

***The Bletchley Girls—War, Secrecy, Love, and Loss: The Women of Bletchley Park Tell Their Story***

Tessa Dunlop (Hodder & Stoughton, Ltd., 2015), 341 pp., photos, notes, bibliography, index.

**Reviewed by David A. Foy**

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That the British code-breaking establishment identified with Bletchley Park (BP) has gained a popular following, complete with its own mystique and museum, alternately horrifies, intrigues, and fascinates the female veterans of the Park. British broadcaster and historian Tessa Dunlop tells their story in *The Bletchley Girls*, which focuses on 15 surviving veterans, average age 90, the majority of whom labored throughout the war in the small village of Bletchley, in Buckinghamshire. Dunlop explicitly states that her goal is to correct a warped historical picture because the “focus on code-breaking’s male hierarchy has obscured the reality of Park life.” (1) She supports that assertion by noting that by 1944, women in the BP labor force—estimated to total 8,500 to 10,000—outnumbered men nearly three to one, most of them in military auxiliary units, along with a few civilians. She also explains that she has focused on those women who were not enamored of life at the Park, those for whom the war years were a brief and sometimes trying interlude rather than the peak experience of their lives.

Dunlop begins by looking at the family backgrounds of the women who worked at the Park—generally, very young women (as young as 14) with very basic skills and few streaks of independence because, as the author notes, “little girls knew their place.” Most had only rudimentary educations—only one of the 15 highlighted in the book attended university before 1945—in large part because “No matter how bright you were, a good marriage was more important than a good education.” (34) For these young women, the encroachment of war brought the prospect of “opportunity” and “adventure,” just as it worried the older generation. What to do with Britain’s young women, faced with the most unfeminine prospect of total war, was, as Dunlop describes it, “a contentious issue” (54), though not for the women themselves, who, embarrassingly, oversubscribed the government’s quota for military auxiliary service—the goal was 25,000, but in 1939, 43,000 women volunteered. Furthermore, for many of the fairer sex, “only active service would suffice” because, after all, “heroes needed heroines.” (61)

In December 1941, Britain passed National Service Act (No. 2), which mandated wartime service for all unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 30. Whether they were linguists at “Station Y” communications intercept stations or engaged in the often menial aspects of code-breaking at BP—known to most at the time as “Station X”, to the Royal Navy as “HMS Pembroke V”—the Park’s military women were housed and paid for by the services, unlike the civilians. Within the sorority of BP women who were or sought to be in uniform, the Women’s Royal Naval Service—better-known as the “WRENS”—was the unit of choice, in part because of the spiffier uniforms and because its members operated the Bombe decoding machine and Colossus, described as the world’s first electronic computer. Of Dunlop’s 15 ladies, 10 sought to become WRENS, but only four made it.

Those women who knew the right people—personal connections were important in getting a job at BP and throughout the war—joined the initial 186 employees on a 51-acre tract of land, part of the much larger estate of stockbroker and Liberal MP Sir Herbert Leon, who had purchased it in 1882. By August 1939, it belonged to the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS), the post-World War I union of the Admiralty’s cryptography units (Room 40) and the War Office. By January 1940, BP employees had decoded the first wartime messages from the German ENIGMA cipher machine, and, not long afterwards, the brilliant but erratic cryptanalytic legend Alan Turing developed the first electronic test machine to detect the settings on the German ENIGMA code machine, the first of thousands of Bombe devices produced during the war.

Within the pages of *The Bletchley Girls*, the obsession with security runs like a steel cable—as Dunlop notes, “Above all else, Bletchley Park’s employees had to be trustworthy.” (65) The first step for women of interest to GC&CS was a mandatory interview that told them nothing of their future duties. However, the seriousness of the undertaking was reinforced not only by the signing

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of the Official Secrets Act but also by security lectures highlighted by death threats and—in the case of one BP recruit—the placing for emphasis of a revolver on the officer’s desk during the briefing. Dunlop refers to the work environment as “compartmentalized reality” (107), in which no one was exactly sure what it was they were working on. Nor were the conditions—or even the labor itself—much consolation; “dreadful” was the term often used to describe the surroundings, while the toil was “boring” or “repetitious,” performed by those who were little more than “bit parts in the conveyor belt of code-breaking.” (272) However, as the author notes, “with good friends, almost anything is tolerable” and the billeting arrangements necessitated by the war definitely broke down social barriers, presaging the future.

The first indication that the Park’s employees had that the European war was nearing its end was when the volume of ENIGMA messages began to sharply decline. The few celebrations that broke out when the German surrender became reality were quickly stifled with the frosty reminder that the war with Japan was continuing and that the Soviet Union was morphing from ally to foe. The number of employees declined to 6,000 until late July 1945, and the number of Bombe machines declined from 2,200 to 60, the rest turned into colored-wire Army scrap. In the postwar years, many of the Park’s women married—11 of the 15 in the book by 1950—and adopted lives of quiet domestic conformity, determined to take their secrets to their graves. When books on Bletchley Park began appearing in the 1970s, most BP veterans were horrified and spoke of a “betrayal”—as the author points out, even had someone wanted to “warn” them, they could not because by then no one knew who they all were. Besides, as one of the women veterans put it, “Our generation doesn’t know how to show off.” (290) By the 1970s, the Park had fallen into disrepair, the property leased by the General Post Office, with GC&CS successor the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) already ensconced in Cheltenham. In the years since, however, the Park has been resurrected, thanks to the Bletchley Park Trust, and the onsite museum welcomed 120,000 visitors in 2012.

Just as it took time for the BP ladies to adjust to peacetime, so it took them time to answer the question, “What did you do in the war, Mummy?” And if discussing their personal experiences was one thing, placing those experiences into the larger context of Bletchley Park—much

less the war—was quite another. While some have been forthcoming in recent years, others have kept quiet, especially those for whom the war years were an unpleasant memory. And, of course, fewer of them are left to tell the story with each passing day—at the time *The Bletchley Girls* was published, fewer than 10 percent of the original BP staff were still alive.

Readers who pick up *The Bletchley Girls* looking for a description of how the efforts of these women turned the tide of the war will be disappointed—as engaging as the book is, it is clearly and unapologetically a social history set against the backdrop of the war, rather than vice-versa. The reason for this focus is not only Dunlop’s expressed desire when writing this volume, but also the airtight security environment of BP, in which women in the same hut often had no idea of what each other was working on, in a larger sense, much less how it was contributing to Allied victory—and of course, they never talked about what they were doing, even amongst themselves. Readers are also advised to have a “King’s English” dictionary at hand when reading this book, as such British words and phrases as “mod-cons” (28), “frisson” (59, 227), “shtum” (100), and “gamine” (163) are likely to befuddle even well-educated American readers.<sup>a</sup> More photos of the named women would be helpful, and, as many reviewers have noted, the jerky nature of the text, jumping from one woman’s experiences to another’s, is annoying, even though Dunlop’s chapters are organized by topic.

In several instances readers need to duck to avoid the frantic waving of the Union Jack. For instance, when Dunlop discusses the US entry into the war, stressing the changes it brought to the code-breaking endeavor, she writes, “At last the green giant juddered<sup>b</sup> into military action,” (202) certainly an odd and snarky description of the US entry into World War II, particularly in light of Pearl Harbor. Similarly, she exhibits revisionist tendencies when, discussing the use of the atomic bomb, she strongly implies the war could have been ended another way—Japanese peace feelers to the United States via the Soviet Union—but the United States “chose not to pursue it” (255) and instead wanted a quick end to the war and to send Stalin a clear reminder of who was in charge in the post-war world.

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a. “Mod-cons” means modern conveniences; “frisson” means to shudder or to thrill; “shtum” means silent or non-communicative; and “gamine” means tomboy.

b. “Juddered” means shuddered.

A quick online search for books on Bletchley Park confirms that there is no shortage of them, and on all aspects of it—Colossus, the Bombe, Alan Turing, Hut 6, COMINT and the war against the U-boats, and so on; one national book chain has 47 books available on Bletchley Park. Nor is Dunlop's the only volume that addresses the experiences of women at the Park—see also *My Secret*

*Life in Hut 6: One Woman's Experience at Bletchley Park*, by Mair Russell-Jones (Lion Hudson, 2014) and *The Debs of Bletchley Park* by Michael Smith (Aurum Press, Ltd., 2015). Although there are caveats for readers of *The Bletchley Girls*, the book does provide a quick and interesting read and offers a valuable vantage point into one of the great stories of World War II.

