

Betty Willsher reviews

Letters To Hazel 1943-1947

Edited and published by Hazel Gifford (Dec. 2004). Available at £10 each from local bookshops, or from Hazel Gifford, 3 Balfour Place, St.Andrews, Fife, KY16 9RQ.

Douglas and Hazel first met in Oxford in November 1942, and were engaged within the year. Through the war years of separation they wrote almost daily, and posted when possible. The letters were a source of strength, of mutual support. They were love letters, but much more. They were a means of discovery

through discussion. Hazel and Douglas shared the same Christian beliefs and the standards held by many young people at that time – of mutual respect, loyalty, duty, trust. Anybody who knew Douglas will recognise that he wrote these letters just as if he were speaking. His sense of fun, of the ridiculous, eased the hardships of war, the grimness, and the fear. He illustrated his anecdotes with sketches, which appear in the text. He recounted zany situations during his army training at the

Quebec Barracks, Northampton. An intellectual, a linguist, he describes his attempt to 'strip off and reassemble' a motorcycle, and comments, 'Aren't I a low type of unmechanical-minded specimen?'

Accepted for the Intelligence Branch, Douglas was sent to the Continent to travel from place to place, taking his part in the 'De-Nazification', interviewing suspected spies and informers. He wrote, 'Getting a confession out of somebody is generally a bitter business – at times the whole thing seems wrong to me. I am daily, on my own responsibility, taking away fathers and sons, mothers and daughters from what they hold nearest and dearest. My religion and my job clash'.

Music was a source of joy and of strength to both Hazel and Douglas. The wireless was a boon, also the gramophone and the occasional concert performance. Douglas described his discovery that Fidelio was to be seen in Brussels and he got a seat. Joy! I found this book both enlightening and entertaining.

Letters To Douglas 1943 – 1947

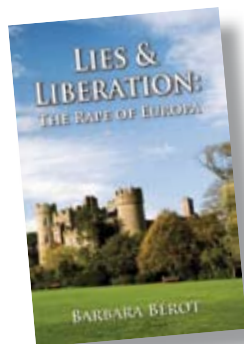
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The letters begin when Hazel was in the first week of a new post in Northampton, living in digs in Kettering. She was one of a team of three; they were employed lecturing in evening classes for the Workers Educational Association, This was not always an easy job, but Hazel wrote to Douglas, 'I just love it.' There were so many vicissitudes in wartime life, and reading first-hand accounts may revive memories – the Black-out, Rationing, Digging for Victory, and worst

of all, Air Raids – buzzbombs, doodlebugs, rockets. Long separations ... And travelling – Hazel had one experience when she missed the bus after Night Class. She managed to borrow a bicycle from the Working Man's Club. 'What a bike! No gears, a tiny saddle, very low – and all in a thick fog. My legs up to my chin pedalling round at a furious rate, and the handlebars way up high like a Penny – Farthing.' And there is a sketch of the episode!



What a wonderful thing to have these two books of letters, written daily, at the time, during four years of that long war. It is history brought alive. It is very moving and it is admirable.



Sandra Carey Cody* reviews

Lies & Liberation: The Rape of Europa

By Barbara Berot (publisher Streetcar Books; ISBN 978-0-9748899-1-7 Price £14.50).

In *Lies & Liberation: The Rape of Europa*, Barbara Berot examines love in its many manifestations and turns upside down some of our most closely-held ideas of what it means to love. She explores the nature of commitment and creates a scenario that pits the challenge of being true to oneself against responsibility to family and society. However, while this novel deals with important themes, it is, at its heart, a very human

story, full of passion, with twists and surprises throughout. And it is the humanity of the story that makes it so eminently readable.

The story continues Annie d'Inard's search for happiness begun in *When Europa Rode the Bull* and follows her conflicting love for two men: Andrew Stuart-Gordon, an aristocratic Scotsman and Mike Rutledge, a successful American attorney. Annie has hard choices to make, formidable obstacles to overcome, and she meets them head-on. Berot balances her strong heroine against a truly malevolent adversary and uses his villainy to show what happens when evil is covered up rather than confronted.

The novel is peopled with well-drawn characters, including Annie herself; Janet, the possessive, self-destructive wife; Mary, the patrician mother; Annie's servants, Lisette and Didier, worldly-wise as only the French can be, and numerous others. Annie's extraordinary quest is played out in settings worthy of its grand scale: dramatic architecture, lush private gardens and the stunning scenery of the Scottish Highlands and the vineyards of Southern France, all described with an attention to detail reminiscent of the novels of an earlier era. I was there in each sumptuous place. I especially loved being vicariously piped to sleep during the Laird's Day celebration in a Scottish castle and eavesdropping on a tête-à-tête with a very special guest – I won't spoil it by telling you her name.

Berot is a born storyteller. Her vocabulary is extensive, yet accessible, and perhaps most important, she believes in her own characters. I was hooked from beginning to end, reading "just one more page" well into the night – and reaching for the tissue box more than once.

* Creator of the Riverview Manor mystery series:
Put Out the Light – Avalon Books, June 2005;
Consider the Lilly – coming from Avalon in February 2008.

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