



A LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER is a new kind of war memorial; one made only of words, and by thousands of people. On the hundredth anniversary of the declaration of war, we're inviting everyone in the country to write a personal letter to the unknown soldier who stands on the memorial on Platform One of Paddington Station in London.

Charles Sargeant Jagger's life-size bronze statue of a serving trench infantryman stands with its back to a wall halfway down Platform One of Paddington Station. It was erected by the Great Western Railway Company in 1922, honouring 2,542 company employees who had been killed in the war.

Like his weary face, the soldier's clothes are depicted with scrupulous realism, and his uniform makes it clear that he's meant to be on active service at the front. Only the scarf hanging round his neck is non-standard issue; hand-knitted, it must have been either sent to him or given to him before he left for France. He is shown intently reading a letter, but there are no clues as to whether it is one that he has just received, or whether it is something that he carries with him in the trenches and has read many times. There is no indication of who the letter is from, nor as to its contents. Some people think that the he is smiling as he reads it; others disagree.

Platform One at Paddington Station was and is one of the busiest railway station platforms in the British Isles, and the deliberate placing of the statue at one of the most crowded spots of a working railway station means that thousands of people walk, run and drag their suitcases past this silent figure every day.

How is A LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER going to work?

People can write their letters in two ways. They can post their letter online to a dedicated website, or they can send a physical letter to the statue at an address at Paddington station.

The website will be the focus of A LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER. Initially, from March 2014, the website will be a focus for publicising and explaining the project. Alongside examples of letters already received from well-known authors, people interested in contributing to the work will be able to find plenty to inspire and provoke them to sit down at a computer or pick up their pens. The website will include photos and film of the statue; interviews with Kate and Neil; comments and suggestions about how to start imagining and composing a letter; historical material about letter-writing in war, and how writing in and about war has always been contested; examples of letters from the First World War from the collections of the Imperial War Museum. It will foreground the idea of being part of something big, involving the whole country. It will explicitly invite people to be part of something that is an alternative to more official and regimented forms of commemoration.

Then, on 28 June 2014, one hundred years from the day Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Vienna, A LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER will open up for participation from everyone in the country.

We want contributors to write now - as themselves in 2014, putting into words their thoughts and feelings as they look at an unknown soldier's face. We want participants to try and tell the soldier what people are saying now - and not saying, now - about the war he died in; about the wars that we are still fighting; about the one hundred years that have passed since he and his colleagues died; or perhaps just about what it feels like to get up every day and assume that you, unlike him, will never hear the sound of gunfire.....

When is this all going to happen?

A LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER will open for participation on 28 June 2014, and the website will then stay open until 4 August, 2014. During that time, it will be interactive, with reports, updates, provocations, and new letters arriving constantly.

Who will write the letters?

We want this project to be open to everybody; this is a national work of art. To make that happen, as well as telling people about it via the media, we will also be spreading the word by approaching an eclectic list of organisations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, making contact with faith organisations, serving soldiers, prisoners, libraries, schools and writing groups. The list of participants will be long, and deliberately diverse.

We want to get letters from people who would never think of themselves as writers, and indeed from people who may never have written a letter before. The website will offer advice and inspiration to get people exploring the art and craft of expressing thoughts and feelings across time and space.

A particularly important part of the project will involve secondary school students on a national scale.

Our target will be to receive at least a thousand letters on our website a day for each of the thirty-five days that the site is open.

What will happen to the letters?

Once the creation of the memorial is complete – at 11pm on 4 August, 2014 – the archive of writing that makes up A LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER will remain available online throughout the full five years of the 14-18 NOW programme, accessible for people to read right up until Armistice Day 2018. People will be able to go to the website to look up their own letters, or to search for and reflect on, for instance, letters from people from the same town or school as themselves, or of the same age – or indeed for letters from people of completely different opinions or backgrounds to their own.

What is 14-18 NOW?

14-18 NOW is commissioning leading artists to create new work as part of the UK's First World War centenary commemorations. Musicians, writers, painters, photographers, theatre directors, film-makers, digital designers, composers, poets, choreographers and more will be invited to look afresh at the First World War and what its many stories reveal about the world we live in today. A LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER is one of first tranche of commissions. For more information, go to: 1418now.org.uk

Who are the two artists creating A LETTER TO AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER?

Neil Bartlett is a novelist and theatre-maker. His 2007 novel *Skin Lane* was shortlisted for the Costa Novel Award, and his new novel, *The Disappearance Boy*, is being published by Bloomsbury in 2014. He has two honorary degrees (from Oxford Brookes and Brighton), bestowed in recognition of his pioneering and continued commitment to gay culture and civil rights, and was awarded an OBE in 2000 for his work as Artistic Director of the Lyric Hammersmith. You can find out more about Neil and his work at www.neil-bartlett.com

Kate Pullinger is a novelist and digital writer. Her 2009 novel *The Mistress of Nothing* won the Canada Governor General's Award for Fiction; her new novel, *Landing Gear*, is forthcoming in 2014. She has been at the forefront of literary digital innovation and participatory media for more than a decade; her on-going web projects, *Inanimate Alice* and *Flight Paths: a Networked Novel*, have gathered readers from around the world. She is Professor of Creative Writing and Digital Media at Bath Spa University. Find her at www.katepullinger.com

Neil and Kate have known each other since 1989, but this is the first time that they have worked together.

A Letter to an Unknown Soldier is a 14-18 NOW: WW1 Centenary Art Commission in association with Free Word.