

SPouses But Strangers: English World War II Marriages After Separation

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I'm lonely in college, and when I'm with other people it's worse. Most conversations feel like a game of missed handshakes: I put out my thought, they put out theirs several inches away, we stand awkwardly for a moment, then shrug and do it again. All my thoughts end up slumping back to my own head, untouched, until I wonder if I'm crazy.

I miss Michael. I felt sanest with him. Our thoughts connect: We don't always have the same opinions, but we can see the same way, trace the pathway from opinion to mind and argue at every step. This is true with other close friends too, but with them I sometimes feel like I'm aiming my thought to a level where they'll grab it, holding it in a slightly uncomfortable position so it'll be in the same place as theirs. With Michael, I don't have to aim: He's just there, wherever I am.

But we're a few thousand miles apart now, and I'm afraid of what happens with separation. When our lives are so different, do those experiences change us? And if so, at what point do I lose him?

I didn't know it when I started my research, but I think it was this question that drew me to the stories of homecomings between long-separated British World War II veterans and their wives. World War II England was the extreme case of growing apart in separation, both because of the long years without much contact and because experiences like army life or running households alone and holding jobs often demanded change. Husbands formed new ambitions and emotions based on military experiences, wives developed new habits of independence, and both adjusted psychologically to separation. By the time they reunited, many spouses couldn't connect anymore. With little contact and having built up psychological defenses against dwelling on the missing partner, their minds had been cut off from each other and had grown in different directions. For many, this growth felt like maturing, but maturity had its cost when their thoughts were no longer in a place where their partner could grab them. The homecoming stories pointed me to a tradeoff between growing up and keeping a connection: Trying to do both now seems like a terrifying tightrope, though may be possible if Michael and I are willing to keep looking forward for the thoughts born of each other's new lives and backward for the thoughts born of the life we had together.

I whine about how phone calls and Facebook are never the same as being with Michael in person, but we're outrageously spoiled compared to spouses in World War II England who had only heavily censored letters and almost inevitably became distant. Psychologist Edwin Howard Kitching posits, in his 1946 *Sex and the Returned Veteran*, a theory of marriage success based on case studies of soldiers and their wives: a soldier

“cannot talk about his job for security reasons . . . [s]o what has he left to write about?” (Kitching 63). The difficulty of expressing war experiences to wives who hadn’t been through the same was compounded not just by official censorship, but by self-censorship: Many soldiers feared their experiences would be too shocking and upsetting for their wives. Alan Allport’s *Demobbed: Coming Home After World War II*, a recent study that looks back at WWII-era England through letters, diaries, newspapers, and books, records Royal Artilleryman Alan Harris’s comment on the inevitable emptiness of his letters home: “I say that I am fit and well, when in fact my bowels are wrenched with diarrhoea, when my stomach is retching and my head aches” (Allport ch. 2)¹. Wives, too, felt pressured to share only cheerful news with their already-burdened husbands and were advised in magazines like *Good Housekeeping* that “letters should be full of jolly family incidents, fun, [and] music” (ch. 2). With their real emotions and troubles carefully protected from each other, it’s unsurprising that psychologists Eliot Slater and Moya Woodside found in their *Patterns of Marriage; A Study of Marriage Relationships in the Urban Working Classes* that “Letters were a thin thread . . . a sense of loss of touch was universal” (Slater 19).

For World War II British soldiers and wives, long-distance communication was so unsatisfying that they often developed an emotional numbness towards their partner as a defense against the pain of separation. Kitching reports that drafted men of a “neurotic” temperament became so unstable upon separation from their wives that they were discharged for being unfit for service (Kitching 40). Stability required not dwelling on the missing loved one and instead getting absorbed into the new military life. Kitching’s prototype of a soldier of “normal” temperament rid himself of separation anxiety by focusing on work to distract himself, smoking and drinking to chemically alleviate stress, and making fun of sentimentality to harden himself against vulnerable feelings (42). Wives who were classified as “normal” (rather than “neurotic”) were those who were able to develop psychological defenses against anxiety (33). But though these emotional brakes might have been necessary during separation to keep from careening into neurosis, it could be hard to disable them upon reunion. One wife said sadly, “I have taken no interest in anything for so long that I now find it impossible to be interested in even the prospect of his return,” and many more found themselves equally numb (Allport ch. 2). Men too felt shut off from their own emotions, and worried about what kind of husbands they’d be in their deadened state: one man who’d been away for five years wrote, “I still love [my family] . . . but I feel if they expect me to show my feelings I’ll run away because I have no energy left” (ch. 2). For him, as for many separated spouses, feeling love had become so exhausting that they avoided it instinctively. In self-defense, they closed their minds to their spouse entirely.

Others did still feel a strong love for their spouses, and throughout the separation were able to keep painfully alive an image of how they had been before the war. But these men and women often ended up heartbroken, never really getting back the

people they remembered. Cordelia Holman, one of the wives surveyed in Ben Wicks' collection of homecoming stories *Welcome Home: The Stories of Soldiers Returning from World War II*, stayed with the husband who was "absolutely great" before the war because she couldn't let go of "the love we once had" (Wicks 49). But he had turned aggressive and indifferent to her and their son, and they were never happy together again. Even the Herculean task of maintaining a fierce and ever-present love for a spouse throughout separation wasn't enough to save a marriage after reunion when the spouse wasn't the beloved person he or she had been. It was not just time apart, but the transformative nature of that time for soldiers and women on their own that created an emotional and mental isolation between spouses.

For soldiers, that transformation often meant becoming traumatized by battle experiences; their paranoid and short-fused tendencies alienated them from their wives after reunion. Veterans frequently had phobias of anything from confined spaces (Wicks 16) to hearing "God Save the King" (Allport ch. 7). Wives could find it difficult to sympathize with these irrational fears, especially when they were forced to abide by them too, as when Dorothy Parker's husband badgered her if she wasted any food (Wicks 58). But the heavier burden was husbands' angry, aggressive behavior, which Kitching explains as a holdover from the lowering of moral standards required by war, since "it is impossible to tell men to go and kill an enemy and risk their lives in doing it, and expect them at the same time to be honest, chaste, kind and unselfish all the time" (Kitching 56). Soldiers and prisoners of war got locked into the belligerence that they needed to keep fighting, so that it became second nature to them. One prisoner of war explained that after years of constantly rebelling against enemy restraint, he couldn't "suddenly assume voluntary restraint" (Allport ch. 7). For wives like Elise Moyer, whose husband shouted at her all through his homecoming night, their husbands' touchy violence inevitably hindered intimacy (Wicks 49-50). More, it made them seem crazy, unhinged: Families whispered things like "Be very careful with Ray, he's mad as a hatter" to guests (Allport ch. 7). The belief that returned husbands were insane expresses an unbridgeable gap between the viewpoints of spouses, a complete breakdown of the ability to connect.

Even when veterans weren't psychologically crippled by war, other changes like new intellectual or career interests could prevent spouses from connecting. Joining the army during WWII offered rare opportunities for travel as far as Japan, and wives felt keenly the difference between their worldly awareness and their husbands', commonly lamenting, "they've been around, they've seen the world" (Slater 223). Army education and rank promotions also broadened soldiers' horizons, so that they were generally reluctant to return to their prewar employment; in his wry guidebook *Call Me Mister!: A Guide to Civilian Life for the Newly Demobilised*, Dennis Rooke portrays the typical veteran telling a friend that he's "certainly not going back to [his] old job before the war" (Rooke 19). Just as old jobs could feel too limited to acknowledge new skills and ambitions, the outlook of a wife could seem "narrow and restricted to a husband who

had been broadened by life in the Army” (223). Afraid that she might not be able to keep up with her husband’s new intellectualism, one wife even rehearsed highbrow conversations as she dusted (Allport ch. 2). Nor were her fears unfounded, for many soldiers did find that their wives couldn’t understand the serious thoughts arising from war. When one soldier started philosophizing about life in a letter to home, his wife thought he had “gone mental.” Here again, the rejection of her husband’s sanity shows that his thoughts were now so far away from hers that she gave up entirely on trying to grasp them. Philip Meninsky, who during the war “had grown up to become a very much [more] serious person” and who found that his wife had no interest in any of his new ambitions, described the disconnect as “living in two totally different worlds” (ch. 2). Trauma wasn’t needed to sever a husband’s worldview from his wife’s: sometimes, just growing up was enough.

Women too had to grow up to make it through the war, and the independence they developed often wasn’t recognized or valued by their husbands as they were pushed back into being housewives after reunion. During the war, with only about thirty-eight shillings (the equivalent of less than \$80 in modern American currency) a week as state allowance and allotment from their husbands’ pay, most wives had to work. By 1943, more than four in five wives without children at home were in full-time war work (Allport ch. 2). One woman said after being “a cabbage” for so many years, getting out of the house to work felt like escaping a cage, after which a lot of housewives wouldn’t want to go back to “the old narrow life” (Mass Observation 58). Surveys are divided on whether the majority of women wanted to continue working after the war; one 1943 survey found that three-quarters of professional women wanted to keep their job after the war (Wicks 130), while another in 1944 found that a majority of women said they “hope and expect to settle down” (Mass Observation 57). Desire to return to the home may largely have been based on exhaustion, however; one woman who wanted to get “right out” of work explained that she “didn’t want to go on, being married and working. After a few years it gets too much for you . . . we’re all getting tired” (Mass Observation 56). In her *Women and the Future*, Margaret Goldsmith writes that women fantasizing about laying down the burden of trying to do it all might not have taken into account that “unconsciously they have formed habits of independence, which will be difficult to break” (Goldsmith 15). These habits of independence came partly from the unusual state of being alone all the time, since a soldier’s wife was “married and yet not married,” not allowed to go out with other men (Slater 215). Simply living alone could be hard for women to give up on, and some bitterly regretted the loss of small freedoms like a room to themselves or quiet mornings (Allport ch. 2). Largely, though, independence came from the challenge of working and running the household, which gave women a “very deserved sense of achievement and confidence” that would have to be given up if they let their husbands take over (Kitching 72).

Snubbing that sense of achievement and confidence, many husbands didn't support their wives' interest in working and in doing so rejected the mature, independent women their wives had become. One man grumbled that his wife "seems to enjoy [work] too much for my peace of mind," and only thirty percent of men surveyed in Mass Observation's *The Journey Home* believed women should be allowed to keep their wartime jobs (Allport ch. 2; Mass Observation 64). During the war, these men had often come to idealize their homes and wives and expect that they would be just the same as ever when they came home; a common post-war fantasy was simply a return to the pre-war status quo (Kitching 61; Mass Observation 18). The same veterans who were acutely aware of how war had changed them didn't appreciate that their wives had been through an equally transformative experience. Women's new concerns were trivialized, as husbands complained that "all the wives have got so dull" for only talking about "queues, rations, babies, coupons, their poor feet" (Allport ch. 2). With this lack of respect shown for the ambitions and interests they had developed, women felt their husbands weren't trying to connect with the people they had become; as Rosie Longman reflected sadly, "after the war I was 'Mummy,' 'my daughter,' 'my wife' or 'the landlady'. I was never me" (Wicks 132). Women like Rosie found that their real selves continued to live alone and apart from their husbands after reunion.

Over and over, husbands and wives tell stories of coming home to strangers. Reading these stories of missed handshake after missed handshake, I started to believe that change was the enemy of intimacy, and indeed many of the rare stories of entirely happy homecomings featured some variation on the theme of not changing. Captain A.M. Bell was relieved to find that "there was no disappointment or disillusion or anticlimax"; his reunion was "sheer heaven" because his wife Frances "is lovely and hasn't changed an atom" (Allport ch. 2). Carol Cockburn O'Neill, who like her wartime coworkers was happy to return to being a housewife after the war, describes being comfortably stuck in the domestic mentality they were raised with despite their new jobs: "The word career wasn't in our vocabulary" (Wicks 135). Other marriages worked well because the dynamic created by war wasn't so different than their prewar dynamic; Vicky Masterman found that her marriage didn't have any problems after she took over as head of house during the war because "he was a very quiet man, so I just took over automatically" (Wicks 138). One way or another, happy reunions seemed to result from lack of change and discord and distance from change; the only way to not grow apart was to not grow.

But as Michael often has to remind me when I make up a theory, it's not that simple. Some couples managed to keep up with each other's changes through letters: Slater and Woodside found that some spouses said they "got to know their partner better by writing, or had learned to appreciate the other more" (Slater 219), and Karina Powell remembers that "every day during the evening I would write a six-to-ten page letter . . . I really think John being away made us grow much closer to each other" (Wicks 47). Meanwhile Alexander Korda, director of the 1945 movie *Perfect Strangers*

(released in the US as *Vacation from Marriage*), had a more radical idea for the benefits of separation: Spouses could end up liking each other more than they had before as a very result of their separate changes. His characters Catherine and Robert Wilson are dull people in a passionless marriage, with Robert's choice of Catherine based on her "dependability" about not wasting money or making foolish choices. Both transform during the war. Catherine, who at first has so weak a sense of personal identity that she introduces herself to new coworker Dizzy as "Wilson . . . Mrs. Wilson" and won't wear lipstick because Robert doesn't approve, ends the movie as a glamorous lipsticked woman who informs her husband that she has no intention of becoming a "weak child-wife" again. But Robert, now a dashing soldier who dances well and craves adventure, no longer wants a weak child-wife who is dependable before anything else. Both intend to ask for divorces, but end up attracted to each other all over again.

I want to believe Korda. I don't think I need lipstick, but I'm not content with who I am, not just yet. I want to somehow dig my way out of the mires of self-consciousness that make me question whether everything I do or say is genuine or an elaborate manipulation. I want to find some kind of volunteer work that I really care about, become a contributing member of the human community. I want to grow up. And yes, I'd like to come back to Michael in four years a better person and have him love me more for it, have us connect on the levels I've grown up to. But I remember making smoothies in his kitchen, laughing over our manipulative tendencies, the constant scheming neither of us could quite turn off. I remember exchanging "oh brother" looks at school assemblies when students fresh off GSL trips enthused about the difference they'd learned they would make in the world. And I'm afraid of losing that, of not being able to find each other in the old favorite haunts of the thoughts of the people we were.

I read a letter from a World War II wife who shared my fear and gave me some hope that Michael and I can both change and stay together. Defying *Good Housekeeping's* advice for letter topics, Minna Scott wrote her husband about her sadness over their dog's recent death and her fear that he would find her grief trivial when his experiences of war had made him aware of true human suffering (Scott). Trying to catch up to where she imagines her husband's mind must be now, she describes turning on the news "to be reminded of the senseless butchering going on everywhere to get the matter of a little dog into perspective" (Scott). But her husband writes back remembering the dog's role in their life together, able to return to the place where the dog mattered tremendously even though he is aware "just a pet dog" isn't much in the larger picture of war. Minna is profoundly relieved, writing, "These letters have reduced the distance between North Africa and Warlingham to something negligible" (Scott). That moment, I realized, was the hope I was really looking for. Minna's husband has changed, but they are as close as ever. He has new thoughts in places that are hard for her to reach, but she stretches to try anyway; he comes back to their old

places when she most needs him to. As long as Michael and I are willing both to let each other change and remember the dogs we had together, we're going to be okay.

NOTE

1. I came across Alan Allport's *Demobbed: Coming Home After the Second World War* in the initial stages of the project. I got stuck on passages, and I read and reread them until I admitted how close to the bone they were. The anxiety of separation, and the coping mechanisms, and the absorption into new lives, new independence, new adulthood that periodically broke into the fear that there would be no going back now—this was what I had been looking for. But it wasn't enough. Allport was, first and foremost, a historian, and he ends his epilogue with a call to Britain to improve her system of demobilization. I was, at bottom, a sad college freshman and I wanted a different kind of answer. Not how a country can reintegrate its soldiers into society, but how two people can make it.

So I went back to his sources, the primary accounts of the men and women who lived during the war and the psychologists interviewing them, and tried to make my own sense of their stories. One of these, Eliot Slater and Moya Woodside's *Patterns of Marriage*, is available from the Butler stacks. For the others, I got myself a New York Public Library card and discovered the wonderland of the offsite collection. They have just about everything, and books can be ordered online through nypl.org and delivered to one of the libraries for in-library use. Some materials can be delivered closer to campus, but if you're ordering several books and want them all in the same place most things can be sent to the Schwartzman reading room, in the main library on 42nd Street. I found out later that you can use the scanners in the library (although they aren't free), but I just sat with the books under the stained glass and copied out all the quotes I liked onto a Word document. I was the kind of Columbian who rarely made it further south than Absolute Bagels, but I was in that moment very, very happy to be in New York City.

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