

Who's Really to Blame For the Halifax Riot?

By LUCY VAN GOGH

Next to A.P.'s Edward Kennedy with his premature peace story, the real authors of the trouble at Halifax, according to this authority, were the restaurant employees who immediately walked out and left the servicemen with no place to eat. From taking food by force they easily progressed to taking liquor, and from liquor to more durable goods. There was nothing criminal about it; it wasn't really a riot, merely a disorderly celebration.

THE real author of the Halifax riot, so the Old Haligonian told me, was Edward Kennedy, but it is ob-

viously improbable that the storekeepers will ever get anything out of him, or out of the Associated Press, to recoup their damages. And anyhow, even if Mr. Kennedy hadn't broken the peace story at an inopportune time somebody else might have, with just the same result.

Next to Mr. Kennedy the people to blame for the Halifax riot, said the Old Haligonian, were the restaurant employees. The restaurant business is an essential public service, as much so as the railway business and the streetcar business and the milk deliveries, and there is a heavy moral obligation on everybody concerned to keep it going when it is needed. Notwithstanding that, the workers in all the restaurants in Halifax walked out an hour after the VE announcement, without notice and without authorization. If the proprietors of the restaurants had turned them out, for their own reasons, they would have howled to high heaven that it was an inconceivable outrage on the public and on the restaurant workers both. But they themselves walked out, just because they felt like it, and left both the proprietors and the public to go to the devil. The voluntary-worker canteens, to their eternal credit, continued to function, but they were desperately over-crowded all day.

No Food—Trouble!

And that was what started the riot. Halifax was crammed with service men on short leave who had no home kitchen to go to and who wanted food, and they couldn't get food. (Exactly the same situation existed in Toronto and scores of other Canadian cities where people visit, and it was only by jolly good luck and the fact that people were feeling exceptionally tolerant that there were no riots in other places. Of course service men, when

gathered together and hungry in large numbers, are quite a bit more likely to assert what they feel to be their rights than ordinary civilians.)

Of course it wasn't a riot really. Everybody was in a good temper, and when people are in a good temper it isn't a riot, it is merely a disorderly celebration. All the same it was dangerous, and exceedingly expensive. But it all arose out of the fact that Halifax was full of men who had been doing their bit in the war, who had helped finish off the war, and who thought they were entitled to have a day's celebration, complete with food, when it was announced that the war was finished. When they found they couldn't buy food it occurred to them that they might as well take it, and they began to do so. But the next idea was that if they were going to take things they might as well take something really worth taking, and something which would be no trouble to cook; and obviously for that sort of purpose the ideal thing was alcohol. So they went for the alcohol. (The idea that beer is a perfectly good substitute for food is very widespread among the services; whether it has any basis in fact is not a subject for discussion on this page.) But unlimited alcohol without any food at all is pretty sure to get people excited and break down their inhibitions, especially those relating to the laws of property.

It is an interesting theory that the naval and military authorities should not have granted the rather large number of leaves that caused the presence of such a mass of service men in Halifax on the great day. But it must be remembered that the naval and military authorities had no idea that the civilian restaurant workers of Halifax were going to close the restaurants and leave the service men to starve. In fact they probably thought that they were conferring a benefit on Halifax by sending in a small army of service men who would have been only too delighted to buy meals at the somewhat fancy prices that the Haligonians have been charging, and would thus have put a lot of money into circulation in Halifax. In ordinary times, said the Old Haligonian, the people of Halifax are just as keen about the odd dollar and a quarter as any other Canadians.

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Small Port Town

The service men, the Old Haligonian thought, had no great affection for Halifax. There was no reason why they should have. In peace it was a small port town, very much run by the Big Merchant class, who are very rich, and very much not run by the Proletariat, who are very poor. (The illegitimacy rate of Nova Scotia is precisely 60 per cent above the average for the rest of Canada, pre-war, but whether the responsibility for this rests with the Merchants or the Proletariat, or whether they co-operate, the statistics do not tell us.) It gets along nicely in peace time under these conditions, but when war comes along and it is suddenly converted into one of the great ports of the world it does not adjust itself to the change with that elasticity and promptitude which would be desirable. In fact it continues to be a small port town, with a way of life, and a set of by-laws, very much unlike those of the other great maritime municipalities. After all, it would be unreasonable to expect anything else. You couldn't expect a place to turn itself into a Liverpool or a Glasgow or even a Montreal, just because it was doing the shipping business of a place like that, when next year it will be back doing the ordinary business of Halifax.

Take for example the business of purveyed alcohol beverages. In small port towns such beverages either are not purveyed at all, as for example in Portland, Maine, or are purveyed in the bottle, which the purchaser takes home and consumes in privacy. This is not at all a satisfactory method for sailors and soldiers who have no home and no place to consume in, and in Liverpool, Glasgow and Montreal soldiers and sailors are provided with places where they can purchase alcoholic beverages and consume them on the spot with their feet on a rail or their elbows on a table. But

Halifax never got around to providing such places, and in a year or two will probably not need them. In the meanwhile however the service men did find it a bit inhospitable.

But the Old Haligonian was convinced that there was no element of revenge in the riot. It was much too good-tempered for that, and besides the rioters showed no sign of animosity against anybody. Service men are quite capable of holding a grudge against a particular establishment, which they suspect of robbing their fellows, for a couple of weeks, and

being quite nasty about it. They are not capable of holding a grudge against a whole town for a couple of years. As for the sentences on the convicted looters, the Old Haligonian didn't see how they could reasonably have been much lighter. You can't admit officially and publicly that looting in one's own country is not a serious crime, especially when committed while wearing the King's uniform. Privately you could remit the sentences as soon as you felt that the ends of justice had been served, and he suspected this would not be long.

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