

Nova Lucks

I am writing this from my hotel room at the Lord Nelson Hotel in Halifax, Nova Scotia, the largest city in Canada's maritime provinces and home to Dalhousie University, where I will soon speak at an international conference. Lord Nelson was a distinguished British Vice Admiral known for his victories in naval engagements with French and British ships around 1800. Over his career he sailed to such outposts as India and the Virgin Islands. I was hoping to read that he stayed in this hotel, perhaps having an illicit affair with a bored wife of some British nobleman, but the Wikipedia only makes the briefest mention of him travelling to Canada (Newfoundland, in 1782). When he died, his body was stored in a keg of brandy mixed with camphor and myrrh -- a fitting tribute for a navy man. Should any of you dear readers wind up tending to my remains, I prefer scotch to brandy.

And so do many others in these parts, for it was Scotsmen who settled this area. The lure of imbibing a homegrown, wee dram led some enterprising natives to establish a Scotch distillery on Nova Scotia's picturesque Cape Breton Island, producing the locally popular Clan Breton Canadian Single Malt Whiskey (you can't call it scotch unless it is distilled in Scotland, hence the long monicker). I downed a glass at a bistro on the Halifax waterfront, and must report that Macallan's has nothing to fear. Still (no pun intended), it is eminently drinkable for those non-thrifty Scot tourists willing to part with \$100 for a smallish bottle.

Visitors to Halifax will quickly make their way to the harbor.



Late one afternoon, I footed down to the harbor in fine 80 degree weather. On the way, I went past the citadel, the highest hill overlooking the harbor. From there the British empire's military prepared to defend the area a few centuries ago. Some very old cannons (probably replicas) are placed on a manicured lawn to remind the Halifax youth of their heritage. My mind's eye envisioned the cannons booming amid a smokey haze, as the Royal Artillery rained heavy metal down on US Navy warships during the War of 1812. But a visit to the city's maritime museum taught me otherwise. There was no mention of

naval battles fought around here during the War of 1812; the closest item in the museum concerned the arrival of the US frigate Chesapeake, brought here after being captured near Boston by the British. In fact, the most famous battle of the War of 1812 was described by Francis Scott Key, who observed the prolonged naval bombardment of Fort McHenry during the British attempt to capture Baltimore, and then wrote a song about it. Most members of our younger generation know that song as "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald". The museum also features finely crafted models of ships both old and new, as well as a few full size sailboats and fishing dories. A visit to the museum's 2nd floor features a thorough exhibit documenting the fateful voyage of over 900 European Jews in 1939, seeking asylum in the New World. They hoped to temporarily live in Cuba until they could secure entry into the US, but both countries refused to allow them in. This appears to be the last time the Cuban and US governments agreed about anything -- perhaps we should appoint a Jewish ambassador to Cuba. The museum exhibit documents the Canadian bureaucrats' sadly predictable response to a group of Canadian citizens' petition for the St. Louis Jews' asylum. The ship eventually sailed back to Europe, discharging the passengers in (soon-to-be-occupied) Belgium. 254 of them are known to have been killed by the end of the war.

Haligonians have known their own disasters, too. The museum chronicles the Halifax Explosion of 1917. A French munitions ship loaded with Nobel's greatest invention (no, not the Prizes) caught fire in the harbor after being rammed by another ship. The burning ship headed for the dock and then, to use the northwoods vernacular, blew all to hell. The explosion touched off a conflagration that killed hundreds. It seems like every Canadian museum contains its own disaster narrative. In the Provincial Museum in Edmonton, I read about the disastrous "Frank Slide". At first I thought Frank Slide was an American outlaw who terrorized Banff, but Frank Slide was a rock avalanche in 1903 that killed around 90 people sleeping sound -- but not secure -- near the coal mining town of Frank, Alberta.

But I digress. A disparate variety of vessels are seen in the harbor. I was honored to watch the captain and crew of the Mar -- a 75 foot wooden masted Ketch -- bring her sharply into the wind to neatly douse all three sails before motoring to shore to discharge their tourist/passengers. While under sail in ten knots of wind, she moved more nimbly downwind than I imagined she would. As I started the walk back to my hotel, I noticed a large container ship quietly moving in the harbor. In contrast to the Mar's graceful stern, the container ship's aft structure is a box (really). The closest analog to it is the Borg's spaceship, feared by Captain Pickard and his Star Trek crew. This contrast is repeated while walking about the city, which mixes old with new in a way that could have been better executed. But the same could be said for most of us aging travelers who try to experience old world charm while reaping the benefits of technology to stay connected, e.g. posts to this blog!



If you Bike to Lyons, Look for Me at Andrea's Homestead Café