

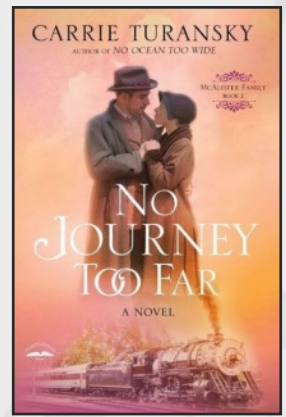
# British Home Children Advocacy & Research Association

Featuring articles from: Our Andrew Simpson "Behind The Faces" pg 2

Special guest writers Brian Read "Ethel Read" our featured BHC  
and Ralph Jackson "The Duchess of Bedford" pg 8



## April 2021 Newsletter



The greatly anticipated sequel to  
No Ocean Too Wide releases  
soon! Pg 7



### A Special Thank-You from Lori

Thank you for all your notes, messages and gifts sent to me during my cancer treatments. I am happy to say that I am all through and I am recovering very well. I am fortunate to have been diagnosed while the cancer was in the very early stages, therefore my prognosis is very good.

I carried each and every best wish and prayer with me. I never once felt alone. Your generous outpouring of support gave me the strength to face this head on.



Visit our websites at:

[British Home Children in Canada](#)

[BHCARA official website](#)

### The journey to find Ethel Read, a British Home Child by Brian Read

Ethel Read was born in Buffalo, New York around 1876 to George Thomas Read and Annie Franklin. The youngest of four children and the only girl, Ethel and her three older brothers, George Golden, Horace and Frederick, would soon find themselves orphaned and labouring as British Home Children (BHC). Despite hardships, her brothers would go on to have fulfilling lives, but Ethel would not fare as well, dying tragically at the age of 16. This is a story of Ethel and how I managed to find her after all these years.



The three Read boys

In 2012, while my wife Darlene and I were living in Halifax, a former colleague visiting from Ottawa, wanted to check out the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 to learn about his relatives. While there, I thought, "hey, let's check out when the Reads entered Canada," and that's where it all started. The archivist on duty found the three Read boys arriving via the Circassian ship to Canada rather quickly. At first I didn't realize these boys were BHCs but then remembered my grandmother saying my great grandfather Frederick W. Read was a BHC when I was a youngster, though at that time, I didn't grasp what that meant. This time, however, I became interested in the history of the family and the significance of BHCs in Canada and their contribution to assisting in building this country.

Since it seemed so easy to find the brothers I thought maybe there was more information out there. Little did I know it would not be always easy, if not impossible to find the facts. For example, the family's last name was recorded as R-A-I-D when arriving in Canada the first time as opposed to the real spelling of R-E-A-D. So, that's why things can take what seems forever.

After some quick inquiries online by putting the name of the ship and BHC, I found Norah Dennis whose great grandmother was also on the same Circassian ship as the three Read boys and who had started an early database for BHCs in Canada. I wrote to Norah and she provided lots of interesting information on the Read family from an Ancestry site and I learned that the three brothers had a sister, Ethel. I was determined to find out everything I could about her. ....Continued on pg 4

# BEHIND THEIR FACES

By : ANDREW SIMPSON

Historian & Author of "The Ever Open Door - 150 Years of the Together Trust



[www.chorltonhistory.blogspot.com](http://www.chorltonhistory.blogspot.com)

[British Home Children.....The Story From Britain](#)

Pick some books on British Home Children and sooner rather than later there will be a picture of an orphan child often set against the backdrop of mean streets and awful housing conditions in one of Britain's great cities

The impact is all the greater, because we know that close by would be the homes of the great and the good, along with those magnificent statues and fine buildings which were the product of a country which had become "the workshop of the world" in just a few short decades.

But those images of child poverty and destitution have to be questioned.

Questioned because some at least were "propaganda images" issued by children's charities to contrast the transformation before and after a child had been taken into care.

Equally the name, and the story of the young person staring back at us is often unknown, and in some cases there is no date, making the image just an adornment to the history of BHC rather than a tool by which to interrogate the story in detail.

And that I think does the study of British Home Children no service.

Nor does it help when in setting the scene, the conditions in which people worked and lived are pretty much presented in generalizations, which ignore the slow but sure advance of State intervention in child protection, and the regulation of housing, sanitation and working conditions.

So as tough as 1891 was for the poor, it might be argued that it was marginally better than it had been in 1851 or 1801.

That said for those on the economic margin, a trade recession, a bout of unemployment, and illness or old age could pitch them into



destitution and a reliance on the harshness of the Workhouse.

Nor were these experiences limited to a faraway time. My mother born in 1920 had bitter memories of the Means Test when during the Great Depression of the early 1930s, anyone applying for financial help first had to undergo the humiliation of having to sell household goods of any value until all that was left were the bare essentials.

And in those "swinging 1960s", just a stone's throw away from the glittering shops and offices of central Manchester, people were living in properties with only a cold water tap, infestations of vermin and surrounded by heavy industry.

So today I want to plunge into just one small part of Manchester and explore the properties and the people who lived there just before and at the start of the BHC migrations.

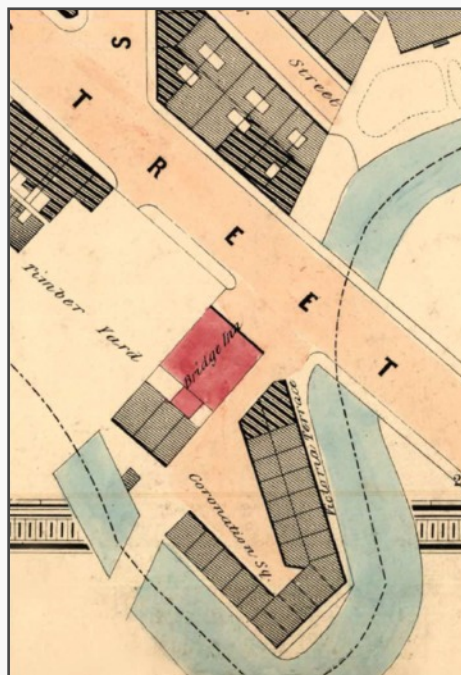
The place is Victoria Terrace, which was a row of 14 back-to-back properties set back from a busy main road and bordered on two sides by the River Medlock, in an area which was dominated by cotton mills, iron foundries, and chemical works, within the shadow of giant railway viaducts.\*

Together with another ten houses, they were home to 102 people in 1851, and of these number 5 was rented out to John Duckworth.

He shared the house with his wife, Esther, their son William, and John's brother. Both John and his brother were mechanics and on the 1851 census John described himself as a spindle maker.

He had been born in 1821 and was from Chorlton on Medlock, but by the 1840s was living on Travis Street, just a few minutes' walk from Victoria Terrace.

Esther was from the small market town of Altrincham, which was eight miles from Manchester, but had been living in the heart of the city when the couple married in 1850.



The area from Adshead's map of Manchester, 1851

Number 5 Victoria Terrace, was not their first marital home, the Rate Books show that they had moved in sometime between January and April of 1851, after the previous tenant had moved on.

Their stay at Victoria Terrace appears to have been a short one and within two years John had died, and was buried in All Saints Church in Chorlton on Medlock.

The houses date from around the old Queen's coronation in 1837, and the first record of them appears in the Rate Books two years later when they were owned by William Walker, who sold them on to a Sarah Glossop.

We know that the properties which made up Victoria Terrace each consisted of four rooms and the remaining properties were a mix of four three and two roomed houses.

Some faced out on to the heavily polluted River Medlock, while the rest were grouped around an open court.

What might have struck us, would have been the range of different accents of those who lived there, for while over half of the resident had been born in Manchester, Chorlton on Medlock or Hulme, there were some from Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, as well London, Yorkshire, and the Lake District.

Added to this, the enclave was young, with over a quarter of the population under the age of 15, and almost another quarter between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four.

By 1891 the number of occupants had fallen to 71 people. There was still evidence of overcrowding, with the eight members of the Younger family squeezed into four rooms, and Mr. Thomas Nagle sharing his three rooms with his cousin and three lodgers.

Most of the occupants were unskilled workers, ranging from laborer's to street peddlers, although amongst them there were also a tailor, a shoemaker and an Assistant Mathematical Instrument Maker. But most were engaged in precarious and heavy work with more than a few heading towards their sixties.

Thomas Nagle was 56, and described himself as a Bricklayer's labourer, although in his case he appears to have left the building trade behind, because in 1895 he is listed as a greengrocer trading from Coronation Square.

Some at least of the properties were being demolished by the early 20th century.

I have no idea whether any of the young people became British Home Children, and many of the documents which might provide an answer are either locked away from public scrutiny or lost.

But falling back on unhistorical speculation it is possible that one or more may have been migrated, and if not they may well have been the recipient of support from a charity or the Workhouse.

By the 1890s the scandal of child destitution was in retreat, but many families still faced hard decisions when confronted with the death of one parent or a bout of unemployment leading to the placement of one or all the children in care. And while that care may have been short term it must still have been at great personal heartache.

So, for now I will just ponder in an equally unhistorical way just what it might have been like to live there, on those cold dark nights with perhaps the occasional noise from the railway viaduct as a train went by, or the distinctive clunk of wagons being shunted around the nearby goods yard.

Or that powerful smell from the river, on a hot and still August day.

It might be silly tosh, but I would argue it is no worse than offering up a picture of an unnamed young person to adorn a history of BHC.

We know that grinding poverty and cases of child destitution were all too real, but I think we owe it to those young people to dig deep and try to find their names and their individual stories. \*Back-to-back houses were just what they said they were. The back of one house adjoined the back of another, saving floor space and allowing more properties to be built on the same plot of land.

Manchester prohibited the construction of back-to-backs in the 1840s, although other cities tolerated the construction of new back-to-backs later into the century. Manchester was also one of the cities that pushed for the conversion of back-to-backs into four roomed properties.

One -up-one down is a term to describe houses which had just one room upstairs and one downstairs.

Cellar dwellings were where cellars were used as living space. In 1835 The Manchester Statistical Society found that there were about 3,500 cellar dwellings home to about 15,000 people or about 12% of the population. Manchester prohibited cellar dwellings in 1853 and closed 454 as unfit for human habitation between 1854-1861

Courts could be open or closed but involved grouping properties in a courtyard facing each other, and were often built off a road which in some cases meant access was limited to a narrow passage.

Credits:

Pictures; nos 14 & 16 Victoria Terrace, July 1900, A. Bradburn, m11490, courtesy of Manchester Libraries, Information and Archives, Manchester City Council, <http://images.manchester.gov.uk/index.php?session=pass>

1851, from Adshead's map of Manchester, 1851, courtesy of courtesy of Digital Archives Association <http://www.digitalarchives.co.uk/>



## The journey to find Ethel Read - continued

Ethel's father George Thomas Read was born in Camberwell, England in 1848, the son of George William (who was a master tailor), and Emily Golden. George Thomas is listed as a boy on a merchant ship in England at age 13. While travelling with the merchant marine as a bookkeeper, he ended up living in Toronto and Hamilton and lastly working at the Thornton and Chester Milling Company in Buffalo, NY. He was a man who loved numbers, the family stories say, whereas Annie Franklin, Ethel's mother, loved music and playing the piano and giving lessons. Luckily I had found through ancestry my American cousin Carol who knew a lot of the stories that were passed down from her grandfather George Golden (Ethel's oldest brother). Annie was born in St. Pancras, near London, England in 1849. —Continued on Page 4

Annie's father was a shoemaker and Annie's mother a silk weaver, trades that were popular in the mid-1800s. George Thomas and Annie met and their first child George Golden was born in Camberwell, England in 1870. Together the small family sailed to Canada, arriving in Quebec City on July 24, 1871 from Liverpool on the Moravian ship. While in Canada they settled in Hamilton and Toronto and then Buffalo according to phone directories and the birth records of the brothers. The family grew, adding sons Horace John, born in Toronto and Frederick William, born in Hamilton. Ethel was born in Buffalo around 1876. The eldest George Golden was baptized in the Church of England, making the family most likely from the Church of England or Methodist.

According to the Buffalo telephone directory 1875-77, the family lived on Prospect Avenue in the Black Rock area close to the Harbour during this period. This area's first industry was shipbuilding which later expanded with foundries, manufacturing, and other water commerce.

In the late 1870s, possibly the autumn of 1878 or 1879, George Thomas tragically died at sea. This is from family knowledge. His death was possibly during the famous Gale of 1878 when many ships and lives were lost on the east coast of the Atlantic? Without the ship's name, unfortunately no records of his death could be found despite countless inquiries.

As a result of George's death, Annie returned to England with her four children, but tragedy struck again. Soon after arriving in Liverpool by 1881, Annie died around the age of 33 from what family descendents say was a broken heart. The family stories reveal that after Annie's death, relatives hired a priest to take care of the children and soon the three brothers were sent to Canada as BHCs under the Catholic Protective Society and placed in separate farms in Ontario. They arrived in Montreal in September 1882 on the Circassian under Richard Yates. At age 4, Ethel was most likely housed at an orphanage in England, though no records or photos exist and the trail went a little cold.

In 2018, Darlene and I found ourselves living in my hometown Ottawa where another friend introduced me to the National Archives to continue searching for Ethel and her brothers. I continued searching records that were available online (i.e. Canada census) and searched and searched for Ethel, not finding anything except one entry of her in the England census in 1881 at age 4. The mystery started.

For months on end I scoured away when I thought of a lead. I simply expanded every tip of information and dug deeper. I was persistent. John Sayers from [British Isles Family History Society in Ottawa](#), with an interest in the BHC, provided two records that showed Ethel in the RG17 files at the National Archives. RG17 records are the Department of Agriculture (D of A) files on immigrant children.

I attended one of the Ottawa meetings for other resources to expand my search and found that the Ottawa Library was a great place for genealogy services. This led to a genealogical society in Ottawa. Even with all these resources little information was found on Ethel until Romaine Honey from the Ottawa Public Library noticed an "Athel Reed" age 16, domestic, on the 1891 census. The location was listed as Mount Forest, Ontario with the Patrick White family. My cousin Carol related to Ethel's oldest brother said she had been "adopted" by the White family near Toronto.

When Librarian Romaine Honey found an "Athel Reed" with the Whites, all the details seemed so close that I was confident it was Ethel. I was thrilled -- grateful to the librarian and determined and hopeful in continuing my search for her exact whereabouts.

At age 10, Ethel was sent to Canada on the Parisian ship under the Liverpool Catholic Protective Society (CCPS) under [Mrs. Lacey](#), arriving in Canada on August 29, 1886. The book "[The Golden Bridge Young Immigrants to Canada, 1833-1939](#)", by Marjorie Kohli, reported that Mrs. Lacey's children were placed from Windsor to Ottawa, including Wellington counties where Mount Forest is located. Their plan was to rescue children from hardships, poverty and crime by finding homes and employment in Canada. I'm not sure how a 10 year old could be put to work but it must have been the norm for some. While the



Drawing of passengers  
aboard the S. S. Parisian  
in 1884

Canadian government required workhouse children to be inspected annually, many could not be found and children went to homes and assigned to local priests unrecorded. It was left up to the priests to check on them!

After arriving in Canada, now as Ethel Reid, she was sent to Hotel Dieu Kingston, Ontario. It is shown on records received by the Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph and that three days later, Ethel was placed with Mrs. Keilty in Toronto. Her husband, Marcus Keilty, was a grocer and records revealed by a Kingston Librarian Joanne Standbrige showed this couple had lost a daughter in 1884. From the Toronto fire plan maps (1884 and 1880) we know that where they lived was close to the St. Michael's Basilica and apparently a great meeting place for Irish Catholics. St. Michaels was one of largest Irish congregations in Toronto of the day. In 1888, the Keiltys decided to leave Toronto and Ethel was sent to Mount Forest, Ontario as a domestic at age 12 with the Patrick White family, also Irish Catholics. I suspect this Irish connection and the Roman Catholic church was probably how Ethel ended up with the Whites. Also through ancestry, I reached out to descendants of these two families. While they were very helpful and willing to assist, none were aware that a BHC was present in their ancestors' lives.

The archivist Rodney Carter for the [RHSJ St. Joseph Region Archives](#), provided inspection report samples written that described some of the details of the inspections. I was quite taken back on how they conducted their inspection. I felt some sadness reading through them. Unfortunately, Ethel was not among those on the inspection list. At least there were some records of children from 1886. As I researched, there must have been lots of kids that fell through the cracks. It is odd why Ethel, living in downtown Toronto, would not have been reported on. It's possible she may have been visited with no written report recorded, although it's hard to speculate.

My search continued and I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the old Mount Forest newspapers were available online. I started to read through the editions for anything on Ethel or the White family. Another archivist, Carol Bryne from [The Bruce Bruce & Grey](#) branch of Ontario Ancestors, was the first to find reference to Ethel in the Owen Sound newspaper. The original story was found in the Mount Forest Representative newspaper. Ethel was a domestic at the White's hotel in Mount Forest until her tragic death in June 1892 at the age of 16. According to this newspaper of 1892, Ethel, recorded as Bertha Reid, had a troubled and sad life. There's evidence of self harm, destructive behaviour, and extreme discipline that eventually culminated in her taking her own life by poison. While it was reported Ethel was "possessed by a peculiar disposition that caused her employer and wife much trouble," her actions could perhaps be interpreted as a call for help or a desperate attempt to leave. However, we can never know for sure.

Ethel was interred soon after her death at what is now known as the [Catholic Pioneer Cemetery in Kenilworth Ontario](#). However, the County Crown Attorney Bill Peterson, apparently a no nonsense fellow as revealed from a story online, requested her body be exhumed because he was not satisfied with the coroner's findings so an inquest was ordered. The White family was cleared of any wrongdoing and left town soon after the inquest was over.

Around 1892, her oldest brother George Golden, who by all accounts was quite the character, went to reunite his family when he left his farm. He found his two younger brothers, Horace and Frederick, on different farms, but when he sought out Ethel at the Whites, he was told she had died of diphtheria at age 15. A few unanswered questions remain of the time: Where did her brother go to obtain this information (especially, since in the RC church, suicide was seen as taboo. Is that why they didn't want to tell her brother)? Why was diphtheria used as the cause of death? Diphtheria, also known as the Strangler, is a bacterial infection that was prevalent in the late 19th century. There was no cure until the later part of the 1800s and it was common among the poor and children with fatality rates up to 20%. This seems like an ideal disease to categorize or possibly blame the passing of a young girl's life. Still, it is nice to know her three brothers did connect later in life and did well. The only pictures that exist are the three boys as adults.

Even though my search revealed a lot of false records like her proper name, age and where she came from -- one can't assume records are correct or believe everything in the papers -- fortunately I still found Ethel. Family stories, records and pictures are so important. Get as much information now while you can.

Finally, since the old newspaper mentioned Ethel was interred at the Kenilworth cemetery, I sought out this cemetery and came across a local contact, Bob McIntee, a former town police officer now retired, with the help of the local catholic church. The township has now taken over the care of this cemetery and Bob was instrumental in preserving this old cemetery in 1984. At that time, he organized the stones with respect and dignity for the long forgotten cemetery. Bob had records of names on the stones and made a list. Unfortunately Ethel Reid was not on his list but there was an old stone with the name White on it so we were confident Ethel was somewhere close to this family marker, laid to rest in an unmarked grave. Bob and I spoke on the phone a couple of times and it was not until April of 2020, with the persistent and generous time of so many people we finally found what happened and where Ethel is buried. I had started looking 7 years earlier.

My research continues on Ethel's life, searching for forgotten details like her date of birth in Buffalo NY and the locations and DODs for her parents, George and Annie. In addition, in the future, we plan to place a memorial plaque in honour of Ethel, probably in Ottawa near two of her brothers. Thanks to the many people who showed compassion in assisting with the research and realizing the importance of these children to Canadian History and for helping me find Ethel. In August 2020, my wife and I visited the Kenilworth cemetery to pay our respects and conducted a short prayer service for Ethel. It was a beautiful day with a light breeze and soft noises from neighbouring farm combines. A very special thanks to my daughter in law Kaitlyn McNabb for taking the time and to edit our story and my wife Darlene who helped proofread and organize my findings



Maria Rye children headed to church in Canada

## New to our collections!

### *The Maria Trunk of Sarah Emily McGuigan*

Through the efforts of our group member Diane McGregor, we have been very fortunate to acquire a rare Maria Rye Trunk! However, research proved to be difficult because the child Sarah's last name on the trunk is spelled McGuickan.

We enlisted the help of Mr. David Hemmings, President of the Niagara Historical Society who has been compiling our new [Maria Rye Database](#). Mr. Hemmings was able to identify the trunk as belonging to Miss Sarah McGuigan. Mr. Hemmings was able to share Sarah's

information with us. This article is based on his work.

Sarah was born in 1872 in Dungannon, Tyrone, Ireland. Her mother was Sarah Jane McGuigan. Sarah was brought to Canada by Maria Rye in 1899 at the age of 16. Sarah worked for a while in the kitchen of Our Western Home.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of June, 1903 Sarah married James Wharry in Middlesex, Ontario. Her parents were listed as unknown. Together Sarah and James had several children.

Sarah lived a long life, passing away at the age of 89 in 1963. She is buried in the Union United Church Cemetery in Elgin County, Ontario, Canada. You can view her memorial on [Find-A-Grave](#)



Our Maria Rye trunk, recently acquired from auction has arrived home! Sarah's information has been found and we have located family, however the trunk will be staying in our collections. Big shout out to Diane McGregor for spotting this, over seeing the auction, picking it up and storing it until it could be sent here. The cost for this trunk was shared between Diane, (in memory of BHC's Susannah Leadbeater and her sister, Elizabeth - Salvation Army), the BHCARA and John Heymans (in memory of his Grandmother Rachel Johnson - Louisa Birt). Thank you Diane and John! This is another amazing addition for our collections!



Are you seeking Maria Rye information?

[Click here for information on the registry](#)





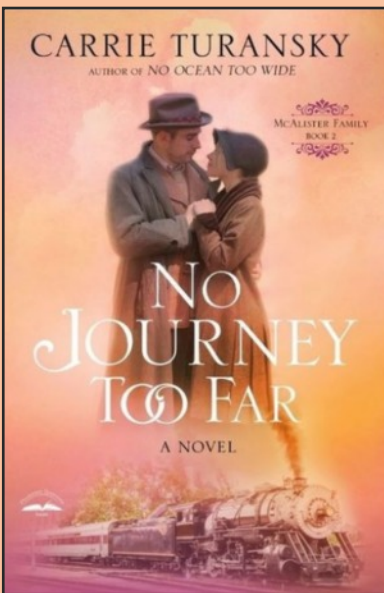
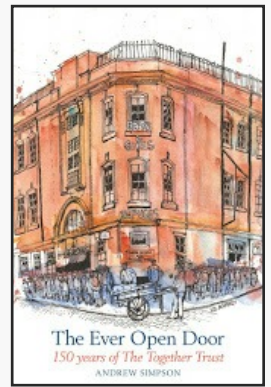
## A Story

This photo has been in the BH-CARA files for a while now. The only information that we had was that these children came from the Manchester Union. I sent the image along to Andrew Simpson - the author of "The Ever Open Door" with hopes of discovering more information. The lady in the centre of the photo was identified as Mrs.

Shaw from the Manchester and Salford Boys' and Girls' Refuges and Homes! Which today is the "Together Trust". This history of which was released in "The Ever Open Door".

You can read about how Andrew solved this mystery on his blog at:

[chortonhistory.blogspot.com](http://chortonhistory.blogspot.com)

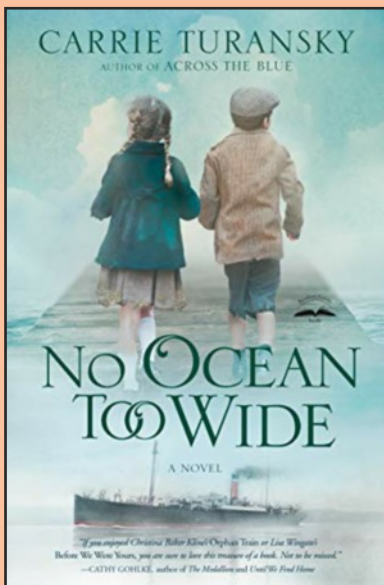


Coming June 8 2021 the highly anticipated sequel to "No Ocean Too Wide"

## No Journey Too Far from Carrie Turansky

[www.carrieturansky.com](http://www.carrieturansky.com)

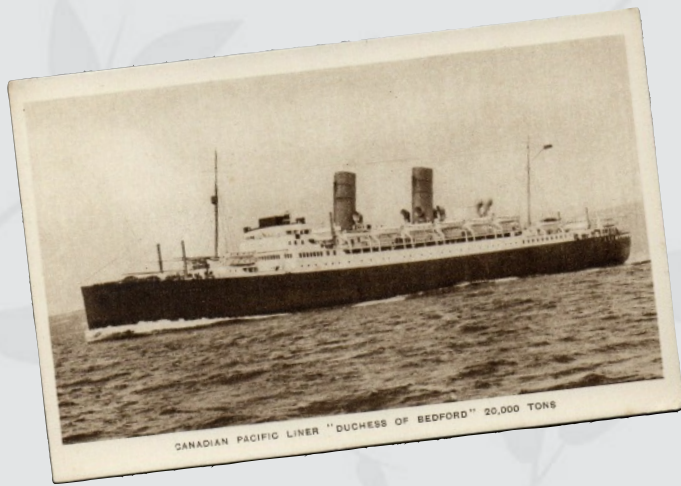
In 1909, Grace McAlister set sail for Canada as one of the thousands of British Home Children taken from their families and their homeland. Though she is fortunate enough to be adopted by wealthy parents, the secrets of her past are kept hidden for ten years until someone from her long-buried childhood arrives on her doorstep. With this new connection to her birth family, will she be brave enough to leave her sheltered life in Toronto and uncover the truth?



After enduring hardship as an indentured British Home Child, Garth McAlister left Canada to serve in World War I. His sweetheart, Emma Lafferty, promised to wait for his return, but after three long years apart, her letters suddenly stopped. When Garth arrives home from the war to unexpected news, he is determined to return to Canada once more on a daunting mission to find the two women he refuses to abandon—his long-lost sister and his mysteriously missing sweetheart.

No Journey Too Far is open for preorder on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com)

If you haven't read No Ocean Too Wide - it is available now on [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com)



# The Ships That Brought Them

A series by Ralph Jackson of Winnipeg, Manitoba

## The S. S. Duchess of Bedford

Canadian Pacific Lines commissioned Glasgow shipbuilder John Brown & Co. Ltd. to build the S.S. Duchess of Bedford. Her official launch was on January 24, 1928 with Lucy Baldwin, the wife of then Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, doing the honor of christening the ship. The fully completed vessel was sailed to Liverpool and delivered to its new owners in May of that Year.

The Duchess' maiden voyage between Liverpool and Quebec was on June 1, 1928. On board for her first crossing was 18 year-old George Woolley, the only Home Child to be listed among the passengers. On the Duchess of Bedford's second crossing in late June, she established a new record by sailing from Liverpool to Montreal in six days, nine and a half hours. Witnessing the event was a group of eleven boys placed aboard by the Church of England, bound for Indian Head, Saskatchewan.

There is little doubt that the Duchess was fast for her day but regrettably, her Atlantic crossings weren't always the most comfortable for passengers. The Duchess of Bedford had two sister ships, the Duchess of Atholl and the Duchess of York. All three vessels had been built at the same time and sadly to the same flawed design specifications. In heavy seas the ships would yaw and roll in the waves as opposed to steadily knifing their way through. Their tendency to lurch and wallow through the swells earned them the nickname "The Drunken Duchesses". Even the most seasoned passengers could be laid low by seasickness. In December 1928 and the first two months of 1929, the Duchess undertook a sixteen day and two twenty-nine day cruises from New York to the West Indies and Panama. Most likely pleasure cruises for people looking to avoid the New York winters. The remainder of 1929 was spent sailing between Liverpool and Canada, principally to St. John, New Brunswick. The voyages transported 286 Home Children to Canada.

From 1929 until August of 1939, the Duchess of Bedford made regularly scheduled crossing between Liverpool, Montreal, Halifax, St. John, Greenock and Belfast. Due to the fact that immigration records after 1935 are not readily available for public scrutiny, it is impossible to determine the exact number of British Home Children transported by the Duchess of Bedford.

### The War Years

The outbreak of WWII in 1939 changed the operations of the Duchess of Bedford and her overall appearance. On August 29, 1939 she was requisitioned for conversion to a troopship. Anything unnecessary to the war effort was stripped from the ship and stored for reinstallation at war's end. Furniture, paintings, pianos and other luxuries were removed to make space for thousands of hammocks, cots and supplies. The ship was camouflaged with paint to obscure its length and speed of travel. Guns were mounted on deck as a deterrent to surface attacks by U boats and aircraft. Later in the war, U.S. Troops being transported to England changed the ship's nickname to "The Dirty Duchess". The Duchess bore little resemblance to the magnificent luxury liner that had crossed the ocean in peacetime.

On September 4, 1939 the Duchess of Bedford was part of the first convoy of WWII, leaving in Clyde, Scotland in the early morning hours. Although not



Troops disembarking the S.S. Duchess of Bedford at  
Sierra Leone





Japanese wartime postcard celebrating the British  
surrender of Singapore

confirmed, it is presumed the ships were heading across the North Atlantic bound for Halifax.

December 10, 1939 the Duchess of Bedford was in convoy out of Halifax, NS, carrying soldiers of The Saskatoon Light Infantry. Travelling through heavy fog the ships became widely scattered. When the fog finally lifted, those aboard were delighted to see that two Royal Navy cruisers and eight destroyers had joined the convoy. Seven days after leaving Halifax, the convoy, minus its heavy escorts, slipped into the harbor at Gourock, Scotland. For most of 1940, the Duchess made several similar crossings, carrying evacuees to Canada and returning with troops and supplies.

In January 1941 the ship transported the New Zealand Division to Egypt and the Mideast theatre of war. Leaving from Belfast to join the convoy, the voyage took several weeks to complete, at times passing close to enemy occupied Somaliland. It arrived Port Tewfik, Suez on March 3. The Duchess returned to Liverpool in May to resume Atlantic troop crossings.

## The Evacuation of Singapore

On December 8, 1941, one day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese aircraft struck the British military facilities on Singapore. The attack destroyed RAF fighters on the ground thereby leaving the island with no air defense. The British military had anticipated any attacks would come from the sea. It was presumed that the five hundred miles of heavy jungle to the north would preclude an assault from that direction. Firm in this belief, the British defenses were focused towards the ocean, a mistake with catastrophic consequences. The Japanese forces advanced from the Malay Peninsular, moving through the jungle with remarkable speed. With the situation worsening by the day, the order was given to evacuate all civilian personnel including military spouses and their children.

The Duchess of Bedford, in convoy with other troopships and escorts left Bombay with reinforcements on January 19, 1942. The route was long and hazardous as the convoy navigated through narrow channels and shallow waters to avoid enemy submarines. The ships arrived at Singapore nine days later. More than 4,000 evacuees were loaded amidst frequent attacks by enemy aircraft. The Duchess of Bedford took a bomb through an open hatch and despite her hull being flooded; she managed to make her way to Batavia (later known as Djakarta). The Duchess remained in Batavia for repairs before delivering the evacuees to Durban, South Africa and then home to England.

Two weeks after the evacuation, Singapore fell to the Japanese. Many aboard the Duchess never again saw the loved ones they left behind

*For a first hand account of the evacuation aboard the Duchess of Bedford, I encourage you to read Veronica Roscow's moving story at:*

[http://www.cofepow.org.uk/pages/civilian\\_evacuation\\_duchess\\_of\\_bedford.htm](http://www.cofepow.org.uk/pages/civilian_evacuation_duchess_of_bedford.htm)

## The Prey Turned Hunter

On August 9, 1942 the Duchess of Bedford was two days out from Liverpool headed for Boston in heavy seas. The crew sighted a German U-boat that was four hundred yards to the stern and stalking the Bedford. Rather than take evasive action, Captain Busk-Wood ordered the ship to change course and close quickly on the U-boat. With that maneuver, the hunted became the hunter. U-boats were at their most vulnerable when on the surface so it was vital to engage the enemy before it could submerge. At one hundred yards the Bedford's gunners opened fire. The first shell ricocheted off the water and travelled the length of the U-boat's hull. The second round struck the submarine just behind the conning tower causing a massive explosion. The next two rounds were also direct hits, one striking the hull and the other the conning tower. The U-boat's bow rose thirty degrees out of the water and then sank to its grave. Shortly after, a second U-boat was sighted but after three rounds from the Bedford, it submerged and left the battle. For his actions on that day, Captain Busk-Wood was awarded the OBE.

## The Mediterranean

In the summer of 1943 the Duchess began transporting U.S. and British troops to North Africa and later, to the Sicily landings. After the allied assault on Sicily, the Duchess of Bedford was given the sad task of picking up the bodies of drowned British Paratroopers.



The Bedford was also used to transport German prisoners during which time she was attacked by both enemy bombers and U-boats. She took five bombs but miraculously suffered non-fatal damage. During the attacks the prisoners were locked below deck and began to become “restless”, a situation that was swiftly squelched when U.S. guards shot some of them. For the balance of the war, the Duchess of Bedford was frequently placed in harm’s way but against all odds, survived to see the surrender of Germany and Japan. At war’s end The Duchess of Bedford became known as “the most bombed ship still afloat”.

## Luxury Returned

In the months following the end of WWII The Duchess of Bedford transported troops returning home from several different theatres of war. In 1947 the Duchess was returned to Glasgow to be refitted to carry four hundred first class and three hundred tourist class passengers. Modifications were also made to increase her speed to twenty knots. She was renamed The Empress of France. On September 1, 1948 the newly outfitted Empress of France resumed her Liverpool to Quebec and Montreal crossings. She continued her regular voyages until November 30, 1960 when she left Montreal for her last trip home to Liverpool.

On December 19, 1960 The Empress of France sailed from Liverpool to the breakers where John Cashmore of Newport, Wales, dismantled it. The bar that once graced the ship’s luxurious Empress Lounge was retrieved and installed in the Barry Hotel, Barry, Glamorgan. It is perhaps a fitting tribute to “The Drunken Duchess”.



Image from a 1933 Duchess of Bedford menu card