

Paul Gough, UWE, UK

'Garden of gratitude': the National Memorial Arboretum and strategic 'remembering' People & their Pasts. International Public History Conference, Ruskin College, Oxford 16 – 17 September 2005

The National Memorial Arboretum in central England proposes itself as the conscience of the nation's history. In this sprawling 250 acre site in Staffordshire, history, culture and nature meet in an ideological domain. The NMA was conceived as an indexical account of factional participation in every aspect of the British experience in the Second World War. Here every voice would be heard, every sentiment allowed to be expressed – from heroism to desertion. As the design of the garden became more elaborated, many further causes and conflicts were annexed until the landscape was brimming with references and inclusive representation. Amongst its many corners, for example, one can find spaces dedicated to groups as diverse as the Royal National Lifeboat Institute and the Road Peace organization. However, as an index to twentieth century British uniformed conflict, the NMA was intended to be an inclusive, non-aligned space that combined an indexical account of a British century of war and peace ('this happened and is here recorded') with an iconic marking of the terrain ('this matters and is here enshrined'). Its inclusivity reflects a wider concern that all voices be heard but also a wider recognition that the NMA represents the ideal motif for a population popularly characterised as a nation of gardeners. As Paul Fussell has so brilliantly observed of the 'English' passion for the rural and the bucolic: 'if the opposite of war is peace, the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral'.

To set the tone of this short presentation, I'd like to cite my first witness. Miss Moss, a character from a short story called 'Evermore' written by the British novelist Julian Barnes.

He tells the story of an elderly spinster who every year visits her brother's war grave in *Cabaret Rouge* military cemetery in northern France. Miss Moss is a proof-reader for a publisher of dictionaries, and she brings this same zeal for exactitude to the indexical zone of commemoration. She is always finding fault with the meticulous crop and prune of the green coverlet of the foreign earth, its foreign plants and alien tone:

There had been problems with the planting. The grass at the cemetery was French grass, and it seemed to her of the coarser type, inappropriate for British soldiers to lie beneath. Her campaign over this with the commission led nowhere. So one spring she took out a small spade and a square yard of English turf kept damp in a plastic bag.

After dark she dug out the offending French grass and relaid the softer English turf, patting it into place, then stamping it in. She was pleased with her work, and the next year, as she approached the grave, saw no indication of her mending. But when she knelt, she realised that her work had been undone: the French grass was back again.

The redoubtable Miss Moss never does find satisfaction with the foreign planting schemes of the imperial war graves commission. Her frequent attempts to personalise the graveside environment are frustrated by the strict procedures of official protocol and brusque gardener, and she resigns herself to alien turf and 'dusty geraniums'.

Barnes' story brings out some of the key issues in the tensions between a public and private agenda of grief. How, in the face of the vast monuments and cemeteries of battle can an individual mourner hope to personalise the civic symbolism of commemoration ? What role might plants, shrubs and trees play in opening up the processes of remembrance ? And, how could these arboreal devices act as metaphors for collaboration and interaction in the future design of new commemorative landscapes ? Furthermore what value should we place in the vast planting scheme of the NMA which purports to be a collective arboreal voice for the nations past?

**The history** of the NMA is easily told: it was conceived by a retired Royal Navy Commander, David Childs, following concerns expressed by Second World War veteran airman Leonard Cheshire, founder of the eponymous ex-servicemen's homes and charitable services. Cheshire was anxious that his and others' military and civilian contributions to the Second World War might easily be forgotten – perhaps indeed even overshadowed by the renewed enthusiasm for the First World War. Childs' visit to Washington in 1988, where he witnessed the multi-layered memorial schemes of Arlington Cemetery, stimulated a wish to find a single focal point for national commemoration in Britain, one that might usefully encapsulate the country's military involvement during, and since, the Second World War.

When the appeal to create an arboretum was launched by John Major in November 1994 the project lacked a site and any form of endowment. Three years later 150 acres of former gravel pit had been donated by a major industrial company – Lafarge Aggregates –

and the site had been designed and planted in elaborate arrangements of avenues, rows, columns, and other geometric configurations- spirals, lines, squares and small woods. In total, 2.25 million pounds was granted by the Millennium Commission. A Visitor's Centre and a Chapel opened in 2002. Since mid-1997, some 40,000 trees have been planted. They exist within a regimented design comprising some fifty dedicated plots. Each major planting has been celebrated with ceremony – invariably military or uniformed – and is usually co-ordinated by a recognized group or charitable concern.

The **layout of** the arboretum is less straightforward than its recent history. In plan the arboretum forms a simple right-angled triangle; its hypotenuse is formed by the north to south flow of the River Tame (and beyond that the main rail line to London), its lower edge follows the line of the minor road that leads from the A513; while the left-hand side is currently bounded by a gravel works. Arranged geometrically within the arboretum are two principle sight lines – 'Millennium Avenue' runs in a north-easterly direction from the rear of the Visitor Centre; another slightly shorter avenue, 'The Beat' runs in a straight line to the south-east, ending in a circular planting described as 'Golden Grove'. Balanced between these two axes is a low circular earthwork known as the 'UN Spiral'. The parkland around the Visitor Centre and Chapel is laid out as a succession of formal geometric plots either side of a shorter avenue. One of the arboretum's most widely known sculptures – the 'Shot at Dawn' monument is concealed in the least formal, and perhaps the most

remote, area of the 150 acre park towards the north-east of the grounds. Around the Visitor Centre the arboretum is littered with relics brought from distant battlefields, for example there are two lengths of railway from the notorious Burma-Siam railway that were delivered amidst great public ceremony in early 2002. In 2004 the site was declared to be 'full': its design complete; like an aged computer it might be said to be 'running out of space for further memory'.

If 'geography is histories' most serviceable reminder', [as David Lowenthal has suggested] it would seem that the concept of a national memorial arboretum has partly answered the needs for a full recognition of the civilian contribution to Britain's armed conflicts of the twentieth century. The creation of such a site of national memory – located in the very heart of England – was intended to meet long-standing demands for a national shrine to the second world war and thus satisfy anxieties over the selective remembering of the last century, which has seen the wars of the latter half of the century seconded by the long shadow of the Great War. A large-scale memorial park combines the British passion for the rural with a pantheistic sense of place. Although it does not yet fully answer the apparent need to 'solidify' participative memory through the construction of elaborate partisan memorials in bronze and stone; witness the recent building of war memorials by Australia and Canada in the grounds of Green Park adjacent to Buckingham Palace, or the more recent unveiling of monuments to the contribution of animals in the world wars, or the role of women in world war two.

The British fixation on over-furnishing the crowded centre of our imperial capitals seems unquenchable.

Commemoration is intended to be 'anti-entropic', that is it is meant to arrest, or at least mitigate the effects of time so as to create 'a state of the eternal present'. Patently, the national memorial arboretum has to marry this imperative with the need to create a new landscape, one that will evolve and yet be dependent on environmental and cultural forces. The commemorative ethos of the arboretum is predicated on a secure ideological future, where commemorative values remain unchanged and a programme of care and maintenance is guaranteed.

Perhaps because of its origins in local networks, official sanction and voluntary contribution, the arboretum has had to become wholly didactic; there is a didactic intention to the planting, to the designed spaces and to its furnishings. As has been noted of similar memorial regimes in the United States (notably at Forest Lawn in Glendale, California) the arboreal and memorial iconography is reinforced by text and narrative. In fact it is not just re-inforced, it is then underlined, spelt out in bold capitals and displayed in excessively large captions. Often lengthy and prolix, these words and labels are designed to dispel any possible ambiguity of communication. A strict typology of meaning is evoked at every step. A path is not a path it is a 'journey'; a flower bed is not just planted it is shaped to remind us of the formation of a squadron in flight, and so on. Explicit captioning, labels and guidebooks endorse these mono-readings and rule out any grounds for misinterpretation or ignorance. This widespread

inscribing of the memorial space - through labels, inscriptions and signage - further glosses the landscape with indelible readings, and these act as unambiguous captions to a series of memorial 'captions'.

As Thomas Lacquer has proposed, specific places of memory do not simply rise out of the ground. They have to be created. Lacquer further asserts that we live in semiotically arid times, that we occupy an environment that eschews representation and the production of meaning, a loss that requires us to resort to 'commemorative hyper-nominalism'. This is hardly the case at the NMA . Here the mnemonic role of the garden is limited; instead visitors are greeted by elaborate semiotic displays, these are aided by elaborate captions, signage and textual descriptors. Here for example are two descriptions of arrangements in the garden:

As the river turns North there is the option of turning into the vast spiral of Plane trees that will form the United Nations Circle or moving into the Royal Air Force Wings where trees have been planted for RAF Squadrons, Wings, Commands and Stations. Besides the river are Maritime Pine, planted for Coastal Command and those who served in Flying Boats, while the main feature is a collection of Silver Birches in the shape of eagle's wings wheeling in flight. ... In between a walnut, a tree from which the first propellers were made, has been planted for the Aircrew Association while the WAAF have a selection of trees with 'Star' in their name shaped in the form of the constellation Cassiopeia, herself an Ethiopian Queen.

Leaving the RAF plot by the southern entrance one crosses between the Adjutant General's Corps Plot and the Staffordshire Regiment Plot, The former is fronted by pleached

Limes laid out the resemble the West Front of Winchester Cathedral, the Corps' home city. The central Beech Tree reflects the species common to the Corp's Headquarters, while the varied collection of trees separating this plot from the Staffordshires symbolise the constituent elements of the Corps, such as *Cupressus sempervirens* 'Green pencil' for the Clerks and *Malus* 'red Sentinel' for the Royal Military Police (the 'Red Caps').

There are, however, inconsistencies in the use of shape and colour across the arboretum. For example: in the plot dedicated to one of the more controversial aspects of British history – the Shot at Dawn memorial – the six arrow-head cypresses in a line facing the sculpture of the blindfolded youth are intended to represent the 'firing squad' taking aim on the boy-soldier. Not far away the same arrow-head trees are employed by the Royal Artillery Association to represent the protective spirit of the 'rapier surface to air guided missiles'. And also of interest, the ground beneath the 250 poles that each represent a soldier shot at dawn has to be regularly sprayed with weed-killer to augment its appearance as 'blighted ground', morally bankrupt and conspiring against natural justice to pardon these 250 deserters and under-age soldiers.

One of the principle ways that landscapes develop meaning, is through the complex interaction between the 'here-and-now' and the 'there-and-then'. Perhaps one of the reasons why the NMA has



attracted so much attention is that it provides the perfect platform for such critique.

Recent debates in landscape architecture have identified a number of elements that are quite specific to landscape architecture, and which offer and augment its commemorative potential over the other arts. Principally, gardens act as liminal enclaves withdrawn from the customary disruption of urbanization. In spaces separated from quotidian use, memorials and other sculpted forms are placed under the open sky, 'in the eye of God' where they constitute the perfect opportunity for the elegiac, but also to the Arcadian and the Utopian, offering a new 'perfection' that is at once paradisiacal, and simultaneously transient. In addition, gardens are indelibly associated with memory systems, whereby themes, ideas, and classical references can be located in statuary, fountains, and other formal props. These act as a series of codes that might be 'strung together into an iconographical programme or narrative.' Here, however, the garden-as-mnemonic-text is at its most vulnerable, as over time many cultural references will be lost or displaced, organizations disbanded or merged, interest groups will lose interest, and the proper reading will be at the mercy of the linguistic sophistication [and selective memory] of subsequent generations.

Perhaps this will not be the fate of the NMA: already the text is too opaque, the script too emphatic, and the young shrubs and saplings too modest to yet assert their own status.

This is perhaps ironic, because as ‘theatres of memory’, the mnemonic structure of the designed garden is perfectly matched to the task of memorialisation. As dramaturgical space, the staged setting of the garden can represent both physical vulnerability and transience and is thus suggestive both of decay and renewal, an effect that is exactly matched to the effort of commemoration. Garden-memorials have perhaps the unique capacity to evoke poignant analogies between human existence, the fragility of nature and ‘consolations of cyclic regeneration.’ These modes of signification are emphasized by the knowledge that many gardens and arboreta will not achieve their intended design until long after their designers have passed away.

### **Some concluding remarks**

The National memorial Arboretum is a complex spatio-temporal environment. It is still too early to assess its impact, its value as the repository of the nation’s history. Too early to know whether it has provided the answer to the ambitions in the late 1940s to create a single national war memorial space in the UK.

Having for some years had to charge an entrance fee [which somewhat diminished its value as the conscience of the country] it has recently been taken on by the Royal British Legion, who now administer and oversee it.

The Arboretum is now officially ‘full’. Individual labels and small tokens of remembrance can be purchased but the design is complete, with no further room for designs or sub-plots. It is now a

case of waiting. Instead the site has assumed a performative function; annual rituals of remembrance are enacted on its grounds, choreographed activities [often uniformed and para-military in style] are held at specific anniversaries; these help re-inscribe the spaces with new accretions of meaning. On a day I visited in 2003 a group of firefighters from Chicago were laying a small wreath at the fire brigade plot, the wreath dedicated to those fellow workers who lost their lives following the bombing of the New York World Trade Center.

Reflecting on garden spaces, Foucault might have regarded the NMA as a 'utopian' project. For him, utopias were the antithesis of homogenized and unified places, instead they were 'arrangements which have no real space. Arrangements which have a general relationship of direct or inverse analogy with the real space of society. They represent society itself brought to perfection, or its reverse, and in any case utopias are spaces that are by their very essence fundamentally unreal.' He characterized such disparate spaces as 'heterotopias' : places that have the power to create discordant juxtapositions, divergent memory systems and collapsed temporal dimensions in a 'single real place'. The cemetery might be considered a heterotopian paradigm in that it collects variously timed elements and pieces from different locales, 'it begins with the strange heterochronism that is, for a human being, the loss of life and of that quasi-eternity in which, however, he does not cease to dissolve and be erased.' Although not a cemetery as such, the National Memorial

Arboretum at Alrewas, similarly attempts to create a durable, though mutable, landscape of remembrance. Its elaborate planting scheme and arboreal symbolism, even its didactic clumsiness, is an attempt to slow the real anxiety of erasure, to 'stop the clock' so as to preserve the eternal, whilst recognizing that all landscapes are ultimately ephemeral.

