

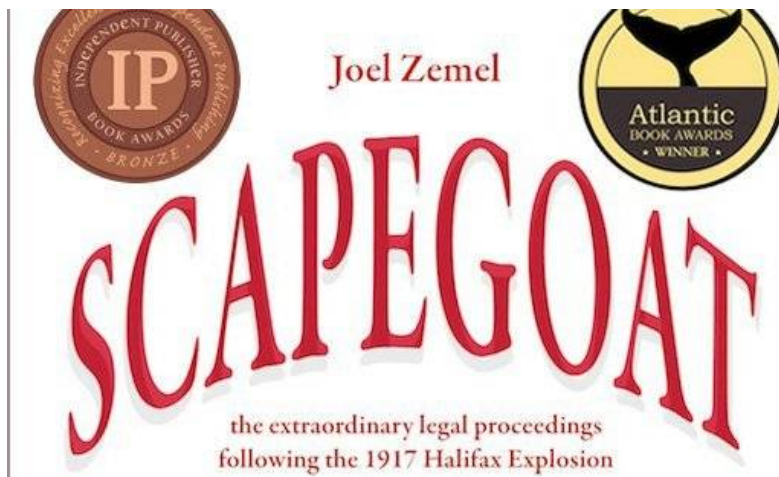
BOOKS: Scapegoat probes Explosion fallout

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Zemel looks at legal implications



Scapegoat by Joel Zemel

Joel Zemel is — if nothing else — persistent.

In 2009, when the Halifax musician and filmmaker came across a photograph of the famous blast cloud that rose above the city's harbour immediately after the disastrous collision of the Mont Blanc and Imo on Dec. 6, 1917, he became fascinated with determining the location from which it had been taken.

This interest led him to focus on the aftermath of the explosion, in particular the legal inquiry into the causes of the disaster that began on Dec. 13, a week after the event, and lasted until Feb. 4.

After more than three years of exhaustive research, Zemel had written what is certainly the single most comprehensive account of the legal proceedings, but discouragingly could not find a publisher. Undaunted, he took a route often fraught with difficulty: he self-published and had 100 copies of the book printed in November 2012.

He also submitted *Scapegoat* to the Atlantic Book Awards and it was first shortlisted and then won the Dartmouth Book Award for Non-fiction in Memory of Robbie Robertson in April 2014, a truly amazing achievement for a self-published book. At about the same time, Francis Mitchell of New World Publishing, who had been offering Zemel advice on distributing his book, offered to pick up the book on a print-on-demand basis.

Later, as a result of New World's involvement, *Scapegoat* won an international award: the 2015 bronze medal of the Independent Publisher Book Awards in the category of Canada East best regional non-fiction. *Scapegoat* is truly deserving of this recognition — and causes one to wonder why no local or regional publisher had enough foresight to publish the book in the first place.

Whatever the reason, *Scapegoat* readers will be treated to a masterly tour de force of the complicated and fascinating legal proceedings following the explosion, hearings that occurred during a tension-filled period to hold someone — anyone — responsible for the disaster. No one connected with the inquiry — from the preconceived notions of presiding Justice Arthur Drysdale to the bullying and dishonesty of several courtroom lawyers to the yellow journalism of William Dennis's *Halifax Herald*, which was based on rumours and innuendo — comes off as being interested in the truth, but instead single-mindedly determined to find a scapegoat.

The lack of impartiality and bias of those involved in the proceedings is shocking to the modern reader. In the end, Drysdale attribute sole responsibility for the disaster to the captain of the Mont Blanc, Aime Le Medec, and the ship's Halifax pilot, Francis Mackey. He also severely censured for negligence the officer responsible for controlling ship traffic in the harbour, Royal Canadian Navy acting commander F. Evan Wyatt.

Although all three were quickly charged with manslaughter, only Wyatt was brought to trial. Justice Benjamin Russell — who had earlier ordered the charges against Le Medec and Mackey dismissed, a decision that inflamed public opinion — instructed the jury a Wyatt's trial that there was no case against the naval officer and he was acquitted.

Sadly, despite his acquittal, the public had found its scapegoat. Wyatt was dismissed from the navy, his career and reputation in tatters. Zemel strongly believes that Wyatt was railroaded and one of the reasons he wrote Scapegoat was to vindicate the naval officer. The reader can judge whether or not he has succeeded.

Zemel has reproduced large portions of the testimony of about 60 witnesses and placed them in the chronological order of the event of Dec. 6, itself a daunting task given the sheer number of transcripts and the large amount of other available written evidence. The author's experience as a filmmaker served him well here, as he incorporated individual testimonies into a format similar to a documentary film.

The result is a seamless witness account of the events of that fateful day, reproduced as never before. The centennial of the Halifax Explosion is only two years away and there are certain to be new books about the disaster as the anniversary date approaches, but none will equal the thoroughness of Scapegoat.

Explosion aficionados, as well as those who know little about the event, will find Scapegoat a great addition to the literature about the disaster. An added bonus of Zemel's book is photographs of virtually all the key players associated with the explosion and the inquiry, most of which have not been previously published.

John Boileau writes about our military history

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