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Most of you will familiar with the story of *The Lion, the witch* and *the wardrobe*. Like the Narnia evacuee children I had a magic wardrobe. Opening its doors, however, did not transport me to a make-believe land inhabited by Aslan and the other denizens of the wood. Rather I was carried into the very real world of the British lion and the trappings of empire. My wardrobe was not in the New Forest but in New England.

My brother, Gerald, and I were two of the some ten thousand young British who were evacuated to Canada and the United States in World War II and the 'wardrobe' was a huge cupboard in which my American hosts stored on its shelves back numbers of the *Illustrated London News* and *The Boy's Own Annual*. Their enthralling pages contained stories of bravery under fire, wonderful colour portraits of the Royal family, vivid cross sections of Royal Naval ships and much more which fed my pride in country and no doubt helped to sustain me in five years of separation from my parents.

It is fashionable today in some quarters to frown on patriotism, to repeat well-worn phrases like Samuel Johnson's 'Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.' I don't share that view. I believe patriotism is a great asset to a country provided it is married to an honest appreciation of your country's failings and a dedication to what you can do to remedy them. Certainly patriotism was very tangible to those of us who were British in World War II and not least to the very young at that time. Even if it is what historian John Keegan has called the 'fierce patriotism of a war child'. It was equally so to young Germans even as the war was nearing an end and Germany's defeat was sure.

I was eight and my brother six when we set off for the United States in August 1940. ‘See you after the duration’ I called out to my parents, using the latest grown-up phrase I had heard. We sailed with hundreds of other children in a liner, the *Duchess of York*, in a convoy of liners escorted by five destroyers and just across from us the battleship *HMS Revenge*. I was particularly pleased to secure the autograph of the battleship’s signalman when he was winched over to us. No wonder that for many of us it was the adventure not the trauma that is our strongest memory.

Most of us were too young to appreciate the very real dangers. On board the *Duchess of York* my brother and I sat on our bunks playing ‘Battleships’ trying to sink each other’s ships quite oblivious to what was going on in the waters beneath us. Another evacuee who travelled in steerage below the water line told me. ‘We children didn’t mind the discomfort as day after day we played the popular board game, “Smash the Nazi navy”’ For him, too, as he says, ‘It was all a colossal adventure.’

For parents it was a different matter. One father, Ted Matthews, noted in his diary during an air raid on 10 August, the day that four of his daughters sailed for the US on the same ship we did, ‘I feel as if I had committed some horrible crime. There are mines strewn across the oceans, submarines lying in wait to torpedo them, aircraft searching for them to blow them to pieces. Yet I cannot but believe that the crime of exposing them to these dangers is less than the crime of keeping them at home to be the possible victims of an invading army. Every minute that passes takes their ship further and further away from that danger. If ever my children read this, I beg them to forgive me for doing this thing. They have no conception of what it has cost to make this decision. They will never know the agony which I suffer at the thought of them tonight.’

In the spring of 1940 when it looked as if Britain would be invaded offers of refuge for children poured in from the dominions and from the USA. Companies like Kodak, Hoover and Warner Brothers and the Ford Motor Company in Canada decided to take children of their employees in Britain. Universities made similar overtures as did organisations like the English-Speaking Union. The British government set up a scheme, CORB, the Children’s Overseas

Reception Board, so that the opportunity to get out of England would be available for all, not just for those who could afford it. More than 200,000 children were signed up. The scheme came to a rapid end in September when the *City of Benares* was sunk and 77 children died.

Our mother had grown up at the time of 'the troubles' in Ireland. In 1922, at the time of independence, her school was occupied by troops and her father was ordered to leave the country by the end of the week or be shot. He had been in the British Army in France as had been my father. So she had good reason to want us out of the war zone. Our parents like other parents also felt that they would be able to pursue their war responsibilities more effectively without us: our father in the War Office and our mother in the Ministry of Information. The broadcaster, J.B. Priestley, describing his first night in the Home Guard, wrote, '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.'

But British parents had no idea in 1940 that the separation would last for five years, any more than American or Canadian hosts could imagine that their generous offers of help, at a time of Britain's desperate need, would be so stretched out. Not many people were as prescient as Harold Macmillan, later to be prime minister, who, when asked in 1940 how long the war would last, replied, 'Twelve months if they win; five years if we do.'

Great care had been taken to try and place evacuees with families where they would fit in. We were placed with the Hinchmans. Walter Hinchman was a teacher and he had captained the American cricket team when it toured England in 1900. Mrs. Hinchman's brother had been at Dunkirk. The Hinchmans had six children, the youngest being 16 when we arrived. We owe the whole family a profound debt of gratitude.

A son-in-law, Hoel Bowditch, who became head of engineering at a leading firm, welcomed us with a five foot long model of HMS Rodney which he had made when he heard we were coming, with searchlights that worked and one gun turret which could fire slugs. Dry ice in the funnel would produce smoke. In the garden we had a

sandpit where we would re-enact land battles or the evacuation from Dunkirk, with Dinky toys and toy soldiers and it didn't matter that some of our British soldiers were in parade uniform and were of a different size than American ones.

Some evacuees in the United States had memorable encounters. One was taught to swim by Ronald Reagan, another was in the same school soccer team as George Bush, and one young English girl was helped in her math homework by an old man who turned out to be Albert Einstein. Writer Anthony Bailey went trick or treating and was given a silver dollar by Orville Wright, the pioneer of flight. But for most of us life was like that of every other young person, with school work and exams and sports, new sports like baseball, basketball, American football and ice hockey.

First days at school were often a trial for evacuees with their classmates making fun of British dress and accents. Most of us were, as the late Janet Baker (Lady Young) confirmed to me, 'intensely patriotic', and this helped us deal with such difficulties. Tremayne Rodd, an evacuee in kindergarten on Long Island, later a Scottish rugby international, learned that America had beaten Britain in the War of Independence. His stout response, 'It's not true. I won't have it.' Ten-year-old Douglas Wilde was quoted in the *Winnipeg Free Press* 'Hitler is trying to scare the people of England, but he isn't doing much of a job of it.'

Like Anthony Bailey, we genuinely saw our role as ambassadors for our country. He writes, 'Whether because of wartime patriotism or the Portsmouth naval tradition, perhaps transmitted in a school history lesson, I had taken to heart Nelson's flag signal flown on *The Victory* before Trafalgar, "England expects every man to do his duty."'

Sir Geoffrey Shakespeare, who headed the government's overseas evacuation scheme, and saw off many of the parties of children, said that he usually told them that they did not represent themselves when they were sent overseas, and therefore they could not behave as they liked. They were going as the children of Britain. They were, in fact, like British ambassadors, he used to say, and consequently they must behave even better than they knew how. If they behaved badly people would say 'What frightful children! Their parents in Britain can't really be worth fighting for.' On the other hand, if they behaved well,

people would say, ‘What splendid children these are. We must do everything we can to help their parents win.’ He said, too, to the children, ‘When things go wrong, as they often will, remember you are British and grin and bear it.’

We had already imbibed attitudes that, even if we didn’t hear Shakespeare’s words, may seem quaint by today’s standards. Soon after our arrival a local paper described a woman observing a group of English children awaiting homes. One of them fell down, and he must have hurt himself but he did not cry. ‘You must be a very brave boy,’ she said to him. His reply ‘It’s all for England.’ The paper commented, ‘There are many of us here who are learning new lessons of self-control and courage these days.’ At a Western Canadian station an escort found a small girl of seven crying. An eleven-year-old girl went up to her and said, ‘Stop it at once and be British.’ The escort recorded that the child immediately pulled herself together.

Historian Alistair Horne says that with comments like ‘Why, I was doing Virgil before I left England’ and ‘We don’t wear helmets to play rugger, or gloves and masks to play cricket’ he and older evacuees at his school were sometimes so arrogant that it was almost a mystery ‘why most of us were not massacred within a week of arrival’. I remember even in my preteens studying reference books so that I could point out that such and such an invention was by an Englishman and was inwardly glad that English boys at my school came top in work and sports.

First days in an American school were a challenge to all evacuees. It depended on age and the kind of preparations made at schools how we all responded. Many Americans schools went out of their way to be welcoming to the influx of young British. At my school a Union Jack was strategically positioned so that we could face it when American children were daily ‘pledging their allegiance’ to the stars and stripes. I was proud that a painting I did of a spitfire over the Channel was hung in the assembly hall.

Few can have had the variety of responses that Granville Bantock and other evacuees from the Actors’ Orphanage ran into at his school in New York where twenty English children found themselves surrounded by 6,000 Americans. They marched in to their first homeroom to Land of Hope and Glory. Granville thought

at first it was a gesture to the English kids. Not so, he quickly learned from the boy sitting next to him who exclaimed; ‘It’s the finest American patriotic song ever written.’’ After the Pledge of Allegiance they went on to sing God Bless America and listen to readings from the Gettysburg address.

They only had to say two words, Granville remembers, to be immediately recognized as ‘Limeys’. Several of the English boys were still in short trousers which was even worse: ‘Where’s the other half of yer pants?’ the American children would exclaim. At his first history class he was introduced to the teacher. When all the students were settled, the teacher stood up. ‘Now class,’ she said, ‘I am going to tell you all about the British and the way they’ve treated the Irish.’ She was of Irish extraction. For what seemed an age to Granville she delivered a tirade of abuse about Britain and the British, hardly pausing for breath. When Granville didn’t answer back a girl next to him stood up and told the teacher to shut up: ‘Don’t be abusive, get on with American history or I’ll take the matter up with the principal.’ The teacher then apologized. And there was no repetition.

His first English class was entirely different. Again he introduced himself to the teacher. After a while she said, ‘Class, we are extremely fortunate to have one of the English boys join us–please stand up Granville.’ There was a chorus of ‘Hi, Granville’. Then she said, ‘I’m going to ask him to read a page from this book, please come up here Granville.’ He was acutely shy; he had never done this at Silverlands, the Actors’ Orphanage school in England. There were thirty-five strange faces staring at him. He read out the whole page and when he had finished she asked him to sit down, saying, ‘Thank you, we all enjoyed that.’ ‘Now class,’ she continued, ‘before Christmas I want every single one of you to speak just like that, with no slurring–just good, solid English.’ A boy at the back immediately stood up. ‘Please, teacher,” he said, ‘I didn’t understand a single word.’ It became a weekly event for the students really did like to hear him speak.

We had a wind-up gramophone that the older ones here will remember. We used to play wartime songs from the first as well as the second World Wars. Whether it was ‘Tramp, tramp, tramp, the boys are marching’ or ‘We’re going to hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line, have you any dirty washing mother dear’. ‘There’ll

always be an England' became almost our signature tune, being sung at many occasions when evacuees got together. Indeed, Sir Martin Gilbert, who was an evacuee to Canada, even chose it forty years later as his first record on 'Desert Island discs'. He says he cried involuntarily, as he read its words in my book about evacuees to which he kindly wrote the foreword.

In that connection when the evacuee ship the *Volendam* was torpedoed, no lives were lost but passengers had to take to the life boats and an escort said later that it was the most moving experience of her life to hear in the darkness, borne on the wind, the voices of the children singing, 'Roll out the barrel' and 'There'll always be an England'.

Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret Rose broadcast to us, the first time their voices had been heard widely. And we were given the chance to hear our parents and broadcast to them. Though it was an anxious moment when the wrong parents were put on to speak to Gerald and me.

I went like many to summer camp and can still sing the college and patriotic and traditional songs we learned round the camp fire. Whether it is 'Anchors Away' from the navy or 'Off we go' from the Army Air Corps or 'Over hill, over dale' from the Field Artillery or the now certainly politically incorrect 'from the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli' praise of the US Marines and its extravagant 'If the army and the navy ever look on heaven's scenes they will find the streets are guarded by United States Marines'.

Every week I had to learn stirring poetry, ranging from Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' and Newbolt's 'Drake's Drum' to American classics like Oliver Wendell Holmes 'Old Ironsides' and John Greenleaf Whittier's 'Barbara Frietchie'. All Americans know or did know then: 'Shoot if you must this old grey head but spare your country's flag, she said.'

I mentioned earlier the stacks of *Illustrated London News* and *The Boys' Own Paper*. My reading at that time also benefited from the fact that my host family still had the books of their six children. It meant that they had many of the Henty stories of Empire builders and such like in their bookshelves which I read avidly. I soon moved on as I got older from *Just William* through the Ransome books to the

adventures of *Biggles* and my favourites, the stories of Dave Dawson and Freddy Farmer. Freddy was an RAF pilot and Dave an American pilot. I looked at a copy recently of *Dave Dawson with the RAF.* Its chapter headings make clear its approach, for instance 'Two Junkers less!', 'Nazi wings over London' and 'England must never die'. The last words of the book are, 'Air Vice Marshal Saunders looked at Colonel Fraser and smiled. "I ask you," he murmured, "what chance has old Adolf got when he's up against chaps like these two."

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 brought a dramatic change. We were no longer outsiders. As President Roosevelt wrote to King George VI, 'Our two nations are now full comrades-in-arms.' We joined in collecting scrap metal, digging up lawns for vegetable growing, saving for war bonds. Despite my youth I was allowed to take a turn spending hours spotting for planes from the top of the school chapel. Though how it was ever imagined German planes would get to Boston I don't know. Many evacuees were, of course, already very knowledgeable when it came to aircraft recognition and made model planes or had pictures of planes covering their walls. I remember saving cereal box tops to send to an address in Chicago to get a cardboard mock-up of a bomber cockpit, also collecting militaria from German and Allied forces. We used to spend a lot of time inventing codes or experimenting with invisible ink.

Older evacuees even found themselves making speeches or christening planes. Shirley Williams, Baroness Williams, 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.

I was there in the crowd waving my British flag when Prime Minister Churchill spoke in Harvard Yard in 1943. 'Whatever form the system of world security may take,' the Prime Minister said, 'nothing will work soundly or for long without the combined effort of the British and American people. I, therefore, preach continually the doctrine of the fraternal associations of our people, not for any purpose of gaining invidious material advantage for either of them, not for territorial aggrandisement, or the vain pomp of earthly domination, but for the sake of service to mankind and for the honour that comes to those who faithfully serve great causes.'

At my school I was entrusted with responsibility for hoisting and lowering the flag, learning to fold it correctly and never letting it touch the ground. We spent time marching and drilling and practicing the manual of arms with model wooden guns and had a colour guard. We also got fitter with an army obstacle course and became proficient in morse and semaphore. My brother by then nine remembers feeling important sitting in the back of a truck being driven to the fields to dig vegetables as part of the war effort. At school my 'war job', as it was called, was looking after the chickens. Many of the movies we watched at school were patriotic ones like *Gunga Din* with Cary Grant and Douglas Fairbanks and *Corvette K225* with Randolph Scott.

The school newspaper was soon reflecting in its columns the difficulties of rationing, staff shortage and above all the fact that several hundred alumni or old boys were in the services 'somewhere in England' or 'somewhere in the Pacific', that some were being killed or wounded or decorated. The war was brought home to us when the father of one of my best friends was killed.

We were encouraged to read *Time* and enter its annual current affairs quiz. As a stamp collector I was aware of the Four Freedoms enunciated by President Roosevelt – freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear - and was pleased to add to my collection the new issue of flags of oppressed nations. Our father came on a mission to Washington, DC. Of course being wartime there could be no advance warning of a visit. I was woken up and told my father was on the telephone. I apparently commented as I put down the phone, 'Gee, he talks just like the movies.' He came to visit us in uniform. We enjoyed being given the chance to polish his equipment, with a metal plate under the buttons to protect the cloth and duraglit to make them shine.

That last Christmas I stayed with another English boy in New Hampshire. There I was introduced to a new board game, called I think Target for Tonight, consisted of throwing dice to advance on bomber raids, that's where I first learned names like Dortmund, Essen and Hamm.

On Christmas Eve I was asked to bring down from the upper house precious, breakable Christmas decorations. I imagined I was

one of the Norwegian children I had just read about in a book *Snow Treasure* who used sleds to spirit gold away from the Germans.

As the years went by and we grew older we had become more aware of what was going on. With the passage of time, too, had grown the desire to get the children back to Britain, although the Atlantic was still dangerous. Sometimes because parents felt that their children were getting too far removed from their roots and family ties. Sometimes because older children chafed to do their bit for the war. At the same time it was a shock for some children, particularly for those who very young had bonded with their host families and never realized that they were going to have to leave them and return to England.

Passages were hard to find, with space reserved for soldiers and supplies for D-Day. We started returning on neutral or Royal Navy ships, and my brother and I came back on a little escort carrier, *HMS Patroller*. Now we could actually see the uniforms we had studied in the *Illustrated London News*. There was a captured Japanese Zero plane inside the hangar and we even had the thrill of watching a surrendered German submarine being towed to the United States.

Uppermost in the minds of most children was the fear of not recognizing their parents. Parents had that same fear of not knowing their children who were then so young and now had matured and grown. Indeed Gerald and I walked right past our mother on the station platform. Then began the process of re-establishing a sense of family. It was not easy to live into the lives of parents who had endured years of bombing and fire watching and jumped at any loud sound. Our parents admonitions were often met with '*We* don't do it that way in America, *we* don't do this, *we* don't do that.' So much so, that America became known in our family as '*We*-land.'

An article in the *Herald Tribune* of May 24, 1944 headed 'British children shock parents with accents acquired in US' outlined some of the difficulties. It described children coming back after five years and beginning the slow and painful process of learning to be English again. 'They talk like Americans, eat like Americans, chew gum like Americans and even look like Americans. They greeted their fathers with 'Hiya Pop' and they

pronounced all the consonants. They wear clothes too large for them, so that the clothes will last a long time on English rationing….Right way they began to learn about war-time trains, taxis in London, queues for everything – hotel rooms, hot water and five shilling meals – utility clothes and not quite enough of anything…The children were shy when they went overseas. Now they talk to everybody without an introduction. They eat with a fork in the right hand and use a knife only to cut with. They eat a great deal. They brought their parents incredible gifts in tins, and very welcome items, too.'

How much the presence of several thousand British children in the United States 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 we established have continued to foster the special relationship that is often denigrated. Even those for whom the separation still rankles expressions of gratitude to North American hosts prevail. We had a granddaughter of our host family stay with us last year. As she is a grandmother it makes me feel particularly old.

Tim Sturgis who was at the same school as I expressed our feelings well when he said at a reunion of evacuees from Oxford, 'Those of us who came were only children, and we took it all very much as it came, amazingly unquestioning. The overwhelming feeling of all of us was the unbelievable, open-ended, and endless generosity of our American hosts. They were memorable years, and a bond has been forged, which has lasted these fifty years.'

The four daughters whose father's diary I quoted from earlier returned home safely. Their father wrote to their hosts, the Meems in Santa Fé, 'Whatever the future may hold for us all I promise that, as far as it is in my power, the adventure of the last four years shall not end at my front door. With the strong emotional bonds which unite your family and mine we have no right to remain strangers to each other. You must know how utterly impossible it is to find words adequately to express our gratitude to you. You must realize how very large is the number of people whose hearts you have touched by your generosity to the children, and whose faith in the ultimate decency and kindness of human beings you have restored.'

That there was not more widespread trauma is in my view due in part to the fact that we were, indeed, an accepting generation. Jessica Mann, the crime novelist, whose parents were Jewish refugees from Germany and who has also written a book 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,' she writes, '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.'

I share that view. This is not said to minimize the really sad experiences of some overseas evacuees. Those who were split up, those who were with families that were unsuitable, or were with their mothers but without sufficient money to sustain them.

I was interested to read recently a book *Children of the Raj* where many of the descriptions of the emotional experiences of British children in India regularly separated from the parents mirrored those of evacuees. The author, Vyvyen Brendon, even writes of evacuees, 'In fact they were in many ways akin to Raj children being sent to Britain in normal times: they were despatched for their own good but without consultation; they travelled so far that returning home was virtually impossible; they did not know how long their exile would be; and they were told that if things went wrong they should remember that they were British and "grin and bear it".'

The years in the US introduced a breadth of approach that might not otherwise have been there. Shirley Williams 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.

Whatever the downside of evacuation, with family ties weakened and education made difficult, ours was a small price to pay compared to the wartime sufferings of others. In a way evacuation was our war service. The experience enriched our lives and introduced us to generations of Americans and Canadians we would not have known

and became, as the final report of the committee that sent us wrote, ‘an applied lesson in international understanding’.