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Constructing Memory: The Vimy Memorial

John Pierce

The 75th anniversary of the battle of Vimy Ridge is also the 56th anniversary of the dedication of the Vimy Memorial. In the summer of 1936 over 100,000 people witnessed a ceremony which captured the imagination of the world and crystalized the Canadian memory of Vimy ridge. The historical reality of the battle was re-worked and reinterpreted in a conscious attempt to give purpose and meaning to an event which was to symbolize Canada's coming-of-age as a nation.

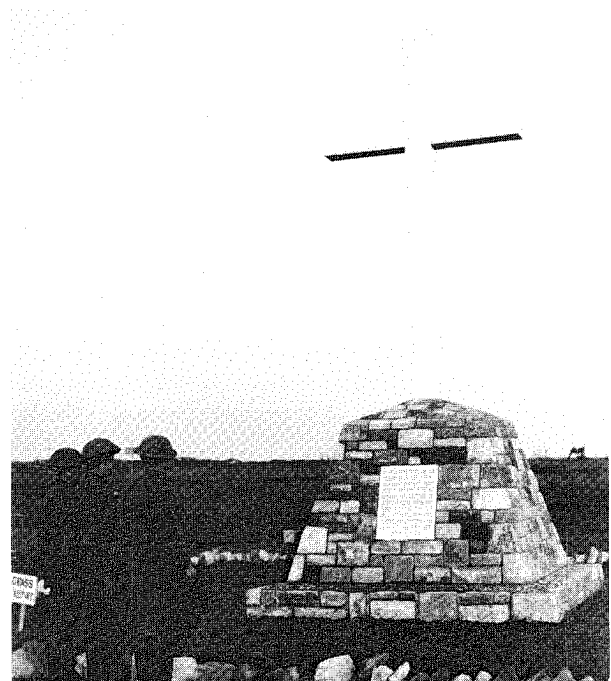
The process of constructing memory began in 1920 when the House of Commons agreed to a motion creating the Battlefields Memorials Commission. Eight sites were selected for the creation of monuments "to commemorate the heroism . . . and victories of the Canadian soldier in the Great War". These sites, the Minister of Militia and Defence, Hugh Guthrie noted "will be known to history" as:

1. St. Julien, a battle which was fought during the month of April 1915, and also known as the second battle of Ypres.
2. The battle of Passchendaele, a battle which extended from 22nd October to the 17th November, 1917.
3. The battle of Observatory Ridge, some times known as the battle of St. Eloi, which extended from May until June in the year 1916.
4. The battle of Vimy Ridge which took place on the 9th April, 1917, and continued until May 3 following.
5. The Battle of Arras which took place during the months of August and September, 1918.
6. The battle of Bourlon Wood which took place on September 27, 1918.

Soldiers of the First Canadian Infantry Division inspect a memorial erected by their comrades on Vimy Ridge.
(NAC PA 2414)

7. The battle of Courcellette, which was part of the great battle of the Somme fought during the months of September and October 1916.
8. The battle of Amiens which took place during the months of September and October, 1918.¹

Vimy was not singled out as the location for a great memorial for several years. Initially "the memorial was to be erected on Hill 62 near the Ypres salient, but on further consideration the officers who had charge of it decided Vimy would be a more suitable point."² Major General S.C. Mewburn who chaired the Commission reported that while many of the army officers "held that Vimy was by no means the most important battle fought by the Canadian Corps," there was something "distinctive about Vimy



Ridge that comes very close to the hearts of Canadians.” This was no doubt true but Mewburn also reported that after all the sites had been surveyed “the obvious superiority” of the Vimy location was evident to all.³

The House of Commons offered unanimous support for the acquisition of land to create the memorial park. George Graham, Mackenzie King’s Minister of Militia, described the memorial as “a monument to Canada’s ideals, to Canada’s courage, and to Canada’s devotion to what the people of this land deemed to be right.”⁴

The design selected for Vimy was the work of Toronto-based architect Walter S. Allward. From an original field of 162 designs, 8 were selected, one for each of the designated sites. Allward’s stunning modernist creation was to be the largest and most impressive project, symbolizing “the whole achievement of Canadian troops during the Great War.”⁵

The necessary road building and landscaping was carried out by French and British veterans employed by the Imperial War Graves Commission. In 1925 Allward moved to Paris to supervise the construction of the monument and the sculptures for it. He described his concept in these words:

At the base of the strong, impregnable wall of defence are the defenders, one group showing the breaking of the sword, the other the sympathy of the Canadians for the helpless. Above these are the mouths of guns covered with olives and laurels. On the wall stands the heroic figure of Canada brooding over the graves of her valiant dead; below is suggested a grave with a helmet, laurels, etc. Behind her stand two Pylons, symbolizing the two forces - Canadian and French - while between, at the base of these, is the Spirit of Sacrifice who, giving all, throws the torch to his comrades. Looking up, they see the figures of Peace, Justice, Truth and Knowledge, etc. for which they fought, chanting the hymn of peace. Around these figures are the shields of Britain, Canada and France. On the outside of the Pylon is the Cross.⁶

In 1927, a small party of veterans had journeyed to France to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the battle. Their trip was overshadowed by the large-scale return of

American veterans to the battlefields of France and this prompted the Legion to discuss the idea of a pilgrimage to Vimy at its 1928 convention. The decision to wait for the moment when the great memorial would be completed was partly influenced by the onset of the Great Depression but there was also the reality that Vimy had become a metaphor for Canadian nationhood. A pilgrimage to this sacred site became a goal worth organizing and sacrificing for.

During the fifteen years between Allward’s design of the monument and the installation of the last dramatic sculptures the world had changed. Vimy, which began as a monument to the valour, the heroism and the victories of the Canadian Corps, also had to serve as memorial to the 19,000 soldiers of the Canadian Corps who, missing in action, knew no marked grave. Allward agreed to inscribe the names of these men on the base of the monument, transforming Vimy into hallowed ground, an empty tomb, a place of pilgrimage. Allward had also been influenced by the general revulsion from war that characterized the late 1920’s and early 1930’s. His sculpture “The Defenders - The Breaking of the Sword” had originally included a German “coal scuttle helmet” crushed under the foot of one of the figures but this feature was dropped because of its “militaristic” imagery.⁷

At home in Canada opposition to “militarism” and a revisionist approach to the meaning of the Great War was actively promoted by pacifist organizations and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in Parliament. As early as 1926 Agnes Macphail, the first woman to become a Member of Parliament in Canada, challenged a reference to Vimy which spoke of the nobility of sacrifice made by young Canadians with the statement, “Will the honourable member admit that what caused the late war is the cause of all wars? Will he admit that the prime cause was an economic one, and that protection of women and children was part of it.” George Nicholson, a war veteran, replied, “I will not admit to anything of

the kind,"⁸ but Great War veterans would increasingly find themselves on the defensive. By the mid-thirties the Vimy Memorial would have to serve as a protest against war as well as a monument to heroism, sacrifice and victory.

The monument was near enough to completion to allow plans for a great pilgrimage to be made for the summer of 1936. More than 6,000 Canadians sailed to Europe aboard five chartered steamers while tens of thousands of British and French veterans and civilians converged on the site. The President of France would be there and the great French commander, Marshal Philippe Pétain, but the main attraction, apart from the monument, was King Edward VIII making his first great ceremonial appearance since ascending the throne. The speeches that day echoed and re-echoed the themes of sacrifice, remembrance

and appeals for peace. Macleans magazine had noted that the pilgrimage was taking place at a time when "Europe was hovering on the brink of another mad orgy of slaughter,"⁹ and many of the pilgrims were aware of the irony of dedicating a memorial to one war while another might begin at any moment.

The Vimy pilgrimage, like the memorial, itself was full of ambiguities. Was it a celebration of the achievement of the Canadian Corps or a ceremony mourning the dead? Was it an imperial event solidifying Canada's relationship with its new King or a statement about an independent Canadian nation? Was the monument to be seen as a remonstrance against war or a warning to the enemies of democracy that Canada would again play its part in defending Britain and France? It was all of these and more. It was, and is, quintessentially Canadian.

Pilgrims and spectators gather on Vimy Ridge prior to the dedication ceremony. Buses queue on the right while passengers make their way to the memorial through shell craters. This view faces southwest.

(NAC PA 148873)



Notes

1. *Debates, House of Commons*. 21 April 1920.
2. *Ibid.*, 22 May 1922.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. Walter S. Allward. "The Vimy Memorial." *The Legionary*. August 1936. See also W.W. Murray. *The Epic of Vimy*. Ottawa, 1936.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Allward told this to the British newspaper.
8. *Debates, House of Commons*. 23 April 1926.
9. *Macleans*. 15 April 1936.

John Pierce is a graduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University writing on the Vimy Memorial and Pilgrimage.

A view of the inner wall of the memorial facing southwest. The 11,285 names on the memorial, organized alphabetically and by rank, represent those Canadians, "missing, presumed dead," in France. The names were engraved with a flat-tipped sand-cutting tool and took seven years to compile and two years to engrave. (NAC PA 183625)

