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Jenel Virden. *Good-bye Piccadilly: British War Brides in America.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. xii + 177 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02225-8.

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In *Good-bye, Piccadilly*, Jenel Virden examines the neglected subject of British war brides who composed the largest single group of people, some 70,000 women, to migrate from any country to the United States in the 1940s. They were a "clearly defined group within a sharply defined time" (p. 1) who met and married American G.I.s in Britain during World War II or who were fiancees of G.I.s and who immigrated to the United States and became permanent residents. They came under the terms of War Brides Act of 1945 and the Alien Fiancees and Fiances Act of 1946, some of the first non-restrictive legislation in the twentieth century to remove limitations on a large category of women immigrants.

In many ways they were unique. In contrast to other immigrants, Virden argues, they formed an unusually homogenous group whose experience was determined solely by their gender and their immigrant status. These lower or middle-class women came from all parts of the British Isles, were about twenty-three years old, and had finished school at age fourteen. Just as the British Tommies were leaving for the front in droves, the American G.I. arrived; all this combined with the heightened tensions and emotions of wartime and the biological state of early adulthood. Sexual contact increased; so did marriage, divorce, venereal disease, and illegitimate births.

Virden argues that the war brides met and married G.I.s despite the war, not because of it, and decided to migrate for love and marriage, not because they wanted to leave Britain or stop being British. They were motivated by personal, not political or economic reasons. In fact, 25 percent of the brides reported a decline in their standard of living upon moving to the United States. Upon their arrival on "bride ships" and "bride trains," they were the subjects of much publicity and warmly welcomed. Unlike other immigrants, the war brides did not move into ethnic enclaves nor into preexisting immigrant populations, and they remained a fixed quantity once the war ended.

Despite their uniqueness, the British war brides also had experiences similar to other immigrant groups. Even fifty years later, they had maintained their strong ethnic identity and had resisted complete assimilation. Although most became American citizens in order to participate in politics, they continued to think of themselves as part British and part American; they exemplified hyphenated British-Americans.

Virden also explains how the British war brides faced many of the same problems as other immigrants such as alienation and loneliness and used the same coping mechanisms as did other immigrants. Their husbands were at home in American society, but the brides had lost the support of their extended family and were deprived of extensive association with other immigrants who were neighbors living in distinct ethnic communities and confronting the same circumstances and problems. Their ethnic clubs and organizations helped to fill a void in their lives. The English-Speaking Union founded British war brides clubs and provided personal services that aided their adjustment to American society and reinforced gender stereotypes. They emphasized cooking, sewing, budget management, and female networks to discuss homesickness and coping mechanisms. The Red Cross also provided financial assistance and other help, if somewhat reluctantly. The brides also established the International Wives Organization dominated by wives from the British Commonwealth and the Transatlantic Brides and Parents Association to keep parents and daughters in touch with each other. Although some brides also used the Episcopal Church as a link to other brides and others read British newspapers and magazines, Virden notes, nearly 40 percent of British war brides did not join clubs. Many rejected the immigrants clubs because they wanted to be Americanized. The clubs could ease but also delay assimilation. The brides, like

other immigrants, needed to learn to understand American society and find their place in it.

"Incomplete immigrants" represented about 5 percent of all marriages that encountered problems like divorce, bigamy, paternity, child support, and desertion, according to Virden. She also details the "callous" (p. 89) and "uncooperative" attitude (p. 91) of the American government toward such problems and contrasts it with the paternalistic British view demonstrated by the Home Office and the Foreign Office. Virden illustrates how the American authorities distanced themselves from their solders' actions and refused to assist in the prosecution of civil actions against them. She writes that "the British and American governments were far more concerned about not injuring the alleged father's sensibilities than they were about gaining compensation for the mother" (p. 97). Women were obviously held to a higher standard than men.

As Virden persuasively argues, the story of the British war brides has been ignored by scholars studying immigration because they have incorrectly assumed that the common Anglo-American language, history, and culture meant that brides assimilated easily. This erroneous assumption has led to a devaluing of the British immigration story. These "neglected voices" (p. 1) illustrate the process of assimilation and the persistence of ethnic and cultural identity among British women immigrants. Their numbers, the transportation of some 70,000 women on bride ships and bride trains carried by the Red Cross and paid for by the U.S. army, and their enthusiastic reception in the United States is without precedent in American history. Regardless of their unique experience, they still faced problems of assimilation.

Assimilation consists of two aspects, according to Virden: cultural assimilation–which denotes outward signs of conformity like dress, manners, and customs–and conceptual assimilation–which illustrates that ethnic or national identity has been transferred and the immigrant no longer looks upon herself as a foreigner or a hyphenated American. Virden believes that the first stage occurred quickly for most brides after experiencing the first very traumatic year filled with feelings of loneliness and isolation. The second stage was harder for the brides. Like other immigrants, they too confronted significant problems in becoming Americans. Living with one's in-laws, as many brides initially did, made adjustment hard; so did a lower standard of living, the loneliness and isolation of leaving home, and the burden of guilt, especially when parents died. Many brides had to deal with their emotional turmoil on their own since their husbands did not always understand their feelings. It was the brides who had given up their family and friends, not their husbands; neither clubs nor kind in-laws could compensate for their absence. Adjustment was a continual process for them, Virden writes, and the majority regarded themselves as "geographic schizophrenic[s]" and yearned for "an island somewhere between England and America" (p. 145).

About one-third of the brides in her survey considered returning to Britain because of homesickness, incompatibility with their husbands, the reception by their in-laws, their living conditions, or a dislike of American culture. Her respondents remained in the United States because of their husbands and their children. Virden also points out that the majority of the brides adjusted to marriage and motherhood more easily than to life in a foreign country. They had expected marriage and motherhood; it was emigration that was unexpected. Eighty-seven percent of Virden's war brides reported that they did not regret marrying a G.I. But for some 11 percent, the price was too high; their marriages ended in divorce.

Virden's British war brides study is part of a wider story of American immigration history. It is based on archival sources located at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., at the archives at the University of Washington in Seattle, at the Public Record Office in Kew, and the Mass Observation Archives in Sussex. Virden also benefitted from her association with the Transatlantic Brides and Parents Association and from funding from Washington State University, the University of Washington, the English-Speaking Union, and the University of Hull.

Besides archival sources, Virden's research also comes from first-hand accounts from oral history sources and from anonymous war brides and former G.I.s who filled out questionnaires in response to her 1989-90 survey or corresponded with her. She distributed about 272 anonymous questionnaires consisting of three pages of questions for the war brides and 200 pages for the former G.I.s. She got a 40 percent return from her survey: 105 brides participated in the survey and 67 husbands. Virden also held in-depth interviews with known brides in the Seattle area where she lives. Her stated methodological purpose is not to participate in an historical or sociological study but to supplement archival material and to do so in the actual words of the participants. This rich data provides the foundation for Virden's immigration theory of conceptual assimilation.

Virden has done her job well. This is an interesting, sometimes moving account of a group of gutsy women like Peggy Virden, Jenel's mother, who dared to risk all for love, to leave their homes for marriage in a foreign country to men they met in wartime. They are neglected voices no longer thanks to Jenel Virden; they sing openly to a receptive audience.

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