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# “Compelled to Act”

## Museums in a Post-Centenary World

**Abstract** The Centenary of the First World War has coincided with a shifting museum landscape in Australia. Exhibitions exploring emotional experience, and the longer-term impacts of actions and behaviours, have increasingly found favour.

Museums Victoria’s exhibition *World War I: Love & Sorrow* depicts the war with confronting honesty, focusing on its challenging physical and emotional impacts. The war is represented through eight personal stories that unfold through the chronology of the war and post-war years. The exhibition uses film-like interpretative techniques to build the visitor’s emotional experience.

The post-Centenary museum landscape provides a critical opportunity for museums to lead re-thinking about war, and to re-assess ideas of borders, divisions and conflicts, past and present.

**Keywords** museum, emotion, empathy, responsibility, evidence, absence

In Australia, war history has long been contested. The focus of this paper is an exhibition project at Museums Victoria, Australia: how it was received, and the broader context of museums and commemoration in Australia during the Centenary of the First World War.

The Centenary has coincided with a shifting museum landscape in Australia. Exhibitions exploring emotional experience, and the longer-term impacts of actions and behaviours, have increasingly found favour, particularly in major museums. Although part of a larger trend towards personal voice and individual experience, the First World War has arguably accelerated these changes.

Museums Victoria's exhibition *World War I: Love & Sorrow* (2014–2018) depicted the war with confronting honesty, focusing on the most difficult experiences including facial wounds, “shell shock” and mourning. The war was represented through eight personal stories that unfolded through the chronology of the war and post-war years, right up to the present day, including a teenage soldier, a mother, a nurse, two Aboriginal brothers and two brothers who fought for Germany. Diversity of experience and plurality of readings were critical principles. The exhibition was deliberately drafted to create an emotive and emotional experience, and to drive new and deeper perspectives of the war. It ended with a film of a family member for each of the personal stories, drawing the narrative to the present day, and underlining the war's continued relevance.

Key experiences in the exhibition included a walk-in space of panoramic photos of Glencorse Wood, east of Ypres in Belgium – called Nonnebossen on German maps. By coincidence both German and Australian official photographers documented the landscape between 1915 and 1917, so we're able to show the course of its destruction. We also sent photographers back to the location, to document the green wood that now grows there. Visitors' own shadows are projected dynamically as the scene changes. Behind them are the names of the 1771 men of the Australian, British and German armies killed in the vicinity in little over a week. The names are organised alphabetically, no matter for whom they fought, in the same way that the remains of so many of them now lie together in the forest, indistinguishable.<sup>1</sup> We're most grateful to the archives of all three nations for providing these names.

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1 Three months after *Love & Sorrow* opened, the “Ring of Memory” memorial was inaugurated in northern France, naming in alphabetical order almost 580,000 killed, again with no distinction of army or rank.



Fig. 1: The “dreadful abyss” – display about the treatment of facial wounds at Queen’s Hospital at Sidcup, England. Australian artist Daryl Lindsay, left, documented the treatment of patients. Photographer: Benjamin Healley, Museums Victoria, 2014

Also central to *Love & Sorrow* was a walk-in space representing the Queen’s Hospital, in Sidcup, England, opened in 1917 to treat facial wounds (fig. 1). The display includes plaster casts of terribly damaged faces, an operating table, facial splints and tin prosthetics made to cover the worst of the wounds. It is confronting and distressing; yet the inclusion of personal stories, including Bill Kearsy, one of the eight key characters in the exhibition, humanises the display. I should note that I owe much to the *Faces of Battle* exhibition at Britain’s National Army Museum in 2008 – the highly positive feedback they received of a similarly confronting exhibition empowered Museums Victoria’s decision to include such confronting content.

Back in 2013 I strongly argued for a story-based, emotional, non-partisan approach to the First World War in a Museums Australia conference panel with Australian War Memorial and National Museum colleagues. And now the Australian War Memorial, once a bastion of conservative views which avoided graphic depictions of war and the depths of grief, includes stories of

facial wounds and post-war grief in its new First World War Galleries.<sup>2</sup> And the Western Australian Museum’s National Anzac Centre, launched after *Love & Sorrow*, also follows personal stories in a life-long journey. And this is a key, I think, to the shift for the representation of the war in Australia: war is shown as part of people’s lives, rather than people’s lives as part of war. War as the central entity has been, at least to some extent, de-throned. Emotions, the personal, have been the principal agents of this shift.

With *Love & Sorrow*, I also wanted to create an exhibition that supported new ways of thinking and seeing, where social responsibility and accountability might find a voice, and which could be a stage for the community’s own experiences and ideas, in the past and today. These ambitions can be seen in Museums Victoria’s earlier exhibitions *Identity: Yours, Mine, Ours* (opened in 2011, Immigration Museum) and *First Peoples* (opened in 2013, Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre), both developed with close community contact, rich with personal voices, and including challenging and sometimes confronting content. Each includes consciously affective elements and deep emotional content, strengthening the impact of the story on visitors and bringing the narrative into the present.

## Understanding *Love & Sorrow*

From the day of its launch *Love & Sorrow* far exceeded expectations, and Museums Victoria quickly doubled its lifespan to 4½ years. The exhibition has been praised as “the most exquisite, moving, and intense exhibition on aspects of the First World War that I have seen anywhere in the world”<sup>3</sup> and Jay Winter called it “one of the best which the Centenary of the Great War has occasioned” (pers comm). (I quote these words to stress the exhibition’s relevance to wider discussion about centennial projects.)

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2 I particularly note that Dr Kerry Neale, who has done important research into facial wounds and their impacts on communities, is now employed as a curator by the Australian War Memorial. Dr Neale was on the academic advisory committee for *Love & Sorrow*, with Professor Joy Damousi, Professor Alistair Thomson, Dr Marina Larsson, Professor Peter Stanley and Dr Bart Ziino.

3 McKernan, M. (2015) WWI: Love & Sorrow. *reCollections* 10(1). [Online], available at: [https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/volume\\_10\\_number\\_1/exhibition\\_reviews/wwi\\_love\\_and\\_sorrow](https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/volume_10_number_1/exhibition_reviews/wwi_love_and_sorrow) [Accessed: 9 July 2019].

*Love & Sorrow* is probably the most evaluated exhibition ever mounted by Museums Victoria, in part because we wanted to understand its success with visitors. Evaluation showed that the exhibition had a high level of impact. Summative evaluation indicated that almost three-quarters of visitors said it had given them new perspectives; 89% learned new things; and 97% said it made them think of the impact of the First World War on Australian society. About the same number again said they would share what they had learned with others. Of the messages received by visitors, the repercussions of the war emerge as a leading theme – a “continuation of the sorrow”. I discuss this further in my chapter of *Emotion and the Researcher*, published recently.<sup>4</sup>

This is much deeper and more nuanced than the conventional “learning lessons” take-out observed (with disappointment) by Jenny Kidd and Joanne Sayner in their analysis of visitor responses to the British poppy artwork “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red”.<sup>5</sup> A successful exhibition is measured not only in quality of experience, including how it meets expectations and needs, but also in its ability to expose the visitor to something new, such as new feelings or ideas or ways of seeing.

We now know that this receptiveness to learning and new perspectives was the result of three things: content that created deep empathy through unfolding personal stories; content that was graphic and unsettling; and content that was new to visitors. Emotion sits at the top of these: 84% of respondents in online summative evaluation believed that their learnings and new perspectives resulted from their emotional connections. Their deepest emotional connections came from the combination of personal stories and graphic or medical content – the Sidcup immersive space, images of wounds, and images of damaged veterans such as Geoffrey Carter, shown in underwear so the stumps of his missing legs are graphically visible.

A significant number mentioned the power of objects such as a baby’s booties, letters and stories – objects with “peculiar vibrancy” or “stickiness”,

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4 Tout-Smith, D. (2018) *Love & Sorrow: The Role of Emotion in Exhibition Development and Visitor Experience*. In: Loughran, T. and Mannay D. ed. *Emotion and the Researcher: Sites, Subjectivities, and Relationships*. Bingley, England: Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 159–176.

5 Kidd, J. and Sayner, J. (2018) *The Power of the Poppy*. Unpublished. See also Kidd, J. and Sayner, J. (2018) *Unthinking remembrance? Blood-Swept Lands and Seas of Red and the Significance of Centenaries*. *Cultural Trends* 27(2), pp. 68–82.

to use Sarah Ahmed’s term (Australian academic Andrea Witcomb is amongst others who have used this term in describing *Love & Sorrow*). This vibrancy resonated with visitors’ own experiences of loss, longing, fear and grief. Visitors also connected with the stories of war in their own families – three-quarters in one survey had family members who had served in some conflict. Their stories almost always come back somewhere to grief and suffering.

Our physical design was very effective in making personal stories emotive too: 95% of the quantitative group of visitors agreed or strongly agreed that the showcases and the casual layout of the objects in them made the space feel personal and intimate.

Text (and labels) were also important to visitors. I used a strongly narrative style, with headings such as “Days of War and Years of Suffering”. And I incorporated significant first person voice, including the words of heart-breaking farewells. As many as 97% of the quantitative group *noticed* that the text was “written as a story and described how people were feeling”. And nearly three-quarters of the quantitative group reported that large images had an emotional impact on them. One visitor described the photographs as “really touching but also very informational” (female, 83); another felt photographs are “a very good way to tell the story because they’re real” (male, 60s). For so many visitors this was a new (or unexpected) type of exhibition, and as education theorist Howard Gardner<sup>6</sup> notes, when creative people “alter their practices” they become more effective mind-changers.

Digging deeper, Gardner identifies “principles” or “levers” that change people’s minds: resonance, reason (and data), research, representational re-descriptions, resources and rewards, real-world events and resistances. Each resonates in some way with *Love & Sorrow*. I don’t have scope to consider them all here, but focussing on the notions of reason and data, *Love & Sorrow* was credible in Gardner’s terms simply because we focus on real-world events; and of course we’ve got a head-start as a museum, and are therefore considered highly trustworthy and believable by the public, notably argued by Ashton and Hamilton among many.<sup>7</sup> Gardner says, “Much of

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6 Gardner, H. (2006) *Changing Minds: the Art and Science of Changing Our Own and Other People’s Minds*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, p. 121.

7 Ashton, P. and Hamilton, P. (2003) At Home with the Past: Background and Initial Findings from the National Survey. *Australian Cultural History* 22, pp. 5–30.

one’s capacity to change the minds of others hinges on whether or not one is trusted, seen as trustworthy, deemed to be a trustee”.<sup>8</sup> As Gaynor Kavanagh notes, there is “no real parallel with the museum and the way it works with such a complete spectrum of evidence”.<sup>9</sup>

*Love & Sorrow* has deliberately included as many primary sources as possible, and in some areas laid our process of historical enquiry bare, such as the interactive that allows visitors to see what was happening in every house in the street where butcher Albert Kemp farewelled his family for the last time. Visitors are able to see digitally the documents including rate books, newspapers and war records that were used to build the story of each house and each source is specified. This authenticity applies to all of Museums Victoria’s exhibitions: they must have a high level of accuracy, and be shaped and approved by content experts who include both scholars and the community members whose stories are represented.<sup>10</sup>

Another of Gardner’s levers is resonance. Considered collectively, *Love & Sorrow* is clearly resonant: it is an unusually film-like artifice – rapidly engaging, with sights, sounds and stories, building empathy, immersing, reaching climaxes (Glencorse and Sidcup) and even a denouement at the end, with the films of family members. Hans Appel is not alone in describing the exhibition form as simply “between book and film” and arguing that exhibitions should be more cinematographic.<sup>11</sup>

I think you’ll sense my optimism about what we’ve gained from this Centenary experience. I see a few key markers that suggest a new maturity in our approach to representing war. I see them in the language we use (much less about sacrifice, the fallen, eternity), the depictions of war (more graphic and brutal and realistic), the visibility of a lifetime of suffering after wounding and bereavement, the profiling of diseases of war such as mental illness

8 Gardner, op. cit., pp. xiv–xv.

9 Kavanagh, G. (2000) *Dream Spaces. Memory and the Museum*. London: Leicester University Press, p. 173.

10 Tout-Smith, op. cit.

11 Appel, H.H. (2009) The Exhibition: Between Book and Film. In: Kjeldbaek, E. ed. *The Power of the Object: Museums and World War II*. Edinburgh: Museumsetc, pp. 100–137, pp. 106–107. See also Droit-Volet, S., Fayolle, S.L. and Gil, S. (2011) Emotion and Time Perception: Effects of Film-Induced Mood. *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience* 5(33). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnint.2011.00033> [Accessed: 10 July 2019].

and venereal disease and tuberculosis, the range of stories told, the interweaving of anti- and pro-war sentiments, and the divergence of narratives of experience and understanding.

We also represent the war in a much more nuanced way, now less an attempt to conquer another army than to conquer one's own fears, an emotional landscape in which the visitor as much as the actors are central. We have a deeper understanding of how individuals and communities navigate the landscape of distress, how they build memory structures or narratives that make sense and are possible to live with.

In the brief and fleeting format of the exhibition the agents of this process remain elusive, but the objects, documents and photographs that survive tell much. They show which moments are the most remembered, and how they are remembered. They provide important clues about how and why some memories are bedded-down for the long term. Some symbolize particular moments when the world tips up and can never be the same again, such as a death telegram or a baby's booties never seen by her father.

I see it too in the deeper scholarship that accepted the war as a primary agent of the Great Influenza, and in the work of archaeologists who have caused us to consider a landscape marked in deep geological time by the fire-storm of artillery and the ferocity of destruction. There is more sensitivity to the incorporation of weapons in some museums too – *Love & Sorrow* is not the only exhibition to consciously respond to the perspective championed by Jay Winter that the weapons of war should only be shown when their consequences are also shown. In *Love & Sorrow*, weapons only appear above the Glencorse Wood interactive, where visitors see progressive panoramas of the destruction of that landscape wrought by those same weapons.

From a practical viewpoint, too, the Centenary has provided impetus for us to better document our First World War collections, make them accessible to a world-wide audience through Collections Online, and build the collections into a more balanced representation of the war and its aftermath. We are “trustees”, to use Gardner's term.

Our collections now include powerful and significant accounts of the impacts of war, such as the suffering of Bernie Haines, who struggled to make a new life after having his leg amputated in the field in 1917, while still a teenager. He spent the rest of his short life in hospital, where he was known as “baby Haines” due to his size and youth. Forty operations failed to improve his condition, and Bernard's cheerful personality gradually gave way to anger and distress. He died in 1926.





Fig. 2: Ethel Kemp with her mother Annie and brother George. Melba Studio, Private Collection, 1917

And there's Annie Kemp, who like so many widows struggled to make ends meet after she lost her dearest love Albert in the war. A poignant little postcard was written to Albert by his daughter Ethel (fig. 2), who writes "dear daddy / I am waiting / and watching / day by day / for you".<sup>12</sup> She never saw him again, and never really recovered from his loss.

There are still, of course, great absences in our telling of the First World War in Australia: women, children, participants from the furthest corners of the conflict, dissidents... I think, too, of what smaller organisations, such as branches of our Returned & Services League in Australia, and local

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<sup>12</sup> Museums Victoria collection MM 91075, Postcard – Ethel Kemp to Private Albert Edward Kemp, "Fond Thoughts of You", 1917.

governments, have made of the Centenary. The cultural shiver of the Centenary has passed through them too, and I think brought with it some changes, though fewer.

So – in the Centenary of the aftermath of the war, I hope we can find opportunities to work more closely together, across nations and former divides, to understand those years and look for parallels between our nations. Australia also came perilously close to social break-down in the 1920s, racked by riots and strikes; some communities pushed extremist views and even more extremist measures; and even the heroic Lieutenant-General Edmund Herring became a regional commander of the paramilitary White Guard. The Great Depression shook society even further, and pushed more veterans and their families to the brink.<sup>13</sup> And at some point, for a terrible number of veterans, the distress was turned inwards to become an epidemic of suicide, which I know was paralleled in amongst the veterans of other nations that participated in the First World War, including Germany.

The Centenary itself is a moment in a continuum of understanding about the war, and the sense we have made of it will surely puzzle scholars and curators one hundred years from now. Tragedy must take a long journey.

For us, today, the post-Centenary museum landscape provides a critical opportunity for museums to lead re-thinking about war and its impacts, and to re-assess ideas of borders, divisions and conflicts, past and present. To quote Museums Victoria’s strategic vision, it is a time when we should all feel “compelled to act”.<sup>14</sup>

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13 See, for example, Larsson, M. (2009) *Shattered Anzacs: Living with the Scars of War*. Sydney: New South Wales Press; Damousi, J. (1999) *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Thomson, A. (2013) *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*. Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing.

14 *Museums Victoria’s Strategic Plan 2017–2025*. Melbourne: Museums Victoria, pp. 3, 5–6.