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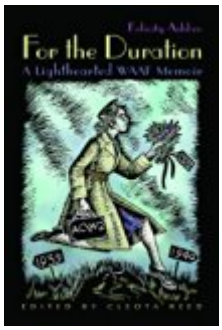

Felicity Ashbee. *For the Duration: A Lighthearted WAAF Memoir.* Edited by Cleota Reed. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012. 240 pp. $19.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8156-0971-1.

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There is no consensus among scholars or authors on the difference between memoir and autobiography. However, it makes sense to think of "autobiography" as a personal account of an entire life from birth to the point at which the author is writing. In contrast, "memoir" may recount a single episode or focus on a particular aspect of a life. Felicity Ashbee's *Lighthearted WAAF Memoir* is concerned with one segment of her life, the part that she spent in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, the British all-woman organization formed in 1939 to support the (all-male) Royal Air Force. Ashbee's membership coincided with Britain's involvement in the Second World War (she joined up in September 1939) and stretched beyond it by a year (she was discharged in July 1946). She then found civilian employment (with her sister) as a designer and administrator, and later as an art teacher.

Much of the large body of literature on memoir and autobiography focuses on autobiography as a literary genre and not on its relationship to history as either a "source" or a form of written history in its own right. Felicity Ashbee's memoir offers the historian the opportunity to think about a specific piece of autobiographical writing from the perspective of the historiography of the Second World War, while drawing on some of the insights of literary scholars to analyze its autobiographical subjectivity.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that autobiographical writing is "a historically situated practice of self-representation" in which "narrators selectively engage their lived experience through personal storytelling."[1] Thus in writing about the specific times and places in which they lived, narrators involve themselves in a creative process of interpretation of remembered experience. Their writing constructs the self that it claims to portray. A historian reading the account is thus faced with a set of challenges. To understand it as a "window on the past" would clearly be inappropriate, but so, too, would a strategy of exposing inaccuracies and distortions, which are an inevitable part of its subjective truth. Rather, a memoir such as Ashbee's invites us to understand

a historical subject's selective representation of her past self in its ever-changing sociocultural and material context, from a vantage point years later. There is an added dimension. This memoir, like much published autobiographical writing, has been edited. The art historian Cleota Reed states that she altered the manuscript very little, apart from removing over-frequent marks of emphasis. Nevertheless, her interventions inevitably modify and mediate the reader's response to Ashbee's text. She provides footnotes giving additional historical details, references to published work, biographical information, and clarification of the identity of people whom Ashbee mentions. She also adds a helpful chronology of Ashbee's life plus three appendices containing other examples of Ashbee's writing, including poetry and dramatic sketches. Lastly, Reed attempts to date the writing of the memoir, suggesting that it was probably composed in the 1980s, when Ashbee was in her seventies.

Ashbee opens her memoir with an account of her awareness of the threat that Nazism posed in 1939, her abandonment of her earlier leftist pacifism, and her frustrated determination to put her language skills (in German, French, and Russian) at the disposal of her country. In a few short pages of lively and unassuming narrative, she communicates quite a lot about herself: her family had a German Jewish side as well as Russian connections; she was a linguist and also an artist; she was privately but, by her own account, not well educated; she was much travelled; she had strong sympathies with both the USSR and Republican Spain; and she had three grown-up sisters as well as parents living in Kent. Her editor, rather than Ashbee herself, supplies two other pieces of information: that Ashbee joined the Communist Party in 1938 (she does not say when or if she left), and that her father was Charles Robert Ashbee, architect and leading member of the Arts and Crafts Movement. In composing the memoir, Felicity Ashbee may have taken her Communist Party allegiance as read (there are many references to her Communist leanings), while dodging discussion of the specific issue of party membership. Her almost casual references to her famous father emphasize that the person she is reconstructing in her memoir is herself in her own right, and not "the daughter of a great man."

By the end of chapter 2, Ashbee has introduced two themes central to her interpretation of her wartime self: the unrelenting tedium of much of women's war work; and her nonconforming and left-wing disposition. Ashbee describes how, when her efforts to join the government's Censorship Office did not work out, she joined the WAAF and was allocated the role of "Clerk, Special Duties." This involved plotting the position of enemy aircraft on a giant map in response to messages from "out-stations" on the coast. The aircraftwomen (or "WAAFs") worked shifts, but, "During the first months of what came to be known as 'the Phoney War,' we would often sit idle for the whole four hours!" (p. 15). Then, in the summer of 1940, just after the war had started in earnest and work as a "Clerk S/D" was becoming more interesting, Ashbee was abruptly demoted to canteen work. Guessing that this had something to do with her "Red" past, she navigated carefully through the WAAF hierarchy until she obtained an interview with the head of the RAF Special Police, who read her some innocuous reports about herself. When pressed he stated that the problem was " 'all this ... er ... stuff about ... er, Communism.' 'But, Sir,' I said innocently, 'I thought we were fighting Hitler, not the Soviet Union!'" (p. 32). Ashbee was duly reinstated in her previous employment. She makes the acerbic comment that tolerance of fascist sympathies was greater in the Armed Forces in the Second World War than that of "Bolshevik" leanings, a point borne out by other research.[2]

The combination of tedious work and an independent disposition led her to swim against the tide more than once. Perhaps the most dramatic example is her response to her position in the WAAF in 1941-42. Having been recruited from

"Special Duties" to "Intelligence" in belated recognition of her knowledge of languages, she was sent as a junior officer to the famous Bletchley Park, a prestigious posting. However, Ashbee found life at Bletchley excruciatingly boring and unsociable. "I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to be doing" beyond translating the recorded conversations of German pilots, which seemed to give away nothing (p. 54). Occasionally she had to listen in to British pilots, who proved in comparison to be alarmingly indiscreet. In response she acquired the task of designing a booklet to encourage greater security among airmen, "an assignment after my own heart" (p. 60). To Ashbee's disgust, however, the booklet never appeared, although her designs and text were printed over another name in the RAF magazine. Not long after this, to the amazement of friends and senior officers, Ashbee applied for a transfer out of Intelligence. The glamour of Bletchley, where the Enigma code-breakers were based, has captured the imagination of historians and filmmakers. Yet the monotony of the work for the vast army of underlings, many of them women, who were simply "listening" and reporting has rarely been recorded. It is captured in Ian McEwan's play *The Imitation Game* (1981). It is also present in a few other personal accounts, such as the unpublished diaries of Pauline Leech, a Manchester woman whose work at Bletchley drove her close to breakdown and who, unable to bear it any longer, left altogether rather than, like Ashbee, seeking a more conducive role.[3]

Ashbee chose to transfer into Administration, which became her occupation for the rest of the war, but it is less than clear that her work contributed in any significant way to the war effort. She was sent to a series of RAF stations whose names conjure their rural remoteness: Middle Wallop, Hampshire; Newbold Revel, Warwickshire; Ottercops Moss, Northumberland; Stenigot, Lincolnshire. The stories that Ashbee tells of her experiences on this trajectory do not depart from her earlier reconstruction of a young woman determined to exert agency. However, according to Ashbee's ironic and humorous account, her efforts to seek more interesting postings in larger and more important stations had the opposite effect. When she attempted to pull strings to leave the uncongenial Newbold Revel she was "roundly attacked for trying to bypass 'the proper channels,'" and two weeks later received a posting "--of all places--to RAF Ottercops Moss … the joke station up by the Roman Wall that always got aircraft mixed up with thunderstorms" (p. 105). Only towards the end of the war, in February 1945, by which time most such stations had been wound down, was Ashbee posted to a more strategically important station, RAF Cranwell, a training base known as "the Cradle of the Air Force" (p.144).

Ashbee's job as an administrative officer was the supervision of the WAAFs who worked on these stations, which meant quizzing them on the quality of the meals, and enforcing discipline, including and especially conducting kit inspections. This task was paradoxical for someone whose nonconformity led to wearing the top button of her tunic undone, who adorned her bicycle with two flags, the Union Jack and the Red Flag, and who marched her WAAFs to church but, as a nonbeliever, insisted on waiting outside while they attended compulsory "Church Parade." Ashbee reflexively acknowledges the contradictions in her own character. In spite of her personal transgressions, she was a stickler for the rules she had to enforce and for the proper procedures. She was also something of an ingénue, in spite of her relatively advanced years. This combination led her to miss the signals that colleagues were trying to send her concerning the need occasionally to turn a blind eye. In one such case, Ashbee, confronted by a usually law-abiding aircraftwoman's silence as to the reason for her absence without leave, referred the case to the RAF commanding officer who, to Ashbee's bafflement, dismissed it. Her corporal finally told her that everyone but Ashbee knew that the reason for the absence was that the aircraftwoman and the CO were having an affair.

Ashbee reflects that "it was difficult for her to believe that someone several years older than herself, with other kinds of 'life experience,' could be so incredibly naïve when it came to human fallibility" and joins in the joke, then and when writing, about her own myopia (p. 140). At the same time, Ashbee's stories of helping pregnant WAAFs and those with desperate home circumstances indicate a deep humanity and genuine interest in the welfare of young women far from home for the first time.

All the same, she writes that her administrative duties did not "use her up" (p. 103). Her solution to the boredom of her war work was immensely creative. She arranged for the RAF and WAAF personnel on the remote stations where she worked to stage variety shows. As well as organizing performances of well-known numbers, she wrote much of the material herself, including and especially a sketch entitled "Shuddering Heights," "a mock Victorian melodrama" with "a heroine called Aspidistra Shudderbottom" which "went down big" at every posting (p. 67). Ashbee's shows did not only relieve everybody's boredom. They were also an improvement on the officially organized entertainment provided by ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association), which by Ashbee's own account was often excruciating. In addition, work by historians on similar theatricals put on by prisoners of war suggests that their world-turned-upside-down qualities, in which male officers dressed as women, kit inspection was represented as a Nazi ritual, and padres featured as murderers, offered performers and audiences catharsis in the context of the hierarchical and highly regulated world of the military.[4]

Most autobiographical writing is, of necessity, relational. Yet although the "others" about whom Ashbee writes, from colleagues and friends to members of her family, are affectionately and frankly portrayed, there are no close or passionate relationships in this memoir. One might conclude that Ashbee, in her thirties during the war, was cheerfully committed to singleness and celibacy, were it not for four poems, dated September and October 1940, that Reed includes in an appendix under the heading "I Did Not Think:" "I did not think that I should ever know / Such utter emptiness since you are gone, / Or that it meant that I should miss you so, / And in a busy world be so alone" (p. 183). There is no indication of an important loss of either a man or a woman in the section of the memoir that covers these months. Ashbee's silence on her affective life is her own choice. Reed's decision to include the poems makes it speak.

This is a memoir to recommend equally to those interested in personal experiences of the Second World War and to those whose primary concern is with the crafting of a memoir. Ashbee uses a novelistic style that includes plenty of direct speech and lyrical passages. She recounts numerous racy anecdotes with polished punch lines. Her memory for names, places, and events was clearly still good at the time of writing. In one place she shares its vividness with the reader, saying of an excursion to the Lake District, "The memory is as sharp and clear as if it were yesterday" (p. 98). She evidently had beside her the poems, log book, scripts--and photographs--that Reed includes in the book. The selectivity of Ashbee's autobiographical subjectivity in these pages is also apparent: for all her outspokenness there is much that is unspoken in the text of this determinedly "light-hearted" memoir, while a heavier heart is present in some of the poems. At the same time, this memoir is, in itself, a historical account that portrays the autobiographical subject within her collective historical context and that offers a distinctive interpretation of women's part in the British war effort.

Notes

[1]. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ***Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 13.

[2]. Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 33-37.

[3]. Pauline Leech, unpublished diaries, 1939-1945, Chetham's Library, Manchester, UK.

[4]. S. P. MacKenzie, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 209-212.