

OUR STORIES IN STONE PART 6

Paying attention

Whimsy, surprises and moments of reflection on Wellington Street

BY ROBERT SIBLEY

I slot a toonie in the outstretched palm, glancing up and down Wellington Street to check if anyone is watching. There is no particular reason to feel self-conscious, but I do. I don't usually give money to statues.

This one, however, elicits such a response. Timothy Schmalz's statue sits crossed-legged on the corner of Kent and Wellington streets, half-hidden among the tulips and daffodils that fill the planters in front of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church.

Perhaps half-hidden is the wrong word. The statue, entitled *Whatsoever* ..., is quite visible, but it surprises me. I've walked passed the old church many times, but for the life of me I couldn't recall noticing the hooded beggar. I guess I wasn't paying attention.

Statues are like that. We create them, plop them in some spot, and then forget them. It's not that we no longer "see" them, but rather, we no longer pay attention. They become a visual version of white noise, an unconscious backdrop to our lives.

This notion has been with me all morning as I explore some of the monuments in and around Wellington Street. Think of Wellington and, no doubt, you visualize all those grand buildings — the Supreme Court, the Bank of Canada, the old Justice Building, the Confederation Building.

But there are other aspects to Wellington — sombre, inspirational and whimsical — that you may not consider until you pay attention to, and rediscover, its various monuments.

As I walked, I kept encountering objects — statues, monuments and plaques — I know I've seen before. For some reason, though, I felt like I was seeing them for the first time.

My sense of discovery began with *The Secret Bench of Knowledge* on the terrace in front of the National Library and Archives on Wellington Street, where I took a morning coffee.

Artist Lea Vivot's sculpture of a boy and a girl on a bench has been there since 1993. It is a lovely, whimsical piece. The boy, with a bitten apple in his hand,



On the corner of Kent and Wellington sits Timothy Schmalz's statue, *Whatsoever*

whispers sweet nothings in the girl's ear, a reversal, I presume, of the Biblical story of Eve tempting Adam.

I've seen the sculpture many times, of course, but sipping my coffee beside the young lovers, I noticed the dozens of handwritten messages inscribed on the bench. Some of the signatures are those of well-known people — writer W.P. Kinsella and poet George Elliott Clarke, for example — but the sentiments of children are the most appealing. "I love hockey, books, and I like to read in bed," says eight-year-old Nicholas Defazio. "I like books because you can use your imagination," says Carol Ramsey, also eight.

Ditto for statues, I said to myself as I packed up my thermos and crossed Wellington, heading for another "unseen" sculpture.

The Canadian Phalanx was created after the First World War to honour Canada's war veterans. It occupies an island in the middle of Lyon Street, just off Wellington, under the Memorial Arch linking the east and west Memorial Buildings.

I suspect it is one of Ottawa's more ignored — or, better, unattended — monuments because of its location, hemmed in as it is by traffic lanes on each side. I've driven by it regularly, but today was the first time I really looked at it.

Sculptor Ivan Mestrovic's marble relief, unveiled in 1920, depicts a disciplined line of soldiers with rifles lowered and bayonets fixed. Set inside a granite architectural frame by Aleksander Topolski, the work possesses all the drama and tension of charging soldiers determined to achieve their objective.

Back on Wellington, I strolled toward Parliament Hill, thinking to find another coffee. Instead, I find this figure in front of St. Andrew's. Wrapped in a blanket, head bowed and hidden, the begging figure is startling. I see nothing of the face until I bend to its level, and realize I'm looking into the bearded face of Christ. A nearby plaque in the tulip bed quotes a passage from the Bible, Matthew 25:40 — "Truly, whatever you did for one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do for me." Only as I'm about to leave do I notice the "wound" in the up-turned hand protruding from beneath the blanket. The purpose is obvious, and before I leave I pull a coin from my pocket.

Walking past the Bank of Canada, I pause to study the seven bronze plaques — all muscular nudes — that decorate the bank's neo-classical facade above the door. Phyllis Jacobine Jones's allegorical reliefs of men and women were commissioned in 1937, and represent Canada's primary industries of fishing, electricity, mining, agriculture, forestry, manufacturing and construction (remember this was before NAFTA).

I cross the street, strolling around the old Justice Building to admire the carving of a musket-toting voyageur in fringed buckskin set high on the wall on the corner of Kent and Wellington streets, and the feathered Indian above the door on the west-facing facade.

I follow the curving driveway past the doors of the Supreme Court to pay my respects to Louis St-Laurent, the prime minister from 1948 to 1957. His lonely statue, unveiled in 1976, occupies a corner of the big rectangle of lawn in front of the court. Sculptor Elek Imredy depicts St-Laurent seated in a suit and gown and facing the Supreme Court where he pleaded numerous cases as a lawyer before entering politics. I think he'd look less lonely among the other prime ministers on Parliament Hill, although he does have the companionship of *Veritas* and *Iustitia*, Truth and Justice, the two statues that flank the court doors.

My last monument of the morning is on the terrace behind the National Li-



PHOTOS BY CHRIS MIKULA, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

The Secret Bench of Knowledge is inscribed with hand-written messages. Some of the signatures are well known — W.P. Kinsella, George Elliott Clarke, for starters. In other places, children have signed the sculpture.

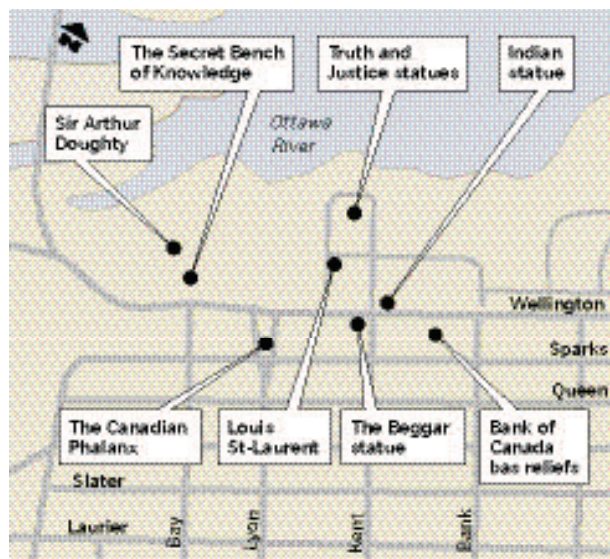
brary and Archives — it's a splendid statue of Sir Arthur George Doughty, the Dominion archivist from 1904 to 1935.

The statue was proposed by former prime minister Mackenzie King in 1937, and begun by Robert Tait McKenzie. It was finished by another sculptor, Emanuel Hahn.

It is a handsome work, showing Doughty seated in a scholarly gown, fountain pen in his right hand poised over a manuscript on his lap. But it's Doughty's words on the pedestal that give this monument its poignancy.

"Of all national assets, archives are the most precious: they are the gift of one generation to another and the extent of our care of them marks the extent of our civilization." I can't think of a better argument for attending to monuments.

I really need another coffee. I think of returning to *The Secret Bench of Knowledge*, but on impulse I walk back to St. Andrew's.



I'm curious.

The coin is gone. Someone was paying attention. I hope they paused for a moment's reflection before taking the money.

I drop another toonie into the wounded palm. I'll have to forgo the coffee, I guess.

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