

Armistice18: Cobourg's commemoration of the First World War

Town plays host to Canada's largest centennial commemoration, from Sept. 21 to Nov. 11

By **Dominik Wisniewski** Northumberland News

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COBOURG — According to all accounts, Cobourg's seven-week [Armistice18](#) commemorative First World War festival is the largest of its kind in Canada.

"No other town is doing as much for the centennial of the Armistice as Cobourg, and it's kind of appropriate," said historian Hugh Brewster, pointing out the town raised more money for the Red Cross than any other town during the war. "Something like 10 per cent of the town was serving in uniform, so it was a very patriotic town."

From Sept. 21 to Nov. 11, the Armistice18 project will honour local war heroes who served in Canada's military and will provide residents and visitors of all ages a variety of showcases, including music, art installations, history exhibits, speaker series and theatre productions.

It all started when Brewster pitched a play about the trial of Sir Arthur Currie, the general who had led the Canadian Corps to victory in 1918, which was held in Cobourg's historical Old Bailey courtroom at Victoria Hall.

Ten years after the end of the war, the courtroom was the scene of a sensational trial that has been called "the last battle of the Great War."

The case was a libel suit brought by Sir Arthur Currie after a front-page article in a Port Hope newspaper claimed that he had needlessly wasted Canadian lives in the capture of Mons on the last day of the war.

The trial placed Canada's entire role in the Great War under a spotlight and kept the country riveted for weeks.

"I am not from Cobourg but have written a number of books about World War I, mainly for young people," Brewster said. "It has always been an interest of mine, and in doing my research I kept reading about the Arthur Currie trial."

Brewster said Currie asked the paper for a retraction, but it refused, so he sued, and the trial took place over three weeks in May 1928.

"They ended up dragging out the whole war and why so many people had died," Brewster said. "It was a very sensational trial."

After securing transcripts of the trial from the national archives, Brewster pictured a play and started to write.

The result was *Last Day, Last Hour: Canada's Great War On Trial*, which opens Oct. 18 and runs until Nov. 11 on most Thursdays to Sundays, in the Old Bailey Courtroom, Victoria Hall, 55 King St. W., in Cobourg.

The play is directed by Michael Khashmanian of the [Beech Street Theatre Company](#) and produced by local theatre company [Northumberland Players](#).

"I tell the story of Currie, and a lot of the scenes are trial scenes, using the dialogue that was actually used in the original trial," he said. "It's a very interesting story, very suspenseful, and to do it in the actual courtroom where it actually took place is going to be pretty amazing."

Cobourg Coun. Debra McCarthy was very enthusiastic about the play, he said, and connected him with Dean Hustwick, the director of the community services division for the Town of Cobourg.

“Dean was great, really enthusiastic and asked what else we could do since this would bring people to town,” Brewster said.

A committee was formed, and more members of council joined the effort, he said, pointing out that Jack Boyagian, the president and artistic director of Northumberland Players, joined them soon afterward.

Hustwick told Northumberland News that when he first heard about the Currie trial and its connection to Victoria Hall, he knew the play had to be held in the courtroom.

“We pulled a few more people in, and it just started to grow,” he said, pointing out that it quickly grew into a mini theatre festival. “We started looking at other theatrical productions, and Northumberland Players really stepped up. Putting on three productions at the same time is pretty miraculous.”

Hustwick said that Boyagian has been “wonderful” to work with and the event would not be possible without the support of Cobourg council and its funding.

“We did apply for both federal and provincial grants. We were turned down for the provincial grant, but it is looking very positive on the federal side with Veterans Affairs,” he said. “We are just waiting for their final decision, which would go a long way to taking some pressure off.”

According to Hustwick, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, the lieutenant-governor of Ontario, will attend several events out of personal interest.

“She is not able to attend the opening, but she wanted to come to see *Last Day, Last Hour* and one of the activities,” he said.

Armistice: Cobourg’s Great War Remembered in Words, Images and Song, which is directed by Brewster, will be held at Trinity United Church, 284 Division St., in Cobourg, on Sept. 29 with a pre-opening gala at 8 p.m.

The Armistice18 opening weekend show depicts 1914-1918 and the remarkable part played by the men and women of Cobourg, told by Brewster and Bridgette Robinson, who will narrate the spellbinding history with a multimedia screen show and beautiful choral music by the Grammy Award-winning The Elora Singers.

Brewster and Hustwick also attended the lieutenant-governor’s suite recently, where *The Great War in Colour* book launch was held.

An art exhibit depicting those photos has been sponsored by the [Vimy Foundation](#) and comes to the Concert Hall at Victoria Hall, 55 King St. W., in Cobourg from Sept. 30 to Nov. 11.

“They had the whole exhibit in her suite, took it down and shipped it to Cobourg,” Hustwick said. “Those are many panels of photos that they had colourized.”

Earlier this week, the Town of Cobourg launched a video to promote the seven-week commemoration: www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=39&v=wMGHHP25fDs.