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Incidents in Victorian Halifax

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INCIDENTS IN VICTORIAN HALIFAX

By PHYLLIS R. BLAKELEY
Public Archives of Nova Scotia

Six weeks after the death of King William IV, the 14,000 people living in Halifax learned that they now owed allegiance to the eighteen-year-old Princess Victoria, daughter of the Duke of Kent, whom many remembered when he had been stationed in Halifax as commander of the forces. This news of a new ruler "of the foremost Nation of the World," arrived by way of Newfoundland, word having been brought from Cork by the army transport *Stakesby*, and then relayed by the schooner *Eight Sons* to Halifax.¹

Queen Victoria's coronation was not only a holiday long remembered by Haligonians, but also an opportunity to express their loyalty, for, in the words of one newspaper, "Agitators in Canada should hear of our loyalty,—and those of the United States, whose movements called again and again for counter expressions, should get further proof of our affection to Great Britain."² On June 28 the townspeople were aroused at dawn by a royal salute fired from the Grand Parade by the militia. From "4 o'clock, to six," commented the *Novascotian*, "guns, fired at brief intervals, pleasantly disturbed those who did not wish to begin the day too early, and caused Coronation visions to break their morning slumbers."³ At 6 A.M., colours were hoisted by the merchant vessels lying in the harbour, and by H.M.S. *Madagascar*, commanded by Captain Provo Wallis, the Halifax boy who had brought the *Shannon* and her prize the *Chesapeake* safely into port after Captain Broke had been wounded in the battle off Boston. Flags also fluttered from flagpoles, houses, and stores, from the Citadel, the Town Clock, the Province Building, the Masonic Hall, and from St. Paul's church where a dozen decorated the cupola. Church bells rang in the ears of the cheerful crowds who were making their way to the exercising ground, that part of the Commons northwest of Fort George.⁴

After watching Lieutenant-Governor Sir Colin Campbell review the troops, the spectators hurried to the Grand Parade to join the multitudes already waiting to see the procession. The arrival of the Masonic Lodges "in full costume, with banners and symbols, and preceded by the 73rd Band," was the signal for the procession to move slowly along Barrington Street between lines of spectators. After each society presented an address to Sir Colin, who was standing near the portico of Government House, the parade continued back through the town along Hollis Street to the Commons. The Citadel was covered with a dense mass, "mostly ladies, whose gay dresses made the old hill look like a vast tulip bed."⁵ Below in an irregular column marched the committee, the militia, the North British and Charitable Irish Societies, the Carpenters' Society in full costume with blue favours and sprigs of oak, the African Friendly Society wearing blue sashes and bearing pink and

¹*Novascotian*, Aug. 3, 1837; *The Times*, Halifax, N.S., Aug. 1, 1837.

²*Novascotian*, June 14, 1838.

³*Ibid.*, July 5, 1838.

⁴*Acadian Recorder*, extra, July 2, 1838; *Novascotian*, July 5, 1838.

⁵*Novascotian*, July 5, 1838.

blue flags inscribed with "Victoria and Freedom," eighty mounted truckmen, and the regimental bands and the Highland Pipes in full costume "sending forth strains so exciting to the sons of old Scotia."

Before the main procession had started, three hundred members of the Nova Scotia Philanthropic Society, all decked in blue favours, had marched to Government House. Two Indians carried the handsome light blue banner of the Society with the insignia of mayflowers encircling a royal crown. The Society had refused to walk in the parade when the Coronation Committee did not allow their claim to head the procession because they were the only organization native to the province. This incident reveals the extent to which patriotic feeling for Nova Scotia had grown.

After the main procession had dispersed amidst wild cheering, everyone moved to the tents pitched about the hill and soon music and cheers were replaced by the "clatter of knives and forks, the rattling of cups, the unrestricted gossip of friendly parties, and soon, by the toast, the speech, and the hip, hip, hurrah."⁶ The citizens enjoyed themselves all the more because the celebrations had been arranged by a public meeting and everyone had contributed to the expense fund. While the governor, the army and navy officers, and the notables of the town were being entertained in a private marquee by the Coronation Committee, the poor and unfortunate were not forgotten. Beef, bread, and porter were liberally distributed and "thousands were thus fed with a wholesome and cheerful repast."⁷ Dinners were given to those in the poor house, the jail, and the bridewell or house of correction. Twenty-six prisoners were pardoned, including all the debtors, and only one criminal remained in jail, because he was, according to the *Acadian Recorder*, "unfortunately . . . a thief of too deep a dye to be let loose in the community."⁸

In the afternoon there were sports such as foot races, football, sack races, and an Irish hurling match between the "reds" and "greens" which had to be abandoned because the spectators joined in the sport. Many young lads scrambled up thirty-foot greased poles in quest of silver coins placed on top, or made futile efforts to grab one of half a dozen well greased pigs loosed among the mob. Others joined in a two-hour cross-country chase in the hope of capturing a queer looking Sable Island pony which had been shaved and painted to look like a zebra.

As dusk fell crowds began to assemble "down town" to admire the illuminations and transparencies, particularly those in the Carpenters' Hall, the Engine House, and Dalhousie College on the Grand Parade where the City Hall stands today. The band of the 23rd Regiment played before the Province House which was covered with glittering lamps which "threw a glare of light on the streets surrounding it, more resplendent than moonlight."⁹ At nine o'clock the Parade and nearby streets were packed with young and old awaiting the fireworks. After a salute by the artillery, a curtain was drawn to reveal a transparency of the Queen mounted on horseback, surrounded by the colours of the Halifax regiments and by the Stars of St. Patrick, of the Garter, and of the Thistle. For over an hour men, women, and children delighted in

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Recorder*, July 2, 1838.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

maroons, blue lights, "trees," "flower-pots," "serpents," and pillars of fire. All these fireworks were made by the artillerymen in the laboratory at Point Pleasant. The favourites with the crowd were the rockets with their curving showers of sparks.

The day closed with a party at Government House for the select few. The guests danced quadrilles and waltzes to the music of the 73rd Band until two o'clock. After an "elegant and sumptuous banquet His Excellency proposed the Queen's health, which was drunk in flowing bumpers of Champagne with reiterated cheers."¹⁰ Thus the Queen's coronation was well celebrated by her "trans-atlantic subjects, who, removed 3000 miles from the scene of splendor and imposing magnificence," nevertheless rejoiced "with spirit and harmony."¹¹

The only gala event in Victorian Halifax which approached in splendour and magnitude the Bicentenary Celebrations of 1949 was the Summer Carnival of 1889. It was a Carnival planned by the Halifax newspapers, the Board of Trade, and the City Council to attract tourists by advertising the natural charms and bracing climate of Nova Scotia, and the noble harbour and delightful pleasure grounds of Halifax. The \$3,000 voted by the City Council for expenses and prizes was supplemented by over \$4,000 contributed by public-spirited merchants. All the citizens tried to do their share by decorating their houses and by helping to arrange special events. Stores, houses, and hotels were hung with bunting and strings of flags whipped in the air above the streets. One correspondent was led to report that at least one good thing would result from the Carnival, "the city will have had . . . the benefit of a good sweeping, such a sweeping as it has not had since the Prince of Wales was here in 1860."¹²

An American writing in the *Boston Transcript* about his impressions of the Halifax Carnival described it as "a gigantic country fair," and "an entertainment for their majesties the people" which attracted and amused thousands of the Nova Scotians themselves.¹³ He went on to relate that it "is quite as good as anything of its kind could be in a town of this size, but for Americans, accustomed to great pageants in great cities, there is nothing remarkable." This American was less interested in the Carnival than in the ships of the British Navy and in the contrasts between Halifax and his hometown, and he was intrigued by the English atmosphere of the garrison city, the custom of five o'clock tea with muffins and gossip, and its charming social life. He found Halifax hospitality "very extensive, genuine, and open-hearted," and learned to disregard uninviting exteriors in the "quaint, delightful, dirty old town in full regalia for the summer carnival."

Thousands of tourists arrived over the weekend of August 3 by steamer and railway, the Intercolonial express being compelled to carry so many extra cars that two locomotives were needed.¹⁴ Visitors and Haligonians alike beheld the town in holiday attire, and enjoyed themselves at reviews, concerts, and theatrical performances. There were the San Francisco Minstrels at the Academy of Music, the ball at the

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*; *Novascotian*, July 5, 1838.

¹²*Recorder*, Aug. 3, 1889.

¹³Reprinted *ibid.*, Aug. 13, 1889.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, Aug. 5, 1889.

Province House, the regattas sponsored by the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron, horse racing, the firemen's tournament and baseball games between crack teams from Boston. The visitors also explored the city's beauty spots and enjoyed its abounding hospitality.

On the first day of the Carnival, Sunday, August 4, thousands thronged the streets to watch the Imperial troops and volunteers of the Dominion Militia on church parade to the Garrison Chapel, St. George's Round Church, and St. Patrick's. At the Oddfellows' service in the Free Baptist Church, the *Herald* reporter noted that "the grand chaplain wore a blue silk sash found on the body of an oddfellow lost in the steamship Atlantic, to which he made very touching reference."¹⁵ The concert at the Academy of Music by the Grayson Opera Company was criticized because it "was advertised as a sacred concert, and some beautiful selections were rendered, including some of a decidedly secular character—"The heart bowed down," 'I dreamt I dwelt in Marble halls,' . . . and 'Scotch lassie Jean',"—a statement typical of Halifax's determination to observe the Sabbath.¹⁶

The highlights of Carnival Week were the sham battle and naval attack, the harbour illumination, and the torchlight parade. Tuesday had been declared a public holiday to allow everyone to see the sham battle and naval attack.¹⁷ All the men and boys of Halifax and their wives, mothers, sisters, country cousins and aunts seemed to be on the streets. But only the early risers had the joy of watching the sham fight on the Commons and the troops taking up their positions at Point Pleasant. By nine young and old had begun to move toward the Point in a constant stream in carriages and on foot. Even after the booming of the guns announced that the battle of Point Pleasant had commenced, more and more came to throng the rocks and knolls from Green Bank to Fort Ogilvie. Spectators on board steamers eagerly watched the moving black mass, streaked by the thin red lines which revealed the whereabouts of the West Riding Regiment and of the volunteers of the 63rd Regiment and of the Princess Louise Fusileers. Here and there a glistening field gun showed the positions of the Garrison Artillery.

Excitement mounted when boats, towed by steam launches, suddenly emerged from the shelter of George's Island with guns spitting flame and smoke. The marines, attempting to land under the protecting fire of their gunboats, pushed closer behind a smokescreen. Tension mounted as the heavy shore batteries answered the bombardment; and the red coats, posted for two miles along the shore and hills of Point Pleasant, by a continuous fusillade of musketry, made the whole shore from the Tower Woods to the outskirts of the city into a wall of flame. Driven back, the launches carried the attacking sailors and marines out of rifle range and ten thousand onlookers yelled in triumph.

The harbour illumination on Wednesday night presented an unforgettable spectacle of gorgeous pageantry which surpassed any other water display in the city.¹⁸ About eight o'clock steamers, yachts, and canoes assembled at the Lumber Yard at the foot of South Street, the crews

¹⁵*Morning Herald*, Halifax, N.S., Aug. 5, 1889.

¹⁶*Recorder*, Aug. 5, 1889.

¹⁷*Halifax Carnival Echo*, midsummer edition, 1889; *Halifax Evening Mail*, carnival number, summer, 1889; *Recorder*, Aug. 3-10, 1889; *Herald*, Aug. 5-10, 1889.

¹⁸*Herald*, Aug. 8, 1889; *Recorder*, Aug. 8, 1889.

having vied with each other to achieve the most magnificent effect. In the glare of electric searchlights from the warships, thirty thousand spectators could be seen jammed on the wharves. Thousands, deafened by the shrieking sirens of ships and launches, made the round trip in the Dartmouth ferries through two miles of water ablaze with coloured lights.

The venetian scene unfolded in all its splendour, when big steamers moved slowly past, giving many Haligonians, as well as strangers, a more vivid idea of the beauty and size of the harbour. Strains of music drifting across the water enhanced the pleasure of all who beheld the glorious spectacle. The yachts of the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron were illuminated with lanterns of all shapes, designs, and colours. Even though the "smallest lantern carried by the smallest boat afloat" contributed to the blaze of splendour, H.M.S. *Pylades* richly deserved the award for the best display. Her hull was outlined from bowsprit to stem with lights, her portholes were ablaze, and because her spars were indistinguishable in the illumination, she appeared to be a phantom vessel. About ten o'clock, rockets shot skyward in all directions, Roman candles belched forth balls of parti-coloured light, red and green fire shed a glare on the flotilla of small boats, and waving torches scattered showers of sparks into the placid waters of the harbour.

The magnificent torchlight procession on Thursday evening was one of the finest events of the Carnival.¹⁹ Tens of thousands crowded the windows and roofs, and lined the streets along the route. A profuse display of coloured fire and exploding fireworks turned the streets into fairyland. One of the best illuminations was the Academy of Music where all evening fireworks revealed the decorations on the building and shed a brilliant halo over the passing pageant. The procession, nearly two miles long, took an hour to pass one corner, and, though it started from the Commons shortly after eight, it did not reach the Exhibition Grounds on Tower Road until midnight. Just before starting, a mishap occurred when the van of T. S. Sims and Company of Saint John caught fire, and delayed the parade to the annoyance of the waiting spectators. In the procession were policemen, city and government officials, bands and fire departments from towns in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, floats from various firms such as Gordon and Keith, Singer Sewing Machine, Comet Stove Polish, W. H. Schwartz, and Oland and Sons, and from clubs such as St. Patrick's Juveniles, the Red Cap Snow Shoe Club, the Preston and Razzle Dazzle Club. The outstanding float, and the one which received first prize, was the "King of the Carnival" by the "Alma" reel of the volunteer firemen. Large, dreadful golden dragons and sea serpents with glaring red and green eyes were piled one on top of another in picturesque confusion. In the centre was a pyramid of coats-of-arms and of floral designs with an illuminated canopy of red plush and gold. On top of the pyramid was a golden swan on which the King of the Carnival was perched. The "Salamander" hose reel was a vivid and startling representation of its name, and was the favourite of many of the onlookers. Rising out of a mountain of belching flame and smoke was a 14-foot monster salamander, with a head of gold, a copper neck, and an iron body which had been cast by McDonald

¹⁹*Herald*, Aug. 9, 1889.

and Company. With outstretched wings, glaring eyes, and emitting wild screams this monster moved his jaw, shot out his fiery tongue, and breathed flames, to the terror and delight of all the children.

On Saturday the Carnival ended amid abundant expressions of satisfaction from all sides. Much of the success, however, was due to the fine weather. There were smug expressions in the press about the good behaviour of the citizens such as "there has been no rowdyism or lawlessness, and no more drinking than would naturally be expected under the circumstances."²⁰ Mingled with pride at the success of the Carnival was a feeling of rivalry with Saint John and pleasure that the Halifax Carnival knocked "the one held in our sister city into a cocked hat The only thing about the St. John carnival that is worth mentioning was the electrical exhibition which, we freely admit, was a very creditable affair. But that too would probably have been a failure but for the fact that it was under the management of a Halifax electrician."²¹

Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was another occasion of great rejoicing and much celebration in Halifax.²² It began on June 19 and was observed by a week of festivities, highlighted by the discussions of the Royal Society of Canada, the concerts of the Halifax Symphony Orchestra, and the visit of the governor-general, Lord Aberdeen and the Countess of Aberdeen. The Countess presided at the meetings of the National Council of Women and unveiled the "Nymph" fountain in the Public Gardens before five thousand school children. The military tattoo was a beautiful and brilliant close to the celebration, and delighted about fifteen thousand who crowded about the big square on the North Common and on Citadel Hill. The moment the music died away, hundreds of Chinese lanterns were lighted simultaneously by the soldiers who marched and countermarched with bobbing lanterns amid the cheers and applause of the spectators. After the band had played the national anthem, a skilfully arranged picture of her Majesty's face surrounded by many coloured lights could be seen in the sky. A spontaneous roar from the crowd "left no doubt of the loyalty of Halifax."²³

²⁰*Ibid.*, Aug. 10, 1889.

²¹*Recorder*, Aug. 10, 1889.

²²P. R. Blakeley, *Glimpses of Halifax 1867-1900* (Publication no. 9 of Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax, N.S., 1949), 187-90.

²³*Morning Chronicle*, Halifax, N.S., June 24, 1897.