Mount Saint Vincent University

History Department

Damsels Relieving Distress:
The Role of Maritime Women in Relief Efforts Following The Halifax Explosion of 1917

Katie Bates

Dr. Martha Walls

Hist 4481

December 3, 2024

Historically, the figure of the 'Maritime woman' has been one portrayed in a singular dimension that is informed by conflated middle-class eurocentric narratives. In reality, Maritime women have always resided in a multi-dimensional space and, as such, were faced with societal paradigms in which to grapple and live with. This element of multi-dimensionality is specifically noted in analysing the roles which Maritime women held in the relief efforts following the Halifax Explosion. This crisis invoked a suspension of societal norms in order to address and minimize the harm inflicted on the Halifax population. Though relief efforts were informed by pre-existing social networks that were influenced by class-dynamics, women nonetheless were able to meaningfully participate in both the facilitation and organization of these relief efforts. The variety of positions that women held in the relief efforts following the Halifax Explosion of 1917— in the context of both female collectives and female individuals— demonstrates the multidimensionality and influence of twentieth-century Maritime women and the influence of the social structures that informed their lives.

On December 6th 1917, the SS. Mont Blanc, a cargo ship filled with military ammunition, and the SS. Imo, a Norwegian ship carrying supplies for Belgian relief, collided in the Halifax Harbor at 9:04:35 am.[1] This collision resulted in the largest 'man-made' explosion that had taken place up until the detonation of atomic bombs in 1945 during World War Two— a bomb designed by Oppenheimer to mimic and amplify the devastation of the Halifax Explosion.[2] This explosion caused unprecedented levels of devastation onto the city of Halifax and surrounding townships resulting in over 1600 deaths, 9000 wounded, and six thousand homeless.[3] As this explosion occurred in the midst of The Great War, the city of Halifax had

[1] Michael Dupuis and Alan Ruffman, *Bearing Witness: Journalists, Record Keepers and the 1917 Halifax Explosion* (Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), 21, 26.
[2] John U Bacon, *The Great Halifax Explosion: A World War I Story of Treachery, Tragedy, and Extraordinary Heroism* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2017), 349-350.
[3] Janet F Kitz, *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion & The Road to Recovery*, 3rd ed. (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing, 2010), 55, 70.

already exhausted their emergency and medical resources in their prior deployment of troops and aid in the war efforts overseas. The city of Halifax thus called on the aid of surrounding provinces and nearby American states to help the facilitation and organization of relief efforts. Unfortunately, the groups of dispatched American aid were ultimately delayed due to extreme weather— on average arriving in Halifax between three to six days after the explosion occurred.[4] The delay of foreign aid and the pre-existing exhaustion of emergency resources fostered the mobilization of the local civilian population— supplemented by the mobilization of healthcare workers from surrounding Maritime provinces— in the organization and execution of immediate relief efforts.[5]

Twentieth-century sociologist Samuel Prince stated that in the wake of the explosion, Halifax experienced "a rift in the social structure such as no community had ever known."[6] Jacob A.C Remes further develops Prince's observation in his book *Disaster Citizenship*, proposing that what Halifax had experienced was not so much a rift to its social structures, but rather a suspension of normality amongst survivors.[7] The short-term suspension of social norms was essential to the efficient mobilization and execution of relief efforts in allowing for an abandonment of social norms and the ideologies which informed them; this is specifically noted in the suspending of norms that were informed by the doctrine of separate spheres. Though the doctrine of separate spheres was never fully actualized in a functional sense in the Maritimes, it had nevertheless taken hold as a structuring ideology that had "elevated to the level of common

---

[4] Chryssa N McAlister, Allan E Marble, and T Jock Murray, "The 1917 Halifax Explosion: The First Coordinated Local Civilian Medical Response to Disaster in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Surgery* 60, no. 6 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1503/cjs.016317, 372.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Samuel Henry Prince, "Catastrophe and Social Change: Based Upon a Sociological Study of The Halifax Disaster," Project Gutenberg's Catastrophe and Social Change, September 30, 2011, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37580/37580-h/37580-h.htm, 32.
[7] Jacob A.C. Remes, *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity, and Power in the Progressive Era* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 22.

sense during the industrial and bourgeois revolutions of the 19th century."[8] The suspension of this 'common sense' in favour of efficient aid relief enabled women to hold roles and positions that would have typically been barred to Maritime women. In analysing the role which women played in explosion relief, there can be a tripartite categorization: collectives of women facilitating immediate relief efforts, individual women leading short-term relief efforts, and the long-term relief efforts facilitated by women.

Female organizations played an essential role in the facilitation and organization of relief efforts in their communities. Halifax's Local Council of Women had already assumed a leadership position since the outbreak of the war via the Nova Scotia branch of the Red Cross.[9] In Janet Guildford's piece on Halifax reformer and feminist Edith Archibald, she stated that, through the pre-established leadership in the Red Cross, The Local Council of Women "worked tirelessly to provide the first wave of medical relief at the time of the Halifax explosion in 1917."[10] The Council, having already been situated in a position of leadership in the Red Cross, allowed for their participation to be much more pointed and organized in comparison to those who formed spontaneous relief efforts. These spontaneous efforts can be seen in the writings of student mobilization in the letter written to address the community of sisters from Mount Saint Vincent after the explosion. In this letter, the following statement is made about the students at this all-female post-secondary institution:

> Our Pupils acted most satisfactorily, and we are proud of their conduct. The larger girls, some of whom were out, forgot their wounds in their desire to help others; and notwithstanding the cold to which they were exposed, some took off their sweaters to

---

[8] Janet Guilford and Suzanne Morton, "Introduction," In *Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19th Century Maritime*s, ed. Suzanne Morton (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1994) 10.
[9] Janet Guildford, "Edith Jessie Archibald: Ardent Feminist and Conservative Reformer," *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 11 (2008), 122.
[10] Ibid.

> wrap around the shivering little bodies of the children from outside who, with their parents, rushed in to us for succor and protection.[11]

This report demonstrates the manner in which grass-root efforts were facilitated by women who had no formal organization or plan to look to for guidance. In analysing these reports, a pattern of female collectives aiding in the facilitation of grassroot relief efforts becomes evident. This pattern is greatly complimented in analyzing the individualistic behaviour of various Maritime women outside of the setting of a 'collective identity'.

The actions and performance of individual women, though scarcely reported, are astonishing. Women with little to no training began dressing wounds, overseeing supply shipments, and organizing community surveys. In describing the efforts of women in these relief efforts, Remes noted that "Untrained women once squeamish at the sight of blood volunteered for hours of nursing duty at hospitals deluged with the wounded."[12] This image of a once squeamish woman rising above their circumstances and turning to aid the sick and wounded, is one which many historical narratives portray. However, in analyzing reports that were accumulated by the Disaster Records office, it is clear some women held much more authoritative roles than one would be led to believe. In the report entitled "Notes of Medical Relief Committee of Halifax Disaster," women were reported to hold positions such as Stenographers, Filing clerks, case takers, and, notably, a woman held the position of the "Head of dressing stat[ion?]."[13] This report demonstrates that women, on an individualistic level, participated in relief efforts in a far more dynamic capacity than the hands-on care that popular

---

[11] "'My Dear Sisters' Account of The Disaster at Mount St. Vincent," Nova Scotia Archives, April 20, 2020, https://archives.novascotia.ca/macmechan/archives/?ID=19, 2.

[12] Remes, *Disaster Citizenship,* 22.

[13] "Report: 'Notes of Medical Relief Committee of Halifax Disaster: List of Emergency Hospitals; Character of Wounds,'" Nova Scotia Archives, April 20, 2020, https://archives.novascotia.ca/macmechan/archives/?ID=10&Page=201761152, 7-8.

accounts portray. In further exploration of women participating in behind-the-scenes, administrative, and leadership positions, one well-documented figure demonstrates the lengths to which women were integral to the fundamental organization of initial relief efforts for the Halifax explosion.

Clara MacIntosh (periodically referred to as Mrs. G.A. McIntosh in reports) oversaw the immediate relief efforts in Halifax as per her role as Superintendent of the Halifax division of the Saint John Ambulance Brigade.[14] On December 8th 1917, MacIntosh facilitated a report of the assessed prescriptive measures as per community surveys performed by volunteers and medical personnel. These prescriptions were intended to provide government authorities with detailed understanding of recommended procedures and measures in order to maximize the efficiency of government aid. The most notable element to this report however is the vocality of Clara MacIntosh in the opening letter of the report. In this letter she declared an ongoing state of disorganization in the mobilization of community volunteers, a disorganization which she attributed to the lack of a central authority present.[15] This opening letter demonstrates not only the lack of government-led efforts, but also an extension and exhaustion of the duties and roles which Clara MacIntosh was expected to perform. This extension of duties and expectations was not an experience unique to MacIntosh but rather an overarching pattern of increased duties and expectations from all men and women alike. Though this pattern of increased responsibility in the short-term was universal in the lives of the surviving adults of Halifax, many Maritime women experienced a specific increase of responsibility when considering long-term shifts that were felt in family dynamics.

---

[14] "Report: Volunteer Work Undertaken by Mrs. G.A. McIntosh," Nova Scotia Archives, April 20, 2020, https://archives.novascotia.ca/macmechan/archives/?ID=34&Page=201761259, 1.
[15] Ibid.

The efforts of women did not end after the immediate medical needs of civilians were met. The Halifax Explosion killed over 1600 people, resulting in over 200 children becoming orphans.[16] Furthermore, there were many children that, while not considered 'orphans', were without homes and family as they lost one parent and the other was overseas aiding in the war efforts.[17] The Halifax Relief committee received, what is estimated to be, over one-thousand letters from people stating their interest to adopt these orphaned children.[18] Despite this overwhelming interest, Suzanne Morton states that "Very few children orphaned in the explosion were not claimed by relatives, and there was strong public opposition to sending Nova Scotia children out of the province."[19] Therefore we can attest that relief efforts were maintained long after the initial devastation was aided in regard to the increased orphaned population that were taken on by Maritime families. Though the adoption of a child affected the whole family unit, it is clear in reading the letters from hopeful parents that "children were very clearly a woman's responsibility."[20] This facilitation of family-care is rarely considered as a relief effort due to two inter-related factors: its long-term nature, and the resumption of social norms. The resumption of social norms reinforced the previous social expectations of women being of a domestic nature with an innate duty to maintain the family unit and the household. While the resumption of social norms did occur, the society to which they returned was not an identical one due to the manner in which these relief efforts fostered social mobilization and impacted the social movements that were prevalent in the 'pre-explosion Halifax'.

---

[16] Kitz, *Shattered City*, 55. ; Suzanne Morton, "To Take an Orphan': Gender and Family Roles Following the 1917 Halifax Explosion," in *Gendered Pasts : Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity in Canada*, ed. Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan, and Nancy Forestell, The Canadian Social History Series (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 107.
[17] Kitz, *Shattered City,* 146, 150.
[18] Morton, "To Take an Orphan," 107.
[19] Ibid,121.
[20] Ibid, 118.

The structure of the relief efforts of the Halifax Explosion was not intended to facilitate social mobility. Pre-existing social networks largely facilitated the ways in which one could help in the larger-scale practices and, therefore, there were limited people who experienced unprecedented and overt mobilization by virtue of their position.[21] Therefore, many of the women who had been able to take leadership positions had already been in a privileged position prior to the explosion. Despite the prevalence of class-favouring practices in the assignment of leadership and managerial-type roles however, social mobility nonetheless occurred. This mobility was not explicit but rather the natural result of the newly forged and negotiated social networks that were created through this unique and high-pressured environment.[22] People were therefore able to situate their social positioning after relief efforts and the intensity of the devastation stabilized. Although social mobility did occur through practicing relief efforts, the same cannot be seen in the social reforms that had been fought for by women before the explosion.

Despite women playing an integral role in the facilitation and participation in relief efforts, these efforts did not serve to unite women in efforts to maintain longer term social mobilization via suffrage movements. Instead, historian Judith Fingard argued that the Halifax Explosion actively "diverted Halifax women away from a renewed concentration on female suffrage activity in the wake of the failure of the provincial suffrage bill earlier in the year."[23] The reason for this diversion—apart from the prior bill failure— is due to the innate disruption which was caused by the unprecedented devastation. This disruption can be understood in two distinct manners. Firstly, one could understand the explosion to have forced the resources and

[21] Remes, Disaster Citizenship, 22-23.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Judith Fingard, "The Ritchie Sisters and Social Improvement in Early 20th Century Halifax," Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society 13 (2010): 1.

attention fostered for the suffragist movement to have been diverted to relief efforts. Secondly, one could argue that, after the bill failure there was a loss of motivation in the suffragist movement that was only exacerbated by the urgency of the devastation witnessed by the explosion. Regardless of one's explanation, the result was the same— Nova Scotia suffrage movements were ultimately negatively impacted by women's occupation in relief efforts rather than it being something that was bolstered to substantiate claim to suffrage. This undermines many narratives of twentieth-century women working in times of emergency in order to lay claims to social reform. In regard to the Halifax Explosion, the main social reforms that women experienced were individualistic ones fostered through social connections made through their direct efforts and labor.

The account of Maritime women during the Halifax explosion is one that is nowhere near complete in this paper. While this paper serves to accumulate practical experience and extrapolate them on larger-scale patterns of social realities and social transformations witnessed— much of the evidence originates from records that detail the experiences of white women of medium-to-high socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, this paper lends the ability to examine and amplify the diverse roles that Maritime women played in both short and long term relief efforts for the Halifax Explosion. Not only did women take-up roles that facilitated the organization and administration of first-wave relief, but they served to facilitate long-term relief via the many orphaned children who became adopted by Nova Scotian families. Though these efforts fostered individual social mobility via the connections made in their occupation in relief efforts, the explosion served to ultimately dissuade momentum from the suffrage movements. In analyzing the contribution of Maritime women in the relief efforts of the Halifax explosion, this

paper serves to not only highlight the importance of these women but also demonstrates the social dynamics and realities that they were faced with.

Bibliography

Bacon, John U. *The Great Halifax Explosion: A World War I Story of Treachery, Tragedy, and Extraordinary Heroism*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2017.

Dupuis, Michael, and Alan Ruffman. *Bearing Witness: Journalists, Record Keepers and the 1917 Halifax Explosion*. Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2017.

Fingard, Judith. "The Ritchie Sisters and Social Improvement in Early 20th Century Halifax." *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 13 (2010): 1-22.

Guildford, Janet, and Suzanne Morton. "Introduction." In *Separate Spheres: Women's Worlds in the 19th Century Maritime*s, edited by Suzanne Morton, 9-20. Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994.

Guildford, Janet. "Edith Jessie Archibald: Ardent Feminist and Conservative Reformer." *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 11 (2008): 110-133.

Kitz, Janet F. *Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion & The Road to Recovery*. 3rd ed. Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing, 2010.

McAlister, Chryssa N, Allan E Marble, and T Jock Murray. "The 1917 Halifax Explosion: The First Coordinated Local Civilian Medical Response to Disaster in Canada." *Canadian Journal of Surgery* 60, no. 6 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1503/cjs.016317.

Morton, Suzanne. "To Take an Orphan': Gender and Family Roles Following the 1917 Halifax Explosion ." Essay. In *Gendered Pasts : Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity in Canada*, edited by Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan, and Nancy Forestell, 106–22. The Canadian Social History Series. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2003.

Prince, Samuel Henry. "Catastrophe and Social Change: Based Upon a Sociological Study of The Halifax Disaster." Project Gutenberg's Catastrophe and Social Change, September 30, 2011. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/37580/37580-h/37580-h.htm.

Remes, Jacob A.C. *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity, and Power in the Progressive Era*. University of Illinois Press, 2016.

"Report: Volunteer Work Undertaken by Mrs. G.A. McIntosh." Nova Scotia Archives, April 20, 2020. https://archives.novascotia.ca/macmechan/archives/?ID=34&Page=201761259.

"Report: 'Notes of Medical Relief Committee of Halifax Disaster: List of Emergency Hospitals; Character of Wounds.'" Nova Scotia Archives, April 20, 2020. https://archives.novascotia.ca/macmechan/archives/?ID=10&Page=201761152.

"'My Dear Sisters' Account of The Disaster at Mount St. Vincent." Nova Scotia Archives, April 20, 2020. https://archives.novascotia.ca/macmechan/archives/?ID=19.