In the wake of the Explosion

New book, Scapegoat, looks at the aftermath of the iconic Halifax tragedy

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Scapegoat author Joel Zemel enlightens an audience at the North Memorial library about the legal fallout of the explosion, on the eve of its 96th anniversary.   Chris Muise photos
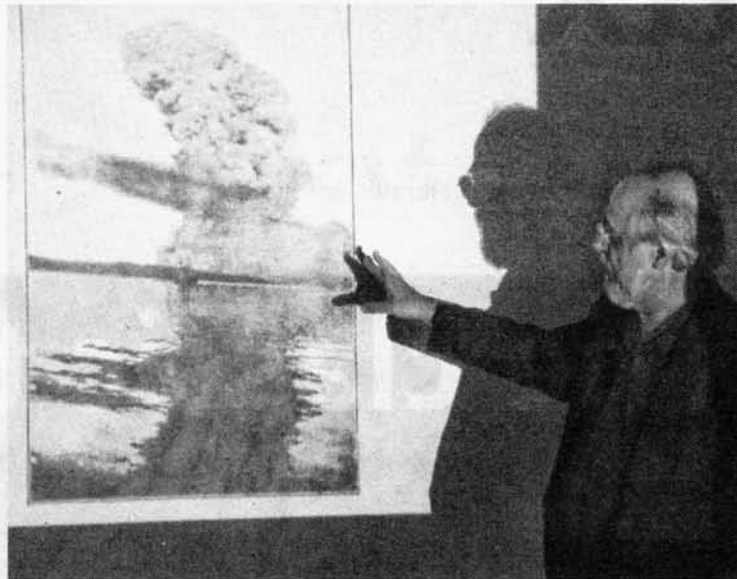
When most people think about the Halifax Explosion, they probably think about...well, the explosion. One local historian is telling the story of the explosion that followed — the explosion of public opinion and legal headhunting — in his first book, Scapegoat.

On the eve of the Halifax Explosion's 96th anniversary, author Joel Zemel hosted a talk about his book at the North Memorial Public Library, where he examined the legal circus that followed in the wake of the blast.

"It turned into a kangaroo court, and went downhill from there," says Zemel. "What intrigued me most was that this one man, Evan Wyatt, was blamed for causing the explosion."

Determining responsibility

The inquiry that followed was, on its surface, meant to determine who should be held responsible for the collision of the French munitions steamer, the SS Mont Blanc, and the Belgian SS Imo, that caused the explosion. Francis Mackey, Aime Le Medec – the Mont Blanc's Pilot and Captain, respectively – and chief examining officer for the Royal Canadian Navy F. Evan Wyatt, were eventually singled out for blame.

"After the other two men were let off on habeas corpus, Wyatt took the full brunt of the grand jury and ended up on trial for manslaughter," says Zemel. "Can you imagine? Manslaughter and criminal negligence."

Scapegoat follows the legal proceedings and background politics at the time, and paints a picture of public hysteria fuelled by panic, inflammatory media coverage, and prejudice that obscured the truth at the time – the explosion was an avoidable accident, but an accident all the same.

"The Mont Blanc was a good ship, but it was way past its usefulness," says Zemel. "It shouldn't have been used as a munitions ship, but the French had no choice. Blame the war."

"The captain and the pilot did all they could to get out of the way," says Zemel, who says the case for negligence was absurd, as it hinged on wilful disregard of harbour regulations when no regulations were breached. "It just happened."

Many of those in attendance at Zemel's panel were history buffs themselves, with a particular interest in the history of the Halifax Explosion, and were interested to learn more about the aftermath.

"Probably even more important than the explosion itself, is how the city reacted," says attendee Pat Dickson. "The explosion itself was over, as [Zemel] said, in the blink of an eye. But there's so many things that developed in our community from the explosion."

'Shaped our history'

"I think it's an important part of what shaped our history in this local area. It affected the landscape, the geography, and what was built following," says Matthew McCarthy, the new branch manager of the North Memorial Library. "It's particularly relevant to this branch, because this is the North Memorial Public Library, and it's 'memorial' for the Halifax Explosion."

Zemel hopes his book, which he publishes himself, will spur Haligonians to get interested in the lesser-known aspects of the explosion, and develop a greater taste for local history in general.

"I would like people to make a concerted effort to, if not themselves, get their children to be more aware of this kind of history," says Zemel. "As the generations move forward, it's going to be more and more difficult, especially as all of the landmarks are disappearing."

Scapegoat, which Zemel launched last November with only 100 copies, is currently out-of-print, but Zemel plans to print more in March. In the meantime, his book is available at any branch of the Halifax Public Library, and many of the details can be found at halifaxexplosion.net. Though there are still a few who are eager to own a copy for themselves.

"It's on my Christmas list," says Dickson.