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## The Clouds: A Portrait of One Family in Wartime Cambridge

Fanny Howe

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

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## The Clouds:

## A Portrait of One Family in Wartime Cambridge

*Fanny Howe*

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*The following is a portion of a work in progress, a biography of Mark DeWolfe and Helen Howe, two Bostonians born soon after the turn of the century. The book describes the adult years of this sister and brother, each of whom participated in American life at many levels important to the social and intellectual currents of the country. This section of the biography describes Cambridge in the World War II years.*

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**A**t number six Craigie Circle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a family of three—Molly (from Ireland) and her two small daughters—lived out the war years. For three and a half years they were without their husband and father, Mark Howe, as he was in Europe. They occupied a first-floor apartment in a brick building within easy walking distance of Harvard Square. Craigie Circle was made up of two large apartment complexes, a small weedy lot behind, and a tarmac road between.

On Craigie Street there was an Episcopal convent, another apartment building, and residential houses made of wood. Around the corner was the Buckingham School (brick too), which the girls attended; classes there were about twelve and under in size, mostly under. Many of the students were children of academics, sons and daughters of linguists, historians, and scientists. Their parents were then in their late thirties and early forties. Many of the men were gone, yet Cambridge was a man's world even without them.

Every Sunday Molly dutifully transported the two girls by subway to number sixteen Louisburg Square, on Beacon Hill, to have midday lunch with their grandfather, Mark's father. He lived in a townhouse with an Irish maid, like Molly named Mary, who was tucked in a bedroom behind the downstairs kitchen. He was a portly man with a watch chain and vest, a white moustache as coarse as his hair, a stammer, and a manner steeped in the good nature ascribed to those with few doubts.

*Fanny Howe is a novelist and poet who teaches at M.I.T.*

His apartment, a floor-through, did not rise to much sunlight, and yellow lamplight instead spread over the tables and chairs and objects brought over from China generations before. A Steinway sat near one window, and there he played and sang Gilbert and Sullivan and favorite hymns. On those visits the girls were not allowed to wear dungarees or sneakers but had to dress up, and in the cooler weather they wore matching coats and hats—navy blue with naval insignia—and often they were urged to march up and down, saluting and singing “From the Halls of Montezuma” to their grandfather. Every Sunday they had the same lunch: chicken consommé, chicken and rice, and ice cream or pie for dessert. Water jiggled in a crystal fingerbowl beside each plate.

A smell of books lingered around the stuffed shelves; some of the books were for children, but they were not the ordinary American fare. These were Victorian English, including pictures of curly-haired children in pinafores, stone walls higher than most parents, black golliwogs, and gardens containing pale but specific flowers. Molly the mother knew the books from her own youth in Dublin, and she knew the songs and flowers. A common education, Anglocentric and literary, bound her to her husband and his family even though their personal histories were literally miles apart.

She had not left Dublin intending to stay in America but had come to do some business for the Gate Theater and to visit her Aunt Muriel and her Uncle Willard Sperry, then dean of Harvard’s Theological School. She had a whirlwind courtship with Mark Howe, though, and married him in 1935. Afterwards she said they had “an awful honeymoon in Washington at the burial of Oliver Wendell Holmes. Mark was public relations man. I was surrounded by Supreme Court justices. One of them glared at me as if I should have been shot for not being a Lodge or a Lowell.”

She insisted that her in-laws were not exactly welcoming to her, “a penniless actress from Dublin,” as she called herself. A leggy brunette with hazel eyes and a dagger tongue and humor, she came from a Protestant background. She associated the Catholic Church in Ireland with fascism in Europe and allied herself with leftists who thought along the lines of Bernard Shaw’s Fabian Society. Many cousins and friends had died in the Spanish Civil War, fighting Franco. In Dublin she attended Communist meetings with a tiny group influenced by another leftwing playwright, Sean O’Casey. But her central interest, she soon discovered, was humanity, not ideology. The theater was always to be the center of her mind and heart.

During the war years in Cambridge she worked as director of the Idler Club, the Radcliffe College drama society. Nearly every afternoon and night she left the children with a sitter and went to work, for sixty dollars a month, putting on productions. *The Playboy of the Western World* was staged at the Brattle Theater in Harvard Square, with Jack Lemmon playing the father. F. O. Matthiessen, the Harvard professor of American literature, helped her get the job because of her background as actress, playwright, and director in the Abbey and Gate theaters in Dublin.

For nine years (1938–1947) she didn’t see her family, or Ireland. Terribly homesick and often feeling like an alien in her husband’s family, she did nonetheless have “a mass of friends” in Cambridge. They included Harvard professors and their wives as well as actors and writers. She was one of the few working women

in her circle at that time. Only a few went abroad as volunteers for the Red Cross. Even fewer went to work for an income. Many of the men were away, either in the army or navy, in Europe or Asia; those who stayed at home did so because of some physical disability or as conscientious objectors. Mark enlisted several months before most of his colleagues did.

“After Pearl Harbor,” Molly said years later, “Mark felt he had to sign up. A world dominated by Hitler was too horrible to contemplate. First he went to Charlottesville to train, then to Algiers, where he worked for the American Military Government. In Cambridge there were all kinds of furious refugees around. We were rationed for sugar and milk and couldn’t afford meat. Victory gardens were started then, and we had to draw the shades every night at 9:30. It was a gloomy, sad time. We were always waiting for the worst news. Once a mailman arrived with a telegram for me and said, ‘I’ve been told to stand by while you open it.’ I was trembling so badly from head to toe, the man had to open it for me. It was from a woman whose name I don’t remember telling me her daughter, whom I didn’t know, had committed suicide.”

During those years Molly and her children spent the summers on the North Shore—Manchester, Annisquam, Beverly Farms. They would stay in a house or hotel, with the in-laws often nearby, and pass their days on the beach. In towns so saturated with the rewards of big money—hotel-sized houses and trees on long lawns that sloped down toward the Misery Islands—the Howes consorted with the rich.

“They weren’t rich themselves,” Molly said, “and they weren’t greedy either. The old man was a snob, though he was also well-meaning. His wife said he liked too many people and meant too well. She also said that her children were as short as they were because the old man’s father, the bishop, had no legs.”

Molly came to terms with her in-laws, and they with her, but she could never forgive them for neglecting her own mother, who had visited her just before the outbreak of the war. She interpreted their neglect in the class terms of a society she had left behind. “Because Mother wasn’t titled,” she said, “they took her nowhere and introduced her to no one.” And she also admitted to some irritation at being exploited for her Irishness. Her sister-in-law, Helen, a performing monologist at the time, loved the Irish songs that Molly used to sing. When Molly taught them to her, she said, Helen “became the one in the family who was asked to sing them for everyone. Not me.” A sense of being neglected, or misunderstood, stayed with her over the years and was often explained in terms of a Victorian class structure that did not exactly coincide with the American scene. At the same time she always wanted to be sure that people knew she was not one of the Irish folk arrived from a thatched cottage, with shamrocks stitched into an apron. Those stereotypes offended her, along with other forms of arrogance that may have been more English in origin than American.

During the war, however, drawing on her intimate knowledge of Dublin, Molly produced an original version of *Finnegan’s Wake* which would later evolve into her successful play, *The Voice of Shem*. She also wrote a play and a novel. Harry Levin, the brilliant scholar of James Joyce, was vital to her as a critic of her work; so was the criticism of other intellectuals, like Jack Sweeney, the curator of the Lamont Poetry Room at Harvard, and Matthiessen. Given the caliber

of intellectuals who had not gone abroad, there was a lively audience for her productions in Cambridge.

She did not have much time with her daughters. Those Sunday visits to the grandfather on Beacon Hill were, therefore, important to the three of them. While Molly and the old man talked, the girls would huddle in the bedroom off the kitchen with Mary, reading the Sunday comics, or would stare through the long windows onto Louisburg Square. The sense of the missing person—the father—trailed them everywhere. After the lunch, the three would walk back down Beacon Hill, along Charles Street to the iron staircase going up to the elevated subway stop. From there they viewed the gray fortress of the city jail, and the river flowing to the harbor. Beacon Hill itself was a simple brick cluster with the gleaming bosom of the capitol building at its top. When the snow came, the blood-red walls of the city grew white and the ice on the river was a stiff winding-sheet. The sky seemed a permanent firmament: a thunder-colored replica of the heavenly gates.

Mark, meantime, had left behind his work on the letters and life of Oliver Wendell Holmes, as well as his family. He was thirty-seven. He had been to Europe only once before, as far as Ireland, where he had met his in-laws. He was known to have a dread of travel. Now he started in Algiers as a major and moved later through Europe and to Potsdam finally, where he became a colonel. Tiny aerogrammes arrived with great frequency at Craigie Circle, along with hand-written and novelistic accounts of his days abroad. He shared with Molly his missing of her and home, but also, in some depth, his political responses, his views on the history being made. In the summer of 1943 he wrote to her from North Africa, now a military occupation zone where the Anglo-American forces dwelled together. It was during the same summer that Mussolini fell from power, the Anglo-American forces invaded Sicily, and DeGaulle rose to power.

From North Africa he wrote:

I wish I had more freedom in these letters than I'm allowed. But even if I had there would be little of interest to say. The striking thing so far is how the simple things are most moving—a few impressions will stay with me always—the troops on the lower deck of the transport singing For Those In Peril on the Sea and The Star Spangled Banner as the sun sank over the horizon and the blackout began, Negro boys from Alabama and Chicago and Buffalo playing baseball on dusty diamonds on the African coast, and hanging over the vast majority of us a choking homesickness and a new appreciation of all the familiar devotions and scenes. . . . But the thing about this experience that is most noticeable is its mass quality. There are, of course, a mass of sordid accompaniments—drunken soldiers and sailors in town—rushing after breakfast to my period of meditation on a beautiful hilltop overlooking the blue Mediterranean with my throne in the completely open air & ten other thrones each with a grunting king reigning over the ruins of the empires of old and the excreta of today. . . . For 4 days & 3 nights—& with one of each still coming—I've been in a train. At first we were travelling in what is called first class where lice, fleas, heat, food from tin cans, & dirt were the steady diet. We then moved up one peg in society into a freight car for 30 men or six horses, but were fortunate in having no horses sharing our sordid floor and only five of us—with all our baggage to wallow with in our luxury. You can imagine some of the discomforts of such a life—but the experience on

the whole has been rewarding. Last night, however, we really thought the game was up when the rickety train got out of control going down a mountain side. For what seemed like an hour, but was probably no more than ten minutes we roared along at 70 miles an hour, with flames leaping from the brakes, Arabs jumping overboard from their posts at the brakes. It was not reassuring as we hurtled through the moonlight to see forty cars strewn along the embankments, having run into similar trouble a few weeks ago. Finally, and just as in one of the old Westerns, we came to a gradual halt. I really think I've never been so scared in my life. There's a crowd of British troops on the train besides these officers in my group—they are simply incredible as regards their tea. All assigned to freight cars—with no facilities for cooking they nevertheless manage every day—at least three times, to take enormous wallows in their indispensable stimulus. Their device is to rush up to the engine at every stop and fill great cans with water from the boiler. Anything to drink has been so scarce on the journey that I have even found myself forming in line at the regular intervals. I suppose it's nothing but crass sentimentality that makes me almost cry with delight when in some outlandish village with an outlandish name we run into a little group of American troops working on the railroads. Their universal quality of friendly equality horrifies the British officers, no less than does the obvious delight with which the other American officer and I rush to these privates. It was like reaching mecca to walk into a cook shed in one of the stations the other morning and to share with a pair of railroad privates from Texas and Alabama their breakfast of fried egg sandwiches &, for once, coffee. The British officers evidently thought our conduct most unseemly.

Meanwhile the drama of New England was enacted on the streets of Cambridge. A fundamental sense of security made thunder into orchestration and blizzards into paper confetti. The area directly surrounding Harvard Square was little and luscious. Trees and shrubs huddled protectively around antique houses. In the spring, honeysuckle, violets, lily of the valley, wisteria, lilacs, tulips, and daffodils hung into the brick sidewalks. In the winter, the arms of the trees crackled inside ice sleeves or sank politely under snow. From the fall storybook, images of red and yellow leaves tumbling into piles, where they were burned on private lawns, accompanied the children on their way to school. And Molly walked home, blithely alone, at midnight from work at Radcliffe.

Many evenings she would have friends at home and they would sit close to the hot body of the radio; its orange light from candletip bulbs in back might have been the glow of bonfires from across the ocean. When the blackouts occurred in Cambridge—practice air raids accompanied by sirens—the radio played on. In terror the children heard the names recur: Afrika Korps, Rommel, Ribbentrop, Molotov, Brenner Pass, Dieppe, Vichy, Mussolini. When Hitler's voice emerged from the box—rasping and mechanistic—it was like something broken that keeps running anyway; it was out of control. An old man played a hurdy-gurdy on the streets of Cambridge all through the war. Flowers garlanded his organ. A legless beggar sat outside Woolworth's, in all weather protected by his striped awning, his board-on-wheels parked beside him and a hat for falling small change.

Fear and religion stayed at the periphery of Harvard Square, but both were tangible in other areas. The children were aware that their sitter, Ruby, and the maids who arrived at friends' houses approached their neighborhood from

Mount Auburn Street, where the trolley rolled from Boston out of the Harvard Square station, or from Huron Avenue, where there was a large Irish population. They were aware that these women had sons in action who were actually being killed, abroad, and that they were serious, and therefore mysterious, in their devotion to a divine presence. Church attendance, rosary beads, and small asides directed to the Lord gave this truth away. The number of young men killed in action who were sons of these working women was staggering in comparison to the losses suffered by the intellectuals and the rich; they were not all Irish.

A young black soldier from Cambridge would enlist, fight, and die in a segregated unit. He would know that in spite of a pressing need for army pilots, only a minimum of those accepted would be black. He would know that the treatment of black Americans in uniform included attacks on public carriers that they were on and the inability to enter a restaurant two blocks from the White House. The young black soldier from Cambridge might know about the fellow GI in the Pacific who asked to have written on his tombstone, "Here lies a black man, killed fighting yellow men, for the glory of white men." He might also say, as did a little girl when asked what the best vengeance against Hitler would be, "Make him black and make him live in America."

All this was part of Cambridge, too. The children were subliminally aware that manual labor and faith went together. Their uncle, Willard Sperry, had faith but it was different in expression, harder to catch. Occasionally Molly would take the children to Memorial Church in Harvard Yard to hear him preach. There his wife, Muriel, an anarchic nonbeliever who had immigrated from Dublin years before, rattled wax paper and cookies and whispered to the children as he spoke. She had won a Gold Medal at Trinity College for her work in Greek and Latin studies. Now her constant companion in Cambridge was the renowned scholar of Saint Paul, Arthur Darby Nock, who ate a lamb chop every night, wore high collars over shabby suits, and spoke in a thick, sputtering English accent. The children sat pressed between these relatives and friends, all speaking the Queen's English, and listened to their uncle over the crunch of their teeth on cookies.

"Modern liberalism," Sperry said in one wartime sermon, "has been, at certain points, in advance of the human fact. In particular, it has tried to assure men that there is nothing in the world to be afraid of and that we may now safely dispense with fear as an outworn motive for conduct. . . . The dean of St. Paul's in London was in this country not long ago, and he told us that although we did not yet know much about such matters in America, we should never understand the mind of Europe until we had envisaged whole populations haunted by fear, a naked dread of what yet might happen. Youth, he said, has insisted on putting back into the litany the petition which its too liberal fathers had prematurely taken out. 'From battle, murder and sudden death, Good Lord deliver us.' "

The influence of England was omnipresent and served as a bond for Molly with those who, like Arthur Nock, understood what it meant. (Years later, before Arthur Nock died, he named Molly as his next of kin and requested that he be buried beside the Sperrys in the Mount Auburn cemetery.) Outside Memorial Church, though not on Sunday, the navy was training, and an Army Chaplain School settled in at Harvard in 1942 before being sent to nearby Fort Devens. Sermons about war and fear had a context in which to grow and make sense.

Where Harvard had, before the war, emphasized the social sciences and humanities, now it stressed the natural sciences, including defense-related research, which would, finally, lead to the atomic bomb.

During the war James Conant was president of Harvard and Roosevelt was president of the nation. Many of the academics who were committing their ideas about American law and literature to paper had grown up as New Dealers. Some had in their youth gone as far left as the Communist party and would, in the forties and fifties, suffer for this. Some had been America Firsters before the war and later would not be allowed to enlist. But most were simply ardent supporters of Roosevelt and his programs for reconstructing the economy after the depression. They were unprepared for the blows to their faith in American democracy which accompanied the war and its aftermath, and they began to reassess the American past simultaneously.

During the war an American Studies program was initiated at Harvard, and American literature, minimized always in proportion to that giant, English literature, was given new, admiring attention. F. O. Matthiessen was particularly involved in this revival. Too small to serve in the army, Matthiessen was politically to the left and socially conservative. He lived with his cats on Beacon Hill and was a favorite at dinner parties. He helped introduce a tutorial system at Harvard which was modeled on that of the English universities, believing as he did in the pure pursuit of "wisdom" as opposed to information. At the same time he was involved in the Harvard Teachers' Union and was passionate on the subject of democracy, using the language of socialism to state: "In a democracy there can be but one fundamental test of citizenship, namely: Are you using such gifts as you possess for or against the people?"

His great critical work, *American Renaissance*, was devoted to understanding the five major (as he saw it) writers of the nineteenth century—Whitman, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Emerson, and Melville—not only in literary terms but in economic and political terms as well. The measure of a writer, for Matthiessen, was the degree of his or her commitment to the American vision of a Christian democracy. While he was electing Melville as the one who best understood the tragic consequences of individualism and establishing Emerson's "will to virtue" as an ominous will to conquest, he saw Germany acting out, in horrific proportions, this will. He also saw, and was appalled by, professionals and specialists in a growing defense industry moving in to the university.

Meanwhile, in the private schools in Cambridge, the nineteenth century was preserved intact; that is, the English Victorian view of the world. The children studied Latin, French, and English history; they read the novels of Jane Austen and the Lake poets as if nothing had changed. In the girls' schools *Moby Dick* was called "a boy's book," just as it had been by turn-of-the-century critics. In geography classes there were maps of South American countries, of India, Africa, and Asia, where each territory was pictorially described by its product—grain, oil, fruit, tobacco, and so on—not by its people or their culture. American history was hurried through, with contempt, as if to suggest that it was crude in comparison with the history of the British Empire.

At home Molly talked to her children about her mother, sister, and brother John in Ireland, but she had only paper evidence for their existence. John would



write, sending mysterious drawings in ink to the girls; they were pictures of an Irish sky, clouds like hands and fingers rising over a hilly horizon. Molly herself referred frequently to the sky, interpreting from its texture and tone a myriad of possible moods, most of them bad. This relationship was one that the girls understood to be peculiarly "Irish" about her. Her mother, their grandmother, sent a bunch of shamrock by mail, pressed in crinkled transparent paper; she also sent lace. The war waged by Britain, so close to Ireland, must have waved from the rim of the sky like those purple hands that John drew as clouds. As time went by Molly became, like many others, increasingly impatient of the continuing violence, whose ultimate holocaust had not yet been exposed. The isolationist instinct of the American was not foreign to her. While the Irish left Ireland in droves, they didn't leave it with aggressive intentions but with the nostalgia of the obedient seeker and the resigned.

Molly's admiration for the Soviets made her delight whenever Mark, in one of his letters, expressed his sympathy for the Italian underground and the leftists. She was asked out frequently to those dinner parties in Cambridge and Boston which maintained a male-female ratio even when so many of the men were gone. There the talk was of war and Harvard politics, literature and art. Helen Howe, Molly's sister-in-law, traveled around the country giving satirical and riotous monologues on national character types, but her base was on Beacon Hill and her home was a center for lively dinners. Those evenings, when the adults gathered over dinner, Mark and Molly's daughters lay at home in the dark in the room they shared and watched the branches scratch on the windowpanes and lights drift by like fairies across the ceilings and walls. They imagined the father they didn't know at all, who sent them aerogrammes filled with extraordinary humor. Each daughter had an imaginary male companion in those years. To one he took on a giant's proportion, to the other an elf's—he was so small, that is, he lived in a mailbox. These imaginary lives were told in whispers in the night.

One cold white morning in December 1944, there was a knock on the apartment door as the three were sitting down for breakfast. A man called, "Paper!" Molly, dressed in her nightgown, went to see what he wanted, convinced it was money. When she opened the door, Mark was there in uniform, carrying a small army bag and packages. He was not very big and not very small. His eyes were deep set and bright blue, his posture soldierly, his manner shy, as he was invited into the home he had never seen before.

The introductions were made and the children told they could stay home from school. For the whole morning the family circulated around the table, with the presents he had brought them, and with their eyes riveted on the others' faces. It wasn't until he had gone out and come back a few times that the sense of his belonging there at all began to sink in. He did not, however, stay long in Boston, but only made the round of contacts with family and friends before moving on to Washington and back again to Europe. On December 3, Matthiessen wrote to his best friend, "Young Mark Howe (a Lieut-Colonel with AMG) is just back from France, and Helen gave a little party for him. It is fine to see a firm and resolute believer in democracy, who has been doing the best job he can."

Molly was increasingly unhappy with the protracted separation between them, as was Mark. But over and over again he communicated his certainty that his absence from home was a necessity, that "the quality of misery is probably more

important than the fact of unhappiness." The misery, in other words, was justified by its cause; this was a theme that would run through his life. He even went so far as to confess to his sister, Helen, that he found "considerable satisfaction, with all the outward despair," in those years abroad during the war. (Years later, seated aboard a schooner off the coast of Maine, with rum and a sunset adding to the glory of the scene, he would remark to his friend Donald Starr: "I wonder if I should be unhappy because I'm happy or happy because I'm unhappy.")

That firm and resolute believer in democracy was, through the war, catapulted out of the minor dimensions of personal history into an arena where new ways of measuring acts and facts became necessary. His future job prospects in America were uncertain, and he was not irresistibly drawn to writing the biography of Oliver Wendell Holmes, the task which awaited him whatever else might happen. He kept promising Molly he would try to be released from duty as soon as he could, while also insisting that he would stay as long as he was needed there.

On July 21, 1945, from the Potsdam Conference, he wrote:

Here the day has been not unlike most others, but there were long conferences in the General's office on Germany, with a recently returned economist telling us something of the gloomy prospects ahead. And I confess that they are gloomy. We seem to have embarked on a program which is bound to fail—we have undertaken to provide the Germans with a minimum standard of living, committed ourselves to the industrial demilitarization of Germany, and undertaken to persuade our own taxpayers that there will be sufficient industrial experts from Germany to pay for the wheat, medicines, etc. which are imported into Germany to prevent starvation. When the Russians transferred eastern Germany to Poland they cut off 25% of the food resources of Germany, and they made inevitable the emigration from the new Poland of millions of Germans who don't want to be Poles. The total result of all this is that we can't possibly expect Germany to live on her present resources, we must send a lot of imports into the country to prevent wholesale starvation, and unless we permit the revival of German heavy industry, and the resurrection of that threat to the peace, we cannot possibly refund ourselves for the goods which we send in. The choice will thus have to be made between abandoning our program of demilitarization and paying out millions in US taxes to feed Germans. In the meanwhile, as you may have noticed in the papers, for humanitarian and commercial motives mixed, the British movement to let German industry get back on its feet is mounting every day. Against this background of virtually insoluble riddles, the American public with fury is demanding the immediate demobilization of the Army and the return of all their sons and husbands to the USA—thus weakening enormously our bargaining power vis-a-vis the Russians, French and British. It looks very much as if all our paper promises and resolutions to play a part in the world are going up in smoke. As I have long anticipated the American's provincialism and homesickness is much stronger than his sense of global responsibility.

This despairing letter was written five days after Secretary of War Stimson received a cable memorandum announcing the first test of the atomic bomb in New Mexico. On July 24 at Potsdam Truman casually mentioned the bomb to Stalin, who replied, "That's fine. I hope you make good use of it against Japan." The Red Army was tightening its hold on Eastern Europe and Stalin had plans

for helping the Allies end the war in the Pacific, at which time he would share the spoils. The British electorate, appalled by the destruction wrought by the war, chose the Labour Party over the Conservatives, confirming a decided backlash against Churchill.

The British playwright Bernard Shaw—elucidating Molly's skepticism in Cambridge—wrote in 1945:

“As to rebridging the rivers the Allies have made impassable, rebuilding the cities they have reduced to heaps of rubble, replacing the locomotives they have smashed, training craftsmen and professionals to do the work of those they have slain, feeding the millions they have left destitute; in short, repairing the damage by war which has reduced itself to absurdity, not a blessed word. Nothing but fairy tales. . . . Lublin has beaten London hands down; and Washington has looked on, not knowing what to say.”

Indeed, back in Washington, where Mark worked in the Civil Affairs Division of the War Department, postwar politics and problems were rife. Victory brought with it a blast of ashes. The Americans wanted to get home as fast as possible and the British felt the war had lasted two years too long. The world was being literally reconstructed, like a face in surgery. Europe, Indo-China, Palestine, South-West Africa, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan—all these areas and many more were reviewed, as if history and territory had become one thing which could be possessed and manipulated by a happy few, the new superpowers. American universities were urged to become involved in this activity, to begin to operate as reservoirs for potential specialists in foreign affairs.

In the midst of this chaos in Washington, there was a proliferation of initials to refer to committees, organizations, and individuals, suggesting a network of coding and secrecy that had evolved over the war years. Narrating his experience in training a successor to his job in the Civil Affairs office, Mark wrote to Molly, who was still awaiting his return to Cambridge:

When I talk about SWNCC, JCS, JCAC, CCS, CCAC, SFE, IPCOG and draw a chart showing how a paper moves from SWNCC to SFE to JCAC to JCS to CCS to CCAC to CCS and on to SACMED, CINCAFPAC, USFET, COMGENCHINA CHUSFA or SCAP and then back up to tell him that before it went from SFE to JCAC we have to go to OPD and ask ASW for a clearance, making *sure* that the policy is approved by Hilldring, the State Department and FEA, he naturally begins to wonder whether he wouldn't have done much better to stay on with the US Group CC (Uncle Sugar Group Charlie Charlie).

Soon Mark was allowed to return to Cambridge as a professor of law at Harvard. Here Wasp eggheads and Jewish intellectuals were the superpowers. The Square, small-town and provincial in its commercial fare, gave little sign of anything unusual going on. The stores could be transported to Main Street, Anytown, America. Students and professors sat around in brightly lit, greasy coffee shops; an English muffin and jelly, tomato soup and a sandwich on white bread, bitter cups of coffee in thick white cups—this was the most common food for thought. The wives did the shopping, often by phone, and met for lunch or at women's clubs while maids let the children in from school. The parent who drove

the children to school in a carpool ordinarily smoked all the way there and back, whirling gusts of Philip Morris or Chesterfield nicotine into the children's faces. Cocktail time was a twilight mystery play enacted on a stage called the living room. Only later did the children understand that the point of this ritual was, quite simply, to get high.

At the end of the war, Molly—unusual as a working wife—decided to quit her job at Radcliffe, and Mark worried over the decision, saying, “The one thing which I don't want you to do is go to seed as Cambridge wife and mother. Mrs. [Alger] Hiss said the other night that Cambridge is completely a man's town, and I'm very much afraid that it is for the women who don't have some occupation of their own.”

Molly did resign, however, in favor of writing fiction and plays. Literature, an institution as much as prejudice and history are, would remain grounded in Europe for her. No matter how strenuously she worked to seduce an American reader, it was really an Irish audience she heard at the end of her imagination. This double self, like an echo, was a continuing distraction for her, as it was for so many people coming to America and learning a new language. As an Irish Protestant, with a system of class and nationality rigorously defined in nineteenth-century terms, she would never be comfortable with the American writers whom her friend F. O. Matthiessen extolled. American ideals rolled back and away from her like foam on the ocean she traveled back and forth across. She didn't understand them half as well as she understood the socialism that had its fecund base in G. B. Shaw's London.

In the summer of 1947 Molly and the children stayed at the old man's flat in Louisburg Square late into one night and then were transported by taxi to Boston's Logan Airport. They gave their tickets at the gate, where they were photographed by a newspaperman. It was a human interest story: one of the first civilian flights was taking the two girls to Ireland to see their grandmother, aunt, and uncle for the first time. Molly, after that long separation, was returning home at last. They crossed the tarmac in a salty breeze from Boston Harbor and boarded the darkened plane. A moon-shaped porthole framed the white moon swathed in clouds. On board the plane were a great many clerics and nuns and only a few civilians. Rosaries rattled under the whisper of Hail Marys as the plane bumped along the ground to takeoff, then leaned out over the black sea.

There was a lot of retching and vomiting, bellyaching and ear-aching all the way to Gander in Newfoundland, where the plane was stalled for twenty-four hours, owing to engine trouble. The popular songs were “Five Minutes More” and “I Wonder, I Wonder, I Wonder” and they played relentlessly from Boston to Gander and even at Shannon Airport, where the plane dropped gently down over the heads of cows onto the ground. The isle was indeed emerald, the airport smaller than South Station in Boston, and the air as soft as a baby's breath. The children wondered if shamrock and clover were the same, since both were said to be lucky, as was the whole green swell of Ireland ahead of them. They were herded into a bus, all questions unanswered, and headed for Dublin, where the clouds were lower than they were in America. Meanwhile back in Harvard Yard experts were already rewriting history in order to rewrite the future. The history of the world was being transformed, and that history, like a fiction, being totally invisible, was probably, as Melville said of all that is invisible, formed in fright. ☘