

placed in service during the American Civil War and both World Wars.

The entries found throughout the journal are enhanced by appropriate and informative maps, portraits, drawings, and photographs. A series of eight colour plates includes contemporary or near-contemporary paintings and illustrations, as well as a vibrant depiction of the fourth-rate *Dristigheten* and companion fleet vessels shortly after breaking through Russia's blockade, painted by Hägg. A handful of the black and white images in the volume seem to have suffered somewhat during reproduction or printing: a series of vertical or horizontal lines are evident in roughly a half-dozen of these, throughout some of the submissions. It is difficult to tell if these are attributable to the source material, an issue at press, or some other fault, but these are minor detractions from an otherwise excellent set of illustrations. One curious omission is found in *The Tailor Prince*, where the author, working from a sketch in a primary source held in her personal collection, describes clearly and in detail the garb, stance, and facial expression of Rangoon. Her discussion does great credit to the sketch, and certainly gives the reader hints at the man's possible character. Since it depicts the central player in the story its inclusion would have been a welcome addition.

In their forwards, the President and the Editors point out that this edition is a special case and applaud the contributors for their efforts in producing an outstanding collection of submissions without benefit of the typical archives, libraries, and research tools afforded during non-pandemic times. This is appropriate praise, and well-deserved.

Jim Hughey
Houston, Texas

T. Joseph Scanlon. (Roger Sarty, ed.) *Catastrophe: Stories and Lessons from the Halifax Explosion*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier Press, www.wlupress.wlu.ca, 2020. 400 p., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. CDN \$39.99, paper: ISBN 978-1-77112-371-6. (E-book available.)

The explosion of the munitions ship *SS Mont-Blanc* after a collision in Halifax Harbour on 6 December 1917 was a disaster that killed nearly 2,000 people and devastated an important Canadian wartime port.

This book by the late Joseph Scanlon aims to present a detailed and comprehensive view of the explosion using the lens of disaster theory. This is a field where Scanlon, a journalist and Carleton University professor, worked for many years. The Halifax Explosion interested him because it was Canada's deadliest manmade disaster, but also because it inspired the first modern academic study of the effects of disaster, *Catastrophe and Social Change*

written in 1920 by Samuel Henry Prince. Scanlon amply demonstrates that Prince's work was important, but deeply flawed, and felt the event deserved a better study. After Scanlon's unexpected death in 2015, his son James David Scanlon took the manuscript and engaged Canadian naval historian Roger Sarty to edit and complete the book.

The result is very different from most books about the Halifax Explosion. These have tended to be lavishly illustrated summaries focusing on survivor accounts, or specialized studies of specific families and institutions. This book focuses on documentation and analysis. (A single map and some images of key players are the only illustrations.) Scanlon explores how the city and its inhabitants were affected using tools of disaster theory about ideas such as panic and communication chains. An important idea in the book is an effect known in the disaster field as "convergence," when outside help brings extra resources, but also confusion and disruption.

In his verdict, the little-known deputy mayor of Halifax, Henry Colwell played a critical role. With other leaders killed, injured or out-of-town, Colwell led the response, holding a meeting behind the shattered windows of City Hall 90 minutes after the blast to create the Halifax Relief Committee. It set up a very effective relationship with the military for rescue, transport and treatment of the injured, identification of the dead and secured money and supplies. The committee's work was, in Scanlon's view, ad hoc and decentralized, but effective. The city used military vehicles and seized private cars to distribute incoming doctors, nurses and supplies to the hellishly overcrowded Halifax hospitals as regional help poured in from cities and towns in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Complexity arose on the third day as more help converged from further away, especially the relief teams from American states, notably Massachusetts. In a chapter Scanlon calls "The American Invasion," he shows how American officials convinced Canada's Prime Minister Robert Borden that a new and larger committee should be in charge, excluding municipal officials and staffed mainly by American "professionals". The exhausted Haligonians, appreciative of fresh help, went along. The Americans soon took all the credit for saving Halifax, dismissing the critical work started before their arrival. They also made some things worse, insisting on setting up their own hospitals, draining resources from the Halifax hospitals with the most serious cases. They brought an over-staffed and heavy-handed approach to dispersing relief that was obsessed with winnowing out "cheaters" using intrusive interviews and questionnaires that demanded detailed personal financial records. (Complaints grew and the American dominated committee was itself replaced by the federal Halifax Relief Commission in February 1918.)

Shipping, both naval and merchant, is addressed throughout the book, although naval scholars will still find that John Armstrong's 2022 book *The*

Halifax Explosion and the Royal Canadian Navy remains the key tool to understand the explosion's effect on the beleaguered Royal Canadian Navy. Most previous accounts have focused overwhelmingly on the two ships in the collision, the French SS *Mont-Blanc* and the Norwegian SS *Imo*, and which was to blame for the collision. Scanlon does not dwell on this controversy, although he does point mostly to confusion aboard *Mont-Blanc*, at odds with most writing in recent years has tended to focus the blame on outbound *Imo*, the ship speeding on the wrong side of the Narrows. This debate will no doubt continue. More significantly, however, Scanlon effectively addresses the broader, and often ignored question, unresolved by the official inquiry, about the dangerous pairing of flammables and explosives aboard *Mont-Blanc* and the admission of munitions ships deep into the harbour. He concludes that the British quietly made some changes to improve safety after the explosion, but continued to put the efficient delivery of munitions ahead of civic safety.

Scanlon's marshalling of sources is remarkable. No other book about the explosion has drawn from such a comprehensive documentary base. This includes not only the staples of firsthand written accounts and newspaper coverage, but also survivor interviews he conducted and a comprehensive array of archival sources that are not only footnoted but explored in a detailed sources chapter.

There are a few flaws. A section exploring the conflicting death toll of the explosion omits the comprehensive work by the Nova Scotia Archives' Halifax Explosion database created in 2002, which has systematically documented and refined the names of those killed. Scanlon also misinterprets some details on the physical effects of the explosion, the subject of considerable scientific work following the important 1994 conference proceedings, *Ground Zero*. These are minor points in wide-reaching and detailed research that sheds light on a myriad of important effects not previously explored; everything from the loss and restoration of critical telephone and telegram lines, to the effect on wages, to the struggle to ensure coal supplies after the explosion. Most Canadians know that railway dispatcher Vincent Coleman sent a heroic telegraph warning, but Scanlon explains exactly how he did it and carefully assesses its effect. This large and systematic study will become the new standard for understanding the Halifax Explosion.

Dan Conlin
Halifax, Nova Scotia

Timothy D. Walker (ed.). *Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railway*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, www.umasspress.com, 2021. xvi+231 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, index. US \$27.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-62534-592-9.