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English Women at Home during the Second World War: Anderson Shelters as Domestic Spaces

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By Stephanie Butler[1]

Abstract

This article examines representations of Anderson shelters in English women's Second World War epistolary correspondence, arguing that both the adaptation of shelters and the representation of these changes—as depicted in women's correspondence—evidences wartime resilience. The article argues that the domestication of these spaces designed for protection, rather than comfort, resonates with pervasive wartime discourses articulating the cultural value of the home.

Keywords: Second World War, domesticity, women's life-writing

Introduction

This article examines English women's personal correspondence to assess women's resilience as evidenced in their writings about their private Anderson shelters.[2] There is a paucity of attention to women's experiences within their homes and private shelters in research on British women and the Home Front during the Second World War.[3] I contend that by referencing women's personal correspondence written during the war we can add necessary texture to women's attitudes towards the dangers they faced within their domestic spaces. In this article I assess anonymised letters from a collection edited by Beatrice Curtis Brown, *Women of Britain* (1941), with an Introduction from Jan Struther. I have chosen this collection because these letters were written during the war, and were published with their authors' permission. In writing this article, I complicate the myth of British stoicism and resilience, reinforced in the collection's Introduction, by positing resilience as a more nuanced way of understanding how people responded to war.[4]

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[1] Stephanie Butler completed her Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada funded English Literature Ph.D. at Newcastle University in 2017. Her Ph.D. thesis investigated British women's use of letter-writing as peer support to cope with threatened and actual home loss during the Second World War. As a Ph.D. student she was a research fellow for the Saratoga Foundation for Women Worldwide, undertook a doctoral exchange with the English faculty at the University of Oxford, and published eight academic articles.

[2] There is not space in this article to engage in a gender-based comparison of women's versus men's experiences within their shelters. My statements about women should not be taken to imply that women suffered worse than men as a result of air raids.

[3] Most feminist research on British women during the Second World War focuses on women's war work rather than their experiences at home. See Gubar, 'This is my Rifle' (1987); Riley, 'Some Peculiarities' (1987); Braybon and Summerfield, *Out of the Cage* (1987); and Summerfield, *Women Workers* (1984) and *Reconstructing* (1998). With the exception of Grayzel, most sheltering references have interrogated public, rather than private ones. See for example, Bourke, *Fear* (2005); Noakes and Pattinson, 'Introduction' (2014); and Noakes 'War on the Web' (2014).

[4] For critiques of wartime stoicism and its influence on post-war cultural representations of people's experiences of war, see Calder, *Myth of The Blitz* (1991: 120); Acton, *Grief in Wartime* (2007: 57); Hartley, *Hearts Undefeated* (1994: 7); Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire* (2012: 220, 222-23, 286-87); and Noakes, 'War on the Web' (2014: 52-56).

I centralise women's domestication of private air raid shelters, and so build on Alison Light's (1991), Judy Giles' (2004), Claire Langhamer's (2005), and Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows' (2009) research on the cultural meanings of home and the importance of domestic pleasure. In contrast to this article, none of these scholars examine air raid shelters. By focusing on the domestication of air raid shelters I build on Susan Grayzel's (2012) scholarship on the air raids on the British Home Front during both wars. On the basis of letters and diaries written before the commencement of air raids, Grayzel argues that women were resistant to using air raid shelters. However, this article draws on letters women wrote later in the war, after air raids began, which demonstrate their enthusiasm for shelters. Giles challenges Western cultural interpretations of the home as a refuge from modernity in opposition to public domains associated with men, by demonstrating how women and domestic spaces have shaped and been shaped by politics and economics (2004:4, 60). I further undermine traditional binaries between domestic and public spaces by articulating how private Anderson shelters, designed to protect people during air raids, were domesticated. While air raid shelters are mentioned in scholarship on the British Home Front, most scholars centre public shelters, and where private shelters are discussed little attention is given to processes of domestication.

Women's Letters: Anderson Shelters as Symbols of Women's Wartime Resilience

Expanding on Giles' emphasis on the importance of comfortable and hygienic houses for women's wellbeing and self-esteem (2004:50), I investigate how comfort and hygiene were integral to women's willingness to use their private shelters. Angus Calder concedes that the duration of the raids, which necessitated long periods of time within these shelters, 'exposed the inconvenience of the private and public shelters; that people would have to sleep, eat and excrete in them night after night had not been allowed for' (1969:165). These discomforts led some women to refuse to even use their shelters. An English nanny, writing to her former employer who had evacuated to the U.S.A., confessed in a letter dated October 9, 1940 that because her friend's shelter had 'beetles, spiders, and worms' she 'decided [she] would as soon risk being bombed as to be frightened to death so [she] went up to [her] room' to sleep (Curtis Brown, 1941:155).[5] Her refusal to sleep in the shelter, out of a desire for comfort is echoed in a letter from a London Ambulance Driver dated October 11, 1940 in which she claimed: 'I take no more notice' of air raids 'and never dream of going to a shelter or any longer sleeping anywhere but in my own bed. If I am bombed—all right, but until then I shall be comfortable and as little tired as possible' (Curtis Brown, 1941:301). The problem of uncomfortable shelters is again raised in a letter from a ten-year-old girl dated November 8, 1940 in which the girl admitted that her family refused to use her grandmother's shelter 'because it is damp' (Curtis Brown, 1941:323). While these writers refused to use their unhygienic and uncomfortable shelters, the women centred in this article resolved sheltering problems so as to make best use of these spaces.

A common problem women identified was the coldness of shelters, particularly at night. As one eighty-year-old woman wrote to her grandniece on July 16, 1940: '[t]he raids are very alarming, especially at night when you have to get out of your warm bed to go to your shelter' (Curtis Brown, 1941:242). It was not just the dangers of air raids which affected women, but having to move from the relative warmth and cosiness of their beds into shelters, which were, at

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[5] Curtis Brown anonymised the women writers included in her collection, though did provide pseudonyms for the women featured in her chapter 'Londoners in Exile', who were marked by their husbands' professions, except for 'The Unmarried Woman.'

best, poor substitutes for the domestic comforts of the home. One of the most popular solutions to the cold shelter problem was donning a siren suit.[6] As is evident in another woman's letter of October 8, 1940, putting on the suit was incorporated into nightly routines: '[a]s soon as I have finished tea, I rush up stairs [*sic*] and change for the night, siren suit, bandeau socks, and thick shoes' (Curtis Brown, 1941:149). Other women, such as this ex-governess writing to her evacuated former employer on October 23, 1940, made use of old 'cloak[s]' and 'coat[s]' to keep 'cosy' at 'night' (Curtis Brown, 1941:295). Others combined warmer clothing choices with shelter modifications. One woman, writing to her sister on July 30, 1940 explained that although they wore warmer clothing (Curtis Brown, 1941:222-23), she bought 'a stove for the air raid shelter' out of concern for the children who 'have to go in sometimes twice in a night', because 'getting out of a nice warm bed' was 'not too good for the girls' (Curtis Brown, 1941:222). These women demonstrated agency by identifying and solving problems which undermined their shelters as comfortable spaces.

People required some time to acclimatise to their shelters, so reactions to them may have changed over time. Drawing on letters written in 1939, when these shelters were introduced, Grayzel demonstrates that some people—especially women—were averse to them. She observes:

> [i]t was mothers in these accounts who resisted leaving home to take shelter anywhere else, even that extension of domestic space and presumably feminine domain, the back garden. The reasons may well have been practical ones, but the emotional implications seem evident as well (2012:283)

The accounts she draws on were written prior to the declaration of war, or '[d]uring the Phony War from September 1939 through the spring of 1940' (Grayzel, 2012:285).[7] Therefore, it is unsurprising that these would differ slightly from some of the accounts I reference which were written after the Phony War when people had time to adjust to these shelters and had been exposed to air raids which made clear the importance of safety. As for the 'emotional implications' of these shelters, I agree with Grayzel who articulates that because 'the Anderson was, fundamentally, a fortified hole in the back garden' it was 'a reminder that war would come home' (2012:284). These shelters were intruders in people's gardens which symbolised the impending violence of war. Yet, not all women responded negatively to these spaces; some exerted effort to incorporate these spaces into the domestic.

Women's efforts to improve their Anderson shelters as comfortable domestic spaces, and their epistolary representations of these improvements, evidence their resilience. Psychological resilience basically means people faring better than expected in the face of extreme hardship or following exposure to potentially traumatic experiences (Masten, 2011:228; Windle, 2011:158-59). Social support, the ability to find the positive in a situation, and the capacity to regulate emotions despite experiencing high stress and negative affect are now viewed as important to fostering resilience (Connor and Davidson, 2003:76-82; Bonanno, Westphal, and Mancini, 2011:511-35; Padesky and Mooney, 2012:283; and Windle, 2011:155). Letters enabled women to

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[6] A 'siren suit' was 'like a snow suit' people wore 'over' their 'nightclothes' to 'keep' them 'warm in the cellar or shelter during a raid' (Curtis Brown, 1941: 220).

[7] Grayzel explains that '[t]he period between September 1939 and May 1940 came to be known as the "Phony War," as both Allied civilians and combatants mobilized for a conflict that remained, for the moment, geographically removed' (2012: 277).

receive social support which promoted this resilience.[8] Yet, there are certain behaviours, traits, or attitudes that are associated with more positive outcomes following exposure to extreme adversity (Connor and Davidson, 2003:76-82; Bonanno, Westphal, and Mancini, 2011:511-35). Some of these attitudes such as humour, competency, and self-compassion are evident in letters written by women who found positives in their domestic discomforts.[9]

Facing dangers to their living spaces, themselves, and their families, many people set to installing Anderson shelters in their gardens, setting up Morrison shelters in-doors, or moving into public shelters at night.[10]Anderson shelters, in particular, had an ambiguous presence in people's lives as both signs of wartime danger necessitating removal from the house and as uneasy domestic spaces; activities people undertook within their houses, from cooking and eating to sleeping, were relocated to these shelters.[11] Anderson shelters were fairly widely distributed during the war, and so the frequency of their depictions in women's letters is understandable: by the time war had been declared, almost 'one and a half million free "Anderson" shelters […] had been distributed to householder with gardens' (Calder, 1969:54). By June 12, 1940 Sir John Anderson, the Home Secretary and Minister of Home Security, notified parliament that as a result of his 'shelter programme', implemented over the last 'nineteen months', around '[t]wenty million people, over half the civilian population, could now find shelter space simultaneously' (Calder, 1969:113). Yet, people's relationships with these spaces were varied; some refused to use them due to the above referenced design flaws while others attempted to domesticate them.

It is important to recognise, however, research limitations inherent to selecting women's letters as primary sources. The wartime lives of working-class women have received attention in previous feminist scholarship drawing on other sources.[12] The edited collection investigated in this article privileges white middle-class English women, though a few working-class women in England, Scotland, and Wales are included. Despite anonymisation of the letter-writers, it is apparent that black and minority ethnic women were completely omitted from that publication. Black and minority ethnic women were present on the British Home Front, but have largely been ignored in popular and scholarly, even feminist, representations of the war. Lack of intersectionality in earlier feminist scholarship and difficulties accessing relevant archival materials at least partially account for these omissions. Stephen Bourne, in *Mother Country: Britain's Black Community on the Home Front 1939-45* (2010) has raised awareness of black people's wartime presence and their contributions to the British war effort. Although far more materials in public archives are from white English women, it is possible for people with requisite patience and financial means to gather evidence of a diverse British Home Front; pervasive

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[8] For more about epistolary peer support and resilience see my articles 'The Circulation of Grief' (2016), and 'Correspondence, Peer Support, and Wellness' (2017).

[9] For self-compassion see Neff *et al* 'Self-Compassion' (2007). For creativity and humour see Padesky and Mooney 'Strengths-Based' (2012). For Competence see Lightsey 'Resilience' (2006).

[10] For information about Anderson shelter installation, see Calder, *The People's War* (1991: 54, 112-13, 165, 179-80). Regarding Morrison shelters, see Calder, (1991:187). Public shelters are referenced in Calder (1991: 25, 54, 165, 180-87).

[11] Morrison shelters were private shelters for people without back gardens; these were, by design, large metal cages that could double as dining room tables.

[12] For research on British working-class women's experiences of the war see Giles' *The Parlour and the Suburb* (2004), and Jolly's 'Dear Laughing Motorbyke' (1995), *Dear Laughing Motorbyke* (1997), and *Everyday Letters* (1997).

resistance to recognizing the U.K.'s racially and ethnically diverse history, prior to the collapse of empire, makes publishing this evidence difficult.[13]

The wartime rhetoric of the 'people's war', celebrating the sacrifices and sufferings of the working-classes, has been maintained in much post-war scholarship in its tendency to centralise public shelters and the experiences of urban working-class people within them.[14] In contrast, investigations of Anderson shelters, such as Grayzel's research and this article, focus on middle-class women living in suburbs. Garden space was necessary for the foundations of these shelters, suggesting they were more frequently used in the suburbs, rather than in the densely populated urban centres more heavily targeted by bombing. Sir Percy Harris stated on April 4, 1939 these shelters could be used in 'the backyards of smaller houses in suburbs and places where the houses are scattered' rather than in 'towns like London, Liverpool and Manchester' (*in* Grayzel, 2012:275). These shelters were used in the countryside, though bombing there was less frequent. By investigating shelters, largely located within suburbs, my research engages with Giles' feminist scholarship on the post-war suburb as a space wherein upwardly mobile working-class women could find better houses than those in which they were raised (2004:64). Like much research on British women during the war, Giles privileges working-class women, but as a result of its topic and primary sources this article centres middle-class women.

Irrespective of their exact class positioning, some women used letters to show off their shelters, which indicates classed performances or ambitions. A woman writing to her aunt in October [undated], 1940 aptly noted that people often discussed 'what they want[ed] and what they [were] going to get for the shelter' as if it was 'just like furnishing another room of their house' (Curtis Brown, 1941:230). Prior to this admission she mentioned her appreciation for her own shelter: 'Mam has got the shelter nice and comfy' having installed 'a standing bed' so they could 'sleep in now all night' (Curtis Brown, 1941:229). The ex-governess' description of her shelter in a letter to her former employer, dated October 23, 1940 further illustrates this point. She expressed gratitude for having her own shelter (Curtis Brown, 1941:295), and described it as 'delightfully cosy' after having 'spen[t] a lot on it to get it drained' and to install 'duck boards, ground sheets, mattresses and eiderdown on floor and bunks on either side, portable wireless and electric light' (Curtis Brown, 1941:293). The 'Official's Wife', a decidedly middle-class woman, relayed to the 'Soldier's Wife' on August 18, 1940 how she and her husband similarly customised their shelter with 'electric light, shelves, a long seat, [and] a concrete floor', so it '[held] 5 quite easily and 9 or 10 in a pinch' (Curtis Brown, 1941:94). In a letter of August 21, 1940, she described how she and a friend were even 'fixing up a telephone between' their shelters so they could converse during air raids (Curtis Brown, 1941:98). These arrangements transformed shelters into domestic spaces, which had the additional benefits of making the war—and its impacts on daily life—more tolerable.

A.H. Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* (1943), developed in the U.S.A. during the war, sheds light on the problems posed by poorly designed, and inadequately furnished, air raid shelters. Each of the human needs he outlined, from the basic to the most advanced, is needed to help people achieve personal growth, or self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943:370). These needs build on the next

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[13] While completing my SSHRC-funded Ph.D. and a postdoctoral project funded by Newcastle University, I located information on black and minority ethnic women living in the U.K. during the Second World War. Some known locations for private papers of black women are the Imperial War Museum London, the National Archives in Kew, and the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton. Letters from a German-Scottish woman (another ethnic minority) living in England can be found in the Vera Brittain Archive at McMaster University.

[14] See, for instance, Calder's *The People's War* (1991), Bourke's *Fear* (2005), Noakes' and Pattinson's Introduction (2014), and Noakes' 'War on the Web' (2014).

so that the most basic (physiological) is foundational to all the rest (Maslow, 1943:370). These needs, in order of foundational to highest level, are as follows: physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943:372-84). When people's basic needs are not met they are motivated to achieve them; once these are met they can move on to self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943:384-86). Thus, when people's physiological and safety needs were met by their shelters they concerned themselves with improving social connections (e.g. the installation of telephone lines, requirements for letter writing, and space for guests), esteem (e.g. decorations and aesthetic customisations, cleaning, bragging about customisations, and showing off to guests), and self-actualisation (e.g. self-growth opportunities such as reading, knitting, or writing creatively). People also wanted opportunities to keep active so they would not have to sit around waiting anxiously for air raids to end - a psychological need provided by proper shelter customisation enabling activity. I argue that women's resilience was bolstered when these needs were met within their sheltering spaces.

By accepting shelters as necessary, and making them as comfortable as possible to suit the needs of their users, people demonstrated resilience. Customisation required that people not deny the reality of the situation, avoid the shelters, or feel too distressed to take appropriate action. Writing of British morale during the war, Edward Glover, advised that keeping busy, including undertaking Air Raid Precautions (ARP) and creating safety, could help them reduce fears which would undermine morale (1940:22-23). His advice is mirrored in women's letters. On August 28, 1939, Rose Macaulay wrote to her sister Jean that she thought undertaking ARP was 'a good thing, as it gives people something they feel useful to do, and may actually diminish the effects of raids, and therefore lessen fear and prevent collapse of nerves' and 'a bad raid being a knock-out blow' (1964:83). Macaulay emphasised the importance of keeping busy, and even of taking practical preventative measures. While waiting around in shelters could be discomfiting for women, the process of customisation and the results improved at least some women's attitudes towards sheltering.

These women's self-reports indicate that customising shelters to allow women to do some kind of work, instead of sitting around, was important for promoting resilience. In her letter to her sister, Eve Grandison (in the U.S.A.) dated July 5, 1942, Ada McGuire insisted that the air raids 'are not so bad if you are busy helping. It is the sheltering and listening that makes one apprehensive. I think of how Rhoda and I crawled over those rafters to put the fire out while Jerry was circling round overhead and somehow didn't think of being frightened'. The ability to take action was considered by McGuire and many other women (if their letters are any indication) to be psychologically beneficial. McGuire had a positive story about how she and her other sister, Rhoda, responded to a potentially frightening situation with a surprising lack of fear. The ability to act—to solve problems—helped McGuire to cope with the war; she was more afraid sitting around waiting for something to happen than when she had a mission to accomplish. Although McGuire's account is only one of many similar responses from different women, this passage suggests that sitting around in a shelter, rather than being productive or active, could be psychologically detrimental to women.

At least one woman raised concerns that her family's relative safety in their shelter would interfere with their ability to protect their home. On July 16, 1940 she wrote: '[j]ust inside our front door we have a shovel with long handle and a pail of earth' and '[o]utside the front and back door there are pails of water, so you can see how seriously we are taking to our obligations' (Curtis

Brown, 1941:143).[15] 'With these things we hope to deal effectively with fire bombs, but as we shall be in our dug out (we hope) I am afraid the house will be burnt up before we discover it', she explained (Curtis Brown, 1941:143). The shelter, no matter how domesticated, was no replacement for the home. She was concerned that being too comfortable—particularly asleep—in their shelter might interfere with the necessary use of the tools they placed in accordance with fire-fighting ARP. These are reasonable concerns, yet in her next letter, of October 8, 1940, she revealed that these fears were unfounded. She described incendiary bombs which were dropped near her home one evening. 'This time of night we were dozing in the shelter when we heard this thing drop. With one accord we leaped out', she wrote and went on to describe her husband's heroics in using the fire-fighting tools to extinguish fires threatening to damage property and to set Epping forest ablaze (Curtis Brown, 1941:146-47). In this instance, at least, being comfortable enough to sleep in the shelter did not interfere with the ability to hear bombs and take necessary action to prevent the shelter from being the only domestic space left to the family.

The process of preparing, stocking, and customising the shelter met Glover's specifications for anxiety-reducing useful action. People worked to improve the safety of their shelters, and by making those shelters more comfortable they enhanced the likelihood that these shelters would be used during air raids rather than abandoned for more comfortable, but less safe, spaces. The Home Office (1938) advised people to purchase items for their refuge-rooms, some of which are equally applicable to shelters. These items included furniture, 'warm coverings', utensils, gas-proof storage for food, 'a tin-opener' and 'plenty of water for drinking' and 'washing' (The Home Office, 1938:18). For hygiene, people were advised to have a washing 'basin' with 'soap' and 'towels' for 'washing things', along with 'chamber pots, toilet-paper', 'disinfectant' and 'a screen for privacy' (The Home Office, 1938:18). Proper lighting, first aid supplies, and a wireless radio were also considered important (The Home Office, 1938:10). In addition to those basic needs, people were encouraged to have 'books, writing materials, cards' and 'toys for children' and a 'gramophone with records' for entertainment (The Home Office, 1938:18). Grayzel observes that '[t]he implicit idea that one would need entertainment in a refuge did little to obscure the larger intent of these handbooks' (2012:282). Irrespective of the government's intentions, entertainment was a reasonable consideration to encourage use of these shelters and minimise the above referenced negative psychological impacts of waiting for air raids to end.

Although Grayzel is correct to note the disjunction between shelters as military spaces and government depictions of shelters as domestic (2012:282, 284), women's depictions of entertainment within their shelters indicate resilience. Entertainment, including of guests, allowed women to normalise their shelters by still engaging in activities they enjoyed despite the potential dangers which necessitated their relocation from the house into the shelter. In her letter to 'The Soldier's Wife', dated August 18, 1940, 'The Official's Wife', described how she, along with her family, visiting friends, and neighbours, 'had to have lunch in the shelter' that day as a result of heavy air raid activity (Curtis Brown, 1941:96). Adding a glamorous touch to the event, she mentioned how the men, who were 'standing outside', kept 'handing in claret and cider' to the women (and the writer's father) who were taking shelter inside (Curtis Brown, 1941:96). Forgetting that she had already relayed this information in an earlier letter, on August 21, 1940, she reiterated 'that on Sunday a large party of us had our lunch in the shelter (the men pretending

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[15] These obligations refer to the Air Raid Precautions issued by the government during the war, which were the responsibility of householders whose adherence to ARP was regulated by police, air raid wardens, and fire watchers. For more information about ARP see the Home Office, *Air Raid Precautions* (1938); Calder, *The People's War* (1969); and Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire* (2012).

to keep watch outside but really enjoying themselves with their field glasses)' (Curtis Brown, 1941:98). Although she detailed heavy air raid activity, she expressed no fear in these letters, but instead amusement and concern with the delicious foods she could make from her garden produce (Curtis Brown, 1941:97-99). These dangers that forced her into her shelter were transformed into an entertaining lunch party where people could delight in delicious food and drink. Middle-aged men (such as her husband) were recast as protective heroes who treated the air raids as a sport to watch at a perceived distance from the dangers to which they were so close.

Some women even compared their shelters to houses, valuing aesthetic improvements to shelter interiors and exteriors. In her letter to the 'Soldier's Wife', of August 19, 1940, the 'Official's Wife' relayed, of her shelter, that '[r]oses trail[ed] over the sandbags and in fact it [was] a very dainty and Ideal-Homey affair [*sic*]' (Curtis Brown, 1941:94). This homey, rose covered, description signals an attempted conceptual reabsorption of the shelter—a symbol of air raid danger—into the domestic. Lyndsey Stonebridge connects roses to anxiety, sexuality, and the death drive in the wartime fiction of Henry Green (1998:25, 27, 29-31). In these letters, the symbolism works in the reverse – these English garden favourites camouflaged the disjunction between peaceful garden spaces and warzones. These shelters were located within gardens, so covering them over with flowers or vegetation could be psychologically and symbolically regenerative. Shelters—intruders in people's gardens necessitated by the violence of war—could be made to appear as though they belonged as glorified, and (hopefully) more comfortable, garden sheds. The nanny, writing to her former employer on August 30, 1940, 'notic[ed]' that some of the 'air raid shelters in people's gardens on the way to London […] have rockeries with gnomes and rabbits on top. One had marrows growing, and another had a nice crop of red tomatoes' (Curtis Brown, 1941:151-52). Just as they customised interiors for physically and psychologically soothing reasons, some women wanted their shelters to interfere as little as possible with their gardens as places where food could be grown or flowers enjoyed. As such, both interior and exterior customisation helped women to transform these signs of war into uneasy domestic spaces.

Grayzel offers insight into tensions between military purposes of shelters and the domestication of them encouraged by government handbooks and propaganda, and by popular representations of these shelters' interiors and exteriors which 'highlighted their *domestic* as much as *protective* aspects, their aesthetics as much as function' (2012:284). Similar dynamics are present in women's personal correspondence, indicating they may have internalised these discourses; moreover, I suggest these letters reveal some women made their shelters more comfortable as part of their processes of adapting to war. Grayzel posits that popular and governmental depictions of private shelters were inspired by people's 'reluctance to make use of these structures', shelters' 'failure[s] to alleviate anxiety, or their inherent lack of comfort' (2012:284). While I agree with her, I contend that depictions of domesticated shelters were not unrealistic; people could be encouraged to enhance their shelters and so improve their experiences within them. She observes that reabsorption of shelters into garden landscapes, as elaborated in the previous paragraph, was common in government and popular representations of these shelters (Grayzel, 2012:284). Photographs of interiors portrayed families engaging in domestic routines such as a mother reading her children to sleep; photographs of exteriors emphasised the verisimilitude of the shelter's exterior with the garden it inhabited - and even demonstrated that gardens could be planted on top of shelters (Grayzel, 2012:284). She remarks that these 'images contrasted sharply with the military purposes of these shelters, but at least they showed the population making use of them' (Grayzel, 2012:284). In practice, however, these 'military

purposes' needed to be reconciled with quotidian practices if people were to comfortably use their shelters.

Admiration of such shelter refurbishments was shared in these letters, further indicating that a nice shelter was perhaps a status symbol. The above referenced nanny, writing on October 9, 1940, described to her former employer an acquaintance's shelter sleeping arrangements: '[t]hey sleep in their shelter since the two houses opposite had a direct hit' (Curtis Brown, 1941:155). She admired this shelter, which had been customised for comfort, and was presumably clean:

> I wish I could draw a picture of their shelter. Ma, Pa, and Betty sleep on a mattress on the floor. Mrs. A. has put a shelf all around, her daughter sleeps on one side, her husband on the other, and the baby at the head. Mrs. A. offered to make room for me on the floor if I was afraid to stay alone (Curtis Brown, 1941:155)

She then contrasted this one to her friend's, which she considered too dirty and insect-infested to be worth using. As with shelter refurbishments, shelter cleanliness was important not just for regular use, but for self-promotion. A woman writing to her aunt on October [undated] 1940, claimed that cleaning 'the shelter in the morning and getting it ready at night is all in the day's work now. The door step is not the last thing you have to do before you are finished the mornings work but the air raid shelter' (Curtis Brown, 1941:230). Incorporating the shelter into regular house cleaning routines signals their domestication. Furthermore, this description of diligent cleanliness is a performance of a socially acceptable identity. As previously observed, when shelters were unclean guests might refuse to use them, and then write negative evaluations of these shelters to other people. Negative reviews could damage women shelter owners' reputations since maintaining cleanliness was considered the responsibility of women.

Women's letters should not be read as straightforward accounts of facts. While their letters likely cohere with reality, how they chose to portray themselves, their shelters, and their experiences within their shelters was influenced by cultural and governmental discourses pertaining to shelters, wartime stoicism, and traditional gender roles. It can be difficult to guarantee a particular interpretation of a life based on material available, which is largely incomplete and can be interpreted in myriad ways (Stanley, 1999:10-12). Margaretta Jolly contends that 'letters are [not] deliberate lies', though she cautions us 'to be suspicious of the assumption that they are the spontaneous outpourings of the true self', suggesting that 'we need to see a subtle interchange between fantasy, writing and relationships' (Jolly and Stanley, 2005:93). Like Nancy Miller and Linda Anderson, I eschew deconstructive approaches to women's autobiography because women have not had the same opportunities for self-definition and authority as men so undermining female authorship appears ethically problematic (Miller, 1988:106; Anderson, 1997:3). Overemphasising identity performance in analyses of life-writing negates the political power of women's autobiography as bearing witness to legitimate and lived experiences of marginalisation (Smith, 1990:17-18). Women's self-representations can be sites of rebellion (Stanley, 1992:92), which centre, respect, and validate women's accounts of war. They ensure that '[t]he white, male story is dislodged from the centre' (Smith, 1990:18). Thus, I caution that psychological factors rather than outright fantasy mediate between people's lives and their narratives.

Although external factors shaped women's letters, the importance of being able to decide for themselves what events to recount and how to describe them—rather than being written about

or spoken for—must not be discounted.[16] Valuing these letters as sites in which women provided responses to, and versions of, their actual experiences is important because these letters are testimonies to women's gendered experiences as civilians in zones of conflict. Nonetheless, I acknowledge the pressures on women to portray themselves in particular ways within their correspondence, and how the editorial process may have further shaped the presentation of their letters. Not only did people face government censorship when sending transatlantic letters, such as those privileged in Curtis Brown's collection, but they were pressured to censor themselves in various ways depending on their relationships with their correspondents. For example, these women may have felt pressured to emphasise their abilities to render shelters comfortable and to normalize their daily lives despite the dangers and hardships of war. This collection was part of a pervasive cultural and political propaganda project of fostering the U.S.A. as an ally (Jolly, 1997b:83); such a wide-ranging agenda likely influenced how some of these women wrote to their initial, transatlantic, correspondents, and more so which letters were selected for inclusion in this collection.

Drawing on feminist auto/biography studies scholarship focused on the importance of relationality in women's life-writing, I suggest these letters emphasise the importance of relationships in the context of war.[17] Each of these letters was sent to a correspondent to continue a relationship, the contents of these letters largely referenced other people important to the writers, and these letters were then anonymised and published collectively to present a particular image of British women's experiences at home during the war. This collection furthermore fostered individual, cultural, and political solidarities between British and American women. Thus, I argue it deserves serious consideration as an example of 'collective solidarity' (Friedman, 1988:40) amongst women that challenges the governmental and cultural narratives with which it engages and demonstrates the limitations of male canonical approaches to life-writing as deeply individualistic.[18] Moreover, my research topic, the domestication of air raid shelters, means that women's relationships are centralised. Many of these women were not just refurbishing or cleaning air raid shelters for themselves, but had children or grandchildren for whom they were responsible (or had older parents and husbands). As such, traditional gender roles highlighting women's caregiving and homemaking capacities remain largely unchallenged in these letters. However, I suggest that the dangers war presented to women, even in their quotidian duties, requires us to rethink the potential for domestic labour to constitute heroism or subversion.[19]

The domestic heroism of women, evidenced throughout the collection, is foregrounded by Jan Struther's Introduction. Struther is best known in the U.K. for her character, *Mrs. Miniver*, who started out as the focal point for Struther's articles in *The Times*, later published as a book (1939 in the U.K. and 1940 in the U.S.A.), and then adapted into movie which picked up where the articles and books left off by featuring life during the Blitz (1942). As will become evident, there was strategic value in having Struther pen the Introduction to this collection. Light claims that Struther's writing as Mrs. Miniver influenced English middle-class interwar cultural redefinitions of the home as a positive space of privacy, comfort, and self-growth for women (1991:127). The emphasis on the home (and domestication of shelters) in Curtis Brown's

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[16] For feminist life-writing research on gender-based and cultural influences on women's life-writing see Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness* (1973: 27), and Friedman, 'Authorizing' (1988: 38-39).

[17] For relationality in women's life-writing see Friedman 'Authorizing' (1988).

[18] See Rowbotham (1973: 27, 29), and Friedman (1988: 34-56).

[19] I am here influenced by Cvetokovich's *An Archive of Feeling* (2003), particularly her investigation of lesbian caregiving in the context of Aids activism.

collection reflects these middle-class values. Both Light and Grayzel argue the importance of Struther's book and particularly the Mrs. Miniver film for elevating ordinary people and their domestic lives to the level of heroism (Light, 1991:113, 154; Grayzel, 2012:301, 303-04, 309). Furthermore, the war was positioned by Struther as an opportunity to learn 'positive lessons' regarding the value of the idea of home, not just the actuality, and the importance of participatory citizenship (Grayzel, 2012:303). Despite negative critical responses to the film (Light, 1991:153-54; Grayzel, 2012:308-09), it won 'the Academy Award for Best Picture' (Grayzel, 2012:301) and was credited by both Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill with encouraging America's entrance into the war and with advancing the Allied cause (Light, 1991:113). Struther's Introduction to Curtis Brown's collection, alongside the publication and cinematic release of *Mrs. Miniver*, all worked to advance a notion of transatlantic solidarity between British and American women focused on the cultural value of the home.

In her Introduction to Curtis Brown's collection, Struther articulated the impact of war on civilians, and how this interfered with people's home lives, particularly via home loss, evacuation, military service, and billeting (1941:6-8). She suggested that the 'disruption of family life [was] probably the greatest ordeal' for the 'nation' because as a people 'they tend[ed] to stay put, to go on living in the same house for years and years' rather than moving frequently (Struther, 1941:9). Yet, she positioned these disruptions as positive because if people were only fighting to protect their houses they might be more tempted to 'surrender' (Struther, 1941:10). Since people's residences and daily lives were already so unsettled, she contended, they 'were fighting for something more precious than bricks and mortar' or their own 'home' lives – they were 'fighting for the idea of home life' and 'for the right of all human beings to live how and where they like' (Struther, 1941:10). I suggest that these women letter-writers' insistence on domesticating their shelters, to make shelters more homey, was part of this fight. While accepting such shelters as necessary, these women insisted that air raids should not mean they have to give up the comforts of the home – even if they have to refurbish buildings made for military purposes.

Conclusion

In this article I argued that in their wartime letters, women articulated their subjective experiences of the dangers war posed to them at home. These letters also demonstrate how the war forced women and their families to reconsider what constitutes a domestic space – even air raid shelters needed to be made more comfortable if people were to use them instead of risking their lives for the sake of sleep. Although we should not take women's letters as unmediated fact, they do provide an understanding of how some women perceived the war. These transformations of uncomfortable, but necessary, air raid shelters into domestic spaces demonstrate women's agency (physically and narratively), and their resilience. Yet, the collection herein examined is reflective of, and contributes to, cultural conceptualisations of English wartime stoicism which require further interrogation.

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