of the graveyard regime. (Plate 4) There are few acts of such 'guerilla gardening' other than paper wreaths and imitation silk poppies. Though always well scrubbed, the military cemeteries seem less abundant in flowers and shrubs than they appear to be in photographs taken during the pilgrimage phase of the 1920s. Transgressive gardening occurs in Julian Barnes' short story *Evermore* when the protagonist, Miss Moss, attempts to reclaim the private memory of her fallen brother from the administrative anonymity and foreign soil of the French cemetery which she visits every year:

3 Richard and Samuel Redgrave, *A Century of Painters* (London, 1866) pp. 438 – 9; see also Francis Greenacre, *Francis Danby, 1793 – 1861* (Tate Gallery, London 1988) pp. 89 – 91, p. 112.

4 David Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism* (Oxford, 1998).

5 T. A. Lowe, *The Western Battlefields: A Guide to the British Line* (London, 1920) p. 9.

6 Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: A History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission 1917 – 1984* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1967 / 1985) pp. 20.

7 Paul Gough, 'Conifers and Commemoration: the Politics and Protocol of Planting' *Landscape Research*, (1996) 21, 1, pp. 73 – 87.



Plate 5

There had been problems with the planting. The grass at the cemetery was French grass, and it seemed to her of the coarser type, inappropriate for British soldiers to lie beneath. Her campaign over this with the Commission led nowhere. So one spring she took out a small spade and a square yard of English turf, patting it into place, then stamping it in. She was pleased with her work, and the next year, as she approached the grave, saw no indication of her mending. But when she knelt, she realised that her work had been undone: the French grass was back again.⁸

Because British and Allied military cemeteries have been sealed against arboreal intervention, remembrance organisations, such as the Western Front Association have had to look elsewhere. In the mid 1990s a group from Bristol sought out and planted a sapling on the site of the notorious 'Lone Tree' that once stood half-way across no-man's land on the Loos Battlefield and formed the right hand marker for the 1st Division of the British Expeditionary Force in 1915. On the slate-flat fields of northern France the tree was a distinctive feature, noted by the artillery as a reliable datum point for calibration purposes. The trade in significant trees and memorial plantings is matched by instances of a more haphazard nature: in the aftermath of the war all sorts of foreign flora were to be found in the ravaged soil

of Flanders: the Our-Lady's-thistle, *Silybum Marianum* had been bought from Scotland in the horses' oats; solid, lumpy turnips were carried there from Germany, and everywhere grew the wind-blown native poppies, *Papaver Rhoeas*.⁹ In 1927, the trans-Atlantic solo pilot Charles Lindbergh scattered thousands of poppy seeds from his 'plane over the American cemetery in Waregem.

There was also a thriving exchange in rocks and stones. On the edge of High Wood in France – possibly near the path taken by Johnstone's prospective tourists – is a cairn memorial that commemorates the 192 Glasgow Highlanders killed here in 1916. (Plate 5) Built in 1972 its form is derived from a Scottish Highland custom that required each warrior going into battle to



add a stone to a pile, each survivor removing one afterwards; the remaining stones representing the number of casualties. The cairn in France is made up of 192 stones hand-picked from the fields around Culloden and is exactly 5 feet 7 inches high – the minimum height for recruitment to that battalion.¹⁰

Compare these subtleties with the scale of quarrying during the 'monumental phase' in the years that followed the war. Every week between 1920 and 1924 thousands of tonnes of white stone were quarried from Portland and shipped across the continent to be further carved and inscribed as headstones for the cemeteries of Flanders. By 1927 more than 400,000 headstones have been erected. This monumental effort was the greatest



period of commemoration since pharonic Egypt." At the foot of each headstone relatives could choose their own inscription, but were charged threepence halfpenny for each letter and for each space between words, to a maximum of 66 characters. At that rate the popular epitaph – 'At the going down of the sun we will remember them' – cost a bereaved family fourteen shillings, seven pence halfpenny.

In 1920 the tomb of Unknown Warrior was sealed with a slab of granite excavated from Belgium, and the body packed in by battlefield soil bought across to London in six sealed barrels. We can see a reprise of these sentiments in the opening sequence to Stephen Spielberg's film of the 1944 Normandy landings, *Saving Private Ryan* when the hardened platoon sergeant, having scrambled through the enemy defences, pauses to cram handfuls of soil into a tin marked 'France'. It is thrust back into his knapsack alongside cans from other campaigns marked 'Italy' and 'North Africa'.

Walking across the boneyards of northern France, Belgium and Turkey is simultaneously sobering and uplifting. The dead ground of the Somme valleys and the Anzac creeks has deeply infused my studio and written work in the past decade and is evidenced in the images reproduced in this catalogue.

Paul Gough

8 Julian Barnes, *Evermore* (London, 1996) pp. 39 – 41.

9 Marc Derez, 'A Belgian Salient for Reconstruction: People and Patrie, Landscape and Memory' *Passchendaele in Perspective* (London, 1997) p. 456.

10 Martin and Mary Middlebrook, *The Somme: A Battlefield Guide* (London, 1991).

11 Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1994).



Sapling
2000
chalks, conté, ink on paper
155 cm x 102 cm



Petrified Tree
2000
ink, oil pastels on paper
75 cm x 42 cm



Dialogue
1999
chalk, pastels on paper
40 cm x 76 cm



Alliance

1999 - 2000
pastel, chalks, ink and collage on paper
102 cm x 155 cm



Trees of Upas

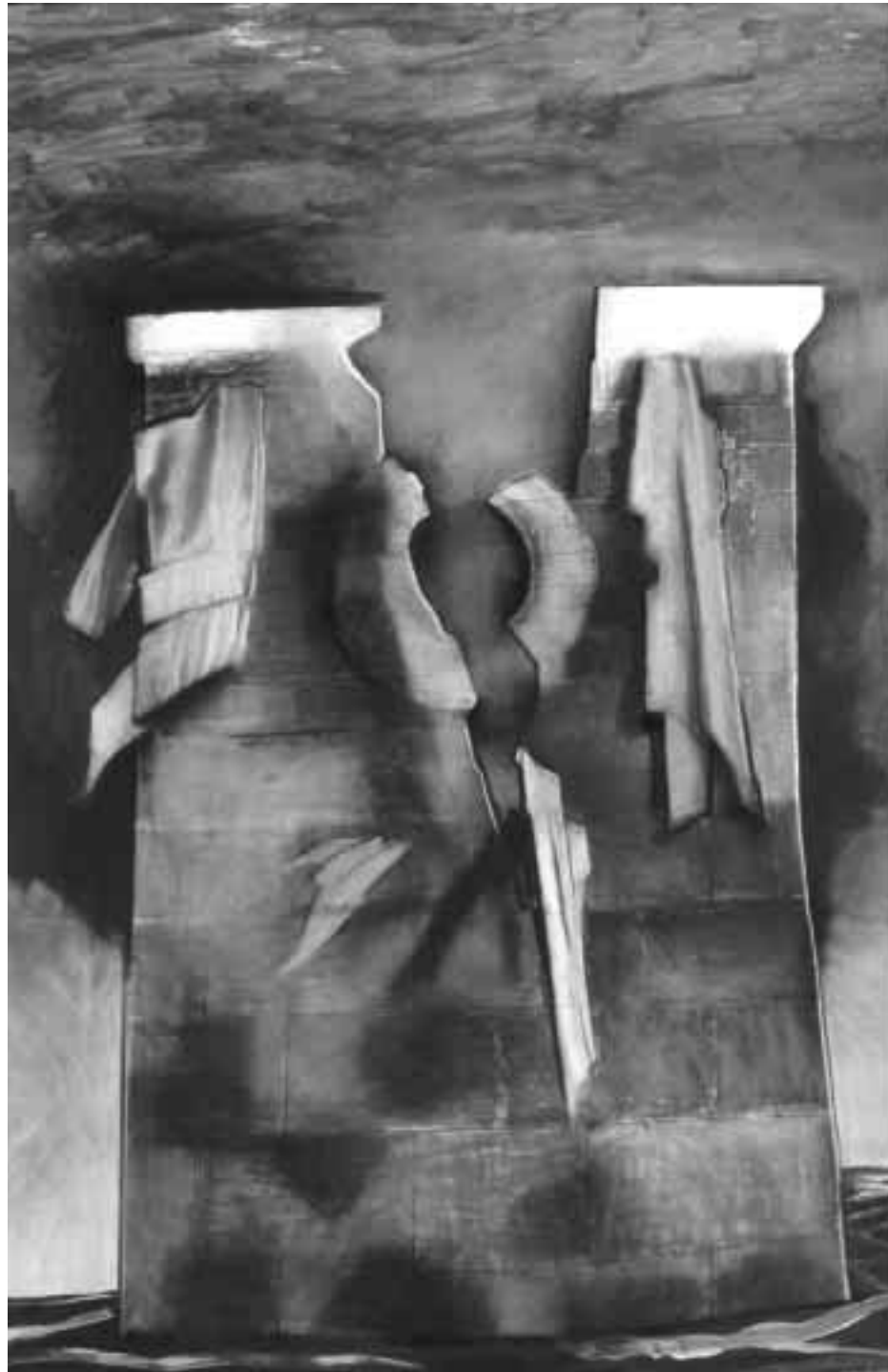
1999 - 2000
chalks, conté, ink on paper
102 cm x 155 cm



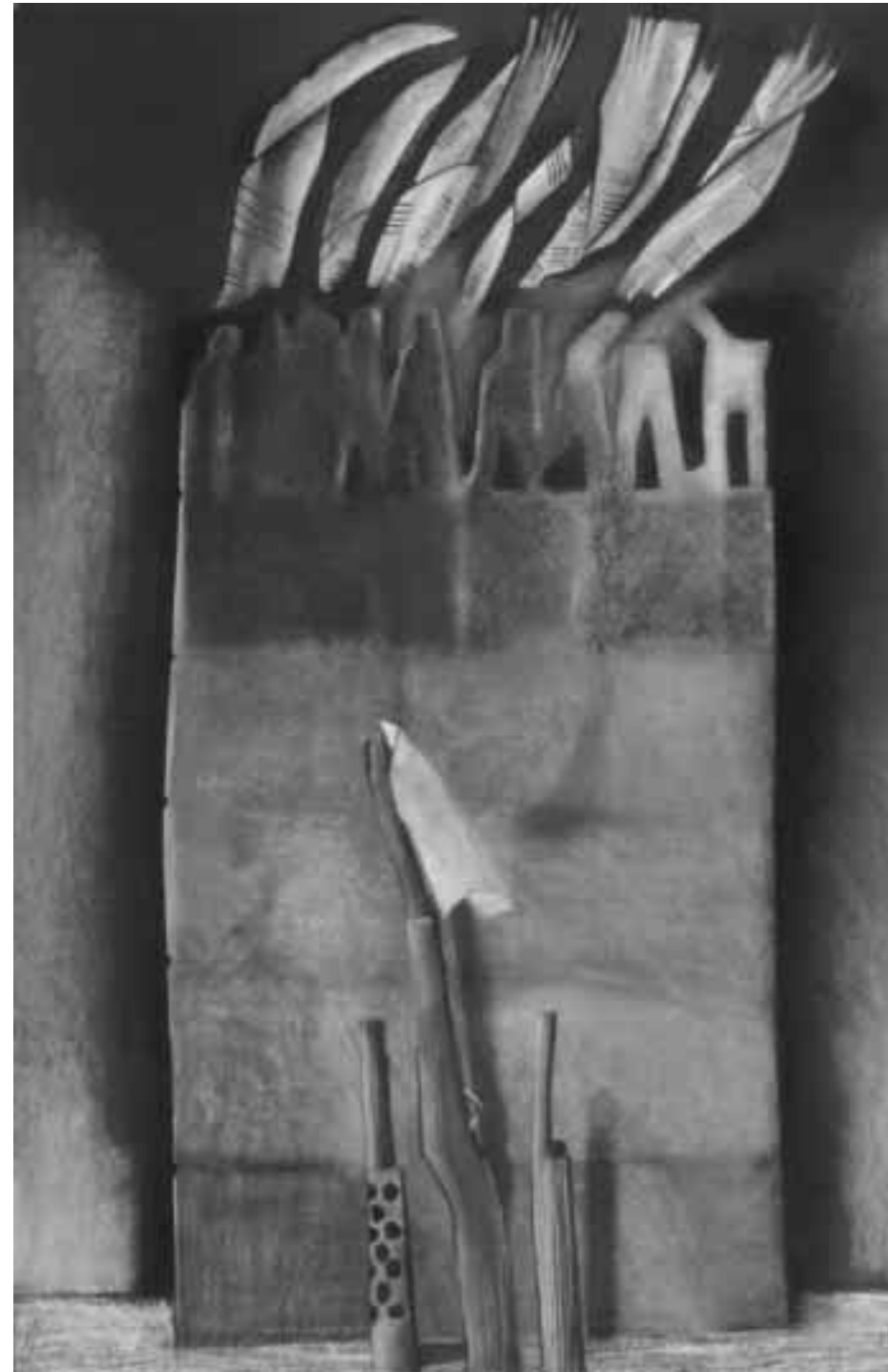
Land Mark
2000
pastel, chalks on paper
155 cm x 102 cm



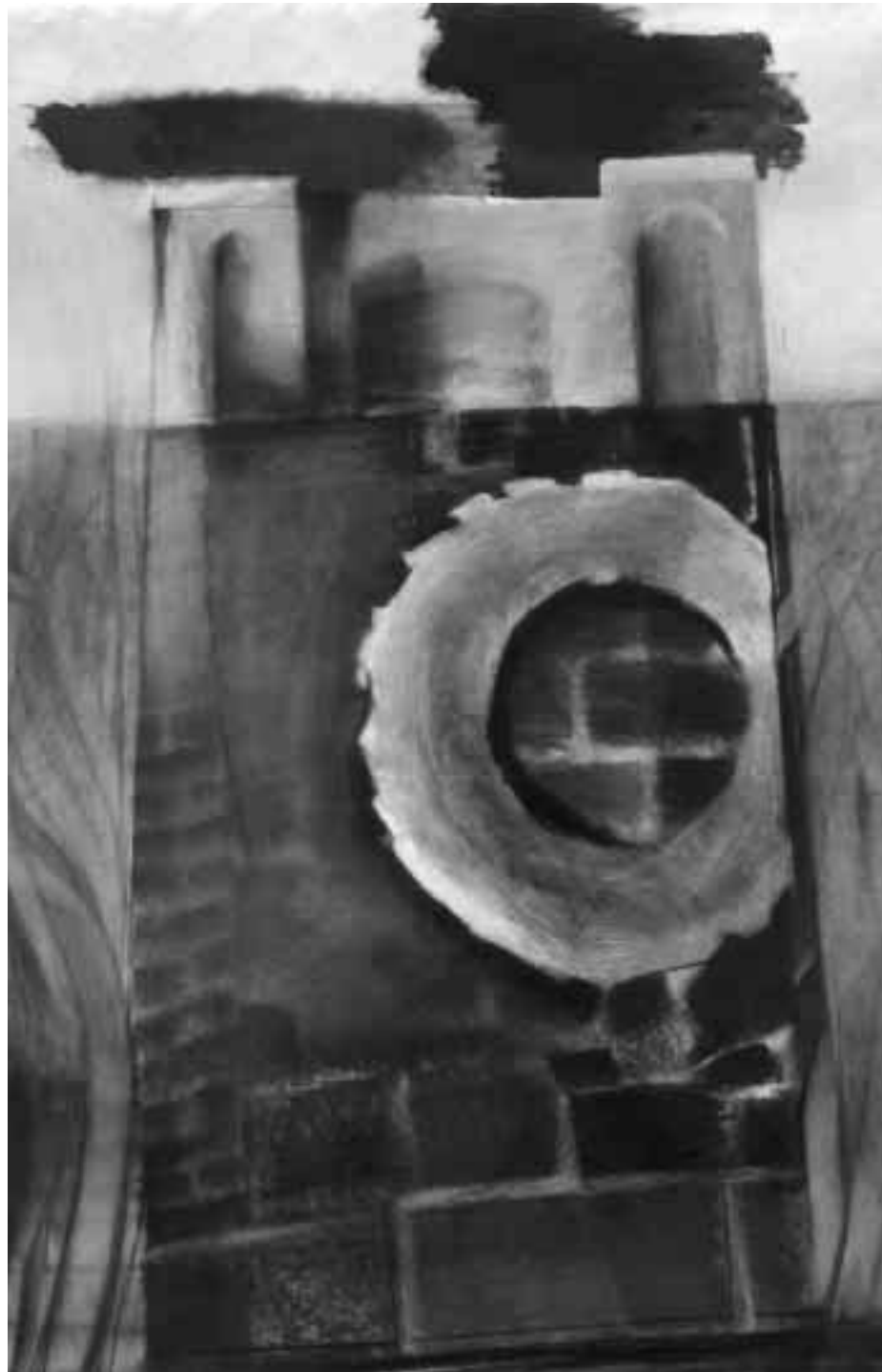
Two studies for
Memorial sous terrain
2000
pastel on paper
75 cm x 41 cm



Catafalque (for Brunel)
2000
pastel, acrylic on paper
155 cm x 102 cm



Catafalque (for Max Aitken)
2000
chalk, conté on paper
155 cm x 102 cm



Centotaph (after Luytens)
2000
chalk, ink, acrylic on paper
155 cm x 102 cm



Unknown Warrior (no.2)
1999
graphite, chalk, ink on paper
160 cm x 120 cm



Monument to an airman
2000
pastel, acrylic on paper
155 cm x 102 cm



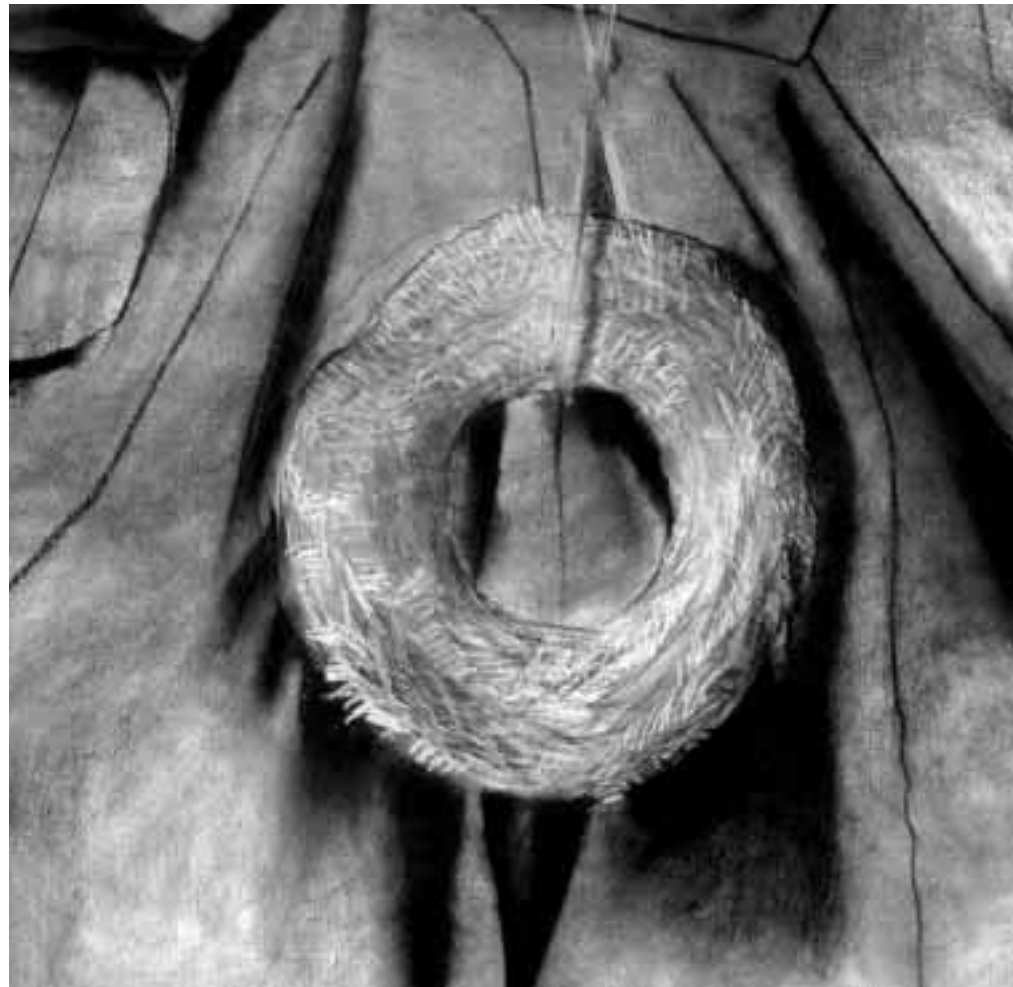
Unknown Warrior (no 4)
1999 - 2000
conté on paper
160 cm x 130 cm



Unknown Warrior (no. 3)
1999 - 2000
pastel, conté on paper
160 cm x 130 cm

Inconnu

**Here
mixed with the dust of kings
and of famous men
in earth bought with him
from the battlefields of France¹**



- ¹ This is an alternative inscription for the stone covering the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, Westminster Abbey, London written by D.S. MacColl, in 1921.
- ² W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems* (London, 1990)
- ³ Cited in *Our Empire* Volume VII, no. 8.
- ⁴ See for example: Michael Gavagan, *The Story of the Unknown Warrior*, (Preston, 1995); Terry Cave, *The Unknown Warrior*, *WFA Bulletin*, no. 17, October, 1986; Ken Inglis, *Entombing Unknown Warriors: From London and Paris to Baghdad, History and Memory*, no. 5 (1993) pp. 7 – 31.
- ⁵ Railton received no reply from Haig; he wrote to Ryle in August 1920.
- ⁶ Cited in *Our Empire* Volume VIII, no. 8.

**horizontal man
Let us honour if we can
The vertical man
Though we value none
But the horizontal one**

Such was W.H. Auden's² sarcastic comment on the sentimental fever that continued to surround the burial of the Unknown Warrior in the decade after the Great War. His, and the few dissenting voices were, however, smothered by the tens, and eventually hundreds of thousands who gathered to lay wreaths at the Cenotaph in London's Whitehall, and then to process in pairs past the tomb in nearby Westminster Abbey on Armistice Day, November 11th 1920.

Many individuals have been credited for the idea of exhuming the body of an unknown soldier and entombing it in the sacred centre of the British State, 'the Parish Church of the Empire'.³ Most scholars⁴ agree, however, that the idea originated with a young army padre, the Reverend David Railton MC who wrote first to Sir Douglas Haig, and then to the Dean of Westminster, the Rt Rev Herbert Ryle⁵ in August 1920. *Our Empire* later explained his motives:

He was worried that the great men of the time might be too busy to be interested in the concerns of a mere padre. He had also thought of writing to the King but was concerned that his advisors might suggest some open space like Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park etc ... Then artists would come and no one could tell what weird structure they might devise for a shrine!⁶

A fear of 'weird artists' was common after the First World War; the popular press gaped aghast at the exhibitions of official war art that were being



Seedling
2000
chalk on paper
155 cm x 102 cm

shown in London and the provinces. As one more sympathetic reviewer noted they were little more than 'cubist monstrosities'. Railton's letter, however, struck a more popular chord, and the Dean soon gained the approval of the Prime Minister, who in turn convinced the War Office and (a rather reluctant) King. Cabinet established a Memorial Service Committee in October and it was hoped that the entombment would take place at the unveiling of the permanent Cenotaph in Whitehall that November.

Necessarily a sensitive act, the selection of a single British body was clouded in secrecy. Historians differ as to the number of bodies actually exhumed, whether four or six. Whichever, a number of unknown bodies were dug up from the areas of principle British military involvement in France and Belgium – the Somme, Aisne, Arras and Ypres. The digging parties had been firmly instructed to select a grave marked 'Unknown British Soldier', one who had been buried in the earlier part of the war so as to allow sufficient decomposition of the body. The party had to ensure the body was clad, or at least wrapped, in British khaki material.

Funeral cars delivered four bodies in sacks to a temporary chapel at military headquarters at St Pol where at midnight on 7th November, Brig. General L.J. Wyatt, officer commanding British Forces in France and Flanders, selected one of the flag-draped figures (described later by Wyatt as 'mere bones') by simply stepping forward and touching one of them. Before this ultimate selection each sackload had been carefully picked through to confirm that they were



Burial Studies
1999 –2000
chalk on paper
75 cm x 45 cm

British (or at least British Empire) and that no name tags, regimental insignia or any other means of identification remained.⁷

While the selected body was made ready to embark on its highly ritualised journey, the others were quietly reburied. Other countries followed suit: the Americans returned three bodies to the soil without ceremony; the seven unchosen by the French government were re-interred under a cross in a Verdun war cemetery at precisely the same time as the chosen body was being buried under the Arc de Triomphe.

Were it not for the recent example of national mourning that followed the death of Princess Diana, we might be astonished at the intensity of symbolism and ritual that accompanied the passage of the unknown soldier to London. After a multi-denominational service in the makeshift chapel, the body, six barrels of foreign soil, and escort party travelled to Boulogne. There, the body still in its original sack was transferred to a coffin, freshly constructed by the British Undertaker's Association from an oak tree that had stood in the parks of Hampton Court Palace. Amidst high ceremony, flanked by a division of French troops, surrounded by thousands of townsfolk and children released early from school, and saluted by no lesser a figure than Marshall Foch, the bearer party embarked on HMS Verdun, to be escorted part of the way by French torpedo boats and French aircraft and then across the Channel by six British destroyers.

On board, the coffin lay on a specially designed bier smothered in wreaths some so large that four soldiers were needed to lift them. It was watched over by a naval guard of honour, who upon embarkation gave way to a single sentry. The entire process was orchestrated by no less a figure than Lt. General Sir George MacDonagh, the King's emissary.

To have achieved all this in a little over two weeks beggars belief. Historians have traced the traffic in telegrams, protocols and administrative niceties that smoothed the way for this highly complex choreography of ritual and display. It must be remembered that exhumation and repatriation of war dead was a vexed political issue which had riven the country when, in 1915, the government had decided that war dead must not be returned home. The Unknown Warrior had thus to serve as the surrogate dead, a symbol of all those left in foreign soil.

From Dover, where the coffin was borne from the destroyer by senior officers, it was transported to London in the same railway luggage van that had carried the remains of war martyr Nurse Edith Cavell. At each station it passed, great crowds of locals were gathered; ex-servicemen's organisations, local dignitaries and a military guard of honour crowded onto the platforms. At Victoria Station, in London, thousands stormed the barriers, clambering onto the engine and carriages in near panic.

Watched over by guardsmen – rifles reversed, heads bowed – all night, the final act in the funereal

pageant began at 9.40 am on 11th November 1920. The coffin, surmounted by union flag, steel helmet and side arms of a private soldier and a torn battle flag, was moved to a gun carriage and then, flanked either side by the twelve highest ranking officers in the country – Field Marshals, Admirals, Generals – moved very slowly along the 4,000 yard route to the Cenotaph.

It took exactly one hour to cover the distance. An estimated fifty thousand people were crammed into Trafalgar Square; those in reserved places along Whitehall watched as the King received the procession, adding the sole wreath of red roses and bay leaves. At 11 o'clock Big Ben sounded, and on the final stroke, the King pressed the button that released the giant flags draping the stone cenotaph. It is a quite startling moment, caught on film like some gesture of defeat rather than mourning. A two-minute silence followed. All over the country everything stopped. A court case in Manchester was suspended mid-sentence:

... the accused – an ex-soldier who had served in France, Egypt and Mesopotamia and gained the DCM and the Croix de Guerre – springing smartly to attention between the warders standing on either side of him. The recorder ... Counsel, solicitors, prison officers and members of the Police all paid silent tribute. Prisoners in the cells, some of them awaiting removal to Strangeways Gaol to serve sentences, rigidly observed the silence.⁸

They are remarkably evocative parallel images – the empty tomb and the unknown soldier. In a war that had killed so many millions it was perhaps the only way to signify the absent dead; emptiness and absence had, after all, become two of the most familiar tropes of the Great War; its most familiar contemporary icon had been the emptied landscape of no-man's-land.

To many thousands of pilgrims making the harrowing voyage to the bleak Flanders countryside, there was often little to see but missing woods, flattened villages and gaping holes that might connect them to the sites of memory and mourning. Of course, the project of the Unknown Warrior (as Ken Inglis has pointed out) was in part the outcome of 'ecclesiastical misgivings' about the secular status of the Cenotaph in Whitehall.⁹ The anonymous body in the Abbey was the Church of England's assurance that the war dead would be given the requisite Christian honour, and not left to reside in a blank structure surrounded by the mere offices of state.

And finally, the funeral procession reached Westminster Abbey. Here, as Geoff Dyer has observed 'the intensity of emotion was reinforced by numerical arrangement': one hundred winners of the Victoria Cross lined the route to the burial place; a thousand bereaved mothers and widows stood behind them.¹⁰ Lowered into a grave dug in the floor of the Abbey, the coffin was sprinkled with soil from Flanders. Later the earth in the six barrels would be added –

⁷ So many conflicting stories emerged in the 1920s and 1930s that Wyatt wrote to the *Daily Telegraph* in November 1939 to correct the record: 'The Unknown Warriors of 1920: How one was selected for Abbey burial'.

⁸ *Manchester Evening News*, 11 November, 1920, p. 4.

⁹ Ken Inglis, *The Homecoming: the War Memorial Movement in Cambridge, England*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 27 (1992) pp. 583 – 605.

¹⁰ Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme* (London, 1994).

'making a part of the Abbey forever a part of a foreign field' – and the grave sealed with a large slab of Belgian marble.

As the service concluded, the queue of pilgrims stood four deep stretching back to the Cenotaph. Over the next three days some 400,000 people marched solemnly past the grave, though – in keeping with the Protestant spirit – no wreaths were permitted. These were piled like a blazing floral aneurysm around the gaunt Cenotaph in Whitehall. Central London would see nothing remotely like this until the funeral of Princess Diana some 80 years later. Yet even by the standards of post-Great War national grieving it was a quite unparalleled event.

There were, though, dissenters. Auden's caustic lines highlight the two arguments against the cult of the glorious unknown dead: it ignored the needs of the survivors, and it 'forced a patriotic and belligerent ideology on the helpless dead'.¹¹ A year earlier some of the surviving veterans had broken up the solemn Armistice Day commemoration by shouting slogans and waving placards. Even *The Times* newspaper noted the mood: an editorial of 12th November 1920 described the entombment of the Unknown Warrior as 'the most beautiful, the most touching and the most impressive that in all its long, eventful story this island has ever seen', but added a warning: "A quarter of a million of the comrades of the Unknown Warrior are still seeking employment."¹²

In artistic circles, it became fashionable to mock the cult: George Bernard Shaw was typical of many

writers when he suggested the corpse in the Abbey might actually be German. In 1921 D.S. MacColl openly criticised the lengthy inscription on the tomb for being 'verbose without being sonorous' adding, 'it is cacophonous, it is pleonastic; in part it touches the journalistic, in part it drops from prose into a jog-trot of verse'.¹³

One of the more eccentric artistic protests was made by the Irish-born artist Sir William Orpen RA, who had been employed as an official war artist by the British government during the war. A master of rather slick, painterly portraits of politicians, statesmen and generals, as well as soldier-heroes and medal-winners, he was retained to paint several large group portraits of the solemn proceedings at the 1919 Versailles Peace talks. During his time as an official war artist Orpen had developed a passionate, if slightly sentimental, view of the frontline Tommy, 'the unsung hero whom he feared would be forgotten when the war ended'.¹⁴

By comparison, the petty disputes and capers of the politicians at Versailles disgusted him as they bickered over the future shape of Europe: 'All these 'frocks' seemed to me very small personalities in comparison with the fighting men, it was all like an opera bouffe."¹⁵ The first two of his three commissioned paintings were gigantic compositions of politicians, presidents and statesmen arranged against the sparkling backdrop of the palace. Nine months into the third canvas – a formal portrait of thirty-six figures posed in the Hall of Peace – he stopped painting.



Burial Studies

2000
chalk on paper
75 cm x 40 cm

'It all seemed so unimportant somehow', he told the *Evening Standard*; 'I kept thinking of the soldiers who remain in France forever'¹⁶

He obliterated the thirty-six figures, substituting 'a coffin covered with the Union Jack and two semi-nude soldiers guarding it and two cherubs in the air above'.¹⁷ Exhibited at the Royal Academy in the summer of 1923, with the title *To the Unknown British Soldier in France*, it was voted 'picture of the year' by public ballot. The left-wing press were enthusiastic: the *Daily Herald* called it a 'magnificent allegorical tribute to the men who really won the war', but *The Patriot* thought it 'a joke and a bad joke at that'. Nor was it liked by the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, who rejected it for the collection, noting with untypical temperance that '... it does not show what we wished shown.'

It is a curious picture, well intentioned but rather mawkish. The English did not produce effective anti-war painting, though clearly there was a post-war groundswell of smouldering bitterness that this huge ungainly painting seem to satisfy. *The Liverpool Echo* ridiculed the War Museum's decision declaring:

Orpen declines to paint the floors of hell with the colours of paradise, to pander to the pompous heroics of the red tab brigade. The IWM may reject the picture, but the shadow legions of the dead sleeping out and far will applaud it with Homeric hush.¹⁸

There is a final coda to this strange tale. In 1928, Orpen approached the War Museum offering to repaint the canvas as a tribute to Earl Haig who had recently died. With permission, he painted out the gaunt, insane soldiers, the cherubs and garlands, leaving only the draped coffin and the marble halls. 'Nothing is left' comments the historian Samuel Hynes, 'but a nameless dead soldier in a cold emptiness. It is a disturbing picture.'¹⁹ Disturbing indeed, but no longer vitriolic, transformed into a tribute to the most vaunted and vilified British army commander, instead of the lowly, unknown combatant.

Eighty years on, the symbolic power of the Tomb in the Abbey has faded. In the years after the war the Cenotaph became the focus of Armistice Day commemoration. In 1927 the British Legion introduced a Festival of Remembrance in London's Royal Albert Hall: the event ended then, as it does now, with the poignant image of poppies falling from the dome of the hall, each poppy representing one of the absent war dead. After 1927 the Tomb took 'third place' in the hierarchy of remembrance; television coverage pays scant attention to the grave and its heavily inscribed black slab²⁰. Millions of viewers would have noticed, however, how during the funeral of Princess Diana in 1997 the Welsh guardsmen bearing her coffin carefully, if slightly precariously, pick their way around that black slab in their otherwise undeviating line to the centre of the Abbey. A case, perhaps, of overknown Princess, unknown soldier.

¹¹ Meirion and Susie Harries, *The War Artists: British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century* (Michael Joseph, in association with the Imperial War Museum (IWM) and the Tate Gallery, 1983) p. 146.

¹² *The Times* (12th November 1920).

¹³ Quoted in Arnold Whittick, *War Memorials* (London, 1946) pp. 121-122.

¹⁴ William Orpen, *An Onlooker in France* (London, 1928).

¹⁵ *Orpen to ffoulkes* 19th February 1922, Orpen file, IWM, London Department of Art.

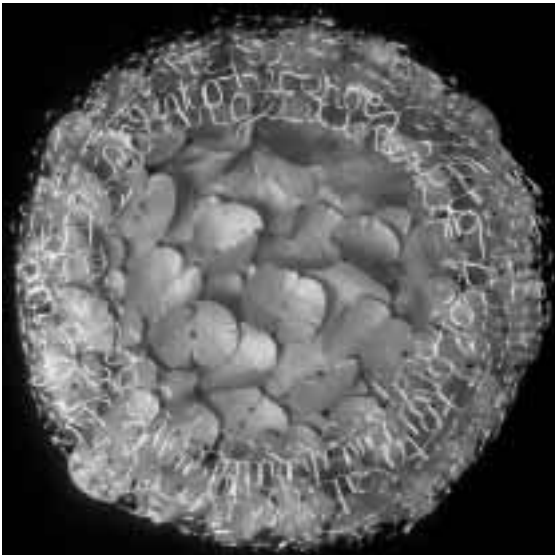
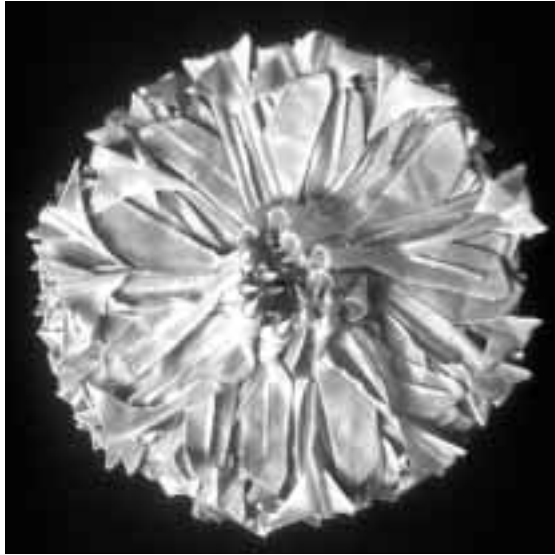
¹⁶ *Evening Standard* (7th May 1923).

¹⁷ *Orpen to ffoulkes* (19th February 1922).

¹⁸ Cited in Harries, *op.cit.*, p. 148.

¹⁹ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1990) p. 460.

²⁰ Ken Inglis, *Entombing Unknown Warriors, op.cit.*, p. 30.



Four Wreaths

Commissioned by Paul Gough

clockwise from top left

Sonja Andrew
John Pym
Paul Gough
Kathleen Herbert

