

# General Sir John Monash GCMG KCB VD

27 June 1865 - 8 October 1931

Commander 4th Australian Infantry Brigade Gallipoli 1915  
General Officer Commanding (GOC) Australian Army Corps - France 1918  
Chairman State Electricity Commission of Victoria - 1921 to 1931

*Scholar, Engineer, Soldier and Nation Builder*



## THE MAN BEHIND THE CREATION OF THE SHRINE OF REMEMBRANCE

General Sir John Monash is widely regarded as the “father” of The National War Memorial of Victoria - The Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne.

It is recognised that without his unswerving dedication, commitment and energy, there would not be a Shrine today, but rather a memorial in the form of a city square, cenotaph, victory arch, hospital, war widows’ home, or perhaps even nothing.

It was not all plain sailing, with many different and conflicting viewpoints to contend with. Controversy raged for a considerable period there being much confusion in the public mind.

Needless to say, Monash’s remarkable powers of persuasion, overcame the various obstacles he encountered, to give Victoria an outstanding Shrine of Remembrance. It is thought to be the largest World War I (The Great War) memorial in the world. Following the end of the war to end all wars, the Victorian community began calling for a State Memorial of Remembrance.

Initially a Committee known as the War Memorials Advisory Committee was set up to advise any community or organisation wanting to erect memorials in Victoria. In time the Committee also made a recommendation for an Arch of Victory across the intersection of Alexandra Avenue and St Kilda Road in Melbourne.

On the seventh anniversary of the Declaration of War, the 4th of August 1921, the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Councillor John W. Swanson (later Sir John Swanson) as Chairman, called a public meeting to launch the Arch of Victory proposal and seek public funds. An Executive National War Memorial Committee was formed. Monash was appointed to this new committee and made deputy chairman - a position he held until his death in 1931.

A sites (selection) sub-committee was set up with Monash as one of its members. At this point in time the general attitude to the Arch of Victory was waning and the selection criteria for the new memorial maintained the original three principles laid down by the War Memorials Advisory Committee. These were:-

- 1) the memorial must be placed at a prominent point in the city, where it would be under direct observation of many passers-by;
- 2) it should be surrounded by a large open space of architectural and monumental setting and scale;
- 3) it should be situated at the intersection of axial communication lines.

On the 13th March 1922, the Executive National War Memorial Committee adopted the site committee's recommendation for the new memorial. This was to be an area in Domain Park known as "The Grange". In addition the recommendations of the competitions sub-committee, of which Monash was also a member, were accepted.

Monash became Chairman of a three man panel which was appointed to select the winning memorial design. Eighty-three submissions were received. On the 13th December 1923, the winning entry, named "The Shrine of Remembrance", was announced.

This design, described as a "visible manifestation of the people's grief", was submitted by the young Melbourne architects and former diggers, Lieutenant Philip Burgoyne Hudson [served in the 5th Field Company of Engineers and the 4th Pioneers] and Private James Hastie Wardrop [served with the 6th Field Brigade and was awarded the Military Medal].

Monash was delighted with the concept. It was a monument on an awesome scale, which was inspired by the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, a royal tomb built in 350 BC, in what is now the city of Bodrum in Turkey. The optical illusions of the ancient Greek Parthenon (447-432 BC) are applied in relation to the verticals, horizontals and convexity of the Shrine columns. The imposing sculptures which decorate the Shrine were created by the English sculptor, Paul Montford RBA RSBS, who in 1928, produced for the State Electricity Commission of Victoria (the S.E.C.), the well known bronze bust of Monash.

There was a mixed press reaction and in particular the Melbourne "Age" fully supported the winning design, whilst the Melbourne "Herald" took on the role as representing the voice of the dissenting section of the community. For some time bitter conflict raged in the various newspapers. For his part, Monash was cautious about appearing to promote the Shrine too prominently, and told his brother-in-law Walter Rosenhain, that he had "refused, both on personal and ethical grounds", to lead a movement for the Shrine. Among other things, the Melbourne "Herald" was a staunch supporter of the State Electricity Commission of Victoria of which Monash was Chairman and in this role, needed all the support he could muster.

Early in 1926 a conference between representatives of the National War Memorial Committee and the State Government Cabinet decided to abandon the project. This was mainly due to the ongoing media pressure, the high costs involved and the political instability of the State Government.

In August 1926 the State President of the R.S.S.I.L.A. declared that the Shrine proposal was "as dead as Julius Caesar". [The Returned Soldiers' and Sailors' Imperial League of Australia which later became the R.S.S.A.I.L.A. when Airmen were added. In the early days the organisation colloquially became the R.S.L. Now the Returned and Services League is the official title of the R.S.L.]

Monash, who was never one to accept defeat, persevered and subsequently went on to win the battle. He was greatly encouraged by his loyal supporters and Melbourne Legacy members Alfred Kemsley (later Colonel Sir Alfred Newcombe Kemsley KBE CMG ED. Shrine Trustee 1938-87 and Chairman 1978-83), Donovan Joynt VC, (later Lieutenant Colonel W. Donovan Joynt VC) and many others. Monash also had the strong support of the Institute of Architects, which was adamant that the original winning design would stay in place.

A year later (1927), Monash was invited to address the ANZAC Eve Dinner of the R.S.S.I.L.A., where he spoke forcefully for the original Shrine proposal. His numerous supporters, including 32 Australian Victoria Cross winners, were led by Kemsley, and were scattered throughout the gathering. At the conclusion of his speech they rose in unison to applaud, and won the support of all present. This powerful and persuasive speech was the turning point for Monash and the Shrine.

The next day, Monash proudly marched at the head of the ANZAC parade. It was a great personal success for him.



The Shrine - ANZAC Day - 25 April 1950

Following the euphoria of the ANZAC Day march, Monash issued a powerful and persuasive statement to the media. This was backed by Major General Harold William Grimwade, Major General Walter Adams Coxen, Major General Harold Edward 'Pompey' Elliott and other senior officers. Legacy was already with him. Monash's leadership and authority caused the R.S.S.I.L.A. to reconsider and the Melbourne "Age" and "Argus" newspapers gave him their full support. In due course all of the media accepted and backed the project.

Right from the start, Monash's attitude was that the memorial must be of remembrance and not a celebration of triumph or might. In his view anything utilitarian, such as a city beautification scheme, (like the proposal for a square), was not a true memorial.

Monash described the Shrine design as *"a beautiful conception, dignified, noble, appealing, and eminently suited as a memorial of great service and sacrifice, without that ridiculous note of victory and conquest which characterised the memorials of the barbarian past. ... There are no structures in the world more impressive than Napoleon's tomb in Paris, and Grant's tomb on the Hudson, and the same note is struck by the Shrine. Added to all this, it is a magnificent piece of architectural design, which will constitute one of the most beautiful buildings in the world."*

After much ongoing controversy and dissension, the Executive National War Memorial Committee, on the 20th May, 1927, adopted the report for the building of the Shrine. It was now a matter of convincing the State Labor government, which took office that day, to agree. Premier Hogan and his party were inclined to favour a hospital as a war memorial, but eventually gave way in view of the commitments made by previous governments. Finally on 17 August 1927, the Government granted the "Grange" site for the erection of the Shrine.

Monash, being very much a family man, took his grand children to the Shrine site in September 1927, to witness the turning of the "first sod", which is the digging of a 'symbolic' spade full of earth, by a chosen dignitary, on a new construction site.

On Armistice Day (now Remembrance Day), the 11th of November 1927, the Governor of Victoria, Lord Somers, laid the foundation stone of the Shrine. It had taken nearly nine years for the 'Memorial' to come to fruition. Then, on the 2nd of April 1928, Lord Somers launched the fund raising appeal for the building of the Shrine. Once again the support of Legacy played a major role and donations poured in, with half of the required funds being raised in just two months.

Monash, as deputy chairman of the committee, took charge of the construction of the Shrine. He conducted negotiations with governments, supervised the successful public appeal for funds, and wrote personally to the wealthy for donations. Monash worked on calculations of material quantities required and attended every quarterly meeting of the Executive National War Memorial Committee until his death in October 1931. In reply to R.S.S.I.L.A. complaints that employment on the Shrine works was not confined to returned soldiers, he explained that due to the shortage of experienced stone masons, some Italian and Scottish carvers, were brought in to carve the bas-reliefs.

Monash opposed the suggestion for the burial of an unknown soldier within the Shrine as he considered it to be inappropriate. However he accepted this as possibly being suitable for a National Australian Shrine.

Early in 1930 Monash was perturbed to find that the inscription Hudson had recommended for the west wall of the Shrine, was "*a garbled and plagiarised version of a poem by Simonides and a speech by Pericles*". He consulted the classicist Professor T. G. Tucker and, with advice from the poet Bernard O'Dowd and Felix Meyer, rewrote the inscription himself. This reveals his concept for the Shrine and reads:-

LET ALL MEN KNOW THAT THIS IS HOLY GROUND. THIS SHRINE ESTABLISHED IN THE HEARTS OF MEN AS ON THE SOLID EARTH, COMMEMORATES A PEOPLE'S FORTITUDE AND SACRIFICE. YE THEREFORE THAT COME AFTER GIVE REMEMBRANCE.

In addition Sir John Monash wrote the words which are inscribed on the east wall of the Shrine. These are:-

THIS MONUMENT WAS ERECTED BY A GRATEFUL PEOPLE TO THE HONOURED MEMORY OF THE MEN AND WOMEN OF VICTORIA WHO SERVED THE EMPIRE IN THE GREAT WAR OF 1914-1918.

Historian, Ken Inglis (author of "Sacred Places") has written of Monash's wording, "*... the words are of neither Christian nor Jewish origin but, as elsewhere in Australian war memorials, in the tradition of stoic patriotism*". However in 1953 the forecourt was added with the paving representing an 'undenominational' cross.

General Sir John Monash died on the 8th October 1931 and many wanted him to be buried at the Shrine. However in keeping with his own words, that "*The Shrine should be no man's tomb*", his wishes were respected and upheld.

On Remembrance Day, the 11th November 1934, The National War Memorial of Victoria - The Shrine of Remembrance, was dedicated "*To the Glory of God and in grateful memory of those who served this State in the Great War*"... by His Royal Highness, Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, before a gathering of some 300,000 people. This represented about one third of Melbourne's population.

The following tribute was paid to Monash when he was singled out for mention in the 1934 publication, 'The National War Memorial of Victoria - An Interpretative Appreciation of The Shrine of Remembrance' ... "*The success of the (National War Memorial of Victoria) Committee was largely attributable to the incessant energy and enthusiasm of the late Sir John Monash, who acted as Deputy Chairman from the inception of the Committee in 1921 until his lamented death, in October, 1931. His knowledge as an Engineer was an asset of incalculable importance, and his views on the most intricate subjects were adopted.*"

Sir John Monash's words "*... seek knowledge in all directions for its own sake.*" certainly endorses the development in 2005 of the Shrine Undercroft into a Visitor Centre for exhibitions and learning.

It is interesting to note that the true focus of the Shrine is towards 'Remembrance Day' when, at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the symbolic ray of light shines on the 'Stone of Remembrance' in the the Sanctuary which is the heart of the Shrine.

There is little doubt that the magnificent Shrine of Remembrance would not have been built without the efforts and contribution of General Sir John Monash.

## **The Spirit of Australia Foundation**

Researched and written by Allan Blankfield OAM

Aerial Photo Joe Salfas 25 April 1950

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