Clearing the Dead

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This article examines the process of the clearance and burial of the remains of British soldiers from the Great War battlefields; and some of the practical, psychological, social, and political issues that surrounded this.

In all conflicts in which the British army had been involved prior to the Great War, little attention had been paid to the remains of the other ranks, which were generally buried in unmarked mass graves. The American Civil War was a turning point in the history of military graves registration and individual commemoration, and hence remembrance.

Observers such as Bob Bushaway and George Mosse have focused on the political aspects of post-Great War remembrance.[i] Jay Winter, alternatively, highlights the psychological aspects – the role of remembrance in mediating grief, especially in relation to the missing.[ii] David Fitzpatrick describes Winter's approach as focusing on the "primary function rather than secondary appropriations".[iii] This is undoubtedly correct – the motivation for remembrance is psychological. How remembrance is publicly structured can serve political ends.

A neglected area of study is the military clearance of the battlefield and burial, both during and post-war, whose success resulted in the cemeteries that became the foci for remembrance on the Western and other fronts; and whose failure resulted in the memorials to the missing. This was driven not only by sheer military pragmatism but also non-military social and psychological factors. From the military standpoint, identification and burial were matters of accounting and morale. There was, however, also public pressure both during and after the war to ensure recovery, identification and burial. "These new British soldiers were men whose parents and wives had not accepted, as one of the conditions of a professional soldier's career, the possibility of an unknown grave in a foreign country; their relatives poignantly and insistently demanded … the fullest information as to the location of the graves of those who fell."[iv]

In one respect this response demonstrated the public's growing awareness of its power and ability to call for 'rights' in response to the government's reliance on its acquiescence in and contribution to fighting the war. On another, it demonstrated the increasing psychological awareness of the early twentieth century in the wake of scientists and theorists such as William James and Sigmund Freud.[v] The novel phenomenon of mass 'death at a distance' had forced the British people into an encounter with a particular aspect of grief, that complex of emotions so poorly understood in the dying embers of the Victorian preoccupation with the panoply of mourning ritual. This was the human need, when death of a loved one has

been traumatic, to have recovery and identification of the body to establish certainty of death, knowledge of how it occurred,[vi] and a focus for grief. The process of recovery and identification of remains, developed for the first time in the Great War, has become a central part of official response to mass disaster, peaking in complexity in the last decade of the twentieth century.

The Burial 'Learning Curve'

The British Expeditionary Force was, unsurprisingly, poorly prepared for the scale of its losses and had no effective organisation for dealing with them. In September 1914 a British Red Cross Unit under the leadership of Fabian Ware[vii] began to collect information about British fatalities and the haphazard location of graves resulting from the retreat from Mons. Partly in response to public concern about preservation of graves,[viii] Major-General C.F.N. Macready, Adjutant-General of the BEF, established the unit as the Graves Registration Commission in March 1915. It was incorporated into the army in October 1915, and in February 1916 became the Directorate of Graves Registration & Enquiries (DGR&E). Graves Registration Units became responsible for recording the burial of the dead (and cemeteries), but it was up to the military unit itself to carry out the actual burial.

The massive losses of the Somme offensive revealed organisational deficiencies. Fabian Ware, (now Lieutenant-Colonel in DGR&E), wrote in 1917:

> *At the beginning of the Somme offensive last year I called at the Fourth Army HQ and saw Gen Hutton … with regard to this question of burials. There was no organisation for the purpose of the time and I was satisfied after having discussed the matter with them that it was impossible to establish any proper organisation at that time in the middle of severe fighting. Subsequently the organisation of Corps Burial Officers was established.*[ix]

In this, as in operational areas, the BEF demonstrated a 'learning curve'. The new roles of the Divisional and Corps Burial Officers became important in liaison with the DGR&E, reaching in some cases a high degree of organisation. The preparations of the Canadian Corps at Vimy Ridge in April 1917 led to the outcome that: "Within twenty-four hours … the graves were each marked and recorded, and the organization did not break down even in that sector where a Canadian Burial Officer was killed."[x]

An illustration of this organisation is contained in the 13th Canadian Infantry Battalion Operation Order no. 94 (p.5) for 9 April 1917:[xi]

> *The 13th Battalion is responsible for the burial of all dead between the Eisner Kreuz Weg and Old British Front Line. Lieut J. L. Atkinson is detailed to supervise the clearing of the battlefield in the above area. He will report at Battalion Headquarters before dawn, and will work in conjunction with, and under the orders of the Divisional Burial Officer, Lieut C. B. Adams.*

This unit's War Diary for 10 April (p.7) records: "Burying and Salvage parties were detailed from each Company, and the clearing of the battlefield practically completed."

Operational orders for the Canadians' next major action at Hill 70, 15-25 August 1917, show increased sophistication. 2nd Canadian Division sent the following special instructions concerning burial to its brigades on 30 July 1917:[xii]

1. *The Divisional Burial Officer will be found at M.20.b.6-7.*
2. *The Forward Cemetery will be at M.12.d.5-7.*
3. *One grave has been prepared, to hold approximately 30 bodies, at each of the following places. Sains en Gohelle, Bully Grenay, Caldron.*
4. *All bodies East of the road running north to South through N.8.c.2-0 and N.1 Central will be dealt with by burial parties under the Divisional Burial Officer.*
5. *Precautions will be taken that bodies mentioned in para. 4, or effects, are not touched or removed by Battalions or other units.*
6. *Battalions or other units will be responsible for the carrying of bodies West of the road mentioned in para. 4 to the Forward or other Cemeteries.*
7. *If Battalions desire to send out Burial Parties, they should be ordered to report to the Burial Officer, and on no account will they proceed with this work before reporting to this Officer.*

The accounting aspect involved identification. Lieutenant H. Knee at Tower Hamlets, Ypres, in October 1917 described the process that was followed as laid down in SS456 *Burial of Soldiers*, published in August 1916:

> *Orders had been given that we were to take from their pockets pay books and personal effects, such as money, watches, rings, photos, letters and so on, one identification disk had also to be removed, the other being left on the body. Boots were supposed to be removed, if*

> *possible, as salvage was the order of the day. A small white bag was provided for each man's effects, the neck of which was to be securely tied and his identity disc attached thereto. It was a gruesome job!*[xiii]

In May 1917 DGR&E was reorganised. Prior to this point the whole organisation was directly controlled from GHQ with a small number of Graves Registration Units, supervised by three inspectors; one for the Northern units, one for Southern units, and one for Lines of Communication. The establishment was now increased and control was vested in the five armies, with a deputy assistant director, each army having a mobile unit (commanded by a Captain, with two subalterns, and clerks and orderlies) and one unit for the Lines of Communication.[xiv] During 1918, across all theatres of war, 94,649 graves were registered and 57,148 unverified burials recorded, bring the total at the end of the war to roughly half a million.[xv]

Burial and Clearance – Morale Issues

Burial was perceived as necessary for maintenance of morale. The Reverend E.C. Crosse wrote:

> *Burials on active service had very great practical importance. In the first place if one had buried a man's body one knew for certain that he was dead. Secondly, nothing is more depressing to the living to see unburied dead about them. In some areas e.g. at Beaumont Hamel in the winter of 1916 the ground was covered with unburied dead and it became a matter of real military importance that the work of burial should be conducted.*[xvi]

Lieutenant-Colonel Fraser-Tytler bears him out: "The 'Body Snatcher' or 'Cold Meat Specialist' (Corps Burial Officer) … was most useful in

removing our pet aversions, which otherwise might have remained unburied for months."[xvii]

Similarly, Fabian Ware, reflecting concerns about both military morale and public perception, wrote (using the word "neglect" to describe the BEF's attitude), on 29 June 1917:

> *We are on the verge over here of serious trouble about the number of bodies lying out still unburied on the Somme battlefields. The soldiers returning wounded or in leave to England are complaining bitterly about it and the War Office has already received letters on the matter.*[xviii]

On 25 January 1917, Lieutenant-General G.H. Fowke, Adjutant-General at GHQ, discussed (perhaps belatedly) "the necessity of provision of some special organisation to undertake burials".[xix] He noted that the alternatives were either "To make divisions responsible for the burial of their own dead", or "To detail such parties as can be made available from time to time, e.g. cavalry has been made use of for this purpose". He noted that the withdrawal of a division to refit after heavy losses might preclude it from the first strategy, and that "It is doubtful policy, from the point of view of morale, to use as burial parties troops as may be called upon to fight later".

This was not the first time the matter had been discussed. A meeting between Lieutenant-Colonel Whiteleaf, Captain Viscount Stopford OC No.3 Graves Registration Unit and others during the Somme offensive had noted:

> *The suggestion for the organisation of the permanent force met with one very serious objection. It was stated that even when cavalry and other branches were sent out to bury, the men of the units offered much opposition as the feeling was very strong on the question of burying their own dead, and it was thought that the effect of coloured men carrying out this work will be very bad on the soldiers.*[xx]

Yet 2nd Lieutenant W.N. Collins, the Burial Officer of the 51st Highland Division in November 1916 at Beaumont Hamel, clearly described the unfortunate effects of using the same units in clearance of the battlefield as had carried out the recent successful attack across it. Of his men, "quite a number … were related to the ones who were dead, brothers, cousins, and they of course were very upset, very very upset".[xxi] Both failure to bury and the act of burying were therefore reasonably regarded as potential morale problems.

Clearance and burial were undoubtedly amongst the most unpleasant and unpopular tasks of the war. Private J. McCauley, recovering from wounds, was attached to one of the new special burial details between August and November 1918. He noted how: "For the first week or two I could scarcely endure the experiences we met with, but I gradually became hardened." He described his work:

> *Often have I picked up the remains of a fine brave man on a shovel. Just a little heap of bones and maggots to be carried to the common burial place. Numerous bodies were found lying submerged in the water in shell holes and mine craters; bodies that seemed quite whole, but which became like huge masses of white, slimy chalk when we handled them. I shuddered as my hands, covered in soft flesh and slime, moved about in search of the disc, and I have had to pull bodies to pieces in order that they should not be buried unknown. It was very painful to have to bury the unknown.*[xxii]

Of forty-four references in biographies and unpublished accounts referring to this process, 84 per cent were expressed in negative terms.[xxiii] A selection of these includes the following: "It was a terrible job … deeply depressing for the men",[xxiv] "(The) most ghastly job I ever had";[xxv] "… always a gruesome task, disliked by all, and frequently made the hardiest sick, but it just had to be done";[xxvi] "God, how sick I felt";[xxvii] "I don't know how many we buried. I'll never forget that sight";[xxviii] "… the most dreadful experience even I have had ... I retched and have been sleepless since … No words can describe the ghastliness";[xxix] "Some of (the men) had been doing this the day before, they were feeling sick and groggy";[xxx] "I've thought about it all my life".[xxxi]

Reverend J. Bickersteth described typical post-traumatic symptomatology in the men carrying out clearing:

> *It is piteous work this collecting of dead … after three or four days in the forward area too, it tries the nerves and causes a curious kind of irritability which was quite infectious – all the party being cross and out of temper, and it was quite easy to find oneself heatedly arguing some trivial point for no apparent reason.*[xxxii]

The 1/19th Battalion London Regiment of the 47th Division was used to the clear the battlefield after the successful assault on High Wood on 15 September 1916. Reverend D. Railton, the divisional chaplain, noted:

> *Many men who have stood it all, cannot stand this clearing of the battlefield … no words can tell you all I feel, nor can words tell you of the horrors of clearing a battlefield. This Battalion was left to do that, and several men went off with shell-shock … caused not just by the explosion of a shell nearby, but by the sights and smell and horror of the battlefield in general. I felt dreadful, and had to do my best to keep the men up to the task.*[xxxiii]

Similarly, the South African Brigade was used in burial details at the end of the Somme offensive. One officer observed that for his troops to move to Flanders to fight once more "With the reek of death still in their nostrils … these memories would be distressing to even the hardest … this misuse of fighting troops was cruel and useless".[xxxiv]

Yet in this as in other areas, the BEF demonstrated its powers of endurance. Although there is clear evidence that this process affected the mood of individual soldiers and groups of soldiers temporarily, there is however no evidence of longer-term effect on morale.

Post-War Exhumation – The Army's Response (November 1918 – September 1921)

The end of the war left uncleared recent dead, isolated graves, and a myriad of accidental inhumations. Three tasks now faced DGR&E and the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), which had come into being on 21 May 1917. The first was to concentrate an estimated 160,000 isolated graves; the second was to concentrate small cemeteries into larger ones; and the third was to locate and identify the missing, estimated at over half a million.

A memo from Major-General J. Burnett Stuart to the War Office, dated 14 March 1919, records the start of the process of exhumation.[xxxv] On 18 November 1918 the Adjutant-General hosted a conference on the matter at GHQ. Three days later exhumation work began in the Fifth Army Area and was extended to the Third and later First Army areas. Volunteers were recruited with extra pay of 2/6d per day. The Canadians offered to search the Albert/Courcelette area and Vimy Ridge,[xxxvi] the Australians followed suit at Pozieres and Villers Bretonneux.[xxxvii] Although the British began to search the Aisne/Marne area for 1914 casualties, the French took this over, maintaining responsibility for three areas north of Amiens: Kemmel Ridge, Meries and Meteren; an area just south of Arras ; and Sailly to Bray.

The sheer physical difficulties of the work were significant. On the devastated battlefields much initial effort had to be directed into erecting accommodation and providing supplies. The weather added to difficulties - on 20 January 1919 frost stopped work. Up to this point five to six men were required every working day to exhume each body, transport it to the cemetery and re-inter it. When work resumed on 17 February 1919 nine men were required per exhumation per day. By 14 March 1919 there had been only 1,750 exhumations (excluding Canadian efforts). Manpower rapidly became a problem - with demobilisation, volunteers began to disappear. An undated memo of a meeting at which both Winston Churchill and Field-Marshal Haig were present, noted the 33,000 "labour men surplus at home who are retainable", but records the decision to pursue the route of volunteers.[xxxviii] It was estimated in March 1919 that 12,000 men would be necessary. This was increased the following month to 15,000 Labour Company personnel, 1,500 Cemetery Party personnel and 1,787 DGR&E personnel. By 17 May Major-General Burnett Stuart was requesting 15 more "grave registration squads" from England.[xxxix]

The battlefields were divided into three areas. The southern area was based at Peronne; the two other areas based on Assistant Directors DGR&E at Douai and Lille. These areas were subdivided further. The process of exhumation was as follows.[xl] A Survey Officer selected 500-yard squares to be searched, indicating to the Burial Officer the anticipated number of remains based on the records of DGR&E. These were often

inaccurate. In one map square of 1000 square metres "information reported 11 isolated graves, careful search reveals 67. In another area in one fortnight no remains found under 4% of crosses erected".[xli]

Exhumation companies comprised squads of 32 men. Each squad was supplied with "two pairs of rubber gloves, two shovels, stakes to mark the location of graves found, canvas and rope to tie up remains, stretchers, cresol (a poisonous colourless isomeric phenol) and wire cutters".[xlii] A stake was placed where remains were found.

Experience was the only method of knowing where to dig. Indeed, the IWGC noted that "Unless previously experienced men are employed … 80% of the bodies which remain to be picked up would never be found."[xliii] Indications of remains included:

i. Rifles or stakes protruding from the ground, bearing helmets or equipment;
ii. Partial remains or equipment on the surface or protruding from the ground;
iii. Rat holes – often small bones or pieces of equipment would be brought to the surface by the rats;
iv. Discolouration of grass, earth or water – grass was often a vivid bluish-green with broader blades where bodies were buried, while earth and water turned a greenish black or grey colour.[xliv]

The remains were placed on cresol soaked canvas. For identification purposes, a careful examination of pockets, the neck, wrists and braces for identification tags was required. A description of attempts to identify a late exhumation might be as follows:

> *Exhumed a grave found in a wood between St Marguerite and Missy. This grave contained an unknown British soldier wearing boots made by UNITY CO-OP SOCY LTD RINGSTEAD 1913. The remains were found in a swamp and had to be recovered from a foot of water. Nothing by which the remains could be identified could be found.*[xlv]

Another soldier was found at Tower Hamlets, Ypres, in December 1921:

> *Body reported by one of a gang. This was not identified even partially, though very careful search was made, the boots scraped and coloured silk handkerchief examined. This was probably a 1914 soldier as date on boots was 1914.*[xlvi]

Effects found were dealt with as Lieutenant Knee described above. The body was taken to the cemetery and interred under the auspices of the Registration Officer.

Arthur Cooke, an engineer working on Gallipoli (April 1923-July 1924), described the somewhat eccentric exhumation and reburial of Lieutenant-Colonel C. Doughty-Wylie VC in his lonely grave outside Seddulbahir:

> *Within a few inches his body became visible – enveloped in a ragged uniform with belt hunched in a crouched position … my men removed the body from the grave … then they placed his skull at the top of the grave and made a geometric pattern of his bones, even down to the finger bones.*[xlvii]

Clearly, many men were happy to answer the call to volunteer for this task. The War Diary of the 4th Canadian Infantry Works Company

recorded on 19 January 1919 that the request for volunteers was "greatly responded to".[xlviii] The work proceeded without problems. The War Diary of HQ Canadian War Graves Detachment notes No. 2 Detachment at Courcelette on 6 June 1919 as "in excellent shape, men contented, working away happily", one of several such references.[xlix]

Captain J.C. Dunn encountered Australians exhumers at Villers Bretonneux in April 1919 and recorded:

> *Large numbers of troops were engaged in burying or reburying their numerous dead, left where they fell since the historic advance on August 8th 1918. Most of the actual work was done by troops freshly drafted from England, men who had not previously been in France.*[l]

Things did not proceed as smoothly with the Australians. Private W.F. Macbeath, one of the soldiers described by Dunn, wrote home on 23 April 1919: "I think they have got the roughest lot of officers they could find in the AIF with this unit, and by jove they want them it is the roughest mob I have ever seen, they would just as soon down tools as not."[li] He continued: "Although we have only been going a few weeks we have had two strikes, we refused to work until we had better means for handling the bodies, had better food and cut out all ceremonial parades." Similarly, Captain A. Kingston reported: "The men were constantly getting drunk … The majority of the men were a bad lot and very inefficient. They were neither dependable nor reliable."[lii] Major-General Fabian Ware referred in November 1921 to "Australian officers who should be withdrawn immediately as confusing records and otherwise causing much mischief".[liii]

There was far more indiscipline in troops in France in general after the Armistice than before it, and the AIF would be seen as having more of a problem in this respect than other elements of the BEF. The extent to which similar problems existed in the British Labour Companies is unclear. Captain W.E. Southgate certainly reported discipline issues and financial irregularity in No. 83 Labour Company working at Cambrai in September 1919.[liv] Southgate's Company, like the Australians, had problems with insufficient materials. He wrote: "This unit joined this group on 18/9/1919 and has only been able to exhume and rebury 190 bodies. This is due to lack of canvas …" He also had transport problems: "There is no Motor Ambulance doing duty with this unit, although one was detailed to report over two months ago." He lacked even the basic requirements: "We have only 30 picks and there is a shortage of shovels (we have about 200 for nearly 500 men)."

It is also possible that this indiscipline was partly related to the nature of task. In January 1920, Brigadier-General E. Gibb, GOC British Troops France & Flanders, reported that on 3 January 1920 the paper strength of the exhumation companies was 9,000, but the working strength was 4,593 with daily sick parades of 500 men.[lv] It is inconceivable that a significant part of this absenteeism was not stress-related. Major A. Lees, commanding the Graves Registration Unit on Gallipoli, wrote in July 1919

of the stress of the task: "One of my section officers went to hospital with a nervous breakdown and I have one or two others on their last legs."[lvi]

Private W. Macbeath described his job baldly in his diary for 15 April 1919: "Working in the fields digging up the bodies, a very unpleasant job."[lvii] Two days later his simple diary entry encapsulated the pity of this task: "Working in cemetery. An English lady came over to see her son's grave, found him lying in a bag and fainted." In describing this incident in a letter home two days later he wrote, with phlegmatic understatement: "I cannot say I am exactly in love with the job." The writer Stephen Graham, who had served as a Private during the war, returned to the battlefields in 1920 and detailed his conversations with British exhumers. He noted: "It is a ghoulish work, but they have become as matter of fact as can be."[lviii] An exhumer who reports with delight at Ypres that he has found a Brigadier-General[lix] missing since 1916 remarks wryly: "It's jolly hard work. But it 'as its better side. Some fellers the other day came on a dug-out with three officers in it, and they picked up five thousand francs between 'em."[lx] Yet Graham was aware of the necessity for psychological defence - another exhumer was asked whether after six months of sleeping on the battlefield he saw ghosts: "The man smiled. He saw none. He felt the presence of none. Imagination did not pull his heartstrings. If it did, he would go mad."[lxi]

It is notable that the described effects of wartime clearance were emotional in nature, namely depressed mood (and other post-traumatic symptomatology), which was both marked and common, if transitory. The post-war exhumers were more prone to behavioural disturbance: drinking, insubordination, and rowdiness. It would be predicted that the psychological impact of exhumation would be greater on the latter than on wartime clearers because there was no real break to the task, and the distraction of other duties was absent.[lxii] It is of course possible that the men who volunteered for this work were those who had no reason to return to civilian life swiftly. Some may have been 'psychological misfits' who would be prone to this 'acting out' behaviour. Lieutenant-Colonel E.A.S. Gell, the senior IWGC representative in France after the Army ceased the clearance task in September 1921, gave a fascinating example of self-selection into this work when he described the IWGC gardener (now responsible for exhumation) at Klein Vierstraat: "The gardener here, who was for 14 years in the 1st Bn. Somerset LI … looks exceedingly gloomy, poor fellow … seems to spend his whole time in the wilderness."[lxiii]

The IWGC had a poor view of the efficiency of the way the work was being carried out: "Exhumation Companies, obsessed with the idea that their reputation depended on their concentrating the highest possible number of bodies in the shortest possible time have often paid little or no heed to the essential matter of identification."[lxiv] (Indeed, identification errors by the British at Hooge Crater led to an inquiry where the Australian Major A.

Allen accused some British units of "chopping men in halves in order to double their body returns".)[lxv] This was therefore not a 'sacred' task.

On 27 October 1919 Major Lees on Gallipoli wrote home: "We have identified not far short of 10,000 which is a fair average and many more than I thought possible at one time." His attempts to achieve identification are clear in his letters. On 28 August 1919 he wrote: "Ask Harold for an exact description of a Grenadier Guards button. We have found a button on an officer with a crown on top G.R. and G.R. reversed and then a grenade; if it is Grenadier Guards it is Col Quilter, but no one can identify the button." On 10 October 1919 he wrote: "Not absolutely certain about Col. Quilter's grave. He is buried in rather a mysterious little cemetery where there are 10 candidates for five graves but if I can't find him elsewhere I will give him a home." Lees appears to be implying that he would 'manufacture' identification to put the search of those at home to rest.

Identification was of course the main psychological preoccupation of the bereaved. Corpses could only be identified by the accompanying effects, and remains found with such were very much in the minority. In April 1920 it was noted that of corpses found with effects, 20% were identified by identity discs; 25 per cent were confirmed by discs; 30 per cent were identified by other methods; with 25 per cent unidentifiable.[lxvi] A name on a compass, a photograph case, a key tab, a spoon or a pipe bowl might

reveal the owners name. In France, however, as the task went on, the emphasis on identification fell away. E.A.S. Gell wrote in May 1921 that DGR&E were only undertaking exhumations for identification "when they had the time".[lxvii] Although 600 bodies a week were being recovered at this time, identification was achieved in only 20 per cent of cases.[lxviii]

The IWGC Replaces the Army

On 6 August 1921 the Colonel Commandant DGR&E certified that with the exception of certain indicated areas, "the whole of the battlefield areas of France and Belgium have been finally researched for isolated graves, both British and German. It cannot be guaranteed that no graves either with or without surface indication remained in the area …"[lxix] Some 204,654 remains had been concentrated.

Yet it was clear the task was far from over. On 12 July 1921 H.R. Chettle, Director of Records at the IWGC, had noted: "It is … clear that there is as yet no falling off in the quantity of the results of this work …"[lxx] The War Office reported on 8 October 1921 that all military staff involved in exhumation had now returned to England. At the 37th meeting of the IWGC on 18 October it was recorded: "Sir Robert Hudson said that if it was known to the public that bodies were being found at the rate of 200 a week at the time the search parties were disbanded, the public would want an explanation."

Questions were indeed asked in parliament by Captain Thorpe MP, and Sir L. Worthington-Evans, Secretary of State for War, was forced into the following response reported in *The Times* on 10 November 1921 to address "public anxiety":

> *Since the Armistice the whole battlefield area in France and Flanders has been systematically searched at least six times. Some areas in which the fighting had been particularly heavy, were searched as many as 20 times. In the spring of 1920 the work was easy and rapid owing to the number of surface indications, but since then in the cases of, approximately, 90% of the bodies found, there was no surface indication. These invisible graves were found by various local indications recognised by the experience of the exhumation parties. It is probable that a number of these invisible graves have you not yet been found, and are likely to be brought to light during the work of reconstruction and in the opening up of areas at present inaccessible owing to the thickness of undergrowth, the marshiness of the land etc. The searching, however was most thorough, as the whole the battlefield area was divided up into map squares, to which a platoon under a subaltern was allotted. The actual search party usually consisted of about 12 men under a senior non-commissioned officer. These parties systematically searched the whole of the surface of the areas.*[lxxi]

The public remained unconvinced, as well they might with approximately 300,000 dead unaccounted for. On 17 March 1922 a Mr Chapman, residing in Mailly Mallet wrote to James Gillies, Minister of Lesmahagon, (whose son was missing at Serre): "Today a Belgian found a body and reported, on his being questioned he admitted that an old cigarette case was there but had been thrown away. Well, I threatened and frightened him and at midday it is produced and inside it is a photo of the poor fellow with his name and address." On 26 May 1922 he wrote again of "Hundreds if not thousands" of British bodies being exposed. He deemed the two francs reward inadequate when the Frenchman might lose seven or eight francs

walking seven kilometres to inform someone of the discovery of remains. He wrote of "The searching and desecration of the dagos who are doing the work of clearing the ground … Last week I pointed out some bodies with the result that an action was immediately taken, identifications secured at least two cases …The whole circumstances are a disgrace to our nationhood". Ghillies then wrote to Captain Elliot MP: "I visited the Somme district in November last. The ground for the most part lay as at the Armistice - & thousands of unknown British soldiers are being brought up as the work of restoration proceeds."[lxxii]

A memo from the Vice Chairman IWGC on 5 May 1921 concluded that "Search might usefully be continued" in the following areas:[lxxiii]

i. Passchendale – Becelaere – Gheluvelt – Comines – Messines – Zillebeke
ii. Neuville St Vaast – Arleux – Oppy – Gavrelle – Fampoux – Roclincourt
iii. Martinpuich – Geudecourt – Les Boeufs – Combles – Guillemont – Montauban

It might be considered that this roughly corresponds to the whole area of BEF major operations from July 1916 to August 1918.

It was clear to Lieutenant-Colonel E.A.S. Gell, the senior representative of the IWGC in France, that some areas had never been searched. He noted on 16 December 1921: "To Bourlon Wood to see the condition of it, as report goes that large numbers of bodies are still missing there. We

worked our way through part of the wood, but soon the tangled undergrowth became so thick that progress was impossible. Brambles grow in such profusion, that I give it as my opinion that no systematic search is possible. I do not believe that wood has ever been searched properly let alone re-searched."[lxxiv] Four days later he noted the same at St Eloi: "Patches of country are left untouched".

The reasons for areas remaining uncleared appear as follows:

i. The weather conditions at the time of year the areas were searched were unfavourable;
ii. The ground was in too broken a condition;
iii. The area was heavily wooded or excessively marshy, and hence difficult to access;
iv. British volunteer manpower for the task diminished;
v. Private owners, quickly reinstating themselves, made difficulties for access and asked to be allowed to level their own properties;
vi. "The money has been exceeded."[lxxv]

It is an inescapable conclusion that definition of the army's task as ended in 1921 was arbitrary. Worthington-Evans's statement gave the impression that some turning point had been reached. It had not. The withdrawal of the army was more a response to diminishing manpower, problems on the ground, and finance. The task was simply passed to the IWGC. In April 1922 E.A.S. Gell reported nine gangs of 30 men and 20

gangs of 10 men working at Ypres; 150 men "(mostly Poles) working under an intelligent French foreman",[lxxvi] at Neuve Chapelle, and 25 gangs working south of the Vermelles-Hulloch Road and on Hill 70 at Loos, this being merely 3 of the 8 areas still being searched. As time went on, the IWGC relied more and more on local reporting as ground was levelled, drainage dug, and roads created. Between 1932 and 1936 4,079 bodies were recovered (7 per cent in Belgium, 93 per cent in France). Fifty-two per cent had been found by metal searchers; 30 per cent by farmers/others; 18 per cent by French government search parties.[lxxvii] The figures for body recovery alone indicate the incompleteness of the task in 1921. 28,036 bodies were found between 1921 and 1928 (with 25 per cent identification),[lxxviii] and approximately a further 10,000 up to 1937.

It was not unreasonable that the transfer of responsibility should have happened sooner or later. The government was not shirking its financial burden as it was, of course, financing the IWGC. That it should have sought to dress this as a task nearly completed (when all involved know this was not the case) was not, perhaps, surprising. Worthington-Evans' statement to the Commons has the air of minor political fire-fighting. Those who argue that the idealisation of the dead (through the developing rituals and memorials on which remembrance focused) served the inhibition of criticism of Britain's social and political structure must acknowledge that if the dead were consciously being manipulated in this way, the abandonment of the Army's formal search for them was not

something likely to support this inhibition. If the decision to downgrade the national effort to recover the war dead was made on a judgement that the public were sufficiently distant from the war and distracted by ritual and monument for this to pass with less resentment, the evidence for it has yet to be found. The evidence presented here suggests it was based on far more prosaic matters such as manpower, local conditions, finance, and, perhaps, simple loss of impetus.

Notes

[i] B. Bushaway, 'Name Upon Name: The Great War and Remembrance', in Roy Porter, ed., *Myths of the English* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 136-167; G. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Shaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[ii] J.M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[iii] D. Fitzpatrick, www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/War/reviews/revfitzpatrick.html (accessed 12 September 2006).

[iv] *The Times* 'War Graves Number' (10 November 1928), p. vi.

[v] William James (1842-1910) is widely regarded as the 'father' of scientific psychology. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), founder of psychoanalysis, published his seminal paper on bereavement, *Mourning and Melancholia*, in 1917 partly in response to the emotional climate created by the mass death of the Great War.

[vi] This need was serviced by the letters from officers or comrades to next of kin. Joy Damousi's study of comrades' letters [*The Labour of Loss* (Cambridge: University Press, 1999)] notes: "In meticulously documenting the details of death, soldiers took care to describe the particular circumstances of a special loss …" (p.11) These details gave great benefit to bereaved families who had a tremendous appetite for detail. The letters might describe the respect in which the dead person was held: "We lost a cheery good pal and staunch comrade and understand your deepest feelings" (p.12). They might describe what happened prior to death: "I was with Allan during the afternoon & he was in the best of spirits & was looking forward (to) the charge" (p.12). They might detail the mode of death: "A shell fragment penetrated the back of his head, death would be instantaneous … Your son was not disfigured & had a smile on his face …" (p.14). Lastly the idea was always conveyed of a noble death or the individual having died with duty done, e.g. "Remember that your son was a hero."

[vii] Sir Fabian Arthur Goulstone Ware (1869-1949) was responsible for originating the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission. Unable to enlist in the British army on account of his age he travelled to France in September 1914 at the head of a mobile Red Cross unit. Following the establishment of the Graves Registration Commission and later Department of Graves Registration and Enquiries (DGR & E), in May 1917 an international Imperial War Conference established the IWGC. Ware served as its Vice-Chairman with the Prince of Wales as its President, directing the development of cemeteries and memorials. Ware continued in this role until his retirement in 1948, serving as Director GR & E in World War II.

[viii] P. Longworth, *The Unending Vigil* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2003), p.6.

[ix] F. Ware to DGR&E, CWGC SDC 60/1 Box 2033.

[x] *The Times* 'War Graves Number' (10 November 1928), p. vi.

[xi] http://data4.collectionscanada.ca. RG9, Militia and Defence, Series III-D-3, Volume 4922, Reel T-10715 File: 383. (Accessed 20 January 2006).

[xii] http://data4.collectionscanada.ca. RG9, Militia and Defence, Series III-D-3, Volume 4846, Reel T-1928 File: 112. (Accessed 20 January 2006).

[xiii] H. Knee, IWM DOCS 77/8/1.

[xiv] Anon, 'The Registration and Care of Military Graves During the Present War', *RUSI Journal*, 62 (1917), pp. 297-302.

[xv] Report on the Work of DGR&E During 1918, CWGC WG1609 Cat. No. 37 Box 1099 War Office File H1/3.

[xvi] Reverend E.C. Crosse, *The History of the Chaplain's Department in the War of 1914-18* IWM DOCS 80/22/1.

[xvii] N. Fraser-Tytler, *With Lancashire Lads and Field Guns in France* (Manchester: John Heywood, 1922) quoted in A. Simpson *Hot Blood and Cold Steel* (Bath: Tom Donovan, 1993), pp.107-8.

[xviii] F. Ware to DGR&E, CWGC SDC 60/1 Box 2033.

[xix] G.H. Fowke, GHQ memo 25/1/1917, CWGC SDC 60/1 Box 2033.

[xx] Undated minutes of meeting at A&Q Office Fourth Army HQ, 1916. CWGC SDC 60/1 Box 2033.

[xxi] W.N Collins quoted in R. van Emden & S. Humphries, *Veterans* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 1998), pp. 130-1.

[xxii] J. McCauley, IWM DOCS 97/10/1.

[xxiii] P.E. Hodgkinson, 'Human Remains on the Great War Battlefields' (Unpublished MA Dissertation, Birmingham University, 2006).

[xxiv] Lieutenant P. King quoted in L. Mcdonald, *They Called It Passchendaele* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 210.

[xxv] Private B.V. Sporton IWM DOCS 01/52/1.

[xxvi] T. Brookbank IWM DOCS 99/13/1.

[xxvii] Private R. Gwinnell IWM DOCS 01/38/1.

[xxviii] Corporal J. Hoyles quoted in L. Mcdonald, *Somme* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 113.

[xxix] Padre McKenzie, quoted in P.H. Liddle, *Men of Gallipoli* (Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1976), p. 159.

[xxx] Lieutenant E.B. Lord IWM DOCS quoted in P. Hart, *The Somme* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 217.

[xxxi] Lieutenant E.B. Lord quoted in P. Hart *The Somme* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 217.

[xxxii] Bickersteth, *Diaries,* p. 274.

[xxxiii] D. Railton, IWM DOCS 80/22/1.

[xxxiv] Quoted in B. Nasson 'South Africans in Flanders: Le Zulu Blanc,' in P.H. Liddle ed. *Passchendaele in Perspective* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), p. 295.

[xxxv] CWGC WG 1294/3 Pt. 1 Catalogue No. 268 Box 1082.

[xxxvi] 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Canadian Infantry Works Companies were pressed into service. Two companies of the Canadian War Graves Detachment were formed as the Works Companies demobilised, each 500 strong, from volunteers in England.

[xxxvii] 1100 men were provided.

[xxxviii] *Exhumations and Cemeteries* CWGC WG 1294/3 Pt 1 Catalogue No. 268 Box 1082.

[xxxix] WG 1294/3 Pt.2 Cat. No. 269 Box 1083.

[xl] See N. Christie, *The Canadians on the Somme* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 1999), p. 57-61.

[xli] Memo Major-General J. Burnett Stuart to Secretary, War Office 14/3/1919. CWGC WG 1294/3 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 268 Box 1082.

[xlii] Christie, *Canadians on the Somme,* p. 59.

[xliii] *Exhumations and Concentrations of Isolated British Graves,* CWGC WG1294 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 158 Box 1082.

[xliv] Christie, *Canadians on the Somme,* p. 59.

[xlv] Memo, Richard Stiles ARO Aisne & Marne 14/2/1922, CWGC WG1294 Pt.1 Cat. No. 158 Box 1082.

[xlvi] E.A.S. Gell, *Journal* 20/12/1921, CWGC WG1294 Pt.1 Cat. No. 158 Box 1082.

[xlvii] A. Cooke IWM DOCS 81/14/1.

[xlviii] RG9 Series III-D-3 Vol 5008 War Diaries 1919. http://www.collectionscanada.ca.

[xlix] RG9 Series III-D-3 Vol 5008 War Diaries 1919. http://www.collectionscanada.ca.

[l] J.C. Dunn, *The War The Infantry Knew* (London: Abacus, 1994), p. 579.

[li] W.F. Macbeath, *Diaries,* AWM PR00675.

[lii] Captain A.C.W. Kingston, evidence given to Inquiry, 30/3/1920. NAA: MP367/1, AA446/10/1840, cited in B. Zino, 'A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2003), p.103.

[liii] Telegram 3/11/1921 from General F. Ware to Major Ingpen CWGC WG 1294/3/2 Cat. No. 273 Box 1084.

[liv] W.E. Southgate, IWM DOCS Misc 136(2118).

[lv] Letter Brigadier-General E. Gibb 19 January 1920, CWGC WG 1294/3/2 Cat. No. 273 Box 1084.

[lvi] A.C.L.D. Lees, IWM DOCS 91/22/1.

[lvii] W.F. Macbeath, *Diaries,* AWM PR00675.

[lviii] S. Graham, *The Challenge of the Dead* (London: Cassell, 1921), p. 26.

[lix] Identity not stated by Graham.

[lx] Graham, *Challenge,* p. 21.

[lxi] Graham, *Challenge,* pp. 26-8.

[lxii] The Candian GRUs were careful in ensuring days off, and organised sports.

[lxiii] E.A.S Gell, *Journal,* 21 Dec 1921, CWGC WG1294 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 158 Box 1082.

[lxiv] *Revised Instructions – Records Branch* (Undated ?1922), CWGC WG 1294/3 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 268 Box 1082.

[lxv] Major A. Allen, evidence given to Inquiry 30/3/1920. NAA: MP367/1, AA446/10/1840, quoted in Zino 'Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War. PhD Thesis'.

[lxvi] Memo from DAAG in charge of effects, 1/4/1920. CWGCWG 1294/3 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 268 Box 1082.

[lxvii] E.A.S. Gell Letter 11/5/1921 GWGC WG 1294/3/3 Cat. No. 270 Box 1083

[lxviii] Lieutenant-Colonel J Dick-Cunningham, *Letter* 3/8/1921 1921 GWGC WG 1294/3/3 Cat. No. 270 Box 1083.

[lxix] CWGC 1294/3/3 Cat. No. 270 Box 1083.

[lxx] CWGC 1294/3/2 Cat. No. 273 Box 1084.

[lxxi] *The Times*, 10 November 1921, p.14.

[lxxii] Correspondence CWGC WG1294 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 158 Box 1082.

[lxxiii] CWGC 1294/3/3 Cat. No. 270 Box 1083.

[lxxiv] Lieutenant-Colonel E.A.S.Gell, *Journal* CWGC WG1294 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 158 Box 1082.

[lxxv] Lieutenant-Colonel E.A.S.Gell, *Journal* CWGC WG1294 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 158 Box 1082.

[lxxvi] E.A.S. Gell Memo 24/4/1922 CWGC WG1294 Pt. 1 Cat. No. 158 Box 1082.

[lxxvii] CWGC 1294/3 Part 5 Cat. No. 272 Box 1084.

[lxxviii] *The Times* ,'War Graves Number' (10 November 1928), p. iv.