

*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](http://www.umasspress.com), 2021. xvi+231 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, index. US \$27.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-62534-592-9.**

*Sailing to Freedom: Maritime Dimensions of the Underground Railroad* is a collection of ten essays, edited by Timothy D. Walker, which examine how seaborne escape attempts by African American slaves in the antebellum South were managed and carried out. The maritime aspects of the Underground Railroad have garnered less attention in the historiography of the Underground Railroad than terrestrial aspects; even the name, the Underground Railroad, is metaphorically terrestrial. In fact, the use of sea routes to escape slavery were, according to Walker, far more prevalent than one may think. He states in his introduction that “of 103 extant pre-emancipation slave narratives, more than seventy percent recount the use of oceangoing vessels as a means of fleeing slavery” (1). That’s an extraordinary ratio that I certainly would not have expected.

One volume will surely not redress the imbalance and the book does not claim to do so, but Walker expresses his hope that it will inspire new scholarship into what he calls “the Saltwater Underground Railroad.” He hopes to raise awareness and improve scholarly accuracy and, ultimately, do justice to the memory of those Underground Railroad operatives who risked severe punishment and even death in aiding enslaved African Americans gain their liberty.

This collection brings to light the volume of escape attempts that occurred by sea and makes it clear that a holistic understanding of the Underground Railroad cannot be achieved without understanding its maritime aspects. Indeed, a waterborne escape offered greater chances of success to fleeing slaves in the deep south, at least to those in coastal regions, than an overland route. Slaves were extensively employed on the waterfronts in the antebellum south and the nature of their work meant that they endured less direct oversight than those employed inland. The prevalence of transient sailors from the northern states and from overseas, including free Black sailors, meant that enslaved people found it comparatively easy to obtain news and information from and about the outside world. Not to mention the opportunity to stowaway aboard one of the thousands of mercantile vessels departing southern ports annually.

Each of the contributors to the book covers a different region along the US eastern seaboard and considers things such the personal profiles of escapees, strategies employed to affect an escape and how Southern authorities attempted to thwart escape attempts. Many escape attempts were made largely in isolation, the escapee perhaps risking contact with one or two people, usually free Black crew members aboard a ship, to make the attempt. But others were made with the assistance of a pre-existing, albeit loose, network of people; dockside workers, sailors and even ship captains, who regularly assisted slaves escape to the north. The backgrounds of those involved in the network was unpredictable. It included Quakers, white abolitionists, freed slaves, and in

some instances, even family members of slaveholders. Some did so out of a sense of altruism, others demanded compensation. Some of the names and their stories will be familiar to readers, such as escapees Harriet Tubman (who became an Underground Railroad ‘stationmaster’) and Frederick Douglass, or railroad stationmaster William Still, or Robert Smalls who commandeered a Confederate gunboat to obtain freedom; but others will undoubtedly be relatively unknown. Eye-catching is the sheer audacity of people like Captain Albert Fountain or the mysterious schooner captain who Still only referred to as B, both of whom took great risks in repeatedly secreting people aboard their vessels and away to freedom.

The opportunities for seaborne escape were well known to Southern authorities to the extent that escape attempts by slaves working on the docks were almost expected, but such was the value of the work that they performed, that the risk was accepted. It was virtually assumed that a missing slave in a coastal community had attempted to escape by boat. Measures were put in place to thwart escape attempts: boats were searched before departing, free Black sailors had their freedom of movement restricted, and punishment for absconders and those that assisted them were harsh, while rewards were given to those who revealed them. But, as the book makes quite clear, these measures were no deterrent.

The text is aimed primarily at an academic audience but is accessible enough for general readership. Indeed, I make no claim to be an expert on American slavery or the Underground Railroad, but I found the text to be both informative and, for the most part, engaging throughout. Some chapters are better than others, as may be expected when a book has multiple contributors, and while there is some minor repetition, all the contributors offer something unique about the respective areas they cover. All chapters are very well researched with extensive footnotes giving the text intellectual vigour. I do not know that this book will inspire new scholarship into the Saltwater Underground Railroad, but it certainly helps to raise awareness of its existence and of those who were involved. Highly recommended.

Petar Djokovic  
Canberra, Australia

**Conrad Waters (ed.). *Seaforth World Naval Review 2022*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, [www.nip.org](http://www.nip.org), 2021. 192 pp., illustrations, tables, notes. US \$60.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-68247-746-5.**

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