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Commonwealth War Graves Commission

15 October 2018

Maidenhead, UK

MEDIA RELEASE:

Shaping a nation's sorrow: CWGC launches new online exhibition to mark the end of the First World War centenary

- As part of the end of the First World War Centenary anniversary, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) has launched a new online exhibition, showcasing more than 600 items from its historic archives
- *Shaping our Sorrow* explores how the Commission provided a physical form and emotional outlet for a nation and world in mourning
- Items within the exhibition range from a copy of the King's Passport issued for his battlefield pilgrimage in 1920, photos of Rudyard Kipling visiting his son's memorial, to personal correspondence from grieving mothers writing to the CWGC

To mark the end of the centenary of the First World War, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), has launched its new online exhibition, *Shaping our Sorrow*. The exhibition explores the way in which the Commission sought to capture the shared grief of an empire through a visionary combination of timeless architecture, subtle design, and poignant words.

It features previously unseen archive material, including photographs, heart-breaking personal letters, film, original architectural drawings and plans of the earliest cemeteries and memorials. Structured around the five stages of grief, the exhibition gives a unique insight into the difficult and often controversial decisions that helped to shape remembrance as we know it today.

Plans for commemorating the dead of the Great War caused much debate, particularly the decision not to repatriate the fallen. The Commission wanted to treat all ranks equally and it was felt that by allowing some service personnel to be brought home, particularly those from a wealthy background, the comradeship that had developed between all servicemen at the front would be lost.

The exhibition showcases several petitions, mostly of mothers who'd lost sons in the war - despairing at the decision not to repatriate the dead. For example, the collection shows a photo of a petition organised by Sarah Smith, a grieving mother lobbying the Prince of Wales – the President of the Commission – to reverse the policy.

It also includes the heart wrenching letter from Anna Durie, a grieving Canadian mother, who lost her son William. In the letter she criticises the practice of non-repatriation and vows to return her son's body home. True to her word, she attempts, but fails to remove Williams's coffin. "I was going like a criminal, by night to



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exhume the body of the bravest officers that ever-left Canada!" writing to Fabian Ware, the Commission's founder.

It highlights the roles of many famous individuals such as Rudyard Kipling, the Commission's literary adviser, who lost his 18-year-old son John in the war, inspiring the famous poem - *My Boy Jack*. John's grave was not identified in Kipling's lifetime, and his name was added to the Loos Memorial in France. A poignant image from 1930 shows Kipling and his wife attending the unveiling of the memorial.

The exhibition brings together photos and rare footage from King George V's 1922 pilgrimage to CWGC's earliest sites. The King travelled with Fabian Ware to over 30 cemeteries and memorials in various stages of development. A newly discovered photograph of his passport is shown, which simply states his name as "The King".

A multi-media collection enables viewers to examine photos in detail, explore a wealth of digitized archive material, and discover some of the untold stories of the Commission's early gardeners.

Andrew Fetherston, Chief Archivist at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, said:

"As the First World War came to an end, it was just the start of the monumental task of honouring the dead. Our rituals of remembrance are too often taken for granted, but this exhibition is a stark reminder that commemorating one million people equally, regardless of class and rank, was unprecedented and often very controversial. We're excited to share our fascinating archive collection which casts fresh light on the creation of our iconic war cemeteries and memorials."

To view the online exhibition, click here:

<http://shapingoursorrow.cwgc.org/>

For more information, images, spokespeople or more personal stories please contact:

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Ends.

Notes for editors:

1. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (www.cwgc.org)

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) commemorates the 1.7 million Commonwealth servicemen and women who died during the two world wars. It also holds and updates an extensive and accessible records archive.

The Commission operates in more than 23,000 locations in more than 150 countries.

Get to know the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

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