



Dear Helen: Wartime Letters from a Londoner to Her American Pen Pal

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In 1937, Betty Swallow was a young London secretary enjoying the social whirl of the world's most sophisticated metropolis. She came to know fellow movie buff Helen Bradley of Kansas City through a movie magazine, and their initially lighthearted correspondence about film stars came to encompass a world war—and reflect Betty's unique view of it.

Today there are countless descriptions of wartime Britain from historians and journalists; *Dear Helen* depicts World War II—from its buildup to its aftermath—from the perspective of an average London citizen, with details of daily life that few other documents provide. In letters written from 1937 to 1950 and now housed at the Winston Churchill Memorial and Library at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, Betty shares accounts of the Blitz and wartime deprivations, then of the postwar austerity programs, in passages that interweave daily terror with talk about theater, clothes, and family outings.

Betty is the epitome of English pluck: patriotic, practical, and romantic despite the bombs falling about her. She laments the lack of ingredients for a proper Christmas pudding, but Helen's holiday package of candy, nylons, and cosmetics helps make up for the shortages. She shares graphic descriptions of the relentless attacks on London but tells also of how silk stockings or a trip to the cinema could take the edge off nights spent in an underground shelter—where “lying about on wet and cold stone floors, breathing bad air” took a toll on her health.

These letters do more than document headlines and daily life: they candidly convey British attitudes toward American isolationism prior to Pearl Harbor and reveal how the English felt about taking on the Nazis alone. They also tell of the social changes that transformed English society—including Betty's transformation from Tory to Socialist—and how the cold war had a different impact on British citizens than on Americans. Throughout the exchange, the haven that Betty and Helen shared in the world of movies becomes a frequent counterpoint to the stress of the war.

Dear Helen is a book of rich personal drama that further attests to the British-American “special relationship.” Through this sustained correspondence spanning the war years, we meet a real person whose reflections shed light on British opinion during the harshest times and whose experiences give us new insight into the horror of the Blitz.

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