

Memories of War

When it rains, the wall weeps." The granite wall Allan Harding MacKay is referring to is located in a preeminent section of Queen's Park in the heart of downtown Toronto. It is 100 feet long and on its surface are etched 43 images of war, spanning some 140 years, which range from the Fenian Raids to the war in Afghanistan. They make up the content of the Veteran's Memorial that Mackay and Vancouver landscape architect Greg Smallenberg designed to be installed on the grounds of the Ontario legislature: It is the first structure to be placed there in 66 years.

As it stands, the memorial is a model of simple dignity. Mackay chose the images from a number of sources, including artist's renderings, archival photographs from the War Museum, The National Library and Archives Canada, as well as using his own video stills. Together, they tell an essentially chronological story, the focus of which rests on the veterans and not on the various conflicts in which they fought. There is an inescapable romance to some of the images, especially those from the First World War. "I wonder if, within a certain generation, of which I'm a member, there isn't a nostalgic association with black-and-white images? Now, if you're watching TV, you're looking at Afghanistan in full saturated colour. It has a totally different look to it."

For his part, Smallenberg has designed an elegant and serene articulated wall with a bronze reveal running its entire length. It forms the ideal structure-and surface-for MacKay's pictured memorial. By going below grade, Smallenberg was able to fashion an eight-foot wall which adhered to the design stipulation of not compromising the view of the legislature. Midway behind the wall, the artistic team planted a red maple tree, which Mackay describes as "part of the symbolism of continuing bloodshed."

In 1993 MacKay was hired as an official war artist by the Department of National Defense to respond to the war in Somalia. "I think, quite honestly, the reason I was considered for this memorial was because of the Somalia connection and because the imagery was literal." But his reproduction of the images has what he calls a "degraded feeling about it," which he feels more accurately represents the way war and memory intermingle. The materials chosen by Smallenberg make that close relationship unavoidable. "With the rain, what you get are these tears. The wetter the images get, the darker they become, until they finally disappear. Then, when the granite starts to grey up, the images reappear." This pattern, a metaphor for rebirth, functions in the same way as do the red maple leaves which fall in autumn, only to re-emerge in the spring.

The collaborative team for the 1.2-million-dollar project included the novelist Jane Urquhart, whose poetic text reiterated the message of regeneration through memory to which the Veteran's Memorial gives shape. "Their faces are shadowed," her text reads, "but they are carrying illumination in their arms."



Veterans Memorial, Ontario Legislative Grounds, 2006,

Architect: Greg Smallenberg,

Artist: Allan Harding MacKay,

Poet: Jane Urquhart.

Granite, etched granite, bronze, maple tree, 30 x 2.6 metres.

Photographs: Katrina Jennifer Bedford.