

BOOK REVIEW

Millions Like Us: Women's Lives During the Second World War

Virginia Nicholson. London, UK: Penguin, 2012. ISBN-13: 978-0-14103-789-9. Price: £9.99. Pages: 528 (paperback)

Today the Archbishop of Canterbury argues that Britain is officially in economic depression, whilst our daily papers carry dire descriptions of austerity, food shortage, climate change and terrorism.

Seventy years ago, during the Second World War, austerity ruled the lives and loves of women and families in Britain, their social boundaries shifting along with others worldwide. During this decade of difficulty these same women found that these shifting social and geographic divides could open doors to new and unexpected opportunities, both at home and overseas. Over 6 million women took advantage of these new opportunities, working on the Home Front. Some 6 40 000 of these women joined the services; 624 of these died serving their country.

This excellently researched book, written by the great-niece of Virginia Woolf, meticulously describes the 'women's war' through the eyes, ears

and experiences of many of these survivors. The true stories of more than 50 survivors tell of this extraordinary decade, including the author's own mother.

We read about Phyllis, a 'working-class' girl who won a place at grammar school, against her mother's wishes. Aged 17, she went to work in the bank in Bishopsgate, London. Despite her education, prospects of a career were unlikely. Yet she later became a respected social scientist. Jean, raised in rural Scotland, was sent to work as a housemaid when only 13 years old, but later 'escaped' to an education and freedom. Posh Patience, from Somerset and London, went to finishing school in Paris and was presented to Court as a debutante, but volunteered as a nurse and soon found herself "polishing buttons alongside her social inferiors, having to question her ingrained feudal assumptions". Women of this generation were swept up by the whirlwind of war, and the social changes brought about in its wake. They were growing up in a world overshadowed by economic depression and unemployment, and by the looming threat of fascism and a potential Nazi invasion.

Post-war Britain would never return to the same gender stereotypes it had entertained for generations about the role of women primarily as the homemaker and housekeeper. Aileen (Mike), a fluent German speaker, saw

active wartime service in 'Hellfire Corner', under constant aerial attack. She observed that men and women responded differently to battle conditions, and wondered whether war might "prove a catalyst for a new androgynous being". Readers may ponder on the prescience of this remark.

Women from this generation, who withstood the turmoil of the Second World War, have tended to speak little about their experiences, whatever their wartime experience. In this sensitive and accessible book, Virginia Nicholson tells their stories in a way which makes history come alive as if the women themselves still were. The piecemeal nature of the women's stories, interleaved with each other throughout the book, can make it hard to follow, although the book is deliberately structured around emergent social themes. It is best read either in a single sitting or dipped into from time to time for the sheer pleasure of bringing alive this fascinating era of opportunity and potential for women prepared to take the risk.

Reviewed by **Imogen Stephens**

Consultant in Public Health Strategy,
Public Health England, London, UK;
i.stephens@nhs.net

J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care 2013;**39**:216.
doi:10.1136/jfprhc-2013-100676