

Meanings in Canada's Vimy Ridge Memorial

By Michael Birnbaum

The massive memorial stretches up toward the sky, its monstrous twin pylons looking like something from an old horror movie. The pylons sit on a tall, wide pedestal whose walls slope outwards and resemble an Egyptian mastaba. On the edge of the pedestal, a grieving, shrouded woman gazes down on a representation of a tomb. The Canadian National Vimy Memorial dominates the summit of the Vimy Ridge in the Pas-de-Calais *département* of France. Its location commemorates the battle that took place on April 9, 1917, in which Canadian troops, succeeding where British and French troops had failed, pushed the German trench line back three kilometers. 3,598 Canadians died in the operation, the largest single Canadian loss of life in the war.¹ It is generally understood in Canada that the battle won their nation a seat at the Paris Peace Conference (as opposed to being represented by the United Kingdom) and thus a full independent statehood. The Vimy Memorial therefore is seen as commemorating not only Canada's war dead, but also a larger moment in Canada's journey to nationhood. Ceremonies that take place at the monument are nationalistic and popular imagination has it that "Canada came of age at Vimy Ridge."² But the memorial itself conveys almost none of this meaning. The statuary is extremely pacifistic and funereal; its symbolism represents the horrors of war and not

¹ Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 278.

² *Ibid.*, 294.

at all the joys of nationhood. Scholars such as Antoine Prost and Jay Winter have examined the meanings of memorials. Prost especially has devoted great attention to the greater implications of imagery in war monuments. What the Vimy Memorial demonstrates, however, is that society is capable of projecting meaning on a memorial to such an extent that the original intent of the memorial is completely ignored and forgotten.

Canada's Involvement in World War I

Canada received limited independence under Articles of Confederation in 1867, but it was still largely under British control at the outset of World War I. Canadian troops had fought under British direction in the Boer War; most French-Canadians had thoroughly objected. When Britain declared war in 1914, Canada became legally at a state of war too, and this time involvement was met with both Anglo- and French-Canadian support. Canada committed troops heavily, initially under British Imperial command. But the Canadian government soon asserted a right to command its own soldiers; Britain was not in a position to say no. Canada controlled its military independently for the rest of the war. Enlistment was initially voluntary, but by 1917 a draft was enacted. This largely alienated French-Canadians; war fervor had worn off and they did not like to be mandated to fight a war that they saw as on behalf of Britain. Nevertheless, Canada's efforts paid—autonomy was

affirmed with a seat at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, and the country received complete governmental freedom from the King of England in 1931.³

Some historians question whether the battle at Vimy Ridge was truly the source of Canada's increased post-war autonomy. The battle itself, after all, was only a limited tactical victory.⁴ Perhaps Vimy was simply convenient shorthand for a larger and more complicated set of processes that started before World War I and ended some time after.⁵ But the popular Canadian perception of Vimy is still that it was the single turning point of Canadian nationhood. It is taught as such in Canada to this day.⁶ Regardless of reality, therefore, the Vimy Memorial is seen in Canada as a nationalistic monument.

Why Study War Memorials?

Far more memorials were built after World War I than after any preceding conflict, perhaps because the effects of the war were so wide-reaching. Most were small memorials that one might find in a town square or any public space (Beinecke Plaza, originally called Memorial Plaza, at Yale is one such example). Some, such as the one at Vimy, were major projects sponsored by the government. Who constructed a memorial obviously has relevance to its meaning, but memorials can and do also stand alone. Iconography in a memorial can show how a society conceived of the war

³ Kenneth McNaught, *The Penguin History of Canada* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 213-220.

⁴ Berton, 296.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 294-5.

⁶ Andréa Picard, "Restoring Loss at Vimy," *Canadian Architect* 05/06 (2005) 74.

and of the sacrifice soldiers made when they were killed. Ceremonies surrounding a memorial can show how a society relates to the war, and the way those ceremonies change over time can also be used to show the changes in a society's relationship to the war. Memorials eventually become the only physical remnants of war as life moves on. Monuments are sites where meaning is produced by ceremonies that occur around them, and they contain inherent meaning as well.⁷ As the Vimy Memorial demonstrates, sometimes these two competing meanings have no relation.

History of Construction of the Memorial

In 1922 France granted 100 hectares of land at Vimy to Canada in perpetuity, in gratitude for the Canadian successes during the war. A competition was held soon after to determine the designer of the memorial; Walter Allward, a sculptor from Toronto, was selected out of a pool of 160. Various accounts have the memorial coming to him in a dream, or in a few bold strokes on a napkin.⁸ Work began in 1925 and was finished in 1936. Part of the reason it took so long to build was that construction had to be done very slowly and carefully; there were so many unexploded mines and shells that excavation could be very dangerous. Allward tried to find stone that would last to build his memorial; he eventually settled on a scarce type of Yugoslavian limestone. Allward had gotten the idea from seeing Roman

⁷ Ken Inglis, "War memorials: ten questions for historians," *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains* 167 (July 1992), 8-9. See also Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 78-116.

⁸Gerald W.L. Nicholson, "*We will remember...*": *Overseas Memorials to Canada's War Dead* (Ottawa: The Minister of Veterans Affairs for Canada, 1973), 33. And D.E. Macintyre, *Canada at Vimy* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1967), 153.

Emperor Diocletian's 3rd century palace at Spalato in Dalmatia; since the palace had not weathered over the years, the sculptor reasoned, similar stone would be appropriate for the memorial. Allward intended for Vimy to be enduring.⁹

Physical Space at Vimy

The Vimy Memorial surmounts Hill 145, the tallest point of Vimy Ridge. It is a natural location for a memorial; it was the most strategically important spot in the German defenses during their several-year occupation of the area, and it is the most visible point for kilometers. Hill 145's capture, therefore, was perhaps the proudest achievement of Canadian forces during the Great War.

The memorial is approached from a road to the west. Most of the statuary on the memorial faces east, however, and looks over a flat field where the German fortifications once lay. So one does not encounter the memorial head on, in confrontation with its statuary—one walks up to the figures from behind, standing next to them, and sharing their pain. The statuary looks east onto a large triangle of leveled grass where once stood soldiers and the machinery of war. Around that sea of flat grass that is sent forth from the memorial, is extremely irregular, pockmarked terrain like a Martian landscape. The memorial therefore seems to be projecting tranquility into the battlefield, calming the shock of war.

The twin design of the memorial pylons also echoes its surroundings. Looking east from the Vimy Memorial, one can see the town of Lens, and, behind it, two

⁹ Macintyre, 153-4.

identical neighboring mountains. These may actually be man-made products of coal mining, but even if they are, they would have been present when Allward designed the memorial.¹⁰ The twin pylons echo these two mountains and connect the monument to the landscape around it.

Statuary at Vimy

The Vimy Memorial contains twenty stylized human figures, each twice life-size.¹¹ A quick catalog: six figures representing Charity, Honor, Justice, Faith, Peace, and Sacrifice; two guardian angels; a dying soldier handing his torch to a comrade who holds it aloft; a man and a woman representing the mourning mothers and fathers of the nation; a female figure representing Canada, looking down on a sarcophagus; a youth breaking a sword next to two other youths looking into the distance; and one erect figure stretching his hand out to three kneeling and bowing figures around him, representing Canada's sympathy for the oppressed. There are two crosses on the outer sides of the pylons, and a fleur-de-lis and a crown on opposite corners of the base wall, representing dual French and British heritage.

Antoine Prost notes four distinct monument styles in French villages: secular civic monuments, patriotic-republican monuments celebrating victory and sacrifice,

¹⁰ David Cale, "Vimy Ridge France 1917," available from <http://www.age-net.co.uk/arts/poetry/vimy%20ridge.htm>; Internet; accessed 2 Dec 2006.

¹¹ Macintyre, 155.

funerary-patriotic glorifying sacrifice, and pacifistic.¹² The Vimy Memorial is by and large a pacifistic monument, with few patriotic references to Canada but many references to grief.

When one approaches the monument from the west, one sees two massive pylons, an angel near the top of each one. A mother and father mourn on either side of the steps that lead to the pylons. This visitor is immediately confronted with death. The angels have taken soldiers to heaven, and the parents are left mourning the loss of their sons. The parents are therefore in theory no different from the mourners who visit the site—they are there for the same reason. (If one goes to the memorial in a patriotic mood, though, they will grieve alone, without you.) On this western side there is no reference to war at all—only to grief and death. As Antoine Prost notes, referencing death without referencing nation is to take away a patriotic justification for death, and therefore “to admit the possibility that it might not be entirely legitimate.”¹³ There is a flag of Canada and a flag of France at the beginning of the path to the memorial, but nowhere does the monument claim that the soldiers died for Canada, and that, therefore, their deaths had a purpose. The monument simply memorializes Canadian dead.

One walks up the stairs past the mourning parents and arrives directly under the looming pylons. They are heavy, tapering slightly, perhaps in an attempt to give them some airiness, but they are not delicate, and are very much rooted to the ground on which they stand. Walter Allward, the sculptor, said that the two pylons

¹²Antoine Prost, “Monuments to the Dead,” in *Realms of Memory*, ed. Pierre Nora (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 316.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 315.

represented the two forces, Canadian and French, who had worked to overtake the Vimy Ridge.¹⁴ This is plausible; elsewhere on the memorial a small English crown and a French fleur-de-lis stand carved opposite each other. But these are not patriotic symbols—they seem more concerned with identifying who the dead were rather than what they died for.

One cannot walk between the pylons because a statue blocks the passage, so one is forced to walk around them, making several turns and seeing the entire panorama of the battlefield along the way. When one looks up at the side of the pylon, one sees a carving of a cross. This of course is another redemptive symbol, a feature of a funerary and pacifistic monument.

The statuary on the eastern side of the monument invokes more imagery of war while remaining extremely pacifistic. The visitor sees first of all the figure of Canada embodied in a shrouded, mourning, Mary-like woman. She gazes off the edge of the base where she stands, directing her look twenty feet downwards to the tomb of a soldier that lies on the level of the battlefield itself. One cannot see the tomb the moment one sees the woman—one has to look over the edge to understand the direction of her glance. Initially, therefore, it appears that the woman is simply standing, head bowed, gazing into nothingness. She holds a bundle of laurel limp at her side. Laurel is typically a symbol of victory;¹⁵ her holding it limp makes the victory hollow. She brought her laurel to give to a living soldier; instead, she arrived to find him dead.

¹⁴ Nicholson, 33.

¹⁵ E. Cobham Brewer, *The Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (New York: Avenel Books, 1978), 734.

The statues behind her, while hardly war-like, are slightly more optimistic. In between the two pylons are two figures in drapery, presumably soldiers, one who falls and gives a torch to the other, perhaps to keep alive the memory of the war and of the fallen. The two soldiers are gaunt—their ribs are clearly visible. Although the men bear the mark of starvation and death on their flesh, the torch is at least raised. Walter Allward, the sculptor, said they represent “the Spirit of Sacrifice, who, giving all, throws his torch to his Comrades.”¹⁶ There is no mourning in these figures. But there is also still no outright patriotism, nothing to show that this is anything more than a massive funerary monument.

When one looks up from the Spirit of Sacrifice, one sees six figures high on the pylons. According to the sculptor, these figures represent Peace, Justice, Truth, Knowledge, Gallantry, and Sympathy. Peace and Justice are at the top, Peace with a torch upraised, making it the highest point in the region.¹⁷ There is nothing particularly compelling about the statues themselves (all are women covered in drapery) but it is notable that none of the images on display has to do with war—rather, all relate to peace. These figures therefore stand on top the monument to ensure against the return of combat.

Underneath the figures on the pylons, and underneath the gaze of the grieving representation of Canada, are two more groups of figures. The first group is of three young men, one of whom crouches and breaks his sword, the other two of whom are looking wearily upwards and outwards to the future. This is the most directly

¹⁶ Nicholson, 33.

¹⁷ Ibid.

pacifistic statue on the whole monument. Antoine Prost notes that broken swords and other images of pacifism were quite uncommon in French war memorials, and presumably they were equally rare in other countries' memorials as well.¹⁸ This group of figures is overtly anti-war. Above the two groups of figures are cannon barrels carved into the wall, which have been draped with olive branches, further symbolizing peace.

At the opposite corner of the base is the second group, which the sculptor called "The Sympathy of the Canadians for the Helpless."¹⁹ One man stands erect and proud; he is surrounded by three other figures who are crouched because they are stricken by disease or pain. All four appear to be starving—their ribs are very apparent. It is quite graphic and disturbing—the standing man, who is supposed to represent Canada, is posed as if a Greek warrior, so one does a double take when one sees his ribs. This grouping of statues challenges accepted notions of heroism.

The last statue is the carved representation of a tomb, which sits in between the two above groups of figures. Laurel leaves and a helmet lie across the top. The helmet has nothing to do with war equipment—it is just a sign of respect for the soldier who lies within the box. The tomb commemorates the man, not the warrior, who has died. Above the tomb reads, in French and English, "TO THE VALOUR OF THEIR COUNTRYMEN IN THE GREAT WAR AND IN MEMORY OF THEIR SIXTY THOUSAND DEAD THIS MONUMENT IS RAISED BY THE PEOPLE OF CANADA." The inscription is notable—it makes no mention of soldiers, merely countrymen, and

¹⁸ Prost, 316.

¹⁹ Nicholson, 33.

those countrymen are not dead *for* Canada; they are merely dead. The military has been completely left out of the memorial. Vimy in its statuary is a funeral stele, an homage to the dead, but not a triumphal or at all a militaristic site.

Ceremonies at Vimy

Ceremonies at Vimy invoke much more nationalism than is physically present within the memorial itself, and Canadian conceptions of the memorial instill this nationalism. This suggests that a monument need not be nationalistic in content to be nationalistic in meaning. To take it one step further, the specific content of any memorial may not have much to do with its greater meaning.

The opening ceremonies of the Vimy Memorial were a major event in Canadian veteran culture, and a major undertaking too. About 6,400 people sailed on five steamships from Canada and 1,365 Canadians came from England.²⁰ Called the “Vimy Pilgrimage,” it is mythologized to this day. The memorial was opened on July 26, 1936 by King Edward VIII in his capacity as King of Canada, and was attended by high Canadian, British, and European officials, including the president of France. There was an honor guard of red-clad Mounties and a contingent of Canadian Naval Guard members with rifles. There were military plane flyovers. And, of course, there were legions upon legions of veterans. Edward VIII gave a speech, starting in French and switching to English, thanking France for its generosity and assuring those assembled that Canada would never forget its war missing and dead. The King

²⁰ Macintyre, 159.

unveiled the Union Jack from the central figure of Canada Mourning Her Dead, and the military band played “The Last Post,” Canada’s version of “Taps.”²¹ The ceremony was extremely nationalistic. With the presence of armed and uniformed troops and the plane flyover, one might even call it a bit militaristic—not at all what the statuary and design of the memorial actually suggest. So from the very beginning of the memorial’s history, meaning was projected onto the memorial rather than drawn from it. The memorial’s message was ignored in favor of what onlookers wanted to make of it for themselves.

Vimy Today

This trend of overlooking the pacifistic message in the Vimy Memorial in favor of a nationalist one has continued to the present day. The battle and the memorial are part of the standard curriculum in Canadian schools, although the battle is not mentioned at all in textbooks outside the country. One can see this exceptionalism too in the name given to the battle: in Canada it is the Battle of Vimy Ridge; in the rest of the world it is just part of the British Battles of Arras.²² Schools teach that the battle was the crucial factor in Canada’s nationhood, and also teach that the memorial commemorates this fact. Postage stamps are issued.²³ A 2001 novel

²¹ Ibid., 169-190. See also Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 221.

²² Berton, 296.

²³ Tony Brown, “Stamps and Remembrance,” available from <http://www.rpsc.org/Library/remembrance/remember.htm>; Internet; accessed 2 Dec 2006.

about Walter Allward and the construction of the monument became a best-seller.²⁴ A limited-edition nickel was issued by the Royal Canadian Mint in 2002, commemorating the 85th anniversary of the battle. On one side was Queen Elizabeth. On the other was the Vimy Memorial.²⁵ Walter Allward was recently declared a person of national historic significance by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.²⁶ There are even amateur videos about Vimy Ridge on YouTube, the popular internet video-sharing website.²⁷ And the memorial itself is under restoration, a massive multi-year project that seeks to clean and restore the statuary and make them as long-lasting as the palace of Emperor Diocletian that inspired Walter Allward to select the material in the first place. The reopening will be in spring 2007.²⁸

Despite the hoopla, patriotism, and pride that now surrounds the battle and the memorial, the physical memorial itself remains extremely pacifistic and not especially nationalistic. In a grim reminder of the ongoing legacy of the war, most of the open grassy areas near the memorial are roped off to visitors because there are still unexploded mines. Grass has to be clipped by having sheep graze on it; once or twice

²⁴ Jane Urquhart, *The Stone Carvers* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 2001).

²⁵ Ken Polsson, "Chronology of Canadian Coins," available from <http://www.islandnet.com/~kpolsson/cancoin/can2002.htm>; Internet; accessed 2 Dec 2006.

²⁶ Laura Brandon, "Canvases of War and the Vimy Sculptures," in *Canada and the Great War: Western Association Papers*, ed. Briton C. Busch (Montreal: The Western Front Association, 2003), 209.

²⁷ Two of my favorites were a clip of a grunge band called Speedhair singing a terrible song called "Vimy Ridge" (available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0GEVUIWgOE>), and a little slideshow about the memorial (available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmH3SH_t80c).

²⁸ Veterans Affairs Canada, "Vimy Memorial," available from <http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=memorials/vw1mem/vimy&CFID=8885919&CFTOKEN=95126741>; Internet; accessed 2 Dec 2006.

a sheep has died when it triggered a mine.²⁹ The reality of the memorial is much starker than its image in the popular eye.

Conclusions

The memorial at Vimy Ridge is a fascinating example of the power of ideology over reality. The physical symbolism at the site is extremely pacifistic, non-nationalist, and anti-war. Because of Vimy's role in Canada's foundational story, however, the memorial takes on a role in Canadian imagination that it does not aspire to in real life. The implications of Vimy in the broader field of memorial scholarship are clear: it is not enough to derive meaning solely from the monument alone. Ceremonies and human interactions surrounding the memorial may have so little to do with the originally intended meaning of the monument that they may be completely independent, perhaps even contradictory.

²⁹ Picard, 74.



Vimy Memorial, view from the road (looking eastwards)



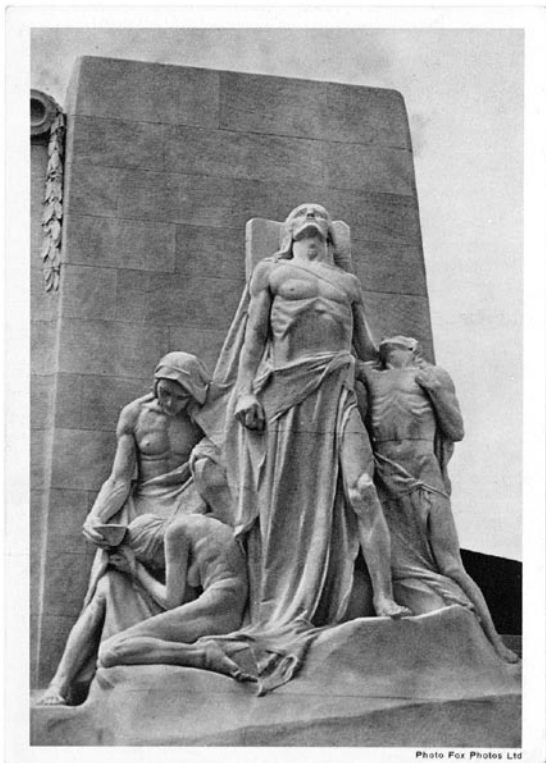
Looking westwards at the Vimy Memorial



Canada mourning (looking down on tomb)



In between the pylons, a torch is



passed on

One figure breaks a sword while two look into distance.

<- Central figure upright, three figures crouching around him.

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