

*Below: Graves at the Bayeux Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery*

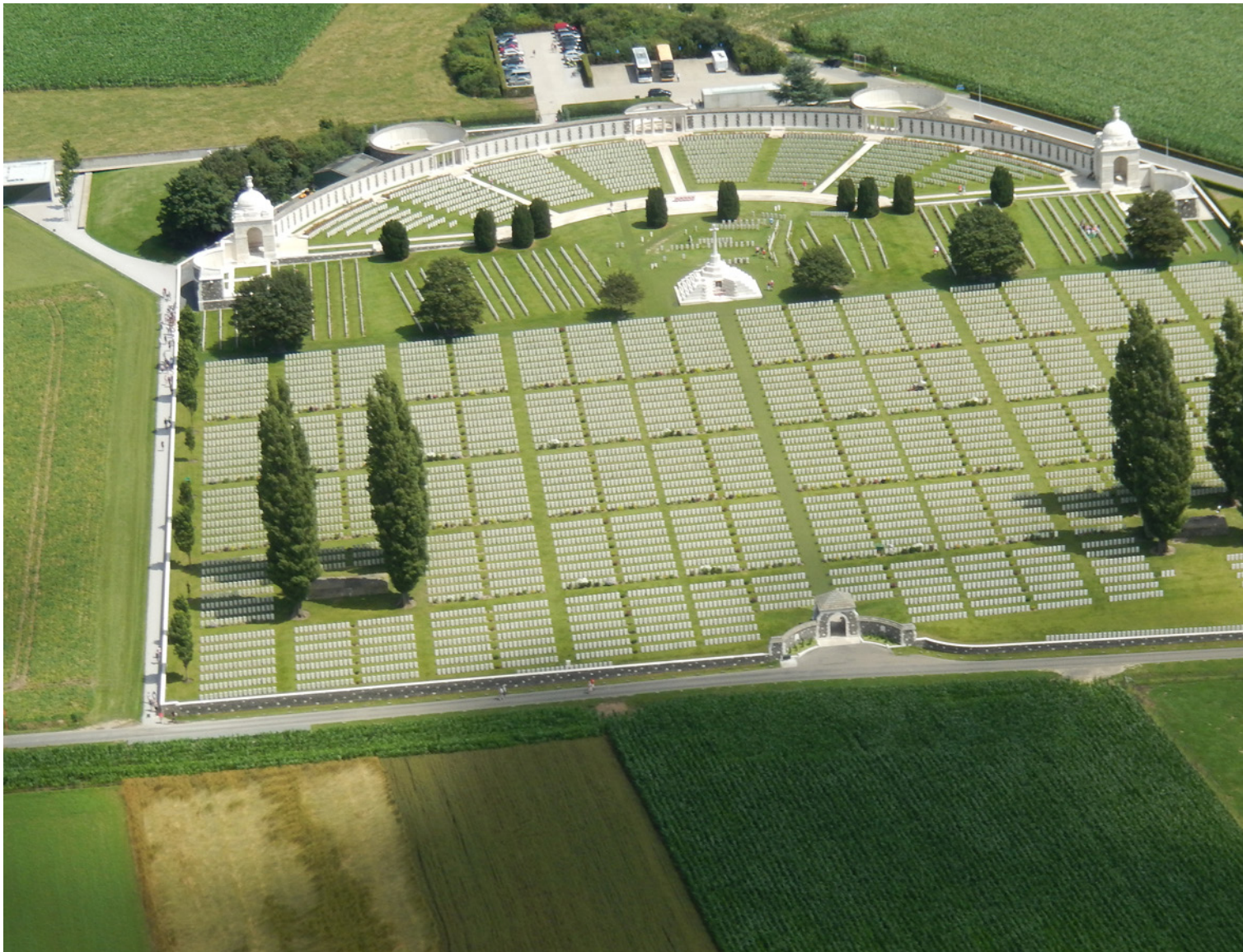


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## Soldiers' bodies, commemoration, & cultural responses to exhumations in the Great War

*Laura Tradii, MSc in the History of Science, Medicine, and Technology (2015-16) shares the details of her research.*

In March 1915, to avoid the unsanitary transportation of war casualties, the British government issued a ban on the exhumation and repatriation of Imperial soldiers, which was to be observed until the end of hostilities. Nevertheless, after the illegal exhumation of an officer following pressures from wealthy family members, the ban was reinstated “on account of the difficulties of treating impartially the claims advanced by persons of different social standing”. This decision applied the principle which was to become the very core of the Imperial War Graves Commission: the equality of treatment.



*Above: Tyne-cot Cemetery, an example of commemoration for the fallen from the Second World War*

Military cemeteries were then decided upon as the most adequate solution to dispose of and commemorate the dead. For the first time in Europe, soldiers would have been individually buried, without distinctions of class and rank, near the battlefield where they had died, with an engraved tombstone to preserve their name.

When the project of military cemeteries was announced and the ban on repatriation was made permanent, the news sparked protests across the British Empire. Although the percentage of the population requesting a lift of the ban remains uncertain, the discussion gained the proportions of a significant public

debate. Soon after the publication of the plans, the *Spectator* and the *Daily Mail* ran campaigns against the Commission, even targeting some of the Commissioners personally; the question of repatriation and military cemeteries was repeatedly discussed in Parliament; and the public debate involved some of the most influential British figures of the time. What was at stake in these debates was the question of what constituted a decent handling and disposal of the dead bodies of soldiers.

Historians have generally focussed on the drastic changes in military commemoration which followed the Great War, analysing the phenomenon mainly in terms of the symbolic



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function that commemoration provided to a nation traumatised by the horrors of the First World War. My research, based on the archival material of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (Maidenhead), shifted the focus from monumental architecture to the dead bodies of Imperial soldiers. Building on cultural histories of the body, I explored how the Imperial War Graves Commission negotiated the demands of public opinion for adopting civilian notions of decency in the burial of soldiers with the difficulties posed by the necessity of exhuming, transporting, and burying hundreds of thousands of cadavers. The fact that soldiers had been volunteers and conscripts as opposed to professional soldiers, it emerged, had a crucial role in this negotiation, as the public demanded a civilian treatment in the burial of the fallen. In the aftermath of the war, notions of decency in death were changing in complex ways: the pre-war military practice of the common grave was no longer acceptable for an army of civilians, and neither were the Commission's deviations from civilian decency (such as transporting bodies huddled together, not making use of coffins, and leaving bodies exposed to public view). When the Commission's practices came into conflict with public opinion, failure to negotiate successfully between material limitations and the wishes of the public led to bitter criticism.

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At the same time, the fact that the task of honouring and reverently caring for the dead was taken over by the state made the disposal of soldiers an explicitly political matter. In July 1920, the Commission was publicly accused in the *National Review* of having been “captivated by the Socialist ideal, the State as opposed to the individual”, and of enforcing a “conscription of bodies [...] worthy of Lenin”. Matters were further complicated when, in 1931, a scandal exploded following the publication of an article titled “British War Dead Smuggled Home: Bodies exhumed from graves in Flanders. – Families pay thousands to Belgian smuggler”. According to the article, in the previous ten years Belgian smugglers had been paid between £250 and £500 to exhume illegally the remains of British soldiers and transport them overnight by motor boat to the Essex coast. The *Sunday Express*, where the article was published, did not refrain from issuing a judgement on the matter:

**“When wealthy persons are approached to pay for the transport of their war dead home to their family graves they should think first whether they are not rather dishonouring than honouring the dead by removing them from the great family of heroes.”**

Regardless of the truthfulness of the rumours, the outcry caused by the scandal several years after the end of the conflict testifies to the ongoing resonance of the question of the war dead, and the active involvement of public opinion in debates over their disposal. The scandal also highlights how two broad understandings of what constituted a decent way of honouring dead soldiers were coming into conflict.

While burial in monumental cemeteries was seen as the most honourable course for the Commission, the opponents of the policy saw this appropriation of dead bodies as simply "not decent", and demanded instead to have the right to honour privately their deceased relatives. The article in the Sunday Express

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perfectly exemplifies this tension. According to the newspaper, it was "wealthy persons", and not the state, who were dishonouring the deceased by expropriating their bodies from their new family, the "great family of heroes". The liveliness of public discussions over the question of repatriation demonstrates that

contested notions of how to best honour the fallen were not marginal or private matters relegated to the sphere of personal

beliefs. Rather, they were the object of heated public and Parliamentary debates in which factions were in fundamental disagreement over what decency in burial was to mean.

I would like to conclude this summary on a personal note. On explaining the topic of my research to my relatives after submitting the dissertation I discovered, to my greatest amazement, that the person who had sold to the IWGC the machines to identically engrave the tombstones after the Second World War was my own great-uncle, Tiziano Malaguti, who owned a large firm of funeral-engraving machinery near Bologna (INCIMAR). He can be seen in the picture at the left of my grandfather, serving as best-man for my grandfather at his wedding.



**-Laura Tradii**

*Left: The gentleman on the left-hand side of the picture is INCIMAR owner Tiziano Malaguti*