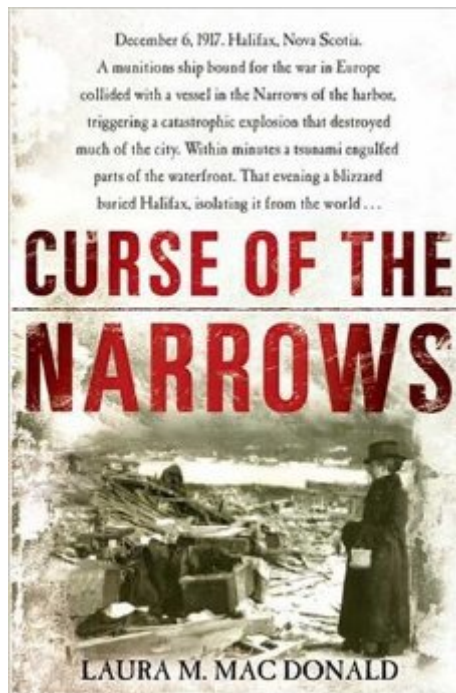


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# Curse Of The Narrows: The Halifax Disaster Of 1917



## Synopsis

The dramatic story of one of the greatest disasters in history. 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I won't recap the story - there's enough of that in the other reviews to give folks a glimpse to the storyline. What I will do is perhaps justify the "goriness" of this book mentioned in other reviews. In 1917, pediatric medicine and emergency preparedness were in their infancy. The Red Cross had developed a pamphlet for disasters (after the SF earthquake), but it was very limited in scope. After the Halifax Disaster, the Red Cross realized how much they hadn't included and how important it was to provide for emergency leadership (rather than counting on the existing leadership to be fully functioning). Very few children survived surgery - dosing children and babies with anesthesia and other drugs was hit and miss - the babies pretty much all died. The children's doctor who came to Halifax with the relief discovered the secret to drugs and children which the book explains (it's not a simple "cut the dosage according to the weight" as had been practiced up to this point). The stories of the children and babies who died in this tragic event brought home just how far we've come in medical treatment and how much of that advancement was due to those children and the doctors who tried to save them. When I first read this book, while visiting Halifax for the first time, I was hesitant due to the reported goriness of the book. However, as I sat on the Pier looking across the Narrows, the book transported me back. I found it hard not to cry as I wandered the streets where the events took place. I felt a connection to the people in the story that I don't think I would have if I had read the book at home by my fire. The immensity of the simplest events became apparent as I walked in the footsteps of these people.

I had never heard of the Halifax disaster before, and even going into this book, I had no sense of the unparalleled destruction it caused. The explosion was massive, bigger than any explosion before it. The description of the damage it caused is now permanently etched into my mind. The physics of the explosion alone are mind-boggling - huge volumes of ocean water vaporizing, people being thrown a mile away from the air pressure, window shattering, buildings collapsing, etc. This book gives you pretty much everything you need to know about the disaster: the climate in Halifax leading up to the explosion, the actual cause of the explosion, the immediate effects of the explosion, the large-scale, urgent need for medical treatment, the administrative fortitude required to mobilize resources after the disaster, the significant involvement from the people of Boston (and an explanation of how Boston gets its big Boston Common Christmas tree each year) the clean-up, the restoration, and the inevitable legal backlash. The book also follows a few specific individuals and families, all of whom had very different stories and experiences. It is a great book and an excellent history lesson. A few notes on the book: First, you should not go into this if you are squeamish about

medical trauma. The book follows an eye surgeon who came to Halifax to treat survivors who suffered eye injuries. Read this next sentence with caution: if you cannot read about eye removal and buckets of eyeballs, you should NOT read this book. Bear in mind that this explosion took place before the use and availability of ether was widespread. The description of the two ships that collided to cause the explosion is arguably the worst part of the book.

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