

Marriages Are Made in Bond Street

TRUE STORIES FROM A 1940s MARRIAGE BUREAU

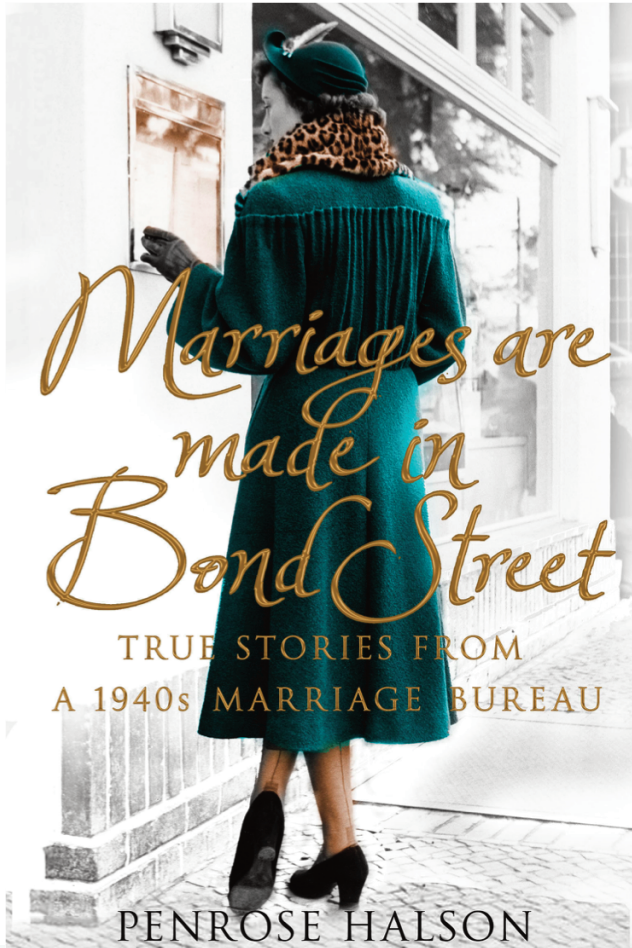
By Penrose Halson

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In April 1939 Heather Jenner and Mary Oliver, aged 24, opened a Marriage Bureau in Bond Street. They wanted to help expatriate men - soldiers, businessmen, tea-planters, missionaries, colonial servants - who came to England on leave to find a wife.

In September 1939 war was declared. In the growing uncertainty and fear, clients of all kinds sought the Bureau's help. It blossomed into a national institution.

A television series based on the book is currently in development



Social history Marriages are Made in Bond Street

Penrose Halson
(Macmillan, £16.99 *£14.99)

IMAGINE if, at the headquarters of today's internet dating agencies, there were two wise, compassionate, practical ladies who really *thought* about the men and women searching for love and had sudden brainwaves about who simply *must* be introduced to whom. Wouldn't the world be a happier place?

This was what I couldn't help thinking while reading this fascinating true story of the Marriage Bureau at 124, New Bond Street, founded in 1939 by two young ladies, Mary Oliver and Heather Jenner. I thought this was going to be a frivolous romp through the frolicks of wartime matchmaking and, indeed, it is a book full of charm and hilarity, written in a no-nonsense style by an accomplished writer and storyteller, but it adds up to far more than that.

It depicts the harsh world of the marriage market, only 75 years ago, when daughters in their early twenties were desperate to get



A licence for love: Heather Jenner was one of the co-founders of the Marriage Bureau

away from deathly spinsterhood under their parents' shadows and homesick men were desperate to find a nice young gal to fall in love with and marry during their short leave.

The book contains hundreds of stories of successful and failed introductions, all presided over by the marvellous, unshockable ladies in the Bureau, including grey-haired Dorothy Harbottle, known as Bottle, who chain-smoked and had an unflinching instinct for inspired introductions. So vividly does Penrose

Halson write, quoting directly from letters and index cards, that you care about each mini-love story, whether it's sweet, impoverished Myrtle who eventually finds her soulmate in the delightful Irishman Rory O'Rawe or the adorable, sensitive Ivy and diffident Archibald Bullin-Archer, whose love story ends in tragedy. There's always a sense of jubilation when a couple gets married—and not just because they pay the After Marriage Fee.

The ladies at the Bureau came up with shorthand terms to put



on the index cards to denote the social classes of the people on their books: Lady and Gent, Near Gent and Near Lady, Gentish and Ladyish and then Working Class, divided into MBTM (much better than most) and MBTS (much better than some).

It sounds a rather brutal system, but it worked, and introductions could certainly be made across the social divides: an MBTM could be introduced to a Gentish and a Near Lady to a Gent.

Ysenda Maxtone Graham