

Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self

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For historians of Britain, the Second World War has long occupied a privileged place in narratives of change and continuity in the 20th century. Until fairly recently, the 1940s stood as a transformative decade in the literature, a moment when the unique pressures of total war recast politics and social relations in a more egalitarian mould. The British people, as J. B. Priestley memorably put it, were ‘bombed and burned into democracy,’ their selfish instincts and class jealousies cast aside in pursuit of the greater good of defeating tyranny and building a fairer world. The war, as the argument goes, speeded Britain’s transition from liberal to social democracy, securing a popular consensus for the radical programme of social welfare and nationalization put in place by the post-war Labour governments.

Perhaps inevitably, this narrative of progress soon came under attack from revisionist critics, who adopted a more sceptical view of wartime popular radicalism and argued for the survival of traditional class hierarchies and gender inequalities both on the home front and in the armed forces. The Labour landslide of 1945, according to this alternative reading, did not signal a moral transformation on the part of the British electorate; there was no fundamental refashioning of a nation of status-conscious individualists into a community of collectively-minded citizens. A fairer, more tolerant and less class-bound society would have to wait – until the cultural revolution of the 1960s at the very least.

James Hinton has been a major participant in these debates over the past two decades, penning two full-length monographs and a string of important journal articles on the social history of wartime Britain. His first book on this theme, *Shop Floor Citizens* (1), explored the part played by engineering trade unionists in

promoting notions of industrial democracy in the early 1940s, whilst his second, *Women and Social Leadership* (2), examined the class dynamics in operation within the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS), the mass volunteer army raised by the National Government in 1939 to bolster the war effort at home. Both studies offer a scholarly, nuanced and even-handed analysis of a society at war, but ultimately side with the revisionists by uncovering the tensions which lurked beneath the dominant imagery of national unity and cross-class solidarity. The dream of worker participation in a state-planned economy, Hinton finds, was thwarted in part by the resilience of voluntarist traditions in industry, and in part by Labour's reluctance to ally with a movement dominated by Communist shop stewards. By nurturing support for productionist ideas amongst workers, Hinton argues, the war presented an opportunity to democratise British industry, but it was an opportunity missed. Equally, despite reframing the unpaid, voluntary service of housewives as a patriotic and publicly valued form of citizenship, the WVS, Hinton contends, functioned ideologically to shore up upper- and middle-class power. The social relations of voluntary work were not democratised by the purported levelling tendencies of the home front; rather, they reproduced the class inequalities and antagonisms of old.

In *Nine Wartime Lives*, a book which completes what might now be rightfully considered a trilogy of works on the Second World War, Hinton continues his investigation of British society in the 1940s, but shifts the focus on to the intimate realm of personal relationships and subjectivities. This, the author suggests, constitutes the dimension missing from the two earlier works, which largely overlooked questions of motivation and the complex and varied meanings that 'active citizenship' held in individuals' lives. To rectify this oversight, *Nine Wartime Lives* promises to reconnect the personal with the political – to explore how private experience informed public activity and vice versa - by telling the stories of six women and three men who kept diaries for the research organisation, Mass Observation (MO). As a study in 'the construction of the modern self', the book aims, as Hinton puts it, to uncover the ways in which individuals 'have used available cultural resources to weave meaningful narratives of their personal identities' (p. 4).

That Hinton feels equipped to pursue such an ambitious research agenda is due to his long and close acquaintance with the voluminous archives of MO, which launched its brand of popular anthropological enquiry in 1937, recruiting hundreds of publicly-minded men and women to carry out its work in the field. These Mass Observers, as they were known, recorded overheard conversations, responded to central directives on a range of topical issues, and kept diaries, in some cases continuously over many years. It is the last of these that provides, in Hinton's words, 'the privileged source for the historical investigation of selfhood' (p. 5). Skilfully synthesising a dense conceptual literature on themes of modernity, identity and the self, Hinton makes a powerful case for the value of diary-writing to the historian, describing this form of self-expression as 'the room behind the shop' where the individual prepares the 'mask' that he or she shows to the outside world. Because of the purportedly 'scientific' nature of the enterprise in which they were engaged, the Mass Observers were uniquely self-reflexive writers, willing to engage explicitly with questions of identity, morality and belief which the casual diarist might be inclined to leave well alone.

Whilst conscious that all forms of writing constitute a kind of 'performance', and that the diaries therefore cannot be treated as 'transparent windows on the soul' (p. 6), Hinton is persuasive in arguing for these testimonies to be taken seriously by historians and not merely raided for a colourful anecdote to support conclusions reached elsewhere. He is also convincing in his suggestion that the diaries might serve as a kind of bridge between the social historian's traditional concern with lived 'experience' and the cultural historian's preoccupation with 'discourse'. Dissatisfied with the latter's tendency to treat cultural representations as a proxy for collective identities, Hinton embraces the diaries because they demonstrate how an individual might make use of those representations and imbue them with meanings quite different from those intended. Real human beings, he reminds us, have messy minds capable of accommodating eclectic and seemingly contradictory sets of ideas. Historians categorise them at their peril.

Having set out this framework of analysis, the rest of the book is organized into biographical chapters, each telling a different diarist's story. The nine writers, Hinton explains, were selected not for their representativeness – no Mass Observer, he rightly remarks, is 'typical' – but for their extensive public activities and for the unusually full and revealing nature of their diaries. The six women include: Nella Last,

a lower middle-class housewife from Barrow; Gertrude Glover, former Suffragette and leading light of the WI in Warwickshire; Mary Clayton, a left-leaning businesswoman from Battersea; Eleanor Humphries, a downtrodden suburban wife in Blackheath; Lillian Rogers, the sexually-frustrated wife of a Birmingham garage mechanic; and Bertha Walton, socialist activist and wartime factory worker in the Durham coalfield. The three featured male diarists are Ernest Von Someren, a free-thinking scientist living in an affluent home counties suburb; Denis Argent, a young conscientious objector serving in the army; and Matthew Walton, a disillusioned schoolteacher and husband of Bertha.

As a group, the nine provide an immensely rich and varied set of insights into the relationship between public and private lives. Some individual testimonies appear to lend support to themes well-established in the conventional historiography. Nella Last, for example, experienced the war as a welcome release from the 'slavery years' of peacetime, a narrative of emancipation echoed in many subsequent oral histories of women's wartime lives. Her extensive work for the WVS not only uncovered hidden talents and nurtured new friendships, but assisted Nella in the quest for personal autonomy within her unsatisfactory marriage. Civic activism, the diaries reveal, emboldened Nella in the struggle to assert her own need for self-expression and independence in the face of an anti-social and possessive husband.

Last's testimony, together with those of Glover and Clayton, confirms another prominent theme in the established literature: the enduring power of Victorian values of service, character and altruism. These values underpinned the popular 'myth' of the war which projected an image of dutiful citizens selflessly serving Britain in her hour of need, a vision of a nation in unity that many revisionist historians have been anxious to dissect. Yet the diaries of these middle-aged, middle-class women suggest that patriotic appeals had genuine resonance and could inspire action. On listening to Chamberlain's famous broadcast on 3rd September 1939, for example, Last felt as though 'spirit spoke to spirit', whilst a Ministry of Information poster left her 'swept away on a wave of faith and exaltation' (p. 41). Clayton, meanwhile, displayed a stoic resilience amidst the terror of the Blitz – 'bombed out and keeping going' she noted in her diary after her flat suffered an indirect hit – and ploughed her energies into the WVS, which she regarded as 'the most direct way of helping my country and those around' (p. 79). All three women hoped that post-war reconstruction would embrace substantial measures of social reform and believed that the Labour government should be given the chance to prove its worth. Glover was positively excited by the dramatic outcome of the 1945 election, which she thought marked 'the beginning of carrying out all those things described in all the Utopias written during the past few thousands of years and more particularly during the last 50 or 60 years' (p. 69). Such fervour sits uneasily with the bold claims of revisionists concerning the supposed apathy and materialism of the electors at the polls.

Other testimonies, however, throw into question these popular narratives of the People's War. Humphries' voluntary work, we learn, was motivated less by a sense of patriotic duty than by the desire to avoid conscription, absorbed as she was in appeasing a patriarchal husband and documenting the quotidian ups and downs of relationships with friends, servants and neighbours. Similarly, Argent relished army life not for the opportunity it afforded to fight the good fight against Fascism, but for the respite it brought from the pressures of civilian life and especially the demands of family and fiancé. Matthew Walton briefly glimpsed the democratic possibilities of collective action as secretary of a communal Shelter Committee, but the moment was short-lived, dissipated by the disinterest of local residents and the tedium of nightly pumping to keep the shelter dry. Walton, we learn, subsequently abandoned all political activity, finding consolation instead in the private study of literature and art.

As well as drawing out the implications of the diaries for these established historiographical debates, Hinton calls our attention to some less familiar themes. His diarists sustained complex spiritual lives, mixing formal religious observance with searching private reflections on the nature of good and evil, the existence of God, and how best to live. Despite adhering to the secular rationality of the MO project, a number of diarists – perhaps, significantly, all female – adopted an apocalyptic tone when writing about mankind's capacity for death and destruction as revealed by the war. Outwardly a respectable communicant of the Church of England, Glover read widely on spiritual matters, believed in reincarnation and expressed an interest in Jehovah's Witnesses, astrology and spiritualism. Rogers abandoned chapel-going aged 16, but the coming of

war, Hinton notes, 'stirred a latent millenarian sensibility' in her (p125), whilst for Von Someren, the dramatic events of May-June 1940 finally convinced him to join the Quakers following years of indecision. His private pacifist convictions, however, were soon compromised by the demands of public, professional life when his firm began working exclusively for the state; Von Someren's expert knowledge was subsequently employed for the purpose of improving military technologies designed to kill and maim.

Other diarists did not experience such acute crises of conscience, but they reflected deeply on moral and ethical questions, sometimes prompted by the directives emanating from MO headquarters but more often in response to their own desire to achieve what Hinton describes as 'transcendence'. Some found this higher meaning in art and literature, which transported them out of their mundane material existences and beyond the disturbing wartime reality of state-sponsored violence. Argent confided to MO in September 1939 that 'life is still worth living while the music of Beethoven can be heard ... [it is] the most worthwhile thing which war can't take away' (p. 170), and shared his fascination with Virginia Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, which he read three times between 1941 and 1943. This preoccupation with culture was not only a entryway to a higher mental plane, but also a route to distinction, a means by which these individuals defined their selfhood against the bland tastes of the masses or the anti-intellectualism of other members of their own social class. The Waltons, for example, felt culturally isolated living on their lower-middle-class housing estate in Bishop Auckland and treasured their occasional visits to the galleries, theatres and bookshops of London. Argent was similarly drawn to the cultural offerings of the metropolis – pleasures not shared by his childhood sweetheart back in staid Tunbridge Wells – whilst Nella Last scrimped and saved to pay for music, dancing and elocution lessons for her sons, determined that they should become 'civilised' individuals.

Hinton's sensitive and subtle readings of these nine diaries paint a vivid picture of life in wartime Britain as lived by real, flesh-and-blood individuals, whose collective menu of intellectual interests, spiritual convictions, personal insecurities and sexual adventures reminds us just how unpredictable and surprising human beings can be; 'eccentricity,' Hinton sagely remarks, 'is ordinary' (p. 199). Given the liveliness of its core material and the author's accessible prose style, *Nine Wartime Lives* will easily attract the general reader, feeding the apparently insatiable public appetite for books on the Second World War; it would certainly not look out of place sitting alongside those doorstopper 'slice of life' volumes produced by the likes of Juliet Gardiner and Simon Garfield. Yet it is to be hoped that such a reader would readily grasp the book's more profound messages about selfhood and the democratisation of the emotions in mid-century Britain. As Hinton himself recognises in his conclusion, the war provides a backdrop against which these nine personal dramas are played out, but much of the action begins in the late 1930s and stretches on beyond 1945. It is what the diaries reveal about the possibilities for re-making personal relationships across this broader timeframe that preoccupies Hinton, rather than the impact of the war per se. Democratisation is presented here as a fuzzy process that doesn't happen only – or even primarily – at the level of the state, nor, as *Shop Floor Citizens* and *Women and Social Leadership* demonstrated, in the workplace or the community. It also happens within the home and inside the head, a realm less respectful of chronologies defined by political events, such as the beginnings and endings of wars.

Having said that, *Nine Wartime Lives* does offer answers to the more conventional question of what difference the war made to British society, but these do not point towards any easy generalisations. In Last's case, for instance, the claims of the warfare state enabled her to put 'nation before husband', providing a rhetorical cover for her voluntary work which presumably would have packed little punch in peacetime. Humphries, by contrast, remained as oppressed by patriarchal power as she ever had been, the war figuring in her diary only inasmuch as it impinged on her personal relationships – by depriving her of a valued domestic servant, or precipitating a row with her husband over an accident during the black-out. The effects of the war were, therefore, ambiguous and highly individualised, and Hinton is probably wise to hold off on drawing bold conclusions about the nature of selfhood in wartime Britain.

Yet a larger story does emerge from *Nine Wartime Lives*, one which traces the cultural values associated with the later twentieth century – self-actualisation, personal autonomy, egalitarianism – back to the 1940s

and to the kinds of struggles and negotiations being worked out by the Mass Observers. The MO diaries reveal how it was possible for some individuals, in certain contexts, to challenge what Hinton – paraphrasing Woolf – describes as ‘the tyrannies and servilities of the intimate sphere’ (p. 202). This is a notably more optimistic narrative of democratisation than that found in *Shop Floor Citizens* and *Women and Social Leadership*, where the tyrannies and servilities of the public sphere were shown to have inhibited progressive social change. It is perhaps to be regretted that Hinton does not reflect more explicitly on how these two narratives fit together. Despite the author’s insistence that public and private lives were interlinked, the analysis in *Nine Wartime Lives* suggests on several occasions that personal fulfilment was not reliant on broader structural changes – that it could be achieved *despite* the continuities of material inequality, class prejudice and institutionalised sexism in wider society. This allows the rather more pessimistic conclusions of the earlier works to stand, but it leaves the reader speculating as to exactly when and how the democratisation of these broader societal structures caught up with the quiet revolution taking place within the private lives of the MO diarists. Hinton alludes briefly to the impact of second-wave feminism from the late 1960s, a movement which made the link between the personal and the political its central, animating idea. But that still leaves an interim period of nearly 20 years for which our understanding of these processes is woefully inadequate. This is not so much a criticism of *Nine Wartime Lives* as a plea for more studies stretching beyond 1945 which explore the connections between the realm of the emotions and the dynamics of the public sphere, rather than treating each in isolation. Historians eager to take on such a challenge will find Hinton’s book an exemplary model as well as an immensely enjoyable read.

Notes

1. James Hinton, *Shop Floor Citizens: Engineering Democracy in 1940s Britain* (Aldershot, 1994).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. James Hinton, *Women and Social Leadership and the Second World War* (Oxford, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)

Other reviews:

New Statesman

<http://www.newstatesman.com/books/2010/02/mass-observation-british-madge> [2]

Times Higher Education Supplement

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp> [3]

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[3] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=411247§ioncode=26>