

# Preserving the Second World War Through Eyewitness Accounts: The Wartime Diary of Mary (Mulry) Morris

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In the second entry of her wartime diary, dated June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1940, Mary Morris (née Mulry) relates in vivid details an eyewitness account of the Battle of Dunkirk. Working as a probationary nurse at the Kent and Sussex Hospital, Mary first encounters the war through the eyes of John Evans, the civilian captain of the *Brighton Belle*, who was injured while rescuing soldiers from the coast of France. "His leg is in a plaster and he talked to me as I helped him to have a blanket bath," she writes before relating an elaborate account of the rescue of Dunkirk as reported by her patient (4-5). While Mary makes her own way to France as part of the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service Reserve (QAs) in the spring of 1944, her portrayal of the Second World War is, for the most part, grounded in the stories of the soldiers and civilians she nurses. Drawing on Morris' (re)narration of eyewitness accounts, this article explores how the private diary makes space for the collective experience as Mary relates her sentiments on the war by preserving a truthful account of it as it unfolds outside the realm of propaganda and censorship. Not only does the diary allow Mary to preserve the voices of soldiers and civilians affected by the war, but the narrative development involved in the writing of a diary enables her to mourn, to protest, and to process the traumatic sights she encounters from her own perspective and that of the patients under her care.

In terms of life writing, diaries offer a unique historical perspective on the war. While memoirs and autobiographies present a mediated narrative of war, in which the author is able to reflect on past events through the lens of historical and personal perspective, the diary is

immediate. Letters and postcards similarly offer a glimpse into immediate responses to the unfolding of war, but they, unlike the personal diary, are written with a specific audience in mind, and, during wartime, were often censored by government officials and subjected to the personal constraints of its author, who, whether anticipating the censorship codes or wishing to shelter their loved ones from the truth, might omit or falsify certain details. The diary, then, is an important receptacle of unmediated personal observations on wartime conditions (Acton, *Grief* 7-9; Smith & Watson 266-68). I use the term personal observations because, as Smith and Watson point out, while diaries “can be read as a history of the writing/speaking subject . . . life narrative cannot be reduced to or understood only as historical record” (13). Mary’s diary grants her the space to negotiate her feelings on the war by collecting both her own observations and those of the civilians and soldiers she nurses, all of which are mediated through her own shifting perspective on the war. As Dorothy Sheridan argues in *Wartime Women*, “It is often claimed, I think rightly, that most diaries, even the most personal and private, are written with a sense of audience” (7). Despite the fact that Mary’s wartime diary was only published posthumously, it is important to question for whom she captured the wartime perspectives of her patients, and for what purpose? As Kathryn Sederberg argues of German diarists of the Second World War, individuals living through the war demonstrate a “growing sense that one was living through a watershed historical moment” (323). History, then, might be considered as Mary’s most attentive audience, looming in the corners of her mind as she writes.

As a nurse, Mary’s wartime experience revolves around the needs of others. Most naturally, the pages of her diary are filled with details of the war as experienced in the walls of the hospital, and her patients’ conditions are described elaborately. Of a twenty-one-year-old wounded Spitfire pilot, Mary stoically notes that “He is in a very bad way, blind with a fractured

jaw and severe burns of the face and head. He was taken to theatre on admission and bits of bone and loose teeth were removed from the remains of his face and a stitch put through his tongue so that it could be tied to a button on his pyjama jacket—otherwise he would have choked to death” (14 August 1940, p. 23). Mary continues to narrate the long night spent caring for the young soldier, evoking in the minds of readers a vivid image of the scene. This kind of narration is extended when she is able to connect with her patients on a more personal level by speaking with them. While medical personnel are often trained to be emotionally detached from their patients, part of the nurse’s duty was to bond with and to bring comfort to her patients. The emotional effect of the nursing sister on the morale of mutilated soldiers had in fact been so profound in the First World War that, as Nicola Tyrer points out in *Sisters in Arms*, as soon as fighting broke out in 1939, nurses were sent as close to the battlefield as possible for this very purpose (9). Mary reflects on this relationship between nurse and patient by writing “The patients are lovely, nothing else matters. It is good to meet people, and to be able to help them” (26 October 1942, p. 44). As the content of the diary suggests, such help was not limited to nursing physical wounds but involved attending to the soldier’s psychological needs as well. Nurses, along with surgeons, were amongst the first to witness the direct aftermath of war. Their job was to deal with the enemy’s failed attempts to obliterate the human body and to mend the minds of men who had seen the bodies of companions falling limp at their sides. As Hugh McManner explains *The Scars of War*, “In war friends are killed without warning, and in shocking and deeply upsetting ways. The danger and impetus of the battle makes the process of normal grieving impossible. Survivors may feel anger, but, in the tiredness, fear, danger and speed of combat, have no time to reflect on and come to terms with these deaths” (369). While there often was no time to grieve the loss of brothers and friends during combat, the hospital ward

offered to many soldiers the time to pause and to attend to their emotional needs. The hospital, in other words, provided soldiers with the space to “narrate deaths of friends as well as to anticipate and negotiate their own deaths in the immediate instance” (Acton, *Grief* 107). Finding in their attendant a willingness to listen, soldiers recently returned from the battlefield readily narrated their experience to the nurse, whose comforting presence was in many ways meant to recreate the caring touch of a mother or a loved one. After the horrific Battle of Arnhem, Mary writes “The Arnhem boys were still talking about their shocking experiences when I went on duty this morning. They were delighted to see me, someone to listen to them at last. They talk and talk and I encourage them to do so” (6 October 1944, p. 127). While Mary clearly recognizes the importance of such discourse as a way to heal both body and mind, her collection of these stories within the pages of her private space demonstrates a willingness to take on the burden of emotional labour from the shoulders of men whose wartime role precludes them from adequately grieving the horrors they witnessed in combat. Emotional labour was, traditionally speaking, a burden women had to bear. However, considering the risk of the diary falling into enemy hands, as advertised by the British government’s propaganda campaign (Welch 85), Mary’s recording of soldier’s experience in combat suggests a more radical purpose.

In an attempt to shed light on this act of defiance, it is worthwhile to examine the content of the diary in relation to its purpose, which, as Morris makes clear, is to produce a true account of war. “Should not be writing this diary,” she says, “It is against regulations and we are constantly reminded to ‘Save Paper’ and ‘Help the War Effort.’ I probably write this because I resent having my private letters censored” (6 October 1944, p. 129). Mary goes as far as to sarcastically position her diary outside the realm of censorship when she includes her precise location (Bognor Regis) in the summer of 1944. “Should have headed this ‘Somewhere in

Southern England," she writes cheekily, "but this *is* a very private diary" (15 June 1944, p. 81). While censorship might have been effective at keeping the enemy in the dark and the general public in line, it also lead to significant gaps in the narrative of war (Acton & Potter 104). The danger of such omissions is magnified in light of the fact that collective memory is unreliable and can easily be swayed by public discourse and propoganda. As Nigel Hunt suggests in *Memory, War and Trauma*, "Memories are manipulated by the state and by political groups, often for what are generally seen as positive reasons, such as the binding together of people after a war" (110). Mary attempts to fill in the blanks by recording the war outside of the regulations of censorship. Noting her status as a genuine witness to the war, Mary begins her diary by writing "The *real* war started for me today" (31 May 1940, p. 3, emphasis mine). Later, she denounces the role of propoganda by saying "It was a ghastly propoganda film, so unrealistic" (5 November 1944, p. 140). Thus, witnessing the war from the other side of propoganda, Mary's secret diary grants her the space in which to preserve the truth of warfare as she experiences it. Even before she joins the Army, Mary provides a faithful account of the war as it unfolds on the home front. Her work in civilian hospitals also allows Mary to note the severe poverty and malnutrition that plagues the people of Britain, while their homes are destroyed by air raids and their hospitals remain understaffed and underserved. Working in the Men's Surgical ward at the Kent and Sussex Hospital in the fall of 1940, Mary writes "Many of the patients are victims of the recent Blitz in London. In the lonely hours of the night they tell me over and over again how awful the days and nights of bombing have been for them. Some have lost their homes and their relatives and are still in a state of severe shock" (26 October 1940, p. 35). Later, while training in the specialist area of fevers at Brook Hospital in Woolwich, Mary finds herself struggling, as the only nurse on duty, to take care of an entire ward of sick

children while air raids go on about them. Mary speaks out against the unsanitary conditions of the hospital until, one evening, she finds a baby's face being eaten by a rat. Shaken by the sight, Mary is promptly told by the doctor that "Last night's incident is top secret. Do not discuss this matter" (17 April 1943, p. 52). The incident, however, is recorded in the pages of her diary. Once she joins the army and makes her way to the battlefields of Europe, her field of vision is, for the most part, limited to the relative safety of the hospital ward. It is only through the eyes of the men who witness combat that she may produce an accurate and broad-sweeping account of war; nevertheless, Mary is very much aware of her position as a witness of the truth of warfare. When she encounters survivors from the disastrous Raid on Dieppe, Mary says "Their presence here is very hush-hush and must not be discussed outside the hospital" (21 August 1942, p. 42). She soon learns why when Sgt. McTavish calls the raid "the most murderously suicidal operation of the war so far" (43). "It was bloody Murder," she quotes him as saying (42). Even with Allied victories, Mary relates details likely to be omitted in the official accounts of the time. Of the Battle of Normandy, she recounts:

Len is a Normandy veteran, one of the shock troops who arrived at Leon-sur-Mer in the early hours of the morning of D-Day, complete with a folding bicycle on his back. His first memory of Normandy was of being dragged up onto the beach and landing face downwards next to a dead German soldier. He had been knocked over by a wave as he jumped off the landing craft and was unable to swim because of the weight he was carrying. He eventually made it to Cazalet Wood but his Wheels unit got dug in there and apparently 'all hell was let loose' around them. They were surrounded by minefields and the shelling went on day and night. The battle for survival went on for two weeks. (27 June 1944, p. 97-98)

Only a few months later, a different soldier returned from the battlefield of Arnhem offers a similar impression of the war:

As Louis approached the river he saw bodies lying all along the path. There were feverish pleading eyes looking up at him from the darkness of the meadow, arms frenziedly clutching his legs. He said "I dragged limp bodies along towards the beach. I ran round and round close to hysteria until someone came up from the river and in an authoritative voice ordered me to leave the wounded where they were". Louis said "I vomited over and over again, and the screams and mortar fire went on. I got into a boat. The heavy gunfire went on as we tried to cross. Several men jumped into the water fully clothed and tried to swim with sten guns across their backs. They could be seen frantically struggling to disentangle themselves from their straps and laces before sinking. (11 October 1944, p. 133-34)

Morris realistically represents the gruesome nature of warfare no matter the outcome of the battle, in effect protesting the official story of the war. When she encounters German prisoners of war in 1945, Morris reflects "Starvation, filth and acute fevers are always hard to see and we all feel a sense of righteous indignation about the cruelty and sadism of the Germans in Belsen and Buchenwald, but what are we to feel or say when prisoners come in from our own POW camps suffering from the most advanced stages of starvation and smelling so badly that we have to wear double face masks?" Troubled by the inhumane treatment the German soldiers have endured at the hands of Allied forces, Morris writes "This little episode will be covered up very nicely, nothing of it will reach the newspapers or the people at home" (15 December 1945, p. 219-20). Mary recognizes that any account of the war that fails to play into the narrative of righteous victory for Allied forces will be wiped out by censorship and lost to the narrative of

propaganda. Indeed, as Carol Acton points out, "As a repository for what should not be said, the physical diary thus contains a voice that would otherwise be silenced by wartime regulations and becomes a subversive space that contests such silencing, both of [Mary's] own experience and that of the men she nurses" ("Stepping" 43). Not only does Mary's diary allow her to preserve a piece of war that might very well have been lost in history, but it also allows her to preserve the voices of men who were sacrificed to that war.

In much the same way that writing from soldiers on the front are often shaped as "extended elegies for dead friends," Morris' diary records with urgency the accounts of the wounded men and women under her care (Acton *Grief* 107; 133). She mourns not only the dead, but the physically and psychologically wounded as well: soldiers who have lost either families or homes, some who will have to rebuild their lives around significant physical impairment, and others who have lost their innocence. She bears witness to this loss, and regrets how war destroys these young men's spirit. "War is not for gentle, artistic, sensitive people," she acknowledges sadly (11 October 1944, p. 134). In many ways, her inclusion of soldiers' stories in her diary seems to represent an act of mourning for an entire generation. "I could cry for them all," she says, "but what use are tears?" (11 October 1944, p. 134). As Acton argues in *Grief in Wartime*, "Nurses witnessing wounding and death on a massive scale have been almost entirely overlooked as mourners of the wartime dead . . . Yet, it is clear from their narratives, in letters, diaries, memoirs and poetry, that the legacy of their work is grief" (133). Their position on the stage in the theatre of war forced upon them the role of grieving the entirety of the war, for "unlike women on the home front who grieve for individual losses of family and friends, nurses' mourning is both individual and collective and, like combatants, bound up with the traumatic environment wherein they are both witnessing and participating in terrible suffering and death

on a vast scale" (133). Mary struggles, as many nurses before her have done, with how she must at once grieve for the lost souls and heal the wounded survivors so they are fit to risk their life once more: "We make these boys well just so that they can return to Nijmegen and Eindhoven to begin fighting all over again . . . One wonders, have they been killed or just posted to another theatre of war?" (10 October 1944, p. 133). No matter the fate that awaits them once they leave the walls of her hospital ward, Mary's diary commemorates the individuals whose faces and voices are lost to the masses swept aside in the grand narrative of war. She includes a name, a rank, a division, and often a nationality in most of the stories, details which would likely get lost in the recollection of a memoir, but which are conserved by her diary and find a way to transcend the boundaries of history. Towards the end of the war, she says: "I feel strongly that it is all of us who are young now, who must shape the world of the future for ourselves. I am tired of the Churchills and the Pattons of this war who enjoy the power it gives them. It is a game to them, these boys are the victims, heroes today, forgotten tomorrow" (30 June 1945, p. 181). In writing down their stories, Mary refuses this cultural amnesia. She preserves their voices within the pages of history, even if only her own history.

The individuality Mary imposes on the faceless mass of soldiers similarly extends itself to the enemy. She talks of Hans, her German Prisoner of War, as she does of any other soldier under her care:

The other German is a man in his thirties with a kind, sensitive face. His name is Hans and he has a wife and two children in Frankfurt . . . Hans is quite unlike the jack-booted Hun whom we had anticipated. He is polite and timid and makes me feel that he is one of the many pawns in this game of war. Propaganda is a big

word in wartime. We deduce that good propaganda is whatever makes us hate the enemy. (23 June 1944, p. 92)

After spending some weeks with him and the few other German POWs in the ward, she says "It comes as a shock to realise they are the enemy. We never think of them as such, now that we know them" (4 July 1944, p. 103). As Acton and Potter have noted in their book *Working in a World of Hurt*, Mary sees her hospital ward as a united space in which the soldiers are able to look at each other in the face and recognize a fellow man. As they shed their uniforms, so too they shed their notions of ally and foe to reveal that each one of them is a man fighting the battles of their superiors, and in turn, to reveal the absurdity of war (107). Looking at the mixed nationalities of patients in her ward, Mary writes "This multi-national microcosm of a Europe at war is interesting and sad. A badly wounded cockney says 'thanks mate' to Hans as he gives him his tea and fixes his pillows. Why are they all tolerant of each other inside this canvas tent and killing each other outside of it?" (24 June 1944, p. 94). Mary revisits this idea of internationalism several times, once noting "What a perfect solution for preventing future wars, a universal language and the opportunity for communication" (27 July 1945, p. 192). As a medical professional in the war, her role includes not only taking care of her own, but of any and all wounded by the destructive forces of warfare. Most medical Army professional, like the Red Cross, operated under the code of neutrality. "They are all patients, rank and nationality do not count," Mary writes. "I suppose this makes us neutral territory" (2 July 1944, p. 102). The diary, like her ward, present an idealistic notion of internationalism. By including various perspectives from the war that humanizes and individualizes both enemy and ally, Morris defies the propagandist stereotypes in order to expose the game of war.

We might be so inclined to consider the diary and her elaborate narration of acquaintances' stories as a war for Morris to deal with the trauma she encounters. Nigel Hunt's theory in fact aligns "processing" trauma with "narrative development" (170). As he further explains, "People need to make meaningful sense of their experiences through the use of language and stories. This relationship between narrative, self and identity is central to our understanding of the response to trauma, and links with the social constructions that help to build notions of self and identity" (Hunt 115). Despite the horrific sights she encounters, Mary's personal negotiations on the war do not seem to express personal trauma. While we may be tempted to look for and read into evidence of trauma in the writing of people who we know have experienced and witnessed inhumane devastation, as Hunt explains, although "Many people have psychological problems as a direct consequence of war . . . On the other hand, we also know that the majority of people who go through these experiences do not have serious long-term problems, and that they are able to handle their memories and emotions and get on with their lives, more or less successfully. Many may still experience intense emotion when they think of what they have been through, but that does not mean they are traumatised" (Hunt 2). Acton and Potter have similarly concluded that "It is clear, in reading accounts by medical personnel" from war zones "that they, too, suffer from the emotional consequences of their work." However, "It is also clear that, like combatants and other groups affected by war, they can be resilient and develop coping strategies that allow them to withstand the rigours of their environment" (4). Morris herself demonstrates an astute understanding of war trauma in relation to mental health when she notes "Army life is an interesting experience, if we are prepared to look at it objectively and take the bad with the good. People react to this way of life in different ways" (21 June 1945, p. 177-78). Only a few weeks later she acknowledges the war as a "catalyst

for psychotic illness" (4 July 1945, p. 183). Mary is quick to diagnose her patients with "battle weariness," noting at the start of 1945 that "There is far less gaiety and *joie de vivre*. These men want to go home to their wives and families. They are tired after all the bloody battles of Normandy, Arnhem and Nijmegen" (23 January 1945, p. 147). She fails entirely to acknowledge that she might be suffering from a similar kind of fatigue; nevertheless, Mary is certainly affected by her experience as a wartime nurse. While her diary initially expressed a sense of excitement and adventure, the ongoing uncertainty of the war begins to plague Mary, and her entries become more despondent. In April of 1945, she writes "Felt rather depressed as I came off duty but was cheered to find Malcom waiting for me" (15 April 1945, p. 156). While the defeat of the Axis Powers on the Western front was a time of celebration for many, there remained a long road ahead for medical personnel. As Mary notes, "I signed on for the duration of the war, but in the medical corps that really means the duration of the emergency which is a different matter" (7 June 1945, p. 171). For Mary, the unpredictability of her future lingers as she is relocated to several different towns around Europe. While her work with victims of war drags on, Mary's spirits continue to sink. "Have been feeling rather depressed all day," she notes only a few months after the end of the war, sentiments that she echoes several times in the months that follow (16 July 1945, p. 188). And yet, it is in the bouts of silence that we may find the most compelling evidence for the effects of the war on her mental health. Following her July 5th entry which records in horrific details the aftermath of an incident in which nineteen young Canadians were badly burned by friendly fire, Mary's diary falls silent for several days. The next entry, dated July 9th, begins "Felt too ill and tired to write this for a few days" (9 July 1944, p. 104). As Acton and Potter note, "Omissions may occur because the circumstances themselves are emotionally wrenching and impossible to articulate and respond to fully, especially when recording is a re-

experiencing of an event that is emotionally dangerous to dwell upon" (104). Once Mary takes up her pen again, her focus is on the recovery of her patients, which might be read as an attempt to heal herself from the horrors she has witnessed.

According to Hunt's theory, narrative development may take many form, including discussion with others, personal reflection, writing, painting, or drawing (Hunt 126). Considered in this light, the diary demonstrates that not only are the soldiers able to make meaning from their experiences as they work through their interaction with Mary, but Mary is similarly able to understand herself and her role in the war through her detailed re-narration of the soldiers' stories. Mary's firsthand experience of the war is filled with injured soldiers, depicting only the aftermath of combat:

There were stretchers all down the middle of the tent, there were charred bodies everywhere, some were quiet and dying, other screaming in pain, all with severe burns . . . Their bodies were black, their appearance horrific. We gave them morphia and more morphia and watched helplessly as they died. We moved the dead out of the ward and got on with trying to save the living. They are all so young and frightened. (5 July 1944, p. 103-104)

Listening to the stories of soldiers recently returned from battle might have enabled Morris to make sense of the devastation she saw by allowing her to reconstruct a narrative with which to reconcile the mutilated bodies. While Mary explicitly acknowledges the value of narration for her patients, it is important to note that she does not acknowledge the same benefits for herself. Her private recollections are never portrayed as a way for her to cope with the trauma she encounters; in fact, when she suffers through moments of intense emotions, Mary's silence rings loudly. Nevertheless, although much of the stories that make up the diary were not taken from

her own memories, they are still part of Mary's wartime experience. Hunt notes that "owing to our social nature, our individual narratives are determined not only by how we think, our own memories of our experiences, but also by others, and by the social discourses that exist in society" (97). As Acton and Potter similarly argue of Morris, "the intimate details demonstrate the extent to which her story and that of the wounded she treats are inseparable" (105). Most of our personal memories are cultural constructions that we build in relation to other people and in relation to their personal experiences. Mary's wartime identity is rooted in those of her wounded patients, and her memories of the war are collective, and clearly expressed in the diary.

Morris's account is shaped by her buoyancy, and it is this ability to move on that, according to Hunt's theory, differentiates her from the traumatized survivors of war. In April of 1945, days after war's end in Europe, Mary says "I feel quite ancient at times, have seen too much suffering yet would not want to have missed any of the life I have lived so far" (14 April 1945, p. 156). Although the duties of war linger for her, once victory has been secured, Mary looks forward to her future with Malcom with a sense of sheer optimism. She closes on her experience of war by saying, "Peace has almost lost its meaning for many of us. We have known so little of it. The realisation of what it means and of what we are going to make of it, will have to come slowly. If only we can remember the horror and futility of war then we may have the right foundation for peace" (11 August 1945, p. 198). Her diary serves this exact purpose: it allows Mary to navigate the war all the while conserving a true account of her experience, which serves as both a protest against and a memorial of the second world war.

Mary's wartime experience is, in many ways, fixed in the experiences of her patients. Even in her "very private diary," she makes space for the voices of others by narrating stories that have been passed on to her through her interactions with the soldiers and civilians she cares for.

Forging relationships with her patients was part of her nursing duties, and thus these intimate moments are as natural for her to include in her daily observations as are the rest of her medical duties. However, in wartime, her act of recording the voices of men who have witnessed hell and, in most cases, will soon return to confront death, is an act of rebellion and an act of mourning. She rebels against the narrative produced by propaganda and censorship that reduces individuals to a faceless mass of soldiers, while simultaneously she mourns the sacrifice of an entire generation who will lose either their life, their mobility, or their innocence to yet another war. It is only by navigating the personal account of others that we may come to see Morris clearly, as an attentive, bright, and rebellious survivor of war.

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