

Platform to Platform podcasts: launch event script

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

I am Bethany Ray, great grand-daughter of Lorna's brother Theo, and Lorna's great-great niece. I play Lorna in the podcast series.

First, thank you Faith for your fascinating insight into Lorna's life and war-time Malvern.

Today I am delighted to read out some of the extracts from the *Diary of the war*, and a few of Lorna's poems.

I'd like to start with an extract from Lorna's diary entry of 15th May 1940. As the German army advanced westwards, Lorna feared that Great Britain would be invaded. Here she considers the future fate of her diary.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Wednesday May 15th 1940

I shall bury this diary, so deep that one day, in a saner world someone may find it and know that the last legions of civilisation meant not domination but good, even though their hands were feeble and their foresight all too dim.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

As well as the purpose of her exercise book after the impending invasion, Lorna reflected on her own possible future.

It is clear from the diary entries as late as summer 1940 that she expected to recover from her illness. This next entry was written during the evacuation of Dunkirk.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Monday June 3rd 1940

The "Great Deliverance", the incredible feat of arms which no one dared to hope possible, is nearly over. And, with the help of God, four fifths of our army, which seemed doomed, has been brought off, and more are still being rescued. The Germans have expended enormous amounts of war materials, planes and men to annihilate the BEF - and failed.

A mood of tranquillity and optimism, which came over me this afternoon, gave place all too soon to weariness and war-fret. One lives a lifetime of opposite moods in a day. But what tears at one's nerves is the endless continuity of it, more and more killing, day after day.

There are times when I feel endlessly old, and worn out, and others when I feel hopelessly young, and completely unable to combat life, or to hope for any future. I know somehow, despite the frantic entry of May 15th, that we shall win in the end, but my spirit quails at the task of building up again what has been broken down. It took twenty two years to arrive even in this country at anything like normality after the last war. When things have settled down again I shall be old?

1000 bombs have been dropped on Paris. The motive was pure spite for the planes were so high that they could not possibly see whether they were bombing military objectives or not.

I seem to have said fairly frequently in the course of this diary that comment is useless. It is useless really. One finds oneself recording huge disasters in almost time-table terms, as though nothing mattered, simply because there are really no words that can adequately express one's feelings.

One's mind will not grasp the idea of Paris - Paris, one of the loveliest cities in the whole world being bombed. Nor can one imagine any human creature that could contemplate such an act.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

Lorna was correct when she said 'we shall win in the end'
but sadly she did not live to see this.

In this poem - probably written in 1941 in the last year of
her life - we can see that she believed, in fact, that her
life was over by 1938, when she was just 24 years old.

BETHANY AS LORNA

1938 to 1929

Dead years, you were the best of life I had
Free from all bitterness and frustrate pain
When I had scarcely leisure to be sad
I shall not know your liberty again

This may be ruin that I look on now
Shadowy half-life in a body marred
Weak, useless, savage with my own despair
Youth's hopes to ashes mercilessly charred

This was the childish promise of great things
This was a hope, realised in emptiness
This was the future, agonising past
This is, and will be, lasting bitterness

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

I'm now going to read from one of the earlier diary entries. This one is interesting for a couple of reasons.

The first is that it was not written in Malvern, but in Bristol, in a church on the Gloucester Road that was demolished in the 1990s.

The other reason for selecting this extract is that there are echoes here of recent events in Ukraine.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Friday September 29th 1939

St Michael and All Angels

I went to Gloucester to the Infirmary and am to go again on November 24th. Report is favourable on the whole, although I have had more pain than has been usual for a long time.

We have received our marching orders. Berlin and Moscow, having "liquidated" the state of Poland, have now decided that we are going to make peace - or else. I am afraid they will be doomed to disappointment, and are liable to find that when you have driven another country to war it is possible that they will be determined only to end it on their terms.

There is one crumb of comfort to be drawn from this deplorable situation and that is that knowing the militant and brutal attitude of Fascist states, when they are sure of any easy victory and their utter intransigence, it leads one to suppose that they have only one thing to look forward to from a long war - and that is defeat. Otherwise there would have been no offer of peace.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

Some might wonder why a 25 year-old might be so interested in war.

We know that war played a large part in Lorna's father Bertie's life: at the end of the 19th century he served in the Second Boer War, and he was on active service in World War I during the first four years of Lorna's life. Bertie's experiences may well have cast a shadow over young Lorna.

In her poems Lorna also tell us about her early encounters with war. With her parents and brother Theo, Lorna visited the World War I battlefields in northern France in 1920 when she was just 6 years old. She wrote this next poem about this trip when she was 15.

BETHANY AS LORNA

The battlefields of France (written 23 April 1929)

I, a child, have trod the hallowed ground
Unknowingly gazed upon the things they knew
Gazed on torn tree of shattered mound
Where once the shrieking shrapnel flew
I did not know, I did not understand
Why these things were and whose the hand
That tore all nature from a flow'ring land

I could not dream that men had fought and died
Upon the very spot on which I stood
Once decked with grass and daisies pied
A pleasant field flanked by a shady wood
Now the trees with shatter'd branches seem to ask
"Lord, is it man's allotted task
To spread out ruin like a hideous mask?"

Why did you leave us, oh men of our nation?
Was it for England? That we may be free?
Was there no other way, no arbitration
To stop such work without such a fee?
"Our lives were the price paid for your need
That peace might be yours we had to bleed
You reap in joy - but we sowed the seed"

They sowed the seed with bone, blood and sinew
Each for his country, his home, and his wife
They sowed it for hope and the breath that is in you
That you might be free - for freedom is life
Those who have died and sleep o'er the waves
Send us this message that we may be brave
"Stamp out all wars! Man is no slave!
Strive for what's right. Christ triumphs o'er the grave"

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

This later poem, most likely composed in 1941 when Lorna was 27, also refers to the trip to France.

The poem also highlights one of the challenges that we encountered when recording the podcast series: dealing with vocabulary in languages other than English! In this case there are three lines in Latin from the 13th century hymn to the Virgin Mary known as the Stabat Mater¹.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Pietà

Small, golden, a wisp of woman-hood
In the dark, distant future a woman grown
Kicking, square-toed at scythed stubble
By Death mown down

Eyes wonder. I straddle a crater
Ploughed by a bursting shell
Grey in my hand and cup-like
Part of a skull
Laughing I let it fall

Stabat Mater dolorosa
Juxta cruces lachrymosa
Dum pendebat filius

O, but this bone is cheap that grows from a woman
Blind in the womb to pitiful birth
Cheaper than bullet or steel for destroying
Dung and manure to the earth

¹ If anyone asks, these translate as 'At the cross her station keeping, stood the mournful Mother weeping, close to her son to the last'.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

I'm now going to read three more diary entries. We selected these ones because they tell us about Lorna's two closest male relations: her brother Theo, and her father Bertie.

In the first one, we are reminded that 'Walls have ears'.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Friday September 15th 1939

Theo rang up, whereupon I dropped two very unmilitary bricks, though I cannot think what use my "information" might have been to the enemy!

What a lot we poor civilians do have to learn.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

Lorna's tone in this next extract is completely different from the last. We cannot be certain, but we believe that Lorna's father's departure described here may be related to the planning of the evacuation of Dunkirk.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Tuesday May 7th 1940

Today Daddy went abroad on sealed orders after having been interviewed by the War Office last Friday. Although he said he would probably have to go, and we had sometimes accepted the idea and sometimes not, it was a horrible shock.

I feel as if I should rather like to be sick, even though there is no immediate prospect of his going into danger. His just walking out as he did after he had said goodbye, without looking back, had a curiously unearthly air about it, as though one was up in the air looking down at it from a long way off, and as though one had no feelings.

The responsibility, when one dares to think of it, is very heavy, particularly in these evil times.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

In the following extract we learn that Lorna's relationship with her father was not an easy one.

You may also be interested to know that this is the first extract of Lorna's diary that her nephew Jonathan Lloyd showed to Hazel Hall in July 2019. If Jonathan had not done this, we might not all be here today!

BETHANY AS LORNA

Saturday October 26th 1939

I have had the by no means unique experience of being ordered to get out by my amiable father.

It has happened now about three or four times, coupled with the assurance that he has not the least interest in me, and accompanied this time with the threat that if I continued to be "rude" i.e. to express my ideas freely, a court order could be obtained to eject me.

The state of being "rude" on my part consists of my replying with any degree of indignance or resentment to orders given in a tone which would disgrace a drover shouting at his moke. Since I am dependant for my bread and butter - and never allowed to forget it - I have no right to be spoken to like a human being. Nor, since my behaviour is worthy only to be ignored, have I any right to raise my voice or venture my opinion, even when I happen to be witness of insults and slights heaped upon my beloved mother. That is stating my case very violently and in the hot blood roused by new cruelties and old bitter prejudices. Now I am going to state my case in stone-cold sobriety.

I am a woman of twenty six and a Bachelor of Arts. That hard-won title, outside of the house circle, gives me the right to be considered of something a little above the average intelligence. I can deny outright any charges that anyone may care to bring of having caused my parents one moment's anxiety in keeping bad or extravagant company, being disobedient to their wishes, or underhand or untruthful. The only demands I make upon either of my parents are that I shall be accorded a common and loving courtesy, shall be treated in accordance with my age and the standing which I have a right to consider mine, and that I shall be allowed my own opinions which I am now well qualified to form.

My darling mother has never for one moment found it necessary to use "force" upon me because she has always listened sympathetically to what I have had to say. I imagine she usually finds that my ideas are common sense, and that when they are not, I am open to reason.

This is my standing ground. Reason and reasonableness are my law - so long as I am expected to acquiesce in anything

that I believe to be unjust or wrong without registering a protest, however vain, a course that anyone with any integrity of spirit would revolt from, and so long as I and my sweet mother are addressed like some kind of helot. So long shall I reserve the right to reply as I think fit, whether my conduct is considered insubordinate and unfilial or not.

But should a new and more loving way be adopted, I should be only too glad and happy to end this hateful state of affairs. When I am treated like a daughter, I shall behave like one.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

While Lorna had a difficult relationship with her father, she loved her mother very much, as is evident in the gentle poem *To my mother*.

BETHANY AS LORNA

To my mother (written in the late 1930s)

If I should love you, as you
Have loved me; true
To your own fair idol of me: false
Only to any picture of me else,
Then might my love surpassing be
Like yours for me.

Your love is like light
Constant and bright,
Here is only bliss
To be loved like this
He - or she - loves changeover
Yours never.

I change and grow
Different and slow
Time building up a nature
Draws in each a feature
To be unchanged and true
Only belongs to you.

If there is any good
In me, or if I should
Nothing achieve.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

I'm going to return to the *Diary of the war* again in the next couple of pieces of Lorna's writing.

In the next one, Lorna reports the fall of Paris in June 1940.

Do please listen out for the mention of the Franck's symphony in D minor here. A section of this music is used as the theme tune for the podcast series.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Friday June 14th 1940

Paris has fallen. Monsieur Reynaud's desperate appeal to America has received no answer - except that Roosevelt says "it has not reached him officially"! Sunk in sloth and folly and unpreparedness as we were before the September crisis, there was no help they could give. What is to be done must be done by our own efforts.

I think I shall remember this day as long as memory holds its seat in this distracted globe. The sense of tragedy enacted and impending is utter, and almost overwhelming.

I shall never forget the BBC's courageous and inspiring music of Sibelius First Symphony and the whole of Cesar Franck's D minor. These the enemy can never take away, but I feel as if something inside me is dying.

Oh Paris, Paris. It is only five weeks since the invasion of Belgium!

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

As well chronicling major events in her diary - such as the 'liquidation' of Poland, the evacuation of Dunkirk, and the fall of Paris - Lorna also considers the impact of war on ordinary, undocumented people.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Sunday January 7th 1940

What won't get into the history books is the story of a bundle of letters found in the pocket of a dead Russian. They were the loving outpourings of his half-literate wife, in which she told him how unhappy she was, and what a miserable day she had spent on the last festival day. But most of the letter was concerned with little Ljonja who wanted to know when his Daddy was coming home, and asked that if Daddy came home in the night, might he be wakened up so that he could see him.

"Daddy" is dead, frozen stiff in a Finnish wood, because Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler have determined to walk the way of senseless ambition.

Huge catastrophes have no power over me, but these small tragedies, which mean so little to demagogues and tyrants who demand them, have power to make me think and feel violently.

I can't get out of my mind what I read about a child in the sinking of the "Simon Bolivar" crying "Save me Jesus" and little Ljonja without a father, and thousands like him: English, German, Finnish, French, Polish, Czech, and Russian.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

This next extract is one of my favourite passages from the war diary. Again, it shows Lorna's compassion. The last line reminds us that Lorna wrote it when the Battle of Britain was underway.

BETHANY AS LORNA

LORNA

Wednesday July 31st 1940

We caught a toad this evening: such a jolly little fellow, who was great faking at being captured by human beings. He put his funny parodies of hands over his eyes, with the fingers spread out to "protect" himself from us.

It was that rather heart-breaking and - from our point of view - quite futile gesture that made me ponder the problem of cruelty and mercy. Personally I find the instruction to kill or inflict pain utterly incomprehensible! I cannot see into, or have any part in, a mind that cannot be touched and softened by a weak confiding little gesture like that of the toad, whether it is in man or beast.

I will never, by word or deed, pretend an admiration for those who abuse their strength to hurt the weak. I prefer Shakespeare's almost divine sympathy that even entered into the feeling of a snail "Whose tender horns being hit, shrinks backwards in his shelly cave with pain, and there all smothered up in shade doth sit, long fearing to peep forth again!"

He was a nice toad.

240 enemy planes have been brought down this month by our ground defences and the RAF.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

A different reptile made it into Lorna's poetry.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Presents for my aunt (written in the late 1930s)

I sent my aunt a lizard to be a kind of pet
She said it had got house-maid's knee and sent it to the
vet.

The vet remarked with feeling that he didn't like the
creature,

"It's just like her to send it, "and "You see if I don't
teach her!"

I sent my aunt a motor-bus, she ran it upon glue;

I sent my aunt some strychnine, she put it in the stew;

I thought it best to do her in with very little pain,

And now I shall not have to send her anything again!

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

Another comic poem was inspired by Lorna's work as a school mistress.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Lines to a member of A form doing prep (written in the late 1930s)

You are a nuisance, Barbara Smith,
You're one I like not to be with.
I hate your giggles, loath your smirks,
You scorn to be a girl that works.
You haven't done a stroke for hours,
And nor have I, by all the powers.
[Damn you.]

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

Lorna's diary ends in January 1941. We don't know for certain why she stopped writing then, but this entry from the last day of 1940 provides some clues.

Here she refers to the church that she attended in Sheffield that was bombed three weeks earlier, and to her grandparents' large house in Bristol that was requisitioned as accommodation for soldiers.

The quotations at the end are from Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Tuesday December 31st 1940

The most curious feature of this diary are the gaps - as though when things are worst and most pressing to express, anything is practically impossible; and when things are better, the desire is less urgent. This is the last day of the most terrible, incredible year that anyone has been called upon to live since the world began. What glorious effrontery to be able to say that and mean it!

No nation on earth has ever stood up to what we have this year and survived as we have, and even managed to end up with a species of solemn optimism for 1941. Does it spring from a sure fore-knowledge of the future, or from a cheerful pessimism that - after all - it would be hard for things to be much worse? Whatever 1941 may have in store for us, it couldn't find it easy to surpass what 1940 had for us, if we had known it.

So much of this diary, which was real and passionate at the time, now seems a little false and stilted. So much more has acquired a significance, unsuspected when the words were written.

Perhaps one shouldn't write diaries, at least not the moralising kind, nor as a peg to hang a war on.

How did one feel at the time? Hardly at all; frequently one deliberately prevented oneself from thinking, or even allowing dread possibilities from taking the shape of thoughts.

The nightmare of the fall of France: how does it look now after six months? Perhaps worse than it did when it was happening because possibilities and dangers which were not apparent (because of the very horror of it) have been reached and passed.

A church clock is striking ten outside and there are two hours of 1940 left. I often listen to that clock in the night. It represents order, decency and sanity, and yet I wonder how long even it will last.

St Mark's, the church where I was confirmed, the little book shop where Joyce and I made innumerable little purchases, are destroyed. Mrs Fisher's house with the ridiculous bull's head sticking out of the quite meaningless façade is burnt out. Craigmore harbours soldiers.

London vanishes gradually. Now a slice is shorn away as on Sunday night, now inchmeal buildings are levelled and gaps torn in its ancient fabric. With each, something dies that was hallowed by generations of hope and endeavour, quiet monuments of ordinary strivings vanish into piles of rubble.

"And some there be which have no memorial, who are perished as though they had never been, and are become as though they had never been born, and their children after them". I think I understand rather better than I did what was meant by the seeming paradox "But these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten".

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

I'm going to finish with one more diary entry, and one more poem.

This is Lorna's final diary entry. Note that her last thoughts are for her dear mother.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Saturday January 4th 1941

Daddy left home at 8:30am on the first stage of his journey to the Near East. Poor darling Mummie. He leaves Liverpool tomorrow or Monday.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

This final poem was written by Lorna when she was 17. I hope that she would be pleased to know that we did find her writings.

BETHANY AS LORNA

Looking forward (written in March 1931)

I wonder if, in a hundred years,
Someone will find my writings dimmed with time
And know my bitter longings and my fears
And find a meaning in each uncouth rhyme.
I wonder if they'll wonder how I looked
And sigh and laugh quite tenderly, and then
Set back my books on the forgotten shelf
Where they have lain, and so forget again.
I wonder if perhaps some smouldering spark
Hidden away in an unlettered rhyme
May help somebody groping in the dark
As never was I able in my time.

BETHANY AS COMMENTATOR

Thank you all so much for your attention. I hope that you enjoy hearing more of the *Diary of the war* and Lorna's poetry in the podcast series.