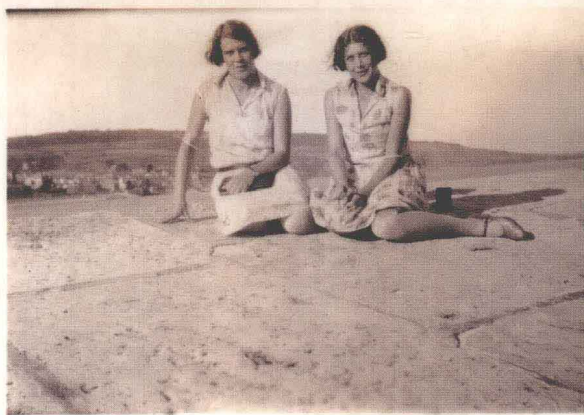


SUMMER PRUNING OF ROSES.



# Margaret FORSTER

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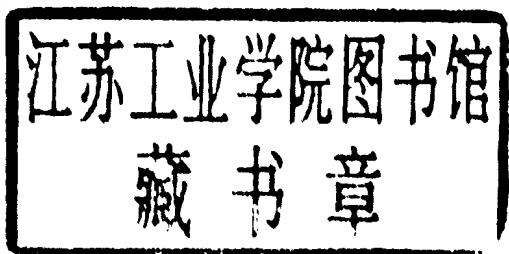


*Diary of*  
*an Ordinary Woman*  
a novel

# DIARY OF AN ORDINARY WOMAN

1914-1995

Margaret Forster



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FOR SUSAN MORRIS

WITH THANKS



## Introduction

In May 1999, I received a letter from a stranger, Joanna King, which seemed at first to be one of those pleasant fan letters that authors are occasionally cheered by, but which turned out to be something else. Joanna King's husband had an aunt, Millicent King, aged 98 in July, who had kept a diary from the age of 13 until she was 94. Neither Joanna nor her husband nor any member of their family had ever been allowed to read any of these diaries but they were sure that, because their relative was a woman of strong opinions, they would be interesting. The point of writing to me was to ask my advice on what might be done with them after their owner's death. Joanna had read a memoir I'd written (*Hidden Lives*, about my grandmother and mother) and, because it was the story of two ordinary women with no claim to fame, it had made her wonder if I might agree that there was some value in Millicent King's diaries as a social document. Could I suggest what might be done with them?

What I suggested was that one of the universities with a department devoted to Women's Studies might be keen to accept the diaries, and I enclosed various names and addresses. I said the thought of anyone keeping a diary over such a length and span of time, so neatly covering most of a century, was in itself extraordinary, and I would love to read them myself. This brought another letter from Joanna saying this was what she had hoped, that is, that I myself would be intrigued enough to want to 'make something of them'. I hadn't, in fact, meant that I'd like to do this but once it had been suggested, in that vague kind of way, I began to toy with the prospect. But what form

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could this 'making something of them' take? Whatever Millicent King's diaries turned out to be, she was hardly Virginia Woolf. If I tried to edit the diaries I'd be stuck with the problem of how to make the ordinary interesting unless I was very lucky and the content turned out not to be ordinary at all. Or could I use them to write a biography? But who would want to read the biography of someone of whom they had never heard?

I wrote back again saying that I was drawn to trying to use the diaries in some way but that I thought Joanna should think very carefully about the possible consequences of letting me have them. She, and more importantly Millicent King herself, might not like whatever I made of them. I pointed out that it is quite dangerous letting a writer loose in a field of very personal material – I might run amok and trample on sensitive areas. I said that, in any case, I was busy finishing a book and wouldn't be free to consider anything else for at least six months; so why didn't she discuss with her husband's aunt whether it would be wise to let me have a free hand with her diaries, and they could let me know in October. A week later, I had a phone call from Millicent King herself. Her voice was strong and confident and, if I hadn't known she was 98, I would never have guessed. She said she was delighted to hear that I thought her diaries might have some worth but that she worried that Joanna might have given me the impression that they contained exciting material, and she was afraid this was not the case. 'They may be trash,' she said. I said I was sure they would not be; but she said I should not be so sure, and that she wanted to send me some samples and then I would know if it was worth 'putting up with another eighty-odd years'. If I decided it was, I could come and collect all the diaries in the autumn.

The samples arrived a few days later, with a covering note from Millicent King herself, the handwriting a little faint, but clear, even though she apologised for its untidiness (it's true it wavered all over the page). They were, she wrote, from the first diary she ever kept, in 1914, when she was 13. They'd been photocopied from what looked like a lined exercise book with the dates written in the margin. I was fascinated by them straightaway. The writing was fluent and lively, and seemed driven by some sort of inner energy which, though the content was mundane enough, gave it a sense of drama. I kept a diary myself at that age and it was embarrassing to look it out and



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compare how I wrote with how young Millicent wrote. If she could write with such vigour at 13, how would she write at 23, 33, right up to 93? I was suddenly filled with enthusiasm to find out, and wrote yet another letter, saying that nothing would give me more pleasure than to read all the diaries and perhaps try to edit them. Could I come in October and collect them? Millicent said yes, and we agreed to fix a date once I returned to London from the Lake District.

I have promised the King family not to identify the village in which they still live (or did at the time of writing) except to say it is in the West Country. I got a train from Paddington to the station in the town nearest their village and Joanna King met me there. She told me a little about herself as she drove me to Millicent King's home, describing how she had met her husband Harry and had come to know Millicent herself, who, it turned out, had only comparatively recently moved from London to be near them. She explained that Millicent was living in a cottage at the end of the lane leading to their farm, so it was very easy to keep an eye on her without her forgoing her independence. Joanna passed the cottage at least twice a day, taking her two children to and from their school, and Harry was always coming and going in that direction as he went about his work on the farm. Millicent was frail but perfectly capable of looking after herself and she resented any suggestion that the time might soon come when she could no longer do so. She had been in hospital recently for a minor operation (Joanna didn't say for what) and had agreed, though most reluctantly, to go into a nursing home afterwards to convalesce. She was booked in for two weeks but after one night had discharged herself, saying she felt fine and couldn't abide being among so many old and sickly folk, and had taken a taxi home. She was, said Joanna, indomitable.

It was hardly surprising that by the time we arrived at Millicent's cottage I had built up a picture of her as a suffragette type, imagining her to be a physically as well as mentally formidable woman, even though I knew that people of 98 are unlikely to fit such a description. I thought she would be tall and imposing so the biggest surprise when she opened her door was to find she was small, quite tiny in fact, I guessed no more than five feet or so. She was not in any way bowed or hunched but held herself erect, seeming to push her shoulders

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firmly back as she greeted me and holding her head high. She wore gold-rimmed spectacles and I could see a deaf aid in her left ear. She had on a pretty, flowery dress and a lilac cardigan which picked out the colour of the floral pattern. When she turned to lead the way into the cottage she steadied herself with one hand on the wall but then walked (without a stick) quite steadily into her living-room.

It became immediately apparent that she did not want Joanna to stay and equally apparent that Joanna had intended to. Millicent suggested that Joanna was busy and had lots to do, and she did it in such a way that for Joanna not to agree would have seemed rude. Joanna did try to say that she had been going to make me some lunch after my long journey but Millicent said she already had something prepared and that, if Joanna came back about three o'clock to run me to the station, this would fit in very nicely with picking the children up from school. So Joanna left, if reluctantly, and Millicent smiled and said she was a good girl but inclined to fuss. 'Now,' she said, 'shall we get down to business?' Business is what the next hour or so felt like. Somehow, I'd imagined that I'd sit and sip tea and be shown photograph albums while Millicent rambled on about her past. But no. First I was closely questioned about my own life and then about my reading habits. Millicent, it transpired, had been a great reader all her life and warned me that her diaries were full of comments on her reading which I might find tedious. I said that, on the contrary, I'd be fascinated and would read along with her, just as I'd done with Elizabeth Barrett Browning when I had been working on a biography of her. This, I think, pleased her. She then moved on to raise the question of what I thought a diary was for. Why, she asked, did I think an ordinary woman such as herself had gone on keeping a diary all these years? It was obviously a test question and I took time answering it, carefully suggesting several possible reasons, and emphasising that it seemed not as extraordinary to me as it might do to others. I hadn't kept a diary every one of the fifty years since I kept my first, aged 10, but I'd kept enough diaries to know how compulsive the habit can become and what strange satisfaction it can give. We discussed this, the satisfaction, and she said that hers had sometimes annoyed as much as satisfied her and that sometimes she had hated her diary and had felt horribly bullied by the compulsion to keep it.

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I was beginning to wonder if we would ever get to the stage when I would be shown these diaries, but after a snack of cheese and biscuits, and some delicious rhubarb tart which Millicent had made herself, she took me into a little room at the back of the cottage which she referred to as 'my sewing-room' (and which did indeed have an old treadle sewing-machine underneath the window, though since there were several pot-plants on it, the machine looked as though it might no longer be in use). There was a floor-to-ceiling cupboard to the right of the window which Millicent unlocked. Odd, I thought, to feel the need to lock a cupboard in a house where she lived alone. Inside, there were three shelves packed with hardback exercise books, most of them red but some black. She stood back and surveyed them, telling me that whenever she looked at them like this, she felt her life must, against all the evidence, have amounted to something after all. She said that there were more than eighty diaries (she'd already told me she'd had to give up at the age of 94) because some years she had filled more than one book. She had never been drawn to the printed sort of diary, she said, with its one page per day, as though every day was worthy of exactly the same space, but instead had from the beginning preferred to put the date in the margin and then write for as long, or as briefly, as she wished. She went on standing in front of the open cupboard, gazing lovingly at its contents, for what seemed like a long time and then she invited me to take out as many as I thought I could carry. Later, Joanna or Harry would bring the rest to me when next they drove to London, which they did from time to time to visit Joanna's sister who, it emerged, lived fairly near to me in North London.

I took out the first ten diaries, feeling it was almost sacrilegious to touch them at all, and then carefully put them into the rucksack I'd brought with me. There was plenty of room still, so I added another ten, and then, testing the rucksack for weight, added yet another five. She herself, clearly counting as she watched, added another one, saying that would take me up to 1939, a good place to get to, a significant year. I assumed she meant the outbreak of the war, but she said that, though this was indeed significant, she hadn't meant the war, but she didn't say what she *had* meant. She closed the cupboard door and locked it again and then said we had time for a cup of tea before Joanna came to take me to the station. She seemed a

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little sad as we sat sipping the tea she'd made and I worried that, now the moment had come, she might be regretting parting even temporarily with her beloved diaries. I said something to that effect but she shook her head and said, no, she was glad I was going to read them and perhaps be able to make something of them (that phrase again) and that she'd merely been ruminating on what her diaries might mean to someone who did not know her. 'One thing,' she said, 'I never lied to them.' (I noted she said 'to' and not 'in', as though the diaries had life themselves and were not inanimate objects.) She said I wouldn't realise the importance of this until I'd read them and repeated again that she had never lied, never once lied.

Joanna returned promptly, at 3 p.m., and then there was a rather awkward and touching departure. It was clear to me, and, I think, to Joanna, that Millicent didn't really want to see her diaries go, whatever she said. She inquired whether my rucksack was waterproof, and when I said that, though it might not look it, the bag had withstood torrential Lake District rain without any contents getting wet, she remarked, 'Good, because ink runs, you know.' I was careful to keep the rucksack on my knee when I got into Joanna's car, and not put it on the back seat or in the boot, and I thought she looked relieved to see me cradling it like a child. She stood at her door waving as we left and I waved until we were out of sight. I said to Joanna that I hoped she wasn't going to regret this, but Joanna assured me this was unlikely, that once her mind was made up she seldom changed it.

\*

In the following weeks after Joanna had brought me the remaining diaries, I read straight through them completely absorbed in Millicent's growing up and constantly surprised by the odd turns her life took. I still hadn't made a single note nor had I come to any decision as to what I might 'make' of them. By the time I'd read the whole lot, I could see that the obvious thing to do, and what I wanted to do, was edit them. They could not possibly be published in their entirety – the material was far too bulky, and the content varied enormously in interest. Editing would involve a rigorous selective process which, because it would be done according to my particular tastes, might not please Millicent. There would also have to be

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a certain amount of bridging work and to do it I'd have to research all kinds of background material which I either knew nothing about or of which I had only the sketchiest knowledge. But I had no doubts at all that I wanted to do it, to 'make something', if I could, of an ordinary woman's life, so meticulously recorded. I saw a thread running through it which captivated me and which I hoped would intrigue and captivate others. I hope I have let Millicent King tell her own story and that my editing has not been too obtrusive or in any way unfaithful to it. It has not always been possible to refrain from comment – what Millicent does and says and thinks is inclined to invite reaction – but I have tried hard to keep this to a minimum.

One thing I feel bound to say: there was nothing ordinary about this woman. Indeed, I now wonder if there is any such thing as an *ordinary* life at all.





26 November 1914

Father said if I want to keep a diary I must begin it on New Year's Day. He said no one starts a diary in November. But New Year's Day is five weeks away and I do not want to wait. I don't see why I should either. Why should diaries have to start on 1st January. It is tidy, I admit, and I am a tidy person, but that is all.

Father said he doubts very much whether I have it in me to be a diarist. He said I have no sticking power and will soon get bored. He said Matilda is more likely to keep a diary properly. He can see her writing in it every day. She has the discipline. He said he thought even George could manage a diary, though if he did it would be awfully badly written. But Father thinks I am a flibberty gibbet (I don't know how to spell that but I don't care about spelling, it is my diary). Mother told him not to be so unkind but he was laughing and said he was not being at all unkind, he was merely amused and wanted to know what had put the idea of keeping a diary into my funny little head. Mother said there was nothing in the least odd or unusual about it, it is a stage girls go through. She said Matilda had probably already kept one but had been secretive about it. Diaries, she said, are for telling secrets to. She smiled herself then, and Father asked why was she looking so mysterious and had she ever kept a diary and she nodded and blushed and Father said, What secrets did you have to confess, my love, but she would not tell him. They were very merry about it and forgot about me.

I can't think of any secrets. My diary, this diary, is not going to be for telling secrets to. Why should I tell myself secrets when

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I know them already, it is silly. I don't know yet what I want to keep a diary for. In fact, I don't see why I have to have a reason. I want to, and I can do what I like. I don't see why I have to write in it every day either. If I don't feel like it, I won't, and that is that.

I don't want a diary like Matilda's. Mother is right. Matilda did used to keep a diary. I have read it. It is in her stocking drawer, inside an old pair of black woollen stockings she never wears. I know it is wicked to look through my sister's things but I can't help it. I don't see why it is wicked. Matilda often calls me a sneak and I suppose she is right and I should be ashamed but I don't care. I do no harm. I haven't told anyone about her diary and I never will. It is very dull. She kept it the whole year, though, writing every day. She started it on 1st January 1912, when she was 13 as I am now. She wrote exactly one page every day though sometimes left a few lines empty at the bottom of the page. Every day she described the weather and what we had for dinner. There is quite a lot about me in the diary. It hurt me to read so much about what a pest I was, and a cry-baby and a nuisance who caused all the trouble in the family. I don't know what trouble she meant and my heart beat fast thinking about it. I wanted to ask her what this trouble was but of course I could not and had to endure the pain as my punishment for reading her stupid diary.

Matilda always wrote down what she was reading, too. It was pure swank. She tells the plots of *Kipps* and *A Tale of Two Cities* and it is very boring. I never saw her reading those proper books either. I am almost sure she never did. Sometimes I have the feeling I am going to turn out to be something queer when I grow up. Matilda is so ordinary she makes me feel special. I am not like her. I want to be different, I don't know how. Matilda hates to be different. I am different already.

### 6 December

I hate music lessons. I never improve and Miss Bryant thinks I am a dunce, I know she does, and only keeps on for the money, I expect. Today I did scales until I thought I would go mad and then I had an idea. I asked Miss Bryant how scales were invented and she took the bottom out of the piano and showed



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me all the inside and explained and then there were only five minutes of the lesson left. Before she left Miss Bryant said, You think you are very clever, Millicent. I pretended I didn't know what she meant. I am thinking about it now. Well, I *do* think I am clever. Everyone knows I am clever. Why should I pretend I don't agree. But I know Miss Bryant did not mean that. She meant she knew I'd tricked her and she was cross. I don't care. She doesn't like me and I don't like her and it is unfortunate we have to be together. I don't care if people I don't like do not like me. It makes sense. I am determined to be strong about this. I cannot go through life currying favour, I have decided.

## 12 December

George is 18 today, though he behaves in such a childish way sometimes, it is impossible to believe it. Father gave him a gold watch with the date of his birth and his initials engraved upon it.

Mother gave him a leather wallet. That had his initials on too. Matilda embroidered six linen handkerchiefs for him which I thought a very dull present and I am sure George did though he said they were topping. He asked me where my present was which I thought very rude and I said that because of his rudeness I might not give him anything. He said he didn't care because knowing me it would not be much, he had never seen me go to any trouble for anyone. I thought I might cry and I left the room but Mother called me back and said not to spoil George's birthday so I was forced to go back and give him the pen I had bought at very great expense. He looked at it and asked why I had given him a pen when I knew he already had two and was not fond of writing. I said it was a good pen and could go with him to the war if he went. Mother burst into tears and Matilda said, Now you really have spoiled George's birthday and you are very horrid and mean, Millicent. They are all against me. George did not even look at his pen properly. He did not see it is made of steel and will not break even if a bullet hits it and it has a clip on it to clip on the pocket of his uniform when he gets it which his other pens do not have. If he is killed I hope it will be returned with his Special Effects. I should then keep it as a memento of him. Father took his photograph