

A SOLDIER'S FAREWELL

By Ian Brown

There were two times in my life that my father gave me a soldier's farewell. The first was a dull September day in 1960, when I left home in Edinburgh to become a boarder at Sedbergh School. The second was at the end of August, 1966.

We stood there at Greenock docks, my father, my mother and I. There, in the distance, resting sedately in the sparkling, blue waters of the Clyde, was the Empress of Canada. It lay there white and gleaming, looking like a huge, ornate wedding cake.

We stood there. As often happened in the company of my parents, I felt embarrassingly out of place. Around us was a hoard of people. There was excitement and bustle. There was laughter and there were tears. On all sides, there were feverish last minute conversations. By contrast, we just stood there, each feeling the other bursting with emotion, but somehow not knowing how to express it.

"Don't forget to write, darling," said my mother. I looked at her. Her usual expression of anxiety was softened by lines of sorrow and love.

"I won't Mummy." I swallowed hard to keep the tears down. At the age of nineteen, it was the last time I called her that. It was time to break away. She knew it and I knew it.

My father moved forward, his hand outstretched.

"Well, looks like you'd better be going." He indicated the waiting tender, which had already started to take on its first passengers. "Time waits for no-one. Well, study hard. Play hard. Write to us as often as you can. I'm not one for lengthy farewells. A soldier's farewell is the best way. So, goodbye."

For just an instant our eyes met. Although his voice had betrayed emotion, his eyes were blank. I wondered yet again why he would not show his feelings. The one time his eyes became alive was when he was angry, although this was often enough.

I turned to my mother.

"I promise I'll write," I said as I hugged her.

"We're going to miss you, Ian," she said, her voice soft and breaking. "You're the last one. Goodbye darling, good luck." I felt like we were watery colours in a painting, dissolving into and away from each other. In a mist of emotion, I picked up my travelling suitcase and walked towards the tender.

As we waited to set off, a man in a crumpled blue suit touched me on the arm, and said, "are you emigrating too, son?"

"No, I replied. "I'm going to University there - for three years."

"Well, you're going to the right place, son. We're awa tae Edmonton. Aye, that's the place tae be. You can have a decent life there. There's nae jobs here. Aye, you're going tae the right place. The 'Land of Opportunity' they call it, and that's what it is."

The tender started moving, and suddenly the man in the blue suit began waving furiously. All around me was a forest of waving hands. On the dock side, a lone piper began to play a lament. I looked to where my parents had been standing. To my surprise, they were still there. Solid, unmoving, separate - they could have been standing at attention. And yet, there was a vulnerability about them. As they began to recede into the distance, they seemed to transform themselves in my eyes from omnipotent beings into an elderly couple, somehow fragile in their stiffness and aloneness. An old man and an old woman standing alone on the quay, saying goodbye to the last of their three children.

Finally they were out of sight. I turned to my companion, the man in the blue suit. I wanted to ask him about Edmonton. I quickly turned back again. He was gazing out across the water and weeping quietly.

On the boat I needed to lose myself. After checking out my cabin, I made my way to the bar. There I struck up an acquaintance with a group of high-spirited Canadians, about the same age as myself. It turned out that they were returning from a summer in Europe in time to start their first year in University, or 'school' as they called it. Before long, I was buying them Younger's Tartan and they were initiating me to Molson's Export. I eagerly pressed them with questions about Canada, but they seemed more interested in talking about their experiences in Europe. After a while, we were joined by someone who introduced himself as Harry Burke. To my astonishment it turned out that like me, he had won a Draper's Company Commonwealth University Scholarship. He informed me that he was going out to the West Coast to study at the University of British Columbia. "They love Brits. out there," he later confided in me.

Long before the Empress Of Canada had reached the open water of the Atlantic, our little group had both proclaimed itself delightfully drunk and indissolubly a unit for the rest of the trip.