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### Looking for Frank

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## ENCOUNTERS

### Looking for Frank

Gail Ritchie\*

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A few years ago I visited Ballykinler Barracks in County Down, Ireland, and was struck by the fact that my three most recent paternal ancestors had spent time there as part of their army training (Figure 1): three generations of one family whose collective service spanned a century. In the shadow of the majestic Mourne mountains, edged by the Irish Sea, had they the luxury of time to admire the view or to engage in a spot of introspection, as I did, about the nature of memory and remembering? Without personal lived experience of combat or military service, how could I begin to understand and represent their pasts in any meaningful way, and where would I be located within these collective histories?

Conceptually, my artwork draws on many references (personal, cultural, academic), and these references can interlink and even interfere with each other. An image or artefact used in one exhibition may be reused in a different context elsewhere, and thus new meanings are created. Motifs are therefore recycled, and this reflects how the nature of memory is fluid and changing. In this respect, all of my artwork to date is work in progress, a circular exploration of memory and memorial. How then do these concepts and references support the production of art?

Literature, for example, often inspires my visual art practice. The writings of academic Alison Landesberg (1997) and poet Seamus Heaney (1995) provide alternative insights into how one might approach the past and position oneself relative to it. Both writers explore how memory and lived experience are passed from one generation to another. For me, the aim is not to graphically illustrate their themes but rather to see where artistic intervention might add new layers of meaning to these themes. The past is not black and white. There is colour in the grey areas if you are prepared to look. Put another way, engaging with the historically *unknown*, rather than with the *known*, creates a space in which the borders between history and memory can be redefined or even removed. This may be academically questionable, but it allows for an artistic exploration of the tensions between the real and the imagined. As part of this process fact, fiction, and even fantasy can be combined in ways which reinvigorate the past to make it accessible and interesting to a contemporary audience.

Landesberg (1997) argues that immersive encounters with the past obtained by visiting, for example, a Holocaust museum or a historical re-enactment enable the visitor to form an experiential connection to that past. This affective experience encourages empathy and can produce alternative memories in those who had no direct lived experience of the historical events portrayed. Landesberg named these memories “prosthetic memories” and posited that they could influence the subjectivity of the viewer.

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Heaney (1995), in the poem “Digging”, is actively watching his father working in the garden and is struck by the similarities to his grandfather, also a labourer. Whilst he can admire his forefathers’ prowess with a spade, he concedes that traditional familial links to the land have been broken, ending with him. His tool is the pen, not the spade, and it rests in his hand “snug as a gun”.

As the last descendant of a particular Ritchie line, the challenge for me is to explore the past in a way which respects the authenticity of another person’s lived experience, whilst at the same time maintaining the integrity of my own artistic output. Heaney’s “Digging” resonates with me because each of my ancestors, as well as having had military careers, also worked as farm labourers and gardeners either before or after service. Unlike them, my tools are the pencil and the brush, not the spade or the gun. Like Heaney, I can respect but not emulate their lives. I have, however, had my subjectivity challenged and have strayed into the realm of Landesberg’s prosthetic memory making – both as the result of an immersive encounter with the past and also through frustration at the opaqueness of a specific past: that of my great-grandfather whom I never knew.

It was only recently and after years of research (outlined below) that a faded photograph of him in uniform turned up. Finally there was a face to the name, and the resemblance to my father was uncanny despite the temporal gap. In visual terms, at least, I could answer the question of where I would position myself relative to family history, and that was alongside my great-grandfather. This was achieved digitally by using myself to recreate his likeness as a way to identify any physical similarities between us. The image produced (Figure 2) illustrates to some degree a form of *prosthetic memory* but it is perhaps more suggestive of a *prosthetic relationship*. Artistically, both are provocative ways to explore the past.

The images which accompany this article are selected from ongoing research-based art centred on my great-grandfather Francis (Frank) Ritchie. Frank served with the 9th Battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers which was part of the 36th Ulster Division. Born in 1884 near Kilmood, Co. Down, he died on 29 March 1918, in France somewhere between Amiens and St. Quentin. There is no grave, but Frank is listed as Lance Corporal Ritchie on the regimental plaque on the rear wall of Pozières cemetery (Figure 3). His Commonwealth War Graves citation lists his age at death as 28. Based on the 1901 and 1911 census records for Ireland, his actual age at death was 34. Prior to enlisting, he was a farm labourer with a spouse and at least four children.

Details which might reveal more about Frank and his service have been difficult to find. The regimental war diaries relating to March 1918 list fallen officers by name, and Other Ranks by total number. The only anecdotal information relating to Frank is that he stood on a mine during clean-up operations after the war – clearly this is not true, as Frank died at the end of March 1918 and the war was to continue into November of that year. He may indeed have been killed by a mine, but if this was the case it was during the war and not after it. Recently, whilst sorting through my father’s papers, I found a letter from the British Legion written in response to a request from Frank’s sister-in-law. She, on behalf of his widow, was trying to glean more information about the circumstances surrounding Frank’s death, but no information was forthcoming. The letter was dated from the mid 1960s, and so some 50 years after Frank died his family was still looking for answers. His name does not appear on any local war memorial. His past seems out of reach.

How typical is Frank’s story? How many other families, decades after the Great War had finished, were still looking for answers? I suspect there were many. What was the

impact of his death? Again, anecdotally, my grandfather (Frank's eldest child) often told me that he had to leave school to help support the family, and they in turn had to move to another location with cheaper rent. It is interesting that my grandfather as a young man also joined the Inniskilling Fusiliers and served from the mid 1920s in India and Egypt. In World War II he was part of the Home Guard, and his son – my father – was an army cadet who in later years served with the Ulster Defence Regiment during the Northern Ireland “Troubles”.

Researching family history is both frustrating and addictive. Many WWI service records were destroyed during the Blitz in WWII, making documentation difficult to find. I am neither a genealogist nor an academic historian. As an artist, I decided that if it was not possible to research Frank Ritchie using historical documentation then I would research around him in ways which allowed for a creative response to his lived experience. This project has taken me to Pozières and other sites along the Western Front to see places where Frank experienced his war. It has inspired me to make substantial series of work on war memorials, shattered trees, and poppies, and to extend the Great War origins of the work into the present day. The Wounded Poppy Series, for example, can be read in many ways (Figure 4). Although the work began with poppies picked along the banks of the Somme, others were picked in Germany, Spain, and Ireland. Pressed into sketch books, their petals crumpled and the colours faded from blood red to pink. They were then painted individually in watercolour. I kept the seeds and scattered them in fields around my locale. These actions recycle my memories of the poppy fields in Flanders: the regenerative power of nature after so much death. The paintings could also be read as a commentary on the current conflict in Afghanistan where civilian and military casualty lists continue to grow, as does opium production from the poppy fields there. The poppy, therefore, differs symbolically depending on one's location, perspective, and needs, whether one is a rural farmer growing a narcotic crop as a means of economic survival or someone for whom the poppy is a symbol of remembrance for the ultimate sacrifice made in other foreign fields.

A series of architectural drawings of war memorials inspired a creative exploration of alternative memorial forms. In this instance, a consideration of the words *felling* and *fallen* led to the development of 100 drawings of tree ring sections used as a metaphor for lives cut short through trauma or violent acts. This work is my attempt to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. As is well known, it was not the war to end all wars, and so the series is also intended to reflect on the fallen from all wars which have occurred since 1918. Each tree ring drawing is numbered by age (Figure 5). Frank, my grandfather, and my father will be remembered in the drawings of specific tree rings (34, 96, 75): the age at which they respectively died in service or as veterans who had served. It is hoped that the audience for this work will locate their own memories within the overall piece.

Like many of those who died in the First World War, my great-grandfather is beyond living memory and only traces of his life exist, in a citation, a photograph, and a plaque on a wall in France. He left no testimony. My grandfather often spoke with pride about his own military service at a time when I was paying scant interest to anything other than myself. My father never talked about his service at all and at the height of the “Troubles” it was not to be spoken of outside of the family. These three men are all gone and with them the memories and experiences of their military pasts.

In trying to uncover Frank's story – or what there is of it – I am by extension telling the story of many of those who served and for whom no documentation exists. This state

of remembering is in itself a form of memorial. It is also perhaps a performance of memory, prosthetic or otherwise, which through the production of visual art can circulate beyond family boundaries to the wider world.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **References**

- Heaney, S. 1995. *Death of a Naturalist*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Landesberg, A. 1997. "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy." *New German Critique* 71: 63–86.



Figure 1. Ballylinker. Author's personal photograph, 2012.



Figure 2. Ancestral memories. Digital collage, 15 x 20 cm, 2012. Left panel: Frank Ritchie; right panel: Gail Ritchie.



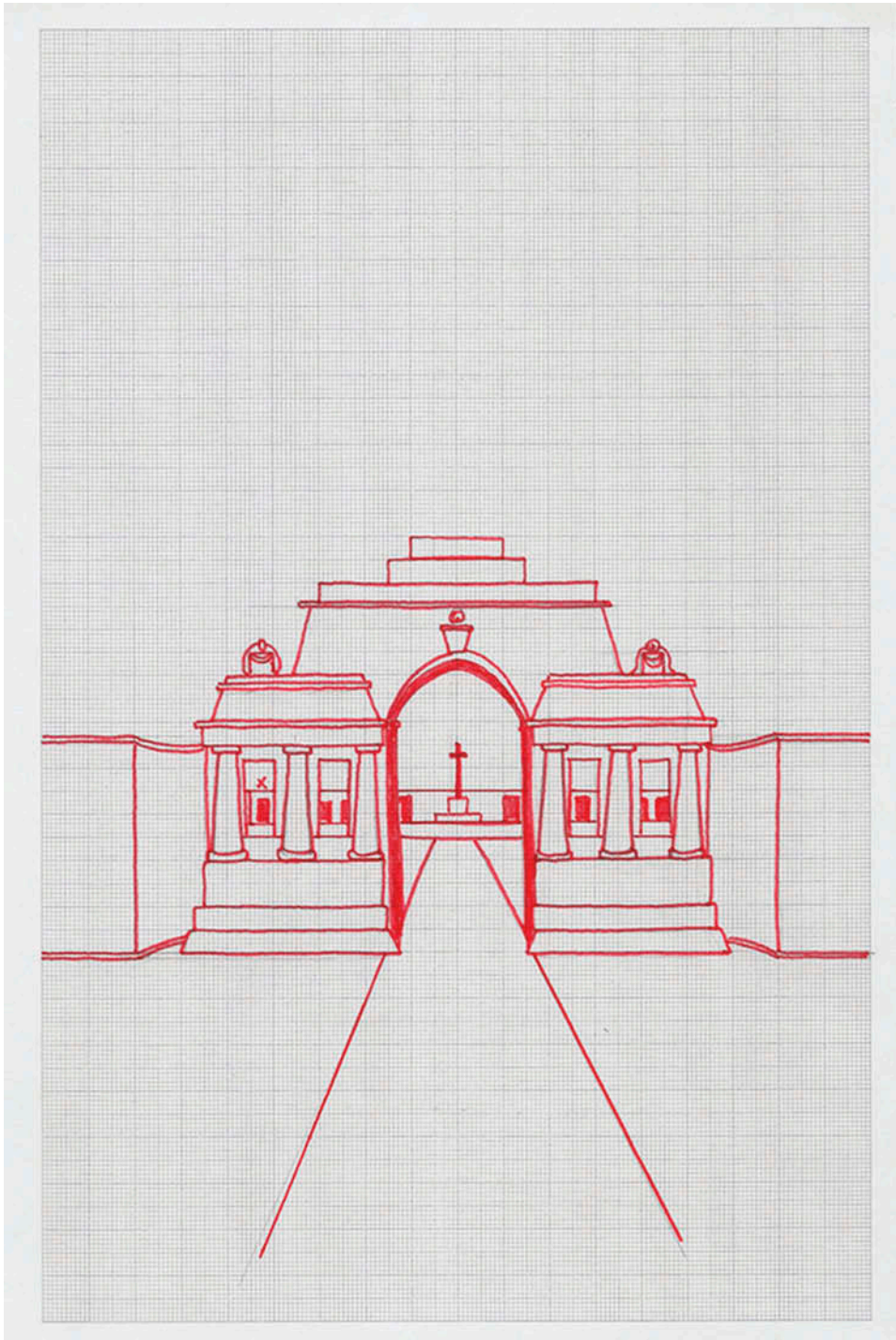


Figure 3. Pozières cemetery. Ink on graph paper, 30 x 20 cm, 2009. From a suite of 36 drawings.



Figure 4. Wounded Poppy Series. Watercolour on paper. Each 30 x 20 cm, 2009. From a suite of 36 paintings.

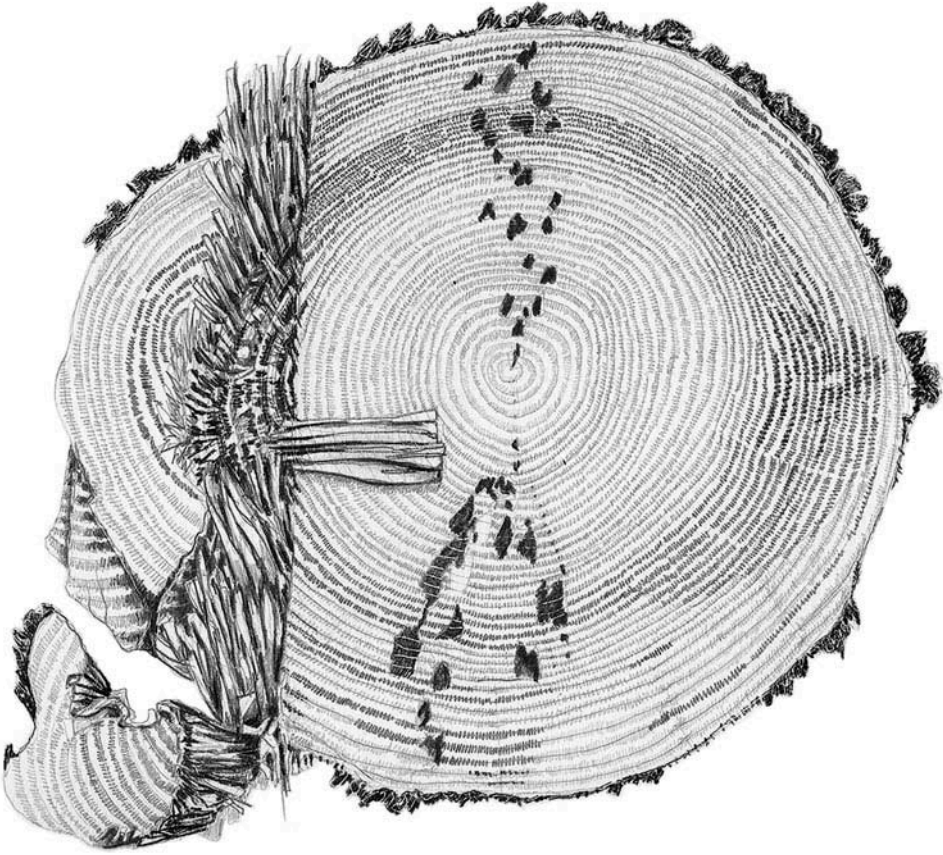


Figure 5. Tree Ring 40. Pencil and engraving on paper, 30 x 30 cm, 2012. From a suite of 100 drawings.