

COBOURG'S SPLENDID LADY

Tully's masterpiece adorns an almost capital.

For such a modest community (pop. 12,000) Cobourg, Ont. has spawned her fair share of celebrities. Sir John A. Macdonald articulated here as a young law student, and fellow Father of Confederation James Cockburn was a Cobourg lawyer. Confederation poet Archibald Lampman attended the local collegiate and painter Paul Kane married and painted in the town. Young Beatrice Lillie took her first bows on Cobourg stages and Academy Award winner Marie Dressler also called Cobourg home. Katherine Cornell spent her summers here. All of these luminaries are no doubt part of Cobourg's glory. But these days, perhaps the town's greatest glory is her most splendid building, Victoria Hall.

Snuggled on the north shore of Lake Ontario, 112 kilometres east of Toronto, Cobourg also spawned local leaders who did not lack vision: from early on they dared to hope that the town would be named the capital of the province or even of the Dominion. In the mid-19th century, Cobourg's population of 5,000 put her close to Toronto in size. She boasted wool mills and a distillery. She was a centre for farming and lumber. Her harbour provided accommodation for ocean-going vessels, the iron-ore mines in nearby Marmora and Madoc promised future prosperity and, all in all, she was, as Charles Dickens recorded during a stopover in 1842, "a cheerful, thriving little town."

In the 1850s, the town fathers elected to reach for the future by undertaking an ambitious enterprise: they would build a landmark and name it after their Queen. It would cost a hefty sum (\$110,000) but it would be worth it, for it would have the town in readiness for that happy day when she was asked to become a seat of government.

Kivas Tully won the competition to design the hall. A Toronto architect most noted for his design of the gracious Trinity College building on Hoskin Ave. in

Toronto, Tully poured into Victoria Hall all of his considerable talents for an architectural style that leaned to busy elaboration. He chose the Palladian mode, one that favoured Greco-Roman temple fronts and roofed porches, and he came up with a 15-metre-high building covered on three sides by highly detailed stonework. Tully gave the entrance four Corinthian columns, with a solemn bearded head of stone gazing down from the arch above. Then, for visual splendor, he added parapets over the entrance, 34 pilasters, 96 generous windows,

for every social occasion: musicals, staged tableaux, gymnastic displays, theatricals, and horticultural exhibitions. And lit by gas-jet lamps, it was a room that just naturally danced with a gay and lively magic.

As fate would have it, the seats of government went elsewhere and Cobourg's Victoria Hall was all dressed up with nowhere to go. "That is indeed a splendid building," said one American observer, "but where is the town for which she was built?" In time, the building deteriorated.

It was at this crucial juncture that Cobourg's citizens dug into themselves. When the crunch came it was clear that enough local people cared about the hall and its traditions. On Feb. 14, 1972, they incorporated as the Society for the Preservation of Victoria Hall, and they set out to gather together the money and talent necessary, not merely to reclaim the building's original grandeur, but to make it a hub of the community. The society's goal, it stated from the start, was "to restore the visual dignity of the 1860s while incorporating the efficiency of the 1970s." Nothing less.

Cobourgites were not the only ones to appreciate the worth of their city's outstanding landmark. An information campaign mounted by the local preservation society resulted in widespread sympathetic coverage of the restoration effort. A fund-raising campaign attracted personal and corporate donations from every part of Canada. Funds from the Ontario government, Parks Canada and Heritage Canada ensured the completion of the project.

Today, thanks to such Cobourg preservationists as Cedric Haynes and to sensitive restoration and renovation work by internationally renowned architect Peter John Stokes, Victoria Hall has been returned to her former glory while being made over for contemporary uses. She is the one celebrity the people of Cobourg seem certain to have with them for a long time to come.

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Ontario Archives

Kivas Tully: designing a town hall befitting an aspiring capital.

and the crown-topped cupola on the roof holding four stately clocks.

Inside, Tully provided a courtroom, quarters for town officials and the sheriff, various other offices, rooms for the use of the Masons (as a small nod to the industrious Masonic Order that dominated politics in the area), and—the crowning touch—a concert hall. This was a spectacular room, 25 metres long, 14 metres wide, and a towering 10 metres high. Its ceiling was painted in a great lozenge design, with laurel wreaths and arabesques and floral motifs scattered through the decor in orderly abundance. It was a room designed