The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the “Memory Boom” in Contemporary Historical Studies

Jay Winter

Abstract

Jay Winter delivered the following in the form of a lecture at the Canadian War Museum on 31 October 2000. A distinguished academic, Winter has been writing about the cultural history of the First World War for nearly three decades. He has taught at the University of Cambridge in England and is presently at Yale University. Since 1988, he has been a director of the Historial de la grande guerre in Peronne, an important war museum in northern France. In this capacity, he has become familiar with a great many institutions of war and military history around the world and he has great knowledge and familiarity with the important historical and intellectual debates that will be fundamental to the creation of a new Canadian War Museum, which is now slated to open in May 2005.

Probably Winter's best-known book is Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European Cultural History published in 1995. In it, he argues that the rituals of mourning associated with commemoration after the First World War had a history stretching far back in human life and experience. In this he contradicts the thinking of Canadian historian Modris Eksteins who argued that the Great War marked the birth of the modern age. Lately, Daniel Sherman has proposed that commemorative ceremonies and memorials are significantly politicized in the interests of state control. In the following paper Winter warns against the dangers of collective memory being collapsed into “a set of stories formed by or about the state” while also providing a rich overview of the great importance that attention to memory and culture studies has taken on in contemporary thought. These cannot be ignored in any serious attempt to lay the intellectual foundation of any new museum, and perhaps especially may have specific relevance to a new war museum.

Recommended Citation

This book studies the trajectory of the work of more than thirty women artists in wartime Germany. They began in the tradition of patriotic mobilization and the stoical acceptance of the deaths of their loved ones. By the end of the war, their work expressed ambivalence about the war, and they constructed an image of women as bereaved and suffering mothers. Memory in Anthropology: a Historical Perspective It is unfortunate that there has not been yet a history, a genealogy of the concept of memory in anthropology, whereas the ongoing obsession with memory in the humanities has been abundantly documented. To the best of my knowledge, the contemporary anthropological use of memory is hovering between history as it is lived by people and those issues of cultural persistence. To me, the memory boom in anthropology is not a surprise, nor is memory only an invention of the postmodernist turn. Indeed, according to White, “To anthropologists, the spate of recent writing on collective memory may seem puzzling for its familiarity. The name of Jack Goody is associated with the first studies of memory.