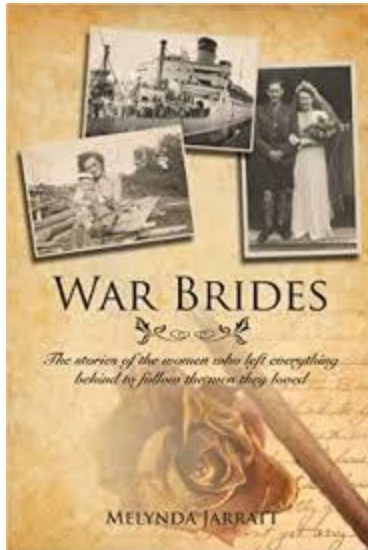


Canadian War Brides of the Second World War



Almost half a million Canadian servicemen were sent to Britain to assist in the war effort during the Second World War. Many of them were young and single, and it is not surprising that friendships with local women were struck. In fact, a significant number of these friendships led to marriage. Furthermore, marriages often had to be arranged hastily when a prospective groom was about to be ordered to the war zone in Europe or Africa. Many husbands did not return to their wives, but those that did so frequently came back to meet a 2- or 3-year-old son or daughter for the first time. There was further stress on the marriage, since at the end of the war these servicemen all had to be repatriated immediately to Canada. Wives and children were not allowed to accompany them.

And so, one of the largest post-war programs was instituted and the term "war bride" came into common usage. In January 1942, the Canadian government announced that "free repatriation would be

extended to dependants (wives, widows, and children) of Canadian personnel who served overseas with the Army, Navy and Air Force." Each dependant was entitled to one journey only, and that was to be Canada-bound. If they decided to leave Canada while the war continued, the dependants would not be given a Canadian exit visa, and they would not be given a second free trip. The Canadian government also offered to reimburse those women and children who had already travelled to Canada at their own cost. Free transportation of service families started as early as 1942 and continued until 1948. However, the greatest influx of such immigrants was seen in 1946, when almost 40,000 women and children crossed the Atlantic.

Initially the Immigration Branch of the Department of Mines and Resources was responsible for the transportation program, but in 1944 it was taken over by the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Wives' Bureau was established in London, working in conjunction with the Embarkation Transfer Unit (ETU). In all, 64,446 wives and children were relocated to Canada during the years 1942–1948. Brides came from all over Britain but started their journeys at hostels in major cities, London being the main venue. It often took several days for paperwork to be processed and medical examinations to be performed. When a ship was ready to receive passengers the women and children boarded trains that took them to their embarkation port.

Some 60 ships were involved in the program. These were of a variety of sizes and types (some were even luxury liners, like RMS *Queen Mary*) and had already been commandeered for military use to bring the troops from Canada to Britain and then back again in 1945. Many ships underwent major refitting to accommodate the different needs of the program. Ships left from Liverpool, Glasgow and Southampton and sailed to Halifax, Nova Scotia, docking at Pier 21.

Accommodation on board ship was usually tight, with several women and children sharing a set of bunkbeds in the same cabin. Each ship had a team of escort officers—women who worked for Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) such as the Canadian Red Cross. A large ship would be staffed with 15 officers, each responsible for up to 200 passengers. The escort officers looked after the daily needs of the war

brides and children from the time they arrived at the hostel until they disembarked at Halifax.

For the first few crossings, procedures were still being worked out, and some passengers experienced poor service and conditions. Crossings were also frequently rough, so seasickness was common. The smell of vomit and dirty diapers contributed to making these trips particularly unpleasant. On the plus side, food was good and plentiful, and those women who were not ill did appreciate the change from the dreary wartime rations. The problems were identified and quickly addressed, however, and before long the entire operation began to run smoothly. In large part this was due to the efficiency of the escort officers and the energy they put into their work.

On arrival in Halifax the new immigrants found they had further trials to undergo. They were often greeted by a brass band and (at least initially) each was escorted off the ship personally by a soldier; however, more paperwork processing was required, and they had to be organized in groups based on their final destination. Also, frequently a ship would dock late in the day and another night would need to be spent on board, followed by an early start the next morning. The women whose husbands were residents of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick had it best: they could sometimes be met inside the immigration hall by their families. Most women, however, were destined for a long train journey to other parts of Canada.

Once the war brides and their children had been processed at Halifax, the ETU movement control, along with VADs such as the Red Cross, took over the responsibility for their transportation across Canada. During the war and the repatriation that followed, the ETU operated in conjunction with the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National railways in moving troops and vital freight across Canada. By the end of 1945, when the bulk of Canadian troops had been repatriated, the railway military staff remained intact for the transportation of war brides and their children, which began in earnest in February 1946.

Train journeys were long and arduous, having to stop at multiple points en route going west. Providing families with up-to-date schedules and arrival notifications was a full-time job for ETU staff. Each stop had a "train meeting committee" made up of local Red Cross members. Their responsibility was to ensure that all expected brides and their children disembarked and were met by a husband or family members. During 1946 alone, New Brunswick Red Cross turned out, day and night, winter and summer, to meet an astonishing 2083 servicemen's dependants headed to villages, towns and cities across the province. Cases of late arrival (or sometimes non-arrival) of reception parties often slowed down the process. For certain arrivals, a connection to another train was required, and sometimes it was up to the local VAD member to accommodate the bride and her accompanying children for the night at her own home.

Canada tried to ensure that every bride was given a warm welcome, and local newspapers were encouraged to send reporters and photographers for train arrivals. Gifts of candy and baby supplies were abundant. Many stories can be found of such events in the newspaper archives.

In the vast majority of cases the integration of the immigrants into their new environment was successful. Government surveys were conducted, and they confirm this. There were, of course, surprises and hardships for some. Husbands did not always fully prepare their new brides for what to expect.

Some exaggerated the comfort and conditions of their home or town. Language, vocabulary, culture, and housing facilities were frequent factors that made settling-in difficult; however, most women managed to adapt to their new lifestyle. A report from a survey in New Brunswick stated that of 1820 marriages, 1760 brides were still in the province as of January 1947. Of the 60 who had left, 38 had moved to other parts of Canada or the United States, one had died, and 21 had returned overseas. Of the 21 who returned, only 12 left Canada because they did not like it, and only 2 obtained divorces.

As of this writing (2020) war brides are in their 90s and dwindling in number. BIFHSGO is proud to recognize their contribution to the history of Canada.

This introduction to the BIFHSGO War Brides project uses information (and some wording) included in

The War Brides of New Brunswick by Melynda Jarratt, "A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of New Brunswick, May 26, 1995."
BIFHSGO thanks Melynda for her support of our project.

Other recommended references:

A) Books

- [Against the Tide](#) by Marjorie Davidson
- [Blackouts to Bright Lights: Canadian War Bride Stories](#) by Barbara Ladouceur and Phyllis Spence
- [Brass Buttons and Silver Horseshoes: Stories from Canada's War Brides](#) by Linda Granfield
- [External Migration: A Study of the Available Statistics 1815–1950](#) by N.H. Carrier and J.R. Jeffery
- [From Romance to Reality](#) by Peggy O'Hara
- [If Kisses Were Roses: A 50th Anniversary Tribute to War Brides: Canada Remembers](#) by Helen Shewchuck
- [Micmac by Choice: Elsie Sark, An Island Legend](#) by Olga M. McKenna
- [Promise You'll Take Care of My Daughter: The Remarkable War Brides of World War II](#) by Ben Wicks
- [The Half Million: The Canadians in Britain, 1939-1946](#) by C.P. Stacey and Barbara Wilson
- [The War Brides](#) by Joyce Hibbert
- [Voices of the Left Behind: Project Roots and the Canadian War Children of World War II](#) by Olga Rains, Lloyd Rains and Melynda Jarratt
- [We Became Canadians](#) by Olga Rains
- [We Came from Over the Sea: British War Brides in Newfoundland](#) by Barbara B. Barrett
- [Information for wives of soldiers coming from overseas](#) by the Repatriation Committee [1918]
- [War Brides: The Stories of the Women who left everything behind to follow the men they loved](#) by Melynda Jarratt
- [Captured Hearts: New Brunswick's War Brides](#) by Melynda Jarratt
- [Voices of the Left Behind](#)

B) Websites

- [Artist Bev Tosh](#)
- [Canada's Historic Places: Pier 21 and Canada's War Brides](#)
- [Canadian War Brides](#)
- [Canadian War Brides of the First World War](#)
- [Love and War: Canadian War Brides](#) (CBC Digital Archives documentary)
- [Major Waves of Immigration through Pier 21: War Brides and Their Children](#)
- [Veterans Affairs Canada: Canadian War Brides](#)