

The South African War Memorial:

An Evolving Identity

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The story behind Memorial Park's South Africa War Memorial, or the "Horsemen of the Plains", as he is dubbed, is a unique one, and its context and history are oftentimes lost among the various other memorials erected after it. The man who was the statue's inspiration, his story came to a close as a lone horseman found on the edge of Calgary, frozen to death. His papers could not identify anything other than the fact that he was a forgotten veteran of the Second Boer War, discharged from the Lord Strathcona's Horse Regiment. Calgary's veterans sympathized with the man and refused to bury him without the honour and dignity his memory deserved. They raised funds and gave the nameless veteran a soldier's funeral. When the soldier's family heard of his death and subsequent funeral, they sent funds to reimburse the Canadian veterans out of gratitude. The veterans decided that the funds would be of better use in memorializing all those who died in the South African War, now known as the Second Boer War. Canada's involvement in the Second Boer War and Britain's impact on Canada was quite controversial at the time, especially among French Canadians, yet, despite these sentiments, Calgarians fundraised for a 35-foot memorial commemorating the courage of the Canadian soldiers who were unable to return.¹ Memorial Park and the various memorials that succeeded the South Africa War Memorial are a visual representation of Canada's transition from a Dominion of the British Empire to a distinctly independent nation. This shift is also represented in Canadian identity and history, from the sense of duty towards the Crown to now a sense of patriotism towards the Canadian flag. Another important factor to help contextualize the memorial was the thoughtfulness of the veterans and Calgarian women who were the driving force behind bringing not only the South African War Memorial but also Central Memorial Park, to life. The South

¹ "Work of Art: Boer War Memorial by Louis-Philippe Hébert." Avenue Calgary, June 26, 2019. <https://www.avenuecalgary.com/city-life/work-of-art/boer-war-memorial-by-louis-philippe-hebert/>.

African War Memorial links two distinct identities as they transformed over the past 100 years; that of a Dominion of the British Empire, being so interconnected in Britain's affairs to the point of controversy, to that of a modern, independent Canada, while also representing the willpower and driving force that was the people, including the volunteers who left for South Africa out of a sense of duty and nationalism, as well as the veterans and women, namely the Daughters of the Empire, who rallied and fundraised to erect a monument in memory of those who fought in the Second Boer War. The encapsulated timeline in Memorial Park including not only the Horseman but other historical aspects is all thanks to the courage and valour of the soldiers who volunteered, combined with the kindness and thoughtfulness of the people, who rallied to memorialize their losses.

The South African War was extremely controversial at its time. Fought between the British Empire and the Boer Republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free state, the Boers being South African descendants of European colonists trying to resist rising British colonialism.² On one side of the country, French Canadians, sympathized with the Boers and felt that the war was fought solely in the British Empire's interests. In particular, Henri Bourassa, publisher for *Le Devoir* was a staunch opponent of the Canadian military's foreign involvements and supported Quebec and Canadian nationalism, separate from that of English Canadians, who supported British colonial endeavours.³ Anglo-Canadians saw participating in the war as their empirical duty and considered themselves profoundly British. Wilfred Laurier, whose position depended

² "South African War Memorial." . south african war memorial | Beltline.ca. Accessed June 13, 2022. <https://beltline.ca/community/heritage/south-african-war-memorial>.

³ Updated by Tabitha Marshall Published Online December 21. "Canada and the South African War (Boer War)." The Canadian Encyclopedia. Accessed June 13, 2022.

on a strong French-English alliance, could not take an official stance on the war. Because of this, any Canadian soldiers who participated in the war were courageous volunteers who received funding from wealthy British patrons.⁴ The war at the time caused a polarizing shift in Canadian identity. It was at a time when both sentiments existed; some wholeheartedly supported British military endeavours, as well as those who believed that Canada should operate independently and not based on furthering the British Empire's identity and interests. This distinct split brought about the shift that we have seen since, watching Canada transition from a series of colonies to its own federal Dominion in 1867, to the Second Boer War, which, though Canada fought with the British army, was the first time Canadian soldiers fought overseas wearing Canadian uniforms.⁵ Not long after came the Great War, wherein, despite allying with the British, Canadian soldiers fostered their own distinct identity. Canada began as a series of British colonies, then transformed into a Dominion with strong British ties, to today where though Canada still recognizes the Crown, Canadian identity has grown apart from its original motherland. The shift is best represented in historical conflicts, from English Canadians choosing to volunteer in a controversial war out of a sense of duty to the Empire and the Queen, to Canadian soldiers fighting in the World Wars coming from a nation with its army, separate from imperial forces, to today, where Canadians are almost fully independent from the Crown and any battles are now fought mainly in the interest of Canada.

Calgary's Central Memorial Park is a place where the visualization of this shift in identity is clear. The Calgary Canadian Club and the Alberta South African veteran association

⁴ “. South African War Memorial.”

⁵ “Canada and the South African War (Boer War).”

commissioned world-famous French sculptor Louis Philippe Hébert for a statue in the memory of the courage of the lone horsemen and others who had fallen in the South African War. Hébert found the site perfect, being a beautiful park in the centre of a busy city.⁶ The statue was unveiled on June 20th, 1914 with great fanfare in the city, with South African War veterans and other distinguished military personnel attending the event.⁷ The streets were described as lined with Union Jacks, with non-military citizens bursting with pride and patriotism as they vied for a glimpse of the venerated army corps.⁸ Because Canada's participation in the war had been its first overseas, this was the first time Canadians celebrated the courage and sacrifices of Canadian volunteers and remembered their losses. Despite the initial fanfare, however, the remembrance of the South African War faced a decline due to the grander First and Second World Wars that subsequently took place.⁹ As the wars waged on, many other monuments and memorials succeeded the Horseman, which further pushed aside the loss and experiences of the soldiers and veterans in the Second Boer War, simply because of the tragic fact that far greater loss had occurred. The South African War Memorial was what began the series of transformations that shaped Central Memorial Park into what it is today.¹⁰ The first to succeed the Horseman was a

⁶ "January 16, 1911 (Page 16 of 16)." *The Calgary Daily Herald (1908-1939)*, Jan 16, 1911.

<https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/january-16-1911-page/docview/2252432223/se-2?accountid=46584>.

⁷ "June 22, 1914 (Page 5 of 20)." *The Calgary Daily Herald (1908-1939)*, Jun 22, 1914.

<https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/june-22-1914-page-5-20/docview/2252333862/se-2?accountid=46584>.

⁸ ". South African War Memorial."

⁹ "Commemorating Calgary - South African War Monument." Commemorating Calgary - South African War Monument. Accessed June 14, 2022.

<https://sites.google.com/mtroyal.ca/commemoratingcalgary/home/south-african-war-monument>.

¹⁰ "Commemorating Calgary - South African War Monument."

cenotaph constructed in 1928 to remember those lost in the Great War, which has since evolved to memorialize every battle Canada has fought in since World War 1, including the Second World War, the Korean War, UN Peacekeeping missions, and Afghanistan.¹¹ Memorial Park, dubbed such because of the South African War Memorial, became a symbolic walkthrough of the shift in Canada's identity from over a century ago, to today. It shows the very beginnings of Canada's independence in 1867, back when it was a Dominion of the British Empire, allowed to self-govern but still deeply interwoven with Britain and its Crown. When Britain participated in a war, Anglo-Canadians felt a strong sense of duty and nationalism to assist their British counterparts in their endeavours, so much so that well over 7000 Canadian men, not including other regiments such as Strathcona's Horse, funded by Lord Strathcona, courageously volunteered for battle, knowing the risks it posed to their lives yet being willing to face those risks in the name of the British Empire.¹² The South African War was the catalyst that resulted in the Militia Act in 1904, the goal of which was to work towards greater liberty for Canadian forces. It decided that though Canada would work with Britain in times of war, Canadian forces were to be independent of Britain's imperial army.¹³ Canada's participation in the Second Boer War and the resulting Militia Act of 1904 was the beginning of a subtle shift of Canadian identity attempting to remove itself from Britain's image and instead be seen as a powerful, independent nation allied with, instead of underneath, the influential British Empire. The shift over the past century has been dramatic. The South African War is an example of Canadians having great

¹¹ Doering, Chris. "Calgary Then and Now – Cenotaph and Memorial Park Library: Then and Now.", November 3, 2014.

<https://www.bigdoer.com/12984/then-and-now/calgary-then-and-now-cenotaph-and-memorial-park-library/>.

¹² "Canada and the South African War (Boer War)."

¹³ ". South African War Memorial."

pride in being part of the British Empire, whereas today that nationalism and reverence towards the crown have all but faded—unless the Royal Family’s celebrity here counts. That sense of duty was instead redirected towards Canada itself, and in furthering the interests of Canada and its allies, rather than rulers. The South African War Memorial catalyzed so many changes, especially in recontextualizing what it truly means to Canadians.

The historical backdrop and context of the South Africa War Memorial and Central Memorial Park cannot be discussed without significant mention of those who quite literally built the park into the peaceful sanctuary it stands today. The soldiers who served, of course, without their courage there would be nothing to memorialize. Credit is also given to the veterans who began the entire endeavour. It was the Calgary Canadian Club and the South African Veterans Association who commissioned Hébert to build an equestrian statue memorializing those who fought in the Second Boer War.¹⁴ After the veterans found the city would not fund the memorial, they rallied the citizens of Calgary to help raise the funds for the sculpture. Their call was answered by the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, who gathered Boy Scouts and Cadets to produce the necessary funds. The Daughters of the Empire’s goal was to spread awareness about the South African War. Much of the credit for the widespread patriotism and remembrance of the War at the time goes to them for their efforts in education regarding Canada as a Dominion of the British Empire.¹⁵ Calgary women also participated heavily in shaping the Central Memorial Park today. The Memorial Park Library, which opened its doors in 1912, was a project spearheaded almost entirely by the Calgary Women’s Literary Club.¹⁶ The women of

¹⁴ “Commemorating Calgary - South African War Monument.”

¹⁵ “Commemorating Calgary - South African War Monument.”

¹⁶ “Central Memorial Park Library.” Central Memorial Park Library | Beltline.ca. Accessed June 14, 2022. <https://beltline.ca/community/heritage/central-memorial-park-library>.

Calgary greatly contributed to the education of generations to come, both intellectually, as well as in a patriotic sense. Every single person, from the veterans to the Daughters of the Empire to the cadets and scouts, that participated in planning, commissioning, and fundraising for the memorial strongly exhibited thoughtfulness and a strong sense of pride in bettering the city, memorializing the courageous sacrifice of Canadian soldiers, and leaving such memorials for Calgarians to come. Looking back, each contribution added a unique historical perspective from which we can contextualize the shift in Canadian identity from being so deeply rooted in its British lineage, in a sense, to being distinctly Canadian, the hearts of citizens devoid of patriotism for any nation that is not their own.

The South Africa War Memorial represents a shift in the identity of Canada's past, tied to a strong sense of Empirical duty and patriotism for the motherland, at least for English Canadians. French Canadian opposition to Canada's involvement in the Second Boer War was only the beginning of this historical transformation of today's Canadian identity. For over a century, Canadians as a whole have changed from wholeheartedly supporting Britain to instead now forming a strong collective identity as Canadians. The South African War Memorial, erected in honour of the courageous veteran found frozen to death, triggered many more memorials to follow. As a result, Central Memorial Park is home to not only the South African War Memorial but also others in honour of Canadian troops who served in various battles overseas following the Second Boer War. The South African War Memorial resulted in a beautiful representation of the spirit of courage present in the veterans. Walking through the park, not only is one able to see a visual historical timeline that presents battles Canadian soldiers have participated in, but also the grand shift in identity that Canada faced over the twentieth

century. The Memorial's impact extended beyond remembering the lives lost in South Africa, in creating a time capsule for Calgarians today to reminisce on a time and identity long past. The Horseman and its historical significance cannot be discussed without mentioning the thoughtfulness in the contributions by Calgarians, especially at a time when the government was not entirely keen on funding or organizing such memorials, it was the people of Calgary who stepped in, most notably women and veterans such as the South African Veterans Association and the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, who contributed greatly to the city and Canadian-British nationalism at the time. The memory of the Horseman would not be alive today were it not for the thoughtfulness of those around him. Today, due to the unfortunate fact that the South African War was overshadowed by greater battles that followed, the history and significance of this statue are often forgotten and overlooked in favour of remembrance of the losses in World War I and II instead. Because of the changes sparked by the South Africa War Memorial, Calgarians today can visit Central Memorial Park to learn not only of the military history of Canada but also of the societal implications and effects that being so intertwined with Britain had on the Canadian citizens of one hundred years ago, as well as how that changed as time and further conflicts bore on. The Memorial triggered numerous changes in both the park and in Canadian identity and helps Canadians today contextualize what it meant to be Canadian in the 19th hundreds, in contrast to the Canadian identity of today.

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