

**The War Brides of World War II**

*By Theresa Reynolds  
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*"Canada welcomes you with a feeling of great admiration and pride - you of British blood and those of Allied stock, who have stood up so courageously under all the adversities of war that have struck home to you so severely through the past six years. Canada will benefit greatly....you who won the everlasting admiration of all decent peoples of the world by the magnificent manner in which you conducted yourselves through those long, dark, trying war years. To one and all, I express sincere wishes for your future happiness, prosperity and well-being, in whatever part of Canada you locate in, from Halifax to Vancouver, may you find contentment in every respect."*

W.E. Sutherland, Commandant of the ship The Queen Mary, which brought 1000 war brides and their children to Halifax's Pier 21 on August 31, 1946.<sup>1</sup>

Between 1942 and 1948 an estimated 44,000 European women who had married Canadian soldiers made the long journey by ship, often with small children in tow, to join their new families in Canada.<sup>2</sup> After living through years of food rationing, the loss of fathers and brothers, long hours working in the factories and hospitals, and the continuous fear of air raids, the women were about to begin new lives in a new country. But rather than experiencing relief after leaving a devastated war zone, the young women, who were almost all between the ages of 19 and 21, were instead exposed to difficult voyages, new cultures, homesickness, and the startling realization that they were about to join up with husbands, often after years of separation, whom they barely knew.<sup>3</sup> The love of good Canadian men and the promise of better lives were not protection enough for the women—they would be forced to endure the red tape of the Canadian military, the frightening sea voyages through dangerous waters, long, lonely train

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<sup>1</sup> Melynda Jarratt, BA, MA. August 26, 2000. *Speech at the Dedication of a Memorial Plaque to the Canadian War Brides at Pier 21*. Retrieved March 29, 2001 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.canadianwarbrides.com/pier21mjremarks.html>

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Koerner, "Romancing the Soldiers," *Maclean's*, February 1, 2000. Volume 112, Issue 52, page 167.

<sup>3</sup> Melynda Jarratt, Erez Segal and, Olga Rains, "The Canadian War Brides: An Introduction," Retrieved March 30, 2001 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.canadianwarbrides.com/intro.htm>

journeys and the dramatically different cultures of Canada.

This paper must really begin in the dance halls of Britain (93% of war brides were indeed British),<sup>4</sup> where the Canadian soldiers, wealthy compared to the local residents, wooed the young women with their foreign accents and handsome uniforms: “With the sound of a big band in the city or a small group in the village hall, it was possible to hold each other without the glaring eyes of disapproving parents.”<sup>5</sup> The local men were either away at military training or they were fighting on the battlefields of Europe. In 1939, the influx of tens of thousands of Canadian soldiers into the cities and towns filled the gaps left by the fighting locals and fulfilled the needs of the young women, whom the soldiers outnumbered “fifteen to one.”<sup>6</sup> It was “in fact, just forty-three days after Canadian soldiers arrived...that they celebrated the first marriage between a British woman and a Canadian serviceman .”<sup>7</sup>

The romance of courting during wartime was short lived. Once a couple decided they wanted to marry, the soldier first had to receive permission from his commanding officer. The bride-to-be could be subjected to an interview by the Canadian military, and the required paperwork was often extensive for both parties:

It isn't an easy matter to marry a Canadian...he must first of all show his good intentions by saving about \$200. He must get his commanding officer's permission to marry and must wait some weeks before the marriage can take place....[The] bride to be must produce proof in the form of letters from clergymen, employers or others that she is a girl of good character and likely to be a success at homemaking in Canada.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>“Resume of Marriages and Births,” Retrieved March 29, 2001 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.canadianwarbrides.com/marriagesstats.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ben Wicks, *Promise You'll Take Care of My Daughter*, page 18.

<sup>6</sup> Christine Dubue-Bertrim and Cherylyn Brooks (Producers), & Anne Hainsworth (Director). 2000. *The War Brides: From Romance to Reality*, [documentary film]. Toronto, ON. Kiss the Bride Productions.

<sup>7</sup> Melynda Jarratt, *The War Brides of New Brunswick*, [Masters Thesis](1995) Retrieved March 29, 2001 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.canadianwarbrides.com/thesis.html>. page 4.

<sup>8</sup> Wicks, *Promise You'll Take Care of My Daughter*, page 20.

If couples did not receive approval from the military and married anyway, the marriage would not be recognized in Canada, and the women would not be allowed to board the war bride ships to join their husbands.

The women who had married Canadian soldiers often waited years for their notification to make the trip to Canada. The trips, along with subsidised meals and provisions for their children, were paid for by the Canadian government. "Operation Daddy referred to the nearly 45,000 war brides and their children who were waiting impatiently in Great Britain and Europe to join their husbands."<sup>9</sup> From 1942 until the middle of 1944, the Immigration Branch of the Canadian Department of Mines and Resources handled moving the women and children to Canada. From 1944 on, the Department of National Defence became the primary agency for arranging transport. In the years 1942-1943 and 1947-1948 the war brides and their children were more than 54% of the total immigrants to Canada.<sup>10</sup>

The journey by ship was often harrowing for the wives. Regardless of the number of children they had, the Canadian government would not permit them to make the sea journey with their husbands. The men would either be waiting for them when they arrived in Canada, having already been discharged, or they would arrive sometime after their wives, depending on the progress of the war. The women were leaving their families and homelands behind, there were restrictions on the amount of baggage they could bring, and many of the 79 ships were old and dilapidated.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, for those travelling prior to 1945, there was the possibility that they

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<sup>9</sup> Melynda Jarratt, "Kay Ruddick: It Was the Most Exciting Time of My Life," Retrieved March 29, 2001 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.canadianwarbrides.com/vads1.html>

<sup>10</sup> Jarratt, *The War Brides of New Brunswick*, page 9.

<sup>11</sup> Dubue-Bertrim and Brooks, *The War Brides: From Romance to Reality*.

would become targets of enemy forces: “It was an old ship which had been used in the Boer War. After two days at sea we were attacked by the Germans and had to return to Liverpool to join a convoy. One girl got off the ship then, and later a baby died and was buried at sea.”<sup>12</sup> Inclement weather, hundreds of babies, toddlers, and pregnant women, and a tired crew of Red Cross Escort Officers, who were overworked with the daily meals and cleaning, meant that the ships were often dirty with vomit (from the hundreds of seasick passengers), overcrowded, and sometimes dangerous. That said, the women whose stomachs did not fail them were treated to daily delicacies which had long been rationed back home: “We all had so much food on the *Aquitania* [that] we wanted to save it all and send it home. We had more meat on our plates for one meal than we had seen as rations for a week per family.”<sup>13</sup>

Once the women arrived at Pier 21 in Halifax, those who were continuing on past Nova Scotia still had the long train journey to contend with. After almost two weeks on the ships, many women still had to endure several more days and nights of train travel before they would be united with their husbands or their husbands’ families. The trains were not designed to transport thousands of women and children, so the washrooms were overrun by mothers trying to accommodate the needs of the many babies. Since public breastfeeding was still unusual, and disposable diapers were unavailable, the mothers found themselves in a bind:

There was nowhere to heat water for the formula-fed babies and nowhere to wash nappies. We did the best we could in the washroom and hung them where we could find a spare spot. By now, almost all the babies were suffering from diarrhoea. We had a porter who was furious with us and called us “dirty English pigs.”<sup>14</sup>

The Red Cross volunteers were integral to the train journeys just as they had been on the

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<sup>12</sup> Wicks, *Promise You’ll Take Care of My Daughter*, page 62.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, page 67.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, page 94.

ships. Each train had several volunteers, in addition to a doctor and a nurse. They were there to offer relief by rocking babies to sleep and babysitting while the mothers napped. The volunteers also provided maps and other information about the towns and cities the women were travelling to, and made sure that the women's paperwork was in order.

The height of the women's anxieties often occurred once they arrived at the stations where they would meet up with their new families. Throughout the voyages, stories of husbands who already had Canadian wives or who had met other European women were rampant. The wives had fears that their husbands would not come to the stations for them, and that they would be stranded in the middle of a vast, foreign country with small children and no money to return to Europe. In reality, many women did return to Europe, for those reasons and many others, including loneliness and homesickness:

[Approximately] 10% of Canadian War Brides returned to Britain and Europe.... [but] it is impossible to know the [exact] number because after 1948, these women were no longer classified as 'War Brides' ....If they left this country they did so at their own expense... and they were not categorized as anything other than females in the outward migration statistics.<sup>15</sup>

There were several other issues surrounding the relationships between husbands and wives. For example, many of the women had never seen their husbands out of uniform, and the formal suits worn by Canadian men were certainly more showy than those worn by English men: "He was a nice looking young man in a uniform when he left England. When I got over here, I met this guy in a pinstripe suite and spats—he looked like a gangster!"<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the biggest shock to the wives arriving in Canada was the completely different lifestyles that would soon become their own. Many of the women who were from the cities of

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<sup>15</sup> Canadian Wives Bureaus files, National Archives of Canada. Research by Melynda Jarratt, BA, MA

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, page 118.

Europe ended up in rural areas of Canada where life was very, very different: “In parts of Canada...it took twenty years before electricity came. There were outhouses [and] wood stoves; [a]rural life that they had never dreamed of.”<sup>17</sup> The isolation could be overwhelming, or, the families of the husbands may not have been as welcoming as the women would have liked. Housing starts had come to a grinding halt during the war, and there was a shortage of homes for the new families. In some places employment was scarce and it could take years for the young couples to move into homes of their own.

Many of the war brides travelled all the way to Canada only to find out that their husbands were incapable of caring for them. When the Canadians had left to fight in the war, they were still young boys. Most of them had no responsibilities outside the chores assigned to them by their parents. Once they joined the military, everything was taken care of for them. Their travel was arranged, their food was prepared by cooks, their clothing was issued, and all their needs were attended to by the military. When the women arrived in Canada, the same men suddenly became responsible for families: “We landed in Canada and [then] they had the responsibility of a wife, or of a wife and a child, a home to find and a home to furnish, and a living to make with no training.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the husbands had lived through a violent and devastating war and when it was over many were unable to cope with the real world back in Canada. Alcoholism, depression and infidelity were common conditions among the veterans, and some of the women suffered through “domestic abuse or neglect.”<sup>19</sup> For a few of the war brides,

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<sup>17</sup> Dubue-Bertrim and Brooks, *The War Brides: From Romance to Reality*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> Canadian Wives Bureaus files, National Archives of Canada. Research by Melynda Jarratt, BA, MA

the men they fell in love with in Europe were not the same men who greeted them at the train stations: "...[he] had no emotion and he did not look at me; he did not look at the baby. I stood there and I went close to him and we didn't know what to say. I was a stranger of course. I waited for the reaction of words. A kiss? No."<sup>20</sup>

Of the nearly 44,000 war brides who came to Canada during and after the Second World War, few returned to Europe. They bore over 200,000 children, and settled in all areas of Canada.<sup>21</sup> Although many were frightened to leave their homelands and families behind, they boarded the ships for Canada anyway, putting their faith in husbands they barely knew. While the journey to this country was difficult, and the adjustments to a new culture, a new country, and a new family were often traumatic, the women remain true to their adopted Canada. Jean Coulter, a war bride from Antwerp, Belgium offers this to the reporter interviewing her for the Canadian documentary *The War Brides: From Romance to Reality*: "Honey, I've got news for you. I wouldn't have left Canada if you gave me a billion dollars! I love this country—I would never go anyplace else...."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

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