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## Home Children

On June 14, 1998, a provincial historical plaque commemorating the Home Children was unveiled at the Holy Rosary Church, 1153 Wellington Street, in Ottawa. The bilingual marker reads:

### HOME CHILDREN

Beginning in 1869, British charitable societies removed children from slums and orphanages in congested industrial cities and brought them to Canada to serve as cheap farm and domestic labour. "Homes" were set up across the country to house the girls and boys until they were placed in service. Monitoring of the children after placement was superficial, leaving them susceptible to mistreatment. Child emigration was discontinued in the 1930s when the Great Depression created a labour surplus in Canada. By then, up to 100,000 children had been transported. This building, formerly known as St. George's Home, was one of many distribution centres in Ontario.

### Historical background

Read in any light, the child emigration movement is a dark page in Canadian history. Between 1869 and the 1930s, close to 100,000 children, some as young as five years of age, were shipped to Canada from Britain. Almost all of them faced an uncertain future of hard knocks and menial labour in the fields and kitchens of Canadian farms.

The causes behind this mass movement of young people lie in the history of both Britain and Canada. Factory jobs created as a result of the industrial revolution caused a massive migration of workers from the British countryside to the cities, a human wave that doubled the population of London in a mere thirty years. Slums quickly developed in all industrial cities and vast numbers of children lived on the streets, surviving by their wits and little else. Many died of hunger, disease and exposure. Destitute parents unable to provide for their families placed children in orphanages that were already overcrowded. As early as 1826 Robert Chambers, a police magistrate, reported to a select committee of the British Parliament: "I conceive that London has got too full of children;" he proposed that they be sent to the colonies as labourers. Philanthropists echoed his sentiments, but it was another forty years before child emigration became a reality.

In the meantime, men and women of Christian, often fundamentalist, background began active campaigns to rescue children from the streets or from homes they deemed unsuitable. They opened shelters with funds provided by philanthropic citizens. Most prominent in this endeavour were Maria Rye, a London suffragette, Annie Macpherson, a forerunner of the twentieth-century social worker, and Dr. Thomas Barnardo, who established a network of Barnardo Homes throughout the United Kingdom where he attempted to train destitute children in useful trades and domestic service. The flow of children into these homes appeared endless and by 1869 sending them to the colonies seemed to be the only solution. This was justified in most people's minds by the thought that anything the children would face overseas could not possibly be worse than conditions at home.

By the time Britain was ready to export her unwanted progeny, Canada, desperate for cheap labour, was eager to receive them. The country's early agricultural economy was fragile and farmers experienced frequent periods of depression when the cost of hired help proved beyond their means. The idea of a young helper who would work for a pittance - room and board, basic clothing, and a few dollars a month to be banked for the child to receive at adulthood - seemed the "common sense" solution.

The movement began in the fall of 1869 when Maria Rye brought sixty-eight children from the streets and workhouses of London to Niagara-on-the-Lake. There, she established Rye Cottage, a distribution centre, or home, from which the children were placed with farm families. Annie Macpherson followed suit early in 1870, bringing about a hundred boys from her rescue homes to be placed on farms in Ontario and Quebec. From then on, both women brought hundreds of children over each year. They were soon joined by other agents and agencies. By 1882 Dr Barnardo was also committed to child emigration, ultimately sending thousands of children from his homes in Britain; in time he established Barnardo Homes in many Canadian towns. By 1900 about half of all so-called "home" children came from Barnardo homes.

By the 1870s there were several distributing homes in Ontario and one in Quebec; soon there would be others in the Maritimes, Manitoba and British Columbia. The first Roman Catholic home for immigrant children was opened in Ottawa in 1895. Originally called New Orpington Lodge, it was renamed St George's Home in 1905 when it became the headquarters of the Catholic Emigration Association. Until the home closed in 1934, all Roman Catholic home children passed through St George's.

Shiploads of children would arrive at Halifax, Montreal and Quebec City. Most were between the ages of nine and fourteen, but some were much younger; about two-thirds were boys. Once they disembarked, they travelled by train to a distributing home run by the agency that had sent them. Newspaper advertisements would alert farmers to a new shipment of children.

They would go to the home, size up the children as they would livestock at a market fair, select a child and take him or her home. No attempt was made to keep brothers and sisters together. Aside from very young children too small to be put to work, home children were not usually adopted in any formal or legal sense. Rather, they were indentured, placed in the care and custody of farm families to whom they were bound by a loose agreement.

Despite the good intentions of those running the distributing homes, sufficient precautions were not taken to ensure proper care of the children once they left the homes. Applicant farmers were not thoroughly screened as to suitability, and children were not visited regularly by an inspector despite government requirements. More often than not, a farmer's word that "things are fine" was accepted in lieu of an inspector's visit and detailed inquiry into a child's welfare. The homes lost track of many children. The children themselves lost track of brothers and sisters sent to other farms. In adulthood, many lacked birth certificates and had no knowledge of their families or of their medical histories.

Some children were treated kindly by farm families and fared well. But the broader experience, as evidenced in written and oral accounts recently gathered from former home children and their descendants, ranged from endless drudgery to outright horror. At the extreme end were children who were physically and psychologically abused in criminal ways, beaten, or inadequately clothed and fed. Few gained an education beyond the minimum government requirements, and not all received even that. Regardless of their treatment, all were exploited: by governments, by emigration agencies, and by farm families.

The child emigration movement had its sceptics from the beginning. In the 1870s, fearing that all was not well with its exported children, Britain appointed Andrew Doyle, a former inspector of poverty, to conduct an inquiry into the conditions of home children in Canada. After travelling to distributing homes and isolated farms through much of the country, Doyle filed a report which praised the devotion of the people who worked in the homes, most of them as volunteers, but then went on to condemn almost all aspects of the child emigration enterprise. He was most critical of the inadequate methods of supervision and the casual way in which children already in painful circumstances were set adrift in a strange country with little if any protection. His report caused much concern in Britain but was dismissed in Canada as the meddling of an outsider. The general feeling among Canadian officials, their rose-tinted spectacles firmly in place, was that the need for labour was great, and the arrangements for the children generous; besides, farmers were good, honest people who were bound to treat their charges well.

By the 1920s, politicians, labour leaders and social workers in Canada began to speak out on the question of child immigration. Among the most vocal critics were Charlotte Whitton, then director of the Canadian Welfare Council, and James Shaver Woodsworth, a member of parliament and future co-founder of the CCF party. Labour politicians in Britain were having

grave doubts as well, and in the fall of 1924 a British commission filed a report recommending that only children over the age of fourteen be sent to Canada. But this did not end juvenile immigration, for hundreds of teenagers, mostly boys, continued to arrive for farm work until the 1930s when, during the Great Depression, people feared that home children would take jobs away from Canadian citizens. Thus, it was economics that brought an end to the movement, just as it had been economic conditions that had engendered it.

The child emigration movement, little known to most Canadians, made a significant contribution to the country's social fabric. It is claimed that home children and their descendants form eleven per-cent of the population. They can be found in all walks of life, working as productive Canadians ... lawyers, teachers, nurses, social workers, factory hands, farmers, businessmen, successful parents and proud grandparents. The courage and perseverance of Canada's home children are legacies for future generations to respect and cherish.

Suggested further reading:

- Bagnell, Kenneth. *The Little Immigrants*. (Toronto, 1980)  
Harrison, Phyllis. *The Home Children*. (Winnipeg, 1979)  
Parr, Joy. *Labouring Children*. (Montreal, 1980)  
Wagner, Gillian. *Children of the Empire*. (London, Eng., 1982)



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