

Review Essay

Curse of the Narrows

John Griffith Armstrong

Laura M. MacDonald, *Curse of the Narrows*, New York and Toronto, Walker and Harper Collins, www.walkerbooks.com and www.harpercollins.ca, 2005, 356 pp., maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. CDN \$36.95, cloth; ISBN 13: 978-0-00-200787-0.

Some 2,000 Haligonians died when an ammunition-laden freighter blew up in the narrows of the Nova Scotia city's harbour after a collision on 6 December 1917. It was the world's greatest explosion to that time and until the dawn of the nuclear age. Hardly a house in the entire city of some 50,000 souls escaped damage; that part within 800 metres was virtually destroyed and some 9,000 were injured - many mercilessly sliced by flying glass. They clogged medical facilities and hastily improvised aid stations, while the living struggled to survive and to help their neighbours. It was a crisis of epic proportions and the memory is a permanent scar on the city. Today, Canadians have largely forgotten the tragedy and more attention is directed to commemoration of another more recent 6 December incident. Still, Haligonians have continued to mourn their loss and they attend the annual gathering on Fort Needham hill in the company of a dwindling handful of explosion survivors. And over these same years a few dedicated researchers have sought to understand the disaster and there is now a respectable literature on the subject. Most noteworthy has been the singular drive of the city's Janet Kitz, who has made the explosion her vocation since 1983, producing the most comprehensive and carefully considered account, *Shattered City* (1989). She tirelessly continues to carry the beacon to this day, researching, writing and lecturing in schools and elsewhere. We owe her a great deal and she is a tough act for the rest of us who follow. Nonetheless, a new heir-apparent may be in the wings.

The calamitous attack on New York, 11 September 2001, reawakened the world to the spectre of terrorism and the prospect of catastrophe in the centre of any city, not only by accident but cruel design. Despite the withering horror there were also remarkable responses in terms of the revealed strength and capacity of the human spirit, steadfastness and triumph over adversity. This, and incidents such as the major hurricanes which have struck at New Orleans and elsewhere, have also swayed new comparisons with what took place in Halifax on 6 December 1917 and have kindled public and scholarly interest much farther afield than Nova Scotia or even Canada. A first proclaimed "major account" has now appeared from a US publisher (Walker) and, in Canada (Harper Collins). *Curse of the Narrows* by Laura M. MacDonald, is being

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marketed throughout North America with some success and attracting favourable comment in various newspapers, including the *Boston Globe*, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* and the prestigious *New York Times Book Review*.

Ms MacDonald is a former television producer, radio commentator, magazine editor and co-author of a novel, *Kay Darling*. Born and bred in Halifax, she now lives in New York. She was on First Avenue in East Harlem after the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 and personally experienced parallel sights and sounds to what must have been in 1917, particularly in terms of insight, empathy, response, behaviour and the unfolding of events. Thus inspired by what she saw and felt in New York, she broadened research she had done previously on Halifax to produce an account which would focus on the experiences of various individuals in the disaster, the aftermath and sometimes into the long term. Thus we encounter across the class spectrum doctors and nurses, officials, soldiers, labourers, firemen, seamen, ferry men, wives and children among others. Three individuals, whose situations were particularly significant and well documented received more detailed attention: Charles Duggan, who lived in Richmond and his extended family, Dr. George Cox, an eye surgeon and Dr. William E. Ladd, who headed the American Red Cross relief effort from Boston. The human perspective is perhaps the work's greatest strength, although the author's research has also contributed significantly to our knowledge of the explosion.

Although much of the ground has been previously travelled, MacDonald has found new personal accounts which are accompanied by strong readable narrative. Her description of medical aspects of the disaster response is particularly interesting, despite remarks which follow. She also seems to have randomly stumbled upon the collection of documents originally assembled by Archibald MacMechan, who had been appointed head of the Halifax Disaster Record Office, as the basis of a commission to produce an official history. After it was written it languished in obscurity until printed in 1978. The fate of the source documents, as MacDonald tells it, was seemingly unknown until an archivist happened to "come across" some ostensibly by chance, on the author's last planned day of research - and asked if she would like to see them. (p.283) Needless to say MacDonald stayed on in Halifax. One would want to ask, however, how it could be that this extremely important material, cited in her notes as "Halifax Disaster Records Office," was "a eureka moment." The documents have been available and consulted since the 1980's, when the Halifax Relief Commission files were turned over to the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. In the event, Ms MacDonald made extensive use of the material but she might have better looked to the original contributing sources of some, particularly the federal government, the military and other organizations. Those who contributed documents to the disaster record office would not have been inclined to be self-critical or controversial, nor to make themselves look bad nor hurt any feelings. Organizations and governments do find ways of not sharing these sorts of things and there was much controversy about after the explosion.

A more substantial MacDonald initiative is new sources in United States archives which shed additional light upon the remarkable response to the disaster by government and institutional authorities, particularly Boston and the State of Massachusetts and the American Red Cross. The Boston chapter of the latter was one of the first to analyse and

publish principles for disaster relief and to promote training programmes across the country. Thus we are given an interesting account of how these principles were brought into play as the relief effort was mounted and trains were despatched, filled with medical personnel and supplies from Boston, New York and elsewhere. There is a detailed account of the epic journey of the first train, which was not able to reach the city until 48 hours after the disaster, due to the harsh winter weather which followed the explosion. Nonetheless, much of the media coverage and documentation of this most generous mission of mercy was also suggestive of self-promotion and hyperbole. There is no question that the assistance was welcome and needed but, as Frederick McKelvey Bell, the Canadian director of the medical relief effort on the scene implied in his report at the time, that attention may have been disproportionate. So might that be the case with Ms MacDonald. Only a cohesive study of all aspects of the disaster relief effort, with particular added attention to the part played by the Federal Government and other Canadian organizations, will provide the conclusive answer.

As this writer has argued, much material key to understanding the Halifax Explosion is to be found in Ottawa. MacDonald has used a few items but there is no convincing evidence of rigorous pursuit of crucial material which exists in federal archives only. No account can be considered truly definitive which does not thoroughly explore the personal papers of the sitting prime minister (Sir Robert Borden, who was also a Halifax MP) and other government officials, and the files of the departments of government most directly concerned. These include the office of the Governor-General, the Post Office (the Halifax posties made gargantuan efforts to get the mail through), Public Works, Railways and Canals, Marine and Fisheries, the Naval Service, the Militia (particularly national and regional subject files concerning medical response to the disaster) and the Chief Press Censor. These were all involved and most had people on the ground or water in Halifax. They are an essential part of the story.

The Halifax disaster presents unusual research and context challenges. There is a crucial event where one must establish a clear sense of the ambient conditions, ie, the daunting task of understanding and delineating things as they were on all related levels and strata, and then drawing upon them to bring the reader effectively through the crucial point and the aftermath. As well, as Malcolm MacLeod has written, "there are still important features of this catastrophe that need probing and quantification. But the demographer/historian/bibliographer/political scientist/sociologist/scientist/town planner/legal scholar/literary critic, who could digest and synthesize everything that is necessary for attaining a full understanding, may be difficult to recruit." (*Books in Canada*, Vol. 31, No. 8 [Nov 2002], p.32). Couched in such terms, Ms MacDonald has done this fittingly enough in the sense of placing the characters she has chosen and delineating their individual experiences into the aftermath. She demonstrates an excellent sensitivity to personal traits and reactions and makes every effort to be fair in her judgments. She is less certain, however, in terms of the government and the military and the overall management of the port. In the case of the former, for example, when discussing the conscription crisis, she speaks of an election in the offing without noting that it was called by a Union - not a Conservative - government, including most of the English speaking Liberal MP's and several prominent Liberal ministers in key positions

such as Public Works, the marine services and the navy.

Ms MacDonald does devote more attention to the important role of the military both in managing the disaster and as fellow citizens than other writers. Nonetheless, she does not acknowledge that the roughly five thousand uniformed Canadian soldiers in Halifax (and not counting over 2,000 naval personnel from Canada, the USA and Great Britain) constituted almost ten percent of the entire population, and therefore a very significant factor, unlikely to have been immediately present in terms of other disasters. Nor does she always confidently navigate the admittedly formidable jungle of military roles, ranks and responsibilities. General Thomas Benson, who is mentioned three times in the text, (pp. 99;107;183) is not a bystander but bears responsibility of command for all troops in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Rear-Admiral Bertram Chambers' presence is noted on page 107 but we are not told who the senior British naval officer in the port is or why he was involved. And his name does not appear in the index. Indeed, turning to the index, it may not have received due care in its preparation. For example, it does not record all of the instances where the name of Acting Commander Frederick Evan (misspelled as Evans) Wyatt appears (examples pp. 264;265;266). A paragraph describing the well known incident involving a diving party near *Niobe* (p. 67) neither acknowledges that the personnel were members of the RCN, nor their ranks - some might not find the omission that important but others may well. In the event, one of the names is also wrong, Acting Gunner John T. Gannon, is named as "Frank" Gannon (RCN records of the incident and the RCN 1917 *Navy List*).

Ms MacDonald's research does provide a convincing recognition of the role played by the army medical corps and the critical medical team building which included Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick McElvey Bell of the Canadian Militia. She makes some errors in local military demographics, however. She rightly describes the brief integration away from the city's normally rigid class structure, as people came together as such to deal with the tragedy and that this coming together included "soldiers and sailors, who created so much moral apprehension in the middle classes, were transformed into heroes" (p.89). Rightly so, and MacDonald also rightly says they were "important not only because they were organized and prepared," but wrongly perhaps that "they did not have the responsibility of their own families. The very thing that created so much anxiety - their single status -meant that they were available to work long hours without distraction." While a social/demographic study of the disaster is one of the great remaining scholarly challenges, this writer believes that one would show that Ms MacDonald's claim would only apply in part and mostly to troops of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) and British Expeditionary Force (BEF) awaiting shipment overseas. The militia soldiers, a service called out for home defence, distinct from the CEF, were the majority of Halifax military personnel. Serving members were almost certainly older for the most part, married with families, or suffering from minor disabilities, which made them less eligible for service overseas with the CEF and by inference the BEF. Indeed, by this time, suitable people eligible for overseas service had mostly been weeded out of Canadian Militia garrisons. Thus the remainder were not fit people in their prime and many were either rooted in the community within local regiments or had brought their families to Halifax.

It is particularly difficult to comprehend why Ms MacDonald frequently refers to members of different navies as “soldiers,” a significant lapse which confounds. The beloved term “bluejackets” or “jackies,” used traditionally by the United States Navy (USN), as a nickname for their sailors is wrongly linked to soldiers of the Continental Army who wore blue jackets as opposed to British red, in the American Revolution (p. 210). Britain’s Royal Navy has also worn blue jackets and has also used the term, however, not as extensively. The US Coast Guard Cutter *Morrill* is inaccurately named as USS (United States Ship) rather than the correct USCGC for vessels of this distinct military service (p.36). His Majesty’s Ship *Highflyer*, the British light cruiser anchored at an angle across from the naval dockyard, is wrongly called a destroyer (p.27), a much lesser ship, which we are told had nonetheless engaged and sunk a German armed merchant cruiser (pp. 32-3). There is confusion over the naming and numbering of piers and wharves in the harbour, there being piers numbered one through four below the naval dockyard and another set of piers within. What she describes as “Naval Hospital Pier 2” was correctly the Pier 2 Casualty Depot (located incidentally outside the naval dockyard in the Canadian Government Railways deepwater terminals and operated by the Canadian Militia and the Ministry of the Soldiers Sailors Civilian Re-establishment).

The BEF is astonishingly identified as the “British Empire Force,” “British men living in America who volunteered to serve”(p.35), when in fact many American citizens enrolled in both the Canadian and British military services, particularly before the US entered the war in 1917.

Most of the information about problems in the management of Halifax Harbour is derived from testimony first given at the Wreck Commissioner’s Inquiry following the explosion. MacDonald is certainly successful in establishing that there were dysfunctional dynamics, at least in human terms, the frustrations of a 15 year old clerk in the pilotage office and wrangling between pilots and local naval people. This is a nice narrative device but not a very thorough exploration of the extent and gravity of the problem and that officials in the federal Department of Marine had for many months considered harbour management in Halifax a serious issue but were prevented from acting for political reasons.

In the aftermath of 6 December 1917, “there were no newspapers that night. No radio” (p.127), thus implying that the population could not listen to radio broadcasts. That is true only because radio-telegraphy was in use for communications purposes. The first radio broadcast as such did not occur until May 1920 and experimental voice transmissions did not occur until late 1919. This is not to belabour a few mistakes; this writer has his own red face in that respect. Nonetheless I report them because I checked so few items in detail, confining my search to issues of particular interest to me or within my imperfect knowledge.

Ms MacDonald provides source notes where others have not. Nonetheless there were significant problems with the few that I did want to verify. A most perplexing omission is Ms MacDonald’s blanket decision, recorded in notes for p.15, that “unless otherwise noted, all observations, thoughts, and quotes regarding the ships’ navigation, the actions of participants, and the observations of witnesses” are found in trial testimony, which includes the inquiry of the Dominion Wreck Commissioner, various writs of

habeas corpus and the appeals which follow. Unfortunately, she specifies the titles of the documents but does not clearly reveal where all of them are held. The source citation for the wreck commissioners inquiry is given several times as "NAC, RG 42, vol. 5, g6/7," which is not correct. (It is NAC, RG42, vols. 596/7.) MacDonald's notes for p.252 and Chapter 19 present similar problems. The wreck commissioner's inquiry alone fills most of archive boxes (vols.) 596 and 597 in the Marine Department files at the federal archives and there are more than 2,100 pages in this source alone. It is disappointing that Ms MacDonald does not provide the specific source document, name of witness, date and page numbers of the information provided, making it extremely difficult if not impossible to verify or follow-up. Further, much of the testimony appears again in subsequent appeals but with different pagination. For example, this writer sought to confirm information that pilot Francis Mackey, aboard *Mont Blanc* creeping slowly up the harbour, had remarked as *Imo* strode downward that "he did not like the looks of the foam at her bow. Quite a ripple." In contrast, Mate John Makiny (similar surname) of the navy, aboard the armed tug *Nereid* anchored off the dockyard, testified "there was quite a foam at her bow....quite a little fuss at her bow; quite a little ruffle." (Appeal book p. 13). Perhaps some future researcher will have the industry to resolve this. Unfortunately, the author compounds by continual use of improvised dialogue, a device which perhaps enhances dramatic interest and readability but at the sacrifice of accuracy and clarity. Mixed use of quotation marks around dialogue is also mixed with use of actual quotes (sometimes even long ones imbedded in her own paragraphs [p.145]) from the work of other writers. And, while she meets the legal niceties with respect to the former in her endnotes, she does not much politely engage the existing literature in her narrative. This detracts.

Despite the foregoing, *Curse of the Narrows* is of value as general history and it will please the general reader. It is well written and interesting and, indeed, would have provided the sound truthful basis for a screenplay so lacking in the appalling 2003 television movie on the explosion. Devotees of marine/military history, however, will experience misgiving because of the too obvious gaffs, the gaps in context, and known research sources which seem to have been ignored. Stronger editorial guidance and perhaps an expert pre-publication reader or two as referee(s) might have helped. In the event this work approaches the achievement of Janet Kitz but does not surpass it in terms of the years of care, reflection and study, as well as the sure-footed gravitas that went into the writing of *Shattered City*.

John Griffith Armstrong
Ottawa

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