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Sites in the imagination: the Beaumont Hamel Newfoundland Memorial on the Somme.

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ABSTRACT

The Beaumont Hamel Newfoundland Memorial is a 16.5 hectare (40 acres) tract of preserved battleground dedicated to the memory of the 1st Newfoundland Regiment who suffered an extremely high percentage of casualties during the first day of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. Beaumont Hamel Memorial is an extremely complex landscape

of commemoration where Newfoundland, Canadian, Scottish and British imperial associations compete for prominence. It is argued in the paper that those who chose the site of the Park, and subsequently re-ordered its topography, helped to contrive a particular historical narrative that prioritised certain memories over others. In its design, the park has been arranged to indicate the causal relationship between distant military command and immediate front-line response, and its topographical layout focuses exclusively on a thirty-minute military action during a fifty-month war. In its preserved state the part played by the Royal Newfoundland Regiment can be measured, walked and vicariously experienced. Such an achievement has required close semiotic control and territorial demarcation in order to render the ‘invisible past’ visible, and to convert an emptied landscape into significant reconstructed space. This paper examines the initial preparation of the site in the 1920s and more recent periods of conservation and reconstruction. The author examines precedents for the preservation of battlefields, the spatiality of commemoration, and the expectations aroused by such sites of memory. By focussing on the Beaumont Hamel memorial site the author explores several areas of contention: historical accuracy, topographical legibility and freedom of access.

‘Remembering where it used to be’: topography and immutable memory

In a lecture commissioned for the New York Public Library, and later published as ‘The Site of Memory’, [1] Toni Morrison closed by suggesting that so-called ‘fictional’ writing is rarely a product of complete invention, it is always an act of imagination bound up with memory. To illustrate the point she drew an analogy between site and memory: ‘You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally, the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and it is forever trying to get back to where it was.’ [2]

Morrison’s poetic image of a ‘stream of memory’ compelled to revisit an original site can be seen as integral to the relationship between geographical spaces and the construction

of individual and collective remembering. As is explored elsewhere in this volume, such 'syncretic interwining' of place, identity and memory is indeed rare and subject to a continuous evolution of meaning. Social memory links emotional ties with specific geographies that are 'anchored in places past' and inevitably, during periods of national commemoration , appropriate emotions have been invested in enduring forms of stone, bronze or brick. [3] Focussing on the monumental forms of our urban landscape, Boyer has described such manifestations as 'rhetorical *topoi* … civic compositions that teach us about our national heritage and our public responsibilities and assume that the urban landscape itself is the emblematic embodiment of power and memory.'[4] However, such didactic intentions on the part of the status quo rarely remain entirely unopposed and, as the work of Matsuda has shown, competition for the mnemonic spaces of cities has often been fierce and dramatic. [5] If, as he contends, commemoration is always an act of evaluation, judgement, and of 'speaking' which 'lends dignity to the identity of a group' [6] then it is easy to see why, as Lefebvre argues,[7] the commemorative process raises issues of territorial domination and the control of memory. Not only are the meanings of monuments problematic but, as Lewis Mumford asserted, both monuments and revered sites may rapidly become invisible within the collective memory because 'something has impregnated them against attention.'[8] They simply blend back into the undifferentiated landscape. In short the meaning of monuments, like memory itself, is profoundly unstable.[9] It is thus hardly surprising that, after each of the world wars of the last century, the dialectic between remembering and forgetting has been a dominant theme in the discourses around commemoration and remembrance. [10]

In Europe such arguments have focussed on the status of memory as invested in a knowable object. It has been argued that the failure of nineteenth century forms of monumentalism resulted from the fact that representational modes of commemoration, either plinth-based or architectural, could no longer convey the complexity and immensity of loss experienced in both world wars. [11] A counter-monument movement, driven largely by contextual fine artists, has further asserted that fixed statuary induces a reified memory that quickly results in national amnesia, rather than a meaningful act of ongoing remembering. Building on the maxim of John Latham and the Artist Placement

Group that 'the context is half the [art]work' [12], artists and cultural interventionists such as Jochen Gerz have claimed that memory is fluid and contingent and that., consequently, it is neither possible nor desirable to insist on a single, objective and authoritative reading of any place or historic moment.[13] Michalski thus contends that the principle aim of the counter-monument is 'to register protest or disagreement with an untenable prime object' – the plinth-bound exalted statue - and, as an alternative, to set up a process of reflection and debate, however uncomfortable or radical. [14] Analysing what he refers to as the'anxiety of erasure' engendered by bourgeois culture, Lacquer asserts in a similar vein that figurative simulation has long been inadequate to the task entrusted to it. Instead, 'the thing itself must do because representation can no longer be relied on'. [15]

In many instances, however, 'the thing' is little more than a cleared and uncluttered tract of land to which historic significance is attached. Further to Lacquer's argument, it is possible to trace a developing commemorative strategy vested in locales of emboded potentiality (Forster, 2004), from the preservation of the battlefield of Gettysburg in 1863 to the barren ash hills around Verdun,[16] through to such Second World War sites as the beaches of Normandy, the 'martyred village' of Oradour, and to Hiroshima. [17] In each place the moral resonance of the site itself is seen as paramount. Ditches, mounds, ruins and apparently barren tracts have been maintained because they are seen as 'historical traces' which have an authority that now eclipses the untenable artifice of the commemorative object. None the less, the semiotics of commemorative spatiality are complex because, as Bender points out, spaces are 'political, dynamic, and contested' and so 'constantly open to renegotiation.' [18] This difficulty notwithstanding, a semiotics of place has been clearly articulated by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who was compelled by the qualities of particular sites and examined their role in the formation of collective memory. 'Space', wrote Halbwachs, 'is a reality that endures', it can unite groups of individuals and believers concentrating and 'moulding its character to theirs.' [19] When compared to transient phenomena and ill-considered monumentalia, certain geographical locations appear to be able to offer a sense of legitimate permanence that draws pilgrims to sites that 'place' or 'contain' the memory of overwhelming events. The terrain around the Brandenburg Gate, *Les Invalides*, the 'raised knoll' in downtown

Dallas, might be considered secular shrines that are capable of rekindling memories of awesome events. [20]

Nowhere, perhaps, are the issues indicated above more urgent than in the controversies that surround how we remember and represent the Holocaust. As Charlesworth and Addis have argued recently, in the absence of convincing memorials the sites chosen to remember the Holocaust are crucial to the national and popular imagination as it comes to address this event. This is especially true of those places where 'unmanaged ecological succession threatens to erase history'.[21] Koonz, in an analysis of the commemorative hinterland around Nazi concentration camps, suggests that whereas we know that written texts are 'infinitely malleable' and readily abridged, films edited and photographs airbrushed, the landscape feels immutable. Only geography, she argues, is capable of conveying the narrative of extermination: 'At these places of remembering, memory feels monolithic, unambiguous, and terrible.' [22] It is a point endorsed by Mayo, in his epic survey of the contested terrain of native north America, when he simply states: 'the landscape itself is the memorial.' [23]

Such sites of memory, or '*lieux de memoire'* as understood by Pierre Nora, [24] exist at the intersection between official (or civic) and vernacular cultures. Their inestimable value to the workings of collective memory is recognised by Gillis, who points out that most people find it difficult to remember 'without having access to mementos, images, and physical sites to objectify their memory.'[25] Preservation and 'reconstruction' of such sites has accelerated recently, alongside a compulsive consumption of personal and public history, and the democratisation (some might say privatisation) of the past. Winter too has drawn important parallels between sites of battle, sites of memory and sites of mourning, identifying three phases in the evolution of commemorative spaces. [26] Firstly, an initial, creative phase involving the construction of 'commemorative form' and marked by monument building and the creation of ceremony; secondly, the 'grounding of ritual action in the calendar' through a process of institutionalisation and routinisation that takes place within the defined commemorative space; and finally, a crucial stage during which the sites of memory are either transformed or disappear, a process that is

largely contingent on whether a second generation of mourners inherits the earlier meanings attached to the place or event and is able to add new meanings. Without frequent re-inscription, the date and place of commemoration simply fades away as memory atrophies as a result the commemorative space loses its potency to re-invigorate memory. [27] As hallowed sites of national memory, the identification and preservation of a battlefield as physical site can help maintain a consciousness of the past which, as Lowenthal argues, is 'essential to maintenance of purpose in life, since without memory we would lack all sense of continuity, all apprehension of causality, all knowledge of our identity'.[28] Rainey and others suggest that, despite the need for occasional artifice, battlefields are especially significant as memorial landscapes because they 'challenge us to recall basic realities of historical experience, especially those of death, suffering and sacrifice.' [29] If landscape, is 'memory's most serviceable reminder' [30], as Lowenthal has suggested, preserved battlefield sites can help to concretise the experience of war and evoke profound reflections – a principle endorsed in the recent *Vimy Declaration for Conservation of Historic Battlefield Terrain*. [31]

Wandering over the sites of the Battle of Gettysburg and musing on the manner in which we help to create significant landscapes, Harbison suggests that 'serious tourists' help monumentalise the landscapes they pass through, 'classicising them by concentrating on certain nodes of significance which acquire ceremonial eminence' whatever their outward condition.[32] The role of the 'serious' tourist, he argues, is essentially reconstructive. At no point is this more evident than in the constructions of 'spectacles of memory' often staged on former battlefields. Invariably these take the form of choreographed events focussed on a commemorative motif where, as Johnson asserts, the annual rehearsal and repetition of commemorative acts – such as Armistice Day or a battlefield pilgrimage – bring about a consensual collapsing of time into place. [33] **(Figure One)** During such events, public monuments can no longer be considered as innocent aesthetic embellishments of the public sphere. Instead attention has to be re-focussed on the 'spatiality' surrounding public monuments, 'where the sites are not merely the material backdrop from which a story is told, but the spaces themselves constitute the meaning by becoming both a physical location and a sight-line of interpretation.'

Inscribing the past on the dystopia of the Western Front

Writing from the front-line trenches in June 1915, Alexander Douglas Gillespie suggested that when the war had ended there would be no need for monuments and memorials. Instead, the governments of France and England should construct one long avenue between the lines from the Vosges to the sea. 'I would', he argued 'make a fine broad road in the 'No Man's Land' between the lines, with paths for pilgrims on foot, and plant trees for shade, and fruit trees so that the soil should not be altogether waste.' [34] Either side of this *Via Sacra* Gillespie suggested 'some of the shattered farms and houses might be left as evidence.' [35] However, so extensive was the battle damage that any early recovery was deemed unlikely. Objective measurements gathered by Clout and others are testimony to the abject scale of the desolation: 333 million cubic metres of trenches to be filled; barbed wire covering an estimated 375 million square metres; over 800,000 dwellings destroyed or damaged, as were 17,466 schools, *mairies*, and churches; the population of the *regions devastees* diminished by nearly 60%. [36] In his analysis of post-war reconstruction, Osborne [37] reproduces a map drawn up by the *British League of Help for Devastated France* which superimposed the scale of war damage to northern France onto the shires of England suggesting that no fewer than twenty-one English counties would have been severely blighted by war.

While the native Belgian and French people toiled to reconstruct the *regions devastees,* individuals and groups from as far as Australia and Canada came to locate particular places
which might still contain the memory of significant events. For most visitors there was little to see. As David Lloyd has observed, the landscape which drew them was largely an imaginary one: 'It was not the sites themselves which attracted travellers, but their associations.' [38] One guidebook assured pilgrims that:

> touring the battlefields is a different thing altogether to touring for the purpose of sight seeing, in fact I can safely say that the mere sight-seer will probably be disappointed with the devastated zones of France and Belgium. But combined with 'atmosphere' and imagination they will draw

> the tourists like magnets and he will probably return to them again and again. [39]

In its desolated and noisome state, littered with war refuse and unspent ordnance, the emptied land was devoid of identifying landmarks except for painted signposts indicating the site of former villages, churches or farmsteads. Yet these were the very sites of memory that were to assume an inestimable significance in national, regional and local memory. In the immediate aftermath of the Great War the victorious armies and their followers worked to shape and fix memory onto the ravaged land. Winston Churchill represented many parties when he wished that he could acquire and 'freeze' the whole of the ruins of Ypres, arguing 'a more sacred place for the British race does not exist in the world.' [40] Like many Britons he wanted to fix forever the memory of that terrible town in the minds of future generations as 'one great and sacred repository of all the scattered dead.' [41] Furthermore, the dead, as Heffernan points out, were not allowed 'to pass unnoticed back into the private world of their families'. They were 'official property' to be accorded appropriate civic commemoration in 'solemn monuments of official remembrance'. [42] Having seized the 'ideological authority' over the rights of the individual citizen, and because large tracts of foreign territory were 'possessed' by its dead, the British Empire, through its constituent representatives, negotiated schemes to enclose portions of land in perpetuity. During this process, the elision of body and territory was central,. As Malvern reminds us, the trope of land- and landscape-as-body was a constant evocation during and immediately after the war. [43]

Over the next decade governments from all parts of the British Empire, along with remembrance groups and bereaved families, purchased small tracts of 'foreign land' as permanent memorials and sacred spaces.[44] Dominion countries and colonies were especially concerned to secure tracts of land. The South African government, for example, purchased the site of Delville Wood on the Somme; Australian ex-servicemen's organisations began an elaborate scheme of tree planting and seed exchange at Gallipoli, Turkey. By 1921 the Imperial (later Commonwealth) War Graves Commission (CWGC) had established over a thousand permanent cemetery sites in France and Belgium alone – comprising some 200 acres of lawn, seventy five miles of flower border and over fifteen miles of hedge. [45] In this task, according to Longworth, the IWGC was honouring its debt

to the dead through a programme of building works that was likened to Pharaonic Egypt. [46]

Possibly the largest single scheme of land purchase was instigated by the Canadian government which acquired sufficient land for eight memorial sites (three in Belgium, five in France). To contain the country's largest monument, Canada was granted in perpetuity 250 acres of devastated land on the Vimy Ridge, site of a notable feat of arms by the Canadian Corps in April 1917. Such acquisitions presented formidable difficulties. Property bournes, landmarks, and roads had often been completely obliterated by shell-fire. The task of relocating the boundaries and establishing the exact position of sites and roads required prolonged and careful instrumental surveys. There were lengthy delays while attempts were made to locate the original owners or their heirs, and long legal processes were often necessary. In some cases – such as at Bourlon Wood – the necessary ground was generously presented by a single landowner (in this case, the Comte de Francqueville) but this still necessitated special legislation to legalise the gift and in this instance the Deed bears the signature of the President of the French Republic.[47]

In areas designated for official commemoration, logistics and budgets were under the jurisdiction of an Officer in Charge of Landscape Architecture. He managed the preparation of sites; 'clearing-up, levelling, grading, tile drainage and the demolishing of deep dug-outs.' [48] Soils were tested to determine the selection of trees and shrubs, and alternative landscape plans were prepared. Despite the ravages of trench warfare the land was rapidly reclaimed. A special correspondent from the *Daily Express* described the transformation:

> Thousands of former soldiers are visiting the battlefields of France and Belgium in the hope of finding trenches, dug-outs, or the exact spot where they received their 'blighties'. In the Ypres Salient they see nothing but flourishing fields of corn, flax, oats, and barley. There is not a trench left in Belgium except a few doubtful examples on Hill 60. In France the scars of war are more visible, but a strenuous peasantry has filled the shell holes and has rebuilt its farms on the front line. It is amazing how swiftly the plough and the building contractor have wiped out all traces of war. [49]

Faced with such incursions, attempts were made to arrest the loss of these sites of memory. Around Vimy Ridge, the Grange Tunnel complex was cleared, rebuilt and preserved – the sunken trenches lined with concrete sandbags and the tunnels made safe for visitors. A number of enterprising café owners enclosed small tracts of battle-torn land to display (for a small fee) to pilgrims and battlefield tourists. At Sanctuary Wood, near Ypres, part of a dishevilled trench line is still preserved for the paying gaze, though the café owner has regularly to re-excavate the crumbling trench walls. [50] But perhaps the most completely preserved tract of battlefield is to be found near the village of Beaumont Hamel on the old Somme battlefield. While the crest of Vimy was being levelled and prepared for its massive memorial, the land around Beaumont Hamel was one of five [51] battlefield sites purchased by the Government of Newfoundland. Each of these sites was closely associated with hard-fought contests in which the Newfoundland Regiment played a particular part. But Beaumont Hamel would become the centrepiece of the Newfoundlander's war story.

Beaumont Hamel Memorial Park – ' then and now'

Much of the tract of front line that would later become the Beaumont Hamel Memorial Park was occupied by Welsh and Scottish troops on the eve of the Battle of the Somme in late June 1916. Led by their commanding officer, Colonel Hadow, the 1st battalion of the Newfoundland Regiment – 801 officers and men - left their billets for the front on the evening of 30th June in preparation for the 'Big Push' the following day. [52] They entered the support line – known as *St John's Road* - at 2 am. Their role in the attack was to form part of a second wave behind battalions of the South Wales Borders and the Border Regiment. At 8.40 am it was intended that they should pass through the first wave troops, regroup on *Station Road* German trench (1,000 metres ahead) and then advance to capture *Puisieux trench* some two miles beyond the British front line in an attack timed to commence at 10.40 am. At 7.20 am they witnessed the explosion of the mine that created an immense crater a kilometre to the left of their position. 10 minutes later the first wave troops left the front-line trench and commenced the attack. Both regiments in this wave were mown down by machine gun fire. Amidst worsening communications, delays and

enemy artillery fire, the Newfoundlanders were ordered to maintain the offensive and at 9.15 am they moved forward. Because the front-line and communication trenches were blocked by British wounded and the dead, the regiment had to climb onto ground above the British front-line system and advance without cover, a distance of some 250 yards before they even reached their own front line. Faced with 'the task of an advance down a slope in an area where the enemy held a convex line' [9] they were exposed to sustained German machine gun fire. By this time in the doomed offensive, the Newfoundlanders were the only attackers visible on that sector of the front. Still in parade ground formation the thinning ranks pushed into No-Man's-Land glimpsing, for the first time, the German wire some 550 metres away. Half way down the slope a number of the surviving Newfoundlanders congregated around a single tree that soon became an obvious marker for enemy fire. By 9.45 am the attack was over: it had been a complete failure. At the roll call only 68 of the attacking force were unwounded. As one of the few survivors noted 'there were blokes lying everywhere.' [53] With over 90% casualties from this single action the Royal Newfoundland Regiment holds a grimly unique record for losses in action during the Great War. The land was fought over again during the war, most notably in November 1916 when the 51st Highland Division gained much of the German line that had repulsed the Newfoundlanders.

Immediately after the war the Government of Newfoundland began negotiations to purchase ground for five battlefield parks, the largest of these would be at Beaumont Hamel. Purchasing the 16.5 hectare (40 acre) tract of land required prolonged negotiation with some 250 French landowners. These arrangements, and the extended task of developing each site and planning for appropriate monuments, was delegated by the Government to the Director of Graves Registration and Enquiry, Colonel Thomas F. Nangle, a former wartime padre of the Regiment and Newfoundland's representative on the IWGC. The purchase of the site was finalised in July 1921. [54]

Initial topographic work

When first purchased, the land was broken and pulverised, the ground pitted with craters and old trench-lines. *Y-Ravine*, a steep-sided Y-shaped valley on the northern perimeter of the intended park, was burrowed by hundreds of deep tunnels that once held troops and their supplies. Cleared of spent ordnance and other debris by the Salvage Corps, construction of the park began in 1922 under the direction of Rudolf Hogo Karel Cochius, a Dutch-born landscape architect and resident of St Johns, Newfoundland. [55] Working with Nangle he reshaped the dishevilled remnants of the landscape, giving it two principle components: a focal point in the form of a monument on a raised stone cairn, and around it, the contextual setting of the devastated landscape retained in its battle configuration. Designed by the English sculptor Basil Gotto, the monument is an immense bronze caribou (the emblem of the regiment) atop a pile of granite boulders and shrubs which acts as both pedestal and viewing point. **(Figure Two)** A low wall with brass direction pointers indicates the main features of the Somme battlefield. In an attempt to recreate a fragment of the Newfoundland landscape, Cochius imported plant material native to that region and the caribou is surrounded with white spruce, birch, dog-berry and juniper.

The cairn is sited a little behind a deep trench line – marked erroneously as *St John's Lane* – which dominates the foreground of the preserved battlefield. **(Figure three)** To the north of the caribou, Cochius planted a tree-lined avenue which leads the eye, and the visitor/pilgrim, to *Hawthorn Crater,* the name given to the 10 metre deep cavity formed by the mine explosion to the left of the Newfoundlander's start point. A second avenue, running roughly parallel to the northern perimeter of the Park, connects one of the military cemeteries with a memorial to the Highland Division. Contemporary photographs show the three cemeteries flanked by plantings and saplings, behind lies the barren and pock-marked Somme plain. [56]

During the planting of the park some 35,000 seedlings and trees were brought from Newfoundland, Scotland and Holland to complement the Lombardy poplars planted around the park's perimeter. Cochius purposefully selected "trees and shrubs of different foliage to soften the whole [effect]" [57] This is particularly evident behind the entrance

walls of the Park. However, from the vantage point of the caribou, the outstanding feature of the park is not the tree planting but the expanse of pitted ground immediately to the north-east, where the level fields give way to the deep gully of *Y-Ravine*. **(Figure four)** Much of the space between the caribou memorial and *Y-Ravine* is former no-man's-land, an exposed tract of land pitted with irregular shell-holes. Approximately half-way across the space lies a trench which is often confused for the German front-line; it is in fact a British trench from a later period of the fighting. The actual 1st July German trench lies a further 200 metres beyond, commanding the higher ground at the lip of the ravine, which acts as the northern edge of the park. No-man's-land is not entirely empty. Half-way across is the petrified remains of the tree that had acted as a gathering point for soldiers during the morning of the attack. Although long since perished, it has been embedded (a little inelegantly) in a barrel of cement. Known as 'the Danger Tree' it stands alongside a grove of flowering plum-trees, which may have grown from the original tree since this species regenerates easily. As a distinguishable landmark, 'the Danger Tree' has assumed heightened significance as an arboreal symbol and is regularly strewn with paper poppies and other tokens of remembrance. [58] **(Figure five)**

The Park was formally opened by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, former Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force, in July 1925. [59] Upon Newfoundland's entry into Confederation in 1949, it was recognised as a Canadian National Historic Site and is currently administered by the Canadian government's Department of Veteran Affairs.

<u>Further alterations</u>

> Dick turned the corner of the traverse and continued along the trench walking on the duckboard. He came to a periscope, looked through it a moment, then he got up on the step and peered over the parapet. In front of him beneath a dingy sky was Beaumont-Hamel; to his left the tragic hill of Thiepval. Dick stared at them through his field glasses, his throat straining with sadness.
> He went on along the trench, and found the others waiting for him in the next traverse. … "This land here cost twenty lives a foot that summer," he said to Rosemary. She looked out obediently at the rather bare green plain with its low trees of six years growth. … "See that little stream – we could walk to it in two minutes. It took the British a month to walk to it – a whole empire walking very slowly, dying in front and pushing forward behind. And another empire walked

> very slowly backward a few inches a day, leaving the dead like a million bloody rugs. No Europeans will ever do that again in this generation."
> … They came out of the neat restored trench, and faced a memorial to the Newfoundland dead. Reading the inscription Rosemary burst into sudden tears. [60]

Roaming the preserved terrain around the Newfoundland Memorial Park, 'Dick' and 'Rosemary' were typical of a vast host of pilgrims, tourists and travelers who flocked to the old Western Front in the decade after the Great War. F. Scott Fitzgerald movingly captures a landscape where time and space had once been strangely compressed, and where the 'emotional memory' of recent events seemed to be irreversibly etched on the surface of the land. During the decades of mass pilgrimage – the late 1920s and 1930s - the Park was considered one of the most important stops on any expedition to the Western Front.. [61] Virtually every account of a tour of the Somme mentions the Park. One visitor recorded a vivid impression in 1927 :

> we zig-zag along the duck-boards, and here are grim reminders on every side of fierce fighting, nothing altered from the time when war ended, helmets where they fell, many pierced with shrapnel; rifles rusty with mouldering stocks ; a rusty machine gun; rusty bayonets; mouldering packs, water bottles, mess tins – just where they fell. [62]

As the surrounding countryside was reclaimed from the war and the screen of trees around the perimeter of the park grew to maturity, little else changed in the site. Apart from an abortive plan by the Germans to remove the bronze highlander statue during the second world war [63] there were no major alterations until the early 1960s. During that decade, much of the white spruce around the cairn was removed because it obliterated both the caribou and the view, and the cairn was replanted using lower species. In 1961 the Hon. Joseph Smallwood, then Premier of Newfoundland, unveiled a bronze plaque in the lodge which houses the reception room for visitors. It lists the Battle Honours of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and pays tribute to the war dead. One year earlier, landscaping modifications had been undertaken and a number of the 1916 trench lines were re-excavated and reconstructed. This act of reconstruction was intended to 'preserve in its original state the shell-pitted ground between St.John's Road and the *Y-Ravine* across which the heroic advance of July 1, 1916 was made' [64] In this, the Canadian authorities were assisted by Captain George Hicks MC who fought as a platoon

commander on 1st July. [65] As a result of this re-modelling the late 1916 and 1918 battle landscape was largely eradicated so as to re-inscribe the narrative of July 1916.

Since then the Park has become one of the landmarks in the mythical topography of the Great War. On April 10, 1997 the Battlefield and Memorial was designated as a Canadian National Historic Site and a memorial plaque to that effect was unveiled on November 8th of that year. Over the past two decades it has become one of the most visited places in northern France and is described by one authority as 'probably the most interesting place on the whole Western Front' [66] – a verdict which benefits from its association with a unique regiment in a defined moment in time. In this aspect, it contrasts strongly with the sprawling anonymity and vast scale of much of the rest of the trench war.

Like many other sites where historic significance has been attached, its very popularity is now deemed to be a threat to both its ecological state and also to its re-invested status as 'sacred ground'. [67] Accordingly, in 2000 the Department of Veteran Affairs Canada, sponsored the first international gathering of battlefield conservation experts. A group of archaeologists, conservation architects, GPR (Ground Penetrating Radar) consultants, military historians, site managers, and landscape architects met in France to develop the Vimy Charter – an international directive for battlefield conservation. [68] Currently available in draft form, the Charter recognised the impact of mass tourism to the battlefields in France and Belgium. It was estimated that in a single year 1 million visits are made to Vimy Ridge; while 250,000 people visit the smaller site at Beaumont Hamel. It was agreed that a number of broad principles should be adopted to help guide the future management of the sites: no damage should be caused; any actions taken should be reversible; and 'no more should be done to increase the loss of legibility of the site permanently.' [69] One of the first actions taken by the Canadian authorities was to ensure that the battlefield was regarded primarily as a memorial space, rather than a place of recreation or historical re-enactment. To this end, the word 'Park' will be phased out. A second (possibly more controversial) decision was taken to restrict access to the site. This would be achieved by allowing grass on the site to grow, in places to waist height. It was hoped that visitors would be deterred from entering the trench systems and so preserve

them from further unintentional damage. It was argued that once appropriate ground maintenance and conservation measures had been taken, the trenches would be partially reopened for visitor access. It was also decided to enhance the Visitor and Interpretive Centre and to continue to train young Canadian students as battlefield guides – a model that is used effectively on US Civil War sites. [70] **(Figure six)**

Areas of contention : historical accuracy , freedom of access, topographic legibility

> Beaumont Hamel Memorial [was] developed by the Newfoundland government to commemorate its soldiers who died during the First World War. During one of the most dramatic days of the 1916 campaign, the 1st Newfoundland Regiment lost more than three quarters of its soldiers in less than half an hour. This site also reminds us of the efforts by the people of Newfoundland to preserve the heritage of the Great War. A walking trail recalling the journey made by these soldiers offers you a new way of understanding the battlefield landscape. [71]

Expressed in this manner the site has three primary modes of discourse: one that projects it as a sacred and reverential domain dedicated to recording a very particular act of war; another that identifies the site with distant, regional memory. Thirdly, the site has become a dramaturgical space where terrain has been re-arranged to create a sequence of spatial and timed narratives. In common with the many Romantic and pastoral mythologies associated with the trench war on the Western Front, the Park has also been presented as an 'enchanted place' where hundreds of soldiers became 'lost' in the void of no-man's-land. [72] Above all, visitors are asked to cherish the preserved battlefield as a unique *temporal* space, one which is linked exclusively to a few hours of battle on a particular morning in the middle of the war. On the Western Front perhaps only the *tranchee des baionettes* at Verdun or the Lochnagar Crater at La Boiselle can make the same claim of origination in a specific and sudden moment. [73]

As a prime example of a site of social construction, the Western Front, argues Saunders is best understood as not just a place of incessant battle but 'a palimpsest of overlapping,

multi-vocal landscapes'. [74] As such, they pose particular problems for those who wish to preserve them. As David Lowenthal [75] has noted, traces of antiquity can be so faint that 'only contrivance secures their recognition.' In the absence of signposts, he asks, 'how many visitors to an old battlefield could tell that it *was* an historical site.'[76] To which we might add, *pace* the Western Front, and how exactly might a segment of battlefield be preserved and rendered distinguishable given the ravages enacted on that desolated landscape ? Lowenthal has described the memorial-strewn sites of the US Civil War as 'landscapes of accretion' stratified by layer upon layer of markers, statuary, beacons and military ordnance which require careful excavation. [77] They are also rhetorical landscapes where military actions, tactical ploys and declarations can be revisited and understood. Reflecting on the preservation of the Gettysburg battlefield in 1863 (an idea conceived only five weeks after the end of the battle) Robert M Uttley [78] describes it as an 'associative monument', a place identified with particular events whose preservation is intended to be 'educational, inspirational and patriotic.' Rainey [79] underlines these concerns, arguing that battlefield preservation should be regarded as a continuous educational process in which successive generations 'revise or expand their cultural memory through interaction with the artifacts and landscapes of its past.' [80]

In the UK Secondary School National Curriculum the Newfoundland Memorial site is considered an important component in any study of the Great War. Here, for example, is a typical itinerary prepared by one history teacher;

> One of the central features of our visit to the Somme is to spend at least an hour at Newfoundland Park and conduct in-depth fieldwork in this portion of the battlefield. Regular visitors to this invaluable preserved site will be familiar with its features and the benefits it affords anyone studying trench warfare. The events of 1st July 1916 can be followed by standing in the British front-line, looking towards the German trenches and then going 'over the top', timing how long the walk across no mans land takes. The view from the German front-line to the British trenches (both front-line and reserve) brings home why the first day of the Somme was so costly for the British and Newfoundland troops who fought there. [81]

For such purposes, the Beaumont Hamel Memorial seems to offer a template for the entire war. To others, however, it can only offer a fragment: the periods of maneuver (in

1914), ‘scorched earth’ (1917), retreat (1918) and pursuit (1918) can never be fairly represented by this site. Its layout and selective nodes of meaning fuel the dominant mythology of the war as an uninterrupted period of entrenchment and futile slaughter – a myth that has been systematically challenged by historians in the past decade. [82]

Many commentators despise the form of vicarious entertainment so carefully choreographed by the history teacher cited above. 'It is the contemporary visitor's duty to resist the “ease” of imaginary projection' argues George Van Den Abbeele (here reflecting on the Normandy landing beaches in France) we must 'remain acutely aware of the gap between what is there, and what is not there (or there no longer).' [83] To remove the freedom to roam, as was recommended in the Vimy Charter, creates a number of tensions over the ownership of memory and the exclusive right to vicarious engagement in the past. One regular visitor summarised these tensions:

> You can imagine my surprise and annoyance to find, in July 2000, that the front-line trenches [of the Newfoundland Memorial] of both sides have been allowed to become overgrown with weeds and that visitors have been denied access to them. This is also true of much of No Man’s Land. … I can understand why access to Y-ravine has been restricted in recent years after the discovery of unexploded shells (albeit a shame), but closing off the front-line trenches indefinitely devalues the experience of the Park for all concerned. [84]

Restriction of movement is also regarded as interfering with the pilgrim/visitor’s right to engage with the significant (and often concealed) motifs of the place. The lead signifiers of the park - caribou, petrified tree, shell-holes and preserved trench lines - lend secular authority to the Christian memorials on the site and are regarded as having talismanic properties. Visitors help ‘reconstruct’ the site in other ways: they litter the site with paper poppies and wreaths, they help to re-inscribe key routes across the terrain with contemporary meanings, and the most informed visitors (usually drawn from remembrance societies and amateur historians groups) also help to re-assert a ‘proper’ historical understanding of the site. This last role is crucial because the historical legibility of the site is compromised by indifferent signage.

A number of signposts in the park are plainly inaccurate: the main Allied trench line, for example, is erroneously labeled *St John’s Road* (after the capital of Newfoundland). In

actuality this was the name given to the metalled road between two villages behind the line. One possible justification for this sleight of hand is that it helps compress the Newfoundlander's narrative into the given space. [85] Similarly the orientation of the approach paths, the alignment of cairn and caribou and the arrangement of the perimeter trees give a sense that the combatants attacked to the north-east, when in fact the attack went in an easterly direction towards the site of the superintendent's lodge. Every aspect of the park's design conspires against this reading. The caribou, for example, is described in the official literature as 'head held defiantly high, facing in the direction of the Newfoundlanders' former foes.' [86] Although 'The Danger Tree' is preserved and labeled, other features cannot be adapted so easily. In his guide to the Somme Battlefield Middlebrook advises readers that in order to appreciate the wartime situation one must

> ignore the trees; the battlefield was open in 1916. Second, ignore the park's boundaries; the line of the Newfoundlanders' intended advance was half right ... not down the centre of the park.[87]

Across this central area a shallow trench line (which visitors often confuse for the enemy line) is left unlabeled 'because it played no part in the Newfoundland story'. It belongs to a later battle. [88] Such anomalies, it could be argued, occlude our understanding of the past, sacrificing historical complexity for a simplified one-dimensional reading. To many these are more than technical points. A leading authority on the site, Nigel Cave bemoans the inaccurate signage :

> the present arrangement does no service to the many Newfoundlanders who would have become casualties as they made their way to the front-line; nor does it help to explain the magnitude of the task that faced them. [89]

Another frequent visitor complained that the available information was 'replete with errors and misunderstandings – it is plainly inauthentic' [90]

'Authenticity' is, of course, a fugitive term. Selective reconstruction in 1922 and 1960 re-inscribed the Beaumont Hamel Memorial terrain with a partial interpretation of history.

By focusing exclusively on the Newfoundlander's story, any parallel narrative – concerning German soldiers or the Scots troops who fought on the same tract five months later – is left untold. Battlefield markers and signage lend authority to a particular reading of the space. Memory is re-assigned and controlled. This is not surprising. As Lowenthal observes 'markers celebrating this relic or forbidding access to that one profoundly influence what we make of them.' [91] In the highly charged yet emptied landscapes of the Somme, even the least conspicuous signpost effects how history is experienced. Battlefield preservation demands compromise and the judicious use of the power of suggestion. As Lowenthal states 'One can only allude to the original conditions, not recreate them.' [92]

<u>Creating a landscape of allusion - concluding remarks</u>

How best then to create a landscape of allusion, of indirect or passing reference, rather than one that is recreated artificially ? It would have been futile to attempt to preserve the Somme battlefield in its 'authentic' devastated state. Despite its dominating shape in our present imagination, the ubiquitous panorama of mud, tree stalks and ruined buildings held true for the battlezones only at certain times and on certain parts of the Western Front. Even the most shell-torn ground would sprout plant growth each Spring and a close reading of Western Front-line literature reveals that the battlefield, and No-Man's-Land in particular, had many guises – from 'an ocean of mud', to 'a strip of green like a racecourse between the lines.' [93] At Beaumont Hamel, it was apparent that the priority for preservation was the orientation of the opposing trench lines and the shell-pitted land between. Hewison reminds us that there is an important distinction between preservation and conservation. Preservation means the maintenance of remains in a 'condition defined by its historic context', and in a form that allows it to be studied with 'a view to revealing its original context'. Conservation will invariably create a new context, and through attracting a new public will create a new use. [94] Furthermore, conservation may lead to damage of the site or artefact, even its destruction.

Plainly, the 2001 Charter was intended to preserve the site from the conservationists.

However, although many would agree with the tenets of the Charter, most anxiety was focussed on the loss of legibility and the limitations of access caused by the decision to allow the grass to grow above accepted norms of horticultural decency, to violate what Edmund Blunden preciously called ‘the green coverlet’. [95] Denied the immediate understanding of the site’s distinctive topography, visitors are left to the whim of the ‘inadequate’ signage. More fundamentally, unkempt undergrowth is widely regarded as contrary to the codes of Commonwealth commemoration. It is widely accepted that a close-trimmed, neatly ordered lawn is synonymous with ‘proper’ remembrance in that it is considered to be timeless, unviolated, pre-industrial. According to Shepheard it is this attention to detail – the assiduous ‘clip and mow and prune’ - and the insistence on ‘specificity’ that makes it possible to ‘commemorate the dead without glorifying the war.’ [96] By comparison, unkempt parkland and overgrown lawn evokes painful associations of traumatized bodies, disintegration and administrative disorder.

Mosse has argued that nature was artificially contrived by the designers of both British Empire and German war cemeteries to mask the horrors of the Great War. [97] Yet, it is apparent from official histories this was never the intention of the British authorities. Cemeteries were never camouflaged from their obvious purpose. As Morris observes, the pristine appearance of the garden cemeteries do however conceal an uneasy tension between a smooth, whole and ordered exterior and the realities of war buried only inches below. Carefully managed turf is also held to have redemptive qualities, softening the memory of a traumatized landscape which is fixed in the collective memory as a violent gash in the earth.[98] An uncluttered green coverlet also meets one of the primary conditions for the process of commemoration , namely a recognition that the cherished open spaces on the Somme battlefield should not become littered with ill-considered ‘monumentalia.’ Amongst battlefield pilgrims and ‘serious tourists’, emptiness is regarded as a pivotal trope in the appreciation of the former Western Front. Bereft of landmarks, waypoints or discernible features, No- Man’s-Land, between 1915 and early 1918, was a zone under constant surveillance and of omnipresent danger. To combatants, the deserted battlefield was not empty at all, it was rather an ‘emptiness crowded ... more full of emptiness, an emptiness that is not really empty at all’. [99] A space both ‘full of

history and yet void of history', this notion of a landscape characterised by absences and loss makes further sense on the Western Front battlefields because it is a place where subjective narratives (often tied to family histories) are located and brought to life. As Shepheard suggests, 'it is a place you take your own stories to'. [100]

As has been argued, preservation of historical remains is layered with complexity. Preserved battle landscapes, as Morris reminds us, are many-layered with 'different and intersecting ideas and meanings about identity, place and landscape production.' [101] As we have seen, Beaumont Hamel is an extremely complex landscape of commemoration wherein Newfoundland, Canadian, German, Scottish and British imperial associations all jostle for prominence in ways that reflect the many competing historical claims over this compressed patch of land. In the eighty years since the Beaumont Hamel Memorial Park was selected as a site of national memory there have been several attempts to assert a dominant historical narrative, leaving others' stories marginalised or effaced from the record. . As has been shown, it is clear that if we value battlefields as important historical, moral and political texts their appearance needs careful consideration. As a locus of pilgrimage, tourism and historical enquiry Beaumont Hamel has so far been spared the staged theatrics of many 'heritage' sites: it is not yet littered with the detritus of forsaken information systems and redundant signage schemes, largely because the histories of even a small tract of land are now quite impossible to retrieve. As a result the site has been topographically re-arranged so as to focus on a thirty-minute action during a fifty month war. If, as Daniels maintains, national identities are co-ordinated and defined by 'legends and landscapes' then the topographical re-shaping of the Beaumont Hamel Memorial has also given shape to the imagined community of Newfoundland as a 'nation' defined by a brief, but catastrophic, historical moment. [102]

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The Vimy declaration for conservation of historic battlefield terrain was drafted by participants at the First International Workshop on Conservation of Battlefield Terrain, held in Arras, France, 1st – 3rd March 2000 at the invitation of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Canada. Participating organizations included the Department of Veterans Affairs, Canada; Heritage Conservation Program, Real Property Services for Parks Canada, Public Works and Government Services Canada; United States National Park Service; Parks Canada; the National Battlefield Commission of the Department of Canadian Heritage; English Heritage; the Durand Group (United Kingdom); University College London; City of Arras, France; American Battle Monuments Commission; Ministry of Culture and Communication (France); and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

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The five battlefield parks are at Beaumont Hamel (near Albert), Gueudecourt (near Bapaume), Monchy-le-Preux (near Arras), Masnières (near Cambrai), all in France, and Courtrai (or Kortrijk) in Belgium.

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55
Cochius was in particular a fitting choice for the Commission. He had first come to St. John's in 1912 to lay out a park outside the city limits that had been donated to St. John's residents by the local firm of Bowring Brothers. This park had been designed by Montreal landscape architect and town planner, Frederick G. Todd, for whom Cochius had previously worked. In 1917 he returned to Montreal where he formed a partnership with Todd and in 1918-1919 served as a town planning adviser and surveyor to the Quebec Government on its housing policy. As a member of the Newfoundland Highways Commission, Cochius took a strong interest in St.John's town planning, devising an extensive boulevard system
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68

The working draft of the 'Vimy Declaration for Conservation of Historic Battlefield Terrain' is available for suggestion and revision on-line at www2.cr.nps.gov/abpp/terraincharter.htm

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70

Such decisions accord with the core tenet of the Vimy declaration, namely: 'The goal is to protect the fabric and meaning of these complex cultural resources and in doing so to partly discharge the debt which the present owes the past.' Article 24 refers specifically to 'Visitor understanding and response': 'The presentation and interpretation of battlefields shall include and make reference to the larger historic, cultural and physical contexts of the battle(s) which occurred there.'

71

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82

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See for example John Terraine*, The smoke and the fire: myths and anti-myths of war* (London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980) ; Peter Liddle, ed., *Facing Armageddon : the First World* War *experienced* (London, Leo Cooper, 1996) ; Niall Ferguson, *The pity of war*, (London, Allen Lane, 1998).

83

G. Van den Abbeele, 'Armored sites/ sites blindes ' in Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, *Visite aux armees: tourismes de guerre. Back to the front*: *tourism of war* (Caen, Fonds Regional d'Art Contemporain de Basse-Normandie, 1994) pp.116 - 177. See also G.Van Den Abbeele, Sightseers: the Tourist as Theorist, *Diacritics,* 10, December 1980, p.4.

84

J. Nicholas, Letters, *Bulletin No. 58,* p. 48.

85

In correspondence with the author, one regular visitor to the memorial park suggested that the Newfoundlanders had 'bought the wrong piece of land. Surely it would have been better for them to have bought the actual trenches from which their men advanced?' He pointed out that the Newfoundlanders did not attack from St John's Road – "which on my trench map is not the name of a trench but the road that runs outside the park!" During a visit on 1st July 2001 one of the Canadian tour guides readily agreed this point. A.Hayhurst, correspondence July 2001.

86

Beaumont Hamel Souvenir Guide (2000).

87

M. and M. Middlebrook, *The Somme*, p.83.
This spatial misreading is repeated in an analysis of Deborah Bright's photographs of the site that are discussed in Valerie Williams, 'Landscape revised: the rural iconography of

the First World War', in *Warworks: women, photography and the iconography of War* (London, Virago, 1995), pp.17-31.

88

M.and M.Middlebrook, *The Somme,* p.86.

89

N. Cave, *Beaumont Hamel*, p.73.

90

A. Hayshurst, correspondence with the author, July – November 2001.

91

Lowenthal, *The past*, p. 269.

92

Lowenthal, *The past*, p.82.

93

For examples of the way no man's land was imagined see P. Gough, 'The empty battlefield: painters and the First World War', *Imperial War Museum Review*, **8** (London, Imperial War Museum/Leo Cooper, 1993), pp. 38 – 47.

94

Robert Hewison, *The heritage industry: Britain in a climate of decline* (London, Methuen, 1987), p. 98.

95

Edmund Blunden, "Introduction', in Fabian Ware, *The immortal heritage: an account of the work and policy of the Imperial War Graves Commission during twenty years 1917 – 1937* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1937), p. 20.

96

Paul Shepheard, *The cultivated wilderness: or, what is landscape ?* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997), p.227.

97

George Mosse, *Fallen soldiers: reshaping the memory of the World Wars* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990).

98

M. Morris, 'Gardens 'for ever England': landscape, identity and the First World War British cemeteries of the Western Front', *Ecumene* **4** 4 (1997), p.428. For an analysis of the tensions and transgressive cat of crossing the pathless lawn see Helen Lipstadt, 'Learning from Lutyens', *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall 1999, pp.65 – 70.

99

Reginald Farrer, *Void of war* (London, Constable, 1915), p.55.

Architect Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the USA, described a similar ambition when recalling the origins of her design:

> I thought about what death is, what loss is … a sharp pain that lessens with time but can never quite heal over. A scar. The idea occurred to me there on that site. Take a knife and cut open the earth and with time the grass would heal it.

Cited in M. Rowlands, 'Remembering to Forget: Sublimation as Sacrifice in War Memorials', in Forty and Kuchler, *The art of forgetting*, p.139.

100

Shepheard, *The cultivated wilderness*, p.216.

Interestingly, in his otherwise evocative exploration of the old Western Front Shepheard names the Beaumont Hamel Memorial as a 'Canadian' site, not one strictly identified with the Newfoundlanders (p. 204). Perhaps this suggests that the recent title change

from 'Newfoundland Memorial Park' to 'Beaumont Hamel Memorial' has been at the expense of the specificity that Shepheard applauds in other Commonwealth schemes. See also, Cora Stephan, 'The Roses of Picardy, the Poppies of the Somme: an anthology of the Great War, or how the war made landscapes', *Journal of Garden History*, 17, 3 (1997) pp.214-220.

101

Morris, 'Gardens 'forever England'', p.428.

102

Stephen Daniels, *Fields of vision: landscape imagery and national identity in England and the United States,* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993), p.5.

Captions for plates

Figure one   Remembrance ceremony, Beaumont Hamel Memorial, 1st July 2001

Figure two   *The Caribou* by Basil Goto

Figure three   Trenches erroneously marked as 'St John's Lane'

Figure four   The view east towards *Y-Ravine* showing front-line trench remains, the *Danger Tree* in the middle distance, and *Y-Ravine* Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery

Figure five   The 'Danger Tree', Beaumont Hamel Memorial.

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Figure six Canadian student acting as battlefield guide, Beaumont Hamel Memorial, July 2001.

All photographs by Alan Hayhurst, except Figure five by Clive Hughes