



Woven Tapestries: Dialogues and Dilemmas in Editing a Diary

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Abstract

Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999) was an established novelist and political campaigner throughout her life. During the Second World War, she kept an extensive daily diary from her home on the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland which she sent in instalments to the London offices of the social research organisation, Mass Observation. Until the 1980s, this diary, together with 500 other diaries for the same period, remained largely unread. It was stored as part of the valuable Mass Observation Archive which was deposited at the University of Sussex in 1970. Between 1982 and 1984 it was edited for publication by Dorothy Sheridan, the Mass Observation archivist, in collaboration with Naomi Mitchison herself. It was first published as a book in 1985 by Gollancz as *Among you taking notes: the wartime diary of Naomi Mitchison 1939-1945*. This article is an account of the collaborative process of editing the original diary for publication and addresses questions of ownership, ethics and methodology raised by the process of editing life documents.

Keywords: diaries, Mass Observation, Naomi Mitchison, World War Two

1

This paper concerns two diaries. The first diary was written between 1939 and 1945 by Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999). She wrote it as her contribution to a collective documentation of life during the Second World War which was being carried out by the British social research organisation, Mass Observation. The second diary is my own which I am using as a resource, together with letters between myself and Naomi Mitchison, to prompt my memory of the years between 1982 and 1985 when I was working with Naomi herself to edit her wartime diary for publication.¹ Returning to my own diary also offers me an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between editor and diarist and to explore the notion of what oral historians have called ‘shared authority’.² Because I deal on the one hand with Naomi’s diary itself and, on the other, my relationship with Naomi during the editing process, this account is inevitably both biographical *and* autobiographical.³ I therefore bring myself into the narrative of Naomi Mitchison’s diary in the spirit of a paper by Ruthellen Josselson who addresses the experience of writing about another’s life. She suggests that this is work that we do ‘in anguish’ because however much care we take we still

entangle ourselves in others’ narcissistically woven tapestries. To be uncomfortable in this work... protects us from going too far. It is with our anxiety, dread, guilt, and shame that we honour our participants. To do this work we must contain these feelings rather than deny, suppress, or rationalise them. We must at least try to be fully aware of what we are doing. (Josselson, 70-71)

Naomi Mitchison’s wartime diary is a prodigious document of about two million typed words. It is part of a larger collection of around 500 diaries kept by volunteer writers from all over Britain who participated in Mass Observation’s nation-wide study of everyday life in mid-20th century Britain. The diary collection itself was part of an even larger archive of surveys, questionnaires, observations and notes, drawings, newspaper cuttings, photographs, reports, books and printed ephemera, all generated by the work of Mass Observation between 1937 and the early 1950s.⁴ By 1969, after spending several decades in the store rooms of various London offices, it looked as if there was a danger that the whole archive might be thrown away. Fortunately, its existence was brought to the attention of the eminent social historian Asa Briggs, at that time Vice Chancellor of the University of Sussex. Briggs stepped in and offered it a home at the University. The collection was duly transferred to the Sussex campus near Brighton, much of it in a very disorganised state and physically

fragile because it was written on poor quality wartime paper. Briggs prudently invited Tom Harrison, who had been one of the three original founders of Mass Observation, to take on the task of opening up the collection as a public resource for social research at Sussex. Harrison had been central to Mass Observation in the late thirties and in the early years of the Second World War.⁵ However, in 1942, he had been conscripted into the army and transferred overseas with the Special Operations Executive. He spent many years living and working in South East Asia following on from his wartime career and as a result his subsequent involvement with Mass Observation was intermittent. He retained a strong interest in the archive and always said that at some point he wanted to return to the UK to revive the social research of Mass Observation. Apart from a short project in 1959, however, when he recruited a group of former Observers to revisit and undertake a further study of the northern English town of Bolton (Harrison 1961), he was only able to return for brief visits. Even as a Visiting Professor at Sussex in the 1970s, he fulfilled his academic obligations by commuting once or twice a term from Brussels where he lived with his third wife, Isobel.

Since he was not always around to safeguard the archive in person, Harrison employed a series of part-time assistants who would look after the collection and liaise with him in Belgium. These assistants also handled enquiries from the very first scholars, initially very few, who had found their way to this new historical resource. Harrison had a small grant from the Leverhulme Foundation which enabled him to finance this work. In 1974, about four years after the collection had arrived at Sussex, I became the fifth of these personal assistants to be employed. Like my predecessors, I did not expect to stay long. It was only a temporary post, working directly for Harrison himself rather than for the University, and it was subject to his idiosyncratic whims and enthusiasms. At the same time, Harrison and I worked quite well together – if a little remotely – and I began to get very curious about this collection in my care. Then quite suddenly and tragically, my new boss died. In January 1976, the news reached Sussex that both Tom and Isobel had been killed in a road accident while travelling in Thailand.

Right up until his untimely death, Harrison had been researching for a book on the experience of living through air raids during the Second World War (Harrison 1976). One of the tasks he had given me was to locate material in the archive which he could use. This meant I had to find my way round the almost completely uncatalogued collection and it was my first introduction to the riches of the diaries. His death left me alone in the Archive and although my responsibilities in the job inevitably widened without his involvement⁶, I was always mindful of the diary

collection and often wished I could return to the diaries to immerse myself completely in them. They felt to me like they told a story about a very distant past even then.

It was not only the *content* of the diaries that intrigued me. I became fascinated with diaries as a genre and recognised, in discussions with the early users of the archive, that they posed many questions. What do we learn about the person from their words in a diary? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the diary as a historical source? How do Mass Observation diaries differ from other diaries? In what ways do diaries differ from other life documents such as autobiographies and oral history testimonies? There was also another, more personal reason for my interest: I wrote a diary myself and was inexorably drawn to other people's diaries to make the inevitable comparisons.

Use of the Mass Observation diaries in any kind of research or publication, even by the Mass Observers themselves during the Second World War, had been limited (as James Hinton [2013] has commented in his history of Mass Observation). No attempt had ever been made to bring the author of a single diary into focus by reproducing extracts which, through their length and comprehensiveness, would identify the writer. Until, that is, 1979. It was then that one particular diary caught the attention of a visiting television director, Richard Broad, who originally planned to base a drama-documentary on one of the diaries. The diary we settled on was written by Nella Last who was a Mass Observer from Barrow in Furness and although the television programme never materialised, Broad and his co-editor, Suzie Fleming, edited the text into a book. It was the first Mass Observation diary to be published. Until Nella's diary appeared, the diaries were seen mainly as a source for textual illustrations to be used thematically by subject or by date and not as having any intrinsic value as either a single biographical narrative or, used collectively, as a specific kind of history.

2

My first meeting with Naomi Mitchison (in real life as opposed to through the pages of her diary) was at the University of Sussex in 1975. She was then 78 years old; I was 27. Naomi was one of the guests at a party hosted by the Vice Chancellor, with Tom Harrison, to mark the official opening of the Mass Observation Archive. She had been one of the first people to join Mass Observation in the late 1930s and had responded to a call for volunteers to keep a one-day diary for the 12th day of each month throughout the year 1937.⁷ This was to be the start of an eight-year commitment in which she documented her everyday life, at first just on one day a month and then shifting, at Mass Observation's request, to a full daily diary in August 1939 just before

Britain declared war on Germany. She continued writing it until August 1945, providing a detailed account of her life during the Second World War right through to the 1945 General Election and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan.

The diary was long, closely typed and packed full of her thoughts and experiences. She conscientiously posted it (usually at monthly intervals) to the Mass Observation offices in London. She had moved from London to Scotland with her five children in September 1939 and was to spend most of the war years at her new home in Carradale, a fishing village on the Mull of Kintyre. Her husband, Dick Mitchison, who was a barrister (and after the war became a Labour MP in Attlee's 1945-1951 government) remained in London most of the time and paid occasional visits to the household in Scotland.

Naomi Mitchison was not a typical member of the Mass Observation Diarist Panel. By 1939 she was 42, already established as a published writer of historical novels, of books for children and of political essays. She was also an active political campaigner and influential in the birth control movement.⁸ Both she and Dick Mitchison were well-known in left-wing artistic and literary circles of their time. Their lively household and rich social life in those pre-war years are described in Naomi's memoir (Mitchison, 201), where she also describes her first encounter with Mass Observation. Most of the Mass Observers who joined the panel as volunteer contributors were much less well known than Naomi. They were also, in general, much less privileged. Naomi came from a well-connected Scottish family, the Haldanes.⁹ She was relatively wealthy – owning a house in London and being able to purchase a big house with land in Scotland when war was declared. In many ways she resembled, not so much the other diarists who came from all parts of Britain and had heard about Mass Observation through the newspapers or radio, but many of the London-based team of investigators grouped around Harrison and his Mass Observation co-founders, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge. She knew all three men and they knew her so it was hardly an anonymous connection. More importantly she was especially fond of the young Tom Harrison and they maintained an affectionate relationship throughout his life. The 1975 launch party at Sussex reignited Naomi's friendship with Tom Harrison. I began to correspond with her, first on Harrison's behalf, and then, after his death, in my own right. She was always a supporter of the ideas of Mass Observation and remained concerned for the survival of the archive.

3

I had been working with the Mass Observation material for eight years before I started to think about editing a diary from the collection myself. Several factors influenced my decision. The first was facilitating the work of editing Nella Last's diary in my role as archivist. The focus on one woman's story was captivating and it alerted me to new ways of bringing the Mass Observation material to a wider public beyond the small 'public' of academic research visitors. The second was a two-year project which I had undertaken with the historian Angus Calder which involved selecting extracts from the collection and publishing them as *Speak for Yourself: a Mass Observation Anthology* in 1984 (Calder and Sheridan). Most of the work on this book had come to an end in 1982 and I was ready for a new and similarly rewarding project. It was also true that my senior colleague at the Mass Observation Archive, David Pocock, had launched a revival of Mass Observation in 1981.¹⁰ This certainly involved me in larger amounts of new administrative work in support of this initiative, but it also motivated me to seek a separate project for myself. And significantly, I was now familiar with many of the diaries and had found myself especially interested not only in Naomi Mitchison herself but also in the diary she had written for Mass Observation.

Despite the fact that it was explicitly being written to be read and used by the core team of Mass Observers, Naomi's war-time diary was a much less studied document than her published autobiographical books. It was not written with an eye to revision and certainly not for publication. In a private note written to Harrison, she had said:

I wrote this diary every evening at my desk. It was not easy to do any real writing, though in 1940 I did a play for Carradale and later wrote *The Bull Calves*. But in general ordinary professional writing wasn't on. A lot of it was about being tired; it was a kind of getting in touch with something outside, not that I wanted or asked for help, but maybe one needs to cry on an invisible shoulder. (Sheridan 1985, 20)

Her paradoxical mix of upper class *hauteur* and her socialist commitment, and how that played out in war-time when she was running her large household and farm in Carradale on the Mull of Kintyre, was intriguing. Naomi was, in so many ways, completely different from Nella Last, but they were alike in that they both used their diaries to combine an account of their inner personal experiences – their feelings and opinions – with a sensitive eye for observation and description. In *that* sense, these diaries are both social documentary accounts of those years *and* autobiographical texts. This finely woven combination of self-reflection with social observation seemed

to me to make the kind of publication which would be popular with a variety of readers.

Moreover, the diary had succeeded in piquing my feminist interest. I confessed in my own diary in May 1982 that I really admired Naomi Mitchison and that working on her diary as a project would be ‘in tune with my own closest interests and my feminism’. In the early 1980s, the interrelationship between the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ was a relatively new concept in feminist thought, as was the interconnectedness of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’. A documentary diary of this sort seemed to me to be illustrative of the kind of duality and convergence of spheres which James Hinton also identifies in the MO diaries (2010, 8-9). Her concern with sexuality, her determination to tackle difficult issues such as abortion and contraception and her commitment to women’s equality, together with her combination of working independence and motherhood, all resonated with my own experience as a socialist feminist. I felt that her diary would add to our understanding of gender and women’s history during the Second World War, a time when for many, the so-called divisive issues of class and gender politics were often subsumed within the wider rhetoric of a nation unified against a common enemy. In terms of the selection process, then, these were the themes I wanted to bring out in my editing of the diary.

My first step was to approach the feminist publishing house, Virago, who replied positively. At Naomi’s prompting and before anything could be agreed with Virago, I also contacted Gollancz. The socialist publisher, Victor Gollancz, had been one of the key supporters of Mass Observation in the 1930s and had published some of their early books.¹¹ By the 1980s, the publishing house was directed by Victor’s daughter Livia, and as it happened she was also Naomi Mitchison’s publisher at the time. In May 1982, I wrote rather breathlessly in my own diary:

I am on the brink of organising a new project with Naomi Mitchison but there is no guarantee that anything will come of it.... Livia Gollancz has asked to visit the Archive and has written me a positive letter. Naomi herself is very interested too. I am quite amazed it has gone so far.¹²

4

Diaries like autobiographies, biographies and memoirs, although taking a written form, are all representations of a life as lived and have much in common with oral testimony.¹³ In particular, the diaries written for Mass Observation can be understood

as emerging from a distinct, though usually imagined, dialogue between the diary-writer and the organisers of Mass Observation.¹⁴ This relationship displays some similar features to the relationship between the oral historian conducting an interview and the person they are interviewing.¹⁵ We can legitimately draw on some of the more analytical literature of oral history to help examine the ways in which a diary can be read as a life narrative. In her first chapter of *Reconstructing Women's Lives*, oral historian Penny Summerfield writes (16):

.....personal narratives are the products of a relationship between discourse and subjectivity personal testimony is inter-subjective in the sense that a narrator draws on the generalised subject available in discourse to construct the particular personal subject. But the personal accounts collected through oral history are also inter-subjective in other ways. The memory texts are products of relationships between subjects and their audiences... and also between the subjects and the performance models available to them.

This emphasis on the understanding of personal testimony as an intersubjective *textual production* is highly relevant in the interpretation of diaries. The work on Naomi's diary had an added layer of complexity. In the negotiations between the story told at one point in history, and a re-reading of that life many years later, it becomes important to recognise how emotionally challenging such a process might be for the author. In an oral account (and without wishing to oversimplify this account) the interviewee usually only has to compose a single retrospective narrative, constructed at the time of the interview.¹⁶ For Naomi, re-reading *her own words* of forty years ago, the challenge was to try to make sense of her past accounts in relation to her present identity. How did she feel about her former self, as she looked again, the first time in years, at all those typed pages? If she agreed to the diary becoming public by working with me, she needed to find ways of accommodating it to her 1980s' identity and her (by then) even better known public persona. What story of her experience of wartime did the diary tell and is it the same as the one she might be telling in the 1980s?¹⁷

Right from these earliest discussions with Naomi, there were questions about the meaning and nature of the diary that could be construed as tensions. In the first place, there were undoubted differences between Naomi's *memory* of her younger self almost fifty years earlier, and the version of herself as represented in her diary, not to mention how she would wish to be seen as a public figure in the 1980s. To complicate matters further, there was also a potential dislocation between *my* understandings of what I was doing as an editor, and *hers* in making her diary public. I never really knew (and

still don't) how she felt about me, a younger woman whom she knew to be a member of the second wave of feminism, coming along with ideas about her diary and how it should be published. So into this knot of intersubjectivity must be added *my* personal motivations and desires as the editor of the diary and the part it played in my own life during the 1980s. I began by wanting to emphasise Naomi as the *private* person as revealed in the diary, whereas *her* understandings of her diary were expressed in an interview she did with Angus Calder in 1982.¹⁸ She asserted to Angus that her main motivation in taking part in Mass Observation was not to put *herself* on paper but arose from her scientific and anthropological interest in the value of social documentary. In one of her earliest letters to me, in response to my first proposal to edit her diary, she wrote:

As for the whole idea I am not sure. I believe the most interesting thing would be to look at key events in the war and see if any of the diaries mentioned them and if so how wrong they got the facts. I know mine seldom mentioned anything military.¹⁹

I replied:

I would like to persuade you that your diary alone would make interesting reading. I agree that comparisons between diaries are useful too but it would be a fairly massive research job which I certainly couldn't undertake. I know it was one of Tom's ideas to compare contemporary accounts of the war with memories to see how different from diaries they are.this seems quite a different task from the publication of a diary as a coherent whole.²⁰

I argued with her that the key values of publishing her diary were both to provide an account of her own reflections on her life as a woman and at the same time provide a description of the life of her village community. She reluctantly consented:

...I have been unwilling to look at it again. It's a bit near the bone. So maybe a kind of collaboration (it wouldn't be so bad seeing it not in my own typescript!) might work.²¹

Any disjunctures between our two understandings of the diary's role were further complicated by the web of relationships existing at the time of its creation including that between Naomi and the people at Mass Observation. Her friend Tom was not the

only person to be receiving the diaries in London. Indeed he delegated much of the paper work to his colleagues in the office. In any case, after 1942 he had departed and other members of the team, less well known to Naomi, would have been processing and acknowledging the diaries as they arrived. Inevitably, any individual diarist's conceptualisation of what a diary should be – in broader terms – was partly a construction of what Mass Observation said they required (and their instructions were notoriously general), and partly depended on the Mass Observer's own ability to draw on a contemporary repertoire of what might constitute a 'diary' at that time. This negotiation with the diary as a genre would have been used by Naomi to play through her various identities: herself as a creative writer, an observer of social life, a socialist, a Scotswoman, a scientist, a mother, housewife, farmer, wife, lover, friend. On the wider front, as Summerfield suggests, she also inevitably drew on national cultural representations through film and the press, propaganda and a variety of government campaigns to construct what it might mean to be a 'wartime woman'.

5

I started work on the editing as soon as Livia Gollancz agreed to consider the final version for publication, mostly working on it in the evenings at home. Many of the issues raised by working on original diaries, which I am now so familiar with, were new to me at that time. I had only a very loose idea of some the challenges that lay ahead. My initial concern was the physical and practical task of reducing the two million words down to book size. I commenced the long iterative process of reading, selecting and deleting. To make a diary 'readable' to the general reader often means constructing a book-shaped narrative which is to some extent artificial. The inclusion of textual signposts at intervals helps to retain continuity. Any cuts have to make sense even if each attempt to reduce word length produces more loose ends. As I went I made notes on people, places and events which might need further investigation and annotation. In those pre-digital days, I kept a hand-written card index of *dramatis personae*, one of the key tools in any diary editor's tool kit, to help me work out who was who. I had to be sure to distinguish the animals from the human beings, the children from the friends. There were two people called Denny, for example, Naomi's eldest son, and her good friend, Denny MacIntosh, one of the local Carradale men. There were many Jims, and Jimmies, and Johns, and many different members of the Haldane family, Naomi's family of origin. There were several Duncans and Dicks – one of whom was Naomi's husband, Dick Mitchison. The diary is full of people: the local people from the village, the fishermen and their families, the farm workers both

local and visiting, the many people who came to stay as a respite from their war work, the London visitors (like the Fabians, Douglas and Margaret Cole) and other political friends, the friends and school mates of Naomi's five children, the teachers and war workers including members of the Free French Army.²² There was a constant flow of people, mostly not explained or described. I decided to include two lists in the final book: a full alphabetical one which runs to ten printed pages, and a shorter one with people in categories (family, guests, fishermen and so on). I wrote in my introduction to the published diary:

It is much harder to pick up the threads of someone's life from a diary than from an autobiography where part of the author's job is to provide background information. This is especially true of a very detailed diary: to dip into it is to catch a glimpse of a life already in motion; the momentum has been gathered many years earlier and there are no reassuringly confidential asides to guide the reader. (Sheridan 1985, 21)

It has been useful to compare my own process of editing with that of other Mass Observation diary editors, above all with Bob Malcolmson who, sometimes with co-editors, including Patricia Malcolmson, and sometimes alone, has published many diaries from the Mass Observation collection including two volumes based on the post-war diaries of Nella Last.²³ All of these diaries have included some form of editorial text: introductions, explanatory notes, glossaries, footnotes and references. The level of editorial input required to help the reader without interfering too much with the narrative flow can be difficult to assess; it depends mostly upon the nature of the diary itself and how the writer wrote, but also on the requirements of the publisher who give priority to the production of a book of a certain length and fluidity. The publisher always has an eye to a sense of narrative structure which might appeal to the reading audience they have in mind.

My principle with Naomi's diary was to give priority to the original text itself and add my own interpolations only where I thought they were needed. I wrote short introductions at the start of each year setting the political scene and filling in details of Naomi's life at the time. Bob Malcolmson has written usefully about correcting punctuation, paragraphing differently, and ensuring consistency and standardisation on the basis that the diarists worked in haste often under difficult conditions and did not have the luxury of re-writing or correcting their texts before sending them off to Mass Observation.²⁴ Much of this kind of editing was not necessary with Naomi's diary. As a professional writer, even her first (and only) draft flowed well.

6

Most of my discussions with Naomi Mitchison herself took place in Carradale. Not only was Naomi still living in the same village in 1982, she was also still living in the same house in which she wrote her diary during the Second World War. Carradale House was an immense, turreted grey-stone mansion close to the sea and set in its own gardens and farmland. I made four visits to stay with her in Scotland – in 1982, 1983 and 1984 and again after the diary was published in 1986. As Naomi suggested when she invited me, these visits allowed me a level of intimacy with her and with the house where she had spent her war years which would have been impossible if I had only worked on the diary in Sussex. Visiting Carradale certainly enabled me to grasp something of the beauty and remoteness of the Carradale estate as well as the grandeur, albeit now rather faded, of the house itself.

All the same, the visits did not result in an entirely comfortable set of experiences – the house was full of people on almost every visit, just as it had been during the Second World War, and staying there was a challenge to my social skills, particularly in class terms, for despite her socialism, and her feminism, Naomi could be a remote, upper class host and I felt that my background did not equip me with the social clout to handle her friends and family (or even to work out who *were* her friends, who was family and who were the paid members of her household and farm). That is partly because the categories were often blurred, as indeed they had been during the Second World War.

On my first visit in 1982, I was driven to Carradale by my friend, the late Angus Calder, who wanted to interview Naomi himself for an article he was writing about Scottish literature. We each took our young sons with us for company. My memory of that visit was that it was quite strained. Angus was at least as awkward as I was. We started off badly by running out of petrol somewhere on the Mull of Kintyre in the pouring rain on the long drive from his home in Edinburgh. It was a Sunday when petrol stations in Scotland were closed. We managed eventually to cadge some petrol from a kindly caravan owner on a remote camping site but when we arrived at Carradale House we were much later than expected and very wet and tired. I wrote at the time:

When we drove up the drive of Carradale House I was tense with excitement. We parked beside several other cars in the entrance and I got out first. Angus muttered something about the cricket score [on the car radio] and made no move to get out. I wondered if he was shy. I steeled myself and went up to a side door. It was a

wooden door leading into what looked like... a modern extension. No one replied to my genteel knock so I opened the door and looked in. At a slightly higher level I could see a roomful of people. It was a kitchen – a huge kitchen. I spotted Naomi through the banisters and she came forward and greeted me warmly by kissing me. The house was magnificent – the immense dining room with one long dark wood table decorated with silver candles and flowers.....When Angus and I went into the drawing room, it was like a morgue. People sat round reading. No one spoke. We got ourselves a glass of sherry....²⁵

Although I appreciated Angus's intellectual help and advice on that trip, I knew I needed a different kind of companion if I was to make the most of my visits to Carradale. On my three subsequent visits, I wisely took my close woman friend, Julia South, whose combination of social poise and warm interest in other people made a huge difference to my experience of being there. She provided me with company of my own age and was helpful both in drawing Naomi out and in giving me thoughtful feedback on the editing process.

7

I have written earlier about the problems of working with a living diary writer. There were also great advantages. Naomi could check details for me and advise on all kinds of contemporary social and political matters. She also lent me the 'top' copy of her diary which she had not sent to Mass Observation but had kept back at Carradale. Mass Observation had received and stored the carbon copy which was harder to read. Occasionally, the last sentence on a page would not have come through, or frustratingly, there were gaps in the page where she had taken the carbon paper out of her typewriter completely. When I asked her about the omitted paragraphs in the Mass Observation copy, she had only the vaguest memories of why she had occasionally done this. She wondered whether it might have been to protect the privacy of other people. Comparing the two versions later it did seem to me as if she was protecting people, generally workers on her farm or local people. It was usually related to her unconfirmed suspicions about their quasi-illegal activities (black marketeering) which we now know was pretty common in many rural communities and a crucial feature of wartime survival. I decided to stay with the 'top' copy as a basis for the published version but the typescript gaps alerted me to the need to provide some degree of privacy for the people described in the diary. This decision about the inclusion of private or sensitive information about people other than the

diarist herself is an issue which faces all editors of diaries and letters. It may be legally impossible to libel those who have died but there is the risk that surviving relatives, friends and neighbours, or their descendants may be offended. Naomi had exercised some degree of caution *at the time* by censoring the diary she sent off although it was soon clear to me that she was reluctant to censor *retrospectively* anything she had written.²⁶

One difficult area concerned the controversial subjects of race and class. My inclination was always to ensure that contemporary expressions of prejudice, class snobbery or racism, including anti-Semitism, remained in the text. This, at the risk of offending readers, seems to me still an important way for us not only to understand the historical context of prejudice but also to respect the original text. If Naomi sometimes spoke through her diary in ways which today would be considered mildly unacceptable (for example about someone's social class, or her interest in Eugenics or her casual awareness of who is and who is not a Jew), then I felt that should not be excised for reasons of historical integrity. I was not able during the editing process to confront this issue with Naomi properly. As a 1980s' public figure, she had championed equality and freedom, and was an active anti-racist; that was also how I wanted to read her. So the subject was never addressed and as far as I remember there is very little in the published diary to suggest that she had ever held views which today might be considered dubious. A few years later, in my introduction to another published anthology, I was more courageous in tackling the question directly and in justifying my editorial approach (Sheridan 1990b, 9-11).

There were however moments when Naomi's commitment to publishing the diary without censorship wavered. As mentioned earlier, the difficulty of confronting oneself many years later was challenging. As she read through the selections I had made, Naomi wrote to me in three consecutive letters during 1984:

I am finding all this quite difficult...

I think you are making a very good job of this though I am spending far too much time talking about my own feelings but then I suppose that is in a way what a diary is all about.

I find I dislike myself more and more.²⁷

But it was not only the image of herself which caused her doubts. There were also sensitive passages reminding her of her own pain and suffering. One particularly

difficult issue arose in connection with the poignant account of the birth of her baby girl in July 1940. When the child was born, Naomi asked for the Red Flag to be raised over the house. Tragically, the baby had a damaged heart and only lived a day or two. 'It was a pretty complete crash...' she wrote shortly afterwards, 'I said to take the flag down and asked Dr Hunter to tell Dick' (Sheridan 1985, 71). Naomi had already suffered the terrible loss of her first child, Geoff, while she was still living in London. He had contracted meningitis and died when he was only nine years old. I did wonder whether she could face this re-telling of her second bereavement and I knew that I would have had to accept its exclusion from the published version if she had felt it was too painful to be made public. I hoped she would feel able to leave it in because she wrote about the experience in such a characteristically moving way that it seemed to me that it would speak to other women's experiences and at the same time it would provide a context and explanation for her subsequent fairly pessimistic feelings about the progress of the war which were expressed later in the diary. We talked about it for a while, and eventually she said that she felt able to leave in the account of that experience.

8

Family members who are described in diaries are often the most vulnerable to an invasion of their privacy. Even when the author of the diary is still around to advise as Naomi was, there may still be problems with references to members of their family. I only discovered the Mitchison family's disquiet on my fourth visit in 1986 after the book had been published. One of Naomi's sons commented to me while we were washing up after a meal that these diaries were not 'the truth' and by implication, perhaps should not have been published. I replied saying that no diary has a monopoly on the truth but that it provided one story, one subjective narrative of a life, and that I believed that when people read diaries, they understood implicitly that it was told from one person's perspective. Naomi overheard the conversation but, according to my own diary at the time, did not intervene. In any case by then the diary was in the public domain. The incident gave me pause for thought, however, and has coloured the ways in which I think about diary publication ever since. In terms of privacy, the most sensitive issues relate not so much to the diarists themselves but to the people about whom they write, many of whom are much younger and may be easily identified. They have had no control over the ways in which they are represented and very little redress. Naomi's children were young at the time she was keeping the diary and she writes about them fairly freely. It must have felt intrusive

to know that accounts by their mother of their teenage years were being perused by the public at large including their own children. I noted in my own diary during one of my conversations with Naomi at Carradale ‘... she got rather nervous about things she written about people. A small example was the phrase about [one of her sons] which she asked me to change.....’.²⁸ I did wonder, when a new edition of her diary was proposed after Naomi’s death in 1999, whether her children would feel able to give consent. It is a tribute to them that they did, and that the diary has continued to be available.

Another incident, relating to the depiction in the diary of other people, occurred on my third visit in October 1984. I wrote in my diary at the time:

A more major drama blew up over a passage describing a walk she took in 1941 with the local head forester. Denny drank heavily like several of the local men and because Naomi was especially fond of him she wrote at length about him and about her efforts to ‘save’ him from the demon drink. I had already cut out several scenes including one lurid one where they cut the palms of their hands to mingle blood in a pact. I left in a nicely written piece where Naomi considers sleeping with him but decides against it. I particularly liked the way she reflects on the possibility of sex and its potential role in helping someone. However the passage has had to be excised. Naomi phoned up [his wife], who duly arrived at Carradale House and was closeted with Naomi for a while on Sunday..... the eventual result was a watering down of one of my linking passages and the deletion of the passage where the sexual possibility is raised.... Had Naomi and [his wife] ever before been able to discuss their relationships with Denny? Denny and his wife had married shortly after the passage was written. They had been in love for some time and had married against their family’s wishes. Denny had been engaged to someone else and no doubt his drinking was of great concern to [her] parents. As it turned out, however, the drinking had lessened. Whether this was as a result of Naomi’s perseverance or whether his marriage sobered him, I can’t say. It occurs to me now that Naomi deceived herself that he would have wanted to make love to her..... I admired Naomi’s courage in talking to [his wife]. Afterwards she said it had been very moving. Both of them have reaffirmed their friendship with each other. Two old, old ladies and a man long dead....²⁹

9

The diary was published in 1985, forty years after Naomi finished writing it. Now more than thirty years after that, I still recall those extraordinary visits to Carradale with gratitude to Naomi and amusement at my younger gauche self which comes across from my own diaries. The experience of working on Naomi's diary, and the related need, as part of the editing process, to research the situation of women during the Second World War had a long-term influence on both my interests and the directions in which my career developed. Not long after the edited diary was published, I registered for a part-time Masters degree at Sussex to study women who had very different experiences of the Second World War from Naomi's, those in the women's wing of the British Army, the Auxiliary Territorial Service (Sheridan 1990a; see also Sheridan 1988). Soon after I completed my MA dissertation in 1988, I returned to the riches of the Mass Observation Archive for a new anthology on women's lives, *Wartime Women* (Sheridan 1990b).

The editing experience also fed into my other books and publications but most of all, it influenced the ways in which I advised the Trustees and steered the policies of the Mass Observation Archive.³⁰ What I had learned was useful when advising researchers using the collection and especially in supporting those who also wished to work on the diaries for publication. At the same time, it provided an important source of case studies, in terms of ethical questions and making editorial decisions, for teaching on the MA in Life History Research which oral historian, Alistair Thomson, and I created at Sussex in the 1990s.³¹ Above all, it informed my practice when I took over direction of the contemporary phase of Mass Observation, the 'MO Project', from 1990 onwards. This revival of a national panel for recording everyday life in Britain, while not inviting diaries, nevertheless concentrated entirely on recruiting volunteer writers to record their lives in the form of autobiographical responses to thematic prompts or questions. This Project still operates today and continually poses the same kinds of ethical and methodological problems which I had first encountered with Naomi's diary.

So Naomi had indeed set me on a path which I had never anticipated and had in many ways an even greater influence on me and on the life of the Mass Observation Archive than that exerted by the dynamic and imaginative Tom Harrison. At the same time, as I have tried to demonstrate, the process was not altogether smooth and the relationship at times seemed, at least to me, fairly formal despite the very personal matters we were discussing. In terms of a 'shared authority', it seemed as if she always inhabited the more powerful role. It is possible that she never appreciated just how

significant the whole project had been for me. While waiting for the publisher's verdict on the draft book in the autumn of 1984, I wrote:

The diary and therefore my relationship with Naomi herself has become a crucial part of my life. I have invested a very large part of the last two and half years into the diary and it has now reached a new and rather worrying stage. In the early days it was enough to keep pottering away on it.... now the bulk of the work is done. Some unknown person, Gollancz's reader in Dorset, is at this moment mulling over the manuscript. Only he and the Gollancz moguls will decide if it can really be published. Except of course for Naomi herself who relies on me as I do on her. Without her I would of course have no diary to work on. Without me, her diary might still be lying in the drawer of her bedroom along with all her old expired passports. But it is inevitably HER diary not mine despite the loving care I have lavished on it. I am only a technician in comparison with her.³²

As I recognised at the time, Naomi made many of the crucial decisions about what should appear and what should not, and although most of the time she concurred with my selection, I will always wonder whether I might have made the same decisions if I had been working alone. As I recognised at the time, it was really Naomi's book. It was she who chose the title *Among you taking notes*. While I was flirting with the more emotive 'Invisible Shoulder' taken from her letter to Harrison, she chose the quotation '*amang ye takin' notes*' from a Robert Burns' poem.³³

Her choice of title demonstrates that Naomi intended to strengthen the Scottish dimension of her diary which continued to be important to her throughout the rest of her life but which perhaps I, as a southern-dweller, had not sufficiently appreciated in the 1980s. She was also emphasising her *ethnographic* role which was the cornerstone of Mass Observation's original manifesto. This insistence on the Mass Observation diarist as observer, someone looking on and taking notes, rather than as autobiographer has come to mean more to me over the years and has shifted the way I think about all the Mass Observation diarists. For the writers, the texts were so much more than personal and subjective autobiographical documents. They were also intentionally written as ethnographic records – reports from the frontline by people who wanted to contribute to history and social science. Naomi chose to emphasise the specifically *social* function of her diary as a contribution to a collective endeavour for the years of the Second World War. At the same time, reflecting on the diary when she wrote the Foreword, she was forced to confront the very personal nature of her diary

and what it revealed about her hopes and fears for the future. She wrote rather wistfully:

Was I as I appear in the diary? I rather hope not as I don't like myself much, but with any luck the book will be read less for the diarist than for what we at the time thought was happening and how we acted. It reads sadly, at least I think so, because it is full of hope for a new kind of world, for something different, happier, more honest, for a new relationship between people who had been cut off from one another by money, power and class structure. It was the same kind of vision that people have had all over the world whenever they have begun to question the morality of the system they happen to live under. But a bright vision fades, always, always.... (Mitchison 1985, 12-13)

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About the Author

Dorothy Sheridan began work with the Mass Observation Archive (MOA) at the University of Sussex in 1974, going on to be its archivist and later director, and co-launching a new collecting phase of Mass Observation in 1981. She has written, taught and published in areas related to social history, women's history, life history and archiving, and was awarded an MBE in 1991 for this work. In 2007, she received an honorary doctorate from the Open University and became an honorary professor at Sussex. She left her post of Head of Special Collections at Sussex in 2010 but remains linked to the MOA and is also an Advisor to the National Life Story Collection at the British Library. Since retiring from paid employment, she has re-directed her life story interests into activist and community work including refugee support and teaching English.

Notes

Further discussion of issues concerning the context and character of MO's life writings, and their editing and publication, can be found in the four related articles published in this volume.

¹ The exchange of letters between Naomi Mitchison and myself, and my contemporary diaries, during the process of *editing* her original MO diary can be seen as part of a wider web of diary- and letter-writing stimulated by Mass Observation. Andrea Salter argues that 'M-O as an organisation and also its diarists multiply drew on epistolary conventions and practices' (94; cf. 131). See further Ashplant, "'Subjective Cameras'" (in this volume).

² The resonant notion of a 'shared authority', or the process in oral history practice where the interviewer and the interviewee work together to arrive at a negotiated and collaborative understanding of the history they are creating, was introduced by US oral historian, Michael Frisch.

³ The biographer Richard Holmes captured something of the symbiotic relationship between the biographer and the subject of study: '...identification or self-projection is pre-biographic and is in a sense pre-literate: but it is an essential motive for following in the footsteps, for attempting to re-create the pathway, the journey of someone else's life' (67).

⁴ Information about Mass Observation and the Mass Observation Archive may be found on its website: www.massobs.org.uk.

⁵ For a full account of Tom Harrisson's extraordinary life, see Heimann.

⁶ After Harrisson's death, Professor Briggs invited David Pocock, Professor of Social Anthropology at Sussex, to take over the role of Director in Harrisson's place. Pocock remained the senior member of the University responsible for the Archive until it was taken under the wing of the University

Librarian in the early 1980s. David Pocock launched a second phase of Mass Observation in 1981. He retired in 1990.

⁷ The one day diaries or 'Day Surveys' as MO called them were the precursors to the full daily diaries which were invited from MO's national panel of contributors from September 1939 onwards. In February 1937, the newly formed small group of volunteers was asked to document in detail everything from waking until sleeping on the 12th of each month. The resulting accounts included detailed accounts of activities on 12th May 1937, the Coronation Day of George VI. These were combined with other reports and turned into MO's first substantial publication: *May the Twelfth: Mass Observation Day Surveys* which was published by Faber later that same year (Jennings and Madge).

⁸ For further information about Naomi's career, see the two biographies by Benton and Jenni Calder; and also Caldecott, and Joannou.

⁹ For example, Naomi's brother was the eminent socialist and biologist J.B.S. Haldane (1892–1964). The Haldane family had been feudal barons in Scotland since the 13th century, but were nevertheless known for their achievements in other spheres. Her uncle was Richard Burdon Haldane, 1st Viscount Haldane, twice Lord Chancellor (from 1912-1915 under the Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, and in 1924 during the first Labour government led by Ramsay Macdonald).

¹⁰ The Mass Observation Project, as it eventually became known, was a re-launch of the idea of co-ordinating a national panel of volunteers from all over the UK who contribute accounts of their daily lives. It began in 1981 and is still in operation, producing an archive which is almost as large as the original collection. Most of this more recent material is open for access. See www.massobs.org.uk/menu_writing_for_us.htm.

¹¹ Victor Gollancz supported Mass Observation in its early days by commissioning four books based on the studies carried out in Bolton before the Second World War (the Worktown Project). In the end only one book appeared, *The Pub and the People*, and that not until 1943, partly because war intervened. Gollancz went on to publish four more books from Mass Observation between 1943 and 1961.

¹² Sheridan diary, 25 May 1982. Private collection.

¹³ See, for example, Ken Plummer's outline of what different forms of expression might constitute 'documents of life' in his seminal *Documents of Life 2* (2001, 17).

¹⁴ The relationship between the imagined audience of the MO organisers, and the diary-writer, is discussed in Ashplant, "Subjective Cameras" (in this volume).

¹⁵ Lucy Noakes (80-82) compares MO writing with oral history and autobiography.

¹⁶ The notion of 'composure' in memory and identity work has been developed Graham Dawson (ch. 1). In its application to oral history testimonies, it has been developed by Alistair Thomson (2013, 14).

¹⁷ For a discussion of how memories change over time, and earlier autobiographical narratives are re-evaluated, see Thomson 2011, ch. 8.

¹⁸ Angus Calder includes Naomi Mitchison in his book of essays on the Scottish Arts (1994, 173-177).

¹⁹ Unpublished letter to Dorothy Sheridan from Naomi Mitchison while travelling in Delhi, 23 March 1982. Mass Observation Archive, The Keep, Sussex, SxMOA/40/3/1.

²⁰ Unpublished letter to Naomi Mitchison from Dorothy Sheridan, 1 April 1982. SxMOA/40/3/1.

²¹ Unpublished letter to Dorothy Sheridan from Naomi Mitchison, 7 April 1982. SxMOA/40/3/1.

²² A most vivid description of the scene within the Mitchison household at Carradale House (and one which confirms my own impressions) can be found in Candia McWilliam's memoir (122-125).

²³ All the Mass Observation diaries which have been edited for publication can be found listed on the website at www.massobs.org.uk/publications_1974_onwards.htm.

²⁴ See for example, the section on 'Editorial Practice' in Malcolmson and Searby, xiii – xiv.

²⁵ Sheridan diary, 4 August 1982. Private collection.

²⁶ Most other Mass Observation diarists seemed to be quite open in what they described and discussed. This might have been because, at the time they were writing, they did not expect extracts from their diaries to appear under their real names. They wrote assuming that they were contributing *collectively* to the contemporary published reports and that their identities would be concealed within

Mass Observation. As a result, taken as a whole, there are at least as many confessional or frank diaries within the collection as you might find within any other more randomly collected diaries.

²⁷ Letters from Naomi Mitchison to Dorothy Sheridan in January 1984 and July 1984. SxMOA/40/3/1.

²⁸ Sheridan diary, 9 October 1984. Private collection.

²⁹ Sheridan diary, 9 October 1984. Private collection.

³⁰ The Mass Observation Archive was set up by Tom Harrisson and Asa Briggs as an independent charitable trust in the care of the University of Sussex. It is currently the responsibility of eight Trustees.

³¹ During the 1990s, one of the first MA degrees in life history research was set up and taught at the University of Sussex by Alistair Thomson and myself. It was innovative in that it combined both oral history and auto/biographical approaches in social and historical research in terms of theory, methodology and ethics. It ran under the auspices of the Centre of Continuing Education until the mid-2000s.

³² Sheridan diary, 23 September 1984. Private collection.

³³ From Robert Burns, "On the late Captain Grose's Peregrinations Thro' Scotland" (1793): 'A chield's *amang ye takin' notes*. And, faith, he'll prent it'.