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10. The Erotics of War

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A Place of Dreams

Desire, Deception and a Wartime Coming of Age

Alison Twells

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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.

10. The Erotics of War

> *27th September 1941: Danny wrote me a beautiful letter. I think he loves me, anyhow I love him very much.*

And all from a pair of socks!

Most civilian girls met their servicemen lovers at dances in 1941. In the words of social researcher Pearl Jephcott, dancing was

> one of the recognized ways in which to meet and look over men, with an eye to selecting a husband. The dance-hall and relatively few other institutions, now that churchgoing has so declined, provide that range of young masculinity which the girls very properly desire to explore. To say that you will go dancing implies that you are going man-hunting, in a perfectly reputable sort of way.[1]

'Oh it was so exciting!' Kath Jones tells me one afternoon as we sit in her first-floor flat, drinking tea and talking about the war. Castle Donington was 'over-run with billeted soldiers' in 1941 and Kath, a few years older than Norah, was a regular at the dances put on for the Army units stationed at the Hall. The stately home in Donington Park had been requisitioned as a subsidiary of Chilwell Transport Depot, where Kath worked in the offices. Her workmates often came for the dances. 'There could be four of them', she told me, 'they used to love to come over, all staying at our house... The friendship was different somehow, during the war, you could talk to people and make friends'.

Kath's main dancing companion was Mary Twells, my great-aunt and Norah's fellow bridesmaid at the wedding of my grandparents, Norah's sister, Helen, and Joe Twells, Mary's brother, in August 1939. Mary and Norah had enjoyed a brief flurry of friendship that summer but soon went their separate ways. Fifteen months older, Mary was already working at the local factory known fondly as Sammy White's. She lived for fashionable clothes and nights out. Even on her walk back

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from work, Kath recalled, she'd be at the heart of a raucous gaggle of laughing girls and dressed to the nines.

The dance venue, the dining room at the council school on Dovecote, had a wooden floor and chairs lining the walls and a stage for the military band. Cups of tea were served, not alcohol, leading some of the girls to start their night in one of the village pubs. But not Kath and Mary ('Ooh no!').

If the dancers had looked up at the high windows, they would have seen a huddle of younger girls peering in from their perch on the top of a coal heap outside. 'I was mesmerised', Norah's neighbour, Irene Marsh, told me. 'The uniforms! The elegance! The glamour!'

Kath met her own soldier husband when he plucked up the courage to ask her to dance one Friday night. Ron Jones was a big, gentle Welshman who had been at Dunkirk. After a spell in hospital, he was billeted at the farm on Apiary Gate that is now the village museum and had first spied Kath in her cap and gown, when he joined the largely female church choir.

'I see we've got a full choir today', the vicar welcomed them drily, as Ron's regiment turned out in force.

After the RAF arrived, a second dance started up at the aerodrome on the edge of the village. This is where Mary Twells met her husband, John Davison, on his first night at the airfield in 1944. The girls were not supposed to be there. On account of the short-cut home across a desolate wasteland, Kath's father had insisted they stay away. The girls ignored him, of course, assisted by the silence of Kath's mother.

'I told her it was better up there, with the RAF', Kath chuckles, 'not so rough. And we *were* invited'.

She remembers one journey home through the fields: 'I was wearing a pair of nylons that Ron had sent me from Germany, and I fell. Mary called out, "Oooh I hope that's not Kath in her nylons!"' I hear my Aunt Mary's voice as Kath speaks, her exclamation a mixture of fun and anxiety.

Tripping in the field on another occasion, Kath muddied up her new coat – green, full length, with a half-studded belt, bought at Ranby's in Derby for thirteen guineas.

'I knew my dad'd kill me if he saw it. He'd know where we'd been'.

She went home with Mary, and between them, in the Twells' kitchen, they made a bad job of removing the top layer of mud. Arriving back at

the house attached to her father's decorating business on Borough Street, Kath pushed the shop door ajar a couple of inches, reaching up to muffle the bell as she slid in. Her plan to make an anxious dash past the living room door to her bedroom was thwarted as her dad called out drolly, 'I've 'eard yer'. Quick as a flash, she turned the coat inside out and left it on the stairs before greeting her parents with the least guilty expression she could muster. On her way to bed, she removed the coat to her wardrobe where it would hang to dry before being stiff-brushed clean.[2]

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As far as oral histories go, my interview with Kath is not the best. The failings are all mine. Although I was as prepared as an any other historian would be, my blindspot about the excitement of weddings is plain to see.

'We went to Leicester, my mum and me', Kath told me, 'and bought a green silk outfit with a plain skirt and a top with a tie bow. It needed shortening. I said "well I'm being married on Wednesday" and they said "we'll get it to you"'.

It was such a rush. Ron had a seven-day pass before being deployed as part of an advance party to Normandy. There was no time to plan. Kath borrowed a fabric orchid from an aunt ('she kept telling me, "I do want it back, you know"'), a pair of shoes from a girl at work and a little brown fly-way hat from Mary's elder sister, my Aunt May. ('It had a lovely band of silk tied on and a flare. I didn't want to part with it'.)

'Your Aunt Mary, she kept saying to me, "Why don't you borrow our May's wedding dress?" But I said no, I didn't like to ask her. But I regret it now, not having a white dress, I feel like I missed out'.

For a historian exploring romance in WW2 – and at that, one who sat and admired the lovely photos of Ron in his uniform, of Kath, lips reddened, dark hair waved and set, slim and elegant in her green silk dress – to fail to follow this up is a poor show. A good oral historian would go further still, not only asking what would have felt different about the white dress, but trying to explore how this feeling had changed over time, to ascertain if this post-war lament was born of the later twentieth-century boom in the white wedding.[3] As Penny Summerfield writes, the oral historian needs to hear 'not only the voice that speaks for itself,

but also the voices that speak to it', that is, the ideas in the culture at large since 1945, from which personal stories are shaped. When did the absence of a fairytale dress come to trump the feeling that a modest and hasty wedding was exactly right in 1944?[4]

My second major failing that afternoon is that I was inhibited by mine and Kath's long family acquaintance to ask her questions about sex. Some historians are impressively good at this, engaging in full and frank discussions with elderly interviewees about contraception, technique and pleasure.[5] I, it turns out, am not one of them. Indeed, my mum was perched on my shoulder as I imagined Kath's son, wide-eyed and furious, meeting her in the street: 'You will not believe what your daughter asked my mother!'

So in terms of oral history, this interview was a missed opportunity. There has been so little in the way of exploration of these wartime affairs[6] that would otherwise not have happened. But Kath's memories and the laughing, delighted tone in which she recounted them – the fun of friendships, the excitement of dances, the thrill of romance – corroborates other studies, from Denmark, Germany, Australia, which suggest that young women began to embrace a new way of loving during the war, the promise of a different future.

And sometimes a memory, or even a single image, can be just as powerful as historical analysis. Kath's nylons story, for example, revealing that the girls still went to the dances and enjoyed chaste flirtations with other men, even when they had boyfriends overseas. Of course, the lads were also out dancing, wherever they were stationed. For the rest of his life, through forty-plus years of marriage, Ron Jones kept a photograph of a Dutch girl.

'There were many times I meant to ask him about her', Kath mused. 'But I just didn't get round to it, somehow'.

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I pay a visit to my Aunt Mary and Uncle John in their former council house over-looking the chip shop, four doors down from my mum. As always, I let myself in, and find my aunt in the armchair next to the gas fire and my uncle at the far end of the settee, his feet resting on a pouffe. He wears an unreadable expression and glances first at me and then, with one eyebrow raised, inviting a question, at a photograph of

a soldier on the mantelpiece. I do as I am bidden. 'Who's he?' I ask, not very respectfully.

'It's Peter Pritchard', he replies. His voice is faster and at a slightly higher pitch than usual, emphasising his Liverpudlian twang. He notes my blank look. 'You mean you don't know Peter Pritchard?'

There is more than humour driving this question. I sense exasperation.

'Peter Pritchard, my first boyfriend'. My Aunt Mary has a slightly dreamy quality to her voice. 'I met him at the dances at the aerodrome. He was a lovely boy'. She smiles warmly and I give her a kiss, but I am not sure she knows who I am. She looks thinner and more frail than ever. Dementia doesn't make you very thoughtful regarding other peoples' feelings, including – or especially – those of your husband of sixty-five years, even if you were that way inclined to begin with.

'What's he doing up there?' I ask, unable to contain a smile.

'Your Aunt Mary fetched him out. All she wants to talk about. Peter bloody Pritchard'. He mouths the swearword to me, but she catches it.

'Now John'.

I make a pot of tea and then, wondering if he'll welcome a distraction from Peter's intrusion in his day, bring him up-to-date on our diary saga. 'Mum's been reading 1945', I say. 'You're in it'.

'I am, am I?' He is interested, wary. 'What does she say?'

'22nd September 1945: Mary Twells married John, her airman.'

He laughs. 'So that's who I am, is it? Her airman?' He isn't used to being anybody's anything, my uncle John. He's somebody in his own right. Tailor and shopkeeper, long retired. Liverpudlian, Blue not Red. Catholic parishioner, former Labour Party councillor, Rotarian, joker, and heart and soul of our family for sixty-five years. When he's better, I tell myself, I'll ask him about those dances in 1944.

I fill him in on Norah's passionate affair with Danny the airman.

'Passion isn't a quality I associate with Norah', he remarks.

I perk up and set down my tea. 'What do you mean?'

'She was cool and aloof'. He considers for a moment. 'Aloof and attractive'. I give him a look, try to embarrass him, draw him out further, but he shoots it straight back. He's having none of it.

'She was a lovely looking girl', Aunty Mary chips in, missing the passion bit.

My uncle's comment reminds me again that people in the village sometimes thought Norah a bit stand-offish. I realise also that he didn't meet her until late in the war, when he started courting his future wife. I think of the difference between the two wartime photographs. By 1945, Norah had adopted her movie-star gaze and calm and unruffled persona. But the first, the one we've seen, taken at W. W. Winter's in the autumn of 1941, shows her open-faced and smiling, looking directly at the camera. She was a lovely looking girl. And she was passionate.

Sadly, my Uncle John died the following year. Apart from everything else that I miss about him, I was looking forward to him reading this book as I wrote it. He had some misgivings, but I was confident I could talk him round. I also knew that he would give me a sense of the excitement of the dances from a serviceman's perspective and, if I dared push beyond his initial disapproval, an insider's 'gen' on sex and the RAF.

His daughter found some letters from his friend Bob Evans, written in 1944. I knew about Bob. A year or two before he died, my uncle had asked me to find out where his old friend was buried. They'd joined the RAF together in Liverpool, but Bob, on 'ops' from RAF Scampton at Lincoln, was shot down over Duisburg a few months before the war ended. I had located him easily via the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and then found my way to a website about Venray Cemetery, just over the border with Holland, where he is commemorated. The digital memorial bears his name but no further details. I clicked on 'contact' and emailed through: 'Please can you add the following?' I had written, wondering who was this American who managed a website devoted to honouring our war dead. 'Sergeant Robert Evans, date of birth 24th February 1923. Much loved son of Charles and Ada Gertrude Evans of Liverpool'.[7]

'I went to see them when I got back after the war', my uncle told me when I gave him the printed sheet. 'But he was their only son. They didn't want to know'.

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Bob's letters are great; lovely, actually. There was lots he couldn't say, about activities at the base. But occasionally he wrote about the daily dangers that he – they all – faced:

> Bugger me if we didn't 'prang' in a crash drome called Carnaby, about a mile outside Bridlington. The flaps and undercart wouldn't come down, so I radioed base, and they diverted us to Carnaby. And there, to make things worse, the starboard outer went for a burton and so we landed on three engines at 140 mph! I had my right arm crushed a bit and the navigator got cuts in the head… I wasn't going to mention it at home [...]

And the losses:

> These Halifaxes go up within ten seconds of hitting the deck, you know; they reek of petrol from nose to tail. I lost thirteen pals that night, John, and when you've been laughing and joking with them in the briefing room a few hours before, it shakes you, believe me.

He wrote about how much he was looking forward to finishing his stint at Scampton:

> We are all in house again here, the same as at Finningley, one crew to a house. Believe it or not, our house is number '26', my lucky number! Anyway, I hope it keeps lucky for me until I leave this station. The day I do leave Scampton, I'm going straight to Lincoln and nipping sharpish on a train to Derby, where I intend to get the two of us (you and I) so 'canned' it will make those 'boozy do's' we used to have at New Brighton seem like child's play!!

But most of all, Bob wrote about women. There was his main girl, Nell L., back home in Liverpool, and another Nell (Little Nell), whom he had met at a dance when he was stationed in Hereford. Then there was Dot, who had an eye for John. And Joan, whom Bob considered 'very do-able'. There were the WAAFs, about whom he had some reservations.

> I told Nell (L.) I went to see you in Derby that time; always best to tell the truth, you know. Of course I forgot to tell her that I had Little Nell with me as well [...]

> (Little) Nell writes every day, which means I always get two letters from her on Monday, and she sends a parcel every couple of weeks, which includes biscuits, tins of spam, cake she makes herself etc. This week she sent me 200 players too, so you can see she's worth knowing! All I got from the other Nell in three years was a 2/6 book of stamps [...]

And he poked gentle fun at his old mate John who, while known for his craic, was a good Catholic boy and a hopeless romantic.

> I can't understand how you have such bad luck with the women when you're freelancing at home. Even the guys here from Canada reckon they're about the easiest in the country and I guess they aren't far out at that. And as for that crack of yours, I don't think there's much I can teach you about the finer arts of twentieth century seduction! Of course I could leave you alone with Nell for half an hour (Little Nell, I mean), there's nothing worth mentioning that she couldn't impress on you! What a woman – sexy from head to toes. Wizzer. By the way, I agree that she isn't as nice in disposition as Nell L although her inclinations more than make up the balance.[8]

'Uncle John. Interested in character as well as looks', my mum says fondly, later that night. We are pondering the thrill of the war as girls like Kath and Mary and Norah suddenly had greater scope for meeting potential romantic partners from outside of the village. The gene pool in Castle Donington had remained relatively unchallenged for some time. While in the post-war years the development of transport links to Derby, Loughborough and Nottingham saw an exponential growth in population, there were few influxes in earlier decades. 'The local lads must have had their noses put out of joint', my mother says. 'Apart from those who were billeted elsewhere, causing a stir in some other village'.

Norah seems to have gone dancing a few times only, all at the beginning of 1941. *Frank & I went to dance,* she wrote in late January. We think there's a good chance she and Frank felt out of place. She didn't mix so well in the village. Kath had said as much. Like John, she found Norah a bit aloof. ('A lot of people did', my mum said. 'It was that school'.) Maybe the whole evening – the girls who rolled in from the pub, that most had gone to the council school bar her and Frank, that they were working and earning and she was not, the absence of lads who they might know from Hill Top – meant it wasn't quite their cup of tea.

But not going to dances didn't stop her. *4th April 1941: Broke up for Easter. Peggy & I stayed in Loughborough to see 'someone'. Went in Bolesworth's for a snack on 1/6. Three soldiers made eyes at us all the time!* And then there was the aerodrome, with its steady supply of flirtatious airmen. *15th July 1941: Man at the aerodrome gave me a super kiss.* Next came Jim and now there was Danny, whom she loved so very much.

This whole wartime kit and caboodle of meeting men who you wouldn't normally clap eyes on: it was so exciting. 'War is very erotic', writes Mary Wesley, author of *The Camomile Lawn*. 'People had love affairs they would not otherwise have had'.[9]