Parliament Hill as a Site of Memory

With the development of cultural studies as a discipline over the past two decades, the phenomenon of cultural memory has emerged as being of central importance. For the “imagined community” formed by any given society, its cultural memory “is always a reflection of its present interests, needs and current levels of experience” (A. Nünning, 3). And this cultural memory is often focused on one or more physical spaces bearing deep symbolic importance, what have come to be termed “sites of memory”: particular buildings or complexes of buildings, battlefields, monuments, public spaces or whatever else that these communities – towns, cities, regions, provinces or states, nations – see as in some way shaping and expressing their particular identity. As such they reflect its values, its “specific view of history, and, by implication, political and cultural values” (V. Nünning, 30).

In Canada, the pre-eminent site of memory is Parliament Hill in Ottawa. Few countries have been constructed as deliberately, and as improbably, as Canada, and few have capital cities constructed as deliberately, and as improbably, as Ottawa. For if Canada as a state can be thought of as a continuous exercise in the politics of reconciliation, its governments a series of internal peace-keeping task forces, then Ottawa as capital was the precursor and original embodiment of this model. Ever since the creation of the United Canadas in 1840, the site of its capital had been a source of endless bickering between Canada East and Canada West, and Kingston, Montreal, Toronto and Quebec City had all in turn served as capital without any agreement being reached on a permanent site. So in 1857 it was decided to end the dispute by appealing to the monarch; identical addresses were forwarded from the Legislative Assembly and the Executive Council to Queen Victoria praying “that your Majesty will be graciously pleased to exercise your Royal Prerogative, and select some place for the permanent seat of Government of Canada” (Eggleston, 101). With inside advice from the Governor General, Sir Edmund Head, she selected Ottawa, a choice that met with surprise and even incredulity. But there were good reasons for it – both positive and, in the best Canadian fashion, negative. Precisely because
Ottawa was not an important town it failed to evoke the heated passions associated with the other contenders. It was not too far east, and not too far west; though in Canada West, it bordered on Canada East, and had a mixed English- and French-speaking, Protestant and Catholic population. And it was far enough away from the St Lawrence River to be relatively safe from American attack, still an important consideration for a generation that had experienced raids from the south only twenty years earlier.

Once the Canadians had reluctantly accepted the Queen’s decision – the debate rumbled on for more than a year – they were faced with the pressing question of where to house the legislature and the civil service. The site chosen was an extensive plateau in the centre of Ottawa that took its name from the military buildings then situated there – Barracks Hill. In May 1859 the Department of Public Works announced an open architectural competition for a parliamentary building and two departmental buildings flanking it. Barely three months later, at the end of August, the names of the winners were made public.

No restrictions had been made regarding the style of the buildings, and the entries covered a wide range, among them “Classic, Norman, Elizabethan or Tudor, Lombard, Venetian, Italian and Plain Modern” (Kalman, 370). But the winning designs were in “Civil Gothic”. This was hardly an accident. In the previous thirty years the Gothic revival in England had advanced so triumphantly that Gothic had come to be regarded as “the truly British style” (Gowans, 101). Moreover, at that very moment, two extremely prominent and highly symbolic public buildings were nearing completion – the Gothic Revival Houses of Parliament at Westminster in London and the Classical, domed Capitol in Washington. “To the architects and clients of the High Victorian era, associationism was an important determinant of historical sources” (Kalman, 370), and for them Classical architecture had become tainted with the whiff of republicanism, while Gothic was clearly linked with Britain and parliamentarianism. And finally, there was what Anthony Trollope referred to as the “natural grandeur of position” of the site, situated “nobly on a magnificent river, with high, overhanging rock”\(^1\) – this romantic, “wild” location cried out for the “picturesque panorama of spires, towers, turrets, and roofs […] silhouetted against the sunset” (Gowans, 159) promised by the winning architects’ designs for the complex of new buildings.

\(^1\) Quoted in Eggleston, 128.
The buildings, then, were in a style that had for their contemporaries specific and clear associations – historical (England), political (the monarchy and Parliament) and emotional (nature and its wild grandeur). But as Kalman points out, “in the composition and details, the past provided only a series of isolated ideas that were carefully synthesized” (Kalman, 372). The sources of inspiration were in fact, in typical Victorian fashion, highly eclectic – the medieval public buildings of Belgium, the Doge’s Palace in Venice, contemporary buildings such as the University Museum in Oxford and designs for a new Foreign Office in Westminster. Non-Gothic sources were also drawn on – the circular Parliamentary Library, for example, certainly had architectural parallels in medieval chapter houses, but functionally it paid homage to the English-speaking world’s most famous library, that in the British Museum in London. And the mansard roofs of the buildings, with their iron crestings, “reflect the early French Renaissance, as interpreted by the architects of contemporary France: the formal plan also seems to acknowledge the emerging Second Empire style” (Kalman, 374). In sum, the buildings that were proposed for Parliament Hill drew on stylistic references spanning half a continent and six hundred years of architectural history.

From the beginning, Parliament Hill was regarded as an organic whole, and so the creation of the most appropriate landscape setting was of key importance. Calvert Vaux, co-designer of Central Park in New York, was consulted on the design for the forecourt, which originally had a marked slope, and the double terrace that links the three buildings to this day was his inspired solution to the problem. A splendid fence and magnificent wrought iron gate along Wellington Street were also added to demarcate the southern limit of the precinct, but otherwise the space was left open, to set off the buildings and leave a theatre for the playing out of national rituals. The symbolic importance of the site, however, was steadily enhanced with the addition of statues of the great statesmen who had shaped the country. The first came in 1885, that of Sir George-Etienne Cartier, a man whose life embodied all the contradictions of Canada: exiled for his participation in the Rebellion of 1837, he returned home to become composer of the patriotic song “O Canada, mon pays, mes amours” – model for the later national anthem – Secretary of the St Jean Baptiste Society, Liberal Reformer, Bleu, Liberal Conservative, Co-Premier of the United Canadas with Macdonald in the late 1850s and a key figure in ensuring that Ottawa became the capital, the leading figure in Québec politics, the man responsible more than anyone else for convincing French Canada of the benefits of Confederation,
and, in a final ironic turn for an ex-traitor, the first Canadian Minister of Militia and Defence. Macdonald had been deeply affected by Cartier’s premature death in 1873, and was among the first to propose that a monument be erected to him. The next monument to appear was to Macdonald himself, only four years after his death in 1891 – he and Cartier flank the Centre Block, linked symbolically in death as they had been in politics and friendship in life. In the next twenty years they were joined by other worthies – the first Liberal Prime Minister, Alexander Mackenzie, two of the Fathers of Confederation, George Brown and Thomas D’Arcy McGee, and Baldwin and Lafontaine, whose joint ministry in the 1840s had proved the shallowness of Lord Durham’s facile assumption that the English and French in Canada were doomed to perpetual enmity, and who had brought responsible government to the colony in the teeth of reactionary governors and the local Family Compact and Chateau Clique. The message was clear – English and French Canadians, Liberals and Conservatives (with a tendency for governments to erect statues of statesmen from their own party), all of them remembered for their ability to bridge difference, whether linguistic, religious, political or regional. The importance of these men was clear to their contemporaries, for whom they were household names: on the plinths of their statues these appear simply as “Brown”, “Cartier”, “McGee”. Nowadays, unfortunately, for most people they are merely yet more Dead White Males, so helpful signs have been erected explaining in detail who they were and why they were included in this symbolic pantheon of the country.

One other statue on the Hill predates World War I – Queen Victoria. Conceived as part of the celebration of her diamond jubilee in 1897, it was only unveiled in 1901, the year of her death. Some controversy existed over where the statue should be sited: the sculptor, Louis-Philippe Hébert, favoured a central position on the Hill, and in the city she had raised to the status of capital with a stroke of her pen, this would perhaps seem only appropriate. But in fact Parliament decided to situate the monument off to one side of the Hill – slightly raised above the other statues, to be sure, but in no way dominating her surroundings. Canada was, after all, a loyal dominion, but no longer a colony.

This was the state of affairs on 3 February 1916, when a devastating fire gutted the central Parliament building. The walls remained standing, and at first it was thought the structure could be rebuilt. The damage, however, was too extensive, and soon plans were going ahead for a completely new building. The style was not in question. The pendant East and West Blocks
remained untouched in their neo-Gothic splendour. In the sixty years since the construction of the original buildings, the Gothic revival had created a network of associations relating to “Christianity, education, government and imperial solidarity” (Kalman, 466). A “Canadian National Style” had developed, a “historically allusive ‘northern’ architecture of steep roofs and vertical proportions” (Kalman, 376), in which Gothic played a central role. Gothic it would have to be.

The structure as finally built is much tamer than the original building, a blander, twentieth-century Gothic lacking the variety of textures and colours and quirky decoration of its predecessor. But it makes up for this by its central feature, the soaring tower that almost overnight became a powerful national symbol. This was partly because as a structure it is elegant, distinctive and immediately recognizable, an architectural triumph by any standards. More important, however, was that it was deliberately designed as a site of memory.

The “Great War” that Canada had been engaged in when the first Parliament buildings burned down had been decisive in the shaping of the Canadian identity: the sacrifices made by Canada had been inordinate, the names of the battlefields where Canadian soldiers had died were etched in the national memory. The country had entered the war automatically, as one of the many subaltern members of the British Empire, but thanks to the steady determination of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, it had emerged as an internationally recognized state represented at the peace talks and admitted as a signatory to the Treaty of Versailles. It was decided that this traumatic and triumphant event should be commemorated at the very heart of the nation, in the central tower of the new Parliament buildings. Named the Peace Tower, in honour of those who had sacrificed their lives in the Great War, its central feature, high above the city, is the Memorial Chamber. Here the central altar displays the Books of Remembrance, in which the names of all Canadians who have died in battle are inscribed. Originally only the First World War was commemorated; now all of Canada’s sacrifices, from the Riel Rebellion to contemporary peace-keeping missions, are remembered. Physically, too, the Chamber is a reminder: the floor is composed of stones taken from the World War I battlefields where Canadians fought and died, the walls and columns are constructed of stone brought from France and Belgium. The central altar employs the same stone as that used for the tombstones in military cemeteries. Everyone who ascends the Peace Tower to the viewing platforms at the top passes through this Memorial Chamber: the message it embodies is reinscribed in even the casual tourist.
The rest of the building too carries its “Canadian” message. The architectural style and building materials, the innumerable carvings in stone and wood, the subjects of the stained glass windows, the paintings and photos along the corridors, the very colour schemes of the Senate and House of Commons chambers are such that something as simple as a standard tour of the Parliament Buildings provides a rich survey of the country’s historical past, its social and cultural roots, its political traditions, its geological and natural history. In other words, the new Centre Block was deliberately constructed as a text on what it is to be Canadian, a statement of national values rooted in historical memory.

In fact this text is still being written – work on embellishing the interior of the Centre Block continues to this day – and outside the building the same also holds true, as more and more statues have been added over the years. Primarily these have been of Prime Ministers, though a 1967 Centennial project to have all of them represented was never carried through – luckily, perhaps, as some were indeed less than memorable. Only Mackenzie King was erected that year: as sleek and enigmatic in bronze as he was in life. There is also another monarch – Elizabeth II. Why exactly this equestrian statue of the reigning monarch was erected as part of Canada’s 125th anniversary celebrations is unclear, though perhaps the reason is the horse she is seated on – Centennial, a former Royal Canadian Mounted Police Force mount that had been presented to Her Majesty by the Canadian government.

The next – and so far last – monument on the Hill represents a total break with tradition, reflecting a shift in paradigm in the society as a whole. A group sculpture entitled “Women are Persons”, it is a tribute to the five women (Nellie McClung, Irene Parlby, Emily Murphy, Louise McKinney and Henrietta Muir Edwards) who launched a court case in the 1920s by which women were ultimately recognized legally as “persons” under the British North America Act, and so eligible for appointment to the Canadian Senate. The larger-than-life statues of the “Famous Five” depict them celebrating their triumph – one holding up a newspaper with a headline announcing their legal victory, the others looking on in joyous mood, two of them seated at a table cozily drinking their tea. It is a remarkable monument, celebrating, not like all the rest on the Hill, those whose make the laws and sign them, but those who challenge the law, and force change through civil action. And the message of radical democracy the monument conveys is reinforced by its structure – not set on a plinth for the spectator to gaze up

550
at with reverence, but flush with the ground, inviting people to walk about on equal terms with the figures, even to sit down in the empty chair and contemplate the remarkable lives and achievements of these “ordinary” women: middle-aged, plump, dressed in their frumpy skirts and cloche hats, full of exuberant satisfaction at the end of their long legal campaign. Across the Hill Queen Victoria hands down a scroll, grandly presenting constitutional liberty to her subjects. A hundred years later, Nellie McClung raises high a newspaper trumpeting women’s hard-won recognition of their existence. Seldom has the formalizing of our memory in stone and in bronze taken the form of such an amusing, spunky challenge.

This remarkable new monument raises the question of what will come next. For it is clear that, if this homage to the “Famous Five” has inscribed women in our official memory, one very important group is still missing – the Aboriginal Peoples. One speculates on what form their monument will take – a monument that, judging by past developments, must inevitably appear, and – judging by current developments – sooner rather than later. Radically, perhaps, here by the very House of Commons that three times refused to allow him to take the seat to which he had been lawfully elected – Louis Riel? He would not be the first ex-traitor in the crowd. And to follow this line of speculation forward one more step, the next question would logically be “Who will embody multicultural Canada?” For the ongoing incorporation on Parliament Hill of the changing Canadian identity will surely continue.

But Parliament Hill cannot only be considered a self-enclosed space. Because of its location, high above the Ottawa River and facing out to the vast spaces to the north, because of the visibility of the Parliament Buildings from so many vantage points, because of the spectacular views from the Peace Tower – because of all these, Parliament Hill and the Parliament buildings are part of a much larger space, one that functions both centrifugally and centripetally, in which acts of memory both unfold from the Hill and fold in on it from outside. Looking out from Parliament Hill towards Nepean Point, for example, the spectator’s gaze falls on the statue of Champlain situated there, and in her mind’s eye she catches a glimpse of him coming up the river at the foot of the Hill for the first time in 1613, and recalls the Natives, the European explorers, the fur traders, the settlers that over centuries and even millennia passed by this site on what was the central line of communication for the whole vast interior of the continent. Or gazing to the north, viewers discover with surprise how the rippling lines of Douglas
Cardinal’s Museum of Civilization are designed, in their natural curves, both to assert his – and our – Native heritage, and to echo the contours of the Gatineau Hills beyond, reminding us of our relationship to the land and the most ancient of rocks, the Pre-Cambrian Shield, of which it is formed. Conversely, standing in Major’s Hill Park, you can see how the corner tower of Moshe Safdie’s National Gallery to the right was inspired by the Parliamentary Library to your left, echoing and paying homage to its neo-Gothic model in a stunning modern display of steel and glass. Or, from the west, the view reveals how the architecture of the Supreme Court and the departmental buildings flows back to the Parliament buildings, the core that set the style of official Ottawa, and beyond that of official Canada, in the first half of the twentieth century.

One of the most satisfying, telling and moving views of the Hill, however, is from directly in front. But not from the Parliamentary Precinct itself, and not because of the picture postcard view of the buildings or the ersatz Changing of the Guard performed in the forecourt every day in summer². Rather, from just outside the Precinct, on Wellington Street, which though not officially within the Parliamentary Precinct is undeniably part of Parliament Hill in the broader sense, and even partly in the technical sense (land that is federal property). What makes this view so special is the two statues there, one an echo of a distant past, the other a product of our present age, but both speaking powerfully of Canadian values. The first is a statue of Sir Galahad. It was erected over a hundred years ago by some of his friends to commemorate the heroism of a local man who had been swept

² The Changing of the Guard is a prime example of false memory. No ceremony of this kind was ever carried out here in the past; it has been created simply as a tourist attraction. And any thoughts of the heroism of Canada’s military in the past are subverted when it is realized that the “soldiers” are in fact young students for whom this is a summer job. The problematic line between genuine and false memory is highlighted by another feature of Parliament Hill, the offices of Sir John A. Macdonald, Sir George-Etienne Cartier and the Governor General. Though the actual rooms were in fact used by these individuals in the early years of the Canadian Confederation, they had undergone many changes before being “recreated” in recent years. The best historical scholarship has gone into this, of course, and in some cases the objects there are “genuine” in that they actually belonged to the individuals in question. In other words, the rooms are simultaneously simulacra and (sometimes more, sometimes less) the genuine articles. It must be admitted, however, that as vehicles for recreating a sense of the past, they are extremely effective.
away in the icy Ottawa River just below Parliament Hill one December in an attempt to save a woman from drowning. The second is a statue of Terry Fox, now probably the world’s best-known Canadian. The statue was originally erected elsewhere, hidden away in a cramped space close to the nearby Rideau Centre shopping complex. But it was subsequently moved to its current site, thus becoming virtually a part of the national pantheon. It is an uncomfortable statue – Fox in his running gear, T-shirt and shorts, with his artificial leg looking as awkward and painful as it must have been in reality. It is as straightforward and unadorned as Sir Galahad is romanticized and elaborate. But the message they both convey – a message of service and sacrifice – is identical, linking the Victorian world in which Canada, and Parliament Hill, came into existence, with the post-modern world of the global village. Standing as they do, where they do, with the Peace Tower rising serenely in the background, they are powerful symbols of Canadian continuity, and speak eloquently of the kinds of memories through which we have chosen to shape our present and our future.

Works Cited


