

The Rooms Provincial Museum Division. *The Royal Newfoundland Regiment Gallery: Honoring All Newfoundlanders and Labradorians Who Served Overseas and on the Home Front During the First World War (1914-1918)*. (St. John's, NL: 2016, The Rooms. www.therooms.ca.)

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[See table of contents](#)

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COMPTE-RENDUS/REVIEWS

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The Rooms' presentation of the story of Newfoundland and Labrador's role in World War I begins before one enters the building in St. John's. Walking from the parking lot, one passes the new outdoor amphitheater dedicated to those that served in the war and on the home front. Above the entrance to the museum, visitors see a statue of a caribou, the symbol of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, framed by the shape of a house. This caribou sculpture is based on those placed at battlefield sites in Europe where the Royal Newfoundland Regiment fought and in Bowering Park (St. John's) as a local monument to those who died. Once inside the museum, visitors walk up the grand staircase to the level where the exhibit proper is located. Looking up, they see an artist's rendition of 2000 metallic forget-me-nots suspended from the ceiling and forming a path that leads to the doors marking the entrance of the exhibit. Facing this entrance are the visages of twenty-two men who fought with the regiment. These elements encountered prior to entering the exhibit leave no doubt of the importance of World War I in the eyes of the community and the museum.

The World War I exhibit, formally titled *The Royal Newfoundland Regiment Gallery: Honoring All Newfoundlanders and Labradorians Who Served Overseas and on the Home Front During the First World War (1914-1918)*, officially opened on July 1, 2016, the one hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel. If Vimy Ridge is said to have made Canada, the same is said about Beaumont-Hamel and Newfoundland, and its place in the story of Newfoundland and Labrador and World War I is made clear throughout the exhibition. The exhibit is divided into seven, more or less equal-sized sections, with a small room for quiet reflection off to the side, but still actively within the exhibit space. Walking through the doors of the exhibit is a visceral experience. Leaving the hard stone and glass environment of the open areas of the museum, visitors enter the

muted world of the gallery; footsteps are softened by carpet and voices become softer. Everything is grey – the walls, floor and ten large vertical panels showing the faces of those impacted by the war. The only colour comes from a khaki uniform in the distance. Even coming in from a foggy St. John's afternoon, the greys of the exhibit feel almost oppressive. The voices of descendants of those who fought during the war are heard on a loop telling the stories of their family members' wartime experiences. This section, entitled "Faces of Valour," sets the tone of the rest of the exhibit, focusing the visitor's attention on the stories and lives of individuals who experienced the war and the long-lasting impact it has had.

Moving on to the core sections of the exhibit, the story proceeds chronologically and with an emphasis on multi-sensory elements. Almost every section includes an all-ages interactive element, as well as an almost life-size video projection of a costumed actor telling the story of that part of the war. The first section, "Home Front," primarily focuses on the early days of the war and includes an interactive element where visitors can see whether they would have been permitted to fight by measuring weight, height, eyesight and chest width. It also introduces the role of women on the home front and includes one hundred socks knitted for the exhibit by members of the community using the original Women's Patriotic Association's pattern. Moving forward in time, the section "Overseas" discusses the mobilization of the Newfoundland Regiment and includes a station where visitors can search for individual soldiers by name or home town and learn their story. This section ends with the Battle of Gallipoli before moving on to the most dramatic section where the Battle of Beaumont-Hamel is described in minute detail.

The design for the Beaumont-Hamel section is effectively theatrical. Visitors are forced into a pathway that mimics a trench. The sounds of machine guns and bombs are heard at all points of the section and the story of the battle is told primarily through maps and large graphics. Exiting the trench-like pathway, visitors find themselves in an open area that contains a life-like sculpture of the "danger tree." The danger tree is an iconic point on the Beaumont-Hamel battlefield beyond which, the story goes, no member of the Newfoundland Regiment survived. The impact of the design elements in this section serves to place the visitor in the shoes of a member of the Newfoundland Regiment during the battle. It is three-dimensional storytelling at its best. The last sections of the exhibit are less dramatic than the first, providing visitors a chance to learn about the wide range of roles played by Newfoundlanders and Labradorians during the war and

to reflect on the impact of the war on Newfoundland as a dominion and later a province. Providing context for those reflections is a sampling of the thousands of recorded interviews conducted with descendants of those who lived during the war years, as well as a room for quiet contemplation on the losses of the war, with quotations from survivors and descendants printed on the walls. Visitors exiting the exhibit are given the opportunity to write their own reflections on a forget-me-not shaped piece of paper and attach it to the wall, adding their thoughts and memories to those presented in the exhibit.

What makes this exhibit stand out from other military exhibits is its use of individual stories to narrate the history of Newfoundland and Labrador during World War I and its aftermath. Curator Maureen Power's folklore background shines through in the use of first person narrative, through both the voices of those who experienced the war and those with whom they shared their stories. The interaction between these two groups of people is presented seamlessly and conveys to those unfamiliar with the relationship between Newfoundlanders and Labradorians and World War I just how present the war is in the culture of the community today. In a conversation with Power, she expressed the hope that the exhibit would facilitate further collecting of stories and materials related to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians' experiences of the war and its legacy. A sign by the doors to the exhibit – the last panel visitors see as they exit the space – thanks those who have shared their stories and invites the sharing of more, noting the exhibit was designed to evolve as collecting continues. To a trained eye, it is also clear that the flexibility of the design will make rotating individual stories and objects an easy one.

The exhibit, however, is not without its flaws, primarily in its discussion, or lack thereof, regarding the causes of the war, opposition to the war and the conscription of soldiers. The causes of the war are dismissed in a short label in the "Home Front" section of the exhibit, which states that British involvement was a result of Germany's invasion of Belgium and Newfoundland's involvement was due to its being a dominion of the British Empire. The text ends with the statement that, in Newfoundland "the news was greeted with anticipation." Opposition to the war is only tentatively mentioned in two places, both in the first two sections of the exhibit. The first is a quotation from a mother begging the Newfoundland Regiment not to take her son if he came to sign up to be a soldier and the second is part of a set of short descriptions of key Newfoundland politicians during the war years where William F. Coaker's early opposition to conscription is

referenced. The question of the value of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians' fighting in the war is also vaguely alluded to in a brief panel at the end of the exhibit, which explains what happened to Newfoundland between the end of the war and confederation with Canada and poses the question of how life would have been different had the young men who were killed during the war become the leaders of Newfoundland. However, none of these references even begins to convey how contentious and hotly debated both the purpose of the war and the place of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians in fighting that war were at the time. In excluding these stories, the exhibit actively perpetuates the grand narrative of Newfoundland and World War I where the willingness to serve King and Country was taken as a given and the validity of the war never questioned. Hopefully as the collecting of stories continues, the exhibit will evolve to include more content that touches on these, still controversial, aspects of the war.

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