A BRIEF HISTORY OF WAR MEMORIAL DESIGN

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Awar memorial may take many forms**, though for most people the first thing that comes to mind is probably a freestanding monument, whether more sculptural (such as a human figure) or architectural (such as an arch or obelisk).

Other likely possibilities include buildings (functional—such as a community hall or even a hockey rink—or symbolic), institutions (such as a hospital or endowed nursing position), fountains or gardens.

Today, in the 21st century West, we usually think of a war memorial as intended primarily to commemorate the sacrifice and memorialize the names of individuals who went to war (most often as combatants, but also as medical or other personnel), and particularly those who were injured or killed. We generally expect these memorials to include a list or lists of names, and the conflicts in which those remembered were involved—perhaps even individual battle sites. This is a comparatively modern phenomenon, however; the ancestors of this type of memorial were designed most often to celebrate a victory, and made no mention of individual sacrifice. Particularly recent is the notion that the names of the rank and file, and not just officers, should be set down for remembrance.

Ancient Precedents

The war memorials familiar at first hand to Canadians are most likely those erected in the years after the end of the First World War. Their most well-known distant ancestors came from ancient Rome, and many (though by no means all) 20th-century monuments derive their basic forms from those of the ancient world. These Roman monuments were large structures, especially triumphal arches (such as the Arch of Titus, 82 AD) or victory columns (e.g. Trajan's Column, 113 AD). They had no individual memorial function, except to preserve in glory the name of an emperor or perhaps a great general, and were—as the name suggests—not about sacrifice and sorrow, but about victory. More modern descendents of such structures include familiar monuments such as the Arc de Triomphe, in Paris (1806-1836, commemorating the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars), and Nelson's column, in London (1840-43, commemorating Admiral Horatio Nelson, who died in the Battle of Trafalgar). Less familiar is Nelson's column in Montréal (1809). These monuments suggest, by their very names, their function of memorializing a victory and the powerful man who effected it. In Canada, Brock's Monument on Queenston Heights (1823-24; destroyed and rebuilt 1853-56) is another example of a column built to commemorate a single man, and a General. None of these structures made any pretence to commemorate the common soldier.

The Arch of Titus, commemorating the popular Emperor Titus and his victory in Jerusalem, has been the model for many triumphal arches since. (Dnalor 01)

19th Century

For the greater part of Europe's bloody history, no attempt was made to bury the bodies of enlisted men in a known location, much less to identify those killed in battle or to keep a record of their names. Well into the 19th century, the majority of the dead were buried as quickly as possible in mass graves, their names remembered only by their friends and families. After the Crimean war, fertilizer companies scooped up soldiers' bodies to manure the crops at home. Though memorials were erected to British dead in the course of Britain's many small imperials wars, they were typically put up by the involved regiments, and did not name individual soldiers, particularly enlisted men.

With changing notions of nationhood and citizenship in 19th-century Europe, however, the citizen-soldier's self-sacrifice on the battlefield came to seem what Karine Varley has called the "ultimate act of patriotic devotion." In a society developing creeping doubts about the absolute promise of a heavenly afterlife, it was crucial for fighting men and their families that an early death should itself seem worthwhile. For states expecting men to lay down their lives—especially far from home, making it harder to convince them that they were defending their own hearths and families—it became convenient to emphasize the patriotic nature of the act of war through ritual and tradition.

Nearing the fourth quarter of the century, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 became the first widely-commemorated conflict in Europe and also the first one in which an effort was made to bury every soldier and officer, albeit often hurriedly. For the first time, "ordinary soldiers were granted permanent resting-places, war memorials were erected in their honour, and each year, communities gathered to commemorate their deaths. The rituals, language, creation of sacred places, and objects that developed through the commemoration of the Franco-Prussian War helped to lay the foundations for the practices of remembrance for the First World War." In this war, as Varley observes, the civilian population began to try to "reclaim some dignity for the dead" who had often been buried crudely and without ceremony by one side or the other. Local people erected little crosses to mark grave sites hastily filled in by the authorities, sometimes during a cease fire called for that purpose. Some villages even held funerals for dead combatants on both sides. Despite these individual efforts, most fallen soldiers were still buried in mass graves, and the memorials did not list the names of the dead. Nonetheless, this war did see the first extensive memorials,
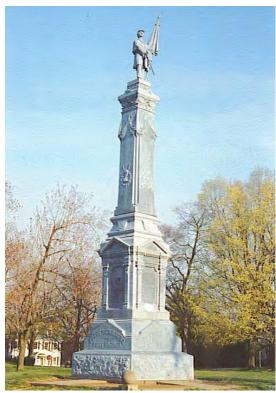
and communities gathered around them yearly to commemorate their losses and to remind (and perhaps convince) themselves of the glory of the sacrifice and its noble patriotic purpose.

A 1914 photo showing a group standing in front of a memorial commemorating battles of the Franco-Prussian War involving the 5th Army Corps.

Just before the Franco-Prussian War, the American Civil War (1861-65) had represented the first large-scale attempt (on the part of the victorious Union) to disinter the dead from their hasty battlefield burials—or, in some cases, to collect their bones from the ground where they lay—and rebury them in central cemeteries after the war (Faust, 211). Initial attempts had been made by both sides to keep lists of those who died, to bury them, and to keep some record of where they were buried, but these tasks were often overwhelmed by the urgent needs of the injured and ill. After the war had ended, supporters of the bill to "establish and protect national cemeteries," passed early in 1867, argued that the state had an obligation to the bodies of its soldiers, and even that the obligation to the common soldier was equal to that owed to the higher-born. The resulting reinterment programme provided individual burials for those who might initially have been pushed en masse into ditches. It also afforded an opportunity to mark graves with a name, although this was often impossible in an era before soldiers were provided with identifying "dog tags." For those who could be identified, the government offered families the option of having their loved ones' bodies sent home for burial; this practice has continued through to the present.

This government-sponsored effort to provide a decent burial for the soldiers of the winning side did not extend to the Confederate dead. In the South, well-to-do white women formed memorial associations to improve and maintain Confederate graves, and to bury the scattered dead in hallowed ground in new or expanded cemeteries. Only after the Spanish-American war in 1898, where northern and southern soldiers fought side-by-side, did Confederate graves become American graves, as President McKinley announced that the federal government would finally take a share in their maintenance.

Civil War Memorial in Stratford, Connecticut, 1889. Like this one, a number of Civil War memorials are constructed of cast zinc (or "white bronze"), a process that became available in the 1870s. Relatively inexpensive, it enabled communities to erect very large and ornate monuments like this one, which lists the names of those who died. (Jon Best)

The Civil War was the first conflict in the United States to be heavily memorialized. The reason for this probably lies in the facts that the soldiers were almost all citizen volunteers, and that the war was so incredibly bloody and took such an unprecedented toll on life. When it finally ended, non-combatants were eager to express their gratitude for this sacrifice. Battlefield memorials are particularly prominent. They were erected with large budgets, often by state governments, with reference to particular events or people. But there are also widespread community memorials dedicated to everyone who died (or sometimes who fought) from a given community. A few of these went up even

before the war had ended, and these tended to take simpler forms such as obelisks. Numerous memorials were added over the course of decades, following the styles dominant at the time ("Connecticut's Civil War Monuments").

Several aspects of the Civil War memorialization of soldiers have parallels in activity during and after the First World War, particularly the reinterment of bodies in National Cemeteries, though it is not clear that there was a direct influence. In addition, a widespread creation of community war memorials, complete with lists of names, would occur after the Great War across the British Empire (though much less so in the United States). It is likely, however, that Canada's war memorials owe more to the British tradition.
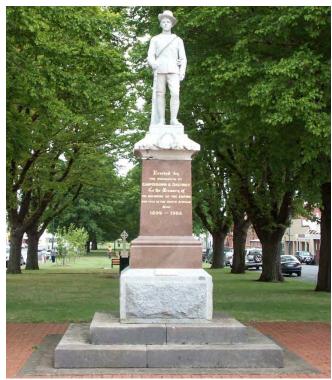

The Volunteers Monument in Winnipeg (Samuel Hooper, 1886) was dedicated to nine men of the 90th Winnipeg Battalion who were killed in the Northwest Rebellion, and whose names are carved in the stone. As a regimental (though privately funded) memorial, this has more in common with those erected during Britain's various imperial wars than it does with the community memorials that followed the earlier U.S. civil war or the later Boer War. (Gordon Goldsborough, Manitoba Historical Society; Christian Cassidy)

Early 20th Century

The Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) saw large numbers of volunteers joining the ranks of professional soldiers in the British army. The grieving families of the dead were not happy to see their sons and husbands unceremoniously dumped into unmarked graves as in previous conflicts, their personal belongings and even teeth often removed and sold. As a result, the army, for the first time, took responsibility for both burying and recording the graves of the dead. The Royal Engineers were given this job ("Honouring the Fallen"). A volunteer group called the Guild of Loyal Women took over the responsibility for looking after graves and cemeteries, and recording grave locations. They became overwhelmed by the task, however, and burial grounds in South Africa quickly fell into disrepair.

1902 Boer War Memorial (figure carved in Carrara, Italy), Camperdown, Australia
(Authentic Heritage Services Pty Ltd)

More relevant for our study of war memorials in Manitoba is the fact that, in response to this war, many towns and cities in Britain and elsewhere in the Empire raised funds and erected monuments to their citizens who had fought and died. Meurig Jones suggests that these memorials "represent the first ever mass raising of war memorials" in the United Kingdom.

1903 Boer War Memorial, Forest Recreation Ground, Nottingham, England
(Nottinghamshire Heritage Gateway)

This move to memorialize can be ascribed to a number of causes. These include the high number of volunteer combatants (as opposed to professional soldiers), patriotic fervour at the height of Empire, a growing middle class with some money to spare, a contemporary culture of chivalry that made death in battle seem noble and worthwhile, and newly-efficient and speedy communications that gave the public at home access to the dread events in South Africa almost as soon as they occurred—giving rise, for the first time, to the possibility of a "popular mood" that could affect the entire country, plunging it into collective pride or despair as the war unfolded far away (Jones).
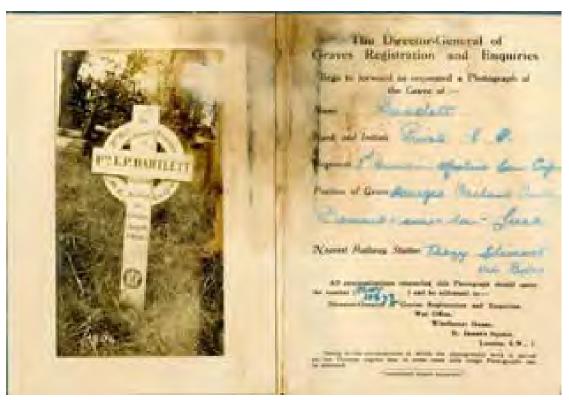

1903 Boer War Memorial, Halifax Public Gardens, NS (Friends of the Public Gardens)

First World War

Many Anglo-Boer War memorials bear a strong formal resemblance to the First World War monuments that were to rise a couple of decades later in towns and cities across the world. In addition, they often included complete lists of names, generally divided by rank. But the Great War—involving millions of volunteer combatants and unthinkable casualties over countless battlefields—provided a challenge unprecedented: a gargantuan task of memorializing on a hitherto unknown scale.

The task was begun by Fabian Ware. A British subject who had worked in the Transvaal from the mid-1890s, he had seen the devastation wrought by the Anglo-Boer War and had been saddened by the declining state of the memorials and grave sites of his dead countrymen. Past fighting age in World War I, he commanded a mobile unit of the British Red Cross in France. At his behest, his unit took on the daunting task of recording and caring for graves, many of which started out as makeshift "soldiers' cemeteries," marked by helmets balanced on rifles, sometimes with rough crosses and inscriptions; Ware sought to make these into permanent burial grounds (Lichfield). By 1915, the War Office had incorporated this work into the responsibilities of the British Army, under the auspices of the newly-named Graves Registration commission (Commonwealth War Graves Commission website), which soon found itself fielding large numbers of requests for photographs and information ("Honouring the Fallen"). The Graves Registration Commission acquired extensive plots of land from the French government that could be used for permanent cemeteries, and made the somewhat momentous decision to allow no further bodies to be repatriated; all soldiers would be buried in these official cemeteries, near the place they had fallen. Furthermore, officers and enlisted men would lie together, regardless of rank. Renamed the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquires, the Commission would send bereaved families a photograph of their loved one's grave, with instructions for finding it should they be able to visit one day.

An example of the information sent by the War Office to a deceased soldier's next of kin, this card includes a photograph of the grave of Private Ernest P. Bartlett, killed on 8 August 1918 and buried at Hourges Orchard Cemetery, Domart-sur-la-Luce, along the Somme River, France. (George Metcalf Archival Collection CWM 20010076-007)

Imperial War Graves Commission

As the war and the slaughter continued, Ware and his compatriots began to think about longer-term maintenance for the burial sites. They were also eager for their work to reflect the spirit of Imperial Cooperation evident in the war effort itself, and in 1917, the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) was established. The membership of the Commission (renamed the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in 1960), comprised the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa, with each country providing funding according to the number of soldiers it had lost. The Commission's work began in earnest after the Armistice, when they began identifying and registering graves, and eventually moving tens of thousands of bodies to new Imperial war cemeteries (work that still continues as bodies are unearthed in the course of agriculture or construction). For the important work of memorializing the Empire's war dead, the IWGC employed luminaries of architecture, landscape and literature: Sir Herbert Baker, Sir Reginald Blomfield and Sir Edwin Lutyens to design the monuments, with typeface designed by Max Gill; Gertrude Jekyll to oversee the landscape design, and Rudyard Kipling to choose the inscriptions. The first three experimental cemeteries were completed in 1921, with one at Forceville, France, being deemed the most successful and becoming a template for further work.

A military cemetery at Coxyde, Belgium as IWGC standard headstones (right) replace the wooden crosses of wartime burials.

Most of these cemeteries are at or near battlefield sites in Europe and elsewhere. But we find war graves on the home front as well, because any veteran has the right to military burial. Sometimes one runs across a solitary War Graves Commission stone in a church cemetery, and some cemeteries have larger areas set aside for war graves. In Manitoba, wartime burials might have been for soldiers who were killed in early training and never made it to the battlefront, or for injured soldiers who were sent home to die. Later burials might be for soldiers who died of war-related causes after the Armistice: of wounds, of the effects of gas, or of suicide brought on by what was once called shellshock, and we now know as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Looking at the dates on the stones, we can see that some veterans who lived to a ripe old age also chose to receive a soldier's burial.

War Graves Commission cemeteries are not identical, but they have certain features in common. Most have stone enclosing walls and wrought-iron gates, and all feature standard headstones. Cemeteries with more than forty graves generally have a Cross of Sacrifice as a focal point. Designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield, the Cross of Sacrifice is a granite cross with a bronze sword embedded on the front, mounted on an octagonal base. Brandon and Winnipeg's Brookside Cemeteries both have Crosses of Sacrifice.

Brandon Cross of Sacrifice

Larger cemeteries, generally those with over a thousand graves (though there are exceptions such as at Brookside), also have a Stone of Remembrance, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens. Devoid of overt religious symbolism, the Stone recalls a tomb or perhaps an altar. The gravestones themselves are of light-coloured limestone and differ only in their inscriptions. They generally feature an appropriate religious symbol, a national emblem (in Canada's case, a maple leaf) or regimental badge, the soldier's name, rank, unit, date of death and age. Relatives also had the opportunity to pay for a short epitaph or other inscription to be added.

The only Stone of Remembrance in North America, at Brookside Cemetery in Winnipeg
(Commonwealth War Graves Commission Canadian Agency)

Around the periphery of many cemeteries overseas are graves marked "A Soldier of the Great War/Known unto God." The bodies of these soldiers were unidentifiable. But though their graves do not identify them, the IWGC'S great memorials to the Missing ensure that their names are preserved.

Thiepval Monument to the Missing. Unveiled in 1932, this vast structure is inscribed with the names of 72,195 British and South African men who went missing in the Battles of the Somme. (Carl's Brum Blog; 1st Battalion, the Cheshire Regiment)

These enormous monuments, architectural in scale, were intended both to convey the enormity of the collective loss and to provide a slate upon which to carve the name of every soldier whose body had never been found, or could not be identified, and who therefore had no known headstone. The most famous of these are probably Blomfield's Menin Gate, at Ypres, with its more than 55,000 names, and the Thiepval Memorial on the Somme, by Lutyens, commemorating over 72,000 lost. A little later, some other members of the Commission built their own memorials to the Missing. Canada's principal memorial, at Vimy Ridge, was designed by the sculptor Walter Seymour Allward. It names 11,285 soldiers who disappeared into the mud in France, as well as serving as a memorial to all the dead of the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

Canadian National Memorial, Vimy (1936). This memorial is dedicated to the memory of some 60 thousand dead of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. The names of over 11 thousand, missing in France, are carved in the stone. At right, a young "Mother Canada" mourns her dead. (Juno Beach Educator Tour; Michael MacKay)

The War Graves Commission's decision not to allow the repatriation of bodies of men who died overseas meant that, for the majority of bereaved families, they would never see the place where their lost loved ones were buried. In addition, there were the countless soldiers who had simply disappeared in the fray – their bodies never recovered or unidentifiable. These facts gave war memorials on the home front a particularly poignant function: they stood in for the gravestones that many soldiers never had, or that their families would probably never see. The carving of names into these memorials provided a gravestone in absentia for mourning every lost soldier.

The Cenotaph and the Unknown Warrior

For the families of those whose bodies had never been identified or found, a Tomb of the Unknown Soldier could provide a focal point for grief. The first, known as the Unknown Warrior and buried in London in 1920, was chosen from amongst six unidentified bodies collected from cemeteries in different locations in Europe; this was to ensure that the body could, in theory, be anyone's son, thus imbuing the tomb with special resonance for those who had lost a family member. (Canada's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was established at the cenotaph in Ottawa only in 2000, and holds the body of an unidentified soldier who was killed at Vimy Ridge.)

The unveiling ceremony at the Cenotaph on Whitehall, in London, 11 November 1920

London's Unknown Warrior was buried among monarchs in Westminster Abbey, simultaneously with the burial of an unknown French soldier at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. At the same time, England's cenotaph was unveiled at Whitehall. This was a permanent copy in stone of a version originally designed by Lutyens in plaster and wood, for the London Victory (or Peace Day) Parade, commemorating the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The cenotaph is a stark stone pylon, rising, through a series of several set-backs, to the representation of an empty tomb (or "cenotaph", in Greek) at its summit. Variously interpreted, the cenotaph became a model for many other war memorials in England and across the empire, including in Manitoba.

Many memorials that were vaguely vertical or tomb-like were at the time described as "like the cenotaph" (King, 147), but many others are copies or heavily-influenced by this form.

MANITOBA
Winnipeg had its own temporary cenotaph, erected by the Women's Canadian Club outside the Bank of Montréal at Portage and Main, in June 1920 (*Manitoba Free Press*, Saturday 5 June 1920). It stood for about three years, and was then replaced by the Bank's own bronze figure of a soldier, which stands there still.

Winnipeg's Temporary Cenotaph, with the Bank of Montréal visible at right. On the front was painted "The Glorious Dead; Their Name Liveth Forevermore" (Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Smith Collection).

The removal of the temporary cenotaph prompted a public demand for a replacement. After considerable delay resulting from controversy over both the site and the sculptor, Gilbert Parfitt's grey stone cenotaph was erected on Memorial Boulevard outside the legislature. A number of other Manitoba communities also opted for a cenotaph form for their memorials.