“HOW MUCH OF AN ‘EXPERIENCE’ DO WE WANT THE PUBL IC TO RECEIVE?”: TRENCH RECONSTRUCTIONS AND POPULAR IMAGES OF THE GREAT WAR

Richard Espley

Perhaps the most ubiquitous and evocative image of the Great War in popular culture is the trench on the Western Front. In novels and film, and in both the classroom and the museum, the trench is called upon to encapsulate the conflict. This focus began in the early stages of the war, as prolonged entrenchment emerged in response to the protracted military stalemate. While it is typically the horror of the trench that is portrayed in recent texts, in wartime journalism and popular writing the dominant tone was frequently of redemptive heroism. The soldier’s suffering was even rendered comic in cartoons such as Bruce Bairnsfather’s extremely successful “Ole Bill” series. Such visions were supplemented by many official reports and depictions with a strong didactic intent, seeking to satisfy curiosity about the battlefield while managing public perceptions in the face of the rising death toll. At the heart of this struggle for representation lay physical recreations of the battlefield in many British towns and cities. Constructed for various reasons, but principally as military training grounds, several of these entrenchments became enormously popular attractions and have been uninterruptedly succeeded by ever more sophisticated simulations. This chapter will seek to examine the first British example, opened to the public in Blackpool in 1916, alongside one of the most high profile, the “Trench Experience,” created in 1990 in London’s Imperial War Museum.

While there are clearly numerous differences in intention, design and impact, there are also many intriguing similarities between these two projects. The “Trench Experience” echoes its forebear in loudly declaring its total verisimilitude, but they are both vulnerable to accusations of providing an incomplete and sanitised vision of the battlefield. The potential impossibility of adequately representing this seminal historical moment has been central to debates on the value and legitimacy of such

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1 Ritchie-Calder (24 November 1988).
replicas. These concerns speak directly to a culture-wide uncertainty about the acceptable imagery of war. By re-examining such issues across these two periods what arguably emerges is not only a more inclusive and flexible attitude towards heritage reconstruction, but ultimately a sounder understanding of where the popular ‘truth’ of the First World War might lie.

The Authenticity of the Loos Trenches

Blackpool was one of many towns whose military authorities ordered the construction of extensive entrenchments in the first years of the war. The digging provided new or inexperienced troops with rigorous exercise, and the finished product offered some training in the routines, and preservation, of life in this essentially new military landscape. However, Blackpool was in a peculiar position in its dual status as a major military centre and the principal resort town of the north of England. Already established as the headquarters of the Royal Army Medical Corps Reserve Training Centre, John K. Walton calculates that, by the winter of 1914, “well over 10,000 troops were accommodated in Blackpool”. Any attempt to perpetuate its aura of gaiety and leisure ran the risk of being challenged as inappropriate in such conditions. As Walton observes, in “war, tourism is as vulnerable as truth, which is proverbially the first casualty”. To survive as a resort, Blackpool needed some means of assuaging the guilt of those being entertained, and of those profiting from it.

Given that the town’s popularity had always relied upon its protean ability to provide a weary public with whatever it desired, it is not surprising that it soon discovered a means of satisfying both patriotic duty and the demand for leisure. The local newspaper reported in June of 1916 that “what is admitted to be undoubtedly the finest example of trench work to be seen anywhere in this country” had been “declared open to the general public”. Extending to over two miles in length, Blackpool certainly boasted a more complex and substantial system of trenches than was to be seen in most towns. The same newspaper had declared months previously that “high military officers […] have

\[2\] Walton (1996).
\[3\] “In the Trenches” (13 June 1916).