

“Guests” not “Refugees:” Child Evacuees to Canada during World War II

Abstract:

This paper examines Canadian policies on child emigration during World War II specifically in relation to British children evacuated to Canada between June and September 1940, under the government’s highly controversial Children’s Overseas Reception Board scheme. It will look at the experiences of the children themselves, both in Canada and upon returning home to post-war Britain. Interest in this topic was sparked by a children’s story, so it will discuss both factual and fictional accounts of Canada’s young “war guests.”

I first encountered World War II child evacuees to Canada in the school library, while I was thumbing through ancient school yearbooks from the 1940s. The symmetry of some class photos was marred by a few girls wearing plain cotton frocks or skirts and blouses, contrasting sharply with the neat rows of identical navy gym tunics. . An article referred to these girls as “war guests” and at age eight I dimly understood they were English children sent to Canada for safety during The War. I was proud of my school uniform and wondered if the “war guests” felt very out of place in their ordinary dresses.

For most of my life I have collected children’s books, mainly British and Canadian, published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The next time I encountered “war guests” was in a 1989 children’s story, *The Sky is Falling*, the first book in Kit Pearson’s trilogy, wherein Norah, age ten, and her brother Gavin, five, are sent to Canada as “war guests.” The sequel, *Looking at the Moon*, recounts the children’s vacation at their host family’s summer cottage in Muskoka, and the last book, *The Lights Go On Again*, covers plans for their return to England.

I belong to *Girlsown*, an online book discussion group, with approximately 400 members. Many are teachers, librarians or connected to the publishing and bookselling industries, others are simply passionate about girls’ school stories. Some of our monthly book discussions take the form of essays; last November’s subject was “War,” and a friend suggested I should write about “those Canadian ‘war guest’ books you’re always talking about.” As Pearson does not follow her “war guests” back to Britain, I included *Back Home*, Michelle Magorian’s account of twelve-year-old Rusty’s return from Connecticut and her first term at a traditional English girls’ school. Magorian is not Canadian, nor is her book set in Canada, however her story reads like a distillation of the first-hand experiences of numerous interviewees.

One of the essential plot devices in children’s literature is the removal of the young protagonists from their everyday worlds to unfamiliar circumstances. From *The Secret Garden* to *Harry Potter*, classic stories depend upon the child being thrust into a new location. Parents are frequently absent, although there are usually some adult authority figures. War causes both displacement and disruption of normal life and numerous children’s authors have used it as a backdrop to their plots. Notable examples include

Judith Kerr's *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* and Canadian Jean Little's *From Anna*, the story of a German family that relocates to Canada in 1933.

Numerous writers of fiction for adults and children have made use of "Operation Pied Piper," the well-orchestrated plan to evacuate children from urban centres to the English countryside that was put in motion in August, 1939. Among the best-known "evacuee" stories are Michelle Magorian's *Goodnight Mr. Tom*, and Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War*, both adapted as popular television serials. In *Out of Harm's Way*, a 2005 examination of child evacuees, Jessica Mann notes that the intention of the mass evacuation scheme was that "the poor should have the same chance of safeguarding their children as the middle and upper classes, who, it was assumed, would stay calm and make their own arrangements for refuge" (p.12).

The suggestion of evacuating children to the Dominions was proposed in the earliest days of World War II, with invitations coming from over 100,000 individuals and service organizations in Canada alone. Mann quotes an editorial from the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, which, "under the headline 'Our Duty to British Children', said Canada could provide a home 'for the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose and as many British boys and girls as we can make room for,'" (p.93). At the time, neither the Canadian nor the British governments expressed official enthusiasm for this proposal to host British children in Canada, although a number of families privately arranged for children to stay with friends and relatives overseas.

As the possibility of a German invasion of Britain increased, so did the exodus of British children; government agencies estimated that by early 1940 over 10,000 children had been evacuated to Canada alone, many with their schools or accompanied by their mothers. Accurate numbers do not exist because the arrangements were made privately; in *The Guest Children* (1988) Geoffrey Bilson cites estimates that up to 30,000 children were eventually sent to Canada. When I first presented a version of this paper on the *Girlsown* discussion board, several members wrote about their parents' experiences as "war guests;" all were from well-off families and came to Canada through private arrangements, most accompanied by their mothers. *The Toronto Star* society pages of 1938-40 mention the presence of numerous members of European royalty, including Queen Juliana who would give birth to her second daughter in Ottawa, causing a portion of the city to be declared temporarily a part of the Netherlands, thus allowing the princess to be born on Dutch soil, as required by Dutch law.

As more children left Britain, a government-sponsored evacuation scheme was suggested to assist children whose parents could not afford the fares. The Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) scheme was the brainchild of Geoffrey Shakespeare, Parliamentary Under Secretary for the Dominions, who Mann describes as a "well-meaning man with a romantic streak" who "presided over a well-meaning romantic muddle" (2005, p.57).

Politicians, notably Winston Churchill, dismissed the CORB scheme as not only "defeatist" but also as likely to cause panic. Numerous public figures agreed with him,

some going so far as to prevent their young relatives from leaving Britain for Canada. The Royal Family was held up as an example and Queen Elizabeth was widely quoted: “They could not go without me, I could not go without the King – and the King will never leave” (Mann, p.37). However the idea continually resurfaced and the War Board finally set in motion the government-sponsored overseas evacuation plan in June 1940, just as France surrendered to Germany. In the two weeks following the announcement of the project, the organization was inundated with over 200,000 applications, at which point names were no longer accepted. Bilson suggests that this represented approximately half the children aged five to fifteen eligible for the scheme. The two children in Kit Pearson’s *War Guests* trilogy, Norah and Gavin Stoakes, are from a working class family and are sponsored by the CORB scheme. After the British government finally decided to adopt an official plan to send children overseas, the CORB officials had to comply with the policies of the host countries. Bilson describes the complex selection process: “Each Dominion had its own requirement for harmony,” explaining that CORB sought to evacuate a large proportion of working-class children, presumably to make up for the fact that many wealthy families had already sent their children overseas. However, the Dominions were only interested in “suitable” children (1998, p.22).

Canada’s idea of “suitable” children reflects a history of organized child immigration reaching back to the 1660s, when the “Filles du Roi” were sent from France to address the lack of marriageable women in the colony of New France. Girls were provided with dowries by the King and shipped off to the Canadian Wilderness. Most were in their late teens and early twenties, but some were as young as ten and twelve. The story of the “Daughters of the King” is told for children in *Alone in an Untamed Land: The Filles du Roi Diary of Hélène St. Onge, Montréal, Upper Canada, 1666* by Maxine Trottier. The book is one of the highly popular *Dear Canada* series, a beautifully presented set of diaries written as if by young girls:

The *Dear Canada* series invites readers into the intimate worlds of girls throughout different times in Canadian history. The ongoing series showcases Canada's most distinguished children's authors who recreate some of the most dramatic events from our diverse history.” (Dear Canada website)

As I explored the history of child immigration in Canada, I found several *Dear Canada* books on the subject. *Orphan at my Door: The Home Child Diary of Victoria Cope, Guelph, Ontario, 1897*, by renowned Canadian children’s author Jean Little, covers a significant period in Canadian child immigration, which formed the basis for later policies.

The “home children” were sent to Canada by charitable organizations, most famously the scheme founded by Dr. Thomas Barnardo, who gathered up London’s street waifs and tried to give them a fresh start in a new country. Some children found the good homes and bright futures he envisaged, but many children were simply treated as slaves, powerless to escape from the backwoods farms. The methods of recruiting children in Britain were unregulated; children were often sent overseas without the knowledge or consent of their families. In *The Making of the Mosaic: a History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (1998), Kelley and Trebilcock detail the earliest legislation pertaining to child immigration:

The Empire Settlement Agreement... contained provisions to promote the continued emigration of British child immigrants to Canada. This movement already had a long history, commencing in 1868, when the first boatload of British immigrant children arrived in Canada. Over the next sixty years, close to 100,000 'home children' would follow. (p.192)

While organized labour argued continuously against child immigration, considering that the "home children" were simply cheap labour, and social services agencies and physicians believed that: "These children... poorly bred, and steeped in criminality, pauperism, and mental deficiencies, were a serious threat to the stability of Canadian society" (Kelley & Trebilcock, p.193), various forms of child immigration operated until the 1930s, although in the later years, the "home children" were teenaged boys, who were trained as farm labourers. Kelley and Trebilcock speak to the government failure to "carefully regulate and supervise the movement" because of the "enormous demand" for the child immigrants.

In addition to examining the history of child immigration, Kelley and Trebilcock trace the shift in Canada's immigration policy over the early decades of the twentieth century:

... from one aimed at *attracting* potential settlers to one directed at *selecting* the most desirable future members of the country... In the 1930s, immigration policy was to shift in nature and emphasis once again. Throughout this decade, immigration policy was reduced to an essentially explicit concept of *exclusionism*. (p.248)

In 1936, the Department of Immigration and Colonization was absorbed into the Department of Mines and Resources. The Minister, Thomas Crerar, was not interested in the Immigration Branch, so responsibility devolved to its Director, Fredrick C. Blair, who "made policy and implemented it... As the man responsible for enforcing Canadian immigration policy, Blair mirrored the increasingly anti-immigration spirit of his times" (Abella & Toper, 1983, p.7). By the late 1930s, virtually the only groups considered eligible for admission to Canada were those of British or Northern European heritage, who could demonstrate that they had the finances to purchase and ability to operate a farm. This policy made it easy for officials to deny visas to virtually all aspiring European migrants, especially given that "one of the first of such measures was the raising of the capital requirement for prospective immigrants, a measure that was effected simply by direction from the Immigration Branch." (Kelley & Trebilcock, p.261).

As part of this "exclusionist" policy, immigration officials created a series of somewhat contradictory regulations to avoid the social problems associated with the "home children," and the possibility that immigrant children, once settled, might seek to bring their families to Canada. Children from Britain could be accepted as "war guests" because they had families at home and would return after the war; refugee children from Europe could not be accepted because it was impossible to prove that they were orphans, and policy required that families were to be considered as a unit.

The Canadian National Committee on Refugees and Victims of Political Persecution (CNCR), established in 1938 with a view to persuading the government to "open the

doors, at least a crack, to refugees” (Bilson, p.5), was virtually powerless to effect immediate change:

... the Immigration Act invested the minister responsible for immigration with extensive authority over the implementation of policy, which was in turn delegated to the director of the Immigration Branch, Frederick Blair. Given such delegation of responsibility, and in the absence of any legislative or judicial check on the exercise of such authority, there was little that those working on behalf of Jewish refugees could do...(Kelley & Trebilcock, p.262)

Although Canada’s immigration laws already virtually barred most Jews, somehow “...CORB sent twelve Jewish children among the 1,148 evacuees in the first four parties to Canada. ‘Coloured children’ were excluded from the scheme at the request of the host countries.” Bilson continues: “Children who passed the tests of race, religion, health and conduct and who lived in areas given the highest priority for evacuation formed the pool from which the sailing parties were drawn” (1988, p.22-3). These exclusionist policies eerily mirror the Nazi concerns about racial purity. Mann notes that:

At the same time the Eugenics Society of Canada was offering homes to ‘suitable emigrants’ selected and certified by the British Eugenics Society. These immigrants would be members of ‘certain eugenically important groups’. That meant British children selected for intelligence, good health and good heredity – i.e. neither Jewish nor coloured...(2005, p.94)

In addition to the restrictive requirements of the Canadian government, the British government dragged its heels, insisting that children travel only in ships protected by convoys. There were considerable difficulties in finding berths and suitable escorts for the children; these delays meant that the first children did not sail for Canada until late July.

The CORB project only operated for three months, ceasing on September 13, 1940, with the sinking of *The City of Benares*, which resulted in the loss of 245 lives. Only 13 of the 90 CORB children on board survived. *Wish Me Luck* (1997) tells this story from a teenage boy’s perspective. Jim, James Heneghan’s young protagonist never arrives in Canada and seems to have no concept of Canada as a place of refuge – or anything much beyond a place that was “very large, colored red on the map, and was the white, frozen part of North America.” Similarly, in *All the Children Were Sent Away*, Sheila Garrigue concentrates on the voyage to Canada, and her nine-year-old heroine’s antagonistic relationship with the formidable Lady Drune who takes charge of her during the crossing. One could argue that Canada is, for Sara, a refuge from the trials of the journey. Both stories detail the sudden decisions and hasty nature of the overseas evacuation plan, although Heneghan’s character manages to circumvent the requirements for passports and examinations, taking a place on the fated ship at the last minute.

Canadians opened their hearts and homes to the War Guests; over 100,000 offers to house children and numerous charities organizing to assist with expenses and clothing. Looking through the archives of *The Toronto Star* in 1940, hardly a day passed without photographs and articles about the children: Norah “had never known that being evacuees would involve so much attention – applauding crowds, newspaper photographs, broadcasts from the princesses and now a movie,” (Pearson, 1989, p.235).

Of the 1,532 CORB children evacuated to Canada, approximately 500 were unsponsored, that is, they were not going to family or friends but to the strangers who had offered to house British children “for the duration.” The CORB plan required that children be matched to homes based upon religion and class. The religious aspect was relatively simple as Jews were virtually disallowed and Catholics discouraged. However, as Canadians were no more familiar with the nuances of the British Class System in 1940 than they are today, children generally ended up staying with far more affluent families (who were, after all, those who could afford to offer to take children) than those they left behind. The children who fared worst were usually the sponsored children staying with family members who could ill afford to keep them, especially as the war dragged on. According to Bilson, “Many of the private evacuees ran out of money soon after their arrival when the British Treasury changed its rules,” (1988, p.18) restricting the funds that could be sent out of Britain. The CORB intention was that while children who attended state schools were given free passage, all parents were required to make weekly contributions to their children’s board. Incidentally this money did not, as the parents had believed, go directly to the host families – it seems to have disappeared into the general coffers. Most guest children were supported entirely by their host families in all ways, including, in some cases, medical care. Some of the arrangements for sponsorship were tenuous at best; children were sent to distant relatives who often didn’t know they were coming and were not prepared to care for them. Some children changed homes numerous times and Mann confirms several cases of abuse.

The overriding principle of the CORB plan was the children would not stay in Canada. Kit Pearson’s account of the children’s arrival in Toronto clarifies the expectations of the Canadian government. The children in Norah and Gavin’s group have been posing for photos and interviewed by journalists:

Two women carrying cameras had been listening at the edge of the group. “Excuse me,” one said to Miss Carmichael. “We’re visiting Toronto from the United States and we couldn’t help overhearing this adorable little boy. He’s just too precious to be true! These children are evacuees, aren’t they? How can we get one?”

“We don’t call them evacuees,” said Miss Carmichael. “That sounds as if they have no homes to return to. They are Canada’s war guests. We’re hosting them for the duration.” (1989, p.69)

While unsponsored children arriving in Canada do not seem to have been subjected to the “cattle market” suffered by child evacuees in rural Britain, Norah and Gavin are left without a sponsor while other children find homes quickly. On her website, Pearson tell how she was inspired to write the story of the war guests:

When I was a children's librarian in Toronto I took a storytelling course from a woman called Alice Kane. Alice told us how, during World War II, she and other children's librarians would go to Hart House to tell stories to the "war guests", children who had been sent to Canada from England to escape the war. They were waiting at Hart House to be "vetted" until they joined their new families. I suddenly got a picture in my mind of these lonely, confused children listening to

Alice tell them a story, especially the story about children being sent away, "Alenoushka and her Brother". I had never heard of the war guests, but from then on I began to find out more about them. Slowly a story about Norah and Gavin was growing, and eventually, after a whole year of research in Canada and England, I turned it into a book. I put in a scene of Alice Kane telling stories, the only time I've ever put a real person into a novel. Alice, who died a few years ago, seemed thrilled! (Pearson website)

Eventually Norah and Gavin are taken by the wealthy Ogilvy family, with a mansion in Toronto and a private island in North Ontario.

In contrast, Michelle Magorian does not give us an account of Rusty's arrival in the USA or explain how she ended up with the bohemian Omsk family. Children evacuated to the USA were sponsored by private schemes, many organized by corporations with business ties to the UK; for example, the children of Eastman employees in the UK stayed with Eastman employees in the USA. Noel Coward assembled a group of children who were to be billeted with Hollywood actors, although the scheme fell through and the children spent the war in New York.

Even before Britain entered the war, several private schools made arrangements to board with their counterparts in Canada, many organized by Major Fred J. Ney, Executive Vice-President of the National Council of Education of Canada. The Canadian schools' enrollment had declined during the Great Depression and they were pleased to have additional students. However, these schools could not afford to keep pupils for free for several years. Mann's research suggests that some arrangements were extremely vague; one girls' school moved several times, the pupils were boarded out and required to do housework in return for their keep. Some were integrated into the host schools; others remained separate. However, some war guest schools have maintained strong ties with their hosts, holding regular reunions.

While many Canadians were fascinated by the war guests and could not do enough to make them welcome, some, at least, were also very much aware that Canadian government was not doing anything at all to help children in Europe, especially Jews, as illustrated on Norah's baffling encounter with her new teacher on her first day at a Toronto school:

Why did she resent them? Norah wondered, lifting up the lid of her desk to hide from all those eyes. She found out almost at once.

"Dulcie and Norah are extremely lucky," Miss Liers was saying. "All British evacuees are lucky that Canada has invited them here for the duration. But we mustn't forget that there are other children in Europe who aren't so lucky. Little Belgian and Dutch and Jewish children whose circumstances are far graver than British children's. Let us hope that our government will act to bring those children over to safety as well."

She paused expectantly and the class droned, "Yes, Miss Liers." But no one was listening. They were all peeking at the two new girls. (1989, p.106-7)

Pearson does not dwell upon this theme and Miss Liers' antagonism towards the war guests is never truly clarified. Eventually Norah, angered by a classmate glorifying the

violence of war, tells the class about her experiences and her grandfather being bombed out of his home.

“Norah is right, Charlie,” said Miss Liers. “You are so far from the war, you find it exciting. But war isn’t a game – it’s a grim, terrible thing.” For once her voice wasn’t sarcastic...After Norah reached the part about arriving in Toronto she stopped, as drained as if she had experienced the whole journey again.

Miss Liers actually smiled. “Thank you, Norah, that was very interesting. We’re glad that you and Dulcie are safe in Canada.” For once, she didn’t remind the class of all the children who weren’t. (1989, p.219-21)

In addition to having to fit in with their host families, the war guests worried constantly about conditions at home. Letters arrived infrequently and were heavily censored, delays caused children to worry but cheery messages about family and friends also made them homesick, as Pearson writes: “Both these cards were so unsettling that Norah put them on her windowsill without reading them again. Molly and Tom and her other friends at home seemed like people in another life”(1989, p.238). The film, *A Rough Crossing*, shows children broadcasting messages to their families, similarly, Pearson describes Gavin’s bewilderment: “Gavin had frozen as soon as he heard his mother...On his face was the same bewildered expression he’d had when he first left home” (1989, p.236).

Additionally, many of the war guests interviewed felt rejected by their families, especially if all their siblings were not evacuated too. Despite parents’ protestations that they wanted their children to be safe, or that they hoped some of the family would survive, it seems that most evacuee children felt their parents didn’t want (or love) them as much as their siblings, so they were sent away. As the war drew to a close, many children did not want to return to Britain; for the youngest, their Canadian hosts were truly the only families they knew, many referring to their Canadian hosts as “Mother” or “Dad.” Over the years they had lost touch with their families, their only contact having been through occasional letters. Pearson demonstrates this sense of distance in *Looking at the Moon*, the second book in the *War Guests Trilogy*; Norah is preoccupied with learning to drive a motorboat, the angst of growing up, and her crush on one of the Ogilvy cousins and the book contains fewer references to their family in England. Older children appreciated that they had enjoyed both material benefits and greater opportunities in Canada than they would ever have in Britain. Some children’s only understanding of Britain was as a battle zone:

When Gavin tried to remember, a wall seemed to rise up between England and Canada. On one side was danger; on the other side, safety. The danger was worse than before: a bomb could smash your house and kill your relatives. That made the safety even more precious. (Pearson, 1993, p.69)

As their ship docks, Rusty and her fellow passengers conceal their doubts that they will fail to recognize parents they have not seen in five years. Similarly Gavin, evacuated at age five, “closed his eyes and tried to remember his real family, but their faces were blank. They were simply names...like distant relatives he never saw” (Pearson, 1993, p.43).

Meantime, the families at home had changed. Rusty's situation was probably typical: a new baby brother, her father still away at war, her former stay-at-home mother now working as a highly competent mechanic and her autocratic grandmother pretending nothing had really changed. According to Bilson and Mann, many families never truly reconciled. Unlike the flurry surrounding the initial evacuation, where children often did not know they were leaving for Canada until a few days or even hours before they left, the "war guests" had a full five years to anticipate their return to Britain. Bilson suggests that this repatriation was more far difficult for many children than the initial evacuation: they were older, they understood the material differences between their lives in Canada and "back home" and many retained a lingering sense of rejection.

Often their families resented the returning children who were well nourished, described as two or more years "bigger" than their British contemporaries, and seemingly far more sophisticated and independent. They were taunted for their "American" accents, teased for being "soft" and wearing "fancy" clothing. Meanwhile the evacuees had dropped from being two years ahead of their classmates in North America to two years behind in Britain and had difficulty coping with the different school systems. Young teens returning to working-class homes in post-war Britain were shocked to find they were expected to join the work force. While children's books generally portray North American children as more sophisticated and mature than their British contemporaries, middle-class Canadian children were kept "children" longer, certainly not expected to leave school and find jobs at 14 or 15. Bilson, MacInnis and Mann tell of several teens returning to their Canadian families to finish their education, and subsequently remaining in Canada.

Pearson and Magorian describe almost insurmountable cultural differences between the returning war guests and their British contemporaries. Rusty's fashionable wardrobe, her independence and sophistication are a source of contention with her parents, who had been imagining her as a larger version of the eight-year-old they had last seen. Norah, age fifteen in *The Lights Go On Again* has turned into a "teenager," curling her hair and experimenting with lipstick, wearing bobby socks and mooning over Frank Sinatra, attending dances during the summers at the family cottage. Incidentally, many first-hand "war guest" accounts describe summers spent camping or at family cottages on northern lakes. Vacation properties were not strictly the purview of the wealthy Ogilvies but the accepted norm for many middle-class Canadian families, although most families did not own private islands.

Returning "war guests" also had to deal with the stigma of cowardice, that they "ran away," a suggestion that according to all my sources lingers today. In the early chapters of *The Sky is Falling*, Pearson writes: "The war was the most exciting thing that had ever happened in Norah's ten years, and this summer was the best part of it... Norah could hardly remember what life had been like before this war. How could anybody bear to be sent away from it?" (1989,p.13). Norah and her gang consider their neighbours, Derek, Dulcie and Lucy "feeble" for "running away" to Canada. This theme is shared by Heneghan and Magorian. Upon her return to Britain, Rusty is taunted by her schoolmates for being a "softy," as is Lance, a fellow returning outsider. "You're English, aren't you,"

Lance reminds Rusty when she speaks of the English as being “snobs.” “I guess so, but I don’t feel like it,” is her reply (Magorian, 1985, p.211).

Evacuees felt they’d missed not only the dangers and privations of war but also the excitement; they could never again be truly part of the British culture. They had been well fed and privileged while their siblings and contemporaries had huddled in shelters and survived on increasingly meager rations. This sense of “missing out” is expressed in virtually all the interviews included in Bilson and Mann’s accounts and in *A Rough Crossing*. Mann in particular relates the problems of reintegration, citing bitter feelings that have only been expressed as the former “war guests” age.

Bilson and Mann are both somewhat equivocal about the CORB scheme. Mann feels that in similar circumstances she *would* send her children away, while Bilson concludes: “Easy generalizations melt away in the light of hundreds of individual lives. In 1940, the children’s parents took a risk that their children would be better off in Canada than at home. Nearly fifty years later, the guest children must answer for themselves whether that risk was worth taking” (1988, p.260).

This is where my original book discussion paper ended. Bilson maintains that, “The story of the guest children would be a more inspiring one today if the welcome had been more open, more generous and less marked by racial and religious barriers”(p.253). In my reading, I came across numerous references to the children Canada did not accept, children who were not considered desirable “guests,” and began to understand Miss Liers’ uncomfortable references to the European children Canada was not helping. Most of the writers cited earlier reference *None Is Too Many*, Irving Abella and Harold Toper’s landmark account of *Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948*. On Friday there will be a presentation related to this work, so I will simply mention a children’s book on the subject, *Turned Away: The World War II Diary of Devorah Bernstein, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1941*, yet another volume in the *Dear Canada* series. Carol Matas presents the “diary” of a twelve-year-old Jewish child, including letters from her slightly older cousin, Sarah, an aspiring pianist living in Paris. Matas based the diary entries on Winnipeg’s daily newspapers; in the extensive Historical Notes, she discusses her difficulties in using these papers, especially as the headlines often proved to be inaccurate in view of later events. However, she wanted “Devorah to be responding as a twelve-year-old Winnipeg girl in 1941-2 would have” (2005, p.199).

Between preparing for her ballet recital, devouring Agatha Christie mysteries, and stuffing herself with popcorn at the movies, Devorah worries about her brothers and cousin serving in the forces in Europe and the Far East and listens to her parents’ continuing efforts to acquire visas to allow her cousins, aunt and uncle to find a refuge in Canada. She and her little friends babysit, knit and fundraise to help with the war effort. Devorah even accompanies her mother on a fruitless trip to Frederick Blair’s office in Ottawa to plead Sarah’s case. While Devorah bumbles on about popcorn and party dresses, Matas does not sugar coat historical facts: classmates’ brothers are lost in combat and Sarah writes to Devorah of daily conditions in occupied France, including a particularly chilling account of two little friends whose mother threw them from a top

storey window to their deaths rather than allowing them to be taken by the Germans; there is no “happy ending” for Sarah.

Conclusion

In reading beyond the original children’s novels, my main impression is that the story of child immigration to Canada during World War II is of numbers, of the quantities of children whose lives were affected by Canada’s immigration policies. While Bilson, Mann and MacInnis tell the stories of individual “war guests,” their narratives are overwhelmed by the statistics: the nearly 200,000 British children whose parents wanted to send them to Canada for sanctuary at the outset of the CORB scheme, the thousands of Canadian homes opened for children who never arrived. Abella and Topper, and also Kelley and Trebilcock, drive the numbers home, describing the fate of the hundreds of thousands of children Canada did not want as “guests.”

Between 1939 and 1945, Canada was approached numerous times to provide sanctuary to children in life-threatening situations. Within a six-month period, the country had warmly accepted 4,500 British children. During the next five years, it would commit itself to accepting only 1000 Jewish children from the continent and, in the end, provided sanctuary to none of them... (1998, p.266)

The second dominant impression is of the power held not only by individual politicians, but by individual civil servants, especially Frederick Blair, whose personal prejudices were permitted to affect the lives of thousands: “Frederick Blair’s own aversion to assisting European Jewry was played out daily in the directives that he issued to his immigration officers and in the hundreds of requests he personally rejected among the eligible applicants” (Kelley & Trebilcock, p.307).

Here I question the roles of both politicians and bureaucrats in setting policy. Policy is meant to be fair and impersonal, dealing with numbers not individuals. And yet Blair took a great personal interest in many cases while defending his decisions because they were supported by “policy.” Could a Frederick Blair be granted such all-encompassing authority today? Kelley & Trebilcock, observe that:

Canada’s wartime policies... were formalized in statutes that were sweeping in scope, that sanctioned extensive delegation of authority, and that were relatively free from parliamentary or judicial scrutiny. Thus, immigration policies adopted pursuant to the Immigration Act, and internal-security measures effected under the War Measures Act, were subject to uneven application and abuse of authority...(p.309-310)

insisting that no matter how we may view the restrictive immigration policies of the 1930s and 40s, these policies “were largely supported by the general public” (p307).

Mann quotes sociologist Margaret Cole as saying that the entire child evacuee scheme was the product of “minds that were military, male, and middle class,” (p.11), suggesting that working class parents found it far more difficult to part with their children than the middle classes, who were expected to send their offspring to boarding school at an early age. Both Mann and Bilson attempt to explain the gripping fear that caused parents to send their children half way around the world, in hopes that they might survive, a

separation that might be considered unthinkable today. Kit Pearson and Michelle Magorian tell riveting stories as well as presenting well-researched impressions of the experiences of the “war guests” and a sympathetic understanding of their difficulties upon returning to post-war Britain and Carol Matas manages to encapsulate the essence of Abella and Toper’s historical account of the frustrations faced by Jews in Canada during the Second World War in a form that speaks to today’s twelve-year-olds. All these authors convey a sense of the absolute powerlessness of children caught in wars and faced with forces far beyond their understanding.

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