

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

**BEING A WOMAN IN BRITAIN DURING THE  
SECOND WORLD WAR:  
Nella Last talks about her life**

**A Pro Gradu Thesis**

**By**

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Tutkielman tarkoituksena on tarkastella naisen elämää Britanniassa toisen maailmansodan aikana ja selvittää, miten naiseus ja naisen roolit rakentuivat ja miten niitä rakennettiin yhteiskunnassa. Materiaalinani on erään keskiluokkaisen kotirouvan, Nella Lastin, päiväkirja toisen maailmansodan ajalta, yhden naisen kertomus naisena olemisesta, ja tutkielmani on pääosin kuvaileva tutkimus. Pysin vastaamaan tutkielmassani seuraaviin kysymyksiin: miten tämä nainen rakensi naiseuttaan erilaisten roolien kautta? Minkälaisia merkityksiä hän antoi rooleilleen; mitä tarpeita eri roolit täyttivät ja mitä tehtäviä eri rooleilla oli? Naisen eri rooleja tarkastellaan niiden asioiden kautta, joita Nella Last itse kuvaa eniten ja pitää tärkeimpinä: perheen, kodin ja sodanaikaisen kodin ulkopuolisen työn kautta. Liitän hänen kertomuksensa, joiden kautta hän naiseuttaan rakentaa, myös laajempiin diskursseihin sukupuolesta sen aikaisessa yhteiskunnassa.

Lähtökohtana tutkimukselle on kiinnostus sellaista naishistorian kirjoitusta kohtaan, joka tutkii naisen elämää hänen omista lähtökohdistaan käsin ja tunnustaa kaikkien naisten kokemusten erilaisuuden. Taustalla on naistutkimuksen ja naishistorian kirjoituksen käsitys sukupuolesta konstruktiona, jota rakennetaan eri diskursseja tuottamalla, valitsemalla tai hylkäämällä. Metodina tutkielmassani käytän feministisen (nais)omaelämäkertatutkijoiden tapaa lukea omaelämäkertoja empaattisesti, hyväksyen ja kunnioittaen, jolloin tutkija ei pysyttele etäällä kirjoittajasta, vaan pyrkii pääsemään tätä lähelle. Tällöin harhaanjohtava objektiivisuuden vaikutelma mahdollisena tai tavoiteltavana asiana vältetään ja tutkielman kirjoittaja jää näkyviin, sillä hän on mukana tuottamassa sukupuolidiskurssia omasta positiostaan käsin.

Nella Lastin narratiiveista voidaan nähdä, kuinka erilaisista ja ristiriitaisistakin diskursseista naiseus voi rakentua. Näin ollen

Asiasanat: construction of gender. discourse. feminist history writing. women's autobiographical writing.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to find out about a life of a woman in Britain during the Second World War in her own words. The goal is to shed light on how a woman constructed her life and her roles as a female being. Further, I will try to discover what meanings and functions she gives to her womanhood; and which needs her roles seem to fulfil. The reason for looking at a woman's life on the time of a war is that I find it interesting to see how a patriarchal effort such as a war, affects the discourses on gender in society, and also how women adopt, dismiss and generate these discourses when constructing their own femaleness.

The motivation for this study originates purely from my interest in women's history. I wanted to find out from historical writings and sources what women's life was like in Britain during the Second World War. What I found out did not satisfy me: despite the volumes of "traditional" history<sup>1</sup> books written about the wartime and its aftermath (needless to say, mostly by men), traditional history writing tends to minimize the significance of women's experience, and confine the description of women to a separate little chapter. Women are *either* represented as heroic figures who took over the men's responsibilities which caused a remarkable change in traditional gender roles after the war, *or* as restorers of the traditional roles, who were happy to go back to the lives they had led before the war. Historians seem to disagree over the extent to which the war affected the position of British women in society in general. For example, Richard Titmuss (in Summerfield, 1984:1) has argued that the war altered some aspects of women's lives, and that they were rewarded for their participation in war work with "permanent changes, notably in terms of state provision for child care, access to men's jobs and equal pay". Arthur Marwick (Marwick 1982:67) also states that the 2nd World War accelerated the changes in the position of women and, in fact led to a "new social and economic freedom" for them. Harold Smith, however, has a

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<sup>1</sup> By traditional history, in this context, I mean the history of "great men" and their actions, history which ignores women and their participation in the making of societies.

totally opposite view (Smith 1986:220): he sees WW2 as "one of the most retrogressive events in the recent history of British women" which only managed to restore their traditional role. So, the issue seems to be complex and controversial, and it confused me a great deal. Therefore, I wanted to dig deeper into the issue of a life of a British woman.

Recently some feminist historians (see, for example, Summerfield 1998:7) have argued that these, either the continuity or transformation theses mentioned above can only be constructed by ignoring some evidence or readings of it which suggest a more ambiguous and contingent picture. Instead, the concern of historians within Women's Studies has been to go beyond these stereotypes and break the silence concerning women's experience. Many feminist historians want to underline especially the *diversity* of experiences of *different* women.

Acknowledging all this, I want to make one voice heard and "let her speak for herself" and tell how she saw her life during the WWII and what she thought were the important aspects of it at that time. I want to read Nella Last's diary, written by a middle-class housewife in her fifties, (*Nella Last's War: A Mother's Diary 1939-45*) from the perspective of narratives on gender roles. I intend to show that at least when it came to Nella Last, the situation with the gender roles seems far more complex than what those two rather extreme views mentioned above put forward. I should point out, however, that no sweeping generalizations can be made to the whole female population of Britain since I am merely studying Nella Last's "truth", nor is it the goal of the present study. This will be *one* story by *one* woman.

The method of this study belongs to women's studies, which emphasize discharging "the fallacy of objectivity" in science, and want to make the researcher's position in the study more visible, as it influences the "truth" being created. Hence, I acknowledge the partial connection that I have with the subject – I am merely writing my "truth" of her life, at the same time constructing myself as a woman. Thus, instead of distancing myself from the writer of the diary in order

to seem more “scholarly”, my way to read it, and one of the women’s studies, is to try and get close to her in order to “see together” with her. This, it can be argued, can make me see her “world” more clearly from one point of view.

The structure of the thesis will be as follows: in the background part of the thesis, I will first discuss the why I consider women’s history important and how it is written according to feminist history writers. Then, I will touch upon the issues of women’s autobiographical writing and the way to read women’s texts. Next, I will introduce British society in the 30’s and 40’s to set the social frames for the study. Then, I will explain my research questions, data and the method of analysis in more detail.

The analysis part starts with the chapter on Nella Last’s discussions on her family with narratives on motherhood, and the accounts of marriage. After that I will deal with her accounts of work containing her stories of household work and war work. Then, I will discuss her narratives on a more general level, relating them to discourses in the society of the time. In the conclusion, I will go back to the beginning of the thesis and ask myself what I was left with after doing this thesis the way I did it.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 WRITING WOMEN'S HISTORY**

This chapter serves as a brief introduction to women's (feminist) history writing. Firstly, I will outline some reasons for why women have been left out from the history writing in the first place, and discuss the purpose and justification for women's history writing; why it is needed and what are its' epistemological suppositions are. Then I will go on to discuss the problems of separate women's history. Secondly, I will concentrate on the how women's history can be written; thus, it touches upon the question of what exactly the term 'woman' means and on the question of the diversity of experiences which make up a history.

#### **2.1.1 The why of women's history**

##### *The invisibility of women in history*

After centuries of (Western and non-Western) history that has been in the strict sense his story (the narratives of "great" men and their actions), historians have gradually turned their attention to the problem of historically representing women. However, historians searching for evidence about women's history have encountered the invisibility of women; women have often been systematically omitted from accounts of the past – they have been less likely to leave written accounts of their daily activities, thoughts, and feelings. The reason for the invisibility, though, is not the absence of information. One of the reasons is that the topics selected worth studying by historians were not those that women wrote about: information on the private sphere and family life were not relevant to the concerns of the "history". What these historians failed to see, as Joan Scott rightly argues (in Kleinberg, 1988:14-19) that family is a social and public institution, connected to economic and political life. Furthermore, as Gerda Lerner (1997:119) suggests, women were left unnoticed because the questions asked by historians have generally been male-centered, and inappropriate to grasp women's

experience. I would like to add that historians have certainly not been intentionally evil; only the masculine discourse style in history writing alone can be enough to make the female voice mute. Penny Summerfield (1998:28) describes this having happened in her study of women's oral histories, when the women interviewed tried to describe their past in the way that they felt was publicly and historically acceptable. For these reasons only, a focus on the women-centered inquiry seems justified.

*The strengths and possibilities of writing women's history*

As to the strengths and possibilities of women's history writing, first of all, history has become the ground on which feminism can challenge the exclusive universality of the (Anglo-Saxon) male subject and the emphasis of traditional history by the use of gender as a category of historical analysis. Within the discipline of history, Joan Scott's (1999) main argument of her book is that new knowledge on women questions the central role that male subjects have traditionally played in historical narratives. This new knowledge is not exactly "new" but, rather, old hidden knowledge which has been discovered as a result re-evaluating what is considered worth knowing about the past.

Secondly, more and more women's history writing has been able to compete with, and challenge the normative way of history writing. Women's history does not simply replace or add to the "old" history but the two can be seen as interacting and hopefully transforming historical understanding.

Thirdly, for example Anna Davin (in Kleinberg, 1997:77) proposes that women's history has implications for the status of women. To take women's experience seriously is to strengthen their confidence and their collective consciousness, to give them power. While I am not convinced about the collective consciousness, I am firmly of the opinion that both reading about and studying the experiences of women in the past (and present) does give a sense of awareness of, confidence about and tools for constructing one's identity and reflecting one's own

experiences. What studying women's experiences has given to me is precisely that.

*The two epistemologies of women's history*

On the one hand, women's history developed out of the need to counter hegemonic discourses about women that ignored or distorted women's history, experience and potential. Women's history started formulating compensatory and oppositional histories to these and wanted to tell a different 'truth' about women – often showing them as active agents of change in the past. On the other hand, the early insistence within women's studies was that no knowledge was value-free, including feminist knowledge. The goal of writing history was not to discover the true history, but rather to construct the story of women's experience within a feminist paradigm. Feminist histories countered hegemonic histories not with the objective truth, but with stories produced from a feminist perspective. I think both of these approaches are valuable and needed: to find out how gender has operated in the past, I think that "we were there" – studies are still important, just as are the topics about how the construction of a woman depends on her individual and subjective experiences. Thus, my thesis will be a kind of a negotiation between these two approaches.

As Susan Stanford Friedman (in Jenkins, 1997:235) puts it, both feminist epistemologies developed out of (and have continued currency because of) the urgently felt *political* agenda of women's studies: "to engage in the deformation of phallogentric history and the reformation of histories that focus on or integrate women's experience and the issue of gender." This political agenda can be considered important because what we know of the past shapes what becomes possible in the future. Knowledge is power. In that sense, I think it is useful and very justified to write women's history: to find about gender relationships and women's experiences. As what gender relationships in the end are about, is also power. The more we know about those often invisible power relationships, the more we can do to change them. The kind of power mechanisms that were in

operation (or the kind of experiences that women had about them) in the past, cannot necessarily be applied to our life today as such, but by simply finding out about the “truths” of the past can help in seeing the mechanisms of our society more critically. Ambitiously, I hope that seeing how the woman in my study constructs her reality, and is constructed by society, provides me with a new way of seeing my reality and the society I live in.

### *The risks of writing women's history*

The ‘marginalization’ of women’s history writing, as that of the whole discipline of women’s studies, has caused a lot of discussion during the past few years. Joan Scott (1999:3,30,195 and in Kleinberg, ed., 1988:8 ) has expressed the fear that the very separate treatment of a category called “women” could serve to confirm women’s marginal and particularized relationship to those (male) subjects already established as dominant and universal, and keep them in their subordinate position rather than change it, or transform the way of making history. Thus, I think the current efforts by feminists and women’s organizations to mainstream gender perspectives into all policies and all disciplines in science are important and essential in promoting gender equality. However, while admitting that the danger of “ghettoisation” exists, I agree with Joan Scott (Kleinberg, ed., 1997:8) that it has permitted an intense focus on women and furthered important and innovative interdisciplinary research. In fact, Sheila Rowbotham (1997:3) has stated that women’s history writing, studying gendered identities and gender relationships in society, has been able to raise new questions about the organization of work, the structure of family and attitudes towards sexuality. To me, it seems that this separation was somewhat necessary in the beginning of the discipline, to be able raise awareness and self-confidence of women. I think this “reading against the grain”, as Catriona Kelly (in Jenkins, ed., 1997:253) describes studying marginal groups, is still needed.

### **2.1.2 The way of women’s history**



The lack of tradition in feminist history writing has meant absence of specifically feminist methodologies, too. According to Scott (1999:18-19, 27) we can find three distinct her-story methodologies that developed hand in hand with social history: 1. those which claim “women’s essential likeness as historical subjects to men”; 2. those which “challenge received interpretations of progress and regress”; and 3. those which offer “a new narrative, different periodization, and different causes,” so as to “discover the nature of the feminist or female consciousness that motivated” the behaviour of both ordinary and notable women’s lives. She recites these with a certain reservation and warns us about social history assuming gender is not an issue requiring study in itself, and her-story methodologies not theorizing how gender operates historically. Scott calls for feminist approaches that focus on women’s experiences *and* analyse the ways in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics. Feminist history would then become not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present. There lies the radical potential in women’s history writing which begins rewriting the history.

### *Women or “women”?*

Lately the concept of “women” has become problematic within women’s history. How to study “women’s” personal accounts, when by only using the word “woman” we leave in place the naturalized contrast between women and men and, therefore, conceptualise “women” as unchangeable and somehow alike? The post-structuralist historians such as Riley and Scott (as cited in Summerfield, 1998:10-15) have argued against the use of “women” as a category, for it is based on biology. The object of study should instead be the discourses by which such a category was established. Gender<sup>2</sup>, as a constituent of social relations, as a way of thinking and as a set of social identities, argued Scott, is constantly constructed

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<sup>2</sup> In the thesis, by gender I mean Scott’s definition of it: “Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.” (Scott, 1999: 42)

and reconstructed by powerful sources which define women and men and control the “parameters of possibility” in their lives. This kind of post-structuralist theory caused considerable opposition among many historians trying to make women visible as subjects in history, as it seemed to deny women’s agency altogether. However, as Summerfield also points out, the position that no one’s personal experience represents a truth which is independent of discourse, can have a lot to offer for “women’s history” writers. I agree with her: accounts of lived experience should not be considered outside discursive constructions, but I don’t think that this is opposed to agency, either: these arguments rest on the importance of language in social relations. The meanings within language are cultural constructions collectively generated, “historical deposits within the way we think, which constitute the framework within which we act” (p.11). As feminist scholars studying auto/biography suggest, subjectivities are formed by numerous differentiated discourses, some of which may even be contradicting each other. This allows subjects some opportunity for selection or rejection of the discursive understandings of themselves and their societies available to them (Summerfield, 1998:12-13). Summerfield quotes (p.13) cultural sociologist Bronwyn Davies on the relationship between women and subjectivity: “When I talk about the experience of being “a woman”, I refer to the experience of being assigned to the category female, of being discursively, interactively and structurally positioned as such, and of taking up one’s own of those discourses through which one is constituted as female”. Thus, Summerfield (1999:16) argues that personal testimony is inter-subjective in the sense that a “narrator draws on the generalized subject available in discourse to construct the particular personal subject.”

*The diversity of experiences as a “woman”*

This leads to the realization, as emphasized by Riley (in Jenkins, 1997:69) that “women” is an unstable category in history, and I think that is important to remember when studying the past: one is uncovering the diversity and specificity of experiences on being female, and how the subjects lived, modified, or resisted particular definitions of femininity. As regards this, Diane Elam quotes Crosby (in

Elam, 1994:36-37) and criticizes feminists who “reveal the fate of being the Other” and argues that the unity of her-stories which is achieved by ignoring the differences of race, and class, ethnicity, sexual preference, age, and all the other differences which divide women. She (in Jenkins 1997:65-74) goes as far as to criticize her-stories written in past tense (as they define what women *were*, attempting to discover the truth which does not exist), and argues that histories should be written in future anterior, i.e. answering what women *will have been*, thus not restricting the “non-category of women”. I think that is hardly necessary, although “women” should not be taken as a unified group, or as a polarized category opposite to “men”. She has a point, though: *her-story is not one story*. Yet I think her-stories are valuable, as long as these stories are studied so that it is emphasized what one includes and excludes – differences between her-stories can be seen as a strength for feminism. Despite all the differences, to me, it seems there are things that *are* universal concerning feminine identity; if not anything else, at least the problematic feminine identity resulting from the fact that there are so many contradictory discourses in societies constituting the subject position “women”. I want to emphasize, along with Scott (1999:174-175), that gender categories are constructed by assuming that everything within each category (male of female) is the same; hence differences within either category are suppressed. What should be kept in mind, then, when writing gendered history are the differences between women and thus trying get away from the fixed meanings. Even within one culture in a specific time the nature of women’s identity as “women” intersect with other factors (class, ethnicity, age, religion, location, economy etc.) (Davin in Kleinberg, 1988:74).

Therefore, to acknowledge the diversity and specificity of women’s experience, I want to underline that the experiences of my source relate only to her. I am emphasizing the fragments of life which make her (gendered) personal history; her experiences are not supposed to be “typical” or “representative” in a traditional sense. In a way, I take part in the discourse of women’s wartime lives by constructing *a* history with a partial view on the issue, recognizing that no single history can encounter the full dimensionality of the “Real”. For as much as my

sympathies operate primarily out of the subjectivist epistemology, I personally believe, that there is “Real”, in a sense that the woman in my study has felt that she exists; the things she describes have happened to her and interacted with her identity. Perhaps I should say, rather, that there are several “Reals”. However, as also Friedman (in Jenkins, 1997:231-236) argues, all access to the Reals is mediated through discourse. For me, one of the feminist aims is to keep the differences between Reals open, just as sexual difference should be kept open.

## **2.2. WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING**

Having discussed some aspects of women's history, I will now briefly discuss what I see as most important aspects in studying women's autobiographical texts: what I mean by autobiographical writing; the possible differences between women's and men's autobiographical writing; the relationship between the text and self/life; the relationship between the writer and the reader; and my way of reading autobiographical texts.

### **2.2.1. The tradition of autobiography**

It is only since the World War II that autobiography has been considered a legitimate genre worthy of formal study. Up until the past few decades, the studies used to concentrate on the lives of "great men" whose lives were considered worth knowing about. There is no complete bibliography of women's autobiographies in the English language – in any language for that matter – nor any quantitative data on the types of autobiographies written in given historical periods, but scholars studying women's autobiographical writings have found out that women have always been writing autobiographical texts (Jelinek, 1986). However, throughout the history, women's autobiographical writings have been – and often still are – excluded from the theoretical analyses of autobiography and, thus, they have remained largely invisible. To a great extent, the reason for this exclusion was that "good" autobiography was expected to contain certain characteristics which women's (not to mention non-Western; lower class people's) writing lacked (Jelinek, 1986:4-5): for example, it must center exclusively or mostly on their authors, not on others. The autobiographer should be self-aware, a seeker after self-knowledge. The autobiography should be an effort to give meaning to some "personal mythos." The autobiographer is expected to "gather the different elements of his personal life and organize them into a single whole," to begin his life study "with the problem already solved." The Western European tradition, with its obvious maleness, seems to transcend the individual with the power of selfhood. It has also been pointed out by for example Vilkkko (1991:15) that the

autobiographical conventions tend to emphasize the public side of life and thus, make the “written life” too neutral. Thus, the process seems to diminish the special features of women’s lives, and make them less distinguishable also for the reader. This kind of assumptions and definitions of “proper” autobiography figure significantly in explaining the neglect and disparagement of women’s autobiographies from earliest times to the present. One solution to this problem is suggested by Miller (cited in Vilkkko 1991:8-9) who emphasizes the responsibility of the female reader who recognizes the gender specific conventions of autobiographies.

### **2.2.2. What is autobiographical writing?**

By autobiographical writing, I mean both autobiographies/reminiscences and diaries, letters and journals. Not all scholars include diaries and letters in the genre of autobiographical writing. For example, George Gusdorf (1980: 28-48) sees diaries as more fictive works because the life writing is done from a perspective of each day and those emotions felt that day, not taking continuity into account, whereas a “real” autobiographical text has more truth-value because the self/life is analysed more wholly after distancing oneself from the events of a specific day. I don’t see the point of this argument, quite the contrary: the feelings and experiences of a specific day, and how they are described *must* be the very ones which are important to the writer at that point. Otherwise they wouldn’t have been written down in the first place. Distancing oneself from the events does give one time to “rationally” explain what one’s life is like but it doesn’t necessarily make the story more true, like Gusdorf seems to argue (let it be noted that it might be possible that he has only been studying men’s diaries which may be less emotional or opinionated). I see diaries and letters as texts in which women construct their (gendered) identities, and process their thinking and feeling – that is, write about themselves and their lives and relationships.

### **2.2.3. The truth in autobiographical writing**

The objectivity of life writing and the truthfulness of experience has been a topic of debate among researchers of autobiographical writing. It seems justified to say that a transparent account of experience cannot be found in autobiography. Obviously, it is necessary to make choices and therefore exclusions in the writing of life, so the act of writing involves a patterning and thus an interpretation. More than this, though, experience and the relation of experience cannot be easily separated (Graham et al., 1989:17). But I think “truth” or objectivity is beside the point in autobiographical writing: studying autobiographical writing is about being interested in the experience of a particular individual and experience is always from her point of view. In autobiography, the truth of the writer is superior to the truth of the facts: it is her image of herself and the world; a glimpse of life the meaning of which should be seen beyond true or false. The writer is the highest authority in autobiography - the whole idea of a “true story” contains a presupposition that there is one and somebody would know it (Kenyon, 1994:200).

However, we, as readers, can expect that the writer has wanted to be honest about her life, since she has been writing her life in the first place. The writer gives the reader instructions on how to read the text, which can be more or less clear, and it is then the reader’s task to pick up the writer’s hints. This is the so-called “autobiographical pact” between the writer and the reader (this concept is by Philippe Lejeune; see, for example Lejeune, 1989; Linko, Saresma, Vainikkala, 2000: 345-362). Coleman, according to Summerfield (1998:20), says “there’s an interplay between what people are able to tell about their lives and what they perceive to be the interest to their audience. So, autobiographical writing is not such a lonely process that it might seem at first. It is always governed by social conventions, and we do tell our story in relation to others and reflect ourselves through others. Even when writing a diary, which is meant for the writer’s eyes only, the “imaginary” reader is present – the ideal, understanding reader. The reader is creating the story together with the writer – thus, the reader is also responsible for the image of the life and the world that the autobiographical text conveys.

#### **2.2.4. The relationship between the reader and the writer in autobiographical texts**

Many feminist scholars have made the part of the reader/the scholar even more visible. Firstly, the feminist way of reading autobiographies (see e.g. Vilkkö, 1995:160-163) is not to distance oneself from the text but to try and get close and understand the writer. This will also be my method of analysis. The way to do it is reading the autobiographical writing with a kind of empathy and respect.

However, one should remember that, as a reader, one is not an invisible neuter but interpreting the story from a certain position and posture. According to Haraway (1991:15), feminist objectivity means situated knowledges: “The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. Here is the promise of objectivity...” Thus, I acknowledge the partial connection and note that I am writing about the autobiographical texts of a certain English woman written in the 1940’s as a young heterosexual Finnish woman. Yet, I can build a common ground with the woman whose writings I study; in writing about her life I am within the writing with her. I think locating oneself as a reader makes sense, as it doesn’t give the researcher a false illusion of being objective which would only make one blind. Secondly, feminist scholars take into account the gender being constructed in the autobiographical writing. Thus, the context framing the writing is seen as important: the object of study spreads outside the text into the social and cultural context where gender is constantly re-created. (Kosonen, 1989:36-37)

#### **2.2.5. Characteristics of ‘feminine’ writing**

As many scholars of autobiographical writing have argued (see for example Jelinek, 1986; Smith, 1998) women and men write different kinds of autobiographies. The topics that women write about differ from men’s and, also,



the image of identity. Thus, many feminist scholars have been creating a genre of its own for women's autobiographical tradition (see Jelinek, 1986: xii); arguing not for "better" or "worse", but for "different" – an autobiography can be "good" or "great" independent of whether it has the characteristics usually associated with men's or women's autobiographies.

So, what are the characteristics common to many women's autobiographies? Smith (1987:51) comments that women, among other groups, are writing from a subordinate position, from "a negative position in culture". Engaging in the autobiographical project from the public marginal position challenges the Western European autobiographical tradition. First of all, the subjects women write about are remarkably similar: family, close friends, domestic activities. The emphasis remains on the personal matters – not the professional, philosophical, or historical events that are more often the subject of men's autobiographies.

Secondly, the identity image has often been found having similarities throughout women's autobiographies. In contrast to the self-confident, one-dimensional self-image that men usually project, women may depict a multidimensional, fragmented self-image colored by a sense of inadequacy and alienation, of being outsiders or "other". The style of the autobiographies is often episodic and anecdotal, nonchronological and disjunctive, according to Jelinek (1986: preface). She admits that there might not be a direct connection between the disjunctive style of women's autobiographies and the fragmentation of their lives but that there seems to be a reasonable conjecture. While Jelinek may have a point in many of her arguments, she has been criticized to be too schematic in differentiating women's and men's writing. The editors of *Her Own Life* (Graham et al. 1989:21) point out that while Jelinek's suggestions may have insight, they can't be generalized as, usually, there is no single pattern in the way selves are articulated. However, I think, the fragmented self-image in women's autobiographical writings can be signs of women's distorting identities and conflicting roles imposed by culture.

Thirdly, it can also be said that, to some extent, women's autobiographical acts demystify the notion that autobiography would stand alone as a testimony to individuals, removed from their relationship to the social world. Rowbotham has suggested, according to Friedman (Benstock, ed., 1988:56), that the collective consciousness of self plays a central role in the lives of women and minorities. Therefore, women's "presence" in individualistic contexts (such as autobiographies) is more ambiguous, as these paradigms do not recognize the significance of interpersonal relationships and community in women's self-definition. Editors of *Her Own Life* (Graham et al. 1989:19-21) have argued that this suggestion implies that women have a more reactive and consciously relational sense of self than men. They refer to Lacan, who has said that everybody needs to construct themselves in relation to others. I think their criticism is welcome: women's experience of self/identity is a problematic concept and there is not necessarily uniformity. Often looking for common characteristics, for example, fragmented self-images can become indicative, i.e. what is looked for, is found only because one sees what one wants to see. On the other hand, the possible common features can be a products of gender discourses in society at a particular time which, without a doubt, influence women constructing their gendered identity. Let it noted here that the theories of women's fragmented writing and the self being created in relation to others are mostly based on studying women's autobiographical acts in dominant Western cultures.

In this chapter, I have considered women's place within the genre of autobiographical writing and autobiographies as a source for inquiries of history. As no autobiography can be written completely of out the historical context of the society in which the writer is living the next chapter will concentrate on the historical context of Nella Last's life.

## **2.3. WOMEN IN BRITISH SOCIETY IN THE 30'S AND 40'S**

To understand better what Nella Last is telling about herself, and to place her in the wider context as a middle-class part-time working housewife, it is important to get a glimpse of the society which she was living in. In this chapter, I'll set the frames for the analysis by outlining what I consider the most important factors in the British society which affected women's work and home life at that time. This chapter also serves as an account of some of the policies regulating gender roles in wartime Britain: these policies also constructed both gender categories – created a “woman” and a “man” – and thus, had an influence on female identities and experiences of being a “woman”. Thus, this chapter as a historical background relates to Nella Last's life, and it is also part of discourse which affects my construction of her as a woman.

### **2.3.1. Pre-war years in Britain**

In the years before the Second World War (WW2 from hereon) the proportion of women in paid employment was slowly rising. The 1931 Census reported that 34.2 % of all women (a total of 6,265,000 women) were in paid work (Summerfield, 1984:8). Most of these women were young and came from the working class as the labour market seems to have been operating solely on male terms: it was the man who was considered the bread-winner in the family, not the woman, that is, if she didn't have to work to survive. However, the majority of the women in Britain were housewives doing unpaid work.

The pre-war employment trends did not offer women much to choose from. About one third of the women in paid employment were in domestic service, which was seen "as a natural sphere of employment" for them. If there was industrial work available it meant unskilled, low-paid work, usually in the "female branches" of industry: such as clothing; textiles; boots and shoes, and pottery work; this work was discontinued upon their marriage. In addition to these branches, women started working in the so-called "new industries", such as light- metal trades;

bread and biscuits; tobacco and electrical fittings, in which "the need for acquired skill is eliminated and replaced by simple work of a routine character ..." (from a report of the metal industry, Summerfield, 1984:8-10). Again, women in white-collar jobs, for example in clerical or commercial work, worked as stenographers or typists which were considered "women's jobs", unsuitable for men (Summerfield, 1984:11). Needless to say, women's earnings were generally lower than men's wages.

So, it seems there was a sex-stereotyped division of work and, women were only employed in semi- or unskilled work, professional women being a minority. However, as Sheila Rowbotham points out in her study of women in Britain (1973:133), "...dreadful and soul-destroying as it is to work, it is even worse to be forcibly prevented from labour" – many women who wanted to work came across the unwritten practice to be dismissed when getting married. Despite the efforts of some female trade unionists, the marriage bar was a reality for many women in teaching and in the civil service, as well as in several industries. In general, a woman's position in the labour market was much more insecure than that of a man and in the times of high unemployment women were far more likely to lose their jobs than men. (Rowbotham, 1997:179-184).

Elisabeth Roberts (1984: 136-137) has viewed working-class women's attitudes towards paid work in three English towns before WW2, and found a common attitude to wage earning: it was not in itself a good thing but undertaken because the family income was not too good. She explains this by the ideal of many working-class women, adopted by middle-class women: the "beau idyll". This meant that the home was seen as a sanctuary which the angel wife took care of. Roberts (1984:125) suggests that a woman had a dual role as the family financial manager and moral guide, acting within tight financial and social constraints. She was "...restricted by the family's income;...by the mores of her family;...by her neighbourhood; ...and by her actual physical environment." A woman had to have good managerial abilities: shopping and cooking took a major part of the day;

household work was hard and very few homes had any mechanical aids to alleviate the burden of it before 1940.

The story was very different for upper class women, it seems: Rowbotham (1997:185-186) describes a woman's typical day as filled with reading letters, giving cooking instructions before going out shopping, lunch parties, tea, bridge, dinner, the theatre, while, "an army of nannies paraded their offspring through the parks and contained them in nurseries". Both of these pictures above are somewhat generalized characterizations, yet they reveal something about the structure of pre-war society. It could be that the gender identities were also more class-specific than after the war.

### **2.3.2. The Second World War**

#### *Work*

As WW2 broke out everything changed and the general impression was that there would be unlimited work available for everybody willing. The women came forward in large numbers and registered as volunteers. In 1940, under the Emergency Powers Law, the Minister of Labour was to direct "any person in the United Kingdom to perform any service required in any place". The total war required that the so-called "non-essential industries" were cut back, and conscription of labour was introduced (Stevenson, 1984:444-448). In 1941, an official Women's Consultative Committee was appointed to advise the Ministry of Labour (MOL from hereon) on the mobilization of women in all aspects (Douie, 1949:11). In 1941, women began to be conscripted for war-work or for service in the women's branches of the armed forces, at first only the 20-30 age group but later, after 1943, practically all women between the ages of 18,5 and 50 were conscripted (with certain restrictions). Between 1939 and 1943, the employed population rose by 2.9 million and most of those recruited were women. By the end of the war, Britain had directed more people to work than any nation at war, except the Soviet Union (Stevenson, 1984:444-448).

### *Paid war work*

Looking first at the overall picture, the numbers of women in paid employment rose during the war, from 4,997,000 in 1938 to 7,253,000 in 1943, which was the peak time (46% of women between ages 14-59). It seems the war accelerated in its part the trend for married women to seek employment outside home: the marriage bar was abolished in 1946 in the civil service; it had been suspended during the war. In addition, many private employers, including firms like Boot's, had removed the marriage bar by 1950 (Smith, 1986:219-20). Stevenson (1984:171) points out that, in fact, between the years 1939-43 four-fifths of the addition to the labour force consisted of women who hadn't been working before or had been housewives. The proportion of all women workers over 14 who were married rose from 16% in 1931 to 43% in 1943 (Smith, 1986:193, 218), and it can be seen from the numbers Penny Summerfield gives in her book (1984:188) that these changes were permanent: the percentage of all female employees who were married was 43% in 1951, and by 1958 it had risen to 52%. For many married women, the most practical innovation of the wartime was the introduction of part-time work. The government began to direct women to part-time work in 1943, the number of female part-timers was 900,000 by June 1944. (Rowbotham,1997:231-232; see also Smith, 1986:216). It was largely popular also among those women who were not under compulsion to work but were eager to "do their bit". It was found that women liked to do something different from the work which they were accustomed to. Part-time work gave them useful money and could be arranged to fit in with their "domestic lives" which was their biggest responsibility, according to Vera Douie in her account of war workers (1949:109).

Like the change in the marital status of women workers, the change in the age profile was permanent: 41% of pre-war women workers (1931) were under 25 years of age, whereas in 1951 the number had gone down to 34%; in the 25-34 age group the figures were 27% in 1931 and 21% in 1951. This meant that the number

of women workers in the age groups of 35-44 and 45-59 increased considerably during the war and balanced the age profile (Summerfield, 1984:31).

What did the women work with? It can be said women entered almost every field of labour. About half a million worked in the *Women's Services* of the army, for example in the Auxiliary Territorial Service. The work in the Auxiliary Forces was mostly rather challenging, of a kind which would have been regarded as unsuitable for women a few years earlier: women acted as air-ferry pilots across the Atlantic; as drivers; searchlight and anti-aircraft crews; wireless and radar operators; and fighter controllers, to mention a few occupations (Stevenson, 1984:174). This, it can be said, was the area where women took more steps towards "male" work than in any other field of work because this was something they had never done before. These women also got higher wages than women in general: their rate was about four-fifths of the men's rate. *Civil Defence Services*, an unarmed force whose task was to protect towns and their citizens, accepted women as wardens, ambulance drivers, for staffing First Aid and rest centres for bombed-out persons, war nurseries, canteens, even Fire Guard Services. The largest contribution to Civil Defence work was through the Women's Voluntary Services, which was organised in 1938 to co-operate with local authorities and government departments in all branches of Air Raid Precautions work. *Care of the sick and the wounded; transport and communications; and food production* on farms, organised through Women's Land Army were other fields of work where women were recruited. In addition to these, more women were employed in *semi-official and official work*, for example, in administrative work. In the 1945 election, more women than ever before in the history of Britain were elected Members of Parliament. The far largest number of the women in paid employment entered *the industry*, working, for example, as forewomen, inspectors, machine & tool operators, assemblers, labourers & packers and also in transport, vehicles etc. (Douie, 1949). Vera Douie emphasizes the co-operation of all classes, women working side by side whether upper class or working class – perhaps to unite the nation after the war (1949:95). I think it is justified to say that this is a slightly idealized picture, for Summerfield (in Smith, 1986:194) points out that

information on the educational backgrounds of women factory workers suggests that social mixing has been exaggerated.

As a result of women broadening the scope of their work and entering new areas of work which were exclusively male before the war, it is generally believed that women improved their position in the workplaces and that the "traditional" divisions between men's work and women's work were shaken. Arthur Marwick has stated (Smith, 1986:211) that "the war undermined the sex segregation of jobs". Furthermore, Caroline Haslett (as cited in Summerfield, 1984:151) claimed at the time of the war that now "it was the job that mattered and not the sex of the worker". Other writers of the time also support the view that the segregation had broken down (see Summerfield, 1984:152).

However, Penny Summerfield (1984) argues that the state wanted to regard women as a temporary work force, and described the contradictions in state policy during the war: women were needed at work and yet their position at home had to be safeguarded, so that the men returning from the war front could get their jobs back. Harold Smith, too, has proposed (1986:222) that the government was in favour of maintaining its pre-war principles of sex differentiation among its own employees. And this seems to have been largely true in the private sector, too: although they won the right to work in almost every field, women were still regarded as belonging to a category of their own, especially in industry. Some of the work had clearly been "men's work" before, such as crane driving, stud-welding or acetylene burning (Summerfield, 1984:152,197), but still, for example in engineering, a small proportion of women were actually allowed to do men's jobs (Smith, 1986:216). In fact, one mechanic wrote (Summerfield, 1984:152) that "the women's services were being used to do the very many lesser jobs in almost the same way as a white man can find employment for native servants". The truth is most women were employed in traditional "female" jobs, such as nursing, catering and clerical work of the type classed as unskilled, as in the pre-war days (Stevenson, 1984:175).



### *Unpaid work – housewives*

The profession of the majority of the British women was that of the unpaid housewife also during the wartime and their patterns of daily family life were severely disrupted as well, despite not working in the public sphere (8,770,000 remained full-time housewives, according to Pugh 1992:265). During the war, more than 9,000,000 children under 14 had to be looked after by women as their primary task, and under the evacuation schemes, large numbers of these children were not their own (the figure from Douie, 1949:152). After war was declared in 1939 1,5 million mothers and children were evacuated into the countryside, whereas the countryside women became the hostesses for the evacuees. Some evacuees were welcomed, others experienced resentment and felt socially uncomfortable (Rowbotham, 1997:235). Furthermore, women were separated from their loved ones, and anxious about their safety, especially about those in the war front; their children had to be separated from friends and familiar surroundings; many lost their homes in air raids (two in every seven houses in England were damaged or destroyed, tells Smith (1986:210).

In these sometimes chaotic conditions of the war, it looks like the housewives had the task of trying to “pull the loose ends together”: to be a full-time mother for the children as well as the men in the need of it; to keep the home a place that resembled a home, providing a clean bed, clean clothes, home-made meals and, perhaps most importantly, a feeling of care and safety. This must have taken a lot of careful planning as well as both physical and emotional effort. One housewife puts it (in Pugh, 1992:265) like this: “It’s getting on my nerves what with the overtime, shopping, doing a bit of housework here and there, and rushing my meals down, I am a fair rundown.”

### *Wartime Home*

Doing paid work or not, the responsibility of the home and household duties were on women’s shoulders. The wartime brought along a challenge for many women.

Former housewives had to face the difficulties of trying to combine household chores, washing, cooking meals, taking care of the children and shopping with paid war work; those who had been wealthy enough to have a maid often had let them go as they, too, were directed to war work. For those who had been working before the war, the adjusting was perhaps a bit easier. However, the rationing of food and possibly being directed somewhere far away from home made everyday life more tiresome.

The typical working time was nine or ten hours a day, six days a week, except for those who were doing part-time work because of their age or home circumstances, for whom the working day was four to six hours (Summerfield, 1984:141-146). Work was often shift work and could be any time of the day. It demanded a lot of planning to organize time for shopping groceries when one had to queue up for rationed goods, and cooking the meals. Absenteeism rates among women workers were often high, and if the burden of two jobs became too great they left because taking care of the home was usually seen as the most important commitment. This gave government officials something to complain about, despite the fact that they themselves did very little to relieve the burden of women. In fact (as Summerfield suggests 1984:4-5), there was a conflict of interest within the state: to increase productivity, collective childcare, alternatives to shopping and cooking among others, were preferable; but as women were seen as threatening men's jobs and wage levels, unpaid work within the family and marriage was to be kept dominant in their lives. Thus, the changes in these areas were made rather reluctantly at first, but as the demand for labour grew, improvements were made, not least because of the efforts of working women themselves.

Before the war, childcare had presented the biggest problem if a women wanted/had to work: most nurseries, which were few, had been meant for children coming from poverty-stricken, unhealthy or neglectful homes. Many women had had to rely on their relatives and neighbours to help them (Summerfield, 1984:19-23). The number of nurseries started increasing after 1941, also partly due to the

"Baby Riots" all over the country arranged by women under the double burden. However, it was often emphasized by the Ministries of Labour and Housing that institutionalised care was not good for children and that nurseries were only a temporary arrangement: "In normal times children were better with their mother and father: it was the whole foundation of British life" (Summerfield, 1984:75-77, 86). Child-minding was officially still preferred but it is justified to say that WW2 did help in building up a collective childcare system: Summerfield (1984:94) gives 14 as the number of nurseries in 1940, whereas it was 1,450 in 1943 (according to Smith, 1986:222) and after the war, in 1947, 879 of them were still in operation.

Ministries involved were reluctant about collectivising domestic work, but after 1942 Ministry of Labour declared that to avoid absenteeism, "women workers with domestic responsibilities must be given some time off to do their shopping". Eventually, the normal 60-hour-week was reduced to 55, and some shops had later hours of opening. Still it was common for women to work from 7.30 in the morning to 7.00 at night and do their shopping during an "extended" lunch hour. Due to these arrangements, which seem quite inadequate, absenteeism was becoming "legitimized" near the end of the war. Demands for communal feeding provisions were often silenced by saying that they would be "under used" which was true to some extent because most men preferred to eat at home; still government-funded institutions, such as factory canteens, British Restaurants and school meals were a wartime innovation (Summerfield 1984:101-140). All in all, it looks to me like many of the improvements, however useful, mostly reorganized the times when a woman did different types of work – she still was double-burdened (this, one could argue, has survived in many families to this day).

Wartime shortages made food a matter of state policy and women naturally played a key role in it. Women on "the Kitchen Front" were told to use the food to the greatest advantage. Bottling and preserving were encouraged and the diet stressed soups and vegetables (mainly potatoes); beans and meat-substitutes. This was quite nutritious (ironically, the health of some working-class people improved

during the war), but dull and extremely labour-intensive, not to mention the further complications to everyday living by queues and shortages in the shops. Some people, frustrated with the rationing, turned to the black-market whereas some people got “spirited” and, with careful planning, managed to even make cakes out of somewhat extraordinary ingredients. Clothes, toys, almost everything was recycled; old dresses were redesigned, stockings became precious commodities (Rowbotham, 1997:226-237). In other words, trying to lead a normal everyday life was more time-consuming. This marked a change to what people had been used to - for example, people had been used to getting almost every kind of food in tinned form, even in the countryside. This was largely due to the rising living standards in Britain until the end of the 30’s. There had been a rise in the real incomes and greater proportion of household incomes was spent on non-essentials in all social classes. (Stevenson, 1984:125-126).

#### *Family size and marriage*

One reason for rising living standards in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the fact that there was a fall in the average family size, states Stevenson (1984:125, 156), because then there was more money to be spent on each member of the family. Many working-class families were moving towards this pattern of family size which had been adopted by upper and middle classes a generation or more earlier – the birth rate had been going down since the beginning of the century. By WW2, birth control through artificial contraceptives had become more widely used. The immediate effect of the war was to decrease the birth rate even slightly below the level of the 1930’s. Not surprisingly, however, with the return of the troops from the continent the birth rate started increasing in 1942, reaching a peak by 1944. This was followed by the famous baby-boom of 1946-8 which has been explained by people wanting to return to the “good old” pre-war days after the horrors of the war, families having been torn apart. The effect of the war on the birth rate was only temporary, since after the couple of years the birth rate began to fall again (Pugh, 1992:270, 294; see also Winter in Smith, 1986:151-178). During the war, the number of illegitimate births increased up to 9.1 % of all

births in 1945. This provoked pessimistic comments about the morals at that time, especially about the loosened morals of the women, but Pugh (1992:271) points out that the figures are somewhat misleading as the wartime circumstances often delayed marriage.

Certainly the marriage rate did drop sharply during 1941-5, but thereafter the pre-war trend towards marriage continued and the rate kept rising until 1972 (Pugh, 1992:270). Also the number of divorces increased hand in hand with the marriages: whereas during the four years before the war an average of only 7500 people filed for divorce each year, the average rose to almost 39,000 in the four years after the war; and 58% of these came from men, which was not usual before. This was partly, perhaps, due to extra-marital affairs and separation of married couples during the war. This, along with the relaxed attitude towards illegitimacy is said to illustrate the loosening of social behaviour (meaning clearly that of women; I have no doubt that different standards for men and women were in operation) during WW2. Anyhow, it resulted in a kind of a moral backlash in the 1950's, according to Pugh (1992:269-271). It is also difficult to say whether it was the war which resulted in the claimed "wanderlust", or, whether it merely accelerated the trend towards more relaxed social standards. One thing should be noticed here, the effect of the war was not uniform for all women of all ages in all social classes in this matter, either. I find it hard to believe that middle-aged housewives would suddenly have "emancipated" themselves from their own moral codes. Yet wartime must have had its attractions for many young and/or unattached women: freed from some restrictions of home life, meeting daily with many people of both sexes, they wanted to have fun in their rare free time. One such manifestation was the growing tendency for women to visit pubs (Pugh, 1992:269).

### **2.3.3. Post-war years**

It seems that the women working during WW2 expanded their work opportunities and changed "patterns" in their paid work, since it was not necessarily only a

phase in their lives. Yet working women were still regarded unequally, as a "sub-class" of some kind and as a temporary labour force by some employers. Even those against it, many of whom insisted that women's rates "degraded skilled work and lowered wage rates" (Summerfield, 1984:174), did not deal with the real issue; which was that there were bigger divisions between the sexes than between skilled/ unskilled work in the workplaces. It looks as if nobody questioned why there was sex segregation in the first place, and why working women were to be treated differently from working men. After the war, even if there was a demand for labour making women part of the workforce, they were usually offered low-paid jobs. When the demand for women's labour was at its highest in 1948, women's wages fell from 53 to 45 per cent of the men's rates, notes Rowbotham (1997: 245).

As some of the women welcomed the new opportunities and had strong feelings against the discrimination at work, not all the women wanted to work neither did all of them support demands of the equal status for women and in the workplace. There were plenty of women who were completely happy with their role as a housewife. According to a wartime survey in 1943, in which employed women were asked about their post-war plans, 75% of professional and administrative employees and 50% of "labourers" wanted to go on working; a total of 29% of them were married. (Smith, 1986:217). The wartime surveys often produced conflicting responses from women, and, I agree with Rowbotham (1997:233) that this could be because the surveys did not dig to deep into the actual contexts in which women balanced between home and work. Also, they disregarded the fact that many women had worked before the war and that not all families were supported by male breadwinners.

The post-war state policy clarified rather clearly what the role of women in Britain was to be. William Beveridge<sup>3</sup> whose welfare system aimed to provide security

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<sup>3</sup> Beveridge, Sir William: social scientist, chairman of the committee that produced the *Beveridge Report* in 1942, which laid the basis for the post-war welfare state. (Richard Broad & Suzie Fleming, eds. 1981:311).

and alleviate poverty, was more concerned about the well-being of the family than that of women directly. Thus the cross-party coalition government passed the Family Allowances Act in 1945, and established a 5s. allowance for every child after the first; also a special maternity benefit was established. These were clear gains for housewives, attracting women to stay at home. In fact, Beveridge, being no feminist, wrote in his National Insurance proposal in 1946 that "...the attitude of the housewife to gainful employment outside the home is not and should not be the same as that of the single woman...Housewives as mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of British race and of the British ideal of the world" (Rowbotham, 1997:246-247).

Despite the new acts, the structure of the post-war welfare state was based on the assumption that the woman was dependent on the man in the family rather than an individual with rights on her own. This becomes evident from the National Insurance Act of 1946: married women in paid employment were assumed to be necessarily dependants; if they chose to pay contributions they received lower benefit. Despite the Women's Co-operative Guild's (a Labour Women's organization) efforts to assert that unpaid mothers were productive workers, they were insured only through their husbands, not in their own right (Rowbotham, 1997:245).

As mentioned already, after the war, having endured the long wartime years, many women were eager to concentrate on family life and to "settle down". It is easy to look back from the future and wonder why so many of them were only too happy to get back to domesticity, to wonder if they really did accept their role at home or was it the ideology of the time forcing them to adjust to it. Martin Pugh (1992:293) suggests that these questions reflect "a double misconception". Many women had not felt any sense of freedom and welcomed the opportunity to establish a home and family on their own. I find this understandable, as the double burden, all the duties, worrying and uncertainties of wartime life can make one feel like almost living in a prison. Furthermore, Pugh argues that the domesticity women looked forward to had changed in character. In 1945 a young woman on

the verge of marriage could reasonably anticipate that only a few years of life would be occupied by the pregnancies and childbirth, and that after that it would be possible to move out into the labour market again. Pugh optimistically states that “the ideal of a companionate marriage of equals appeared to be within reach” (1992:293). However, as seen above, the welfare system did not seem to be encouraging this view. Looking at these somewhat conflicting trends and government policies in the wartime and post-war society clarifies some aspects of the life which British women of the time were leading. Yet this picture raises many questions about what it was *really* like: one is eager to hear more about a woman’s life from the woman personally.



### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, DATA AND METHOD

#### 3.1. Data

I have discussed women's autobiographical traditions and the way of reading and studying them, as well as introduced some aspects of the wartime society and historians' views on them in brief. Now I'd like to briefly introduce my primary source, the diary of a middle-class housewife called Nella Last, and describe my research task, and my method of reading the diary.

*Nella Last's War* (Broad & Fleming, eds., 1981: *Nella Last's War: A Mother's Diary 1939-45*) was published by the Mass-Observation Archives based in Sussex University in 1981. Mass-Observation was set up in 1937 by Charles Madge, poet and journalist, and Tom Harrison, an anthropologist, to 'record the voice of the people'. In addition to recruiting volunteer 'observers' to send in regular reports, they also invited people to keep a 'Mass-Observation Diary', appealing through newspaper articles to write a day-by-day account of their lives which would provide a record for the future. This resulted in a an extraordinary range of material collected in the period 1937-49 (Calder and Sheridan, eds., 1984: 1). The diaries were sent monthly to the Archives, and the authors couldn't make alterations in their writing after that. It should be noted that the diaries were first and foremost social records written expressly for Mass-Observation to be used in purely anonymous forms as background information. They were never designed for public consumption. However, later some of them were published with the permission of the writers or their families. The reason why I chose this particular diary for my research is simply that this one I managed to locate and it was available. As it is quite hard to find women's diaries it seems that they were not the most popular ones to be published.

Nella Last began writing her diary in September 1939 for the Mass-Observation project. She was a keen writer and continued to write for nearly thirty years. This is remarkable, comment the editors (Broad & Fleming, eds., 1981, preface): she

was not only unique in the regularity and persistence with which she wrote, but she wrote at great length, and with unusual skill (editors' preface). This, probably, is because she had wanted to be a writer all her life, as she reveals in her diary. This book is an edited version of her writing during World War II. In the preface, the editors point out that they have worked to keep Nella Last's style as it was in the original diaries, making only as few alterations as possible, for example, correcting punctuation and so on.

### **3.2. Research task and my method of analysis**

In this study, I will describe Nella Last's life as a female person and show how she constructs herself in her writing. In her diary, she deals with several issues concerning her life and the ones I discuss are those that I see as most important to Nella herself in the diary, that is, the issues she talks about most of all. I'll describe her family life from the perspective of motherhood and marriage, and her work, both household work and work outside the home. Those are the spheres of her life that strike as central, and through those categories I will, with Nella's own words, construct a picture of her life. The questions I want to ask her diary are: in what way does she construct herself concerning her work/family life? In what ways does she describe her work/family? Further, what meanings does she give to them and what functions do these aspects serve in her life? What kind of feelings do these areas of life evoke and what needs do these seem to fulfil? I want to respect her unique voice by using her own words as much as possible to discuss her views and, at the same time, to grasp the texture and atmosphere of her times.

Of course, the two categories are somewhat artificial in a way that the matters discussed in them overlap a great deal in the diary. The mere division of the thesis to parts of family and work (which are intertwined in every way) are expressive of my situated "gaze" as a Westener who sees these two areas separate. Yet, I do it for the clarity of the paper, but acknowledge that it reflects a partial view as it provides by no means a complete picture – only a view from my particular position. Furthermore, as Nella was living in a Western capitalistic society herself

she makes a division between her public and private work in her writing, too. I also want to state that as I can't go through every topic that she writes about, the issues that I have left out are, for example, her descriptions and opinions on the war itself, the bombing etc., which undoubtedly were also forming her identity as a woman at the time.

As mentioned above (see the chapter 3.4 on the relationship between the reader and the writer), my method of studying the diary is to try and get close to the writer by respecting her and treating her with a kind of empathy. This way I will be able to construct a version of "the truth" with her, however, always remembering that I, as a researcher, have a part in recreating her life. Thus, I locate my position in this study by acknowledging that I see her situation from my point of reference. Yet, acknowledging this fact does not diminish the importance of the study or make it less reliable. On the contrary, by not distancing myself and being "on the same level" with the writer, I may be able to see what a gaze from above might ignore.

## **ANALYSIS: Nella Last's construction of her roles as a woman**

As mentioned above, the analysis is divided in two parts: family and work, which overlap a great deal. Before the analysis, though, I want to tell some personal information about Nella Last. As the war broke out she, a middle-aged housewife, was living in the shipbuilding town of Barrow-in-Furness in Lancashire, North-West England. Her husband worked as a joiner and a shopfitter. They had two sons, who were both in their twenties: the elder boy, Arthur, was a trainee tax inspector working in Manchester, and the younger one, Cliff, was living at home when the war broke out and waited to leave for military service. Later he was called for the army and joined the war. His parents did not always know his whereabouts because of the censorship of letters during the war. Nella started working in the Women's Voluntary Service Centre (hereafter called the W.V.S. Centre) which was providing welfare services for hospitals, evacuees, the Armed Services and the Merchant Navy. Later she also took up work in a canteen for the men manning the defence guns, soldiers and sailors, and organized an opening of a Red Cross shop.

### **4. FAMILY**

Nella writes a lot about her family and the meaning of family in the time of the war. It seems her female identity is in strong relation to her roles as a mother and a wife. In the following two chapters I will describe her accounts on motherhood and wifeness which illustrate many roles she gives to herself. First, I will discuss her experiences as a mother and her opinions on motherhood in general; then, I will go on to discuss her identities as a wife.

#### **4.1. The narratives on motherhood**

*The proud mother*

Nella's diary has a subtitle "A Mother's Diary" – I wouldn't be surprised if her sons came up with the title after she passed away because she does give an image of herself as a mother committed to her children. She mentions she would have liked a family of five children but we never learn why it wasn't possible. Perhaps it is due to her bad health which she refers to every now and then. As the country is in the war, it pains her every time when she sees her children leaving home, not knowing when they see each other the next time:

*(about Cliff going to war; 6 Sept. 1939) : There seems a kind of resignation – a 'Well I'll get my turn I suppose', and a look on the faces of the lads who have joined the Territorials and Militia that was not there this time last week. I looked at my own lad sitting with the paper, and noticed he did not turn a page often. It all came back with a rush – the boys who set off so gaily and lightly and did not come back – and I could have screamed aloud. I have laughed to myself sometimes, thinking what a surprise – shock too – my rather spoilt lad was to get, but it's not funny now. He has such a love of order and beauty, not to say cleanness, and I remember the stories they used to tell of the last war, of the dirt and mud in France (p. 13).*

In the unusual circumstances of the war their relationship remains close, despite the long times of separation. Throughout the diary, a great affection, trust and understanding between the mother and the boys can be detected. This is what she writes in the spring of 1943: "Two such dear boys; never any meanness. Tempers, yes, like wet cats at times, but always reliable: I knew that, if trouble came, I could rely on them. It was good to have them – and the memory" (p.247). The picture I get from her is an encouraging mother who is willing to do anything for the boys as long as it fits her method of bringing them up. She speaks very warmly of them and seems to have pondered a great deal of how she wants to raise them, the way which, in my opinion, shows great insight :

*(21 Oct. 1940) "No woman ever had such two boys, I feel! Such nice men they are – and they like me – which is my crown and joy. Liking is more important than loving, for the first is detached and must be earned. My boys path will always lie apart from mine, I know, but when they were small I chose it that way. I want no namby- pamby mother's boys, who stop growing before they are mature I want the best in life for my boys - and for them to do and see all the things it was not written that I should have. I look at their photos – at my Cliff's direct gaze as he looks so fearlessly at me, and*

at Arthur's rather serious face – and I think how blessed I am. If all my struggles and disappointments can crystallize in two men with fearless eyes, a gift for friendship and a desire to help others, then all the turmoil and terror, all the tears and pain will someday work out. It makes me want to help, and is a spur when I'm tired or dim. Nothing seems as hard to do when I think of the boys and the privilege it is to have them.” (p. 80)

She is proud of them and proud of herself as a mother. It seems she has had to give up a lot in her life and face personal disappointments but motherhood is one thing she has been successful in.

She describes her relationship with the boys as a friendship. They like each other's company and respect each other's opinions. She reminisced in her diary: “...we loved to talk so much, and discuss things from every possible angle. We rarely saw eye to eye, and had some fierce arguments when at times I took an unfair advantage – a sort of ‘You will know better than that when you are a few years older’” (p.16). As an eager writer, Nella dedicates a considerable amount of her time writing long letters to the boys. She also knows many of Cliff's friends who even write her letters from the warfront. Like her husband once said, she used to mother them all (p.180).

Interestingly enough, as Nella determines her (female) identity through being a mother to her sons, her sons seem to have a say on her motherhood, too. In fact, they “control” her appearance, even if they only appear to be joking. These quotations tell something about the appearance that a mother in her early 50's was to have and not to have:

*(14 Sept. 1939)* Tonight I looked a bit washed out, so after tea I changed into my gayest frock and made up rather heavily. When Cliff came with his friend, he said ‘Oho!’ and raised my face with his finger: ‘Hm! Quite good but just a wee bit tartish!’ – and he wiped my lips and cheeks, kissed me on the tip of my nose and turned me round to see if Jack approved.

*(8 Oct. 1939 /18 Nov. 1940)* Cliff's letter yesterday was a bit incoherent – a tirade against me cutting my back curls off. I see myself having to practise walking backwards when Cliff comes home, for you cannot see any difference from the front view. He seems to have got the idea I'll go into pants! Funny how my menfolk hate women in pants. I do myself, but if

necessary for work or service, would wear them./ I'm going to get my hair permed for Christmas, for I've let the back grow again. My menfolk did not like my 'neat shingle'. There was such an outcry for my curls that I gave way – partly. (p. 19/89)

Nella doesn't really seem to mind 'her menfolk' criticizing her nor does she try to resist them. The boys' attitude towards their mother is caring- even if to me a bit patronizing at times- so that she probably sees them doing it out of affection and to humour themselves (and they probably are). She, too, carries an idealistic image of how a woman/mother should look like: she disapproves of "the queer hybrid creatures pushing prams and wearing pants, a woman's coat and either a pixie-hood or a beret" (p.194). To her being a woman, especially a mother, has a fixed meaning and getting out of the frames made for motherhood was not appropriate: motherhood had a certain dress-code, for example. In this sense, motherhood can be said to mirror the idea of femininity not only at home but also outside it, in a powerful way. She also criticizes women who seem to use the war as an excuse for being sloppy and lazy with their make-up (p.194) which the other side the coin: careful make-up was allowed and preferred in order to look feminine. Yet I suppose too much make-up would have been disapproved.

It is also interesting to notice that when Nella feels a bit worn out, or sad and puzzled, she has a habit of dressing up in her best clothes (she does it also on a gloomy evening when they are anxiously fearing for the bombing to start, p. 140), as if to 'put on her role' as a woman, as if not to forget who she is. Maybe this was all an expression of fear of change in a situation where everything around you is unstable and changing. The traditional gender roles were breaking up at least partly for the duration of the war, so why not keep those things unchanged that one still could, for example the way of dressing. However, the war does change the person and Nella has conflicting ideas of whether it is a good thing or not. Yet, she doesn't want to change as a mother, for her sons are constantly begging their mother not to change as a result of the war:

*(9 Jan. 1941) (Cliff to her mother) 'Don't change, dearie – ever – fight hard against changing....and a repeated 'Don't change' made me wonder at his thoughts, and search for something kind and helpful to say. I felt at a loss. I*

said, 'I'll never change, in that I love my boys, and as long as I've health and strength I'll 'keep the home fires burning'. (p.100-101)

(14 Mar. 1941) It's really curious the way I cling to the feeling I have of wanting all to be the same. I can understand Cliff's attitude to home, and his aversion to any change – even if for the better, in the shape of me in a new overall! If I could, I'd gather my dear, wide-windowed house and take it far away, and hide it safely in a quiet spot. (p.117)

I think that she writes a story of herself as a mother who is very important to her sons and who has earned their respect by being what she was – a devoted and understanding friend, and a safe haven. This discourse is talk of a woman who is pleased with her success in bringing up her children. She seems to feel confident with her motherhood and she trusts her judgement as a mother.

### *The stoic mother*

(6 Mar. 1940) In all my life I've never kept anything or anyone I've loved. If I've had a woman friend, she has either died or gone away; and my boys went. I used to fret when one by one they went, but now I have a queer numb feeling – 'God's will'? Tiredness? Or defeatism?...My Arthur can understand things like 'sublimation' – I gather it's a kind of 'polishing up the dark side' when there is not a bright side around – but, anyway, whatever it is, it helps me keep on when women who have had 'good times' seem to feel at cracking point, women stronger-minded and healthier than I am. (p. 41-42)

Being a mother is a source of personal strength and happiness for Nella, as well as a personal hell, one could say, in the time of the war: Cliff signing up for the army causes her stress and anxiety, as it did to thousands of other women having to let go of their children for the war effort. The worrying for Arthur, who is in Manchester which is heavily bombed, and Cliff, serving his country in a secret location, is a hard burden to carry for years. When Cliff is not heard from for months, Nella goes through all the possibilities in her mind but never loses her hope. She misses him, and Arthur, from the bottom of her heart and many pages of the diary are filled with memories of them and about wishes to see them again: "I wondered if my lad would see an English spring again – and would he still have his wide flashing smile when we met?" (p.214). Still, deeply ingrained in her is



the firm belief that Cliff is doing the right thing; it is his honour and duty to protect the country, as it is Nella's *duty as a mother* to let him go. In fact, she believes in her opinion so much that she gets into an argument with her husband who doesn't want to let Cliff go abroad as a volunteer:

(24 Jan. 1942) If I knew my baby was going to his death, I'd not hold him back – even if I could. We must all play our game as the cards are dealt, no trying to sneak aces from another. Cliff must LIVE – *not* shun life, and always be afraid of things and people and ideas, and be an old man before he has had the fire and endeavour of youth. I shook with rage, and felt a wonder that anyone but a timid girl could be so silly, childish and immature as my husband. I *may* be hard – but I've had to be, hard and resolute. Boys need a firm hand, as well as a 'mother's hand'. (p.192)

She seems to think she has had to have two roles as a mother – the soft and the hard one, as her husband hadn't really participated in parenting them. At times she even criticizes her husband having been so much of an outsider in their family (p. 191). However, the main point here is that she implies her identity as a woman and a mother has had to go beyond the boundary of a 'normal mother' as a result of that – she has had to be hard which is not to her a feminine quality.

She seems to be a patriotic mother looking up to all women/mothers, who endure the wartime burden of worry:

(19 Aug. 1943; *In the Women's Centre*) I looked round the big room at faces I've known and loved for over four years. My heart aches and, even in that small circle, the bravery and courage, the "going on" when their boys are taught to fight like savages if they are commandoes – when they are trained and trained and *trained*, for bodies to endure, and to go and kill other women's lads, to wipe all the light from other mother's faces. (p. 257)

So, her solidarity goes also beyond the borders of the Allied countries, and she feels sorry for "all the helpless women in Germany who dare not want their babies" (p.46). To her, all mothers were 'in the same boat' and their 'collective' strain and anxiousness brought Nella a little comfort. She admires their heroic gallantry and feels pity for all of them:

(5 Mar. 1940) She (*a workmate of Nella's*) was a polished, well-dressed woman with immaculate hair, complexion and hands. We talked of our sons – her boy is on a hush-hush boat somewhere – and as she packed, she pressed her hands out to flatten the bundle, and I saw her hands. Her once beautiful nails were bitten to the quick, and then I seemed to notice her too bright eyes and I thought of all the mothers whose boys have gone to fight and who suffer, and I felt pity wrap me like a flame. (p. 41)

While so many of her acquaintances suffer nervous breakdowns or fall seriously ill as they can't bear the burden of anxiousness for their loved ones, I think Nella shows remarkable mental health and strength, taking into account that we learn she has suffered a nervous breakdown a couple of years ago. She describes her hopeless feelings in her diary, and yet manages to hold it together outwardly: "I thought of my inner fears and dreads, of hurting thoughts that whirled and whirled inside my head and felt like broken glass, so brittle and sharp, of my anxiety for boys" (p. 123). She writes quite a stoic account of herself despite revealing her dreads to the diary – she is the one who appears strongest in their family in a "real" crisis such as a war. She says she can thank her work for that: "... I often wonder what I'd do if my days were not so full – and thank God I can work – not only for the bit I do, but for the strength it gives me to go on (p. 41).

Nella notices (p. 29) that surprisingly many women seemed to have no resources of their own to fall back on. She, on the other hand, has resources even to "mother" others' children. In fact, the local doctor sends her a baby, whose mother was ill, to take care of for a few weeks (p. 32-34). She feels getting her was a "blessing": "I wish she was mine to keep; it all came back to me when I looked down at her tiny face – all the love and interest and work a baby makes. My boys were always such a joy to me and, without wanting them to stay young, I missed their gay naughtiness when they grew older" (p.33). This kind of "collective motherhood" seemed to suit Nella fine, but many women did criticize the government for the lack of proper childcare system during the war (see, for example, Summerfield,1984:75-79).

I think Nella's infinite empathy towards motherhood results from her own successful experience as a mother. She feels privileged to be a mother, and, to her,

being a mother was respectful womanhood. It was a justified way of being a woman.

### *Motherhood as an institution*

As pointed out above (see chapter 2.3.), looking at the official discussion and policies of the WW II period, it is easy to see that the public opinion regarded women mostly as mothers and homemakers, despite the fact they were needed to keep up the production. Nella seems to have internalized this discourse of a 'proper woman'. To her, motherhood is the single most important role of a woman; motherhood and care almost determine womanhood:

*(25 Feb. 1942)* That's the dreadful part to me – so much dying: family unity, peace to live one's own life, the ordinary decencies of everyday life, hopes and ambitions, aims and endeavours. It gives me a fear of the future sometimes, a fear of the aftermath of things, and a wonder about how all the boys and men that are left will begin again. Women are different - as long as there are babies to tend and care for and hungry, tired men to feed and tend, a woman will *be* a woman, and make a wee corner into a home. (p. 114)

*(23 Sept. 1942)* "...I suppose it's a part of a woman to want children, to feel someone depends on her, someone she has to fight for and see they get on." (p. 220)

She clearly thinks it is a women's biological need and instinct to want and to have children, to nurture them (and men) and to bring them up. This is the traditional way of seeing the women: when it is natural for a woman to give birth, it is also natural for them to bring up the children. This assumed connection seemed to determine women's social role in the society for Nella. She never even mentions her husband having a role in upbringing their sons.

So, for Nella, a housewife in her 50's, motherhood and nursing are matter-of-fact things, she never sees motherhood as a choice, as the later generations will do. What is interesting here is the change in the attitudes of the young people in the WW II period that Nella mentions; she remarks that people marry a lot later than what they used to, and that the standards were clearly changing when it came to

having children outside marriage: it was no longer such a disgrace when a single woman got a baby. She still mentions the “shame” of those mothers whose daughters got war-babies out of wedlock but doesn’t really seem to condemn them, good-hearted as she is (p.122). Rather, she feels pity for them. However, she seems to restrict motherhood only to women who are married, talking about there still being “normal girls” who were brought up by “good mothers” who have successfully “passed on the torch” (p. 246). The right kind of motherhood was the married kind. She also remarks that many young women feel it was ”a grave sin” to bring a child into the world when there was a war going on whereas when she was young, during the Great War (WW I), the girls saw it as their *duty* to make babies for the country. She says she understands both views but seems to put the government pleas and ”propaganda” for more children first in priority, criticizing the authorities which were recruiting potential mothers:

*(talking about the women being recruited to work)* ”If the country wants babies, I feel this conscription of women will be a backward step, for it is taking the best, most formative years from a girl’s life, and giving her a taste of freedom from home drudgery that many crave for. Will they settle to homes later?” (p. 198)

I do not think this remark is subtle criticism toward the society not encouraging women to combine work and motherhood, instead it can be read as her opinion that motherhood comes first even if she seems to admit that staying at home does restrict her freedom. She clearly sees it as a woman’s patriotic duty to have children if that’s what “the country” needed. Therefore, she also thinks that no mothers of young children should be allowed to work:

”What’s the welcome for anyone to come into a cold cheerless home?.../...What chance has youth, if they have no background, no anchorage, no feeling that there is a wee spot all their own. I feel sometimes I want to shout loudly to all mothers, and tell them how important they are, how much more they matter than all the preaching, talking men.../... I want to cry, ‘Mothers UNITE. Let’s all be oldfashioned.’ After all, babies and little ones are the oldest-fashioned thing there is. Let’s give them background, teach them simple rules of life, mentally and spiritually, love them a lot and then stand aside.” (p. 261)

By 'oldfashioned' I take it that she means choosing motherhood over work if a woman had a chance to do that. There is nothing oldfashioned in being a mother, as motherhood is a social construction liable to change in time. However, what to a modern reader strikes as "backward" is having to make a choice between being a mother and choosing to work. Still, it can be seen as progress that maybe many young women actually had a choice to make for the first time in their lives, and, more generally, in society. However, Nella's idea of women being mothers before anything is a middle-class value – often working class women couldn't afford making a choice of staying at home, even if they wanted to. After all, as many middle-class women fought for their right to work, the working-class women struggled for their right to be mothers. Women's valuable work as mothers was in fact recognized in the Beveridge Report (see above), in 1942, which Nella Last welcomed with joy hoping a new world for women. The Report recommended children's allowances to be paid as a universal benefit, a state health service with free health care among other things (Nella Last, p. 228). As the Report perhaps tied women more tightly to home, it allowed many working-class women to have a baby without a fear of being too poor to have one or avoiding an illegal abortion. Nella's home help was one of those who wanted to get rid of the pregnancy because she wouldn't have survived economically - this made Nella a firm supporter of the national child allowance (in her opinion, abortion was an immoral act to commit). (p. 256).

I would not call Nella Last with her ideas of the motherhood very oldfashioned at her time; in those days the spirit of the time encouraged women to have more children, and as it was Nella's task as a woman to take care of that, she only supported what she saw as a woman's mission in this world. To write about the importance of women's work within home as mothers and homemakers as well as trying to make her family respect her work as "proper", which she wrote about several times, sounds rational and even forward in her time. Here is an example:

*(15 Jan. 1941) (She describes Cliff having some cake) He said, 'If ever you have to work for your living, Mom, come and cook in the Army.'* I said, 'What do you mean 'work for my living'? I guess a married woman, who

brings up a family and makes a home, is working jolly *hard* for her living, and don't you ever forget it! And don't get the lordly male attitude of thinking wives are pets – and *kept* pets at that.' (p. 103)

She believed raising children was a job among others – to her a pleasant one – and that women should be respected for that in the society. As a side remark I want to point out that interestingly enough, this is exactly what many women are trying to do in Finland today – demanding respect for being at home bringing up children and trying to get a sufficient compensation for it. However, it is clear that Nella's feminine identity is closely related to the things which were thought to belong to “the natural sphere” of femininity: she never questions women's role in the society. Yet she does see their role vital and, because of this I would call her a feminist in this respect (even if I have a feeling she wouldn't agree with me).

#### **4.2. The accounts of marriage: Nella as a wife**

Next to being a mother, Nella's feminine identity is related to her being a wife in her writing. Her diary tells one story of being a wife in Britain, and also how it changed during the war, and this is what I will describe in the following.

##### *The marriage of Mr. And Mrs. Last*

Nella and her husband (whose name is, strangely enough, never mentioned) had been married some thirty years when the war broke out. I think their marriage were not the unhappiest one – even if one could read about some major disagreements between them in the diary, the biggest one being her husband's control over her, and her own submissiveness. She never directly characterizes her husband in the diary but her remarks here and there convey an image of a rather nervy and stressed out, introverted and quiet man. For instance, she mentions that he gets easily annoyed, thus, she likes all to be straight and quiet for him after tea as (p. 47). It seems that he likes to be at home with his family; Nella, on the other hand, comes across as talkative and extrovert, as a person who likes to see and do things. The husband's character is the reason for why they rarely do things outside

the house together, apart from occasional trips to the seaside. Despite the rather peaceful existence together, they don't seem very close anymore (to which Nella also admits). Mr. Last rarely shows his affection directly, yet, in his own way, he sometimes expresses his love, for example (p.54) by advising her to go to bed and let him take care of the people popping in to see her. Their shared memories of the old times with their two sons seem to keep them together and comfort them during the long years of the war.

*Nella on sex & marriage*

Despite having grown together during the years, Nella doesn't describe her relationship with her husband as a sexual one at all. This is not because she would be embarrassed to discuss these things in her diary, as she does discuss sex generally, but because their relationship, we learn, has not been sexual for a while. In fact, she mentions the lack of intimacy between them, which seems to have broken their "connection":

*(17 Nov. 1943)* Suddenly I thought what a break it had been when he suddenly decided to sleep alone, almost two years ago. He had a bad cold and was restless at the time; and as I prefer – had always longed – to sleep alone, and put on a light to read or write or get up when I felt like it, I was quite suited. Yet it snapped a big link somehow – that last-minute discussion before going to sleep: it's surprising how, when the light was out, little things could be talked out before going to sleep. Maybe I'm wrong; it may be that it is the way he has aged so rapidly; but tonight I looked at him and could *not* think of *any* kind of intimacy, mental or physical. The boys have gone out of my life. I've no family around me. I felt my whole married life was a dream – so *very* odd! (p.260)

She did not mention her husband moving out of their bedroom before this, I suppose she only now noticed how it affected their relationship. So, it looks like they used to be closer before but, little by little, have turned into strangers to each other. Nella doesn't seem to mind, though; she hints us on not being interested in him sexually anymore:

(15 June 1945) My husband is coming back into my room for the two nights Cliff is home. Strange how odd – and unwelcome now – he feels. I giggled to myself as I thought I could not have felt less ‘interested’ than if he had been a stranger. (p.259)

In the quotation above she states that she is not interested in her husband in a sexual sense; perhaps because there were so many other things in her life now. Nella’s identity as a sexual being is put forward in a very subtle way in the diary – if at all. I think the biggest reason for this is that she is married, and since there is no intimacy between her and her husband, there’s not much to write about. Her commitment to her marriage comes across very strong and her sexual identity is related to that. However, there is an incident in the diary where the driver of the mobile canteen, which Nella is also working in, asks her out:

(4 June 1941) I felt as if I has been winded, as I said, ‘I’ve a feeling my husband might object!’ – and a wild impulse to giggle like a schoolgirl swept me at the thought of his face if he knew. I went on, ‘We are *very* old-fashioned in Barrow, you know – very married and all that – and no one thinks even of friendships between men and women . There are none – just the good marrieds and the OTHER kind.’ He flushed and said, in a very dignified way, ‘Please don’t misunderstand me – you have never mentioned your husband or a family, and I’d the impression somehow you were on your own.’ He went on, ‘I am myself , and it’s rather disappointing, when I feel attracted to anyone, to find they are married../.I didn’t know which I felt strongest – laughter at his taking a fancy to a woman of fifty-one, or pity in that he was so lonely. Perhaps he wanted mothering, really! (p.157-158)

Nella is very surprised to find a 36-year-old man attracted to her, as, I suppose, she thinks she is too old, and too married for him. Her comment on him wanting “mothering” suggest her seeing herself rather as a motherly figure than as a sexual woman – yet she feels like a schoolgirl for a moment getting attention from a stranger. It seems the sexual roles were strictly defined in Barrow; friendships between sexes were not allowed, and one had to keep within narrow sexual norms if one did not want to be considered amoral. I suppose “the OTHER kind” of married people, which she refers to above, are the ones having extra-marital affairs, the ones having several partners at the same time, and the ones not heterosexual (according to Weeks (1981:106) homosexuality was considered unacceptable and punishable under the 1912 Criminal Law Amendment Act,



though few people were actually convicted). Considering the moral codes of the time, it is not surprising that Nella's sexuality is tied to her identity as a married woman. In fact, she uses her marriage as a means of flirting – at least I see it as flirting – for example, she persuaded a bus driver to take a detour by smilingly admitting that the reason she had missed the Barrow bus was because she found some lovely fish for her husband's tea at the fishmongers. Now, wouldn't *his wife* have been tempted if she has seen fish to serve *him*, she insinuates, and makes the bus driver laugh (p.241). I suppose, this kind of subtle flirtation was allowed even to a middle-class housewife.

Briefly, Nella's general remarks on the effect of war on sex are also worth commenting on (p.159-161). She recalls that before the Great War (WWI) women were expected to obey and the men expected to be masters in matters to do with sex. She points out that the previous war, with men having to go to France, was the start of a difference in sex life. There were the "disreputable" girls interested in soldiers, and loads of sexual "goings-on". Nella states this quite matter-of-factly, not noticing or commenting on the double standard underlying her statement. The woman was the "bad one" behaving like a "harpy", not the man. It was allowed for a man to lust but women's sexuality was somehow dangerous, dirty and to be controlled. However, Nella's opinion is that everything was changing during this war. She discusses this with her young home-help, Ruth, who agrees that people *do* things and don't *talk* about them. "It's as if people don't *think* it's wrong anymore, or giggle about so-and-so and her boyfriend being 'as good as married'. The sexual standards must have had an effect on the women's image of themselves – perhaps not for Nella directly, her being middle-aged with a sexual identity already rather fixed, but as general infiltration from surrounding society, anyway. Together with other changes during the wartime, perhaps it influenced her and other women in regarding themselves as more active participants of the society, considering the relationships of the two sexes.

*The caretaker wife*

War or no war, Nella considered her first priority as a married woman to take care of her husband, in her words: “I will dedicate every part of my time when I’m not looking after my husband to the W.V.S.” [*Women’s Voluntary Service*] (p.14). During the bombing, she refuses to leave Barrow and go to the countryside like many did, for the sake of her husband, even though her sons were pleading her to get out of the town. This is what she answered to them (p. 144): “Who would look after Daddy and make his meals and keep him well for work if I ran away?” “In return” of this caretaking, her husband took care of the money, giving her a certain amount of household money. If she wanted something special for herself, she had to hint her husband about it (p. 200).

On a number of pages I can detect a great deal of consideration and compassion towards her husband – the kind which one is no doubt a product of over thirty years of life together. Despite the problems they might have, she considers his needs and likes, often at her own expense. For example, she stays at home from work when he has a flu (p.266); she doesn’t invite soldiers for dinner at Christmas (which was popular) as her husband “shuns strangers more than ever and only wants to be quiet.” (p.183). She seems worried about how much he has aged during the war, one of her concerns is also that he lacks hobbies and interests, and she tries to interest him in the garden work (p.41): “Perhaps I can get him take an interest in the garden when the better weather comes – as yet, poor lamb, he does so resent my little hens and the sight of the dug-up lawn.” Whether it is a duty or pity or genuine affection that she feels towards him – probably all of these at times – to me it looks like she sees him not as a man anymore but, rather, as a child. She explains how she tricks him into eating economy dishes because he wouldn’t eat them if he knew they were “economy dodges” (p.179). When he complains about the food being too expensive she just ruffles his hair and says: “Oh, eat your lunch and don’t worry” (p.87). In addition, the way in which she writes about him is at times a bit matronizing. Here’s one more example of her attitude:

(16 Mar. 1941) After tea, my husband said, ‘I’m going to do a bit of gardening – I’ve my onion bed to make.’ He spoke so importantly that I

chuckled to myself. I've sung the praises of my little useful garden so much all winter – and let *him* see how clever I thought *he* was to rear a whole row of leeks, when more experienced gardeners' leeks failed in the drought of last spring. (p.117)

According to Nella's representation of him, it seems that her husband does often behave childishly, so maybe it is partly Nella's natural reaction to him. She is very protective over him, hiding her own concerns from him, like these examples show:

*(17 June 1940)* My husband came in and we looked at one another silently, and then I said, 'Bad – very bad'. He nodded and sat down at the table, and he said, 'It's not so bad now I'm HOME,' and I saw his work-grimed finger tracing the hollyhocks embroidered in the corner of the cloth. I poured out the tea and, as I passed him, he leaned against me and looked up at me, and I saw the terror bogey looking out of his eyes. Mine had gone – please God never to come again – and I felt strong and sure, I bent and kissed him and said, 'Get your tea, my dear, we will take all the things back to the Centre and then go to Walney shore for some sand.' (I'd used up the sand when we had got for my little hens to scratch in.) He said, 'You never lose courage or strength, my darling – I know why Cliff thinks you are 'like a little red candle'.' To confess my terrors would have been to rob him of his faith, so I smiled and said nothing. (p.65)

The quotation above shows more affection between them than any other in the whole diary. I think her husband's comment on being at HOME deserves attention here. As they are inside their house, Nella is the one in charge of the "feeling of home". It is her kingdom where she is to give comfort and keep things stable and homely. Her husband is allowed to take off the brave face, which he undoubtedly shows off to the "masculine" world outdoors, and feel safe:

*(5 April 1941)* The devil planes must be coming back now – a hundred must have passed over tonight. I think I'd like to cry or swear or something. I've got a tight knot in my head. My husband is very nervy, though, and it would upset him if he knew how terrified I felt. I don't like knitting, but I've been glad to have something in my fingers. (p.127)

Nella has described a scene where she portrays herself in a caretaker role as a woman again – outwardly strong yet feeling weak within. She describes her husband as the "weaker" one, and herself as the stronger one, the "motherly" wife,

thinking of everybody else and repressing her own terrors. Her constructing herself a role of a caretaker wife can be affected by the wartime propaganda which encouraged mothers and wives to “keep the home fires burning” (Nella’s own words) for the heroic men, in addition to “doing their bit” for the war work outside home. I think this kind of writing illustrates much of the “old” Victorian view on a wife as an angelic figure as well as a wartime ideal of a strong, enduring wife; the womanhood on the pedestal.

### *The frustrated wife*

Nella’s diary does give another view of her life as a wife as well. It seems that the way her husband sees Nella’s role as a wife, and the way she would like to be seen do not match. On several occasions (see, for example, p.18), she mentions having been stifled in their marriage because he never went anywhere or let her go anywhere without him. This has a lot to do with the differences in their character, but, I think, also with the idea which he has of a good wife; of what a woman should do and should not (have to) do. This is what Nella tells:

(22 Nov. 1940) My husband said, ‘You look lovely tonight,’ and I got up and had a good look in the mirror. My crisp set waves certainly *were* lovely, but my face was no different, and I said, ‘Would you always like me to look like a doll with a wig on?’ He said, ‘Yes, if you mean looking like you do tonight, and I would like you to never have to work and worry over *anything*, to see you in the glowing silks and velvets I know you always admire in the shops, and fur, jewellery, perfume, lace – everything I’ve ever known you admire.’ I said, ‘I suppose you would only think I was putting a brave face on if I told you I’d sooner *die* than step into the frame you make for me. Do you know, my dear, that I’ve never known the content – at times – real happiness – that I’ve known since the war started? Because you always thought like that and were so afraid of ‘doing things’, you have at times been very *cruel*. Now my restless spirit is free, and I feel strength and endurance comes stronger with every effort. I’m *not*, as you always fear, wearing myself out – and even so, it’s better to wear out than rust out.’ Gosh, but I hope my husband never comes into money. It would be really terrible to be made to ‘sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam’! (p.90-91)

She puts it very nicely “the frame you make for me”. The trouble of men of Nella’s generation was, according to her, that they look at women as someone ‘to

be cared for' (p.227). This passage clearly states how passive her husband's ideal wife was, according to Nella. She feels he would like her to be a "doll – like" figure to be protected. *Not* because he was mean, though, but because that was the way he thought that she would be happiest. To me, it seems like underestimating the capabilities of half of the humankind and treating them like children, but against the values of British society of the 40's, he sounds only reasonable. For the society of the time had an ideal that women did not work – at home or outside home – if they could afford not to. It was a question of status. This, however, could make many women lack any responsibility, and, thus, as I would call it, turn them easily into objects. Perhaps this is part of the reason why besides herself, Nella defines other women on the basis of their marital status. On several occasions she refers to her acquaintances as somebody's wife, for example, "a wife of a well-to-do stationer" (p. 41; 249). To me, this suggests that getting married affected the way in which a woman was seen in the society of the time – she was no longer a person in herself but a person through her husband. In other words, what she was was determined by her husband. Further, his occupation and social status determined the wife's status. This was understandable enough, I suppose, among the middle-class women whose efforts at home weren't recognized in society. Thus, it could be argued, the only way to construct their identity was by the persons they 'lived through'.

Also, I think Nella, having lived a Victorian childhood, had been brought up to obey one's husband and keep to the image of desirable womanhood that he had of her. She may have seen it as her duty to submit to his wishes. This makes her sometimes a very frustrated woman:

*(19 Oct. 1942) He [her husband] added piously that he was always thankful I was such a marvellous cook and a manager! Sometimes I could YELL. I feel I'd like to peel off the layers of 'patience', 'tact', 'cheerfulness', 'sweetness' that smother me layers of unwanted clothes. What would I find under all the trappings I'm credited with? I might be surprised! I know how people feel who 'disappear'. They get up one morning and look out of the window – maybe just up along road, maybe the sun is shining, or there's a bright poster on a wall, or a ship's siren is hoo-hooing its way out to the sea – and they go and go and GO. (p.222)*

To me this suggests she would never *really* leave her home, but the frustration she describes tells something about her experiences as a housewife. At times, she feels “smothered”, not leading the full life she would like to. Her husband’s expectations, as well as those of society, seem to constrain her and make her behave in a way which is against her own character to some extent. Her bored dependence and lack of alternative ways of being a woman is exactly what Betty Friedan would argue later, in her book about the American society of the 1960’s, to be a common problem of white middle-class femininity (Friedan, 1979).

Nella discovered that she liked working and being active, and being a doll wife did not satisfy her, hence the frustration. She was not pleased with the role middle-class women have been given in society yet, again, she doesn’t question the gender system in itself. She hopes her husband would never get wealthy for then she would have had to adjust to idleness, not mentioning the possibility of resisting “being put on a cushion”. She does acknowledge the fact that it was a man’s world, the following opinions further prove it: “If I could choose it, I’d like to be a man when I ‘come again’. Men do seem to get the best out of life, all the responsibility and effort, all the colour and romance” (p. 68). ...I think I’d like to be a man and have the freedom to go to the far ends of the earth, to do things and see places...(p. 203). Furthermore, she describes a conversation with a school-friend (p. 68-69) who confesses she would like to be a courtesan “who could sway a man’s affections and affect his works and ambitions” for the same reason as Nella would like to be a man – to have power. Yet what she doesn’t do is ask why it is a man’s world in the first place, and what could be done to change it. Perhaps she couldn’t imagine how things could be otherwise, because, as someone has said, women who had tried to have it all were told they had had it in 1945 as well as 2001.

In sum, this narrative indicates that Nella felt sometimes discontented in a frame of a traditional wife. She clearly felt she lacked recognition from society, and felt powerless and unable to affect the

circumstances of her life, let alone their husbands. I think Nella's criticism towards her role as a wife comes from the fact that she has felt like "the other" in relation to her husband. As a mother, she chooses to be the other as she wants to do everything she can for her sons but not when it comes to her husband. She wants responsibility and respect. However, as the war goes on, she starts writing an alternative identity as a wife, constructing her own role in the marriage in a different way than before.

*The 'new' identity as a wife – resistance!*

Above I described how Nella made comments on how she had not always been too content with her marriage. Before the war, her husband had been the master in the house and Nella apparently was too afraid or too good-hearted to do nothing but obey. However, what is interesting here is that Nella talks about this as if things had changed a bit in their marriage. In the beginning of the war, she comments that she had a lot to be grateful for and therefore, she had settled into a feeling of content, despite her husband wanting her to stay at home (p.18). Soon, surprised even herself, she starts writing how little she cares about her husband's opinions anymore. Several times she describes to her diary a situation where she has spoken her mind, for example as follows:

*(14 Mar. 1940) [discussion with her husband about his meals] I told him he had rather take his lunch on Thursday, and several times I've not had tea quite ready when he has come in, on a Tuesday or Thursday, and I've felt quite unconcerned. He told me wistfully I was 'not so sweet' since I had been down at the Centre, and I said, 'Well! Who wants a woman of fifty to be sweet, anyway? And besides, I suit me a lot better!' (p.45)*

She often comments on things having changed and still changing:

*(17 Aug. 1940; talking about her husband and herself) He (her husband) talks things over quite a lot and does not sit silently nearly as much. Perhaps it's because I get so cross, for if he doesn't answer when I speak, I feel a hot flame of rage sweep over me. I could slap him really hard, and say, 'Now if you are going to be like that, I shall go out ALONE – my nerves are not as good as they used to be, and I'm not as patient as I was.' I realise sadly how we make mistakes, for if I had had the idea – the courage – of taking a firm*

line instead of always thinking, 'Perhaps he is tired – I'll sit quiet and not bother,' it would have been better for us both. (p.69)

It doesn't seem she blames her husband for having been so dominating more than herself having been too timid to stand up for herself. These remarks tell something about her new strength and assertiveness that she had found within herself. She had found a way of being which "suited her" better. It is almost as if she had been putting up an act, hiding her personality for the sake of being a good wife. Apparently "sweet" is also what he considered a wife should be like. But now she had started to think of herself as well. She talks a lot about her husband growing more understanding: for example, he listens to her opinions, appreciates her being such a marvellous cook when, before, she would only tell when something was wrong with the food (see, for example, p. 167); he even does not criticise her spending money on writing pads. Yet, I argue, most of the change has been within herself and the new side to her identity. She was the one who pushed her husband to change by demanding more household money (in which she, to her surprise, succeeds); she was the one to demand more respect and freedom to herself and the one to refuse to always live by his rules. She does acknowledge this herself sometimes, like these extracts show:

*(26 Feb. 1941) He (her husband) never went out alone – nor would he ever let me go at one time – but there is a difference now. Perhaps, though, the difference is only in me. Whether it's because I broke loose and insisted, some three years ago, that I would be more like other women, or because of the stress of the present times, but I don't chafe and strain as I used to. (p.115)*

*(9 May 1945) But I will not, cannot, go back to the narrowness of my husband's 'I don't want anyone else's company but yours – why do you want anyone else?' I looked at his placid, blank face and marvelled at the way he had managed to dominate me for all our married life, at how, to avoid hurting him, I had tried to keep him in a good mood, when a smacked head would have been the best treatment. His petulant moods only receive indifference now. I know I speak sharply at times, I know I'm 'not the sweet woman I used to be' – but then I never was! Rather was I a frayed, battered thing, with nerves kept in control by effort that at times became too much...(p.282)*



The strong words that she uses “frayed, battered thing” speak plainly about how she experiences herself in the past in her marriage. She implies she has been “a thing” rather than a whole person. She has let her husband pull the strings all their life, and in a way, she has been in a prison as an individual, a prison from which she has now “broken loose”. Her “sweet” side is not so present anymore because she has allowed the other “her” show, the one which has always been locked inside. However, reading her diary, I do not get the feeling she is bitter towards her husband. Perhaps she sees herself to blame at making a prison for herself by trying to be too unselfish. This is what she pondered one day: “I wonder if Arthur was right once when he said, ‘You make home too attractive, dearie – and it has turned into your prison.’ But when I look at my husband’s tired face sometimes, I wonder what else I could have done” (p.187). I assume she did not allow herself to express anger, or be more demanding before because she still did not see herself allowed as a woman to do that. Her husband controlled her, true, but so did she herself or, rather, the society in which she was brought up as a woman. She describes a big change in her, though. She writes herself a new “me”, a more confident one as a wife:

*(1 Aug. 1945) I suddenly thought tonight, ‘I know why a lot of women have gone into pants – it’s a sign that they are asserting themselves in some way.’ I feel pants are more of a sign of the times than I realised. A growing contempt for man in general creeps over me. For a craftsman, whether a sweep or Prime Minister – ‘hats off’. But why this ‘Lords of Creation’ attitude on men’s part? I’m beginning to see I’m really a clever woman in my own line, and not the ‘odd’ or ‘uneducated’ woman that I have dinned into me./ ..I feel that, in the world of tomorrow, marriage will be – will *have* to be – more of a partnership, less of this ‘I have spoken’ attitude. They will talk things over – talking *does* do good, if only to clear the air. I run my house like business: I have had to, to get all done properly, everything fitted in. Why, then, should women not be looked as partners, as ‘business women’? (p.254-255)*

The unusual circumstances of the war enabled Nella to take control of more things that she used to. This also changed her behaviour, and she seems to have gained in self-reliance. It looks like she has not been thinking too highly of herself before, but the wartime has made her question men’s, including her husbands authority. In addition, she writes in a way that looks like she has learned to respect herself. She

sees the importance of her work and would like to be treated like an equal by her husband. (She never, however, questions why there are gender-specific roles within the marriage in the first place.) Yet, even if Nella describes him changing, he still looks down on her at times, for example when it comes to her ability to understand the value of money, like the discussion about the importance of deep shelters (to protect people from the German bombers) shows (p. 78). Nella supported them and her husband was against them, because of the costs. He points out “condescendingly”: “Just like a woman – never *can* realise the value of money”, to which Nella “deadly calm” answers. “..As to the value of money – don’t make me *laugh*. That was ‘gone with the wind’, and we talk in millions nowadays, millions wasted”. In the quotation above, Nella talks about marriage in the future, about the younger generation. Does this perhaps mean that she believes there was no hope in improving her own marriage permanently? Was she afraid that what she has gained might somehow slip away from her? On the basis of how many times she emphasized her having changed and “not going back to how things were” in her diary, I think she was determined to have it her way, yet she reveals her fears for the future. It might not be easy, as she does seem worried about her husband’s reactions. This is what she wrote when the war was in the end:

(25 July 1945) I felt tired, but ironed my washing, as I’m going out to the Centre in the morning. My husband was very sulky about it. He said, ‘When the war got over, I thought you would always be in at lunch-time.’ I said, ‘Well, you always have a good lunch left – much better than many men whose wives are always at home.’ He said, ‘Well, I like you there always.’ No thought as to either my feelings or to any service I could be doing. I thought of the false sentiment my generation had been reared with, the possessiveness which stood as the hallmark of love, with no regard to differences in temperament, inclination or ideals – when the ‘head of the house’ *was* a head, a little dictator in his own right; when a person of limited vision, or just plain fear of life, could crib and confine more restless spirits. I looked at my husband’s petulant face and thought that, if I’d never done anything else for my lads, at least I’d left them alone and had never given advice at pistol-point, shrinking from imposing my will in any way. A little chill fell on me – not from the dusk which was creeping on the garden, either. Rather did it blow from the past, when to go anywhere without my husband was a heinous crime – and he went practically nowhere! I had a pang as I wondered what I would do when all my little war activities

stopped, when he *could* say plaintively, ‘*Must* you go?’ or ‘I don’t feel like...’ – and I wondered if my weak streak would crop up as strong as ever, and I’d give in for peace and to that unspoken, but *very* plain, Victorian-Edwardian accusation, ‘I feed and clothe you, don’t I? I’ve a right to say what you do.’ It’s not ‘love’, as the sloppy Vic-Eds. song, it’s sheer poverty of mind and fear of life. If you love a person in the real sense, you want then to be happy, not take them like butter and spread them thinly over your bread, to make it more palatable for yourself. (p.296-297)

This is quite harsh critique towards society and its’ ideal gender roles in marriage, as well as indirectly, towards her husband. It also gives us her view on gender roles of the time – and how she saw the past and the future. Still, while she believes women’s subordinate position within marriage is wrong, she is afraid of giving in to her husband – perhaps, I argue, because she unconsciously agrees with him to some extent, that is, maybe her upbringing has underlined the importance of obeying one’s husband. I know it is often very difficult to shrug off the beliefs that one has been brought up to believe in, even if one would know they are not correct or just. However, I also believe that once Nella is this much aware of the underlying mechanisms creating inequality in society, I don’t think she could only commit to pleasing her husband anymore. Then again, writing was to her an opportunity to “be herself” and express her opinions freely – I do not know whether she actually was as brave in her opinions in practise. The important thing here is, however, the fact she *did* have these ideas and feelings; this is the way *she created herself*. At least in her diary, she allowed herself a new side to her womanhood, she gave herself a permission to be “bitchy”, like she called herself one time (p.153).

## 5. WORK

Having discussed Nella's discourses on family, this part of the study will concentrate in more detail on Nella's work, the way she describes it and the meanings she gives to it. Firstly, I will deal with her accounts of household work, and then I will discuss her war work, that is, her voluntary work outside home. Before those, however, I'd like to describe what kind of tasks were included in these two areas of work, and how she comments on this double burden.

### 5.1. The Double Burden

The war brought along a situation in which everybody was encouraged to join the national effort. Even though avoiding the conscription to do war work because of her age, Nella Last wanted to "do her bit" for her country. Just like thousands of other women, she volunteered to work. At first, it was only part-time work in addition to her full-time household work, but as the war went on, she took more and more responsibilities upon herself outside home. This meant that she had practically two full-time jobs to take care of: the housework and the war work. Before the war as a housewife she used to have a part-time home-help, a young woman called Ruth, who would come to the house on a regular basis. Eventually, she had to give her up because young women were "mobile work force" conscripted to the "essential industries". During the war, she had a couple of other temporary home-helps both of whom left. So, most of the time she was on her own. Today one might wonder why a household of two needed a maid in the first place, yet it was very common in middle-class families of the time. I think it was mainly a question of status – but need as well. It should be remembered that in the 40's, they did not have all the equipment and machines that we are used to, to make the cooking and cleaning easier and quicker. And at least in this case, Nella was completely responsible for the household, 24 hours a day, except for the bit of gardening her husband used to do. This is what she writes about her situation without the home-help: "When Ruth goes, and I've all to do myself, I'm afraid I'll have to 'scamp' a lot of little things, for the first things must come first and there

is my work at the Centre” (p. 131). She feels a little worried about how it will work out. I think she was used to keeping the house in a tip-top shape and now she has to learn to be less “fussy” with it. She surprises even herself by making things run so smoothly, as this remark shows: “If anyone had told me I could do all my own work – only sending large or ‘boiling’ articles to the laundry – I’d have thought I could not manage it, now there’s the shop and the Centre” (p.217).

### *Days filled with work*

What Nella’s days actually consisted of are as follows: she made the breakfast, often warm; cooked the lunch, often serving a soup, a salad and dessert; and prepared the tea (the dinner) for her husband. She cleaned the house and did the laundry. She planned meals and went shopping with the ration cards; “hunted” for fresh meat or fish or whatever else she needed around the town. She took care of the pets; a cat, Mrs Murphy, and a dog, Old Sol. She started keeping hens in the lawn and did most of the gardening.

The first war work outside the house that she took up was in the Women’s Voluntary Service Centre (W.V.S.), formed in 1939 to provide welfare services in the event of war. The Centre made clothes and blankets for the evacuees, as well as swabs, pyjamas and other supplies for hospitals and supplies for merchant navy and the forces. It also organized fund-raising activities. Later she also worked in a mobile canteen, serving tea and sandwiches to men clearing bomb damage in areas without gas or electricity, and in a Red Cross shop.

Doing all this demanded careful planning and prioritising, and Nella seemed to use her diary for outlining her ideas. This is what she wrote in the beginning of the war: “Now that I’m going down to the W.V.S. Centre on Mondays as well as Thursdays and Tuesday afternoons, I’ll plan my days out carefully. Easily prepared lunches, cooked the night before – so that I can make a nice lunch and lay the table for tea and be away in one and a half hours” (p.18). Notice that the clearly the first priority is the house and her husband – that was what she had been

doing all her life, after all! As mentioned before, it was often emphasized by the media, too, that the war work was something additional and temporary, and should not interrupt the home life (see for example, Summerfield,1998:83).

*Double burdened but not broken up*

Nella Last seemed to do well under the double burden, she conveys an image of an enduring person who is ready to take what may come, for the duration of the war: “Now when I plan and work harder, I find my brain sharper and I don’t forget things. I’m following my doctor’s advice and have not lost any more weight. I can sleep at least four hours a night and, although always tired, have not been so exhausted” (p.149). She does not complain much, in fact, even if she is tired and worried, she mostly seems grateful to be able to work to keep her mind off the war:

*(29 Feb. 1940)* Some days I am so busy I can only think of what I’m doing, or the immediate tasks ahead, and I’ll have a static feeling of happiness – a rhythm of mind – when the realization of WAR sweeps over me: for one dreadful second I could scream like a horse and a wave of coldness breaks over me. It passes, but often I wonder what I’d do if my days were not so full – and thank God I can work – not only for the bit I do, but for the strength it gives me to go on. (p.40-41)

Although she does not complain about over-exhausting herself, she doesn’t write about herself in a heroic way, either (unlike many of the post-war writers, see, for example Douie 1949). Nella lets her fears and terror show in the diary, and confesses that the sadness in her heart would master her if she did not work and work until too tired to do anything but sleep (p.22). Yet she never gives in to desperation completely, but always seems to keep up her spirits. Perhaps she used the diary to write down the occasional bad moments and to encourage her self to go on. After all, writing was the dearest of her hobbies.

*(10 May 1941)* My husband said, ‘You’re a queer lot (*referring to Nella and some other women*) – you actually seem to like danger and upset. I’ve never seen you work so hard, or seen you so cheerful for years – and on less sleep and food at that!’ It set me pondering, and while it would be *wrong* to say

I'm enjoying it, I've a queer feeling that at last I've ceased to be 'always on the outside looking in' – as Flanagan and Allen sing. (p.151-152)

Perhaps without realizing it, Nella has stated here that she had been frustrated in the life that she had lead. The war opened her a new opportunity for self-fulfilment through work. She really liked being busy. She probably felt like she was part of something important and was making a difference. The war, in a way, woke her up in good and bad, and the huge amount of work was one of most positive things:

*(19 May 1940)* I don't wonder my husband being surprised – when I contrast the rather retiring woman who had such headaches, and used to lie down so many afternoons, with the woman of today who can keep on and *will not think*, who coaxes pennies where once she would have *died* rather than ask favours, who uses too bright lipstick and on dim days makes the corners turn up when lips will not keep smiling. (p.57)

She describes her new energetic and brave self as a sharp contrast to the old one. She seems to be amused by this herself. The double burden was not so much a burden to her; I think she came off the war years a lot better than her husband, partly due to her having so much to do.

## 5.2. The stories of household work

### *The competent household manager*

One of the images that Nella writes of herself is that she knows how to run her household in a practical way.

*(19 Dec. 1939)* There was very little bacon in town today and women were anxiously asking each other if they knew of a shop which had any in. We eat so little bacon and cheese, but I'll get my ration and start using it in place of other things – meat and fish – in my cooking. Fish is very dear and, in my budget, not worth for the price of the nourishment. I've always been used to making 'hotel' meals, as the boys call them – soup, a savoury and a sweet. If one is a god cook and a manager, it's the cheapest in the long run – cheaper than getting a big roast and chops and steaks for frying. In the last war, we were living tolerably well when many were complaining of dullness and

shortness of food. Now, when I'm out two days and have to come in and make a hot lunch, my soup-casserole/omelet lunch is a real boon, for I can prepare it beforehand and it's no trouble to serve – a few minutes to set on the table. (p.24)

This is very “professional” talk. She knows what she is talking about, since it is her job to manage the meals. She seems to acknowledge that she is a “good cook and a manager”, and there's is no hesitation or uncertainty in her words, at least not to me. Her tone is very matter-of-fact and even “businesslike”, probably because of the confidence it reflects. She has a budget plan to follow and she has to make the meals as nourishing and tasty as possible within the budget frames. This is what she writes about the situation in 1940:

(8 Dec. 1940) I was writing my grocery order this morning, and I reflected that every week I had to make some kind of adjustment, to make my money go round evenly. This week toilet rolls are risen from 6d. pre-war to 11d. now – and a lot smaller at that. It's not scrap of good, either, asking for more housekeeping or grizzling, so I keep on ‘dodging’. It's really funny how really *frightened* of a long addition I can get, or any kind of finance outside, and yet my own £3.10s.0d. has to be budgeted and re-budgeted, added and subtracted and planned as if it was fortune – and it doesn't worry or bother me. (p.92)

The wartime household economy was tough business – adjustments after adjustments. I think she enjoyed budgeting because doing that she could be independent and use power and her organizational skills. In this respect, being a housewife did not mean being suppressed or passively taken care of. It was active participation in economics and society. As we have seen in the chapter on marriage, Nella had not, however, always been pleased with that role. She felt that being a housewife did not get the consideration that it deserved from the State (and society – not to mention her husband) (p.227), and that she had been too tied to the house. As said above, it was the appreciation and the feeling of doing important work that she seemed to need. In fact, she even mentions that she would have liked to be a writer if she had had “the brains and the time” but turned her creativity to her home and cooking (p.19). The brains she undoubtedly would have had but I suppose no time, as taking care of the household came first since it was her “part” as a woman. Therefore, the household work filled the need of feeling



useful. Thus, I think she found mostly pleasure in the household work, and that is also why the busy days of war, with voluntary work in addition to the home, made her write in such an energetic way about herself – she was more in control of things and herself.

Nella's creativity came in handy during the war, especially when it came to cooking which presented many problems because of the lack of certain ingredients. Her diary serves as an organizer and a recipe book as well, as she describes carefully her cooking arrangements:

*(8 Aug. 1940)* I asked him (*Cliff*) last night what he would like best for a birthday tea. He thought very carefully and then said, 'Orange whip and Viennese bread.' Such a simple wish, and such a boyish one. As oranges with full flavour are difficult to get, and 4d. each, I decided to use a Rowntree's orange jelly. I used to use the juice of four jaffas in the old 1d. orange days, and 1d. worth of gelatine which now costs about 4d., for the same quantity. I made jelly with slightly less water than usual, whipped it when cold but not set, and added three stiffly beaten whites of eggs that I had saved from baking. They did not know it was not made from fresh oranges, and I did not say anything when they said it the 'best ever'! (p.67-68)

Shopping, too, took time and effort if one wanted to be economical. Nella Last expresses her competence in this field:

*(7 May 1941)* I've a real love and talent for shopping. I am not a 'telephone shopper', and don't really like my butcher to 'send what he can'. I got veal and mutton for a pie. I'd have preferred beef and mutton, but it should be all right: a veal jelly-bone, with enough meat on it to make a little bowl of potted meat, and a shank-end mutton bone for a stock-pot – all for 2s.1d., so I've still 11d. left for when Cliff goes back. I had put 6d. worth of cress seeds on some felt for my chicks, but it's been grand for salads – with chopped carrots and beets – and our Cliff could eat salads at every meal. There will be enough for the chicks too, and I've planted a little more to come on later. Lettuce were from 1s.2d. to 1s.7d. today, and not as good value as my scrap of cress, costing 1d. at most. I'm *stubborn* – I'll not buy things I think are too highly priced, or queue for them. (p.144-145)

It is funny that she once mentions being "dumb" in not understanding "markets and economics" (p.228), yet to me it seems that it is exactly what she does

understand. She belittles her knowledge of economics but agrees that she knows “how to plan ahead and work in my own little sphere” (p.228). The boundaries of her household are the boundaries of her competence or, should I say, confidence. Maybe it is because her kind of competence was not valued as much as the competence, say, in the public business life (= the masculine sphere), yet it’s the same kind of budgeting only the amounts of money differ. She *thinks* that she doesn’t understand “markets” just because she is not supposed to know about them. Yet, she firmly believes she is good at her job – perhaps better than your average housewife – in managing her household. To her diary, she feels free to state her expertise in this field, often, in a form of criticism towards the War Cabinet. She calls the rationing a “farce” (p.201), because it was not fair – greedy people took more than their share which resulted in shortage of essential goods, such as coal. She also blames the Cabinet for short-sightedness:

*(1 July 1940)* At times, when I see such silly waste in shop windows, I think it’s pity there are no women in the War Cabinet. It’s taken the powers that be all this time to see the shocking waste of sugar in the confectioner’s shops, and to realise it would be better to let people have sugar for jam. I’d like to have some of them to come and stay for a weekend. I’d show them a few things, and tell them what women thought – real everyday commonplace women like myself, who had to budget on a fixed income, and saw ordinary things wasted and no shortage of unnecessary things. (p.65)

Her confident discourse comes from the fact that she appears to know what she is talking about. She regards herself talented and educated in a commonsensical way – and she had to be, because her husband was not taking any part in the household management, but not did she ever expect him to. Shopping and cooking were the household jobs in which she truly found pleasure, those being the tasks in which she could make a difference.

### *The satisfied housewife*

Household management seemed to be something over which housewives competed. Nella mentions a friend of hers, Isa, who had an evacuee woman

staying at her house that criticized the way Isa ran her house. Nella seemed upset about this and made a comment that the woman did not appear too clean herself. For a housewife like Nella, a household run well was one thing to be recognized and respected for – and criticized for – at least among the female population. When Cliff brings an army friend for a visit, Nella immediately feels obliged to unpack all the stored household goods and “straighten the lounge” (p.164). The outbreak of the war, gives her an opportunity to “shine” in what she has been good at, also in other people’s eyes:

*(3 Oct. 1941)* I get many a chuckle at myself nowadays – no hiding away my dodges and strict economies as I used to. Instead, I broadcast ‘how little fat’, or ‘how economical’ my bits and bobs of recipes are. And Gran’s old recipes are going the rounds. Her piccalilli and chutney are pronounced ‘marvellous’. I had no time to copy out a recipe one day, and hurriedly pushed my old tattered recipe book in my basket, to do it at the Centre. I got on with my job, and when I went into the office, a chorus of ‘Would you mind me taking a recipe for...’ greeted me. It’s childish of me, I know, but it gives me such a warm feeling to find I’ve anything people want. I’ve not a lot to give, and I do so like giving. (p.173-174)

Practicality and economical cooking was exactly what was emphasized by the authorities in charge of wartime food supplies. “I have congratulated myself lately on the way I’ve ‘managed all’”, Nella confesses (p.204). The worse the shortage of supplies, the more successful turns the story with her household. The boys had always been praising her cooking but now even her husband gives her credit for her clever ways, a remark that she had been waiting for thirty years, she reveals (p. 167). Everyone seems to rely on her help, be it the neighbours or the women in the Centre. She had gained a reputation as a woman who could make a feast out of anything. Rightly so, Nella felt happy about her skills. She did not have to be secretly ashamed of saving in food costs anymore as she mentions she used to feel. I think part of her wartime courage and endurance comes from the confidence she gained by discovering her competence.

*The significance of home*

The house is Nella's working ground with various responsibilities. I suppose that is the reason why the house is so dear to her; it is the trademark of her work as a mother and a caretaker. This is how she describes it on a spring day:

*(14 Mar 1941)* ...it's only a semi-jerry-built modern house, with little value in it. I keep telling myself that, but then the soft sheen of my 'autumn-tiled' fireplace or my gay bright curtains or the polished, panelled hall takes my eye, and I know it's just 'Chinese' way of talking – and my hand goes to stroke a cushion or curtain, or move my brass tray to catch the sun. (p.117)

The house carries a strong symbolic value as *her* accomplishment to Nella, she never talks about "our house". Her husband may have bought it but it is she who makes it a home. Therefore, she feels worried about it getting ruined in the bombing:

*(4 May 1941)* Now I've a sick shadow over me as I look at my loved little house that will never be the same again. The windows are nearly all out, the metal frames strained, the ceilings down, the walls cracked and the garage roof showing four inches of daylight where it joins the wall. Doors are splintered and off – and there is the *dirt* from the blast that swept down the chimney. (p.138)

Most of the women and children of the town flee to the countryside when the bombing is worst. Her husband wants them to go, too, but Nella refuses to leave the house and her animals. She replies that there is no good in her life if she was to lose everything she held dear and, with it, her self-respect. Presumably, a great deal of her self-respect was in fact related to her home. To lose it would have been to lose part of one's self-esteem, just as a one can feel if one gets unemployed.

However, Nella has also another account on the matter. Sometimes she feels uninterested in the house. She points out that she has no pride in spring cleaning anymore in the way she used to have, that in fact something "died" in her and, perhaps, something was born (p.197-198). It is possibly because its' place has been taken by the new responsibilities outside the house; her priorities have

changed. She writes as if she used to have a fixed identity which has now split into two different women. Be what it may, but it seems to puzzle her:

*(6 May 1941)* I don't know what's wrong with me, or what my reactions really are. There are two distinct 'me's'. One says, 'Oh, look at that plaster off, and look at that crack in the wall – it's worse than yesterday.' The other me says, 'Um', and turns indifferently away. I wish the two of me would go together again, and think about things more, it's so *odd*. If anyone had told me *I* could feel so detached at my little treasured home ruined, I could never have believed it. (p.144)

Due to the war, the changes in the society – even if considered temporary arrangement – were altering discourses on gender roles. Despite the wartime propaganda underlining the importance of women in homes “treasuring the British way of life”, the practises of many women were so different from the life before that it generated new discourses. I think part of Nella's puzzlement are the conflicting expectations and discourses concerning women in the society. Part of her doesn't see the house and its' chores as important anymore:

*(5 Dec. 1942)* ...I thought of other little changes, both in myself and friends. Of our slaphappy way of 'doing the bits that showed most', making beds soon after rising, without the turning and airing we once thought so needful: now, in my rush out on two mornings a week, they are lucky to be straightened. I saw pillow-slips and towels, even underclothes, scrutinized to see if they were *quite* soiled – or would they do another day, or week? I saw myself putting on a dress, working all day at the Centre and then having neither time nor energy to change when I got in – just a quick wash, and a house-dress in gay print, as I cooked tea. I thought of the stack of dirty crocks to tackle after the tea, of pictures and furniture that were once polished every week, and now got done when I had the time. I wondered if people would *ever* go back to the old ways. I cannot see women settling to trivial ways – women who have done worthwhile things. (p.229)

I am not saying that the gender roles were altering in the Last family – she still did the housework just like before. But now she seems to assume that the women's traditional role was more trivial than the role many had during the war. In early 1941, she wrote that she was lucky to still possess all the little things that “make a woman's life” – home, husband and sons, all the little routine actions of home life, and cooking and caring for a home, that make for the stability of mind (p.135).

The passage above shows another perspective to her thinking: maybe the abovementioned things alone do not “make a woman’s life” after all. I do not think the meaning of home is any less important to her but the household management alone gives less satisfaction than what it used to. Her new responsibilities outside the home take up more and more of her time and interest.

### 5.3. The discussions on war work

#### *Choosing to work*

Nella’s account of her wartime employment emphasize clearly the voluntary nature of her engagement; she was in no way obliged to work. As she proudly put it to an acquaintance, she was *choosing* to work (p.218). To my knowledge she wasn’t paid anything so she never discusses salaries or trade unions, that was more the concern of younger women I suppose. Nor does she even think about being paid to, I assume, since she has been working without compensation all her life. War work was one’s patriotic duty to one’s country above all. Besides, it was the same kind of “women’s work” that she was doing at home, and could be seen as an extension of her caretaker duties, which fell “naturally” on her. At Hospital Supply she was mainly knitting; at the mobile canteen she was working as an advisory cook overlooking and giving advice on economical and tasty food (p.168) – only the Red Cross Shop was something new to her. She enjoyed every task, though, and comments: “It’s what I’ve always wanted to do – I am realizing what a knack of dodging and cooking and managing I possess..” (p.168).

Because of the war the family Last was more or less broken up, and, in my opinion, part of Nella’s dedication to her work is a result of that. She needed a substitute to home or otherwise she would have felt completely useless. This is what she wrote in the first weeks of the war: “I’ve always had a rather narrow life and my joys have been so simple. I seem to have built a home like a jackdaw – straw by straw – and now my straws are all blowing away!” (p.18). She complained about there being nobody to bake for at home since the boys were

gone. She rejoices over the busy days at the Centre around Christmastime, as spending too much time in a quiet home would only make her weep (p.183). Yet she ended up getting more than a mere substitute to home because, in addition, she gained a completely new view on her life.

*Nella taking the initiative*

Of Nella's several jobs outside the home the Red Cross shop was the most beloved one. She writes about it with such enthusiasm and pride probably because it was her own project. In the summer of 1942, the Red Cross organizer from London visited Barrow to find people for a committee, which would take care of the shop. The second-hand shop was to raise money for the Red Cross, who sent parcels to British prisoners of war. In the preparatory meeting it was Nella who opened her mouth and started "the ball rolling" – she was willing to go in for it if only she got help from the others. Therefore, she was to form a committee, and look for a shop to get rent- and rate-free (p. 211-212). She threw herself into the project whole-heartedly and found the effort fulfilling when it finally opened:

*(26 Aug/1 Sept. 1942)* Such a happy worthwhile day, it makes up for all the thought and planning, all the hurry and tiredness of the last three hectic weeks. There is no sweetness like success of effort./ Stuff poured into the Centre for the shop, and I'd to keep taking it round and pricing it. When I went there just before we came home, I found that, when the shop closed today, we would just have reached £100 for the week we have been open! (p.215-216)

Hardly work of a withdrawn and frail woman which she wrote that she used to be, as we have read before. Despite her modesty, she writes of herself here as an initiative taking woman who has confidence and belief in what she has started. She compares this enterprise to her dearest "project" of bringing up her sons:

*(18 Dec. 1943)* I smiled to myself as I thought of the wee shop – my baby, my dear child – not business, at all. Next to my lads it comes. At first, I felt frightened to love it – though it would be just another 'dear gazelle', but when Mrs. Waite was so unpleasant about it, I discovered claws and fangs –

and an acid, biting edge to my tongue. I used the lot in my fear that my wee shop would be closed, just because a narrow, selfish old woman was jealous that she was not to get the credit at all for it. It grew into a 'living thing', which I felt needed only care to live and prosper. (p.268)

She clearly has put her heart and soul into the shop, as well her skills and talent. She takes the work very personally, not separating her heart from her head. Therefore, she sees the shop as of her own flesh and blood, and fights for it like a mother standing up for her children. I would suspect that if it was a man writing here he would talk about "markets and economics" in a much more impersonal way. But, Nella writes here from a standpoint of a woman in a caretaker role rather than that of a "hard businesswoman". She doesn't have that kind of ambition, nor could she see herself in that position:

(25 June 1945) I was so touched by the people stopping me and telling me how sorry they were about the Red Cross shop closing. A prominent hairdresser said, 'You have put enough work into that shop to establish a good little business – now it's gone and all been in vain. Look at the money you could have made for yourself.' I smiled and went on. I thought, 'I could never have kept on if it had been for myself. I would often have thought it was not worth the struggle, just to make money for myself, to buy things I did not need. (p.291)

For Nella, the effort was not all in vain, though. She mentions that she always felt so worthwhile, as if she was really helping (p.292). I think she had ambition but it was to make something *of* herself, rather than make something *for* herself. This is what she writes near the end of the war:

(18 June 1945) No one could have realized what that little junk-shop has been to me. I *loved* it, and felt a blessing from every 10s. we raised. It's not always been easy going. I've had a few fights, even if they *were* quiet ones. It grew and grew. We never *knew* the happiness we brought to poor P.O.W.s [*i.e. Prisoners of War*], but could feel our work was worthwhile: I felt I was a soldier like my Cliff – and we will be demobbed about the same time. Arthur said, 'You have earned a rest. And see you take it.' I shall do, and will turn gladly to reading again, but must find some outside interest. I can never go back to that harem existence my husband thinks so desirable. Barrow is strangely short of interests – constructive ones. I detest politics...I'm not a churchgoer, so work on Mothers' Unions – horrors – is denied me. I'll work for the hospital; but there again, it's my dollies which



will be most welcome, and that means indoor work. As Mrs. Howson often says, 'There is so little personal work.' Mrs. Higham says she is waiting the time to get me on the Social and Moral Welfare Committee – I feel I couldn't care less. (p.289-290)

As was pointed out above, it seems that she has been missing a challenge in her life, and that is also the reason for her feelings of an outsider in life and a prisoner in marriage. Now, when she was to go back to the pre-war 'normal life', she confesses her mind is in chaos (p.294). The change-over had gaps and nothing was to be quite the same as before, mainly because of the changes in her identities – perhaps not so much in gender roles at large.

*The work mates – female bonding*

On the first days of the war, Nella confesses to her diary (p.10) that for the first time ever, she longs for a close woman friend. What she wasn't aware then was that she was about to get acquainted with a half of the female population of Barrow. Wartime voluntary work brought (mostly middle-class) women together in a way quite extraordinary to many of them. Before they had met each other while doing their shopping, in the market place, or perhaps while calling on a friend, whereas now they were to unite their efforts and work together for a common cause. I want to argue that the uniqueness of these circumstances brought out new kind of solidarity between these women. Whereas earlier there was competition, there was now less of that and more comradeship (among most of them). Instead of being competitors, the women were partners and instead of being separated, they were now united. In the end of 1940 Nella sends out a quiet wish that they would all finish as they began – together (p.98).

Nella writes about the pleasure that the Centre work brings because of the people working there. It served as temporary "breather" from constant worrying:

*(14 Mar 1940)* ...I notice the same subdued look in a lot of women's eyes. And yet we laugh a lot at the Centre, and I know I laugh and clown more than I've done since I was a girl. Perhaps the 'quiet look' is a hangover from nights when we lie quiet and still, and all the worries and unhappy thoughts

we have put away in the day come and bring all their friends and relations!  
(p.45)

Workmates kept one going when everything seemed desperate. Thus, working together convinced Nella how valuable co-operation was. Even she had not known some of them for long, it is easy to believe the circumstances made them very close. She referred to one of them as “only a war-time friend” (p.76) but is moved to tears of the woman’s consideration towards her. The women seemed to find comfort in each others company because they all shared the same fears. This probably made it possible for them to relate to each other and give strength to each other, as this short passage shows:

*(17 June 1940)* Miss Mac and a ‘nearby stranger’ came in from the next street. She goes to our Centre, and sits at our table, and she apologised so humbly ‘for coming bothering’; but she said, ‘I wanted to have something sure to hold. Everyone round me was convinced we were ‘done’, and in some odd way I felt I’d like it to be Centre day, and then I thought of you and felt like to come.’ I said, ‘Come in my dear, I think we are all feeling the same.’ (p.64)

Nella describes how people felt a sense of solidarity and sincerely wanted to help each other. She felt sorry for a woman who put her head in the gas oven just because she thought she had no friends, when the best thing for her would have been to come and work in the Centre. She remarks: “We welcome all the nervy ones that come along, and although we too have nerves, they are not the kind that would shorten our lives, and we *do* try and keep calm and on an even keel. I detect pride, and a sense of belonging in her words. The people in the Centre seemed to form a female community with a common goal and effort. Through work the community grew into something “bigger”, as the women experienced collective sorrow, happiness and hope. Work in the Centre wasn’t only serving the purpose of “being useful” for them, but it also had an emotional function. I think that it must have been the first time for Nella to be connecting emotionally outside the home sphere. Therefore, it is so difficult for her to get detached from the community:

(31 May 1945) There seemed a shadow on us all at the Centre, with Mrs. Waite ill and the feeling that soon we will be scattered. It's been grand to work all together – finding, if not comfort, that at least, when things looked black, we cheered each other up, and felt we were helping. Mrs. Woods came in, then went to a meeting; and people came in for wool and stayed to chat. I collected some flowers to send to Mrs. Waite, and Miss Heath suddenly said, 'Lasty, I'm going to miss you more than I realised. I'll have no one to tease and torment me, trying to shock me with 'Have you heard this one?'' – and we talked of the little jokes and days that are rapidly taking on the golden hue of 'Do you remember?' We are forgetting already any little troubles like the blitz and it's effect on the old building, pipes bursting and no heating, and times when Mrs. Waite was so cross and difficult. (p.285)

This female bonding, one could argue, was new to Nella and her kind of middle-class housewives. Many of them had been only in close ties to their family and relatives whereas it had probably been men's privilege to come together, for example, at work, in politics and sports. These women were now experiencing a feeling of unity. Near the end of the war Nella writes: "It's been a long and trying road, but I found comradeship, and it brought peace of mind when otherwise I'd have broken" (p.282). I could imagine it was hard to put an end to their work and "go back to the house".

The Centre was a place where the women came for a chat and a gossip. It was also good amusement, a place where little everyday dramas come up:

(13 May 1941) I was quite busy, sorting wool and booking it carefully as I gave it out, and feeling pleased at the pile of returned work, when Mrs. Lord swept in like an act of God! She was furious at my 'interference', and would not listen to anything I'd to say at all. That got my back up and I went 'all mischievous' – the best way I've found to deal with some people! I went 'big-eyed', and put my finger on my lips and said, 'Sh, sh, sh, *shush* – NOT in front of the children, dear,' and all the 'children' howled – women of fifty to sixty who had come in and sat for a chat. Mrs. Wilkins looked ghastly, but still laughed till she cried, and then said, 'That settled it – we will get a couple of tables up on Thursday and start. It's the only place crazy enough nowadays to get a laugh – pictures seem a waste of time and the wireless bores me.' Mrs. Lord said grandly, 'So *little* amuses us these hysterical times,' and her pursed mouth and prim look of disapproval set us off again like a pack of silly kids. (p.153)

As one can see, the Centre was by no means without any difficulties or arguments because, just as in any other working community, hierarchies existed. As a resourceful person, Nella took initiative and opened the Centre for War Savings and knitting to be handed in. Even though having got a permission from the head of Centre, Mrs. Waite, she stepped on somebody else's toes and got the blame for "*daring to go above her head*" (p.153-155). Luckily, that time the situation resolved with using humour, as it often did.

Occasional problems are also caused by Mrs. Waite, who, according to Nella, envies her cheerfulness and popularity, which leads to her taking advantage of good-temperedness and scolding her for taking all credit at work. Patient as Nella is, she usually just ignores her sharp tongue, yet sometimes surprising everybody by getting very upset (p.202). Nella's role in the Centre is the one a peacemaker, therefore her rare outbursts of temper are not left unnoticed, as everybody expects her to sort things out. "The importance of her cheerfulness" cannot be underestimated at the Centre, therefore it was a "crime" for her to come in tired by "*paltry housework*", was once remarked by Mrs. Waite (p.59). In this sense, I think her tact even turns a bit against her, as she feels obliged to behave accordingly. Therefore, she enjoys jotting down her frustrations in her diary:

*(8 Feb. 1940)* It's been a really dreadful rush at the Centre, for Mrs. Waite is still away ill and Mrs. Lord, although capable, has the fatal knack of saying the wrong thing and offending people; and Mrs. Machin, although a good secretary, is just getting over 'flu and inclined to be a bit touchy; so we have all had to pull together and leave them alone as much as possible. I feel as if I don't want to hear the word 'tact' for at least a fortnight! (p.38)

Her remarks are sometimes mean, flavoured with a dry sense of humour. She criticizes the way the canteen is run, and especially the head of it, whose system of buying things is "so poor that there's always a shortage of something" (p.176). This kind of remarks she keeps to herself, though, probably because of her need to please everybody.

*Discrepancies of the “self”*

There is another discourse apparent underneath “the enthusiastic worker” one. Nella feels that her behaviour as a worker was so different from her “normal self” that she is mixed up in what she really is like. She seems to see herself not half as cheerful as the other people see her. This leads to her seriously pondering her identity. There are many remarks in the diary such as : “Come to think of it, down at the W.V.S. Centre they think I’m a ‘mental tonic’, as old Mrs. Waite put it. I must be a very good actress, for I don’t feel gay often.” (p.22) She describes that her behaviour is often different from her mood: “I think I’m digging myself into a deep rut, and soon I’ll not be able to see out of it – only along it. Yet I never consciously worry. I chatter gaily at the Centre. It’s queer to feel numb and hollow, instead of vital.” (p.258). The whole situation was rather unusual on the home front, maybe that is why she feels so alienated and detached from herself. I think she was getting a bit “war weary”.

(2 July 1942) I feel I’m dividing more and more into two people: the quiet, brooding woman who, when alone, likes to draw the quiet round her like a healing cloak; and the gay lively woman who ‘keeps all going’, who ‘never worries about anything’. People soon exhaust me nowadays. (p.210)

What she describes appears to me like a perfect example of female adjustment, a way of surviving endlessly in any situation. Everybody expected miracles from her, and what else could she do but perform:

(10 Sept. 1942) I wonder if it’s true that all women are born actors. I wonder what I’m *really* like. I know I’m often tired, beaten and afraid, yet someone at the canteen said I radiated confidence.../...What would I *really* be like if all my nonsense and pretence was taken from me? I have a sneaking feeling I’d be very scared, ageing woman with pitifully little. It’s an odd thing to reflect: *no* one knows *anyone* else, we don’t even know ourselves very well. (p.217)

She touches upon question of how solid our identities really are. She is trying to find a real her somewhere underneath what she calls ‘nonsense’, only to get nowhere because there’s no ONE truth to her. I think her working identity is a

new side to her, a way of surviving the day. Surely she must have used up most of her energy after a long day at work, and feels “gloomier” alone, yet the quiet her is not any more real than the one appearing at work.

## 6. DISCUSSION

I have explored the diary of Nella Last and attempted to reconstruct her life as a female person, emphasizing those topics that she herself talked about from my perspective. This has been a glance to a woman's life in the most patriarchal of all contexts – the war. The war is an effort which is mostly about men's virility and power as fighters and protectors of women, home and nation. Therefore, it has been interesting to look at how a woman constructed herself during this extraordinary time, how she dealt with the wartime changes in her life. In the following passage, I will discuss Nella's narratives on a more general level and discuss what kind of discourses of femininity, of those available, were the ones that she chose (and what she could choose and was made to choose). These discourses can be defined as practices, rules and systems that guide the way of understanding - and thus constructing - what it means to be a woman.

Penny Summerfield (1998:78-105, 252-286) has characterized two types of women's discourses in her study of oral histories of the Second World War roughly dividing the women into two categories of "the traditionalists" and "the modernists". She describes that the "traditionalists" were stoics who saw the wartime as something to be endured, framing their wartime stories in terms of continuity with what women had always been: people for whom the satisfactions of marriage, children, home-making and life (with all its variety and complications) in the bosom of the family were sufficient. The "modernists" were the ones telling heroic accounts of themselves, constructing narratives structured by the concept of change, despite the possible resistance from society towards their effort. Next, I would like to observe Nella's diary from this point of view. However, my intention is not to place Nella Last into either of the categories as such but, look at her accounts as having aspects of both; she presents contradictory discourses and views on femininity – some of her stories can be called modern, in the sense that they challenge the gender stability of the time, and some can be defined as traditional because they echo that. This clearly indicates the fact that within a person, several discourses can be at work at the same time.

Of those various discourses, one tries to construct a somewhat coherent female identity.

### **6.1. Traditionalist discourses**

This passage deals with those narratives of Nella Last that I consider belonging to the patriarchal ideology in society. I will also try to relate her views to the public discussion on women's roles of the time.

Nella's accounts of motherhood reflected the traditionalist discourses of femininity. To her, all women were either mothers and non-mothers, motherhood being the superior level of femininity to strive for. She seemed to think motherhood was given to women by God. She wrote of herself as a good mother nurturing her children – and, to some extent, also her husband – selflessly and unconditionally. However, it seems that she gave little space for herself (and other mothers) to move around within the frame of traditional, proper motherhood which she pictured. For example, a mother should dress and behave in a certain way – pants and prams could not be combined! Her opinion could have been affected by wartime propaganda which encouraged women to preserve aspects of pre-war feminine appearance (Summerfield, 1998:81). In addition, she thought that the 'perfect' patriotic mother held it her duty for her country as a mother to stoically wait for the boys on the home front, keeping up 'the home ways' and 'home morals'.

Furthermore, women were naturally life-givers, not life-takers. During the war, it was the men who took lives and women who gave them. Nella supported firmly the pleas of the government for more babies to keep the nation going strong. When reducing maternal work into a 'natural' aspect of a woman's identity, this determined her other roles as well. Thus, in Nella's opinion, women with children were not to work outside the home. Nella's narrative is consistent with the discourse of pronatalism (the contemporary emphasis on the need to increase the birth-rate) in the 1940's which constructed motherhood, undertaken full-time and



not combined with paid work, as the socially acclaimed role for women (Summerfield,1998:210). It has to be noted that while supporting this image of motherhood, she herself had no young children to take care of anymore which enabled her to work outside the house – yet if she had had I think she would have stayed there without hesitation. I am convinced that she would have felt guilty if she had not; to her it would have been failing to go along with the ‘normal’, good motherhood. In this respect, Nella echoed a rather conventional view published by the writer Gertrude Williams, in her book on women and work (*Women and Work: 1945*) (Summerfield,1998:102), stating that younger women were to stay at home and rear children while for older women, confinement in the home was bad. When a woman’s children were grown up, and no longer required all her “skill, interest and energy”, she should work part-time. (one could say, this view represented a development which would still marginalize women, despite the partial engagements outside the home). This kind of construction of motherhood taken up by a housewife can be said to give very much control to society over personal choices concerning motherhood. Thus, it enabled society to control women/mothers in the public sphere: it could determine what kind of work – if any – was appropriate for a mother.

To Nella being a wife was closely related to the women’s caretaker role in society. This is what government reports, as well as more popular writing, repeatedly declared: women’s primary orientation was to be marriage and motherhood which biologically, socially and morally dominated her life (Summerfield,1998:200). Aligning with that, Nella’s discourse is partly traditionalist, in a sense that she does write as a wife whose main concern was the welfare of her husband. She did not seem to seriously question her role as a caretaker in her actions, even if she might have uttered dissenting opinions to being confined to *only* that. It seems that, in her opinion, gendered hierarchy and a division of labour within marriage embodied happiness for both sexes and stability for society – to an extent. Thus, according to her, the gender structures in society were not to be eliminated altogether.

Concerning Nella's discourses on work, what is traditionalist in them is that her work both outside and inside the home can be regarded as gender-specific – she was not a person to question the sex-segregated division of work (By this, I mean that she didn't question the existence of "women's work" and "men's work" in both the private and public sphere.) Thus, for instance, she regarded household work as her natural sphere of employment which without a doubt fell on her, whereas her husband would be responsible for other things, say, the car. Her war work, as well, was done for the boys and men on the warfront as an extension of her caretaker duties. In a way, it was patriotic "mothering", too. Nella was all for working outside the house if the job kept to the female category of work. Thus, she is a traditionalist in assuming a natural connection between female identity and a caretaker work in society.

In addition, Nella's narratives of war work reflect traditional aspects considering that she first regarded war work as a 'nerve-consoler' rather than as 'real' work. Even though war work did turn into something more than that it can still be considered as an emotional substitute to shattering home life. Perhaps due to that, she didn't seem to mind that her work was uncompensated voluntary work; she never even considered she could be rewarded something for her efforts. As Adkins and Lucy have argued (according to Lawler, 1996:157), the caring work which women do as part of their jobs outside the house is naturalized, transformed into 'non-work', just as in the home. Hence the skills and the labour which go into caring are not recognized and not rewarded. Nella Last was an example of a 'non-worker', her narrative emphasizes the natural connection between womanhood and unpaid care work.

## **6.2. Modernist discourses**

Of Nella's narratives, several can be called 'modernist' in a sense that they challenged the traditional discourses of women's roles of that time.

Concerning marriage, Nella criticizes it as a source of discontent. She sees wifehood as too passive a state, and marginal as a role in society. Thus, I would call her discourse modernist even if it seems that she does not necessarily believe that she could change her own marriage in a revolutionary way but thinks that marriages in future were to be more equal and companionate. Furthermore, as her story goes on, she gives marriage a less dominant position in her life; it no longer represented fulfilment for her life, and marriage could be combined with outside activities, too.

The modernist narratives of marriage and war work intertwine a great deal because Nella's liberated discourse on marriage depends on her becoming a more active participant outside the house. It can be claimed that the war did away with the boundary between the home and the wider society which enabled Nella to seek responsibilities in war work, thus making possible her discourse on a 'liberated' marriage. The Labour MP Edith Summerskill (as quoted by Summerfield,1998:254) presented in 1942 an image of the modern woman freed by the war to discover her own value and her importance as a citizen. Other writers, such as a popular writer Peggy Scott followed her lead, and thought that especially the older women, who had experienced the isolation of home-life before the war, would be ready to welcome change (Summerfield,1998:257). This kind of thinking can be found in Nella's discourse – she had filled her duty as a reproducer (note that this role was never questioned), hence she now wanted more responsibility and respect. She no longer found the same satisfaction in her roles within the home, so work in the public sphere was motivated by selfish reasons: a need for self-fulfilment and recognition by society. In other words, she didn't want to be 'the outsider' anymore. Furthermore, what can be regarded as modernist is that she wanted to continue with her public responsibilities after the war, she did not want to think of them as temporary like the popular representations of women's participation in war work did at the that time (Summerfield,1998:83).

Nella's modernist accounts can be looked at as stories of maturation from timidity to extroversion and self-confidence. I claim that the biggest personal change that the war brought about to her was more self-reliance which resulted in activity. It can be said that she became emancipated to an extent. Partly because of this, she started questioning male authority, and gained gender awareness. This is also what Summerfield (1998:273) found in some of her interviewees' narratives on war and personal change: The war may have made no difference in gender hierarchy, which was based on men's sexual, economic and political power, yet it revealed many women the implications that this hierarchy had for them as women.

As to home life, Nella's demand for being respected for household work is an aspect of modernist discourse. She wants to be regarded as a business partner who deserves a fair compensation for her efforts within the house. In this she also included rearing children, which shows a modernist feature in her otherwise very traditional view on motherhood. These views can be related to the discourse of 'welfare feminism' (Summerfield, 1996:230) (the term which is used to describe such political activities relating to a role of women as wives and mothers) promoted by some working and middle class women, trying to improve women's position within their sphere, for example, by demanding better maternity and childcare facilities and family allowances, instead of rewriting the gender roles altogether. In a sense, it can also be called traditionalist, if one assumes that accepting these roles means accepting men's view of women. However, I would call it somewhat modernist, considering that a person needs to be respected and treated equal whatever her role is. One has to remember that had the women gained what welfare feminism promoted, it would have been a great step ahead in women's rights in the 40's; thus taking into account the context of society at the time, I categorize that discussion as modernist discourse.

So, how a woman experienced her life in the time of the Second World War (as in any time) depended not solely on social class, age or education, but also on how she 'took up as her own' the models of what it meant to be a woman, available to her during the war. It depended on the ways in which she confronted the

institutions that “reproduce and dictate social models of and for women” (Summerfield,1998:285). I would like to add that the social models, in turn, were affected by women’s reconstructions of themselves, thus enabling women to change them, at least to an extent. Yet, as mentioned earlier, those models were confusing and contradictory, not least because of the wartime circumstances. In wartime, men must fight for and defend the vulnerable women and children of the motherland. According to Summerfield (1998:91), gender stability depended upon this construction, which was upheld against all challenges, no matter how starkly it contradicted the experience of women mobilised for war. Hearth and home, and the gendered social structure for which they were a metaphor, were to be kept at the centre of national identity. The country needed people to support this rhetoric, yet at the same time women were needed to contribute to the war effort, which was to alter some of their roles. Hence, in my opinion, various views affected Nella Last’s construction of femininity.

### **6.3. Home – a source of oppression?**

Nella’s reconstruction of herself as a woman can be seen as winded around the dichotomy between private life/public life. This leads to an interesting question of whether home and family were/are really a source of oppression to women. Feminist thought has long seen the family as the major obstacle to most women’s ability to have ‘power over themselves’, and the resistance to such entrapment as essential to their liberation. The terms ‘oppression’ and ‘liberation’ are debatable and ambiguous but, in my opinion, here they serve their purpose as they are used for representing the preoccupations of white, middle-class women- which is exactly what Nella Last was. Janet Finch (in Coslett et al. 1996:13-20) has proposed that it is ‘*the*’ family, that is, the *dominant form* of nuclear family which embodies a particular definition of gender relations, conventionally allocating to a man the role of the breadwinner and to a woman the role of homemaker, and making women both dependent upon and subordinate to men. Of course, this is a crude oversimplification, yet it can be argued that on the basis of that, the women living inside ‘the’ family could feel discontented.

As a consequence of the industrial revolution the nuclear family was the normative family form in the Britain of 1940's. It reorganized productive work into two separate spheres, only one of which was paid for. The economic life set the scene for reordering of gender relations, and the physical separation between the home and the workplace became increasingly to be associated with a division of labour between women and men. As we have seen, Nella, on one hand, felt like the outsider in society because she did not feel that she was in control of anything, except her tiny kingdom called home. On the other hand, she also liked being the queen of her castle in the private sphere.

One could ask if activity in the public sphere is a road to contentment, then? In Nella's case, it appears that that was her idea of living a life of a full citizen, even if it was on a female field of voluntary work which can also be considered. Summerfield (1998:80) reports the freedom of many single women during the war was only the result of her not being what a woman was expected to become, a wife and mother. In other words, they were not emancipated as *women* but as persons who were thus not allowed to be feminine. They could be diluted to public employment, even to perform tasks normally done men because they were not 'real' women, hence their 'heroism' was more acceptable. Thus, gaining power over oneself required going against the grain of social life, losing some of one's femininity. In that sense, it is be argued that separate spheres were oppressive to women, since they could only be liberated by losing some aspects of their gendered identity. It seems that the highly polarized construction of masculinity and femininity can always be found oppressing. Margaretta Jolly (1997:24) argues that this patriarchal ideology prevented the upsurge of feminism in wartime, which so obviously tests the sexual division of labour upon which war was organized.

However, we shouldn't necessarily throw out family ties and domestic identities as criteria for fulfilment. For Nella, domestic life gave pleasure, an opportunity to use creative skills and gain feelings of success. Besides, the power that she

possessed in the household was actually quite remarkable. Furthermore, the experience of motherhood was anything but a source of discontent to her. Yet, it can be argued that the institution of motherhood within nuclear family in wartime Britain could be experienced as somewhat oppressing. It is not the motherhood itself or domestic identity itself which is so unpleasant, it is rather *the confinement to separate sphere of femininity* could be found oppressive, be it home or elsewhere, because it put women into inferior position in relation to men. I think Nella Last would not have welcomed the restoration of home and family after the war because her sons lived elsewhere, and would have regretted the return to “marginality”.

All in all, to me it seems that putting people, be it men or women, in clearly defined “gendered boxes” can create discontentment and confusion between what one is as a person and what one should be according to the norm, especially when there are big changes in society which create pressure for change.

#### **6.4. Writing a female self**

As commented in the chapter concerning women’s autobiographical writing, it has been considered more fragmentary and less concentrated on the self than men’s autobiographies. Taking Nella’s writing into consideration, it seems justified to say that her writing is very much about herself in relation to others. I found about her way of constructing her identity when she discussed about the other people around her: her sons, husband, workmates, neighbours. In a way, her identity is intertwined with the people close to her; I could say she stands alone as a person looking at herself *through* the others and *with* the others. Even if autobiographical writing is structured around the self, Nella’s story is as much as a story of independent self a narrative of the self in context. Whether it is the result of female “otherness” in society or not, I can’t say, I think it could also be a sign of a woman’s role as an mediator in the family circle.

Furthermore, she does not always give an image of a coherent identity. In fact, she does write a fragmentary self, constantly contradicting herself, and pondering

what she is really like, given that there are so many 'hers'. I think this can be taken as an example of how identities are always interpretive and self is constantly in the move. Of the various discourses available for the writing of the self, one tries to construct a somewhat coherent female identity. Often one can get perplexed in the process, when noticing that the coherence is somewhat an illusion, for the self is constantly dissolved and recreated. The fragmentariness of Nella's writing could also be so visible because it is a diary recording one's life of the moment, not an autobiography written as a memoir in which case one has had time to explain rationally one's decisions and has forgotten the "irrelevances" and inconsistency of one's bygone days. As already mentioned, this kind of autobiographical writing differs from the canon of autobiography and thus, hasn't been considered worth taking into account by traditional history writing. I think it is the best mirror to human mind, though, in a sense that it reveals the occasional haphazardness of one's feelings and actions that can not be explained with logic.

I am left wondering how much of a woman which Nella constructed is a result of her writing practise, and if she thought that she was to write in a certain way to construct a picture of a socially appropriate femininity. I think all of us, even when writing a diary, write a somewhat polished picture of the self. I don't know whether Nella Last did go through with everything that she planned in her diary, I don't know whether she even agreed with everything that she had written, say, ten years afterwards. Nella's stories were a gate to her mind on *those specific days and moments* which the pages were dated on – her interpretation of herself and the situation in Britain at that particular time. I am left wondering what happened to her after the war. I have a feeling she did alright, because as she put it herself: "it's a wonderful philosophy of mine to try and take each day as it comes and do the best I can with it." (16). I certainly hope she *did* go for all the things that she wanted to achieve.



## 7. CONCLUSIONS

I have studied Nella Last's diary to shed light on various aspects of a British woman's life during the Second World War. The emphasis has been on the way she constructed herself and negotiated her roles as a "woman" in society, and the possible changes in those roles. It should be reminded here that this is a story of *one* woman. Nella Last's story provides a *partial* view to the complexities of being a woman in the wartime Britain. It is different, for instance, from the story of a young, single woman, who was working as a welder during the war, or from the tale of Nella's acquaintance, who put her head in the gas oven for not being able to take the war anymore. Those two would have other views on their female selves and their experiences as women. However, Nella's gender construction didn't take place in a vacuum, so we can expect the changes affecting her can also be related to the processes in the society at large. Hence, it can be assumed that *some* of the experiences were similar to other women of the time.

Referring back to the introduction of the thesis, my intention has not been to find answers for the question of whether the women were emancipated or not during the war, like so many "traditional" historians have tended to do, as there are no clear right or wrong answers available. Nor have I tried to show the multiple ways in which women were oppressed in society because that kind of history writing tends to simplify the situation and ignore the differences of women and the richness of women's experiences and therefore, is beside the point to me. The histories that unfold are neither straightforward marches of progress nor oppression, and the dimensions of women's history are too simply extensive to fit a simplistic linear model. The accounts of how women have been and should be do not now - and have not in the past - constituted a unified culture of femininity.

Thus, I hope my study has demonstrated the importance of "alternative" history writing as opposed to the normative way of writing history. The historians' disagreements on whether women were liberated or not during the Second World War is done by overlooking many important issues. I am not saying that they are

wrong, and that the point of view of women's history would somehow be more justified than that of "traditional" history but it deserves to be brought out, because this kind of women's history writing has implications. It shows us that women have been living, making and creating history, too. They have been doing it mostly in the private sphere but that is just as important as the public one to be studied, because that is where the gender mechanisms underlie at their barest in every society. Furthermore, women's history can make us question the categories of gender held so self-evident in society and my humble wish is that it would also make the borders of those categories less fixed.

I'd like to point out that this was *my way* of trying to understand what it was to be a woman in Britain during the Second World War, and I am present in the text on every page of this study with my own ideas of womanhood. In a way, I am trying to 'figure myself out' as I try to reconstruct Nella. Looking at her diary from the perspective the present, I recognize the woman in her and I do not feel alienated from her, as one could think. I think the method of trying to read the diary with understanding and empathy brought me close to the "subject". In fact, there were moments when I thought I was not even doing research but discussing with a friend. Nella was easy to like and easy to identify with; I did not always agree with her yet I'd like to believe that I could understand her. This approach certainly helped me gain a deeper insight into a woman's life during wartime than any of the 'distanced-in-order-to-be-objective' history books that I have read so far.

So, as for myself, I know that writing this thesis has provided me with new ideas and perspectives. It has made me realize that "the truth" that history provides should always be questioned and requestioned, and that it should be seen as a partial view from a certain position. Thus, it should be noted that this paper, as a part of discourse of a wartime gender identity, would be different if it was written from some other standpoint and position. For history is constructed of many layers and cycles of discourses that re-occur. I picked up some of those – somebody else might have picked otherwise.

Moreover, me writing the story of a woman's roles with Nella has left me aware of how complex an issue a woman's role is – there are several conscious and unconscious forces governing the way we determine ourselves and are determined by our culture. Considering the past has made me pause and ponder about the roots of present-day circumstances in my own society. Looking at the narratives of a woman in 1940's has left me more aware than before of how I construct myself as a female person, which discourses I can choose from and more importantly has made me wonder why I, conscious of many of the conventions of the gendered society, still make certain choices “against my better judgment” (though not as much as used to) because that is how I was brought up as a woman. Thus, raising awareness about gender issues has had an influence on me (yet it has left some un- or semi-conscious parts of my identity unaffected). For me, the importance of this study lies exactly in this realization: gender constructions and gendered selves are complex issues which need to be constantly analysed in every context. Therefore, further research is needed on how gender operates in society and on “women” as products and producers of the practises and discourses of culture. Women's history can't tell us directly what should be done in the future but I think every inquiry into different experiences of different women in the past generates new questions, which makes us more aware of our own situation.

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