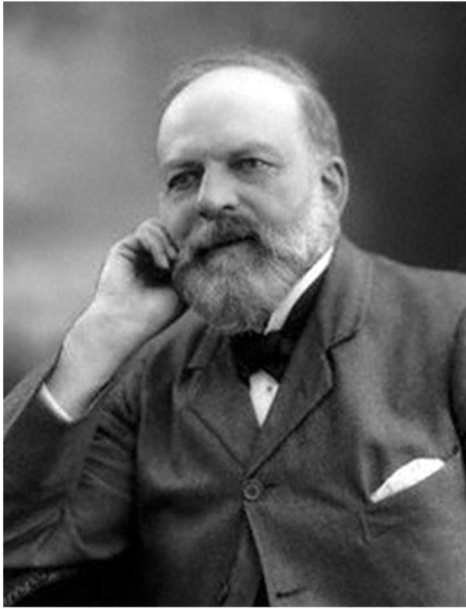


March, 2016



# *British Home Child Group International*

## **Sir John Kirk — A Children's Friend In Britain and Canada** By Peter Mitchell



An unremarkable man with an unremarkable name, John Kirk dedicated his life to improving the lives of those deemed insignificant by Victorian society: the juvenile street arabs and gutter snipes that littered the streets of London.

His volunteer work began in 1863 at the Ann Street Ragged School, one of hundreds of religious charitable schools established to teach the rudiments of reading and writing to children who were often so poor they were clothed in rags. The Ragged School Union, which had been established in 1844 to unite these schools to fortify their influence, took notice of the young volunteer and hired him as their Assistant Secretary in 1867. John's career progressed quickly and he was appointed Secretary in 1880. He continued to labour—a middle-class middleman moving between the ranks of the ragged and the royal—until shortly before his death in April 1922. His efforts did not go unnoticed, and in 1907 King Edward VII rewarded him with a surprise knighthood that saw Sir John Kirk hailed in newspapers around the world as "The Children's Friend."

Sir John's work was not limited to the labyrinth of squalor that plagued the Great Metropolis. He often toured England, Europe and the Empire promoting the work of the Ragged School Union, and espousing the virtues of the ragged classes as productive, labouring citizens that could benefit all society. His greatest journey occurred in 1911 and 1912 when he circled the globe to investigate the options available for child emigration. This tour saw him visit Sri Lanka, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Hawaii, and finally North America where he was reunited with J. J. Kelso, the Director of the Children's Aid Society.

*Continued on page 2.....*

MP Judy Sgro joined Sandra Joyce and Karen Mahoney at a talk presented to attentive grade sevens and eights and their teachers at St. Andre Catholic school in her York West riding. Principal Bria and the teachers were given fact sheet handouts and topics of discussion to follow up with their classes. It is our hope that many children went home to ask their own families about their personal history as well as made them aware of the story of the British Home Children and their estimated four million Canadian descendants.



## Sir John Kirk — A Children's Friend In Britain and Canada *continued*

The two men had met when Kirk toured Canada in 1890 and taken an immediate liking to each other. It was during that trip, on a memorable August 22, that Kirk accompanied a group of 300 children as they crossed Lake Ontario on the 'Chicoutimi' to enjoy a day's outing at Victoria Park as part of Kelso's Fresh Air Fund initiative.

The visiting Londoner was so impressed with the experience that on returning home he partnered with newspaper publisher Arthur Pearson to start Pearson's Fresh Air Fund. It was an immediate success, and helped foster a sense of blind trust between the charitable scions of both countries.

In the years that followed Kirk and Kelso built a solid friendship that spanned the Atlantic. When they reunited in 1912 Sir John was keen to voice approval of the recognition his friend's efforts had received in a speech he delivered at the Waldorf Hotel in Hamilton on January 22.



"I am pleased to see that the Government of Canada has seen fit to place such a man as J. J. Kelso at the head of the movement for caring for neglected children," Sir John said. "Ontario has the right way of handling the child problem. Placing the children under a Government department, as is done here, is the only really effective way."

With their mutual admiration acknowledged and suitably applauded, Sir John got to the heart of the reason for his tour. He commended the advancements that had been made in England and her Dominions on behalf of their impoverished children that saw these unfortunates rise from the status of societal nuisance to valuable components in the building of the British Empire.

He stressed that while every effort should be made to preserve the family unit, it was the duty of all to step in when that unit failed.

"We have discovered that children must be given a chance at the start," he said, "And if the attention were given them that a farmer gives his stock,

the world would be better for it today; a child cannot be too particular in the choice of his parents. During the past few years there have been marvellous changes, and unless you



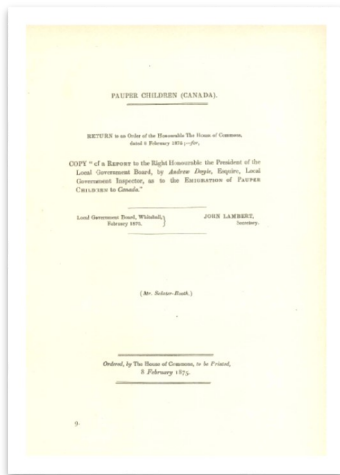
get good stock you can't hope that a change of environment will make good citizens."

The speech and the tour were great successes. After returning to London, Sir John gave his report to the Ragged School Union Council in a meeting held February 9. He had nothing but praise for Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, and recommended the Council revive their efforts in Emigration. He felt confident in the welcome that would greet young emigrants sent from Mother England.

He remarked, "I realised, as never before, the eagerness which existed to get our young life to the Colonies."

*Peter Mitchell is a descendant of Sir John Kirk, and is currently working on his biography.*

## Andrew Doyle and The Doyle Report by Sandra Joyce

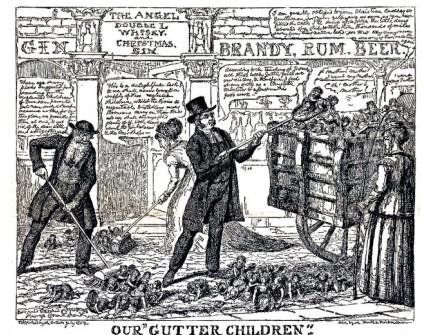


In 1874, an inquiry was initiated in England after unfavourable reports had reached that country about some of the children who had been emigrated to Canada through Miss Maria Rye's and Miss Annie MacPherson's Homes. There had been rumours of mistreatment, improper placement and supervision of children and suggestions that some philanthropists were personally profiting from public funds they had received.

The inquiry was conducted by Local Government Board Inspector Mr. Andrew Doyle who visited Canada to interview around 400 children and his report, published in 1875, expressed serious concerns relating to their welfare and aftercare. Doyle was a senior inspector of the Local Government Board after having been an Inspector of the Poor Law for many years. Besides discharging his duties as an Inspector, he was often called upon to undertake work of a special and important nature, like vagrancy, pauper education and 'lunatics' and he drafted a detailed report entailing the sanitary conditions of his district after the passing of the first Public Health Act.

The children selected to be interviewed included the impoverished as well as 'arab' or street children and encompassed the very young up to the age of 15. Doyle's 75 page report concluded that more discrimination and greater supervision was required in the selection of placements for the children. Although young children were frequently adopted, and generally well placed and treated with kindness and affection; the majority of older children were placed in farm service and many of them suffered hardship, ill-treatment and deprivation. He thought that safeguards must be put in place to provide for their protection by suggesting the local government in Canada provide a system for visiting and supervising children. Local committees could be established and visits made by school inspectors.

He found that many children had not been visited for two to three years, and many others had been lost altogether. He recommended that girls should not be sent to Canada after the age of about 7 to 8 years, as older girls tended to suffer more than younger children from homesickness. He found that providing they could find good homes for the young children, it seemed to be advantageous to send them to Canada. Finally, if the emigration of pauper children was to continue, they should be separated completely from those known as 'street' children. In his report, Doyle singled out Miss Maria Rye mainly due to the inadequate supervising and placement of the children.



Despite this setback, Miss Rye continued her activities and over a 25-year period placed around 5,000 girls in new homes in Canada. In 1895, she handed over her home and her work to the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society.

William Quarrier was particularly troubled by the Doyle Report. He believed the children he was sending to Canada would become good future Canadian citizens. In 1897, after two years of reducing the numbers sent, William Quarrier stopped emigration to Canada altogether for the remainder of his life. In 1904, with his daughters at the helm, Quarrier's homes resumed child migration and continued until 1928. Between 1871 and 1928 Quarrier's Homes sent up to 7,500 children.

Doyle's report was rejected by the Canadian government, who then set up a Commons Select Committee on Immigration and produced its own report to demonstrate that child labour importation was both successful and beneficial. In 1884, the provincial governments were given the responsibility for supervising the child migrants. In 1897, the Ontario government created the Act to Regulate the Immigration into Ontario of Certain Classes of Children, by which each agency was to be inspected quarterly and the children should be supervised until the age of 18. The Act also stipulated that all child emigration agencies were to maintain proper homes for the children and made it an offense to bring any child who was intellectually or physically defective or had been convicted of a crime. Similar acts followed in Manitoba, Quebec, and Nova Scotia.

Doyle retired from the Local Government Board in 1876, after 28 years' service, but continued, on the invitation of successive Governments, to discharge important functions including being a Royal Commissioner in Ireland. He died in December, 1888.



## The Red Brick Wall by Ali Thompson - Foreword by Sandra Joyce

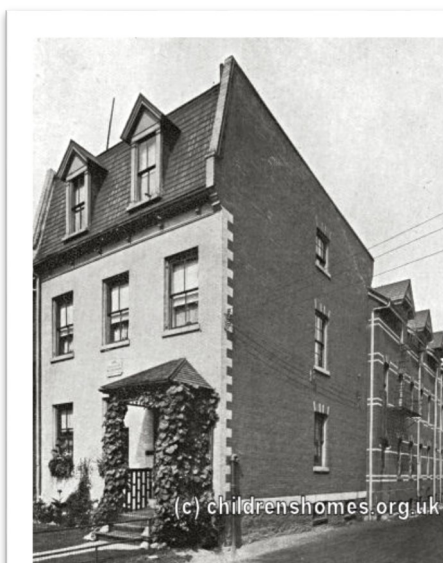
Boarded up and abandoned, the once magnificent building at 295 George Street is still cordoned off, a danger to all attempting to enter. This home is located in a formerly prosperous, thriving area of Toronto owned by the wealthy Allan family — after whom the Allan Gardens is named.

It is one of the oldest buildings in the city, erected in a subdivision built in 1853. With the construction of new areas such as Rosedale, the wealthy moved away from the once prestigious neighbourhood, which had started to change.

In 1884, 295 George Street was bought by William Gooderham Jr., a philanthropist and member of the well-known family of distillers. The building was then handed over to J.W.C. Fegan for the purpose of establishing the Fegan Boys' Distributing Home. This was one of the many such organizations to bring destitute young boys over from Britain and prepare them to work on farms.

The house was used for that purpose into the late 1930s, when the British Home Child scheme petered out. It was then used as a home for the disabled and later, as a storage facility. After Seaton House, Toronto's largest men's homeless shelter was established in the 1950s, the street fell further into notoriety and most buildings on that street became rooming houses.

A year and a half ago, Eleanor McGrath, a local writer and filmmaker became interested in the property on George Street while doing research for a film on Irish immigrants to Toronto. One day she noticed some new fencing around the building and contacted the Heritage Preservation Services to ask that they look into the building as a heritage site.



The next day it was partially destroyed by a fire.

"I'm still in shock," Eleanor said in a Toronto Star article, "about the timing."

McGrath went on to make a film called *Forgotten*, inspired by the story of the building and the story of the British Home Children.

The City of Toronto has since bought the building and has developed plans for the refurbishment of the heritage homes in the area.

The following is a story written by Ali Thompson, the daughter of one of the Fegan boys who passed through this house:

This is a story about my dad, Henry Atcheson Thompson who was born on November 11, 1901 in England, the eldest son to Alice and William Thompson.

My dad was the eldest of three sons and luck did not follow him in his youth and barely existed in his adult life. As the eldest, he was encouraged to watch out for his two younger brothers, Sheriff and Richard.

Only dad understood what impact his mother's death at 26 would have on their young lives. Dad was seven years old when his mother, my grandmother, knew she was not going to survive the TB that attacked her young body and she made the arrangements to entrust her three sons into the care of her mother, a great aunt and her three single adult siblings. Dad's mom returned to their home without her sons and died in a sense of peace knowing she had done the best for her three sons ages 7, 5, and 3 years. It is uncertain where the boys' father was although he was listed as 'the informant (witness) on his wife's death certificate. *Continued on page 5.....*

## The Red Brick Wall *continued*

Three active boys are no match for a quiet serene lifestyle with adults at the best of times and so, Alice's three siblings decided that their nephews had to leave. At 75, dad still remembered the fear and isolation that riddled their innocent hearts on the dreadful day their one auntie took them to a train station, sending them far away to Fegan's Orphanage for boys in London.

The three little boys realized that their lives were about to change drastically and were beside themselves on the journey. The conductor told them not to cry, that he would look after them but that was of little comfort during the long ride. The train steamed into London station, stopping in front of a Fegan's worker waiting to scoop up the boys!



Upon arrival at the Fegan's property, the three lads were escorted through what seemed like a thousand boys of various ages with little to no hair. This scared the three brothers even more, especially when they were walked into the room where their heads were shaven without any explanation. Even though they were starving, they were afraid to ask for anything to eat.

The adjustment and long days ahead changed their values and outlook and interest in life. They never heard from their aunties or uncle or grandmother while they were at Fegan's in England. In due time, the three boys were destined to become part of the British Home Children [BHC] immigration scheme.

The boys crossed an ocean, travelled by train to Toronto and were scooped up by farmers and placed on three different farms. They tried hard to be brave. It is recorded that Canadian government inspectors visited each farm conversing with the farmer in the presence of the boys or perhaps without their knowledge. The boys' feelings, concerns or conditions did not seem to be of much interest to the farmer — at least in my dad's case. My dad died at 82, with most of his story untold, trapped in his mind and being a very unsettled, lonely man.

Even though the three boys still had family, their English relatives who chose not to keep them maintained contact with the boys in Canada until the last Auntie died in 1958. They continued to make it clear the three boys were not to come back to their English home and they were better off in Canada.



I came across his BHC story by accident — having heard about British Home Children, I had a feeling that my dad was one. A friend directed me to a well-known author, Marjorie Kohli, who put me in touch with Irene Fry. Irene has the Fegan's inspector's journals in safekeeping and shared the contents with me. I was able to view the three boys' years as indentured farm workers recorded by a government-paid inspector.

Throughout my dad's life, he never ever spoke to me about his hardships or difficult times as a farm boy who was kept in a barn, treated like an animal and expected to do a man's work. After viewing these records, Irene Fry introduced me to Eleanor McGrath, who had decided to produce a film called *Forgotten* about the British Home Children.

Eleanor McGrath invested four years in intense research on the Fegan's distribution home at 295 George Street, Toronto and diligently recorded so many stories from British Home Children still alive and their descendants.

One amazing discovery at George Street in the presence of some Fegan's descendants was a red brick wall full of names and dates carved into them by Fegan boys over the time that the building was a BHC receiving home.

Through Eleanor McGrath's film, *Forgotten*, this precious historical red brick wall has been recorded for all posterity.

*NOTE: After correspondence began in 2013 between Shirley Studevant, the Ontario Genealogical Society's President, and the City of Toronto, asking about the preservation of the red brick wall and offering OGS assistance, the OGS received this answer in April 2014: "After the City takes possession next week, we will issue an RFP for the stabilization of the heritage houses until the redevelopment begins...Specs for stabilization include the installation of a frame around the inscription, with hoarding and sealant across the top. This will remain in place until the redevelopment begins, likely in 2018." Courtesy the OGS blog from April 4, 2014.*



# British Home Child Group International

Stay in Touch!

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By regular mail: 97 Dagmar Ave., Toronto, ON, M4M 1V9

Our website: [www.britishhomechild.com](http://www.britishhomechild.com)

To book a speaker: [sandrajoyce@rogers.com](mailto:sandrajoyce@rogers.com)

Follow us!



## Upcoming Events

Heritage York—Lambton House

March 10 @7:30pm to 9:00pm

Esquesing Historical Society

April 13 @7:30p-9:30pm

Streetsville Historical Society

April 14th @7:30-9:30pm

York Grand River Historical Society

April 19 @ 7:00pm-9:pm

Halton-Peel Ontario Genealogical Society  
Branch

April 24th @ 2:00pm-4:00pm

Montreal's Atwater Library

April 28 @12:30-1:30pm

