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Mass Observation, Counterculture and the 'Art of Living'

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Abstract: Mass Observation was the most ambitious and controversial investigation into cultural life in Britain in the twentieth century. Buoyed by a democratic spirit yet riven by eclectic intellectual allegiances, the project, in its inception, revelled in contradictions, many of which have endured in its legacy. This paper revisits the early countercultural aspirations of Mass Observation in order to reflect on the significance of these contradictions for the fate of popular writing. It is argued that the tensions between art, philosophy and science, as articulated in the inaugural statements of Mass Observation, are illuminated by the anti-elitist agenda of the founders. Building on these insights, the paper revisits controversies in the use of Mass Observation data for research and calls upon the findings from a recent recreation of Mass Observation Diary Day (12 May 2024) to argue that Mass Observation's 'science of ourselves' be reconsidered as creative cultural production and a contribution to the 'art of living'.

Keywords: Mass Observation; British culture; creativity; writing; class

1. Introduction

According to David Hall, 'Mass Observation was probably the largest investigation into popular culture to be carried out in Britain in the twentieth century' (Hall 2015, p. 1). Established in 1937 by the left-wing poet and journalist Charles Madge, painter and documentary film-maker Humphrey Jennings and the ornithologist and amateur anthropologist Tom Harrisson, this novel and wide-ranging inquiry into the customs, habits and daily routines of the nation 'became one of the defining cultural phenomena of Britain in the late 1930s' (Hall 2015, p. 1). In a letter in *The New Statesman and Nation* on 30th of January 1937, the group announced the formation of a 'science of Mass Observation' as the crystallisation of an idea that 'was being worked out in many separate brains' (p. 155). The history of this remarkable concurrence is well known. Tom Harrisson, separately engaged in his own anthropological study of working-class life in Bolton, joined forces with London-based Madge and Jennings, having learned of their project in an earlier issue of *The New Statesman* (2 January). By chance, Harrisson's poem 'Coconut Moon' was printed on the same page as Madge's letter—a happenstance that would have appealed to the Blackheath intellectuals, who at the time were fascinated by Freud's essay on coincidence. In his letter, Madge had responded to Geoffrey Pyke's suggestion that Britain stood in desperate need of an anthropological study of 'our own civilization' (Hubble 2006, p. 107). When the group letter appeared at the end of January, it bore the title 'Anthropology at Home' (Harrisson et al. 1937) and referenced Pyke's suggestion that the Simpson crisis (the prospect of Mrs. Simpson becoming queen) occasioned reflection on whether the press was merely reporting public opinion or actively shaping it—the latter a prospect Madge knew all too well as a reporter on the *Daily Mirror* (Hubble 2006, p. 104). It was thus in the pages of the left-wing literary press that the Mass Observation movement came to be.

At its core, there was something fundamentally anarchic about Mass Observation (hereafter MO). Formed from 'the cross currents of 1930s radicalism' (Hinton 2010, p. 2), the movement in its early phase was distinctive for the boldness of its social ambition, the idiosyncrasy of its borrowings from a plethora of disciplines and the peculiarity of its sites

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of inquiry. In the 30 January letter announcing the project, the names of Darwin, Marx, Freud and the British anthropologist, Tylor, are listed alongside such areas for investigation as 'shouts and gestures of motorists', 'the private lives of midwives' and 'the aspidistra cult'. This eccentric collection and juxtaposition of ideas clearly owed something to the interest that Madge and Jennings took in French Surrealism and psychoanalysis, particularly the charged and unconscious meanings of everyday images. Indeed, as Matthew Chambers has commented, characterising MO as 'ethnographic surrealism' has 'become the most popular way of dealing with the movement's early "interdisciplinary" approach, as it explains its borrowing of rhetoric from both art and science' (Chambers 2015, p. 78). However, MO, in its early incarnation, is distinctively resistant to any swift characterisation. Critical of the 'aestheticizing' tendencies in Surrealism and its awkward fit with leftist politics, the three poets maintained an uneasy relationship with 'high' art. Accordingly, from its inception, MO was distinctive for its anti-intellectualist and democratising agenda of deploying insights from the 'social sciences' of anthropology, psychology and sociology; for cultivating a new, jargon-free and accessible idiom; and for recruiting volunteer 'observers' who would provide the points from which 'weather maps of public feeling' could be plotted in a crisis (*The New Statesman*, 2 January).

The findings of these observers were to be supplemented by volunteers tasked to keep a diary of their everyday experiences as well as to comment on 'directives' (questionnaires) ranging from topics such as eating habits to post-war hopes and expectations. Whilst Harrisson organised an intensive study of the Lancashire cotton town of Bolton (referred to by the observers as 'Worktown'), Madge and Jennings organised day surveys to take place on the 12th of every month, starting in February 1937. Unlike the other MO projects, the day survey format offered the volunteers more freedom in their responses. Although Madge hoped that observers would identify dominant 'images' in their reports (Hubble 2006, p. 119), the exercise gave the amateur writers a blank canvas to discuss everything they did between rising and going to bed. The request was repeated for each month of 1937, including George VI's Coronation on 12 May. The volunteers corresponded directly with MO headquarters, and did not have access to other volunteers' writings until the founders made selected materials available for publication in *May the Twelfth* (1937), *First-Year's Work* (1938) and *Britain by Mass-Observation* (1939) (Walker 2016, p. 213).

May the Twelfth (1937) contained excerpts from the day surveys of over two hundred observers on the day of the Coronation of George VI and was published with minimal contextualisation, offering a fragmented array of different voices. Ben Highmore describes this 'montage' technique as a critical response to the techniques of newspapers and the institutionalised forms of social criticism found in governmental agencies (Highmore 2002, p. 95). However, *May the Twelfth* was an expensive hardback book (12 s 6d), well beyond the means of the panel of volunteer authors, and sold only 800 copies (Highmore 2002, p. 95). The experiment was not repeated in this form, and after February 1938, the original brief was abandoned. Special focus was now accorded to key days (such as Bank Holidays and Armistice Day), and the national panel were issued with time sheets to keep more precise accounts of their daily activities. The trend towards standardisation continued throughout the next decade. By the time of the Second World War, Mass Observation had been commissioned by the Ministry of Information to monitor the nation's morale and to explore attitudes to government policy, including war restrictions to everyday life and the impact of propaganda (Sheridan 1992, pp. 102–3). Indeed, MO soon found itself competing with market researchers for the same commissions and, on occasion, would work alongside them. For example, in anticipation of wartime rationing of butter, it collaborated with Lintas on a report 'on the social prejudices against margarine' (Moran 2008, p. 832). In the wake of the pioneering 'experiment' in 'building a cultural sphere or counter public sphere' (Highmore 2022, p. 8), MO fell into decline as a social research organisation (Pollen 2013, p. 216). As the only remaining founder member, Harrisson sold the MO name in 1949 for use in commercial market research in exchange for the rights to the early papers (Pollen 2013, p. 216).

As Nick Hubble has commented, the opinion-gathering methods employed by MO were in many ways 'the direct precursors of the sampling and focus group work that has become so influential in Britain since the 1990s', but whether they served to transform or merely reflect public opinion during the Second World War remains open to question (Hubble 2006, p. 3). In any case, with each passing year, the trajectory of MO in the twentieth century was towards the analysis of consumption and away from experiments in cultural production. When MO was revived as a social research organisation by the University of Sussex in 1981 (now the Mass Observation Project), its focus fell somewhere between the two, its initial remit being to canvass members of the public to respond to socially relevant 'directives'. It was not until 2010 that the day surveys were rehabilitated. As a result, there has been much recent interest in their research relevance, particularly in relation to issues in oral history and life writing (Ashplant 2021; Hurdley 2022; Purcell 2022). However, to date, there has been far less consideration of this aspect of MO writing in relation to its countercultural legacy, the significance of which can only be appreciated by revisiting its founding statements. It is only by clarifying the stakes of the peculiar arguments regarding science, art and philosophy in the inaugural MO publications that it is possible to identify the cultural and political radicality of MO volunteer writing today.

2. Revisiting *Mass Observation* (1937)

In *The New Statesman* letter from 30 January 1937, the MO founders had promised to produce a pamphlet outlining 'a programme of action', the result of which was the 64-page *Mass Observation* (1937), swiftly authored by Madge and Harrisson in the early months of 1937. The cover designed by Jennings features brief extracts from the day surveys already produced by volunteer observers—a snapshot of the 'weather maps' of public feeling. On the back cover, Madge and Harrisson declare that the text is the first publication of a new organisation dedicated to the collection of 'a mass of data based upon practical observation, on the everyday life of all types of people'. They add that the data will be used 'for scientific study of Twentieth-Century Man in all his different environments'. In essence a manifesto, the pamphlet is the signature statement of Mass Observation as both a practice and an ideal.

Two points of historical context are in order. First, the authors reference the rise of fascism in Spain and Germany and the Italian aggression in Ethiopia ('the bringing of "civilization" to Abyssinia') as forcing home the point that a 'science of ourselves is a crying necessity today' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 11). They caution that a 'revival of racial superstition', stirring primitive beliefs only partly sublimated, should not drive us back into 'ways of thought that science has replaced' ('we are all in danger of extinction from such outbursts of atavism') (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 11). Second, the authors claim that the newly literate 'mass' are prey to the persuasion industries of advertising and entertainment which offer 'a continuous supply of automatic thinking and foregone conclusions appearing as spontaneous thinking and voluntary conclusions' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 17). Accordingly, the new 'science' of MO will address these powerful sites of superstition by countering the dominant meanings that are perpetuated by the popular press. Arguing that mass media employ the best empirical anthropologists to aim their suggestions at 'the part of the human mind where the superstitious elements predominate' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 20), they propose the counter measure of a monthly bulletin, designed for wide circulation: 'It will be an experiment in co-operative newspaper-making, since those who read it will also help write it' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 41). It is through this people's takeover of the media and the amassing of 'facts' that a challenge will be made to 'the voicelessness of everyman and the smallness of the group which controls fact-getting and fact-distributing' (Harrisson and Madge 1939, p. 9).

In this way, MO establishes itself as a 'counter-form' to the way that radio and newspapers speak 'on behalf' of an audience or a readership (Highmore 2022, p. 24). Nevertheless, it is made clear that the MO 'programme of action' will be 'scientific' and not political—the first of a number of tensions to surface in this provocative pamphlet. Science has the power to supplant 'superstition', but how it will succeed in doing so is not obvious since the role

of the mass observer will not be one of ideology critique. On the contrary, superstitions number among the 'facts' that MO will 'examine and describe' without passing any 'moral judgment' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 12). Thus, it becomes apparent early on in *Mass Observation* (1937) that the term 'science', sprinkled liberally throughout this publication, will perform several contradictory roles.

MO introduces itself as a movement dedicated to the 'scientific study of human social behaviour, beginning at home' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 10), its 'new method' aiming to pluralise the viewpoints that are broadcast in British culture. On the grounds that we know so little of 'ourselves', of 'our next-door neighbour and his habits' or 'of conditions of life and thought in another class or district', MO promises to 'make use of not only the trained scientific observer, but of the untrained observer, the man in the street' (1937, p. 10). The rallying cry to collective participation is progressive, but at the margins of the text, the vestiges of hierarchy linger. Despite planning to recruit observers from all classes, localities and opinions to mitigate 'bias', the reader is assured that MO will enjoy 'more rigorous objectivity' on account of the input of the 'professional scientist' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 35). Time and again, the founders of MO defer to the 'expert' to legitimise the authority of their enterprise. Moreover, we are informed that MO intends to collect data on which 'science will one day build new hypotheses and theories' but that 'in the meantime, we must patiently amass material, without unduly prejudging or preselecting from the total number of available facts' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 29). The quietism of this stance is justified by the authors on the grounds that 'no scientist considers the consequences of his research at the time he is conducting his experiment' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, pp. 46–47), a claim that sits uneasily alongside the assertion that today 'science is too busy forging new weapons of destruction to give heed to our questions' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 11). With the exception of Julian Huxley, who states in the Foreword that it is 'urgent to obtain detailed and unbiased information as to the mode of thinking' of English people because this will result in some kind of 'scientific control' of society (a worryingly sinister remark), the writers of the manifesto resist anticipating what their efforts will achieve or what their research will find (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 5).

How might we understand the contrary roles accorded to the term 'science' by the *Mass Observation* authors in 1937? First and foremost, science is privileged because it is held to be value-neutral. There is no a priori alignment of science with reason, nor with truth, a word that is noticeable by its absence in the pamphlet. As Boris Jardine has commented, 'M-O's awkward fit into classical social theory is explained by the fact that it was not theoretically but practically oriented from the beginning' (Jardine 2018, p. 74). Rather than a commitment to positivism, 'science' in MO terms signifies a form of empirical investigation concerned with the collection of 'facts'. The appeal to facts is contentious, but it is useful here to think of 'facts' as 'evidence' from experience (from factum—a thing 'done' or 'performed'). 'Objectivity'—another conceptually problematic term—is formed from these facts and is synonymous with the absence of bias. There might be some additional value in thinking about objectivity in terms of the philosophical concept of 'facticity', the concrete and uncontested details of a life that might constitute objective self-description. All the signs indicate that the far-reaching experimentalism of MO culminates in an *empiricism without an epistemology*. Following Gilles Deleuze's understanding of empiricism, it might be argued that the MO researcher's task is 'to find the conditions under which something new is produced (*creativeness*)' (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, p. vii). In default of any pre-existent model of knowledge subtending its practice, MO envisions a radically new way of writing and thinking 'from the ground up'.

Should it still seem odd to align these experiments in popular writing with science, the role of the latter is thrown into sharper relief in the series of comparisons that the *Mass Observation* authors draw with 'art'. As Matthew Chambers has pointed out, the early moments of MO are to be found in the pages of literary and cultural periodicals (Chambers 2015, p. 17) and its 'avant-garde poetic origins' are well documented (Noel-Tod 2015, p. 51). However, the overwhelming tendency in these writings is to position art as a

handmaiden to science: 'An age of great scientific discoveries is favourable to art, because it is continually raising new questions, and art attempts to answer these questions in its own way, before science is ready to answer them in the scientific way' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 25). Whilst Rimbaud is applauded for striking a rich mine of anthropological material, we are advised that 'art cannot successfully compete with science on the same ground' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 26). Indeed, all that such art can hope to achieve is to clarify to other artists 'the immense importance of science' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 26). Although the authors conclude the second chapter of the pamphlet with the hope that the artist and scientist will 'meet on common ground', they make it clear that this could only be possible within a strictly limited genre: 'the work of the greatest artists has always been akin to the work of the greatest scientists' because 'both look at the world in the same realistic way' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 27).

Given the modernist poetic tastes of Madge and his co-writers, it may strike the reader as counterintuitive that they should valorise realism in art and literature (Courbet and Tolstoy are cited as respective exemplars). However, closer scrutiny reveals that even this approval is limited, with realist prose fiction being credited as generally inferior to science. The authors of *Mass Observation* downplay the role that realistic novels and diaries have performed in documenting the 'vast social and mechanical changes' and 'revolutionary inventions' throughout the nineteenth century, going so far as to criticise the latter works on the grounds that they deal with such matters 'always from a personal angle or from the angle of romance' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 15). This sweeping characterisation of nineteenth-century literature is not one that readers of Eliot, Gaskell or Hardy would recognise, but it is evidently essential to the MO argument that a certain model of the fictive is distinguished from the factual.

Further light is shed in *Mass Observation* when the 'readability' of the report of a mass observer describing her treatment by an insolent bus conductor is praised for its powers of 'scientific observation', its 'fascination' deemed 'akin to that of a realist novel, with the added interest of being fact and not fiction' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 42). The latter genre is then summarily derided for providing childish 'escape into worlds of wish fulfilment, where the mill girl always ends by marrying the mill owner' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 43). The same 'factual' text about the bus conductor's rudeness is quoted once again in a brief discussion of prose styles to be found in the short essay contemporaneous with *Mass Observation*, 'Poetic Description and Mass Observation' by Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, which appeared in the magazine *New Verse*, February–March 1937. As before, the simple description is championed for its 'reality' and pronounced superior to a popular fictional piece which uses figurative phrases and poeticisms. The account is true to life by virtue of real experience. The reader is assured that 'There is no need for her to try to make the events real: the observer has simply been a recording instrument of the facts' (Jennings and Madge 1937b, p. 2). Needless to say, it seems bizarre to present the writing of the observer in such passive and operational language as if there is no creative skill in constructing the scenario. In a reversal of terms that is astonishing, the authors then conclude that the 'interest' of the bus conductor incident is '(i) scientific, (ii) human, and therefore, by implication, (iii) poetic' (Jennings and Madge 1937b, p. 2). Apparently, such observations, 'though subjective, become objective because the subjectivity of the observer is one of the facts under observation' (Jennings and Madge 1937b, p. 2). According to this strange logic, feelings are social 'facts' which, when simply 'recorded' by an observer, are useful to other observers and to scientists, who may interpret them in myriad ways. It is in this sense that the resulting observations are like popular 'poetry' but quite unlike culturally celebrated poetic art, which is the exclusive preserve of 'a handful of esoteric performers' (Jennings and Madge 1937b, p. 3).

This is an extraordinary argument, for it rests on the claim that this 'popular poetry' transcribes 'reality', unlike literary art, which is too mired in subjectivity and artifice to qualify as scientific 'data'. To express the same point in different terms, Mass Observation 'science' produces writing which is 'objective recording' yet is also 'poetic' to the extent that

it dispenses with anything traditionally resembling poetry. Ben Highmore acknowledges that 'to say science equals poetry when you mediate it via humanism is not a straightforward claim' (Highmore 2022, p. 18), but it is an issue that he suggests can be illuminated by distinguishing MO writings from mere 'information'. As he points out, these 'raw nuggets of life' are 'inexhaustible' and, like poetry, have 'relative autonomy' and 'longevity' (Highmore 2022, p. 19). What remains unanswered, nonetheless, is why such tortuous efforts are made by the MO founders to redefine these core disciplinary terms. Whilst the difficulty in maintaining these new distinctions is everywhere apparent, the anti-establishment stance of MO appears to be the driving force behind them. Madge and Harrisson declare that MO 'is a science that can only work if it is kept free from scientific jargon, and also from the obscurity typical of the contemporary artist and intellectual' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 40). Plain language is commended for its accessibility, whereas enigma, technical terminology or literary flourish is frowned upon. Whilst art is judged of value only to the extent that it can perform the role of social science, other reflective and esoteric discourses will not be tolerated at all. In this regard, philosophy receives particularly short shrift, dismissed in a long but single paragraph as dealing 'only with pure thought' and having 'no connection with life whatsoever' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 20). This characterisation seems particularly cursory given that for much of its history, and especially in antiquity, philosophy was not a theoretical discipline but a way of life. Indeed, Socratic wisdom was exemplary for offering a practical model for living. Nevertheless, the authors' sole concern is to indict philosophy and art for being out of touch with contemporary life, not to debate detail and nuance. Consequently, Madge and Harrisson sum up their position in the Mass Observation pamphlet by asserting that the arrival of Mass Observation coincides with 1. 'a poverty of philosophy', 2. 'the close of the epoch of illuminations of the inner man by art' and 3. 'with the centenary of the development of scientific methods for studying man, which still await mass application' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 28). It is because the other humanities disciplines are reckoned too remote from everyday experience that science is championed as the great leveller, a means of cultural participation open to all.

This intriguing three-point summary goes some way towards elucidating the tensions at play in the Mass Observation manifesto. MO is presented as a new kind of practice, which emerges at a historical moment when philosophy and art have been found lacking and when scientific method waits in the wings for mass application. A major implication of this is that MO will *take over* the functions of other humanities disciplines in a new alliance with scientific method. Not only does this help to illuminate the perplexing equation of poetry with science noted by Highmore (who does not explore the relation of art and philosophy to science in the Mass Observation pamphlet), it also sheds light on the multiple agendas united under the banner of MO. In the Mass Observation pamphlet, Harrisson is presented as a thinker who has submitted 'all existing philosophies of life' to doubt without having relinquished the hope of producing a new synthetic philosophy, a view not shared by 'the other author', Madge, who sees MO as an instrument for collecting facts and raising social consciousness' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 47). Elsewhere, Harrisson declares that Jennings is 'much more interested in the purely poetic side' of MO than observation (Hall 2015, p. 79). As Hinton notes, Harrisson 'hated' the collage method that the latter had deployed for *May the Twelfth* (Hinton 2013, p. 74). Here again, it is the commitment to countercultural action that unites a group of intellectuals who are otherwise very differently invested in MO. For example, Harrisson was inclined to liberal humanism in his politics, whereas Madge and Jennings were more revolutionary. However, like many on the left, they found 'common ground in the defence of democracy against fascism', which offered a compelling logic for unity (Hinton 2013, p. 3).

It is also worth adding here that literary criticism in the 1930s was styling itself on a model that resembled science. The fundamental commitment of Madge, Harrisson and Jennings to viewing popular writing in practical, egalitarian and value-neutral terms may owe something to the highly influential work of the Cambridge University critic, I. A. Richards, who in 1929 had published *Practical Criticism*, the result of a series of 'experiments'

in which 'anonymous' poems were given to students to analyse without any accompanying contextual information. Richards' objective was to encourage students to develop an organised response to poems without being influenced by 'privileged' knowledge of authorship, period or the history of the poem's critical reception. If it can make sense to formally analyse poems 'on their own merits', it can make sense to treat the testimony of observers likewise. Furthermore, it is possible that the three former Cambridge students felt that a counterculture could not explicitly repurpose philosophy, literature and high art, which, in their experience, was the preserve of the highly educated. Madge is said to have been of the view that 'working-class people simply preferred other things; and their culture should thus be examined on its own terms' (Campsie 2016, p. 99).

Indeed, in this curious double denial of literary art (first as the de facto outcome of 'science' and second as exclusionary), much seems to hinge on a prejudice about ordinary experience, which is never articulated as such. It is suggested in the Mass Observation pamphlet that the man in 'the street is apt to complain of art that it is not useful to him, that it does not supply him with anything that he really wants' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 37). Whether this is true or not—since this assertion predates any concerted interviewing of ordinary people—the authors propose that MO will attempt to find out what the common man needs and try to 'get the artists to satisfy it' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 37). The underlying assumption is that taste is class-based. It is deemed inevitable that the ordinary person will have a pragmatic, instrumental sense of art, preferring cinema or other forms of 'entertainment' to any form of 'higher' culture. This view is reinforced by the follow-up claim that 'art has become too highly specialized for mass-consumption' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 37). Disavowing the academic art and literature that they consumed as members of a public school-educated elite, the MO founders profess that a new form of 'poetry' exists in popular culture, thereby crossing the 'class divide that was so deeply entrenched in 1930s Britain' (Hall 2015, p. 6). Of course, it must be remembered that travel goes in both directions. Many people who volunteered to write for MO were aspiring to inhabit a cultural space outside their social class (Ashplant 2021, p. 24). In this respect, MO was instrumental in cultivating a new kind of writerly culture to rival the established literary culture, which, until that point in time, had been the main point of entry into intellectual circles for the newly educated classes (Casey et al. 2014). Importantly, MO gave working-class people an opportunity to become involved in literary production for the first time. For example, Bill Naughton, who delivered coal to the 'Worktown' headquarters in Davenport Street, Bolton, got involved with the project and used the practice of observation as a springboard for a successful career as a dramatist. Furthermore, in the 1930s, national levels for literacy were relatively high, and with the availability of cheap paperback books in Woolworths, it was starting to become easier for working-class people to access a broad range of fictional and non-fictional work.

Nevertheless, MO remained ambivalent about the existing culture from which it drew. Contemporary art, philosophy and literary study were considered too recondite for ordinary people to understand, yet despite everything, there was an implicit acknowledgement in *Mass Observation* that writing about everyday life requires the kinds of skills that the humanities disciplines typically furnish. When Madge and Harrisson address the question of how to teach volunteer writers to become observers, they propose using a pack of picture card images as a training resource to 'sharpen the powers of observation' and 'strengthen the imagination' (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 38). The specimen example 'image' of 'A house with broken windows', complete with its accompanying list of exercises in interpretation, suggests that exegetical competency is required beyond the simple 'recording' of the social scientist. By contrast, these exercises are exactly the kinds of 'prompts' that any student of creative writing today would recognise readily. In short, there is a tacit admission here that 'reality' is produced and not merely discovered. Indeed, what else could strengthening the imagination entail? If the ordinary person needs to cultivate creative expression in order to develop their scientific skill, this is an 'art' that can never be named as such.

3. Mass Observation Materials and Methods

Revisiting the early aspirations of Mass Observation is instructive when reflecting on its role in relation to popular writing today. As has been established, the status of MO writing, poised precariously between humanities and science, is never fully resolved in its foundational documents. This goes some way towards explaining why the legacy of MO has been a troubled one from the point of view of research. Generally speaking, researchers have struggled to know how to approach Mass Observation data as a historical resource. Scholars have found its 'hybrid heterogeneity hard to contain' and have tried without success to tame it within 'a single monolithic view' (Pollen 2013, p. 213). Admittedly, the material in the Mass Observation Archive is sprawling and peculiar, ranging from highly detailed catalogues of drinking protocols in Bolton pubs to reports on caring for dogs in wartime. Extensive documents recount overheard dialogue, replies to 'directives' and voluminous long-form diaries. The data has been variously 'problematised as statistically unrepresentative, even prejudiced, and methodologically brash, ignorant or unfathomable' (Hurdley 2014, p. 5). The lack of standardised formats in the case of many documents adds to the complexity of the challenge. In the case of diaries and day surveys, for example, there are considerable variables to negotiate of style, content, length and form.

As Rachel Hurdley has commented, 'What many researchers find unnerving when they first try to "use" MO as a data source is the diversity of volunteers' writing' (Hurdley 2014, p. 3). James Hinton has acknowledged that historians have tended to be conservative about using first-person testimony as primary data upon which to build hypotheses: 'Intimidated by the sheer bulk of the material and worried about its representativeness, they have found little to do with the diaries beyond trawling them for vivid illustrations of conclusions already reached from other sources' (Hinton 2010, pp. 16–17). As Kaleda Brophy-Harmer (2023) has observed, the anonymity of the volunteer data poses additional challenges. Historically, the ethnicity of respondents has not been recorded, limiting what can be said of demographic samples. Although archived profiles of the age and class of volunteer writers permit some analysis, typically, this reveals 'an over-representation of middle-class respondents, as well as older people (with fewer work and childcare commitments)' (Brophy-Harmer 2023). As various scholars have pointed out, the very choice to write about one's life may mark someone out as 'atypical' and thus not 'ordinary' at all (Ashplant 2021, p. 24). Indeed, exploring the research status of nine wartime diarists, Hinton remarks that 'the only way in which they might be seen as representative is in the radically non-statistical sense that, as exceptionally self-reflective people, they can provide us with access to a cultural world that others inhabited with less self-awareness' (Hinton 2010, p. 17). This is a powerful argument because, as the MO authors were at pains to establish, mass media and democratic government purport to speak for everyone yet, if anything, they are less 'representative' than the mass observers.

These issues are particularly pertinent to the day diaries, which are the least structured of the MO writings and differ from the directives and interview materials, which resemble more standard opinion sampling and market research. Because of their non-prescriptive narrative format, the day diaries have proved particularly awkward to quantify according to conventional models of knowledge. Indeed, it remains uncertain whether these kinds of popular writing should be treated as scientific 'evidence' or as artistic 'responses' to a given environment. As noted in the preceding section, it is open to question whether volunteers are producing 'science' when narrating everyday encounters or when responding imaginatively to a creative prompt (such as a 'house with broken windows'). Whereas the long-form diaries at least have the advantage of enabling researchers to track the evolution of an individual writer's work over the course of time, and thus produce a longitudinal study, the day surveys lack the cumulative detail of social context. This is not a completely new problem. In his discussion of the day diary montage *May the Twelfth*, Highmore remarks that 'the reader is left to make their own connections within a work that appears to have no ordering principle apart from disorder' (Highmore 2002, p. 95). Arguably, the counter-cultural potential of this mode of communication is considerable because it demands that

the reader be an active agent of interpretation rather than a passive consumer of cultural messages. In fact, this anarchic presentation of data exemplifies how a radical 'science of ourselves' might forestall the 'automatic thinking' and 'foregone conclusions' that the MO authors caution against in *Mass Observation* (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 17). On the other hand, the collage of day diaries comprising *May the Twelfth* might be 'consumed' as a merely literary offering, appealing to a sophisticated readership familiar with the writings of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. As Hinton notes, the book received mixed reviews in the press, not least because it was 'difficult to see how its findings served to advance MO's fundamental goal of combatting superstition in the name of science' (Hinton 2013, p. 69). In addition to the singular problem posed by the day diaries, this example reveals how problematic it is to appreciate the value of popular writing as 'science' when the term is freighted with a range of contrary meanings. If it is right to see the 'science' of MO as an extension of the humanities rather than its contrary, the question remains as to how these writings might be best appreciated. This is an issue with which researchers today are still contending and it is explored now with reference to a recent study.

4. Writing for Mass Observation Today

Since 2010, the Mass Observation Project has been inviting members of the UK to record their everyday life in a day diary on 12 May, recreating the format of the original 1937 day surveys. The completed diaries are donated to the Mass Observation Archive as a historical resource for future generations. In May 2024, a research team from the University of Bolton, in collaboration with the community arts organisation 'Live from Worktown' and the Bolton Library and Museum Service, ran a campaign to boost interest in 'Diary Day' amongst members of the Bolton public. The 'Worktown Revisited' project mirrored the original 1937 initiative's methodological framework, encouraging participants to document their day on 12 May but without being prescriptive about what should be included. Participants were fully informed about the Mass Observation Project (MOP) and provided consent for their diary entries to be used for research. All entries were anonymised in line with MOP guidelines to protect the privacy of the diarists, particularly given the personal nature of the narratives.

In previous years, the archive had on average received just three diaries from Bolton, but in May 2024, as a result of the project's publicity, 52 diaries were received. Methods of submission were varied—34% online, 48% on paper, and 17% via email. Nearly a quarter (23%) of respondents chose to write in longhand despite the content of the diaries indicating high levels of digital literacy. The demographic profile reflected Brophy-Harmer's observation that older people tend to be highly represented in volunteer writing, with 48% of participants over 50 years old. A diverse range of professional backgrounds was indicated, with significant representation from those working in creative arts (15%) and retirees (38%). A higher percentage of respondents identified as female (63%).

Analysis of the diaries posed the question of what to identify as significant. This is where questions as to the status of 'social facts' from the original MO documents came to the fore. Initially, the team read all 52 diaries, beginning with a first round of 'open coding' to identify emergent themes and patterns (Richards and Morse 2013; Charmaz 2014). Open coding was the first step in making sense of the material on its own terms. This inductive approach (Hayes and Heit 2018) ensured that the themes identified (such as 'gardening' or 'exercising') were grounded in the contemporary data, reflecting the participants' lived experiences without being pre-shaped by any particular 'agenda'. By allowing the themes to surface naturally, the study captured the unique cultural dynamics of 2024. Following this, recurring themes were identified within the coded data (Terry et al. 2017). The decision to avoid direct comparison with any 1937 materials during the various stages of coding was deliberate, to minimise potential bias and allow the unique cultural dynamics of 2024 to emerge organically. To strengthen the credibility and rigour of the analysis further, multiple rounds of coding and re-evaluation were conducted. This iterative process allowed for the refinement of themes and ensured that the analysis was both thorough and reflective

of the data's complexity (Deterding and Waters 2021). Once the primary themes were established, a reflective comparison with the 1937 themes was conducted, enabling the observation of the evolution of themes over time, without forcing connections. Importantly, while historical themes eventually were used as a comparative tool, they did not shape or constrain the identification of the 2024 themes.

Previous attempts at historical comparative analysis have been attempted using MO material. Clarke et al. (2018) explored the rise of 'anti-politics' in the UK across eight decades, using qualitative data from MO from the mid-twentieth century and early twenty-first century, in addition to quantitative analysis of responses to public surveys. In a similar process to our own, Clarke et al. read the MO writing samples independently before coding them into categories and refining the codes using content analysis software. The important difference is that these researchers pre-selected the directives for their sample and 'read the letters and the diaries of panellists looking for specific things' (Clarke et al. 2018, p. 64). Our 'Diary Day' project was not driven by a search for commonalities in the same way, as we were interested to see which themes might emerge from the samples. In another comparative study, Mike Savage (2007) used MO qualitative data as a means of examining patterns and processes of historical change in post-war British class identity over several decades, taking 1948 and 1990 as points of comparison. Like Clarke et al., Savage used responses to directives as his primary material, the focus falling on significant changes in the way that class is narrated in the two periods. Whilst there is little discernible change in 'content' terms—since most people define themselves as middle class in both periods—the 'form' in which class is talked about reflects larger changes in cultural discourse, for example, sensitivity to stereotypes is commonplace in the later period. This study bears important similarities to our own in that we found the 'style' of the diary narratives as significant as the content (see the next section). However, since we were looking at day diary accounts rather than responses to questionnaires, it was not surprising to see a much broader range of styles. In addition, our study was distinctive in that the majority of our diarists had not written for Mass Observation before, unlike the participants in other well-known studies of popular writing (e.g., Sheridan et al. 2000).

5. Discussion

The 'Worktown Revisited' project supplied engrossing data pertaining to the 'everyday life' of residents in Bolton today. The revival of the Diary Day emphasised the enduring relevance of the Mass Observation method, prompting renewed reflection on the nature and significance of this kind of popular writing. The thematic analysis revealed that issues such as economic precarity, community identity and digital technology's impact are central to the lived experiences of the participants, reflecting broader UK societal trends. The tension between traditional and modern practices, particularly evident in the narratives around work and social interaction, highlighted the significance of local culture in maintaining continuity and belonging. Many of the 52 respondents wrote about how they used technology to stay connected to others and for social and creative activities. Diary Day (12 May) fell on a Sunday in 2024, and the diarists gave a varied picture of Sunday leisure and cultural activities, including gardening, visiting friends and family, enjoying the outdoors and eating out. This focus on leisure enabled significant comparisons between everyday life in Bolton in 2024 and the years of the original 'Worktown' study. This leisure focus was apposite because as Jennie Taylor and Simon Prince remind us, 'Worktown was about what workers did when they were not working' (Taylor and Prince 2021, p. 1088). In this regard, it is interesting to note that a sizeable proportion of diarists in the study report work obligations, despite it being a Sunday. In several cases, this is owing to shift work: 'My first child was born today, she's 43. I won't see her because she works, and I work. Times are tough financially, so I'll treat her next payday' (Single female, Age 63); 'Loud construction work starts up well before eight at the fisheries. Sunday mornings don't count for much any more' (Married female, Age 56). In other instances, the use of Sunday to complete paperwork and catch up on work emails indicated the erosion of the distinction

between work days and the weekend. This was just one of many 'themes' to emerge from the study.

Nevertheless, using the Diary Day 2024 material for comparative purposes with early 'Worktown' themes was not a prior objective of the project and was not the only outcome. As noted earlier, the MO founders aspired to patiently amass material 'facts' without a working hypothesis to test (Madge and Harrisson 1937, p. 29). Although unorthodox as an approach to research design, the merit of this strategy is that it does not presuppose what kind of insights its experiments will produce. Specific content for inclusion in the day surveys was not stipulated, and unanticipated themes emerged. This reflected the original project's radical empiricism, which, in the spirit of Deleuze (Deleuze and Parnet 1987), enabled conditions for the production of something new. In this connection, the researchers were struck by the frequency with which the diarists in the study expressed gratitude for their good fortune: 'I recognise that today I'm one of the fortunate ones' (Married female, Age 40); 'Snapped the tree branches into little bits and thought of my dad and how lucky I am to live in a nice area in a good home' (Female with partner, Age 58); '10.15 pm in bed productive day living the dream and its happy Monday in the morning' (Single male, Age 52). Often, diarists extolled the simple virtues of good food and fresh air: 'Sit outdoors/What a joy!/Spiced oat cake/Absolutely delicious' (Handwritten submission, no profile supplied); 'I enjoy walking on my own. It gives me a chance to meditate and interact with nature' (Single female, Age 42). These declarations of gratitude and personal fulfilment raise the interesting question of what people disclose about everyday life when not 'directed' in a particular way. In 1938, Mass Observation invited Bolton residents to complete a directive on the nature of happiness, asking them to rank a series of factors in order of importance (McHugh 2018). In contrast to this semi-structured approach, the day survey yields insights about happiness which might not have surfaced if people had been asked more directly about their feelings. For example, the diaries revealed the extent to which joys in everyday life are embedded in the smallest of rituals. Several of the respondents to the 'Worktown Revisited' project itemised the activities of their day in a short list but appended a comment or two signifying the enjoyment of modest pleasures. For example, one writer, despite discomfort from a recent hip operation, reported details of her day with positive qualifiers: her 'black pudding and goat's cheese stack salad' was 'yummy'; a television programme about Nigeria was 'very interesting'; her completion of the newspaper crossword prompted a 'hurrah!' (Married female, Age 66). Such writings constitute 'weather maps of feeling', which reflect underlying moods and dispositions. Arguably, these affects are less easy to record by traditional research methods. Whilst the unseasonably warm UK weather on 12 May 2024 may have contributed to the positivity of the Bolton diarists, their writings imply that there is a link between appreciation of everyday culture and wellbeing. Following Hinton's suggestion that MO diarists are exceptionally self-reflective people (Hinton 2010), it might well be the case that the very act of writing about everyday life is itself beneficial.

Indeed, whilst the question of *what* people write is of enduring interest for Mass Observation, it is equally true that the Diary Day exercise prompts reflection on *how* people write and *why* they choose to write at all. One of the shortcomings of a wholly thematic approach to the MO data is that it ignores its heterogeneous nature (Pollen 2013; Hurdley 2014). In addition to digital and handwritten submissions, 'Worktown Revisited' received several submissions that included photographs, images of art work, drawings and some doodles. These creative pieces of work reveal how documenting the everyday takes multiple forms and complexifies what we might regard as knowledge. Even if we set aside these elements of visual creativity and focus on words alone, the writing itself exhibits tremendous variety. Some respondents included poetry in their submissions, whereas others cultivated an explicitly 'literary' voice. For example, one writer uses a narrative style to give background context to the 'story' of the day: 'My friendship with H was an easy one—a long standing friendship that had stood the tests of fights and fallouts' (Single male, Age 35). Another writer signs off with an intertextual nod to nineteenth-century

modes of address (specifically, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*): 'We ordered a take away that we could barely afford and then I went to bed, my phone plugged in to charge. Reader, it didn't—our electrics had tripped' (Married female, Age 52). These examples testify to the difficulties inherent in demarcating disciplinary differences between 'scientific' and 'poetic' depictions of reality—something which Madge and Jennings struggled to do—and reinforce the point that the tensions embodied in the foundational statements of MO have endured in its legacy.

Indeed, as comparison between the 1937 and 2024 diaries demonstrates, Mass Observation documentation was always very close to literary expression. As previously mentioned in the discussion of the pioneering 1937 project, the day survey gives the writer considerable freedom to choose how to document the everyday. The findings of 'Worktown Revisited' exemplified this, the diary form lending itself to a number of writerly styles, ranging from the lyrical and reflective to the clipped and expository. Some writers embellished their modest chronicles with personal comments, whereas others presented itemised schedules, the respective paradigms of 'art' and 'science' evidently both at play in these different approaches.

> What a lovely morning. For once the sun is shining and it is warm . . . What a gift it is though to live so near to beauty. Never mind the dark Satanic mills. It's the beauty of the moors we should sing about (Married female, Age 76).

> Up at 7.45. Bright start but weather forecast not brilliant. Today is my birthday. A day to reflect. It is also the Prime Minister's birthday (Rishi Sunak, aged 44) and he's got plenty to reflect on (Married male, Age 85).

> 8am go downstairs, open curtains etc. Check garden and water then hang up new hanging baskets bought yesterday. Wave to neighbours. 8.45 breakfast of banana and cereal, fruit juice. Check email and messages etc on iPad (Married female, Age 77).

Interestingly, similar patterns are discernible in the 1937 day diaries, as demonstrated in the examples below from the compilation text *May the Twelfth* (1937), one of the first attempts by the MO authors to make volunteer writing available to a wider audience.

> Sunrise was very beautiful, fiery clouds preceded the sun, even the drab stone walls which separated the fields were touched with pink (CO.34, Newcastle) (Jennings and Madge 1937a, p. 171).

> I was uncertain as to the exact time I opened my eyes on May 12th, I know I was dreadfully tired, the cheap clock on the mantelshelf had stopped, my watch had been in tick for some weeks, anyway the day being a holiday and I being financially short so that I would be unable to enjoy the revels I decided that I would enjoy the luxury of lying in bed until midday (CO.44, South London) (Jennings and Madge 1937a, p. 176).

> 7.55, got up. Had my bath and dressed. Came down to breakfast 8.35. At breakfast my wife and I talked of the weather (it was not raining but it looked very dull). A friend had sent my baby daughter an Ed. VIII coronation mug (CO.6, Norfolk) (Jennings and Madge 1937a, p. 181).

It is worth adding that *May the Twelfth* was a set of edited writing samples and that there is an artistry to their assemblage. It is possible that the *avant-garde* nature of the work would have had broader appeal in 1937 had the cover price not been exclusionary (12/6d, when a miner's wage was about £2 a week). In response to Harrisson's ire and perhaps in fear of alienating ordinary people, MO retreated from this montage technique in subsequent publications by offering more editorial commentary and framing material in more conventional ways (Highmore 2002, p. 96). In this sense, MO reverted to something much closer to the model of media that they had sought to challenge.

Nevertheless, in its early moments, Mass Observation was a powerful experiment in popular writing, and its countercultural potential survives in its current incarnation

as the Mass Observation Project. The Diary Day initiative provides a forum for those whose voices do not prevail in dominant institutions, such as government and media, and who are 'typically excluded from having a voice in writing history' (Sheridan et al. 2000, p. 12). As Sheridan et al. (2000) contend, the representatives of mass media, universities, government and business are 'legitimate' writers who have the power to 'define reality' (Sheridan et al. 2000, p. 7). By contrast, 'when ordinary people write, there are very few contexts in which their writing is acknowledged and in which they are acknowledged as writers' (Sheridan et al. 2000, p. 6). Although MO writing is increasingly used as research data, it is important to remember that it is produced by people who are outside academic institutions, and their work is not easily assimilated into its disciplinary categories (e.g., autoethnography, life writing, social science, etc.). Whilst MO shapes what people write through directives and other initiatives, it is equally true that MO is formed through what people use it for (Sheridan et al. 2000). As Anne-Marie Kramer has highlighted, when people write for MO, they often 'consciously situate themselves and their accounts not just in social or geographical space, but also in relation to history, and in time' (Kramer 2014). Hinton concurs that MO offers a discipline and a context which transcends the purely private, 'meeting a need to frame individual quests in relation to larger public purposes' (Hinton 2010, p. 6). Interestingly, as a coda to his contribution to 'Worktown Revisited', one diarist adds:

> p.s. Dear Reader, I hope the actions of history have been kind to you. If not, don't spend your life blaming it, or using it as an excuse for anything bad in your life. You can't change the past, anyone's past. Just learn from it (Single male, Age 50).

This reflective stance supports Hinton's view that people who volunteer to write for MO are active citizens working for 'the greater social good' as well as being inquisitive, thoughtful people, 'looking for meaning and purpose in their lives beyond the mundane satisfactions of everyday life' (Hinton 2010, p. 2). The writers who participate in this activity are doing something that lacks a ready-made institutional niche, and this is the source of its countercultural power.

Building on the work of Sheridan et al. (2000), we suggest that the amateur MO writers are engaged in a 're-definition of reality' that has a practical, philosophical dimension. To the extent that the diary writing promotes a contemplative way of thinking that does not simply pre-exist its expression, it differs from market research and the canvassing of consumer opinions. In this, MO diary writing has something in common with creative practice-led research, which draws on 'the uniquely human process of making meaning through experiences that are felt, lived, reconstructed and reinterpreted' (Sullivan 2009, p. 50). Diary writers seek to pass on to any future reader the wisdom of their 'art of living'. The modest virtue of cherishing individual moments, of savouring things rarely acknowledged as relevant aspects of reality, is remarkably edifying. These details of everyday experience constitute an alternative canon of knowledge that has no prior cultural presence.

As a countercultural movement, Mass Observation called for a 'science of ourselves' which would collect data on everyday life in Britain. Owing to its anti-elitist agenda, MO privileged science above art and philosophy but this led to the contradiction of envisaging observers and volunteer writers as mere 'recording instruments'—as recipients of culture, rather than its producers. By revisiting the *Mass Observation* (1937) manifesto and related writings from the beginnings of Mass Observation it is possible to read volunteer writing today in a new light. MO writing is radical because it has the potential to change what will count as knowledge. Beyond interesting sociological detail about how the respondents live, the Diary Day initiative supplied unexpected insights in to how to live *well*. Unlike the directives, which solicit opinions to pre-determined questions, the diaries invite respondents to create the narrative of what it means to be human. In this respect, they are the architects of culture rather than its passive consumers, artists and philosophers who create rather than discover. This is the production of 'artful science', a repurposing of humanities as countercultural knowledge. Arguably, this was the agenda of MO all along. Future research in popular writing would benefit from exploring this artful science, thereby doing

justice to the kind of examination of everyday life that Madge and his co-authors were so keen to foster.

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