

National Myths and Pivotal Battles: The Case of Vimy

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“British Smash Through German Line: Canadians Storm Famous Vimy Ridge.” So read a blaring headline, in bold red letters, by the *Winnipeg Free Press* on 10 April 1917. “Brilliant Attack of Canadians Results in Capture of Vimy Ridge in Half Hour—Casualties Light,” appeared below. “Canadians Part of Victory was Capture of Vimy Ridge and Two Thousand Prisoners,” ran a parallel article on the war-news from page of this edition.¹ On that same day, the *Toronto Globe* reported “Canadians Lead in Triumph: 5816 Enemy in British Net,” adding “Canadians Put in Front to Capture Vimy Ridge.”² These first reports across Canada, and the many which followed, were remarkably similar because they were based on the dispatches of Stuart Lyon, a Canadian War Correspondent. From the *Vancouver Sun’s* lead article, “Famous Ridge the Scene of Many Gory Battles Was Stormed and Carried by Warriors from Canada,”³ to the *Halifax Herald’s* summation of a “Brilliant Canadian dash signal for armies left the right to advance,” the origins of a national myth can be traced back to these early reports. Even *Le Devoir*, which often opposed or stood aloof from war reporting on

¹ “British Smash Through German Line: Canadians Storm Famous Vimy Ridge,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, 10 April 1917, p. 1.

² “Canadians Lead in Triumph: 5816 Enemy in British Net,” *The Globe*, 10 April 1917, p. 1.

³ “Canadian Troops Carry Famous Vimy Ridge,” *Vancouver Sun*, 10 April 1917.

what many in French Canada saw as an imperial contest led in Canada by the British, featured translations of Lyon's reports as they received wide recirculation in the English Canadian Press.

Why was Vimy Ridge, a particular sector, approximately 7 kilometers along the longer line of the Arras advance, described as famous? It was because reports of the success of the Canadian Corps were marked by comparisons to previous and failed efforts of both the British and French to take the Ridge. We could say that Vimy Ridge by the Spring of 1917 was infamous, rather than famous, in the eyes of all the allies. The fame that the success of the four divisions of the Canadian Corps would bring to Canada and beyond was that it was a costly but sustained advance—it was a success. With 3,598 killed and 7,004 wounded, it was also a costly victory earned with stubborn determination.

Some four key elements were established in press coverage of Vimy Ridge that proved remarkably stable and laid the groundwork in constructing one of Canada's most enduring myths. First, it was a comparative success. The British failed in previous attempts to take the Ridge. So had the French, with a total of some 100,000 casualties incurred in previous attempts to take and hold the high ground. When reports first came back of the German soldiers and captured enemy guns, now safely across the lines with the Ridge now part of allied territory, they possessed all the makings for a great national story that has endured to the present.

Second, the Canadian Corps, as these early reports implied, were led by a Canadian general and officers: it was Canada's victory, and not just that of General Arthur Currie. Virtually all descriptions of Canadian troops highlighted their gallantry, courage, and pluck. Third—and these early reports emphasized the importance of carefully planned artillery barrages—the Canadian victory was the result of a particular tactic in the co-ordination of artillery bombardment and troop advance. Finally, reports, like that of the *Globe* as it looked back at Vimy three months later in July of 1917 stressed the strategic significance of Currie's accomplishment and that of his men the previous Easter when the battle took place.

As well, it might be added, some attached a religious significance to a victory in the trenches borne out from the Friday to Monday weekend as one of resurrection. "Canadians Beat Powerful Enemy," as the *Globe* stated. "Victory at the Ridge Had

Important Bearing on Haig's Plans." And "A Valuable Ridge Plan of Attack Carefully Laid." This summation followed the reception from General Headquarters in France that detailed all operations spearheaded by the Canadian Corps from the 9th to the 12th of April. "The attack of the Canadian corps upon the Vimy ridge," as this report outlined, "was launched at 5:30 a.m. on the 9th of April 1917 as part of the general British offensive delivered at that hour east of Arras. Possession of the ridge would deprive the enemy of observation of the valleys running southwest from it, and would secure for the British a commanding view of the plains to the north and east." What was, as the *Globe* queried from an official report, the significance of the ridge from a military point of view, or as this paper framed it, "The Ridge's Great Value?" "In view. . . of the recent German withdrawal south of Arras, the right of which rested on this powerful position, the tactical importance of the Vimy Ridge, already great prior to the enemy's withdrawal, had been considerably increased. The capture of the ridge would imperil the German hold upon the French industrial districts."⁴

A great victory. One led by Canadians where others had failed. One based on careful and exacting preparation and training, especially the use of rolling barrage directly ahead of troop advance. And a win of enormous strategic importance in defeating the Central Powers. A pivotal battle fought when all of Christendom was celebrating the resurrection. Home front Canadians had absorbed such news and preliminary interpretations with alacrity.

And, of course, over the last century Vimy Ridge has only increased in its symbolic weight as part of the nation-building thesis. As Jonathan Vance has argued so persuasively, interpreting the myths and meanings of the Great War as a noble sacrifice and not a senseless slaughter in the interwar period brought many Canadians towards a new appreciation of their national status and standing. A resumption of interest in memories of this war began in the latter 1920s with the construction of war memorials across the country. The unveiling in July 1936 of Walter Seward Allward's war memorial on the site itself rejuvenated this process as a public historical process, as did the re-dedication of the Vimy Ridge war memorial at the 90th anniversary observances led by Queen Elizabeth II. In my day as a high school and undergraduate student, Pierre Berton's best seller, *Vimy* (1986), went a long way to keeping the memories of this

⁴ *The Globe*, 11 July 1917, p. 4.

particular battle as an especially Canadian achievement alive and well. The year his book came out, which now aligns with his other books on the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the War of 1812, the Klondike gold rush, and the Dionne Quintuplets, Berton tapped into a powerful vein of, primarily, English Canadian nationalist sentiment. Writing the *Toronto Star* in the wake of the publication of *Vimy*, Berton claimed that Vimy, as a hard fought and pivotal battle in World War I, “Created Canadians.” “The stunning victory produced a wave of national feeling that had a profound effect on Canada’s future relations with the mother country and on the image that Canadians had of themselves. In the measured march toward Canadian autonomy Vimy was always seen as a turning point.”⁵ Since then, much has been made of the “national birth in battle” narrative. Ted Barris’ *Victory at Vimy: Canada Comes of Age, April 9-12 1917* (2007), as his title implies, certainly fanned the flame in the 90th anniversary surrounding popular notions of the significance of the battle as we make our way to past its centenary.

The equating of the Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge with the birth of a nation has drawn many critics, perhaps the most significant being Ian McKay and Jamie Swift. Published last year, their co-written book, *The Vimy Trap: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War* (2016) mounted a sustained attack on what the authors see as the abuse of “useable past.” With respect to memory, nationalism, and this particular battle, they went as far as to coin a word, “Vimyism,” to describe an ideology of nationhood attached to the symbolic significance of this event. Probing school textbooks, war art, and the mountain of words, many from journalists, that has been crafted to re-invent this battle’s meaning, they warn against become entrapped in glorified interpretations of this one battle in this terrible war.⁶

Most recently, Canadian war museum historian Tim Cook has completed the most extensive evaluation of the Vimy myth in *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (2017), published on the battle’s centenary. Cook considers the history of the myth since the 1960s, beginning with a chapter entitled “Birth of the Nation.” Here, he concludes that “Vimy did not resonate in all parts of Canada or with all Canadians. Few symbols do.”⁷

⁵ *Toronto Star*, 6 April 1986, p. A12

⁶ See Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *The Vimy Trap: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016).

⁷ Tim Cook, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (Toronto: Penguin Random House/Allen Lane, 2017), p. 327.

Mostly older Canadians and veterans, he adds, responded to it: “In the decade of discord that was the 1960s, Vimy was a bulwark for older Canadians; for veterans; and for that sizeable number of Canadians who continued to have strong connections to the British Empire”⁸ It was already by this point a contested myth and, as Cook concludes, “The Vimy legend provided meaning for some Canadians as one the marked the birth of a new nation after the Great War. But the 1960s saw the rise of a ‘newer’ Canada, with its own icons and symbols, and the concept of Vimy was increasingly sidelined within a Canada that was developing, maturing, and navigating nationhood.”⁹ In the chapter that follows, “Vimy Contested,” Cook goes on to consider the resurrection of the Vimy legend during the years of Prime Minister Harper, culminating in the 90th anniversary of the battle: “In 2007, the Vimy legend returned to the mainstream, invoked as Canadians fought in another far-off war.”¹⁰ Indeed, the experience and news of Canadian troops in Afghanistan provided the necessary tonic for a renewed interest in Canada’s modern wars. “The meaning of Vimy,” as Cook observes, “would continue to find relevance, potency, and usefulness in the twenty-first century, as an old idea was refashioned and given new life. Such is the power of legends.”¹¹

Rather than retrace well-trodden ground, my chapter here is designed to retrace what I see as the key elements of the Vimy myth not back to the unveiling of a national monument nor the speechifying and other cultural expressions of national identity won in battle that began in the interwar period, but to suggest instead that the roots of Vimy as a case of national mythmaking actually circulated in the first reports of this Canadian Corps victory based on the four assumptions I have just introduced. That it was a success in contrast to previous failures. That the Canadian Corps was led by Canadian officers in charge of Canadian soldiers. That it took place as a brilliant innovation, a successful application of rolling artillery barrage and something Canadians introduced. And, perhaps most of all, that it was a hugely significant victory that paved the way for the German defeat. Each assumption deserves a closer look. Some, I don’t think we should throw out altogether; others need a more nuanced interpretation. And, indeed,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 364-5.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 365.

there is some nonsense that has become connected the story of Vimy Ridge, as a story. I don't think we remain helplessly trapped in the interplay of memory and meaning in the case of Vimy Ridge, but that the time has come, a century later, to consider the historical evidence in contrast to the first reports of this battle that circulated in Canada.

On the one hand, it is true that during the preparations for the battle the four divisions that made up the Canadian Corps were part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and were either by, or soon would be, Canadian officers, beginning with Major-General Arthur Currie who led the 1st Division and would ultimately assume command of the Canadian Corps after the battle at Vimy. But at the level of senior leadership, it is noteworthy that Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng, a British commander, replaced Lieutenant-General Edwin Alderson in May 1916, nearly a year before the Canadians took Vimy Ridge. It was then that Field Marshall Douglas Haig, who made the decision to replace Alderson, ordered the 54-year old Byng to assume command of the Canadian Corps. Haig wired Byng, offering his "heartiest congratulations on your promotion. . . and good luck"¹² Byng expressed disappointment, and was said to have remarked "Why am I sent to the Canadians? I don't even know a Canadian."¹³ Nonetheless, he was resigned to the fact, pledged to do his best, and did not know if any true sense of "congratulations" were in order. But it was more than luck that would carry him through in the weeks and months leading up to the 9th of April the following year. In the meantime, Byng led the Canadian Corps at Mount Sorrel and at the Somme. Of the 118 senior officers and staff that led the Vimy attack, 84 had been placed in charge under Byng.¹⁴ With respect to infantry battalion commanders, 40 out of 49 took up their positions while Byng led the Canadian Corps. He quickly earned the respect of his officers, often holding extensive briefings with both senior and junior officers, who got to know him well as a motivator, planner, and decision-maker. Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Ross's impressions, in retrospect, were representative. Ross had been appointed to battalion commander in September 1916: he remembered a division commander who "revolutionized the whole thing," who gave him "new ideas. Things that appealed to my common sense I always found that [he] was rational,

¹² Pat Brennan, "General Byng and Leadership in The Canadian Corps," in *Vimy: A Canadian Reassessment*, eds. Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci, and Mike Bechthold (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), p. 88.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 91.

reasonable, and [as] a regular soldier a trained soldier.” Byng “improved my morale and my battalion I’m sure. I never found [anyone] as easy going to get along with as I did him. He would come into your dugout in the front line, you would take out your maps, you would discuss things, his ideas were reasonable, he was interested, and would make suggestions and so on.”¹⁵ Byng also worked hard to ensure that British and Canadian officers worked well together and did not develop any sense of ego or national pride.¹⁶

During the first two and half years of the war, most of the senior staff officers were British and their contribution to the building of a professional corps cannot be overstated.¹⁷ Nonetheless, as Pat Brennan recounts, the “process of Canadianization of staff appointments, which Byng had strongly supported, was bearing fruit by the spring of 1917, with seven of the senior staff officers of the Corp’s twelve infantry brigades wartime-trained Canadians.”¹⁸ That said, a large part of the myth of the Canadianess of the Corps is rooted in a simplistic notion of Britain passing the baton to Canada in the final preparations for the battle that “made” Canada. “Nevertheless,” as Brennan continues in a significant observation, “British officers still held twenty-one of thirty-two top staff appointments in the artillery, infantry or at Corps headquarters, including all but four of the most senior positions.”¹⁹ As Ross, a prairie lawyer who had assumed command of the 28 Battalion, put it: “we were good, in every department. Staff work and all the rest. Everything was good. [And] our relations with the Corps staff were extremely good.”²⁰ Certainly Byng, and all concerned with morale and a sense of military identity, worked hard and successfully to keep politics, especially nationalistic politics, out of the basic functioning of the Corps.

In many ways, the Canadian Corps, at this point, was a hybrid between British roots and increasing Canadian participation. While it is true that, with respect to the men of the ranks, the Canadian Corps went into battle in April with four divisions comprised of troops from across Canada, a closer look at these numbers reveals the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 97-8.

continued presence of British-born soldiers, something that began with the war itself when some two thirds of the First Contingent were British born. With some 10,602 casualties and 3,598 killed in action at Vimy Ridge, a costly victory, it should be emphasized that most of the Canadian Corps were British-born. As Paul Dickson records in his assessment of the Corps of the eve of the great battle, “[a]t a time when seventy percent of Canadians were born in Canada, the majority of the men who fought at Vimy Ridge were drawn from the ten percent of the Canadian population who were British-born.”²¹ In broad terms, as Gary Sheffield observes, the “Canadian Corps occupied a slightly uncomfortable position both as a proto-national army and a component, albeit an unusual one, of the wider BEF. While it developed its own highly effective style of war fighting, it was never hermetically sealed from the other divisions, whether Imperial or Dominion, on the Western Front.”²² Major-General Julian Byng countered successfully his “slightly uncomfortable” position of leading an evolving Corps, aided by a sense of common purpose and the sentiments of the soldiers themselves. A comprehensive understanding the Canadianization of the Canadian Corps, often described as the first time a unified, Canadian-led and manned force went into a battle formation must recognize not only the presence and influence of Byng, but those of both officers and men of the ranks that saw themselves as much a part of an Imperial force as that of a Dominion.

The earliest reports of the victory at Vimy also contributed to the myth that the successful application of rolling, or “creeping,” artillery barrage waves aimed just ahead of well-trained Canadian soldiers was something introduced by the Canadian Corps. The true genealogy of this particular tactic, first deployed by the French at Verdun and later taken up by the British and prescribed to the Canadian Corps, is overlooked in the earliest of press accounts, and was never really corrected thereafter. On 10 April 1917, for example, the *Toronto Globe* commented on Canadian Corps trench combat tactics as follows: under the subtitle of “Comparatively Little Fighting” the *Globe* cited a *London Daily Express* correspondent’s description, one that spoke of the Canadians having taken the ridge “and are sitting on the far slope looking down on the Plain of Doual. They took it with comparatively little fighting, pushing from one line to

²¹ Paul Dickson, *The End of the Beginning: The Canadian Corps in 1917*, in *Vimy: A Canadian Reassessment*, p. 33.

²² Gary Sheffield, “Vimy Ridge and the Battle of Arras,” in *Vimy: A Canadian Reassessment*, p. 23.

the next as punctually as though meeting their enemies by appointment.”²³ A subsequent report on 11 July 1917 spoke of a “Plan of Attack” that was “Very Carefully Laid.”: “At 5:30 a.m. our guns suddenly opened an intense bombardment and the infantry assault began. The long line of battalions advanced in good order immediately behind the rolling barrage maintained by our artillery. In spite of the difficult conditions of the ground, much of which had been reduced by the unfavorable weather of the preceding days to a succession of vast puddles of *sticky mud*, our first objectives were carried in scheduled time.”²⁴

The troops had trained carefully for this method. Preparations were intense. And it was successfully executed. But it was French in origin. As Mark Osborne Humphries concludes in his assessment of preparatory communications between Currie and Byng, the “search to solve the riddle of the trenches began in late 1916 when British generals began to examine the methods used by the French at Verdun.” Indeed, he goes on to reveal, “[o]n 5 January 1917 the commander of the 1st Canadian Division, Major-General Arthur Currie, was appointed with the other British officers of the First Army to visit the French Second Army where it was hoped they would learn from the French experience at Verdun.”²⁵ They did. The Canadian Corps trained accordingly, but were not by any means deploying a unique tactic with deep Canuck roots. Yet another element of the myth of Vimy was nonetheless embedded in public reports that suggested otherwise. The true pedigree of what the *Winnipeg Free Press* and many Canadian newspapers reported on 10 April, and thereafter, as the “Brilliant Attack of Canadians” was lost in translation.²⁶

Arguably, however, the most significant aspect of the myth of Vimy was its strategic importance. Early reports lay heavy emphasis on just how crucial this victory was. The first *Globe* report, on 10 April, spoke of the “crest of the Vimy ridge” having “been carried.” It spoke of the “strongest defensive position of the enemy on the western front” having been “captured by the army of Sir Douglas Haig” with the

²³ The *Globe*, 10 April 1917, p. 2.

²⁴ The *Globe*, 11 July 1917, p. 4.

²⁵ Mark Osborne Humphries, “Old Wine in New Bottles: A Comparison of British and Canadian Preparations for the Battle of Arras,” in *Vimy: A Canadian Reassessment*, p. 67.

²⁶ *Winnipeg Free Press*, 10 April 2017, p. 1.

Canadian Corps granted “the place of honour in the great event.”²⁷ “The capture of Vimy ridge has brought the Canadians to the crest of the hill, but the critical fight will be for possession of the slopes that lead down to the plains.”²⁸ This, too, was ultimately taken by the Canadian Corps. The *Globe* noted that the London press opined that the “pivot” of the “whole retreat” of the enemy had shifted. Vimy might lead to the end of the war. A great military success of enormous significance was trumpeted in subsequent press reports. The German “loss on the Vimy Ridge has dangerously weakened the enemy hold on Lens and the great industrial districts surrounding it, and a captured officer expressed the opinion that it constituted one of the most serious defeats sustained by the enemy in the war.”²⁹ Canadian war correspondent Lyon asserted that “Canadians made Arras possible.” Their “taking of Vimy Ridge” had proven to be the “keystone” of the whole offensive.³⁰ Officially, the Canadian Corps reported on the ridge’s “Great Value” in strategic terms: “the tactical importance of Vimy Ridge, already great prior to the enemy’s withdrawal, had been considerably increased. The capture of the ridge would imperil the German hold on the French industrial districts.”³¹

Subsequent studies of the war’s course on the western front after Vimy have downgraded its relative significance considerably. In *The Greatest Victory: Canada’s 100 Days, 1918* J.L. Granatstein convincingly argues that Vimy pales in comparison to the battles of the 100 days. The rhetoric of Vimy, which began with first reports and continues to this day, has never matched the reality of the subsequent history of the war: “Vimy did not change the course of the war and did not lead in a straight line to the Allied victory in November 1918.” The battle planned by British staff officers, led by a British general and fought by a majority of British-born soldiers who had only recently immigrated to Canada, certainly established the Canadian Corps’ reputation and unleashed a wave of nationalist sentiment across the country, but it was not, as is so often implied, ‘Canada’s greatest victory.’³²

²⁷ *The Globe*, 10 April 1917, p. 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24 April 1917, p. 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14 May 1917, p. 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 11 July 1917, p. 4.

³² J.L. Granatstein, *The Greatest Victory: Canada and the 100 Days, 1918* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2014), introduction.

The case of Vimy is one of a ready-made national myth. As Ernst Renan once said famously “getting its history wrong is part of being a nation.” And Vimy has contributed enormously to the abuse of history for the sake of nationalism, at least in English Canada. What stands out, too, in the case of Vimy is something that has been reflected in the Canadian poetry it generated from the beginning to the unveiling of the Vimy Memorial and onwards to the present day. It carries an essentially unchanging message that Canada was born in the climb to take an elevation in France as part of the western front’s often stymied advances. Moreover, that it took place over the Easter observances throughout Christendom lent it religious significance as a kind of military rebirth, following so many setbacks at that point, during the annual celebration of the resurrection itself. In his study of Canadian poetry inspired by Vimy Ridge, Jonathan Vance notes the remarkable consistency of poetic messages that Vimy Ridge inspired in the decades that followed: “Over the next twenty years,” Vance writes,

Vimy Ridge became the Great War’s most popular battle with poets of every stripe, from the amateur versifier to Canada’s most well-known writers. Its popularity lay in the fact that it was more than just a stunning military success of the kind that inspired many a classic narrative battle poem. The special appeal of Vimy Ridge rested in its ability to bring together the religious and nationalist. Easter Monday, the holiest day in the Christian calendar, was chosen as the offensive’s opening day for reasons that had nothing to do with religious symbolism, but that reality was irrelevant to Canadian poets. For them, Easter Monday 1917 brought together two events of tremendous import: the celebration of the resurrection of Christ and the birth of a nation. The spiritual and the secular meshed so completely that the poet could not help but be drawn to it.³³

Vance also emphasizes that:

In surveying the poetry of Vimy Ridge, however, one is immediately struck by its consistency; no matter who the author, there is a surprising degree of concordance in theme. Nor were there any dramatic changes in tone or meaning between April 1917 and the dedication of the Vimy Ridge Memorial in 1936. The cynic might find in this sufficient reason to dismiss

³³ Jonathan Vance, “Battle Verse: Poetry and Nationalism after Vimy Ridge,” in *Vimy: A Canadian Reassessment*, pp. 265-6.

a body of poetry that is distinguished largely by its sameness. For the historian, however, the continuities point to a general agreement, both through society and over time about the significance of the Battle of Vimy Ridge for Canada. It was a story that could be told as a stirring narrative, but it was also one whose religious, political and nationalist meaning superseded the mere historical details.³⁴

Let's not let a few facts get in the way of a great story, and great national story. As Tim Cook puts it: "There is power in the Vimy legend—the ridge, the memorial, the meaning—that is not easily put into words. The memorial is for the dead, but it is remade generation after generation by the living. Canada was indeed forever changed by the Great War, but Vimy did not make the nation. It was the nation that made Vimy."³⁵ Since the battle that coincided with Easter 1917, Vimy Ridge has invited generations of Canadians, seeking a key moment in the country's origin mythology to reflect on its symbolic significance and misread its actual importance. As Renan points out, part of Canada's becoming a nation, an imagined community in the case of Vimy, is putting the story ahead of the history.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 267-8.

³⁵ Cook, *Vimy*, p. 384.