

In the summer of 2017 Canadians saw a daily stream of asylum seekers walking across the Canada-U.S. border into Quebec. As Canadians saw images of families dragging suitcases into a temporary shelter set up in Montreal's Olympic Stadium, perhaps they wondered if the country was facing a wave of refugees similar to the one Europe had experienced in 2015-16. What Canadians may not have realized was that this sudden swell of displaced humanity in search of a haven is typical of a long historical pattern in which periods of relative calm and orderly migration are disrupted by waves of refugees and other migrants. These surges often appear without warning and then subside as quickly as they appeared.

The United Nations Convention on Refugees defines refugees as people with a well-founded fear of persecution, whether because of race, religion, political opinion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group. They are typically outside their home country and unable or unwilling to return to it.

The signatories to the convention, which include Canada, have agreed not to forcibly return refugees or legitimate refugee claimants and to treat them in a manner similar to their own nationals. In Canada's case that means the provision of health care, education, legal aid, and work permits for employment.

At different times Canada has provided asylum or created refugees. On the displacement side is the expulsion of Acadians in the mid-1700s and the fate of the Sioux, led by the legendary Chief Sitting Bull, who came to Canada in 1877 after their victory over American troops at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Starving, and with their request for a land reserve rejected by the federal government, they returned to the United States. On the receptive side are the stories of the Scottish highlanders, driven out by the agricultural clearances that began in the mid-eighteenth century and continued until the mid-nineteenth century, and of the victims of the Irish potato famine of 1845 to 1849.

Our country has had a long and complicated history when it comes to refugees, at times welcoming and at others unwelcoming — or, as the advocacy group Citizens for Public Justice put it, providing a “half welcome.”

Canada's first large-scale influx of refugees occurred after the American Revolution ended in 1783. Some forty-five thousand United Empire Loyalists, formerly British subjects coming from the newly united republic, fled north to the remaining British North American colonies. Their

number included some three thousand black Loyalists who had gained their freedom from slavery by joining the British side. Lawrence Hill's award-winning novel *The Book of Negroes*, which became a literary sensation when it appeared in 2007, referred to a ledger of the same name used by the British to evacuate 2,744 former slaves in 1783.

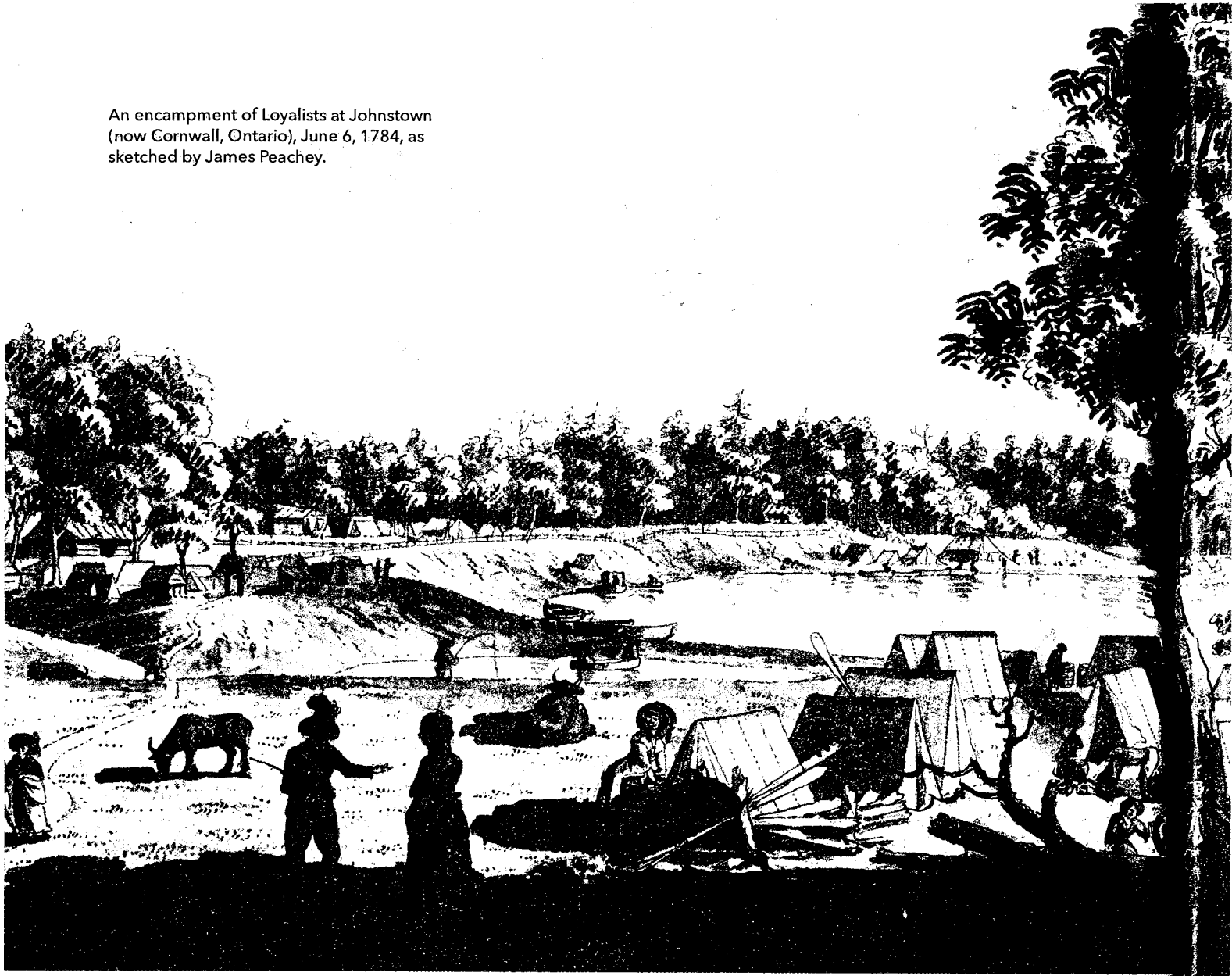
African Americans, both free people and those who had been enslaved, continued to flee to Canada in smaller numbers throughout the early nineteenth century. Their ranks increased dramatically when the United States passed a law in 1850 that allowed for the recapture of escaped slaves who had made it to free states. About thirty thousand former slaves fled to Canada, many of them using the so-called Underground Railroad, a secret network of abolitionists and formerly enslaved people who assisted them on their journey north.

Although many found refuge in Canada, they also had to deal with widespread racism and discrimination. The movement produced a popular literary genre that came to be called slave narratives. Among them was a collection of first-person accounts published in 1856 under the title *A North-Side View of Slavery: The Refugee or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*. One of those narratives was by J.C. Brown. He described coming to Canada in the early 1800s from Ohio, which had just passed a law demanding that a bond be posted by employed African Americans:

“I spoke to them of Canada and we formed a Colonization Society of which I was the President. I wrote for the Board to Sir John Colborne, at Little York, now Toronto, to know if we could find in Canada an asylum for ourselves, our wives, and children. Two members of the Board went with the letter to Toronto, and were well received by Sir John. He wrote us to remove ourselves into Canada with our wives and children, if we chose to do so;

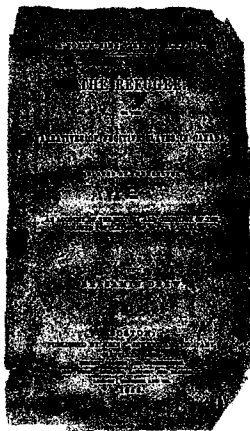
Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Chinese labourers work on the Canadian Pacific Railway in the mountains of British Columbia in 1884. A family arrives from Hungary in December 1956. A man talks to passengers from India who were not allowed to leave their ship, the *Komagata Maru*, to enter Vancouver in July 1914. An 1835 painting, *Bedford Basin*, by Robert Petley, depicts black Loyalists in the Halifax area pulling a cart. Russian Doukhobor settlers on a ship to Canada, 1898. Refugee Nguyen Thi Yen holds her sick child as she and forty-eight other refugees arrive at Khlong Yai in Thailand in 1977 after making the perilous voyage from Vietnam in a fishing boat.

An encampment of Loyalists at Johnstown (now Cornwall, Ontario), June 6, 1784, as sketched by James Peachey.



and that so long as we remained true and loyal subjects, we should have every privilege extended to us that was enjoyed by any of her majesty's subjects without distinction being made on account of color."

Smaller groups of refugees entered Canada in the later 1800s, including Jews fleeing pogroms in the Russian empire. The Doukhobors, who also came from Russia, were a religious minority whose members had been persecuted and then forced into military service against their pacifist beliefs. Leo Tolstoy, the famous novelist, petitioned for and then mobilized support for their emigration. With the financial help of his fellow countrymen (Tolstoy donated the royalties from his book *Resurrection*) and the intervention of Quakers in Britain and North America, some seven and a half thousand Doukhobors settled in Saskatchewan in 1899.



The title page of *A North-Side View of Slavery*, from 1856.

Canada was at its least welcoming to refugees after the passage of the *Immigration Act* of 1910, which enshrined racist criteria that targeted groups such as Asians and African Americans who wanted to participate in the settlement of Western Canada at the turn of the twentieth century.

The infamous *Chinese Immigration Act* of 1923 barred all Chinese people except those who had a minimum of \$2,500 to invest in a business. It continued the entrenched racism of an earlier era, when, after the 1885 completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, each Chinese person had to pay a head tax of fifty dollars to enter Canada; the figure had risen to five hundred dollars by the 1920s.

In stark contrast, Canadian officials in the 1920s were more than willing to accept white European Mennonites fleeing communism in Russia. In total about twenty thousand Mennonites were

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VANCOUVER PUBLIC LIBRARY

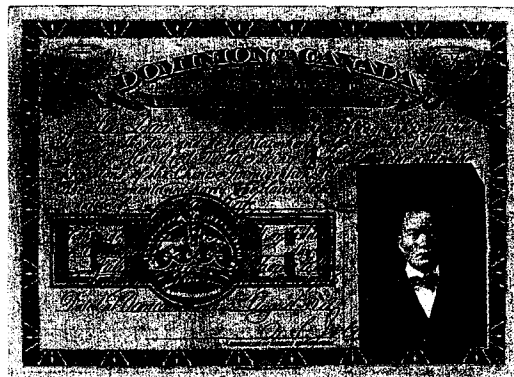


admitted to Canada by 1927 thanks to the efforts of the Mennonite Central Committee, which had to persuade the federal government that Mennonites were not communists.

During the Depression of the 1930s immigration plummeted, as did the number of asylum seekers coming to Canada. At that time Canada did not make a distinction between a regular immigrant and a refugee, which proved especially tragic as the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe generated a new wave of refugees. In 1939 the SS *St. Louis*, carrying more than nine hundred Jewish refugees from Germany, was turned away first by Cuba, then by the United States, and finally by Canada. The ship returned to Europe to face the Nazi

terror, and hundreds of its passengers died. In May 2018, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that he would officially apologize in the House of Commons for Canada's rejection of the asylum seekers on the *St. Louis*.

One of the organizations that sought to change the mind of the Canadian government was the Canadian National Committee on Refugees (CNCR), formed in 1938. Chaired by Cairine Wilson, Canada's first female senator, the organization lobbied vocally on behalf of asylum seekers. The CNCR focused on some 2,500 "enemy aliens" who had first been interned in Great Britain because of their German or Austrian nationality and then were shipped to Canada to live in camps. Many



A certificate issued under the *Chinese Immigration Act*.

ABOVE: LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA. BELOW: PHILIP DOMAN

VANCOUVER PUBLIC LIBRARY



Jewish refugees aboard the SS *St. Louis* in 1939. After being turned away by Canada and other countries, the ship returned to Germany, where about a quarter of its passengers died in Nazi death camps.

were Jews who had fled to Britain after Hitler came to power, but their citizenship rendered them suspect. Those who remained in Canada after the war — some had gone back to Britain or to the United States — were reclassified as “internal refugees” (friendly aliens) from the United Kingdom and allowed to stay. Roughly one thousand of them, mostly young people, opted to become Canadians.

The post-Second World War period brought the term “displaced person” — often shortened to the pejorative DP — into Canadians’ lexicon. The term referred to the vast numbers of refugees generated by the war, including the seven million people who had been used for forced labour or who had been prisoners in Germany at the end of the war. Many were repatriated, but many others refused to be sent back to their former homes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union because they feared persecution and did not want to live under communism. They were people without a state, a home, or possessions.

For the first few years after the war, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration looked after the camps in which these former prisoners lived. The newly created United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) took over in 1950. Among the first of these refugees to make

it to Canada was a group of four thousand veterans of the Polish Free Army who had fought with the Allies. They were admitted to Canada as farm labourers and were indentured to spend two years in agricultural work before being free to choose their own futures. In total, about 165,000 displaced people immigrated to Canada between 1947 and 1952, most of whom were bona fide refugees.

In the fall of 1956 Hungarians rose up against their country’s communist regime, but the revolt was crushed within two weeks by the Soviet Union. Two hundred thousand Hungarians fled to Austria; thirty-seven thousand of them came to Canada. The Canadian government, which remained staunchly anti-communist during the Cold War years, was eager to help and even chartered planes to bring them to Canada. The use of air transport was a new development that became essential to refugee resettlement policy in the future.

Clearly, when a refugee crisis developed, Canada was capable of taking in a large number of those in need; but ordinarily the numbers were much smaller. For example, during World Refugee Year in 1959–60 — a UN-supported international initiative to alleviate a global refugee crisis — Canada took in only seven thousand refugees.

BRIDGMAN IMAGES

VANCOUVER CITY ARCHIVES, LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA

While not technically refugees according to the UN definition, the young American men who fled to Canada between 1965 and 1975 during the Vietnam War were seeking refuge from serving in what they considered an unjust war. It is difficult to determine their numbers because these conscientious objectors — or draft dodgers, as they were often known — gained entry as regular immigrants.

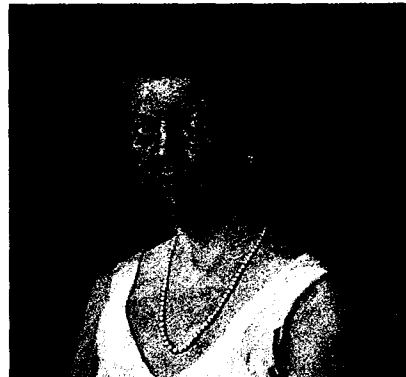
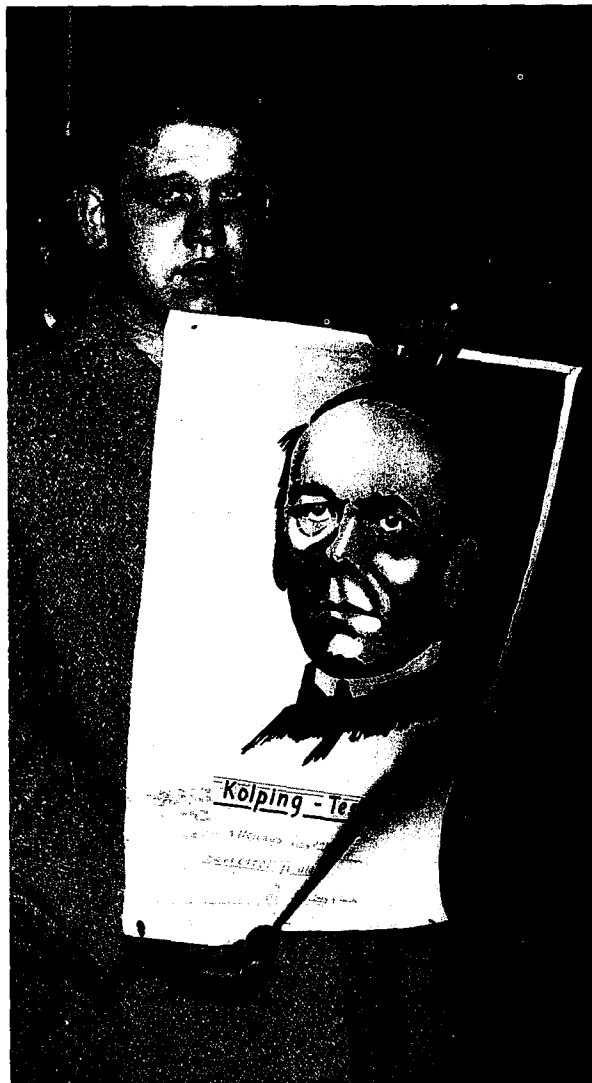
At the time Canada had a point system for assessing immigrant admissibility. If a war resister showed up at a border crossing carrying proof of education, such as a university degree, or, better still, a teaching certificate, he would probably have enough points to be admitted immediately as a landed immigrant (now called a permanent resident). If someone did not have the right credentials, the only option was to sneak across the border and go underground.

Ismaili Muslims of South Asian origin living in east Africa definitely fit the definition of refugees. In 1971, Idi Amin seized power in Uganda in a military coup. The next year all South Asians in the country, whatever their citizenship or the passports they may have held, were given a short time to leave. They were exiled because of their race, their religion, and their economic status. Amin saw their entrepreneurial record and their higher economic status as a threat to the advancement of African Ugandans, and he seized the chance to look like a

leader by indulging in ethnic cleansing. Canada organized an emergency airlift and admitted 5,700 Ismaili Muslim refugees.

Other than some families from Hong Kong who had been granted entry in 1962, this was the first instance in Canadian history when non-white refugees were admitted en masse. Their arrival signalled the effective removal of longstanding racial discrimination in Canadian immigration and refugee policy.

In September 1973 the elected government of Chile was overthrown by a military coup. Thousands of Chileans were imprisoned, and many died in custody. More than seven thousand Chilean refugees who had supported the previous government entered Canada between 1973 and 1978. Canada's new *Immigration Act* of 1976 specifically mentioned a commitment to refugees under the UN Convention on Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. The new act also mentioned persecuted minorities and displaced persons who did not qualify under UN rules as refugees but who were considered by Canada to be in need of protection for humanitarian reasons. It created a category known as a "group of five" that allowed small groups of private citizens to sponsor refugees. It was the most progressive legislation on refugees Canada had seen, and it set the context for the dramatic happenings of 1979–80.



Far left: A man who has just arrived from Hungary in 1956 holds a poster.

Left: A portrait of Cairine Wilson, Canada's first female senator and a founder of the Canadian National Council on Refugees, circa 1930.

Below: Refugees from Uganda talk to a government official at CFB Montreal in 1972.





Left: Soldiers supporting a coup in Chile, led by General Augusto Pinochet, take cover as bombs are dropped on the presidential palace, La Moneda, on September 11, 1973.

Above: Members of the Enriquez family, fleeing Chile in 1974, prepare to board a Canadian Forces plane that will take them to Toronto.

Below: Five members of the American Deserters Committee pose for a photo that originally accompanied "Why They Won't Fight," a story in *Weekend magazine* in May 1969. From left to right: Larry Svirchev, Jim Weeks, Paul Petri, Steve Argo, John Nicols.



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The Vietnam War, a civil war complicated by American intervention, had been a brutal conflict. It ended in 1975 when the communist north conquered the anti-communist south. Not only did it generate a flow of war resisters to Canada, it also prompted an exodus that began to swell in the late 1970s when tens of thousands of Vietnamese piled into rickety boats and sought asylum outside their war-torn homeland. While many died at sea, more than eight hundred thousand ended up in camps in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Hong Kong. The Canadian government sent officials to the camps, organized an airlift, and eventually admitted sixty thousand boat people, as they were commonly known, to Canada.

For the first time, a nationwide sponsorship agreement was signed, in this case between the federal government and the Mennonite Central Committee. Similar agreements were soon signed with other charitable organizations. These master agreements allowed numerous five-person groups of private sponsors to be vetted, approved, and warranted, not by the government but by an agency that held a master agreement. The agencies agreed to fulfill the commitments made to refugees no matter what happened to the sponsoring group.

The result was that more than half of the Vietnamese people who came to Canada were admitted as privately sponsored refugees. No other country had such a system. A group of five had to deposit sufficient funds to maintain the refugees and their families for a full year and was responsible for facilitating their resettlement in Canada, including schooling for the children, housing, clothing, and groceries. Within two years there were forty-seven of these master agreements in place. This meant that hundreds of small groups of ordinary citizens from across Canada were mobilized to offer assistance under the guidance of larger, credible organizations.

The arrival of the Vietnamese refugees also marked a new era in which most people who fled to Canada were not from European backgrounds. With widespread conflict in Africa and in the Middle East came sharp increases in the number of refugees. At the beginning of the 1960s there were one million refugees in the world; thirty years later there were fifteen million.

In 1985 Canada received the Nansen Medal from the United Nations for its work on behalf of refugees — the only time the award has been given to the entire population of a country. But the very next year Parliament passed Bill C-84, the *Refugee Deterrents and Detention Bill*, to deal with boatloads of refugees appearing on its shores. The unexpected arrival of unprocessed refugee claimants at Canadian borders was a new phenomenon. Concern grew that the newcomers were bypassing normal procedures in which their claims would have been processed abroad. So began the debate over “jumping the queue.”

The next year the government created a new immigration act that would deny entry to any refugee claimant who came from a designated “safe country” that had a reliable refugee adjudication process. In many cases, that meant the United States. But, curiously, the legislation contained a major loophole. It only applied to people trying to enter Canada at an official border crossing, where they could be turned back. With thousands of kilometres of undefended and unfenced border



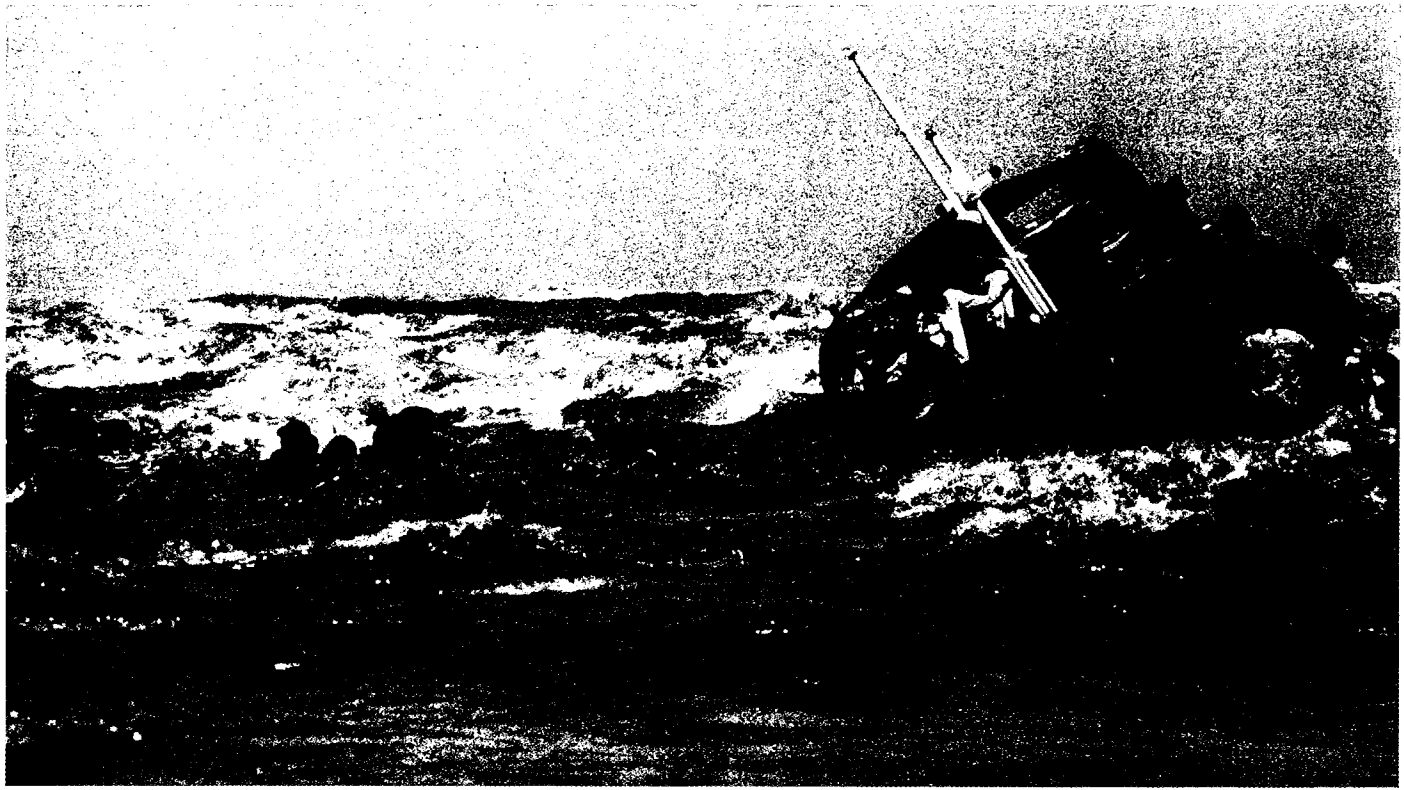
Refugee claimants from Eritrea, bound for Canada, cross the border between New York State and Quebec in March 2017.

Canada and the world's dispossessed

In 2016 Canada admitted 46,700 refugees, the largest yearly number in half a century. Jean-Nicolas Beuze, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative in Canada, called it “a tremendous achievement which reflects Canada’s long-standing tradition of welcoming refugees.”

More than twenty-two million refugees around the world are registered with the United Nations, many of them internally displaced or living in UN-supervised camps. Only about one per cent (220,000) ever get a chance at resettlement. The other ninety-nine per cent languish in the camps for years or are absorbed haphazardly into their host society, often without legal rights. A further forty-five million displaced people are not registered with the UNHCR.

From 2000 to 2016 the number of asylum claimants — those seeking refugee status either at the border or within Canada — has varied from ten thousand to forty-four thousand, with an average of about twenty-seven thousand per year, according to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. The last time Canada took in a similarly large number of refugees was in 1980, when 40,271 Vietnamese boat people — the name came from the rickety, overloaded vessels in which they fled their homeland — arrived. As just one wave of refugees remembered by many living in Canada today, they were certainly neither the first nor the last to arrive. — *George Melnyk*



Vietnamese refugees scramble from a sinking boat at Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia, in December 1978.

between the two countries, people could cross anywhere and request a refugee hearing. And they did.

When Haitians living legally in the United States after having fled their country in the wake of the 2010 earthquake began to fear deportation, many decided to cross the border outside official crossing points. Those who chose this route were arrested, quickly processed on-site, and then released as refugee claimants to await a hearing. Of the Haitian cases adjudicated by the end of 2017, only a small percentage was approved. Rejected claimants were subject to deportation.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the arrival of Sudanese, Bosnians, Kosovars, Afghanis, Bhutanese, Somalis, and Sri Lankans reflected regions with severe conflicts that sent people scrambling for a better life. By 2013 there were 16.5 million refugees worldwide; a year later that number had jumped to 19.5 million; and by early 2018 it surpassed 22 million.

Another Canadian mass humanitarian outreach was extended to Syrian refugees starting in late 2015. The twenty-five thousand who initially came to Canada represented a small portion of the millions of Syrians who had fled to Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon after the outbreak of a murderous civil war that continues to rage. Canada was selective, taking in primarily families and doing this through a large contingent of private sponsors that included groups from churches and unions as well as spontaneously formed teams of co-workers and neighbours. Between

November 15, 2015, and January 29, 2017, 40,081 Syrians landed in Canada, including 14,274 who were privately sponsored.

While Canadians generally pride themselves on welcoming refugees, there are many problematic, even tragic, individual stories. The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, which adjudicates such claims, generally approves sixty to seventy per cent of applications, leaving a large number of people who are denied status and deported.

The lucky ones get to stay, like the two tourists who arrived from Europe on a warm fall day in 2016. Their flight was the first to be received at the Calgary airport's spanking-new international terminal. Upon arrival, the men picked up their luggage and their cat, and then they entered the arrivals area to be greeted by those waiting. Three months later they applied for refugee status.

The two men had been high-profile gay activists in Serbia. They were fired from jobs and expelled from university because of their sexual orientation. They experienced physical assaults and online death threats, and their apartment was ransacked. The men had extensive proof of persecution on the basis of sexual orientation, and they had the support of an ad hoc group in Canada that raised \$5,000 to pay for their legal fees.

Today they are busy telling their story to Canadian audiences, especially to LGBTQ youth, improving their English language skills, and waiting for their permanent resident cards to



The UN's Nansen Medal, awarded in 1985 to Canada for its work with refugees.

arrive. While awaiting permanent resident status they have found an apartment and work. One assists LGBTQ asylum seekers in a program run by a Calgary agency for newcomers. The other, a talented photographer, is going to school and working part-time as a barista. To repay a loan to secure their apartment, he photographed a community garden during the growing season. The community gardeners were so pleased with his work that they used some of his images to create a calendar as a fundraiser.

The story of the half welcome continues. Jean-Nicolas Beuze, the UNHCR representative in Canada, suggests that Canada can take a major step forward in its refugee policies by encouraging non-profit organizations that serve people with disabilities to take a lead in sponsoring refugees with disabilities. While refugee advocates see accepting refugees as a legal and moral imperative, there continue to be discrepancies between public goodwill and government actions. The Canadian Council on Refugees reports that 275,000 refugees have come to Canada

through private sponsorships since 1979. The organization notes that, at present, non-Syrian refugees, especially those from Africa, face considerable bureaucratic delays in processing.

Canada's somewhat cautious approach to those seeking asylum here has kept the country generally free of conflict or untoward incidents that would jeopardize the reputations of refugees or public support for them.

But the door has never been wide open; nor has Canada ever had to take in hundreds of thousands of refugees at a time, a situation some countries have recently faced.

Since 2017, the pressure on the system here has increased. Many Canadians are wondering how we should handle the thousands of "irregular" border crossings that have occurred. Considering Canada's sometimes-yes and sometimes-no response to asylum seekers and its historic preference for processing claimants outside the country, the growing challenge of irregular border crossings will require creative solutions that are both humanitarian and fair to genuine refugees who cannot make it to our borders. ■



The Personal Connection

I was part of a private group that sponsored a Syrian refugee family from Lebanon that arrived on December 28, 2016. We provided them with accommodation and a monthly stipend for living expenses, helped them to get health and dental care, accompanied them to open a bank account, and helped to enrol both the parents and the children in schools. We had Arabic speakers in our group who facilitated communication.

Now the Qotlaish family has a car, the children are progressing in school, and the parents are working on

improving their English before going to work.

They seem happy, and so is our group; but it was not always clear sailing. We spent months fighting for the family to get its child-benefit payments for their three children. We also had to pitch in as tutors in English for the parents and in math for the two older children.

The effort has been worth it. We feel strongly that private sponsorship offers refugees a better chance of integration into Canadian society because of the personal touch. — *George Melnyk*