

Glossing over the Great War: Canadian Methods of Remembrance and Commemoration

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Abstract

The following study seeks to provide a critical overview of Canadian methods of remembering and commemorating the First World War. Offering commentary on various memorials, monuments and tributes erected both domestically and internationally, it argues that Canada's way of honouring its fallen soldiers through physical means of commemoration is immensely flawed, failing to accurately encapsulate and communicate the historical reality of World War I (WWI). Analyzing the effectiveness of specific grave sites, artwork, commemorative events and larger-scale memorial pieces dedicated to Canadian soldiers — such as the famed “Grieving Woman” statue located at Vimy Ridge and the epitaphs of mass cemeteries designed and maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) — this paper thus encourages readers to pause and reflect on the shortcomings of deliberately well-polished, tailor-made methods of remembrance that appear in the contemporary era, especially those designed and promoted by Canadian officials to strategically and purposely “glorify” the reality of the First World War by erasing and/or fabricating select narratives, histories and emotions.

Keywords: Remembrance, Commemoration, Canada, Canadian, WWI

Introduction

If you could remember the darkest parts of your history, would you choose to advertise them to others? Would you embellish the truth of particular incidents or lay the gritty details of every setting, action and outcome flat? When it comes to events like war, the international community seems to prefer the former option, commemorating tragedies like World War One (WWI) through a variety of well-polished and tailor-made methods of remembrance. Recognizing the problems that may arise from this overwhelmingly “perfect” framework, however, many citizens across our country may remain skeptical regarding Canada's everyday presentation of WWI, bringing themselves to wonder things like: *Do contemporary methods of remembrance in Canada strategically “glorify” the reality of the First World War?* In hopes of shedding light on such concerns, this paper will seek to answer that question through an in-

depth study of “Canadian methods of remembrance and commemoration”, providing a critical overview of Canada's WWI tributes and their overall effectiveness. In doing so, it will make reference to an ever-growing body of literature, pursuing three key areas of analysis throughout: (1) “What exactly *are* contemporary methods of remembrance?”, (2) “Where do they appear and how do they manifest in a Canadian context?”, and (3) “Does Canada's way of honouring its fallen soldiers through physical monuments, memorials and/or other methods of ‘remembrance’ seem to positively influence public perception of the First World War?”

Methods of Remembrance - A Contemporary Catalogue

In order to conduct an objective analysis of “Canadian methods of remembrance and commemoration” in relation to the First World

War, it is however, first and foremost necessary to outline what the concept of “remembrance” itself means. After all, the act of remembering and/or reflecting upon a particular event, especially one as tragic as WWI, may involve a variety of complex processes and emotions that are hard to pinpoint to a singular definition. Yet, as explained by scholar Jan-Werner Müller, the idea of remembrance, at its core, can best be understood as a powerful, political “tool” (2002: 1) used for the “temporal re-anchoring and ... ‘recovery of the real’” (2002: 15). Indeed, research shows that memory, and thus, the broader process of recalling *collective* memories (that is, “remembering”), holds widespread transformative power, especially in the aftermath of a global conflict like the First World War, where its relationship with both culture and the broader justice system enables new policies and frameworks (Müller, 2002: 2).

Recognizing this dynamic, the concept of remembrance and its associated effects becomes much more clear, thus providing reason for the various ways in which we see WWI being commemorated in modern society. Notably, things like art, music, literature, video games, movies and museums are methods of contemporary, cultural remembrance that we typically see used in the present era to pay homage to the Great War (Brandt, 2017: 3). Together, these tributes work alongside the means of state-erected memorials, monuments, statues and grave sites to honour the fallen soldiers of WWI. Complimenting one another in this vein, both physical and media-circulated techniques of commemorating the First World War have thus come to contribute to a “popular memory” surrounding WWI (Brandt, 2017: 3), creating a catalogue of imagery that influences how we understand and recall the past century of human history not only individually, but as a broader global community.

Canadian Memorials, Monuments, and Tributes

Having laid this foundation, it is now possible to assess how contemporary methods of remembering and/or commemorating WWI specifically manifest in a Canadian context. As expected, much like the other countries and dominions that fought under the Allied Powers from 1914-1918, Canada does *not* fall short in its ways of honouring its fallen troops, whether it be at home or overseas on the soils of Europe.

This reality is aptly demonstrated through the erection of the famous “Grieving Woman” monument at Vimy Ridge, a statue which contains “the names of 11,285 missing Canadian soldiers” engraved at its base (Brandt, 2017: 13). Combining “classical iconography and composition with contemporary European expressionist influence” (Hucker, 2006: para. 9), this piece maintains a well-polished white finish (CWGC, 2022: Vimy Memorial), gazing over an additional array of like-structured figures strewn about. Yet, despite the critical placement of its body at the heart of Canada’s biggest overseas monument, the image of the “Grieving Woman” is overshadowed by the presence of two large, equally as eye-catching twin pillars located to its rear. Altogether, it is thus approximated that the monument as a whole is composed of “6,000 tonnes of Seget limestone” upheld by an 11,000 ton “steel-reinforced” concrete base (CWGC, 2022: Vimy Memorial). Due to its sheer size and symbolic significance, this war site has consequently



Figure 1. Canada’s Vimy Ridge Memorial from a Distance

attracted many tourists over the years, with records showing an attendance of approximately “8,000 [Canadian] pilgrims” at its initial unveiling ceremony (Lloyd, 1998: 158).

Similarly, the construction of the St. Julien Canadian Memorial in northern Belgium has come to garner great attention in the public eye as well. Historically, this site marks the place where Canadians fought and withstood the very first gas attacks of World War I (Veterans Affairs Canada, 2026: para. 1). Composed of granite stone, it features an 11 metre tall shaft that gives way to the construction of a statue known as “The Brooding Soldier” at its summit (VAC, 2026: para. 3). Over time, the image of the bowed head (VAC, 2026: para. 3), folded hands (VAC, 2026: para. 3) and solemn expression of this statue has left a lasting mark on both viewers and historians alike, giving the piece a sort of special feeling that speaks to the tragedies which once occurred near its base. Set in the middle of a well-manicured garden, “The Brooding Soldier” is surrounded by a series of tall cedar trees, each groomed to “match and complement” the towering pedestal upon which he sits (VAC, 2026: para. 3). Originally unveiled on July 8th, 1923 by the Duke of Connaught, the memorial also features a key inscription dedicated to Canadian soldiers at its base, which courtly reads, “*this column marks the battlefield where 18,000 Canadians on the British left withstood the first German gas attacks the 22nd-24th of April 1915. 2,000 fell and here lie buried*” (VAC, 2026: para. 6).

However, despite the popularity of pieces like “The Grieving Woman” and “The Brooding Soldier”, the Vimy Ridge Memorial and the St. Julien Memorial are not the only Canadian WWI commemoration sites that exist in Europe. In fact, a full list of battlefield monuments dedicated to Canadian WWI troops can be found on the Government of Canada’s official “Remembrance” website, which details a series of memorials situated in France and Belgium that are designed to

commemorate the sacrifices of our fallen soldiers. These memorials notably include, but are not strictly limited to, the “Bourlon Wood Canadian Memorial”, the “Courcelette Canadian Memorial”, the “Dury Canadian Memorial”, the “Hill 62 (Sanctuary Wood) Canadian Memorial”, the “Le Quesnel Canadian Memorial” and the “Passchendaele Canadian Memorial” (VAC, 2025a: 1). Together, these grounds mark a consistent pattern of commemoration, with each having been chosen and deliberately marked by the Canadian government through the use of identical “granite blocks situated within reflective garden landscapes” (VAC, 2025a: 1).

Following suit in their commemorative practices, many Canadian provinces and territories have also established their *own* individual memorial sites within and across Europe. This is especially true in the case of Newfoundland and Labrador, who not having joined Canada until the 1949 confederation, has taken it upon itself to erect a wide array of monuments specifically dedicated to the men it lost during WWI. The most famous of these pieces is symbolically located in northern France, overlooking the rolling trenches in which the “Battle of Beaumont-Hamel” once claimed the lives of thousands of Newfoundland soldiers. Situated on a “16.5-hectare tract of preserved battleground” (Gough, 2004: 235), this site houses a variety of trees and plants native to Canada’s most eastern province, including “white spruce, birch, dogberry and juniper” (Gough, 2004: 243). At its heart, resting on the base of a “raised stone cairn” (Gough, 2004: 242) and surrounded by a series of plaques depicting the names of 821 fallen men “with no known grave” (VAC, 2025b: Section 6), a large bronze caribou statue can be found gazing over the property, its head raised towards the sky in a symbolic image of both strength and defiance. Having served as the official emblem of the “Royal Newfoundland Regiment” for nearly 100 years, this caribou holds great historical significance. Centered as the focal point of five

other battlefield memorials located in France, Belgium and Turkey, the bronze Caribou statues mark what is now known as “The Trail of the Caribou” (VAC, 2025b: Section 5), a series of memorial sites dedicated to the commemoration of bygone Newfoundland troops who once fought under the British Commonwealth.

Yet, recognizing the importance of establishing such tributes on the homefront, Canada has also moved to create various memorials and exhibitions within its *own* territorial borders dedicated to honouring the men it lost in WWI. For example, the *Canadian War Memorials Fund* particularly took initiative in putting together a meaningful exhibition “of war paintings and relics”, including “photographs, war trophies, souvenirs ... artillery pieces and aeroplanes” used by (or at the very least, reflective of) Canada’s fallen soldiers (Lloyd, 1998: 147). First displayed in the year of 1919, this exhibition continues to be shown periodically in museums across both Toronto and Montreal (Lloyd, 1998: 147). Designed for similar purposes, the construction of “The Peace Tower” and “The National Memorial Chamber” in Ottawa serves as a further testament to the sacrifices made by Canada’s WWI troops (Canadian War Museum, 2008: Section 1). Located at Parliament Hill, this site

notably contains the official “First World War Book of Remembrance”, a log of names commemorating the loss of more than 66,000 men who fought in WWI, including “all military personnel who died from 4 August 1914 to 31 April 1922” (Canadian War Museum, 2008: Section 1).

Situated in the eastern city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, similar sites of commemoration have been produced to honour the lives of soldiers, sailors and nurses who died at sea during the Great War. Examples include the aptly titled “Halifax Memorial” and the “Halifax Fort Massey Memorial” (CWGC, 2022: Memorials in Canada), two areas containing large stone cross statues and a well-arranged collection of inscribed plaques/headstones dedicated to eternalizing the many casualties that befell Canada’s naval fleet from 1914-1919. Following suit in this idea of honouring Canadian WWI soldiers and sailors who were lost at sea, the city of Victoria, Vancouver has erected a memorial located “within the grounds of the Ross Bay Cemetery” that pays homage to “the only Canadian war vessel lost at sea during World War One” (CWGC, 2022: Memorials in Canada). Simple, yet impactful in its design, this slab of granite bears the names of almost 40 mariners who died in the tragedy (CWGC, 2022: Memorials in Canada).

In total, research suggests that no fewer than 1,300 WWI memorials have been erected within and across Canada (Djebabla, 2023: 38). Of these, approximately 120 memorial sites and/or monuments are based in the province of Quebec (Djebabla, 2023: 38). Traversing the diverse cultures and ideologies of various communities, Canadian methods of commemoration thus span far and wide. Creating and maintaining an abundance of WWI grave sites and cemeteries designed to honour their dead, Canadian citizens have worked diligently to keep the names of their fallen brothers alive, no matter the cost. The physical, albeit temporary, erection of a “Cenotaph” outside the doors of Toronto’s



Figure 2. Victoria WWI Sea Vessel Memorial

City Hall in 1920 has consequently strengthened this movement, leading to the creation of numerous, like-structured memorial pieces across Canadian provinces in which large crowds of people visit once a year to leave flowers and wreaths (Lloyd, 1998: 149).

Building on the legacy of these tributes, Canada has also shown to adopt broader cultural traditions designed to commemorate the efforts of its fallen soldiers. For instance, borrowing from the British Legion, our government has officially adopted the “Poppy Campaign” (VAC, 2025d: 1), a federally recognized practice designed to honour the sacrifices made by our WWI veterans. Distributed each year in the form of small, wearable pins, poppies have consequently become “a symbol of mourning” over/for Canada’s fallen troops (Brandt, 2017: 13), one that continues to be displayed each and every year during the month of November. Likewise, and in conjunction with various other countries and dominions who previously fought under the Allied Powers, Canada has also formally recognized a series of “commemorative events” designed to honour the lives of those who fought in WWI (VAC, 2025c: 1). As outlined by the official Veterans Affairs website, these notably include the national holidays of “Remembrance Day” on November 11th and “Vimy Ridge Day” on April 9th (2025c: 2).

Still more, from a local perspective research shows that many *small-scale* methods of commemorating WWI also manifest from coast to coast. In fact, in Canadian provinces like Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), it has even become custom to name large institutions, streets and/or sports groups in honour of specific troops like the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, a reality demonstrated through not only the title of the region’s ruling University, but its at-home hockey team.

Perception & Impacts

Understanding the wide range of Canadian memorials, monuments and tributes that exist, it should come as no surprise that many of the aforementioned statues, exhibits and/or other forms of symbolic commemoration have been critiqued by the general public. Indeed, most (if not all) of these objects and sites have received some sort of negative backlash from their viewers, especially that of the Vimy Ridge monument located in northern France. Accused of perpetuating a solely “Christian view of the world” through not only its twin pylons, which were explicitly designed to represent white colonies, but the structure of its grieving woman statue, the Vimy Ridge monument notably excludes the lives of “First Nations Canadians” that fought there during WWI (Barrett, 2011: 313). This failure to honour Indigenous soldiers proves to be a huge gap, diminishing the monument’s success and distorting the reality of what truly happened at the Battle of Vimy Ridge by erasing an entire population of men. Unfortunately, however, such injustice is mirrored throughout a plethora of memorials constructed within and across Britain’s colonies (Barrett, 2011: 315), thus situating race and ethnicity as critical factors in shaping how the bodies of soldiers are respected and represented in the contemporary era. A closer analysis of the official Veterans Affairs website proves to strengthen this theme, with only one commemorative event being formally recognized by the Canadian government in honour of its fallen Indigenous troops — “Indigenous Veterans Day”, which is held annually on the date of November 8th (2025c: 2).

Likewise, despite their involvement in the First World War, Japanese Canadians have also not “figured prominently in Canada’s commemorative sites such as war memorials and cenotaphs, or in the paintings and other visual art representations produced by Canadian artists during and after the war” (Dick, 2010: 440). Notably, there is no statue or holiday specifically dedicated to the

sacrifices they made defending the homefront. Their names are not inscribed on any plaques, and their likeness is not reflected through the means of mainstream visual artwork, leaving their legacies to consequently die on the battlefields in which they once took their final breath. Hence, it is easy to see that the image of WWI produced by these commemorative efforts (or lack thereof) is one that is largely flawed in the sense that it paints an increasingly simplified version of the war, excluding entire groups of soldiers that once critically contributed to the success of the Allied Powers.

Unfortunately, applying this lens of erasure to the examination of Canadian war cemeteries produces similarly gut-wrenching results. Indeed, it is evident that the wide array of headstones, inscriptions and plots of earth housed within and across these grave sites are strikingly limited in their representation of

WWI and the lives it claimed. While many epitaphs contained therein fail to accurately encapsulate the legacy of the men to whom they are dedicated, blandly reinforcing the vague, time-worn descriptors of “Rest in peace”, “Gone but not forgotten,” and/or “Son of ... born in ...” (McGeer, 2017: 59), others simply do not exist. In fact, research suggests that “of the 66,000 Canadians killed in the Great War, nearly 18,000 have no known grave” (McGeer, 2017: 59). Of those lucky enough to have been commemorated through an unoriginal base plaque or the marking of a cross, the number of inscriptions that offer personalized accounts and/or meaningful “insight into the minds of the bereaved” total about 3,000 (McGeer, 2017: 59). The result? Widespread physical and symbolic erasure of a plethora of WWI heroes, creating a commemorative imbalance that privileges a mere 5 per cent of Canada’s war dead (McGeer, 2017: 59).

BRITANNIA, GUARD WELL IN PEACE OUR LOVED ONE’S RESTING PLACE.

Private George Albert Potts, 5th Battalion, November 25th 1917 (age 39)

LEST WE FORGET.

Private Cyril Charles Hill, 24th Battalion, April 30th 1916 (age 19)

Private Horace Hill, 24th Battalion, April 30th 1916 (age 22)

Figure 3. Generic Epitaph Examples



Figure 4. An array of identical CWGC headstones dedicated to fallen Canadian Soldiers

Despite the rather positive perception of modern Canadian artwork focused on themes of the Great War, it is additionally evident that many of the narratives our country has been perpetuating about WWI throughout the course of the past twenty-five years have become deeply entrenched with false images and/or myths created by those who never experienced it (Fussell, 2013: 348). Based on this reality, all forms of contemporary Canadian commemoration, including paintings, literature and memorials should be taken with a grain of salt. This is especially true in the case of more recently produced films, artwork, and poetry written and designed *in honour* of WWI veterans rather than *by* WWI veterans. Reinforcing inaccurate stories/accounts of the war, such tributes are strikingly misleading in structure. But what can be done to stop their influence on unknowing, susceptible viewers? With thousands of tourists a year travelling out of their way to visit sites like Vimy Ridge (Brandt, 2017: 13), there seems to be an overwhelming appreciation for these otherwise “flawed” monuments, as expressed through constant visitation of and appraisal towards their erection. Yet it is important to recognize that these tributes are only so “positively” perceived due to the strategic ways in which they glorify WWI through their shiny stone surfaces, intense watercolours and gold-trimmed plaques. In reality, their failure to accurately communicate the harsh reality of the First World War goes unmarked by the average viewer, thus resulting in the need for more historically-sound, community-aligned WWI memorials. Indeed, as explained through the work of scholar Jay Winter, Canada’s larger, federal-based WWI monuments notably fall short of their goal to successfully commemorate the lives of our fallen troops, for it is only possible to honour such a tragedy through meaningful, “small-scale, locally

rooted social action” that includes and considers *all* peoples and stories whom have contributed, in one way or another, to the collective memory of the Great War through their kinship and/or shared experiences (2006: 150).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is strikingly evident that contemporary methods of remembrance in Canada strategically glorify or “gloss over” the reality of the First World War. Indeed, manifesting across a variety of locations (including, but not limited to, France, Belgium, Turkey, Quebec, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador), and through a variety of mediums (such as statues, paintings, headstones, plaques, holidays and decorative pins), Canada’s way of honouring its fallen soldiers has shown to positively influence public perception of WWI, perhaps behind what is necessary and/or “truthful.” Creating and promoting deliberately well-polished, tailor-made methods of remembrance, our country thus fails to accurately encapsulate and communicate the historical reality of the First World War. Recognizing this, viewers of these various monuments, memorials and symbols must therefore be careful in wholly accepting the messages that Canadian tributes perpetuate, taking time to reflect on what meaningful “remembrance” and “commemoration” truly entails for our country. Indeed, as demonstrated by this paper, the “perfect” and prideful image of war that Canada likes to strengthen through its diverse erection of statues, cenotaphs and/or other forms of artwork is notably and unfortunately flawed, leaving out the complex identities, sacrifices and emotions that many WWI soldiers embodied during their time in the trenches.

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