

Lest We Forget: National Memorials to Canada's First World War Dead

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We live among the ruins and echoes of Armageddon, its shadow is receding slowly backward into history. At this time the proper occupation of the living is first to honour our heroic dead, next to repair the havoc ... and lastly learn aright and apply the lessons of the war.

— Prime Minister Arthur Meighen at the unveiling of the Cross of Sacrifice at the Thélus Cemetery, 1921

The First World War remains a defining event in the 20th century. The scale of slaughter was hitherto unmatched and, as European armies were decimated, the horror of the catastrophe seemed to obliterate all human endeavour and achievement. For its part, Canada saw the loss of more than 65,000 of its soldiers, of whom more than one quarter have no known grave. Canadians acted upon Prime Minister Meighen's adjuration to honour their dead. In particular, two remarkable monuments were created: the Vimy Memorial in northern France (Figure 1) and the Memorial Chamber in the Peace Tower in Ottawa (Figure 7). Each of these structures gives vivid expression to 20th-century ideas and sensibilities, and both can legitimately be viewed as major contributions to modern memorial architecture.

Before 1914 there were few British or Canadian precedents for war memorials — as distinct from testaments to the achievements of particular regiments, or monuments to individuals. The South African War, for example, gave rise to no national monuments. The memorial to a cause or a struggle can be traced primarily to France and Prussia, countries whose resources were increasingly mobilized by the state and whose armies were esteemed to a degree unmatched in Britain. Revolutionary and Napoleonic France looked to the classical architecture of Greece and Rome for precedents, while Prussia developed a tradition of monuments based upon the memorial to Frederick the Great.¹ The concept of honouring the war dead emerged gradually, out of the Crimean War and the American Civil War in the second half of the 19th century. As the nature of war changed and casualties increased, concern for the fate of the individual increased.

By the end of the 1914-1918 war, the life of a soldier had become so expendable that survivors were left with a deep sense of obligation never to forget their colleagues' sacrifices.²

In responding to the tragedy of the Great War, many artists, poets, and novelists experienced an acute sense of a "rupture in history," which separated the past from the present.³ Earlier approaches to memorialize war seemed inadequate to convey the extent of the loss or to express such modern sensibilities as melancholia and obligation. To British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, for example, the war appeared to "obliterate all human endeavour and achievement." Assuming the post of senior architect for the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) in 1917, Lutyens nonetheless determined that his monuments, if they were to succeed, needed first and foremost architectural forms that were rooted in tradition.

The IWGC, which was established in May 1917, included representatives from the dominions. The IWGC was made responsible for arranging for the burial of the dead and securing for them an honourable grave. To this end it formulated several general principles to govern the work of construction, which were approved by the Imperial Conference of 1918. First, there would be no repatriation of bodies: soldiers would be buried together where they fell; second, there should be no distinction made between the graves of officers and men; third, there should be no private memorials erected on the battlefields; fourth, each soldier should be individually honoured; and fifth, the memorials should be permanent. This approach gave expression to a shared belief that each soldier should be commemorated for his role in an event of collective heroism⁴ (Figure 2). These principles were first applied to the identified and located dead, but almost half-a-million soldiers who had fought for the British Empire, including more than 16,000 Canadians, were registered as missing and had no known grave. The IWGC reasoned that the missing dead were as entitled to remembrance as those deceased whose identities were known.⁵ After much deliberation the IWGC



Figure 1. Toronto sculptor Walter Seymour Allward descending the Vimy Monument in France on 26 July 1936, the day the memorial was unveiled. (W.W. Murray, ed., *The Epic of Vimy* [Ottawa: The Legionary, 1936], 60)

concluded that the most appropriate way of honouring the memory of the missing would be to include the names of each on large memorials. This decision was to have an impact on both the Vimy Memorial and the Memorial Chamber in Ottawa.

As hostilities drew to a close, a committee was struck to identify and name the principal battles and allocate sites to the appropriate countries. Canada was awarded eight battle

sites, three in Belgium and five in France, distributed along the length of the battle line. Another committee was established to advise on the erection of battle memorials on the Western Front. As in the past, individual regiments had begun to erect their own monuments. On this occasion, however, the practice was questioned, since regimental loyalty had had little meaning for the large numbers of civilian soldiers who



Figure 2. Canadian Cemetery No. 2, designed in accordance with the general principles established by the Imperial War Graves Commission. The cemetery, located in sight of the Vimy Monument, contains the graves of 2,904 Commonwealth soldiers, of whom 695 are Canadian. (Heritage Conservation Program, Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1996)

had volunteered for duty at the outbreak of the war. Applying the principle of equality adopted by the IWGC, the dominion governments chose to reserve their battle sites for national monuments, whose costs would be borne from public funds. The British government soon adopted a similar approach. Concluding that permanent national monuments offered the optimum solution for honouring the missing, the IWGC proposed that the name of each dead soldier should be inscribed on the appropriate national monument.

In late 1919 the Parliament of Canada voted funds to cover such preliminary site work as clearing the battlefields and constructing roads. Early in the following year, a special committee of the House of Commons began deliberating on how the eight Canadian battles might best be commemorated. These deliberations led to the establishment of the Canadian Battlefields Memorial Commission on 2 September 1920, which was tasked with the responsibility of overseeing the erection of the monuments. With guidance from Professor Percy Nobbs, head of the school of architecture at McGill University, the commission set up an architectural competition open to all Canadian architects and sculptors.

The competition guidelines asked contenders to address four requirements: first, the monuments should have a significant landmark presence; second, they should be designed to last “for many centuries”; third, artists should take into account that the monuments would stand in the restored countryside of France and Belgium and be set off by landscaped grounds; and fourth, the monuments should incorporate figurative sculpture.⁶ An international three-person jury was asked to evaluate the entries. It comprised Charles Reilly, representing the Royal Institute of British Architects (London), Paul Cret, representing the Société Centrale des Architectes (Paris), and

Frank Darling, representing the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada.⁷

In debating the appropriate character for the monuments, the Canadian Battlefields Memorial Commission was undoubtedly conversant with the activities of the IWGC, one of whose members was Peter Larkin, the Canadian High Commissioner in London, who served as the liaison between the Canadian government and commission members in Europe. Larkin was closely involved in the activities of the commission. In fact, when the question of where to place the Canadian national monument was being debated in Ottawa, he toured the length of Vimy Ridge with Rudyard Kipling — who was also employed by the IWGC — to ensure that the appropriate site was chosen.

The results of the Canadian Battlefield Memorials Commission competition were announced in October 1921. The winner, W.S. Allward, a sculptor from Toronto (see Figure 1), was selected from 120 entries.⁸ Shortly thereafter, the government decided that the names of 11,283 Canadians who died in France and had no known grave would be inscribed on the base of the monument (Figure 3).⁹ In the summer of the following year, Parliament agreed that Allward’s monument should be erected on the highest point of Vimy Ridge and authorized the acquisition of a 250-acre site in order to protect the structure against future construction.¹⁰ Notwithstanding the national role of the Vimy Monument, the commission was at pains to emphasize that Canada’s eight official battle sites in France and Belgium were of equal significance and should be treated accordingly.

The erection of Allward’s monument proved a major undertaking. The land underfoot had been the subject of bitter fighting and was pitted with deep dugouts, mine craters,

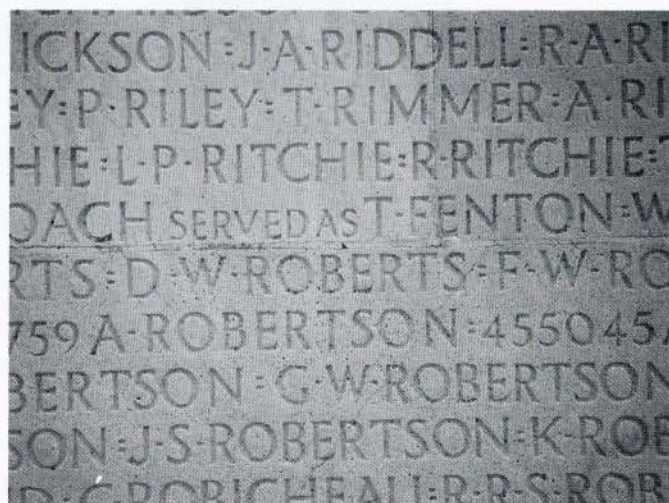


Figure 3. Detail of the 11, 283 names of Canadians who died in France and have no known grave, engraved on the Vimy Monument. The names of the 6,940 Canadians who went missing on the Ypres Salient in Belgium are inscribed on the walls of the Menin Gate, the British Empire’s principal monument to those military dead who have no marked grave. (Heritage Conservation Program, Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1996)

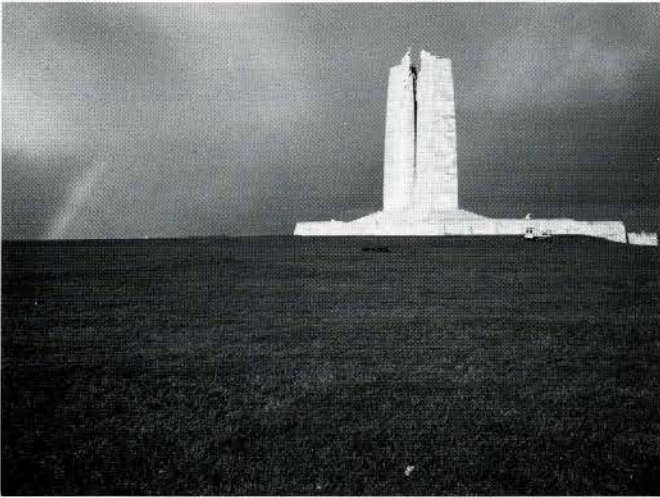


Figure 4. The Vimy Monument, France, designed in 1921 and constructed in 1925-36; W.A. Allward, sculptor. (Heritage Conservation Program, Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1996)

trenches, and shell holes. It took 30 months to clear war debris and two years to acquire suitable building stone. Work on the monument began only in 1925, and more than ten years were required for its completion.

No previous monument by Allward or any other Canadian prepares one for the Vimy Monument.¹¹ Two vertical shafts rise 100 feet from a high platform measuring 236 feet long by 36 feet high (Figure 4). Twenty figures of heroic proportions adorn the monument, symbolizing the loss suffered by individuals and the country as a whole; collectively, they condemn the evils of war and speak to the higher virtues to which civilization aspires. The main figure overlooking the battlefield represents the "spirit of Canada mourning her fallen sons." The brooding sorrow that characterizes so much of the war art of this era is crystallized in this isolated figure (Figure 5), whose gaze is directed at a stone sarcophagus crowned with laurel and a soldier's helmet and sword. The monument's dedication reads "To the Valour of Their Contrymen in the Great War and in Memory of Their Sixty Thousand Dead, this Monument is Raised by the People of Canada."

In an interview shortly after winning the competition, Allward revealed that the powerful sentiments of his work had been inspired by a dream:

When things were at their blackest in France, I went to sleep one night after dwelling on all the muck and misery over there, my spirit was like a thing tormented I dreamed I was in a great battlefield. I saw our men going by in the thousands and being mowed down by the sickles of death Suffering beyond endurance at the sight, I turned my eyes and found myself looking down on an avenue of poplars. Suddenly through the avenue I saw thousands marching to the aid of our armies. They were the dead. They rose in masses, filed silently by and entered the fight to aid the living. So vivid was this impression,

that when I awoke it stayed with me for months. Without the dead we were helpless. So I have tried to show this in this monument to Canada's fallen, what we owed them and we will forever owe them.

The monument was executed in the modern classical style favoured by the IWGC. While its artistic inspiration was ultimately rooted in tradition, its ability to convey the psychological needs of a people and its collective commemorative message marks the monument as an original work of modern design and sensibility.

At the time that plans were moving ahead for a monument at Vimy, no decision had been made to erect a national war memorial in Canada. It is possible that a preoccupied federal government envisioned no more than a memorial window in the Centre Block, which was then under construction following the fire of 1916.¹² John Pearson, the principal architect, thought otherwise. In 1920-21, when only the Peace Tower of

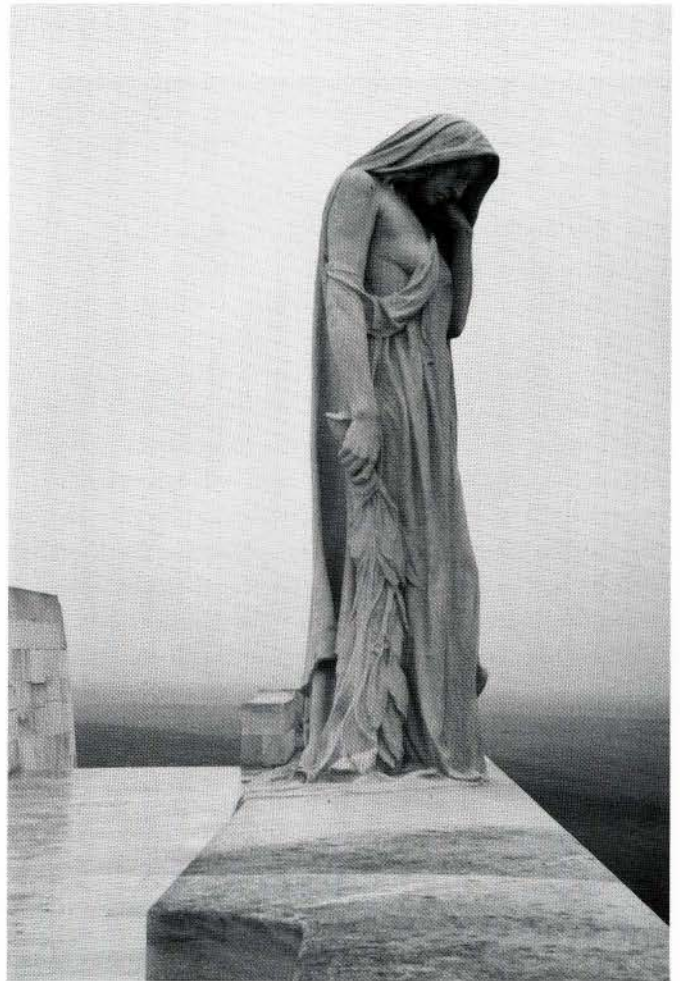


Figure 5. The figure of Canada mourning her dead, on the Vimy Monument. Isolated against the expansive landscape, the figure looks down upon a stone sarcophagus crowned with laurel. Conveying the psychological needs of a people, the figure reveals the influence of contemporary European Expressionism. (Heritage Conservation Program, Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1996)

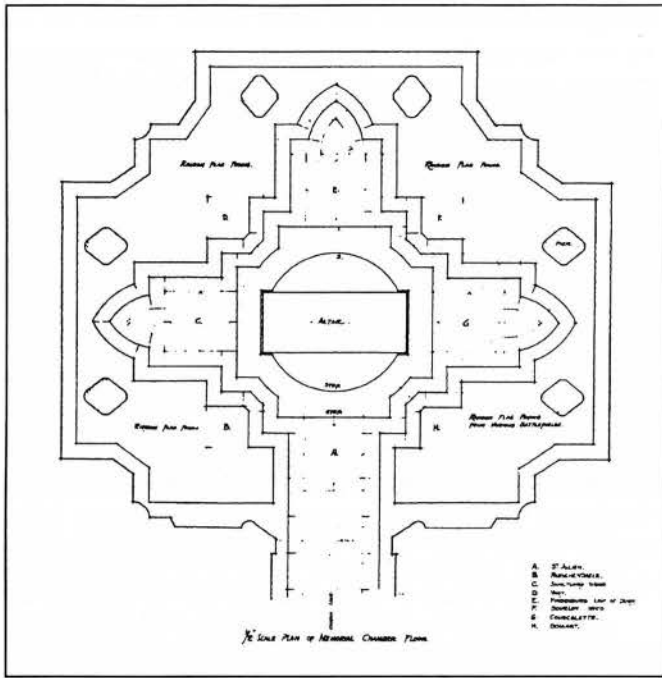


Figure 6. The 1921 plan for the floor of the Memorial Chamber of the Peace Tower, Ottawa, showing the layout of flagstones gathered from Canada's major battlefields. (Heritage Conservation Program, Public Works and Government Services Canada)

the new building remained to be completed, he drew up a plan to place a memorial chamber in the tower. Like many of his fellow artists and architects, Pearson was greatly affected by the deaths of so many young Canadians. He saw an overwhelming need for a national shrine in Canada — a counterpoint to the Vimy Memorial — where grieving Canadians could find solace in a place reserved expressly to honour the memory of the dead. Pearson's plan was aired publicly in August 1921 when, during a visit to Europe, he gave an interview to *The Times* of London.¹³ The subsequent article revealed that he had in mind a superbly decorated Gothic space not unlike the Henry VII Chapel at Westminster Abbey. The chamber was to have attenuated Gothic columns supporting an intricate fan-vaulted ceiling. The lower walls were to be lined with canopied niches containing plaques on which the story of the war would be recorded, and the upper walls to feature stained glass windows. The floor was to be fashioned from stone collected at Canada's major battle sites (Figure 6), and the walls and columns were to be faced with stone from France and Belgium. At the centre would stand the Altar of Sacrifice carved from a block of Hopton Wood (Figure 7), a particularly hard British stone that had been adopted by the IWGC for the headstones in the military cemeteries. Pearson had originally planned to inscribe the names of the missing around the walls of the Chamber, but the numbers were so large that it proved an impossible task, so a "Book of Remembrance" was substituted.¹⁴ With the approval of the Parliamentary committee overseeing the reconstruction of the Centre Block,



Figure 7. The Memorial Chamber in the Peace Tower, Ottawa, designed in 1920-22 and built 1923-28; John Pearson, architect. (Canadian Government Travel Bureau, c. 1972)

Pearson negotiated the donation of the various stones and oversaw their shipment to Canada in 1922. Work on the chamber began in 1923, and it was officially opened in 1928. The hand-inscribed, illuminated Book of Remembrance, which contains 66,655 names, was not completed until 1942.

Recording the names of the missing (an innovation of the First World War) was an expression of the "modern anxiety of erasure," and signalled a loss of faith in traditional monuments, according to American scholar Thomas Laqueur.¹⁵ Another expression of this loss of faith in past commemorations was the desire to preserve the actual battlegrounds. Battle sites had traditionally been allowed to revert to farmland. This return of the land to a semblance of normalcy was a practical necessity, but also doubtless satisfied a psychological need. Laqueur identifies the maintenance of the American Civil War site of the Battle of Gettysburg as the first such preservation enterprise in modern history. He suggests that the preservation of the battle site from the "attacks of time" also stems from an anxiety of erasure combined with a feeling that the 19th-century monument was no longer capable of expressing modern sensibilities: only the actual site would suffice. What began in western Pennsylvania in 1863 found new forms after the Great War. At Verdun, for example, the Trench of the Bayonets commemorates an incident during the Battle of Verdun when an infantry company remained at its post and was buried alive. After the war a monument was built over the trench, not to commemorate this heroic stand but to protect the trench from the ravages of time and tourism.

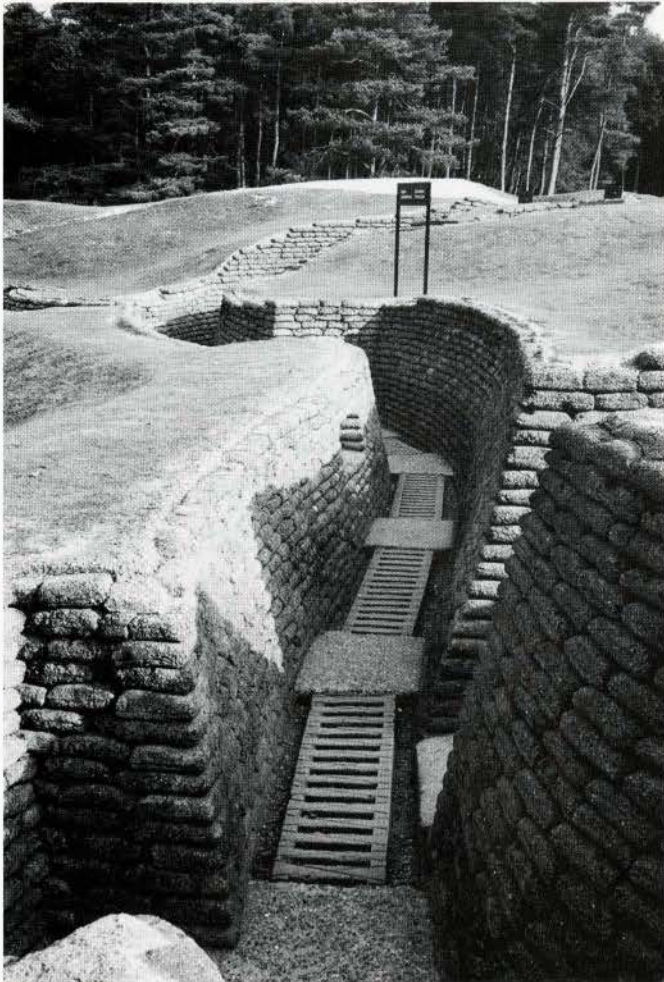


Figure 8. Detail of the trenches at Vimy, preserved in the mid 1920s while workers were awaiting delivery of stone for the monument. (Heritage Conservation Program, Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1996)

For the Vimy Memorial, the larger part of the 250-acre "park" in which the monument is situated was returned to its pre-war rural character. In a 25-acre segment, however, features of the battlefield such as trenches, a tunnel, and mine craters were preserved and rebuilt with concrete to make them "permanent" (Figure 8). The Memorial Chamber on Ottawa offers a more explicit example: by lining the chamber walls with stone and marble from France and Belgium and paving the floor with flagstones fashioned from the very battlefields on which Canadians fought and died, Pearson not only "preserved" parts of the battlefields but symbolically brought the battlefields back to Canada. The architect left no doubt that his chamber was laden with this symbolism:

Around the walls of the Chamber will be a black marble base, the gift of Belgium, bearing the weight of the memorial as the Belgians bore the first terrific onslaught Reared upon this, and enclosing carved canopied niches, will be columns of St. Anne's marble, also from Belgium, suggesting her aspiration to new strength after being bruised and crushed by the invader. Behind the niches, with their

bronze tablets recording Canadian battles, are to be walls of Savonniers stone from France, solid and immovable as France at Verdun. Stone for the paving of the floor are being gathered in every part of France where Canadian troops fought. After these have been turned into flag-stones, on their surface will be incised and caulked with lead the names of the places at which Canada's battalions were engaged. The floor will be the only record of the last rest of many a gallant man. In its centre, surrounded by those French and Belgian walls will stand the altar of Great Britain ... carved out of a solid block.¹⁶

In an echo of the battlefields, the centrepiece of Pearson's design is an altar on a dias that closely resembles the war memorials at six of Canada's seven other battle sites and harks back to Lutyens' great Stone of Remembrance, designed for the military cemeteries (Figure 9).

The link between the Memorial Chamber and Canada's overseas monuments is made explicit by the iconographic program of the chamber's three stained-glass windows. The principal (south) window, in particular, plays a vital role in

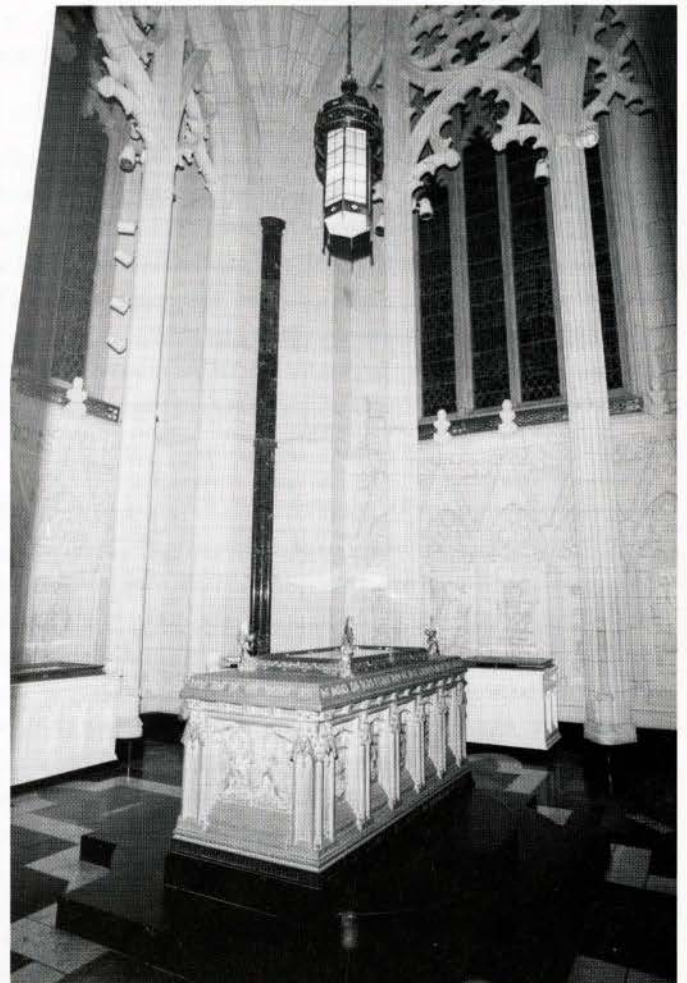


Figure 9. The Memorial Chamber showing the altar constructed of English Hopton Wood on a dias of Belgian black marble. The walls are lined with white stone from France. (Heritage Conservation Program, Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997)

the grand design and ties the Memorial Chamber directly to the monument on Vimy Ridge (Figure 10). Representing “a people gathered in remembrance of their country’s glorious dead,”¹⁷ its memorial meaning is made abundantly clear by the inscription in the lower border, which reads “At the Going Down of the Sun and in the Morning We Will Remember Them.” In the window’s upper range are the figures of St. Michael, St. George, Justice, and St. Joan. In the lower range are the people gathered in remembrance. The second figure from the right symbolizes Canada. To her right stands a young armoured figure bearing a large flambeau. He represents the sense of national obligation addressed in the famous verse from John McCrae’s poem *In Flanders Fields*, which was incised on the centre panel directly below the south window:

To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.¹⁸

For Pearson, the figure of Canada was the most important figure in the windows. He described her as

a heroic figure, armoured and helmed, symbol of Canada proudly contemplative yet sorrowful, holding in her hand the victor’s laurel wreath ... she is standing above looking down to the centre of the Chamber upon the sculptured marble altar with the incised frieze of “my marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought his battles who will now be my rewarder ... so he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other sides.” This altar bears the “Book of Remembrance,” containing the names of her valiant dead.

More than any other, the figure of Canada ties the memorial windows to the singular purpose of the chamber by associating the iconography of the windows with the names of the dead in the Book of Remembrance. In so doing, she draws the visitor’s attention to the focus of the whole chamber and invites the visitor to join the Assembly of Remembrance.¹⁹

One final observation can be made on the desire to preserve the First World War battle sites. After the Great War, the land where so many young Canadians had died took on spiritual dimension. To use a quotation from the Canadian scholar Jonathan Vance’s latest book:

A new and mysterious light was born of heaven hid behind the sunshine, and cast a glory upon men and even nature The battlefields of Belgium and France were no longer Flemish fields or Picardy orchards; the blood of Canada’s youth had sanctified the very earth, transforming the Western Front into a new Holy Land.

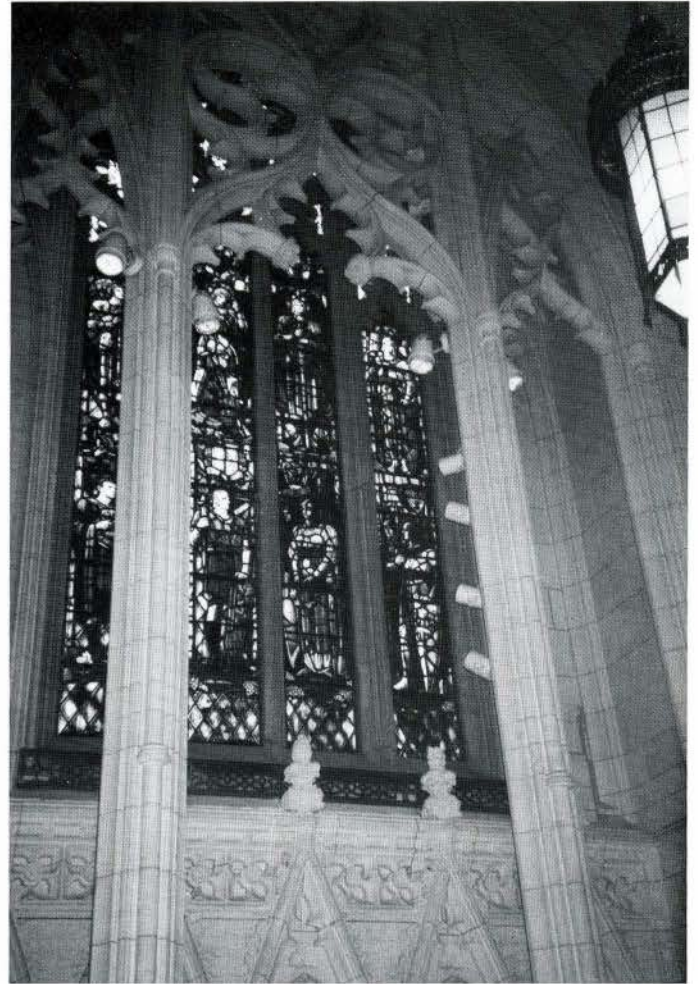


Figure 10. The south window of the Memorial Chamber, designed by Frank Hollister in the mid 1920s. The second figure from the right is Canada. (Heritage Conservation Program, Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997)

Allward and Pearson were sensitive to the notion that a great battlefield is haunted by the dead. On the Vimy Monument two figures representing the Spirit of Sacrifice and the Passing of the Torch are grouped between the pylons. They gaze aloft to the highest point on the pylons where the figures of Truth, Faith, Justice, Charity, Knowledge, and Peace are carved out of the shafts, like column statues on the facade of a Gothic cathedral. When asked to explain his design, Allward’s reply included the statement:

In the afternoon when a shaft of sunlight will break through the space between the pylons, and illuminate part of the sculptures, [it] will suggest a cathedral effect.

Pearson, too, sought to endow the Memorial Chamber with metaphysical meaning through the use of light passing through the stained glass windows. In the course of a day this light moves around the room, striking the altar, bringing with it a sense of spiritual life.²⁰ Thus, like the French commemoration of the sacrifice made in the Trench of the Bayonets at

Verdun, Canadians approached the site of the Canadian battlefields with a reverence and a deep sense of obligation.

In the aftermath of the Great War it became the task of Canadian architects and artists to put into tangible form this sense of tragedy and obligation. With no direct precedents to draw upon, Allward and Pearson created national monuments that are remarkable for their articulation of the national grief and for the singularity of their appropriate designs. The Vimy Monument and the Memorial Chamber belong to a group of national memorials that owe their emotive power to the creativity of their designers and to the overwhelming desire by all concerned to honour the dead. This sense of obligation derives its legitimacy from the principles of equality that were laid down by the Imperial War Graves Commission in 1917. The same principles underlie the meaning of these monuments and give both a resonance that has endured throughout the 20th century.

Thomas Laqueur has remarked that "remembering and mourning demand that somehow the past is kept present." For most Canadians the loss of 65,000 lives no longer hurts; therefore, the memory of this sacrifice is in danger of being forgotten. Nevertheless, the impact of the Great War still haunts us. Despite the knowledge that we cannot hold on to the past forever, the sense of obligation to pass those memories to the next generation remains alive.

Endnotes

- 1 This summary of the origin of the European war memorial is based on John Harris and Gavin Stamp, *Silent Cities 1914-1919: An Exhibition of the Memorial and Cemetery Architecture of the Great War* (London: Royal Institute of British Architects, 1977), 3-8.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 3 Thomas Laquer, "The Past's Past," *London Review of Books* 18, no. 18 (9 September 1996).
- 4 Fabian Ware, *The Immortal Heritage: An Account of the Work and Policy of The Imperial War Grave Commission During Twenty Years, 1917-1937* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), 29-30.
- 5 Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: A History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 1917-1967* (London: Constable and Co., 1967), 43.
- 6 National Archives of Canada [hereafter NA], RG 25, vol. 335, "Conditions of Competition in Design and Eight Memorial Monuments to be erected in France and Belgium," issued 20 December 1920.
- 7 Charles Reilly was undoubtedly chosen for his pre-war teachings on modern war memorials at the Liverpool School of Architecture.
- 8 The second winner was F.C. Clemesha. Initially, his monument design was to be placed at all seven remaining sites. After the first had been erected at St. Julien, however, Charles Reilly felt that placing the same monument at all seven sites would lessen its emotional power. The rest of the sites, therefore, are marked by a block of grey Canadian granite set on a low dias and framed by landscaped elements.
- 9 The remaining 5,000 missing Canadians who died in Belgium had their names added to the Menin Gate Monument, the British monument to the missing at Ypres.
- 10 The site was conceived as a memorial park, an idea said to have originated with Prime Minister W.L. Mackenzie King.
- 11 Allward had created two earlier monuments, to the North-West Rebellion and the South African War. These Toronto monuments, both paid for by subscription, were executed in the conventional manner.
- 12 Pearson prepared a design for such a window, but it was not executed.
- 13 W.L. Mackenzie King Papers, NA, vol. 82, reel C2248, p. 67416.
- 14 A similar plan was adopted for the Scottish National Memorial in Edinburgh.
- 15 This interpretation of the art of the Great War is based on works by historians and architectural historians of the First World War: Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Living Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Harris and Stamp, *Silent Cities*; Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum and Maxwell Macmillan International, 1991); Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and Thomas Laqueur's excellent critical review of Winter's book, which was published in the *London Review of Books* 18, no. 18 (9 September 1996).
- 16 *The Times* [London], 8 August 1921. Copy on file at the National Archives, W.L. Mackenzie King Papers, vol. 82.
- 17 W.L. Mackenzie King Papers, NA, vol. 114, reel C2299, p. 124390.
- 18 John McCrae's verse is also illustrated on the Vimy Monument in a group entitled "Passing of the Torch."
- 19 The idea of collective commemoration as expressed by the Assembly of Remembrance is reinforced by the large number of artists chosen to decorate the chamber.
- 20 NA, RG 11, vol. 2692, file 1575-109A [January-April 1925].