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Millions Like Us

WOMEN'S LIVES DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

VIRGINIA NICHOLSON

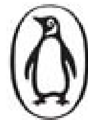
By the same author

Among the Bohemians
Singled Out

Millions Like Us

Women's Lives in the Second World War

VIRGINIA NICHOLSON



PENGUIN BOOKS

For my mother, Anne Olivier Bell

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Virginia Nicholson was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and grew up in Yorkshire and Sussex. She studied at Cambridge University and lived abroad in France and ltaly, then worked as a documentary researcher for BBC Television. Her books include the acclaimed social history *Among the Bohemians: Experinents in Living 1900–1939, and Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men after the First World War*, published by Penguin in 2002 and 2007. She is married to a writer, has three children and lives in Sussex.

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Author’s Note

In July 2005 the Queen unveiled a memorial in Whitehall dedicated to ‘The Women of World War Two’. This massive bronze structure, twenty-two feet high, is studded with a row of oddly spooky disembodied uniforms. Hanging from the monument are the clothes and belongings of the servicewomen, factory workers, farm-workers and women who worked in hospitals, emergency services and volunteer bodies across the nation between 1939 and 1945. They are suspended in a featureless void, with no faces, no personalities. In its way the monument is a perfect metaphor for our state of national amnesia. Six million-odd women threw their energies into the home front. 640,000 British servicewomen played their part in helping to win the war. Of these, 624 died for their country.[*] But many of them are still alive.

Surely their endurance, their adventures, their sacrifices, their personalities are worthy of a deeper appreciation. This book asks, who were they? And what did it feel like to be them? I wanted to find out not only what they did in the war, but what the war did to them and how it changed their subsequent lives and relationships.

The chapters that follow are arranged chronologically, with the personal stories of a fifty-strong cast of characters in the spotlight against a backdrop of important social, political and international events: a momentous decade, seemingly familiar to many of us, but seen entirely through the eyes of the women who lived it. My approach to historical research is, as far as possible, to merge it with biography, and the telling of stories. I believe that the personal and idiosyncratic reveal more about the past than the generic and comprehensive. (A small note here: my intermittent – but, I think, authentic – use of the word ‘girl’ to describe the young women of the 1940s may sound a little patronising today, but back then it was their own preferred term, and was also universally used in the press and literature.)

Among the many elderly women whom I interviewed and whose stories appear in these pages is my mother, Anne Popham, as she then was. Not because her experiences were unusual or heroic, but precisely because they weren’t. There have been numerous books celebrating the courage of women agents parachuted behind enemy lines in France, women in Japanese

prisoner-of-war camps, women pilots from the Air Transport Auxiliary who delivered Spitfires to their airfields. Odette Hallowes and Dame Margot Turner have earned their place in history alongside Douglas Bader and Stanley Hollis. My mother is now ninety-four years old. Like most of our mothers and grandmothers, and like the majority of women in this narrative, she grew up in a world that seemed small and sedate and did nothing starry or distinguished in the war. When it was declared in 1939 she was ordinary, frightened and unsuspecting. But six years of conflict reordered that world; along with an entire generation, she awoke to her own post-war potential. In all these respects she was entirely typical of the many millions for whose sake I have borrowed my title. (*Millions Like Us* was a propaganda movie made by Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat in 1943, to persuade women to join the war effort.)

If I could have chosen another title, it might have been ‘We Just Got on with It’ – the mantra of every woman I spoke to who lived through the war. So this book is not only an attempt to characterise that faceless war memorial, it is also my tribute to a generation of brave, stoical, unselfish, practical and uncomplaining women, whose values, along with their deeds, seem to be passing into history.

Prelude

A little over eighty years ago a very ordinary girl named Phyllis Noble was growing up in a terraced house with an outside toilet in Lewisham, south London. She was born in 1922. Her dad was a jobbing builder, and like many in the 1930s his trade was falling off; the Nobles' financial situation was not improved by his fondness for the pub. Phyllis's mum looked after the extended family of grandparents, in-laws and her own three children, who all lived under the same roof. As a role model Mum never overstepped the limits; she was first, foremost and exclusively a housewife, whose life revolved around the daily routine of shopping, cooking and washing. Despite the family's straitened circumstances Phyllis had a happy, rumbustious childhood. The kitchen in their cramped terrace house was a haven, and even when Dad had had a drop too much the family was united, roaring and joking when he let out one of his spectacularly loud farts. Phyllis was clever; but when she succeeded in winning a scholarship to a grammar school in Greenwich, Mum, disgusted at the expense of the uniform, launched a family battle to stop her daughter going. In any case getting educated would, in her view, be a pointless waste of time, since there was no alternative to the trap that she had herself been forced to enter twenty years earlier: that of marriage and motherhood.

To Phyllis's relief Mum was overruled by Dad, and in 1933 she took her first apprehensive steps away from the crowded, working-class, patriarchal world of her childhood. A better accent and a better life beckoned, alongside dreams of romance and escape from her proletarian background. But by the time she was sixteen it was 1938. Dad sat gloomily at home reading the newspaper reports about mass unemployment and the threat of war.

In June 1939, aged seventeen, Phyllis Noble joined the ranks of the so-called 'business girls'. She was to be a ledger clerk at the National Provincial Bank in Bishopsgate. Her workplace was a gloomy, noisy Victorian hall. Seated on a backless stool before her cumbersome ledger machine (a kind of monstrous typewriter), Phyllis was one of hundreds like her who spent their days sorting through piles of cheques, orders and statements to reconcile the bank's accounts. Prospects for women in this world were 'virtually nil'. Like

their working-class counterparts, the maidservants in their basements and pantries, the business girls tended to be time-servers, dreaming of ensnaring their boss or male colleague into marriage. Then they could leave:

For women the main road was to matrimony. Judging by the total absence of married women and the scarcity of older, unmarried ones, this was a destination which most women who strayed into the banking world reached soon enough. And indeed with so many young men around, head office at least served well as a marriage market.

Years later, Phyllis told the story of her teenage years and early adulthood in two short memoirs entitled *A Green Girl* (1983) and *Coming of Age in Wartime* (1988). She had grown up, married a man named Peter Willmott and become, not a film star or a literary virtuoso, but a respected social scientist. There is little to set her early life apart from the great mass of the working class to which she belonged – so what made her think her unexceptional adolescence was interesting enough to be the material for a book? And yet it is, for the reason that she lived through extraordinary times. Phyllis's life, like that of millions of her contemporaries in mid-twentieth century Britain, was about to be shaken to its foundations by uncontrollable international events. It would never recover its stability.

For skinny Jean McFadyen – like Phyllis, born in 1922 – a life of obscurity and narrow horizons was also about to be changed for ever. Jean had been brought up in a remote country area of Argyllshire. With an ailing mother and little twin sisters who needed looking after, she left school at thirteen-and-a-half to help. But when her mother regained her health the family couldn't afford to keep Jean in education. There was no local work for girls, so at the earliest opportunity her parents sent her off to be housemaid to a landowner in Inveraray. 'I was the junior of the housemaids, so I got all the dirty work to do …' From morning till night there were beds to make, commodes to empty, grates to black-lead. Eighty years ago there was nothing unusual in such a life for a country-born Scottish teenager, but even then Jean could sense that there was no future in it. 'It was a dead-end job,' she recalls. 'I was seventeen – very quiet and shy, and I hadna mixed very much with people my own age. But I knew there was other things in the world. I knew there was something that I was not having, and I wanted a share of it.' The disaster that befell Europe a few years later brought untold evil and tribulation, but for Jean the Second World War was to offer an education, a chance of liberty and a source of self-confidence.

Five hundred miles away in Somerset, Patience Chadwyck-Healey, the daughter of a city businessman, was growing up to be waited on by young

women like Jean. The Chadwyck-Healey family divided its time between London and a country residence near to Exmoor. ‘We rode and hunted all day - I lived in the saddle. There was a large staff who looked after us, and we were brought up not to go into the kitchen or do anything for ourselves. In fact my aunt was proud of the fact that she didn’t know how to make a cup of tea.’ Patience was born in 1917; in her nineties she is still poised and sprightly, a product of her class. Her education consisted of day school in London, followed by six months being ‘finished’ in Paris (‘as so many of us did’). In 1935 she donned her ostrich feathers and was presented at Court, before ‘doing’ two glitzy seasons as a debutante. ‘We were very ignorant and romantic … attracted in a starry-eyed way to the young chaps we were dancing with. I had no ambitions. I lived very much in the present and enjoyed what there was. I don’t ever remember thinking ahead as to what my eventual life might be. I think I hoped that it would be rather nice if I met a young man …’ For a brief moment Patience considered doing an outside course at university, ‘… but I had no idea how it worked. Then they wrote back and told me I had to sit some exams, so I thought better of it.’ Nothing had prepared this young lady for the approaching derailment of her privileged life at the age of just twenty-two.

*

As ‘children of the Armistice’, growing up in the 1930s, these women were just three of millions swept into the conflict that descended on our nation in 1939. The men who embarked on that war certainly did so in part to secure and perpetuate a way of life in which young women like Phyllis, Jean and Patience continued to take after their maternal role models, flush away the contents of commodes for their betters and look decorative in the saddle and at dances. Those men dared all, flew Spitfires, fought Fascism, suffered in prison camps and died in their thousands to preserve an ideal – an ideal of womanhood.

The story told in this book is the story of that ideal: of what it was, what became of it and the reality that lay beneath it. It’s the story of a generation of young women caught up by the whirlwind of war and dropped down again in a different world not of their own making. And it sets out to tell how and why their stable position in that pre-war world, along with so much that they had taken for granted, was dislodged and blown apart by the Second World War, only to be reconstituted after 1945.

They were schoolgirls and business girls, brides, mothers and daughters,

poor and privileged; some settled in the marital groove, others looking for love; reaching out to adulthood, or in their prime. These women were preoccupied by concerns that have always filled the minds of their sex: home and husband, boyfriends, family, work, exams, money, social life. If contemporary newspapers and magazines are anything to go on, shopping, childcare, the talkies, wireless programmes, Agatha Christie, knitting patterns, beauty and recipes preoccupied the waking hours of many of them. They revered the royal family. Despite the rise of socialism and industrial unrest, their media were as obsessed with the ruling classes as ours are with celebrities, and any class mobility there might have been in the 1930s was still only superficial. At the opposite end of the social scale from Patience Chadwyck-Healey and her kind was the 'socially lower' girl: meek and passive, she knew that the world of the posh girl who 'talked lovely' was beyond her reach. And yet the poor girl and the deb shared something. Neither looked for any other escape route than marriage.

But happiness was within easy grasp. Kay Mellis, now in her late eighties, was brought up in Edinburgh in the late 1930s. She speaks with the light, tripping accents of a town-bred Scot – in what she calls her 'how d'ye do' way of talking. Kay left school at fourteen and was bound apprentice to an Edinburgh dressmaker for five shillings a week. But she felt young for her age:

> I was still going out to play on my bike when I was fifteen. In those days people were more satisfied with their way of life. Our expectations were to be able to live comfortably from Friday to Friday. We were far, far more content than they are nowadays – we didn't expect the man in the moon to come down and say hello to us! At that age we had no idea what a war was going to *be* …

Kay's community was tightly knit. On Sunday nights teenagers would meet at Bible class; Kay had known Alastair Wight, whom she would eventually marry, since their schooldays together. His brother had married her sister – why look further?

Privileged and unprivileged, most of them were innocent about sex. Margaret Herbertson, a diplomat's daughter born in 1922, was entirely unacquainted with the most basic facts of life: 'My mother said nothing at all about it to me. Zero. I had an idea that if you were married you had a baby, but how you had the baby I had *no* idea whatever. We were all very, very naive.' For the vast majority in the years leading up to the Second World War the walls of home were their fortress. Life for them rolled securely on, seemingly untouched by military build-up and a botched European peace.

*