

## **Scraps of paper: First World War short fiction and the ephemeral**

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In critical discourse on the short story, few things emerge with greater regularity than comments on its fleetingness and its disposability, particularly when published in magazines. This article puts the well-established ephemerality of short fiction in dialogue with another kind of transitoriness, that of ephemera as a category encompassing items as diverse as newspaper cuttings, postcards, playbills, concert programmes, medals, and printed memorabilia of all kinds. I propose that this new way of reading short stories through the lens of the ephemeral opens up important insights on the ways in which short fiction engages with the legacy of conflict. Ephemera, fragile and hard to catalogue, survive in libraries, archives, museums and private homes as reminders of conflict. Like many short stories, they fall through the cracks between categories and suffer from a physical and generic vulnerability to forgetfulness. Using the example of short stories and ephemera relating to the First World War, this article contends that both share a similar relationship to the everyday, to memory and forgetting. I suggest that there is a conceptual affinity between short fiction, memory and ephemera – a three-way relationship that puts short stories in touch with the fragility of marginalised strands of memory as well as with the most vulnerable fragments testifying to these memories.

In recent decades, historiography of the First World War has taken a cultural and a material turn. This has meant an increasing emphasis on everyday experiences, placing them at the heart of understanding the conflict. Such developments go hand in hand with an approach to the war through the marginal, from snatches of folk songs preserving the war experience of illiterate sepoys in India (Das 2018) to fragile scraps of paper that represent families' last ties

to deceased relatives (Foster 2018 and 2019). Das's work on the cultural traces of the First World War in a society that was, at the time of the war, characterised by extremely low literacy rates and a strong oral culture, highlights the importance of considering ephemera alongside what Western scholars would consider "literary" texts. Das argues that the fragile nature of physical mementos, "the childish scrawl across the page, the crinkliness of the postcard are in many ways the hand-prints and face-prints of war in the act of writing its own violent life", which we can use to re-construct "piecemeal narratives" of the experience of conflict (Das 9). While this may seem of particular importance with regards to cultures where oral traditions still dominated, attention to insubstantial physical traces of war are in fact just as revealing in Western societies, where, as Foster observes, small physical items and ephemera "formed the backbone of family memorial practices during the interwar period" (Foster 2018, 4), especially in working-class families.

Likewise, modernist scholars and indeed the authors they study have long recognised the importance of objects and the affinity between the material world and its literary representation. In *Postcards from the Trenches* (1997), Allyson Booth develops complex links between everyday objects and inter-war modernist writing. Booth approaches literary and documentary, lasting and ephemeral sources side by side – novels, buildings, newspapers, poems, letters, monuments, and documents of architectural criticism and military history – as part of the same "Great War culture" (Booth 4). In line with Booth's critical approach and against the backdrop of historians' renewed interest in the fleeting and mundane traces of war experience, I consider short fiction as both an everyday and an ephemeral form of writing about the war. This entails looking at the mode of publication of wartime short stories in easily discarded media such as magazines and newspapers, and looking at the way short fiction about conflict engages with physical and often ephemeral

items. In the process, I propose a new way of reading short fiction as a medium for preserving and modelling the humble aspects of war experience that fall through the cracks of larger, weightier, more substantial or official narratives.

### War stories and ephemera

The short story is ephemeral in more than one way: in its mode of publication, its effect, and often also its subject matter. Ruth Robbins, for instance, observes that the short story is reliant primarily on “ephemeral publication forms such as magazines”, and consequently “is very prone to disappearance from the record” (Robbins 296). Magazines are designed to be read and disposed of, or at best preserved in volume format, rarely to be accessed again. The effect of magazine publication also applies in the case of online magazines, where digital overload leads to a similar burial of the individual piece among a vast repository of hyperlinks and digital documents, not to mention the even shorter half-life of Twitter fiction. Short fiction is moreover frequently concerned precisely with the fleeting moment or emotion, though this is especially true for particular types of short fiction, from the Romantic fragment to the modernist sketch, the prose poem or the digital flash fiction.

One of the most common definitions of ephemera, though it is not unproblematic in its vagueness, is that they are “minor transient documents of everyday life” (Rickards 13). Scholars of the short story are likely to be struck by the applicability of this description to short fiction. Whether it is intended as a “slice of life”, or offers brief insights into mundane pursuits through generic formulae like romance, melodrama or detection, short fiction habitually engages with small portions of everyday life. As is the case with ephemera, this everydayness may centre around unusual or poignant moments in the midst of the mundane. Both ephemera and short fiction capture events or feelings which, in hindsight, turn out to be

far more significant than first meets the eye. For instance, in Katherine Mansfield's inter-war story "The Fly" (1922), the photograph of a son killed in the war, taken to celebrate his new status as a soldier, becomes retrospectively imbued with tragic significance once the subject of the photograph is dead, while the ordinary appearance of a fly, its life as transient as that of any living creature, comes to signify a complex confluence of emotions, memories and trauma. Mansfield's story is "haunted", as Claire Tylee's observes, by the originally innocuous photograph whose apt depiction of its subject as "grave-looking" contradicts the father's recollection of his son as alive, cheerful and "natural" (Tylee 168). Virginia Woolf's wartime story "The Mark on the Wall" (1917), too, offers a meditation on the ephemerality of physical traces, from hairpins to coal scuttles, as an expression of "the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard" (Woolf 21), thrown into greater relief by the war. History in general, Woolf's narrator reflects, is made up of fragments, thrown together haphazardly, as she imagines her fictitious antiquary's prized arrowhead that resides "in the case at the local museum, together with the foot of a Chinese murderess, a handful of Elizabethan nails, a great many Tudor clay pipes, a piece of Roman pottery, and the wine-glass that Nelson drank out of" (Woolf 27). These are the mundane traces of momentous events, whose significance lies in their fragile physicality, having survived the cataclysmic workings of history by chance and putting us in touch with the past by way of stimulating our imagination.

Short stories are likewise frequently thrown together haphazardly and at the mercy of the collector for their preservation. This dependency covers both the physical collector, private or institutional, who chooses to preserve magazine issues by binding and keeping them, and the editor who chooses to include a short story in the physically more robust format of the anthology. Even anthologies are by no means as enduring as one might hope. As bound "best

of’ volumes or themed compilations, they are more navigable for the reader and find their way into private and public library shelves more readily than bound volumes of magazines. However, as Elke D’hoker points out, anthologies are fraught with their own challenges concerning publication, marketing, and the reading experience they offer. Inclusion in an anthology does not guarantee survival, since anthologies – despite their potential canon-building function – are just as likely to go out of print as any other publication. D’hoker suggests that the very eclecticism of anthologies, often critiqued for causing distraction or dilution in comparison with the relative textual unity of the longer novel form, in fact reveals an important generic trait of the short story. Being placed in close proximity to a variety of other texts in either a magazine or an anthology, D’hoker argues, short stories gain additional meanings and change in the reader’s eye by serendipitous juxtaposition with other texts, whether stories, advertisements, poems, articles or images (D’hoker 108; see also Einhaus 40–41).

The proneness of the short story to shift meaning depending on context is a trait shared with ephemera, which likewise usually occur not as stand-alone items, but as part of a larger disparate unit: items assembled in a drawer, a box of mementos, on a mantelpiece, in an archival folder or display case. Depending on where an item is found, its meaning changes, illustrating either remembrance or forgetfulness, affection or neglect. In the case of ephemera, the absence of other items might pose a problem even to basic comprehension, as a photograph unaccompanied by annotations or additional documents is likely to remain unidentifiable if it has been separated from the original owner. Once an item is unmoored from its original context, its meaning “can be difficult to find, and without contextualisation, these objects are simply items from the past, void of personal meaning” (Foster 2018, 5).

Roland Barthes, in thinking about links between photography, memory and mourning, noted

the distinction between the meaning a particular personal photograph can acquire for the individual closely touched by the photograph's subject, as opposed to every other observer without this personal connection. Barthes argued that a particular photograph picturing his deceased mother as a child "exists only" for him, whereas for anyone else, "it would be nothing but an indifferent picture" (Barthes 73). Likewise, Alison Landsberg recognises with Siegfried Kracauer, whose essay "Photography" (1927) she discusses, that any photograph requires an anchor, or "indexical link to the world" (Landsberg 16) to make sense to the beholder. Just as a photograph is interpreted differently by the person who knows its subject as opposed to a viewer who does not, the meaning of a short story is substantially formed in the process of reading and dependent on the context in which it is encountered, and consequently the reader's response to the text shifts with time and circumstances.

There are parallels, too, between short fiction and letters. Letters exist as loose sheets of paper, though they may be bundled, stored in boxes, or bound in albums. They are preserved in private homes where they are considered to be of emotional importance, or collected in archives where they are thought to have value for posterity beyond the sender's or recipient's immediate circle. In the wake of the First World War, letter-writing in Britain and elsewhere was conducted on a hitherto unprecedented scale, as Alice Kelly notes when she highlights the "uniquely important place in wartime culture" occupied by letter-writing (Kelly 77). Letters from the front, in full or as extracts, were habitually published in newspapers during the First World War, not just in Britain but elsewhere. Anna Maguire's research on West Indian servicemen shows that such published extracts from letters can in fact constitute the most lasting traces of marginalised war experience in situations where the letters themselves "are distinctly absent from the archive" (Maguire 100).

Wartime letters, especially if written by servicemen and women who subsequently died in the war, were generally preserved at unprecedented rates because they often represented the last connection to the deceased. Beyond mere words, such letters might bear physical traces of the dead loved one's physical existence – a smear, a stain, a pressed flower. As a result, the full weight of such letters is hard to transpose into more enduring forms. However, the attempt to do so was made by many families who had the financial means. Memorial volumes consisting of typeset or facsimile letters from a deceased soldier, often combined with the dead man's photograph, a short memoir or letters of condolence from family and friends, were a common form of memorialisation (Acton 23). On a more public scale, we see volumes of letters by multiple authors published during the war and the inter-war period in several combatant nations. In France and Germany, patriotic compilations of wartime letters had been popular since the Franco-Prussian war and were a familiar form of publication by 1914 (Hettling 51). Philipp Witkop's *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten* (previously *Kriegsbriefe deutscher Studenten*; ["War letters of fallen/German students"]) was first published in 1916 and revised and extended several times during the inter-war period, culminating in an unashamedly nationalist "Volksausgabe" endorsing National Socialism in 1933: a testament not just to Witkop's problematic patriotism, but to the popularity of this kind of volume. In Britain, Laurence Housman's later volume *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen* (1930) likewise became a best-seller and was reviewed favourably as a record of fading war experience.

In parallel to memorial volumes and public compilations of letters, short stories collected in gift books and certain anthologies served some similar functions and shared some common traits with private and commercial volumes of letters. Gift books combined material gleaned from other sources with items that were written and collated for a specific purpose, either the

commemoration of a specific event, or raising funds for a particular cause. Moreover, these books served an explicit function as a memento, often of a particular aspect of the war. Like memorial books and commercial anthologies collecting letters, they were also an attempt to give a more permanent form to an easily discarded medium. Due to their more public nature, as opposed to the narrow personal, private audience of memorial volumes, gift books resemble public compilations of war letters like Witkop's or Housman's more closely than privately printed volumes.

A community-oriented example of a gift book is a volume that was ostensibly a Christmas magazine for employees at the Newcastle-based W. G. Armstrong, Whitworth & Co. munition works. It was titled "*Carry On*": *The Armstrong Munition Workers' Christmas Magazine* (1916) and sold in aid of the Northern War Funds. This publication has been preserved in the British Library and though nominally labelled a magazine, it was really a fundraising gift book, described by the editors as "an interesting and lasting souvenir which will serve as a reminder in days to come of a time when Britain was a nation in arms" ("*Carry On*" 2). One way to read "*Carry On*" is as a literary time capsule that reveals glimpses of wartime life. Besides poetry, cartoons and jokes, the magazine contained sixteen short stories. Not all of them addressed the war directly, but those that did related to the munition workers' lived reality: Zeppelin attacks, the state of the economy, wartime standards of living, fashion, family and relationships, entertainment and food. These stories captured specifically Newcastle-based insights into wartime life: stories are set in places like the Bigg Market, part of the city's central shopping and entertainment district, and feature Newcastle protagonists and dialect. Several of them centre on the importance of letters and keepsakes, too, such as the romantic tale "Janet Murray's Error" by M. A. Thomas. In this story, misdirected letters from the front deepen the divide between a young woman and her



former fiancé, but another letter, from a nurse in the fiancé's convalescent home, serves to reunite them. The stories in "*Carry On*" thus illustrate both the status of short fiction itself as a personal keepsake – as something that is hard to categorise and preserved haphazardly in a one-off wartime publication – and the engagement of short fiction with ephemeral items such as letters, photographs or postcards.

### War and ephemera in inter-war stories

This leads us to the importance of ephemera within First World War short fiction. I have already referred to Mansfield's "The Fly", in which a dead son's photograph, displayed in his father's office, plays a central part. The photograph is introduced early on in the story, and it is contrasted pointedly with the brand-new office fittings and furniture that the father has been showing off to a visiting acquaintance:

But he did not draw old Woodfield's attention to the photograph over the table of a grave-looking boy in uniform standing in one of those spectral photographers' parks with photographers' storm-clouds behind him. It was not new. It had been there for over six years. (Mansfield 298)

The photograph has survived the young man's death and the changes his father's office has undergone since the end of the war, and it has become a part of the father's everyday world; an object so familiar that it can no longer fulfil its original function of facilitating a temporary release from grief through tears. Having locked himself away in his office to grieve, the Boss finds that "[s]omething seemed to be wrong with him. He wasn't feeling as he wanted to feel." (Mansfield 301) When he tries to use the photograph as a prompt for weeping, it fails to work as desired: "He decided to get up and have a look at the boy's photograph. But it

wasn't a favourite photograph of his; the expression was unnatural. It was cold, even stern-looking. The boy had never looked like that." (Mansfield 301) The boss's recognition of the photograph's shortcomings reveals the inadequacy of the photograph as a physical trace of the dead son. It preserves a likeness, an approximation, but cannot preserve a sense of the living being beyond what is preserved in the bereaved father's own consciousness.

What Mansfield's story implies about the dead son's photograph chimes with Barthes's thoughts on photography in *Camera Lucida* (1980). Discussing Alexander Gardner's 1865 photograph of would-be political assassin Lewis Payne, Barthes reflected on the fundamental "catastrophe" inherent in each photographic portrait, that of the death of its subject, whether this death is past, present or future (Barthes 96). Mansfield's description of the mismatch between the father's recollection of his son and the son's appearance in the photograph tallies with Barthes's desperate search for a photograph of his deceased mother that does justice to her essence as a person. Although Barthes found a childhood photograph of his mother that seemed to him to encapsulate her perfectly, it is not, as we might expect, an accurate likeness of her as he knew her. The majority of her photographs only reveal her in "fragments", falsified and partial (Barthes 56–66). Indeed, the "spectral photographer's park" in the photo in Mansfield's story, the background against which the fictional dead son posed for his portrait, calls to mind Barthes's reflection on the attempts of photographers to counteract the power of death always inherent in the photographic portrait of a person by simulating a "lifelike" environment (Barthes 14). When Barthes argued that in the process of being photographed, he was "truly becoming a spectre" (Barthes 14), his expression recalls Mansfield's sentiment in "The Fly" that a photograph cannot capture a person, merely (in Barthes's words) "embalm" them (Barthes 14). Like Barthes confronted with his mother's photographs, the Boss in Mansfield's story recognises his son in the photograph

“differentially, not essentially” (Barthes 66), in that he recognises the physical likeness, but not the essential being of his son.

At the same time, the photograph also has the effect of making the son’s death itself appear unreal, and speaks to Charles E. May’s observation that “‘The Fly’ seems to emphasize the transitory nature of grief” (May 1994, 203). The father has never been able (or willing) to see his son’s dead body or his grave in France. Since the photograph is his only readily accessible memorial and the centrepiece of his grieving practice, the Boss has preserved his son in his mind exactly as pictured in the photograph. We can see this when the narrator notes:

“Although over six years had passed away, the boss never thought of the boy except as lying unchanged, unblemished in his uniform, asleep for ever.” (Mansfield 300) By remaining unchanged in the face of life-changing (and life-ending) changes, the photograph thus preserves an increasingly unreal past. As a consequence, it transforms from the fond reminder of a lost loved one into a troubling reminder of irreparable loss. The world moves on, says the unchanging photograph, oblivious to the death that has occurred.

The photograph as an inadequate reminder of the dead son, which like the fly is an embodiment of ephemerality and fragility, is an apt image to use in a short story that thrives on a lack of clear meaning and concerns itself with the complex nature of death, loss and grief. In the strictly limited space of a short story, a small physical reminder like a photograph can act as shorthand for a host of complex, unresolved feelings. Mansfield uses this particular photograph to characterise the boss’s relationship to his son, to give the reader an insight into his grieving process, and to reflect on the fact that memorialisation and memory are not the same thing. More than anything else, the inadequacy of the photograph conveys that the attempt to fix what we have lost may well result in losing the essence of

what we are seeking to preserve, as when Barthes observed that a photograph, far from constituting a memory, has the capacity to block memory instead and to become (as has happened in the Boss's case) "a counter-memory" (Barthes 91).

In A. W. Wells's short story "Chanson Triste" – written and first published, like Mansfield's story, in the early 1920s – the protagonist likewise has to rely on fragile, inadequate reminders of wartime loss. In this story, the narrator shares the history of his greatest wartime trauma, which still haunts him years after the war. While serving in the Balkans, the narrator had befriended a Bulgarian enemy soldier, who subsequently died at the hands of the narrator's fellow soldiers in the belief that his friend had betrayed him. The narrator is thus grieving for a man for whom he has no official right to grieve: an enemy, and what is more, an enemy whom he only met in person once, at the moment of his death, having previously communicated only by exchanging books and letters via a secret hiding place.

All that remains of this unusual friendship – which the narrator himself compares to an illicit love affair – are these letters, a volume of Rupert Brooke's poems inscribed with the dead man's name (Nicolas Dimitri), and a photograph. The narrator describes in great detail these ephemeral traces of the dead man, noting "the curiously stilted, Latin-looking hand" of the letters and dedication, and reflecting: "That letter still lies before me – one of the dozen, tattered, carefully hoarded pages I have just revealed to Joan; but little purpose could be served, I am afraid, by quoting it in full. [...] To quote [the letters] now would be to mock them." (Wells 114–115) In addition, the narrator has held on to the dead man's photograph, and observes of it:

even now, as I write, there stares mutely, half-defiantly up at me from the midst of the tattered letters the picture of a tall, rather lanky sort of youth, with that peculiarly elusive kind of face we are inclined to call ‘temperamental’, and with a mass of jet black hair brushed abruptly back from his forehead. (Wells 116)

Though ostensibly he is simply giving a description of the photograph, the narrator’s emphasis on the muteness, the defiance, the elusiveness of the man pictured convey precisely the feelings of loss and irredeemable guilt that the photograph has come to embody. Carefully treasured, and hidden for years from his own wife, the letters and photograph serve as reminders of trauma as well as mementos of a dead friend. They are the fragile traces that anchor the narrator to a story shared with nobody else, a story that runs counter to official narratives of the war and leaves him painfully in need of external validation. Wells’s story not only centres on one particular, painful, personal story asserting itself against forgetfulness, but is also situated within the larger context of the First World War’s “‘forgotten’ armies” (Michail 254), of which the British forces serving in the Balkans were only one. In a broader sense, the fictional ephemera to which the narrator of “‘Chanson Triste’” holds on as reminders of loss, regret and trauma also stand in for recognition of the war experience of the so-called Salonika Army, asserting the reality of their experiences against a Western Front-centred public narrative of the First World War in Britain.

The same sense of objects preserved as reminders of living human beings killed in the war surfaces in another inter-war short story, H. M. Tomlinson’s “Armistice”. Here, it is a practical item, not a photograph or letter, that serves this function and acts as a prompt or centrepiece for Tomlinson’s narrative. The narrator of this story – which is essentially a short, first-person narrative sketch running to just a page and a half – experiences the

announcement of the Armistice in London, in the offices of a big newspaper. Hardly daring to believe the news to be true, he ascertains that the war has ended by looking out into the street, where the raucous celebrations have begun. While his co-workers leave the office to join in the festivities, the narrator decides to stay behind and finds himself contemplating the old bowler hat left behind four years previously by a colleague on joining the army, which had remained behind on a peg by the door. The hat is identified as “Charley Bolt’s old hat”, “ancient with dust” and “ridiculously out of fashion” (Tomlinson 928). Its outmodedness and dusty exterior remind the narrator keenly of the changes wrought by the war, and it is in fact his re-discovery of the hat that persuades him not to join in the celebrations, which he had at any rate been reluctant to do.

It is significant that the abandoned hat appears at the very end of the short story. The narrator discovers it only just “as [he] made for the door”, and it is so inconspicuous, “only just visible in the shadow of a recess” (Tomlinson 928), that he nearly overlooks it, as he has done on a daily basis for the duration of the war. It is made clear, however, that the hat has been there all along, on its peg since Charley Bolt’s enlistment in 1914; the narrator might have noticed and contemplated it at any point during this time, yet it takes his deeply fraught response to an Armistice that he perceives as “late” and that finds the narrator and his colleagues exhausted and disillusioned (Tomlinson 927). Like the humdrum letter, note or photograph that only becomes significant when its author or subject are gone, the hat acquires significance only when it is transformed by the Armistice into an object linked to the past before the war that has now ended.

While Charley Bolt is identified by name as the hat’s former owner, the narrator does not appear to be thinking specifically of Charley or of any one particular person in his

contemplation of the hat. Rather, his impulse to stay relates to the hat as an anthropomorphised object. The narrator observes of the hat: “It seemed very much by itself. I got out a pipe; took a chair; I might just as well keep it company, on such a day.” (Tomlinson 928) The hat thus seems to stand in not just for a specific person lost to the war, but in a sense for the narrator himself, whose sense of disillusionment and alienation is projected onto the abandoned hat. Like the hat, the narrator – unable to join the raucous celebrations that are “erupting” outside – feels “ridiculously out of fashion” and out of step with the new, post-war world (Tomlinson 928). Whereas the objects in Mansfield’s and Wells’s stories have personal significance, the hat in Tomlinson’s story is thus a marker of broader social change, and of loss on a larger scale. It stands in not just for one dead friend and colleague, but for the loss of a whole way of life.

#### War and ephemera in contemporary short fiction

The stories discussed so far are all products of the inter-war years, written by those who had lived through the war and were coming to terms with the losses and lasting effects of that conflict on their personal lives and the wider world around them. These personal effects were felt keenly by the war generation, but began to fade gradually even between the wars, and with increasing rapidity after 1945. In a parallel process, the war’s ephemeral traces – the framed medals and photographs, the old pipe preserved on a mantelpiece – gradually shifted from personal mementos to (at best) props for family myths, or (at worst) chance items discovered in attic clearances and car boot sales, of interest primarily to specialist collectors and historians. Winter points out that war memorials, too, experienced this shift, as memorials built in the aftermath of the First World War “had another meaning for the generation that passed through the trauma of the war” compared to later generations’ perception of them as important but abstract “symbols of national pride” (Winter 2014, 79).

However, ephemeral items are even more vulnerable to such a shift, as they can be completely decontextualised in a way that official memorials cannot. While both can change their meaning, ephemera can lose it altogether.

In light of this gradual process of moving from living memory to what has variously been termed cultural memory, collective memory or the mythologization of the war, a further dimension of the close relationship between memory, ephemera and (short) fiction emerges. To the original recipient, a letter written by a deceased loved one is a fragile but tangible physical trace – flawed and limited, always threatened with disintegration or destruction, and a poor evocation of the living body that is lost, but nevertheless a direct, personal connection. Like a first-hand memory, this direct link cannot simply be passed on to the next generation. To someone who did not know the deceased letter writer, the document can be poignant and moving, and evoke a closer sense of connection, especially if one is related to the writer. However, without personal knowledge of the letter writer, the letter itself becomes a source of closeness and a prompt for emotion rather than a reminder of closeness and of physical presence – not entirely unrelated to the processes of prosthetic memory formation Landsberg describes in her work on mass media and the democratisation of memory. In parallel to this shift, short fiction about the First World War also moves from directly exploring war experience to increasingly engaging with the war's memory, whether explicitly or incidentally (Einhaus 144–145). The smaller scale and less substantial canvas on which a modern short story retrospectively paints the First World War, and comments directly or indirectly on the war's memory and its commemoration in the present, echoes the limitations of ephemeral documents and their potential emotional impact on the beholder, which can be disproportionate to their size.



Bearing in mind the threefold affinity between memory, short fiction and ephemera, I want to continue my exploration of the role of ephemera within First World War short fiction with a discussion of one of the best-known examples of what Barbara Korte calls meta-memorial short fiction: Julian Barnes's "Evermore" (Korte et al. 236).<sup>1</sup> In Barnes's story, an elderly English lady, Miss Moss, still travels annually to the cemeteries of the Western Front in a ritualised pilgrimage of mourning for her brother, killed in the First World War. She always carries with her the three last postcards written by her brother, Samuel. The story relates her travel routine, but most of all her musings on grief, mourning, remembrance, and the possibility of a collective memory of the First World War. Miss Moss resents the Second World War because it threatens to eclipse "her" war, and she quarrels with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission about matters of form and design concerning the graves and monuments on the former Western Front. Her overwhelming fear is that one day the Allied governments will decide to discard the Great War cemeteries because they find these are out of date; a fearful thought that closes the narrative.

In its preoccupation with personal and public commemoration, "Evermore" is notable for its overt engagement with the war's memory and the "inexorable movement towards forgetting", and engagement that Virginie Renard argues is a common characteristic of postmodern fiction about the war (Renard 325). It is also a striking example of a short story that recognises the particular significance of First World War ephemera in a world where the

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<sup>1</sup> Barnes's short story is also an intriguing example of an instance where short fiction and ephemera collide in both the physical and figurative sense. It was first published in magazine format in the *New Yorker* on 5 November 1995, before being included in Barnes's collection *Cross Channel* in 1996. It was also – linking it to my previous discussion of ephemera as items that do not necessarily fit into standard archiving or collection practices – published as a stand-alone booklet in a limited edition of 150 (37 pages, with a blue slipcover) by Palawan Press in 1996, with illustrations by Howard Hodgkin – one copy of this edition is held by the Imperial War Museum in London (Barnes 1996), but the remaining copies for the most part are likely to be in private hands. Given the story's preoccupation with memorabilia, this choice to issue the text as a collectable item seems to be no coincidence, but a choice that reflects Barnes's understanding of the importance of ephemera in the memorial process.

memory of war is steadily receding. The three field postcards sent by a brother killed at the front form the centrepiece of this narrative.<sup>2</sup> These postcards are carefully preserved by the dead man's sister, and accompany her on her annual ritualised pilgrimage to the cemeteries of the Western Front. The centrality of the three postcards is highlighted, first and foremost, by their appearance at the very beginning of the story. The story opens: "All the time she carried them with her, in a bag knotted at the neck. She had bayoneted the polythene with a fork, so that condensation would not gather and begin to rot the frail card." (Barnes 2007, 345) As the postcards are introduced, their fragility and Miss Moss's attempts at their conservation are highlighted in a way that is productive of acute pathos. By highlighting the fragility of the postcards, Barnes provides a literary parallel to real-life ephemera preserved in family homes, such as the newspaper clippings, elaborately framed photographs and medals that were subsequently donated in large numbers to British archives and museums (Foster 2019). Whereas middle-class families habitually owned portrait photographs taken by professional photographers (such as the one on display in Mansfield's "The Fly") and/or family snapshots that could be used to remember the dead, many working-class families were less fortunate. For instance, Foster cites Cumbrian historian Colin McCourt's view that many working-class families in Cumbria (and likely elsewhere) lost memorial material such as newspaper cuttings in the process of the 1930s slum clearances, when any items to be moved into new housing "had to be disinfected in 'the bug van'", and as a result of such clearances and the effects of bombings and salvage drives during the Second World War, Foster notes that:

"Overwhelmingly the story of the 1930s and 1940s is one of ephemera being destroyed"

(Foster 2018, 15).

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<sup>2</sup> British field service postcards were pre-prepared postcards that allowed soldiers to send a message home simply by crossing out/selecting a set number of printed statements indicating their health, location (in hospital or at the base), and the receipt of letters or parcels from home. Soldiers were not allowed to write anything in the margins or on the reverse of the postcard. An example is accessible on the Imperial War Museum web pages: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205131476> (last accessed 1 May 2020). Barnes introduces the text and layout of the field service postcard into the text of his story.

The reason Miss Moss is preserving the three postcards so carefully is the same that motivated thousands of relatives to treasure mementos of their loved ones, namely their being the last remaining connection to the deceased. In Miss Moss's case, these postcards represent the literal last connection, in that they are "the last he had sent", while "earlier ones had been divided up, lost perhaps" – to Miss Moss's analytical, lexicographer's mind, their being the last three makes these postcards "his final evidence" (Barnes 2007, 345). Just as Miss Moss's annual commemorative journey to the Western Front follows the same ritualistic pattern each year, so does her engagement with these fragile pieces of evidence that her brother once existed:

On the day itself, she would unknot the bag and trace her eyes over the jerky pencilled address, the formal signature (initials and surname only), the obedient crossings-out. For many years she had ached at what the cards did not say; but nowadays she found something in their official impassivity which seemed proper, even if not consoling. (Barnes 2007, 345)

The story dwells in great detail on the physical appearance of the postcards, evoking the thoroughness of a forensic examination not just by their being placed in a plastic bag to prevent contamination, but also by the minute attention Miss Moss pays to every aspect of the cards. The detailed description serves a double purpose: it conveys not only the importance of these postcards as the last living connection to Miss Moss's dead brother, but also equates their fragility with the fragility of memory. In the decades since the loss of her brother, Miss Moss has rehearsed her memories of Samuel as often as she has scrutinised the postcards.

The postcards, described in such painstaking detail, are not simply fictional mementos, designed to illustrate the importance of such fragile reminders to thousands of real-life families. They are also an important narrative device within the framework of this story, similar to Tomlinson's bowler hat: the postcards serve as a hook, a shortcut for this brief narrative to a more humane, personal understanding of the lost brother's personality, and of Miss Moss's particular predicament. The opening reflections on the postcards serve as an oblique characterisation of Samuel Moss, the dead brother, via his habits of communication, his handwriting, and his choices of expression. Likewise, the reflections of Barnes's narrator on the fragility of the postcards form a fitting exposition of the story's main theme, the fragility of personal memory and the reductive nature of collective remembrance. The "brutal choices" of the standardised field postcard foreshadow what Miss Moss considers to be the brutality of official memorials and rituals for the dead and missing; too formulaic, too uncaring to allow us a personal understanding of what has happened. It is significant, too, that Miss Moss's postcards stay in family hands and remain meaningful at a personal level, especially given that her devastating vision of the end of a collective memory of the war is that the responsibility of this memory might one day be "handed over to the archivists" (Barnes 2007, 361), which Miss Moss considers as tantamount to being forgotten.

Barnes's choice of field service postcards rather than letters is in itself significant. Kelly discusses class and age-based discrepancies in literacy levels in Britain during the First World War and the difficult conditions under which ordinary soldiers in particular had to compose messages home in the frontline trenches. She argues that especially for working-class soldiers, "the development of the Field Service Postcard", with its easy deletion choices, "was a very helpful means of efficiently communicating a message to home" (Kelly

80), though these postcards were parodied copiously and slighted by critics like Paul Fussell. But even allowing for their utility, it is clear that these sorts of formulaic cards were subject to clear limitations, which are highlighted poignantly in “Evermore”. Booth explores the field service postcard as not only limited and in effect a narrative fiction, but as an official act of erasure. Commenting on the process of crossing out statements that did not apply, and noting the “mutually exclusive” nature of the various options given to the sender, Booth notes that the “real act of erasure” was not the process of crossing out, but “the prohibition against using the margins of the card to delineate anything that happened beyond its margins” – a prohibition that constitutes “the representational limits of the Field Service Card” and simultaneously served to protect “the imaginative limits of civilians to whom thousands of them were mailed” (Booth 15).

Barnes homes in on both of these aspects, the erasure of experience and the limitations of the recipient’s civilian imagination. When Miss Moss is said to “ache at what the cards did not say”, she is chafing against the limits of officially sanctioned information, but also the limits of her own imagination. Only so much can be extracted from these cards, however closely they are studied – and Miss Moss has clearly studied them obsessively, noting everything from the basic facts (the crossings-out, the dates) to the exact physical appearance of her brother’s signature and the way he has addressed the card (Barnes 2007, 346). In the story, Sam has in fact written a short message on the middle one of the three postcards and got away with it, letting his family know that he wrote the card “50 yds from the Germans. Posted from Trench.” (Barnes 2007, 346, underlining in the original) Miss Moss has spent half a century agonising over this illicit message, which should have led to the postcard being destroyed. However, in the absence of her brother or any other living witnesses, she is ultimately only able to speculate why Sam, “a cautious and responsible boy”, should have

risked such a message and the possibility of his postcard never reaching his family and causing them “a worrying silence” (Barnes 2007, 346). Yet the postcard escapes destruction, both at the hands of the military authorities and at the hands of time, unlike the living, breathing body of which it is the final trace.

The troubling way in which ephemeral objects can outlast the body are at the heart of all stories explored in this article. Discussing Woolf’s short story “Solid Objects” (1920), Booth observes that a piece of glass picked up by one of the two protagonists on the beach, for him, proves more real and lasting than “the solidity of the young men’s bodies” (Booth 126). What emerges from Woolf’s story and Booth’s reflections on it is that objects, however trivial, can and do prove more “solid” and lasting than human bodies – a realisation that lends Barnes’s “Evermore” its real heartrending pathos. The three flimsy postcards have been successfully preserved for most of Miss Moss’s life, but her brother is irrevocably gone. Yet the postcards, as decontextualized objects, open up “imaginative possibilities”, to use Booth’s words (Booth 126). They cannot replace Miss Moss’s brother or console her for his loss, but along with more lasting (yet to her curiously unsatisfactory) official memorials they act as a focal point for her grief, perhaps precisely because of their limitations and the scope they allow for her own interpretation of her loss, and her lost brother’s personality.

Barnes’s “Evermore” makes for a fitting object to discuss the importance of ephemera within short fiction because it captures this importance in relation to two groups: those who lived through the war and were left with only fragile reminders of what they had lost, and those of us, readers and writers, who approach the war across decades of separation. It is not a coincidence, though certainly facilitated by enhanced digital possibilities, that the past few years have seen an explosion of digitised ephemera both on library and archive pages and in

the form of crowdsourced collections like Europeana 1914–18. Ephemera, and generally physical objects harking back to the First World War, have increased in importance in recent years. The centenary has heightened interest in all traces of the war, but the primary drivers for our interest in physical traces is the loss of living memories, and the fear of seeing the war slip into oblivion as a lived, embodied experience. For young people in particular, it is hard to connect to events so far in the past without some sort of direct link – and what better link could there be than something that has passed directly through the hands of those who witnessed the Great War themselves. Surviving objects and especially fragile ephemera consequently take on a new significance to generations born without immediate personal links to the war. As we can see in the case of Barnes’s “Evermore”, short stories can be a particularly effective literary form for centring and exploring such fragile objects without the need to embed them in a broader panoramic view of the war or to imbue them with any sense of closure. Thanks to the influence of modernist indeterminacy on our understanding of the short story, we have come to expect just the lack of definitive closure in short fiction that also characterises the ephemeral object out of its own time and context.

Yet where “literary” short fiction such as Barnes’s embraces the idea of ephemeral items as resisting closure, other contemporary short story writers make a different kind of use of ephemera within their narratives. Accessibility and continuing relevance are integral to the concept of publications such as *The Great War: Stories Inspired by Objects from the First World War*, a richly illustrated hardcover anthology of eleven short stories by well-known authors, including Michael Morpurgo, Marcus Sedgwick, A. L. Kennedy and Tracy Chevalier. The collection is aimed primarily at young adult audiences, although it does not preclude adult readers. Contributors were asked to respond to a number of wartime objects ranging from soldiers’ equipment to home-front items, objects that can “[bring] home the

reality of a war which is fading from living memory” (*The Great War* 7). This concept adopts in literary form an approach that historians, archivists and museum professionals have taken for years; that is, the accessing of a past without living eye-witnesses via physical objects. By imaginatively animating a number of objects of the kind that readers are likely to encounter in museum exhibits or online repositories, the collection seeks to bridge a widening gap between the past experience of war and its commemoration and understanding in the present.

In the opening story of this anthology, Morpurgo’s “Our Jacko”, we follow a young boy’s journey of discovery as he connects to his own family’s history of the war via a soldier’s helmet with a bullet hole, kept by his family as a memento of his great-great-grandfather. Little is known about the helmet beyond a vague recollection of the narrator’s father, who recalls:

It’s definitely First World War. Belonged to Grandpa Tom’s grandfather. Jacko. We always called him ‘Our Jacko’ in the family, when I was growing up. That’s what I was always told when I was little: that Our Jacko didn’t come home, but his helmet did. Brought home by his best friend. That’s how come we got it. (Morpurgo 22)

Beginning by despising war and wanting nothing to do with it, the young narrator is prompted by a school assignment to dig deeper into his own family’s past, and learns about his ancestor’s story by means of his personal items, kept by the family for a century in an old suitcase in the attic and long forgotten: an old notebook, photographs and a shell-case converted into a vase. These items, it turns out, were on the verge of being thrown out, had the boy’s interest in the helmet not prompted a search. The helmet thus acts as a prompt for the re-telling of its owner’s story, and a re-discovery of family history that can bring the past



to life for the young narrator. The notebook that accompanied the helmet back from the front is suitably fragile, written in pencil, almost (but not quite) illegible. Morpurgo rehearses the standard tropes of recovering a voice from the past by emphasising the difficulty deciphering the writing, the rapt attention of the audience and the sense of direct communion with the dead. Addressing a young audience, Morpurgo's story invests its fictional ephemera with a satisfyingly complete nature to which real ephemera rarely hold up. The story of the helmet, which could so easily have been forgotten, remains more or less intact in family memory, and the notebook and photograph help to fill the gaps.

While the satisfying completeness of this fictional family record of the First World War might make us a little suspicious and while it is certainly not the norm to find such well-preserved clusters of items, discoveries such as the one made by Morpurgo's protagonist are by no means unprecedented in real life. Especially during the First World War centenary period, increased public attention to the war and a plethora of community research and commemorative project in the UK and elsewhere have led to the (re-)discovery of various small personal collections of deceased soldiers' personal effects (see e.g. Hill and Johnson 2020). However, even these tantalising finds of complementary ephemera leave gaps to be filled in, and their interpretation is no longer supported by living witnesses.

### Conclusion

The didactic use of physical objects and ephemeral items as easy access points to the past in *The Great War* anthology stands in stark contrast to the role of ephemera in the other short stories I have discussed. Mansfield, Wells, Tomlinson and Barnes deny such items, and their stories, any sense of closure or completeness. Their photographs, letters, postcards, hats, prompt more questions than they answer: they trouble and disrupt, refusing to release the

protagonists and by extension the reader from their spell. Literature sparked by the First World War engages with the war's material traces in many genres. However, the short story has a special relationship to the ephemeral traces of war because it partakes of many of the same characteristics: a confined scope, a reputation of lesser significance, a built-in sense of fleetingness in both practical and conceptual terms. Short fiction and ephemera also share the capacity both to spark our imagination and simultaneously often to frustrate it by depriving us of neat resolutions, of obtaining all the knowledge we crave.

Reviewing the anthology *Great Short Stories of the War* in November 1930 – a volume that collected a large number of international short stories about the war written by British, American, French and German authors – the reviewer in *Time and Tide* magazine argued that since it was virtually impossible to “compress this war into a single tale”, “the next best thing” was “a massive and variegated anthology such as this” (“The Whole War Picture” 1441), with the ability to shine individual spotlights on a wide array of incidents and perceptions. The reviewer's suggestion was that an experience as vast, variegated and troubling as that of the First World War was best approached by piecing it together from fragments, a sentiment shared by many writers of short fiction themselves (Korte and Einhaus 57; *Great Short Stories of the War* ii). If fragments are our best chance at grasping the experience of a war that lies more than a century in the past – from official documents to private letters and photographs, often unmoored and cut loose from their original context – then perhaps short stories remain the most apposite imaginative response to the war and its enduring legacy. Read through the lens of the ephemeral, short fiction about the war reveals complex and varied engagement with the memory of the war in everyday life. Paying attention to the affinity between short fiction and ephemeral objects allows us to explore this engagement fully and to understand the importance of short stories to tracking the small-

scale, mundane and fragile aspects of the war's legacy. Short fiction lends itself to the exploration of conflict because it not only enables writers to write about the humble, neglected, everyday aspects of war experience effectively, but because its form serves to embody the very insubstantiality and vulnerability of these aspects.

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