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"Dispatches from the Front: The Life of Matthew Halton, Canada's Voice at War (Book Review)" by David Halton

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Matthew Halton. *Dispatches from the Front: The Life of Matthew Halton, Canada's Voice at War*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2014. Pp. 352.

Matthew Halton served as a Foreign Correspondent for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) during the Second World War, and his broadcasts serve as a vital record for both Canada's role in the conflict and the willingness of the CBC to acknowledge the brutality of conflict to its domestic audiences. Arguably once known more widely than Billy Bishop (p. 2), Halton's prominence in the Canadian canon dwindled in the intervening decades. *Dispatches from the Front*, as an accessible mass-market tome, hopes to assert Halton as a hero worthy of the Canadian canon.

The efforts to make a hero of a mostly-forgotten journalist are not assumed. David Halton—hereafter referred to as the author to avoid confusion with Halton the subject—grapples with a challenging historiographical approach. As the son of his subject, the author has unprecedented access to the private life and letters of Matthew Halton, and consequently has remarkable capacity to elucidate details censored and omitted in Halton's broadcasts. However, as his son, the author's aspirations for the reception of his father's works are boldly self-satisfying. It seems to the author a profound injustice that "journalism scholarships, foundations, awards and plaques" are named for Halton's contemporaries, yet not for him; the author's intention, stated plainly from the preface, is to "re-awaken interest in a Canadian legend" (p. 3).

The turn of phrase is apt, as the notion of "legend" is central to the work. In theory, this vested interest in the legend of a broadcaster ought not to interfere with the accuracy or completeness of the work—many histories of great men and women have been written with reverence at their core. In this context, however, reverence has the tendency to interfere with the establishment of new understandings of the Canadian press context of the period.

Halton's celebrity status in the Canadian press was at its peak during and after the Second World War, when his coverage of D-Day and the subsequent invasion of Normandy kept Canadians on the home front enraptured. Yet these "dispatches from the front" for which the book is named are merely a brief chapter. Rather than focus on Halton's wartime journalistic work, the author traces the course of his life and seems to spare no detail. Halton's financial circumstances

that disrupted his studies (p. 20), his numerous romantic affairs and the manner in which they were described to his seemingly open-minded wife, or his efforts to compose poetry—badly, by the author’s admission—are distractions from the remarkable broadcasts that brought his career success.

Barring these diversions, Halton’s time in Europe serves as a significant record of Canada’s status internationally in the early twentieth century. He arrived in London in 1929 with an Anglophile’s zeal, and was dismayed to discover that most “[Brits were] mildly condescending towards the young colonial” (p. 27). Yet this condescension seemed largely limited to a Europe untouched by the battles of the Second World War; in 1930, he travelled to Flanders to observe the nightly memorial and observed that, “After the last war, one should probably be ashamed of patriotism, but the Belgians still speak of the Canadians with reverence” (p. 36). This conflict was reinforced as Halton interviewed members of the British Royal Family for the *Toronto Star* in 1939, prior to their Canadian tour. In public writing, he described the King and Queen of England as “regal” and “radiant” (p. 99) respectively, while in private he claimed that “the ruling class [despises] us rude colonials” (p. 98). This conflict—the pull away from the blandness of “Protestant Toronto” (p. 40) yet the frustration of Canada’s lack of regard among world powers—provides perhaps the most compelling new understanding in the book. While Canadians are intimately aware of Canada’s history, military and otherwise, it is significant to observe both awe and indifference to Canada on the part of European nations. As Halton’s career developed, his access to conflicts improved, which allowed him to cover the Spanish Civil War as well as Nazi Germany, before and after *Kristallnacht*. Halton’s writings and broadcasts established his prominence as a Canadian perspective on Europe. Far from being simply a Canadian journalist, Halton was *the* journalist, who incidentally happened to be from Canada (or so the book strongly implies.)

The bias implied by the affectionate depiction of Halton’s entire life draws some of the more salient historical analyses into question. Halton’s prophetic assessments of Nazi Germany’s menace in the 1930s stand in stark contrast to his contemporaries, particularly his contempt for the Berlin Olympics (p. 106). Perhaps greeted with more skepticism under the “legend” of the subject is the suggestion that Halton unintentionally coined the term “final solution” in reference to

the Holocaust while covering a piece in *Der Strumer* in 1936 (p. 136). This is emphatically represented as evidence that Halton's irritation with flawed institutions, cultures, and understandings was consistent with his position as a "Cassandra" (p. 121). The author presents his subject as having seen crises before they emerged, all while enduring the cruel indifference of those who would be proven wrong by history. While the sources are altogether credible, the prominence of their inclusion seems somewhat suspect. After all, given the timeframe of work on display, one presumes that an author not crafting a hero might have included more missteps.

Above all else, Halton's Second World War broadcasts are unimpeachable to the canon of Canadian wartime history. He describes Normandy at length (p. 210-211), marking an indelible record of the impact of Canadians on the outcome of the Second World War and the impact of the war on the Canadian soldiers who fought. Halton's personal experiences of working with the CBC help illuminate the context of what was shown and what was hidden during Second World War broadcasts. Halton was accused by his superiors of being "too severe" (p. 216) in his descriptions of battle. Given how significant his records have become in retrospect, this conflict between reporter and editor establishes the fallibility of journalistic sources as historic records. While journalists witness events first-hand, their perspectives are inevitably coloured by the expectations of their publishers and audience; this is altogether rational, but not always immediately obvious.

From the perspective of Halton's broadcast influence, the book can be included alongside other affectionate forays into the history of Canadian broadcasting. For instance, Murray Gill's *Nothing on but the Radio: A Look Back at Radio in Canada and How It Changed the World*.¹ Both books could be accused of the faint revisionism that presents hand-in-hand with nostalgic histories, yet each illustrate the value of broadcast media to its intended audience as well as historical observers after the fact. The role of early twentieth century Canadian broadcasting in differentiating Anglo-Canadian identity from British, as personally experienced by Halton, is explored in Ryan Edwardson's

¹ Murray Gill, *Nothing on but the Radio: A Look Back at Radio in Canada and How It Changed the World* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2003).

Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood.² To focus on Halton's observations of Normandy situates the work in a much denser field of Canadian academic study. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* by Terry Copp³ presents the same breathless energy of Halton's coverage of the conflict; Halton's "dispatches" do not readily comment on military strategy but maintain the same tone of nationalism and awe for the extraordinary character of the Canadian effort. *Dispatches from the Front* is unusual among books in the field in that it encompasses military and broadcast history in the Canadian context, and offers insights for those interested in the relationship between both. As a general market work, it presents an accessible point of entry into either topic for the more casual observer.

Dispatches from the Front makes ample use of primary source documents to craft a compelling narrative of wartime journalism from the Canadian perspective. Not coincidentally, the observations of greatest value coincide with the heights of Halton's fame. Fame is a recurring theme in the book, and the author's concern with the fame or lack thereof of his subject may actually be to the book's detriment. At the height of Halton's prominence, with the key moments of his illustrious career well known to the public, examining his humble Alberta upbringing or convoluted romances might have served as an important counterbalance. As an "untold story," which would explain the lengthy background examinations, the book is effective; however, it typically helps to begin with the audience's foundational understanding of the "told story."

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² Ryan Edwardson, *Canadian Content: Culture and the Quest for Nationhood* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

³ Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).