

‘MORE THAN JUST HUMAN HEROES’ THE ROLE OF THE PIGEON IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Abstract

Due to their centrality in war communications, carrier pigeons, lofts and pigeon handlers were legitimate targets for enemy forces during the First World War (1914–18). As a result of the multi-faceted nature and conflicting interests associated with the post-war debate on appropriate ways of memorialising the war dead (humans), the contribution the animals was largely excluded from the discussions and rarely considered. Belgian and French pigeon fanciers in particular, who as moral witnesses to the slaughter of their birds and brethren, were the exception. They took action to supplement the military and quasi-military, as well as informal recognition extended to war pigeons and their handlers, by erecting official monuments to honour their war dead. Responding to current debates that question animal memorialisation in general, this article, which is largely based on contemporary news reports, reports on an investigation of the early war pigeon memorials, their nature, form symbolism and meaning for the affected community within the context of animal and war memorialisation generally.

Introduction

Despite a stream of publications acknowledging the war-time role of non-human animals,¹ a small group of critics maintained that animal memorialisation is an inappropriate fad² that trivialises and ‘disneyfies’ the ugliness of war while sidelining human suffering through the foregrounding of non-human sacrifice.³ Indeed, suggests Appleton, the promotion of non-human animal memorialisation has effectively led to a situation where “the tomb of the unknown pigeon takes the place of the unknown soldier”.⁴ Far from being throw-away statements, these sentiments may be directly related to descriptions of the late 20th-century upsurge in war

*Scientia Militaria, South African
Journal of Military Studies, Vol
43, No. 2, 2015, pp. 133–150.
doi : 10.5787/43-2-1127*

memorialisation as not only a “boom”⁵ but also a “mania”.⁶ Since there is a well-recorded history of non-human animal commemoration, the sentiments expressed by these critics may well be ascribed to generational and

experiential differences and loss of links with war survivors, including animals.⁷ As far as pigeons in particular are concerned, historical ignorance of their war-time contribution in combination with the general view of pigeons as messy and disease-transmitting ‘rats-with-wings’ lies at the heart of a consciousness that not only denies the centrality of pigeons to modern society but also fails to appreciate the “processes that may be central to how humans live and make sense out of themselves”.⁸ Furthermore, Appleton’s central argument fails to acknowledge the fact that pigeon fancying is a mutually constitutive social activity that adds cultural meaning to the lives of both fanciers and pigeons. Indeed, declared *De Voorpost*, “de duiven maken de melker”.⁹ As a result, these critics make no contribution to advancing the addition of the non-human animal contribution into the public discourse on the military or of bridging the “long-existing gap in the larger narrative of warfare”.¹⁰

Against this background, the present study aimed to contextualise the first generation of pigeon memorials erected after the First World War (1914–18) with due consideration to their form, features and meaning to pigeon fanciers in Europe with the aid of contemporary newspaper reports. In addition, and with due consideration to the nature of the criticism levelled against non-human animal memorialisation, the study attempted to identify and describe the role of post-war political and social conditions on the approach, specific activities and outcomes of the pigeon memorialisation movement in general and in France and Belgium in particular.

Pigeon fancying as social practice

Pigeon handlers, fanciers or ‘duivenmelkers’ as they are commonly known in Belgium, can be regarded as a community of practice who possessed a shared history, interests and activity. In addition to adding cultural meaning to pigeons, the natural objects of their interest, fanciers over time also developed a “distinct category of orientation”.¹¹ This orientation is further strengthened by pigeon fanciers’ ongoing social interaction and respect from peers as a result of their engagement in a form of social activity through the rearing, caring and training of the birds.¹² As a result, the individual practice is replaced by a set of collective practices “embedded in the kind of social networks that are the foundation of community”.¹³ This community (or subculture) like any other, perceives its activity as a clean, honest and constructive sport.¹⁴ Membership of this group and its activities, especially participation in prize-racing and the breeding of winning birds as well as the acquiring of encyclopaedic knowledge about bird behaviour and the

different blood strains was a sure way of acquiring respect and self-esteem from fellow members and the public beyond the confines of the immediate cultural community.¹⁵ There were also signs of overzealousness, irrational and perhaps even anti-social behaviour that occasionally characterised other sports and leisure activities at the time.¹⁶ As such, pigeon fanciers far and wide given the commonality of their activities are tied together as "... goal-directed people, with an agenda, a project" in a bond of "... fictive kinship".¹⁷ The wide diffusion of pigeons in European military circles furthermore contributed to a high media profile and recorded both "prolonged practices of identification"¹⁸ and what Jerolmack in a different context has called "... phenomenologically compelling descriptions of the men's lived descriptions of this animal practice".¹⁹ Furthermore, close interaction with animals in general also "... mediates ways of knowing that are both the means and ends of forging caring orientations to another species".²⁰ Pigeon keeping for both social and military purposes – as will be demonstrated in this article – was therefore clearly a serious undertaking.

War pigeon consciousness in Europe

Close scrutiny of the contemporary news reports of the pre-Great War years revealed frequent references to developments in military pigeon affairs. As a result of the omnipresence of military pigeons and the existence of a vast continental pigeon network, the term 'pigeon gap' with reference to the country-specific stock variations, was coined.²¹ Antipodean newspapers in particular frequently reported on military pigeon matters and contributed to spreading a 'military pigeon-consciousness' beyond the boundaries of Europe. *The West Coast Times* observed that pigeons had effectively become "a small shoot from the mighty tree of militarism".²² More than two decades before the start of the Great War, the New Zealand *Tuapeka Times* prophetically concluded that carrier pigeons would "play an active part in the next great European war".²³

At the beginning of 1891, the French was one of the first European countries to formally integrate pigeons into the military.²⁴ In addition to establishing a dedicated naval war pigeon service supported by the national fiscus,²⁵ a formal pigeon census was undertaken, which placed nearly 3 million pigeons for war service at the disposal of the military.²⁶ Furthermore, an attempt was made to place restrictions on the flying of foreign birds over French territory.²⁷ During the last part of the century, following their French counterpart, Germany and Great Britain set out to restore the military balance. During the period 1890 to 1914, both countries made an increased public investment into the registration of privately owned

pigeons and lofts and the establishment of official lofts and pigeon stations. The British, in an effort to match the 15 stations with 10 000 war pigeons and access to the stocks of 50 pigeon-flying societies with an estimated 50 000 birds established by the Germans,²⁸ set up formal infrastructure at various naval locations such as Portsmouth, Sheerness, Dartmouth, Devonport, Gibraltar and Malta. This helped Britain by the turn of the century to come to be recognised as a “military pigeon force” with “well equipped naval and military lofts”.²⁹

Bravery, masculinity and the pigeon soldier

The First World War ushered in an era of the industrial war, characterised by large armies and the use of new destructive technologies such as poison gas, tanks, aerial bombardments and submarines. It also saw the formulation of a set of new war rules.³⁰ As a result of its fundamentally transformed nature, especially its wide-scale use of destructive technologies that facilitated mass killings, this war was far more traumatic than any of its predecessors. It therefore demanded a different kind of physical and mental courage from individuals.³¹ This in turn, had definite implications for memorial practices in its aftermath. Technological advancement, however, did not eradicate the need for animals as part of the logistics of war. Amongst the variety of animals commandeered by the various armies were falcons, dogs, glow-worms and horses.³² In addition, as indicated by Roos and Liebenberg, domestic and farm animals inevitably also bore the brunt of the all-encompassing conflict.³³ Such were the conspicuousness of animals that the *Sydney Morning Herald* in Australia reported in February 1915 –

Dumb creatures are giving great help to mankind in the present war ... seldom have so many different animals been called to assist as at the present time, and this in spite of the great advance of mechanical means of locomotion.³⁴

News reports revealed that between 440 000 and 500 000 birds were commandeered for war duty by all sides involved in the conflict.³⁵ The United States contributed about 20 000, the Central Powers 120 000, and the Allied Forces more than 300 000. Hungary with the smallest contribution, committed about 160 pigeons.³⁶ The British Royal Air Force, the leading Allied nation, also used pigeons almost from the start of the war.³⁷

Understanding the strategic value of pigeons for war communications, the opposing armies from the outset attempted to circumscribe the keeping, maintenance, transport and flying of the birds. Upon their occupation of France and

Belgium, the German forces almost immediately ordered the destruction of all pigeons and lofts and banned their flying at the pain of death. In Belgium, the slaughter of 25 000 pigeons on a single day is still regarded as one of the most rational episodes of violence against pigeons as non-human animals.³⁸ A significant number of fanciers in both countries paid the ultimate price by being executed as spies for their refusal to destroy their animals and for alleged collaboration with the enemy. Given the generally destructive nature of armed conflict, the widespread use of poisonous gas also exacted its toll amongst the winged population. The majority of the birds and a significant number of their handlers on active duty therefore never made it to the peace. Given their natural lack of the ‘soldier’s doctrine’ and the fact that pigeons did not swear an allegiance to any unit, regiment or country, it is not surprising that these non-human animals were treated as a mere disposable resource in the arsenal of the opposing military and political forces.³⁹

For the American newspaper, the *Bemidji Daily Pioneer* and the New Zealand *Hawera & Normanby Star*, the contribution of the winged soldier was undisputable. As such, they became early advocates for pigeon commemoration. In this regard, the former stated –

What memorial will acknowledge the services of carrier pigeons in the world’s war of 1914–1918 remains to be seen, but their work amidst barrage fire, bursting shrapnel, the zip-zip of machine-gun bullets and the death destroying gases was of enormous value.⁴⁰

Similarly, the *Hawera & Normanby Star* called for the general recognition of all war animals (dogs, mules, horses and pigeons) and expressed the hope that –

among the many monuments which will undoubtedly be reared to commemorate the war there should be one group to perpetuate the memory of four who served not knowing what they did or why, unbiased by any prejudice, unspurred by any desire for glory; who served to the uttermost because it was commanded by Man, whom they loved, and to whom they have ever rendered unthanked and unrewarded fealty.⁴¹

This call was highly appropriate since pigeons, based on the definition used by Lazar in his article titled “Complicity, collectives, and killing in war”, equally belonged to the category of combatants although they were not volunteer members (they lacked “participatory intentions”) of the armed forces.⁴² Furthermore, although they were generally treated as “ineffective combatants”, i.e. “those who are not responsible for significant contributions to threats posed by their side” and were

often treated as an expendable commodity, the contribution of pigeons as information carriers made them legitimate targets and therefore “complicitously liable to be killed” by the enemy.⁴³ Such valuable relationships as were forged between the birds and their human counterparts in the heat and carnage of battle, therefore placed a moral obligation or “associative and non-contractual duty” on humans who were primarily responsible for the conflict, to equally commemorate the wartime sacrifices of non-human animals and to affirm their “equal moral worth”.⁴⁴

Meritorious as they were, these appeals coincided and were simultaneously obscured by a vigorous debate within the ranks of the military about general restrictions on the number of valour awards to be issued and the equal treatment of female officers in the process.⁴⁵ Appeals for the recognition of non-human animals’ role in war as a result, became a contested issue then as it still is today.

Throughout the war, British military authorities debated the issue of restricting awards to only the most deserving cases.⁴⁶ At the heart of this matter were both the curious lack of objective and uniform standards and the complex and multi-layered process of decision-making, which involved different levels of military authority and large volumes of documentation. Although there were incidences during the war where medals and other honours were used as a means to boost the morale of the fighting forces, the basic principle was that every case had to be decided on its own merit. The military authorities attempted to ensure a ‘proper balance’ between the different arms of the military, not to cheapen the honours system but above all not to leave “courage unrecognized”.⁴⁷ As a result, a significant number of recommendations for the award of medals such as the Victoria Cross, the most iconic of all British military awards, were declined.⁴⁸ These objectives were, however, fundamentally challenged by the unprecedented nature and the severity and the traumas associated with the war which created a situation where, “uncommon valour was actually so common that it could not be properly rewarded and death in the line of duty did not therefore make any person more eligible than the other”.⁴⁹ To complicate matters, female bravery under siege, especially the case of the commendation of eight Canadian nurses of the Army Medical Corps with the ranks of major and lieutenant, further pressurised the system.

Over the course of their service in Europe, several females distinguished themselves to the extent that a small number of eight individuals were recommended for receipt of the Military Cross, the standard bravery reward for junior officers. Due to its unprecedented nature, the military authorities elected to recommend that they rather be awarded the Military Medal or, alternatively, the Royal Red Cross

normally reserved for nurses as a reward for professional services.⁵⁰ Since this award was normally reserved for non-commissioned officers and privates, its recommendation was clearly in breach of military protocol. Furthermore, since gender rather than their ranks was identified as problematic, the matter was clearly discriminatory. In the face of Canadian objections, the military authorities remained steadfast and postponed gender equality to the future by awarding the lower award, namely the Military Medal.⁵¹ Given the priority of these debates, equal recognition for non-human animals in general and pigeons in the form of official memorials in particular, became a distinct impossibility. Admittedly, some recognition through both military and quasi-military means were extended to pigeons during the course of the war and in the immediate early post-war period which, in turn, laid a platform for more substantial intervention by pigeon fanciers themselves. Examples in this regard are further discussed in the next section.

Military and quasi-military pigeon honours

Over the course of the war, a number of individual birds, both named and unnamed, became well known as a result of newspaper reports about acts of bravery performed within the different theatres of war. These include birds such as Rupert of the British Pigeon Service, the American flyers President Wilson, Cher Ami and Mocker as well as the unknown Number 183 of the French service.⁵² Depending on the communication effectiveness of the unit to which a particular bird was attached, a number of pigeons, such as those from the Sandringham Lofts owned by British King George V, and which undoubtedly contributed to bringing pigeon heroics to public attention, were also mentioned in official war despatches from the front.⁵³

Honourable mention or mentions in dispatches (MIDs) is a long-established military tradition and an important means to acknowledge valour on the battlefield. Although a largely non-tangible and junior award in the hierarchy of military decorations, it brought “exceptional performance” to the attention of peers and served as a source of inspiration to others.⁵⁴ Mentioning of non-human animals, however, had no similar effect other than ending their obscurity and amending their status from being “as lost to sight as the Unknown Soldier”.⁵⁵ Furthermore, most MIDs where pigeons were identified were never gazetted, as was the case with human commendations, and these low profile and non-public mentions can therefore merely be regarded as quasi-military forms of recognition. This confirmed Halliday’s contention that bravery awards remain human creations and therefore subjected to political, policy and other considerations depending on time and circumstances.⁵⁶ In order to extend broader acknowledgement to the pigeon role,

some institutions deemed it fit to put their stuffed remains on public display, such as were the cases of President Wilson, an American pigeon on display in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, and Number 2709, one of the heroes of the Battle of Menin Road in October 1917, in the United Services Institution in Whitehall in the United Kingdom.

In a limited number of cases, nations such as France and America recommended birds for the actual receipt of official military commendations. Le Valiant and Number 183, communication heroes of the Siege of Verdun in 1916 and the Battle of the Somme respectively, were awarded official military honours in the form of a Croix de Guerre and a Légion d'honneur as well as diplomas and the award of a silver leg ring, the equivalent of the French Military Medal awarded to human soldiers.⁵⁷ Similarly, the American birds, Cher Ami, President Wilson and Mocker were reportedly recommended for receipt of the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) whilst a third named Spike was accorded a war record and a “veteran’s place of honor at the pigeon-training quarters of the U.S. Signal Corps with unlimited corn to eat and no work to do”.⁵⁸

The act of naming or individualising (“interpellating” according to Karnicky⁵⁹ or “front staging” according to Milstein) and therefore distinguishing a specific bird from the general species, represents a significant additional form of recognition since it acts as a restorative act that contributes to the compilation of a “war bird biography”.⁶⁰ The existence and distribution of such biographies serve both as a testimony to the close relationships between animals and humans and as a form of social memory that helps with the structuring of “understandings of self and society”, as well as in the formation and resilience of identity.⁶¹

Towards pigeon monuments

Beyond the award of military or quasi-military honours, various institutions also attempted to recognise pigeons through both formal and informal public means, such as dedicated monuments and special events. The Scots were amongst the earliest nations to start a formal national discussion about appropriate ways to honour the war dead.⁶² While still in the throes of war, interested parties put together a multi-disciplinary national project committee in October 1918 to work towards the establishment of a national war memorial. After years of planning, consultation and lobbying, the memorial was finally unveiled in July 1927; nearly a decade after the idea was first raised. This time delay, according to McDowell, is a natural phenomenon and is attributable to the interplay between a range of factors in-between the “impulse to commemorate” and the “actual act of memorialisation”.⁶³

These include the design and construction process itself, the availability of funding, divergent political agendas as well as ethical and moral considerations that relate to the process of grieving and healing.

As a dedication to human sacrifice, the Scottish National War Memorial forms part of the devotional tradition of memorialisation.⁶⁴ It was, however, one of the first that actively attempted to recognise the war contribution of non-human animals. The east and west bays of the memorial in particular bear the inscription “Remember also the humble beasts that served and died” and the monument depicts each of the animal types (including pigeons) in the medallions on the surface of the monument. This action almost immediately attracted positive public comment. The Canadian newspaper, the *Redcliff Review*, praised the effort for ensuring that “not even the humblest worker has been forgotten by the generous-hearted men who planned the building”⁶⁵ whilst *The Argus* referred to it as “a combination of delicate beauty and massive power”.⁶⁶ As a beacon to human sacrifice, the monument naturally omitted the names and war service of the various non-human animal categories. It therefore does not fully assist in the process of the individualisation or the writing of pigeon biographies and further underlines the status of non-human animals as ‘unknown soldiers’.

Given the significant time gap between conceptualisation and realisation of memorialisation, the possibility of a significant acknowledgement of the non-human animal contribution in the post-war phase further diminished over time. Matters were not helped by the fact that pigeon fanciers in Belgium, the acknowledged spiritual home of pigeon fancying, and key ‘moral witnesses’ of the war “whose very lives are defined by that story” and who, because they had direct and personal experience of the war, were authentic story tellers and carriers of the “collective memory of radical evil and of those destroyed or disfigured by it”, were still caught up in a fight to safeguard their material interests in the immediate aftermath of the war.⁶⁷ This situation shifted the responsibility of commemorating the pigeon role to others such as Ernest H Baynes of the American Museum of Natural History and the International Red Cross during the period 1919–1921. Baynes, who travelled to Europe during the course of the war to conduct research into the use of animals, presented an illustrated lecture entitled “The use of animals in modern warfare” at the McCullough Gymnasium in October 1919. During this talk, he specifically touched on the sacrifice made by both pigeons and pigeoneers.⁶⁸ Similarly, the Red Cross Society in New York City, on the occasion of the inauguration of some new buildings at their headquarters in 1921, released a flock of 24 ‘golden pigeons’ to mark the event. These pigeons, being the ‘mothers’ of pigeons killed in the service

of the Allied forces, were therefore hailed as soldiers equally entitled to acknowledgement as was the case with ex-servicemen.⁶⁹

Despite the symbolic merits of these acknowledgements and the fact that it strongly expressed the sentiments and values of those with a high regard for the contribution of non-human animals, both were limited events of a non-recurring nature. Furthermore, the location of these markers bears no relation to the places where pigeons had distinguished themselves and could therefore not serve as proper memorial or ritual sites for the gathering of the community of fanciers to “express its attitudes and values towards those persons and deeds that are memorialized” and where the legitimacy and strength of the sentiments of the assembled could be confirmed and reinforced.⁷⁰ The importance of these particular aspects were strongly emphasised and contrasted by the ceremonies that accompanied the unveiling of a marble plaque in honour of pigeon action in June 1929 at Verdun, a significant war-time battle ground.

Proper memorialisation of non-human animals whilst still not universally accepted also came at a time that some critics favoured the erection of living memorials with a utilitarian value rather than traditional monuments.⁷¹ In addition, German attempts to commemorate the role of war horses further complicated the matter. Being the original aggressor, efforts by the Germans were quickly denounced as indicative of a renewed craving for war and as exceeding the boundaries of reasonableness.⁷² Given the long history and existence of equestrian statues (i.e. statues of a rider mounted on a horse) in world history, in contrast to the proposed unmounted horse statue (or equine statue), this reaction appeared totally irrational. It was, however, indicative of the extent of war-weariness prevalent in frontline communities and a heightened sensitivity of the messages embedded in symbols and artefacts. As evidenced by the poem of Fons van der Maele titled “Is dat een duive?” Belgians were also increasingly becoming concerned about the growing and exclusive use and portrayal of pigeons as essentially instruments of war instead of symbols of peace.⁷³ Given their first-hand experience of a brutalising frontline, the Belgian sense of collective trauma was understandably deeply embedded, but given their long association with pigeon fancying, the time clearly had arrived to reclaim pigeons and their meaning for members of the interest community.⁷⁴ This turn of events supported Davis’ contention that war experience and memory differed along interest and ideological lines, and that “the actors involved with the planning and erection of memorials, brought with them far more than differing views of the war. They carried all the social, political, and other allegiances and interests to which they were drawn before the war and for which the discussion of memorials provided a major foil.”⁷⁵ The final push towards a broader

and more significant memorialisation, however, had to wait for the Belgian fanciers to secure their material interests first.

Pigeon monuments from Brussels to Lille

For a significant period after the Great War and unperturbed by the wave of both foreign and local war memorials being erected all over Belgium to tie together diverse communities at opposite sides of the world,⁷⁶ pigeon fanciers and numerous pigeon admirers were involved in a struggle to secure meaningful compensation for war losses.⁷⁷ This process was, however, frustrated by a serious problem of claimant dishonesty which turned the process into a long drawn-out affair.⁷⁸ In addition, a royal decree, published on 28 August 1921, placed a tax on the commercial sale of pigeons and all racing prize money. Fanciers forthwith had to obtain permission from the Ministry of Finance for the purchase and keeping of any stock. In addition, they had to apply for compulsory membership of the Nationalen Duivenliefhebbers Bond (NDB) (National Pigeon Fanciers Association).⁷⁹ This was followed by the tabling of further legislation in 1923 to provide for the protection of pigeons as a means of ensuring their availability for military service.⁸⁰

Given the threat of these measures to their material interests, the NDB embarked on a campaign to try to effect its scrapping, reform or securing an exemption for the sale of pigeons for welfare purposes. After years of public campaigning and extensive lobbying of their parliamentary representatives, the NDB won critical concessions in the form of a reduced levy on the sale of pigeons and inclusion into a commission of investigation to be established in order to consider the reform of the measures.⁸¹ With their material interests partially secured, pigeon fanciers were free to participate in the unfolding process of local memory-making and thus able to declare what they plan to forget or not.⁸²

First on the NDB agenda was a decision to raise funds in order to erect and dedicate a monument in honour of both carrier pigeons and fanciers.⁸³ Their actions therefore confirmed Winter's description of small groups with shared experiences and a common agenda as fictive kinship groups and "social agents of remembrance".⁸⁴ This action further demonstrated the "consubstantiality" or "identification through shared substance" of the parties concerned and simultaneously served as an instrument to speak "strategically for a nature stripped of its voice".⁸⁵ Although the eventual monument, sculpted by Voets and unveiled in March 1931 in Brussels, built on the pioneering example set by the Scots in 1927, it was an unambiguous and specific dedication to both the pigeoneers and the 20 000 pigeons whose lives were sacrificed.⁸⁶ Its central physical features, namely that of a

woman figure holding a pigeon in one hand (representing the peace which was returned by pigeons) and the specifics of the dedication (“to the war pigeon” and “to the 20 000 who died”), further emphasised this aspect.⁸⁷ Furthermore, this type of memorial provided, according to Van Yperséle, for a better and closer social recognition of war veterans and survivors and their lived experiences, in comparison to most of the other “glorifying statues” which were erected previously.⁸⁸

The division of roles during the dedication ceremonies, from the choice of main speakers to the ceremony at the grave of the Unknown Soldier, also bears testimony to the determined efforts of fanciers to leave their unmistakable imprint on all aspects of the process. Although the future king, Prince Leopold, was in attendance, all the ceremonial speeches and the formal dedications were handled by the civilian representatives present such as the chairman of the NDB his counterpart from the Eastern Flemish region as well the mayor of Brussels, whose task it was to express and generate feelings of patriotism and a sense of appreciation for the sacrifice made by fanciers specifically.⁸⁹ The guests of honour on the day, other than the general public, were the official delegations from the pigeon fraternities of France, Italy, Denmark, England and Spain. The attending crowd was otherwise broadly representative of the Belgian population. Given the features of the memorial event and the frequent references in the contemporary media to pigeons as part of the category of ‘unknown soldiers’, the Brussels monument therefore fulfils the same function as the cenotaph, namely to “formally perpetuate the memory of those who had laid down their lives, and to grant a place not to commemorate the end of the war but to rather mourn those lost” and for fanciers to find closure from grief, to ground their identity as a community and to maintain their narrative of local history.⁹⁰

In the aftermath of the Brussels event, the French, who pioneered the first memorial to pigeoneers following the war with Prussia in 1871 and who earlier unveiled a marble plaque at Verdun to further commemorate the pigeon contribution, erected another monument dedicated to the pigeon at Lille in 1936. This led the *Press* newspaper to comment, “Of the making of memorials of one kind or and another there appears no end, and the latest suggestion is certainly not the least curious”. Furthermore, “it adds a touch of human interest that they were not engaged in bearing Government despatches alone, but that a distinct proportion of them carried into the beleaguered capital information of concern to the families of the besieged residents.”⁹¹

The Lille memorial, like its counterpart in Brussels, balances and acknowledges both the contribution of the pigeons (22 000 in total) and pigeoneers

who have died during the Great War. Designed by the sculptor Descatoire and the architects Alleman & Allery, it cost the National Federation of Pigeon Owners (NFPO), its main sponsor, an estimated amount of £4 000. A stone obelisk, its central features include a column of white stone against which a peasant woman, representing France, leans and from whose hands a flight of pigeons flutters. In addition, a heavy shield surmounted by a pigeon at her feet crushes the coils of a serpent, representing war. Furthermore, the roll of honour inscribed on the monument lists all of the battles in which pigeons played an essential role. By this action, pigeon fanciers assisted pigeons to advance their claims of “intrinsically valued beings with stories, intricate histories and at times personal connections”.⁹² The monument also recognised the sacrifice of 13 specific fanciers who were executed by a German firing squad for concealing enemy pigeons in the occupied areas during the course of the war.⁹³

The official unveiling ceremony in Lille mirrored the proceedings in Belgium and was similarly dominated by the local fancier community and their brethren from Italy, Luxembourg and Belgium. The dominance of the pigeon fancying community as a community of interest was further emphasised by the award of a special commemorative medal to Deputy Delsant, a member of the French parliament and former war prisoner arrested for pigeon keeping during the conflict. To link the event in Lille with the earlier dedication ceremony in Verdun, the bells of the Verdun Cathedral were chimed and pigeons ceremoniously released.⁹⁴ The commonalities of the Brussels and Lille monuments were observable in the central features and the detailed nature of the inscriptions on the surface of the monument in Lille. The monument inscriptions and figurative detail likewise objected to the persistent anonymity that surrounded the role of the pigeon as a non-human animal and therefore further enhanced what Alderman in a different context called “the process towards the construction of a new geography of memory”.⁹⁵ The ‘unique’ and ‘novel’ nature of these events had repercussions beyond France and Belgium, and stimulated debate and calls for similar actions in countries such as Hungary and the United Kingdom. With the dedication of a monument to pigeons in Budapest, *The Advocate* declared, “it is stories such as this, that awakens thoughts of war as a deadly sin” but that “it cannot now be said that there are 20 000 victims, with no memorial”.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Although these early memorials continued the traditional approach to memorialisation, it broke new ground in terms of the subject that it honoured.

Furthermore, it concretised the concerns and values of a distinctive community of practice at a particular point in time and showcased the special relationship between humans and their pet animals. These matters are conveniently overlooked in the current a-historical criticism against non-human animal memorialisation in general and that of pigeons in particular. It is generally accepted that human war is a complex affair with wide-ranging implications for both humans and non-human animals and the environment at large. Whether non-human animals act as companion animals, war mascots, ammunition in the war arsenal or as an indistinguishable part of the general battlefield, their destiny is unavoidably tied to human affairs. Since it is impossible to isolate or protect animals from the destructive results of human conflict, it is morally defensible to both acknowledge their presence and suffering and to appropriately commemorate their contribution on its own merit without the matter becoming an issue of ‘either or’ as portrayed by some of the critics of animal commemoration.

Endnotes

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