

POET'S HILL IDEA DESERVES ATTENTION



KATE HEARTFIELD

Some ideas just feel right. I stood yesterday on a green hill in Beechwood Cemetery, and I could feel why the cemetery and its friends have the spot in mind for a monument to Ottawa's literary heritage.

It's not a big hill, but it has an epic view of the Peace Tower to the west. Trees and flowers surround it. It's the sort of place that makes a person feel grounded and pensive — just the sort of spot that's good for writing poems.

It's a spot that ought to be on

the itineraries of more visitors. Literary-heritage buffs and greenspace advocates have been working on a plan for a Poet's Pathway around the city. Beechwood seems a natural starting point, for geographic and sentimental reasons. Several of Canada's best-known poets are buried at Beechwood.

The hill at Beechwood is one component of the pathway scheme. Much of the plan for the hill is still indefinite. But soon, probably within the next few years, the hill will be Poet's Hill, a place dedicated to literary commemoration and reflection.

The cemetery foundation is working with the Ottawa Literary Heritage Society and the Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital. The work on Poet's Hill could begin this fall.

The pace and scope of construction will probably depend

on the pace of fundraising. Poet's Hill could help Beechwood become, in the words of Vera Yuzyk, the Beechwood Cemetery Foundation's director of development, "Canada's national cemetery."

Ms. Yuzyk took me around the cemetery yesterday, with the help of Beechwood's assistant general manager (and story-teller), Roger Boulton.

Despite the neatness of the flower beds, Beechwood feels close to nature. It's bordered by forest and a surprising little marsh full of ducks. The rocky hills and outcroppings help rescue Beechwood from the cloying artificiality that make so many modern cemeteries look like ghastly golf courses.

"We're not exactly a pop-up sprinkler type of cemetery," said Mr. Boulton cheerily as our golf cart bounced over the path. Beechwood Cemetery dates

tions dedicated to cultural and religious communities.

Ms. Yuzyk's phrase — Canada's national cemetery — began to seem apt by the end of my tour. Beechwood's 65 hectares is big enough for

Canada as well as Ottawa, for the future as well as the past.

"That national significance has been developing, over, let's say, the last five years," said Ms. Yuzyk.

In those five years, Beechwood has become home to the National Military Cemetery of the Canadian Forces and the RCMP Memorial Cemetery. It's been a National Historic Site since 2001. In 2002, the cemetery erected a memorial to the Canadian victims of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Ms. Yuzyk wants Beechwood to be a "destination," not just a burial ground. Beechwood is as deserving of being called a destination as any place in Ottawa. It's interesting and beautiful.

(Mr. Boulton said it's in demand as a location for wedding pho-

tos.) With care, the cemetery can welcome the attention of tourists and other visitors without losing its dignity.

Some work is required before Beechwood can be a true tourist attraction. Pedestrian access is one problem: There is no sidewalk up the cemetery entrance, and no crosswalk across Beechwood Avenue, where cars come whirring along the winding road. To cross from the cemetery to the westbound bus stop requires steeply nerves and a lot of faith.

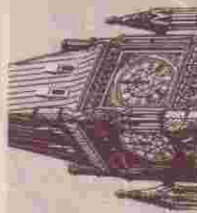
Mr. Boulton says they're working on that. The work on Poet's Hill will probably include a path up the hill from that entrance, so that project creates an opportunity to consider other improvements.

Next time I stand on that hill, I expect, it will have begun a metamorphosis, just as Beechwood Cemetery has.

KATE HEARTFIELD is a member of the Citizen's editorial board.

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