# WHY DO WE NEED A MUSEUM OF IMMIGRATION?

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Nothing brought attention to the global migration crisis like the photograph of the body of three year-old Syrian refugee, Alan Kurdi, washed up on a beach in Turkey. The image became a symbol not only of the heartbreaking and dangerous flight forced upon millions of refugees due to war and destruction in Syria and elsewhere, but also of the responses of countries faced with providing them sanctuary. The world seemed ready to open its doors. But it was short-lived, as some nations like the United Kingdom and the United States were shaken by populist movements, fuelled in part by nativist fears and reactions to the crisis.

This crisis cannot be fully understood without knowledge of the historical contexts of immigration and movements of people seeking refuge. The twentieth century alone was marked by large-scale displacements of people. For Canada, it was most notable after the Second World War when millions arrived after fleeing economic devastation, environmental destruction, and persecution in Europe. History offers no exact parallels to any situation — postwar Europeans found themselves in vastly different circumstances than Syrians do today. Yet history can still inform the present in profound ways.

The Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 in Halifax offers exhibitions and programs on the history of immigration to Canada as well as the contemporary experiences of newcomers. The Museum began life as a centre focussed on the history of Pier 21, an ocean port-of-entry immigration facility through which, between 1928 and 1971, almost one million immigrants passed. The current permanent exhibition on Pier 21 reveals the site as a microcosm of Europe, with hundreds of thousands of Europeans streaming through its doors mostly en route to somewhere else in Canada. With



The Canadian Immigration Hall exhibition, 2016.
Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 [17374-2]

the advent of accessible air travel, the facility eventually closed its doors.

The European character of Pier 21 contrasts with the more global nature of the exhibition in the Museum's Canadian Immigration Hall. This exhibition takes 1604 as the beginning of permanent European settlement in Canada, with a small group of French who eventually founded Port Royal in Nova Scotia. Over the centuries great waves of people followed, first from Europe and then from all parts of the globe. While the historical contexts changed greatly over time, the reasons pushing people out of their home countries and pulling them toward Canada — the push and pull factors — remain remarkably similar. Some, like the disadvantaged youth known as the Home Children, who were sent alone to Canada from the United Kingdom, had little control over their situation. But for most, war, discrimination, and limited economic opportunity prompted them to leave their countries of origin. Canada was attractive for a variety of reasons, among them the promise of peace, land, and the chance to live a better life.

Charles Foran, CEO of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, has recently suggested that non-Indigenous Canadians need only look at themselves to see the "generally happy ending of an immigrant saga."[1] The cumulative success of immigration to Canada is evident, yet history reminds us that the story is not one of unmitigated progress. It must first be qualified by considering the historic and continuing relationships between immigrant communities and Indigenous peoples. A key message in the first section of the Canadian Immigration Hall is that Indigenous peoples have lived in what became Canada thousands of years before the arrival and settlement of Europeans. Indigenous peoples have had to cope with the longstanding negative impacts of colonization on their lands, cultures, languages, and lives. It is not a comfortable history, but it informs present-day circumstances like the legacy of residential schools, the elevated rate of suicide on reserves, and the missing and murdered Indigenous women.

The exhibition in the Canadian Immigration Hall also explores the different treatment of certain groups in their attempts at settlement. Some were encouraged to come to Canada, and supported and assisted in the settlement process, and some were discouraged from coming, actively turned away, or not made welcome once arrived. In 1849 in Saint John, New Brunswick, a nativist response to new-

1 CHARLES FORAN, "The Canada experiment: Is this the world's first 'postnational' country?" *The Guardian*, 4 January 2017, www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/04/the-canada-experiment-is-this-the-worlds-first-postnational-country (accessed 16 January 2017).

comers was behind a riot that capped a series of violent clashes over the previous decade. Few today would think of Saint John as a hotbed of sectarian strife, yet the principal cause of the conflict was the reaction of Protestant Orangemen to the arrival and settlement in the city of large numbers of Irish Catholics, most fleeing the Great Famine.[2] Many Saint John residents were themselves descendants of refugees — Loyalist supporters of the British Crown forced to leave their homes in the American colonies during and after the Revolution.

After Confederation the Canadian government created a series of laws, regulations, and practices aimed at better controlling immigration, particularly as they pertained to people considered to be desirable, or undesirable, as immigrants. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, the government launched a massive publicity campaign aimed at drawing European and American agriculturalists to the vast tracts of land in western Canada. These immigrants received free land in return for establishing homesteads. But at the same time, black American farmers, attracted to western Canada for the same reasons, were discouraged from immigrating by bureaucratic obstructionism and thinly-veiled racism.[3] Race was also the basis in 1914 for officials turning away from Vancouver Harbour the mostly Sikh passengers of the SS *Komagata Maru*, and denying them entry to Canada. Prime



Newly-arrived immigrants in Pier 21's assembly hall, 1965. Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 [R2013.1362.469]

2 SCOTT W. SEE, *Riots in New Brunswick: Orange Nativism and Social Violence in the 1840s*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), and SEE, "The Orange Order and Social Violence in Mid-Nineteenth Century Saint John," *Acadiensis*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Autumn 1983.

3 STEVE SCHWINGHAMER, "The Colour Bar at the Canadian Border: Black American Farmers," Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, https://www.pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/the-colour-bar-at-the-canadian-border-black-american-farmers (accessed 16 January 2017).

Minister Justin Trudeau has recently made a public apology for this act.

Immigration policies and practices in Canada eventually became more progressive and inclusive. The Canadian government repealed the *Chinese Exclusion Act* in 1947, removed "race" from immigration criteria in 1962, and in 1967 implemented the "points system" for assessing potential immigrants, which removed other discriminatory factors. In 1971, the introduction of the multiculturalism policy marked the beginning of an era where diversity emerged as an important element of Canadian national identity. More so than in most western democracies, in Canada diversity has become the normal state of affairs. In 2011, Statistics Canada reported that twenty per cent of the Canadian population was foreign-born, and today the federal cabinet includes four foreign-born ministers.[4]

Immigration policies and practices have greatly improved, but recent newcomers face some of the same issues in integration that newcomers have faced throughout the centuries: language barriers, lack of social networks, and cultural stereotyping. Knowledge of these personal experiences comes to us in part through written stories and oral history interviews generously granted to Museum historians. Yukari Yamamoto, originally from Japan, likened not understanding English to wearing earplugs, and then her eventual understanding of the language to be like waking up from a dream. Eileen Lao, who arrived from China, related her daughter's initial difficulties with the transition to Canada, as her daughter sorely missed her friends back home. Janos Maté, who fled Hungary as a young person with his parents after the Hungarian Revolution, described being harassed and called names as a "DP" by other children after he arrived in Canada.

The history of immigration to Canada is comprised of these many histories, marked with success and also some failure. History doesn't repeat itself, but it reveals the nature of our common humanity over time, and informs our current decision making. Canada stands out in the world for its liberal attitude to immigration and open response to those seeking refuge — in 2016 Canada's target for immigrants was 300,000, including more than 55,000 refugees and protected persons.[5] What we do today is the history we will be telling in the future, but before looking forward, we must first look back.

4 STATISTICS CANADA, "Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity in Canada," https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm (accessed 16 January 2017).

5 GOVERNMENT OF CANADA, "Key Highlights 2017 Immigration Levels Plan," Http://News.gc.ca/Web/Article-En.do?Nid=1145319 (Accessed 16 January 2017).