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Lawlor Island: a shield against contagion

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The Doukhobors, a group of 1,998 Russian emigrants and religious dissidents, spent three weeks on Lawlor Island when they first arrived in Canada in 1899.

Always a poor choice for its role, an island in Halifax Harbour was once a massive quarantine camp

There is a neglected island in Halifax Harbour where deer roam among the crumbling foundations of a once busy quarantine station. Lawlor Island played a key role in keeping communicable diseases out of Canada in the past two centuries, yet few people even know it exists. But Halifax's Dr. Ian Cameron, a family doctor and regular contributor to the Medical Post, is hoping to change that by writing about the events at the Lawlor Island quarantine station between 1866 and 1938 in his book: *Quarantine, What is Old is New*.

The subject appealed to Dr. Cameron as an historian—he has been president of the Dalhousie Society for the History of Medicine since 1984—and a physician with an interest in quarantine.

Dr. Cameron's fascination began in 1980 when, on a visit to nearby McNabs Island, he first glimpsed Lawlor Island tucked into the harbour's mouth. His interest piqued, he published several research papers and made many presentations about the island before taking a sabbatical from his practice and teaching classes at Dalhousie's medical school in 2005 to write the book.



Corpses piling up

In 1866 when the premier of Nova Scotia (and future prime minister of Canada) and health officer for Halifax Dr. Charles Tupper learned passengers on the approaching S.S. England were sick and dying of cholera, a makeshift quarantine was set up on McNabs Island. The port's health officer, Dr. John Slatyer, a 36-year-old physician and father of five, worked tirelessly to isolate and treat the sick. His letters to Dr. Tupper detailed the situation: corpses piling up and inadequate shelter and

food for the living. Just as the epidemic was lifting, Dr. Slater himself became ill and ended up among the 200 lives the epidemic eventually claimed.

The government took the 395-hectare McNabs Island for military use and made what Dr. Cameron calls a “snap decision” to set up a quarantine station on the 55-hectare Lawlor Island. “No one checked its suitability,” says Dr. Cameron. A hospital was built but not winterized, there was no proper wharf, no fresh water sources and, because the harbour was surrounded by shallow water, entering through ice was treacherous.

Through research and by interviewing their descendants, Dr. Cameron came to know the doctors in charge and was impressed by their commitment and efficiency despite primitive conditions. There is, however, a black sheep in the group. In 1871, Dr. Charles Gossip allowed the S.S. Franklin to dock in Halifax Harbour and not on Lawlor Island, although 27 passengers had died at sea and cholera was suspected. It remained in port for two days and a number of people boarded the ship while Dr. Gossip did only a cursory inspection. Cholera spread into Halifax and a handful of people died. Yet out of the bad came some good, as public outcry led to the establishment in 1872 of the Provincial Medical Board, Nova Scotia’s first regulatory body for doctors.

Dr. William Wickwire then assumed control of the Lawlor Island quarantine service and oversaw considerable construction, including a deep-water wharf, a shed, detention centres and disinfecting apparatus including a boiler and vacuum pump. Immigration to Canada was about to boom and Lawlor Island became one of Canada’s four major quarantine stations.

Dr. Norman MacKay, a surgeon, was the next appointee in 1898. “He used the latest treatments on people. He performed intubations and mastoid operation, and went above and beyond the expectations of the position,” says Dr. Cameron.



Dr. Ian Cameron.

The book contains excerpts of many letters, and Dr. Cameron’s research involved reading thousands of pieces of archival correspondence, work he calls “elevated drudgery.” He says every so often he stumbled upon something interesting such as the writings of Count Sergei Tolstoy, son of Russian author Leo Tolstoy, who brought the Doukhobors to Lawlor Island in January 1899. The Doukhobors are a sect of Russians who were religious dissenters seeking a new life in Western Canada. Almost 10,000 kilometres into their journey and just four days before arriving, a passenger died and the S.S. Lake Superior entered Halifax Harbour flying the yellow quarantine flag. The hard-working farmers erected expanded accommodations during their three-week stay on Lawlor while the women washed their laundry in the frigid harbour water. After fumigation, disinfection and vaccination, the Doukhobors were allowed to leave for Saint John, N.B., where they boarded trains heading west. Tolstoy wrote that Halifax, “Was nothing out of the ordinary.”

Lawlor Island was bustling: in 1903, 68,961 people were examined and 16 died. Measles were most common that year with 86 cases, while eight patients had scarlet fever, four had influenza, two had smallpox and two had pneumonia. Individual cases of typhoid fever, quinsy, tonsillitis, delirium tremens and suicide were also recorded.

By the 1920s, widespread vaccination programs and a better understanding of preventive health care and improved communication between ports greatly reduced the spread of infectious diseases. By 1938 the quarantine station was no longer needed. The Canadian government purchased it to use as a medical facility during the Second World War, but Lawlor Island has since fallen to ruin and access is restricted.

Missing grave markers?

More than 100 people died on Lawlor Island during its time as a quarantine station, yet what happened to their corpses remains a mystery. There are only eight grave markers; the book's cover is a picture Dr. Cameron took on one visit to Lawlor Island of the small, deteriorating graveyard. The dead seem as forgotten as the island itself.

Dr. Cameron says he hopes the island can some day reopen for tourism. Even Doukhobor descendents who sought permission to come to Lawlor Island in 1999 on the centennial of their arrival there were denied entry. Dr. Cameron wants the book to highlight the island's role in Canada's immigration history. He says he would love to see it become part of the Halifax high school curriculum. He explains his love for medical history and particular interest in Lawlor Island with the George Santayana proverb: "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

Quarantine, What is Old is New is available from New World Publishing. Go online to newworldpublishing.com.

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*Dr. Norman MacKay:
Quarantine officer
during Lawlor Island's
peak years.*