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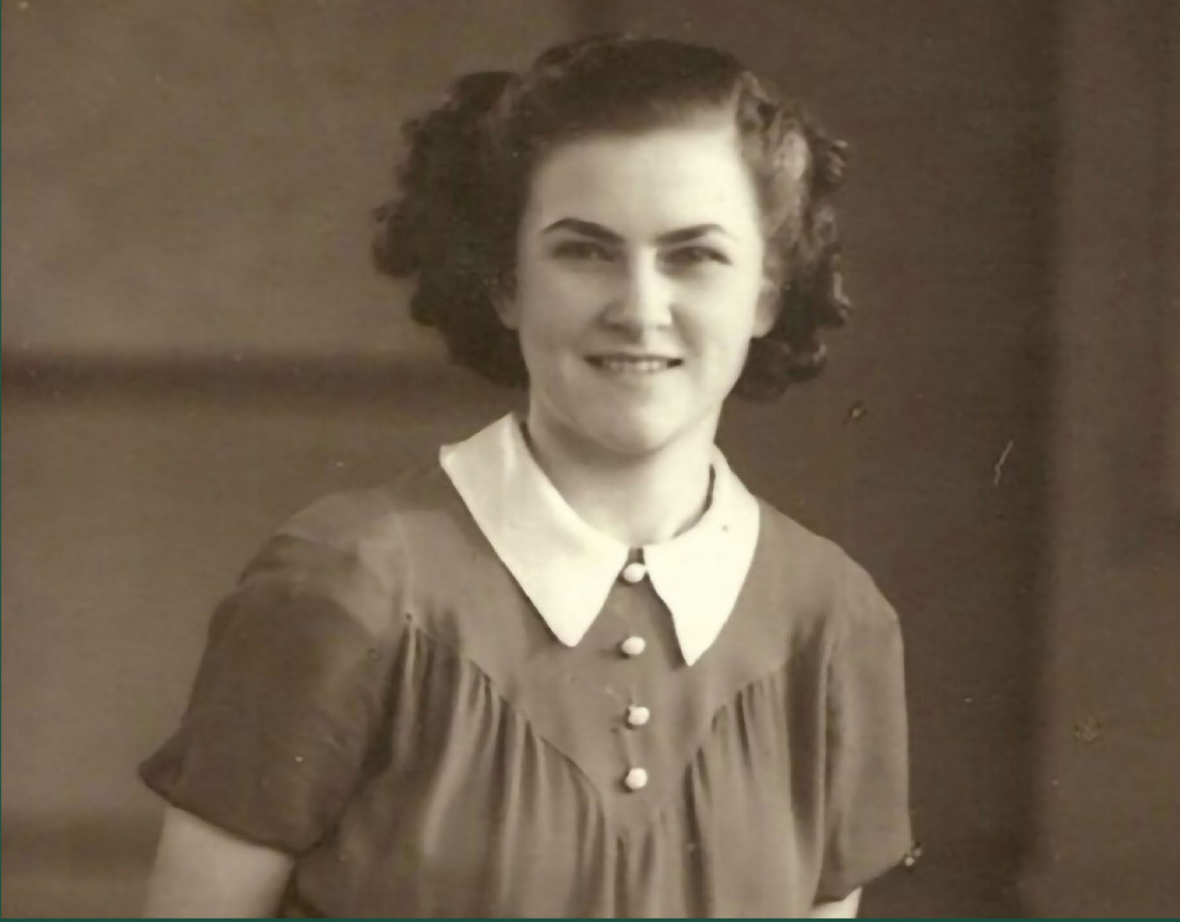
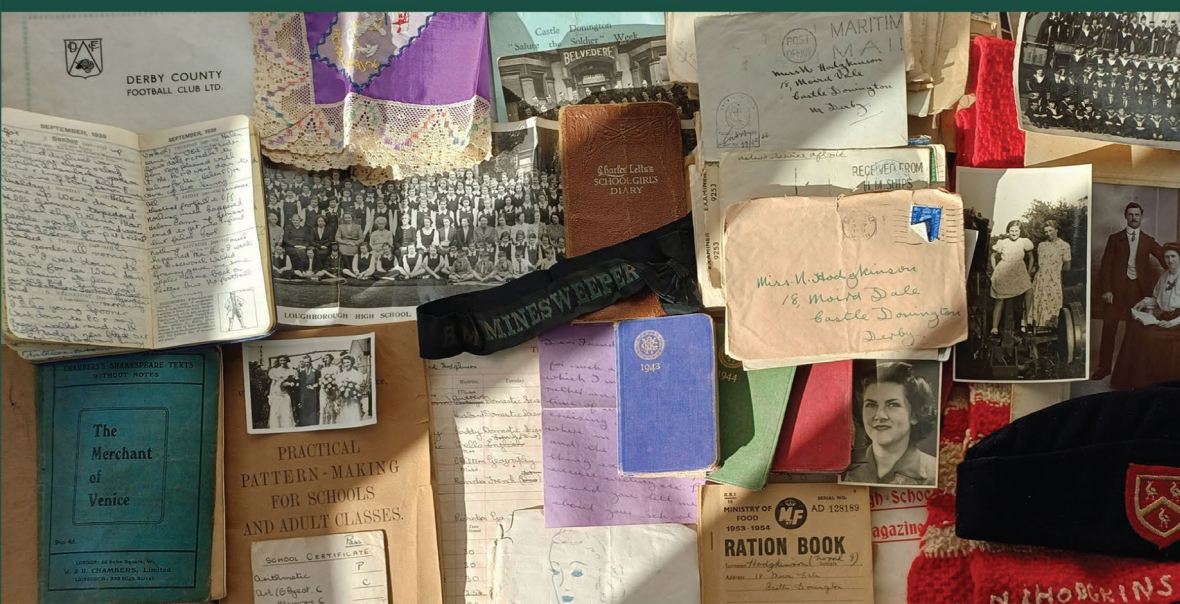
TWELLS, Alison <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2602-0029>



A Place of Dreams

Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age

Alison Twells



https://www.openbookpublishers.com

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-566-3

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-567-0

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-568-7

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-570-0

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80511-569-4

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0461

Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

7. I Believe You and I Have a Few Things in Common

Was Jim like Arthur Ford, a Dorset ploughboy, who blamed his decision to join the Navy on his restless desire to travel and his abiding interest in sex? 'I got fed up with just walking up and seeing one hedge and walking back and looking at the other hedge all day long', Ford told an oral history interviewer. How else could a poor and uneducated man see the world? Plus: he knew that it gave him 'a better chance of mixing with — well, of course, you hear these things, don't you?' Sex was 'the predominating thing' in the Navy, he said in a later reflection. The stuff of daily life at sea, 'sailors talked about it all the time'.

Many men found the exposure to sexual knowledge and experiences of intimacy that accompanied life in the armed forces to be exhilarating. For others, the unrelenting focus on sex could bring unwelcome pressures. Bill Batters felt secretly ashamed of his sexual initiation as a teenage recruit with a young prostitute in Argostoli, Kefalonia in 1937. He did not let on to his shipmates, of course, who had pushed him into the encounter and greeted him on return 'like a young lion'. Another ex-sailor confessed to being so embarrassed by his youthful ignorance that he ordered a sex manual through the post, relishing his mess-mates' delighted surprise at his medical lingo and technical know-how. It made him part of the gang.[1]

Some inevitably got up to no good. Dennis Maxted, a new recruit on the training ship HMS *Collingwood*, was shocked at the public dressing down given to four young sailors. One night at about 5pm, after instructions to 'clear lower deck', a group of 'matlows', all from Scotland, were arranged in line. The guard – mounted, with gages and rifles – and the Chief Petty Officer were also present. The charge? Sending 'obscene literature through His Majesty's post'. They had been corresponding

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0461.07

with a girl in Glasgow 'and telling her all the things they were going to do with her and to her, sexually of course, and her father found 'em and reported 'em to the Commanding Officer', Maxted said. 'They all got 90 days cells, but of course there was "off caps, off collars", they took their collars off and their silks off and they marched 'em away under guard [...]But the drama that was in that, seeing three ranks, and you looked at that and you said "no way am I going into be getting myself into trouble" [...] Real drama I thought that was, very well staged too'. How much the Navy hierarchy was concerned for the girl, or whether the outrage was directed at the threat to their own reputation (or the abuse of His Majesty's postal system, as Maxted suggests), is hard to tell from his account.[2]

We can hazard a guess that peer pressure led these Scottish lads to write letters they wouldn't have composed alone. A key feature of 'scribal culture' in the armed services is that letters were often shared; in some cases, replies were jointly authored. The sailor's 'ditty box', where personal letters were kept, apparently private, was also for public display and discussion, an ambiguous space in which masculinity was performed for other men on the lower deck.[3]

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In his first letter to Mollie Baker, a married mother of two and a mover and shaker in the Maidenhead Comforts Fund, Bill Stewart thanked her for her woollen 'comforts', sought to direct her future knitting efforts ('sock's seem to be the chief worry of men') and gave her advance warning of 'the boys' on his ship. As skipper of the requisitioned trawler-now-minesweeper HMT *John Stephen*, Stewart told Mollie he had seventeen men on board, fifteen of whom 'can drink any pub dry'. One of his seamen was a keen letter writer who 'writes the most passionate letter's to every dame who gives him encouragement'. After receiving Mollie's reply later that month, Bill told her: 'I let my boy's have a read of it, so if you should get some very affectionate letter's just don't blame me'.

Sam Gibbs lived up to Bill Stewart's mock warning from the off: 'You asked if we would like to be adopted', he wrote in his first letter to Mollie on 8th September 1940. 'I'll say we would then we could say that John Stephen has a few sweethearts'. 'Don't forget I've a good pen', he tells

her. 'I can write any kind of letter from Love to blackmail Love letters are my speciality ask Bill he'll tell you'. 'Well hows the gang going', he asks Mollie a few weeks later. 'I hope there all OK give them my love, how old is your youngest member, if she's single drop me her address I'll write her a letter that'll make her think she's engaged to be married'.

A married father of five and a North Sea fisherman from Grimsby, Sam Gibbs sends his letters from a trawler base in North Shields. 'Dear Mollie and the Knitting squad', he writes. 'You keep the needles going and we'll do our best to keep you in food by keeping the seas clear for the Gallant merchant men'. A few letters in, Sam switches from addressing Mollie as Mrs Baker: 'I hope you'll excuse me calling you by your christian name but if we're going to be pals, that's how it will have to be'. Acknowledging the Maidenhead women's lack of experience in making some of the more complex garments, Sam was happy to guide their knitting practice. They all want socks, he tells Mollie, suggesting she works to a size 9. He later asks for a sweater which, when it arrives, is perfect except that the arms are too long. The helmets fall over their faces; can they have woollen hats instead? He shares with Mollie a cheaper way to make mittens and says that as they wear short wellingtons, the boot stockings don't need to be quite so long; she can save a third of her wool. He is also perfectly at home with some gentle ribbing: 'I had to smile when I saw the stocking without heels but one cannot look a gift horse in the mouth'.

Sam tells Mollie about an ATS girl called Joan with whom he has been corresponding for some months. They had not met – she was based in Nottingham – but they had exchanged photographs ('she looks a peach'). He elaborates at a later date, telling Mollie that Joan had been moved near to Newcastle: '[I]f we can meet half way we can have a afternoon and evening together and I'll mind my P&Qs'. He continues: 'This girl friend hasn't got a boy and she is over 20, I always write to her as a sweetheart, just to let her feel someone thinks a bit about her. I wrote her some lovely love letters but she knows I'm married and that doesn't worry her she has more sence than take any serious so we're just 2 good war pals'. Sam was not looking for a lover: 'I've a good sweetheart waiting at home', he tells Mollie. 'We have been sweethearts now 23 years. We started courting while we were at school and I never had no other girl....' For him, flirtatious letters and the occasional date,

whether with a married mother of two or a young, single woman, were part of keeping up spirits during the war. 'Give my regards to all our Girl friends', he writes to Mollie, 'also your husband, and my love to the kiddies. CHINS UP'.

There is much care in this correspondence. Sam thinks of Mollie during the raids and offers reassurance: 'keep the chin up, were a long way from being licked and all the lads are ready for anything'. They exchange photographs of their families and he asks after her husband, in the Horse Guards, and children, Buffy and John. After Gibbs shares his excitement about his first Christmas at home in twenty years ('three sweeps' away, he writes on 13th December; his wife already has the tree 'all rigged up'), she sends toys for his children and a box of apples for them all. He doesn't know how to thank her: 'I know you will know how I feel so I'll say no more'.

Sam loves writing. He can write more than he could ever talk if he met her, he tells Mollie; although he can adapt himself to any company, he is 'on the shy side'. But 'I love writing to someone who can appreciate a letter', he says. 'I think letter writing is my favourite sport'. Writing to a class of woman with whom he was unlikely to have been in contact during peacetime opened up a new world of self-representation; he knows she'll know nothing about his work, fishing on deep-water ships around Iceland, Greenland, Bear Island, Sea Horse Island, the Russian coast. He tells her about his days, the different jobs on board, the speed of travel (11 mph), the trawls themselves – shooting the traps, hauling the fish onto the deck, gutting – then the welcome dry clothes and bottle of rum, the journey back with over 4000 boxes (the fish stiff as boards), each weighing six stone, the dangers of icebergs, the cold and the blinding snowstorms, the men washed away. Once near to home, they get shaved and polished up. They might have a night at a show, the fish is sold the next day and then they're away again: 'sometimes we might get an extra day in the dock but its always the same, you leave the wife with a tear in her eye and God speed and that goes on until your too old or the sea claims you'.[4]

I will confess: I am a little bit in love with Sam Gibbs and even more with Bill Stewart, his gentle, fun-poking skipper. When Sam ranges beyond ordinary letters to include his two pieces of life writing, Bill expresses his sense of awe: 'What a gift', he writes to Mollie, 'to be able to

sit down and write a nine page letter'. With a nod to his own deficiencies as a writer (though, we could say, while revealing a decidedly literary ear) he continues: 'My wife reckon's it's a shame to waste a stamp on the letters I send her but one cannot tell about his undying love all the time and if I write and tell her about my kidney's she sends back a Pithy letter about drinking. The hardest letter a man can write is to his wife', he concludes, 'a Prophet gets no honour in his own home'.

What a treat Sam's and Bill's letters must have been for the Maidenhead women. I imagine them taking breaks from their knitting to enjoy Mollie's readings, laughing uproariously at their fun, desperately keen to write back, worrying for their safety in the weeks in between. 'Sam reckons if you read it [the nine-page letter] to the B knitters there will be no knitting that day', writes Bill. 'I reckon Sam is a bit of a Fifth columnist because he is stopping production at the knitting B'.[5]

Rather than simply pressing on with Norah's story, I include Sam and Bill here – their letters to Mollie and 'our Girl friends in the knitting squad', those 'B[lessed] knitters' who 'done there bit just the same as my gang', the banter between them, the way the language of romance is part of the morale-boosting package of care – because their contrast with Jim helps us to see him more clearly.

Sometimes we need more than the story itself to know what it might mean.

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We don't know from Jim's letters how he got on with the men in Mess 2. His early request for a lock of Norah's hair, 'to be in fashion', suggests he wanted to be one of the lads. He had already told Norah that he spent his shore leave on his own. Whether he was a bit of a loner or merely trying to distance himself from stereotypes of sailors, we can't know. He must have been well aware that he had some work to do there. But maybe it was simply love and romance that he wanted: the adventure and the intense emotion, the idealisation of another, the masculine reassurance that a bit of chivalry could bring, feelings of being cherished in return.

He wouldn't be alone in that. Romantic overtures are very evident in the collection of letters written by servicemen to Doris Dockrill, a tobacco factory worker from Wandsworth, South London and a teenage

knitter. Doris produced socks, gloves, scarves and balaclavas for British servicemen all over the globe. Most of the letters she received were one-off notes of thanks. Some contain a brief reference to the author's far-flungness and loneliness, their discomfort or boredom. Quite a few go further with an offer to repay Doris's kindness and hard work 'by taking you out somewhere and giving you a good time... what do you think of the idea?' 'Don't think I am being forward...' continues Ron Cotter, a driver in a Royal Artillery Anti-Tank Regiment. 'Perhaps we could go to a show over the West End eh, still you think it over & let me know. If you say yes, could you send a photo of yourself if you have one'. Cotter confided that he had been engaged but the girl had found someone new 'in Civvy Street [...] so you can see that I have been let down very bad'.

Ron kept Doris's photo in his wallet. He wrongly assumed her age to be 24-25 years when, in fact, she was 14 in 1941. 'I hope I haven't given you a shock', he wrote, telling her that he was thirty-one. 'I don't think age counts do you, if a couple likes each other, & both have a pleasant nature, that I think goes a long way towards a nice friendship, you think it over Doris & let me know as soon as possible'. Thirty-year-old Eric Bowring was similarly 'surprised' in 1943, to find that Doris was only sixteen. 'I expected you to be a little older. Nevertheless, I expect you are much older in experience and ideas. You know the saying about a woman being as old as she looks and a man being as old as he feels. I would still like to meet you anyhow. You say you look older than sixteen so there is not many years between. We can always be friends anyhow. You can see for yourself when we meet, that is if you agree to. I shall be very disappointed if you don't'.

Other men were keen to ascertain Doris's marital status. 'Dear — Doris Dockrill', wrote S. E. Ridge, a sailor serving on HMS *Ganges*. 'Sorry I can not write much to you, as I do not know weather you are a miss or a mrs which makes a lot of difference in letter writing as you must know'. Peter O'Dwyer, given to reminiscing about nights at the Locarno and nostalgic for 'a walk along the high road and a stroll round Tooting Bec', was similarly pulled up short: 'PS It has just occurred to me that you might have become engaged since you made the comforts or perhaps you are an elderly woman, if so disregard my letter and accept my deepest thanks for what you sent you may be assured they are appreciated'.

Some letters very quickly read like dating profiles. 'Doris I believe you and I have a few things in common, such as we both like films, but to give you an idea of my character I will endeavour to tell you what I do and do not do', wrote Pete Hunt. He does not dance much, he tells her, nor go in for drinking but 'unfortunately' is a heavy smoker. Errol Flynn, Anne Sheridan and Ingrid Bergman are among his favourite actors and for music, he likes the Glenn Miller Band and Bing Crosby. He hopes to meet her on his next leave and would like a photo. 'You might be surprised to hear that I am approximately 6 ft tall, so I do hope you are not too small, although I shall not worry about that… Yours, Peter xxx'.

Writing in response to Doris's reply, Peter 'was very pleased to hear that we are some what similar in our doings, such as dancing and film stars', though he was 'very sorry to say I do not indulge in reading books very much', confessing that he had only read six books in his life. He had enjoyed *Jamaica Inn* and *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, but supposed 'the latter is not in your line'. As a crime novel with controversially explicit scenes of sex and violence, about the kidnap and rape of a young woman, searched for by her father who wanted her back but with the proviso 'better dead than deflowered', I feel confident that this admission would not have endeared him to Doris or her parents, who kept a close eye on her epistolary affairs.[6]

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Historians have written a great deal about letters between servicemen and their mothers, wives and girlfriends, showing the correspondence to be a crucial means by which men gained emotional sustenance and stayed in touch with their pre-war selves.[7] Here, however, we have something different. The letters that many men sent via the comforts funds in WW2 were written in a romantic register to unknown women and girls. While not quite love letters, they were an attempt to create intimacy and explore new romantic possibilities, sent to the girlfriends of their fantasies and, very possibly, by 'the selves of their imaginations' too.[8]

We know nothing more about Doris Dockrill and her pen-friendships. She appears not to have met any of the men, despite their requests. Although she gave Pete Hunt directions to her house, he

later wrote to apologise for not turning up: his long-term girlfriend had arrived in town.[9]

Should we be concerned for her? Maybe not. While some men were perhaps a tad too bold, requests for photographs and gentle flirtation were part of the now-usual exchange between knitters and their correspondents.

And Norah? The sheer excitement of a budding romance overrode any concerns she may have had that anything could possibly go wrong.