

# ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

During the weeks leading up to Remembrance Sunday in November 2007, RCAFMS staff joined veterans from the Royal British Legion Scotland and Erskine Edinburgh for a poetry workshop. The workshop provided the opportunity for the veterans to reflect on military history through an exploration of local war memorials and to channel these thoughts into poetry.

Veterans who had served in a variety of military campaigns, from the Second World War to more recent conflicts in Northern Ireland and Cyprus, formed the group. The workshop provoked strong feelings of belonging and comradeship. It enabled the men to reflect on their experiences of active service, how these past events affect them today, and the significance of war memorials.

Four of the workshop participants visiting the Scottish National War Memorial, Edinburgh Castle.

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# ABOUT THE WORKSHOP



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Veterans exploring ideas with the poet Ken Cockburn.

The group worked alongside the poet Ken Cockburn, who helped turn their personal and emotional responses into a thought-provoking, and often moving, collection of creative writing and poetry. This valuable source of writing will help others appreciate the enduring impact of war.

# CAPTURING THE PAST

RCAHMS holds a rich resource of material relating to military history, from drawings and photographs of war memorials, to surveys of defensive sites. We opened our collections up to the veterans, providing a starting point for their thoughts and ideas.

The men explored a variety of historical photographs, books and architectural drawings. Treasures held at RCAHMS, such as sketchbooks belonging to Sir Robert Lorimer (the architect of the Scottish National War Memorial), provided new insights into war memorials. The group spent time discussing this material with RCAHMS staff, who shared their own specialist knowledge.

One of the veterans studying > our archive material.



< The RCAHMS collections provided a starting point for the veterans' poems.

# CAPTURING THE PAST

The group visited the Scottish National War Memorial at Edinburgh Castle where Lieutenant Colonel Ian Shepherd, secretary to the memorial's trustees, gave the veterans a guided tour.

The veterans learnt about its history and construction, as well as the process of updating current memorials. Colonel Shepherd also showed the men their individual regimental memorials and pointed out some particularly poignant aspects of the site that may not be obvious on first glance. The visit proved a time for thought and reflection.



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The Scottish National War Memorial.

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# THOUGHTS ON PAPER

Using their thoughts and responses to the archive material and the Scottish National War Memorial, the veterans explored their own poetic potential. Time was dedicated each day to putting pen to paper, with the guidance of Ken, in order to write short creative pieces. These writings also sought to trigger the group's memories and stories.

A variety of poetic techniques were introduced, such as the 'acrostic' technique. This uses the letters of a word to start, and influence the content of, each line of a poem.

This technique was used to create the work 'Highlanders':

"How many years, so long ago!  
India and Italy  
Gurkha Rifles  
Highlanders  
Let's not forget the  
Argylls!  
Nairn, my sister based at Fort George too  
David, my friend also in the Gurkhas  
Egypt, where my father was based  
Robin, my close friend, we travelled together  
Stirling Castle, the home of the Highlanders"

# THOUGHTS ON PAPER

Some participants were inspired to go beyond the limits of the workshop and enjoyed working further on the poems in their own time.

Ken created a group poem formed from verses produced by all the participants. The poem crossed different times and spaces, but came together as a whole to reflect the diversity of military experience.



< One of the veterans pens his thoughts.

The group at work. >



# REMEMBERING THE FALLEN

Whilst considering the Scottish National War Memorial, participants were inspired to write their own inscription for the memorial:

“You must remember the stories here  
Of war, of hardship and comrades so dear  
The loss, the suffering, the bloody battles  
The pain, O God, it really matters.

Just stop and think and see and imagine  
The wonderful heroes this memorial is for  
The bravery, the stories, the suffering, the loss  
Of people who fell in the war.”



In addition to the Scottish National War Memorial, the Lothians have many memorials honouring those who sacrificed their lives during wartime. The group looked at material held by RCAHMS on several of these sites. War memorials at Parliament Hall, St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral and other churches in Edinburgh, Loretto School Chapel at Musselburgh, and towns including Ratho, Athlestaneford, Pencaitland, and Penicuik, were all examined.

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Commemorative window at the Scottish National War Memorial.

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# THE READING

The poetry and creative writing developed by the group were presented at a reading held at the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh. Family and friends of the veterans attended the event.



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Veterans and guests gathered to hear the poems.

The veterans presented their individual and collective pieces in person. To complement these works, Lorna Irvine from the Scottish Poetry Library read a selection of poems written by children about the Second World War.

The reading created an intimate atmosphere and proved an emotional occasion for all involved, enabling the veterans to express in their own words their reflections on war.



# THE READING



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One of the veterans tells his story of wartime events.

A veteran is congratulated on his efforts at the reading.

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