"An essay is a short piece of prose in which the author reveals himself in relation to any subject under the sun."
J.B. Morton

Interlude: 1941

by ELIZABETH BIRD *on* May 8, 2022 • 12:01 am 6 Comments

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by Elizabeth Bird

Readers' Choice Award, Summer Writing Contest

Collage by Anthony Afairo Nze. Insert: August 1941, Stainforth Bridge, Eileen and Mick after lunch near Clapham Cave

My mother lounges on a blanket, skirt hiked up her thighs, dozing in the warmth of an English summer, her friend sprawled beside her. They're dressed identically – sensible skirts, gym shirts, and sturdy sandals. Perfectly at peace.

The black-and-white snapshot is one of 15 that accompany a journal my

mother wrote one long-ago August. Six densely-typed pages, stapled together, with a cover page hand-inked in large, careful letters: “Caravan Holiday, Stainforth 1941.”

My mother Eileen had just turned 19. She had completed her final year at a girls’ boarding school where she enjoyed a glittering career as “head girl,” captain of cricket, and star of *HMS Pinafore*. It was a world she adored, embedded in a cocoon of female friendship and achievement, in which anything was possible. Two of those school friends were with her that summer.

I’d seen the journal before, stacked in a drawer with old photo albums, the staples rusting and staining the pages. I’d always meant to ask her about it. Why did she write about this holiday? Who were the two girls who stayed with her in the tiny caravan, parked for three weeks in a field in North Yorkshire? Well, Tigger and Mick, of course; it says so in the journal. Two strong, healthy young women who joined her in hikes through the rugged, hilly countryside. Did she have a hearty nickname too? I never did ask. And even then, a childhood bout with rheumatic fever had sown a seed that suddenly took her life just 40 years later. There was so much I never asked.

* * *

Could this little journal offer a glimpse into her young life? Before she was a wife. Before she was my mother. It isn’t one journal among many, or if there were others they didn’t survive. My mother was a no-nonsense organizer, whose penchant for tossing out “junk” was well known to the family. And yet she kept certain treasures tucked away. A pair of kid gloves, too small for her hands. Two tiny, hand-smocked dresses, worn by my sister and me in long-ago baby photos. But why this journal?

The narrative is quite unremarkable. Described on the first page as a “Log-Book,” its six pages cover 21 days, a significant number of words assigned to what the friends eat for breakfast, dinner, and supper. She meticulously records the exact sum the friends pay to rent the field: one pound, four shillings, and seven-and-a-half pence. The first day, as they set up camp, they feast on cornflakes and bacon and eggs, before deciding to chop wooden stakes (from who knows where?) to construct a fence around their caravan and “keep out inquisitive cows.” I imagine them gaily chopping and laughing; thoughts of campfire songs come to mind. To celebrate their success, they walk to the nearest village and buy three bottles of cider, the alcoholic refresher that remains one of my favorites today.

By the next morning, “the entire fence had been trampled down and the guy ropes had been chewed through. Even our soap had been bitten and sucked!” The girls finish breakfast (although “one of the eggs was bad!”) and cheerfully rebuild the fence before setting off on their “great climb to Malham Tarn.” They go “badly astray” on the high fells, and it’s late evening before they find their way back to their field – after hiking 20 miles in the rain. Eileen sketches a handy map, memorializing their arduous route.

And so the days continue. Friends arrive for a visit, and a cricket match ensues. “Bowling became an ingenious art of hitting the right tummock to bring the ball anywhere near the wicket,” while cows wandered across the pitch. Hikes, picnics, rainstorms, and the occasional walk into a nearby town to “the flicks.” *Torrid Zone*, a 1940 James Cagney melodrama, is pronounced “a terrible flick!”

Some moments strike a chord of recognition. The little I know about English wildflowers I learned from her. Primroses, columbines, meadowsweet and violets are threaded into my memories of walks through the countryside around my grandfather’s home – he strolling with his cane in a three-piece tweed suit, while she pointed out flowers in the hedgerows to us children. The logbook reveals the deep roots of her knowledge and passion. One Saturday, the trio hikes to Hull Pot, a collapsed cave that attracts walkers to marvel at the dramatic chasm in the hillside. Eileen seeks different treasures. She finds “knotted Pearlwort (a small white star-like flower),” before spotting the rare yellow Saxifrage and noticing that “Butterwort also thrived in the damped, mossy crevices among the rocks.” Some days later, another hike nets sightings of “Variegated Hearts Tongue, Eyebright, and Heartsease.” I struggle to recall the shapes and colors of the flowers she lovingly records.

And the journal casually confirms my memory of my mother as calm, matter-of-fact, and fearless. One morning, the friends are awakened by a man’s face peering through the window. “He ran away very rapidly on seeing that he had been observed.” No panic – the three go back to sleep, awakening later to find him back again. They give chase, “but he ran away so quickly that it was impossible to catch him.” I wonder what fate he might have suffered if they had. And I wonder what I would have done, in another decade, in another world. The intruder is never mentioned again; the trio head off for a “glorious bathe” followed by a stroll to find wild mimulus.

* * *

But as I scour the pages for what is there, I am simultaneously stunned by what is not. How can I ignore that date, emblazoned on the front page? 1941 – well into the third year of the war that was once more tearing Europe apart. The holiday began on July 28th and ended on August 17th. By then, Paris had fallen, the evacuation of Dunkirk was over, the Battle of Britain had thwarted Hitler’s plan to invade Britain. As the girls settled into their holiday routine, Hitler was instructing subordinates to submit a plan for the “final solution of the Jewish question.” The Blitz had devastated London, and bombing raids had hit all over England, including Eileen’s home town of Sunderland, where more than 250 people died and ninety percent of the city’s buildings were damaged or destroyed. Eileen’s brother Gordon, having completed an accelerated medical degree designed to provide doctors for the war effort, was serving overseas as a Royal Army Medical Corps doctor, at age 23.

Yet for these three young women, the war is absent. They have a working "wireless," but if they are following war news, we will never know it. There's not a mention amid all the chatter about food, cider, hikes, flowers, and trips into town. Just once, Eileen notes how unusually easy it was on a particular day to obtain meat and beer, but with no reference to the rationing that made this a special surprise. And there's a moment when the friends find a "mysterious army haversack containing a woman's sweater, a camouflaged mac, cigarettes and food," with an identity card nearby. "We hung about hoping that the owner would turn up, and sure enough they did as we were eating our tea – a soldier and girl!" Nothing more, and I am left to imagine the lives of this couple, perhaps taking a rural respite from war.

* * *

Stainforth Falls, Wikipedia

Yet I suspect I know why the ugliness of war cannot be allowed to intrude. Surely it was a deliberate decision to create her tale of three magical weeks, suspended in time. Was this summer the last gasp of girlhood, a precious interlude before serious life took over? Later that year, she followed her brother to medical school, graduating as the war finally ended. By 1949, she had met and married another young doctor.

My father never tired of telling us how he met my mother – struck dumb by her lovely legs dangling from a table in the doctors' lounge. He had returned from the war engaged to an Army nurse, but as he told it, that meeting changed everything, and within six months they were married. This and countless other tales ripened into an old man's stories. Childhood stories. Love stories. War stories. He lived on for more than 30 years after she died, honoring her memory to the end.

My mother never grew old and could rarely be coaxed to speak of the past. I never heard how she recalled that meeting – or even if she remembered it at all. Her stories never bloomed, but died on the vine. I wish I had asked about her own mother, who died just months before Eileen was married. Or about her brother, who died at age 37 – on Eileen's birthday. I wish I had asked about what it was like to be among a handful of women at medical school during the war years. What made her decide to follow her brother there? Did she face discrimination, condescension, or hostility? How was life as a junior doctor in austere, post-war Britain? Sometimes, I would get brief glimpses. Abortion was legalized in Britain in 1967, when I was a teenager, and she once told me how grateful she was for that landmark legislation. Recalling her professional days, she described treating women

who had been rushed to Emergency after self-induced or back-street abortions. No-one should celebrate abortion, she told me firmly. But the lives that were saved ….

In spite of the medals and honors she earned in college, and her early success in practice, she gave up her career to raise four children, only returning to it later in life. I never heard her express a moment of regret, although some time in the 1960s, she gave me a well-read copy of Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique. "This is an important book. You need to read it." It was, and I did.

* * *

During my teens and twenties, we spoke often, and when I settled across the Atlantic, we exchanged long, newsy letters. She kept mine among her treasures. We talked always of the present and future, rarely of her closely held past. I always assumed there would be more time. Time to leaf with her through those family albums and learn the names of relatives in Jazz Age hats, pinafores, and fur stoles. Time for her to tell stories to the grandchildren she would never meet. Today, the Stainforth logbook, tantalizingly brief and unreflective as it is, offers a small and frosted window into my mother's heart. It isn't enough, but it is precious; how many people have documents written by their parents in their youth? It was not written for posterity, and yet it reaches to me across 80 years, and I cherish the vision of her young, care-free face. It tells me that we all can find joy and light in moments like this, no matter how dark the shadows that skulk at the edges of this determined happiness. In these days of exotic travel and endless new experiences, the simplicity of that summer shines through, as my mother describes their hike to Gaping Ghyll, a reportedly bottomless ravine, where they dropped stones into the abyss while "hunting for Sundew in the crevices of the rocks." As they made their way down hill to the road:

"One or two flowers were found and while waiting for the bus we watched a Dipper in the river. After 14 miles we were tired and ready for supper. As it was a perfect evening for fishing the fisherwoman tried her skill and actually caught one small trout! At 10:15 p.m. we had an icy cold bathe to end a perfect day."

Yorkshire dales, Wikipedia

6 comments

PATRICIA says:
Jul 26, 2022

". . . the lives that were saved" made me shiver. What a beautiful and melancholy piece about the importance of choice. How we choose to know one another and to be known, what we value, and what we leave behind. Thank you.

Reply

ELIZABETH BIRD says:
Aug 25, 2022

Thank you very much for your kind words!

Reply

TERRI SUTTON says:
May 15, 2022

I love the sweet sadness of the piece. It's a reminder to seize the day.

Reply

ELIZABETH BIRD says:
May 18, 2022

Thank you for your kind words. And you are completely right!

Reply

DENISE CLEMEN says:
May 9, 2022

I'm grateful for the human capacity for joy, even in the worst of times. This essay gave me some minutes to ponder that.

Reply

ELIZABETH BIRD says:
May 18, 2022

Thank you for your kind comment.It was exactly those thoughts that made my mother's journal seem so special.

Reply

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Maintained by ***Martha Highers***