

# *The Parliamentary Carvers*

*Ken Desson*



Shield bearing a Unicorn carved in stone at the entrance to the Parliament Buildings, Ottawa, (National Film Board Photothèque/Chris Lund)

**I**n late May 1982 the proud unicorn which had guarded the entrance to the Peace Tower for more than half a century was shorn of its magnificent horn by an anonymous trophy seeker. The vandalism was detected by the Public Works architect responsible for the Centre Block, Robert Calvert, who immediately contacted the Parliamentary Stone Carvers. On July 1, as usual, huge crowds flooded Parliament hill to enjoy the fine weather, the setting and the entertainment. There, at the base of the peace tower, surrounded by admirers stood a thoroughly regal unicorn, horned and rampant. No miracle had transpired. It was simply another demonstration of the skills and importance of the Parliamentary Carvers.

*Ken Desson, an Ottawa researcher and writer, has recently completed the manuscript for a book on the history of the Parliamentary Carvers.*

The Parliamentary Stone Carvers are the guardians of sculpted antiquities in Canada's public buildings — especially those on Parliament Hill — and the source of much original ornamentation for historic buildings left unembellished at their time of construction.

The current Parliamentary Sculptor, Eleanor Milne, along with her three assistants — Chris Fairbrother, Marcel Joanisse and Maurice Joanisse continue the tradition of Neo-Gothic carving on Parliament Hill begun by itinerant masons during the construction of the original Centre Block and its two sister buildings, the East and West Blocks, in the early 1860's. Some of the thematic roots of their craft, and many of its techniques are found in the Gothic monasteries and cathedrals of Europe dating from the 10th century.

Using the time-proven tools of ornamental carving — heat-tempered chisels, bell-shaped metal hand mallets and moulded rasps for smoothing or texturing — the carvers bring the limestone walls of Parliament Hill to life with the rich foliage, animal life, gargoyles, allegorical figures and historical scenes characteristic of the Gothic and Neo-Gothic styles. Occasionally, they capture the visage of a prominent person, honour a special event or interpret a contemporary theme.

## **The Tradition of Carving**

The first three generations of Parliamentary carvers have drawn heavily on British, European and French-Canadian stone masons who learned their skills through on-the-job apprenticeship. Until the 1940's, most major buildings in Canada used a great deal of stone and, in an era before the mass production of stone ornaments was possible, embellishment required many skilled hands.

The first official Parliamentary Sculptor, Cleophas Soucy, had as many as eleven carvers at a time working for him between 1936 and 1940 when the major carvings in the Senate, the Main Hall and at the base of the Peace Tower were completed. Mr. Soucy was from a family of Quebec City carvers, but most of his subordinates were recent immigrants from England or Scotland. Chief among these was Coeur de Leon MacCarthy, son of English sculptor Hamilton Plantagenat MacCarthy. Coeur de Leon, a carver of prodigious output, carved the lion and unicorn at the base of the Peace Tower.

Carving was interrupted during the Second World War. When Cleo Soucy returned to work in 1947 at the age of 67, it was already becoming difficult to find skilled carvers to replace the older men quickly reaching retirement age. Soucy pressed for the implementation of a systematic apprenticeship program for carvers but at the time of his death in June, 1950, no steps in that direction had been made.

Soucy's replacement, Karl Oosterhoff, a trained sculptor who had immigrated from Holland in 1925, worked almost entirely with French-Canadian carvers. Most came to him with only limited experience so much on-the-job training was necessary. His approach tended to result in a solid, uniform level of skills and a more homogeneous, less exciting body of work than had been produced in the past.

## The Recent Past

Eleanor Milne became the third individual to hold the title of Parliamentary Sculptor in March, 1962. Following a national competition in which she edged out 21 competitors, she soon embarked on the first major story-telling work on the Hill. In the foyer of the House of Commons, she depicted 25,000 years of Canadian history in a sixteen-panel frieze. It traced the arrival of native peoples across the Bering land bridge from Asia, depicted early European exploration and concluded with a representation of the emigration to Canada of United Empire Loyalists following the American Revolution. These panels could not be removed to the studio so the carving took place on site, usually late at night, on a narrow scaffold twenty feet above the floor.

As the history frieze slowly progressed, Miss Milne was assigned a second major project: the design of stained glass windows for the House of Commons Chamber. Since the construction of the new Centre Block following the fire of 1916, Members of Parliament had been plagued by the undiffused light streaming through the tall Gothic windows on the east and west walls. Correcting the problem was undertaken as a project in celebration of Canada's Centennial in 1967. Miss Milne's designs, featuring the flora of each Canadian province, proved an exquisitely appropriate solution.

Although a prolific carver through most of her 20-year tenure, Miss Milne is now almost fully occupied with design work for carvings soon to come and for the stained glass windows planned for the Senate Chamber. This she does in addition to the supervision of restoration and cleaning, consultative work for government departments which may be commissioning art works, and the occasional public relations assignment relating to her unusual work. There is also the odd "special assignment" like the recent request to design a ceremonial chair for the Speaker of the Council of the Northwest Territories. By bringing such versatility to her job, Miss Milne is very much in the medieval tradition when an artist in the service of the state was expected to be jack-of-all-trades.

Chris Fairbrother, Assistant Parliamentary Sculptor, has recently put the finishing touches on the striking allegorical figure — a graceful, resolute woman in a flowing robe — dominating the stone depicting Freedom of Speech and Religion. Like Miss Milne, he draws on extensive training and experience in the arts to give his sculptures an originality and polish that place them among the most distinguished ever installed in the Centre Block.

Marcel Joanisse (pronounced Joan-ih-see) and his older brother, Maurice, have no academic training in sculpture, but are nearing the end of a lengthy apprenticeship in the shop that began for Marcel in 1971 and for Maurice in 1973. They are not yet officially permitted to sculpt human figures. These require a more

complete knowledge of anatomy and carving techniques (and a change in their official civil service job description), however, their boss, Eleanor Milne, says they are very near that level of competence. For the time being they carve the decorative details at which they are fully competent, design and execute some of the non-human, non-floral elements called for in the Parliamentary sculptures, and experiment with human figures in anticipation of more ambitious assignments soon to come.

As most of the Indiana limestone blocks left for carving by the Centre Block's builders do not support the weight of the building, they can be removed from the walls and transported to the carvers' studio in the sprawling Public Works Canada warehouse on Somerset Street. It is a Spartan shop with unadorned concrete walls, bright florescent lights, towering dust collectors, a tangle of compressed air hoses, several work benches and a lunch table. Except for the massive blocks of stone and the unlikely assortment of chisels, mallets and other specialized tools, it could as well be a paint shop, garage or machine works as the home of Canada's longest-standing group of artists in the direct employ of government. The work is dusty and at times heavy, so each carver either wears workmen's clothes to the shop or dons them on site before beginning the day's work on one of the four-ton segmented blocks supported on frames made of heavy timbers.

## The Constitutional Series

The major work in progress is on a contemporary theme. Focusing on a quintessentially Canadian subject, the carvers will soon complete a co-ordinated series of twelve high relief sculptures depicting aspects of Canada's constitutional division of powers. Since embarking on the project in 1972, eight of the stones — representing Founding Peoples, The Provinces, The Vote, The Governor General, Criminal Law, Civil Law, Education, and Transportation and Communications — have been completed and installed in the walls just above and behind the Members' Galleries in the House of Commons chamber. Two others, representing the Senate and the Taxation System, will be installed following the summer, 1982, Parliamentary recess. Yet another, honouring Freedom of Speech and Religion, is nearing completion. The last, to represent the Constitution itself, is in the design stage.

The overall theme for these stones was proposed by Eleanor Milne in summer, 1972, after a request for suggestions by the then House of Commons Speaker, Lucien Lamoureux. Miss Milne's proposal for a "BNA Series" (the British North America Act was Canada's constitution at the time), was the product of a careful weighing of factors including the role of the House of Commons, the architectural and decorative features of the Chamber, themes already treated elsewhere in the building and an educated guess about what would appeal to the officials in the House of Commons and Public Works Canada to whom she must answer. Miss Milne undertook several months of library research on the Constitution and on the rules of the House of Commons before drafting the first four of twelve scale drawings for approval by her governmental patrons. On this occasion, the overall theme and the initial drawings were approved without reservation, a reflection both of Miss Milne's unquestionable talents as a designer and of her acute understanding of her patron's preferences. The approval of subsequent drawings has proceeded just as smoothly.

Each of the relatively soft limestone blocks that form the Constitutional Series measures six feet in height, four feet in width, and two feet in depth and is composed of three smaller blocks of equal size stacked one on top of the other. Occasionally the carvers model the proposed carvings in clay before putting chisel to stone. But more often the design provided by Miss Milne is simply sketched on the flat face of the stone for the carvers to render in high relief. In the drawings that guide the work, much detail is purposely left missing, an invitation to the carvers to exercise their creative talents. The carvers take obvious delight in the creative personal touches that emerge as they carve directly into stone. The work proceeds with great care and deliberation, each finished sculpture taking a year or more to emerge. As a subtractive art, stone carving leaves very little leeway for error.



One of the "BNA" series, this sculpture depicts the operation of Canada's Criminal Justice System. Carver: Chris Fairbrother; Location: Carver's studio, Plouffe Park, Somerset Street, Ottawa, (Ken Desson)

## Art and Politics

In many countries, work of this scope in the building housing the seat of government, would be a source of national pride and the subject of close critical attention.

But the installation of new works of art by the Parliamentary Carvers is typically greeted with thundering silence. There is no "Official unveiling" for these sculptures and very little media atten-

tion. It has been that way since the 1920's when the first carvers went to work on the new Centre Block under stone shop foreman, Walter Allen.

At times the carvers must speculate whether this is because Public Works is apprehensive about critical public attention, or, worse, simply does not understand the significance of the carvings. More likely, it is simply a misplaced manifestation of the traditionally-expected anonymity of public servants.

At times the carvers also grumble that Canada's "art community" is largely biased against their work, snobbishly assuming that the Parliamentary Carvers are mere craftsmen working to a rigid formula who do not create original form or help to advance understanding of the expressive limits of their medium as "real"



A detail taken from the Criminal Justice Stone. The soft, porous limestone used in the sculptures is ideal for finely-detailed work. (Ken Desson)

artists do. Whatever the case, there is little contact between the Parliamentary Carvers and artists or art critics in the private sector.

On the face of it, the themes that the Stone Carvers tackle are rather tame — largely a consequence of the need to respect the traditions of Neo-Gothic carving and to meet the long-standing rule against partisan subjects in Parliamentary decorations. The carvers are quick to point out that even these limits leave plenty of scope for the demonstration of accomplished sculptural techniques.

Each carver is fully conscious of the constraints imposed by tradition, by the Parliament Buildings' architectural style and by the tastes of Parliamentary officers responsible for approving work carried out in the House of Commons. Nevertheless the fact that the themes are so cautious and the carving styles so traditional remains a source of mild frustration. Each carver has a personal carving style developed before embarking on this work, and at times the urge to abandon Neo-Gothic for his or her personal form of sculptural expression becomes very strong. Sometimes that



**View of stone carvings, central arch, Peace Tower, Parliament Buildings, Ottawa. (National Film Board Photothèque/Chris Lund)**

urge actually finds expression — usually in details unlikely to draw much attention. As creatures of tradition first and of their own sculptural tastes and instincts second, the carvers still maintain an infectious enthusiasm for their work which is manifested in prodigious output and, in most cases, long tenures.

## Indian and Inuit Contributions

In recent years the predominantly Neo-Gothic tradition in Centre Block decorations has begun to co-exist with more typically Canadian expressions. In 1980, for the first time, contracts were signed with six Inuit and three Indian sculptors to make carvings over a number of entrance ways in the Centre Block. Carvings by Walter Harris and Earl Muldoe of the K'San Co-operative in Hazelton, British Columbia, and by Geeshee Akulukjuk of the Pangnirtung Eskimo Co-op in the Northwest Territories have been completed. The artists worked in their own homes or studios according to dimensional specifications set by a seven-member committee under the auspices of Public Works Canada of which Eleanor Milne is a key member. Other sculptures by Joe Jacobs and Abraham Anghik of Vancouver, Kumakulak Suggiak of Cape Dorset, Pauloosee Akiterk of Arctic Bay, Guy Sioui of the Odanak Indian Reserve in Quebec, and Devie Atchealak of Pangnirtung, Northwest Territories, have been commissioned but not yet completed.

Each of these native carvers has been free of direct supervision and of the necessity to emulate styles traditional to the Parliament Buildings, although the bold, caricatured forms characteristic of Indian and Eskimo carving styles are surprisingly at home in the Neo-Gothic surround. Their involvement in Centre Block embellishment is an important breakthrough not only because it marks a departure from Neo-Gothic and Romanesque styles, but also because it may mean that future sculpture in the Centre Block

will draw more widely on the talents of Canadian carvers from diverse artistic backgrounds than has been the case in the past.

## The Unicorn

The story of the unicorn was not an allegory. It actually happened. Marcel Joanisse received the call. Carrying a tool kit that included several sheets of tracing paper, he immediately made his initial inspection. The break, he discovered, had been clean and close to the base. He examined the stone for colour and texture, traced its outlines on the paper and returned to the shop.

After several days spent locating photographs of the original horn and selecting a piece of limestone that would offer a good match, Marcel roughed out a tall, narrow cone using a pneumatic power chisel.

Then, reverting to the tools used by generations of his predecessors — the bell-shaped mallet and straight-edged chisel — he fined the cone down to an exact dimensional match using his tracings and photographs as a guide. With a soft carpenter's pencil, he drew a guide line for the horn's spiral.

Under Marcel's skilled hands, the delicate spiral slowly emerged, each slight tap of the mallet shaving no more than a dusting of finely-grained stone from the white-grey spiral. After eight days of attentive work he had a replacement that could be securely attached using metal dowels, epoxy glue and a limestone paste to erase the thin line marking the join. Less than a month after its "accident" and just forty-eight hours before Canada Day, the unicorn stood restored to its former splendor.

With scores of blank stone still to be carved in the Centre Block and with ambitious projects for carved murals in the discussion stage, Canadians can look forward to many new dishes in what is already an artistic feast.