



## London War Notes, 1939-1945

*Mollie Panter-Downes*

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## London War Notes, 1939-1945 Mollie Panter-Downes

Mollie Panter-Downes not only wrote short stories (Good Evening, Mrs Craven: The Wartime Stories and Minnie's Room: The Peacetime Stories) but also non-fiction 'Letters from London' for The New Yorker. She wrote her first one on September 3rd 1939; on May 12th 1945 she wrote her hundred and fifty-third. Her New Yorker obituary observed: 'Other correspondents were writing about the war, of course, often with great power and conviction, but they dealt with large incidents and events, while Mollie wrote of the quotidian stream of English life, of what it was like to actually live in a war, of what the government was doing, of the nervous sound of the air-raid sirens, of the disappearance of the egg, of children being evacuated – of all the things that made life in England bearable and unbearable. In a steady flow of copy, directed to editors she had never met at a magazine she had never visited, she undoubtedly did more to explain wartime England to American readers than anyone else in the field.

And as the TLS said when London War Notes was published in 1971: 'For sheer range of mood and matter Mollie Panter-Downes leaves most of her rivals standing. Nothing more vivid has been written about those early days of soft sunshine when it was hard to disentangle the dream from the reality, a long summer afternoon in which fantasy flourished, and the barrage balloons glittered "like swollen fairy elephants lolling against the blue".'

## London War Notes, 1939-1945 Details

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## From Reader Review *London War Notes, 1939-1945* for online ebook

### Jane says

Having read Nella Last's diaries of life in Barrow-in-Furness, I was au fait with the shortages and almost knew enough history to get the references, but I hadn't been aware of the frustration of the populace with how long (in \_years\_) it took to get the invasion of Normandy going.

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### Sarah says

I love Panter-Downes fiction and while I enjoyed these essays I do prefer her fiction voice. These London dispatches are just a little too fanciful in style to have gripped me and made me feel like I lived in War Time London.

I still enjoyed the book, it is a real dip in and out volume but for a real feel on how London was during the war I recommend the reprints of Mass Observation diaries.

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### Heidi says

Amazing read ... history in the making in London during WWII. I love reading history as witnessed by a person as it happens without anyone going back afterwards and interpreting it for me. Highly recommended to any history-buff.

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### Deb says

Woman from London that wrote articles about about daily life during WWII for the New Yorker magazine. You can visualize exactly what she is writing about -- air raid drills, rationing, people's everyday lives, what they thought about being in a war, what they thought about the USA, France, Italy, etc. It's quite a good read. Plus she manages to let one know the views both good and bad about the other countries/people.

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### Kazen says

I love primary sources and I've been wanting to try a book from Persephone, so *London War Notes* was just the thing. Panter-Downes lived in and around London during World War II and wrote weekly articles for *The New Yorker*, describing the state and mood of the city. This 459 page book is an edited collection of those pieces. I'm not big on military tactics or strategy but real, lived experiences on the home front are exactly my thing.

Panter-Downes paints a vivid picture of what London was like from the first rumbles of war, through the Blitz, up to VE Day. Her attention to detail serves well, and single sentence scenes bring the war to life.

It has always been a strange and startling sight to see middle-aged Kensington matrons in fur coats standing grimly in line waiting for six pennyworth of gumdrops, as though it were Biblical manna.

There were so many things I hadn't even heard about. Blackout deaths, where vehicles would strike and kill pedestrians on the dark streets. Double summer time, a two hour version of daylight savings, was put into effect to try and conserve energy. And at one point newspapers were forbidden from printing weather reports, as it was feared it'd give the enemy an advantage.

The detail is paired with humor to make each entry pleasantly readable, despite the circumstances.

The Christmas dinner isn't going to be so particularly festive, either, from all accounts. Turkeys are difficult to find, though it's rumored that tinned ones will be available - a bleak prospect for those who can't work up any suitably seasonable emotions at the thought of getting out the yuletide can-opener.

And when she aims at your heartstrings, she hits.

Old men and women call to find out if they can be evacuated to safe areas and the bureaus try to find billets for them, but it isn't easy. "Old and infirm people take a good deal of looking after and people grow tired of them" is the official explanation - a full-length tragedy in seventeen words.

Once more London finds itself a blitz city. A city officially enters that class when people ring up their friends the day after a noisy night to find out if they're still there.

I wouldn't necessarily recommend *London War Notes* to someone with little interest, but if you're curious about the lived home front experience it's a great place to start.

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**❁?RoryReads?❁ says**

4.5 Stars

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**Laura says**

I enjoyed this book because it was interesting to get a different perspective on the events of WWII. She really focused on the daily grind of London, and it was a big contrast to what was going on in the US at the time. It's also the first WWII book that I've read that barely mentions the Eastern front, and makes almost no mention of Japan.

The only thing that bothered me was that you knew nothing about the author. She didn't tell you her job, age,

how she got assigned to send these dispatches to the New Yorker, etc. I don't know if that would have changed the flow of the book, but I at least hoped for some kind of endnote telling me more about her and what happened to her after the war.

If you're interested in WWII history, this is a good book to read.

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### **Starhistnake says**

This was a dense read, but that makes sense since these were pieces written and published over the course of the war. It was totally worth the effort though because homefront life during WWII was definitely one of my interests. The entries are really interesting and good. The humor and struggle of day to day life amid bombs, rationing, and the many other trials of wartime life makes for an interesting read. I don't think anyone who lacks some sort of background knowledge of the war would pick up this book but I will say that while there are some things explained there seems to be an assumption that the reader would know a bit coming in.

This is a really great book for anyone who has an interest in learning more about what it was like to live in London at that point in time.

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### **Austen to Zafón says**

In 1939, at the beginning of WWII, Mollie Panter-Downes, a young and successful novelist at the time, began a weekly column in the New Yorker magazine, called "Letter from London." Her column was so popular that the New Yorker kept her on until 1984 (45 years!). This book is the complete columns from September 1939 to the end of the war in May 1945. Densely packed with details about daily life in London, it gives a different view of the war than most Americans grew up with. For us, the war started in December 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. Then we what, swooped in and single-handedly saved Europe? That's not how it the British saw it. They'd been fighting the war for over two years before we had any active troops there. They'd watched one ally after another fall to Germany. They'd been bombed, suffered much more extreme rationing than we ever did, and then still stuck to it until the end. They appreciated our help, along with Canada's, but they didn't feel that we were their saviors. In fact, the book doesn't even focus much on the entrance of the US into the war.

What interested me most about the book were the details of every day life. I think it was brilliant of the New Yorker to choose a woman for the column, as she was very tuned in to what the war meant not just for soldiers, but for women and children.

Some quotes:

"All over the country, the declaration of war has brought a new lease of life to retired officers, who suddenly find themselves the commanders of battalions of willing ladies who have emerged from the herbaceous borders to answer the call of duty. Morris 10s, their windshields plastered with notices that they are engaged on business of the ARP or WVS (both volunteer services), rock down quiet country lanes propelled by firm-lipped spinsters who yesterday could hardly have said 'boo!' to an aster." (Sept 1939)

"How to accustom children to a war which at any moment may come right into the nursery is something that

exercises everybody. The juvenile genius for accepting new conditions has already, however, reconciled many a family to a father unaccountably vanished and a mother who in a tone of determined gaiety proposes a game of Mickey Mouse in one of these amusing new mask things. The most comforting reaction so far reported was the remark of the little girl who countered parental whimsy with a stern, "It's all right, Mummie. I know what it is. It's a gas mask, and we put in on when they bomb us." (Sept 1939)

"The fall of Paris [June 14th] was the culmination of a tragic week for the British people...On Monday, June 17th--the tragic day on which Britain lost the ally with whom she had expected to fight to the bitter end--London was as quiet as a village...People stood about reading the papers; when a man finished one, he would hand it over to anybody who hadn't been lucky enough to get a copy, and walk soberly away...There was little discussion of events, because they were too bad for that...Few people remembered that Tuesday was the anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo, another occasion when disaster trod very close on the heels of this country, and when it seemed impossible that [we] could stand up to the assault of the greatest military machine in the world, led by the greatest commander. 'Hard pounding, this, gentlemen,' said Wellington to his staff at one stage of that battle. 'Let's see who will pound the longest.' ...The determination to keep pounding the longest is the only thing that people have been able to see clearly in the past dark and bewildering week." (June 1940)

"Incidentally, the announcements of air raid deaths are beginning to appear in the obituary columns of the morning papers. No mention is made of the cause of death, but the conventional phrase 'very suddenly' is always used. Thousands of men, women, and children are scheduled to die very suddenly, without any particular notice being taken of them in the obituary columns...All that is best in the good life of civilized effort appears to be slowly and painfully keeling over in the chaos of man's inhumanity to man." (Sept 1940)

"It is realized that at best, the coming winter is likely to feature among its cold attractions more intensive bombing, new food shortages, and cold. The last will probably not be at all funny, owing to the critical coal shortage...the threatened winter milk cut has stirred up a lot of criticism too...Eggs are rationed at one a week to a person...Vegetables are plentiful; Londoners dug so manfully for victory this spring that scarlet runners in every back yard seem to be trying to strangle the house, and for the time being there is a greater danger of being hit by a marrow falling off the roof of an air-raid shelter than of being struck by a bomb." (August 1941)

And this was all before we entered the war.

I admit I skimmed some of the military details, but I did learn a lot about what was happening in Asia. I guess I'd never really taken in what it meant for Britain to have all those extensions of the British empire fall. Not that I support Britain's imperialism or the Victorian view of it's empire, but many people in England had family and friends there and worried about what was happening to them. And in the days before the internet, there was little information to be had.

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**Amy says**

Interesting subject but rather boring presentation. DNF.

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## **Karen says**

Fascinating first hand account of London during "The War". Excellent for research but also quite readable for anyone with an interest in the period. Really want my own copy now.

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## **Rosemary says**

I struggled with this at first, and took some 6 weeks to read it, which must be a record for me with a Persephone book. Although partly caused by books for challenges taking preference, it was a lot to do with the impersonal tone of the book, which is a collection of fortnightly articles written for the New York Times by Englishwoman Mollie Panter-Downes. Her short stories such as Good Evening, Mrs Craven are wonderful, but these articles are so obviously propagandist in the first couple of years (trying to get Americans to support the British in the war, either directly or indirectly) that it is tiresome to read. Still, it's always interesting to read actual day-by-day accounts, and to realise how seriously the British were expecting an invasion after northern France was occupied in 1940.

From the beginning of 1942, it gets much chattier and easier to read, as she drops the propaganda which is no longer necessary. Then the surprises are more about how people foresaw things long before they happened - D-Day was expected from about a year before it happened, and was called D-Day a couple of months before. Even then, it was another year until VE day. Knowing the outcome as we do, it's easy to forget how unpredictable it was in real time.

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## **Laurie Glassel says**

This book is so full of history and information. It's so interesting to read about WWII from someone who was actually there. It's a long read but I highly recommend it for anyone who likes to read about English history.

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## **Sasha Drennan says**

An excellent first-hand description of London life throughout WWII. Well-written, insightful and humorous, this account covers the political questions and media coverage as well as being an account of the progress of the war. It needs to be read in the context of a view of life from a monied, educated point of view, and that it was intended for consumption by the American media.

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## **Toast says**

Credited with helping turning the tide in the US, these 'letters' to the New Yorker from MPD gave the ordinary Brit's view of the War. Not just life on the Home Front but its response to 'the news' - good, bad and indifferent, politics, rationing, the movement of children, women and works of art, the blackout, bombing, the country at war as it happened so to speak. It gave the Americans a bird's eye view of life on this little

island as it fought the foe and fought alongside the friend and fed as many as it could too.  
Makes you damn proud I have to say without even trying.  
Toast

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