

Institution: Oxford Brookes University		
Unit of Assessment: 27 (English Language and Literature)		
Title of case study: The Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre: Changing Perceptions of War Poetry and Commemoration		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: July 2014–June 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Niall Munro	Senior Lecturer in American Literature & Director, Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre	[text removed for publication]
Dr Jane Potter	Reader (Arts), Oxford International Centre for Publishing	
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 4 July 2014–27 November 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>‘Changing Perceptions of War Poetry and Commemoration’ has challenged the ways poetry is used to understand and commemorate global conflict. Based at the Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre, the project draws on Dr Jane Potter’s research into war writings and Dr Niall Munro’s work on commemorative practices to advocate for a different approach to commemoration. Moving away from nationalism and nostalgia, and towards a more nuanced consideration of conflict in our globalised present, the project has transformed public understanding of what it means to commemorate. ‘Changing Perceptions’ has also generated impact on creativity, culture and society both nationally and internationally by contesting assumptions about well-known war writers and has built capacity through its creation of opportunities for veterans to offer alternative viewpoints on the legacies of conflict.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Potter is a leading international expert on First World War (FWW) poetry, especially the writings of Wilfred Owen. Her findings have challenged the long-held, one-dimensional view of Owen as ‘the poet of pity’. <i>Wilfred Owen: An Illustrated Life</i> reveals Owen’s works to be highly complex and argues against the politically-inflected heritage agenda into which they are traditionally co-opted. [R1] Drawing on previously unpublished archival materials, especially photographs of Owen, his family, and objects relating to his life, Potter offers a more closely informed view of the relationship between Owen’s experiences and his writings. Potter’s edition of Owen’s letters (forthcoming, Bodleian Library Publishing, 2021) shows that the poet’s correspondence was often the blueprint for his poems and refutes the idea – gleaned from a reading of his poetry alone – that Owen was a pacifist. [R2] Potter’s parallel findings on Jessie Pope, demonised as a civilian ‘war-monger’ in Owen’s famous poem ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, reveals Pope to be a deservedly popular poet. Here and elsewhere, Potter has led the call for a wider recognition of women writers of the FWW and a reappraisal of the notion of a ‘war poet’, arguing that non-combatants as well as combatants should be accorded this title. [R3] Potter’s co-authored book, <i>Working in a World of Hurt</i>, continues this reassessment by considering the letters, diaries, memoirs and weblogs produced by doctors, nurses and ambulance drivers during the FWW, Second World War, Vietnam War and in Iraq. Potter’s inclusive, interdisciplinary approach shows that while the experiences of these writers were different to those of combatants, their work must be considered equally and treated on its own terms in order to build a clearer and more accurate picture of war’s conditions and legacies. [R4]</p> <p>Potter’s recovery of the forgotten voices of conflict intersects with Munro’s work on how narratives</p>		

of war are written, recorded and remembered. Munro was Co-Investigator with Professor Kate McLoughlin (University of Oxford) on the Mellon-Sawyer Seminar Series, 'Post-War: Commemoration, Reconstruction, Reconciliation' from 2017 – 2018. Funded by a \$175,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (awarded to the University of Oxford, with events co-conceived and hosted jointly with Oxford Brookes), the Series brought together a wide range of participants such as poets, veterans, museum curators, religious leaders, academics and policymakers in seminars and public gatherings to consider acts of commemoration from across the globe. Events were structured around three different commemorative modes: Textual, Monumental, and Aural. **[R5]** A key conclusion from the 'Post-War' Series was that there is a need, in an increasingly connected world, to move away from parochial forms of memory-making that deal solely with individual countries, and to take into account instead a shared, international set of perspectives. These findings were developed in *On Commemoration*, a volume inspired by the Series and co-edited by Munro. Focussing on the same three modes of commemoration, fifty international contributors endorsed a transnational approach, and argued that an increased sensitivity to current conflicts is essential when remembering wars from the past. **[R6]** The influence of the past on the present also informs Munro's work on Allen Tate and Donald Davidson, two American poets of the Southern Agrarian movement in the early twentieth century. **[R7]** Munro shows how these writers invoked a dangerously nostalgic version of the American Civil War that glorified and incentivised violence in order to legitimise an ideological struggle against the North. Munro draws parallels between 1920s/30s neo-Confederacy, and Confederate ideology and the threat of white supremacy today, especially around the politics of monuments in the United States.

3. References to the research

- R1.** Jane Potter, *Wilfred Owen: An Illustrated Life* (Bodleian Library Publishing, 2014). ISBN: 9781851243945 Between 2014-19, the book sold 1,811 copies; a 'visually stunning book' (Edward Eason).
- R2.** Jane Potter, "I can find no word to qualify my experiences except the word *sheer*": Wilfred Owen's letters and his baptism of fire', in *Writing the Great War: Francophone and Anglophone Poetics*, ed. by Nicolas Bianchi and Toby Garfitt (Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 121-36. ISBN: 9781787073982
- R3.** Jane Potter, "A Certain Poetess": Recuperating Jessie Pope', *Far Beyond the Lines: Landscapes and Voices of the Great War*, ed. by Angela K. Smith and Krista Cowman (Routledge, 2017), pp. 97-114. ISBN: 9781138079878
- R4.** Carol Acton and Jane Potter, *Working in a World of Hurt: Trauma and Resilience in the Narratives of Medical Personnel in Warzones* (Manchester University Press, 2015). ISBN: 9780719090363
- R5.** 'Post-War: Commemoration, Reconstruction, Reconciliation', a Mellon-Sawyer Seminar Series, October 2017 – June 2018. Although the funds were administered by Oxford, the project was a joint endeavour and half of the seminars were held at Oxford Brookes. The project website, with podcasts and videos of the events as well as a blog documenting the Series, is hosted at The Oxford Research Centre for the Humanities (TORCH) website: <https://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/post-war-commemoration-reconstruction-reconciliation>
- R6.** *On Commemoration: Global Reflections upon Remembering War*, ed. by Catherine Gilbert, Kate McLoughlin, and Niall Munro (Peter Lang, 2020). DOI: 10.3726/b14904
- R7.** Niall Munro, 'Neo-Confederates Take Their Stand: Southern Agrarians and the Civil War', *European Journal of American Culture*, 39.2 (2020), 141-62. DOI: 10.1386/ejac_00020_1

4. Details of the impact

'Changing Perceptions' has generated impacts on public understanding and on creativity, culture and society. These include: challenging assumptions about FWW poetry and its authors by sharing field-leading research through a wide range of media appearances; inspiring a reassessment of how we should commemorate war; and empowering military veterans by developing their writing skills so they might create and share their poetry with a wide audience.

In REF2014, the Poetry Centre showed how its work with refugees and asylum seekers

encouraged the local community to reconsider its perception of marginalised people. 'Changing Perceptions' builds on the Centre's proven strengths in harnessing poetry's power to intervene in cultural debates and influence public opinion.

Challenging assumptions about FWW poetry: Through extensive media interviews, Potter has re-shaped public understanding of war writing by challenging existing views of well-known war poets and by recovering overlooked women authors who responded to war in the early decades of the twentieth century. She has appeared on high-profile radio programmes such as *Woman's Hour* (BBC Radio 4, 19 September 2014 – average audience 3.7M) and the *Jeremy Vine Show* (BBC Radio 2, 12 November 2014 – average audience 7.4M). Adrian Munsey, producer of the Sky Arts film *The Pity of War* (2018), commended Potter's 'touching, authoritative and engaging' offering on Owen and her ability 'to evoke and describe both well-known and little-known facts of Owen's life'. **[S1]** The film has so far been broadcast in the UK, New Zealand, Belgium and Norway and was shown three times on 11 November 2018 to mark the 100th anniversary of the end of the FWW. Total UK viewing figures so far are estimated at around 350,000 with worldwide figures of over 8,000,000. Beatrice Rubens, BBC Radio 3 producer of *The Essay*, affirms that Potter's contribution on the American-British poet and novelist Mary Borden to the 'Minds at War' series, which achieved an audience of 132,000 on 7 November 2018, 'was important in extending knowledge of the FWW and of lesser-known female artists'. **[S2]** A representative listener wrote that Potter's broadcast had shown her how '[t]he repercussions of this period are immense' and that 'these texts are still relevant today as civilians are increasingly affected by war'. **[S3]**

Reassessing commemoration: Potter has engaged diverse public audiences on the importance of diversifying the ways conflict is memorialized, especially during the period of the FWW centenary; for example in a public lecture before a production of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* at Guildford Cathedral (2018), at the Rochdale Literature and Ideas Festival (2014), the British Library (2014) and Glasgow Women's Library (2015). Potter was also one of four academics who advised on and featured in *The War Poetry of Wilfred Owen* app, devised by Ian Bennett (Anglia Ruskin University). The app, which costs £7.49, has been downloaded 280 times in the UK, Saudi Arabia, USA, South Africa, Russia, Japan, America and Canada; and has been adopted for use by schools in the Australian state of Victoria. At all of these engagements, Potter has demonstrated poetry's ability to shift the focus away from static and outdated commemorative practices.

Through his collaborative work on 'Post-War' and in the book *On Commemoration*, Munro has encouraged a reassessment of how we commemorate war by insisting that commemorative practices must be considered in transnational, transhistorical terms and always with an eye to the future. 1,286 people attended the fourteen events in the Series which ranged from public keynote talks by internationally-recognised figures, to gatherings for postgraduate and Early Career scholars, to a final concert of music from across the globe focussed on commemoration, held in the Sheldonian Theatre and attended by a capacity audience of 650 people. In addition, the digital outreach of the Series was considerable: the homepage of the Series website received 6,550 visits and the podcast pages were visited 4,841 times. **[S4]** Attendees at the seminars came from at least twenty-four different countries and included novelists, poets, composers and sculptors, lawyers, musicologists, theologians, anthropologists, war veterans, academics from numerous disciplines, and specialists in conflict resolution. During the seminars, they were exposed to many different perspectives on commemoration and its effects (one attendee noted that 'the breadth of commemorative practices discussed was revelatory'), and the events changed the way that they thought about the meanings of commemoration and how it can be practised. A second attendee remarked that they could now 'appreciate more widely the variety and the complexity of commemoration as well as the fact that commemoration and reconciliation may not always be possible or appropriate'. Another attendee explained how the project had made them reconsider the duration and motivation for commemoration, observing that they had been 'particularly struck by the discussion on the future of commemoration. Commemorative acts should indeed be future-oriented and come with ethical commitment.' **[S5]**

Alongside this impact on public learning, the emphasis these projects placed on new writing, particularly poetry as an essential means of commemoration, has had a significant impact on the creative practice of the writers associated with the Series. In addition to the publication of their poetry in *On Commemoration*, two of the poets have seen their careers advanced as a result of

their work as poets-in-residence: Susie Campbell published *Tenter* (Guillemot Press, 2020) and Mariah Whelan's *the rafters were still burning* is forthcoming from Dancing Girl Press. In addition, another contributor to the Series, the internationally-acclaimed writer Dunya Mikhail, has explained that the events helped her to develop her current memoir by showing how linking people through acts of memory can 'diagnose our wounds throughout history, which [...] is a first step in working toward healing our future.' [S6] These successes are testament to work by Munro and the Poetry Centre more generally to increase capacity for writers and allow writers opportunities and spaces in which to thrive and disseminate their work to a range of audiences.

Empowering military veterans through poetry: 'Post-War' and *On Commemoration* revealed how commemorative events still tend to be 'top-down', unimaginative and nationalistic, that organizers frequently fail to consult recent veterans, and that the stereotype of the veteran as an old, white male soldier remains prominent in public consciousness. The Oxford Brookes Veterans' Poetry Workshop was created by the Poetry Centre in 2018 to consider how poetry might allow a range of veterans to commemorate their military experiences differently. It also aimed to build on the success of the Series in considering commemoration beyond national borders by creating a singular and supportive space where UK and US veterans could share experiences and make new work together; and, building on Potter's research findings, explore the role of women in military service. Munro and Potter worked with poet and PhD researcher Susie Campbell, psychologist Dr Rita Phillips (whose work examines public perceptions of US and UK veterans), and veteran Alex Donnelly to develop three three-day workshops for ten UK and US military veterans and one widow of a veteran in March 2019, August 2019 and March 2020. These were held in partnership with Blesma (the UK charity for limbless veterans), New York University Veterans' Writing Workshop and the Joiner Institute, Boston.

Though workshop leaders were always mindful of the risks of re-traumatising those participants who had suffered from PTSD, unlike other writing workshops for veterans these workshops were not designed to primarily focus on writing as a means of catharsis. Instead they helped veterans hone their poetic craft as serious writers, regardless of their stage of development. One participant, Claire Hughes, commented that Potter's discussion about women writers was deeply enabling and 'opened up a whole new world of poetry for me and showed me a tradition' which she could now envisage herself joining. Another participant, Tom Laaser, explained how the Workshop was transformational, helping him create poetry that 'encapsulated a lot of the different images that I was still carrying from war and what I was trying to say with them'. [S7]

The poetry generated by the Workshop was collected in an e-book entitled '*My teeth don't chew on shrapnel*': an anthology of poems by military veterans, allowing nine of the veteran-poets to disseminate their work to an international audience. This anthology also featured a short essay by Potter about recovering the 'hidden tradition' of women war poets. [S8] To maximise distribution, the e-anthology was made freely available and produced in several formats including an audio-enhanced version with readings by the poets. Cognizant of the fact that many veterans have experienced sight loss or other disabilities that require them to use screen-readers, the book was also made available in an accessible epub format. The anthology has been downloaded 818 times (available since May 2020), whilst the website, which has received 1,602 unique visits, includes audio and transcribed interviews with each of the Workshop participants. [S9]

One reader, an arts-based researcher from Australia, commented on how poetry in the anthology 'reaffirmed its potential [for arts-health initiatives]' and that they planned to mention the Workshop in an article about the need for more arts-health research with a focus on women veterans. A second respondent based in the UK who is a creative writing facilitator for Lapidus International (the association that promotes writing for wellbeing), commended the writing prompts in the anthology and explained how they were particularly keen to share these with members of their writing group. This respondent observed that '[t]hey are not military vets but many have been traumatised by other situations, i.e, domestic violence, sexual assault.' [S10]

The Workshop was featured at IF Oxford (Science and Ideas Festival) on 23 October 2019 and also at Think Human, a festival organized by Oxford Brookes (4 February 2020), in two public-facing events that brought facilitators into further collaboration with veteran poet Jo Young. Three of the thirty attendees surveyed noted that their previous knowledge of veterans had been exclusively through Owen or FWW poetry. But as one attendee explained, the event expanded and

enriched their understanding of veterans since it 'bridged the gap between the remoteness of war and everyday life'. [S11]

The project also reached members of the Armed Forces and their families in the UK when it was the subject of a five-part series produced by the British Forces Broadcasting Service (BFBS), aired between from 3–7 August 2020. [S12] The series included interviews with seven of the participants, as well as Munro, Potter and Campbell, and showcased the veterans' writings. The producer of the series, Jo Thoenes, commented that the Workshop 'allowed BFBS to showcase how the arts and the storytelling that can be done by veterans doesn't have to be from one perspective, and how in recent years diversity in representation of the military (and veterans) has gone from strength to strength.' [S13] Munro was also interviewed twice on Radio Oxford [S14] and profiled in *Blesma Magazine*, which has a circulation of 7,000. [S15]

Inspired by their participation in the Workshop and anthology, the veteran-poets have been motivated to continue writing and have successfully published their work. Maggs Vibo's 'To Our Fallen', developed at the Workshop, was included in an online visual poetry exhibition entitled 'Escapisms', curated by Poem Atlas from 15 May – 5 June 2020. Vibo has had other poems published by Ice Floe Press (15 November 2020) and *The Rainbow Poems* anthology (Remembrance Edition 2020), and also took part in the 2020 Army @ the 'Virtual' Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Poetry that Claire Hughes wrote during the Workshop has since been published in *One Hand Clapping Magazine*, *The Rainbow Poems*, and *The Babel Tower Notice Board*.

In these ways, 'Changing Perceptions' has occasioned an important reassessment of public perceptions of war poetry and the creative possibilities for commemoration. The Workshop has benefited from and further enhanced the Poetry Centre's core mission: to build capacity among developing writers from under-represented groups, particularly women, and to maximise the benefits offered by literature to public life.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. Statement by Adrian Munsey, producer of *The Pity of War*. Received 12 September 2019.
- S2. Statement by Beatrice Rubens, producer of *The Essay*. Received 14 August 2019.
- S3. E-mail to Jane Potter from listener to *The Essay*. Received 9 November 2018.
- S4. Statistics obtained from TORCH and the University of Oxford up until July 2020.
- S5. Feedback from participants in the postgraduate conference (26 May 2018) and workshops on 21 October 2017, 10 February 2018, and 19 May 2018.
- S6. Interview with Dunya Mikhail. Conducted 12 November 2020.
- S7. Feedback from participants in the veterans' poetry workshops.
- S8. *'My teeth don't chew on shrapnel': an anthology of poems by military veterans* (Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre, 2020). Includes an introduction by Munro contextualising the Workshop and writing prompts by Campbell. E-book free to download from the Centre's website: <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/poetry-centre/veterans--poetry-workshops/>
- S9. Statistics obtained via Google Analytics and Oxford Brookes' digital repository up until 27 November 2020.
- S10. Feedback from respondents to an online questionnaire about the anthology.
- S11. Feedback from attendee at 'The Poet as Soldier and Veteran' event, 4 February 2020.
- S12. British Forces Broadcast Service (BFBS) broadcast, 3-7 August 2020. An article by Laura Skitt on the BFBS website (31 July 2020) includes audio from the series: <https://www.forces.net/military-life/veterans/how-poetry-helping-explore-what-it-really-be-veteran>
- S13. Supporting statement by Jo Thoenes, BFBS producer. Received 6 August 2020.
- S14. Niall Munro interviewed by Adam Ball, BBC Radio Oxford (audience 75,000), 11 November 2019 and by Lilley Mitchell, 14 June 2020 (a special Sunday feature that shared several poems).
- S15. 'Poetry Can Craft a New Sense of Yourself', *Blesma Magazine*, Autumn 2020, pp. 40-45. Available in e-magazine form: <https://www.flipsnack.com/7C7A9586AED/autumn-blesma-magazine.html>