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## A Difficult Path to Tread

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is meant to recall the Canadian forest. To reach the gate from the plateau, visitors walk past the monument to the Caen resistance members who were assassinated by the Germans on the morning of the invasion. To reach the gate from the valley, visitors must wind their way up the zig-zag path to the edge. Partly a functional solution to climbing the steep slope, the effort of climbing is also intended to evoke the struggle to attain the beachhead. The tensions of the

project are experienced through the movement of the eye and body.

This Canadian "cut" of landscape in a park [once a medieval quarry] in Caen is intended to touch the emotions of the visitors and to convey to future generations both the fragility of peace and the power of cooperation and moral engagement. A theatre of war is transformed into a theatre of memory.

If there are a few disappointments in the details, the students nonetheless were overcome with sheer delight in seeing most of the design concepts embodied and built. The last square of new turf is tucked into place minutes before the ceremonies begin, and then we watch a host of white T-shirted Caen school children, Canadian flags in hand, form a white serpentine line as they run down from the "edge" across the valley to the grove.

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## A Difficult Path to Tread

### The new memorial garden at Caen, Normandy

Paul Gough

In a previous issue of *Canadian Military History* (Vol.5, No.1, Spring 1996) I looked at the recently unveiled Canadian War Memorial in Green Park in London, UK. I drew comparisons between the memorial and its counterparts on the Somme and at Vimy Ridge, I was fascinated by the fusion of abstract and figurative elements, and speculated that this combination of hard modernist edges with dramatic use of statuary seemed to be a particular strength of Canadian war memorials. Later that year I was invited by Professor Terry Copp to join a Canadian universities study group in France. At Caen, Normandy I had the chance to examine the new Canadian garden at *Le Memorial de la Paix*. This is a quite original, even controversial, installation, more of a peace garden than a monument. As a garden space it seems to want to tell a particular

story; its layout invites speculation and association. There are, though, many ways of 'reading' a landscaped space: this is my attempt.

The best way to appreciate the full extent of the Canadian garden is from the west where a lane cuts into the valley from the surrounding plateau. The museum is on your left, a busy 6-lane highway on the right and the broad, flat floor of the valley below. One hundred yards away, towards the headwall of the valley, lies the American forces garden, and on the plateau above lie the sites for future memorials, including a British garden.

Unlike the grandiose architecture of the US site, the Canadian garden strikes the casual walker as unusually modest. First you encounter a shallow fountain to the right of the valley floor, shielded from the highway by a bank of trees that mutes the traffic noise. I took this to be the 'start' of the garden, the beginning of a story that begins (as at Green Park) with an incessant flow of water. The fountain is in fact a sunken pool made up of sixteen rectangular black stone slabs; dug into the side of the valley wall it reminded me of gun

**Right:** A view of the ceremony taken from the terrace. The valley which separates terrace from the grove is clearly visible

pits that were built to house large artillery pieces or (to stretch the military analogy further) redolent of those Great War photographs of a battalion formed in open square to receive and hear its commanding officer. The black slabs are inscribed with Latin text - *Nulla dies umquam memori vos eximet aevo* (No day will erase your generation from our memory). Like the Green Park fountain, it evinces powerful notions of cleansing and perpetuation. It struck me that the water was intended to act as a metaphor for the Atlantic crossing, a point somehow reinforced by the grid-like structure of the slabs, which seems to mimic the longitude and latitude lines on Admiralty charts.

Lining the flower beds of the fountain and 'gun pit' is a low wall engraved with the names of dozens of French villages that were liberated by the Canadian Army after 1944. The list includes many hamlets and villages - Authie, St. Contest, Cussy - that are within walking distance of the garden. The slopes are planted with four rows of sycamore trees which simultaneously announce and 'protect' the exposed slab of water.

Turning your back on the fountain the next stage of the garden presents itself. Leaving the formal layout of the sunken pool (with its axial regimentation and sense of order) one has to cross 38 metres of flat terrain, aware all the time that the crossing can be monitored from the crest above and increasingly aware of the looming presence of the sheer stone wall that comprises the next stage of the garden. Unlike the falling water of the fountain, this traverse has no obvious geographical connotations except that it asserts a sense of exposure and vulnerability. The passage of time is suggested in the layout of the trees which mature as one crosses from water to the wall - from the young sycamore saplings in sentry formation besides the fountain, past two larger birches at the foot of the slope, on to the mature trees at the crest.

The next part of the garden is certainly the most challenging and, for many visitors, the most problematic. We are confronted by a steep wilderness of thick, spiky prairie grass. At first it appears impenetrable but a mud path zig-zags



steeply ahead, first to the right and then into a succession of interlocking spurs. The most striking effect is not the sense of exposed space behind or the large smooth wall directly ahead, but the strange effect where the harsh brown prairie grass give way to verdant green clumps. The transition between green and brown is abrupt and makes a straight line at the edge of the winding path giving the odd impression that a ten yard swathe of the hillside has been scorched leaving broad bands of greenery on either side. There is a further surprise in that the brown spikey clumps - neatly planted 18 inches apart in parade ground formation - are not "dead" at all, but actually soft to the touch and sprout tiny delicate yellow flowers. On the steeper banks the tufts are knitted into the soil by a cellular plastic webbing that resembles a think veneer of skin flowing over the hillside. These corporeal undertones are at the root of many objections to this phase of the garden. I was told that veterans groups and ex-servicemen's associations have objected to the apparent deadness of the plants, with their implication that they represent the fate of so many young Canadian soldiers on the campaign to liberate Europe. It may not be just the grass that

offends. The zig-zag path is frustrating to the walker; progress up the slope is constantly confused by the repetition of the clumps which are difficult to keep in focus. To add to this, one is aware constantly of the oppressive mass of white stone bearing down - a possible quotation from the impregnable walls at Vimy, but also perhaps a reminder to many veterans of the heavily-defended Atlantic Wall or a fortified pill-box that still looms gigantically in the memory.

The wall itself does seem impregnable. As one takes the third turn in the zig-zag path, the mounds of earth to either side start to assume the shape of a rampart, the brown prairie grass spreading down the slope looks more like the wiry tufts of a dismembered broom, or even miniature shrapnel bursts. Directly above, the white wall is bisected a third of the way along its length by a strip of black marble. From a distance one might have assumed that this was an opening or doorway. Instead it serves as another visual frustration, a neatly ironic touch by the design team.

The actual opening is far to the right; indeed it is at the furthest point from the last turn in the path. In the summer it is a relief to leave the dusty, baked and visually abrasive prairie path and move onto the cool white slabs of the stonework. The gap in the wall is narrow, and gives on to a stairway of four flights faced by a wall of polished black stone inscribed with the legend "Liberation Comes from the Sea. La Liberation Vient par La Mer." At the foot of this imposing and reflective surface is a narrow flower bed planted with poppies - this century's primary floral symbol of martial mourning. The narrow aperture into this stage of the memorial may be familiar to battlefield pilgrims: it repeats the stepped walkways of the Vimy memorial and the cool narrow cleft of the Green Park monument.

The shadow of the stairway is soon left behind as the visitor climbs onto the fifth and final phase in the garden's narrative. The summit of the monument takes the form of a flat viewing platform from where the journey across the floor of the valley, along the winding zig-zag path and through the tunnel of the memorial is easily read. A national flag and four glass panels make up the remainder of the memorial. The panels -

rectangles of thick laminated glass, some two metres tall - repeat the unit of commemoration that has been constant throughout the garden. Unlike many Allied memorials there are no individual names; instead there are long lists of the Canadian military units that fought in Normandy during the summer of 1944. Unlike the carved inscription near the fountain these names are less easy to read as the transparency of the glass makes the words blend with the landscape behind - a metaphor perhaps for the movement of troops through the land or for the assimilation of dead soldiers into the soil.

The small lawn is bounded by two cypress trees - the only concession to traditional funeral convention in the entire garden - and then merges with the plateau with its industrial park and grounds of *le Memorial*. One hundred yards away is the site of a proposed United Kingdom garden, distinguished only by a roughly hewn pillar of Antrim granite sent by the people of Belfast and standing rather forlornly in open space.

The Canadian Garden is a controversial piece of landscape theatre. The design team seem to have used the topography of the valley to suggest a complex series of ideas about distance from one's home country, about the painful progress of a combatant through exposed tracts, up an arduous and disorientating climb, to a hard-won breach in an impregnable stonework, and finally to an eventual triumph. I found the experience of this garden quite fascinating; it shares with the Vimy Ridge tunnels a sense of theatre, in that it was unpredictable and physically engaging. And, unlike the recently-opened Australian Memorial Park at Hamel on the Somme, it works without words, there are no proclamations or guidebooks on how to read and respond to the garden. It is a subtle mime show in which the pilgrim-visitor acts out the grim progress of the combatant. For me, it sets a benchmark for future designs of memorial landscapes.

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An extended version of this paper first appeared in *The International Journal of Heritage Studies* in January 1998.



*Top left: Caen school children walk down the zig-zag path during the ceremonial opening of the garden in May 1995; Top right: A view of le Mémorial overlooking the fountain; Above left: Glass steles etched with the names of Canadian units which fought in Normandy; Above right: The fountain, looking towards the terrace; Right: The grove as it appeared in the summer of 1998; Bottom: Two views of the terrace showing its forbidding stone structure and the wilderness of thick, spiky prairie grass which hide the zig-zag path which leads up to it. (except where noted, photos by Nan Griffiths)*



Steve Osterberg

