

12. Went over Daleacre: The Likely and the Plausible

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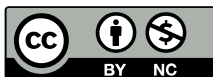
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

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11th April 1942: Received a letter from my Danny. He's definitely coming today. Danny came about 8 o'clock & I fell all over again. Stayed up til 1 o'clock. Kissed me goodnight beautifully.

12th: Danny & I went over Daleacre in morning & down to the Trent at night. Mum told him all my secrets. He said he'd kiss me every time I said 'yes' & carried it out about 8 times. I love the way he kisses & him too.

13th: Danny went by bus to Birmingham just after nine. He says he hasn't so much confidence now but I hope he'll soon recover it. Received letter from Jim & let Danny read it.

I was hopeful in the early days that we might find Danny's letters in one of the piles of documents we salvaged from Norah's bungalow. But after a few months of sifting and sorting, we had to accept that they were gone forever. As her letters to him are also missing (of course), we are left to piece together their developing relationship from her diaries alone.

Received a letter from my Danny, Norah notes in her diary twice, three times, four times a month. He writes frequently, but in terms of the content of what he has to say, she gives little away. Received a lovely letter from my Danny with a beautiful photo of him & his flight... Danny arrived in Isle of Man... He's passed his course... Danny went on battle exercise... Received a beautiful letter from my dearest sweetheart.

It is hard to know how established a relationship this was. With Danny at such a distance – in Wiltshire, then London, followed by a longer stint on the Isle of Man, then Worcester in late February 1942 – they were hardly an item. But the lovely letters that he wrote to her, the beautiful Christmas telegram *from my love*, the Greetings Telegram that

arrived on her seventeenth birthday, all suggest that the relationship was *on*, that they were well on their way to becoming a couple.

The most fulsome set of diary entries about Danny concern his visit at Easter 1942. This was only their second meeting. If Norah had any worries that over the months she'd romanticised him beyond all recognition, or that he wouldn't still be attracted to her, she doesn't say. But in those hours between 8pm and 1am, she *fell all over again*.

How did the evening pan out? Danny arrived after dinner – which, I am guessing, would have been about 6pm. With everybody working out of the village, the Hodgkinsons will have made the switch from dinner at noon to a cooked evening meal. I doubt, with men to feed, that they delayed. Maybe Marsie kept a plateful of food warm for Danny or Norah rustled up a quick snack on his arrival, a ham sandwich perhaps, and a welcome cup of tea to wash it down.

We can only guess at their conversation, of course. There would be family news. Danny was polite enough to enquire. He will have known from Norah's letters that Helen had been ill with pleurisy, that Dennis, Norah's eldest brother, was already in the Army, somewhere in North Wales, and Frank's papers were due any time soon. Birdy was still hoping his epilepsy would see him exempt, but I doubt he'd crow about that in a room with a serving airman and a Boer War vet, and Norah and Marsie would refrain from the ribbing they dished out on a normal day.

They surely talked about the progress of the war. Maybe they caught the 9 o'clock news. At this point, early 1942, it was hard to be upbeat. The public, annoyed by the 'soft-peddalling of bad tidings', could read between the lines. The Blitz was stepping up again, though Churchill's promise to unleash 'shattering strokes of retributive justice' on German industrial regions was still a few weeks away.¹ Pop will have had plenty to say about recent catastrophes: the disastrous fall of Singapore, the surrender in Java and the Japanese entry into Rangoon, the wolf-packs of U-boats in the Atlantic which meant the war at sea was going badly. No doubt he agreed with public demands to help the Russians and was disappointed by Churchill's focus on the mess at Tobruk and the 33,000 men now captive there.

Marsie and Norah tried to keep it light (no easy feat with Pop and Birdy in the room). The man needed a break, after all. Did they chat about the ingenious ways they dealt with rationing, now extended to absolutely

everything: canned meat, fish, veg, dried fruit, canned fruit, tapioca, sago, condensed milk, tomatoes and soap? What with Joe being a butcher, they didn't do badly for fresh meat (shhh). They no doubt joked about the impact on Norah of plans to include syrup, treacle and biscuits in the next roll out, with a 'personal points' scheme for chocolate and sweets coming in soon.² Danny knew all about Norah's sweet tooth. She will have mentioned in a letter the lovely Victoria sponge she had made for her birthday (but probably omitted reference to the gifts from Norman and the boys in the Night Office: *all the lovely choc*).

Birdy may well have teased her about her successes at bartering clothing coupons, taking on his household jobs in return for a new pair of shoes. Perhaps Norah had a brief moan about the upcoming Utility Wear that was just plain ugly, with pleats, seams and buttonholes, decent hems and collars, all things of the past. Still, 'Make Do and Mend' was nothing new, had long been a way of life for women like her. You just had to smile through.

Are there too many maybes in this story? Historians don't like too much uncertainty. 'Though astute, the author is sometimes too dependent on speculation', writes a reviewer of *The Five*, Hallie Rubenhold's excellent study of Jack the Ripper's victims. 'There are many conditionals – and in search of nuance she makes some assumptions which, in the absence of a firm historical record, are impossible to check and have to be left to the domain of the likely and the possible'.³

The many 'would haves', 'perhapses' and 'maybes' is the basis of James Buchan's criticism of Natalie Zemon Davis' *Trickster Travels* (2007), her study of al-Hasan al-Wazan, the man known to history as Leo Africanus, traveller and author of the first geography of Africa published in Europe in 1550. It is, Buchan writes, 'not history but a sort of romance laden with footnotes, a novel dragging an academic ball and chain'.⁴

But what do we do when more than fragmentary sources elude us? Do we just not tell those stories, confine our knowledge of the past to the well documented, the already told? We are back to the lives of Great Men that way. In his positive review of the same book by Davis, Jonathan Berkey writes that while 'the reader cannot help but notice how frequently terms like "might have" and "probably" or "possibly" pepper the text', it is, for him, 'not an obstacle'. Davis poses questions, draws on comparable evidence, makes plausible comparisons.⁵

Comparing silence and absence in history with the phenomenon of the black hole, Hannu Salmi suggests that as astrophysicists can determine features about such holes on the basis of their environment, so historians can draw inferences about the past even when it provides no direct evidence. 'In a situation in which history is a black hole', Salmi writes, '... we can imagine nothing about the core of the hole that would contradict the information provided by the surrounding cosmos'.⁶ But we know it exists. Much of history comprises an 'unknowable territory', in Frank Ankersmit's words. 'Saying true things about the past is easy', he writes, 'anybody can do that'. It is the 'dogged effort' to explore unknowable borders that is most compelling.⁷ As Davis explains in her introduction to her earlier study, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983): 'When I could not find my individual man or woman in Hendaye, in Artigat, in Sajas, or in Burgos, then I did my best through other sources from the period and place to discover the world they would have seen and the reactions they might have had. What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by the voices of the past'.⁸

The detail of Norah's courtship with Danny is my 'unknowable territory', my black hole. All we know for certain about that night is that at getting on for 1am, the family disappeared up to bed, leaving Norah and Danny alone. *Kissed me goodnight beautifully.*

There is a trio of men in these three diary entries: Danny, Jim and Norman, the boy from the Night Office, who had been wooing Norah with chocolate since her arrival at the LMS in October 1941. She had turned down his first few requests for a date, but he was persistent and, when they finally went to see John Wayne in *The Citadel of Crime* in mid-February, he wrote her a (love?) letter the next day. A fortnight later, they saw *Ice Capades*, a slow-moving American comedy and again, he followed up with a letter.

But beyond friendship, Norah was not interested. Her diary entry after their third date betrays her lack of excitement. *19th March: Went to pictures with Norman. Saw Nelson Eddy & Rise Stevens in 'Chocolate Soldier'. Rotten.* Her disinterest is even more palpable when she hears that Danny has a cold and wishes she could nurse him back to health, while poor

old Norman is off work with *mumps or something*. A week later, he sends her a *shirty letter* and accuses her of having *led him up the garden path*.

Norman almost gets his revenge during Danny's Easter visit, when Marsie reveals the dates her daughter would rather keep under wraps. *Mum told him all my secrets*, Norah writes. She seems unperturbed, nonetheless: while she no doubt enjoyed Norman's attention, she'd been careful to not give him the wrong idea. Her sights were set on Danny alone.

Norah's confidence is surely borne of her and Danny's shared intimacy, including reading together the letter from Jim which arrived during Danny's visit after a month-long silence. Jim explains why, despite his promises, he'd failed to meet Norah in Derby a few weeks before.

HMS Elgin, GPO London

[Postmark: Aberdeen 10 Apr 1942]

Dear Norah,

I expect you think me rather odd and fail to understand my attitude towards you. When we first corresponded it was my sole intention to start an intimate friendship. Since Danny has come in the picture you can see why my letters are not frequent and my visit to Derby has not taken place. When I got your photo I naturally fell for you the same as Danny. I had the pleasure of seeing Danny just recently and he described you and said you are swell which I don't doubt. It makes me happy to know you and Danny are such good friends. We may meet one day but I would never make a special visit to see you. Would you tell me if in your way do you love Danny? I can assure you he does. I want you to know I am not put out or jealous because Danny is a swell brother and he spoke on fair terms concerning you so we are settled over you. Please do not imagine we are taking things for granted but if you love Danny he is yours.

Please write and tell me your thoughts.

Cheerio,

Love Jim

Norah will have expressed her upset that Jim had declined to meet her and seemed no longer inclined to write. And Danny? That final sentence is the crucial one: *if you love Danny he is yours*. We can presume that he did not demur.

And then there are their walks. *Down to the Trent* could refer to any number of locations (Cavendish Bridge? King's Mills?), whereas *over Daleacre* is specific: the high grassy ridge connecting two neighbouring villages, a half a mile or so from Norah's home. With their thatched cottages and pretty streams, Hemington and Lockington are as chocolate-boxy and quaint as any Derbyshire village even if the plains of the Trent Valley are far removed from the undulating charms of the Dales, and Daleacre itself (pronounced Daliger, with a hard 'g'), in the scheme of things, is nothing special.

Except it is, to us. Like Norah, I love this landscape. There is nowhere that I feel more strongly the sedimented layers of history, the intimate connectedness between time and space.⁹ Daleacre was Marsie's picnicking site with her children and grandchildren over five decades before I was born. More distant ancestral presences exist on the Twells side, the fields still bearing the imprint of medieval strip-farming and the generations of labourer ancestors who have lived and toiled in these villages since before the church records began.

Daleacre has been the site of teenage dog walks, intimate ambles with lovers and friends and in more recent years, the mid-September blackberrying spot for my young daughters and me. Leaving grandma's house on Barroon, we'd follow the same route that Norah took with Danny, passing the grand old houses and smaller cottages, then the cemetery, where Norah and three of her siblings are now buried, the allotments and Cherry Orchard now bereft of cherries. We'd enter the grassy slopes of Lady's Close through the kissing gate, leaving by the same at the bottom of the field. Crossing the road, passing beneath the ruined church reputed to have been used for canon practice by Cromwell's men, we'd head up through the overhanging boughs of Church Lane and Dark Lane, looping round through the red-brick farm houses and cottages of Lockington, taking a path through another kissing gate into an open field and, keeping an eye out for cows, start the climb up onto Daleacre ridge.

The gradient makes blackberrying a precarious business, the slightest over-reach tipping the picker forward until they threaten to topple into the prickly beds below. Bags and tupperwares full, younger daughter snagged and juice-stained, we made our way down towards Hemington, where a modern form of enclosure has seen the ruined church absorbed

into the garden of a plush house in a new gated community. Grandma and Bessie dog on look-out duty, my daughters and I enjoyed the thrill of the illicit clamber up the stone wall to the damson tree, shaking the sturdy trunk and branches, straining to catch the black fruit before it dropped into the cowpats below.

A few weeks later and we'd be back again, Daleacre now forming the course of our Sunday morning walk after a night at Donington Wakes, an age-old annual fair which sees the main shopping street lined with stalls and fairground rides. The walk over Daleacre was as essential as the hook-a-duck stall or, as my girls grew, the Cyclone ride in the Turk's Head yard. It was as much part and parcel of the weekend as our late-night open chips, eaten as we perched on the low cold concrete of Mrs Kinsella's council-bungalow wall, in that final hour before the lights went out, the rides were dismantled and the main street litter-strewn and dulled, like the underside of a rug. The following morning, after younger daughter had scuppered all hope of a lie-in, we walked up through the now golden autumnal lanes, stopping for a teacake on the bench on the top of the hill. It was there, in the years after her death, that my thoughts would turn to Norah, here on her dates with Danny in 1942, when *walked over Daleacre* was code for romance.

Walking alongside another has been developed as a life story research method, a way of enabling interpersonal understanding. If I walked with Norah now, sharing a rhythm, the same views, checking out together whether the bull was safely gated in a neighbouring field, and I asked her about other walks over Daleacre she had made in her lifetime, what would she tell me? My guess is that she might chat about Marsie and their picnics and warm autumn afternoons spent blackberrying. But those most embodied, most sensual of walks with Danny? She'd remember, and feel, in silence.

Instead, I mobilise my possibles and probables and walk in her footsteps. I stand before the gate and look across 'into the unattainable past on the other side' and try, in the words of biographer Richard Holmes, to bring it alive 'by other sorts of skills and crafts and sensible magic'.¹⁰

Norah and Danny, walking out together on this their first meeting since his visit seven months before. Norah wearing one of her new dresses, either the blue or the green, Danny in his RAF uniform, exuding that ashy blue flyboy glamour. Do these well-trodden paths now feel unfamiliar underfoot, as she links her arm in his, trying to keep in rhythm with his stride? Do encounters with people she has known since childhood feel just as strange, like she is an interloper in her old life? Maybe she wonders if any of them have felt as she feels now, this hidden but utterly transforming swell of passion. Do the kisses start on the kissing-gated grassy slopes of Lady's Close, or maybe as they reach the leafy seclusion of Church Lane, the green hedgerows alive with birdsong, arm-in-arm becomes arm-around-her-waist and Danny pulls her in, pausing to kiss her every time she says 'yes'?

On our imaginary walk over Daleacre, is this what Norah would remember? Her and Danny disentangling as they enter Lockington village, then once onto Daleacre's slopes, she is heady again with the day's wild sweetness as they reach the series of small hillocks that give good cover for a canoodling couple as well as a vantage point over the path below. She would surely remember how Danny seemed to know what she herself didn't know, that she had a 'hidden self' to be discovered, by his mouth, his hands, his sometimes gentle, sometimes fevered attentions. How her own body now told her what she'd had no inkling of before: that 'the world was matter, not words'.¹¹

The smell of his aftershave (fruity, flowery, bitter?), the burning look in his eyes, the confidence of his kisses.