

Curse of the Narrows

By Laura M. Mac Donald

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In 1917, the port of Halifax, Nova Scotia, was crowded with ships leaving for war-torn Europe. On December 6th, two of them--the *Mont Blanc* and the *Imo*--collided in the Narrows, a hard-to-navigate stretch of the harbor. Ablaze, and with explosions on her deck filling the sky, the *Mont Blanc* grounded against the city's docks.

As thousands rushed to their windows and into the streets to watch, she exploded with such force that the 3,121 tons of her iron hull vaporized in a cloud that shot up more than 2,000 feet; the explosion was so unusual that Robert Oppenheimer would study its effects to predict the devastation of an atomic bomb. The blast caused a giant wave that swept over parts of the city, followed by a slick, black rain that fell for ten minutes. Much of the city was flattened, and not one in 12,000 buildings within a 16-mile radius left undamaged. More than 1,600 Halifaxians were killed and 6,000 injured; and within twenty-four hours, a blizzard had isolated Halifax from the world.

Set vividly against the background of World War I, *Curse of the Narrows* is the first major account of the world's largest pre-atomic explosion, the epic relief mission from Boston, and the riveting trial of the *Mont Blanc*'s captain and pilot. Laura M. Mac Donald is as adept at describing the dynamics of a chain reaction explosion as she is at chronicling unforgettable human dramas of miraculous survival, unfathomable loss, and the medical breakthroughs in pediatrics and eye surgery that followed the disaster.

Using primary sources--many of which haven't been read in decades and--with a wonderful feel for narrative history, Mac Donald chronicles one of the most compelling and dramatic events of the 20th century.

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Curse of the Narrows By Laura M. Mac Donald Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #109584 in eBooks
- Published on: 2009-05-26
- Released on: 2009-05-26
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Assiduous research, beautiful writing, and a great talent for historical reconstruction make Laura MacDonald's *Curse of the Narrows* the definitive account of the Halifax explosion of December 1917. MacDonald is a master of minutia--chemistry, laws of navigation, the horrors visited on the poor people of Halifax's north end--and she writes with supreme authority and exquisite detail.

MacDonald begins her account with geography and she sets the scene by examining the bustling port of Halifax in the First World War. Using the very best recent scholarship, she then reconstructs the accident itself, describing closely the series of small errors that lead the Norwegian freighter *Imo* to ram into the French munitions vessel *Mont Blanc* in the narrows of Halifax harbor: "The *Mont Blanc*, with 2,925 tons of explosives, packed in hermetically sealed holds inside a super-heated hull was now the most powerful bomb the war and the world had yet produced." When it exploded, thousands of innocent people were killed in an instant. If MacDonald had limited her investigation into the causes of the accident her book would still be worth buying. She offers much more: examinations of the inquiries and court cases, the official response to the devastation, and above all the ways in which families were challenged by the appalling effects of the explosion. By tracing the struggles of these families, the Duggans, the Frasers, and the Galloways among others, MacDonald brings the scope of the tragedy home to the reader in a way that few would have believed possible. Be warned. Parts of this book are book have an impact on the reader's soul no less than the concussion of the explosion itself. This is a magnificent accomplishment. --*William Newbigging*

From Publishers Weekly

In this recounting of the December 6, 1917, explosion that leveled much of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Mac Donald gives a minutely detailed if not particularly lively rendition of what legend holds to be the most powerful manmade detonation before the testing of the atomic bomb in 1945. The unique natural characteristics of the city's harbor had long made it an ideal naval base of operations, and by 1917, Halifax had become a key transit point for war material bound from the ostensibly neutral United States to the beleaguered European allies. The merchant ship *Mont Blanc*, loaded with thousands of tons of TNT and the notoriously unstable explosive picric acid, was passing through the harbor's Narrows when it was struck by a Belgian relief vessel and exploded. More than 1,600 died, thousands more were injured and the blast wave collapsed buildings, in the words of a survivor, "like a grain field in harvest before a gust of wind." A television producer and Halifax native, Mac Donald draws out her narrative with excessive detail and flat prose, failing to bring her trove of first-person accounts to life. 40 b&w illus. not seen by PW. (Oct.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Booklist](#)

On December 6, 1917, two ships--the *Mont Blanc* and the *Imo*--collided in the narrows of the harbor of Halifax, Nova Scotia. The *Mont Blanc*, with 2,925 tons of explosives in barrels and kegs, caught on fire and set off a chain of events that destroyed much of the city. The 12,000 buildings within a 16-mile radius were damaged. More than 1,600 people were killed, 6,000 were injured, and many were blinded. The explosives created a slick black rain that fell across the city. The *Imo* spun across the harbor, crowded with ships bound for Europe, and ended up with its stern partially underwater. MacDonald, a native of Halifax, offers a minute-by-minute account of the disaster. She describes how many of the people miraculously survived, the extraordinary relief efforts, and the medical procedures in eye surgery and pediatrics. With 40 black-and-white illustrations, her book captures in vivid detail the history of this catastrophe. *George Cohen*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ralph Garibay:

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have much more or little spare time? That's why, you can choose the suitable activity intended for spend your time. Any person spent their very own spare time to take a go walking, shopping, or went to the particular Mall. How about open as well as read a book titled Curse of the Narrows? Maybe it is being best activity for you. You understand beside you can spend your time along with your favorite's book, you can cleverer than before. Do you agree with it is opinion or you have some other opinion?

Nellie Davis:

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Sandra Forester:

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