

Sophia Andia
Ottawa, ON
Colonel By Secondary
School July 15, 2020

*The Cold Stone of the Past and the Flourishing Flowers of the Future:
An analysis of the National War Memorial*

The National War Memorial in downtown Ottawa is a favourite for its rich history and proud Canadian heritage, but also for its intense contrasting symbols, which are visible to all who look deep enough. The memorial itself was built for the enjoyment of the Canadian public and the honouring of Canadian soldiers after the military success of World War One. However, it now symbolizes a more mellow appreciation for the lives lost in all major Canadian conflicts.

During the First World War, Canada was still economically and politically dependent on the monarchy of Great Britain. Because of this, they were automatically pulled into war as soon as Great Britain declared it. By the end of the First World War, over 66,000 Canadians were dead¹ and 173,000 were left wounded. Interestingly, despite being under British rule at the time, Canada was able to score some victories which established the colony as a strong military force. Canadians fought at the battle of Somme, Ypres and Passchendaele. However, the most important victory for Canada in World War One was at the battle of Vimy Ridge², where they proved that they were capable of fighting without the interference of Britain. Erecting the National War Memorial after the close of the First World War was a good way to cultivate a sense of nationalism and pride in the Canadian peoples. After working tirelessly, both at home and in warzones abroad, Canadians were finally given the recognition for their efforts separate from the British monarchy.

Not long after (1931), the Statute of Westminster was signed, once again bringing more freedom and nationalistic pride to the Canadian people. When the memorial was erected in 1939 by His Majesty King George VI, the general Canadian sentiment was a sense of pride over

¹ Hall, Roger D., and Norman L. Nicholson. 2020. "World War I." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. July 7, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada/World-War-I>.

² "National War Memorial." n.d. National War Memorial | The Canadian Encyclopedia. Accessed July 12, 2020. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/national-war-memorial>.

the contributions of their country to the world. However, the relationship between Canadian citizens and the National War Memorial has changed over the years.

In the Second World War, Canada gained a more independent role by fighting in Italy and across the North Atlantic. Now mostly separate from Great Britain, they were able to establish themselves a nation that believed in freedom and democracy.

For Canadians, the National War Memorial became a symbol of the strength and prosperity of the Canadian people. Despite growing dissent between French-Canadians and English-Canadians, the general population saw war as a way to prove that Canada could contribute on a global scale and benefit the world as a whole. *Resilience* allowed Canadians from across the country to work together with the common goal of protecting Canadian values. No matter the province, territory, language or country of origin, Canadians pride themselves on being welcoming and cooperative. The amalgamation of a tribute to wars in different time periods is yet another example of how Canadians are brought together by their common virtues to fight for what they believe in.

The memorial was designed by a British sculptor by the name of Vernon March, through a competition in 1925. He named the memorial "The Great Response of Canada". While the monument was originally created to commemorate soldiers who died in the First World War, it has since expanded its dedication to fit all conflicts in which Canadian soldiers were mobilized. The goal of the sculptor was to avoid glorifying war while paying tribute to all those who fought for the values of freedom and peace. Later on, in 1982, a few changes were made to the memorial, including the addition of dedications to the Second World War and the Korean War. Once more, in 2014, another addition brought along the recognition of the South African war and the mission in Afghanistan, as well as an inscription saying "In service to Canada/au service

de Canada”.³ This solidified the already changing meaning of the original statue. The focal point of the memorial is no longer on the individuals and their courage (although this remains important) but their *cooperation* and dedication to protect Canada in various conflicts. These conflicts were each important to Canada for unique reasons; the Second World War was the first war that Canada entered under its own free will, while the Korean war solidified Canada’s position as a harbinger of peace and freedom. The South African War was the first war in which Canadian troops fought on foreign soil and the mission in Afghanistan was Canada’s largest peacekeeping initiative.

Not including the two angelic figures atop the monument, there are 22 statues of members of the war effort. This is seen in the utilization of the different uniforms and rankings for the statues on the National War memorial. An infantryman, a nurse, a sailor and a couple of mounted soldiers are all present. No matter their differences, Canadians fight together and use their unique strengths to bring prosperity to the country. Through the statues’ different jobs, they are stronger and more resilient. At the time, the statues were positioned in order of their perceived importance, however this symbol has since changed its meaning as we now recognize the equal importance of all wartime duties. Through time, symbols change and the mark of a good memorial is that it withstands the swaying of the wind and social change alike. I believe the National War Memorial has withstood both trials and has been updated to incorporate a new, more reflective atmosphere. Flowers, comfortable seating and informational plaques all serve to instill a pensive, educational atmosphere into a trip to this famous memorial. This grand, powerful monument has forged a path for *thoughtful*, introspective education. One

³ Government of Canada, Public Works and Government Services Canada. 2019. “Infographic: National War Memorial Restored.” Real Property - PSPC. Government of Canada. November 6, 2019. <https://www.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/biens-property/monument-memorial-eng.html>.

cannot help but be inspired by the nature and new life that grow around the cold stone monument. The War Memorial is, oddly, a wonderful location to stop and think about peace.

At the foot of the National War Memorial lies the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier⁴. This monument could be given a complete description of its own, but when coupled with the War Memorial is a more sombre look at the effects of war on a country and on individuals. The dynamic image of soldiers and nurses alike climbing off to fight for their country is juxtaposed against the static view of the tomb. Although both evoke feelings of pride and respect, the Tomb is perhaps a more realistic representation of the outcomes of war and conflict. It contains the remains of an unknown Canadian soldier who was killed in the battle of Vimy Ridge during World War One. It is significant as it is meant to honour the lives of all those who have fallen while fighting for Canada, whether their bodies were recovered or not, and whether they lay on Canadian soil or abroad. The Tomb is adorned with maple and laurels, a helmet and a medieval sword. The helmet harkens back to one that would have been worn by soldiers in the First World War, while the maple is the national symbol of Canada and the laurels are a universal symbol of victory, as well as death. These two symbols may seem contradictory, but again, the memorial serves both the purpose of honouring the dead and revering those who fought. Around 116,000 Canadians have died while serving their country, including 28,000⁵ whose bodies have an unknown resting place. Just like similar Unknown Soldier monuments around the world, this Tomb is a physical representation of the thousands of men and women who believed in something bigger than themselves and were willing to die for it. The four corners of the sarcophagus are all unique; three of the four are adorned with Royal Cyphers representing

⁴ Canada, Veterans Affairs. 2020. "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier." National Inventory of Canadian Military Memorials (NICMM) - Memorials - Remembrance - Veterans Affairs Canada. May 6, 2020. <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/national-inventory-canadian-memorials/details/9367>.

⁵

each of the three monarchs who guided Canada into war; King George the Fifth, King George the Sixth and Queen Elizabeth the Second. The last is inscribed with only a poppy. This, in itself, is a symbol of the lives that may be lost to war and conflict in the future. This suggests a level of autonomy that was not present under the rule of the British monarchy, so it is an interesting and thought-provoking addition to the monument.

The position of the statues in relation to each other is also an interesting feature. The statue closest to the front of the National War Memorial (that is, the infantryman) stares directly at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. This, I would argue, implies that even the most proud and revered soldiers are impacted by the deaths of their comrades and the possibility of their own downfall during war. Before the First World War, when war propaganda was prominent worldwide, it was common to present a heroic version of war that did not match the gruesome reality. In 21st century Canada, respect for the fallen remains, but the glorification of war is not as prominent. Since the 2014 tragic shooting of Corporal Nathan Cirillo⁶ at the site of the memorial, the National War Memorial and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier have taken on a new meaning: conflict ends in death and destruction, and it is important to honour the dead while also avoiding a glamourized version of war and conflict. In today's climate, where gun violence is so prevalent and sensationalized in the media, it is important to stray away from any idealistic perspectives of war while remaining faithful to those who have laid down their lives for our freedom.

Canadian war memorials in the 21st century serve two purposes. Primarily, they exist to pay tribute to those who have lost their lives fighting for Canadian values of freedom, democracy and equality. Secondly, they exist to remind citizens and tourists alike of the horrors

⁶ Lisa Polewski, "Remembering Hamilton's Corporal Nathan Cirillo 5 Years after Ottawa Attack," Global News (Global News, October 22, 2019), <https://globalnews.ca/news/6067053/nathan-cirillo-five-year-anniversary/>.

of war and the mistakes that ought not to be made in the future. As said by philosopher George Santayana, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”⁷ In order to prevent future tensions which may lead to more devastating wars, these monuments remain as a reminder of the death and destruction that came as a result. This is important for daily passerby, elementary school students on field trips, and history buffs alike. The presence of the dates on the sides of the monument serve as a glaring reminder that history is always in the making, and the only way to prevent its repetition is through open *communication*.

Monuments such as this one serve an additional purpose of starting a dialogue with high school students about the dangers and drawbacks of war. In a time period where political conflicts worldwide bring along the fear of an impending war, it has never been so important to initiate a discussion with Canadian youth about the very real consequences of war on a personal and global scale. It is essential that we as a country raise up those who have been lost to war by putting down the conflict that led to their deaths.

⁷ Herman Saatkamp and Martin Coleman, “George Santayana,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Stanford University, August 8, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/santayana/>.

Bibliography

- Canada, Veterans Affairs. 2020. "National War Memorial." National Inventory of Canadian Military Memorials (NICMM) - Memorials - Remembrance - Veterans Affairs Canada. May 6, 2020.
<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/national-inventory-canadian-memorials/details/9429>.
- Canada, Veterans Affairs. 2020. "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier." National Inventory of Canadian Military Memorials (NICMM) - Memorials - Remembrance - Veterans Affairs Canada. May 6, 2020.
<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/national-inventory-canadian-memorials/details/9367>.
- Government of Canada, Public Works and Government Services Canada. 2019. "Infographic: National War Memorial Restored." Real Property - PSPC. Government of Canada. November 6, 2019.
<https://www.tpsgc-pwgsc.gc.ca/biens-property/monument-memorial-eng.html>.
- Hall, Roger D., and Norman L. Nicholson. 2020. "World War I." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. July 7, 2020.
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Canada/World-War-I>.
- Heritage, Canadian. 2017. "Government of Canada." Canada.ca. Government of Canada. October 2, 2017.
<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/art-monuments/monuments/tomb-unknown-soldier.html>.
- "Memorials and Cenotaphs." n.d. Memorials and Cenotaphs. Legion. Accessed July 16, 2020.
<https://www.legion.ca/remembrance/promoting-remembrance/memorials-and-cenotaphs>
- "National War Memorial." n.d. National War Memorial | The Canadian Encyclopedia. Accessed July 12, 2020.
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/national-war-memorial>.
- Polewski, Lisa. "Remembering Hamilton's Corporal Nathan Cirillo 5 Years after Ottawa Attack." Global News. Global News, October 22, 2019.
<https://globalnews.ca/news/6067053/nathan-cirillo-five-year-anniversary/>.
- Saatkamp, Herman, and Martin Coleman. "George Santayana." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, August 8, 2018.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/santayana/>.
- Webb, Jonathan. Canada's Wars: an Illustrated History. Toronto: Madison Press Books, 2010.

