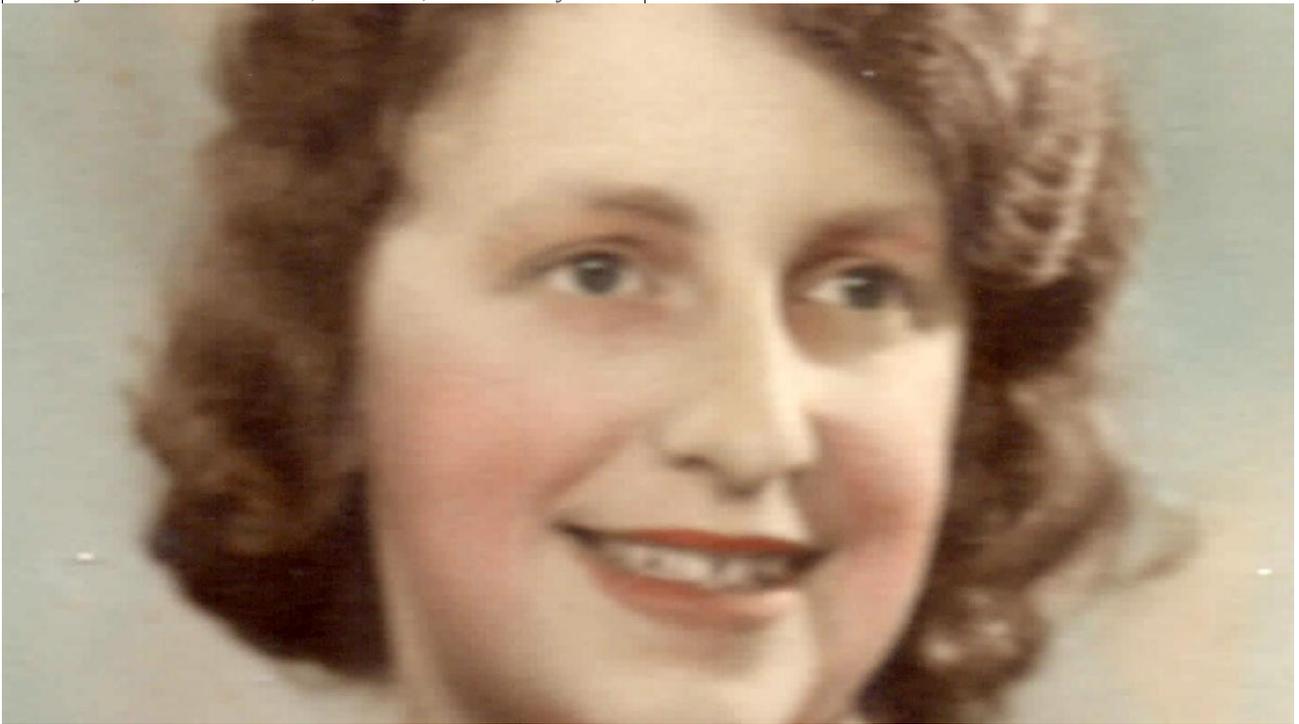


# Granny's year of dances, suitors and gas masks

To me, my gran was just a white-haired giver of Smarties — until I discovered her hidden diary, written on the eve of war

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Sunday December 31 2017, 12.01am, The Sunday Times



Désirée Pullman: golf, tennis, skiing and cinema trips

I have always felt fairly short-changed on the family front, especially with grandparents. One, a perpetually out-of-work opera singer, killed himself before my time, and two others died when I was just a tot. The last grandparent standing — Désirée Pullman, my father's mother — died when I was 10. My few memories are happy: she, well into her seventies, bodyboarding on a wooden surfboard in the freezing north Devon sea, the Smarties she dished out on goodbyes, and the raspberries she grew in her garden. But, in truth, Granny died before I could appreciate that she was more than a white-haired wrinkly we were duty-bound to visit.

Shortly before her death in 1998, she burnt all her diaries. So when, almost two decades later, one surviving journal was discovered, it felt naughty to pry. Though not prying was never an option.

In this slightly tatty exercise book, Granny made an entry for every day of 1939. She was then 21 and an only child living with her widowed mother in a large house outside Bideford, Devon.

Delving into a late loved one's diaries is a dangerous pursuit. Will there be sordid affairs? Secrets? Scathing judgments? Revelations once read cannot be unread. As it transpires, Désirée (née Hardman) — who would have turned 100 this year — was not a remarkable keeper of scandal. Her life in 1939 is an Evelyn Waugh world of minimal work, maximum play and a pesky world war occasionally impinging.

Over the year, she plays golf, squash and tennis endlessly (the diary's first words: "Play golf with Dickie Easeby"). She enjoys 48 cinema trips and a three-week skiing holiday. And, as with countless young women's diaries before and since, there are a fair few boys.

The first suitor pops up on January 2: "Toby rings up to ask me to go with them to Dormy House but am not well enough. Dot & Audrey go instead and have a good party. Damn." Thankfully there is another party — the Crowbies' pirate fancy dress — the next night: "The room is got up as a ship. Rather well done. I am Pedro . . . Charles & Toby very devilish . . . Play silly games with much vigour — rather exhausting. Good eats but rum punch appalling." The next day brings another party where a girl called Therese is "an awful dampener".

My own occasional biting criticism, it seems, has been inherited from Granny. At a Conservative dance her gang are joined by "a wretched girl who Peter wouldn't dance with and left on us". Early on she writes: "A Mrs Casement staying — a rather dull female." The NW Devon Hunt Ball is "an awful flop", a lady called Yvonne has "filled out a bit after five infants", and a bunch of Canadian golfers are "not much to look at and poor dancers". Ouch.

Toby also finds himself on Granny's bad side. On January 21 they have a "curt talk" and there is "no sign of him coming round". Thankfully, she has the skiing trip to Wengen,

Switzerland, to distract her. Her ski instructor is “callous and very indifferent” and her fellow pupils are “very dull people” too. One day she gets stuck skiing with a fellow named Douglas Cox: “Although he was showing me the way, I was much better than him. He was so slow I thought we should never get home.” We Pullmans, it dawns on me, don’t suffer with false modesty. At a fancy dress bash Granny describes herself as a “terrific success” and often writes of what a “great impression” she’s made.

After the ski trip, things “are not as they were” with Toby. On April 6, he is “very amiable” when a gang “turn up the carpet and dance and fool about to the wireless”, but at a point-to-point days later, he’s “aloof”.

On April 27 comes Granny’s first mention of war: “Government bring in conscription for men aged 18-25.” To a degree, her routine of sports, socialising and shopping is disrupted. For the first time since leaving a Swiss finishing school two years earlier, Granny has some purposeful work. On August 24: “Go & help make gas masks”. On the 31st: “White lines being painted everywhere on roads, walls and posts etc.” (To help with night-time driving during the blackout.)

The September 3 entry reads: “War announced by Neville Chamberlain at 11am. France declared war on Germany at 5pm. SS Athenia torpedoed 400 lives lost out of 1,400. King speaks in evening, Submarine later sunk by our Navy.” (The Athenia was the first German sinking of the war and 118 people died.)

By September 4, there are wedding bells: “Budwood’s early wedding to Gordon Graham. Marcell unable to come as ‘best man’ — called up.” With no wedding of her own, Granny attends a demonstration on war cookery (“vinegar cakes etc”) and goes shopping: “Buy skirt (grey) & green silk dress. The last time?”

There are numerous mentions of the blackout, but “little war news” is her frequent refrain. Granny mans the telephones (“dull”), stamps National Register forms (“3,300 times” in one morning) and takes typing classes (“great fun”).

She writes about the emergency budget: rises on income tax (two shillings), pint of beer (one penny), and sugar, tobacco and whisky. The next day, she plays golf with “Mrs Galloway who took no caddy as one of her economies”.

War efforts aside, the boredom and empty days are striking. Typical entries include: “Sleet & rain, Stay in all day.” “Cold. Do nothing all day.” Activities are often simple: blackberry-picking, marmalade-making, cliff walks, seaside drives, mornings altering dresses, evenings knitting. How different from my own 22nd year — 200 miles from home, working and partying hard at university.

Reading the diary I occasionally get caught up in the timeless romantic dilemmas and bad weather grumbles, before being jolted back to the Thirties: the day “the telephone is out of order”, the unknown games (Totopoly, Buccaneer, Carrom), and mentions of the monarchy. On June 22: “At Southampton the flags are out — people waiting for the arrival of the King and Queen from Canada. Platform with red carpet, flags and flowers. My train missing them by 30 minutes. Bah!”

On November 4 comes another jolt: “Big surprise. Peggy & Toby are engaged. I didn’t think he had got any further than with me. Most suitable though. It might have been me. I wonder.” I’m momentarily impressed that Granny invites the happy couple round for a celebratory sherry. However, she then writes: “Toby is full of beans and looking very well. Peggy was very shy, self-conscious & looking her plainest.”

Granny, a girl after my own heart, promptly steps up her flirting with a man named Trevor. A week later, at a dance, she gives her number to Edward despite him having “a very bad reputation”.

After 132 pages, we finally arrive at Christmas, spent in a hotel in Paignton. It doesn’t come up to standards: “Awful scrum after dinner. We get out early and settle in arm chairs . . . Dancing a complete fiasco with hardly a soul there — I dance with two other girls.”

On Christmas Day, the hotel is “overrun” by drunken sailors and soldiers. Presents include three yards of blue silk, hankies and golf balls. Dinner, eaten in evening dress, consists of: “sole meunière, turkey etc, plum pudding, mince pies, pêche melba”. Sitting with “Bunny Rodsock and her sugar daddy” afterwards, her night suddenly looks up: a Captain Turner whisks her off to dance.

“We got on very well in every way until his wife turned up,” she writes. “Still we danced twice together again until Ma thought him tight and not quite nice behaviour.” Granny disagrees: his “behaviour was very pleasant & [he] took me to bed where I went quite willingly being quite dead after the efforts of dancing.”

On Boxing Day, she wins a prize for her fancy dress. She suspects it came about “thanks to Capt T on the committee” though adds: “don’t do so well in that direction — wife taking a firm hold”.

Before the year is out, there’s time for a dinner at Saunton Sands, an ARP (air raid precautions) dance and a trip to see the Ginger Rogers film Bachelor Mother. The final entry is rather sombre: “Cold is heavy. Listen to the wireless in the evening & do not see the New Year in.” Granny, I’ve never much enjoyed New Year’s Eve either.