

THE DIARIES OF NELLA LAST

Writing in war and peace

Edited by
PATRICIA AND ROBERT MALCOLMSON

P

PROFILE BOOKS

Published in Great Britain in 2012 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
Exmouth Market
London EC1R 0JH
www.profilebooks.com

Copyright in selections and editorial matter © Patricia and Robert Malcolmson, 2012
Mass Observation Material copyright © The Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive, 2012

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd
info@macguru.org.uk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays, Bungay, Suffolk

The moral right of the authors has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84668 546 0
eISBN 978 1 84765 846 3

The paper this book is printed on is certified by the © 1996 Forest Stewardship Council A.C. (FSC). It is ancient-forest friendly. The printer holds FSC chain of custody SGS-COC-2061



CONTENTS

Introduction	ix
Nella Last's Family, Friends, Neighbours and Associates	xiii

PART ONE: WAR, 1939–1943

CHAPTER 1	Points of View: <i>August 1939–September 1940</i>	3
CHAPTER 2	Watching, Working, Waiting: <i>September 1940–April 1941</i>	27
CHAPTER 3	After the Bombs: <i>May–June 1941</i>	49
CHAPTER 4	Facts of Life: <i>June–September 1941</i>	70
CHAPTER 5	Past and Present: <i>September–October 1941</i>	86
CHAPTER 6	Steady On: <i>October–December 1941</i>	104
CHAPTER 7	Winter's Tales: <i>December 1941–February 1942</i>	120
CHAPTER 8	Time Passes: <i>February–June 1942</i>	141
CHAPTER 9	At Home and Abroad: <i>June–September 1942</i>	164
CHAPTER 10	'End of the Beginning': <i>September 1942–August 1943</i>	183

PART TWO: PEACE, 1945–1955

CHAPTER 11	Cheers and Tears: <i>May–September 1945</i>	209
CHAPTER 12	A Sort of Peace: <i>September 1945–January 1946</i>	237
CHAPTER 13	Darkness and Light: <i>February–September 1946</i>	263
CHAPTER 14	Everyday Scenes: <i>November 1946–October 1947</i>	288

CHAPTER 15	Highs and Lows: <i>October 1947–August 1948</i>	314
CHAPTER 16	Lots to Talk About: <i>January–February 1950</i>	338
CHAPTER 17	Pleasures and Perturbations: <i>May–December 1950</i>	368
CHAPTER 18	Defining Moments: <i>June 1952–August 1955</i>	396
	Epilogue	423
	Glossary	427
	Money And Its Value	430
	Editing Nella Last's Diary	432
	Mass Observation	435
	Acknowledgements	438
	List of Illustrations	439
	Index	441

INTRODUCTION

'Words have always fascinated me.' (Nella Last, 24 March 1945)*

'If I'd been clever or had a less sketchy education, or perhaps more time on my hands, I'd have loved to write. Funny how things work out. I often think of the many books my letters and my diary would make!' Nella Last wrote these words in early 1942 in a letter to her elder son, Arthur. Clearly she thought of herself as a writer ('When I was a girl I always craved to be a writer', she declared on 20 October 1940) – at least she did in her more confident moments – though hardly anyone else did until the 1980s, well after her death in 1968. Now, decades later, Nella Last is the author of three books. *Nella Last's War* was first published in 1981 and reissued in 2006 with some new ancillary material, including photographs and a few words by her younger son, Cliff, written shortly before his death in 1991. (This volume was the inspiration for the television film *Housewife, 49*, starring Victoria Wood.) Her more recent two books, also published by Profile Books, are *Nella Last's Peace* (2008) and *Nella Last in the 1950s* (2010). She is now a writer whose work has been enjoyed – and admired – by tens of thousands.

While selections from Nella Last's diary have been published in these three volumes, most of what she wrote between 1939 and the time she ceased writing, in February 1966, actually remains unpublished. This is mainly because the quantity of her writing is vast. Nobody, to the best of our knowledge, has read the diary from beginning to end; a rough estimate is that it may be around ten million words in total. In many years she was writing at least a third of a million words – perhaps more like

* This was written in response to Mass-Observation's questionnaire – known as a 'Directive' (DR) – for February–March 1945. Details on M-O, the social research organisation established in 1937 for which Nella wrote, are provided below, pp. 435–37. Since 2006 the hyphen has been dropped from its name.

half a million in some years. Her discipline and commitment to writing are extraordinary; she wrote regularly even when little was happening in her life, which she deemed to be for the most part 'uneventful' (19 September 1939), and this meant that when something out of the ordinary did occur, she had her pencil or pen at the ready and was primed to record her thoughts. In one diary entry in November 1941 she wrote that she was feeling ill all day – and yet she could still produce in the evening (this is when she did most of her writing) some 2,000 words. And she did this almost every day, year after year, except when she was really sick or travelling. Of course, it is virtually inconceivable that all these words can be published – or indeed *should* be published.

The three volumes mentioned above present perhaps 10 to 15 per cent of Nella Last's handwritten diary, although some periods of her writing are more fully represented than this. Thus, most of her diary has never reached a wider audience. A major reason for producing this new volume is to bring more of her writing to public attention, especially what she wrote in the early 1940s, much of which can only be read in the Mass Observation Archive or at Mass Observation online. The editors of *Nella Last's War*, Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming, were pioneers. They, in a sense, discovered Nella Last in the Mass Observation Archive, digested what she wrote during the upheavals of the Second World War and produced an immensely appealing book of a manageable size that embraced the entire period of the war. Inevitably, given publishing constraints, they could not include a great deal. Consequently, much writing remains unpublished that is vivid, sensitive, engaging and astute. This previously unseen material comprises almost all of Part One of *The Diaries of Nella Last*, which concerns the years 1939–43 and in many ways builds on Broad and Fleming's wartime edition. There is minimal overlap between the two books; less than 5 per cent of the material in this volume is also found in *Nella Last's War*. Part Two, 'Peace', is different. It presents highlights from *Nella Last's Peace* and *Nella Last in the 1950s*, along with a few previously unpublished selections from her post-war diary, mainly from May and July 1945 and 1955. Part Two, then, presents a retrospective of Nella Last's experiences of post-war living, writing and social change.

In this book the Nella Last who features most prominently is the disciplined and skilled writer who was a keen observer – an observer of herself, her family, her neighbours, the natural world and the larger society in which she was living. In one passage (24 February 1941) she wrote of how it would be nice to have the gift to compose music, but, she went on: ‘Best of all, though, I would like to write books and travel to far places to see and hear things to write about.’ She imagined herself discovering and writing about ‘wayside treasures’. Nella never did travel very far (although her son Cliff emigrated to Australia after the war); in fact, she did not travel much at all outside her rather isolated home town, Barrow-in-Furness, its adjacent countryside and the nearby Lake District. But within her limited geographical world she was always on the look-out for wayside treasures that could be remarked on and described in her diary at the end of the day – remarks overheard, interesting conversations in which she participated, unusual incidents, stories of comedy or tragedy, changing attitudes and customs, noteworthy public events, current history, the peccadilloes of family and friends, gossip and rumour, feelings and emotions (hers and others’), individual actions that in her view warranted praise or criticism.

Diaries are documents of everyday life, and they are often packed with mundane, unremarkable details. But along with Nella Last’s accounts of preparing food, house-cleaning, gardening, shopping, bodily complaints and the vagaries of the weather are hundreds of pages of her writing that contain passages of narrative richness, psychological insight and colourful observations of people forging lives for themselves in often challenging times. Nella had an excellent eye for captivating moments; and when she saw or heard them, she possessed a skill with words that allowed her – perhaps almost compelled her – to write about them. While it might be said that words came naturally to her – ‘I get a pencil and gallop away’ (30 July 1940) – this knack was certainly learned and cultivated, for it was to a large extent a consequence of her immersion as a child in books and the thousands of hours in which she absorbed herself in reading. Because of a childhood accident, she was lame, often forced to be sedentary and solitary, and pushed towards

private pleasures, notably engaging her mind in literature and the world of the imagination. 'I was a queer, intense child,' she wrote in her reply to M-O's questionnaire of February/March 1939, 'who at a very early age learned to escape from pain and loneliness into books – any books.' The novels of Charles Dickens had been central texts for her in these formative years of self-education.

Editing Nella Last's diary might be likened to mining for ore. The valuable ore is there, in those millions of words, but it needs to be extracted and separated from writing of less value. And judgement is exercised and has to be exercised in deciding what is good enough to publish, or even what *must be* published, tasks about which editors, past, present and probably future, are bound to differ. A passage that strikes one editor as highly appealing might strike another as unremarkable. Moreover, whatever is selected needs to be given shape. This shaping includes the creation of chapters (they, of course, are not in the original diary) and paragraphs (which she rarely constructed), the composing of passages that summarise and characterise weeks or even months for which no diary selections are presented, and the shifting of certain pithy observations from the diary entries in which they appear either to these connecting passages or to occasional footnotes. At all times our principal objective is to show Nella Last at her best as a writer and as a sharp-eyed witness to her life and times in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

* * * * *

The various characters that appear in Nella's diary are identified on the following pages. The appendix 'Editing Nella Last's Diary' (pp. 432–34) outlines our criteria for selecting passages to publish and summarises the more technical aspects of our editorial practice. A few quotations in this book are drawn from her responses to M-O's regular (usually monthly) questionnaires, called 'Directives'; these are identified below as 'DR'. The symbol † in the diary indicates a word defined or a proper name identified in the Glossary (pp. 427–29).

CHAPTER ONE

POINTS OF VIEW

August 1939–September 1940

Barrow-in-Furness, once in Lancashire, now in Cumbria, and largely surrounded by the sea, had a population of a little over 70,000 at the beginning of the Second World War and was overwhelmingly a one-industry town. Its giant shipyard – Nella commonly wrote of it as ‘the Yard’ – dominated the seafront and employed in 1942 around 18,000 people. Almost all the women known to Nella had husbands, or uncles, or brothers, or fathers, or boyfriends/fiancés who worked at the Vickers-Armstrongs shipyard, some as ‘bosses’, others as skilled or unskilled labourers. Since September 1936 Nella had been living in a new semi-detached house – 9 Ilkley Road – on a pleasant estate a mile north of the centre of town, just off Abbey Road, Barrow’s longest and most important artery. Her husband, Will – she almost never refers to him by name – had his own joinery business in partnership with a brother on an older street where they had previously lived. Nella situated herself socially as one of the ‘ordinary middle class people’ (12 November 1940). The Lasts were prosperous enough to own a car but in the early 1940s did not have a telephone; Nella portrayed herself – almost certainly accurately – as less well-off than many of the women she worked with in the Women’s Voluntary Services (WVS), some of whom presided over large houses. Both her unmarried sons had, as boys, won scholarships to the grammar school. Arthur (born 1913) was a trainee tax inspector living in Manchester; Cliff (born 1918) was still in Barrow at the start of the war and about to be conscripted into the Army.

In late August 1939, when the international crisis seemed very likely to lead to another terrible war, Nella and other volunteer ‘Observers’ had been invited by Mass-Observation (M-O) to start keeping a diary, and she responded enthusiastically, although she had doubts about her writing skills. Her self-doubts, we now know, were unwarranted.

Thursday, 31 August. The weather is still so oppressive – real crisis weather – and makes people jumpy. Downtown this morning no one seemed to be talking of anything but food and I saw as many prams parked outside Woolworths, Liptons and Marks and Spencers as on a busy Friday afternoon. Inside it was the food counters in Woolworths and M & S that were the busiest. I heard the news at 1 o'clock and felt as if the worst had happened in spite of the assurance that evacuation was not to be considered 'inevitable'. I felt that if I stayed in I'd worry so went down earlier to the WVS meeting. I got a real surprise for the big room was filled with eager women who settled down to swab making or evacuation or evacuation supplies. Our 'Head' [*Mrs Waite*] is a darling 'young' woman of 72 who had charge of Hospital Supplies in last war. She told us a more central room had been taken and 'for the first' [*of September*] would be open two afternoons a week. Four machines were to be installed and we were to make in addition to swabs etc. pyjamas and all Hospital Supplies. It was odd to me that there was so little talk of the big issues – just a planning of how household affairs could be arranged to enable as much time as was needed to be given. When coming home I encountered the usual 'Hitler beaten, and we are doing this to bluff him' and I wondered if it was faith – with a capital F – or stubbornness which made those of us who thought 'something will happen at the last minute' cling to their disbelief in the worst happening. When I was a small child I remember a prophecy my dad heard – that little Prince Edward would never be crowned king and that in 1940 a world war would start that would end things. I'm no more 'scared cat' than the average but I have a cold feeling in my tummy when I think the first came true. Feel so tired I cannot keep awake but my eyes won't stay shut. Wonder how the people who live on the 'edge of things' keep their sanity. Know I'll have to work hard to keep from thinking. Wish I liked meat and stout and had a good appetite to keep up. Will try and drink more milk. Wonder if I should give my faithful old dog and my funny little comedian cat 'the gift of sleep'. Perhaps it's as well my husband insists on the light out for the night.

Friday, 1 September. I feel tonight like a person who, walking safely on the sea sands, suddenly finds his feet sinking in a quicksand. Odd how I should have believed so firmly in my astrological friend when he assured me that there would be NO WAR. Today the town was full of women carrying huge rolls of brown paper from the printers to black out. I knew my younger boy had to go in a fortnight but now when it looks as if he will have to go any time and at such a time I realise his going. He is such a cocky bright eyed lad, so full of jokes and such a 'know all', I know he would be offended if he knew I kept seeing the little funny boy who was so difficult to rear. I feel I'd rather go and serve six months in the Army than let him go!!!!

I'm so tired I can hardly see for I've been shopping – had to do tomorrow's shopping as the bus service is going to be seriously curtailed as the buses are to go to help take evacuated children into the more remote Lake villages. Then I've been machining dozens of tailors' samples of about 2 x 4 inches into evacuation blankets and then tonight there has been the problem of the blackout. Ours is a modern house with huge windows rounded at one end. We took the usual weekly groceries for an aunt living about 12 miles away and found her busy getting things ready in case they brought her any children whom no one could put up. She would 'really not like more than four as winter is coming on and washing and drying is such a problem' – and she is 75!! When I got undressed and into bed I thought the process should have been reversed for all today I've had the feeling that it was a dream that would pass.

Saturday, 2 September. I decided after today's rush and work I am not the crock I thought! I'm sure the thoughts of the housewives struggling with paper, drawing pins, dark blankets etc. would be quite sufficient to cook Hitler brown on both sides! Paper jumped from 3d or 4d a sheet to 9d. My next door neighbour, who had been most careful to lay in an extra supply of bottled beer and whiskey, left getting dark out materials too late and then could not get any. Frantic SOS all round got enough bits and pieces to manage but she naturally had to wait till we had all finished. An Air Warden friend called and told me of what might easily

have developed into an ugly situation. The market, library and all shops not blacked out closed at sundown. The others drew down blinds and tied paper on light they could not do without. An Italian chocolate and ice cream shop had all lights as usual and a crowd gathered muttering. The proprietor took no notice and police were sent for who dispersed the crowd *and* the light. I could not understand his attitude at all for he and his brothers were from here and have always talked 'British'. It seems though that he has lately had his wireless tuned in continually to Italy and quotes Mussolini freely. My elder boy who is home from Manchester for the weekend says he has noticed a growing feeling against Jews, particularly foreign Jews. I hate the shut in feeling of closed windows or paper curtained over ones, wonder what it must feel like down a coal mine or in a submarine. The Air Wardens seemed to think we might hear of something 'big' tonight but now it is tomorrow as my boys used to call after 12 o'clock and we are still wondering. My cat seems to feel the tension for he is a real nuisance and follows me round so closely I have tripped over him several times. Last night he hid until I'd settled off and then jumped quietly on the bed and settled on my feet – not a trick of his at all!

Sunday, 3 September. A violent thunderstorm has cleared the air and it's cool now. It's been so close and heavy for over a week – just as it is before a storm breaks. I'm having a morning in bed to rest but don't feel like resting. The boys say there is an important announcement coming over at 10 o'clock so have decided to get up.

Bedtime. Well, we know the worst. Whether it was a kind of incredulous stubbornness or a faith in my old astrological friend who was right in the last crisis when he said 'no war', I *never* thought it would come. Looking back I think it was akin to a belief in a fairy's wand which was going to be waved. I'm a self-reliant kind of person but today I've longed for a close woman friend – for the first time in my life. When I heard Mr Chamberlain's voice so slow and solemn I seemed to see Southsea Prom the July before the last crisis. The Fleet came in to Portsmouth from Weymouth and there was hundreds of extra ratings walking up

and down. There was all 'sameness' about them that was not due to their clothes alone and it puzzled me till I found out. It was the look on their faces – a slightly brooding, far-away look. They all had it, even the jolly looking boys, and I wanted to rush up and ask them what they could see that I could not – and now I know.

The wind got up and brought rain but on the Walney shore men and boys worked filling sand bags. I could tell by the dazed looks on many faces that 'something' would have turned up to prevent war. The boys brought a friend in and insisted on me joining in a game but I could not keep it up. I've tried deep breathing, relaxing, knitting and more aspirins than I can remember but all I can see are those boys with their looks of 'beyond'. My younger boy will go in just over a week. His friend, who has no mother and is like another son, will go soon – he is 26 – and my elder boy is at Sunlight House in Manchester, a landmark. As Tax Inspector he is at present in a reserved occupation.

Tuesday, 5 September. Tonight I had my first glimpse of a blackout and the strangeness appalled me. A tag I've heard somewhere, 'The city of Dreadful Night', came into my mind and I wondered however the bus and lorry drivers would manage. I don't think there is much need for the wireless to advise people to stay indoors – I'd need a dog to lead me. Heard today that a big new Handicraft Centre is commandeered for a hospital. I wondered why we were not starting making shells etc. as in last war. It's a good thing that my husband likes his bed and insists I go up when he does. I feel so over strung tonight I 'could fly' and know if left alone would have gone on sewing – silly to knock oneself up so early. Best get into the jog trot that stays the course.

Thursday, 7 September. Today Ruth, my 'morning girl', and I were a bit dumpish. We can generally find a bright side to talk or laugh over but this morning all was quiet. Suddenly I heard laughter and she said 'Well, God love it!' I went to where she was in the clothes closet in hall and found Murphy my cat sitting snug on a rug under the dinner wagon. 'He has found his air raid shelter like a Christian', Ruth declared. Bless my little cat and his

funny ways. He seems to 'work for his laughs' like a seasoned trouper and he scores a point in his cat-mind if he makes me laugh, I'm sure!

We took a large room for WVS and find we could do with one twice as big! No one was actually turned away. Tailors' pieces or wool for blankets were given to those who could not sit down but those of us who were sitting down worked under such cramped conditions that our output of swabs and pneumonia jackets was lessened and we all had bad heads. I've often felt ashamed of my sex but never so proud as the way the 'right' women have rolled in. No 'butterflies' who want particular jobs, no catty or what is worse bitchy women, and when an old woman who it seems had had some authority in the last war got peevisish at being 'one of the crowd', she hushed and blushed at the way her complaints were received. I get the oddments any tradesmen give us to look over and advise best things to make for I have clever fingers.

Saturday, 9 September. I went into the Maypole and jokingly said to the girls 'What – got stuff on the shelves yet? Seems to me you girls are not trying!' It was a feeble kind of joke and I was startled at the way they laughed and gathered round for a 'crack' – there was no other customer. They asked 'How long the war would last' and I said 'Just a day at a time and the first seven years were the worst'. The manager and counter man joined up to join in the laugh and he said 'Well, it's a treat to find someone who can find something to joke about these days'. With two sons and a brother and the knowledge that my husband's men (four for a start and two later) [*might be conscripted*], which will mean there will be little they can do as shopfitters etc, I don't know I've got much [*to laugh about*] but it gave me an idea. I've always been able to joke and see the funny side up till now and I'll keep on if I crack my face doing it. If my nonsense can raise a smile I'll think it worth the effort and perhaps it will take the picture of those naval boys out of my mind. It's all right when I'm working and have to keep my mind on my work but if I relax they pass before me. Gave myself a treat today. I hate stitching pieces of cloth together for hospital blankets – am not a good routine worker. I like to design or plan and see others do the drudgery!!