‘Remnants of Patriotism’: the sculptural appeal of the greatcoat after the First World War

Catherine Moriarty

‘Remnants of Patriotism’ is how Vera Brittain described the returned effects of her fiancé, killed in France in 1915, in an emotional passage in Testament of Youth. Brittain conveys the power of a serviceman’s belongings to emphasise the absence of a dead loved one. This paper explores the appeal of military equipment and accoutrements to the sculptors of First World War memorials, focusing on the greatcoat. Represented sculpturally, the greatcoat had great formal potential and could be an important compositional element both in relief and in the round. It could play a part in narrative, operating as a contemporary motif but with comparable monumental precedents. The greatcoat identified the soldier’s body as part of the serving forces, it protected him, disguised him, obscured him, comforted him. In death it could become his shroud, he could be buried in it. Sculptors utilised the greatcoat for commemorative purposes in a number of interesting ways exploiting the conventions of drapery to memorialise the mass death of civilian soldiers.