

**Jonathan Kearns
Rare Books
&
Curiosities**

**“Five Ordinary Women”
(If indeed there is such a thing..)**

Jonathan@kearnsrarebooks.com
www.kearnsrarebooks.com

Five Ordinary Women

1. Brittan, Margaret. *Diary for 1926*.

London, 1926.

Small 8vo, red rexine bound memo book, worn to spine, shaken in its case with inner hinges starting. 312pp. in a legible hand. Laid in are two pieces of ephemera; a photograph, black and white of Margaret at the approximate age of the diary period, and a handmade silhouette of the same young woman, executed in black paper on a white card. Our heroine is a teacher, or at least that is her ambition, as the diary opens with a list of resolutions (including keeping a diary), an expression of her “new lease of life consequent upon recovery from operation for appendicitis” (a far more risky happenstance in the 1920’s than it is today), and a visit to the circus, with a very detailed account spanning several pages of the heretofore unimagined pleasures to be found there. This is an auspicious opening, Margaret, fresh from her recent brush with mortality has high hopes for an appointment she has just secured as a governess, in Paris no less:

“11th Jan. Mon. DEPARTURE FOR FRANCE. Rose early was out of home by 8:20 for 10 am train to Paris at Victoria. Found only carriage with corner seat...lady and gent came along with a girl about 16. Turns out she was returning to Sch. in Dieppe alone and was (therefore) put in my charge. So we journeyed tog. She was a bad sailor but it was a perfect day so we remained on deck for some time and revelled in the sunshine and sea breezes.”

So far so good. There follows a pleasant encounter on the Paris train “A charming lady, not young, not quite old but fascinating and interesting..” in addition “Two Yank gents also in the carriage, not half bad.”



Paris though is less kind to our heroine, having travelled all the way from Streatham in South London, men of “very rough type in the cafes”, problems with the language, and perhaps most of all, an immediate culture clash between the tried and tested British method of governing children (if they are happy you are doing it wrong), and the more relaxed French method where the children do things like speak, go to bed after 6pm and are permitted a host of other liberties which Margaret interprets as them being “horribly spoiled”.

It’s at this point that Margaret’s position on the rather peculiar gender landscape of the 1920’s starts to make itself known. She’s genteelly poor, her parents give every appearance of being solid working class Londoners, frugal and wary of excess but not struggling, her yearning is for freedom and independence. Several times during the journal she cites as her only objective “to have a little place of my own”, not just by happenstance, but through being allowed to work in an environment she can manage. Margaret falls out with her employer, resigns and returns to South London, somewhat defeated, but secure that she has “done the right thing”. There, things get harder, she is clearly weakened in health, tires easily, worries ceaselessly, is socially anxious and frequently infuriated. She’s depressed, hopeless (“Is life worth living? Often I ask the question...” You and me both Maggie), and most dreadfully lonely. Her internal isolation reveals itself most often as a frustration with not being able to understand or make herself understood to others, the confusion at why people are like they are, and the anger that causes her, recurs frequently. It’s not until one Wednesday in February however that she decides to start the day after a disturbed night by unburdening herself to her diary:

“I rise rather late, and feel very unhappy. At this point, yes, I actually did (I’ve groaned in spirit before many times and tried to dismiss my longing) weep for Hindle. Oh would to God that I cd. meet him again. Why did he come in my path in such an extraordinary manner + at such time if we were not meant to do something with each other. I can’t understand it for I have the greatest affection for that man + why shd. I be tricked in this way. He found me, and realised at once all my wretched existence + was so good to me. Why did he declare his love if he meant nothing. O man why art thou so deceptive + why play with the heart of a woman. Oh I was serious, maybe some girls like a little flutter - but when you meet a girl in my circs. tis not that she wants but a real, true, solid friend + helper. And if you have deceived me, O how can I bear it.”

Whilst I can’t deny that Margaret has a flair for the purple by modern standards, pain is pain, and Margaret, fresh from failure in Paris, having trouble integrating back home... Margaret is not doing very well here. It has also to be considered that she’s 29, everyone (herself included) has pretty much given up any idea she’s going to get married, she was born in 1897, and 21 when the war ended. She’s a lower middle class London girl at the highest estimation of social status, basically the unmarried male side of her entire age group no longer exists as it did when was growing up; they all died in mud, gas and shrapnel, or came home unable to work. The well trodden pathways to security, safety and respectability had all been closed of for Margaret’s generation, you only had the vote if you owned property, you only owned property if you had a man or independent wealth. So called emancipation wasn’t going to do anything for Margaret except cause frustration, insecurity and pain.

“I wanted to trust you, but convention did not allow and now we have been parted for nearly 2 years and still I want you + need you and long for you... yet if I were to find you again I might still go on wondering whether it was safe to continue with you, whereas if you sought me out I should be more inclined to believe you really wanted me + were genuine. O cruel fate. Tis hard to think that...of man’s degraded state + and the absurdities of convention a man cannot act the Knight Gallant to a Demoiselle without the whole neighbourhood gossips and

kiboshes everything. O it's all a dreadful muddle and how is one to know what is right to do. And I didn't, but heavy is my heart + I'd give anything to have you back. The disappointment is great upon me. Time does not heal it and I've suffered for you."

Firstly, Margaret has read too much Walter Scott, secondly, it's been 2 years, and thirdly, damn.

Life goes on however, Margaret is still not well, her doctor puts her on sedatives to help her sleep, and she remembers fondly the time they gave her heroin in hospital. There are sales to attend and jobs to apply for. There are more setbacks and disappointments, her attitude towards men in general doesn't receive enough evidence to improve, there's a bus accident that causes her great shame and anxiety, "Life is wretched" is a continued theme. Solace comes from God, letters from her friends (although often attended with the reflection that they have found joy and she now never will) and the hope that she will find a job before "I become quite desperate."

I have to admit that despite Margaret's somewhat "Medieval romance" style of introspection, 1926 is not her year. The feeling of claustrophobic restriction is very strong, even in one of the biggest, most prosperous cities in the world, Margaret seems hemmed in and blocked off from the opportunities to attain her wish of a place of her own to belong. An emotional read.

[Ref: 765] £350

2. **Douglas (nee Campbell), Unetta. *Diary for the Year 1928.***

1928.

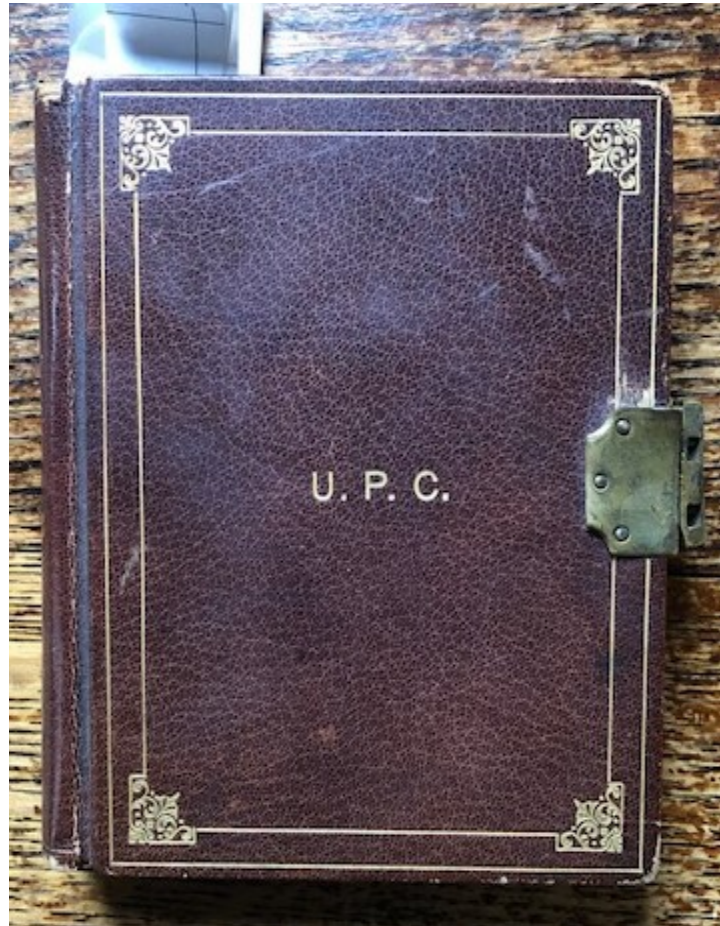
Small 8vo. Polished morocco journal with brass clasp, initialled U.P.C. to front board, ruled and decorated in gilt. The clasp has been forced at some point. Internally clean, marbled endpapers, one page for each day. Unetta's handwriting is legible, if a little drawling, I can't help but imagine it appropriately mirrored her manner of speech; brisk, acerbic and with a decided tinge of vamp.

Of Unetta herself, outside of this diary little is known. Originally Unetta Campbell of Youngstown, Ohio, she seems to have been quite the society lady. In the year of the diary she married Robert "Robin" Sholto Douglas, (there's a picture of him in a positively barbaric pair of shorts, tipped in at the front; the photo, not the shorts), the son of Norman "Bribed a young boy with cakes, indecently assaulted him then had to run away to the continent to avoid a scandal" Douglas, he of "South Wind" fame, mate then enemy of D.H. Lawrence, citizen of the island of Capri and friend with the likes of Graham Greene. Robin Douglas was also the closest friend of Joseph Conrad's son, and lived with the Conrads for a while as a boy. Nephew of Lady Helen Douglas, and scion of an aristocratic and decidedly headstrong extended family. Unetta's lack of public profile is probably accounted for by the fact that Robin was, at the time of his marriage, already someone else's husband (there's a rather awkward dinner detailed in the diary where Unetta meets Robin's "first" wife. "Robin hardly said a word throughout."). If Unetta was aware, she certainly didn't let it stop her. A woman of quite formidable character, she doesn't give the impression that she's someone to mess about with, and if she wants an opinion from you, you'll definitely know about it.

"I begin the New Year being kissed. I carried on in the morning by being violently sick. Hardly auspicious. I remained in bed all day until Tam confused me by arriving in my bedroom with a bunch of violets. I got up, dressed (after he'd gone), and flirted violently with him. I wonder why?"

By January 2nd (Unetta is based at Tudor Court in London's Kensington), she has distressed one suitor (Allan) with her apparent attraction to Robin (as yet not a fully realised romantic interest), ditched another date with Tam Moritz to spend all night drinking, eating and touring London with Robin ("Robin and I roamed all night eating in all sorts of places at

intervals...What a night!"), arrived home on the 3rd after breakfast ("Met Tam Moritz and apologised to him, not a great success as he did the proud and haughty and walked out."), Tam later returns ("sat a long time telling me what a rude vixen I am, assured me he'd never ask me out again and ended by suggesting a drink in his room. Instantly we were there he turned about- was almost charming- made love to me and all was forgiven! I agreed to drive with him Thursday."), Robin pops over the next morning ("We were badly molested by vacationing schoolgirls" is one of the more opaque sections of January 4th), moons about all day and then in the evening "told me some of his troubles. It's rather wearing this. I do wish he'd get a job."



January 5th is lunch with Robin, dinner and cocktails with Tam, and then a "wee bit worried" letter from Allan, "My affairs do seem to be rapidly getting complicated. I daresay America will do me the world of good." By this time, five days in, it should be clear to everyone that Unetta Campbell is hell on wheels, doing very much her own thing, and scrubs need not apply (ah, the 90's!). I like her very much. Things with Robin are just getting foolishly steamy, and Tam is still lurking about with a handful of violets and lustful intentions, when Allan turns up: "Our first meeting was not a huge success..." not to be cowed (by anything I would imagine, a Panzer regiment would have trouble stopping her) our heroine explains herself "I have however declared my independence, and am what Allan calls 'An emancipated woman' as I reserve the right to do as I choose and neck, flirt or even sleep with whom I choose when I'm not with him. Of course, he's not pleased by this- but we've made a pact of friendship and the door is open to renewing our relations whenever we wish." Allan clearly knows when he's outclassed. Unetta resolves to get a job guiding visiting Americans around the UK, just to have something to do, Robin falls upon hard times: "Had a telegram from Robin at the post office 'Pat and I evicted today, may we sleep in your car and eat the upholstery? Love, Robin' I replied 'Upholstery yours, but spare the lamps, love Unetta'...can it be I'm falling in love with

him?" The afternoon is spent having a few of "Those Moments" with Allan. By the 17th of January Unetta's grandmother has suggested she become engaged to Robin, Tam has reappeared and they have gone on a wild motoring weekend together, and Unetta has on one occasion worn nothing but a green skirt and two strings of beads, called Allan into the room and "executed a 'Hootchie-Cootchie' dance. This was followed by the inevitable." How unlike the home life of our own dear Queen.



The decisions regarding Robin settle down, it appears they become mostly exclusive, a fact that seems to confound Unetta, who finds Robin "unfathomable" which might actually come as a nice change from the eminently fathomable Tam and the supremely biddable Allan. A list is included of the year's conquests, including a Dr. who doesn't seem to feature very highly. Unetta appears to be bridling somewhat at the rather quieter pace of her life; perhaps unsurprisingly, but it presents itself as periods of depression, illness and what she herself describes as "neutral coma." I'm cataloguing a lot of the inner thoughts of women in Britain immediately after the First World War at the moment and this depressed, "seedy" discontent appears almost universal across classes and occupations. Whether struggling aristocrats, penniless schoolteachers, artistic spinsters or even Sixth Form schoolgirls, it seems to have been a turbulent time for women, having come out of what was undoubtedly a traumatic but socially freeing period, to be thrust back into a world trying and failing to drag itself back to a semblance of normal, with whole towns empty of young men, and the streets filled with the war torn, labour unrest, massive debts and a feeling that all the advances that came at such huge cost might be evaporating into nothing. It's a time of social flux, with the old paths disappeared, and the new ones as yet unsignposted. Despite the glitzy, libertine lifestyle,

Unetta is no exception. Her life gradually becomes more complex, and a trifle less turbulent, as the year progresses, but there are peaks and troughs of discontent and frustration, joy, contentment and confusion. It's a hell of a year. Fascinating and packed with insight.
[Ref: 763] £600

3. **Junior, Hope Elphinstone. A Collection of Photographs and ephemera, in two small books: One of general photographs, the other detailing a teenage pursuit of an ardent crush..**

1912-17.

Two small notebooks, card bound, one (an official Clifton High School For Girls notebook entitled Hope Elphinstone Junior: photographs) with the front cover all but detached; the other in red card wraps with a photograph applied to the front entitled "Enid Shirley". 54 black and white images in Vol I, 4 photographs and some pieces of ephemera to Vol II. One watercolour image of Hope Junior and her camera, and a postcard bearing what look like school subject results.



Hope Elphinstone Junior eventually became a missionary with the CMS, teaching (and rising to Headmistress) in Khartoum and Wad Medani between 1930 and 1952. She eventually died in 1992 at the astonishing age of 95. She was a student at Clifton High School For Girls, and lived at Clifton, in Bristol.

Those are the very sketchy facts, as usual bearing no resemblance to who Hope actually was. The small home made album of photographs depicts Church Summer Camps and retreats, sports teams and plenty of girls in starched white blouses larking about, smiling clergymen

and some daring looking ladies on motorcycles. Some of the group and team photos are captioned to the verso with names and events. "Upper VIth Hockey" for example, or "Old Girls, June 17." There are also some pictures of a rather formidable looking ladies cricket team. All of this is perfectly delightful, the photos, although small, are in good condition, and looking at them, you quite rightly wouldn't be able to tell there was a war on (with the exception of a single picture of a distant Bristol Biplane attracting much attention). The second book, however, is a carefully compiled account of a rather intense schoolgirl crush on an older girl: Enid Dorothy Mary Shirley, captain of various sports teams and absolute centre of teenage Hope's universe.

"This Book is a record of Happy Moments spent with Enid Dorothy Mary Shirley, By Hope Elphinstone Junor, from Christmas Holidays 1912-13 to January 31st 1914" Titled in red and black no less, a theme which holds true throughout where Enid's name and pronouns are written in red ink, with the body of the text in black. The volume, (with 76 rather crammed pages) is labelled Book I, so one can only assume that Hope produced at least one other notebook detailing the object of her adoration.

"The beginning, The VIth Form Party: Elinor had a VIth Form party, that is to say, some of the VIth came to tea, among them was Enid. She had just put her hair up and looked so sweet that from that moment I adored her."

Hope is about 15 or 16, Enid is about 17 or 18, depending on the ladies hockey season. The age difference doesn't seem terribly important unless you've spent any time in the English private school system, but Enid is all but a grown woman, hair up, arms crossed, forbidding look and all. Hope is, perhaps to her frustration, a little way off from that. My girl Hope, however, is tenacious. Whether Enid was aware or not, nobody can tell, although there is a definite reserve to the pictures she allowed Hope to take, not quite smiling, keeping distance, boundaries ("She pretended to object, but I got two beauties."). There's a possibly apocryphal little burst of joy from Hope upon hearing that Enid asked another girl to check her hair looked alright because "Hope is going to take my photograph", but maybe Enid was used to being an object of admiration. Who knows. The joy in this lies in Hope's ecstatic keeping count of every word said to her by Enid, every disappointment ("Going through the gate, Enid and Sylvia stood as sentinels and I tried to snap her, but she saw and laughed to Sylvia, and I went home in a furious temper with myself for letting her know I was keen on her.") every smile received (18 recorded in the book in case anyone other than Miss Junor is keeping count), the daydreaming that she was the one Enid took to the cinema, every postcard, every letter, every telephone call, every bit of second hand gossip, the dresses she wore, railway journeys they shared, some pressed violets that Enid wore for a dance, and a poem entitled "A Lyric":

"My maiden returns to her country
Ere many more suns have set
And I'll shout for joy in the morning
When Enid and I have met.
The days of my waiting are over
Six long moons have risen and waned
Since the time my darling departed
And this height of bliss attained
And O! What radiant futures
Along my pathway lie
For e'en the darkest winter
Seems light when she is nigh.
HEJ (age 15)"

Regardless of anything else, and aside from the fact that Hope Junor never married and spent the better part of her life surrounded by faith and women, and even knowing that Enid married a career Royal Navy officer named Leech, who served in both World Wars and rose to the rank of Commodore, it would be nice to think that each of us would have better lives knowing that at least one person felt about us the way Hope Elphinstone Junor felt about Enid Shirley.

[Ref: 764] £400

4. **Lomax, Mrs. Anna. Diary 1939-40.**

Eccles,

Large 8vo. ruled notebook, rexine spine over cloth boards, strong and durable. Page edges marbled. 100pp. in a legible closely written hand writing in green ink. Laid in are two advertisements for the Park Garage in Eccles, which Mrs. Lomax ran with her husband Wilfred in Eccles, near Manchester, on occasion, before starting a dress shop of her own, also laid in is a studio photograph of Mrs. Lomax.

Originally from Belgium, daughter of a notable butter manufacturer who had been active in the resistance during WW1 (her brother was in the Belgian intelligence service), Anna moved to England, married Wilfred and set up in business for herself (one of her prized possessions was apparently a machine for stitching beadwork onto dresses, clearly she was doing her bit towards glamourising the ladies of Eccles). The majority of the diary (this volume begins in August with a holiday through France and Brussels), deals with the commencement of World War Two, seen through the eyes of a continental, middle class woman in the North West of England with strong ties to France and Brussels and an uncompromising attitude to the threat posed by Nazi Germany.



Whilst this journal bears parallels with the Olive Vaizey collection; those living in more rural

areas of Britain received the same news from the same sources in the most part, the sinking of the Royal Oak, the first air raid on the Firth of Forth, the same casualty numbers, the scuttling of the Graf Spee and Von Ludendorff's suicide etc. Mrs. Lomax's account can be read from a number of additional angles. Firstly, she had been occupied by the Germans in WW1, and was more familiar with the likely situation on the European mainland, secondly her anxieties and worries are spread more liberally across a multitude of family members, combatant friends and relatives in different areas of the conflict, and thirdly, she herself is a "foreigner" (although deeply patriotic towards England) and must find ways to use that foreignness to contribute. She volunteers to help with the influx of French and Belgian refugees, Eccles took an initial influx of 800, all needed billeting, medical attention and basic familiarisation with their new situation. Mrs. Lomax (rather proudly in charge of the tannoy system) would have been the first voice speaking a familiar language in an informative manner that many of them would have heard in their journey northwards through England. Many of the refugees are children, from evacuated schools, accompanied in the most part by nuns and priests, and Mrs. Lomax in the midst of the practical considerations of extensive rationing, air raid warnings, the manufacture of gas mask carriers which appears to have become a compulsory element of running her dress shop until she closes it up later in 1940, and on top of the continual stress and worry of her loved ones in occupied France and Belgium, does her very best to make sure her new informal charges have everything they need. Indeed, a complete reading of the journal makes it very clear that her motto is essentially "Mustn't grumble." which is about as British as it gets.

In addition to all the other worries, the fact that Wilfred doesn't have much work at the garage because of petrol rationing for example, she has to contend with the fact that, as a woman, she has a slightly more limited access to information (apocryphal or otherwise), Wilfred wanders off every night to the local pubs to have a drink whilst she mends, listens to the wireless and waits for him to return and share the news and gossip. Anna herself, like many wartime women, seems to consider it a point of honour to be aware of casualty figures, losses and gains and prominent events and offers a vigorous commentary on them. Hitler is scathingly referred to as "That Infernal Devil", the Germans are beastly, rotten, vicious, the brutal Boches etc. (not, it has to be said a unique viewpoint, but perhaps stated more bluntly than usual).

Anna faithfully records the actions of the RAF and the Royal Navy, and recounts the opinions of visiting dispossessed servicemen from the European Theatre, the French that she meets for example are furious at Petain's capitulation to Hitler, and in the midst of being given sandwiches and cigarettes vow "There will be a Revolution in France after the War!"

With the increased bombing of Manchester and Liverpool, the devastation creeps closer to Eccles, the bombing of the Palace Theatre in Manchester, the devastation of Stretford Rd and the sheer number of air raid warnings, all clears and explosions on the horizon, the evacuation of several streets due to unexploded ordnance and the stress of crouching night after night "on the cellar steps" builds to what should be terrifying levels, only to be met with a "mustn't grumble" and the information that she is attempting to crochet a table cover from left over yarn. A bomb lands in the next street, killing 11 people and destroying 4 houses, one of which was an Air Raid Patrol office where the men were having a Christmas party. "Wilfred came back very disturbed, it feels dead everywhere, Eccles is silent and deserted, children in the street are picking shrapnelles as souvenirs...Manchester is badly damaged, also Salford, a lot of people have been killed." As a time span, this journal covers only the period of time from the declaration of war to Christmas 1940, to say the worst is yet to come is something of an understatement, but as an insight into what a perfectly ordinary woman, in a perfectly ordinary part of the North West felt, understood, and coped with whilst doing her best to be

of assistance to her adopted country, it is a concise and vigorous record.
[Ref: 766] £350

5. **Vaizey, Christine Olive De Horne. "Olive". 16 Manuscript Diaries dated between 1904-1959.**

1904-1959.

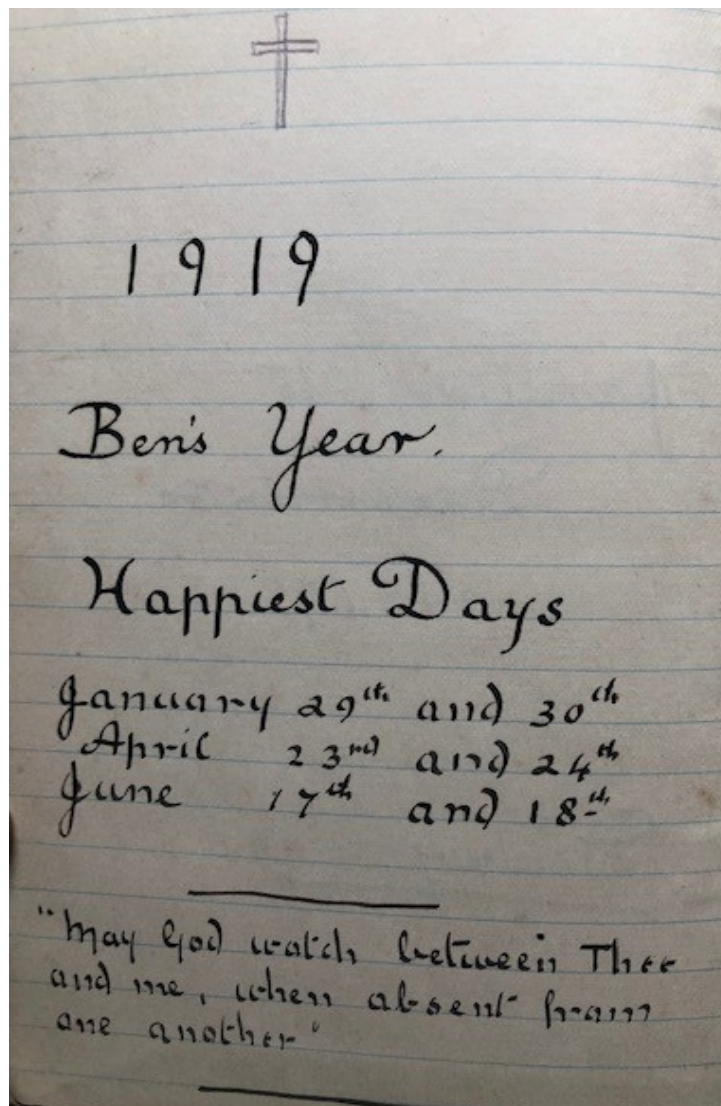
16 vols, 14 8vo, 2 Folio sized Boots Scribbling Diaries. A rather motley array of diaries and notebooks, one lacking its binding, and a roll of legal documents (character references for one of the multitudinous cast of participants in Olive's life to get a job as a solicitor), many thousands of words, each volume generally comprising a single year. Condition is generally very good, Olive's handwriting is very legible, and, not going to lie, they are something of an emotional rollercoaster. A collection comprising an extensive selection of the major events of a woman's life throughout two world wars and the first half of the 20th century.

As is so often the case with items like this, it is hard to know where to start. The basic facts are fairly straightforward: Olive De Horne Vaizey (universally known as Olive, despite her christian name being Christine) was born in Braintree, Essex in 1894; she lived the vast majority of her life in the village of Bocking; she was a VAD nursing assistant at Braintree Hospital during the first world war, she never married, she lived with her parents, she made a modest name for herself as a painter, she died in 1973, her executor being her cousin Julian; she was a cousin by marriage of Mrs. George De Horne Vaizey, a notable author of girl's school adventures for young ladies, and belonged to that section of peculiarly British society which might be described as the genteel poor, possessed of a historic name and eternally worried about where the money would come from.



Them's the facts, as they say, and they contribute about as much towards a portrait of Olive as my business card does towards a portrait of me. There's a responsibility that booksellers share, in fact there's a number, one of them is the frequently occurring understanding that we are often the first people to discover the inner lives of the long dead. To many people the

average bookseller's lock up is a mass of tired paper, to most booksellers it's a crowd of muttering ghosts, nagging to be heard and at least given their due as having been alive once, to be known to have loved, and hated, and endured tragedy, led their own little revolutions in great shades, and ultimately to have slipped beneath the waves with all their memories gathered about them. The great and famous pay better, it's very true, but they are often the chain restaurants of the memory business, you know what you're going to get; cheap drinks and indigestion. Olive was a painfully ordinary woman, if such a being exists (I've never met one), but even if I do make it to 79 years of age there is no way I will have lived my life as decently, generously, and kindly, as she did.



In 1904, Olive was 10 years old, she did 10 year old stuff; fed the chickens, idolised her mother and elder brother, went to church, went for walks, visited the fair, met gypsies, did lessons and picked apples (King Pippins, for those with an interest in traditional apple growing). She spells things incorrectly, she gets punished for forgetting to remind her mother to buy a tooth brush, and is obsessed with playing farm. As a diarist, Samuel Pepys she isn't, but then he was a boozy sex pest who buried cheese, so we can be thankful for that.

The next volume is 1912, and Olive is just 17, the young lady of Maysent House, and develops a habit of introducing herself to her new diary :

"My dear Diary, I don't know you yet, so you mustn't mind or feel hurt when I tell you I am sorry to begin you. 1911 has helped me a lot, I mean the diary, it has seemed to be so

empathetic. Now I want you to read my two letters in 1911. No 1 on page 1, the other on page 100, then private note 216. Then you can judge me a bit." Her dedication to diary keeping has extended to including a digest of the political year, Books read, servants kept, names of governesses, names of pets, books and magazines read, and the aforementioned private notes:

"Ever since measles about 6 years ago...at night sometimes I have convulsions, it terrifies me, so it does other people. Naturally I am a great worry to Father and Mummy, they are so good though. They never go away by themselves for longer than a day. Sometimes I fall down without ANY warning!" Olive's generation cries out in one voice: Vaccinate your kids! She continues: "6 long years, it is so miserable, I can never be like other girls, or have hopes like others, I wonder why I am like this? Oh for the reason, the reason, the reason why?????" There's a charming and rather moving juxtaposition between schoolgirl heart wringing (which gradually develops through depression and guilt towards low points of being suicidal over the burden she is to others) and a very dry awareness of the world outside Bocking: "All the countries engaged in war are over here in England having a conference. Turkey seems rather unsatisfactory at present. Greece, rather restless. I hope all will end peacefully."

Narrator: It did not end peacefully.

Olive dances, and has a girlish crush on her dancing teacher Miss Brettell, which presents itself as enormous guilt at being jealous of the other girls who gain her attention. Guilt, and talking to God about how awful she is, is a recurring theme throughout Olive's life. In keeping with many nicely brought up young ladies of her generation, Olive is something less than worldly in her teenage years; many grown up responsibilities and concerns but most of her other knowledge comes from books and her parents.

The diaries dealing with WW1 are not present, and her activities have to be pieced together from the 1919 volume, we know there was a dashing Colonel staying nearby, possibly at the hospital, with whom there was some inappropriate behaviour (detailed in an inserted note)...Olive's standards of appropriate are somewhat more stringent than mine, unsurprisingly.

1919 is the year of Ben Hoff (possibly Hoffman), a young ANZAC soldier with whom Olive falls deeply in love:

"1919, Ben's Year. Happiest days: January 29th and 30th, April 23rd and 24th, June 17th and 18th. Foreword: I have not much to say except thank God this will be a Peace Diary, not a War one...I fancy peace will be more difficult to face for a month or so, than war. So many people will have their lives quietly altered and I fancy strikes and so on will come about, there is great unrest everywhere. No one seems to be able to quite realise that we have won the war, we are like a child crying for a longed for thing, for so long, that when the child gets it he is too exhausted and tired to realise his good fortune. Then the high wages, the high cost of living and so on makes everything most difficult."

It's an often overlooked facet of the post war world that for normal people, even if they hadn't lost loved ones, everything became far harder, jobs were lost, whole sections of industry disappeared completely, for women (including Olive) the ironic freedoms that war had offered; important labour outside of the home, positions of respect and authority, disappeared almost overnight. Couple that with the multitudes of broken, wounded and damaged men unable to take up their previous responsibilities and occupations and Olive's account speaks of both an England of her youth that has gone forever, at the same time as mourning the beneficial changes that war wrought upon her own life. "I love my hospital work and shall miss it badly when it ends, it is part of my life, and I FORGET when I am there..."

Olive's romance with Ben embodies that strange mix of practical and deeply emotional that

wartime encounters typically hold:

“He is engaged to an Australian girl, he did it in a hurry before he left, he is sorry now and wants to break it off, But I said he better not. He said she did not like him taking a farm, and he wanted one and she would not let him do as he wanted and was so independent. It was a hard question to answer for me. He said I was just the kind of girl to make a man happy out there and he said if he hadn’t been engaged he would have asked me. Oh my diary you can guess what a difficult question it was to answer when he asked if he should break off with his girl, but I thought of her, and won! He is so gentle to women and gentlemanly and kind, that he can’t hurt anyone and he is afraid of hurting her. A happy evening and a wonderful one.” Her sense of hopelessness with her own lack of strength, her illness, her parents and the impossibility of going to Australia with Ben is the all pervading theme of Olive’s 1919 diary. Downton Abbey has nothing on the situation in Bocking.

The diaries continue throughout the 20’s, giving an insight into the everyday hardships of labour strikes, hostile budgets, shortages and anger at Germany’s ill deserved post war prosperity. Olive mourns the absence of Ben throughout 1921 and 22.

There’s too much to encompass in a catalogue description that is already far too long. The diaries that cover the beginning and end of WW2 are particularly detailed; accounts of evacuees and rationing, the protracted illness of Olive’s Mother, air raids, U-Boats, the scuttling of the Graf Spee and Germany’s subsequent revenge attacks on unarmed fishermen, soldiers once again being billeted in Bocking and Braintree. Olive hungrily records every detail she can, including a few unfamiliar ones, including an rumour of the Germans dropping balloons full of mustard gas for children to pick up. She expresses great admiration for Poland’s last stand against the Nazis, and mourns the recognition of Franco. She is a woman of 45 now, still painting and occasionally selling her art and various crafts, still living with her ailing mother and father, worrying about the less fortunate members of her community, raising money and giving to good causes. Her crusade against the local Dean of the church and his uncharitable ways is worth a description all on its own. Several narratives are being built at the same time; an English village with all its trivialities, joys and small tragedies, the larger story of a world that from her perspective seems to lurch from turmoil to turmoil, and the story of a kind, resourceful, rather lonely woman, of passion, intelligence and sensibility, living her existence of small joys and great disruptions though the larger part of the 20th century. Earthshaking events on a Grand Stage it might not be, but frankly I would sooner transmit Olive De Horne Vaizey’s quiet voice, with its fretting and tea dances and unrequited loves and standing against small injustices, than I would any of the more imposing people we are taught to value over such as her. Unique.

[Ref: 762] £1,600

Jonathan Kearns Rare Books
ABA, ILAB, PBFA
jonathan@kearnsrarebooks.com
www.kearnsrarebooks.com