

Introduction

Nella Last was a housewife who lived in Barrow-in-Furness in Cumbria. From 1939 to 1966 she wrote her diary every day, initially as a contribution to the Mass Observation M.O. project. This edited extract is taken from her diary of 1943, during the Second World War. "The Yard" that Nella Last mentions is the shipyard in Barrow. Will is her husband.

The Diaries of Nella Last

'End of the beginning'

When Nella was on foot in Barrow, she occasionally remarked on the signs of a nation at war. On Sunday, 2 May 1943, she and Will were out enjoying the warm day and saw groups of Dutch and French Canadian soldiers from nearby camps 'strolling along' the roads. 'I looked at the ugly Nissen huts, at the training planes overhead, and at the gorse, so brave and gay. I felt "There will be golden gorse and larks when all the ugliness of huts and torn up country roads are past and when khaki is not general wear." I'd a queer sadness on me somehow that not even the sunshine could dispel. But the battles that were being fought abroad rarely came up in conversation – 'Not one word of the war', she might report after a day spent in the company of others. On 24 June she remarked in her reply to M-O's Directive that month, 'it's surprising how little the war is discussed – even mentioned.' Among her WVS colleagues 'the chatter is of everything but the war. If war is discussed it's in that personal way – sons and daughters in the Services and their needs, leaves, parcels etc., points' values, Home Front recipes', and similar close-to-home concerns. 'Beyond saying "Aren't our lads doing well?" or "We gave 'em it last night again," or occasionally a queer wave passes over the town and an "It won't be long now" attitude is taken up', war news featured little in conversation.

On those infrequent occasions when Nella did dwell explicitly on war, optimism failed her.

Thursday, 19 August.

A shadow falls over me somehow. Maybe the weather, maybe the thoughts of this dreadful invasion of Europe starting. I often think 'It will indeed be a "new world" after the war. All and everyone seem hell bent on destroying everything in the old one.' Sometimes when I sit quiet a chaotic montage whirls through my tired head, the 'civilization' we boast so much about, and where it has led us. Fabulous riches found to train men to destroy each other, to equip them with more and more death dealing weapons, when such a fraction of the thought, energy and money could have done so much good. The world is 'coming to an end' indeed. If all the bad cruel Nazis and the 'wicked' Japs were being wiped out, we could think it for betterment of all, but it seems so many of the flower of all races are going. Two women have sat side by side for four years at Centre sewing at bandages. One has lost two sons at sea – and now learns her airman son has to be 'presumed dead.' The other one's three sons work in the Yard – have good jobs. The daughter of 28 is 'reserved' as she is considered necessary as a secretary to a boss in the Yard. The other woman's daughter had to join the WAAF. I look round the big room at faces I've known and loved for over four years. My heart aches. Even in that small circle, the bravery and courage, the 'going on' when sons have been killed, when letters don't come, when their boys are taught to fight like savages if they are Commandos, when they are trained and trained and trained for bodies to be made to endure, to go kill other women's lads, to wipe all the light from other mothers' faces