

**The Japanese Canadian War Memorial: The Struggle for Enfranchisement and
Recognition in Canada**

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Introduction

The Japanese Canadian War memorial is dedicated to the Japanese Canadian soldiers who fought and died in the First World War. This memorial is remarkable for its recognition of the war efforts of a visible minority, who are often excluded from the narrative of Canadian war remembrance. Japanese Canadian enlistment in the First World War was largely driven by their pursuit of enfranchisement. Despite their service, the veterans and 21,000 other Japanese Canadians were arrested and detained during the Second World War.¹ The memorial's connection to the struggle for enfranchisement and other major parts of Japanese Canadian history makes it a complicated symbol for the Japanese Canadian community today.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze how the historical context attached to the Japanese Canadian war memorial makes it an important symbol to the Japanese Canadian community, representing not only a history of disenfranchisement and exclusion, but also one of empowerment and resilience. Its secondary purpose is to examine the role of war memorials in the 21st century.

Barriers to Enlistment and the Creation of the Memorial

In the early 20th century, Japanese Canadians living in B.C were subject to large amounts of anti-Asian sentiment and experienced systemic marginalization. Beginning in the late 19th century, B.C politicians passed numerous discriminatory laws with the intention of forcing Asians to leave the country.² In 1895, an amendment to the Provincial Voters Act denied Japanese Canadians the right to political franchise and other laws banned them from underground mining, the civil service, and practicing law or pharmacy.³ In 1907, anti-Asian sentiment

¹ Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians." In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, edited by Mona Oikawa, Eli Yarhi, and Celine Cooper. Canadian Encyclopedia, January 31, 2011.

² Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians."

³ Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians."

culminated in a violent riot of 9,000 white Canadians that wrecked the homes and businesses in Vancouver's Chinatown and Japantown.⁴ In response, Japan and Canada negotiated a 'gentleman's agreement', wherein Japan would voluntarily limit the number of Japanese migrants to 400 per year.⁵

The First World War provided Japanese Canadians with an opportunity to gain enfranchisement through military service. Yasushi Yamazaki, the publisher of a Japanese community newspaper and head of the Canadian Japanese Association (CJA) began recruiting volunteers in August 1914.⁶ He obtained military training for 171 volunteers in 1916, only to be refused by enlistment centers in B.C on racial grounds.⁷ Over 160 men travelled instead to Alberta, where they successfully enlisted.⁸ A total of 222 Japanese Canadians enlisted across the country, serving with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in Europe.⁹ They fought in such notable battles as Passchendaele, Vimy Ridge, and the Battle for Hill 70. Ultimately, 54 Japanese Canadians fell in the line of duty. Considering the racial barriers they faced and their socioeconomically marginalized status, their successful enlistment and service demonstrates great resilience and courage.

After the war, the Japanese Canadian community raised 15,000 dollars for the creation of the Japanese Canadian war memorial.¹⁰ The memorial was unveiled April 9, 1920, on the

⁴ Robinson, Greg. "Internment of Japanese Canadians." In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, February 15, 2017. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/internment-of-japanese-canadians>.; Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians."

⁵ Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21. "Gentlemen's Agreement, 1908." Accessed June 13, 2021. <https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/gentlemens-agreement-1908>.

⁶ Dick, Lyle. "Masumi Mitsui." In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, January 21, 2019. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/masumi-mitsui>.

⁷ Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians."

⁸ Dick, Lyle. "Masumi Mitsui".

⁹ Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians."

¹⁰ Kwok, Perry. "Commemorating with (in)Visibility : The Case of the Japanese Canadian War Memorial." The University of British Columbia, 2014.

anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge.¹¹ Designed by James Anderson Benzie, the memorial is a pillar with a lantern on top, and a large, circular base.¹² The design is a blend of Japanese and European architecture styles; the pillar is a distinctly Western fluted column, while the lantern resembles a Japanese pagoda lantern. The lantern at the top is a symbol of the “unification between Canada and Japan”.¹³

The same year the cenotaph was erected, Shirofugen cherry trees were planted around the memorial.¹⁴ Ojochin and Shirotae cherry trees were planted in 1925 and 1932, respectively.¹⁵ Cherry blossoms hold great symbolic meaning in Japanese culture. The primary significance of cherry blossoms is a metaphor for the transient and ephemeral nature of life.¹⁶ A parallel can be drawn between this symbolic meaning and the sacrifice of the 54 young men in the war: their lives were short, but still beautiful and worthy of recognition.

The creation of the memorial coincided with an emerging movement for Japanese Canadian enfranchisement. Japanese Canadian soldiers had temporarily obtained the right to vote during the war under the Military Voters Act of 1917.¹⁷ Post war, the veterans headed the suffrage movement and attempted to convince the B.C government to honour their service by granting them the franchise.¹⁸ To further their efforts, they formed B.C Branch No.9 of the Canadian Legion.¹⁹ In 1931, they organized a franchise campaign and sent a delegation to lobby

¹¹ Kwok, Perry. “Commemorating with (in)Visibility”.

¹² Kwok, Perry. “Commemorating with (in)Visibility”.

¹³ Veterans Affairs Canada. “Japanese Canadian War Memorial.” Accessed June 15, 2021.

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/national-inventory-canadian-memorials/details/4217>.

¹⁴ Veterans Affairs Canada. “Japanese Canadian War Memorial.”

¹⁵ Veterans Affairs Canada. “Japanese Canadian War Memorial.”

¹⁶ Choy Lee, Khoon. “*Japan—between Myth and Reality*.” 1995. 142.; Funk, Brian. “Cherry Trees in Japanese Folklore.” Bbg.org, April 25, 2016.

¹⁷ Elections Canada. “A Brief History of Federal Voting Rights in Canada.” Elections Canada. Accessed June 15, 2021. <https://electionsanddemocracy.ca/voting-rights-through-time-0/brief-history-federal-voting-rights-canada>.

¹⁸ Dick, Lyle. “Masumi Mitsui.”

¹⁹ Dick, Lyle. “Masumi Mitsui.”

the B.C Legislature in Victoria.²⁰ Japanese Canadian veterans (only) were granted the right to vote, nonetheless a significant breakthrough for the entire Japanese Canadian community.²¹ This victory is proof of the cooperation and resilience the veterans demonstrated in their pursuit of enfranchisement.

Internment and the Redress Movement

The advance of the Second World War amplified anti-Japanese sentiment across B.C and Canada, particularly following the atrocities in Hong Kong and the attack on Pearl Harbour.²² One day after the Hong Kong attacks, Sergeant Mitsui wrote a letter to the Minister of Defense on behalf of Japanese Canadian veterans, pledging “their unflinching loyalty to Canada as they did in the Last Great War”.²³ Despite this declaration of allegiance, Japanese Canadians, including veterans, were considered spies for Imperial Japan and declared “enemy aliens”.²⁴

In 1942, under the War Measures Act, all Japanese-Canadians within 100 miles of the Pacific Coast, some 21,000 people, were forcibly relocated to internment camps in the Kootenays region.²⁵ Their property was seized by the government and sold to cover the costs of internment and to discourage their return to the West Coast.²⁶ Among those detained was Sergeant Masumi Mitsui. When he was escorted to Hastings Park to be registered as an “enemy alien”, he reportedly threw down his medals and declared “You've taken everything away from me. ... What are the good of my medals?”.²⁷

²⁰ Dick, Lyle. “Masumi Mitsui.”

²¹ Dick, Lyle. “Masumi Mitsui.”

²² CBC News. “Japanese Internment.” Accessed June 15, 2021.

<https://www.cbc.ca/history/EPISCONTENTSE1EP14CH3PA3LE.html>. ; Marsh, James. “Prisoners in Their Own Country”.

²³ Kwok, Perry. “Commemorating with (in)Visibility.”

²⁴ Kwok, Perry. “Commemorating with (in)Visibility.”

²⁵ Sunahara, Ann. “Japanese Canadians.”

²⁶ Robinson, Greg. “Internment of Japanese Canadians.”

²⁷ Dick, Lyle. “Masumi Mitsui”.

In the same year that mass internments began, the lantern atop the memorial was extinguished.²⁸ Probable causes for this act include mandatory blackout regulations and concern for the possibility of vandalism, though the exact reasons remain unknown.²⁹ The history and meaning behind the lantern lend this act a heavy symbolic weight. The extinguishing of the lantern can be seen as a symbol of the “extinguishing” of hope for enfranchisement.

The internment of Japanese Canadians lasted until 1945.³⁰ Internees were given two options: relocate east of the Rockies, or be repatriated to Japan.³¹ While officially neutral, the federal government’s policies were intended to pressure Japanese Canadians to give up their status as British subjects.³² Around 4,000 Japanese-Canadians were repatriated to Japan, despite public opposition from organizations such as the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians (CCJC).³³ Those who agreed to relocate east lived under other legal restrictions until all Asian Canadians were granted the federal franchise 1948.³⁴

In the seventies and eighties, a redress movement for Japanese Canadians gained prominence, headed by the National Association for Japanese Canadians (NACJ).³⁵ The increase of support and attention for the redress movement was prompted by two publications in 1981.³⁶ The first was Joy Kagawa’s novel *Obasan*, which provoked an emotional response in the Canadian public and garnered sympathy for the wartime experiences of Japanese Canadians.³⁷

²⁸ Kwok, Perry. “Commemorating with (in)Visibility.”

²⁹ Kwok, Perry. “Commemorating with (in)Visibility.”

³⁰ Robinson, Greg. “Internment of Japanese Canadians.”

³¹ Marsh, James. “Prisoners in Their Own Country.” ; Robinson, Greg. “Internment of Japanese Canadians.”

³² Robinson, Greg. “Internment of Japanese Canadians.”

³³ Robinson, Greg. “Internment of Japanese Canadians.”

³⁴ Marsh, James. “Prisoners in Their Own Country.”

³⁵ Sunahara, Ann. “Japanese Canadians.”

³⁶ Library and Archives Canada. “Japanese Canadians: Redress Campaign.” July 24, 2018.

<https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/history-ethnic-cultural/Pages/Japanese-redress-campaign.aspx>.

³⁷ Library and Archives Canada. “Japanese Canadians: Redress Campaign.”

The second was the Politics of Racism by Ann Gomer Sunahara, which used the federal government's own records to document the politics behind the 1942 expulsion order.³⁸ Between 1984 and 1988 the NACJ Strategy Committee lobbied for a formal acknowledgement of wrongdoing from the government, individual compensation, and an amendment of the War Measures Act to ensure that the experience of Japanese Canadians would not be repeated.³⁹ By 1986, national polls showed that 63 per cent of Canadians supported redress, and of those, 71% supported individual compensation.⁴⁰

On July 21 1988, the Emergencies Act replaced the Wartime Measures Act.⁴¹ A few months later, on September 22, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney spoke in the House of Commons, acknowledging the wartime rights violations and announcing a payment of 21,000\$ to Japanese Canadians expelled from the coast in 1942 or born in Canada before 1 April 1949.⁴² Among other compensations, the settlement included a fund of 12 million dollars to rebuild the infrastructure of destroyed Japanese Canadian communities.⁴³

The most relevant indication of the NACJ's success in amassing national support and changing the attitudes of the larger public towards Japanese-Canadians was the relighting of the memorial's lantern. In August 1985, a formal ceremony was held for the relighting, performed by a 98 year old Masumi Mitsui.⁴⁴ Considering the original meaning of the lantern as a representation of the "unification between Canada and Japan", this event symbolized a

³⁸ Library and Archives Canada. "Japanese Canadians: Redress Campaign."

³⁹ Library and Archives Canada. "Japanese Canadians: Redress Campaign."

⁴⁰ Library and Archives Canada. "Japanese Canadians: Redress Campaign." ; Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians."

⁴¹ Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians."

⁴² Library and Archives Canada. "Japanese Canadians: Redress Campaign." ; Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians."

⁴³ Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians."

⁴⁴ Dick, Lyle. "Masumi Mitsui."

reunification between these countries. Furthermore, bearing in mind the conjunction between the extinguishing of the lantern and the categorization of Japanese Canadians as “enemy aliens” , the relighting was evidence of the acceptance of Japanese Canadians into the national consciousness by wider Canadian society.

Not only does Japanese Canadian war memorial honor the contributions made by Japanese Canadians in the First World War, it is closely connected to their struggle for civil rights. The history of the memorial symbolically mirrors the history of their path to enfranchisement. First, the erection of the memorial marked the emergence of the enfranchisement movement. It was also testament to the determination of Japanese Canadians to enlist and serve their country, despite racial barriers and their marginalized status. The lantern’s subsequent extinguishing in 1942 coincided with the internment of Japanese Canadians.⁴⁵ This act symbolized the “extinguishing” of the hope for enfranchisement. The relighting of the lantern in 1985 was attestation to the success of the redress movement and the acceptance of Japanese Canadians into the national consciousness. The memorial has come to be a symbol of both disenfranchisement and enfranchisement for Japanese Canadians, depicting not only a narrative of exclusion and disempowerment, but also one of empowerment and community mobilization.

War Memorials and National Collective Memory

In the present day, the role of war memorials in Canadian war commemoration must be reconsidered. Memorials are reflective of the times in which they were created, and are embedded with the values, beliefs and attitudes of that era. The majority of Canada’s memorials

⁴⁵ Kwok, Perry. “Commemorating with (in)Visibility.”

were constructed in the 1920's and 30's, to memorialize those lost in the First World War.⁴⁶ Memorials and monuments of the era were used to construct a historical narrative to fit the national collective memory that emerged surrounding the war.⁴⁷ This narrative depicts the war fought in the name of ideals such as democracy, freedom, justice, and God, against an oppressive German Empire.⁴⁸ Examples of such memorials include the Victoria Cenotaph, and the Calgary Cenotaph.

The constructed historical narrative that entered into the nation's collective memory neglected the contributions of minority groups such as the Japanese Canadian volunteers. As the most visible manifestations of war commemoration, war memorials play a critical role in the establishment and reinforcement of the national collective memory. An increase in recognition of war memorials dedicated to minority groups would result in war remembrance practices that are more reflective of the diverse nature of Canadian identity and history. Some such memorials to be considered are the National Aboriginal Veterans War memorial, the Chinatown Memorial Monument, and of course, the Japanese Canadian War memorial.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Powell, Rebecca. "Memory and Memorialization: How War Memorials Shape Historical Narratives of Canada's Role in Military Conflict." University of Victoria, 2018.

<https://www.uvic.ca/learningandteaching/students/scholarships/jcura/current/powell-rebecca.php>.

⁴⁷ Powell, Rebecca. "Memory and Memorialization."

⁴⁸ Powell, Rebecca. "Memory and Memorialization."

⁴⁹ Veterans Affairs Canada. "Chinatown Memorial Monument." Accessed June 14, 2021.

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/national-inventory-canadian-memorials/details/7699>. ; Veterans Affairs Canada. "National Aboriginal Veterans Monument." Accessed June 13, 2021.

<https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canada/national-aboriginal-veterans-monument>.

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<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/internment-of-japanese-canadians>.

Sunahara, Ann. "Japanese Canadians." In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, edited by Mona Oikawa, Eli Yarhi, and Celine Cooper. Canadian Encyclopedia, January 31, 2011. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/japanese-canadians>.

Veterans Affairs Canada. "Chinatown Memorial Monument." Accessed June 14, 2021. <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/national-inventory-canadian-memorials/details/7699>.

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