Taking Vimy Ridge: Jane Urquhart's The Stone Carvers *and Canada as 'Warrior Nation'*

Herb Wyile

Acadia University

At the end of *Shock Troops*, the second volume of his history of Canadians fighting in the Great War, Tim Cook reflects on how, "[o]ver the last ninety years, the Canadian memory of the war has changed, being shaped and reshaped by each generation that has tried to make sense of the nation's appalling sacrifice on foreign battlefields. The Great War ended on November 11, 1918, but the reverberations of its terrible battles have resounded through the ensuing decades" (621). Such a reshaping of memory has been a key part of what many see as a hallmark of the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, a conscious and sustained effort to redefine Canadian identity, to "rebrand" Canada by emphasizing, among other things, self-reliant entrepreneurialism, ties to the monarchy and the Anglosphere, and the country's heritage of military accomplishment. "War memory and commemoration," contend the editors of *Commemorating War*, are "a key element in the symbolic repertoire available to the nation-state for binding its citizens into a collective national identity (Ashplant et al. 7), and thus the centennial of the Great War marks an important phase of the Harper government's ideological campaign, as such a significant anniversary offers the opportunity to consolidate a particular interpretation of that conflict and of Canada's participation in it. As Ian McKay and Jamie Swift argue in their polemical new study *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety*, the Battle of Vimy Ridge has become the centrepiece of a palpably martial reading of the war that sees Canadian troops' success during the battle as the pinnacle of achievement of a nation emerging into maturity. "The 'Canada' that shimmers in the imagination of

right-wing politicians, militarists, and new warrior historians," they write, "is a virtuous nation of warriors. It is one based upon blood and soil, sanctified by battle deaths and engaged in a perpetual war with tyranny and terror championed by less-evolved peoples. We must seize the day for a new Canada, sanctified by the blood of Vimy Ridge" (11). Given the importance of Vimy Ridge to this restyling of Canadian identity, it seems an opportune time to revisit Jane Urquhart's 2001 novel *The Stone Carvers*, which engages with both the Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge and the building of the Vimy Memorial near Arras in France. Urquhart's novel offers a more complex and less celebratory portrait of Vimy (both battle and memorial), a perspective less compatible with such a martial view of Canadian identity. Like many who write about the First World War, Urquhart stresses the chaotic horror of the soldier's experience and resists presenting the conflict as a heroic national coming-of-age. The Vimy Ridge of *The Stone Carvers*, in other words, implicitly cautions against the very kind of rebranding of Canada in which the current government is vigorously engaged. At the same time, certain developments and incidents in this militaristic reprogramming of Canadians since the time of its publication resonate in interesting ways with various aspects of Urquhart's celebrated novel and offer an opportunity, in turn, to reassess its vision and achievement.

While Vimy Ridge has become comfortably ensconced as an iconic moment of national accomplishment in Canada, the nature of that accomplishment is still very much in dispute. In his foreword to *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, A.M.J. Hyatt observes that it has "been said again and again that Vimy was a great strategic victory, the most important battle of the war and an experience which awakened a sense of Canadian nationalism" (xi). In *Shock Troops*, Cook offers a more expansive view of

Vimy Ridge as a substantial moment in the formation of a national identity:

> The Canadian capture of Vimy was more than just a battlefield victory that had driven the Germans from their fortress and ensured that the British had a position of observation over the Douai plain. Because all four Canadian divisions attacked together and all regions of Canada were present at the battle, Vimy became a symbol of what Canadians could do together – a symbol that epitomized the sacrifice of the young Dominion. In 1922, the French government ceded Vimy Ridge and the surrounding land to Canada in perpetuity to honour the country's sacrifice on behalf of France during the war. Though it was the collective sacrifice and deeds of all Canadians during the war years – both those at the front and those on the home front – that eventually won Canada's full independence from Britain, the Vimy Memorial, which was unveiled in 1936, remains one of the most visible and evocative symbols of Canadian nationhood. (141)

Others, however, are somewhat more skeptical of the significance of the taking of Vimy Ridge, especially as a military accomplishment. Reflecting on the role of the British in capturing Vimy Ridge, Gary Sheffield for one questions the widespread belief that "the capture of Vimy Ridge was somehow decisive, or a turning point in the Great War. It is not easy to see how this claim can be substantiated" (16). Instead, he sees the inflated significance of the battle as fuelled by Canadian nationalism and he speculates that, "if Vimy Ridge had been captured by a British or French formation instead of the Canadian Corps, this action would not enjoy its current celebrity. While the Canadian Corps undoubtedly achieved a fine feat of arms on 9 April 1917, 'Vimy Ridge' resonates largely because of its role in the growth of Canadian nationalism" (17).

Indeed, the current revival of Vimy Ridge as a hallowed site for Canadians is the latest stage in a complex history of shifting significance, part of a larger history of shifting attitudes to the war itself. As Cook notes, in the immediate post-war years the prevailing sentiment was that the war had been a justified one: "in the 1920s the Great

War was seen as the good war. The Great War for Civilization had been a necessary conflict that many participants and supporters saw as a fight to ensure liberal values, to defend the rights of small nations, to protect the world from German militarism, and to support the British Empire in its time of need." Furthermore, "despite the huge losses, not many Canadians believed that the war should not have been fought or seen through to the bitter end" (631). While this view of the war and of the importance of Vimy Ridge in it understandably waned over the course of a very eventful twentieth century (especially with the advent of the Second World War), to the point that "[b]y the end of the twentieth century, the Great War was almost universally viewed as a war fought over nothing, and for the sake of nothing" (Cook 640), it has certainly been revitalized under the Harper government. In the ten-page section on Canadian history in *Discover Canada*, the government's revamped guide to Canadian citizenship, for instance, the Battle of Vimy Ridge has pride of place in the overview of Canada's participation in the First World War: "The Canadian Corps captured Vimy Ridge in April 1917, with 10,000 killed or wounded, securing the Canadians' reputation for valour as the 'shock troops of the British Empire.' One Canadian officer said: "It was Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific on parade. . . . In those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation" (20). As the guide notes, "April 9 is celebrated as Vimy Day" (20), and the new Canadian twenty-dollar bills are graced by an image of the Vimy Memorial. Furthermore, as Robert Zacharias observes, the rededication of the Vimy Memorial in 2007 was taken as an opportunity by the Prime Minister and others to link Canadian participation at Vimy to the ongoing war in Afghanistan, "show[ing] how the cultural force of Vimy-as-origin continues to be wielded in an effort to garner support for, and silence dissent over, the

military's present engagements" (128). As these initiatives suggest, under the Harper Tories, Vimy Ridge has been reinvigorated as a significant peak of national achievement, part of a drive, as McKay and Swift see it, to reframe Canadians' view of the First World War: "in the Great War as the new warriors restage it, in a militarized Canada in which Remembrance Day has become Remembrance Month, plucky and valiant Canadians, fighting for our freedom, chivalrously laid down their lives for their country." The main problem with such a vision, they argue, is that it "turns the mass death of twentieth-century warfare into the romance of heroes facing down fear and foe to achieve an inspiring result" (72).

To engage with Vimy Ridge in literary terms, then, is to return to "the mythological birthplace of Canada" and enter "into the very heart of the national narrative" (Zacharias 128). Such a return figures prominently in Urquhart's *The Stone Carvers*, which focuses on three generations of an immigrant family from Germany living in rural Ontario. Much of the novel, as Gordon Bölling notes, is taken up with describing the experience of German immigrants in the nineteenth century, tracking the efforts of Father Archangel Gstir and carver Joseph Becker as they "attempt to establish a likeness of European civilization in south-western Ontario" (300). However, the latter part of the novel focuses on Joseph Becker's grandchildren, Klara and Tilman, who travel to France many years after the First World War to work on the monument at Vimy Ridge. In doing so, the pair are propelled by Klara's determination to make amends to her former lover Eamon O'Sullivan, who earlier in the novel abandons Klara to go off to war and is one of the many missing to be commemorated by the monument. Tilman's return to the site of the battle, in which he served as a runner, and the siblings' participation in

the construction of the monument offer Urquhart the opportunity to, in a figurative sense, revisit Vimy Ridge, and the vision of the battle that emerges is one that is very different from the vision of it as a moment of collective national accomplishment and maturation. It is, of course, important to recognize *The Stone Carvers* as a work of fiction and not a documentary treatment of the history of Vimy Ridge and of the building of the monument, and to resist drawing a straight line between the two. At the same time, as a historical novel, *The Stone Carvers* is an amalgam of fiction and history, and, as the long history of debates and controversies over fictional representations of historical figures and episodes demonstrates, historical fiction certainly tends to compel readers and critics (rightly or wrongly) to consider the fiction in relation to history and certainly participates in our experience of and understanding of the past in interesting ways.[1]

One of McKay and Swift's key critiques of the so-called new warriors is that they are reviving a militarism grounded in stark moral polarities, reflected not least in an us-vs.-them approach to Canada's involvement in the Afghan War, but shaping also the revision of the First World War. Rather than originating "in large part in the contradictions of a socio-economic system, a scramble for markets, territories, and resources," McKay and Swift contend, for the new warriors, the First World War "*had* to be a Great War pitting a Good Empire against an Evil Empire" (71; italics in original). It also involved, they underscore, a rapid, propagandistic transformation of Germans into Huns (70). A notable characteristic of *The Stone Carvers* is that it troubles this kind of polarized thinking, especially through its representation of Tilman, who enlists in the

[1] A good example in Canada was the uproar that ensued upon the publication of Newfoundland novelist Wayne Johnston's historical novel *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, about the province's divisive first premier, Joey Smallwood, in 1998, with many critics and readers taking exception to what were seen to be Johnston's liberties with the personal and history of Smallwood.

army, unlike the rest of the inhabitants (Eamon aside) of the hometown he has left behind, whose elders "had not abandoned ancestral homelands, endured the misery of a pitching ship, battled armies of trees and insects, watched their spouses and children die wretchedly and far too soon only to see their children return to the battlegrounds from which they had fled" (137). After he is reunited with his sister Klara, many years after the war, Tilman recounts to her the experience of listening to German soldiers conversing in nearby trenches and emphasizes the similarity rather than otherness of their preoccupations: "they were talking about precisely the same things that the men beside me were talking about: girls, hometowns, food. Sometimes I would forget I was listening to German because what they were talking about was so familiar" (253). In the process, Tilman implicitly challenges what Paul Fussell has characterized as a "gross dichotomizing" that stems from "the actualities of the Great War. 'We' are all here on this side; 'the enemy' is over there. 'We' are individuals with names and personal identities; 'he' is a mere collective entity. We are visible; he is invisible. We are normal; he is grotesque. Our appurtenances are natural; his, bizarre. He is not as good as we are" (75). Furthermore, Tilman describes to Klara how, amidst the horrifying carnage of trench warfare, soldiers were blown to pieces to the extent that "nobody could tell if they were Brits or Germans or even what colour their hair had been" (243). As Bölling observes, Urquhart thus "throws into relief the suffering experienced by Canadians as well as Germans and thereby emphasizes the humanity of the enemy" (311). In these fairly concentrated and fleeting gestures to Tilman's experience in battle, *The Stone Carvers* mitigates against a romantic celebration of Vimy as a triumph over a caricatured and anonymized "foe."

The novel also mitigates against the view of Vimy as a moment of maturation, the notion, as Pierre Berton questions it in his canonical popular history *Vimy*, that "[b]ecause of Vimy […] Canada came of age; because of Vimy, our country found its manhood." Just as Berton doubts that it was "worth the loss of thousands of limbs and eyes and the deaths of five thousand young Canadians at Vimy to provide a young and growing nation with a proud and enduring myth" (307), in *The Stone Carvers*, Urquhart, rather than representing the battle as a crowning achievement and as a turning point in the war, instead highlights the chaos and horror it entailed. For instance, when Tilman's friend Giorgio Vigamonti,[2] who also travels to France to work on the monument, muses, "I thought Vimy was our great victory," Tilman counters by observing

> That may be, . . . but I don't think a single one of us who was there knew whether or not there was a victory. We barely understood where we were when it was all over. And let's not overlook the fact that thirty-five hundred guys died, and three times as many were injured. I didn't even hear about the grandness of the victory until the war was finished, and then I thought the fellow telling me had things all wrong. (306)

Instead, all Tilman remembers of the battle is how, through "twenty minutes of chaos [he] froze in a crouching position with his back to the Germans," staring into the "pale, dead face" (322) of a comrade killed as the Canadians burst out of the tunnels.

The Stone Carvers also questions the value of Vimy in its portrait of the impact of the battle on the survivors. Reflecting on the toll of Vimy Ridge, "the costliest victory in Canadian military history" (Cook 143), the editors of *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* insist that while considering "the triumph of Vimy Ridge we should not

[2] Giorgio's name evokes that of Italian master carver Luigi Rigamonti, who oversaw the carving of all the figures on the Vimy Memorial (Hucker and Smith 61). As Hucker and Smith note, "Rigamonti and his team served as inspiration for important characters in Jane Urquhart's widely read novel *The Stone Carvers*" (65).

forget the deep tragedy of the battle. Consider the 10,602 Canadian casualties suffered in the fighting." They also urge readers to "contemplate the thousands more who survived the battle broken in body and spirit. Consider the families who cared for them, often getting by on a meagre disability pension. For them Vimy Ridge held a far darker legacy" (Hayes et al. 316). This legacy is underscored in *The Stone Carvers* through Urquhart's portrayal of the government's disregard for those who sacrificed their futures to achieve that ostensibly nation-defining victory, once they are back in Canada. Alienated and disillusioned upon his return, Tilman takes refuge in a workshop that employs traumatized veterans in the manufacture of primitive prosthetics. For the government, the workshop is a convenient, multi-pronged solution, as it represents an effort to alleviate the difficulties of the maimed and to facilitate their reintegration into society, while also serving to keep occupied a constituency that could prove to be politically and socially volatile. Once demand for such prosthetics dwindles, however, "[s]atisfied that they had done all they could to rehabilitate Tilman and his colleagues, the same government that had called these young men so earnestly to arms now cast them unceremoniously out into the streets" (235).

As reader-response criticism in particular has taught us, the reception of a literary work does not remain stable but changes over time in response to a variety of factors (social, political, cultural, and so on). In revisiting *The Stone Carvers* – a book published at a time, as Cook notes above, when the prevailing inclination was to see the First World War "as a war fought over nothing, and for the sake of nothing" – a decade and a half later, in a political climate coloured by the Harper government's embrace of the military as central to Canadian identity, one sees a number of interesting and complicated

resonances. For instance, it is hard to avoid perceiving in these post-war travails of Tilman's a parallel with the Harper government's escalating conflict with veterans over services for veterans and, in particular, the closing of Veterans Affairs offices in various parts of the country. Despite the fact that veterans have been one of the Conservatives' most supportive constituencies, this conflict devolved into very public dust-ups between outraged veterans and their supporters and Minister of Veterans Affairs Julian Fantino, whose callous response to veterans' concerns served to consolidate rather than alleviate the impression that veterans were being brushed off by the government ("How Julian Fantino's"). As with Urquhart's novel, the tensions between veterans and the Conservative government highlight a contradiction between the government's public praise of the contributions of soldiers and its less generous treatment of them upon their return from service. As McKay and Swift starchly put it, "[a] Warrior Nation might be expected to treat its wounded warriors well. But adulation and adjectives are cheap; meaningful programs of rehabilitation and assistance more expensive" (24). Tilman's disillusioning return home thus further contributes to *The Stone Carvers*' resistance to a heroic representation of Vimy Ridge and its consequences for Canadians, but it also gestures to a long genealogy of governmental ambivalence toward the sacrifice of veterans that continues to the present.

If *The Stone Carvers* presents a view of the Battle of Vimy Ridge that sits uneasily with the "new warriors'" hallowing of the battle, Urquhart's engagement with the Vimy Memorial and its architect Walter Allward is a more complicated matter. While the novel inscribes an unmistakable admiration for the logistical and aesthetic achievement of the building of the memorial, Urquhart also underscores the tensions

implicit in such a lavish architectural and sculptural tribute, reflecting a certain skepticism, at least within the contours of the novel, about the appropriateness of such a grandiose vision.

Figure 1: Vimy Memorial (credit: author)

First of all, Urquhart draws attention to the irony of the government forking out handsomely for such a memorial while veterans of the battle, the living human reminders of the costs of the conflict, are largely neglected.[3] Living in a shanty town in the Don Valley in the depths of the Depression, Giorgio first hears of the memorial, which is "to honour the thousands who had gone missing from France," from an agitated veteran, "a mad, dishevelled pencil seller who really *had* lost his right arm." When Giorgio expresses incredulity at the idea that "the government is really going to pay for all this," the pencil seller's response is "So I've heard, . . . the bastards" (279; italics in original). Likewise, Tilman's participation in the project, as a survivor of the battle, helps to underscore the

[3] The monument cost 1.5 million dollars to build ("Vimy Memorial"), roughly equivalent to twenty million dollars in 2014.

uneasy relationship between the war memorial as a public architectural marker and the military experience and/or accomplishment that it serves to mark. The marshalling of a considerable legion of artisans and labourers prompts Tilman to describe the project as "[j]ust like the war" (301). In the same vein, Giorgio, being interrogated by Allward as he auditions to be a carver, responds to Allward's insistence on suppressing any creative flourishes, by observing, "[s]o you are the general and we are the troops" (288). And, in somewhat the same vein as generals in the war were routinely derided as single-minded and heedless of the consequences of their decisions, Urquhart's Allward is depicted as narcissistic and megalomaniacally determined, dismissive of official anxiety about the inflating expense and the extended delays in the building of the monument: "Angry letters arrived from Ottawa demanding dates of completion, and then more letters arrived filled with threats of cutting back the funds. Allward replied with rage, claiming that no one but he was intimate with the memorial, knew what it meant, what it would be" (272). He is described as singularly obsessed by the monument to the point of dehumanizing those who work for him: "Human beings too were either an extension, a manifestation of his own skills, his own vision, or they were not. If they were not, he wasn't interested" (273). This irony intensifies as the building of the monument stretches into the Depression: "an increasingly hysterical government in Canada sent out emissaries to lure him home. The depression in the country had deepened, the tax base was shrinking. Allward kept none of the appointments these bureaucrats made with him. If they were in France, he was in England and vice versa" (273).

In looking at *The Stone Carvers*' questioning of the pursuit of such a costly project at a time of severe austerity, once again recent developments in the Harper

government's promotion of the military resonate with the novel in interesting ways, as the novel's depiction of the building of the monument at Vimy finds a curious parallel in the present – that is, with the construction of what is envisioned as a counterpart to the Vimy Memorial. Recently, Parks Canada announced its involvement in Toronto businessman Tony Trigiani's plan to erect a thirty-metre statue of "Mother Canada" on the coast of Cape Breton (indeed, right on the scenic Cabot Trail), facing toward and consciously echoing the Vimy Memorial in France, with a projected completion date of July 1, 2017 (Government of Canada, Parks Canada).[4] As reported in *The Globe and Mail*, Trigiani's vision for the Never Forgotten National Memorial involves various features of the site being named after lines in the national anthem, including "a 'We See Thee Rise Observation Deck' in front of the Mother Canada statue, and behind it 'The Commemorative Ring of True Patriot Love' […] He's also planning a 'With Glowing Hearts National Sanctuary,' as well as a restaurant, souvenir shop and interpretive centre" (Taber). Without getting into what some have decried as the monumentally bad taste of Trigiani's vision, it seems fair to point out the irony of the federal government investing in such a project while invoking austerity on so many other fronts, including services for veterans. While at this point the government's commitment appears to be restricted to the donation of government land for the site of the memorial, it nonetheless seems to suggest (coming as it does amidst widespread concern about the treatment of veterans) a greater interest, as in Urquhart's novel, in cultivating militaristic patriotism than in providing for those who have actually served in the military.

---

[4] For images of the Never Forgotten National Memorial, visit the *Never Forgotten National Memorial Foundation* site: <http://www.nfnm.ca>

The divided reaction to the prospect of the Never Forgotten National Memorial likewise prompts a reappraisal of *The Stone Carvers*' portrait of the building of the Vimy Memorial, a reappraisal that is complicated by the fact that skepticism about the memorial in Urquhart's novel is far outweighed by its celebration of Allward's determination and achievement – and its implicit invitation to appreciate the achievement of the historical figure on which the novel is based. It would be hard to disagree, I think, that the novel gestures to the actual Vimy monument and inscribes an appreciation for the magnitude and artistic accomplishment of the memorial, described by Jonathan Vance as "the nation's primary altar to the fallen of the war" (70). As Urquhart says of Allward in an interview, "[h]e was a greatly obsessed man, and the memorial stands there as a kind of tribute to his obsession, because it worked. I think in order to accomplish something like that you almost have to be obsessed" ("Confessions" 98). Although the depiction of the sculptor and architect himself is more complicated, ultimately (if the novel, as I believe it does, invites us to think beyond the fiction to the history itself) it does so sympathetically rather than critically. While for much of the novel Allward is depicted as an uncompromising tyrant, treating people as pawns in the realization of his vision, in the latter part of the novel he is very much humanized by the sympathetic understanding that he shows when he discovers that Klara has disguised herself as a man in order to work on the monument to pay tribute to Eamon. Allward catches Klara carving Eamon's likeness in one of the figures of the memorial, thus violating Allward's insistence on generalized allegorical depiction: "He had wanted this stone youth to remain allegorical, universal, wanted him to represent everyone's lost friend, everyone's lost child. He had wanted the stone figure to be the 66,000 dead young men who had marched through his dreams when

he had conceived the memorial" (337). Rather than send Klara packing, however, Allward, who insists to "*everybody* who works for [him] that there are to be no independent acts, no theatrical feats of originality" (336; italics in original), considerately accedes to Klara's desire to memorialize Eamon. Indeed, he sees Klara's defiant act as having breathed life into the monument:

> This woman had brought a personal retrospection to his monument, and had by doing so allowed life to enter it. She had carved the uncomplicated face of prewar youth, children who were aware they would be made extinct by the war. No subsequent generation, Allward suddenly knew, would ever achieve such innocence. Their kind would never come again. (340)

Urquhart says of this sympathetic side of Allward: "It was important to me partly in the making of his character, because I don't believe that any human being is one way or another" ("Confessions" 99). Still, while the sensibility of Urquhart's Allward – echoing the historical figure on whom he is based – is complex, driven by his obsession to realize exactly the appropriate and lasting commemorative vision, his turnabout in the novel is arguably an awkwardly dramatic one. This abrupt transition becomes even more pronounced when Allward gives his blessing to Giorgio and Klara as the former helps her to carve Eamon's name into the base of the monument. As he looks on, Allward senses that in their presence he has at last, at least momentarily, achieved the balance for which he has been looking, and he amends his unspoken description of the pair from "these people who worked for him" to "these friends who worked with him" (377), a *volte-face* that is a bit hard to swallow, even keeping in mind that Urquhart's Allward is a fictional creation.

At the core of Urquhart's narrative, then, is the idea that working on the monument offers three people whose lives have been scarred by the war and its aftermath the opportunity to experience a kind of healing, which the heretofore belligerent and uncompromising Allward (however melancholy and conflicted internally) benevolently condones. Indeed, at the end of the novel, Urquhart's narrator explicitly consolidates the portrait of Allward as a sympathetic genius whose achievement has gone unappreciated: "the knowledge of Allward's genius was quickly forgotten by the very nation that had commissioned the memorial where he was most able to demonstrate this genius. Even those Canadians who would later make the trip to France and who would admire the monument would rarely take the trouble to ask the sculptor's name" (381). He is remembered by Klara, who had muted her speech as part of her disguise, as the man "who had given her a voice" (385). Contrasting Urquhart's *The Underpainter* and *The Stone Carvers* with "the aims of historiographic metafictions seeking to unsettle the collective memory of the dead," Neta Gordon argues in *Catching the Torch: Contemporary Literary Responses to World War I* that "Urquhart's work […] culminates in the reification of those myths about Canadian participation in the war that seek to celebrate the way the nation came together in grief" (117).

The conservative overtones of the ending of the novel that Gordon highlights seem a particularly charged consideration within the framework of Vimy's importance in the "new warrior" narrative, and the prospect of such a companion piece to the monument at Vimy as the Never Forgotten National Memorial (which of, course, has yet to be built) offers an intriguing occasion to reflect on both the Vimy Memorial and its representation in *The Stone Carvers*. It is hard not to imagine that those who appreciate

the aesthetic achievement of *The Stone Carvers* and of the sculptor whose reputation it strives to revive would be highly critical of the literal-minded patriotism and allegorical triteness of Trigiani's planned memorial, and thus resistant to the drawing of a parallel between the two memorials. However, there are potential tensions, and even contradictions, entailed in criticizing Trigiani's vision on the one hand and celebrating Allward's on the other. Certainly *The Stone Carvers* is resistant to such simplistic patriotism and to the view, embraced by the Harper government, of the First World War as a crucible in which a new nation was forged. Urquhart herself has observed of the war that "it wasn't worth it, and I don't believe it defined us in any particular way" ("Confessions" 86), and the ending of *The Stone Carvers*, while allegorically underscoring a collective grief and recovery, is far from validating the war as a constructively formative experience. But the Never Forgotten memorial's echoing of the Vimy Memorial in turn prompts the question of whether the Vimy monument, as opposed to the battle itself, was "worth it," and on this front *The Stone Carvers* is considerably more ambivalent. After all, in the novel, the government that is bankrolling such a lavish memorial is described by a maimed veteran as a bunch of "bastards." But the artist who bloody-mindedly escalates that cost at a time of financial exigency and dire social need, while not immune to critical scrutiny, is ultimately portrayed as the overseer of the psychic and emotional recovery of the main characters. Consider the striking asymmetry between the detailed and considerably sympathetic chronicling of Allward's obsession and the fleeting reference to those hapless government emissaries, always in France when Allward was in England and vice versa, who probably had better things to do.

The obvious response to such an attempt to connect the contexts of the two memorials, of course, is to point to the aesthetic majesty and the symbolic power of the actual Vimy Memorial, particularly in comparison to something as aesthetically and allegorically facile as the Never Forgotten National Memorial promises to be. But – especially given the Harper government's embrace of the Vimy monument as part of its positioning of Vimy Ridge as the site of a defining national achievement – it seems fair to ask the question of the Vimy Memorial "what kind of power does it have?" Describing Allward's design for the memorial, Vance provides an overview of its allegorical play:

> It was a massive structure built on a series of long walls that were intended to symbolize a line of defence. Around the base stood figures representing the Breaking of the Sword, the Sympathy of the Canadians for the Helpless, and Canada mourning her dead. Two huge pylons rose from the base; between them, a figure symbolizing the Spirit of Sacrifice threw the torch to his comrades, while the figures of Peace, Justice, Truth, and Knowledge looked down from the pylons. (67)

In their gorgeous coffee-table book *Vimy: Canada's Memorial to a Generation*, intended as an interpretive accompaniment to the monument, Jacqueline Hucker and Julian Smith describe Allward's commemorative vision thus: "Through their heroic self-sacrifice, Canada's 65,000 dead had earned spiritual resurrection. In our turn, we are obligated never to forget their sacrifice and to live by the values for which they died" (29). Hucker and Smith's summation of Allward's vision seems eminently compatible with the myth of the First World War as a just war that Vance dissects in his 1997 study *Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*. Vance highlights the politics of portraying military deaths as a noble, selfless sacrifice that must in turn be emulated by the surviving:

> To forget was to drop the torch and to fail the men and women who had given their lives. Remembering, on the other hand, constituted a perpetual tribute to the fallen. If the sacrifices were fixed firmly enough in the public consciousness through various forms of commemoration, the myth of the war would become self-perpetuating and would not need Canadians to defend it. (201)

In the same spirit as Vance, we might question for what values the soldiers in Hucker and Smith's description died: peace, freedom, and justice? Or romantic militarism, unquestioning Anglocentrism, and hatred of the Hun? The issue here, though, is not so much the troublesome shorthand of attempting to distill the values of 65,000 dead soldiers but that the allegorical reduction of their fate and of the example they set is redolent of what Vance describes throughout his study as "the dominant memory" that imposes a hegemonic and coercive myth of the war as noble self-sacrifice:

> The dominant memory emerges after a struggle between conflicting interpretations of historical events and comes to act as a bulwark for the establishment. The past becomes an excuse for the present, justifying the social or political order on the grounds that the status quo exists because the past wills it. In doing so, it sets out what should be remembered (as well as how it should be remembered) and what should be forgotten. Individuals who do not subscribe to the dominant memory, who refuse to forget or remember what it prescribes, become subversives. (9)

Although Vance's description precedes the Harper government's campaign to reshape Canadian history, it presciently describes the hegemonic attitude towards opposing views that has routinely characterized and facilitated that reshaping. All of this is to say that, at a time when the Harper government is engaged in incorporating the Vimy Memorial into a narrative of consolidated, militaristic patriotism, it seems fairly important to ask the question of how the grandeur of Allward's monument makes us think about what happened at Vimy Ridge and, in turn, how Urquhart's novel makes us think of Allward's

monument, to engage in a consideration of "the contested nature of form" (Ashplant et al. 38).

There seems to be widespread agreement that the Vimy Memorial is the most striking of the many First World War memorials scattered across what was once the Western front. What the memorial signifies, though, is a less settled matter. Dennis Duffy, indeed, argues that reading the aesthetic and symbolic achievement of the Vimy Memorial is fraught with tension, because its "familiar narrative of consolation that attributes sanctity and significance to the dead" (193) "remains in fact severely qualified and compromised. A lengthy series of monumentally inscribed statements – 11,285 of them, in fact – insinuate a message at once starker and emotionally distant, a laconic registry of heartache and loss" (190). As Duffy sees it, the carving of the names of the missing soldiers into the base, about which Allward was initially reluctant and which he had imposed upon his vision (194), not only is at odds with the rest of Allward's monument but indeed has proved to be its most enduring characteristic:

> The vast numbers of the Missing – a direct product of the material conditions of that process of industrial warfare relying on bombardment and mass attack – form a tragic and potent feature of the Great War, a fact that moves us still, long after any idea of Defending the Right has lost interest. Small wonder that Walter Allward set aside his initial resistance and came to see the inclusion of the list as his monument's principal feature. No surprise, either, that the names provide a meaning for viewers to the Memorial at a time when allegorical representation exists only as a satiric device in editorial cartoons. But our critical faculties force the conclusion that the statuary and the names belong to two different artistic and even ontological worlds. The list refers to bodies, the statues to ideas. Their conjunction reduces complexity to contradiction, even as it assures continued interest in the work itself. (196)

Duffy's underscoring of its internal tensions suggests that reading the monument is not such a straightforward matter after all and that understanding its power involves contending with two very different semiotic systems and artistic languages. As a consequence, rather than a transparent, readily accessible sculptural and architectural statement, the monument, like Vimy Ridge itself, is a contested site.

If Allward's monument, as Duffy argues, reflects the complications of commemorating an event, and especially one as complex as the Canadian experience in the First World War, Urquhart's novel, it might be said, in its portrait of Allward and his monument, reflects the complications of commemorating the commemoration of such a complex event (though the novel certainly amounts to much more than this). As Gordon argues, *The Stone Carvers*, in its portrayal of Tilman, Giorgio, and Klara's participation in the building of the monument, shows how "the construction of a mythic memorial may provide the [war] insider with an avenue towards forgetting, towards a safer sort of anaesthetic" (116). But she also subsequently cautions that, "in its transcendence of the historical moment, myth, especially the mythic memorial, has the potential to eliminate any need for the war insider's act of bearing witness and, perhaps, any obligation the greater populace has to recall the precise origins of their site of grieving and remembrance" (116). While the novel certainly resists the triumphalist patriotic reading of Vimy Ridge itself, its portrait of the monument as a commemorative response is more complicated and conflicted, suggesting ultimately, if reservedly, that the monument, unlike the battle, was worth it. For Gordon, this ambivalent ending is suggestive of how "the collective remembrance of war can simultaneously denounce the horrors of war and celebrate its productive effects" (93).

Certainly there is a sense of regeneration and recovery at the end of *The Stone Carvers*, although to see the ending as a celebration of the "productive effects" of war may be somewhat harsh. But Urquhart's artistic choice to celebrate, ultimately, the productive effects *of the artist* has its own complications, implicitly reinforcing, as it seems to do, the significance of the Vimy Memorial as a site of "collective remembrance." Indeed, one of the problems with seeing Vimy as an originary moment of national identity, as Zachiaras argues, pointing to a long tradition of portraying nations as being formed at moments of extreme crisis, is that the battle comes to serve as "a moment of violence sufficient to ground and legitimize the subsequent authority wielded by the nation in order to maintain […] unity." Most importantly, that originary violence is then used to command an ongoing obedience and to suppress dissent: "a violent origin is necessary because its invocation is what grants the nation the authority and cultural force to inspire devotion, to demand loyalty, and yes, to efface the acts of violence that have followed its inception" (118). If the Vimy Memorial, as Zacharias argues, can be deployed as a sacred site from which to invoke this loyalty, then certainly it is hard to see *The Stone Carvers* as being in line with such a "new warrior" mentality; the novel very clearly resists celebrating the Battle of Vimy Ridge as a formative moment for Canadian national identity. But the ways in which it gestures toward the achievement of the building of the memorial itself (indeed, in the years after its publication the novel certainly helped to fuel a revival of interest in the memorial) are much more conflicted, and ultimately, whether intentionally or unintentionally, it arguably contributes to the sanctification of the Vimy Memorial as a site of national remembrance. *The Stone Carvers*, in other words, further endows the memorial with symbolic power, and that

power can be harnessed in different ways, including to invoke the message trumpeted by the new warriors that past, current and even future conflicts were and are "worth it."[5] That is not, I would argue, the thrust of *The Stone Carvers*, which seems to be more interested in seeing Vimy Ridge as hallowed ground in artistic and human rather than military terms, and even in that respect, Urquhart's portrait of Allward is a complex one and far from simplistically celebratory. At the same time, looking at *The Stone Carvers* from the vantage point of a much more conservative present, it is hard not to see the emotional and commemorative significance with which it invests the Vimy Memorial as being eminently co-optable within a reactionary sociopolitical climate that was still nascent at the time *The Stone Carvers* appeared. One can only speculate as to whether the novel would have been different were it to have been published in 2014 (or even 2017, the hundredth anniversary of the battle), but certainly the experience of reading it feels very different, and that difference says a lot about the ideological shift that has occurred in this country since the start of the century.

Acknowledgment

An earlier version of this article was presented at the "Canadian Literature of World War One" conference at the University of Ottawa in August of 2014. I would like to thank the two anonymous readers for *Canada and Beyond* who provided helpful feedback on ways to fine-tune this essay.

---

[5] A good example of the politics of such sanctification is offered in Prime Minister Harper's press conference on 22 October 2014, in which he described the killing of a Canadian soldier guarding the National War Memorial in Ottawa, across the street from Parliament, as occurring at a "sacred place," a strategic gesture in a speech clearly designed to cultivate a collective, vigilant, and defensive response on the part of all Canadians to a vaguely defined terrorist threat. The Prime Minister's rhetorical framing of the incident lends itself very well to the kind of reading Zacharias applies to the Vimy Memorial. To see a video of the press conference, visit <http://globalnews.ca/video/1630116/prime-minister-harper-addresses-the-nation-following-attack-in-ottawa>.

WORKS CITED

Ashplant, Timothy, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, ed. *Commemorating War: The Politics of Memory*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 2004. Memory and Narrative Series.

Berton, Pierre. *Vimy*. Toronto: McClelland, 1986.

Bölling, Gordon. "Acts of (Re-)Construction: Traces of Germany in Jane Urquhart's Novel *The Stone Carvers*." *Refractions of Germany in Canadian Literature and Culture*. Ed. Heinz Antor et al. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003. 295-317.

Cook, Tim. *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918*. Vol. II. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 1989.

Duffy, Dennis. "Complexity and Contradiction in Canadian Public Sculpture: The Case of Walter Allward." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 38.2 (2008): 189-206.

Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. 1975. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

Gordon, Neta. *Catching the Torch: Contemporary Canadian Literary Response to World War I*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2014.

Government of Canada. Citizenship and Immigration Canada. *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*. Np: Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012. Web. 8 July 2014.

http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/discover/section-06.asp

Government of Canada. Parks Canada. "Foundation Presents Vision for Never Forgotten National Memorial to Commemorate Canada's War Dead Wherever They May Lie." 27 August 2013. *Parks Canada*. Web. 27 July 2014.

http://www.pc.gc.ca/APPS/CP-NR/release_e.asp?id=2029&andor1=nr

Hayes, Geoffrey, Andrew Iarocci and Michael Bechtold, eds. *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*. Waterloo: Laurier Centre for Military Strategic and Disarmament Studies, 2007.

"How Julian Fantino's Meeting With Veterans Went off the Rails." *CBCNews* 29 Jan. 2014. Web. 25 July 2014.

http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/how-julian-fantino-s-meeting-with-veterans-went-off-the-rails-1.2515817

Hucker, Jacqueline and Julian Smith. *Vimy: Canada's Memorial to a Generation*. Ottawa: Sanderling, 2012.

Hyatt, A.M.J. Foreword. Hayes et al., xi-xii.

McKay, Ian and Jamie Swift. *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2012.

Sheffield, Gary. "Vimy Ridge and the Battle of Arras: A British Perspective." Hayes et al. 15-29.

Taber, Jane. "Placement of 'Mother Canada' statue has Cape Bretoners on war footing." *The Globe and Mail* 7 March 2014. Web. 27 July 2014.

http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/placement-of-mother-canada-statue-has-cape-bretoners-on-war-footing/article17382958/

Urquhart, Jane. "Confessions of a Historical Geographer." Interview by Herb Wyile. *Speaking in the Past Tense: Canadian Novelists on Writing Historical Fiction*, by Herb Wyile. Waterloo: U of Waterloo P, 2007. 79-103.

--. *The Stone Carvers*. Toronto: McClelland, 2001.

Vance, Jonathan. *Death so Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War*. Vancouver: U British Columbia P, 1997.

"Vimy Memorial." *Canadian War Museum*. Web. 16 July 2014.

http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/guerre/vimy-memorial-e.aspx

Zacharias, Robert. "'Some Great Crisis': Vimy as Originary Violence." *Shifting the Ground of Canadian Literary Studies*. Ed. Smaro Kamboureli and Robert Zacharias. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2012. 109-28. TransCanada Series.