

*Bonnie G. Rourke, The Sea Cadet Years on Georgian Bay.  
Midland, ON: Huronia Museum, 2008.*

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“There’s something about Naval training and the sea that asserts its own discipline.”

Godfrey Lister (120)

Godfrey Lister’s comment seems an appropriate place to begin, because Bonnie G. Rourke’s book The Sea Cadet Years on Georgian Bay is about communities framed by naval training and the sea—albeit, in this case, an inland sea. It is not an easy book to review, not least because it is more two books than one. Rourke has assembled written recollections from former cadets, primarily about life on the Queen Elizabeth and Princess Alice camps, which operated between 1942 and 1953; and interspersed these with her family’s history of living among the islands of the eastern Georgian Bay. In each case, the book provides a snapshot of unique communities largely absent from the historical record.

To some extent, the marriage of narratives makes sense. Rourke’s father Frank served as a caretaker for the camps, and so helps to bridge the seasonal halves of the book. We alternate between stories of isolated winters shared by a few families in a belated frontier environment, and the “beautiful boys of summer” boated in for naval training each June. “I refer to the Sea Cadets as the ‘Beautiful Boys of Summer,’”

Rourke says in her introduction, “[because beautiful] they are, not only to look at, but who they were and are, the values they still hold, their belief in honour, duty to country, community and family, respect for others and themselves” (12). That is, in many ways, the last comment she will make on the subject, though nearly all of former cadets share her view.

The Sea Cadets were a project of the Navy League of Canada, founded in 1895 to promote Canadian support of Britain’s naval superiority. The League spent the first few decades of the twentieth century establishing support systems for navy personnel on shore, lobbying for federal commitment to naval defence, and developing a youth training program known as the Boy’s Naval Brigades. The Brigades were renamed the Navy League Sea Cadet Corps in 1923 to link them more formally to the Canadian military, and solidify their intended role as a “nursery for seamen” for the Royal Canadian Navy. The RCN agreed to partner with the League in 1941, and the next year the Sea Cadet corps earned Royal designation.

This same year, League president Gordon C. Leitch, a transportation tycoon, and his American business partner James Norris, financed the purchase of a property on Beausoleil Island, one of the largest islands in the southern Georgian Bay. (We learn relatively little about Beausoleil, by then part of a national park; Rourke’s real interest is in the history of Minnicognashene Island, on which her family lived). Leitch and Norris then paid for the construction of SCC Queen Elizabeth, which was opened in July 1942 by such august officials as the Minister of Defence for Navy Services, Angus Macdonald, and the Chief of Staff for the RCN, Vice-Admiral Percy Nelles (23). A year later Leitch and Norris bought an old hotel property on nearby Minnicognashene (“Minnicog”), and had it refitted it as SCC Princess Alice, named for the wife of the Governor General.

Why naval training camps two thousand kilometres from the nearest ocean? For one thing, there were numerous cadet units in southern Ontario. Many who attended the Georgian Bay camps were from the nearby towns of Barrie and Midland, but cadets also came from cities along the Windsor-Toronto corridor (Kitchener/Waterloo, Guelph, Hamilton, etc.). Men recall taking the train to Midland and then boarding the 1916

steamer the *City of Dover*. The novelties of sailing on such an antiquated ship and encountering the topography of the Canadian Shield for the first time clearly made an impression. “It was very rocky and I think there were a lot of snakes,” writes Alexander Kraft (34); others were struck by the scenery, “the endless water, forests, rocks and the sky so blue” (110). Sunnyside Beach, this was not. I couldn’t help but think of Thomas Raddall’s curious comment in 1948’s *Halifax: Warden of the North* that “the Maritime regiments were full of sailors and fishermen while the Canadian Navy was manned largely by freshwater men from Ontario and farm boys from the prairies.”<sup>1</sup> What drew these city boys to naval life? It is never made quite clear, though nearly all the contributors are explicit about the merits of the *cadet* experience for adolescent boys. “Sea Cadets started me out right,” reflects Frank Zonka in a typical comment, “learning self discipline and an appreciation for accomplishment” (151).

In addition, the Georgian Bay has a long history of fierce maritime weather, and its famous rocky shore can mimic well an oceanic coast. So it was, in many ways, an ideal as well as convenient location. The characteristic unruly topography of the islands, though, made for some challenges: “The island was all rock and there wasn’t a level spot to be had” (41), so the wooden deck of the old hotel’s tennis court doubled as a parade square at Princess Alice—until one cadet went through it and broke his leg (44). The Navy League did its best to stamp some naval presence on the landscape: buildings and corps are named dutifully after British, Canadian, and American admirals (Nelson House, Nelles Block, Nimitz Block), and camp boats after ships like the HMCS *Haida*, *Athabaskan*, and *Huron*. The main building at Princess Alice—which, of course, is the camp that Rourke knew best—was constructed in the shape of a ship’s bridge and wheel house, earning it the title of the “stone frigate.” (This seemed appropriate, considering the Canadian Shield; but then, my alma mater, the University of King’s College, hosted an officers’ training camp during the Second World War and was also nicknamed “the stone frigate”—and with its neoclassical façade a further site from Beausoleil can’t be imagined). Scattered around the two islands were cadet cabins, hammocks, recreation and mess halls, and officers’ cabins. The Sea Cadet Years is wonderfully illustrated; fortunately many of the boys brought Brownie Kodak cameras with them, and so we are given an excellent visual sense of the camps.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Raddall, Halifax: Warden of the North (New York: Doubleday, 1965 edition) 248.

We piece together a sense of cadet training and activities. Swimming, gymnastics, parade, rifle drills —“we used to also kick the gun butt and twirl it around...We had to spread out or we would hit someone on the head” (151)— semaphore and signaling; and standing watch on the “bridge.” And, of course, sailing: in dinghies, whalers, and most impressively, a few yachts donated by well-to-do Georgian Bay cottagers (like the Eaton family) who couldn’t acquire fuel in wartime and so, in the spirit of civic duty strongly flavoured with pragmatism, loaned them to the Navy League. I confess I wanted to know more about the camps’ naval training, especially their freshwater fleet; and about other cadet camps in the Great Lakes region (there are passing references to camps on Lake Ontario and Lake Erie) and other cadet programs, like the University Naval Training Division. But teenage boys have other priorities, and as much as their adult selves praise cadet discipline and routine there was clearly a thrill in breaking that routine; and so there are plenty of stories about everything from the innocuous (jumping off the boathouse, 225) to the illicit (going to look for girls at the Guides camp on Beausoleil and getting lost, 26).

But if the Sea Cadets were designed to give these boys “the basics of military discipline and knowledge of service life and, hopefully steer them to that military branch later” (41) then they succeeded, for many of these men went on to wartime or even lifelong involvement in the Cadet organization, the Navy League, or the Royal Canadian Navy. “There’s a certain rhythm to Naval life and no matter where you go you just step into the rhythm,” writes Radleigh Mackenzie, a cadet at Princess Alice in 1948. “That part of it doesn’t change” (168). Some of the most interesting material— perhaps because it links us to the larger narrative of Canada’s military activity at the time—comes in the stories of those who served in the Navy after their cadet training: a signalman in the Merchant Marine on the Atlantic convoys (28); a torpedo man posted to the HMCS *Uganda*, the only Canadian warship to fight in the Pacific (34); or a quartermaster lost on the HMCS *Ottawa* when sunk by a U-boat east of Newfoundland (36). Indeed, the matter-of-fact references to friends lost in the war are quite affecting:

I shared a room in the cabin with Dudley “Red” Garret, who had been a rookie with the “Rangers” [sic] in the NHL and was an Officer Candidate acting as an instructor. He never became an officer and was lost as a radar operator on the ship *Shawinigan* when it was sunk with all hands in the Davis Strait (39).

Given that Rourke canvassed the sea cadet alumni organization for material, it is not surprising that those who contributed have had longstanding relationships with the Navy League. (Though even a former director of the League admits that, between a broken jaw and mosquitoes, he had a pretty miserable experience at Princess Alice, 202-3). But some post-cadet accounts require a firmer edit; successful though these men may be, they read as non-sequitorial postscripts to camp or naval life.

Half the book is not about cadets or the camps at all, but stories of Frank and Juanita Rourke raising a family in essentially frontier conditions in the Thirty Thousand Islands (Frank, as camp caretaker, writes the Navy League in 1948 that he cannot get men to come and work in such an isolated locale, 161). Rourke attends to the camps overwinter: shoveling snow, cutting wood, and noting these tasks in a few words in his daily log. This is the *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, though, not the *Journal of Georgian Bay History*, but there are a few glimpses of the war's effects on Collingwood and Midland—odd to think of these towns, now retirement and cottage centres, launching Fairmiles and Corvettes, with supply depots first serving the camps and other bases and later, cottages mushrooming up the shore. Such references, though, are buried in truly exhaustive detail of day-to-day home life; Rourke's mother kept a diary of life "up the shore."<sup>2</sup> On January 11, 1952, she noted "some unsettling rumours coming from the Navy League that Princess Alice Camp might be closed down in the next few years" (217). I was curious about changes at the camps after war's end, or after their disposition in 1953—a few cadets note that naval veterans returned to assume positions in the local cadet corps, for example.

As might be expected in a compilation of oral histories, information about the cadet program and its relationship to Canadian naval history is concentrated in the brief introduction, with only passing references scattered throughout the narratives. In some ways The Sea Cadet Years on Georgian Bay most resembles a scrapbook, with photographs, crests, a few memos, corps banners and the like, amid short and lively accounts of camp life. But with no bibliography, it is impossible to know from where

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<sup>2</sup> Juanita Rourke published these recollections as Up the Shore: A Timeless Story of Georgian Bay (Midland, Ontario: Up the Shore Enterprises, 1994).

the introductory histories or the handful of official documents come. If you want to learn about the Sea Cadets or the Naval League, or the Georgian Bay for that matter, this book is not the place to start; but it will colour in more thorough and academic histories with the voice of human experience. It records a little-documented element of Great Lakes history, and as we are learning, camping experience (military and recreational alike) in Canada has often gone unrecorded.<sup>3</sup> The sea cadet camps also suggest a vibrant period of human activity in a place long romanticized for its “wilderness” qualities. Bonnie Rourke is frank at the outset that “this book is a memoir; people telling their story about places, events and people as they remember them” (12). For what this book aspires to do, it does it.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Sharon Wall, The Nurture of Nature: Childhood, Antimodernism, and Ontario Summer Camps, 1920-55 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009).