

Roses and Thistles: Second World War Brides in Newfoundland

G.J. CASEY AND MAURA C. HANRAHAN

INTRODUCTION: ROSES AND THISTLES¹

AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II, a wave of approximately 800 European women arrived in Newfoundland. At that time Newfoundland, whose self-governing Dominion status had been suspended in 1934, was still ruled by a British-appointed Commission, referred to as the Commission of Government. It was to this political system and the gloomy economic conditions associated with it that these overseas wives arrived with their Newfoundland husbands. These immigrants were known as war brides, a term which some of them dislike. A war bride is, however, the popular name applied to a woman who married any member of the Armed Services, or a civilian, who was in a foreign country as a result of the First or Second War. They came chiefly from Scotland, England, Wales, and Ireland (especially the North), while a few came from Germany, France, Belgium, Holland and Australia. These war brides had met and married Newfoundland men who served in the British Air Force, Navy and Army, the Newfoundland Overseas Forestry Unit and the Merchant Marine. While some of the young couples remained in Britain after the war, the vast majority of them settled in Newfoundland. In fact, it appears that none of the Newfoundland women who were serving overseas during the war brought back husbands. Of the 800 war brides who immigrated, it is commonly claimed that up to one-quarter of that number returned to their homeland. According to verbal accounts, many of them had been overwhelmed by the isolation, the lack of employment and proper housing, the poor prospects for the future, as well as the poverty in Newfoundland. Others were women whose husbands had turned to alcohol, had abused them or had been unfaithful; some were homesick. This paper draws on data collected to December, 1992, in research done by the authors on Second World War brides who immigrated to Newfoundland. As one of the war

brides noted, the women who came forward to share and talk about their lives probably represent the happier cases.

Throughout this exhilarating exercise, representativeness has been a problem. No records of the names of the war brides who settled in Newfoundland were available from which to draw a sample. Over a two year period, a roster of names and last known addresses was established, chiefly through word of mouth. A search of the Provincial Archives and various Newfoundland newspapers of the late 1940s provided additional names. A questionnaire was mailed to some 400 of these women who had lived at least two years in Newfoundland. The response rate of 70% was extraordinarily high, especially since a number of the women had died and others had relocated to various parts of Canada, the United States and throughout the world. The mail-out questionnaire listed specific themes, and the respondent indicated if she would be willing to be interviewed about any or all of these topics. Almost without exception, the women made it clear that they did want to have their story told. Based upon such encouraging returns, by December, 1992, we had recorded twenty interviews, chiefly on the Avalon Peninsula. Despite the obvious difficulties in doing so, two of these women, one English and one Scottish, one who had settled in an urban centre and one in a rural area, were selected for this discussion.

The telling of the war brides' stories, however, is a challenging venture. While the women have some characteristics in common, chiefly their marriage to Newfoundlanders, and their age of nineteen to twenty-one years at the time of their marriage, their life experiences have been very disparate. The war brides differ in religion, place of origin, place of residence in Newfoundland, personality, degree of assimilation and various other respects. Consequently, it is impossible to draw a composite or representative war bride. This brief discussion focuses on a few aspects of the experiences or life stories of two women, Anna Bowen and Sandra Graham Dwyer, pseudonyms used to protect the identities of these individuals. Anna is English and an immigrant to St. John's, the largest urban centre in Newfoundland; Sandra, a Scottish crofter's daughter, spent her married life in a small town or outport in Conception Bay. Glimpses of their life stories will indicate how different and yet how similar in some respects their early Newfoundland experiences were.

ANNA BOWEN

Peter's father (in Newfoundland) had sent me a beautiful, blue silk dress, which I had kind of saved to be married in, because there was no such thing as being able to get a new wedding dress. But, anyway, I had this old bachelor uncle ... who just doted on us two children... . He said, 'Look, you can always go up the street in your best dress and say you've been married but you only have one day you can wear a white dress.' So my uncle bought me my dress, and he was a wonderful old man.²

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Anna's marriage to Peter Bowen, a Newfoundlander serving in the Royal Air Force, took place in Northampton, England, on March 16, 1943. Anna was nineteen and Peter eight years older. The two were very much in love and had planned to marry when Anna turned twenty-one. But His Majesty's government intervened: one winter's day Anna got her "call-up papers" or conscription documents from the army. Her mother was upset. She had lost her husband to mustard gas in World War I and now was threatened with the absence of her daughter on whom she was economically dependent. When Peter pointed out that married women were never conscripted, the wedding day was immediately set.

Goods were scarce in wartime Britain and everyone was subjected to rations. For Anna this showed a community willing to share and to pull together. During the young couple's courtship, Peter's mother sent food parcels from Newfoundland. With the wedding on the horizon, Anna's mother saved the dried fruit from these parcels to make the wedding cake. Neighbours chipped in with an ounce of fat, and the butcher donated "two big ox tongues". The food office allowed a maximum of twenty-five people to attend weddings, and despite the fact that Anna was marrying in the Catholic Church, all her staunchly Anglican relatives attended in support. In Newfoundland, life as one half of a "mixed marriage" would not always go so smoothly.

Like most of the war brides, Anna automatically planned to immigrate to Newfoundland following her husband's tour of duty in Britain. When she arrived in St. John's in March, 1946, Anna and Peter lived with his mother and Anna kept the twenty-one room family house. Work was just not available for married women and she had no children; she could easily have lived a very isolated life. However, her role as a war bride remained very much a part of her life after the war, and it was this status that presented opportunities and responsibilities and gave meaning to her life during these first years in a new land. She served on the Women's Auxiliary of the Legion and on the committee of the Rose and Thistle Club, which she helped found, and as well did a great deal of hospital visitation "because don't forget, there was a lot of hospital visitation done with the war brides that were in the hospital because they didn't have any family to visit them. We were a big support group, a wonderful support group we had".³

Added to the economic conditions and the new culture and unfamiliar ways of doing things, these women often had other problems in adapting to the new life. As Anna observed in the same interview,

some of the men had no work and then some of them were at Memorial (College) trying to finish their education. Few had homes, because the Americans were here and the Americans were paying skyhigh rents for all the apartments. And here were these girls, unemployed most of them.

The Rose and Thistle Club, a St. John's social organization for overseas brides, was a saving grace for many of the women as they gradually made their adjustments to life in the New World:

(it) was a sounding board for us. We bitched about our in-laws. It never went any further than that meeting. You couldn't go outside and say to a Newfoundlander, well, they treat me terribly here, or this happened to me or that happened to me, because the Newfoundlanders were very good to us. So you couldn't go and, you know. I mean, we had never, I had never seen a stove in my life. I'd always had a gas range not like the cookers that are on the go. I mean most of the girls burned wood fires. I was lucky I lived in a house where there was an Enterprise oil range. But nobody knew how to turn dampers on or clean out flues ... we had to find this out the hard way. So, you know, we really picked up the way of Newfoundland life from one another.⁴

The war brides had had to cope with shortages and rationing in their native lands, and they brought their resourcefulness with them to Newfoundland. Anna recalls selling forget-me-nots for July 1 one year with Marjorie Power, a war bride from Sussex. The two decided to explore St. John's and they walked the three miles to the fish plant on the Southside Road. Anna claims that the workers there, who were all men in those days, bought every last flower. But these two war brides were shocked to see hundreds of pounds of flatfish or flounder not being processed but being discarded or used for fertilizer. Marjorie insisted that it was an edible and tasty fish, much like the sole that she had been familiar with in Britain. For many months after, the two women would walk over the railway trestle bridge with two carrier bags and fill them with flatfish, provided free by the plant workers. What they did not consume themselves would be distributed to the other war brides at the Rose and Thistle Club.

Before they married, Anna converted to Peter's religion, Roman Catholicism. She explains:

Peter was a devout Roman Catholic who never missed Mass. When my mother realised that our relationship was serious we talked about the difficulties of combining two faiths in a marriage. She suggested that one Sunday I go to Mass with Peter and find out what his worship was all about. I realize now what a wise woman my mother was; a woman really before her time. I attended Mass with Peter and was surprised to find that the Mass was the duplicate of what I attended at my church, the High Church of England. Our Sanctus and Kyrie, etc., we recited in Latin, so it was not difficult for me to follow the Latin Mass.... The basics of our religions were the same. We recited the same Creeds; we acknowledged the same sacraments, and above all we believed in the Blessed Trinity. So I decided to enter the Roman Catholic Church.⁵

By joining Peter's church, which she felt to be "a duplicate" of her own Anglican faith, Anna thought she would make her married life as uncomplicated as possible.

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There was the added bonus in that: "My father-in-law was delighted, Peter had 'saved a soul'. Talk about hero worship, he thought his son was St. Peter!"

But all was not sweetness and light, for religion and sectarianism presented problems upon Anna's arrival:

I can honestly say that until I came to Newfoundland I did not realize what prejudice was. I knew what it meant but I had never experienced it.⁶

Anna was very upset and offended when her parish priest suggested that she try to convince another war bride in a "mixed marriage" to have her children baptized as Catholics. In addition, another priest told her that she was committing a sin by attending the Rose and Thistle meetings as the club was, he alleged, "a Protestant establishment." Both of these incidents ended in angry verbal exchanges, but Anna held her ground. Furthermore, when Anna arrived in Newfoundland she

met prejudice of not only religion, but of country of origin. While Peter's family had been wonderful as far as letter writing and sending food parcels; now here I met with sudden and dreadful hostility. Here I was an 'Englishwoman' daring to put foot in an 'Irish' household. I was supposed to make friends with only Irish Catholics according to the edicts of the family.⁷

The "aside remarks" by her mother-in-law about her English ancestry once angered Anna so that she answered with words "I'll never forget":

It was bad enough coming into this family as an English Catholic. It would've been, ... God help me, if I had entered it as an English Protestant.⁸

Again Anna found solace at the Rose and Thistle Club. This club "which had no religious affiliations" was used "as a sounding board for all the difficulties that we encountered in trying to build new lives for ourselves".⁹

Although the activities of the Rose and Thistle Club dwindled over the years as the women assimilated into the community and had more children and less time, Anna insists that the club remained invaluable to her and to many of the other war brides:

Even though people didn't attend the meetings ... they were still the war brides, the great rapport.... Oh yes, we all, you see when I look back, it's amazing how we held together like that, how jelled we were you know. In other words, we became a family. You know, we became a family.¹⁰

SANDRA GRAHAM DWYER

(My parents) had no knowledge of Newfoundland, they had no knowledge of it. But we were taught it in school. We knew the people were civilized, we'll say. But mother thought they were running around the woods. I don't know why and she never explained it to me ... I left home and she still thought the people were naked, naked in the woods. That's what she said - probably loincloths on them or something. He asked me if I'd marry him. I didn't expect him (to) and I didn't accept his offer for quite some time. But the fact was I didn't know where I was going; that was the biggest problem. Where am I going? Where am I going? Because I knew he wanted to come home because his mother was there and this was his home, just the same as my home was mine. And he wanted to come home, and he wanted me to come with him ... he was definitely coming home; there was no question of that ... of course, when Ian was born, our eldest son, that finished me. Well, I made up my mind that I should follow and go. Because I figured, well, if he comes home and I'm left here with Ian — well, here I am. So I was happy to come with him; I made up my mind: 'I'm going with you.' He made no promises: 'I have no mansion, no such thing.' And he didn't tell me anything was wrong. 'Cause when I came here things were as he had explained to me about it. And I accepted it.¹¹

Sandra Graham Dwyer was one of nine children of Scottish crofters. She was born on the Shetland Islands and lived in her grandfather's thatched cottage until she was four, when her family moved to the mainland. Here her father worked in a distillery for about five years until he bought a small farm of his own. The Graham children's first language was Gaelic and they did not start to learn English until they commenced school at the age of six. When Sandra left school at fourteen, she worked on her parents' farm for her keep. Four years later, she became a live-in nanny for a well-to-do couple and their grandchild in Inverness. During this time she also worked part-time in the Home Guard, which was composed of civilian volunteers who took basic military training to protect their local areas should the Germans attempt an invasion.

In remembering her wartime years, Sandra speaks of a particular friendliness, almost a kinship, that existed between the Scottish people and the men of the Newfoundland Overseas Forestry Unit, who came by the hundreds to work in the neighbouring forests. On November 10, 1943, after a three year courtship, Sandra married John Dwyer, one of these Newfoundland foresters.

By this stage, Sandra had converted to Roman Catholicism, the religion of her husband. Her father, a devoted member of the Free Church of Scotland, had objected, contending "You should marry somebody of your own creed." His stance weakened once he met her husband-to-be, and he not only gave her away at the church ceremony but also sponsored the wedding "supper" at the local hotel. Three years later when his daughter, son-in-law and grandson were leaving for Newfoundland, he gave her "a little firkin' of whisky" in case "your spirits might get very low before you get there". Sandra still emotionally recalls her father's parting

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words: "Remember if you want to come home, money is no object. Let me know, and I'll get you home".¹²

In July, 1946, Sandra and John settled with their one year old son, Ian, in the Conception Bay outport where John was born and raised. Once there, Sandra found that for much of the time she had to be both mother and father to her sons, as well as household manager and farmer. Like so many rural Newfoundland men of his generation, John was habitually away working on construction or other projects in different parts of the province for weeks and sometimes for months at a stretch. In fact, just six weeks after their arrival Sandra's husband left home for three months to do construction work in a different part of the island. One of Sandra's first difficulties was to adjust to the local pattern of doing house chores. She claims:

My first chore in the morning all my life was, after breakfast the breakfast dishes were washed and cleared away; the kitchen was cleaned. Then the next chore was the bedrooms. You started in the bedrooms, and you worked your way down out to the back door. Now here it was different, 'cause whatever came to hand, well, they did it. And I couldn't get into that routine. ... I had an awful job of getting accustomed to just being myself.¹³

Although it was a hard life, Sandra would not change any of it for the world. With enormous grit and fortitude she accepted and adjusted to the lifestyle of the area. She found the local people to be a comfort to her:

I felt quite at home ... But it wasn't the fact of what I had, it's the people that helped me to live here, we'll say. Because they really were a wonderful group of people and I'm quite sure that the people and their kindness towards me and wanting to make me welcome, that was the key to my happiness here. The older people, not the younger generation, but the older people who were here at the time ... (would) come and visit. And anytime I went out, they would all stop and talk to me and ask me how I was getting along ... They made you feel that you were just — you became part of them ... I didn't feel outside at all ... And I think that's what some of the girls missed when they came here, and they couldn't make it, they just couldn't make it.¹⁴

While Sandra always looked forward to her husband's return from one of his jobs, she continued to care for their horse, cows, hens, and sheep without difficulty because they were chores she had mastered while growing up on her father's farm. She supplied her mother-in-law with fresh cream in exchange for churned butter. She also grew a variety of vegetables, including cabbages, potatoes, carrots and turnips, and made most of the clothes for her sons, just as so many Newfoundland outport women had done for hundreds of years. Sandra philosophically states: "I was curious as to what was coming next ... you just took it in your stride ... well, it had to be done, and you went and did it. Whereas, perhaps someone would sit down and cry over it, I didn't. I kept going and I'm glad I did".¹⁵

This is not to suggest that Sandra adapted quickly and blended easily into the daily routine and life of the town. She recalls that “first night in a strange place, I wasn’t sleeping”. She kept thinking about breakfast and carrying out the household chores the next day with her husband’s stepmother. It was some of these household chores that caused Sandra the most grief, especially when her husband was away from home for extended periods at work. She found it difficult to chop wood and especially “to make splits for starting the morning fire”. Learning new and different culinary skills often was not easy and was punctuated by various failures. Neither was having to place “big pots on the old Waterloo stove to heat water”, which had to be brought from the neighbouring well. Likewise washing in a tub with a scrubbing board was a new chore to be mastered and “was one of the hardships I had when I came here, especially when it came to washing the blankets. No wringer. Just wring them with the two hands”.

Sandra was most conscious of her perceived inability “to fit in” during the public rituals and ceremonies in the Roman Catholic Church. She felt she “had no words”, claiming:

I didn’t know any of the routine of the church... It was all different to me. That was the most difficult thing for me in church, here in public, and when you have to respond. Well, what can you say? You can’t say it, when you don’t know it.¹⁶

Later Sandra became more involved in the church, prepared the altar and carried out other such activities. She explains that her knowledge of the church “doesn’t bother me any more now. For years it didn’t bother me”.

Unlike Anna who had settled in St. John’s, Sandra was not surrounded by war brides. Only two other young war brides lived near Sandra, and they became friends. Partly because of this isolation from other women like herself, Sandra assimilated into her outpost community through gradual involvement in a variety of church and school activities — once her children were older. She still thinks of herself as “a native daughter of Scotland” but has also developed a strong loyalty to Newfoundland and Canada. In fact, she expresses the general feeling of many other Newfoundland war brides, when after a forty-five year residency, she affirms:

My roots are there [in Scotland], and that’s where my main roots are, although my home is here. And this is a home to me. But the roots are calling back. This has been a home to me away from home.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The consensus that approximately one quarter of the war brides returned alone to their European homelands points to distress originating in homesickness, inability to adapt, harsh economic conditions, and marital conflict. The stories of Anna and

Sandra, two who stayed, appear to represent some of the happier early Newfoundland experiences of these women in both an urban and a rural setting.

While these two individuals had different cultural, educational, and life experiences before they emigrated from southern England and northern Scotland, it is obvious that they shared many similar earlier Newfoundland experiences. Both women experienced loneliness, and “felt outside” in the Roman Catholic Church to which they had converted. Similarly, they shared the difficulties of adjusting to the seasons, with “the long, snowy winters” and the “short summers”. Spring in the land of their childhood, as well as the observations of the English and Scottish calendar celebrations, were equally missed. Both Anna and Sandra were attached to their homeland and families, and each felt like an outsider because of their speech patterns and the ways in which they would tackle various chores. Although there were variations in the stages and methods of adapting and coping with their new lifestyles, they both became very much involved in the community, church and school activities, especially any local dramatic performances. Anna designed and constructed the sets and sewed the costumes for all the productions of the drama club in a neighbouring school, and as well became an active member of the Rose and Thistle Club. Sandra, on the other hand, became involved with her own children, but continued to participate in and direct local community drama, in addition to working with the Canadian Legion Club.

The interviews indicate that many of the war brides have led extraordinary lives. For example, one woman we interviewed, at age twenty-one, was responsible for organizing air raid evacuations in her northern England town. We met a transplanted Cornish woman who raised nine children, including a disabled daughter, in an isolated northeast coast outpost without the extended family support network that is so often taken for granted in Newfoundland. The lives of this province’s war brides have taken us through the horrors of the blitz in London; the scrupulous saving of food coupons for wedding cakes and Christmas dinners; the cultural obstacles of trans-Atlantic courting in the 1940s; the lonely and bumpy crossing of the Atlantic Ocean; the eventful years of homesickness, “fitting in”, “coping”, child-rearing, laughter and love; and the senior years of remembering and reflecting. In this respect this brief account offers only a cursory glimpse into the very full lives of two of these “Roses and Thistles”.

Notes

¹The title is borrowed from the Rose and Thistle Club, a St. John’s social organization for war brides, which remained active until the 1960s. The rose stands for the English, while the thistle is a symbol of Scotland. The Irish women were referred to as shamrocks, and the Welsh as daffodils.

²Personal interview with G.J. Casey, October 2, 1991.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Letter from Anna Bowen to G.J. Casey, November 1991.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Personal interview with G.J. Casey, October 2, 1991.

¹¹Personal interview with G.J. Casey, July 26, 1991.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*