

Seven Lives from Mass Observation

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Author: James Hinton

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Reviewer: David Kilgannon

Surveying the latter half of the 20th century in Britain, Professor James Hinton highlights the popular tendency to consider this period in terms of its characteristic decades. There is ‘the boring 1950s, the exciting 1960s, the crisis-ridden 1970s, [and] Mrs. Thatcher’s 1980s’ (p. 23). Such a taxonomy is attractive, lending a period of enormous social and political change a relatively cohesive narrative structure. Such a narrative holds that the consensus of the post-war Labour settlement was initially cemented in the social conformity of the 1950s, before facing challenges in the form of cultural change in the 1960s and the economic instability of the 1970s. This consensus then received its death knell during Margaret Thatcher’s administration through the 1980s, leading into the individualised British society of the 1990s in which ‘each individual was in control of his or her own destiny. Collective solutions faded’ (p. 19). Of course, such a model is an undeniably blunt instrument for describing an extended period of complex change, yet James Hinton acknowledges its clear appeal to the popular consciousness as a tool for understanding the latter half of 20th century British society (p. 23). In his new book *Seven Lives from Mass Observation: Britain in the late Twentieth Century* Hinton seeks to go beyond these popular stereotypes to explore – ‘What was it like to live in Britain during the second half of the twentieth century?’ (p. v) This is an undeniably ambitious question to ask within a slim 200-page volume. Yet, through his adept interrogation of the work of seven prolific contributors to the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex, Hinton more than meets his question with seven rich and varied answers.

James Hinton has a long-established history of engagement with the various iterations of Mass Observation, having published the superb examinations *Nine Wartime Lives* in 2010 and *The Mass Observers: A History 1937-49* in 2013. Both are notably rich accounts of lived experiences in Britain; with, as Dr. Nick Hubble notes, an ‘unquantifiable aura that can be sensed when an historian has put years of his life and intellectual energy into a project.’⁽¹⁾ Hinton’s sustained investment in the work of Mass Observation resulted in the production of two immensely readable texts that manage to balance an accessible prose style with a deep dive into the voluminous archives of the organisation. *Nine Wartime Lives* examined the diaries and directive responses of wartime correspondents, whose personal writing explored the complex interaction between private experience and public activity. Attempting to reveal ‘the construction of the modern self’⁽²⁾, Hinton brilliantly illustrated how these wartime individuals fashioned meaningful narratives around their personal identity during a period of inherent uncertainty. *The Mass Observers* spotlighted the central figures

at work in the Mass Observation organisation during its first phase, from 1937 to 1949, showing how it worked to create 'a democratic people's history from below'.⁽³⁾ In both texts, Hinton consistently and convincingly underscores the value of the Mass Observation archive to the historian, showing how the aim of Mass Observation to involve correspondents 'as active participants' in the work of the archive produced unusually reflective and considered accounts that go beyond reflections seen within 'standard' diaries.⁽⁴⁾ Additionally, both texts manage to balance an often dense conceptual literature around modernity and the self, alongside an almost novelistic rendering of the Mass Observation participants and central figures.

In *Seven Lives*, Hinton has progressed to examining accounts contributed to the second 'phase' of Mass Observation, the Mass Observation Project, which has operated since 1981. The book begins with a short chapter on the work of this phase of Mass Observation, showing how the project has expanded from its original remit from the 1930s, particularly under the curatorship of Dorothy Sheridan from 1990. Influenced by the growth of social history, feminism and the emergence of oral history as a discipline, Sheridan and her researchers began to ask more probing questions than their predecessors, resulting in a body of 'autobiographical writing [that] provides rich documentation of each observer's experience, sensibility, and contribution to the life of his or her times' (p. 2). Hinton adeptly moves the reader through these developments in the project, synthesising an often turgid conceptual literature around subjectivity, identity, and the Mass Observation archive with admirably concise and clear prose. This chapter makes a strong argument for the value of these new Mass Observation testimonies to historians of later 20th-century Britain, emphasising how the 'luminosity of single cases' (p. 6) offers a unique starting point for deeper historical investigation. While the collection can be viewed as an extensive collection of colourful anecdotes, it is repeatedly shown to be of greater value, allowing an analysis in which subjects can be viewed as 'a personality ... not a cipher or statistic to be manipulated and aggregated' (p. 6).

The second chapter 'Histories' presents an incisive summation of the major historiographical trends shaping analysis of the latter half of the 20th century in Britain. Inevitably, this results in Hinton both encountering, and having to complicate, numerous prevailing popular myths about this period. That the 1960s saw the definitive end of 'Victorian attitudes to sex and the family' (p. 9) and that Thatcher rose to power based on a peculiarly 'British disease' (p. 15), to take just two examples, are both shown to lack the nuanced depiction of a more complex reality. This chapter is particularly good at capturing the sometimes confused sense of change inherent to this period, underlining how the evolution from 'the quasi-corporatist structures of the post-war settlement towards the deregulated capitalism of the neo-liberal project' (p. 23) was a less predetermined certainty than many popular histories consider. It also establishes the wide variety of contextual influences that the reader will encounter within the subsequent biographical chapters.

Having established this framework around both the period under review and the work of the second-generation Mass Observation Project, the remainder of the book consists of the seven biographical chapters and a short conclusion. The subjects chosen for examination, Hinton explains, are not representative of the project as a whole. Indeed, he argues, no sampling could be representative of 'the rather special people who volunteered to write for Mass Observation' (p. vi). Instead, of the archive's most prolific correspondents, the seven subjects were chosen due to the 'the vividness and intimacy of the[ir] writing' as well as their engagement with activities beyond 'the worlds of paid employment and domesticity' (pp. v-vi). The four female observers are: Caroline, the frustrated housewife who identified with Thatcher's message of self-reliance and used Mass Observation directives as a way of easing loneliness; Janet, the teacher, whose fiery responses to Mass Observation directives around patriarchy and British society are frequently 'angry, undisciplined tirades, polemic edged with paranoia' (p. 41); the social worker, Stella, whose accounts balance her engagement with New Age psychology alongside her erotic life experiences; and Helen, the RAF wife, who lead a 'third age' of activist campaigning during her later years. Hinton's three male correspondents are: Len, the culturally conservative mechanic; Bob Rust, the lorry driver who negotiates the changing nature of the working class in this period; and Sam, the city banker.

These seven correspondents offer an incredibly varied range of insights into the relationship between the individual and wider British society throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Some of their accounts

lend support to the conventional historiography of this period, while others contradict prevailing ideas. The chapter on lorry driver Bob Rust, for instance, highlights the link between his sense of a working-class identity and his support for the Falklands War. In a 1982 directive to Mass Observation, he writes with pride about how 'the Old Dunkirk/Blitz spirit is re-emerging' among his fellow lorry drivers at the local depot following Thatcher's decision to contest the Falkland Islands (p. 128). Hinton convincingly positions Mr. Rust's patriotism for the Falklands conflict within nostalgic memories of the 'People's War ... the apex not only of national pride but also of the social and political power of the working class' (p. 129). In contrast, the bank-director Sam remained distinctly unimpressed by the Thatcher government's involvement in the Falklands, arguing in a diary entry against intervention, stating that '[we] should acknowledge what Suez taught us – we are not a world power now' (p. 151). These divergent viewpoints across the class divide conform with prevailing historiography around the impact of the Falklands conflict on British society, which regarded the conflict as an important phase in fostering a new sense of 'populist patriotism'.⁽⁵⁾ It also lends some credence to contemporary commentary of the period, such as *The Guardian's* pessimistic editorial from June 1982, which bemoaned how 'Patriotism has worked its old magic with the working class'.⁽⁶⁾

Hinton is admirably skilful and even-handed in his management of the various observers' chapters, even though he does admit to a personal affinity with the activism of the RAF wife Helen (p. 92). It is a delicate balancing act, but one in which he is successful, incorporating clear critiques into each account, while also allowing the 'voice' of each Mass Observer to be clearly heard. Discussing the distinctive responses of the teacher Janet, for instance, Hinton shows how underneath her often garbled prose there is 'a coherent worldview, a strange amalgam of residual Marxist-Leninism, anti-communism, radical feminism, and a Hogarthian vision of corruption' (p. 41). To reach this worldview is a challenging task, as Janet's responses are sometimes difficult to understand, even Hinton admits that she 'rants and she raves' (p. 41). Yet, despite this difficulty, Hinton manages to adroitly highlight this underlying coherence to her perspective, showing how her traumatic childhood and often challenging job shaped her use of the platform afforded to her by Mass Observation directives. Janet spent her life using her self-described role as a 'low grade dealer in high class ideas' (p. 47) to inculcate a moral code in her pupils that was capable of 'withstanding the sadness, corruption, and evil surrounding the[ir] lives' (p. 58). This work directly fed into her attempts to give a voice to the oppressed and excluded kids through her responses to Mass Observation.

The Observers' accounts are arguably even more interesting when they defy expectations, and Hinton clearly delights in exploring the unexpected eccentricities within his subjects' lives. *Seven Lives* abounds with a mass of such minutiae about the correspondents' lives. The lorry driver Bob, we are told, is an experienced knitter (p. 114), while the housewife Caroline notes her previous flirting 'with the possibility that Hitler had all the answers' (p. 29). A particularly recurrent theme emphasised by Hinton was the sense of collective ownership that pervaded the work of these contributors to the archive. The banker Sam described how his 'guard is down' when he wrote for Mass Observation (p. 134), while the mechanic Len relished the opportunity to be truly candid about his life so that he could 'stir the pot' with his frequently contrarian views (p. 93). Indeed, sometimes this candour lead to incredibly intimate accounts of correspondents' private lives. We learn of Sam's extra-marital affairs (p. 144), for instance, as well as Bob's periodic hiring of prostitutes (p. 131), and of Janet's childhood tic of persistent masturbation (p. 44). Hinton's text presents a subtle but probing analysis of these seven lives, helping to paint an often vivid picture of their varied lives in post-war Britain. The eccentricity of the lives detailed, combined with Hinton's remarkably accessible prose style, makes this book readily attractive to the general reader.

If one is to quibble with any aspect of *Seven Lives*, it is with the age profile of the observers chosen. Born within the relatively limited range of between 1921 and 1934, the observers are all between 56 and 69 going into the 1990s. Hinton acknowledges this decision, citing Kierkegaard's aphorism that life 'is lived forwards but understood backwards' (p. 4) to argue that a better perspective is offered from the responses of older Mass Observers. This decision is also justified on practical grounds, with Hinton arguing that younger correspondents caught up 'in the throes of establishing a family and making a living' (p. 4) are simply unable to equal the level of depth provided to directives by more senior Observers. Of course, on this issue

Professor Hinton's expertise must be bowed to. Yet, for this reader, the use of one younger correspondent (if just for comparison) would have served to further illuminate the brilliance of his selected Observers. However, this is an insignificant complaint to make with a book that will undoubtedly serve as an exemplary model for future historians of social history, Mass Observation and the latter half of 20th-century Britain.

Notes

1. Nick Hubble, 'Review: The Mass Observers: A History 1937-49' in *Reviews in History*, No. 1603 (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1603> [2])(3 November 2016).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p. 4.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History 1937-49* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), p. 378.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ibid, p. 73.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: The politics and social upheaval of the 1980s* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010), p. 152.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. 'Editorial: Patriotism has worked its old Magic' in *The Guardian*, 16 June 1982 (<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1982/jun/16/past.falklands> [3]) (4 November 2016).[Back to \(6\)](#)

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[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1982/jun/16/past.falklands>