

Edith (Bette) Naylor
English War Bride
By Daughter Jan DeGrass
Lady Rodney
May 24, 1946



Jan DeGrass is a professional freelance writer living in Gibsons, B.C. who writes about the arts for a local newspaper and has published in national newspapers and magazines. "When I interviewed my mother to collect the memories of her war bride experience I was inspired to turn them into a short story. Based on an incident she described--the accidental meeting of another war bride many years later--I wrote Brides Crossing. Though you might call it fiction, it sticks very close to the truth in every detail; only the name of the other war bride has been changed."



War Bride
Transcript of Interview by Jan DeGrass

(Recorded in May 1994 while travelling by Via Rail across Canada to visit relatives in Fort Erie, Ontario. The train trip brought to mind another, earlier train trip from Halifax in 1946 to the same destination.)

During the years 1945 and 1946 over 48,000 women, mostly British, with 22,000 children, crossed the perilous North Atlantic Ocean to find new homes and new families in Canada. Most of the women were young and eager to see their Canadian soldier husbands once more, even if the faces of Joe or Bert or Al were no longer quite as vivid in their memories. Some had experienced whirlwind courtships and had spent their married lives in snatched weeks, or even days, between troop movements. Many had survived the bombing of London or Manchester or Coventry only to see their homes reduced to rubble and their food and clothing rationed. Most had never left home before in their lives.

In 1943 Edith (Bette) Gill met a Canadian soldier while she was working in the Silver Café of Bentall's, a department store in Kingston-on-

Thames, on the outskirts of London. His name was Alfred Naylor, born in Fort Erie, Ontario, into a family of seven children. Bette and Al married in February 1944, and they honeymooned at London's heart, a Piccadilly Circus hotel--amid a rain of bombs.



When the war was over Al Naylor was sent back to Canada. Bette would follow later in one of the largest mass migrations the country had ever known. Years later she remembers:

JD: Were you all war brides on the voyage?

BN: Yes, we left from Southampton. We all had to go up to London the day before and stay overnight in a sort of YWCA hostel place. Beds put up all over the place with about this much space between them. We were just there overnight, then we got the boat train down to Southampton in the morning.

JD: What was the boat like?

BN: Oh, the boat was good—the Lady Rodney. It was very small--ten times around the deck was a mile. We walked it for exercise.

JD: How about the food?

BN: Oh! Well, the food was out of this world. We had come from England where food was rationed. One egg a month—I always remember the first meal we had on board was pork chops. I hadn't seen a pork chop in five or six years.

JD: So you didn't get seasick?

BN: No, nobody got seasick. We went way up north, because of the U-boat land mines--not land mines--depth charges? So we had to go north. Of course we sailed past icebergs which was not nice. Anyway we got to Halifax.

JD: How long did it take?

BN: About eight or nine days because it was only a small boat. They used to take seven or eight days on the bigger boats.

JD: What were your feelings at being so far away from home?

BN: Well, of course, it was in our minds of most of us that we just wanted to get there...The men had already been discharged.



JD: So how long had it been since you were married?

BN: Married in February 1944, and this was May 1946.

JD: Quite a long time. Of course the war had gone on...

BN: Until 1945.

JD: How long had Al been back in Canada?

BN: He left around Valentine's Day-- something to do with Valentine's Day was in my memory...

(Ed. Note: He appears to have been discharged in April 6, 1946.)

JD: Of '46?

BN: Yes. So it wasn't that long after.

JD: They started to move them out pretty fast.

BN: Yeah, once the war was over. We were told we might only have seven days notice.

JD: Did they give you any clues?

BN: Yes, we all had instructions. There would be no first class or second class--it was all in together. The officers' wives didn't have any priority after the war. I was working in Bentalls and I was due to go on holiday--two weeks paid holiday--and I could have taken that, but I didn't. I did the right thing and I went up and told them that I'd be leaving. I didn't even get one week's holiday pay after faithfully working for them all through the blitz, all through the war. They wanted me to stay on but I said, "Come on, I've got my orders."



JD: I wonder if they felt that all their help was leaving England?

BN: That could be. I don't know. You had to give a couple of weeks' notice but the thing was I faithfully worked there since 1938. I could have just gone on holiday then phoned them up to say I got my notice and I have to go. But you know I couldn't do that.

JD: What about passports?

BN: Well, that was all taken care of. We didn't have passports. We had what they called a landing card that immigration made out.

JD: You must have met many other wives during the voyage.

BN: Yeah, but a lot of them got off in Quebec and all the way through to Toronto. I arrived in Halifax on the 24th of May and arrived in Toronto the 26th of May which is Al's birthday. I remember that when we arrived in Halifax, all set to get off the boat and onto the train, they told us, "No train until tomorrow!" The train had gone without us. We had to stay on the boat overnight and go on the train the next day.

JD: Was the train full?

BN: I don't remember if we had just the one coach or two coaches with all the women ...whether they added us on to the regular train.

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JD: What was the train like?

BN: We had upper and lower berths, I remember. We didn't have to sit up all night. It was two nights, three days. I was in an upper because I had been in a lower on the boat--we had to share.

JD: It must have been close surroundings. (Jokingly) Could you wash out your nylons each night?

BN: I don't think I bothered. I might have done because I only had one pair of stockings. I didn't have more than one pair because of rationing--no coupons.

JD: How did you pay for the trip?

BN: The Canadian government, the taxpayers, I guess. As my sister-in-law always says, the taxpayers always pay. All free.

JD: So even the food was included in the trip.

BN: Yes. Even on the train. We had to eat the regular train meals. We didn't have to pay a penny for anything.

JD: Was it Canadian Pacific?

I've no idea. Or CN. (Ed. Note: It appears to have been CN.) I can't remember what the stations looked like then. In Toronto we arrived at Union Station. Then of course Al and I stayed at a hotel overnight--the King Edward, I think it was, which they've remodeled now.

JD: Would the train have continued?

BN: Oh yes, it was going on right across Canada with those who were left. But so many got off in Toronto. They probably went on to different areas in Ontario--different towns. Al and I went the next day to Fort Erie.

JD: Did he meet you?

BN: Yes, at Union station. I can still show you the exact spot where all the husbands were lined up waiting (laughs). They were all told. They were all informed that we were coming.

JD: They'd paid all this money to get you over there. The husbands had better show up!(Laughs)

BN: Right. I never thought of it that way.

JD: You must have had to go through immigration?

BN: Oh, we did all that on the boat. We did that before we left England. By the time we got to Toronto we just got off the train and that was it.

JD: How was it? You got off and they were all there to meet you?

BN: Oh yes, and here all the way along, anytime the train stopped anywhere (laughs) we all jumped off and wrote letters to our husbands thinking that the letters would arrive the next day.

JD: Like the British Post?

BN: Oh dear, (laughs). We had no idea. They were all informed anyway. We stayed at a hotel then we went down to Fort Erie the next day.

JD: So what did you think of Fort Erie?

BN: I arrived at night in the evening on the train. We had missed one train. We went to what they used to call Sunnyside which was a sort of amusement park at the next station out of Toronto. We went in to the amusement park so we missed the train and caught the next one. His family, Barbara, Marlene, Ben and Florence were waiting at Fort Erie. They'd been down to the station for the previous train and of course we weren't on it. That was in the days when there was more than one train. The Toronto Hamilton and Buffalo, the TH & B.

JD: So they were all there to meet you. I'm trying to think of their relative ages at that time.

BN: Barbara, Al's niece, must have been about ten, eleven. His sister Florence was older than Al, of course.

JD: Do you remember your first impressions of Fort Erie?

BN: No. We all went to 7 Russell Street and Florence made tea. And...the next morning Florence got up and went to work, Al went to work and I was left at home.

I wandered around the house, while Al's brother, Bud, was still in bed. He worked in shifts and he came home late. I thought he was never going to get out of bed. He didn't get up until about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. I



hadn't even met him. Anyway that was the first day. Al was on shift work. It was either four to twelve or eight to four on the Peace Bridge in Immigration. He had started work on the 13th of May at the Peace Bridge. I arrived on the 26th.

JD: He got the job just before you arrived?

BN: Yes, I suppose he thought he'd better have a job to go to. He didn't know that I was coming until I was on my way.

JD: And you didn't know when you'd be leaving.

BN: No. It was all sort of at the last minute. That was the way they had been doing it all through the war.

JD: Were there other war brides in Fort Erie?

BN: There were two of us that were already there when I arrived. And then we all moved away.

JD: But you met one of them recently?

BN: Yes, she was thinking of going back to England. When I first came out to Vancouver in 1991, I had a return ticket to Toronto so I used it. On the bus from the airport down to Fort Erie I sat beside a woman. We sat beside each other quietly for half the trip then all of a sudden we got talking. We knew each other. She was one of the women, war brides, who had arrived in Fort Erie just before I had.

JD: How well did you get to know them?

BN: Not well. We weren't there very long before we moved away.

JD: Were any of them from the same part of England?

BN: No.

JD: So really when you got on the boat you didn't know any of the others.

BN: We were all strangers to each other.

JD: Brave.

(End of transcript)

Brides Crossing
by Jan DeGrass

Bette knew that the lady in the next seat would be the first to speak. They had sat in silence ever since boarding the bus in Toronto. As they sped over the arch of the Hamilton Skyway and gazed onto Lake Ontario, the lady twitched a bit and cleared her throat. Resolutely Bette

stared out the window at the familiar highway but was distracted by the reflection of her own face—white, wavy hair, the finest of lines under the eyes. She smiled. Pretty good for an old woman, she thought.

Finally the lady waved a soft, graceful hand at the passing countryside. "It looks lovely in May," she said, in a voice modulated by a British accent. Bette focused beyond her own reflection. After the bitter winter, spring was finally budding on the fruit trees of the Niagara peninsula.

"Just like the first time I saw it," she replied. Her head was full of memories of another journey 45 years ago. The words had just popped out.

The lady gave her a keen glance. "When was that?" she asked.

Bette sighed inwardly. Her memories were private; all that she had left since Alfred's death. She didn't want to share them with a stranger but was too polite to ignore the request, so she answered, "May 1946. When I arrived from England with my new husband. I was a war bride."

The lady's fine hands flew to her mouth. "Oh, my dear! I was, too. Do you know, you look familiar." She turned in her seat and stared quite openly.

"When did you arrive in Canada?" Bette asked her, curious despite herself.

"March 1946. How could I forget? It was the worst time of my life. All that way across the North Atlantic on that horrible tub, then my husband didn't even meet me in Halifax. And when I got to his drab home town of Fort Erie! Well, even after the Blitz London still had life..."

Bette remembered that the year she had met Alfred—1943—was one of the worst for bombings. In the suburb of Hounslow where she had lived, a street might be destroyed in a single night, the residents surviving only because they had crowded into their cramped back yard bomb shelters or taken refuge under especially constructed heavy tables.

But Kingston-on-Thames, where she had worked, was largely untouched. She remembered the walk along the river bank footpath, overhung with drooping willow trees, that took her from the bus stop to her waitress job at the Silver Café in Bentall's department store. That was the place where a young Canadian soldier had stopped in to lunch one day, along with his brash buddies. He looked a bit like the film star Ray Milland, she had thought. He smiled at her and ate two bowls of potato soup—most of the other menu items were "off" because of food shortages. He asked if he could see her again.

"You'll not be courting any American soldier," her father told her gruffly.

"He's not American," she replied firmly. "And I will be seeing him."

She and Alfred met many times—they went to the pictures together, went dancing, walked home in the darkest nights when the buses had stopped because of the blackouts. Three times he had been shipped out to secret destinations but had returned to England and relative safety.

Occasionally she visited him at his camp in Tunbridge Wells, 30 miles away. One day she learned that he was in camp hospital for a minor operation. She saved her ration coupons to make jam tarts especially for him, so with tarts in hand, she went to visit. After three buses and a train, she arrived at the hospital only to find he had been discharged and had gone to London to see her. When they finally got together, she was miffed about the waste of the jam tarts.

"I know how I can make you smile again," he said. "We can get married if you want." They were wed at a little church near Hounslow in February 1944. They honeymooned in the heart of London at a Piccadilly Circus hotel, amid a hail of bombs. He returned to his camp and she to her home with her widowed father.

"You'll come back to Canada with me after the war," Alfred had said, and he spoke of his home, a town in southern Ontario on the Niagara River, and of his family, six brothers and sisters, who would welcome her.

The stranger was still staring at her. "My name is Fay Becker," she was saying. "Arbuthnot was my maiden name—the Hereford Arbuthnots, you know. You arrived in Fort Erie after me. Do you remember that other lady, the officer's wife? We're all from London so we must stick together."

Goodness, Bette thought, imagine keeping such attitudes all these years. She shrank away from her new acquaintance. "Yes, I remember you now," she murmured in reply. In a flash of memory, Bette saw a younger version of Fay Becker seated in Florence's stifling parlour at Russell Street in Fort Erie, the electric fan whirring. She was sipping tea daintily from a thick china cup with a green stripe. Fay was saying, "You're lucky to be living with in-laws like this. I can't so much as buy a packet of biscuits before his mother is complaining about the cost."

When the war was over Bette was given one week's notice of her impending trip to Canada. Alfred had already been demobilized, and he

returned home on Valentine's Day. When the authorities contacted her with travelling instructions, she was told that the Canadian government would pay the bill and would provide a landing card in lieu of a passport. Many years later she learned that she was only one of 48,000 women who rejoined their new husbands during 1945 and 1946.

She was due for a holiday from her Bentall's job but she had to give notice instead. Her employers had been chippy about her leaving. She supposed they were upset that their good help was quitting instead of rebuilding the country after the war. "Come on, I've got my orders," she told them. It still annoyed her, nearly fifty years later, that she had never received her holiday pay.

Thinking back over those years, she realized that she had forgotten what it was like to leave her father, her friends and the country of her birth. She couldn't remember tears, though she supposed there must have been many. She remembered only a youthful eagerness to start her new life—and a lot of anxieties. Would she and Alfred be happy? They had been married over a year but had never lived together in their own home, only in a rooming house with strangers. There had been the ecstasy of seeing one another after long absences, but would it last? What if his family didn't like her? Then there had been some talk of a girlfriend of his in Fort Erie. What if he had decided that the English marriage was a mistake?

She was instructed to go to London where all the women would stay overnight in a sort of YWCA style hostel. The beds had been so close together she could hear the next girl snore. In the morning they all climbed aboard the boat train for Southampton.

The ship was called the Lady Rodney. She was so tiny that ten times around the deck made a mile. When they reached the swells of the North Atlantic the girls had staggered on deck and hung onto railings as the flagpole dipped to the water, first one side, then the other. Because unexploded mines still floated along the shipping lanes, their boat had taken a northern route that would supposedly be safer. The sight of the massive icebergs terrified them.

"Do you remember much about the crossing?" Bette asked Fay. "You must remember the food." Even now Bette could still see the gleam of the gravy and smell the rich, meaty juices of the first night's offering—pork chops, not one but two! Heavens, what with rationing she hadn't seen such a piece of meat in five or six years. And the eggs, as many as you wanted! While others succumbed to seasickness she ate her way across the Atlantic feeling young and healthy. It buoyed her spirits immensely.

"Yes, I do remember the food," Fay replied. "We were seduced by it as young girls, weren't we? The soldiers bringing us canned meat, chocolate. And stockings."

"I had only one pair of silk stockings when I left England," Bette mused. "I wore them on the voyage, but I was ever so careful not to ladder them." Fabric was difficult to come by. For her wedding dress, she was forced to use parachute nylon. It had the virtue of being white and available. On the trip she took only one trunk which held all of her possessions. Uncle Percy had neatly lettered the lid with her new address: 7 Russell Street, Fort Erie, Ontario, Canada.

They arrived on the 24th of May after a nine day voyage.

"One of my funniest memories," Bette continued, "was the day we landed at Halifax. We were so eager to get off the boat but they told us that the train had already left. When we finally departed, every time the train stopped we all jumped off and mailed letters to our husbands to let them know we were coming. We thought the letter would arrive the next day—same as in Britain! We had no idea."

Fay laughed. "One train a day and slow mail delivery. How primitive Canada seemed."

The husbands had already been informed, Bette remembered, and had been told to wait outside the platform gate at Union Station in Toronto until the disembarking women emerged. As Bette stepped blinking into the brightly lit waiting room on her second day in Canada her gaze darted about in curiosity. Just where the ramp rose into the main hall, among the creamy marble pillars, she saw the assembled motley collection of men—now no longer in uniform—some eager, some uncomfortable. It was Al's 25th birthday. She had planned to greet him with birthday wishes but when she caught sight of him among the crowd her carefully rehearsed speech vanished. He waved at her and his handsome face lit up. At that moment she knew that she need never have any anxieties about their future together. After observing some of the less attractive husbands stumbling through awkward reunions, she considered herself the luckiest woman in the world.

"Did you go to Fort Erie directly?" Fay broke in.

"No, Alfred and I stayed overnight at the King Edward Hotel. The next day we went to Sunnyside Amusement Park so we missed the first train. Alfred's family, his sisters Florence and Marlene and his young niece Barbara, had all been down to the station to meet an earlier train, but of course we weren't on it."

It had been evening when she and Alfred finally arrived in Fort Erie. The family had greeted her warmly despite having waited all day for the arrival. Everyone went to 7 Russell Street and Florence made tea. The next morning Al went to work in Customs and Immigration at the Peace Bridge and Bette was left at home alone. She wandered around the house while Al's brother Bud, who worked nights, continued to sleep. "Just make yourself at home, honey," Florence had said.

"I've been thinking about returning to England," Fay was saying, "ever since my husband, Douglas, died eight years ago. I didn't know until after I arrived what a mistake he was...He said I should have my own garden in Canada. Ha! For the first year we lived with his mother and then we had one of those abysmal tiny war-time homes..."

Bette was wondering why Fay had bothered to stay with Douglas—a tactless question to ask—when the bus driver's voice abruptly came over the intercom. "Fort Erie. First stop—drug store." Relieved, Bette gathered her things: overnight bag, parcel of gifts for Florence and Marlene, her purse and camera.

"Will someone be there to meet you?" asked Fay.

Bette nodded. "Yes, Barbara will be there." In truth she doubted the delivery of the message she had left with one of Barbara's kids. But when the bus drew up to the drug store in the old familiar south end of town she could see the gleam of Barbara's platinum hair in the parking lot as she waited beside the car.

"Goodbye," Bette said firmly to Fay. "Thank you for your company."

"Wait, here's my address," said Fay. "Maybe we can chat some more..."

But as the bus pulled away, Bette crumpled the address into the depths of her pocket as she rushed into Barbara's embrace.