
Opening Extract from...

Domestic Soldiers

Written by Jennifer Purcell

Published by Constable

DOMESTIC SOLDIERS

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Constable • London

Constable & Robinson Ltd
3 The Lanchesters
162 Fulham Palace Road
London W6 9ER
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the UK by Constable,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2010

A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication data is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-84529-522-6

Printed and bound in the EU

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A work of this nature is never accomplished alone. Throughout the process of researching and writing this book, I have been blessed with encouragement and support from dear friends and family. I have met some wonderful people who have made contributions to this project in their own ways, and along the way I have managed to make some new friends. To all those who lent moral support, offered sage advice or helped to make my work easier, I am eternally grateful.

I would like to thank the staff at the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex who were not only incredibly helpful, but who also made life at the archive enjoyable. Special thanks to Fiona Courage, Karen Watson and Jessica Scantlebury, who were not only helpful during my research at the archive, but who also made it possible for me to pursue my research from abroad. I am also grateful to the staff at Mass-Observation for acting as my cultural interpreters as they so often did. Thanks to Simon, who not only helped with my work in the archive, but who also schooled me on the joys of cricket. Thanks also to Joy Eldridge, whose knowledge of the archive

was invaluable at the outset of this project. I especially thank her for sharing with me her memories of growing up listening to women's programmes on the BBC with her mother. Special thanks to Dorothy Sheridan for sharing insights about the women, which proved integral to my research. I particularly want to thank her for working out solutions that helped me continue my work abroad. I would also like to thank the trustees of the Mass-Observation Archive for making available such an extraordinary and unique resource. All direct quotes from the diarists are copyright of the Mass-Observation Archive. I wish to thank too the archivists at the BBC Written Archives Centre at Caversham Park in Reading for their assistance in this project.

To Sandra Koa-Wing, thank you for your support and encouragement throughout my time at Sussex and in the early days of writing. I will always remember your laugh and the brightness with which you filled the archive. You are, and shall forever be, greatly missed.

Without the advice, support and encouragement of Claire Langhamer and Alun Howkins, I dare say this project would not have come to fruition. I am eternally indebted to Marjorie Levine-Clark, who has been a wonderful mentor, coach and advocate over the years.

I wish also to thank my friends, old and new, who lent their support and encouragement during this process. Special thanks to Jenna Bailey, who has given generously of her time and advice in combing over numerous drafts – thank you for your support and friendship. Over innumerable cups of tea and equally numerous emails, Andrea Salter and I contemplated the life of Nella Last – I could never have survived archival work (and Nella's maddening handwriting)

without you! Thanks to Susan Gustin, Laura Rey and Donna Castle for your unfailing encouragement over the years. I wish also to thank Susan Ouellette for her advice and friendship, and of course, Jane Viens, without whose help absolutely nothing would ever get done!

Thanks to Jessica Cuthbert-Smith for a keen critical eye and to Jo Stansall for her help in this process. Special thanks to Leo Hollis, without whom this book would never have reached the light of day. Thank you for the helpful advice and criticism along the way, and, certainly not least of all, for infinite depths of patience.

Finally, to my family, who has been a source of love, encouragement and inspiration. To my father for instilling in me a love of history and for helping to fire my historical imagination on so many childhood trips to American Revolution and Civil War battlefields. Love and thanks to Bill and Kim for their continual support. Love and thanks also to Doug for sharing his love of history with me and for always supporting me in my endeavours. We are blessed to have you in our lives. Without the unconditional love and support of my mom, I do not think I could have made it this far. Thanks for reading my work (really, every single scrap of paper I've ever sent your way!) and for never failing to be my number one fan all these years. Finally, to Rob, for your numerous sacrifices and support, which I can't possibly begin to enumerate here, and for patiently listening to me discourse endlessly on housewives and the Second World War, as always, my love.

INTRODUCTION

It was 2 a.m. on a frosty Saturday morning in December. Helen huddled over a coal-fired stove, straining her ears to discern any trace of the Luftwaffe growling in the distance. Night after night, she complained, they 'murdered' her sleep with each wave of planes that passed over the draughty medieval residence on the Kent coast. Whether they dropped their bombs on her village or whether they passed over on their way to deliver death on another city, the anxiety was the same. Neither was the murmur of the RAF planes on their way to the Continent comforting: their engines signalled the same death and destruction for German cities that the Nazis rained upon English cities.

Tonight, she listened for 'Firebomb Fritz', but there was no sound. After weeks of raids, it was eerily silent: a 'lovely thick fog' had descended upon the south-east coast of England, thwarting air operations for either side. Helen shivered in the silence – the stove was wholly inadequate for the sharp chill of a December night. She cursed. The one night she volunteered for fire watching duty was the one night she could have

managed some sleep. 'What have I done for you, England, my England?' she bitterly mused.

It was the definitive question of the war: what were you doing for the war effort? Stated another way, as seen in the wartime pages of the classic guide to middle-class housewifery, *Good Housekeeping*, women were questioned, 'Is your conscience clear?'[1] It was a simple, but stinging, call to action that underlines the nature of the 'People's War'. Before the first month of the war was done, the phrase had been coined in the upper echelons of government in recognition of the fact that everybody was important to the war effort. Soon afterwards, the title, and the idea that everyone had a part to play in the war, was picked up in popular venues: on the BBC, on the silver screen, in the newspapers and magazines. The People's War was not – by its very definition, could not be – an entirely military affair. It galvanized everyone – woman, child and man – into action to protect Britain and to fight for a new future.

If your conscience chaffed, there were ways to soothe it. The People's War was a war of small, ordinary, even mundane, feats compounded by the millions into incredible tides of action. Certainly there were the military campaigns, the triumphs and the defeats (and sometimes the triumphal defeats) of the battlefields, in the air and on the seas: Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, Singapore, El Alamein, D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge, for example. And, of course, these defeats and victories were composed of numerous acts of the ordinary and the courageous, the cynical and the hopeful. It was no different for those at home.

Volunteering and paid work were some of the ways civilians might assuage the conscience of those who

stayed behind, but there was more to it than that. Every moment and every action counted: turning over your flowerbeds to vegetables, using less hot water, scraping the margarine paper till all the grease was gone, saying 'no' to a new pair of shoes . . . shivering on a cold December morning. The war lurked behind every act on the home front. This fact of the People's War was invigorating and powerful for some, maddening for others.

Because every act was potentially heroic, anyone could be a hero. Because there was so much to do, there was also a wonderfully empowering flexibility about the People's War. Whatever one did, or wanted to do, if it was done well and if it was deemed useful to the nation in its hour of need, it was important. But if one could be a hero, one might also be a villain; and if there was so much to do, one might not be doing enough, and the guilt could be crushing. For many, this was the day-to-day reality of the war.

It is a reality that threads its way through Mass-Observation diaries, tangled and entwined in the fabric of everyday life and relationships; sometimes the thread is barely discernible, sometimes it is a chaotic zigzag or a tangled mess; at other times it glistens like a strand of silver. In 1939, a group of intellectual avant-garde researchers, who had begun documenting everyday life in Britain two years previously, offered ordinary Britons an extraordinary opportunity: to write diaries about their day-to-day lives in wartime. The inquisitive researchers at Mass-Observation (M-O) also sent out surveys (called directives) with carefully constructed questions to understand life in Britain: what did one think about Churchill's performance? How did one feel about the Germans? Did people believe BBC news

reports? Did one think British morals were slipping? Furthermore, M-O made it clear that any Briton who decided to participate wrote for an audience: their voices would be heard.

Though their names would be kept anonymous to the public, it was understood – indeed, the writers expected – that the staff at M-O read their submissions and reported on their findings to the rest of Britain through newspaper and magazine articles. (They probably did not know that, at least for the first part of the war, their observations were also distilled and reported to the government in the interests of understanding public morale.) Since M-O regarded the everyday lives and opinions of individual Britons as a crucial element necessary in exploring the true nature of British society, it was very much a part of the People's War. In fact, many of its volunteers considered their writing as a patriotic act.

The diary project was a practical response to the war. With the outbreak of conflict in Europe and the potential disruptions to postal services, the group was unsure how to carry on its mission to document everyday lives. It would continue to send its directives to the cadre of volunteers it had accumulated since 1937, but in the event that this strategy failed, M-O asked its observers to keep diaries of their experiences and post them back to the organization if, and when, possible. Thankfully, the postal service continued to operate even during the hottest periods of conflict on British soil and M-O continued to collect and analyse the observers' writings throughout the war, and indeed, well into the post-war period.

The writings of the observers leave a legacy of the war that is often forgotten. They remind us that

political leaders and battles were significant, but at the same time they were often only a small part of ordinary individuals' lives. The experiences that the men and women of M-O shared with us also illustrate the extraordinary power of war to transform lives. More importantly, they offer us a human connection to the past; they tell us a story of the war, but also a story of themselves.

This book recounts the war through the eyes of six ordinary women who wrote for M-O. Women were in the vanguard of the People's War; they stepped into jobs that no one would have ever dreamed permitting them to join in peacetime, let alone excel. If women are considered in the history books, it is these women workers who are most often remembered for their contributions to the war. But there are many others, who have been rendered faceless by the tide of history: ordinary women who had families to care for, who volunteered any scrap of time they could muster, who tried valiantly to contribute in their own ways while simultaneously juggling personal and domestic obligations. Though often lost in the retelling of the war, they and their struggles were – and are – significant parts of that story.

Through these six women, we can glimpse everyday life and the thoughts, fears and personal battles of ordinary women as they lived on the edge of history, not knowing from day to day, moment to moment, how the war or their lives would play out. The tale is bounded by the events – national, international, local and personal – that these women thought important at the time; it is shaped by their words and observations. They lived across England: Sheffield, Leeds, and Newcastle in the north, the shipbuilding town of

Barrow-in-Furness in Lancashire, Kent and the Bristol coast and Birmingham. All of them were middle-aged married women and most had children.[2]

Born around 1885, Irene Grant was the eldest. Before the war, she and her family had eked out a respectable existence in the working-class suburbs of Newcastle, but always teetered precariously close to poverty. For her, the People's War offered the promise to make society more equitable: she rarely missed an opportunity to remind M-O that she was a socialist.

Nella Last was four years younger than Grant and lived in Barrow-in-Furness. She prided herself on her children and her domestic ability. The war gave her a chance to show off those skills. Though he'd rarely ever done so before the war, even her husband could not fail to recognize her abilities in wartime. Nella basked in the praise garnered from those around her, building up a confidence unknown to her in peacetime.

In much the same way as Nella, Alice Bridges found her voice in the war. She was born in 1900 and lived in the suburbs of Birmingham. The war unleashed a cheeky and playful streak that blossomed into a stubborn independence.

Natalie Tanner, who was born in 1902, enjoyed a freedom unmatched by the other women. She was not as constrained by the domestic demands that the others faced. Living in the rural countryside surrounding Leeds, Natalie was often found working in her garden, walking on the hills near her home or reading. But the social life of Leeds and Bradford always beckoned, and Natalie never failed to see a play at the local theatre, or a feature on the silver screen.

Natalie, Nella, Irene and Alice were early volunteers for M-O. Their diaries date from the beginning

of the war, but observers were also recruited throughout the war by word of mouth, via advertisements and through the various articles published by the organization. Both Edie Rutherford and Helen Mitchell began writing for M-O in 1941.

Like Natalie Tanner, Edie Rutherford was also born in 1902, and although her parents were both British, she was born in South Africa and was a fierce champion of the empire. The only woman without children, she lived with her husband in Sheffield. Edie's diary was somewhat different from the other women's: her tone and insightful, often amusing, commentary on both war and local events create the feeling of a friendly chat over the morning coffee and newspaper.

Helen Mitchell was born in 1894 and spent most of the war in Kent, though when the bombing and planes became too much, she often escaped to the coast near Bristol. Helen's war was a desperate struggle to find her own voice. Her diary drips with a caustic sarcasm that reminds us that the People's War was not always empowering.

The women in this book were housewives and mothers, all of whom wrote for Mass-Observation. They were ordinary women living in extraordinary times. Through them, we can view the struggles and triumphs of everyday life during the war. We follow them into their homes, watch them cook, knit, read or listen to the wireless. Through their eyes, we watch the skies anxiously for German bombers and walk through the rubble left behind. We hear them gossip, converse or fight with family members and neighbours. We see them cheer the government at one instant and doubt it the next. We hear their worries about the future and

learn of their pasts, of their hopes and joys, their fears and frustrations, their friends and families. Aware of the gravity of the times, we see them searching for ways to be a part of history and to contribute to their nation in its time of need. Finally, we watch them navigate the perennial human struggle: the fight to find voices of their own, to free themselves from others' constraints, to live and define themselves on their own terms.

In many ways, they are our mothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers. Their struggles in wartime were unique as well as universal. Their insights, their triumphs and their defeats reach far beyond the global conflict of the 1940s.

This is the story of life and war through their eyes.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LAST WAR

Helen Mitchell looked at the newborn baby boy cradled in her arms and sighed. Lonely and worn-out from the birth, the only thought she could muster was 'future cannon fodder'. It was 5 November 1917, Guy Fawkes' Day, but few celebrations were planned that autumn. More than three desperately sad years into the Great War, the nation, and indeed the entire Continent, languished in a deep state of weariness. That day, *The Times* published a short article assuring the reading public that there was 'cheerfulness at the front', yet even this sentiment was shot through with a far from comforting reality.

The 'cheerfulness' of which the article spoke was of those who lay wounded and dying on the Western Front, not knowing when death would free them from their pain, but supremely confident in the 'ultimate result': British victory. The soldiers' heroism was all the more poignant in the conditions they endured, the author explained, as Tommies fought in: 'a country sodden with water where they frequently sank, not only up to the knees or the waist, but quite often up to the neck or beyond it'.[1] Though literally devoured

by the mud of Flanders, they could not be thwarted in their duty.

If Helen had opened *The Times*, which she read often, on that day, she may have seen this article, and perhaps flipped through the pages until her eyes rested upon the paper's daily requiem for the dead, the 'Roll of Honour'. Day after day throughout the war, the paper published a list of casualties, highlighting the officers lost and naming the privates who had fallen; the vast black-and-white monotony of those lists still has the power to strike one with an intense feeling of loss. Living in Newcastle at the time, Helen may have anxiously searched the names of the Northumberland Fusiliers for anyone she or her husband knew. That day, *The Times* reported twenty-six Northumberland privates who had died in recent action, a small paragraph in a sea of losses comprising over three tightly printed columns of dead.

She may have been relieved that only one officer had been lost from the Gloucester Regiment, the county where she had grown up. Or she may have wept bitterly if she recognized the name. Though she could not have known it then, the battle that had produced such devastating carnage over the past three months was to end the day after her son was born, when British and Canadian forces finally took the village of Passchendaele. The Third Battle of Ypres, more commonly known as Passchendaele, sacrificed more than 310,000 British soldiers to the gods of a war many believed futile – and interminable.

When Helen Mitchell looked at her newborn son, all she saw were the lists and lists of dead and wounded. Between 1914 and 1918, hundreds of thousands of young men lost their lives, and many more were mutilated or psychologically scarred from the action

they had witnessed in the trenches during the Great War. The scale of everyday death and destruction in the trenches is unimaginable: on average, nearly 7,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded on any given day; the officers called it 'wastage'.[2] In the end, over 600,000 British soldiers were killed, and more than two million were wounded or missing.

It is little wonder, suffocating under the weight of a never-ending war, as soldiers were drowned and churned into the mud of the Western Front, that in her son Helen could only fathom 'future cannon fodder'. Indeed, Mitchell's vision in 1917 seemed eerily prophetic in 1940, when her son William, now twenty-three, was conscripted into the army. When war on the Continent emerged once again in 1939 for the next generation, those who had personally endured and remembered the random, senseless death of the trenches and the grief of the Rolls of Honour could only imagine the horror that waited.

Those who lived through the First World War continued to carry the scars of the conflict well beyond 1918. Though different in age during the war – some were married, and others young teenagers – every woman in this story felt the war deeply, and each was shaped by its long-term effects. For Helen, the trauma of the Great War was inbred in her infant, ultimately poisoning the bond between mother and son. But the scars were as varied as they were deep. Returning veterans came home to an uncertain economy and often found that their patriotic service had ruined them for the post-war world.

Edie Rutherford was a young teenager living in South Africa during the war, but her future husband, Sid, was

old enough to fight. He was injured on Vimy Ridge in 1917 and suffered shell shock. Afterwards, he was sent on military duty to Burma, where he endured bouts of malaria and dysentery that adversely affected his health for the rest of his life: his military service left him suffering severe shortness of breath, heart problems and psychological trauma.

Sid and Edie met in South Africa and were married soon afterwards in Australia, where they lived until moving to Sheffield in 1934. Australia did not experience the depth of economic troubles that Britain did during the 1920s, but Sid's war disabilities nonetheless made it difficult for him to keep a job for any significant length of time. Reasoning that he could never reliably provide for a family, and feeling it unwise to bring up children they could not afford, Edie and Sid decided to forgo having children. Furthermore, Rutherford explained to M-O, her husband's shell shock made it difficult to cope with the inevitable racket raised by children. As it was, Edie's diary had to be suspended when he was home because she used a typewriter, and the noise was too much for him.

Like Sid and Edie, Irene Grant's young family struggled to survive the severe economic downturns in 1921–2 and the more famous global depression of the early 1930s. The mounting casualties of the Great War that so depressed Helen Mitchell instead motivated Irene to create life. She couldn't bear to send her husband to the Western Front without having his child, so Irene and Tom conceived a baby girl just before he left for France in 1918.

After Tom returned from France, they had another child. 'But that', Irene confessed, 'was a mistake.'

Marjorie was born in 1921, right as the post-war boom collapsed. Irene would have liked four children, but the economic reality of the 1920s made that hope impossible. By 1922, unemployment had soared to a national average of 15 per cent, causing the government to extend both the length of assistance and the monetary benefit of the dole for the unemployed. In July 1922, the rates given to out-of-work men, women and juveniles were raised by 3 shillings a week and the number of weeks of benefit extended from fifteen to twenty-six. The increase was welcome, but it was hardly enough.

The tension in the hardest-hit areas such as Sheffield and Tyneside rose steadily despite this intervention. On 8 December 1922, during a debate about the rising social unrest, Tom Smith, MP, made it clear that the benefit was not enough to feed a family even in the workhouse – the most despised form of welfare available for the poor. When respectable working men lost their jobs, the MP pointed out, they lost everything. 'I have seen men come in for food or relief who went to school with me,' he related:

> . . . good living men, men who tried to maintain a decent standard of life for themselves and their dependants. The piano has gone, the watch has gone, and they have come for relief. What is worse, they have lost a good deal of their self-respect.

These hard realities, the MP argued, led previously hard-working, stable, men to become radicalized and to take action against the government. It was a dangerous situation that ultimately culminated in the General Strike of 1926, a national strike in sympathy of coal miners whose wages were cut. Over 1.5 million workers

downed tools for nine days – the longest general strike in British history.

The Grants' troubles began in earnest when Irene was forced to leave her job. Her husband Tom, one of the 'respectable' working men radicalized by his experiences, was in and out of work throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and the family could have used Irene's income as a teacher to keep afloat, but in 1922 married female teachers across the country were forced to resign. The institution of the marriage bar by many local education authorities, requiring all women to leave a career once they married, was meant to help returning veterans find work. Ironically, it nearly devastated the Grants. Throughout the inter-war period, Irene and Tom's young family barely managed to scrape by on savings left over from Irene's teaching days and whatever could be laid by when Tom was in steady work. Although she never wrote about receiving unemployment insurance, it seems likely that the Grants were probably forced to turn to the dole during lean times.

Nella Last also remembered the inter-war period as a time of scarcity in which the domestic skills that her grandmother taught her as a child were indispensable, especially the 'dodges' that made the most of the ingredients she could afford. Times were not as difficult for the Lasts as they were for the Grants, however. After the Great War, Nella's husband Will had taken over his father's joinery workshop and worked steadily throughout the inter-war period. Those who had work during the depressions of the 1920s and 1930s were generally better-off than they might have been in more prosperous times, because they could take advantage of the lower cost of living that accompanied

the downturns. In fact, while the Grants and the Rutherfords struggled to keep food on the table and to pay the rent, the Lasts bought a new house with the help of inheritance money from Nella's father. Will was never an ambitious businessman, but with Nella's wise household management they were able to raise their two growing boys.

Nella and Will were married three years before the First World War, and when he enlisted in the navy, they moved to Southampton, where they spent most of the war. While Will worked in the shipyards, Nella took care of their young son Arthur and volunteered at the local hospital. Nella fondly remembered helping the injured soldiers write letters home and entertaining them. She enjoyed bringing a smile to their faces or a glint of light to their eyes with her jokes and lighthearted 'monologues'. Nella and Will's second son, Cliff, was born during Will's service on the south coast. The birth left Nella desperately ill, but a kindly doctor took care of her and secured a month's leave for Will to help her recover. Though her health was touch and go for a few weeks, looking back on it, Nella figured she was happier in Southampton than at any other time in her life.

Alice Bridges recalled the First World War and the 1920s as a particularly difficult time. Born in 1901, she was only thirteen when war broke out. Her father was out of work for most of the war and did not serve in the military. Instead, he insisted that he was the 'chosen one of God' and left work for days and weeks at a time to pray at home. This left her mother to fend for the family, and Alice soon became her mother's main support. Although her mother worked hard to feed and

clothe six children on her own, there was never enough and Alice remembered 'many hungry days' during the war and afterwards. She believed that these lean years, and the endless hours she helped her mother, 'ruined' her health.

Even in the 1940s, when she wrote for M-O, Alice's health was always delicate, but for eight years in the 1920s, between the ages of twenty-two and thirty, she suffered severe illnesses. When she married in 1928, her doctor warned her against having a child, as it might put Alice in grave danger. Les and Alice waited almost five years until her health improved before they had Jacqueline. Although she wanted two children, Alice stopped at one. It was not her health that barred her this time, but rather Les' behaviour that convinced her not to have more. After the birth of their daughter, he became jealous that Alice's attention was focused elsewhere, and left her to do all the work. Once she realized Les would not lift a finger to help with Jacq, she decided one child was enough.

Natalie Tanner made the same decision after giving birth to her son in 1933. She considered having three children, but with her husband busy building a thriving engineering firm, and because she felt the first two years of the baby's life were too 'trying' without the help of a nanny, James would be her only child. Although they remembered the large-scale destruction and grief of the war, both Natalie and Hugh were too young to participate directly in the First World War.

Instead, Natalie came of age during the economic crises of the 1920s, when she threw her support behind the Labour Party. She spent most of her early twenties campaigning for Labour candidates, and even carried

out a term as Poor Law Guardian herself. For a stint of two years her radical leanings led her into membership of the International Labour Party (ILP), known especially for its staunch pacifism amid the jingoism of the Great War.

After getting married in 1926, Hugh and Natalie moved to Spain for five years; they left in 1931, the year in which the Spanish Second Republic was established. The republic soon, however, became overwhelmed by the infighting that would eventually blow up into the Spanish Civil War. When war did break out there in 1936, Natalie became involved in organizing relief efforts for the Republicans who fought against General Francisco Franco's Fascists. It was this work that brought Natalie into contact with communists, for whom she gained great respect. Although she accused them of 'tactical stupidity' and usually voted Labour, she was nonetheless a staunch supporter of the idea of communism and the Soviet Union from this time onwards. In fact, at a theatre production in 1941, she was appalled by the fact that everyone stood up for 'God Save the King', but sat down when the 'Internationale' was played. Natalie remained standing, and angrily instructed the rest of the audience to pay respect to the national anthem of their new ally, the Soviet Union.

The frequent playing of 'God Save the King' during the Second World War was one of the many annoyances with which Helen Mitchell coped. 'Why must we so frequently save the King?' she muttered when the BBC seemed to play the song continually after Italy capitulated in September 1943. Helen's less than patriotic feelings sprang from a deeper well than the simple, though exasperating, repetition of the patriotic tune:

they can be traced to an unfulfilling marriage and a tragic realization that there was no escape from it. This revelation came to her in 1936, when Edward VIII abdicated the throne to marry a divorcee.

On 11 December 1936, it was announced that King Edward VIII abdicated the throne in order to marry the American divorcee, Wallis Simpson. To Mitchell, everything about this episode illustrated the fundamental problems of British society and its conservative stance towards marriage. It was a poignant reminder of her own situation. If the stigma of divorce could not evade even the king, neither could she be immune; if she chose to leave her own loveless marriage, the shame of it would stalk her, too. She was fascinated by the prospects of divorce, and eagerly corresponded with friends who succeeded in breaking away from their unhappy marriages in the 1940s, but something in the abdication kept Helen from leaving her husband. The abdication slammed the door and turned the key on her domestic prison.

Helen married Peter in 1915 and followed her new husband to Newcastle, where he spent the First World War as an engineer. He was shy and hard working, and she was running from a desolate childhood – the youngest child by nine years, Helen's mother frequently told her she was unplanned and unwanted. Helen saw little of her husband while they lived in Newcastle, and they spoke even less. She remembered that their first years together were awkward. Neither knew much about the 'facts of life', nor was she 'very thrilled about "sex"'. Upon reflection, she figured he 'knew as little about the job as I did'. They 'managed to produce a son after 2 years', but Helen was intensely lonely. Soon after giving birth, she 'got less keen on the sex business' and

felt her husband had little interest in her outside the bedroom. He threw himself into his work and rarely noticed her.

After the war, they moved to the outskirts of Aberdeen, where initially, the isolation was maddening. Helen spent these years alone in mind and spirit. She knew no one, felt painfully rejected by her husband and found little comfort in motherhood. Being the youngest child, she had had no experience with infants. They made her nervous and self-conscious, and she had no idea how to care for her own child, no one to help her and very few tender feelings towards him.

By the time William was seven, Helen seems to have finally settled into life in Scotland. For several weeks in the autumn of 1926, she presented a local radio programme on 'Prominent Women of the Eighteenth Century', but it would be three more years before she truly came into her own.

In September 1929, she left Aberdeen to study drama and elocution at the Royal Academy of Music (RAM) in London. Helen never explains how she convinced her husband to let her leave, or if indeed she *did* convince him. Nonetheless, she did leave, and since her sister-in-law lived in London, it seems likely that Helen stayed with her during her studies. At the academy, Helen was introduced to a new and exciting world. She found something at which she excelled – receiving bronze and silver medals for outstanding performances on her annual examinations. Helen also discovered kindred spirits in her fellow actors, writers and producers. And for the first time in her life, she felt truly accepted.

The ensuing years in Aberdeen were the happiest of her life, and night after night the house was filled

with music and laughter. She put on bridge evenings and staged plays, poetry readings and concerts, inviting amateurs and professionals alike to her home for grand social evenings. With her husband, Peter, she founded a local Shakespeare society; both Peter and William spent their spare time together building sets for the plays. This period would see the bond between father and son strengthened, as the carpentry shed offered the perfect environment for intimate talks, and a place where William eagerly soaked up his father's knowledge and technical skills.

Though Helen watched with some sadness as she was increasingly shut out of the close relationship developing between Peter and William, the 1930s were the height of her life. She had made new friends at the RAM and, with a newfound confidence, blossomed in Scotland. With her workaholic husband rarely home, her son at boarding school for most of the year in England, and an efficient servant to take care of the house, domestic life faded into the background and her social life was in the ascendant.

The abdication crisis in 1936 was the first shock to bring her back to reality. The final blow came a year later when, tired of his work, Peter uprooted Helen from the Aberdeen she had grown to love and sequestered her in an old, rambling house in a quiet village in Kent with few friends and fewer reliable servants. Helen was given no say in the relocation; the decision to move was entirely her husband's.

Moving to Kent would place Helen in the centre of the storm that would soon break over Britain. But while she could not know the struggles she would soon endure in wartime, Helen braced herself for the domestic battle of her life.