



Anglo-Celtic Roots

Quarterly Chronicle • Volume 27, Number 1 • Spring 2021

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**Researching WW II British War Brides
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War Brides of the First World War

Minutes of the 2020 Annual General Meeting



Anglo-Celtic Roots

This journal is published quarterly in March, June, September and December by the British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa and sent free to members.

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Canadian Publications Mail Sales Product Agreement No. 40015222
Indexed in the Periodical Source Index (PERSI)

Editor: Barbara Tose

Assistant Editor: Christine Jackson

Editors Emeritus: Jean Kitchen, Chris MacPhail

Layout Designer: Barbara Tose

Proofreaders: Anne Renwick, Christine Jackson, Sheila Dohoo Faure

British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa

Founded and incorporated in 1994

Charitable Registration No. 89227 4044RR0001

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Mary Imhoff, the War Bride on Our Family Tree[©]



BY CAROL ANNETT

Since joining the BIFHSGO Writing Group in 2006, Carol rarely missed a meeting before the pandemic. The group was on hiatus in 2020, but Carol managed to keep on writing. While helping a friend write about the war brides in her own family, Carol unexpectedly discovered that she had a war bride in her family tree too.

Mary Didlick Weds Regis Imhoff

The wedding took place in Smethwick, Staffordshire, in April 1945, just before the official end of WW II in Europe.¹ When Mary Didlick, an Englishwoman, married Regis Imhoff, a Canadian soldier, she would become one of the nearly 44,000 war brides who wed Canadian servicemen and moved to Canada after the war. As Mary later claimed, her husband tried to prepare her for New Brunswick. She also said “There is one thing about my husband. He told me that he

didn’t own anything . . . He said ‘I don’t own the clothes on my back but I’m telling you the truth, I promise that you’ll never be without and I’ll build you a house when you come over’ and he made that promise.”²

Historian Melynda Jarratt included Mary’s candid comments in her master’s thesis, and in her book, *Captured Hearts*, about war brides of New Brunswick. A desire to learn more about Canadian war brides had led me to Melynda’s excellent website, www.canadianwarbrides.com.³ There I found a gold mine of

information about war brides in general, and, to my amazement, I discovered a family connection to one war bride in particular—Mary Imhoff.

Discovering an Imhoff Relative

When I read Melynda's thesis, Mary Imhoff's unusual surname caught

Mary Imhoff's Acadian husband from Bathurst told her the truth about what she could expect in Canada, and that honesty is what prepared her for the long and sometimes difficult years ahead on the north shore of New Brunswick.

Melynda Jarratt^{4,5}

my attention. My husband's maternal grandmother was an Imhoff. Research soon confirmed that Mary Imhoff's husband Regis, from Bathurst, New Brunswick, and my husband Richard Annett's maternal grandmother, Mabel Imhoff, of New Carlisle, Quebec, were related. Regis and Mabel were second cousins. His wife Mary was now the only war bride on our family tree. I wanted to know more about her. Did Mary really know what to expect in New Brunswick? How much did she know about Regis Imhoff?

Imhoff History

Mary would never meet either of Regis's parents. His mother, Seraphine Legacy, died when he was 4 years old and his father, Israel Imhoff, died seven years later.^{6, 7, 8} Mary was told that her husband had

Acadian heritage, and that is likely true. But the Imhoffs were of German origin.^{9, 10} Regis's Imhoff ancestor had come to British North America from Brunswick, Germany, 138 years before Regis was born. In 1985, my father-in-law, Gaspé historian Ken Annett, who married

Mabel Imhoff's daughter, Velma, included a chapter called "The Imhoff Family" in his self-published collection *Gaspé of Yesterday* in which he tells the story of the Gaspé Imhoffs.¹¹

In 1776, the British government recruited experienced soldiers from Germany—called Hessians—to bolster their forces in North America. From April 1776 onwards, more than 30 ships carry-ing a total of 30,000 Hessian troops sailed across the Atlantic from Portsmouth, England. Most were bound for New York, but the Brunswick Dismounted Dragoons Regiment was stationed in Québec. Johann Ludwig Louis (Lewis) Imhoff was one of these Brunswickers. He spent seven years with this regiment repelling the American invaders who threatened to take over Montréal and Fortress Québec. When he retired from active duty, Louis petitioned to remain in Lower Canada with the Loyalists who were settling in New Carlisle on the Gaspé Peninsula.

Quebec and New Brunswick Imhoffs

Mabel Imhoff belonged to a branch of Louis Imhoff's descendants who stayed in New Carlisle, Québec.¹²⁻¹⁶ Regis Imhoff was descended from a branch of the family who moved across the Baie des Chaleurs to northern New Brunswick.^{17, 18} The Imhoffs were farmers, but Regis's father also worked as a hunting and fishing guide. In the 1911 Census,

his place of work is listed as "Forest."

After 1881, census records show that Imhoffs on both sides of the Baie des Chaleurs stopped giving their "racial/tribal origin" as German. Instead, they said were English, Irish, French, or Dutch.¹⁹⁻²⁷ As often happens with the passage of generations, the story of an early ancestor is lost.

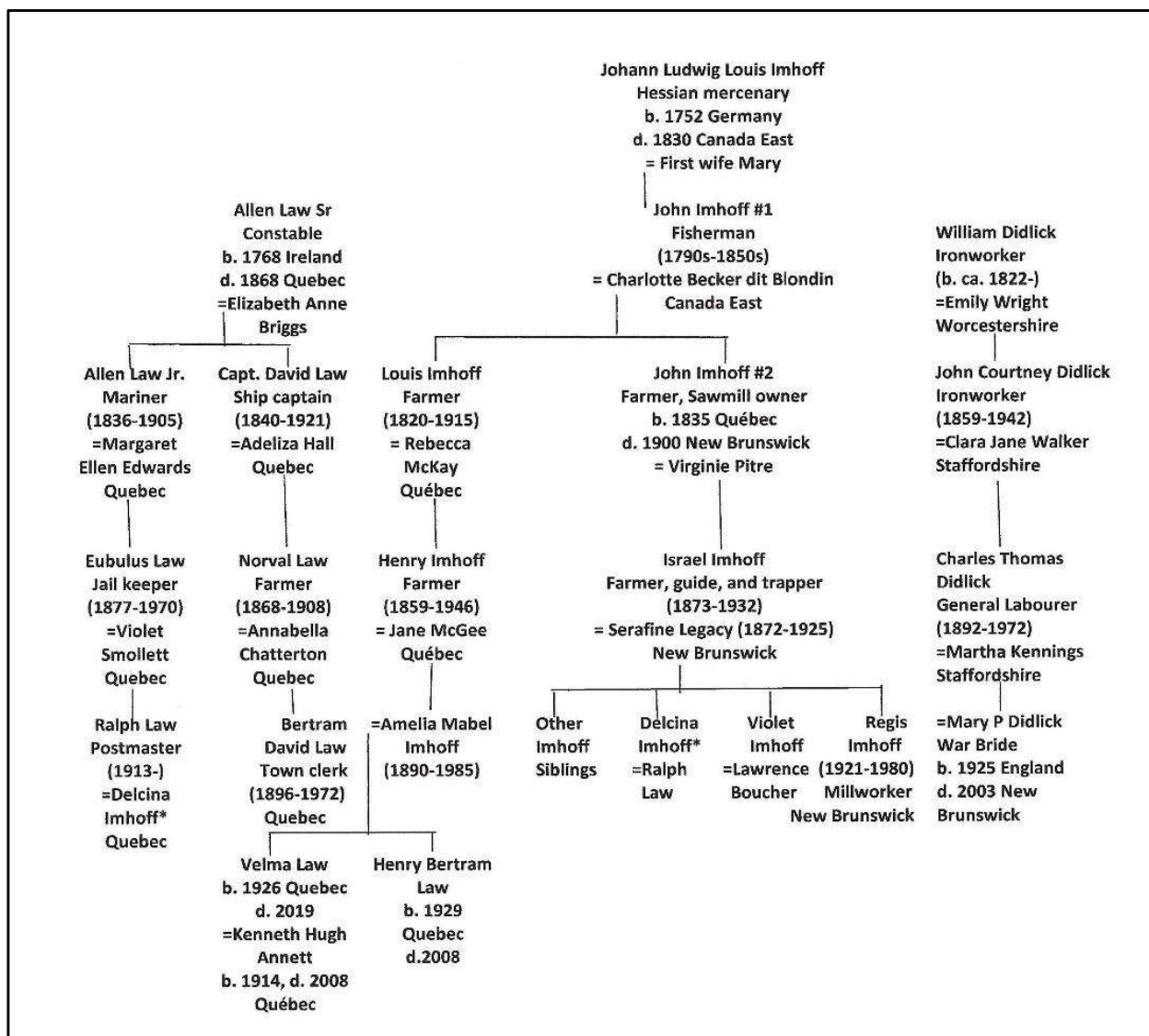


Figure 1: Relationship between Regis Imhoff and Mabel Law

Source: Author

Both Regis and Mabel came from generations of large Roman Catholic families. Regis was the youngest of nine children. Mabel was 30 years older than him; she was closer in age to his eldest siblings. In 1925, the same year as Regis's mother died,²⁸ Mabel Imhoff married Bertram Law.²⁹

Since Regis and Mabel's families lived on opposite sides of the water, they may not have been close. But these small maritime communities were strongly interconnected. Everyone in the Imhoff clan in the Gaspé would have been familiar with the Imhoff Settlement in northern New Brunswick. The Imhoff brothers were renowned hunting and fishing guides who ran numerous popular hunt camps.³⁰

In 1932, the shocking news would have reached Mabel Imhoff Law in New Carlisle that Regis's father Israel, an experienced guide, had frozen to death in the snow on his way home from setting traps one winter night, just a quarter of a mile from his home at South Tetagouche, New Brunswick.³¹ He was 58 years old. Regis was 11 years of age when his father died; he had to grow up in a hurry. Only two older siblings were still at home.

In 1939, Regis' sister, Delcina, left New Brunswick for New Carlisle, Quebec, to marry Ralph Law.³² Ralph was a third cousin of Bert Law, the husband of Delcina's

second cousin Mabel.^{33, 34} Ralph Law and Bert Law shared the same great-great-grandparents, Allen Law Sr. and Elizabeth Anne Briggs, who were born in Ireland and settled in the New Carlisle area between 1830 and 1835. Although Regis Imhoff now had a sister living in New Carlisle when he enlisted in the army, he gave as his next-of-kin his sister, Violette, Mrs. Lawrence Boucher, who lived in East Bathurst, where he lived.

Corporal Regis Imhoff

Regis Imhoff, a Canadian from New Brunswick, a descendant of a German mercenary who fought for the British in North America in the late 1700s, was about to go to war against the land of his German forebears. Regis may not have known about this historical twist of fate. Nor did he know that he would fall in love and marry an Englishwoman named Mary Didlick, who, despite his straightforward honesty, would find Bathurst, New Brunswick, quite different from Smethwick, Staffordshire.

Mary Didlick's Background

Mary Didlick was born in 1925 in Smethwick, an industrial town in the West Midlands, four miles west of the centre of Birmingham, the second-largest city in the United Kingdom.^{35, 36} Her working class parents were Charles Thomas Didlick, a general labourer, and his wife, Martha Kennings, a mineral

water filler, according to the 1939 England and Wales Register.^{37, 38} Mary's paternal grandfather and great-grandfather both lived in Staffordshire, employed as iron-workers.³⁹⁻⁴² In WW I, Mary's father, a general labourer, had enlisted in the Coldstream Guards.⁴³ In WW II, between August 1940 and April 1943, Mary, her parents and two siblings lived through the Birmingham Blitz.⁴⁴ The German Luftwaffe pounded Birmingham with around 1,900 tons of explosives, making it the third most heavily bombed city after London and Liverpool. In Smethwick, 80 people were killed in the bombing raids. Air raid sirens and bomb explosions were the soundtrack of Mary's adolescent years.

A Blind Date

When WW II began, Mary was 14 years of age. By the end of 1941, war service had become compulsory for women, so in 1942, at the age of 18, she joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service of the army as a cook, a profession she would later take up again in New Brunswick. In 1943, on a blind date in Trafalgar Square, Mary Didlick met a Canadian soldier named Regis Imhoff. He was serving in the army with the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment, which would land at Juno Beach on D-Day and fight in northwest Europe for the rest of the war. Regis was wounded early in

1945.^{45, 46} He returned to England and to Mary.

Marriage Counselling with the Regiment Padre

The couple would need permission before they could marry. Accompanying the North Shore regiment was Major Raymond Myles Hickey, Roman Catholic padre, who was later awarded the Military Cross for bravery under fire on D-Day.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹ One of Father Hickey's roles was to counsel couples who were planning to get married and warn potential wives about difficulties they might encounter in New Brunswick. Melynda Jarratt quotes a delightful story from Father Hickey's war memoir, *The Scarlet Dawn*, about a letter of caution he sent to one of the prospective war brides and her terse reply.⁵⁰

Dear Miss O'Brien:

I'm the Catholic chaplain of the regiment your friend Joe is in. He tells me you intend to marry. Now Joe is a fine good boy, but has he told you of the conditions you will be going to in Canada? For example, we have terrible winters where Joe and I come from; we have nine and ten feet of snow; it's awfully cold and there's ice from October to June.

And, secondly, Miss O'Brien, have you considered the language question? How are you going to get along with your Irish brogue—which I admit is sweet in your County Down, but out of place in Joe's French-speaking village?' And with a bit of fatherly advice, I closed my letter. Back by return mail, came

the answer. It was written post haste in lead pencil on, I think, paper she tore off the wall in her wrath. Here was the answer.

‘Dear Father Hickey:
Thank you for your letter. As to your first difficulty, I like snow, and secondly, love knows no language.
Yours truly,
Mary O’Brien’

If Mary Didlick had received such a letter from the chaplain, no doubt her response would have been similarly indignant. She would also have been warned of the challenges of a new language and deep drifts of snow. Whether Regis confided to Mary that his father had frozen to death during a New Brunswick winter, we don’t know. But for Mary, weather, language, and religion were no barrier to marrying the love of her life.

Two Wartime Weddings

Regis was Roman Catholic. If Mary wasn’t already of that faith, she would have agreed to convert to her husband’s religion, as many war brides did. Mary passed the required medical examination and introduced Regis to her parents, who gave their blessing. She and Regis submitted the “permission to marry” form and obtained a marriage licence. On 14 April 1945, Private Mary Patience Didlick, 20, of the Auxiliary Territorial Service and Corporal William Regis Imhoff, 25, of the Royal Canadian Army, were

married at St Philip’s Roman Catholic Church in Smethwick.^{51, 52}

Two months after Mary and Regis were married in England, a family wedding took place in Canada. On 26 June 1945, Mabel Imhoff Law was the mother-of-the-bride at the wedding of her daughter Velma Law to Kenneth Annett—my husband’s parents.⁵³ Unlike Regis, Ken never went overseas. He joined the RCAF as a radar technician and was posted to a radar station responsible for the air defence of Halifax harbour in Nova Scotia.⁵⁴ Unlike Mary, his sweetheart was a Canadian woman. Ken and Velma were married in her hometown of New Carlisle, where Regis’s sister Delcina, a hairdresser, lived with her husband Ralph Law, the assistant postmaster.⁵⁵ I wish I could ask my late mother-in-law, Vel Annett, whether her cousins Ralph and Delcina attended her wedding in New Carlisle.

On a clear day, across the Baie des Chaleurs from New Carlisle, the town of Bathurst is visible on the New Brunswick shore. There Regis Imhoff, repatriated to Canada ahead of his bride, would await her arrival.

Mrs. Mary Imhoff and Daughter Sail to Halifax

The Canadian Wives Bureau looked after the arrangements for transporting the war brides to Canada. The brides were put up overnight in a hostel, transported to a seaport,

either Liverpool or Southampton, and escorted on board their assigned ship bound for Pier 21 at Halifax Harbour, Nova Scotia. From Halifax, special trains were booked to take them to wherever they were going in Canada. Organizing transport to Canada for the 43,454 war brides and 20,997 children was a massive logistical feat. The press called it “Operation Daddy.” Only certain ships were deemed suitable for women with children. Mary had to wait over a year to depart for Canada. By then, she was anxious to reunite with Regis, the “Daddy” of their 5-month-old baby.⁵⁶

In July 1946, Mary Imhoff and her daughter sailed from Southampton to Halifax aboard the *Queen Mary*.⁵⁷ On the ship, she met other war brides going to New Brunswick. If she needed a break from the baby, there were always Red Cross Escort Officers available to look after her child. The workers would call her over the loudspeaker and ask her to return to the cabin if the baby was crying.⁵⁸ Mary felt well supported on the ship, but she didn’t know if anyone would meet her at her destination. According to the passenger list, her contact in Canada was Mrs. Lawrence Bouchy [sic] in East Bathurst, New Brunswick, a sister-in-law she had never met. Mary needn’t have worried.

After arriving in Halifax, Mary and the baby took a half-day journey by train. When the train stopped in

Bathurst, “Somebody said, ‘Is there anyone there to meet Mrs. Imhoff?’ ” Mary told Melynda Jarratt. “Oh, there was a dozen voices. One grabbed my baby, one grabbed my suitcase, and my husband grabbed me.”⁵⁹ Regis whisked them off to stay temporarily at his sister Violette’s home in the ominously named town of Rough Waters. Mary Imhoff wasn’t at Stony Lane in Smethwick now. Her tough, early years as a war bride in Canada had begun.

A War Bride’s Life in New Brunswick

Though Bathurst, New Brunswick, was an industrial town with a power and paper company, its population of around 3,500 in 1941 made it less densely populated and more rural than Smethwick (pop. 84,000 in 1931), where Mary had grown up.^{60, 61} Bathurst was originally an Indigenous community before people of Acadian, Irish, Scottish, and English heritage settled there. French remained a predominant language. The town sits on the Baie des Chaleurs at the mouth of four rivers, including the Nepisquit, whose rapids gave Rough Waters its name.⁶² Regis may have shown his bride the local scenery with its pleasant views of the sea, rivers, forest, and rural landscape untouched by bomb blasts. However, the couple had some pressing business to attend to—they needed a house of their own.

Regis had promised to build Mary a house. But when they moved into the home on the outskirts of Bathurst, it was only half finished.⁶³

Undaunted, Mary learned to put up drywall. Together, Mary and Regis finished the rooms as they needed them. When Regis was laid off from the mill in Bathurst and took a job at a lumber

camp, Mary came with him and got a job as a cook at the camp. Writes Melynda Jarratt, "The only thing she never got used to in those early years was having to melt snow to wash." Mary said "We used to have those big boilers on the top of the stove to heat water, and you'd come down in the morning and the water in the bucket froze. That was something new for me, I tell you."⁶⁴

Regis eventually got a permanent job at the mill in Bathurst, where he worked for the next 30 years. Mary looked after their children, who were her pride and joy. When their youngest son married, Mary and Regis gave him the house they had built, and they downsized into a trailer.⁶⁵

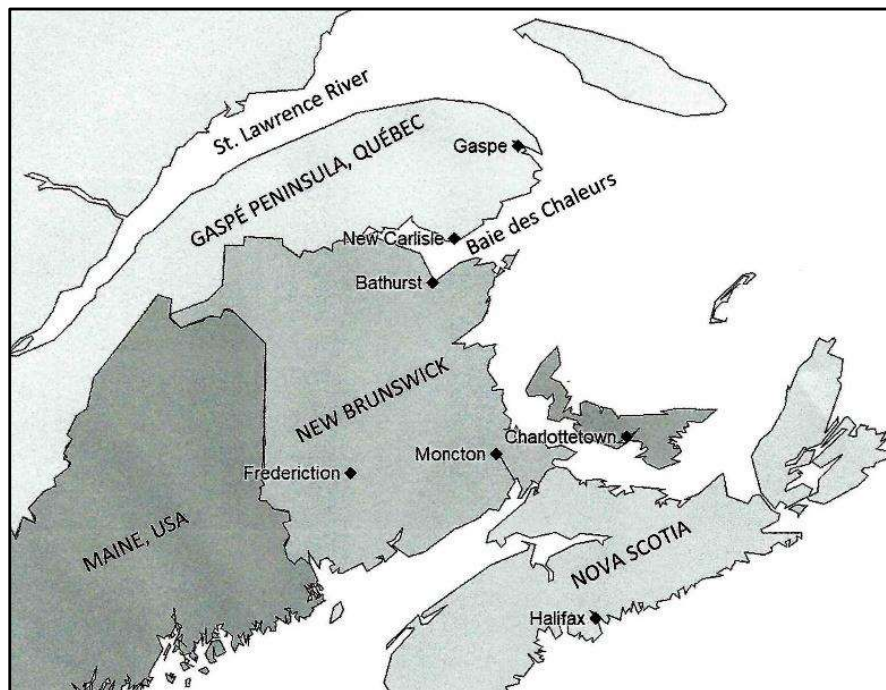


Figure 3: New Brunswick and environs

Source: Author

Mary Outlived Regis

Regis Imhoff died in 1980. He and Mary had been together for 35 years. When he was gone, Mary was lonely, so she sold the trailer and moved into Bathurst. Mary was a member of the Holy Family Catholic Women's League. She was active in the Royal Canadian Legion and a member and past president of the War Brides Association. Perhaps she reconnected with women who had sailed over on the *Queen Mary* with her.

In 1988, when Melynda Jarratt interviewed Mary Imhoff, Mary told her:

It was tough. There were lots of times you got lonesome at the beginning. It's only natural really. But you had your family. We were brought up that when you marry

that's your family. That's the one thing that's the most important to you is your children and your husband. It doesn't matter what kind of hard time you have, you have to stick to it.⁶⁶

Mary survived the lean times of rationing, the terror of the Birmingham Blitz, and the loss of a carefree adolescence. However, during a time of war, she found love. Like thousands of war brides, Mary gambled, leaving everything and everyone she knew in England to be with a Canadian man she barely knew, whose cultural background and upbringing were unlike her own. It wasn't so much that she knew in advance what to expect when she came to New Brunswick. It was that she was prepared to pick up a hammer or a cooking pot, or to head into the bush to work alongside her husband. With a positive outlook and a healthy sense of humour, she met every challenge head on and never gave up. As she said, "... you have to stick to it."

Melynda Jarratt, whose writing was the source of much of my information about Mary, told me over the phone that she remembered her as an exuberant woman with lovely white hair, bright red lipstick, and a hearty laugh. She had been in New Brunswick so long she even spoke with a slight French accent.⁶⁷

If Mary had ever met my husband's grandmother, Mabel Imhoff Law, she would have made a lasting

impression. Mabel died on 10 April 1985, before I even knew to ask her about Mary, the war bride married to her cousin Regis.⁶⁸ Mary Imhoff died in 2003 at the age of 78.⁶⁹

Celebrating Canadian War Brides

The year 2021 marks the 75th anniversary of the arrival of most of the 43,454 Canadian war brides in Canada. We shine a light on this significant episode in Canadian history so that it will not be lost to future generations. Personal stories of war brides are worth documenting before those who remember them are dead. Melynda Jarratt and others have already made an enormous contribution to preserving the story of Canada's war brides. If you visit Melynda's website you will find references to information, articles, and books about Canada's role in repatriating the war brides of WW II, as well as many individual war bride stories, which make fascinating reading. You might even find someone related to your family, like I did.

It has been my privilege, through Melynda Jarratt's work, to get to know Mary Imhoff—this war bride on our family tree—and retell her story.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Melynda Jarratt for taking time from her vacation to talk to me on the phone from New Brunswick about her recollections

of Mary Imhoff and for allowing me to quote from her work.

Thanks to fellow Writing Group member Lynne Willoughby for an enjoyable physically distanced porch visit to chat about war brides. Thanks also to Lynne for obtaining the passenger list entry for Mary Imhoff on *Findmypast*.

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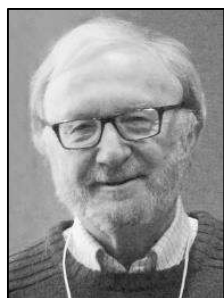
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Researching WW II British War Brides to Canada



BY JOHN D. REID

John, a long-time BIFHSGO member, is well known for his Canada's Anglo-Celtic Roots blog and his many previous articles in ACR.

In early 1945, with the war in its final stages, RCAF

Corporal Norman Regis Leslie married in Wimbledon. His wife, Margaret, was just one of the estimated 48,000 women who tied the knot with Canadian service personnel overseas by the end of 1946. Some couples remained in the UK; a small number of brides refused to join their husbands in Canada. Some marriages did not last and a few proved to be bigamous. While a few war brides were able to fly to Canada, tens of thousands of women and children arrived by ship between 1942 and 1948, but mostly in 1946.¹ Margaret's journey on the

RMS *Aquitania* and on by train ended in Ottawa—which became home for this gentle and caring person with an excellent sense of humour who enjoyed golf and bowling for almost 68 years.²

This article looks at discovering the UK war brides' history before their settlement in Canada by following good genealogical research practice: working backwards in time.

Before diving into official records, find out what's known about the bride from family sources. Did she write a memoir? Few did; still, she may well have told stories of what was undoubtedly one of the most memorable events in her life, the