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Mass Observation (1937-2017) and Life Writing: an Introduction

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Abstract

Mass Observation (MO) was formed in Britain in 1937 as an innovative research project, to develop new methods for accurately gauging public opinion, thereby contributing to a more democratic form of politics and public policy formation. The archive of its first phase (1937-49) was transferred to the University of Sussex in 1970. In 1981 it was revived as the Mass Observation Project (MOP), which continues to the present. The documentation which MO and MOP together generated includes a significant body of life writings. The purpose of this cluster of articles is to introduce the ways in which the interaction between the aims and approaches of MO's founders and its later MOP refounders, and the responses of its contributors, produced specific forms of life writing; and to explore aspects of the 'afterlife' of these texts – their contextualisation, publication, and interpretation. This introduction situates the original, multifaceted and idiosyncratic, MO project within wider political and cultural trends of the 1930s, and then examines MO's methods, which aimed at 'the observation by everyone of everyone, including themselves'.

Keywords: Mass Observation, life writing, 1930s, social enquiry

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Mass Observation (MO) was formed in Britain in 1937 as an innovative research project, with the aim of developing new methods for accurately gauging public opinion, and thereby contributing to a more democratic form of politics and public policy formation.[1] Its subsequent history falls into three phases. From 1937-49, at first under the guidance of its two key founders, Tom Harrisson (1911-76) and Charles Madge (1912-96), and – from the middle of the Second World War till 1949 – under the leadership of a 'second generation' of MO full-time researchers, it used qualitative methods to assess public opinion on a wide range of topics, thereby contributing to pre-war political campaigns and wartime monitoring of civilian morale, as well as to planning for post-war reconstruction. After Harrisson severed his links with MO in 1949, it was reconstituted as a limited company, concentrating on survey research for a range of clients, alongside (and sometimes in competition with) a growing number of market research and opinion polling companies. This second phase ended with the closure of MO in 1961. Thanks to the efforts of two young historians (Paul Addison and Angus Calder) working on the political and social history of Britain during the war, and the vision of Asa Briggs, a leading historian who then headed the University of Sussex, the MO archive from 1937 to the early 1950s was salvaged and relocated to the university in 1970 (Hinton 2013, 363-4). It became increasingly recognised as a valuable resource for the growing fields of twentieth-century British social and women's history. In 1981, the then Director of the MO Archive, the social anthropologist David Pocock, revived one central element of the initial MO project, directed diary keeping and reporting: this third phase has continued to the present day.[2]

Looking back on MO after eighty years, three features of its first decade seem striking: the extraordinary ambition and creativity of its two principal founders; the energy and commitment they, their few paid staff and many volunteers, brought to the project; and the multiple tensions – contradictions even: between science and art; objectivity and subjectivity; political intervention, policy influence and historical documentation – with which the project was riven.[3] Despite (or arguably because of) these contradictions, MO in this period produced an invaluable body of work. The revived MO Project, led by Pocock from 1981-90 and then by Dorothy Sheridan (1990-2010), has built on MO's pioneering focus on self-reporting, but with greater sensitivity to epistemological and ethical complexities.[4]

Among the voluminous documentation which MO generated, there is a significant body of life writings.[5] This cluster aims to introduce these texts, and explore aspects of their 'afterlife' – their contextualisation, publication, and interpretation. This

introduction situates the multifaceted and idiosyncratic MO project within wider political and cultural trends of the 1930s, and then examines MO's methods.

In my own opening article, '"Subjective Cameras": Authorship, Form and Interpretation of Mass Observation Life Writings', I provide an overview of the specific and distinctive forms of life writing which MO initiated and encouraged, and sketch the social profile and the motivations of their authors, so as to clarify the institutional, historical and generic contexts within which individual texts were produced. I then outline some of the varied ways in which scholars have recently used and interpreted these texts in addressing a range of historical and sociological questions.

There follow three articles by scholars who have long worked with life-writings in the MO Archive, and who now reflect autobiographically from their experiences on the intellectual, ethical, and commercial challenges posed by editing, publishing and interpreting MO and MOP life writings. Dorothy Sheridan, for many years the MO archivist at Sussex, has played a major role in promoting the Archive as a resource, demonstrating through her own writing and editing the riches it contains, exploring the intentions and writing practices of MO and MOP correspondents, and reflecting on the editorial and ethical issues raised by publication of MO materials. Here, she returns to her early years at the Archive, when she edited one of the first MO diaries to be published. Drawing on her own diary of the period, she considers the intersection of the biographical and the autobiographical inherent in any such life-writing project – the more so when the original diarist (here, the author Naomi Mitchison, one of the first Mass Observers) was still alive and participated in a collaborative editing process.

Robert and Patricia Malcolmson have been prolific in editing MO diaries. They sketch the riches contained in MO's wartime diaries, and then consider the challenges inherent in editing some of these texts – those of suitable length, and quality of writing – for publication. Whereas few commercial publishers will take on the risk of an 'unknown' memoirist, local historical record societies have been willing to publish such texts. The Malcolmsons describe the editorial requirements of this format, and the textual and ethical choices posed in making public diaries not originally written to be published.

James Hinton worked with the MO materials as rich sources in writing two books about the patterns of active citizenship in Britain during the Second World War (1994; 2002). More recently, he has focussed his attention on MO itself as an institution (2013), and on its wartime life writings (2010). Here, he reflects on the process of writing his most recent book (2016), which draws on materials from MOP to explore the social

and cultural history of late-twentieth-century Britain. He highlights the difference, as life writing, between the immediacy of the wartime diary entries, and the more reflective MOP texts (written only three times each year). Since this was the first project to draw on MOP writings by persons still alive (or only recently deceased), Hinton in conjunction with MO's Trustees had to develop a set of appropriate ethical protocols for using such intimate texts.

MO as a Thirties Project

In Britain, the advent of a near-universal adult franchise in 1918, and the displacement of the Liberal Party by a Labour Party more substantially rooted in the urban, industrial working class, provoked in many intellectuals and social commentators concerns about how mass democracy would work. These concerns intersected with anxiety about the influence of the emergent mass media in shaping public opinion. To the power of the popular press (pioneered in Britain by the *Daily Mail*, launched in 1896, which by 1930 had reached a circulation of 1.8 million) had been added that of two emergent audio/visual media: cinema and radio. At the level of the state, these anxieties resulted in typically British forms of at-a-distance control through the creation of formally independent institutions: the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).[6]

It is revealing that, among the fears which the resultant mechanisms of indirect censorship sought to control, the direct articulation of a working-class voice was prominent. Following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and the onset of the Great Depression, unemployment in Britain rose sharply. In 1933, a working-class author, Walter Greenwood, had published *Love on the Dole*, a best-selling novel about the impact of mass unemployment on working-class people's personal lives which was then turned into a successful play. However, a film screenplay based on the novel was banned by the BBFC as showing ‘too much of the tragic and sordid side of poverty’ (Constantine, 234). In 1934 the BBC broadcast a series of radio interviews, *Time to Spare*, in which unemployed men and women spoke directly of the way they lived. The resulting complaints from the government helped pressure the BBC into ‘a marked retreat from dealing with contentious issues in talks programmes’ for the rest of the decade (Scannell & Cardiff, ch. 4, quoted at 69).[7] Some efforts were made to challenge this. Independent documentary film makers, prominent among them John Grierson who founded the GPO Film Unit in 1934, sought to depict the conditions of working-class life; but they did so from the position of sympathetic outsiders. Only in

the film *Housing Problems* (1935) were working-class people able to speak directly to camera about their lives.[8]

It was in this context that in 1937 MO was conceived. Brought together initially by coincidence, a small group of upper-middle-class of intellectuals formulated the ambition to develop what they termed an 'anthropology of ourselves'.[9] Two of the key founders of MO, Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge, brought complementary strengths to the new project. While still at school Harrisson had set up a pioneering ornithological study, using a widespread network of observers; he would carry over to investigation of the human species an emphasis on the meticulous observing and counting of actions and interactions by non-participant observers (largely volunteers).[10] But he had also taken part in anthropological fieldwork in Borneo and the New Hebrides, from which came his first book *Savage Civilisation* (1937). He wrote: 'Then I came back to England and went to live in an industrial town, trying to apply the same principles of observation to our own civilization'.[11] Madge too had diverse interests: having studied science and philosophy at university, he then worked for a reformist newspaper, the *Daily Mirror*, and was a published poet.[12] In January 1937, he sent a letter to the left-wing weekly the *New Statesman*, headed 'Anthropology at Home', announcing the formation of a group of poets, painters, and filmmakers committed to social documentation. Harrisson joined him, and by the end of the month they had created MO.[13]

Their shared concerns fitted the wider post-1918 anxieties about the functioning of democracy, but heightened by the impact of the economic depression (and soon by the growing threat of war). The *New Statesman* letter which had prompted the formation of MO had been triggered by the Abdication Crisis of 1936, and the claims made in the press about the state of public opinion.[14] MO aimed to address: the role of myth and superstition in national life (especially about royalty, and soon about war); distrust of the press, and its ability to perform the function of mediating between political leaders and the people; and what the MO founders perceived as the gulf of ignorance dividing rulers from ruled.[15] They created MO not only to document and give voice to 'the values expressed in the private lives of ordinary individuals', but as an organisation designed 'to foster a genuinely democratic public sphere capable of resisting the twin evils of top-down political manipulation and popular political apathy'. By soliciting, summarising and circulating the opinions of ordinary people, James Hinton argues, 'MO hoped to build a barrier against the demagogic exploitation of irrational anxieties, and to promote realistic, enlightened, and scientific attitudes in social and political life. Most of those who volunteered as mass observers shared these goals' (2010, 2).

MO's Methods

Harrisson and Madge were (at this point) keen to distance themselves from academic protocols.[16] They believed themselves to be pioneers, publicly dismissive of most previous social-scientific work in Britain.[17] Faced with the crisis of continuing high unemployment, British social researchers had continued the pre-1914 tradition of predominantly quantitative investigation, whether of poverty or of the new concern about the impact of long-term unemployment. But the direct voices of the poor and the unemployed were present in these texts only sporadically and in fragments.[18] By contrast, Madge and Harrisson asserted that MO 'intends to make use not only of the trained scientific observer, but of the untrained observer, the man in the street. Ideally, it is the observation by everyone of everyone, including themselves.'[19] This formulation contained crucial ambiguities: are the originators of MO to be part of the observed, or not? Conversely, are the observed to be part of the interpreting group, or not? Who are the 'we' of 'ourselves'? There was also a conflict between a populist wish to be democratic, and a determination to be scientific – the more so since they also felt that science must mean being unselective.[20]

There were also differences of approach between the two men, which shaped the two separate initial projects they set up.

> While Harrisson, with an ex-ornithologist's passion for observing behaviour, recruited volunteers to document everyday life in Worktown (= Bolton), Madge, fired by a surrealist curiosity about the operation of the unconscious in everyday life, set about developing a national panel of Observers who … were asked to respond to monthly open-ended questionnaires ("directives") geared as much to probing their own attitudes and feelings as to soliciting reports on the behaviour of the "masses".[21]

Harrisson rented a house in Bolton, chosen as a typical industrial town, a centre of the once-dominant, now economically beleaguered British cotton industry; and recruited a number of full-time observers.[22] Meanwhile, Madge remained in Blackheath, London, where he co-ordinated what would become MO's first major project: to monitor reactions to the Coronation of the new king.[23] To this end, he enrolled a panel of volunteers to write about themselves (equivalent to anthropological informants), and of observers to write about what they saw.[24] The idea was that everyday things, experiences, events, which had become so familiar as to go unnoticed, would be raised into consciousness again. Even the untrained observer would then transform their

subjective personal experience into an objective experience that contributed to an overall understanding of a community or nation.

From February 1937, volunteers were asked to keep a diary on a specific day each month: the 12th was chosen because it would include the Coronation of George VI in May. MO's focus on the Coronation was because they believed official interpretation of such public events was at odds with what people really thought and felt (cf. their original inspiration in the Abdication Crisis). The resulting book, *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day Surveys 1937* (Jennings and Madge), compiled from a combination of subjective accounts (volunteers writing down everything they did in a day-survey), and observations (from twelve observers placed at different points along the processional route on the day), was structured like a documentary film, constructed from 'clips' – word-pictures, dialogue, commentary.[25]

With its origins in the Abdication Crisis, and its first major publication devoted to the Coronation of the new King, MO's work from the start addressed the symbolic dimensions of politics. But with its response to the Munich Crisis of September 1938, MO made a more direct political intervention. In January 1939 it published *Britain by Mass-Observation* (Harrisson & Madge). The chapter 'Crisis', drawing mainly on responses from Panel members, tracked in close detail the shifts in public opinion away from support for the (coalition) National Government of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain as the terms and implications of the Munich agreement became clear. As a Penguin Special (a series of topical books in cheap paperback format), it sold 100,000 copies in ten days.[26] Drawing on this experience, Harrisson then made the results of his public opinion surveys available to the candidate opposed to the agreement in a 1939 parliamentary by-election. (Hinton 2013, 97-8)

With the outbreak of war seeming increasingly likely, Harrisson and Madge discussed how if at all MO could contribute to the war effort. Harrisson manoeuvred for MO to receive a contract to conduct official research for the government on civilian morale, and from early 1940 to September 1941 it provided regular reports to the Ministry of Information. Madge, suspicious that MO's independence would be compromised, finally broke with Harrisson in 1940.[27] When its government contract was terminated, MO continued with the support of private funding to research issues of wartime morale, war work efficiency, and aspirations and fears concerning post-war reconstruction.[28] In 1949, faced with increasing competition from commercial opinion polling companies conducting market research, MO was reconstituted as a private limited company. Harrisson withdrew, while retaining ownership of all the material produced between 1937 and 1949. (Hinton 2013, 359-62) This archive was formally opened at the University of Sussex in 1975, with Harrisson as its Director.

Following his death in 1976, the new Director, David Pocock, initiated a revival, as MOP, in 1981. (Sheridan et al., 43-6)

Since then, the MO Archive has provided the basis for a wide range of academic studies focussed on the 1930s and 40s.[29] And, starting from Tom Jeffery's short history (1978) and Nick Stanley's thesis (1981), several historians have pieced together and interpreted its history.[30] More recently, the social and cultural historian James Hinton has published two important books which offer new perspectives on MO and its work. *The Mass Observers: a History 1937-1949* (2013) is a detailed and thoroughly documented history of MO in its first incarnation. Hinton tracks the often conflictual relationship between Harrisson and Madge until its final breakdown in 1940; and identifies the distinctive roles of those who took over leadership of the project from Harrisson after he was called up for military service in 1942. He also engages with, and sometimes challenges, earlier historiography of the organisation; in particular, he re-evaluates its post-war role. The book is an essential reference point for researchers working with MO materials. His earlier book, *Nine Wartime Lives* (2010), which presents biographical essays on nine individuals who kept substantial wartime MO diaries, is discussed in my '"Subjective Cameras": Authorship, Form and Interpretation of Mass Observation Life Writings'.

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Notes

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All emphases in quotations are in the original texts.

[1] The nomenclature of Mass Observation has varied over eight decades. I have followed the terminology in Pollen 2013, 231 n.1. "Mass Observation" (MO) refers to the organisation, and the body of material it has generated, from 1937 to the present; "Mass Observation Project" (MOP) specifically to its revived form from 1981 onwards. The name was originally hyphenated; I have retained the hyphen when quoting sources which use it. Around 1990, the term "correspondent" was adopted by MOP to refer to its Mass-Observers, as "convey[ing] the sense of a mutual relationship much more accurately than the more usual social scientific terms such as 'respondent', 'subject' or even 'informant'" (Sheridan et al., 76).

[2] For the Mass Observation Archive, see http://www.massobs.org.uk/. This article focusses on those aspects of MO's history most relevant to its encouragement of life writing. For detailed accounts of MO, see Jeffery; N. Stanley; Calder 1985; Summerfield; Highmore, ch. 6; Hubble 2006; Hinton 2013; Hall. For the revived MO Project until 2000, see Hinton 2016, 1-4; Sheridan et al., 43-60.

[3] For these initial tensions, see Highmore, 77-81; Hubble 2006, 5-7; Kushner 2004, 10-12.

[4] For discussion of methodological issues in interpreting the writings produced by the MO Project (in some ways continuous with those of the original MO), see Sheridan et al., chs 1-3; Pollen 2013; Pollen 2014, reporting the 2009-10 University of Brighton research network "Methodological Innovations: Using Mass Observation" (MIMO) which brought together 150 participants to debate and share methods for analysing the materials of MOP.

[5] Sheridan et al., 32, estimated that the life-writings of the National Panel members of the 1930s and 40s constitute about a fifth of the whole MO archive. MOP consists entirely of life writings.

[6] For an overview of the expansion of the mass media between the wars, the political anxieties this contributed to, and the resultant forms of (in)direct censorship and self-censorship, see Williams. *Daily Mail*: Jeffery & McClelland. BBFC: Richards 1981, 1982; Pronay. BBC: Scannell & Cardiff. For MO's concerns about the mass media, see Highmore, 84-6; MacClancy, 498.

[7] Shortly before, the BBC's magazine *The Listener* had commissioned a series of articles in which individuals described the psychological effects of unemployment. The article were not broadcast, but published as a book (Beales & Lambert); see Scannell & Cardiff, 389 n. 36.

[8] On the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit, see Swann; Aitken; Anthony & Mansell. On *Housing Problems*: Stollery; Corner, 63-71 ("The film may be seen … as a work of radical ethnography … giving previously marginalised or unheard voices a chance to express their grievances publicly" [64]). Cowie, 106-108, locates the issue of voice in the film in a wider discussion of the politics of the 1930s documentary film movement which parallels that of MO.

[9] Geoffrey Pyke's letter to the *New Statesman* which triggered the coalescence of MO referred to 'that anthropological study of our own civilisation of which we stand in *such* desperate need'; Madge's reply referred to 'an anthropology of our own people': Sheridan et al., 22-3. The phrase 'anthropology of ourselves' was used in Madge and Harrisson 1937, 10; and in Harrisson and Madge, 12.

[10] For the relationship between the new observational purposes and practices developed in British field ornithology in the inter-war years, and MO, see Toogood.

[11] Quoted in Highmore, 79-80. On Harrisson, see Heimann; Hinton 2013, 4-6, 10-13, 28-31, 89-91, 122-4, 144-7, 157-61, 195-6, 201-5, 218-20, 232-8, 241-2, 255-9, 294-9, 331-3, 348-50, 361-7; Stanton, 20-24.
[12] On Madge, see Halsey; Hinton 2013, 6-7, 61-86, 91-2, 118-27, 139-41, 144-7, 161-2, 270, 368, 376; and several articles in *New Formations* 2001.
[13] On the formation of MO, see Hinton 2013, ch. 1; Highmore, 75-7. The exchange of letters which led to the formation of MO is reprinted in Sheridan et al., 22-26.
[14] King Edward VIII was forced to abdicate the throne in December 1936 as a result of his determination to marry a divorced woman. His brother succeeded him as George VI; his Coronation was in May 1937.
[15] MO's context also included a response to growth of market research for advertising, and public-opinion polling (which started in the USA in 1936, in Britain in 1938). See Moran; Jeffery, [6-8].
[16] Both men had left Cambridge University without completing their degrees: Hinton 2013, 5-6.
[17] Attitude to previous social science: Harrisson and Madge, 12-14; cf. Cross, 4. L. Stanley 2007 discusses the complex relationships between MO and academic social science disciplines which were still emergent in the late 1930s. On their relationship with contemporary anthropologists, see Kushner 2004, 8-10; MacClancy, 504-8; Sheridan et al., ch. 3.
[18] Typical was Pilgrim Trust, *Men without Work* (1938). A rare exception was *Working-Class Wives* (Spring Rice, 1939), in which working women spoke powerfully about their health problems and needs.
[19] Madge and Harrisson 1937, 10. Cf. note 9 above.
[20] Calder 1985, 128-9; Pollen 2013, 226.
[21] Hinton 2008, 207-8. The differences between Harrisson and Madge have been over-polarised: see Kushner 2004, 11-12; Highmore, 77-8; L. Stanley 2007, 93-4; but contrast Jardine. Cf. note 4 above.
[22] On the Worktown project (which also included Blackpool, "Seatown", as the seaside resort at which many Bolton workers took their annual holiday), see Hinton 2013, 17-60, 113-127, 138-9, 147-52, 167; Hall; Richards & Sheridan; Cross; Gurney.
[23] In October 1938, Madge moved to Bolton and took over the Worktown project, studying working-class saving and spending; while Harrisson took over the London end of MO: Hinton 2013, 89-91.
[24] On the initial recruitment of the National Panel, see Hinton 2013, 61-2.
[25] Humphrey Jennings (1907-1950) was the third co-founder of MO, having worked alongside Madge in Blackheath. However, he ceased to be an organiser after co-editing the publication of *May the Twelfth*, while continuing his career as a film-maker with the GPO Film Unit; see Hinton 2013, 1-2, 6-10, 74 n.57; Jackson. For readings of *May the Twelfth* which re-evaluate its (cinematic, collage- and montage-based) structure, much criticised at the time of publication, see Hinton 2013, 66-70; MacClancy, 500-2, 506; Highmore, 93-4; L. Stanley 2007, 98-9, 104-6; Kohlmann, 143-153 (on Jennings's "textual purging" [151] of the day-surveys which he cited as editor); Jardine, 58-60. For the individual-as-camera as a quintessential Thirties image, see Cunningham, 327-333. Feigel, chs 2 and 4, links the tension between objectivity and subjectivity, the real and its representation, in MO with the ways in which it is evident throughout the (literal and metaphorical) camera-works of thirties documentary film-makers and writers.
[26] Reprinted in February, it made MO a household name. N. Stanley, 11-2; Hinton 2013, 89-90, 96-7.
[27] Hinton 2013, chs 6-8. 'Mass-Observation's organizers believed that the responses to their monthly directives, together with diaries subsequently sent in by many of the panellists during the war, enabled them to penetrate beneath "public opinion" (manufactured and manipulated by the press), to tap into deep currents of private thought and feeling, the inchoate beliefs of real individuals "at the stage before they have crystallised into definite organised institutions", as Charles Madge put it in 1940 ….' Hinton 2008, 222.
[28] For MO during the war, see Hinton 2013, chs 9-10, 12-13.
[29] Studies based on the original MO archive: Calder 1969; Harrisson; Beaven & Griffiths; Addison; Noakes 1998, ch. 4; Kertesz 1992; Salter 2008 (Second World War); Langhamer (first atomic bomb); Noakes 2015 (Armistice Day observance); Hinton 2008; Savage, 2007, 2008 (class);

Kushner 2004 (race); Cross (leisure); Gurney (sex); Watson (pubs); Gazeley & Langhamer (happiness); Curzon (visual culture); Richards & Sheridan (cinema). For ways in which the changing intellectual climate since the early 1980s (including developments in feminist studies, oral history, sociology, anthropology, and literacy studies) has led to a much richer appreciation of both MO's original project and its archival legacy, see Kushner 2004, 13-22.
[30] See note 2 above.