



‘The Serbian Boys’ at Westminster and Cheshunt Colleges, 1916-1919 : Schoolboy Refugees from World War One

Fifty years before Westminster and Cheshunt Colleges united, each undertook to provide a home for refugees in the Great War. While our own students were away during the war years, Professor Buick Knox’s history of Westminster refers to the college buildings being used by ‘the Serbian boys’. In parallel, Stephen Orchard writes, in *Cheshunt College: A Record* that ‘the new buildings were occupied for most of the war by Serbian refugee boys’.¹ The ‘Serbian boys’ at both Westminster and Cheshunt colleges were schoolboys, some as young as 5 or 6 years old.

While the reasons for the conflict are complex, the direct cause was the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand by a disgruntled Serb, Gavrilo Princip. The nations of Europe allied themselves either with the Austrian or Serbian cause, and Britain found itself ultimately associated with the latter. In the Autumn of 1915, the Austrian, German and Bulgarian forces launched a concerted attack on Serbia. Rather than surrender, the leaders of the Serbian army retreated across Montenegro and Albania – with the King and thousands of civilian refugees – in an attempt to reach the coast, where they could be rescued by the ships of their allies: Britain, France, and Italy.

Half a million soldiers and civilians – almost a third of the total Serbian population – escaped through the mountains in the bitter winter weather between October 1915 and February 1916. Over 200,000 of them died of cold, starvation, disease, or enemy action on the march.²

With the army went over thirty thousand boys, most aged 12 to 18. Field Marshal Radomir Putnik, Chief of General Staff of the Serbian Army, gave the order that the boys should follow the army, hoping they would escape and become the future citizens – and soldiers – of a free Serbia, after the war.³



‘The Ipek Pass In Winter’, by Jan Gordon. From *The Luck of Thirteen* by Jan & Cora Gordon, 1916.⁴



Serbian heavy artillery crossing the Babouna Rover in Macedonia during the retreat, by the Serbian official photographer. Imperial War Museum © IWM Q 52272

¹ *Westminster College, Cambridge: Its Background and History*, by R Buick Knox (2007) p.27; *Cheshunt College: A Record* by Stephen Orchard (1968) p.16.

² Figures vary, but Gatrell (2014) gives the figure of half a million soldiers and civilians; Gatrell and Nivet (2013) say this totalled almost one third of the population.

³ *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*, by JM Winter and B Baggett (Penguin, 1996) p.141

⁴ *The Wanderings of Thirteen*, by Jan and Cora J Gordon (EP Dutton & Co, London & New York, 1916). From the Project Gutenberg online edition at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/17291/17291-h/17291-h.htm>



Poster for the Serbian Relief Fund, raising money and awareness in the UK
Imperial War Museum © IWM Art. IWM PST 10927

Some of the boys were old enough to fight – Alice and Claude Askew, British newspaper correspondents and writers who were present, describe Serbia as having ‘called up all her men, even to the “last defence” – which means boys of fifteen and sixteen and old men of sixty.’⁵ But some of the boys were younger: Cora Gordon and her husband Jan, British artists and writers present at the ‘Great Retreat’, described seeing ‘hundreds of boys, big seventeen-year-old boys with guns, and little limping fellows from thirteen to sixteen, [...] dragging along’.⁶

The Serbian Relief Committee was formed to coordinate British help. Those boys who arrived in Albania and Corfu in early 1916 were evacuated mainly to France and the UK. About 300 of the refugee children were brought to the UK and were housed in what Kushner describes as ‘sixteen small “colonies” across England, Scotland and Wales’⁷ including Oxford, Cambridge, Birmingham, Southampton, and Edinburgh.

During the summer of 1916, when Cheshunt’s and Westminster’s theological students were away during the Long Vacation, both Colleges began hosting Serbian refugees.

The *Cambridge Independent Press* reported on June 16th, 1916, that ‘Last Tuesday a party of 125 Serbian boys arrived in Cambridge. 80 of them are being housed at Westminster College and the rest at Cheshunt College.’ (The *Cambridge Chronicle* reports slightly different figures, saying ‘About 80 are at Westminster College. The younger ones, about 40 in number, are at Cheshunt College. The youngest of these is only five years old.’⁸). The *Press* continues: ‘While every child is being taught English, special endeavours are being made to prevent them from forgetting their native tongue, and their national songs, which might easily happen in the case of some of them, for the youngest is 6 and unable to read and write. When the war is over it is hoped to repatriate them [...]. The financing and managing of these two ventures is the work of the Serbian Relief Fund.’⁹

One week later, on Friday 23rd June 1916, a public meeting was held in Cambridge, at which ‘town and gown’ united: presided over by the Vice-Chancellor of the University, supported by the Mayor of Cambridge, the meeting appointed a local Advisory Board to work with the Central Serbian Relief Fund to organise and oversee the local care and education of the boys.¹⁰

Sir Arthur Evans and Mrs Carrington-Wilde of the Serbian Relief Fund Committee both addressed the meeting and outlined the ordeals the boys had been through; Sir Arthur Evans was keen to point out that they were not just offering charity, but also ‘serving an extremely useful purpose; they were opening out for these boys a new vista for the future; they were cementing entirely new relations with a part of the world which had been hitherto very much a closed book to English enterprise.’¹¹

⁵ *The Stricken Land*, by Alice and Claude Askew (1918) p78

⁶ *The Luck of Thirteen: Wanderings and Flight through Montenegro and Serbia*, by Jan and Jo Gordon (1916), p.264; p.274.

⁷ ‘The First World War: Serbian Children in Flight’, by Professor Tony Kushner. Online at <https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/serbian-refugees-in-the-first-world-war>

⁸ C R Cooke-Taylor in *Cambridge Chronicle and Uni Journal* of July 5th 1916, p4

⁹ *The Cambridge Independent Press* reported on June 16th, 1916

¹⁰ *The Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal* 21 June 1916

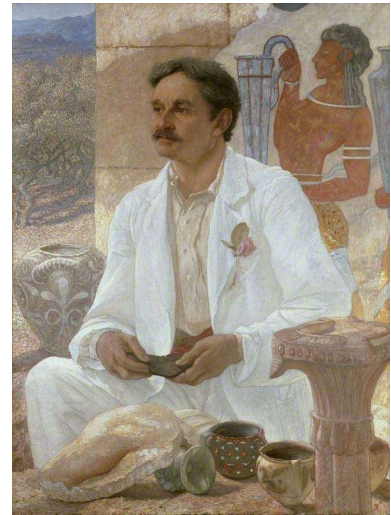
¹¹ Reported in *The Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal*, 28th June 1916. Sir Arthur Evans, the archaeologist who defined Cretan Linear A and Linear B script, was also keenly interested in the Balkans. See ‘Arthur Evans’, by R W Seton-Watson, in *The Slavonic and East European Review* Vol 24 No 63 (Jan 1946) pp47-55. Online at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4203726>



Thomas Cecil Fitzpatrick, by Wilfrid Gabriel de Glehn
© Queens' College, University of Cambridge¹²



Mrs Carrington-Wilde - statue in Niš, Serbia
© Milorad Dimic¹³



Arthur Evans by William Blake Richmond
© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford¹⁴

The Vice-Chancellor of the University, Thomas Fitzpatrick of Queens' College, said 'he felt the residence of these boys among them would call out the sympathy of them all' and that 'he thought they might take it for granted there was no one present who was not prepared to do anything in their power to make the residence of these 150 boys whilst with them not only happy but useful.'¹⁵

There seems to be a very modern understanding in the comments of the Mayor of Cambridge, George Turner, who addressed the meeting, saying "it might be thought that as a schoolmaster of long experience he should lay emphasis on the amount of education which should be given to these boys, but he was really most anxious to lay emphasis in the opposite direction. He thought after all the suffering these boys had gone through they, above all things, should give them a pleasant time (Applause)."¹⁶ Turner went on to say that "First of all they were boys, and they all loved boys, even when troublesome – (laughter) – then they were boys in distress and again they were, he could say from his own personal observation – delightful boys."¹⁷

The inhabitants of Cambridge seem to have had great sympathy and kindness for the Serbian boys, and tried to make them feel welcome and give them treats. In July, the 'annual treat' of the Victoria Road Sunday School was 'greatly enhanced [...] by a visit of the Serbian boys in residence at Westminster College (80 in number), who had accepted an invitation to be guests of the treat', where there was football, cricket, a swing boat, and donkey and cart, after which 'tea was served for about 360 and the Serbians sang their national anthem'.¹⁸

In a similar vein, the minutes of Westminster College House Committee record that it was 'agreed to give permission for an entertainment in aid of Red X funds to be held in the College Hall subject to the approval of the Serbian Committee' in July 1916.¹⁹

Even the army got involved: in July 1916, Field-Marshal Lord French visited Cambridge to inspect the troops, and the Cambridge Chronicle ran a page of pictures – including this picture of Lord French 'inspecting' the Serbian boys (it's not clear where, but not at Westminster College).

¹² Image reproduced with the permission of Queens' College, Cambridge, with many thanks

¹³ Statue of Mrs Carrington Wild in Niš, Serbia. Image by Milorad Dimic / Intermedichbo / Wikipedia, 2013. This file is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/) license.

¹⁴ Image of 'Arthur Evans among the Ruins of Palace of Knossos', by William Blake Richmond (1842-1921), reproduced with the permission of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, with many thanks

¹⁵ *The Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal*, 28th June 1916

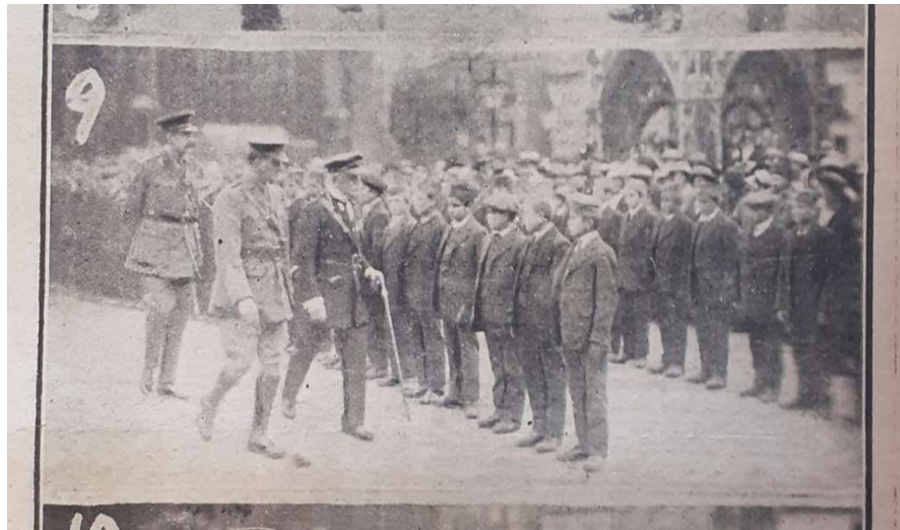
¹⁶ *The Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal*, 28th June 1916

¹⁷ *The Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal*, 28th June 1916

¹⁸ *The Cambridge Independent Press* of 7 July 1916

¹⁹ Minutes of 12th July 1916, WM6/1

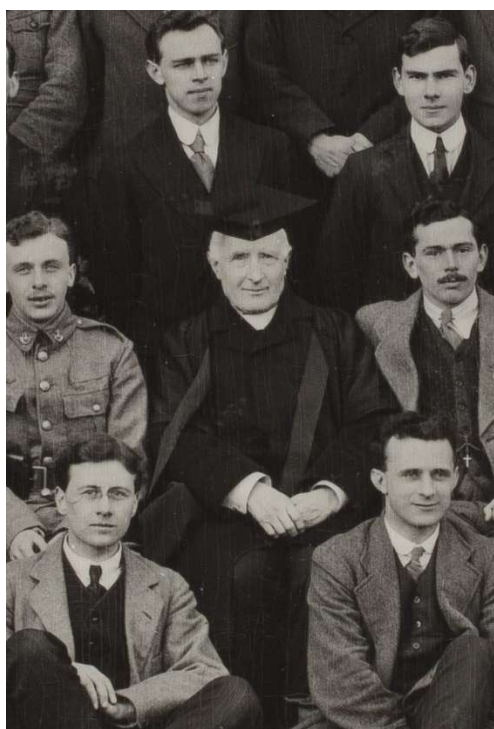
The friendly intent is made clear by the caption: 'His Lordship's face exhibited the kindest feelings as he inspected the Serbian boys who are at Westminster College'.²⁰ (No specific explanation is given of why Lord French undertook this, but his sister, Mrs Harley, was a leading member of the Serbian Relief Fund, and it may be that she arranged it.)



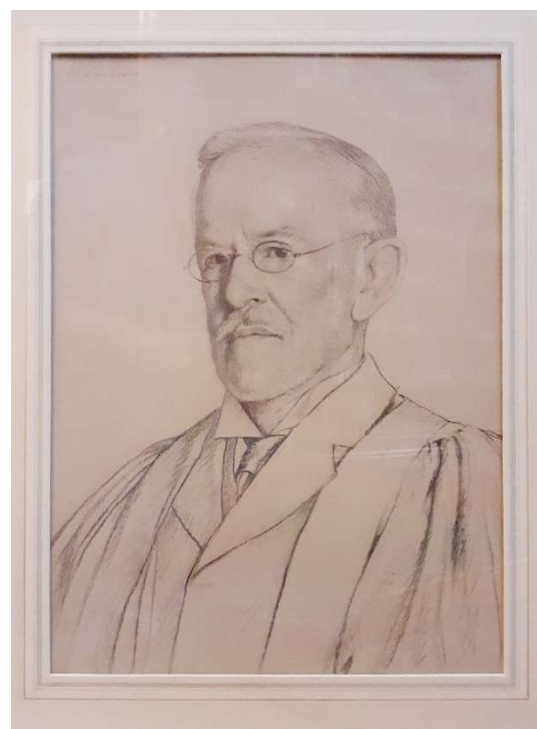
Field-Marshal Lord French 'inspecting' the Serbian boys
Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal of July 5th 1916

Because the boys arrived in June 1916, the theological students at Westminster and Cheshunt were no longer in residence, and both colleges offered accommodation for the Serbian boys throughout the summer of 1916.

Sir Arthur reported to the meeting that he 'had just been over the two colleges, Westminster and Cheshunt, which had been temporarily placed at their disposal, and he could say on behalf of the executive of the Serbian Relief Fund how charmed he was, and he was sure all who saw the arrangements would be, at the really wonderful reception that these boys had had at Cambridge.' And the local Advisory Committee that was duly elected included both Revd Dr Skinner, Principal of Westminster College; and the Rev. Ernest W Johnson, the Resident Tutor of Cheshunt College.



Revd. John Skinner of Westminster College,
in 1915 (WA4/18/1)



Revd. Ernest Johnson of Cheshunt College,
in 1934, by Francis Dodd (1874-1949)

²⁰ *Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal* of July 5th 1916

Cheshunt College had moved to Cambridge only a few years earlier, in 1906, and work on its new building on Bateman Street had begun in 1913. When war broke out in 1914, the building work was suspended, with only half the planned campus buildings completed; and the College closed, with its scholars dispersed – serving in the forces, the YMCA, or pastoral or mission fields.²¹ The Resident Tutor, Revd Ernest W Johnson and his wife, Bertha, remained on-site throughout the war years, but in the absence of theological students at the College, Johnson taught at The Leys, a private school in Cambridge.²² The College would remain closed until 1918, so the building was placed at the disposal of the Serbian Refugee Committee in summer 1916, and it was easy enough for the Serbian boys to move in. They stayed until the end of the war.

However, Westminster was in a slightly different position. Westminster's students had been enlisting as soldiers or YMCA helpers since 1914, but many still remained, and the College was still open in 1916. The Serbian boys stayed in the summer of 1916, while the Westminster students were on their summer holidays; but in October 1916, Westminster's own students returned and teaching recommenced.

There were further treats for the Serbian boys at Cheshunt College at Christmas 1916. *The Chronicle* reports a that nicely ecumenical approach was shown when 'the boys went in the morning to Selwyn College Chapel to receive Holy Communion of the Greek Church' on the 23rd; they had tea with the Master of Downing, where a band played; and were entertained 'by Mr and Mrs Johnson at Cheshunt College, and after tea the time was happily spent in the singing of English and Serbian songs'.²³ The *Cambridge Daily News* adds that there was a football match at The Leys School (maybe also organised by Johnson?); Christmas dinner at Trinity College Old Hall, with turkeys and plum puddings donated by well-wishers; and, from the Photographic Club Committee, an evening of blind man's buff, unlimited buns, and 'humorous magical lantern slides, followed by conjuring tricks, which evoked great enthusiasm and interest'.²⁴

On March 5th 1917, however, the exemption from military service for theological students was removed, with the earliest possible call up set for April 3rd. In 1917 Westminster College announced it had extended the Lent term, with the intention of finishing in early April 1917²⁵ – and when this was done, there were so few students left in attendance that the Principal and most of the academic staff moved to Birmingham, at the request of the Presbyterian Church of England, in order to care for the churches of that Presbytery.²⁶

Westminster had previously agreed to rent the College to the Serbian Relief Committee so the boys could live there through the summer of 1917, but what should happen after that? The College Committee did not want to leave the building empty, and they wanted to 'provide that the College Buildings shall be cared for as economically as possible.'²⁷ Letting the building to the Serbian Relief Committee for the use of the boys must have seemed like a sensible, mutually beneficial arrangement. The College considered the Serbian Relief Committee to be undertaking good work, and charged only nominal rent;²⁸ in return, Westminster benefitted from two very important advantages: firstly, 'while retaining control of the staff we are not responsible for their wages, and further, being under these conditions a charitable institution, the building is exempt from rates. It will thus be seen that in the judgement of the College Committee to use the property for so worthy an object was far better than to close the College during the absence of the students.'²⁹ Accordingly, Westminster rented its buildings to the Serbian Refugee Committee from October 1917 until February 1919, at one month's notice.³⁰ Presumably there were similar considerations in play with regard to Cheshunt College, both about providing a home to those well-deserving of one, and about

²¹ *Cheshunt College: A Record* by Stephen Orchard (1968), p.16

²² Johnson teaching at the Leys is recorded in an un-named, undated newspaper obituary. Johnson died in 1947; the obituary is at C9/6/144 in the Cheshunt Archives.

²³ *The Chronicle*, December 27th 1916 p6

²⁴ *Cambridge Daily News*, Tuesday 2nd January 1917

²⁵ 1917 College Committee Report to Synod

²⁶ Another Professor (Carnegie Simpson) was helping congregations in the Presbyteries of Liverpool and Bristol. 1918 College Committee Report to Synod

²⁷ 1917 College Committee Report to Synod, page 610

²⁸ 1918 College Committee Report p.939; Serbian Relief Funds Agreements in Westminster archives at WCR2/19

²⁹ 1918 College Committee Report p.939

³⁰ College Committee Minutes 1916-1919; Senatus Minutes 1916-1919; House Committee Minutes 1916-1919

a tenanted building being better for finances and upkeep – although at Cheshunt, Johnson and his wife remained onsite throughout.

SERBIANS AT BRITISH SCHOOLS.

FROM MR. SIDNEY BALL, CHAIRMAN OF THE OXFORD SERBIAN COMMITTEE.

The Serbian Relief Fund includes in its scope the education of over 300 Serbian boys in this country. The aim of the Fund with regard to students in Great Britain is to train a body of professional, industrial, and commercial men to take the place of those educated Serbians whose ranks have been so grievously depleted during the war. The bulk of the boys who came over from France in the spring and summer of 1916 were accommodated at Oxford, pending arrangements for their distribution, and the headquarters of the administration was subsequently transferred to Cambridge. The following statement showing the distribution of Serbian students and boys in various Universities, schools, and other training centres will give some idea of the work that has been organized by the Education Committee of the Serbian Relief Fund, under Mrs. Carrington-Wilde, and carried out under the direction of Mr. J. E. Bellows, at Westminster College, Cambridge:—

ENGLAND:—

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Birmingham University | 5 |
| Bourneville Elementary School | 8 |
| King's Norton Secondary School | 5 |
| Cambridge University | 13 |
| Perse School | 17 |
| County Secondary School | 6 |
| Leys School | 2 |
| Higher Grade School | 2 |

British Library Newspaper Archive

Other local communities of the Serbian boys were at Foxton Hall, ten miles south of Cambridge, and at Shippea Hill, near Ely; some students also stayed at what had previously been the Isolation Hospital, at Brookfields on Mill Road, Cambridge.³¹ As their time in Cambridge progressed, some students were taught at Westminster (for example, by volunteer English teachers); but school places were found for the refugee boys at the Leys, the Perse, the Grade School, the County Secondary School, the School of Arts and Crafts, and the School of Agriculture, as well as at several Colleges of the University.³² This detail of the placement of Serbian boys in British schools (left) shows that at Cambridge, 'under the direction of Mr J E Bellows at Westminster College', they also went to the University, the Perse School, the Leys School, the Higher Grade School, and the County Secondary School. Bellows was one of the Serbian Relief Fund.

Mrs Carrington-Wilde had said in June 1916 that the Committee 'had not the least idea of interfering with their national ideas and substituting their own',³³ and this chimes with the recollections of Ernest Johnson, Resident Tutor at Cheshunt, as he describes the College's time in the Great War. Writing just over twenty years later, he recalled how 'we received, housed, fed, and cared for sixty Serbian boy refugees, with two teachers and an Orthodox priest under the leadership of a worker from the Society of Friends, and for a time, an ikon was erected over the door of the dining room, while on Sunday evenings the boys used to come into our house to sing some of their national songs while we taught them some of our English hymns.'³⁴

When the end of the War came in 1918, plans were made for the re-opening of Cheshunt. Although lectures began in the spring term of 1919, the Serbian boys were still living in the building, so the students had to find external accommodation, until the October term of 1919.³⁵ Likewise, at Westminster, the 1919 College Committee reported that 'The College premises have been used during the year by the Serbian refugee students, and their occupation has been in every way satisfactory. They vacated the building on April 9 [1919].'³⁶

After their years in England, the Serbian refugees returned home after the war;³⁷ hopefully with pleasant memories of their time in England and living at Westminster and at Cheshunt Colleges. Indeed, the Chairman of the Cambridge Serbian Fund, Prof AC Seward, wrote in 1919 that 'when the new state of the Jugo Slavs is established we hope they will recall with pleasure the days spent in Cambridge.'³⁸

Helen Weller, Westminster & Cheshunt Archivist, Spring 2024

³¹ *Cambridge Independent Press*, Nov 24th 1916; "The Victorian Isolation Hospital", online at *Creating Cambridge* <http://www.creatingcambridge.com/history-stories/victorian-isolation-hospital/>

³² *The Cambridge Daily News*, January 19th 1917; *The Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal*, 20th November 1918; 'The First World War: Serbian Children in Flight', by Professor Tony Kushner, <https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/serbian-refugees-in-the-first-world-war>

³³ *The Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal* 21 June 1916

³⁴ *The Cheshunt Union Magazine* No 44, May 1940, p7 (C9/9/9a)

³⁵ *Cheshunt College: A Record* by Stephen Orchard (1968) p.27; *The Cheshunt Union Magazine* No 44, May 1940, p7 (Cheshunt Archives C9/9/9a)

³⁶ 1919 College Committee Report p.157

³⁷ 'Cambridge History of the First World War, Part III - Populations at Risk; 8 - Refugees and exiles' by Peter Gatrell and Philippe Nivet; and 'The First World War: Serbian Children in Flight', by Professor Tony Kushner, University of Southampton

³⁸ *The Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal*, 20th November 1919

CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS

The Luck of Thirteen: Wanderings and Flight through Montenegro and Serbia, by Jan and Jo Gordon (published 1916), online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/17291/17291-h/17291-h.htm#image27>

“The Retreat of the Serbian Army”, was written by Captain G Gordon-Smith of the Serbian Army, and published in *Current History* Vol 11 No 3 Part 2 (March 1920). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45325194>

The Stricken Land: Serbia As We Saw It, by Claude and Alice Askew (published 1916), online at <https://archive.org/details/strickenlandserb00aske/mode/2up>

With Serbia Into Exile, by Fortier Jones (published 1916), online at <https://archive.org/details/withserbiaintoex00jone>

Photographs of the retreat across Albania in 1915/1916 by the Serbian Official Photographer can be found in the collections of the Imperial War Museum, London, online at <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/search?query=&filters%5BcollectionString%5D%5BSERBIAN%20FIRST%20WORLD%20WAR%20OFFICIAL%20COLLECTION%5D=on>

Contemporary newspaper accounts of the Serbian boys in Cambridge, published in local newspapers (and especially *The Cambridge Journal*) are found in the Cambridge Local Studies Library

Mike Petty has indexed some of these collections, available online here:

<https://archive.org/details/a-cambridgeshire-scrapbook-1897-1990-by-mike-petty-july-2020/mode/2up>

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Published online by Cambridge University Press: 05 December 2013 <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-the-first-world-war/refugees-and-exiles/EF03944BAB480615CA0E85BB7A7C073D#>

‘In The Service of the Children of Serbia’: a blog about Jean Rankin and Florence Maw, and their work in Serbia, 1915-1953, by Milan Grba, British Library, October 2016 <https://blogs.bl.uk/european/2016/10/in-the-service-of-the-children-of-serbia-1915-1947.html>

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