

The Soldier and the Orphan: Separated by Church and War

Alastair Henry

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The Soldier and the Orphan is a fascinating historical novel in which separated twins experience love, friendship, and the power of a neighbor's kindness.

Alastair Henry's fascinating historical novel *The Soldier and the Orphan* concerns the human cost of Britain's Home Children program, which sent orphaned boys to Canada when they reached thirteen years of age.

This straightforward, fast-moving story covers three generations, but it is most concerned with the lives of Billy and Tommy, working-class twin boys who were separated at birth in the early twentieth century and who were reunited by a series of miracles. It begins with drama, as Billy contends with critical injuries at a hospital during World War II. He's otherwise a "rag and bone" man who ekes out a living by recycling the trash of others. The tragedy and hopelessness of his situation is clear.

Around Billy, people endure war, poverty, loss, and separation. Still, they persist. And then, through the kindness of strangers, Billy learns that he has a brother. His brother, Tommy, works as an indentured dairy farmer in Quebec. Their birth family's circumstances, including the twins' conception outside of marriage and their grandfather's rigid religiosity, led to their separation—and also to the alienation of their birth mother from her father.

Here, an orphanage is, in fact, a "holding facility for children until they were emigrated to Canada." The novel establishes a keen sense of Britain's use of church institutions in the scheme, reflecting the realities of how people shuffled orphans as though they were "commodities for export," doing so with no regard for their family ties or personal well-being. The boys' story evokes indignation over such injustices, in which people were treated as less human after their circumstances separated them from their families.

The prose is plain; it includes just enough details to flesh out its events. Indeed, this is a perspective-driven story that emphasizes the influence that people have on one another. Above all, they provide encouragement. Indeed, Billy remembers his neighbor Irene's words forever: "There's always someone who needs us, Billy." Billy and Tommy work toward a reunion, but it is wholly dependent on the kindness of those around them in disclosing what they do not know. People's memories of what happened in previous generations factor in to great effect; they complement the boys' present, proving crucial to their understanding and eventual healing.

Working toward a joyous, emotive conclusion, *The Soldier and the Orphan* is a fascinating historical novel in which separated twins experience love, friendship, and the power of a neighbor's kindness.

LAURA MORENO (January 17, 2023)

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