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"Turf Wars": grass, greenery and the spatiality of commemoration. Recurring debates and disputes in the uses of horticultural iconography by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in northern Europe.

Paul Gough

Introduction – discourse and debates

Where once geographers could argue that the ideological issues surrounding the quintessential character of English and Empire military cemeteries had drawn little comment, there is now a considerable literature exploring the space and place of remembrance. Increasing attention has been paid during the past decade to the value of "situation" in the discourse of death, grieving and commemoration. In this respect, "situation" should be understood to be a focus on "place", "space" and the geopolitical (Gillis 1994). The emerging discipline of cultural geography in the late 1990s created the tools necessary to elaborate "space" in the abstract, to regard "place" as a site where an individual might negotiate definitively social relations, and give voice, as Sara Blair argued, to "the effects of dislocation, disembodiment, and localization that constitute contemporary social disorder."[1] In our post-historical era, further argues Blair, temporality has largely been superseded by spatiality, what has been termed the affective and social experience of space. Almost a century after Freud's treatise *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), our understanding of how memory and mourning function continues to be challenged, revised, and refined. Issues of place have become important to this debate. Once a marginal topic for academic investigation, there is now a body of scholarly work exploring the complex interrelationship between memory, mourning and what might be termed "death-scapes". Indeed, this fascination with places of death and dying has given rise to myriad academic explorations spawning academic disciplines such as dark- or thana-tourism, which is an extreme form of grief-incited travel to distant prisons, castles, and abandoned battlefields where anthropological enquiry can be conducted. Suspicions of a release of "recreational grief" aroused after the death of Princess Diana in 1997 have also provided sociologists with considerable material for scholarly attention (Walter 1999).

However, this chapter will focus on the many ways in which horticulture, architecture and planning have been mobilized (to borrow the military term) to transform traumatized battle landscapes into permanent sites of memory. Mosse (1990), Morris (1997) and McKay (2001) and others have examined the aftermath of war and observed the creation of what some have also described as "memory-

[1] Blair, 544.

scapes", a *portmanteau* term that fuses an appreciation of once- violated landscapes with personal and discursive memories (Basu 2007).

In this chapter I want to focus not only on the torn and traumatized terrain of war, but on its repair, on the intensive attempts to smoothen the surfaces of war and to dress them in ways appropriate to civic and personal commemoration, to create "homely" and familiar plots of memory forever land-locked in the proverbial foreign field. I will do so by examining the project to create garden cemeteries on tracts of former battlefields after the Great War, 1914-1919. It is an impressive story. Yet, what would appear to be a straightforward narrative of reparation, recovery and rejuvenation is tainted by disharmony and argument. After the war, there was much disagreement about the "proper" form of remembrance; there was an intense dispute about the repatriation of bodies; and an extended (at times quite bitter) public argument about the best way to mark the sites of burial. What is additionally surprising is that these disagreements can seem as alive and vivid today as they did ninety years ago. Conducted by families, remembrance groups, ex-servicemen, politicians, and others, these disputes tell us much about the way we remember our dead, how we create protocols of commemoration and, significantly, how we play out discussions about national identity through horticultural proxies such as trees, shrubs, and most importantly, turfed lawn.

Why should this be the case? In his seminal text on cultural histories, David Lowenthal has argued that landscape is "memory's most serviceable reminder". He suggests that certain places can be regarded as key sites in a continuous educational process, where successive generations "revise or expand their cultural memory through interaction with the artifacts and landscapes of its past."[2] Former battlefields are critical places in Lowenthal's taxonomy of significance. This is because they are not a single, sealed terrain isolated in a given moment of time, they are multi-vocal "landscapes of accretion" stratified by overlapping layers of social, economic and occasionally political history. They are also, Barbara Bender reminds us, invariably politicized, dynamic, and open to constant negotiation (Bender 1983). Official sites of mass burial, ornamented with august memorials and strict planting regimes have not only long provided "pegs" upon which national fiction could be hung, but flagposts from which declarations of national identity and purpose can be articulated. Others have argued that the marking of a battlefield with monuments, memorials and markers fulfills a natural human need to understand, possess, classify and control what happened "so that it is manageable, even if not wholly explicable."[3] Explication, however, needs a certain quorum of authentication; and achieving authenticity is rarely straightforward; it requires careful manipulation and even contrivance (Saunders 2000). These issues of "contrivance", "manipulation", and "authenticity" will be the key considerations of this chapter. Nowhere are such terms more contested than on the British and Empire war cemeteries in northern France and Belgium. To understand why, we will have to first sketch out their origins.

"The Silent Cities"

[2] Lowenthal, 103.
[3] Iles, 171.

Given the scale of death on the battlefields of the Great War – the total British dead alone was over one million, of which a fifth were from British dominions overseas – the bold decision taken by the British government (on behalf of the entire British Empire) not to repatriate the bodies of the dead created a need for a comprehensive administration to rationalize, routinise, and standardize the recording of the dead, their site of burial and their marker stone. Initial attempts by the British and Allied armies to co-ordinate the burial and recording of the dead were haphazard. In Flanders, it was the zeal of Fabian Ware and his graves registration unit that laid the foundations of a systematic audit of the dead and their place of burial (Longworth 1967). Ware established a method for graves registration and a scheme for permanent burial sites. He also arranged that all graves should be photographed so that relatives might have an image and directions to the place of burial. By August 1915, an initial 2,000 negatives, each showing four grave markers, had been taken. Cards were sent in answer to individual requests, enclosing details that gave *"*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.*"*[4] Less than nine months later Ware's makeshift organisation had registered over 50,000 graves, answered 5,000 enquiries, and supplied 2,500 photographs. Little over a year later, the work to gather, re-inter and individually mark the fallen had become a state responsibility. The dead, as Heffernan points out, were no longer allowed *"*to pass unnoticed back into the private world of their families*"*. They were *"*official property*"* to be accorded appropriate civic commemoration in "solemn monuments of official remembrance".[5]

Attempts to dress the cemeteries and so alleviate their barren appearance were in hand as soon as the sites had been agreed. Wooden crosses were fashioned, flowers planted and some attempt at caring for the battlefield graveyards was made where it was safe and practical to do so. As Kenneth Helphand observes in his book *Defiant Gardens* (Helphand 2006), the bucolic habit was already well established: soldiers across the Western Front had created their own flower gardens during the course of the war itself. Amidst the squalor and horror of the front, behind the front lines, in reserve and supply trenches and in the rear zones, combatants from all sides had cleared tracts of land, restored it, laid flower beds or planted seeds and vegetables, tended them, and even harvested their fruit. He cites as a typical example the remarkable garden created in the trenches on Hill 59 near Ypres in 1915 by Lothar Dietz, a student from Leipzig:

> "As one can't possibly feel happy in a place where all nature has been devastated, we have done our best to improve things. First we built a new causeway of logs, without railing to it, along the bottom of the valley. Then from a pinewood close by, which had also been destroyed by shells, we dragged all the best tree tops and stuck them upright in the ground; certainly they have no roots, but we don't expect them to be here more than a month and they are sure to stay green that long. Out of the gardens of the ruined chateaux of Hollebecke and Camp we fetched rhododendrons, box, snowdrops and primroses and made quite nice flower beds."[6]

[4] Ware, vii.
[5] Heffernan, 302.
[6] Helphand, 38-39.

Not far from where Dietz transformed his melancholy desert into an idyllic grove, British troops were also establishing trench gardens. In May 1915 the *Illustrated London News* published a full-page image of a *"*villa*"* garden on a stretch of trench named *"*Regent Street*"*, the garden and a shelter sitting neatly amidst scorched undergrowth and shell-torn trees. By the end of the war the British had established a Directorate of Agricultural Production, a large-scale initiative to create a system of farms capable of mass-producing vegetables. Decorative and utilitarian schemes survived throughout the war; soldiers planted and nurtured flower gardens with the aim, argues Helphand, of creating an alternative reality, a tonic for morale, and for use as a boost to morale, a soft-edged weapon in the arsenal against the enemy:

> "A garden, and especially a plant emerging from the ground, is a sign of regeneration and an indication of the continuation of life. War magnifies our awareness of our human connections to these forces of life and death."[7]

These principles persisted in the immediate peace that followed the Armistice.

Arguing soon after the war for the promotion of English gardening principles and ideas in the military cemeteries, the horticulturalist Sir Arthur Hill, Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, insisted that *"*home flowers*"* should adorn all soldier's graves of the British Empire. Where possible, he argued, native species should be used to lend an impression that each of the Empire's dead lay within a garden setting. Through creative and sensitive planting, this was largely achieved, despite indifferent soils, fragment-strewn earth, and a northern European climate (where the vast majority of cemeteries are located) which discriminated against plants associated with the dead from the far reaches of the Empire. So, whereas *"*old fashioned double white Pinks, London pride, mozzy Saxifrages, Cerastium and Thrift…Polyantha Roses, Lavender, Rosemary, Iris, perennial Iberis, small heaths*"*[8], thrived in the northern climate, more exotic strands – such as bougainvillea - intended to commemorate the graves of soldiers from the West Indies – failed. The scale of the task facing the Commission was immense: its achievements equally so. By 1921, its architects and gardeners had established over a thousand permanent cemetery sites in France and Belgium alone – comprising some 200 acres of lawn, seventy-five miles of flower border and over fifteen miles of hedge.[9]

Not everyone, however, agreed that the numerous military cemeteries should be dressed in this way. Rather surprisingly, several noisy factions argued that the appropriation of the military cemetery as the epitome of a certain quality of *"*Englishness*"* was not to be undertaken lightly; floral adornment was seen by some as *"*a mere dress parade of the dead rather than a celebration of heroic sacrifice.*"*[10] Although Brooke may have articulated an idea that such places were unambiguously a *"*… corner of a foreign field /That is for ever England*"*, this idea brought together a complex intersection, indeed a clash, of gender, race, and class, underlined by Stuart Hall's admonition that the British have a strong tendency *"*to 'landscape' cultural identities so as to give them an imagined places or home."[11]. As we shall see, others

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[7] Helphand, 51.
[8] Hill, 8.
[9] Longworth, 87.
[10] Mosse, 112.
[11] Morris, 411.

argued that this tendency to homogenize character and experience led to a synthesized falsehood, a leveling of individuality that reduced the largely volunteer civilian-soldiers to mere ciphers.

However to a grieving public, the military cemetery garden - well-tended, bursting with native species, and with a carefully calculated informality - reasserted the principle of historic continuity, promoting it as a powerful declaration of continuity and *"*rootedness*"* that linked nation and soil to a pre-industrial past, even though such myths had apparently been torn asunder by the savagery of the Great War.

From Front Line to front lawn – contested turf

If the planting of flowers, shrubs and trees was, at times, a contested issue then surely the matter of the *"*green coverlet*"*, the lawn that surrounded, connected and contextualized the headstones of the dead ought to be less problematic? Not necessarily so. Once again, there were carefully articulated points of dispute; some historic and others that were to recur over the decades and were closely attuned to issues of national identity, environmental debate, and the cost of maintenance. Such disparate views have deep historical roots. After all, the lawn – argues George McKay – might be regarded as the most pronounced marker of imperial culture, exported by the English even to those countries with climates or landscapes that make the growing of flat expanses of lush green grass difficult, expensive or time-consuming.[12] Regarding it as *the* pivotal, privileged space of certain green sporting Englishnesses – cricket, croquet, lawn tennis, golf – he suggests that the lawn, and especially the front lawn of one's home, has become the primary formal signifier of one's standing and conformity to social norms. Not to mow, or to clip, or to tend fastidously to the borders of one's rectilinear tract of turf is not only willfully unsocial, but lowers the financial and moral value of the homes around, and threatens the very integrity of the community. An argument nicely visualised on the front cover of Alain de Botton's book *Status Anxiety* (de Botton 2004) which shows a well-heeled female, clippers on gloved hand, standing on the closely clipped turf of an impressively large estate. A lawn, states Michael Pollan[13] is to be regarded as *"*nature under totalitarian rule*"*, or as radical gardener Lyx Ish[14] puts it, the lawn is little more than *"*a symbol of white male civilization*"*.

Today's radical responses may not have impressed those in the 1920s, but strong views about the *"*verdant turf*"* were declared from the outset of the Commission's work. Looking for horticultural specialists a year after the war, Arthur Hill doubted that the French might actually be capable of growing a *"*good lawn*"*:

> "Doubt was expressed by those in authority whether the sowing of grass was worthwhile and the absence of good lawns in France was held up as an object lesson to the Botanical Adviser and the Horticultural Officers. I chanced to be reading Arthur Young's 'Travels in France' at the time and came across the passage in which he refers to French lawns and says he sees no reason why the

[12] McKay, 131.

[13] Pollan, 169.
[14] Ish, 123.

> French should not be able to have lawns as good as those in England, provided they cut them and looked after them properly."[15]

Hill's ideal was based on a visit to Hascombe village, Godalming in Surrey, where the churchyard's smooth green lawn clipped closely to each headstone deeply impressed him as a paradigm of English values. Diligent and thorough, and mindful of the peculiar conditions pertaining in western Belgium, he also visited Holkham Hall on the Norfolk coast to study the planting of Marram grass on the sand dunes. Although aspirational, he was also realistic about his chances of seeding with grass every military cemetery. He recognized that those on the former battlegrounds in Italy, Macedonia, and Gallipoli, while beautifully located on the shores overlooking the Mediterranean, would never hope to emulate the verdant garden-cemeteries of northern France and Belgium, which were largely staffed by British veterans of the Great War.[16] Their love of gardening was regarded as a pre-requisite for the task, endorsed by much popular writing during and after the war which valorized gardening as an essential, even *"*inherent*"* trait of the English. Writing on *"*exciting to be English*"*, Raphael Samuel has located this innate talent in his study of the making (and unmaking) of British national identity (Samuel 1989).

Hill's antipathy to foreign practice was not new. A resistance to French (or indeed any non-English) gardening practices had been a characteristic of the British stance towards continental farming practices for centuries. During his extended *Travels in France* written on the eve of the French Revolution, Arthur Young, the greatest of all English writers on agriculture, *"*did not hesitate to tell his French readers some blunt home-truths*"* about their farming practices which he regarded as retarded, although he considered their soil superior to the English.

When relocated to the war grave cemeteries of the Great War, the suspicion of foreign habits was magnified. It is brilliantly captured in Julian Barne's short story, *Evermore* (1995),which tells the tale of the redoubtable 'Miss Moss' who, in the decades after the Great War, undertakes an annual pilgrimage to visit her brother's gravestone in *Cabaret Rouge* Military Cemetery in northern France. Her frequent attempts to customize, even *"*personalize*"*, the graveside environs of her brother's stone are frustrated by the strict protocols that held in the cemeteries:

> "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 kept damp in a plastic bag.
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> After dark she dug out the offending French grass and relaid the softer 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."[17]

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[15] Morris, 426.
[16] Morris, 431- 432.
[17] Barnes, 108.

While Miss Moss has eventually to resign herself to alien turf and *"*dusty geraniums*"*, others were less satisfied with the becalmed appearance of the former battlefield. Great War veteran Edmund Blunden harboured a concern that the leveled ground, the even greensward, which characterised each British and Empire cemetery was a mask that concealed dreadful truths:

> "The beauty, the serenity, the inspiration of the Imperial cemeteries have been frequently acknowledged by more able eulogists; for my part, I venture to speak of these lovely, elegiac closes (which almost cause me to deny my own experiences in the acres they now grace) as being after all the eloquent evidence against war. Their very flowerfulness and calm tell the lingerer that the men beneath the green coverlet should be there to enjoy such influence; the tyranny of war stands all the more terribly revealed." [18]

Others have observed this uneasy tension between the pristine orderliness of the cemetery and the chaotic causes of death and destruction just centimetres under the surface.[19] However, no single consensus holds. Whereas Mosse (1990) has argued that nature has been artificially distorted to reshape, smoothen and ameliorate the horrors of war, others have taken a different view arguing that it is the very specificity of remembrance – the assiduous clip and mow, the attention to every detail - that prevents the Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries from becoming simply mawkish (Shepheard 1997). By comparison, the sight of unkempt parkland and overgrown lawn evokes painful associations with traumatized bodies, disintegration, administrative lethargy and neglect. In brief, lawns require regular care and maintenance. Closely mown grass soon shows signs of decay if it is neglected for long, and by extension memory requires equivalent levels of attention if it is not to atrophy (Winter 1995).

It is fascinating to discover how polarized views can be. Alan Bennett, in his edited diaries (2005) dwells on a visit made in the late 1980s to an obscure village somewhere between St Omer and Zillebeke, south-east of the Flemish town of Ypres in Belgium. He is on a quest to locate the burial site of his Uncle Clarence, who died, aged twenty, in 1917. Once located, the cemetery is typical of the one hundred and seventy others in the Salient, neat and regular, more orderly than the surrounding banal suburbs, the bungalows and factory farms. It is, he notes, as if *"*the dead are here to garrison the living.*"*[20] Uncle Clarence is easily spotted, the stone is in a row backing onto the railway line though his body lies not beneath it, known only to be buried somewhere in the compact plot. For Bennett, it is an unnerving moment, made more so by the unblemished agelessness of the site. The walls, he writes, are sharp, new-looking, unblurred by creeper, the bleached Portland stones free of lichen, the turf manicured. *"*The dead*"*, he states, *"*seeming not to have fertilised the ground so much as sterilized it.*"*[21]

Where he saw only a frigid landscape populated by the absent dead, the architect Maya Lin relied on the smooth folds of rolls of turf to help soften the jagged edges of

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[18] Blunden
[19] Rowlands, 129-147.
[20] Bennett, 26- 28.
[21] Bennett, loc.cit.

bitter memory. In her design for the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington DC, she used generously grassed lawns to repair the deep cuts in the social and political fabric of a country traumatised by an embarrassing and unpopular war. *"*I thought about what death is, what loss is … a sharp pain that lessens with time but can never quite heal over. A scar. The idea occurred to me there on that site. Take a knife and cut open the earth and with time the grass would heal it.*"*[22] Summarising these many tensions, Morris (1997) suggests that the outwardly serene surfaces of lawn, flowerbed and well-tended shrub stand as uneasy interfaces between a sanitized landscape of national grief and the shattered bodies just beneath the pristine greensward, a tense balancing of the official and unofficial, the public and the private, a landscape at peace, as opposed to one with a veneer of decorum that conceals bodies in pieces.

Issues of environmental sustainability: the commission and the "turf experiments"

As the challenges of climate change have become ever more apparent and with a proliferation in the level and intensity of media coverage on the topic, organizations such as the Commonwealth War Graves Commission have had to consider the possible impact of environmental change on their horticultural work. In 2009, the Commission began to engage on a series of experiments to test out their preparedness for imminent climate change. Arguing, with some justification, that they had already a great deal of experience in gardening under challenging conditions, they set out their purpose with a series of reflective questions:

> "What pests and diseases might we encounter and what can we do to mitigate those challenges? How can we practically employ in the cemeteries the breadth and wealth of horticultural experience we already have as an organisation and how might the public react to these changes?"[23]

So as to test the validity and durability of its existing environmental policy the Commission set up a controlled experiment. On the premise that the bulk of the cemeteries it maintained were in northern Europe, it chose two sites in France and two in Belgium as showpieces where it could demonstrate the adaptations that might be necessary to combat climate change. Through making these horticultural, design and sartorial changes it was hoped to engage with the visiting public and assess their reaction to the work.

The four cemeteries were, in France, Les Moeres Communal (13km east of Dunkerque) and Ove-Plage Communal (14km east of Calais). In Belgium, Oostduinkerke Communal (midway between Nieuwpoort and Koksijde) and Railway Chateau Cemetery (2km west of Ieper). Two methods were to be tested – at one cemetery in each country - a *"*dry landscape*"* scheme was created whereby the turf was completely removed and replaced with other surfaces; at the two other sites the existing greensward was replaced with drought tolerant turf. Floral borders in all four

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[22] Danto, 152.
[23] Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <http://www.cwgc.org/content.asp?menuid=2&submenuid=9&id=102&menuname=Climate%20Change%20Update%20-%20February%202011&menu=subsub/>, 25 September 2011.

cemeteries were planted in the time-honoured way but with plants selected for their ability to withstand period of drought.

As the Commission was keen to point out, in advance of public reaction, such changes were not new or untested elsewhere. In Mediterranean locations – Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya – which had sizeable numbers of military cemeteries and where a lack of water, or irregular supply, grass could often not be grown, other options had been pursued and successfully implemented. On such sites pebbles or gravel had been used instead, with and without border planting. However, it was acknowledged that this was the first time such a programme of work had been conducted in northern Europe.

Public reaction was invited. It was not long in coming. In addition to direct communications with the Commission, web-based bulletin boards carried a great many colourful exchanges. If we take the *ww2Talk* on-line forum as a typical example of the banter shared between regular visitors to Western Front battlefields, we can discern three slightly overlapping responses to the Commission's experiment. Firstly, some saw it as a rejection (indeed betrayal) of first principles, regarding it as an abdication of responsibility by the commission and an abandonment of an essential component of remembering, which might best be summarized as: *"*I've only ever seen them as grassed places. It's just the tradition I've grown up with.*"*[24] Secondly, other responses (a minority) saw the pilot exercise as an underhand ruse to cut maintenance costs, hidden behind the unproven arguments of global climate change. Suggesting that Belgium was probably one of the wettest places on the planet, one skeptical correspondent stated categorically: *"*I suspect it is simply a cost saving experiment under the pretext of global warming.*"*[25] A third set of responses congregated around broader frustrations with sluggish official attitudes to preserving memory, regarding the experiment as yet another erosion of British values, under threat by non-specific *"*foreign*"* practices: *"*I thought the idea of these cemeteries in a foreign land*"*, said another, *"*was to be forever a bit of England.*"*[26] In several cases these sentiments were laced with anxieties about a waning sense of patriotism, and a betrayal of those we ought to hold in the highest regard:

> "I have always been touched by the commissions way of making its cemeteries fit for heroes, and a little piece of England. Gravel just doesnt (sic) work, in my opinion."[27]
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> "I am always impressed by the lovely lawns between the headstones. A piece of green, immaculately kept in an oasis of peace."[28]
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> "I really don't want to think the world these guys died for is turning into That. *Find a way* of giving them grass. Don't they at least deserve that?"[29]

[24] 'Steve G', Commonwealth War Graves Commission online.
[25] 'Steve G', Commonwealth War Graves Commission online.
[26] 'Geoff 501', Commonwealth War Graves Commission online.
[27] 'Owen', Commonwealth War Graves Commission online.
[28] 'Auditman', Commonwealth War Graves Commission online.
[29] James Daly, Commonwealth War Graces Commission online.

To these passionate respondents the greensward was being threatened not by others but from within; the quintessential English churchyard cemetery was being defiled so that it looked *"*more like a goods yard*"* than a garden. To some it echoed a greater loss of national identity; this was *"*a metaphor for what's happening to England's green and pleasant land.*"* (‘Idler’, posted 27 November 09) Of course, context is all. The Commission’s experiment had taken place against a backdrop of polarizing views around the larger environmental debate. Take for example, the gardening pages of national newspapers, which offer diverging positions on the ethical proposition symbolized by the well-maintained grassed lawn. On the one hand there are such expressions as *"*a lush, well-watered lawn is every Englishman’s right*"*, and *"*if an Englishman's house is his castle then his lawn is most certainly his estate*"* (Fort, 2001) while on the other hand, there is the environmental lobby which argues that *"*Clinging to the grassy elegance of English lawns will be signals of social and moral decadence.*"* (Gray, 2009).

Caught in the midst of such debate and faced with a barrage of objection, even ridicule, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission brought an end to this phase of the experiment and drew some conclusions. During the trial period, some 250 members of the public had expressed their views through the on-line survey. 106 of these had actually visited at least one of the four cemeteries, where more comments had been left in the Visitor’s Books. The Commission conceded that although many supported their work on climate change and many had recognized the need to consider alternative approaches, there was *"*little enthusiasm for the hard landscaping approach adopted at Railway Chateau*"* (CWGC 2009). As a result of the feedback received it would be re-established as a typical lawn cemetery in the spring of 2011. However, the experiment was not to be wholly abandoned: that particular Cemetery would remain part of the climate change demonstrations as the Commission continued to explore the use of drought tolerant plants in the borders and a drought tolerant grass mix, which would continue to be used at Oostduinkerke Communal Cemetery in Belgium.

Conceding that it had not won the public relations campaign, the Commission restated its original argument that elsewhere in the world, dry landscaping was commonly and successfully used in other cemeteries where grass cannot be grown or maintained, usually due to a lack of a regular water supply. However, this was the first time it had been demonstrated at one of their cemeteries in northern Europe. Perhaps it had indeed been a step too far and too quickly. To this end the Commission reassured interested parties that the demonstrations would continue to run for another four years and would be closely monitored by their officers and gardeners, and also by the many visitors who maintain their ideological vigilance on these sites of memory.

As a coda to this charged debate we might dwell a little on the fondness, indeed the urgent need, for designed green spaces in times of trauma. In defiance of the grim and challenging conditions of wartime Iraq and Afghanistan we find examples of British and US soldiers creating gardens, growing plants, and even harvesting fruit from small pockets of earth between the tents and temporary huts of their fortified camps[30].

[30] Helphand, 243- 244.

Where the task of managing a plot is too demanding, possibly too dangerous, we can find evidence of *"*temporary*"* lawns or symbolic strips of grass planted as an emblem of *"*home*"*. Possibly the most idiosyncratic of these is an image of a square of green tarpaulin laid out in the midst of a tent city at U.S. Air base at Al Khary, Saudi Arabia in 1990-91. Held down by sandbags, and giving every impression that is it brushed clear of dust and sand daily, the finishing touch to this temporary lawn is a hand-painted sign urging pedestrians to *"*Stay Off!*"* the *"*lawn*"*.

Concluding observations

Little should surprise us about the intensity of feeling aroused by these proposed changes to the appearance of the *"*Silent Cities*"* in France and Belgium. Even though the last of the Great War veterans has passed away, the moral commitment to preserve the inherited memory of the war has put renewed pressure on those maintaining the state of the cemeteries by assuming the moral high ground over what is grown and nurtured. The disputes, which may seem petty to many on the outside, shed a fascinating light on the attributes of Englishness which I have explored elsewhere (Gough 2004, 2007). They tell us much about the palpable tensions between a public and private agenda of grief and how the individual *"*rememberer*"* can contest the dictates of a centralised administration. In an interesting reversal of topographical fortune what were once blighted and scarred landscapes, heavily contested by several sides, have (despite their outward calm) remained contested; wounds that ought to be left to heal, are picked at, even allowed to redden, to remain scabrous. Here there is only partial closure. Although the mines, tunnels and dugouts have been capped and fenced off, memory refuses to be parked. As John Rodwell has so eloquently described elsewhere, *"*closure*"* has many readings – political, social, geographical – and the siting of parkland or a memorial ground is as much an act of policy as it is an evocation of particular remembering (Rodwell 2008).

Given the fixity of the stone monuments, the weight of official histories and the great burdens of the grand narratives of the war, many of those who want to mark their own, unique and individualised memory have had to do so through rogue planting, the laying of flowers, the surreptitious marking of the foreign field with seeds and saplings. Plants, shrubs, even trees, and other natural interventions act as metaphors for collaboration and interaction in a way that hewn stone, shaped bronze and architectural scale cannot. Just as hand-picked flowers allow the private voice to be heard with equal status alongside the high diction of official rhetoric, so a carefully manicured lawn speaks of attention to detail, egalitarian values and long-term commitment, of turf wars fought by grass roots communities of interest.

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