

The 1936 Vimy Pilgrimage

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Canadians regard the Battle of Vimy Ridge as an iconic event in our nation's history. The story of Vimy has been taught to succeeding generations in English Canada, to the point where it has been embraced by many as one of our country's founding myths.¹ The four Canadian divisions, consisting of soldiers from across the dominion, came together to attack the reputedly impregnable German-held ridge in northern France over the Easter weekend of 9 to 12 April 1917. Through meticulous preparation, training, determination, and sacrifice, the Canadians succeeded where both the British and French armies had failed in the past. The Corps' victory solidified its reputation among allies and opponents as an elite fighting force. But this was no glide to victory, with the 100,000-strong Canadian Corps suffering 10,602 casualties.²

Countless newspaper articles, histories, children's books, documentaries, novels, plays and

poems have been produced about Vimy as a central event in the Canadian war effort. Individually and collectively, these cultural products have shaped our memory of the battle. While almost every component of the preparation and fighting at Vimy has been dissected by historians, few have attempted to examine carefully the story of why Vimy Ridge matters to Canadians.³ How did a battle at the mid-point of the Great War become a founding myth that is now woven into our history and national identity? Vimy over time has become more than a battle, because it represents to many Canadians, much like the 1915 Gallipoli campaign for Australians, an event where the nation seemed to be fundamentally changed from a self-governing colony to a full-fledged nation. In Canada, this is represented by the much-repeated phrase that Vimy was the "birth of a nation."⁴ This article seeks to unpack some of the strands of constructed memory surrounding the battle and the memorial. By examining the pilgrimage to Vimy made by more than 6,200 Canadian veterans and family members for the unveiling of the Vimy Memorial on 26 July 1936, we hope to shed light on how the battle was infused with new meaning, and perhaps how Vimy and the memorial became lodged firmly in the Canadian imagination.⁵

Choosing a Memorial

The Great War killed an estimated ten million combatants, of which Canada contributed more than 60,000 to that grim figure. As a result of this sacrifice, and perhaps directly because of the agonizingly high number of deaths, Canada was said to have come of age during the war. Canada was different after the war, but these changes were not immediately apparent. In 1919, hundreds of thousands of veterans returned to a grief-riven and debt-laden country plagued with social unrest. The conscription crisis had revealed old and new fault lines with English pitted against French, labour against employers, farmers against urbanites.

Abstract: This article explores the significance of the 1936 Vimy Pilgrimage. More than 6,200 Canadian veterans and their families voyaged to France for the unveiling of Walter Allward's Vimy Memorial on 26 July 1936 by King Edward VIII. The symbolism of the pilgrimage, along with the messages presented during the unveiling ceremony, played a key role in establishing the importance of the Vimy Ridge memorial to Canadians.

Résumé : L'article analyse les activités des membres du Corps expéditionnaire canadien pendant leurs temps libres en Grande-Bretagne lors de la Première Guerre mondiale. Pour plusieurs de ces soldats en poste outre-mer, ce pays devint leur « chez-soi à l'étranger », et Londres, leur principal lieu de séjour. En dépit du fait que des milliers de soldats du Corps purent visiter la capitale britannique, les autorités canadiennes, fédérales et militaires, conservèrent une approche passive en ce qui avait trait aux activités des hommes en dehors de leur service. Préoccupée de leur bien-être, la philanthrope canadienne Julia Drummond mit sur pied le seul .



The Vimy Memorial.

remaining six Canadian monuments, each one constructed from blocks of rectangular, grey Canadian granite, and bearing inscriptions related to the battle they commemorate.

The CBMC had initially decided that Allward's memorial was to be erected at Hill 60 in the Ypres salient, near the site of the June 1916 Battle of Mount Sorrel. While this was ground that offered a commanding view of the countryside, the battle itself was a costly draw at best, and certainly not an inspiring victory. Vimy Ridge was a better choice, although not a universal one, because the CBMC selection committee believed, strangely, that Allward's memorial "would be lost in the mass of the ridge."¹³ Others agreed that Vimy was not an ideal location for the memorial. The influential Sir Arthur Currie had remarked in April 1922 to a former Corps veteran – and also expressed this view to the members of the CBMC – that if

they place the large memorial at Vimy it will confirm for all time the impression which exists in the minds of the majority of the people of Canada that Vimy was the greatest battle fought by the Canadians in France. In my mind that is very far from being a fact. We fought other battles where the moral and material results were greater and more far reaching than Vimy's victory. There were other victories also that reflected to a greater degree the training and efficiency of the Corps. Vimy was a set piece for which we had trained and rehearsed for weeks. It did not call for the same degree of resource and initiative that were displayed in any of the three great battles of the last hundred days – Amiens, Arras, Cambrai.¹⁴

Although he was not alone in his thinking, he nevertheless agreed that

Because of the deep scars left by the war, many Canadians felt compelled to mark the nation's sacrifice. Plaques, books and histories; stained glass windows, statues and edifices; official medals, certificates and awards – these and many other forms of commemoration provided meaning for Canadians.⁶ Memorials were erected in communities large and small, many with the names of the fallen engraved upon them. The Peace Tower of the Parliament Buildings and the National Cenotaph were commemorative structures, but before their unveilings in 1927 and 1939, there were also calls to erect memorials on the battlefields of Europe.

Shortly after the Armistice on 11 November 1918, the commander of the Canadian Corps, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, and a small group of his officers met with British military officials to select battle sites that were significant to the Canadian Corps, although not, it should be noted, to those formations, like the Cavalry Brigade, that fought outside of the Corps. Eight sites were selected for monuments and recommended to the government in Ottawa.⁷ The minister of militia and defence, Hugh Guthrie, introduced a motion in the House of Commons on 21 April 1920, "to consider and report upon the question of what memorials, if any, should be erected on the battlefields

of the late war to commemorate the gallantry of Canadian troops." His motion received the unanimous support of the Commons.⁸ With this vote, the House also agreed to the establishment of the Canadian Battlefields Memorials Commission (CBMC), a seven-member body under the chairmanship of Sydney Mewburn, a former minister of militia and defence.⁹

The CBMC was responsible for drawing up the specifications for the proposed monuments, which, at that time, were conceived as stones of remembrance. The sites were all significant Canadian Corps' battles: five in France, at Vimy Ridge, Brouillon Wood, Le Quesnel, Dury and Coucelette, and three in Belgium, at St. Julien, Hill 62 (Sanctuary Wood) and Passchendaele.¹⁰ The public competition for the design of the monuments was open to all Canadian architects, designers, and sculptors.¹¹

Two years later, during a sitting of the House in May 1922, Mewburn informed members, and the nation, that the design of Walter Allward had been selected for the national overseas memorial.¹² A second memorial, designed by Regina architect Frederick Clemesha, *The Brooding Soldier*, was to be erected on the Second Ypres battlefield near St. Julien where Canadians faced the first chlorine gas attack of the war. Clemesha also designed the

the heights of Vimy Ridge would make an impressive setting.

It would appear, however, that the Canadian prime minister, W. L. Mackenzie King, was the most influential champion for the Vimy Ridge site. While he had not fought in the war, and had never seen Vimy Ridge, King believed it was “hallowed ground” and that Allward’s memorial should be placed there as “Canada’s altar on European soil.”¹⁵ These were inspiring, and perhaps surprising, words coming from a politician who spent much of his life countering criticism for not donning a uniform during the Great War.

The prime minister eventually had his way and after inter-governmental negotiation with the French, which involved King’s personal intervention, Canada purchased and accepted donations of the land needed for the construction of the six stone memorials and *The Brooding Soldier*. In December 1922, the French government ceded 248 acres [approximately 100 hectares] on and surrounding Vimy Ridge to Canada in perpetuity. Contained within this parcel of land were two military cemeteries, German and Canadian trenches, a series of underground tunnels, and tens of thousands of unexploded and buried bombs and shells.¹⁶ It was here, over the next decade and a half, that Walter Allward would construct the national memorial.

Walter Seymour Allward was already one of Canada’s most accomplished sculptors. Although his formal training as a sculptor and architect was not extensive, Allward’s ability and skill had won him his first commission in 1894 for the construction of Toronto’s

monument commemorating the 1885 Northwest Rebellion. He was eighteen years old. This was followed by the stunning South African War Memorial in Toronto, which was erected in 1910.¹⁷ Upon being chosen to build the national monument, Allward was obliged to give up his work on several commissions already in progress, including Peterborough and Brantford war memorials. After selling his house and studio in Toronto, he moved with his family to London, England, during the summer of 1922 where, in his words, “my whole time [was] being given to Vimy.”¹⁸

Allward later remarked that the vision of the Vimy memorial came to him while in a Toronto park. He sketched on an old envelope two pylons, representing the mourning nations of Canada and France.¹⁹ While it was an oversight that Belgium, which had suffered grievously during the war and where thousands of Canadians had

shed their blood, was omitted from Allward’s conception, the monument would eventually be perceived as not just a memorial for France and Canada, but as a memorial to the sacrifices of an entire generation of Canadians. While the construction and analysis of the memorial, with its many allegorical figures, is beyond the scope of this article, Vimy is awe-inspiring in conception, size, and design, and regarded by many as one of finest war memorials of the Great War.

Pilgrimages and Tours

Tours to the Western Front battlefields began soon after the Armistice with veterans and civilians from Britain making the short and inexpensive trip across the English Channel to France and Belgium. They went for a number of reasons: to find the grave of a loved one, to accompany a veteran, or perhaps



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Walter Allward, the designer of the Vimy Memorial, stands beside his masterpiece as it is constructed.

to simply walk over the desolate landscape before it flourished again as farmland. Tour books, battlefield guides, and maps guided the curious and bereaved alike in the footsteps of the soldiers. Attesting to the Great War's influence on British society, in 1919, for instance, about 60,000 visitors explored the Western Front.²⁰ Yet these tourists were often derided by veterans for trivializing the war, sneered at as "curious and disrespectful day-jaunters, sallying out from their comfortable hotels in fast motor cars," buying gaudy souvenirs, and generally demeaning the war experience.²¹ The Western Front was not a place for mere sight-seeing; too much blood had been spilled. However, pilgrims were seen as far different, as they engaged in more solemn acts of remembrance. There was a sacred nature ascribed to their sojourns. They often travelled with fellow grievers, stopping to place flowers or wreaths in the newly created cemeteries, speaking of their experiences in hushed voices. For mourning family members and war-haunted veterans, these reverential trips were about seeking answers and finding closure.

It was much more difficult and expensive for pilgrims or visitors from Canada and Newfoundland to make the trans-Atlantic voyage. Although many veterans and their families from the overseas dominions felt compelled to visit the places and "imagined spaces" that they had seen in photographs and films, and read about in newspapers or histories, many could not overcome the obstacle of cost. In 1923, Thomas Nangle, an ambitious former chaplain of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment who had played a key role in rallying political, business, and veterans' support for the erection of a memorial at Beaumont Hamel, attempted to organize a veterans' pilgrimage to the unveiling of the site in 1925. Unfortunately, the expense and the length of time away from jobs

made it impossible for the majority of Newfoundland's veterans to even contemplate such a trip. Despite pleas for support in newspapers and veterans' magazines, plans for a 500-strong pilgrimage had to be cancelled.²² Over the years, however, numerous Canadians and Newfoundlanders did make the journey overseas individually or in small, unofficial groups. In 1927, for example, 30 pilgrims from the Maritimes made what is thought to be the first large group tour from Canada.²³ However, this trip was overshadowed by the pilgrimage of 15,000 American veterans and families to the Western Front that same year.²⁴

During the 1928 national convention of the Canadian Legion, delegates passed a unanimous resolution asking that a pilgrimage be organized to the Western Front battlefields.²⁵ Partially inspired by the Americans, but also no doubt miffed that the Yanks had carried it off first, the resolution instructed the Legion's Dominion Council to approach railway and steamship companies in Canada, Britain, and on the continent to negotiate "the best rates which can be made available" for those wishing to go, and, should there be subsequent interest, to make arrangements for a trip.²⁶ The concept of a pilgrimage – as it was soon known – soon began to take form, and the Legion aimed to coordinate the pilgrimage with the unveiling of Allward's memorial, which was expected to take place sometime in 1931 or 1932.

The stock market crash of 1929, and the high unemployment and financial uncertainty that followed in the nearly decade-long depression, was a blow to the Legion's hopes for wide participation in the pilgrimage. Allward's memorial had also been delayed, due in part to the sculptor's obsessive search for the perfect stone. A series of minor controversies flared in the

press and the House of Commons over the delays, but Allward would not be rushed.²⁷ Despite the problems with the memorial and the crushing Depression, the pilgrimage proceeded, in the words of decorated Great War veteran W.W. Murray, "quietly but with a dogged determination to see it realized."²⁸

In the summer of 1934, there was an enormous reunion of Canadian veterans in Toronto. For three days and nights some 75,000 veterans gathered to meet old comrades, sing familiar songs, and relive the best parts of the war.²⁹ One veterans' pamphlet observed, "For those days of Ypres and Vimy Ridge and the Somme are unforgettable. As in shadowy procession they pass and re-pass, each awakens memories in the men who knew them. And once more we travel down a road that is twenty years away and share again its friendship, romance, laughter and tragedy."³⁰ The reunion was a celebration of service and an opportunity to embrace nostalgic memories. While many Canadians, veterans among them, decried the war as a senseless slaughter, and this was captured in memoirs and novels that were published during this period, most veterans did not want to completely turn their backs on the war.³¹ While there was much to lament about the terrible loss of life, the seemingly poor leadership, and frequent hardship, the camaraderie of service remained an important bond that kept veterans together in the difficult postwar years. Twenty years on from the start of the greatest cataclysm in modern history, and in the midst of the Depression, veterans refused to denigrate their service. The war could not be forgotten.

Organization

The Legionary, the national magazine of the Canadian Legion of the British Empire Service League,

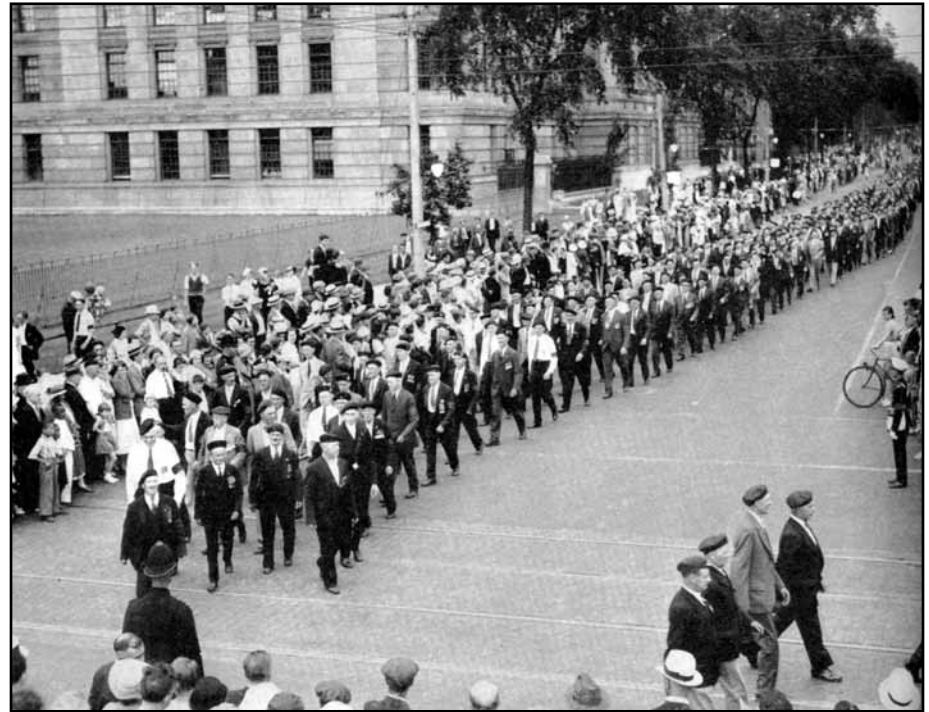
In 1934 an enormous reunion of veterans in Toronto showed that interest and remembrance of the war had not declined in the 20 years since the start of the conflict.

Top right: This box-car carrying veterans from Montreal bears its correct quota of 40 men plus pipers – but no horses. Note how the veterans have marked the car with their wartime phrases and slang.

Below right: Toronto had its first glimpse of the veterans in marching order when groups from each Canadian division and associated services paraded for the service of remembrance at the Toronto Cenotaph at noon on 4 August 1934. The photograph shows the parade coming southward on University Avenue and turning east on Queen Street.



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finally put an end to years of rumours when it declared in its July 1934 issue, "that the Canadian Legion is definitely organizing and conducting a Pilgrimage to the Battlefields for all ex-Service men and women in Canada."³² Although the exact date for the unveiling was still not set, the Dominion President of the Canadian Legion, Brigadier-General Alex Ross, invited former service men and women "to forward inquiries and tentative reservations to Legion Headquarters in Ottawa."³³

The Legion approached the organization of the pilgrimage as if it were planning a military operation. Without the 21st century advantages of email or teleconferencing, the organizers had to depend on air mail and telegrams to pass plans and ideas back and forth across Canada, to England, and to Europe. The dominion organizer, or chief planning officer, was Captain Ben Allen, and to him fell the day-to-day responsibilities of administration and planning. He was ably assisted by the chief transportation office, a former Great War intelligence and staff officer, Lieutenant-Colonel D.E. MacIntyre. The success of the pilgrimage was unquestionably due to them and their small staffs, who over two years gave unstintingly of their time to this project.

A host of matters were addressed before any pilgrims set foot aboard Vimy-bound ships. To avoid misunderstandings and ensure necessary tasks were not overlooked, the Legion and the government established their respective responsibilities. Government responsibilities included the selection of the official delegation and the program for the official unveiling of the memorial. Organizing the pilgrims, the most challenging aspect of the project, was the Legion's task. Each day had to be planned: when and where meals would be served; accommodation was allocated taking into consideration families or people travelling in groups; all transportation arrangements needed to make allowances for veterans with disabilities or elderly parents with

physical limitations; information had to be distributed on a timely basis across the country. Individual requests to visit specific cemeteries were arranged in conjunction with the Imperial War Graves Commission. The eventual gathering of over 6,000 veterans from all parts of Canada, moving them over an ocean, to join a comprehensive program of ceremonies, commemorations, and social events in Belgium and France, before partaking in the official unveiling ceremony on 26 July, to be then followed by more visits and commemorations in Britain and France, and the return to homes in Canada, was an incredibly complex undertaking. This would be the largest ever peacetime movement of people from Canada to Europe.

The response from the veterans across the country was immediate and enthusiastic, with over 1,200 inquiries received by November 1934.³⁴ Prominent Canadians and Britons who had been associated with the Corps warmly supported the pilgrimage; Lady Currie, the widow of General Sir Arthur Currie, wrote to "wish the Legion all success in its splendid enterprise," while Sir Archibald Macdonell, the former commanding officer of the 1st Canadian Division, "strongly endorse[d] the Vimy Pilgrimage."³⁵ Many of the Corps' regimental and unit associations expressed similar views. One of the most welcome letters came from Lord Byng of Vimy, the Canadian Corps commander from May 1916 to June 1917, informing the Legion that he hoped to stand shoulder to shoulder with his former comrades-in-arms at the unveiling; alas, he died a year before the unveiling.³⁶

To encourage veterans to join the pilgrimage, the Legion announced the memorial would be unveiled on Dominion Day, 1 July 1936. Having a specific date in mind, it was thought, would spur the undecided to action. In truth, the government did not know when the memorial would be unveiled as they, too, were waiting for word from Allward. The Legion barrelled ahead. Succeeding issues of *The Legionary* urged members to plan for the once-in-a-lifetime event: "Cheer-io, boys – see you at Vimy!" was the Legion's lighthearted call, while another plea sought to emphasize the "solemn pilgrimage to those hallowed places in France and Flanders where sleep the silent armies of fellow-Canadians and brother Britons we left behind."³⁷

By early 1935, the Legion had calculated the price of the 3½-week trip would be \$160 (this would be approximately \$2,600 today³⁸). The sum included all meals, accommodation, sea and land transportation and health insurance,

but the pilgrims had to pay for their rail tickets (much reduced to one cent per mile) to Montreal.³⁹ Five ships were contracted for the round-trip trans-Atlantic voyage; Canadian Pacific Steamships provided the *Duchess of Bedford*, *Montrose*, and *Montcalm*, and two ships, *Antonia* and *Ascania*, came from the Cunard-White Star Line.

Although the Legion's plans were supported by sympathetic groups and governments, the veterans' organization emphasized that the pilgrimage would be funded by its members without subsidies or financial aid from the Canadian taxpayer. As one organizer wrote, "the Pilgrims would much prefer that the trip be organized and placed before the ex-soldier community on its own merits."⁴⁰ But the Canadian government assisted where it could. For example, it waived the passport fees for pilgrims who were Canadian or British subjects, issued a special Vimy pilgrimage passport, and allowed veterans in the civil service to have an additional 11 days of paid leave.⁴¹ The corporate sector was involved too. The T. Eaton Company, a major Canadian department store chain, granted time off to employee-veterans.⁴² Yet with about 30,000 veterans out of work, and tens of thousands more suffering from the devastating effects of the Depression, many veterans could not afford the costs.⁴³ *The Canadian Veteran* lamented that many ex-soldiers were denied the right to return to the battlefields because of "lean and empty purses which [made] it seem impossible for them to go."⁴⁴

Speaking in the Commons near the end of April 1936, the minister of national defence confirmed that the monument would be unveiled a few months later on 26 July. It was later announced that King Edward VIII would unveil the monument in the presence of the president of France, Albert Lebrun.⁴⁵ The unveiling would be the King of Canada's first official

engagement since the death of his father, King George V, earlier in the year. This was a significant gesture on the part of His Majesty and it was not lost on the veterans nor other Canadians, raising significantly the profile of the event in Canada and throughout the Empire. However, Mackenzie King had already made the decision not to go to Vimy for the unveiling. He felt "a little badly" about not being "at this event,- but with my fatigued state I do not see how it is possible."⁴⁶ What King left unsaid was that he was never comfortable around veterans and that his lack of war service left him feeling that another of the veterans in his cabinet should take his place. The rancour caused by King's harsh treatment of the then governor-general, Lord Byng (Baron Byng of Vimy) during the political and constitutional crises of 1926, and especially the prime minister's accusation that Byng was trying to re-impose imperial control over the Canadian parliament, caused many veterans to despise King.⁴⁷

The Voyage

The pilgrims were set to return to Europe in the midst of another dark period. Germany, now firmly under Nazi control, had reoccupied the Rhineland in the spring of 1936, challenging the governments of France and Britain to push her out. Unprepared in all respects for another war, the wartime allies offered no resistance beyond statements of outrage. Germany remained in place and Hitler was emboldened by his unpunished actions. That same year, the fascist Italian army conquered Ethiopia after a short war and once again the toothless international community failed to confront naked military aggression. The League of Nations seemed to be sleep walking towards its grave. In Spain, civil war erupted in July 1936, which

set fascists against communists, with countless innocents caught in between. With nations at war, rearming, or intimidating neighbours, few believed that the “war to end all wars” had done little more than set the stage for another world-wide conflict.

In mid-July, pilgrims from across the country boarded the special trains to Montreal. Coast to coast, newspapers had for the last month been highlighting the unveiling with breathless anticipation.⁴⁸ “On to Vimy” had been the battle cry of veterans.⁴⁹ R.W. Trowsdale wrote “The Vimy Pilgrimage,” a poem for his fellow pilgrims; it contained the lines:

Back once again to Vimy’s slopes,
Where sculptured granites rear
A nation’s tribute to her sons –
Our friends of yesteryear.⁵⁰

Trowsdale believed the “nation’s soul was mirrored,” at the ridge and the memorial. Not everyone felt that same sacred call. Arthur Kemp, from

Olds, Alberta, a former member of the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles, and his wife Dorothy, wrote accounts of their pilgrimage, beginning with their departure from their home on 13 July. Dozens of trains carrying western pilgrims arrived and were said to hold over 2,000 veterans. The Kemps and others marvelled at the spectacle and scale of the event. “Three trains left Winnipeg ahead of us at half hour intervals and ours was the fourth then two after ours from Regina and Edmonton.”⁵¹ For the Kemps, and likely others, the enormity of the trip seemed to overshadow its reverential nature. Frances Owen, a 7-year-old travelling with her parents, spent much of the train ride looking for children her age, but she remembered that there was initially a mood of tense expectation on the train. But within a few hours, the veterans began to move about the car, discover old friends, renew acquaintances, and share stories.⁵² Wives and children were introduced; tears of joy and sadness were shed. There was a sense of nostalgia that

infused the boisterous talk as old comrades celebrated together after nearly two decades.

Over the course of two days, 6,200 veterans and their families boarded the ships waiting at Montreal. The group included 50 nursing sisters, some 60 to 75 French Canadians, and a few Japanese Canadians.⁵³ There are no indications that Aboriginal Canadians took part in the pilgrimage. On one ship alone there were 50 Silver Cross mothers and widows, women who had lost sons or husbands in the war.⁵⁴ Many of them travelled alone. Also among the pilgrims were a number of journalists, many, if not all of whom, were veterans. The *Toronto Star*, for instance, sent Gregory Clark, a veteran and holder of the Military Cross, and many of Clark’s stories were carried across the country.⁵⁵

The Montreal docks were lined with thousands of well-wishers who cheered and shouted, while bands played and fireworks exploded above the wharf. Florence Murdoch, from Amherst, Nova Scotia, whose two

Passengers enroute to the unveiling of the Vimy Memorial relax on the deck of one of the luxury passengers liners that carried 6,200 veterans and their families to France, July 1936.





Ephemera from the 1936 Vimy Pilgrimage. Clockwise from left: King Edward VIII's Vimy Pilgrimage Medal. Each pilgrim received a medal that was worn on the right breast. The King's medal was recently acquired by the Canadian War Museum; a beret issued to all pilgrims – khaki for the veterans and blue for the non-veterans (shown here); the Vimy Medallion; an armband indicating the bearer belonged to the 20th Battalion.

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brothers Ward and Alfred had served at the front, was a passenger on the *Antonia*: "My, but what a send-off we had. It was a 'royal' alright, but then our whole trip was along the same line. Such crowds filled the sheds at Montreal, bands played, aeroplanes flew overhead, they threw flowers, streamers, and it was such a beautiful day."⁵⁶ At 11:00 a.m. on 16 July, the *Montcalm*, *Montrose*, *Antonia* and *Ascana* set sail, with the *Duchess of Bedford* casting off four hours later. While the ships were making their way down the St. Lawrence River, HMCS *Saguenay* steamed along as their trans-Atlantic escort.

During the first day underway, pilgrimage kits were issued, containing a haversack, a beret (khaki for the veterans and blue for the non-veterans), an identification disc showing the ship's letter and company number, a Vimy Pilgrimage Medal (also referred to as a membership

badge), and a specially-prepared guide book. The berets became prized possessions for most pilgrims and the medal, worn on the right breast, opposite service medals and gallantry awards, was displayed with pride. Kathleen Murdoch, sister of Florence, felt it "an honour to wear the beret and we never had a hat on until we left the Pilgrimage. The old soldiers and war nurses wore khaki berets with green maple leave on the sides, and we wore navy blue with green maple leaves. Then we had a very lovely Vimy badge that we wore at all times and a white company pin."⁵⁷

The pilgrims were going to Europe, wrote Legion president Brigadier-General Alexander Ross, "as an Army of Peace, bearers of a message of goodwill, bent on a sacred mission."⁵⁸ Ross implored the pilgrims to "re-capture the spirit of the Army, its comradeship and good-will,...that spirit of mutual

helpfulness and co-operation..."⁵⁹ Pilgrims were reminded of the need to honour the dead during their hallowed trip. "The years have passed, but time has not obliterated the memory of those who went away and did not come back," intoned Ross. "For all of us this visit has special memories which are very dear and very sacred."⁶⁰ The hallowed nature of the trip would have weighed heavily on the minds of many, especially those parents who were visiting the graves of sons or of veterans who steadied themselves for the reawakening of long buried emotions.

Yet the pilgrims refused to be cloistered. Aboard the ships, the pilgrims talked and drank, shared old stories and told tall-tales. It was a period of joyous reunion rather than sombre pilgrimage, and all of the ships had issued autograph books with the names of fellow

pilgrims, so that old faces could be put to names.⁶¹ Among the pilgrims rank seemed to dissolve, as all were now veterans in a new army. One reporter observed that a wealthy ex-serviceman who could have afforded the best accommodation on the voyage, decided to forego his stately rooms to instead bunk "with his comrades as comfortable and happy as a lark."⁶² Another pilgrim, Japanese Canadian Saburo Shinobu, wrote,

there was no such thing as an officer or a private now – all were ex-war buddies. There was one who, reunited with his platoon commander, was hugging him with affection. There were an orderly and his battalion commander who had not seen each other for eighteen years now standing silent and staring at each other with tears streaming down their faces.⁶³

Adding to the nostalgic memories were good food and drink. Amid such bonhomie, old and new friends relaxed, played games, and danced. The rusty soldiers practiced their marching much to the amusement of guests who watched the smiling and laughing veterans move in every direction before their muscle memory took over.⁶⁴ One woman observed how many of the "old soldiers sang from morning until night," reliving their old camaraderie and basking in the shared emotions of time long gone.⁶⁵

The Return

All of the ships docked during the early hours of Saturday, 25 July: *Antonia*, *Ascania* and *Duchess of Bedford* at le Havre, with *Montcalm* and *Montrose* at Antwerp. Most of the passengers were awake from the excited talk and expectation when the ships arrived around 5:00 am. A thrilled Florence Murdoch wrote of

the landing: "The whole place was lighted with colored lights and every ship in the harbour; really it just looked like a fairy land. Everyone got up and listened to the bands and I for one can never forget the picture."⁶⁶

What did pilgrims hope to find when they returned to Europe, and ultimately to what remained of the Western Front? What was the inner call to explore a site of death and destruction? Many veterans might have wished to forget, but the scars were imprinted on the body and mind. Veteran W.W. Murray offered some insight into "the desire, which reposes wistfully in the heart of all war veterans, to return to the scenes of their own achievements and the graves of comrades. Memory is a vibrant thing, and the veteran is filled with remembrance."⁶⁷ Eighteen years on, the pilgrimage provided veterans an opportunity to make sense of the war for family members and themselves, to mourn and celebrate, and perhaps to find some closure.

The pilgrims were met by bands, cheering civilians, and honour guards. Journalist Gregory Clark recounted how he witnessed veterans disembarking excitedly from the *Antonia*, but was moved by "the ranks of elderly mothers, women of 60 and 70, wearing berets on their heads and carrying haversacks slung from their shoulders, marching in fours to the waiting trains on the quay. These, the mothers of the men who died twenty years ago, marching in fours. If I wept I was not the only one."⁶⁸ Mary Botel was equally stirred, as she rode in a train to Vimy, passing the countryside and listening to veterans "explain where important engagements were fought and places now historic where they were in action or training or billeted during the war. Hard to believe that these beautifully cultivated fertile field had twenty years ago had been shell torn desolate war territory."⁶⁹

The logistical challenges were enormous. Moving 6,200 pilgrims

by rail and bus from multiple sites and finding enough accommodation had required incredible planning, with veterans deposited in nine cities throughout much of Northern France and Belgium. There were problems with the 235 buses needed to move the pilgrims between hotels, the ceremony, and the battlefield tours. The principal French contractor, unable to fulfill his commitments, sub-contracted with a number of smaller, poorly equipped bus companies. Many of the drivers spoke no English, were unfamiliar with the Vimy region, and had to be directed by the veterans to battle sites and memorials. Cemeteries presented special challenges for the drivers as Canadians were buried at more than 300 sites along the Western Front. Surprisingly, there are no accounts of veterans missing the unveiling on 26 July.⁷⁰ Some of the pilgrims visiting the graves of loved ones carried Vetcraft-made wreaths, created in Canada by wounded Great War veterans.⁷¹ The coming event was building towards a more sacred experience, as pilgrims moved ever closer to the ridge and the memorial.

The Unveiling, 26 July 1936

Sunday, 26 July, was a warm, sunny day. Beginning soon after dawn, pilgrims converged on the ridge. Marty Botel, who was travelling with her veteran husband Harry, and daughter Frances, wrote in her diary of the advance to the ridge: "The memorial on Vimy is a beautiful and impressive structure. We saw it from various points of vantage as we drove along the road, and gleaming white in the sunlight it seemed to dominate the landscape for miles and miles."⁷² During the morning and early afternoon, the pilgrims explored the ruined landscape, still pitted and cratered from the hundreds of thousands of shells that had crashed into the terrain. Many

descended into the Grange Tunnel, one of the 13 sheltering tunnels that had been dug for the Canadians in the months before the assault. The tunnel had been restored in the late 1920s and it, along with a series of trenches with concrete sandbags, allowed some visitors to reimagine the battle and the environment.⁷³ Other veterans had trouble reconciling the sea of mud and corruption from the war with green grass and growing vegetation around the new memorial. Even the Legion's official publication, *The Epic of Vimy*, recognized the regenerated landscape: "from the monument one looked back, searching for what had once been landmarks; but failing to find them."⁷⁴ Perhaps more poignant were the Canadian and German cemeteries that lay as mute testimony to the terrible sacrifice.

With an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 French civilians arriving at the site, the pilgrims were escorted forward to a privileged spot in the large amphitheatre in front of the memorial.⁷⁵ Companies of veterans formed up here, with tall, numbered banners and emblems to guide veterans to their pre-arranged groups. The khaki beret-wearing veterans were placed in front of the memorial, while civilian-pilgrims stood on the veterans' flanks. An honour

guard from the HMCS *Saguenay* were situated on the south side of the pathway which runs across the memorial, while a colour party of 120 veterans were placed to the left of the sailors. The Royal Canadian Horse Artillery Band, a composite band from Canadian highland regiments and buglers were also on parade. French army engineers, and French-Moroccan cavalry men (who had fought at Vimy in 1915), wearing their traditional blue and scarlet uniforms and mounted on white Arabian horses, added to the pomp and ceremony. Canadian and French veterans bearing their national flags were placed on the monument's steps, facing the parade.

The monument rested on Hill 145, the ridge's highest feature and site of ferocious and bloody fighting until it was captured. The base of the monument covered 2,000 square feet, and it seemed to emerge from the ridge and reach skyward, the pylons rising to a height of 138 feet. The 6,000 tons of white limestone, quarried from a 3rd century mine near Split, Croatia, had a warm, almost ghostly quality. Along the base of the memorial were the names of 11,285 Canadian soldiers who were killed in France and who have no known graves, and throughout the memorial were 20 allegorical

figures.⁷⁶ The monument did not glorify war nor trumpet victory; it was a monument to loss and remembrance.

Shortly before the King arrived at the monument, the Canadian Radio Commission [CRC], the forerunner of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, began a one hour and thirty five minute live broadcast of the event. The CRC utilized the shortwave facilities of the British Broadcasting Corporation to transmit the ceremony to Canada for broadcast over the national radio network, while the British shortwave broadcast was heard worldwide. The broadcast enabled people in Canada to be "present not only in spirit but as auditors," according to the *Winnipeg Free Press*.⁷⁷

At 2:15 pm King Edward, accompanied by Ernest Lapointe, the minister of justice, and Philippe Roy, the head of the Canadian Legation in Paris, arrived at the Canadian park and proceeded to the monument to be greeted by Ian Mackenzie, the minister of national defence, and Charles Power, the minister of pensions and national health. With the playing of "God Save the King" followed by "O Canada," and a 21-gun salute, the King inspected the guards of honour. He also stopped to speak with a number of the bemedalled former warriors as he made his way down the ranks. After the inspection, he walked back to the monument to be introduced to distinguished pilgrims, such as Lady Byng, Lady Currie, Sir Robert Borden, and Walter Allward. Mrs. Katherine de la Bruère Girouard, whose husband was a Legion official and the designer of the Vimy Pilgrimage Medal, was seated on the monument with the special guests and official parties. From her vantage point she thought it was "a



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Pilgrims explore the restored trench lines at Vimy, 26 July 1936.



A large crowd of pilgrims and French onlookers gather at Vimy for the dedication of the monument, 26 July 1936.

marvellous sight to look down and see the thousands of navy and khaki berets."⁷⁸

His formal duties done for the moment, the King then walked down into the amphitheatre to meet the veterans. Although the waiting Canadians heard the anthems and the artillery salute when he arrived, they had not yet seen their monarch. Upon his appearance, the veterans, according to one eye witness, offered "such a roar you never heard in war or peace."⁷⁹ The parade came to attention and the colour party dipped its standards and raised them again. The King walked among the pilgrims stopping for a few minutes to talk with a group of disabled and blinded veterans.

One of the most poignant moments of the day was when the King stopped to talk with Mrs. C.S. Woods, a Silver Cross mother from Winnipeg. Mrs. Woods' had eleven sons serve in Canadian and British forces, five of whom were buried in France. Three other sons later

succumbed to war-injuries. Holding her hand as they talked, the King said, "I wish your sons were all here." Excitement and sorrow were both evident as she spoke haltingly to the King: "Oh, Sir, I have been looking at the trenches and I just can't figure out why our boys had to go through that." His response was like a prayer: "Please God, Mrs. Wood, it shall never happen again."⁸⁰

King Edward spent about half an hour walking among the companies of veterans and meeting some of the assembled families. Waving to the French veterans standing at the rear of the Canadian companies, he then turned and walked to the west side of the monument to greet the president of France, Albert Lebrun. Following the two national anthems and another artillery salute, the two men walked to the monument to take their places. At this moment, four squadrons from the Royal Air Force and French Air Force flew over the monument, dipping their wings in salute, before flying away towards Douai.

The ceremony began with prayers offered by the three pilgrimage chaplains representing the Church of England, the United Church of Canada, and the Roman Catholic Church. Colonel the Right Reverend A.E. Deschamps of the Catholic Church spoke of the "unfailing gratitude" owed by all Canadians to the sacrifice made by the dead; "of the necessity for making of the 1914-1918 sacrifice a pathway leading to permanent peace."⁸¹ Together the padres spoke of the strength of the Canadian nation, her soldiers' sacrifice, and the duty the survivors had to ensure everlasting peace. These were fitting words for a sacred day, although few could not help but reflect upon their incongruity with the recent warlike behaviour of Germany and Italy, as well as Europe's rearmament.

Ernest Lapointe, the minister of justice and leader of the official delegation, spoke after the chaplains. The Vimy memorial would, in his words, "preach a new ideal of



A sea of people surround the memorial shortly after the figure of “Canada mourning her dead” was unveiled by King Edward VIII.

humanity in which recourse to force shall be abolished before the cries of mothers, the revolt of conscience and the right of the weak. Humanity suffered too much during the War... Humanity desires...justice and truth, and is eager for a Peace founded in conscience and international solidarity, on the will of nations to co-operate for the greatest good of the greatest number of men and peoples.”⁸² Canada, he concluded, would devote “her energies and her unalterable endeavours, whatever may be the obstacles which appear to retard its realization,” a statement that was suitably unclear and oblique, especially since it had been Lapointe’s influence that had driven the King government, a few months earlier, to reverse its stand on the

Canadian initiative of aggressive sanctions against Italy for its invasion of Ethiopia, another in a series of blows to the League of Nations.⁸³ Lapointe was more forthright in his claim that Vimy had forced the young dominion to step forward like never before, and “in their hour of testing the souls of Canadians revealed themselves gloriously at the summit of their national ascendancy.”⁸⁴ The Canadian soul, Lapointe claimed, had been forged at Vimy.

Following his ministers, King Edward began his address in halting French, thanking President Lebrun for attending the ceremony and for the welcome France had given the pilgrims. Turning then to English, he spoke of the memorial “crowning the hill of Vimy [that] is now and for

all time part of Canada.” Invoking gallant sentiments, the King intoned that the world “will long remember” what happened here, “and Canada can never forget.” The Dominion during the war stood shoulder to shoulder with France and Britain, as an equal: with this monument, “Canada shall stand forever.”⁸⁵

Not to be outdone in language that invoked the solemn or the transformative impact of the war on Canada, President Lebrun stepped to the dais and addressed the veterans and the memory of the dominion’s “60,000 sons who fell fighting far from their homeland, and in honour of the Canadian army corps... which in 1917 took Vimy Ridge in action as glorious as it was bloody.”⁸⁶ The memorial to the dead was “a

triumphal hymn," which would forever remind French and Canadian citizens of the bond between the two nations. In the King's and the president's speeches was evidence of Canada having stepped on to the world stage and having made its name through service and sacrifice.

Yet what did the veterans think about the event? Most were staring in rapt attention, straining to hear the speeches. Others likely reflected upon the war or the battle. *The Canadian Veteran* wrote that during the ceremony

the mists of time momentarily [lifted], and once again [veterans stood] in the jumping off trenches waiting for the zero hour.... Even the soft splash of snow and rain on steel helmets [could] be heard – then that crashing crescendo of a tornado of bursting shells, with the obligation of a thousand machine-guns the attack [began].⁸⁷

The above passage seems a bit dramatic, but no doubt some veterans were drawn back to the battle as they stood on that same ground, which the speakers described, over and over again, as being haunted by the war dead. Yet at the close of the ceremony, as the King and president departed, there was a reported cacophony of cheers from the enormous crowd, with thousands of veterans breaking into a spontaneous "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow."⁸⁸ The veterans' reaction, in the presence of their King, was one of celebration mixed with pride, although with perhaps a darker more poignant undercurrent

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Top right: The union jack falls away as the King unveils the figure of "Canada mourning her dead."

Bottom right : The King inspects a group of former nursing sisters.



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Above: Four squadrons of aircraft from the British Royal Air Force and the French Armée de l'Air performed a flyover of Vimy during the ceremony.

Left: King Edward VIII descends from Vimy Memorial to greet Canadian pilgrims at the unveiling ceremony. 1–Brigadier-General Alex Ross, President, Canadian Legion; 2–Major-General S.H. Burstall, wartime commander of 2nd Canadian Division; 3–King Edward VIII; 4– Ernest Lapointe, minister of justice; 5–Charles Power, minister of pensions and national health; 6– Ian Mackenzie, minister of national defence; 7–Lieutenant-General Sir Richard Turner, VC; 8–Major-General Sir Archibald Macdonell, wartime commander of 1st Canadian Division; 9–Prince Arthur of Connaught; 10–Philippe Roy, Canadian minister to France.



of feeling running through many hearts and souls.

When the dignitaries departed and the official ceremony came to a close, veterans had their own opportunities to lay wreaths and inspect the memorial. Many Canadians looked for the names of the missing engraved on the memorial, running their hands over the carved letters that represented comrades, friends, uncles, sons, and fathers. The names of the fallen in many cases had replaced the bodies that had been destroyed.⁸⁹ Here was a chance at emotional closure. There was immense power in those names, and pilgrims took photographs or

made tracings of the characters, to bring home and cherish. It was an emotional and draining day, yet one also steeped in celebration and pride.

One pilgrim, W.K. Fraser, summed up the unveiling in his diary: "Wonderful ceremony at Vimy – huge crowds. Beautiful view. Long day... Some fainted. Number of nice wreaths.... Everybody is tired out, awful rush."⁹⁰ Archdeacon F.G. Scott, the former 1st Division padre, was more articulate and likely captured the mood of most veterans when he wrote that the "heart thrilled with memories as we passed over the ground so long associated in our minds with grim hatred, suffering and death."⁹¹ The battle had been remade, and forged into something anew.

Aftermath

The pilgrimage did not end on 26 July, although that day was surely the highlight of the tour. Buses transported veterans to the battlefields, with most of the pilgrims moving north to Ypres, visiting cemeteries on the way. For Sir Robert Borden, Canada's wartime prime minister, he found the visits to the war graves "much more solemn and impressive and moved me more deeply than the unveiling ceremony at Vimy."⁹² Yet not all could stomach the return to the killing fields. Stuart Armour recounted that he refused to return to the site of the 1916 "blood bath" in which he had fought. His experience as a company commander on the Somme had "wearied [him] of it forever."⁹³ At Ypres, thousands of pilgrims took part in the Last Post ceremony at the Menin Gate, and then searched among the names of almost 7,000 Canadians inscribed on the gate, who died on Belgian soil and who have no known graves.

After the Western Front tours, the pilgrims crossed the Channel to England and were taken to London



Top: King Edward VIII inspects the guard of honour; Above: King Edward VIII is surrounded by a group of adoring pilgrims during the garden party held at Buckingham Palace in London following the dedication ceremony at Vimy.

by trains. British veterans waiting at the railway stations gave them a hearty welcome. This portion of the trip was organized by the British Legion, which missed no opportunity to highlight the unity of the Empire. *Our Empire*, the British Legion's magazine, honoured the pilgrims of the "Second Canadian Expeditionary Force," observing that this act of commemoration and unity would "rebind the Imperial brotherhood in awakened memories of a common sacrifice," and that with the coming war, "they can do it again."⁹⁴ Such sentiments were

no doubt welcomed by many in the Canadian Legion, but that imperial message was all but absent from formal discourse surrounding the pilgrimage, and gives insight into the many competing messages at play.

A reception at Westminster Hall, an address by British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, and a garden party at Buckingham Palace captured the festive mood which prevailed on these final days. For many veterans, this might be the last trip to Britain, and so the events and receptions often had additional family and friends attending and supporting

the pilgrims. The official pilgrimage ended in Britain, with about a third of the pilgrims leaving for Canada on 1 August, while a larger portion of the veterans returned to France as guests of the government for another week of travel before going home.

In France and Britain there was intense interest in the pilgrimage. Newspapers covered all the events in great detail, recording the memories and experiences of veterans in interviews. Canadians were no less enthralled by the unveiling, the memorial, and the pilgrims. Hundreds of thousands had listened to it live on the radio. Many millions more read about it in newspapers that highlighted the accomplishments of the Canadians, their sacrifice for the mother countries, and the nation's coming of age. The French and Canadian post offices issued special stamps to mark the occasion. The pilgrims came back to Canada and were invited to speak at dinners, churches, and clubs. Archdeacon F.G. Scott was one of the most honoured of the pilgrims. He spoke at the Empire Club of Canada in October 1936, describing the "unveiling of the monument and all that was connected with it ... [as] really something more than the simple display of a great memorial. It has a tremendous bearing on our whole national development."⁹⁵

In the aftermath of the visit, the Legion ran competitions to find the most "interesting" photographs taken by pilgrims, were to be published in a souvenir book, *The Epic of Vimy*.⁹⁶ The pilgrims continued to contribute to how the unveiling, the monument, and the memory of Vimy would be constructed, as they actively created the visual record through their published photographs. The souvenir book was available less than three months after the triumphant return of the pilgrims and the first run of 3,000 copies sold out before the first book had been shipped.

Other pilgrims turned to scrapbooks to preserve this once-in-a-lifetime experience, with elaborate binders and books containing a collage of souvenirs, postcards, letters, and published material.⁹⁷ An official film of the unveiling ceremony was released in 1937. The Vimy passports, medals, and berets were archived and treasured.

On the first anniversary of the pilgrimage, Harold Davidson claimed that the pilgrimage had "caught the imagination of every Canadian."⁹⁸ That was too grandiose a claim, but the pilgrimage, the King's speech, the pomp of the unveiling, and the magnificent memorial had been reported upon extensively. Another veteran and pilgrim, Bill Garvock, wrote that while standing before the monument, one could not help feel that "the name 'Vimy' will have an imperishable place in the hearts of all Canadians and in the proud annals of the Dominion."⁹⁹ The souvenir booklet of the pilgrimage stated quite simply that "for many years to come...this will be a sacred place of pilgrimage."¹⁰⁰ Indeed that is the case, and each year thousands of Canadians travel to Vimy, to find themselves, to pay their respects, and perhaps to gain a better understanding of their country.

Meaning and Memory

Vimy Ridge was a site of death and destruction, where Canada had suffered grievously in four days of withering battle. It was also the place where many believed that the nation had come of age. Even though Vimy was just one battle in a long series of engagements and campaigns, its capture was portrayed as something significant. This was "Canada's Easter Gift" to France, claimed several French papers. Canadian soldiers of the day, and afterwards, wrote about

Vimy in reverential poetry and doggerel.¹⁰¹ The Vimy victory was the central theme for a Canadian official photography exhibition in London in July 1917, with tens of thousands viewing photographs of the "historic battle."¹⁰² Vimy was the first tangible and obvious victory of the war for the Canadians, and, perhaps most importantly, it delivered a geographic position that could be observed clearly from kilometres away. Many British formations attacking to the south on the 9 April 1917 advanced as far as the Canadians, but they simply captured more devastated farm land, and were eventually driven back. The Canadians captured a ridge that overlooked the German lines, and, considering the flat terrain, it might almost have been a mountain. There is no doubt that the commanding heights of Vimy added to the value of the prize. So, too, was the importance of a battle on Easter weekend to a Christian army and society. In Vimy's aftermath, and even up to the unveiling in July 1936, most Canadians would have recognized that the name "Vimy" stood for something important.

Yet it took time for Vimy to become the icon that it is often described as today – the crucible upon which a nation was forged on the field of battle. This is captured in the myth surrounding Vimy, with the battle becoming a condensed, even conflated event, which seems to represent in short-hand the war effort for the nation. How Vimy evolved into that mythical battle of imagination remains almost impossible to quantify, although it can be suggested that the minor disagreement over where to put the memorial seems to indicate that Vimy had not yet achieved mythical status in the early 1920s. Allward's slow work on constructing the memorial was commented upon by some in Canada, but the delays and cost overruns did not engender

fierce debate among veterans to the extent that the equally delayed multi-volume official history of the war excited commentary about Canada losing its hard-earned place in history.¹⁰³ Besides annual Vimy dinners hosted by Lord Byng, there were few other signs during the 1920s that Vimy had secured a special place in the Canadian imagination, nor was there much evidence to suggest that during this period, and into the 1930s, that there was a government or veterans' plan to make Vimy into a nation-building event.

The pilgrimage was the key to drawing Canadians to the battle and the memorial. The pilgrimage mixed official and private commemoration, veterans and civilians, and it was surrounded and underpinned by the mixed messages of pride in service, lament for the dead, fear of an increasingly unstable Europe, and Canada's wartime sacrifice that led to its emerging role on the world stage. For the veterans, much of the pilgrimage was an event infused with camaraderie and nostalgia. The pilgrim's guide book observed that this veterans' reunion would allow the pilgrims "for a little space of time to re-capture the spirit of the Army, its comradeship and good-will."¹⁰⁴ The ship's voyage was a time of reunion and reliving of old memories. Yet when standing on Vimy Ridge, in the presence of the King and Canada's wartime allies, veterans – and all Canadians – were told how they had fought and sacrificed for a greater cause on that Easter Monday, nearly two decades earlier. Canada had earned the right to be treated as an equal.

In the shadow of the Vimy memorial, the battle was recast, carved in stone, as an iconic, nation-changing event. Such meaning may have been present for some time, but there had been few opportunities to allow for the expression of such sentiments. Now was the time. Vimy

veteran Perce Lamont testified years after the event that it was not until the unveiling of the memorial in 1936 that he "had a sense of Canada becoming a nation at the time of the battle."¹⁰⁵ At Vimy Ridge, on 26 July 1936, there was a bleeding of the past into the present, and the present into the past. Canada was indeed forever changed by the Great War, but it appears that Vimy did not make the nation, it was the nation that made Vimy.

Notes

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