

The Halifax Relief Commission (1918-1976): Its History, Historiography, and Place in Halifax Disaster Scholarship

Barry Cahill

Volume 47, numéro 2, été–automne 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058005ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.1353/aca.2018.0020>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cette note

Cahill, B. (2018). The Halifax Relief Commission (1918-1976): Its History, Historiography, and Place in Halifax Disaster Scholarship. *Acadiensis*, 47(2). <https://doi.org/10.1353/aca.2018.0020>

The Halifax Relief Commission (1918-1976): Its History, Historiography, and Place in Halifax Disaster Scholarship

IN DECEMBER 1931 THE REVEREND DR. SAMUEL HENRY PRINCE, professor of economics and sociology at the University of King's College and author of the first scholarly study of the Halifax Disaster,¹ presented a paper to the Nova Scotia Historical Society entitled "The Halifax Explosion – Fourteen Years After."² In it he described in specific detail the core accomplishments of the Halifax Relief Commission: \$4M on constructing temporary hospitals and houses (816 of the latter), 500 permanent houses erected (including 324 in what is known today in Halifax as "the Hydrostone"), repairs to 12,000 damaged houses, the settling of 16,000 claims for disaster losses (totalling \$18.5M), assistance for 14,000 medical and convalescent cases, \$1M to reconstruct churches and other public institutions, and \$3.5M in pensions for the disabled as well as widows and orphans.³ The Halifax Relief Commission would continue to exist for another 45 years until 1976, focusing on the provision of pensions and similar assistance, but today it is forgotten, as obscure as the Halifax Disaster remains a defining, indelible moment in the public memory about the city. Yet in a recent study of the Nova Scotian experience of the First World War, historian Brian Tennyson properly includes the Halifax Disaster on 6 December 1917⁴ and the Halifax Relief Commission as significant aspects of that experience.⁵ But to this day the Halifax Relief Commission remains the missing link in the historiography of the disaster. Why is that the case? This research note, through a close critical examination of the limited existing historical literature on the commission, attempts to answer that question.

Created through legislation in April 1918, the Halifax Relief Commission was a federal-provincial hybrid: established by the government of Canada and incorporated by the Nova Scotia legislature. It was a cross between an administrative tribunal and a Crown corporation. Given the time and circumstances of its creation, any study of it must consider the expanding role of the Canadian state in wartime; doing so enables the student of administrative history to contextualize

1 Samuel Henry Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change: Based upon a Sociological Study of the Halifax Explosion* (New York, 1920).

2 The complete text of Prince's lecture was published in the *Halifax Mail* of 6 December 1932: "When Halifax Proved its Fine Nobility on Dec. 6th." See, generally, Susan Dodd, *The Halifax Explosion: The Apocalypse of Samuel H. Prince – A Commentary on Catastrophe and Social Change* (Grandview, PE: Underhill Books, 2017).

3 Prince, "When Halifax Proved its Fine Nobility."

4 Throughout this research note I use the term "Halifax Disaster" to refer to what is popularly known as the Halifax Explosion. That locution is neither accurate nor historically authentic – Halifax did not explode; it was the *Mont Blanc* that exploded, after a collision with the *Imo* in the Narrows of Halifax Harbour that ignited a shipboard fire leading to the explosion that, in turn, wrought the devastation. It is revealing that between 1995 and 2011 the subtitle of journalist Michael Bird's republished *The Town That Died*, the first modern history of the disaster, originally published in England in 1962, altered Halifax "Disaster" to Halifax "Explosion."

5 Brian Douglas Tennyson, *Nova Scotia at War, 1914-1919* (Halifax: Nimbus, 2017), 221-2.

Barry Cahill, "The Halifax Relief Commission (1918-1976): Its History, Historiography, and Place in Halifax Disaster Scholarship," *Acadiensis* XLVII, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2018): 93-110.

meaningfully the local narrative. According to Robert Craig Brown's biographical description of Sir Robert Borden, conscription for military service overseas during the First World War "was echoed by vigorous use of the powers of the state at home. The nationalization of the transcontinental railways was begun. Borden's government regulated food and fuel distribution and controlled fuel prices and miners' wages. It imposed a 'temporary' direct tax on incomes, both personal and business. It forbade both strikes and lockouts."⁶ The first and most significant display of state power was, of course, the War Measures Act itself, enacted in August 1914 shortly after the outbreak of war with Germany; this historic legislation conferred on the federal government control of the nation's harbours. Such was the Canada of 1917 – a year when the Military Service Act (conscription) was passed, the Union Government coalition was formed, and the Halifax Disaster took place (the latter while the "conscription election" campaign was in progress). The context underlying the creation of the Halifax Relief Commission was a significant moment in the development of the Canadian regulatory state, which continued to expand during the interwar years and grew to maturity during and after the Second World War. Enlarging the scope of the study to include the development of the federal regulatory state during the First World War supports the claim that the Halifax Relief Commission has a significance well beyond the confines of disaster scholarship.

The Halifax Relief Commission is unique not only in the history of Canadian emergency management but also in the history of Canadian public administration. In their classic 1965 study of Crown corporations, C.A. Ashley and R.G.H. Smails include the commission in their four-part taxonomy under "unclassified corporations," the others in this category being the Bank of Canada, the Canada Council, the Canadian Wheat Board, the Eastern Rockies Forest Conservation Board, Industrial Development Bank, the National Productivity Council, and the Northern Ontario Pipe Line Crown Corporation. Introducing the chapter dealing individually with each of these "unclassified corporations," the authors state: "These corporations are so diverse in their functions and their administration that no attempt is made at generalization." Ashley and Smails observe that even with the Halifax Relief Commission receiving most of its funds from Ottawa, its members being appointed by the federal cabinet, its audited financial statements submitted annually to the federal minister of finance, and its equity "apparently" belonging to the federal government, there is still a question of "whether this corporation [can be] properly included in this study."⁷ The reason for their uncertainty is that the Halifax

6 Robert Craig Brown, "Borden, Sir Robert Laird," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* Volume XVI (1931-1940), http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/borden_robert_laird_16E.html. See also J.A. Corry, "The Growth of Government Activities in Canada, 1914-1921," *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report 1940*, 63-73, and R.C. Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart), 1974; repr. 1976), chap. 12 ("The War Economy").

7 C.A. Ashley and R.G.H. Smails, *Canadian Crown Corporations: Some Aspects of their Administration and Control* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), 162, 175-6. There is no study of First World War Crown corporations comparable to Sandford Borins's "World War II Crown Corporations: Their Functions and Their Fate," in *Crown Corporations in Canada: The Calculus of Instrument Choice*, ed. J. Robert S. Prichard (Toronto: Butterworths, 1983), 447-75. According to Borins (447), "few crown corporations were established" during the Great War." The Halifax Relief Commission was one of the few. In an important study, written in the wake of the enactment of the

Relief Commission was not only *sui generis* but anomalous: a federal public body incorporated provincially. Central to their interpretation is that while the commission was incorporated by the province, it was not set up by it. Given Ashley and Smails's criteria and definitions, the commission was unique even among "unclassified corporations." There is a tendency among scholars to assume that if the commission was set up by Ottawa it must have been by an act of Parliament; alternatively, if set up by the province, then it must have been by the act of the legislature incorporating it. Neither of these propositions is true.

Historical writing about the Halifax Relief Commission is almost as old as the commission itself. The very first book written about the Halifax Disaster, journalist Stanley K. Smith's valuable and unjustly neglected *Drama of a City: The Story of Stricken Halifax*, published in New York in 1918, took note of the commission in the following way:

It was with something of relief that on Monday, January 21 [1918] the announcement was received that a federal "Halifax Relief Commission" had been appointed by the Dominion Government to take over the work of relief and reconstruction, the commission consisting of T. Sherman Rogers KC and Hon. W. B. Wallace, judge of the County Court, two well-known Halifax citizens, and F.L. Fowke, ex-MP, former mayor of Oshawa, Ont. By this time, the reconstruction [rehousing] work had grown to immense proportions.⁸

In 1920 sociologist Samuel Henry Prince described the genesis of the commission in these terms:

Public opinion seemed to demand that the work of restoration and reparation be undertaken by the government of Canada as a national enterprise. The government, while disclaiming all legal liability, acceded to the request. On January twenty-first [1918] there was announced the formation of a federal Halifax Relief Commission to take over the whole work of rehabilitation and reconstruction – an announcement which brought a feeling of relief to the already discouraged workers.⁹

federal Financial Administration Act (1951), H.R. Balls, an official in the Department of Finance, recognized the Halifax Relief Commission as a Canadian Crown corporation, charged with "the administration of a local relief and rehabilitation program following a disastrous explosion in Halifax." But he also acknowledged its near uniqueness. According to Balls, "Excepting only the Canadian National (West Indies) Steamships Limited, which was formed under the provisions of Part I of the Companies Act, and the Halifax Relief Commission, which was incorporated under an act of the legislature of the province of Nova Scotia, they [Canadian crown corporations] were all constituted as bodies corporate by special acts of the parliament of Canada which defined their purposes, powers and responsibilities"; see H.R. Balls, "The Financial Control and Accountability of Canadian Crown Corporations," *Public Administration* 31 (Summer 1953):128.

8 Stanley K. Smith, *The Drama of a City: The Story of Stricken Halifax* (New York: Gerald E. Weir, 1918), 155-6.

9 Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change*, 106-7.

The first professional historian to study the commission was John C. Weaver of McMaster University, for whom “the question of reconstruction in Halifax [was] a unique episode in Canadian history.” Weaver’s 1976 “Reconstruction of the Richmond District of Halifax: A Canadian Episode in Public Housing and Town Planning, 1918-1921” marks the beginning of serious historical work related to the commission.¹⁰ The early scholarly impulse, of which Weaver’s article is typical and which has persisted, was not to study the commission as a *Ding an sich* but to use its records to study aspects of post-disaster experience such as the rehabilitation efforts. Janice Walton Miller followed Weaver in 1980 with a master’s thesis in historical geography that examined the same subject from a broader town planning and urban renewal perspective. Miller gives three pages to the Halifax Relief Commission while misstating both its origins and its organization. A helpful appendix, however, provides an extract from the lengthy Nova Scotia act incorporating the commission and the full text of the act of Parliament confirming and ratifying the Nova Scotia act.¹¹

Janet Kitz’s 1989 *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion and the Road to Recovery* is the first serious general history of the disaster.¹² The subtitle of this work makes clear that Kitz viewed the disaster and disaster relief as a continuum. Recognizing that the road to recovery was built by the Halifax Relief Commission, Kitz provides a useful overview of the commission and its operations from its founding in 1918 to its dissolution in 1976. The second of the book’s four parts (“The Road to Recovery”) includes among its ten chapters one entitled “The Relief Commission Arrives” (125-35). Unfortunately, the value of Kitz’s trail-blazing work for scholarly purposes is diminished by the book’s lack of a bibliography or source notes.¹³

It was also in 1989 that historian Suzanne Morton published in *Acadiensis* an expansive study of the commission’s relations with organized labour during reconstruction in 1918 and 1919. The relationship between the commission and the Halifax District Trades and Labour Council was not one of equals and was fraught with tension and mutual misunderstanding. The demand for labour during reconstruction was huge and, in the commission’s view, could not be met on the usual terms, which recognized union wage rates. Morton’s analysis focuses on the most significant period in the commission’s history and highlights an important aspect of it: “The reconstruction efforts of the commission dramatically affected the Halifax building trade unions and led to a struggle by labour to maintain the pre-war and war-time status quo. Moreover, labour in Halifax found that it was ideologically

10 John C. Weaver, “Reconstruction of the Richmond District of Halifax: A Canadian Episode in Public Housing and Town Planning, 1918-1921,” *Plan Canada* 16, no. 1 (March 1976): 36-47.

11 Janice Walton Miller, “Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Effects of Disaster upon Urban Morphology” (MSc thesis, Brigham Young University, 1980), esp. 30-3, 94-6. An abridged version was published under the same title as a paper in *Ground Zero: A Reassessment of the 1917 Explosion in Halifax Harbour – Canada’s Most Tragic Disaster*, ed. Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell (Halifax: Nimbus and Gorsebrook Research Institute, 1994), 409-20.

12 Janet Kitz, *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion and the Road to Recovery* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1989; repr. 2004); the reprint includes a very helpful index.

13 The preface includes a brief bibliographic commentary; see Kitz, *Shattered City*, xiii-xv.

and organizationally incapable of dealing with the powers of the HRC.”¹⁴ There is no denying that the powers of the commission, which were entrenched in its incorporating act, gave it a unique advantage over organized labour that other employers did not possess. Itself the product of the exercise of emergency powers, and authorized to exercise some of its own (such as rent control and expropriation), the commission saw itself as an exception to rules that bound everyone else.

While Morton’s observation that “the subject of labour relations during the reconstruction of [North End] Halifax has been virtually ignored by historians” is true, the same may be said of the commission generally. However, it was not the case that the refusal of the federal government to grant restitution to disaster victims made them dependent on private relief. Nor, for that matter, is it true that the federal government refused to compensate victims of the disaster; what Ottawa offered was not dollar-for-dollar restitution but what it considered reasonable compensation based on demonstrated loss and need. In the end, the federal government granted the commission \$18 million for that and other purposes, two-thirds of all relief monies received. Morton makes a convincing case for the commission’s anti-labour stance but overstates it: “The government-appointed body, reflecting the approach of the federal Unionist government, outraged unionized labour with its military style and undemocratic methods The HRC, like the Unionist government, was simultaneously criticized for lacking direction and arbitrary decisiveness.” There was nothing military about the commission’s methods; two of its three members were lawyers, one of them a judge; its methods were lawyerly, not soldierly. Nor should one expect democracy in an administrative tribunal set up by Order in Council under the War Measures Act to deal with what the federal government considered to be an “emergency of the war.”¹⁵ Criticism for directionlessness and arbitrary decisiveness is understandable but unwarranted. While the commission was undoubtedly arbitrary and decisive, it had to be; its powers spoke to the commission’s overwhelming responsibilities and its willingness to exercise them, even unilaterally, without fear or favour in order to discharge those responsibilities. At no point in its history, especially during its first few years, can it be said to have lacked direction; the very opposite was true. Policy development always lay at or near the top of its agenda – a reflection of the commission itself being the outcome of high-level public policy-making in which the prime minister himself took the lead. Morton’s work is important, though, because it explores in depth how the policies and practices of the Halifax Relief Commission affected organized labour and how labour responded. It also goes some distance towards identifying the sources of the commission’s perennial unpopularity. Labour’s contest with the commission persisted beyond the end of reconstruction, when the commission ceased to be an employer and labour’s critique of it assumed a more ideological character.

14 Suzanne Morton, “The Halifax Relief Commission and Labour Relations during the Reconstruction of Halifax, 1917-1919,” *Acadiensis* XVIII, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 73-93 (esp. 48); repr. in *Workers and the State in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*, ed. Michael Earle (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1989), 47-67.

15 The term apparently first appears in Order in Council PC 3402 (14 December 1917), and defers the federal election in Halifax from 17 December to 28 January 1918.

Morton revisited the subject in her 1995 monograph on Richmond Heights (otherwise known as “the Hydrostone”). This book deals with how gender issues affected men and women in a respectable working-class neighbourhood in the former Devastated Area that the commission rebuilt after the disaster. In the first chapter she provides an excellent thumbnail sketch of the commission’s origins and mandate:

The most important intervention by a government body was the creation of the Halifax Relief Commission (HRC). The voluntary organization of local citizens that responded to the emergency [Halifax Relief Committee] was replaced in late January 1918 by a federally-appointed, state-supported, three-man agency. The HRC was given further legal jurisdiction under the provincial HRC Act. The commission was responsible for investigating losses, damages and injuries and for awarding compensation, and . . . was empowered, within a defined area of 325 acres, to expropriate land, create zoning regulations, rebuild and carry out a town-planning scheme. The HRC’s responsibilities for compensation and reconstruction were integrated through a plan that proposed to have the rent of the rebuilt homes finance future pension payments. Hence the HRC was inadvertently given a public mandate to create the first public housing project in Canada. This quasi-governmental agency served as the primary landlord in Richmond Heights from the fall of 1919 . . .¹⁶

Whether or not the commission was a “quasi-governmental agency” is debatable. It was not a public-private partnership; it was governmental without being government, in much the same way as federal and provincial adjudicative agencies, boards, and commissions are today.

Morton returned to the subject for a third time in her 2014 biography of social worker Jane Barnes Wisdom, second in command of the rehabilitation department – the largest and busiest – over the commission’s critical first year: 1918. In a chapter entitled “Halifax: Bureaucratization, Emergencies and the Progressive State, 1916-1921,” she describes the Halifax Relief Commission as “a public/private hybrid, with its funds originating from both government and private donations, and operating under federal statutes and with government appointments. It conflated the categories of state and society already under pressure of war stringencies.”¹⁷ The commission’s appropriation of the largely private-donation Halifax Relief Fund, which by April 1918, when it closed, had reached some \$4 million, hardly justifies or explains why it should be described as a public/private hybrid. There was nothing “private” about it: only 15 per cent of its core funding came from private sources. Nor did the commission operate under federal statutes but under a provincial one. It

16 Suzanne Morton, *Ideal Surroundings: Domestic Life in a Working-Class Suburb in the 1920s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 16.

17 Suzanne Morton, *Wisdom, Justice & Charity: Canadian Social Welfare Through the Life of Jane Wisdom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 119.

was no more a conflation of the categories of state and society than it was a public/private hybrid, nor did it have a foot in both worlds. It was a federal public body created by executive fiat for a specific, time-and-space-limited purpose and within specific municipalities.

Systematic academic study of the Halifax Disaster began in earnest in December 1992, when the Gorsebrook Institute at Saint Mary's University hosted a conference marking the 75th anniversary of the disaster. The resulting publication mentions the commission only in passing. Several papers deal with reconstruction and other aspects of recovery for which the commission was responsible, and there is even an article on the Massachusetts-Halifax Relief Committee. Though the editors candidly admit in their introduction that insufficient attention had yet been paid to "the response of emergency measures officials, the planning for reconstruction [and] the role of the state in explosion relief,"¹⁸ the deficiency remained unaddressed. And the role of the state in disaster relief could be summed up in three words: the Halifax Relief Commission.

Although he did not participate in the conference, Ian McKay was the first historian after Morton to place the Halifax Relief Commission in historical context and perspective. In an essay on Atlantic Canada in the 1910s, he wrote:

The federal Halifax Relief Act and the reconstruction of the ruined city were . . . symptomatic of the state's new power. The act gave a federal commission, incorporated with a budget of \$20 million, the responsibility of meeting the needs of 6000 homeless Haligonians. The expropriation of land, the imposition of arbitrary work rules, the complete bypassing of constituted civic authorities, the wielding of an absolute power to grant aid or withhold it from the victims of the explosion: all these features of the Halifax Relief Commission raised the spectre of authoritarian progressivism.¹⁹

While there was no federal Halifax relief act, nor was the commission incorporated with a budget of \$20 million, its establishment undoubtedly reflected powers devolving from the state through the War Measures Act; "expropriation, the imposition of arbitrary work rules, the complete bypassing of constituted civic authorities, [and] the wielding of an absolute power to grant aid or withhold it from the victims of the explosion" were indeed all among its features. Whether the commission's exercise of its powers in areas where it had exclusive jurisdiction raised the spectre of authoritarian progressivism is another matter. It was more authoritative than authoritarian, and its progressivism was not inherent but acquired. It was, for example, authorized to employ expert professionals and did so, especially in the areas of rehabilitation (e.g., social worker John H.T. Falk) and reconstruction (e.g., consulting town planner Thomas Adams).

18 Alan Ruffman and Colin D. Howell, "Introduction," in Ruffman and Howell, *Ground Zero*, 2.

19 Ian McKay, "The 1910s: The Stillborn Triumph of Progressive Reform," in *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, ed. E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (Toronto and Fredericton: University of Toronto Press and Acadiensis Press, 1993), 217.

In a 1996 article entitled “Building the Old New Order: Halifax in the Wake of the Great Explosion,” Michelle Hébert Boyd offered the first sustained rigorous critique of the Halifax Relief Commission. It is undoubtedly true that “there is much more to the story of the rebuilding of Halifax during the weeks, months and years following the blast than is generally told,” and Boyd does a significant service filling that gap with a close analysis of the activities of the commission. Her administrative history, however, is unsatisfactory. The commission was not a continuation of the Halifax Relief Committee, “renamed . . . through federal legislation”²⁰; it was neither established nor dissolved by federal legislation. She also alleges, quite wrongly, that “the military were quick to take control of the city after the disaster”²¹; at no point during the emergency did the civic authorities yield control to the army. Boyd’s thesis – that “through the HRC’s policies, the poor were kept poor and the oppressed were further marginalized . . .” and that these policies “have profoundly shaped race and class relations, and the very character of Halifax, even to this day”²² – would appear in retrospect to confer more power on the commission than it possessed. Despite the breadth of its powers and its longstanding existence, one wonders how HRC policies could possibly have had such a long-term negative impact. The commission’s remit did not extend beyond the Devastated Area and victim-survivors of the disaster. Boyd is conflating reality and reputation. The tale of the commission’s skulduggery, if such there was, grew with the telling, fed especially by needy survivors of the disaster who were not pensioners and by North Enders generally, dissatisfied with the commission’s hegemony. An entire article could be written on Halifax Relief Commission as urban myth and oral tradition.

Elsewhere in her article Boyd shares a striking personal reminiscence: “The inadequacies of the HRC pension scheme were still evident in Halifax only 30 years ago [1966], when my own family first moved to the city. Then, it wasn’t unusual to see a blind man or a man with an amputated limb begging on Barrington or Gottingen streets, wearing a sign proclaiming him an ‘Explosion Victim’.”²³ While the Halifax Relief Commission awarded no *new* pensions after 1920, it continued to assist non-pensioned disaster victims throughout its existence. Applicants, however, had to be able to satisfy the commission that the injuries or need which led them to seek assistance were in fact sustained during or as a result of the Halifax Disaster. Compensation for injured survivors who lacked pensions or who had not been otherwise compensated, or in their view adequately compensated, remained an issue years after the commission’s demise.

Boyd’s assertion – that “HRC’s policies were not socially responsible: rather they were exclusionary, undemocratic, paternalistic and racist”²⁴ – mischaracterizes

20 Michelle Hébert Boyd, “Building the Old New Order: Halifax in the Wake of the Great Explosion,” *New Maritimes*, March-April 1996, 4-15 (esp. 5, 6).

21 This is the caption accompanying a photo appearing on p. 9 of “Building the New Order,” which shows two soldiers standing guard in the Devastated Area. The army was patrolling it at the request of the civic authorities, who had early on decided that martial law would *not* be declared.

22 Boyd, “Building the Old New Order,” 6.

23 Boyd, “Building the Old New Order,” 14.

24 Boyd, “Building the Old New Order,” 15. See also Sherri Borden Colley, “A troubling reality of the Halifax Explosion relief effort – racism,” CBC News online, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/halifax-explosion-relief-blacks-unfair-treatment-racism-1.4412528>.

both the commission's policies and their impact. Claims, regardless of origin, were treated on their merits. Just because the commission was not in a position to give everybody everything they wanted does not mean that it was exclusionary, undemocratic, paternalistic or racist. It could not be all things to all people. Its mandate was specific and defined its priorities, its operating procedures, and its actions; its resources were limited and non-renewable; its clientele well and clearly identified; its sense of responsibility (more legal and moral than social) directed by the extent of its powers and its overwhelming obligations. It was paternal rather than paternalistic. There was no other body looking after disaster survivors except the Massachusetts-Halifax Relief Committee, a private charity. It was the federal state's duty to assist, and the state did its duty vicariously through the Halifax Relief Commission. Boyd presents a case for the prosecution that must be judged not proven. Yet her article is valuable for shedding light on anti-commission sentiment, an important theme in the commission's history and post-history.

A decade after her article, Boyd revisited the subject in her 2007 book *Enriched by Catastrophe: Social Work and Social Conflict after the Halifax Explosion*. The Halifax Relief Commission, through its rehabilitation department, was the catalyst for, and the engine of, the rapid development of social work in the aftermath of the disaster. The commission engaged professional social workers such as Howard Falk and Jane Wisdom, and vigorously promoted the new scientific model of social work. Once again, however, Boyd fails to distinguish adequately between the Halifax Relief Committee and the Halifax Relief Commission. While it may well be true that the committee comprised "the best brains in the city," the Halifax Relief Committee did not "become" the Halifax Relief Commission.²⁵ Boyd's reading of the administrative history is misleading. The Halifax Relief Commission did not result from representations made by the Bank of Nova Scotia (its bankers) to the committee and by the committee to Ottawa. That is not to say, however, that the brilliant minds populating the overwhelmed and discredited Halifax Relief Committee were not in favour of establishing a federal commission to succeed and replace their committee; they certainly were, though partly because they hoped and perhaps expected to be made members of it in recognition of and reward for their services.

Perhaps the most striking and strikingly accurate evocation of the Halifax Relief Commission to appear in a popular history is the epilogue to James Mahar and Rowena Mahar's 1998 *Too Many to Mourn: One Family's Tragedy in the Halifax Explosion*, a fictionalized collective biography of the extended Jackson family of Richmond who lost 46 of its 66 members in the disaster:

In January [1918] the sporadic aid being administered by the civic authorities [Halifax Relief Committee] was organized under a single bureau, the Halifax Relief Commission. This agency took over the function of twelve separate committees and would eventually receive international recognition as a model for similar

25 Michelle Hébert Boyd, *Enriched by Catastrophe: Social Work and Social Conflict after the Halifax Explosion* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2007), 72-3.

relief organizations. However, in the beginning it was on shaky ground. Although massive amounts of money had been pledged . . . caution was the order of the day. The money would have to last a long time. There were hundreds of widows, most with children, who would receive pensions until they either died or remarried. Hundreds of blind and critically injured victims would require institutional care for the rest of their lives. Thousands had to be compensated for property destroyed or the expense of repairs to their home. But until the financial picture was solidified, available resources were distributed sparingly, primarily by where they were most needed – food, clothing and temporary shelter for the homeless. Compensation for losses of real property would have to wait. This did not sit well with many of the survivors. . . . The Halifax Relief Commission became the catalyst for the victims to begin their lives anew.

One of the commission's most successful strategies was to assign case workers to individuals. Except for a few instances, where there was a clash of personalities, this system was ideal. The case worker came to know the individual people they served. They knew who was most in need, who was trying to put something over on them, who needed help but was too proud to ask. Aid was rendered on a person-to-person basis; no one ever became just a number lost in a complex system. This commission existed until recent times [1976], still disbursing funds to the long-term victims who had been blinded or otherwise rendered incapable of earning a living. It received full marks for fulfilling its mandate to the people of Halifax and Dartmouth. But it could only serve the more practical necessities of recovery.²⁶

In their 1999 book commemorating the 250th anniversary of the founding of Halifax, historians Judith Fingard, Janet Guildford, and David Sutherland accord the Halifax Relief Commission a role in the transition from progressive Halifax (1901-1918) to wrestling with adversity (1918-1945):

In the rebuilding of the area devastated by the 1917 explosion progressive reformers manifested their optimism in the grand plans drawn up for revitalizing the north end. In late January 1918 the Halifax Relief Commission (HRC) was established to investigate losses, damages and injuries and award compensation to victims. It was also given a mandate to redevelop the 130 hectares worst hit by the explosion.²⁷

26 James Mahar and Rowena Mahar, *Too Many to Mourn: One Family's Tragedy in the Halifax Explosion* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1998), 199-200.

27 Judith Fingard, Janet Guildford, and David Sutherland, *Halifax: The First 250 Years* (Halifax: Formac, 1999), 139.

The commission, established as it was within seven weeks of the disaster, marked the onset of a new era. Historic periodization helps integrate the commission into the wider history of Halifax and shed light on the commission's contribution to urban development over the long term. Whether the commission wrestled with, mitigated, or aggravated the "adversity" of interwar and wartime Halifax is a question that only an institutional history of the HRC can answer. In any case, the nearly 60-year odyssey of the commission looms large in the modern history of Halifax.

Laura Mac Donald's 2005 *Curse of the Narrows*, whose author grew up in Halifax "listening to stories of the 1917 explosion," is the most substantial history of the disaster to appear. Yet this work largely ignores the Halifax Relief Commission, confusing it with the Halifax Relief Committee, which it replaced, and overplaying the Massachusetts contribution to "reorganizing" disaster relief.²⁸ According to no less an authority than David Sutherland, *Curse of the Narrows* is a "study of the explosion and its aftermath that moves beyond [Janet] Kitz's work in terms of factual detail but leaves out important information about developments after the end of 1917 and says virtually nothing about whether the explosion altered the character of Halifax."²⁹

Historian Jacob Remes deals with the Halifax Relief Commission in his 2016 monograph comparing the experience of working-class survivors of the 1914 Salem, Massachusetts, fire and the Halifax Disaster.³⁰ *Disaster Citizenship* is an engrossing exercise in "history from below," though Remes, like Mac Donald, overstates the American contribution to disaster relief organization in Halifax; he also exaggerates the role of the Halifax branch of the Massachusetts-Halifax Relief Committee. Yet it is Remes who has best summed up the impact and significance of the Halifax Relief Commission at its zenith, 1918-21:

[The commission] represented a technocratic, interventionist, progressive state . . . established to do what was best for Halifax and its citizens, and it wrapped itself in rhetoric about the public good. It presumed that the best action could be determined by disinterested, outside experts, with the advice of local experts if need be but without formal consultation with or deference to the people it claimed to help. Its staff comprised professional experts: social workers, a university president,³¹ and expert builders and planners. . . . The HRC was thus almost a perfect embodiment of a

28 Laura M. Mac Donald, *Curse of the Narrows: The Halifax Explosion 1917* (New York: Walker, 2005).

29 David A. Sutherland, ed., *"We Harbor No Evil Design": Rehabilitation Efforts after the Halifax Explosion of 1917* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 83.

30 Jacob A.C. Remes, *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity and Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016). According to Suzanne Morton (in the outside back cover promo), "Remes sets a new standard for transnational continental history as the everyday solidarity of working people is contrasted with the progressive state, civic institutions, and emergent welfare professionals."

31 George Barton Cutten (1874-1962), president of Acadia University, was one of the pioneers of social psychology. He was appointed director of the rehabilitation department by the chair of the commission, a graduate and afterwards a recipient of an honorary doctorate from the university.

certain Progressive ideal of expert, active intervention on behalf of the people, in which expertise was substituted for democracy. The absence of working-class voices within the relief process was not accidental; it was fundamental to the progressive, technocratic project of efficient and benevolent state action.³²

Other recent literature on the Halifax Disaster, triggered by the 2017 centenary, takes stock of the Halifax Relief Commission, though not to the extent of Kitz's *Shattered City*, whose integrated disaster-relief-recovery continuous narrative has not really been emulated.³³ All previous work on the Halifax Relief Commission has now been eclipsed by the introduction to David Sutherland's 2017 Champlain Society volume entitled "*We Harbor No Evil Design*": *Rehabilitation Efforts after the Halifax Explosion of 1917*. Part One addresses the formation of the commission and its activity in 1918 and 1919. Part Two explores "the impact of the Relief Commission on the people of Halifax's North End and what emerged in terms of a long-term legacy from relief operations in Halifax" (71); this section is really a social history of North Enders affected by the disaster. Part Three is devoted to "historiographic perspective and legacy." While it is puzzling to read that the seven-week ad hoc "Citizens" Relief Committee (Halifax Relief Committee) should have had a long-term impact in the same sense as the Halifax Relief Commission (81), there is little to criticize in Sutherland's masterly ear-to-the-ground study. Like other scholars, he tends to see the commission as the sum of its relationships – both external (clients) and internal (commissioners, management staff, and employees). This inside track, social history approach to institutional history is unhelpful, tending as it does to sacrifice context for content. The danger inherent in such an approach is failing to see the woods for the trees. For example, a public inquiry conducted by a judge is not a "judicial inquiry" (35), nor was the wreck commission inquiry conducted by the judge of the admiralty court authorized to investigate the disaster: only the collision in Halifax Harbour that led to it. No "official inquiry into the causes of the December disaster" (43) was ever held. The war politics of inter-Allied cooperation ruled that out completely. These cavils aside, it is impossible to dissent from Sutherland's conclusion: "Integration of the home front with European battlefields imparted a degree of legitimacy to the work of the now [after April 1918] more muscular Halifax Relief Commission" (57). Among his most important points is that the over-emphasis on emergency relief assistance from the Americans, which disfigures every popular history account of the Halifax Disaster, is "problematic in that it overshadows other sources [Canadian] of post-explosion assistance and, above all, obscures the federal government's decisive response to the crisis of 1917 in Halifax-Dartmouth. Through its agent, the Halifax Relief Commission, Ottawa provided most of the funds and personnel needed to carry out disaster management in a fractured urban environment" (91).

32 Jacob A.C. Remes, "Cities of Comrades: Urban Disasters and the Formation of the North American Progressive State" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2010), 370-1.

33 See generally Barry Cahill, "The Significance of Disaster: The Explosion Too Often Overshadows the Global Root Cause and the Subsequent Rebuilding of Halifax," *Atlantic Books Today* 85 (Winter 2017-2018): 16-21.

Sutherland's analytic documentary study of a small purposive sample of survivor pension case files seeks to contribute to "overcoming the prevailing amnesia about the legacy left by the Halifax Explosion of 1917."³⁴ Looming large among the elements of that amnesia is the Halifax Relief Commission. Sutherland's work sets forth an agenda for academic study of the Halifax Disaster, which is the most pressing need. The forthcoming publication of disaster scholar Joseph Scanlon's posthumous *Catastrophe: Stories and Lessons from the Halifax Explosion* – the first scholarly monograph on the subject – promises to break new ground.³⁵

It is ironic that the historiography of the Halifax Relief Commission is as short and thin as its history is long and complex. The commission deserves to be seen as a milestone in the continuum of the "long" Halifax Disaster: the collision, fire, explosion, relief, recovery and renewal. A product of the First World War, the commission carried on through the inter-war years and well after the post-1945 era. It kept itself going, paying out pensions, sustaining the pension fund, managing property, and in general attending to the needs of injured or impoverished survivors of the disaster.

The year 1948, the commission's 30th year of operation, proved a turning point in its history, a time when the commission paused to take stock of past, present, and possible future. It submitted to the federal government, for the first time since 1918, a report (which was printed in bulk, if not actually published), in addition to its audited financial statements which by law it was obliged to submit annually to Ottawa. According to the report, which was in essence a 30-year retrospective, "the work of the commission now consists of administration of the fund providing allowances for pensioners, the supervision and provision of medical and surgical care as required by our pensioners, and the administration of some 345 dwellings and twelve shops and offices." The commission also decided to pre-empt calls for its elimination, which by then were resonating among municipal politicians in Halifax, by recommending to Ottawa that the commission divest its rental properties to the tenants and amend its 1918 constitution to repeal its town planning powers; legislation to that effect was passed in 1948 and came into effect in July 1949. The report also recommended the establishment of a memorial to the victims of the disaster, thus marking the transition from personal and collective memory to public memorialization; this was the genesis of Fort Needham Memorial Park.

By the mid-1950s the commission was no longer involved in building maintenance because it owned very few properties. Aside from procuring medical services for pensioners and other injured or needy survivors, all that was left were the pensions and managing the revenue generated for the pensions from investment securities. The long goodbye of the Halifax Relief Commission is best explained by the necessity and difficulty of Canada and Nova Scotia agreeing

34 Sutherland, *Rehabilitation Efforts after the Halifax Explosion of 1917*, 91. For the author's review in January 2018, see Cahill, "Much Needed Contribution to the Study of the Halifax Disaster Relief Effort," *Atlantic Books Today*, <http://atlanticbookstoday.ca/much-needed-contribution-to-the-study-of-the-halifax-disaster-relief-effort>.

35 T. Joseph Scanlon, *Catastrophe: Stories and Lessons from the Halifax Explosion* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, forthcoming).

between themselves how best and by whom the pensions would continue to be paid, and what would be done with the residue after all the pensioners had died.

The Halifax Relief Commission was finally dissolved in May 1976 by the same body that had incorporated it in 1918: the Nova Scotia legislature. Parliament's Halifax Relief Commission Pension Continuation Act came into force on 11 June 1976. On that day, according to journalist Adrian Waller,

in a little ceremony in its office on the Hydrostone site, white-haired Mabel Young [accountant] and Edgar Crooks, the [secretary-] manager, handed over their ledgers to two officials of the Canadian Pension Commission – plus its remaining \$1.5 million, to defray future pensions and medical costs. Today [December 1977] there are only 57 pensioners left, receiving an average of \$145 monthly.³⁶

The event was noticed editorially in a Halifax newspaper,³⁷ but was news in the *Globe and Mail*, which announced “The Halifax Relief Commission is dead” when the pension continuation bill received third reading in the House of Commons in January 1976.³⁸

The commission went quietly because it was unpopular. It had no communications director or reputation manager, and its public relations were abysmal. Resentment against the commission began early and persisted almost as long as the commission itself. Janet Kitz captures vividly the commission's unpopularity among its clients, or at least some of them. Such attitudes were deeply-rooted among the disaster generation. Kitz relates, for instance, how

a woman leaning on crutches sold a pamphlet at a street corner in the South End. A few sentences summed up the tone of the booklet: “My main object in writing this is to bring before the public how the Halifax Relief Commission have dealt with the sufferers. . . . Are not the sufferers testifying to the fact that the suffering entailed upon them by the explosion is only a drop in the bucket, compared to that which they have suffered and are suffering by the cruel hand of the commissioners and their co-workers.” The money, she said, was going towards the likes of medical boards and social workers, not the needy. Others shared her dissatisfaction.

The author of the eight-page pamphlet was one Mary Anne Settle, a successful dressmaker in the North End before the disaster who obviously had not benefitted from (or perhaps had not availed herself of) the commission's program to assist

36 Adrian Waller, “Explosion! The Great Halifax Explosion of 1917,” *Reader's Digest* (December 1977): 252.

37 Alex Nickerson contributed a piece entitled “Halifax Relief Commission Closes Books – Tower Chimes Suggested as Memorial,” *Chronicle-Herald* (Halifax), 8 June 1976. The memorial bell tower appeared in Fort Needham Memorial Park (developed by the Halifax Relief Commission after the Second World War) ten years later, but not to honour the memory of the commission.

38 “Closing the books on the Halifax blast,” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 27 January 1976.

“small traders” whose businesses had been affected. Miss Settle saw herself as no less a victim of the Halifax Relief Commission than of the disaster itself.³⁹

Resentment was especially strong in Dartmouth, across the harbour from Halifax, the north end of which had suffered comparably to Halifax’s Richmond district.⁴⁰ There the Halifax Disaster was the “Dartmouth Disaster” and the Halifax Relief Commission the “Government Relief Commission.” In 1967 educator John Patrick Martin, civic historian, could still lament “the meagre doles awarded victims of the explosion which amounted in some cases to \$30 a year. [It] is high time Dartmouth had a say in the distribution of the Relief Commission funds which were certainly not donated exclusively to Halifax. Dartmouth should have a representative on that body.”⁴¹ His proposal met with a cool reception from the commission, who considered Martin a “mischief maker.”⁴²

On the occasion of Dartmouth’s memorial service on the 50th anniversary of the disaster – 6 December 1967 – Martin took aim again at the commission, arguing that it was not too late to compensate disaster survivors. He pointed out that many people (other than official pensioners) were still suffering from the effects of the disaster, and suggested that the \$1 million lying in the relief commission’s fund should be distributed among those injured in the disaster.⁴³ He followed up with a lengthy and eloquent letter to the editor of Halifax’s afternoon newspaper in which he stated, in part, “Even the embarrassment of a mutilated face or a half-century suffering of shattered nerves should justify some periodic monetary compensation from the rich relief commission to these victims before the last of the 110 pensioners die and the fund is returned to Ottawa.”⁴⁴ For his courageous victims’-rights advocacy, Martin was warned by a member of the commission not to criticize it.⁴⁵ Dartmouth never forgave the “Government Relief Commission.” In 1992 local author Joan Payzant, whose father, a prominent lawyer, had been an executive member of the Dartmouth Relief Committee,⁴⁶ observed: “Several times after the explosion [the committee]

39 Kitz, *Shattered City* (2nd ed., 2004), 179. The work she quotes is M.A. Settle, *The Tragedy of the Halifax Explosion: A Pitiable Account by One of the Victims* [Halifax, 1918?]; for a discussion of Settle, see Donna E. Smyth, “A Semiotic Blast,” in Ruffman and Howell, *Ground Zero*, 108-9.

40 A quasi-official booklet, published in 1917 under the auspices of the Dartmouth Relief Committee, bore the title *30 Views of the Dartmouth Disaster* (Dartmouth, NS: A.W. Griswold).

41 “Dartmouth on the day of the explosion,” *Dartmouth Free Press*, 30 November 1967.

42 W.E. Tibbs (commissioner) to E.W. Crooks (executive officer), 7 December 1967, Halifax Relief Commission Records, MG 36, ser. C, file 192, doc. 10, Nova Scotia Archives (NSA).

43 “Historian Seeks Aid For Living Victims,” *Chronicle-Herald*, 7 December 1967; “Historian aims at relief commission,” *Dartmouth Free Press*, 7 December 1967.

44 “Those Who Suffered,” *Mail-Star* (Halifax), 14 December 1967.

45 E.W. Crooks to W.E. Tibbs, “Flinn [commissioner] has spoken to Dr Martin to leave the Commission alone,” 21 December 1967, Halifax Relief Commission correspondence, MG 36, series C, folder 192, doc. 12, NSA.

46 The Dartmouth Relief Committee was the emergency response body set up by the town of Dartmouth in the immediate aftermath of the disaster; see, generally, Harry Chapman, *The Halifax Harbour Explosion: Dartmouth’s Day of Sorrow* (Dartmouth, NS: Dartmouth Historical Association, 2007). The Halifax Relief Commission at first allowed the Dartmouth Relief Committee to continue after January 1918, though without decision-making powers. However, the Dartmouth committee proved so uncooperative that by the end of 1918 the commission closed it down and assumed direct responsibility for disaster recovery in the town.

felt that the Halifax Relief Commission was overstepping its authority.”⁴⁷ The commission, however, could hardly have overstepped its authority, for its authority was complete and absolute.

The longer the commission lasted, the more controversial it became. Although an anachronism, it still had power, money, and the formidable reputation of being a law unto itself. After 1921, when recovery had effectively concluded, the commission magnified its residual tasks – property management and services to both pensioners and survivors without pensions (as many were) – assuming an air of indispensability with a view to indefinite self-perpetuation. The federal government, for its part, lost interest and largely forgot about the commission – except as a useful patronage plum for unrewarded local Liberals – because, after 1919, it was no longer giving it money. The commission, left to its own devices, endeavoured to respond creatively to the ambiguous position in which it found itself. It had never been the government’s intention that the commission should carry on post-recovery. By way of filling the vacuum, however, the commission not only adapted to its shrinking responsibilities but also skilfully deployed its finite financial resources, exploiting its statutory tax-free status as well as opportunities accruing from its being a large landholder and landlord.

Investment income and astute divestment of real estate sustained its revenue stream and enabled it to act as a community benefactor. For example, on the occasion of the disaster’s 46th anniversary – 6 December 1963 – Chairman Allan MacDougall Butler (alderman and former mayor of Halifax) announced that the commission would grant the city’s library board \$100,000 towards the cost of building the Halifax North Memorial Public Library, which lay outside the former Devastated Area but at the heart of Halifax’s historic black community in the old North Suburbs. Opened in October 1966, the library honours the memory of disaster victims. Beleguered pensioners, on the other hand, understandably took a less-than-charitable view of the commission’s pretensions and noblesse oblige: the manner in which the commission managed its assets should reflect the needs of surviving victims of the disaster. Spending its money other than to directly benefit disaster survivors meant that the commission’s well-intentioned effort at good corporate citizenship damaged rather than enhanced its reputation.

While it made much of its relationship with the federal minister of finance, to whom it nominally reported, the commission was for all practical purposes a free agent with easy access to political leverage on the federal scene. Its David-and-Goliath contest with the City of Halifax, which poisoned civic politics for decades, was a very unequal one from which the city did not emerge victorious as the would-be giant-slayer. From the later 1940s onwards, when post-war retrenchment and accommodation made the commission’s continuing existence harder to justify, the City of Halifax became more aggressive in its dealings with the commission. Despite attracting sensational press publicity that it did not want and did not know how to counter effectively, the commission resisted all efforts to disband until it was ready to be disbanded. It also strove to influence how its last remaining official function – pension administration – would be carried on after its demise.

47 Joan M. Payzant, “The Dartmouth Side of the Explosion,” in Ruffman and Howell, *Ground Zero*, 41.

The commission appreciated that its fate depended on how well it cultivated the powers that were in Ottawa and much of its energy was therefore directed towards that goal. Its strategy of hiding behind the coattails of the minister of finance, while assiduously courting the local MPs, worked amazingly well. Ottawa quietly condoned the stratagem that the commission could take no substantive action without Ottawa's approval, despite the fact that this was at variance with government policy and commission practice in early days when its responsibilities were as great. Yet it well served the commission's purposes when dealing with its domestic political arch-enemy, the City of Halifax. By the end of the Second World War no one much cared about the commission except its pensioners and tenants and the cash-starved City of Halifax, the latter lustfully eyeing what it assumed to be an overripe cash cow. The city stood potentially to gain a great deal of money depending on the final disposition of the commission's residual assets. That the commission was so successful for so long in its war of attrition with the city was due, at least in part, to its mastery of brinkmanship.

As a federal public body, the commission prized its position vis-à-vis the City of Halifax, which was rather hopelessly outclassed by an organization able to draw on the power and prestige of the federal government. As far as Halifax was concerned, the commission was a cancer on the body politic from start to finish. The plentiful evidence of their interaction to be found among archival records of both the commission and the city amply support that view. The city's naive assumption that it would as a matter of course directly benefit from the commission's "surplus" after its demise proved fatal to its case. Reasoning that grounded the city's claim in a vested interest or moral right to the commission's assets made no impression in Ottawa, indeed probably having the opposite effect to what was intended. At the root of Ottawa's indifference was that successive ministers of finance did not wish to be seen to be involving the federal government in what amounted to a social war between the commission and the city, two big fish in a very small pond.

An *imperium in imperio* where the Devastated Area was concerned, the commission was a powerful administrative tribunal at a time when the regulatory state lay in the future and federal adjudicative bodies such as the Board of Railway Commissioners were not numerous in Canada. The Second World War changed all that, and the Halifax Relief Commission benefitted from the new paradigm. A public administrative body with financial support from and senior appointments made by the federal government, the commission was a unique response to a unique event. The worst disaster in Canadian history was met by a concerted intervention on the part of the federal government in municipal affairs. Were there – should there have been – constitutional implications? Although no lawyer served on the commission after 1940, one suspects the commission's *modus operandi* was both the invention and the legacy of its first and most influential chair – Tecumseh Sherman Rogers – an exceedingly clever, determined, and resourceful corporate lawyer who in 1921 became a justice of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia while continuing, until his death in 1928, to serve as chair of the commission.

If post-disaster Halifax was, in the words of the title of one unidentified article, "the town that was blown into progress,"⁴⁸ then the commission was the mighty

wind that blew it thither. The commissioners had the perspicacity to see that the disaster, despite its unremitting horrors, was opportunity writ large: the means of bringing the North End, and indeed the whole city, forward into the zeitgeist of the 20th century. The same spirit that animated the Halifax Relief Commission at the zenith of its undertaking, January 1918 through December 1921, animated it from beginning to end. This helps explain at least in part why the commission kept such good records and relied on them for evidence-based decision-making and policy development as well as to rebut criticism and resist encroachments. The commissioners knew their mandate and their clients, and they knew their organization – its powers and perquisites. The corporate memory was assiduously cultivated and well preserved; one commissioner (William Evan Tibbs), who was also a long-time senior official, served from 1929 through 1973.

The decades-long odyssey of the Halifax Relief Commission sheds light on the politics of intergovernmental relations. Why did the federal and Nova Scotia governments cooperate to deprive the City of Halifax of any meaningful say in the reconstruction of the Devastated Area? Were they concerned that too many cooks would spoil the broth – that recovery would be undermined if plenary powers were not concentrated in the hands of a single arm's-length agency? There was also the issue of trust. If federal government money was to be spent, then only a federal government agency should be entrusted with spending it.

There is no other instance of the federal government setting up a special operating agency in response to a catastrophic disaster that the provincial government then incorporated with paramount powers rivalling, if not exceeding, those of the municipality where the disaster occurred. The commission's evolution, post-recovery, was mostly driven by its desire and capacity to perpetuate itself, a stance reinforced by the laissez-faireism of the federal government. It did not want for resources, material or political. Yet it is hard to understand that by the 1950s, when most of its real estate had been divested, the commission continued to operate because – and only because – of services to pensioners and other needy survivors. The blame for this situation lies with the federal government, which could have abolished the commission after 1921, when recovery was accomplished, repossessed its assets, and reassigned its remaining responsibilities to the city or the province. Ottawa took the view that the devastation wrought by the tragic collision of two ocean-going steamers in the Narrows of Halifax Harbour was “an emergency of war” sufficient to justify its taking control of the situation under the War Measures Act. The federal government acted as decisively as it did because Halifax was the east coast port central to Canada's war effort.

BARRY CAHILL

“the latest in environmental history from Atlantic Canada”

An original exploration of people and the environment in Atlantic Canada, from the native-settler interactions of the 17th century to the present-day challenges of resource depletion and economic renewal.



<http://www.lib.unb.ca/Texts/Acadiensis/>

\$29.95 • Ecology/History • 978-0-919107-24-3

Bookstore distribution by Nimbus, www.nimbus.ca



ACADIENSIS PRESS