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Cockney gumption in the blitz

REVIEW BY ALFRED RUSHTON

CARTOONIST and writer Ben Wick's *Nell's War* is a compilation of eyewitness accounts and his personal memories of the blitz that was launched against the British from 1940 to 1941, during which some 43,000 civilians were killed. Half of the deaths were in London, where Wick was born. Nell was Wick's mother, a charlady who, with her husband Alf, endured the blitz with Cockney gumption. Young Ben spent most of the time in the countryside, along with other London youngsters who had been evacuated for the duration of the war.

At first, writes Wick, the family had to adjust to the relentless new reality. Gas masks were issued, and people had to learn to use them, as civilians suddenly found themselves on the front lines while the air force, with its British, Canadian and Polish pilots, fought air battles in the canyons and Spitfires above. Local authorities were recruited to

NELL'S WAR
BY BEN WICK
Stoddart, 252 pages, \$24.95

protect the public and set up air-raid precautions. Blackouts doubled the number of road accidents. As the blitz continued, notes Wick, class distinctions became even more evident — the upper classes had access to comfortable hotel shelters as well as fine food and entertainment. Even Churchill doesn't escape criticism: Wick quotes Lord Birkhead: "Churchill's tastes are simple. He's easily contented with the best of everything."

In stark contrast, less well-born people crowded into the London Underground, which had become an improvised shelter. After the evacuation of Dunkirk, writes Wick, class barriers faded in the face of the common war effort. Women from all classes learned the proper use of small arms, while civilians in the Home Guard prepared for the

expected German invasion. Contrary to some books and films that showed sentimental depictions of the blitz, *Nell's War*, with eight pages of photos, is unsparring in its first-hand descriptions of real life far from the propaganda mills. The blitz brought out the best and the worst of people, just as any war does. Some survivors tell of returning to their home after an air raid only to find the house looted.

Other survivors show a strong sense of ingenuity — a woman took a parachute from the body of a dead German, and used the material to make dresses for her daughters. These survivors endured not with a whimper, but a shout of defiance at Germany's territorial imperative.

Nell's War is not to be read at one sitting. If the reader wants to absorb the full impact of what these people have to relate. As a character reference for a country at war, it is a wonderful tribute.

Alfred Rushton is a writer living in Brampton, Ont.

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