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Citadel Century

In 1906, the British left Halifax for good, leaving a fortress and a taste for
history

By John Boileau

One hundred years ago the permanent British military presence in Canada ended with the departure of the last imperial troops from Halifax. Their exodus marked the conclusion of a story that stretched back more than three centuries in North America and over 150 years in Halifax.

This week, Halifax marks the anniversary of that departure with a week-long display of military pageantry centred around the Citadel, the city's imposing hilltop fortress. Called the Changing of the Guard, events include re-enactments of battles, concerts, parades and a military encampment on the hill.

The British left behind them vast and valuable buildings and facilities, among them the Citadel, Royal Artillery Park, Wellington Barracks and the Dockyard, as well as several forts and batteries, all of which were turned over to the Dominion government.

Canada was now responsible for a larger share of its defence, an expense that the new country had largely been able to avoid previously.

Over the years, Halifax had profited greatly from the continued British naval and military presence in the city, with merchants, tradesmen and farmers reaping the benefits of catering to this market. Businessmen entertained British naval and army officers with oriental lavishness, hoping for lucrative contracts.

Haligonians were also very conscious of the cosmopolitan look that the large numbers of sailors and soldiers gave the city, which many felt elevated and refined the tone of Halifax society.

On the other hand, the seedier side of life in a garrison town often showed itself in the dissipation of sailors and soldiers reeling about the city's streets in a drunken stupor, as well as incidents of public brawling at all times of night and day.

Some felt the city had been hurt more than helped by being a garrison town, but others tacitly accepted it as part of the cost of maintaining Halifax's prosperity.

During the War of 1812, Halifax historian Thomas Akins was only a small boy but he recorded the first-hand accounts of others:

"The upper streets were full of brothels; grog-shops and dancing houses were to be seen in almost every part of town. A portion of Grafton Street was known under the appellation of Hogg Street from a house of ill-fame kept by a person of that name.

The upper street along the base of Citadel Hill between the north and south barracks was known as "Knock Him Down Street" [Brunswick Street], in consequence of the number of affrays and even murders committed there. No person of any character ventured to reside there, nearly all the buildings being occupied as brothels for the soldiers and sailors. The streets of this part of town presented continually the disgusting sight of abandoned females of the lowest class in a state of drunkenness, bare headed, without shoes, and in the most filthy and abominable condition."

These and other areas, such as the "Beach" (Lower Water Street), co-existed with the good townsfolk and splendid mansions of nearby Argyle and Barrington Streets.

The world of the common soldier and sailor was startlingly different from that enjoyed by the officers. For the majority of ordinary troopers and tars in Halifax, much of their time was spent in the sordid side of Victorian life, a world of bars and brothels, booze and brawls.

Not so for the officers. They not only entered into the city's high society--such as it was--their presence was eagerly sought and formed a large and important part of Halifax's upper-class activities.

In their spacious official mansions, the resident Royal Navy admiral and British Army general entertained lavishly. Admiralty House on Gottingen Street and Bellevue at the corner of Spring Garden Road and Queen Street witnessed hundreds of teas and garden parties, banquets and balls over the years.

It was at functions such as these that many a Halifax maiden met her future spouse, as British officers were highly sought after as husbands for the daughters of the city's "best" families.

Interestingly, it didn't matter whether the officers had money or not. The most important consideration was the status that being married to an officer automatically conferred upon the wife.

Even the daughters of Samuel Cunard, the innovative Haligonian who founded the first regularly scheduled transatlantic shipping line in 1840, were not immune to their charms. Of Cunard's five daughters who married, all but one wed Englishmen, and two of them married army officers.

None of their husbands were rich and Cunard had to help support them. He gave each of his daughters an annual allowance of £300, but told them "if you require a further amount from any unforeseen circumstances let me know and you shall have it." Cunard frequently had to follow through on his promise.

The number of Royal Navy ships at Halifax fluctuated over the years, depending on the threats to Britain. By the time the navy handed over the dockyard it was down to six vessels. The duties of the squadron changed very little through out the 19th century. Its main role was to show the flag, patrol fishing grounds and keep a suspicious eye on the United States as it continued its continental expansion, driven by the concept of Manifest Destiny.

Haligonians regarded the squadron as their own. Nova Scotian historian Beamish Murdoch noted the city's affection for the navy:

"What was most popular . . . was the British navy. Their courageous and adventurous life, --their unsophisticated manners, -- their good-hearted, reckless generosity, and even their little faults and aberrations won them a place in the

esteem and affection of our people. Their quaint phrases were re-echoed, and even their prejudices sometimes adopted."

The army in Halifax was concentrated in two areas: in various barracks in and around the Citadel and, after 1860, at Wellington Barracks on the site of today's Stadacona. It is claimed that every imperial infantry regiment was stationed here at some time or another. Artillery, engineers, staff and various support elements made up the rest of the garrison.

Although the numbers varied, for several years a 700-man infantry battalion occupied each location. These units normally spent 30 months in Halifax, half at each site. From May 1869 to November 1871, one of the British regiments was the 78th Highlanders. The 78th's regimental surgeon, Valentine McMaster, had received the Victoria Cross for his bravery at Lucknow in 1857 during the Indian Mutiny. McMaster quickly joined the city's social world and became intimately involved with it.

He soon met Eleanor Burmeister, 15 years his junior. The two were married at St. Paul's in June 1870, with six bridesmaids and the officers of the 78th in full dress in attendance. The Acadian Recorder noted, "The ancient edifice was crowned with the beauty and fashion of the city to witness the ceremony."

Eleanor was continuing a family tradition. Her mother was the daughter of Henry Cogswell, one of Halifax's leading businessmen, and had married a Royal Engineer officer.

Today the Halifax Citadel Regimental Association perpetuates the memory of the 78th Highlanders. Its members sponsor historical re-enactors dressed in the 78th's full highland regalia who perform period drill and firepower displays every summer.

The last imperial troops to leave Halifax were members of the Royal Artillery, the Royal Engineers, the 5th Garrison Regiment and assorted support elements. Before they left, soldiers had been given the opportunity to take their discharge and join the Canadian Permanent Force. Some 155 men took the offer.

In November 1905, the Garrison Regiment and the Royal Artillery departed Halifax for Liverpool aboard the liner Canada, along with 123 women and 318 children. The

very last to leave were the Royal Engineers. In March 1906, they marched from Royal Artillery Park down Sackville Street and onto a waiting troopship to the strains of the Scottish tune of Will Ye No Come Back Again?

But the British did not return. Ironically, in a reversal of roles, it was Canadian servicemen and women--over a million strong--who went to Britain's aid during two world wars, most of them through the port of Halifax.