

## **“The White Cliffs”: Literature and War in the Days of Radio**

by **Rebecca Stelzer**

I have loved England, dearly and deeply  
Since that first morning, shining and pure,  
The white cliffs of Dover, I saw rising steeply  
Out of the sea that once made her secure.

These are the opening lines of Alice Duer Miller’s *The White Cliffs*, a sentimental story-poem of love and sacrifice in the two World Wars. Although it has largely been forgotten in today’s studies of war literature, it was immensely popular in the 1940s, spending thirteen weeks on the best-seller list (Justice 220) and selling almost 700,000 copies in the first four years of publication (Miller, *All Our Lives*). Its popularity is almost something of a mystery, as it does not fit the gritty battlefield realism or upbeat “home front” domesticity of other contemporary fiction, nor is the quality of the verse very exceptional (one critic called it “doggerel”). Rather, the phenomenon that was *The White Cliffs* can only be explained by the way it met a need in the British and American cultures and dovetailed with the radio propaganda culture of the 1940s.

It is difficult to find secondary criticism on Alice Duer Miller or her most famous work. Two articles that stand out are Fred M. Leventhal’s “British Writers, American Readers: Women’s Voices in Wartime” (*Albion* 2000) and K. R. M. Short’s ““The White Cliffs of Dover’: Promoting the Anglo-American Alliance in World War II” (*Historical Journal of Film, Radio, & Television* 1982). Leventhal’s article is mostly concerned with how *The White Cliffs* aligns with other domestic fiction of the time, but does not completely address the poem’s wider appeal. The article by K. R. M. Short is a mostly historical exploration of the poem’s connection to anglophilia in wartime propaganda, with greatest attention to *The White Cliffs* film adaptation. Therefore, I have turned to other sources to explore the deeper and broader appeal of *The White Cliffs*. I believe that exploring the context of wartime radio culture clarifies the reasons for the story-poem’s success in a way not previously discussed.

So, let me turn to the situation in America in the 1940s. In addition to a general reluctance to enter war in Europe, many Americans were very distrustful of England. They thought of the culture as snobbish, oppressive, and classist. However, Alice Duer Miller met these concerns head-on and created a piece of literature that would unite England and America in the war effort by creating the character of Susan Dunne, a young American on holiday in England in 1914. Through her mastery of plot and character as a veteran play and short-story writer, Miller takes Susan Dunne through the hardships of World War I and World War II in *The White Cliffs*, giving her the whole range of experiences with British culture from worst to best.

The story tells how Susan meets and falls in love with a British soldier named John, who also happens to be a member of the landed gentry (albeit one in financial decline). Much to the chagrin of her rigidly patriotic father, Susan and John marry shortly before he is shipped off to battle in World War I. Susan remains with her mother-in-law Lady Jean and John's former Nurse in the country house in Devon and gives birth to a son, Percy. John is killed in battle on the eve of the armistice, and young Percy grows up to follow his father's footsteps into the army. The poem ends as Susan contemplates her son's probable life sacrifice for England on the brink of World War II.

Despite its sort of fairy-tale optimism and sentimental plot, *The White Cliffs* was perfectly suited to a radio-saturated culture. The inexpensive and entertaining nature of radio had led to the height of its popularity in the 1930s (Gorman 56). Radio was a major tool of propaganda and advertising in the 1940s, and the major stations as well as the government all created or encouraged programs that dealt with themes of the war. Not simply a domestic fixture, radio was also a major source of entertainment for troops stationed in Europe, where Allied programs and Axis "black stations" were very popular. It is not surprising, then, that *The White Cliffs* was widely marketed through radio and achieved its greatest success because of radio.

First published in September, 1940, *The White Cliffs* had been rejected by several other publishers before it was picked up by Coward-McCann (T. R. Coward was a longtime

friend of Alice Duer Miller's) (Coward 998). After initially slack sales, it became a hit when on October 13, 1940, Lynn Fontanne read a dramatic version of the poem on NBC. Fontanne and her husband, Alfred Lunt, were also friends of Alice Duer Miller, and she had read the poem to them while it was still in manuscript form. According to Alice's husband, Henry Wise Miller, Fontanne was enthusiastic about the poem and "begged to be allowed to read it in a broadcast." NBC was skeptical about airing a long poem, but eventually agreed to a twenty-seven minute version that Alice edited (*All Our Lives* 207). It was immediately popular, and Fontanne gave a second broadcast on NBC two weeks later. Other performances followed, including a Canadian Broadcast in February 1941 where "all other radio programming was suspended during the half-hour reading" and a non-broadcast concert performance with the Cleveland Orchestra in January 1941 (Brown 294, *All Our Lives* 208). Though heavily edited for its criticism of English society and American crime, a forty-minute radio dramatization featuring Constance Cummings was broadcast on BBC's Home Service and European Service in 1941 and 1942, respectively (Short 6, 10).

In 1941, a three-record set of Lynn Fontanne's reading was issued by NBC and R.C.A. Victor Records. It was very popular, selling almost 50,000 copies by 1944 (Coward 998), and was included on a "Recommended List of Educational Recordings for Classroom Use" in *Wilson Library Bulletin* (Raines 291, 296). Perhaps inspired by the poem or simply eager to cash in on its popularity, Walter Kent and Nat Burton wrote the song "(There'll Be Bluebirds Over) The White Cliffs of Dover" in 1941, and it was an immediate hit with plenty of radio airplay. Easily one of the most recognizable songs of the war, it was frequently covered by artists of the period such as Sammy Kaye, Jimmy Dorsey, and the Glenn Miller Orchestra; Vera Lynn, "The Forces Sweetheart," also often sang it on her BBC radio program "Sincerely Yours" ("Vera Lynn"). The refrain promises "There'll be Bluebirds over / The White Cliffs of Dover / Tomorrow, just you wait and see / There'll be love and laughter / and peace ever after / Tomorrow when the world is free." Although she was annoyed that Kent and Burton did not consult her prior to its publication, Alice Duer Miller did not pursue legal action against the songwriters

for pirating her story title, especially as it seemed to help the England-America unity effort (Short 11).

The poem only continued to increase in popularity on the radio. A dramatized adaptation starring Constance Cummings was featured on the “drama anthology” *Theatre of Romance* (CBS), and the government-sponsored *Treasury Star Parade* (syndicated) also aired a short adaptation read by Lynn Fontanne (“The White Cliffs,” “The White Cliffs of Dover,” “Treasury Star Parade”). In 1944 MGM released the film adaptation *The White Cliffs of Dover* starring Irene Dunne and Alan Marshall, and it subsequently aired in condensed form on the short-lived *Academy Award Theatre* (CBS) in 1946 (Dunning 4-5, and Swartz 208). Irene Dunne reprised her role as Susan Dunn for this broadcast.

Like many other works of wartime literature and propaganda, *The White Cliffs* was both prolific and popular. However, it was also different from these works. Instead of appealing to a specific audience in a general way, *The White Cliffs* appealed to the widest possible audience in specific ways. Beginning with the love story, the fairy-tale plot of an American who marries an English aristocrat is one broad appeal for female readers. However, this “fairy-tale” resembled reality for many of Miller’s fans, who wrote letters to her explaining that they were “American women who married Englishmen, whose sisters married Englishmen, some connection such as that” (Van Gelder 2). Likewise they could understand Susan’s situation when she and John marry but are soon separated, Susan “settl[ing] down in Devon / When Johnnie went to France.”

Again, as an experienced short fiction writer of magazines such as *Harpers*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Woman’s Home Companion* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Alice Duer Miller was very well-attuned to the domestic female American audience. Because women who read Miller’s style of fiction were also the majority of radio soap opera listeners (Cantor 114), it is not surprising that *The White Cliffs* would also reflect many of the same themes represented in those programs. In wartime, when the War Advertising Council was monitoring radio programs, this meant themes of volunteerism, rationing, conservation, and the living situations of war brides were highly visible in soap opera and other radio

program plots (Blue 263-264, Horten 142). In *The White Cliffs*, Susan befriends her mother-in-law Lady Jean, and together they brave the home front hardships of rationed supplies in a cold winter while volunteering to roll bandages and write letters for wounded soldiers (36-38). Miller's story, then, reflected not only popular taste in the media, but also the living reality of much of her audience.

Another interesting parallel to wartime soap operas is the existence of expendable male characters who fight in the war while central male characters are found exempt from service (Horten 152). In *The White Cliffs*, male characters are almost always on the periphery. John's father is never mentioned in the story, and Susan's father is usually in America, often sailing alone in Narragansett Bay. He is apparently never drafted for service in the war, but only makes occasional short visits to Susan in England. John's brother Percy, also an Army officer, is only seen at their wedding, and then he "went from the church to catch his train to hell; / And died – saving his batman from a shell" (29). John himself is mostly in France and dies shortly after the birth of their son, leaving Susan alone with the newborn baby, Lady Jean, and John's old Scottish Nanny. This sort of matriarchal environment, though close to the nature of radio soap operas, may have also suited Miller's tastes as a traditional feminist who taught at Barnard College in its formative years and first gained popularity through her feminist writings, most famously the satire, "Are Women People?"

However, lest Alice Duer Miller seem overly invested in the female domestic audience (and lest I retread the path of other critics), I must point out that such widespread sales of the book and record could not be due to these appeals alone. Miller showed skill in international relations as well. As her husband writes, despite the persuasive arguments of American and British politicians concerning the war, "the heart of the matter, the essential truths of the relation between the two countries, had not been reached" (*All Our Lives* 209). The matter was, however, being reached by the German-run propaganda of Axis Europe.

Joseph Goebbels, Nazi minister of propaganda, highly valued radio and saw it as a key tool in demoralizing and dividing Allied troops. One of the strongest ways he used radio was through “black stations” broadcasting from Germany. The stations often did not identify their locations or supporters (O’Connor 278) and usually used American or English speakers (Rolo 110). These stations and their programs all had different tactics, but held the same goal of working against British-American unity.

One station, Worker’s Challenge, sought to fan the flames of class hostility in Great Britain. However, Miller neatly addresses this issue in *The White Cliffs* by giving her readers a first-hand look into the everyday lives of the British aristocracy through the eyes of a middle-class American, Susan Dunne.

At first Susan is swept up by the fairy-tale of British wealth and aristocracy. At a ball in Belgrave Square she admires the “Admirals, Lord Lieutenants of the Shires,” Counts and Dukes, and of course her soon-to-be husband, Sir John. However, we soon learn that the aristocracy is not all glitter and gold. John and his brother Percy both have military careers, and “Johnnie’s mother, the Lady Jean” is the “child of a penniless Scottish peer” (21). John’s sister-in-law makes it clear that Susan is financially no better off for her marriage to a squire, claiming, “no one nowadays cares a button / For the upper classes” (60) and “You’ll be saving your pin money every week / To mend the roof. Well, let it leak. Why should you care?” (59). Additionally, throughout the story Susan remains critical of “the pride unchecked of class” (67), yet she upholds the form of tradition, making sacrifices to allow her son, the heir, to follow the footsteps of his father.

Miller also addresses another class and nationalism issue in *The White Cliffs*; this time, concerning Scotland. The German “black station” Radio Caledonia was designed to inflame Celtic factions and call for Scottish independence (O’Connor 279). However, Miller consciously integrates strong Scottish characters into her story and paints them in a favorable light. Susan’s Scottish mother-in-law Lady Jean quickly becomes her “nearest, dearest friend” (57) after a little initial friction. She even wins over Susan’s crusty patriot father, becoming the “only one person [...] always safe from his jibes”

against the British (53). Lady Jean is also a staunch supporter of the war effort, selflessly battling arthritis to roll bandages or write soldiers' letters for hours at a time, even shortly after she has been informed of her son Percy's death (38). Likewise, Susan's son is raised by John's former Nanny, "A Scot from Lady Jean's own native passes." Nanny is described as "bright and wise – a great soul" who is a strict disciplinarian but lovingly devoted to her charge (52).

Yet the most prevalent issue of German English-language propaganda radio, and of *The White Cliffs*, is the differences between the British and American culture and values. In his 1942 book, *Radio Goes to War*, Charles Rolo writes that German radio programs aimed at British audiences "venomously criticized unemployment, slums, disease, and crime in America" (116). Alice Duer Miller addresses this issue by sending Susan Dunne to briefly visit her father in America during the Prohibition 1930s. She is appalled by the gangs, gambling, crime, and even the Teapot Dome Scandal, and repeatedly asks herself, "Was this my country?" and "Was this America?" (55). However, she points out problems in British government and society as well, and to the end continues to think of herself as American.

There were also German propaganda programs directed at Americans. One popular argument was that the English were unworthy of Allied support as the traditional enemies of American and the world at large. Their history as an oppressive, colonizing nation was effectively termed "Britality" (Rolo 19). One radio speaker went so far as to call Winston Churchill's administration "the most sinister and corrupt dictatorship the world has ever seen" (19). But despite the disturbing messages in these broadcasts, many of these programs were still very popular with troops. Charles Rolo explains this phenomenon, "Radio is every man's best friend. He turns to it instinctively for news, comfort, and diversion. Thus broadcast propaganda, if shrewdly interwoven with entertainment, will be listened to whether people like it or not" (33). So even though the G.I.'s thought of Mildred Gillars' "Axis Sally" persona as the "Bitch at the Mike," they would still listen to her program *Home Sweet Home*.

Gillars was one black station radio host who promoted the idea of England as enemy by admonishing American troops to refuse to support England by following the Pilgrims' example in a pre-Thanksgiving broadcast (O'Connor 85). Again, Miller had a ready response to these tactics. She explores the American identity through Susan's character by writing "I could never be an English woman, there was that in me / Puritan, stubborn, that would not agree to English standards" (18) while later claiming that English patriotism is "steady, and simple, wordless, dignified" and "above all others" (28). Susan's father makes the most scathing critique of British-American history in a letter reply to her engagement announcement. He brings up, among other things, the Boston Tea Party, the War of 1812, and Paul Revere's ride (32-33). John's response, however, effectively neutralizes the situation: "No wonder people hate us," adding, "But I say / I'll make your father like me yet, some day" (35). Reducing the anti-British arguments of German stations to a very typical and personable father/son-in-law conflict is probably more effective to listeners and readers; again, illustrating how Alice Duer Miller could enter the territory of the human heart where the most articulate politicians could not.

Coming to the issue of Churchill and his supposedly "sinister and corrupt dictatorship," Susan speaks to the central question as England is about to enter World War II. She asks, "Rulers of England – for them must I / send out my only son to die?" (67). To answer this question, I must turn to yet another radio source; this time, the voice of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. As James H. Meredith writes in *Understanding the Literature of World War II*, "Roosevelt was not only commander in chief of the powerful U. S. Army during the war. He was also the leader of the home front" (106). His Fireside Chats were broadcast over the radio in the evenings, and they often addressed issues at the heart of the American people. In a Fireside Chat broadcast on December 9, 1941, President Roosevelt discusses and answers the question of Susan Dunne and many other Americans:

[...] Wars are not won by people who are concerned primarily with their own comfort, their own convenience, and their own pocketbooks. We Americans of today bear the gravest of responsibilities. And all of the United Nations share them. All of us here at home are being tested – for our fortitude, for our selfless devotion to our country and to our cause. This is the toughest war of all time. We need not leave it to historians of the future



to answer the question whether we are tough enough to meet this unprecedented challenge. We can give that answer now. The answer is “Yes.” (qtd. in Meredith 115)

When her son asks if England is worth dying for, Susan knows, like Roosevelt, that the answer is yes. *The White Cliffs* concludes:

I am American bred  
I have seen much to hate here – much to forgive,  
But in a world where England is finished and dead,  
I do not wish to live. (70)

Rather than conceding that England is dependent on the very “colony” it once oppressed, Alice Duer Miller claims that America is actually dependent on England for a rich heritage of culture, history, and for its very existence: “[...] Were they not English, our forefathers? [...] The tree of Liberty grew and changed and spread, / But the seed was English” (70).

The theme of willingness to sacrifice life is, I think, the part of *The White Cliffs* that must have hit hardest with its audience. It is one thing to entertain and debate the abstract notions of world freedom or national pride. It is quite another thing to decide whether the welfare and freedom of a nation is worth your own life, that of your husband, or that of your son. Considering the massive loss of life in World War II, it was clearly a question in the minds of thousands of people. *The White Cliffs* is a valuable piece of literature because it articulates this question so clearly. Its strong connections with the culture of wartime radio are only further proof of the wide reach of this single human concern.

**Rebecca Stelzer** is a second-year M.A. student and instructor at the University of South Carolina. She was editorial assistant for the *James Dickey Newsletter* 2003-2004 and currently serves as copy editor to the *Yemassee* literary journal. She presented a version of this paper at the Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association Conference in November, 2004.

## Works Cited

- Blue, Howard. Words at War: World War II Era Radio Drama and the Postwar Broadcasting Industry Blacklist. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002.
- Brown, Jared. The Fabulous Lunts: A Biography of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. New York: Atheneum, 1986.
- Cantor, Muriel G. and Suzanne Pingree. The Soap Opera. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983.
- Coward, T. R. "“White Cliffs’ Sets Record.” Publisher’s Weekly 16 Sep. 1944: 998.
- Dunning, John. Tune in Yesterday: The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio 1925-1976. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976.
- Gorman, Lyn and David McLean. Media and Society in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Introduction. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003.
- Horten, Gerd. Radio Goes to War: The Cultural Politics of Propaganda During World War II. Berkley: U of California P, 2002.
- Justice, Keith L. “Miller, Alice Duer.” Bestseller Index. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998. 220.
- Leventhal, Fred M. “British Writers, American Readers: Women’s Voices in Wartime.” Albion 32.1 (2000): 1-18.
- Miller, Alice Duer. The White Cliffs. New York: Coward McCann, 1940.
- Miller, Henry Wise. All Our Lives: Alice Duer Miller. New York: Coward-McCann, 1945.
- O’Connor, William F. “Expatriate American Radio Propagandists in the Employ of the Axis Powers.” Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio. Ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio. New York: Routledge, 2002. 277-285.
- Raines, Vincent. “Educational Recordings.” Wilson Library Bulletin 16 (1941): 291-97.
- Rolo, Charles J. Radio Goes to War: The “Fourth Front”. New York: Putnam, 1942.
- Short, K. R. M. ““The White Cliffs of Dover’: Promoting the Anglo-American Alliance in World War II.” Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 2.1 (1982): 3-26.

Swartz, Jon D. and Robert C. Reinehr. Handbook of Old-Time Radio: A Comprehensive Guide to Golden Age Radio Listening and Collecting. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1993.

“The White Cliffs.” Perf. Constance Cummings. Theatre of Romance. CBS.

“The White Cliffs of Dover.” Perf. Lynn Fontanne. Treasury Star Parade. Syndicated.

“Treasury Star Parade.” On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio. Ed. John Dunning. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.

Understanding the Literature of World War II: A student casebook to issues, sources, and historical documents. Ed. Meredith, James H. The Greenwood Press “Literature in Context” Series. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1999.

Van Gelder, Robert. “An Interview with Alice Duer Miller: The Author of ‘The White Cliffs’ Discusses the Trials and Pleasure of Her Trade.” New York Times Book Review 29 June 1941: 2.

“Vera Lynn.” Encyclopedia of Popular Music. 10 Nov. 2004.  
<[http://www.theiceberg.com/artist.html?artist\\_id=1117](http://www.theiceberg.com/artist.html?artist_id=1117)>. Muze UK, 2002.