# *My War*

• *Norma Rowen* •

***Résumé*** *: Une spécialiste du romantisme et de la littérature jeunesse songe à l'impact de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale sur ses souvenirs de petite enfance en Grande-Bretagne.*

***Summary****: A literary scholar with special interests in Romanticism and children's literature meditates on her childhood in England during the Second World War and the shape it gave to her early world.*

Lights?" we cried. "Lights in the *street*?" Our faces, I'm sure, expressed our wonder. Across the table from us, our father's face took on a look of surprise. "Of course," he said, after a short pause. "Before the war we always had lights in the streets — now it's almost over and we'll have them again." I thought of the big standing lamp in the living room with its green satiny shade and rather elaborate fringe. How would it fare, out in the street, poor thing? "Will they have settees outside too," asked my sister, "and chairs and tables?"

My father burst out laughing. This reassured us, but not altogether. For if the outside turned into the inside, we had been thinking, where would the *inside* be? I remembered that brief transformations of this kind had taken place before and had been fun. When my mother, for instance, had hung the garden with great drying sheets she had created miraculous inside spaces on the grass. My sister and I had run in and out of these sudden houses with great delight; after a while, however, the sheets had dried and been taken in and the garden was a garden once again. But if something as solid as the lights actually moved out into the streets, there would be no going back. My sister and I, at ages nine and eight, realized that we had reached a watershed in our lives, a change in the very nature of our world. Until now there had been certain things we could absolutely count on — spring, for instance, and summer, and autumn, and winter, and the war.

The seasons guided the circling year and the war gave us the shape of the world, a world firmly divided into us and them, black and white (as the battle maps had it), good and bad, England and Germany, with Europe a captive princess, Canada and Australia our noble battlemates, and only America, for a long while, an ambiguous entity somewhere on the edge of the map.

Now, however, it looked as if this major structuring principle were about to collapse. A new era was about to begin, or perhaps — an even more unsettling suggestion — an old one, out of the deep well of the past, was about to resurface. This was the mythic time we thought of as Before-the-War. To us it was almost a country, an enchanted land that had existed long ago, like the age of knights and dragons or of Jason and the Argonauts. It was in that country that our parents had been born, in the time, unimaginable ages ago, before they had become our parents. And intriguing traces of it still remained to our wondering present-day gaze. Thus, every time we went onto the platform at the train station our eyes were confronted by the brooding empty hulks of the chocolate machines, dark relics which looked like the ruins of old castles and which had once housed, so we were given to understand, great treasures. At the trick of a coin, gold and silver chocolate bars would miraculously drop down, presenting themselves to be eaten. Or there were our Christmas tree lights. They were pear-shaped and solid and hung in the branches like waxed fruit. We admired them a lot but our father told us that in the land of Before-the-War they had been lit up from within and glowed like jewels. But the spark that had produced that glow had gone, and there seemed to be no way of making it return. It was the same story with our toys. Our doll's house, purchased at the beginning of the war, was completely devoid of furniture, items for the use of dolls having disappeared shortly after from the shops. To us this empty structure too seemed like a kind of relic whose rooms the war had stripped and left hollow. And if our doll's house was a relic of the land of Before-the-War, my doll was one of its refugees. "The last doll in Manchester" according to my mother, she had arrived with only the dress she stood up in and we were never able to find any more for her, doll's clothes having gone the way of doll's furniture.

The amazing thing, however, about the country of Before-the-War was that once, long ago, I too had lived in it, in a kind of pre-existence before I was myself and knew my own name. And if I shut my eyes and let myself drift back down into my memory as far as I could go, concentrating with care and steadiness, I could catch a glimpse of it, like a sudden vision or a dream. In this vision I would be sitting at our dining room table wearing my favourite white boots, while sunlight streamed in through the open windows. Always, at the centre of the picture, was an object in which all this sunlight ultimately seemed to embed itself — a long curved yellow fruit that my father was carefully slicing up into my pudding. I knew that

this fruit was utterly delicious, and every time I conjured the picture up I tried with all my might to recapture its taste, to feel it on my tongue again. Always it eluded me. Years later, however, relatives sent us some dried bananas, and when I cautiously sampled these seemingly black and shrivelled things, the sought-for taste bloomed once again in my mouth, warm, mellow and as familiar as if it had never been lost.

Wartime, then, was an era dominated by vanished things, but it was not without its own forms of magic. One of the most potent of these was generated on nights when the moon was full and the air was alive with noises, the steady unerring hum of the planes coming over to bomb Manchester, about eight miles from where we lived. Soon this hum would be joined by other noises — the stark staccato sputter of machine guns, the soberer, deeper rumble of the anti-aircraft installations, and, dominating everything else, the great falling whine of the bombs as they came whistling out of the sky, followed by the mighty cascading boom of their landing. They had all the excitement of what I imagined fireworks to be, and when I heard these sounds there often flashed into my head an image out of my favourite picture book in which Mickey Mouse, dressed up as a wizard, conjured up great flashing stars in the sky with his wand.

We listened, my family and I, to all these noises from under the dining room table where we had taken shelter, my sister and I neatly curled up in the niches of the crossbars, my parents' bodies half protected but also stretching out into the spaces beyond. In fact, I loved these nights under the table. Spaces had been magically transformed, the place of the feet becoming the place of the head, the place of eating strangely turned into a bed. Above all, I liked the feeling they produced in me of being at the heart of the house, within breath of the hearth, ballustrated by my mother and father's bodies, while the sound and light show entertainingly unfolded outside. This was the inside of the inside; how far, dark, and cut off my bedroom seemed from this shelter, like a form of exile.

Eventually, as the war went on and showed signs of settling in, the time of the table came to an end. As a place of safety it was superseded by an officially labelled indoor shelter. This was a squat iron and steel contraption that took up residence in the "best" room, obliterating half of the rose-coloured carpet and hustling the elegant blue-grey furniture out of the way. This shelter became a bed for my sister and me. But in spite of the excitement of those bombing nights when our parents joined us there and wire netting closed it up, we never liked it. It was like sleeping in scaffolding, the kind of scaffolding we saw holding up bombed out buildings when we went to Manchester. It was as if the best room too had been bombed out. The best room was a problem in itself; it was so pretty and special that it was rarely used. There was hardly ever a fire in the fireplace and it always smelt lonely. Although it was just next door to the dining room, it seemed even farther from the centre of the house than our bedroom. Again

our bedroom had become an exile.

The shelter was a dead grey-black colour, and as time went on this colour sank into our hearts like lead. In fact, as the bombing raids started to peter out and the excitement faded from the sky, lead seemed to have become the dominant colour of the war, a colour compounded of the drab clothes, always trademarked "utility," which were now the only ones in the shops, and the lacklustre foods, like the grey dehydrated potato substitute, that we ate with increasing frequency. This was also the time when the disappearance of toys from the shops became a stampede. I only got books for Christmas now, nothing to play with or trundle around. The toys we did have had been with us ever since we could remember and they were so battered about that I thought they must have belonged to other children first and come to us secondhand.

It was in this atmosphere that the myth of the land of Before-the-War grew. In our fantasies, it was full of people dressed in clothes out of American films and eating untold amounts of jellies and ice creams and of the chocolate we could barely remember. Among these Before-the-War people were our parents, not the careworn, harassed figures that we knew but glamorous and bright with youth, fox-trotting around with the rest.

Yet, in spite of the dreary atmosphere it generated, the war, like the shelter itself, continued to give us the harsh and unaltering structure that shaped our world as it went on, and we lived and grew within its infallible protection.

The first sign of the radical developments that were to shift this structure on its base and undermine the main architecture of our lives came with the liberation of Paris. My sister and I had of course never been to Paris. We had never, in fact, been out of England. We didn't know it could even be done. "But didn't they arrest you?" we cried in horror when our father recounted stories of pre-war continental visits. Nonetheless, Paris was deeply familiar to us. From almost before memory began it had haunted our fantasies. It was my father's favourite city and a frequent subject of conversation to him. And it was always floating from the radio on waves of nostalgic song. One of those songs in particular clung to our imaginations. "The last time I saw Paris," it began, "her heart was young and gay," but this, the singer added mournfully, was only a memory now. Although the words of the song were tinged with melancholy, the music itself had a lilt to it, like waltz or a quickstep, and summoned up irresistibly to my mind the figure of my young dancing aunt, who had once modelled her satiny sky blue evening dress with its long swirling skirt, gleaming in shimmering patterns as she moved in the light, before going out for the evening with her boyfriend. This incident, which had been one of the highpoints of our lives, gave the song added enchantment. The voice of the singer, on the other hand, was rather light and thin, like a leaf beginning to go dry. It had a kind of ghostliness to it, as if there wasn't enough of it to fully embody

the lively tune. And yet it was a very sweet voice that seemed to make the whole song give off a faint scent, like lightly flavoured lemonade. Both the dancing swirl and the aroma of the song would resurface powerfully in my mind on certain occasions, most notably when my grandmother, herself always darkly clad, would reach into the dark mess gathered in the backs of drawers and bring out one or two old scent bottles. The glass of these bottles was moulded into swirling folds like my aunt's dress or the dresses of princesses, and it was delicately clouded, opaque against the shining silver top. The actual perfume in these bottles had long ago evaporated, gone away to take up permanent residence in the land of Before-the-War, but a hint of scent still clung to them; when I pressed the puffer a distant breath of the lost perfume, delicate and flowery or tinged with a sense of musk and mystery, would waft into my face. The names on the bottles were, of course, all in French.

And now, it seemed, almost out of the blue, Paris was to be restored to us. The princess in the tower who was at the heart of captive Europe was to be set free. My memory of the day of the liberation is especially sharp. As I helped set the table for lunch, the cloth seemed to glow with a particularly bright whiteness and the blades of the knives to gleam with more than usual intensity. Everything was held in an atmosphere of enchantment, with the brilliant white light of the sky through the dining room windows and the emerald glow of the garden, as if it had been steeped in green, wrapping us all around. It seemed like all the special times, Christmas and Easter and our birthdays, rolled into one. This connection had its puzzling aspects, however. For, like winter, spring, and summer, Christmas and Easter and birthdays were part of our unchanging world — they came circling round every year. But the liberation of Paris, I knew, would never come again. This was the end of something, a finishing off. Perhaps, in fact, in this respect the whole event felt more like a fairy tale than Christmas or Easter. Here we were in the "happily every after" conclusion. But this idea too was puzzling. For if it was a conclusion, why didn't everything stop? And things clearly weren't going to stop. I knew that this magical today would be followed by the familiar tomorrow, in which I would get up and go to school in the usual way, as I would in a whole sequence of tomorrows to follow. The story was over but life went on.

The liberation of Paris was a harbinger. Less than a year after that, the war itself — which had seemed as permanent a structure as the grass, the trees, the seasons — also finally came to an end, leaving us exposed and unprotected in the strange new world that bore the official label of peace. On the evening of Victory in Europe day, after the big street parties were over, I stood outside alone for a moment trying to get the feel of the new world. In a few months I would be nine years old. And next year, I suddenly thought, I would be ten. I'd have moved into double figures and the time when my birthday was always a single figure would, like the war, be

over. Everything was moving forward and I was, it seemed, somehow bound to be carried along with it.

As it turned out, the end of the war did not signal any great changes in our day-to-day circumstances. The land of Before-the-War was never regained. Rather, we now inhabited the Post-War Years, a time when the dreariness of the later years of the war not only continued but seemed to intensify; when rationing grew more stringent, when we still wore our drab utility clothes and the wonder of the lights in the streets became grimed over with daily use and what seemed to be the continual slanting of rain. Although the indoor shelter had long ago been dismantled, its leaden hue seemed to have expanded, smearing the whole atmosphere.

But in case we were ever tempted to forget the drama of the early bombing, there was one evening every year that helped to remind us of it and produced in me a terror I had never known during the war itself. This was the evening of November the fifth, Bonfire Night, when the failure of Guy Fawkes's plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605 was annually celebrated with fireworks and bonfires.

I first became aware of Bonfire Night on an early autumn evening just after the war had ended. I was playing in the street when I noticed a nearby group of boys crouching around what looked like a dirty bundle of rags. One of them flashed something at it and they all leapt back with a cry of mingled warning and triumph. What hit my ear was a sudden mighty blast that seemed to pass through my body like shrapnel, almost, I felt, lifting me off my feet. Shaking with fright, I realized when I returned to myself that I had come to no physical harm. The boys had merely been going in for some early firework practice. From that moment onwards, however, I, who had lived with relative calm through all the sounds of falling bombs in the war, some of them so close that they rattled the windows of our dining room, suddenly found myself incapable of bearing any loud noise, especially one I was not expecting. At the children's parties that seemed so frequent in the autumn and winter after the war, balloons, instead of being associated with fun and delight, became major objects of anxiety as I waited, cringing in corners, for them to be popped. At school lunches, I always kept in sight innocent paper bags, containers of my schoolmates' sandwiches, as I prepared myself for the inevitable moment when they would be playfully exploded. The same fear, in later years, poisoned my theatre experience. If I saw that a play I was watching had any guns in it, a pall of worry set in that overshadowed the whole performance. But Bonfire Night was worse than anything. Then the bangs seemed to rain down without intermission, every one a massive convulser of the body, and "rip-rap" fireworks, small but deadly, would scutter across the ground, thrown at the feet of anyone who was passing by. In fact, it almost seemed as if the full terror of war, hitherto ironically missing from my life, was regularly visited on me on those evenings, as my sister and I, sent out by our parents

to enjoy ourselves, toiled along to some supposedly festive neighbourhood bonfire. The sudden bursts of fierce sparks, throwing the houses into lurid relief as we went along, the flames burning darkly through hedges, the sounds like great blasting shells, all made me feel like one of those refugees whose pictures had appeared so often in documentaries late in the war, distraught and staring-eyed, trying desperately to find an exit from a burning city.

A sense of the terrible fragility of my own body would engulf me at these times, intensified by the statistics on past Bonfire Night casualties which regularly appeared in the paper at this season. The body's almost infinite capacity for being suddenly blown apart or simply irretrievably damaged would present itself to me with a new and fearful clarity. This was something I had not experienced during the war itself — somehow this had seemed more distant. As I looked back, it was as if the war had been fought in the sky. That was where all the action took place, at a remove and safely observable. But Bonfire Night was going on all around us, near to the ground and at our level. And there were different people in charge. The war had been run by adults, by men and women whose azure uniforms seemed to reach up to the clouds. But Bonfire Night was run by little boys, children no bigger than I was. The dangerous anarchy of equality was in the air, with a minimal sense of adult control. Above all, there was the difference in the behaviour of my parents. For they, who had unfailingly protected us during the war, on one occasion at least throwing their bodies on top of ours when a bomb seemed to be falling too close, now abandoned us to our fate and sent us out into the perilous void of the evening without giving the matter a single thought. My diffidently offered pleas were gently set aside on the grounds that Bonfire Night was "fun," that children had always gone to Bonfire Night and that I would "like it when I got there." Of course, I never really told my parents of the extent of my terror, for it was a source of deep shame. I was guilty of cowardice, of being too frightened and too weak to enjoy what children are supposed to enjoy, and this was something that could only be kept a dark secret, even from my sister. Thus, although I knew she had suffered from nightmares of bombing and airplanes during the war, I never discussed Bonfire Night with her or asked how she felt about it.

Later, as we got older, the situation became, if anything, worse, since the Bonfire parties we went to were more distant with more dangerous terrain to travel through before we arrived. In our early teens we went more often than not to the house of our friend Jean, who lived on another housing estate. Our journey would lead us away from the neighbourhood, through fields that, although silent, had the look to my tense gaze of enemy territory. We would scuttle across the railway bridge — high and exposed — and then dodge along by the shadows of the hedges, our whole journey coloured by our terror. Our friend's house abutted onto a waste

area that, like all other waste areas we encountered, irresistibly suggested bomb damage to us, and as I clambered over its rough surfaces I felt as though I were trampling on the bones of dead houses. When we got there we would see the great bonfire blazing in Jean's garden and the fiend-like forms of her little brother and his friends dancing around it. Soon we would be herded out to join them round the fire, nerving ourselves up with hard skeleton grins for the perilous two hours ahead, for the rip raps thrown at our feet, the great banger fireworks exploded near our ears, the secret terror of death and damage.

Later on, things would start to get better. My parents would arrive, establish a solid adult block with the other parents and we'd all sit round the table and eat potato and onion pie. Finally, peace and civilization would have reemerged. But in this part of the evening too, things were not always easy. For sometimes present at the party would be our friend's uncle, badly shell-shocked, not from our war but from the one before. And there he'd sit, clean-boned, dark-haired, still handsome, his eyes gliding in his head, caroling odd bits of song to himself. Only occasionally would he break through into any human conversation. In his case, the damage had certainly been permanent.

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