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**Ecclesiasticus, War Graves, and the Secularization of British Values**

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**Abstract:** This article reads the design of the British Imperial War Graves cemeteries in the context of the religious pluralism of the late Empire. Reviewing the deliberations of the design committee and parliamentary debates on the design of the cemeteries, it notes that the Christian character of the cemeteries was relatively muted, a design decision which caused no small amount of public and political controversy, but which permitted the cemeteries to present an image of a unified Empire. The paper argues that the choice of quotations specifically from the apocrypha was an important and deliberate aspect of this presentational strategy.

**Keywords:** War graves; Ecclesiasticus; Commonwealth; pluralism; memorials; Kipling.

1 **Introduction**

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


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in memorial practices that were previously rare, but very little wholesale invention.⁴

This is fitting, as the First World War marked neither the beginning nor the end, but an important point along the way in the gradual transition of Britain’s self-understanding as an empire to a single nation at the center of a less tangible and considerably denser web of cultural and political influence. This shift was apparent in the identities of the armed forces that fought in support of Britain: by the end of the war, both Canada and Australia/New Zealand had developed a consciousness of themselves as military and diplomatic powers in their own right, although all three initially entered the war in support of what they viewed as their parent nation. This tension is reflected in the design of the Imperial War Graves cemeteries (now, of course, renamed as Commonwealth War Graves); soldiers from the colonial regiments remain part of the empire, buried side by side with soldiers from the English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish regiments, but marked out as distinct through the inscriptions and regimental insignia on their headstones. It is not just the particularities of geography and citizenship which the design of war graves cemeteries had to take into account, but also religious differences – and it is the way in which cemetery design has navigated religious difference that I wish to discuss in this article. I will pursue a brief history of the cemeteries and the design choices made in their construction, followed by a more focused discussion of the biblical text employed in the cemetery design, and conclude with some reflections on how the design of the war graves helped to construct a sense of post-Imperial British identity.

⁴ A possible exception to this is the two-minute silence, which was instituted in the British Empire by George V at the first anniversary of the Armistice in 1919; see Adrian Gregory, The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 8–12. Although, this practice had a precedent, most notably a ten minute silence held in the Portuguese Senate on the occasion of the death of José Maria da Silva Paranhos Júnior, in 1912 (see the parliamentary record of the day at “Debates Parlamentares,” Assembleia de República [Portugal], accessed July 24, 2017, http://debates.parlamento.pt/catalogo/r1/cs/01/01/02/039/1912-02-13/2). Popular articles detailing the history of the silence are prone to cite Quaker silent worship as a precedent (e.g. Rose Troup Buchanan, “Minute’s silence: When, where and why do we hold a silence to remember those who died?” The Independent, July 3, 2015, accessed July 27, 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/minutes-silence-when-where-and-why-do-we-hold-a-silence-to-remember-those-who-died-10363290.html); although the documentary record of the institution of the silence does not appear to support this derivation, the suggestion is an interesting one in light of my argument here that the driving principle behind the commemorative culture of the British Empire at this time was to produce memorial forms which drew on the aesthetics of religion without containing enough religious content to provoke unease in the ethnically and religiously diverse population of the Empire.
2 War Graves Cemeteries: Origin and Design

The seeds of the war graves cemeteries were planted in 1915, when the British government determined that no soldier’s body should be repatriated, whether they be English, Canadian, or Australian; instead, the soldier was to be “buried on the spot where he falls,” as the Mishneh Torah puts it (Hilkhot Melakhim 6:12). Samuel Hynes notes that “the spot where he falls” was a rough guideline only; “there were more than twelve hundred patches of soldiers’ graves in France alone at the end of the war, and these were eventually consolidated.” Phillip Longworth dates the decision against repatriation to a March 1915 order issued by Marshal Joffre, “banning exhumations during the period of the war,” which later took on a more permanent character. At first, this practice was simply a practical response to the realities of combat; the mobile ambulance unit headed by Fabian Ware, who would eventually become the first head of the Imperial War Graves Commission, began its work of registering graves simply to have a record of where bodies were, so that when hostilities ceased they could be interred in a more permanent fashion – either at a site chosen by the families of the deceased or, should the deceased not have a family of sufficient means to care for their remains, in a common ossuary, as was the common British practice at the time.

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

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

5 It is, of course, highly unlikely that the British authorities were referring to Maimonides in making this decision – as a doctoral student I have spent a great deal of time trying to find a connection, as it seems so obvious that there ought to be one, but to no avail.
8 Longworth, Unending Vigil, 1–2, 11, 14.
9 Longworth, Unending Vigil, 11.
10 Longworth, Unending Vigil, 11–2.
for the graves of her own soldiers.”11 The activity of tending a grave was understood to be significant enough that ensuring that those who tended the grave were of a sufficient relation to the deceased (even if the relation was no more than “fellow citizen”), and the issue became a major concern in international negotiation. However, there does not appear to have been a similar drive to ensure that those whose particular relationship to the deceased (that is, familial) would, by custom, entitle them to tend the grave were able to do so.12

The public reaction was mixed. At least one body was disinterred and repatriated during the war, in spite of the general order to the contrary; Ware became concerned that this might set a precedent that “would increase the demand at home for repatriation.”13 Likewise, the cultural historian, Jonathan F. Vance, recounts two separate instances of Canadians attempting to reclaim their relatives’ remains after the war.14 In both cases, the bereaved relations (parents of the dead soldiers) eventually traveled to France to dig up their sons’ graves in the hopes of personally transporting their remains back to Canada; both attempts failed.

While public demand for repatriation may have been high enough to concern Ware, the majority of public concern focused on the gravesites, rather than the bodies themselves. Providing photographs of graves – images of the names on the headstones – became part of the Graves Registration Commission’s regular work, from March 1915 onwards. By August of that year, demand was such that the Commission had developed a standard system for responding to such requests: letters of enquiry were answered with a photograph that showed four graves, one of which would be the grave of the soldier enquired about (photographing the graves in groups of four permitted a more efficient use of time and film than photographing individual graves would), and a card on which “were given certain particulars, including the best available indication as to the situation of the grave and, when it was in a cemetery, directions as to the nearest railway station which might be useful for those wishing to visit the country after the war.”15 The demand for these photographs indicated a concern for the care and upkeep of the graves, but also points towards the development of a system of substitutionary mourning. Where a body and grave were physically unavailable, mourners were compensated with artifacts, such as letters and photographic images of the grave.

11 Longworth, Unending Vigil, 12.
12 This is an abbreviated summary of an argument I cover in more depth in Making Memory, 72–6.
13 Longworth, Unending Vigil, 12.
This system was, I argue, foundational to the civic imagination of what would shortly become the Commonwealth as a multinational, multi-ethnic, multi-religious community, due to the manner in which soldiers from different parts of the empire were buried side by side, so that the headstone of a Sikh soldier from the Punjab would become part of the mourning process for a Presbyterian family in Leaskdale, Ontario – and the headstone of the Canadian Expeditionary Force soldier would become part of the mourning process for the Sikh family. As the mythic memory of the war as a grand sacrificial gesture in defense of broadly humanistic values gained traction in the 1920s, the framing of the memorial photographs and the radical integration of the gravesites themselves made clear to those who owned them that the sacrifice, and the motivations behind it, was not bounded by religion, ethnicity, or national origin. The photographs of war graves thus played a vital early role in constructing the sense of shared history and shared values that underlie the modern Commonwealth of Nations.

While the memorial cards sent during the war would have depicted a fairly ramshackle row of improvised grave markers, after the war this sense of shared values was heightened by the design of the gravesites themselves. When constructing the permanent battlefield cemeteries, the Imperial War Graves Commission strove (not uncontroversially) to maintain a uniform treatment of every grave in every cemetery, obliterating any differences in rank or social standing between the men (they were almost exclusively men) buried there, emphasizing the equality of each soldier’s sacrifice, as well as the commonality of their service to the Empire. Thus, not only were the headstones absolutely uniform in size and shape (though their inscriptions varied widely), the cemeteries themselves all contained roughly the same elements. Graveyards of 1000 occupants or more include the Stone of Remembrance, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, the same architect responsible for the London Cenotaph. The Stone is large, about 12 feet long, and both its horizontal orientation and its situation, atop three steps, is meant to resemble an altar. It bears the simple inscription, chosen by Rudyard Kipling: “Their name liveth for evermore.”

16 The precise details of this juxtaposition are invented, and a reader familiar with the design of War Graves cemeteries will be quick to protest that, for the most part, Sikh regiments occupy separate cemeteries or sections of cemeteries; however, such intermingling certainly can be found, for example in the cemetery at Lijsenthoek, and the possibility of its occurrence could not be overlooked by the cemetery designers.
17 This transition is investigated in detail in Samuel Hynes, A War Imagined, and Janet S. K. Watson, Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
3 Scripture in the Cemetery Design

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

Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us.
The Lord hath wrought great glory by them through his great power from the beginning.
Such as did bear rule in their kingdoms, men renowned for their power, giving counsel by
their understanding, and declaring prophecies:
Leaders of the people by their counsels, and by their knowledge of learning meet for the
people, wise and eloquent are their instructions:
Such as found out musical tunes, and recited verses in writing:
Rich men furnished with ability, living peaceably in their habitations:
All these were honoured in their generations and were the glory of their times.
There be of them, that have left a name behind them, that their praises might be reported.
And some there be, which have no memorial; who are perished, as though they had never
been, and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them.
But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.
With their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance, and their children are within
the covenant.
Their seed shall remain for ever, and their glory shall not be blotted out.
Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name liveth for evermore.

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

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¹⁹ The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (1562), Article VI.
²⁰ This was the case prior to the 1922 revision of the prayer book, which added texts from Eccle-
siasticus/Sirach to the Sunday lectionary.
With regard to the inscription on the stone, I do not venture to make a recommendation. It must be left to the inspiration of one of our masters of literature. I would only suggest that it must be short, and that its effectiveness must not depend upon literary associations, which do not exist for the majority of those who will read it. A phrase from the Bible, or some words which will of themselves strike the right note in the hearts of those who read them, is what is required. One member of the Commission might be appointed as a committee of one to supply this need.21

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

There is room here for an interesting digression into the massively under-discussed topic of Kipling’s own religious life, upon which one might well note that inscriptions in war graves cemeteries are not the only time he makes reference to the text of Ecclesiasticus, it also appears in the fifth chapter of his autobiography “Something of Myself,” where he “earnestly commend[s] to the attention of the ambitious young a text in the thirty-third chapter [...] which runs ‘So long as thou livest and hath breath in thee, give not thyself over to any.’”23 There is clearly scope for a study of intertextual referencing in his written oeuvre, which has yet to be undertaken in any systematic fashion – but his private interaction with the text is rather beside the point; the topic before us is, rather, the public use to which the text is put. Kipling’s choice to confine himself to the apocrypha is significant only insofar as the rest of the committee accepted it as an appropriate choice and passed it into official policy; Kipling’s comment regarding his choice of text is significant in that it reveals that choice to have been both a considered one and openly acknowledged. As such, we are within bounds to treat the choice to classify the choice of texts used in the war graves cemeteries as a politically strategic decision.

I am not the first to note the absence of any identifiably Christian content from the texts of the war graves cemeteries; the lack of reference to any promise of future resurrection is, in comparison to what had been up to this point normal memorial design, glaring. Alan Wilkinson has suggested, in fact, that the verse on the

21 “War Graves,” 11.
Stone of Remembrance, “omitted a previous sentence that might have offended Hindus,” who practice cremation rather than burial. Sir Frederic Kenyon’s 1918 report introduced the need for a monument which “must have, or be capable of, religious associations, and while it must satisfy the religious emotions of as many as possible, it must give no reasonable ground of offence to any.” The report went on to commend the design of the Stone in the following terms:

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

The sparse geometry of the Stone and the uniformly shaped headstones were the occasion of ongoing controversy, beginning as early as 1917 and continuing past the end of the War; while a desire to avoid causing distress to the general public meant that the majority of this debate was carried out in private committee meetings, it did spill over onto the floor of the House of Commons in 1919, particularly notably on the 17th December, when Lord Hugh Cecil read out several letters he had received from British families protesting their lack of access to, and control over, their loved ones’ remains. The ensuing debate encompassed objections to the policy of non-repatriation; objections to the practice of re-interring bodies buried in isolated spots within larger cemeteries; objections to constraints placed upon families who might wish to erect memorials of their own design at grave sites; objections to the alterations of existing grave markers (crosses made from airplane propellers are mentioned several times, and considerable concern is shown for the treatment of crosses after they are removed from graves); and several (unsuccessful) instances of special pleading that more permanent cross-shaped markers be permitted as variations to the standardized headstone design.

27 House of Commons Debates 17 December 1919, vol. 123 cc 485–512. A search of Hansard shows that discussions over latitude, or lack thereof, regarding marking graves continued in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords through much of 1919 and into 1920, and also featured in formal written responses to questions. The debate revolved most vociferously around the expressed desire for some to have the ability to erect cruciform headstones (as shown in House of Lords Debates 9 April 1919 vol. 34 cc 223–40), though it does seem at times that the opposition was attempting to suggest that the members of the War Graves Commission, and by extension the government, were opposed to crosses.
The content of this debate gives some flavor of the careful balancing act the design committee was engaged in: the British public was largely unaware of the issues of cultural and religious diversity with which the committee contended; the nearest acknowledgement in the public debate was the observation Clifton Brown (MP for Hexham), that, “‘[a]ll tastes are not alike, and stones put up by some people would perhaps be very distasteful to the relatives of some of the men lying near by.’” So the choice to take inscriptions from the Apocrypha had the virtue of compromise, in that it was likely to render all interested parties (except, perhaps, the Catholic ones) equally unhappy: members of the Established Church recognized the quotes as not really scripture, and non-Christians recognized them as rather more Christian than not.

In its religious ambiguity, the Stone of Remembrance is unlike the Cross of Sacrifice designed by Reginald Blomfield: “a tall finely proportioned stone cross, with a symbolic sword of bronze attached to its face, thus emphasizing both the military character of the cemetery and the religious affiliation of the majority of the dead.” More importantly, however, the conflation of sword and cross emphasizes the sacrificial narrative that underlay much of the recruitment propaganda in the war. To the Christian citizens of the Empire, the suggestion of a link between the soldier’s sacrifice and that of Christ served both a justificatory and a consolatory purpose. The justificatory purpose aligned Britain and the Allied nations with the side of God, transforming what may have otherwise been a rather obscure political conflict into a Holy War, in which Germans and their allies ceased to be viewed as human but instead represented the sin from which Christ died to cleanse the world. The consolatory purpose did not simply align the soldier’s sacrifice with that of Christ, but also the soldier’s reward: the soldier, like Christ, willingly gave up his earthly life, but in so doing gained the rewards of resurrection and life eternal. This latter treatment of the sacrificial theme grew quickly beyond a mere consolatory gesture and transformed war service into a religious and moral purification. In a debate in the House of Lords on 9th April 1919, Lord Balfour of Burleigh argued that the War Graves Commission’s rejection of cross-shaped grave markers constituted a failure to acknowledge that, “‘the dead who have died in so great and so noble a cause, died with the very ideal of self-sacrifice so inseparably connected with the Cross of Calvary.’”

28 House of Commons Debates 17 December 1919, vol. 123 cc 491. I note, as an aside, that from at least 1835, the discourse of “taste” had been used in parliamentary discourse to convey concerns regarding moral decay.
29 Philip Longworth, Unending Vigil, 36.
30 Not to be confused with Arthur James Balfour, the first Earl of Balfour, whose political career had more extensive historical echoes.
31 House of Lords Debates, April 9, 1919 vol. 34 cc 223–40.
The suggestion that the eternal life promised by both the Christian faith and the inscription on the Stone of Remembrance was directly linked not just to the soldiers’ ostensibly voluntary surrender of their lives, but to the militant context in which that surrender occurred has become an important interpretative key for the spatial arrangement of the War Graves cemeteries.

The Cross of Sacrifice is present in every cemetery, regardless of size, and in the larger graveyards, where the Cross of Sacrifice and Stone of Remembrance are both present, there is usually an area of tension between them, a line of sight from which the headstones radiate outwards – a wide spread of death between resurrection and eternal life. In the Tyne Cot Cemetery at Passchendaele, the largest of the Commission’s cemeteries, there is a clear line of sight between the Stone, the Cross, and the entrance gate. The Cross stands at the center of this configuration, clearly visible from either end of the cemetery, but obscuring the view between the Stone and the entrance. In smaller graveyards, where placing the Cross in the center is impractical, it nevertheless occupies a similarly prominent position, accomplishing what Kenyon termed “recognition of the fact that we are a Christian Empire, and this symbol of the self-sacrifice made by those who lie in them.”

4 Conclusion

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

33 Frederic Kenyon, “War Graves,” 11. In debate in the House of Lords, when Lord Balfour asked which representatives of churches were consulted, Viscount Peel claimed that, “the Chief Rabbi [gave advice] on behalf of the Jewish community,” House of Lords Debate 09 April 1919 vol. 34 cc 223–40.
design of the war graves cemeteries is a perfect portrait of the cultural imaginary of the British Empire at this time, the admittance of diversity in small ways, but with a still militant Christianity at its center. I conclude with the suggestion that this cross-centered pluralism remains characteristic of the civic religion of the Commonwealth today.

**Works Cited**


