

NIAMH BAKER

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?



WOMEN IN SOCIETY
A Feminist List edited by
Jo Campling



Happily Ever After?

Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain
1945–60

Niamh Baker

M
MACMILLAN

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To my daughter Siobhan Breslin

‘She has made the change from governess to mistress of the house very charmingly,’ said Tinty. ‘It is like one of the fairy tales.’

‘But not a fairy tale in which I should want to be the heroine,’ said Margaret. ‘One begins to see what is meant by “they lived happily ever after”.’

(Elizabeth Taylor, *Palladian*)

Preface

I am aware that by arbitrarily selecting a group of women writers who produced novels during the fifteen years following the Second World War, I am offending against literary practice. What is worse, these writers have little in common: their backgrounds, class, political opinions and attitudes to feminism are too varied to include them in anything that could remotely be called a 'movement'. However, such categories are not always as homogenous as they appear. John Wain's preface to the 1978 reissue of his novel *Hurry On Down* points out the anomaly of his novel supposedly belonging to 'The Movement' when, in fact, not only did it pre-date it, but Wain did not see himself as part of it (although he suggests he may have originated it). To explain the reasons for my choices, I have first to explain why I set out to look at women writing novels in this period.

What first drew me to the period was my irritation at the assumption by the feminist movement that feminism had somehow died during the period and had had to be reinvented in the 1970s. The second assumption – by feminists and social historians – that the Wife/Mother image of women during the 1940s and 1950s was widely and uncritically accepted also seemed to me quite wrong, for how was it possible for a movement, many of whose members were still alive, to die out completely?

Because of the lack of a strong and coherent feminist movement at the time (although there were many separate feminist organisations), it is difficult to find out what women's real aspirations were during this period. I have tried to find some evidence of these submerged feelings in a few of the novels written by women at the time. The texts I use were chosen haphazardly, sometimes on the basis of what I could actually get hold of, and my criteria for selection is described at the end of the Introduction, in the section

headed 'Women Novelists'. Throughout the book the views I discuss are those that surface in these novels. Because they are only a small sample of women writing at the time, they do not necessarily represent views held by all women, or even by a majority of their readers. They are, however, evidence that the orthodoxies of the time were not universally supported: that there was a certain amount of female rebellion.

These are not 'feminist' novels, as defined by Rosalind Coward,¹ but novels which represent individual women novelists' views of what life was about for women. Perhaps they more clearly match Andrea Zeman's definition of serious women novelists: those engaged in 'telling women accurately where they stood at a given moment'.² Where they differ from her definition is that in a period that was highly prescriptive for women, the fiction stands back from clear moral statements, preferring to explore the dilemmas rather than suggest solutions.

In the Introduction, 'A Myth of Happiness', I have given a very brief summary of the situation of women during the period. For a fuller and more detailed background, I recommend Elizabeth Wilson's *Only Halfway to Paradise. Women in Postwar Britain: 1945-1968*.³ The rest of the book looks in detail at some novels written by women during the period.

NIAMH BAKER

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NIAMH BAKER

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Introduction

A myth of happiness

Women were wanting to escape the net just as men were climbing back into it.¹

The myth

The period immediately following the Second World War, especially the decade of the 1950s, produced an image of Woman almost as enduring – and in my opinion as mistaken – as that powerful image of the Victorian lady palely reclining on her couch, smelling-salts held delicately to her nostrils. The postwar British woman was more robust than her Victorian grandmother, but she was still the Angel in the House. A slightly battered angel it is true, one that during the war years had been seen in sensible overalls and unglamorous headscarf at the factory and on the land doing men's jobs, but now that 'normality' was restored, an angel who wished to return to her proper sphere, the home. Whether this image reflected the reality or not is another matter. The war, which had taken women out of their homes, was over, and as the postwar reconstruction began, there was an intensification of official and media debate over the place women should occupy in the brave new world that was envisaged. During the war, government agencies, backed by newspapers, magazines, propaganda films and radio, had explored the way that the traditional sexual divisions of labour could be altered by using a combination of exhortation and the presentation of images of women doing jobs normally done by men. The need to draw on women's labour to keep the war effort going had overcome the usual prejudices and assumptions about what

2 *Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain, 1945–60*

women were capable of doing. Periodicals and newspapers had printed photographs of women at work, and newsreels had shown them operating heavy machinery, piloting planes, working on the land – a remarkable departure from the usual way of portraying women. These women did not look invitingly at the photographer but bent purposefully over their work, glamour and sex appeal sacrificed to practicality. The government's most difficult job may have been to convince men that this was the proper role for women, and it is significant that concessions were made to male egos by ensuring that, despite the long working hours, women were still responsible for the home and family. The image of women as homemakers and child-carers was not significantly challenged, and therefore, when the war ended, the assumption was that women would happily return to the home, which was, after all, their natural place.

Even so, it was not possible to return to pre-war conditions. The election of a Labour government, the creation of a welfare state² and, when the postwar years of austerity ended, the importance of the housewife as consumer, meant that what women did with their lives, what choices they made, came to be seen as central to the proper working of society. Consequently a spate of books, documents, articles and government papers examined the female part of its society from schooldays onwards. Underlying the whole debate was the assumption that girlhood and young womanhood was a preparation for marriage and, once married, a woman's main preoccupation was the successful maintenance of married life and the raising of children. It was widely accepted at the time that that was what women themselves wanted and what, on the whole, they were getting. It is noticeable when reading commentaries written during the period that no one seriously challenged this assumption. Difficulties were admitted, and there was disagreement about how women were to go about their homemaking, but the consensus about woman's role was virtually unanimous. Even when the need to attract women back into the workforce became so pressing that the government found itself promoting two contradictory images of women, this was smoothly explained away by the term 'dual role'. Myrdal and Klein's studies of the phenomenon of women combining marriage and work delineated many of the problems such a dual role entailed, but their assumption was still that home and family came first and that work for women was subsidiary to their commitment to married life.³ In fact, the very term 'dual role'

creates an over-simplified image of a working wife's problems. If it were simply a question of two roles, how uncomplicated life would be!

The myth that women were universally happy in the role ascribed to them in the postwar period, that they passively accepted, or were deceived into accepting, this narrow view of their potential, is still held as a truth about the 1950s, even by the critical intelligence of the present women's movement. The widespread success of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*⁴ did nothing to help dispel this myth. Friedan cannot be blamed; she was writing truthfully and painfully about a particular aspect of American society, but her study has been universalised. Certainly there were aspects of the study that ring an uncomfortable bell as far as Britain is concerned, but conditions for women were in many ways very different from the American scene, not least for economic reasons. Books such as *The Women's Room*⁵ have, like the hackneyed picture of the swooning Victorian lady, tended to strengthen the image of the postwar woman actively embracing, or at least uncritically accepting, her destiny as wife and mother. Certainly the most outstanding characteristic of postwar discussion of woman's role is the centrality given to marriage. To be 'womanly' was to be a wife and mother.

Women's magazines reflected this view in the fiction they published, the problems they discussed and the advice they gave.⁶ Stories and articles in these magazines portrayed women conforming to their role. When there was rebellion it was either swiftly abandoned when the woman came to realise where her 'best interests' lay, or it was punished. Once wed and shut into her 'dream home', a woman was expected to run it efficiently so that when her children came home from school she could be totally at their disposal until the arrival of her husband – generally by commuter train – when the efficient cleaner/child/psychologist metamorphosed into a combination of wife/hostess/mistress. The 'wife' would serve the effortlessly produced meal in the comfortable surroundings of the home she cleaned; the 'hostess' would feed the man questions which, while not too demanding, were designed to elicit stories of success or setbacks, which would receive support and encouragement (never criticism or advice); while the 'mistress' would present him with the picture of a beautifully dressed and made-up woman who was permanently available sexually, but never demanding. Her problems, it was assumed, were trivial and

secondary and He should not be burdened with them. Any doubts the man may have had about whether this was really what he wanted were probably dissipated by his wife's failure to fulfil the dream, and his irritation would have been compounded by his belief that other men did have satisfactory wives. The wife who failed to create this perfect woman would blame herself for the failure, and in this she was seconded by the women's magazines, whose main content was devoted to teaching her first how to get a man and then how to keep him happy. The break-up of a marriage *had* to be her fault; it was the result of her poor job performance, since keeping the marriage going was her job and not her husband's. No matter what his behaviour, from complaining about her cooking to beating her up, according to the magazines, she must have done something or neglected something to provoke him to such actions. If the problem was 'Another Woman', then she was not giving her husband what he deserved from a wife. Doubts about this simplistic view were often expressed in the problem pages that most women's magazines carried, but even the often repeated, almost stereotyped letter which began, 'I have a lovely husband and two beautiful children but . . .', did not lead to a genuine exploration of the problems such a woman might be suppressing. The writer was generally fobbed off with suggestions to make her conform even more to the ideal she was already having difficulty with, and often she was briskly admonished for her lack of gratitude at having all the things that women were supposed to need. Nor was it ever suggested that this image did not reflect reality.

The persistence of the image of the happy housewife-mother during the 1950s led to a belief that it represented a general truth about women at this time and obscured the fact that many women did not lead this sort of life, that conformism to this narrow ideal of womanhood was not as widespread as had been imagined. If the present women's movement has done nothing else, it has ensured that the public debate about women has widened to take in all the categories ignored by professional commentators on the social scene. At last we are aware that women do choose, or have thrust upon them, other lifestyles; that as well as single women, single mothers and lesbians, there are widows, divorcees, deserted and deserting wives, and that even the apparently uniform model of the Average Marriage promulgated by advertisers and social commentators is a false one, undermined by a variety of strains and

accommodations. Why then cannot the insights of the 1970s and 1980s into the complexities of women's lives be used to throw light on postwar women's problems?

The present women's movement sees itself as beginning in the 1970s, after the 'death' of feminism in the fifties. The convention is that the tradition of feminism is constantly broken and its gains have to be fought for over and over again. The most recent break in this tradition is believed to be the twenty or so years following the end of the war and what is seen as women's eager grasping at an easier life and their betrayal of feminist ideals, which had to be rediscovered by a later generation of women, keen to blame their mothers for not handing the tradition on to them. The least attractive element of this view is the way one generation of women denigrates another. Postwar women are accused of colluding with men and wilfully rejecting the gains an earlier feminist generation achieved. The fifties, it is agreed, is dead as far as feminism is concerned.

I disagree with this verdict. As Elizabeth Wilson says, it seems:

improbable that a powerful social movement and political crusade, an expression of the aspirations of (potentially) half the population, should suddenly have withered away, only to reappear as suddenly, and – as it seemed – as if out of nowhere, around 1970. Yet so pervasive was this myth that it has become the 'facts' for the women's liberation movement too.⁷

In fact, the more closely one looks at the postwar period, the more deceptive its bland surface appears.

Work

I began this chapter by describing the myth. It is more difficult to find the reality, given that the social history of women during this period has been very neglected.⁸ There does, however, seem to be a gap between what women were believed to be doing and what they were actually doing. This was particularly the case in relation to work.

The assumption was that married women were only too glad to relinquish work outside the home and return happily to being wives and mothers. It may well have been the case that many women were initially relieved to be able to give up the long hours of war work

they had had to undergo in addition to their domestic duties. Shifts of ten to twelve hours had not been unusual, and the need to queue for food and everyday necessities had certainly placed an immense burden on working women responsible for running their homes. Rationing of food and queuing for scarce commodities was part and parcel of life in the years immediately following the war,⁹ and despite newspaper and magazine articles claiming that women's work was now lighter because of the invention of domestic appliances, the reality was that few homes had these labour-saving machines. The boiler and hand-wringer remained features of washday, not to mention 'blueing' and starching; kitchens often had wooden drainers and working surfaces, which had to be scrubbed and bleached; floors in these pre-vinyl days were covered with linoleum that had to be washed and polished; carpets were still often cleaned by the use of a manually operated type of carpet-sweeper and by being beaten on a clothesline in the backyard. Tinned foods were limited, frozen foods largely unavailable and modern convenience foods had not yet appeared. With their men back at home, the shortcuts that most women on their own use to limit housework and cooking had to be abandoned. Housework was now a full-time activity, even for the middle class, who found it too difficult or too expensive to employ domestic servants. In addition, the war nurseries and work canteens were being closed, despite pressure by women's groups, making it very difficult for the mothers of young children to work, whatever they may have wished. Add to this the moral pressure exerted on women to vacate jobs in favour of men returning from the fighting, and the effort to continue working may have seemed to be too much.

Despite all these factors, though, the proportion of married women in the workforce was higher than before the war (21 per cent in 1951 compared with only 10 per cent in 1931), and by 1961 had risen to 32 per cent of the workforce.¹⁰

What those who ceased to work thought and felt is more difficult to ascertain. Again the problem pages of women's magazines published letters from women who seemed to have been far from satisfied with their return to the confinement and isolation of their own homes. It was not so much the quality of the work itself they missed; much of the work women did during the war was repetitive and boring. There had, however, been two compensations: companionship and money. Working outside the home had meant

spending a lot of time with other women, and social life had often been based on work friendships. The sharing of problems and joys had cut into the solitariness of a home-based life. It is a commonplace that men often look back on the war years with pleasure because of the companionship they enjoyed, but it is less appreciated that women too found this side of war work the most rewarding. Money was also an important factor. No longer dependent on being given housekeeping money, women had earned their own and had had control over how it was spent. Also, as factory work had expanded during the war there had been a flight from domestic labour. Not only were the wages in factories considerably better, but there was no attempt to control women's lives; once outside the factory they were independent of their employers' whims. To give up the power and independence that earning your own money confers was not welcomed by many women. There were also letters to women's magazines from women who had been employed in the armed forces and who dreaded the return to boring and repetitive work or constricted lifestyles.

In spite of all the discussion about women and work during the postwar period, little was done to find out what women themselves really wanted. Viola Klein and Alva Myrdal had great difficulty in writing *Women's Two Roles* because of the lack of systematic research into women's problems during this period. As they said, it became:

a constant source of surprise and regret that at practically each point in the discussion we have had to look in vain for evidence that had been scientifically collected and examined.¹¹

They specifically mentioned the lack of surveys on women's desire to work and how women between the ages of 50 and 65 spent their lives.¹² The letter page in women's magazines seems to have become one of the few outlets of expression for women, but inevitably the writers of the letters are a tiny proportion of the readers and the number who felt they could openly challenge existing assumptions would be small. In addition, editors of magazines, which were becoming increasingly identified with the currently acceptable images of women, would not necessarily select and publish letters which contradicted these images. Cynthia White

describes the general attitude of women's magazines during this period:

in one important area of counselling, namely women's employment, the women's magazines acquiesced in a regressive tendency and later used their influence positively to discourage women from trying to combine work and marriage. In this they were doing no more than reinforce the traditional view of a woman's role, but as a result of the war, and women's part in it, the time was propitious for a radical redefinition of that role to encompass fuller citizenship and wider social participation. Many women were willing for their new social position to become permanent; others, with a little encouragement, might have come to share their views. But the traditionalist camp was strong, and it found a sympathetic mouthpiece in the women's press, particularly the popular weeklies. *My Weekly* reflected the conflict in its fiction and came down firmly on the side of domesticity. In the words of one of its fictional heroines, 'I've spent a week discovering I'd rather be Mrs Peter Grant, housewife, than Rosamund Fuller, dress designer.'¹³

My own reading of women's magazines of the period confirms this view. Although many did carry articles about careers for women, the careers outlined remained, depressingly, the traditional 'service' ones: secretary, nurse, teacher, social worker. Women were certainly not encouraged to envisage themselves taking over managerial careers and there were no indications that they might find outlets in the higher ranks of the professions or even in the creative field. There was, therefore, no platform for women who wanted to work but found themselves prevented from doing so. The only indication of their real wishes is that they voted with their feet, for the proportion of married women in the workforce continued to rise each decade.

Unfortunately, the nature of the work available to most women remained fundamentally unchanged. Although there was a huge reduction of women in domestic service, the increase in clerical, distributive and professional services still left women largely in the lower ranks: as secretaries rather than directors; shop assistants rather than managers; nurses rather than doctors; and classroom teachers rather than heads of schools or school inspectors. In the civil service it was the clerical ranks women filled; less became career civil servants. The removal of the marriage bar did mean women were not automatically dismissed when they married, but the ghosts of marriage and children continued to haunt their working lives, leading to the assumption that women were not