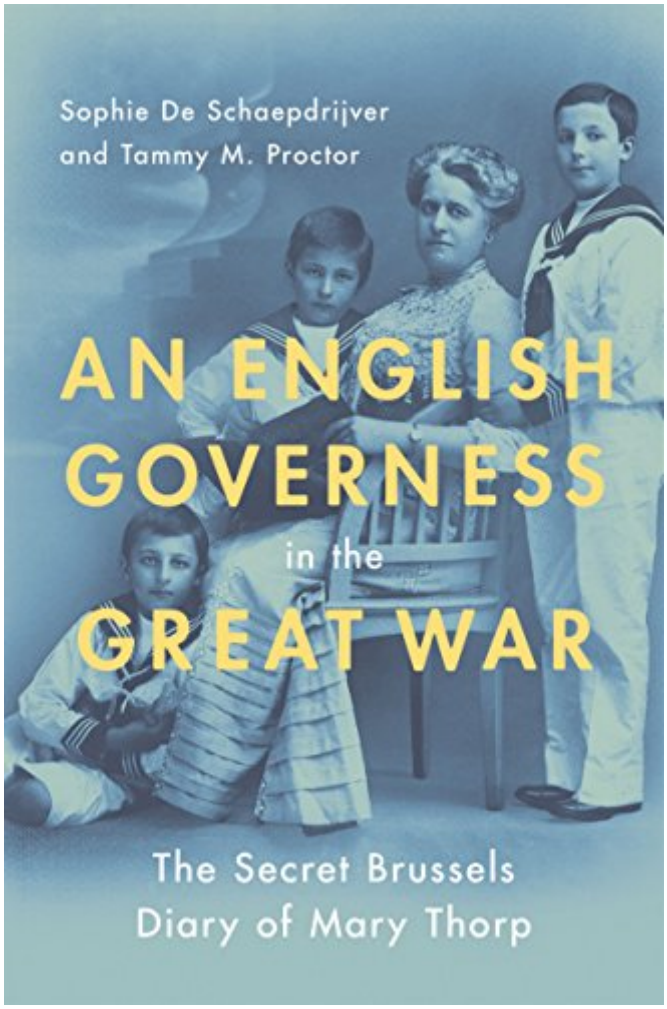
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An English Governess In The Great War: The Secret Brussels Diary Of Mary Thorp



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Synopsis

An Englishwoman of no particular fame living in World War I Brussels started a secret diary in September 1916. Aware that her thoughts could put her in danger with German authorities, she never wrote her name on the diary and ran to hide it every time the "Boches" came to inspect the house. The diary survived the war and ended up in a Belgian archive, forgotten for nearly a century until historians Sophie De Schaepdrijver and Tammy M. Proctor discovered it and the remarkable woman who wrote it: Mary Thorp, a middle-aged English governess working for a wealthy Belgian-Russian family in Brussels.As a foreigner and a woman, Mary Thorp offers a unique window into life under German occupation in Brussels (the largest occupied city of World War I) and in the uncertain early days of the peace. Her diary describes the roar of cannons in the middle of the night, queues for food and supplies in the shops, her work for a wartime charity, news from an interned godson in Germany, along with elegant dinners with powerful diplomats and the educational progress of her beloved charges.Mary Thorp’s sharp and bittersweet reflections testify to the daily strains of living under enemy occupation, comment on the events of the war as they unfolded, and ultimately serve up a personal story of self-reliance and endurance. De Schaepdrijver and Proctor’s in-depth commentary situate this extraordinary woman in her complex political, social, and cultural context, thus providing an unusual chance to engage with the Great War on an intimate and personal level.

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Customer Reviews

This book was hard to get into at first. It simply didn't seem that interesting, even when it turned into mostly the diary entries of Mary Throp, a British governess working for a wealthy family in Belgium. Eventually, however, Ms. Throp's observations about life under German occupation became more and more captivating, although never approaching the feel of a well-written memoir. But it's really not fair to expect her diary to read like a memoir, since it was strictly a day-to-day account of her life during World War I. Moreover, don't expect entry after entry of talk of the three boys she was caring for; there's actually little about them compared to all the other talk of many, many other individuals, both rich and poor; politics; what was printed in various newspapers; what was going on in various countries; what the Catholic Church was doing during the occupation, etc.Much of the book is about how the Germans were taking away everything they could take away from the Belgians--food, clothes, coal, horses, household items, plumbing supplies, men. It's truly extraordinary to read how people dealt with such deprivation, how they survived all the hardships. Of course, many did not survive, but Mary Throp did not have it horribly bad due to the wealth and status of her employers. One of the saddest things about her diary, and other similar war diaries, is the hope and belief often expressed in the beginning that the war would soon be coming to an end; only to eventually repeatedly read of the fear and belief that the war was never going to end. One of the most hopeful things about the diary is how Ms. Throp described ways individuals fought back against the Germans, if only in words when confronted by a German soldier. They still had pride and fight in them, even under an oppressive occupation.(Note: I received a free copy of this book from NetGalley and the publisher or author.)

'Governess' consists of an introduction followed by a daily diary. The bulk would have limited general appeal, the intro more appeal. My family was forced from Belgium during WWI and hence my interest and 4-star rating. My GGF wrote a book on his new life in America ('Harden Levenskampeener Signorenfamilie in Amerika', Van Reet, Jacob, drug. De Vos-Van Klef, 1925, Flemish only, no English translation - few copies remain, one in Royal Library of Belgium). Researchers would find '..Governess..' interesting. It chronicles the tough life experienced by

Belgians who chose to remain in Belgium during the occupation. The immigrants to America also had a very tough life as told by my GGF. They were exploited in most cases.

Especially poignant as my family (great-grandfather, grandparents, and great-aunts) had to flee Belgium during WWI because of the relentless plundering of the country by the Germans under Kaiser Wilhem. They treated the Belgians horribly. It's often the everyday small actions of the survivors, the daily willingness to live through each day, that give testimony to the ability of the human spirit to soar towards a better future.

Well worth reading. The governess was a tough lady as the Germans confiscated all the coal from Belgian mines, everything else that could be taken from homes was taken-down to toilet paper, and most healthy men were shipped shipped off to work in mines and factories in Germany (when they got worked close to death, they we shipped home where doctors had little to treat them with). War is indeed hell.

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