The Mass Observers

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In November 2013, the Mass Observation Archive reopened following a move from the University of Sussex Library to the Keep, a nearby purpose-built archival and historical resource centre that houses all of the University’s Special Collections alongside the county records of East Sussex and the holdings of the City of Brighton and Hove. This is now where the thousands of boxes of diaries, directive replies, topic collections, file reports and other material collected by Mass Observation, in both its first phase from 1937–49 as a social research organisation and its second phase in the 1950s and 1960s as a market research company, are stored alongside the materials collected from the current Mass Observation Project launched in 1981. The climate-controlled environment of the £19m Keep, with its sustainable energy sources and state-of-the-art facilities, is a world away from the cellars of the London headquarters of Mass Observation (UK) Ltd., where the papers were mouldering away before their rediscovery in the 1960s by Paul Addison and Angus Calder, working on postgraduate projects that would eventually feed in, respectively, to The Road to 1945 (1975) and The People’s War (1969). From this nadir of neglect, the reputation of the Archive, and the movement that produced it, has risen exponentially to the point where the 75th anniversary of Mass Observation’s foundation in 1937 was marked by a series of public lectures held at Sussex over the 2011-12 academic year and given by historians including Juliet Gardiner, David Kynaston, and Virginia Nicholson, which culminated in an international conference held from 4–6 July 2012. In 2013, the status of Mass Observation was further enhanced by the publication of the first full-length history of its initial phase, The Mass Observers: A History, 1937–1949, by James Hinton, who had also been one of the keynote speakers at the anniversary conference. The focus of his book’s title – taken from an earlier uncompleted project by Calder – is on the people rather than the potentially more abstract concept of the organisation itself, indicates Hinton’s approach, which is to establish that Mass Observation was primarily intended ‘to deliver a democratic people’s history from below’ (p. 378).

Another key component of Mass Observation’s current standing has been the digital availability (since 2007 when Mass Observation Online was launched) to subscribing institutions of increasing amounts of this
archival material. As described in Reviews in History (review no. 969 [3]), by 2009 it was possible to access all of the day surveys completed on the 12th day of each month between February 1937 and January 1938, all of the directive replies and diaries up until the end of 1942, 13 of the topic collections, all of the file reports and the full text of Mass Observation’s books and other publications. This data was supplemented in 2011 by the addition of all diaries and directives from 1943–5, another five topic collections and all of the ‘Worktown collection’, which amounts to 65 boxes of material relating mainly to Mass Observation’s participant observation study in Bolton from 1937–40. A third tranche of papers was added in 2013 which includes a full run of diaries from 1946 up to the end of 1950, directive replies from the years of 1946 and 1947, and 30 topic collections from the war and post-war years including ‘Health’, ‘Family planning’, ‘Sexual behaviour’, ‘Industry’, ‘Sport’, ‘Holidays’, ‘Propaganda and morale’ and ‘Conscientious objection and pacifism’. Some of this material, including that in the last two topics mentioned, was collected during the period from April 1940 to September 1941 when Mass Observation was working full-time for the Home Intelligence section of the Ministry of Information. According to the Adam Mathews website, a final instalment including the diaries from 1951–65, directive replies from 1948–55, and a further 21 topic collections which is due to be published in late 2014 will ‘make the Mass Observation Archive available to researchers in its entirety’. (1) This statement cannot be entirely true as it stands because, for example, the number of topic collections listed above adds up to only 69 whereas 87 are listed on the Mass Observation Archive’s own online catalogue. (2) There may be some explanation for this discrepancy but even if some of the topic collections do not get digitised, it is clear that at least 95 per cent of the historical archive should be online by the end of this year.

However, what does appear to be missing is some of the material in the Archive concerning the organisation of Mass Observation itself. While much of the paperwork concerning the operation in Bolton can be found in box one of the ‘Worktown collection’, ‘Organisation of the project’, similar material concerning the National Panel of volunteer observers run from Mass Observation’s original Blackheath headquarters is not here. In particular, the long acrimonious memos exchanged between co-founders Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson at the point when they began to fall out irreparably in January 1940, which are essential reading for anyone interested in Mass Observation as they argue at length and in fine detail about the three years of its existence, do not appear to be available. A good sense of the first year of Mass Observation may be derived from the early directives, pamphlets and publicity collected in the file report numbered A4 and dated, somewhat misleadingly, January 1937; but this is buried on the ninth page of the long list of reports and unlikely to be found by anyone who does not know what they are looking for or who is not extremely persistent and thorough in their use of the search engine. To be fair to Mass Observation, the historical archive has never been set up to facilitate this kind of research because it has always prioritised focusing its, at times, limited resources to maximise the service it provides to researchers investigating aspects of British social history of the period. Furthermore, the very comprehensive analysis of Mass Observation’s organisation in Hinton’s book might be expected to obviate the need for these aspects to be highlighted in the online archive.

From the beginning, Hinton makes it clear that his aim is to write a rounded history of Mass Observation by proceeding chronologically, describing its everyday functioning and discussing ‘the evolution of its aims and its methods of work’ (p. viii). In particular, he demonstrates a keenness to correct a focus on the early 1937–8 phase of the organisation that is found within both the existing historiography and contemporary criticisms of Mass Observation’s methodology, such as Mark Abrams’s damning account in Social Surveys and Social Action (1951). To counter these preconceptions of what Mass Observation is, he demonstrates at length across the central third of the book how it became professionalised during the war. By paying attention to the key roles played by women working for Mass Observation from Kathleen Raine, who did much of the early work with her husband Madge, long-time stalwarts Gay Taylor and Priscilla Feare (who was to marry a male colleague, Henry Novy), sociologists Gertrude Wagner and Kathleen Box, and wartime paid observers such as Celia Fremlin, Nina Masel and Mollie Tarrant, he counters the perception which sometimes arises that it was merely the plaything of a gang of dilettante public schoolboys. Furthermore, he provides detailed accounts of the methodological and organisational input of figures other than the founders,
such as Bob Willcock and John Ferraby.

Willcock, who started work as Harrisson’s deputy in January 1940 and went on to become acting director when Harrisson was conscripted in 1942, was responsible for guiding Mass Observation’s frenetic all-embracing stance towards a more targeted approach. Ferraby, who also joined Mass Observation in 1940, brought an expertise to data analysis that had not previously been present and had the theoretical capability to set out rigorous arguments as to why the organisation’s characteristically qualitative approach was more effective in gauging the depth of public opinion than the statistical sampling used by pollsters, which produced only a snapshot of attitudes. Hinton’s contention that the two were responsible for influencing much of the output in the immediate post-war years, which are often seen as a period of decline for the organisation, is not just a minor point but a crucial element of his wider argument that Mass Observation was not undermined by the changed political context and Government policy on social research, which favoured university-based approaches, but could have carried on as it was if it had not been for Harrisson’s decision that his future lay in Sarawak, where he was to live and work for many years. There is a somewhat counterfactual sense of what might have been here that is characteristic of Mass Observation studies. In one of the most fascinating sections of his book, Hinton discusses how Willcock and Ferraby struggled to come up with a concept of culture that accounted for the relentless trend they perceived ‘towards a society that valued independence over interdependence, personal autonomy above social solidarity’ (p. 321). Here, he argues, that rather than concerning themselves with such issues as the decline in religious faith, they might have taken a lead from their colleague Fremlin, whose projected study of middle-class housewives, drawing on the wartime diaries that Mass Observation was collecting, had led her to question whether the very reforms that progressives like herself were calling for would eventually generate a mass psychological crisis by weakening familial ties of affect. The potential outlines of a whole different line of study are revealed that would have anticipated much more directly the modes of critical and cultural analysis that have become the norm over the last quarter of a century. Despite the fact that Mass Observation never seriously pursued this line of enquiry, Hinton’s careful excavation of this possibility alongside the cumulative wealth of detail he provides on the organisation’s approach over the 12-year period he covers, suggests that fresh consideration needs to be given to its role in the history of cultural and critical enquiry in the United Kingdom.

For its authoritative scope in describing how Mass Observation operated, and its possession of the unquantifiable aura that can be sensed when an historian has put years of his life and intellectual energy into a project, it is likely that The Mass Observers will deservedly become an essential port of call for all working on the organisation and its historical archive. However, before it becomes regarded as the standard work on questions of how Mass Observation was organised, it is worth carefully scrutinising some particular aspects of Hinton’s argument in order to make it clear exactly what is at stake in some of the assertions that he makes such as, for example, the claim at the outset of the book that ‘MO had two founders (Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge), not, as all existing accounts assert, three – the influence of Humphrey Jennings has commonly been exaggerated’ (p. ix). More specifically, to disclose a possible conflict of interest on the behalf of this reviewer, Hinton states that my own assertion of a ‘tripartite operational division’ in which Harrisson ran Bolton, Madge the panel, and Jennings had responsibility for “the business of presenting the results” greatly exaggerates Jennings’ role’ (p. 74 n. 57). (3)

Now, it is undoubtedly the case that Jennings’ involvement in Mass Observation, even including his participation in the preceding group discussions that took place in Blackheath during the autumn of 1936, before Harrisson made contact with Madge in January 1937, amounts to less than a year. Therefore, viewed from the perspective of considering the entire 1937–49 lifespan of the initial phase of Mass Observation, Jennings is understandably not one of the central figures in Hinton’s account. However, Hinton’s implied argument that the signatures of the three men attached to the famous letter in the New Statesman of 30 January 1937 announcing Mass Observation does not constitute proof of Jennings’ status as a third co-founder because his name was added without his permission does not necessarily hold as the question remains as to why Madge or Harrisson (or both of them) would have decided to add his name unless it was to indicate shared responsibility. Furthermore, it is not the case as Hinton implies that the sole evidence for the existence of a tripartite structure is a ‘remark’ in the preface to Mass Observation’s first full-length book, *May the Twelfth*
which was edited by Jennings and Madge; for example, the leaflet ‘A Thousand Mass Observers’ published in the summer of 1937 notes that ‘at present, executive questions are decided by a committee consisting of Charles Madge, Tom Harrisson and Humphrey Jennings’. (4) It was certainly Calder’s position that Mass Observation was founded by the three of them. (5) Rather than categorically deny Jennings’ status as co-founder as Hinton does, surely it would make more sense to argue that while Jennings should be considered one of the founders of Mass Observation, his involvement was short-lived, he was never really comfortable with the demands that the role would potentially make on him and in all probability he would not, as Hinton persuasively argues, have been able to co-exist with Harrisson in the long run.

The reason why the question of Jennings’ role in Mass Observation is so charged, despite the fact that it can be readily described in straightforward terms, is that he has come to personify the poetic and surrealist strands of the organisation that have increasingly made it attractive to scholars in the discipline of English Studies over the last 20 years or so. Rejecting the very notion of Jennings playing a foundational role enables Hinton to dismiss the relevance of the well-documented late modernist sensibility of May the Twelfth to the ‘fundamental’ goals of Mass Observation (p. 69). This is a specific instance of a wider denial of the long-term significance of the imagist ideas that inspired both Madge and Jennings in the run-up to the foundation of Mass Observation and over the following months. For example, it can hardly be seen as coincidental that the first page of chapter one of The Mass Observers includes David Gascoyne’s well-known description of the first meeting of Madge and Jennings with Harrisson, in which the latter two spoke ‘loudly and simultaneously’ without ‘paying the slightest attention to what the other was saying’ (p. 1). From the start, Hinton is implying, there was no compatibility between the avant-garde ideas represented by Jennings in the well-appointed environs of Blackheath and Harrisson’s propensity for the activity of fieldwork: ‘toughing it out in the grimy streets of Bolton’ (p. 15). Furthermore, despite the concession that nothing like Mass Observation could ever have emerged without Madge’s involvement, it is clear that the representation of the relationship between Jennings and Harrisson as one of dilettante and practical researcher is intended to also symbolise the relationship between Madge and Harrisson: ‘The Jennings-Harrisson confrontation that had marked the beginning of MO provided a foretaste of the tempestuous relationship between Harrisson and Madge, which stood at the organisation’s centre during its first three years until finally, their differences blew them apart’ (p. 16). In his keynote address to the 2012 Mass Observation Anniversaries Conference, Hinton actually went as far as suggesting that Harrisson ‘saved’ Madge from poetic obscurantism by allowing him to discover a vocation for empirical social research that sustained his career after 1940. While Madge did effectively become a career sociologist, he still continued to publish poetry and retained the interest he shared with Jennings in the revelatory potential of images, as evidenced by his editing and completion of the manuscript of Pandaemonium, which was left unfinished by Jennings’ untimely death in 1950. (6) As it stands, however, the claims in Hinton’s conclusion such as ‘Madge eventually abandoned his pursuit of “popular poetry”’ (p. 369) and ‘Madge rapidly moved to a sober empiricism’ (p. 377) uncannily mirror the following statement in a recent biography of Gascoyne: ‘Madge … would later desert poetry and end his career as the first professor of sociology in Birmingham University’. (7) Thus are disciplinary boundaries rigorously policed and the radical interdisciplinarity of Mass Observation occluded.

I do not think that Hinton actually intends such a misleading depiction of Madge; rather, it is the unintended consequence of his side lining of Jennings and a measure of his determination to rebut the arguments of ‘those who write about MO as though it were some kind of failed revolutionary project’ (p. ix). The ‘aura of failure’ (p. 376) that he identifies as hanging over the received narrative of Mass Observation has indeed been a significant inhibiting factor in gaining the organisation the recognition it deserves, although it may reasonably be argued, in the light of the developments I outline in the opening paragraph to this review, that this factor had been overcome before Hinton’s book was published. In my book Mass Observation and Everyday Life (2006), I tried to argue that while Mass Observation failed in its aim to revolutionise everyday life, it succeeded by playing a key role in the more mundane transformation of British society that took place over the Second World War and resulted in the 1945 settlement. After reading The Mass Observers, I would now agree with Hinton that this designation of failure was misplaced, but not because the ideas of Madge
and Jennings never had any real traction; rather, that the modernist and poetic impulses that influenced their initial founding of the organisation became implicitly embedded within it even after the stage of their explicit expression was ceased. (8) The most significant factor in predisposing me to this revised conclusion has been Hinton’s work on the Mass Observation diaries culminating in his previous book *Nine Wartime Lives*. (9) As he notes in the preface to *The Mass Observers*, when approached more than ten years ago by the then Mass Observation archivist Dorothy Sheridan to see if he would take on the project of writing the history, he decided that he could only do this if he understood ‘more about the diarists who were empowered by MO to write so intimately about their everyday lives’ (p. viii). What Hinton revealed was the influence of modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf on the self-reflective everyday practice of the diarists by which they constructed modern identities for themselves. In providing a pretext for the diaries and a context that transcended the private sphere, Mass Observation was involved in – as the sub-title to *Nine Wartime Lives* expresses it – the ‘making of the modern self’. In particular, Hinton used the diaries to cast light on how women established equality and autonomy in the private sphere during the decades between the great public campaigns of the Suffragettes and the Women’s Liberation Movement. From this perspective, the modernist techniques of Jennings and Madge, that determined the presentation of results in not just *May the Twelfth* but also the self-reflective and montage techniques used in the other Mass Observation publications such as *Britain* (1939), *War Begins At Home* (1940), and *The Pub and the People* (1943), which the diarists would have had in mind, did directly influence the kind of social transformation they sought to inspire. In other words, Mass Observation was a success.

The opportunity to access *Mass Observation Online* allows researchers to explore this process of modern identity construction for themselves. For example, anyone looking up diarist 5420 will find the working-class Birmingham housewife who is given the name Lillian Rogers in Hinton’s *Nine Wartime Lives*. (10) Hinton describes her as a pioneer of modern selfhood who anticipates the complex identities which were ‘to explode into cultural revolution in the 1960s and beyond’. (11) What distinguishes her in particular from some of the other subjects of that book was her tendency to combine reporting on public events for Mass Observation with the ‘delights of participation’: a tendency which Hinton illustrates with a tantalisingly brief mention of her account of drunken VE Day celebrations culminating in ‘her own boisterous flirtation with the head warden cross-dressed in his wife’s clothes’. (12) Therefore, it is somewhat disappointing to discover that according to the online contents page for this diarist there are no diary entries for May 1945; indeed, apparently none between June 1944 and June 1945. Exploration of this issue reveals a few potential problems with the online archive and suggests some useful tips for researchers. Clicking on the link on the contents page for June 1945 reveals the first page of an entry dated 28 May 1945, which is numbered as image 653. The researcher has the option of clicking through the images one at a time to reveal each page of the diary or downloading either the page or this particular batch of the diary as a pdf. While the latter option is probably most useful for those who have found the entries they want, it is worth clicking on both the previous entry and previous image options to double check that the contents page is entirely accurate. In the case of 5420, the previous entry batch turns out to commence on the date of 29 April 1945, whereas the previous image is the last page of an entry for 6 May 1945. Therefore, there is a continuous set of diary entries from 29 April to 6 May 1945 that are not listed as present according to the entry page for this diarist, which highlights that it may well pay dividends for researchers to check the online archive carefully on a page by page basis rather than relying entirely on the contents lists. (13)

However, somewhat frustratingly, the discovery of this hidden run brings us no closer to the full account of the cross-dressing incident mentioned by Hinton, as it does not reach quite far enough into May to encompass VE Day. At this point, a bit of lateral thinking suggests that maybe Hinton is confusing VE Day with VJ Day on the 15 August and by moving forward through the diary entries to image 718, it is possible to find the first – beginning with an account of listening to the speech at midnight on the 14th of the newly-elected Prime Minister, Clement Attlee – of a seven-page entry for that day. (14) By the sixth page (image 723), Rogers is describing the evening street party and we find a reference to the air-raid warden doing a turn while dressed up as ‘Mrs Mopp’ including wearing drawers: ‘long white ones with lace on’. Nor is this an isolated incident, for as Rogers goes on to note ‘Mr Wells was dressed up as a woman, so was young
Dennis, the fun had really got going…” The party ended in the early hours with Rogers allowing the warden a ‘victory kiss’ and getting covered in grease paint as a result before finally she and her husband ‘went to bed and lay reviewing the day and its happenings’. Earlier in the evening, Rogers had left the street for a while to head further into the centre of the city. This was in part so that she could report back on events for Mass Observation but also because she liked to flirt with various men friends that she was expert at stringing along. However, on her return she had been puzzled by the attitudes of some of the other women at the party and the looks she had got. Now, she found out from her husband what had happened:

Les was hugely delighted that he had created a sensation. It appears that about an hour after I’d been gone Mr Beardsmore wanted to know where I’d gone. That gave Les his ‘cue’ and he just revelled in the fact that his wife had deserted him, he wasn’t going to stand for it he should get himself another woman, he said he so worked on their sympathy that they soaked it all up – hence the looks. Les and I were nearly in hysterics by the time he’d finished…

Here this married couple are laughing, in effect, at the performance they have put on for the neighbours: him playing the long–suffering wronged husband and her the scarlet woman. At the same time, there is a redemptive quality to this shared sense of performance because he was clearly annoyed when she did go off and leave him and it is also evident that she wants more from life than she could get just through the relationship and yet the way they are able to relive the night together afterwards re-enchants the night and the relationship.

But what about the descriptions of cross dressing? The men who are described as dressing up as women here are clearly participating in a performance but Rogers is also happy to join in as reflected in her description of that final kiss with the cross-dressed warden: ‘Needless to say my face was grease paint all over when he’d finished’. This example further illustrates that the subsequent telling of the performance is just as important as giving it. In the context of a Mass Observation diary, telling becomes writing and thus adds yet another level to the performance because it enables Rogers to gain more self-awareness and control over the process of retelling. In the diaries, therefore, we can see how writing for Mass Observation enabled otherwise ordinary people to develop a broadly modernist self-reflexivity.

This modernist self-reflexivity seems to me exactly what Madge and Jennings had in mind with the concept of ‘Popular Poetry’ that was originally floated during the 1936 meetings in Blackheath. When Mass Observation attempted to move towards a more objective popular anthropology after 1937, as for example in their Penguin Special Britain, there was always the potential for a difference between the observer and the observed to open up as is visible in the write-up of their fieldwork on the Lambeth Walk dance craze. Here the text makes a clear distinction between ‘the observer’ who is an outsider watching working-class women and cross-dressed men engaged in the ‘obscene’ pantomiming ‘familiar to anthropologists in many kinds of primitive dance’. (15) Precisely what it does not directly incorporate is the obvious personal pleasure that both Harrisson and Madge found in participating in such research as reported by Hinton. For example, he cites from a letter written by Madge to Inez Spender at that time:

Then I went to Lambeth and Christ! What an evening. We had the most wonderful party till two in the morning. Tremendous dancing, tremendous people. All playing piano or accordion by ear. All handing round their glasses of beer for others to drink. Transvestism and fine class-conscious songs (p. 92)

The qualitative data in the archive transcends being a mere historical resource and acquires a three dimensional depth when it is seen as a product of both the participation and the performance of both its personnel and the ordinary people it brought together. In this respect, it is not just an example of history from below but the record of how such history is itself a force for social change. Therefore, it is necessary to concur fully with the moral charge in Hinton’s concluding sentence: ‘Hopefully this book, by providing a
detailed account of the generation of the archive, will be useful in helping historians and social scientists to fulfil the hopes invested in them by the original mass observers’ (p. 378).

Notes

1. This of course refers only to the historical archive and not the post-1981 material collected as part of the contemporary Mass Observation Project. See Mass Observation IV <http://www.amdigital.co.uk/m-collections/collection/mass-observation-iv/> [4] [accessed 21 March 2014]. Back to (1)


8. Likewise, I would also now agree with Hinton that Jennings’ departure from Mass Observation did not destabilise Mass Observation in the way that I argued it did in Mass Observation and Everyday Life and, for the record, while I still stand by my book as a whole, I freely acknowledge that there are of course a number of lesser points of interpretation in it that would benefit from various degrees of reconsideration in the light of the evidence presented in The Mass Observers. Back to (8)


10. See Ibid., chapter six ‘Lillian Rogers: Birmingham flaneuse’, pp. 111–35. The same woman is also written about extensively under the different pseudonym of Alice Bridges in Jennifer Purcell, Domestic Soldiers: Six Women’s Lives in the Second World War (London, 2010). Obviously, the scans of her diary available within the online archive feature her real name but I am using Hinton’s pseudonym here for convenience. Back to (10)


13. It should be noted that such anomalies do not necessarily reflect faults with the digitisation or cataloguing of the online archive; they might well be caused by errors in the paper archive cataloguing or even by the misfiling of the papers by someone in the original organisation during the 1930s and 1940s. One of the pleasures of Mass Observation is that there is always the possibility of discovering something unexpected while searching the files. Back to (13)

14. As a matter of fact, as I subsequently found out, Hinton did not confuse VE day for VJ day but instead referred to the diarist’s response to the VE Day directive which is written in the form of a diary. There was a different numbering system for responses to directives and so this same person who is diarist 5420 is also respondent 2254, as the online archive makes clear. The VE Day directive is labelled on the contents page for respondent 2254 and by clicking on that and reading through the researcher will find the incident to which Hinton is referring on the page numbered as image 202. It looks as though an impromptu performance on the first occasion became incorporated as part of the VJ Day show described in this review. Incidentally, while clicking through the pages of 2254’s directive responses I noticed that the VE Day directive was immediately preceded by the directive response for July which should come after it. This response for July is not listed on the contents page for the respondent, which emphasises the need for researchers to actually look through the papers rather than rely entirely on the contents description. Back to (14)

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