# **LOAL & MUB IN FONDON**

*A Woman's Diary* 1939–1942 by Olivia Cockett

Edited by Robert Malcolmson

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Wilfrid Laurier University Press

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"The emotional life ... is the core and essence of human life. The intellect arises out of it, is rooted in it, draws its nourishment and sustenance from it, and is the subordinate partner in the human economy."

-John Macmurray, Reason and Emotion

+ + +

"A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead."

—Graham Greene, The End of the Affair

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The central source for this book is the World War Two diary of Olivia Cockett, who was born in 1912 and grew up and lived in London. She wrote this diary for the research organization Mass-Observation (M-O)—its work is discussed below, mainly in the introduction and appendix—and the original manuscript is preserved in the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex. Olivia Cockett started her diary in August 1939, continued with it for much of 1940, wrote only irregularly in 1941 and 1942, and ended it conclusively in October 1942, when she turned thirty. In addition to her diary, she also sent M-O a number of "Directive Replies." These were her responses to M-O's monthly, sometimes open-ended questionnaires to its volunteer participants, which were referred to as "Directives." Her responses to these Directives are linked to her diary at appropriate places.

Olivia Cockett also kept private journals—three in total (one very short)—which are held by her niece, Hilary Munday. Almost all of these writings predate late 1940. Whenever this material is referred to below, it is clearly distinguished from the material in the Mass-Observation Archive.

I have also offered a number of extracts from other diarists who were writing in 1940–41, and whose comments and observations about wartime England can be connected to, and amplify, those of Olivia Cockett. The words of these other diarists, all of them women, are found mainly at two points in the diary: February 1940 and September 1940. Quotations from other contemporary sources, such as newspapers and J.B. Priestley's *Postscripts* (1940), help on occasion to clarify or enlarge upon matters mentioned by Olivia Cockett herself.

The following text represents a complete and unabridged transcription of Olivia Cockett's diary-writing for Mass-Observation between October 1939 and October 1942. While she sometimes typed her diary, it is mostly handwritten, and her script is not always easy to decipher. Her writing, though, is largely free of errors and obscurities, for she

valued highly clear, precise prose. However, almost any personal diary (diaries are often composed in haste) includes a few obvious mistakes, such as a typo or a word missing a letter, and when these occur I have made corrections silently. My main interventions have related to punctuation, paragraphing, capitalization, and consistency in usage. Most personal diaries are, in some respects, punctuated whimsically, and Olivia's diary is no exception. She also capitalized a lot of words that would now not be capitalized (e.g., "News"), and a few words, such as "War," were sometimes capitalized, sometimes not. Small numbers (less than 10) were on some occasions written as words, on other occasions as numerals. My editorial goal on all such matters has been consistency and clarity. Thus, for example, small numbers are consistently presented as words except when they refer to clock time. I have not in any way tampered with the substance of Olivia Cockett's writings or deliberately omitted any words from her M-O diary during these three years. Her "Directive Replies," by contrast, have been used selectively, depending on their relevance to the diary, as have her private diaries and other personal papers not in the Mass-Observation Archive.

England during the Second World War had a pre-decimal currency, of which only the pound sterling  $(\mathfrak{L})$  still exists. There were twenty shillings in one pound  $(20s = \mathfrak{L}1)$  and twelve pence in one shilling (12d = 1s). In 1939 Olivia Cockett's annual salary was  $\mathfrak{L}160$ —that is, about  $\mathfrak{L}3$  1s per week—and she seems to have spent almost all of it for basic sustenance. Wages and salaries tended to rise during the war, but so too did taxes and the cost of some goods and services, assuming that they were available, which they often weren't. An expenditure of, say, two shillings represented one-thirtieth of Olivia's pre-tax weekly salary.

I am happy to acknowledge the help I have received from a number of people. One person who has been a major—indeed, vital—source of support for this project is Dorothy Sheridan, head of Special Collections and director of the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex. Her help was especially important in 1999–2000, when I began and pursued much of my archival research for this book. She offered some good suggestions, led me to related sources, and facilitated my research from abroad in various practical ways. She also contacted Hilary Munday, Olivia Cockett's niece, advising her of my work on her aunt's diary, and thus initiated a very happy relationship that I have enjoyed with the Cockett family. Olivia's brother, Freddie, invited

me to lunch in February 2000 at his home in Petts Wood, Kent, where I met some other members of his family and was able to question them about Olivia's life. Since that time the support of Hilary Munday has been especially crucial. She inherited her aunt's personal papers and has given me full access to this material, some of which I have used at key points in this edition. I am deeply indebted to Hilary and her husband, David Munday, for their encouragement, advice, and generosity. Olivia's nephew, Mike Cockett, kindly sent me two photographs of his aunt, including the one on this book's cover, and responded helpfully to a draft of the epilogue. Danielle Bylfield, Mike Cockett's daughter, knew Olivia, her great aunt, from the 1960s and showed a keen interest in some of the literary and psychological dimensions of Olivia's writings. I am grateful to Danielle for her insights and thoughtful reflections.

I wish to acknowledge as well the assistance I received from several other people, notably Joy Eldridge at the Mass-Observation Archive, Jackson Armstrong, John Coulter, Patricia Malcolmson, Jennifer Grek Martin, Debbie Stirton-Massey, and Judy Vanhooser. Cathy Dickison was responsible for producing a final polished typescript, and I thank her warmly for her efficient and friendly support. I am also indebted to the Advisory Research Committee at Queen's University for timely financial support of my research in England.

Robert Malcolmson Cobourg, Ontario

### A NOTE ON SOURCES

All references to sources held in the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex are presented in brackets within the text. Material from M-O diarists other than Olivia Cockett are identified not by name but rather by the number assigned to the diarist; material generated in response to the monthly "Directives" is identified by the different numbers assigned to these "Directive Respondents" (DR) and the month and year in which the particular Directive, or what we might now call an open-ended questionnaire or prompt, was circulated. Most other references, both to the primary and secondary sources, are presented in the endnotes.

### INTRODUCTION

"On the whole I prefer life to be bracing rather than relaxing." — *Olivia Cockett*, October 6, 1934

In the 1930s, Olivia Cockett, a young Londoner, kept a private journal that was intended only for the eyes of her lover. Their love was passionately intense but unfavoured by circumstances, for he was married and a divorce seemed unlikely. They met each other furtively, and these meetings were fleeting. The strains of keeping their relationship alive were sometimes acute and often tested their composure. They succeeded, however; and on September 14, 1935, when Olivia was coming up to her twenty-third birthday and her love affair had already survived for some five years, she wrote of it in the following words. It is, she thought, "a strong growth; a shoot of Romance; a challenge to Hitler. It keeps alive a tradition of Love for love's sake which might otherwise die."

Here, in her mind, was an intersecting of personal and public realities. The private, intimate world of erotic love was set against the brute force of Hitler's aggressions. The "hearts" of two individuals, she thought—her own and her lover's—were kept "green" through love, and this was not a colour much associated with the Nazis. Olivia Cockett was testifying in these reflections to a collision of sensibilities, and to a clash between the external world of coercive politics and the inner world of feeling and fulfillment. Most of the time, for her, the deeper meanings of life were to be found within herself, and they were pursued though reading, listening to music, contemplating the natural world, and being with people she loved. She also loved books, and she was entranced by words and what they could create. She found poetry more appealing than, for example, political journalism. While she followed public events and was committed to social reform, she wrote mainly about her own emotions. The youthful self that she portrays, a self in the

making, developing and maturing up to the age of thirty, is the centrepiece of her diaries.

Olivia Cockett's diaries are vibrant and engaging. She discloses a lot about herself, and is candid about her frustrations, pleasures, worries, and self-doubts. She records her mood swings and tries to understand them. And she is often observant about what she see and hears in her daily life from 1939 to 1941, as she and her lover, family, friends, and fellow workers are swept up by the momentous events of yet another European war. Prior to 1939 almost all her writing is in the form of private diaries. From August 1939 most of her diary-writing was produced for Mass-Observation, the remarkable organization established in 1937 to conduct a sort of anthropology of everyday life in contemporary Britain. Mass-Observation's goal was to create a "social anthropology of ourselves," and Olivia Cockett was one of hundreds of British citizens who contributed voluntarily—some for only a month or two, others for several months, others for years—to this project of self-study and selfobservation. (See the appendix for a brief account of Mass-Observation's early work.)

People wrote and still write diaries for all sorts of reasons and with many different results. They write because they are lonely and need a "friend" to talk to. They may write as a means of self-exploration, and perhaps to vent feelings that would otherwise be bottled up. Perhaps they write to give some order to their thoughts, or to keep a record of their own experiences. Some diarists are introspective and self-disclosing; others write more as chroniclers of the incidents and events in their lives. While a few diarists may write entirely for themselves, with no expectation that their diaries will ever be read by anyone else—indeed, these diarists usually take pains to ensure secrecy—many (probably most) know or expect or hope that at least one other pair of eyes will someday see what they have written. Diarists may not start writing with others in mind, but they often move in this direction, away from an exclusively private orientation. There is, then, often something of a public dimension even to very personal journals.

Diary-writing was not, of course, for everyone. Many people who started a diary gave up quickly. Others wrote only intermittently. Some 475 wartime diaries are held in the M-O Archive, but many are very brief; only a minority represent sustained, uninterrupted writing over a period of at least two years. Conscientious diary-keeping was demand-

What is presented here to us is a two-year slice of one sensitive person's life, which coincided with one of the most critical periods of Britain's history, indeed, of modern world history. Olivia Cockett began her diary for Mass-Observation just as war was about to be declared. She was most keenly involved in diary-writing during those critical and momentous months of mid-1940, a period of crisis for which no precedents existed in Britain's past. And she wound her diary down a year or so later, a time that happened to coincide with a new phase of the war (the Eastern front, the active involvement of the United States, and the cessation for a while of intensive bombing of London). What we have in her diary is a vivid rendering of a portion of one woman's experience, addressed, mainly though not entirely, to the here-and-now, and highlighting the sentiments of the moment. Since these experiences were those of a perceptive, energetic, free-thinking personality who read widely and had her own way with words, she was able to construct her "ordinary" life in a manner that is evocative both of her own character and of her times. We, as readers, are allowed to engage and perhaps even identify with her struggles, her satisfactions, her confusions, her self-questionings, and her efforts to find an anchor for her life.



#### Notes

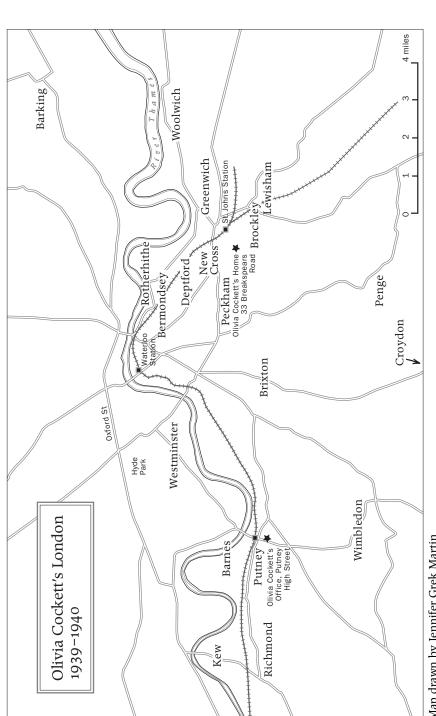
- 1 M-O Archive, diarist no. 5182. His wife, diarist no. 5406, produced an excellent and detailed diary for the last four months of 1939; thereafter she wrote only occasionally.
- 2 Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan, Speak for Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology 1939–1949 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 151.
- 3 See, for instance, Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, *Britain by Mass-Observation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939). This study predated the writing of diaries by M-O's volunteers.
- 4 M-O Archive, diarist no. 5396. She was writing from Tadworth, Surrey.
- 5 These details are found in school records in the archive of Haberdashers' Aske's Hatcham College, Jerningham Road, London SE14 7N7 (I am grateful for being allowed to examine these documents); M-O Archive, H.2160, DR for Winter 1992; and the Metropolitan Police Museum, London SW1H OBG.

## I TARQ-VARIO JHT

*War in Name Only*October 1939–April 1940



Olivia Cockett as a child, with her mother (seated), brother Freddie, and grandmother. Photograph courtesy of Michael Cockett.



Map drawn by Jennifer Grek Martin

# I War in Name Only October 1939-April 1940

♣ In the late summer of 1939, as political tensions in Europe mounted and war seemed increasingly likely, numerous people began to keep, or resumed keeping, a diary. As alarming events were unfolding, a significant number of people responded to the crisis by writing of their lives and their feelings and describing what was going on around them. Olivia Cockett was one of these people. She started her diary for Mass-Observation in August 1939, when she was twenty-six years old, living in Brockley, southeast London (SE4, in the borough of Deptford), at 33 Breakspears Road, and working as a payroll clerk in New Scotland Yard.

London, then the world's largest city with a population of some eight million people, was already on a war footing, and Londoners were gearing up, psychologically and in all sorts of practical ways, to defend themselves against an enemy attack that seemed more and more inevitable, perhaps even imminent.<sup>1</sup> Olivia Cockett's diary, in late August and early September 1939, recorded many of the sentiments and sudden changes in everyday life that were reported by hundreds of other Englishwomen at that time. There was the heightening sense of anxiety during the last week of August, after the news of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. There were new intrusions into people's daily routines, such as the requirement to black out windows at night— "having blacked windows with curtains, feel stupid and bewildered," Olivia wrote in late August—and there were plans for the evacuation and relocation of families and offices, with consequent major upheavals in civilian lives. Newscasts were eagerly devoured. Younger men expected to be called up by the Armed Forces any day. Some families prepared air-raid shelters. Private cars displayed "Air Defence Priority" labels on their windscreens, according to Olivia's diary for August 31. The face of London was conspicuously changing: "Walking through Oxford Street to Holborn," on August 30, Olivia "saw many buildings sandbagged and windows shuttered." On September 1 she "Felt weepy at seeing groups of children with their bundles [they were being evacuated to the provinces]. Mothers being very very brave, few breaking down."

Olivia reported (sometimes minutely) on her own feelings and what she saw of the feelings of those with whom she had contact, at work, at home, and while travelling. "Some exaggerated cheerfulness, singing etc., among junior clerks," she noted on Wednesday, August 30. "Few people will talk of the facts in a reasonable, broad-viewed way. They get irritated. But they will swap wild rumours and make spiteful suggestions for as long as you like." As for her own emotions that day, "Found myself 'snapping'—first observed sign of nerves. Have stronger desire for lovemaking—may be full moon. Am eating more than usual—two cream donuts today along with tea; usually nothing." The next day, Thursday, August 31, she noticed a more positive mood in the office. "There's a marked rise in the 'kindness' in the atmosphere. Small jokes and 'Please and Thank You' and mistakes guickly explained away and apologies easily tendered and accepted." Almost everyone wondered at the end of August what would happen in the potentially explosive world of high politics, and speculation was rife. On Thursday, August 31 Olivia felt "quite certain all will blow over after he [Hitler] is given something at someone else's expense." Appeasement, however, was now a discredited policy. Germany's attack on Poland that night brought Britain to the brink of armed conflict, and Olivia spent the next night, Friday, September 1, in a restless state.

Mother went to bed and I continued to search the ether [shortwave radio] and picked up various world reactions. Felt very depressed at the war atmosphere. Got some milk to drink and went to bed and read mathematics<sup>2</sup> till I couldn't keep my eyes open. But the minute I tried to sleep I was fully awake again. Lay imagining horrors and noises. Switched light on and realized I had removed blackout curtain. Felt so disgusted with world didn't bother to put it up again. Had diarrhoea most of the night and was glad to get up early and bath.

- Sunday, September 3, was, unusually, not a day of rest. Olivia was required to report for work, and to new premises, for her office was being evacuated from central London to a school in Putney, much farther to the west of her home. She offered a detailed account of this day.
- 3 pm. I wonder how the moths will get on with so few lights to fly to.

  Last night the thunderstorm woke us all up and we walked round the house to see if we were all alright. Inevitably we thought of raids, as Dad and Son [her brother Freddie, aged twenty-five] are on duty all night. I slept well till 7:30 after the storm but Mother slept only between 4 and

out glasses and decides must stay home with baby. Tells Chief. I get German news in English. Call parents. It is mirror version of ours. Well put over. Probably appeals to Germans as ours to us. Blah but something to listen to. Like King's speech. I say, Last war made people fed up with wars, this one may make them DO something. If so almost worth it. We talk to neighbours over wall.Religious but nice. I rather enjoy shocking them with cynical comments. Get a bit worked up but soon cool down again.

Night falls and we check up on the windows. Spend half an hour more on them. Dad very tired; on from 11 last night till 7 tonight. [He drove a lorry for the local Council.] But keeps cheery in front of Mum. Dims to me and I gloom a bit too. Then we both cheer one another. We eat, talking about last war and the day's incidents. No one seems to like this war at all. We listen nervously to a sound in case it's a warning. It isn't and we grin and hope for a goodnight. I go to bed without bathing and type this in bed. Don't really like being alone. Feel tense but must try and sleep.

• During the next few days Olivia and everyone else tried to get used to the fact of war. There was a lot of gloom about. She reported some of her own feelings on Thursday, September 7.

Have been too utterly fed up to bother to write last two nights. And miserable. The whole business seems madder and madder to me, and my Mother feels the same. Other people seem willing to treat it all as slightly out of the ordinary but sufferable. She hates to hear we have bombed Germans as much as to hear they have bombed Poland. (WHY NOT US? Many people begin to suspect some funny business, and would not be surprised by a speedy dirty peace at Poland's expense—and feel so sick at fearing that they would swallow it.) Have been travelling down to new HQ with moderate ease. In the early raid of September 6 I got two lifts, private car and lorry, and arrived at normal time.... Blacking out windows, living in gloom, not sleeping, waiting for the warble, are so far our troubles; and that ever dreadful feeling that so much worse may be to come. Hopefully, one discusses Germany's early collapse, clutches at straws of rumour; even at the straw that M-O suggested a diary for the next three weeks. Perhaps it won't be necessary after that. I have heard from one of my three closest girl friends that she will be Red Cross in Devon. The other two I have not had the heart to write to, nor they to me, though probably they are carrying on normally as far as possible. But we have so often implored that this wouldn't happen, we should probably just weep if we met, at the tremendous pity of it all.

• A few days later, responding to M-O's "War Directive No. 1" (which is found among her private papers and apparently was not mailed to M-O's headquarters), she described her evening of Tuesday, September 12. She was driving in a car from Putney to central London.

Called at Boots for a battery for hand torch—no luck. That's the tenth shop in four days. Struggled on to a tram. Was still aware of everyone's gas mask. Went to a friend at Brixton for the evening. Ate a lot of sausages and mash and talked vaguely about the war and its reactions on us. So far she has felt little change, but may have to evacuate to North of England at any moment. Got fed up with war talk and black-out precautions. Agreed that none of us knew any real facts of the matter and just swap rumours. So played Bach and Beethoven and sang some Schubert songs until 10:30. Early to bed but slept badly, hearing sirens in every passing car. Stayed the night with her. I usually do, but was extra pleased to as the blackout makes travelling so miserable.

• A few days earlier, on Saturday, September 9, Olivia had written a few sentences in her diary; she then fell silent for almost all the following four weeks. She was distracted and upset, mainly because of her strained relationship with her lover, Bill Hole. Her one explicit reference to these stressful weeks was written around the end of September and attached to a reply to a Mass-Observation questionnaire.

My personal life has been hurricaned in the last month, not by the war particularly, but by having to decide <u>not</u> to "live in sin" after trying it for a few days. The decision was forced by personal fastidiousness and a longing for my Mother, both unexpected facts.

\* \* \*

• In early October Olivia resumed her diary, in a new spirit of determination and candid self-exploration. She was finding her voice as a diarist—a voice suitable to representing both her inner self and external events.



Waterloo Station in 1941. Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum (no. D2791).

Monday, in at 9:10, after flood on the electric line and confusion at Waterloo. A foggy damp morning cleared to a heavenly blue sky by noon so I went for a long walk over Putney Heath among the silver birches at lunch time, purposely "forgetting" my gas mask etc. Was aware of guilty feeling when passing two policemen. But the Heath and the free feeling on swinging hands and striding without parcels was worth it. Leaves of gold wet thin leather were very slippery underfoot, bare boughs enticing the eye upward aiding downfall.

Worked hard all day, left sharp at 4. Went to Westminster to book seats for self and four girl friends tomorrow night. Town looks much as it did six weeks ago [at the outbreak or war]. Met Lover for a brief while, decided we mustn't kick too hard against the pricks of separation; but

I get on a tram and the conductor takes my fare and then tells me it is the wrong tram. I ask for my fare back and an Inspector comes and there is a lot of talk but no decision is reached. I go to a shop to get some stuff—can't get it right. Look at some with tiny patterns all over.

November 11 At school a man is teaching and Joan is there too. A wireless set balanced on a chair falls over. A big procession is coming by. I am on a balcony very squashed up. Can only see the people behind me. There are some very nice profiles there and I look at them with pleasure for a long time. Everyone else begins to sing, but I am much too squashed to be able to stretch my chest. The balcony changes to a theatre balcony.

November 12 I am in bed with a man, leaning back on pillows, talking happily. His wife comes in and says "I suppose this happens every two or three days." I say, very earnestly, "Oh no, this is the first time for a month." She sits by him and laughs and talks about paraffin while I dress. I lean over the foot of the bed and say "I can see you two belong to one another." They go into the next room and chink coins while I pack a small case with chocolates, fitting in a bit of crystallized pineapple very carefully. There is a doctor waiting patiently behind a screen in the room and when I have picked up a lot of untidy £1 notes from the floor he sees me and says "I suppose you are the young woman I've come to see." I am surprised and say "Yes, I suppose I must be." (Mother came up and woke me then; and I felt vaguely annoyed because I wanted to know what would happen next.)

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• At this time, Olivia temporarily abandoned her writing for Mass-Observation. Her personal journal of "General Thoughts" included an entry for "Old Year's Day" that looked back on 1939. "In bed, sore throat. Snow outside. And war." After these initial words, she declared that "This has been a stormy year, of unexpected changes." She mentioned the trip she had taken with her mother to the United States, the changing positions of three of her friends, and, of course, the war. Thinking back, she remembered that "At first we were all very afraid of air raids. Had three warnings in three days. As no more in three months we forget and just grumble at blackout and rationing and call it a funny war." She also chastised herself: "Feel selfish. Am selfish."

In this private journal and in other personal papers from the 1930s it was her relationship with Bill Hole that was pivotal to Olivia's sense of herself. By



Bill Hole in 1938. Photograph courtesy of Hilary Munday.

that I knew nothing of before you taught me: pleasure that won't be forgotten because there are so many things every day to remind me of it—every book or picture or pair of lovers give it a new urgency" (August 17, 1932). She was, she said, "hungry for you."

Later that day—she was in a reflective mood and wrote ten pages in her diary—she was still pondering her sexual character. Might she be "oversexed?" Olivia offered Bill a self-commentary, her own interpretation of how she had changed during her eighteenth and nineteenth years.

You see—dismissing the last two years—I have been singularly free from any contact with or knowledge of—what shall we say?—carnal appetite. No, just sexual inexperience. I was chivvied at school for being

very down on "that sort" of joke, and for refusing to discuss "that sort" of thing with anyone. I didn't refuse it very self-consciously. I was just too interested in other things. And I had read so deeply and satisfiedly of Love—like that without any detail—and felt so certain that it would be my portion, in that land of "after school," that I didn't worry. What little I gathered of the other girls' views I dismissed as rot, and nasty rot. I was content to keep poetry as my guide to Love, not pimply boys and sticky sniggers.

So that I was, I see now, extraordinarily ignorant when I first met you and became really interested in the subject. And you know how much I know now because you've told me. Mother never has, or anyone. Except I've read some Marie Stopes.<sup>13</sup>

♣ She then spoke of her own intensity, and of her strong urges and powerful emotions.

Perhaps if I had joined in with the ordinary vaguely beastly mouthings of the other girls I'd have used up energy that way instead of bottling it all up all unknown until You came. That's what it is you see—the accumulation of all my life till now—the love of everything and anything pure and sweet and beautiful expressing itself in my love of you who are so—loveable. And it's still a wonder to me that you should love me. Every time I see myself in a mirror I love you more for loving me, even me as I am.

• In discovering the young, naive Olivia, Bill Hole had, it seems, caused Olivia to discover herself, and she had trouble imagining a parting of the ways or that any man might replace Bill in her affections. On April 22, 1933, they were discussing some of their "intellectual divergences" and what these might mean for their continuing relationship.

And then you said you were sorry you'd made love to me, three years ago, because it has made me unhappy; that I ought and could find somebody else. And for the first time I <u>felt</u> you meant it. And I compared a young man—any young clever man—with you and honestly thought I might like one, <u>if</u> one ever liked me; and <u>that</u> I believe impossible. I'm plain and cleverish and it's an unattractive mixture. Why darling You should ever have liked me I literally can't imagine. I love you, Bill,

though I do recognise your limitations now—ones I never dreamed existed. But I love you more fiercely because of them, because they make loving you unreasonable, which it is. And the more unreasonable the stronger must needs be the passionate affection.

This theme of "unreasonable passion" persisted in Olivia's writings, even as she matured, gained in confidence, and became more vocal and sometimes blunt in her criticisms of Bill's deficiencies. By 1934 she was asserting herself and found that she was (in words she addressed to him) "not so consciously bound by the ever-present desire to be like—appear like—my idea of your idea of me." She was aware of a growing strength and independence in herself, and of moving into full adulthood (she was now twentyone). "I think that in fact I am tougher and brighter and more sarcastic than you imagine me. And as I become older, and more established in the mould of my character, these traits are stronger and less hidden in any sweet girlishness. They will probably develop until you dislike them and me too." That same day, August 17, 1934, she had played a little game with herself, rating Bill according to various criteria of her own.

I began then, jokingly in my mind, to classify your different qualities and give them percentages. A rough and ready but interesting guide to my thoughts about you, if not to you. Today they ran thus (another time they may be quite different):

As a lover, 99, most decidedly.

As an economist, 33, if that.

As a manager, 60, a little vague.

As a walk and talk companion, 79 in town, 69 in country.

As an intellectual stimulant, 20, only in opposition.

As an actor, 70, too serious—no, solemn [Olivia and Bill were in amateur dramatics].

As an office associate, 100 in the past, 10 now.

As a listener to music, 60, varying.

As a looker at pictures, 60, varying.

As a looker at maps, 50, disappointing.

As a shopping companion, 85, very good.

As a provider of "treats," 40, unavoidably low.

As a judge of clothes, men 80, women 70, Me 65 (too Turk).

As a reader of books, 50, pity.

As a reader of plays, 60, better.

- 17 To get to work at this time, she normally travelled from St. Johns station to Waterloo station, where she changed to another westbound train that would take her to Putney station, a short distance north of her relocated office.
- 18 Housewife, which began in February 1939, was oriented to the "modern" woman and designed to fit in a handbag. Its contents were diverse. The two issues for February and March 1940 included one short story each, along with articles on baby care and child-rearing, honey-making, jealousy between children, gardening, knitting, home decorating, the plight of British women married to enemy aliens, "Life in a Cottage," "Corns—and their cure," wise budgeting, making and keeping friends, kitchen gadgets, games for children, skin care, headaches, homemade bread, "A Housewife in the Holy Land," shoes in wartime, "Hens in Your Back-Yard," using vegetables, and "Catering for Your Family on a Rationed Budget."
- 19 A man in a "reserved" civilian occupation, or older than a specified age, was not liable for conscription. Given the increasing demand for military manpower in the early 1940s, call-ups of men in previously reserved positions became more and more common.
- 20 The English pianist, Solomon Cutner (b. 1902), did not use his surname professionally. The *Radio Times* indicates that he was to play Beethoven's *Concerto no. 2 in B flat.*
- 21 This issue of *US*, for March 2, 1940, included a five-page article on conscientious objectors, who comprised about 2 percent of those men who had registered thus far.
- 22 Olivia is referring to the "Winter War," the war between Finland and the Soviet Union. The latter had attacked the former on November 30, 1939. Declarations from Britain and France in support of Finland were merely rhetorical, as the Finns were now concluding. They signed an armistice with the Soviet Union on March 13, 1940.
- 23 *US*, no. 6, for March 9, 1940, had asked readers what they liked and disliked about the magazine, and what changes they would like to see (45). An analysis of the responses was printed in *US*, no. 9, for March 29, 1940 (82–84).
- 24 Olivia rarely mentioned religion or church. She recorded her most blunt observation in September 1939: "Find religious broadcasts physically sick making" (Wartime Directive no. 2).
- 25 See Keith Bell, *Stanley Spencer: A Complete Catalogue of the Paintings* (London: Phaidon Press, 1992), 456 (*Bridle Path, Cookham* was painted in 1938). This reproduction cost Olivia almost two weeks' wages.
- 26 On March 19th and 20th the RAF attacked the German North Sea air base at Hornum on the Island of Sylt near the German-Danish border. Olivia's opinion was that of a minority;most people approved of the raid (M-O Archive, FR 63).
- 27 The Arctic port of Petsamo, which the Soviets had captured during the Winter War, was returned to the Finns in accordance with the peace treaty in March.

# III TAAQ-YAAID JHT

Bombs, Busyness, and Hoping for Babies September 1940–October 1942



Olivia Cockett's passport photo, from October 1931. Photograph courtesy of Hilary Munday.

### III Bombs, Busyness, and Hoping for Babies September 1940–October 1942

"September the 7th, 1940, was a Saturday. On that Saturday, a warm and sunny day, there occurred an event which had been dreaded for years, expected for over twelve months, and which now had been awaited with mounting certainty throughout that hot summer of battle, and defeat, and death. On September the 7th, 1940, the German Air Force set out to destroy London."

• These were the opening words of chapter one of The Blitz by Constantine Fitzgibbon, first published in 1957. For those who lived through them, these early days of Germany's assault on London were unforgettable.

On that September weekend in 1940, Phyllis Warner, a woman in her early thirties, was living on Tavistock Place, London WC1. On Sunday the 8th, she wrote in her diary, "Last night was a night of horror, a hell on earth. About one o'clock I heard the sound of an approaching bomb for the first time, an appalling shriek like a train whistle growing nearer and nearer, and then a sickening crash reverberating through the earth." Vera Brittain's diary for that day conveyed a similar tone of horror. She, too, was in central London (specifically, Kensington).

Terrible night—10 solid hours of bombing from 8:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. German bombers circling overhead—now far—now nearer, with bomb crashes as they came. One very loud one broke glass in shelter window, already shattered by previous night. Between 2.0 & 3.0 bombs seemed to drop every 5 minutes. Lay in shelter most of night face downwards with pillow over my head. Worst night yet.

In afternoon (& also early morning) went round & saw damage done last night. Warwick Gardens was a devastated area—no glass anywhere. House at corner of Pembroke Gardens & Earl's Court demolished—windows all round broken; clock & windows smashed on St Philip & St James's Church.<sup>2</sup>

"The squalor of destruction," she remarked elsewhere, "has made a temporary slum of these once prosperous middle-class homes." All the sky was

thirties who lived with her mother in Putney, wrote the following words on September 18. "What can I say? Last night, from before 8 until 6 this morning, heaven and earth went mad with noise. The barrage spat into the air booming and bursting shells and all manner of other horrors. All night long the swish and whistle of things falling from the skies kept us on the alert; at times the whistles seemed so near that we were certain that the bomb was to hit our house—but it passed over. The flashes through the curtains looked like endless lightning and the beastly planes purring overhead made a fantastic accompaniment to the crashing night chorus. We lay in bed, lucky to have beds to do this in, and listened and watched—and so the night went by."7 These raids went on some nights for eight hours, ten hours, or even more. Sometimes bombers were heard overhead—or seemed to be overhead ( a few diarists kept count)—every five or six minutes. "It did not seem as though bombs were falling," wrote one London woman, "but as though they were being slammed down, like the lash of a whip."8 Another diarist, a woman born in 1901 who lived in Notting Hill, vividly remembered the first days of the Blitz a year after she had first been exposed to it. On September 10, 1941, she wrote: "Exactly a year today that I returned to London to face the blitz.... I shall never forget the next fortnight as long as I live ... sleepless, terrified nights, and days when you could fall off your chair for weariness, and yet somehow held on ... the tense look on the faces of all the inhabitants of Notting Hill Gate—for, of course, I ventured nowhere else!"9

Olivia Cockett kept no M-O diary for these weeks of the Blitz. However, she did respond to two questionnaires in September that asked for details on how the bombing was affecting her life and other people's lives. She offered the following reflections on Wednesday, September 11, just four days after the Blitz began.

There's no word I can start off with to give the mood of these ghastly days and nights of bombs on London. In a way it's not yet as bad as I feared. Yet that it has come at all tears away good from life. And makes good all the more important. I've not lost my nerve—yet. Had a good cry one day last week and sent off a bulletin ending hysterically. Now, my nerves are steady after seeing one strong man I know crumple up and cry like a baby after living through those two nights and Saturday afternoon [September 7] in Rotherhithe near the Docks. (There are terrible explosions going off somewhere still, 30 minutes after the OK of the second afternoon raid. Books have just slid off the desk here, and the house shudders.)



Above and facing page: Damaged houses on Breakspears Road, 1940-1941. Photographs courtesy of the Lewisham Local Studies Centre.

Material record. Sunday night I put out an incendiary beside the coal cellar. Monday night a high explosive at the end of the garden brought all the walls down and made a crater ten feet deep and thirty in diameter. Of course broke a lot of windows. No casualties. Have mended windows with cardboard and also those of lone lady opposite. Reported damage. Have had no official notice taken at all. The Ministry of Information local boards have a notice: local damage, two houses hit, no casualties. Bloody farce. There are literally hundreds of houses down in this borough of Deptford. (During these last few minutes planes have gone over. Now I can hear bombs going off, but there is no warning.)

Luckily I am on leave this week. Should have been walking in Buckinghamshire—am very glad to be at home. Have tried to get in touch with the office, but since Monday morning the trains have not run and the phone is off. They can get me if they want me. I'm not going if I can help it.

Every night we have been in the cellar. I cannot sleep, especially since I was the only one awake to hear the incendiary bomb and was able to put it out within two minutes of landing. I daren't sleep now. I roam around the house and garden and keep going back to the cellar

allowing changes let alone helping them. Even winning the war, right now, must not interfere with their sacred rights of profit.

One of the questions posted to Mass-Observers at this time was "How have you formed your own plans and desires about what you want after the war?" Olivia's reply pointed to the principal components of her own progressive attitudes.

I have formed my hopes of future improvement (a) On personal experience: from seeing the standard of living acquired by my own family and "class" and realising how many people are worse off, and wanting them not to be. (b) On history: largely on Toynbee's interpretation of cycles of civilisation and the realisation, pressed home by Wells and Russell and Powys and even Joan Grant [a novelist], that we CAN if we WILL improve the "housekeeping" of the world. (c) On the possibility of getting into a Ministry where I can do something about it, and also get responsibility and promotion for myself.

❖ Almost her final words for M-O were, "I am getting more and more restive for action" (DR, October 1942).



#### Notes

- 1 Imperial War Museum, "Journal of Phyllis Warner, September 1940-February 1942," Ref. no. 93/14/1.
- 2 Vera Brittain, Diary 1939-1945: Wartime Chronicle, ed. Alan Bishop and Y. Aleksandra Bennett (London: Gollancz, 1989), 53.
- 3 Vera Brittain, England's Hour (London: Macmillan, 1941), 164.
- 4 Imperial War Museum, Ref. No. 95/8/7, "Letters of Mary Eleanor Allan to Mary Chalmers," September 9, 1940.
- 5 Rose Macaulay, Letters to a Sister, ed. Constance Babington-Smith (New York: Atheneum, 1964), 111.
- 6 Imperial War Museum, Gwladys Cox, "London War Diary 1939-1945," Ref. no. 86/46/1(P).
- 7 Imperial War Museum, "The Second World War Diary of Miss Vivienne Hall," Ref. no. DS/MISC/88 and Con. Shelf.
- 8 Imperial War Museum, Diana Brinton Lee, "It Happened Like This: A Housewife's Diary of the Blitz," Ref. no. P178,100, week of September 22-28.
- 9 Few Eggs and No Oranges: The Diaries of Vere Hodgson 1940-45 (London: Persephone Books, 1999; first publ. 1971), 210.

- 21 Olivia was referring to the experimental community health centre set up in the south London suburb of Peckham. The centre's work was described and explained in a book published in 1943 by Innes H. Pearse and Lucy H. Crockes, *The Peckham Experience: A Study in the Living Structure of Society* (London: Allen and Unwin). For an evaluation of its philosophy and practices, see Jane Lewis and Barbara Brookes, "A Reassessment of the Work of the Peckham Health Centre, 1926–1951," *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, 61, 2(1983): 307–50.
- 22 A Declaration of the Rights of Man (1940) was prepared under the chairmanship of Lord Sankey. It articulated eleven core values, including the "Right to Knowledge," the "Right to Work," "Duty to the Community," and "Protection of Minors."

# **EDIFOCUE**

*Olivia's Life* 1942–1998



Olivia Cockett in her mid-thirties. Photograph courtesy of Michael Cockett.

# *Epilogue* Olivia's Life 1942–1998<sup>1</sup>

Olivia's intelligence and questioning mind, and perhaps her strong feelings as well, allowed her to develop professionally, to be promoted, and to enjoy a fulfilling career in the public service. She spent her entire career in the Ministry of Works. During most of the latter half of World War Two she worked for "Buildings Materials Licensing": she dealt with (as she remembered when she was eighty) "Appeals from local refusals and travelled to all bombed areas for several years. reviewing needs. Got to know uk under difficulties." Her work involved the allocation of building materials to various regions of the country, taking bombing damage into account. In 1946 she was a staff officer (Licensing) in the Ministry's Labour, Licensing and General Division. Her responsibilities were carried out in a unit that dealt with "Policy, Parliamentary Questions, Instructions, and General Matters."2 After the war, to advance her career, she wrote the Civil Service Reconstruction Exam, and by 1947 she had been promoted to the minister's office, where she served as his assistant private secretary—and earned at least triple the salary she had been paid in the early 1940s. "Enjoyed state visits and Parliament," she later recalled. For most of the postwar years she worked closely with the minister of the day, whether Labour or Conservative. One official invitation in 1951 was to a reception held by the prime minister, Clement Attlee. "Marvellous experience with Ministers and Houses of Parliament; ran Museum and Science vote till voluntary retirement." She helped to prepare the minister for Question Period in Parliament. She also had responsibility for the upkeep of much government property, including royal palaces and historic buildings. During the years before her retirement in 1964, she was one of the most senior women in the Ministry. (Her office, in Lambeth Bridge House, SE1, overlooked the Thames.) In the New Year's Honours List for 1965 she was awarded the Order of the British Empire (o.B.E.): "Miss Olivia

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no children. As Hilary Munday has observed, "A bungled attempt at divorce ruled out her greatest ambition of being a mother. She had a choice between Bill and having children and she chose Bill." She also chose to write, and in this writing she preserved a part of herself, putting on record her entanglements with history and her immersion in the challenges of living.

#### **Notes**

- 1 In writing about Olivia Cockett's life after 1942, I am heavily dependent on the recollections and testimony of her nephew, Michael Cockett (born 1938), and her niece, Hilary Munday (born 1941). Both have been exceptionally helpful and forthcoming in answering questions and offering information and opinions, and I am very grateful to them, and to David Munday, Hilary's husband, for their opinions and co-operation. I have also benefited on several occasions from the perceptive comments and reflections of Olivia's great-niece, Danielle Blyfield (born 1963, daughter of Michael). The documentary sources that I have drawn on in composing this epilogue are mainly Olivia's letters and responses to questionnaires from the Mass-Observation Archive between 1989 and 1995, held in the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex (file no. H.2160); and various personal papers that Hilary Munday inherited from her aunt and that remain in her possession. Dorothy Sheridan, head of Special Collections and director of the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex, provided timely and generous assistance in the use of the postwar papers held in the Mass-Observation Archive.
- 2 Public Record Office, Kew, Work 45/25, "Memoranda of Chief Licensing Officers 1942–46," memorandum of May 17, 1946 regarding the reorganization of HQ staff.
- 3 "Supplement to the London Gazette of Tuesday, December 29, 1964," 11.

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