‘Is Britannia a personality?’: some questions arising while indexing the Imperial War Museum’s collections

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Illustrates—even if it does not resolve—some of the problems in providing subject access to the extensive, international, multi-media collections of the Imperial War Museum. Chief among these is the variety of ways in which items in Museum collections can be relevant to a particular line of enquiry.

Origins and history

The Imperial War Museum originated in the British government’s decision in March 1917 that a National War Museum should be created to collect and display material relating to the war that was then in progress. The scope of the project was broadened at the insistence of the Dominions, and the Museum was formally established under its present name by act of Parliament in 1920. The Museum first opened in 1920 in the Crystal Palace, South London. From 1924 to 1935 it was housed in South Kensington, and on 7 July 1936 it opened in its present home in Lambeth, the surviving central portion of the nineteenth-century Bethlem Royal Hospital (or Bedlam). The terms of reference of the Museum were enlarged in 1939 and again in 1953, so that now the Museum covers all aspects of all conflicts since 1 August 1914 in which any part of the Commonwealth has been involved.

An important redevelopment programme is currently under way, and a major enlargement of the principal gallery space—the results of the first stage—was opened by the Queen in June 1989.

From its creation, the Museum has been much more than a collection of artefacts. By inheriting some of the mantles of the Ministry of Information and the War Office, it has claims to being the oldest film archive and (after the Tate Gallery) the second-largest collection of modern British art in the country, and a major repository for books, manuscripts, photographs and sound records as well. One of the indications of the size and range of the Museum’s collections is the variety of ways used by the seven collecting departments to quantify their holdings.

Collections and Departments

The Department of Art has 12,000 paintings, drawings and pieces of sculpture and other collections, including 50,000 posters. The Department of Documents administers collections of British and foreign papers occupying more than 11,000 document boxes and 5,000 reels of microfilm. The Department of Exhibits and Firearms has over a quarter of a million items in its care, ranging in size from buttons to a B-52 bomber and including 1.5 tons of badges and insignia. The Department of Film holds 70 million feet of film, the Department of Photographs in excess of five million images. The Department of Printed Books—the Museum’s Library—has over 100,000 books as well as maps, periodicals and pamphlets. The Department of Sound Records, the museum’s newest collection, has over 6,000 hours of recordings.

These seven collecting departments have primary curatorial responsibility for the materials listed. A service department, the Department of Information Systems (renamed in November 1989—formerly the Department of Information Retrieval), exists to help them with the task of documenting their collections.

Documentation, in a museum context, involves the creation of tools that assist the curators in managing their collections and that assist outside researchers or inquirers (directly or indirectly) to gain access to and use those same collections.

Problems of access

Outside users of collections fall into two predictable categories: those who wish to see a particular item, and those who wish to see material relevant to a given subject. The former category should be relatively easy to satisfy. It is reasonably straightforward to establish whether or not the Museum Library has a copy of John Steinbeck’s Once there was a war, or to list paintings in the Art Department by Leonard Rosoman, and it should be no less easy to tell visitors whether or not they will be able to see the Victoria Cross awarded to Boy Jack Cornwell or Chamberlain’s ‘Peace in our time’ document from Munich (yes, in both cases). Of course, there may be problems in making sure that the inquirer and the Museum share the same vocabulary in naming the items required, but these are not problems that are special to Museums, let alone to the Imperial War Museum. It is
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can give rise to some fairly arcane questions. What, for
example, is the correct main index heading for the
regiment whose official name before 1882 was 'The
Princess Louise's (Sutherland and Argyll Highlanders)',
from 1882 to 1920 'The Princess Louise's (Argyll and
Sutherland Highlanders)', and from 1920 to 1970 'The
Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (Princess Louise’s)?
With its international collections, the Museum acquires
the problems of working in more than one language—for
example, that of how to tell a computer that the words
‘die’ or ‘les’ may be definite articles to be ignored for
filing purposes in some contexts (die Dreiросchenoper,
les Misérables) but are significant words in other con-
texts (Die hard, Les Patterson). Add non-European
scripts, and problems of transliteration are incurred: at a
recent count the Museum generated at least four dif-
ferent ways of transliterating the name of the Soviet
Marshal Chernyakovsky. The Imperial War Museum is
largely a museum of twentieth-century history, and the
naming of its subject matter carries with it the burdens of
the changes wrought by that history—the metamor-
phosis of St Petersburg to Petrograd to Leningrad, and
of parts of the Ottoman Empire into Palestine and then
Israel. If even these problems fail to strike the reader as
particularly novel or deserving of sympathy, it will be
necessary to play the final card: morality.

Ethics and politics

One particular problem of being modern, military and
international is that it is virtually impossible for a
museum such as the Imperial War Museum to overlook
the political 'subtext' of any item in its collections. On
the whole, the British Museum can display the artefacts
of ancient civilizations without expecting to have to open
a moral debate (rumbles about the ethics of the original
collection of such artefacts apart). If the British Museum
displays an Egyptian sarcophagus, it is not expected to
consider the socio-political character of Pharaonic
society, the morality of the Pharaoh's imperial ambitions
or the present state of modern Egypt's foreign policy—or
at least, it will not find its public questioning the decision
if it chooses not to do so. Imagine the care that would
need to be taken, however, around the decision to
display Lawrence of Arabia's rifle or a street sign from
Hiroshima in the Imperial War Museum: even choosing
to say nothing will be interpreted by a sizeable propor-
tion of visitors as some kind of statement in itself. Behind
the scenes, the indexer faces similar problems. He or she
may have to try to find ways of providing equal access as
'air raids' to information on Guernica, Coventry, Ham-
burg and Dresden, bearing in mind the probability that
many users will feel extreme emotion on encountering at
least one of those names, but not all users will experience
the same emotions in response to the same names.

Beyond the 'political sub-text', the Imperial War
Museum and others like it are expected to collect and
display material that is overtly political in its creation.
Again, the problem may be that what users may perceive
as harmless or actually praiseworthy in one context will
not seem so in others. Exhortations to fresh air and fun
in the Boy Scouts, the Young Pioneers and the Hitler-
jugend attract different responses despite their similari-
ties. Filmed speeches warning of 'the red menace' will
have different effects on their audience not only accord-
ing to the current state of the Cold War but also
according to whether their makers are British Conserva-
tives or German National Socialists. Consider, in a more
frivolous context (but one in which the Imperial War
Museum does move, under its 'film archive' hat), the
difficulties that are likely to be experienced by an inter-
national body of film archivists required to draft a
standard list of genre definitions within which both
British and Russian experts could agree a definition for
From Russia with Love (the early James Bond film) or Red
dawn (the film in which US high school children resisted
a Russian invasion).

Semiotics and substitutions

Once one has resolved all these various linguistic,
political and moral problems, it remains necessary to
to consider what is meant when a museum 'has some
material on' a particular topic. A possible range of
meanings is presented as Table I. Yes, the Museum does
have exactly what you are interested in (perhaps the gun
that fired the first shell on land in the British Army's
involvement in the First World War) or, no, we do not
have exactly what you want, but we can offer some near
misses. (The Imperial War Museum does not have
Colonel J. D. Landers's personal P-51D Mustang fighter
aircraft, but we have painted the P-51D that we do own
to represent that aircraft; at further removes from the
user's precise interests, it may be possible to offer another
example of the same type—for example, another Victoria
Cross with the blue naval ribbon—or an example of a
How museums represent items
1. IT, the item itself
2. An example of the same type, dressed or painted to resemble IT
3. An example of the same type as IT
4. An example of a similar type to IT
5. A replica of IT
6. A model of IT
7. A part of IT
8. Another object associated with IT
9. A photograph, picture or plan of IT
10. A written or spoken description of IT

Table 1

similar type—we have some combat aircraft represented by trainer, rather than fighter, versions.) Other forms of representation found in museums—including our own—are replicas or models, when the originals are unavailable, too precious or too large to display. It is also not uncommon to use a part to stand in for the whole: we have outside the Museum 15-inch guns from the battleships Ramillies and Resolution which may be considered to represent those battleships as well as being exhibits in their own right. Similarly, one object can represent another through its association with it: we do not have a 'Dambuster' Lancaster bomber, but we have the model used at the briefing for one of the 'Dambuster' raids. Finally, of course, we can offer inquirers representations of the object of their interest (or of similar objects, parts, etc.) in other media—photographs, film, paintings, plans, descriptions, etc.

A similar range of possibilities exists with regard to inquiries about people. Leaving aside the ghoulish possibilities of equivalents for 'the object itself', a museum might be able to offer a picture, sound recording or film of the person; a portrait, sculpture or death-mask; something 'by' the person (which could of course be a personal work of art or manuscript document, a typed document bearing a signature, or simply a copy of a published work); something associated with the person (such as a letter addressed to them, or a piece of memorabilia); or a written or recorded description. Indexers can find themselves in some bizarre conversations. Does a person attend his or her own funeral (in other words, would a researcher interested in film of Queen Victoria be pleased to be offered film of her

Figure 1. The Museum's North American P-51D Mustang, which has been painted to represent the aircraft flown by Colonel J. D. Landers, who commanded the USAAF 78th Fighter Group at Duxford—the airfield in Cambridgeshire which is now part of the Imperial War Museum.

(IWM photograph number MH 21231.)
funeral)? If funerals are relevant, then how about graves, memorials, statues? If statues are relevant, does this mean I start to record entries for St Joan (or, indeed, for 'Victory' and 'Britannia') in my 'Personalities Index'?

It is the museum indexer's task somehow to convey to the inquirer that these sorts of material exist, and how they may connect with the original inquiry. Another form of connection that can be required is not so much that an item is relevant to a given line of inquiry as that it is not irrelevant. If an exhibition designer is dressing a case on the Russian Revolution, he or she will obviously expect a core of exhibits that have direct relevance to that event; it will, however, also be appropriate to include in the case items that are suitable to Russia in or before 1917—a much broader category than that of precise relevance.

**Constraints on access**

Once the 'found item' at the end of an inquiry is located, however, the museum curator or audiovisual archivist may be faced with another range of questions. An index entry in a book points its readers to a piece of information which may or may not meet their needs: they are usually able to judge this for themselves. Curators of objects or audiovisual records may be obliged to impose additional constraints on inquirers' 'finds'. Many of the collections here discussed are not easy to browse: they may be housed a long way from London (as is the case with some exhibits, books, etc.) or they may be of such a nature that every viewing exposes the material to some risk of damage (as with film or posters). Equally, the inquirers may have their own additional objective criteria to add to a search. These could include, in the case of objects, questions of condition, completeness or authenticity; in the case of photographs, the acceptability of black-and-white rather than colour, or, in the case of film, the acceptability of silent rather than sound footage are examples of other kinds of constraint.
Indexing policy

The title of this paper carefully limited itself to 'questions', but the reader who has persevered thus far deserves at least a few of the answers that are incorporated in procedures at the Imperial War Museum. The first of these is that, on the whole, the Museum does not really follow a policy of indexing the collections. Rather, we catalogue the collections and then index the catalogues. The researcher then finds—or may hope to find—the supplementary information in the collections. Rather, we catalogue the collections and then index the catalogues. The researcher then finds—or may hope to find—the supplementary information in the catalogues that explain some of the issues of relevance or acceptability explored above. The catalogue is not intended to be a substitute for viewing the collection, but is intended to serve as a filter so that unnecessary viewing (which can be disruptive and time-consuming for all concerned) is kept to a minimum.

Within this general principle, issues of political sensitivity are addressed by following, as far as practicable, whatever position was broadly accepted by the international community at the period to which the material relates (so that, for example, we locate Alsace in Germany from 1871–1918 and in France thereafter). Issues of morality are as far as possible avoided by using neutral vocabularies—for example, the description of any overt political statement designed to incite fear, hatred or ridicule of a perceived enemy as 'propaganda, inflammatory' regardless of its source or target.

Other goals which the Museum has set itself—though not, to be honest, as yet quite attained—are coherent procedures across all seven collections and a strong level of Museum-wide terminology control. The procedures outlined are evolving, not evolved—comments and opinions from outside experts are always welcome.

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First find your index

T. E. Lawrence, author of the classic *Seven pillars of wisdom*, a complex, detailed account of the Arab Revolt of 1916–18, cared greatly about typography and design—so much so as to tailor his text for the sake of appearance. He did not merely eschew widows and orphans, but actually revised his text after seeing proofs so that each paragraph should end in the second half of the line—earlier would have been aesthetically displeasing; and rewrote also to adjust page breaks and openings for typographic elegance. He told a correspondent, 'Often we have to alter things, to dress the ends of the paragraphs neatly. Also I don’t wish any words divided at the ends of lines. These things all lead to rearrangement'. He ‘added a few words to the concluding paragraph’ of pages to make the last line solid. We know of journalists measuring their words by the hundred, but for literature such as *Seven pillars* to come second to design considerations in the estimation of its author seems strange indeed.

Lawrence originally intended to index the work himself, but abandoned this plan in favour of synopses at the beginning of the book, and, for each page, its own contents summary in small caps above the text. 'MORALITY OF BATTLE—STRANGENESS AND PAIN—DETACHMENT—ARABIA PROPER—THE PROBLEM OF POPULATION—NOMADISM IN ACTION—TIDES OF WANDERING'—one per page except for chapter openings (122 untitled chapters) and illustrations. All were devised by Lawrence, one criterion being that facing pairs should be of equal length for symmetrical effect.

A subscription edition of a hundred-odd copies, privately and very expensively printed in accordance with all these principles, was produced in 1926. Lawrence died on 19 May 1935, aged 44, after a road accident; Jonathan Cape rushed out a general, workaday edition of the book, abandoning the fine typographical precepts, published 30 June that year. Presses ran night and day, and the text was indexed as it was set, resulting in a most inadequate piece of work.

For 684 pages of text (in the current Penguin edition), plus appendices, there are two indexes: a little over four pages of place names, and over five for the 'Personal index'. Neither has any subheadings; many names lack completion or any explanation—'Joyce', entered simply thus, is not in fact a lady of the desert, but should be cited, 'Joyce, Lt.-Col. Pierce Charles'. This entry has six lines of undifferentiated page references; Nasir of Medina, Sherif, has eleven; and Feisal, Emir, fifteen. In the index to place names, Damascus and Deraa each have six such lines, and Akaba seven.

We may all nod and recognize such a result from indexing in such circumstances. What seems incredible is that the frantic endeavours of June 1935 have never been revised in any of the enormous numbers of reprints of this volume. The Penguin edition, first published 1962 and reprinted almost annually since then, each time repeats the indexes from Cape's 1935 edition. So efficiency of information retrieval, after all, remains second to the look of the thing; barely basic indexes at the back of the book contrast with detailed subject analysis of the text still found atop each page. What subject headings and subheadings are here, had they but been assembled and properly arranged in the index!

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