

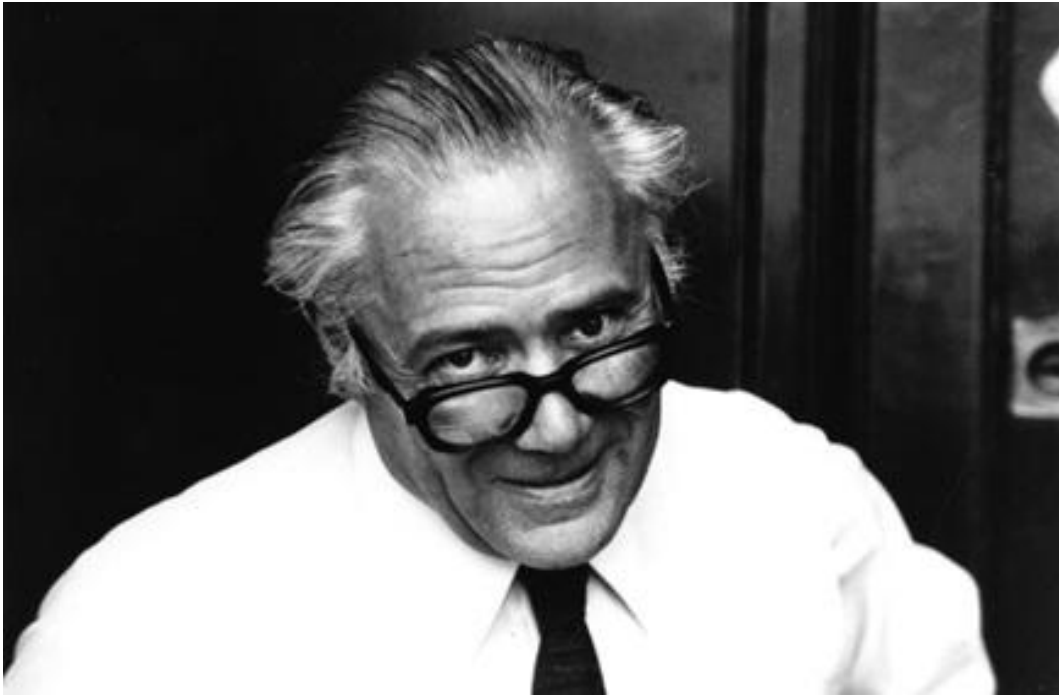
Bernard Feilden

Born 1919. An architect's childhood on a Canadian ranch.
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1. Introduction



Sir Bernard Feilden.

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from Wikipedia.

Sir Bernard Melchior Feilden CBE FRIBA (11 September 1919 – 14 November 2008) was a conservation architect whose work encompassed cathedrals, the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal. Feilden was born in Hampstead, London. He was educated at Bedford School and The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College, London, completing his training at the Architectural Association after the second world war.

His love of architecture was inherited from his grandfather, Brightwen Binyon (1846-1905), an Ipswich architect and former pupil of Alfred Waterhouse.

He joined the practice of Edward Boardman and Son in Norwich, where he designed the Trinity United Reformed Church. He set up an architectural practice, Feilden+Mawson, with David Mawson in 1956, to which offices in Norwich, London and Cambridge were later added. In 1968 Feilden took over as consultant architect to the University of East Anglia, completing the work of his predecessor Denys Lasdun, and creating an arena shaped square as a social space.

His work in Britain encompassed Norwich Cathedral, York Minster, St Paul's Cathedral, Hampton Court Palace and St. Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh. Overseas he advised on Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque, the Taj

Mahal, the Konark Sun Temple and the Great Wall of China. From 1969 to 1977, he was Surveyor of the Fabric of St Paul's Cathedral.

Bernard Feilden died on 14 November 2008 at the age of 89.



St. Paul's Cathedral.

2. Early Years in Canada

The childhood life story which follows is an account by Bernard Feilden of his early year in Canada. It was transcribed and archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the British Library National Life Stories oral history collection.

I'm Bernard Melchior Feilden, born on the 11th of September 1919 in the Hampstead Garden Suburb, together with twin Francis Anthony Feilden. We were second sons of Robert Humphrey Feilden who was an engineer and an artist.

Could you describe the house where you grew up?

After we were born, we were taken to Canada. This goes back to my father's career in the army where was a Royal Horse Artillery gunner. He rose to the rank of Major and got an MC in the First World War for staying with his guns when the Fifth Army was overrun. He was gassed and badly wounded by shrapnel. He found that working in London was not good for his health, and he decided to go to Canada. He had been in Canada at the time the First World War broke out and he was mobilised immediately. He was at Mons and Ypres. He took us back to Canada. In his former years he had been working in Montreal as a graphic designer. After the war he took us to the Okanagan Valley in the middle of British Columbia - in the middle of the Rocky Mountains. There the air was good so his damaged lungs could function better. He had to go to hospital for further treatment for his shrapnel.



Okanagan Valley.

He had a small ranch at the foot of the mountains at the top end of the Okanagan Valley, where the Shuswap River joins the Thompson River. It was a lovely place. It had a very big influence on our life to live in Canada. My twin and I followed my father. My mother and father went in advance to set up the house, and took my elder brother Robert. We followed on the

S.S.Montrose, and all I can remember about that journey is that I was in the arms of my aunt and there was a nurse who looked after my twin. My aunt said that I used to get so excited with the colours of sunsets on board ship. I was only nine months old if that.



S.S.Montrose.

We settled in Canada and grew up in this valley, which was a wonderful experience. The climate was hot, dry and very cold in winter. It used to go down to minus 40 degrees zero. The snow used to be two foot deep. It wasn't until March, when the sun got hotter and the top of the snow formed a crust that we could run on top of the snow. Otherwise we had to labour through two foot of snow. I had the job of chopping kindling from cedar, which was very nice and straight, and knocking the icicles off the eaves so the weight of icicles didn't pull the roof off.



Okanawa Valley in winter.

That was one job. Another job I had in the middle of the winter was to get the water. You can't drink melted snow water without suffering from loss of valuable minerals. It's one cause of goitre, which is serious. So drinking water had to be got from the stream. The stream was only about three hundred yards away. In boyhood memories it was definitely twice that distance. It's funny how things shrink as you grow older. Anyhow, I went to this stream, and the ice on top of it was about twelve inches thick. The ice on the river in our valley was always about two foot thick. My water hole would freeze over with about two inches of ice in the night, so I had to break the water hole and then fill the milk churn with water and put it on my sleigh and trudge back to our house, which was not far away.

But I am jumping ahead because my father, who brought us out to Canada, was farming this small ranch. One of the strange things in the photographs which amused me was that he always had a tie on, whatever he was doing. And that was because he was a gentleman, and in those days gentlemen dressed properly!

He joined in the village life. At the end of the winter the roads became very muddy and rough in the spring. At the end of the spring, when they dried out, there was what was called a corvée. All the men in the village joined together with a horse drawn grader and they graded the road so that it became level again. That was one of the customs.

My father was an energetic man, with great charisma. He organised a Pied Piper of Hamelin for the village children. He could play a flute. He organised my twin and myself as pages. I can remember him painting black moustaches on us. I think I was the Knave of Spades in his production. He certainly was a lively and charismatic man, and ambitious. He wanted to organise an electric generator for our house, powered by the stream. Not very practical when you think of the winters, which would have frozen everything up. He had ideas. He was lively. While we were there my two younger brothers were born, so he ended up with five boys. He really wanted a girl. He was very disappointed. He wanted a girl.

When my youngest brother was still a babe in arms, we went swimming by the lake. And this is one of the points where my life was changed, because my father ambitiously swam across the lake and as he was coming back a storm broke out. He had to fight against short choppy waves, and he was obviously in some distress. My mother, seeing that he was failing, tried to get a log of wood and rush out into the deep with it. But she was too late. He drowned in front of our eyes. That was what caused us to come back to England. If he hadn't died we would have become Canadians, and had a very different life.

3. Canada after Father's Death

After my father's death my elder brother was sent straight away back to London where he lived with my grandparents - my maternal grandmother. We stayed on in Canada for another four years. It seems quite a long time, but the problem was schooling. We wanted to go back to an English school.

Anyhow those four years were very happy in spite of the loss of my father. My twin and I worked together. We used to continue clearing the land behind our ranch which had been left with stumps. We got paid five cents per stump that we burned out. We used to dig a hole at the bottom of the stump and light a fire. You might say that we were pyromaniacs, because ever since we have always loved bonfires.

Anyhow, we worked very hard on this, it kept us busy. But one day I was standing behind my twin brother when I unfortunately got in the way of his pickaxe and he dented my forehead. Both of us ran back home crying. The problem was my mother didn't know which of us was hurt. My poor mother, because the whole burden of life fell on her shoulders.

When she came out from London she was wearing a fashionable hat and she met our Canadian neighbour who said 'Mrs Feilden, we are all equal here'. And in our village everybody was equal, and we all went to the village school. But it was a hard life for my mother. When my father died my aunt, who had followed us to Canada, joined us and helped. And we had some help, but it wasn't a big house. My aunt taught us how to garden, how to cultivate, how to make plants grow. Then in the winter I was responsible for milking my cow. I had a beautiful Jersey cow called Beauty. She was a beauty. And in the winter they were stabled and fed with hay. In the summer they would go out and graze. I learned to milk and was very fond of my cow. One of the nice things we would do in the winter was to jump into her neck, and she would swing her head around with a lovely warm belt of flesh. That was one of the strange pleasures of boyhood.

In summer my twin and I used to drive the cattle out. The procedure was that he had a knotted rope. He drove his cow, who was called Betty. Betty was a bad tempered one, with horns. He drove her with his knotted rope and I followed behind with a pocket of stones. And I would plonk the stones to the left or right of the cow to keep her going straight.

Anyhow, my twin and I had a wonderful time together. At the top of our ranch we had the stream and I spent many happy hours fishing there. I was told to fish with a bent pin. I dangled the bent pin and watched trout move gently round a pool. I was lying on my face over a tree trunk that had fallen across the stream, and I could see the fish. I enjoyed myself immensely. But nobody had told me to put bait on the hook, so I never caught anything.

The only fish my twin and I ever caught was one that had got landlocked in a puddle after a flood. We trapped it by halving the puddle - it was in one half. Then we quartered the puddle. Then we eighthed the puddle. And then we caught it with our hands. And then we ate it. But that was an unfortunate fish.



A bridge over the Shuswap River.

Of course there were salmon in the Shuswap River. There was a big wooden trestle bridge across the river, and the village boys used to spear the salmon as they ran under the bridge. You could see them, shadowy creatures, shooting up river. We used to buy the salmon.

It was a very interesting village. It had been settled by Finnish people, and they were the strongest element in the village. We had to respect them, because life in the village school depended on who had the biggest brother! Tony never respected these niceties. I was cautious, but he was pugnacious. If you had a big brother you had a much better chance of survival within the school!

The school was a great institution. It was quite near our house. What used to happen was that we would just go over a fence and get to the school. And we then could come back for lunch. There were two big classrooms. I visited it thirty years later, and nothing had changed, except for new floor material and new light fittings. The school had two teachers, one for each classroom, and the teachers had to manage the various grades. I forget what grade I reached in the end, but I left when I was eight, nearly nine.

The teacher organised things so that she taught one group and the other two or three groups were put onto work on the blackboard. The whole

classroom was surrounded by blackboards, and you did your board work while the others were taught. Anyway they managed it. I remember in summer going to school barefoot through the dust, and wiggling my toes in the dust. That was an exquisite feeling.

Years later, when I was given a reception in my honour in Ottawa, I remembered by schooldays in British Columbia. It was quite an important phase of our life. We were very sad to leave, we were almost heartbroken to leave our dog. The dog was a big Airedale, and she accompanied us in our expeditions into the forests, or woods as they were called. My mother must have been very trusting or brave to let us penetrate this wilderness, as there were wild bears and cougars there. Once we did really get scared, when our dog wasn't with us. We set up a call for her, and she heard, and we heard her coming bounding through the undergrowth; we were quite scared. A friend of ours shot a bear in this place. It was a black bear. Curiously enough, we ate the bear steak and it was absolutely delicious. One of the richest meats you can imagine. It was a black bear, which is mainly vegetarian.

So Canada was the big memory for us, up to the age of nine for me.

What was it like being a twin at this school?

My twin and I were companion babies, not identical. And we had different characteristics. He was extraordinarily strong for his size. Always was. And he was by nature a fighter, and according to my grandmother a true Feilden. I was different. I didn't look for trouble and I was not nearly as strong as him. If we wrestled, he would always trip me up and throw me. I got used to it. But we were partners, and we enjoyed working together. He was fair haired and blue eyed, whereas I was dark haired with hazel eyes. So we were very different, even from birth. But we were partners.

4. My Mother Olive Binyon

What was your mother's name?

I've not done my mother justice. Her name was Olive Binyon before marriage. Her father, Brightwen Binyon, was an architect who was quite distinguished. He is worthy of mention because he designed Sunderland Town Hall, now destroyed unfortunately. He designed the Corn Hall in Ipswich. He designed Aldermaston Manor for the Duke of Hamilton, and he designed a lot of seaside houses in Felixstowe. He was based in Ipswich and he was a very dedicated Quaker. He used to try and get people not to drink. I am sorry I don't follow him. But he was dedicated.

And he was a great traveller. Before he married he did the most adventurous trip for his time into the Middle East. They sailed to Cairo, then went to Damascus where they hired a caravan and went through the ten cities of the Decapolis including Jerash. He did beautiful drawings of Jerash. They didn't get as far as Petra, but they came up the Jordan Valley and he did some wonderful drawings in Jerusalem. I have handed most of these drawings to his great grandson Michael Binyon, who writes for the Times. Brightwen was an adventurous man. He married Rachel Cudworth. The Cudworths were by then railway people. Rachel's father was the first chief engineer of the Stockton to Darlington Railway.

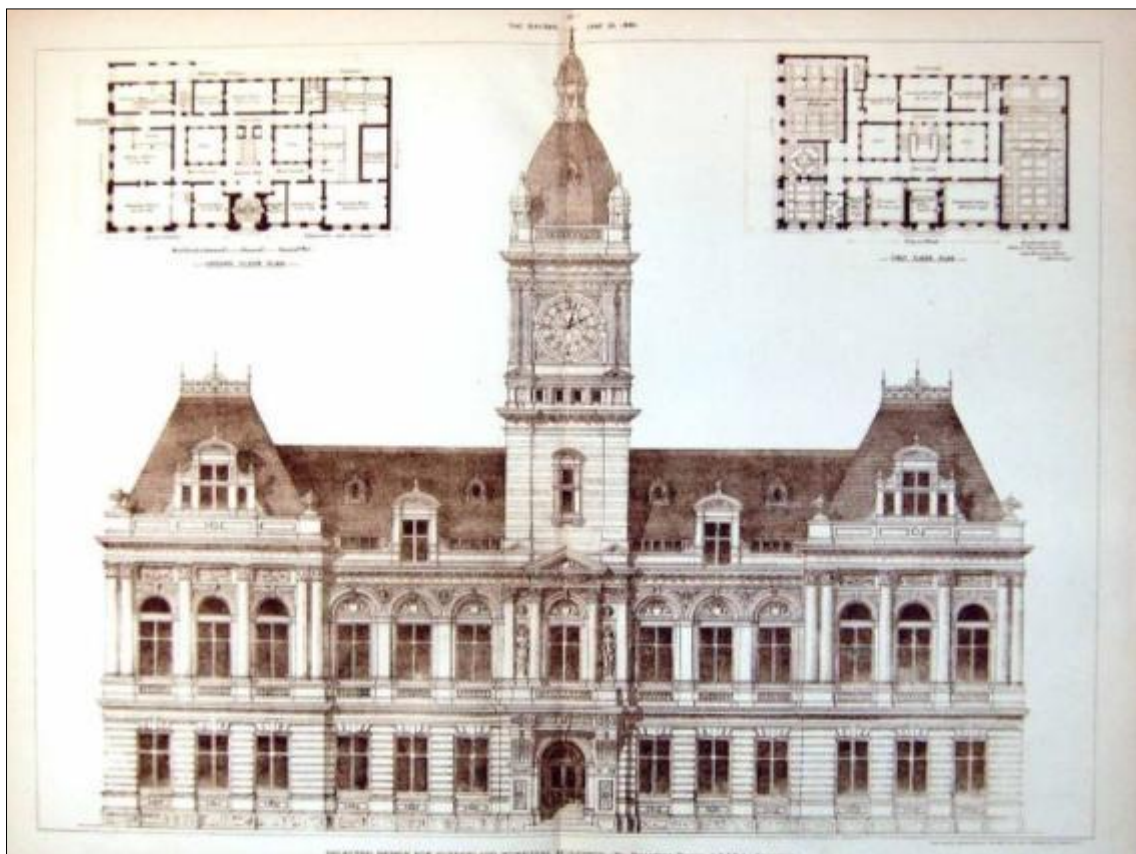
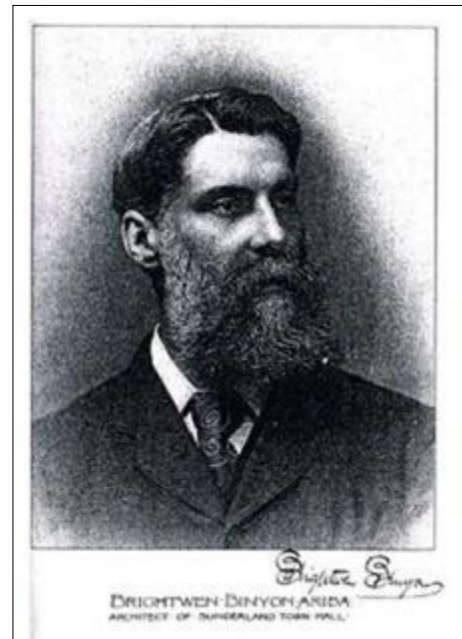


The Stockton to Darlington Railway.

Why was he chosen, as a classical scholar? He was chosen because he was a Quaker, and it was Quaker money that built the railway. And they wanted a reliable engineer, so he became chief engineer. And his two sons

followed him and were apprenticed to Robert Stephenson. These became respectively chief engineer of the Great Northern Railway and chief engineer of the Southern Railways. The next generation produced another chief engineer of the Canadian Pacific. But he had four daughters, and none of them became chief engineers.

The Binyons came from Manchester. I think they were quite well off, because Brightwen (right) had the most remarkable mother, who took him to Italy to study. He studied architecture and he also went to some of the early classes at the Architectural Association. He was an extremely talented draughtsman. Unfortunately he died before I was born. But he had a great influence on me because from the age of nine I decided to follow in his footsteps and become an architect.



Sunderland Municipal Buildings, designed by Brightwen Binyon in 1886.

My mother naturally had a very big influence on me. Being the daughter of an architect, she was interested in historic buildings and when we travelled

round Britain we would look at them. I remember my first visit to York Minster. That was actually with my godmother who lived in York. My mother had been to the Quaker school for girls in York. My godmother took me to York Minster and taught me to admire the glass. There was of course much more to it. And I can remember my very uncomfortable feeling when going behind the high altar into the Lady Chapel, because I thought God was somewhere by that altar. Anyhow, I got to know York Minster as a young boy.

But I am jumping ahead, because we had better go back to my mother in Canada. She had a hard time with us in the winter. It was difficult to keep warm. We used to have a stove running almost red hot in the centre of the house. There was no central heating, and no open fires as you might think. But this stove heated the whole house. We had baths, but there was no piped water - everything had to be carried in cans, and we bathed in a tub. It wasn't until we came back across Canada on the railway that we ever had a bath run by a tap. I was nine then.

She, being a Quaker, was a surprising bride for my father, who came from a strong Anglican basis. Although I suspect my father was not very religious. He didn't bother to get my two younger brothers christened. I had been properly christened, with my twin.

My mother had this hard time, as I say, and she took us all back to England, and this was quite a momentous move. We were, as I said, very sad at losing our dog. But we were obviously excited by this trip across Canada by rail. The railway had a branch running down our valley, and it had a bell to clear the way from animals or people. It used to ring its bell going down, and the valley being fairly narrow it reverberated with this. I remember when we went on train journeys the conductor was always very sympathetic to us. My mother went with her brood of children down the valley. We would go through Enderby, and then on to Vernon which is at the top end of the Okanagan Lake itself. We spent one winter at Vernon to avoid the difficulties - that was when my father was alive. Later we spent a winter at Enderby, where my twin and I got up to terrible mischief.

As I said, we were pyromaniacs, having been given five cents each to burn the tree stumps on the ranch. So we carried on our fire play in the centre of the town of Enderby. It was alright so long as it wasn't found, but we lighted some sawdust and this smouldered and suddenly burst into flame, and the fire brigade was called. We were heavily punished for this by my mother. She resorted to using a porridge spoon on our buttocks, and it was very painful. Interestingly, after I made my first visit back after thirty years, the mark of this fire was still there on the doorway to this garage, as though I had left my mark there!

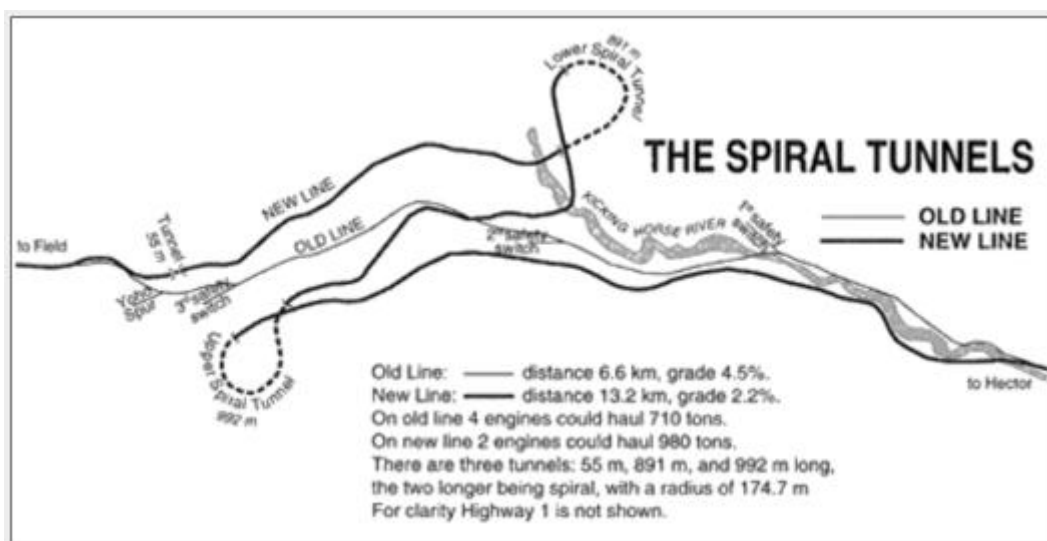
5. Back Across Canada

Could I ask you what made your mother decide to leave Canada?

She left Canada on grounds of education. In our valley there were two boys who had been to Bedford for school. One was from Bedford School, and one was from Bedford Modern. And Bedford was obviously an educational centre. I don't know the correspondence and what went on, but we took the train from Mara to Sicamous, which is a junction. And from Sicamous we took the trans-continental Canadian Pacific train through the Rockies, past Kicking Horse River, and up through the mountain. It is a remarkable feat of engineering. The train does a figure of eight in tunnels inside the mountain. Because the Rockies are just like a wall and the train had to climb this figure of eight to make height.

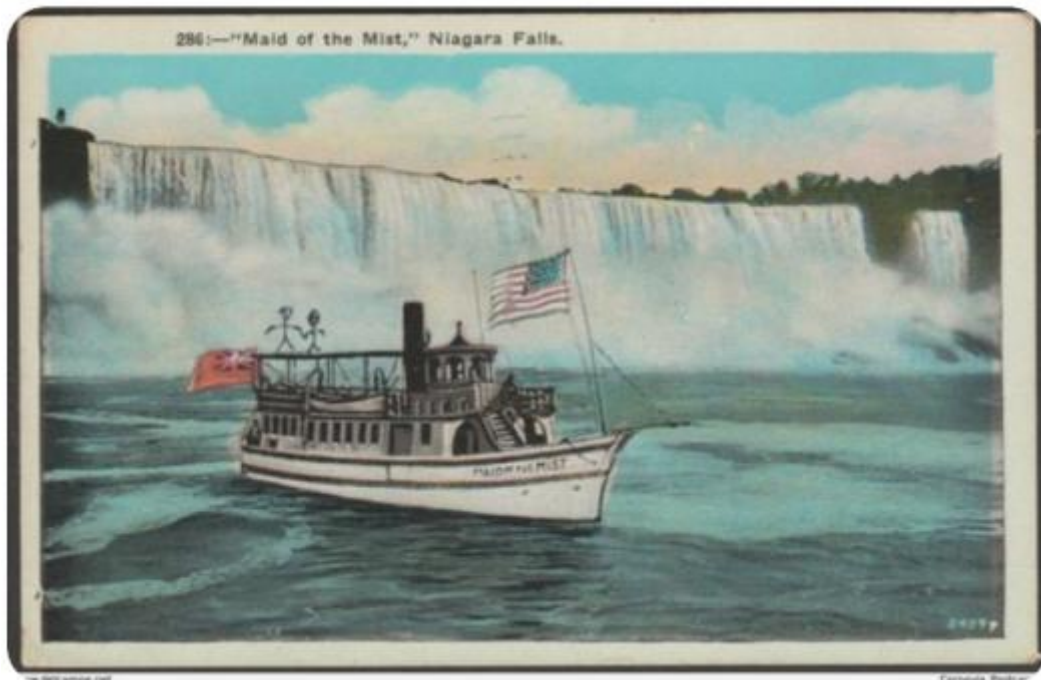


Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1920s.



Interestingly, much later I looked at that, and the trains were about a mile and half long. You could see the front of the train coming out while the tail of the train was going in. Amazing. Absolutely amazing.

We went through Banff, then on through Calgary to Regina. At Regina we had a rest and that was where we had our first really hot bath. I don't know what the hotel thought, but we must have flooded the floor with all four of us jumping in and out of the bath. Then we were met by my mother's cousin, who was the chief engineer of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and travelled to Toronto, where there were family friends.



Maid of the Mist postcard, 1928.

My mother took Tony and me to the Niagara Falls which were magnificent. The Canadian falls are bigger than the American falls, but there is a bridge over the gorge to the American side. We looked down from the bridge to the swirling gorge. There was a steamer called the Maid of the Mist that used to push its way up. It must have been very impressive. It's a very impressive sight. But my twin jumped up onto the handrail of this bridge. With my mother and myself walking beside him in terror, he walked across the bridge on top of this handrail. That was typical of him. He was absolutely fearless and we didn't want to say anything in case we spoiled his concentration. When he jumped down my mother said that he shouldn't have done that. He calmly said 'I knew that if I was going to fall I would fall on the right side'. That was my twin at nine. But all through my life my twin was doing extraordinary things like that. But he was remarkably strong for his age and size, and quite different from me.

6. Across the Atlantic and Home



An interior of the S.S.Montrose.

We continued with our journey to Montreal. There we took the S.S.Montrose, a Canadian Pacific liner back across the Atlantic. By some curious coincidence this ship had played a big part in our family life. First of all, it had rescued my father at the outbreak of war because he was being mobilised and called back to England. He had blue eyes and a beard or moustache, and looked very much like a German. The crowd was getting quite ugly when they saw him. Luckily he took refuge on the Montrose before it sailed. Secondly, we sailed out in the Montrose, my twin and I, when we joined my father in the Okanagan Valley way back in 1920. And then finally in 1928 the ship took us back to England.

We were treated with great kindness by the crew and enjoyed the trip immensely. The Captain allowed us to steer the ship. And we went down into the engine room and looked at the propeller shaft and engines. There was never a dull moment. And of course the food was wonderful.

We arrived at Southampton, and were met by my uncle Basil Binyon and he escorted us to London where we stayed with an aged relative in Blackheath.