

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Sir Arthur Currie

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Sir Arthur Currie biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Despite the many controversies surrounding his career, Currie was one of the most successful Canadian military leaders during the First World War.

### Aims

The biography of Sir Arthur Currie is a good way to introduce the study of the First World War. Students will compare Currie to other military leaders and study several war poems.

### Background

Sir Arthur Currie, or 'Guts and Gaiters' as he was later nicknamed, was born in Strathroy, Ontario in 1875. Although figures such as General Douglas Haig and Sam Hughes are famous leaders known for their blunders and fanaticism, Currie will be remembered as one of the most ingenious and intelligent leaders of the First World War. While he did not 'look the part' of a soldier, standing 6 foot, 4 inches and weighing over 200 pounds, Currie quickly adapted to the role of a leader and led his

men to countless victories. Although controversy threatened to strip Currie of his military reputation, he managed to win his battles both on the field and in the courtroom.

At the turn of the century, Currie left his home to 'go west' to Victoria, B.C., where he joined the Dandy 5th Regiment in Victoria. After marrying Lucy Sophia Chaworth Masters, Currie was thrown into action during a bitter strike by the United Coal Miners in Nanaimo, where he captured the attention of Garnet Hughes, son of Sam Hughes.

After joining the 50th Gordon Highlanders, Currie was surrounded by controversy, accused of stealing \$10,000 of regimental funds. Currie managed to escape blame when Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, marking the beginning of the First World War. Militia minister Sam Hughes remembered Currie from Nanaimo, and decided to send him to Britain as commander of the Canadian brigade.

Currie quickly became an integral part of the battle in Europe. Like many others, he was forced to endure mustard gas in the Battle of Ypres and helped to turn back the Germans. It was the Battle of Vimy Ridge that has been called Currie's greatest achievement though. Currie's 'creeping barrage' approach succeeded in two hours where others had failed. Through this victory, Currie not only reclaimed important land, but also raised the morale of his soldiers and united them in a common goal. Currie was equally successful during the battle of Passchendaele and the battle at Canal du Nord. Currie's final battle was the attack on Mons, Belgium. Although Currie and his men were successful, he was once again surrounded by controversy when *The Port Hope Chronicle* insinuated Currie had sacrificed men in exchange for glory. The libel trial of 1928 became the focus of many Canadians, and although Currie won his battle, the newspaper was only fined \$500 instead of the \$50,000

Currie had hoped.

After the war, Currie lobbied Mackenzie King's government for veteran pensions and was successful in bringing Canadian soldiers compensation. Currie died at 57, leaving his wife destitute. She was given \$50,000 by the Canadian government – the amount Currie had hoped to secure in his lawsuit. Although Currie is often overlooked when studying Canadian history and World War One, he should be remembered for his intelligence, his ingenuity, and for his unwavering effort both on the battlefield and at home.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

### **Procedures:**

1. Role-playing: Stepping inside the mind of 'Guts and Gaiters'
  - Provide students with a map of Vimy Ridge. Briefly review with students the components of a map (legend, key, and scale).
  - Explain to them that they will assume the role of Arthur Currie in the First World War before the battle of Vimy Ridge. Explain how the Germans had held the ridge for 3 years, and that it is up to them to find a way to break through the German stronghold.
  - Remind them of the scene in the video assessing the underground tunnels at Vimy Ridge, and ask them how this could factor into their plans. Discuss possible strategies with students as a class; brainstorm possible ways of advancement. Instruct students to use

their map and to make a plan of attack, including a timeline for their attack, a list of weapons/equipment required, an estimated number of men needed for the attack, and a clear outline of the steps involved in the attack.

- Give students one hour to complete this task. After completion, have students present their battle plans to the class, and discuss the advantages/disadvantages of each. This exercise will help students understand the pressures/difficulties Currie's career involved

## 2. Group project: Visual Poem Analysis

- Ask students if they remember the name of the poet featured in the video (Wilfred Owen). Discuss why it is important to study poetry written during the war.
- Provide students with a copy of "In Flanders Fields," by John McCrae. Ask students their reaction to the poem: how does it make them feel, what is their favourite line, what images do they think of when they read the poem? List some of these images on the board.
- After discussing the "In Flanders Fields," hand out two or three of [Wilfred Owen](#)'s poems. Read one of the poems together as a class, and discuss the same questions: how does the poem make them feel, what is their favourite line, etc.
- After reading one poem as a class, have students work in groups to read at least 2 other poems by Wilfred Owen. Ask students to write down a list of images they think of when reading the poem, and any symbols that are mentioned in the poem. Provide all groups with a piece of chart paper. Have the students put the title of the poem they read at the top of the chart paper, and have them draw the symbols they thought of when they read the poem; this will serve as a visual representation of their feelings towards war and will help them

empathize with the difficulties soldiers experienced. When finished, students will have various images of war on their respective posters. Have the students present the poems they studied to the class, and explain the symbols on their posters.

### 3. Working in partners: Comparing Currie to other military leaders

- Discuss with students what makes a good leader: what do they look for in a student council leader, who would they vote for if they could, who are some examples of good leaders in history/present day. Write these characteristics on the board.
- After viewing the video, ask students if they think Currie was a good leader, and ask them to defend their position. Discuss whether it is more important to be respected by your men or to be successful on the field.
- After deciding if Currie was or was not a 'good leader,' provide students with information on Douglas Haig and Sam Hughes. Have students work in pairs to read about Douglas Haig and Sam Hughes. Ask students to choose five characteristics that make a 'good leader.' In their notebooks, have students use these characteristics (i.e. charisma, intelligence, honesty etc.) to rank Currie, Hughes, and Haig, giving each a mark out of 10 for each category. Explain they will have to defend their rankings to the class.
- After they have completed their ranking, have them make a leadership graph on chart paper, using the data they found in their ranking system. Review how to make a graph with the students. This will help students have a visual understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Canadian military leaders during the First World War.
- Give students an hour to work on these graphs. When students

have finished their graphs, have each pair/group present to the class, defending their ranking system, and explaining the criteria they have used.

5. 'Guts' or Glory?: Recreating the Famous *Port Hope* Newspaper Story:

- After viewing the film, review with students the controversy surrounding Currie and the Battle of Mons. Show students a copy of their local newspaper and ask them to identify the defining features of the front page (date, headline, ads, pictures, captions, Newspaper title, etc.). Have students research the Battle of Mons. After students have researched the Battle of Mons, discuss as a class whether they thought the *Port Hope* newspaper was accurate or inaccurate: do they believe Currie's presence in Mons was necessary; was he able to justify the final battle? Students will decide the above question for themselves, and they will create their own newspaper page outlining Currie's character, and his role in the war (specifically the end of the war). Students should include fictional headlines, court details, imagined commentary from Currie, and any other details they think would be found in the newspaper.

## Resources

[Arthur Currie Worksheet](#)

Dancocks, Daniel G. *Sir Arthur Currie: A Biography*. Toronto: Metheun, 1985.

Hyatt, A.M.J. *General Sir Arthur Currie: A Military Biography*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987.

Sharpe, Robert J. *The Last Day, the Last Hour: The Currie Libel Trial*. Toronto: The Osgoode Society, 1988.

[The Battle of Mons](#)

[Battle of Mons - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[First Earl Douglas Haig](#)

[Vimy Ridge and the First War Battlefields of Flanders](#)

[Vimy Ridge: Bloody Easter - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Vimy Ridge - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[War Poems & Manuscripts of Wilfred Owen](#)

[Sir Sam Hughes - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)