

Whither Thou Goest

War Brides: an investigation and comparison of the experience of Canadian and American wartime marriages

Whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge:
thy people shall be my people.

Book of Ruth, chapter 1, verse 16
The Holy Bible, King James Version

One of the unexpected fallouts from the two great wars that Canada and the United States of America, (America), were involved in in the twentieth century was the large numbers of liaisons between the troops and the women of the country where they were stationed. Some of these were ephemeral but a surprising number of women married or were affianced before the troops returned to their homes. The arrangements for reuniting these women with their men and the process of assimilation in their new homes have presented some interesting questions for the historians. In the biblical quotation Ruth is making a solemn promise to her mother in law as they were leaving both of their husbands dead. The young women that are the subject of this study had made an equally solemn promise to their Canadian serviceman husband. They were prepared to leave their homeland and follow their new husband to an unknown land.

As we will see in this paper, most of the war brides dealt with the typical situations that any immigrant encounters: loneliness, vocabulary, and unfamiliar customs in the new country. At the same time the process of fitting into their new husband's established way of life sometimes presented unique problems that challenged these young women in ways they could not have anticipated. These challenges and the factors that influenced their acculturation in Canada will be the principle areas for investigation.

The focus will be primarily on the experience of the war brides who emigrated from the late summer of 1944 to the end of 1947 when the governments of Canada and the United States, ended their programs of support that were invaluable in assisting this great movement.

There were also war brides from Europe but this will be mentioned only in passing since our concern is specifically with the problems faced by English speaking immigrants assimilating into what was apparently a similar English speaking society. Most of the literature considers war brides as only those married in Britain before they began their journey to Canada, but there were also women who were affianced but, for one reason or another were not married until they reached their husband's home in Canada. This will also be considered. The American brides faced a more difficult situation since transportation for the troops was given priority until after 1946. Special arrangements to meet the needs of the women with children were not provided until much later than was the case for the Canadian brides.¹

From a review of literature in the York University, the Toronto Public Libraries, the local press and the Internet it is apparent that the experience in Canada differed somewhat from that in America particularly because the women emigrating from Britain were British subjects with equal rights in the British Commonwealth whereas in America they were considered as immigrants from a foreign, although friendly, country. Where things proceeded smoothly as they adjusted to their new home few problems arose but inevitably some encountered complications and unexpected difficulties and these were more easily resolved in the Canadian situation. Jenel Virden, herself the daughter of a British war bride, has written perceptively about some of these difficulties.² Other scholarly papers written by Canadians were found on the Internet that has proved a surprisingly rich source for research.³

The Internet sample from which the conclusions here were drawn is admittedly small. A request was posted on the email list from the web page for Canadian War Brides to women interested in completing a brief survey of their experiences. In Canada, associations of war brides were formed in the Maritimes and in the West. Letters were

¹ Virden, Jenel, *Goodbye Piccadilly, British War Brides in America*, Centennial Series, University of Illinois University Press, 1996, ch. 4

² *ibid.*

³ retrieved from world wide Web: <http://canadianwarbrides.com> November 26, 2002, a number of useful reminiscences, book references, an M.A. dissertation and other references will be referred to in the research paper.

sent to fourteen of these Canadian War Brides Associations.⁴ It is recognized that the Internet replies represent a selected group of women, in their seventies or eighties, for the most part computer literate. In one or two cases a sibling answered, either at the request of mother or as a reminiscence of a deceased parent. The post replies were often in the shaky script of old age. All of these women have maintained some contact with the associations who have organized social groups and reunions to celebrate their experience. From about the 1980's a number of yearly reunions were organized. For the fiftieth anniversary of the end of hostilities in Europe a number of special reunions were organized. Pier 21 in Halifax, the arrival site for most of the war brides has been renovated and made an historical site. It was the location of a special reunion to mark the year 2000 and a book has been written about the part played by that site in welcoming immigrants to Canada.⁵ A number of other women have written about their arrival and recollections of that time.

What is missing is the experience of the hundreds of war brides who have simply melted into the general population, forming friendships and raising children as part of the mosaic that Canada has become in the post war years. Nor has it been possible to learn much about those who found unhappiness and grief in their new life in Canada although two or three in the survey have offered a glimpse into the problems that some brides encountered in Canada and references can be found in some of the biographical notes published in books that have been compiled since about the 1980's.⁶

Meeting with other women who have also taken the big step of marrying a Canadian and traveling to a strange country can be an important aspect of adjusting to the new society. This survey has been based on women who have kept in touch with other war brides and formed associations to keep these friendships alive.

⁴ Jarratt's sample was about two and a half times the number in this survey. In addition she did many personal interviews. As noted above, approximately twenty-eight women were surveyed here: fifteen from the Internet, ten by letter and three were interviewed in person

⁵ Mitic, Trudy Duivenvoorden and J.P. Leblanc, *Pier 21 the Gateway that Changed Canada*, Lancelot Press, 1988, reprinted, Nimbus Publishing Ltd., Halifax, 1997

⁶ some references in Granfield are particularly poignant.

For that reason it seemed an anomaly that it was not possible to find an Association of War Brides in Ontario's largest city, Toronto. It was not possible to judge from e-mail addresses where the respondent was presently living. For that reason a question on the survey requested information regarding an association in Toronto. Only one reply out of twenty-seven mentioned attending a small group in the late forties which did not survive for very long. One can only suppose that the social resources in a large city made such an organization unnecessary and the war brides in that city are among those who found other social supports and simply blended into the general population.

A country at war is an unnatural setting in which to begin a relationship. Many of the men from the home country were already in the services and away from home, some might even have been killed, and the Canadian and American troops were far from their homes, many of them for the first time in their lives. Virden comments on the fact (that) "A uniform also provides uniformity that makes it more difficult to make a clear assessment of the man under the uniform."⁷ This was sometimes a problem when a bride was reunited with her husband in his home setting and saw him for the first time as a civilian. That this, in some instances, led to shock and disappointment will be explored. The overseas troops had an additional attraction: they had more money to spend than the local boys.⁸

The women were almost uniformly from 18 to 23 years old. Many were working as volunteers in one of the service agencies or canteens that were created to assist the troops on their leave time or convalescence from the front. Other girls worked in the war production industries or were attached to one of the women's military units or the land army, helping to replace the men who had been sent on active duty to the front. In some instances the girls were relatives or friends of a family whom the soldier visited while on leave.⁹ Dances, movies or pubs, even skating rinks,¹⁰ were popular places to meet and

⁷ Virden op. cit.

⁸ Wicks op cit

⁹ Internet sources previously cited

¹⁰ Betty, survey interview #9

forget for a time the stressful real world of wartime.¹¹ It was not to be supposed that either the soldier or the young woman was actively looking for a partner but romance blooms quickly in wartime and belonging to someone can help to keep the world at bay. Costello¹² notes the fear factor as an incentive to romance. When a service man was about to leave on a mission that might very well be his last the need for closeness was a powerful aphrodisiac.

Should the young couple decide on a quick marriage there were hurdles to jump:

First: Permission from the Canadian commanding officer: From December 1941 a soldier contemplating marriage was “required to declare his current marital status, his ‘probable ability to maintain a family after discharge ‘, and his consent to a \$10.00 monthly deduction from his pay until \$200.00 was accumulated, a not inconsiderable amount in the 1940’s. This would be used to pay for his family’s passage after discharge.”¹³

Second: Letters of reference were required from the girl.¹⁴ Then there was the question of setting a date. Obtaining leave and sudden postings abroad were some of the difficulties they faced. If the young woman was also in the service it was even more difficult and sometimes resulted in a wedding on very short notice.¹⁵ Although some couples were married early in the war, separations and short leave times rarely allowed the couple to get to know each other very deeply. In spite of this it is amazing that many marriages endured for fifty years or more unless injuries or ill health intervened.¹⁶

It is not surprising that by the time the brides were preparing to leave for Canada many women already had at least one child and even more were pregnant. The Canadian troops were stationed in England for three years before they saw active duty. One writer has

¹¹ Wicks op cit

¹² Costello, John, *Love Sex and War*,

¹³ Stacey, Charles Perry and Barbara M. Wilson, *The half Million, the Canadians in Britain, 1939-1946*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1987, p.136

Other sources mention the Canadian government having assumed the cost of this transportation. One wonders whether the army retained this amount or was it paid out on discharge?

¹⁴ Wicks, op.cit.

¹⁵ email survey op. cit.

¹⁶ canadianwarbrides.com op cit

quipped (that), "This was the only army in history where the birth rate was higher than the death rate."¹⁷ There has been some discussion about where the women were living while preparing to leave for their new home. In pre war times it was unlikely that a young woman would be living apart from her parents or other family if she were unmarried. With the demands of war great numbers of young women left home to engage in war work: in the women's services, in munitions factories, or on the land.¹⁸ During the blitz in London a parent might advise a teenage daughter to seek a school or work out of London to avoid the dangers. Teaching at a school away from home was one option.¹⁹ Married to an airman or a serviceman she might possibly have moved to a village close to where her husband was posted.²⁰ Marg recounts how she moved around England with her two children to be near their father. When he was sent to France she moved back to her hometown and it was there she received first, a telegram that her husband was missing in action and three months later a second telegram telling her that he was a prisoner of war. Marg sailed for Canada in early 1945. Her husband was liberated in May and joined her in Canada in August of that year.²¹ With the end of hostilities on the continent and the prospect of a call to embark most of the wives were living with a relative or a friend so as to be able to respond quickly to word of a sailing date. A discussion on the Warbrides list seemed to disagree with the evidence from this survey.

Debby Beavis writes (that) "I have never been aware of anyone living other than in a private address and generally (in) the town in which they were born. The only exceptions to this have been women who were themselves in the Services. The best evidence has been shared on this list by the women themselves, and who better than they to know the answer! My own research lends the documentary evidence that these women were still living at home with their parents, even when there were one or more children of the marriage too."²²

Although crossing the Atlantic no longer took six weeks or more as it had in the days of sail, storms and fog had not changed and many were desperately seasick for most of the voyage. Seasick and homesick; often the joy of being reunited with a husband was combined with apprehension for the new life that awaited them. Between August 1944 and January 1947 when the plan was terminated, 41,351 wives and 19,737 children were

¹⁷ Shapiro, Lionel S.B., *They Left the Back Door Open*, Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1944

¹⁸ *The Half Million*, p. 134,

¹⁹ #2, survey

²⁰ Granfield, Linda, *Brass Buttons and Silver Horseshoes, Stories From Canada's British War Brides*, McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 2002

²¹ #6 survey

transported to Canada at government cost under this program. War brides and their children constituted more than 54% of the total immigrants to Canada in this period.²³

The literature indicates that women who were about to travel to Canada were encouraged to join groups in England in order to learn more about the country they were entering and that after immigration similar groups, especially in the larger centers, aided in their assimilation to their new country. According to The Legionnaire, considerable attention was given to the war brides themselves.

Before they start for Canada, care is taken that they receive instruction and assistance in connection with their money and personal belongings. A splendid booklet, specially prepared by Canadian Legion Educational Services and describing life and customs in all the provinces of the Dominion, is presented to each bride. Motion pictures and talks on Canada have also been arranged by the Legion, and Lady Tweedsmuir, widow of the late Governor-General, has been particularly active in assisting the Legion officials in this respect.²⁴

The first Maple Leaf Club was established for the wives of soldiers of the 3rd Field Regiment, RCA in September 1941 in West Wickham, Kent by Honourary Captain J.I. McKinney. Princess Alice Clubs, named after the royal wife of the Governor General of Canada, the Earl of Athlone, followed in Chichester and Brighton in 1943.²⁵

Sadly, according to one chaplain, the response to these clubs was slight: "the majority of the young wives... have no interest in Canada,"²⁶ he wrote. That may have been so, especially at the beginning, when the prospect of leaving England must have seemed remote. From the replies received on the survey this was often the case. If the girls were distant from London in many cases they had nothing but brochures or they paid little attention to the information offered. Most reported that they were quite unprepared for the vast distances in Canada and the primitive conditions many found.

²²Beavis, [WARBRIDES -L@rootsweb.com](mailto:WARBRIDES-L@rootsweb.com) Sept.8, 2003

²³ www.warbrides.com/statistics

²⁴ *The Legionnaire*, January 1945, p. 39. Quoted in Jarratt, ch.2

²⁵ *The Half Million*, op. cit. p. 140.

²⁶ *Granfield* op. cit

Films about the new country were sometimes screened during the voyage but mothers preoccupied with babies or seasick themselves often did not attend. As to advice in Canada, one correspondent reported that a Red Cross volunteer in Sudbury recommended that she not join a war bride's group because assimilation would be easier if she made friends within her new community. This woman managed to blend a combination of both for a very successful life in her new home.²⁷ A very young bride replied that she had been reluctant to come to Canada so she had declined to attend any group. Sadly, this young woman arrived to find an abusive alcoholic husband and deplorable housing conditions. She did however remain in the marriage until her husband's death in 1985.²⁸ This determination to make the best of things appears to be an outstanding characteristic of the women who became Canadians with their marriage to a Canadian serviceman. During one crossing on board the Queen Mary with 1,837 brides and children on board, Prime Minister MacKenzie King, returning from a conference in London, addressed the brides. Kay (Ruddick) still has a copy of the original press release produced on the ship by its public relations office, in which the Prime Minister's speech was described as follows:

Mr. King, in a short speech of welcome congratulated the brides who won the hearts of Canadian soldiers, the men on their choice of brides, and Canada on the splendid addition being made to its citizenship.²⁹

Even before the end of hostilities in Europe, between 1942 and 1944 some women actually embarked for Canada in ships in convoy under the auspices of the Immigration Branch of the Canadian Department of Mines and Resources.³⁰ In those years it was often necessary to sail either by a southerly route near the Azores or north almost to Greenland to avoid the threat of U boats. Some wives traveled to Canada before the discharge of their husband but the greater number came after 1945 when the European phase of the war had concluded and troops were also being returned to Canada.³¹ The Department of National Defense had by then taken over the task of arranging transport

²⁷ #15 Survey

²⁸ #11 Survey

²⁹ Jarratt, *op.cit.* ch.2 "Large Contingent of Brides Arrive" Press Release from PRO aboard HMS Queen Mary, August 31, 1946. See Kay Ruddick, "Diary 1946".

³⁰ Ibid. Jarratt, *the War Brides of New Brunswick*, p.9

³¹ www.canadianwarbrides.com op cit

for this great emigration program. Preceding their husband's arrival could present special problems. Concerned for her safety in England, Sammy's father had made all the arrangements for his wife to travel to Canada and she was not aware that she could bring money or belongings other than her suitcase. The loss of family portraits and mementos that were given away or sold grieved her and made her unwelcome reception in her husband's home even more difficult. Lynn's mother also preceded her husband and also came to an unhappy home situation. When she joined a War Brides Club in Montreal she soon met another bride in a similar situation and they agreed to rent a small cottage together while they waited for their 'boys' to come home.³²

In most cases the women were not allowed to travel with their husbands but followed several weeks or even months after the men had been demobilized.³³

The first war bride immigrants came in ships that had been refitted for troop movements but it soon became apparent that the requirements of caring for many infants and children made it necessary to provide special assistance on the journey. In August 1944 the Canadian Wives Bureau was organized as a branch of the Canadian Military Headquarters and arrangements began to be organized with military precision.³⁴

Volunteers from the Canadian Red Cross Society were enlisted to assist the women as they assembled at the shipping ports and ninety-four women from the Canadian Red Cross Corps were assigned to accompany the brides and their children and provide help in coping with travel problems on board ship as well as preparing the dining rooms, serving meals, and entertaining the passengers.³⁵

The young Red Cross volunteers had given up study or work to join the corps, completing a rigorous program of training and two hundred hours of volunteer hospital work to qualify for posting. They were truly volunteers, receiving only a token amount of

³² #3 and #7 survey

³³ Even if they were on the same ship they were in separate quarters and not supposed to fraternize with the men.

³⁴ Jarrett, op cit.

³⁵ Day, Frances Martin, Pyllis Spence, & Barbara Ladoucer, eds. *Women Overseas, Memoirs of the Canadian Red Cross Corps*, Ronsdale Press, Vancouver B.C. 1998

remuneration to cover out of pocket expenses when they were stationed away from home.³⁶ In addition to their work with the young women on their journey to Canada, Red Cross volunteers served in many areas directly associated with the troops in Britain and in areas of open hostilities.³⁷

Leah Halsall of Ottawa was an Escort Officer (2nd Lieut.) in the Nursing Auxiliary of the Canadian Red Cross Corps. Leah was working at the Pension Commission in Ottawa when her call came to go overseas with the Corps.³⁸ She took a six-month leave of absence and, over the course of her tenure with the war brides, she crossed the Atlantic 10 times. In the publication Memoirs of the Vancouver Island Branch Overseas Club, Leah recalls the work she and other Escort Officers carried out on the Queen Mary:

We numbered fourteen Escort Officers on the Queen Mary. Ten of us were allocated to take care of the brides and children in their cabins. Each of us was responsible for over 200 persons and this kept us pretty busy. If we found anything that was beyond our competence we had the patient report to "sick parade" and the Canadian Medical Corps took over. Then two Escort Officers were in charge of the day nursery, and the remaining girls took care of the distribution of knitted clothing and layettes donated by Canadians through the Canadian Red Cross Society.³⁹

When they reached Pier 21 in Halifax military personnel and other Red Cross Volunteers were there to assist the young women and accompany them on their journey across Canada.⁴⁰

The brides who entered the United States faced a more complex situation. Because they were not American citizens legislation was necessary to facilitate their entry into the country. Records show that under the provisions of the War Brides Act of 1945 and the

³⁶ Women Overseas, p.71, One pound per month plus room and board.

When she left the service Lee Goodman Golding got the princely sum of \$25.00 discharge pay which she used to purchase a bicycle. P.68

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁷ Jarret, op. cit. Interview with Leah Halsall, Escort Officer, Victoria, British Columbia, April 12, 1995.

³⁹ Ibid. Memoirs of the Vancouver Island Branch Overseas Club, p. 221.

⁴⁰ Op. cit Women Overseas

Alien Fiancees and Fiancés Act of 1946 approximately 115,000 entered the country but this figure includes all persons, women, men, and children who entered under the act and also includes many who managed to obtain commercial passages.⁴¹ Official records do not agree with figures presented by the American Red Cross whose estimate was only between 40,000 and 60,000. A survey in 1989 indicated many more were married after they reached the United States.^{42 43}

It would appear that, from the beginning, conditions for marriage and subsequent emigration from Britain were very different in the two armies. The enlisted men in the American service were actively discouraged from marrying: the rationale was that they were there to do a job for the army and not to fraternize with the women. As will be seen, this attitude was later somewhat relaxed although it appears that efforts to support the British wives were not a priority until much later. When it became apparent that there were indeed many marriages, some efforts were made to orient the young women to the country and lifestyle they should expect in their new country. Nevertheless many still came expecting the glamorous picture they had seen in American movies. Apart from unreasonable expectations many of the young women were unprepared for the attention paid to their 'foreignness', their unfamiliar vocabulary, dialect and even their dress, drab from years of rationing.⁴⁴

Public resentment was another hurdle for the brides, both against the women who had 'stolen our young men' but against them for wanting transportation before all of the servicemen had been returned to America. Shipping space to New York was very limited and public opinion seemed to favour repatriation over consideration for re-uniting the servicemen with their brides, citing the length of time all American soldiers had been separated from their American families. By late mid-June 1945 the American Red Cross had more than 1,670 applications for accommodation and the brides were informed that it

⁴¹ Goodbye Picadilly, op.cit.

⁴² *ibid.* There were actually some men who came under this program, married to women in the services.

⁴³ #11 survey. One or two respondents to the Canadian survey did not accept the designation of war bride for British women who for one reason or another traveled to Canada and were married in their fiancé's community upon arrival

⁴⁴ *op. cit.* Virden

might be ten to twelve months before transportation might be available.⁴⁵ Lack of co-operation between the British and American governments aggravated the situation and by October demonstrations had begun to protest the delays. Money problems and a concern for their unborn children were part of their concern. In contrast to the Canadian situation where a British subject was automatically welcomed on Canadian soil, a child born after the arrival of the British mother on American soil would automatically become a U.S. citizen but, should the child arrive before transportation was available, application for immigration status would be necessary for the child as well as the mother.

At a protest rally in central London one newspaper estimated that several thousand attended.⁴⁶ Unfortunately little was achieved and appeared only to harden the official attitude toward wartime marriages. It was not until the legislations in 1945 and 1946 were passed that firm efforts were made to facilitate the movement of the war brides and their families.

Arrival in America did not end their troubles for some of the women. Whether from the pressure of public opinion or simply the result of too hasty marriages some women found that the husband they expected to be waiting for them had changed his mind and might even have begun divorce proceedings before their arrival. Others found that the civilian who met them was very different from the happy G.I. of wartime Britain. Unlike the Canadian plan, the American government made no provision for situations like this and a woman who wished, or was compelled, to return to Britain had to do so on her own. Dealing with foreign courts to resolve their problem was complicated and costly but facing family and friends should they return could be equally daunting.⁴⁷

An additional problem that was less likely to occur among the brides traveling to Canada was that of a mixed marriage. Some Canadian aboriginal servicemen married British girls but there were coloured regiments in the American army and they would have seemed

⁴⁵ Reynolds, David, *Rich Relations, the American Occupation of Britain, 1942-1945*, ch. 23, Virden op. cit. ch.4

⁴⁶ *ibid.* p.58

⁴⁷ *ibid.* p.80,

exotic to young women unaware of the strong discrimination they, and their mixed blood children would face when they reached America.⁴⁸

The plight of the young women was recognized even in Canada. An article by J. V. MacAree in the *Globe and Mail* published in Toronto in February, 1946 compared the situation of war brides in America with the Canadian experience. Some of the bad feelings stemmed from the misperception of the British brides as coming from the poorest homes in Britain, 'Piccadilly commandos or waifs from the slums', while in actual fact most of them came from the well respected working or farming class. Only about 2% might be said to fit the disparaging description, approximately the same number as the poor quality of the servicemen occasionally found among the military ranks. Just as in the Canadian experience most would adapt and blend successfully into the American society. The thought that some might have married to escape the hardships of wartime Britain for the luxury of American life was countered by the reaction of some women to overheated homes, and the threat of strikes and unrest in their new country. The women were attracted to the qualities of gallantry and tenderness shown by the American GI's which contrasted with the more casual attitudes of British men. For their part the men found the girls much less demanding of material things. The fact that both had experienced the stress of war in Britain provided a common bond for many marriages.⁴⁹

America had many more cities than Canada but, like pre-war Canada, towns and cities were small and there were still many frontier-like areas. In addition, perhaps from nostalgia or the desire to make a good impression, troops from both countries may have been inclined to exaggerate the good qualities of their distant home. The vast distances of forest, rocks and prairie as they traveled across the country were a surprise to many. In rural areas the lack of simple things like electricity and indoor plumbing that were taken for granted in most parts of England was a surprise and for some a trial.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Virden, *op.cit.*

⁴⁹ *Globe and Mail*, February 20, 1946, p.6

Public opinion played a significant part in the welcome that war brides received in America. From the survey of Canadian brides it was the cool reception that many encountered from the new family and especially their new mother in law added to their feelings of separation. This was not always the case but it appears to have been an unhappy experience for a significant number of women and added to the homesick feelings all immigrants experience and that some would continue to feel from time to time in spite of the fact that most came to love Canada.

Although the British war brides were apparently the same as Canadian citizens: they spoke the same language, their skin was the same colour, in actual fact their culture was significantly different and they were outsiders. One woman reported that her mother in law felt that men should not marry outside of their community and others have hinted as much⁵¹. Some insight into this prejudice can be found in an article by a British war bride in an issue of Macleans magazine in January 1944. She suggested that, just as in America, some of the feelings she encountered were resentment that British girls had taken the cream of Canadian men, that they did not conform to Canadian standards for behavior and, perhaps most telling of all, there was a distrust that lingered from the previous world war when some Canadian soldiers married poor types of women who did not fit into the conservative Canadian society. The author cited the more rigid control of service marriages during the current (WW2) conflict as an answer to that concern.⁵²

A columnist in the Globe and Mail responded to this article and added more insight into the prejudice that the British women might encounter.⁵³ The author noted that many Canadians in Toronto were of British origin and were still influenced by the idea of a class system that dictated one's station in life or social status. The writer felt that this would be a strong indicator of the war bride's ability to assimilate easily into Canadian society. Just as was the case in the United States, the writer acknowledged the feeling that many Canadian women would be deprived of a chance to marry because the British

⁵⁰ Rich Relations, p.423

⁵¹ #13 survey

⁵² MacLeans, , *A British War Bride Speaks Out*, Toronto Ontario, January 15, 1944

⁵³ Globe and Mail, *Welcome the British War Brides*, Tuesday March 21, 1944

women had stolen their prospective partner but he blamed the Canadian mothers for treating their daughters like little princesses. The bright side, in his opinion, was that the British position in Canada was strengthened by this addition of British blood by helping to keep Ontario a British province. Multiculturalism was many decades in the future but there is no doubt that this perception of difference is something that any immigrant must deal with as they are becoming accepted into the new society.

Some good advice to help the young immigrants was offered in a booklet published by the Department of National Defense and presented to each bride on her arrival. One of the paragraphs read:

Canadians are very democratic and take a dim view of people who try to impress them. They are, generally speaking, energetic and fun-loving. They'll join you happily in a good natured "grouse" but it might be just as well to remember that they don't like criticism based solely on the fact that some customs may be different from those of other counties.⁵⁴

One young bride forgot this admonition one evening when she and her husband had some of his friends visiting. Probably feeling lonely and strange in the company she suddenly 'let fly' with all of her frustrations until she suddenly broke down in tears. While her husband comforted her and they retired to the bedroom the guests quietly departed. Next morning they found coats and hats that had been forgotten and the couple set out to return them with an apology to each couple. From that time she found herself accepted in the group and made many fast friends.⁵⁵

To add to their difficulties some of the brides found that their husband came from a very different ethnic culture and they could not even speak the language of the home.

In the Ontario samples this was most often likely to be French and their reception appears to have varied depending on whether the new family lived in an urban or rural setting. One British bride found herself at a bush camp outside of Sudbury in a family that spoke only French. To add to her troubles her husband had become a violent

⁵⁴ op cit. Pier 21, p.83

alcoholic, a consequence perhaps of his army years. By contrast another young woman lived in town with her bi-lingual speaking in-laws and she felt that the time she spent there helped her to become adjusted to Canadian ways.⁵⁶

The Canadian west was settled by many European immigrants in the early part of the 20th century and sent a great number of their men to serve in the Canadian forces. One correspondent reported that some 8000 men married and brought brides back to Saskatchewan, one sixth of the total number of brides who came to Canada to a province with a population far less than one sixth of the total Canadian population at that time.⁵⁷ The Canadian born sons of these immigrants were English speaking but the language of the home was that of the mother country and this was often a barrier to communication and subsequent acceptance of the young bride.⁵⁸ Edna could not communicate with her husband's mother because she spoke only Ukrainian. She described her new home as "a step back in time", a primitive home with no doors on the bedrooms, just curtains and of course the usual outdoor privy. They lived in very isolated area where they were snowbound for two months every winter. S. did not have to share a home with the older family but her husband also came from a Ukrainian household and she could not communicate with her new mother-in-law. Their home was not so isolated but among the surprises in the new country was the sight of a cougar in their backyard and a 5.4 earthquake shortly after she arrived. Both women successfully adapted to their new life in the country instead of the town life they had known and are happy to have become Canadians.⁵⁹

Childhood on a farm and the role model of a parent who had homesteaded could also lead to some unrealistic expectations for the young husband. Several women mentioned their husband's desire to farm and not all these dreams were successfully realized. After years of isolation and privation some families had to accept defeat and move to towns or cities

⁵⁵ Broadfoot, Barry, *The Immigrant Years, from Europe and Britain to Canada, 1945-1967*, Douglas and McIntyre Ltd. Vancouver, 1986, ch.2

⁵⁶ surveys # 4 and 22

⁵⁷ #17 survey

⁵⁸ survey #17,21,22

⁵⁹ survey #'s 21 and 19

where other work was available⁶⁰. G's husband was one of those disappointed men. His parents had been immigrants to a farm and that was what he was looking forward to. They understood what coming to a strange country can feel like and they made G's adjustment easy but even after giving up the idea of farming and moving to a small town it was some time before her husband was able to find suitable work and settle down. A War Bride Association in town and the Legion for her husband helped both of them to find friends who empathized with their life experiences.⁶¹

Two successful stories both involve a strong wife who encouraged her partner to let her also pursue a dream. With so many of the men in the army in wartime England teachers were in short supply thus Mary, instead of being called up at 18, was able to stay in school until she received her teaching certificate. She was teaching at a girl's school when she met her future husband. After their marriage Mary continued teaching at her school until she completed the school year and then returned to her father's home to await her summons to board ship. Upon reaching Canada she joined her husband where he was working on a farm in Saskatchewan. Before her husband left England they had discussed their options and agreed that his best plan would be to go to the University of Alberta and realize his pre-war dream to qualify as a teacher. Fortunately the veteran's assistance with tuition would now make this possible. However, with a Mormon background, upon returning home her young husband became convinced that the simple life on a farm offered a more ideal setting in which to raise a family. He and other young Mormons had purchased cheap unbroken land, which they proposed to break and plant to achieve this dream. But farming in the Canadian west is a harsh taskmaster and it was almost impossible to support a family on a small acreage.

The compromise Mary and her husband reached was to try to combine teaching with part time farming. With her husband in school, even with the government grant, money was very tight. After trying several other options to solve their money problems, with her qualifications from England, Mary successfully applied for a teaching position in an

⁶⁰ survey #'s 2, 9, 22, 25

⁶¹ #9 survey

Alberta school. The happy outcome of this story is that, after a number of moves, both husband and wife found work together in various schools and finally at a school where he was the principal and she was a teacher. Sadly, the dream of farming was lost in the past. Mary continued to teach High School for 28 years and since retiring she has continued to upgrade her university qualifications for her own satisfaction.⁶²

Another happy story was that of a young French war bride. After the armistice in Europe her future husband had searched out relatives of his parents who had emigrated from France to homestead in the west in 1909. A comely second cousin caught his eye and they were married before he was posted back to Canada. Homesteading was also his ambition and they endured the required ten years to obtain title to the land, often in very difficult conditions. Once this had been accomplished his young bride went to the University of Alberta and qualified for her teacher's certificate. Since teachers were scarce in the west in those years she was able to teach in their own farm community until her husband sold the farm twenty-one years later. When he found work in Edmonton she obtained her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Edmonton and taught French in the Edmonton High School until her husband retired⁶³ By contrast, another correspondent reports that, unhappy with the flat prairie and the wind, she "bitched for twenty years. The only reason it was not twenty one years was because the first year she was in shock!"⁶⁴ The stamina of these strong purposeful young women helped them to adapt to the harsh conditions of prairie life but fortunately none of them had to cope with the problem of hostility from their new family.

Apart from the rejection some women experienced, a part of their unhappiness can be attributed to the difficulties related to their husband's readjustment to civilian life. Inevitably some veterans returned wounded mentally or physically and were ill equipped to play a healthy part in family life. A number of men had joined the services as very young fellows just out of school and thus had no experience with the responsibilities of

⁶² survey #2, unpublished biography

⁶³ #25 survey

⁶⁴ #17, survey, This correspondent reports that after that 21 years they moved from the prairie to a small town on the B.C. coast where she felt closer to her beloved English scenes.

heading a family. Some marriages floundered on these rocks and the women returned to their home country.⁶⁵

In the present time much has been learned about the effects of post traumatic stress but immediately following World War II demobilized soldiers were simply expected to return to civilian life and get on with living. Unfortunately the traumas of battle or the experience in prisoner of war camps often led to emotional or physical problems that complicated the marriage in the post war years. One American bride commented that when her husband met her at the railway station he was a changed man. “He showed absolutely no emotion. In fact he wouldn’t even look at me”.⁶⁶

Adjustment to civilian life might appear at first to be fairly successful. A notorious story in the post war Toronto was that of Edwin Alonzo Boyd. His British wife and their three children arrived in the city in December 1944 and he joined them a few months later. Like some fortunate veterans they were able to settle in a wartime house and Boyd found work as a streetcar driver for the Toronto Transit Commission. Not all of his subsequent problems can be attributed to his wartime experiences as a commando instructor and military provost while he was overseas. Boyd had a troubled childhood and had drifted from place to place prior to joining the army. He had done well in the army but Boyd had problems with authority and did not handle setbacks very well. His wife Doreen was a hard worker and he and his wife cooperated with household chores and childcare to allow both of them to work several jobs on the side while he waited for enough seniority to give him a settled route instead of the odd hours assignments that new recruits had. Driving a streetcar in Toronto did not satisfy him for very long. He claimed that it was his wife nagging him about a promotion but he soon quit the Transit commission for more challenging jobs. As he tried less and less successful enterprises his wife reported that he seemed to be uptight and worried. Eventually, unknown to his family, he turned to a

⁶⁵ Jarratt, ch.4

⁶⁶ Virden, op. cit.

more exciting life of crime. Boyd was eventually convicted of a series of spectacular bank robberies and was implicated in a double murder in one of Toronto's parks.⁶⁷

Like two of the respondents, now widowed, some women made the best of the situation but their quality of life was much improved following the death of their husband.⁶⁸

Some were so shocked at the conditions that greeted them that they turned around and fled back to England. Red Cross escort Eleanor Culver encountered a trainload of these disenchanted women in the Montreal area as she escorted her trainload of hopeful and apprehensive women across the country.⁶⁹

“[Approximately] 10% of Canadian War Brides returned to Britain and Europe ...[but] it is impossible to know the [exact] number because after 1948, these women were no longer classified as ‘War Brides’ ... If they left this country they did so at their own expense ... and they were not categorized as anything other than females in the outward migration statistics.”⁷⁰

In other cases, after a time of trying to cope with a bad situation, the wife left the home and raised the children on her own. In the depressed post war employment situation the available work, especially for a woman, was often menial but some had special skills that could be employed. Betty Oliphant opened a ballet studio to support her family and eventually became the inspiration and head of the National Ballet School⁷¹. Where a husband was unable to find work it was often the wife who found it necessary to go out to work. Finding paid or volunteer work was sometimes a way of coping with an unhappy situation although in post war Canada this was often frowned upon.⁷²

Sociologists of the period maintained that women in the workplace could be putting the well being of their families in jeopardy or their husband's masculinity might be

⁶⁷ Brian Valee, *Edwin Allzo Boyd, the Story of the Notorious Boyd Gang*, Doubleday Canada Ltd., Toronto, 1997

Toronto Star, Nov. 20, 2002

⁶⁸ 3 of 24 replies reported serious problems

⁶⁹ op.cit. *Women Overseas* p. 276. The Canadian government guaranteed their passage back to Britain within a reasonable time of coming to Canada if that was their decision.

⁷⁰ ibid. Canadian Wives Bureaus files, National Archives of Canada

⁷¹ *The Half Million*, op. cit. p.141

⁷² #13, survey

questioned as well as his ability to support the family.⁷³ Some of the negative attitudes toward women working outside of the home would have been in reaction to the poor employment opportunities for servicemen returning to civilian life. Newspaper accounts of the period highlight the dilemma between a priority for veterans in work allocations and putting a stay-at-home (a man who had not been in the services) out of a job to honour that priority.⁷⁴ Farming and the resource industries still provided work but in the urban centres work was often hard to find and many businesses had a rule against employing married women.

K. recounts how she tried to assuage her feelings of boredom and homesickness by finding an office position with the Kiwanis Festival. This move disturbed her husband because, it went against the policy of his company. “Wives were expected to remain at home and have tea parties to help in obtaining new business for the Bank.”⁷⁵ Fortunately, she says, she joined the Red Cross, an acceptable activity for wives, and the wives of her husband’s business associates were kind to her. Later her husband decided to inform his bank that she was a volunteer for the Festival. This gave her an opportunity to meet other women and feel she was contributing to her community.

It appears from the sample that community involvement was an important factor in a happy integration into Canadian life. While their children were small most mothers were busy enough but there are many stories of volunteer work that enlarged their world. Cubs and Girl Guides, the Red Cross, the Elizabeth Fry Society, and Church associations interested some women. Volunteering at the local nursing home, assisting a handicapped group or working in the local Salvation Army thrift store were other activities that helped their community and their own integration. Being aware of the needs of the community is a good yardstick of assimilation and working to establish a local library a good example.

This last activity was the achievement of the only American war bride who responded to the Internet request. Her husband was with the USAAF bomber squadron and she was

⁷³ Betty Friedan and Veronica Strong-Boag quoted in Jarrett, *ibid*

⁷⁴ *Globe and Mail*, Tuesday February 5, 1946

working with the British Land Army in Northamptonshire. Unlike the difficulties that many American brides experienced she joined her husband in 1946 on the campus of the state university in Virginia while he earned his degree in Biology. Later they moved to the acreage that had been in his family since 1790. Here he farmed and taught in the local high schools. Along with the children's school activities, 4-H, working with horses, volunteering for the Red Cross, the American Cancer Society and local Health and Welfare groups she found the time to get that library going and, with the children off to college, work part time in the library; and go to college in the evenings to earn a BA and an M.Ed. to teach in the local school system: a full and satisfying post war life and a happy contrast to some of the unhappy stories.⁷⁶

Betty Oliphant was not the only dancer who brought her skills to Canada. Micki was a dancer in the one of the London theatres that was temporarily closed by the blitz. She had joined the WAF when she met her husband in London. Upon arrival in Canada on the Aquitania in September of 1946 and she joined her husband in northwestern Ontario where he and his former RAF navigator had purchased a small resort. Micki loved being a part of the hotel management but when a destructive 'twister' destroyed some of the hotel buildings they were forced to sell the only building left standing to an American for a personal retreat and to look for work elsewhere. Fortunately it was a hotel in Winnipeg that offered the opportunity and, with their accommodation within the hotel, the lack of things to do, that prompted Micki to once more turn to her first love, dancing. She began to organize a dance school and in a very short time had 93 pupils. Teaching is very different from just being a dancer but her personality made her very successful at teaching. It was a fortunate move. About this time the Royal Winnipeg Ballet was becoming well known and this no doubt helped to popularize dance for young people. They did not remain in Winnipeg, other hotels beckoned. Finally they moved to Weston, a small town on the western outskirts of Toronto where she conducted another dance school for seventeen years, holding her dance recitals in the church hall of her historic

⁷⁵ #13 survey

⁷⁶ #26 survey

Anglican Church. A love of people and a love of dance combined to develop her great love for her new country.⁷⁷

An institution that was founded by Canadian veterans of the First World War also played a part in the in the integration of the young women. A conference of fifteen local veteran's organizations met in Winnipeg in 1925 to form what was then to be called The Canadian Legion of the British Empire Service League⁷⁸ with the stated purpose of ensuring that proper attention should be paid to the welfare of veterans and of all their dependants. In the ensuing years the organization has been successful in bring into being a number of benefits that were not available to veterans of earlier wars. Membership in the local branch gave access to their pubs and reading rooms and social events in the various branches often led to friendships and support for their British wives.

Joining the Legion sometimes represented a tradition begun by a father following his service in the First World War.⁷⁹ Sadly, it sometimes happened that a husband would spend too much time in socializing or committee work at the Legion, leaving at home a lonely wife with small children. Several accounts mention a wife going to the legion hall to beg her husband to return home. For a veteran who was finding it difficult to adjust to the responsibilities of civilian life the Legion hall offered a place to meet buddies who had known similar experiences and perhaps were more familiar to him than the British wife he had known such a short time overseas.

Being lonely and homesick for the old home is normal for an immigrant. One of the questions asked in the survey was the length of time that elapsed before a correspondent returned to Britain for a visit. The answers varied from two or three years to as much as

⁷⁷ Granfield,op. cit. p.83 and survey #16, also telephone interview April 24, 2003

⁷⁸ The B.E.S.L. was dropped in 1959 and in 1960 their act of incorporation was changed to make the official name "The Royal Canadian Legion" the word Royal was conferred by her Majesty in recognition of the Legion's thirty-five years of service.

⁷⁹ #11 survey,

twenty-nine years. The amount of distress from homesickness often had some relationship to the need for this expensive return. The loss or illness of a parent or grandparent in the home country would emphasize the great distance from their loved ones to this strange new country. Sometimes family finances prevented a trip home but, if the need was strong enough, the money could often be found.

One woman called these trips back home the \$1000.00 cure, often a trip back to war ravaged England was enough to put conditions in Canada into perspective.⁸⁰ If problems in the family be too great, the trip home might turn out to be a one-way trip.⁸¹

Where there was a happy relationship with the family and the new community a trip to the home country would often be postponed until the children were grown and away from home. With this freedom regular visits often became common.

Lea reported that she went out to work to finance trips home every two years. "If you want something badly enough you do something about it." This determination has resulted in a well educated and successful family. Although Lea reported feeling homesick for fifty years she says she is no longer homesick. She did not feel accepted in her new family but this woman was fortunate to come to an area where she was one of 150 other brides settled nearby. The association with such a large group of similar immigrants has been important in assisting their integration into the community⁸² The area was the site of a large settlement of Irish immigrants a generation before and a culture clash between the new British arrivals and the settled Irish community group would not be surprising. Many of the servicemen from the area would not have made an alliance with a British woman while stationed in England so the number of marriages must surely be an indication of the great number of men who enlisted from this area.

After experiencing a great depression prior to the declaration of war many men enlisted to secure an income. In the transition from wartime production to domestic products there

⁸⁰ op cit Broadfoot, ch.2

⁸¹ #5 survey

⁸² #14 survey

was still a significant shortage of work particularly in urban areas as the servicemen arrived home in great numbers and began looking for work. Housing construction could have done much to alleviate the critical housing situation and provide work for a number of men but there was a shortage of building materials. Manufacturers were reluctant to enlarge their capacity for building materials for what they perceived as a short-term demand.⁸³

The debate had gone on for some years. As early as 1944 newspaper editorials were blaming the federal government for their reluctance to expedite housing for the returning veterans. Regular frame construction was judged to take too long to build and prefabricated homes, quickly assembled, were the choice of the Veterans Bureau and the Dominion government was urged to make this their first charge. In Toronto a dispute over an offer of land for these temporary homes was blamed for some of the delay.⁸⁴ This survey revealed many unhappy situations where the new family was forced to share limited quarters with the in-laws or manage in very small rooms until housing became available. At one point in Toronto there were 4500 on a waiting list for affordable housing and eviction lists were growing. Some war brides told Frank Dearlove, Toronto's chief housing inspector that, "They wished they had never come."⁸⁵ The housing problem not only affected returning veterans with their British wives. Some city residents who were also coping with the housing shortage resented preference being given to these new immigrants from Britain. By 1947 the shortage was still acute. In Montreal, four families were evicted from a former barracks where they had been given temporary accommodation. Two of these families contained a British war bride.⁸⁶

This examination of the experience of the young women who married servicemen in wartime Britain has shown that emigrating to North America from English speaking Britain presented the same problems that any immigrant must deal with when settling in a new society. While it may not have been quite so difficult to learn the vocabulary of

⁸³ Globe and mail, Wednesday February 20, 1946, p.6

⁸⁴ Globe and Mail, August 15, 1944, p.4 Some of these 'temporary homes' still exist fifty years later. Some have been transformed into substantial residences with additions and fancy siding.

⁸⁵ Ibid, Tuesday Feb. 5, 1946

⁸⁶ Globe, op. cit. July 16, 1947, p.7.

Canadian or American English as it might be for an immigrant from one of the European countries, never-the-less there were differences that set them apart as different. The unnatural conditions of an ongoing war changed both the men who fought in it and the women who married them and they sometimes had to cope with the grim consequences.

All immigrants have to cope with finding housing and work. While middle class standards discouraged the war brides from working outside the home many were prepared to do even menial work to make it easier for the new family to settle quickly into more comfortable conditions in their new life. They had one advantage over European immigrants who tended to cluster in communities and work situations where there was a common language. The young war brides could make themselves understood anywhere even though they spoke a different version of English. Some landlords posed unreasonable restrictions against children as a possible excuse for not renting to a British wife but on the whole it was simply the lack of available space that prevented veterans from finding homes of their own.

There had been little home building during the war and the addition of 40,000 new families over a period of just four years put a considerable strain on the housing supply. In consequence most of them spent some time living in the home where the husband had lived as a boy. It is difficult for two women to share a home, one must be paramount and no doubt this had some bearing on the reception many of these spirited, independent young women encountered when they arrived in Canada. As the men settled into their old jobs or found new ones and accommodation in small apartments or new housing became available they were able to move out and begin developing their own home life.

As we have seen the wives of American servicemen faced many of the same problems of assimilation but the additional problem of public policy made their task more difficult. The initial attitude of the American military establishment toward GI marriages and the difficulties they faced in getting transportation to America to join their new husbands

See also reference #10 survey where a bride encountered lice and bedbugs in the Montreal home of her brother-in-law where she had been expected to live and was offered barracks accommodation.

were aspects of a more formal policy against opening the country to immigration. It was not until 1947 that new immigration legislation was initiated that would increase the number of immigrants allowed to enter that country each year. The fragmented state legal court system was another difficulty that the British women had to deal with if their erstwhile husband had changed his mind.

In spite of the efforts of numerous groups assisting them, in both countries most women had no clear conception of the country they were entering. Indeed, some of those who traveled to America found it hard to resist their unrealistic picture of the country they had formed from watching Hollywood movies. Not every G.I. had talked of a 'spread' for a few acres of farmland in the west or a Canadian talk about his ranch outside of Truro to a his new bride but young men cannot be blamed for boasting when they were thousands of miles from home.

Their experience coping under wartime conditions had made the British war brides resilient, independent and adventurous. And in love. Love can help one cope with almost anything. While they were unprepared for the prejudice of the conservative settled communities in postwar Quebec and Ontario, neither were they prepared for the primitive conditions of the sparsely settled west but even these were accepted and eventually improved. That they might encounter language barriers was a complete surprise. That some women faced disappointments cannot be denied. But for the greatest number, cope they did and with the help of their husband added their contribution to the building of Canada.

Bibliography

- Barbara B. Barrett C.M., Eileen Dicks, and Isobel Brown, Hilda Chaulk Murray,
Helen Fogwill Porter, eds., *We Came From Over the Sea ,British War Brides in
Newfoundland*, British War Brides Association of Newfoundland and Labrador,
1996
- Broadfoot, Barry, *The Immigrant Years, from Europe and Britain to Canada,1945-1946*,
Douglas and McIntyre Ltd. Vancouver BC, 1986
- Day, Frances Martin, Phyllis Spence, & Barbara Ladouceur, eds. *Women Overseas,
Memoirs of the Canadian Red Cross Corps* ,Ronsdale Press, Vancouver B.C.
1998
- Granfield, Linda, with the co-operation of Pier 21 Society, *Brass Buttons and Silver
Horsehoes, Stories from Canada's British War Brides*, McClelland and Stewart
Ltd., Toronto, 2002
- Virden, Jenel, *Goodbye Piccadilly, British War Brides in America*, University of
Illinois, 1996
- Vallee, Brian, *Edwin Alonzo Boyd, the Story of the Notorious Boyd Gang*, Doubleday
Canada Ltd., Toronto, 1997
- Wicks, Ben, *Promise You'll Take Care of My Daughter*, Stoddard Publishing Company,
Toronto, 1992

Nell's War, Remembering the Blitz, Stoddard Publishing Company, Toronto, 1990

Internet sources:

<http://www.canadianwarbrides.com>

Jarratt, Melynda, BA, MA. *The War Brides of New Brunswick*, [Masters thesis] 1995

Reynolds, Theresa, *The War Brides of World War II*, 2001

WARBRIDES-L@rootsweb.com war brides listserv

Publications:

Globe and Mail archives, Yorku E-resources

MacLeans, *A British War Bride Speaks Out*, January 15, 1944, Toronto, Ontario,
p. 10, 42-44

The Toronto Star, Toronto, Ontario, Nov. 20, 2002

Personal interviews:

Betty Graham, Pickering Ontario

Joan Banner, Toronto, Ontario

Jack Belcher, Toronto, Ontario, telephone

Micki More, Vancouver B.C., telephone

Appendix 1

List of correspondents

Appendix 2

e-mail Responses to questionnaire