Australia's Global Memory Footprint: Memorial Building on the Western Front, 1916–2015

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Shortly after the First World War ended, Australian authorities erected memorials in France and Belgium in memory of the Australian Imperial Force. Decades later, during the so-called ‘second generation of memory’, Australians again engaged in planting memorials on sites of memory on the Western Front. This article compares the two periods of memorial building, contrasting the sites that were chosen for commemoration and examining what these suggest about the difference between past and contemporary modes of remembering the First World War. It highlights the growing importance, in extra-territorial commemoration, of memorial diplomacy and the development of a shared memory between Australians and the communities which host their memorials.

England, home and Beauty
have no cause to fear
Should Auld acquaintance be forgot
No! No! No! No! No! Australia will be There.¹

IT NEEDS NO RESTATING, during the centenary commemorations of the First World War, that Australia was there. Some 330,000 men embarked in 1914–18 to ‘take the field with brothers o’er the foam’, as this popular wartime song put it.² Moreover, as the extension of the Australian centenary programme to encompass ‘A Century of Service’ indicates, Australians continued to ‘be there’ across the twentieth century. The Australian War Memorial Roll of Honour lists over 102,000 men and women who have died serving with the Australian defence forces since Federation.³ For a country which has suffered a major threat to its territorial sovereignty only once, it is a remarkable record of projecting military force overseas.

One of the many consequences of this ‘expeditionary force mentality’ has been the proliferation across the globe of sites in which Australians, individually and collectively, have invested meaning and significance, by virtue of the fact that they, or their family members, fought and died there.⁴ As Matthew Graves

Unless otherwise stated, archival records are from the Australian War Memorial (hereafter AWM) or the National Archives, Australia (NAA).
has put it, ‘the memorial geography of Anzac [now] straddles the globe from France, Belgium and Turkey, via the Mediterranean and Middle East through Thailand, Malaysia, Korea, and Vietnam, to Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia’.  

The processes whereby Australians imprinted this global memory footprint have changed over time, varying according to the mix of individual and collective agency in memory-making and the role played by the Australian state in national commemoration. But in almost all cases, given that Australian sites of war memory are generally extra-territorial, accommodation and negotiation with the foreign countries and communities that host them have been part of the process of their creation.

This article considers these processes in relation to the installation of Australian war memorials on the Western Front: first, in the immediate postwar period; and then, in the ‘second generation of memory’ since the 1980s. These Australian interventions allow us to trace the changing dynamics of Australian memorialisation at the collective level across the century. Who determined which sites of memory were given prominence over others in the necessarily selective process of memorial building? What can be learned from the changing ‘hierarchies of memory’ about past and contemporary modes of remembering the First World War? Beyond this, by tracing the history of Australia’s memory footprints in France and Belgium—footprints which, in 1919, were nationalistic in impulse, though dependent upon imperial advocacy for their implementation—the article illustrates the growing importance in recent commemoration of there being a sense of a shared, possibly transnational, memory: a memory which transcends national boundaries and plays a key role in the ‘memorial diplomacy’ of contemporary international relations.

The sites for first footprint

The Australian National Memorial near Villers-Bretonneux in France lists the following battles in which Australians fought on the Western Front from 1916 to 1918: the Somme, Pozières, Bapaume, Bullecourt, Messines, Menin Road, Polygon Wood, Broodseinde, Poelcapelle, Passchendaele, Avre, Ancre, Villers-Bretonneux, Lys, Hazebrouck, Hamel, Amiens, Albert, Chuignes, Mont St Quentin, Epehy, Hindenburg Line, St Quentin Canal, and Beaurevoir Line. What is immediately striking about these battle honours is how few of them feature in today’s national commemorative practices.

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5 Matthew Graves, ‘Memorial Diplomacy in Franco-Australian Relations’, in Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration: Mobilizing the Past in Europe, Australia and New Zealand, eds Shanti Sumartojo and Ben Wellings (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 182.
6 The seminal work on Australian war memorials is K. S. Inglis, Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 1998).
8 I borrow this term from Graves, ‘Memorial Diplomacy’.
This selectivity of collective memory began during the war itself. Just as Anzac Day became a day of national commemoration from 1916 on, so on the Western Front, the men of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) began to erect memorials to their dead while still in action.\(^9\) The 1st and 2nd Divisions erected two crosses in the ruins of Pozières where they had suffered huge casualties in July and August 1916. On 8 July 1917 a ceremony was held here around a 4.5-metre-high Celtic cross honouring the 1st Division.\(^10\) The cross stood on this site until 1932 when it was dismantled and sent to the Australian War Memorial (where it disintegrated, thanks to dry rot).\(^11\) Another wooden cross, erected by the 2nd Division, lasted until it was destroyed by a storm in 1930.\(^12\)

So far as can be gleaned from the documentary record, these were unofficial, even ‘vernacular’, memorials, in the sense that they arose from ‘first-hand experience in small-scale communities rather than the “imagined communities” of a large nation’.\(^13\) As Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan have put it, they were ‘the product of individuals and groups who [came] together, not at the behest of the state or any of its subsidiary organisations, but because they [had] to speak out’.\(^14\) Within months of the war’s ending, however, a more officially coordinated process of Australian commemoration on the Western Front began. Early in 1919 the Australian government decided to erect, at various points in the battle zone, memorials ‘to commemorate the deeds of the A.I.F’, and planning meetings of senior leaders of the Australian Corps followed in Belgium and London.\(^15\) From these deliberations it was agreed: first, to build two memorials to the Australian Corps; one in France, and one in the Ypres Salient; and second, to erect a memorial to each of the five infantry divisions which had fought in France and Belgium.\(^16\)

These proposals were backed by Prime Minister W. M. (Billy) Hughes, who was then in Europe for the Paris Peace Conference. When the Australian cabinet suggested that action on Australian memorials on the Western Front might await the development of a comprehensive policy, including memorials

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\(^10\) Photo EZ0131, Photo E02059, AWM collection.


\(^12\) Memo to Fabian Ware, Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), 18 January 1930, A458 P337/6 pt 2.


\(^16\) Minutes of conference at Ham-sur-Heure.
in Gallipoli, Egypt and possibly Palestine, Hughes (as he was wont to do) overrode them.\textsuperscript{17} As he said to Acting Prime Minister W. A. Watt on 20 May 1919,

In the case of Divisional Memorials ... immediate action is necessary. Men are very keen about them ... they want to have a hand in preparing sites and foundations and approving designs etc. We can utilise their labour; this will save much expense and please the soldiers who are after all the men principally interested.\textsuperscript{18}

Whether Hughes, who cherished his special relationship with ‘the digger’, was in fact responding to pressure from within the AIF—making this an early case of that symbiotic relationship between individual and official agents of memory that would characterise some later Australian commemoration on the Western Front—we can only speculate.\textsuperscript{19} The divisional memorials proceeded, with cabinet approving a budget of £12,000 in June 1919.\textsuperscript{20} The memorial design was agreed to be an obelisk, bearing the ‘Rising Sun’ badge: the brain child, it seems, of Lieutenant-General Sir J. J. Talbot Hobbs, the commander of the Australian Corps in 1919, and a junior officer working with the Graves and Monument Committee at Australia House in London.\textsuperscript{21}

Where were these memorials to be located? The decision-making processes on this matter provide some entree into the thinking of the men of the AIF about how they wanted their war to be remembered. Hobbs, who was fortuitously an architect in civilian life, was appointed to oversee the whole programme of memorial building. However, the choice as to the particular site for each divisional memorial was delegated to the divisions themselves, or at least to their senior leaders.\textsuperscript{22} There were some guiding criteria: first, the memorials should commemorate ‘battles’; second, they should be on sites ‘where the greatest number of men fell’.\textsuperscript{23} In addition, the memorials should be ‘in the most commanding view points’, so that they could be seen from many locations.\textsuperscript{24} No one was to be left in any doubt about Australians’ exploits. Rather, ‘the famous deeds of the “Aussies” [were to] be marked for all time on the Battle Fields’.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{17} Acting Prime Minister A. W. Watt to Hughes, Papers of W. M. Hughes, MS1538 Series 24.1 Box 122 Folder 2, National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA).

\textsuperscript{18} Hughes to Watt, 20 May 1919, Hughes papers, MS1538 Series 24.1, Box 122, Folder 3, NLA.


\textsuperscript{20} Department of Defence to Prime Minister’s Department, 7 October 1919, A461 D370/1/15.

\textsuperscript{21} Captain G. S. Keesing, ‘War Memorials in France and Belgium’, A461 D370/1/15.


\textsuperscript{23} Meeting of G.O.C.s Divisions and Brigades, ‘Australian War Memorials in France’, 14 March 1919, AWM27 627/3.

\textsuperscript{24} ABM& SG Committee, 20 March 1919, A2909 AGS6/1/5 pt 1.

Pozières was the unanimous choice for the 1st Division’s memorial.\(^{26}\) Not only was this already established as a site of remembrance but, like other key sites in Australian national commemoration, such as Gallipoli and, in the later Vietnam war, Long Tan, it was a ‘baptism of fire’: that is, it was the first operation on a large scale undertaken by the 1st Australian Division in France. Three Victoria Crosses were awarded during this operation, and Charles Bean, war correspondent, official historian and pre-eminent agent of war memory, would later call the Windmill at Pozières ‘a ridge more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth’.\(^{27}\)

The sites chosen by the other divisions, however, come as something of a surprise. The 2nd Division chose Mont St Quentin. This hill, overlooking Péronne, had been captured in a dramatic assault between 31 August and 3 September 1918. Its capture was not a major action strategically but it culminated in the planting of a flag at the summit, a trope which always has a powerful hold on the popular imagination (\textit{vide} the iconic status of the United

States Marine Corps war memorial of Iwo Jima. Mont St Quentin was also recommended by the fact that its capture had been widely lauded at the time, including by the British commander of the Fourth Army, General Sir Henry Rawlinson, who declared it to be ‘a feat worthy of the highest praise’.28

The 2nd Division memorial was not the standard obelisk that Hobbs preferred, and which the Australian government was willing to fund.29 Instead, the divisional commander, General Charles Rosenthal, who was also an architect, took it upon himself, even before the war ended, to commission ‘a first class Australian sculptor’, Web Gilbert.30 The division raised some £1,700, and on the seventh anniversary of the Mont St Quentin attack, in 1925, their memorial was unveiled by the French Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch.31 In Rosenthal’s words, the statue was ‘a fine composition’, but it depicted a towering Australian soldier plunging his bayonet into a prostate German eagle.32 Bean condemned it as ‘a cheap conception’ that bore ‘no shadow of the AIF’ and it is hard to imagine a more triumphalist image of the slaying of imperial Germany.33 Unsurprisingly, the memorial disappeared in the Second World War, when Péronne again was occupied by the Germans.34

Meanwhile, the 3rd Division chose for the site of its obelisk Sailly-le-Sec, on the northern bank of the Somme, east of Amiens. It was here that the division had played a role in halting the spectacular German offensive of March 1918. As the divisional commander at that time, General John Monash, put it, this represented, ‘literally, the end of the great German advance in this part of the field’. For Monash, Sailly-le-Sec may also have represented an affirmation of his role in ‘proving’ the skills of the 3rd Division on the Somme. As he wrote in his postwar memoir:

Here was the Third Division—the ‘new chum’ Division, which, in spite of its great successes in Belgium and Flanders, had never been able to boast, like its sister Divisions, that it had been ‘down on the Somme’—come into its own at last.35

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28 ‘2nd Divisional Memorial’, 4 December 1918, AWM27 623/5. Other possibilities considered by the 2nd Division included Pozières, Bullecourt, Menin Road, Polygon Wood, Amiens and Montebrehain: Memo by Brigadier G. Martin, 12 April 1919, A458 P337/6 pt 1.
29 Conference at Ham-sur-Heure, 14 March 1919; Meeting of ABM& SG Committee, 29 April 1919, A2909 AGS1/2/1.
32 Rosenthal diary, 23 November 1918.
34 So, too, did the statue of a United States ‘doughboy’ standing on a giant eagle, sword in hand, marking the spot at St Nazaire where the American Expeditionary Force landed in April 1917. See 87th Infantry Division, http://gallery.87thinfantrydivision.com/Personal-Remembrances/McAulliffe-Sculptors/2685673_HB9PPQ/142189560_D5TzBSg#/i=142189560&k=D5TzBSg (accessed 18 October 2014).
The 4th Division, for its part, chose another 1918 battlefield, Bellenglise. Here, in September 1918 the division had helped break the Hindenburg Outpost Line, earning an accolade from a German battalion commander to the effect that ‘Your men are so brave and have so much dash that it is impossible to stop them’. It is significant that the 4th Division chose Bellenglise in preference to Albert, Pozières, Hamel, Dernancourt and, most importantly, Bullecourt. The latter was the site of two very costly battles in April and May 1917, in which the 4th Division had suffered casualty rates as high as 78 per cent in one brigade.

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37 Memo by Commander 12th Australian Infantry Brigade, 13 March 1919, AWM27 623/7; Memo by Commander 13th Battalion, 13 March 1991, AWM27 623/7. Other sites on the list for the 4th Division memorial were: Mouquet Farm, Guedecourt, Messines, Broodseinde, Hébuterne, Hamel, Amiens (Proyart), Hindenburg Line.
Why the 4th Division leaders finally gave priority to Bellenglise is not clear, but the surviving records state that an initial decision in favour of Bullecourt was reversed after ‘2 long and wordy meetings’ in 1919.39 Possibly it mattered that Bullecourt ‘was not what be [sic] termed a successful operation’.40 In contrast, Bellenglise was ‘the culminating point of the Divisions work in the war besides being an extremely successful operation’.41

Finally, the 5th Division chose Polygon Wood, one of the more successful operations within the long Third Ypres campaign of August to November 1917. The central feature of this battle was the Butte which the Australians captured on 26–27 September 1917, thanks, the division later claimed, ‘to the vigour with which the troops of the Division snatched complete victory from an almost desperate situation’.42

It is clear from the choices for these divisional memorial sites that the leaders of the AIF preferred locations that were ‘reminiscent of their greatest achievements’.43 They wanted to be remembered for their victories, not for catastrophic defeats—and particularly not for ‘war’s traumatising effects [which] have been a central trope in the post-1980s incarnation of Anzac’.44 To quote Brigadier-General Thomas Blamey, who represented Australia on the Battle Exploit Memorials Committee, a War Office committee created in London in 1919, ‘The sooner we may forget the tragic side of the war and elevate into its place the memory of the soldierly virtues of Australian troops, the better.’45

**Negotiating the sites**

Choosing where to place the divisional memorials was only the beginning of the process of Australian memorialisation. Beyond this, there were at least two tasks of an essentially diplomatic nature. Australian authorities first had to gain approval for their claims from the British authorities under whom the AIF had served. Since Australian units had always formed a small part of a vast multinational war effort, there were other claims to ‘ownership’ of particular battlefields. Bellenglise, for example, was claimed by the British 46th Division.46

Such potential disputes were moderated through the London-based Battle Exploit Memorials Committee, which required ‘properly documented evidence’ to back Australia’s case.47 In the end, the Committee did not block any of the claims by the five Australian divisions. It was probably to Australia’s advantage

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41 Sinclair MacLagan to Hobbs, 28 March 1919.
43 ‘War Memorials in France and Belgium’, A461 D370/1/15.
46 Battle Exploit Memorials Committee, April 1919, A2909 AGS1/3/1.
47 Appendix to Paper no. 2, Battle Exploit Memorials Committee (BEMC), April 1919, A2909 AGS1/3/1.
that these claims were made early in the post-armistice period when much of the decision-making surrounding imperial war graves and memorials was still fluid.\(^{48}\) By late 1920, the British authorities were finding that they would ‘no sooner decide on a suitable site for a memorial—Villers-Bretonneux or Vimy Ridge—than [they] would discover that the Australians or Canadians had got in first or that some division had already built its own private memorial’.\(^{49}\)

A second challenge was acquiring the land on which the Australian memorials would stand. The Western Front was no new \textit{terra nullius}. Rather there were multiple stakeholders to consider: landowners, communities and the French and Belgian governments. Faced with a tsunami of memorial plans from its allies, the French government declared in April 1919 that it was willing to accept proposals for permanent memorials. However, it insisted on dealing with one central authority.\(^{50}\) This was agreed to be the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC), whose charter gave it responsibility for acquiring land for the purposes of cemeteries, erecting permanent memorials in cemeteries and elsewhere, and maintaining all British Empire military cemeteries and graves.\(^{51}\) Australia, of necessity, had to work within this framework of imperial memorial diplomacy, since it had no independent diplomatic service at this time.

However, Australian authorities were keen to use the labour of the AIF awaiting repatriation to build the divisional memorials; so they initiated negotiations for land purchases with the local stakeholders.\(^{52}\) Sometimes these discussions went smoothly. Land was purchased without difficulty at Sailly-le Sec and Bellenglise, although the price for the latter was considered exorbitant.\(^{53}\) The communal authorities of Mont St Quentin donated the land.\(^{54}\) However, the citizens of Pozières were not impressed when a site for a memorial was pegged without authority or any consultation with town plans: they ‘thought it strange that a Monument should be erected, and their land fenced off without consulting them first’. The more ambitious Australian plans, such as securing the land on which the famous German Gibraltar pillbox stood, failed to eventuate since the owner wanted to sell the land for eight times its prewar

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\(^{48}\) Army Order, 12 April 1919, AWM27 623/7, Appendix to Paper 2, BEMC. The only claim about which there was any hesitation was Polygon Wood (Minutes of 2nd Meeting of the Battle Exploit Memorials Committee, 24 April 1919, A2909 AGS1/3/1), but this was approved by end May 1919.


\(^{52}\) The Australian representative, Captain A. H. Bardin, made recommendations to the ABM& SG Committee which forwarded these to the IWGC for action with the French government: Minutes of ABM& SG Committee, 17 July 1919, A2909 AGS1/2/1. All sites were formally transferred back to the French state in 1937: Minute for Prime Minister, ‘Australian War Memorials in France’, October 1937, A461 A370/1/15.

\(^{53}\) Major Phillips, Minute, 9 June 1920, A2909 AGS6/1/5 pt 1.

value and be paid in gold. It was only in the 1930s that the iconic Windmill site was able to be purchased.

Australian local land purchases were referred via the IWGC to the French and Belgian governments for approval, and by late 1919 four of the five divisional memorials had been completed. In addition to these, a plaque was installed in Amiens cathedral in November 1920 to mark the role the AIF had played in defence of the city in 1918. To the north, meanwhile, at Hill 60 near Ypres, a monument to the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company had been erected by the company itself in April 1919. This marked the site of one of the most dramatic episodes of the war on the Western Front, a spectacular explosion of subterranean mines which killed some 10,000 Germans prior to the Allied attack at Messines on 7 June 1917.

The Australian National Memorial

After this burst of memorial building in 1919 ebbed, the focus of Australian commemoration on the Western Front turned to the construction of war cemeteries and memorials to the missing. These were essentially imperial commemorative activities, led by the IWGC, on which Australia, like the other Dominions, was represented. In time more than six thousand Australians whose bodies were never recovered were listed on the Menin Gate Memorial, Ypres, Belgium, and over thirty-five thousand Australian dead reinterred in immaculate IWGC cemeteries. However, even though the Menin Gate would acquire iconic status in Australia, thanks to the immense popularity of Will Longstaff’s 1927 painting, *Menin Gate at Midnight*, there was little place in these memorialising practices for any distinctive national voice. Menin Gate listed over fifty-five thousand missing of the British Empire, and there were only two all-Australian cemeteries on the Western Front, VC Corner at Fromelles and Toronto Avenue at Ploegsteert Wood, Belgium.

It is surprising, then, that it took nearly two decades to erect what is now the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux. Whereas the divisional memorials were some of the earliest on the Western Front, Villers-Bretonneux was the last of the Dominion national memorials to be installed: the Newfoundland memorial at Beaumont-Hamel dated from 1925; the South African

57 The 5th Division memorial at Polygon Wood had then to be reconstructed in 1920 because of insufficient filling-in of tunnels and dugouts underneath: CO Australian War Graves Services, ‘Australian Memorials’, 17 December 1920, A2909 AGS6/1/6, pt 1.
59 Ibid. The Hill 60 memorial was replaced in 1923 by a granite obelisk after the original fell into a state of disrepair.
60 Figure for graves provided by Commonwealth War Graves Commission, August 2014. This includes dead and unidentified Australian dead.
at Delville Wood, from 1926; the Indian at Neuve Chapelle, from 1927; and the Canadian, at Vimy Ridge, 1936.

Why this was so is not entirely clear. As mentioned, the decision was taken early in 1919 to build two memorials to the Australian Corps. The Belgian option, on Broodseinde Ridge, was soon abandoned. As Hughes saw it, the 5th Division memorial at the nearby Polygon Wood would serve this function.62 The site for the French memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, meanwhile was chosen by mid-1919 (thus precluding it as a choice for the divisional memorials). This again was a site of Australian victory, the much vaunted recapture of the town of Villers-Bretonneux from German occupation on the night of 24–25 April 1918. The fact that this action occurred on the third anniversary of the Gallipoli landing gave it almost instant mythic status. However, the choice of Villers-Bretonneux may also have owed something to the fact that Hobbs, who had been commander of the 5th Division on the night of the attack, believed that he did not get due credit, even though he ‘really planned’ the operation.63 As with Monash, private and public memory may have converged as Hobbs nominated for the Corps memorial the hill which had ‘great sentimental value’ as ‘the key of the position we held and … the objective the Germans fought so hard to win’.64

Ten acres outside Villers-Bretonneux was purchased by the Australian government in 1919, but thereafter progress on building the memorial slowed.65 Perhaps this was because the French government was becoming uneasy about populating their sovereign landscape with massive British memorials.66 In 1922 it removed the responsibility for authorising memorials from the prefecture and invested it in the central government. Only units at divisional level or above would be allowed normally to install a memorial.67 The French also questioned the ‘colossal dimensions’ of some of the British memorials proposed for the Western Front. As the French delegate on the Anglo-French Mixed Committee (established, within the framework of the IWGC, to manage relations with French military and civil authorities) noted on 25 June 1926, some memorials would be ‘about as large and as high as the Arc de Triomphe de l’Etoile at Paris’.68 He asked ‘very diplomatically’ if the IWGC could ‘find out if it would not be possible to request the British Government to design Monuments which would not appear so large by the side of the poor little Monuments we are obliged to erect to our own dead’.69

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62 Meeting of ABM& SG Committee, 29 May 1919, A2909 AGS1/2/1.
64 Hobbs to Lieutenant-General C. B. B. White, 4 April 1919, A2909 AGS6/1/5 pt 1.
66 Crane, 212.
68 Similar ‘mixed committees’ were established with the Belgians (1919), the Greeks (1921), the Italians (1922) and the French and Germans (1935).
In response, the IWGC scaled back its memorial plans. The Australian government meanwhile proceeded in the mid-1920s with a design competition for the memorial, with applicants limited to Australians who had served in the war or whose children had enlisted.\textsuperscript{70} In May 1929 the French government granted approval for the Australian memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, but by this time the Great Depression had made the original generous budget allocation of £100,000 impossible.\textsuperscript{71} After years more delay, the Australian government jettisoned the prize-winning plans from its own competition and opted for a cheaper memorial designed under the auspices of the IWGC.\textsuperscript{72} The choice of designer was Sir Edwin Lutyens, a Briton who was one of the four principal architects appointed by the IWGC.\textsuperscript{73} He had already created the gates at the Villers-Bretonneux cemetery, and scores of other war memorials: including the impressive Thiepval on the Somme and the Cenotaph in Whitehall, the latter of which had been replicated around the imperial world. Lutyens had also designed New Delhi, the acme of imperial hubris. The Australian ‘national’ memorial was

\textsuperscript{70} ‘National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux’, August 1927, A6006 1927/08/16; Gazette no. 106, 17 December 1925, A461 H370/1/15 pt 1.
\textsuperscript{71} Australia House to Prime Minister’s Department, 31 May 1929, A461 H370/1/15 pt 1; ‘The Villers Bretonneux Memorial’, nd, A461 H370/1/15 pt 1.
\textsuperscript{72} Cabinet agenda no. 118, 15 March 1932, A461 H370/1/15 pt 1.
\textsuperscript{73} Ware, 31.
becoming decidedly imperial—but so too was the nationalism of loyalist Australians at that time.

The final design for the Villers-Bretonneux memorial was a tower thirty-one metres tall, diplomatically shorter than the Arc de Triomphe’s fifty metres but high enough to gaze out across the sites on which Australians fought in the Somme region. The tower was flanked by walls inscribed with the names of more than ten thousand Australians missing in France. The unveiling of the memorial in 1938 was presided over by King George VI, with Queen Elizabeth and the French President Le Brun in attendance. Since budgets were tight, the Australian prime minister did not come—an absence unthinkable at any major commemorative ceremony today.74 Instead, the Australian delegation included the High Commissioner in London, former Prime Minister Stanley Bruce, and those cabinet ministers who happened to be in Britain already on government business. Hundreds of veterans and nurses made the journey to Villers-Bretonneux, though the only government financial assistance they received was for travel from London.75 Fully government-funded ‘pilgrimages’ of veterans from Australia came only in the 1990s.

The second memory ‘boom’

After the installation of the national memorial, there was a long hiatus in Australian commemorative interventions on the Western Front. With Australian formations not being deployed to land fighting in Europe during the Second World War, there were few new sites that commanded Australian attention. After 1945 the main concern was with repairing the damage inflicted on World War I memorials as a result of battle or German occupation.

Primary among these was Mont St Quentin where the 2nd Division memorial had disappeared. In 1947–49, the Australian government decided, after consulting Rosenthal, not to replace the statue, partly because it was not possible to find the cases of the original, and partly because it was conceded that this ‘might in the years to come be regarded as offensive’.76 Only the panels on the base of the statue were replaced at this time.77 In the mid-1960s, however, a constellation of veterans of the 2nd Division, the Returned and Services League (RSL) and Australian ambassadors to France lobbied for the Australian government to install a new memorial.78 Unveiled in 1971, this took the form

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74 Prime Minister Lyons to Minister for Repatriation, 7 February 1938, A461 H370/1/15 pt 3.
77 Circular no. 2.
of a consciously ‘more subdued’ statue, depicting an Australian soldier, in a slouch hat with his head cast slightly down.\(^{79}\) (The Commonwealth Art Advisory Board thought it less aesthetically satisfying than the original Web Gilbert.)\(^{80}\) Notably, while the government funded the memorial, it held back from financially backing the veterans’ ‘pilgrimage’ to the unveiling of the statue, even though the veterans argued—little anticipating the memory boom to follow—that ‘this will, undoubtedly, be the 1st A.I.F. Swan Song, the final exit, so far as the United Kingdom and Europe is concerned.’\(^{81}\)

Much would change as Australia experienced a remarkable resurgence in memory of war from the mid-1980s on. The reasons for this phenomenon, which was global as well as Australian, are beyond the scope of this article.\(^{82}\) Suffice to say that, in the case of Australia, it was the result of a complex and symbiotic interaction between, on the one hand, successive governments and state commemorative agencies, invoking the memory of past wars for purposes of legitimation and national identity construction, and, on the other hand, a diverse mix of agents of memory ‘from below’, whose motives (so far as there is any scholarly consensus on this) have ranged from nationalist sentiment and a passion for military history to curiosity about their family’s past and a search for meaning and identity in a world of globalisation and prevailing secularism.\(^{83}\)

In this context, memorial building on the Western Front shifted from being, as it had been in 1919, the preserve of a relatively small political and military elite, acting with no reference to audiences at home, to the domain of multiple agents playing out their memory-making in a very public performance, at home and abroad. Concurrently memorial diplomacy, which in the immediate post-First World War period had been an instrument whereby Australians secured their claims on sites of memory, became itself a force of international relations. With this, the nationalist impulse behind commemoration, though still dominant, became infused with the rhetoric and practice of a shared or transnational memory between Australia and its former allies.

All of this became manifest in a proliferation of new memorials, mostly at the initiative of the Australian government, and a reorientation in Australia’s commemorative focus towards catastrophe rather than victory. The five divisional memorials of 1919, of course, remained in place (when, one might ask, is it politically possible to dismantle a memorial?); but at least two of them, Sailly-le-Sec and Bellenglise, slipped to the margins of commemorative practice.

\(^{79}\) G. J. Yeend, Assistant Secretary to Prime Minister, nd 1966, A463 1964/4940.
\(^{81}\) W. F. Anderson, Mont St Quentin Memorial Association, to PM Gorton, September 1970, M4251 15 pt 2; E. S. Keehn, Department of Interior, to Secretary PM& C, 15 April 1971, A3211 1971/1087, pt 8.
\(^{82}\) For a recent engagement with this question see Carolyn Holbrook, *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2014).
\(^{83}\) For one leading contribution to the debate see Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward, ‘“It Was Really Moving, Mate”: The Gallipoli Pilgrimage and Sentimental Nationalism in Australia’, *Australian Historical Studies* 38, no. 129 (2007): 141–51.
Sailly-le-Sec, in particular, has been eclipsed by two other sites in its vicinity: one, the well-established Villers-Bretonneux; and the other, a new site of memorialisation, Le Hamel.

Villers-Bretonneux’s continued prominence is not surprising. It is, after all, the national memorial, and Australian nationalism, shed of its earlier imperial associations, has been the mainspring for much of the recent resurgence in the Anzac legend. As Brigadier-General H. V. Bennett predicted with considerable prescience in 1919: ‘The next generation will have forgotten the separate Divisions and think only of Australia’. Moreover, Villers-Bretonneux has long possessed a mix of attributes that attracts the battlefield ‘pilgrims’, as those undertaking such tourism are now routinely called. It is reasonably accessible from Paris, and close to the town of Villers-Bretonneux which has creatively constructed its own identity around a shared memory of its liberation in 1918 and a history of postwar collaboration with Australians. The town landscape is now liberally marked by tributes to Australia, from Rue Melbourne and Restaurant Kangourou to the museum in the primary school, funded by Victorian donations in the 1920s, that boasts ‘Never Forget Australians’. On the outskirts of the town, meanwhile, is the Adelaide cemetery, from which the Australian government exhumed the body of the Unknown Soldier for reinterment in the Australian War Memorial in 1993.

However, beyond this, the status of Villers-Bretonneux in the Australian memory hierarchy has been affirmed strongly by ongoing interventions by the Australian government and Franco-Australian memorial diplomacy. The national memorial was the site of an international ceremony in 1998, when in recognition of the eightieth anniversary of the end of the war, the French bestowed the Legion of Honour on four very elderly Australian veterans. Ten years later more than five thousand Australians attended an official Anzac Day dawn service at Villers-Bretonneux, an event which has been seen as something of ‘a commemorative take-over’, in the sense that the established commemorations by the local citizens were overtaken by a more orchestrated ritual on the part of the Australian government. In the aftermath of this event, the Australian authorities decided to make an official dawn service an annual event, a decision, it seems, that was prompted by tour operators’ desire to

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84 Minutes of conference at Ham-sur-Heure, 14 March 1919. At that time Bennett was acting commander of the 1st Division; later he would become notorious for leaving Singapore in February 1942.
86 Beaumont, Broken Nation, 433–45.
87 Minister for Veterans’ Affairs Media Release, 17 June 1998, supplied by Department of Veterans’ Affairs (DVA) under special access.
88 Romain Fathi, ‘“A Piece of Australia in France”: Australian Authorities and the Commemoration of Anzac Day at Villers-Bretonneux in the Last Decade’, in Nation, Memory and Great War Commemoration, eds Sumartojo and Wellings, 280.
market Villers-Bretonneux as ‘The other Anzac Day’ (as opposed to the one at Gallipoli). 89

Le Hamel’s new status similarly reflected a more intense level of Australian commemorative intervention in France. A small ridge on which the Australian Corps under John Monash fought ‘the perfect battle’ using new integrated weapons systems on 4 July 1918, Hamel was overlooked as a site of memorialisation for many decades. 90 This was despite a long campaign for a memorial to the Australian Corps on this site by a popular military historian, John Laffin. 91 Finally in the 1990s, Hamel was ‘discovered’ as part of a flurry of new memorial building under John Howard (prime minister 1996–2007). Howard, whose father and grandfather had both served in the First World War, embraced the opportunity to mark the eighty-eighth anniversary of the end of the war with a memorial honouring not just the Australian Corps but the 100,000 Australians who had served in France. This was part of his wider agenda of refocusing Australian war commemoration on Europe, as opposed to the Asia-Pacific orientation of his arch political rival, Paul Keating, in the early 1990s. 92

Unveiled in 1998 (and rededicated in 2008 after major repairs necessitated by poor design), the Hamel memorial again spoke to the way Australia’s memory footprint was being reshaped by memorial diplomacy. 93 Its unveiling was attended by delegations from several nations, among them France, Britain and the United States (some of whose forces had fought under Monash at Hamel). The occasion was an exemplar of those ‘carefully choreographed public ceremonies on the anniversaries of historic occasions at selected sites of memory, long established or of recent invention’, to quote Matthew Graves. 94 The Australian Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, Bruce Scott, chose to depict Hamel as a ‘key to understanding ourselves and the world around us’, an illustration of ‘essential human truths, as constant as nature itself, which ignore time’. In an even more forced attempt at transnational memory, Scott depicted the soldiers of Hamel as a fusion of the Anzac and French revolutionary traditions.

No long cannon fodder, sheep driven into the bloody slaughter of years past, but free men, partners in the enterprise before them. In the fight for France’s liberty, equality and fraternity found new form at Hamel. 95

While Hamel and Villers-Bretonneux were being reinvented, other sites of memory, notably Bullecourt and Fromelles, also gained a new prominence in

89 Age, 25 April 2008.
92 Holbrook, 179–94.
93 The Hamel memorial was undergoing further renovation at the time of writing.
94 Graves, 170.
95 Address by Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, supplied by DVA under special access, file reference 990975.
Australian commemoration. Memorial diplomacy played a role in their rediscovery but primarily their memorialisation testified to the complexity of contemporary memory formation and, in particular, the way in which proactive individuals created a memorialising context into which the Australian state was drawn.

Passed over by the 4th Division in 1919, Bullecourt was for decades on no remembrance trail other than that of veterans and their enquiring families. However, from the 1970s, intrigued French residents created a museum and raised funds for a memorial. This was soon capped with a bronze slouch hat funded by the Australian War Memorial, the RSL and the Department of Foreign Affairs. Progressively, the Australian government became woven into this tapestry of local remembrance. A new Australian memorial park was opened in 1992, in which was installed a bronze statue of a digger by the sculptor, Peter Corlett. In another instance of how private and public memory can converge to shape national remembrance, Corlett modelled the statue on his father who had served at Bullecourt in the 4th Field Ambulance. Bullecourt is now an integral part of official Anzac Day rituals in France.96

Fromelles too was ‘forgotten’ for decades, even though it was one of the worst battles for the AIF on the Western Front: some 5,533 Australian casualties were incurred in twenty-four hours on 19–20 July 1916. However, in the 1990s, a new Australian memorial park was created, at the centre of which was another Corlett statue, ‘Cobbers’. Depicting an Australian staggering under the weight of a wounded soldier draped across his shoulders (an actual event from 1916), this was a reflection of the degree to which compassion, sacrifice and mateship were becoming the distillation of the Anzac legend in the age of ‘post-heroic warfare’.97

These were government initiatives but far more important in the projection of Fromelles to a dominant place in the commemorative hierarchy was the activism of a small group of Australians, headed by a retired school teacher from Melbourne. Intent on finding a mass grave in which they believed that many Australian missing of Fromelles were buried, they initially met with official scepticism. But their persistence won out—thanks, in part, to advocacy by the popular media whose role in the construction of contemporary memory can be critically important. Eventually a mass grave containing the remains of around 250 soldiers, most of whom were Australian, was excavated.98 These remains were then reburied in 2010 in a newly created cemetery, the first to be built by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in fifty years. Even more unusually, a search was launched to identify the missing individually. DNA samples taken from the remains were matched, where possible, with those of the missing soldiers’ living descendants in Australia and the United Kingdom.

98 For a full account see Patrick Lindsay, Fromelles (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2008).
The missing of Fromelles provided a platform for yet more memorial diplomacy. The former head of the French army claimed at the first of many Fromelles burials that ‘Memory is only alive when nations are brought together. Memory is only alive when it unites generations’. But Fromelles also spoke to two of the phenomena that have fuelled the growth of Australian war memory in recent years: first, the explosion of genealogy and, with it, the desire to set family stories ‘in a wider, at times, universal context’; and secondly, the centrality of victimhood in contemporary memory of war. The very fact that Fromelles—Bullecourt likewise—was not a victory, but rather a manifestation of the worst of British almost criminal incompetence, resonates with today’s popular understanding of the First World War much more effectively than does Polygon Wood or Bellenglise, the successful operations with which the 4th and 5th Divisions chose to be identified.

The new rituals of Fromelles also testified to one of the core functions that the memorialisation of the war dead serves in contemporary Australian political culture. Like any liberal democracy, Australia faces an inherent contradiction, in that the rights of the individual are a core value but the state still needs at least some citizens to be willing to die in its defence. The very public commemoration of the missing of Fromelles—all volunteers—acted to reassure current and future defence personnel that they too would be honoured individually, no matter how great the effort, should they lose their lives in battle.

Conclusion

The early twenty-first-century imprint of Australia’s national memory on the landscape of France and Belgium is manifest in the Australian Remembrance Trail which has been developed by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs for the centenary of the First World War. This includes three of the 1919 memorials—Bellenglise, Mont St Quentin, Pozières—together with Villers-Bretonneux and the more recent sites of memorialisation, Fromelles, Bullecourt and Le Hamel. These are joined also by Péronne, Ploegsteert (near Messines), Zonnebeke and Ieper (Ypres). Most of the latter have an intrinsic historic importance but their inclusion owes something to the fact that they have established local museums on the First World War. The Australian government can invest in these at relatively little financial cost while accruing significant capital in international collaboration. New interpretative centres, meanwhile, are planned for Pozières, Villers-Bretonneux, Ploegsteert and Fromelles.

99 Australian, 1 February 2010.
100 Winter, 40.
102 Bullecourt, l’Historial de la Grand Guerre at Péronne, the Memorial Museum Passchendaele in Zonnebeke and the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ieper.
These ‘stations of the cross’ of the secular religion of Anzac would be familiar to the men of the AIF. All were sites of great struggle and loss in the war years and they align with the battle honours on the national memorial at Villers-Bretonneux. However, the soldiers who fought the war might question the reordering of the priorities within these sites of memory, and the emphasis on victimhood and sacrifice in the discourse that accompanies the rituals of commemoration. They would also surely be astounded at the centrality of war memory in the national political culture and in international diplomacy, and the associated commodification and trivialisation of war commemoration. What this dissonance between how the men of 1919 remembered the war and Australian national memory today confirms is the now axiomatic lesson about collective memory formation: that it is dynamic and contingent, and its rituals enshrine the values of the present rather than of the past. For this reason alone, Australia’s memory footprint in France and Belgium will continue to be the subject of ongoing renegotiation and reinvention in the changing political landscape that will prevail in the decades after the centenary commemorations have ended.

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