Review

Canada remembers

Permanent Exhibitions
Canadian War Museum / Musée canadien de la guerre
1 Vimy Place
Ottawa, Ont.
www.warmuseum.ca

Harry Foster, CMC

An interior view of the Canadian War Museum. The windows spell out the Museum's initials CWM/MCG in Morse code.

Canada, it seems, is getting better at remembering its wars and its warriors. Remote memory grows in brilliance even as recent memory shrinks, along with the ranks of those who were there. In past years special groups have been added to our collective memory: the peacekeepers, First Nations fighters, Hong Kong prisoners of war, merchant mariners and the latest, victims of hantavirus fever in the Korean campaign.

Situated on the windswept LeBreton Flats, on the south bank of the Ottawa River about half a mile west of the Parliament Buildings, the new and expanded Canadian War Museum has a great advantage over its crowded predecessor: space. Not obeying any obvious rule of building shape, outside or in, it is difficult to approach as well as to enter. But, once inside, the visitor realizes that the imagination of the architect was little constrained, leaving the resulting headache of building it to the civil engineer and the contractor. The intent of the irregular interior spaces, with their uneven floors, oddly sloping walls and bizarre layout is to evoke the instability of war and of military life.

War, if the eight permanent theme display areas have it right, has been fundamental to this country since recorded history began. Champlain arrived to find the Hurons and the Algonquins at war over territory and trade. The French joined (and changed) the struggle, with the English (from Boston) and the Dutch (from New York) following closely on. We have been at it since, with brief pauses, by land, sea and air.

For reminding, and for teaching those too young to know, this museum seems admirably appointed to depict, portray and evoke the key military events. For example, the salient Canadian confrontations in World War I — Ypres, Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele — are brought to life in film and photograph. Victory and its cost in lives lost are given equal play. The visitor is led into a trench and later walks among the dead, modelled face down in the mud amid barbed-wire mayhem. Although the chirrup of the larks overhead is there, it is "scarce heard amid the guns below," not because of those guns but rather because of command-

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ing strains of "God Save the Queen" and "The Maple Leaf Forever"!

Attention is given to the medical aspect through details such as the story of a nurse from Ontario who served in the Boer War and a graphic cut-away illustration of a high-caliber artillery shell and what it might do to a human femur. In the World War II section a field surgeon's kit is laid fully out, displaying the bone saw, rib cutters, hemostats, a tourniquet with a built-in porcelain arterial occluding device, an ampoule of morphine tartrate containing ¼ grain (15 mg) and (without a word of explanation) a packet of sodium cyanide. And, in this section, we read the surprising fact that half of Canada's physicians were engaged in the war effort.

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"Sympathy for the helpless." This greater-than-life-size sculpture is one of the plaster figures created between 1925 and 1930 by Canadian sculptor Walter Allward (1875–1955) in preparation for the construction of the Vimy Memorial in France. The memorial commemorates the 1917 Battle of Vimy Ridge in which 3598 Canadians died and more than 7000 were wounded. The memorial was Canadian sculptor Walter Allward's most important commission; its making is represented in Jane Urquhart's novel *The Stone Carvers*. Allward's design, selected from 160 others in a 1920 competition, was finally unveiled in 1936. The Canadian War Museum has 17 of Allward's plaster figures. They are half the size of the stone figures on the memorial itself. Restoration of the plaster models began in 1999.

As the visitor follows the serpentine course of one conflict after another — all conveniently arranged around a central area where visitors may plot their course, and clearly marked by exit signs aloft and arrows embedded in the design of the floor carpet, the question arises as to who has been forgotten in this museum? Wives and children are one obvious group. Although we do observe tearful goodbyes and joyful reunions (and learn the surprising fact that during World War I men needed signed permission from their wives to enlist), we are given little measure of the impact of the absence of the men — and even less of the struggle to have them back at home after all that had transpired or changed. And nothing of the children whose fathers never came home.

It is also difficult to get a sense of what life was like for the ordinary enlisted man: how boring the endless waiting, how burdensome the separation and homesickness, how uncomfortable, in Rupert Brooke's phrase, "the rough male kiss / Of blankets." What was it like to be dispatched on a sortie not knowing its larger purpose or real risks, not knowing when one will next have the chance to eat, to pee, to sleep? And not knowing, should death come, if one's survivors will ever know what happened.

The remembering and teaching mandates of the Canadian War Museum are likely to be met. There are four main themes set out by the museum's historians: geography, politics, brutality and survival. The other concept, that of regeneration, has been nurtured by architect Raymond Moriyama, who was apparently struck by the ability of the land to regenerate itself from a visit to Beaumont Hamel, France, where over 700 Newfoundlanders perished in a bloody battle and which is now grass-covered; and from Carl Sandburg's poem "Grass":

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo
Shovel them under and let me work —
I am the grass; I cover all.

Thus, we can stroll quietly on the Museum's roof amid tough grass holding sandy soil against the winds that whistle over the LeBreton Flats. As Moriyama puts it: "nature may be ravaged by human acts of war, but inevitably it survives, hybridizes, regenerates and prevails." Regeneration Hall, the soaring A-frame structure on the building's east face, gives a visitor upon entry a framed view through a small window of the Peace Tower in the distance. On the lower level is Allward's plaster maquette of his sculpture of "Hope" and more of the figures from his Vimy Memorial. All of this is meant to convey the hope of the future.

And yet the regeneration concept seems more like wishful thinking than a vital part of the War Museum. Recovery from war injury can only be in the form of cure, rehabilitation or adaptation; regeneration, strictly speaking, is not a form of healing that higher animal species are capable of. Perhaps the idea is meant more to be a psychic or spiritual one. Here, I was reminded of Pat Barker's compelling 1992 novel, *Regeneration*, which portrays Siegfried Sassoon's stay in the Craiglockart War Hospital in Edinburgh during World War I. He had been found to be "mentally unsound" for refusing, after Passchendaele, to continue to fight in what he believed to be an insane war. His therapy under Dr. William Rivers was designed to patch him up and get him back into the trenches. Only his own sanity and growing friendships with Rivers and with his fellow patient, the budding poet Wilfred Owen, saved him from self-destruction. As Sassoon leaves the hospital to go back to his men (and his death), it is up to the reader to decide who was regenerated.

The museum has reserved space for temporary exhibitions, the first of which were "Art and War" and "Canada's Gunners." An exhibition on war propaganda, entitled "Weapons of Mass Dissemination" will begin later this month, remaining on view until Apr. 20, 2006. Special events in the theatre and in Memorial Hall will mark Remembrance Day. The evolution of this lively, expanded museum will be interesting to watch.

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