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## THE COMMODORE OF THE MACKEREL FLEET

OR

### THE BRINE IN HALIBURTON

HALIBURTON WAS BORN a few yards from the sea. No Maritimer can get more than a few miles from the sea unless he takes the desperate step of leaving the Atlantic provinces. Even then he generally prefers to go to "the Boston States" where he can still smell home at low tide.

One cannot, therefore, discuss Haliburton's humorous observation and portrayal of Nova Scotian and New England characters without considering one of his sailors. Sailors, or fishermen, though not as numerous as farmers, played a more important role in the early days of both New England and Nova Scotia (which is also true of England) than have the farmers. It should be remembered incidentally that many of the farmers were sailors too, or naturally "had wet feet", in the Maritimer's phrase. They fished on the sea in summer, through the ice in winter, and farmed in their spare time.

The sea and the sailors who chose to sail upon that then very dangerous element have also been one of the strongest influences in the literature, national fortunes, and of course policies, of the English-speaking world. The sailor and the sea in English literature date back to early Anglo-Saxon origins and Alfred the Great, and thereafter they reappear constantly. One has only to think of a chill poem such as "The Seafarer", the piratical portrait of Chaucer's shipman, and Shakespeare's business-like bosun in *The Tempest* (not unlike Haliburton's 'Old Blowhard') of whom Gonzalo said, as the ship was foundering off Prospero's enchanted isle, when he was ordered with other landlubbers of courtiers to get out of the way: "I have great comfort from this fellow; methinks he hath no drowning mark upon him; his complexion is perfect gallows. . . . If he be not born to be hanged, our case is miserable".<sup>1</sup> A

magnificently humorous statement, comparable to Mercutio's last melancholy joke.

Shakespeare's sea imagery, consequent upon the great Elizabethan sailors' battles and voyages of discovery,<sup>2</sup> is well known, but it is also worth observing that the sea and sailors are equally part of the common background of the three national groups—Yankee, Nova Scotian and English—with which Haliburton's humour is mainly concerned. Their case would indeed have been "miserable" unless they had learned to live with the sea and they, like Shakespeare's hard old bosun, Melville's Ishmael and Haliburton's "Blowhard", were skilful enough at their sea-trade to have no drowning mark upon them—though Ishmael had luck on his side.

Sam himself of course has "wetted his feet" on many occasions, including a whaling voyage to the South Seas and the Dutch East Indies, with several fact-finding (i.e., U.S. espionage) trips around the British American colonies where his prime butts, the Bluenoses, designed one of the continent's most famous schooners, the beautiful *Bluenose* herself, not to mention Donald McKay's perfection of sail—the Nova Scotian—American windjammers.

To put Nova Scotian history in a significant nutshell, it might best be symbolically interpreted by the famous schooner called after the hardy Nova Scotian potato. Fishing and farming and cold noses—and not much profit from any of them—meet in this symbol, incongruously but appropriately. Hard old "Nova Scarcity", as the disillusioned Loyalists used to call their northern land of exile, at least had fish and potatoes, which meant hard work, blue noses and excellent chowder in plenty—as well as freedom. (Which must fall strangely on American ears.)

Donald McKay, who was twenty-six years of age when *The Clockmaker* was published, and who designed some of the world's most famous clipper ships, such as the *Flying Cloud* and the *Glory of the Seas*, was a Bluenose himself, a real Nova Scotian, who, like so many others then and now, took his talents South, across the border, to the greener grass, bluer seas and thicker pay checks of New England, where the funds, and opportunities for research, were also so much greater. Samuel Cunard, another Nova Scotian, founded the first regular Atlantic mail service by steamship between Britain and America, in 1840, and never looked back, except to take the log.

These people were not called Maritimers for nothing. They were primarily sea-people, by tradition and necessity, like the British; it would therefore be missing a central quality to ignore these sea-going characters, and to pass over this aspect of the ethos of all these similar people living anywhere

from New Haven to Labrador, in all the glory of their white sails, lobster pots, fish nets and herring scales.

Captain Love, or "Old Blowhard", skipper of a fore-and-after and self-styled Commodore of the fishing fleet, is a good example. Sam comes across this old salt, skipper of the *Bald Eagle* (a symbolic name) at the outset of his duties as Commissioner of the Fisheries on the shores of the British Provinces. Sam, on board the *Black Hawk*, has already had a one-man mutiny on his hands, which sends the skipper of his ship off his head, and he wishes to ship both skipper and mutineer back to home-port. He therefore boards the fore-and-after, *Bald Eagle*, though he is a little depressed by the Captain's name, and is taken below by the mate, Tim Cutler. The mate informs the Captain, Old Blowhard, that a stranger wishes to see him. The captain however is preoccupied; he is busy, and has been for a long time, inventing a better 'jigger' to catch more mackerel faster. He is engrossed in this task and does not want any landlubbers bothering him:

"What the devil have I got to do with a stranger?" he replied in a voice as loud as if he was speakin' a gale of wind. "He don't want to see me at all, and if he has got anythin' to say, just hear what it is, Matey, and then send him about his business. No, he don't want me, but I'll tell you what the lazy, spongin' vagabond wants, he is fishin' for a supper to eat, for these great hungry, gaunt, gander-bellied bluenoses take as much bait as a shark."<sup>3</sup>

Sam nevertheless steps into his cabin, where an angel might think twice, in spite of this noticeable lack of affection on the part of Captain Love, and he sees him sitting at his cabin table, with a lamp in front of him, working at his patent 'jigger':

He was a tall, wiry, sunburnt, weather-beaten man. His hair was long and straight, and as black as an Indian's, and fell wildly over his back and shoulders. In short he might easily have been mistaken for a savage. His face exhibited a singular compound of violent passion and good nature. He was rigged in an old green pea-jacket, made of a sort of serge (that is now so commonly worn as to be almost a fisherman's uniform) a pair of yellow, waterproof, cotton duck-trowsers [sic] surmounted by a pair of boots made of leather such as patent-trunks are composed of, being apparently an inch thick, and of great weight as well as size. Beside him there lay on the table an old, black, lowcrowned, broad-brimmed shapeless nor'wester hat. He wore spectacles, and was examinin' very closely the mechanism of the extended prongs of the 'jigger'. He was mumblin' to himself, a sort of thinkin' aloud.<sup>4</sup>

At this particular moment Old Blowhard is baffled by the "pesky snap", which

was essential. Sam modestly offers, breaking the Captain's concentration, to show him how to 'fix' it. This was an unfortunate way of putting it as the skipper had spent some two years working on the problem.

He turned his head round to where the voice came from and looked at me nearly speechless with surprise and rage; at last, he jumped up, and almost putting his fist in my face, roared out, "Who the devil are you? Where do you come from? And what do you want, that you dare poke your ugly nose in here unasked arter this fashion?" And before I could answer he went on: "Why don't you speak, you holler-cheeked, lantern-jawed villain. You have slack enough at home, I know, for you and your countrymen do nothin' but jaw and smoke all winter. What do you want?" said he. "Out with it and be quick, or I'll make you mount the ladder a plaguey sight faster than you come down it, I know." "Well", said I, "as far as I know, sittin' is about as cheap as standin' 'specially when you don't pay for it, so by your leave I'll take a seat". "Do you hear that, Matey", said he: "don't that take the rag off the bush? Hain't these Blue-noses got good broughtens up, eh? Confound his impudence!" and he rang the bell. "Come here, you curly-headed, onsarcumsized little imp of midnight!" said he, addressin' a black boy. "Bring that little piece of rope-yarn here!"<sup>5</sup>

The little negro cabin-boy is of course terrified, not knowing for whom the bell tolls. Sam, however, continues to bait Old Blowhard in spite of his rope's end. The Captain still has the dark suspicion that, among many other possibilities, the unwelcome visitor is certainly after a free meal and that, with a stowage capacity like a shark, he aims to bolt enough free food to last him a week. Sam tries to reassure him by claiming that all he wants is a "biscuit and a glass of water." The ascetic demand further enrages Captain Love, who now suspects that things are even worse than he thought and that he may even have a "Temperance man" on board his ship, bringing bad luck, with his unbridled temperance, which was bringing ruin (West Indies rum imports badly hit) and camp meetings too.

The violent old skipper grabs the rope's end and Sam decides it is time to stop the fooling and to unveil his identity, which he does quickly enough to avoid further foolish scenes. He goes into his set routine of introduction: "I am Sam Slick", sais I. "Sam Slick! Sam Slick!" said he a pronouncin' of the words slowly, arter me. "Yes", sais I, "at least, what's left of me."<sup>6</sup>

This is Sam's famous introductory cliché. It is enough to cause Old Blowhard to change his manner entirely and welcome him in a suitably nautical manner. This, after all, is a civilized, "enlightened, free-and-equal" American. "Give me your fin, old boy", he says, calling immediately for "Jamaiky", tumblers,

sugar, and some "special fine eyesters" recently fished up from the Prince Edward Island (Canadian) flats. These are brought to them by Satan, the negro sea-cook who, Sam notices, has beautiful white teeth "a Cuba shark might envy."

Over the "Jamaiky" and "Eyesters" Old Blowhard tells us something of his life and navigational skill, admitting modestly and without being pressed that there were only two skippers who could tell where they were off the treacherous New World coast, merely by looking at the bottom of the lead without getting out of bed—and he was one of them. In fact he confessed that he excelled his mate, Tim Cutler, whom he had adopted on the death of the latter's father, at this particular seaman's skill.

"Nothin' but experience, usin' the lead freely, soundin' a harbour, when you are kept in it by a headwind or a calm, dottin' down on the map the shoals, and keepin' them well in mind, will make you way wise. He can't do that like me, and I don't know as he has a genius that way; nor is he equal to me as a fisherman. The fact is, I won't turn my back on any man—Southerner, Yankee or Provincial—from Cape of Varginy to Labradore [sic], as a fisherman; and though I say it who shouldn't say it there ain't a critter among them all (and it is generally allowed on all sides as a fact), that can catch, clean, split and salt as many mackerel or cod in a day as I can. That too is a sort of nateral gift; but it takes a life a'most to ripen it and bring it to perfection."

Captain Love has brought it to perfection evidently, but he nevertheless plans to invest in a whaler and go harpooning whales personally, while Timothy Cutler, his mate and adopted son, acts as Captain, because he is, believe it or not, as good a seaman in heavy weather as Old Blowhard himself; which is praise indeed.

The Captain then turns in, and Timothy Cutler gives a further sidelight on the character of his volatile and violent skipper. Taken from the fond and heartbroken widow, his mother, as a small boy, to serve his mackerel-fishing apprenticeship under Old Blowhard, the young Timothy, clutching a letter in one nervous little hand and his small bundle of possessions in the other, goes on board and approaches the captain, who unfortunately at that moment is stamping with rage on the deck, shivering his timbers and swearing notably salty oaths. The boy, a clergyman's sheltered child, who had been brought up in a godly manner by his mother in the almost certain conviction that he would be President of the United States, or perhaps even with luck a bishop of the Episcopalian Church, is terrified. He gets a rowdy and somewhat hostile greeting:

"Hallo, where the devil did you come from, little Broadcloth? And what do you want here?" "Look at this", said I, "please", handing him the note. "What another bill! I thought they were all in and paid. This is from that old cantin' scoundrel 'Praise the Lord', the cheatin', swindlin' old rascal. He'll never give over his tricks, till I use up his yardstick over him. Oh!" said he, "so you are young Cutler, are you?" and all his manner and tone of voice became altered in a minute.<sup>8</sup>

The Captain's bark is worse than his bite in fact.

Old Blowhard, after bedding the boy down in his own cabin, tells him to get his hat because they are off to see old "Praise-the-Lord", the previously mentioned "old, cantin' scoundrel". This dried-up individual is Elder Jedediah Figg, high on religion and low on morals, and he runs a noisome, airless, ship-chandler's shop, but young and innocent Timothy is more offended by the irreverent nickname than by the smell of the chandler's shop, or its owner, who has a good many of the characteristics of Uriah Heep:

"Well, brother Jed", said the skipper, "how are you and how's the times with you?"

"Not well, not well, captin, I am troubled with the rheumatiz dreadful, lately, and the times is poor—praise the Lord."

"Well, you have reason to praise him, you old yaller Sadducee", said he; "for when grasshoppers are so plenty as to make the pastures poor, gobblers grow fat. Hard times is what you thrive in, . . ."<sup>9</sup>

After which frank approach Old Blowhard orders a complete sea-chest for young Timothy and tells the "old yaller Sadducee" to send it on board for six o'clock. Jedediah is happy with the sale but noticeably anxious about the question of whom to bill for it, as some people can be presented with much larger bills than others without fear of repercussions—widows and orphans for instance:

"Who is a-goin to pay for 'em?"

"I am", said the Captain.

"Praise the Lord", said Jedediah.

"Don't forge ahead that way, old boy, or you may get aground afore you know where you be. I'll advance the money for his mother, and she is as poor as a hen partridge that's a hatchin' eggs."

"Praise the Lord", said Jedediah.

"Now let me see the bill is all done at lowest possible cash price, or I'll keep the goods and let you fish for the pay."

"I'll put them below first cost", said he, "I'll lose by them all I can afford. Praise the Lord!"

"What an everlastin' lie", said the skipper, "what a hypocrite you be, Jed", returning to the counter: "if ever you dare talk to me that way agin, I'll flay you alive. I shouldn't mind you rippin' out an oath or two now and then, for thunder will burst, and it clears the air—tho' swearin' is as well let alone, when you can help it—but cantin', whinin', textin' and psalmin', when a man means trickery—oh, it's the devil!"<sup>10</sup>

Old Blowhard is not only a fine sea-going character, crude, capable, eccentric and choleric, but he is a much more convincing one than his contemporary, Old Peggotty, who is better known—because he is in a better-known book. He is dressed in a routine fisherman's style, with huge sea-boots, pea-jacket, and nor'wester, and his long black hair hangs down to his shoulders. He is inventive, and in fact occupies his mind on his 'jigger' deliberately to prevent himself drinking, or possibly going mad, like the skipper of the *Black Hawk*, who got that way, Old Blowhard says, from an overdose of hell-fire revivalist "preachin'" (which turned him into that rather extraordinary creature, a gloomy enthusiast). Captain Love swears, loses his temper, is apt to be violent, plays practical jokes, is far from modest, dislikes all strangers and foreigners, works hard, likes his "Jamaiky" and "eyesters", and hates pretension and hypocrisy worse than icebergs in a fog on the Banks. He also has a soft spot for anyone in trouble, and is thoughtful of small things, such as sending presents rather than money to Timothy's widowed mother, and getting the boy quills, paper and slate, for his schooling on board. In short there is in him that mixture of "violent passion and good nature", which Sam observed on first seeing his wild, uncouth face; which suggests that Haliburton thought one could see to some extent the mind's construction in the face, or the outward reflection of character.

He is no cardboard sea-captain but quite a complex character and goes to great lengths to prove that he is, as he says, "the best natured man in the world", while knowing very well that his periodically violent conduct is his chief weakness; which he illogically tries hard to justify. He has also quirks of character which cause these outbreaks, such as objecting beyond reason to a little thing like a man telling him he may "pay anything he likes", instead of naming the exact figure; or a man using the word "scientific" in connection with fishing, or boxing, or anything else for that matter. With dubious logic, he tries to demonstrate his good nature by proving that other people are often worse. There is nobody gets quite as "mad" and in such a spectacular way,

he says, as a Frenchman. Irritate one of these strange human beings and then watch closely.

A French fisherman rowed alongside his ship one day with some fine fresh cod for sale. The Captain asked for some. The fisherman threw up about twenty cod on the deck and Blowhard asked him how much he wanted for them. The fisherman was unfortunate enough to tell him to pay what he liked. People saying this, of course, sometimes hope they will get more. The Captain insisted on a price. The fisherman insisted on not naming one. "Whatever you like", he said. The Captain, exasperated, reached down and gave him some five powders, in papers, of patent medicine (probably laxatives) for which he had not further use, adding out of the irritation of his soul that it would clear up his complexion, in no time, and furthermore, make him "as spry as a four-year old".<sup>11</sup>

The effect was immediate and electric of course. The French fisherman looked at the five little papers. He then took off his hat, threw it on the deck, and jumped on it. He kept jumping on it with determination, and he also started to swear. He foamed and raged, and swore in French, Gaelic, Indian, English, Irish and Yankee. He was upset. The oaths came pouring out in one long unbroken chain, and Old Blowhard said admiringly that if anyone could have taken hold of them they would have stretched clear across the Gut of Canso. Blowhard listened and watched, wrapt. After a while relenting, and sympathetic towards such an outstanding demonstration, he offered him silver, belatedly to pay for his fish, but that only set the Frenchman off jumping on his hat again. He probably expected more powders. Or Chinese coins with holes in them. He cursed and swore again and, ill-advisedly, moved on to the subject of the Yankees, that great nation with the inferiority-superiority complex, with some powerful but perhaps rather unconsidered terms—in all probability going into the immediate ancestry of Captain Love and including his fellow countrymen in a strange and highly imaginative family tree. The Captain, now in his turn irritated all over again, forgetting his previous admiration of the Frenchman's performance and his respect for a finer frenzy than any of his own, turned the deck hose on him, to clean him up, cool him off and make him more acceptable to his "old lady" when he got home.

With his own particular logic, he explains to Sam Slick that ". . . it was his own fault, he ought to have kept a civil tongue in his head".<sup>12</sup> And he probably believed it.

The Frenchman, it must be admitted by the impartial outsider, had a



point. He gave the skipper twenty good fish and he was told to take a powder; five in fact, which would make him "spry as a four-year-old", when he was already evidently spry enough. When he expressed his very real dissatisfaction by jumping on his hat, he got the deck hose turned on him. (Sea-water or Bilge?) Courtesy was lacking on both sides. This would have been annoying even for a phlegmatic man and without the loss of his shining, newly caught fish. He must have seen himself, for many a long day afterward, trustfully tossing his catch up to the Yankee skipper, and this memory must have hurt. He certainly never knew what he did wrong and he must have taken ashore with him a re-inforced conviction that English-speaking sailors were not to be trusted, and that all he had been taught about Evangeline, or rather the Acadian deportation, was an understatement.

The above incident is a typical instance of how otherwise reasonable men do get into a frenzied state over a small point. The French fisherman was not to know that this eccentric skipper always insisted upon a price being stated, and Old Blowhard on the other hand could hardly expect such a magnificent outburst of irremediable rage as the result of five powders. He no doubt expected a protest along somewhat blasphemous lines: "Tabernacle! What de 'ell! What's dis?" to which he would probably have said "How much? None o'yer 'Give me what it's worth'. Name your price and none o'yer monkey shines". After such a civilized exchange everything could have been quickly straightened out. The Captain's admiring gaze must have driven the Frenchman even madder, in the proper sense of the word, who no doubt construed it quite wrongly as triumphant gloating over his stupidity in throwing his fish on board any Yankee craft. Old Blowhard undoubtedly expected some surprise and a brief argument, to be settled by the naming of a definite price. However, the Frenchman also had a terrible temper—the best demonstration of one that connoisseur, Captain Love, had ever seen, from the outside. When two such violent adults meet they are apt to start jumping on their hats, or even on each other's stomachs, should the opportunity arise. And if it does not arise, they are most likely to arrange it. Haliburton obviously knew such men, with tempers that were tickle o' the sere. (Such a meeting must incidentally have done very little for early international relationships in the neighbourhood of the Gut of Canso, and nothing at all for bicultural exchanges.)

In such stories, however, human nature and character are only too well demonstrated. It rings true. Many men, having little eccentricities and oddities of temperament, combined with a hair-trigger temper, would do just

such a thing and be a little surprised at the results. The other fellow is always unreasonable. They might possibly still think that they were the best-natured men in the world, as Blowhard maintained. One sees in Old Blowhard's character a real man, and to hark back to a previous statement, he is a much more convincing fisherman than Dickens's Peggotty. Haliburton has an earthiness about his men, and saltiness about his sailors, that Dickens lacked. They have callouses on their hands and the smell of cod and tar and sweat about them.

Finally, there are two points involved in this incident worthy of comment. Firstly, Haliburton uses, as does Dickens, the technique of the set, or favourite, phrase to bring out character and to fix a typical characteristic—as well, of course, as dialect. "I am Sam Slick", says I, "or at least what's left of me", is an instance. Old Blowhard, for another example, persists in calling himself, "the best-natured man in the world", in the face of his own direct evidence to the contrary. Again the "old, yaller Sadducee", the ship-chandler, reiterates, whether it is a suitable addition to the conversation or not, his "Praise the Lord!" like a parrot. Secondly, one notes once again Haliburton's heavy bias in his choice of scapegoats. "Canters" all come from kirks and chapels. There is no cant to a good Anglican. He keeps his religion tucked well out of sight. Sam, Blowhard and Tim Cutler are all Episcopalians.

Dryden observed in what is now a well-worn quotation that the fourteenth-century Father of English Literature, Geoffrey Chaucer, gave us "God's plenty", by which he meant all kinds of humanity and humour and history as well as all kinds of stories. The same is true of Charles Dickens, the great Cockney humourist of the nineteenth century, whose novels are alive with humorously observed characters. When one considers the scores of brilliantly caught 'human' types who flit briefly out of the past into life again in Haliburton's books, the same is found to be true of our own humourist.

If literature is about humanity, and if it takes a humanist to know and record the human beings he sees daily, we can hardly do better than listen to the man who had the most potent, grave and reverend signiors of the Provincial Assembly in stitches—and they were not really laughing men, until Haliburton showed them the absurdity of life—to the point where Jo Howe, the ambitious journalist, gave up trying to take his words down and just laughed instead.

Sam, Old Blowhard, Jedediah Figg, and the unfortunately volatile and anonymous French fisherman, constitute quite a comedy team. Moreover, Old Blowhard has brine in his blood, his "jigger" in one hand and his own

patented bait-box in the other, whereas Old Peggotty's main claim to saltiness is a gimmick; he lives in a ship turned into a house.

## NOTES

1. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I, i.
2. Also evidently from his own personal experience; he had sailed to the Low Countries more than once and even from Scotland, with King James, to Norway, according to David Scott. "Shakespeare, Essex and the Dark Lady: Solutions to the Problems", *Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 49, No. 2, 1969.
3. T. C. Haliburton, *Wise Saws*, p. 60.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 84.