Between diary and memoir: documenting a life in wartime Britain

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‘Authenticity’

• Use and content

‘[the diary is] not meant to be read by anyone else...Unlike the letter, they have no addressee; they do not expect publication; and therefore, presumably, they are more truthful’. (Gass, 1994: 49)

• Materiality

The diary ‘signifies by virtue of its paper, its ink, its spelling and its script, and many other aspects while the printed text only captures words, and often very few words. To publish a journal then, is like trying to squeeze a sponge into a matchbox’ (Lejeune, 1999: 202).

• Temporality

‘should everyone keep a record of his daily acts and sentiments, the history of the world would be made out in a way that no historian could distort’. (Ford Maddox Brown, quoted in Steinitz, 1997: 52)
Evacuation: between diary and memoir

So, Thursday, register at your nearest school, receive instructions. Be ready to leave on Friday. Farewells, tears, bravado. [...] A long morning, waiting, getting bored. Don’t eat your sandwiches yet, you may have a long day. Mid-afternoon – Listen children, you’re not going to-day. Go home, come back tomorrow at eight. Go home, feeling a bit sheepish, at a loose end. Saturday. This time?

[...] Just three hours wait at school this time. Line up, littlest in the front, some with Mums, oldest i.e. us “lads” at the rear, labels on our lapels, two by two to Granton Road Station. Waves and weeps from families out to see the kids away.

The train was waiting. [...] after some indication that no one quite knew where or when they were going to take us, some shunting, some waiting, some hesitant stops and starts, I eventually recognised that we were en route for the Forth Bridge[after some 5 hours] at last, a station sign said “St Andrews”

Led by W.V.S. ladies we crocodiled out of the station [...] lots of ladies bustling about. Sandwiches and watery squash [...] names being read off lists and boys and girls being led off in ones and twos. [...] Another W.V.S. lady ‘you four boys with me’. A car, a short drive and a hand-over to an elderly couple [...]But they received us kindly [...]We handed over our iron rations and had tea of fresh warm scones and home-made jam. [...]On Sunday we explored our surroundings but were back by eleven to hear these [Neville Chamberlain’s] sombre words “[This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German government a final note, stating that unless we heard from them - by 11 o'clock - that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us] I have to tell you that no such undertaking has been received. Consequently, this country is at war with Germany”.
The Evacuation Diary

Of

Harry Tuckey

2nd September 1939

31st December 1939

 Wallace
 Balone
 St. Andrews
 Fife

% Maxwell
 Lumbo
 St. Andrews
 Fife

2nd September 1939

Assembled at school 8 a.m.
Left Granton Road station
at 11.30 a.m. Arrived at
St. Andrews

Stayed with Alex Cunningham
Arnold Silly
Duncan Rosie

Walked along Lade Brae

Walk and got rooms

Was Declared

Mon. Went to St. Andrews Bough
writing pad and envelopes.
‘Evacuees, in fact, played a vital role in wartime farming and various means were devised to provide teenage evacuees with basic training in agricultural practices’

(Moore-Colyer, 2004: 190).
SUNDAY 27

Sent 101' home
Milked cow
Mrs. Maxwell ill in bed

THURSDAY 31

Finished bath
Mrs. Maxwell still in bed.

OCTOBER—NOVEMBER, 1940

Friday 15

Went to Deane's was put in Stage Patrol
Mrs. Maxwell had to undergo an operation
for a growth on the bowels.

Saturday 16

Sawed up legs in morning
Met Seymour. He gave us a fish supper
in January.

Mrs. Maxwell died in the hospital at 10 1/2 am.
JANUARY, 1940

15 MONDAY

MEMO

Listened to Lord Haw-Haw.

FRIDAY 16


FRIDAY 4


SEPTEMBER, 1941

1 MONDAY
Started at Dockyard as Engine Fitter. Mum was for dys.
Between diary and memoir: content and use

Fri
Went to Madras college for gas drill again. Went to Strathclyde to see Alex’s sister. Found washing conditions unsuitable at Balone. Saw automatic milkers.

Sat
Drove horse and cart at harvest. Went walk walk with Jock Graham. Had first bath. Have been here 1 week. Made up mind to go.

Duncan & Arnold left Balone. Sun
Saw Mrs Maxwell about staying at Lumbe. Told Mrs Wallace that we were shifting.
‘...we asked the Maxwells if we could take the girls’ place. I don’t really recall why we did so or how we had the nerve. Perhaps we were a bit of handful for the Wallaces but my diary, started and written up some time later, records ‘Found washing conditions (at Wallaces) unsuitable’, but I wasn’t being honest with myself...’
‘The weather didn’t keep us at home. Only once do I remember being “kept off”. That was for heavy snow...’.
Between diary and memoir...

‘The diary, with its abbreviated phraseology, can be seen as the prenarrative position of the potential autobiography. Its short notes need to be filled out and emplotted to achieve full narrative status’. In this process ‘the mundane is discarded and the life that emerges is focused and purposeful’ (Hughes, 2010: 8)

‘necessarily involves a certain kind of interpretative violence’ (Norman 1991: 120).
Between diary and memoir ...

the diary is an ‘instrument of self-continuity’
(Paperno, 2004: 564)

the ‘bricolages and fragments...deposited in a trail behind a life as it is lived’ (Plummer, 2001: 44)