

Romain Fathi

Représentations muséales du corps combattant de 14-18.

The Australian War Memorial de Canberra au prisme de l'Historial de la Grande Guerre de Péronne

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In this study of the Australian War Memorial through the optic of the Historial at Péronne in Northern France, Romain Fathi offers a fascinating reflection on the contrasting orientation of the two institutions towards the representation of war. This is not a comparative study in the strict sense of the term since Fathi recognises that they are not strictly comparable – the mission of each, the period of their inauguration, the scope of their collections., are very different, as the titles of the institutions reveal. The Memorial, inaugurated in 1941, was raised to record, commemorate and celebrate the service of soldiers in Australia's external wars; the Historial, opened in 1992, was the result of a conscious and considered decision by historians to avoid heroisation of war and to induce reflection on the way WWI has been represented. However Fathi, through establishing a series of analytical oppositions that he sees as uncovering the fundamental characteristics of each, demonstrates how revealing it is to study each institution in the context of the other.

His main focus, as the title suggests, is on the representations of the soldier's body: the way that war is enacted by bodies and its effect on bodies, and his guiding thread in undertaking the comparison is the opposition between verticality and horizontality. At the AWM the soldier is typically represented holding himself erect or in an active, attacking position, confronting the enemy head on, exposing himself to danger, sacrificing himself in a heroic *élan* that is a conscious choice. At Péronne, through the device of displaying much of the material in a series of ditches sunk into the floor, the emphasis is on the horizontality of war fought in the trenches. The soldiers are not represented as heroic figures in frontal combat but as mere elements of uniform, laid out in the earth, drab as camouflage demanded. The items displayed at Péronne bear mute witness to the inequality of a combat that pitched heavy artillery against the almost defenceless human body. At the AWM, however, the injured are usually depicted in ways that minimise the dismemberment, blood and gore of battle.

Péronne displays the modernity of this war that was without precedent, the anonymous nature of the struggle that saw men wiped out by an invisible enemy, its industrial nature. The AWM continues the epic tradition, representing combat (notably in the dioramas to which Bean attached such importance) as a series of battles with visible enemies. The dioramas, pictures and sculptures chosen or commissioned for the Memorial drew on a traditional artistic vocabulary of heroic military conduct. Fathi devotes considerable attention to the sculptures of Simpson and his donkey, using this case study to demonstrate, through a study of the letters exchanged between the instigators of the Memorial and the artists,

that the latter had to conform to certain constraints concerning 'what the public expected to see'.

The author draws upon a wide range of material to illustrate and substantiate his argument: correspondence; visitors' books; the comments of museum guides and personnel; tours for children that offer 'real-life' experiences of wartime conditions. He explores how the physical characteristics of the institutions: the layout of the buildings and disposition of the rooms (an important passage on the significance of the room devoted to the Victoria Crosses won by Australians), together with the selection and display of items, all combine, he argues, to orient the visitor towards a certain experience of war. The gap between representation and interpretation can be wide, however, and, as Fathi recognises (170), he cannot be sure what message the visitors are in fact taking away with them. This is one of a number of intriguing questions raised by this study, for future consideration. To offer another example, since among the historians responsible for the Historial was a group who argued for the existence of 'patriotic consent' amongst the belligerents (68), it would be interesting to explore what impact this theoretical orientation may have had on the collections and presentation at Peronne.

The AWM offers a rich field for reflection on the multiple ways in which commemorative, political and military imperatives and priorities impact on the design and functioning of a museum. The final chapter brings the story of the Memorial up to the present with an analysis of the mutually beneficial relationship forged between recent Australian Prime Ministers and the AWM, a relationship that accords legitimacy to the politician and the assurance of funds to the Memorial (which is financed by a special Government grant).

Recognising that a museum is oriented to the present and the future as much as to the past, Fathi poses finally the question of the model of citizenship the AWM promotes, arguing that it seeks to instill a sense of civic virtue based on self-sacrifice and an incitement to emulation in the young. In this regard it is interesting to note that last year's AWM report stated that it had achieved 125,800 student visits in 2010-11, the highest number ever recorded.

Représentations muséales makes a valuable contribution to the fields of Museum and Memory Studies, sharpening our awareness of the role that the diverse features of the War Museum – design of the building, displays, artwork, literature – play in constructing narratives of conflict.

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