



Seven Late Twentieth-Century Lives: the Mass Observation Project and Life Writing

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Abstract

From its revival in 1981, the Mass Observation Project has collected life writing. In response to open ended questionnaires ('directives'), MO correspondents send in what often amount to fragments of autobiography. While this material has been explored by researchers 'horizontally', to discuss attitudes and behaviour in relation to the themes raised by particular directives, my book *Seven Lives from Mass Observation* is the first attempt to use the material 'vertically', assembling the fragments of autobiography contributed by some individual writers who continued to respond over two or three decades. In an earlier book, *Nine Wartime Lives*, I used MO's original wartime diaries (and directive responses) to write biographical essays exploring a set of common themes, derived from the mature historiography of the period, from the contrasting perspectives of nine very different observers who had all participated as active citizens in public life. This article describes the very different challenges and insights posed by the use of the more recent MOP material. The longer time frame, and less developed historiography, demanded toleration of initial confusion in the research process before the key theme of a contrast between the 1960s and 1980s emerged. The reflective narrative of MOP's autobiographical fragments (different from the immediacy of the MO wartime diaries) shaped the sample chosen: a single older generational cohort, born between the two world wars, responding to the 1960s and the 1980s as adults formed by earlier experiences. Writing intimate

biographies of living people, guaranteed anonymity when they first volunteered for MOP, required developing a set of ethical protocols in conjunction with the MO Trustees.

Keywords: Mass Observation, life writing, research ethics

From its revival in 1981, Mass Observation has been collecting life writing from its volunteer contributors. Three times a year, in response to open ended questionnaires ('directives'), the MO correspondents send in what often amount to fragments of autobiography. This material has been explored by social researchers 'horizontally': i.e. used to discuss attitudes and behaviour in relation to the themes raised by a particular directive (or in some cases several directives.) My book, *Seven Lives from Mass Observation* (2016), was the first attempt to use the material 'vertically': i.e. to assemble the fragments of autobiography contributed by some of the individual writers who continued to respond for two or three decades after the new project was launched.¹

Some years earlier I had made similar use of the material collected during the original phase of MO (1937-49) (Hinton 2010). Mass Observation's founders had been quick to understand that what was of most value was not the volunteers' observation of other people – their efforts as amateur ethnologists – but what they had to say about their own attitudes and behaviour. The main use they made of the material was for the purposes of opinion research, where MO was operating in competition with the emergent industry of quantitative opinion polling, and they struggled to establish the value of their own qualitative methods with a panel of volunteers who could in no way be claimed as representative of the population at large. In the positivistic intellectual atmosphere of the time, the representative samples of the pollsters appeared to be far more reliable guides to public opinion, and MO's polemics against the apparent solidity of the artificial blocs of opinion created by the pollster's tick-box procedures fell on deaf ears.²

When the war broke out, the volunteers were encouraged to supplement their directive replies with daily (or weekly) diaries, and many of them did so. Although MO raided the diaries for illustrative material in opinion reports, their main value was seen as providing material from which future historians would be able to write the social history of the war. When historians started to do this, in the 1960s, they made extensive use of the directive replies (and MO's contemporary summaries of them); but the diaries themselves remained largely untouched.³ One or two were edited for

publication, most notably Nella Last's (Broad and Fleming), and citations from her printed text became a staple in histories of the British 'home front' during the war. More systematic use of the diaries, however, was inhibited by the problem of representativeness, even more acute for the diaries than the directive replies; as Tom Harrisson, who had thought about this during the war, later remarked: 'At this degree of intimacy the word "typical" is no longer suitable. No one is privately typical of anyone else.' (Harrisson, 254) Historians were also inhibited by the sheer scale of the (largely handwritten) archive, and the difficulty (prior to digitisation) of accessing the writing of single individuals, since the diaries, like the directives, were stored by month rather than by author. It was not until the 'subjective' or 'biographical' turn, of the late twentieth century that the diaries began to come into their own.

In *Nine Wartime Lives* (2010) I made use of the wartime diaries (and directive responses) to write a cluster of biographical essays, designed to explore a set of common themes from the contrasting perspectives of nine very different actors united only by the fact that all of them, in one way or another, had participated as active citizens in public life. Because the material I used came almost exclusively from the war years, and because there was already in existence a mature historiography of the period, the common themes largely suggested themselves – the impact of the war on active citizenship; the light thrown by these years on the long twentieth-century processes of democratisation in private life; and the search for meanings in life that could transcend the wartime context of limitless violence. The quantity, immediacy and intimacy of the diary material, enhanced by directives which prompted the volunteers to reflect on and write about every aspect of their lives, thoughts and feelings, provided an extremely rich source from which to construct biographical accounts of these wartime lives.

The second phase of MO (now known as the MO Project), which is ongoing, was launched in 1981 by David Pocock, the anthropologist in charge of the archive from the first phase which had found a home at the University of Sussex. No diaries have been solicited,⁴ but by 2015 around 2,600 individuals had at one time or another sent in responses to the thrice-yearly directives. Half of these correspondents (as the volunteers are now called) quickly lapsed, but around 1,100 people remained for between two and ten years, 250 for up to 20 years, and a similar number for more than 20 years, a select few writing for the whole period from 1981 to the present.⁵ Initially little thought was given to methodological issues. The purpose of the new project – which was expected to be short lived – was simply to collect material for the use of future historians. But under the influence of Pocock's assistant and (in 1990) successor, Dorothy Sheridan, the MOP soon came to see itself as part of the wider upsurge of

'history from below' inspired by History Workshop, community publishing, and the methodological debates surrounding oral history. By the early 1990s Sheridan and others were publishing sophisticated reflections on the nature of MOP writing. (Sheridan 1993; 1996; Sheridan, Street and Bloome) By now well aware that what the MOP was collecting was a species of life writing, Sheridan ensured that the directives were geared to soliciting autobiographical material as well as the correspondents' current experience and views. Alongside directives on everyday life (including the occasional diary of a single day) and political, economic, social, cultural and religious affairs, correspondents were asked to write about, among other things, their childhood, education, work, marriage, mid-life crises and the experience of ageing.

When I started work on my book, most scholars using the material had treated it as a series of one-off exercises in qualitative research, rather than as life writing, with little attempt being made to locate the views expressed by particular individuals in response to one directive in the context of their regular MOP writing. There is, of course, no easy way of doing that. Since the material is not (yet) digitised, and is stored by directive rather than by author, the practical difficulty of accessing material sent in by particular individuals remain.

I set out to use the MOP material in a similar way to my use of the wartime material – in this case using writing sent in over 20 or more years from several individual respondents as the basis for a collection of biographical essays focussed on the later twentieth century. In the remainder of this article I discuss some of the problems I encountered in doing this. Set out like this my procedures give an entirely misleading impression of a well-directed and coherent plan of research. In reality such order as I achieved emerged from long months of chaos, reminding me, once again, that an important (and little taught) skill of the researcher lies in learning not to be frightened by confusion, and to be prepared to explore in whatever directions present themselves in the hope that sooner or later something coherent will take shape.

As with my work on the wartime diaries I allowed the organising themes to emerge from my movement back and forth between reading the MOP material and exploring secondary literature about the social and cultural history of later twentieth-century Britain. Dealing with a longer period and a less developed historiography than I had encountered in my work on the war, I found it more difficult to choose coherent themes to link the essays, eventually settling for the respondents' reactions to the shifts identified with the 1960s and the 1980s. In our attempts to anchor the chaotic flux of historical time we tend to invest decades with meaning, although on closer inspection the meanings we attach to these pleasingly round numbers usually defy their apparent fixity. Neo-liberalism preceded Mrs Thatcher's 1980s, and what we mean by

'the 1960s' could well be dated from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s. Moreover the relationship between these two historical moments was complex and often paradoxical: Thatcher might denounce the permissive society, but one reason why neo-liberalism was so difficult to resist was that 'the 1960s' had already done much to loosen the ties previously binding individuals into received patterns of social solidarity. The reverberations of these two moments could be felt, in very varied ways, in each of my selected correspondent's lives. Some felt left behind by history, but their disappointment or bewilderment is as much a part of the history of these years as are the fashionable enthusiasms of the young. Others responded positively to the tides of change, and for several 'the 1960s' provided the occasion for life-changing experiences. As self-reflective individuals, they were all engaged in re-thinking the apparent certainties of their upbringing and youth, stimulated not only by the broad currents of cultural change, but also by MO's probing questionnaires which insistently confronted them with questions about every aspect of their own identities and values.

I began by sampling a handful of responses from a hundred or so of the most prolific MOP correspondents, gradually narrowing down my selection according to the vividness and intimacy of the writing; its relevance to my (emerging) themes; and the need to select individuals, both women and men, from as widely as possible across the social spectrum. As in the first phase of MO, the MOP correspondents are disproportionately drawn from the middle classes, and my eventual selection comprised a senior corporate executive, a teacher, two social workers, the wife of a small businessman, a junior manager in local government, and a lorry driver. It was only late in the day that I realised that I was being drawn towards choosing people from a single generational cohort, all of them born between the two world wars, people who were, therefore, responding to the 1960s and the 1980s as adults already formed by earlier experiences. Partly this reflected the fact that the MOP correspondents, unlike the original MO panel, were disproportionately drawn from older age groups. More importantly, however, it reflected the nature of the writing – and especially its difference from the diary material I had made use of in *Nine Wartime Lives* (which included people from several different generational cohorts).

While the wartime diaries contained fragments of autobiography, the bulk of the writing concerned immediate (and therefore relatively unmediated) experience, the thoughts and doings of a day or a week. With the MOP responses, written only three times a year, often over several weeks, the balance between immediacy and autobiography was reversed. MO and MOP gave me quite different kinds of access to the lives of the respondents – the immediacy of the diary versus the reflective narrative of the autobiographical fragments – and this difference pushed me towards

selecting older people, most of them retired or close to retirement by the time they started writing for MO, because their autobiographical reflections tended to be fuller, richer, deeper, more considered than those of younger people caught up in the throes of establishing a family and making a living.

Researchers who have used the MOP material frequently comment on the bond of trust built up between correspondents and the archive. It is not unusual for correspondents to say that they are revealing things to MO that they have never told their partners or their closest friends. Since they share the archive's goal of preserving the thoughts and feelings of 'ordinary people' for future generations, and are guaranteed anonymity, the correspondents have no reason to dissimulate. Because their responses are written rather than (as in an oral history interview) spoken, they are not subject to the self-censoring dynamics of even the most sensitively conducted face-to-face meeting. Moreover the gap between receiving the directive and writing the response gives them time to reflect on the issues raised and to interrogate their immediate reactions in search of an honest response. The more introspective of the writers take pains to explore their doubts and confusions, the complexities of their private feelings as against the apparent certainties of their 'public' opinions.⁶

Nevertheless, as I worked on my selected correspondents I became aware of an absence. Dependent for the most part on retrospective accounts of experience, fragments of autobiography, I missed the immediacy of the wartime diaries. Although even diaries do not provide an unmediated window on the soul, the daily practice of diary writing leaves a jagged record of emotional fluctuations and intellectual confusions that tends to be ironed out by the smoother contours of autobiographical composition. Even where a diary is started with an expectation that future historians would read it – as in MO's wartime diaries – the daily practice of writing tends towards an interior dialogue with the self, and the sense of addressing an external audience becomes secondary: that, at least, was the impression I gained from submerging myself in the wartime diaries. With the directive responses, the imagined audience is far more present, if only because the directive is lying on the table beside the writer's notepad or typewriter.

But the difference between the diaries and the autobiographical writing is not primarily a question of audience. Even in the latter the most important audience remains the self, and the smoothing and reworking that occurs has less to do with presenting oneself in a good light to others, than it does with the endless process by which we construct narratives of our lives in such a way as to make ourselves acceptable to ourselves. The purpose of autobiography, which we all engage in every time we tell and re-tell stories from our pasts, is to find composure:⁷ and this is

particularly true of the older people I found myself selecting. This characteristic of the MOP material was brought home sharply to me by one of my subjects who also kept a daily diary (not for MO) which, after his death, his widow gave to the archive. There are striking contrasts between the story he tells in his directive replies, and the story as it unfolds in the diary. There is no dishonesty involved. This man was at least as committed as any of the others to providing MO with an accurate account of his experience for use by future historians. The discrepancy arises because the reflective autobiographical voice brings a measure of composure where the diaries, so much closer to the raw experience, record angst and confusion.

Finally, there are the ethical issues involved. The correspondents are guaranteed anonymity and, while all of those I selected had given copyright of their material to the archive, they retain a right for their privacy not be invaded (as do the other people about whom they may have disclosed sensitive information). The sense of shared purpose and the trusting relationship that correspondents have with the archive is critical to the value of the material solicited, and those who act as MO's Trustees have a duty to ensure that nothing is done with the material that will jeopardise that relationship. In the case of my work on the wartime diarists this did not pose too much of a problem. They were all dead, and (with the consent of their children where it was possible to trace them) I was able to write about them without disguising their identities, thus making it possible, where relevant, to make use of evidence about them from sources extraneous to the MO archive. In one case where it proved impossible to trace a (probably) living child, the diarist concerned was given a pseudonym.

For the MOP writers the ethical problems seemed far more acute, and, since no one has previously attempted to use the material in this way, both the Trustees and myself were feeling our way. In order to protect the identity of correspondents MO catalogues them under code numbers, redacting any real names or addresses that may appear in their contributions. Normally, researchers have no access to the volunteers. In the rare cases where this is requested the correspondent is asked before any contact is allowed. In my case all those approached agreed to meet me so that I could explain what I was doing, and ask them questions about issues that had arisen from their MOP writings. All but one of the seven individuals who figure in the book do so under a pseudonym – the exception being the lorry driver who insisted with characteristic boldness that he has never done anything in life that he would mind appearing on the front page of the *Daily Mirror*. It is, however, difficult to write a biography that will not be recognisable to the children, partners, friends and others who have known the subject well.

By the time we met I had written a draft of the relevant chapter, and Dorothy Sheridan, who accompanied me with a watching brief on behalf of the MO Trustees, had read these drafts. Between us, therefore, we were able to gauge their feelings about the eventual publication of the more sensitive parts of their stories. We were surprised and gratified by their responses: none of them placed restrictions on my use of the material, although as an added safeguard each correspondent was sent final drafts for their comments before publication. Two of the seven subjects were dead. In one case, we interviewed the surviving partner who, after some hesitation, gave me permission to tell her husband's story in full. In the other case, deterred by the record of family tensions, we decided not to attempt to contact surviving relatives, and the account was written with an eye to minimising any possibility of identification.

I had expected to encounter difficult ethical problems when writing intimate biographies of living people. As things turned out this was not the case. The mass observers write because they want their views to be heard and their lives to be recorded for history. But it is reassuring to know that the MOP Trustees now have a procedure for handling the potential difficulties of such an enterprise. Since they hold the copyright of the mass observers' writing, it would have been, in the last analysis, up to the Trustees rather than the writers (or myself), to decide what could or could not be published. I was confident throughout that they would approach any such decision with a view to balancing the feelings of the correspondent concerned, the trust that other correspondents place in the archive, and the purpose of the archive as a resource for scholarly enquiry.

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About the Author

James Hinton, Professor Emeritus at the University of Warwick, has published widely on the social history of twentieth-century Britain, including books on labour history, women's history and the peace movement. Since retiring in 2004 he has written a history of Mass Observation and two collections of biographical essays based on the writing of the mass observers. Currently, using his own youthful diaries, poems and letters, he is trying his hand at an autobiographical essay.

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 I owe this terminology to Tony Kushner whose *We Europeans? Mass-Observation, 'Race' and British Identity in the Twentieth Century* includes a pioneering attempt to trace the evolution of individual mass observers' attitudes.

² For discussion of this, and the history of the first phase of MO in general, see Hinton 2013.

³ E.g. Calder; Addison.

⁴ Although a number of people have sent in diaries un-solicited.

⁵ These rough totals are derived from calculations based on information in the on-line MOP catalogue.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of the nature of the MOP writing, and the use to which it has been put by researchers, see Pollen.

⁷ On 'composure' see Dawson, 22-5; Summerfield.