

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Dr Annie Gray: Winston Churchill's Cook (1940)

Welcome to Episode 13, Season 2 of the *Travels Through Time* history podcast.

[Intro music]

Violet Moller: Hello, I'm Violet Moller. In this episode, we're going back to 1939, one of the most dramatic years of the 20th century. The 'queen of food historians', Dr Annie Gray, is going to take us behind the green baize door of Number 10, Downing Street to meet a remarkable woman called Georgina Landemare. Georgina worked as Winston Churchill's cook for over 15 years and her fascinating life story is the subject of Annie's latest book, *Victory in the Kitchen*, which traces her meteoric career from teenage nursery maid to one of the most celebrated cooks in the whole country; an unheard of achievement for a working-class woman at that time. They say an army marches on its stomach and this was certainly true of Winston Churchill, who really loved his food. He was especially fond of beef, which he always ate rare and often for breakfast. So it is fitting that when I met up with Annie the other day at her publishers, we were right next door to Smithfield Market, which has been the centre of the London meat trade for over 800 years. Annie has many strings to her bow. She's the resident expert on BBC Radio 4's *The Kitchen Cabinet*. She is a research associate at the University of York and the author of several bestselling books, including *The Greedy Queen*, about Queen Victoria's love of food.

Welcome to *Travels Through Time*, Annie.

Dr Annie Gray: Thank you very much for having me.

Violet Moller: Before we find out about Georgina's life, I was wondering if you could tell us a bit about how you found her and came to her as a subject.

Dr Annie Gray: I was in the unenviable position that authors sometimes drop into where they have to come up with an idea. It's really hard to come up with a really good idea for a book because you want something that you can live with for over a year; writing it, researching it and then later on publicising it. You want something that people will be interested in and I write books for a general public who don't necessarily have specialist knowledge and who just want something that's going to be a cool read. They're not necessarily particularly even interested in the period. They just want something that's fun. Also, I'm a food historian and a social historian and so I knew I wanted to write about food, obviously, and I kind of have this burning desire to write about women as well. I think women tend to be still very underrepresented in history writing and especially when it comes to servants and below-stairs lives. Partly, I have to admit, because they're really hard to research.

I went to the Jane Grigson Library which is in Oxford Brooks and stood there and hoped that something would jump off the shelves. I was there saying, 'Oh look, this is really interesting. This cookbook looks lovely. I don't know what I'm doing.' I came across Georgina's cookery book, which she wrote in 1958, called *Recipes From Number Ten*. I thought, 'This is really interesting. This is lovely.' I put it back on the shelf and thought, 'I'm sure someone has written about her because quite obviously, there's loads of interest in Winston Churchill. This was quite clearly a key figure and absolutely would have been covered.' It turned out that it hadn't. No one had written about Winston Churchill's domestic life. No one had written about his servants at all. There are a thousand biographies of Winston Churchill and very, very few of them even mention

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his servants which I think is criminal, especially in this day and age where there is a wealth of historical material that is out there. There are new books all the time and really groundbreaking things, like Hallie Rubenhold's *The Five*, which shows the lives of 'ordinary people' are just as rewarding to read about and just as interesting as anything else. I got in contact with Georgina's granddaughter, who is still alive, who is 76 and Britain's oldest Ironman competitor.

Violet Moller: Wow!

Dr Annie Gray: The genes run in the family [*laughter*]. She was delighted that I wanted to write about her nan. She said she'd tried but couldn't really get beyond the starting block because there's so little information. I like a challenge. I thought, 'This is brilliant.' This is the life of a woman who was clearly at the top of her profession. She was quite groundbreaking because women, at that point, working at that level in cookery were relatively rare still and it gave me a chance to talk about domestic service and 20th-century food. When I wrote about *The Greedy Queen*, some of that really was to talk about Victorian food and put that into perspective. With this one, I also tell the story of 20th-century food and the changes that happened. It kind of rolled loads of things I wanted to write about into one.

Violet Moller: Yeah, I think it's wonderful that, as you say, you found a hidden female story of which there are millions in history and telling this incredible woman's story. I think there is huge value in that domestic, social history which, perhaps, is coming to the fore now but certainly previously, it hasn't been focused on. It's mainly been the politics and the big stories, so I think it's fascinating. One of the things I really loved about your book were the little details about Georgina's story that you put in. One that springs to mind is the German pastries filled with jam and cream, which her and her brother, Algie, would sneak off and spend their pocket money on. They didn't admit to their parents for decades that they'd been doing this.

Dr Annie Gray: No, and then Algie used the same shop to cater his wedding which was just so perfect.

Violet Moller: Did he? That's amazing. Of course, then you explain that there were lots of German bakeries in London in the 1880s, which I had absolutely no idea about. All these bakers had fled the unrest in Germany in the 1870s and come over. I just thought that was such a wonderful detail. I wonder, going back to the point about this not being big history and you can't just go to the calendar of state papers and plot it, how on earth did you find the sources?

Dr Annie Gray: I have to say that this was one of the most difficult things I've ever done and conversely, of course, one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. I, rather naively, thought there would be lots of information because there's a massive archive on Churchill in Cambridge. Surely, there would be loads of information there. It turns out that not only is there not very much information on servants in the Churchill archive because a lot of it was edited before it was given over and so things like wage books are missing and menu books are missing. The stuff that would have been kept and the documents that certainly would have existed are just no longer there. There are lots and lots of minutes of meetings, and drafts, and redrafts of letter to important men talking about important things to do with war but very little to do with the people who were actually running the household.

Violet Moller: Do you think that's because someone went through it and said, 'This isn't important stuff. We're going to throw it away and not bother keeping it'?

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Dr Annie Gray: Yes, I do. I assume Clementine Churchill or possibly even Mary Soames, who went through the archive as well, decided what was and wasn't important. There may also have been a level of attrition at the time. One of the sources that was lovely to read were the menu ledgers that were kept, which was a daily record of what was eaten. I used similar sources a lot for *The Greedy Queen*. In this case, there is one for 1937-1938, nothing for the whole war, a staff menu book for 1946 and then the sporadic bits in the '50s. Really, those would have existed but they may just have been lost. These are just tiny, little exercise books.

Violet Moller: Yeah, ephemera.

Dr Annie Gray: Yeah, but no one would have thought were interesting. I managed to trace the cookery books that Clementine Churchill had on her own shelf through the notes that she'd made in those menu books. Those cookery books no longer exist. They may be on a shelf somewhere at Chartwell. They just have got lost. 'Oh, let's give the archive all of these books that belonged to Winston Churchill, the great man himself,' but these ones - the domestic trivia, the fiction and the equivalent of the trashy crime fiction - no one is interested in them.' There was a genuine way of curating Churchill's life after his death and a really concerted effort to do that, consciously or subconsciously. That means that a lot of the stuff that I would have loved to have used just wasn't there.

Violet Moller: That's really interesting. I suppose it's all about Churchill rather than his wider family and household.

Dr Annie Gray: Exactly. Yes, and even Clementine, his wife, almost deliberately took herself out of that archive and so it is very much focused on Winston himself. Georgina was completely complicit in this and when she wrote her cookery book in 1958, she didn't put herself in it at all. With modern cookery books, we are very used to them being slightly autobiographical. If you read a book by Nigel Slater, in particular, or Diana Henry, or Catherine Phipps, or any of these people who are writing brilliant cookery books, you read them and they'll say, 'I was doing this at this point,' or 'I came up with this recipe because I used to live in (wherever).' We're very used to that idea that a cookery book is also a storybook. In *Recipes From Number Ten*, Georgina has stripped herself out. There are no introductions to the recipes. They're just really basic prose and you get almost no sense of character. She was complicit in the fact that she's invisible, in some ways. It turns out, of course, that no one is completely invisible. She kept a memoir, which she wrote down in the 1970s. In 1978, she tore it up into little pieces and put it down the sink...

Violet Moller: [Gasping] Oh!

Dr Annie Gray: ...because her daughter, who was dying of breast cancer at the time, and her son-in-law told her that her life wasn't valuable.

Violet Moller: Oh no!

Dr Annie Gray: She was a servant. Who would be interested? It was a horrible time in the household. Tensions were running very high, as you can imagine. It was also indicative of an attitude in the '70s whereby domestic service, which so many people's parents and grandparents had been in, was regarded - it wasn't quite shameful but there was this real tension around how you saw domestic service. Was it good? Was it bad? So she ripped up her memoir and put it down the sink and 26 pages were saved by her granddaughter but they only cover the first 13 years of Georgina's life. They're really good. Her memory was absolutely razor-sharp, bearing in mind that she was 95 at the time. There's that, which gives you a vague idea of the early part of

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her life and then, of course, there are the usual official records, like census data and electoral registers. She also recorded a programme with Joan Bakewell in the 1970s - 1976, I think it was. There are 15 minutes of Georgina onscreen talking about her life.

Violet Moller: Oh wow! So it's for film and not radio?

Dr Annie Gray: No, this is for film.

Violet Moller: You can see her.

Dr Annie Gray: She's there and it's her birthday. She's really reactionary by that point, as many old people are, but bright as a button and absolutely amazing to listen to. There's that fragment where she's mainly talking about the war years. It really was CSI history with this and researching the life of someone who was working class and who was a woman. Actually, in some ways, the 20th century is more difficult than the 19th because, of course, we don't have access to the census data after 1911. So in that middle period of the century, she's virtually invisible and it really was a question of teasing out tiny references in her manuscript recipe book that she kept and things like that. I suppose a vast knowledge of food from that era and the aristocracy of that era was crucial. Knowing that little, tiny references could be extrapolated into longer paragraphs, based on what was the norm for a cook or in the case of Paul, her husband, for a chef in France, that was also helpful.

Violet Moller: Well, you did a very, very good job. It's a beautifully told story. Just to touch upon something that you mentioned. Georgina was born in 1882 and so she lived through this period of enormous change through two world wars and enormous change in the number of people who worked in domestic service. When she was born in 1882, thousands of men, women and children worked for wealthier people in their houses. As with other professions, children would often follow in their parents' footsteps and get the same kind of jobs. Sometimes, the same family would have worked for the rich family for generations, especially in rural areas. I think that's fascinating how there was this connection. Georgina's aunt was a lady's maid and her father, Mark Young, was a coachman and so I suppose that, for her, getting a job in service would have seemed quite natural and she could also make use of their contacts. Can you just give us a brief overview of the trends of domestic service and how it would have been when she first started working? What kind of jobs would there have been? How many people would have worked in different types of households?

Dr Annie Gray: I think the history of domestic service, especially when it comes to women, really is the history of women because if you were not a servant, you were probably a servant keeper. Very, very few women would have been neither at some point in their lives. It's one of those things where that's like saying, 'Sum up office work today.'

Violet Moller: Yeah, I'm sorry [*laughter*].

Dr Annie Gray: It's a fascinating area. Georgina was born just at the point where domestic service was starting to be very problematic, where there were a lot more middle-class families that wanted to employ servants and where there was a lot of angst about servant keeping. She was the last person in her family to go into domestic service. Her mother had been a kitchen maid. Her father was a coachman. One of the things I found fascinating when researching the book were these networks and the way in which servants got into households. In the village that she was born in, Aldbury, there were three or four crucial families and then there were the

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Rothschilds down the road. You could quite clearly see these networks building and how people got employment was through these aristocratic connections.

Violet Moller: You mentioned that the aristocratic families would sometimes stand as godparents to the village children.

Dr Annie Gray: Yeah, and then stand them in their first job or provide a reference. There's so much that isn't recorded about jobs, especially for girls, because the norm was that you would start as a day girl and you'd need to gain experience. Georgina's first job was as a nursery maid for a family called the [13:35 - s.l. Gwynns]. She went off and did that for a bit and then she came home again. It wasn't as if a girl left home and that was it, she's gone. They would gain experience in various different areas and when she decided to become a kitchen maid, she must have been quite focused very, very early on because she went straight into a household that employed six people in the kitchen.

Violet Moller: Do you think she was already interested in cooking at that age?

Dr Annie Gray: She said she was.

Violet Moller: Was there anyone who might have taught her how to cook?

Dr Annie Gray: Her mother had been a kitchen maid and clearly was a very good cook because she wouldn't have worked her way up in that position otherwise. I think she had some form of hereditary idea of cooking. She was certainly interested in food. Although, because the memoir was written down at the end of her life, of course, she's emphasising the food bits in it because of what she's done for a job. As she says, when she's older, she was constantly thinking about food, about pastries, about coming home from school to get food at home and then going back to school and having the rest of the soup that the people who had food at school had. She talks about all of those things but whether or not that's her looking back as a cook at her early age or whether or not, as a nine-year-old, she was that obsessed is harder to tell. She certainly felt that that was a thing she wanted to go into and she must have felt that it was a thing she wanted to go into in quite a serious manner. Most servants worked in very small households and 75% of the households that employed servants only employed one or two people. That's the norm in terms of servant keeping. You've then got the households who have, say, four or five servants who are upper-middle class and you go up and up until you get to the Royal Household where there are hundreds. She started in one that was already very prestigious and she never ever worked in small households. She's already in the top 10% of servants and she's already working for very prestigious homes. She started as what she called 'Number Six' - the scullery maid - and like all people in her profession, she worked her way up steadily through the kitchen hierarchy, moving houses at each step of the way. It's very difficult to gain promotion within a house because if you made cook somewhere where you'd been a maid, you're not going to have any discipline. All the maids would be like, 'Yeah, but you were one of us two days ago. You were having midnight feasts and hanging out the window, so why are we going to obey you now you're a cook?' We know she worked for a really, really wealthy household in 1909, which was when she'd become cook at the age of 25. It took her about ten years to go from scullery maid to being cook. When she was made cook, she was cooking for really nouveau riche families, so quite fussy cookery that would have been a blend of English and French cookery and mainly learnt from books and from experience. There would have been lots of moulds and lots of fiddly food.

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Violet Moller: Yes, can you tell us about the mould because that was one of the recipes that made me laugh the most? It was called 'Jugged Hare à la Surprise'. The first instruction is 'butter some hare moulds'.

Dr Annie Gray: There is a picture of those hare moulds.

Violet Moller: Hare is H.A.R.E. for the listeners who are getting confused [*laughter*].

Dr Annie Gray: It's brilliant!

Violet Moller: Imagine that have not just rabbit moulds but also hare moulds.

Dr Annie Gray: Also very specific. There are very specific moulds at that point. British cookery in the 19th century was really divided between the very high-end stuff which you aspired to have, which was French. Absolutely. If you were an aristocrat, if you were titled, if you were wealthy, you employed a French, male chef and you probably paid them about £150 a year.

Violet Moller: Wow!

Dr Annie Gray: They would cook French food in the French idiom. They had French names and it was aggressively French, French, French. That was it. All the restaurants served French food and employed French chefs. If you couldn't afford a French chef, you'd have a man who was English but was probably still cooking predominantly French food. If you couldn't afford them, that's when you'd employ a woman who was probably on half or a third of the wages that you'd pay a man.

Violet Moller: Nothing has changed [*laughter*].

Dr Annie Gray: Well, quite. English women were still often called upon to cook high-end, French food but you had this type of food called *recherché cuisine* in the Edwardian and late Victorian period and it covers a whole range of different things. In the kind of milieu that Georgina was cooking in, this very, very wealthy milieu but new money, it was all about transforming the food. It had to look like nothing on earth. It couldn't possibly look like something that you'd ever see anywhere in a field or in a butcher's shop. Jugged Hare à la Surprise is cake. That's the surprise. Wow! It's cake in a hare mould. All of the recipes from that particular style of cuisine go on and on for pages and involve [17:52 - s.l. patent] mixtures, food colouring and essences.

Violet Moller: There was one describing 'mincing raw steak'. I think it's called Beef Cake, so it doesn't sound very French. You mince the steak and then you have to press it through a sieve which just...

Dr Annie Gray: Yeah. Have you ever done it?

Violet Moller: Of course not. I mean it sounds impossible [*laughter*]. How do you do it?

Dr Annie Gray: You develop really good shoulder muscles.

Violet Moller: Yeah, you must do.

Dr Annie Gray: Cooks were renowned for having enormous biceps.

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Violet Moller: Can you have a sieve with big holes in it?

Dr Annie Gray: No, because then you don't get a mince, do you? It does take hours to put raw meat through a wire sieve but that was the requirement. That was the point because if you were wealthy enough, you could afford six people in your kitchen.

Violet Moller: You had enough people, so they would do the work.

Dr Annie Gray: The work was incredibly physical. You showed your wealth by having all of these incredibly intricate and very expensive copper moulds.

Violet Moller: Style over substance.

Dr Annie Gray: Very much. If you were old money, you didn't bother with any of that. You'd just put half a sheep on the table because then, you were completely going against all of that and saying, 'Those people have got that but I'm doing something which, 50 years ago, is what we would have done.'

Violet Moller: Yeah, a sheep from your estate.

Dr Annie Gray: How you display what you're eating on the table is very much tied up with not just class but also how long you've had your money for and how long your pile has existed in the country.

Violet Moller: Fascinating. Fascinating. I think we should fast forward a bit now and get to your first scene. We are in the summer of 1939 and we're at a house called Exning House in Newmarket. Can you take us to Exning House and tell us what's happening there?

Dr Annie Gray: Exning House still exists. It's a mixture of private flats and apartments. It is a beautiful Arts and Crafts house on one side and then a Victorian house on the other. In its day, it was owned by a man called Baron Glanely, William Tatum. He was a racehorse owner and he was known as this huge sporting figure in Newmarket. He was a very, very wealthy, self-made man. Again, new money. Georgina, at this point, was really at the peak of her career. She was married in 1909 to Paul, her husband. She'd trained at his side and worked with him. They had worked as jobbing cooks for most of his life but he was much older than her and he died in 1932, leaving her a widow. She was only 50 and she had a daughter, Yvonne. She wasn't going to retire after his death because she was 50 and she was working class. She was still young and it was just not in her thinking. She became a jobbing cook or a cook for hire and a very, very good one because she had all of this English training. She now had this veneer of French training from Paul and she had a lot of connections as well. She was cooking for things like debutante balls, coming-out parties and she was doing stints of either two or three nights for someone, or one big party or, as with Baron Glanely, she was there for the season. This was the racing season and he'd hired her to cook for him instead of his normal cook. She had a kitchen maid and she had full staff. There was a housekeeper, who was permanent and stayed with the house, who was very well respected locally. She would have been cooking all of the meals that he was putting on for entertaining. He had two houses in Newmarket and he owned really good studs and so this would have been very, very prestigious stuff with really huge meals. Every single one, of course, would have had to be absolutely magnificent. This is not just, 'Throw me together a quick toastie because I'm having a snack.' This is, 'Put on my 11-course meal please.'

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Violet Moller: Can you give us a flavour of what kind of things they would have been eating? Can you contextualise it in the styles you describe with the very fussy 'that doesn't taste that nice'?

Dr Annie Gray: A lot of that fussy stuff died a death. It didn't really survive the First World War because how could it?

Violet Moller: Rationing?

Dr Annie Gray: Rationing and also just realism. When you look back from 1920 at 1913, the idea that you could do that just seems such a waste when half the country is dead or maimed. We often think of the 1920s as roaring and full of jazz and cocktails but wherever you went in the countryside, in particular, you would see displaced men who couldn't settle. The homeless problem was enormous because you had a lot of what we would now call PTSD. You had people who had lost limbs, who were disfigured, who couldn't hold down a job and who didn't feel settled within four walls. You couldn't miss the impact of the First World War and this went on for, of course, years and years and then you had the Depression that came in as well. The food did become much more muted between the wars and even those people who could still afford it, and there were a lot - there were lots of new people coming on the scene in the '30s, who were buying country houses and who wanted to put on parties - the food did change and there was a lot more influence from Europe and a lot more influence from America, in particular. There was a really nasty set of composite salads that crept in.

Violet Moller: With fruit in?

Dr Annie Gray: Yeah, grapefruit and mayonnaise. Some of the recipes for those, you just think, 'Why would anyone ever do that?' This was the era where the candle salad was invented, which was American as well. It was a banana set into a piece of pineapple with a piece of pepper as the handle, a cherry on top and the whole thing was covered with mayonnaise.

Violet Moller: Oh, that sounds terrible.

Dr Annie Gray: It sounds terrible. It looks worse. I mean it's impossible not to look at it and start sniggering.

Violet Moller: I was quite struck by quite a lot of the food you described which just, to me, sounded really foreign and really hard to imagine how it would have tasted. I don't know. I suppose I was quite surprised that that was the case. It does seem like the food we eat today - and I know we're obviously so lucky today with supermarkets and eating whatever we like with so much choice. Do you think that's right that food combinations...?

Dr Annie Gray: It's a mixture, I think. We have this idea that a lot of our 'traditional foods' were around in the '20s and '30s, like bread and butter pudding, suet puddings and all those comfort foods that we think are quasi-Victorian and quasi-'20s and they were but they're very much middle-class foods. The level that I'm describing a lot in the book is really that upper-class level where you've still got some elements of the Edwardian period, which are quite foreign with lots of aspic for one thing, but, especially among the people that Georgina was cooking for, you've also got a desire to show their good taste by being quite exotic. Some of the combinations that were put together do sound quite weird to us today but then, I suppose, if you were in 1932 and you were looking at a quinoa salad, you'd think that was pretty odd as well. They'd still have

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a go at eating it. Some of the foods are quite alien and some of them, I think, sound alien but when you cook them, they're fantastic. Boodles Orange Fool, which is in there...

Violet Moller: Oh, that's on my list to ask you about.

Dr Annie Gray: ...is so nice.

Violet Moller: What is it? Describe it.

Dr Annie Gray: I'm a real trifle hater. I think that soggy cake has no place on a table anywhere and that is a hill I will die on but Boodles Orange Fool is like a nice trifle. You take sponge cake and, effectively, put it into boozy cream with loads of orange in. It's really plain and simple and it's just divine. It's one of those dishes where, again, there are five ingredients and it's just absolutely beautiful. You have it on a summer's day, as the sun is starting to fade, as a sweet/palate cleanser and it's gorgeous.

Violet Moller: The recipe is in the book, isn't it?

Dr Annie Gray: It is, yeah.

Violet Moller: I will try and make it.

Dr Annie Gray: It's very easy. Make your own sponge cake though and don't buy one.

Violet Moller: Back to 1939, she's in Newmarket and working for this man.

Dr Annie Gray: Yeah, she's cooking amazing food. She's cooking very long meals. There will always be soups normally with French names and lots of garnishes; stuff that you would recognise in the Edwardian period but it's pared down. She'd developed a style of cooking, by this point, that was quite pared down. It was very much more Escoffier than Agnes Marshall. It was very much more flavours that were coming to the fore and really privileging ingredients that were very, very good.

Violet Moller: Seasonal.

Dr Annie Gray: Seasonal, yes.

Violet Moller: Good quality.

Dr Annie Gray: Certainly by the '30s, there was more of a trend towards seasonality than there had perhaps been in the Victorian era where, of course, you could force things out of season and having things out of season was a mark of wealth. By this point, people were much more revaluing the idea of things that were seasonal, things that tasted really, really good and everything presented with a real flourish. But, of course, this was the summer of 1939 and it was quite obvious to a lot of people that war was coming. Winston Churchill was in France in August and they came back early because they could see that something was going to happen. They weren't sure what. Mary Soames talked about seeing the French troops massing at the railway stations on the way back and there was this sense of menace and of waiting because something was going to happen. It wasn't clear what.

Violet Moller: Looming.

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Dr Annie Gray: Georgina, at this point, was almost approaching retirement but not really. She certainly had a career in front of her. She had no real dependents because her daughter was working by this point. She must have been conscious of what was going to happen because it was impossible not to be. As the war grew closer and then eventually was declared, Baron Glanely dropped everything and rushed back to Cardiff where he had his shipping interests and left the household. By the start of September, Georgina was still there in Exning House but at a loose end, presumably packing up the house with the rest of the people. I presume she'd still have been salaried because she would have been taken on. She'd already lived through the First World War and she was well aware that all those employment opportunities that she had would disappear. No one was going to be holding debutante parties in the middle of a war.

Violet Moller: No, of course not.

Dr Annie Gray: From her point of view, she'd gone from being a cook right at the top of her profession and cooked for all sorts of people, including the Churchills who couldn't really afford her but had used her for a couple of weekends to cater for them at Chartwell. She's now faced with this enormous decision. Does she try and continue to be a jobbing cook when almost certainly, those opportunities will dry up or does she try and find an employer and go back into permanent service for the first time since 1909?

Violet Moller: I have to just quickly explain that we are slightly cheating with your year. It's an 18 month period, isn't it? I hope the powers that be at *Travels Through Time* won't mind about this. It's between July 1939 and our next date which is February 2nd, 1940. We're at Admiralty House in Central London. The country is now at war. Georgina is working for the Churchills full-time, so she's gone back into service. Winston has been made First Lord of the Admiralty, which is a fantastic title.

Dr Annie Gray: It's great.

Violet Moller: Nelson is visible on his column in the distance [*laughter*]. Take us there and tell us what was happening.

Dr Annie Gray: Georgina already had a relationship with Churchill. She'd cooked for them on at least three occasions in the 1930s and also done some weekends. Some of those menus exist and so you can see what she'd cooked for them. They clearly valued her a lot. They used a lot of cooks from agencies and they really played about. They couldn't retain staff and it was a really rackets household. She clearly made quite a big impression on them because they did use her repeatedly to cater events for them.

Violet Moller: She seemed able to cope with their chaos and how demanding they were.

Dr Annie Gray: Churchill was renowned as a difficult employer.

Violet Moller: Yeah, but she seemed to be able to manage him.

Dr Annie Gray: I think she was just very, very calm and no one ever had a bad word to say about her. All of the people that talked about her later on always said that she was always cheerful, even in the face of these desperate situations with really struggling to get hold of food or Churchill deciding at the last minute that he wanted to have his meals somewhere else, which

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he frequently did. She always kept a smile on her face and she always turned out exquisite food. I think she'd worked for so many people and she must have been there, seen that, done it.

Violet Moller: She must have had a really specific set of personal characteristics though. She must have been incredibly talented.

Dr Annie Gray: Yeah, and very unflappable. There are stories told of her, an hour before the dinner is due to be served...

Violet Moller: Oh, I love that story.

Dr Annie Gray: ...sitting there with her feet up doing the *Racing Post*. When you meet the good, professional chefs today, they're unbelievably calm. I work quite regularly with a chef who teaches at Westminster Kingsway and it's amazing. You go in and it doesn't matter how many dishes are being prepared, everything is ready. Everything is wrapped in about a million tons of clingfilm and everything is clean.

Violet Moller: The Gordon Ramsay model is not... the norm [*laughter*].

Dr Annie Gray: It's not real. I think it makes good television but when you actually work with people who know what they're doing, it is so calm and collected. Things just happen like magic. It's taught me an awful lot working with professionals because it's a delight. You come to the end of it and you just think, 'No, that was fine.' It's all about the planning and the organisation.

Violet Moller: Of course. Knowing what you're doing is very important.

Dr Annie Gray: She was very well organised and because I think she'd worked in the English idiom and the French idiom as well, she knew exactly what she was doing and she could draw upon a huge pool of recipes. She knew them and she knew what she was getting into. I suspect that her decision was very simple. 'I need a job. I need a job that's going to be decent. I need a job that's going to be challenging. I need a job that's going to be prestigious. Among the people I've worked for and have a relationship with, who is going to be the most likely person to get a decent position that they're going to hold onto for the duration of the war?'

Violet Moller: Do you think she actually thought like that?

Dr Annie Gray: I suspect she did.

Violet Moller: Did she approach them or did they approach her?

Dr Annie Gray: It's very hard to know. It appears she approached them because Clementine talks about 'when Georgina approached me'. They had a meeting. Clementine's engagement diaries exist and there is a meeting between them much earlier in the year, where they settled on terms. Georgina then started work with them, finally, on 2nd February. They had this meeting on 5th January, just before rationing which came in on 8th January. Clementine later said, 'I was absolutely delighted when she came to work for us. I knew that she would make the most of the ration' and that 'everyone in the household will be happy.' The subtext is as long as Winston is fed, and watered, and he feels that he's getting a good dinner, he'll be able to get on with his job. She recognised, very early on, that it was crucial that his stomach was happy. When he travelled, he used to travel on what he called 'tummy time' and keep British time so that he wouldn't get disrupted by different flight zones. His stomach really did rule him. For Georgina, going to work

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for them, must have been a huge relief because this was one of only two men who'd been consistently against German appeasement, so it was quite clear he was going to get a good position in the government. Being First Lord of the Admiralty was obviously absolutely crucial and then when Chamberlain's government fell, Churchill became Prime Minister. That's it. Brilliant. She's in the best job she could be in, at that point, in terms of job security because even she'd been working for a duke or even for the Royal Household, they were retrenching, they were moving or they were shutting down houses. This was something where she was working at the top.

Violet Moller: She was at the centre.

Dr Annie Gray: Yeah. Can you imagine cooking for anybody more crucial at that point or seeing more of what was going on in terms of how the world was working?

Violet Moller: One of the things that is really, really interesting in your book is this relationship between entertaining, diplomacy and networking and how important it was for the Churchills to know that no matter who they had, like Eisenhower, de Gaulle or whoever it was...

Dr Annie Gray: Anyone who was anyone.

Violet Moller: Exactly.

Dr Annie Gray: She always said she'd cooked for 14 monarchs.

Violet Moller: ...that they could relax and know that whatever came out of the kitchen was going to come out on time. It was going to be exquisite.

Dr Annie Gray: It's the things you don't notice that are the really important things. If the food had been bad, it would have ruined dinner.

Violet Moller: But don't you think people would have noticed how good the food was because during the war, generally, even if you were rich...

Dr Annie Gray: I suspect it's one of the reasons the King came to stay quite so often with his regular meetings with Churchill, given they had really obvious austerity at the palaces and up pops George quite a lot *[laughter]*. 'Hi, Winston. Just coming over for lunch again.' *[Laughter]*. People did notice how good the food was. Winston Churchill used food quite aggressively as part of his diplomacy. He always regarded dinner table diplomacy as a key plank and so much happened both before the war and, indeed, during it around the dinner table that was never really recorded in official meetings. This social glue, I suppose, and all those interactions over dinner tables were really important to how relationships were formed and worked. If you had a really good relationship with, for example, the Premier of Canada, it would be much easier to get Canadian troops to join in the war, which is exactly what happened. Georgina's cooking was crucial to that because it was a time of rationing.

Violet Moller: But didn't the Canadian Prime Minister and quite a lot of friendly Canadians send them parcels?

Dr Anne Gray: Yes.

Violet Moller: There's a great recipe for maple syrup.

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Dr Anne Gray: Mousse de Maple. It's lovely as well [*laughter*]. Churchill didn't really know what the ration was. He had no clue.

Violet Moller: As patriotic as he was, he was going to.

Dr Anne Gray: He wasn't going to live on the ration. He nominally did. He had to be seen to be doing it. That's how rationing worked. Everybody had a ration book. Everybody was entitled to the same amount of food at set prices and no one could cheat it and no one did, ostensibly. But, of course, you're an aristocrat and you've got a country estate, you've got unlimited game. You've unlimited milk because you've got your herds. You've got unlimited fruit and vegetables.

Violet Moller: Honey.

Dr Anne Gray: Honey, peaches... always a breakfast item.

Violet Moller: The all-important peaches.

Dr Anne Gray: If you weren't an aristocrat and you were working class but you had an allotment, you would grow your own. Really, what the aristocracy are doing is they're doing it on a much bigger scale. I think as well, within the country, there was this idea that Churchill did deserve more because he was leading the country, so it was absolutely fine. It wasn't as if there was a great resentment of what was going on in terms of what Georgina had to cook with. It wasn't the basic ration. He was sent loads of eggs from a primary school from their hens and all with their own names on. This massive amount of eggs arrived.

Violet Moller: It's heartbreaking though to think those poor primary school children, who were probably living on one egg every two weeks...

Dr Anne Gray: Didn't have an egg that day. Well, it's the contrast. You find war diaries where one woman lamented that she'd got her one fresh egg that she'd had for two weeks and it was off and that was it. He's got venison coming down from Balmoral because the King is sending him Balmoral venison. He's got game coming down. Even after the government stop people sending food parcels to relatives on the grounds that it's not good for morale, it's alright because if you've got the airforce from America arriving...

Violet Moller: Food is so important, isn't it? It's so important.

Dr Annie Gray: Absolutely, and people's letters at the time obsess about food and about the fact they can't get hold of it. Churchill is no different. It's just that they're thanking people for sending them crates of oranges rather than saying, 'Oh, I wish I could have an onion.'

Violet Moller: 'I'm so hungry. I haven't had an orange for...' Our third scene is a few months later and now we're in Downing Street. Winston Churchill is Prime Minister and there's a very dramatic thing that happens. Will you tell us about it, please?

Dr Annie Gray: I think this is the thing that really cements their relationship, in some ways, and certainly shows Georgina's work ethic and Winston Churchill's work ethic. This is October 14th and it's right in the middle of the Blitz. There's Blitz tourism going on. If you read war diaries at the time, people get on the bus to go and see what's happened on Oxford Street. There's this idea of the Blitz spirit which I think has been overplayed. There was as much pillaging, looting

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and people being terrible as there were people helping each other out and I think that's just human nature. Certainly, there was a lot of people saying, 'Oh, there's been a big building bombed. Let's go and have a look at the bomb site.' On 14th October, which is one of the heaviest nights of the Blitz, bombs fell very, very close to Downing Street itself. The Downing Street kitchen was in the basement, which a lot of kitchens were in Georgian houses, and it had this enormous plate glass window in it on both sides, actually. There was a kitchen table in front of the plate glass window and the ranges, dressers and all the rest of it. You have to imagine this kitchen with this huge window. Georgina and her maids were preparing dinner and the main dish they had on the go was a thing called a mousseline pudding, which was this incredibly ethereal, beautiful - it's gorgeous - light sponge pudding. Georgina talks about this incident in the interview with her that she made in the 1970s and she just says, 'I couldn't turn it out. It wasn't like a normal dessert. I couldn't have turned it out. It had to be done at the time. If it had been a normal one, I'd have turned it out.' Apparently, every night, Churchill would pop his head around the kitchen door and say, 'The air raid shelter is downstairs. The sirens are going off. Will you go downstairs?' She'd say, 'Yeah, in a minute.' Eventually, he just said, 'If Mr Hitler gets you, I won't get my soup.' So this had become a bit of a running gag between them. He wrote about this incident as well in his memoir of World War Two and, of course, his version is more grandiose. He talks about having 'a sudden premonition that something bad was going to happen' and 'rushing to the kitchen where Mrs Landemare and her maid were working without turning a hair as the bombs fell around them'. I think the truth is probably somewhere between the two. He did have to tell her every night but on this night, he said to her, 'You've got to go down to the shelter.' She said, 'No, I've got this pudding.' He said, 'Come on.' They all went down and then a bomb fell metres away from Downing Street. When they came back upstairs again, this plate glass window had exploded all over the kitchen. She would have died. She said she owed him her life but actually, she was just as worried about the fact that the table was covered with rubble and, of course, the mousseline pudding was ruined [laughter].

Violet Moller: Exactly. What happened to the mousseline pudding?

Dr Annie Gray: I think it does show the bond that they had and a bond that was very, very real. He very much valued her skills but also valued her personally. There was a document drawn up in 1940 which gave a list of all the people that would be taken out of London with Churchill in the event of an invasion and only two domestic staff were named: Georgina and Winston Churchill's valet, Frank Sawyers. The fact that she was so important that she would have been taken out of London with him, to cook for him when they got whisked away to some unknown location, shows how crucial she was to that household.

Violet Moller: Of course, they were living together. I think that's another thing [38:38 - unclear].

Dr Annie Gray: Well, she was upstairs at Downing Street.

Violet Moller: It's the Upstairs Downstairs thing. They're altogether in the same house.

Dr Annie Gray: Even after they built the extra bomb-proof apartment just over the road after the bomb incident, she probably had rooms there, or was sleeping in the kitchen, or possibly she was still at Downing Street but they were all very close. This was very much cheek by jowl living. The respect they had for each other was very, very clear from that incident and then it just grew and grew. She ended up cooking for the Churchills for over 15 years, all told, because she retired and then kept coming back again. She was their longest serving domestic servant and they were her longest serving employers as well. That's a long time to be living alongside each other,

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knowing each other's tastes and knowing each other's secrets. She used to talk about constantly seeing him streak naked through the house. 'Oh no, here's Winston again. Put a towel on.' They were so close and as close to Clementine Churchill who was really key.

Violet Moller: They stayed in touch, didn't they? She stayed in touch with all of them for the rest of her life.

Dr Annie Gray: She really missed them. She really struggled when she retired. She retired through ill health when she was in her 70s in 1955 and then again in 1956. She just kept coming back and retiring. Eventually, she did go but she really struggled to adjust. She lived with her brother, Algie, for a while and then she moved into a granny flat with Yvonne and Ted, who was Yvonne's husband - her daughter and her son-in-law. She wrote to the family and was still in contact. Clementine used to visit her quite regularly. She'd cook a chocolate cake for Clementine's visits. When the series *The Valiant Years* aired on television, Clementine rang up and said, 'I've got a colour television that the television series have given me. Do you want it?' Georgina said, 'Yeah, brilliant. Amazing.' She went downstairs and said to her daughter, 'Great! We're going to be given this colour television,' and her daughter said, 'Yeah, but not today, Mum, because this is Labour HQ for the local council elections and it's covered with a sea of red.' *[Laughter]*. They did stay in touch and they were genuinely close, to the point that when Clementine was dying at the end of 1977, she didn't send out Christmas cards that year mainly but she did send one to Georgina, which still exists. There's a very small family archive and the card is there. Eddie, who is Georgina's granddaughter said she was there as Georgina opened this card and cried. Even I'm welling up because you get so close to your characters. She cried as she opened this card, knowing that Clementine had died and she got the card after her death. That finished her and she died herself four months later.

Violet Moller: Did she? Goodness.

Dr Annie Gray: It's a beautiful story, in some ways, of a woman who, in her own words, devoted her life to service but felt that she got back as much as she gave and that the relationships that she forged with people who were among the most important of their day made everything that she'd done worthwhile. She thought her life worth celebrating and I think it's worth celebrating which is, I think, one of the reasons I'm so proud of what I've done with the book.

Violet Moller: Absolutely. As you say, she was a really talented, successful woman who played a really, really important role in Winston Churchill's life and his family.

Dr Annie Gray: You read books about him and there might be two references to her; one, which is usually the bomb incident and the other one is the fact that on VE Day, he turned to her - she'd struggled up from the basement and just made it for the end of his speech and he turned to her, broke away from the crowd, shook her hand and said, 'I couldn't have won the war without you.' You just think...

Violet Moller: All that food, all those meals and all the beef.

Dr Annie Gray: The food is fantastic. When you cook her recipes, they are so good.

Violet Moller: Are they?

Dr Annie Gray: So good.

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Violet Moller: Maybe you should reissue a cookbook.

Dr Annie Gray: The Imperial War Museum has issued a cut-down version. It's a slightly abridged version of *Recipes from Number Ten* and so the recipes are in there. They're quite hard to cook unless you know what you're doing. That was said in reviews at the time was that it was very much for professional cooks. They're quite sparse in terms of the prose but they are absolutely fantastic.

Violet Moller: A bit like on the *Bake-off* when they have the technical section.

Dr Annie Gray: Yes. Working from Georgina's recipes would be quite a lot like that but they are really, really good.

Violet Moller: I've just got one more question that I want to ask you and that is if you could choose something to bring back with you from the year 1939 to 1940, what would it be?

Dr Annie Gray: In some ways, it's the pots and pans and things she used but actually, some of those still exist and they're in the Churchill War Rooms' kitchen because her granddaughter had some of them and had put them on permanent display. I think I'd have to choose one of the menu books; the books that give the details of what people were eating. In theory, there's probably a staff menu book and a family menu book, so I'd like to be sneaky and bring back both of them, just so I can see what she actually was cooking. There are diary entries that detail the kind of meals people had. In particular, Mary Soames' diaries are beautiful to read. She's such a joy. She was a teenager when the war breaks out. You're reading them and giggling and really living with her the kind of highs and lows of teenage life. She details the food that she was eating and there are people that visit but there's no clear picture of what was being eaten on a daily basis. So I'd bring back the menu books that have disappeared.

Violet Moller: Would those menu books include who was coming for dinner on that night as well?

Dr Annie Gray: A lot of the time they do. The earlier ones don't but some of the time, they do, especially when Professor Lindemann, who was one of the advisors, came to dinner. He was vegetarian and only ate white food [*laughter*]. You can tell when he's there because suddenly, everything is very bland.

Violet Moller: So everything is egg...

Dr Annie Gray: A lot of egg.

Violet Moller: ...and spaghetti.

Dr Annie Gray: Yeah.

Violet Moller: Wonderful. Thank you so much for that. That was absolutely fascinating.

Dr Annie Gray: Thank you very much.

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Violet Moller: That was me, Violet Moller, talking to Dr Annie Gray the other day about the fascinating Georgina Landemare. Annie's book, *Victory in the Kitchen* is available now in all good bookshops and it's published by Profile Books.

John Hillman: Hello, I'm John Hillman, one of the producers on the *Travels Through Time* podcast. I hope you enjoyed Violet's conversation with Dr Annie Gray about Churchill's cook in the year 1940. Now, if you head over to our website tttpodcast.com, you'll find loads more to explore from this era. We have Andrew Roberts discussing Churchill in 1940 but if you wish to continue exploring the culinary theme, you'll also find a fascinating episode featuring Thomas Harding with an incredibly interesting story about the Lyons' Tea Company and its confrontation with Britain's 1930s' fascist leader, Oswald Mosley. You'll also find many other fascinating adventures into the past from across the centuries and I'm sure there's something there for you to enjoy. Once again, thank you very much for listening and we look forward to welcoming you back very soon.

[Sound of ticking clock]

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