

## John Throgmorton Middlemore and the Children's Emigration Homes Patricia Roberts-Pichette

**Abstract:** *Recently the National Archives of Canada was able to obtain microfilmed copies of documents relating to the Children's Emigration Home in Birmingham and the Middlemore Homes in Canada. This was a Home established in 1872 by Dr J. T. Middlemore (1844-1924) of Edgbaston for bringing children to Canada by. Dr Middlemore, the 'Child's Friend', brought more than five thousand children to Canada between 1873 and 1935, first to Ontario, and later to the Maritimes. As these documents have not been indexed, a small group in the BIFHSGO Research and Projects group started a pilot project in the summer of 2001 to index the information pertaining to those children who were brought to Ontario. Considerable progress has been made in this pilot project hence this article to bring information about Dr Middlemore and his child emigration scheme to the members of the Society.*

Who was John Throgmorton Middlemore who was so passionate about children? Why at the age of 28 did he establish the Children's Emigration Home in Birmingham? What is the evidence that he really was 'The Child's Friend', concerned more with the state of a child's health and welfare than the state of its soul?

We know that John Middlemore was born June 9, 1844, the fourth son of William Middlemore (1802-1887) and Mary Groom (dates unknown). He was the tenth child in a family of thirteen, six of whom did not survive childhood. The family home was in Edgbaston, south of Birmingham, where Middlemores had lived since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Originally a Roman Catholic family, one Middlemore uncle, the Blessed Humphrey, was executed in June 1535 for refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy to Henry VIII. Family members continued to adhere to the Old Religion at considerable personal cost, but over time became supporters of the Established (Anglican) Church. John's father, however, broke with tradition and became a Baptist. He was described as "a magnificent man of business, [bringing] the saddlery and leather concern [Middlemore and Lamplugh] which his father Richard had founded, to a peak of reputation and prosperity. [He] was a generous giver to educational and other charities in Birmingham [and] to the Baptist community. His obituary said in part: "He was strictly a Dissenter, giving temperance and therefore weighty adherence of his powerful mind to Nonconformist principles."

William was a stern father, meaning that John had a strict Victorian upbringing, tempered it is said, by his mother's gentleness. Family life in general was happy and one of privilege. After schooling at the Edgbaston Propriety School, John worked in the family business until he was 20 when his parents sent him to his uncle, Thomas Groom, who had a stationary business in Boston, Massachusetts. He was in North America about four years and while there took a medical degree at Brunswick, Maine. This was to prove useful in his life, although he never practised. He also took the opportunity to travel widely in the US Midwest and parts of Eastern Canada. He was much impressed with the open spaces in Ontario, where large farm families provided essential helping hands. He could see the progress being made in both urban and rural areas, and more impressive, there was

equality of opportunity - class did not seem to matter, especially in the rural areas. The people expected a bright future.

On his return to Birmingham, Dr Middlemore involved himself in political, intellectual and artistic interests – he was always a strong supporter of the Birmingham Art Gallery – but somehow something was missing, he felt he was not contributing. In the back of his mind was the picture of Canada and its healthy, hardworking people who were convinced they were living in the land of opportunity. This picture contrasted starkly with the appalling living conditions among the poor in Birmingham slums. Cheap houses, built for the migrants flocking from the country to find work in the expanding factories, were usually on unfavourable land in industrial areas. They were back-to-back, poorly maintained, two-storied terraced houses with a common yard, wash house (brew house), and water pump shared by hundreds of people. As many as 15 families shared an outside (usually uncovered) privy. The courts were dark and filthy and often damp; swarms of young children played there, as well as in the streets or in the public houses. Despite the external conditions, most people kept the inside of their dwellings clean and tidy and tried to brighten them with curtains and other small amenities. But with families of 8, 10 or more living in three rooms (a small downstairs kitchen/living room and two bedrooms upstairs), there was little space. This space was further reduced as the women and children often used the living room as a workroom to earn extra cash from such piece work as gluing matchboxes or sewing buttons on cards. There was little privacy. No matter how crowded a house, there was always the possibility that a lodger would be taken in to help with the expenses and would probably share a bed with one or more of the children. Rent for these houses may have been as low as three pence per week but when this was too much for the occupants, they would do a “mid-night flit.” Sometimes furniture or clothing was sold to buy food or pay the rent, sometimes belongings were sold by the bailiff for unpaid debts and the occupants thrown into the street no matter what their dress - which could mean nothing.

People lacked knowledge of birth control; diseases such as venereal disease, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and alcoholism, were rampant, as was spousal and child assault, rape, and incest. The infant death-rate was high. One or both parents might desert, be in prison or the workhouse leaving their children with grandparents, friends or in lodging houses. Slum lodging houses were hardly suitable for families let alone abandoned children. Descriptions would indicate they were ‘dens of iniquity’. Beds, rather than rooms seem to have been rented, and as in private homes, children could be sharing their beds with strangers - perhaps a different one every night. Think of the opportunities for abuse! Yet, however grim a lodging house might have been, it often seems it was preferable to the workhouse.

Because of hunger and cold, the children were often driven to thievery, playing truant and using their school money for food. They would frequent the markets, earning a few pennies looking after horses or as messengers. Many, as young as 10 or 11, were put in prison as thieves. Girls as young as seven could be raped and thereafter labelled as “impure.” These slum children were known locally as gutter children or street arabs. A life of idleness,

vagrancy, or crime was the only option for most of them, with a high probability of prison and/or death before they were 20. In short, they had no hope and no future.

Education, prior to The Education Act of 1870, was difficult for most of the working classes, although a charity school in Birmingham had opened for six hundred children in 1812. Other schools were established, some encouraging attendance by providing meals; this was especially true of many Sunday Schools which were better attended because they did provide food. By the late 1860s, the average time spent in school was about two years and some 84% of the older children had been to Sunday School. After the Act was passed, all children between the ages of five and 13 were required to go to school and new schools were built in consequence. Still children were often absent, they were often needed as workers, illness was a factor, and as indicated above, truancy was common.

This is what confronted Dr Middlemore on his return from North America. In these conditions, he asked himself, what chance had children to grow up clean and healthy, decent and honest? What chance had they to develop their minds and personalities, when they were so hungry and cold that they used their school money for food? With no hope in the future, could anything else be expected?

He reasoned that if he could get children to Canada, perhaps they would be welcomed, given happy homes, healthy conditions, and a chance of a good life. As he thought about it, he started to visit influential people in Birmingham to explain his idea and request support; he also wrote letters. He was often met with ridicule and rebuffs, but he persisted. All through this, he made it a stern rule that no matter how rude his reception, he would remain calm and cheerful. He was not alone in Birmingham in his concern for children; in 1860 Josiah Mason had built and endowed a large orphanage which housed 300 girls and boys, and in 1869 Thomas Crowley founded Crowley's Orphanage for Poor Girls. It was 1867 when Thomas John Barnardo started his first home for boys in Stepney, where 'no destitute child is ever refused admittance'. There is no doubt that Middlemore was influenced by these men, especially Barnardo, who, through various organizations, was already finding homes for his boys throughout the Old Commonwealth. However, it was only in 1882 that the first official party of Barnardo boys arrived in Canada, ten years after the first party of Middlemore children.

Dr Middlemore's 'begging' was successful, and the idea became reality in September 1872 when he bought a house for boys on St Luke's Road, and the Children's Emigration Home was established. In December, he opened a Home for girls on neighbouring Spring Street. During the first year, 35 children were admitted to the Home for training. In May 1873, Dr Middlemore brought 29 of them to Canada aboard the *Sarmation*. They landed in Quebec city and two days later they arrived by train in Toronto. With the help of the Hon. Mr Allan and Professor Wilson (who met Dr Middlemore at the Toronto Station), articles and advertisements in the Toronto newspapers, and through correspondence, the children were all settled in good homes within three or four weeks. Twenty-three children were settled in Toronto and six in London - these last through the help of two men originally from Birmingham, Messrs Heath and Finnamore. The older children were settled as servants or

assistants and efforts were made to the younger ones adopted by people who no children of their own. The Newsboys Lodgings in Toronto were used as the temporary housing for the boys, and the girls in the girls' home. Dr Middlemore personally escorted them all to their new homes.

In his first annual report, Dr Middlemore wrote:

“Children are not taken to Canada because they are poor, but to save them from their bad companions, to whom, if they remained in Birmingham, they would always be tempted to return. Emigration is the only mode of permanently separating these children from their old associations.

The children admitted are, for the most part, either less than ten or about thirteen years old, In the former case they are too young for admission into the Industrial Schools, while in the latter they escape altogether the provisions of the various Education Acts.

Before removing a child to an Emigration Home, the responsibility of the parent has always been considered. In many cases the children are orphans, friendless, and in a great measure self-supporting. In some cases they have been taken from step-parents, who had contributed little or nothing, to their support, and in whose houses they were treated as mere intruders.”

The children were protected when they came to Canada by the signing of a written agreement which, although modified from time to time, was similar to the one below used in 1875:

*I promise to take \_\_\_\_\_ into my home, and adopt him/her and to treat him/her in all respects as my own child. I agree that he/she shall attend school and a place of worship. During the year of his/her adoption, I will communicate with you not less than four times as to his/her welfare. Each subsequent year, until he/she is sixteen years of age, I will communicate with you not less than twice as to his/her welfare. If it is necessary for me to part with him/her, I will return him/her to the Guthrie Home, London, Ontario, after having given a fortnight's notice of my intention to do so. Respectfully, Signed*

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The Guthrie Home was acquired by 1874 through the courtesy of the City Council, London, and became the reception area for the children arriving from England. It was also the place to which children returned 'in case they receive or give cause for complaint.' For the first several years Dr Middlemore accompanied his children to Canada and took the opportunity to visit children he had already settled. His signature appears on many of the reports after 1876 (visits were probably started in 1874 but written reports were not made until 1876). Visiting the children was primarily the responsibility of the Guthrie Home managers, but as years passed and the numbers of children increased, others were asked to act as visitors, especially in remote areas. It would appear that written reports of visits were not always prepared.

In September 1878, Dr Middlemore married Marion, daughter of Richard Bagnall J.P. of Worcester. Unhappily, Marion died in 1879, quite likely in childbirth, as a daughter was born November 1879. He married secondly, on December 29, 1881, Mary, the daughter of Rev Thomas Price of Selly Oaks, Birmingham. There were at least nine children born during the second marriage, of whom one boy and six girls survived to adulthood.

Dr Middlemore, in the early years was the chief administrator, and always travelled to Canada with the children. In later years, while not so much involved with the day-to-day running of the Home, he would still go to the railway station to see the children off to Canada and would sing or play games with them till the train departed. He involved his family members in the operation of the Home – at least one daughter helped to escort the children to Canada before she was married. The involvement of family members in the affairs of the Home seems to have continued long after his death.

He was not without criticism: to the accusation that he was ‘taking away from England every year the backbone, the very life-blood of her population’ he replied ‘No, I am taking away what would only be diseased tissue if it were left in England, but in Canada it grows into healthy flesh and blood and sinew.’ It was a rule from the start that only those children with the worst chances would be admitted. Children could be brought by parents, relatives and friends to the Homes, some were recommended by magistrates, others, especially in the early days, were found by Middlemore himself. There are also examples of children presenting themselves for admission to the Home. No child was taken into the Home if the parent or guardian objected to it going to Canada.

For the first twelve years of emigration, all of the Middlemore children were brought to Ontario, but in 1885 a group of 18 children was settled in York County, New Brunswick, the first to be brought to the Maritime provinces. Nevertheless, until 1898 when the Guthrie Home was no longer available, the majority of children were settled in Ontario. In that year, the Fairview Home in Halifax, Nova Scotia, built at a cost of \$1000, was opened and became the reception Home for Middlemore Children until the Canadian program was closed in 1935. During this last period, the children were settled throughout the Maritimes, except for 1927 onwards when no children were placed in Nova Scotia. Canadian Government policy and other changes after World War I, resulted in limitations on child emigration. In 1935, the Fairbridge Society of London which depended on many organizations in England, and with which the Middlemore Homes had been working since 1926, took responsibility for all overseas settlement of Middlemore children. Very few Middlemore children were brought to Canada after that date, as most were taken to Australia. Those who were brought to Canada, were taken to the Prince of Wales School in British Columbia.

While there was very little documentation about the living conditions of the children admitted to the Home in the first four years, documents after 1876 contain sad details. For example: young children left alone while parent(s) worked; parent(s) confirmed drunkard(s); mother a prostitute; father beats wife and children; mother in service cannot have her

children with her; step-parents refuse to have a spouse's children, are cruel, or sell children's belongings; 10 and 11 year olds run the streets; child(ren) steal(s) from family, friends, and from market stalls, sell family belongings, stay out all night or for days at a time, sleep in coal yards, in the market or other unsuitable places. There are even reports of parents or guardians selling the clothes off the backs of their children or spouses.

Children from such living conditions were usually admitted but many were not. Even among reports of horrific deprivation, there could be also signs of hope, reports of well-behaved children who attended school regularly, maybe living with elderly grandparents who might be receiving parish support to supplement a meagre income. Children in such circumstances were considered "too good" and admission was refused. On the other hand, boys accused of stealing and lying were often preferentially admitted, but girls as young as 11 could be refused for being 'impure' meaning they had been raped or were involved in prostitution. Sometimes those originally refused entry were admitted (without any explanation) and brought to Canada. Not all of those admitted to the Home came to Canada, and there is little or no documentation as to what happened to them - although there is evidence that some were sent on to work opportunities or industrial training schools.

Once the children entered the Home, Dr Middlemore spent considerable time with them, reading aloud to them from popular books of the time, including stories about Canada. He would preface his readings with 'ten minutes of mental arithmetic to train their minds and make them concentrate fiercely . . .' They all attended school from the age of five (whether in the Home or outside is unknown), as all the Middlemore children in the 1881 census are listed as 'scholar'. Dr Middlemore 'would never tolerate a slouch or a turned-up wrinkled coat collar or a feeble excuse for wrongdoings,' because, as he explained, they had to be taught self-respect 'because most came from homes where there was nothing to respect.' He concerned himself with every detail operating the Homes and with the care of the children. In the absence of the matron, he would make their morning porridge, bandage their chilblains and other sores and give them medicine.

While all the children brought to Canada until 1887 had spent some time in the Children's Emigration Home, it was that year that the first children from an Industrial School and Unions in the regions of Birmingham and London were also among the Middlemore groups. In 1887 and 1888 three Middlemore groups were brought to Canada, with most coming from such Unions as St Olave's Bermondsey, London, Chelsea Union, St George's in the East, Middlesex, the Wolverhampton Union and the Shustoke Industrial School. As all of these children are entered into the Children's Emigration Home History Book and are included in the lists sent to the government after they arrived (even though separated in the lists as 'workhouse children'), they were apparently recognized as Middlemore children.

All children were prepared for life in Canada and the evening stories were part of this preparation. ***During their voyage, this preparation was intensified.*** But, given their backgrounds, were they *really* prepared for what they would face? Could they possibly have comprehended just how different Canada would be – how green, how clean, how

cold, how hot, how rich, how large it was in comparison with what they knew and understood? Did they in their imaginations think that they would leave all their trials behind them? Most children would never have been on a farm, or have looked after animals so would have had no idea about the amount of hard work involved in running a farm or how tired they would be at the end of the day. No doubt they had seen live chickens or rabbits in the market, and some had held horses for their owners. But the idea of digging, ploughing, planting, harvesting, haymaking, catching and harnessing horses, milking cows, feeding pigs, would have been absolutely foreign. Yet this is what so many of them had to learn to do immediately on their arrival. It was all totally new.

Then there was everyday living; many for the first time would have had a room of their own. Within their own families they would have shared a room and, until they entered the Home, would have shared their bed with two or three others. A room of one's own may not have been welcome – many would have found this arrangement very lonely and probably frightening. After all, they had come from crowded conditions, most from large families, and in the Home there were lots of other children and dormitory conditions for sleeping. Now suddenly, many were in the situation of an only child – most of the host families were childless (or their children had left home), and did not want to take more than one child. Thus, while most siblings were separated (although members of the same family were often settled in close proximity), there are examples where a host family took at least two members of a family. Given the enormous changes in the lives of these children, they must have been under considerable stress, so is it any wonder that many were bed-wetters? It is sad to think that children were returned to Guthrie Home for this reason.

There is no doubt that children are adaptable, and adapt the Middlemore children did. They learned new skills, they became useful members of their families, they saved their money, they bought farms, they married, they became inheritors, they (or at least 600 boys) joined the army or navy during the first World War, they became productive members of their communities, and some became hosts to new Middlemore children. One, William Ray, who was brought to Canada in 1890, became the superintendent of the Fairview Home in Halifax in 1914, a position he held until his death in 1931.

What is known of the first 29 children who came to Canada in 1873?

Ten children were 12 or over, 15 children were less than 12, the ages of four children are unknown;

Fourteen children had only one placement, nine children had four or more.

In the first year:

Two boys and one girl ran away causing much anxiety;

One boy, aged 16, was returned to England;

Two children left the province or area of settlement with their families and were lost.

In later years:

Several more children ran away, were found, put in new homes, and subsequently received good reports;

In 1878, one girl ran away but returned to her employer voluntarily; in 1876 her mother had come from England looking for her, but apparently she did not wish to live with her mother;

One boy, aged about 12 when he arrived in Canada, seems to have secured his own place within two years and passed out of the care of Guthrie Home;

One boy, aged nine when he arrived in 1873, was earning \$150 per year by 1882. Most teenage boys at that time were earning not more than \$100 while most girls of the same age were earning less \$50 (some children were earning much less or nothing at all);

One boy, who arrived in Canada as a seven-year-old, had over the years, four different placements. In 1882 he was sent to the Penetanguishene Reformatory for four years.

Dr Middlemore recognized the failures he had had with some of these children especially in the first year, and attributed them to inexperience. The runaways, all teenagers, were placed in the city and all had led vagrant lives in England. In hindsight, he considered that they should have been settled in the country. From then on, the older children were almost always settled in the country, mainly on farms, but sometimes with village storekeepers. This does not mean that runaways did not occur, but they were not common and almost all were found and brought back to their family, or back to the Home for resettlement.

Between 1873 and 1880, almost 500 children were brought to Canada, among whom were three who were deaf, one blind or almost so (she was admitted to a school for the blind, but was afterwards placed in a home), two had (or had had) syphilis, and one was probably lame (she was admitted in 1873 but did not come to Canada until 1878 because of leg surgery). Of these 500 children, 10 children ran away from their placements and were not found, three were taken to the US, two or three others were taken out of Ontario by their families, three died early, two were sent to Penetanguishene and nine returned to England (two because they were unmanageable, the others because they wanted to return). Perhaps the most amazing fact about the Middlemore children, was not that some ran away, or were returned to England because they were unmanageable, or were imprisoned, but, considering their origins, that the number of children with problems such as these was so small.

Interestingly enough, some of the boys who returned to England actually came back to Canada to settle. By 1883, Dr Middlemore was able to report that his first boy had become a landowner and his first girl was happily married. By the early 1890s, 2,209 children had been taken into the Children's Emigration Home in Birmingham of whom, 2,049 were brought to Canada.

John Throgmorton Middlemore died on October 17, 1924 at Worcester. He was remembered best for the founding of the Children's Emigration Homes to which he had devoted more than 30 years of his life. He was a member on the Birmingham Town Council 1883-1892 and a member of the House of Commons 1899-1918. In 1919, he was knighted as the first baronet of Selly Oak, for his services to his community.

This then, in brief, is the story of Dr Middlemore and an introduction to his Children's Emigration Home in Birmingham and the Middlemore Homes in London and Halifax. There are about 120 reels of Middlemore documentation at the National Archives of Canada, 32 of which are restricted because of privacy concerns. To date about 22 reels have been partially or completely indexed by eight volunteers and most of this information entered into spreadsheets. In March 2002, an index to the source material on Middlemore children who came to Canada between 1873 and 1880 was posted on the BIFHSGO web site. Work on the 1880s is well underway; about 10 reels still have to be extracted before the indexation of all the children who came to Ontario is finished. To complete the extraction of all the Middlemore documents, we estimate that it will take about 200 person months; we would be happy to welcome more volunteers for this project.

### **References**

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