**TITLE PAGE**

**‘. . . and then there was one’**

**Cultural Representations of the Last British Veteran of the Great War**

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**Introduction**

While several thousand Britons who lived through the duration of the Great War remain alive,[[1]](#footnote-1) those who served in the armed forces, and certainly those who saw combat, are all now dead. However, this was not the case little more than a decade ago, as the nation began to anticipate the centenary of the outbreak of war and how best to commemorate it (Bavidge 2009). In political and media discourse in particular, this anticipation became momentarily focussed on identifying and celebrating the dwindling number of war veterans before they were gone forever.

In this contribution to the special edition of *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, we explore this moment in terms of the attention afforded the last of the British veterans. Momentarily, this band comprised Bill Stone (1900-2009), Henry Allingham (1896-2009), Claude Choules (1901-2011) and Harry Patch (1898-2009). We focus in particular on the way in which Patch – celebrated as the very last of the veterans to have fought on the Western Front – emerged as a public figure. While we are interested in the historiography of the war and the empirical experience of such men, it is the representational politics about Patch in contemporary media and other cultural forms that concerns us here.

Our approach is predicated on an argument that media forms make a particularly important contribution to organising discourses of public memory (Ebbrecht 2007). As significant contributors to the constitution of identity among the communities that they serve (Anderson 2006), they perform historical work too. News reports and wider journalistic analyses are constructed within the context of a broader arc of meaning making, and important events are revisited and reviewed regularly when presenting and understanding other, newer events, in a historicising process. And whereas in history more generally it is seen as problematic that memory sometimes focuses on individuals in a way which ‘binds and limits the past into a purely subjective mode, and undoes the distinction between the individual and the collective’ (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003, p. 9), this is a vital component of the affective offer of journalism as a media form. Even when news stories focus on distant historical events, in order to create a context for such reports journalists have typically relied upon the ability to interview living individuals; in the case of the First World War, this was for a long time its veterans, whose memories offered an ‘authentic’ link with the past. The reduction of this group to a lone representative is itself significant and newsworthy and, while there are precedents in other conflicts and moments, is a kind of event that has not been rehearsed in a media-saturated society in which popular forms play a public history role.

In proceeding, we consider a context for examining the lineage in which Patch sits as a signal figure of the Great War veteran and its ultimate representative. Attending to the rhetorical motifs and narrative tropes of the popular press, we evaluate how mediations of Patch position him as a representative not only for the generation who fought and died but also as a focal point for working through contemporary perspectives on the meaning of the Great War. As we discuss here, Patch’s signification sits within a constellation of popular ideas about the very nature of history, memory and the role of the veteran in the commemoration of war. His passing offers a means for considering the transition of World War One from an event within living memory to ‘history’ and the transmutation of the role it plays in the symbolic economy of national heritage. Core to our discussion is the nature of such frameworks in relation to the construction of Patch’s authority, his role as bearer of memory and responses to it and his loss.

**Public History and the First World War**

While conflict always produces survivors, the figure of the veteran has taken on an increasingly important role in the modern era, particularly as a consequence of the First World War. The mobilisation of huge numbers of men (and women) and the nature of mass conscription needed to feed the industrialised war machine made the veteran a much more visible figure in its aftermath (Cohen 2001, Fell and Hurcombe 2013). The war produced a group with a shared identity although this was by no means homogenous. Divisions between veterans distinguished between those who saw action and those who did not, between ranks, and of course between the injured and those apparently unscathed. Likewise, the nature of one’s status as former soldier was distinct from those on the home front including families, friends and the wider society (Mosse 1990, p.170, De Groot 1996, p. 275-84).

The range and shared experience of returning soldiers made them an identifiable social group with particular interests and, in some countries, a force with potential political power. In the interwar years, the high degree of veteran organisation in France and Germany contrasted with Britain where there ‘were few supports for making veteran’s experience a centerpiece of post-war political discourse’ (Winter 2006, p. 133). Attendant on this observation is a recognition of the low-status traditionally afforded the army relative to navy, suggesting something of the ambiguous status of returning infantrymen in British life. Furthermore, in Britain, the lack of political framing of veterans’ movements ‘may help to account for the greater significance of “shell-shock” as metaphor in narratives of the war experience’ (Winter 2006, p. 8).

Nonetheless, the dead, veterans injured, maimed or not (shellshock was a complaint not universally ascribed to those otherwise affected) merited some kind of response that was worked out in aspects of social settlement and in the politics of commemoration and debates about the forms it would take. If there were to be memorials, should they be ‘artistic’ in nature or utilitarian – village halls, or houses for instance (Malone 2012)? Certainly, the Cenotaph, its use and other aspects of commemoration inaugurated in the years after the war often proved to be contentious, divisive even (see Parker 2010, pp. 24ff.). In tandem with debates over what kind of physical symbol commemoration should take, the presence of veterans as a group extended to the variety of representations that emerged in response to them. The idea of a ‘lost generation’, centred on elites (Winter 2006), indicates the often partial nature of such responses. Thus, this figure took on the status of hero or role model as well as ‘outsider’: ‘Disabled and shell-shocked veterans began to appear in fiction and films, sometimes functioning as a representative of the horrors of war, sometimes as an alternative hero attempting to reintegrate into an unfamiliar post-war world’ (Fell and Hurcombe 2013, p. 263).

Informed by a lineage of issues and images established in the interwar period, we want to consider how contemporary representations of the Great War veteran and debates over the commemoration of the conflict can be understood as engagements with the past demonstrating the manner in which history is a ‘social form of knowledge’ (Samuel 1994, p. 8). This perspective encompasses a productive notion of public history, a field of activity which describes the variety of ways in which ideas of the past are constructed as a result of a range of commemorative practices, popular forms and informal practices (Ashton & Kean 2008; Jordanova 2002; etc.). This is not to say that this practice is inconsequential, as public history as non-professional or non-academic in its formulation is nonetheless a complex site of activity and meaning. While this field is increasingly encroached upon by professional historians, ‘the implications of new ways of engaging with the past have not been thoroughly investigated. This is often the result of professional distaste for the various popular forms of history, emerging from a critique of the popular and a theoretical model of the cultural industries which encourages a binary of high (History) versus low (heritage or “the historical”)’ (De Groot 2009, p. 4).

The polarity described here hints at the role of mass media and popular culture practices in public history making. This mode of history encompasses the range of ways in which the war has been commemorated alongside the sociality of the audience that convenes around public events and as media consumers and commentators. This field can be illustrated by the breadth of activity impelled by the UK Government’s announcement in October 2012 to support national commemorative events in landmark moments such as the first day of the Battle of the Somme (2016) and Armistice Day (2018). In addition is funding for the Heritage Lottery Fund to generate community projects ‘to enable young people working in their communities to conserve, explore and share local heritage of the First World War’ (Ministry of Defence 2012). Alongside such civic projects is a range of commercial activity that has elicited the kind of distaste mentioned above. For instance, at the outset of 2014, the journalist Simon Jenkins complained of a ‘sickening avalanche’ of war-related material ‘flooding’ television schedules while ‘History bestseller lists focus on little else: there are no fewer than 8,000 titles on the subject. War magazines cram newsstands. Churches will fill with candles for the fallen. Children carry flowers "of reflection and remembrance"’ (2014b).

These practices frame how individuals and collectives experience and share aesthetic and affective evocations of the past. They inform the manner in which its proper representation is debated, and the way that commemoration offers an assessment and critique of historical understanding. Such instances, and indeed the large-scale contemporary commemoration of the First World War and the prodigious variety of modes of coverage of it, indicate the way in which the past has become a very *present* concern in modern societies in which ‘Untold recent and not so recent pasts impinge upon the present through modern media of reproduction’ (Huyssen 2003, p.1). Alongside the ever-expanding historiography of the First World War (Kramer 2014), there is a long lineage of work attending to its place in collective memory, cultural representation and wider public history practices (e.g. Winter 1998, Fussell 2009 [1975], Sheffield 2001, Todman 2005, Hannah 2009). This work draws attention to the manner in which popular memory of the war and its representation across cultural forms inflects the way in which it is popularly comprehended and, indeed, what is at stake as a consequence. There are for instance critiques of a ‘downbeat view of the war cherished by the “progressive”’ intelligentsia ever since the 1920s’ (Barnett, quoted in Bell 2009, p. 198). This view has provided an interpretative framework around the war that has assumed conventional status and which pervades British culture as a common sense way of understanding ‘the war as tragedy and disaster’ (Todman 2005, p. xii). Repeated evocations of the war convey the horror of the trenches, incompetent generals, tremulous sub-alterns and the lion-hearted Tommy. As John MacLeod of the *Daily Mail* summarises, this presents a discourse that the war was ‘completely unnecessary - waged for class-ridden imperial splendour; that it was incompetently directed; that not a tenth of those who served survived; that untold thousands of shell-shocked men were shot as deserters’ (MacLeod 2008, p 17).

The idea of pervasive common sense about the war cohered in the latter part of the last century (Todman 2005), its key tropes and reference points disseminated with the coming of television, its narrative forms and various genres drawing upon particular sources and historiographical materials. A signal moment was the broadcast of the BBC television documentary *The Great War* (1964). The approach of the series has been described as one paralleling the emergent social history of the post-war period, representing aspects of ‘history from below’: ‘a shift away from what might be called “mandarin history”, based around the memoirs of major historical figures, towards the use of the recollections of “ordinary” people’ (Chapman 2007, p. 23). Attracting audiences of between 7 and 11 million, the seriesconveyed a particularly negative analysis of the war’s purpose and prosecution (Todman 2002, Badsey 2002, Hannah 2007, Downing 2017). In so doing, it drew upon sources such as Alan Clark’s *Donkeys* (1961), as well as the theatrical and film versions of *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1963 and 1969 respectively), originated by the radical Theatre Workshop under Joan Littlewood. Subsequently, the common sense of the war was repeatedly rehearsed in representations of the First World War on film, TV and elsewhere (see: Hannah 2009), and across genres. This included the final season of the *Blackadder* sitcom that presented a potentially controversial setting for humour. Set in Flanders, *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989) employed familiar tropes for comedic purposes, albeit ending on a tragic and elegiac note as the characters go ‘over the top’.

We can note from some of the comments above how ‘common sense’ narrative tropes of the Great War have not gone uncontested, whether from within academia (Corrigan 2004) or across the terrain of public history. McLeod (2008) for instance describes as ‘specious nonsense’ the view of the war taught in schools by way of the war poets and dramatized by series like *Blackadder Goes Forth*. Certainly, a politics of memory and representation of the war are being played out around the very curriculum decried by McLeod. The mission of former UK Education Secretary Michael Gove, for instance, was one of intervening in the curriculum, aiming to counter ‘left-wing academics’ seen as generating a negative mythology ‘by attacking Britain’s role in the conflict’ (quoted in Perry 2014).

Such arguments about by the nature of this event underline the politics of representations and responses to their symbolic function. Todman suggests that the common sense repertoire of images and ideas reduces the complexity of historical cause, effects and reality to a set of readily understood interpretations. This is not to suggest that these ways of seeing the past are in fact specious but that they hint at our contemporary concerns and mythologies. Thus, the stories of Harry Patch and of the last of the veterans, and *how* these tales have been told, can be understood in the context of an accrued set of representations, ideas and interpretations of the war, and its meaning and their role therein.

**Locating the Last Veteran**

Patch was the last surviving British soldier who had seen combat on the Great War’s Western Front. A Lewis Gunner in the Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry, his term of active service was brief: arriving at the front in June 1917, he was wounded at the Battle of Passchendaele in September of the same year and invalided out. A centenarian when he emerged in the British media, he was one of several surviving combatants who contributed to the BBC documentary *Veterans* (1998). A BBC obituary gives an account of Patch’s recruitment to this documentary, relating how he overcame a reluctance to talk about his experiences when faced with the recognition of the ever dwindling numbers of combat veterans remaining to bear witness to the war to end all wars (Anon 2009b). He quickly achieved a form of celebrity, thrust upon him by virtue of his very longevity - in the end he lived to become the *country’s* oldest man - and as a touchstone for one of modernity’s defining events.

Further television contributions included *World War 1 in Colour* (2003) and *The Last Tommy* (2005). Patch published an autobiography in 2007 as *The Last Fighting Tommy*, which received a wealth of attention, and his testimony is quoted in a wide range of works on the war. He received poetic tributes from successive poet laureates, one of which formed the basis of another TV programme, *A Poem for Harry* (2009). There were also musical tributes from Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Keeper of the Queen's Music, as well as a dedicated song from the rock band Radiohead: *Harry Patch (In Memory Of)*.

A site where the last of the veterans and Patch in particular received sustained attention in reportage and commentary was across the British press. It is conventional to speak of press reportage as ‘The First Draft of History’ (Bingham 2012), a source in any consideration of the events of modern history. Yet the press is often overlooked as a site of *contemporary* perspectives on the past and its interpretation, for its role in the production of cultural memory, leaving ‘journalism’s status as a primary recorder of a shared past both unsettled and unarticulated’ (Zelizer and Tenenboim-Winblatt 2014, p. 2). Here, we turn to explore press representations where Patch, and other veterans, were enlisted as witnesses to historical events and in turn became the primary focus of reportage.

As anticipated by historians pondering the cultural memory of the Great War and its commemoration (Todman 2005, Bavidge 2009), the identification of the existence of the last veteran and his anticipated end assumed the status of news and cultural event. Recognized as a momentous occasion, popular coverage conveyed a material sense of time in paying witness to ‘an event currently encapsulated within living memory, however tenuously, passing entirely into history’ (Pollard and Banks 2007, p. iv). In the period from Patch’s identification on TV in 1998 to the year after his death, there were over 1400 articles in UK national and regional newspapers with mention of him, many of them substantial reflections, interviews and commentaries. While the quantity of this material is significant in underlining the elevation of Patch to a public figure, the aim of surveying articles in the press in this instance is to examine his appearance in terms of the narrative and generic tropes of this coverage. How did Patch feature in these sites? What were the rhetorical turns of the representations of his story and references to the Great War, its commemoration and its interpretation as historical event?

Our interpretations derive from an analysis of the visual and verbal rhetoric of more than 200 articles from the British popular press. Here, our focus is on tabloids such as *The Sun*, *Daily Mirror, Daily Express, Daily Mail*, their Sunday editions or companion papers as well as regional versions. As we suggested at the outset of this paper, these sources are particularly interesting for thinking about public history and the veteran due to the way in which tabloid journalism focuses on the human interest aspects of stories and the personalisation of events (MacDonald 1998, Rowe 2000). On a pithier note, former tabloid editor Roy Greenslade has commented of this generic group that they ‘are illiberal, reactionary, negative, pessimistic and infected with a sentimentality which appeals to readers’ emotions rather than their intellect’ (Quoted in Johannsen 2007, p.7). While this insight suggests how such newspapers might be productive sites for exploring the affective dimensions of history and its representation, we have been cautious about proceeding with any *a priori* assumptions, particularly regarding the political inflections of news and interpretation. Newspapers are by no means univocal, offering complex and contradictory sites of meaning (Bingham 2012).

Inevitably, the imagery and prose of the press dealt with the inexorable dwindling of the number of the veterans, a countdown of mortality. As Bavidge (2009) notes, this was manifest in anticipatory discussions in Parliament and the press of whether or not the last veteran would be afforded a state funeral and indeed how, and on what terms, this individual would at last be identified. One can see in the imagery and prose of commemorative events from 1998 onwards how a ‘handful’ of survivors became the ‘last’ survivor, as features drew attention to the dwindling number of veterans: ‘Remembrance Day with all its emotion is especially poignant for them, as this may be the last time they will ever experience it […] this could be, literally, their last parade’ (Wills 2003). ‘Today, just four survive’ (Anon *Express* 2005). ‘Of the five million men and women who served in the First World War, three remain alive’ (Anon *Mirror* 2008). Most bluntly, this is expressed in headlines such as: ‘And then there were two’ and ultimately ‘And then there was One’ (Hickley 2009, Anon *Express* 2009d). This evaluation is one that is echoed in the title of Patch’s own autobiography, which sits alongside others produced by veterans who were encouraged to tell their stories and whose book titles testify to a fascination with the passing of their generation and establishing exactly who qualified as the *very* last. These include *Kitchener's Last Volunteer: the Life of Henry Allingham, the Oldest Surviving Veteran of the Great War* (2009) and Claude Choules’s *The Last of the Last: The Final Survivor of the First World War* (2011).

**Authenticity and Sentiment in the Press and Public History**

In general, stories about Patch and other veterans in the press were illustrated through the common sense iconography of the Great War. A repeated image is that of the muddy trenches, battlefields and infantry of the Western Front. In press features on Patch and others, visual points of reference to war as collective endeavour – marching men, attacking formations, platoons at ease – are set alongside the personal scale in terms of hitherto private images of the veteran as a young man in uniform or civilian clothes. These images of the past sit alongside recently captured shots of the veteran which attest to their existence – the survival of the historical figure pictured in black and white, and sometimes sepia tones. The most recent images reveal the frailty of old age and the obvious mortality of the veteran confined as he was to a wheelchair, a rug protecting him from the cold. Many instances in which Patch and other veterans featured were in commemorative events, at the Cenotaph, Menin Gate or other war cemeteries. In such instances, a younger uniformed man, holding a wreath of poppies, often accompanies the elder, drawing attention to the continuity of an idea of service but sometimes to underline how wanting contemporary society can be (see, for example, Hennessy 2007, p. 55). Often, the veteran is framed alone, as if to emphasise his literal isolation as the last representative of either those buried at his feet or who survived long enough, like him, to testify to the experience of war.

Thinking of the use of the archival image, such photographs can be approached not as factual, informational evidence of the past but instead act ‘As markers of collective memory […] most useful when they symbolize socially shared concepts or beliefs’ (Griffin 1999, p. 147). The use of photographs from the past in televisual explorations of the war for instance suggests how they provide that quality that Roland Barthes describes as the ‘punctum’, a touching and poignant detail of the image (Bell 2009). The use of photographs in this way, serves to bridge a temporal gap between the past and present, between those lost to time ‘and later generations with no direct recollection of the conflict’ (Bell 2009, p. 197). Such imagery is laden with the weight of history and evocations of *pastness* that in the press is often counterpoised with the image of the veteran in old age, underlining the very frailty of the embodiment of that connection.

Bearing in mind the morbid countdown of the headlines, Dawney (2013) notes an obvious, if rather politely ignored fact about Patch and his representation in TV and radio broadcasts. In encounters with Patch, viewers, listeners and readers were offered rare access to the testimony of a dying man. His frail condition demanded that interlocutors and audiences had to strain to hear him, his vulnerability a quality that added to the weight of his authority as a witness to history. Patch’s authority is emphasised by the singularity of his participation in a historical event and for the way in which his own passing took on that character. On one hand, the acceleration of communication technologies has brought many more people face to face with both banal and significant events of our time: ‘We know more and have seen more of this century than the generations of any previous century knew or saw of theirs’ (Ellis 2000, p. 9). Nonetheless, in spite of the prodigious variety of documents, accounts, interpretations, archival materials, contemporary press or cinematic newsreel footage, and recorded oral histories, Patch was *there*, the embodied memories unassailable and his experience not reproducible. He was ‘a very ordinary man who, 90-something years ago, did an extraordinary thing’ (Anon 2009a). The millions who had shared Patch’s experience of the front were in the end reduced to this one figure, the anonymity of modern warfare and its amassed armies focussed by chance in a unique and individualised reference point.

Patch’s hard-won knowledge can be thought of as affective and bodily, gained through experience of the front, of violence and emotional trauma (Dawney 2013). This serves to naturalise and authenticate his account. Patch himself underlined the value of the individual perspective, of the authenticity and affective truth of embodied experience. As related in his obituary in the *Daily Telegraph* (Anon 2009c), he had appeared in and acted as a consultant on Richard van Emden’s TV reality show *The Trench* (2002). Here, veterans recalled their wartime experiences while a group of young men relived life in the trenches, albeit without violence and the threat of death. Patch commented that: ‘You can make the programme, you can imitate a shell burst by a thunderclap firework [...] you can improvise everything, except the fear’ (Anon 2009c).

In tandem with his historical experiences, Patch’s very longevity and frailty evidence his authenticity: ‘discursive articulations of dignity, vulnerability and life are materialised through his body such that he becomes a figure who is listened to’ (Dawney 2013, p.38). Importantly, his voice and perspective was distinct from that of the professional historian, politician or indeed journalist commentator: his knowledge and wisdom not based in data analysis or objective and rationalised perspective. His embodied expertise was underwritten by his West Country working-class status, couched in plain speaking: ‘the knowledge produced in this relation may be considered by those who listen as pure, uncorrupted: it comes “from the heart” – an embodied memory and knowledge from first-hand experience that materialises a message that stands outside of the politics of pressure groups and government’ (Dawney 2013, p.38).

It is worth pondering the value of Patch’s authenticity a little further here in light of the idea of the ‘common sense’ repertoire framing the understanding of the war and responses to it. As noted above, Patch did not begin to talk about his experiences until 1998, when he was already 100 years old. As the quantity of coverage of his last years attests, by the time of his death his stories had been widely circulated. In turn, they have become part of the repertoire of representations of the war. There are three incidents in particular which have come to define Patch’s war and, as we suggest, the character of the man himself. Firstly, the ‘vision of a Cornishman with his whole upper body all bloody and torn, dying with the word “mother” on his lips, [which] is as vivid today as the day he died’ (Anon *Daily Mail* 2002; see also Shanahan 2009, p. 11). Secondly, an encounter with a German soldier who attacked with fixed bayonet: ‘I gave him his life. I shot him above the ankle and above the knee and brought him down’ (Patch in Blundell 2007a, p. 58; see also Ellam 2007, Anon *The Sun* 2009e). Finally, the recollection of the explosion which killed Patch’s Lewis Gun team, leaving him seriously injured: ‘I got some shrapnel in my groin and my three mates were blown to pieces’ (Patch in Anon *Daily Mail* 2002; see also Ellam 2009, Van Emden and Blundell 2005).

There is no question that the things Patch described happened to him, but their telling, interpretation and his conclusions come to us in particular ways and have particular resonances for thinking about the act of memory. Helpful here is Roper’s (2000) exploration of personal narratives of soldiering, of the processes and nature of telling, in which re-remembering is treated as a conjunction of the weight of the past and the needs of the present. This analysis draws on a psychological model for framing the personal aspects of narrative, contrasting this with and critiquing a context of ‘popular memory’, where accounts emphasise the power of public language at the expense of the role of the private and unconscious (see also: Trott 2013). It has been suggested for instance that Patch’s account of his teenage years as a soldier is presented with the wisdom of hindsight, his interpretation framed by later events and indeed inflected by other accounts (Strachen 2009). This perspective is particularly instructive for those who have wondered what the veteran might have said at the time of the conflict by way of contrast with his contemporary pronouncements in which he denigrated the war as ‘organised murder’. Of the men that fought, it has been suggested that ‘the greatest surprise is how thoroughly many reflected the attitudes that we might think of as elite propaganda’ (Jenkins 2014a, p. 4). Certainly, insights offered by Patch as an old man might have been frowned upon by many of his contemporaries, verging on an appearance of ‘cowardice’, even. This insight emerges from his retrospectively pitched unwillingness to fight, dissatisfaction with the war, and the striking claim that ‘I never knowingly killed a German’ (Ellam 2007). The point is made to question neither Patch’s integrity nor the veracity of the events he recalls and his hard-won learning and conclusions, but rather to underline the way in which the personal telling is caught up in a public language and repertoire of memory.

While Patch’s pronouncements presented him as one whose pacifism was arrived at through bitter experience, his framing across the press was often contextualised by more ambiguous attitudes that suggest a contest over the values he expressed and was enlisted to represent. In considering contemporary servicemen, Patch was not reflecting on the legal or just nature of their wars, he was against *all* war for all soldiers as ‘they come back bloodied and broken just the same’. This concern was extended by journalists to an attention to the plight of ‘our boys’ in Afghanistan or Iraq. In such manoeuvres, the conclusion was not an objection to war *per se* but, as the house historian of the *Daily Mail* expressed it: ‘the misguided folly of liberal interventionism’ (Sandbrook 2014). From another perspective, as one account suggests, taking Patch’s ethos literally might be a step too far. A newspaper report gave credence to Normandy veteran George Evans’ claim that he had been prevented from continuing in a long-term role in a Remembrance Sunday service after reading a self-penned anti-war poem directly inspired by Patch. He was conscious too of the fate awaiting Second World War veterans like himself: ‘Now, Mr Evans says, it was the turn of his generation of old soldiers to fade away’ (Lusher 2014).

How Patch was enlisted as a figure whose experience could serve wider ideas about war was possible because of the way in which the detail of his stories could be understood as generic, where his individuality and experience became representational whatever his singularity and authenticity. Certainly, tropes of embodiment were repeated aspects of Patch’s representation in the press, often balancing veneration and condescension. On one level, being the *last* of men was rendered in his presentation as the human essence of a particular generation, a contingent embodiment of nation enduring beyond a historical moment: ‘our Last Tommy, a symbol of the Great British spirit’ (Rowe 2009). His presentation was as the distillation of war-as-person – the last accessible soldier – standing as synecdoche for all Great War soldiers but in some way for all Britons, for those who fought but also, perhaps, for those who did not (and who did or would not ever want to). Press coverage about or featuring reference to Patch often emphasised his physical frailty, but celebrated also these ‘essential’ qualities and their manifestation and appeal to his interlocutors. Thus, such reports often explored what it meant to be in his presence and indeed to touch him. As was reported, ‘there are up to 10 requests a day from people who want to meet him, shake his hand, touch this last living link to history’ (Ellam 2008, p. 34). He was pictured with both ordinary people and politicians, all eager to touch and be seen with him, or indeed simply to see him. In particular, such desires and journalistic encounters evince the way in which Patch framed a material concept of History, a tangible, human link to a specific idea of the past, of the war: ‘I shook his hand, then held it for a moment. I had expected to be moved, but not this much. The fingers felt fragile as twigs; 91 years ago they had picked up a machine gun and aimed it across No Man's Land’ (Motion 2008). This need to touch, to shake hands, of course expressed awe, a sense of thanks and other emotions also. It featured literally and metaphorically, as press articles urged their readers to thank war veterans, in some cases citing Patch’s own prompt to ‘Thank them before it's too late’ (Blundell 2007b). In turn, these sentiments were echoed in readers’ letters. A story in the *Sunday Mirror*, for example, was supplemented by correspondence expressing ‘A Big Thank You, Harry’ in the following week’s edition (Blundell 2006, Anon 2006). For Patch himself, a particular handshake allowed a symbolic closure in his story. In 2004 he met and shook hands with a surviving German veteran, Charles Kuentz, agreeing that the war should be put behind them: ‘he is very nice and all for a united Europe and peace and so am I’, said Patch (in Lakeman 2004; see also Blundell 2006, 2007a).

This coverage then was deeply affective in tone, a result of an approach in which Patch’s longevity was distilled and focussed around a particular moment. His frail appearance often appears to be an index of the weight and sorrow of his wartime experience. In the prose and imagery of the press, we encounter this decrepit figure, his expression appears to be one of sadness; perhaps he is distant, lost in permanent reverie. The memories of his that we have access to in repeated stories are of the suffering and horror of the Western Front and, perforce, we infer that it is these specific experiences and not his many years of life, work and indeed love and laughter – there *must* have been some of that – which have resulted in a melancholy aspect and his inevitable and apposite solitude as last of the veterans and, for a time, Britain’s oldest man alive.

**Conclusion: Then There Were None.**

The countdown of the numbers of veterans left alive reached its conclusion with Patch’s inevitable death. And when his end came, this was framed in appropriately sentimental terms, inviting communal grief and amplifying the sense of his signification and the characteristics he was seen to embody. While there was to be no state burial for the last veteran as once mooted (Bavidge 2009) his farewell was a major public event. ‘Mourners arrived from 6am to secure one of 1,050 free tickets for [the] ceremony at Wells Cathedral in Somerset’ (Crick 2009), thousands lined the route of the funeral cortege and ‘even the heavens, it seemed, were in mourning’ (Smith 2009). Echoing other displays of public sentiment such as the funeral of Princess Diana, Patch was the focus for the respect and emotional outpouring of a wide audience who never knew him, but for whom the press had made him familiar and a human embodiment of history and its tangible turn (see Brown et al. 2003).

Facilitated by a highly mediated age, coverage and responses spoke to a desire for authentic experience and we can see how a sense of public history emerges from such moments, defining community as it does so. In this instance, Patch’s qualities and role as synecdoche are captured in one comment from a teenage mourner who reflected that: ‘I never got to meet my grandfather, who fought in the Second World War, but I'm happy I can pay my respects to Harry’ (quoted in Crick 2009). A repeated lament was that this passing was the conclusion to a historical moment and the valediction for an entire generation, ‘the like of which we shall never see again’ (Smellie 2003).

The work of scholars that speculated on the coming of this moment (Todman 2005; Bavidge 2009), anticipated the question of what the memory and commemoration of the First World War would be like without the presence of the veteran (*The* Veteran?). It is hard to imagine the kind of affective response to this history without the reference point of one who was *there*, who might still attest to the indescribable experience of the war and the repertoire that conditions its comprehension. On this note, there are a number of interesting things to observe about Patch’s posthumous status as a focus for a particular kind of memory work. First is that he was survived by Claude Choules, a veteran who served at sea but whose life – and passing - received limited coverage by way of comparison. Secondly, the last surviving Briton who actually saw service was a woman. Florence Patterson (later Green), as she was at the time, served in the WRAF during the war and died in February 2012, at which point, once *again*, ‘An important human link with British history was severed’ (Anon *Daily Mirror* 2012). Furthermore, in continued centenary coverage since the year after Patch’s death, interest in the detail of his life and its utility has declined, with around 170 articles making mention of him. In these, he is generally rendered as a simple signpost – a reference point back to the millions and to the logistics of war. In this process, the very ordinary man has become ordinary again: the embodied authenticity, authority and indeed aura that could be called upon and deployed by the press and wider media were now absent.

The afterlife of Patch’s representation and its deployment merits continued attention in order to understand the changing position of the veteran. More widely, the period of commemoration offers an on-going site for thinking about the war, memory and public history both within the domain of the popular press and wider sphere of cultural production. Without living veterans, the centenary of the Great War’s outbreak shifts the struggle over history and its meanings to a new terrain, beyond living memory, as is the case with Agincourt, Waterloo or the Crimea. As the centenary period concludes, are the myths surrounding the First World War to be subject to interrogation or does the prodigious field of commemoration lack space for a critical evaluation and the embodied message of Patch which acted as rejoinder to any overtly jingoistic reclamations of this historical tragedy? How might his anti-war message play out in an age of resurgent nationalism, populist politics and Brexit?

Symbols of national commemoration such as the Cenotaph and particularly the myriad local memorials across Britain offer stern and formal authority to the names of the dead they list and those who fought and survived. Annual rituals and martial reference points in terms of parades and the sounding of the Last Post cement these qualities. Such occasions are respectful and rationalised responses to the unimaginable loss of war. Patch’s representational life suggests a more personalised commemoration, focussed on his humanity as a reference to that of all those who fought. While Florence Green was briefly news but was not worked on to become a historical signifier in the same manner as Patch, the very recognition of her status as veteran is suggestive. This is important in anticipation of the way in which the last veterans of the People’s War of 1939-45 will dwindle and be recognised in a mediatised world. What kind of commemoration and public history will be produced around the last of those who fought across land, sea and air or behind enemy lines? What of those who served on the land or weathered the Blitz? What of the POWs or evacuees at home? More broadly, what of the liberated and the last of those who survived the Holocaust? The range of available experiences, personages and stories suggest further transmutations in understanding the veteran and her representation, again inflected by a repertoire of ways of speaking about the Second World War that have been established during and after it.

The historical treatment of veterans and the ways in which the Great War has been popularly narrated illustrate the tendentious nature of commemoration and cultural memory in their relationship with history. In this sense, any approach to those who survived has to acknowledge the history of the veteran as part of a historical social group and cultural icon. Important to emphasise here is that in their gradual disappearance, a relatively ordinary status (*millions* served and returned, as they did in World War Two) becomes exceptional, veterans transformed from the role of social group to individuals inevitably burdened with a history of representation. In that representation there is a great deal at stake in how we conceptualise the past and its comprehension.

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1. At the time of writing, the most recent datasets from the Office of National Statistics (2016) give a total of 870 persons living aged 105 or above: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/datasets/midyearpopulationestimatesoftheveryoldincludingcentenariansunitedkingdom> (Accessed 1 March 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)