

PRIVATE LIVES, PUBLIC HISTORIES: THE DIARY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN

In recent years, the diary of the private citizen has emerged as a fertile source for both academic and non-academic historians. Diaries bring together a range of interests in academic cultural and social history: the development of modern ideas of selfhood, the recovery of overlooked or marginalized lives (particularly those of women, who have often been diligent diarists), and the history of everyday, domestic and private life. Among public historians, Juliet Gardiner, Virginia Nicholson, David Kynaston and others have made extensive use of the diaries of ordinary British citizens of the last century in a new kind of “intimate history” of the recent past full of vivid detail and human interest, inspired by a sense, in Nicholson’s words, that “the personal and idiosyncratic reveal more about the past than the generic and comprehensive.”¹ Anthologies of twentieth-century British diaries, particularly centred around the Second World War and the period of post-war austerity, have proliferated in recent years and several have been bestsellers. Many have titles - *London Was Ours*, *Our Hidden Lives*, *We Are At War*, *We Shall Never Surrender*, *Our Longest Days*, *Millions Like Us* – which suggest that these private reflections have somehow become repositories of collective memory.

This article seeks to explain, contextualize and critique this growth of interest in twentieth-century diaries. It begins by tracing a history of British diary keeping since the early part of the century and explores some of the ways it was imagined, encouraged and defined by

¹ Virginia Nicholson, *Millions Like Us: Women’s Lives During the Second World War* (London, 2012), xvii.

newspapers and other media, diary manufacturers and social organizations such as Mass Observation, in response to changing notions of the self, individual privacy and the value of ordinary life and its representation. It goes on to discuss the more recent ways in which these private diaries have been imagined as compelling forms of historical evidence, in online and hard copy archives and in popular histories and representations, as well as some of the interpretative challenges these texts present to historians. Finally it points to the value of private diaries as a resource for twentieth-century historians in particular, suggesting that the inherently opaque nature of these texts means that they can both elucidate and usefully complicate our understandings of the wider social and cultural histories of which they form a part.

The exact extent of diary keeping, an inherently private and often clandestine activity, may always remain unknown. Diaries are part of that vast amount of unpublished, mostly handwritten writing by ordinary people, most of which will never be made public but which we can assume must have proliferated in the last hundred years or so as literacy rates have risen. The circumstantial evidence does suggest that, in the first half of the last century, more British people, and from a wider social range, began to keep diaries. One indication is that more diaries were sold - in 1900, the leading firm, Charles Letts, sold just under a quarter of a million diaries a year, and by 1936 this had risen to three million² - although of course, not all diary keepers wrote in these commercially produced diaries and many who bought them kept them simply for appointments.

² Brian Dobbs, *Dear Diary: A Survey of Diaries and Diarists* (London, 1974), 228.

The new machinery of daily-produced mass culture, such as radio broadcasts and popular newspapers, also often discussed the art and purpose of diary writing, advising their mass readerships and audiences about its art, purpose and etiquette. A recurring motif in these discussions was the extent to which an ordinary, private life might be (or might not be) worthwhile and interesting enough to record. “If we do not move among the great, if we have no opportunities of treading behind the scenes, if we meet only ordinary people, is a diary worth keeping?” inquired one newspaper leader rhetorically.³ “When a man comes before the Recording Angel it isn’t going to be the sins that he has committed that will worry him; it will be the utter futility of the way he spent his days,” concluded another.⁴ A *Daily Mail* columnist confidently told his readers that “what you have for dinner to-day will certainly not interest you in six months’ time.”⁵

Others, though, insisted that these mundane details were precisely what a diary should concern itself with, that it was a “horrible and shameful admission” that we let our lives “pass into oblivion without a word or a sign.”⁶ One editorial suggested that a diary’s value lay in the fact that it required no sense of proportion: a new hat or an amusing actress might “sweep all the armies and potentates of Europe over your margin into nothingness and oblivion.”⁷ The popular novelist Clemence Dane wrote: “It seems odd that we should have so poor a

³ “On Diaries,” *The Times*, 16 December 1922, 13.

⁴ James Clifford, “Are You Going to Keep a Diary?,” *Daily Mirror*, 1 January 1925, 5.

⁵ W.T., “How to Keep a Diary,” *Daily Mail*, 29 December 1920, 4.

⁶ “The Second Month,” *Manchester Guardian*, 1 February 1934, 6.

⁷ “The New Diary,” *The Times*, 6 January 1926, 13.

memory of our passionate forgotten selves. Our lives are serial novels, but we have mislaid the back numbers.”⁸ In a *Daily Mail* article titled “One Way to Immortality,” Evelyn Waugh argued that “nobody wants to read other people’s reflections on life and religion and politics, but the routine of their day, properly recorded, is always interesting, and will become more so as conditions change with the years.”⁹ The lives of “ordinary people” – according to Raphael Samuel this phrase was a coinage of the interwar years, at least in its normative mode to mean the decent, unremarkable majority of the population¹⁰ – were becoming more visible in an age of mass democratization and mass literacy. But there was still some uncertainty about whether their lives were noteworthy and whether it was even self-indulgent to write about a life that had no contact with public events or important people.

The Labour MP and peace campaigner Arthur Ponsonby, who in the interwar years published several popular annotated anthologies of British diarists as well as biographies of John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys, and who often spoke on BBC radio about diaries, was a great proselytiser for the idea that ordinary lives were worth recording. Ponsonby argued that private citizens’ diaries were “human documents of peculiar interest” and potentially more valuable than those of eminent people, because they allowed us to “enter into the trivial pleasures and petty miseries of daily life – the rainy day, the blunt razor, the new suit, the domestic quarrel, the bad night, the twinge of toothache, the fall from a horse.” In

⁸ Clemence Dane, “Do You Record Your Own Life-Story?,” *Daily Mail*, 11 August 1933, 8.

⁹ Evelyn Waugh, “One Way to Immortality,” *Daily Mail*, 28 June 1930, 8.

¹⁰ Raphael Samuel, “The People with Stars in their Eyes,” in *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain: Theatres of Memory, Volume II*, ed. Alison Light with Sally Alexander and Gareth Stedman Jones (London, 1998), 225.

Ponsonby's writings on diaries, it is also possible to detect a post-First World War shift in attitudes to privacy. He dismissed the still common charge that reading diaries not intended for publication was prying into private affairs, "spying out chambers of the soul we have no business to enter." The absence of an injunction to destroy a diary, he argued, "implied on the part of the diarist a perhaps unexpressed but nevertheless not unabsent expectation that what he or she wrote might one day be read."¹¹ He was also critical of editors of posthumously published diaries who omitted details that might shock the reader: "The fetish of discretion can easily be carried too far. The next generation, I feel sure, are not going to be so squeamish. They will turn us all inside out, and chuckle as they do it."¹²

Ponsonby explicitly intended his anthologies and broadcasts to encourage the potential diary writer, believing that keeping a diary was "within the reach of every human being who put pen to paper."¹³ He had the idea for his first anthology of diaries after reading W.N.P. Barbellion's *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* and *A Last Diary* – "the publishing sensations of 1919 and 1920"¹⁴ - and the book concluded with extracts from these diaries. Barbellion, the pen name of Bruce Cummings, was a previously obscure staff member in the insect room at the Natural History Museum, who published the first of these books when he was still alive, although dying from a rare sclerotic disease. Cummings may have hidden behind a pseudonym and faked his own death at the end of the first volume (the subterfuge

¹¹ Arthur Ponsonby, *English Diaries: A Review of English Diaries from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century with an Introduction on Diary Writing* (London, 1923), 24, 32, 30-1.

¹² Arthur Ponsonby, "Casual Observations," *Manchester Guardian*, 26 November 1927, 11.

¹³ Ponsonby, *English Diaries*, 1.

¹⁴ Raymond A. Jones, *Arthur Ponsonby: The Politics of Life* (London, 1989), 135.

soon being discovered), but the publication of a private diary by a living person was highly unusual¹⁵ and his diary was peculiarly unapologetic and eloquent in its self-absorption.

Barbellion had, wrote Ponsonby, “revived interest in diary writing” and vindicated his own argument that “position and circumstances have nothing whatever to do with the production of a good diary.”¹⁶

In 1931, the *Western Morning News and Mercury*, noting “a singular growth in the habit of keeping a diary,” wondered whether “the success of some recent books of reminiscence, based upon diary records, whetted a public appetite.”¹⁷ A clear link between the publication of diaries and more extensive diary-keeping by private citizens is naturally hard to establish, but certainly many diaries published around this time served to validate and re-enchant the routines of everyday life in ways that may have encouraged the ordinary diarist. James Woodforde’s *The Diary of a Country Parson* was published by Oxford University Press in five volumes between 1924 and 1931; and the Victorian clergyman Francis Kilvert’s diary appeared in a three-volume edition, edited by the poet and novelist William Plomer, between 1938 and 1940. Popular, fictionalized accounts of quotidian life also mimicked the diary form through their serial publication in newspapers or magazines, such as E.M. Delafield’s partly autobiographical *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) which began as a series in *Time & Tide* in 1929 and took the form of a journal of the life of an upper-middle-class woman, married with two children, living in a Devon village; and Jan Struther’s *Mrs Miniver*, which first appeared in *The Times* in October

¹⁵ Lawrence Rosenwald, *Emerson and the Art of the Diary* (New York, 1988), 7, 11.

¹⁶ Ponsonby, *English Diaries*, 432-3.

¹⁷ “Diaries Grow in Popularity,” *Western Morning News and Mercury*, 19 December 1931, 3.

1937 and in book form in 1939, written in the third person but with the form, pace and everyday concerns of a journal.

Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei have linked Delafield's and Struther's reclamation of daily life as an object of careful scrutiny to the diurnally themed work of modernist women writers such as Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf, also both prolific diarists. Woolf also wrote numerous reviews of published diaries, commending Pepys in one essay for writing about "all the infinite curiosities, amusements, and pettinesses of average human life."¹⁸ A number of recent scholars of modernist literature have related its recurrent interest in the minutiae of daily life and the impressionistic moment to the new routines of urban modernity, Elizabeth Podnieks even referring to Woolf's "diaristic modernism."¹⁹ Briganti and Mezei argue that Delafield and Struther similarly "adopted the diary form to reproduce the immediacy of daily life, redefine the heroic, and reconsider the validation of public over private space."²⁰ These books were affirmations of the domestic and social routines of a certain kind of upper-middle-class woman's life, either

¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, "Papers on Pepys," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Volume 2: 1912-1918*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London, 1987), 234.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Podnieks, *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart, and Anaïs Nin* (Montreal, 2000), 123. See also Joanne Campbell Tidwell, *Politics and Aesthetics in the Diary of Virginia Woolf* (New York, 2008), 39; and Max Saunders, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford, 2010), 219-32.

²⁰ Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, The Interwar Novel, and E.H. Young* (Aldershot, 2006), 31.

lightly comic (Delafield) or lightly lyrical (Struther), and they further reinforced the sense that this sort of ordinariness was worthy of daily witness and record.

May Smith, an elementary school teacher living with her parents in Swadlincote in Derbyshire who kept a diary for the duration of the Second World War, was inspired by Delafield's Provincial Lady series in *Time & Tide* and, in the spring of 1940, was trying to scrape together the funds to buy a copy of one of the sequels, *The Provincial Lady in Wartime*. The alternately waspish and scatty tone of the Provincial Lady suffuses Smith's diary. Her reporting of some of the classic wartime myths that circulate in her area, like refugee Jews signalling to German planes during air raids, and German parachutists with folding bicycles, are classic Delafield in their sceptical, amused detachment. Smith also copied Delafield's habit of wryly capitalizing other people's reported speech to give it a fake portentousness: "My father remarked curtly No Wonder We're Not Winning the War."²¹

Stuart Sherman has argued that the consolidation of the diary form in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was related to an emergent notion of "incremental time," a sense of the passing hours less as "elastic" than as "relentless continuity." As the diary became a mass-marketed form in the early twentieth century, its keepers similarly had a keen sense of the physical form of the diary imposing constraints on marking out one's life, of the pull between what Sherman calls "serial measure" and "signal occasions."²² A key chapter of Struther's

²¹ May Smith, *These Wonderful Rumours! A Young Schoolteacher's Wartime Diaries 1939-1945*, ed. Duncan Marlor (London, 2012), 114.

²² Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form 1660-1785* (Chicago, 1996), 162, 40, 49, 35.

Mrs Miniver begins on Twelfth Night with her heroine dithering over whether to buy a beautiful new diary in green lizard-skin at the extortionate price of 7s. 6d. “An engagement book,” Mrs Miniver believes, “is the most important of all those small adjuncts to life, that tribe of humble familiars which jog along beside one from year’s end to year’s end, apparently trivial, but momentous by reason of their terrible intimacy.” For Mrs Miniver, the key consideration when choosing a diary is how much space it gives to the days – “the units which mattered most, being divided from each other by the astounding phenomenon of losing and regaining consciousness.” A fortnight of days per double page is too many, she feels; a week is just right.²³

Virginia Woolf also recognized that the physical form of a diary, and how much space it gave to days, could constrain what one wrote. In *Jacob’s Room* (1922), Clara Durrant begins writing a diary entry about Jacob Flanders “but Mr Letts allows little space in his shilling diaries. Clara was not the one to encroach upon Wednesday. Humblest, most candid of women!”²⁴ Woolf saw her own diary as a physical object, a “dear old red-covered book” that could offer material reassurance of her past life and the continuity of her personality in the face of both her worsening depressions and the deepening international crisis.²⁵ “Against all laws, I am going to make this the first volume of a diary, though as ill luck has it, it is not even the first of the month. But it is the fault of practical life,” she wrote on 15 June 1929, beginning Diary XIX. “I can’t write any longer in books whose leaves perish. I don’t know

²³ Jan Struther, *Mrs. Miniver* (New York, 1940), 51, 53-4.

²⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* (Oxford, 1992), 94-5.

²⁵ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume 5: 1936-41*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth, 1985), 251; see also Tidwell, *Politics and Aesthetics*, 83.

how to keep them. Here in a bound volume, the year has a chance at life. It can be stood on a shelf.”²⁶

Woolf would often refer to the physical object of her diary in its text, seeing the individual volumes as creating narrative beginnings and end stops in her life: “One must pause to say that here a new volume starts, the third, & therefore there is every appearance of a long, though intermittent life.”²⁷ Podnieks points out that Woolf “bought diaries that were physically appealing, and she further made them, or transformed them, into aesthetic caches.” She mostly used two kinds of book: the first medium-sized with lush marbled-effect covers, the second large, floppy books which she covered with wrapping paper with striking print designs made by the Woolfs’ own Hogarth Press. She also had a penchant for writing in different colours of ink, her favourites being peacock blue and bright purple, and she often mentions her fascination with different kinds of fountain pen in the diaries.²⁸

Woolf’s interest in the material culture of diary keeping was characteristic of this period. As Michèle Barrett and Peter Stallybrass argue, it has been common for historians to see handwriting and printing as distinct from each other, when in fact in our daily activities “printing and writing constantly interact” and well into the twentieth century there was an “explosion of printed forms designed for completion by hand.” Two of the twentieth

²⁶ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1925-30*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth, 1982), 233.

²⁷ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume I: 1915-19*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth, 1979), 171.

²⁸ Podnieks, *Daily Modernism*, 104-5.

century's bestselling works of print culture were the wall-calendar and the diary, both of them "designed to organize and shape manuscript culture. They elicit manuscript, encouraging us to write down future meetings, past events, addresses and telephone numbers – subject always to the material space provided by the organization of the printed page."²⁹ The major diary manufacturers in the first half of the century - Charles Letts, Collins, T.J. and J. Smith, John Walker and Co. and Iliffe – also competed with each other to create covetable products with covers in exotic leathers like crush morocco or crocodile skin, ribbon bookmarks, stitched case edging, gilt foil corners and marbled inside covers.³⁰ The main innovation in diary manufacture of the first half of the twentieth century, a result of growing market segmentation, was the specialist diary, an extension of the schoolgirl's and schoolboy's diaries first published at the end of the Victorian era. By the 1930s there were thousands of these specialised diaries, with Letts alone publishing over 400, aimed at scouts, guides, motorists, investors, electrical engineers, poultry keepers, wireless amateurs, gardeners, textile workers, racing pigeon owners, bowls players, ramblers, animal lovers and many others.³¹

All the major diary firms employed teams of researchers to produce data for their preliminary pages: information about the rising and setting of the sun, the phases and eclipses of the

²⁹ Michèle Barrett and Peter Stallybrass, "Printing, Writing and a Family Archive," *History Workshop Journal*, 75 (2013), 4.

³⁰ Anthony Letts, "A History of Letts," in *Letts Keep a Diary: A History of Diary Keeping in Great Britain from 16th-20th Century* (London, 1987), 31.

³¹ "All Sorts of Diaries," *Manchester Guardian*, 18 December 1936, 7; "Incentives to Discretion," *Manchester Guardian*, 21 December 1933, 5.

moon, public holidays, and more random facts about the cost of a dog licence or the average speed of a snail. The purpose of much of this data was ritualistic rather than instructive. For instance, many diaries still had tide tables, of vital importance to the city merchants who bought the first Letts diaries in the early nineteenth century as they awaited the arrival of ships, but mostly redundant by the twentieth century³²; the notices often included about law sitting and dining terms, and Oxford and Cambridge university terms, were useless to the majority of diarists; and much of the ecclesiastical information about minor feast days like Septuagesima and Quinquagesima was a residue from the religious heights of the Victorian era. The eight-year-old Douglas Hurd's Letts Schoolboy's diary for 1938 was

a formidable document bound in cloth with black loop pencil and world maps, priced one shilling and sixpence. A long section on careers beckons its owner into the "Indian Police" (medical and riding tests age 19-21; salary from R450 a month) or "Banking" (salaries being at about £80 and rise, for clerks, to £400 a year). There are tables of Latin, Greek and French verbs, an essay on bicycles, a list of ocean liners, many lists of sports records, and a page for personal memoranda. This showed that our telephone number was Pewsey 50, that I stood at four feet, six inches and weighed five stones, two pounds. Though invited, I did not record my size in collars or hats.³³

Diaries were thus conspicuously tactile objects with specific textual and visual conventions. Even those who kept their diaries in simple notebooks often gave considerable thought to the look and feel of the repository of their writings. Frank Forster, a labourer, communist and

³² Dobbs, *Dear Diary*, 223.

³³ Douglas Hurd, *Memoirs* (London, 2004), viii.

autodidact based in Saltney near Chester, who kept a diary out of his “desire to record some of my thoughts and activities so that when I am gone some one may come and read through them and see that I at least was capable of thinking of somethings that are removed from that which stinks in the nostrils,” wrote throughout the 1930s in identical “Canadian Tablet” reporter’s notebooks, all purchased from the same stationers. Catherine Feely points out that when, because of rationing and paper shortages, Forster had to write his 1940s diaries in notebooks of varying makes and sizes, it was a source of great irritation to him.³⁴ Walter Musto, a civil servant in the General Stores Department of the Crown Agents for the Colonies at Millbank, filled eleven notebooks from the bespoke academic stationers Philip & Tacey of London’s “Orient” series with his diary, written between 1939 and 1945 - a choice that fits the neat and fastidious person, with a love of small pleasures, who emerges from his diaries.³⁵ Others, like Clara Milburn, a diarist based in Balsall Common near Coventry, augmented the exercise books in which they kept their diaries with drawings and pasted-in newspaper cuttings, telegrams and letters.³⁶ It seems that, for those who kept diaries in these years, the palpability of the traces of a life were an important part of the ritual of diary keeping.

³⁴ Catherine Feely, “From Dialectics to Dancing: Reading, Writing and the Experience of Everyday Life in the Diaries of Frank P. Forster,” *History Workshop Journal*, 69 (2010), 95-6.

³⁵ Walter Musto, *The War and Uncle Walter: The Diary of an Eccentric*, compiled by Art McCulloch (London, 2004), 5.

³⁶ Peter Donnelly, “Introduction,” in *Mrs Milburn’s Diaries: An Englishwoman’s Day-to-Day Reflections 1939-45* (London, 1979), 10.

The social research organization, Mass Observation – and its energetic promotion on radio and in newspapers by its founders, particularly Tom Harrisson – also did much to point to the value and significance of diary keeping by private citizens in these years. On 12 February 1937, less than a fortnight after a letter appeared in the *New Statesman* announcing the project, 30 volunteers kept the first “day surveys” and these experiments were repeated monthly on the same day until the following January, by which time nearly 600 people were participating.³⁷ Two of Mass Observation’s founding members, Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, saw these day surveys as the most important part of the organization’s work: the dustjacket cover of its first book, *Mass-Observation*, designed by Jennings, consisted of photographed extracts from the day surveys describing the morning weather.³⁸

The day survey had conflicting purposes, a product of the sometimes conflicting aims of the organization’s founders and the project as a whole, which the Mass Observation archivist Dorothy Sheridan usefully summarises as “its collapsing of categories between the expert and the non-expert”.³⁹ It was inspired in some sense, like the rest of MO’s work, by the idea that the unconscious fears, fantasies and wishful thinking of the population might be psychoanalytically and anthropologically deciphered: *May the Twelfth*, MO’s book about the 1937 coronation, precedes a section dealing with a normal day survey for March the 12th with a quotation from Pavlov about habits being “nothing but a long chain of conditioned

³⁷ Dorothy Sheridan, “Ordinary Hard-working Folk: Volunteer Writers in Mass-Observation 1937-50,” *Feminist Praxis*, 37/38 (1993), 3.

³⁸ Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (Basingstoke, 2006), 119.

³⁹ Sheridan, “Ordinary Hard-working Folk,” 4.

reflexes.”⁴⁰ The focus on a single day was intended as a means of tapping into the diasporic forms of community in mass society and culture, and the way that events like the Coronation might unify social consciousness around a single theme.⁴¹ This was reflected in the form of the day survey, which was mostly a freeform diary but with often quite detailed instructions given about what to include, such as the state of the diarist’s general health, striking dreams they may have had, and the weather, so there would be some unity in the responses. But the motive behind the day surveys was also democratic and egalitarian, aimed at making these ordinary citizens’ lives better known to the people who governed them, at a time when there were few systematic attempts by either politicians or the press to find out the views of electors and “ordinary people” were rarely seen or heard on film or radio. The day survey, like some of the wider discussions of diary keeping around this time, thus valued self-expression as an end in itself and suggested that each individual life was worth noticing and recording on its own terms, but combined this with a sense that this newly literate mass of people still needed guidance and direction in what they wrote.

The diarists themselves were motivated by a wide variety of impulses which did not always correspond with the organization’s aims. Panel members tended to fit the profile of other diarists from this period whose writings have been unearthed. They were overwhelmingly middle-class, with only about a tenth in working-class occupations, many being members of the expanding new clerical class, that “indeterminate stratum” identified by George Orwell as “the germs of the future England”: librarians, clerks, secretaries, schoolteachers, lab

⁴⁰ Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings (ed.), *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day Surveys 1937* (London, 1987), 345.

⁴¹ Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, *Mass-Observation* (London, 1937), 30.

technicians.⁴² The sample was also slanted towards the south-east and nearly three-quarters were unmarried.⁴³ Answering the directive question “Why did you join M-O?” towards the end of 1937, panel members mentioned wanting to contribute to the social-scientific study of society or to help themselves become more observant.⁴⁴ Much was made in MO’s publicity of the organization as a kind of virtual society of public-spirited souls, a “large system of voluntary helpers” which “does not meet, has no group opinion or constitution.”⁴⁵ To write for MO, as Robert W. Malcolmson argues, “was to participate in an intellectual community – a sort of Open University years before any such formal institution came into existence.”⁴⁶

As Margaretta Jolly points out, the volunteers also often said that they found writing itself pleasurable: “joy in scribbling about the very things I’m always studying in life – I’ve done it

⁴² James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949* (Oxford, 2013), 62; George Orwell, “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius,” in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 2: My Country Right or Left, 1940-1943*, eds Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harmondsworth, 1970), 98.

⁴³ Tom Jeffery, *Mass-Observation: A Short History* (Brighton, 2nd ed. 1999), 29; Margaretta Jolly, “Historical Entries: Mass-Observation Diarists 1937-2001,” *New Formations*, 44 (Autumn 2001), 111.

⁴⁴ Dorothy Sheridan (ed.), *Wartime Women: An Anthology of Women’s Wartime Writing for Mass-Observation 1937-45* (London, 1991), 16, 18.

⁴⁵ Tom Harrisson, “Mass Observation: Objective Enquiry,” *Catholic Herald*, 19 April 1940, 2.

⁴⁶ Robert Malcolmson, “Introduction,” in Olivia Cockett, *Love & War in London: A Woman’s Diary 1939-1942*, ed. Malcolmson (Waterloo, Ontario, 2005), 4.

unconsciously for ages.”⁴⁷ Christopher Hilliard suggests that in this period aspiring writers of the working and lower-middle classes, with limited opportunities to develop their talents, latched on to organizations like MO as a way of practicing their craft and connecting with other writers and readers. But as with other avenues for aspirant writers around this time, like writer’s clubs, they often found MO an imperfect fit for their talents and interests and for the more dedicated correspondents, diary keeping seems to have soon taken on a logic and momentum of its own.⁴⁸

MO’s call to its volunteers for freeform diaries just before the outbreak of war in September 1939 was a pragmatic approach to the fact that the organization was expecting to have to scale itself back in wartime. Continuous diaries could be written with nominal direction from MO and could even be kept in the writer’s home should any wartime emergency interfere with the mail.⁴⁹ “Failing further directions being sent you,” read Charles Madge’s “Crisis Directive,” printed in red ink and sent to all Mass Observers in August, “would you keep a diary for the next few weeks, keeping political discussion at a *minimum*, concentrating on the details of your everyday life, your own reactions and those of your family and others you meet.”⁵⁰ By the end of that month, before war had even been declared, 70 people had started

⁴⁷ Jolly, “Historical Entries,” 111; Sheridan, *Wartime Women*, 16.

⁴⁸ Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 79.

⁴⁹ Sheridan, “Ordinary Hard-working Folk,” 5.

⁵⁰ Simon Garfield, *Our Hidden Lives: The Everyday Diaries of a Forgotten Britain 1945-1948* (London, 2004), 2; James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949* (Oxford, 2013), 140.

war diaries and another 55 began during September. The numbers of people sending in diaries fluctuated throughout the war and had dropped to 60 a month by the end of it, but in total, nearly 500 kept diaries, of hugely varying lengths and frequency of submission, throughout the war, and a handful carried on until well after the war had ended.⁵¹

The Mass Observation diarists were different from ordinary diarists in that they had immediate readers, of a sort. In his editing of the wartime Mass Observation diary of Olivia Cockett, a New Scotland Yard payroll clerk living in Brockley, southeast London, Robert Malcolmson includes some entries from another, more intimate journal of hers. This is a useful reminder that, although the MO diaries could be frank, with Cockett freely discussing her affair with a married man, they often omitted purely personal matters, not just because they were read by other people but also because the genre of the Mass Observation diary was geared more towards reflecting on public events. After spending an idle early morning in March 1940 going on a meandering walk, feeding the birds and arriving late at the office, Cockett wrote: “Well, that morning will live as long as my memory, but I don’t suppose M-O means that by ‘Diary.’”⁵² Diarists imagined Mass Observation’s founders as “kindly, educated, progressive, tolerant and, above all, interested and therefore validating.”⁵³ They were sometimes addressed directly by the diarists: “Never be a canvasser Tom Harrison and Charles Madge, it’s the rottenest job in the world! I know!”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 268; Jolly, “Historical Entries,” 111.

⁵² Cockett, *Love & War in London*, 38, 124, 66.

⁵³ Sheridan, “Introduction,” in *Wartime Women*, 8-9.

⁵⁴ Simon Garfield, *We Are at War: The Diaries of Five Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (London, 2006), 80.

But although they claimed to read every submission, MO's staff made limited use of them. Tom Jeffery suggests that the poor reception of *May the Twelfth*, which made extensive use of the day surveys, discouraged Harrison and Madge from using the diarists too extensively in their future work.⁵⁵ Anonymized extracts were occasionally published in the organization's monthly bulletins and in a short-lived weekly publication of 1940, *US: Mass-Observation's Weekly Intelligence Service*, as well as being quoted in some of MO's book publications, particularly *War Begins at Home* (1940) and *People in Production: An Enquiry into British War Production* (1942). In February 1942, Tom Harrison pointed out in the *New Statesman* that the radio programme *The Brains Trust* was "one of the things that comes up most frequently in the diaries ... Few names occur more frequently in the written words of ordinary people nowadays than [C.E.M.] Joad."⁵⁶ In many cases, though, MO staff simply filed the diaries by month, gender and surname. More than any part of MO's work, they fulfilled its initial mission statement that "our first concern is to collect data, not to interpret them."⁵⁷

In the organization's rough division of labour, Jennings and Madge had instigated the day surveys while Harrison did fieldwork in Bolton. But in wartime, Harrison took over the task of coordinating the diaries and other correspondence from observers. As a frequent contributor to newspapers and BBC radio, he was Mass Observation's public face, and perhaps the ideal reader the diarists imagined for their entries. He even invited London Mass

⁵⁵ Jeffery, *Mass-Observation*, 31.

⁵⁶ Tom Harrison, "Trusting the Brains," *New Statesman and Nation*, 28 February 1942, 3.

⁵⁷ Madge and Harrison, *Mass-Observation*, 34.

Observers to phone him. Olivia Cockett took him up on this on 5 October 1939, but “he only suggested as many verbatim conversation reports as possible about the war, and I am fed up with the damn war and don’t want to talk, or listen to talk, or write about it.” Carrying on a tradition begun by Madge, Harrison also sent notes of thanks and encouragement to diarists, which Cockett appreciated, writing in her diary of 27 June 1940: “Thank you for the letter, Tom Harrison. Hope you’re right about the material being of some use. Haven’t got a very strong missionary impulse, but should be heartened to think that someone, somewhere, would someday be helped somehow by something I’ve done.”⁵⁸ But the diaries did not interest Harrison as much as they did Madge and Jennings as a genre in their own right and, after he was called up in 1942, he was not so involved in the project anyway. In 1944 the full-time Mass Observer Celia Fremlin tried to use the diaries as the basis for a book about the effects of war on the social role of the housewife. But she gave up because, although they provided “invaluable quotations, sidelights, etc.,” she could not “prove” anything from them.⁵⁹

As Mass Observation’s founders dispersed after the war and it became a limited company specializing in market research in 1949, it still accepted diaries but did little more than file them. The explanation given by the teacher who gave up writing for them in 1949, after keeping a diary for nine years, is revealing:

⁵⁸ Cockett, *Love & War in London*, 16, 97; see also Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 65.

⁵⁹ Celia Fremlin to Bob Willcock, 14 September 1944, MO File Report 2181, quoted in James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass-Observation and the Making of the Modern Self* (Oxford, 2010), 214.

Recently I wrote and asked for information. As I lead a very uneventful life, I wanted to know which ... items in my diaries were of use and whether anything different was desired and what could be omitted. I received a polite reply in such general terms as to constitute no answer. It was as if one man said to another in an office "What shall I say?" "Oh, keep the old girl at it, some of it may come in handy." Soon after that I lost interest ... It was clear to me that the man who replied to me hadn't looked at the diary I sent with my request for information.⁶⁰

The uncertain purpose and direction of Mass Observation's diary project is partly reflected in the diary of the best known of its correspondents, the Barrow housewife Nella Last. Having dabbled with completing day surveys for MO in 1938, she began a proper diary at the start of the war, partly because the *Daily Express* columnist William Hickey had argued "that the Government would find MO valuable. Never can see just how, but although not clever am 'bright' enough to trust people who are!"⁶¹ ("In a war, when censorship may necessarily prevent us all from having our say publicly," Hickey had written, "such a service might give a valuable quick check on the public's private reactions: it would supplement propaganda by showing how it was taken – a more benevolent Gestapo."⁶²) But Nella's diary keeping soon became simply a matter of routine: she wrote it almost daily, usually late at night, in pencil

⁶⁰ Dorothy Sheridan, Brian Street and David Bloome, *Writing Ourselves: Mass-Observation and Literacy Practices* (Cresskill, NJ, 2000), 38.

⁶¹ Nella Last's diary, 22 September 1939, quoted in Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 47.

⁶² William Hickey, "These Names make News: H.M. Eyes & Ears?," *Daily Express*, 30 August 1939, 6.

on loose leaf paper, and on one Friday morning each month, on his way to work, her neighbour Mr Atkinson dropped off the parcel to Mass Observation at the post office.⁶³

Nella continued to send entries for the next three decades, occasionally reflecting on whether it was worth carrying on. “The thought struck me as I began my diary,” she wrote on 4 May 1945, “how much longer will they want them?”⁶⁴ For Nella, as for most of the diarists, Mass Observation was mainly a postal address: first, 6 Grote’s Buildings, Blackheath, SE3; then 82 Ladbroke Road, London, W11; then 21 Bloomsbury Street, London, WC1; and finally 148 Cromwell Road, London, SW7. In November 1946, on a trip to London to see her son Cliff, she visited the offices at Bloomsbury House, but does not seem to have gone in.⁶⁵ Since many MO diarists wondered about the fate of their diaries, it was natural for them to be interested in what happened at the address that would have been so familiar to them. In April 1947, another MO diarist, Herbert Brush, was bolder than Last. As he crossed Bloomsbury Street on the way to the British Museum, he suddenly thought he “would go and see what the office of ‘Mass-Observation’ is like, as that is where my diary-letters end up.” He went up to the fifth floor and had a brief conversation with the then head of MO, H.D. (Bob) Willcock: “I questioned the use of my diaries, as they very seldom contain any interesting matter for strangers to read. However, I was told that they were all read, and if anything of interest was there it would be found and noted.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Patricia and Robert Malcolmson, “Introduction,” in *Nella Last’s Peace: The Post-War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (London, 2008), ix.

⁶⁴ *Nella Last’s Peace*, 1.

⁶⁵ *Nella Last’s Peace*, 132.

⁶⁶ Garfield, *Our Hidden Lives*, 383-4.

Last carried on until February 1966 when, aged 76, she wrote her last diary entry, wondering if her writing was ever read and “if the need for it is past now.”⁶⁷ Last’s son, Cliff, later blamed Mass Observation for having failed to tell its longest-serving diarist how well-written and thoughtful her contributions were.⁶⁸ But giving feedback in this way was not what MO did; in providing the most minimal incentive to write - an address with the possibility that the diary might be read there - but little direction, it allowed each diarist to find their own voice and pace of writing and create a body of evidence that might not have existed otherwise. The wide publicity given to Mass Observation, and its sense that the experiences of ordinary people were worth recording, may also have encouraged others to take up the diary habit.

Even without Mass Observation the Second World War, like the First, seems to have led to a sharp rise in diary keeping, although sales of actual diaries fell because of paper rationing.⁶⁹ Uncertainty about whether one’s life would continue perhaps increased the desire to record what was left of it; conscription meant that many more literate people were involved in fighting than in earlier wars; and total war determined that even civilians had their ordinary lives disrupted so they may have seemed extraordinary and worthy of note. “You’re living in days that your children will read about in their history books,” the *Daily Mirror* reminded its

⁶⁷ Nella Last’s diary, 17 February 1966, quoted in Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives*, 49.

⁶⁸ Jolly, “Historical Entries,” 120.

⁶⁹ Dobbs, *Dear Diary*, 229; see also Ronald Blythe, *Each Returning Day: The Pleasure of Diaries* (London, 1989), 162.

readers in 1941, advising them to keep a diary.⁷⁰ Harold Nicolson regularly urged readers of his *Spectator* column to keep a diary, claiming that the diarist's ideal audience should be

his own great-great-grandchildren at the age of twenty-five ... I often remind myself, when I write my daily diary, that whereas my great-grandson will not care a hoot what I thought on January 1st, 1942, of our prospects in Libya, he will be much interested to know what I had for dinner that evening, how much I paid for it, and by what means of locomotion I returned to my chambers ... He will want to know by what alchemy margarine-coupons were transformed into underwear, and how one moved or hesitated when the sirens screamed.⁷¹

These diary-keeping habits seem to have continued for many after the war. By the early 1950s, diary publishers reported an increase in prewar sales by more than half, one attributing this to the fact that “in a 42-hour week, everyone has time to write in a diary, and something to write in it.”⁷² There was a growing public acceptance by mid-century of the significance of ordinary experience, how this might be articulated through diary writing, and even how this information might be useful to future historians. When, in June 1952, a Mrs Norah Arnott had her personal diary stretching back 48 years stolen and appealed for its return by saying that it was “of no value to anyone but me,” it was the unlikely figure of King George V's biographer, John Gore, who admonished her that “truth is the daughter of time” and that “if

⁷⁰ “You're Making History,” *Daily Mirror*, 6 January 1941.

⁷¹ Harold Nicolson, “Marginal Comment,” *Spectator*, 2 January 1942, 9.

⁷² “Books that Give All the Answers,” *Manchester Guardian*, 31 December 1951, 3.

diaries are punctually kept by an honest hand, they will be a gold mine to biographers and historians though they may treat largely of the day's weather or the day's bag."⁷³

One reason why historians are now making so much use of diaries from the first half of the twentieth century, then, may simply be that there are a lot of them, and that it has taken this long for them to be discovered and sifted, usually after the writer's death. While writers and historians from the 1920s to the 1950s had begun to point to the value of the diary as a historical resource, there was little sense of *how* they might be valuable and little systematic attempt to archive diaries, so there is a sense of serendipitous survival about them which adds to their romantic allure today but also presents problems of organization and interpretation. From the beginning, the MO diarists thought of the usefulness of what they were doing to posterity: Miss Atkinson, a filing clerk from Tonbridge wrote as early as 1937 that "the studies of daily lives with every little detail should be very interesting to posterity in the way the Samuel Pepys diary is".⁷⁴ Madge's Crisis Directive of August 1939 explicitly made this point about the wartime diaries, that they would allow future "historians and social scientists" to make use of "a detailed, authentic record of the effects of war on the civil population."⁷⁵ Harrison also assured the MO Panel in August 1940 that their diaries were "quite definitely going to prove of first class importance when the time comes to write a history of this war."⁷⁶

⁷³ John Gore, "Of No Value ...?," *Sunday Times*, 8 June 1952, 4.

⁷⁴ Sheridan, *Wartime Women*, 18.

⁷⁵ Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 140.

⁷⁶ Jolly, "Historical Entries," 120.

As well as promoting the private habit of diary keeping, Mass Observation could be said to have pioneered this future-oriented sense that today's ephemeral writing might be useful to later historians. But MO's own practice, particularly when directed by Harrison, a political animal concerned with the contemporary dissemination and publicizing of the project (and himself), was simply to accumulate copious material and to publish quickly and often.

In short, the usefulness of the diaries to historians of the future was an idea and gesture rather than something actively fostered through archival practice, other than simply by filing them. The diaries lay mostly unread for two decades until the late 1960s when the historian Paul Addison discovered them, along with the rest of the archive, "all higgledy-piggledy under layers of dust" in the basement of Mass Observation's offices in Cromwell Road, South Kensington, where it felt "like stumbling on buried treasure".⁷⁷ They were the work of hundreds of diarists who had posted hundreds of thousands of diary entries into the nation's postboxes to an unknown reader of the future, which had then survived the London blitz, several office moves, cellar floods and attacks by mice and fungi. The state of the collection when it arrived (largely thanks to Addison and his fellow historian Angus Calder) at the University of Sussex - with old folders full of jumbled-up papers held together by rusted paperclips and broken elastic bands⁷⁸ - shows how little thought had been given to its value as an archive up to that point.

In the years since Mass Observation's first incarnation ended in the 1960s, there has been a growing sense of the value of archives, a greater sensitivity to the storing of collective

⁷⁷ Paul Addison, "Angus Calder (1942-2008)," *History Workshop Journal*, 70 (2010), 300.

⁷⁸ Sheridan, *Wartime Women*, 265.

memories in contemporary culture and a “grassroots revolution in historical participation” identified by Jerome de Groot, Raphael Samuel and others.⁷⁹ When Mass Observation relaunched the panel of diarists in 1981, under the direction of the University of Sussex anthropologist David Pocock and the archivist Dorothy Sheridan, it retained some of the guiding aims of the original project. It had the same creative combination of restriction and shapelessness: while most contributors responded directly to suggestions and guidance from the Archive about what to write about, other writers sent in personal diaries and impromptu contributions not covered by the directives.⁸⁰ But there were also clear differences, inspired by a new sense of the value of recording people’s lives for posterity. In keeping with a growing interest in life writing, also evident since the 1970s in the growth of feminist and oral history collectives and community-publishing initiatives (the Brighton area, where the archive was based, having a particularly rich tradition in this area, for example through the independent publisher QueenSpark Books and the radical newspaper the *Brighton Voice*), the new project placed more emphasis on writing for Mass Observation as a way of recording and preserving a life story.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London, 2009), 48; see also Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1994).

⁸⁰ Annebella Pollen, “Research Methodology in Mass Observation Past and Present: ‘Scientifically, About as Valuable as a Chimpanzee’s Tea Party at the Zoo’?,” *History Workshop Journal*, 75 (2013), 219.

⁸¹ Dorothy Sheridan, “Writing to the Archive: Mass-Observation as Autobiography,” *Sociology*, 27, 1 (February 1993), 30.

The archive's usefulness to scholars in the future was now seen not simply as a fortunate by-product, as it had been in MO's earlier incarnation, but as its *raison d'être*. This was partly because the archive had a new-found academic respectability, based in a university with funding at various points from the Leverhulme Trust and the Nuffield Foundation - so a concern with scholarly longevity began to displace the original Mass Observation project's engagement with its contemporary political and cultural moment. The volunteers who contributed to the post-1981 project were explicitly asked to address "a putative and virtual set of future historians." As Ben Highmore notes, "this accounts for something of the temporal atmosphere that often pervades these documents: all this, the correspondents seem to be telling the reader, will have happened a long time ago."⁸²

Diaries like this, written with a strong sense of audience and readership, may need to be read differently from the rather less premeditated and future-directed diaries of the earlier MO project which, along with more conventional private diaries, present different kinds of challenge for the historian. As a body of evidence, diaries are generally hard to process as they are often very long and diverse in their subject matter, almost always hand-written, and, given that they are frequently written in haste, difficult to decipher. It is notable that, for the first 30 years of its existence, diaries were the least used material in the Mass Observation Archive. Historians focused instead on the topic collections and file reports, because these were relatively short, indexable and (since almost all were typed, unlike the majority of the diaries) easily legible. It was not until 1991 that the archive produced a preliminary guide to the content of the diaries. It stored and still stores them together by month, which means that

⁸² Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* (London, 2011), 92.

following a single diarist through the war might mean retrieving 150 archive boxes.⁸³ With the exception of Nella Last and the writer Naomi Mitchison, it is only in the 2000s that individual MO diarists began to be published in edited collections.⁸⁴ There have also been three bestselling anthologies of the diarists by Simon Garfield, and another by the late Sandra Koa Wing of the MO archive; and Mass Observation diarists have increasingly been included in wartime diary anthologies alongside other diarists.⁸⁵

As a piece of evidence, the diary remains stubbornly analogue. One of the catalysts for the growing use of periodicals, newspapers and other ephemera among historians of Britain in recent years has been the expansion of digital archives, with their electronic subversion of conventional hierarchies of textuality. By using word searches to produce “hits” across a

⁸³ Dorothy Sheridan, “Introduction,” in *The Mass-Observation Diaries: An Introduction* (Falmer, 1991), 3.

⁸⁴ See Robert W. Malcolmson and Peter Searby (eds), *Wartime Norfolk: The Diary of Rachel Dhonau, 1941-1942* (Norwich, 2004); Patricia and Robert Malcolmson (eds), *A Woman in Wartime London: The Diary of Kathleen Tipper, 1941-1945* (London, 2006); Patricia and Robert Malcolmson (eds), *A Soldier in Bedfordshire, 1941-1942: The Diary of Private Denis Argent, Royal Engineers* (Woodbridge, 2009); Patricia and Robert Malcolmson (eds), *Dorset in Wartime 1941-1942: The Diary of Phyllis Walther* (Dorchester, 2009).

⁸⁵ See Amy Helen Bell, *London Was Ours* (London, 2011); Penelope Middelboe, Christopher Grace and Donald Fry (eds), *We Shall Never Surrender: British Diaries 1939-1945* (London, 2011); Jennifer Purcell, *Domestic Soldiers: Six Women’s Lives in the Second World War* (London, 2010); Robert Kershaw, *Never Surrender: Voices of a Lost Generation* (London, 2009).

wide range of texts, digitized archives have expanded our definition of print culture. Diaries, though, have largely been excluded from this opening up of ephemeral documents to digital access, because handwritten documents cannot (yet) be searched through the imperfect system of “Optical Character Recognition” (OCR) that these archives rely on. The diaries of a small number of prominent figures such as Queen Victoria and Beatrice Webb have been digitized, and Wigan Library and Chetham’s Library in Manchester have both begun projects to digitize some of their diary collections. In most cases, though, even digitized diaries cannot be searched in the same way as digitized print archives and so they remain resistant to the kind of electronic data mining that has transformed the study of ephemeral print culture.

The most extensive recent project to archive private diaries – the Great Diary Project, housed at the independent, charity-funded Bishopsgate Library in the City of London – is an attempt to address this deficiency while making something of a virtue of the diary’s irreducibility to digital form. It was inaugurated in 2012 with Irving Finkel’s gift of his private collection of about 1500 diaries from the 19th and 20th centuries and has since invited members of the public to augment the archive by depositing their own or their relatives’ diaries in it. In newspaper articles, lectures and media interviews, Finkel discussed his rationale for collecting diaries and his campaign to store them in a single archive. His aim, he said, was “to rescue other people’s diaries from perdition,” from being “unloved, uncared for, burned, skipped, torn up or left to moulder into green lumps in cellars.”⁸⁶ A curator in the Department

⁸⁶ BBC Radio 4, *The Man Who Saves Life Stories*, 8 June 2012; Irving Finkel, “Accidental Historians,” *Guardian Books Blog*, 1 November 2007, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2007/nov/01/accidentalthistorians> [accessed 11 June 2012].

of the Middle East at the British Museum, Finkel saw diaries as a “rescue corner for the human spirit” and believed that their seemingly banal subject matter would be transformed by time into significance, just as the cuneiform written on clay tablets in ancient Mesopotamia is now charged with meaning. He indiscriminately collected every available diary, “on the basis that even one about changing the tax disc or mending the fence, if it were 400 years old, would be very interesting.”⁸⁷ Before the collection was housed at Bishopsgate, he spoke of saving the diaries “in some fire-proofed vault for unborn readers, for whom the 20th and 21st centuries will seem distant and unreal,” or of burying thousands of them in an empty Tube station, so that someone in 200 years would have access to the “gold dust” of social history.⁸⁸

Being able to inspect a large number of diaries in the Bishopsgate Library undoubtedly adds to our understanding of diary keeping. We can see that the different functions of a diary, as a mnemonic for future appointments and as a vehicle for personal reminiscences, often overlapped; that even in this most individualistic of genres, diarists were constrained by the size and format of the diary itself, and the way it divided up days, but that they were also resourceful in commandeering sections meant for accounts or general memoranda for other purposes, such as Christmas card lists or summings-up of the year; and that diaries were personalized by their keepers with doodles, drawings, pasted-in newspaper articles, cheque stubs, postcards, pressed leaves and bus tickets. One teenage girl diarist, writing from a private school in Cumbria in the early 1950s, treated her Letts day-a-page desk diaries as an omnium-gatherum of her life, pasting in cartoons from Ronald Searle’s *St Trinian’s* series, slips from her teachers (“marks deducted for untidiness”), pictures of Mario Lanza and Glenn

⁸⁷ Tim Walker, “One Day at a Time,” *Independent*, 30 December 2009, 2.

⁸⁸ Finkel, “Accidental Historians”; Walker, “One Day at a Time”.

Ford, theatre programmes and restaurant menus, as well as including lipstick traces, stick-figure drawings of school lacrosse matches and some of her own juvenile poetry (“Lo before my downbent head / Appeared this vision - light of life ...”), with which she unsuccessfully tried to interest the publishers Faber and Faber.⁸⁹ Examining a mass of diaries at the archive, one also sees that they are all marks on a page made by a person. A pencil becomes gradually blunter until it is sharpened, ink gets slowly fainter until the cartridge is refilled, or there are furious crossings-out, double underlinings and even special announcements written in red ink (“Petrol rationing ends. 10 years of restriction over!!!”⁹⁰) that reflect the mood of a moment.

En masse, as Finkel puts it, the diaries add up to a sort of “mute appeal,” a sense of the weight of numerous lives lived anonymously and mundanely but meaningfully.⁹¹ It is very moving to be able to witness the commitment of obscure individuals to acknowledge and record the trivial details of their lives, if only to themselves. The philosopher of communication John Durham Peters calls these kinds of texts “gifts to the dead,” arguing that they are “desperate and daring acts of dignity” precisely because they are “expressive acts occurring over distances and without immediate assurance of reply.”⁹²

Since the nineteenth century, as Carolyn Steedman argues, a visit to an archive has been regarded as “a foundational and paradigmatic activity of historians,” and this “cult of the

⁸⁹ GDP/1, Great Diary Project, Bishopsgate Library, London.

⁹⁰ GDP/30, 26 May 1950, Great Diary Project.

⁹¹ BBC Radio 4, *The Man Who Saves Life Stories*.

⁹² John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago, 1999), 152.

archive” has come to underpin certain historians’ sense of legitimacy, most recently in arguments over postmodern history, when “social historians had turned their attention to the archive, claimed it as their very own place, in which they were more at home than any other kind of historian.”⁹³ The archive combines the proof of intellectual labour completed with a more emotive sense of actively possessing and resurrecting the past. The idea of the archive as a place that preserves both an official, authoritative history and a more nebulous psychic past is exemplified in the Great Diary Project, a public entity that is entirely concerned with the personal and intimate.

As Steedman argues, any skilled historian is aware of the disparity between the archive’s promise to be able to “locate, or possess that moment of origin, as the beginning of things” and the reality that what has ended up there is the “tiny flotsam” in ‘the great, brown, slow-moving strandless river of Everything.’⁹⁴ But in the Great Diary Project, this sense of coming in halfway through the story, or of following a narrative which then peters out without giving up its secrets, is amplified. One 17-year-old public schoolboy’s diary for 1950 is mostly punctuated with prosaic entries (“Went to Bournemouth to get trousers etc. Very boring”) before abruptly hinting at some serious existential crisis (“I feel really unhappy, and feel that I have worried Dad and Mother which makes me worse ... Muddle again. A terrible depression today”) before, just as abruptly and without explanation, reverting to mundanity (“my bike developed wheel wobble”).⁹⁵ This is how private diaries often read to an outsider: functioning mainly as notes to the self, they are tantalizing textual fragments that obscure as

⁹³ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester, 2001), x, 3.

⁹⁴ Steedman, *Dust*, 3, 18.

⁹⁵ GDP/30, 4 January 1950, 10 January 1950, 25 January 1950, Great Diary Project.

much as they explain. And since the Great Diary Project consists almost entirely of private citizens who have for the most part left little alternative trace of their existence, there is no way of piecing together the story forensically from elsewhere – a problem exacerbated by the quasi-accidental, chaotic way in which the items have come to be in the collection, after being rescued from house clearances, car boot sales, junk shops or attics after the writer's death.

The idea of the archive as a place that can retain both tangible textual traces and more elusive private desires is now familiar to the British public from the BBC genealogy series *Who Do You Think You Are?* and other TV history documentaries. The rituals of exploring archives – scanning the shelving, identifying the relevant file, unloosing the archive string, turning the pages carefully with white gloves – are part of the visual connecting tissue of these programmes. In *Dear Diary*, a 2010 BBC4 series about diaries, for instance, the comedians Rory Bremner and Victoria Wood were shown roaming the Mass Observation stacks at the University of Sussex. The moment of discovery (presumably aided by pre-production) showed Wood, who played Nella Last in her own 2006 television adaptation of the diaries, *Housewife*, 49, hungrily laying her hands on Last's diary, noting excitedly the embroidery cotton she had used to tie the loose sheets together and the Venus symbol to denote a woman diarist scrawled on its cover. According to other contributors to the series, diaries offered the "intimacy that you can't get enough of" and "a totally unedited, honest picture of the time,"

and they filled “the hole where the history should be.”⁹⁶ Diaries, it was assumed, were a particularly intimate form of evidence that offered a first-hand encounter with the past.

This modern sense of the diary as a therapeutic truth-teller was also evident in *Housewife, 49*. Condensed into 90 minutes, it intensified the narrative arc of Last’s wartime diaries, which show the war providing the occasion for a liberating break from her depressions and “nerves” of the 1930s, as she gains confidence from helping to run a Red Cross charity shop and learns to challenge her husband. Nella writing and reading from her own diary provides the voiceover in the film, offering the viewer an access to her that is not available to the other characters – although in fact this voiceover that purports to be the diary often uses modern idioms like “I’m sad and I’m scared” and is partly an invention of Wood’s. Nella’s husband does not understand why she writes a diary; nor do the RP-accented Mass Observation staff in London who assure each other that “loonies will always write in,” who casually label her “Housewife, 49,” and who are not sure where Barrow-in-Furness is. For all his occasional old Harrovian hauteur, Tom Harrison would never have treated the diarists so flippantly. In the film the diary’s only sympathetic reader is the viewer, who understands Nella better from our supposedly more enlightened, less emotionally stifled present.⁹⁷

This is a starker version of how Nella’s diary is usually read in popular accounts: as a cathartic, self-actualizing narrative with its author, in the words of a recent *Daily Mail* article, as “the Original Desperate Housewife.”⁹⁸ Virginia Nicholson calls Nella’s decision to write a

⁹⁶ Rory Bremner and Simon Garfield cited in *Dear Diary*, 18 January 2010, BBC4.

⁹⁷ *Housewife, 49*, ITV, 10 December 2006.

⁹⁸ “Nella, the Original Desperate Housewife,” *Daily Mail*, 15 October 2010, 34.

diary for Mass Observation “the first step on the road to her recovery.”⁹⁹ It is not so much that this version of events is wrong – wives pouring hitherto unfulfilled energies into home front activities in the face of obstructive or killjoy husbands feature heavily in Dorothy Sheridan’s MO diary collection, *Wartime Women* - but that it is only one way of reading the story. Last’s surviving diary is incomplete, large parts of 1944 and 1945 being lost at some point before the archive’s arrival at Sussex, which should at least give us pause before extrapolating too much from what survives. Even the diary that remains is so long it is unlikely anyone has read it all. Nella’s entries from the late 1950s and early 1960s, which relate her husband’s worsening depression and her own declining health and growing reclusiveness, have not been published - perhaps because they cannot be shaped as easily as the wartime diaries into a redemptive narrative - and, until recently when David Kynaston cited them in his book *Modernity Britain*, mainly to demonstrate the effect of the arrival of television in a household ambivalent about it,¹⁰⁰ were unused by historians. In any case, organizing Last’s diaries into a continuous narrative is a somewhat misleading way of reading them because, like all MO diarists, she did not conceive them in this way. On 30 August 1945, she referred to the “miles” of text her diaries must now constitute,¹⁰¹ but she never saw this accumulated text herself, simply posting her entries away each month.

The relationship between the physical object of the diary and its edited, codex form is, as the French theorist of diarists Philippe Lejeune puts it, “a veritable Procrustean bed. It is like

⁹⁹ Nicholson, *Millions Like Us*, 8.

¹⁰⁰ David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957-59* (London, 2013), 295, 301, 322.

¹⁰¹ Nella Last’s *Peace*, 1.

trying to make a sponge fit a matchbox.” The unedited manuscript of Last’s diary - with its paratactic use of “and” or dashes to connect points, sparing use of paragraphs or punctuation and copious use of inverted commas and underlining of words - has a more extempore feel than the published diaries, suggesting something done hurriedly and intuitively late at night. What mattered most to Last seemed to be the moment of composition itself, not a notion of how these myriad entries would later link together. The diary as a form is best understood, argues Lejeune, not as a consecutive narrative but as a system of daily habits, a *modus operandi*. “Before becoming a text, the private diary is a *practice*,” he argues. “The text itself is a mere by-product, a residue. Keeping a journal is first and foremost a way of life, whose result is often obscure and does not reflect the life as an autobiographical narrative would do.”¹⁰²

As Jennifer Sinor points out, much of the existing research on diaries has tended to stress that they are ultimately performative texts, vehicles for identity-formation and self-fashioning. Studies of women’s diaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, in particular, have argued that their recording of daily life sought to “authorize self-representation,” to write into life a hidden self not constrained by patriarchal conventions, so that “a woman’s diary is a self-portrait of someone who should be invisible, silent, even erased,”¹⁰³ or that women often shared their diaries with intimates and saw their diary keeping as of a piece with more obvious tools for self-expression such as letter-writing, suggesting that “the dividing line

¹⁰² Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, eds Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak, trans. Katherine Durnin (Honolulu, 2009), 226, 31.

¹⁰³ Catherine Delafield, *Women’s Diaries as Narratives in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Farnham, 2009), 36, 48.

between degrees of privacy is a delicate one.”¹⁰⁴ Sinor suggests that, because diaries have historically been undervalued by historians and literary critics, scholars of diaries have often tried to justify their entry into the literary canon by showing how similar they are to more prestigious texts in their qualities of introspection, authorial presence and narrative shaping.¹⁰⁵ As Michael Roper points out, cultural history also leans naturally towards examining such constructions of identity because it focuses on what is “collectively shaped,” its subject matter being “the public narrative forms and social practices through which personal accounts are composed.”¹⁰⁶

While Last’s diary certainly contains elements of a narrativized life story, much of it makes more sense if we think of it as what Sinor calls “ordinary writing,” which is process-oriented, exists in the moment and is fundamentally bound up with the act of composition itself. Sinor suggests that this form of writing is often produced by women who, caught up in routine tasks like cooking, cleaning or mending, have “historically and primarily experienced time as measured rather than occasioned ... in fact the general measuredness of women’s bodies, tasks, and days assures both their skill and promise at translating the experience of ‘time in’ to the page.” She argues that the ordinary diary “bears the traces of just enough recognizable

¹⁰⁴ Judy Simons, *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf* (Basingstoke, 1990), 7; see also Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff (eds), *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women’s Diaries* (Amherst, 1996).

¹⁰⁵ Jennifer Sinor, *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray’s Diary* (Iowa City, 2002), 29.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Roper, “Splitting in Unsent Letters: Writing as a Social Practice and a Psychological Activity,” *Social History*, 26, 3 (October 2001), 319.

narrative features in combination with just enough gaps, omissions, and general disarray to make it highly vulnerable to hyper-performative reading” – by which she means that there is a continual temptation to turn these messy, illegible, gap-ridden texts into a structured narrative, and that this temptation should be resisted.¹⁰⁷ In a discussion of her Great Aunt Norah’s diaries, the historian Alison Twells similarly notes that, writing in ordinary pocket diaries with space for about twenty or thirty words for each day, her style - disjointed, telegraphic sentence fragments in which verbs dominate over pronouns - left little room for narratives of personal transformation.¹⁰⁸

But while one should recognise that diary-writing as a genre often privileges banality and routine over narrative incident, it is worth noting as well that diarists themselves are often unconventional or idiosyncratic. To write thousands of private diary entries over a long period is a rare and even contrarian act. Only a minority of the Mass Observation diarists, already an atypical group in their interest in writing about their lives, made regular contributions over a period of at least two years.¹⁰⁹ A fifth of MO’s wartime diarists stopped after their first entry and another fifth after two to four entries.¹¹⁰ A truly representative history told through diaries would have to include the vast, forgotten majority that did not see January out. This alternative account would tell the story of an eternal winter, populated by a

¹⁰⁷ Sinor, *Extraordinary Work*, 95-6, 88.

¹⁰⁸ Alison Twells, ‘Storying Norah’s Diaries’, available at <http://norahsdiaries.wordpress.com/2013/06/06/storying-norahs-diaries/> [accessed 3 November 2013].

¹⁰⁹ Robert Malcolmson, “Introduction,” in Olivia Cockett, *Love & War in London*, 2.

¹¹⁰ Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 268.

tribe of initially loquacious people who suddenly become monosyllabic and then lapse irrevocably into silence. The Great Diary Project contains examples of these kinds of diaries, in which the entries become gradually more sporadic before ending with a single, gnomic entry on 28 February: “Phoned saying I had to work late. Went back to office & typed letter to George.”¹¹¹ More dedicated diarists are, by nature, a self-selecting and skewed sample. James Hinton points out that for all MO’s rhetoric about allowing ordinary people to speak for themselves, “many of the panel members did not think of themselves as ‘ordinary’. They tended to see themselves as unusual people, distinguished by their desire to self-fashion their lives free from the conventions of their social milieu.”¹¹² They were certainly highly unusual in one sense: they kept diaries consistently.

David Kynaston’s book series on the postwar history of Britain is vivid and compelling partly because the diarists he employs extensively are not “representative” – and not only because they betray the familiar bias towards the lower-middle-class, London and home counties-based, unmarried and middle-aged, but also because they are so often vibrant, eccentric characters with mordant or wry takes on public events. Such characters include Grace Golden, a middle-aged, London-based commercial artist, lonely and depressed at her lack of commissions; Gladys Langford, a world-weary school teacher deserted by her husband in 1914, now living on her own in the Woodstock Hotel, Highbury; and Florence Speed, unmarried, in her 50s and in poor health, eking out a living writing romantic novels such as *Girl Proposes* (1948) and *No Poster Girl* (1953), and house-sharing in Brixton with her sister and brother. Kynaston’s most assiduous diarists seem to have been motivated by a

¹¹¹ GDP/29, 28 February 1944, Great Diary Project.

¹¹² Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 374.

combination of loneliness, time free from children and spouses and, often, undemanding clerical jobs with frequent breaks, short hours and plenty of time to write.¹¹³ His accumulation of these voices has the rich texture of classic realist fiction; the postwar demi-world of cheap boarding houses, residential hotels and urban solitariness he evokes is reminiscent of the novels of Patrick Hamilton or Norman Collins. When Gladys Langford sees Terence Rattigan's play *Separate Tables* in October 1954, she records tellingly that "the awful loneliness of the flotsam and jetsam in a guesthouse was only too well portrayed."¹¹⁴

The most absorbing character in Kynaston's books is the oddest of all: Henry St John, an unmarried civil servant in his 30s living in the Westbourne Hotel, Bristol, before moving to London to work for the Ministry of Food. St John is, in Kynaston's words, "a man of virtually non-existent human sympathies" for whom "the war had essentially been a personal inconvenience." Public events impinge little on his consciousness, as he spends his days failing to buy Ovaltine at 11 successive shops, attending nude shows at London's Windmill Theatre or returning to a public toilet to masturbate over the obscene inscriptions he had seen in one cubicle, only to find "there was no lock on the door."¹¹⁵ His diary entry for 6 February 1952, the day the King's death is announced, concentrates on how the cold in his head has produced "more nasal discharge," before noting that "I never saw King George VI." When he goes to relatives in Southall to listen to the Coronation, he records only that "one log of an electric fire was switched on, but it was still cold." It is not quite fair to say that St John

¹¹³ See Jeffery, *Mass Observation*, 29, for an account of the short hours that many of the middle-class Mass Observation diarists worked.

¹¹⁴ David Kynaston, *Family Britain 1951-57* (London, 2009), 426.

¹¹⁵ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-51* (London, 2007), 16, 61, 63, 85.

complains constantly: instead he offers, as Kynaston puts it, an “almost commentless chronicling” with no explicit emotional input at all but an always underlying tone of misanthropy.¹¹⁶ What the extracts from his diary do communicate, though, is the sense of an individual voice: a resilient consciousness, not necessarily in kilter with current events but alive and open to experience at that moment in history. Similarly, Ben Highmore has suggested that in the best writing that makes use of Mass Observation’s diarists, “the particularity of respondents’ quotes are never held hostage by overriding arguments: they always remain little islands of singularity, fractals of a life-world that exceed an argument.”¹¹⁷

The value of the private diary as evidence is precisely that it is likely to be eccentric or tangential in this way. For the historian of Britain’s recent past, there is almost a surfeit of harder, more demographically representative evidence, particularly of statistical and quantitative data accumulated through the expanded role of government, advances in computing and what Mike Savage calls “the creeping rise of the social science apparatus” in the postwar years.¹¹⁸ Since 1967, the opening up of the National Archives by the 30 year rule (and, since 2000, by Freedom of Information legislation) has also greatly increased the amount of official documentation available to researchers. Contemporary historians have understandably wanted to draw on these rich resources as they are released but as the historian Stephen Brooke argues, it has meant that “our understanding of post-1945 Britain

¹¹⁶ Kynaston, *Family Britain*, 66, 299, 463.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Pollen, “Research Methodology in Mass Observation,” 222.

¹¹⁸ Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010), 10.

has yet to be entirely loosed from its moorings in Whitehall and Kew.”¹¹⁹ It is one reason, perhaps, why twentieth-century historians have still to create the thoroughly interdisciplinary accounts of the relationship between individual subjectivities and collective mentalities that have illuminated earlier periods.

Some of the techniques used by early modern historians in analysing the much scantier evidence from that period – close reading of textual fragments, the extrapolation of historical pattern from the forensic examination of seemingly anecdotal or peripheral material – might usefully be applied to the ordinary writing by private citizens that has proliferated in the last century, for it is this kind of writing that occupies what Roper calls “the articulation points between cultural scripts and subjectivity.”¹²⁰ The recent work of Matt Houlbrook and Claire Langhamer on *Queer London* and *The English in Love* shows the rich potential of exploring this genre of private writing which occupies a liminal space between the social and subjective.¹²¹ Such texts “provide routes into people’s affective worlds, operating as an archive of feeling,” as Langhamer puts it, but they also reflect “wider structural shifts” and the complex relationship between everyday experiences and the efforts of experts and other

¹¹⁹ Stephen Brooke, “Moments of Modernity,” *Journal of British Studies*, 42, 1 (January 2003), 136; see also Peter Catterall, “Contemporary British History: A Personal View,” *Contemporary British History*, 16, 1 (Spring 2002): 1-10; and Pat Thane, “Introduction: Exploring Post-War Britain,” *Cultural and Social History*, 9, 2 (June 2012), 271.

¹²⁰ Roper, “Splitting in Unsent Letters,” 323.

¹²¹ Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago, 2005), and Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford, 2013).

cultural actors to define and prescribe those experiences.¹²² As Houlbrook reminds us elsewhere, in an essay on Edith Thompson's letters, "privacy is not the same as authenticity."¹²³

In the context of twentieth-century British historiography, then, diaries can show how the collective experience of a historical moment comes up against the seeming randomness and singularity of everyday life as it is being lived. They help us to see the recent past as an era of still-to-be-decided tensions, possibilities and contingent moments, instead of a story to which we already know the ending, with statistical agglomerations or abstract nouns like "austerity" and "affluence" substituting for the messy, convoluted experience lived by thinking, feeling selves. Diaries show us that daily lives are experienced corporeally, as a series of sensual pleasures or discomforts in the present moment. May Smith's heartfelt complaints about "the awful blaring whine" of the air raid sirens and the hard, unyielding chair she has to sit on while listening to long lectures about Combines or the profits of Vickers Armstrong, or Herbert Brush salivating in front of a still life of a pork pie "with plenty of jelly between the meat and the crust" at the Royal Academy summer exhibition in May 1947, convey with great economy that, for most people in this era, news about the second front or postwar export drives was less pressing than aching bottoms or empty stomachs.¹²⁴

¹²² Langhamer, *The English in Love*, xvi, 3, 14.

¹²³ Matt Houlbrook, "'A Pin to See the Peepshow': Culture, Fiction and Selfhood in Edith Thompson's Letters, 1921-1922," *Past and Present*, 207 (May 2010), 226.

¹²⁴ Smith, *These Wonderful Rumours*, 35, 60; Garfield, *Our Hidden Lives*, 389.

In a centrally heated, abundant age in which we are insulated from many such discomforts, diaries remind us that the past is occupied by countless separate consciousnesses, swayed from one day to the next by their moods and instincts (in which, at least in wartime, sexual desire seems to rank lower than hunger and dislike of noise, wet and cold). Twentieth-century British diaries seem especially revealing when their relationship to their historical moment somehow subverts our expectations about social attitudes or popular responses to public events. It is useful to note that, on 19 June 1940, Walter Musto was more saddened by the state of Chessington Zoo than the fall of Paris.¹²⁵ Or that a Wolverhampton housewife who kept a diary in the first months of 1941, when news from the war was particularly bad, was far more deeply affected by the inquest into the death of Virginia Woolf.¹²⁶ Or that Nella Last found VE day anti-climactic, in contrast with the “wild mafficking” of the South African War, and eventually celebrated it by opening a tin of pears.¹²⁷ Untroubled by the historian’s reaching after pattern and significance, diarists often juxtapose the public and private, the momentous and banal, in unexpected ways.

It is striking that the most prominent exhibit in the Samuel Pepys room of the 2009-10 Wellcome Institute Exhibition, *Identity: Eight Rooms, Nine Lives*, alongside extracts from historical diaries, was a streaming video of the confessional chair of the “Diary Room,” in which housemates talked “privately” to Big Brother while also being broadcast to viewers. In

¹²⁵ Musto, *The War and Uncle Walter*, 141.

¹²⁶ GDP/18, 19 April 1941, Great Diary Project.

¹²⁷ Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (ed.), *Nella Last’s War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife*, 49 (London, 2006), 270.

an age when openly accessible blog posts and social networking sites host perpetual updates on the mundane details of people's lives, in ways that would have seemed inconceivable a generation ago, the long-term commitment to private writing in the personal diary seems an impressive, even heroic act. Perhaps some of the popular fascination with the private diaries of the recent past stems from this recent shift in public attitudes towards personal privacy that the sociologist Eva Illouz has called "the transformation of the public sphere into an arena for the exposition of private life."¹²⁸ But it may also mean that there is a temptation to read this kind of diary through the lens of our own era's transformed attitudes to self-expression and emotional "authenticity": the diary as a kind of secular confessional and giver-up of secrets. My sense instead is that these diaries best illuminate their historical context when we recognise that the key thing about them is that, while they are mediated by cultural conventions and expectations, they are also, finally, private – which makes them strange, enigmatic and ultimately unknowable.

¹²⁸ Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge, 2007), 108.