

MEMORY

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INTRODUCTION

Philippe Tortell, Mark Turin, and Margot Young

ON NOVEMBER 11, 1919, King George V of Britain inaugurated a tradition of remembrance for the fallen soldiers of the First World War. One year earlier, hostilities in the “Great War” had ceased, though the conflict would only officially end with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919. In the early days after the war, and certainly during the first official ceremonies at Buckingham Palace, optimism and hope mixed with a profound sense of loss and grief. Surely, the world had learned an important lesson from this “war to end all wars.”

As we know from the decades that followed, this was not to be. Rather, much of the world would soon find itself engulfed once again in a horrifying conflict that would turn out to be longer and bloodier than its predecessor, with particularly devastating impacts on millions of civilians. And conflicts continued over the twentieth century and into the current one. King George could scarcely have imagined the number of people who would come to be remembered on November 11.

Over the past century, the practice of Remembrance Day, as it is

known throughout the Commonwealth, has changed significantly. There are no living survivors of the First World War, and the same will soon be true of the Second World War. Sadly, there is no shortage of those wounded and killed in war to take their place. What has changed, however, is the nature of global conflict and our understanding of the physical and psychological effects of war on combatants and civilians.

As we mark the one hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War, we do so not only with diverse perspectives on what constitutes war but also with a sharpened sense of the injustices and trauma perpetrated in times of (and sometimes in the name of) peace. Take, for example, the appalling treatment of Indigenous communities in Canada at the hands of colonial settlers. This history is marked by the appropriation of lands, the destruction of entire communities through imported diseases, the disentanglement of and violence directed against Indigenous women, and the forced removal of thousands of children into residential schools, where they suffered physical and emotional abuse and the erasure of their cultural heritage. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was established to shed light on these injustices, forging a collective consciousness of past wrongs and calling for institutional actions to create a fairer society. Meaningful reconciliation demands remembrance of the harms of colonialism, past and present.

As collective memory changes, so too does a society's ability to understand and express different facets of remembrance. Through legal and political systems and through the creative and performing arts, we have developed increasingly sophisticated and technologically mediated modes of recalling and revitalizing societal memory. With

respect to individual memory, we know more than ever about the workings of our unconscious and about the complex neural networks that make up our brains. We are now beginning to understand the molecular mechanisms of how (and when) memories are formed. We are also advancing our understanding of nonhuman aspects of memory, whether through the creation of sophisticated digital technologies or through deep study of Earth history and the evolution of our universe, reaching back to the very beginning of time.

It was in this context that we took on the challenge of exploring memory from a wide range of perspectives. We sought to bring together a collection of voices from some of the world's leading thinkers and scholars in order to examine memory through a variety of lenses. The project began with a series of discussions in the fall of 2017, at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. The institute, which recently celebrated its first quarter century, brings innovative thinkers together to explore fundamental research questions from creative interdisciplinary perspectives. These initial discussions were as surprising as they were inspiring, and they helped us generate a list of topics that would eventually turn into the collection you now hold in your hands.

Our initial vision for this book, influenced by personal experience and professional training (in oceanography, anthropology, and law, respectively), was swept cleanly away. The contributions that we gathered address a range of topics far beyond our own disciplines, from molecular genetics and astrophysics to cultural history and the arts. We were challenged to seek unifying themes that illuminate and deepen our understanding of memory.

Important and transdisciplinary themes surfaced. Most significantly, perhaps, the essays share an appreciation of the fragility and fluidity of memory and its capacity to convey different meanings across time and space. The insights of neurological science into how memories are formed, archived, and retrieved help us better understand the tendency for human memory to change over time. Several authors discuss the malleability of memory and the implications of this for the administration of legal justice or for our understanding of shifting ecological baselines in the face of an expanding human footprint on natural systems. Some essays focus on the choices we make in commemorations and ceremonies that either reinforce or challenge dominant cultural narratives. In this light, it is critical to understand how memory has been transmitted over thousands of years through Indigenous oral histories, storytelling, and embodied cultural practices and to understand the role that museums and archives can play in shaping and reclaiming memories.

Long-term perspectives on memory give us a richer understanding of the world, challenging us to expand our imagination beyond our everyday experience. Several essays examine how the creative and performing arts can be used as a vehicle for transforming our understanding of past traumatic events. At the same time, the tools of modern science and technology have given us the capacity for seemingly limitless digital memory, while also creating a legacy of environmental destruction that lives on in the synthetic materials that have accumulated around the globe. Authors in this collection explore the memory of materials at the atomic level or, at much broader scales, how science enables us to read the memory of our

planet, our place in the universe, and the spectacular events that led to the diversification of life on Earth.

In appreciating what it means to be human, understanding how, when, and why we forget is just as important as thinking about what we remember. Several of the contributions thus explore how memory can be harmful and what the loss of memory signals for our sense of self.

We hope this collection will challenge you to think creatively and deeply about memory – its composition and practice. We ask you to consider the meaning of memory for individuals and societies and for our material world. The essays in these pages offer a road map to explore the ways that memory matters and how it is transmitted, recorded, and shaped across space and time.

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