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Victoria K. Tutino
College of the Holy Cross

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Stay at Home, Soldiers
An Analysis of British and American Women on the Homefront during World War II and the Effects on Their Memory Through Film

Victoria K Tutino ‘19

Over the past twenty years, stretches of “The Year of the Woman” in 1992 and “The Pink Wave” have infiltrated national dialogue concerning the role of women in society and politics. These periods demonstrated that modern-day women have once again started to rise up as a unit and demand equality. Yet, as political science professor Kelly Dittmar noted back in October, these cycles lead others to believe they represent all women and have urged society to reexamine the role of women in previous eras such as the women of World War Two. However, just like the films about the women of WWII, these cycles only tell part of the story and society needs to examine them cautiously.

While today’s society values women’s stories more than during the 1940s-1960s, the producers and directors at the time believed their selective decisions portrayed the reality of women. Mrs. Miniver (1942) and Since You Went Away (1944) attempted to highlight the truth of the Homefront, but propaganda penetrated the script and has led to a misleading depiction of how the war affected women. By 2006, Housewife, 49 delved into the diaries of Nella Last and the Mass Observation (MO) Archives in a pursuit to showcase the strains of war and the potential emancipatory qualities it possessed. Still, this film leaves the viewers believing they know the entire picture. Society needs these films in order to understand the context of the wartime era, but society must be wary as this medium only explores one side of women’s multi-dimensional roles in the public and private spheres of society. Although they captured parts of women’s wartime experiences and the societal complex of the time, these films about women and the Homefront in Britain and the United States created the illusion that the viewers knew and now know what the war meant and was like for these women.

In order to get a full sense of what women experienced during the war, a quick look at their various roles and responsibilities will reveal why the three films mentioned above serve as faulty depictions of these women’s realities. The Homefront allowed the military to fully engage in war with the male population fighting overseas. Due to labor shortages and women needing money to support

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their families as men were off fighting, women took on wartime jobs. These women in both the United States and Britain responded to their government’s call for aid and support. In Britain early into the war, the government started conscripting women under forty to war work and placed them into mobile and immobile categories. Women volunteered for the Women Voluntary Services, worked in factories, served in the Women’s Army Corps (WAC), the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) or Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), or remained in the home taking care of the family and local duties. However, these women received conflicting advice from their governments which told women to stick to their jobs in the home and to only volunteer and work in their spare time. Also, magazines and advertisements urged women to remain feminine in everything they did and that maintaining a proper household would help defeat Nazism and Fascism. These requests by the state shined through in the 1940s films and even in the diaries of Nella Last in *Housewife*, 49. Moreover, the propaganda of the period and this inconsistent advice engulfed films, leading to oversimplified and over-dramatic depictions of women’s realities as they coped with wartime traumas such as death and loneliness while maintaining a smile and the image of domesticity.

**Historiographical Understanding**

Since the end of the Second World War, historians and writers have published a prolific amount of literature on WWII women and on the Homefront. Discoveries in attics, newfound appreciation of the Mass Observation Archives, and the Feminist Movement of the seventies and nineties inspired individuals to investigate women’s experiences and perspectives at home during the war. However, as sociologist Pauline E. Parker points out in her book *Women of the Homefront: World War II Recollections of 55 Americans*, a majority of the women from the period have passed and all that remains of their experiences are their letters and memories of their memories.7 Their deaths mark both a loss of the WWII Generation and the beginning of a transition from primary accounts to a form of retrospective memory in which people today form memories of the people of the

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4 Minns, 7-9, 13, 15.
5 Minns, 10.; Yellin 5-31.
past. The only problem with this – acknowledged by all the historians and writers that will be discussed in this paper – is that the history of women in WWII and diaries selected and written about only detail part of the story, as not all classes, backgrounds, and races penned their experiences or not enough documentation is available to offer a comprehensive analysis.

Furthering that, Parker, journalist Emily Yellin, author Raynes Minns, archivist Dorothy Sheridan, and historian James Hinton all tackled the complex topic of women on the Homefront in their own distinctive way. They did so to pay homage to the recollections of the women both in the United States and Britain who experienced the war first hand and deserved a voice in the conversation. As Parker reflected upon American women’s experiences during the war in her 2002 *Women of the Homefront: World War II Recollections of 55 Americans*, she emphasized the need to publish the words of World War II women in order to capture their experiences rather than allowing the Feminist Movement’s influence to revise their actual sentiments. Yellin follows a similar path to Parker, but expands the narrative to provide a comprehensive look at American women during WWII in her 2004 *Our Mothers’ War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* to demonstrate that men were not the only soldiers. Yet, as Raynes Minns points out in her 1999 *Bombers & Mash: The Domestic Front 1939-45* about the British Homefront, these women’s experiences need to be stripped of the propaganda of the period in order to examine the impact of the war on women, but, even then, a comprehensive look of their experiences cannot be complete. Hinton’s *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* and Sheridan’s *Wartime Women: A Mass-Observation Anthology 1937-45* echo this as they delved into the diaries of the Mass Observers and, like Parker, they put the women at the center of their work in order to tell the history. Overall, these five works detail the moves historians made in the 1990s and 2000s in order to illuminate the memory of these women and their overlooked impacts during the war and in depictions in film.

Leading up to the early 2000s, various American historians and writers started to produce work about women’s roles during the war. The fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in 1995 and influences from the Feminist Movement sparked new interest in forming different narratives about who fought in the war abroad and at home. This moment urged historians and writers to examine the role and histories of the individual and the nontraditional actors. Whether it was women in the armed forces, in the factories, or in the home, these writers set the precedent for how modern-day historians tackle WWII subjects like the housewife. They

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9 Parker, 1-4.
10 Yellin, x-xiv, 5-19.
11 Minns, 1.
worked with the discovered diaries and untold stories that the women of the era kept tucked away and hidden because their generation focused on the men’s viewpoints of the war. Although historians and writers generated many works in the early 2000s, two stand out due to their unique approaches to addressing the topic of women on the Homefront: Pauline E. Parker’s 2002 *Women of the Homefront: World War II Recollections of 55 Americans* and Emily Yellin’s 2004 *Our Mothers’ War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II*. While Yellin opted to do a comprehensive look at women on the Homefront and abroad, Parker went a different route and decided to let the women’s reflections of their experiences during WWII tell the narrative of the Homefront. These two works, although focused on the same topic, diverge in both their views on what the war did for women and on who tells the story. Their works are essential to gain even a glimpse of what women’s wartime lives looked like, sitting opposite the narratives enforced through film.

Throughout Parker’s book, her attention to the voices and recollections of the women of the 1940s illuminates women in WWII in a profound way. She not only focuses on housewives, but compiles the voices of women in the military, at home and abroad, and in laboratories, capturing how the war affected them emotionally, personally, and as a community. She argues that by allowing the women to speak “it captures the experiences and feeling of young women living through the turmoil and upheaval of World War II before our stories are lost forever.”

This decision is profound. Not only does she recognize the ravages of time, but as a trained sociologist, she understands the power of comprehending society through raw and contemporary eyes. The women’s actual accounts undermine the narrative construed by the Feminist Movement and reinforce the importance of accurate voice representation. Additionally, she acknowledges that these women need to be heard because they endured different hardships and experiences than the women in the heart of the conflict, as American women carried it in their minds and imaginations. This note shines through in each section of the collection. In the “Voices from Military Dependents” and “Voices from Daily Life” sections, readers get a sense of what the Homefront actually was like and what these women endured. Rather than only getting one side of women’s experiences as viewers get in the films, these accounts offer a personal window into the lives of these women. Given that modern historians did not experience WWII, these recollections permit historians to take a step back from Feminist teachings and theories in order to engage in an authentic conversation with the women who withstood the war.

Diverging from Parker’s take, two years later, Yellin expanded the narrative

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12 Parker, 1.
13 Parker, 1-2.
14 Parker, 153-218.
of women by taking the diaries and accounts of these women and crafting a comprehensive view of them in WWII. This might be due to her background as a journalist, but she is able to capture the entire scope of a story. Throughout her book, Yellin’s attention to the diversity of women in the war illuminates the importance of documenting their history. She started investigating this unwritten history after she discovered her mother’s wartime diaries and letters tucked away in a box in the attic. They illustrated the various issues and people Yellin highlights throughout her book. She not only focuses on the white, married housewife, but digs deeper and examines the narratives of factory workers, nurses, WAVES, WACs, and African American women. In chapters such as “Jane Crow” and “A Question of Loyalty,” she analyzes the war through the lenses of African American and Japanese American females. This decision opens up the conversation about women’s experiences and expands upon Parker’s collection of recollections by showing that white women of European descent were not the only people who struggled. She provides the necessary space to show viewers of films to understand that individuals like Fidelia in Since You Went Away went through the exact same situations as Mrs. Hilton and other women. The privilege of time permitted Yellin to do this and her mother’s diary entry about her fellow nurses and her serving African American soldiers in the Pacific urged Yellin to consider this history. The interesting part of her inclusion lies in her ability to track down first-hand accounts and the diaries of these women. Without these, she would not have been able to chronicle these sentiments. Also, she reveals that these diaries and accounts permitted her to start to understand the emotions women felt and the sacrifices they made. Overall, they gave her insight into the courage and determination they had to never give up.

Additionally, Yellin breaks down the different roles and statuses of women in order to give her readers the necessary basis to understand what the government expected of women and their reality. With subsections of “War Brides,” “War Wives and Their Children,” “Rationing,” and Women’s Magazines,” she delves beneath the surface of the portrayals of women like Mrs. Miniver, Mrs. Hilton, and even Mrs. Last, who are the main characters of the three films. These sections detail not only the traditional image of the perfect housewife, but the journal entries and letters of these women bolster Yellin’s argument that these women were soldiers. It illuminates that even though they did not fight on the front lines, their daily efforts positioned them in situations that required them to remain

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15 Yellin, ix-xvi. Her mother served as a Red Cross nurse in the Pacific from 1944-1945. Also, her mother said that she was part of the generation that kept their tales to themselves while men’s stories like her husband’s became the national narrative.
16 Ibid, 199-224, 253-277.
17 Yellin, xii-xiii.
18 Yellin, xi-xii.
19 Yellin, 6-16, 19-31.
feminine and keep up the domestic lifestyle while providing for the needs of their family. Even though Yellin goes too far by falling into the Feminist trap of arguing that WWII provided a revolution for women in their emancipation of traditional roles, she holds some merit in detailing the possibilities for women in a time when their country needed them the most.20

Although these two wrote about the same topic, offering a glimpse into the lives of women at this time, they diverged down two different paths. This divergence occurred because of how the war touched them. Parker notes that she endured the war, while Yellin is the daughter of the woman who endured it. This distinction matters because it reflects in their analysis. While Yellin argues that WWII provided a revolutionary space for women to come into their own, Parker urges caution to this argument by stating that the women of the time did not hold a Feminist view and all they wanted to do was their best to get through it so they could get back to their lives.21 Parker’s experiences during the war made her realize the importance of memory and preserving the authenticity of other female voices. Her decision to publish the words of the women of the time deserves praise. She gave the women back their forgotten voice. Yellin agrees with this to an extent, but she was born after the war and the Feminist Movement influenced her thought processes. This shows that even though she chronicles what the women did and felt, she did not fully stay true to what the women of the time wanted and felt about their roles.

Although Yellin’s work is crucial to understanding the story of women and war, readers must be prudent just like viewers of the films like Housewife, 49. These pieces skew the audience’s understanding that this time period started the revolution for women to break from the traditional realm of the house by suggesting that all women yearned to be independent instead of the reality that most women wanted to do their part until men came home. Even though these two authors differ in this and their approaches, they both pay close attention to the various groups of women.22 They break women down into categories based on marital status, age, profession, and in Yellin’s case, race. By doing this, they both give their readers the best possible way of viewing the full picture of women in the United States and in some cases, Britain, during the period while the three films at issue here fail at accomplishing this.

Transitioning from the American Homefront to the history of the British Homefront and housewife, Raynes Minns’ 1999 Bombers & Mash: The Domestic Front 1939-1940 captures the sentiments of the Britons behind their stereotypical stiff upper lip. Minns had a fascination with wartime cooking after the birth of her daughter and wanted to dig deeper in order to understand how women made these

20 Yellin, xiv, 383-383.
21 Yellin, xiv, 377-384; Parker 2-4.
22 Parker, vii-xi, 3-4.; Yellin, vi-vii, 3-37, 109-303.
meals during wartime.23 Her book overall does not offer a comprehensive narrative of the domestic lives of these women. Rather, it strips back the propaganda of the time, to examine the fear, loneliness, and anxiety that these women grappled with as their homes were bombed, their children evacuated, and their loved ones shipped off to battle.24 She heavily uses images, ads, and posters to demonstrate the conflicting advice these women would receive from the government.25 In each chapter, she explores the calls from the government in the propaganda posters to unpack the realities of the women. She argues that these images need to be included because women encountered these forms of propaganda daily and by stripping the propaganda away, her readers cannot start to understand the real strains on these women.26 This matters because it reveals to viewers of films like Mrs. Miniver and Since You Went Away that these films captured only one side of the women and that source material like Minns allows them to see what women experienced.

Additionally, rather than offering a comprehensive look at women in the war like Yellin does, Minns opts to hone in on the domestic responsibilities of women in order to illuminate the struggles these women endured as they fought the war at home. She alludes to the notion that a comprehensive look at women in the war cannot get at how women coped with the war and adapted to it.27 Even though Yellin’s format is similar to Minns, following different age groups and marital statuses of women and how those aspects affect their experiences, Yellin’s book fails to recognize Minns’ point that the government wished to keep these women in their place and only volunteer when they completed their domestic duties.28 This note might be due to these women writing about two different countries. However, historians should value Minns’ points because she gets at the crux of the matter in which these women held multi-dimensional roles in the public and private sphere regardless of their country and have a complex history.

In addition to Minns’ attention to the domestic front, Dorothy Sheridan’s 1991 Wartime Women: A Mass-Observation Anthology and James Hinton’s 2010 Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self delve deeper into this front by narrowing the analysis to the women volunteers in Mass Observation. MO was a social research organization that sought to form an “anthropology of ourselves” and to have a more democratic look at the social and political views of the populace in order to report back to the government with policies more in line.

23 Minns, 1.
24 Minns, 1.
25 Minns, 7-8.
26 Minns, 1, 10-15.
27 Minns, 15.
28 Minns, 10.
with the people. 29 Sheridan and Hinton tackled this angle of the Homefront because of their previous work as an archivist for MO and a social historian respectively. However, their different paths for chronicling the voices of the people of the period and how the war affected them and what their role was during it shows how their gender influenced their decisions. While Sheridan follows a similar route as Parker, Hinton isolates himself by forming biographies of nine individuals to offer a partial comprehensive look at the Homefront through the lens of MO.

Sheridan’s move to form an anthology of selected female diaries reveals the importance of making historians and viewers of WWII Homefront films cognizant of the words of the women. She argues that her book is unusual but must be written in this form because it was the writing done at the time and the individuals wrote their accounts in the hopes that someone would value their work and use it to understand their thoughts and opinions.30 As an archivist, she knew the value of these diaries. Her decision informs readers both about the existence of these women’s experiences and the benefit of encountering their original work in order to allow women to put forth their own memory. Additionally, Sheridan argues that historians must be careful to not fall into the Feminist trap of believing that the period was fully emancipatory for all women. She claims that she agrees with other feminist historians, like herself, that the war was limited in its emancipatory qualities and progress because women of the time made choices.31 Those choices shaped the way they lived and thought. Only those women can tell their story. Overall, Sheridan aligns with Parker’s decision to let the women speak in order for a memory to be formed about them. Yet, she differs by recognizing that these MO diaries only tell part of the story of those on the Homefront as they do not include everyone.

Then, almost twenty years later, Hinton deviates from all of the historians and writers above by investigating the issue of interpreting the voices of the past with the discovery and formation of the modern self. This is an interesting move because in the 1940s films of Mrs. Miniver and Since You Went Away, the use of propaganda dissuades the forming of the individual as war called for the strength of the community. It adds to the history and memory of women in war because it gets deeper into their thoughts and feelings at the time. Hinton recognizes that the diarists he focuses on, including Nella Last, crafted their own concepts of self, but

29 Sheridan, 4-5; Hinton, 2-3. This organization had both volunteer and paid Mass Observers. Most of the volunteers were from the upper and middle classes because women and men in the working class either did not have time to write down their thoughts as they needed money to survive. Also, this organization recognized the limitations in its base, but with the consent of its base, published its findings in books and articles. These people wrote in because they felt they added something to the war effort and the MO valued their contributions.
30 Sheridan, x.
31 Sheridan, 2-4.
only for themselves and the MO. He argues that the MO “offered a discipline and a context which transcended the purely private, meeting a need to frame individual quests in relation to larger public purposes.” Even though his point centers on MO, this claim showcases the complexity of the memory of these individuals. It explains the intricate nature of women and war because they had to both adhere to the call of their governments and to maintain a functioning home while forming their identity. Also, his decision to use the diaries as a way to construct biographies of the six women and three men he selected highlights the value in placing these individuals and MO in the context of wartime Britain. He grasps what constitutes the memory of MO and contemporaries’ reality and sentiments even if, as both Sheridan and Hinton note, MO only received diaries from their upper and middle class volunteers.

Despite Sheridan and Hinton honing in on the MO, their works leave their readers with a sense of not knowing the entire story and limit their influences on the historiography of women on the Homefront in Britain and the United States. They do acknowledge early on that their works only examine part of British society as the MO was limited in their collection of entries. By only including some perspectives of what domestic life was like in Britain, they lose the sentiments of the women in Minns’ book. With Minns, Parker, and Yellin including different marital statuses, classes, and backgrounds of the women, they put Sheridan’s and Hinton’s books into perspective in order to unpack the illusion that film creates about women on the Homefront. Overall, these five works permit viewers of the films to be aware of the complicated nature of the women on the Homefront and to realize that film only captures one side of the story.

**Film as a Source and a Means for Information**

As these historians and writers debate on how to characterize the women on the Homefront and who ought to tell the story, the films *Mrs. Miniver, Since You Went Away*, and *Housewife* dealt with similar questions. They too struggle with the questions of who tells the story and what aspects of everyday life and the war they should show. Regardless of the critical reception these three films received, they fail to tell the whole story just like some of the written sources above. They captured the women’s experiences, but from the director’s and producer’s viewpoint, similar to that of what the authors and historians thought was best instead of entirely through the women’s voices. These films focused on depicting a distinct group of upper and middle class women, a selection that might be due to the propaganda of the period inclined to project the best images of the countries.

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32 Hinton, 5-8. This insight can be made due to Feminist theories focusing on individuality and the twenty-first century historians turning their attention toward people’s memories rather than the nation’s memories.
33 Hinton, 6.
34 Sheridan, 1-12; Hinton, 17-19.
Additionally, the tension between President Roosevelt’s “interventionist policies” and American’s wish to remain neutral caused the film industry to try to ease this tension and find a way to detail to the American people the struggles abroad. Roosevelt believed that Hollywood held the best method to get information to the public due to the high numbers of people going to the cinema in the 1940s. His belief reveals the freedom filmmakers had to portray the Homefront in the way they best saw fit. This can be seen in Nella Last’s April 20, 1948 diary entry when she describes seeing *Mrs. Miniver* again and how she wondered “again just why futile silly pictures [were] made” and that it came out during a time when people were frightened but still had the hope and courage that they could do something for peace. Her reflections in the post war period showcase both the popular reception of the film and her insight into realizing that this film, while enjoyable, did not truly depict what they went through. Her words allow readers of her diary to grasp the value of film to provide entertainment, not reality. Furthering this, film historian Bernard A. Dick’s notion that Hollywood took history and turned it into a plot and in some cases, invented it entirely illuminates the limits of film to illustrate reality. The three films that this paper focuses on embody this inventing of reality that cause viewers to leave with a false sense of women in war. This is not to disparage these films, but to make historians and viewers aware that these films only provide them with a snapshot of women’s experiences. Overall, both written sources and film have had challenges conveying the whole story and accurate portrayals of women in WWII. However, those problems cannot be overlooked and historians need to return to the voices of the women in order to scratch the surface of what women endured throughout and after the conflict.

Homefront Films and Their Illusory Deceptions

*Mrs. Miniver*

Numerous critics in 1942 characterized William Wyler’s *Mrs. Miniver* as “excellent,” capturing the strength of humans and “human courage,” and one of the best of the film season in 1942. These notes truly capture the emotional, dramatic and propagandist elements throughout the film and how critics of the day

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received them. Set in the quiet, upper middle class village of Belham, UK, *Mrs. Miniver* follows the Miniver family through the summer of 1939 before World War II into the bombings of London and the surrounding areas in 1940. This look into the family led by the matriarch, Kay Miniver, offers the viewers an inside glimpse into British family life during the early years of the war. Wyler’s ability to depict both the stereotypical roles of women shopping or organizing the Flower Show and in women’s quiet strength to remain calm for the children is important for American viewers to see. It instills in the viewers a sense that Britain needed their support: this family was like theirs and everyone had a role to play in the war effort.\(^40\) However, with Wyler working for MGM at this point in his career, it makes sense why he wanted to galvanize American support for its allies by depicting their family life and humanity because the studio was devoted to depicting the family.\(^41\) This position of the studio matters because it demonstrates what view they had of women at the time: housewives. This is not to discredit the popularity of the film, but to acknowledge that films like this one put forth the message that women ought to remain in the home. It embodied the mixed messages women received from the government that Minns demonstrated above.

Even though this film helped make Americans aware of their responsibilities and obligations to the war effort after Pearl Harbor, it crafted a false depiction of the realities British women endured up to 1942.

As Wyler depicts the Miniver family, the opening scenes capture the illusion of the Homefront. Kay’s worry about a hat potentially being sold, Mr. Miniver’s indulgence in a car, and the Americanized house structure of “Starlings” transports Americans to a Britain that resembles America.\(^42\) These scenes chronicle the lives of the upper and middle classes of British society and not what the traditional British woman went through in the lead up to and beginning of the war. Dick’s notion that the Minivers were a privileged family in which their atypical characteristics led to a mythical family reveals the meaning of these scenes.\(^43\) It showcases that although Americans might identify with some of the materialistic and family aspects of the Minivers, this fictitious portrayal of a British family only creates a sense for the viewers that women were carefree and that their help took care of their basic needs. Churchill might have called it “propaganda worth 100 battleships,” but this film and these scenes demonstrate how propaganda offered a hazy image of women by altering their memory as only Mrs. Miniver-like people.\(^44\)

Furthering this, Wyler’s scene halfway through the film when Vin gets called up to active duty highlights the realities of war, but in a melodramatic fashion. His

\(^42\) *Mrs. Miniver*, 1:47-15:47.
\(^43\) Dick, 182.
\(^44\) Yellin, 100.
decision to show an empty table with empty chairs in the Miniver’s dining room when Vin leaves urges the viewers to pause. These five seconds of just the table and chairs on the screen is eerie and horrifying. Although their voices drift off in the background, it makes war all too real for the viewers. The emptiness that is felt when looking at the screen with no life visually present reflects the immense strains and pressures that fell upon families during the war that Minns details in her book. It is as if Wyler attempted to tell the viewers that if they do not do anything and do not support America’s entry into the war, then this image foreshadowed their future. This might be extreme, but it illuminates the note that “the personal impact of war is carefully examined [by motion pictures].” Yet, this scene fails to show how women internalized their emotions. The long stares by Mrs. Miniver and Carol foster this soap opera-like saga that over dramatizes women’s sentiments and plays up emotions in order to pull at the heartstrings of viewers. Even though film had this leeway, viewers must heed caution in believing all send-offs were like this.

In addition to this highly dramatic scene, the moments the Miniver family takes shelter in their bomb shelter solidify the illusion this film crafts about the Homefront. Wyler films this cramped space for almost ten minutes in which the viewers see Kay knitting, reading to the children, and acting like an all-protective matriarch that shields her family from danger. This scene demonstrates the fear of the bombs and attempts to depict what these families endured during the Blitz. Wyler’s decision to hone in on the immense courage and responsibility that women like Mrs. Miniver took on in these moments emphasizes what the “people’s war” actually meant. However, as Fyne put it, scenes like this “glamorized” the heroism of women and overshadowed the realities they faced in the city. His point holds merit because in most cases, women were on their own in London with their children evacuated to the countryside or huddled in bomb shelters throughout London. The realities of the Minivers were not the realities of all the women of Britain. Although this film captured the spirit of Britain, it causes viewers who loved the film to hold a false understanding of what their allies across the pond actually endured.

**Since You Went Away:**

Two years after *Mrs. Miniver* in 1944, David O. Selznick gave the American public the most melodramatic, emotional, and mythical epic of the American

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46 Minns, 1-15.
48 *Mrs. Miniver*, 1:30:00-1:40:48.
50 Fyne, 94.
Homefront in *Since You Went Away*. Critics held mixed reviews with some characterizing it as emotional and the “definitive home-front movie...until a realist comes along” while others stressed that most people only went to see it due to it being Shirley Temple’s first grown-up role and its all-star cast.52 These reviews illuminate how Selznick’s showman qualities overpowered the film and led to a dramatized depiction of an America that did not fit the average woman’s experiences. Rather, by buying the rights to Margaret Buell Wilder’s 1943 book *Since You Went Away: Letter to a Soldier From His Wife* and then kicking her off the writing of the screenplay, he crafted his own interpretation of the Homefront and what women went through.53 This move matters because it more accurately details Selznick’s desire for acclaim than his wish for an accurate wartime depiction. Additionally, his decision to make the film like a Dickins novel that depicts the day to day lives of a few characters reveals that this film might have been loosely based on the letters a wife wrote to her husband, but in the end, it only captured “an average American dream.”54 Selznick’s “epic” turned into a melodramatic soap opera highlighting the upper and middle classes in America instead of what the average housewife experienced.

The film directed by John Cromwell focuses on the American Homefront during WWII and “the unconquerable fortress: the American home.”55 This depiction of the home is interesting because Yellin highlights that by this point in 1943, most Americans viewed the home as America itself.56 Essentially, Selznick made a point at the opening by stating that nothing could bring down the American home. This attempt to bolster the American spirit three years into the war seems like an overextension of propaganda because by this time, Americans had settled into a routine and were already doing their part for the war effort. In addition to this, it follows the Hilton family as they navigate life without Mr. Hilton, who is a captain in the Army. Anne and her two daughters, Jane and Brig, project an image of what women ought to do during the war almost like an instructional video for female viewers, such as taking in a roomer, rationing, and forming a Victory Garden. As the family finds out that Mr. Hilton is missing in action, they also cope with the loss of Jane’s fiancé, Bill. Overall, this epic details the loneliness and loss the women at home felt as war took place thousands of miles away.

Right from the beginning, Selznick’s transportation of his viewers into this

56 Yellin, 36.
unconquerable fortress leads them to believe that Anne’s world is everyone’s world. As Anne leans against the wall appearing defeated as she looks at her husband’s bed and pictures, the dramatic music in the background creates empathy in the audience.\textsuperscript{57} They see her as a vulnerable individual who buckles under the absence of her husband in the privacy of their room. Even though this scene captures the emotions and sense of loneliness women felt once their husbands went off to war like Parker and Yellin point out, it causes viewers to believe this is how it was all the time. Parker and Yellin note that in most cases, women who were married with children moved back in with their parents during the war or moved in with other families to get by and afford the cost of living.\textsuperscript{58} Additionally, Chad Newsom argues that scenes like this one “creates a feeling of home” in a melodramatic manner by pushing forward a moral agenda in everyday life.\textsuperscript{59} His point illuminates that film crafts what viewers wish their reality was. It demonstrates that this soap opera, emotional music, and acting offered an escape for the viewers of the forties. It allowed them to witness what they fought daily to protect even if it was from their homes.

However, viewers need to be hesitant to avoid falling into the trap of believing this fantasy actually occurred in the average women’s life. Selznick brings in the character of Fidelia, an African American servant, a few minutes later and makes it appear that most Americans have help at this time.\textsuperscript{60} As Yellin illustrates to her readers, African American women went through the similar struggles as characters like Anne in addition to living in a racist country with segregated communities and working environments.\textsuperscript{61} These forgotten realities of the Homefront fed into the idealized vision of what the Homefront ought to look like. By doing this, Selznick leaves his viewers with an inaccurate and glorified Homefront.

As the melodramatic tropes and over exaggerated depictions of the Homefront continue, the scenes of Bill’s emotional departure suggest some sense of how women felt about their separations from their loved ones. This instructional aspect of the film matters because it reveals that even though it depicts an illusory Homefront, it succeeds at making the viewers aware of the realities they faced with their loved ones shipped off to war and the potential of receiving a telegram telling them their loved one was either missing in action or killed. Before Bill heads off and Jane says goodbye, the montage of the different people in the train station

\textsuperscript{57} Since You Went Away, 3:10-5:27.
\textsuperscript{58} Parker, 1-4; Yellin, 6-16.
\textsuperscript{60} Since You Went Away, 7:48-10:09.
\textsuperscript{61} Yellin, 199-224.
presents one of the few looks throughout the film into what people experienced. Clayton R. Koppes’ notion that these scenes depict “the dichotomy between individual selfishness and patriotic sacrifice” embodies this scene because the extras in the background grapple with not wanting their loved ones to go while still wanting to do their patriotic duty. It shows that even though Selznick wanted to dramatize the Homefront, these scenes make it seem like the life of the Hilton women were a universal reality. Then, with the goodbye scene as Bill’s train departs, the director’s decision to only focus on Jane’s face and then a long shot of her alone on the platform captures the message of loneliness and anxiety Selznick aimed for. It depicts the actual reactions of people. It showcases the emotions of what women felt, similarly to what Yellin, Parker, and Minns detail in their books, even if it is in a dramatic fashion. It informs the viewers that this outward emotion of what Jane expresses was what women of the time felt internally. Even if Fyne feels that these scenes could not save the film from its melodramatic aspects, they provide viewers with a more realistic sense of what the women left behind endured. This is not to suggest that it does not add to the illusion of the Homefront, because it does, but to acknowledge that it details how the women at home felt about men living and the realities they faced.

Despite this attempt to showcase an authentic moment in the lives of the women at home, the final scene at Christmas cements the mythic depiction of the Homefront. This conclusion illustrates the lengths Selznick went to sell the American dream and depict women in a stereotypical light. As Fidelia places the gifts under the tree from Mr. Hilton and Anne receives a phone call, the audience witnesses a happy ending when they find out Mr. Hilton is coming home. The audience gets caught up in the heartwarming, happy ending, but it leaves them with a false sense of reality. Rather than end the film with Anne going to work and showing women that their country needs them, Selznick takes a different route. This conclusion details to the viewers that in the end, women ought to stay in the home and await the return of their husbands. It instructs them to stay in their place as Minns articulates in her book above. Koppes argues that this scene neatly ties up the story of “personal sacrifice and growth” for an anxious public, while Fyne claims that it was the only possible ending to keep up the act of family wholesomeness and the upper-middle class image. Yellin’s section on the

62 Since You Went Away, 1:55:42-1:57:30. The others are when Anne and Emily go to the bar and various voices in the bar detail their feelings about the war and then when the Hiltons are on the train going to and from trying to see Tim.
64 Since You Went Away, 2:01:00-2:03:00.
65 Fyne, 207.
67 Koppes, 31.; Fyne, 121-122.
anxieties surrounding the telegram reveals how unrealistic this scene is, as most women receiving a telegram or call meant their loved one had died. Over all, this film, while it interprets a universal American wish for this reality, leaves the viewers with a blurred memory of women at the Homefront. It causes viewers to get swept up in the melodrama and forget what the average American woman endured during the war.

**Housewife, 49:**

Over sixty years after the forties films, comedian Victoria Wood brought Nella Last’s MO diaries to life in 2006. However like its predecessors, *Housewife, 49* creates an interpretation of what one middle class woman endured and not what the average Briton experienced. Wood wanted to develop a project inspired by Last’s diaries because in Wood’s eyes, Last was an extraordinary woman and her diaries needed to be brought visually to the public. Critics wrote mixed reviews about this made-for-television film as women felt it depicted a woman ahead of her times and a relatable film for modern day women, like Nella, as they seek a new purpose. Men on the other hand found this depiction of the Homefront “unusual” and interesting enough to stay up for the entire film. These gendered reviews and language reveals how these individuals remember women like Last. First, with the men’s view, it demonstrates that people in the post-war period believed that society needed to catalogue and remember the men who fought the war and their memories. It showcases that even in the twenty-first century, women’s roles during the war continue to be an afterthought or a footnote in the national memories of the war in Britain and even in the United States. On the other hand, with the women’s reviews of the film, their language reveals how periods like the Feminist Movement and “The Year of the Women” have skewed people’s perceptions and memories of women on the Homefront during WWII. Rather than examining the war through the eyes of contemporaries like Last, they used modern language and views to retrospectively view Last and women like her. This is not to criticize their critiques, because Last’s diaries do reveal that some of her thinking and writing did allude to her breaking from the constraints of marriage as she used language like “slavery.” Rather, it is to show that their language fell into the

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68 Yellin, 31-36.
71 Billen, "You Review: Housewife, 49."
72 Yellin, ix-xiv.
73 Hinton, 28-35.
Feminist trap that Yellin, Parker, and Sheridan warned their readers about. Additionally, their critiques reveal that these views of the film cast women on the Homefront in a role that they themselves did not identify with for the most part. They cause the memory of women like Last to appear to be revolutionary and as the beacons of womanhood instead of depicting the multi-dimensional roles they took on in both the private and public spheres of British society during the war.

The film, directed by Gavin Miller, chronicles Last’s life from 1939-1945. It opens with her contemplating writing for MO and her recovery from a recent nervous breakdown. She struggles with finding a purpose in her role as a mother to Arthur and Cliff when it comes to an end with Arthur getting a job and Cliff enlisting in the war. It showcases the everyday life of mostly middle class and upper working class individuals in the shipbuilding town of Barrow-in-Furness. Her work at the Women’s Voluntary Service gives her a position in which she finds her voice. This part of her work at the WVC suggests that this was the first time she ventured out of the home and became her own individual. While it is true that she started to find her voice in her diaries, Hinton’s biography of Last reveals that during WWI, Last volunteered and was involved in various political meetings and other organization when she was younger. Although the length of the film limited Wood from examining Last’s past, viewers of the film need to have this information at their disposal. Without it, they get a false sense that the war liberated women from the house and provided the space for them to come into their own. Although that might have been true for some of the younger generations of the period as Sheridan points out, it fosters an invalid depiction of Last and women like her. With the film ending with Last trying to figure out what is next for her after 1945, it allows the reviewers and viewers to make these assumptions if they had not previously read Last’s diaries or understood that the diaries inspired the film rather than it being an accurate depiction of Last’s life.

Right from the beginning, Cromwell and Wood’s introduction to MO and Last shape the viewers into thinking that MO represents the entire British society and women like Last. The MO office and individuals portraying the MO workers present an image that this organization actually represented the opinions and views of the populace and in the case of this film, only women. This scene brings the viewers into the mindset of the organization, but leaves them with a false pretense of what they actually did and the people who reported to them. Minns, Sheridan, and Hinton reveal that MO only represented the upper and middle classes of Britain during the war due to working class people not having time to write down their thoughts. Their points expose the limitation of this scene. While it gives

74 Hinton, 29-34.
75 Sheridan, 3-4.
76 Housewife, 49.
77 Minns, 3, 32.; Sheridan, x, 5.; Hinton, 2-3, 16-20.
viewers who have never heard about MO a generalized understanding of its work, it leaves them with the belief that that was what it did. It fails to illuminate the purpose of the organization and the different people who wrote to it. This glossing over of reality limits the film as helping the public understand this organization and Last’s place in it. Furthering this, Wood’s depiction of Last in the opening scenes as flustered and confused and questioning whether she ought to write for MO creates an image of Last as only a woman who had a nervous breakdown. This might not have been Wood’s intention, but it casts Last and women like her as one-dimensional figures rather than delving into the multidimensional roles they held at this point in time. Even if Wood and Miller made this decision to build up her character, it leaves the viewers with a false perception of Last. It causes viewers to remember her and other women as the women who needed the war in order to come into their own. Hinton’s critique of the title and depictions of Last in the opening as showing only one side of her identity proves the illusion film makes about women on the Homefront and the limiting qualities of this film to depict what women went through during the early years of the war and the Blitz. With the opening setting the scene for the rest of the film, viewers must be careful to not believe that this film and Last embody the totality of women during the war.

As the film continues and viewers see Last navigate the private sphere of her home life with Mr. Last and the public sphere of her work at the WVS, two scenes in the middle of the film reveal Last coming into her own and why she wrote for MO. These scenes, while dramatic, recreate the diary entries of Last in such a way that she appears like a powerful and independent woman. First, in the scene when Nella and Mr. Last argue over Cliff enlisting in the Army, Nella stands her ground and tells Mr. Last when he states that Cliff is his son and does she want him killed that she was the one who raised him and that she wants him to have a life. This scene and the one following it at the cabinet meeting for the WVS make it appear that Last and women like her held immense autonomy at this point and were independent women. The scenes generate a memory of these housewives as not needing men to survive. However, Hinton urges viewers of the film and readers of Last’s and other Mass Observers’ diaries to be aware that this selfhood and independence was limited. His point illuminates the disadvantage of these scenes as being an unrealistic depiction of these women. Although Last stood her ground and came into her own at this point in her life, it does not mean the war created the space for women to become independent. Rather, it simply happened that this

79 Housewife, 49.
80 Hinton, 23.
81 Housewife, 49.
82 Hinton, 5.
traditional coming of age of women realizing their worth and the realities they live in just so happened to take place during the war. In addition to this, once the Lasts find out that Cliff was missing in action, Mr. Last’s questioning of why Nella continues to write elicits a response from Nella that embodies the feeling of most women of the period regardless of class: “I am alone. I have no one to talk to.” Her words transcend time and align with the sense of loneliness and exhaustion women felt during the war that Minns captures in her book. It permits viewers to remember the immense strains war took on women and why they felt alone. However, viewers must remain guarded as they watch this scene. Nella might personify women’s sentiments in this scene, but her response to why she writes and chronicles the war only provide one side of why women wrote and their experiences during the war. Sheridan’s inclusion of women’s responses to why they wrote for MO expands the narrative and causes readers to realize Last only casts one memory of women’s experiences. Overall, this film, while it matters to keep MO’s and Last’s memory alive, skews its viewers’ recollection of women’s realities during the war.

Even though these three films portrayed the real-life experiences the women of WWII faced, they left the viewers of the 1940s and today with a false memory of the realities of the women of WWII. They lead viewers to have what Michael C.C. Adams calls “selective recall.” Given that they are films and they tell stories, it does not mean they should have had free range in their depictions of women. The prominence of film as both an entertainment outlet and a source of what was happening overseas serves as a reminder to viewers today that these films played an important role in what British and American society perceived and understood about these women. The directors’ and producers’ judicious depictions of women cultivated a memory of one side of these women’s stories. With each film only depicting the upper and middle class experiences of war, they cast these fictitious and real characters as representing all women’s struggles during this period. They inhibited the housewives of WWII from speaking their truth and kept the soldiers of the Homefront in the home.

Additionally, the illusory portrayal of these women has profound impacts for today’s viewers. These films, particularly the ones from the forties, transport thw

83 Hinton, 28-35.
84 Housewife, 49.
85 Minns, 1, 187-200.
86 Sheridan, 15-23.
viewers back in time to different views and morals that might counter today’s view of the place of women in society and in times of war. They lead the average viewers to accept that these films were accurate portrayals that placed women in traditional, inferior roles. If viewers do not have access to these women's testimonials and diaries, they either hold a false outlook of the Homefront or enter into a Feminist Movement mindset of believing this period offered an emancipatory channel for these women. This is not to suggest that some of these women did not experience freedoms. However, it is a plea to viewers to pause and to reflect. Modern viewers must understand the war from the viewpoint of the women of the forties and not allow the second- and third-wave of the movement to cloud their view of these women. While new research aids a better look at the period, an introduction of modern feminism into this analysis overshadows the complicated history of these women. Their multi-dimensional roles in the public and private spheres need to be cherished for what they actually were in order for society to reclaim their history and to enter the women’s actual perspectives into the national narrative in order to restore the women’s memories.

Victoria K. Tutino is a senior History major from Taunton, Massachusetts. Within the history major, Victoria concentrates in War and Memory and has engaged in complex research about the effects of memory on the roles of women during World War II. Her desire to study history stemmed from her courses with Professor Anne Blaschke and Fr. Anthony Kuzniewski during her first and second years respectively. While at Holy Cross, she was very involved and participated in a slew of activities, some of which include: Summer Gateways Orientation, Liturgical Ministry, the Hanify-Howland Lecture Committee, the Charles Carroll Program and the Student Advisory Committee for History.

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