

The Home Children *Patrick Stewart*



Immigrant children from Dr. Barnardo's Homes at Landing Stage, St. John, NB (*National Archives of Canada, PA-041785*)

In the late nineteenth century, conditions in Industrial-era Britain were often appalling; a combination of poverty, pollution and social inequality created terrible circumstances for hundreds of thousands of people in Great Britain, particularly the children. Industrialization led to the growth of large slums in the major cities, and a lack of empathy for the growing poor made sure that very little was being done for them. People with no other prospects could go “into service” as essentially indentured labour, seek out a workhouse (which was probably even worse),¹ or try to eke out a life in the streets. A lack of educational programs for children meant that many who chose the third option, trying to survive by their wits alone, and many died from hunger, illness or exposure.²

By the late 1800s, the conditions had gotten too bad to ignore, and a number of philanthropic organizations arose to try and do something about it. On October 28, 1869, the British Child Emigration Movement began when Maria Susan Rye gathered sixty-eight children from London and Liverpool, brought them onboard the *Hibernian*, and travelled to Canada. Her intent was to bring the children out of the urban slums of Britain and place them with farmers in Canada, who would treat them as family in exchange for help – or, if they were under the age of nine, adopt them outright. Maria Rye and others

¹ Plaut, Martin, “Misery of Britain’s Workhouses Revealed,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/1917452.stm>.

² Harrison, Phyllis, The Home Children (Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1979), 16.

hoped to free the children from a truly hopeless life and send them to a place where they could have home, work, and health all at once.³

A number of organizations were created in the wake of Rye's movement, with varying degrees of charity behind them. The most philanthropic of the organizations were the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society, the Fegan Homes of Southwark, and Dr. Thomas Barnardo's own Barnardo Homes (which was by far the largest of the organizations).⁴ The Homes would quickly become a tremendous network spanning Great Britain and much of Canada. Especially Canada: "by the turn of the twentieth century, almost every second immigrant child in Canada was from a Barnardo Home."⁵ The scale of the migration was massive. Between 1868 and 1924, at least 80,000 children, possibly as many as 100,000,⁶ had arrived in Canada as Home Children. They would, in time, claim one million descendants.⁷

Upon their arrival in Canada, the Home children were placed with a foster home, usually a farm, which would essentially indenture them until they reached adulthood. It certainly was indentured servitude; the children were generally forbidden to leave their foster home, certainly didn't receive any pay for their work, and often suffered from abuse and neglect.⁸ The girls – for a third of the Home children were girls – often had it worse. In addition to the contempt that was often given a Home child (they were, after all, "waifs and strays" in the Church of England's memorable phrase!), a double standard was present. For example, boys from Barnardo homes would receive medals for "Long service and good conduct." To earn one of these good-conduct medals, the boy simply needed to not run away from his host and employer. No girl ever got recognized for this "good" behaviour, and many of them had to face serious problems of physical and emotional abuse.⁹

There was some attempt at oversight by the Homes, which often provided written contracts between the host family and the Homes specifying the expectations of the family (food, shelter, financial allowances, education, and at least enough freedom to write to the Home and to friends at times¹⁰), although the hosts' adherence to these expectations was spotty. Education apparently suffered particularly badly; many parents saw the presence of a Home child in their house as an opportunity to send their own child to school without losing on the potential labour. As a result, many Home children went with a minimal or even nonexistent schooling, being used as a "spare" for the farm child or children.¹¹ When the children got to the point of being able to work for wages, they were often taken advantage of some more: one Home child turned farmhand received a

³ Ibid, 16.

⁴ Ibid, 16-17.

⁵ Ibid, 17.

⁶ Barber, Marilyn, Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1991), 12.

⁷ Harrison, 13.

⁸ Ibid, 22; Barber, 12-13.

⁹ Harrison, 22.

¹⁰ Young, Barbara, Chasing Grandma (Québec: Shoreline, 2001), 36-38.

¹¹ Harrison, 21.

single silver dollar for “a month or two” of work, when he was entitled to a dollar a day.¹² In the (admittedly extreme) case of Margaret Cleaves, ended up more of a slave than a “mere” indentured servant. Kept away from schooling, and not told that she was entitled wages on her 16th birthday, she remained on her host’s farm working without pay until she was thirty-one years old.¹³

The negative circumstances of the Home children were, of course, not all there was to it. A community of a hundred thousand people will always have its good and bad experiences, and a great number of these children were placed with veritable saints who treated them as family and left them with nothing but glowing words for the British Child Emigration Movement. For thousands upon thousands, it was almost certainly a reprieve from a terrible life in England dealing with the conditions of the high industrial era, here many would have otherwise been abandoned to poverty or even death. Today, at least a million people can tie their descent to the Home children, and possibly as many as one in ten of us have connections with these youths who were brought to Canada between 1868 and 1924.¹⁴ However, it is equally beyond doubt that thousands of these children suffered abuse and neglect, and wound up living with a stigma, seeing themselves as mere urchins rather than human beings, which many would end up taking to their graves.

Eighty years have passed since the last Home children were brought to Canada. Very few of them are still alive today, and their story has only recently begun to attract attention. As former Canadian governor-general Roméo LeBlanc said:

*A country’s history is made up of glorious episodes that enrich the collective memory and are related in the history books. It also includes sombre, disturbing periods not mentioned in these books, events that give rise to a sort of collective amnesia. Canada is no exception. Some chapters of Canadian history summon forth our national pride; others, however, make us uncomfortable – we would prefer to simply ignore them.*¹⁵

To forget the story of the Home children altogether would wrong both their memories and the legacies of their descendants. The arrival of these “waifs and strays” a century ago brought with it people who affected the character and landscape of Canada in innumerable ways. It is only proper that they be remembered for their accomplishments as well as their sufferings.

¹² Harrison, 54.

¹³ Ibid, 57.

¹⁴ Young, 38.

¹⁵ LeBlanc, Roméo, letter of June 1999.