

**The Angel of Victory:
Canada's Processing of The Great War**

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Across Canada, there are hundreds of memorials and monuments, all commemorating the contributions of Canadians in various wars. Each of these memorials have played a part in the forming of narratives about the conflicts they honor and those that fought in them, adding to the overall story Canada tells itself about its involvement in war. Whether to embolden future generations to fight in the next war or to martyrise those that fought in the last, these symbols of remembrance have had and continue to have an important role in shaping the legacy of wars. In the heart of Downtown Vancouver, between the modern conveniences of a car park and a bar, is one of these symbols; the Angel of Victory. Built just three years after World War I, the Angel of Victory war memorial, like other monuments constructed at the time, reflects the role Canada played in the war and how the nation coped with and interpreted its aftermath. World War I unequivocally left a mark on the nation, marking a pivotal point in Canadian history, but equally important is how we as a country reacted to and dissected it in the years after the armistice. The Angel of Victory is representative of this processing of the first world war, because of the values the memorial embodies, its historical context, and the imagery it utilizes.

Commissioned by the Canadian Pacific Railway company (CPR), the Angel of Victory was created in 1921 by sculptor Coeur De Lion McCarthy, as a part of a trio of identical statues that were erected at key CPR stations.¹ These statues, along with gold plaques placed at stations across the country, were clear in their purpose:

To commemorate those in the service of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company who, at the call of king and country, left all that was dear to them, endured hardship, faced danger and finally passed out of sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others might live in freedom. Let those that come after see that their names be not forgotten. 1914-1918.²

¹ “Angel of Victory, CPR Station Bronze War Memorial,” Vancouver Heritage Foundation, last modified November 7th, 2014, <https://www.heritagesitefinder.ca/location/angel-of-victory-cpr-station-bronze-war-memorial/>

² “Canadian Pacific War Memorials,” Canadian Pacific Railway Company, last modified 1922, <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0356993>.

The Canadian Pacific Railway had played a large part in bringing British Columbia into Confederation, and by the early 20th century it had been incorporated into Canada's larger national identity, as the largest employer in the country.³ With its president proclaiming in 1919 that "Canada's prosperity is our prosperity, and what is good for Canada is good for the CPR."⁴ It was no surprise then, that at the outbreak of war, the CPR encouraged its employees to enlist, pledging to provide six months pay and job security to those who left to fight.⁵ Close to twelve-thousand employees of the CPR enlisted in the Canadian Armed Forces, and over one thousand of these men became casualties of the war.⁶ On the home front, the CPR took on an additional six thousand workers and provided more than fifty ships to be commandeered for the war effort.⁷ After the armistice, the Canadian Pacific Railway formed a large part of the Canadian Overseas Railway Construction Corps, helping rebuild Europe's railways, and by 1922 were employing around eighteen-thousand veterans.⁸ Due to their cooperation, the CPR and its employees were an integral part of Canada's efforts during WWI, and the company's leadership felt they had a responsibility to acknowledge these contributions.

Vital to understanding the Angel of Victory, is understanding its historical context, including how Canadians responded to the war that the statue commemorates. The moment Britain went to war in 1914, Canada was also embroiled in the conflict. As a dominion of Britain, Canada was required to take up arms and 620,000 of its citizens and residents fought in

³ Canadian Pacific Railway, "Our history," Connecting Canada, last modified 2017, <https://cpconnectingcanada.ca/our-history/>; Mary MacKinnon, "Canadian Railway Workers and World War I Military Service," *Labour / Le Travail* Volume 40, (1997): 213, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25144169>

⁴ McGill University, "The CPR Years, 1901-1942," Beatty Lecture, last modified November 23rd, 2020,, <https://www.mcgill.ca/beatty/about-edward-beatty/cpr-years>

⁵ "War Memorials," CPR.

⁶ Helen Borrell, "Winged Victory," *British Columbia Historical News* volume 26, no.4 (1993): 16-17, <https://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0190762>

⁷ Jonathan B. Hanna, "Canadian Pacific Railway and War," Canadian Pacific Railway, <https://www.cpr.ca/en/about-cp-site/Documents/cpr-and-war.pdf>

⁸ "War Memorials," CPR; Hanna, "CPR and War".

Europe.⁹ By its end in 1918, the war was being presented as a force that had unified Canada and cemented it as a nation.¹⁰ However, while World War I significantly impacted Canadians both on the battlefield and at home, the conflict did not universally bring the nation together. Initially, when Canada pledged to take up arms on Britain's behalf, there was little opposition¹¹, with thousands of men across the country heeding the call to enlist.¹² Yet, as the war raged on and parliament began discussing a conscription bill, discontent began to grow, especially among French-Canadians.¹³ Identifying neither with English Canadians who saw themselves as loyal subjects of the British Empire nor with European French who were being deeply impacted by the conflict in Europe, French-Canadians felt they had no stake in the war.¹⁴ This was reflected in the demographics of military volunteers: despite making up 30% of the population of Canada at the time, French-Canadians comprised only 4% of those who volunteered to fight.¹⁵ Quebecois politician and writer Henri Bourassa was outspoken on this subject; "French Canadians are being exhorted to fight the Prussians of Europe in the name of religion, liberty and loyalty to the British flag. But shall we allow Ontario's Prussians to impose their domination at the very heart of Canada's Confederation, aided and abetted by the British flag and British institutions?"¹⁶ The

⁹ Tim Cook, "A changed Canada emerged from the First World War," *The Globe and Mail*, November 15th, 2017; "Canada and the Beginning of the First World War," Government of Canada, last modified August 4th, 2014, <https://www.canada.ca/en/news/archive/2014/08/canada-beginning-first-world-war.html>

¹⁰ Walter Klaassen, "Vimy Ridge and Canadian Nationalism," *Active History*, last modified July 15th, 2016, <https://activehistory.ca/2016/07/vimy-ridge-and-canadian-nationalism/>

¹¹ "Peace Activists", Canadian War Museum, last modified October 16th, 2017, <https://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/life-at-home-during-the-war/voices-for-peace/peace-activists/#:~:text=A%20small%20number%20of%20Canadians,the%20ranks%20of%20peace%20activists.>

¹² Desmond Morton, "First World War (WWI)", *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last modified August 24th, 2021, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/first-world-war-wwi>

¹³ "The Conscription Crisis", Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, last modified 2001, <https://www.cbc.ca/history/EPISCONTENTSE1EP12CH2PA3LE.html>

¹⁴ Serge Durflinger, "French Canada and Recruitment During the First World War," Canadian War Museum, <https://www.warmuseum.ca/learn/dispatches/french-canada-and-recruitment-during-the-first-world-war/#tabs>

¹⁵ Durflinger, "French Canada and Recruitment".

¹⁶ Béatrice Richard, "Henri Bourassa and Conscription: Traitor or Saviour," *Canadian Military Journal*, last modified December 21st, 2006, <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vo7/no4/richard-eng.asp#n9>

Canadian government had begun the war promising to hold off on a conscription bill, but by 1917, volunteer numbers were not providing sufficient reinforcements for the military, and in August of that year, the Military Service Act became law.¹⁷ French-Canadians were in uproar, and anti-conscription protests broke out in Montreal.¹⁸ The culmination of this outrage was in Spring of the following year, when an anti-conscription mob ransacked the Quebec City Military Service registry, and troops were sent in from other provinces.¹⁹ Ultimately, four protesters were killed by the military and many more were wounded in the ensuing riot.²⁰ Another dissenting group that emerged in the latter half of the war were labour activists. Before the war, unemployment was high, and the nation was undergoing an economic depression.²¹ The labour movement was not a unified entity, and few workers were organized into unions.²² However as the war progressed, this began to change; the economy flourished and Canada began to experience a labour shortage.²³ Workers suddenly had a great deal of bargaining power with their labor in high demand for the war effort, and union membership rose, with joint union councils also gaining popularity nationwide.²⁴ This organized, newly-empowered workers movement was against conscription and highly critical of government actions like the use of the war measures act to censor the media.²⁵ In Vancouver, this all came to a head in August of 1918, when British Columbian labor organizer Ginger Goodwin was shot while evading the draft, and Vancouver

¹⁷ Durflinger, "French Canada and Recruitment".

¹⁸ "Conscription Crisis", CBC.

¹⁹ Durflinger, "French Canada and Recruitment".

²⁰ Durflinger, "French Canada and Recruitment".

²¹ "1919: Radical Solutions", Canadian Museum of History,

<https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/hist/labour/lab21e.html>; Brad St. Croix, "Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes (Canada)," International Encyclopedia of the First World War, last modified June 28th, 2018, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/labour_movements_trade_unions_and_strikes_canada

²² St. Croix, "Labour Movements".

²³ "1919", Canadian Museum of History.

²⁴ St. Croix, "Labour Movements"; "1919," Canadian Museum of History.

²⁵ Craig Heron and Meyer Siemiatycki, "The Great War, the State, and Working-Class Canada," in *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925*, ed. Craig Heron (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 11.

activists organized a general strike to coincide with his funeral.²⁶ Six thousand workers took part in the strike in the name of solidarity, eventually clashing with soldiers who ransacked the building where the strike had been planned.²⁷ Over the following year, strikes broke out across the country, most notably in Winnipeg where thirty-five thousand workers were on strike for over a month.²⁸ While not occurring on the battlefields of Europe, these actions were equally important in shaping the Canada that emerged from WWI, and the environment the Angel of Victory was built in.

Standing seven feet tall, the Angel of Victory depicts an angelic woman lifting up a limp soldier, one arm raised towards the heavens. The female winged figure, or “Winged Victory” is not one unique to McCarthy’s sculptures, she first emerged as an icon in 1863 after the recovery of an ancient statue of the Greek goddess of victory, Nike.²⁹ Over the following fifty years, Winged Victory evolved into a culturally recognizable figure and after 1918, she became a common motif in World War I memorials, appearing across Canada in various forms.³⁰ Though the Angel of Victory was specifically dedicated to employees of the Canadian Pacific Railway and their sacrifices in the First World War, the deliberate and thoughtful use of this imagery contextualizes the memorial as honoring all Canadians that fought in the Great War and later, World War II. In the context of WWI monuments, Winged Victory became “A personification of victory showing warriors the way to triumph on the battlefield”.³¹ McCarthy’s Angel of Victory

²⁶ Rod Mickleburgh, “The Ginger Goodwin General Strike,” BC Labour Heritage Centre, last modified August 7th, 2018, <https://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/the-ginger-goodwin-general-strike/>

²⁷ Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement* (Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 2018).

²⁸ Travis Tomchuk, “The Winnipeg General Strike,” Canadian Museum for Human Rights, last modified May 13th, 2019, <https://humanrights.ca/story/winnipeg-general-strike>

²⁹ Amanda Herring, “Nike (Winged Victory) of Samothrace,” Smart History, last modified August 11th, 2021, <https://smarthistory.org/nike-winged-victory-of-samothrace/>

³⁰ Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So noble* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999).

³¹ Vance, *Death so noble*, 18

inhibits a slightly different role, shepherding a dead or dying soldier not to victory, but to the afterlife. This stark image has been interpreted by some as glorifying death in battle and by others as showing the brutality of war. In a 2009 article discussing possible restoration to the statue, the author expresses that “Despite its name, there is nothing heroic or uplifting in [this] image...The soldier is dead, a young life snuffed out just as it's beginning, and the angel gazes at him with sadness. It's a subtle anti-war statement, a lament wrought by the appalling loss of human life in the Great War.”³² Nearly fifty years earlier, in the July 27th 1963 edition of his “Talks About Art” column, Carl Weiselberger condemned the memorial as “a kind of Canadian Valkyrie, carrying a Canadian soldier into a kind of Canadian Valhalla. It's the worst kind of candy art applied to a great human drama.”³³ Despite its scathing nature, Weiselberger's critique hits upon a common narrative that arose in the aftermath of WWI: the glorification of death in battle and the emphasis on these fallen soldiers attaining immortality in the afterlife by reaching heaven.³⁴ World War I was the greatest loss of life Canada had experienced up to that point, with sixty-six thousand total casualties.³⁵ The country was grieving on a national scale and monuments like the Angel of Victory provided their families with the consolation that these men would live on through their sacrifices in the name of freedom and justice.³⁶ The imagery of the statue speaks to a thoughtful consideration of the war's emotional impact, as does the fact that “In each case the war memorial was actually unveiled by the father or the mother of one of those who in lifetime served the Canadian Pacific long and faithfully in the district where the memorial

³² John Mackie, “A sad, beautiful memorial, covered in soot,” *Vancouver Sun*, February 12th, 2008.

³³ Carl Weiselberger, “No Shortage in Blow-upable Statues —At Least for Artistic Reasons,” *Ottawa Citizen*, Jul 27th, 1963.

³⁴ Vance, *Death so noble*, 44

³⁵ Claire Brownell, “Canada's First World War sacrifice by the numbers,” *Macleans*, October 4th, 2018.

³⁶ Vance, *Death so noble*

has been erected.”³⁷ Memorials established in the wake of WWI functioned not only to commemorate, but to help Canada as a nation cope with the war and its effects.

Today, the Angel of Victory still stands in front of Vancouver’s Waterfront station, now an intermodal transport hub visited by 13 million people each year.³⁸ The memorial itself has fallen into a degree of disrepair; Winged Victory’s wreath is no more, the bronze facade of the statue has turned green, and soot marks are streaked down the bodies of both soldier and angel.³⁹ Yet, despite these signs of age, the memorial is still a striking image that draws the eyes of those who pass it, invoking contemplation about the conflict it commemorates and its casualties. When it was built in 1921, the Angel of Victory was part of a first wave of war memorials being erected across Canada, and in the hundred-odd years since it has become one of thousands, honoring Canada’s role in numerous wars.⁴⁰ Each of these memorials preserves the legacy of a conflict, but perhaps to an even greater extent, they each act as a snapshot of the nation in the aftermath of war. War memorials, by their very nature, are built once a war is over and soldiers can be finally laid to rest. Therefore they become imbued with the narratives war has left in its wake, whether that is of the righteousness of the conflict, of a nation that universally came together, or of the glory of death in battle. In the 21st century, Canada’s war monuments can provide crucial insight into how these conflicts have been interpreted by the public and the ways war has transformed the country.

³⁷ “War Memorials,” CPR.

³⁸ Gordon Price, “Waterfront Station: A Cautionary Tale – Part 2,” Viewpoint Vancouver, last modified January 21st, 2021, <https://viewpointvancouver.ca/2021/01/21/waterfront-station-a-cautionary-tale-part-2/>; “Welcome to Waterfront”, Canada Line, last modified 2017, <http://thecanadaline.com/station-guides/waterfront/>

³⁹ Mackie, “A sad, beautiful memorial.”

⁴⁰ Jaqueline Hucker, “Lest We Forget: National Memorials to Canada's First World War Dead,” *The Journal of the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada* Volume 23, no. 3 (1998).

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