

Gerald William
Fitzpatrick
English Immigrant
Ryndam
April 2, 1955



IMMIGRANT STORY: Gerald Fitzpatrick

It's almost fifty years since my brother Michael and I decided to migrate to Canada in March 1955. We were both in our early twenties, our parents had died three years before, we had each served our mandatory two years military service in the Royal Air Force and returning to our former jobs did not fill us with enthusiasm. Besides, England's prospects did not look particularly good in those days; Churchill had come back as Prime Minister but the country was struggling hard with the after effects of World War II. The future looked bleak.



After our parents died, we lived temporarily with a kindly aunt and uncle in suburban London whose two daughters were still living at home. When my brother and I

returned there after our military service the tiny house became very crowded and it was obvious that we had to move - so why not out of the country? We had nothing to lose.

By the end of 1954 I managed to find a job in my own field in New Zealand. But Michael wanted to come to Canada. "If we don't like it, it won't be so far to return home," he said. And it seemed to make sense not to put a world between us: after all, he was the only sibling I had.

The process was very simple in those days. We went to Canada House in London, filled out a few forms, got our passports in order and arranged our sailing date. All our lives to that point were what would fit into a couple of suitcases and one good-sized cabin trunk. Like others, I suppose, we brought with us mainly



family photos; faded sepia portraits of grim looking ancestors and a few precious mementos such as an oil painting of Salisbury Cathedral painted by a grandmother that I never knew. Over the years, these few things have become even more precious to me as they are the only tangible link I have to my childhood and youth.

On March 26 1955 we said our good-byes to family and friends and boarded the boat train to Southampton. We had lived a short distance from the port as kids and on many summer afternoons had sat on Ocean Pier with our father watching the great ships come and go: the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth and older vessels like the Aquitania that our father had served on years before as a merchant seaman. Now it was our turn to leave.

I don't think we thought much about whether we would ever return to England to live. The whole thing was just a great adventure. Who knows where it might lead? Certainly we didn't know much about Canada other than what we had heard and read about Toronto, our chosen destination. We knew no-one in Canada, had no job to go to - but we did have the small bequest that our parents had left us: enough to survive for about a year if things didn't work out.

Of the voyage itself aboard the Holland America Ryndam I remember little - other than a couple of rough days in mid-Atlantic when I wouldn't have cared if the ship sank. One of the best things about the Ryndam was that it was all one class so we had the run of the ship. It was mostly filled with immigrants, mainly from the Netherlands, but a good number like ourselves from Britain.



Our first sight of Canada was Sable Island and we docked in Halifax at 10:40am on April 2, 1955. Many people left the ship here but we decided to continue on to New York. However, we went ashore in Halifax for a few hours with some of our new-found shipboard friends.

Our first impressions were not particularly promising. The area around the Halifax docks was dingy but we walked to the centre of town, climbed up to the Citadel and looked past the Town Clock over the surrounding area. The whole prospect before us was of an old port city with none of the high-rise buildings that dot today's skyline. We found a lunch counter, typical of the 50's as we later realized, and ordered the first hamburger that I had ever had. It also had something else I had never seen before: cole slaw.

Back on board ship we sailed on to New York, hurrying on deck in the early morning of April 4 to see the Statue of Liberty as thousands of immigrants before us had done. After a couple of days in New York, gawking at the skyscrapers, we caught a train to Toronto. We stopped at Niagara Falls where our passports were stamped Landed Immigrant on April 6, 1955.

Arriving at the magnificent Union Station in Toronto we had the feeling we were arriving in a great city. But as we trudged up Bay Street with our suitcases our hearts fell. After London and New York, Toronto seemed like an overgrown small town. But we persevered and I landed a job the following day. We befriended other immigrants from Britain and gradually became absorbed into the strange new culture. Even though we spoke the language, things were very different from Europe.

That was all almost 50 years ago. I married a Canadian, strengthening my ties to my new country, started university (something I would have been unlikely to do in Britain) and settled down. I now have three grown sons and two grandchildren who have recently returned to Canada from abroad.

I have also been lucky enough to visit over sixty other countries since arriving in Canada - most recently India. Every time I return home I give silent thanks that my brother persuaded me to "Come to Canada" all those years ago.



