

Summary of discussions prior to the symposium regarding the French memorial at the Pukeahu National War Memorial Park

Introduction :

On the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the end of World War I, and at the invitation of the New Zealand authorities, a French memorial will be inaugurated in 2018 within the Pukeahu National War Memorial Park in Wellington, opened to the public in 2015. The objective of the symposium, which will take place in France from 6 to 12 December 2015, is to establish, through a dialogue between France and New Zealand, a document which will define the general terms of reference, in regards to aesthetics, design and remembrance purpose, and set out the general specifications for the memorial. This document is intended to guide the artists, designers and architects wishing to submit to the call for tenders which will be organised in the form of a public competition in New Zealand in the first half of 2016. For this purpose, the participants in the symposium will be invited to visit some of the most significant places of remembrance for France and New Zealand in France, to meet with various stakeholders involved in the commemoration of World War I, and to reflect on the issues at stake through the French memorial at Pukeahu National War Memorial Park.

In order to facilitate the work of the members of the symposium, to provide them with avenues of reflection and to give them an overview of representations and ideas generated by the Great War in New Zealand today, the cultural service of the Embassy of France interviewed more than thirty New Zealand professionals (artists, historians, designers, writers, prominent personalities involved in projects relating to the Great War, or in charge of commemorations). This document presents a synthesis of the comments, anecdotes, feelings and thoughts collected during these interviews. Based on recurring response elements, this synthesis will highlight a few major principles with regards to the perceptions held by New Zealanders about World War I and its role in the relations between our two countries; however, it also incorporates more ad hoc considerations deemed relevant in view of the preparatory work for the memorial.

I) Spontaneous statements

At the beginning, participants were asked about the first words to come to mind when considering World War I and the joint involvement of France and New Zealand. The collected responses fall, for the most part, into three main categories:

- A geographic and topographic category focusing on locations, the physical backdrop of the conflict, and the revelation of the upheaval caused to the landscape: the devastation of the trenches, the plains of the Somme, the walls of Le Quesnoy, often contrasted on the one hand to the charm of French landscapes such as those discovered by the soldiers during their long journey by train from Marseille to the front line, and on the other hand to the aridity of Gallipoli and Egypt. Being in France gave rise to mixed feelings of familiarity and strangeness among the soldiers, whose ancestors often came from Europe.
- The horror and violence of the war, the disproportionality between human losses and military gains, the incommensurability between individual suffering and the major imperial and geopolitical objectives. "Losses", "suffering", "sacrifice", "the dead" are words which come up frequently, even if it may be noted that instead of "sacrifice", one respondent prefers the term "*blank loss*" in order to emphasise that the death of a soldier, if it could be understood from the

point of view of the war effort as a useful or glorious sacrifice, did not necessarily have the same meaning for the bereaved families, marked by the distant and sometimes incomprehensible disappearance of one of their own.

- A more positive and sometimes paradoxical category in view of the latter, referring to unity born of remembrance, memory and commemorations, and focusing on the links forged during the war ("friendship", "bonds", experience and values shared) and the long-term ties they henceforth establish between the two countries. This experience is not like brotherhood in arms, since the troops did not serve side-by-side, but it is akin to a community of ideals, almost a shared belief in civilisation. It often includes reference to a joint healing process and is associated with places of remembrance (gardens of remembrance and memorials which can materialize these bonds).

II) Emotions

The respondents mention various emotions when asked to reflect on the period, its people and the relationships forged between France and New Zealand in World War I. In addition to sadness - related to loss of life - and admiration for the "ordinary courage" demonstrated by New Zealand soldiers who agreed to defend a country they had never visited, more complex emotions are cited. They represent an effort to retrospectively imagine the paradoxical mindset of the soldiers, which is difficult to render today. Many participants insist on the confusion that these soldiers must have felt, caught between the excitement at the idea of leaving for Europe, and the brutal disillusion which they had to face once on the battlefield, as well as on the inability of the soldiers to imagine what to expect, or to talk openly about it. Relying on the example of a letter sent by a young Wellingtonian to his mother, one of the participants emphasises the pride and excitement of this soldier, but wonders whether he was not actually feeling fear, without being able or wanting to express it because of the tension between social pressure and the rhetoric of courage on one side, and the genuine feelings and ineffability of the experience of war on the other.

However, some respondents also caution against the widespread notion that the vast majority of soldiers exhibited a form of naivety: if they could not have imagined that the war would be so lengthy and deadly, not all of them were enthusiastic to leave for a European 'adventure'. This nuance is important, because it seems that the revision of the soldiers' attitudes prior to departure retrospectively highlighted the disparity between their supposed naivety and the brutality of the war, and also standardised the attitude of the soldiers without taking into account the range of feelings.

Indecision, waiting, the difficulty in perceiving any coherence in the manoeuvres, the feeling of arbitrariness and fatalism (chance or destiny decides who lives or dies), as well as the ineffability of the experience of war were also mentioned many times.

III) Historical figures and the collective dimension of the war

Historical figures who appear to have left the strongest impression on the respondents are either high-ranking military leaders (Marshals Foch and Pétain, Field Marshal Haig, the New Zealand general Bernard Freyberg...) or archetypal war characters: "les poilus", the New Zealand tunnellers, Maori troops from the *Pioneer Battalion*, French peasants having to cope with the war, the unknown soldier representing all the military victims, or even women staying behind in New Zealand who, because of the lack of communication, could hardly imagine the situation that their husbands, brothers or sons were experiencing. Animals are a recurrent emblematic theme (horses, carrier pigeons delivering messages...), as if their silent suffering somehow better symbolised the pathetic condition of all those afflicted by conflict. Thus, even if the respondents concentrate for the main part on the soldiers, most of them also take into account all the other people whose lives were affected, however indirectly. A recurring figure, in

these discussions, is that of the "common man/woman", whose life was being irrevocably disrupted by the historical impact of the war.

Many participants insist on the importance of this collective perspective, as opposed to an approach that would glorify a small number of *war heroes*. This collective perspective, honouring the anonymous who were *in* the war, would place greater emphasis on commemoration, serving to counteract, according to some respondents, the tendency to "celebrate" war by virtue of the ultimate victory of the allies. The importance of proposing an interpretation which differs from the epic understanding of the war, insisting on the hero figure, is emphasised by many of the personalities interviewed. If not all New Zealanders challenge this interpretation, some express the wish to see another analysis grid emerge, more critical without being polemical, intended to encourage a reflection on war and its consequences rather than a unanimous celebration of victory which would obscure many aspects of the historical reality of war.

Furthermore, in the mode of remembrance, the dichotomy between the individual and the collective is expressed on many other levels - the anonymity of the massacre ("slaughter", "cannon fodder", "unmarked graves" etc.) as opposed to the scars of war carried in the flesh of the soldiers (disabled veterans) and personal stories.

Several participants comment on the relations that have been established between the New Zealand troops arriving in France and the local population, in particular at the rear of the fighting. In contrast with Gallipoli, the Western Front offered many opportunities for interaction with French civilians. They stress the importance for the soldiers of these village encounters: pride in coming to the aid of the villagers, games and complicity (including through sport), small-scale trading, fleeting delights of the local café. Despite the language barrier, a friendship developed between the New Zealand troops and these villagers, which makes the experience of war also one of discovery of another country, even if devastated, and its people, with whom we can weave fraternal ties. Thus, the war appears to be a war in the name of friendship, with New Zealand soldiers coming to the aid of a friendly nation facing its "invaders". This interpretation contrasts with that of World War II, where the purpose was rather to fight against an ideology on other theatres of operation. We understand the importance of a battle such as the one at Le Quesnoy in the New Zealand memory, which also pertains to this fraternal and human dimension of proximity, to the idea that soldiers achieved the liberation of a village populated by individuals whose descendants uphold the memory, and where "friends" of New Zealand have lived until today.

IV) A "Chinese portrait" of the Great War

Respondents were asked to propose a "Chinese portrait" of the Great War, by choosing a colour, a sound, a landscape, etc. to describe what it meant to them. Here is a summary of the most frequent or most relevant responses:

- **colour:** red (for blood, but also for the poppy), khaki, black, and blue.
- **shape:** gravestones, the Christian cross, trenches, and more generally angular shapes (rectangle).
- **time of day:** almost unanimously, dawn, paradoxical moment offering the promise of a new day, but a day to survive while exposed to danger.
- **sound:** the bugle, detonation of firearms or the sound of bullets, or the silence of a military cemetery or necropolis.
- **material, texture:** thick woven wool for uniforms, mud, metal, fire.
- **concept:** "*War to end all wars*", idea that this war was to put an end to militarism (la "*Der des ders*" in French), camaraderie ("*the triumph of friendship over distance*") and mutual assistance, loss, remoteness and exile, the comprehensive and imperial nature of the conflict, the arbitrariness of death or of salvation.
- **landscape:** the *No man's land*, dead trees on a battlefield, their uprightness in contrast with the plains of the Somme, trenches as wounds of the earth, but also the garden of remembrance.

V) The need to devise a memorial with a long-term vision

Even if the experience of World War I is of course never first-hand for the respondents, it turns out that many of them nevertheless had a grandfather, a great-uncle or great-grandfather who fought in France. Testimonials thus reveal a dual relationship to war, that we need to understand in order to grasp the meaning of World War I for New Zealanders: firstly, a common knowledge coming through school and education, which translates into common representations (places - Le Quesnoy, Gallipoli - or images - trenches, uniforms...) offering some stereotypes of war images; and secondly, a finer perception of the emotions felt - supposedly - by the soldiers, their living conditions and those of their families, and the consequences of war in the long term, once the war was over. This second aspect stems from a family memory and elements of oral history, quite widespread in New Zealand.

It may therefore be relevant, depending on the respondents, to reflect on the means to ensure that the memorial not only become part of an "anniversary" temporal approach, representing a historical perspective on the occasion of the centennial, but also correspond to a diachronic approach, which would take into account the consequences of the war throughout the last century and up to now, and the work on remembrance already undertaken and in the making. This could for example be achieved by taking into account certain developments: one of the participants thus emphasises how our awareness of the war has been transformed, wondering whether it would still be possible today to find such a large proportion of young people enthusiastic about the idea of going into combat in unknown lands. Another participant stresses the importance of progress in the field of communication technologies: the difference between the difficulty of access to information in 1914, as opposed to the instant access and quasi-unlimited reliable sources of information which we enjoy today, and explains, according to him, that it is so difficult to understand the state of mind in which the soldiers found themselves...

This prompts us to dispense with the need for a short-term "marking" of the centennial for the memorial, by, on the contrary, setting it against a long-term temporal backdrop which is one aspect of the relations between both countries and one which we strive for. Still on the subject of this relation to time, one of the respondents states that it is necessary to take into account the fact that the history of New Zealand, a "young" country, cannot be dealt with in the same way as the history of France. He suggests not to overlook this difference when trying to understand how we relate to history, and thus to World War I, in each of the two countries and how these perceptions might differ. In this regard, many participants consider the idea of World War I being a key event for forging a national identity as a myth, ie something beyond true or false. While it is, of course, a major event, its importance in the nation-building process and national narrative must be kept under scrutiny, both when it comes to recording the national history and to understand how New Zealanders interpret their role in European history.

Finally, the entanglement of different historical levels is frequently pointed out by the participants. With regards to creating the memorial, they clearly identify several strata for interpreting history which need to be kept together: the official and institutional history, the scholarly history of historians and historiography, the informal and diffuse history of the collective and oral memories within families.

VI) Comments about the memorial

Several respondents formulate suggestions to enable the memorial to stand out from other projects that will emerge during the 4 years of the centennial, in order to avoid appearing as '*just another war memorial in the park*'. One of them, who worked on the interactive and international memorial *Still* in 2015,

insists, for example on the need to commemorate, and not celebrate, setting the project apart from a certain tendency to highlight the heroes among the soldiers and the glorification of the final victory, and seeking to stimulate pride rather than memory. Several participants also express their wish to see the memorial encapsulate a positive message, such as the aspiration of the soldiers to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of a better world (with the hope that it would be the last of wars) while commemorating the seriousness of this sacrifice, which has also proved, in a certain way, futile. They also think the memorial should not confine itself to the war but rather to strongly emphasize the lasting friendship born from the joint experience of war.

One participant also prompts us to reflect on the motivation for building this memorial, beyond the commemoration of the centennial (*"Why, beyond the obvious marking of the war, should we see this as relevant to our two nations today?"*); while another stresses the importance of relying on a strong conceptual basis before initiating the implementation of the project: *"The greatest recent memorials have an "art concept" underpinning them, e.g. the Vietnam Memorial in Washington DC - a wound in the earth; the 9/11 memorial in New York - a negative space representing absence and loss."*

Two of the participants also underline the significance of the memorial of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, which is remarkable in so far as it lists the names of the 579,606 killed on the Nord-Pas de Calais front without distinguishing nationality and rank. They insist as well on the importance, in their opinion, of building a memorial, which presents "ordinary people", their interconnections, and the collective experience brought about by war despite the plurality of individual experiences depending on nationality, age, gender, social position... Another respondent develops a similar reasoning in cautioning against a mentality of *"Us and Them"* (« Eux & Nous »), between the Allies and their former enemies. One way to recognise the "humble people" who were involved in the war, as suggested by a participant, would be to incorporate into the memorial replicas of personal objects having belonged to the soldiers.

Finally, several comments mention the idea of a "living memorial" which could either be re-enacted at ceremonies or artistic performances, or enriched by digital content accessible via QR codes.

VII) For a memorial rich in terms of semantics

Other respondents rely on their experience of war memorials (visited, made...) to underline the importance of building a striking, imposing memorial, which would have a physical impact, powerfully highlighting some material elements (landscape features, terrain, tree trunks, stones, soil...). To do this, an historian proposes adopting a bold, powerful, design incorporating additional "layers" of interpretation, nuances that would reflect the richness of the subject matter: the diversity of individual experiences in the war, for example, but also the relations between France and New Zealand. An artist, who carried out several major works in connection with the centenary, also insists on the importance of proposing several layers of interpretation, and suggests using a symbolic approach that is both accessible and rich. A way to integrate such a conceptual richness into the memorial would be to design it by incorporating a variety of scales: the external appearance, from afar, could echo a first idea, while other symbols, concepts or inscriptions could be integrated into the memorial so as to become perceptible during a more meticulous and patient exploration.

We can then consider the variance of concepts and symbols according to the "macro-meso-micro" scale distinction; but it is also possible to think of other ways to "physically" account for different layers of reading: for example, by playing on the "inside/outside" distinction, reminiscent of a dome-shaped structure, whose external appearance could be combined with an interior layout which would convey a distinct idea; or even on "above-below", by imagining a partially buried memorial, etc.

VIII) Finding relevant symbols for the ties between France and New Zealand

Some respondents suggest that many New Zealanders may have a limited knowledge of the role played by France in this war, and the magnitude of the losses she has incurred. There is often a misunderstanding or a false perception of the French commitment to the war (the alleged ineffectiveness of French troops to be offset by those from the Commonwealth), perhaps due to the fact that the ANZAC had little operational relations with French soldiers, and more with civilians, and also to the fact that the bulk of accessible historiography comes from the anglo-saxon world. This confusion also applies to locations: Passchendaele and Ypres are not always clearly identified as Belgian cities, the predominant idea of "Western Front" comes at the cost of some confusion.

One of the participants insists on the risk of wanting to "force" a connection between the two countries, by mixing the symbols of each without relying on elements that carry true meaning. This meaning, precisely, should come from the history of the two countries, and not be a collection of "clichés" or simplified representations of the ties that unite New Zealand and France. The difficulty lies in the fact that, in the eyes of the participants, these ties are mainly links established through the history of French exploration in the Pacific, war, rugby, trade and a common interest in gastronomy. But beyond these concrete elements, most of the respondents consider that these relations are based on concepts which, although more muted in their expression, are equally structuring: a solid friendship and mutual respect, a good understanding of each other's culture strengthened by a mutual interest in the latter, common values...

It may be noted that a small number of respondents advise to "frenchify" the memorial to incorporate cultural elements that echo the image of France in New Zealand. Some believe therefore that the "sophistication of French culture" should appear, symbolically, in the memorial. Others say meanwhile that taking into account French cultural elements would be a way for New Zealand to expand its global visual and mental directory of World War I. One respondent takes the example of the poppy, a strong symbolic element found in all New Zealand commemoration efforts of the Great War, but which does not carry the same meaning for French people. Introducing the French own symbols and references – in this case the cornflower for instance - would be a means of encouraging the New Zealand public to take a fresh look at how we remember war and at cultural specificities that may change the way in which two nations commemorate the same event. The same person says: '*Be French, be comfortable doing so, say what you want to say*', before cautioning us: '*Don't overlay symbols, or pretend our relationship is what it's not*'.

In order to bear in mind what France represents in the eyes of New Zealanders (to experiment with these symbols in the memorial or on the contrary to avoid stereotyping), we may refer to the responses of the participants to one of the questions where they had to indicate what best symbolised France in their eyes. In no particular order, we find: architecture, impressionism, the existence of numerous grand monuments (Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the château of Versailles). One respondent further defines the French "style" as an ability to reconcile simplicity and extravagance. Those participants referring to architecture think either of urban architecture (Haussmann), meaning cobbled streets and stone houses of idealised villages, or boulevards lined with rows of trees (an image which is featured in many replies). Certain qualities (elegance, sophistication, conciliation of both classic and modern) also appear on several occasions.

The participants, while touched by the idea of a public competition launched in New Zealand, underline that France should not only be represented by the monument, but could also be materially present in it, for example through the addition of elements from our country (soil, archaeological objects and *memorabilia*, small architectural elements, remains of our heritage...).

IX) Taking into account the acoustic environment for the memorial

One respondent, a composer, keenly stresses the need to take into account the acoustic dimension of the venue that will host the memorial: due to the amount of traffic in the vicinity of the *War memorial park*, it might be useful to find a way to control the auditory environment of the memorial. To do this, for example, it should be possible to devise an "acoustic shield" which would be partially or wholly integrated into the memorial. Controlling the sound in the vicinity of the memorial would thus strengthen its symbolic significance and effect on passers-by, and the same respondent thus advises placing as much importance on the acoustic dimension as on the aesthetic or spacial dimension of the memorial.

Conclusion:

The memorial would most likely benefit from taking on board several key ideas: an in-depth conceptual reflection, the integration of several layers of interpretation that may correspond to different physical "scales", or taking into account the auditory environment of the memorial and its relationship to neighbouring monuments. The responses of the participants indicate a desire to see the memorial adopt a tone more akin to commemoration than to celebration, while incorporating typically "French" elements, as well as to highlight the ties between France and New Zealand in the long-term and not only in the short temporal backdrop of the "anniversary".

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that there are some myths to deconstruct in regards to the perception of the war as viewed by New Zealand: the destruction suffered by France is often underestimated, and the role played by the war in the construction of national identity should not be overstated, and especially not to exploit the war for the benefit of one's national history while weakening historical accuracy.

The main challenge finally resides in the search for a way to account for two different readings of a shared event: how to educate and inform New Zealanders on our own (French) perceptions of the war, without denying, ignoring or misrepresenting their own? How can we give a full account of the importance of an event in our memory without conveying persistent myths? How can we represent both the historical truth of the war, and cultural elements integrated into our respective national histories?

Finally, the expectations of New Zealanders are unanimously very strong with respect to the French monument in terms of boldness of design, innovation, creativity and enduring symbolic depth and richness.