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# Narrating Canadian War Memorials, Understanding National Identity

**Abstract.** Pierre Berton writes that “Canada, more than most countries, is a nation of ... memorials”. Yet, with the passage of time, war memorials inevitably tend to lose their original significance, becoming altogether ‘invisible’ for historically-estranged generations. Hence the need for re-remembering war memorials and monuments for the purposes of consolidating a (national) collective memory. The aim of this paper is a comparative analysis of *Fields of Sacrifice* (1963, dir. Donald Brittain), Herbert Fairlie Wood’s and John Swettenham’s *Silent Witnesses* (1974), Robert Shipley’s *To Mark Our Place* (1987), and Robert Konduras’s and Richard Parrish’s *World War I: A Monumental History* (2014) within the context of the theoretical distinction between memorial and monument cultures in order to discuss the defining ideological tropes of ‘Canadianness’.

**Keywords:** war, commemoration, memorials, monuments, the Great War, World War II, Canada, national memory

## 1. Introduction

State-imposed commemorative modes of representation of war(s), be it memorials/monuments, museums, or rituals of remembrance, provide the most efficient affective, epistemological and ideological means to ensure a unifying sense of a nation as a “soul, a spiritual principle”, a “grand solidarity” (Renan 1994 [1882]: 17) and an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983: 6). However strongly we may condemn wars, the brutal truth is that it is precisely wars that have the greatest potential to consolidate a nation by means of evoking “a moral conscience” (Renan 1994 [1882]: 18). Scholars such as Jay Winter, Daniel J. Sherman, K.S. Inglis, and Steven Trout,<sup>2</sup> working in the field of memorial

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2 For the significance of memorial/monument spaces for an understanding of the ideological workings of national (collective) memory, see Jay Winter’s *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in*

studies, have all underscored the necessity of seeing commemorative landscapes as a key factor in constructing a sense of national identity in a given present. However, architectural embodiments of (national) collective memory—and collective memory itself—have been put under close scrutiny. The experience of war, inscribed in the minds of those who fought in it or simply lived through it, is inevitably to be supplanted by what Pierre Nora defines as “*lieu de mémoire*”, where “what is being remembered [is] memory itself” (Nora 1989: 16). Nora’s “sites of memory” are a determinant of collective memory, which Susan Sontag defined in the following terms: “What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulation: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened” (Sontag 2004 [2003]: 76). In Peter Novick’s words, “collective memory” as a representation of the past carries the danger of oversimplification, which easily allows for ideological manipulations: “To understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity, to have sufficient detachment to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities of protagonists’ motives and behavior. Collective memory simplifies, sees events from a single, committed perspective; it is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes” (Novick 1999: 3–4). Taking my cue from Arthur Danto’s distinction between the “memorial” and the “monument”,<sup>3</sup> I suggest considering the difference between the cultural processes of memorialization versus monumentalization. I define memorialization as a purposeful over-focus on the physical and psychological suffering of soldiers as victims of war in order to convey a powerful anti-war message. This representational schemata is all about underscoring the futility of sacrifice, so as to convey an ethically-motivated anti-war message.<sup>4</sup> In turn, monumentalization is a representational schemata that does not deny that war is hell but aims to depict the suffering of a (national) collectivity as a worthwhile sacrifice superior to the trauma of the individual and the extent of the loss of life, a sacrifice seen as contributing to the greatness of the nation in the present.<sup>5</sup> My argument is that the sense of a distinctive national ‘Canadianness’ has been written within a war-based ideological overlapping of memorialization and monumentalization,

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*European Cultural History* (1995), Daniel J. Sherman’s *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (1999), K.S. Inglis’s *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (1998), Steven Trout’s *The Battlefield of Memory: The First World War and American Remembrance, 1919–1941* (2010); see also William Kidd and Brian Murdoch (eds) *Memory and Memorials: The Commemorative Century* (2004).

- 3 “We erect monuments so that we shall always remember and build memorials so that we shall never forget” (Danto 1985: 152).
- 4 The most distinctive examples of memorialization encompass the British cultural memory of the Great War and the US cultural memory of the Vietnam War.
- 5 Significantly, the monumentalization of the Second World War in British and US cultural memory serves to counteract, respectively, the British Great War “futility myth” and the US “Vietnam War Syndrome.”

combining a memorial-oriented emphasis on the tragic loss of life with a monument-based evocation of ‘the birth of the nation’ myth.

Commemorative practices, as Pierre Nora claims, “have no referent in reality; or rather, they are their own referent: pure, exclusively self-referential signs, and hence their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications” (Nora 1989: 19). This “incessant recycling” may ultimately lead to a non-meaning altogether, with the passage of time creating an unavoidable historical estrangement, for “[o]nce we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of the memory burden” (Young 1993: 5). Concomitantly, as Robert Musil has emphasized, “[t]here is nothing in this world as invisible as monuments. ... It is ... the purpose of the most ordinary monuments to first conjure up a remembrance, or to grab hold of our attention and give a pious bent to our feelings .... They repel the very thing they are supposed to attract. One cannot say we did not notice them; one would have to say they ‘de-notice’ them, they elude our perceptive faculties” (Musil 2006 [1957]: 64–65). It is beyond doubt that, “as part of nation’s rites or the objects of a people’s national pilgrimage, [monuments and memorials] are invested with a national soul and memory”, but, as Young emphasizes, “by themselves [they] are of little value, mere stones in the landscape” (Young 1993: 2). In his 1992 essay, K. S. Inglis asks: “Will it be the more and more common fate of war memorials to be functionally visible only at widely separated ceremonial moments? How is a reverent regard for war memorials to survive the generations which created them?” (Inglis 1992: 18). In the “Preface” to his study of Canadian war memorials, Robert Shipley expresses his concern that “It didn’t take many trips to the library to find that virtually no one had yet written about the monuments that are such a ubiquitous feature of Canadian communities” (Shipley 1987: 10).

And why write about memorials? Shipley’s answer is that “if we look carefully at these pieces of our national and communal inheritance, we may well be rewarded with an enriched appreciation of our own unique society and country” (Shipley 1987: 21). Yet, the documentary *Fields of Sacrifice* (1963), Herbert Fairlie Wood’s and John Swettenham’s *Silent Witnesses* (1974), Robert Shipley’s *To Mark our Place. A History of Canadian War Memorials* (1987) and Robert Konduros’s and Richard Parrish’s *World War I: A Monumental History* (2014) are more about encoding than decoding the Canadian commemorative landscape. Two issues need to be taken into consideration here. First, however comprehensive the authors wished to be, the sheer number of Canadian war memorials as well as war cemeteries is such that a selection was necessary. And selection is always determined by a certain ideological bias. Second, it is highly unlikely that any one person could possibly see as many of the memorials and war cemeteries as included in these works, thus what is actually being proposed is a reading of the Canadian commemorative landscape within the interpretative frame offered by the authors. Finally, certain (hi)stories tended to gain prominence over others,

whereas quite a few (hi)stories remained largely untold. One needs to look critically at the narratives which evolved round Canadian practices of remembrance so as to underscore the complex intertwining between nationalism, multiculturalism, and expiating national guilt.

It is true, as James Young asserts, that typically “the memorial operation remains self-contained and detached from our daily lives” (Young 1993: 5). And yet, a commemorative landscape can become a malleable ideological space. This is usually the result of a shift in national politics and/or social awareness. First, there may appear a politically or socially determined need to remove ‘old’ monuments, which changes both the national commemorative landscape and the national narrative about the past. The transnational phenomenon of “statue wars” is worth noting, with the “Rhodes Must Fall” movement in South Africa, Great Britain and the USA,<sup>6</sup> or the “de-Sovietization” policy in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup> In Canada, the repercussions of the discovery of the graves of victims of the notorious residential schools has brought about protests against Pope John Paul II monuments.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, the contestation of the ideologies underlying existing forms of commemoration often brings about a reassessment of the modes of representation. Does it suffice to simply erect new memorials or monuments? Such as the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument in Ottawa? Or does commemoration need to be more firmly written into the everyday life of a community? In the specific case of Canada, Tyler Stiem has praised the idea of “Vancouver [as] a city of reconciliation formally recognising its occupation of the unceded territories and embarking with local First Nations governments on a long-term plan to decolonise and indigenise the city. To begin with, some streets, parks, schools and landmarks will be renamed ...” (Stiem 2018). This particular case of Canada shows how embracing the hitherto ‘Otherness’ of the First Nations may serve to appropriate the memorialization of people for the purposes of a monumentalization of the nation. Let it suffice to quote the following description from the webpage of Veterans Affairs Canada: “The richly symbolic sculpture represents the stories of thousands of men and women who have played a decisive role in defending the freedom of our country” (“The National Aboriginal Veterans Monument”).<sup>9</sup>

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6 See Tyler Stiem’s “Statue wars: what should we do with troublesome monuments?”, 2018, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/sep/26/statue-wars-what-should-we-do-with-troublesome-monuments>

7 See Helen Parish, “Soviet monuments are being toppled—this gives the spaces they occupied a new meaning”, 2022, *The Conversation*, [theconversation.com/soviet-monuments-are-being-toppled-this-gives-the-spaces-they-occupied-a-new-meaning-190022](https://theconversation.com/soviet-monuments-are-being-toppled-this-gives-the-spaces-they-occupied-a-new-meaning-190022)

8 “Statue of Pope John Paul II outside Edmonton Catholic church painted red”, 2021, *CBC News*, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-police-church-paint-residential-schools-1.6082378>

9 <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/national-inventory-canadian-memorials/details/7972>

## 2. Engraving the Memorial versus the Monumental (Hi)Story of Canada: The Canadian National Vimy Memorial

Though Robert Shipley's *To Mark our Place. A History of Canadian War Memorials* is devoted exclusively to local Canadian memorials, the focus of Pierre Berton's "Foreword" is, significantly, the Canadian National Vimy Memorial. It is, as Berton writes, "arguably the most massive monument in France, [even though] commemorating as it does one of the briefest and least bloody of the Great War battles" (Berton, in Shipley 1987: 8). The site chosen for the memorial commemorating the Canadian capture of Vimy Ridge, as well as the sheer magnitude of Walter Allward's architectural design, renders it a perfect example of the monument as defined by Arthur Danto: "Monuments make heroes and triumphs, victories and conquests, perpetually present and part of life. ... With monuments we honor ourselves" (Danto 1985: 152). Half a century after the official unveiling, Berton writes of the meaning of the Vimy Memorial for Canadian nationhood:

One, I think, has to do with pride. Canada entered the war as a colony and emerged as a nation. ... The Great War was a searing experience and also a turning point. We grew up as a result of that war: for the first time we came to understand that war is not gallant; it is hell. But if we lost our illusions, we also lost our inferiority complex. Like the Australians, we learned that we were equal to any fighting nation in earth. (Berton, in Shipley 1987: 8)

It is clearly noticeable that Berton writes into this ideologically monument-oriented narrative yet another one, very memorial-oriented, and in perfect accord with Arthur Danto's definition of "the memorial [as] a special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead" (Danto 1985: 152). Berton writes:

The monument says something else, of course. The names of the dead stand for the sacrifice as well as the futility of war—tens of thousands of them spread across the country engraved on sullen bronze. Here you can sense the lifeblood of the nation draining away, the flower of our youth scythed down, the promise of the future distorted. (Berton, in Shipley 1987: 8)

In Berton's view, therefore, the Vimy Memorial perfectly projects the two most prominent and interdependent narratives of Canadian nationhood, one memorializing the Canadian sacrifice of life on the battlefields of France and the other monumentalizing Canada's autonomous national identity gained on the foundations of that sacrifice.

According to Jacqueline Hucker, "[Allward's] monument made no reference to victory. Instead it spoke to national and universal goals for good in the world" (Hucker 2007: 283). However, the reading of Walter Allward's architectural design obviously depends on the

onlooker. Diverse meanings can also be construed through the different photographic takes of the Vimy Memorial. Herbert Fairlie Wood's and John Swettenham's *Silent Witnesses*, published in 1974, was intended as a follow-up to the 1963 documentary *Fields of Sacrifice*, for "it was recognized that only a few of the many memorials and cemeteries could be portrayed, and only a limited amount of information could be given about those that were included" (Wood & Swettenham 1974: 1). Funded by the Canadian Department of Veterans' Affairs, *Silent Witnesses* was to be as wide-ranging a guide as possible to the overseas war cemeteries where the Canadian dead lay buried. It was also the aim of the authors to restore the historical context of the memorial sites, hence the book is also an account of Canada's involvement in all the military conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with particular emphasis on both world wars. Though in both these wars Canadian regiments contributed to the final victory, the tone of the book is sombre, its final message being:

The men who died for what they believed in thought their sacrifice would bring an end to war. We honour them today in cemeteries and with memorials throughout the world. Let us honour their hopes, too, by doing all we can to prevent a recurrence of the tragic wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century while defending the liberties those men gave their lives to preserve. (Wood & Swettenham 1974: 236)

This is a call for an understanding of the price that had to be paid for the peace in which contemporary generations live. And this price of life is underscored by the 236 pages of the book showing cemetery after cemetery in which the Canadian dead lie. This is an overtly memorial-oriented project, hence the very deliberate choice of George Hunter's photograph "The Vimy Memorial by Night" for the frontispiece image. Though the photograph conveys the size of the Vimy Memorial, the visual dominance of the two pylons, the invisibility of the allegorical figures, as well as the enshrouding darkness endow the structure with an austerity befitting a memorial and diminish the inherent grandiloquence of Allward's design so typical for a monument.

A totally different meaning of the Vimy Memorial is conveyed in Robert Konduros's and Richard Parrish's photographic narrative, meaningfully entitled *World War I: A Monumental History*, published in 2014. The second chapter, "Cast in Metal, Carved in Stone", is entirely devoted to the Vimy Memorial, with altogether 18 pages containing photo images of the various constituent parts of Allward's complex design. Regardless of whether the photo was taken in daytime or night, the allegorical figures are always well visible, not to mention that the most impressive image, spread out on two pages (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 25–26), conveys a sense of magnitude by including a minute human figure walking past the gigantic pylons. If, in *Silent Witnesses*, the image was to speak for itself, the photos in *World War I: A Monumental History* are accompanied by commentaries which, though emphasizing that Vimy Ridge was "the costliest victory

in Canada's military history", also highlight that it was nevertheless a victory, the more gratifying as "no one expected the Canadians to succeed" (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 27), and thus, not surprisingly, the Vimy Memorial is stated to be "the greatest [monument] the world has seen, ... inspired by [Allward's] desire to show the debt Canada owed to its fallen soldiers" (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 18).

Konduros's and Parrish's monumental photographic (hi)story of Canadian nationhood intentionally foregrounds the details of the Vimy Memorial as the signifiers of the ideals constituting the foundations of Canadian national identity, including "The Chorus ... symbol[izing] Justice, Peace, Hope, Charity, Honour, Faith, Truth and Knowledge", as well as the allegorical representation of "The Sympathy of the Canadians for the Helpless ...". Yet, the focus of Allward's design is undoubtedly laid on Canada's sacrifice, which is the source of both national mourning and national pride, as signified by "The Mourning Parents that represent all the mothers and fathers of Canada's war dead", "The Spirit of Sacrifice ... symbolizing a dying soldier passing the torch to his battlefield comrade", and "The Defenders", including an allegorical representation of the "Breaking of the Sword" (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 28). The figure of "Mother Canada looking down at the stone sarcophagus" (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 31–32) poignantly blends the memorial and monumental (hi)stories of Canada, concomitantly signifying a symbolic shedding of Canada's ties to the British Empire. It is at once a statue representing Canada mourning for her sons lost in war, yet, in its appearance, the figure also depicts Canada's readiness to accept the sacrifice of her sons: "[she] shows her power through her disregard of her clothing. ... The [exposed] breast of the private world is the source of nourishment for the future hero" (Evans 2007: 124). Most importantly, however, the female figure of "Canada Bereft" symbolically supplants the imperial ideal of "Mother England".

The fusion of memorial and monumental meanings in commemorative practice is not a specifically Canadian practice, and, it must be emphasized, all depends on the interpretations of the forms of remembrance, for one may well argue that the monumental magnitude of the Menin Gate Memorial or the Thiepval Memorial for the Missing of the Somme quite effectively overshadows their memorial purpose. The Vimy Memorial was designed to be the ultimate Canadian memorial-monument, with the deliberately dominating "heroic figure of Canada brooding over the graves of her valiant dead" (Allward, qtd. in Evans 2007: 124). Yet, the importance of a memorial is not, by definition, ascertained by the mere fact of its construction on a chosen site. According to Eric Brown and Tim Cook, it was the ceremonial ritual surrounding the unveiling of the Vimy Memorial in 1936, including the presence of "6,200 veterans and their families" organized by the Canadian Legion (Brown & Cook 2011: 43), which contributed most effectively to the rise of the "birth of the nation" narrative: "The pilgrimage ... was surrounded and underpinned by the mixed messages of pride in service, lament for the dead, .... In the shadow of the Vimy memorial, the battle was recast, carved in stone,

as an iconic, nation-changing event” (Brown & Cook 2011: 53). However, historical facts cannot be ignored. First and foremost, the official unveiling of the Vimy Memorial could not have taken place without the presence and address of King Edward, who, as Prince of Wales, had come to the British Dominion of Canada for a three-month tour in 1919 (Brown & Cook 2011: 114, 117). Secondly, the Canadian Legion, which had arranged the pilgrimage to the 1936 inauguration of Allward’s monument-memorial was, as historian Jonathan Vance emphasizes, “a part of the British Empire Service League, which had been established in South Africa in 1921”, and “even the Vimy Pilgrimage [itself] that was proclaimed the birthplace of the Canadian nation, was a celebration of empire as well as nation” (Vance 2012: 143–144).

### **3. ‘British’ or ‘Canadian’ Canada?: From “Fields of Sacrifice” to Nationhood**

The intertwining monumental and memorial (hi)stories of Canada are inextricably connected to the British Empire. And yet, the shedding of this connection seemed necessary for the confirmation of a distinctive Canadian national identity in the aftermath of the Second World War. In the 1963 documentary *Fields of Sacrifice*, the historical trajectory is reversed, beginning with the Normandy invasion, during which the military commitment of the Canadian soldiers “left behind a liberated people and their dead in final dignity”, and ending with the Canadian military contribution during the Great War, the final image of the documentary being the Vimy Memorial, uniting, albeit symbolically, the Canadian killed during 1914–1918 and 1939–1945: “11,000 names of Canadians who vanished and were joined by other Canadians until there were 100, 000 memories of the two world wars over the fields of sacrifice” (*Fields of Sacrifice*). The documentary’s strategy is quite transparent, the concluding image being the one the viewers would remember most vividly. It would seem, therefore, that, for Canada, all began with and must return to the Vimy Memorial. And yet the specific emplotment of Canada’s military history in this particular documentary is also a delineation of a complex process combining both a necessary acknowledgment of Canada’s ties to the British Empire as well as an endorsement of the myth of the birth of [the Canadian] nation.

The starting point of the documentary is the Beny-Sur-Mer Canadian War Cemetery in the village of Reviers, with the following comment: “though Normandy was a place of great victory, others died in terrible places of defeat”. The reversed historical storyline consequently takes the viewer to the eighteen-day battle for Hong Kong (1941), where the Canadians “never stood a chance”, as well as the ill-fated raid on the French port of Dieppe (1942), during which Canada’s soldiers “[were] killed by the cliffs and the enemy ... looked down on them from the cliffs” (*Fields of Sacrifice*). The eternal reminders of Canadian martyrdom are said to be, respectively, the Sai Wan War Cemetery and the Dieppe Canadian War Cemetery, where the victims of disastrous tactical military decisions were



to be forever buried. However, the message of the documentary is that the greater the adversities the Canadian soldier had to endure, the greater was his sacrifice. The initial defeats were to be followed by hard-worn victories. The tide was to turn in favour of the Allied Forces, and the documentary shifts to the Netherlands, where “[the Canadians] are best remembered” as “[they] brought back the old life”. The viewer is provided with an image of children “[who] have no memories of that war, but each year they are taken to the [Groesbeck] Canadian War cemetery... so that they would know of the men who faced fear and death [and] so that they may be born unafraid” (*Fields of Sacrifice*). The post-war footage shows schoolchildren taken to lay flowers at the graves of the Canadian soldiers, as if to accentuate that if the Dutch remember this sacrifice, the more so should the Canadian nation. Quite intentionally, the documentary juxtaposes contemporary and historical images, the more powerfully to foreground the need to remember that the places where people can freely move about, going about their everyday business or spending vacations, were once battle zones.

The meaning of the eponymous “fields of sacrifice” is expanded to also include the sea and the skies, where likewise so many Canadians lost their lives. Though unveiled in 1927, the Diamond War Memorial in Londonderry in Northern Ireland was also to become the commemorative site for the dead of the Second World War. Londonderry itself is defined in the documentary as “the haven for Canada’s navy”, with “a fond memory of the Canadians” to linger long after the end of the war (*Fields of Sacrifice*). The Diamond War Memorial has a unique design, consisting of a winged figure of Victory placed upon a majestic stone column, the base of which is written over with the names of soldiers killed. Situated on both sides of this centrepiece design are two figures, a soldier and a sailor. The uniqueness of these two statues resides in their dynamic postures. These are not the typical figures of a standing soldier; these are figures of men as if on active duty. And it is the figure of the resilient sailor that is brought into the centre of the lens of the camera, to represent not just the Irishmen lost at sea, but also the Canadians. The documentary also takes the viewers to the fields of England, from where, alongside Englishmen, Canadian pilots “who flew [the Lancasters and Spitfires] to die” were to be commemorated at the Runnymede Royal Canadian Air Force Commonwealth Memorial, with “the names of the 3,000 Canadian airmen” who lost their lives in air warfare (*Fields of Sacrifice*).

The intention of *Fields of Sacrifice* was, predominantly, to convey Canada’s right—gained through the eponymous “sacrifice” of life—to a sovereign identity. The reversal of time’s arrow allows the showing of a symbolic departure from the British Empire. After the material concerning the Second World War, the documentary depicts contemporary footage of the Menin Gate Memorial, with people taking a pause, in the aftermath of the Second World War, to listen to the Last Post, in an eerie replication of the Great War routine of the stand-to. Designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield, and officially inaugurated

in 1927, the Menin Gate, though performing an obvious memorial function, was also, by means of the recumbent figure of a lion as if towering over Ypres, a monument to the greatness of the victorious British Empire. The documentary also includes images of the Tyne Cot Memorial. Designed by Herbert Baker and unveiled in 1920, the memorial was dedicated to the men who fought in the name of the British Empire. If the Menin Gate and Tyne Cot memorials include Canadian sacrifice within the discursive frame of an imperial unity, the memorials subsequently shown in the documentary delineate Canada's path—leading through the eponymous sacrifice—to independent nationhood. It is not a coincidence that an image of the caribou statue at Beaumont Hamel is shown, for by the time the documentary was made Newfoundland had become a province of Canada. The Bourlon Wood Memorial commemorates the Canadian contribution to the final and decisive counter-offensive, determining Germany's ultimate defeat, to be called "Canada's Hundred Days". One of the most distinctive of the Canadian overseas memorials is, beyond doubt, Frederick Chapman Clemesha's "The Brooding Soldier" in Saint Julien, Belgium. Though the soldier figure is incomplete, the design focusing only on his bowed head and resting arms, the size of the column clearly suggests the resilience of the Canadian soldier. Similarly, the mention of the Courcellette Canadian Memorial serves the purposes of monumentalization, with the inscription reading "THE CANADIAN CORPS BORE A VALIANT PART IN FORCING BACK THE GERMANS ON THESE SLOPES DURING THE BATTLES OF THE SOMME SEPT. 3RD–NOV. 18TH 1916" (*Fields of Sacrifice*).

It is not surprising that *Fields of Sacrifice* ends with a voice-over underscoring the importance of April 1917, when "Germans report the Canadian trenches below Vimy Ridge are alive with activity, they are good troops and well-suited for assaulting", accompanied by documentary footage of "the Canadians [throwing] themselves at Vimy Ridge", and concluding with a bird-eye's view of Allward's Vimy Memorial, with the commentary symbolically uniting the Canadian dead of both 1914–1918 and 1939–1945: "11,000 names of Canadians who vanished were joined in violent death by other Canadians, until there were 100,000 memories of the two world wars over the fields of sacrifice" (*Fields of Sacrifice*). The ending of the documentary foregrounds the Vimy Memorial as the 'birth of a nation' memorial-monument with the victory achieved during the Great War connected, albeit symbolically, to the Canadian contribution to the final victory over the Third Reich in the Second World War,<sup>10</sup> thus confirming Canada's moral right to national pride.

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10 It is worth mentioning here J.L. Granatstein's *The Last Good War: An Illustrated History of Canada in the Second World War 1939-1945* (2005).

#### 4. Defining Canada: National Homogeneity or Multiculturalism? And ... the Missing Stories...

Memorial/monument-building is essential for constructing a sense of national identity. It is important to note that “monuments are able to communicate their message by their form alone” (104) because “through [the] association of certain shapes repeatedly used for the same purposes, monuments have become a kind of language” (Shipley 1987: 104, 107). A sense of national unity can be achieved by means of the standardization inherent in commemorative practice. Though by the fact of their location, memorials “express[ed] local distinctiveness and individuality”, nevertheless “it was [their] similarity to other memorials across the country [that] affirmed that the town shared at least one common experience with a larger collectivity: death in war” (Vance 2005: 410). In Konduros’s and Parrish’s *World War I: A Monumental History*, the cover photo shows Coeur de Lion MacCarthy’s sculpture of a soldier holding a rifle with an attached bayonet in a position suggesting that he is about to kill the enemy. This is a monument honouring the military prowess of the Canadian soldier, and his determination to overcome the enemy in service of his country. The inside front photo shows Vernon March’s likewise dynamic-looking soldier-figures, a truly monumental design. The choice of the National Memorial in Ottawa, tellingly also called “The Response”, as one of the opening photo-images could not have been coincidental. The National Memorial in Ottawa was officially unveiled in 1939, and dedicated by King George VI. However, when the Memorial was rededicated to honour the Canadian soldiers who lost their lives in the Second World War and the subsequent conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, not to mention the decision to entomb here the Unknown Canadian Soldier in 2000, the historical imperial context of Canada was ultimately supplanted by an apotheosis of a truly independent nationhood. The final pages of the album depict the memorials dedicated to Jack Bouthillier (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 171, 175–176) and Karine Blaise (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 172, 173–174), both killed in Afghanistan, both solemn, and yet emphasizing both the nation’s gratitude and the readiness of the Canadian soldier to serve, not to mention that these images are followed by a concluding part entitled “Honour Roll”, showing sculptures clearly chosen to evoke a sense of national pride. The message of the album is clear: “Remember” (180), and the maple leaf and Canadian flag featuring in many of the images clearly indicates what the Canadians should be proud of.

Differences that are latent in peace time may potentially gain in intensity in times of military conflict and, as Robert Shipley emphasizes, “the bitterness between classes, groups and religions [was] reflected in the stone of monuments or in the lack of it” (Shipley 1987: 96). He provides the example of Sydney in Nova Scotia, where a post-Great War memorial failed to recognize the sacrifice of the Catholic men, listing only the Protestant dead (Shipley 1987: 96–97). There were also communities, Shipley writes, that showed no interest in either supporting the Canadian war effort or, in the inter-war period, erecting memorials to the war dead:

Waterloo, Ontario was the centre of a pacifist Mennonite settlement. ... There was never any indication of sympathy for the Kaiser's cause, but neither were German Canadians in places like Waterloo over-anxious to fight. ... West Elgin County, in southwestern Ontario, had been the home for several generations of dispossessed settlers from the Scottish Highlands, nurtured in their resentment of English domination. (Shipley 1987: 97)

Significantly, Shipley devotes less than two pages to such areas of conflict, claiming further on that “what is surprising is that despite centrifugal forces, the requisite degree of agreement was reached in the vast majority of Canadian communities”, and this “remarkable ability and willingness on the part of diverse people to bridge gaps and combine their efforts in a common desire to commemorate a common loss” is best seen in the case of “monuments in much of Quebec, New Brunswick, and in parts of Ontario [with the inscription] “*Nos morts—Our Dead*” (Shipley 1987: 98). It is evident that Shipley is focused on an analysis of Canadian war memorials as signifiers of “a new national awareness” (Shipley 1987: 113). Though Shipley underscores the fact that “monuments in certain places also reflected various cultural traditions and ethnic distinctions”, providing examples of monuments built by the Scottish, Acadian, Japanese, and Italian communities, and including a photo of “a monument dedicated to the memory of the Ukrainian and Ukrainian-Canadian war victims” (Shipley 1987: 115), the fact remains that he does not devote more than three pages to Canada's endemic “cultural mosaic” (Shipley 1987: 114). For Shipley, just a few sentences suffice to cover the commemoration of other communities, with specific emphasis on the ‘Canadianness’ of these memorials:

Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Jewish, and Russian immigrants to Canada have built memorials in such places as St. Catharines and Toronto, Ontario, Rawden, Quebec, and Winnipeg, Manitoba. These monuments generally include both Canadian emblems and the symbols of the old country as well as inscriptions in both English and the particular national language and script. They remember those from the specific community who were killed while serving in the Canadian forces and those relatives and friends who fought in the old countries. (Shipley 1987: 115–116)

Could it be, perhaps, a sign of his times that Shipley is attentive to only selected absences within the Canadian memorialscape, and yet deliberately ignores others? He notes, for instance, that “women's direct involvement as members of the armed forces during the wars was not widely acknowledged before [the Women Soldiers Memorial in Winnipeg] was erected ... in 1976” (Shipley 1987: 57), and yet he fails to see what Konduros and Parrish underscore thirty years later, namely that “The names [Aboriginals, First Nations, Indians] change with political correctness but the story of shabby treatment has not” (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 76).

*World War I: A Monumental History* includes a photo of a memorial “erected by the Chipewewa Indians of Cape Croker” with information that this is “the only statue for Canadian Indians who fought in the Great War” (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 75). A further page is devoted to the history of Corporal Francis Pegahmagabow, whose service during the Great War was exceptional and yet “he was not good enough to be equal”, for “such was Canada of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 78). The implicit message is that Canada has changed, ready to acknowledge its wilful historical amnesia. However, the authors do not include other memorials that had appeared by the time their book was published, such as the National Aboriginal Veterans Monument in Ottawa, designed by Lloyd Pinay and unveiled in 2001. Canada’s historical guilt is likewise acknowledged in the very same chapter in the context of the persecution of Ukrainian Canadians during the Great War: “It was mistakenly thought the Ukrainians might be loyal to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany’s ally. ... [They] were interned across Canada and one of the largest camps was near a site known as Kapuskasing. They were forced to clear the woods and build bunk houses during the winter” (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 80) It is implied that even if Canada had once strayed from the path of ideals purported to be the foundation of its national spirit, it was ready to rectify the mistakes of the past: “In 2005, the Parliament officially expressed its deep sorrow for having interned persons of Ukrainian origin. The ‘Never Forget’ statue at the Kapuskasing site ... was unveiled in 1995” (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 80). Concomitantly, there is no mention of other significant absences within the practices of commemoration pertaining to Canada’s national guilt, for instance the mistreatment of German Canadians during the Great War.<sup>11</sup> Though *World War I: A Monumental History* is overtly stated to be a “tribute to those Canadians and communities who long ago gave so much in the struggle of civilization against barbarism” (Konduros & Parrish 2014: 2, emphasis mine), the thematic scope of the book is such as to highlight an overarching Canadian national identity, as exemplified by chapters such as “Cast in Metal, Carved in Stone: Vimy Ridge”, “Other Canadian Sculptors”, “Triplets and Replicas Across Canada”, or “The Greatest Poem Ever Written: In Flanders’ Fields”.

## 5. Conclusion

Commemorative practice serves to construct a sense of national unity by appropriating a chosen ideological schemata, be it within the representational frames of memorialization or monumentalization. A country like Canada, as a former settler colony, has always been faced with the challenge of appropriating its origins and history into its socio-political and cultural constructions of a unique national identity. Every nation needs a sense

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11 See Gerhard P. Bassler’s *The German Canadian Mosaic Today and Yesterday: Identities, Roots, Heritage*, Ottawa: German-Canadian Congress 1991; or Bohdan S. Kordan’s *Enemy Aliens, Prisoners of War: Internment in Canada during the Great War*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002.

of distinctiveness. Yet, the determinants of this distinctiveness may vary. For Canada today, the political guidelines for commemorative practices appear to revolve round the acknowledgement of diversity underlying ‘Canadianness’: “Parks Canada’s *National Historic Sites of Canada: System Plan*, published in 2000, outlined three strategic priorities for any ‘future commemorative activities’: the commemoration of Aboriginal history; the commemoration of ethnocultural communities’ history (those other than the French and British); and the commemoration of women’s history” (Weeks 2019). This may well have been the result of social pressure: “By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ethnocultural groups, often assisted by federal and provincial multicultural initiatives, had achieved significant commemorative success” (Strong-Boag 2009: 56); “Indigenous, ethnic, female, and working-class assaults on conventional narratives have also increasingly connected in a wide-ranging condemnation of dominant perspectives” (Strong-Boag 2009: 53). It is worth, however, looking back at the writings of Canadian nationhood throughout the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s from the perspective of the theoretical framework of the monument versus the memorial landscape. It is likewise worth taking a critical look at a cultural writing of the Canadian commemorative practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to see how much it has departed (or not?) from the focus points of the previous decades.

In the case of the documentary *Fields of Sacrifice* and Herbert Fairlie Wood’s and John Swettenham’s *Silent Witnesses*, the emphasis is on overseas war cemeteries and memorials, the aim of which was to convey an ideal of national sacrifice within the frame of the purported universal standards justifying Canada’s participation in the major conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is no glorification of war (hence also the highlighting of military defeats), but what is obviously underscored is the duty to serve in the name of morally unquestionable principles. Though his primary focus is on homeland memorials, Robert Shipley’s *To Mark our Place. A History of Canadian War Memorials* is characterized by a similar pride in the Canadian readiness to fight in the name of such principles. Robert Konduros’s and Richard Parrish’s *World War I: A Monumental History* is the most problematic, considering the time of its publication. Though noting the involvement of the First Nations in the Great War, it fails to convey the complexity of Canada’s multiculturalism. All in all, these works testify to the fact that Canadian commemorative practice was—and remains—affirmative, serving to heal and unite rather than re-open wounds.

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