

VIMY RIDGE, CANADA'S FIRST WORLD WAR MEMORIAL: RESTORATION CHALLENGES OF AN EARLY-MODERN STRUCTURE

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The art critic and novelist John Berger observed that war memorials are “numb: monuments to an inexpressible calamity.”¹ And, said Berger, “they demand our active engagement, if we are to remember the full consequences of the First World War.” His insight proved to be especially pertinent for Canada’s First World War monument on Vimy Ridge. The beauty of its figures can cast a spell over the onlooker, but they seem locked in their own psychological drama, oblivious to the world around them. The preoccupation of those solitary figures –and that of the artist–together with many other questions were the subject of debate throughout the work on the monument’s restoration. One question concerned the place of the memorial in the cultural history of the early 20th century: Was the monument a product of the late-19th century, Beaux-arts tradition, or was it an early expression of the modern era? The answer would provide the framework for understanding the observable physical reality.² Not surprisingly, the monument offered no easy answers, but embodied certain of the anxieties that beset the living in the melancholy post-war years, anxieties that retain a hold on the present.

Britain’s declaration of war on 4 August 1914 meant that Canada, as a member of the British Empire, was automatically at war with Germany. Prior to the commencement of hostilities, Canada had a small standing army of slightly more than 3,000 regulars, supplemented by 74,000 part-time militia. By the end of the war, the country had over 600,000 men and women in uniform. Its most notable contribution to the war effort came through the Canada Corps, a force of some 100,000 soldiers sent to fight along the Western Front, and whose courage and innovative methods earned it a high reputation. The battle for Vimy Ridge in April 1917 was one of several significant Canadian military engagements in the Great War, but has assumed a special place in the country’s history. It marked the first time all four Canadian divisions launched a simultaneous attack on a single front under Canadian command. At the end of the four-day battle, Canada’s force had suffered 10,602 casualties, including 3,598 deaths. Notwithstanding its high cost in human life, the successful outcome of the attack boosted the country’s military confidence. It also served to reinforce Canada’s awakening sense of independence and nationhood.³

The memorial that now dominates Vimy Ridge in the Pas de Calais region of northern France is Canada’s national memorial to the contribution and sacrifice of all who took part in the First World War. It also marks the capture of the ridge by the Canadian Corps on April 9-12 1917 (Figure 1). It honours the memory of the 65,000 Canadians who lost their lives in that war, and it records the names of 11,285 Canadians whose bodies were never found and who have no known grave.

The Vimy monument was designed in 1921 by the Canadian sculptor Walter Allward, who watched over its construction between 1925 and 1936, overseeing its realization to the very last detail. Scaled to stand as a powerful presence in the sweeping landscape of northern France, the huge structure is built in reinforced concrete and faced in white limestone. Two walls, one behind the other, define the front of the monument. Each is anchored deep in the ground. From

¹ John Berger, “The Untellable”, *New Society*, 11 May 1978, quoted in Geoff Dyer, *The Missing Of The Somme* (London: Phoenix Press, 1994), p. 24. Berger’s telling remark echoes a 1936 observation of the Cenotaph in London as “an ethereal monument of [England’s] inarticulateness.” See: *The Epic of Vimy*, W. W. Murray ed., (Ottawa: The Legionary, 1936), p. 140.

² Parts of this paper were presented at the ICOMOS conference in Quebec in 2008. It also combines parts of a paper presented by Julian Smith, the Canadian leader of the Vimy restoration project, at the same conference.

³ Paul Dickson, “The End of the Beginning: The Canadian Corps in 1917,” in Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold, eds., *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), p. 64.

this base rise two tall pylons. This simple architectural design provides the backdrop for the enactment of a *mis en scène* involving 20 larger-than-life figures (Figure 2). These depict interrelated allegorical themes, evoking the myth of sacrifice, death and resurrection. The drama of the sculptured figures unfolds above an empty tomb, or sarcophagus, which stands on the former battlefield at the base of the monument's principal wall and symbolizes Canada's 65,000 war dead. Standing over it is the tall, shrouded figure of "Canada Bereft." Deep in contemplation, she mourns forever her fallen sons. Between the pylons, two figures represent their heroic sacrifice and spiritual rebirth. The first resembles a crucified Christ, the second, holding the torch of peace, strains upwards towards six column-figures representing the virtues of Truth, Faith, Justice, Charity, Knowledge and, at the summit of the monument, the figure of Peace. At either end of the main wall two figure groups represent Canada's ideals for which the young men had given their lives; ideals the living must strive to protect. On the opposite side of the monument are two more figures. Isolated by their grief, they represent those who lost loved ones to the war.

Ironically, barely three years after the monument was completed, Vimy Ridge was again under German military control. The monument survived the Second World War relatively unscathed, but in the 1950s, its walls began to deteriorate. A failure of the drainage system was diagnosed as the principal cause of the deterioration. Despite attempts to resolve the problem, the monument continued to decay and by the mid-1990s, its walls were scarred by patchwork repairs of different stone types, calcite deposits, discolouration, spalling and cracking. Especially troubling was the deteriorated state of the names of the missing Canadian servicemen inscribed across its walls (Figure 3). Aware of growing public concern for the fragile and irreplaceable names, the Canadian government resolved to repair or replace the damaged names, correct the technical problems, and recapture the monument's aesthetic quality. A conservation program began in 2004 and was completed in April 2007, in time for the rededication ceremony on the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Preparatory analysis undertaken for the conservation project in the late-1990s revealed a paucity of documentation, suggesting that the monument had not been the focus of earlier scholarly examination. At the historic site, interpretation had focused almost exclusively on military history, and very limited information on the monument was available to visitors. The monument's official commemorative message was well known, but the significance of the actual structure was not. To be fair to the Canadian government, which is responsible for the care and upkeep of the monument, in the 1990s few First World War monuments had been deemed worthy of academic investigation. Rather, they tended to be catalogued collectively as state-sponsored memorials, conservative in their design and sentiment, and falling squarely into 19th century monument traditions, with ideas derived from classical, romantic and Christian sources. This view of the First World War memorials only began to change when the cultural impact of the Great War became a subject of growing academic interest, following the publication of Paul Fussell's groundbreaking 1975 study, *The Great War and Modern Memory*. A second influential work was Samuel Hynes', *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, published in 1991.

Fussell and Hynes provided insights into how contemporaries understood the Great War and emphasized the war's significance in the cultural history of the 20th century. Each examined the responses of writers, poets and painters who had lived through the war. They found that many had experienced an acute sense of a rupture in history that, in their work, took the form of irony, fragmentation and ruin. Fussell and Hynes demonstrated that, if the war did not actually create the modern world, it fueled its development and shaped its character.⁴ Their work inspired a number of subsequent studies on war memorials, at the local and national levels. A dissentient view was espoused by Jay Winter, a leading English-speaking scholar, who noted that most post-war memorials were "framed in traditional language of shared ideas." This, he argued, was because only this shared language had the power to heal.⁵

⁴ Thomas Laqueur, "The Past's Past," *The London Review of Books*, vol. 18, no. 18, (9 September, 1996), p. 3.

⁵ Jay Winter, *Sites of memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005)

An initial assessment of the Vimy Monument would seem to confirm Winter's thesis. Its adoption of a classical figure style with a message of death and spiritual resurrection was traditional and well-used commemorative response. Moreover, its principal figure, "Canada Bereft" was the embodiment of a 2,000-year tradition of the mourning female figure. However, the monument's figures revealed a new psychological depth that marked a departure from the visual realism and patriotic optimism that had characterized earlier memorials, including those by Allward.⁶ These figures dwelled in a somber world whose melancholy state was heightened by the presence of the carefully inscribed names of the 11,285 missing Canadians.

Writing in the 1990s, the American historian Thomas Laqueur pointed out that the inscription of many thousands of names on First World War memorials spoke to the modern fear of erasure. He took issue with Winter's thesis, observing that, while the First World War monuments made use of the classical language, this was a remade classicism expressing the modern sensibilities of loss and obligation, which demanded that somehow the past be kept present.⁷ Among the examples that Laqueur used to demonstrate his point were the Menin Gate in Ypres and the Monument To The Missing of the Somme at Thiepval. Support for Laquer's perceptive analysis can be found in Walter Allward's own words. Explaining that inspiration for his design had its origins in a dream that haunted him for months afterward, he expressed the fear and anguish of those living in the immediate post-war years:

When things were at their blackest in France, I dreamed that I was in a great battlefield. I saw our men going by in thousands and being mowed down by the sickles of death...Suffering beyond endurance at the sight, I turned my eyes and found myself looking down on an avenue of poplars. Suddenly through the avenues I saw thousands marching to the aid of our armies. They were the dead. They rose in masses, filed silently by and entered the fight to aid the living. So vivid was the impression, that when I awoke it stayed with me for months. Without the dead we were helpless. So I have tried to show this in this monument to Canada's fallen, what we owed them and will forever owe them.⁸

In disclosing the content of his dream, Allward revealed how his response to the catastrophe of the war aligned with those writers, poets and painters who believed that the war had shattered pre-war cultural assumptions. And, in struggling to create a memorial that could transcend the event and bring solace to the bereaved, Allward evoked emotions that were to preoccupy a generation of artists who lived through the war.

The pathos of Allward's monument appears to have had an immediate impact on Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King. In 1922, he proposed that a larger part of the battle site be acquired and preserved as a memorial park. He recorded his reason in a diary entry:

I made a strong plea for conserving a tract of one or two square miles of Vimy ridge as consecrated hallowed ground around Allward's memorial to be erected. The real memorial being the ridge itself, one of earth's altars, on which Canadians sacrificed for the cause of humanity. . . This is Canada's altar on European soil.⁹

⁶ Alexandra Mosquin, "Walter Seymour Allward," Submission Report, National Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, 2001, 5, pp. 4-7.

⁷ Thomas Laqueur, "Memory And Naming In The Great War," *Commemorations: The Politics Of National Identity*, John R. Gillis, ed. (Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1994), p. 159.

⁸ 'Vimy Clippings,' Allward Fonds, Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Canada. I have discussed aspects surrounding the design of the Vimy Monument in my article "Vimy: A Monument for the Modern World", *Journal, Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2008), pp. 39-48.

⁹ W.L.M. King Diaries, 26 April 1922, LAC.

For the prime minister, as for Allward and many others who had lived through the war, the battlefields of the western front had assumed a sacred identity, transformed by the sacrifice of those who had died.¹⁰ Their spiritual quality captured the imagination of artists, searching for some purpose in the carnage, and many adopted this imagery in their work.¹¹ Acceding to the prime minister's suggestion, France presented Canada with 100 hectares of land at the highest point along the Vimy ridge. Contained within its boundaries were two military cemeteries and the remnants of German and Canadian trench lines. There was no modern European or Canadian precedent for preserving an actual battle site as a means of commemorating the war dead, and the Canadian prime minister's words harked back to those of President Abraham Lincoln sixty years earlier in his address at the preserved site of the Battle of Gettysburg, perhaps the closest antecedent to the Vimy memorial.

If the meaning attached to the Vimy monument by Allward and its siting on a preserved portion of the western front distinguished it from pre-First World War memorials, so too does its architectural design. Prior to the war, Allward had enjoyed success as a creator of public monuments, working in an unremarkable late-nineteenth century style that was gradually breaking away from the Beaux-Arts manner with its reliance on hierarchical, pyramidal compositions and a realistic figure style. In the early years of the 20th century he had traveled to Europe to study the work of August Rodin. The French artist's work had a liberating effect on Allward's sculptural compositions, but it took the war to prompt Allward to move beyond his former approach. For Vimy, his first early-modern monument, he adopted a composition of bold, weighty masses and a figure style that abandoned realism and whose physicality served as a vehicle for psychological expression.

The same modernist aesthetic also informs Allward's composition drawings. Architect Julian Smith, the Canadian leader of the conservation team, observed that Allward's drawings emphasized simple volumes with unbroken surfaces, and manipulated light to give the structure its formal quality as a single composition. The texture and shape of the individual masonry units were secondary considerations. Smith also observed how obsessed Allward had been with maintaining the formal simplicity and harmony of his original concept throughout the building process:

For almost three years he searched for the perfect stone – smooth, homogeneous, white, luminous - and then he designed a system where the blocks were so large and the joints so fine, that there was almost nothing but stone visible to the eye. The mortar in the joints was coloured to match the stone, and tooled flush with the surface to eliminate even the hint of a shadow line.¹²

Allward's approach to applying the names of the missing was a further indication of his modernist vision for the monument. The structure was nearing completion when the Canadian Battlefields Memorial Committee decided that it should carry the names of the dead around its outer walls. The Imperial War Graves Commission (later renamed the Commonwealth War Graves Commission) had earlier developed a particular technique for this purpose. Under this, names were inscribed on individual panels that could be removed and replaced as required, without undermining a monument's integrity. This served to facilitate subsequent maintenance. The Menin Gate and the Thiepval monument were both designed in this fashion. Allward, however, chose a different approach, carving the names in a continuous band that ran from stone to stone and across vertical and horizontal mortar joints. The effect was that of a lightly incised pattern

¹⁰ Jonathan F. Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning And the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997), p. 56.

¹¹ Most notably the British painter, Paul Nash, who was employed as a war artist by the Canadian War Memorials Fund and traveled to Vimy Ridge shortly after the battle. His paintings and drawings of the western front expresses not so much the drama of war as the metaphysical quality of the battlefield where so many had lost their lives.

¹² Julian Smith, "Restoring Vimy: The Challenges of Confronting Emerging Modernism", *Journal, Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2008), p. 50.

that all but disguised the presence of the joints while maintaining the formal purity of the monument.¹³ Allward designed the alphabet and also the method of application using rubber templates whose flexibility sometimes affected the size and shape of the letters, giving the whole exercise an almost handcrafted appearance.

The challenge for the conservation team became, how could the monument be conserved so that Allward's ideas and wishes could be preserved? A general standard in conservation is that, in order to protect the heritage value of a historic site, interventions should be as minimal as possible. But Allward had not designed a monument that could adapt to the normal weathering of age. Nor had he created a monument that could accept replacement materials of a different colour or texture, nor one that allowed the names to be easily separated from the walls. To protect the monument's formal value, a full restoration was necessary, and the work would have to include repair of the foundations. This, in turn, would mean dismantling and rebuilding the outer walls and removing the patchwork repairs that had gradually scarred the monument over the years.

The debates that led the team to adopt such a radical approach were frequently intense and played out against the knowledge that, whichever approach was adopted would embody subjectivity and carry with it some degree of cultural bias. Julian Smith examined these issues in a paper published last year in the *Journal Of The Society For The Study Of Architecture In Canada*,¹⁴ when he asked:

... what are the consequences of dealing with modernism if we decide that the abstract idea, and its formal representation, justify a continual cycle of reconstruction? Does the importance not only of materiality, but of the original craftsmanship associated with it, disappear from the discussion?

Smith illustrated his concern with examples of iconic modern buildings contemporary with the Vimy Monument: The Barcelona Pavilion of Mies van der Rohe, which is a complete reconstruction; the Villa Savoye, which has been heavily restored to preserve the formal perfection of Le Corbusier's ideas; and Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, whose formal qualities have also been carefully restored but whose concrete has been treated with a modern coating to protect it from deterioration. "In each case," wrote Smith, "precedence was given to protecting the creative idea of the architect."

For Vimy, historic value was clearly endowed in its materiality – the stone – and in its craftsmanship – the design and execution of the names – as well as in its formal qualities and in the preservation of the names. (Fortunately, the sculptural figures were in very good condition, requiring no conservation). It might be argued that protection of the monument's formal quality and the names should take precedence over its materiality and craftsmanship. But if a different repair stone were introduced, it would have had an impact, albeit minor, on the monument's aesthetic quality. The debate over the craftsmanship was more complex because it was associated directly with the names. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission initially urged that, since the walls had to be dismantled and largely rebuilt, the names should be completely re-engraved within removable panels. But this solution would have undermined Allward's intent for the walls to be perceived as strong bastion walls. Smith therefore made a case for preserving as many of the names as possible and replacing the illegible names in the same style and form of application as the originals. The various possible conservation approaches were presented to a blue ribbon committee, which had been appointed to advise the government on the restoration project. The committee decided that the purity of the original concept should be preserved. It recommended that the new stone should match the existing, that as many of the names as possible should be conserved, and that all the replacement names should be designed and inscribed so as to be indistinguishable from the originals.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Op.cit. p. 53.

There was one conservation option that might have been adopted, and that was to allow the monument to continue to decay and become a ruin. It would have meant removing all later interventions and simply stabilizing the decaying structure. Ruins are potent triggers for evoking memory, but in the case of Vimy, it was never a serious option. As the outcry over the loss of the names had demonstrated, the First World War haunts us still. Collectively we harbor that modern fear of erasure and cannot countenance the thought of allowing these memorials to disappear.

In the result, when work began on the Vimy restoration in 2004, the walls were dismantled, the stone was tested and as much as possible saved and reused. New stone was obtained from the original quarry in Croatia, shaped and dressed exactly as before. Almost half of the names had to be re-inscribed and, where they ran across or along the mortar joints, many of the letters had to be carved by hand to ensure a perfect match. With the exception of its two pylons and one section of wall, the entire structure was rebuilt.

At Vimy, the preserved battlefield remnant constitutes a significant element in the memorial. After the war, the French Government had singled out the ridge for a reforestation program intended to regenerate a landscape, which had been devastated by the war. This program was coordinated with a simple landscape plan prepared for the Vimy site and developed in consultation with Allward. The site was planted with thousands of Austrian pines. In the French custom, the slender trees were carefully spaced in an orderly manner. As they matured, the trees were pruned to reveal rather than hide the battlefield landscape beneath. The result has been a canopy of pine-green branches filtering the sunlight from above, and an open, grass-covered undulating landscape of trenches, shell-holes and earthworks below. When it was completed, the memorial park appeared at one and same time heroic in scale and allegorical in meaning. The repetition of the trees, the long vistas and wide horizon lines evoked an elegiac mood to match a monument whose emotive power was reinforced by the interplay between the former battle landscape, the monument, the cemeteries, the forest, and the sky. The particular spirit of the ridge has doubtless contributed to the erroneous but persistent myth that a tree was planted for every Canadian who lost his life (Figure 4).

For Allward setting the monument on such a landscape added further complexity to its meaning. Significantly, he did not want it to sit on the crest of the ridge but be positioned in such a way that it appeared to grow out of the unbounded battlefield, where its mythologized interpretation of the war would forever confront the real tragedy. To achieve this effect, he chose to excavate the ground in front of the monument until the desired impression was achieved. He placed the empty tomb directly on the battleground and, when the monument was completed, he turned this area into a grassed space he referred to as the amphitheatre. He retained the remnant landscape around the sides and back of the monument, thereby establishing a direct and powerful emotional connection between the monument and the ridge. When the monument was unveiled in July 1936, 5,000 Canadian veterans stood in pride of place in the amphitheatre, while family members watched from its sloping sides. Viewed in this light, Allward's monument may be understood as a modern retelling of a Greek tragedy. Rising from a site of so much destruction and loss of life, it harnesses the violent and irrational forces released by the war and offers solace through the promise of a return to order and harmony.

A newfound fascination with Greek tragic drama had reemerged at the beginning of the 20th century. This was attributable in large measure to the popularization of Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth Of Tragedy*, his famous analysis of the cultural meaning of ancient Greek tragedy. Nietzsche believed that the harmony of Greek art was in fact a sublimated expression of the violence that permeated Greek society. The great achievement of Greek tragedy, he argued, was its ability to reconcile the conflicting sides of human nature through art, and specifically the invention of tragedy. Edward Gordon Craig, the visionary British stage designer was an admirer of *The Birth Of Tragedy* and sought to convey through his designs the psychological undertones of tragic drama (Figure 5). No direct evidence has been found to suggest that Allward was acquainted with Nietzsche's thinking; however, the many correspondences between the Vimy

monument and Craig's stage designs suggest that Allward was aware of the Englishman's work. Vimy's towering modernist background, the symbolic gesture of its figures, the preference for a monochromatic material and the role of light and space, all owe a debt to Gordon Craig's stage designs. And, like Craig's work, Vimy's design elements rise above reality and function as poetic symbols. With Vimy, Allward was also able to accomplish something that Craig could not do. Through the monument's placement in the regenerating war landscape he reconnected the ancient symbiotic relationship between war and tragic drama identified by Nietzsche.

Re-establishing the relationship between the monument and its landscape has given rise to new conservation issues which have yet to be resolved. But it has also lent legitimacy to the key conservation decisions that were taken. It has, moreover, underlined the wisdom of John Berger's advice on the need to actively engage with the First World War memorials. The Vimy monument represented a radical break with 19th century monument tradition, because the old way of commemoration no longer sufficed. It has been observed that the only response to tragic events lies in the resilience with which the situation is confronted and the "depth and artistry with which it is framed."¹⁵ As an artist who had lived through the war, Walter Allward understood that his role was to respond to the "inexpressible calamity" in a way to which people could relate. Vimy's originality, beauty and workmanship attest to the lengths to which he went to ensure a response that was of its time and timeless. The memorial on Vimy Ridge is not only Canada's national memorial but also an important Canadian early modern work of art and an enduring image of the First World War (Figures 6 and 7).



Fig. 1. The Vimy Monument, Pas de Calais, France; designed 1921, built 1925-36, Walter S. Allward, sculptor. The monument in 1926. (Courtesy of Queen's University Archives, W. S. Allward Collection, G11 5055, Box 5.)

¹⁵ See Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea Of The Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), especially the chapter titled 'Tragedy and Modernity.'



Fig. 2. The Vimy Monument in 1936; detail of the main wall. (Courtesy of Queen's University Archives, W. S. Allward Collection, G11 5055, Box 5.)



Fig. 3. The Vimy Monument; details of deteriorated walls. (Government of Canada, 2004.)



Fig. 4. The Vimy Monument; view of the forest. (Courtesy of Lane Borstad, n.d.)

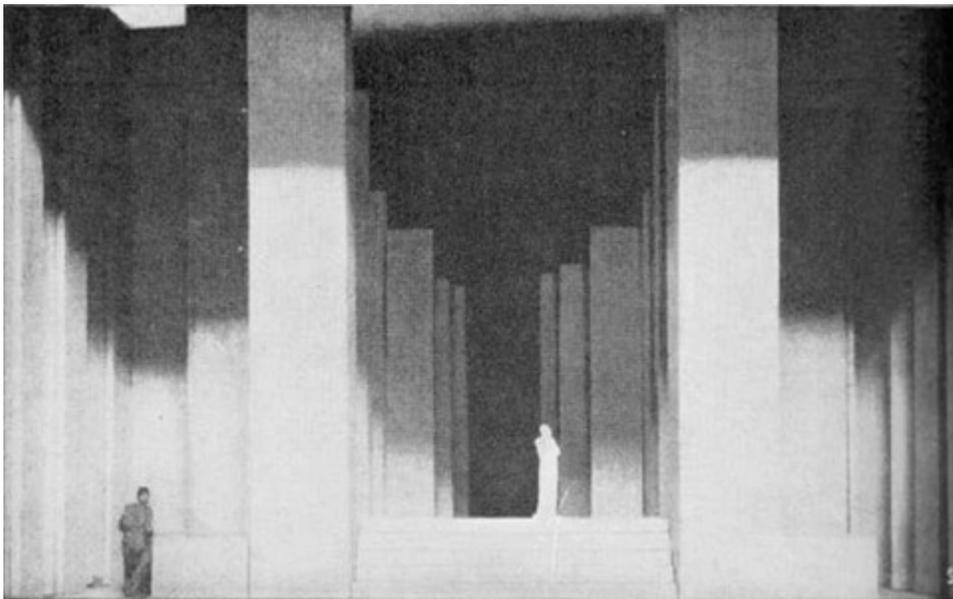


Fig. 5. Edward Gordon Craig's model for the final scene of his production of Hamlet in 1911. (Edward Gordon Craig, *Towards a New Theatre*, 1913.)



Fig. 6. The Vimy Monument after restoration in 2007; detail of a rebuilt wall. (Courtesy of Blair Ketchenson for Phillips Farevaag Smallemberg, Vancouver, Canada, 2007.)



Fig. 7. The Vimy Monument after restoration in 2007. (Courtesy of Blair Ketchenson for Phillips Farevaag Smallemberg, Vancouver, Canada, 2007.)