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Chapter Author(s): Jay Winter

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21. Sites of Memory

Jay Winter

Sites of memory are places where groups of people engage in public activity through which they express “a collective shared knowledge . . . of the past, on which a group’s sense of unity and individuality is based.”¹ The group that goes to such sites inherits earlier meanings attached to the event, as well as adding new meanings. Such activity is crucial to the presentation and preservation of commemorative sites. When such groups disperse or disappear, sites of memory lose their initial force, and may fade away entirely.

The term, abumbrated in a seven-volume study edited by Pierre Nora,² has been extended to many different texts, from legends to stories to concepts. In this brief essay, I define the term more narrowly to mean physical sites where commemorative acts take place. In the twentieth century, most such sites marked the loss of life in war.

Such sites of memory are *topoi* with a life history. They have an initial, creative phase, when they are constructed or adapted to particular commemorative purposes. Then follows a period of institutionalization and routinization of their use. Such markings of the calendar, indicating moments of remembrance at particular places, can last for decades, or they can be abruptly halted. In most instances, the significance of sites of memory fades away with the passing of the social groups that initiated the practice.

Sites of memory operate on many levels of aggregation and touch many facets of associative life. While such sites were familiar in the ancient and medieval periods, they have proliferated in more recent times. Consequently, the subject has attracted much academic and popular discussion. We therefore concentrate here on sites of memory in the epoch of the nation-state, primarily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the modern period, most sites of memory are imbedded in events marked distinctively and separately from the religious calendar.

There has been some overlap, though. Visiting a commemorative site on Armistice Day, November 11, in countries that observe the end of the 1914–18 war, is close enough to the Catholic feast of All Saints on November 2, and in some countries with a large Catholic population, the two days occupy a semi-sacred space of public commemoration. First comes the visit to the cemetery; then the visit to the war memorial or other site. The day marking the end of the Second World War in Europe, May 8, is also the saint's day of Joan of Arc. Those engaging in commemorative acts on that day may be addressing the secular celebration or the Catholic one; some celebrate the two together. Usually the site chosen to mark the day differs.

Commemoration at sites of memory is an act arising out of a conviction, shared by a broad community, that the moment recalled is both significant and informed by a moral message. Sites of memory materialize that message. Moments of national humiliation are rarely commemorated or marked in material form, though here too there are exceptions of a hortatory kind. "Never again" is the hallmark of public commemoration on the Israeli Day of Remembrance for victims of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. The shells of public buildings in Hiroshima remind everyone of the moment the city was incinerated in the first atomic attack. Where moral doubts persist about a war or public policy, commemorative sites are either hard to fix or places of contestation. That is why there is no date or place for those who want to commemorate the end of the Algerian War in France, or the end of the Vietnam War in the United States. There was no moral consensus about the nature of those conflicts; hence there was no moral consensus about what was being remembered in public, and when and where were the appropriate time and place to remember those wars.³

When the Japanese prime minister visits a shrine to war dead, he is honoring war criminals as well as ordinary soldiers. The same was true when President Ronald Reagan visited the German cemetery at Bitburg, where lie the remains of SS men alongside the graves of those not implicated in war crimes. And yet both places were sites of memory: contested memory, embittered memory, but memory nonetheless.

The critical point about sites of memory is that they are there as points of reference not only for those who survived traumatic events, but also for those born long after them. The word *memory* becomes a metaphor for the fashioning of narratives about the past when those with direct experience of events die off. Sites of memory inevitably become sites of second-order memory, places where people remember the memories of others, those who survived the events marked there.

Historical Remembrance and Sites of Memory

Increasingly over the twentieth century and beyond, the space between history and memory has been reconfigured. In between is a varied set of cultural practices that may be described as forms of "historical remembrance." Many such practices emerge when people confront sites of memory. The term *historical remembrance* is one that is an alloy,

a compound, which we need because the two defining concepts we normally use, history and memory, are insufficient guides to this field. Commemoration requires reference to history, but then the contestation begins. Whose history, written for whose benefit, and on which records? The contemporary memory boom is about history, to be sure, but historians are not its sole or even its central proprietors. Witnesses demand the right to be heard, whatever historians say. When the *Enola Gay* exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, “The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II,” was constructed painstakingly as history in 1995, it was attacked and rejected by people—ex-servicemen—who had their own history. And the “witnesses” won. The exhibition was reorganized. This was no simple tale of sordid political pressure. Here was a real collision between “history” and “memory,” a collision arising out of the different subject positions of those involved in the exhibition. The outcome was a kind of “historical remembrance” that made space for the claims both of historians and of those whose lives as soldiers they were describing.

If “history” has difficulty in withstanding the challenges of “memory,” the opposite case can be just as problematic. Witnesses forget, or reconstruct, their narratives as a kind of collage, or merge what they saw with what they read. Memory left to itself renders history, a documented account of the past, impossible. Furthermore, “memory” is a category with its own history and its own mysteries. Cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists have taken huge strides in understanding how individuals remember, but leaders in the field admit that there is a vast amount of fundamental work still to be done. How much harder it is to construct a model or set of pathways to describe how groups of people remember together.

And yet these traces are all around us. “Historical remembrance” is a discursive field, extending from ritual to cultural work of many different kinds. It differs from family remembrance in its capacity to unite people who have no other bonds drawing them together. It is distinctive from liturgical remembrance in being free of a preordained religious calendar and sanctified ritual forms. And yet historical remembrance has something of the familial and something of the sacred in it. When all three are fused, as in some powerful war memorials—Maya Lin’s Vietnam memorial in Washington comes to mind—historical remembrance is a phenomenon of enduring power.

Adopting the term *historical remembrance* has other advantages as well. Using it helps us avoid the pitfalls of referring to memory as some vague cloud that exists without agency, and to history as an objective story that exists outside of the people whose lives it describes. Historians have memories too, and their choice of subject is rarely accidental. They are part of the memory boom, though not its leading part. When they join other men and women who come together in public to remember the past—their past—they construct a narrative that is not just “history” and not just “memory,” but a story that partakes of them both. Historical remembrance is what they do and how they contribute to a memory boom that extends well beyond the historical profession. Sites of memory are places where historical remembrance happens.

This approach to the subject provides a solution to some of the controversies surrounding the topic of sites of memory. Three in particular stand out. Some critics claim that commemorative practices sacralize war and the political order that governs it.⁴ But this objection misses the point that pacifists have used sites of memory for precisely the opposite purpose. Languages of mourning have sacred elements in them, but they are never alone. Historical remembrance subsumes these cadences as it admits the power of family rhetoric to shape the language people use when they come to sites of mourning. A second objection is that sites of memory proliferate because memory has ceased to exist within our lives and therefore needs to be created in artificial forms. Thus Pierre Nora spoke of concocted *lieux de mémoire* occupying the space of vanished and authentic *milieux de mémoire*.⁵ *Lieux de mémoire*, he posits, are artificial substitutes for the living memory-culture of the past. This argument betrays an ingrained Eurocentrism. Anyone who even glances at the power of living sites of memory in Latin America or India, for example, will realize that the distinction cannot hold. *Milieux de mémoire* are alive and well, and so are oral and written traditions of remembrance that inform them. A third objection is that sites of memory are places where people escape from politics. We remember because we cannot see an achievable future; thus the efflorescence of interest in sites of memory coincides with the period of disillusionment following the 1960s when Marxism collapsed as a theory of history and a theory of society. Memory, from this angle, is a “fix” for those who fear the future and have given up their conviction that they can master it.⁶ This argument is incomplete at best. In some cases the quest for memory does offer an alternative to a plan for the future. But among Guatemalan Indians or Palestinians or Vietnamese people, the construction of narratives about a past recently disfigured by massive violence is not alternative to politics but rather its direct expression. Sites of memory are places where local politics happens. The men and women who come to such places arrive with a mixture of motives and hopes; to claim that they are there to flee politics is absurd.

On one point, though, the critical conversation about sites of memory has not gone far enough. All the critics cited here base their arguments on a clear separation of history and memory. This position cannot be sustained. It makes no sense to juxtapose history and memory as adversarial and separate concepts. As I have already noted, they overlap in too many ways to be considered as pure categories, each living in majestic isolation on its separate peak. Historical remembrance is an analytical category of use here, in that it enables us to understand more fully both the field of force between history and memory and the people who fashion, appropriate, and pass on to us sites of memory.

Commemoration and Political Power

Much of the scholarly debate about sites of memory concerns the extent to which they are instruments of the dominant political elements in a society. One school of opinion emphasizes the usefulness to political elites of public events at such sites establishing the

legitimacy of their rule.⁷ Some such events are observed whoever is in power—witness Bastille Day in Paris or Independence Day in Philadelphia or elsewhere in the United States. But other events are closely tied to the establishment of a new regime and the overthrow of an older one: November 7 was the date that marked the Bolshevik revolution and establishment the Communist regime in the Soviet Union. That date symbolized the new order and its challenge to its world-wide enemies. The march past of soldiers and weapons deployed by the Soviet army in Moscow was a moment of commemoration as well as of muscular pride, demonstrating to both the domestic population and the outside world the authority of the Revolution.

This top-down approach proclaims the significance of sites of memory as a materialization of national, imperial, or political identity. Anzac Day, April 25, is celebrated as the moment when the Australian nation was born. It commemorates the landing of Australian and New Zealand troops as part of the British-led expeditionary force sent to Turkey in 1915. The fact that the landing was a failure does not diminish the iconic character of the date to Australians. It is the day, they hold, when their nation came of age.⁸ There are many sites of memory where this day is marked. First, people come to war memorials throughout Australia. Second, there is a state event at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, an edifice built in the shape of Hajia Sofia in Istanbul. On the walls of this building are inscribed the names of all Australian soldiers who died in the war. Third, there is an annual pilgrimage, still robustly attended in the twenty-first century, to the shores of Gallipoli itself. There, Australians mark the Gallipoli landings on the beaches where they took place.

By no means are all commemorative activities or sites of memory associated with warfare. The birthdates of monarchs or deceased presidents are marked in similar ways. Queen Victoria's birthday, May 24, was Empire Day in Britain; now it is celebrated as Commonwealth Day. The creation of such commemorative dates was part of a wider movement of what some scholars have termed "the invention of tradition." That is, at the end of the nineteenth century, new nation states and preeminent imperial powers deepened the repertoire of their ceremonial activity. Such flourishes of the majesty of power were then immediately sanctified by a spurious pedigree. To display ceremonies with a supposed link to ancient habits or forms located in a foggy and distant past created an effective cover for political innovation, instability, or insecurity.⁹ Interestingly for our purposes, such traditions have only a tenuous attachment to a site, thereby increasing the flexibility of choices available to those who want to invent traditions.

This functionalist interpretation of commemoration has been challenged. A second school of scholarship emphasizes the ways that sites of memory and the public commemorations surrounding them have the potential for dominated groups to contest their subordinate status in public. However much political leaders or their agents try to choreograph commemorative activity, there is much space for subversion or creative interpretation of the official commemorative script. Armistice Day, November 11, was a

moment when different groups came to war memorials, some for the celebration and others for the denigration of military values. Pacifists announced their message of “never again” through their presence at such sites of memory; military men and their supporters used these moments and the aura of these sites to glorify the profession of arms and to demonstrate the duty of citizens, if necessary, to give their lives for their country in a future war. The contradictions in these forms of expression on the same day and in the same places have never been resolved.¹⁰

This alternative interpretation of the political meaning of sites of memory emphasizes the multivocal character of remembrance and the potential for new groups with new causes to appropriate older sites of memory. From this point of view, there is always a chorus of voices in commemorations; some are louder than others, but they never sound alone. Decentering the history of commemoration ensures that we recognize the regional, local, and idiosyncratic character of such activities and the way a top-down approach must be supplemented by a bottom-up approach to the performance of scripts about the past at commemorative sites in villages, small towns, and provincial cities, as well as in the centers of political power.

Very occasionally, these dissonant voices come together, and a national moment of remembrance emerges. On such occasions, however, there is no one single site of memory at which this braiding together of leaders and led takes place. One example of this diffusion of remembrance is the two minute silence, observed in Britain between 1919 and 1938 at 11:00 AM on November 11. Telephonists pulled the plugs on all conversations. Traffic stopped. The normal flow of life was arrested. Then the Second World War intervened, and such disruption to war production was not in the national interest. Thereafter the two minute silence was moved to the Sunday nearest November 11. But in the two decades between the wars, it was a moment of national reflection, located everywhere. Mass-Observation, a pioneering social survey organization, asked hundreds of ordinary people in Britain what they thought about during the silence. One answer was that they thought not of the nation or of victory or of armies, but of the men who weren't there.¹¹ This silence was a meditation about absence. As such, it moved away from political orchestration into the realm of family history. To be sure, families commemorated their own within a wider social and political framework. But the richest texture of remembrance was always within family life. This intersection of the public and the private, the macrohistorical and the microhistorical, is what has given commemoration in the twentieth century its power and its rich repertoire of forms. But the very complexity of these processes means that sites of memory are not always the foci of acts of remembrance.

In addition, some buildings can be converted into sites of memory unofficially. A cinema where workers organized a strike, a home where women created a midwifery or child care center, a school where people made homeless by a natural disaster found shelter: each can be turned into a site of memory by those who lived important moments there.¹² Official certification is not necessary when groups of people act on their own.

The Business of Remembering

Unofficial sites of memory must be preserved through the time and cash of groups of people. That is a crucial defining feature of sites of memory: they cost money and time to construct or preserve. They require specialists' services—landscapers, cleaners, masons, carpenters, plumbers, and so on; they need funding and, over time, refunding. There are two kinds of expenditure we can trace in the history of sites of memory: capital expenditure and recurrent expenditure.

The land for such sites must be purchased; and an appropriate symbolic form must be designed and then constructed to focus remembrance activities. The first step may require substantial sums of public money. Private land, especially in urban areas, comes at a premium. Then there are the costs of architects' fees, especially when a public competitive tender is offered, inviting proposals from professionals. Finally, once the symbolic form is chosen, it must be constructed out of selected materials and finished according to the architect's or artist's designs.

When these projects are national in character, the process of production occurs under the public eye. National art schools and bodies of "experts" have to have their say. Standards of "taste" and "decorum" are proclaimed. Professional interests and conflicts come into play. Much of this professional infighting is confined to national commemorative projects, but the same complex step-wise procedure occurs on the local level too, though without the same level of attendant publicity. Local authorities usually take charge of these projects, and local notables can deflect plans toward their own particular visions, whatever public opinion may think about the subject.

Most of the time, public funding covers only part of the costs of commemorative objects. Public subscriptions are critical, especially in Protestant countries where the concept of utilitarian memorials is dominant. In Catholic countries, the notion of a "useful" memorial is a contradiction in terms; symbolic language and utilitarian language are deemed mutually exclusive. But the Protestant voluntary traditions have it otherwise. In Protestant countries, commemorative projects take many forms, from the sacred to the mundane: in Britain there are memorial wards in hospitals and memorial scholarships in schools and universities alongside memorial cricket pitches and memorial water troughs for horses. In the United States and in Australia there are memorial highways. The rule of thumb is that private citizens pick up most of the tab for these memorial forms, and the taxpayer pays for the rest. The state provides subsidies and occasional matching grants, but in many cases the money comes out of the pockets of ordinary people. The same is true in Britain with respect to a very widely shared form of public commemoration: the purchase of paper poppies, the symbol of the Lost Generation of the First World War. These poppies are worn on the lapel, and the proceeds from the sale go to aid disabled veterans and their families.

Recurrent expenditure for sites of memory is almost always paid for by taxpayers. War cemeteries require masons and gardeners. The Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission looks after hundreds of such cemeteries all over the world. The cost of their maintenance is a public charge. Private charities, in particular Christian groups, maintain German war cemeteries. Once constructed, memorial statues, cemeteries, or highways also become public property, and require public support to prevent them from decomposing. They are preserved as sites of commemorative activity.

Much of this activity is directed toward inviting the public to remember in public. This means directing the public toward particular sites of remembrance. Some of them are near their homes. In Britain and France there are war memorials in every city, in every town, and in every village; it is there that Armistice Day ceremonies are held annually. Churches throughout Europe of all denominations have memorial plaques to those who died in war. Special prayers were added to the Jewish prayer book to commemorate the victims of the Nazis in the Second World War, and later, those who died on active service in the Israeli army.

Remembrance in local houses of worship or at war memorials requires that the public travel a short distance from their homes to sites of remembrance. But given the wide dispersal around the world of cemeteries in which lie the remains of millions of men and women who died in two world wars, the business of remembrance also entails international travel. Such voyages start as pilgrimage; many are mixed with tourism.¹³ But in either case, there are train and boat journeys to take; hotel rooms to reserve; guides to hire; flowers to lay at graves; trinkets and mementos to purchase. In some places, museums have arisen to tell more of the story the pilgrims have come to hear and to share. There too money is exchanged along with the narratives and the symbols of remembrance.

This mixture of the sacred and the profane is hardly an innovation. It is merely a secular form of the kind of pilgrimage, for example, that made San Juan de Compostela in Spain the destination of millions of men and women in the Middle Ages who came to honor the conventionally designated resting place of the remains of one of the original Apostles. Pilgrimage to war cemeteries is public commemoration over long—sometimes very long—distances. Where does pilgrimage stop and tourism take over? It is impossible to say, but in all cases, the business of remembrance remains just that—a business.

Aesthetic Redemption

The life history of sites of memory is described by more than political gestures and material tasks. Frequently, a site is also an art form, the art of creating, arranging, and interpreting signifying practices. This field of action can be analyzed on two different but intimately related levels: the aesthetic and the semiotic.

Some national commemorative forms are distinctive. Others are shared by populations in many countries. The figure of Marianne as the national symbol affixed to thousands of town halls throughout France could not be used in Germany or Britain. The German Iron Cross, on commemorative plaques, denotes the location and the tradition in which commemoration is expressed. Germany's heroes' forests or fortresses are also imbricated in Teutonic history.

At times, the repertoire of one country's symbols overlap with that of others', even when they were adversaries. After the First World War, the first industrialized war fought among fully industrialized nations, many commemorative forms adopted medieval notation. Throughout Europe, the revolutionary character of warfare was marked by a notation of a backward-looking kind. Medieval images of heroic and saintly warriors recaptured a time when combat was between individuals, rather than the impersonal and unbalanced duel between artillery and human flesh. The war in the air took on the form and romance of chivalry. On the losing and the winning sides, medievalism flourished. We can see these traces clearly in stained glass windows in many churches, where a site of memory for the two world wars takes on a meaning by virtue of its proximity to older religious images and objects. Twentieth-century warfare thus takes on a sacred coloration when its sites of memory are located within a sacred grammar and a sacred building.

Until very late in the twentieth century, on war memorials the human form survived. In some instances, classical images of male beauty were chosen to mark the "lost generation"; others adopted more stoical and emphatically nontriumphalist poses of men in uniform. In most cases, victory was either partially or totally eclipsed by a sense of overwhelming loss. Within this aesthetic landscape, traditional Christian motifs were commonplace. The form of the grieving mother—*Stabat Mater*—brought women into the local and national constellation of grief.

In Protestant countries, the aesthetic debate took on a quasi-religious character. War memorials with crosses on them offended some Protestants, who believed that the Reformation of the sixteenth century precluded such "Catholic" notation. Obelisks were preferable, and relatively inexpensive too. In France, war memorials were by law restricted to public and not church grounds, though many local groups found a way around this proscription. In schools and universities, the location of such memorials touched on such issues. Some were placed in sacred space (in chapels), some in semi-sacred space (around chapels), and some in secular space. Public thoroughfares and train stations also housed lists of men who had died in war. Placement signified meaning.

Twentieth-century warfare democratized bereavement. Previously, armies had been composed of mercenaries, volunteers, and professionals. After 1914, Everyman went to war. The social incidence of war losses was thereby transformed. In Britain, France, and Germany, virtually every household had lost someone—a father, a son, a brother, a cousin, a friend. Given the nature of static warfare on the Western front, many—perhaps

half—of those killed had no known grave. Consequently, commemorative forms highlighted names above all. The names of the dead were all that remained of them, and chiseled in stone or etched on plaques, these names were the foci of public commemoration, both on the local and the national scale.

Sites of memory preserved the names of those who were gone. In some rare cases—Australia is one of them—war memorials listed the names of all those who served. This notation was a constant rebuke to those who passed the site knowing full well that their names were not inscribed on the memorial. Most of the time, though, the dead were the names that mattered, so much so that alphabetical order replaced social order. The overwhelming majority of war memorials list those who died in this way. A small minority listed men by rank, and some listed men by the date or year of death. But sites of memory were built for the survivors, for the families of those who were not there, and these people needed easy access to the sole signifier left to them—the name of the dead person.

This essential practice of naming set the pattern for commemorative forms after the Second World War and beyond. After 1945, names were simply added to Great War memorials. This was partly in recognition of the links between the two twentieth-century conflicts, and partly a matter of economy. After the Vietnam War, naming still mattered, and First World War forms inspired memorials, most notably Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. Her work clearly drew on Sir Edwin Lutyens's memorial to the missing on the River Somme at Thiepval, inaugurated in 1932.

By the later decades of the twentieth century, artistic opinion and aesthetic tastes had changed sufficiently to make abstraction the key language of commemorative expression. Statues and installations thereby escaped from specific national notation and moved away from the earlier emphasis upon the human figure. The exception to the rule is Soviet commemorative art, which resolutely stuck to the path of heroic romanticism in marking out the meaning of what they called the Great Patriotic War (World War II). In many instances in Western Europe, but by no means all, forms that suggested absence or nothingness replaced classical, religious, or romantic notions in commemorative art.

This shift was noticeable in Holocaust remembrance. Holocaust sites of memory—concentration and extermination camps, in particular, but also places where Jews had lived before the Shoah—could not be treated in the same way as sites commemorating the dead of the two world wars. The first difficulty was the need to avoid Christian notation to represent a Jewish catastrophe. The second was the objection of observant Jews to representational art, either forbidden or resisted within Orthodox Jewish tradition. The third was the absence of any sense of uplift, of meaning, of purpose in the deaths of the victims. Those who died in the Holocaust may have affirmed their faith thereby, but what is the meaning in the murder of one million children? To a degree, their deaths meant nothing, and therefore the Holocaust meant nothing.

Representing nothing became a challenge met in particular ways. Some artists provided installation art that literally vanished through the presence of visitors, for example,

by inviting them to hammer in metal rods and thereby attest to the irreversible character of genocide. Others projected photographs of the vanished world onto the facades of still erect buildings occupied by non-Jews. Others adopted postmodern forms to suggest disorientation, void, emptiness. Daniel Libeskind's Jewish annex to the Berlin Historical Museum is one such site. It has been likened to a Jewish star taken apart, or a lightning bolt in stone and glass. Whatever metaphor one chooses, it is a disturbing, tilted, nonlinear representation of the unrepresentable.

Since the 1970s, commemoration of the Second World War has become braided together with commemoration of the Holocaust. This presented aesthetic as well as social and political challenges. Great War commemorative forms had sought out some meaning, some significance in the enormous loss of life attending that conflict. There was an implicit warning in many of these monuments. "Never again" was their ultimate meaning. But "never" had lasted a bare twenty years. Thus, after the Second World War, the search for meaning became infinitely more complex. And the fact that more civilians died than soldiers in the Second World War made matters even more difficult to configure in art.

Finally, the extreme character of the Second World War challenged the capacity of art—any art—to express a sense of loss when it is linked to genocidal murder or thermonuclear destruction. We have mentioned how Auschwitz defied conventional notations of "meaning," though some individuals continue to try to rescue redemptive elements from it. The same is true for the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Sites of memory are places where people affirm their faith that history has a meaning. What kind of site is appropriate where the majority of people see no meaning at all in the events being marked in time and in space? Ignoring Auschwitz or Hiroshima is impossible, but locating them within earlier commemorative structures or gestures is either problematic or absurd or both.

Ritual

Public commemoration is an activity defined by the gestures and words of those who come together at sites of memory to recall particular aspects of the past, their past. Such moments are rarely the simple reflection of a fixed text, a script rigidly prepared by political leaders determined to fortify their position of power. Inevitably, commemoration overlaps with political conflicts, but it can never be reduced to a direct function of power relationships.

There are at least three stages in the history of rituals surrounding public commemoration. The first we have already dealt with: the construction of a commemorative form. But there are two other levels in the life history of monuments that need attention. The second is the grounding of ritual action in the calendar and the routinization of

such activities; the third is their transformation or their disappearance as active sites of memory.

One case in point may illustrate this trajectory. The date of July 1, 1916 is not a national holiday in Britain; but it marks the date of the opening of the British offensive on the River Somme, an offensive that symbolized the terrible character of industrial warfare. On that day, the British army suffered the highest casualty totals in its history: a volunteer army, and the society that had created it, were introduced to the full terrors of twentieth-century warfare. Groups of people still go to the Somme battlefields to mark this day, without national legislation obliging them to do so. Theirs are locally defined rituals. A party of Northumberland men and women bring their bagpipes, and mark the moment when the battle began, locating themselves at a gigantic crater they purchased to ensure the site would not be ploughed over and forgotten. Others from Newfoundland go to the still extant trench system at Beaumont Hamel where their ancestors were slaughtered on July 1, 1916. There is a bronze caribou at the site to link this place to the landscape from which the men of Newfoundland—then a British colony—came as volunteers to fight for King and country. In France, November 11 is a national holiday, but not in Britain. Legislation codifies activities whose origins and force lie on the local level.

Public commemoration flourishes within the orbit of civil society. This is not true in countries where dictatorships rule; Stalinist Russia smashed civil society to a point that it could not sustain commemorative activity independent of the party and the state.¹⁴ But elsewhere, local associations matter. And so do families. Commemorative ritual survives when it is inscribed within the rhythms of community and in particular, family life. Public commemoration lasts when it draws out overlaps between national history and family history. Most of those who take the time to engage in the rituals of remembrance bring with them memories of family members touched by these vast events. This is what enables people born long after wars and revolutions to commemorate them as essential parts of their own lives. For example, children born in the aftermath of the First World War told the story of their family upbringing to grandchildren born sixty or seventy years later. This transmission of childhood memories over two or sometimes three generations gives family stories a power that is translated at times into activity—the activity of remembrance.¹⁵

There are occasions when the household itself becomes a site of memory. The great German sculptor and artist Kathe Kollwitz kept the room of her dead son as a kind of shrine, just as it had been when he volunteered for war in 1914. In Paris, there is a public housing project in a working-class neighborhood where above every apartment door is listed the name of a soldier who had died in the Great War. This is their home too, the metaphoric residence of those who were denied the chance the rest of us have of living and dying one at a time.

This framework of family transmission of narratives about the past is an essential part of public commemoration. It also helps us understand why some commemorative forms are changed or simply fade away. When the link between family life and public

commemoration is broken, a powerful prop of remembrance is removed. Then, in a short time, remembrance atrophies and fades away. Public reinforcements may help keep alive the ritual and practice of commemoration. But the event becomes hollow when removed from the myriad small-scale social units that breathed life into it in the first place. At that moment, commemorative sites and practices can be revived and reappropriated. The same sites used for one purpose can be used for another. But most of the time, sites of memory live through their life cycle and, like the rest of us, inevitably fade away.

This natural process of dissolution closes the circle on sites of memory and the public commemoration that occurs around them. And rightly so, since they arise out of the needs of groups of people to link their lives with salient events in the past. When that need vanishes, so does the glue that holds together the social practice of commemoration. Then collective memories diminish and sites of memory decompose or simply fade into the landscape. Let me offer two instances of this phenomenon. For decades Dublin's National War Memorial, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, was completely overgrown with grass. No one could tell what it was, and this was no accident. That thirty-five thousand Irishmen died for Britain's king and country was not an easy matter to acknowledge as a feature of Irish history after the Armistice in 1918. But with the waning of sectarian violence in the later decades of the twentieth century, the grass was cut and the monument reappeared, as if out of thin air. Sites of memory vanish, to be sure, but they can be conjured up again when people decide once again to mark the moment they commemorate. At other times, resurrection is more difficult. For years, I asked my students at Cambridge what they saw at the first intersection into town from the railway station. Most answered nothing at all. What they did not see was the town war memorial, a victorious soldier striding back home, right at the first traffic light into town. They did not see it because it had no meaning to them. It was simply white noise in stone. For them to see it, someone had to point it out, and others had to organize acts of remembrance around it. Without such an effort, sites of memory vanish into thin air and stay there.

We have reached, therefore, a quixotic conclusion. Public commemoration is both irresistible and unsustainable. Constructing sites of memory is a universal social act, and yet these very sites are as transitory as are the groups of people who create and sustain them. Time and again, people have come together at particular places, in front of particular sites of memory, to seek meaning in vast events in the past and try to relate them to their own smaller networks of social life. These associations are bound to dissolve, to be replaced by other forms, with other needs and other histories. At that point, the characteristic trajectory of sites of memory, bounded by their creation, institutionalization, and decomposition, comes to an end.