



# Learning About the Halifax Explosion

by Thelma Fayle

## BOOK REVIEW:

*The Blind Mechanic*

by Marilyn Davidson Elliott

(Nimbus, 2018)

On a recent June visit to Nova Scotia, I had a chance to visit the stunning LEED-certified library, built to look like a stack of books on the Halifax horizon – a story highlighted on CNN; the moving immigration museum, Pier 21, featuring immigrants who have helped build Canada; the art gallery – full of Maude Lewis’s fabled work; and the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, presenting insights from the Titanic disaster among other fascinating stories. Throughout our two touring days, guides made frequent references to the “Halifax explosion in 1917.” I wanted to learn more about the tragedy, but did not want to read through a history of the moment the munitions ship, the Mont-Blanc, exploded in the Halifax harbour. At the Maritime Museum, I found a copy of *The Blind Mechanic*, by Marilyn Davidson Elliott (Nimbus, 2018). Learning about one family’s experience seemed a good way to get a sense of the event that marked the growth of a city in the same way tree rings from a year of drought mark a tree even a hundred years later.

This is from the jacket of the book: “Eric Davidson was a beautiful, fair-haired toddler when the Halifax Explosion struck, killing almost 2,000 people and seriously injuring thousands of others. He lost both eyes—a tragedy that his mother never fully recovered from. He also developed a fascination with cars and how they worked, and he later decided, against all likelihood, to become a mechanic.”

Written by his daughter Marilyn, the book gives new insights into the story of the 1917 Halifax explosion. Marilyn was only able to bring herself to write the book about her father after he died. “I knew that dad was extremely humble, and he would have considered a book about him to be boastful,” she said, explaining her decision to write about him after he died in his 90s.

Following the explosion, once he recovered from his injury, Eric attended the blind baby nursery. That option seemed to help his naturally overly-protective parents. Eric adjusted quickly in those first few years and did not seem to suffer mental trauma; whereas his parents, like many other survivors, referred to as “refugees,” suffered mentally with a form of PTSD, although they didn't call

it that then.

Two years after the explosion, when the little boy developed a fascination with cars, Eric's father wrote to the relief commission, asking them to help him locate an old junk car for his little boy to play with in their backyard. Eventually, the school for the blind in Halifax, offered Eric an education comparable to the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston. He learned to read and write Braille, along with other interesting subjects; but the main skill he learned was to be independent. He wanted to learn to play the banjo, but they didn't teach banjo, they taught piano. So, he learned to play the piano, and then later in life he decided to teach himself to play the banjo.

As an adult, Eric looked back on his childhood as a boy who ran, walked, swam, and skated with kids in his neighborhood. "I never considered myself blind or any different from them; and they never really considered me any different," he recalled. He was one of those people who figured out early in life what he wanted to do for a living. He wanted to be a mechanic, but was not sure if he would ever get the chance to fulfil his dream. He decided he would have to teach himself and was able to get his brothers, parents, and sister to read the manuals to him. He experimented on the old Chev in his backyard. He took the engine apart and then put it back together. He taught himself everything he could about auto mechanics and worked on any car he could get his hands on. In 1948, he received his automobile mechanics license from the province.

He met Mary, his wife-to-be, who had also attended the school for the blind. They worked hard, married, secured a loan to buy a house, and raised a family of three children. He went on to have a long and successful career as a highly valued mechanic. With one particular employer over 25 years, he rarely missed a day of work. His career led him to a passion for owning and restoring antique cars. In 1953, he hitch-hiked to New Brunswick to buy a 1927 Springfield Rolls-Royce Phantom meant as a parts-only car; but within a few years, he had it in good working order. Two years later, the Rolls-Royce was featured in the National Day Parade in Halifax. Eric was remembered by friends and colleagues as a good-natured, responsible man who laughed often. During his retirement years, he was an avid blood donor, a square dancer, a ham-radio operator, a CBC radio fan, and an involved citizen in his community. He was a rare person who took the time to send thank you notes whenever his pension was increased over the years. He was grateful for his life and saw it as a gift – to be paid forward. He urged his children never to give up on their dreams.

"Life holds very great happiness and interest for me," he said; "99 more years would be too short for all the different things I have in mind to do." There is much more to this man's story, but the essence of the book gave me a sense of the tangle of complexities around the Halifax explosion, and one human being's choice to live a productive, happy life. I admired Eric's well-thought-out decisions and his determination.

If you want to read about the results of a life-long can-do attitude, I recommend *The Blind Mechanic* – a beautifully written book by a proud and loving daughter.

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