

Battlefield Cemeteries, Pilgrimage, and Literature after the First World War: The Burial of the Dead.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Battlefield Cemeteries, Pilgrimage, and
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The Burial of the Dead**

Joanna Scutts

Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
"Their name liveth for evermore" the Gateway claims.
Was ever an immolation so belied
As these intolerably nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.

—Siegfried Sassoon, "On Passing the New
Menin Gate," 1928¹

In a war where the full strength of nations was used without respect of persons, no difference could be made between the graves of officers or men. Yet some sort of central idea was needed that should symbolize our common sacrifice wherever our dead might be laid and it was realized, above all, that each cemetery and individual grave should be made as permanent as man's art could devise.

—Rudyard Kipling, *The Graves of the Fallen*,
1919²

On 17 February 1919, *The Times* of London published an article by Rudyard Kipling—popular author, vocal war propagandist, and bereaved father—describing how the British war cemeteries overseas would be designed and built, thus outlining for a reeling nation what the graves of their loved ones would look like.³ The article, prosaically titled "War Graves: Work of Imperial Commission: Mr. Kipling's Survey," was quickly republished as an illustrated booklet, *The Graves of the Fallen*, that broke up Kipling's text with elegant watercolor artist's impressions of the cemeteries. The rapid evolution of this article from news item to souvenir booklet exemplifies the dynamic process by which the battlefield cemeteries, the core British memorial site of **[End Page 387]** the First World War, were written into cultural existence and acceptance, largely through the efforts of Kipling, the official "literary advisor" to the organization in

charge, the Imperial War Graves Commission. Because so many elements of the cemeteries' design were new and controversial—most importantly the uniformity of their appearance and the equal treatment of all ranks of the dead—the Commission had to work hard to persuade the public that its decisions were right, proper, and inevitable. Thus in the years of their design and creation, the battlefield cemeteries had a significant engagement with the contemporary literary culture and as such constitute a rich and productive area of literary-historical inquiry. The cemeteries had conceptual roots in the poetry of Rupert Brooke, and under Kipling's guidance they were inscribed with poetic fragments and laden with symbolism that turned visitors into active readers and interpreters. The popular practice of cemetery pilgrimage, especially the model tour undertaken by King George V in 1922, offers an underexplored context for one of the signature works of modernism, published at the end of that year, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Meanwhile, contemporary short stories by Katherine Mansfield and—somewhat ironically—by Kipling himself feature pilgrimage and the cemeteries as emblems of abiding war trauma.⁴

Before 1914, the commemoration of war was usually the private business of families or the army rather than of the state. The most recent British conflicts, in South Africa and the Crimea, were memorialized inconsistently, usually via domestic or battlefield monuments that named primarily high-ranking officers. The bodies of the dead might be repatriated if families could afford to pay, but common soldiers often rested in mass graves. No single body had authority for all the battlefield sites, nor were those sites preserved and transformed into places of pilgrimage.⁵ The First World War cemeteries deviated from these precedents in several ways. From early in the war it was widely recognized that existing commemorative modes were not sufficient for this new kind of war; combatants and civilians alike reflected on its exceptionality and questioned how, where, when, and by whom it would be remembered. Classically educated British officers could draw upon a wealth of sources for such reflection, such as the notorious Horatian ode from which Wilfred Owen drew the title and bitter

conclusion to his most famous poem: “*Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori.*” For Owen, the use of this kind of poetry by civilians to sublimate the horrors of the battlefield was morally indefensible. For the War Graves...

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JOANNA SCUTTS
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