Robbing the Cradle

Some poor British children had been sent to Canada as apprentices even before the rebellions of 1837. But the idea of uprooting slum children and packing them off to the colonies for their own good really took off 30 years later.

By Joy Parr

Royal Ontario Museum

***Home children.** Child immigrants to Canada at the end of the 19th century were sponsored by a variety of philanthropists. Annie Macpherson, a Scots Quaker, opened several homes in Ontario. The painting shows some of her children arriving in Montreal in 1873.*

Between the year of Confederation and 1924, 100,000 children came to Canada by themselves, plucked from the poorest and most crowded districts of British cities. Homes were found for them in every province from Nova Scotia to Saskatchewan — radically different places from those they had known. A third of them were Catholics placed by British diocesan committees in eastern Ontario and western Quebec. It was all supposed to be for their own good.

The movement really got started in 1868, in the wake of the last great London cholera epidemic, when two women — Maria Rye, a feminist, and Annie Macpherson, a Quaker — working independently, brought parties of children to Ontario. Rye, Macpherson and her sister Louisa Birt of Liverpool, as well as Thomas Barnardo of London, William Quarrier of Glasgow, and Leonard Shaw of Manchester, had cottoned on to emigration as a way to help British children in distress. Soon, other charities — the Middlemore Homes in Birmingham, the National Children's Homes, Mr Fegan's Homes of Southwark and Westminster, Miss Stirling of Edinburgh, and the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society — established Canadian branches.

Sin and Suffering

The child-savers saw working-class neighbourhoods as nests of sin and suffering. Children were put to work at an early age to help support their families. Fathers were often absent, looking for work. Parents at times had to take their families into the workhouse, or leave their children in the care of relatives and friends. Perplexed and angered by what they saw, reformers believed the hard and unstable lives of poor children were the fault of selfish and irresponsible parents; the solution was to separate these children from their kin.

Some of the children were abandoned, run-aways or orphans. But many had parents who cared for them, without being able to match the standards set by the child-savers. In either case, the youngsters were removed to large, walled institutions where they were first given schooling, domestic or industrial training and religious instruction to prepare them for a new and better life abroad.

While the child-savers were suspicious of British working-class parents, they had extraordinary confidence in the temperate, Christian agricultural people of the colonies. They hoped that in farm households, far from the temptations of city life, in clean air, doing healthy work, their British slum protegés would grow to devout, industrious adulthood. And the younger children were when they entered this new environment, the more rapid, it was thought, would be their adjustment to its standards.

Emigration was not an expensive rescue policy. The transatlantic passage cost about the same as one year's keep in an

About our Voyage

A Scottish boy describes the Atlantic crossing and his first day in Canada:

Belleville, Ont. April 1885
Dear Mr. Quarrier,

I write you these few lines to tell you about our voyage. While we were rounding the Irish coast the sea ran very high and the ship was tossed like a small boat. We thought there where whales. Mostly all of the boys were sick. We had two or three severe gales in one of which the mast was blown down. On Sunday the waves were pouring in the hatches and down the stairs. We had oranges three times and sweets four times on the ship, and one orange in the train. While at Quebec we got a walk on the ice for about a mile, and saw the sleighs driving out. It is very hot out here through the day, hotter than summer in Scotland, and there are a great many apple trees out in blossom. There were fourteen boys sent away today, and there are other six to go tonight, and I am one of them. I have to be in the same house with my little sister Katie, and I am very glad. No more at present but I shall remain your affectionate adopted son. J.J.

***Off the boat.** This party of young girls arriving in Quebec is led by the matron who supervised their trip out to the colony.*

Barnardo Photo Library

Barnardo Photo Library

English institution. Once in the colony, the child cost the agency very little. Canada's closeness made it the least expensive destination and thus the most favoured for emigrants.

Going abroad offered better economic prospects for the child as well. Many Canadians were leaving the countryside for the cities. Those who stayed on the farms were eager for extra help and especially willing to receive a young apprentice who would work for board and perhaps a small wage. The Canadian demand for agricultural labourers and domestics was likely to continue. There were homesteads to be taken up in the West, and homesteaders looking for capable wives. Canada seemed to hold a promise beyond all expectations for the working child in Great Britain.

Going for a Ride

Children were encouraged to think of emigration as an adventure. Boys who had watched great ships pass down the Thames and revelled in tales of the Great West were especially easily convinced. But children had also heard adults express fears about emigration. Parents did not want their children to go so far away, beyond the likely prospect of any reunion. But relatives had signed agreements surrendering custody of the children to the agencies on admission, and these agreements included clauses allowing for emigration to Canada.

Prior to leaving, each child was outfitted with new footwear, summer and

▲ ***At school.*** *These youngsters lived with a farm family in rural Ontario. A boarding fee was paid by their British sponsor so that they would be released from chores and allowed to attend school, where they are pictured in 1912.*

In the fields. *Older immigrants were expected to work hard in their placements, and in the process learn a trade which eventually would make them independent.*

Barnardo Photo Library

Settling Into a New Home

Campbellford Ontario, Sept., 1924

Dear Friend,

Just a few lines to let you know I arrived safe as I thought you would likely be worried about me. I was just about one good hour on the train. I like Mrs. M. well enough at present but of course, time will tell Later. Well I can't say I was lonesome at all I was just on the train but when I began to look at all the country I was all right I Didn't cry so dont worrie. When I got here I slept like a log didn't waken till a quarter till seven. Pretty good for a strange place. Sunday school starts in the afternoon next sunday and I am going to go. Well Meyer's have a trebbele big house all wax floors. Except my room and the bathroom. And the first day I was here in the afternoon was the Campbellford Fair they all went to it and I had to rake the Leave's on the Lawn up and take them away and believe me its no wee lawn either but anyhow I got it done it was a grand day. Well I guess I will close.

Your Faithfull Friend E.J.

Hopeing this find everyone in the best of health.

winter clothing, and a Bible. All these goods were installed in the traditional rectangular wooden box of the immigrant trade, and identified with the Home child's name. The first parties of the year were older boys, who travelled in February from Liverpool to Halifax, then overland by rail to reach Ontario and Quebec before the beginning of the spring work. Later parties of younger boys and girls travelled through to Montreal by ship, then on in special railway coaches.

Ontario Archives

Group portrait. *These young boys, pictured about 1898, lived at Annie Macpherson's home at Stratford, Ont.*

At reception facilities in southern Ontario, the Eastern Townships and western Quebec, southern Manitoba and the Maritimes, arriving parties of immigrants were held over temporarily, bunkhouse style, until their first Canadian placements could be arranged.

Farmers and mistresses who wrote to the Homes requesting the children's services were asked to fill out applications stating their church affiliation and the size of their household, but usually no Home official had ever seen the place to which the young emigrant was despatched by train. At some reception centres, farmers arrived in groups on an appointed day, and picked the youngsters they wanted from among the waiting rows.

Small But Suspect

Rural placements were preferred for all Home children. Most boys were sent to farms to apprentice as agricultural labourers. Girls were sent to smaller towns or rural homes to work as domestic servants. In some rare instances, British children were adopted into Canadian families. Some less scrupulous English agencies asserted that this was the happy fate of all their juvenile emigrants. In fact, the children were better off as apprentices. In this way the Homes' chief Canadian official, not their employer, remained their legal guardian and their work was paid for in wages, not in vague promises of some future inheritance.

The Home children were often mark-

Barnardo Photo Library

In service. *Many immigrant girls preferred placement as a domestic servant to life on a farm. This girl, shown in her houshold uniform in 1898, eventually trained as a nurse.*

Wondering about Roots.

A boy admitted to an English orphanage at age three as 'friendless,' and later sent abroad, writes to inquire who he is.

Toronto, New Year's Day, 1917

Sirs, It is with much pleasure that I am writing you a few lines to see if I can get some information as to my exact age and of my mother and father. I was placed in the Marchmont Home when very young, and have been knocking around the world ever since not having been told anything of my right age or of my parents whether they are living yet, not where they lived or where I was born. Now I am sure it would be of great benefit to me if it would not be too much trouble to you. I should not like to be living hear alone and think I had a father and mother some where or a brother and sister of which I should be pleased to know. I must say that owing to the present war they are placing national service cards in the houses as you are aware of and I cannot answer the question not knowing where my father and mother was born. And for this reason I write to you also to satisfy myself on other things. Hoping this is not too much to ask and you will answer me the best you can. E.F.H.

edly shorter than Canadians of the same age. Their hard early life showed in marked skin, eye problems and bone disease. Canadians candidly wondered what kind of personal and moral conduct could be expected from children raised by parents of dubious character, in chaotic Old World cities. The children's record in Canada is an admirable one. They were not conspicuously idle, infirm, or criminal. But they were always suspect.

Becoming accustomed to life in Canadian households was not easy for many British children. Nor were the curious ways of the young strangers easy for Canadian families to accept. Most juvenile immigrants felt the stresses of being an apprentice rather than one of the family.

There were many signs of these tensions. British apprentices changed workplaces often. The average child changed places four times during his or her first five years in Canada. One young girl was placed in 11 different homes, between 1888 and 1892 when she was aged 9 to 13. Many children were returned by their employers because they were not big enough or skilled enough to do the work expected of them. Generally, Canadian farmers and mistresses attempted to be fair, but they were frustrated with young helpers who knew nothing about farm work and little about the routine of rural households. Confusing lack of experience with lack of intelligence, they returned youngsters as stupid or slow.

There were also economic reasons for frequent changes in situations. As boys and girls grew older and more skilled they were able to contribute more to the household and the farm. Representatives of British agencies wanted the apprentices under their care to be fairly treated and periodically requested wage increases. Such negotiations could be painful for the young immigrant. Masters and mistresses pointed out all the child's failings in arguing against a raise. When bargaining failed, the apprentice was recalled, and placed in a new situation in a different district.

National Museum of Man

Worldly possessions. A tin trunk belonging to one of Dr. Barnardo's girls, and containing the clothes and other belongings she would need to start a new life in Canada.

Barnardo Photo Library

◀◀ Dr. Thomas John Barnardo. His organization brought about 30,000 children to Canada.

Royal Ontario Museum

Dining at home. The dining room of the National Children's Home, a Methodist agency founded by Rev. Thomas Bowman Stephenson. In Canada the organization's headquarters was in Hamilton. The dinner setting seems suspiciously genteel for a charitable institution; the drawing may have been slightly embellished for advertising purposes.

Public Archives of Canada (PA 41785)

Arrival. Some of Dr. Barnardo's children on the dock at Saint John, New Brunswick, about 1905; girls in the front, boys in back.▼

Off on the Wrong Foot

Neither was the school-house an easy place for the child immigrant. Rural teachers did not welcome immigrant apprentices. Because their farm workloads were heavy, Home children were not able to attend regularly, and were often late. The many changes in their early years usually left them far behind in their schooling. They became the frequent butts of schoolyard pranks. Many child immigrants never went to school regularly after they arrived in Canada, a disadvantage which would limit their opportunities later in life.

Men and women who had come to Canada as child immigrants usually left the rural areas in which they had served their apprenticeships soon after their indentures were completed. Like many Canadian-born young people, they moved off in search of excitement and high wages in Canadian and American cities. Some boys went west, often with the annual railway excursions, to try their luck at Prairie homesteading. But few stayed on the land for long. Most found work in service, manufacturing, logging and mining jobs. Emigration did not bring them riches or fame. It did, however, bring more financial security than they might have expected in Britain, and much better opportunities for their Canadian-born children.

In the years immediately following World War One, the thinking group of professional social workers argued that British emigration agencies were negligent in their care of their wards, that they chose neither the children nor their placements with enough care, and that they offered young people far too little protection from exploitation and physical abuse. In Britain, working men returning from military service demanded through their trade unions and the Labour Party that the state care for all its citizens in the egalitarian way it had called them to war. They insisted that working-class children should be allowed to grow up in their own families.

No More

In 1925, the child immigration movement for youngsters under age 14 stopped, by agreement between the British and Canadian governments. Canadians and Britons were no longer willing to have children separated from their parents and working in distant lands for a living, no matter how healthy the setting.

In the end, this remarkably long-lived program of child immigration ground to a halt because representatives of British working people, supported by Canadian social workers, demanded and won for working-class children, no matter how troubled their beginnings, the right to food, shelter and schooling in the land of their birth.