

Walter Charles
Tomkins by Son
Paul Tompkins
Home Child
Duchess of York
April 26, 1929



I write this on behalf of my father, Walter Charles Tompkins, who sailed on the Duchess of York which left Liverpool, England on the 19th of April 1929 and arrived in Quebec, Canada on the 26th of April, 1929. He died in Surrey BC, Canada in October, 2004.

This is not a story he would have told himself: indeed when faced with the curiosity of his children about things in the past, he had very little to say. What follows has been reconstructed from sources in England and Canada; libraries, books, archives, museums and organisations and from interviews with Walter shortly before he died. At that point, much of what he had lived through was either forgotten or "not a subject I want to go into". I have discovered that for many 'Home Children' not wanting to publicly revisit the distant past is a method for dealing with what were more often than not painful and to them inexplicable experiences.

Walter was born in London, England on the 23rd of November 1912, within the sound of Bow Bells, a 'proper Cockney'. His father, Herbert, was a meat porter at Smithfield Market, his mother, Margaret Lenora, was unemployed at the time. Herbert had two brothers: Harry who lived in Thornton Heath and worked as a plumber and Charles who lived in Camberwell and worked as a tailor. Their father, Titus, was a 'bespoke' gentleman's hairdresser. The family lived at No 35 Cross Street in Islington in a single rented room in one of a long row of Georgian Terraced properties. They shared the house with its' limited amenities with 19 other people consisting of 7 families.

Shortly after Walter's birth, his parents secured 'tied' employment in a large hotel in South Kensington, near to the Natural History and Victoria and Albert Museums. Herbert was taken on as a Housekeeper and Margaret as a Cook at the Naval and Military Hotel on Harrington Road just as the 'so-called' Great War began. Their home depended on their jobs. Herbert resisted volunteering and managed to avoid the first conscription for single men but when conscription changed by law to include married men with children he was asked to report for duty on the 23rd of May 1916 to one of the London Territorial Battalions, given basic

training and transferred almost immediately to the Machine Gun Corps Training Camp at Grantham, Lincolnshire.

His training was brief and from some perspectives inadequate. The War Diary of the 66th Machine Gun Company records:

"A draft of 13 OR arrived from the Machine Gun Training Centre - These men had not had sufficient training to take their places in the front line"

Herbert was shipped in 1917 by way of Marseilles, France to Thessalonica in Greece, a minor location in the grand scheme of the war but no less devastating for those who spent their time there.

While the exact details of Herbert's war experience in Greece can only be the subject of speculation assisted by the Campaign records of the 66th Machine Gun Company his Personal War Record indicates that shortly after his arrival in Greece he was taken a prisoner of war after what must have been a particularly fierce encounter during which he was both gassed and shell shocked. He was never to recover from that combination of events and soon after his repatriation to England was given a medical discharge under King's regulations as being unfit for further military service. He received the two standard service medals: (the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, nicknamed 'Mutt and Geoff') and was awarded a small pension.

My father remembers him returning with an enemy sword, a military cap and a handful of prison ration biscuits.

Herbert returned to London in 1918 to be greeted with the news that both his Father, Titus and his wife, Margaret had died during his period of captivity. His son Walter had been taken in by his brother Harry, an experience my father remembers only as "not being particularly pleasant".

Herbert was not immediately re-united with his son on his return to England as he was admitted to the Ministry of Defence Hospital, the Horton in Ewell, Surrey, a large Victorian Mental Hospital which had been commandeered by the MOD in 1915 and converted for military use. There, and at the Queen Mary Convalescent Training Camp nearby Herbert would begin treatment for his war injuries, treatment which would last until his death in 1931, two years after his son Walter had arrived in Canada. From 1918 until 1931 Herbert would spend time in five different Ministry Hospitals in London, Surrey, Saltash in Cornwall and finally Portsmouth in Hampshire.

The first document in my father's orphanage file (which he obtained intact in 1994 from the Fegans Organisation) was on the headed notepaper of the NSPCC-the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. It was a document that set in motion a chain of events that would result in my father arriving in Canada with eight other Fegans boys on the Duchess of York in 1929.

On the 1st September, 1919 my grandfather re-married. Herbert had attempted to retrain as a gentleman's hairdresser at the Queen Mary Convalescent Training Camp, Woodcote Park, Surrey. At the time of his marriage, however, Herbert was employed as a lift (elevator) attendant and in fact was spending most of his time in various hospitals. At the time of the issue of the NSPCC order, Herbert was back at the Training camp. His second wife, Ellen was living with my father in a small rented 'two up, two down' (rooms) terraced house in Goodenough Road, Wimbledon, South West London.

My father remembers little of this time but said he thought "there was a problem with alcohol". The NSPCC's intervention in the family results in young Walter, aged 10, being taken into care and application being made by the NSPCC for him to be admitted to 'Mr. Fegans Homes Inc', one of literally hundreds of charitable organisations concerned with the welfare of homeless, abandoned and/or at risk children in the large metropolitan areas of the United Kingdom.

Three quotations from the application are illuminating:

Father's Occupation:

"In Army Training Camp to learn the trade of hairdresser. Receives 21/- (21 shillings) while in training and 7/6 (seven shillings and six pence) allowance for the child."

"The father is willing to continue payment of 7/6 after Army Allowance stops."

Character of Child:

"Good at present but is under no proper control."

Grounds for this application:

"Step-mother is alleged to ill treat him, father has no proper home, boy likely to go to the bad if left with either parent."

The application form has been filled in and signed by J. S. Bartholemew for the NSPCC. Overleaf the document is countersigned by Herbert Tompkins in the presence of a Justice of the Peace. It is signed at the Queen Mary Convalescent Training Camp. What Herbert signs, is as follows;

"I, the undersigned hereby give my consent for the emigration of Walter Charles Tompkins to Canada or any British Possession, under the direction of the Governor and officers of the above institutions, and promise not to interfere with his training in the Homes or any arrangements which may be made on his behalf."

Herbert Tompkins

Father

On the 5th of October 1922, Walter is admitted to the Fegan's Orphanage in Stony Stratford, Buckinghamshire.

My father's recollection of his seven years at the orphanage is mixed. On the one hand he speaks of the place with affection and gratitude, along with pride at his achievements there and on the other draws attention to the punitive nature of his experience.

"The place was run on a very strict order."

"It was this constant regimentation."

"You had to adhere to it or you were in trouble."

"When we went out for a walk, we walked like an army."

"Life was very detailed. I know that it was all inspected. Woe betide you if you didn't pass muster. Because everything was controlled by you pocket money, small as it was. It was controlled by your behaviour, by how things were done. Once a month we had what was called, at least in my memory, judgment day and judgment day was when you were in a large room like this one we're in, up on the platform of the dining hall where we ate and round that large table were the orderly masters, your school teachers and all the staff who had any contact with you and they all came up with a mark for the month."

"Well of course it was hard, we were under that system and we had to behave ourselves, or else. There was 150 of us there. I guess they had to have discipline like that. I read a book about the orphanage and it pointed out that some of the boys had joined the army after they left. When they came to the discipline of the army, they said it was kids stuff compared to what they had been having."

"I came under the influence of an older boy, a big lad. We ran away to Northampton (14 miles away) and tried to catch a train to London but the police picked us up and we spent the night in jail. We were taken back and punished in the shower room-the strap of course, naked, which was a good number of blows to the bare bottom because I remember screeching about it.

We had to take castor oil 'to clean our insides' and they shaved our hair and then we had to eat our meals for two weeks standing in the dining hall with our backs to everybody else. We only got bread and water."

"I remember a kind of wistfulness that I never will forget. For instance, when at Christmas time you would see the village parents with their children and the Christmas trees. It struck home then to me in a wistful way."

"I wouldn't want to write a book and say that Fegans was a lost cause."

"Where would I be if I hadn't gone there?"

During this period of my father's life, he had very little contact with his own father, Herbert. This was partly to do to the Fegans Organisation desire to retain control of the situation and protect Walter from what they must have perceived as a dysfunctional, if not dangerous (to my father) family and partly due to the inability of Herbert to return to a 'normal life' after his war experiences. The Fegans Organisation kept very close records and document each time that Herbert communicated with them. The origin of these letters is almost invariably a MOD (Ministry of Defence) or MOP (Ministry of Pensions) Hospital-the Horton in Surrey, the Maudsley in London, various convalescent Training Camps, St Barnabas in Saltash, Cornwall and the Gosham in Portsmouth.

(Similar letters are also received from Herbert's second wife Ellen always from addresses in close proximity to the institution in which Herbert is receiving treatment)

The longest stay out of hospital for Herbert is in a rooming house in Bath Lane, Plymouth, Devon-an area marked by grinding poverty and sickness, an infinite variety of pubs, various industries ranging from foundries and lead works, slate and marble factories, a cannery, a brewery, Millbay railway station and shunting yards and a Salvation Army barracks. Close by is Union Street, notorious for its prostitutes and pubs catering for the sailors and factory workers.

The letters from Herbert and Ellen, both singly and sometimes together are requests for information as to where Fegans have placed their son and as to how he is getting along. They are signed with 'Yours respectfully' or 'Yours Obediently'. The parents request to take their son on short holidays but are always refused. The orphanage does grant visiting orders which are taken up by Herbert and Ellen on more than one occasion during the seven years. In one letter, Ellen complains that Walter has sent "...a very different letter to what he usually sends, and very strange, it properly upset us as it looks as if he is getting religious Mania...we should like to know what has come over him?.."

Walter eventually informs them of his intention to seek a new life in Canada. Herbert's response, as he is now under treatment in a Ministry of Pensions Hospital in Saltash, Cornwall is to contact an MOP area officer asking for assistance in getting his son back.

"I am writing to ask you if you will help me to prevent my little child from being sent abroad as I am very worried about it having a lot of trouble at the time and did not know what to do and I was persuaded to sign him away very much against my wife's wishes as he had a good home and was well cared for and was in perfect health when he went away."

The orphanage replies that young Walter will not be sent away without the parent's permission.

This dialogue continues in much the same vein for the better part of three years. I cannot determine to what extent my father was allowed access to the correspondence. At one point in our conversations he said he couldn't understand why: "My father had abandoned me."

The usual practice of Fegans was to indenture their young men at the age of fourteen after a brief training period of Canadian farming methods on a farm in Goudhurst, Kent. In 1929 Walter is 17, long past the 'leaving age' and a resolution is needed. The orphanage agreed to a request from the parents for their son to visit them in Devon. They had written:

"To talk things over together and to decide things one way or the other - we can't say fairer than that."

My father remembered nothing of that meeting on the 23rd of March 1929, which resulted in his return to Stony Stratford and from there on the 26th of March to the Fegan's Training Farm at Goudhurst.

Less than three weeks later on the 19th of April, 1929 after training in the ways of Canadian farming practices he set sail for Canada on the Duchess of York.