The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946

Claire Tylee

Adrian Gregory. *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919-1946*
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Adrian Gregory has produced a needed study of the role of public ritual in the construction of the English [ic] national memory of the Great War. Examining the discourse that informed that ritual and contributed to its complexity of meaning, Gregory confirms Jay Winter's thesis in *Sites of Memory*: the ritual, especially as viewed through the lens of popular culture, drew on and perpetuated traditional forms of mourning, notably through the use of "high diction", and was a conservative influence on inter-war society. In view of Benedict Anderson's influential *Imagined Communities,* this is not a surprising finding, though it is interesting to have it substantiated by an examination of the gradual development of the Armistice Day ceremonies. Nor are Gregory's conclusions unexpected: that the "high diction" which framed the memory and had its roots in Victorian ideology no longer carries its mystical freight: "the language which surrounds the ritual is dead" (227). Yet I would expect many Christians in particular to demur from his view that we can no longer hope to understand the "empty rhetoric" of sacrifice, especially the idea of sacrifice as making sense of redemptive suffering, that comforted the bereaved. Readers may judge Gregory's arguments to be limited in other ways, too.

This book is one of the series edited by Jay Winter (and sponsored by the Historical de la grande guerre Peronne-Somme): *"The Legacy of the Great War"*. One of its major characteristics is shared with other titles in the series. I am referring to its archaic androcentricity. This is displayed both in the development of Gregory's argument and in the bias in the texts which he has consulted to support that argument. Out of forty-two primary sources cited in his bibliography, apart from two Mass Observation collections, only six concern the responses of women—so that Vera Brittain, Mrs Milburn and Naomi Mitchison must carry the weight of women's memory by contrast with a list of men including Asquith, Carrington, Clifford, Churchill, Graves, Haworth, Jarché, Lauder, Muggeridge, Read, Sheppard, Sassoon, Sherriff, Short, Street and A.J.P. Taylor. The bias demonstrated by the Secondary Works is even more marked. Despite the acknowledgement in a footnote that "The growth of feminist criticism has begun to make commentators on this subject more sensitive to the inherent gender bias of the 'myth of war experience'", the only text cited to indicate the development of gender awareness is by Michael C. C. Adams, and concerns *Male Desire* (143fn8). Out of over 175 secondary works, I calculate that only five are authored by women. Two of these (by Pat

Jalland and Anne Summers) could be considered feminist. No mention is made of significant feminist theorists such as Cynthia Enloe, or of revisionary histories by such eminent American professors as Gilbert and Gubar or Jane Marcus, let alone of critical anthologies such as *Behind the Lines, Arms and the Woman, Gendering War Talk* or *Women and World War 1: The Written Response,* or of the countless articles in learned journals—even to rebut them.

Some awareness of such feminist work might have alerted Gregory to the partiality in his approach which seriously undermines the force of his detailed analysis and his overall argument. His own gender bias is exemplified in such errors as documenting the experience of 'parental bereavement' only by fathers: Herbert Asquith, Bonar Law, Harry Lauder, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle (22-3), implying—without a second glance at Freud—that only men's ambitions would be thwarted at the death of a son. This is particularly odd since much of Gregory's evidence concerns the preponderance of women at Armistice Day celebrations. His surprise at that might have been lessened by a reflection on the likely scarcity of grieving widowers or fiancés as a result of the war (and he constantly writes "fiancés" when I suppose he means "fiancées") and the demographic fact that women lived longer than men so that there were likely to be more surviving mothers than fathers. What would have been intersting would have been further consideration (perhaps in the light of other government policies directed at women) of why official ceremonies "targeted" women rather than men as representative mourners, whilst relegating than to an unmoving and silent role in the proceedings. Why did (many) women accept this?

Furthermore, whilst recognising that civilians might be women or men, Gregory constantly assumes that ex-servicepeople would have been men. Despite quotations that indicate that nurses and other women had been awarded medals (40) and that the British Legion represented "the severely incapacitated or disabled ex-servicemen and women" (54), in the immediately following sentence Gregory speaks only of disabled service*men*. Women were not, as he says, "of the wrong sex to have served" (114) but of the wrong sex to have been conscripted. One of the innovatory aspects of the Great War was that women served their country in countless ways—as men did—sometimes in danger and under fire. Has Gregory not heard of the WAAFs and the WRENs, not to mention the VADs or the personnel of the Scottish Women's Hospital Units? He does quote from May Cannan's

poetry; she served in Intelligence work. And after all, not all male veterans of that war had been combatants in it: Field Marshall Haig is not noted for his trench experience or exploits in No Man's Land. I waited in vain for some discussion of the controversy concerning war memorials figuring women—such as the one commemorating Edith Cavell near Trafalgar Square or the sculpture of Dr Elsie Inglis—and of what happened to women's names, when naming was so important to acknowledging grief. Gregory's silencing of women's voices, his erasing of them from memory, is all the more ironic in view of his title.

Finally, I would point out the limitations of concentrating on monumental war-memorials and official ceremonies when trying to understand how the past is popularly recalled. Leicester, for instance, commemorated its war dead not only by erecting a Lutyens cenotaph, but also by founding—in the building which had been a military hospital—the college that became Leicester University. After the next war, I attended English tutorials in the wooden block that had been thrown up to house the nurses who had tended my own grandfather when he was demobbed, sick, after four years in Flanders. Yet the annual ritual of remembrance takes place not at the University but at the cenotaph.

That war memorial is also the site for the unofficial candlelit peace vigils which have protested—silently—against later wars.

-University of North London