

Mass Observation Online

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The formation of Mass Observation ([1](#)), conceived as a programme for the scientific study of human social behaviour in Britain or, in other words, as an ‘anthropology of ourselves’, was publicly announced in a letter printed in the *New Statesman* of 30 January 1937 and signed by Tom Harrisson (1911–76), Humphrey Jennings (1907–50) and Charles Madge (1912–96). Harrisson, a schoolboy ornithologist who had turned into an anthropologist during the course of four international scientific expeditions, was enjoying fame as the author of *Savage Civilisation* (1937), a polemical account of his experiences with ‘cannibals’ in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), which came out as a Left Book Club edition. Jennings was a documentary filmmaker, painter, set-designer and surrealist, who had sat alongside his friend André Breton on the organising committee for the International Surrealist Exhibition held in London the previous summer. Madge, besides being a reporter for the *Daily Mirror* (a position obtained for him by T. S. Eliot), was a communist, a poet and a regular contributor to the influential journals *Left Review* and *New Verse*. Despite, or perhaps because of, the esoteric and heterogeneous interests of this trio of founders, Mass-Obsession has endured to the present after passing through a number of incarnations including collecting ‘home intelligence’ for the Ministry of Information during the early 1940s, working as a commercial market-research company during the 1950s and 1960s, becoming an archive at the University of Sussex in the 1970s and being relaunched in the 1980s as what has become a longitudinal life-writing project. While the data collected during this latter, ongoing phase is increasingly becoming of interest to contemporary scholars, it is the earlier material from the 1930s and 1940s that has become established as an indispensable primary resource for social historians of the period.

This material was collected as the result of a two-pronged strategy by Mass Observation, which initially saw Harrisson head up a project to investigate the everyday lives of the industrial working class in Bolton (‘Worktown’), while Madge and Jennings organised a National Panel of volunteers from London. In Bolton and Blackpool, where the Worktowners went on holiday, teams of observers recorded every aspect of life from the contents of sweetshop windows to the behaviour of courting couples. The National Panel initially invited volunteers from around the country – recruited through the pages of publications ranging from the *Daily Mirror*

to *Left Review* – to keep day diaries of the 12th of each month as well as to answer ‘directives’ instructing them to describe aspects of their lives ranging from their smoking and reading habits to the contents of their mantelpieces. After the first year, the day-diaries gave way to more structured directives covering a number of different areas of enquiry for each month. However, at the outbreak of the War, Mass Observation asked its panellists to begin keeping day-to-day personal diaries for them and, although many started and gave up after relatively short periods of time, there are about a hundred diarists who kept going for at least several years and one or two, such as the celebrated Nella Last, who even continued up until the mid 1960s. Aside from these diaries and directives, Mass Observation also investigated and filed material in 85 topic collections ranging from ‘Housing’ to ‘Drinking habits’. More than 3000 file reports, some of which are book length, were compiled from all of this data by Mass Observation staff. Virtually none of this material has gone missing – Last’s diary entries for 1944 being one of the few notable losses – and it can all be found in the archive.

How much of this material is available on [Mass Observation Online](#) [2]? All of the day surveys, all of the directive replies and diaries until the end of 1942, 13 of the topic collections, all of the file reports and also the full text of the 25 books and other publications produced by Mass-Observation including *May the Twelfth* (1937), *Britain by Mass-Observation* (1939), *War Begins at Home* (1940), *The Pub and the People* (1943), *Britain Revisited* (1961), as well as all issues of *US: Mass-Observation’s Weekly Intelligence Service*, the weekly newsletter which ran from February to May 1940. In other words, there is a huge quantity of invaluable material, most of which is fully searchable. However, not only does this online resource make the contents of this unique archive available globally to subscribing institutions, it also facilitates a major ongoing shift in the way that Mass Observation is being used by scholars. This is the increasing importance that is being attached to the diaries because, as Robert Malcolmson argues in ‘Diaries for Mass Observation 1939–40’, one of a number of specially commissioned essays for *Mass Observation Online*, they necessarily disrupt and complicate any attempt to generalise on the everyday experience of the ‘home front’ during the Second World War.

Initially, the focused file reports, with their indexed titles, were the first ports of call for the historian researching various period topics and, of all the material, it was the diaries which were the most underused. However, over the last 15 to 20 years there has been a huge growth in the academic study of Life Writing, corresponding to a rise in the public interest for biographies and autobiographies; especially historical accounts by ‘ordinary’ people. Mass Observation itself is directly linked to both of these trends: the development from the early 1990s of the Sussex MA programme in Life History Research, which included modules focusing on the archival material, did much to legitimate such areas of study and the publication of edited Mass-Observation diaries and anthologies has both contributed to and benefited from a popular boom in wartime nostalgia.(2) The most famous of these diaries is *Nella Last’s War*, which was first published in 1981, but gained national recognition following its adaptation for television in 2006 as *Housewife, 49* by Victoria Wood, who also won a BAFTA for her performance in the lead role. The problem that has always existed for the researcher wanting to read an individual diary, such as Last’s, at the Mass Observation Archive is that the various monthly instalments are each filed with all the other diary instalments Mass-Observation received for that month, so that one cannot simply ask the archivist for a particular diary but has to work in succession through what are, in effect, a series of 12 different boxed collections for each year of the diary. The great advantage of *Mass Observation Online* is that the researcher can now read any diary straight through simply by clicking on from one monthly instalment to the next. Well, it’s not quite that simple because it is necessary to download each set of entries as a PDF file, but these can be saved or printed and therefore studied offline as well. The problem that remains, of course, with many of the diaries, such as Last’s (diarist 5353), is that of deciphering the handwriting, but even here the zoom options provide benefits over the traditional archival setting. Among the few diaries that are typed is that of the novelist Naomi Mitchison (diarist 5378), which has also been published in an edited edition.(3)

A useful tool on *Mass Observation Online* is the interactive map which allows researchers to find the diarists located in a particular region. For example, there were five Mass Observation diarists based in Norfolk. Two of these (diarists 5323 and 5324) were the sisters running a garage in Snettisham with their widowed mother,

who are given the names Jenny and Muriel Green in Dorothy Sheridan's anthology *Wartime Women*.⁽⁴⁾ Muriel's diary, which Sheridan quotes from 1939 and 1940, is particularly engaging and many who have read the published excerpts will want to read more.⁽⁵⁾ This highlights what is always a problem with Mass Observation: the tendency of the material to draw us in as though we were the readers of a novel rather than academic researchers. Fortunately, in his recent book on the Mass Observation diaries, *Nine Wartime Lives*, James Hinton has produced a compelling argument that allows us to have our cake and eat it. He makes the point that these diaries are unique: 'Mass-Observation offered a discipline and a context which transcended the purely private, meeting a need to frame individual quests in relation to larger public purposes'.⁽⁶⁾ The diaries, Hinton suggests, 'take us as close as a historian can hope to get to observe selfhood under construction' and, in particular, reveal to us the everyday unfolding of what, following the work of Charles Taylor, he takes as the central process of modernity: the radical disembedding of individual subjectivity from received sources of meaning.⁽⁷⁾

Thus if we return to the example of 'Muriel Green', who is not one of the diarists Hinton analyses, we see a young woman of 18 at the outbreak of the War writing about everyday activities in the village she lives in, which would all be perfectly ordinary apart from her strong understanding that she was part of an extraordinary collective practice that everyone ought to have heard of:

Afternoon – Jenny and I went to Lynn ... We went to W.H. Smith's and son's best and biggest bookshop in Lynn, to buy a Penguin book and asked if they had *War Begins at Home* just to see if they had. I did not expect they had as I had never seen it there, and if the girl had produced it I was preparing to say it was too expensive. Anyway she had not got it. Nor *Britain*. I felt insulted and offended with the shop. She did not even seem to have heard of them either which was all the more annoying ...

Before we caught the bus home we went in the town library to ask if they had got 'our' book. (We always call it 'ours', hope MO doesn't mind, but you see we've never had anything we've written in print before and claiming 14 lines and J. 25 lines we feel a proprietary interest in the publication, and that everybody ought to sell and read it.) Were delighted to see that the paper cover was pinned up inside the main entrance with other new books they had bought this month for the library (19 April 1940).

This sense of belonging to Mass Observation repeatedly occurs in her diary culminating in her account of an impulsive trip to the organisation's London office, when she meets Tom Harrison at the door. Harrison, despite being too busy to stop and talk for more than a few moments, comes across as polite and friendly:

I then came away and for the next half-hour could do nothing but laugh to myself about it. I wondered what TH really thought and how he probably was cursing inwardly all the time he was being nice and polite. I expect he was terribly annoyed but I was triumphant that I had actually been and not quite got kicked out. He also had thanked me so much for doing the MO directives, etc. I thought him very charming and did not mind at all being got rid of, as I expected it. I was very glad I went, however he and the MO in general would be about it (10 May 1941).

The diarist's ability to provide not only her own unspoken thoughts but also those of Harrison as well generates an equivalence between the two that is amplified by the fact that the description of the encounter is then fed back to Mass Observation and Harrison by being submitted as part of her monthly instalment. The potentially endless reflexivity of this process captures the logic of Mass Observation that if everyone were a Mass Observer then the observation of another would always be in some way an observation of oneself and

so, therefore, the divisive boundaries between people – between classes, between genders – would dissolve. It is this inherent logic that makes a Mass Observation diary, at least potentially, collectively self-reflexive in a way that exceeds the self-reflexivity of a normal diary.

This self-reflexivity beyond self-reflexivity affects the way that we need to read these diaries. Muriel, on a brief trip home from her war job as a gardener in the South West, realises that she can never go back to her life as a garage girl amidst the vibrant pre-war modernity, which George Orwell described as ‘a rather restless, cultureless life, centring round tinned food, *Picture Post*, the radio and the internal combustion engine’.⁽⁸⁾ She does not just recognise the loss entailed in growing up or that caused by the war but both of those things combined with a implicit recognition that the self-reflective act of writing a diary as part of a collective enterprise is irrevocably distancing her from her younger less reflective self:

There are very few cars on the road and absolutely none pulling in the garage sweep. This life would soon get on my nerves if I was at home again while the war is on. There seems no one about at all (15 June 1942).

My last day’s leave. Tonight I cried bitterly. I had not cried for ages. It was not about going back ... I cried because of the war. It has altered our life which can never be the same. To see the desolate emptiness of the seaside upsets me. When you are away and Mother writes to say the latest desecration, the latest boy missing, the latest family to sacrifice, it is just words. But in the home it is mortifying. Life will never be so sweet as before the war and the last two summers and early ’39 were the most perfect years of my life when all seemed young and gay (16 June 1942).

What such painful self-recognition highlights is how fundamentally the process of disembedding oneself from the past in order to move into the future is part of everyday life. It was the particular form of self-reflexivity generated by the practice of writing about themselves for Mass Observation that allowed the diarists to realise that they were agents of history, which is to say that they became aware of themselves making history through the process of going about their everyday lives, and thereby gave them the confidence to pronounce on public matters with an authority they would not otherwise have had in a hierarchical society. This authority and sense of agency can be seen in Muriel Green’s reflections on the 1945 General Election:

I feel that at last the working classes of this country have begun to think for themselves and wake up. They have not been fooled by the bogey of voting ‘National’ or by Churchill’s smiling face. They do not want to get back to 1939. The conscription and shortages have taught them democracy and that all men are really equal. I feel confident that a better world is going to be the result of this election and that the future in spite of so many difficulties is bright. Now is the chance of the Labour Party to show the world what they can do and what can be done. Churchill is an old man and as a war leader against Japan not irreplaceable. It is for the young people of this country to support the new government to success (31 July 1945).⁽⁹⁾

What this brief overview of one diary is intended to illustrate is that Mass Observation material should never just be viewed as a source of illustrative quotes concerning various aspects of the wartime experience but needs to be read according to the logic of Mass Observation. To this end, *Mass Observation Online* also includes a selection of past papers and, as mentioned above, specially commissioned essays that provide new scholars encountering this material for the first time with a comprehensive and heterogeneous critical account of the many contexts that need to be kept in mind while they search through this rich and varied collection of data. It is particularly heartening to see Tom Jeffery’s ‘A Short History of Mass Observation’

here, which was first published as an Occasional Paper by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1978. Of the new essays, Jennie Taylor's 'Sex, Snobs and Swing: A Case Study of Mass Observation as a Source for Social History' provides an excellent and accessible account of the repeated attempts to map the sexual dynamics of Worktown dancehalls, while Lesley Whitworth's 'Getting Beneath the Surface of Things: Mass Observation and Material Culture' provides a refreshing account of the organisation's trajectory that highlights the continuity between the original phase and the commercial market research of the 1950s and 1960s. 'The Mass Observation Archive: A History' written by the current Director of Mass Observation, Dorothy Sheridan, who has worked there since 1974, provides a concise and useful account of the provenance of the archive. However, perhaps the most essential essay for those seeking to get to grips with the logic of Mass Observation is Ben Highmore's 'Everyday Life and the Birth of Mass Observation' which outlines the context and ideas underlying its original formation. His final paragraph offers a salutary warning to potential users of *Mass Observation Online*:

An archive is open. Dip in to it at will. Discover the dreams and nightmares of generations living through momentous historical circumstances. Find the way that necessity and aspiration are threaded through the activities of social life. But take care too. Pay heed to the fabric of memory, to the moment of memorial. These documents were not collected primarily, to furnish material for the social and cultural historians of the future. They are explosive documents, or at least they are meant to be. Treat them with the respect they deserve. They are meant to be detonated.

What is particularly explosive about Mass Observation is the link it highlights between its collective form of self-reflexivity and social agency. In many ways, the internet provides the ideal location to reveal such links because it allows the kind of searches and analyses that Harrison, Jennings and Madge could only dream about when they expressed the desire to produce weather maps of the unconscious. We can now view any of the panel contributions, whether it is a directive reply or a diary instalment, more or less simultaneously as part of a single ongoing body of work by the participant or as part of a collective set of responses. The apparent blurring of vision resulting from those simultaneous perspectives is indicative of the difference between Mass Observation and other ways of seeing. It is the task of the researcher to resolve this form of observation into focus. To this end, despite some glitches and minor editorial errors such as not all entries in the bibliography being in alphabetical order, *Mass Observation Online* is a superb resource and its value can only increase as further materials, and the remaining years of the wartime diaries in particular, are digitalised and added.

Notes

1. This first use of Mass Observation was without a hyphen but afterwards it was written Mass-Observation up until 2006, when the hyphen was dropped again. *Mass Observation Online* has been edited according to the new usage. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Recent examples of the publication of individual Mass Observation diaries include: *Wartime Norfolk: The Diary of Rachel Dhonau 1941-1942*, ed. Robert Malcolmson and Peter Searby (Norwich, 2004); Olivia Cockett, *Love and War in London: A Woman's Diary 1939-42*, ed. Robert Malcolmson (Stroud, 2008); *Nella Last's Peace*, ed. Patricia and Robert Malcolmson (London, 2008); *A Soldier in Bedfordshire, 1941-1942: The Diary of Private Denis Argent, Royal Engineers*, ed. Patricia and Robert Malcolmson (Bedford, 2009). Popular anthologies include Simon Garfield's edited trilogy: *Our Hidden Lives: The Everyday Diaries of a Forgotten Britain 1945-1948* (London, 2004); *We are at War: The Remarkable Diaries of Five Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (London, 2005); and *Private Battles: How the War Almost Defeated Us* (London, 2006). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Naomi Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes: The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945*, ed. Dorothy Sheridan (London, 2000). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Wartime Women: A Mass-Observation Anthology*, ed. Dorothy Sheridan ([1990], London, 2000). [Back](#)

[to \(4\)](#)

5. Further extracts from Muriel Green's diary, including from the later years of the war, are published in *Our Longest Days: A People's History of the Second World War by the Writers of Mass-Observation*, ed. Sandra Koa Wing (London, 2008).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass-Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* (Oxford, 2010), p. 6.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 7.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* ([1941], London, 1982), p. 69.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Because the diaries on *Mass Observation Online* only currently go up to the end of 1942, I have quoted this passage from Wing, *Our Longest Days*, p. 262.[Back to \(9\)](#)

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[3]

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