

“Safe Keeping”

Echoes from a Vanished World

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“I really believe the separation gets worse instead of better.

*However, it really doesn't matter what we feel as long as the children
are safe & well. That's why we sent them there to you — for their
safe keeping, not for our pleasure.”*

Vera Cooke to Grace Bacon, November 22nd 1942.

Synopsis

It was the spring of 1940 and the countries of Europe had collapsed in sequence before the military might of Hitler's Germany. Standing alone in proud isolation, Churchill's England awaited the promised invasion. In this moment of impending catastrophe, a small boy, bound for sanctuary in New England, found himself gazing at the telltale wake of a U-Boat's torpedo headed towards him, the heavy blast of exploding depth charges reverberating over the sullen grey Atlantic swell.

Thus begins the touching saga of four rich childhood years, lovingly recounted in *Safekeeping* — four years amazingly documented through an extraordinary hoard of correspondence that had lain hidden for over sixty years.

In *Safe Keeping* we discover the intimate story of a small boy's wartime exile in America, documented month-by-month through the perceptive letters passing between an anxious mother in war-torn England and a wise and understanding foster mother in Connecticut, enhanced by letters from the boy himself.

But *Safe Keeping* is much more than just the moving story of a rediscovered childhood. The two mothers were women of remarkable insight and humanity, and their letters resonate on many levels for they were articulate correspondents. As their friendship develops we find them discussing through their letters, not only issues of war and peace and the many concerns common to all parents, but also probing the psychology of separation and loss, of foster-adoption, child-rearing and education. Struggling to maintain an illusion of normality in their lives, they unconsciously paint vivid vignettes of the impact of war on ordinary people as they report on rationing and shortages, conscription, death and sacrifice.

“The green Atlantic swell, turbulent and menacing, stretched off to meet the sky in every direction, and only the muffled explosions of distant depth charges could be heard above the wind. On deck, sheltering next to our appointed lifeboat, I watched uncomprehending but fascinated, the telltale wake of approaching torpedoes. It was 1940, and we were a party of children bound for safety in America, when a German submarine attacked us without warning.

Only a few short weeks before, as North Oxford filled with cherry blossom and summer’s languid tranquility started to envelope the city, my life as a five-year-old had been secure and well-ordered, but the ominous threat of invasion and Nazi domination was drawing ever closer. My safe, familiar world vanished forever when I embarked on that journey to sanctuary across the ocean. It was a dramatic overture to four wonderful years of exile in America.”

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Preface

“I want to go home.” My plaintive five-year-old voice was barely audible above the howling wind and the columns of spray ricocheting across the deck, yet it expressed the sentiments of most, if not all the passengers on board — and brought my mother close to tears.

The old Cunard liner *SS Antonia* was four days out of Liverpool bound for Canada, battling heavy weather several hundred miles to the West of Ireland. In those far-off days, before aircraft routinely made the journey in a few hours, the sea passage to the New World could be long and arduous. Rough transatlantic crossings were always frightening — and memories of the *Titanic* disaster, barely thirty years earlier, were still fresh. Fear showed on many faces. But it was not simple, primitive fear at nature’s wrath, but fear borne of the knowledge of a threat more real and sinister — a hidden threat lurking somewhere beneath the waves.

While I cannot recall uttering the words that so fueled my mother’s distress, the occasion itself is etched vividly into my archive of early memories. It was Friday, July 12th, 1940, and the convoy that had escorted us from the mouth of the Mersey was about to return to sea duties elsewhere. Suddenly alarms sounded, and we were rushed on deck to our lifeboat station — starboard side aft. The life-jackets, which we had been firmly instructed never to be without, were now donned in earnest. As we — my mother, two sisters and I — huddled together cold and bewildered, we learned that we were under attack from a German U-boat.

I was too young to experience the fear and foreboding that must have gripped the grown-ups. I recall only the intense excitement of the moment, preserved as an indelible mental image of the wake of a torpedo passing just a few feet under our stern — and of the heavy, ponderous explosions of depth charges dropped by our escorting Royal Navy Destroyers. Fear, buried in the subconscious, would only manifest itself later.

Just days before, my life had been safe and orderly — some might even say privileged — but Hitler’s impending

invasion destroyed my childhood idyll. To escape the threat of Nazi subjugation, generous offers of hospitality from America were to bring 105 Oxford children on this voyage to safety.

We were lucky to pass unharmed on our Atlantic crossing. Just two months later, 600 miles from land on the same route, the luxury liner *SS City of Benares*, also carrying children to refuge in America, was torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine. Ninety children perished in that midnight attack, and in all only thirteen passengers and crew survived. One family fleeing the London bombing, the Grimmonds, lost all five children on their voyage in search of sanctuary.

The arrival of our ship in Quebec on the morning of Friday, July 19th was greeted with profound relief by those on board, and with jubilation by enthusiastic crowds thronging the quayside to welcome us, particularly a contingent of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry waiting to embark for the homeward journey. Our narrow escape had captured popular imagination, and the press would pursue us vigorously for stories as we travelled on to Montreal and beyond.

Our arrival also marked the start of my American exile, which was to last for almost four years, and whose legacy would come to dominate all aspects of my life thereafter. Few exiles can have left such profound and happy memories as my American childhood. This book is the story of that exile; documented month-by-month in the correspondence exchanged between my concerned mother in distant, war-torn England, and Grace Bacon, my patient and understanding American foster mother with six children of her own. A further significant dimension to the story is added by my own buoyant letters home. These were lovingly taken down at breakneck speed on the typewriter as I spoke, and joyously capture the confused torrent of thoughts pouring from the mind of a disorderly but enthusiastic little boy.

Painted in broad brush-strokes, the first chapter provides a backdrop against which the mother-to-mother letters themselves can be read in perspective and better understood in their social and historical context.

It is impossible to deny that for me, the war proved a positive experience, and contributed, albeit indirectly, to a particularly happy period of my life. However, the fact that I

was able to benefit from the conflict has, even today more than sixty years on, left a residue of conscience that continues to trouble me. It is not just the thought of those who perished on my behalf on the battlefield. As the horrors of the Holocaust were revealed after the war, spreading like a dark stain to tarnish the peace and mute the jubilation of victory, I felt guilt at having escaped and enjoyed so much delight while so many perished so terribly. The publication of this book will be thus, for me, something of a bitter-sweet celebration.