

## COLLECTING MEMORIES

**Interview with Dr Stuart Lee, Reader in E-learning and Digital Libraries**

‘I think we are reaching a very critical point in how the First World War is viewed. The most obvious event is 2014, the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the war. But we have also just passed the death of the last surviving veteran from the war who actually fought on the Western Front, so I think it is quite a dangerous period. The war may pass out of “ownership” by the people, so that memories, artefacts, items, diaries and photographs may start to be thrown away.

The Europeana project is mainly trying to collect material held by the public across Europe relating to the First World War – their family mementos. The project aims to reveal that information, and then make it freely available online to researchers, lecturers, teachers and students.

When they bring in material to one of these roadshows, people cannot quite understand why someone from Oxford University would be interested in the story of their grandfather or great-grandfather. When we explain to them that this really is a unique historical record – it may be a photograph, a diary, a set of letters which may contain information not previously known – I think they understand then the importance of it. What we have also found is that the public have an astounding awareness of the war and quite an in-depth knowledge of real intricacies, historical material, military information and so on, which we can tap into.

I think someone once said that war exposes the extraordinary about the ordinary person. And it also exposes the ordinary about the extraordinary people. A famous object which we often talk about was a postcard that was brought in when we were in Munich (and this actually made the national press) because as it stands it is just a postcard from a German soldier to his friend, written in 1917: a picture of Nuremberg on the front, a scribble on the back saying he was going to go to the Front soon, and he had just been to the dentist – nothing really spectacular. What made it extraordinary was that it was a postcard from Adolf Hitler to his colleague. And suddenly, holding that item was quite an emotional experience for all kinds of reasons.

‘When you see one of these artefacts, suddenly you are asking yourself, “What was the story behind this? Who collected this? How did it get passed on?” What I am seeing here is the effect on the wife, the daughter, the son, the child – and the soldier who saw things which we can only imagine.’



**Postcard written by Adolf Hitler in 1916**