



Millions Like Us: Women's Lives in War and Peace 1939-1949

Virginia Nicholson

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In Millions Like Us Virginia Nicholson tells the story of the women's Second World War, through a host of individual women's experiences. We tend to see the Second World War as a man's war, featuring Spitfire crews and brave deeds on the Normandy beaches. But in conditions of "Total War" millions of women - in the Services and on the Home Front - demonstrated that they were cleverer, more broad-minded and altogether more complex than anyone had ever guessed. Millions Like Us tells the story of how these women loved, suffered, laughed, grieved and dared; how they re-made their world in peacetime. And how they would never be the same again ... 'Vividly entertaining, uplifting and humbling, Millions Like Us deserves to be a bestseller' Bel Mooney, The Daily Mail 'Passionate, fascinating, profoundly sympathetic' Artemis Cooper, Evening Standard Virginia Nicholson was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and grew up in Yorkshire and Sussex. She studied at Cambridge University and lived abroad in France and Italy, then worked as a documentary researcher for BBC Television. Her books include the acclaimed social history Among the Bohemians - Experiments in Living 1900-1939, and Singled Out - How Two Million Women Survived Without Men after the First World War, both published by Penguin in 2002 and 2007. She is married to a writer, has three children and lives in Sussex.

Millions Like Us: Women's Lives in War and Peace 1939-1949 Details

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From Reader Review Millions Like Us: Women's Lives in War and Peace 1939-1949 for online ebook

Johanne says

Fascinating - a look at how the lives and expectations of women were turned upside down by the second world war. A particularly interesting read in conjunction with another book by Nicolson - Singled Out which complements this nicely being about how the "excess" women after WWI carved careers and influenced society

Kirsty says

I adore history, particularly that which deals with women, and Nicolson has presented her information so well in this book. She states that she 'wanted to find out not only what the did in the war, but what the war did to them and how it changed their subsequent lives and relationships'. Nicolson has focused upon a wealth of women from so many different walks of life, merging history with biography, and bringing some fascinating characters to the forefront of her work. We meet, through her words, famous diarists like Nella Last and Mollie Panter-Downes, the privileged in society, and novelists such as Nina Bawden and Barbara Cartland. The chronological structure which Nicolson has adopted works so well, as did the sectioning of information into short chapters, all of which dealt with a different element of wartime life for women – from rationing to conscription.

Michael Moseley says

This was a fascinating book about the way lives of British women were transformed during the Second World War. Left behind to run every think from families to bomb products and making aircraft. Britain could not have done what she did without the use of millions of women while their men did the fighting. They were involved in many roles from administration through to heavy industry and even gunnery in anti aircraft guns. This very sympathetically and well written account of different women's live during the war shows that so much of societies norms where suspended for the duration. The power drama and thrill of during useful things for the war effort gave women's lives a focus and meaning that they had never had before and would take many years to regain. I wanted to talk to my mum about some of the issues. The sorrow and fear of the woman who sent their children away as evacuees to the nurses who went to the front lines in North Africa and Europe. Women did things that they never thought them selves capable of. The make do and mend attitude which worked well during the war led to a sense of anticlimax in the peace. An indebted broken Britain found it difficult to rebuild and deal with the shortages. Many women went back to the role housewife and mothers at the end of the war but many others would never be the same again. The great reforms for women in the 1970's began in the liberation of the war years but it was a long time coming if it has really got there yet. Nic will enjoy this read.

Philippa says

A fascinating read, following the lives of a dozen women of various ages and backgrounds and the changes in their lives over the course of WW2.....and, most interestingly, what happened once peace came. The seeds of the feminist revolution that came a few decades later were sown, but many were keen for life to resume as it was, which made things very complicated. Absolutely enthralling to read and an impressive piece of work, I highly recommend it.

Nancy says

This is a highly readable anecdotal account of British women's experiences during World War II. It's a worthy addition to the shelf of similar books, but there's nothing new here in information or insight.

❀?RoryReads?❀ says

Very good! Well researched with many first hand accounts, it's one of the best non-fiction books I've read about women on the Home Front in Britain during World War II.

Katie says

I loved this book. I am really interested in the social history side of the second world war, especially regarding the changes to the lives of women. This book has a great collection of diary extracts and stories from a wide range of women from housewives to Wrens. It does jump between characters but I did not find that a problem as I liked the fact that you got to find out what different women with different roles were doing at the same point in time.

Rebecca says

A rather sobering story about the women in Britain during the second world war - with examples from many different women, through their diaries, biographies and interviews with them now, women from all parts of society and all parts of the country. Their experiences (both similar and different) give a vivid picture of some really hard and trying times. It's not dramatic as war time stories usually are, because their lives were seldom at the front, their lot was to make the everyday life work, and trying to take care of the jobs left by the men who had left for war (and of course, helping out in the army in many important ways). The problems were many, all the way from not being able to buy stockings (which might sound like a silly problem, but when working in offices that forbade women wearing trousers and the rationing of fabrics which made the skirts even shorter during the war, it really was a problem) to being bombed out of your home and to lose your loved ones...

It is an interesting read, and it gives a vivid pictures of all the problems these women had to face. It's not an upbeat story, but it can very well bring you to tears from time to time.

I also really like that a large portion of the book also is devoted to what happened afterwards - which is quite important too - when things were beginning to return to the way they had been before, but with people whose lives had been heavily influenced by these trying years.

Will says

I saw this reviewed in the Guardian Weekly and knew immediately I wanted to read it; I was not disappointed.

This is a book that can never be written again as it is based on in-depth interviews with some 50 women who lived through WW 2 and its aftermath, chronicling their heroically ordinary lives, fears and thoughts over more than 10 years. For some it appeared to be the only time they had been able to talk honestly about their experiences. Virginia Nicholson's women weren't chosen randomly – they were themselves writers – and their contributions were entertaining and literate, but were the millions like *them*? I think so; the range of experience is huge - from naive protected upperclass girls to the hard-bitten and desperately poor – and many of them did not even take up writing till many years later.

The chapters are chronological, and that makes sense of course. It did give me a bit of a problem distinguishing the women's narratives though, as they were necessarily chopped into short and interleaved reminiscences. (Though someone with better short-term memory might not agree).

Some of the most searing moments occur in recollections that sounded almost throwaway, but of course were not ... a nurse walking home in the blackout, is called over to a bomb site where an unknown number of people are trapped. She has to be lowered head-first through a tiny gap to find someone hideously maimed and beyond hope, and then be lowered again with a wad of chloroform to apply to the remains of the face, having to say "try to keep calm, we're working to get you out".

This incident comes up again later in the book and it is interesting that Nicholson understood it to be a desperate life-saving attempt, while I read it as an impossible act of mercy that no-one should be called on to perform. Who is to say? Either way, war for these women was the sum of shocking, numbing experiences like that and probably explains why many never spoke of it until they talked to Nicholson.

The first person accounts like this are riveting; Nicholson's transcribings to the 3rd person, not so much. She has a few too many descriptions of beautiful nurses falling for handsome and debonair surgeons and at times the effect reads like a bad second-rate romance. Oh yes, there was a lot of sex during the war, but there are only so many ways of describing it. A very minor quibble though.

There is a good balance to this book – the end of the war occurs just 2/3 of the way through, leaving the rest devoted to the aftermath, which after the initial ecstatic celebrations (for some) was a let-down for many. Returning servicewomen were unprepared for the desperation of lives at home: "after the brilliant colours [of Italy], everything looks grey and shabby" said one nurse.

So the Postwar period is at least as interesting to read about: despite awareness at the start of the war that the "old order" of women's subservience was changing – in the end it didn't; there was simply weary acceptance of a return to domestic life. The contrast between the feeling in the early years that "women could do anything now", and that the world would never be the same again, with the end in 1945 when all anyone wanted to do was "just stop working", was very marked.

Something I never really appreciated was that the rigid dress code of the times would not have been relaxed even under extreme conditions. The misery caused by the absolute rule on wearing stockings - even when unobtainable, which was for most of the war – was mentioned over and over. No trousers allowed in the depths of winter, and when stockings were unobtainable, women resorted to drawing fake seams on bare legs.

One thing I found a bit odd, that symptoms of what we now call PTSD were never mentioned. Many talked about the sudden lack of purpose with the end of the war, when the fear and exhilaration was suddenly turned off, but that's not the same thing. Yet PTSD must have been widespread, I would have thought. I wonder whether the unutterably grim conditions that prevailed in the UK after the war, only gradually improving over about 10 years, meant that there was no "post" - the contrast between war and peace in fact not being that great?

A terrific book, and its spirit could well be summed up with the words that Nicholson said she heard over and over – "You Just Got On With It"

Josie Cotton says

LOVE LOVE LOVE.

Why do more people not know about this book? It's truly amazing. I don't read very much nonfiction, but this book makes me want to read more. It is shocking, heartbreakng, funny, tragic, uplifting, terrifying, and fascinating. Nicholson brings together dozens of individual lives--so different, but all with one glaring thing in common: They were the women of World War II.

They were factory workers, nurses, housewives, code-breakers, "clippies," ambulance drivers, mothers, singers, and air raid wardens. Nicholson shows us how extraordinary ordinary women can be, how they dreamed and feared and lived in the chaotic world of the Second World War.

I bought this book at the wonderful WW2 museum in Caen. It was the best museum I've been to, and I wanted something to remember it by. I could have not made a better choice by buying this book. I highly recommend it for everyone.

Veronica says

I have really enjoyed Simon Garfield's selections of Mass Observation diaries, such as Our Hidden Lives, and I adored Nella Last's War. This book is in the same vein and is full of vivid, sometimes shocking, reminiscences by women from a wide range of backgrounds, about their war experiences and the often very difficult adjustments afterwards. Fascinating; my major criticism was that with so many women and a decade-long story told in chronological order, it was hard to keep track of who was who, and for this reason I didn't feel I got to know them the way I got to know Nella and Jean Lucey Pratt. And sometimes Nicholson's prose is a bit overblown. A very worthwhile read if you are interested in women's lives in this period though.

Mary Margaret says

I found this a fascinating window into women's lives in WWII.

The author follows many women, from a wide variety of social classes, occupations, and backgrounds through the war, including the introduction of female conscription. I found it hard to keep track of all the women, and so didn't feel much connection to many, but the overall picture, of the changes demanded of women and how that did (and didn't) change society as a whole, as well as what changed back after the war, were very interestingly portrayed.

I also found the reality of their lives surprisingly different from how that period it is portrayed in the media today.

Girl with her Head in a Book says

In my final term at university, I studied a module on 1940s Film and Literature and basically I fell in love with a whole different time period. You may or may not have noticed that I love history on a completely amateur basis. For me, this is the best way, I seriously considered studying it at university but decided not to, this way I don't have to do the research, I just read the books so I still get the stories. For me, history at its best is a collection of well-written stories and in this respect Virginia Nicholson delivers and then some. This book is fantastic.

For my full review:

<http://girlwithherheadinabook.blogspot.com>

Wendy Percival says

A brilliantly, meticulously researched book and a pleasure to read. Such a range of experiences from women in all walks of life and in a variety of situations - hospitals, Bletchley, factories, farms, town, city, countryside. Amusing, distressing, frightening and uplifting stories in the words of the women who lived them. For anyone who wants to get an insight into those who lived through the Second World War off the battlefield, then I can highly recommend Millions Like Us. I look forward to reading another of Ms Nicholson's books, currently sitting on my shelf, Singled Out, about women after WW1.

Michelle says

This book was an excellently written and enjoyable study of the period. I couldn't put it down. I recommend it to anyone interested in women's lives, British history and/or the Second World War.

I must say, however, that I found it regrettable that the book completely ignored lesbians. For such a thorough and well-researched book about women of all ages, walks of life and regions -- a book that put great emphasis on their love and sex lives -- it was a shame that the only mention was of one woman being hit on by a scary, mannish lesbian once.

From reading the book, one would think everyone in Britain in the forties was straight. Even a quick mention of the hidden and taboo aspect of these lives would have been better than silence.
