

# ***Review: Museums, History and the Intimate Experience of the Great War: Love and Sorrow***

By Joy Damousi, Deborah Tout-Smith, and Bart Ziino, eds.  
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It has now become a durable trend within the museological practice to diverge from the traditional ways of displaying objects by exposing the visitors' senses to multiple stimuli such as sound, smell, and vision. The conscious use of emotions in the exhibitions aim at evoking a more authentic and intimate relationship with a historical experience: 'Museums by their very nature are places where people move and talk, see, think and feel, becoming theatres of the emotion whereby the threads of materiality that link us metaphorically to the past are engaged with the senses as well as the intellect' (Watson 2016, 80). At the same time, within the field of history, the growing emphasis is placed on the individual experience of the past, the cognitive stances that accompanied historical actors, their social and material contexts but also the role of the human body and practices related to the life cycle (Frevert 2018). In the light of the centenary of World War One (1914–1918), historians investigating the conflict have increasingly begun to appreciate the insights coming from the individual and collective emotional experience and the meanings that were attributed to it (Roper 2011; Rosenberg 2014; Wilcox 2012). This is to say that history and museology have been under the ongoing influence of the 'emotional turn'.

Against this background, *The Museums, History and the Intimate Experience of the Great War: Love and Sorrow* brings forward a valuable contribution to history of emotions as well as to Australian history and memory. Both history and museology shape the analytical input of this book. Firstly, on the historical level, the experience of the war does not constrain itself to the battlefield as the book incorporates into the narrative not only the war's direct participants but also civilians, families and those who stayed at home (Damousi, Tout-Smith and Ziino 2020, 1).

Moreover, it argues that the perception of World War One transcends the intimacy of one generation by tracing the evolution of emotions that the next generations of Australians (family-members, historians) ascribed to the national involvement in the world-wide conflict.

Secondly, the museological perspective lies in the book's reflection on the highly successful exhibition *Love and Sorrow* hosted by Museum Victoria in Melbourne (2014-2018). The main aims of the exhibition included challenging the triumphant, nationalist representation of war by showing 'the graphic impacts of war on bodies, minds, families and communities, and across generations' (Ibidem, 1). *Love and Sorrow* represented none of the traditional language associated with the commemoration of the Anzacs (Ibidem, 173). It also stayed away from military and political framework (Ibidem, 153). Visitors were not told the martyrological story, but were instead encouraged to become more emotionally engaged through witnessing real stories of individuals who fought in the war but also struggled with the ghosts of the past in its aftermath. The curatorial choice to focus on the particular stories rather than on the whole grand narrative made the whole experience intensive and touching.

Overall, the main argument of the book entails that the remembrance concerning World War One needs to be assessed as a wide-reaching process which begins with the sounds of artillery barrage and concludes with the choices of how to display the intimate experience. Soldiers, families and relatives but also historians do not simply immortalize the past but they actively shape the perception of the historical event by ascribing their emotional attachment to it.

The first main theme of the volume considers the immediate experience of World War One. The collected chapters effectively capture the feelings of individuals and collectives – the participants as well as those who remained at home. In her analysis of World War One soundscapes, Joy Damousi stresses the importance of sounds for combatants and civilians for their remembrance of the conflict. As she argues, these sounds were not merely background noise but instead '[they] defined the memory of the war; and [they] elicited a range of emotional responses' (Damousi 2020, 10). Ross McMullin's research on the Australian military officer, Major General Harold 'Pompey' Elliott, provides the reader with a detailed account of the wartime feelings accompanying the sensitive individual. According to the author, Elliott should be considered as an exception within the army ranks, precisely because of his high emotional volatility. Bart Ziino's chapter significantly shifts the attention away from the battlefield as he instead takes the reader to the Australian home front. By analyzing letters addressed to the Australian general sir John Monash, the author reveals the variety of emotional stances of those who stayed away from the frontline but nevertheless suffered from anxiety, grief, and a sense of alienation.

The second thematic part of the volume offers a reflection on historical practice and how the recognition of feelings of both historical subjects and historical analysts may contribute to our understanding of World War One. By scrutinizing the case of his grandfather, an Anzac soldier, Alistair Thomson traces the long-lasting detrimental consequences of the war – both in physical and emotional terms. Specifically, he identifies that instances of mental illness were providently hidden not only by army doctors but also by family-members. The chapter by Peter Stanley identifies the way in which the practitioners of military history and museum curators went beyond their interest in the allegedly ‘objective’ historical qualities such as weapons, uniforms, army movements and embraced the notion of personal experience by focusing more on accounts and objects that could effectively convey emotion. Apart from the general trends within the disciplines, historians are also carriers of personal emotions which profoundly influence their analytical choices and the general perception of the past. This aspect is discussed at length by Tracey Loughran, who highlights the impact of the personal events involving sense of insecurity and grief on her interest and perception of World War One.

The last part of the book is dedicated to museology and varying curatorial concepts that accompanied the creation of the exhibition *Love and Sorrow* in Museum Victoria in Melbourne. Deborah Tout-Smith considers personal lives, intimate experiences and emotional responses as the underlying principles of the curatorial plan. She highlights that ‘the intent is to maximize emotional engagement and provide an environment in which new ways of seeing become possible’ (Tout-Smith 2020, 153). Visitors entering the museum’s rooms are no longer passive recipients: they become participants in these (hi)stories. Andrea Witcomb’s research discloses that the *Love and Sorrow* exhibition enables a feminist history to emerge (Witcomb 2020, 171). She admits that such a narrative may implicitly critique Australia’s masculinist mythology around World War One and encourages the reader to reflect on the extensive social impact of the war on those who did not lose their lives but were, nevertheless, touched by death (Ibidem, 173). Several curatorial solutions were used to explain acts of giving testimony and the process of witnessing. They are expressed in words such as ‘mimesis’ or ‘sticky objects’. The first concept refers to faces and voices that were used to create a mimetic form of communication. This type of displaying the content focuses more on relations between people, rather than the communication of information (Ibidem, 175). ‘Sticky objects’ are those representations that acquire new meaning or change due to the wartime feelings of love and sorrow.

To sum up, the authors provide convincing reason for including both historical and museological perspectives. The past cannot be understood without scrutinizing the way in which it is remembered. This assumption opens an opportunity for both academic disciplines to contribute

by showing the complexity of the narratives surrounding a specific historical event and recognizing the role of the individuals and their feelings. The reconstruction of emotions begins with the direct witnesses, progresses with the view of the next generations and the subsequent revision of the past, in order to finally arrive at the *Love and Sorrow* exhibition. At every stage of the book one can witness the interplay between emotions, remembrance, and the meaning attributed to conflict by differing actors. While reflecting on the museological part, it is worth underlining that the authors place special emphasis on new heritage studies trends, such as emotional networking (Rana, Willemsen and Dibbits 2017), agency (biography) of things (Dudley 2012) and articulating the significance of identity in museum space. The innovative nature of this collection stems from the fact that it broadens the scope of actors who are emotionally involved in the historical process but also presents the means by which their intimate experience can be effectively displayed and recognized in a museum.

The authors declare that '[t]his collection of essays seeks to engage and extend our understanding of the senses in wartime' (Damousi, Tout-Smith and Ziino 2020, 1) and that there is an urgent need to excavate better, more humane histories (Loughran 2020, 137). They vividly demonstrate that emotions matter. However, it seems justified to ask if the focus on the individual experience and feelings does not come at the expense of the explanatory aspiration of history. Apart from accessing and disclosing the intimate relations in the past it is equally important for historians to make sense out of the past by explaining the causes, dynamics and consequences of historical developments. Consequently, the book is particularly effective in fulfilling the first task but it struggles to address or reflect upon the latter element. Undoubtedly, the question of how to balance both perspectives perpetuates history of emotions as a whole. Nevertheless, these aspects can become reconciled, as Johannes Lang rightly points out: 'Historians of emotion should not only call attention to these often subtle features of the human condition, but also insist that we cannot properly understand or explain history without them.' (Lang 2018, 118). By the same token, Jan Plamper suggests connecting emotions with the broader causal mechanisms in history by creating 'an emotional foundation for causal explanations of political decision-making' (Plamper 2015, 281).

In respect to the exhibition *Love and Sorrow*, the authors tend to stress only its positive sides without fully addressing the potential shortcomings or challenges connected to visitors' perception, sensitivity, or memories. Deborah Tout-Smith writes that this is an exhibition for our times (Ibidem, 153). This is true when it comes to techniques used in the exhibition (creating a theatrical space). One should note that visitors' senses and memories are getting increasingly recognized as important in the heritage field. One of the examples is the project Odeuropa which

deals with the role of smells in creating intangible cultural heritage. When it comes to museology, curators strive to stimulate the audience by relating its background to the displayed content. This approach is clearly visible in the way the exhibition at Tenement Museum in New York is organized. The museum presents the story of immigrants by showing their stories within the setting of the recreated historical houses and allowing the viewers to interact with actors, dressed in the clothes of the epoch. This creates a multisensory experience which ought to resonate especially with the audience that has immigrant background. *Love and Sorrow* exhibition employs similar, emotional techniques. The exposition as the whole highlights emotions rather than historical facts. In a traditional museum feelings follow the facts. In *Love and Sorrow* the process goes the other way around - the facts are defined by emotions. It remains an open-ended question whether the particular focus on the emotional discourse does not overshadow the historical facts. Curators cannot fully anticipate the exact reaction of each viewer. However, they are in charge of picking a narrative which can influence the emotional perception of the public. Therefore, the balance between emotions and facts is delicate and requires careful consideration in every situation.

Overall, *Museums, History and the Intimate Experience of the Great War: Love and Sorrow* deserves the highest academic recognition for its very valuable contribution both to the fields of history and museology. Undoubtedly, this volume extensively enriches our understanding of the World War One experience and provides an interesting lens through which we may analytically access the past. In essence, the book effectively translates the main underpinnings of interdisciplinarity into a coherent narrative which hopefully will be taken as an example by other scholars.

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