The evacuation of British children to North America in World War II.

By Michael Henderson

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Sixty years ago my brother and I returned to Britain after five years in the United States where we lived with an American family unknown to us at the start of World War II. Along with some three thousand others[1] we were beneficiaries of generous offers to provide homes for British children at a time when it looked as if Britain would be invaded. Some seven thousand others went to Canada, some privately and some under a British Government scheme. I have corresponded with or met more than a hundred evacuees to North America, now mostly in their seventies, for my book *See You After the Duration*, which were the very words that I called out to my parents as we parted from them in London in August 1940.

To generalize about the experience of all those evacuees would be inappropriate. The stories of how they got on and how they reacted to the separation and the long-term effects on their lives are as varied as the children themselves. Everything depended on their age at the time, the number of years they spent apart from their parents, the care of hosting organisations, the character of their individual hosts, the nature of their subsequent family life. This was also the case whether children went privately or under the government scheme, even though this latter scheme was designed principally for families that could not otherwise afford to send their children. Social workers who dealt with young British evacuees, for instance, according to one report[2], gained the impression that those who came from happy, integrated families in England adjusted more easily and happily to life in the US than those who came from a home atmosphere of parental friction or anxiety. Other elements which are not easily grasped by more recent generations also played their part, in particular both the contemporary spirit of acceptance of things as they are and the sense of patriotism which imbued even the youngest and carried them though separations and setbacks. Tremayne Rodd, an English evacuee in kindergarten on Long Island, learned that America had beaten Britain in the War of Independence. His stout response, 'It's not true. I won't have it.'[3] What does seem universal in the experience, even on the part of those whose circumstances went badly, is gratitude – gratitude for the kindness and generosity of American and Canadian host families.

Tim Sturgis, who attended the same school I did, writes[4], 'The overwhelming feeling of us all was the unbelieveable, open ended, and endless generosity of our American hosts, so often

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[1] According to Foreign Office records (DO131/27 and DO13/7) the total of British children evacuated to the United States and Canada from June to December 1940 (inclusive) is 9,578, most of them sailing in June, July, August and September. Out of that total the US figure is 2,928 of which 838 went through the American Committee and 2,090 went privately, among them 476 children who travelled with groups like Hoover and the Actors Orphanage in August and September. 2,271 children were between 5-15 years and 657 between 0-4.

The Canadian figure is 6,650 children of which 1,532 went through CORB and 5,118 went privately. These private figures include children who were accompanied by their mothers as well as a few school and company groups.

In addition, 253 children under the age of 16 were sent to Canada in 1939, 260 were sent in 1941 and 120 in 1942. In 1941 102 evacuee children came to the US but there seem to be no records of children evacuated to North America privately before June 1940.

[2] Report of the United States Committee for the Care of European Children

[3] Quotation provided to author by Tremayne's cousin, Juliet Boobbyer (Rodd).

[4] In an account of his stay at Milton Academy sent to the school in 1994

given without our knowing, in the hope that we would never know. They were memorable years, and a bond had been forged, which has lasted these fifty years.'

That there was not more widespread trauma is in my view due to the fact that we were an accepting generation. Jessica Mann, the crime novelist, whose parents were Jewish refugees from Germany and who has also written a book *Out of Harm's Way*[5] about overseas evacuation, puts it well: 'British society had been accustomed for centuries to Empire-builders sending their children away from hot climates to foster homes or boarding schools. Our contemporary horror at the idea of parting children from their parents is a post-war development, and although it is often tempting to use that early "trauma" as the excuse for all my deficiencies, I have the impression that the majority of the evacuees survived intact and even enriched.'

In the years before the onset of World War II some official thought had been given to the question of the internal evacuating of children from danger areas in Britain. As early as 1925 a government committee had met to discuss the threat aerial bombardment posed for the country. In 1931 the Imperial Defence Committee set up an evacuation subcommittee. In the 1930s the frightening effect of bombing from the air, as witnessed in the Spanish Civil War, and at the end of the decade in the German assault on continental countries, increasingly alarmed the authorities. The words of Stanley Baldwin[6] in Parliament were often quoted, 'The bomber will always get through.' In fact, destructive as the bombing of Britain in World War II turned out to be, it never reached the proportions of damage and the public never exhibited the degree of panic predicted before it began.

A detailed plan was developed for the evacuation of children within the country and was brought into operation two days before the declaration of war. But the question of overseas evacuation had not been contemplated at all and was given no serious thought until nine months after war had started when the country's prospects were bleak and offers of sanctuary for children had been pouring in, principally from the Dominions and United States. These offers required an official attitude and response from Britain. Overseas evacuation had also become by then increasingly a live political issue within Britain as the public learned through newspaper articles that some people who could afford it or had links across the Atlantic were sending their children for safety overseas. Resentment grew and question of elitism or fairness was raised. The government acted[7] by setting up CORB, the Children's Overseas Reception Board, but while doing so was anxious not to communicate to the United States through such a step any sense of a weakened resolve to resist Nazism on the part of Britain. For the future of the country depended in large measure on the support it could count on from the United States, indeed the hope that somehow America could be persuaded to do more than it had done by then.

Most overseas evacuation was concentrated in the period of June, July, August and September 1940. Prodigious efforts went into finding homes across the Atlantic and escorts to accompany the children across as well as securing passages on ships and convoys to protect them and dealing with the paperwork involved. Grosvenor House, London, which served as an adjunct to the US embassy where private evacuations to the US were processed, and the CORB offices in Berkeley Street, along with the Passport Office, became the hub of efforts in those anxious months.

Vera Brittain, in a few short passages in her book *England's Hour*[8], encompasses many of the themes of evacuation including the generosity of hosts, the variety of participants and the spirit of the children and suggests that the emphasis on wealthy people being evacuated is somewhat exaggerated. Four North American households had offered her children a home. She writes, 'When we visit the Passport Office to obtain passports for Richard and Hilary, there is

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[5] Article in Daily Telegraph 1 June 1990
[6] English Conservative politician and prime minister
[7] 17 June
[8] Macmillan 1940

certainly no evidence that the queue of parents which stretches to the end of Dartmouth Street is composed of "wealthy escapists". For over an hour we stand waiting in the company of an ex-army corporal, who is using his savings to send his family to a Canadian sergeant whom he knew in World War No.1.' She notes as the children depart, 'Are these the wealthy, taking advantage of their privileges? They exist, perhaps on other liners: not many of them seem to be boarding this one.'

She adds, 'It's the parents, not the children, who are suffering; at least we can thank God for that.' She records an exchange with them when the question of overseas evacuation was taken. Son Richard had accepted the decision with the 'philosophic stoicism of twelve years old'.

'It's all right,' he confides, 'so long as Hilary's going to America too!'

'Then you don't mind Daddy and me not coming with you?'

'Oh, no! It's half the fun, being by ourselves.'

The wrench of separation was on the whole felt more strongly by parents than by children and was usually masked by self-control. Many children, particularly the younger ones, were not consulted and to some of us the whole project was depicted almost as a holiday trip. It was a time when obedience was expected yet some managed to persuade their parents not to send them away.

For most evacuees, the sea voyages out and back were understandably some of the most dramatic weeks of their young lives. Most had, of course, never ever travelled on an ocean liner; for some, even menus were a mystery. Most but not all were spared the horrors of torpedoing. Some had to watch other ships in their convoys being sunk. Most, happily, were unaware of the dangers. We sat on our bunks playing 'battleships' and sank each other's ships oblivious to the fact that submarines in the waters below were looking for targets like us. We were in a convoy escorted by a battleship and five destroyers which probably partly explains why adventure rather than trauma was my predominant memory.

On 30 August, the Volendam was torpedoed with 320 children among the passengers but all were saved. But three weeks later 77 children died when the City of Benares was sunk and the Government brought the whole scheme to an end.

What motivated the parents to take an action which sixty years on looks hardly credible and when one realizes that there might easily have been many more sinkings?

By mid-summer 1940 a German invasion was expected and fears for the safety of their children was probably the overriding consideration. Our mother had grown up at the time of 'the troubles' in Ireland. She had experienced machine gun fights around her house and seen her Dublin school occupied by troops. In 1922 her father had been told to leave Ireland within the week or be shot. She wanted us to be spared war. She felt so strongly about it that she marched into the offices of shipping executives to try and secure places for us.

Apart from reasons of our personal safety our parents like other parents felt that they would be able to pursue their war responsibilities more effectively without us, our father in the War Office and our mother first with St John's Ambulance and then in the Ministry of Information. The broadcaster, J.B. Priestley, describing his first night as a Local Defense Volunteer, wrote[9], 'I remember wishing that we could send all our children out of this island, every boy and girl of them across the sea to the wide Dominions, and turn Britain into the greatest fortress the world has known; so that then, with an easy mind, we could fight and fight these Nazis until we broke their black hearts.'

[9] in Postscripts

Historian Alistair Horne records how his father told him as he set off for the United States[10], 'We're going to lose everything, old boy. But you're my only son, and my most precious possession, and I just want you to come through it, even if I don't.' Sadly, his father died after an accident in the blackout in 1944. Happily, our parents survived.

There was also the fear of indoctrination if Britain were invaded. One American paper[11] wrote, 'The fear that children could be brought up as Nazis was worse, even, than the fear of death.'

Another motivation, rarely expressed and more in the minds of some political figures than a consideration of parents, was the enlistment of the US in the war against Nazism. Certainly some in the American administration saw this aspect of refugee children coming into the United States. The head of the State Department's visa section[12], for instance, opposed any special arrangements for the children: 'The very surest way to get America into the war would be to send an American ship to England and put 2,000 babes on it and then have it sunk by a German torpedo.'

It could not be assumed that the US would come into the war on the side of Britain. A copy of Life magazine published eight weeks after the war had started gave the impression that bets were hedged as who was going to win and the US was a spectator. It included a page that celebrated German naval prowess, two pages devoted to the achievements of German pilots in shooting down British planes and seven pages of paintings by Adolf Hitler and his architectural taste. His mansion in Berchtesgaten suggest, a critic writes, that in a more settled Germany he might have done quite well as an interior decorator. Vera Brittain noted the same ambivalence in papers on the West coast when she was there three months later[13]. She found it an educative experience for a British traveller to read publications which presented England's naval misfortunes with the same laconic detachment as Germany's aerial defeats and treated Winston Churchill's speeches with hardly more respect than the picturesque pronouncements of Dr Goebbels.

In the spring of 1940 as the situation worsened and the likelihood grew that England was going to be invaded offers of all kinds came in from the Dominions and from the US to take in British children. Companies such as Hoover and Kodak and Warner Brothers in the US and the Ford Motor Company in Canada offered to take in children of their employees in Britain and university faculties like Yale and Swarthmore and Toronto extended hospitality to children of their opposite numbers. Invitations came from churches and schools, from private individuals and various organisations like the Rotary Club and the English-Speaking Union. In Boston a local newspaper, the Boston Transcript, now defunct, launched a scheme to bring 500 children. It was portrayed daily in the paper as a competition between communities to see who could provide the most homes.

For children of whatever age the arrival in North America certainly led to big adjustments. It was a dramatic change of mood, of culture, of language, of accent, of perspective, even of humour. It was a switch from short trousers and gartered long stockings and school cap to dungarees or corduroy knickerbockers and ski cap and an introduction to the decimal system. And then five years later it was back to school blazers and school scarf again, and to the archaic calculations of pounds, shillings and pence.

Right across the continent evacuees landed in a variety of homes and of situations, a few of them exotic. Peter Isaac, later a documentary film maker and author, found himself in Hollywood, taken in by film producer Hall Wallis. Young Ronald Reagan taught him and his sister to swim. Chris Eatough was in his high school soccer team captained by a skinny George

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[10] in A Bundle from Britain
[11] Christian Century 1941
[12] Breckinridge Long
[13] in Testament of Experience

Bush, Sr. At Princeton a girl evacuee had an old man help her with math homework–it was Albert Einstein. In Dayton, Ohio, Anthony Bailey went trick or treating one Halloween and was rewarded with a silver dollar by Orville Wright, the pioneer of flight. Our host in Boston had captained the US cricket team, the Gentlemen of Philadelphia!

Most evacuees quickly settled in to the everyday life of an American schoolboy or girl, and adapted to different teaching methods and examinations with multiple choice answers, to new sports like baseball, basketball, American football and ice hockey, and new foods like peanut butter and corn on the cob and new cultural events like Hallowe'en and Thanksgiving. Some were introduced to summer camp. My brother and I won first prize at a fancy dress party at a camp soon after we arrived. We were dressed as 'bundles from Britain'. If there were difficulties like, for instance, being made fun of because of dress or accent, most children weathered the storms, often sustained by patriotism. Most, even the very young, regarded themselves as ambassadors for their country.

In some ways those who had the most difficulty seem to have been the few who were accompanied by their mothers and often had insufficient funds, none being allowed in the first years to be transferred from Britain, and also families where siblings had to split up.

American entry into the war after Pearl Harbor changed life considerably. The next day all of us evacuees were taken to be fingerprinted. It was now our war, we were all in it together. We collected scrap metal and helped dig victory gardens. Petrol, or gas, was rationed which curtailed travel. We began saving for war bonds. Even though very young because I lived next to my school, I was permitted in the holidays to spot for planes from the top of the school chapel. Though how it was ever imagined that German planes would get to Boston is a mystery.

Evacuees, depending on their age, could even be found christening planes and making speeches. The children from Britain's Actor's Orphanage put on a musical revue in New York 'Gratefully Yours'. Shirley Williams[14] says she became the embodiment of the little girl ally and was always being handed up on platforms like Bundles for Britain and even presented bouquets to Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador, and Lady Halifax when they came to town.

As early as 1942 some families began desiring the return of their children. Some because they feared that prolonged separation would have permanently adverse effects on relationships, some because they thought their children were not in suitable homes, some that their children were becoming too American. There was also a wish on the part of some parents and some children to have a share in the experience of Britain at war. Though perhaps few felt as strongly on that latter point as novelist Lynne Reid Banks who writes[15], 'Our loved ones welcomed us with utmost warmth and helped us, as far as they could, to fit back into our places. They never let us feel like deserters. But that's what I knew I was.'

The return and subsequent efforts to re-establish family links was for most more traumatic than the initial separation. Indeed, some had so bonded with their hosts that they didn't want to come home. Would they recognize their parents was the children's universal fear, a fear shared by parents not having seen their children at these formative years. On the station platform we walked past our mother without recognizing her.

The next challenge, which took longer, was to re-establish the sense of family. It was naturally hard for us to live into the lives of parents, who after years of bombardment and nightly fire-watching, would jump at any loud noise. Our army officer father expected a quicker obedience perhaps than we gave him. Our parents' admonitions were constantly met with the refrain, 'We don't do it that way in America. We don't do this and we don't do that.' So much so that America soon became known in our family as we-land. The return was also more difficult than the initial departure because the children were that much older and the urgency of the war had been removed.

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[14] See footnote 15

[15] in Celebrity Childhood Memories by Henry Buckton

Children had to face not only recovering from the separation but for some the standing up at school to teasing about accents, being made to feel bad about not having shared the dangers and deprivations of the war, and also making up for educational gaps. This latter point, educational gaps, was an issue for most of us, not necessarily that we were behind but principally because students learn different things at different times on either side of the Atlantic. As schooling was free in Canada some CORB evacuees stayed on longer at school there than they would have in Britain. Adjusting to American and Canadian education was probably easier than adjusting to British education on our return. In Britain we had started school a year earlier than in the US. We also learned different histories. As one evacuee who spent the war in Canada put it[16], 'Four and a half years in Manitoba gave me a foundation for my future and my comparative success but my knowledge of General Wolfe, Montcalm and the Heights of Abraham were not much help in getting a place at a grammar school back in Britain in 1945.' I had to swot hard for a term and a half to pass the Common Entrance exam on my return. Fortunately, and perhaps unusually, my American school had thoughtfully helped me keep up Latin.

All evacuees will have been effected in some way or another for life by the early separation, some perhaps not even recognizing how much, but most would feel any loss to themselves was offset by benefits whether through personal development or the widening of contact with another continent. It was in a way our war service.

Baroness Williams[17] says she enjoyed what she calls 'freedoms I had never enjoyed in England' and felt her years in the US gave her a sense of promise of a 'new world where everything is possible'. She was horrified on her return at the extent to which Britain was 'mired in class'. It was one of the things, she says, that drove her into politics. Likewise Eric Hammond, who became General Secretary of the EEPTU, the electricians union, and spent the war in Canada, was delighted to find you didn't have to accept Britain's supposedly insurmountable class barriers[18].

How much the presence of several thousand British children in the country played a part in bringing home to the American public the reality of the war in Europe it would be hard to measure but the links established have continued to foster the special relationship that is often denigrated.

Sixty five years ago the attitudes of British parents were more stoic and their lives less cosseted than those of today. But even British parents in 1940, if they had been asked, do you wish to send your children away for five years, would I am sure have said no. Likewise if the generous hosts in North America had been asked, will you take children for five years, they would have been less enthusiastic. Any long-term considerations were outweighed by immediate danger

There may be social scientists who regard the whole overseas evacuation as a big mistake. Many accounts tend to dwell on the trauma of separation and the examples where it didn't work out well. All I can add, as would many others with whom I have been in touch, we would not have missed the experience for anything. It has enriched our lives and the links with the United States and Canada it opened up to us have been a blessing. The final sentence of the report of the US Committee for the Care of European Children reads, 'In the long run, the 861 British children in the Committee's program turned into nearly that many emissaries of good will, who through the personal feelings they developed and provoked added solid substance to the friendliness of British-American relations.' The report described the evacuation as 'an applied lesson in international understanding'.

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[16] Douglas Wilde in message to author

[17] Member, House of Lords, former MP and cabinet minister and co-founder of the Liberal-Democratic party in messages to the author. Quoted in Mann article in Daily Telegraph 1 June 1990

[18] in his book Maverick: Life of a Union Rebel

In a new edition of his book America Lost and Found[19], evacuee Tony Bailey says that the toughest question that remains for all who went is, 'What would we have done, had we been in our parent's shoes in 1940?' Likewise, Sir Christopher Meyer, former British Ambassador to the US, writes[20], 'Those of my generation, born towards the end of the war, are often haunted by the thought of what might have happened had we been just a little older.' Fortunately, it is unlikely that such questions would have to be posed in a similar situation in the future. It is hard to envisage anything quite like this ever happening again. Perhaps a major reason is that much of the world has become a danger area and that after September 11, and even despite July 7, few British parents would regard the United States as a safer haven than Britain..

Michael Henderson is the author of *See You After the Duration – the Story of British Evacuees to North America in World War II*.

[19] University of Chicago Press 2000
[20] Given to the author as part of his endorsement for See You After the Duration