The Silence of the Somme: Sound and Realism in British and Dutch Poems Mediating The Battle of the Somme

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Abstract

The place occupied in cultural memory by the First World War is chiefly determined by a handful of mainly English-speaking poems which portray the conflict as a senseless slaughter. During the war itself, opinion was strongly influenced by a film made for the propaganda arm of the British war effort: The Battle of the Somme (1916), which managed to elicit quite varying reactions. The violence of war had never before been brought into focus so sharply, yet the interpretations of this mediated reality were varied. Three poets wrote about, what of necessity, remained absent from this silent film: the noise of industrial warfare (imitated in some performances by live musicians) and the voice of the individual soldier. Jingoist Henry Newbolt saw the film as an ode to sacrifice, while his compatriot and Somme veteran C.H.B. Kitchin was chiefly struck by the fact that so many soldiers only lived on on celluloid. In neutral Holland Jacobus van Looy was confronted with his own search for excitement and half-hearted humanity.

Keywords

First World War Poetry; The Battle of the Somme; Henry Newbolt; Jacobus van Looy; C.H.B. Kitchin; Mediation; Sound of Silent Films

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Around the UK, people observed the annual two minutes' silence at 11:00 GMT to mark the day in 1918 when World War One ended. The tradition of two minutes' silence to remember the dead began exactly a year after the end of World War One. The coronavirus pandemic affected commemorations this year, although remembrance services and events were allowed, provided there were strict social distancing measures. Image copyright Owen Humphreys / PA Wire. The bugle was found next to the body of a Welsh Guard who fought during the Battle of the Somme in 1915. Image copyright Jacob King / PA Wire. Image caption RAF veteran Alan McQuilllin, 97, stands at a war memorial in Cirencester, Gloucestershire. The Battle of the Somme was fought July 1 to November 18 during World War I and resulted in 1.5 million casualties as the Allies attacked the Germans. In 1916, the British and French intended to launch a large-scale offensive along the Somme River. With the beginning of the Battle of Verdun in February, the focus changed to a British-centric operation with the goal of relieving pressure on the French. Moving forward on July 1, the British sustained massive losses in the opening hours of the offensive while French troops made some gains. Far from the breakthrough hoped for by the high command, the Battle of Somme became an extended, grinding affair that came to symbolize the futility of the fighting on the Western Front. Background. The battle at the Somme started with a weeklong artillery bombardment of the German lines. 1,738,000 shells were fired at the Germans. The logic behind this was so that the artillery guns would destroy the German trenches and barbed wire placed in front of the trenches. The use of artillery was heavily supported by Field Marshall Haig: “The enemy's position to be attacked was of a very considerable character, situated on high, undulating tract of ground. (They had) deep trenches...bomb proof shelters......wire entanglements forty yards broad often as thick as a man's finger. Defences of this nature A two minute silence has marked the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. A vigil was held at Scotland's National War Memorial to honour the Scots who took part in the offensive. The silence ended with the sound of a whistle, blown by Alan Hamilton, which was used by his great uncle to signal the start of the first assault, at 07:30 on the morning of 1 July 1916. Other events are taking place across the country to commemorate the fallen.