SECRET LOVE

After his mother’s death in 2003, Simon Worrall unearthed a chocolate box full of passionate letters that revealed a family secret, hidden for almost 80 years.
advancing Germans. The roads were chaotic as British troops collided with Belgian civilians fleeing to safety. At the village of Gournain-Ramicròx, the battalion was strafed by Stukas dive bombers, killing dozens of LX and Bucks men. A French travelling circus was also caught in the melee. The body parts of dead animals and men lay strewn across the road.

On 23 May the 1st Bucks Battalion was ordered to Hazebrouck, an important railway junction in northern France. With the surrender of the French Army, the British Expeditionary Force was fleeing headlong towards the coast. Orders were to hold the town to the last man; otherwise, the German prisoners for even 12 hours would help the British Army make it to Dunkirk.

By 26 May, the Germans had smashed their way into the centre of Hazebrouck, while Stukas and Heinkel's pounded it from the air. The remnants of the battalion were held up in an orphanage. Most of the town was on fire. Shortly before midnight, Martin was ordered to lead a patrol to the railway station.

My mother never did find out what happened to Martin that night, though for two years she tried to piece together the narrative of his last days, writing to the Red Cross and War Office, and collating information filtering back to wives and fiancées from the surviving Bucks men, now in a POW camp in Austria. She never gave up hope he was alive, although there was no letter or information in the pipeline. She had was the hope that you are in Camp X.F.X. I shall be writing a note in a few weeks. If you cannot get them through to you, I often go to Penn, to the church and the great wide views we love — on your birthday. I walked for miles in the warm, high sun up there. I think of you day and night. The moment I open my eyes in the morning. And when I close them at night. Your love lifts me up. It's a crown I wear in my heart.

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My beloved, dearest Martin.

Although we do not yet know where you are or if you are going to recover, I am writing this letter to tell you how much I love you. I have written in the hope that you are in Camp X.F.X. I shall be writing a note in a few weeks. If you cannot get them through to you, I often go to Penn, to the church and the great wide views we love — on your birthday. I walked for miles in the warm, high sun up there. I think of you day and night. The moment I open my eyes in the morning. And when I close them at night. Your love lifts me up. It's a crown I wear in my heart.

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By then my mother had moved on in her life. She also believed that Martin would have wanted it, as this letter, written to his sister, Rosa, in 1941, makes clear: 'Whatever happens, I know I can never stop loving Martin. I do not have to tell you that, or how much I want to go on finding kindness and beauty in life and loving it for his sake. Tears were never any part of him and we must not let them be part of us now.'

Yet she never did fully let him go. Was it selfish of her to keep alive the memory of her first great love in such a viable way? There are some in my family who believe it was and that, by doing so, she made my father, Phil, feel he was always playing second fiddle. In the run-up to my mother's memorial service in 2005, a family row erupted when I insisted that, along with other memorials of her life, we should put on display some of the letters and photographs of Martin. 'I want to remember Mum for her 57-year-long marriage to our father,' my elder brother said during an Easter lunch in Somerset. 'Not for a two-year love affair she had when she was young.'

Though I cannot know for sure, I believe my father never begrudged his wife's lost love. He was a Special Operations Executive zero, and would have respected a fellow soldier's memory. Martin's story was also something I think he accepted as part of Nancy's life before he knew her; her 'baggage.' He certainly didn't speak about it to me, or any of his other children. And we never asked. Our father was the person that mattered in us, out of love for him, my mother never openly brought up the past. She was too busy, being an Army wife, travelling the world with three boisterous boys, running a home, cooking the daily 'train tray,' as she called it.

On the mend after his marriage, Martin remained the perfect love; an ideal my father could, of course, never match. If they had a row, or the dark winter days had sapped her normally cheerful spirits, she would sometimes take the car and drive up to Penn for a walk.

Martin went on writing her, and all our lives, in middle age, like a subterranean river flowing beneath the house. I discovered, for instance, that she lived at Wychert House after Martin's death. And that, in the 1970s, my mother and father travelled together to Hazebrouck in Flanders so that Nancy could lay a wreath at Martin's grave. I did the same in 2010. And though my father's family was from Somerset, she never strayed from Buckinghamshire, climbing, like a barnacle, to the landscape of her youth, and her first, great love. She died in 2005, five miles from Wychert House. My father followed her a year later, to the day.

As a child, I would sometimes look at the photos of this young man and wonder who he was. Did I, in some unconscious way, identify with Martin as an alternative narrative, the father I might have had? The letters in the chocolate box were a gift. Not only were they beautifully written. They also told a story that rose above the particulars of time and place: a universal tale about two young people facing the ultimate challenge of war.

Bringing my brother back to life in fiction, as a vibrant young woman, helped me forget the suffering of her final years with Alzheimer's. And by telling the story of this brief and beautiful affair, I could rescue it from oblivion, and make good on the hope expressed in one of Martin's letters that 'this love can't fail for nothing.'

The Very White of Love, by SC Worrall, is published by HarperCollins (£16.99). To order your copy for £13.99, plus £2.99 delivery, call 0844-847-3594 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk
It is almost 60 years ago, but the memory of that summer afternoon in the garden of a house in Buckinghamshire still shines in my mind, as if it were yesterday. Whichert House was named after the local word for ‘white earth’, the mixture of lime and straw used in the construction of houses in this part of the county. It was built in the 1920s by Charles Preston, a lawyer, and it was his widow, Aunt Dorothy, as my mother called her, though we were not related by blood, whom we were visiting that day. I was nine years old.

Childhood memories have no background, only a foreground. So when I close my eyes I don’t see the house, just pools of blue shadow; a circle of grass covered in a picnic rug; a table set with tea, and Aunt Dorothy, a birdlike creature with a gardener’s tan and cornflower-blue eyes, sitting upright in a wicker chair, with a straw hat on her head. Even after all these years, the brief time my mother and I spent in that garden — and we would never go again — is still bathed in a special light.

Sorting through my mother’s effects after her death from Alzheimer’s in 2005, my brothers and I found a battered chocolate box, decorated with red roses, at the bottom of her wardrobe. Inside, were bundles of love letters, tightly bound with string. No one else wanted it, so I took the box home with me, where it lay unopened for weeks. Her death was still fresh and raw, I was in my mid-50s. Divorced. Anchorless. Now motherless. Then one rainy afternoon, I untied the strings and the meaning of that afternoon became clear.

Whichert House, September 1938

Dear Aunt D,

I’ve fallen madly in love with Nancy Claire Whelan. You’ve every right to laugh when you read that, but I’m terribly happy to have found someone so fond of me, who leaves everyone else I’ve met to the side. I’m sure you’ve seen her riding her bicycle about town. She lives down the road from you at the Cottage. She is an only child — and weird! She was at school in Oxford so she knows it well and has also lived in France and Germany. She speaks the languages, she sings and acts, she’s intelligent, pretty...

My eyes widened. This was my mother being described. But the man writing about her was not my father. I opened more letters, trying to piece together the story that lay behind them. There were about 60 in all, mostly written from Oxford, but also from France in 1940. With them were a handful of letters returned to my mother, stamped by the British Forces Post, ‘Return To Sender: Addressess Reported Missing’.

Who was this other man? And what had happened to him? Those questions propelled me on a seven-year journey of discovery and investigation that finally took me back to Whichert House. I ransacked military archives and searched out relatives of the young man. I contacted the Red Cross for his file and travelled to France, retracing his time in the army in the run-up to Dunkirk. Gradually, I pieced together the story.

His name was Martin Preston, and he was the nephew of the celebrated First World War poet and novelist Robert Graves. When the correspondence with my mother began he was 19 years old, a second-year student at St Edmund Hall, Oxford.

He was, by all accounts, a serious young man, perhaps because of his colonial childhood. Fished off to boarding school from Egypt at the age of six, Martin rarely saw his parents. Instead, Whichert House and Aunt D, his father’s sister-in-law, and her own family, became the fixed points of his life: the place he thought of as ‘home’. Aunt D knitted him socks, made marmalade or posted back his books to Oxford when he left them behind.

His mother, Molly Preston, an operatic woman who dabbled in the occult and liked to drape herself in pearls of ping-pong balls, was Robert Graves’ half-sister. From his father, Alfred Percival Graves’ second marriage, to Amable von Ranke, Molly made much of that ‘you’, though Martin loved to tell the story of being referred to by a stick-up relative as ‘only a half-Grave’.

When the war Martin, Nancy Claire Whelan, my mother was 22, a vivacious redhead with a love of theatre, dance and music. She was not upper class, like Martin, but educated at Edgbaston Grammar School. He went to Marborough. And social tensions bubbled away beneath the surface of their relationship. ‘A tax inspector?’ Molly exclaimed in horror upon hearing that Nancy’s father worked for the Inland Revenue.

Class didn’t matter to the young couple. It was love at first sight. ‘I don’t know how to feel when you’re around,’ Martin wrote. ‘You turn me so inside out — no one has ever done it before. You are the most exciting thing in the world...’ That love would soon be interrupted. In August 1939, less than a year after they met, Martin received his commission as a second lieutenant in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. He was the youngest officer in the Bucks Battalion, and after training in Sussex, the regiment shipped out to northern France in January 1940. Before he left, Nancy and Martin got engaged. Martin had the words, The Furry White of Love, a reference to a favourite poem by Wey Gardner, engraved on their rings.

The battalion was stationed in Walsignham, a drab mining town in the Lille area. Martin was not a natural soldier. Small, fine-boned, with an artistic temperament, he was nonetheless determined to do good by his men. And for the six months of what became known as the phoney war, he drilled them in trench-digging, marching and weaponry. And dreamed of Nancy.

‘My Only Love,’ he wrote in February 1940. ‘I’m sitting in the mess, almost the last one up. If I close my eyes, I am with you again, on that blissful afternoon when we drove up to Penn and lay in each other’s arms on a rug, under the dark-furred sky. The sunlight is falling across your face. Above us, that gnarled oak tree sways its branches...’

When the balloon finally went up on 10 May 1940, German panzers smashed through the Ardenes and Martin’s battalion was realised for action. To save weight for the route marches ahead, the soldiers were ordered to dispose of their personal effects. Martin had to burn more than 100 letters from Nancy, which he had carried to France in his kit bag.

The Ox and Bucks, now part of the 44th Midland Division, marched east to Waterloo, but after less than 12 hours were ordered back to the Escourt Canal, where the British Army hoped to hold the