

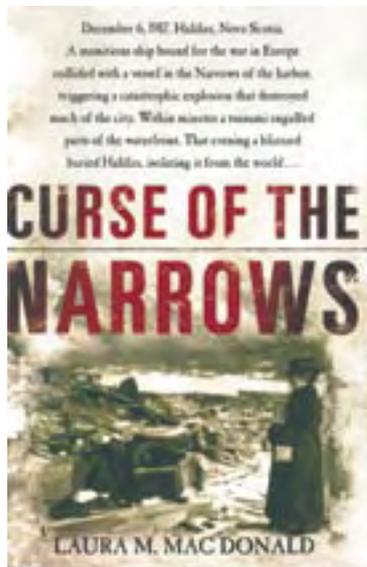
AJEM BOOK REVIEW

Curse of the Narrows by Roger Jones, Director, Board of the Victoria State Emergency Service Authority

by **Laura M. MacDonald.**
Publisher: Walker and Company, New York, 2005.

In 1917, the busy Canadian port of Halifax, Nova Scotia was crowded with supply ships servicing war-torn Europe. On the morning of December 6 Imo, a Belgian relief vessel collided with the Mont Blanc, a French munitions ship in the hard-to-navigate Narrows entrance to the harbour. The subsequent explosion, which effectively vaporised the 3,121-ton Mont Blanc and was later studied by J. Robert Oppenheimer to help predict the effects of an atomic explosion, devastated the port and the city, killing over 2,000 people (some 30% of whom were children) and wounding over 6,000. Nine thousand people, many of them widows or orphans, were made homeless.

Laura MacDonald's interest in the event was more than academic — an author and writer/producer for films and television, she grew up in Dartmouth, on the other side of the Narrows from Halifax proper, and many of her friends and neighbours were descendants of those affected by the explosion. Driven by that personal interest, she gained access to an array of historical, legal and primary sources including medical and welfare files.



The result is a well-written and fascinating narrative history of the cause and impact of the event itself, its immediate aftermath and its political, social and economic consequences, illustrated with a wealth of human interest stories. Many heroes feature in the stories — and a few villains.

For the student of disaster management, however, there are some particularly interesting aspects and more than a few reminders of how little we tend to learn or remember from one disaster to the next. MacDonald's detailed examination of the immediate post-disaster relief and rehabilitation activities, which involved a large

contingent of Massachusetts Public Safety Committee and American Red Cross volunteers, gives copious examples of both.

The issues of resource mobilisation and deployment, in an aftermath which featured fire, flooding, blizzards and transportation problems, are well canvassed and just as valid today. The concerns of the medical and public health services and of the city administration would have their modern parallels. One surprise is the extent of awareness of the longer-term recovery and reconstruction problems revealed in many of the reports, and of the degree of initiative and innovation displayed in dealing with them.

The book is extensively referenced, has detailed end-notes and a comprehensive index, together with a number of useful appendices, one of which is a transcript of a 1958 radio interview with Francis Mackey, the pilot of the Mont Blanc who survived the explosion and continued to work as a pilot in Halifax harbour for the rest of his life.

Commended as a thoroughly good read or even for adding to your collection.