Clarion Review

Autobiography & Memoir

Coin Street Chronicles: Memoirs of an Evacuee from London's Old South Bank
Gwen Southgate
iUniverse
978-1-936236-81-7
Four Stars (out of Five)

Though the gritty South Bank London neighborhood that author Gwen Southgate grew up in has today been redeveloped into a tony tourist and arts destination, she vividly portrays the people and landscape of this area during the 1930s and ’40s in her book *Coin Street Chronicles*. This memoir is an absorbing account of a peripatetic childhood in which the author, her brothers, and her schoolmates endured many hardships while separated from their families at a tender age. Though many books are written about the diplomatic, military, and social aspects of World War II, Southgate’s memoir provides a highly personal and detailed look at this era from a child’s perspective.

The wealth of information Southgate remembers is extraordinary. When war was declared between Great Britain and Germany in September of 1939, the author and her brothers left their widowed mother in London and were doled out to various rural families for what was hoped to be only a month-long emergency. The separation lasted much longer, though, not only because of the duration of the war, but also because of the unfortunate remarriage of Southgate’s mother to an abusive husband.

The author expertly transports the reader back to this time with swaths of remembered conversation in the South Bank dialect and with colorful portraits of the many teachers, host families, and friends she encountered. There are touching details about the loneliness she and her mates felt after each new move—from descriptions of the few precious items that were packed into their suitcases to the gas masks stored in cardboard cases that were hung around their necks.

While this very informative prose style is used effectively throughout most of the memoir, there are instances where paragraphs seem to run on too long or there are asides that don’t add anything to the narrative. In a similar vein, there are sometimes lengthy runs of

dialogue that continue well after the reader has gleaned the personality of a certain character. And while Southgate does a good job of explaining many British customs and terms, others are left for readers to research on their own.

The two photos on the cover offer accurate clues to what sensitive little Gwen and her family looked like; additional photographs would have further enriched the text. Similarly, a genealogy chart would have helped clarify which of the myriad characters in this autobiography are relatives, family friends, teachers, or other important people in Southgate's life.

Aside from the need for further editing, *Coin Street Chronicles* is an impressive account of a unique time in modern British history told from an unusual perspective. It very effectively relates the privation and uncertainty that so many London children endured during the pivotal years of the Second World War.

Rachel Jagareski