

The Halifax Explosion - Fourteen Years After

A lecture by Dr. Samuel Prince

Originally given to the Nova Scotia Historical Society

4 December 1931

When Halifax PROVED Its Fine Nobility On Dec. 6th

The full lecture published in The Halifax Mail

THE THIRD PAGE

6 December 1932

Fifteen years have passed since that morning, another Dec. 6th, but oh so different, which found the Northern section a shambles, a field of death. Today Halifax has a confidence that promises a future of continued progress. And, the spirit of the present, that of ability to put handicaps of the moment aside, was equally emphasized on that direful day of Dec. 6th, 1917, when hundreds of citizens paid the price of war, - death - and thousands more were maimed or rendered homeless.

Today a new Halifax has arisen - but it is a city that does not easily forget. In many homes today there will be more keenly felt the missing presence of some member of the family circle, and to those family units there will be extended the heart-felt sympathy of those who, in this respect, were more fortunate. It can be safely said that few, if any, stepped from the doors of their homes this morning, without pausing to realize what that Dec. 6th of fifteen years ago brought to "The Warden of the North," its supreme honor. On this significant anniversary of the "blow" The Halifax Mail presents in full one of the most searching of articles that has ever been prepared dealing with this awful tragedy, a paper read by Dr. S. H. Prince before the Nova Scotia Historical Society. The entire text follows:

WHEN is history history is a question which may very properly be put to a society which announces an historical paper upon an event so recent as 1917. Perhaps the answer may be given that an event is history when it happens, though it can be authentically portrayed only after it has received the fuller appreciation which the lapse of time bestows. For our present title there is ample precedent in the many narratives which have already assayed to tell the story of the Great War and the Russian Revolution.

Indeed were there no other justification for the subject which has been selected by this Society its discussion would be opportune at this time, If only for the service which may perhaps be rendered to the future historian, whoever he may be. The facts associated with the Halifax Disaster call for public review while as yet there are some alive with memories clear as to the sequence of the dire events which make this anniversary forever memorable in the annals of this ancient City.

Data On Disaster

THE literature upon the Halifax Explosion may be said to be remarkably small. Several months ago a writer commented with surprise to the effect that no work upon the Halifax Explosion had been written. It is not impossible to be surprised because of a reason so simple as ignorance. Perhaps one may be permitted to refer in this connection to some explosion literature in manuscript or in print. There is first of all the book entitled a "Romance of the Halifax Explosion" by the late Dr. McKelvie [sic] Bell, one of the leaders in the Medical Relief work, whose death occurred only in January of last year. Then there is the little volume entitled "The Halifax Horror"

by Stanley K. Smith, City Editor of the St. John Telegram, and also a brief brochure called a "Narrative of the Explosion at Halifax by J. T. Gammon, as well as the study which was published in 1921 by the present writer under the title of "Catastrophe and Social Change". In manuscript form there are three most valuable compendiums. There is the story of medical relief at Halifax by Dr. Fraser Harris, there is Professor MacMechan's collection of disaster data and documents resting in the vaults of the Halifax Relief Commission, and last but not least there is the yet unpublished manuscript of my friend of many years, the late Arthur J. Johnston, the son of Mr. A. C. Johnston, Assistant Receiver-General. Mr. Johnston's book entitled "The Tragedy of Halifax", was read in manuscript by the late Lt. Gov. MacCallum Grant and described by him as a faithful and realistic record, well proportioned in every way. After a good deal of reading in the field of disaster literature, I have no hesitation in stating that Mr. Johnston's work is not only an accurate history of the Halifax Explosion but from a literary standpoint is the finest description of any disaster to be found in the English language. It ought to be published, and I hope it will be.

Incomplete Record

IN addition to the works mentioned there are a considerable number of magazine articles to which reference should be made. The following are worthy of note: "Halifax in Ruins", by Archibald MacMechan, Canadian Courier, Vol. 23, No. 4; "From the Ashes of Halifax", C. C. Carstens, Survey, Vol. 39, No. 25; "Report of Halifax Relief Expedition", Ratschesky, The State, Boston, 1918; "The Town That Was

Blown Into Progress", William F. French, Vol. 22, No. 3; "T.N.T.", Allan Baddeley, Blackwood's magazine, Vol. 229, No. 1385.

Yet withal, it must be confessed, as I have said, that there exists an unfortunately small amount of reliable and permanent material to chronicle what is acknowledged to have been the greatest and most dangerous single explosion in the history of the world.

To the salient facts of this catastrophe, I now invite your consideration.

Episode Of War

THE Halifax Disaster was an episode of the Great War. "If ever was a war incident," said Attorney-General Daniels in the Nova Scotia Legislature, "this was such a one." Canada went forth to War regardless of consequences to herself - even should it bring her own fair land within the range of its horrors. Yet there was another circumstance which determined that Halifax should have been the part to suffer. That circumstance was the possession by the City of a magnificent harbor - one of the three finest in the world.

The advantage of this harbor, together with ample defence, and a fortunate situation with regard to Northern Europe, established the Garrison City early in the year 1914 as the natural war-base of the Dominion. She served, moreover, as a connecting link with the French, British and American bases of supplies, and as an integral part of the United States system of transportation to France. Hither the transports came and the giant freighters to join their convoy, thence to file out in ragged line for ports unknown. Cruisers and men-of-war put in to use its great dry-dock and take on coal. Here too cleared

the supply of munition boats - some laden with empty shells, others with high explosives destined for distant fields of battle.

How much of the deadly cargo lay in the roadstead or came and went during those fateful years cannot be told. During the month of December, 1915, alone, 30,000 tons of munitions passed over the railroad piers of Halifax, and at one time nearly half of all the shrapnel and shells used in the British army took shipping here.

Certainly there was too much to have bred a sense of safety. Halifax was "a dangerous neighborhood in other ways as well", but not one gave the matter second thought. All were intent upon the mighty task of the hour. Sufficient unto each day was each day's evil. Each night the great war-gates were swung across the channel. Powerful searchlights swept unceasingly the sea and sky. The forts were fully manned, the gunners ready. The people knew these things, yet no one dreamed of danger save to loved ones far away. Secure in her own defences, the City lay unafraid, and almost apathetic.

A December Morning

ABOUT midway between the last two years of war, a December morning dawned fair and cold. It was a brilliant morning of sunshine, clear skies and summer blue. Men rose from their beds, and prepared for their daily avocations. Housewives and mothers busied themselves about their morning duties getting their fathers and sons to work, and the younger tots to school. Soon the water-front was all astir. Factory whistles blew shrilly. Street cars sped along their accustomed routes. Shoppers stepped out into the cool crisp air, and merchants, conscious of Christmas opportunities, arranged the day's display with special care. Everything wore the same look it had worn

day in and day out for a long time past. The morning of December 6th, 1917, bore in itself no evidence that it was any different from countless other Thursdays in December since 1749. Yet it had come to full time for one of the most terrible tragedies in the history of the world.

"Halifax sits on her hills by the Sea
In the might of her pride
Invincible, terrible, beautiful, she
With a sword at her side."

Yet within a trice, she was to be laid prostrate. Yea "the sword shall pierce through thine own bosom." She was to know the meaning of the prophetic words. "Therefore shall evil come upon thee; thou shall not know whence it ariseth; and mischief shall fall upon thee; thou shalt not be able to put it off, and desolation shall come upon thee suddenly, which thou shalt not know."

In Another Port

BUT to go back for a moment to another day and to another harbour, a greater and busier mart than that of Halifax had yet to become. The mouth of the North River at New York was never more alive with hulls than in the pre-Christmas mid-war period. The old gray City from its lofty sky-line looked down upon a grandly moving scene, of coming and departing ships. Proudly the Statue of Liberty held her vast torch aloft in greeting and farewell.

So when on Saturday, December first, there crept out of the harbor of New York a 33-foot French munitioneer, few knew her name nor the

deadly errand on which which she had gone - Sunday found her ploughing a steady course along the sound.

She was a single screw propellor and her weight of cargo held her low. Monday and Tuesday still found her on the coast, and it was late on Wednesday afternoon when she reached Chebucto Head. Finding the harbor gates closed, she came to anchor in the proximity of George's Island, where she lay until dawn while the City slept as snugly as if her decks were piled with eider down.

Distant about three or more miles Northward lay afloat the other actor in that December drama - one of the heterogeneous vessels which made of Bedford Basin the waiting room of the Atlantic. It was another freighter, larger and faster than the Frenchman. Early on Thursday morning there signs of life and activity upon her decks. Strangely enough she was preparing to sail for the self-same port from which the other ship had come.

What a difference the errands of the two: One sailed upon a mission of death - her hold contained the mightiest agencies of destruction the world has yet devised. The other sailed upon a mission of life - she was setting forth to fill her roomy bulk with food for the war-starved hosts of Belgium.

A Deadly Cargo

THE ship from New York was the Mont Blanc - an eighteen-year-old vessel hailing from St. Nazaire. Her commander was Captain Lemedec [sic], who was making his maiden voyage with an explosive-laden ship. It was a brave venture,. His ship carried a deadly combination of Benzol, picric acid and trinitrotoluol - the equivalent of five thousand mines.

The ship bound for New York was the old White Star liner, Runic of the Eighties, now renamed Imo. She was a Norwegian, Captain Fron [sic], and travelled light with ballast.

Who can explain the mystery of coincidence - that these two steamers on that fateful morning, should so have timed their weighing of anchor, their engine-bells, their rate of movement, that instead of the salute of the wide seas, their needs must meet in the narrow theatre of Turtle Head?

It was as if some master fiend, playing with human lives as pawns, had tricked the vessels to their doom. Head on they swept into each other's water - into the embrace of death. There was a confusion of signals, a few agonized manoeuvres [sic]. The vessels collided - and the shock of their colliding shook the world. War came to America that morning - sixteen hundred slain, six thousand injured, ten thousand homeless, thirty-five million dollars of property destroyed, three hundred and twenty-five acres left a smoking waste. Such was the appalling magnitude of the greatest single explosion in the history of the world.

An Awful Moment

THE explosion was not instantaneous - it had been better if it were - but the inevitable had happened. The Mont Blanc was instantly aflame. And as she burned she drifted close and closer to the Richmond piers. Meanwhile the minutes were ticking on to the zero hour of 9:05. There was a subterranean rumbling brief but ominous. There was one awful moment when breaths were held while men awaited the crack of doom; then a terrific devastating clap as if the globe itself had rent asunder. The blast from the bursting ship swept the

city like a tornado. The old rock-bounded Capital shook with palsy. Houses shivered, tottered, and crumbled in a mass of ruin; trees sprang from the ground; poles snapped; great buildings swayed and fell. Men and women cowered under the shower of debris and glass. To some death was quick and merciful. Others were blinded with lacerating glass and staggered to and fro before they dropped. Still others with shattered limbs dragged themselves forth naked, blackened unrecognizable human shapes.

They lay prone upon the street side, under the shadow of the great death-cloud while the sky rained iron fragments upon the helpless City. Like a meteoric shower of death whistling earthwards they came, piercing a thousand roofs or with many a splash bearing down into the sea.

The sea rushed landward with a gigantic wave and swept many to their doom. The lightning discharge of gas seemed to have set the world aflame. Soon there was naught to the northward but a roaring furnace. Men and women lay pinned beneath wreckage past self-help. Frantic mothers heard the cries of little children. Fathers tore desperately through burning brands to save alive the captives of the flames. And so the last dread process went on - earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. And when the fires at last abated the north end of Halifax looked for all the world like some blackened hillside which a farmer had burned for fallow in the Spring.

Carnival Of Death

MEN who had been at the front said they had seen nothing so bad in Flanders. A returned soldier said, "I have been in the trenches. I have gone over the top. I have seen the dead lying upon the field,

but the sight witnessed at Halifax was a thousand times worse and far more pathetic." The Halifax disaster caused loss in all the ways it is possible for a disaster to do so. Here in one dread assembling were to be found the combined horrors of war, earthquake, fire, flood and storm - a combination seen for the first time in the records of human catastrophe.

Nor did this carnival of death complete the tale of this December "Dies Irae." Scarce was the catastrophe an hour old when the news flashed around that there was havoc yet to come - a second explosion was approaching. It was the powder magazine to which the flames were perilously near. Through the crowded streets raced heralds like prophets of wrath to come. Flee! Flee! Get into open ground, was the cry! All instantly joined the precipitant throng - driven like animals before a prairie fire. It was like the flight from Vesuvius of which Pliny the Younger tells:

"You could hear the shrieks of the women, the crying of the children and the shouts of men. Some were seeking their children, others their parents, others their wives and husbands, one lamenting his own fate, another that of his family. Some praying to die from the very fear of dying. Many lifting their hands to the gods, but the greater part imagining that there were no gods left anywhere, and that the last and eternal night had come upon the world." - So Pliny.

It has been said that Moscow was no more deserted before Napoleon's entry that were the shattered streets of Halifax when the flight had been carried out.

City Of Dead

AND when the Hegira was over, and there had ensued a partial recovery from the blow and gloom, a still lower depth of agony had yet to be undergone, a succession of winter storms. The morning of the gold and faded blue had gone. Blizzards, rainfloods and zero weather were even now upon their way. They came in close procession, and as if to crown and complete the terrors, thunders rumbled, while lightning broke sharply and lit up weirdly the snow-clad streets. Such was the catastrophe of Halifax, a calamity the appalling nature of which stirred the imagination of the world.

Mr. Johnston has given us the most graphic word-picture of the catastrophe, perhaps of any in all literature. Of the social contrasts of the night before he writes:

"What a change from the night before! No theatres open. No happy throngs along the street, no cheery gatherings around the fireside. The houses were all cold, and dark and silent. Instead of laughter, weeping; instead of dancing, agonized pain. Instead of Elysian dreams, ominous nightmares. Fears and sorrow were in the way, and all the daughters of music were brought low. Halifax had become in a trice a City of dead bodies, ruined homes and blasted hopes."

"The lofty city he layeth it low, even to the ground: he bringeth it even to the dust."

Tender Sympathy

IN the midst of the great darkness shone out two stars: the courage of the people and the limitless generosity of helpers the world over.

There was no bitterness, no complaint - only a great and eager desire to help someone less fortunate. One observer said, "I have not seen such kindly feeling, and have never seen such tender sympathy. I have never heard an impatient word," - and this among men who were covered with bruises, and whose hearts were heavy.

One visitor remarked, "There is not a more courageous, sane and reasonable people. Everyone is tender and compassionate." A Montreal clergyman said, "Halifax people have been meeting with dry eyes, the tragedies, the pain, the suffering and the exposure which followed the explosion." Articles, lectures, sermons everywhere told to interested thousands how a city blown to pieces, swept by fire, buried under ice and snow and deluged by rain, was a city courageous beyond words.

Of special instances of heroism there were many. A catastrophe like a battlefield brings out what is in a man. Individual acts of finest model were written ineffaceably upon the social memory.

A child released with her teeth the clothes which held her mother pinned beneath a pile of debris.

A wounded girl saved a large family. Injured school teachers saved many a member of their classes.

A telegrapher at the cost of his life stuck to his key, and sent a wire which stopped an incoming train in the nick of time.

The St. John Express was then rounding Bedford Basin. His message went out as far as Truro: "Boys, an ammunition ship is on fire. Watch out for the explosion. Goodbye!"

A corporal seized an axe and broke the burning door of the powder magazine.

The commander of the cruiser Highflyer, killed in his attempt to aid the Mont Blanc, was awarded posthumously the Albert Medal.

A lady telephone operator at the Dockyard remained at her post and sent out calls for doctors. She had to be carried from the building.

Heroes And Others

GROUP heroism was no less remarkable. A second explosion did not really occur because of the bravery of the 72nd battalion of Ottawa. Every man volunteered to remain at his post to flood the magazine at Wellington Barracks.

The munition ship Picton lay at the Sugar Refinery pier. Longshoremen, Not ignorant of the Mont Blanc's cargo, battened down their hatches, and saved the munition ship from explosion. Sixty-four paid the penalty for heroes.

Incidents such as these, and there were many of them, revealed the same spirit as did their brothers beyond the seas; and showed that our people have not lost the tincture of their noble blood.

But not all were heroes. There were ghouls and vultures, who clambored [sic] over the bodies of the dead and dying, rifling the pockets, snatching rings and cash from icy fingers. One man in rescuing shopkeeper, gave a bystander a cash box of \$150 to hold a second. It was never seen again. A storekeeper asked a little starving child 30 cents for a loaf of bread. Many a profiteer turned the disaster to his own sordid advantage. More than five thousand dollars have been sent in as conscience money.

A Second Star

THERE was a second star. This was the unparalleled [sic] opening of the springs of generosity. The public heart responded with instantaneous and practical sympathy. Halifax specials were on every railroad. Ships brought relief by sea. Every hour brought telegraphed assistance from governments and organizations. Was her glass destroyed? Eighty acres of transparencies came for temporary repairs. Were her buildings gone? Seven and a half million feet of lumber were soon available to house the homeless. Were her people destitute? Food and clothing were soon packed high. Were her citizens bankrupt because of loss? There came \$50,000 from Newfoundland, \$100,000 from Quebec, \$100,000 from Montreal, \$250,000 from Australia, \$50,000 [sic] from Great Britain, \$1,000,000 from Massachusetts in money and clothing.

In fifteen weeks apart from the Federal grant of 18 millions, there were subscriptions of \$3,800,000. The totality of the subscriptions was not more remarkable than the number of givers.

So many rushed with their donations before the Calvin Austin sailed from Boston, that the police reserves had to be called out. Factory girls brought stockings, wealthy women tore off their fur coats and put them on board.

The great mass of gifts called for real sacrifice. The fountains of sympathy were opened wide, and the spirit of all that is fine and best in humanity pervaded and brightened the shadow of the disaster.

Courage In Ruin

AND there was need of all. To have looked out upon the scene of desolation and ruin, the gaping roofs, the glass strewn streets, the chimneys askew, the foundries, factories, by now a smoking waste, would have been demoralizing to less courageous folk.

As of San Francisco so of Halifax it could be written:

Halifax would ten times rise
Not till her last tower crumbles
Not till her last rose dies
Not till the coast sinks seaward
Not till the cold tides beat
Over the high white shasta
Will Halifax cry defeat.

When an ant hill has been crushed it is often a source of wonder the rapidity with which the survivors set to work of rescue and restoration. Equally marvellous [sic] is the speed with which human adaptability accepts and meets the strokes of fortune. In an incredibly short space of time the work of rescue had begun. That part of the social sensorium which is most closely organized in normal times, is the first to recover consciousness in disaster.

In the case of Halifax it was the army. Its training is for the resistance of shock. Fireman too are accustomed to think and act quickly in emergency. The large number of men in uniform stationed where they could quickly cover the devastated area, as well as the fire alarm which preceded the explosion, also explains the fact that these two groups were foremost in the work of rescue, of warning and

of protection. The general public with its family ties must needs think first of their own homes and families, and indeed it was an appreciable time before the urgency of the need in the stricken area became generally known. Yet it was not long ere the eager hands of willing citizens were feverishly at work.

Tragic Scenes

THE work of rescue was at first rapid, but done at random - a single ruin being dug through a second or even a third time by different groups of searchers. The danger call of the second explosion had cleared the North End of all who could or would take their flight. Heaven was kind in sending so fine a day. The tempo of the search quickened as the hours sped. Within 15 minutes a hospital ship in the stream had sent 100 men ashore with dressings and bandages.

Passengers from the incoming train were among the first of the first aid workers. The dead were laid in long rows. Cars sped over broken boards and glass to every hospital with the maimed and dying. There was work for all to do.

Men, women and children were horribly injured. Melancholy memories still picture the bleeding figures, blinded men and women, fragmentary corpses, the blackened and charred remains. But every street was hospital street. Red Cross centres and emergency dressing stations the sprang up as if by magic. The American river steamer Old Colony was improvised as a hospital. The Niobe received the casualties [sic] of the trawlers and backyard victims, while the Victoria General, Cogswell Street, Camp Hill, Infirmary and Children's Hospital were soon crowded to the doors.

Homeless Thousands

HOW fragile and weak a thing is man! Living in plenty he is yet even on the edge of starvation. An isolated city would starve in a week. Soon imperious human needs were making themselves felt - the needs of food, shelter and a roof. Food had been destroyed, spoiled with glass, and there were hungry thousands. Clothing was gone, but men stripped off their coats and wrapt them around shivering women and children. There were homeless thousands in the open spaces. Soon a white encampment rose upon the common. Improvised shelters sprung up on every side, and many a home opened its doors in a fellowship of sympathy born of the common calamity.

To have looked in on the great makeshift dormitories that first night, to have seen men, women and children of all stations, huddled together on the stages of theatres, in the chancels of churches, in stables, in box cars and basements, was to have beheld a rift in the social structure such as few communities have ever known.

And so the humanitarian work went on, without direction, system or authority save the unwritten law to respond to the call of human need. But at length authority began the work of direction and control. While martial law was not declared, the military at first assumed command. Military orders vacated the North End.. Military orders permitted people to return. The military established a cordon round the district. At noon orders divided the soldiers to regular details. By 2 o'clock organized rescue was under way. Soon the civil authorities were active. During the morning the Deputy Mayor had called a meeting of citizens, and naval and military authorities and again in the afternoon. This meeting was presided over by the Lieutenant Governor, and a beginning of relief organization was made.

No Preparedness

THERE had been no preparedness. There was no vigilance committee. The city possessed not even a paper organization for such a contingency as a sudden disaster, so that during the most precious hours citizens and civic officials had to spend time in consultation and to map out a program as circumstances allowed. It was late afternoon before a tentative plan had been formulated at City Hall. The Citizens' Committee was to be in general charge. Proclamations were issued and nationwide appeals sent forth.

The first news of the disaster went by telephone, it is understood from Bridgewater to Truro, whence it was given to the world. But the C. P. R. Telegraph which suffered less than its sister system, soon had details upon the wires.

The first relief train came in over the D. A. R., reaching Halifax at 3:45 p.m. And meeting en route [sic] at Windsor Junction the first trainload of injured then being transported to Truro.

The services of Truro, Windsor, Kentville, New Glasgow, and other towns which became cities of refuge must never be forgotten. Each hour brought news and other trains with hospital units and relief supplies were upon the way. The promptness of the action of the Public Safety Committee of Massachusetts, which was already meeting in Boston within five hours after the explosion, was a magnificent instance of dispatch.

And so the relief trains came pouring in. Happily an open route into the city was available by the newly constructed railroad to the Ocean Terminals which were at this time used for the first time.

Desperate Search

WITH the influx of fresh assistance the work went on with renewed vigor. All through the night the desperate search proceeded in the Richmond ruins. It was a weird scene lit up by flaming torches. All roads led to the morgue, which was hastily improvised at the Chebucto School. It was the largest morgue ever organized in Canada. A fifteen months old baby was found under the ashpen [sic] of a stove still alive after the second day. After three days some children were found alive. During the first four days 720 bodies were removed from the ruins. Not until the Spring thaw were the last bodies recovered, two being found as late as eight months after the explosion. Large numbers were never identified.

The pressure of indescribable suffering precipitated the medical and hospital arrangements, but it was the weather conditions which drove the workers to their noblest efforts.

The gold and blue of Thursday faded. The wind veered round the compass, and there ensued that never-to-be-forgotten Friday wher. [sic] for a greater part of the day everything was blotted out by furiously driven snow. It handicapped the exertions of the search parties, blocked the distribution of relief, and kept many from the centres of surgical aid. Yet the work went on. The weather spurred the workers to new endeavours, and many of the most workable methods were hit upon under the stress of storm.

A Friend In Need

THE organization of relief was undertaken by men weary and distrougt [sic] with the magnitude of the problem. Under great

difficulties the Committees attempted their work of ministering to the maimed, the reverent burial of the dead, the catering to the hungry and provision for the destitute thousands. But when forty hours after the disaster the American Unit arrived with Hon. Mr. Ratschesky of the State of Massachusetts, it was like the coming of a friend in need. It was soon clear that the new-comers had had unusual experience in dealing with other disasters. At once everyone took new heart. Nine hours later the Citizens' Committee was reorganized and a working plan developed, out of which grew the most efficient disaster relief organization of modern times. To the visitors Halifax must ever be indebted, not alone for the contributions, munificent as they were, but also for the relief policies and for the methods of centralization, co-operation and rehabilitation.

The relief work became organized for effective administration on Saturday afternoon, December 8th. The managing committee consisted of R. T. McIlreith, Chairman, Hon. G. E. Faulkner, Vice Chairman, Hon. G. S. Campbell, Hon. R. G. Beazley, D. MacGillivray, H. R. Silver, W. A. Black, G. Fred Pearson and Ralph Bell, Secretary. The chairman of the sub-committees were J. L. Hetherington, E. Gaboury, W. S. Davidson, Hon. R. G. Beazley, F. A. Gillis, A. D. MacRae, J. C. Stredder, Col. McKelvie [sic] Bell, G. S. Campbell, A. S. Barnstead, D. MacGillivray and H. Milburn. It was these men who bore the burden and the heat of the day.

The nature and scope of the Dartmouth relief work was exactly the same as the work in Halifax. Though the need was on a smaller scale, it was in many cases equally as great.

The Executive Committee consisted of Ex Mayor A. C. Johnston, Chairman, Rev. A. F. Baker, Secretary, R. H. Murray, R. B. Kobl, W. H. Covert, Mrs. F. J. Ward, Mrs. A. F. Baker and H. R. Silver.

The chairmen of the sub-committees were R. K. Elliot, C. J. Burchell, Aldermen Lynch, H, O'C. Baker, John Forsyth, W. C. Bishop, C. E. Creighton, E. S. Fraser, H A. Young, Rev. C. W. Vernon, D. A. Mosher.

Counting Damage

IT was not until responsibility had been delegated to a special group that the public felt itself free to draw a breath, to look around and count the damage that the blow had done. Everything was at a standstill. Business and industry must be set agoing. Church and school must resume their work. So one by one the broken threads were reconnected.

Commercial activity was the earliest aspect of life to resume its functions, and of these the public utilities were first on the list. Wire communication had been broken completely. One was reconnected within an hour. By evening six multiplex wires to Montreal had been established, three to St. John and one each to Boston and New York. Upwards of a thousand messages an hour went forth.

Telephone service was suspended two hours and the cable telephone three days. Illumination was quickly restored. There was partial light and some service from noon on the Sixth. On the evening of the Sixth the first regular train for Montreal left the city and by Monday the full passenger service was resumed. The street car system, though badly damaged, was able to restore a scant service by noon on the Sixth.

Then the blizzard tied up all the lines, and it was not until the Ninth that it was possible to resume service. Newspapers produced papers on the Seventh, but in limited editions and size. The postal

service was not restored to any extent until Monday the 10th. The banks were open for business on the morning following the catastrophe. All business in the banks went on as usual the day after the Explosion. The theatres resumed business on December 28th.

Churches Resume

ON the first Sunday, December the Ninth, Archdeacon Armitage conducted Devine Service in St. Paul's, and the same afternoon this edifice was used by the congregation of All Saint's Cathedral. Services were not generally resumed until the second Sunday, and then in theatres and halls. The opening of schools spread out through the winter months. Classes resumed in one institution on December 10th. January saw classes established in several emergency shelters, church halls and schools. It was not until May 5th that fifteen school buildings were in use. Halifax resumed her function as a port with the sailing four days late of a convoy of some 40 ships under the escort of the cruiser "Highflyers" [sic] which had lost her commander and twenty officers and men in the Explosion and had suffered some injuries which had been hastily repaired.

Commission Formed

IT was early seen that the relief work was to be of such a wide spread and continuous nature that a special organization would have to be incorporated to deal with the reconstruction and rehabilitation work. As a result of an insistent demand by a number of Canadian Journals, the Federal Government, while disclaiming all legal liability to do so, yet undertook to take up the work of

reconstruction and reparation as an "emergency of war." An order-in-council was passed, and the Halifax Relief Commission was formed with T. S. Rogers as Chairman, Judge Wallace and F L. Fowke as Commissioners.

The order-in-council was passed on January 18th, and the Commission took over the great work of relief, restoration and reconstruction.

The first work was the building of temporary houses on the Exhibition Grounds. 816 temporary houses were built and rented at nominal rents to disaster victims. The devastated area was cleared of ruins. It took a thousand men three months to clear up the district. The Commission then constructed 500 houses, 324 of them in a special group along modern community lines. There was also the task of restoration by rebuilding, or by grants to owners, of private and institutional property.

Practically a million dollars was spent on churches and public institutions. Twelve thousand houses were repaired. Small claims courts were set up, which dealt with 16,000 small claims.

Another field of the work was the medical and surgical relief and the convalescent care. Some 14.000 cases were dealt with. For temporary houses, temporary hospitals, clothing and temporary or emergency work of all kinds, the Commission spent about four millions of dollars. For personal claims, and property, dwellings destroyed and property replaced, there was required the huge sum of 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ millions. There were also pensions to be provided for widows and orphans, and those with eye and other disabilities. For those 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ millions were set aside. The pension funds have been so arranged that the balance of all relief monies will be used up with the payment of the last pensions in 1975. To the men and to their successors who

shouldered this tremendous task, the City of Halifax is in everlasting debt.

I cannot close this section of the paper without repeating the recommendation made in my book, and which has not yet been acted upon, that the City should set up a permanent vigilance or public-safety committee, which should be ever ready to function. Such an organization is a necessity in a civilization in which disasters are growing more numerous every day.

The Question "Why?"

WITH the delegating of the duties of relief work to a special committee, the citizens of Halifax had opportunity not only to turn their attention to the salvaging of their disrupted businesses, but also to make vocal the question as to why the catastrophe should have happened at all, and who were to be held responsible. It is the inevitable question which pursues every incident, public or private. But in this case there was the companion question: Was it an accident? It was no mere human weakness which clamoured for a scapegoat. It was the natural reaction of a people who had greatly suffered.

That it was at least the indirect result of war no one could doubt. The German submarine campaign had made the convoy system necessary. The convoy system had brought the T.N.T. To Halifax. But was the collision itself an operation of the War? May there not have been a reason more direct? A large number believed and some still believe that Hunnish propaganda was at least the disaster's secondary cause. The suspicion which attached to certain members of the Imo's crew has

more method than madness in it. The helmsman of the Imo was arrested, and later on released. But the release was regretted.

According to reliable testimony, the Imo blew wrong signals and then did not navigate in compliance with them. - a proceeding which at best provokes thought.

The crew of Belgian relief ships were, it is known, wont to mingle with the spies, aids [sic] and sychophants [sic] with which the Belgian ports were infested. It is not beyond the range of possibility that aboard the Imo might have been mysterious agents of the enemy. That there was a brood of spies in Halifax is fact not fancy. The torpedoing of the Landoverly Castel [sic] told of their devilish presence. They sent the fatal lie across the ocean. If they were here in July, 1918, they were also here in the previous December. Did these play the murdering hand? The New York Times was among those who thought so as late as July afterwards.

Negligence Certain

THE conviction grew however that no Teutonic machination could have so controlled in time and space the movement of two independent vessels so as to bring them into collision at a spot so favorable as may be to the fell design, and with the precise severity to cause the selected one not to founder but to take on fire.

Turning from the German theory, the opinion spread, that whether crime, blunder or incompetence, the disaster was born of apathy, laxity and negligence on the part of the port authorities. Surely a vessel so dangerous ought not to have entered Halifax. The chief Examining Officer had allowed her to pass the gate in the anti-submarine netting. Therefore he must be the author of the calamity.

Though a commander of of first-rate ability and record, he was relieved of duty in deference to popular clamour. In naval eyes the charge that the Mont Blanc should not have been allowed to enter was preposterous. To assemble and organize convoys was the port's main function. To exclude vessels carrying munitions would have reduced the system to a farce, yet there should have been a patrol boat and the harbor cleared.

That the regulations for governing traffic in Halifax Harbor, enforced during the war, were prepared by competent naval authorities, yet did not deal with the handling of ships laden with explosives, - was shown by the Drysdale Board.

This serious, and, to Halifax, fatal, omission was subsequently cared for in in regulations issued by the Parliament of Canada, for the ship-control of explosive-laden vessels in the harbors of Canada. Had these regulations been in effect and observed in Halifax Harbor, it is hardly conceivable that the great disaster of 1917 would have occurred.

Pilots Overworked

ANOTHER view directed culpability to the Pilotage system. It has been pointed out that the war which brought calamity to Halifax, had for three years, been bringing prosperity to the port, and breeding a spirit of desire to take every personal advantage of conditions for the augmenting of incomes. With heavy increase of tonnage, the pilots were earning large fees, were over-worked, and were securing inadequate rest. At the same time they resisted all attempts to add to their numbers. The implication is that the pilots involved were not in condition for such responsibilities.

The pilot of the Imo was killed in the Explosion, and it will never be known why on a calm clear morning he star-boarded his helm as the Mont Blanc approached, inward-bound on her proper side of the channel.

The pilot of the Mont Blanc was suspended, but was afterwards reinstated.

Another matter of negligence which must certainly have been responsible for at least a portion of the casualties was the action of the crew of the explosive-laden ship. Scarcely had the collision occurred, when the whole complement lowered away their boats , rowed like madmen to the Dartmouth shore, and scooted to the woods. The judgment of the Court of Inquiry ran as follows:

"The master and pilot of the Mont Blanc are guilty of neglect of public safety in not taking proper steps to warn the inhabitants of a probable explosion."

As the ship, although set on fire immediately, did not actually blow up until twenty minutes later, much might have been done to give warning and perhaps to minimize the inevitable catastrophe. They could have opened the sea-cock, or could have driven the ship full speed to the Basin, or at least have hoisted danger signals.

Opinion Divided

IT should be remembered that at the Wreck Commissioner Court at Halifax Mr. Justice Drysdale, a Justice of the Supreme Court, assisted by two nautical assessors found the Mont Blanc alone to blame. The owners of the Mont Blanc appealed directly to the Supreme

Court of Canada, where there was a division of judicial opinion. Two judges were of the opinion that the Mont Blanc was alone to blame, and two were of the opinion that the Imo was alone to blame, while Justice Anglin believed that both ships were to blame.

The result was a reversal of Mr. Justice Drysdale's judgment and a finding that both ships were to blame. From that judgment the matter was appealed to the Privy Council by the owners of the Imo, and a cross-appeal was made by the owners of the Mont Blanc.

The Privy Council's decision which was handed down on March 22nd, stated that both Captains were to blame for not having earlier reversed their engines, and prevented, while that was possible, their respective ships from getting into the desperate straits which resulted in the fatal manoeuvres [sic].

It is probable that history will accept this as the final word. Yet there are even many who held and still hold to the theory of an engineered crime. This explanation was given a passing semblance of life when in June 1922, one Johnson or Hohanson [sic] confessed at Seattle to having caused the Halifax disaster before he suicided. This happened to be the name of the helmsman of the Imo who for a time was suspected as a possible German sympathizer.

Passing Of Imo

IF by any fresh evidence it should ever be discovered that the Imo was guiltily implicated in this murderous plot, probably history would be able to show no such striking nemesis as the fate which later befell this same vessel, which after being refloated and repaired, struck the rocks off South America, and foundered on the anniversary date of December 6th a few years since.

The passing of time gave the public also opportunity to reflect upon the many curious phases of the mighty thing which had happened in their midst. The phenomena in connection with the explosion would alone furnish an evening's discussion.

Greatest In History

IN the first place, as an explosion expert testified at the enquiry, the explosion was the greatest explosion in the history of the globe, the greatest previous explosion being that of 500,000 pounds of dynamite in Baltimore Harbour. The mighty energies so suddenly set free were estimated by Prof. Bronson of Dalhousie University as five million foot pounds. In the confined ship the pressure might have been as high as twenty-five million pounds per square foot.

No wonder the Mont Blanc vanished in a fraction of a second, vanished into a spray of small bits of iron showered over the City like grapeshot. Over many acres these broken bits of half inch boiler plate were to be seen, in every yard of ground.

Ton and half ton masses floated upon the air like flakes of driven snow. The Mont Blanc's 1,207 pound gun was thrown to a distance of three miles, landed in Dartmouth, 280 feet above salt water - and reached an elevation of 1 1-2 miles. The anchor of the ship flew over the city and came to rest on the other side of the Arm. The hawse pipe - 200 pounds in weight - was driven three miles from the scene. Enormous boulders weighing tons were scooped out of the harbour bed and deposited on the wrecked decks of nearby steamers. One of these vessels was blown across the harbour. A tug was set down bodily on top of a wharf. Pier No. 6 was completely blown away.

Deadly Flame

IN the second place, the explosion transformed the 3000 tons of T.N.T. into a cubic mile of intensely hot gas at a velocity of 1200 feet a second, or a mile every four seconds. The gas accompanied by an unseen flame, brought instantaneous ignition to the houses which it reached. While the air percussion thus set up swept on with stunning power to smash in walls and windows, lift roofs, and uproot trees along its disastrous path, reaching Milford at 9:06, Stewiacke about 9:08, Truro at 9:09, and rattling dishes as far away as Prince Edward Island, 120 miles distant. [T]he sudden cooling of the gas blast, acted like an elastic snap so that the air crashing back in the rebound caused houses to collapse like a pack of cards.

According to the siesmograph [sic] of Dalhousie University, there were three explosions registering at the hours of 9:05, 9:10 and 10:05, the latter two may have taken place at the bottom of the harbor.

One of the many strong freaks is to be seen in St. Paul's Church where a portion of a gallery window was blown out in the shape of the profile of a human head. This relic of the disaster has been preserved by protecting glass.

Museum Material

THERE must be in the possession of many inhabitants of the City, many interesting relics and records which would form museum material for the Archives of the Province. Perhaps it might be suggested by the Historical Society, and that the Society should also suitably mark the resting places of the gun and the anchor. And when the new

bridge spans the Harbour, a plate may well be erected to indicate the locality where the great event took place.

There were many humorous incidents connected with the Explosion. A Halifax officer was leaving his house on the morning of the Explosion. As he parted from his mother he said, "We are going to have artillery practice. If you hear an explosion, don't be afraid." Half an hour afterwards, the lady was thrown across the room and out of the door. As soon as she could speak she said, "If Willie carries on like this he will lose his job."

One small boy was in the garden helping his mother take the clothes off the clothesline. Having trouble with the fractious garments, he pulled very hard just at the moment of the Explosion. The next house to which the line was attached suddenly collapsed. The small boy ran into the house and said to his mother, " See what I have done. I have pulled the next house down."

And Halifax Today

AFTER the passing of several years, with the relief work complete, with the sorrows and distresses tempered by time, the citizens of Halifax may contemplate the catastrophe in the light of the wonderful recuperation which has come through the intervening years.

Today there remain but few signs of the disaster excepting the scars and disabilities of those who were most severely affected. Our sympathies go forth to the six hundred pensioners and especially to those who have been blinded and maimed. And those whose lives were taken we enroll among the heroes whose blood was part of the price that saved liberty and progress for the world. The Explosion was an integral part of that struggle. And in the two minute silence of

every Remembrance Day, we shall ever join them together in our thoughts.

It is a fitting and proper honour that on every anniversary in all these years, the monuments to the victims in the cemeteries of Fairview and Mount Olivet have been decorated with flowers. Indeed the City of Halifax might well act upon the suggestion that a memorial pedestal be erected in the centre of the Cit, supporting one of the large metal fragments hurled ashore from the Mont Blanc on that fateful day.

Because of the lives thus given every harbour in Canada will be the safer for all time to come, in peace and in war. Because of the experience which cost so many lives every future disaster will be better managed and with less suffering than in the past.

Wrought Changes

BUT it is possible for us now after these intervening years to see how these lives have been given not only for a safer Canada but for a greater Halifax; and how out of the strange alchemy of Nature, there has taken place the transmutation of evil into good. Many years ago St. Augustine wrote in regard to the capture of Rome by Alaric the Goth in 410 A. D., "This awful catastrophe is not the end. But the beginning. History does not end so. It is how its chapters open." One would almost think that the Ancient Father was speaking of Halifax. That the disaster of 1917 has wrought revolutionary changes is apparent to all.

In the North End of the City, Nature has healed the devastated area, and from the ruins has arisen a model Garden City. Through the Explosion, Halifax exchanged more than 500 dilapidated houses for new

up-to-date dwellings - models of what a Canadian home should be. There is no finer section with its avenues of young trees, its courts, grass-lawns and central public recreation area. One may also subscribe to the Eastern proverb that "Fire is the agent of Civilization." The new is much greater and better than the old.

But it is not alone the physical appearance of the City which has benefited by the disaster. The physical life of the people has itself undergone transformation. Prior to the Explosion the health organization of Halifax was little short of a disgrace. The infant mortality had been tremendously high, reaching the rate of 182 per 1000 living births.

If Halifax has today one of the most complete health organizations in the Dominion, it is largely due to the five year plan which was inaugurated through the \$75,000 per year expenditure made possible through the munificence of the State of Massachusetts.

Through the stimulus of this work and the related activities, the general mortality has dropped from 20.2 per 1000 population to 11.7. The infant mortality has dropped from 187.5 in the disaster period to 77.2 last year. Today five hundred people live each year who would otherwise have died had the general death rate been maintained as in the Explosion year. It means that since the Explosion, over 5000 lives have been saved in the City of Halifax. The Explosion cost us just 1635.

Bonded To The World

There is not time to pursue the subject along sociological lines, or to indicate how Halifax has garnered in its fruit of tears in better standards of education, recreation, civic planning and co-

operation. Sufficient that I quote from my own little work to say:
"That through the stimulus of a great catastrophe, Halifax has undergone a civic transformation such as could hardly otherwise have happened in fifty years. The death and suffering in Halifax was not all loss - was not all in vain. The twenty-first day of June was the old Natal Day kept each year with punctilious regularity. Many of us believe that for Halifax there was a new Nativity and that it dates from December sixth. Sad as was the day, it may be the greatest day in the city's history."

And so when December sixth comes round let the great deeds of that historic episode be told again. Let its heroism be built into our tradition by song and story. Let it be remembered that in 1917 Halifax became the City of Comrades, that on this historic date the people of many nations and many tongues clasped her hand and poured their treasures at her feet. "More than two hundred cities in all parts of the planet have given of their means to bring back Halifax! You have to make good! You are bonded to the world!"