

1996

Canada, Conflict and Commemoration: An Appraisal of the New Canadian War Memorial in Green Park, London, and a Reflection on the Official Patronage of Canadian War Art

Paul Gough

University of the West of England, Bristol, paul.gough@uwe.ac.uk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>

Recommended Citation

Gough, Paul "Canada, Conflict and Commemoration: An Appraisal of the New Canadian War Memorial in Green Park, London, and a Reflection on the Official Patronage of Canadian War Art." *Canadian Military History* 5, 1 (1996)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Canadian Military History* by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.



Canada, Conflict & Commemoration

An appraisal of the new Canadian War Memorial in Green Park, London and a reflection on the official patronage of Canadian war art.

Paul Gough

I

On 3 June 1994 a large and imposing war memorial was unveiled in Green Park, central London. Dedicated to one million Canadians who fought in two world wars, the memorial sits on the edge of open parkland some 100 metres behind the Canada Gates facing Buckingham Palace. Approached from The Mall, it first appears as two shallow triangles. Their apparent whiteness makes them look curiously like yacht masts floating incongruously on the green lawns of the park. On getting closer, the surface of the triangles seems to shimmer inside its perimeter edge. Twenty yards away the cause of this shimmering suddenly becomes obvious: the triangles are in fact slabs of black polished stone rippling with shallow cascades of never-ending water. The water emanates unseen from the apex of each triangle to fall gracefully, and with extraordinary poignancy, over the polished surface. The triangles are divided by a narrow causeway. It cuts through the water like a metaphorical parting of the seas, representing perhaps a symbolic bridge across the Atlantic connecting Canada to Great Britain.

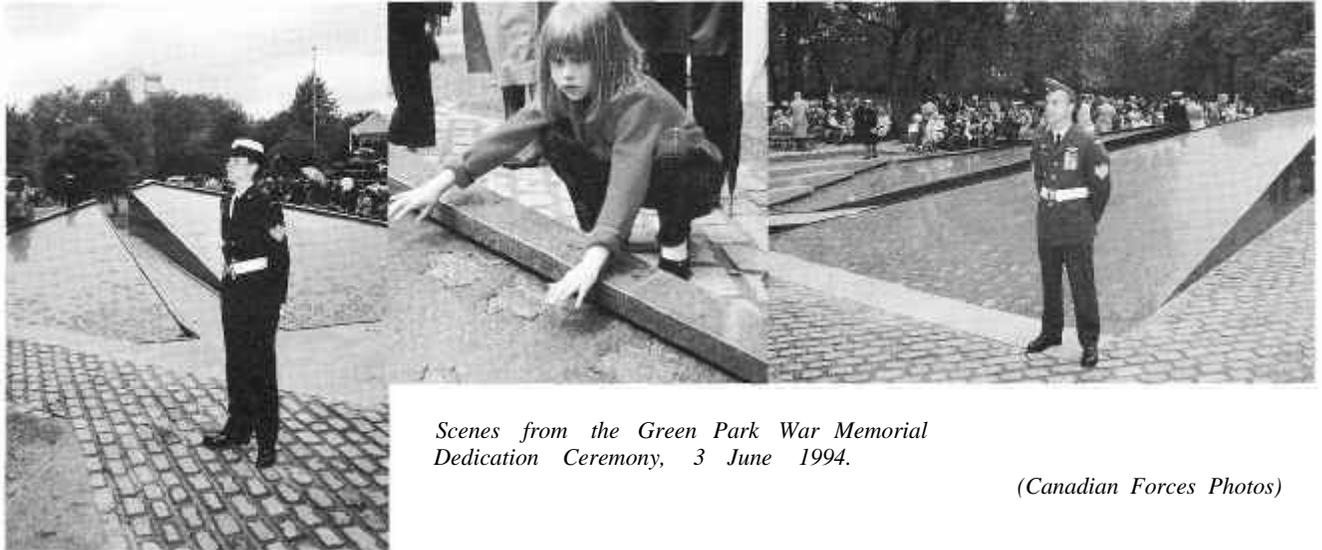
Inside and between the raised triangles of water, the causeway becomes a narrow fissure - not unlike the stone preserved trenches in the Canadian Memorial Park on the Western Front -

Opposite: The Canadian War Memorial in Green Park (top) and the compass rose memorial plaque.

and, in a subtle architectural touch, the ground rises by perhaps as little as eight inches, just enough to require the walker to make an actual effort whilst all around is the rush of water moving remorselessly in the opposite direction. Emerging out of the trench-like space the memorial reveals itself as two massive spikes pointing west across London, their cruel angularity redolent of the rockets and missile launchers of the Second War. The walk back through the monument takes the visitor in a direct line to a sunken memorial plaque, in the form of a compass rose, inscribed in two languages with the legend:

*In Two World Wars
One Million Canadians
Came to Britain
And Joined the Fight for Freedom
From Danger Shared Our Friendship Prospers.*

From this raised position it is easy to see that the memorial has been designed as three interlocking triangles: two water-covered shapes that drive the memorial westward, a third triangle that acts as a counterweight pulling the memorial back towards the Canada Gates. The central fissure seems as the shaft of an arrow directing the eye unequivocally to the circular plaque with its crucial and powerful inscription. As if to underline the west to east axis of the monument the compass rose itself is aligned on Halifax, Nova Scotia, the principle port of embarkation for the Canadian forces in both world wars.



*Scenes from the Green Park War Memorial
Dedication Ceremony, 3 June 1994.*

(Canadian Forces Photos)

But it is not a totally abstract monument. Sunk into the lower reaches of each fall of water are several dozen bronze maple leaves. In a weird reversal of the autumnal process, their colours are gradually changing from a deep brown to a bright green as the chemicals begin to react with the water. Seen against the pure abstract form of the rest of the monument the naturalistic leaves convey a powerful symbolic reading: suggestive at one end of interpretation as images of immutability and permanence, and at the other end as uncomfortable reminders of figures left stranded or washed ashore in the shallow waters of amphibious landings, most poignantly for the Canadians at Dieppe and Normandy.

The building of this memorial follows on from the furore caused by the siting of the commemorative statue to Second World War RAF commander "Bomber" Harris in Whitehall. The abstract and architectural nature of the Canadian memorial has helped mediate the message - the memorial is neither a cenotaph to those buried elsewhere, nor is it dedicated to a particular figure. Rather, it continues the recent practice of the Dominion nations of the old Empire in commemorating their part in 20th century conflict with grand architectural monuments: the South African memorial and museum at Delville Wood on the Somme is perhaps the grandest of these recent schemes.

But the Green Park monument is important for several quite specific reasons.

Firstly, it is an extraordinarily bold design - an architectural monolith that fuses an abstract geometric idea with subtle, unobtrusive figurative elements. This synthesis of apparent opposites is, as we shall see, an important aesthetic principle in the commissioning and construction of Canadian war memorials in Europe.

Secondly, the monument was designed by a Canadian - Pierre Granche - and a French-Canadian sculptor at that. Historically, this is a quite crucial issue in the evolution of a Canadian war art. It will be a major theme of this paper.

Thirdly, the monument is important because it continues, and may even conclude, a remarkable story which unites art, war and the nature of remembrance, a story that covers 80 years of inspired arts patronage and public debate in Canada and Britain.

II

In order to put the new memorial in artistic and historical perspective we have to turn back to the middle years of the Great War and to the story of the key figure in the genesis of Canadian war art - Max Aitken.

A self-made millionaire, entrepreneur, unionist MP, and proud Canadian, Max Aitken had more or less appointed himself the official

recorder of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in Europe in the first twelve months of the First World War. Moving freely around the Canadian lines on the Western Front, Aitken amassed piles of photographs, reports and eye-witness accounts of the Canadian soldier at war. From December 1915 he provided a daily news bulletin to the Canadian Forces, indeed for many months he was the sole conduit for Canadian news on the battle front. In January 1916, at his own expense, he founded the Canadian War Records Office (CRWO) in London and by March 1916 had opened an office and archives. Three months later the office boasted a staff of 17 men and 11 officers, some permanently stationed in France where they systematically gathered news, accounts, reports and photographs from the Canadian lines.

This was a remarkable achievement. At a time when the control of war news was still in its infancy, the CRWO had become, in Aitken's words, "the fountainhead of reliable information concerning Canadian affairs and the Canadian troops in the field."¹ As such, it severely embarrassed its sister organisation, the Department of Information (DoI) run from Wellington House. The DoI could not compete with Aitken's energy and initiative. Its director, the writer John Buchan, even complained that the success of the CRWO's publicity and pictorial propaganda could make one believe "that Canada is running the war."²

Initially, the CWRO had four rather utilitarian functions: to publicise the achievements of Canadian arms in Allied and neutral countries; to help recruitment in Canada; to systematically maintain a record of Canadian involvement in the war; and to inform and influence Allied and Canadian press and their governments. By the middle months of 1916, Aitken was ready to add an aesthetic role to these overtly political and propagandists functions.

Aitken was aware that Wellington House had seized the cultural high ground with its appointment of the Scottish etcher and draughtsman Muirhead Bone as the first Official War Artist in the summer of 1916. Aitken recognised that with a similar scheme to commission front-line artists he could solve several pressing problem: firstly, he could remedy the shortage of interesting images from the front-line. The supply of photographs from the Western

Front, which were a vital element in CWRO publications such as *Canada in Flanders*, was drying up. Aitken had long since lost faith in the work of studio artist-illustrators such as W.B. Wollen and R. Caton Woodville who drew heavily fabricated, extraordinarily ignorant renditions of warfare. He was also aware that major events in the Canadian's war had gone unrecorded, most notably their stand at the Second Battle of Ypres. Artists, decided Aitken, could remedy many of these shortfalls.

He may also have recognized that by using artists to record and interpret the face of modern war he was striking an important blow for cultural freedom. By allowing specially-commissioned artists a relatively free hand to paint the face of battle he was asserting the principles of individualism and interpretation, an act of enlightened arts patronage that would stand in stark contrast to the military imperative of "kultur." In addition, oil on canvas, as with bronze and stone, carried a cultural capital that news photography, however authentic and inspirational could never hope to equal.

At the back of his mind he may also have had a vision of a grand memorial building housing the finest examples of commemorative painting and sculpture - a permanent cultural epitaph to the Canadian dead, and indeed a monument to his own entrepreneurial flair.

It was a considerable irony then, that the first artist commissioned by the CWRO to record the Canadian's famous stand at Second Ypres produced little more than a vast canvas of cliché-bound illustrative realism. Richard Jack's vast painting - it measures 12 feet by 19 feet - was an anachronistic reprise of the worst excesses of Victorian battle art. In style and content it is comparable with the giant, often faked, battle photographs of Canadian troops that were later shown in the Grafton Galleries in London. But Aitken worried little about the aesthetic shortfalls in his grand scheme. His ability to recruit and sponsor Jack was proof enough that he could augment a grand scheme for war art.

By 1917, using the profits accrued from the various CWRO ventures, Aitken (newly honoured as Lord Beaverbrook) established the Canadian War Memorials Fund, an equally ambitious project which aimed to commemorate the war in



Second Ypres.
by Richard Jack
(Canadian War Museum)

oils and bronze for a grand memorial building somewhere in Canada. Beaverbrook's organisations had immaculate credentials as both a propaganda machine and as a cultural patron. The CWMF was able to attract some of the keenest minds in the country. One such mind was the art critic Paul G. Konody who became Beaverbrook's chief arts adviser in 1917. His role was to become quite crucial.

Born in Hungary, Konody had lived in London since 1889 where he worked as art critic for the *Daily Mail* and the *Observer*. By all accounts Konody had an astute eye and he articulated his aesthetic judgements with intelligence and insight. There was, though, a fundamental flaw in his appreciation of certain sections of the British art scene - his declared inability to fully embrace the radical modernism of English Vorticism and French Cubism. Konody's difficulty with extreme geometric abstraction left an interesting legacy in both commemorative painting and memorial sculpture. In our observations on the 1994 Green Park memorial we shall find it necessary to recall the roots of this difficulty.

Konody's taste may have extended to the likes of Augustus John and Sir Alfred Munnings, but he found it difficult to support such avant-garde painters as David Bomberg and Wyndham Lewis whose prewar paintings had explored the language of fracture and dynamism, and had almost abandoned figurative references completely.

But Konody did not condemn all modernist approaches. He distanced himself from the inappropriate illustrative style of Victorian battle

art, and he scorned the sort of history painting that drew on an archaic and stale allegorical imagery. He argued passionately that the new era of mechanised war demanded a virile art that fused description with innovative formal languages. To this end he championed English painters such as Christopher Nevinson whose small oil painting *La Mitrailleuse* had achieved overnight fame when it was exhibited at the Allied Artists Association in March 1916.³ Ostensibly modernistic and radical, Nevinson's style actually employed little more than a veneer of cubism. Enough though to attract significant popular attention partly, one suspects, because it conveyed the appearance of modernism without any of the pictorial excesses and distortions. To Konody, as to many other leading critics of the day, Nevinson's work was favoured because of its synthesis of "clear illustration and futurist abstraction" and also, as Konody wrote in his *Observer* column, because it was "absolutely intelligible without being in any sense of the word literal representation."⁴

Konody's aversion to the formalistic abstraction of much Vorticist work is an important theme in this paper - the battle between a vigorous figuration and a geometric abstraction as a means of describing the nature of modern warfare. It is a battle that may have exercised a significant effect on the aesthetics of commemorative statuary and memorials built by the Canadian government after the war. It is sufficient to say that, by and large, Konody was largely antipathetic to what he termed as the "geometrical obfuscations" of Vorticist art. The

effect of this rebuke on some English artists was very great indeed.

As one example of this prejudice, the Committee's reply to the young English modernist painter William Roberts is worth citing in full:⁵

Canadian War Records Office,
14 Clifford St, Bond Street London W1
28th, December 1917
To Gunr W. Roberts
D.Battery 51st Brigade RFA BEF France

With reference to your communication re your being transferred to the Canadians for the purposes of painting a Battle Picture for the Canadian War Memorials Fund. I would be glad to know whether, providing you are given the necessary facilities and leave, you are prepared to paint the picture at your own risk, to be submitted for the approval of the committee. The reason for this request is that the Art Adviser informs us that he is not acquainted with your realistic work and Cubist work is inadmissible for the purpose. If the picture, which would be 12ft wide, is accepted you would be paid from £250 to £300, in case of refusal you would be refunded for material and trouble.

Harold Watkins
Captain
For Officer i/c Canadian War Record
JHW/AM

As if to underline the essentially cautious and conservative approach of the Canadian Scheme under Konody it is worth noting that of the 45 artists working for the CWMF during 1917 almost half were painting portraits of eminent politicians, statesmen and decorated soldiers. Avant-garde artists had a much harder time convincing the CWMF art adviser that their "realistic work" was sufficiently intelligible and respectable for the Canadian collection. David Bomberg, who was ordered to repaint his angular composition of a Canadian Tunnelling Company so that its abstract forms should look more naturalistic, later wrote angrily that Konody had made him make "one of the few compromises of his life." Wyndham Lewis dismissed his painting commissioned by the memorial fund as "one of the dullest good pictures on earth."⁶

While art history has been kinder to these paintings (and less severe in its criticism of the compromises made by these anti-establishment artists) it has also shown how extraordinary an achievement in art patronage this actually was.

Without the support of the Canadian government Beaverbrook had mobilised huge amounts of private and public money, had commissioned dozens of established and young artists, and had organised a complex logistical scheme of artists placements abroad and at home. He had also ensured that the work was exhibited and publicised. His British counterparts were flabbergasted: "The Canadian Government... alone seems willing to spend money on patronage of art in connection with war and are paying large sums of money for work by Kennington, Nevinson, Orpen and others," wrote a jealous C.F.G. Masterman in 1917.⁷

Nothing seemed to stop Beaverbrook. He recruited freely amongst the great and good in the English art world: William Orpen, ARA, recalled in his war memoir, *An Onlooker in France*, how he was approached by a CWMF officer in September 1917:

About ten minutes past four up breezed a car, and in it was a slim little man with an enormous head and two remarkable eyes. I saluted and tried to make military noises with my boots. Said he: 'Are you Orpen?' 'Yes, sir' said I. 'Are you willing to work for the Canadians?' said he. 'Certainly, sir' said I. 'Well' said he, 'that's all right. Jump in, and we'll go and have a drink.'⁸

But while Orpen was bemused that "the Canadians have robbed every artist of distinction in England," there was a growing furore in Canada that indigenous artists had been totally ignored.

On leave from the front convalescing from his wounds, the Canadian portrait painter Ernest Fosbery expressed his anger at the exclusion of his fellow artists from the CWMF scheme:

We have in the Canadian Academy some good portrait painters...and I think it probable that there would be considerable feeling in Canada if in a matter of this sort Canadian artists were entirely overlooked. Canada is taking its place as a nation and Canadian art has more than kept pace with the developments of the country. Would it not be possible to have this essentially Canadian series of portraits done by Canadian artists?⁹

It became a widespread sentiment. In November 1917 a Montreal newspaper headline summarized feelings at home: "Canadian Artists not included." The slogan was picked up by groups as varied as the Ontario Society of Artists,

the Royal Canadian Academy, and Montreal's Pen and Pencil Club. Beaverbrook ran into further difficulties: as a quasi-autonomous body the CWMF threatened to de-stabilise an already delicate relationship with the cultural powers at the National Gallery of Canada and with the Canadian Advisory Arts Council.

Yet, within weeks, Beaverbrook, having solicited the help of key figures in the Canadian art establishment, had appointed four Canadian artists, some serving with the Canadian Expeditionary forces. Others were to follow, painters who seem to have been known always by their first initials - A.Y. Jackson, J.L. Graham, H.J. Mowan, J.W. Beatty, F.H. Varley.

This was an important victory for Canadian art: a victory won in 1917 that most certainly had a bearing on the nationality of sculptors for the great memorial building era of the 1920s and 1930s, and even more so on the origins of the sculptor chosen for the Green Park Memorial in the 1990s.

Even so, Canadian artists were not necessarily given preferential treatment. By early 1918 the CWRO was employing over 55 artists from some six countries, besides Canada. At the hugely important Canadian War Memorials Exhibition at Burlington House in January 1919, not one Canadian artist was shown in the central gallery. The focal point of the show was preserved for Augustus John's vast drawing *The Canadians opposite Lens* and for canvases by Charles Ginner, Laura Knight, Richard Jack and several other British artists.

History has been fairer on several of the Canadian artists. Major canvases by A.Y. Jackson and F.H. Varley were hung in the important *A Bitter Truth* exhibition at the Barbican Gallery in London in 1994, canvases that showed these two Canadian landscapists to be the equal of their British and continental counterparts.

III

The triumph of representational figuration over non-referential abstraction has an interesting sequel in the development of commemorative monuments after the war.

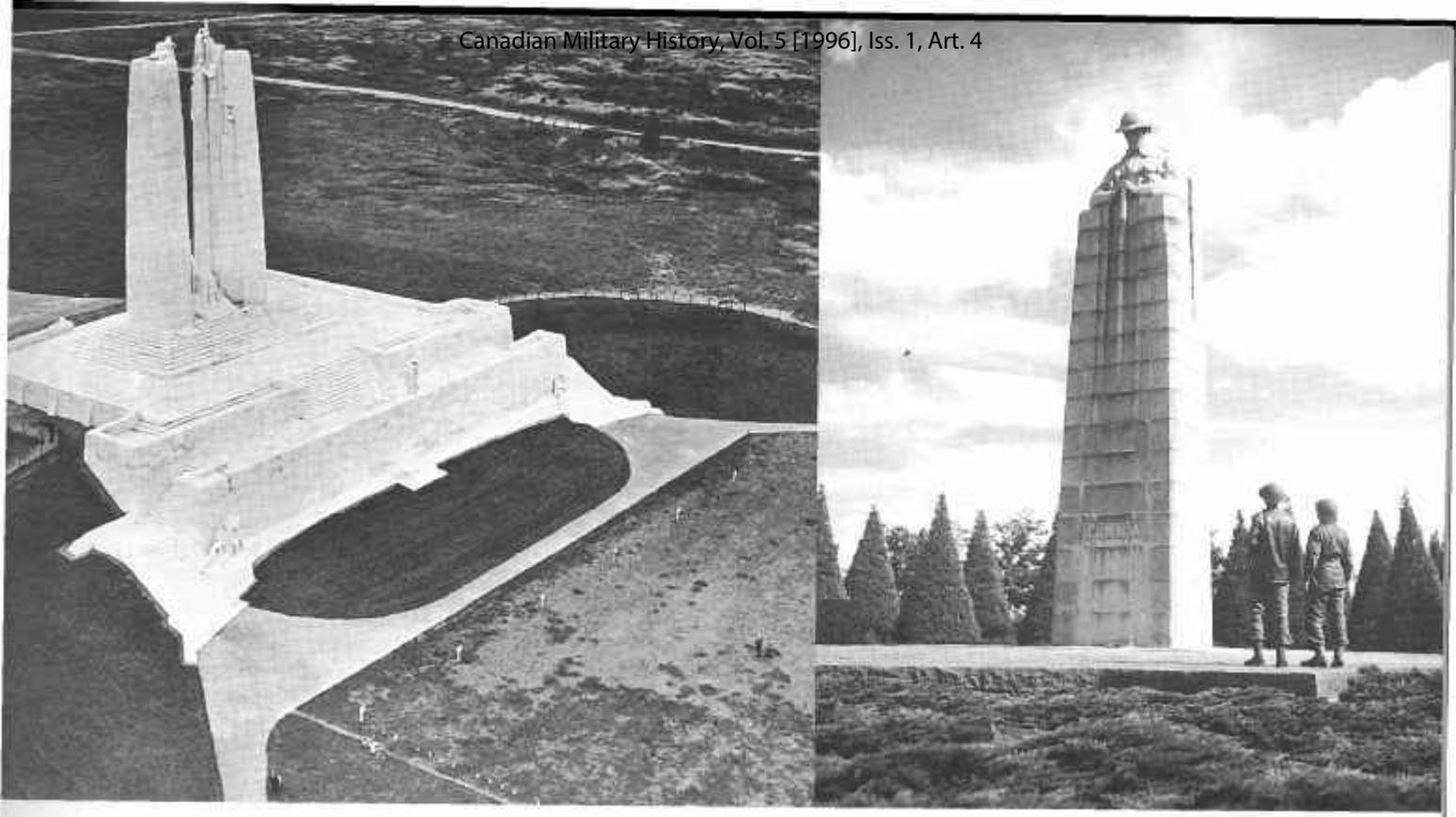
When the CWMF collection finally arrived in Canada in August 1919, Konody did his best to drum up enthusiasm from a war-weary public by exaggerating the idiosyncrasies of the modernist work. In the event he need not have bothered: the Canadian public turned up in the tens of thousands to see one of the greatest cultural events in Canadian history. During its two weeks in Toronto over 107,000 saw the 447 works in the collection; similar numbers flocked to the Montreal exhibition. Perhaps predictably the most popular work at both shows was John Byam Lister Shaw's *The Flag*, a sentimental composition depicting grieving womenfolk workers and children at the foot of a giant memorial upon which a dead soldier is draped in the Canadian red ensign. This though, is no ordinary memorial, for the Canadian soldier is lying astride the paws of a gigantic British lion - an allegorical rendition of the sacrificial relationship between the two countries.¹⁰

Enslaved by its figurative exactitude Byam Shaw renounced the opportunity to make a bold play between the clusters of grieving figures and the impartial mass of cold stone. Instead, he was seduced by the quality of surfaces and textures and shied away from making the image exactly symmetrical - an opportunity eagerly seized, for example, by William Orpen in his disquieting canvas *To the Unknown British Soldier in France* of 1922.

But the painting does point the way to the dominant aesthetic of several key Canadian memorials designed and built after the war. It was an aesthetic that attempted to fuse the principles of a geometric abstraction with a figurative realism. If this is becoming a familiar refrain in the story of official war art it is because it was, in effect, a reprise of Konody's guiding principle of a vital, but not too radical approach to abstraction.

In lesser hands this fusion of abstraction and figuration could have produced an art of compromise and mediocrity. On the contrary, in one piece at least, it gave birth to a memorial image of extraordinary power.

The Canadian monument at Vimy epitomises this fascination for apparently irreconcilable opposites. The huge memorial marks the site of a major triumph of Canadian arms - the battle



Above left: The Vimy Memorial; Above right: The brooding soldier at St. Julien.

(NAC PA 183631 & Canadian Forces Photo)

and capture of Vimy Ridge in April 1917. On this 180-foot-high earth barrier, the four divisions of the Canadian Corps had fought together for the first time, eventually over-running the German defences on Hill 145 on Easter Monday, 1917.

A vast tract of the hill is dedicated to a battlefield memorial park - "the free gift in perpetuity of the French nation to the people of Canada" - which is dotted with graveyards, preserved trench systems, tunnels and lumpy meadows. The highest point of the 250 acre park is dominated by the Vimy Memorial. It was designed by Walter S. Allward, a sculptor from Toronto, as part of an open competition staged in the early 1920s. Chosen above dozens of other submissions,¹¹ Allward's design fuses a bold architectural scheme with figurative elements. It takes the form of two tall pylons - meant to symbolize the twin forces of the Canadians and the French - standing on a base which alone required 11,000 tonnes of concrete and masonry. On the inside walls of each of the pylons are various figures - Defenders, the Spirit of Sacrifice, representatives of Peace, Justice, Truth and Knowledge. The whole edifice teeters on the edge of the ridge, two near-symmetrical white columns peering indomitably across the sprawling Douai plain.

As Alan Borg has pointed out in his authoritative study of war memorials,¹² the mourning populations of the postwar period would not have tolerated a memorial aesthetic based on pure abstraction. Instead public and private memorials relied on the classical tradition. As such they ignored the prevailing modernist currents which flowed towards abstract and constructivist form. Borg argues that the few genuinely abstract forms used in memorial sculpture drew from the lexicon of funerary sculpture - obelisks and tombstones, for instance. Much of the figurative imagery took the form of traditional heroic and naturalist sculpture: plinth-based statues, narrative friezes of figures in low relief, groups of figures in complex compositional postures.

A few designers tried to combine the two modes. Edwin Lutyen's severe icon in Whitehall, *the Cenotaph*, is generally considered to be an extreme abstract form, a focal point for national mourning, devoid of irrelevant decoration and unnecessary frills. It is, in fact, a representation of a tomb elevated on a gigantic pedestal - a fusion of figurative emblem with abstract form.

This then, takes us by way of conclusion to what I consider to be the single most effective memorial piece commemorating Canadian dead

- the astonishing statue-cum-obelisk at St. Julien on the Ypres Salient.

The memorial stands at the crossroad of Vancouver Corner near the village of St. Julien. It was near here on 22 April 1915 that the first German gas attack of the war took place and where the Canadian troops put up a staunch resistance without the benefit of gas masks or any other preventative equipment.¹³ The memorial carries the following evocative inscription:

This column marks the battlefield where 18000 Canadians on the British left withstood the first German gas attacks on the 22nd - 24th of April 1915. 2000 Jell and here lie buried.

The monument itself is quite extraordinary. At 35 feet tall, it towers over the neatly cropped juniper bushes which have been grown to mimic the outlines of shell holes and craters. Its form is that of a truncated obelisk, its diamond tip replaced by the lowered head of a soldier in mourning, his arms neatly clasped to his middle, his rifle reversed. At this point the entire figure seems to metamorphose into the severe vertical lines of the pillar. Designed by Frederick Chapman Clemesha, an architect-soldier who was wounded while serving with the Canadian Corps, it is a brilliant example of how to bring together the abstract and the naturalistic.

Like the Vimy Memorial (but with none of that edifice's awkwardness) it continues the aesthetic principle of synthesising disparate languages. As we have seen, this is an important element in the 1994 memorial - a severely abstracted and architectural motif rewarded with a subtle figurative touch through the hyper-realistic representation of maple leaves. As well as this fusion of linguistic forms the Green Park, memorial borrows something else from previous Canadian memorials: Granche has paraphrased the split pillars of the Vimy monument in his Green Park piece. Where Allward uses the twin pillars at Vimy to separate the figurative elements of the composition and to symbolize the two powers of France and Canada, so Granche has

employed the formal schism of a central fissure to bisect the larger mass of the sculpture, in this case to symbolize the emotional and psychological "land" bridge across the Atlantic represented by the cascades of water.

Notes

1. Max Aitken in the Sir Robert Borden Papers, National Archives of Canada (NAC), Vol.64, 19 May 1916, p. 12.
2. John Buchan to Sir Reginald Brade, 4 August 1917, Imperial War Museum.
3. *La Mitrailleuse*, Tate Gallery. London.
4. *The Observer*, 26 March 1916.
5. William Roberts, *Memories of the War to End all Wars: 4.5 Howitzer Gunner, RFA, 1916-1918* (Canada Press, 1974) p.24.
6. Wyndham Lewis to Herbert Read, 17 December 1918, No.97 in W.K. Rose, *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (London, 1963) p. 101.
7. Masterman to Clement K. Shorter, 20 December 1917.
8. William Orpen, *An Onlooker in France* (Williams and Norgate, 1924) p.42.
9. Fosbery to Eric Brown (undated, possibly October 1917) cited in Maria Tippett, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984)
10. Byam Shaw, Canadian War Memorial No.8796.
11. For a full account of the commissioning and construction of the Vimy Memorial see John Pierce "'Constructing Memory': The Vimy Memorial" *Canadian Military History*, Vol.1, Nos. 1 & 2, Autumn 1992, pp.5-14.
12. Alan Borg, *WarMemorials* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991).
13. See Rose E. Coombs, *Before Endeavour Fades* (After the Battle Publications, 1983) p.39.

Paul Gough is a painter, writer and broadcaster. Born in 1958, he studied in the West Midlands and at the Royal College of Art in London. His PhD (1991) examined the imagery of landscape on the Western Front during the Great War. He has published on all aspects of war art and, more recently, on war memorial schemes at Gallipoli and Flanders. He is currently Head of the Fine Art degree course at the University of the West of England, Bristol.