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Vimy Ridge Day, 2012

Dean F. Oliver

Editor's note: This article is based on the text of a speech given at the French Embassy in Ottawa on 4 April 2012

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Vimy Foundation for the privilege of this invitation, and to the Embassy of the Republic of France and to his excellency, the Ambassador, for the honour of this company.

Canada's Vimy Ridge is about to turn 95. In many respects, the years have been kind. Vimy may be said to have aged well. It has a national day named for it. It has schools, public buildings, and institutions, and streets and ball diamonds and plays, and book after article after book. It has stamps and coins and a highly publicized annual pilgrimage. It is iconic and demonstrative and, somehow, quintessential. Vimy is emphatic, unavoidable.

Abstract: Vimy sits at or near the very centre of whatever national historical psyche Canadians might reasonably be said to possess. Vimy is unique, unalloyed, and unparalleled in our commemoration of the nation's military past. It may or may not deserve the honour, but it holds the honour just the same. Vimy's status is as its battle was: epic, indelible, and, in part, inexplicable. Vimy nevertheless should be remembered as a whole, and not disaggregated as moral lesson or site of mourning. Vimy is place, battle, and memory – a fusion of land, people, and time. We forget this, or exaggerate it, to our peril; we misunderstand it, or ignore it, to our shame.

Vimy sits at or near the very centre of whatever national historical psyche Canadians might reasonably be said to possess. Passchendaele, in comparison, has fared far less well, the commendable efforts of Canadian filmmakers notwithstanding; so too has Amiens or Ypres. The costly but victorious Sicilian campaign, one war and a quarter century later, has no comparable purchase on the collective imagination. Why, precisely, Vimy stands apart may largely be irrelevant now, 95 years later, or perhaps – more controversially – it is “impossible to say,” as historian Jonathan Vance wrote in 2007 at Vimy's ninetieth fete. Regardless, let us agree at least on simple truths: Vimy is unique, unalloyed, and unparalleled in our commemoration of the nation's military past. It may or may not be deserving of such singular esteem, but it holds the honour just the same. Vimy's status is as its battle was: epic, indelible, and, in part, inexplicable. Vimy has in this sense corporeal essence: it is a pliable shape that has been made to frame a country, a scaffold across the slats and axes of which we can almost see stretched the skins of nationhood.

What are we to make of this Vimy, deep, as we now are, in the first century removed from Vimy's own? Is it a useful but doubtful fable,

born of truth but steeped in legend, a familiar coda we dredge up to atone for the miseries of war, and that war in particular, or to “make meaning” of the sacrifices such conflict entailed? Is Vimy, on the other hand, untouchable, unarguable, a distant but precious archetype in which the very best of us can be found, and to which we must turn in search of better angels? What is Vimy, really? What is its character? Can sensible people really believe that a country already celebrating its fiftieth name day in 1917 could somehow be “born” anew, or for the first time, in the squalor of a foreign mud amidst a war that measured both its failures and its victories in countless

Résumé : Vimy figure en plein cœur, ou tout près, de toute représentation historique nationale que l'on peut raisonnablement attribuer aux Canadiens. Vimy est unique, pure et sans égale dans notre souvenance du passé militaire du pays. Qu'elle mérite, ou non, cette consécration, elle conserve cet honneur. Le statut de Vimy est identique à ce que la bataille fut : épique, inoubliable et, en partie, inexplicable. Vimy devrait néanmoins être évoquée comme un tout, et non pas distinguée isolément comme leçon de morale ou site de deuil. Vimy est un lieu, une bataille et un souvenir – une fusion d'espace, de personnes et de temps. Nous l'oublions, ou l'exagérons, à notre détriment; nous la comprenons mal, ou l'ignorons, à notre honte.

Photo by Mike Bechthold

fatalities and shredded lives? Is Vimy a cheap spur to emotionalism? Is it a cue to pass the hat for history? Is Vimy a bumper sticker rejoinder to presumably dim and ungrateful contemporaries, especially our supposedly unreachable youth, a not-so-distant cousin of the Bastille, the Alamo, or Trafalgar in the clarity of its message and timelessness of its meaning? Is Vimy undignified, or oversold? Or is it shamefully unknown and, in such, unconscionably disrespected? What is it?

I propose a simple thing at our birthday reverie: that we remember Vimy whole, and not disaggregated as moral lesson or site of mourning, or not these things alone. Vimy is place, battle, and memory – a fusion of land, people, and time. We forget this, or exaggerate it, to our peril; we misunderstand it, or ignore it, to our shame.

Place

The first point verges on the simplistic. Vimy is a place – a collection of stones and trees and ripples in the earth, a gentle rise, a sliver of cultivated fields ending in a

terse descent tumbling towards the east, a shard of clay and rock made famous only by the vicissitudes of war. It had no military history of its own, no timeless fortifications. It was no Constantinople, no Gibraltar. It was no crossroad of empire or pathway to a continent. Like Agincourt or Waterloo, Gettysburg or Marathon, it was a tragic accident.

Vimy was a source of livelihood and social intercourse. It fed families and offered shelter. Its folds echoed to the sounds of men and animals and playfulness and industry. Vimy village, two small villages in fact, were home, on the eve of war, to some 2,500 souls. Many others, connected by pasture and dirt road and well-trodden path, dotted the surrounding countryside. War destroyed, utterly, these environs and removed or killed their inhabitants. Vimy was very different in the mouths and minds of those who lived there before. It meant different things, conjured different memories, and concealed different secrets. It explained no innovations in battle tactics or applications of scientific gunnery. Its qualities, familiar but intimate, drew from local traditions and agricultural fairs and quotidian pursuits. It graced no

military maps, bore no auguries of death.

But the place called Vimy gave its name to a great battle, to several in fact through a long war, lending poignancy and melancholy but also pride and satisfaction to its echo in the minds of combatants, Canadian scarcely more than German, British, and French. Unknown before, it has become unforgettable since, not least to families for whom the name itself ever after meant a vacant bed or an unfinished life, a returning hero or a mental husk. The place called Vimy then became a graveyard for strangers, in fact many graveyards in which collected over time the known and unknown dead. As France and England and Germany well knew, far from all of them were Canadian. Vimy, once styled an Easter gift of one weary combatant to another, a welcome victory, in time was gifted back. It became, its flag regardless, a magnet for the remembrance and personal communion of many nations' citizens, and – macabre though it no longer sounds – for war tourism too, as gaiety replaced grief and curiosity challenged respect amidst the many thousands who soon walked freely the now-calm

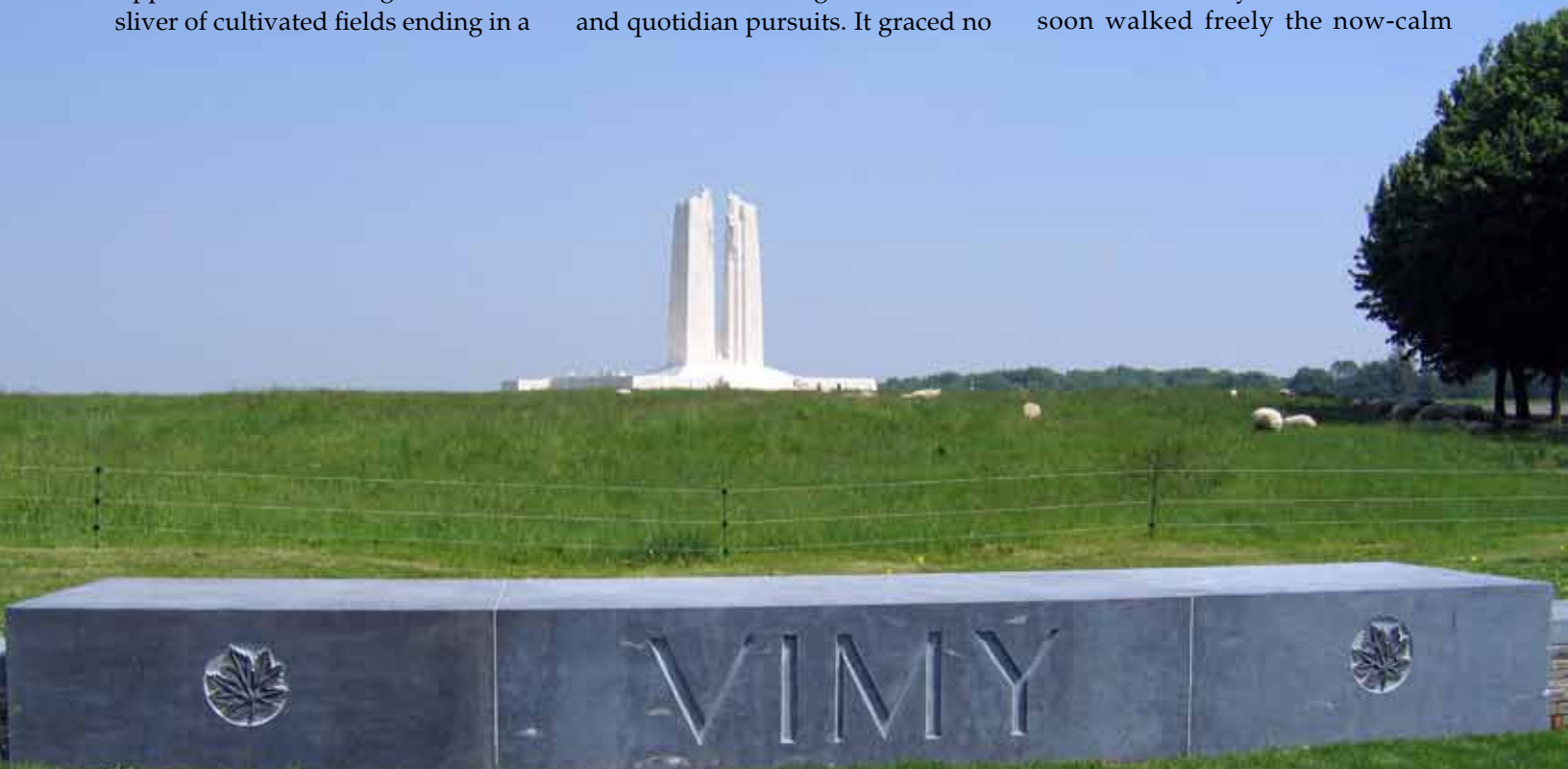


Photo by Paula Fletcher



A battlefield study tour group stops at Vimy.

fields of war. A vast monument grew from fiery speeches and shrill commitments against forgetting, its ramparts and soaring figures facing down now-invisible foes, towering above the ghosts of those in whose name it so elegantly stood. Life and commerce and farming soon resumed, but only around Vimy's demarcated margins, the stone evidence of war and remembrance striking upwards like an iceberg's tip amidst the fields, its base grounded far below, in the sullied dirt of violent times.

Vimy became a green space too, a verdant parkland and a lover's walk, a commuter's thoroughfare. Grasses grew again, slowly, and then with greater greed, where trenches had once sheltered or entombed men, and scraggly saplings poked through seared and battered crust that no longer trembled at human hand. Sod and soil and leaf reclaimed

discretely a landscape that had once and long resembled more moon than earth, more piercing nightmare than waking fact. The barbs of war still lay concealed to prick the unwary, too many to count, to poison farmers' fields and fill the trucks of brave *démineurs*. Makeshift graves gave way to orderly plots and serried markers. Tour guides roamed where men had once hugged the mud in terror, and tarmac roads were made to wind the paths where screaming horses once had writhed in death. In part, the land itself explained its own fate: the nature of its elevation, its drainage and water table, and its geology, having first determined the assault lines and trench locations and gun positions of former combatants, now revealed – literally – the contours of history to bored pupils and enthusiastic historians who explored it for the first time. Vimy became an example, par

excellence, of how knowing the land can help one to know history too, or at least a small aspect of it. Walk the ground, or otherwise know less history's meaning.

Vimy as a place is also how millions of us first encounter it: as a paved parking lot or leafy bower, an ominous crater or a spectacular view. It is a physical site, a graveyard and a gift shop, and the community of creatures that inhabit it, even in death. Despite the mortal wounds scored deep by spade and bomb and shell, and the realignment of gradients and the erasure of village and farm and pastured field that resulted, Vimy remains this place. Its height – no more than 150 metres at its highest point – and its angles sealed its fate, such vantage being irresistible to vast armies on flat and soggy plains, for which elevation promised safety, and information, and control. Vimy's subtle undulations

saved lives too, as generations of young Canadian guides dutifully have noted, its clawed out caverns, tunnels, and trenches offering shelter for miserable residents, accidents of empire, condemned onto its care. Canadians lived there for a while, in this place called Vimy. But the place alone remains, mute, insensate now to the wars that made it legend. War came and changed Vimy. And Vimy changed, in some small measure, the war.

Battle

More than just place, then, Vimy is – and was – an event, and a particular kind of event at that: a battle. Its image differs and stays the same, the hues familiar if, at times, contested. One's personal frame of reference matters here, whether or not one's recollection is tinged with family loss or unit pride or a community's act of remembrance. So too matters the precise occasion on which one's personal moments are held in silence or glasses raised or heads bowed in remembrance. It is, for some, a great and unexpected victory, no more but, vigorously, not one iota less. For others, it is the nation incarnate, through fire and brimstone birthed at the very edge of hell. For others still, it is a chapter of biography – for famous generals or forgotten men or families gone to war, or perhaps – and not unimportantly – a stroke of military brilliance amidst what seemed, and all too often was, the unrelenting futility of the madness of that war.

Vimy is "what" as well as "where." It lived, drew breath, swirled across the battered, bleeding landscape, and then was gone. One Vimy was measured in eons, the other in hours. It begs reflection on its details and peculiarities, on the awkward insolence of its horrors: where went these men, and why? At whose command and for what reasons did they march? What



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did they do and say and feel and fear that commend them and the dreadful war they waged to our distant consideration? Historian Dennis Showalter lamented long ago our penchant to love all else save battle in our pompous narratives of peace and class and social forces in the breeze. He penned "a modest plea for guns and trumpets," to know the lines of battle and the scars they've etched across our world, to understand the contingency of events, how things might have been different, or why they are the same, and to address the military past on its own turf, so to speak: in the clash of arms as they rang across the field. My colleague, Peter MacLeod, has argued much the same in writing of thirty minutes on the Plains of Abraham, and how studying these

minutes, knowing them, inhabiting them as a people, facing down their embarrassments and their sins, is the very essence of self-awareness, and self-awareness, the heart of everything else. Whither citizenship in the absence of historical literacy? Whither judgment in the absence of fact, or wisdom in ignorance of perspective? There is the ground, the place. And then there is what happened there.

At Vimy, the battle, it was cold. In the early morning of 9 April 1917, as the Canadian Corps prepared to assault the ridge, it rained. There were snow squalls, and sleet. The ground, already damp from thawing snow and scads of ice, was slick and sodden, and softer as the day wore on. Many of the trenches and craters where Canadians spent the night waiting to attack were half filled with water. Greatcoats clung to legs, stiff with mud and ice. Some men hacked it off with knives and bayonets, and for this small relief were fined a dollar each for destroying government property.

They were almost uniformly dirty. They stank. Dysentery and other internal ailments contributed to the "smell of an army." Many were riddled by aches, fever, and disease. Vermin owned their trenches. They had lice, and they scratched constantly, uselessly, at scabs and myriad afflictions. They coughed and hacked from colds and respiratory ailments and shivered in the dampness. They died or fell injured from accidents and chronic illness and stray bullets and friendly fire. Many survived never to be healthy in mind or body again.

They were proud and well trained. They were well prepared for battle. They mostly hated officers, as soldiers mostly do, but followed them too. Vaunted colonial ill-discipline had coalesced, or was coalescing, into a sturdiness of will and a dedication to purpose that would, in time, lead to flattering praise, to descriptors like

"elite," "undefeated," and "shock troops." They had been treated with respect and conscientiousness in the preparation for this latest Armageddon, often by British officers who it is Hollywood formula still deeply, mostly inaccurately, to revile. They were a British corps, in truth, but a Canadian army. One could plot their birthplaces from Dover to Vancouver. They were, to a person, volunteers. Their morale was high. They were afraid. Many, especially those who waited underground in tunnels for the attack, wrote letters home. They loved their mothers, and their wives. They inquired of fathers and farms and sporting events, and remembered friends and loves. They missed children, or a future in which children might reside, and they plotted a life's course in promise and anticipation even on the verge of their own annihilation. They wondered if the planting season would go well, or if the girls in Ottawa were as pretty as they remembered. They prayed for victory. Sometimes, they spoke consciously of their small, important

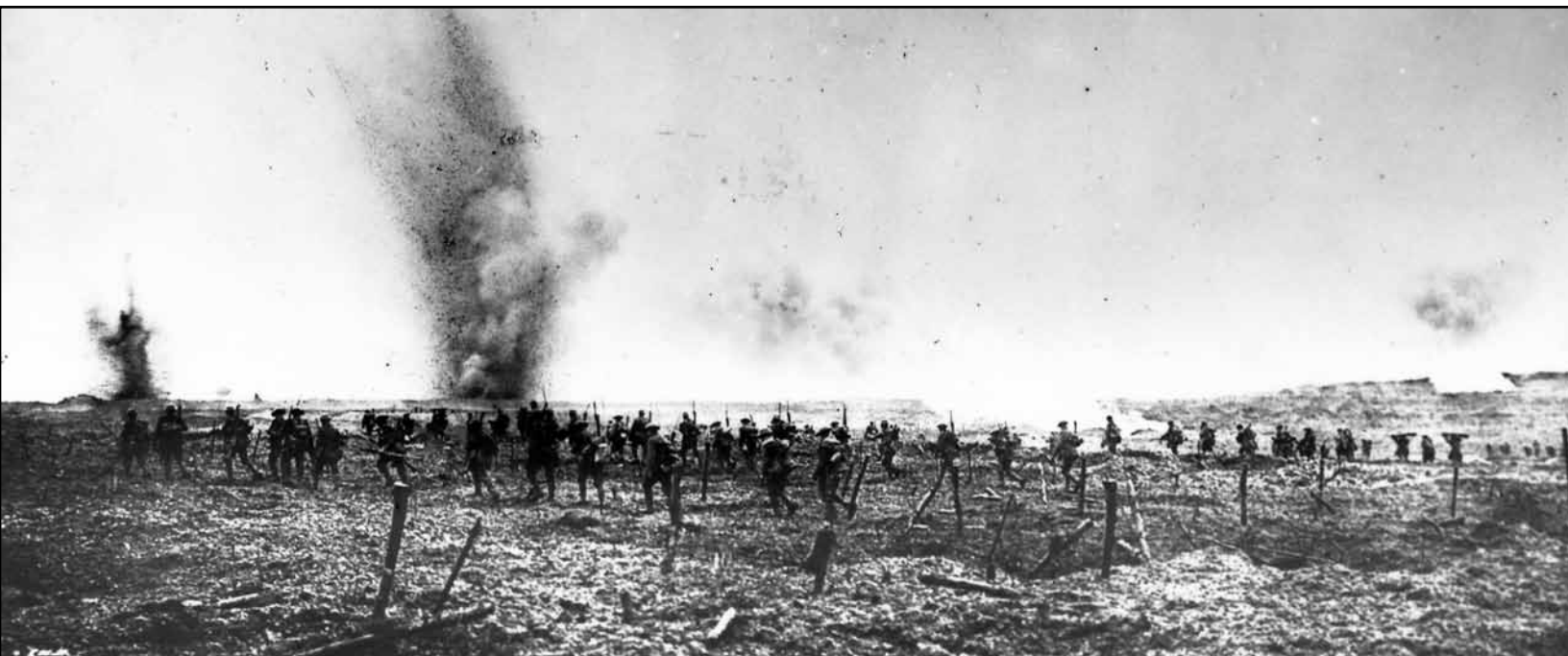
parts in history. They pinned to themselves hastily scratched notes, lest they be found dead, or passed letters to friends to send home if their bodies were never recovered - letters from beyond the grave, signed, "Your affectionate son..." They smoked and drank, laughed and listened. They fell silent in private reveries of war.

At 5:30 AM on Easter Monday Vimy, the battle, swept over Vimy, the place, in a thunderous storm. A thousand guns and the fighting wedge of a hundred thousand-strong army of fragile young hurled itself at an elevation on a map. The hurricane of shot and shell razed the ridge in liberating it. Leaning into the shellfire, moving close behind it, weighed down with loads sometimes in excess of one hundred pounds, the men trudged forward. In the bunkers, trenches, dugouts, and mud holes that lay ahead, or firing from artillery positions beyond the ridge, or scrambling into position to repel their advance, were Germans - equally scared, equally homesick, and equally determined. As the first

Canadians stepped forward into this orchestra of violence, the first Canadians also died.

Measured only by time, most of the battle was over by the evening of the first day, a rarity for the First World War, and only on the left of the Canadian line did the savage fighting continue. On 12 April, that ended too, and a pulverized little patch of land, known to history as Vimy, was in Canadian hands. It had been grimly spectacular. More than 10,000 Canadians had fallen. Some 3,600 had died - struggling, winning, living, suffering, together, at Easter time, ninety-five years past, and so very far from home. The battle was not the airy victory speech it soon became, though a victory it most surely was. The battle was more complicated than that, more contingent, more atomized, more chilling. Its immediate impacts were smaller, simpler - relief, perhaps, or pain, or shock, or gratitude that worse fates had been avoided. And pride - sheer, unapologetic, unmitigated pride. How can we treat seriously of

The constructed memory of Vimy: Canadian troops advance across the turbulent Vimy battlefield. The relaxed nature of the troops is at odds with the violent explosions in the background which were added to the scene after the fact.





history without admitting as much? Canadians had won. The Empire had won. Each battery and battalion had won. Canadians stood atop the ridge and Germans did not. It is not minor, or apologetic, or parochial, this glimpse at the mind of war in the letters and diaries and post-war thoughts of those who lived it. Those Canadians who struggled up that ridge had greater sense of themselves and what victory meant – in all its grim complexity – in that moment than a great many scribes who have come afterwards to share with us their views.

This is less bombast than perhaps it sounds: those who lived the battle knew it from the inside out. Attitude born of personal experience: this is the vital source, the essence of history, the origin of wisdom. Those who study it from afar have an obligation to know intimately such views before venturing with confidence their own. Otherwise, history fills with disappointment. The dead must refuse to star unbidden in our passion plays or politics, to exemplify our personal revulsions or exonerate our sins. Anniversaries bring forth charlatans just the same: Vimy as the triumph of the stupid or the vision of the blind; Vimy as the hallmark of brilliance or the herald of greatness yet to be. We might start with more limited optics: what happened here, and to whom? How did these men live and so many die? What said they of their lot, for and against,

in passionate outburst or somber reflection? Can we try, honestly and well, before using the past as drivers might the lash, to know this time, and those who lived it, before assuming much about their dreams and the causes in which they were realized or risked? They deserve as much. So too do we.

Memory

And so a third Vimy instantly was born, a Vimy of memory and faith and celebration, a Vimy

of recollection and remembrance and imagery and myth. It cried immediately from newspaper headlines and official communiqués of the battle, and was discussed in trenches and tents and parliaments. This Vimy embraced religious imagery and patriotism. It made sense of the war, or damned it. It gave focus to unprecedented grief, offered solace for loss, and the opportunity for contemplation for what had been, and would always be, unthinkable. It gave rise to studious or involuntary forgetting too, as hearts and minds struggled with the monstrosity of witness and the responsibilities of survival. Memory vivid and memory suppressed: both prospered.

Canadian Forces Photo iv-2004-3199

Most of those who lived through Vimy knew that Canadians had done great things together, or would find little fault with those who did. No honest reading of the poetry or prose or sermons or popular entertainments in the decades that followed can avoid the realization that Vimy had assumed quickly for survivors and those who loved them the heady airs of myth and majesty that all great tales attain. Vimy could be spoken of in the same sentence as Gallipoli or Waterloo, Borodino or Poitiers. It fired the imagination and held tightly the heart. It ennobled. Vimy explained. Vimy changed. Vimy somehow exceeded: the battle delivered more than Canadians had ever promised and promised



Master Corporal Heidi Chamberlain plays the trumpet during a memorial service at Vimy Ridge in France, 17 July 2004.

more than no pre-war Canadian could ever have hoped to deliver. Vimy became a shorthand narrative for the war itself. It still is.

This alone should be a caution. It is easy in the afterglow of Vimy, still bright these many years removed, to be blinded by its brilliance. What was the texture of such times? What happened in the chancelleries and trenches of those years? What is the measure of this war and those who made it? Vimy can push back unpleasant truths. It is a patriotic passion, a battle cry, an unavoidable red-flagged email across a century of distance to remember something – though the subject line can be tantalizingly imprecise: remember what, exactly? How, and for whom? Does Vimy crowd out other narratives?

In the war that made Vimy, in the war that Vimy made, Canadians incarcerated innocents and, at times, shot the unyielding. Some groused or profited from misery; others shirked or disapproved the cause. The sheer effort of victory, necessary though it may have been, imperilled a young and already great country in order to defend it, and stretched to breaking fledgling laws and ancient traditions so that presumably righteous causes might yet prevail. Wartime Canada sought to legislate the boundaries of patriotism and ostracize dissent, punishing those who resisted or who questioned too vigorously the grounds for the assumption of consent. The times seemed to demand as much, and certainly did to governments and opinion leaders and churches and

proud citizens of many stripes. Context pushed strongly at the margins of an imperfect democracy in holding dear its core. It is no slick apology for past misjudgements to recognize as much. Plotting reasonable alternatives to what the Union government later achieved, and was held to account over, is by no means as easy as critiquing those known and taken paths. It never is. Prime Minister Borden deserves a better fate in those silly rankings of prime ministers that have since in stern monotones regularly emerged. So too his Cabinet, his war management, his crisis decision-making; his understanding of the relationship between now and soon, between imperial war and post-imperial commonwealth, might likewise have earned a fairer shake.

The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Prince William and Kate Middleton, look at the giant mural done by Welsh painter Augustus John. The painting, which is a representation of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, is over 30 feet wide and was unveiled by their Royal Highnesses during their visit at the Canadian War Museum, 2 July 2011.



But they do not deserve a free pass. Had autonomy been worth such cost? Had Empire? Had Belgium? Had France? They are reasonable questions, ones to which not all answers are vapid, judgmental, or imprecise. What do we recollect if we infuse our queries of the past with impatience and disappointment and the certitudes and arrogance of the present? History flatters vanity if we let it, a carnival mirror showing much of what we wish, and little of what we are. We change, or we stagnate, and history – ransacked, misunderstood – consoles us even so. Speak of heroes and feel no shame; but question the record and fear no retribution. These are large demands – certitude amidst uncertainty, pride subsumed in responsibility. The alternatives have bred no end of global mischief: rhetorical larceny, fungible outrage, inflammable hypocrisies.

Vimy is one such memory – living, flexible, useful. We shape it to a purpose, clothing ourselves in it as befits the moment, deploying it appropriately to explain ourselves to newcomers to our country or to old allies, or to doubting naves who shamble about in embarrassment of the past, rejection of the present, and despair for the future. History hating thrives alongside its flamboyant embrace as a moveable feast – a bag of tricks that, regardless of supposed purpose, can salve any hurt or inflame any wound. Explorations of a warrior past are bemoaned by simple virtue of their subject, as though deepest pride or curiosity alone corrode the national membrane, usurping more pacific destinies by deliberate acts of pillage. More martial treatises respond in kind, dismissing mere critique itself as evidence of shallow thinking, or worse, a disloyalty of heart or an insufficiency of mind. Editorial pages fill with examples of each simplistic caste as the anniversaries roll onward: Vimy as dangerous

myth or splendid memory; Vimy as dreadful carnage or exemplary service; Vimy as a monument to public ignorance or a clarion call to perpetual remembrance. They are equally useful, and just as useless.

We have what we have. We have what we did or did not do. We have what we are bold enough to find by dint of critical inquiry, and honest enough to incorporate into our points of view, our questions, our views of others, our fathoming of self. We have our understanding of Vimy as place, our knowledge of Vimy as battle, our sensitivity to Vimy as memory. We have the luxury of time, and the privilege of freedom.

This alone is vast. Vimy has more to teach than distant memory or grasping scholarship allow, and more than incendiary op-eds will attempt predictably to incite. Vimy was and remains an experience shared in history and pondered or visited *ensemble* in the present, a site of secular (and, still, religious) pilgrimage, a focus of collective attention even in our disagreements over its meaning. It is in this more opportunity than encumbrance, something that bodes more hope than our cultural trysts and historical petty combats might otherwise suggest. Vimy was not incomprehensible to those who lived it. This much is clear: grief at loss, love of comrades, pride in accomplishment, disgust at the conditions of battle, and, most often, it must be said, respect for country and for king. Wishing otherwise does not make it so. Purpose in carnage, faith amidst unprecedented horror: Vimy was juxtaposed and accepted more easily by its wartime inhabitants than by cranky ideologues or idolatrous scribes in later years. It is the critical difference between the remembrance of things as they were, and the fancy of things as we might wish them to be. History is like this at times: uncomfortable, unclear, and, perhaps, unsatisfying.

Vimy in this sense has a universal tinge, a narrative clear in diction and powerful of message. It resonates. It explains and comforts and, seen whole, shorn of knee-jerk pride or compulsive critique, it challenges and guides. In Vimy are found the glib quips of long dead patriarchs, and the wondrous curiosity of contemporary youth. Vimy is unfinished business, a familiar and fearsome portal through which we travel in search of things, in search of us. This is the very nature and impact of war, of which Vimy has become our cultural acme: it scatters us about, shakes us upon the winds of time and leaves us to be discovered, again and again, by those who come later, from different lives and different worlds and different loves, to understand – or try to – who once we were, or still might be again. It is the brilliant Bell telephone commercial of some years past, in which a grandson calls home to an aging granddad in Canada from the chert beaches of Dieppe, and brings an old man to tears by saying “thank you” across an ocean of water and a galaxy of time. War scatters us. Not forgetting brings us back.

Vimy is not about “them.” It is about us. Place, battle, memory: we live, comfortably or not, ignorantly or informed, in Vimy’s lengthy shadow, as though, somehow, Alward’s edifice atop the ridge stood immovably between the entire country and the very sun itself.

The views expressed are the author’s alone and do not represent those of the Canadian War Museum.

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Dean F. Oliver is the director of research and exhibitions at the Canadian War Museum. In 2010 he was made a Knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands.