

## **14. Glorious Letters from My Sweetheart**

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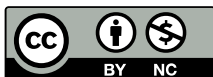






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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.



## 14. Glorious Letters from My Sweetheart

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In the 'Monthly Accounts' section at the back of her diary, Norah listed *Letters Received*, with ticks in a second column denoting her reply. While in June and July 1942, she received letters from Jim and Norman as well as from Danny, by August through to the end of the year, Danny was her sole correspondent.

'Seems like poor old Norman got the message'. My mum looks down-hearted. 'But what happened to Danny's letters?'

My mum remembers dusting Norah's room as a ten- or eleven-year-old in the early 1950s and picking a letter from the front of a dressing table drawer that was slightly ajar. She slid it from its envelope, unfolded the thin paper, noted Danny's signature and hurriedly put it back. There was a whole stash of them. At some point, Norah clearly felt that the time had come to remove the letters from their prime position in her life, a daily reminder of what might have been. We agree that she must have destroyed them, but we are no closer to knowing why or when.

And of course, Norah's letters to Danny are missing too. What did she tell him during that summer of 1942? We can't know for certain, of course, but her diaries allow us to make a pretty good guess. Norah will have certainly told Danny about joining the WJACs, the Castle Donington branch of the Women's Junior Air Corps, formed in May 1942. Known as the Jacks, they had existed at the national level since 1939 and, like the Girls Training Corps (1941) and Girls Nautical Training Corps (1942), aimed to prepare young women for the services, in this case, the WAAF. Meeting twice weekly at the Church School, the Donington group varied their activities between games of rounders, country dancing and war-related classes: aircraft recognition, squad drill, first aid and morse code, which saw a local lad, known as Billy Blob on account of his



rotund shape, come into his own. Norah, a corporal within a few weeks, seems slightly bemused by the earnestness: *Had inspection by top knob in Jacks*. But she liked the uniform: the grey blouse and black tie, grey forage cap and blue-grey skirt, which she *remodelled* to give a better fit.<sup>1</sup>

Norah will have told Danny about the bombs that dropped on Rolls Royce on 27<sup>th</sup> July, leaving twenty dead. It was the talk of the village. Daisy Warren, a land girl at Powdrill's market garden in Hemington, just down the hill, was cycling to work early that morning when she heard a hum-hum-hum overhead. Minutes later, a grey plane with swastika markings passed directly in front of her, flying so low that she got a good view of the pilot and crew as they followed the railway line to Derby, keeping down to miss the barrage balloons. Mr Powdrill had been watching from the gate. 'I wish I'd got my gun', he was telling everybody. 'I wouldn't have missed at that height. I'd have had a pop at him, the ruddy Gerry'.<sup>2</sup> *27th July 1942: Germans bombed Royces. Syd Higgins among the dead.*

There were plenty of life-goes-on-as-normal events to report, such as Norah's walks over Daleacre with Marsie; they'd keep Danny's romantic memories alive. There was her summer reading. Did she tell him that she had lapped up Hugh Walpole's *Jeremy* over sunny lunchtimes in the River Gardens during the early June heatwave? She might have told him that her shorthand at Kemp's Commercial College was coming on nicely, and that she and Jean from work were thinking of joining a dancing class, and that she was looking forward to showing him her steps after the war.

Did Norah mention to her airman boyfriend her anxieties about his pilot training? I doubt it very much. She knew the rules of letter-writing: light, loving and up-beat. 'Set down for him the gay happenings about you, bright little anecdotes, not invented, necessarily, but attractively embellished', wrote Dorothy Parker. 'Do not bedevil him with the pining of your faithful heart because he is your husband, your man, your love. For you are writing to none of these. You are writing to a soldier'.<sup>3</sup>

She will surely have mentioned Connie's trunk call from her soldier boyfriend Frank in Bognor Regis, summoning her down for a next-day marriage, and the cake and port they enjoyed on her return. But it is unlikely that Norah shared her interest in the progress of the affairs of local girls and their servicemen boyfriends as they headed towards



engagement. That would presume too much. Neither would she have let on her pleasure on hearing from Frank in Oldham that there were *enquiries about me in his gang*. But maybe she dropped in the odd snippet of news about Norman ('my friend at work is in the Navy now'), just to keep Danny on his toes.

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Very occasionally, Norah's diaries report that Danny was a bit of a let-down, sending scrappy, short, perfunctory postcards and letters, the sort you might expect from a casual acquaintance and not the object of your heart's desire. Love letters demand intimacy, their sole purpose to bind the lovers over time and space, to provide proof that love and desire are enduring, despite separation. What scholars call an 'epistolary pact' lays out unspoken but recognisable expectations about letters: their frequency and length, the amount of space given to answering questions and addressing daily concerns, the sharing of sentimental memories and dreams for the future.<sup>4</sup>

When Danny failed to play the game, when his letters failed to seduce Norah, to make her feel that she had *fallen all over again*, she is not merely disappointed, she is furious. *Received terribly disappointing letter from Danny*, she wrote in May 1942. *Felt awfully mad but sent fairly decent letter back*. Again in mid-October: *Received a lousy letter from Danny & tore it up. I think I hate him*. I am taken aback by the fierceness of seventeen-year-old Norah's responses. Danny's letters clearly fail to express the ardour and affection that she believed befitted their affair.

*5th September 1942: Received a letter from my Danny & a grand photo of him. Went into raptures about it*. But always, even after a shocker of a letter or a promised visit that didn't happen, Danny comes up trumps. *31st October 1942: Received a glorious letter from my sweetheart, he's been home to Jim, I love him terribly. He wants to know what age I want to marry*. And with that, he is back in her good books. Because of course Norah wanted to marry. But before then, before the wedding, before she, the glamorous modern girl, could welcome her hero-lover home from the war, she wanted romance in the form of passionate letters. 'Romantic love was not only the basis for marriage in the 1940s', writes Marilyn Lake, 'but for women it was meant to supply the meaning of life'.<sup>5</sup>





We – here, now – tend to see romantic love as natural, timeless, universal, spanning cultures (and even species). Progressive, liberated, it marks us apart from places in which it is outlawed or discouraged, where couples are denied the intensity of connection which – we believe – should be the basis of their future together.

Here, now: these are a historian's qualifiers. Evolutionary psychologists tend to suggest that romantic love is humanity's evolutionary destiny, a 'panhuman emotion' that first evolved over four million years ago to enable human reproduction and that can now be found in almost every culture around the world. Biological anthropologists compare romantic love to substance addiction: the craving, euphoria, obsessive thinking, yearning for emotional union and the signs of withdrawal if all goes wrong. Historians beg to differ, pointing out that while that longing for human connection seems to exist as an intrinsic emotional state, cultures of intimacy change over time. Compare courtly love in twelfth-century France, for example, with the changes in courtship in early industrial Europe or the shift in focus from the spiritual to the erotic in the twentieth-century USA.<sup>6</sup>

Norah's introduction to romance coincided with romantic love taking the Western world by storm. The 1920s and 1930s, in Eva Illouz's nifty phrase, saw the 'romanticization of commodities' and the 'commodification of romance'. Cinema, dance music, romantic fiction, fashion and beauty products all promised romance, as romantic love, sexual desire and ideas about marriage became tightly interwoven in mid-century Britain.<sup>7</sup>

True to her time, Norah believed in love and its essential component, the romantic couple. At no point in her life would she have had truck with feminist critiques of romance as conservative or oppressive. For her, romantic love should be expansive, transformative, transcendental, the key to happiness and fulfilment.<sup>8</sup>

With his twinkly eyes, nice manners, passionate kisses and loving letters, Danny fitted the bill.

When he chose to.