

Laying the Children's Ghosts to Rest

Sean Arthur Joyce

On February 24, 2010, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown publicly apologized to the families of the approximately 130,000 children who were emigrated from Britain to the colonies between roughly 1867-1967. For the elderly survivors and their descendants, numbering now into the millions in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, it was a long awaited moment, one some thought might never arrive. Many of these former child immigrants endured horrific physical, emotional or sexual abuse and nearly all of them were worked like beasts of burden. Indeed, on the balance sheet of empire, they figured as little more than that. In 19th century Malthusian and social Darwinist terms, these children were 'surplus population', unwanted because they were poor. Imagine growing up carrying that in your psyche.

For the British governments of the day child emigration was a politically expedient solution to the burgeoning poverty problem created by the upheaval of the Industrial Revolution. With the advent of mechanization, an agrarian/craft-based economy was uprooted virtually overnight and with it, hundreds of thousands of workers, who were suddenly unemployed. Britain's cities were inundated with families struggling to survive, giving rise to roving gangs of half-starved street children as immortalized in the novels of Charles Dickens. The parish relief system originally established under Elizabethan era Poor Laws, even with its cold, massive workhouses and orphanages, was overwhelmed. The religious revivals of the 1860s led to social reformers like Annie McPherson and Thomas Barnardo getting involved and they hit upon the idea of exporting children to the colonies. Both church and government were soon on board since it was a way of reducing the expenses of maintaining children in the orphanages.

Parish priests were given the authority to take children "into care" as wards of the State if it was determined that the family was too poor to support them. Barnardo called this practice "philanthropic abductions." Poor parents unwilling to give up their children had little choice. Once taken from their families, children were essentially branded 'orphans', regardless of whether their parents survived or not. Although parents could occasionally visit their children in the orphanages, some were shocked to discover that what they had considered a temporary placement had become permanent. Or worse, that they had been shipped overseas. Most of these

parents would never see their children again. With state, church and charitable subsidies some emigrationists earned as much as £2 a head for transporting children in the late 1800s. A single ship might carry as few as two dozen and as many as a hundred or more children bound for Australia, Canada or New Zealand.

Probably millions of Canadians are now descended of the 100,000 or so child immigrants sent to this country by Britain. In Canada they came rather ironically to be known as the 'home children' though few were adopted into Canadian families. 'Homeboy' came to be an insult and child immigrants did their best to hide their origins. Depending on your political views, you could argue that it was a necessary phase in the development of a new country and that once grown up, the home children had a whole new country of opportunities before them. Certainly Canadian farms were desperately short of labourers. But from a humanitarian perspective it was a disaster. Girls were often sexually molested and boys worked like draft animals. Often they had to sleep in the barn with the horses and cows. The fact that capitalism's so-called 'global economy' still exploits children in sweatshops and unregulated factories around the world demonstrates that we have yet to learn from this tainted chapter of our past.

I am the descendant of one such child immigrant. My grandfather Cyril William Joyce was sent to Canada in 1926 as a boy of 16. His father George was a 'commercial traveller' and the family lived in the poverty-stricken east end of London—East Ham, to be precise. Cyril spent several years working as an indentured farm labourer in northern Alberta until reaching legal age. He never spoke of it much with his wife and children, and spoke even less of his family in England. His mother had signed the emigration papers and he never spoke of her again. Shame is a powerful silencer, but it doesn't stop the pain. What one generation leaves unfinished, the next one will have to deal with. I grew up with no connection to my English relatives and a huge hole in my psyche that wondered what had happened. Interestingly, I unconsciously imitated my grandfather's pattern when I left home at the early age of 15 due to family disagreements. Sadly, Cyril was unable to loosen the bonds on these painful memories and took his family secrets to his grave. When PM Brown's apology came I had already felt 'called' by my grandfather to spend more than two years researching his history. What I call 'walking the path of the ancestors' led me to the child immigrants.

It was decades before any system of Canadian government inspections of immigrant children was created and even then child welfare agencies were grossly under-funded. It took until 1924 for the minimum age of child immigrants to be raised to 14. Our past governments paid to bring these boys and girls here, then largely abandoned them to their fates on isolated farms in the Maritimes, Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba and later, the West. Yet not once in all my years of public schooling did I learn about Canada's home children. And still Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government refuses to step up to the plate as the Prime Ministers of Australia and Britain have done with an apology and some restitution. The time is long past due for Canadians to own up to this and help lay the children's ghosts to rest.

As my Uncle Rob Joyce wrote upon hearing of Brown's apology: "It is a great day, I wish we could be reading this with Dad now, that would have made it even better. I understand Dad better now than I ever did, and why he was sad at times for reasons I never knew. An understanding that, like the British Government's apology has come, sadly, much too late."

The elders of the Native American Siksika/Sauk Blackfeet nation say there is great healing power in the acknowledgement of past wrongs, and that healing goes both forward and backward in time. The children's ghosts are waiting. Let the healing begin.

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