

Burning Haliburton, Revisted: Questioning The Author And His Legacy

Content Warning: This paper deals with themes of racism, colonialism, classism, misogyny, and domestic violence.

The Haliburton Society is not only one of the most venerable and long-standing societies on the King's campus—136 years old at the time of writing—but the oldest English literary society on a North American or Commonwealth campus. The group was founded in 1884 by King's students with a passion for literature, whose members originally met in Chapel Bay to pool their funds and read aloud to each other from shared books.

The Canadian landscape (literary and otherwise) is much changed since those early days in Windsor. While the Haliburton Society still gathers every second Wednesday to share readings and each other's company, we are privileged to have greater access to books than those who came before us. 'CanLit' is much-changed too, with traditionally marginalized voices now taking centre stage and asking difficult and important questions. Just as Canadians have reckoned with our country's troubled past, so too must we take up the challenge of examining our own history.

George Elliot Clarke, an African-Nova Scotian poet, novelist, academic, and Honorary Member of the Haliburton Society, has pulled back the curtain on Thomas Chandler Haliburton's anti-Black racism and, in an address at a 1996 symposium, asked "Must we burn Haliburton?" (*Must We Burn Haliburton?* 1) As the first bestselling Canadian author and an alumnus of King's College, Haliburton must have seemed a fitting recipient of the society's honour. We must nevertheless re-open Dr. Clarke's question and consider several of the darker facets of Haliburton's oeuvre, including his overt sexism and grotesque racial caricatures. Through a

consideration of his portrayals of women, African-Nova Scotians, and the Mi'kmaq nation, we hope to shine a light on some of these difficult realities and consider how best to move forward in a contemporary context. Or to be more direct; while casting no judgements on the historical and literary merits of Haliburton's work, is it nevertheless proper to continue naming a Society in his honour in light of his retrograde views on a range of issues that King's students deem important?

While small populations of Black settlers lived in colonial towns such as Louisbourg and early Halifax in the 1700s, historical records reveal that the first large group of Black refugees arrived in Nova Scotia from the United States in 1782 ("African Nova Scotian"). These refugees, known today as the Black Loyalists, were promised land; however, upon arrival they were given lands of lesser quality than those of their white counterparts. Nevertheless, the Black Loyalists settled in communities such as Annapolis Royal, Clements, Granville, Birchtown (which notably, for several years after its creation was the largest free African community in North America), Brindelytown, Preston, Little Tracadie, Chedabucto, and Halifax, where they routinely experienced discrimination from white settlers ("Black Migration"). In fact, the first recorded race riot in Canadian history occurred in Shelburne, a mere two and a half hours from Haliburton's native Windsor ["African Nova Scotian"]. Growing up within this climate, Haliburton would have been acutely aware of divisions within the Nova Scotian community, but his writing reveals little sympathy or compassion. To the contrary. As Clarke writes, "[Haliburton's] mouthpiece, the Yankee clock peddler, Sam Slick, believes that 'those thick skulled, crook shanked, flat footed, long heeled, woolly headed gentlemen, don't seem fit for much else but slavery'" (2).

Indeed, anti-Black racism permeates much of Haliburton's *oeuvre*. While undoubtedly a product of his time, Haliburton was nevertheless a very conservative figure, even for his day. Weighing in on the debates of his age, Haliburton's defence of slavery mirrors that of Southern American apologists; "he shared the same imperilled worldview," Clarke writes, "fear[ing] that abolition and other socio-economic reforms marked the imminent collapse of Protestant/Christian civilization" (9). This idea is reinforced in *The Clockmaker*, where an escaped slave, Scip, longs for his former servitude (qtd. in Clarke 15). Slavery, for Haliburton, is a "loving paternalism" (Clarke 14) and a Christian-centered institution that underpins Western civilization. Without this divinely-ordained system of class and race, Haliburton worries that liberty is threatened; as Clarke ironically notes, "slavery is freedom: freedom slavery" (21). As a monarchist and loyalist with a Tory philosophy, Haliburton "equated Blackness with modernity"—and therefore, for him, it represented a troubling and "inherent instability" (Clarke 28).

While Haliburton's work does not feature Mi'kmaq characters as prominently as it does African-Nova Scotians, it is nevertheless important to consider his characterizations of their community. In his 1823 work of nonfiction, *A General Description of Nova Scotia*, Haliburton seeks to capture the province's history and natural landscape. Nestled among portrayals of the towns, judicial systems, and flora and fauna is a portrait of the Mi'kmaq nation. In keeping with the European tradition of treating Indigenous peoples as specimens for study, Haliburton offers a physical description of Mi'kmaq peoples, contrasting them with white settlers and Black loyalists (*A General* 51), tapping into the problematic notion of the 'noble savage.' He also uses stereotypical and racist language to describe their behaviours, depicting them as violent drunks: "When sober [the Mi'kmaq] are silent and thoughtful, very shrewd and sensible in their remarks.

When intoxicated by liquors, which is often the case, they are riotous and quarrelsome among each other” (51-52). Furthermore, Haliburton repeatedly mis-identifies Mi’kmaq terms, referring to moccasins as “mogasins” (52) and papoose carriers as “papuse” (52). He also attempts to create a short Mi’kmaq-English dictionary, which, when cross-referenced with the Mi’kmaq Online Dictionary, is revealed to be based on inaccurate perceptions (Mi’kmaq Online). Otherwise, the bulk of the fifth chapter is an unremarkable piece of writing that attempts to describe Mi’kmaq ways of life, including medicines, fishing and hunting practices, styles of dress, and judiciary systems. Of particular interest is his passage on gender dynamics: “In this tribe the female sex are the servants of the men, and carry not only the children, but in travelling, all the domestic utensils, provisions, and other burdens [...] tasks are imposed upon them without pity, and services are received without complaisance or gratitude” (52). This critique is deeply ironic given Haliburton’s broader misogyny and attitude toward domestic violence.

As Ruth Panofsky notes in her essay “Breaking the Silence: *The Clockmaker* On Women,” if we “remain silent on the disturbing aspects of [Haliburton’s work], we are sanctioning the negative views it expresses” (42). While Panofsky recognizes the elitism and racism that are prevalent in his writings, her own essay focusses on the “denigration of women” throughout *The Clockmaker* series (41). Panofsky observes that although Haliburton’s “caustic derision of both Blacks and women” would have “been sanctioned during the first half of the nineteenth century,” (42) it is difficult to tolerate these views today.

Of particular issue is Haliburton’s portrayal of female characters in *The Clockmaker* and his repeated comparison of women with animals. For example, his protagonist, American clock

salesman Sam Slick, often compares women to horses, and the acquisition of a wife to the purchase of a horse:

...matrimony...an't like a horse deal, where, if you don't like the beast, you can put it off in a raffle, or a trade, or a swop and suit yourself better, but you must make the best of a bad bargain, and put up with it. It ain't often you meet a crittur of the right mettle: spirited, yet gentle; easy on the bit, sure-footed and spry; no bitin', or kickin', or sulkin', or racin' off, or refusin' to go or runnin' back (qtd. in Panofsky 43).

In likening women to animals, Haliburton denies them their humanity, and by creating the innuendo of the women as a “crittur” to be “mounted” reduces them to their reproductive function (Panofsky 43-44). Indeed, the value of female characters in *The Clockmaker* is often determined by their sexual availability and virginity; Sam Slick has a fondness for “splendid little fillies” (qtd. in Panofsky 43), young girls on the brink of maturity, and a deep contempt of “grey mares” (qtd. in Panofsky 43), seen in his caricature of the “shrewish housewife,” (Panofsky 48) a married woman who has lost her looks: “When the freshness of youth is on the move, the sweetness of temper is amazin apt to start along with it” (qtd in Panofsky 45). Sexual desirability is also shown to be a key aspect of female worth throughout the text, and as Panofsky notes, Slick “infrequently encounters homely women” (45).

Perhaps most disturbing to modern readership is the intersection between the metaphor of the white woman as animal and Slick's advice to married men justifying domestic violence—particularly with regard to women who disobey their husbands. Throughout the narrative, Slick advocates for spousal whippings, gleefully telling the tale of an “impudent wife” who was “sub-

dued” by her husband “seizing her by the arm with one hand...[and quilting] her with the horse-whip real handsum, with the other” (qtd. in Panofsky 47). Women who challenge their husbands and the status quo of their societal roles are publicly humiliated and beaten (Panofsky 47). Haliburton’s attitude towards domestic violence can be summed up with this line from *The Clock-maker*: “A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree / the more you lick ‘em, the better they be” (qtd. in Panofsky 47). This practise was unfortunately widely accepted both societally and legally in Nova Scotia, and Haliburton would have been very familiar with laws pertaining to marriage and women in his career as a judge (Panofsky 46).

While the contemporary reader can note many similarities between Haliburton’s contemptuous treatment of white women and African-Nova Scotians, it is extremely important, as Panofsky notes, not to conflate the two (42-43). While white women may have been socially and legally inferior to their male counterparts, they nevertheless enjoyed a higher societal position than their Black counterparts. Haliburton is keenly aware of this, and even as he vilifies white women he separates them from Black characters: “Slick carefully directs his barbs at either one group or the other, but rarely at women and Blacks simultaneously” (Panofsky 43). The exception is during scenes where white women abuse and berate Black servants. Haliburton often portrays white female employers—and not their husbands—as being especially cruel:

[the employer was] a dreadful cross gained woman, a real cantamout, as savage as a she bear that has cubs, an old farrow crittur, as ugly as sin, and one that both hooked and kicked too—a most particular onmaricifal she devil, that’s a fact. She used to have some of her n***** tied up every day and flogged uncommon severe, and their screams and screeches were horrid, no soul could stand it—nothin was heerd all day but *oh Lord*

Missus, oh Lord Missus” (qtd. in Panofsky 49-50).

In this paragraph, we can see the anger white women feel at their limited circumstances being horribly redirected to innocent targets. This was a tactic used to sow division amongst people who had “othering” qualities to prevent them from challenging the real societal dominators—white men with high social standing such as Haliburton.

Lastly, it would be unwise to examine the issues surrounding women and African-Nova Scotians as separate categories given the existence of African-Nova Scotian women. Indeed, Haliburton’s portrayals of Black women use similar techniques as cited earlier, resulting in especially offensive caricatures. For example, here’s the description of a “wench” named Rose:

What a slashin’ large woman that was, half horse, half alligator, with the cross of a mammoth in her...Her foot was as long and flat as a snow-shoe, and her hands looked as shape less and as hard as two sponges froze solid. Her neck was as thick as a bull’s, and her scalp was large and woolly enough for a doormat. She was as strong as a moose, and as ugly too; and her great white pointed teeth was a caution to a shark (qtd. in Clarke 59).

Here, Rose is dehumanized both through crudely rendered racial traits (e.g. the report of her natural hair) and her unflattering comparison to a strange array of animals. If Haliburton limits his likening of white women to horses, he debases Rose even further by comparing her to alligators, mammoths, bulls, and moose. If white women are less human than their male counterparts, then Black women are one further step below.

Haliburton’s views may have been common in his time—particularly for a staunch Tory—but they have not aged well. Unquestionably, he played an important role in developing and

promoting Canadian literature, both nationally and internationally. However, the modern reader is called upon to interrogate the racism, misogyny, and shocking justifications of domestic violence that pervade his *oeuvre*. As such, we feel it would be inappropriate for the Haliburton Society to continue to name ourselves after this man. Such a position places him, much like a statue, on a pedestal. George Elliott Clarke is correct when he asserts that to burn Haliburton is to burn our own history. Rather, the Society proposes to place Haliburton in a space where he and his work can be openly studied—and criticized!—without upholding him in blind idolatry. We are not turning our backs on our history, but instead opening a new chapter where the values of our Society and the King’s community may be more accurately reflected.

Changing the name of our Society would merely be a symbolic gesture if we did not couple it with other commitments to diversity and greater inclusiveness. We will continue to diversify our archive of works by Canadian authors. The acquisitions for the 2019-2020 school year include *heft* by Doyali Islam, *No Meeting Without Body* by Annick MacAskill, *I Can Hear You, Can You Hear Me?* by Nolan Natasha, and *The Skin We’re In* by Desmond Cole. We will continue our *Live Poets!* reading series with a particular focus on supporting BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ authors. We will reach out to other student societies at King’s to create events that reach a wider audience, building on the success of co-hosted events last year with the WUSC (Student Refugee Program) and PRIDE societies. We encourage other groups affiliated with Haliburton’s name to join us in considering his impact, and to rethink the spaces named in his honour. And finally, we remain open to suggestions from the community, and to journalistic, historical, or artistic projects that explore and challenge Haliburton’s complex legacy.

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