Hard work & long days in Canada

Empire emigrants are often brave, sometimes naive, and always fascinating people to have in your family. **Emily Manktelow** explores the history of migration to Canada for British men, women and children.

If you leave the gloom of London & you seek a glowing land,
Where all except the flag is strange & new,
There's a bronzed and stalwart fellow who will grip you by the hand,
And greet you with a welcome warm & true;
For he's your younger brother, the one you sent away,
Because there wasn't room for him at home;
And now he's quite contented, & he's glad he didn't stay,
And he's building Britain's greatness o'er the foam.
'The Younger Son' by Robert William Service (1907).

In the years 1815-1914 approximately 22.6 million people left Britain as emigrants. Of those who travelled to the British Empire the vast majority went to Canada – a British colony most like Britain in terms of climate, closest in terms of travel, and most similar to the most popular destination for European emigrants: the USA.

Assisted migration

Among the colonies, Canada was the favoured destination for Government schemes designed to assist people to emigrate. For Britain, empire migration seemed to offer an opportunity to tackle urban overcrowding and poverty – and in later years the problem of orphaned children, waifs and strays. It also had a vested interest in the colonies doing well – after all, what was good for the empire was seen to be good for Britain. For Canada, the need was for strong, fit and healthy people to help populate their corner of the vast continent of North America.

Assisted migration to Canada (and elsewhere) then, was essentially about colonisation. Sending white British people (men, women and families) to the colonies helped consolidate the racial demographics, replicate British institutions, and strengthen inter-imperial cultural and economic ties.

Of course the reality of 'settlement' is the dispossession, and indeed eradication, of thousands of indigenous peoples – the ramifications of which can still be seen and felt in the world today. If there is a colonial element to your family tree, you could certainly have indigenous ancestors. The early history of colonial Canada is characterised by whaling, fur-trapping and logging. Men alone on the colonial frontier often had indigenous sexual partners: sometimes through force and coercion, but also through both pragmatic and loving relationships. As colonisation progressed, indigenous communities were increasingly removed from their land, coerced into work, and forcibly disconnected from their culture and their families (particularly through the practice of compulsory residential schooling). The story of indigenous peoples in the empire is a difficult one to confront, but one we should all be aware of, whether we have family connections to that history or not.

The sense of empire as a family (however inaccurate!) was captured well in this WWI propaganda image.

Canadian resources

Subscribers to Ancestry.co.uk can access Canadian census records from 1851 to 1911, read the guide at: **search.ancestry.co.uk/search/group/canadiancensus**.

- Ancestry has a Canadian Travel and Immigration collection that includes passenger lists, citizenship records and immigration and emigration books. These provide valuable information about the migration experience of your ancestors, **search.ancestry.ca**.
- Find Canadian births, deaths and marriages, military records and voting registers at **www.ancestry.ca**. You will need the worldwide membership or pay-as-you-go credits.

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1911: Mr J Gaston and a group of English migrants.

An Englishman, an Irishman, a Scotsman

Many migrants to Canada were from Scotland and Ireland, particularly those emigrating around the time of the Highland clearances and the Irish potato famine. In Scotland so-called 'landlord-assisted' migration became quite common, as landlords sought to clear their land of the native tenants by shipping them overseas. Aided by the 1851 Emigration Act, landlords could secure their nominee a passage for £1. According to Education Scotland (**www.educationscotland.gov.uk/higherscottishhistory/migrationandempire/index.asp**), between 1846 and 1857, 16,533 were thus 'assisted' to emigrate.

While the Scottish Highlands lost around 9 per cent of its population between 1851 and 1891, Ireland lost an enormous 28 per cent through emigration in the same years. This was largely due to the Irish potato famine – actually a series of famines between 1845 and 1852. In those years 2.5 million Britons migrated overseas; around 2 million of them were Irish. In Canada, most of the Irish immigrants were Protestant: around 500,000 Protestant Irish had already migrated to Canada (then called British North America) between 1815 and 1845 – they were followed by approximately 300,000 more Protestant migrants after the famine. The Imperial Census of 1901 records that 21 per cent of the British-born in Canada were Scottish, and the same percentage Irish.

Meanwhile in England, state-assisted migration was losing its popularity. Charities and philanthropic organisations began to step into the breech, seeking to assist English 'paupers' to new lives, and to consolidate the ties of empire. William Booth's Salvation Army had assisted around 200,000 working-class migrants by 1930 through the provision of low-cost loans and the chartering of special ships to make the crossing.

The good life?

So what was life like for these migrants? Living in urban poverty and

Deciding where to go

The dryness of the air, the character of the soil, which retains no stagnant pools to send forth poisonous exhalations, and the almost total absence of a fog or mist, the brilliancy of its sunlight, the pleasing succession of its seasons, all conspire to make this a climate of unrivalled salubrity and the home of a joyous, healthy, prosperous people, strong in physical, intellectual and moral capabilities.
(Extract from *The Question of the Hour! Where to Emigrate!* by Thomas Spence, 1883; find it at **archive.org**).

overcrowding, British emigrants were tempted away and promised 'excellence of soil and water, agricultural and commercial advantages, and educational facilities; and in addition... cheap lands, and free homesteads of 160 acres... splendid opportunit[ies]... productive country... [and] no landlord, no yearly rent to pay'. Imagine the impact of such descriptions on a Victorian slum-dweller: 'fair fields... flowering meadows... the luxuriant growth of fertile soils and tropical suns... perfumed breezes... bountiful harvests of golden grain, rich and mellow fruits, and all the wealth the earth can yield' (*The Question of the Hour! Where to Emigrate!* by Thomas Spence, 1883).

Of course the reality was somewhat different, and sometimes felt far less developed than had been promised, but the opportunities were generally very real for those 'able and willing to work' (*Question of the Hour!*). In the words of Simeon Titmouse, emigrant to Upper Canada in 1832: 'The country is discouraging at first, but the longer one is in it, the better one begins to like it. Any stout, hard labouring man, with a family, may do better in this country for them, than he can do at home. But remember, he will have to work pretty hard and long days.' For women, too, there were good opportunities in domestic service, but most women emigrated as wives. After all, 'from the great disparity of male over female population in the Canadas, I would advise every young farmer... to take an active young wife with him' (*Emigration Practically Considered*, by A C Buchanan, 1828).

Child migration

Migrating as an adult was one thing, but an estimated 150,000 children, mostly aged 8-14, were emigrated from Britain to the colonies in the years 1618-1967. Around 90,000 of these were shipped to Canada between 1869 and the 1920s. Maria Rye, who made her name with the Female Middle Class Emigration Society (mentioned last issue in relation to Australia), settled around 5,000 children in Canada when her attention turned away from female emigrants in the 1860s. The most famous child migrants were the Barnardo's children however. Barnardo's alone sent over 28,000 children to Canada between 1882 and 1928. Supposed to be orphans, it has subsequently been proved that many were not, and that parents were often misled into signing away their parental rights, or indeed that children were shipped overseas without their knowledge or agreement – the children being told that their parents had died.

Children shipped abroad were supposed to find better lives overseas, with better job prospects, a healthier lifestyle, and a severing of the cord with British families deemed 'immoral' or 'delinquent'. For some this may have been the case, but other children endured lives of hard work and disaffection with unhappy placements in domestic or agricultural labour, and living in poor conditions. By the 1920s the tide was turning against child migration, both in Britain (due to concerns about the children's welfare) and in Canada, which was increasingly concerned about receiving the 'dregs' of British society.

'Oranges and Sunshine'

The last group of Barnardo's children were sent in 1967. The 2010 film 'Oranges and Sunshine', directed by Jim Loach, tells the story of children sent to Australia by the homes founded in the 19th century by philanthropist Annie MacPherson. They also dispatched children to Canada, including from Dr Barnardo's homes.

Child migration resources

- **www.barnardos.org.uk** – the Barnardo's website has much useful information for people whose relatives may have been involved in the organisation (in the UK and abroad). Search for 'Family History Service' then click on 'Useful links' to access other organisations in the field.
- **freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~britishhomechildren** – connect to fellow British Home Children researchers at Rootsweb.

Official apology

In February 2010 PM Gordon Brown apologised to children sent abroad as child migrants. Much of the subsequent news coverage can still be found online, for example, the BBC's coverage: **news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8531664.stm**, which also offers useful links, including to the Child Migrants Trust: **www.childmigrantstrust.com**.

Sense of empire

British migration to places like Canada in the 19th century was about empire at the macro level, and individual opportunity at the micro. There was a rhetorical resonance to the idea of a Greater Britain abroad, filled with 'a great homogeneous people, one in blood, language, religion and laws, but dispersed over a boundless space' (John Seeley, *The Expansion of England*, 1883). The sense of the 'empire family' would come to the fore in bloody fashion during World War I when 2.5 million colonial soldiers from around the empire fought for Britain. In World War II just under half of the 8 million men who served were from the British empire (including India, Canada, Australia, East Africa, West Africa, and New Zealand, in order of number of soldiers). The sense of empire as a family (however inaccurate!) was captured well in the propaganda used in World War I, but was also in existence long before. In the words of the poem that began this article:

You've a brother in the army, you've another in the Church;
One of you is a diplomatic swell;
You've had the pick of everything and left him in the lurch,
And yet I think he's doing very well.
I'm sure his life is happy, and he doesn't envy yours;
I know he loves the land his pluck has won;
And I fancy in the years unborn, while England's fame endures,
She will come to bless with pride — *The Younger Son.*

About the author

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