

**Bernard O'Connor, *Agent Rose: The True Story of Eileen Nearne, Britain's Forgotten Wartime Heroine***

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The *Agent Rose* of Bernard O'Connor's title is Eileen 'Didi' Nearne, whose lonely death in Torquay and modest council burial in 2010 made international headlines after her wartime medals revealed her to have been another of Britain's female special agents during the war. After months spent serving undercover as a wireless operator in France, the courageous Nearne was caught by the Gestapo and, after some brutal but fruitless interrogation, sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp. Amazingly, unlike Szabo from whom she wisely kept her distance at the camp so as to remain undercover, Nearne survived the war to live modestly and die alone over half a century later.

Keeping quiet was one of Eileen Nearne's great strengths, and she saved many lives (including her own) through silence, bluff and determination in the face of what must have seemed a hopeless situation. However this ability, along with scant records, has made O'Connor's job rather difficult. The first five chapters of this biography deal mainly with SOE agents' recruitment and training, in detail, but without much revealing reference to Nearne herself. It is almost half way through the book before she appears in any personal sense. Here she is in a damning supervisor's report that opens, 'she is not very intelligent or practical and is lacking in shrewdness and cunning...' [p.109]. It is only when Nearne had overcome such objections, and was serving covertly in France, that the reader begins to gain a real picture of this modest and enigmatic woman whose ability not to stand out from the crowd and, when caught, to 'play the daft lassie' proved so valuable [p.194].

Nearne's work as a wireless operator in France kept agents in touch with London. Her sister, Jacqueline, also served with the SOE, as a courier, and one of her brothers, Francis, would also join 'the firm', as the organisation was known to insiders. Although the sisters knew of each other's work, they operated separately,

and O'Connor's intention to write Jacqueline's story in a subsequent book means that she features rather less than might be expected here. Eileen Nearne was arrested in July 1944, and suffered appalling torture during interrogation. She nevertheless persuaded her captors that she was simply a naïve Frenchwoman caught up in things she did not understand. Showing remarkable resilience, having survived a period at Ravensbrück, she eventually escaped from a forced labour camp in Silesia.

This dramatic story is largely told in long quotes from other sources, but it is the rare examples of Nearne's own words that are the most poignant in the book. 'When I put my hands on the signals keys, there came a feeling of patriotism', she later recalled. 'I was pleased I was doing something. It was perhaps a little emotional' [p.181]. And this is about as emotional as the reader is going to get with this oddly hollow book, unless you count the bathos of 'the very sad time', for example, when an elderly Nearne lost her ginger cat.

*Agent Rose* is useful if you want an overview of the training of F [French] Section agents, but brings little insight into the character or motivations of Eileen Nearne. In some ways it is hard not to applaud this very private woman for having successfully evaded capture yet again, this time by a biographer, but it leaves the reader rather frustrated nonetheless.