Introduction

It was an act few people witnessed.

A lone, lean figure standing shoulder-square on the Halifax waterfront, blocking the path of an oncoming bulldozer assigned to level an abandoned early-nineteenth-century building fifty feet from his back.

The year was 1963. The human barrier was Lou Collins, a bearded thirty-nine-year-old high school principal, part of a committed coterie of citizens fighting to preserve local heritage. Collins's brave defiance that day would fail. The structure fell. But in the coming months and years, through the unrelenting efforts of Collins and other local activists, many along the harbour would be saved. Those rescued structures would form the core of what would, a decade later, become Historic Properties, an internationally acclaimed restoration project that remains an important element of Halifax's economy and civic identity.

"If he hadn't done that, the waterfront buildings wouldn't be there," said Gil Hutton, a defence scientist and fellow heritage proponent, years later. "I think the whole rejuvenation of the city came from saving those buildings."[1]

Such fervid advocacy was not common at the time in Halifax. "In the sixties there was a strong ruling group of people here," says Bob Geraghty, a former provincial deputy minister. "There was little or no protest from people. People accepted their lot in life, their position. It was almost like a calcified area."[2]

"Things were pretty hide-bound," echoes Mike Bradfield, an economics professor at Dalhousie University. "Not because the people of Nova Scotia didn't want change, but because people in the power structure—especially business leaders—didn't want to be threatened by anyone else."[3]

As the 1960s progressed, however, so did citizen engagement and the resistance to that power structure. In patches across metro, bit by bit, residents were finding communion with the like-minded and speaking out about subjects heretofore in the shadows, giving expression to racism, to feminism, to environmental pollution. While it was engagement far less vociferous than that exploding across the continent at the time, by 1970 Halifax was clearly evolving.

Several factors contributed.

"[With the universities,] we had many young people at that time," says Bradfield, "not just kids, but all sorts of people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. And they are always the people who are at the vanguard of protests and things like that. [A] lot of the social movements were developing in the middle of that."[4]

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1. *Globe and Mail*, January 8, 2008, p. S8.
2. Interview, August 10, 2016.
3. Interview, January 12, 2015.
4. Interview, January 12, 2015.

At the same time, there was an influx of young Americans who were evading conscription into the U.S. military and a likely tour of Vietnam. A good number were educated and left-leaning and would remain in the area, working as teachers, professors or artists. Many also became involved in local causes, inserting a political vitality already prevalent in major cities throughout North America.

Another factor in the spike of activity was that certain elements in the media began to cater to a more progressive audience. *The Mysterious East* magazine out of New Brunswick, the Halifax-based weekly *The 4th Estate* newspaper and CJCH's left-leaning supper-hour television news show *ID* all provided a more progressive viewpoint. Student newspapers at local universities also contributed, albeit serving a readership already on-side.

Highly influential was the cultural and political earthquake happening in the United States. In American cities and on campuses, poverty, crime, Vietnam, racism and housing all kindled virulent unrest. Activists and reformers, young and impatient and idealistic, were at the gates, voices rising. The mounting anger was particularly pronounced in black communities where the momentum of the civil rights movement was forcing a hard-won political transformation.

In Canada, with urban burdens seldom as extreme, young and restless populations nevertheless adopted language and attitudes indistinguishable from their American counterparts. In Montreal, nationalist fervour manifested in FLQ terror and a legitimate Canadian crisis. At Sir George Williams University, rebels occupied and demolished the computer complex in support of aggrieved West Indian students. Near downtown Toronto, a small precinct named Yorkville became Canada's bohemian capital, attracting hippies, folk singers and American draft dodgers. This moveable feast of protest took to the city's streets to oppose the Vietnam War, nuclear weapons, industrial expansion, racial discrimination and the suppression of women. "[Protesters] did not always articulate clearly what they were for," reflected Trent University professor Bryan D. Palmer of the phenomenon, "[but] they certainly knew what they were against."[5]

In Halifax, the embrace was less overt and largely minus the era's psychedelic excesses. Nonetheless, a discernible form of activism—on a different plain than the food drives and rink-building volunteerism customary in neighbourhoods throughout the region—had slowly taken hold. "The town the sixties forgot" was catching up, and doing so even as the general population remained dubious of change and trespassers promoting that change.

Groups around metro that championed heritage conservation, women's liberation, racial fairness and the elimination of poverty began to increase in number and membership. The local black population alone by 1969 would have three viable black-focused organizations in the city. But while causes garnered more volunteers, and some advancement occurred in some areas, the overall pace of change was halting and uncertain, testing the patience of even the most committed. A resilient, reactionary establishment was only one reason for this.

Few participants had formal training in social change. Methods employed in community organizing were haphazard, even frenetic. Often missing were the rudiments of political strategy and basic planning. Consequently, results were mixed, sometimes counterproductive.

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5. *The American Historical Review*, Volume 123, Issue 3, June 2018, pp. 773–78.

On an individual level, misspent energy and false starts caused repeated frustrations as goals even within groups did not always align. Strong personalities seemed to repel at least as many workers as they attracted. Meetings frequently led to only more meetings. Few groups were spared bitter resignations and wounded egos. Back-biting and in-fighting among volunteers were common. In at least one instance, two members on the same planning committee settled a disagreement with a punch-up on a city sidewalk.

Compounding the challenge was a palpable intimidation within the population, a baked-in reticence to partake not just in political protest but in protest in general. “I have the feeling that fear permeates a good deal of this community,” said feminist leader Muriel Duckworth. “[There] is fear of all sorts of consequences, from people of all walks of life.”[6]

Local author and teacher Lester B. Sellick felt it.

There was tension in the city when it came to the idea of change, he would tell a public forum. People didn’t seem to want it, nor often did governments.

“I have found that one rocks the boat with considerable peril to his life,” Sellick said.[7]

For seven tumultuous days in February 1970, one event would rock that boat.

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It was called Encounter on Urban Environment, a ponderously named week-long kinetic exercise in public engagement. It was organized by the provincial government and was the first experiment of its kind ever held in Canada. No official event in Halifax had ever involved more residents. Fractious and unsettling and loud, Encounter would jolt an entire metropolitan area as it laid bare the problems and the divisions of an urban population already in a slow swirl of change.

Encounter featured twelve experts—several with international reputations, academics by and large—who criss-crossed Halifax-Dartmouth en masse and met in open forums with local leaders and groups representing varied interests and topics. For one week, every day, all day, “the twelve wise men” poked, challenged, lectured, warned, insulted and, on occasion, praised as they encouraged people to talk to them—and to one another—about fundamental issues of the community. Roughly forty meetings were held.[8] All but a handful were open to the public. Each night a town hall—televised live across the province and broadcast on local radio—drew outsized in-person audiences and huge viewership.

Encounter captured the zeitgeist of a city already in transition. Its goals were to expose and confront impediments to change. This, one hoped, would foster greater public involvement in decision-making and ultimately improve governance.

The experiment was actually one element in an ambitious change strategy the Progressive Conservative provincial government was attempting at the time. That strategy—and Encounter—emanated from a recently formed, little-understood unit that operated within the orbit of the

6. Encounter town hall, Wednesday, February 25, 1970.
7. Encounter town hall, Monday, February 23, 1970.
8. Total includes scheduled daily sessions, nightly town halls and informal meetings such as working lunches.

premier's office. In its ranks were iconoclasts, free-thinkers and mavericks, at least one schooled in the techniques and philosophies of radical American community organizing guru Saul Alinsky.

While Encounter's purpose was noble, its result was explosive.

Never before had Halifax's power structure been so brazenly confronted. To many in the establishment, Encounter was an ideological ambush. Provincial and federal officials were humiliated for their ineptness, indifference and lack of accountability. Business leaders, influential clergy and civic administrators were castigated for abysmal planning and what some Encounter panellists determined was blatant racism. Police and local government agencies had their flawed leadership and, in at least one instance, their criminal actions exposed. The local media were insulted. Community leaders were left angered and embarrassed. Careers were derailed.

Years later, one Encounter panellist was still puzzled as to why Halifax-Dartmouth had taken such a risk. "Who in their right mind would do such a thing?" asked journalism professor Joe Scanlon. "Christ, who would ever want such divisions in their city?"[9]

The week would also bring a hovering spectre of violence. Threats of a mass shooting and promises of unrest permeated both topic-based sessions and nightly town halls. A bomb scare opened the final day. Fearing the worst, Nova Scotia premier G. I. Smith at mid-week contemplated prematurely ending the great experiment.

"Encounter," reflected one newspaper reporter from the period, "really tore the scab off the soul of the city."[10]

Compounding the impact were two events that followed Encounter in quick succession, extending the commotion for local residents to more than thirty days. Both were influenced and escalated by Encounter and its energy. The racially explosive "Oldland affair," which revolved around the hiring of a new city manager from Oklahoma City, and the tense two-day workshop of consummate provocateur Saul Alinsky, the famed and feared community organizer, further assailed an exhausted and heretofore largely passive city.

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This book tells of a remarkable moment in the history of a city familiar with remarkable moments. It is not intended as a definitive history of the period in Halifax-Dartmouth, nor a handbook on activism or advocacy, although there is a good deal here of interest in both these areas.

Seven Days in Halifax is the chronicle of one event. It is equally a portrait of the men and women associated with that event. Many were experienced activists and some even trained organizers. This is their story. Others were ordinary citizens and novice volunteers unexpectedly immersed in a maelstrom in their community. This is their story, too. For those in both categories, Encounter became a part—sometimes a *major* part—of their personal narrative for the rest of their lives.

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9. Interview, November 12, 2014.
10. Interview, John Soosaar, February 25, 2015.

Certainly, context plays an important role in this book. The dynamism of the sixties both drives and frames Encounter and the reaction to it. Yet, the modern reader will find much here that is familiar in today's world: deep domestic divisions unlocked by distant conflicts; the spiteful demeanour in public discourse; an angry and assembling marginalized underclass garnering political power and mainstream profile; mistrust in public institutions; the spectre of civil unrest; and random violence baked into daily life. Also common to both eras are specific issues related to education, policing, planning, federal-provincial tensions, housing, race, governance and evolving urban ideals—all topics confronted during Encounter. Hard to miss as well is that the two periods share an impactful generational transition—the 1960s' tsunami of baby boomers evoking today's millennial surge, both groups flexing their size and influence and altering the political power base.

Finally, this book is a personal mission of sorts. Outside of a select and dwindling demographic, Encounter is largely forgotten, proof of its existence relegated to library shelves and, off and on, the menu of the National Film Board (NFB). References in articles and available books are rare and frequently inaccurate. This is unfortunate. *Seven Days in Halifax* seeks to rescue an extraordinary event from such ill-deserved obscurity.