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“THIS SACRED SOIL OF VIMY”, AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF THE VIMY RIDGE MEMORIAL PARK, 1920-2007

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This paper examines the environmental history of the 250-acre Vimy Ridge Memorial in Northern France. It argues that the meaning of Vimy Ridge and the memorial within Canadian culture has been shaped by the physical environment of the site. In particular, the geographic location of Vimy Ridge in Europe, as well as the biological and physical features of the memorial park, shaped the possible meanings assigned to the site.

Cet article examine l'histoire environnementale du mémorial canadien sur la crête de Vimy dans le Nord de la France. L'analyse montre que l'impact de Vimy sur la culture canadienne, à travers son histoire et son monument, a été façonné par l'environnement physique du site. La situation géographique de Vimy en Europe, ainsi que les caractéristiques biologiques et physiques du site proprement dit, ont produit des interprétations diverses.

In June of 1940, with the German Army already in command of Paris, Adolf Hitler paid a visit to the Vimy Ridge Memorial, located just outside of the French city of Lens. The memorial, dedicated in 1936, was built by the Canadian government to commemorate the capture of the ridge by Canadian forces in April of 1917. The supposed purpose of Hitler's visit was to refute claims by the Canadian and British press that Nazi soldiers had defaced the monument. Additionally, to further ensure its safety, he had troops from the Waffen S.S assigned to guard the location during the Nazi occupation of Northern France. However, not being one to miss an opportunity to demonstrate his expertise, Adolph Hitler used the conveniently preserved trenches and concrete-filled sandbags at Vimy to provide an impromptu demonstration to the assembled crowd on how to engage an entrenched enemy.¹

Ninety years later, in the spring of 2007, Canada prepared to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge by revealing the newly refurbished Vimy Ridge Memorial. Thousands of visitors had come to the French countryside for the occasion, and journalists, veterans, military personnel, politicians and academics all took the opportunity to comment upon the legacy of Vimy Ridge and to repeat stories from the site's colourful history.

¹ HAGGART, Ron, (2007) "How Hitler Spared Vimy Ridge," *Toronto Star*, 7 April 2007, http://www.thestar.com/news/2007/04/07/how_hitler_spared_vimy_ridge.html

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One of the most repeated anecdotes was of Hitler's 1940 visit, though in all its many retelling, no one thought to ask why there were trenches, duckboards and (concrete) sandbags at the site in 1940, twenty three years after the battle. This question seemed too simple to even bother addressing; it was a battlefield, so of course there would be remnants of the battle. However, compared to other national memorials, the preserved battlefield of Vimy Ridge is unique. Instead of meticulously preserving the physical scars on the landscape, as Canada did at Vimy Ridge, other countries decided to either eliminate all physical references to the war, such as the French memorial at Verdun, or left them to slowly decay, as at Gallipoli in Turkey. The result for visitors was a one-of-a-kind experience found "nowhere else" (ELLSWORTH 1990: E5).

While the stone and concrete monument unveiled at Vimy in 1936 dominates the landscape, it is clear from events described above that the landscape of the site, the two hundred and fifty acres of trees, fields, tunnels, trenches and craters also continue to play an important role in shaping how visitors experience Vimy Ridge and remember and interpret the events of April 1917. The question this paper aims to investigate is how did the physical landscape of Vimy Ridge help shape visitors' experience and the memory of the battle itself in Canada's collective historical consciousness? While Canadians have assigned many different meanings to the battle and the memorial park, this paper seeks to understand how the physical landscape of Vimy Ridge, the dirt, rock, grass, trees and animal life, as well as its geographic location, impacted the way Canadians remembered the Battle of Vimy Ridge through their interaction with the Vimy Ridge Memorial.

Such a study is relevant given the increasing attention both the public and Canadian government has paid to Vimy Ridge in particular, and in memorializing Canada's military history in general, during the previous decade. The 2007 refurbishment of the monument and the 90th anniversary celebrations of the battle served to focus public attention once again on the events of Easter 1917. Additionally, government commemorations of other military events, such as the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, have taken on a greater political significance. Throughout their ten years in power the Conservative Party of Canada sought to increase Canadians' awareness of Canada's military history while downplaying other events such as the 30th anniversary of the Patriation of Canada's Constitution and the creation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (DUMMIT 2013: A16). In light of these recent developments and the approaching 100th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge in April of 2017, for which commemoration events are already being planned, it is important to

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study how people's understandings of historical events are not only actively shaped by conscious human actors, but also informed in unexpected ways by the natural environment. Battlefield memorials, and Vimy Ridge specifically, provide an ideal opportunity for such an analysis.

The majority of academic and popular work regarding Vimy has focused on the Battle of Vimy Ridge and its aftermath. Numerous works discuss the experience of Canadian soldiers and provide an overview of their actions during the three-day battle. Additionally, other works place the battle within the context of the larger Battle of Arras, orchestrated by the British Army, or within the even larger context of engagements on the Western Front during the Spring of 1917 (COOK 2008; BERTON 2001). However, relatively few works directly engage with the history of the construction, unveiling or upkeep of the monument and the park itself (HUCKER and SMITH, 2012: ii). The most in-depth of all the works dealing with the history of the site itself is Jacqueline Hucker and Julian Smith's monograph written for a popular audience and providing a broad and accessible overview of the first hundred years of the site's history. While utilizing extensive primary research, the book simply presents a large amount of detail for interested readers with little historical interpretation. However, in her article-length study of the site, Jacqueline Hucker writes for an academic audience and focuses on how the monument and the site it was built on were designed to honour all Canadians who served and died, not just the elite (HUCKER 2009: 89-109).

Along with Hucker, other scholars who have focused specifically on the monument itself have highlighted the role of chief architect Walter Allward in designing the monument. Specifically these scholars have examined how the Canadian Government's official narrative of public mourning and remembrance, along with the fact that the battle being commemorated took place far away from Canada, shaped both Allward's initial design and the continuing place of the memorial in Canadian culture (DUFFY 2008: 189-206; DURFLINGER 2007: 291-312). More broadly, discussions regarding the Battle of Vimy Ridge and the memorial on the site feature prominently in the work of Canadian historians investigating how the First World War affected Canadian culture. Drawing on the insights of Paul Fussell's in his work *The Great War and Modern Memory*, these scholars argue that the First World War sparked a substantial change in Canadian culture, specifically in how Canadians memorialized their dead (THOMPSON 1996: 5-27) and more broadly in how Canadians assigned meaning to death in armed conflict (VANCE 1997). Overall, historians of culture and public memory are broadly concerned with

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the cultural effects of the war and the various meanings Canadians assign to Vimy Ridge – both the battle and monument – and other so-called “defining moments”.

In much of the historiography, both Canadian and European, monuments have been treated as symbolic constructions, not as actual places people visit and experience. These visitors, influenced by their interaction with the landscape and physical features of these sites of mourning and memory, subsequently shape cultural discourses regarding the meaning of the war. Thus, the meaning Canadians assign to places like Vimy Ridge is inextricable from the environmental history of the site itself. In order to understand how ideas of remembrance have changed over the past century it is imperative to understand the physical nature of battlefield memorials. Within this context, the Vimy Ridge Memorial provides an interesting and illuminating case study. This paper will examine the very site itself and how its discursive creation as Canadian soil was influenced by its physical location in Europe. Additionally, this paper will discuss how natural features of the landscape such as trees, grass, animals and topography served to influence visitors’ perception of the site and their memories about their encounter with the battlefield. Finally, it will also investigate how the human influence on the landscape, from the wartime craters, trenches and tunnels to the post-war memorial, also shaped understandings of the battle and its legacy. Overall, this paper will argue that visitors’ experiences at Vimy between 1920 and 2007 were co-creations. Planners did not have the final say in how people would experience the site and the landscape served to exercise its agency in shaping popular understandings of the Battle of Vimy Ridge and the place of Vimy Ridge in Canadian culture.

However, the landscape of Vimy Ridge was also shaped by decades of human actions and was managed by subsequent generations in order to convey certain messages and influence how visitors interpreted the site. While giving significance due to the battle which occurred there, Vimy, like any other battlefield, is a natural environment that needs managing. As such, managers of the site have to make a large number of rather mundane decisions concerning everything from the length of the grass to the type of trees planted. However, each of these small decisions can alter the impression of the landscape and how visitors ascribe meanings to the site (RYAN 2007: 13). Beyond unintentional alterations of the landscape, site managers have the ability to consciously manipulate it to make certain points and emphasize aspects of the battlefield (LEOPOLD 2007: 51). In doing so site managers have to balance visitors’ competing priorities.

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During the inter-war years, tourists began to tour the battlefields of the First World War in order to understand and experience what it was like to be a soldier. Yet, such trips conflicted with a more traditional form of travel: the pilgrimage. For pilgrims, implicit in the act of traveling to the battle site was an “instinctive spiritualism” which was expressed through visitors’ ideas that one could get closer to the spirits of the dead by visiting their final resting place (LLOYD 1998: 1-5). Thus, deciding, for example, whether to preserve the physical devastation of the landscape caused by years of shell and mortar fire or to repair it in order to create a more serene environment necessarily meant mediating between competing ideas regarding the purpose of the Vimy Ridge site.

For many commentators, preserving wartime destruction was not only practical, for people wanted to see the effects of the war and feel like soldiers, but also a moral act. Only by observing first hand the total devastation of France, or at least the little section of France where the memorial was located, could visitors appreciate the sacrifice of the soldiers and learn appropriate lessons regarding the destructive potential of armed conflict (LLOYD 1998: 116-118). However, many experts felt that the lack of built structures and empty space on most battlefields meant that visitors could not truly appreciate the underlying moral message the site was intended to convey, necessitating plaques, guides, pathways and other structures (PIEKARZ 2007: 29). The result of these extensive management and construction programs gave rise to a critique from traditionalists who argued that rather than imbuing an appropriate sense of respect and awe, tourism trivialized the war experience as visitors now stayed in comfortable lodgings and experienced a sanitized version of the battle, as told through interpreters and officially sanctioned displays. As a result, many visitors associated visiting sites like Vimy with pleasant memories of overseas vacations and not the horrors of war (MOSES 1990: 152-156).

From 1914 to 1917 though, Entente troops stationed on the frontlines facing Vimy Ridge experienced the horrors of war first hand. The town of Vimy and the ridge named after it were captured by German troops during their initial drive into France in August of 1914. Fortified as part of the Hindenburg Line, the 400-foot high ridge gave German defenders a commanding view of the countryside and served as a strongpoint for their defence of the Arras region. By the time Canadian troops were stationed in the area in early 1917, the fighting around Vimy, particularly the failed French assault of May 1915, had dramatically altered the landscape. It was estimated by British High

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Command that nineteen distinct crater groups existed along the front facing the ridge. Each group often contained several large craters, all of which were the result of explosions caused by underground mine warfare (BOIRE 2007: 20). In the months leading up to the attack in April of 1917, the landscape would be further altered.

In the spring of 1917, as part of a broader Western Front-wide offensive planned by new French Commander Robert Nivelle, Canadian troops, fighting for the first time as a unified group under the command of British General Julian Byng, were assigned to capture Vimy Ridge (TURNER 2005: 17). In preparation, British and Canadian tunnelling companies took advantage of the geological conditions around the ridge to create an extensive network of underground tunnels and fortifications. Twelve subways, up to 1.2 kilometres in length, were excavated at a depth of 10 meters to allow soldiers to quickly reach the front lines protected from enemy observers and artillery shells. This extensive tunnel network carved out of the chalk often incorporated rail and telephone lines, hospitals, supply dumps and machine gun and mortar posts (BARTON, DOYLE and VANDEWALLE 2000).

By early April the preparations for the battle were set and on April 9th, 1917 the offensive commenced. Canadian artillery opened fire at 5:30 am and by nightfall on April 12, Canadian troops had captured the ridge and surrounding areas. Such success was costly though, as the Canadian Corps suffered 10,602 casualties: 3,598 killed and 7,004 wounded (MORAN 2007: 139). Significantly, the combination of Canadian Arthur Currie's inventive tactics, a victory by all four Canadian divisions fighting together and the previous failure of the French to take and hold the ridge all made the Battle of Vimy Ridge hugely symbolic and represented in the minds of many English Canadians their country's growth as an independent nation and not simply a part of Britain's empire.

While Canadian troops subsequently fought in other important engagements in the war, Vimy Ridge remained an important milestone for English Canadians. After the war, Canada, like other victorious countries, wanted to secure certain sites for memorial construction. In order to determine which sites should be granted to various allied nations, the British and French Governments worked together to establish the Battle Exploits Memorials Committee in February 1919. The Canadian Government, led by Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden, appointed Brigadier-General H.T. Hughes as Canada's representative to this committee. The committee ultimately

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recommended that Canada be granted eight sites in Belgium and France where eight memorials would be constructed. One of these sites was a 100-hectare area around Vimy Ridge. In response the Borden Government established the Canadian Battlefields Memorials Commission to oversee the construction and future maintenance of the eight planned memorials. At their first meeting in November of 1920 this committee decided to hold a design contest for the memorials they planned to build at the eight sites. This competition was open to all Canadian architects, designers, sculptors and other artists. Thus began the seventeen-year process of designing and building the Vimy Ridge Memorial.²

From the initial acquisition of the Vimy Ridge site through to the 1936 unveiling of the monument, public officials, military personnel and lay visitors all sought to emphasize the Canadianness of the area. Such emphasis was necessary because unlike the National War Memorial in Ottawa, which was unquestionably Canadian, Vimy was located overseas and would only ever be visited by a very small percentage of the Canadian population. Thus, from its inception, officials involved with the project all sought to convey just how Canadian the land actually was and how, like Ottawa, the land of Vimy was equally a part of Canada (THOMPSON 1996: 16). The government's desire to have Canadians view Vimy Ridge as a physical part of Canada stemmed from the federal government's decision to reserve the eight battlefields granted to Canada for national monuments paid for by public money. Whereas previous memorials for Canadians killed overseas – such as in South Africa during the Boer War – were erected by individual regiments, World War One memorials were to be constructed by the Canadian government on land granted by the Belgian and French governments to the Canadian people as a whole. One of the motivating factors for this policy was that, unlike in previous conflicts, the vast majority of soldiers were civilians recruited specifically for the war. The lack of career soldiers in the army meant regiment loyalty was less important than national allegiances. As a result, when the Canadian Battlefields Memorial Commission (CBMC) was deciding on how to construct such monuments, they prioritized a universal and national character for the eight sites they selected (HUCKER 2009: 94-95).

The policy of the CBMC reflected the explicit desires of Canada's political leaders. In a series of correspondence with Peter C. Larkin, Canada's

² GOVERNMENT OF CANADA (2012), *Canadian Memorial Battlefields Commission*, Ottawa: Veterans Affairs Canada,
http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/overseas/can_battle_committee

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High Commissioner in London, newly elected Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King emphasizes how important it is that the CBMC created memorials are universal in their appeal. Particularly, in a letter to Larkin from 22 July 1922, King states that the Vimy Ridge Memorial should “become a place of pilgrimage for travelers and an enduring monument in Europe to our country's valour.”³ For King and the committee following his direction, Vimy in particular was to be a place for all Canadians to visit and to appreciate the sacrifices made by the entire nation. Hence, King does not demand that the memorial honour the valour of the army or the specific regiments which fought at Vimy, but rather that of the entire country of Canada. King also recognizes that the monument itself is in Europe and that Canadians' perception of it would be necessarily shaped by Vimy's overseas location.

In order to formalize the transfer of the Vimy Ridge site from France to Canada, the French and Canadian governments signed a specific treaty dealing with Vimy Ridge in 1920. The language decided upon by the two governments reflects Canada's desire to portray the land as Canadian. This was especially important given that the deed to the property would ultimately remain with the French government, as French law forbid property transfer to a foreign government. Since the property would not actually be owned by the Canadian government, Article One of the treaty specifically states that the land is freely given for all time. The treaty states that, “The French Government grants, freely and for all time, to the Government of Canada the free use of a parcel of 100 hectares located on Vimy Ridge in the Department of Pas-de-Calais.” While ownership would ultimately reside with France, the land itself was Canada's to use forever.

The Canadianness of the site was also emphasized in the first Appendix to the treaty. This appendix puts forward a motion in the Canadian parliament asking, Parliament to approve:

The acceptance by the Government of Canada of the gift graciously made by the Republic of France of a tract of land 250 acres in extent on Vimy Ridge at the site selected by Canada of a monument commemorating the exploits of Canadian soldiers in the Great War.⁴

³ MACKENZIE KING, William Lyon (1922), “William Lyon MacKenzie King to Hon. P.C. Larkin, 22 July 1922,” Mackenzie King Fonds MG 26 Volume 1174, C2729, Library and Archives Canada.

⁴ GOVERNMENT OF CANADA (2014), *Agreement Between Canada and France*, Ottawa: Global Affairs Canada, <http://www.treaty-accord.gc.ca/text-texte.aspx?id=102661>

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The parliamentary motion emphasizes that the land was given as a gift to the Canadian government to honour Canadian soldiers' actions. The use of the term gift is particularly revealing as it connotes ownership passing freely from one party to another. While legally the land where the monument would be built still belonged to France, symbolically, the treaty and subsequent legislation emphasized Canada's moral ownership over the property. Additionally, constructing the monument and maintaining the site itself was essential to ensure the ridge remained Canadian. While not stipulated in the text of the treaty, during final negotiations between the French Minister of Devastated Regions and Canada's representative of the CBMC (and House of Commons Speaker) Sgt. Rodolphe Lemieux, the French government stated that the transfer of land was contingent upon both the construction and maintenance of a memorial to fallen Canadian soldiers.⁵

The idea that Vimy Ridge was in fact Canadian territory, consecrated through the sacrifice of Canadian soldiers, was reinforced during the 1936 dedication of the monument. With the monument finally complete, the Canadian Legion organized a pilgrimage for veterans of the First World War and their families to travel, free of cost, to the dedication of the monument by King Edward VIII. During his speech at the ceremony, King Edward emphasized the importance of the memorial being built on the actual battlefield. He stated that, "Beautiful and impressive as is the Ottawa memorial, the Canadian people would not feel it was complete. It was 'over there' that Canadian armies fought and died. It is 'over there' that their final monument must stand" (THOMPSON 1996: 16). Because the battle took place in France, the King argued that the memorial also had to be built far away from Canada. However, rather than the distance alienating Canadians from the site, the fact that their soldiers had served, died and were buried there made the land important. A monument to Vimy could not be built in Canada and have the same effect, the geographic reality was that Canadians had fought overseas and so the monument to their service and death must be "over there."

The distance between Vimy and Canada did not impede Canadian visitors from recognizing the ridge as being part of their country. Rather, the combination of Canadians' heroic exploits on the battlefield and the diplomatic

⁵ LEMIEUX, Rodolphe (1922), "Sgt. Rodolphe Lemieux to William Lyon MacKenzie King, 5 December 1922," Mackenzie King Fonds MG 26 Volume 1174, C2729, Library and Archives Canada.

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gift of the site by the French government combined to make the land Canadian. In his diary, John Mould, an artillery gunner from Toronto who served at Vimy and who went on the 1936 trip, wrote that:

The ground it covers is the Gift of France to Canada. All the world over, there are battlefields, the names of which are written indelibly on the pages of our troubled human story. It is one of the consolations which time brings, that deeds of valour, done on those battlefields, long survive the quarrels, which drove the opposing hosts to conflict (MOULD 1936: 63).

Echoing the remarks made by King Edward VIII, Mould emphasizes the importance of the battlefield as a specific site of pilgrimage and remembrance. However, the simple fact that France gave the land to Canada was only part of the reason for the site's significance. It was also the actions of soldiers like Mould and thousands of his comrades in arms that made Vimy a site of international importance. Importantly though, it wasn't simply because Canadians had died and were buried at Vimy that the land was Canadian, but also the specific acts of valour which said soldiers had performed there. Mould's focus on Canadian soldiers' heroism reflected the original priorities of the CBMC and the Canadian Government when they decided to build Walter Allward's memorial at Vimy Ridge. It was important that the site of Canada's main memorial not only be a place where Canadians had fought and died, but also a site where Canadian forces had won a victory.⁶ Vimy was not just about memorializing the dead, the monument and the site were also about remembering the acts of the living.

Other pilgrims also reflected on how the monument sat on "Canadian" land. Florence Murdoch, the sister of Alfred W. Murdoch, an officer in the 1st Canadian Heavy Artillery Brigade at Vimy who lived in Amherst Nova Scotia, kept a diary when she traveled with her brother to Vimy in 1936. Upon arriving at the Vimy Ridge Memorial she wrote of the park that, "It is Canadian soil" (MURDOCH 1989: 25). Her perception was further enhanced by the events of the next few days. Not only was the monument dedicated by the King, but the Canadian Army and Canadian Legion also performed a series of actions intended to memorialize the dead. Murdoch highlighted how the crosses erected by Canadian troops on November 11th, 1918 to commemorate the armistice

⁶ LARKIN, Peter C (1922), "P.C. Larkin to William Lyon MacKenzie King, 9 August 1922," Mackenzie King Fonds MG 26 Volume 1174, C2729, Library and Archives Canada.

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were burnt and the ashes spread over Vimy Ridge. Doing so symbolically reinforced the idea that the very soil itself was Canadian as, along with the blood and bodies of the soldiers who had served there, it was now mixed with ashes of the impromptu memorials erected to commemorate their sacrifice. Ultimately, upon leaving Vimy, Murdoch concluded that, "This sacred soil of Vimy was not alien soil but would be forever Canadian" (MURDOCH 1989: 33). While the idea of Vimy as Canadian soil was a cultural construction, it was a necessary one given its geographic location far from Canada. The perception of the battlefield as physically part of the mother country was further reinforced discursively, but also literally and symbolically, through specific actions undertaken by Canadian officials.

The geography and ecology of Vimy Ridge also shaped how visitors interacted with the park and how they understood the legacy of the battle. Of particular importance in shaping visitors' experience at Vimy Ridge is the plant life of the site with one of the most prominent examples being the 650 maple trees and many more Austrian and Scott pine trees planted in 1924. Commencing with the initial treaty gifting the land around Vimy Ridge for Canada's use, the CBMC intended to reforest sections of the park although they had no specific plan. By 1924 the French government was undertaking extensive tree-planting campaigns in the areas around Arras and hoped to include Vimy Ridge in their planting activity. The Canadian government agreed to have the French plant pine trees on most of the site but specifically imported 650 maple trees from Saskatchewan because of the association between the maple leaf and Canada.⁷ Other Canadian plants were also interspersed within the maple trees by Canadian horticulturalists, with the stated purpose of recreating the woods of Canada.⁸

The trees remained an important part of Vimy Ridge throughout the park's history. After the Nazi occupation of France and continued rumours of Wehrmacht or SS soldiers vandalizing the monument and surrounding park, many Canadians were concerned not only with the state of the monument, but also with the park itself, particularly the trees. Such concerns were groundless as the majority of trees survived intact, although, as predicted by Colonel H.C.

⁷ CANADIAN BATTLEFIELD MEMORIAL COMMISSION (1922-1954), "Minutes and Estimates 1922-1954," Department of Veterans Affairs Fonds R1183-0-7-E Volume 419, Library and Archives Canada.

⁸ GOVERNMENT OF CANADA ([N.D.]), *Memorials to Canada's War Dead*, Ottawa: Public Affairs Division of Veterans' Affairs Canada, p. 46.

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Osborne, many need pruning after the liberation of Northern France in 1944.⁹ This concern over Vimy's arboretum in general continued after the war. By the 2000s a large number of the pine trees had reached the end of their natural life span and were dying off and many of the maples had also died or were damaged and in need of replacement. Veterans Affairs Canada is still determining how to deal with the issue of replacing the trees at the site given the importance generations of visitors have attached to them (HUCKER AND SMITH 2012: 90). The continued importance of the forests of Vimy in shaping visitors' perception of the site is demonstrated most clearly in a 1990 *Washington Post* article by adventure/travel writer Scott Ellsworth. Ellsworth, an American with no familial or national link to Vimy Ridge recounts approaching Vimy Ridge by bicycle. Even before seeing the monument, the first feature of the site that he notices is the "replanted forests of pine and maple."¹⁰ For Ellsworth, as for hundreds of thousands of other visitors, the trees of Vimy played an integral role in shaping visitors' perceptions of the site.

The care and attention that the CBMC and later Veterans Affairs Canada paid to tree planting and maintenance over the years has led to the misconception that each maple tree represents one Canadian soldier who died at Vimy and whose body was never found. Despite the fact that ninety percent of the trees on the site were actually planted by the French Government and that the maple trees were brought to the site solely because of the association between Canada and the maple leaf, the apocryphal story of the trees is repeated in both popular culture and academic texts. Denise Thompson most clearly articulates this belief in her article from 1995-96 when she writes that the park includes "a grove of trees, one of which was planted for each Canadian killed in France who had no known grave – new life replacing death" (THOMPSON 1996: 12). However, Veterans Affairs Canada is quick to repudiate such claims in their official literature, stating that the trees were not planted specifically to remember individual soldiers.¹¹ The prominence of the maple trees and the care and attention given to them over the years creates the need for interpretation among many visitors. The six hundred and five trees must have been planted for a purpose and in lieu for specifically stated reasons,

⁹ CANADIAN BATTLEFIELD MEMORIAL COMMISSION (1922-1954), "Minutes and Estimates 1922-1954," Department of Veterans Affairs Fonds R1183-0-7-E Volume 419, Library and Archives Canada.

¹⁰ ELLSWORTH, Scott (1990) "Twilight on the Western Front: Biking the Back Roads of Northern France, On The Trail of World War One," *Washington Post*: E5

¹¹ GOVERNMENT OF CANADA ([N.D.]), *Memorials to Canada's War Dead*, Ottawa: Public Affairs Division of Veterans' Affairs Canada, p. 47.

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people assume that the plant life of the site itself must contribute to the site's purpose of memorializing Canada's dead.

The trees are not the only important biological feature of the site, as a large area of the park is also covered in grass and kept short by a herd of grazing sheep. The grass and the grazing animals represent a conflict between the two stated purposes of the memorial: remembrance and preservation. From its inception, CBMC officials attempted to balance pilgrims' and tourists' expectations when constructing the site. In Appendix III of the initial treaty, the CBMC stated that:

Vimy Ridge is a barren tract of land, miles in extent, devastated and pitted with shell holes, etc. The object of the Commission is to reserve and develop in a suitable way sufficient land to form a background for the monument and prevent the erection of unsightly structures in its vicinity. Such further land as may be reserved for the proposed "park" will be left largely in its present state.¹²

The commission wanted to ensure that the physical scars of war would be preserved for future generations. The policy of preserving these "devastated lands" in their current state was initially adopted by the French government in 1919 and the presence of shell holes, craters and tunnels made the section of the ridge from "a line of craters near 'The Pimple' to the vicinity of 'Les Tilleuls'" particularly desirable for the CBMC when deciding on which specific parts of Vimy Ridge would become part of the site.¹³ However, in order to preserve the shell holes and physical scars on the landscape and ensure they were visible for visitors, it was necessary to keep the grass and other cover plants closely cropped. Human grass cutters were not an option though due to the large number of unexploded ordnances buried in the ground at Vimy. Sheep were a perfect solution as they were lighter and unlike human groundskeepers, replaceable (HUCKER AND SMITH 2012: 81). Over the past eighty years the sheep have become an iconic aspect of the Vimy landscape and part of the experience of visiting the site. Yet, the reason for the animals presence at the site has been forgotten in popular memory, rather they have simply become like the grass and the chalk of the ridge itself; just a part of the European landscape

¹² GOVERNMENT OF CANADA (2014), *Agreement Between Canada and France: Appendix 3*, Ottawa: Global Affairs Canada, <http://www.treaty-accord.gc.ca/text-texte.aspx?id=102661>

¹³ HUGHES, H.T. (1922), "Brig. General H.T. Hughes to P.C. Larkin, 1 June 1922," Mackenzie King Fonds MG 26 Volume 1174, C2729, Library and Archives Canada.

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and not consciously placed there as the result of a specific management strategy.¹⁴

The sheep, trees and other plant life are not the main attraction for visitors to Vimy Ridge, rather they form the natural background for the preserved battlefields, tunnels and trenches, seemingly unchanged from 1917. The vision of a preserved battlefield, as articulated by the CBMC, is best reflected in a series of photographs taken just after World War Two, exhibiting a peaceful morning contrasted with the grass covered shell craters preserved around the monument.¹⁵ Many veterans who visited the site also commented that the battle scarred landscape brought them back to April 1917. Vimy Veteran and 1936 pilgrim John Mould commented in his diary about the shell craters and other preserved aspects of the site when he wrote:

It was during this walk that scenes of the old war days came back to me more than ever. Huge craters, shell holes and barbed wire were there, the same as they had been left on those April days nineteen years ago... It is the same old clay we used to get during our trips into the trenches, and the continuous walking in and out of the shell holes and over barbed wire made the women rather tired. I heard one woman say: "No wonder they called it No Man's Land, I can understand it now" (MOULD 1936: 48).

As discussed above, the landscape had been extensively managed to create the illusion of stasis. This illusion was so effectively conjured though that soldiers who had served at Vimy were affected by it. Even more so, those who had never seen the original battlefield were totally convinced that they were experiencing something similar to what the soldiers had. Mould later reflected on his companions' remarks in his diary. He wrote, "I wonder what she would have said about it twenty years ago when we had to plow through fields of mud and slush up to our knees. Still it was a little reminder of what we had to go through just the same" (MOULD 1936: 49). While Mould knew that the experience of visitors nineteen years later and the soldiers who fought at Vimy were clearly different, he recognized an innate similarity and, due to the landscape, was able to more effectively share his experience with those who had not fought at Vimy.

¹⁴ BIANCHI, Angela (2004) "Canadian National Vimy Memorial Park," *CBC News*, 9 April 2004. http://www.cbc.ca/news2/background/vimy/cdn_natl_memorial.html

¹⁵ ZK-1896-1 and ZK-1896-4 Volume 30451, Library and Archives Canada.

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Even eighty-five years after the battle, the preserved shell and mine craters continued to impact visitors. In 2004 Canadian travel-writer Angela Bianchi commented on how the preserved battlefield impacted her emotionally. She wrote, “For those of us who have never seen a shell hole or mine crater, seeing them by the hundreds, bubbling up from the ground, is quite unnerving.”¹⁶ The landscape was preserved with the intention of shaping visitors’ emotional reaction to the site and continues to effectively do so into the 21st century. Additionally, the visitors’ experience is shaped by their physical interaction – or lack thereof – with the military refuse on the site. Military historian Kenneth Mackey visited the site in the 1960s and observed that there was, “rusting shells and wires throughout the Vimy Ridge site” (MACKEY 1965: 190). While forty years later, Bianchi described restrictions on visitors’ exploration when she wrote about the “many signs warning visitors to stay well behind the fenced off ‘red zone’ areas where munitions, from 85 years ago still rest, unexploded.” The threat of unexploded munitions also occasionally became acute and necessitated a total evacuation of the Memorial site and the neighbouring village of Vimy. The most recent example occurred in 2001 when 170 tons of shells containing the chemical warfare agent mustard gas were discovered by French authorities.¹⁷ While all of these examples stem from a practical desire of park managers to keep people safe, each event and personal interaction with a fence, shell or crater, serves to shape how people understand the site and their experience. While some visitors’ emotional reactions to climbing over a shell crater is intended, the possible fear and unease someone feels regarding potentially deadly ordnances buried under their feet is not a product of human management but rather the landscape acting as an equal partner in defining tourists’ or pilgrims’ experience.

Beyond the shell craters and seeming ever-present danger of unexploded artillery shells, one of the unique features of the Vimy landscape is the preserved trench and tunnel system. As mentioned in the introduction, even Hitler was impressed with the preserved fortifications. The irony of the continuing appeal of the preserved fortifications is that they were protected by concrete only due to historical accident. After excavating the base for the Vimy Memorial, construction was delayed as the work crews waited for the correct stone to be found, quarried and shipped to France from the quarry in what is now Croatia. Eight years later, Colonel H.C. Osborne of the CBMC stated that

¹⁶ BIANCHI, Angela (2004) “Canadian National Vimy Memorial Park,” *CBC News*, 9 April 2004. http://www.cbc.ca/news2/background/vimy/cdn_natl_memorial.html

¹⁷ CANADIAN PRESS (2001), “WW I Shells Force Evacuation of Vimy,” *CBC News*, 14 April 2001, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/wwi-shells-force-evacuation-of-vimy-1.296644>

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finding the correct stone was such a time-consuming process because the memorial required stone of “an agreeable colour, obtainable in large sizes required, tractable enough for sensitive carving but at the same time hard enough not to disintegrate when exposed on four sides.¹⁸” This delay meant that during the downtime in the Summer of 1924, Captain – later Major – D.C. Unwain-Simson, who was part of the engineering corps and responsible for overseeing the work crews, ordered the workers to line the trenches with concrete and to replace the sandbags with concrete as well while waiting for the first delivery of the Croatian stone (HUCKER AND SMITH 2012: 41). However, he was only able to do so because of construction delays well beyond his control; if work had proceeded as usual, the trenches would have slowly been filled in and disappeared.

Subsequently, Veterans Affairs has incorporated the concrete trench system into their interpretation of the Vimy Ridge site. In an official brochure they state that, “Trenches and tunnels have been restored and preserved so the visitor can understand the magnitude of the task that faced the Canadian soldiers¹⁹”. Other visitors to the site over the years have also remarked on the impressive fortifications. In 1936, Vimy pilgrim Florence Murdoch remarked in her diary that twenty-two miles of trenches and tunnels had been preserved (MURDOCH 1989: 25). While her actual description of the site is relatively brief, one of the few specifics she mentioned was these concrete structures, indicating their importance in shaping her experience. Additionally, in his article about visiting battlefields of the Western Front, Scott Ellsworth described Vimy as follows: “walking through [the trenches] is a chilling experience, giving a hands-on perspective of trench warfare found nowhere else.²⁰” For Ellsworth not only were the trenches impressive, they also served to make Vimy Ridge unique among all Western Front battlefields. From Veterans Affairs representatives through to journalists and visitors, the trenches were not only a physical feature of the landscape, they were one of the defining aspects of the Vimy Ridge experience. Yet they only existed because of a delay in finding a quarry with the correct type of stone.

Similar to the trenches, sections of the tunnels used by Canadian troops to ferry supplies and soldiers to the frontlines were also protected and incorporated into the Vimy Ridge experience. In particular, the Grange tunnel,

¹⁸ CANADIAN BATTLEFIELD MEMORIAL COMMISSION, *op.cit.*, 1932, R1183-0-7-E.

¹⁹ GOVERNMENT OF CANADA [N.D], *op.cit.*, p. 47.

²⁰ ELLSWORTH, Scott (1990) “Twilight on the Western Front: Biking the Back Roads of Northern France, On The Trail of World War One,” *Washington Post*: E5.

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a 33-foot deep tunnel carved into the chalk, has become the most famous of all the tunnel sections. This particular tunnel is of interest to many visitors because it is the deepest and it contains graffiti carved by Canadian soldiers during the battle.²¹ The markings, particularly a maple leaf carved into the chalk, are viewed by many as a symbol of both the battle and also Canada's birth as a nation at Vimy. During the construction of the Vimy Memorial, the CBMC recognized the importance of the Grange tunnel and its ability to attract visitors to Vimy. In the annual report of the CBMC in 1927, the secretary summarizes international reaction to the work crew's preservation efforts. The report quotes a London journalist as stating that:

The tunnel is destined to become the most remarkable relic of the war. The dugouts have been preserved. The trenches have been lined with concrete sand-bags. Duck boards have been cast in concrete and passages have been reinforced with concrete and metal. Furniture and other objects have been left in place. The Grange Tunnel will, in its present condition, last as an object of interest and instruction for a century or more.²²

Unlike the trenches and shell-craters, which were preserved due to a delay in acquiring the stone for the monument, the Grange Tunnel was intentionally restored due to its unique features. The CBMC's desire to have future visitors understand the experience of fighting at Vimy is particularly reflected in the fact that furniture and other objects within the tunnel were kept in place. Preserving this feature of the battlefield reflected the clear desire of the CBMC to both maintain the site as it was in 1917, but also to make Vimy into an international place of pilgrimage, unique on the Western Front.

Largely the CBMC was successful in their mission and during World War Two many Canadians were anxious about the state of the site itself under German occupation. While aerial reconnaissance could observe that the monument was intact, observation flights could not view the landscape in sufficient detail and certainly could not see underground²³. Canadians had to wait until the liberation of France in the summer of 1944 to learn about the state of the rest of the park. Paul Piroson, the Belgian maintenance worker who took

²¹ BIANCHI, Angela (2004) "Canadian National Vimy Memorial Park," *CBC News*, 9 April 2004. http://www.cbc.ca/news2/background/vimy/cdn_natl_memorial.html

²² CANADIAN BATTLEFIELD MEMORIAL COMMISSION, *op.cit.*, 1927, R1183-0-7-E

²³ ASSOCIATED PRESS (1941), "Vimy Memorial Intact," *New York Times*.

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care of the area throughout the war, reported that Germans had blown up the entrance to the tunnel network out of fear the French resistance was using them to store supplies. However, his biggest complaint was that German soldiers had defaced the graffiti left by Canadian soldiers (DURFLINGER 2007:300-301). Canadians' anger over the occupying soldiers' actions demonstrate the symbolic importance of the markings in the chalk. However, neither the tunnel nor the carvings would have survived if not for the geography of the ridge itself. While British and Canadian forces dug tunnels during every major engagement in the war, most were in loose soil and mud and so quickly disappeared. However, the chalk at Vimy allowed these features to be preserved throughout the war and afterwards. While their significance is culturally constructed, the material reality which allowed such constructions could only exist at Vimy and not at other places where Canadians fought, such as Ypres and the Somme.

Overall, this paper has argued that the way the Vimy Ridge Memorial Park has been understood and interpreted by Canadians and visitors from around the world is as much a result of its landscape and geography as it is of human agency. Beginning with the simple fact that it was located overseas, Canadians sought to characterize the site itself as being Canadian in spite of its location in France. Furthermore, the biological life of the memorial park served to shape people's interaction with the site and to influence how the public memorialized fallen Canadian soldiers. Finally, the physical features of the landscape, both natural and man-made, shaped what aspects of the site were highlighted and incorporated into the public narrative of the memorial.

These public narratives surrounding previous conflicts involving Canadians has become a contentious political issue over the course of the 2010s. Particularly, the efforts of the Stephen Harper led Conservative Government from 2006 to 2015 to place a greater emphasis on Canada's military history was met with substantial criticism from academics and journalists. While the 28 million dollars' budget for War of 1812 commemorations was widely criticized, reports from 2015 that there would be no additional money allocated to remembering the hundred year anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge and that any expenditures had to come out of the budget of the Department of National Defence, elicited similar condemnations. Such controversies represent the wide variety of opinions regarding commemorating Canada's military history and also demonstrate the political perils of failing to properly navigate this metaphorical minefield.

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However, despite frequent debates about how Canadians should remember their country's participation in various armed conflicts, Canadians lack a detailed understanding of how and why the country collectively remembers and values iconic military engagements like Vimy Ridge. Rather than viewing the battlefield and memorial park as simply a passive backdrop upon which Canadian soldiers and later visitors acted upon, Canadians need to understand the dynamic processes of environmental change which occurs outside of human control yet which has tremendously shaped public perception regarding many of the iconic features of Vimy Ridge. For example, the maple trees, preserved tunnels and concrete trenches that make Vimy Ridge unique among First World War memorials exist in their present state only due to environmental and geographic contingencies. All of these contingencies speak to the dynamic nature of memory and argue that commemorating the dead is not simply an act of human will but a collaborative project where human actions are shaped not only by rational decision making but also the very earth itself.

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