

**Cicatrix: the scar of a healed wound**  
**Opening, 30 August 2014, Young Gallery, Salisbury**

**Henny Burnett**  
**Susan Francis**  
**Prudence Maltby**

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I teach the First World War not as military or political history, but as a way of getting my students to think about how our perspectives on the past change over time and how the present makes itself felt in every rewriting of history. Like the scar of a healed wound, the past and present co-exist.

Each generation retells the story in its own way, and imagines its version to be the 'right' one. Thus we have

- A story of the glorious dead in 1919
- A story of hopes betrayed and a generation lost in the 1920s and 30s: a generation disappointed – where was the land fit for heroes? – and the looming threat of another war
- The Great War re-visited in the 1960s: a growing sense of its futility, and a new sense of betrayal: this was the generation which rediscovered Sassoon and Owen and which drew parallels between the First World War and the Vietnam War – another conflict which was supposed to have been 'over by Christmas'
- Remembering the last survivors in the 1980s and 1990s: more personal stories

Together, we look at Lutyens' first sketches for the Cenotaph, hastily drawn on a napkin, and at the black and white images of those first chilly remembrance Sundays.

We read the war poets – and the changing reactions to them – and extracts from more recent fiction – which now stand as a response and as testimony: it was only a little disconcerting that Sebastian Faulks should read from *Birdsong*, a book first published in 1993, at the candlelit service at Westminster Abbey on 4 August 2014.

My students watch *Oh what a lovely war* and *Blackadder*, and scrutinise both their portrayal of past events and their impact in their respective presents. And this year, of course, we have thought about commemoration and the different claims made of the past – by politicians and commentators, small community groups and schoolchildren, museums and local history societies, artists and performers.

A focus on the physical and visual record of the War underpins much of this work: the Imperial War Museum's new galleries contain 2000 objects of the period; across Wiltshire, as across the country as a whole, local groups have gone back to war memorials to research those listed there, trawling army papers, local record offices and the chance survivals within family archives to recapture and then retell increasingly distant stories. Many cherished

objects, or perhaps once forgotten ones, have found their way into exhibitions and displays; letters have been rediscovered and re-read; past lives re-imagined.

This exhibition, too, draws upon the historical record, specifically upon the traces left in or on Salisbury Plain and the multiple layers of meaning inscribed in the landscape. It reflects on the Great War and on other, more recent conflicts; and on the nature of evidence – left as a tiny doll, an enclosed space within an open one, a line in the earth and on paper.

There is a fierce honesty in this work – as Susan Francis puts it in the notes which accompany the exhibition, ‘we are destined to forever view through a glass darkly, observing but not experiencing, documenting but not inhabiting’. This is, at the same time, as powerful an assertion of the importance of contemporary art in interpreting past events as you are likely to find.

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