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Commemoration and Cult of the Fallen (Canada)

By [Jonathan F. Vance](#)

Some 70,000 Canadians died while in military service during the First World War, a loss that made commemoration imperative. The memory that emerged stressed the values for which the war had been fought and the new sense of national identity that emerged in its wake. This determination to see the war as a positive, nation-building experience and to provide consolation to grieving families persisted through the Second World War and has been restated in recent decades.

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Introduction

In 1914 Canada was a young nation, founded as a self-governing dominion in 1867 by the union of four colonies of British North America. It was independent in some matters but not others. There was no Canadian citizenship and no power to act independently in foreign policy, a state of affairs that did not trouble the largely pro-British population – although it did rankle some important elements of the French-Canadian minority. Nor was there a strong tradition of a professional military. Instead, from

the earliest days of the European presence in North America, Canada relied on the citizen-soldier, the volunteer militiaman who would come forward for service when duty called. That was how Canada entered the war in August 1914 – with a tiny Permanent Force and a Non-Permanent Active Militia of part-time soldiers that was more impressive on paper than in fact. By the time the war ended, the nation of around 7 million people had put roughly 700,000 men and women in uniform, 100,000 of whom were conscripts, called up after voluntarism had run out of steam; some 70,000 never came home. That level of loss for such a young country demanded commemoration, but it also demanded explanation: what had it been for?

The Return to Peace

Canada's soldiers returned to heroes' welcomes in 1919 – cheering crowds, brass bands, parades, thanksgiving banquets. The nation would do right by them, politicians had promised; veterans would enjoy the fruits of their sacrifices in a land fit for heroes. As Prime Minister Robert Borden (1854-1937) had told them two years earlier:

You need have no fear that the Government and the Country will fail to show just appreciation of your service to the Country and Empire ... no man, whether he goes back or whether he remains in Flanders, will have just cause to reproach the Government for having broken with the men who won and the men who died.^[1]

Many soldiers were impressed by Borden's pledge and confident that a grateful nation would discharge its debt to those who had served, the survivors and the fallen.

Civilians were just as hopeful. Canada's war effort had been about self-sacrifice, cooperation, and unity in a common cause. The same unity and sense of purpose that helped transform the Canadian Corps into the shock troops of the British Empire would be brought home to build a finer nation – more united, more egalitarian, more open-minded. Canadians would not allow the country to slip back into the old ways of suspicion, competition and self-interest. Commemoration in postwar Canada was a direct response to this challenge: to remember the war and to use that memory as a force for good at home.

That sense of optimism was one of the first casualties of the post-war era. The great homecoming coincided with a year of unprecedented labour strife, as striking workers downed tools and took to the streets. Politics became more divisive, with fringe and special-interest parties splintering the political spectrum. Inflation jumped as unemployment rose; ex-soldiers, tagged as unreliable workers by a public that no longer seemed so grateful, were particularly hard hit. The wounded veteran benefited from a new healthcare system built on the Military Hospitals Commission, but there was less for the able-bodied man. Once the parades and banquets had finished, the new veteran was left with his uniform and tin hat, a \$35 clothing allowance, and a negligible War Service Gratuity. For everything else, he was on his own. It was not long before the returned man realized what that meant. Pensions were niggardly and tough to chisel out of the government. A soldier settlement scheme put veterans on inferior land and saddled them with excessive costs. Retraining programs

were effective, but only a tiny minority of veterans could qualify. Much had been promised, but little was delivered. Rhetoric that made good patriotic sense in 1917 made bad economic sense in 1919, and the government felt less inclined to show its appreciation for ex-soldiers in the chilly economic climate of the postwar depression and with a war debt of well over \$2 billion hanging over its head. The nation was willing to help veterans to their feet, but would not do much to ensure that they stayed there.

But if the sacrifice of four years of war had not built a better country, what had it been for? Because there were so few tangible gains from the Great War that people could point to – daylight savings time hardly seemed a sufficient gain – commemoration focused on intangibles, on the timeless values that had been at the heart of Allied [propaganda](#) since 1914. For civilians, this meant liberty, democracy, Christianity, freedom, justice, western civilization – in a word, Right. The moral [understanding of the war](#) as a simple struggle between good and evil was restated, while the more tawdry geopolitical motives that emerged from post-war memoirs and government publications were pushed aside. For ex-soldiers, the gift of comradeship was the great compensation; whatever they had endured at the front, they had done so in the company of true friends who constituted the brotherhood of the trenches. And for all Canadians, there was the certainty that a new and vibrant national identity had emerged from the sacrifices of war and the cooperative spirit that had enabled the Canadian Corps to achieve such great victories.

In this [mythology](#), the fallen soldier encapsulated all of these intangibles. He was a modern Christian knight, defending the faith against the infidel. He was the idealist who fought not for gain but to preserve values. He was the nation-builder, the incarnation of a country maturing on the world stage and heir to generations of Canadian soldiers through history. And he was the common man, the Canadian boy shaped by frontier and farm. Healthy and vigorous, the citizen-soldier's stubborn individuality stood in sharp contrast to the automatons of European [militarism](#) and the inhuman mechanization of war. His youthful vitality hinted at immense potential. He was the nation's past, present and future, the embodiment of its aspirations and promise.

Commemoration in the Interwar Era

The fallen soldier was at the heart of a commemorative impulse in post-Armistice Canada that was intense and immediate. The overwhelming emotions throughout society must have been relief and exhaustion, but there was no evident desire to turn the page on the war. There was no unspoken agreement that the previous four years should not be discussed, no decade-long moratoria on anything to do with the [Western Front](#). The war had been a great national experience that was simply too important to be pushed aside. To commemorate it was a public duty.

That was how many communities saw the erection of a war memorial: as a public duty. Canada lacked a strong tradition of public [art](#) before 1914, although a few important monuments had been erected to commemorate the fallen of the War of 1812, the Crimean War, the South African War, and other conflicts. In 1915, the soldier and artist [Alexander Young Jackson \(1882-1974\)](#) had predicted

sourly that war memorials would soon “disfigure every town and village in the country.” [2] He was right to foresee their omnipresence but wrong to imagine that they would become eyesores. In fact, they are some of the most poignant and powerful testaments to the nation’s history.

War memorials were erected in astonishing numbers, perhaps as many as 10,000, but even more striking than the quantity is the sheer variety. They fall generally into two types: the aesthetic, whose sole purpose is to commemorate, and the utilitarian, which perform some other function beyond the commemorative. Within these categories, Canadians were remarkably ingenious in devising meaningful forms. A cairn built of local stone allowed all members of a community to make a tangible contribution to the monument. A captured German [artillery](#) piece celebrated the victory of Canadian soldiers on the battlefield. A stand of trees reminded observers of the power of the regenerative process. A war memorial school ensured that children were constantly reminded of those who died to preserve their way of life. Canada certainly has its share of mass-marketed marble soldiers, but there are many other inspired memorials, including neo-Gothic bell towers, stately cenotaphs (many patterned on the Whitehall [cenotaph](#) in London), scholarships, art collections, libraries, and monuments that defy both sense and taste. [Walter Allward’s \(1876-1955\) memorial at Vimy Ridge](#), a piece of high ground that the Canadian Corps captured over the Easter weekend in 1917, [Frederick Clemesha’s \(1876-1958\) Brooding Soldier at Saint Julien, Belgium](#), where the 1st Canadian Division withstood German [gas attacks](#) during the [Second Battle of Ypres](#) in April 1915, and [Vernon March’s \(1891-1930\) National War Memorial in Ottawa](#) are among the nation’s finest, but charming and equally evocative memorials can be found across the country: a tin-hatted infantryman in Wolfville, Nova Scotia; a dignified obelisk in Kamsack, Saskatchewan; a marble infant at play in Chesley, Ontario.

Commemoration took other forms as well. It was understood that the history of the war should be recorded as part of any commemorative effort, and so Canadian publishers and printers churned out war histories of military units, towns, [churches](#), [schools](#) and businesses, not to mention memorial volumes commissioned by grieving families. There was an avalanche of war [literature](#) – novels, short stories, poems, plays – that had an underlying commemorative element, although it was not always immediately obvious. One of the most popular acts in the post-war era was The Dumbells (the name comes from their divisional insignia within the Canadian Corps), a vaudeville troupe that parlayed its popularity with the soldiers it entertained at the front into a thriving post-war career that included cross-Canada tours and even a sold-out run on Broadway. [Veterans groups](#) were implicitly commemorative in nature as well. Ex-soldiers had started organizing as early as 1916; after the units of the Canadian Expeditionary Force came home in 1919, the vast majority of them organized clubs of former soldiers. These were in addition to the larger veterans groups, such as the Great War Veterans Association, many of which would eventually amalgamate into the Canadian Legion of the British Empire Service League in 1925. The Legion stated as one of its primary goals “to perpetuate the memory and deeds of those who have fallen,” an aim that underpinned almost everything that veterans organizations did. [3] In their reunions, their publications, their political lobbying and their public statements, they upheld the idealized version of the fallen soldier and the sanctity of the ideals

for which he died.

As the interwar years passed, commemoration became less intense, not necessarily because of a desire to put the experience into the past but because so much had already been done – towns had their memorials, veterans had their associations, units had their histories. An example of this more sober and reflective turn came in 1931, when an act of Canada's Parliament changed the name of Armistice Day to Remembrance Day. There were many motives behind the legislation, but the overarching concern was that Armistice Day was too closely linked to a particular historical event. When it was first observed, Armistice Day had been about victory (the 1921 legislation referred specifically to the day "in which the Great War was triumphantly concluded"), but a decade later Canadians no longer had the same need to celebrate the day when Germany had admitted defeat.^[4] Much more fitting for the time was the name Remembrance Day, which was directed at a general spirit of commemoration.

But the tenets of Remembrance Day, and of commemoration more broadly, scarcely changed through this settling process. Indeed the first attempt to standardize the observance, mounted by a citizens' group called the Armistice Ceremonial Committee, accepted as a given that the ceremony should be built around the same elements that had been in use for the previous decade: the anthem "Chant for Dead Heroes" and the hymn "O God Our Help in Ages Past," the Last Post and Reveille, "God Save the King," the moment of silence.^[5] Through the 1930s, as the Great Depression ravaged the country and idled as much as a third of the working population, there were fewer memorials unveiled and fewer histories and memoirs published but, like Remembrance Day services, they tended to follow the established patterns. Anti-war sentiment existed, but pacifism remained a fringe ideology and its adherents' attempts to recast the memory of the First World War fell on deaf ears. As the dictators tightened their grip on Europe and another war seemed more imminent, the most common argument in the public discourse was that events were affirming not the arguments of pacifists and isolationists on the evils of militarism and state violence, but the notion of war as a vital and honourable defence of sacred principles – one of which was peace. Musings on the state of the world in the late 1930s were often tinged by this apparent contradiction: the First World War had taught, at the same time, the importance of peace and the illogic of [pacifism](#).

The Second World War and Beyond

The course of the Second World War had the same impact. It verified that the cause of 1914-1918 had been right and good; it had not been The War to End War, but that conflict would come if the world remained vigilant in defence of the values embodied by the fallen soldier of the Great War. At every opportunity, connections were drawn between the memory of the First World War and the reality of the Second. Poets were fond of observing that the soldier of 1939 was following in the footsteps of the soldier of 1914: "The sons shall sleep beneath the soil that holds their fathers' dust," wrote one Ontario poet.^[6] Remembrance Day services in the early 1940s differed very little from those that had been held in the 1920s and 1930s, and scarcely mentioned the war that was in

progress. And no poem written during the Second World War was able to unseat [John McCrae's \(1872-1918\)](#) "In Flanders Fields" as the verse most often used for commemorative purposes.

Through the 1950s, the memory of the First World War continued to overshadow that of the Second. After 1945, Canada did indeed become a land fit for heroes, for the tangible gains of the war were everywhere: full employment, a robust and growing GNP, generous veterans benefits, industrial expansion, rising rates of home ownership, a baby boom, a vibrant consumer economy. The generation of people who fought the Second World War had no need to take refuge in the glories of its war; they were too busy enjoying the fruits of victory. And so the Great War continued to dominate many of the conduits of memory. Veterans' organizations were run by soldiers of the Great War well into the 1960s. A decade after the end of the Second World War, fully two-thirds of the Canadian Legion's membership still consisted of veterans of the First World War, and its magazine, *The Legionary*, was still dominated by articles and photographs relating to that war. To write their official histories, military units tended to turn to senior historians or veterans of the Great War – such as [Kim Beattie \(1900–1963\)](#), [Will R. Bird \(1891-1984\)](#), [Robert Collier Fetherstonhaugh \(1892-1949\)](#), [G. R. Stevens \(1892–1975\)](#), the very same men who had written such volumes in the interwar era. Communities, rather than building another war memorial, simply added more names and dates to the Great War memorial. Inevitably, such additions were off to one side or along the bottom, a spatial recognition of the different weight placed on the wars in the public memory.

Since then, the memory of the First World War has waxed and waned. When in the early 1960s [Britain](#) took an anti-war turn in remembering 1914-1918, Canada followed. In 1964, a documentary produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation selectively used oral history interviews to tell the story of mud, blood, and poppycock that had been popularized in the stage play *Oh! What a Lovely War* and books such as [Leon Wolff's \(1914–1991\)](#) *In Flanders Fields* and [Alan Clark's \(1928-1999\)](#) *The Donkeys* – even though the raw transcripts revealed no such interpretation. Most of the veterans interviewed did not raise those notions on their own but were pushed in that direction by interviewers. Veterans who attempted to disagree with their questioners were brushed off or dismissed as having lapses in memory.

More recently, the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April 1917 has been enshrined as the centrepiece of Canada's memory of the First World War, for it was there that the four divisions of the Canadian Corps first fought together as a unit, capturing a feature that the British and French had failed to take. Novelists and journalists rhapsodize over it, schoolchildren study it, and politicians make pilgrimages to the site of the memorial in [France](#). That memorial even adorns the new Canadian \$20 bill. Vimy as the cradle of the Canadian nation has become an article of faith in Canada's collective memory; in a typical phrase, Veterans Affairs Canada refers to Vimy Ridge as "a key turning point in shaping Canada as a nation."^[7] This is in spite of the fact that the battle was a single bright spot in the disappointing Allied offensive in Artois in the spring of 1917 and had no discernible impact on the outcome of the war. Sir [Arthur Currie \(1875-1933\)](#), commander of the Canadian Corps and the nation's most distinguished general, had predicted this privileging of Vimy decades earlier, when the Canadian Battlefield Memorials Commission was beginning its work. "I do not want to have the

impression left," he told the Commission in 1920, "that Vimy was our greatest battlefield." Other successes, such as the breaking of the Drocourt-Quéant switch line or the crossing of the Canal du Nord, were far more decisive in contributing to the eventual Allied victory, but Currie had to admit that they lacked the emotional appeal of Vimy.^[8] Modern critics who argue that the emphasis on Vimy as a militaristic symbol of unity and cooperation is misguided have had to concede the same point as Currie.

Conclusion

In the immediate aftermath of the Armistice of 1918, Canada's memory of the First World War was primarily directed at finding consolation in loss. Through the Depression, the Second World War and the post-1945 boom, it served to validate the losses of 1914-1918 as a worthwhile sacrifice. Although the anti-war sentiment of the Vietnam era called these assumptions into question, the traditional memory of the First World War re-emerged in the 2000s, in a form that Canadians of a century earlier would have found very familiar. Canada has always remembered the First World War that it needed, not necessarily the war that had actually occurred.

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Notes

1. ↑ Address of April 1917, quoted in Hale, James: *Branching Out. The Story of the Royal Canadian Legion*, Ottawa 1995, pp. 43f.
2. ↑ A.Y. Jackson to Mortimer Lamb, December 1915, quoted in Tippet, Maria: *Making Culture: English-Canadian Institutions and the Arts before the Massey Commission*, Toronto 1990, p. 76.
3. ↑ Aims and Objects of the Canadian Legion, in: *The Legionary* 1/2 (1926), p. 2.
4. ↑ Statutes of Canada, 11-12 George V, chapter 16, An Act respecting Armistice Day, assented 4 June 1921.
5. ↑ Armistice Ceremonial Committee of Canada: *Armistice Day Ceremonial*, November Eleventh, Toronto 1928.
6. ↑ Little, Robert D.: *Sleeping Far From Home*, in: *Rhymes and Reason*, Willowdale 1946, p. 43.
7. ↑ Veterans Affairs Canada: *The Battle of Vimy Ridge*, online: <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/history/first-world-war/vimy-ridge> (retrieved: 12 December 2014).
8. ↑ Currie, Arthur: 4 May 1920, in: *Canadian Battlefield Memorials*, Ottawa 1929, annex C.

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