Editor’s Notebook

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol33/iss2/3
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More than others, the month of November is one that western societies for the past century have filled with rituals of collective memory. November’s gloomy weather and sometimes dour mood contributes to this social function, but the anchor of these reflective practices is Veterans Day, or Remembrance Day, as it is called in much of the rest of the English-speaking world. Veterans Day gets its place in the western calendar because it recognizes the critical moment when, in 1918, after more than four years of intractable fighting among European and American armies, World War I came to its merciful end: 11-11-11, at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. This year, 2014, marks the centennial of the onset of that “Great War,” and expectedly, our commemorative efforts ring louder.

We remember those whose lives were sacrificed to protect our values and interests, not just in World War I but in all wars in which our countrymen have fought and died before and since. We remember them in granite and cement memorials, in cenotaphs and columns, in bronze statuary, in film, in songs and sermons, and in poetry, such as John McCrae’s 1915 “In Flanders Fields,” which scores of Canadian schoolchildren of my generation were made to commit to memory and recite. We remember, as the oft-repeated line in Rudyard Kipling’s 1897 poem “Recessional” instructs us, “lest we forget.”

But we do forget. As a society, we forget often and we forget a lot. November’s collective remembering prompts us to think about how social memory really functions and how the collective acts of remembering and forgetting interact. Collective remembering is a deliberate act, one that is done as a corrective to forgetting, which we assume is a natural, human tendency. If we don’t make the effort to remember, the past—our past—and its lessons will by default be lost and any tutelary benefit they have for us wasted. But can it also work in reverse? That is, can collective forgetting be a deliberate social act, one designed to counteract the human tendency to remember? Some recent scholarship has some interesting things to say on this matter.

For more than a generation, scholars have examined when and why societies choose to remember. It is no surprise that war commemoration is the subject of most of our collective remembering. The stories that war commemorations tell (particularly the ones in which our side won decisively) are a fertile site for teaching broad-scope civic lessons about the things in which we are supposed to believe—honor, duty, character, democracy, justice and the rule of law. The act of remembering is the attempt to graft useful meanings onto otherwise regrettable events and the chance to prescribe to others how to behave in the wake of such awful loss. Paul Fussell’s pathbreaking 1975 book The Great War and Modern Memory (newly reissued for the centennial by Oxford University Press) examined the subject first and best. In Britain (and elsewhere, as Fussell’s scholarly heirs in the U.S., France, Russia and Canada have detailed), World War I bequeathed an “inherited myth” to a generation of writers and other symbol makers who took on the task of remembering the “truth” about the war and convincing their compatriots of its meaning. Of course, societies remember together things non-martial as well. We remember those great moments of fellow feeling that are triggered by national tragedies (such as a president’s assassination or ethical fall, episodes of ethnic cleansing and acts of mass terrorism) or triumphs (such as the passage of landmark civil rights legislation, unexpected Olympic victories and symbolic athletic feats).

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that Apartheid caused through a long and painful national reckoning that its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provided, 1996–2000. Japanese Americans interned during World War II were issued public apologies and reparations by the US Government in 1988, and again in 1992. And most recently, in Canada, the victims of that country’s often abusive Indian Residential Schools have found healing in providing testimony to its own six-year TRC. These are acts of collective healing that do the opposite of forgetting: they call attention to these awful chapters of racist segregation and systemic violence, and encourage us to remember.

In all of this remembering, forgetting and forgiving, we are making important choices about who we are today. These three social functions are each, in their own ways, forward-looking, prescriptive acts that build community. When we do them, we are imagining who we want to be. This month, as we begin to commemorate the centennial of a long-ago war in moments of silence, cannon and rifle fire, parades and prayer, we will do well to recognize the civic uses of our November rituals.

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