

CONFESSIONS OF A WAR'S FALLEN WOMEN

Unearthed in the Scottish Highlands, an old shoe box holds the 100-year-old secrets of a generation of lonely and desperate illegitimate mothers confiding in an agony aunt who was not what she seemed

BY CAROLINE SCOTT IN SCOTLAND



Pen relations: Previous spread, Mary Ann Brown with granddaughter Morna Stewart. Above, the cover of Weekly Companion in September 1916

The letters were written in pencil on pages torn from notebooks, on scraps of paper, on the backs of receipts and shop order forms; towards the end of 1914, as the First World War unfolded, they began to arrive on the black-bordered note paper of the recently bereaved. They were addressed to Fanny Deane, agony aunt on the newly launched DC Thomson title *The Weekly Companion*, and they began simply: “Dear Friend...”

Sometimes the handwriting was beautiful copperplate script, but more often it was a barely decipherable, unpunctuated scrawl. Many of the letters were from domestic staff, who, late at night, spilled onto the page things they could not tell their families, if they had families to tell - and many did not.

Fanny Deane was a pseudonym used by Mary Ann Brown, a 25-year-old from a lower-middle-class background with few obvious qualifications for the job. According to her granddaughter Morna Stewart, who has inherited a shoebox filled with the letters, Mary left school at 14, then worked in the jute mills around Dundee.

“Granny liked to boast that she was the first ‘editoress’ in the DC Thomson empire,” says Morna. “She used to tell us that when she applied for a job at the age of 17, it was DC himself who interviewed her. ‘How is it that you have such an old head on those young shoulders?’ he asked.”

When *The Weekly Companion* launched on 14 February 2014, joining a stable of other popular titles, including *My Weekly*, *Happy Home* and *Weekly Welcome*, Mary was given a full-page spread - “Our Chat by the Fireside” - and promptly created a completely new identity for herself. As Fanny Deane, she was a middle-class woman of wisdom and means, a loving wife (her fictional husband was fighting bravely at the front) and mother to two adorable children, Eppie and Ernie. Her writing style was both invitingly intimate and saccharine, an approach

that her readers - mostly women, but she also had a loyal following of “lonely soldiers” - seem to have found hugely comforting.

“I am to add another to the long list of resolutions in my notebook, and it is this,” Mary/Fanny began confidently: “I am to answer every letter within three days of receiving it, sooner if possible.” It looks as though she was true to her word. Spreading out the contents of the shoebox 100 years later on Morna’s kitchen table in Tarland, Aberdeenshire, the letters form long conversations conducted over many months, like a postal Facebook thread. Many of them are achingly sad and depressing. The writers were invariably pushed for time and often bone-weary, and, although the tone is relentlessly upbeat, the pages reek of desperation and loss.

‘I go mad over her’

They wrote about social isolation: “I work in a shop from 8am until 10 at night. I am motherless and 16 years of age. When I want to go out I have no one to go with... Can you send me a girl’s address?” And work: “I am a barmaid, a life which I hate. I work very long hours and only get out once a week. Mother is always raging at me for not speaking to the customers but I simply cannot do it as they are the most detestable rough sort of men.” And about sexual confusion: “I am a kitchen maid here. There are three maids and a housekeeper. I feel as though I must tell someone or I shall scream. Since being here I have got very much in love with the housekeeper. Every time I touch her I feel as though I could put my arms around her and kiss her. She is so fascinating and kind I simply go mad over her. Sometimes I cry because I so want to be near her.” It is a rare glimpse into the private lives of a generation still bound by the social constraints of the Victorian and Edwardian eras and now blindsided by war - the overwhelming impression is of exhaustion, isolation and unremitting loneliness.

During the autumn of 1914, when the letters begin, husbands, brothers and sweethearts were disappearing to the front. Slaughter on the battlefields resulted in a new awareness of the transience of human life, and the women they left behind wrote in their droves to their “friend” Fanny Deane for advice on the uncertain business of wartime sexual etiquette.

“Give the boys on leave a good time,” was a universal sentiment, but there was much confusion over how that should be played out. “I should like you to tell me whether you think it is wrong to go to the Picture Palaces with a soldier boy who I may not see again,” one asks. They wrote on the inconceivable shock of lost love: “He was hit by an enemy machine gun after taking part with his company in a chase to occupy a trench.” And they wrote for help “placing” their illegitimate babies: “I am sorry to say that I have a little girl aged nine months that’ll require to find a good home, the baby’s father has gone to the war and will have nothing to do with the baby or myself.” The press had a field day with the newly coined phrase “war babies”. By 1918, illegitimacy was up by around 30% on pre-war figures, yet

child adoption had no legal status in Britain until 1926, when the first act was passed in England and Wales, and in Scotland not until 1930.

‘Dear friend I am grieved to tell you that my darling baby passed away 10 o’clock last night (Friday)’

THE WEEKLY COMPANION, COURTESY OF DC THOMSON & CO LTD

“It is a pity he did not marry her before he went away...”

‘I am always afraid’

A reader wanting “a curly-haired little girl with a nice disposition” provoked a deluge of letters from young women. A letter from Florence Adams written on lined paper torn from a notebook and dated 15 February 1915 reads: “In last week’s *Companion* I saw where you spoke of a home for a little baby girl ... If this offer is closed do you know of any other home or place to put a baby, she is now one year and 10 months old.”

The same week, Lizzie Moore wrote: “I have a little girl, about three months old. I am trying to get someone to take her as I am only a factory worker earning 12/6 weekly ... and the baby’s father can’t be traced at all. I am always afraid of not doing the baby justice.”

Mary clearly did her best to place the babies of domestic servants who couldn’t keep them with better-off women who could and, as offers shot back and forth, there was no sense from anyone involved that this was iniquitous. Mrs Moore from Birmingham wrote: “I should like one from three years to five but I do want a nice healthy little one, I don’t mind how poor as long as it doesn’t have bad blood. Perhaps a soldier’s child who has been killed - but I must have it all to myself. We are highly respectable and it would have a kind Christian home.”

Mary, still only 25, and living at home in a creaky tenement with her mother, two younger sisters and a brother, was unlikely to have had first-hand experience of any of the above. But as Fanny Deane she was able to dispense crisp advice and comfort to the masses. None of her own letters survive but she tore out and kept a few of her columns. To “Newcastle Girl” she wrote: “I do wish I had you beside me dear, to have a long chat with you. You must not rush into intimacy just because you are lonely. Above all don’t let your infirmity of speech stop you making friends. Do you take any interest in church work? Some of the finest ideas I have come to me in church. Write me again soon...”

According to Morna, “Granny was grumpy, argumentative, terminally mean and borderline Aspergic”. Not much empathy then? “Oh, absolutely none! And she was pretty economical with the truth.” Fanny was, however, a brilliantly clever construct and through her, Mary built relationships and sustained long pen-friendships that she may have had difficulty navigating as her real self.

‘I need a friend’

In late September, Lucy Allen, a young girl in service in Clapham, south-west London, wrote to Fanny Deane with heartbreaking candour: “Dear Friend, at present, I need a friend. I am in trouble with my young man who has left me and gone to join the army and I expect my baby this month. I have tried to find a babys (sic) home where they are taken in for just small payments but cannot find one. I have neither mother nor father nor

anyone belonging to me whom I could look to for help. I am longing to receive a letter from you at your earliest convenience as I must have a baby’s home before I give birth to my child.”

Mary wrote to George Riddell, one time managing director of the *News of The World* and a friend of David Lloyd George, who replied on 15 October 1914: “I think I can get her into a home where I have some influence.” He refers the case to a Mr Williamson who writes with arch detachment: “I presume she would only be walking out with the soldier? If so, she has no claim on any fund. If they had been living together and he had provided a home for her, she would have been entitled to relief from the Soldiers and Sailors Fund. It is a pity he did not marry her before he went away... The Government will not recognise cases of soldiers simply walking out with anyone, neither will any association. There are homes in London for such cases.”

In 1914, maternity hospitals were reserved for married mothers only, but all over the country, there were refuge homes for unmarried mothers run by the Salvation Army and other missions existed in private houses.

The next letter from Allen is undated but she writes from a “hospital waiting home” for unmarried mothers, where she is only allowed to stay for 14 days: “You will be surprised to hear that I have given birth to a son. He was born on 10 October, it would be the same day you received my letter although I did not expect for another two weeks yet. He is a fine little son I am very proud of him and hate the idea of parting with him. He is brought into the world for something good or he would not have lived.”

On 11 November, after receiving a “beautiful” letter from Mary, Lucy writes back to tell her that she has named her baby Wilfred Eric Allen. “I was so pleased to receive your letter of Wed and so pleased to tell you that both baby and myself are getting on very nicely indeed. He is such a darling little boy. I used to wish the child would be born dead but now it would break my heart to lose him. Sir George Riddell went to the hospital to visit me and left me £1. And left another £1 with the matron I was very grateful indeed. The money took a lot of worry from my mind.”

The scandal of late Victorian baby-farming, where illegitimate babies were starved and left to die by unscrupulous foster carers, had shocked the nation and resulted in a series of acts of parliament designed to protect children such as Lucy’s, but even well-intentioned fostering was precarious. Babies were fed cows’ milk or sugar water and very often failed to thrive.

On Christmas Eve 1914, Lucy writes from Station Parade in Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire, where she has taken a position as cook. She has found a foster carer for Wilfred Eric. “I am sorry to tell you my poor little Wilfred has been very very ill. Poor little soul, he only weighted 7lb 5oz when he was born but now he has wasted away to 5lb 3oz. The doctor told me I should have kept him and fed him myself. I told him I would love to have kept him but I could not as I was obliged to go out to work. I have now



Revealed: in this First World War picture of DC Thomson's "editorial girls", Mary Ann Brown, aka Fanny Deane, is on the far left of the front row

changed the foster mother ... and I must hope for the best that he will live and grow."

The shoebox only gives one side of the correspondence so we cannot know how Mary viewed their relationship, but to Lucy, Fanny Deane's life must have seemed enviably stable. In February, she is keen to know more about Mary's "new baby". "When you write again will you tell me about your little girl and what her name is and her age?" In March, she writes: "You have such a sweet little name for her I really think Joy is a fine name for a little girl."

In the *Companion*, Mary gave full vent to her imagination. "Amongst my letters this week was one from a woman whose simple account of how she makes her husband's wages keep the home going is one of the most grandly inspiring things I have ever read. I took it to my husband and read it to him. He put his arm round my waist when I'd finished. 'It's a wonderful magic you women practise,' he said. With more gravity than is usual with him."

'If only I was married'

The *Companion* often came with paper sewing patterns: "a useful blouse" or "a fashionable child's apron". Romantic fiction featured heavily, with serials appearing over several weeks, including "Little Meg or Homeless on the Streets of London", "The Adventures of Polly Bright" (a muffin seller who stole men's hearts) as well as competitions and articles on cooking, sewing and knitting.

"I sent a cookery hint to the address you gave me and while writing this received a very nice blouse which I was very pleased with..." Lucy writes: "Wilfred, my darling babe now four

months old, is a little better and I have just finished making his underclothing."

Although Lucy often struggles to find enough money to pay the foster carer, she rarely complains and is bursting with pride in her little son. "I am pleased to tell you my dear Eric is a little better," she writes on 12 March. "He weighs in at 8lb 11oz. He was five months old yesterday. When I went to see him last Wednesday he laughed so sweet and he was so pretty. His hair was quite black when he was born but now he has some new hair and I think it will be curly and so fair. When he gets a bit bigger I shall have his photo taken and you shall have one. If only I was married I would be so proud to take him and show him to all my relations and friends."

Birth control, although newly available, was hard to come by and illegitimacy was a pressing social concern, debated endlessly in Parliament. But attitudes, even among the young, were trenchant. Lucy talks about a young man she'd met: "Of course I had to tell him about dear baby and he said he could never have it with us and after a time he told me I must choose between baby and himself. I told him I could not marry

I do wish I had you beside me dear, to have a long chat with you. You must not rush into intimacy just because you are lonely'

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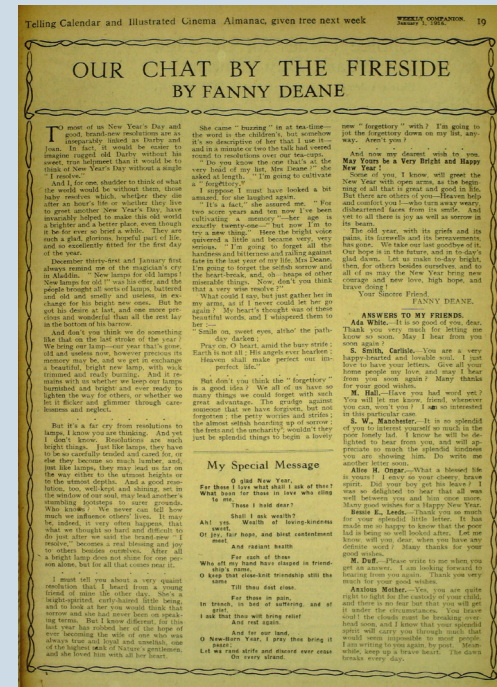


anyone who would not be a father to my baby and so I bid him goodbye forever."

Mary must have sent Lucy a present for Wilfred because on 23 April she writes thanking her for it and then breaks the most ghastly news. "Dear friend I am grieved to tell you that my darling baby passed away 10 o'clock last night (Friday). I had been very busy making him a little dress and with your present too, I was going to have his photo taken on Monday. He was quite well Friday morning laughing and trying to talk in his little way but at about 3 in the afternoon he had a fit and never was out of it, he was dead by 10 o'clock at night. It was so terrible as the last time I saw him was the week after Easter he was such a lovely boy and oh so pretty ... it really makes me feel there is no God as everything is so hard. I felt that I had at last one thing that really did belong to me."

Wilfred Eric was buried the following Friday at Streatham Park Cemetery and Lucy, poleaxed by grief, writes on 7 May: "You are the only one who sympathises with me. Everyone else says it is a blessing that he was taken." By July, she has moved to 264 Bath Road, Kettering: "I left Gerrards Cross on May 14th," she writes. "I couldn't stay anywhere round there. Everything reminds me of my dear baby. I did not know I could ever love him so much." She has been to see "my darling's grave. Poor child, I shall never get over his loss".

There are no more letters from Lucy until 20 September when she writes in pencil in a shaky hand to say she has been ill in bed for two months with diphtheria. "I had not been myself for a long, long time now. I thought I was going to die. I would not have minded." The only good thing to



come out of her illness was that her "dear soldier brother" was sent for and came home from the front "so now I feel I have someone. It will soon be 12 months since my dear baby Wilfred was born and it is yet 5 months since I lost him. How lovely would he be now, had he lived."

In December, her grief still raw and intense, she tells Fanny she "cannot look at a baby, it is such a dreadful feeling. To think my poor, poor Wilfred lies deep under the turf. I would so love him back. Life is so lonely. You are the only person I can mention my dear baby to." She has met a man; he is about to enlist and they plan to get engaged before he leaves. "Now friend," she writes, "if you were in my place, would you tell him about my darling Eric? I don't know what to do and it makes me very unhappy."

'Life is so lonely'

By August 1916 Lucy has taken a job working in the fields near Rothwell. She thanks Mary for her "long and beautiful letter, though as yet I have not taken your advice. I have dropped several hints but he does not seem to take them ... My darling boy would be a year and 10 months on Thursday. What a gap he left behind him. I wonder if it will ever be filled. But I am afraid not it seems so to cling to me. I can almost feel his baby fingers now."

On 7 November Lucy makes "a very daring" offer which proves calamitous to the relationship between the two women: "Well dear friend, first of all I must make enquiries about your husband and hope he is still safe and also your children are well. Give them my best love and a kiss from me. I had been so looking forward to my brother coming from France but I am afraid he is killed or

Pen relations: Mary Ann Brown's granddaughter. Above, the cover of the *Companion* in 1916

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wounded so that he cannot write. I have not heard from him for six weeks. You will think I am making a very daring offer but I have been thinking so much lately about your little girl. Could you trust me to look after her at Xmas. You could put her on a train at St Pancras and I would meet her at Kettering. I would promise to take the greatest possible care of her and should love her dearly. Think over what I have asked won't you. I will close with deepest love, your sincere friend Lucy Allen."

This is the very last letter in the shoebox from Lucy Allen. The conversation stops abruptly - perhaps because Lucy had crossed an undeclared line, or maybe because real life for Mary had taken a new turn. In December 1916 Mary Ann Brown married David Malcolm Stewart, a hackle maker and factory owner from Dundee: she was 27, he was 40. Her column makes a final appearance on 9 December 1916.

Nine months after her marriage, Mary gave birth to her first child, Morna's father Rennie Stewart, followed by a second son, Bruce, in 1929. Morna agrees there's a possibility Mary was pregnant herself and had to leave work quickly. Certainly she was proud of her position and missed it greatly. She lived a long and fairly prosperous life but never worked again.

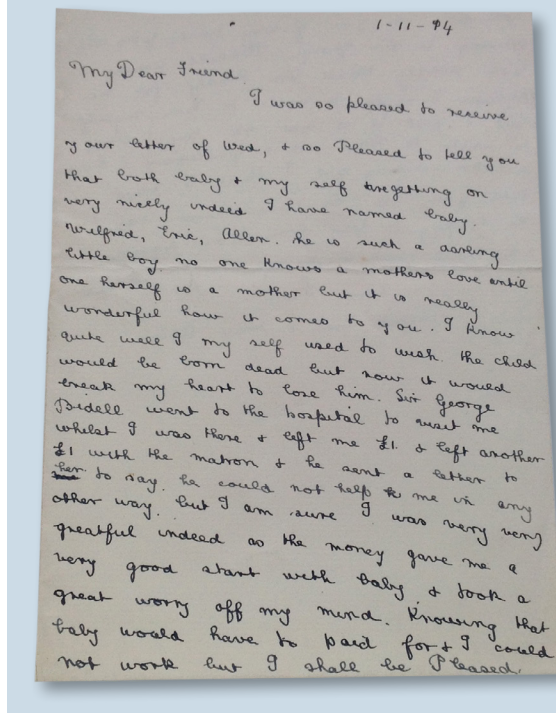
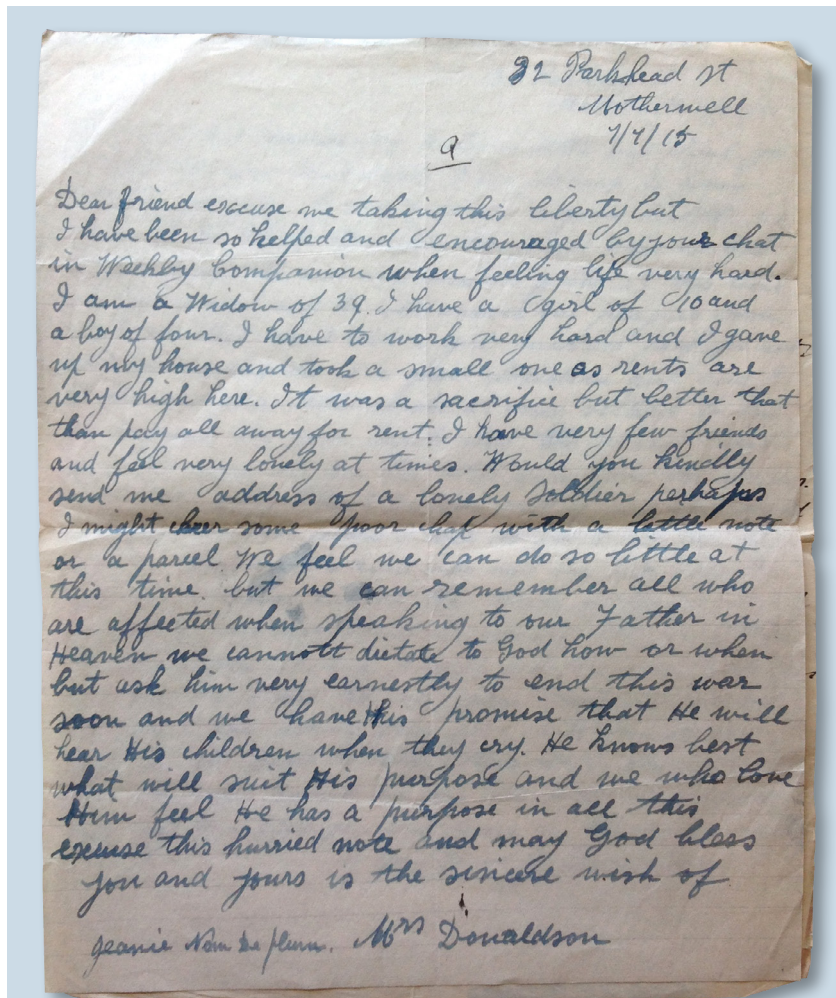
Morna, a retired teacher, has no warm memories of her grandmother. Does she think Mary felt real empathy with her readers? "It's hard to know," she says. "I don't know if I can answer that question. She wasn't particularly kind, and she wasn't interested in us. The only time she was ever nice was in front of other people."

Morna is immovable on this point. She can't think of a single occasion that granny didn't spoil with her argumentativeness and lack of grace. But it's clear from the letters that Fanny Deane's "friendship" sustained hundreds of people during the early years of the war. There were two marriages - girls she'd connected with lonely soldiers - and many close bonds and attachments were forged through her column.

We may never know what happened to Lucy Allen, but I hope she found happiness. I visited Streatham Park Cemetery and found the grave of her beloved boy Wilfred Eric. He is buried in a common plot - or pauper's grave - along with 20 or 30 others, and there is no headstone. Lucy would not have been able to afford even to mark his passing. His life and death are marked merely with a number, 8974, and the ground has been turfed over and recently mown. There is nothing now, apart from the shoebox letters, to say he ever lived. I took rosemary for remembrance and sprigs of honeysuckle for devoted love and laid them on the spot where his young mother must have knelt alone so many times, whispering his name.

Caroline Scott

has written extensively on fostering and adoption and, last year, was approved as a foster carer herself.



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