



# General Introduction

## 320 rue St Jacques: The Diary of Madeleine Blaess

In July 1939, Madeleine Blaess graduated with a first-class degree in French from the University of Leeds. The future was bright and exciting. She had been awarded a university bursary to begin doctoral research at the Sorbonne in Paris and take a step closer to her dream of becoming an academic. Two months later, in September 1939, France and Britain declared war on Germany. Uncertain whether still to go to France, Madeleine took advice and finally made the decision to leave for Paris a month later than planned, in November 1939. Her decision to go did not appear to have been a difficult one to make. There was a generalised confidence that the allies would be able to easily contain and repel a German attack in the unlikely event of it happening. Indeed, her account in letters sent to her parents of her passage from Folkestone to Calais and her subsequent rail journey to Paris describe a country going about its everyday business with a minimum of disruption. This generalised calm and ordinariness – other than regular air-raid alerts and bomb shelters being dug in the street – endured until the late spring of 1940.

**Page vii:** *Madeleine Blaess graduating from the University of Leeds, 1939.*  
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Yet, even then, when the British Expeditionary Force was stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk and traumatised Belgian refugees were arriving in Paris, the atmosphere was one of unease, not panic. At the same time, students in Paris, particularly the British and Australian expatriates, began to drift away from Paris towards the ports, much to the annoyance of professors at the Sorbonne. In a final letter to her parents on June 1st Madeleine spoke casually of her imminent departure like a summer holiday, wondering whether to take her winter clothes with her in case she was unable to return to Paris in the autumn. Madeleine did not catch the boat train to Folkestone in early June as she had planned.<sup>1</sup> The German advance cut off her escape route to the ports and she fled the capital together with thousands of other panicked civilians in a blind and largely purposeless flight to southern France. The little that is known about Madeleine's final days in Paris comes not from anything she herself wrote, but from the letters of an Australian student friend Dorothy Clarke who had managed to get on a boat to Britain in May. Clarke wrote to Madeleine's parents in August 1940 to tell them that their daughter had been calm and organised and busily preparing for her departure when she had last seen her. Indeed, Clarke claimed that Madeleine had been preoccupied with buying souvenirs of Paris for her family back in Britain.<sup>2</sup>

Madeleine returned to Paris in July 1940 and found temporary accommodation in an apartment on the rue Rollin vacated by a British expatriate friend of the publisher and bookseller Sylvia Beach and which she shared with Canadian postgraduate student Ruth Camp. It was here, on the evening of October 1st 1940, sat in lamplight and wrapped up warmly in a dressing gown that she completed the first entry of the diary she would keep diligently for the next four years.

The diary written by Madeleine Blaess in Paris during the Nazi Occupation of France is an extraordinary document. Were it not for the fact that Madeleine had a French birth certificate, she would have been arrested and interned, like many of her British, Commonwealth and American friends, by the occupying authorities. Instead, she remained at liberty to record everyday life roving occupied territory as, effectively, a civilian enemy of both Germany and France's collaborationist Vichy state. Not only is the diary unique for this reason, but its

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Madeleine's experience of the Phoney War and life in Paris in the months before the German invasion, see the 2012 journal article by Wendy Michallat, *Mon cher Papa, ma chère Maman: The drôle de guerre of Madeleine Blaess*, *Essays in French Literature and Culture* 49: 135–153. Madeleine's Phoney War letters are held in the Madeleine Blaess archive at the University of Sheffield.

<sup>2</sup> Correspondence between Dorothy Clarke and Madeleine's parents is held in the Madeleine Blaess archive at the University of Sheffield. Full reference is in the bibliography.

documentary style means that there is a richness about the data she gathers into diary entries which are diligently completed and rarely missed from the first day of October 1940 to the final entry made on 17 September 1944, a month after the Liberation of Paris.

When Madeleine began the diary she imagined it as a letter to her parents to replace the long letters she used to write them the previous year but which she could no longer send to Britain. The first page of the diary is thus set out like a letter with her address in the top right hand corner and a first line 'Dear Daddy and Mummy'. Although the letter format does not endure and the direct interpellation of her parents as readers becomes less frequent as the months pass, the chatty evocation of the minutiae of her daily life which had characterised her letters home continues to dominate the diary content. The use of the diary as a letter replacement goes some way to explaining the descriptive content of it. Madeleine intended the diary to be a log of activities and news, which her parents would be able to catch up on when she finally returned home and she could give them it to read. However, the epistolary style does not explain her documentalist approach entirely. Madeleine does not meander through her diary pondering philosophical questions or analysing her feelings, unlike many of her peers who also kept diaries because it was fashionable amongst the educated elite to do so. She declared that she wanted to write about people and 'things' instead. It was the sort of tenacious 'reporter' style of diary writing positively and popularly encouraged through the British press by the Mass Observation Project in 1930s Britain, as well as being a style redolent of Pepys, whose famous turns of phrase – 'and so to bed' – Madeleine occasionally cites when signing off a diary entry. Joe Moran's description of the British inter-war diary and the inspiration for its descriptive style bears similarities with Madeleine's diary. The Mass Observation Project – a survey of everyday life in Britain carried out in the 1930s – advertised for typical and simple diary entries describing the facts of the lived everyday of ordinary working-class people. This documentary style also found an echo in a new wave of women's fiction in which the domestic everyday of ordinary women was elevated to the forefront of narratives. Lives formerly regarded as trivial were now foregrounded for a generation of post-war and post-first-wave feminist women readers to critically evaluate (Moran, 2015: 138–162).

A diary which simply tells what happened every day would once have held little worth for historians for whom diaries – even those containing substantive historical data – were of dubious worth as historical sources. Little by little over recent years, however, diaries have been rehabilitated through the turn towards 'grassroots upwards' historiography, which valorises life-writing as a source of important data with which to challenge or to elaborate upon what is known of a historical period. There is an increasing number of so-called 'Occupation diaries' in circulation as the war generation passes on its memories to surviving relatives who want to publish these testimonies or otherwise make them

public.<sup>3</sup> There is an enduring enthusiasm for testimonies where an ‘extraordinary’ personal story contributes to the drama of a known historical moment. There were plenty of ‘moments of drama’ in Paris between 1940 and 1944 and plenty of narratives of valour and self-sacrifice for high ideals in the face of despotism. But what to make of a diary like Madeleine’s diary, which explicitly declares before the first year of the Occupation is out that it is preferable not to talk about ‘political matters’? If the reader comes to this diary with an expectation that it will evoke the wartime Paris of the newsreels, the Paris of feature films and of tales of Resistance derring-do, then they may be disappointed. Whilst there is indeed some of all that, particularly in the months after the Normandy landings in June 1944, Madeleine mostly describes what it was like to live through the real-life grind of the everyday, for which the Occupation was, for many, a remote backdrop. That is not to say that the Occupation is not in evidence. It is. But it is articulated largely through the deprivation, physical discomfort and psychological strain it causes than through reflections on the political situation of accounts of heroic acts of resistance to Nazi repression. Madeleine’s diary is unique because her account describes the Occupation as lived through the routine and banality of everyday life. It is a precious de-dramatisation of the Occupation because it shows how the Occupation was swept up into lives which maintained a focus on ambitions and priorities which had nothing to do with patriotic defiance, resistance nor moral obligation.

Most every entry tells us something about the impact of the historical event of the Occupation on the lives of individuals. The value of these entries, frequent and detailed for the most part, is incalculable for the research data they provide. The day-to-day struggle to find enough to eat and to cope with the freezing cold in winter with a very limited fuel allowance is the well-documented experience of most Parisians during the Occupation. Madeleine’s diary articulates these facts in a narrative where coping strategies and ruses, periods of respite and abundance became the very fabric of a new life to which people adapted. Lack of food and comfort forced people to readjust their daily priorities and shaped most every social interaction they made; social interactions could still be fun but they were invariably accompanied by Machiavellian motives connected with the acquisition of foodstuffs through exchange and barter.

The attention to everyday minutiae is a constant of Madeleine’s diary style. Only occasionally does she deviate from the logging of ‘things’ and happenings to more contemplative entries, deviations which are usually relatively brief. Nevertheless, through her forensic inventory of everyday existence under Occupation, Madeleine sketches a record of what life was like for the first generation of women students to enjoy tertiary education in large numbers in

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<sup>3</sup> Two recent edited collections in which life-writing is used to cast new light on the period of the Occupation are a useful reference here. See Michallat and Dodd (2017) and Dodd and Lees (2018).

France. The diary is woven through university life from the outset. She begins it at the *rentrée* to tie in with the resumption of courses at the Sorbonne and over the course of the four years of occupation, the diary gives insight into how the Sorbonne managed practical disruption, political interference and how students, female students in particular, adapted to challenging circumstances of the Occupation in order to continue their studies. It is apparent at numerous points in the diary that Madeleine was aware of the fight she faced to realise her career ambitions as a woman.

Madeleine's status as a student brought her into contact with a fascinating cultural milieu and, also, into direct contact with the anti-Semitic brutality of the Vichy and German authorities. She worked briefly at *Shakespeare & Co*, a bookshop and lending library owned by Sylvia Beach, publisher of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and a figure of some importance and influence in the Paris literary scene of the inter-war. It was through Beach that Madeleine met Hélène Berr and Françoise Bernheim, Jewish students who were also studying at the Sorbonne. We only see traces in the diary of Madeleine's encounter with the horror of anti-Semitic persecution through these two close friends, both of whom were arrested, deported and murdered in the camps.

The military circumstances of the Occupation are not always in the background in the diary. There is considerably more engagement with the conflict from the summer of 1943 onwards when Allied readiness for an assault on the European mainland is common knowledge and liberation becomes a tangible hope for the first time. By 1944, the military conflict is much more prominent and entries centre on bombing raids, the response of civilians and the German military to the Normandy Landings of June 6 and the weeks running up to the Liberation of Paris in August 1944. The Liberation itself is a remarkable record provided for by a confluence of the documentary style predominant elsewhere in the diary and her recognition, for the first time, of the historical importance of the events unfolding. Madeleine's account of the Liberation stands out from other testimonial accounts of Liberation because, in keeping with the style of the rest of the diary, the dense detail and regularity of the entries meant that the minutiae and the fabric of the everyday was maintained in addition to her eye-witness account of fighting.

The Blaess diary is certainly an engaging and important historical record. It is also an example of how life-writing can be employed as a coping mechanism. The diary helps her to imagine and enact discourse with the parents she can no longer see, thereby helping her manage loneliness and isolation. And, by noting down challenges and difficulties and the successful strategies employed to overcome them, she uses the diary as a source of reassurance and support there to be read back over when needed. It is broadly accepted that diarists can keep journals to try to maintain or restore psychological health in times of stress or crisis. Even the genesis of a diary, the reason why it comes into being, has been interpreted, most notably by Philippe LeJeune, as a saving recourse, a catharsis, a means to maintain self-control whilst living a crisis. When the

crisis ends so too, invariably, does the diary.<sup>4</sup> To an extent Madeleine's diary fits with this model. The meticulous note-keeping format maintained throughout enables her to impose order not just on the things happening in her life but on thoughts, feelings and sensations promoted by depression and anxiety which may have otherwise overwhelmed her. Lists are one way of doing this, and Madeleine's daily diary entries do, on occasion, read like lists. She notes the people she has seen, the books she has read, the people she has taught and, on occasion, synthesises this everyday data into lists. She does this with every new rationing quota announcement which she sets out food item by food item.

The value of the diary as a living history which makes a contribution to our understanding of the period of Occupation is clear. The density of the detail logged over a period of four years makes it a unique historical record. But it holds many more intriguing and enlightening narratives in respect of gender, the evolution of tertiary education for women, the purpose and place of life-writing in wartime and its use as a panacea for psychological distress. These are just a few of the areas of interest I have identified over the course of several years researching the diary. There are inevitably many more possibilities for interpretation in the many thousands of words with which Madeleine unselfconsciously records everyday life.

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<sup>4</sup> Philippe Lejeune, 'How Do Diaries End?', *Biography*, 24, 99–113.

## About the Manuscript

Madeleine writes her diary in the imperfect French of an experienced yet non-native speaker. The register is everyday and informal and regularly interspersed with English words and idioms. Only on one occasion do we see a substantial passage in English, when she reminisces about her childhood and the land and seascapes of Yorkshire. In parts, the detail is sparing, the sentences short and sometimes abbreviated into telegraphic note form. At other times, the passages are lengthy and the writing style is literary, florid and reflective. The layout of the diary evolves over the course of the Occupation. The first page of the manuscript is set out like the letters she had sent home to her parents between November 1939 and June 1940 during her first year of study in Paris. She explains that the diary will serve as a replacement for letters she can no longer send. The letter format quickly gives way to a conventional journal format whereby dates are diligently and uniformly listed down the left-hand margin and the diary entry is written across the page from left to right. Although the epistolary layout does not endure and the presence of interlocutors is less obviously written into the diary text as the months go by, there is, nonetheless, always an intermittent dialogue in which the other party would seem to be Madeleine's mother.

Madeleine's hand is neat and uniform. For the most part, it is miniscule and for that reason it can be difficult, at times, to decipher. In the final weeks of the Occupation – also the final weeks of the diary – this tiny script unfolded into an untidy scrawl which presented new deciphering challenges. In a diary

which offers psychological succour during the Occupation, one can intuit much from the uniformity and discipline – of lack thereof – of Madeleine's diary entries. From the translator's point of view, it has meant that the occasional omission for reasons of illegibility has been unavoidable. There are more of these omissions towards the end of the manuscript as Madeleine's pen nib, which she was unable to replace, was worn and damaged and her handwriting less clear. For the most part, though, the diary has been translated in its entirety. High-resolution photographs of the manuscript have been an enormous help in the examining of indistinct letters and puzzling out of the meaning of stubborn passages. Where there has been doubt over a word, a gap with a footnote where appropriate has been inserted.

As I read and translated through almost four years of entries producing 123,000 words of English text, Madeleine seemed very alive, her voice always vivacious and vibrant as she described, with little self-consciousness or censorious discernment, the minutiae and fabric of her everyday life in wartime Paris. On occasion, she felt so present that finishing the work for the day felt sad and poignant. Looking up, it felt like she had just slipped away. It is my hope that these translated words retain the zest and vivacity of Madeleine's voice and enable her story to find its place in the narrative of that extraordinary period in French history.

