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Landscape and emotion in modern First World War cinema: Representations of the British soldier in nature

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ABSTRACT
This article examines landscape representations in twenty first century First World War cinema. Spanning 2011's War Horse and ten subsequent British and American productions, it demonstrates the appeal to filmmakers of not only dramatizing the First World War generally, but dramatizing the Western Front landscape in varied ways. While intentions no doubt vary, these choices reflect discussions in British soldiers' written accounts of the emotional connections these men felt with particular spaces. The article is structured under three themes, 'Nostalgia', 'Endurance', and 'Memory', and concludes that such cinematic scenes powerfully visualise the role war landscapes played as a coping mechanism for soldiers.

Introduction

> 'Surely it is One of the Compensations of this War to be Able to Recall Beautiful, Inspiring Things.'[1]

First World War cinema in Britain has a history stretching back to the very events themselves, with newsreels, and films such as *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) reaching a wide public audience.[2] The twenty first-century has seen the war continue to hold a place in popular memory, with several British and Hollywood-made films depicting British experiences released since 2011, the debut year of the film *War Horse*. While

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[1]Imperial War Museum (hereinafter IWM), private papers, Documents 11906, Captain A. McCormick Memoir, p. 46.

[2]Michael Paris, 'Film/Cinema (Great Britain)', https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/filmcinema_great_britain. Accessed 19 January 2024.

these productions vary in their particular construction – whether a 'traditional' take following a group of soldiers; a wartime or inter-war biopic; or other – the majority of them employ the visual language of the Western Front trenches and no man's land which has become so embedded in popular memory. However, filmmakers' immersion of their characters into war landscapes – echoing the sensory experience of combatants – goes beyond scenes of devastation. The films examined in this article provide, to differing extents, nuances in imaginings of the Western Front, from vistas of 'unspoilt' countryside, to the transmission of memory via flora taken from the landscape. These scenes resonate with experiences of British servicemen, who described their surroundings in diaries and memoirs, and engaged in activities such as bird-watching, gardening, collecting flowers, and painting.

The question of whether nature at the front provided emotional support to soldiers during the First World War has been underexplored, in contrast to the impact on morale of letters from home, food, and the support of comrades, which have all been closely studied.[3] While important environmental studies of the British and global war experience have been published in recent years, they predominantly interrogate aspects such as the operational difficulties posed by particular terrain, and the mining of home landscapes for natural resources.[4] Exceptions which have examined the connections between emotion and war landscapes include Natasha Silk's book chapter on the relationship between soldiers and their 'sacred' spaces of the Western Front; Alex Mayhew's article on the allotment culture and vegetable shows of Le Havre; and John Lewis-Stempel's trade history book on nature and the British First World War serviceman.[5] Cultural histories which explore war cinema and period drama have also examined important facets including popular memory, masculinity, and medicine.[6]

[3]Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

[4]Selena Daly, Martina Salvante, Vanda Wilcox (eds), *Landscapes of the First World War*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Tait Keller, J. R. McNeill, Martin Schmid, Richard P. Tucker (eds), *Environmental Histories of the First World War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[5]Natasha Silk, 'Some Corner of a Field That is Forever England: The Western Front as the British Soldiers' Sacred Land' in Alan Beyerchen, Emre Sencer (eds) *Expeditionary Forces in the First World War*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2019); Alex Mayhew, 'British Expeditionary Force Vegetable Shows, Allotment Culture, and Life Behind the Lines During the Great War', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 64, Iss. 5, (December, 2021), pp. 1355-1378; John Lewis-Stempel, *Where Poppies Blow: The British Soldier, Nature, The Great War*, (London: W&N, 2017).

[6]Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Jessica Meyer,

However, there is arguably room for discussion on war landscapes as (re)imagined by filmmakers.

This article centres on two interlinking arguments. Firstly, that more attention should be paid to the nuanced ways in which modern First World War cinema employs war environments, offering interpretations on landscape, emotion, and memory while still dramatising the familiar concepts of the trenches and no man's land. Secondly, that British soldiers used war landscapes and the recreational activities they undertook within them as a coping mechanism during their service, thus broadening Michael Roper's concept of men's 'emotional survival'.[7] Soldiers' diaries and memoirs are cited to demonstrate the resonances between their writings and war cinema. The parameters of the article are as follows. Eleven British and Hollywood First World War films have been examined, both studio and independent – all focused on British characters – which fall under the category of war film or biopic respectively:[8]

- *War Horse* (2011)
- *Private Peaceful* (2012)
- *Testament of Youth* (2014)
- *Goodbye Christopher Robin* (2017)
- *Journey's End* (2017)
- *The Burying Party* (2018)
- *1917* (2019)
- *Tolkien* (2019)
- *Benediction* (2021)

'Matthew's Legs and Thomas's Hand: Watching Downton Abbey as a First World War Historian', *Journal of British Cinema and Television,* Vol. 16, Iss. 1, (January, 2019); Julie Anne Taddeo, 'The War is Done. Shut the Door on it!: The Great War, Masculinity and Trauma in British Period Television' in Katherine Byrne, James Leggott, Julie Anne Taddeo (eds) *Conflicting Masculinities: Men in Television Period Drama*, (Bloomsbury: London, p.b. edition 2020), pp. 165-186; Claire O'Callaghan, 'Pride Versus Prejudice: Wounded Men, Masculinity and Disability in Downton Abbey' in Katherine Byrne, James Leggott, Julie Anne Taddeo (eds) *Conflicting Masculinities: Men in Television Period Drama*, (Bloomsbury: London, p.b. edn 2020), pp. 187-205.

[7]Roper, *The Secret Battle*.

[8]For the purposes of this article, the author has taken the succinct definition of war film by the Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies:

'An enduring, varied, international genre showing scenes of war. Home-front dramas, veteran films, service comedies, basic training films, documentaries, prisoner-of-war movies, and partisan films may all be regarded as war films.' Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies,* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2020 2nd edn.), n.p. Oxford Reference online version.

- *The Laureate* (2021)
- *The War Below* (2021)

Television war dramas and films in alternative genres, such as DC's *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *The King's Man* (2021), a prequel to the spy-comedy *Kingsman* films, are not included in this particular study. This is due in part to the volume of televisual productions, and to the article's intention to draw connections between war film depictions and the experiences of real-life soldiers, as documented or recalled in their personal writings.[9] The latter two examples also differ in intention. Rather than seeking to present a 'realistic' portrayal, their primary objective is entertainment, with *Wonder Woman*'s superhero action, and *The King's Man*'s narrative of a mysterious organisation engineering the 'War to End All Wars'. While there are many examples of international First World War films, these also do not feature – with the exception of the German-made *All Quiet on the Western Front* (2022) – given the article's focus on British soldiers' connections with war landscapes. With the Western Front setting of these films, the majority of the archival material discussed pertains to experiences in Belgium and France.

The article begins with a discussion of nostalgia and the war landscape, examining servicemen's compulsion to compare spaces at the front with those of home, and to 're-enact' activities such as collecting and displaying flowers. This is followed by a section on endurance, particularly the ideas of finding beauty in unlikely places, and feeling inspired by flora and fauna witnessed at the front. The final section explores cinematic depictions of landscape as memory, including soldiers' concerns that the 'renewal' of nature would result in an erasure of their experiences; the idea of the countryside as a refuge following the war; and the meaning imbued in objects such as the violets Roland Leighton collected at the front for his fiancée Vera Brittain.

Nostalgia

1917 (2019) is a film which attracted considerable media and awards attention for the intensity and immediacy of its cinematographic style.[10] One of its standout scenes sees

[9]The many examples of twenty first century First World War television period dramas include 'prestige' dramas such as *Birdsong* (2012), and *Parade's End* (2012); productions centred on alternative voices to soldiers including women, and men who were unable or unwilling to serve – *The Crimson Field* (2014*), Lady Chatterley's Lover* (2015 and 2022), *Chickens* (2013); and series encompassing a longer period of twentieth century history which dedicated most or all of a season to depicting the impact of the war – *Downton Abbey* (2011), *Mr Selfridge* (2014).

[10]Mark Kermode, '1917 Review – Sam Mendes's Unblinking Vision of the Hell of War', https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jan/12/1917-review-sam-mendes-first-world-war-ww1-unblinking-vision-one-shot. Accessed 19 January 2024; BBC News,

protagonist Will Schofield sprinting, and stumbling, across French countryside as a company of the Devons launch an attack, and explosions rock the landscape. However, despite the film's focus on the frenzy and exhaustion of close combat and navigating the Western Front, there are quieter moments which too have resonances with the experiences of British First World War soldiers. A poignant scene sees Schofield and Tom Blake – who are tasked with journeying to the 2 Devons' position to urge them to halt their planned attack – enter the remnants of a garden or orchard. Imaginably once a tranquil space for a French family, it is now a pitiable sight of broken stone walls and damaged cherry blossom trees. The purpose of this scene is revealed in its opening dialogue, as Schofield exclaims 'Jesus. They chopped them all down.' His immediate reaction to the cherry trees is a metaphor for the soldiers slain during the First World War, but Blake's response is arguably more interesting. After remarking 'Cherries,' Blake moves closer to the trees and touches some of their buds, pondering the species out loud. Here, Blake demonstrates a horticultural knowledge built during his civilian life in Britain. As the conversation continues, the viewer is provided with the context: 'Why on earth would you know this?' 'Mum's got an orchard back home. Only a few trees. This time of year, it looks like it's been snowing. Blossom everywhere. And then in May, we have to pick them. Me and Joe [his brother]. Takes the whole day.'

This scene provides Blake with an opportunity to discuss his pre-war life, but its most meaningful resonance is the nostalgia garnered for a domestic landscape dear to him. First World War servicemen's diaries and memoirs include descriptions of encountering particular war landscapes and comparing and contrasting them with British environments. As with Tom Blake in *1917*, Denis Alfred Jex Buxton encountered a space which reminded him of his garden back home. Buxton, a private in the 88 Field Ambulance serving in Gallipoli, recorded his thoughts of a visit to a Regimental Aid Post in tranquil surroundings on Wednesday, 5 May 1915: 'It is a lovely spot, the mound dotted with almonds, figs and olives, and covered with purple vetch, poppies, grass, etc, and great big white leaved thistles, like those we had in the garden at Chigwell.'[11] For Private Jack A. Gunn, of 1/8 Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Somme of summer 1915 represented both the unknown and the familiar. He recorded that its valley bore 'a striking resemblance to the chalk Downs of Kent,' with its white roads 'winding over undulating country, woods and cornfields, farmhouses and orchards.' Yet Gunn observed that the setting was subtly different to English soil, with its sun-soaked fig trees and numerous walnut trees lining the country

'Baftas 2020: Sam Mendes Film 1917 Dominates Awards', https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-51324805. Accessed 19 January 2024.

[11]IWM, private papers, Documents 797, 2nd Lieutenant D. A. J. Buxton RAF Diary (1915), pp. 41–42.

roads.[12] Private T. S. Williams also commented on the Somme landscape in 1915 (November), specifically Buigny l'Abbé. He recalled 'It is hard to believe that after months of hard training we are at last in France. The surrounding countryside might well be taken for a typical English scene. It is a rather flat, undulating landscape covered with a patch-work pattern of fields.'[13] Yet not unlike Gunn, Williams – who served in 19 Battalion of the King's (Liverpool Regiment), a 'Pals' battalion' – observed landscape features which stood out as marks of difference; he wrote that sights including elongated avenues of trees and 'sunken grass-grown lanes' reminded him he was far from the 'open chalkland country of Salisbury Plain' where he had undertaken his training.[14] In 2019, it was the actors and crew members of *1917* who converged on the Plain to film key sequences, including the opening scenes featuring treescapes and chalk trenches.[15]

In contrast to Buxton, Gunn, and Williams's nostalgia being prompted by tranquil landscapes, it is no man's land which sparks a particular memory for the protagonist of *War Horse* (2011). During this scene, Albert 'Albie' Narracott – whose connection with his horse Joey is the thread of the film – is in conversation with his friend Andrew Easton, from back home in Devon, while preparing to go 'over the top'. He remarks 'You know what it reminds me of out there? That bloody impossible lower field the day me and Joey ploughed it. Best day of my life, that was, and you were there. And this here is the worst day of my life about to begin and you're here cheering me on.' Pre-attack anxiety led Albie to recall a time when he faced what appeared to be an impossible challenge, and succeeded, with his reminiscence of choice perhaps also an attempt to lessen the terror of the battlefield by comparing it to familiar ground.

Beyond war environments specifically inspiring recollections of British landscapes, First World War cinema also generally portrays characters reminiscing about their pre-war lives. In *Journey's End* (2017), the 'uncle' of the film's central group of soldiers, Lieutenant Osborne, is tasked with leading a raid with Second Lieutenant Raleigh, a young officer newly arrived on the Western Front. Osborne's attempts to distract Raleigh, and presumably himself, from the impending raid led to a discussion on a setting they both have ties to, the New Forest,

[12]IWM private papers, Documents 15990, J. A. Gunn Pamphlet 'The Bivouac Botanist' (1915), p. 1.
[13]IWM private papers, Documents 5033, Essays on Nature Between the Battle Zones During World War One 'Bird Life in a French Orchard Behind the Lines' (1929), p. 1.
[14]IWM, private papers, Documents 5033, Essays on Nature Between the Battle Zones During World War One 'Bird Life in a French Orchard Behind the Lines' (1929), p. 1.
[15]James Medd, 'Where was '1917' filmed?' https://www.cntraveller.com/gallery/where-was-1917-filmed. Accessed 29 February 2024.

> Osborne: You know the New Forest?
> Raleigh: My home's there. Allum Green. It's just outside Lyndhurst.
> Osborne: I know Lyndhurst. I used to walk through the forest with my rucksack and sandwiches. I like it better than any place I know.
> Raleigh: Stanhope and my sister and I would spend days and days walking the forest. You should come stay with us sometime.
> Osborne: Yes, I should like that very much.[16]

Osborne also talks about his home in Sussex, with these conversations on the beauty of British landscapes reminiscent of propaganda which called on men to fight for 'their' countryside.[17] The depth of Osborne and Raleigh's conversation is arguably a testament to the continuing importance of their domestic masculine identities. It also has a further emotional pull given Osborne's death during the raid. In the Wilfred Owen biopic *The Burying Party* (2018), Owen and Siegfried Sassoon – while at Craiglockhart War Hospital – discuss a nostalgic poem Owen has written, which includes the lines: 'What gentle light emerges 'cross the down above Broxton's pale and pretty spires […]'. According to Guy Cuthbertson, the Cheshire village of Broxton inspired Owen's vocation as a poet when he holidayed there with his mother in the early 1900s.[18] In the same scene in *The Burying Party*, Sassoon – who had enjoyed a privileged upbringing in rural Kent and was a patient at Craiglockhart following his 'Declaration' against the war – critiques Owen's poem, with the dialogue containing prejudicial class-based sentiments:

> These hostile climbs bid me now remember the simple hues of homely English spring. It's just a bit… I mean is that actually how you felt over there? Face down in French mud alongside the mental defectives of the Manchester Regiment? You were thinking, golly gosh, can't wait to get back to the simple hues and pretty spires of good old Blighty?

The conversation continues

> Owen: Well I'll confess to missing a solid pint of pale ale. [laughs] But the rest, I see your point.

[16] *Journey's End*, directed by Saul Dibb (2017, Lionsgate).
[17] Keith Grieves and Jenifer White, 'Useful War Memorials, Landscape Preservation and Public Access to the English Countryside: Fitting Tributes to the Fallen of the Great War', *Garden History*, Vol. 42, Supplement 1, (autumn 2014), p. 19.
[18] Guy Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 20.

> Sassoon: There's no need to rewrite Keats. It isn't bad. It just needs a bit of steel. And a bit more goddamned outrage. And a bit less of the old pro patria mori.[19]

This scene is the film's take on a central part of the story of Sassoon and Owen's friendship – Sassoon's influence on Owen's anti-war poetry, or as Owen himself termed it, poetry on the 'pity of war.'[20] While literary analyses are beyond the scope of this article, there are of course important connections between soldier-poets' experiences of war landscapes and the resulting creative expression.

The films *1917*, *Journey's End*, and *Birdsong* (2012) all feature officer characters who attempt to mask their emotions.[21] Captain Stanhope is horrified when Raleigh, a friend from home, shows up at his dugout because he fears Raleigh's sister Margaret – Stanhope's sweetheart – will find out how 'shot' he is. Stanhope uses alcohol as an emotional crutch, and the only person he finds himself able to open up to is Osborne. Another theme linked to pre-war domesticity which is again evident in First World War cinema and wartime diaries and memoirs are soldiers 're-enacting' familiar activities. In *The War Below* (2021), a dramatisation of the Messines tunnelling operation, Colonel 'Hellfire Jack' Northon-Griffiths initiates a cricket match to boost his men's morale prior to the final stages of their mission. He gathers them all in a countryside setting and remarks 'All right chaps. Bit of R and R before the final push. Haven't got the time for a week in Bognor, so, um… this'll have to suffice.' William Hawkin, one of the working-class miners, responds 'Think we're more the football type, sir.' The cricket match is short-lived, with one of the men, Charlie, distressed by a letter from home he receives during the scene. Sports were only one variety of recreation that servicemen enjoyed in war landscapes. Others included bird-watching, gardening, and collecting flowers to display or send home. Denis Buxton sent a piece of 'real Greek thyme' to his mother from Gallipoli.[22] While Corporal Reginald H. Bryan collected flowers from a wood near the French villages of Belloy en-Santerre and Barleux',

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[19]*The Burying Party*, directed by Richard Weston (2018, Sine Wave Media).

[20]Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* (1991) and the 1997 film adaptation also explore Owen and Sassoon's time at Craiglockhart.

[21]Sebastian Faulks's novel *Birdsong* (1993) was adapted into a two-part BBC series.

[22]IWM private papers, Documents 797, 2nd Lieutenant D. A. J. Buxton RAF Letter to Mother (2 August 1915), p. 95. As Nigel Steel noted, the diary the serviceman's father sent to him to document his war experiences echoed a family tradition of maintaining naturalist journals; IWM private papers, Documents 797, 2nd Lieutenant D. A. J. Buxton RAF 'The Gallipoli Diary and 1914-15 Letters of Denis Alfred Jex Buxton (1895-1965)', np.

> One afternoon at the end of April 1917 I went to a wood which had been destroyed by guns and had the surprise of my life. The trees had without exception been splintered to smithereens and the ground was strewed with wreckage and broken branches, but I also found that the wood was covered with a mass of yellow wild-flowers, oxslips and cowslips. Elsewhere there was not a sign of a flower but here they were growing in thousands. I was delighted with my find and gathered some and sent a box of them home to Mother.[23]

These instances demonstrate not only the importance of the maternal relationship to British soldiers, as Michael Roper has argued, but also the emotional comfort which could be derived from war landscapes.[24] In her memoir *Testament of Youth* (1933), Vera Brittain describes receiving violets her fiancée Roland had picked in France. In a creative interpretation in the film (2014), Brittain discovers the violets, and Leighton's poem about them, after his death, in his kit, which has been sent to his family. At the moment of Brittain's discovery, the viewer sees Leighton walking through a wood and picking the flowers, his face expressive as he contemplates the violets and then looks up to the sky before walking away. But there is also an edge to the scene, with Leighton having picked the violets from around a dead body. During the scene, Leighton is heard reading his poem *Villanell*e, also known as *Violets*,

> Violets from Plug Street Wood---
> Sweet, I send you oversea.
> (It is strange they should be blue,
> Blue when his soaked blood was red;
> For they grew around his head.
> It is strange they should be blue.)
> Violets from Plug Street Wood---
> Think what they have meant to me!
> Life and Hope and Love and You.
> (And you did not see them grow
> Where his mangled body lay,
> Hiding horror from the day.
> Sweetest, it was better so.)
> Violets from oversea,
> To your dear, far, forgetting land:
> These I send in memory,
> Knowing You will understand.[25]

[23]IWM private papers, Documents 13953, R. H. Bryan Memoir (c. 1920s-1930s), p. 46.
[24]Roper, *The Secret Battle*.
[25]The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, 'Vilanelle' [sic], http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4071. Accessed 19 January 2024.

'Plug Street Wood' was a nickname of British soldiers for Ploegsteert Wood in Wallonia, Belgium, where Leighton picked his violets. *Villanelle* encapsulates several themes including death, memory, and nostalgia for a loved one (who inspires their creativity). The poem also resonates with a topic which will be discussed later in this article, the idea of soldiers finding beauty among horror.

Captain A. McCormick embarked on a daily ritual of collecting and displaying flowers to brighten his surroundings. He wrote 'Most folks who served in France learned to have a great appreciation of the wild flowers which did so much to brighten the arid wastes left in the trail of war. Each evening I used to bring in a different kind of wild flower – dandelions, cornflowers, poppies – to grace our evening meal.'[26] The attention McCormick gave to this practice is evident in his complaints about a perceived lack of appreciation by his fellow officers, and the army cooks' arrangements of his flowers.[27] In another anecdote, the serviceman's civilian and martial masculine identities are visually interlinked as he arranges a 'bowl of emblematic Scottish flowers'; a display of French thistles wrapped in the tartan paper from a box of shortbread he had received from Scotland.[28]

Other soldiers created, and tended to, their own gardens despite the fact these could only ever be temporary endeavours. When Lieutenant A. Ashurst Morris was due to move between sectors in Flanders, his thoughts turned to the garden he had worked on: 'I had finished our garden. Just as the seeds are starting, and the nasturtiums are really going fine. Anyway, the fortune of war.'[29] This sense of resignation suggests Morris was emotionally invested in the activity. While not a dramatisation of gardening at the front, *Journey's End* includes a scene where Osborne speaks of working on his garden while home on leave. Following a question from Stanhope about whether he went to see any shows, Osborne responds 'Uh, well, wish I had now. Spent all of my time in the garden working on the rockery [laughs].' After Stanhope comments 'Your wife must have been thrilled,' Osborne remarks 'Well, Joan and I and the boys pretended there wasn't a war on. It was great.'

Endurance

Beyond a sense of nostalgia, war landscapes could also elicit feelings of inspiration, and the desire to endure. *Testament of Youth* (2014) encapsulates these emotions through the figure of Geoffrey Thurlow, one of the four loved ones of Vera Brittain killed

[26]IWM private papers, Documents 11906, Captain A. McCormick Memoir, p. 216.
[27]Ibid., p. 216.
[28]Ibid., pp. 217–218.
[29] IWM private papers, Documents 14134, Lieutenant A. A. Morris Diary (1915-1917), p. 47.

during the First World War. The scene is framed around Vera and her brother Edward, who is being treated in hospital. Edward reads a letter from Geoffrey which Vera found in his pocket, with Geoffrey's voice taking over from Edward's:

> We walked back to the barracks last night, all of us thoroughly exhausted. It was a scene of devastation, and yet, as I looked at it, a strange feeling came over me. The setting sun had lit up the water in the shell holes, so they looked like pools of gold. And I felt a presence there, greater than all this. Such… peace, Edward. And I thought of you, dear friend. And I knew I'd see you again, either in this world or the hereafter.

During the reading, the viewer sees Geoffrey marching in a line of soldiers. He takes off his helmet, stops, and stares at this scene of beauty witnessed in a devastated landscape of shell holes and damaged trees. In Geoffrey's words, this moment is not just a comfort at a time of physical and perhaps emotional exhaustion, but a religious experience, a sensing of the numinous in the landscape. T. S. Williams' interwar writings display a similar ability to find beauty in unlikely places. He wrote

> Looking back on the varied experiences of trench life on the western front it may seem strange to think that some of us still treasure one or two really pleasant associations with no man's land. Who, for, instance, can forget the red glow of early dawn over the enemy's lines and the larks singing in the morning sunlight? Men in mud-stained uniforms of Kahaki [sic], field-grey and horizon-blue listened with never-failing wonder to those sweet notes.[30]

While Captain A. McCormick recalled, 'surely it is one of the compensations of this war to be able to recall beautiful, inspiring things, and even the recalling of pathetic and tragic things has a great value if the setting down of such can in any degree help to prevent a recurrence of the harrowing things described.'[31] L. Williams's description of a contrasting landscape has a darker edge to it: 'Gorgeous were the poppies that decked the untilled fields of Picardy, torn up by giant shells, stained with poison gas and reeking with the smell of the putrefying flesh of unburied horses, mules and men.'[32] Williams's juxtaposition of the poppies with the scent of death indicates that he felt their beauty was tainted.

The idea of animals inspiring endurance in First World War soldiers is nodded at in *The Laureate* (2021) and is explored in detail in *War Horse*. *The Laureate*, a Robert

[30]IWM, private papers, Documents 5033, Essays on Nature Between the Battle Zones During World War One 'Nature Notes from No Man's Land' (1929), p. 1.
[31]IWM, private papers, Documents 11906, Captain A. McCormick Memoir, p. 46.
[32]IWM, private papers, Documents 24249, L. Williams Memoir (1915-1918), p. 16.

Graves biopic, includes an early scene of Graves pruning in his garden when he hears the song of a nightingale. Calling over his daughter Catherine and conversing with her about the bird, Graves – who has been struggling with his poetry – remarks 'You know, if a nightingale can sing on a chilly autumn morning as passionately and as sweetly as it does on a night in May …. then there is hope for me yet.' While it is not nature which ultimately inspires Graves's creativity but the arrival in his life of Laura Riding, in *War Horse* Albie's horse Joey becomes a symbol of endurance for several soldiers. When Joey is ensnared in wire in no man's land, both a British soldier, Colin, and a German soldier, Peter, attempt to free him, and are successful. Peter gifts Colin a pair of wire cutters, with the British soldier replying 'Thanks. I'll use them back in the garden in South Shields.' This nonchalant mention of South Shields reminds the viewer that Colin, who they have only seen as a soldier, had a civilian life before the war, and serves as a contrast to Albie's Devon, highlighting the service of men across Britain and perhaps attempting to draw a universality in their war experiences. As Colin leads Joey away, Peter says 'Remarkable. A remarkable horse!' Colin is also inspired by Joey. After returning to the British lines, he pleads with a doctor to treat the horse, saying 'Please, sir, this horse can pull through anything!' Continuing his efforts despite the doctor's refusal, Colin says later in the scene 'He was alive, you see, sir, where nothing survives. So to me and my mates, to the men, sir, he's… well, we have high hopes for him.' Following the reunion of Albie and Joey – Albie was being treated for gas injuries nearby and heard talk of a 'miracle' horse – the doctor changes his mind and assures Albie that Joey will be treated like the soldier he is.

British servicemen's writings also discuss the impact on their emotions of inhabiting tranquil green spaces directly after serving in less appealing environments. Ornithologist Captain Collingwood Ingram's diary includes this entry for Wednesday, 18 September 1918, from St-André,

> The last two days I have spent in the war-stricken area, which now stretches in an ever widening belt of desolation, a broadening scar across the fair face of France. This is a country of weeds and graves, of shell-splintered trees, littered everywhere with the ugly debris of battle. Returning to the pleasant valleys and the peaceful cultivated fields was like waking from a horrible nightmare – or the satiating of an aesthetic thirst that had become well-nigh intolerable.[33]

This sense of relief is also evident in a passage by L. Williams,

> On the opposite side of the river the aspect of the country changed because so far it had been little damaged by war and only here and there one saw a freshly

[33]Ernest Pollard and Hazel Strouts (eds), *Wings Over the Western Front*, (Charlbury: Day Books,2014), pp. 224–225.

> made shell hole. It was good to look on the green fields and woods for they made a pleasant change to the devastated country in which we had for so long been fighting.'[34]

Contrasts in war landscape aesthetics have been employed by the makers of First World War films. In an interview with the author, Edward Berger – director of the German adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* – described using idyllic landscape scenes to provide the viewer with relief from the intense battle depictions, as well as to portray a sense of 'the beauty of what we are destroying'.[35] *1917* also uses this technique in striking ways. The film begins and ends with scenes of tranquil countryside, both featuring Will Schofield sitting upright against a tree. In the first, Schofield is at rest with his eyes closed, in the second an exhausted Schofield has completed his mission, and informed Tom Blake's brother of his death. Having walked to a tree, Schofield places one hand on it before sitting and resting his head against the trunk. In a moment of vulnerability for the guarded officer, he opens a box containing photographs of, presumably, his wife and two daughters. While the film ends without a clear resolution for Schofield, shortly after he examines the photographs, the dialogue from the earlier cherry blossom scene suggests a renewal of nature and, if we continue the metaphor of the trees being the soldiers killed, better times to come for humanity. Schofield asks Blake 'So, these ones all goners?' With Blake replying 'Oh no. They'll grow again when the stones rot. You'll end up with more trees than before.' The idea of the renewal of nature at the front was discussed by British servicemen in their diaries and memoirs. In October 1918, Ingram described visiting Bourlon Wood and Hill 80 with comrades,

> The former has been a very hotly contested spot and has been won and lost on many occasions, but finally fell into our hands a week or so ago. The fresh splintered gashes in the trees, the crumbling brown earth of the shell craters and finally a row of khaki-clad corpses awaiting internment, all bore evidence of very recent strife. And yet this wood was still alive and sufficiently leafy to harbour a jay, and it certainly did not present that gaunt, blighted aspect of the woods of last year's battlefields.[36]

Bryan voiced similar sentiments in a passage describing a warm June day: 'Nature too was trying to cover up the effects of war – the damaged trees were all trying to cover

[34]IWM private papers, Documents 24249, L. Williams Memoir (1915-1918), p. 60.
[35]Bethany Wyatt, 'All Quiet on the Western Front Inspiration: As Remarque Said, War is Not an Adventure. There's Nothing Glorious About it', https://www.historyextra.com/membership/all-quiet-western-front-adaptation-inspiration-creation/. Accessed 19 January 2024.
[36]Pollard and Strouts (eds), *Wings Over the Western Front*, p. 227.

up their wounds by sprouting green leaves.'[37] Here Bryan uses the military language of 'wounding' to describe nature as suffering at the hands of the war, and his phrase 'Nature too' suggests he was perhaps also thinking of his and his comrades' efforts to endure. However, as discussed in the next section, not all servicemen were heartened by the prospect of a transformation of the war's landscapes.

Memory

The final section of this article examines more closely the connections between memory and war landscapes as represented in First World War cinema. *Goodbye Christopher Robin* (2017) – the biopic of Winnie-the-Pooh author A. A. Milne, and his son, Christopher Robin – contains a moment which evokes the anxiety that some soldiers felt about the future of Western Front landscapes. In a scene with Milne and Christopher Robin, E. H. Shepard – Milne's collaborator and illustrator on Winnie-the-Pooh – gazes at the idyllic countryside of the Ashdown Forest, East Sussex, and appears shaken. Milne asks his fellow ex-serviceman 'You all right, old man?' Shepard replies 'Those fields in France… they'll look like this now, won't they? As though it never happened.' Shephard's response is resonant of the soldiers who were concerned about the loss of specific martial landmarks, and the possibility these spaces and the actions undertaken within them would be forgotten. The serviceman and poet John Masefield once wrote,

> When the trenches are filled in, and the plough has gone over them, the ground will not long keep the look of war. One summer, with its flowers will cover most of the ruin that man can make, and then these places, from which the driving back of the enemy began, will be hard indeed to race, even with maps. […] In a few years' time, when this war is a romance in memory, the soldier looking for his battlefield will find his marks gone. Centre Way, Peel Trench, Munster Alley, and these other paths to glory will be deep under the corn, and gleaners will sing at Dead Mule Corner.[38]

An alternative view is voiced in soldier H. Harris's account of a pilgrimage he took to Gallipoli. The account includes a description of an area that retained military materiel such as rifles, bayonets, and water bottles, but was otherwise transformed,

> We alighted from the car about 400 yards from Krithia and explored the front line trenches and communications. They appeared to be untouched since they

[37]IWM private papers, Documents 13953, R. H. Bryan Memoir (c. 1920s-1930s), p. 51.
[38]John Masefield, *The Old Front Line,* (London: William Heinemann, 1917), p. 75, cited in Tim Godden, 'Memory, Landscape and the Architecture of the Imperial War Graves Commission', in Daly, Salvante, Wilcox (eds) *Landscapes of the First World War*, ed. by Daly and others, p. 195.

> were occupied in 1915, except that nature has endeavoured to obliterate the signs of war by a generous gift of lovely flowers and plants which grow both outside and inside the trenches.[39]

First World War films have also portrayed the memory transmitted between a person and an object. Of many examples, these have included a watch in *Private Peaceful* (2012), the military pennant of Albie's father in *War Horse*, and a woman's scarf which passes as a token from soldier to soldier in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, with each new wearer taking the scarf from the body of a fallen comrade. These objects have also included those taken from war landscapes. As previously discussed, Roland Leighton sent violets from the Western Front to Vera Brittain. In her memoir *Testament of Youth*, Brittain writes of having kept the crinkled and brown flowers.[40] A scene in the film adaptation conveys the powerful memories Brittain associated with these violets. The scene shows her (after the end of the war) in her room at Oxford University, taking a violet out of a tin and moving it between her fingers. Another violet can be seen outside of the tin. After a few moments, Brittain replaces the violet and pushes the tin away after shutting the lid. The viewer is then flooded with various sights including letters on the bed; Brittain experiencing nightmares; Brittain at the sea in the outfit she wore on what should have been her wedding day; Leighton at the front. Brittain's memoir includes another example of memory transmitted via a Western Front landscape. She describes the mud on her fiancé's kit, which was sent to his family following his death. In the film adaptation, Leighton's father buries the kit in the garden, in a ceremony speaking to the fact of Britain's policy of non-repatriation. The film also features a scene of Brittain, upon discovering the news of her brother Edward's death, running outdoors and sinking her feet, then her knees, and then her hands into the mud, pushing it between her palms before rubbing one hand along her face.

The cherry blossom symbolism of *1917* returns in a scene sometime after Tom Blake's death, with Will Schofield still attempting to reach the Devons' position and fulfil the pair's mission. After jumping into a river to escape an enemy soldier and having been informed by a French woman he met that he would reach his destination if he followed the river, Schofield is swept along, clinging on to a broken piece of a tree for support. The mood of the scene shifts from the frenzy of the current to a calmer progress, but with a sombre tone. Petals fall onto the water around Schofield, and as he becomes aware, he moves one hand through them, gasping, no doubt reminded of Blake and the cherry blossom trees they had walked among. Schofield quickly submerges his head and begins swimming, with cherry blossom trees coming into view on the banks.

[39]IWM private papers, Documents 9355, H. Harris Memoir (1936), p. 11.
[40]Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 2009, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009 edn), n.p. Amazon Kindle ebook.

The theme of nature and death entwined reaches an apex when Schofield's way is blocked by fallen trees, and numerous bodies which he has to climb over to reach the left bank. Stricken, Schofield falls on his knees and sobs, with his hands pressed in the earth, before continuing on his mission. The symbolism of cherry blossoms as representing the fleeting nature of life, but also renewal, has seen them appear in other First World War films. In *Testament of Youth*, Brittain's fellow student Winifred Holtby – who would become an important figure in her life – reminds her that they are all surrounded by ghosts and must learn to live with them. Holtby adds that spring is outside, waiting for her friend. Brittain looks out of the window, birds can be heard singing, and then the scene shifts outdoors, to a lawn and a cherry blossom tree. Brittain contemplates the tree and holds some of the blossoms in her hand, with the scene ending with her smiling. Cherry blossom also features in the Siegfried Sassoon biopic *Benediction* (2021). A conversation between Sassoon, and psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers, at Craiglockhart, concludes with the following dialogue,

> Rivers: Are you searching for truth?
> Sassoon: Isn't everyone?
> Rivers: And if you find it, what then?
> Sassoon: [Inhales sharply] Peace of mind, contentment. No longer yearning for what's been lost.

His face working with emotion, the camera then moves from Sassoon to a window, then to a view of a cherry blossom tree. A song, *A Shropshire Lad: Loveliest of Trees*, accompanies further lingering shots of this cherry tree, and others.[41] The music continues as the viewer sees Sassoon sitting at a window, then hears a knock at his door and his answer, with the music only stopping as Wilfred Owen enters and asks 'Lieutenant Sassoon?'

A further theme of memory and landscape presented in cinema, and soldiers' writings is the idea of the countryside as a refuge following the upheaval of the First World War. From the beginning of *Goodbye Christopher Robin*, the impact of the war on Milne is evident, with him experiencing flashbacks at noises such as theatre lights being turned on, and a champagne cork popping. Milne confides in Shepard that he had 'been thinking of moving down to the countryside where it's peaceful and quiet.' In a later conversation with Shepard, and Milne's wife Daphne, the matter comes to a head. Milne voices his disquiet about the purpose of the war, and his perception that others are pretending nothing happened, as well as a feeling of inadequacy that he is doing nothing about it. He adds 'Nothing has changed. Don't you see? If nothing changes, then the same thing will happen all over again. I need to get out of London.' Daphne mistakenly believes her husband is referring to a day out, but he states he wants to

[41] Composed by George Butterworth, words from a poem by A. E. Housman.

leave 'for good. I'm talking about going somewhere quiet and decent and trying to think for once. Do something worthwhile.' Milne and his family do make the move to Ashdown Forest, where the writer initially works on a pacifist tome, but through time spent with his son, and Shepard, in the outdoors, the Hundred Acre Wood is born. Reflecting on those days with Christopher some years later – following Christopher's return from the Second World War, when he was missing presumed dead – Milne says 'Those days, just the two of us… they were the happiest I've ever known. After the worst I've ever known.' For Milne, their life in the countryside, however fraught with the impact of Winnie-the-Pooh's success on Christopher's childhood, gave him a renewed happiness following the ordeals of his war experiences.

The Laureate presents Robert Graves as another writer who sought to build a new life in the countryside. Following the title card, the film shifts to a green field, and the words 'Islip, Oxfordshire 1928' appear. A narration by Graves goes: 'I'd thought of a cottage in the hills …. a cottage full of books, pictures and brass and …. cosy nooks. Flowers in the garden …. walls all white. I'd live there peacefully and dream …. and write.'[42]

The dramatizations of Robert Graves in *The Laureate* and *The Burying Party* both include flashbacks to the First World War, with the former focused on the fact that the poet was so severely wounded during the Battle of the Somme that his family were told he had died. During a scene in *The Burying Party* of Graves, Owen, and Sassoon walking around Edinburgh after leaving a pub, Graves falls to the ground and experiences a hallucination. When Sassoon becomes aware, and struggles to calm Graves,

> Graves shouts 'You listen to me, you little tart! I procured you your your [sic] shell shock alibi, but this? This is what it's like!
>
> [….]
>
> Even the smell of these f*****g poppies makes me shake.'
>
> Sassoon says 'We're on Calton Hill, Graves. Not in the trenches.
>
> How would you know? How would you know?
>
> There isn't any gas. There isn't any gas.'[43]

[42]*The Laureate*, directed by William Nunez (2021, Creative Artists Agency).
[43]Ibid.

While posited differently to Milne in *Goodbye Christopher Robin* and Graves in *The Laureate* – with a direct comparison to war-devastated landscapes – British serviceman A. McCormick voiced an appreciation of life in the countryside following the war. He wrote ,

> Had I not been encamped for eighteen months on the battlefield of Arras, and contemplated the arid waste of chalk thrown up from trenches and shell holes could I as keenly enjoyed the beauty of this autumn day and all the radiant glory of woodlands and moorlands intensified and enriched by the first day of rain which has fallen for many months.[44]

McCormick was far from the only ex-serviceman to seek out a rural idyll after the First World War.[45] This desire to take refuge in the countryside was not an entirely new phenomenon – John Tosh has discussed the Victorian middle classes' nostalgic 'idealization of the countryside' – but nevertheless it is clear that for some soldiers, their experiences of industrialised warfare resulted in a longing to escape into nature.[46] For Vera Brittain, the return to the provincial settings of her pre-war life following the loss of four loved ones, and her service as a nurse, was less a refuge than a blaze of memories. One of the earliest scenes in the film adaptation sees Brittain, her brother Edward, and Victor Richardson, swimming in a lake in the Derbyshire countryside. It is to this lake that the film returns in its final scenes, visualising the continuing trauma of Brittain's war experiences. While a poem of Roland Leighton's is read – *Hédauville* – the viewer watches Brittain make her way to the lake and prepare to go in. As she wades and then swims, the film moves between the scenery of the lake setting and flashbacks of Edward, Leighton, and Richardson, with Brittain's narration stating 'They'll want to forget you. They'll want me to forget. But I can't. I won't. This is my promise to you now. All of you.'

Conclusion

This article has argued for the benefits of studying cinematic First World War landscapes in all their nuances. For all the scenes of soldiers navigating, and fighting in, environments of devastated countryside – which loom large as a visual in popular memory – there are others which resonate with the wider experiences of British soldiers. While comparing the narratives and cinematography of motion pictures with written accounts by soldiers, the article has also argued that servicemen's physical and emotional engagement with war landscapes operated as a form of coping mechanism, a theme which has been underexplored in the historiography of the First World War.

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[44]IWM private papers, Documents 11906, Captain A. McCormick Memoir, p. 13.
[45]Roper, *The Secret Battle*, p. 293.
[46]John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 32. Jstor ebook.

The eleven selected films differ in narrative, structure, and intent, but all feature landscape contrasts, whether that is simply the juxtaposition of domestic (British) spaces with harrowing war scenes, such as in *The Burying Party* (2018) or the more sustained focus of *1917* on presenting 'unspoilt' countryside. A theme of nostalgia for home landscapes provides poignant scenes in *1917*, *War Horse*, and *Journey's End*, which resonate with the writings of British soldiers who compared and contrasted significant places to them with the war landscapes they encountered. Whether they were observing similarities, naming sectors after landmarks, or engaging in activities such as bird-watching, gardening, or flower collecting, servicemen were demonstrating the continuation of their domestic masculine identities, which supports Jessica Meyer's research on masculinity and British soldiers.[47] *Testament of Youth* provides a particularly striking example of finding beauty in unlikely settings, through the visualisation of Geoffrey Thurlow's letter, which describes the rays of the setting sun shining on a waterlogged shell hole.

While devastated landscapes could elicit unsettling emotional responses in soldiers, there are also occasions in their diaries and memoirs which describe the pleasure of witnessing birdlife, or flowers, in such places where it is expected there will be no signs of life. Cinematic depictions of the impact of war memories on protagonists have not only provided powerful scenes for the viewer, but have also spoken to the emotional ties between servicemen and the landscapes they served in, as Natasha Silk argues in relation to the 'sacred' Western Front.[48] *Goodbye Christopher Robin* presents Shepard's fear that the footprints of the First World War, the physical evidence of the soldiers' experiences, will have vanished from the Western Front given the passage of time. *Testament of Youth* includes several scenes presenting landscapes as arbiters of memory, from the final lake scene, and Roland Leighton's violets, to the cherry blossom which also features in *1917* and *Benediction* as motifs of fleeting life and renewal. The ideal of the countryside as a refuge from memories of industrialised warfare – which some British soldiers attempted to make reality – is explored in *Goodbye Christopher Robin* and *The Laureate*, but is met with more success for its protagonist in the former. With the enduring popularity of First World War cinema, and with recent British, and international examples including *1917*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *Tirailleurs* (2022), it is possible that filmmakers will continue to explore the narrative opportunities provided by (re)imaginings of First World War landscapes in the 21st century.

[47]Jessica Meyer, *Men of War*.
[48]Natasha Silk, 'Some Corner of a Field That is Forever England'.