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A Couple That Fights Together Stays Together: Romance, Marriage, And Divorce In British Home Front Films Of The Second World War

Authors	Kolan, Idit
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A COUPLE THAT FIGHTS TOGETHER STAYS TOGETHER:
ROMANCE, MARRIAGE, AND DIVORCE IN BRITISH HOME FRONT FILMS OF THE
SECOND WORLD WAR

by

IDIT KOLAN

Under the Direction of Ian C. Fletcher

ABSTRACT

The impact of total war on the British home front from 1939 to 1945 was profound. In particular, military and economic mobilization disrupted gender relations. Men and women of different class and national backgrounds encountered each other, sometimes forming romantic relationships that strained the institutions of marriage and family. This disruption was heavily depicted in wartime British cinema, especially in feature films devoted to the home front experience. Differences of class, gender, and nationality were downplayed in order to construct a solidaristic meaning for wartime social experience, fitting for “the People’s War.” My thesis examines romantic relationships and marriages depicted in numerous British home front films. While many films featured unconventional couples of mixed class or nationality, they did not always offer happy endings. I argue that these films evince the problems of marriage in wartime Britain and foreshadow the rise in divorce that came with peace in 1945-46.

INDEX WORDS: Britain, Second World War, Film, Home Front, Gender, Marriage, Divorce

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IDIT KOLAN

Committee Chair: Ian C. Fletcher

Committee: Denise Z. Davidson

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Georgia State University
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1 Introduction

When I started watching British feature films made during or immediately after the Second World War, I was particularly interested in plots dealing with everyday situations that depicted the everyman's and everywoman's response to a prolonged total war. I watched these films through the lens of gender, paying close attention to roles and relations. In films about the home front, it soon became apparent that men's and women's love interests and relationships provided an endless array of real-life situations to explore. My thesis investigates the plot patterns and cultural significance of heterosexual romance and marriage in British home front films.

Film as a means of entertainment is very much a product of its time. It is a negotiation with social reality, sometimes reproducing real-life situations, especially in the realist genre, sometimes recreating a parallel, wished-for reality. The war disrupted British society on many levels, including gender relations. Films made at that time responded to the current preoccupations of the British people and tried to construct a meaning out of the experience of a total war. Contemporary gender discourse both shaped these films and, in turn, was shaped by them.

Cinema is a perfect medium to appreciate the social and cultural discourse of a nation, because it is collectively produced and consumed.¹ Therefore it is not surprising that many feature films made during the war conveyed the new possibilities opened up in the British courting world: conscripted men and mobile women going out of the house, the mixing of classes as well as sexes in war industries and in the armed forces, and the encounters of British women with millions of American GIs and other Allied soldiers. In many cases, couples formed untraditional ties, an odd coupling of sorts: young and old, upper-class and working-class, British

and foreign. Exploring film representations of how couples met, what kinds of relationships they formed, and how the war conditioned these relationships can shed a new light on the interaction between cinema and society. Given what we know about the social history of wartime Britain, especially changes in gender relations due to millions of women working outside the home for the first time, a close study of films can help us understand how far cinema converged with or diverged from popular attitudes and practices.²

Home front films helped British filmgoers process their war experience, both individually and collectively. Audiences could compare their experience against what they encountered in the media. Especially in realist cinema, ordinary viewers could see a war experience resembling their own and recognize themselves as a vital part of the People's War. The common notion about the People's War is that it erased differences of class, gender, or nationality, as all citizens are dedicated to the national cause. But, as Sonya O. Rose and other scholars have determined, the People's War also sharpened tensions and divisions, especially ones of class.³ This myth of wartime solidarity has been commemorated in British war films. Such differences were "noted in the films, but then lessened, often through the suggestion that a set of internal differences is precisely what makes Britain distinctive, and hence unified."⁴

Lessening the difference was often achieved through non-traditional couplings. If a working-class man can form a relationship with an upper-class socialite, then they depict the ultimate solidarity of Britons. Whereas couples formed in the simpler times of the interwar era tended to be similar in age, background, nationality, and class, wartime couples were not often based on compatibility of backgrounds and personalities. Romance formed quickly in a time of blurred gender boundaries. It was common for newly formed couples to have only known each other briefly before marriage and for subsequent separation and enforced self-reliance to take a

toll on their budding relationships. But even relationships that seemed solid in 1939 sometimes turned out quite differently after six years of total war. As the war reached its end in 1945, many Britons took stock of their changed world, including changes that manifested first in the home, between a husband and a wife. Fighting the People's War together had affected the fighting front as well as the home front, the realm of private and family life. The prolonged fighting meant that couples endured years of separation that coincided with new opportunities for extra-marital temptations.

Films acknowledged most changes in class and gender relations, sexual conduct and moral standards, and practices of courtship and marriage, but tended to explain them as contingent on the war. This underlines the fact that conservative British cinema did not and perhaps could not stand for a society radically altered by total war. Therefore my investigation of home front films seeks to understand how British cinema contained the potentially disruptive consequences of the war by marking many changes as "for the duration only." It may be that film did not so much contain change as offer a compensation for it, in plot resolutions that were more satisfying than the outcomes of real, everyday gender conflicts in the lives of filmgoers.

Cinema was the most popular media outlet during the war, enjoyed by all levels of society. Wartime surveys claim that a third of the population went to the movies at least once a week; two-thirds went sometimes.⁵ The importance of cinema was recognized even during the war, when Mass Observation and the Ministry of Information (MoI) were surveying cinemagoers and their reactions to what they were watching.⁶ According to these surveys, working-class women formed a large share of film audiences. British wartime cinema was undoubtedly a man's world, as men wrote, produced, and directed most films and through them gave voice to male

attitudes and agendas. Starting the mid-war years, the Ministry of Information Films Division commissioned films that conveyed the female experience of war, obliging the film industry to come up with credible female characters and storylines.⁷

That is why my primary sources are the films themselves, with the addition of film reviews from *The Times* (London), the *New York Times*, and contemporary film magazines. While many feature films represented romantic relationships, like costume melodramas or combat action and adventure films, I am particularly interested in realist films that directly approach gender relations and treat the home front everyday experience in a meaningful way.⁸ A realist feature film reflected an identifiable and authentic wartime experience, influenced by the documentary genre. The national cinema, or “the new school of realism,” set out to distinguish itself from Hollywood and create a distinct national style. Part of this was to depict hardships in wartime Britain as a stark contrast to affluent, glamorous America from the Hollywood films.⁹ The MoI Films Division offered “special support” for production of realist films, and defined them as “films about everyday life dealing with matters not directly about the war but featuring events.”¹⁰

My thesis focuses on the genre of realist films, particularly home front films. Antonia Lant describes home front films as “seek[ing] to make entertainment from the facts of home front wartime experience ... Focusing on the home front as opposed to the fighting front meant emphasizing the psychological, rather than the physical, aspects of war, and this forced (or allowed) an emphasis on narratives about female experience.”¹¹ The focus on the female experience makes home front films the best source of gender interplay and the construction of contemporary gender discourse. Films are not mirrors of society. They “refract” rather than “reflect” reality. Home front films worked on and resolved rather than reproduced real-life

situations. Contemporary gender discourse both shaped these films and, in turn, was shaped by them. When we recognize that filmgoing was the main form of wartime popular entertainment, the interplay between what film viewers saw on the screen and what they were doing in their own lives becomes all the more interesting.

It is important to note the limitations of British realist films as historical sources. While some of them may have been favorites among critics, escapist Hollywood films enjoyed a much larger number of showings and a larger share of audiences in Britain during the war and after.¹² Even *Brief Encounter* could not compete with Gainsborough's *The Wicked Lady* for the audience's love at the box-office in 1946.¹³ Then and now, cinema realism rarely produces a blockbuster.

In researching this thesis, I have watched over fifty films, many of which are available on DVD or can be streamed online through Amazon Instant Video, Hulu, or YouTube.¹⁴ Most of these films are British, although I watched a few wartime American films set in Britain for comparative purposes. For my three main chapters, I have selected sixteen films from this larger pool. This smaller number allows me to make a closer analysis and comparison of the films. Nevertheless, I have chosen a wide range of films. My selection includes classic films, such as *Mrs Miniver* (1942), directed by William Wyler, and *Brief Encounter* (1945), directed by David Lean, which are recognized by critics to this day. My selection also includes popular films, such as Gainsborough's *Millions Like Us* (1943) or *Waterloo Road* (1945) and even a few undistinguished films like *Johnny Frenchman* (1945), *The Captive Heart* (1946), and *English Without Tears* (1944). Some of the latter films have not received serious consideration by scholars who have analyzed issues of gender in British war and home front films of the 1940s. While not all the films place relations between men and women at the center of the plot, I have

found that, taken together, they deliver a clear and compelling picture of wartime gender relations. Thus my evidence comes largely from the films themselves, rather than from film industry memoirs or audience research.¹⁵ I maintain there is a great deal that can be learned about issues of gender in wartime cinema by carefully viewing, comparing, and contextualizing films.

Watching films for the purpose of historical analysis requires considerable focus. It is particularly interesting to me how films processed wartime gender and social changes and whether and to what extent these changes were directly represented or only obliquely referred to in the conduct of characters and the twists and turns of plots. I usually watch a film several times, and concentrate my attention on dialogue and acting. I also take account of settings, sound, and camerawork, although this thesis is less concerned with the artistry of filmmaking. Every time I watch a film, I develop not only an analysis of the story, plot (how the story unfolds), and character development, but also comparisons between films on the basis of recurrent themes and situations. My choice of films was not arbitrary, but determined by three important themes that emerged from watching films comparatively and have become the basis of the three main chapters: foreigners and romance, cross-class romance, and disrupted marriages.

There is an abundance of scholarship on Britain during and after the Second World War. My thesis stands at the intersection of two lines of historical inquiry: the first is everyday life, gender relations, and social change in wartime and postwar Britain; and the second, British cinema in the 1940s.

Among the rich social history of Britain in the Second World War, I found work connecting perceptions of citizenship and gender particularly stimulating. James Hinton's *Nine*

Wartime Lives offers a glimpse into social changes, mainly the redefining of active citizenship and gender roles, through nine Mass Observation diaries. It is refreshing to see how Hinton uses subjectivity and the personal experiences of ordinary people to explain social processes without necessarily connecting them into one cohesive history of wartime Britain. Sonya O. Rose's *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945* reveals that wartime perceptions of masculinity and femininity were even more layered and complex than before. Fighting the People's War together was a seemingly inclusive national ideal, but sharpening gender differentiation was the reality. Women were expected to fit into masculine occupations in war production for the good of the nation without losing their femininity or maternal instincts. This "sexualized femininity" stood in contrast to the temperate masculinity of British men, evident in the national motifs of heroism, camaraderie, and good-humored reasonableness.¹⁶

Recent work in wartime British film studies and film history includes general surveys, such as Marcia Landy's *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960*. Landy challenges the common view of British feature films as uninteresting or uncinematic, as well as the perception that films were either realist and unpopular or "trashy" and popular. She maintains that British realism was socially constructed, part of a society finding its way, partly resisting the dominant discourse and partly reinforcing it. James Chapman's *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945* concerns the interplay between the film industry and the government. He focuses on the Ministry of Information Films Division's role in British wartime cinema, arguing that films did not merely convey the official discourse, and mixed propaganda with other ideologies and points of view, to create a rather complex cinematic representation of the People's War. Neil Rattigan's *This Is England: British Film and the People's War, 1939-1945* discusses

class representation in wartime cinema and maintains that the ruling class projected an image of the People's War that celebrated its natural leadership, while providing little room for the heroism of the lower classes or even "cross-class fraternization" one would expect from the "all in it together" propaganda catchphrase.¹⁷

My interest in wartime heterosexual romance and marital relationships as represented in home front films has been influenced by two engaging feminist studies: Antonia Lant's *Blackout: Reinventing Women for British Wartime Cinema* and Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson's edited collection, *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War*. Lant focuses on images of the blackout and of mobile woman, both widely used as part of the deglamorization of the female body in wartime realist cinema. As women were the major audience during wartime, many titles dealt ambivalently with the female experience of war, constantly juggling between traditional female domesticity and wartime responsibilities outside the home, between men's and women's experiences, and between the battle front and the home front. Gledhill and Swanson's essay collection is at the intersection of film history and cultural and social history, providing a thorough survey of women on the home front from family life to work and entertainment.

My thesis complements Lant's and Gledhill and Swanson's studies of the representation of women in wartime British films by exploring the representation of romantic and marital relationships between women and men. Through my analysis and comparison of realist home front films, I want to answer several questions. What was the role of heterosexual romantic and marital relationships in the plots of home front films? In individual, social, and moral terms, how were the characters and couples represented and what did they signify? How did these plots and characters negotiate changing gender relations in British society during the war? More

broadly, I look at how these films dealt with issues of women's status on the home front, from the private and domestic sphere to the workplace and public life, and the effects of prolonged war on the relationships of young lovers, newlyweds, and older married couples.

The existing scholarship on social change as well as on cinema in Britain during the Second World War covers many themes that I also address in my thesis. Yet there are topics that still have not been fully investigated through film, such as foreigners and nationality or disrupted romance. Moreover, there are interesting films that have been more or less overlooked in the scholarship, such as *English Without Tears*. Looking into the representation of romantic relationships in a number of films provides a more balanced picture than studies of only a few films. As to which films I discuss in each chapter, I have chosen the films that are richest in social content and thematic value. The combination of films for each chapter is original, mixing well-known and little-known films, box-office hits and films that have been mostly forgotten. I also juxtapose film's wartime reality and the findings of social history, treating films as a unique primary source that sheds new light on the changing social reality of Britain during and after the war.

There are three main chapters in my thesis. Chapters 2 and 3 explore two sorts of unconventional couplings: couples of different nationalities and couples from different classes. I am interested in the way films represent the effects of prolonged war on young lovers and their "opposites attract" romance, and make interconnections of class, gender, and nation. These liminal romantic relationships reveal the duality of a conservative British movie industry, which emphasized the disruptive nature of war and suggested that things would go back to normal when the war ended, while at the same time proving unable to completely dismiss audience anxieties and expectations for a changed postwar society. The fourth chapter delves more deeply

into the effects of a prolonged war on married couples. Newlyweds barely had time together before war tore them apart, while established couples were changed by the war. In both cases, husbands and wives seemingly met for the first time when the war ended and they were reunited. Long forced separations coupled with the traumas of war took a heavy toll on British family life, and many reunited couples opted for separation and divorce. I examine the cusp between war and peace in British cinema to understand the unique social milieu of a society finding its way again, now that the Nazi enemy had been defeated.

In analyzing and comparing home front films, I wish to understand the significance of couples in social, national, and moral terms as well as the resolution of issues of women's status on the home front, from the domestic sphere to the workplace and public life. Lant proclaims that "[e]ven in film, a medium thoroughly permeated by masculine fantasies of female subjectivity, we catch glimpses of women's wartime predicaments."¹⁸ I shed light on women and men's wartime experience, separately and together, and explore representations of femininity and masculinity, which were colored by class and nationality. It is sometimes the case that a film's plot and characters engage with the themes of more than one chapter. Thus *Piccadilly Incident* concerns a cross-class marriage, the depiction of a foreigner, and the separation of lovers.

The ironic title of my thesis points to the limited willingness of the British film industry to explore the everyday dilemmas of heterosexual couples in wartime and immediate postwar Britain. British social history demonstrates that many real-life couples found it hard to stay together during and after the war. In some cases, distance failed to make the heart grow fonder. In other cases, women discovered social and economic freedoms during the war that they were reluctant to surrender when husbands came back at war's end and marital duties and domestic

responsibilities were once again the order of the day. In still other cases, the mobilization of millions of Britons had vastly increased romantic and sexual opportunities. In the absence of enough common ground, the attraction of a spouse could quickly wear off. Yet all too often the filmgoer who lived through similar experiences saw a seemingly realistic film that left relationships' fates unresolved or excluded the possibility of marital dissolution.

The films I have chosen to analyze are not naïve celebrations of love, commitment, and sacrifice. Their plots and characters engage with some of the challenges and anxieties faced by British couples during the war and its aftermath. At the same time, filmmakers seemed reluctant to present a clear picture of the direction the nation was headed and tried instead to walk a fine line between conservative and progressive responses to social change. The attention to recuperating disrupted marriages, which figures so prominently in films of these years, is even more intriguing. In the end, despite public concern about premarital and extramarital sexuality and rising divorce rates, the British film industry rarely produced any convention-shattering feature films.

In British national cinema of the 1940s, sexual desire and freedom were contained as the short-lived excesses of the war years. In peacetime, they were not likely to become a way of life or pose a real threat to the legitimacy of monogamous marriage between two equal spouses. The message was that love, flings, and flirtations should result in a lasting union, or be consigned to the trying years of the war. But even conservative British cinema was not immune to popular expectations of a new, more equal postwar society. Here we need to remember that the reference point was not simply the improvisations of the war but also the class and gender hierarchies of the interwar period. Home front films may not have been able to cope with wartime moral laxity, but they were more receptive to social changes affording increased economic and

professional opportunities to women. Some films suggest that continuity in married and domestic life might be the anchor of change in public life. They leave the door open to slow changes in women's choices and alternatives, a fittingly ambiguous response to a society in transition between the old and the new, facing inevitable class leveling and gender role redefinition.

¹ Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, *The Battle of the Sexes in French Cinema, 1930–1956* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

² James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³ Sonya O. Rose uses the wartime term “class feeling,” maintaining that the British were one people divided by social and economic inequality. There was abundant popular unrest against the self-interested behavior of the wealthy. Rose states that “[w]ith nearly every major demand for additional contribution to the war effort, the rhetoric of equality of sacrifice let to the expression of class antagonism.” See: Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 36. Neil Rattigan claims that patriarchal hegemony and class hegemony deemed it unlikely that women and the working class shared interests with men or the ruling class, unless propaganda films stressed their necessity for the People's War: “Women need to be told it is ‘their’ war in the same way the lower-classes had to be told it was their war.” See Neil Rattigan, *This Is England: British Film and the People's War, 1939-1945* (Cranbury, NJ, London, and Mississauga, ON: Associated University Press, 2001), 187.

⁴ Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 41.

⁵ James Chapman, “British Cinema and ‘The People's War,’” in *‘Millions Like Us’?: British Culture in the Second World War*, ed. Nick Hayes and Jeff Hill (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 41.

⁶ Lant, *Blackout*, 7; Jeffery Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, ed., *Mass Observation at the Movies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 1-16; Anthony Aldgate and Jeffery Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World*, 2nd ed. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 3-4.

⁷ Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 84-85; Lant, *Blackout*, 63.

⁸ Chapman, “British Cinema and ‘The People's War,’” 33-34; Lant, *Blackout*, 13.

⁹ Antonia Lant, "Prologue: Mobile Femininity," in *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 16.

¹⁰ Cited in Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 12.

¹¹ Lant, *Blackout*, 13.

¹² Stacey, *Star Gazing*, 83-84, 97, 108.

¹³ Lant, *Blackout*, 232; James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 253.

¹⁴ During the war, an average of sixty-nine films were produced in Britain each year. See Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 2.

¹⁵ For comprehensive audience research on British female spectatorship of Hollywood stars, see Stacey, *Star Gazing*; for conceptualization of the cinematic gaze and spectatorship, see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

¹⁶ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 74, 135.

¹⁷ Rattigan, *This Is England*, 29.

¹⁸ Lant, *Blackout*, 62.

2 “Oh, isn’t it like an Englishman to niggle about a thing like that?”: Foreigners and Romance

The People’s War is the popular British name for the Second World War. This name has been used during the war and ever since, to suggest that the British people were fighting a different kind of war, one they were actively shaping. As Britons lived through events significant for the entire nation, they became “protagonists in their own history;” their shared stories created history.¹ The People’s War is a national term, indicating a unified national community against its aggressors. It is intriguing to examine the role of foreigners in a society hyper-sensitive to its self-preservation, an island fighting alone (whether it was real or imagined).

In this chapter, I will examine several wartime British feature films with romantic unions of a Briton and a foreigner. Romance between either a British man or woman and a foreign partner who is Irish, American, French, or Russian remind us that British national cinema addressed not just the “People’s War” but also a “peoples’ war,” reflecting the presence of many foreign civilians and soldiers in the country. Exploring the representation of mixed British-foreign couples, especially the gendered nature of “Britishness” and “foreignness,” can shed new light on the cinema’s negotiation of patriotism as well as cosmopolitanism, at a time when Britain’s very survival depended not only on national unity but also on Allied and imperial support.

I wish to understand the significance of couples’ depiction in social, national, and moral terms as well as to explore how these films dealt with issues of women’s status on the home front, from the domestic sphere to the workplace and public life, and the effects of prolonged war on young lovers and their “opposites attract” romance. British movie production was mostly a

men's world and a more natural voice for masculine values and goals, so it is hardly surprising to find conservative social notions and a tendency to emphasize the disruptive nature of war, suggesting that while foreigners are in fact friends and allies, they are not necessarily suitable matches for marriage.

The four films I have chosen have not yet been taken together to consider the potentially-devastating outcomes of absent British men and the very present foreign soldiers in Britain during the war.² *I Live in Grosvenor Square* (1945) centers around a love triangle between a Duke's granddaughter, an army Major, and a charismatic GI; in *The Demi-Paradise* (1943), a prejudiced Russian engineer changes his mind about the British people with the help of a bubbly socialite; *Johnny Frenchman* (1945) focuses on a Brittany fisherman and a fisherman's daughter from Cornwall who unite their communities against a common enemy; and in *I See a Dark Stranger* (1946), an Anglophobe Irishwoman tries her luck as a Nazi spy while being pursued by an English Lieutenant.

2.1 The Made-in-Hollywood American

John Patterson: "So this is England, eh? You know, Benjie, this is the hundred percent war effort that we've heard so much about. Peacocks. Tennis. Fussy women colonels. No wonder the folks back home thought this was a phoney war."³

This type of critical response was all too common among American soldiers upon first arriving in Britain. Most Americans were young and impressionable, had never been in a foreign country before, and could not comprehend the seemingly undemocratic class system or the mismatch between the glorious British Empire and the dreary country they encountered, the blackout, the lack of food, and the bomb-damaged buildings in the cities. Even the picturesque

English countryside with historic landmarks had little appeal to the GIs, who were used to vast open spaces and instead were looking for entertainment.⁴ Criticism was flowing from the other end, too. Many British disliked the GIs, who were referred to as “overpaid, oversexed, and over here,” for their spending ways and cheeky manners towards British women. The Home Office claimed that “the sudden influx of Americans, speaking like the films, who actually lived in the magic country, and who had plenty of money, at once went to the girls’ heads. The American attitude to woman, their proneness to spoil a girl, to build up, exaggerate, talk big, and to act with generosity and flamboyance helped to make them the most attractive boy-friends.”⁵ To the dismay of the domestic male population, many British women were drawn to the glamorous Americans who showed them a good time after years of rationing and a general atmosphere of austerity and want.⁶

I Live in Grosvenor Square, however, released around VE-Day to become the second most popular British film of 1945, presents an idealized picture of British open-mindedness toward the Americans. First, it was the Duke of Exmoor, whose Grosvenor home became part of the American headquarters in London. He doesn’t seem to resent this intrusion in his elegant home, and seems amused by the familiar way Sergeant John Paterson (Dean Jagger), one of the GIs billeted there, addresses him. Strangely, the Duke likes John’s direct approach and encourages it, and even invites both John and sidekick Benjie to his country home. Major David Bruce (Rex Harrison), upon first meeting John, offers to share a taxi with him, shows him around London and even invites him for drinks at his club. Lady Patricia Fairfax (Anna Neagle) is the one least impressed by the American, but is still relatively tolerant and reserved in response to John’s know-it-all attitude about the British when they first meet. “I guess maybe the war hasn’t changed things so much over here,” he tells her over tea, to which she cynically replies: “you’re

a keen observer, Mr. Patterson.” While most Britons needed to be implored to remember the cultural gap, the upper-class characters present exquisite manners and a tolerant and warm welcome to a complete stranger, even when he romances Patricia, the Duke’s granddaughter and David’s girlfriend.

Compared to other British women, Lady Patricia is less likely to fall for an American: she is well-off and her long-time boyfriend is upper-class, too. The American cannot even be mistaken for a glamorous movie star, as he tells Pat he is from Flagstaff, Arizona and explains: “It’s on the road to California.” John realizes he judged Pat too hastily after he sees her in her WAAF uniform, and he apologizes to her on the train to back to London. Although he was not a movie star, he was charming enough and she agrees to spend the afternoon with him at the (in)famous Rainbow Corner. In this night club, a “bit of America in Piccadilly circus,” Lady Pat is introduced to a foreign community; a bold GI asks her to dance, which soon turns into a fierce jitterbug; they listen to Irene Manning and share a drink. Patricia has to report back to duty and they are in a hurry to get her to the last train. Their blackout taxi ride symbolizes the liminal space of war where old rules do not apply. She manages to board the train and instantly returns to a wholly British world.

The wartime novelty of non-classed railway cars⁷ provided a typical *mise-en-scène* to home front films, where the audience could get a sense of the composition of “the people” fighting the “People’s War.” In this scene, “the people” are represented by two working-class mobile women, a sailor, and an older gentleman. Patricia and the men hear the two women discuss their American boyfriends showering them with gifts, nylons, and cigarettes, all while complaining of their cheekiness (“But don’t they expect a lot of gratitude just because they give you some camels and a lipstick?”). The cramped space doesn’t stop one of the girls from

bragging about her new “all the way” nylons, exposing herself to an unabashed male gaze from the dark corner; Pat is embarrassed and looks down, while her companion is nonchalantly smoking an American cigarette. The working-class girls label their GIs according to what they are worth (gifts) and their Hollywood good looks (“looks just like Jimmy Stewart”). But it doesn’t get deeper than this. “Same language but a different world,” concludes the voice of “the People.” Pat now seems amused by this bluntness, as this encounter in a British wartime social space reaffirms her own very different connection to John, emotional over material.



Figure 1. *I Live in Grosvenor Square*: the People discuss the Americans

The housekeeper in Grosvenor square is another working-class character who initially rejects John’s direct and amicable approach. Mrs. Wilson resents the Americans who take over the house and is annoyed by their mannerisms, leading her to reject John’s food offerings, even

though sugar and butter are in short supply. Only after she learns the American had lost his father in the First War she can relate to him, having lost her husband then.

The People voice their objections and grievances about the Americans, but their natural “leaders” are welcoming and affectionate. Pat and John meet again the day before the bi-election, supporting Major Bruce, the Conservative candidate. While David is busy with rallies and kissing babies, John skips formalities with Pat. David ends up losing the election, and he figures out he had lost his girl too. A respected member of his community, an army major who seems like the best match for Lady Patricia and a “sure bet” for parliament, his world is changing all too fast:

David: you mean this fella can come on a weekend’s leave and break up everything we meant between us?

Pat: I said I’m sorry, David.

David: So you did. And say it again, it’s very easy.

Pat: Oh, don’t talk like that.

David: How do you want me to talk? With the conventional stiff upper lip? Jolly good luck and may the best man win and I’ll send you a cake stand for your new home?

David can’t seem to react with the appropriate upper-class emotional restraint at his double loss. He represents the defeated gentlemanly elite. A Conservative in a time of transition to a Labour government, his chance of marrying within his class (as part of the upper-class self-preservation) is crushed by a foreigner. Rex Harrison “displays, with great subtlety, the ‘moral beauty of good form’, even more charismatic in defeat than in victory.”⁸

Patricia and John do not see each other again, and it takes the Duke’s intervention to bring the lovers back together the night before John goes back on active duty. This is the second time the blackout plays a crucial role in their relationship, but this time the lovers solidify the bond between them, admit their feelings, and start planning for the future. While the possibility

of an Anglo-American romantic relationship is explored, Lady Pat and John don't have a happily-ever-after. This morose finale to a love story is a typical resolution in the home front genre.⁹ David is there for Pat after John's death, reliable and dependable, a stand-up guy who doesn't hold it against Pat for choosing John, as he did not hold it against the American. He embodies a temperate British masculinity: "heroic ... quintessentially reasonable ... who willingly and with good humour sacrificed [his] private and personal interests and desires for the collective good."¹⁰

Serious exploration of an Anglo-American relationship can be seen in the more realistic *The Way to the Stars* (1945). *I Live in Grosvenor Square* "all too soon leaves any profitable discussion on an absorbing topic to present the over-polite and chivalrous battle between the Arizona champion ... and the Grosvenor Square representative."¹¹ Despite the different approach, both films glorify the American for sacrificing himself. Both John Patterson and Johnny Hollis cannot land safely when they return from a mission over Germany, and crash their plane away from the villages to avoid civilian casualties. The Americans have made the ultimate sacrifice for England. The notion that America won the war and saved the free world might be the unofficial American narrative to the war, but to the British, it diminished their sacrifices and suffering. Compared to their contribution, Americans were "Johnny comes lately" to both wars.¹²

I Live in Grosvenor Square tries to show audiences in both sides of the Atlantic that the war was a cooperative effort, and that each side's contribution and sacrifice needed to be appreciated. The message proved very appealing to both British and American audiences, if not to critics, who accused the film of being simplistic, overly-sentimental, and especially unrepresentative of the American experience ("Every GI who went to England didn't get billeted in an elegant mansion owned by a congenial duke, nor did he win the affection of a titled blonde

beauty betrothed to a British major”¹³) and the British experience (“it is a pity that the middle-class sergeant from Arizona had to fall in love with an aristocrat whose home and background are almost as unlike those of most English people’s as the average American’s”¹⁴). But it was precisely this glamorous Hollywood-like upper-class appeal that made the film such a success. The star quality is undeniable. Dashing Rex Harrison also appeared that year in *The Rake’s Progress* as a playboy sought after by women, and Anna Neagle was one of the most popular female stars during the war, the epitome of British femininity.¹⁵

The Demi-Paradise shares *I Live in Grosvenor Square*’s glamorized female constructed in an upper-class setting, however it subdues her glamour to fit the theme of a reckless female who redeems her ways because she becomes a part of the People’s War.

2.2 The Practical Russian

Ann Tisdall: Daddy, that’s Mr. Ivan. He’s Russian.
Mr. Tisdall: Well, that’s no excuse for being rude.

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, the love/hate relationship of Britain with the Communist state was further complicated. On the one hand, the clash of ideologies persisted with Churchill and the upper-class still abhorring Communism and expressing “many reservations” about aiding the new ally. On the other hand, the British people were relieved to finally be cooperating with a powerful ally that would divert Nazi fury away from British sky and sea.¹⁶

Though anti-Communist feeling still prevailed among the British population throughout the war, especially among the privileged, none of it is shown in *The Demi-Paradise*, a comedy that cheerfully portrays Anglo-Soviet solidarity. Ivan Kouzetsoff (Lawrence Olivier) is a Russian

engineer who, on his first visit to England in 1939, is eager to disapprove of everything and everyone. He came to build an ice-breaking propeller for ships, armed with an innovative design and preconceived notions about the English. Ivan complains about the gloomy weather and even gloomier Britons: the people on the train, his landlady, and an employee at the shipbuilding company's office in London. Discouraged, he meets Ann Tisdall (Penelope Ward), the granddaughter of the owner, Mr. Runalow, and is taken by her bubbly personality.

Ann takes Ivan to Barchester to meet Mr. Runalow, where Ivan first mistakes Mr. Tisdall for the gardener. He is then upset at the eccentric Mr. Runalow for seemingly being more preoccupied with teatime, nightingales, and train timetables, than with work. Slowly Ivan discovers a great technical mind and a benevolent paternalism in Mr. Runalow, who is far from the lazy ruthless capitalist he first had in mind. Mr. Runalow even justifies himself, claiming he once loved working but is getting too old for it. The town's people and especially the Tisdall/Runalow family are very friendly towards the critical Russian, with the exception of older family member Winnie, who nonsensically fears the Russian due to Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

In this upper-class narrative, England is portrayed in a sentimental way, where the small town with its benevolent gentry, its teatimes, historical pageants and "certainties of pre-war values" are mythologized; even class distinction is a feature of Englishness "worth defending."¹⁷ While Ivan is very critical of the English character, he is curiously uncritical of this supposedly undemocratic classed society. One exception is when he crucifies Ann for selfishly going to the theatre with him instead of fulfilling her designated role at the benevolent fund dance. While he eschews using her misconduct as proof of general upper-class degeneration and the superiority of Soviet classless society,¹⁸ he claims she is using her privileged position in a heartless,

hypocritical, and selfish way. “All this kindness, all this generosity of yours means nothing. You have never done [sic] kind thing in your life. You have only enjoyed being [sic] big lady distributing charity to the poor. Look at the way you let down all the people who expect you tonight.” Ivan’s incidental criticism only comes after his ego is slighted by Ann’s rejection of an awkward marriage proposal. Ivan reveals to Ann he was contemplating her good and bad points, and is happy to tell her the calculated verdict is in her favor. But his insensitivity is heightened by subjecting the offer to certain conditions: “First, that you tell Tom the truth about tonight, and never do such thing again. Second, that you promise me to use less makeup - it does not go with your face.” He is insulting her character as well as her physical appearance, aiming to fix her to better fit his Soviet notions of femininity. Offended, Ann calls him conceited and egotistical. Her rejection makes him further dismiss everything English (especially the town’s cherished historical pageant).

As a “good Soviet citizen,” Ivan is consumed with his professional personality as a workman/inventor. The British working class had long “held a naive admiration for Russia as a workers’ state.”¹⁹ This admiration is briefly addressed in the film through the character of Tom, a passionate dreamer who works with Ivan on the propeller’s design and complains about the faulty British system (he has special training and can’t use it), claiming this would have never happened in Russia. The Russian appreciates Tom’s passion, but does not take the opportunity to share Tom’s enthusiasm about Soviet ideology. This serves as a reminder that the film conveys an upper-class value system, glorifying England as a happy society of unequals. There is no interest in encouraging a working-class agenda. When Tom says goodbye to Ivan at the train station, he wishes he could join him, but still tries to deflect the Russian’s critical attitude toward

England: “It’s not as bad as you think, you know?” to which Ivan replies: “Maybe something will happen soon to wake you up, will it? But will you wake up?”

A few months later, war breaks out. Tom’s admiration for the way things are done in Russia has subsided, as his efforts are drawn to Britain’s own national survival. In the Soviet Union, many women joined the Red Army or were mobilized into relocated war factories after the Nazi invasion.²⁰ British working-class women admired their Soviet counterparts, where women were equal to men. Soviet women were the model national citizen, and “depicted admiringly as masculine”.²¹ This admiration for Russian women was further reinforced by Ministry of Information propaganda, which sent mixed signals to British women. They were still expected to conserve their “sexualized femininity” while contributing to the war effort in military uniform or in factory overalls. This visible gender differentiation was aimed at countering the possibility of permanent change to gender relations, from a wartime exception to a postwar reality.²²

Images of women in the Red Army, such as pilots, gunners, and snipers, were particularly captivating for British media. In *Tawny Pipit* (1944), Corporal Bokolova, a heroic Russian woman sniper on a goodwill tour, visits the village. She receives a warm welcome and a telescopic rifle from retired Colonel Barton-Barrington. He presents this gift to her with mixed signals: “Now I’m going to call upon this brave - and I’m sure you all agree with me - beautiful representative of our gallant Russian ally to say just a few words to you.” Bokolova delivers a militant speech: “We mean to smash the fascist invaders. I myself have shot over a hundred Hitlerites. And I am looking forward to shooting many more!” Feeling uncomfortable with this strange type of femininity, Colonel Barton-Barrington needed reassurance of the visitor’s womanhood (“Fine figure of a woman, eh Kingsley?”). For the two Land girls in the audience,

Bokolova's determined aggressiveness is a role model. They wonder "what she's got that we haven't," and wryly conclude: "If the Germans had got here, I only hope I should have made a better sniper than I have a Land girl."



Figure 2. *Tawny Pipit*: aggressive Soviet femininity

If in 1939 Ann is baffled by the concept of work ("I suppose all offices look much the same. I can't understand how anybody manages to stay in them"), by 1940 she has transformed into a model citizen who is mature and ready for self-sacrifice. When Ivan comes back to England and bumps into Ann on the street, he immediately inquires her if she is married yet and tells her she should hurry up or might end up a maiden. It seems like he is finally beginning to understand the English sense of humor, which mystified him so in 1939. But the Soviet's education in the English ways is yet to be completed. "War has not changed the High Street very much," he observes, but the unmistakable *mise-en-scène*, with an action-filled sky of enemy

planes dogfighting the RAF, immediately reminds Ivan that the country is at war. He learns Ann does canteen work in one of the shipyards and has taken in evacuees; soon after she joins the Wrens (the Women's Royal Naval Service). The film does not clarify whether Ann has become a responsible member of the upper-class because of the war or due to the Other's disapproval of her behavior.²³ Come war, even the minute criticism of upper-class selfishness is deflated.

In their night out together, Ann admits to Ivan she loves him. He feels like a failure because his propeller design proved unsuccessful. He tells Ann she must forget about him, but upon drinking tea he suddenly sees the solution. There is barely time to build the new design, and Ann, alongside Tom, urges the workers to do a final push. Barchester is coming together to get the propeller ready in time. This documentary-like scene highlighting workers is reminiscent of Soviet films. Its incorporation in a comedy conveys a sense of community and balances the over-emphasis on the upper-class's crucial position in the People's War.

Sue Harper claims that when Ivan rejects Ann's love confession, she is desexualized.²⁴ I maintain it is Ivan who is desexualized. From presenting his propeller lover, to his "reasoning" for marriage and for rejecting Ann, it all revolves around his professional personality. Ann is trying to make him see beyond the job, but she is only partly successful. In 1939 at the train station, he says he did not understand (her? The English?). She says she'll miss him but he doesn't hear her, another sign of their doomed romance. His passionate goodbye to the dog further accentuates his reserved reaction to Ann. In 1940, after accomplishing his mission to build the propeller, Ivan returns to Russia without Ann; the film does not elaborate why. Ivan's professional success was supposed to signal his romantic success with Ann, but the couple ultimately remains apart.

Ann and Ivan develop a relationship that is almost realized into a love affair. This “almost” pairing is a typical way for home front films to resolve romance - exploring possibilities only to have them wither away. According to Sarah Street, “their failed romance symboliz[es] that Anglo-Soviet relations can only go *so far*.”²⁵ The English and the Russian temporarily collaborate but ultimately are too different. Ivan is practical in rejecting her advances, since how could this love affair even work? Are we to believe that the upper-class spoiled girl could live in Soviet Russia or that Ivan would give up his status as a *Stakhanovite*, “a workman who invents new methods of production?” No wonder *The Demi-Paradise* was referred to as lacking, its portrayal of the British temperament too “stuffy,” and the educative tone toward the visitor “patronizing.”²⁶

The British might appear fastidious and insensitive at first, but close encounters created empathy and understanding. In *I Live in Grosvenor Square* and *The Demi-Paradise*, British institutions are cherished: the upper-class family and home, drinking tea, playing tennis, music halls, and historical pageants.²⁷ Both John Patterson and Ivan are critical of British traditions but upon receiving unusually warm welcomes, they shed their misconceptions. The fictional foreign Other needed to be persuaded of the merits of the British way of life. For John, it was a matter of hours after meeting Patricia; for Ivan, only on his second visit a year later did he come to appreciate British determination, and realize it stemmed from their traditions and quirky sense of humor.

“The England at war Ivan sees is a falsely pretty water-colour drawing of a fraction of it, but there is yet enough authentic humour, self-reliance, and self-restraint in it to explain its capitulation.”²⁸ A very different, and in some way more representative and realistic, sort of People’s War is happening in a fishing village in Cornwall. Lacking the omnipresent wartime

scenes of air raids, dance halls, and men and women in uniform, *Johnny Frenchman* still manages to provide a compelling narrative of popular resolve in the face of adversity.

2.3 The French Lover

Nat Pomeroy: Bob's your boy. And he is away fighting. It'd look nice, wouldn't it, if you were to chuck him over for a foreigner. A Frenchman. At a time like this.

After France's defeat and occupation in June 1940, surprisingly Britons felt some sense of relief and joy. Fighting Germany now became a "nationalist matter" and Britain could pride itself for standing alone with no more allies to prop up.²⁹ But other than supporting nationalistic feelings, the grim reality was that all the wrath of the Luftwaffe would now turn to Britain. The French seemed to have given in too easily, deserting their British allies. Significantly, *Johnny Frenchman* was produced after the liberation of France, when cooperation and friendship between the British and the French could be celebrated again.

The film opens in 1939, with a historic petty rivalry between two fishing villages, Trevannick in Cornwall and Lanec in Brittany. The French cannot fish within three miles of the British coast. Florie (Françoise Rosay), the Breton leader, amusingly defies this rule and the English harbor master Nat Pomeroy (Tom Walls) accuses her of poaching. Nat's daughter, Sue (Patricia Roc), has been friends since childhood with Bob (Ralph Michael). Bob wants to marry Sue, but she is reluctant to commit, especially after meeting Yan (Paul Dupuis), Florie's son, who has been caught fishing in British waters and is interned at the harbor. But before Yan is handed over to the coast guard, Trevannick's fishermen leave him to catch the season's school of mullet. Yan and his boat crew, instead of leaving British waters, end up helping the struggling fishermen with the mullet, a mythologized catch for the Cornish. Ancient superstitions must be obeyed for them to secure the catch. Women are not to look at the mullet or even leave the

house. Sue objects: “To hear you men talk, anybody would think this was, well, 1639.” To which Nat replies: “The mullet don’t know what the date is.” In fact, Sue is ambivalent about challenging old costumes; when she sees Florie outside looking for Yan, Sue immediately stops her and stalls her in the house.

Nat is the character in charge of upholding the conservative value system, a comical patriarch who is stubborn to a fault. In this traditional society, it is even more difficult for Sue to stand up to her father and the whole community, who assume she is to marry Bob. Bob and Sue say a hasty goodbye when he is called to the naval reserve in June 1939.

Bob: Looks like the real thing this time. You know what that means.

Sue: Yes

Bob: Maybe months until I see you again and I’d like to make things clear before I go. As soon as I get some leave I want you to marry me. Will you?

Sue: Oh, Bob, I ... I can’t answer that all in a moment.

Bob: But we’ve only got a few moments left. You can’t take weeks to think it over this time.

Sue: I know I’ve kept you hanging about, but it’s not because I don’t care for you.

Bob: Fine! Then there’s nothing to stop us.

Sue: But Bob! ...

Bob refuses to listen to Sue’s deliberations and wants her to commit to him; Sue is still reluctant to say “yes” but doesn’t know how to say “no.” They kiss goodbye.

Burch and Sellier maintain that French cinema of the occupation years portrayed a male identity crisis caused by “the trauma of defeat” and the disgraceful patriarchy of the Third Republic.³⁰ Even in British cinema, Frenchman Yan is an invalid who cannot fight for his country, the opposite of Bob’s virile British masculinity. In the spring of 1940, as the British expeditionary force evacuated France, Yan is upset to see wounded British soldiers resting in his mother’s cellar: “poor devils, they’ve done their best. I’ve done nothing. My leg was broken in

accident. But now I can help.” He takes them to England in his boat, but not before asking his mother for approval. (Matriarch Florie, too, matches Burch and Sellier’s patterns for French cinema of the occupation as a woman in a position of power.³¹) The powerless Yan arrives in England and morphs into a rejuvenated hero. Sue runs to him and they kiss in front of the whole village. After Yan gets the British girl he joins the Free French.

This Ealing production is a typical example of British national cinema, or realism. Michael Balcon, the head of Ealing studios, preferred modest productions that struck a balance between fictional and documentary styles.³² Many cast members were real Cornish villagers and Free French soldiers.³³ Beautiful shots of fishermen at work, while emphasizing family and community life, ancient ceremonies and traditions to convey a sense of reality. *The Times* raved about the camerawork, “roaming through the harbour and up the abrupt streets to reflect sea and sky from the cliffs fills the screen with loveliness.” This sensitivity to the small details of everyday life conveys an overall simple, old-world atmosphere and produces the most realist movie of the four examined in this chapter. However, the rivalry between the two communities and the Bretons’ constant need to prove themselves to the Cornish make for, in the words of one reviewer, “an artificial story.”³⁴

By focusing on the female experience, *Johnny Frenchman*’s conservative tone is considerably nuanced. Women are not marginalized; rather they provide the two main controversies. Florie, the center of friction in the beginning of the film saves the day by forcing peace between rivals and through her brave actions in dealing with the mine in the harbor; and Sue, the sweet girl who raises controversy by going against her father’s wishes, shapes her future and the future of the two communities.

Sue is a deglamorized female in a realist setting.³⁵ Life as a fisherman's daughter is far from glamorous, as evidenced by her simple home and plain clothes. Sue is shown tediously peeling potatoes, ironing, cooking, or mending fishing nets. Patricia Roc played a similar deglamorized feminine in *Millions Like Us* (1943), where frail Celia was housekeeping for her father and ultimately defied him by becoming mobile. It is no surprise Ealing studios specifically borrowed the actress (by arrangement) from Gainsborough studios, since she magically conveys domesticity, fragility and defiance.



Figure 3. *Johnny Frenchman*: a deglamorized female in a realist setting

Yan explains to Florie that she must accept Sue as his wife: “she is good looking and she’s strong, she’s a good house-keeper and she will be a good wife and a good mother, too.” Florie, who objects to the marriage at first, is pragmatic enough and agrees to talk Nat into supporting the marriage. After she empowers Sue into leaving the house while Nat is at sea, the

marriage takes place. Now it is Florie's turn to domesticate after years at sea, taking Sue's place in the Pomeroy household. From this position, she acts as a figure of reconciliation, a typical Ealing female character.³⁶

When the patriarch returns home, he is amazed that his daughter has defied him; he says Sue is not welcome in his house anymore. Florie tries the direct approach ("She's a Frenchwoman now"), but Nat refuses to accept what has happened. Florie then delivers a determined speech: "We are neighbors. Neighbors often disagree; it doesn't matter, because we are really not so different. We drink coffee, you drink tea; you say we eat frogs and snails, we say you eat raw beef. But these are not things to fight about." This simplistic description of the historical rivalry is apparently enough for Nat to support the union. In this respect it is interesting that the Duke of Exmoor in *I Live in Grosvenor Square*, who would be expected to resent the American the most because of his age and social position, is only too keen to be called "pops" and initiate his granddaughter's reunion with John. Runalow in *The Demi-Paradise* is not apprehensive about Ann falling for the Russian. On the contrary, ever the benevolent capitalist, he advises Ivan about relationships and human nature. The Duke of Exmoor's and Runalow's temperate attitudes are a testament to upper-class cosmopolitanism, the complete opposite of working-class Nat Pomeroy's anti-foreign and patriarchal ways.

By the final scene in the pub, when Florie says "Lanec and Trevannick are now one village," she has fulfilled her vocation as a figure of reconciliation by "helping to lie to rest ancient conflicts between the Breton and the Cornish."³⁷ Bob's assertiveness is traded for an approving nod to Sue, giving his blessing to her marriage to Yan.

The Demi-Paradise, production made sure not to include too many references to Soviet Communism in the generally positive depiction of Ivan as to not encourage the British working-

class to further embrace Communism. The film deflected the issue by using a “schizophrenic concept” that divided the Soviet Union from its Communist ideology, falsely defining the German-Russian struggle as nationalistic rather than ideological. With frequent mentions of “Russia” instead of the more appropriate “Soviet Union,” the film evokes a pre-Revolutionary image of the country that better fits it as a British ally.³⁸ *Johnny Frenchman* also mixes collective identities in a double dichotomy: Cornish and English, on the one hand, and Breton and French, on the other hand. Both Brittany and Cornwall share a Celtic heritage as well as geographical proximity. Producers wanted to stress the common background of the Cornish and Bretons, reserving the negative stereotypes to be discussed in French/English terms. Nat asserts that “English and French were never meant to mix,” fears having “froggies” for grandchildren, and asks Florie: “Do you think I’m gonna have my daughter made cheap by a Frenchman?” Florie retaliates by saying that Yan is “far too good for any Cornish girl.” (Cornish is a derogatory term, but Florie doesn’t elaborate why.) When discussing traditions and superstitions, the film reverts back to polarity of Cornish and Breton.

A more ambiguous dichotomy arises when the English(man) considers the Irish part of the British family of nations, but the evasive Irish(woman) keeps trying to break away. Questions of suspicious national neutrality and explosive female sexuality are explored through an international espionage plot in *I See a Dark Stranger*.

2.4 The Neutral Irish

Bridie Quilty: There’s nothing remote about it. If you go to my country you can see what he did to us. And you sit there and make stupid jokes about him.

David Baynes: I’m only writing a thesis.

Bridie Quilty: I don’t care what it is. And I don’t care what lies you tell me as long as you don’t pretend you came here to write a lot of nonsense about a black soul like him.

David Baynes: We don't seem to be getting along very well, do we?

While not a typical home front film, *I See a Dark Stranger* has some realistic touches as well as an amusing cat-and-mouse romance. Ireland was the perfect setting for a spy thriller, since the Irish government maintained its neutrality throughout the war, but many actors perused their own, often conflicting, agendas. On the one hand, the Irish Republican Army and radical Irish nationalists continued to fight against the British partition of Ireland. On the other, the relatively new country of Eire still had strong ties to England, and its government was practical enough to endorse work in British war industries.³⁹ Ambiguity was further stressed by Northern Ireland that, as a part of the United Kingdom, saw the presence of thousands of American GIs and had around forty thousand volunteers in the British army. The practically open borders between Ulster and Eire made the situation even more fluid.⁴⁰

When Bridie (Deborah Kerr), a strong willed Irishwoman, hears that Englishman⁴¹ David (Trevor Howard), an army officer on leave, is writing a thesis about the “underrated general” Oliver Cromwell, she is far from ambiguous. English wrongdoing in Ireland is very much a personal matter to Bridie (“what *he* did to *us*”) and “black soul” Cromwell is at the top of her list of offenders, despite the three hundred years that have passed since his death. Her father’s tall tales of his bravery in the Anglo-Irish war have kept her anti-English feelings very much alive. Upon reaching twenty-one, Bridie leaves her hometown of Baligari and sets out to fulfill her dream of joining the IRA by contacting one of her father’s old comrades in the Irish Revolution. “I know they’re at separate war with somebody else and we’re neutral, but that’s no reason why we shouldn’t carry on our own private war that’s been going on for the last 700 years,” she tells Michael O’Callaghan, who has since moderated his views and refuses to assist her. A pragmatist,

he suggests what further claims the Irish might harbor for a united Ireland can be discussed on a friendly basis after the war.

Luckily for Bridie, Mr. Miller, a fellow passenger on the train to Dublin, turns out to be a Nazi spy. He is surprised to hear Bridie's hostility regarding the English: "There's nothing belligerent about it. It's entirely a question of which side I'm neutral on." Miller diverts Bridie's passionate anti-English sentiments to a plot to free a Nazi spy from a prison in Devon before he is transferred to London. For this purpose, she starts working at the George, a hotel in Wynbridge. Lieutenant David Baynes arrives there on leave, and Miller, suspecting he is a counter-intelligence agent overseeing the prisoner's transfer, wants him out of the way that night. Bridie takes an immediate dislike to David, but complies with Miller's instruction that she seduce him. After spending the day together, Bridie is surprised he is in no rush to go back to town and realizes David is not the man Miller thinks he is. She is upset at herself after realizing she is not the woman she attempts to be, when she easily compromises her morality for "the cause." Bridie is angry that things didn't go her way and pretends to be indignant that David has used her, creating a comical scene that signals the rest of the duo's dynamics: Bridie runs away and David is after her. Bridie can't seem to handle her sexuality. She is attractive, a woman whom men seem to want, but young and immature. David is baffled by her erratic behavior, but falls for her despite (because?) of her mixed signals.

Bridie knows she can manipulate most men into getting what she wants, a perfect trait for a spy. She gets important intelligence from a British sergeant in Wynbridge, who tells her when the prisoner is to be transferred to London. With David, Bridie uses her sex appeal, but is frightened of its consequences. She is used to pushing everybody away with sarcasm but sees something different in David:

He's an Englishman, but he's nice and solid and behaves like a gentleman. I did lock the door, didn't I? He's talking nonsense, of course, when he says he might be serious about me. But why shouldn't he be? Terrance Delaney was. Why shouldn't he be deeply and beautifully in love with me?

In the midst of all her troubles, with the Germans and the English looking for her, she makes time for romance. She intends to be her own mistress when she leaves Baligari, but before long she needs a man to save her, the ultimate damsel in distress. David can't understand Bridie's behavior or motives, but he is mysteriously attracted to her, and so tries to save her.



Figure 4. *I See a Dark Stranger*: a damsel in distress

David can put her uncontrollable, potentially explosive femininity in check.⁴² He is favorably depicted as a sensible, peace loving, thesis-writing, handsome young man. Other than his persistence, David embodies a British temperate masculinity.⁴³ Like Bob in *Johnny*

Frenchman, David refuses to take no for an answer, and wherever Bridie goes, he follows. He manages to soften her with his refined gentlemanly reasonableness, a stark contrast to the country Irishmen she is accustomed to, who are comically and stereotypically portrayed as big talkers, childish, and prone to “excessive nostalgia.”⁴⁴

Landy asserts that the misguided behavior of the Irish creates humor, but we must recognize that other than David (British) and Michael O’Callaghan (Irish), all the other male characters are complete fools. The British intelligence officer who is in charge of transferring the prisoner to London boasts that “it’s not what you’re doing in the army that counts; it’s what you’re noticed doing,” even as he manages to lose his prisoner. This becomes even clearer when Bridie goes to the Isle of Man,⁴⁵ to trace a hidden notebook holding information about the allied plans for D-Day. The policemen on the Isle of Man - inept Captain Goodhusband and the slightly less ridiculous Lieutenant Spanswick - fantastically cannot identify Bridie as the spy, despite a comprehensive description given to them. Bridie suddenly realizes how many lives, British and Irish, would be lost if she hands over the information and has a change of heart. She burns the incriminating book. Resourceful David arrives to the Isle of Man hotel room just after Bridie has been questioned by the two officers and identifies himself as her husband, thus temporarily saving her from association with the fleeing spy. He insists on knowing what she is up to and undeterred by her sarcasm, tells her to stop behaving like a child. David confesses his love, and Bridie complies; she reveals to him that she is a “retired spy.” Dutiful to a fault, army Lieutenant Baynes feels he needs to report her (not without serious doubts). How can he turn in the woman he loves, knowing she will be tried, possibly even shot? While David rides this emotional roller coaster, Bridie breaks away to spare him the pain of having to report her. She tries to confess to Captain Goodhusband, but he is having none of it, too busy getting her to

dance. Lieutenant Spanswick then reports that Bridie's identity card is fake, to which Goodhusband responds in dismay: "I can't believe it! A lovely girl like that. What are we gonna do?!" *The Times* (London) reviewer calls the futile efforts of the British to catch the Nazi net of spies "under-intelligence,"⁴⁶ and indeed, while the duo tries to determine who is more (in)competent, Bridie falls into German hands. When David tracks them to a boat, he is captured as well.

The lovers get to Ireland and manage to escape their captives across the border to Ulster, without even realizing it. After all they've been through, David still feels it up to him to report her so she won't endanger the war effort ("you're a menace that's got to be neutralized"). Bridie doesn't get her way and resorts to childish insults ("it's your stiff neck British obstinacy"). Thinking they are still in Eire, David calls the police. When they see American soldiers at the pub, David panics at Bridie's impending fate, and tries to persuade her to flee across the border to safety. She is stubborn, as always, insisting on staying with him and accept her fate. In another typical wartime *mise-en-scène* in home front films, strangers gather to listen to the radio announcing D-Day. Bridie's information is now useless; she escapes.

Bridie's actions call into question Irish neutrality; only her romantic attachment to an Englishman absolves her, suggesting the compromise path that Ireland should take regarding Britain.⁴⁷ David is composed and reliable, the gentleman she hoped for and a worthy Englishman for the feisty Irishwoman. He is older and can exert a good influence on young Bridie. After the war, Bridie and David wed but their marriage gets off to a rocky start when David chooses the Cromwell Arms for their honeymoon night. Outraged Bridie still prefers running away as a coping mechanism, but it is clear that "Irish Belligerence has been domesticated, turned into a

family tiff.”⁴⁸ With their marriage comes the hope for a future coexistence between the Brits and the Irish, in which past conflicts are put aside and replaced by cooperation.

I See a Dark Stranger is different from many other home front films mainly because it doesn't convey a sense of community, family relations, and social connections that shaped the cinematic representation of the People's War. The war presented here is very much an individual effort. In her attempts to help the Germans, Bridie is at first Miller's operative, but he is soon out of the picture and she is on her own. An outsider, she doesn't make any social connections other than those that advance her cause. David is detached as well. On leave, he has no army peers and nothing to tie him to Wynbridge other than his thesis subject.

Johnny Frenchman and *I See a Dark Stranger* are the two films of the four discussed in this chapter where the lovers end up getting married. Part of the British family of nations, Irish and Bretons are Celtic relations. Yan's and Bridie's unions with a Briton are more favorable than marriages to strangers. In both films, the wedding is not shown. Yan and Sue's wedding is not a familial or communal celebration, rather a private, hasty affair (Sue puts on her best clothes on a moment's notice and meets Yan at the courthouse); Bridie and David's peacetime wedding is probably not shown to avoid sentimentality, that would detract from the final comic scene at the Cromwell Arms.

2.5 Conclusion

A love story full of complications between members of the British People and foreigners makes for more than good entertainment. These cinematic relationships can also be statements of national unity against the foreign Other. Foreign characters put the national character to the test and refocused the feeling of togetherness, of a community that shares a culture, a history and a

future. Cinematic foreigners also helped to confirm national identity, an opposite to national identity of the foreign Other (national identities at war). The British Empire was not a stranger to foreigners, and London especially was long considered the crown jewel of cosmopolitanism. But wartime reshapes and sharpens national identity to create a sometimes impenetrable division between Us and Them. The nation demanded unquestionable patriotism and total devotion to the national cause, all while relying on Allied manpower and resources.

Exploring the representation of mixed British-foreign couples can allow us to explore British duality toward its Allies: the Johnny-come-lately American, the defeated French, the standoffish Russian or the enemy within that is the Irish. The foreign characters in these films are stereotypical, but not over-simplified; they mirror popular opinions of their countryman and women (*Tawny Pipit*'s tough Russian women soldier, *Johnny Frenchman*'s wounded lover, *I Live in Grosvenor Square*'s overconfident American). Foreign femininity is potentially dangerous (Bridie), while foreign masculinity can be indifferent to British women (Ivan) or more often over-eager (John and Yan). It is especially evident that new allies are questioned (the Russian and the Irish) while older comrades are more easily accepted, after the obligatory prejudices are overlooked.

In the four films analyzed in this chapter, war shaped the nature of the couples' "opposites attract" romance. The war both enabled two couples who would not have met otherwise (Bridie and David; John and Patricia) to meet, and it also disrupted the relationships of all four couples, as meetings were scarce and far between, and every minute together mattered. Part of this wartime reality manifested in a cinematic standstill to the "classical ending of lovers fading out in a 'happily-ever-after' embrace."⁴⁹ This is especially evident in *I Live in Grosvenor*

Square, when Patricia, on duty as a stenographer, records a list of dead American flight crew. She tearfully records John's name among the dead; her newfound happiness was short-lived.

I See a Dark Stranger is unique with a honeymoon concluding the film, but even then, problems are not over for the couple. The wedding in *Johnny Frenchman* does not yet seal the union of the two communities. The French still need to prove themselves to the British before Sue can get the villagers' blessing for leaving them (and the British people). These two films celebrate a coming together of neighbors. The fact that there is the possibility of a lasting union within the British family of nations, but not with Soviet or American allies implies there are limits in British national cinema to the acceptance of potential "threats" to national (and imperial) unity- these threats are confined within the boundaries of "for the duration only."

I suggest that the liminal romances portrayed in the four films signal just how disruptive the nature of war was for British gender relations. Young female characters actively take control of their lives by resisting patriarchy (Sue), or going into the armed forces (Patricia, Ann), or falling for the "wrong" man. Britons were unsure whether such changes were temporary or if victory could bring an opportunity to right social evils such as class distinction or women's status.⁵⁰

¹ Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 17; Rose, *Which People's War*, 2.

² "All the men are thinking about is coming ashore with a Sten gun and moving through the countryside shooting all the Poles and Czechs and the American who've been sleeping with their wives and girls." Cited in Alan Allport, *Demobbed: Coming Home after the Second World War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 6.

³ The "Phoney War" refers to the relatively uneventful first months of the war in western (not eastern) Europe, but which ended spectacularly with the *Blitzkrieg* invasion of France in May and June 1940.

⁴ David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain 1942-1945* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), 254, 256.

⁵ Cited in Calder, *The People's War*, 311.

⁶ Americans looked glamorous not only because of the Hollywood aura surrounding them but also because of their flattering uniforms, which at first glance made everyone look like officers. See John Costello, *Love, Sex and War: Changing Values 1939-1945* (London: Collins, 1985), 311-12.

⁷ Philomena Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 131.

⁸ Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 11.

⁹ Lant, *Blackout*, 38-9.

¹⁰ Rose, *Which People's War*, 79.

¹¹ "I Live in Grosvenor Square," Empire and Warner cinemas, *The Times*, 20 July, 1945.

¹² Calder, *The People's War*, 310.

¹³ Bosley Crowther, "The Demi-Paradise," Movie Review, *New York Times*, 14 December 1945.

¹⁴ "I Live in Grosvenor Square," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 30 June 1945, 138.

¹⁵ Sarah Street, *British National Cinema*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 162-173; Stacey, *Star Gazing*, 97.

¹⁶ Calder, *The People's War*, 260-61, 349.

¹⁷ Street, *British National Cinema*, 66.

¹⁸ Rattigan, *This Is England*, 71.

¹⁹ Calder, *The People's War*, 260.

²⁰ Costello, *Love, Sex and War*, 47.

²¹ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 52.

²² Rose, *Which People's War?*, 123, 135; Chapman, *The British at War*, 202.

²³ Rattigan, *This is England*, 69.

²⁴ Sue Harper, "The Years of Total War: Propaganda and Entertainment," in *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 200.

²⁵ Street, *British National Cinema*, 66.

²⁶ Bosley Crowther, "The Demi-Paradise," Movie Review, *New York Times*, 14 December 1945.

²⁷ Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 160-161.

²⁸ "The Demi-Paradise," *The Times*, 17 November 1943.

²⁹ Calder, *The People's War*, 113.

³⁰ Burch and Sellier, *The Battle of the Sexes in French Cinema*, 7-8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10, 103.

³² Landy, *British Genres*, 41; Chapman, *British Cinema and 'The People's War'*, 46.

³³ Landy, *British Genres*, 169; "Johnny Frenchman," *The Times*, 17 August 1945.

³⁴ "Johnny Frenchman," *The Times*, 17 August 1945.

³⁵ Lant, *Blackout*, 62-63.

³⁶ Landy, *British Genres*, 169.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Rattigan, *This is England*, 70.

³⁹ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 218-219.

⁴⁰ Calder, *The People's War*, 414. Eire was a young country, with a small army, with little desire to be dragged to a lengthy war.

⁴¹ Irish prefer to use 'England' over 'Britain' because 'England' conveys a shared history "of attempted cultural dominance ... which is not conveyed to an Irish ear by 'Britain.'" See R. F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr. Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), xii.

⁴² Lant, *Blackout*, 78-79.

⁴³ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 79.

⁴⁴ Landy, *British Genres*, 137.

⁴⁵ For the internment of suspected Fifth Columnists on the Isle of Man, see Calder, *The People's War*, 131.

⁴⁶ "I See a Dark Stranger," New Films in London, *The Times*, 8 July, 1946.

⁴⁷ Landy, *British Genres*, 137.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁹ Lant, *Blackout*, 38.

⁵⁰ Chapman, *The British at War*, 202.

3 “The world’s rather made up of two kinds of people; you’re one sort and I’m the other”: Cross-Class Romance

The People’s War is commonly perceived in terms of total dedication to the national cause that put aside differences of class and gender. In reality, these differences were not eliminated, not even for the duration. In a way, the war even sharpened tensions and divisions within British society, especially around class.¹ British films both celebrated wartime solidarity and acknowledged internal differences, suggesting that the interplay of these differences was a distinctively British way of unifying the country and winning the war.² In this chapter, I will examine several wartime British home front films that feature romantic unions between men and women of different classes. Cinema allows an insight into the social and cultural discourse of a nation and indeed, home front films used unconventional couples to depict supposed class-leveling and the “all in it together” spirit of the People’s War. At the same time, films conveyed the need to preserve class distinctions as a tradition worth fighting for.³ “Class feeling,” or resentment against the selfish behavior of the privileged, although a grave wartime social concern, was hardly addressed in home front films.

Arthur Marwick argues that class differences between the working class and the middle class were significantly reduced throughout the war, while Penny Summerfield, James Hinton, and other scholars do not support an up-and-coming classless society. Manual workers’ relatively high wartime wages did not lead to class leveling; education, work, and living conditions exposed a considerable gap between the classes.⁴ Hinton’s select group of Mass Observation diarists, mostly middle-class, shared a deep-rooted understanding of their social position and class identity. They patronized people below their status and aspired to rise higher

in the social scale, by education (Nella Last and her boys), avoiding the company of working-class girls even if it meant no casual sex (Denis Argent), or by keeping up appearances (Eleanor Humphries was terrified that a caller might drop by while the family was having breakfast and lunch in the kitchen instead of the dining room).

I intend to discuss films' negotiation with changing class perceptions in wartime British society, particularly the contrast between the official discourse, with its favorable perception of the war as sweeping away class boundaries and, to the contrary, actual lived experience and its cinematic reflection. For this chapter, I have chosen four films that engage with this wartime duality of class perceptions through unlikely romantic pairings. Relatively neglected by scholars, *English Without Tears* (1944) presents an unconventional romance between a young lady and the family butler; *Millions Like Us* (1943) depicts mobile women in a dreary factory overcoming hardships and class prejudice; *Piccadilly Incident* (1946) confronts the implications of a hasty wartime wedding between strangers; and *Mrs Miniver* (1942), an American film, portrays middle-class perseverance in a quaint English village.

3.1 An Officer and a Gentleman

Tom Gilbey: Yes, I'm an officer now. Not that that's anything in itself, but the army's done quite a lot for me in, well, broadening my views on things and giving me bigger ideas.

Joan Heseltine: Yes, I see that.

Tom Gilbey: After the war, I'm not going back to butling.

Joan Heseltine: After the war, there won't be any butling to go back to.

British officers are typically associated with public school educated middle- and upper-class men, whereas common, rank-and-file soldiers belonged to the lower or working classes. In the 1930s, "only about 5 per cent of officers were ex-rankers," since the army regarded the lower

classes as lacking the proper level of education believed necessary for an officer.⁵ Even up to 1942, “class bias was undermining the efficiency of the officer corps ... Senior regular officers remained convinced that men of middle-and upper-class backgrounds were much more likely to possess powers of natural leadership than men from the lower middle or working classes.”⁶ But the war did open up opportunities in the armed forces that proved valuable for wartime (and mostly post-war) class-leveling. Officers acquired a social status and skill set (technical and administrative) that paved their way out of the working-class.⁷

Watching *English Without Tears*, it is tempting to think that a working-class butler is easily settling into his new role as an officer. Tom (Michael Wilding) tells Joan (Penelope Ward), his former employer’s niece, that the army broadened his views and gave him bigger ideas. It is not surprising, considering his limited pre-war world. He was a working-class man who lived only for his work, serving his upper-class family, namely Lady Christabel Beauclerk (Margaret Rutherford) and Sir Brandon (Roland Culver). Butler Tom is depicted as devoid of feelings, plastic-like, inhuman almost. He is disconnected from his working-class peers; even when he goes to the pub, he only associates with his father and grandfather, both retired butlers. There he vents to them about work, how the family requires him to go to Geneva while he despises anything foreign. They encourage him to join the family on their trip and stress putting the family’s needs above his own discomfort: “My boy, in our vocation there are many arduous and unpleasant duties which we are called upon from time to time to perform. Now, accompanying one’s mistress on a trip abroad is no pleasant duty... But if you are ordered to go to Geneva, you’ll go to Geneva, and like it. Do I make myself plain?”

After the trip, war break outs and Tom leaves for the army. Joan decides it is the right time to confess her love to him. In response, he chokes on his toast. “Miss Joan, this is highly

irregular.” She insists that he tell her how he feels about her, and he remains professional. Tom is immersed in his role as butler, oblivious to what life has to offer. Calculated and apathetic, he is unaware of the opposite sex; his demeanor is caricature-like. In his defense, Joan has just finished school. It makes sense that he does not perceive her as a match option, not just because of her class, but also because of her age.

Tom: I feel about you as every domestic servant should feel about his employer’s niece.

Joan: Now don’t say we’re going to be kept apart by some idiotic thing like...

Tom: Class distinction? Class distinctions are not idiotic.

Joan: There isn’t any hope for me at all?

Tom: No, Miss Joan, I’m afraid not.

Come war, Tom is reinvented. His butler identity is replaced for that of an officer. He is more confident, and he even smiles at times. Tom also discovers his attraction to Joan when away in the army. When Gilbey arrives on a week’s leave, Sir Cosmo Brandon salutes his former butler the officer in a comic role reversal.

Lady Christabel: Gracious, you’re an officer.

Tom: Uh, yes. Well, they said I knew how to run things, so they put me in charge of supplies.

Lady Christabel: very sensible of them, very. Get me some more hot water, will you, Gilbey?

Contrary to the popular assumption that an officer is synonymous with a gentleman, Tom still has a long way to go before becoming a gentleman. Tom’s character “affectionately debunked the gentlemanly ideal.”⁸ Joan started teaching English to Allied soldiers at Lady Christabel’s sanctuary for “birds of passage.” To enhance Joan’s transformation to womanhood, two of her students, the Polish officer Felix Demborski (Albert Lieven) and the French officer

Françoise de Freycinet (Claude Dauphine), compete for her heart and grades. She has matured in her view of Tom, and no longer thinks “he’s worth more than everybody else put together.” Joan doesn’t love Tom anymore and tells him she only loved him when he was out of reach (“cold and inhuman and God-like.”) Now that Tom is a Second Lieutenant he is indistinguishable, one of hundreds of Second Lieutenants who look just about the same.

Tom learns that the Allied soldiers at the sanctuary are very popular with the ladies: “None of them can speak a word of English. But, that hasn’t stopped them from getting girls ... They’re very nice and very charming. They kiss your hand ... And they send you flowers.” At the dance, Tom, Felix, and François compete for Joan. The All Rank dance scene further confirms Joan’s feminine charm; she wears her glamorous dress with an air of confidence and managed her suitors with ease. Tom’s confusion with the ladies puts his masculinity in question.

Tom leaves the dance not having the opportunity to dance or talk with Joan. Almost defeated, he then decides to master the “continental technique” of romancing girls. He is inexperienced in social interaction, making his approaches to Joan ridiculous and ultimately a failure. The Allied soldiers give him questionable advice he acts upon (“when a woman says no, she mean yes”). Tom tries to win Joan over with dimmed lights, music, and humor, but performs his role as Casanova in an insecure and unromantic fashion (she thinks he is childish; he again looks terrified), very different than his foreign masters of seduction. It is no surprise that the two archetypes of foreign romantic maneuvers are a Frenchman and a Pole; the French were known as attentive lovers and the “dressy and romantic” Poles were very popular with British girls during the war.⁹ Sir Brandon is astounded at how de Freycinet and his fellow Frenchmen seem to be “always getting themselves mixed up with girls.” Demborski and de Freycinet represent foreign threats to British masculinity (clumsy Tom and bitter Sir Brandon), who watch

powerlessly as their women become enamored of the Allied soldiers swarming the streets of London.



Figure 5. *English Without Tears*: a gentleman's apprenticeship

Upper-class women like Joan could afford to engage in voluntary war work because they did not need the money.¹⁰ Joan's war work as a teacher of Allied soldiers was voluntary and could continue throughout the war, but instead she joins the ATS, much like the character Ann in *The Demi-Paradise*, who left her voluntary canteen work to join the Wrens. Her reasons are not entirely selfless; many British women were not so patriotic that they put their country above all else.¹¹ Joan is motivated to leave the comfort of voluntary work because she wants to escape her three suitors, and men in general, which is a funny move considering the army is a hyper-masculine environment. She thought they were also perusing their English teacher/translator, Brigid Knudsen (Lilli Palmer), partaking in "some sort of oriental orgy." If many young British

women joined the ATS in hope of finding men (Phyllis in *Millions Like Us*), for Joan it is a chance for a fresh start.

In another amusing role reversal, the army provides opportunity for the former butler to command his former mistress's niece. At first, Joan is happy to reunite with Tom, but she soon discovers he has reverted back to an efficient but inhuman commander. Tom's transformation from docile servant and affable Second Lieutenant to evil commander is unexplained, but the film suggests it might be due to his failure to court Joan. For Joan, Tom is again desirable because he is unattainable. In this, he is very different from the typical cinematic depiction of upper class men, who are mostly portrayed as sexy and charming (even Michael Wilding played an irresistible upper-class Major in *Piccadilly Incident* just two years later). Most women will not find desexualized Tom such a catch, but like Ann in *The Demi-Paradise*, Joan is attracted to men who are indifferent and cold.¹² If at first butler Tom saw Joan as an avatar of her class, they can finally become a couple when they are both in the army. Their class matters little there and they both seem to adopt a new classless identity. The "out of reach" Major is a more suitable match for Joan.

In the film's final scene, Joan and Tom wed in their uniforms. It is interesting to note how family and friends in attendance react to their cross-class match. Lady Beauclerk is an eccentric preoccupied with protecting migrating birds. When war breaks out she turns her house into an Allied soldiers' sanctuary. Much like the Duke of Exmoor in *I Live in Grosvenor Square*, Lady Beauclerk is all too happy to donate her home for the common good (it was even her own initiative), whereas in reality, many members of the upper class did not share their houses, which aroused class feeling.¹³ Lady Beauclerk also stands out compared to cinematic male patriarchs in that she does not insist on preserving class etiquette. When Joan reveals she loves the butler,

Lady Christabel thinks it is a ridiculous teenage folly. Sir Brandon and Lady Christabel think of Gilbey as family, but do not wish to see him as an equal member of the family – he needs to remain in his proper place as a family servant-friend. As for Sir Brandon, social status bothers him less than foreigners, and he envies their success with the ladies. But then again, when Joan and Tom eventually get together, the next scene is their wedding. Their courtship is not shown. The film does not view the couple from this potentially explosive angle, opting to present an ideal classless society where everyone accepts the union and barely questions it. In a utopian British society, class is no longer an issue; what the person achieves and accomplishes is what matters. A working-class butler faces no impediments on his way to higher class status, no prejudices or resentment from the upper-class family he once served. Someone can be born without pedigree and still become someone of importance, a gentleman.

Tom marrying into the upper-class is his final validation that a self-made man cannot be a prominent player without social status or economic means. He may have come a long way since butling with his army training but a self-made man cannot be considered a gentleman without upper-class connections and education.

While some critics called the film “a subtle comedy of manners” and “charming, caricaturing with tolerant incisiveness the classes of English people,”¹⁴ this film is hardly “endearing” in terms of class, when an upper-class comedy cannot seem to depict a genuine working-class person. Tom is very one-dimensional; his life purpose is serving the upper class. He does not know how to act when he is off-work in real-life situations. Tom’s solemn and detached butler is the only depiction of the working class in the pre-war part of the film; during the war the working people are absent from the film altogether, except Tom’s grandfather who resumed his butler role in the Beauclerck household. *English Without Tears* might seem

revolutionary in that an upper-class girl marries the former butler, but what actually unfolds is a relatively traditional cross-class relationship. The working class wants to be recognized in the eyes of the upper class, reflecting the long history of working-class desire to gain access to and acceptance in the upper class. Before the war, using upper-class connections, influence, and prosperity was the only way to rise in a very stratified society, and the film reflects this way of thinking. But if *English Without Tears* does not signal a change in viewing the working class and their place in British society, our next film, *Millions Like Us*, tackles this front successfully. A film celebrating the working class, its unique sense of self and possible future in postwar Britain, it is also a great example of British realism.

3.2 Working-class Pride

Annie Earnshaw: You are going to work in a factory?

Jennifer Knowles: That, apparently, is the idea.

Annie Earnshaw: Ah, they're getting all sorts now. Gee, you have got a lot of clothes. Where did you get coupons?

Jennifer Knowles: I got them before clothes rationing came in.

Annie Earnshaw: Stocked up in advance, like?

Jennifer Knowles: Nothing of the kind.

By 1942, Britain was fighting a “battle for production.” Hesitant about getting women out of the domestic sphere, the government had little choice due to the grim shortage of factory workers. The country’s first ever female mobilization, or the conscription of young unmarried women, was considered a success: 90% of singles aged eighteen to forty and 80% of this age group married without children were conscripted.¹⁵ The “vital war work” category assigned women to the production of munitions, aircraft, and tank as well as to work on farms as part of the Women’s Land Army. These lines of work became the only options available to women

conscripts by mid-1943, as the women's forces (the ATS, Wrens, and WAAFs) were no longer an option for war work.¹⁶

The British government pressured and eventually coerced women into contributing to the war effort, all the while maintaining that homemaking was women's work men were incapable of performing.¹⁷ The mixed signals were not lost on even die-hard feminists, who understood women's domestic responsibilities were even more demanding come war, and were hesitant about the unequal conditions for mobile women.¹⁸ Still, many supported conscription in the hope of erasing the privileges enjoyed by "idle rich girls" and insuring that all the classes contributed their fare share in serving the nation.¹⁹

Social mixing between the classes and the social leveling it implied was the official discourse and a favorite propaganda topic. Reality proved quite different. The upper and middle classes were scarcely represented in factories in the prewar years, and this trend was not affected by wartime labor shortages. The more privileged women preferred relatively low-paid forms of national service, such as the women's forces and the Women's Land Army or voluntary work, such as the Red Cross and the Women's Voluntary Service. This involvement in voluntary work was to many a sign of "inequality of sacrifice."²⁰ In this respect, *Millions Like Us* (1944) addresses the unusual presence of upper-class girl Jennifer Knowles (Anne Crawford) in a factory. It is very clear to workers (and viewers) that her presence there is outside the wartime norm. The film does not address why Jennifer was directed to factory work but hints that she did not choose it. When she meets Harry, an old friend turned RAF pilot, he is shocked she is now a working girl, and reminds her that the last time they met she was "helping old Toole at the canteen near Hyde Park corner." Canteen voluntary work was a characteristic female upper-class war contribution (Ann in *The Demi-Paradise* did it before joining the Wrens). Foreman Charlie

Forbes (Eric Portman) observes that manual work is “a bit different from dumping lumps of sugar into cups of coffee at the West End canteen or something of that sort, not that there’s anything wrong with that only it doesn’t call for the same guts.”

Sonya O. Rose maintains that the British were one people divided by social and economic inequality. There was abundant popular unrest against the self-interested behavior of the wealthy: “With nearly every major demand for additional contribution to the war effort, the rhetoric of equality of sacrifice led to the expression of class antagonism.”²¹ What Annie Earnshaw seems to have missed (but contemporary audiences would have surely picked-up on) is that unlike the working-class unprivileged, Jennifer doesn’t need coupons to buy clothes. The rest of the population very rarely obtained new clothes. For example, Jennifer’s co-worker, Celia Crowson (Patricia Roc), cannot get all the clothes she wants for her wedding and honeymoon. The ration book’s coupons make her choose between walking shoes and a nightdress.

Millions Like Us was specifically requested by the Ministry of Information to help recruit women to the war effort. Screenwriter and directors Frank Launder and Sydney Gilliat decided to focus exclusively on women’s factory experiences. They attempted to lessen female anxieties about conditions in the factory (dirt, noise, accidents, the physical nature of the labor, male resentment, sexual harassment, and the unequal pay compared to men) within the context of more familiar female experiences of family and romance.²² In this way, *Millions Like Us* can be considered a propaganda film promoting war work for women. Neil Rattigan claims that patriarchal and class hegemony deemed it unlikely that women and the working class share interests with men or the ruling class, unless films stressed their necessity for the People’s War.²³ The film emphasizes shared interests through Celia, a working-class woman who voices government interests while overruling patriarchy. This makes hard-core propaganda seem more

refined and shared interests between classes and sexes more natural. For example, Jim Crowson refuses to be left home without a female homemaker (“I work all day, three nights a week home guard, coming home to an empty house, no fire in the grate ... no supper, no bed made”), but Celia reminds him she is mobile, even if it proves inconvenient. Jim is quickly turned: “If the country needs you, it needs you. Nobody’s going to say I’m not patriotic.”

More than straightforward propaganda, this film confronts women’s general hardships on the home front, which are unrelated to factory conditions. At the factory, Celia finds joys in her work and female friends before meeting Fred (Gordon Jackson), a Scottish air-gunner; their happiness is short-lived when he is killed over Germany soon after they marry. Her loss and unhappiness are not related to factory work but part of a general wartime sacrifice endured by the British population.²⁴ In spite of its shortcomings in presenting the complex and unique reality for women factory workers, this film is a fine specimen of realism in British national cinema. The directors were commended for their “restraint,” and for introducing “a realist atmosphere and a documentary touch to life in an aircraft factory.”²⁵ An authentic depiction, “deliberately unglamorous to the point of austerity,” was combined with documentary footage of wartime Britain (blackout, bustling trains, invasion preparations, the All Ranks dance, rations, air raids) to create a favorite among critics and viewers alike.²⁶ *Millions Like Us* is also unique in its non-patronizing approach to working-class culture. A male viewer caught the film’s strong points with the audience: “*Millions Like Us* I enjoyed, because it really was true to its title. These were real people, people one knew and liked, not film actors and actresses. It was like spending an evening with a delightful variety of people and enjoying with them all the humour of everyday life ... I loved the quiet charm of the heroine.”²⁷

Female viewers might have been less enthusiastic about timid Celia, who before becoming mobile is content with keeping home for her father while working in a drapery shop. Chaste Celia was a model of “desirable femininity,”²⁸ what the Ministry of Information hoped would appeal to male audiences and calm their anxieties about the loosened sexual morality of wartime, but her character would have been hard for working-class women to identify with. However, repressed working-class femininity is not the only model in this film. Annie is naïve and adolescent-like, admiring unattainable movie actors; Welsh girl Gwen Price does not seem interested in men romantically; and Celia’s sister Phyllis (Joy Shelton) actively pursues men and enjoys their attention, what contemporaries referred to as a good-time girl. Good-time girls were deemed irresponsible, selfish, and lacking in self-control. Their shady morality supposedly hampered the national effort and furthered the “association between working-class and promiscuity.”²⁹ But *Millions Like Us* turns even this common notion on its head, since Phyllis joins the ATS over the objections of her father (“you’re not joining any women’s army. It may be alright for a girl with a head on her shoulders, but for a daft nelly like you, and amongst all those men?”). Her reasoning might have been selfish – gaining a sense of independence or adhering to wartime fashion (“the coat is cute”) – but so did many other girls who were not necessarily overzealous patriots.



Figure 6. *Millions Like Us*: good-time girl Phyllis

With Gwen's character we notice distinctions even among the working-class girls. If Celia could be considered a better-off working-class woman (the Crowson have a nice house in London, a car, and an annual vacation), Gwen is a miner's daughter who grew up on the dole "in a distressed area." For her, the decent conditions in the dormitory, compared to her home, can be attributed to the "social conscience" developed as part of the People's War. Gwen, like Jennifer, is a misfit at the factory, a university graduate who could have contributed elsewhere. Her working-class descent directs her vital war work to the factory floor. At the factory, she is chosen as the leader of the group of women. Maybe that is why she is not portrayed perusing men – she is a self-made woman who has enough self-esteem to not need a man's approval or attention. A man from her social class would be threatened by her achievements. After the war, Gwen will not need others' social conscience – her university degree is her ticket out of the working class.

Contrary to typical upper-class characters in wartime films, Jennifer is less favorably portrayed. In her first scenes she seems selfish, conceited, and lazy, but later she turns out to be kind-hearted, witty, and friendly and she has no trouble connecting with the other girls despite their very different backgrounds. Her comical stint is usually reserved to a lower-class character.³⁰ Annie (and viewers) laugh at Jennifer's upper-class grooming habits; even her clothes are both admired and ridiculed (Annie warns Celia she would never dare wear Jennifer's lace underwear on her honeymoon with Fred). When she first arrives at the factory, she is contemptuous of the mundane manual work, her output is low, and she is "spoiling good material with scamping." She soon becomes the focal point of Charlie's negative attention. Jennifer has her eyes on him, and subtly, with an indifferent air, she charms him.

The air raid scene marks the turning point in Jennifer and Charlie's relationship. With the siren's sound, everyone leaves their stations to go to the shelter, but Jennifer stalls. The factory's lights turn off, she is alone on the floor. Charlie goes to fetch her. She teases: "Mr. Forbes, think of my output?" But it is no laughing matter for him: "Are you going to do as you're asked or do you want me to use force?" Their banter is interrupted by a loud explosion overhead; Charlie carries her to the shelter while she loudly protests. As they enter the shelter, the camera pauses over the "Tighten your grip" poster. Jennifer has succeeded in her effort to be alone with him, and is pleased to have secured his attention. A factory in an air raid is a most peculiar mise-en-scene for such an unlikely union and it only underlines its strangeness. The socialite and the foreman are in a world of their own in the empty, dark, and momentarily quiet factory, a stark contrast to the incessant hustle and bustle of people and machinery running around the clock to meet wartime production targets.

Jennifer's upper-class femininity is sophisticated not only in her glamorous clothes, but in her more nuanced flirting. She is not cheap (like Phyllis), throwing herself at men, but still lets Charlie know she is interested in a romantic connection. Celia and Fred's relatively smooth way to love and marriage provides a mirror to Jennifer and Charlie's attraction to each other. At their wedding, Charlie signals to Jennifer that he is not that naïve to think that a wartime relationship can be so easy (calling the bride and groom "a couple of nice kids"). But romance was in the air even for a realist like him – he asks Jennifer out to the movies in his own unromantic way ("There's a good picture down at the Palace ... I thought I might take you along."). Jennifer, as always, wryly replies: "Oh, Mr. Forbes, I hardly know what to say."

Sue Harper finds similarities between Charlie and Mr. Crowson: "Traditional working-class life was shown under the thumb of the repressive father; the new, post-war life envisaged was similarly structured around the dour will of the new patriarch, played by Eric Portman."³¹ This observation about two of the male characters, which omits the third male character, Fred, who clearly does not fit the patriarchal type Harper sees, misses the mark. There is little similarity between Jim Crowson and Charlie. Mr. Crowson tries to control his household, but all three women (Celia, Phyllis, and their sister-in-law) end up ignoring him and do as they please. Phyllis continues to see Willard and later joins the ATS despite her father's disapproval. Like Tom in *Johnny Frenchman*, Jim is a comical, aging patriarch who tries to maintain the old ways but is resisted by the women around him. The scene that portrays the house in disarray, where a grown man cannot manage without a woman taking care of him, is extremely telling. The film depicts the helpless patriarch, abandoned by his female kin, as a relic of the past, even if in reality deserted men performing house duties instead of women was not the wartime norm.³² By contrast, Charlie is a self-made man and a respected, well-liked manager. He is a mature and

refined working-class male character. He symbolizes the new British man who knows his place in the world and has every right to be proud of his class.

The “dour will of the new patriarch” supposedly refers to the penultimate scene between Charlie and Jennifer. But this patriarch isn’t even sure he wants to be one, especially not in a mixed-class home. When Jennifer tells him he should not take too long to consider marriage, Charlie owns up to a very distinctive working-class sense of identity.³³ He rejects Jennifer’s reassurance regarding her parents’ approval of him. Worlds apart from typical propaganda films (and indeed, most home front films), Charlie’s character does not seek upper-class approval and reverses this notion: “Would I approve of them? I doubt it.” He professes what many working-class people aspire to in post-war Britain: a classless society in the sense of an independent working class, free of the centuries-old need to gain the approval and acceptance of the ruling class. Charlie is taking a stand against the matter-of-fact sense of entitlement and air of importance (conveyed in most British wartime films) of “blue-blooded grandees.” He is unapologetic, and believes that a self-made man has more to be proud of. Jennifer’s “bad points” are also class-related, not character flaws: “You can’t cook or sew, I doubt you can even knit. You know nothing about life, not what I call life.” In his eyes, Jennifer doesn’t have the life-skills needed to disconnect herself from her class and marry into the working class. For him, marrying her without knowing how things are going to take shape after the war is too much of a chance: “The world’s rather made up of two kinds of people. You’re one sort and I’m the other. Oh, we’re together now there’s a war on. We need to be. What’s going to happen when it’s all over? Shall we go on like this or shall we slide back? That’s what I want to know.” He is not conveying the will of a new patriarch, but rather a sensible and realistic approach to marriage and wartime romance, especially considering Celia’s rushed marriage and bereavement.

The Courtneys of Curzon Street (1947), a film from Herbert Wilcox's Mayfair circle, also features working-class self-respect and independence vis-à-vis the upper classes of British society.³⁴ After his grandfather Sir Edward Courtney (Michael Wilding) caused a scandal by marrying his mother's Irish maid Kathy (Anna Neagle), Teddy Courtney meets his future wife, Pam, while he is on a commander's course and she is working in a munitions factory during the war. When the Courtneys meet her, Kathy remarks "Thank goodness there's none of that stupid class prejudice now," to which Edward agrees that "we don't have to worry about that." But Teddy alerts the Courtneys that class prejudice is coming from the other direction now, as Pam's family do not accept Teddy. This amuses Kathy and Edward at first, and Teddy states the obvious ("You see, I shall be a Baronet one day and Pam's family are working people"). Pam takes it upon herself to explain her family's staunch working-class attitude to the Courtneys: "It's a big difference. Too big a difference, my people think. Too big for what Teddy and I feel for each other to stand up to. They say it's what you've done, and not what you were born, that matter these days." Like Charlie, Pam questions "whether the upper classes will have any use in postwar Britain."³⁵

One wonders what to make of these cinematic role reversals. Are these depictions of working-class snobbishness real or imaginary? It is true that some working-class people did not want to be improved and hated patronizing approaches by middle- and upper-class individuals and institutions. But rejecting marriage simply because the prospective wife or husband comes from the upper class seems like wishful thinking on the part of the screenwriter. Certainly the trade unions and the Labour Party encouraged the working class to feel that it had pulled most of the weight during the war and would play a leading part in postwar reconstruction. In reality,

however, the middle and upper classes remained far better-off in terms of education, wealth, and political and social influence.

While the realism of *Millions Like*, revolving as it did around the relatively unromantic life of factory workers was compelling, it was very different from the more conventional setting and plot of a film like *Piccadilly Incident*.

3.3 Beware of Strangers

Alan Pearson: I bet you've got a husband in every port.

Sally Benton: If the Allies had fought for democracy as hard as we have to fight for our honor the war would have been over in a month.

Amidst death, destruction, and the many uncertainties of wartime, people engaged in love affairs as a perfect distraction. Putting aside the bloody warfare and the rapidly changing and unpredictable reality around them, lovers wanted to feel normal once again. In a time when individual wants and needs had to give way to the nation's, the nation could not invade this ultimate realm of personal happiness. Never sure how much time they would have together, couples "were forced to abandon the traditional drawn-out period of courtship."³⁶ An exciting new romance led couples to rush to the altar before the imminence of separation and the fear of death crushed it.³⁷ Couples who had barely spent a few days together were all too quickly joined for life.

Piccadilly Incident reflects wartime romance in the hazy days of the Blitz. A whirlwind romance starts during an air raid when two strangers – Wren Diana Fraser (Anna Neagle) and Intelligence Captain Alan Pearson (Michael Wilding) – bump into each other in the blackout. He then helps her into the safety of his own apartment, replete with butler, in Piccadilly. There we

learn that Capitan Pearson is an upper-class man of means and his self-conscious guest is rather taken aback by the luxurious setting. She had once been a professional ballet dancer like her mother. Mother and daughter were impoverished by the death of the father and Diana had to quit the ballet and “sold music from 9 to 6.” This backstory, together with service as a Wren, positions Diana as middle-class. If there was any doubt in the minds of filmgoers, it was dispelled by casting Anna Neagle to play Diana. Neagle had a “class-bound image” that placed her characters firmly in the ranks of the middle class.³⁸

Diana ends up spending the night in Alan’s sister’s room because “tubes don’t run under the river in a raid” so she can’t catch her train from Waterloo station. Their next meeting is scheduled on Diana’s 48-hour weekend leave. Diana agrees for a last drink goodbye with fellow Canadian sailor Bill (Michael Laurence). He tries to romance her but she doesn’t give in, and rushes back to meet Alan. Again, Alan wines and dines her with champagne and an upscale dinner. After hearing that Diana is scheduled to embark to Singapore in three days, he proposes to her:

Alan: Look, I know this is all quick and hurried, but our falling in love was a bit of a rush job too, wasn’t it? And now they’re trying to rush you away again. Let’s beat them to it, darling, let’s get married tomorrow. Let’s have one solid thing in this rush world of theirs, something that’ll last forever and ever and still be as gay and exciting as it is now. Will you Diana?

Diana is in love and readily says yes. Alan’s upper-class charm and sophistication certainly don’t hurt his chances. The following day, they marry in a courthouse with only two witnesses, Jack the butler and Alan’s sister. They go out to celebrate in a restaurant the Pearson family has been frequenting for years. The waiter has known Alan for years, but is still horrified to hear him ask for steaks. Alan then remembers there’s a war on and corrects himself (“you’re

right William, it's not funny"), but William also remembers that some clientele do not adhere to government rations ("As a matter of fact, sir, we did find a small steak tonight for Sir Charles.") Sir Charles is surprised to hear of his son's sudden marriage but is nonetheless delighted and orders a bottle of Ballinger. Unlike many wartime weddings, Alan and Diana manage to enjoy a short but lavish honeymoon at the Savoy, filled with even more Champaign, fancy garments, and underwear. This is something of a contrast to the rationed food and clothing available to ordinary Britons.³⁹ The wealthy did not have to limit themselves to government rations; they could spend their money in restaurants and get to "eat more and better food."⁴⁰ If the rationing system aspired to provide everybody with an equal share of necessities, it eventually sharpened class differences.

After their brief, intense weekend affair the lovers part at Waterloo train station. The film tackles wartime romance from a different angle. In a role reversal, Diana is the serviceperson leaving to be posted abroad, while Alan stays in England. This is where the romantic drama turns melodramatic: Diana's ship is torpedoed during the evacuation from Singapore, and she is believed dead. Unbeknownst to Alan, Diana and her Wren friend Sally Benton manage to make it to safety on a deserted island with a few sailors. Back in Britain, Alan is heartbroken but recognizes that his nation needs him for the fight. He is injured on a mission and returns home to recuperate. There, he mulls over his lonely, miserable existence.

Alan meets Joan (Frances Mercer), an American nurse who has come to Britain after the death of her fiancé. Joan is in love with English class society (very odd for an American), admires Alan's country estate, and is entertained with the notion that the queen of England once stood where she stands. She is smitten with Alan (and his title and estate), but he is never shown falling in love with her. Rather, he needs the company and comfort that she provides. He does

not pursue her; if anything, it is the other way around. Alan eventually moves on from his loss and remarries. Thus the Anglophile Joan finds her way into the coveted English upper class, complete with castles, servants, and a title.

Three years pass, with the shipwrecked survivors making do on the island, gradually losing hope for an imminent rescue. The greatest challenge faced by Diana and Sally is the defense of their middle-class sexual “honor” against incessant pressure from the working-class sailors. Most are harmless enough, but Bill, a Canadian and the leader of the group, maliciously preys on Diana, whom he calls “Sunshine.” On one occasion, she finds herself alone with him, and he blurts out “you don’t want to be stuck with a memory” before kissing her. She fends him off, slaps him three times, and runs back to the girls’ tent in tears. Sally tries to comfort her (“Oh, I knew he was a no-good type”) and ease the blame of the continuous sexual harassment (“it’s what this fish diet does for these sailors”). The British sailors, it seems, are persistent yet harmless, cheerfully socializing. By contrast, the Canadian is a threatening predator, perhaps derived from the model of the relentless GI who refuses to take no for an answer.⁴¹

Women in the services suffered from an undeserved bad reputation. They were viewed as a threat to gender conventions because the uniform “sexually disguised” their female form.⁴² At the same time, women in uniform were deemed less respectable and even promiscuous.⁴³ Men made sexual advances more often to women in uniform than to women in ordinary clothing, who were perceived to be less open to wartime loose morals.⁴⁴ An Admiralty memorandum tried to solve the Wrens’ predicaments by suggesting that they wear civilian clothes and rejoin the ranks of “respectable women.” Wrens in uniform were too approachable to lower deck because “they belong to their service.” This created unwanted cross-class fraternization. It remains for historians to consider who did not want such relationships. The memorandum claimed that

Wrens found it “a matter of embarrassment to be continuously addressed by sailors.” Who was more embarrassed – the women or the Admiralty?

The Admiralty wanted to preserve the image of the Wrens and perhaps the manners and morals of the women as well. Sexual harassment was a genuine concern for women in the services,⁴⁵ but here we are specifically concerned with the class and gender configuration of the Royal Navy and especially with the cross-class relationships arising between the working-class “lower decks” and the middle-class Wrens. Wrens, the elite of the women’s services, had to be protected from the sailors’ “well meaning attempts at making acquaintance.” The patriarchal solution was to hide their patriotic femininity⁴⁶ instead of disciplining the disruptive behavior of the men. This reflected a pervasive wartime sexual double standard: on the one hand, women were free, away from home and familial obligations under state’s orders; on the other, “attempts were made to contain and control their sexual activity.”⁴⁷ Were the naval authorities seeking to put an end to a real problem, the harassment of women in uniform? Or were they merely seeking to accommodate male anxiety about the blurring of gender lines? If women changed back to civilian clothes, the gender line was secured and the fear of women changed and empowered by the war was lessened.⁴⁸

In *Piccadilly Incident*, Bill’s harassment of Diana begins before they are stranded on the island; “Sunshine” was already easy prey when both were serving in uniform in Singapore. But Diana has no “conflict between sexual desire and familial responsibility,”⁴⁹ unlike Tillie Colter in *Waterloo Road* (1945). Her image is pure, angelic, and unsullied by thoughts of adultery, even in an end-of-the-world situation on a deserted island with no chance of rescue. Her non-conflict is enhanced by the depiction of Bill, whose predatory character makes no sense as a match for her. This storyline has no room for female agency. It offers instead a patriarchal perspective on

male sexuality and female virtue, even if these views diverge from the actual sexual practices of men and women during the war. We gain the impression that the representation of Diana as devoted and faithful is intended to reassure male filmgoers about the fidelity and devotion of the British “everywoman” to her husband, fiancé, or boyfriend.



Figure 7. *Piccadilly Incident* movie poster: Beware of Strangers

In the movie poster for *Piccadilly Incident*, the lead-in line “Beware of strangers” and the accompanying image capture the moment when Bill tries to force himself on Diana and she, for the thousandth time, rejects him. He is the stranger. But what makes him dangerous? His Canadian nationality places him ambiguously between compatriot and foreigner as a result of Canada’s dominion status in the British Empire. Given Canada’s enormous contribution to the defense of Britain in both world wars, it is striking that the filmmakers cast the villain as a Canadian. Indeed, Bill is less of a stranger to Diana than Alan, the husband whom she barely

knows. What makes Bill dangerous is the fact that he is a sexual predator who menaces the feminine innocence of the heroine. And what makes the story troubling is it unfolds along the uncertain line dividing men who pursue sexual companionship and men who pursue sexual domination.

For three years, Diana manages to keep herself morally pure for Alan, unaware that he has remarried and had a son with his new wife Joan. The survivors decide to head out to sea in hopes to being spotted by an airplane or ship and they are finally rescued. Diana is joyful about her return and cannot wait for a happy ending to her wartime ordeal. According to Alan Allport, the historian of British demobilization, “[f]antasies of reunion, often highly elaborate, had been spun in servicemen’s minds.”⁵⁰ Diana telegrams Alan and looks forward to reuniting with him where they had once parted at Waterloo station. She rushes off the train and walks merrily along the platform, only to be puzzled when he is not there to embrace her. Sally’s fiancé meets them but there is no sign of Alan. This scene is shot so that Diana’s slight disorientation, after three years away, is very evident; the train station she knew so well now seems different. As the hubbub of the station fades and everybody leaves, the lively soundtrack turns gloomy to reflect Diana’s rollercoaster emotions, from excitement to disappointment and fear. She is the only one left on the platform.

She next goes to Alans’s flat in London only to discover that it had been demolished in an air raid. She is terrified to learn that a man was killed there, but is relieved it was Jack the butler. As much as Jack was part of the family, Alan is all Diana can think about. “Tell Jack to take care of you,” Diana had told Alan when they parted. Jack had identified himself with the family and what they stood for in society, but in a narrative focused on relations between the

middle and upper classes, especially the assimilation of the former into the latter, the kind-hearted working-class character is disposable.

Diana experiences what many returning soldiers were reported to have felt after a few years away and apart – her new reality is very different than the life she remembered. Diana goes to the Pearson's country estate and meets Joan. Her reality becomes impossible, for she is now in the way of her husband's new marriage and family. She consults her father-in-law, Judge Pearson, and he explains to her that she is still Alan's wife in the eyes of the law, but the whole emotional vista has shifted dramatically: "He loved you, when they told him you are dead he seemed to die himself. Then after a while he found that life had to be lived and people had to be loved. He loves her Diana, that Alan now loves another woman. You would want that from him, wouldn't you?" When Diana hears that Alan and Joan's son is now considered illegitimate, she regrets ever coming back. She must see Alan one last time, to arrange a divorce. The former lovers are united only to part again, for Diana dies in Alan's arms after an air raid after uttering the most unbelievable and "unsatisfactory"⁵¹ words from her deathbed: "I'm happy to go Alan, it's so much easier than any other way." This unhinged descent into melodrama was oddly attached, according to film reviewers, to an otherwise quite "authentic" and "promising" film.⁵² It resonates as well with *I Live in Grosvenor Square*, in which Patricia finally chooses John only to lose him when he dies on his next mission.⁵³

We can say that Diana and Alan's romance was doomed from the start, but not specifically due to their different class identities. For wartime film audiences, the reputation of Piccadilly during the blackout was as a pickup place that could not be further from the right place for love and marriage.⁵⁴ The narrator judge explains the legal mess following Diana's return to Britain as "one of the casual things that go with the period." What this means more

broadly is that wartime love plays by a different set of rules. When strangers fall in love and quickly go down the aisle, their hasty action can lead to catastrophic consequences. Bigamy was perhaps not as common as the film suggests, but *Piccadilly Incident* rightfully casts doubt on the expectations of wartime sweethearts who live an anomaly of exciting times with an acute “sense of temporality, of for the duration only, here and now.”⁵⁵ Wartime romance belongs to wartime; it cannot be transposed to peacetime.

We could attribute Alan and Diana’s failed relationship to class had Alan remarried within his elite circle, but he marries an outsider to the British class system. Instead of casting further doubt on the old and rigid hierarchy of social classes, the American Joan marries into it. So, again, there is no criticism of the British social and gender order, much less a vision of its radical transformation. Instead, Jack and Diana sacrifice themselves so that life and love can go on in the upper classes. In this story of the People’s War, the People are curiously absent except for the shipwrecked sailors. Bill presumably returns with impunity to Canada, where his type of man evidently belongs.

Mrs Miniver, the cliché-ridden American version of the home front’s trials and tribulations, also refrains from casting doubt on the British class system. But if *Piccadilly Incident* underlines the impregnable nature of the upper class and the failure of the middle class to enter it, *Mrs Miniver* showcases upward social mobility as a counter-intuitive proof of British democracy.

3.4 An Americanized Middle-Class

Kay Miniver: "I'm afraid I do like nice things. Things far beyond my means sometimes. Oh, pretty clothes and good schools for the children, a car, a garden, you know."

Lady Beldon: We don't get orders, we give them. Worst thing about this war is the chance it gives little persons to become important.

Many historical and sociological studies of British home front conditions and experience focus on women out of the house, in the workplace or the armed forces. The rarely discussed housewife also underwent significant changes to her lifestyle during wartime, with her burden worsened and chores multiplied. An exhausting wartime chore was shopping, with endless queueing in lines for food and other necessities due to food shortages and rationing. Middle-class women especially had a rough time, since the paid labor of cooks and maids was mostly unavailable, and they had to take on the household chores themselves.⁵⁶ With many husbands away, "normal routines of housekeeping were horribly complicated."⁵⁷ Clothes rationing made it essential to keep mending existing clothes and limited food supplies made cooking for the family an everyday struggle. Housewives became the epitome of wartime making do.

The humdrum housewife was also rarely the subject of wartime films. It took an American movie to put the British middle-class housewife front and center. Loosely based on *The Times* newspaper columns and a book by the same name, *Mrs Miniver* was the top British box office success of 1942.⁵⁸ The hit walked a fine line between Hollywood glamour and British home-front realities. The first twenty minutes of the film presented an Americanized middle class whose main concern is shopping. For Kay Miniver (Greer Garson), it was an extravagant hat; for Clem Miniver (Walter Pidgeon), a new car. Kay meets Lady Beldon (Dame May Whitty) on the train home from a shopping expedition. The Lady is very snippy regarding her own

shopping experience in the summer before the war: “Oh, oh, shopping’s absolutely impossible nowadays! You can’t get near the counter and when you do, they haven’t got it and you pay twice as much for it.” She carries on about “middle class females buying things they can’t possibly afford,” and finishes with a comical cynicism that is not lost on shopping-weary Mrs. Miniver: “I don’t know what this country is coming to – everyone trying to be better than their betters. Mink coats and no manners. No wonder Germany’s arming.”



Figure 8. *Mrs Miniver*: glamorous middle-class femininity

In some Mass Observation diaries, we encounter “middle-class women more concerned with their standards of comfort than assisting the war effort.”⁵⁹ After Kay Miniver’s shopping spree in the summer of 1939, it is surprising to see that she turns her back on her idle spending days and becomes devoted to the national cause without question. From a narrative perspective, however, it made sense to set up the plot and characters by contrasting prewar excess with

wartime hardship. Even a fashionable and seemingly frivolous housewife can prove herself to be a model citizen. Mrs. Miniver's charm and character are an ideal representation of patriotic middle-class femininity. If actual middle-class housewives had been like Kay Miniver on the screen, there would have been no need for the BBC to remind them of their duty: "It's no longer a question of what is the most comfortable arrangement for each family. We are fighting for our lives – our freedom and our future. We are *all* in it together, and what is already being done by other women, you can do!"⁶⁰

Though not quite the documentary realism than many critics preferred, British viewers flocked to the cinemas to see a Hollywood fiction about their wartime experience. "The Documentary News Letter critic wrote with scarcely concealed disbelief of the reception of Mrs Miniver: 'You can sit at the Empire and hear practically the whole house weeping – a British audience with 3 years of war behind it crying at one of the phoniest war films that has ever been made.'"⁶¹ It didn't hurt to add the star presence of Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon, with Richard Ney, Garson's real-life partner, playing Vin Miniver, the eldest son. But more important, the British enjoyed the reflected image of their better selves, not only patriotic, but calm and reasonable. In the most emotionally uplifting scene, Kay Miniver has spent five agonizing days waiting for her husband and son to return from aiding in the Dunkirk evacuation when she discovers an injured German pilot in her garden. He terrorizes her but she handles him with reason and kindness, tending to his wounds and reassuring him he'll be "wonderfully looked after" in the hospital. A perfect monster, the Nazi sneers at her that England will be just like Barcelona, Warsaw, and Rotterdam. "Wir werden alle vernichten!" ("We will destroy everybody!"), he snaps in fury. His obvious madness can be seen as overly-melodramatic, but even today still holds a mesmerizing power over viewers who know after the fact that the

German's terrifying threats never came to pass. The perfect mother and wife, Kay succeeds in fending off the enemy, hugs her youngest son Toby, and doesn't even trouble Clem with her ordeal now that he is home.



Figure 9. *Mrs Miniver*: stoic resolve facing the enemy

When Vin Miniver returns home from Oxford in the summer before the war, he is full of new ideas. He excitedly tells his family he has changed his whole outlook on things, “I know absolutely nothing on anything.” But when he meets Carol Beldon (Teresa Wright), he forgets his relative ignorance and puts his newfound social consciousness into action. Carol asks Kay to persuade Mr. Ballard (Henry Travers) to withdraw his “Mrs Miniver” rose from the Beldon Challenge Cup competition so that her grandmother, Lady Beldon, can win, as she always does. Idealist Vin is sure this act represents all that is wrong with the world: “I’m aware of the influence of the feudal system in this village. These are orders from the manor. Her ladyship

must be offered no competition ... A humble working man is denied the reward of his artistry to gratify the vanity of an aristocrat.” Carol thinks Vin hides behind his books and refrains from taking action, while he calls her charity work “playing Lady bountiful” to the poor.

Later that night, both of them apologize and find out they share an irresistible attraction to one another. Carol proves that Vin’s view of the ruling class is anachronistic. She respects his ideas and enthusiasms, but balances him with her own down to earth qualities. Vin tells her he gave up dancing, even though he was pretty good at it, as a form of self-censorship (“Is this a time for frivolity?”). Carol provides the sense to his sensibility: “Is it time to lose one’s sense of humor?” The young lovers have to separate for the summer. Carol and Lady Beldon return from Scotland only at the outbreak of the war in September. Lady Beldon refuses Vin’s suggestion to help prepare for the blackout, with her typical privileged air of self-importance: “We can take care of ourselves. We’ve been doing it for the past 800 years.”

Just after France surrenders in June 1940, Flight Officer Vin Miniver gets a week’s leave. When the Minivers sit down for dinner, Vin proposes to Carol. The family barely has time to grasp the news or bless the young couple when Vin is called back to his airfield, a reminder that “in war, time is so precious to the young people,” as Kay tells Lady Beldon when the latter expresses her displeasure over the marriage. Lady Beldon seems to recognize she is out of step with the situation: “I’m old-fashioned, I believe in breeding, but that’s neither here nor there.” Her objection to the marriage is surprisingly not about class difference. She claims Carol, who has just turned 18, and Vin, who is not even 20, are both too young. She wants them to wait, in the hope that Carol will change her mind.

Kay Miniver: We’re at war, Lady Beldon, and Vin’s a flyer.

Lady Beldon: That’s no excuse for rushing into an ill-considered marriage.

Kay Miniver: But how old were you when you married? ... 16? And did your parents approve?

Lady Beldon: That's beside the point ... My marriage only lasted a few weeks. My husband was in the army. He was killed in action ... We married because we knew it might happen. But I don't want Carol to suffer as I suffered.

Lady Beldon eventually accepts the union, and the Minivers as family ("So long as we are going to be relatives, the least you can do is to offer me some tea"). The ceremony is not shown, fitting for a rushed, low-key wartime wedding. The couple goes to Scotland for their honeymoon and return two weeks later just in time for the Beldon Cup.

Especially in terms of class dynamics, *Mrs Miniver* presents a simplistic and stereotyped view of the English. Meant as a sympathetic gesture to Britain at war and to promote a future alliance, this film doesn't "tackle the perennial American criticism that Britain was class-ridden and dominated by a privileged aristocracy."⁶² Rather, it provides a rose-colored image of Britain that is more palatable to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.⁶³ Upper- and middle-class characters are neither bad nor selfish. Lady Beldon's snarky remark about the middle-class sort of people "trying to be better than their betters" belongs to prewar days; come wartime she is softened and clearly sees the good of the nation (and the People) before her own, her self-importance making way to benevolence. Working-class characters are marginal, either having nothing of importance to say (like Ada the cook and Gladys the serving maid) or idolizing the ground the better-off people walk on (Mr. Ballard, the stationmaster, naming his rose after Mrs. Miniver). They are the defenders of the class system, as if they benefit from their long-standing inferior position. So a conversation between the store owner Mr. Folley and his customer Mrs. Huggins seems to suggest:

Mr. Folley: To hear people, you'd think Mr. Ballard committed a crime.

Mrs. Huggins: I don't hold with people getting ideas above their station. Who's he to think he can enter his rose in the show?

Mr. Folley: And who's to say he can't?

Mr. Ballard himself is later confronted by fellow bell ringer Mr. Huggins, who shares his wife's concerns about social etiquette:

Mr. Huggins: If you'd called your rose a "Lady Beldon," I'd have said quite right and proper. But who's Mrs. Miniver?

Mr. Ballard: The nicest lady in the neighborhood Mr. Huggins, that's who.

Mr. Huggins: Yeah, maybe, but a newcomer. No, Mr. Ballard, you stick to the railway and leave roses alone.

By entering his "Mrs Miniver" rose, Mr. Ballard is threatening not only Lady Beldon's thirty-year domination of the flower competition but also her social leadership of the community. Furthermore, naming a rose after a "newcomer" is adding insult to injury. The middle class might not have eight hundred years' worth of history and breeding to their name, but in the form of Kay they are charming as well as pretty. Working-class characters emphasize how "nice" the people above them are, and how fit they are to enjoy their positions and privileges. The middle class is also an enduring middle class, willing to sacrifice its domestic help for the greater good with a cheerful spirit. As Clem humorously remarks on Ada's departure, "She was a good cook, as good cooks go. And as good cooks go, she went."

Carol and Vin's relationship forces Lady Beldon to acknowledge the other classes in the community and fulfill her responsibilities as a true leader of the People. She reverses the judges' deferential decision in the flower competition and concedes that Ballard's rose is the best rose. "We Beldons are not used to competitors. In the old days, we just lopped off their heads. Can't do that nowadays, more's the pity. But if I had to lose, there's no man I'd sooner lose to than

James Ballard because he's a man of spirit." Now the working class gets a well-deserved nod from the elite that only stresses the patronizing and unauthentic depiction of the working class. If the film attempted to efface class conflicts and show a wartime bonding of the classes, in the matter of the working class it failed miserably. The result is a peculiar American approval of the British class system and the seemingly natural division and hierarchy of the classes.

In this distorted microcosm of English society, classes are connected through their wartime sacrifices and love of the ubiquitous English rose. But the bond is especially strong between the middle class and the landed gentry, perpetuated in Vin and Carol's marriage. This cross-class marriage unites the middle-class backbone with the natural leadership of the aristocratic head to form a social body more appealing to Americans, who prefer upward social mobility to ancient titles. This is "a nicely ambiguous solution to the question of class, in which the dominance of the bourgeoisie in exchange for that of the aristocracy is offered as if it were equivalent to an egalitarian classlessness."⁶⁴ Democracy in the form of cross-class marriage is what the film advocates as the modern face of Britain, a Britain that is worth fighting for. The film was eventually released six months after America entered the war, but it had been in production for several years. Initiated when it was not yet certain that America would renounce its famed isolationism, *Mrs Miniver* presented American audiences with a Britain they could sympathize with.

The flower show is followed by a German air raid that further shows American viewers why Britain is worth fighting for. Kay and Carol drive Vin to the airfield and are returning home when a dogfight between enemy and RAF planes takes place overhead. They wait it out in the car. In a shocking twist of the plot, Carol is hit by fire from the aircraft and dies in Kay's arms. Though war-weary audiences likely expected that RAF flyer Vin Miniver was living on

borrowed time, the marriage actually ends because of Carol's death. This scene puts newlywed Carol's words to her mother-in-law in a different light: "I know that I may lose him. He's young and he loves life, but he may die. Let me say it. He may be killed any day, any hour ... I will be very happy. Every moment that I have him. Every moment. If I must lose him, there'll be time enough for tears. There'll be a lifetime for tears." Although alerted in various earlier scenes what war does to young love, audiences likely watched in disbelief as the sweet young bride tragically dies. Carol is resolutely prepared to risk becoming a widow if only she gets to live romantic and married life to its fullest for however little time there is for her and her husband, just like her grandmother before her. Lady Beldon is no stranger to hardship, and even though she has lost her granddaughter, she manifests the quintessential stiff upper-lip at Carol's funeral. So does Vin, the newest member of the upper class.

The overly sentimental scene of Carol's death resonated with many Britons, who had lived in a home front constantly under enemy attack. British civilians were just as vulnerable as soldiers in the Second World War. During the Blitz of 1940-41, in fact, the casualty rate of non-combatants "far exceeded the death-rate in the armed forces during the same period."⁶⁵ Women were of course concentrated on the home front, which was a theatre of war for all intents and purposes. The deadly rain of V-1 buzzbombs and V-2 rockets in 1944-45 showed that the invasion of Europe had not made Britain safer. Women amounted to almost half (48%) of Britons killed or seriously wounded.⁶⁶ This war reversed the supposedly natural order of things, with some soldiers overseas more worried about their wives at home than the other way around.⁶⁷ How fitting that in addition to Carol's death this attack also costs the life of the "man of spirit," the commoner Mr. Ballard. If Carol represents the toll of death for women and the privileged, Ballard represents the toll of civilian men and the masses.

This film won several Academy awards and was praised as a mastery of subtle directing and impeccable acting, “magnificently done” in creating an “excellent illusion of England.” It was also looked down on by some critics for being too pompous and unrealistic.⁶⁸ British audiences were divided over how well the movie matched their own wartime experiences. Some were upset at the “hidden propaganda” or thought it “over-done,” while others believed it “true to life.”⁶⁹ Still, the British flocked to the cinema to be moved and have a good cry. The dramatic blend that in some ways resembled their own experience, with added touches of stoicism and bravery facing the enemy, was extremely appealing. Although some of the actors are British (Greer Garson and Dame Mea Whitty, for instance), it was made in a studio thousands of miles away from Britain and used Hollywood techniques and conventions. But this physical and aesthetic distance from the war may have helped the filmmakers achieve the mythic quality of British bravery and selflessness that makes the film compelling as well as sentimental.

Mrs Miniver is undeniably conservative in its presentation of clean-cut class dynamics, a beautiful harmony of all classes, and dutiful and sacrificing citizens. It is interesting to contrast Kay Miniver’s clean and calm figure with the other model, indeed iconic, middle-class wife of the era, Laura Jesson. *Mrs Miniver* was released in 1942, in the middle of the patriotic euphoria of the People’s War. When David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* was made in 1945, the “all in it together” mood was already fragmenting. Celia Johnson’s Laura Jesson is a fragile and lonely woman. She conveys authentic emotions and everyday struggles, entirely different from the ultimately melodramatic scenarios exemplified by Kay Miniver’s bloodless triumph over the murderous Nazi. In visual terms, Greer Garson possessed an undeniable star quality with her charismatic beauty and endless grace, whereas the plainer-looking Celia Johnson was a powerful actress on the stage who never rose to stardom on the screen. These two actresses and their films

are convenient markers of the difference between serious British cinema and its actors and glamorous Hollywood cinema and its stars. Although Hollywood flashiness was toned down in *Mrs Miniver*'s case, it still emphasized stars and style over acting and realistic portrayal. As we have seen, however, mainstream British film itself offered different – although usually conservative – visions of the interplay of class, gender, sex, and romance on the home front.

3.5 Conclusion

The myth of wartime solidarity has become the standardized account of the British Second World War experience. But social cohesion and the creation of a classless society is more or less pure nostalgia. The classes were all in it together in the sense of experiencing the terrors of war at home and abroad, but age-old distinctions were not easily swiped away. In a class-ridden society, controversial cross-class romance became at least a cinematic reality, a testament to the social changes the country underwent during the “People’s War.” Contemporaries envisioned a classless utopia through the media of film. One example is the omnibus genre,⁷⁰ producing films like *The Way Ahead* (1944) or *The Gentle Sex* (1943), intended to unite the different classes. In these films, characters’ differences are acknowledged but they find they have much in common, besides the obvious desire for victory over the Nazi enemy. Typical wartime scenes, like the All Ranks dance, demonstrate the coming together of classes through the mixing of men and women, featured in three of the four films discussed in this chapter.

Unconventional romantic and sexual relationships between members of different classes in films can shed a new light on the interaction between cinema and society and the transition of a society between the old and the new, in particular class leveling and the reorganization of

gender roles. Many films may have presented a coming together of classes and bridging of differences as part of the people's war propaganda. In such cases, Britain's internal differences are credited as a distinctively unifying factor,⁷¹ but do not suggest the prospect of "genuine and lasting social change."⁷² British home front films expose a fluid society, torn between keeping the supposedly natural order of classes and moving forward in the spirit of what the People fought for: a better future, a more democratic future that marks the end of dated perceptions of class hierarchy.

The war eroded conventions of class and gender, when women and men of the working, middle, and upper classes had to come together to defend the kingdom both at home and away. Britons were unsure if social changes brought on by the war were temporary, for the duration only, or if victory would bring an opportunity to right social evils such as class distinction or women's rights. The question of whether the Second World War served to democratize British society is much debated even today. It is clear that the 1945 Labour victory and the construction of the welfare state did signal the increasing influence of the working class in the political arena, but in terms of social and cultural patterns postwar Britain looked very much like its familiar conservative self – the privileged rarely mixed with the rest, in employment, education, or matrimony. Recently James Hinton has argued that old social arrangements were reinforced after the war ("the continuities of class"), and that class remained an important marker in British society. Changes in class structure and relations only became visible in the 1960s.⁷³

Films tended to be just as ambivalent and did not seek to definitively answer questions of social change. Dealing with unorthodox cross-class romance was a way to work on and resolve British class dynamics. Of the four films discussed, some raised doubts as to the validity of such a connection: Charlie and Jennifer in *Millions Like Us* are a product of wartime class leveling,

that is questioned come peace; Alan and Diana in *Piccadilly Incident* are quick to marry, but their union is doomed; Vin and Carol bridge the gap between the middle and upper classes, but this honeymoon is short-lived. Others condone a relationship between people of different class: Tom and Joan in *English Without Tears* marry despite his working-class origin and her upper-class roots; *The Courtneys of Curzon Street* acknowledges social barriers for unconventional couples but proclaims that love can triumph, as the couples marry anyway, first Sir Edward and Kathy and two generations later, their grandchild and his working-class girlfriend during the war.

Of the cinematic cross-class love affairs discussed in this chapter, three feature couples of “radically separate classes.”⁷⁴ Tom and Joan end up married, whereas Charlie and Jennifer, as well as Teddy and Pam, see the difficulties such a union promises and are hesitant to pursue it. It is interesting to note that the working-class partner is more hesitant than the upper-class partner, as if they had more to lose – quite the opposite of what we might expect, given the notion of marrying “up.” These various possibilities suggest that cinema’s negotiation of cross-class romance is not one-dimensional and such relationships are not always “doomed.”⁷⁵

¹ Rose, *Which People’s War?*, 36; Rattigan, *This Is England*, 187.

² Lant, *Blackout*, 41.

³ Street, *British National Cinema*, 66.

⁴ Penny Summerfield, “The ‘Leveling of class,’” in *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War*, ed. Harold L. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 179, 189; Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*.

⁵ David French, *Raising Churchill’s Army: The British Army and the War Against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁷ Summerfield, “The ‘Leveling of class,’” 197.

⁸ Spicer, *Typical Men*, 11.

⁹ Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 308.

¹⁰ Harold L. Smith, *Britain in the Second World War* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 44.

¹¹ Women's motivations for wartime public service were very much inspired by their personal circumstances, as evidenced in Mass Observation diaries. Eleanor Humphries's decision to take up voluntary work was driven more by a desire to avoid conscription than by patriotic fervor. Nella Last threw herself into war work to escape a domineering husband. See Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*.

¹² Both *The Demi-Paradise* and *English Without Tears* are upper-class comedies produced by Two Cities Films. See Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000), 50.

¹³ Lower class families hosted the majority of the evacuees. See Smith, *Britain in the Second World War*, 43.

¹⁴ "English Without Tears," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 31 August 1944, 128; Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, 164.

¹⁵ Harold L. Smith, "The effect of the war on the status of women," in *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War*, ed. Harold L. Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 211.

¹⁶ John Costello, *Love, Sex and War: Changing Values* (London: Collins, 1985), 211-212.

¹⁷ Smith, "The effect of the war on the status of women," 212; Philomena Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 44.

¹⁸ Smith, "The effect of the war on the status of women," 213. See also Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, 44-48; Costello, *Love, Sex and War*, 197-213.

¹⁹ Smith, "The effect of the war on the status of women," 215.

²⁰ Summerfield, "The 'Leveling of class,'" 194.

²¹ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 36, 70.

²² Harper, "The Years of Total War," 203. See also Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 300-301.

²³ Rattigan, *This Is England*, 187.

²⁴ Ibid., 198-201, 204.

²⁵ “Millions Like Us,” *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 31 December 1943, 120.

²⁶ James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998), 212.

²⁷ Jeffery Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, eds., *Mass Observation at the Movies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987), 277.

²⁸ Harper, “The Years of Total War,” 203.

²⁹ Rose, *Which People’s War?*, 82.

³⁰ Rattigan, *This Is England*, 201.

³¹ Harper, “The Years of Total War,” 203.

³² Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, 44.

³³ Rattigan, *This Is England*, 198.

³⁴ The Mayfair Circle includes *Piccadilly Incident*, *The Courtneys of Courzon Street*, *Spring in Park Lane*, and *Maytime in Mayfair*, all extremely popular romantic melodramas starring Anna Neagle.

³⁵ Rattigan, *This Is England*, 201.

³⁶ Costello, *Love, Sex and War*, 19.

³⁷ Alan Allport, *Demobbed: Coming Home After the Second World War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 58.

³⁸ Street, *British National Cinema*, 172.

³⁹ Costello, *Love, Sex and War*, 19.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Britain in the Second World War*, 48.

⁴¹ Costello, *Love, Sex and War*, 314.

⁴² Lant, *Blackout*, 107.

⁴³ Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, 90.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁶ Ibid., xi.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁸ See Lant, *Blackout*, 66, who claims that “By 1945 the question of whether the war had had a permanent effect on women was *the* topic on film’s and others’ lips.”

⁴⁹ Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 145.

⁵⁰ Allport, *Demobbed*, 52.

⁵¹ “Piccadilly Incident,” *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 30 September 1946, 153.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, 163.

⁵⁴ Lant, *Blackout*, 137.

⁵⁵ Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, 95.

⁵⁶ Smith, “The effect of the war on the status of women,” 210; Goodman, *Women, Sexuality and War*, 44; Allport, *Demobbed*, 63.

⁵⁷ Allport, *Demobbed*, 63.

⁵⁸ Lant, *Blackout*, 21.

⁵⁹ Smith, “The effect of the war on the status of women,” 215.

⁶⁰ Cited in Costello, *Love, Sex and War*, 195.

⁶¹ Richards and Sheridan, eds., *Mass Observation at the Movies*, 16.

⁶² Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 295.

⁶³ Ibid., 331.

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- ⁶⁴ Janet Thumim, "The Female Audience: Mobile Women and Married Ladies," in: *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 250.
- ⁶⁵ Costello, *Love, Sex and War*, 17.
- ⁶⁶ Smith, "The effect of the war on the status of women," 209.
- ⁶⁷ Allport, *Demobbed*, 115.
- ⁶⁸ Bosley Crowther, "Mrs Miniver," Movie Review, *New York Times*, 5 June 1942; "Mrs Miniver," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 31 July 1942, 103; Colin Shindler, *Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society, 1939-1952* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 48.
- ⁶⁹ Richards and Sheridan, eds., *Mass Observation at the Movies*, 246, 285, 288; Calder, *The People's War*, 369: "The infamous Mrs Miniver, the saga of middle-class courage set in an olde worlde utopia, provoked very mixed reactions from British audiences."
- ⁷⁰ Raymond Durgant, *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 201.
- ⁷¹ Lant, *Blackout*, 41.
- ⁷² Rattigan, *This Is England*, 202.
- ⁷³ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 332; James Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War: Continuities of Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ⁷⁴ Rattigan, *This Is England*, 199.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

4 “I want the wife I left behind, not something different”: Disrupted Marriage, Forced Separation, and Divorce

The British institution of marriage was one of the lesser known casualties of the Second World War. Fighting a total war took its toll on British citizens, as couples endured years of separation that coincided with new opportunities for extra-marital temptations, especially for conscripted men and mobile women. The result was an all-time high number of divorce petitions in 1946 and 1947, not to be matched again for more than twenty years.¹ Intriguingly, 1945 and 1946, the two years of transition from war to peace, also saw the revival of the British film industry, with the peak of cinema attendance in 1946 after a steady rise throughout the war years, as well as the release of many critically acclaimed films.² It seemed like British cinema was finally catching up with Hollywood, and becoming a favorite with critics and audiences alike.³

Many feature films made in 1945-46 dealt with problematic relationships between the sexes, with topics ranging from adultery and infidelity to separation, marital alienation and divorce. Cinema provides a glimpse into the social and cultural discourse of a nation, and indeed, these films echoed a nation finding its way, as wartime unity and common purpose diffused into the personal arena. At the end of the war, the focus changed from fighting the People's War together to portraying individual relationships. Social problems could no longer be camouflaged behind the “all in it together” propaganda slogan; the new Labour government was expected to reexamine women's status and tend to the class divide as part of a comprehensive social reform. Historians and film scholars alike have pinpointed the tension between old and new conceptions of marriage and the role of personal happiness in a married life as a recurring theme in British cinema of the 1940s.⁴

Many feature films dealt with issues of infidelity, directly or indirectly, from escapist, fanciful costume melodramas such as Leslie Arliss's *The Wicked Lady* (1945) or Anthony Asquith's *Fanny by Gaslight* (1944) to realist films that present dilemmas mostly related to the war. The most celebrated British film of 1945 was David Lean's *Brief Encounter*. It is still considered one of the best British films of all time, and has been much discussed for its artistic values as well as for its handling of a wide range of social issues. I wish to integrate this film into a discussion of four home front films that share the disrupted marriage theme and examine how anxieties over marriage manifested in British home front films and how these films explored issues of women's status, divorce, and the effects of prolonged war on relationships between men and women. These films have yet to be taken together to suggest the range of possibilities in cinema's response to marital dilemmas made more acute by the war. *Waterloo Road* (1945) centers on a working-class couple torn apart by war and suspicions of adultery. *Perfect Strangers* (1945) celebrates a married couple for overcoming individual change triggered by war and separation. *The Captive Heart* (1946) is a men-in-uniform omnibus picture dealing with relationships both at camp and at home, depicting the dissolution of marriage, breach of promise, jealousy, and the separation of lovers. Finally, *The Years Between* (1946) portrays a woman's reluctance to reunite with a husband she believed to be dead.

4.1 "I'm still a respectable married woman"

The practical side of divorce is very briefly discussed in *Perfect Strangers*:

Cathy Wilson: Will it be difficult to get?

Robert Wilson: Now don't you worry about anything, Cathy. You sue me. I'll give you cause.

Cathy Wilson: Oh, no, no, we'll stick to the truth; I've deserted you.

Robert Wilson: Oh, no, I take a very strong view of that. It's a bit of a slur, you know.
Cathy Wilson: I don't mind, it can't be helped.
Robert Wilson: Slur on me, I mean.

British divorce proceedings in the mid-1940s were constructed on a notion of matrimonial fault, making divorce more about punishing the people seeking it rather than enabling them to take a step toward building happier relationships. This notion of fault only changed after the war. Carol Smart illustrates the complexity of divorce law and the burdens it placed on women especially by hypothesizing *Brief Encounter's* extra-marital affair between Laura Jesson and Alec Harvey turning into a divorce and second marriage. Smart claims Laura and Alec “represent a particular moment of transition in the history of marriage and divorce in post-war England.” Laura doesn't act on her attraction to Alec, leaving her marriage “materially intact,” but she is painfully mourning a love unfulfilled. Laura's passionate yearning for a man other than her husband is representative of this moment in time, when women experienced freedoms during the war but were expected to resume old social constraints (repressed sexuality, domesticity) after the war, resulting in conflicting emotions and confusion.⁵

The film was a success partly because Laura Jesson is the everyday middle-class British woman, who candidly questions the moral norms she once lived by. Female viewers could also understand (if not identify) with the ending, when Laura decides she cannot end up with Alec, realistically weighing the comfort and respectability of her home and married life against the shame of divorce and an unknown future with a married man. Smart recognizes that many women saw Laura as a woman who “knows the limitations of her situation,” and her choice as realistic, while male critics tended to see the ending as a moral tale, portraying possible marital disruptions caused by war and the resort to the old ways once the disruption is removed (war is over or Alec is away in South Africa).⁶

A classic romantic comedy, *Perfect Strangers* playfully explores the idea of divorce and a fresh start. When war breaks, Robert (Robert Donat) and Cathy Wilson (Deborah Kerr) are the epitome of an ordinary married couple, endlessly preoccupied with their dull routine. He joins the navy and she becomes a Wren, and each simultaneously evolves into a more confident and glamorous self. Both dread the prospect of meeting their spouse after three years apart and both want a divorce. The film emphasizes that their personal growth is parallel, derived from going out of the house and into the homosocial company of peers in the service. It implies that the war shapes British individuals for the better and simplistically assumes that since the Wilsons are (again) so similar, there is ultimately no need for a divorce. War might seem to be the cause of marital problems and personal hardship, but seen through the rose-colored glasses of director Alexander Korda, war is the catalyst for British citizens to experience friendship, adventure, and personal growth.

Sue Aspinall claims the movie is quite unique in addressing “changes in women’s consciousness wrought by the war,” but the humorous comparison of changes in both husband and wife evades “the real incompatibilities, conflicts and tensions created between men and women because of women’s new consciousness.”⁷ Reviewers were equally dismayed with the movie’s light-as-a-feather treatment of marital conflicts. The narrative’s core idea is intriguing, tackling explosive social dilemmas regarding married couples altered by separation or women’s wartime status, but it fails to sensitively portray its characters or deliver a credible ending. A disapproving reviewer claimed that “the film often lacks reality. At times the characters seem just to be saying their lines, and not particularly good ones at that ... This is a superficial film, which assumes that all that is needed for marital happiness and success in life is physical well-being and glamour.”⁸

Women's metamorphosis after going out of the home to serve the nation "for the duration" has been generally acknowledged by contemporaries and scholars alike.⁹ Men, however, were already out of the house and in the public sphere. Thus the drastic changes in Robert seem out of place, but they serve a purpose in the plot. This symmetry of husband and wife make Cathy's transformation seem less menacing (to husband and male viewers alike). When Cathy is out of the house for the first time, and suddenly doesn't have to live by Robert's moral code, she also experiences same-sex friendships she doesn't seem to have had at home. She is closest to fellow Wren, Dizzy Clayton (Glynis Johns), who is most influential in Cathy's transformation. It is unclear how Robert could undergo such an extreme change just from being away from home and Cathy. He could have formed same-sex friendships with his peers at the office, men of the same rank and class. Somehow, it is the evidently lower-class shipmates who help him shed out his gloomy, insecure middle-class shell.¹⁰ This change in Robert moves the plot forward, but it seems artificial and probably bears little resemblance to conscripted men's reality.

In the home front genre, it is only expected to find the British home as a space in question. What used to be a place of stability and retreat, has become a space of uncertainty, a mere memory for many. Thousands of homes bombed and destroyed beyond repair and millions of changes of address, many due to mobile women working in the war industries or the armed forces, found their way into film narratives.¹¹ Antonia Lant claims that in *Perfect Strangers*, home is a space of the "phony war" and the phony marriage between Robert and Cathy.¹² Their marriage might have been a comfortable fit for prewar times, but when they talk about it with their peers in the service, the Wilsons begin to see cracks in their union. Each of them thinks their spouse is helpless without them, that they are the only ones altered by war while their

spouse has stayed the same. “Mind you, I was fond of Cathy and she was fond of me. But the thing we had in common, our home, it was pre-war,” Robert tells shipmate Scotty. On her end, Cathy confesses to Dizzy: “And there were times when I’d think to myself, if I hear the click of his latch key just once more, on time, always on time, I’ll set fire to the house. Oh, Dizzy, I can’t go back and live that life again ... I can’t live in that guinea pig hutch with Robert.”

As Alan Allport keenly observes, “at its greatest moment of reunion the family seemed to be on the point of collapse.”¹³ Cathy does not want to go back to either husband or home. Both are reminders of a self she no longer recognizes. Cathy is reluctant to see Robert after three years apart, telling Dizzy: “I think it’s downright immoral to treat a husband as a husband when you haven’t seen him in three years. Robert and I are Perfect Strangers. I can’t just resume married life without any preliminaries.” Robert is less sensitive to the home as a relic of the past and goes back to their apartment, waiting for Cathy there. Cathy gets cold feet at the door and telephones Robert to meet her outside. Their only light in blackout London is the night sky’s searchlights. The camera catches the searchlight’s reflection on the river, a further reinforcement to the blackout taking control over the reunion scene (Robert: “Do you realize I haven’t seen you in three years? Not that I can see you now.”) Cathy wastes no time:

Cathy: You see, I’ve had time to do a lot of thinking and –

Robert: What about?

Cathy: Oh, about you and me and the life we used to lead before the war.

Robert: What else?

Cathy: and about the life I intend to lead after the war.

Robert: and just exactly what sort of life do you intend to lead after the war? Is it with someone else?

Cathy: You needn’t worry, Robert. I’m still a respectable married woman.

Robert: Oh, I’m absolutely sure about that, Cathy.

Cathy: Oh, you needn’t be so sure as all that.



Figures 10a-b. *Perfect Strangers*: gloomy blackout couple transforms via light

As the couple moves in space from the deserted riverbank, they also leave the blackout behind and enter a typical wartime social space, a pub packed with other men and women. Here,

viewers get another positive message about the war: not only does it potentially lead to personal growth, it also provides ample opportunities for joyous communal gatherings. Their problems seem to disappear in that cheerful, lighthearted environment; they even dance together, much to Dizzy's amazement. Scotty is equally amazed that Cathy is practically a "pin-up girl," nothing like the dull, dependable sort of wife Robert used to complain about. Livid, she tells Robert she is not a "child-wife" who needs him to look after her. The four then leave the pub with another communal shot, as pub patrons dance hand in hand to "Auld Lang Syne."

After her falling out with Robert, Cathy goes back to the apartment accompanied by Dizzy. Nervously drinking one cup of tea after the other, she reminisces about her first date with Robert. Robert is outside in the dark street corner, humming "my little grey home in the west." He returns to the apartment to collect his gear and finds Cathy at the window, reminding him of "the high walls that used to make the room dark." There used to be high walls between the couple, too, with each of them putting on an act merely to please the other. After the Blitz, Cathy finally gets the view she always wanted, but is aching at the sight of desolated London. "Well, we'll just have to build it up again," says Robert, implying the rebuilding of their marriage.

Cathy is artificially positioned as a mirror image of her husband, making husband and wife seem almost equals. Young Deborah Kerr has equal screen time and dialogue to one of the biggest British films stars of the time, Robert Donat. Cathy's point of view on marriage and men, her position in the marriage and her abilities are all discussed at length. Her thoughts and actions matter. In the beginning of the film, Cathy dreams of "an airline ticket to romantic places." When the Wilsons' financial situation takes a turn to the worse, she suggests getting a job, but Robert will not hear of it: "You know how strongly I feel about that?" and she

obediently replies: “Just as you say, Robert.” Surprisingly, she soon after joins the Wrens, and only lets Robert know about it after the fact. Still, upon starting service, she voices her concerns about whether Robert would approve of her smoking, putting on lipstick, or dancing. Meanwhile, Robert describes Cathy to his shipmates as “just an ordinary girl. Simple, uncomplicated, quiet, dependable sort of person.”

The opposite of her “simple, uncomplicated” ways, Cathy is also reflecting her future life as a “changed” housewife, making *Perfect Strangers* another film that reaffirms a woman’s domesticity while leaving room for a somewhat changed future after the war. Meanwhile Robert changed his mind about a woman’s place in the home, but Cathy for some reason remained old-fashioned about women’s prospects of going out of the house after the war. She wants a changed marriage, but is not looking for adventures outside the home. War helps her reach some realizations about herself and her husband, realizations she fails to act on. Her domesticity serves as a reassuring message to male viewers that changes in women are merely temporary and on the surface. Women might feel more independent or look more attractive, but they are still the housewives and mothers-to-be, and that is what *they* want. Patriarchal order is still intact; marriage is still the preferred way of life in post-war British society.

4.2 “I wish I didn’t have to keep reminding myself you are a married woman”

Dr. Montgomery: “Here in London, the people waged a whole campaign and won it. Yes, and there were other battles too, folks battling with themselves. Little people like Jim and Tillie Colter.”

This connection between the People’s War and war’s effects on the people is made by the all-knowing narrator Dr. Montgomery (Alastair Sim), telling the story of *Waterloo Road* in

flashbacks. Whereas in *Perfect Strangers* “[n]othing is natural or spontaneous,” *Waterloo Road* is a sensitive portrayal of working-class characters and way of life with a realistic setting and believable storyline.¹⁴ This film is a fine example of British realist cinema, with its comical stunts, succinct dialogue, and deglamorized mise-en-scène. Even the hedonistic Alcazar dance hall is a space of war, where sessions of dance and drink are interrupted by random checks of identity cards and leave passes. Depicting the harsh reality of life on the home front, especially in London during the winter of the Blitz (1940-41), conveys a different message about the effects of war on the British people; if *Perfect Strangers* glorified wartime opportunities for individual experience and community belonging, *Waterloo Road*’s newlyweds Jim (John Mills) and Tillie Colter (Joy Shelton) make audience relive the catastrophic affects of war on family life.

Torn apart by the war, Jim joins the army and Tillie has to go through the Blitz living with the Colters, sharing a tiny apartment with Mrs. Colter, younger sister Vera, older sister Ruby, her husband Fred, and the tenant Tom. When the couple got married, Jim was reluctant to move out of his mother’s home due to the uncertainties of war. Tillie’s home is either her mother-in-law’s during the day or the public shelter at night, both spaces lacking privacy, magnifying her stress. *Waterloo Road* does not spare viewers from scenes of communal life in shelters, men and women cramped together, sharing a confined space, worry for loved ones far away and fearing for their own lives during incessant Luftwaffe air-raids. Shelter life consisted of prying eyes everywhere: “Privacy, so highly cherished by Britons, is gone ... Here nothing is intimate. One talks, eats, sleeps, lives, with a hundred, a thousand others.”¹⁵

At the shelter, Tillie is perused by the local spiv, a shady character named Ted Purvis (Stewart Granger), whom she initially dislikes. Ruby accuses her of betraying Jim, and Tillie has a breakdown, crying to her mother-in-law: “I’m tired of everybody watching me all the time,

imagining things, getting at me. Nagging, nagging, nagging.” Ruby and Fred are working opposite shifts at Southern Railway, “meeting only to part,” sacrificing married life for the war effort. This divide created between husband and wife is partly why Ruby feels embittered around Tillie, who had a fight with Jim on his last leave and didn’t make the most of their time together. Ruby alerts Jim to Tillie’s alleged infidelity. Jim then decides to go home without leave. By the time Jim unexpectedly returns home, his wife is out and about with Ted.

Waterloo Road criticizes the decadent world of nighttime London, with shady Ted Purvis as its picture boy. Ted’s standard afternoons consists of dog-racing, the pictures, or jitterbugging at the Alcazar. “That about covers his war effort,” says Toni, his hairdressing lady friend. The film presents several escapist establishments that Jim goes through, trying to track down Tillie and Ted: the “Lucky Star” (a spin-table saloon), the “Canterbury Arms” (a local pub), a tattooist’s shop, and the Alcazar dance hall, where he is further delayed by authorities hot on his heels. Ted stands for all that is wrong with the home front: a womanizer and petty criminal, aiming to break the sanctity of marriage and the unity of the British nation. Dr. Montgomery calls Ted Purvis a symptom of the general condition, telling Jim: “You make the sacrifices, you fellas in the services. You don’t want the Ted Purvises of this world to reap the benefits when this is all over, or now for that matter.”



Figure 11. *Waterloo Road*: the decadent world of nighttime London

At the Alcazar, Ted flatters Tillie (“I wish I didn’t have to keep reminding myself you are a married woman”) and makes sure her liqueur glass is always full. Jim finally catches up with them at the Alcazar but misses the couple sitting at the bar, making the audience feel his frustration that he is always one step behind Ted. Meanwhile, Ted doesn’t miss an opportunity to further push Tillie’s buttons by mentioning her uncomfortable living arrangements (“it’s not like being your own boss, having a home of your own.”). For contemporaries, a married woman without a proper house of her own had a cause for divorce.¹⁶ Indeed, the Colter marriage is presented as fragile because of their unstable home. They don’t have a physical space of their own, nor do they have a proper home since they don’t have children. Tillie had nothing to keep her in the home, making her sexually unpredictable and a threat to the stability of family and nation.¹⁷ She is willing to risk her marriage to a patriotic soldier for attention from an undeserving lady’s man. The film clearly designates men to be dutiful soldiers and women to be

dutiful wives, but reminds men that in order to keep their wives dutiful and home-dwelling, they must provide them with a home and children. *Waterloo Road* effectively reinforces conservative values of “family, nation, and self-discipline” while at the same time pinpointing “problems in the private sphere” caused by war.¹⁸ The use of flashbacks shows that even if war had created problems in family dynamics, order has already been restored and problems are a thing of the past. In the end, Jim further reaffirms his patriarchal status by managing to get a hold of Tillie just before she commits the fateful act of adultery and giving his wife the home and baby she always wanted. The Colters’ baby assures the future of his family as well as his kingdom.

As opposed to the gender-balanced *Perfect Strangers*, *Waterloo Road* is a man’s world. Tillie protests to Jim about their uncomfortable living arrangements and the fact that he doesn’t want a child right away. This scene isn’t shown; only the voices play out in Tillie’s head. She tells Jim: “I am sick and tired of this sort of life if you want to know, not doing this and not doing that, just because of the war. And I’ve had about as much as I can stand of your mom and Ruby, and if it going on like this I wish I never met you.” The voiceover flashback implies that even when she stands her ground, Tillie has a voice only retrospectively, when it doesn’t really matter. Tillie is also futilely resisting Ted. During their day out, she is constantly trying to go back home but he sweet-talks her out of it and into his arms, again showing that the female voice isn’t as effective as the male voice. Ted gets Tillie into his flat pretending to hold a birthday party and a gathering of friends; the friends soon are told to leave and they are left alone, an air raid already underway. She gives in to him at first, then changes her mind, crying that she “can’t do that to Jim” for fear her wrongdoing might make Jim not come back from the war. At this point, Ted refuses to let her go (“What’d you take me for, a mug?”) Saying “I’m sorry you

hadn't had your money's worth," Tillie tries to storm out, but Ted slaps her. Before things get ugly, Jim has finally tracked them down, showing up at Ted's door.

Sonya Rose maintains that British women were expected to behave morally and that expressive sexuality on their part was considered damaging for the People's War.¹⁹ Men were expected to defend their country, but even "Jim's French leave is treated positively in the context of his defending his country by defending his family."²⁰ The detailed fight scene, when Jim defends Tillie's virtue in Ted's flat, also reinforces the good/evil duality of war: like the Luftwaffe bombers aiming to destroy Britain, Ted Purvis aims to destroy the Colter family by bringing Tillie to his flat under false pretenses. It is up to the British people (in the figure of Jim) to save the nation (Tillie). The soundtrack of the Blitz further stresses the threat Ted presents to Jim and Tillie's marriage. Ted is making his final move on Tillie to the warning signal of an air raid. Then, when Jim fights Ted, enemy aircrafts are raiding the area, but they don't succeed in breaking British morale or the British family. After he makes sure their marriage is "materially intact," Jim settles the score with Ted, undeterred by bombs exploding around them.

In *Waterloo Road's* man's world, men are taking action and having the last word. Before the fight scene between Jim and Ted, Jim says: "wait downstairs, Tillie," as if this matter does not even concern her. He reaffirms his masculinity by defeating an experienced, professional fighter, while making sure his final punch is done in front of Tillie, letting her know he is still the man of the house. Tillie is seen primarily from the husband's point of view, through his suspicions. Her sexual desires are misdirected due to her wartime situation and her resentment for not having a proper home with her husband.

The film patronizingly portrays female logic (Tillie is superstitious about going on with Ted fearing Jim might not come back from the war) and need for male attention (Tillie initially

resists Ted's advances but is later attracted to the good time he can offer her, compensating for the deprivations of war.) Tillie is foolishly risking her marriage for drinks, dancing and a good time from the most unworthy man around.

4.3 "A fear of becoming forgotten men"

Private Mathews: What a sucker I was joining the ruddy Army. I pictured myself cutting it loose with some roundie old French dames. And here I am, shut up in this place until I'll be past it.

Dunkirk is mythologized in popular memory as the "spirit of Dunkirk," where the British came together and via a joint effort of navy and civilian vessels most of the British expeditionary force was rescued from Nazi grip. The "miracle of Dunkirk" leaves out the unfortunate soldiers who were left behind, captured by the Germans. They were marched hundreds of miles to be interned for the rest of the war in a German POW camp. They could no longer fulfill their duty and aid their nation in its time of need; their only enemy was boredom.

The Captive Heart depicts British prisoners' relationships both at camp and at home. Part of the omnibus genre, the film presents a cross section of British society that is forced to come together. The group includes two former building trade partners, Corporal Ted Horsfall (Jack Warner) and Private Dai Evans (Mervyn Johns), veterans of the previous war; Lieutenant David Lennox (Gordon Jackson) who is injured and loses his sight; Lieutenant Stephen Harley (Derek Bond), a newlywed pianist who succumbs to suspicions of wife Caroline's (Jane Barrette) infidelity; and Private Mathews (Jimmy Hanley), a former burglar. The group is joined by a Czech concentration camp escapee, Captain Karel Hasek (Michael Redgrave). His best chance of survival and freedom is to pass as a British soldier, so he steals the identity of Captain

Geoffrey Mitchell who was killed in Dunkirk. When Mitchell's wife, Celia (Rachel Kempson) writes to him at camp, Hasek has to write back, to make her believe her husband is still alive in order for his scheme to work. He tells her he hurt his hand to make up for the changed handwriting, but she is mostly astonished that the brutish and cruel husband she remembered has changed. Things are further complicated when Hasek/Mitchell's letters are affectionate, when in fact Mitchell and Celia were estranged and faced a dissolution of marriage. He didn't list her as his next of kin, but for some reason still he held on to a picture of her in his wallet. Their son wishes his father wouldn't come back from the war because "he used to make mommy cry."

Celia and Hasek exchange letters for several years, a correspondence that gradually becomes intimate and affectionate. Celia reads his poetic depiction of everyday life in the camp and believes that through his miserable captivity, her husband developed newfound warmth in his heart for her:

Our third winter is approaching, bringing with it a new enemy. It is not the duration but the indefiniteness of duration. For if a man knew the length of his sentence, he could plan accordingly. Afterwards in our memories, we shall relive only the sunny days ... We shall forget the wet days, the wet weeks, those days when it seemed an effort to do nothing and our bunks were the only release. Deep down in the hearts of all of us there dwells a lonely ache, a desperate yearning for those we love, and a fear. A fear of becoming forgotten men. Write to me again soon, Celia. You never know how great the comfort is that your letter bring. They give me strength, and hope, and happiness. You will never know how much they mean to me.
(Hasek writing to Celia, November 1942)

Celia falls back in love with her husband; on his end, Hasek starts to envision his life as Geoffrey Mitchell, married to Celia, living in their country home and raising their two children. His own family was killed by the Nazis, so he is easily carried away by a fantasy of a fresh start in England.

For Stephen Harley, married bliss was especially short. He and Caroline marry after only knowing each other three weeks, a quick romance “followed by years of separation.” This romance was typical of the war years, resulting in shaky marriages “between virtual strangers.”²¹ In captivity, he succumbs to suspicions of Caroline’s infidelity, doubting his wife and the bond they share. The poison pen letter informing him of Caroline’s alleged infidelity plays to Stephen’s biggest fear, that he has been forgotten. Still, Harley longs for Caroline all those years in captivity. Hasek thinks Harley is not the only one letting his emotions get the better of him, telling him: “Then I am a bigger fool than you are, falling in love with a photograph. Dream on a home in a strange land.”

For the imposter Hasek, pretending to be an Englishman not only saves his life in the immediate sense (from the Nazis), it also lifts his spirit as he awaits future possibilities. Chosen among the group of POWs to be repatriated (rather, Mathews stepped down to allow Hasek to go in his place, thus “doing his time” for his past crimes), Hasek sees Celia waiting for her husband at the docks and cannot bring himself to break her heart with the news. Till then, Hasek desperately clung on to the delusion of a wife and family, just as Celia had wanted so desperately to believe her husband is a changed and improved man.

When he finally gathers the courage to face her, Celia’s disappointment upon meeting Hasek and discovering the truth is heartbreaking. She learns her falling in love was through pretence. “Your letters came to be my life,” he reveals to Celia in the home he pictured as his own. Hasek tells Celia he fell in love with her, but she turns him down. She then rereads his letters and realizes she fell in love with the person who wrote them. After she has some time to accept her new reality, the war ends and Celia and Hasek reunite. Ultimately, Celia gets her fresh start, but not with her husband. This makes *The Captive Heart* the only movie of the four

that suggests wartime couples do not always get their happy ending. On a happier note, the film implies that war provides chances for a fresh start that could not have materialized otherwise: had it not been for the war, Celia would still be trapped in an empty shell marriage with an unfit father and husband.²² But promoting the possibility of a second, blissful marriage is not going as far as advocating divorce, since Captain Mitchell (conveniently) died in battle, and his long suffering wife is very deserving of a fresh start. Thus the movie evades dealing head on with divorce due to incompatibility and faded love, and opts for heartless Geoffrey to die on the beaches of Dunkirk.



Figure 12. *The Captive Heart*: Falling in love through pretence

The first foreign film to be produced in Germany since the outbreak of war, *The Captive Heart* is also the first to address the subject of prisoners of war. This Ealing production keeps up with the studio's tradition of authentic, realist films. Camp scenes were reconstructed at Marlag

POW camp in Westertimke, and two actors were prisoners of war until shortly before filming began. Acting is subtle and sensitive, notably the scenes of the men returning home. Some viewers found the interaction of the prisoners at camp far more appealing than “a series of artificial stories,” like Lt. Stephen Harley’s intentions to divorce Caroline or Lt. David Lennox breaking off his engagement to Elspeth after becoming blind, not wanting to become a liability on his future wife.²³ POW’s minds are preoccupied with marriage and relationship troubles, relationships that have been put on hold for years but are swiftly and unconvincingly resolved in the end. The film focuses on male camaraderie at camp, ending with a somewhat nostalgic shot of the abandoned camp after the war, as a time that could be remembered with a quiet yearning.

In the four films examined in this chapter, women not only come from very different situations in life, but also have different roles in the narratives. As a consequence, they have different voices. From the most conservative (*Waterloo Road*) to the apparently most progressive (*The Years Between*), women are sometimes only depicted relative to the men in their lives. This is the case of *The Captive Heart*. It is a man’s world, yet not one of glorified men-of-action, but of captured, nearly-defeated men. Injured and homesick, they are only complete again upon returning home and reuniting with fiancées and wives. Women here have no choice but to wait for their men to come back. Still, they have diverse reactions to their situation. Elspeth is actively defying David by waiting for him at home, insisting they belong together, while Caroline accepts her fate submissively. She meets Stephen accidentally at their apartment, collecting the rest of her things. Caroline didn’t want to fight for a marriage her husband so easily dismissed. But luckily for Caroline, Stephen is a “one woman bloke.”

4.4 “You must stay with him”

Diana Wentworth: You still have me, whether I work or not.

Michael Wentworth: I want the wife I left behind, not something different.

Diana Wentworth: But darling, things *are* different. I’ve got a job now, an important job.

Michael Wentworth: The job happens to be mine.

The difficult choice a woman has to make between a fresh start and going back to the way things were in 1939 is the conflict driving *The Years Between*. The play *The Years Between*, on which the movie is based, debuted in late 1944 to mixed reviews. This later haunted both the movie and the play’s return to the West End in 2007. Nevertheless, while the general conditions of war are unrealistically portrayed, and the highbrow lifestyle held little appeal to audiences, the courageous representation of marital hardship caused by war is realistic and very personal.²⁴

Diana (Valerie Hobson), wife of Colonel Michael Wentworth (Michael Redgrave), is extremely shaken upon news of his death. At the funeral, the widow privately cherishes snapshots of their married bliss, shown together with her matching diary entries, from their wedding in 1930, to Michael’s first speech in parliament and the christening of their son, Robin. Back at home, Diana wants everything to be left exactly as it was, refusing to donate his clothes or tidy his desk. “She’s in no condition to be worried about vegetables,” Nanny (Flora Robson) tells Ames, the gardener, and adds: “I don’t see her crying either, that’s the trouble.” Diana undergoes a painful mourning process, filling her diary with longing for Michael (“April 30th 1942: Michael’s birthday again. Where are you my darling?”) Diana doesn’t eat, doesn’t sleep and spends her nights pretending Michael is still alive. Nanny implores her to “get used to the idea that the Colonel is dead” and “start a new life, without him.” Nanny also talks to Richard (James McKechnie), Michael’s long time friend, that Diana must find a job to keep her mind off

things. Although she knows “nothing about politics,” Diana is persuaded to take Michael’s seat in parliament, and slowly evolves into a popular MP and a respected speaker for women’s issues on the home front. She “creates quite a stir” at the party for her unconventional views, but the women attending a women’s rally are excited to hear her deliver this speech: “This business of standing in queues all day has got to stop. It’s unhealthy, undignified, and it’s unnecessary. If the men had to stand in the queues instead of the women, they’d soon find a way of preventing it. And if the men can do it, we can do it.”



Figure 13. *The Years Between*: New MP Diana creating “quite a stir”

Diana manages to build a new life for herself. Richard is around the house a lot, teaching Robin to fish and providing a father-figure of sorts. He wants Diana to marry him; she is “very fond” of him but cannot commit to him yet with her life changing so quickly. He stands by her, and his persistence eventually pays off. They form a romantic connection and get engaged.

Halfway through the film, just before she marries Richard, Diana learns that Michael is in fact alive. Caught between marriage to Michael and her new love for Richard, Diana is also torn between Michael's wishes that everything (especially his wife) be exactly as he had left them and her new position as a public official in her own right.

The lovers' impossible situation is captured in a secret meeting in the forest, filmed through the branches of a tree.

Richard: There's only one thing you can do. You must stay with him.

Diana: I know you're right, but he's practically a stranger.

Richard: He's your husband.

Diana: You might have been that by today.

Richard: There's no need to remind me.

Diana: Oh, darling, I didn't mean it like that. Look, let's be logical about this. He *is* my husband. He's tired and ill, having such a time of it trying to adjust himself to his surroundings.

Richard: We've all got to do that.

Diana: Yes, but he is so lost. He's like a child who's had a long illness, suddenly started to get better to find that the world has grown up while he's been away.

Richard: So you got to mother him?

Diana: That's right.

Richard: What about you?

Diana: I don't know, Richard, I just don't know.

Richard: Diana, you know I'll do anything you say.

Diana: You know I love you.

Richard: Yes. And him?

Diana: I'm not sure. At the moment I just feel sorry for him.

Richard: That won't be quite enough, you'll find.

Diana feels the husband she is committed to is very much a stranger, similar to how Cathy feels towards Robert in *Perfect Strangers*. But unlike the latter film, that depicted a mutual change in husband and wife, *The Years Between* takes the more realistic route,²⁵ showing how men and women adapt differently to life apart and cannot seem to pick up where they left things when the war started. For Diana and Michael, a few years apart disrupted their

relationship, especially since Michael was supposedly dead and mourned for (another relationship based on pretence from the male partner, like *The Captive Heart*); Diana was not waiting for him anymore. Their individual evolution puts at risk everything they used to share as a couple. Diana finds Michael's presence and physical closeness intimidating, and cannot bring herself to put the clock back four years.

Michael is dismayed with the home he finds upon his return. His roses made way to cabbages, his iron gate taken to salvage, his wife has taken his place in parliament and his friend, Richard, has taken his place in her heart. The changes in the appearance of his home might be hard to bear, but the changes in his family dynamics are most unbearable. Even his son prefers Richard's company. Michael feels he is worthless, in everybody's way, "spoiling everybody's plans." Michael's perception of home is forever tied to wife and family in that home. He asks Diana if she minds giving up her work ("the job happens to be mine") and being just a wife again. Like many men returning home after years in the services, Michael can only grasp the changes he underwent; he cannot understand or appreciate the change in his wife and her "new and more interesting life outside the home."²⁶ Michael is not used to being challenged as the patriarch, but ultimately he accepts his fate: "I'm not the first man who's had his wife stolen from him while he's away at the war. It's quite a common thing, they tell me."

The Years Between is a rare example of the female voice in wartime British cinema, originally written by novelist and playwright Daphne du Maurier and features a woman as the main character. Diana is learning to be a person of value unrelated to her dead husband. When Michael returns just in time to prevent his wife from practicing bigamy and demands she revert back to her prewar existence, she realizes her marriage is a relic of the past, irretrievable and even irrelevant. Many late wartime movies question whether the war can be an incentive for

social change;²⁷ Diana is an active citizen for that change, while undergoing a profound change in character, profession and love interest. She is very successful in a man's job, which poses a threat to the old, patriarchal way of life.

Diana and Michael are both reasoning for and against marriage. This only makes Diana's voice more powerful and effective, for she is not cornered into a resolution reflecting a man's decision. In her deliberations, Diana is going back and forth between the two men and the two very different lives she is to have with each of them. Through her deliberation, the movie questions whether women can go back to old partners and old domestic lives now that the war is over. Both Diana and Michael are changed, their relationship strained and full of misunderstandings. Ultimately, it is Michael's unwillingness to accept change that drives her into Richard's arms. When she finds out that he deliberately withheld from her the fact that he was still alive all those years, she understands he doesn't need her as much as she thought. Now she has a clear conscious about leaving him for Richard.

However, in the last minutes of the film, supposedly after a moral intervention from Nanny, Diana changes her mind and reunites with Michael in an ill-explained ending that puts the sanctity of marriage above personal wishes. It takes another woman's voice to bring Diana back to home and husband. What seemed at first like two strong personalities colliding made way to compromise- "Michael learns that he must accept the changes in his wife if he is to keep her"²⁸ and Diana realizes he is the only home she truly knows, giving up her seat (for him) and is re-elected elsewhere. Nanny's cry for marriage seems out of place, as an employee in the Wentworth's household, but is to be understood as the conservative voice of the older generation that lived through the First World War and is ready to find the middle ground. Diana is taking the route of compromise, a proper "victim of English correctness."²⁹

4.5 Conclusion

As they faced the approach of peace after six long years of war, many films from the home front genre dealt with infidelity and strained marriages, a preoccupation intersecting with the new Labour government's much-anticipated social reform.³⁰ The films I chose to analyze present some of the challenges and anxieties married couples faced during the war and its aftermath. Despite the social realities of disrupted family life and rising divorce rates, British national cinema mainly offers reconciliation narratives that keep the family intact. British films depicted long separations, temptations, and loose morals as byproducts of the war, but conveyed the message that as the nation overcame the Nazis, so could couples overcome their differences and go back to normal married life come peacetime. Marriage is sacred, never questioned, and built on compromise. Desire and sexual freedom are a short-lived fashion of the war years, and come VE-day they are deemed insignificant again, never posing a real threat to monogamous marriage.³¹ The postwar period might harbor expectations of a new, more equal society, but "old obligations and demands" cannot be overlooked.³²

In this context, choosing duty over desire in the conclusion of *The Years Between* is less surprising. Diana's choice is not merely an individual one but reflects her situation as a public figure and member of the upper class. She is acting according to society's expectations of a respectable woman in her position. It is the dissonance between advocating for women's needs on the home front and her private choices that make viewers realize social reform is going to be a long process. The most plausible ending would have been for Diana to reunite with Richard, the one who accepts her for who she is now. Her choice to return to Michael in the end defies the direction in which the plot was headed, given Michael's portrayal as a strong headed, sulking

and demanding husband. Diana running to meet Michael at the house on VE Day seems like a lukewarm ending to a narrative of conflicted emotions and ways of life.

VE Day seemed a fitting ending for another home front movie produced immediately after the war, *The Captive Heart*. Europe's liberation from the Nazis is intertwined with Celia's private liberation from the ghost of her dead husband and broken marriage. She is finally ready to give her new love a chance. In *Perfect Strangers*, too, a happily united couple, full of hope for the future concludes the film. Apart from the setting in desolated London, the ending feels taken out of a Jane Austen novel, where the future of the blissful couple is never discussed; their actual married life after the long-awaited reunion remains a mystery. In a mostly linear story, showing the couple growing apart and the problems of coming together, the open-ended conclusion leaves many questions unanswered: Will Robert find a new job? What kind of housewife will Cathy be? How will their relationship evolve and will it survive the postwar years? This subtly optimistic ending with unanswered questions "registers the ideological difficulty of making films in Britain on the cusp between war and peace; the gravity of the war's effect still prevents total narrative unity and cohesion."³³ The closest of the four films to a total narrative is *Waterloo Road*, celebrating the Colters' baby and the hopes for the future of Britain after the war, but this future is not, and indeed cannot, be specifically pictured.

¹ Carol Smart, "Good Wives and Moral Lives: Marriage and Divorce 1937-51," in *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 93-94; Allport, *Demobbed*, 80-89.

² Lant, *Blackout*, 30; Christine Gledhill and Gillian Swanson, ed., *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 6.

³ Lant, *Blackout*, 30.

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- ⁴ To name a few, Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*; Sue Aspinall, "Women, Realism and Reality in British Films, 1943-53," in *British Cinema History*, ed. James Curran and Vincent Porter (New Providence, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1983); Lant, *Blackout*.
- ⁵ Smart, "Good Wives and Moral Lives," 98, 91.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.
- ⁷ Aspinall, "Women, Realism and Reality in British Films," 283.
- ⁸ "Perfect Strangers," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 30 September 1945, 106.
- ⁹ Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 23, 204; Lant, *Blackout*, 103-113.
- ¹⁰ Cathy's Wrens friends seem upper-middle-class, fitting the popular image of service.
- ¹¹ Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 155.
- ¹² Lant, *Blackout*, 121.
- ¹³ Allport, *Demobbed*, 11.
- ¹⁴ "Perfect Strangers," Empire Cinema, *The Times*, 31 August 1945; "Waterloo Road," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 28 February 1945, 14.
- ¹⁵ Gledhill and Swanson, ed., *Nationalising Femininity*, 24-25.
- ¹⁶ Smart, "Good Wives and Moral Lives," 97.
- ¹⁷ Landy, *British Genres*, 300-301.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 435.
- ¹⁹ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 92.
- ²⁰ Landy, *British Genres*, 301.
- ²¹ Smart, "Good Wives and Moral Lives," 95-96.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 96-98.
- ²³ "The Captive Heart," *The Time*, 29 March 1946.
- ²⁴ "The Years Between," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 30 April 1946, 45-46; "The Years Between," New Films In London, *The Times*, 27 May 1946; Sam Marlowe, "The Years Between," *The*

Times, 11 September 2007.

²⁵ Allport, *Demobbed*, 60-61.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁷ Chapman, *The British at War*, 211, 214.

²⁸ "The Years Between," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 30 April 1946, 45-46.

²⁹ ""The Years Between," Wyndham's Theatre, *The Times*, 11 January 1945.

³⁰ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 62-70, 138-150.

³¹ Aspinall, "Women, Realism and Reality in British Films," 283.

³² Landy, *British Genres*, 307.

³³ *Ibid.*, 125.

5 Conclusion

Postman to Nanny: Nothing will even be the same again after this war, that's what I say. You mark my words – nothing will even be the same again, and that's a fact.

(The Years Between)

As a medium especially sensitive to social norms and social problems, film can provide a glimpse into the specific social conditions of an era. It reflects and processes reality, but it also creates an arena in which to design an alternate, wished-for reality. Messages conveyed in films were later reconstructed in real life. The postman's "words" of change in *The Years Between* prophesied the coming of a new British society, both dreaded and anticipated, after the war.

As to the extent of change, it is a much-debated question. Hinton understands the political shift to social democracy in Britain not as a popular revolution but as an option best suited for an exhausted population. Reeling from six years of total war and facing imperial contraction and economic and financial restructuring, class leveling was not really on the agenda of the new Labour government. Gender relations were closely connected to class society. The Beveridge Report of 1943, which envisioned a postwar welfare state, confirmed the British domestic ideal of a male breadwinner and a housewife-mother.¹ As many women went home, literally and figuratively, dreams of emancipation were postponed to the 1960s.²

Using an extensive social history background, I have explored the intersection of class, nation, and gender through the cinematic representation of romantic relationships. If in the middle years of the war men and women were experimenting with new possibilities in the courting world, including unconventional pairings that crossed the boundaries of class and

nationality, the last year of the war saw a sense of community breaking down. From Mrs Miniver, the backbone of society, in 1942 to Laura Jesson's loneliness, isolation, and alienation in 1945, a clear trajectory becomes visible. If a Nazi victory seemed plausible in 1942 and resulted in strongly patriotic narratives and characters in British home front films, an Allied victory was coming in 1945 and Britons could focus on the personal or private dimension of the wartime experience. It was somewhat ironic that the British population who "had held together so well for six years of total war seemed to be coming apart in peace."³ Many films from the postwar years echoed a feeling of tension, anger, and detachment, especially coming from demobilized male soldiers. *Dancing with Crime* (1947), depicts the return of childhood friends from war, with one becoming a taxi driver and the other choosing a life of crime; *Mine Own Executioner* (1947) deals with the traumatized psyche of a former POW; *They Made Me a Fugitive* (1947) tells the story of an RAF pilot so bored with civilian life he joins a gang – these are only a few examples of a cinematic trend of disillusionment and demoralization.

But it was *Brief Encounter* that so sensitively captured this feeling of detachment mixed with the most pressing social issue of the day: a woman's impossible situation in the postwar world. Set in the winter before the war, *Brief Encounter* is the best-known example of a marital disruption film. A rare example of British realism making a box-office hit, the film examines Laura Jesson's "contradictory feelings of excitement, temptation, agony and pain" as she participates in an extra-marital affair.⁴ It is unique for its clear and credible female voice. Laura is the center of the narrative; her thoughts, desires and confusion make for a very sensitive, reflective film. While the clandestine affair involves two married individuals, Dr. Alec Harvey and Mrs. Laura Jesson, spectators only get to see Laura's family and explore her inner world. This is a clever narrative manipulation that conveys Laura's sense of loneliness and helplessness.

According to *Brief Encounter*, an adulterous woman is lonely, and loneliness is harder to bear than an unsatisfying marriage. Neither lover nor husband provides solace. Her brief encounters with Alec do not provide Laura with the constant emotional support that she needs while the presence of Mr. Jesson is merely physical. He isn't affectionate and doesn't seem to notice or care that she is going through something. For her part, Laura cannot bring herself to reveal it, forever rehearsing unspoken lines in her head.

A woman's point of view on infidelity was of special interest to women who experienced wartime brief encounters, with their array of emotions and confusion. Separation from a husband and social and sexual encounters with other men outside the home were a new kind of life to many, but the film fails to go all the way. *Brief Encounter* acknowledges sexual frustrations but "reinforces the sublimation of desire as duty."⁵ In a nation where "[t]wo thirds of the record number of divorce petitions in 1946 and 1947 cited adultery as the cause for the marriage's breakdown,"⁶ Laura's unfulfilled sexual desire might seem more convincing for 1938-39 than for 1945-46. Indeed, by setting the story in the prewar era, the film evades, perhaps deliberately, the pressing social issues of the day and offers no relevant guidance to men and women conscious of the rapidly changing world around them.⁷

Connecting *Brief Encounter* with *Perfect Strangers*, Sue Aspinall asserts that "if Laura had run away with Alec, if Kathy had gone to live with her WRNS friend instead of falling into the arms of her bullying husband – a climate of opinion might begin to be created in which real women would be freer to make such choices. This, however, would have required film-makers to take up a conscious position. Instead, they defended and adapted the old stereotypes and images of women's lives."⁸

The limited ability of cinema to fully explore the complex range of romantic and marital relationships is evident in the ironic title of my thesis. While many actual couples found it hard to stay together after the war and public concern rose over adultery and divorce, home front films mainly persisted with conventional narratives that suggested the difficulties faced by couples during and immediately after the war were either temporary or easy enough to overcome. Conservative visions of society were not the only perspective in British cinema, though. It is important to note that British home front films were raising the questions preoccupying contemporaries. Would the wartime spirit of “all in it together” survive the war? Would women’s status still be invaluable outside the house in the post-war years? British cinema was not immune to popular expectations of a new, more equal postwar society. Here we need to remember that the reference point was not simply the improvisations of the war but also the class and gender hierarchies of the interwar period – working-class women were working outside the home even before the war; middle- and upper-class women were not strangers to the public sphere. Home front films may not have been able to cope with wartime moral laxity, but some films suggest slow changes in women’s choices and alternatives, a fittingly ambiguous response to a society in transition between the “before” and “after.”

¹ Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War*.

² Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 7.

³ Allport, *Demobbed*, 12.

⁴ Street, *British National Cinema*, 65.

⁵ Smart, “Good Wives and Moral Lives,” 101.

⁶ Allport, *Demobbed*, 80.

⁷ Lant, *Blackout*, 159, 167, 179.

⁸ Aspinall, "Women, Realism and Reality in British Films," 291.

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