MEANING CONVEYED THROUGH "EMOTIONAL POWER", NOT SCALE

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In the small town of Chesley, Ontario, sits a tiny war memorial. It is the figure of an infant looking intently into a half scallop shell, perhaps searching for something or maybe just feeling the texture. On the block beneath the figure is the inscription: "To the Boys of Geneva Church School who fought in the Great War 1914 – 1918."

It is one of the smallest, most modest war memorials to be found in Canada, yet it possesses considerable emotional power. It seems so incongruous, even mystifying, unless one is familiar with Christian iconography. The scallop shell, associated with St. James the Greater and pilgrimages of the faithful to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, was often carried by pilgrims as an emblem of their piety and devotion, an association that seems entirely appropriate for a memorial to the Great War. But not everyone walks around with a dictionary of symbolism at the ready. For the rest of us, we are struck by the apparent contradiction between childhood, symbolized by the infant and the reference to "boys," and war; if one were to list the different figures that might be suitable for a war memorial, it is unlikely that an infant at play would come to mind. But herein lies the power: one cannot help but imagine the little boys who grew up in Geneva Church School and eventually marched away to war, some of them never to return.

But it is the memorial's size that is its most striking feature. No more than a foot tall at its highest point, its inscription is often obscured by tall grass, and when the snows of winter pile up in Chesley, it disappears altogether. This begs the question: when commemorating war, does size matter?

Canadians are almost congenitally programmed to value size. To mimic the expanse of the country, we have taken to dotting the landscape with giant

reproductions of everyday objects: the big nickel in Sudbury, the giant pysanka (Ukrainian Easter egg) in Vegreville, Alberta, the world's largest axe in Nackawic, New Brunswick, the enormous fiddle in Sydney, Nova Scotia.

So it is hardly surprising that as discussion turned to the erection of war memorials towards the end of the First World War, some influential people regarded size as an important consideration. They saw an implicit correlation between size and meaning, with size often standing as proxy for commitment or loss.

That was certainly the association made by Sir Sam Hughes, Canada's Minister of Militia and Defence in the early years of the First World War. He proposed a program in which the federal government would provide all communities with an identical war memorial — identical except for the size. Communities that sent the largest proportion of their young men to war would get the largest memorials, while communities with a lower participation rate would suffer the eternal indignity of a small memorial. Hughes saw this as an exercise in civic boosterism; communities that responded eagerly to the call to arms should be able to boast about it through their civic war memorials. But he would also have endorsed it as a valuable exercise in public shaming; if a town failed to meet its obligations to the country and the British Empire, every visitor should know at a glance.

Not often was there such a blatant insistence on size as a criterion, but it was rarely absent from the design and construction work on major projects. The National War Memorial in Ottawa went through a process of expansion, designer Sidney March electing in 1933 to enlarge the arch and the plinth upon which it sat, to make the memorial more imposing — and so that it was wide enough to accommodate the artillery piece that was ostensibly to pass through it. But the wider arch demanded the addition of extra figures to maintain continuity of movement, and to address demands that more units be represented. This in turn necessitated some further enlargement of the plinth, and of the steps leading to the monument. The implicit assumption through this entire process of revision, which took a number of years and probably helped to send March to an early grave, was that in the original version, the memorial simply was not big enough.

The Vimy Memorial in northern France, on the site of the Canadian Corps' famous assault in April 1917, had few critics at the time of its unveiling in 1936. Concerns had been raised about delays in construction, but the general consensus was that the monumentality was entirely appropriate. Both the local topography and the importance of the event demanded a structure of unprecedented size. Any criticism that it was too large can be explained by other factors. Garnet Hughes, Sir Sam's son, dismissed it as "another enormous thing with steps and railings" and mused that he would quite like it if he had the contract to build it. But he was likely still smarting at his failure to secure command of a division in the field, and was prone to carping about anything that was connected to the memory of the Corps.

The present-day Never Forgotten National Memorial project, which aims to erect on the coast of Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia an enormous maternal figure, reminiscent of the figure of *Canada Bereft* on Walter Allward's Vimy memorial, has drawn much

sharper criticism. At 24 metres in height, the figure of a cloaked woman (often referred to as Mother Canada), her arms outstretched towards the sea, would tower over the landscape. It has generated ire for many reasons, not the least of which is that it is widely regarded as being too big. Federal Green Party leader Elizabeth May called it a "monstrous Colossus," and the *Globe and Mail* also questioned its "monstrous size." Other critics have compared the project to Soviet monumental statuary of the post-Second World War era, which valued size over all other considerations. Many news stories include a chart, provided by the project's main backer, showing the relative size of famous memorials, including the Statue of Liberty and Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro. Perhaps the chart is meant to respond to criticism by pointing out that Mother Canada is far from the biggest monument in the world. Or maybe its aim is to attract supporters by celebrating the fact that Canada will have one of the biggest monuments in the world. Either way, the key message is that size matters.

But we err in assuming that the size of a memorial correlates to the impact of a loss or the degree of a group's determination to remember. A large memorial is no guarantee of remembrance, nor does it prove that a community's loss was particularly substantial. To make this connection is to confuse quantity with quality; it is to confuse the height of a monument with the depth of feeling that it represents.

A war memorial is, in a very real sense, a substitute grave — even if it is not the architectural form known as the cenotaph, which is derived from the Greek term meaning "empty tomb." The majority of Canada's war dead lie buried on or near the battlefield, or they have no known grave at all. Because a visit to a war grave has always been inaccessible to most Canadians, the local war memorial serves as a gravestone for each of the dead that it represents. In this light, would we judge a family's depth of feeling for a loved one by the gravestone chosen? A gravestone that looks amply proportioned is a guarantee that the individual's family loved the departed deeply and truly; one that seems undersized indicates a shallowness of emotion. "If they really loved Grandma," we might think, "they would never have bought such a small gravestone."

The war memorial committees of the two world wars realized the folly of such thinking; they rejected Sam Hughes' idea because they knew that a community would be judged not by the size of its memorial, but by the memorial's emotional power. In reading the deliberations of dozens of memorial committees, one can only be struck by how infrequently size was mentioned as a consideration. Location, design, inscription, yes — but size, almost never. A small cairn, a modest obelisk, or a tiny infant at play had just as much meaning as the grandest arch or the most towering figure. It's a lesson that future members of memorial committees might well take to heart.