

New Approaches to the Halifax Explosion

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New Approaches to the Halifax Explosion

IN APRIL 2018, ACTOR ROB LOWE appeared on the American talk show *Jimmy Kimmel Live* to promote his most recent movie. In the segment he adlibbed about the Halifax Explosion and explained that he had convinced the movie's producers to change his character's nickname from "The Explosion" to "The Halifax Explosion." Lowe went on to (mis)educate the host of the show, Jimmy Kimmel, about the details of the Halifax Explosion, and between the two men it was implied that the explosion was a forgotten historical event. Only four months earlier, on 6 December 2017, following months of preparation and public events leading up to the anniversary, the centenary of the Halifax Explosion was commemorated. The response from Canadians to the segment on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* was swift and largely condemnatory of both Lowe's inaccurate recounting of the details of the disaster and the conclusion reached by the men that it was acceptable to laugh about the disaster now because it was 100 years ago and the victims have been "forgotten."¹ In the days that followed the story was picked up by provincial and national news outlets, first as a quirky interest piece but soon the focus shifted to popular outrage that the two men had joked about a tragedy that, despite being a century in the past, is still seen by many as integral to the identity of Haligonians. The short-lived scandal seemed to culminate in a letter being sent from Nova Scotian provincial labour minister Labi Kousoulis requesting an official apology from the comedian.²

Aside from the attention garnered by the irreverent treatment of the disaster detailed above, the assortment of new scholarship on the disaster and the contemporary responses to it published in 2017 (both locally and internationally) make it clear that the explosion, its victims, and its lasting effects are far from forgotten. The six texts reviewed here highlight the diversity of approaches to, and interpretations of, the records of this historic disaster: John Bacon's *The Great Halifax Explosion: A World War I Story of Treachery, Tragedy and Extraordinary Heroism*; Keith Cuthbertson's *The Halifax Explosion: Canada's Worst Disaster*; David Sutherland's "*We Harbor No Evil Design*": *Rehabilitation Efforts After the Halifax Explosion of 1917*; Michael Dupuis's *Bearing Witness: Journalists, Record Keepers and the 1917 Halifax Explosion*; Dan Soucoup's *Explosion in Halifax Harbour, 1917*; and Susan Dodd's *The Halifax Explosion: The Apocalypse of Samuel H. Prince*.³ These texts are academic or popular works that have been authored by three historians, two journalists, and a political theorist. Uncommon though it may be

1 Jimmy Kimmel Live, "Rob Lowe Is a Trivia Wiz," 17 April 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7jGZpQC0wQ>.

2 Sima Shakeri, "MLA Tells Jimmy Kimmel To Apologize For Halifax Explosion Segment," *HuffPost Canada*, 21 April 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2018/04/20/labour-minister-labi-kousoulis-tells-jimmy-kimmel-to-apologize-for-halifax-explosion-segment_a_23416683/.

3 John U. Bacon, *The Great Halifax Explosion: A World War I Story of Treachery, Tragedy, and Extraordinary Heroism* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017); Ken Cuthbertson, *The Halifax Explosion: Canada's Worst Disaster* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2017); David Sutherland, "*We Harbor No Evil Design*": *Rehabilitation Efforts After the Halifax Explosion of 1917* (Toronto:

to review popular works alongside academic, the assortment represented here is reflective of the wide interest in the disaster, its causes, and aftereffects.

The two monographs by journalists, Bacon's *The Great Halifax Explosion* and Cuthbertson's *The Halifax Explosion*, have both been published by the trade press Harper Collins and, as such, seek to engage a popular audience. Bacon and Cuthbertson each promise to answer enduring questions about the disaster and to humanize the story by exploring the lives and fates of individuals affected by the blast. This, however, is where the two part ways; while Bacon describes the explosion as a "forgotten disaster,"⁴ Cuthbertson more rightly considers the disaster to be "an integral element of the city's self-identity and of Canada's national mythology" that is far from forgotten.⁵ These two quotations, each part of the respective author's introduction, are representative of how each has approached the topic. John U. Bacon, an American professor of journalism, takes a more sensationalist approach as he endeavours to reconstruct the worlds and experiences of victims and survivors while relying on his audience to have very little knowledge of the disaster or of Nova Scotian history.

Bacon's *The Great Halifax Explosion: A World War I Story of Treachery, Tragedy and Extraordinary Heroism* draws primarily on familiar secondary sources, including the works of Kitz, Bird, Beed, Dupuis (also reviewed here), and Ruffman and Howell.⁶ The narrative that Bacon constructs takes a new approach to the history of the Halifax Explosion by intertwining the personal story and experiences of Joseph Ernest Barrs – "the great-grandson of Nova Scotia's greatest privateer."⁷ After providing a family history of the Barrs, Bacon then uses the young man's correspondence to follow him as he enlisted in the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry brigade during the First World War, fought on the front lines, suffered injury, and eventually returned home to Nova Scotia. The chapters following Barrs's experience are intertwined with chapters dedicated to the events leading up to the Halifax Explosion. Barrs's story is utilized to compare the desperation and destruction of the warfront with that experienced at home in the wake of the explosion. While this approach is useful in showing the similarities of experience on the battlefield and in the city struck by disaster, the two narratives never come fully together as the reader might expect and the result is somewhat unsatisfying. That said, the significant portion of the text that is dedicated to the experiences of the

Champlain Society, 2017); Michael Dupuis, *Bearing Witness: Journalists, Record Keepers, and the 1917 Halifax Explosion* (Halifax, Fernwood Publishing, 2017); Dan Soucoup, *Explosion in Halifax Harbour, 1917* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2017); Susan Dodd, *The Halifax Explosion: The Apocalypse of Samuel H. Prince* (Grandview, PE: Underhill Books, 2017).

4 Bacon, *Great Halifax Explosion*, 4.

5 Cuthbertson, *Halifax Explosion*, 11.

6 See Janet Kitz, *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion and the Road to Recovery* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1989); Michael J. Bird, *The Town that Died: The True Story of the Greatest Man-Made Explosion Before Hiroshima* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1962); Blair Beed, *1917 Halifax Explosion and American Response* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1998); Dupuis, *Bearing Witness*; and Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell, eds., *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour* (Halifax: Nimbus and Gorsebrook Research Institute for Atlantic Studies, 1994).

7 Bacon, *Great Halifax Explosion*, 49.

young soldier Barrs appears to be new primary research that may prove of interest to those interested in the experiences of Nova Scotian soldiers and especially to those interested in the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.

In terms of a faithful account of the history of both Canada and Nova Scotia, historians of either will be disappointed with this work. Bacon founds his work on the premise that enmity had existed between Nova Scotia and the New England states (based on the sometimes-cool relationship between Canada and the United States), and despite relying heavily on the work of Thomas Randall and other historians of the region he fails to appreciate the kinship connections between Nova Scotia and New England. The outcome of this oversight is that Bacon portrays the generous aid sent by Massachusetts in the wake of the disaster as "surprising" and "the start of a great relationship" – effectively dismissing a rich and complex history that extends back at least as far as the founding of Halifax.⁸

Ken Cuthbertson, by contrast, while still appealing to a popular audience, has clearly done his research. *The Halifax Explosion* makes good use of both primary and secondary sources as the events leading up to and following the explosion are explored in a cohesive and clear fashion. Cuthbertson's narrative begins by tracing the events that led French Captain Aimé Le Médec and Norwegian Captain Haakon From and their crews to that fateful collision in the Narrows of Halifax Harbour and, in so doing, offers what is perhaps a more humanizing view of the two men than is normally recounted. Norwegian Captain From, based on an incident two months earlier while the *Imo* was in harbour in Philadelphia in October of 1917, is portrayed as someone with a hot temper and little patience; this resulted in assault charges against From and a court case with great expense for the shipping line.⁹ While speculation on each captain's personality may feel historically uncomfortable, the apparent battle of wills that unfolded in Halifax Harbour only months after the aforementioned incident, for which French Captain Le Médec was originally assigned responsibility, makes this information relevant. Cuthbertson shows that From had demonstrated in the past that his temper could override concerns for his ship or his standing with the shipping line. With this information included, the reader can see how what transpired in Halifax Harbour could have been the result of From's impatience, temper, and already demonstrated willingness to pick a fight and leave the shipping line to clean up the mess. This small observation, which offers a new perspective on a much-told story, is demonstrative of the way in which Cuthbertson's narrative moves along. It is never more dramatic than it needs to be, and the author's style and ability to consolidate a great deal of information into an organized and enjoyable narrative will likely make this text popular with both academic and lay audiences. In many ways it offers an able companion to existing works such as Kitz's *Shattered City* by showing new perspectives and touching on, but not repeating, already-told and well-known stories.

While the approaching centenary surely encouraged publisher interest in the historic disaster and resulted in new popular retellings, access to new source materials

8 Bacon, *Great Halifax Explosion*, 329; see, for example, George T. Bates, "The Great Exodus of 1749: or The Cornwallis Settlers Who Didn't," *Nova Scotia Historical Society* 38, no. 1 (1972): 33.

9 Cuthbertson, *Halifax Explosion*, 47.

also played a significant role in at least one of these works. David Sutherland's edited collection of the case files of the Halifax Relief Commission pension records is an outstanding addition to the historiography of the Halifax Explosion. This is not Sutherland's first contribution to the historiography of the disaster, and readers are likely familiar with his earlier work. Building upon that earlier research, the Halifax historian has undertaken the tremendous task of sifting through the pension records of the Halifax Relief Commission. The more than 14,000 pension records detailing not only claims resulting from the explosion but also ongoing reports monitoring the pensioners and their families remained restricted until 2004. "*We Harbor No Evil Design*" is the result of a project utilizing those records that began in 2007. With their release comes a new tide of information about the residents of post-explosion Halifax. The sheer volume of the records could make them both a dream come true and a daunting nightmare for any historian tasked with sorting and interpreting them, but the author has clearly risen to the challenge. Methodologically, Sutherland had to make difficult choices that resulted in finally winnowing down those records to 56 representative cases. These are further divided along four themes related to the primary claimant or victim dealt with by the pension record: a) the principal individual was killed as a result of the explosion leaving dependent children or wife (widowers were not eligible for long-term support); b) adults who were left with permanent disabilities as a result of the explosion; c) children left either orphaned or seriously injured or disabled by the disaster; and finally d) individuals who "occupied the margins of society" and whose pension files were complicated by a combination of factors, including race, socio-economic class, citizenship, marital status (especially where unmarried mothers were concerned) and other extenuating circumstances.¹⁰ While the bulk of this text consists of the reproduced pension records of the Relief Committee, the amount of work required to select, sort, and make a sampling of those records is not to be understated. Sutherland has broken new historiographical ground in using these records to facilitate a view of not only the survivors and victims of the disaster but also of the extensive organization and administration required to make the relief work possible. This collection should be of utmost value to historians of the explosion as well as having the potential for the collected primary sources to serve as wonderful teaching material in any upper-level seminar.

Michael Dupuis's *Bearing Witness: Journalists, Record Keepers and the 1917 Halifax Explosion* also offers a useful collection of new source material that will be appreciated by historians, students, and the lay reader alike. As Sutherland has shown with the organization and dedication of the individuals who collected the information for the Relief Commission, Dupuis has set out to demonstrate the importance of the role of correspondents, journalists, editors, censors, and other record keepers in reliably transmitting information of the explosion and relief efforts to news outlets across North America. This relatively compact text – 154 pages including an appendix – provides a wealth of primary sources complemented by valuable historical analysis and interpretation. Dupuis's first chapter outlines the role of Lieutenant-Colonel Ernest J. Chambers, Canada's chief press censor at the time of the explosion. Chambers is a figure not often considered in histories of the

10 Sutherland, "'We Harbor No Evil Design'," xx.

Halifax Explosion. He was British-born and his office was in Ottawa. This meant that he was removed from the immediate reality of the disaster. Dupuis, however, convincingly makes the argument that Chambers's decision to make all substantiated facts about the explosion available to the press and printable played an essential role in the rapid relief that was sent to the city from all corners of the world. Having established the importance of Chambers's decision, Dupuis then divides the reproduced sources into three additional chapters, one each for material produced by those who experienced the disaster, those Canadian reporters and record keepers who visited and reported on the aftermath, and lastly, visiting American reporters and record keepers. In sum, this small but important text offers a new way to think about the massive relief effort undertaken in the wake of the disaster. The faithful reproduction of primary sources, neatly organized, makes this an ideal reader for university students, and the vignettes offered through the reproduced articles should pique and hold the interest of ordinary readers interested in the history of the explosion as well. Throughout the text Dupuis demonstrates that without the tireless (and sometimes thankless) work of the members of the media – as they not only reported the news of the explosion but also conveyed the human faces and stories behind the relief efforts – the donations from around the world that funded the rehabilitation and rebuilding of the city may have been far fewer and the lasting results even more devastating.

The smallest of these texts, Dan Soucoup's *Explosion in Halifax Harbour 1917*, is perhaps also the most reader friendly and appealing to a lay audience. It lacks the sensationalism of many other popular texts but draws together the many stories surrounding the explosion from well-known sources such as Kitz, Bird, and Beed and supplements them with a wealth of photographs graciously reproduced from the provincial and national archives as well as the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic and other sources. Soucoup's work endeavours to present a history that is both broader and more comprehensive than much of the academic scholarship surrounding the disaster. Included is a chapter on the federal election held in the month after the explosion, which was undoubtedly impacted by the disaster, as well as the often-overlooked Turtle Grove community and the lasting effects of the explosion on the Mi'kmaq settlement there that was destroyed. Published by Nimbus as part of the *Stories of Our Past* series, *Explosion in Halifax 1917* is intended, like the other books in the series, for a popular readership and is likely appropriate for use in either a late elementary or junior high classroom.

The final text reviewed here, Susan Dodd's *The Halifax Explosion: The Apocalypse of Samuel H. Prince*, sits apart from the other texts in terms of tone and anything but the broadest subject matter. Dodd approaches the work of Samuel H. Prince, a survivor of the Halifax explosion, who three years later published *Catastrophe and Social Change* as a result of his own observations in Halifax and his doctoral work at Columbia University. Those readers fortunate to be acquainted with the work of Prince will be pleased to see this long overdue discussion handled so competently. Through careful exegesis Dodd demonstrates the ways in which Prince, a lifelong social reformer and evangelical, found promise in the apocalyptic destruction of Halifax in 1917 and the potential for social change unleashed in its rebuilding. One of Prince's most famous statements is perhaps his assertion that "the Explosion blew Halifax into the twentieth century," which clearly

encompasses his personal belief in the power of reform as well as the hopefulness in human progress that was embodied in so many popular and academic movements of the early-to-mid-20th century.

Dodd's work is organized around the structure of Prince's dissertation, which includes four substantive chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion. As the reader moves through the chapters, the stages of the explosion and its aftermath as ruminated upon by Prince are revealed. Prince described the immediate outcome of the explosion as a period of "Social Disintegration" as the old order of the city is destroyed and the opportunity for progress is revealed but can only be achieved through the proper actions and responses. In the subsequent chapters, Dodd follows Prince's exploration of disaster as a means for positive social change through the lenses of nascent social psychology and studies of organization, economy, legislation, and, finally, positive social change.

Through a careful and well-supported argument, Dodd reveals the ties between, and Prince's roles in, early 20th-century social gospel reform and the later state-centered institution-building that came to replace it. Prince's background as an Anglican priest, his experience with disaster, his education at Columbia, and his outstanding career of public service all combined to create a larger-than-life historical figure endeavouring to understand society through faith and improve it through science. Dodd's overarching argument that Prince, already recognized as the founder of Disaster Studies as a result of his dissertation, should also be recognized as one of the founders of the Canadian welfare state along with more recognized names such as Tommy Douglas and J.S. Woodsworth bears careful consideration.

The six books reviewed here share many common themes. One of the most prominent among them is the complicated legacy of Confederation as demonstrated by the fissures in the chain of command surrounding the coming and going of ships in Halifax Harbour that ultimately contributed to the naval disaster. Cuthbertson, Bacon, and Soucoup spend the most time attempting to unravel the complicated series of events that led to the collision between the *Imo* and the *Mont Blanc*, and each emphasizes different aspects of the same problem. The conclusion that a combination of human error and failure to establish a clear chain of command over the harbour because of the involvement of the Royal Navy, the Royal Canadian Navy, and the private contractors represented by the harbour pilots is not new, but it is explored in new ways that contribute overall to the existing historiography. In addition to new perspectives, the combination of the records curated by Sutherland and Dupuis offer an exciting new opportunity for other historians and students to engage further with the events following the explosion. Sutherland's work especially will likely inspire further study of the pension records that are now openly accessible at the Nova Scotia Archives. Finally, Dodd's study stands alone in this grouping, both by way of topic and source material; but it seems fitting that Samuel Prince's work, inspired by the Halifax Explosion and so influential in the years that followed, is brought to the foreground once again amidst these works that contextualize the disaster through which he lived and in which he found such promise of redemption for a city that he loved.

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