

Foreword

Looking Back – and Ahead

EMILY LETHBRIDGE

The past has always been remade in the present, remoulded in collective and personal memory to serve different contemporary ends, whether ideological, political, religious, social, moral, or other. As the existential opening lines of T. S. Eliot's poem "Burnt Norton" (the first in his *Four Quartets* collection, written between 1935 and 1942) remind us: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past" (171). A slightly different formulation is found later in the first section of the poem:

Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
(172)

Time, memory, and (Christian) salvation are the core matter of this poem and these themes are explored from an intimately personal and grounded perspective as well as from the perspective of all of humankind. As with Eliot's other major works, the poem resonates and opens the mind with every new reading. Eliot (b. 1888) was a slightly younger contemporary of the pioneering sociologist and scholar of collective memory Maurice Halbwachs (b. 1877). The themes and foci of their inter-war work intersect and overlap in many respects, though their intellectual background, circumstances, and emphases were different and I am not sure that they knew each other personally, or directly engaged with each other's work. Their personal fates were also very different. Eliot died in England, his adopted home, aged 76 in 1965; Halbwachs died aged 68 in the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald in 1945. Eliot—whose antisemitism has come under scrutiny in recent decades¹—is commemorated in "Poets' Corner" in Westminster Abbey in London; Halbwachs (along with others murdered at Buchenwald and other Nazi concentration camps) has no personal grave but his name is in the Book of the Dead for the Buchenwald concentration camp.²

Memory as a sociocultural phenomenon is a universal and eternally productive topic. What is remembered? How? By whom? For whom? Via what

media? And how, subsequently, are memories adapted and reworked in new contexts and at different scales? These are huge questions that can never be answered absolutely or comprehensively. Indeed, part of the appeal of the critical study of collective memory lies in the multitude of possibilities that exist for developing and refining theoretical approaches, in conjunction with case studies drawn from different societies and different time periods that focus on sources in a variety of media. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, this interdisciplinary field is a well-established one. Review essays and chapters that chart the historiographical development of memory studies as an emerging discipline point to how the critical thinking and work produced in the 1980s and 1990s by figures such as Jan and Aleida Assmann, Pierre Nora, and (in the field of medieval studies) Mary Carruthers and Michael Clanchy, amongst others, laid the foundations for the current “memory boom” (see Astrid Erll 2011, 3–5)—with all of this work, of course, building on the pioneering work of earlier figures such as Maurice Halbwachs. In the twenty-first century, the publication of handbooks, readers, dedicated journals, and book series, together with the founding of research centres and dedicated university degree courses that focus on memory studies, are taken as marking the canonization of memory studies as a field of academic research within the humanities and the social sciences. As Marek Tamm observed in his 2013 article “Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies,” “the 2000s have been characterised primarily by the institutionalisation, organisation and systemisation of memory studies” (Tamm 458).

In Old Norse studies, memory as a phenomenon and its function and importance in social, literary, and legal contexts in medieval Iceland and elsewhere in Scandinavia was of course always of interest to philologists, historians, and other scholars working in the field, from the origins of modern scholarship in the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. But in the past couple of decades, the application and adaptation of theoretical ideas developed within memory studies to the multidisciplinary field of Old Norse studies have yielded inspiring and thought-provoking results. Individually and collaboratively, a number of researchers have already made important contributions to scholarship in this rapidly expanding area within Old Norse studies.³ These new insights have shed light on how extant textual and visual sources for early medieval Scandinavia were shaped by the collective memories of historical events to which the figures or groups who produced them had access, for example, as well as improving our understanding of techniques by which important information was memorized and passed down.⁴ There is naturally an enormous amount of work still to do, however, and the alliance between memory studies and Old Norse studies looks set to be a productive one for years to come.

The publication of the present special issue of *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* is testimony to how vibrant and open the field is—as well as to how much there is still to do and where early career scholars might direct their intellectual energy and curiosity. All of the articles included in this volume present insightful case studies covering important themes and angles: they consider memory with regard to environmental history, landscape, gender, belief, law, literary, and material culture. In sum, they add detail and depth to the critical current of thinking and state of the art as, for example, summarized in the milestone two-volume *Handbook of Pre-modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches* edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell and published in 2018.

It is especially encouraging to see that the articles in this issue are all authored by Old Norse early career scholars who, hopefully, will have the chance in future decades to take their thinking and analysis of the wide range of sources discussed here even further. It is not uncommon to come across observations in reviews or historiographical surveys within the field that refer to a perceived time-lag of many years—even decades—with regard to the take-up and application of new critical approaches to medieval Icelandic and Scandinavian studies. I don't believe it can be said that this is the case here with regard to the meeting of memory studies and Old Norse studies, however, and Simon Nygaard and Yoav Tirosch, the early career editors of the present volume, also deserve credit and recognition for playing a part in pushing the agenda ever onwards and upwards and helping to create a platform for these young scholars to publish their work. Bringing publication projects to completion in the time of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic deserves an extra round of applause.⁵ I'm sure that this volume will inspire other early career researchers as well as those who are further along in their academic careers, demonstrating the great potential that lies in combining analysis of textual and material culture of Viking and Medieval Scandinavia with theoretical frameworks and methodologies from memory studies. So without further ado (as the narrator in Eliot's "Burnt Norton" asks), "Shall we follow?"

Emily Lethbridge is Associate Research Professor at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, Reykjavík, Iceland.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., Anthony Julius's piece "The Poetry of Prejudice" in *The Guardian*, published in conjunction with the re-issue of Julius's book *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* in 2003 by Thames and Hudson.
2. Online access to the Buchenwald Book of the Dead is <http://totenbuch.buchenwald.de/>, and the memorial for Maurice Halbwachs is <https://www.buchenwald.de/en/1219/>.

3. Whether it is something more than an intriguing coincidence that this approach has gained critical forward momentum in our field in the first two decades of the new millennium—part of a bigger turn-of-the-millennium intellectual zeitgeist, for example—would be an energizing subject for a post-conference drink with colleagues in a pub; we can only hope that by the time this volume has been published, this fantasy might be closer to being realized than at the time of writing this foreword, while we are still firmly in the era of online-conferences and Zoom meeting protocols given the current Covid-19 pandemic.
4. On the subject of mnemonic devices, it's interesting to note that the classical Greek and Roman technique known as the method of loci, or the memory/mind palace technique, is still used today in different contexts, including second-language learning. The BBC's recent television series *Sherlock* (in which actor Benedict Cumberbatch played Arthur Conan Doyle's iconic private detective Sherlock Holmes) has also highlighted this mnemonic technique in prime-time popular consciousness.
5. On the subject of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic, it remains to be seen how this international public health emergency will be remembered in collective memory in different parts of the world and in different societies. Astrid Erll's 2020 online essay "Will Covid-19 become Part of Collective Memory?" is edifying reading on this subject. She draws attention to the fact that, amazingly, the Spanish Flu European pandemic of 1918-1919 that killed more individuals than the death toll of World War One and Two put together (between 50 and 100 million people) went unremembered in collective memory.

REFERENCES

- Eliot, T. S. 1969. "Burnt Norton." In *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays*, 171-76. London: Faber and Faber.
- Erll, Astrid. 2011. *Memory in Culture*. Translated by Sara B. Young. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2020. "Will Covid-19 become Part of Collective Memory?" In *13 Perspectives on the Pandemic: Thinking in a State of Exception*, 45-50. De Gruyter, online publication. Accessed 16 April 2021. https://blog.degruyter.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DG_13perspectives_humanities.pdf.
- Glauser, Jürg, Pernille Hermann, and Stephen A. Mitchell, eds. 2018. *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies. Interdisciplinary Approaches*. 2 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Julius, Anthony. 2003. "The Poetry of Prejudice." *The Guardian* June 7, 2003. Accessed 16 April 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jun/07/poetry.thomasstearnseliot>.
- Tamm, Marek. 2013. "Beyond History and Memory: New Perspectives in Memory Studies." *History Compass* 11 (6): 458-73.