

# Across the Atlantic to safety

For a short time in 1940, thousands of British children were sent to North America by parents fearful of a German invasion. Halifax was a common landing point.

By **MICHAEL HENDERSON**

*'Coming into Halifax was like coming into fairyland. We sighted silver sands on the Nova Scotian coast and after three or four hours, we saw the harbour mouth, a beautiful place surrounded by forest-clad hills rather like a bristly doormat at the gates of a new land. The nicest part of all was to see the millions of unshielded harbour lights that night.'*

**T**HIS IS HOW one young English girl, Patricia Backlar, remembers her arrival in Halifax in August 1940. She and several thousand other children had spent 10 days crossing from Britain in a convoy with tight blackout restrictions, zigzagging to avoid German submarines.

Canadian Press sent out a story, datelined from an East Canadian port, a euphemism for Halifax: 'Youngsters by their hundreds waited beside a pier tonight from their landing in Canada from Britain as officials struggled to complete the greatest water-borne migration of children in history.'

My brother, 6, and I, 8, were among them. We were oblivious to the dangers we had come through and had even sat on our bunks playing Battleships. With our convoy of liners escorted by a battleship and five destroyers it was a sense of adventure that prevailed.

It was different for parents waiting for news back home. The father of four girls on our ship noted in his diary the day we left Glasgow: "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 at home is less than the crime of keeping them at home to be the possible victims of an invading army."

The Halifax Herald reported that 'There'll Always be an England and other songs popular since the outbreak of hostilities were sung by the youngsters as they left the ship and tramped through the sheds to immigration headquarters — the children were tired but happy — a few showed traces of home-



Hundreds of British children line the decks of the Duchess of York as the passenger liner arrives in Boston. Thousands of children were evacuated from Britain to North America in 1940, until another liner, City of Benares, was torpedoed.

sickness but the majority were keenly enthusiastic at the prospect of new things that lay ahead.'

The children left Halifax for all parts of Canada, from Nova Scotia to Victoria. At each train stop huge crowds greeted them. My brother and I took a quieter route. Like many, we were bound for the United States and went by train along the Bay of Fundy to Yarmouth and then by boat to Boston.

The 1939 evacuation of British children to the countryside to avoid bombing is well known but not the private and the official government-backed evacuation of children overseas in the summer of 1940, fuelled by the threat of a German invasion.

After the war began, generous invitations came in from the Dominions and from the United States to take in British children. American and Canadian companies and universities and schools offered homes.

The papermaking company Bowater had a mill in Corner Brook, Nfld., and people there had offered to look after the firm's children for the duration of the war. Eric Hammond, then 10, sailed on the company ship SS Corner Brook and remembers 'the crew treated us royally: to be presented with the amount and quality of food we got on board was like entering an Aladdin's cave of delights.' The president of Ford Canada, Wallace Campbell, offered

homes for 125 children.

The magazine for Ridley College, a private school in St. Catharines, Ont., commented, 'A considerable representation from that island has invaded Ridley and consolidated its forces. Should more follow this peaceful invasion will have already done its work of improving further the understanding between Canada, England, and the United States.'

Over the months questions were asked in Britain why overseas evacuation was only for those who could afford it or had such connections. In June 1940, responding to public clam-

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our and to the invitations, the British government set up the Children's Overseas Reception Board (CORB) inviting anyone to go. Within two weeks 212,448 children were signed up and within six weeks the first ship with CORB children sailed from Liverpool to Canada.

According to British Foreign Office figures, about 3,000 evacuees were sent to the United States, and 7,000 to Canada, of which 1,532 came through CORB. Thousands more were signed up for North America but the program ended after the City of Benares was sunk on Sept. 17, 1940, and 77 children died. The last official ship to sail, on Sept. 21, 1940, was the RMS Nova Scotia.

In Canada and the United States we were soon fully engrossed in the life led by other young people, particularly in wartime. A sense of patriotism helped many of us come through the family separation unscathed. Whether it was broadening our perspectives, learning to appreciate other cultures or even, in the case of two I know, playing ice hockey for their universities, there were long-term benefits. I was in touch with more than 100 evacuees for my book *See You After the Duration* and it is clear that even for some who felt harmed by those years there is gratitude for the generosity of Canadian and American hosts.

Penny Jaques in Montreal had difficult emotional problems but overcame these and says that perhaps not surprisingly she trained as a social worker and then as a psychotherapist. Ron Hart in Creston had such a good time he only returned reluctantly to Britain after the war. John Crawshaw, a CORB evacuee in Winnipeg, still thinks of Canada as his second home and Doug Wilde in Manitoba describes evacuation as 'an adventure that made us self-reliant and more confident.'

Ford evacuee Barbara Shawcross regards her wartime Canadian hostess as 'mother' and for Ruth Hutchison,

who was in Ottawa, 'these second families we were all given was the great plus from it all.' Geoff Towers, who as a seven-year-old stayed for two years with the Cox family at 100 Henry St., Halifax, and attended Le Marchant Street School, told me that the experience had a profound effect on him and gave him 'a certain self-reliance'.

Shirley Williams, baroness Williams, who spent the war in the United States, says those years gave her a sense of promise of a new world where everything is possible.

Eric Hammond, who became a national trade union figure in Britain, says that it was his time in Canada which made him into a belligerent egalitarian. "You didn't have to accept British assumptions or its supposedly insurmountable class barriers," he said.

He wrote in 1990 to the Newfoundland paper the *Western Star*: "War brings tragedy and loss to many people and there are few redeeming features. But here and there the decency and kindness shine through the shadows of conflict. The warm welcome given by the whole west Newfoundland community must surely count on the side of man's humanity to man amongst all the inhumanity. I have never forgotten the people of Corner Brook, Nicholsville and Deer Lake. Across those 50 years, I remember that frightened boy of ten who lost his fears amongst you. On his behalf, I salute and thank you."

Historian Martin Gilbert, in his foreword to *See You After the Duration*, sums it up.

"The British evacuees were especially fortunate. Many of us, Michael and I included, found the people of the United States (in his case) and Canada (mine) both welcoming and supportive. We were far from home, and yet, in the main, made to feel at home. We were educated in a far-off land, acquired a strange accent (rapidly lost on return) and learned a great deal about a world that would never otherwise have crossed our ken. Links of Anglo-American and Anglo-Canadian friendship were formed in those days that have lasted to this day, more than 60 years later."

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*A reunion of CORB evacuees is being organized for Sept. 24 in Halifax. Anyone interested should contact John Haikings at 422-8434.*



Author Michael Henderson in his childhood.

## Tories to sport new boss when House re-opens

CHARLOTTETOWN — Progressive Conservatives in Canada's smallest province are getting ready to choose the person they hope will lead them back to power in 2011.

The party has been without a permanent leader since Pat Binns resigned after Islanders turned down his request for a fourth consecutive mandate. Binns was later appointed ambassador to Ireland and, more recently, consul general in Boston.

The party chose Morell-Mermaid MLA Olive Crane as interim leader and Opposition leader in the legislature. She held the post until July when she entered the leadership race. Former cabinet minister Jim Bagnall took over both roles.

Crane and Jamie Ballem, who served in Binns' cabinet, are considered the front-runners in the race that will be decided at UPEI on Oct. 2. Ballem may have a slight disadvantage because he entered the race at the last possible moment.

Peter Llewellyn, a former executive in the seafood processing industry, is mounting a strong campaign. While serving as mayor of Georgetown, he built a provincial profile by fighting the closure of small rural schools. While eight schools did close, Georgetown was spared.

He later resigned the mayor's post in a dispute with council over legal bills the town incurred when it unsuccessfully sued the school board.

The field is rounded out by Fred McCardle, a one-term MLA in the Pat Binns government, and Jamie Fox, a businessman and former police chief in Borden-Carleton. Fox has no previous political experience.

The five candidates have undergone the most rigorous application process in the history of P.E.I. politics. They were required to undergo a credit check, a criminal record check and fill out a 30-page application form that asked questions about their dealings with the Canada Revenue Agency, whether they have been sued, participated in an illegal strike or written an opinion piece in a newspaper. It also asked if they were involved in a divorce or custody battle.

The new leader will have exactly a

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year to put a personal stamp on the party before the next election. Islanders will go to the polls on Oct. 3, 2011. It will be the first vote held under a fixed election law that was passed by the Binns government and later amended by the Robert Ghiz government.

Conservatives face a daunting challenge if they expect to unseat Ghiz because no sitting premier has been denied a second term since 1930.

If anyone besides Crane wins, he will face the added task of running the party without a holding a seat in the legislature. That likely wouldn't change until the next election. The party holds just three seats in the 27 seat assembly.

There is a possibility Bagnall or Georgetown-St Peters MLA Michael Currie might not run in the next election because both have been at Province House since 1996. If one of them resigned to make way for an unelected leader, it would send voters in that riding to the polls twice within the space of a year.

In advance of the convention, the party is holding five town-hall-style debates across the province. The first, on economic and rural development, was held in eastern P.E.I. on Aug. 31. The session showed little difference among the candidates as they spent most of their time attacking the governing Liberals.

The first task following the convention will be preparing for the fall session of the legislature in mid-November. That job would be business as usual for Crane, but for any other candidate, the first job would be to decide who would be Opposition leader.

Crane has the experience but would a new leader seeking to develop a leadership style want to give such a public profile to a potential rival?

Islanders have always had a keen interest in politics. The leadership campaign has meant the fall political season that usually arrives with the opening of the legislature has come a little early.

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