

Sheila Newby Ferguson nee  
Robinson  
By daughter Brenda Jacobsen  
Saxonia  
March 22, 1957

SAXONIA March 22, 1957  
SHEILA NEWBY FERGUSON  
(NEE ROBINSON)

I was 26 when I left my job as a  
Registered Nurse in London,  
England and emigrated to Canada. I passed through the gates of Pier 21

2 DESCRIPTION-SIGNELEMENT		3	
Bearer-Titulaire	*Wife-Femme		
Profession	Student - Etudiante		
Place and date of birth	Manchester, 3 March 1931		
Residence	London		
Height	5' 6"		
Colour of eyes	Green		
Colour of hair	Brown		
Special peculiarities			
National Registration Number	1165 424		
Name-Nom	*CHILDREN-ENFANTS		
Date of birth-Date de naissance			
Sex-Sexe			
Usual Signature of Bearer	Robinson		
Usual Signature of Wife			
Signature of the Bearer			
Signature of the Wife			



and never looked back. My daughter Brenda wrote this profile: after chatting unendingly on the telephone across the U.S- Canadian border; after late- night conversing when she visited me in Dartmouth from her home in Darien, CT and after withstanding her recording sessions, speaking into a microphone the size of a breadcrumb. 7/09

## THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

March 22, 1957. Liverpool, England. The moment of departure had arrived. Stacked up in the hold of the SS Saxonia is my steamer trunk. Sturdy and brown and monogrammed with two letters LV. I was moving to Canada and would arrive in five short days. Paid five shillings for that trunk. What a bargain! A second- hand find in Shepherd's Market, London. Seemed to do the trick. Packed it with my nursing uniforms, I did. Clothing, a few books, bits and bobs. All I owned, really, if I think about it today.

My adventurous spirit carried me across the Atlantic on that day since I had precious little connection to Canada. Departure day meant a day trip for my family, the entire Robinson clan. Dad, my step-mother Ethel and five unmarried Aunties: Cissie, Mary, Annie, Mary, Agnes and Hilda rode the train with me and my trunk from Blackburn to Liverpool.

I stepped toward the deck rail, signaling to my Dad, Steve. My dear Aunties clutched bleached hankies and quivered them high above their heads. One moment I was singing for joy. Then suddenly I was awash in tears and did my best to hold back the floodgates. Until tugs pulled that grand ship far enough away from the dock and further still, beyond the harbor so I could no longer see the shore. Was I ready to for that job at the Toronto General hospital and a new country? Where was Toronto, anyway? What did I know was waiting for me in this new land?



I was on my own. I had taken advantage of the “assisted- passage” programme with loans and travelling expenses offered by the Canadian government. Everyone was leaving – We were encouraged to do so. The Commonwealth countries including Canada, Australia, and NZ offered us the opportunity for a better future. Governments devised programs available to us- banding together like neighborhoods and welcomed us. The wages were so much better in Canada. I couldn't have earned the same money in England at that time.

To emigrate from England, I first went to Green Street. Next stop was Canada House along with hundreds other people- a place where we got passports. There was a big, big line- up of people around building and down the street I recall. All these British citizens preparing to get out of England including me. I waited in line. Of course, people were friendly and I struck up conversations with those around me- not hard for me to start chit-chatting with somebody.

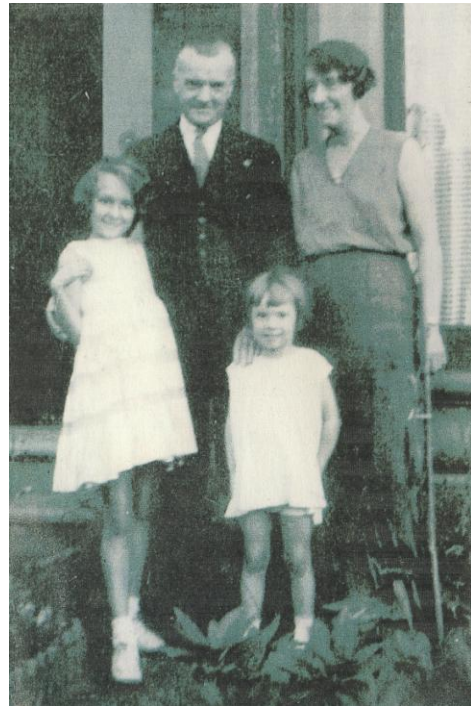
Before leaving I made one last trip to my hometown of Blackburn, England to spend time with my family. “By gohm lass you can't be going by yourself, are you?” said my Dad. Oh I am, was my response. My Dad took my leaving in stride. He had been away for great lengths of time during WWI. I have a photo of him with his army friends- all in uniform

standing on a stoop wearing his kilt. Before the war I loved travelling throughout Europe with my nursing friends from the London Hospital. We (my dear nursing friends, Rowena, Patty, and Daphne) stayed in youth hostels and hitchhiked through France and Spain.



During WWII, I carried a gas mask along with my lunch pail. In the evening we had 'black-outs' where we covered our windows with large sheets of black paper. Enemy planes flew overhead and our town would be better protected in total darkness. Even the lamplighter roamed the streets and extinguished the street lamps. The bomb shelter in reality was the moist cellar of a local dry cleaning shop. I slept on one of many narrow benches scattered about the room. Fortunately, the Germans did not bomb Blackburn though I wish I could say the same for London. I befriended the American soldiers camping out across the street. My Dad said they dressed too casually, strutting around town with their uniform jackets unbuttoned, too much for his liking. That was the last I saw of my family for many years.

My Mom had died of breast cancer when I was 14. I felt sad and disappointed that my mother died in her forties of cancer. It didn't help that medical care was scant due to the war. Wounded soldiers took priority, and so they should have in some respects. They quickly filled all the hospital beds. General depression all around was how I remember it. Who could forget? My older sister was married and busily having children (she had seven in all). To top that off my Dad had remarried and while I loved him dearly, I did not share the same affection for my stepmother as is often the case in such situations. One day, my Dad and I removed the iron railings from my front stoop because the British government asked for donations of metal. The metal was recycled for weaponry but I naively envisioned the army went to battle with the iron posts just as they were.



I imagined the Red Coats waving them about and using our sturdy posts as swords!

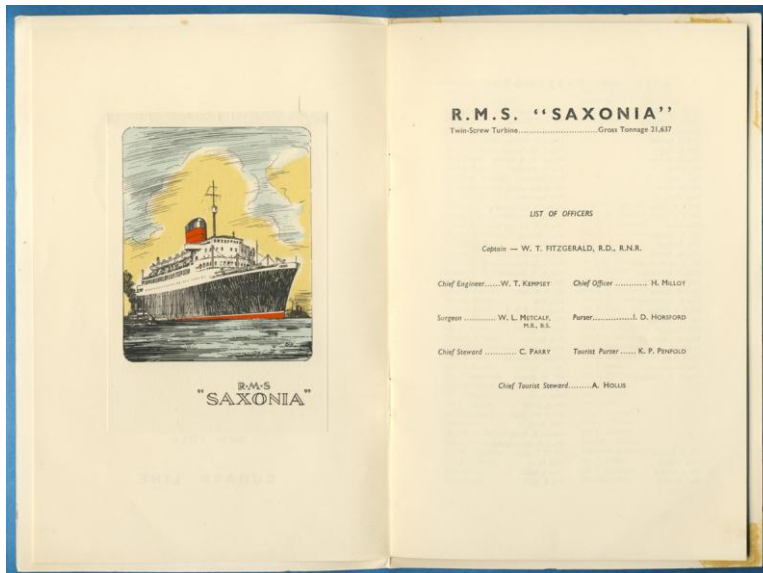
After WWII Britain was in a shambles. There had been very little recovery effort. In a depression, times were tough. Food was rationed. England did not pick herself up for a long time. We suffered. Yes, we won the war against Germany but were left shattered. No shops. No jobs. Factories gone under and buildings were piles of rubble. I bid farewell to a Hungarian boyfriend who was forced to marry a cousin back in his home country in order to get her safely out of their country.

Still, I had been better off than some. I left a steady job in London and on the day of my departure the mood on the pier was celebratory.

“I left amidst a big kafuffle and the blowing of horns.”

The pier was filled with hundreds of people, milling about, saying their good- byes. I know my trunk made it on the ship but I wouldn't see it for close to two weeks when I arrived in Toronto.

Once the Saxonia pulled away from shore I felt my life took a turn for the better. I was on the adventure of a lifetime I was on the threshold of a new life- a new life amidst the vast and welcoming country of Canada.



Fortunately, my two cabin mates were nurses from Scotland heading to the same hospital in Toronto. Marg and Margery were their names. Together we explored the ship which included the dining room and for the first time in our lives ate ice cream and banana splits.

The scariest part of the trip was a storm I encountered for a day or two. I recall it was so stormy we were told to stay in our cabin. I knew it was serious when I saw sailors anchoring down all the tables and chairs on the decks. I liked peering out of the portholes when it calm but even that had its drama. “One minute I would see the sky and the horizon and then the ship would behave like a ‘bucking bronco.’ I felt the boat riding these huge waves on the open

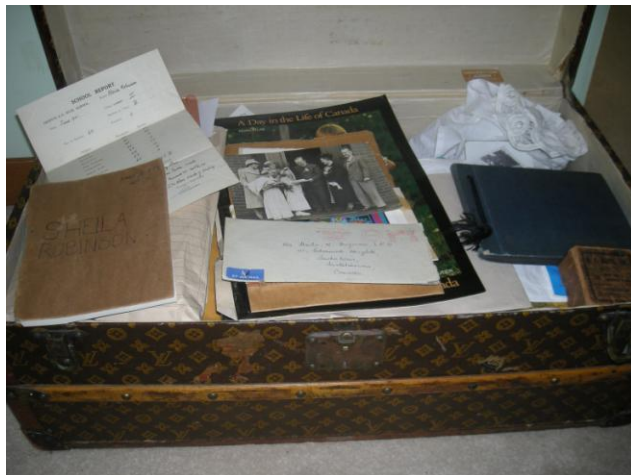
ocean; the ship would dip downwards and I was left with water covering the window. Then she would raise herself up on the crest of a wave and I would only see the expansive sky.”

Upon arrival at Pier 21 all was dark. I didn't see Halifax at all. We went from the ship into the Great Hall. I recall Salvation Army volunteers in uniform, handed me a ditty bag (toiletries and small gifts) as I walked down the gangway. I entered the Great Hall and felt unsure of myself and huddled against the wall. The process of showing our documents was not complicated. Everyone was very kind. We had to wait for our names to be called. All was foreign to me. Yet the staff was extremely kind. I had never met kindness like that before and had never been in a situation where I needed it.

Then I boarded a train waiting inside the building. Before I knew it, we were on a train heading towards Ontario. The trains were much bigger, longer and heavier than the trains in England. They had little tiny ‘Choo, choos.’ No sooner had we reached Bedford Basin which is just outside of Halifax and I thought we were almost in Toronto. I was beginning to get anxious on the train about my new job. My impression of Canada as it passed by the window of the train was its sheer immensity. The expansiveness of the land and stunning scenery I never forgot.

Nine hundred miles later we arrived at the Station in Toronto, met by red-capped Porters unloading stack of trunks, my trunk as well. So began life in a new country. That was the first time I had seen my trunk since Liverpool, England. Not unusual back then to see stacks and stack of trunks. More than suitcases as you would see today.

I ran through a mental inventory of the trunk's contents: nursing notebooks, my uniform, clothes, a few books, photos and the name and address of an English family- John and May Ferguson and their two boys who used to live in Blackburn and recently immigrated to Ontario, Canada.



Toronto seemed gaudy to me compared to London, England. Everyone had a car which was impressive and unheard of back home. And the heat was nearly unbearable. Still, I adjusted despite the constant challenges and differences in education and customs. Transitioning to

nursing care in Canada proved to be quite smooth. I had been well trained at The London so it seemed. After two years in Toronto, I decided to move to Vancouver because I wanted to get away from the hot muggy



summers and I was eager to see more of the country. My nursing friends, Marg and Margery became my flat mates in Toronto. We worked together and shared many fun times on our days off.

Eventually we decided to move to the West Coast. We packed our bags intending to get a job in a train to British Columbia.

Vancouver's scenery was breathtaking- the mountains and water. Still is. Upon arrival we realized we were missing a British Columbian nursing license so in the meantime we were employed at a local TB Sanatorium. I remember many of the patients lying in their beds facing the sun in the day room. Fresh air treatment – pushing heavy beds on a patio in order to soak in good old Vitamin D! The rays of sun help tuberculosis patients. We did

the same routine in England. One day I came across the Ferguson family's' Toronto address that had been given to me from my Dad. Coincidentally, my family and the Ferguson family were connected. Miss. Ferguson and Miss. Stewart, Aunt of my brother-in- law George used to reside on the same street in Blackburn. John and May Ferguson had a son living in Vancouver. David was unmarried and we became friends. We were married in 1959. My Aunt Ada attended our wedding. She happened to live in Vancouver but I did not know this ahead of time. I was grateful for her presence! While we lived in Vancouver, David and I had two children, Neil and Cathy. Then David felt called to the Anglican ministry and left his insurance career. As a result we packed up our small family and move to London, Ontario where he could begin his theology studies at Huron College. Our third child, Brenda was born in London. Later David received his first church assignment in Saskatoon, Sask. Our family kept growing with the wonderful addition of Craig and Linda. Living on the Prairies was an entirely novel experience for me- no ocean or hills in sight! Moving became a part of my life. After six years in Saskatoon, David took a position on the East Coast in Nova Scotia. We moved from a city on the West Coast to the tiny village of Upper

Kennetcook where David oversaw three country churches. The town was so small our phone number was one digit- the number seven! Then we spent many years in Shelburne at Christ Church parish (which burned to the ground during a lightening storm in the 1970's but later rebuilt.) Following that chapter of our lives we settled in Dartmouth at Christ Church near the waterfront. I loved being a Mom of five active children and they enjoyed my stories from England and British accent (and the fact I was fluent in French!) All the while, my sister Jean and I found time to mail letters back and forth across the ocean. Rarely, a week passed without receiving news within those sky blue air mail letters. We kept each other informed as our respective children grew up. Those letters kept passing between us for fifty years! My children were my first priority. I had to adjust to many little changes in customs in Canada. For example, the education system was unique. I had attended a girl's school and wore a uniform. Boys were frightening!

Each time I moved I brought along my five shilling trunk- now a faithful friend and a connection to my old life 'across the pond.'



For me, a holiday trip back to my family of origin would be a long time coming. In 1970, we took the entire family on a holiday to England to meet their cousins and their grandfather, Stephen Robinson. My English family came to Canada occasionally and I treasured those times, especially with my sister, Jean and my nephew David. In my day, people didn't travel great distances unless they were highly privileged.

While I have been asked by fellow Brits why I never returned to England, I tell them Canada is my true home. I built a life for myself. I married a Canadian and had five terrific children. I worked at various hospitals from one coast to the other, caring for ill Canadians.

I made more money and the food was better. Once I waved good-bye that was it. "Every year I look forward to Canada Day. I am thankful to the Canadian government for receiving me years ago with open arms.

In my heart I always yearned to return to Nova Scotia though I didn't think too much about Pier 21 in spite of the fact that it was across the harbor.

For years, Pier 21 was dark and forgotten in a sense and then the unexpected happened. On Canada Day, 1999 it sprang to life and reopened as a museum, thanks to many generous donors and visionary people. When I visit Pier 21, now as an honored alumna, I am struck with the determination of the many immigrant families. Many often endured considerable hardship, far more than me. I called Canada "the land of plenty."

I turned 78 on March 3, 2009. Seventy- eight years young! That means I have resided in Canada fifty years- twice as long as in Britain! I own a dog- eared British passport and my British accent still rolls off my tongue, especially when I chat on the phone with my sister. But let it be known that I am Canadian first and foremost.

Canada provided me opportunities to work and a positive future. I will always be grateful to this country. Allowing me to pass through the open door at Pier 21 was a gift. I have no regrets. I built a life for myself and made friends from all parts of the world.



"Canada is beautiful. My true home. Now my children have grown up and have their own interesting lives. Cathy lives with me in Dartmouth. Craig lives with his family in Lunenburg. Brenda lives in Darien, CT and Linda in Rochester, NY. And I am blessed with six grandchildren, aged 6- 20 years old. And they visit from time to time as they love Nova Scotia as well.

I especially love the East Coast. If I need to be reminded of England it is in my backyard so to speak: that view of rugged coastline towards Lawrenctown beach; that European-style fort like Louisburg in Cape

Breton or the Citadel; or that freshly poured cup of English tea. And in my living room sits my faithful steamer trunk. Sturdy and true with the same bold and black label that reads "Halifax"- placed by someone's hand back in 1957.



Imagine. That trunk that sat in the hold of the Saxonica and carried into the trunk room at Pier 21.

My daughter Cathy tells me, after her research on eBay, that my illustrious trunk is worth a

pretty penny. Thousands of pennies! A Louis Vuitton designer trunk. An antique like me! Now the mystery of the initials, LV has been solved. The trunk has become a piece of trusted furniture. A part of me and our family. The exterior has changed little other than the brass latches turning a warm bronze.

Inside you will find my 50- year old nursing apron, starched and pressed. Alongside, the carefully penned nursing notebooks, (complete with instructions' for using leeches to stop profuse bleeding in patients) you'll find my original British passport dated 1956. Look closely for the authentic stamp -"Port of entry Pier 21." My name is typed inside the SS Saxonica passenger manifesto which looks and reads more like a concert program. But as the years have gone by, my travel documents tend to get buried beneath more current treasures not from Britain, but Canada.

Cards and collections gathered over the past forty years. Creased report cards handwritten by teachers. Crinkled mothers day cards with a coffee ring stain. Canadian two dollar bills. Maritime post cards and sky-blue air mail letters from my sister. Poetry I wrote now packed in envelopes and tied in string. Family photographs, many with the Atlantic Ocean glistening in the background. While the objects may be yellowed and worn the memories are fresh and alive. Tucked away in the hold, as it were, of my old trunk. Seems fitting. Once filled with my old life from England. Then emptied and filled with my new life. My life as a Canadian.

Sheila Robinson passed away July 22, 2009 in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.



FERGUSON (Robinson) Sheila

Newby— 78, Born 1931, in Lancashire England, died peacefully at home surrounded by her family on July 22, 2009 in Dartmouth. She was the daughter of Steve and Lily Robinson; survived by her loving sister Mrs. Jean (George) Stewart, Crayford, Kent; Aunt of Elizabeth, David, Alistair, William, Rosemary, Andrew and James, all residents of the United Kingdom. Sheila trained as a nurse at the London Hospital in White Chapel, England. In the spring of 1956 Sheila immigrated to Canada sailing from Liverpool on the steamship Saxonica, arriving at Pier 21 in Halifax. She worked at the Toronto General Hospital and the T B Sanatorium, Vancouver, BC. Married David E. Ferguson and together they raised a family in Vancouver, London, Saskatoon, settling in Nova Scotia. Sheila's greatest joy was being a Mother of Neil Ferguson (predeceased 2004, aged 45), Cathy Ferguson, Dartmouth, Brenda (David) Jacobsen, Darien CT; Craig (Mary) Ferguson, Lunenburg; Linda (Doug) Clapp, Rochester NY. Sheila was an advocate for people suffering from mental illness and volunteered many hours to help others throughout her lifetime. She played Scrabble on the computer and solved crypto quotes found in the daily newspaper. Sheila loved her small supportive group of clergy wives, a good book and a cup of tea; and was a longtime patron of the Woodlawn Public Library. She was a Community member of Northwood Manor in Halifax and spent many happy hours attending classes and met many interesting people. She will be missed by her four grown children and her six grandchildren; Ingrid, Rosemary and Rachael (CT), Henry and David (NY) and Tessa (NS). Sheila's children will remember her laughter; quick wit; love of literature; her "way" with

words. Many thanks to WeCare and Palliative Care for their support. Cremation has taken place. Visitation will be held Tuesday, July 28 from 7-9 p.m. at the Dartmouth Funeral Home, 29 Queen St.; a Memorial Service and Celebration of Sheila's life will be held at 11 a.m. July 29 in Christ Church Parish Hall, 61 Dundas St., Dartmouth, Rev. Jody Clarke officiating. In lieu of flowers; donations may be made to Woodlawn Library, 115 Woodlawn Rd., Dartmouth; or Hope for Wildlife Society, 5909 Hwy. 207, Head of Chezzetcook, NS., B0J 1N0 in memory of Sheila Ferguson.

Sheila and her mother



Sheila at Sullivan's Pond in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia with her nephew David Stewart during his visit from Nottingham



Sheila and her sister Jean Stewart in Nottingham, England

