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Beyond “for ever England”: Contemporary British Women’s War Poetry and the First World War Canon

Abstract: Turning to the First World War patriotic narrative of “for ever England,” epitomised by Rupert Brooke and his writing as the point of departure, this paper investigates 21st century commemorative women’s poetry written during the First World War centenary years and its subversive interaction with this traditional war narrative. This article argues that while the public discourse on war memory often turned to the idea of a “shared past” between the UK and former colonies, thus “sanitising” the history of colonial violence (as argued by Santanu Das), poems by Yrsa Daley-Ward, Malika Booker, Imtiaz Dharker, and Jenny Lewis written for commemorative anthologies effectively de-colonise the narrative(s) of the First World War by opening up the space for new voices and construing the image of England beyond “for ever England” in its relation to other spaces and other wars.

Keywords: women’s war poetry, the First World War, Jenny Lewis, Yrsa Daley-Ward, Imtiaz Dharker, Malika Booker, Rupert Brooke, colonialism

1. Introduction

The title of this paper is cited from arguably the most recognisable First World War poem, “The Soldier” by Rupert Brooke. Published and canonised immediately after Brooke’s death in 1915, the poem emerged as a “nostalgic motif of England and Englishness” (Rutherford 8). The famous patriotic image of the “English heaven,” described at the end of the poem, is central to Brooke’s other writing, too: in his short prose text “An Unusual Young Man,” published in 1916, Brooke writes how

[The] word “England” seemed to flash like a line of foam. With a sudden tightening of his heart, he realised that there might be a raid on the English coast. [...] The

idea sickened him. He was immensely surprised to perceive that the actual earth of England held for him a quality which he found in A-, and in a friend's honour, and scarcely anywhere else, a quality which, if he'd ever been sentimental enough to use the word, he'd have called "holiness." His astonishment grew as the full flood of "England" swept him on from thought to thought. He felt the triumphant helplessness of a lover. (177–178)

In both texts – "An Unusual Young Man" and "The Soldier" – England emerges as giving, fertile, maternal, and peaceful, thus brushing aside the history of the country's colonial violence. The starting point of this patriotic sentiment is the fear of "warfare on English soil" (177). The image of England embodied as a woman in sudden need of protection exhilarates the speaker and ultimately opens up the possibility of a masculinist, traditionalist, patriotic voice.

This, however, was hardly a new voice: as Rutherford writes, at the end of the 19th century, observing the negative impacts of modernity and social instability, many British writers and intellectuals turned to "rural England as a symbol of the country's unchanging essence," as "an Arcadian idyll" (51). This narrative was set to "reinvent the English nation in an age of imperialism" (50–51). Despite its focus on (an imaginary) England, it was simultaneously embedded in colonial thinking: in his seminal work *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell writes that "the special British ruralism is partly the result [...] of a tradition of Imperialist exile from home" (252). Fussell based his argument on Raymond Williams, who argued that the romantic idea of "home" emerged prominently among Britons living in the colonies. Their "ideal of rural England" opposed the "strangeness" of the colonial spaces: "[England's] green peace contrasted with the tropical or arid places of actual work; its sense of belonging, of community, [idealised] by contrast with the tensions of colonial rule and the isolated alien settlement" (405). These patriotic feelings embedded in the idealised image of the rural English countryside only intensified with the start of the First World War. As Craig argues, "in reaction to the external threat [...] England was recreated between 1914 and 1918 as the site of rural holiness" (131). Perfectly placed in this narrative, the image of "for ever England" became a convenient source of patriotism during the First World War, and a source of nostalgia thereafter (Rutherford 8).

In this article,¹ I am turning to Brooke as a starting point, against which contemporary commemorative poetry will be analysed. His famous poem epitomises a British, or specifically English, heroic war narrative, which still exists in various forms in commemoration and the popular memory of the First World War, manifesting itself most evidently in the cultural centrality of the figure of the 'soldier boy' or soldier-poet. For a long time, the centrality of British male soldier experience signified the marginality and exclusion of the colonial voice as well as voices of women, conscientious objectors, and other non-combatants, both immediately after the First World War and in the decades to come. In this paper,

I offer a comparative close reading of commemorative poems written by Jenny Lewis, Yrsa Daley-Ward, Malika Booker, and Imtiaz Dharker. These texts present different strategies of writing war beyond “for ever England.” Daley-Ward and Booker oppose the colonial narratives by creating a strikingly different image of England in war poetry, and by introducing new speakers. Lewis and Dharker turn to other wars and non-European spaces while remaining within the commemorative framework. In my analysis of these contemporary texts, I will also occasionally return to the figure of the soldier-poet, because, as my analysis shows, tension with original First World War writing, as well as its well-established iconography, remains at the core of the 21st century commemoration.

2. The First World War Centenary: Poetry and Commemoration

Over the past decades, the centrality of the white English soldier narrative has been continuously challenged by cultural historians and literary scholars of the First World War. Remarkable scholarly work has been done by Santanu Das (*Race, Empire and First World War Writing*), Richard Smith (*Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War*), Catherine Reilly, Nosheen Khan, Margaret Higonnet (in the anthology *Lines of Fire*), and others. In this academic and cultural context, some changes have finally started to take place in the public discourse surrounding the First World War and its commemoration. In his most recent article “Colonial Commemoration in a Time of Multiculturalism” (2021), Santanu Das writes that something was different about the First World War centenary celebrations: the programme set up between 2014 and 2018 was conceptualised as “the grand-stage to play the theme of multiculturalism” with a strong focus on “diversification” (22). However, Das convincingly argues that in terms of public memory “diversification” did not lead to “decolonisation”: on the level of the political discourse, the narrative of the “shared past” was often instrumentalised (29–30). A narrative was constructed that was supposed to unite the 21st century UK and its former colonies in the process of commemoration, circumventing the “shared past” of centuries of colonial violence and oppression (Das 2021, 21–22).

In this complex commemorative framework, poetry remained one of the central forms in which commemoration was ‘performed’: new poems emerged in large numbers – commissioned for anthologies, war documentaries and performances. Some anthologies commemorated particular poets (*Peace Poetry: RSL Poets Mark the Centenary of Wilfred Owen’s Death*, 2018), others turned to international examples of First World War poetry for inspiration (*1914: Poetry Remembers*, 2013). Other anthologies addressed experiences that were never represented in the First World War canon (*Unwritten: Caribbean Poems After the First World War*, 2018). The scope of poets and poetries represented there was very diverse, which is essential to acknowledge in a field historically dominated by white male

voices: many women poets, poets of colour, and poets of migration background were commissioned to contribute. Similarly, while big names (such as Carol Ann Duffy, Jackie Kay, Simon Armitage) were represented, these anthologies also gave a platform to a new generation of (performance) poets, such as Yrsa Daley-Ward or Warsan Shire. Among these responses, the centrality of Duffy's, as British Poet Laureate at the time (2009–2019), has to be addressed: throughout the centenary years, Duffy edited several commemorative anthologies and wrote commemorative poetry which was widely represented in the UK media as well as integrated into the commemorative events. For instance, Duffy's poem "A Wound in Time" was part of "Pages of the Sea" (2018), a UK-wide commemorative event conceptualised and curated by Danny Boyle. Her editorial efforts to bring together a diverse group of contemporary voices to comment on the First World War opened up the space of war writing. Namely, she expanded the field of who is encouraged to write about the events of public importance of such scale and significance in the UK and within the UK commemorative framework.

While the poetry that was commissioned in the commemorative context might also be instrumentalised by political discourse, it certainly generates more nuance, and, I would argue, does the work of "decolonisation" that Das deems necessary. Many contemporary poets writing in a commemorative context today also effectively subvert the expected forms that commemoration can take and change the perspective on who gets to be commemorated and how. In this essay, I will turn to selected poems written by women poets in the context of the 2014–2018 First World War centenary celebrations. In these new texts, the questions of Black, colonial or female agency become central, as women poets write work that challenges the established narratives of the First World War.

3. England From Far Away: Colonial Speakers, Post-Colonial Perspectives

It is not accidental that the poetry anthology which was published in 2018 focussing on the Caribbean experience of the First World War was called *Unwritten*. In the absence of the 'original' colonial soldier poetry in the canon, poets such as Karen McCarthy Woolf, Malika Booker, Jackie Kay, Yrsa Daley-Ward and others are doing the work of writing 'into the void'. In their works, these poets reimagine what this body of writing might have looked like had it existed. Very often this writing is based on stories of soldiers and their families who left some form of a written trace: for instance, Kay wrote poems for a BBC Four documentary about a Black Scottish soldier in the First World War whose diary was accidentally found in Glasgow in 2004 (Kay). Booker's poems published in the anthology *Unwritten* were inspired by a story of a young soldier displayed at the Jamaica Military Museum (Booker). Charnell Lucien's poems "Broken Letters" were also "inspired by real correspondence during the war found in the Imperial Museum" (Lucien). In

other words, there is a record of these Black and colonial experiences in the context of the First World War, but that record was rarely made available in the context of the UK commemoration, or rarely became the subject of commemorative literature or poetry. As a result, these poets introduce new speakers and new voices into the established commemorative narratives. While England as the metropole inevitably appears in these texts, it is represented in a way that is far removed from if not directly opposed to an Anglocentric version of the First World War.

“When Your Mother Calls You, Come” (2016) by Yrsa Daley-Ward was a part of the commemorative multimedia project *Fierce Light*. The poem follows a Black Jamaican man who volunteers to fight for England in the First World War. The text is submerged in conflicted contexts of masculinity, colonial patriotism and violence, and the underrepresented Black and colonial experience of the war. The tension between the colonial sense of duty and colonial oppression emerges early on in the poem. The second stanza reads: “If your mother was stolen / Or you never had one / You go to the one who calls you / Even if her voice comes through far away / And she doesn’t know your name” (2016a, 9). The reference to imperial Britain as a mother(-land) is related to the traditional iconography of Britannia, especially in the context of patriotic verse. However, here the image of the “mother” from “far away” is opposed by the image of the “stolen mother”: a metaphor of the colonial order’s distorting a sense of belonging in the colonies. The image of the “stolen mother” may also be linked to narratives of slavery, thus referring to earlier storylines that are an integral part of British imperial history.

To oppose the voice of England, the mother from “far away,” Daley-Ward introduces a second voice in the poem, the voice of the soldier’s grandmother, who laments:

Your grandma said, “Don’t
you go. This war that isn’t
ours will take the best of us
and the worst of us
[...]
Our men too black so they send dem
away Our men try back again dey send
dem away Some of dem too soft and
dey run them ‘way most they a guh lose
and few they take why our boys a run
guh foreign to be German bait?” (2016a, 10)

What stands out is the ‘foreignness’ of this war, referred to twice in this excerpt: “war that isn’t ours” and “why our boys a run guh foreign.” This stance effectively opposes the narrative of a shared war that, as Das argues, commemorative and political discourse has embraced. The narrative of the imperial duty ‘calling’ its

colonial subjects, which emanates from the estranged and distant ‘mother,’ therefore clashes with the familiar voice of another female ancestor, the grandmother. It is especially interesting to hear Daley-Ward read the last section: she intones it differently from the rest of the poem, emphasising a distinctive rhythm and melody, making this stanza stand out (2016b). This is the case of ‘giving voice’ in a very literal sense: not only through the choice of a character/speaker who is completely absent from the ‘grand narrative’ of the war, but also by representing Caribbean English in melody and print in the texture of the poem (“dey,” “dem,” “guh” etc.). In the case of Daley-Ward, it is also the language that embodies her own family history, as a daughter of a Jamaican woman.

However, Daley-Ward also complicates this anti-colonial sentiment by writing about a protagonist who, in fact, volunteers to fight, believing in a version of imperial patriotism and duty. Within this complicated context, it is significant that one of the means that is instrumental in creating this false sense of shared identity is English poetry, which appears in the poem as means of colonial propaganda:

and when your mother calls you
 you come swiftly
 [...]
 come half-reciting
 parables you learned
 as a child
 running over fields
 with pans of water
 quoting English verse (2016a, 11)

In this section of the poem, “English verse” can be read as a metonymy for colonial education, which encouraged such men to fight under the British flag. “English verse” becomes synonymous with the image of good colonial Britannia, instrumentalised for the purposes of propaganda. It provides colonial subjects with a false sense of common cultural space they are meant to protect and fight for, but of which they are in no way a part.

Malika Booker’s poem “Her Silent Wake” was written for the anthology *Unwritten: Caribbean Poems after the First World War*. The poem was inspired by a story of a seventeen-year-old Jamaican soldier Herbert Morris, who was court-martialled for desertion. “Her Silent Wake” focuses on his grieving mother: Booker writes in her author’s note that her work “often focuses on the lives of black women and on making them visible and heard, particularly in the narratives in which they are absent” (Booker). The poem therefore should be read at the intersection of race and gender, with a postcolonial lens: it focuses on the Other twice excluded – as a woman of colour and a colonial subject. In the poem, the woman encouraged her son to enlist (which allows Booker to represent the ambiguous

sense of duty to the metropole), but the death of Herbert results in vocal and explicit anti-colonial protest. The speaker spells out her hatred against the metropole:

The motherland had called our sons to her bosom
Come sons come
fight
for your motherland
 she said
 that bitch, pressed her calloused feet
 onto our boys’ backs, until spines
 cracked,
 then grind those broken
 bones into pieces and did
 not send their crumbs back. (Booker)

In the final, fifth part of the poem, the curse is repeated, when the speaker calls England “that bitch of a stepmother England built a forest of bones for rats to feast on succulent black men” (Booker). As in Daley-Ward’s poem, England is seen as a wicked (step-) mother figure, a “mother-land” – placed in direct opposition with the mother-speaker of the poem – benefitting from its colonial subjects, even feasting on them like prey. It is important to note that this loud grieving as well as the use of taboo lexis is an important divergence from the British First World War narrative: women were expected to mourn their family members in silence, since “[r]evealing one’s unhappiness” as well as grief “[was] unpatriotic” (Plain 47). Therefore, the anticolonial aspects of the poem are revealed even in the form of the speaker’s grief – loud, despite the poem’s title.

Throughout the poem, Booker represents grief in violent descriptions of pain and acts of self-harm. The speaker’s own body and physicality are central because what drives her mad is the inability to physically bury her son, whose body was never returned to her:

she bent her back and crawled in the dirt pushing in the seeds [...]
 howling her son Herbert’s name, like psalm, like hymn,

like scripture. It would be said that in the absence of a body she had to
 bury something (Booker)

The absence of the body, and therefore complete disappearance of the speaker’s son invites comparison with Brooke’s “The Soldier”: the speaker of Brooke’s poem famously imagines the site of his death or burial as “some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England” (111). In this context, this thought can be read as a colonising gesture in itself: the body of the soldier is “A body of England’s,”

and it is colonising the space of a “foreign field” by converting it into “for ever England.” Unlike in Brooke’s text, in Booker’s poem the body is absent; it is immaterial, precisely because it was taken away and never returned home: “I think about how they take you whole and send / you back an inked name on paper”; “what mother does not want the crumpled / dust of her son instead of nothing?”; “now she is making him a garden / of flowers, a monument, a way of burying something into this island’s earth” (Booker). The image of the “crumpled dust” in Booker’s poem also links to and opposes Brooke’s “richer dust [...] A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware” (111). Brooke’s image of dust thus continues to, metonymically, stand for England, as if its “Englishness” were part of a traceable provenance, while the mother of Booker’s poem wishes to receive the “dust” of her dead son as proof of his materiality – of his ever existing. It is significant that in the poem, it is the British army that killed the woman’s son for deserting and never returned his body. His body, unlike Brooke’s soldier’s, does not colonise space; it was colonised. Thus, colonial violence and the violence of war intersect to destroy the body of the speaker’s son without a trace.

Both Booker’s and Daley-Ward’s poems turn to the First World War to introduce a different kind of speaker that is absent from Anglocentric war writing. Most significantly, in these contemporary poems, the legacy of the First World War is not treated as separate from the legacy of colonial violence, slavery, and racism: the complicated history is often masked by the “sterile” narratives of the “shared past” and “fighting side by side” that can be still observed in commemoration today (Das 2021, 21–22). As a result, these poems are as much about the First World War as they are about the absence of Black and colonial commemoration in the 21st century UK.

4. Far Away from England: From WWI to Other Wars

Despite writing (or being commissioned to write) in the specific context of the First World War commemoration, many poets made a decision to extend their commemorative verse to other wars. It is not coincidental that in these texts poets turn away from the UK to non-European, non-white spaces. Without doing this overtly, these texts effectively argue that war is not only something that happens to white bodies on the European continent. The fact that these texts appear in the context of the First World War commemoration can therefore be interpreted as a subversive and political gesture: the subversion emerges as a result of a tension between text and context. A radical example of this tension is “War Poem” by Warsan Shire. Shire was commissioned to contribute to the Poetry Society’s anthology devoted to the centenary of the First World War (*The Pity*, published in 2014), yet chose not to refer to that conflict. Instead, she writes about the war in Somalia, police brutality in the United States and elsewhere, the refugee crisis

and the instrumentalization of refugee narratives by the UK media, as well as about conflict’s effect on the (female) body. The fact that Shire’s “War Poem” was published in an anthology devoted to the First World War effectively opens a debate on what commemoration consists of, and which wars and conflicts can be addressed in a commemorative framework. Two poets discussed in this final part of this essay, Jenny Lewis and Imtiaz Dharker, inspire a similar debate while, unlike Shire, still turning to the iconography of the First World War.

Jenny Lewis’s poetry collection *Taking Mesopotamia* was first published by Carcanet in 2014, and the collection presents a contemplation on war as exemplified by two conflicts set largely in the same geographical space almost a hundred years apart: the Mesopotamian campaign in the First World War, in which Lewis’s father participated, and the Iraq War. The two conflicts emanate from a very different set of contexts: the discourse around the First World War has been formed by decades of school education, the literary canon, and ‘respectful’ commemoration (often heroic, tragic, patriotic narratives), while the Iraq War is too recent and controversial to allow for any mode of commemoration to ‘settle.’ In the collection, the parallels between the two wars are initially created by the placement of pairs of texts, which should be read together. The book is punctuated with dated poems: “March 1916” is followed by “March 2003,” “April 1916” by “April 2010,” and so on. Most of the First World War poems are written from the perspective of Tom, Lewis’s father. In the Iraq War poems, the speakers change: sometimes they are American or British soldiers, men, women and children from Iraq, refugees, witnesses of the war, or their family members. The conflict or connection of each pair of poems is noticeable when one reads them together: through time, they seem to mirror each other, creating a dialogue between the Mesopotamian Campaign and the Iraq War beyond the identity of geographical location. For instance, in the poem “November 1916” the speaker Tom contemplates the violence his army is inflicting on the civilian population:

[...] it’s almost beautiful, yet moments
 later, we are shelling a village with women and
 children on fire, running for their lives. I weep.
 Christ said *suffer the little children to come to me*
 yet how we make those little children suffer. (Lewis; original emphasis)

The responding poem from the Iraqi campaign, “November 2009,” is written from the perspective of “Khwater Sadeq, aged 13, a Muslim orphan (interviewed in the *Guardian* [sic], 2009)” (Lewis; original emphasis). These notes, explaining who the speakers of Lewis’s poems are, form another important feature of the Iraq war texts. Her speakers are often traceable, documented persons whose life was destroyed by the wars. In some cases, the lines and phrases uttered by the speakers can be traced to actual interviews, as in this case. Such modified direct speech gives

these characters agency. Khwater tells the story from a perspective that was not available to Tom: “My name is Khwater Sadeq, when the war came / we had terrible suffering, / shelling from the air, / explosions, tanks, suicide bombers: all the time / fear for me and my seven sisters” (Lewis). In the sections of the poem quoted above, Tom is the agent of violence and Khwater (or his double nearly a century earlier) is the victim of violence. Because of the placement of these two texts, it almost appears as if Tom is the one inflicting violence on Khwater through time.

What does this sense of continuity achieve? On the one hand, it suggests that two different conflicts, almost a hundred years apart, are in fact deeply intertwined – through the dialogue of the texts, the space-time of both wars (a Bakhtinian chronotope) merges into one. It is also significant that the Iraq War allows Lewis to introduce a polyphony into the collection that is otherwise centred on the figure of her father: the singularity of the First World War voice, that of the British soldier, matches the canonical and singular status of the texts written by soldiers, and as the reader moves between the early 20th century and the 21st, the change of voice to that of ‘Others’ becomes more and more apparent. It is especially significant that the collection does not only speak with its reader in English, as several poems have been translated into Arabic and published in the volume (and the first poem of the volume is dedicated to Lewis’s translator, thus creating a sense of dialogue from the start). This bilingual element makes possible a different creation of space and readership: this is not poetry written about the ‘Other’ for British audiences or the UK commemoration alone; it is a poetry that wishes to represent the Mesopotamian and Iraqi experience as a dialogue across space and time.

Another example of a text linking the commemorative context to a different, more contemporary conflict is Imtiaz Dharker’s poem “A Century Later,” which was published in the anthology *1914: Poetry Remembers*. In her poem, Dharker responds to one of the most canonical First World War texts by Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth.” Owen’s famous first line “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?” (73) turns into Dharker’s “The school-bell is a call to battle / every step to class, a step into the firing line” (71). In this way, Dharker alludes to one of the most famous and recognisable first lines in war poetry, which helps connect her text to an established First World War narrative. However, she refers to a different battlefield: the school.

As the poem develops, it becomes clear that Dharker has a very particular protagonist in mind, and a specific battlefield: she is writing about the Pakistani activist for women’s and girls’ education Malala Yousafzai, who in 2012 survived an assassination attempt, being shot on her way from school. The poem does not refer to her directly, but in context the connection is apparent:

Surrendered, surrounded,
she takes the bullet in the head
and walks on. The missile cuts

a pathway in her mind,
 to an orchard in full bloom,
 a field humming under the sun,
 its lap open and full of poppies. [...] (71–72)

Here, and in other parts of the poem, Dharker uses a vocabulary of militarism and war. This vocabulary is rarely used to describe the war experience of women, who are usually imagined away from the frontlines. By employing this language, Dharker establishes women’s struggle for education as a battlefield of its own. Another notable feature in the excerpt quoted above is how Dharker describes the mind of her protagonist as “an orchard / in full bloom” (71). Besides the reference to poppies as a very recognisable symbol of war and commemoration, it is perhaps more striking that the poet describes the inside of the girl’s mind in the same terms as in First World War writing rural England was described: as a utopian ideal at home worth fighting for as “the site of a rural holiness” (Craig 131). Dharker utilises this metaphor to mean something else entirely: the complex mind of her protagonist, also as an ideal worth fighting for.

Dharker’s poem, therefore, shifts the focus from a male English perspective on the First World War to a very contemporary experience of Pakistani women and girls in the context of their battle for education. Because she is responding to Owen’s poem, Dharker writes her own “Anthem for (Doomed) Youth,” except that her ‘soldier boys’ are young women and girls in Pakistan. In doing so, the poem ‘decentralises’ the European, soldier-centred vision of what defines war. Similarly, in Lewis’s collection, the transition of focus from England to Mesopotamia and Iraq, and from a single soldier voice to a multitude of voices, linking all through time, allows the poet to problematise the singular status of the Great War in the commemorative imaginary.

5. Conclusion

I opened this paper with several quotations from Rupert Brooke, a canonical voice in the First World War narrative, which, in public memory, is still largely predicated on the stories of soldiers and located in European spaces. This version of the war narrative largely ignores other stories: those of continued colonial violence, for instance, as Claire Buck convincingly argues in her essay “Reframing Women’s War Poetry” (2011): “From the perspective of the colonial or postcolonial writer, conventional British spatial and period classifications of 20th war – the First World War and the Second World War – operate as convenient national fictions organized around the disavowal of Britain’s imperial history” (26–27). In this context, annual commemorative ceremonies and events play a large role, as they either keep perpetuating or challenging these ‘national fictions.’ Due to the significant role

which poetry has always played in British commemoration, contemporary poets can also access and shape this narrative.

In his introduction to *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, Das writes: “The contours of the ‘Great War and modern memory’ start to look different if instead of the writings of an ordinary European soldier, [...] we take the memories of an Indian sepoy, a Chinese worker or an African askari” (2014, 1–2). This is true not just for cultural and historical research: as the poems analysed in this paper look beyond “for ever England,” they search for new protagonists beyond the European soldier and spaces beyond Western Europe, and thus complicate the existing mainstream narratives and oppose the “sanitisation of the violence” which Das comments on in relation to centennial celebrations (2021, 22). The tension with the commemorative context within which these texts emerge is therefore of utmost importance.

Poems by Daley-Ward and Booker turn to England as a centre of colonial violence in and beyond the context of the First World War: both poets chose to give voice to colonial soldiers and their families, whose critical perspective on Britain, as well as their struggle with a version of imperial patriotism is far removed from the patriotism of “for ever England.” Lewis and Dharker write to remove the focus from the “Great War” and exclusively white, European, British spaces, and turn to other wars, such as the Iraq war, where the British involvement resulted in a commemorative narrative that is very different from that of the First World War. At the same time, both poets turn to the First World War for images and allusions, thus making the parallels between the different wars more pronounced. These four poems are only a small selection: writing about the First World War, poets also turn to distinctly Scottish and Welsh voices, embody experiences of women during the wars, write about the experiences of the ‘Other,’ racism and sexism, and comment on the legacies of Empire. While it is hard to predict whether these poems will also become part of commemorative ceremonies and school curricula in the future, they are representative of what is happening with commemorative poetry today: diversification and decolonisation of the war narrative – something that is surely long overdue.

Notes

1. The analysis of the poems presented in this paper is based on my doctoral thesis preliminarily entitled “A Century Later: Twenty-First-Century Women’s War Poetry and First World War Commemoration in the UK” (to be submitted by the end of 2023).

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