

A Bouquet  
of Memories:  
Reminiscences of  
Eighty Years

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## Preface

When our grandchildren started to ask questions about World War II—because they were learning about it in school—I realised that every year there are fewer and fewer people alive who actually lived through the War. Not only that, there are even fewer who are still able to write about their experiences. So it was initially for the benefit of our eight grandchildren and four children that the first part of this book was written, and although it is not intended to be a history of the war, there are some statistics taken from the newspapers of the day.

The second part of the book is just memories of some of the things that I did as a young woman. Even our children might be surprised at what I got up to. Our youngest son has described it as “compelling reading.” I hope he is right.

# 1

## How it all Began

When World War II was declared in September 1939, I was just seven years old and my brother Rory was nine. We were living with our parents in Forest Gate, a part of East London. By today's standards we were really quite poor, managing on just three pounds a week. Our father worked at Woolwich Arsenal examining detonators. He had been in the Navy when World War I came to an end and considered himself fortunate to have a job at all. I don't think our parents would have considered themselves poor, although they couldn't afford to rent or buy a house locally, so we shared a house with two single ladies.

My first home was a terraced house in Forest Gate, on the edge of London's East End, overlooking Plashet Park. I was born on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1932, in the front bedroom of a house in Lincoln Road. It was one of two rooms rented by my parents, Eleanor and Thomas McDermott, (known as Nell and Tom). My brother Rory was two years old at the time and until he was five years old, we all shared the same bedroom. Our living room was downstairs at the back of the house and from the window we could see the garden and beyond that, Plashet Park. We shared the kitchen and the toilet with the other occupants of the house, two single sisters who were, in fact, the tenants. Florrie and Alice Alford had grown up in that

house, the owner being another lady who had flatly refused to have electricity installed. Hence the rooms were lit by gaslight and heated by coal fires.



**My Father in the 1920s**

The kitchen was very basic, but probably no more so than many other kitchens in the 1930s. We had a gas cooker, a brick-built copper boiler and a shallow stone sink. There was no hot-water system, just a cold water tap. When we needed hot water, it was boiled up on the cooker or in the copper. Beneath the window in the kitchen was a semi-circular table. The back door of the house led from the kitchen into a lean-to, and at one end

of the lean-to was the toilet. We were fortunate in that we did not have to go outside to the toilet, although it was actually outside the house. We did not have a bathroom so we bathed in a zinc bath in our living area. When not in use the bath hung on the garden fence. The kitchen was painted dark green, and on one of the walls hung a long wooden plaque on which was written in black paint, the Lord's Prayer.

Our living room was very small but also very cosy. When we eventually moved, in February 1940, the removal men could not believe that so much furniture could be crammed into so small a space. The fireplace was a kitchen range, so a certain amount of cooking was done in the oven when the fire was alight. On one side of the fireplace there was a built-in dresser and on the other side a ceiling to floor cupboard.

We had a small gate-leg table and four Polish wooden chairs with round seats and round backs and also one larger chair of the same design with arms. To this day I have that chair. Another relic of those days that only went when my late mother's house was sold was a wooden armchair that had been "cut down" to make a suitable nursing chair, when we were babies. It gave our mother a good lap on which to

change our nappies. Our father, Thomas, was a prolific reader, so we had a very large bookcase crammed full of everything from Agatha Christie to G. K. Chesterton and Charles Dickens—we had a very large set of his books given to us by our grandfather.

We also had a treadle sewing machine, an essential piece of equipment as Mother made many of our clothes, having been in the needlework trade before she was married. When my maternal grandmother died, we inherited her piano, and somehow that was also incorporated into the tiny living room.

The floor was covered with lino, with a coconut mat in front of the fire. Our father was a great story teller and in the winter we would sit for hours in front of the fire, listening to fairy stories that he made up as he went along. On the dresser we had an accumulator wireless, which had a battery that we took to the bicycle shop to be recharged. Rory and I were avid listeners of “Children’s Hour.”

Perhaps the thing that I remember most about living in Lincoln Road was the park at the bottom of the garden. Separated by only a low railing at the bottom of our garden, we spent many happy hours in that park, on initially, Rory’s little blue Kiddie-car and our three-wheelers, and then our fairy-cycles, before we graduated to real bikes. Although by today’s standards I suppose we would be considered deprived, but compared with many of the children who came to play with us in the park we were well off.



**Rory and myself on our  
bikes in Plashet Park in 1938**

Every now and again we would turn out our toy cupboard and fill some carrier bags with the unwanted toys and give

them away to children in the park. I even gave my three-wheeled bike to a little boy who admired it.

We knew many regular visitors to the park—the people who walked their dogs; “grandad”, a veteran of WW I, who held a kind of “Kite Club” in a corner of the tennis courts; the cricketers who played every Saturday afternoon during the summer on the green nearest our garden; and many children who talked and played with us because we were always there.



**Rory, my Father, and myself  
in Plashet Park in 1935**

Those halcyon days came to an end with the outbreak of the Second World War, when we moved south of the river, partly for safety and partly to be closer to our father’s place of work. My memories of these years before the War are of a sort of Garden of Eden, where sorrow and unhappiness had not reached us and war was just a word. To our parents, however, the horrors of the First World War were only a short time in the past. When

the possibility of another war became a reality it must have been too terrible for them to contemplate.

During the year before war was declared things began to happen that indicated that in all probability there would be another conflict. A team of men came round and installed air raid shelters in our back garden. Search lights were tried out at night and air raid sirens tested during the day. Guns boomed out across the River Thames where Woolwich Arsenal was situated.

At school our teachers prepared us for evacuation by painting a rosy picture of life in the country with foster parents.

So why did we have to go to war? After the experience of the Great War (as the First World War was called) it was not something to be entered into lightly. In November 1932, the

Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, told the House of Commons "I think it is well for the man in the street to realise that there is no power on earth that can protect him from being bombed".

On the 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939 we were all in our little living room in Lincoln Road, Forest Gate listening to the "wireless". I was embroidering a picture of a church that my father had drawn on a piece of white cloth. At 10 o'clock it was announced that German troops had invaded Poland. At that moment the lives of millions of people, including that of our little family, changed forever.



**My Mother, myself, and Rory in  
Plasnet Park in 1935**

My parents must have discussed what they would do in the event of the Germans invading Poland. Rory and I knew nothing about their plans until that morning when we were told that with our mother we would be taken by car to Bognor Regis. The previous day we had seen a stream of children walking past our house on the way to the railway station. They were all being evacuated to places of safety as part of the Government scheme that we had been told about at school.

We had never been away from home, not even for one night and our parents decided that they could not let us go away under the Government scheme. Our Dad thought that London would be bombed that night and that was why we had to leave home immediately with Mother. When Rory and I realised that we were leaving Dad behind we began to cry and it seemed as though we cried for hours. Eventually we were sent out into the garden with a slice of cold fruit pudding; looking over the railings into the park we could see a large number of men busy digging public air-raid shelters.

The barrage balloon that had been based near the park gates was straining at its moorings and the park looked strangely deserted. Most of our little friends had been evacuated, and sadly we were never to see them again.

When we returned to the house a hired car was waiting to take us to Bognor Regis. We said a tearful goodbye to our father and Auntie Alice (with whom we shared the house), and an Irish lady that we called Auntie Molly, who was later killed by a bomb.

It was a long drive to Bognor and once we got over the crying it was a bit of an adventure. Rory had never been in a car before and I had only been on one journey when two teachers had taken me to Brentwood. We passed many groups of men who were digging sand out of the banks on the side of the road to make sandbags.

As we neared our destination I began to feel sick and as happens with little children I brought it up over everything. The one toy that I had been allowed to take, my teddy bear, did not escape and was "out of action" for weeks.

Joe and Win Baillie were friends of my grand-parents and they ran a boarding house in Bognor Regis. They had agreed to take us in if war was declared, so it was to their house (No. 5 Richmond Avenue) that we were heading.

I have read in books about the War that all the towns on the south coast were themselves evacuated. Well I can say that Bognor Regis was not one of these towns. It was overcrowded with evacuees from South London and we shared a house with ten children from Clapham and Balham.

Bearing in mind that the school holidays were not yet over, some of the summer guests were still in residence at Number 5 Richmond Avenue. These were two elderly ladies and a little boy with his aunt who came from Croydon.

We were welcomed by the Baillies with open arms and ushered into a side room where tea was laid out for the three of us. Joe could see that we were inclined to be tearful so he brought his little dog, Girlie, to see us. Girlie (or Josephine as

was her real name) did tricks for chocolate buttons. There was another dog Prince, a big Chow. Doing tricks would have been beneath his dignity, and he would only enter the house through the front door.

Win Baillie was a very motherly person although she and Joe did not have any children. Win's sister Lil also lived in the house and helped with the guests. Her fiancée was killed in the First World War and she had never married.