

“WITHIN THIS GATE”

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YEARS ago I saw an inscription above two gates, and, down through time since, the words have sung in my heart. These are the lines which are written above the entrance of the House of Commons:

The wholesome sea is at her Gates,
Her Gates both East and West.

It is the Eastern Gate that has swung endlessly in my world, the Gate of the Atlantic that is the old and beloved city of Halifax. This city is not a collection of houses and streets, nor of schools and colleges and churches, nor of people going between the Gate and the sea, it is a tradition built on the sheltered Bedford Basin, on the deep water harbor that moves restlessly all winter long, deep and free of the imprisoning ice, a great and majestic port which men call the Princess of the Atlantic. It is the corner stone of the ivory tower that is Canada, a stone laid down nearly two hundred years ago by Cornwallis at the command of the British Government: “This land is England’s, and Englishmen must live within its boundaries so that all men know it theirs.” Thirteen ships carried the dream of a new settlement into the Harbour and formed a new link in Empire. Thus Halifax bears the mark of the Imperial footprints of the men who broke the first roads that are now the beaten tracks of the British Empire. Sometime look at the map of the world, and trace with your finger the pink spots that are British. A wonder and an awe will make you reverent of the men whose eyes were forever on the horizon, who saw down the years into two great wars, who touched our destinies when they quarried from the living rock the great stone gate that was to be Halifax, and who, because they were men of vision, hung it on the immense and sapphire hinges of the sea.

We do not associate antiquity with Canada; rather we think of her as an adventure in youth, a reckless and daring youth, but Halifax has beneath this “youngness” a quality of secret and serene age far removed from the passing of the present. You have to see Halifax to believe in this recession into the past. No one can tell you of the cobble stones on

Water Street, of the mast house at the dock yard, nor of the old sail loft and the clock tower. You must go into St. Paul's to believe in the existence of the Queen Anne Communion Plate, massive and imperial as her coat of arms inscribed on the vessels, and beneath this church are the vaults that hold all that remain in dust of the men who gave their lives and their dreams to the building of the Gate. You have to walk on Barrington Street to see the ancient grave stones that sag a little with each passing generation, and lean their weathered stone against the noise rising from the busy modern street outside the quiet of the undisturbed, and undisturbing, sleepers.

When the white sails of England cast their painted shadows on Halifax Harbour, these shadows melted and merged with the reflection of the green world that kept impregnable the water's edge. Great trees marched down from the hills into the sea, and set firmly their roots against the feet of men. The English, who were not accustomed to such an abundance of growth, must have been appalled by the fecundity of green, and they must have cursed the years of the dropping pine and spruce needles that burrowed into the earth. The first winter was a terrible one. We who are bred to the cold and the Viking winds from the North are often forced to a bitter resentment against our weather, but we should be more than a little ashamed of our thought when we remember the men and women who first forced the Gate. Many died of disease, and those who lived must have cried in their hearts for the rains of England, and the early spring, and the lark breaking her heart in the English dawn. But being English they stayed in this new land, defiant of the climate and all the evils of the cold.

Gradually the trees fell away from the clearing, and with their going the Indians crept farther into the long miles that held their birch bark lodges, and their fading heritage of a fertile land, but the red man did not lightly give up his claims. One night, while the dark brooded over the tiny settlement of Dartmouth, whiling away the time by folding and refolding the shadows, the light, swift canoes of the Micmacs swept down the lakes and inlaid waterways, and with these canoes rode the unspent years of a number of the white settlers. Halifax was awakened by the cries and the roar of the fires which brightened the Harbour. By the time the rescue party made the opposite shore the Indians had left, leaving behind them the scalped dead, the burned homes, and the bitter cup of tears to be forced against the lips of those who remained. I have often stood by

a window in a safe stone building in Halifax and tried to imagine that night, but the vision escaped me. Halifax and Dartmouth are cities, they are full of lights and the sound of footsteps. The Indians who used to come to the market with their pails of berries were so tame looking and so meek, and so marked with the years of the white man. And yet—some of the men had strong hands and a sneer on their mouths if I refused their berries. What were they thinking, or remembering? At night what ghosts crept out of their fires and sat with them? Perhaps they half rose from the ground and turned their faces toward Halifax, only to sink back, defeated by the lights and the overflowing streets of the palefaces.

Halifax is marked with tragedy. During the last war the Gate came into its own as a link of Empire, fulfilling the dream of the past, and with the fulfilment came the sudden death of the Great Explosion. I was only a child, but I remember the morning when nothing came out of Halifax except the sound of rushing waters, the high scream of fires feasting in beast fashion on the wooden city, and the cries of the lost and dying. I have a book which contains descriptions of the unclaimed, a book of the dead, dedicated to the Keepers of the Gate, the innocents who paid the toll of war coming and going between the Gate and the sea. Halifax still bears the scars, and the marks of the grafted flesh rebuilt on her burned face—the Hydrostone, a district in the North End build on the devastated wastes. The first time I saw the city after the Explosion I thought, "The Hand of Death has rested here."

Halifax was destined to be again a crossroad to war where all the nations of the earth would pass, and repass, where armies of men would go out through the Gate, where ships would gather in grey armadas, and the lean hounds of war would follow the scent of the beast through the submarine gates out across the rolling moonstone roads:

The grey slow ships have put to sea,
Tanker and tramp, and the Headlands pass,
One last glimpse of the safe sane earth,
And the simple loveliness of grass.

Out of the past, echoing the turmoil of the present, comes the sound of other steps, of drums and cannon fire. With our men of the Second World War march the first soldiers and sailors whose nailed boots rang on the ancient stones of Lower Water Street, and on Citadel Hill, that squatty Guardian, the

shadows of an older race of sentries walk side by side with our own. The only difference is: these men of the years laid away between the pages of history did not watch the skies. All that ever disturbed the serenity of their blue spaces were the seagulls sailing the wind. In those far away days it was the water that brought peril, and a grim reminder of that peril is Chain Rock in Point Pleasant Park. Even then the watery roads that led to the Gate were vulnerable, and a great boom of logs and chain stretched from shore to shore, remains of the earthwork fort thrust their mounds through the covering green and can still be traced by the eye. This was Halifax in the beginning, her fortifications of earth and wood, with only her Citadel built of stone. This Citadel was built by the labour brought from Jamacia—the black and war-like Maroons who came to love the things of civilization that their wages earned, but who were defeated by the long winters that drained the warmth out of their blood, and set them longing for the deep south and the flower-ridden winds. There are tales told of the beauty of a Maroon girl who found favour in high places, and of strange rites and of stranger ways. These dark workers in stone were eventually sent to Sierra Leone, but in time drifted back to Jamacia. They might have been forgotten, only they left behind them the imperishable stone of the Citadel, a monument to the alien who had not found peace in a land which bred peace only to those who fought and won it to what we know today.

It was at Government House in Halifax that the Expulsion of the Acadians was discussed—and from there the orders were given to evict the stubborn French, as they were termed. What we think of the Expulsion is a personal thought, but I find it hard to reconcile this shameful deed with the men who had met greater obstacles than nationalism, and defeated them without bringing down on their heads the wrath of generations to come. But who am I, or who are you, to sit in judgment on these men who had every good reason to hate all things French? It is past and buried with the men who made the decision, it is words on a page of history, and no nation ever built its ivory tower without one stone made of human hearts and their human sorrows. Today Halifax holds the reins of power in Nova Scotia as she did in times past. The first newspaper was printed there, and through this medium more and more the people turned to the Gate until the city became what it is today—the centre of Nova Scotia, from which radiates all the political and economic life of the

province. Confederation was an infant in the arms of the city, and this infant is still causing the decendants of the Fathers of Confederation to walk the floors of the Maritimes. Education has its centre within the Gate, Dalhousie, St. Mary's, the Ladies' College, and the College of Art. From out of these monuments raised to the betterment of men have gone many who have shaped and moulded the destiny of Canada; from out of Halifax, a Gated City which was once only a clearing in the woods, will forever go all that is good and fine. Halifax, a Gate swung on the immense and sapphire hinges of the sea, a city of Canada—may you always remain in the hearts of those who love your ancient stone and your restless harbour.