

# **The Mass-Observation Diaries**

## **An Introduction**

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The first edition of this booklet has been produced collectively by the members of a two-term evening class organised in Autumn 1990 and Spring 1991 by the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Sussex: Joyce Collins, Adam Conroy, Sheila Haines, Mary Hopper, Jan Hunt, Cynthia Martin, Lizzy Mountain, Eileen Noel, Margaret Pearson, Jacqueline Pollard, Shery Russell and Beatrice Sofaer. Dorothy Sheridan (the Archivist) was the course tutor.

The index was compiled by Sheila Haines. Joyce Collins checked and proof read the text and Lizzy Mountain designed and organised the printing of the cover. Dorothy Sheridan introduced and edited the booklet.

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Enquiries about the Mass-Observation Collection should be addressed to the Archivist, the Mass-Observation Archive, the Library, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9QL. Tel. 01273 678157.

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## Introduction

In August 1939, the social research organisation, Mass-Observation, invited members of the public to record their day-to-day lives in the form of a diary. These diaries were to be sent at intervals to Mass-Observation's office in London where they would be used as a basis for the study of civilian life during wartime Britain.

Mass-Observation had been set up in 1937 by Tom Harrisson, a self-styled anthropologist and adventurer, Charles Madge, a poet and journalist, and Humphrey Jennings, a documentary film-maker working at that time with the GPO Film Unit. Their aim was to create an 'anthropology of ourselves' - a comprehensive survey of ordinary people's feelings and activities using a very wide variety of techniques to gather information. Most of their early work centred around the observation of people's behaviour but they were also interested in how people wrote about their own lives - hence the diaries. During their first year of work, the organisation recruited a group of volunteers (eventually termed the 'Panel') to keep a detailed account of everything they did on the twelfth day of each month. This included 12 May 1937, which was the Coronation Day of George VI, and selections from the diaries written on this day were published by Faber the same year in Mass-Observation's first book, *May Twelfth*.

Most of the diaries which were sent to Mass-Observation were never published at the time. For two decades after the war they lay in a London basement, largely forgotten, until the University of Sussex offered them a new home. They arrived, together with all the other papers generated by Mass-Observation's research activities, at the University in 1970. The first task was to get the whole collection into some sort of order and create finding aids so that the material could be used as a resource for historians.

Since the early 1970s, many people have visited the Mass-Observation Archive to study the papers but, apart from one or two notable exceptions, most people have found the diaries too dense to tackle during a brief research visit and have concentrated on the more thematic material and investigation results. One of the problems faced by researchers is the lack of any very full guides to the contents of the

diaries. We have some rudimentary indexes but nothing which indicates the full range and depth of the diaries. However, over the years, a few people have found themselves drawn to the diaries. One diary in particular has attracted interest both in its published form and in the much larger original version. This was a diary written by a woman in her late forties living in Barrow-in-Furness who kept a diary for Mass-Observation until the early 1960s. Her wartime writing was published, under her real name, in 1981 as *Nella Last's War*. A second diary from the Archive was edited for publication a few years later. This was a rather different kind of diary written for Mass-Observation by Naomi Mitchison, already an established (published) writer during the war. For details of these publications, see the section on further reading.

Extracts from other diaries have been included in recent anthologies but the vast bulk of the diary material remains unpublished. A few researchers have spent time reading through the monthly instalments of one diary and learned a good deal about both the person who wrote it and its contents. In general, however, there has been no formal mechanism through which this time-consuming work could be passed on to the next reader, and no procedure for alerting subsequent researchers to passages which might be relevant to their research topics.

This booklet is a first step in remedying the situation. It has been produced collectively by members of an evening class organised under the auspices of the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Sussex. We began meeting in the Archive itself at the beginning of the Autumn Term 1990 with eleven members. Numbers had to be limited because the Archive itself is not large. We re-assembled with a slightly different (and reduced) membership at the beginning of the Spring Term 1991. Although the course was designed to discuss questions about diary writing, autobiography and their contribution to history, the main purpose of the course was to create an opportunity for the diaries to be read and described.

We quickly realised what an enormous task we had set ourselves. Many of the diaries cover the entire six years of the Second World War, often without any breaks, and some went on after the war. One

monthly instalment could run to 20 or 30 pages. Mass-Observation had stored the diaries by month, and this remains the arrangement within the present-day Archive. Following one person's writing through the war years could mean opening nearly 150 different boxes. Simply retrieving the instalments from their storage boxes was the first major task. Then they had to be read. Half the diaries are hand-written and many of these are difficult to decipher. Page order had to be checked and sometimes fragments of diaries had to be re-identified.

Every class member 'adopted' a diarist to work on and, using a structured record sheet, tried to tease out some of the key pieces of information. In most cases we already knew the age, sex and place of residence of the diarists but we had a much hazier idea of their occupation, of the people in their lives, their political and religious outlook and the activities and events which their diary covered. By reading the whole diary, we hoped to establish enough about the writer to produce a short biography. This biography would highlight important features not only of the diarist as a person but of the diary itself, and would enable future researchers to identify which diaries might be useful for specific kinds of research. The diarists have been given fictitious names in keeping with Mass-Observation's promise that their writings would be anonymous unless they agreed to be named. This anonymity applies to all the diarists except Margaret and Doreen Bates. In fact, as a result of a letter on the women's page of the *Guardian*, we managed to re-contact both sisters and they have given permission for their real names to be used both in this booklet and in any future publication of their diaries.

By the end of the second term, we had been able to gather enough information to produce twelve short biographies. It was not possible to read the whole of either Mrs Grant's diary or of Mrs Brown's diary but we felt that we had gained enough insight from the early instalments to portray a reasonably accurate picture without reading the whole diary in detail. Some other diaries have been read, or partially read, but we did not feel able to produce a biography at this stage. The twelve biographies are intended to form a basis for a gradually expanding compendium of biographies as additional diaries are read. There are another 500 Mass-Observers, male and female, who at one time or another wrote a diary and for whom biographies are

urgently needed. The course has also acted as a starting point for further work on the diaries; at least one proposal to publish a diary has emerged and several class members have indicated their interest in continuing their work on an individual basis.

Readers of this booklet may wonder to what extent the twelve diarists included here are representative of Mass-Observation diarists as a whole. Is there a certain 'type' of person who chose to write for Mass-Observation? Without very intensive work on all the diaries, it is impossible to resolve these questions with any certainty. As it turned out, we worked only with women's diaries and it was striking that we came upon so many references to ill health and 'bad nerves' and even allusions to mental breakdowns. Miss Penn starts writing her diary in a mental hospital, Miss Watson starts hers in a TB sanatorium, Dorothea Jones talks of being depressed and of being in psychoanalysis, Rachel Schultz has 'crocky insides'. In our discussions we explored some possible explanations: the nature of diary-writing itself may encourage women to write frankly about their inner states and to confess their fears and anxieties. It has been observed that diarists often write most when they are feeling depressed or miserable and need a shoulder to cry on. It is also important to remember that all the diarists we read began writing around the time war was declared. This was inevitably a time of anxiety and uncertainty, of disruption of familiar routines; it might mean separation and even death. In 1939, people in Britain were preparing for immediate gas attacks and aerial bombardment. By September 1939, most people had already endured a year of dreadful uncertainty. No doubt this tension was felt more by some women than by others. Those who were already leading a busy life would have had little time to reflect on their own inner states but those whose health was poor, or who were still seeking direction in their lives, were more vulnerable. Moreover, the inequalities of gender, the restricted opportunities for women in many areas of life, the emphasis on feminine fulfilment primarily through marriage and children, are all factors in understanding why women's diaries might be a channel for the expression of frustration and yearning. Many Mass-Observers, including thoroughly healthy and happy people, have commented on the therapeutic value of writing a diary.

During our discussions, one important issue has recurred: the subjective nature of our reactions to specific diarists. Although we set out to record some basic 'factual' information, we quickly realised we all had our own particular ideas about what was interesting and important to say about what we were reading. It soon became apparent that the dividing line between 'factual' information and 'evaluative' information was extremely thin. Moreover, we found that each of us began to feel quite attached to our adopted diarist and that a relationship was formed between the reader and the writer which naturally coloured the way we perceived what we read. It is interesting to note, for example, that only diaries by women were selected, even though course members were free to choose from either gender, and even though, during the first term, one of the course members was male. This doesn't mean that everyone liked or admired their diarists. Some people found their diarist infuriating and, from time to time, simply boring and repetitive. Other people found themselves feeling quite intensely identified with their diarist. This very personal response to the diaries was an issue which dominated several of our discussions; we were worried that this subjectivity in our approach and the resulting selectivity would make the biographies less useful to other researchers. We decided that, to some extent, this was an inevitable and not necessarily undesirable outcome of spending so much time inside the life of another person. All we can say, by way of warning to subsequent readers of the diaries, is that these short biographies are not the definitive summaries of a person's life as seen through their diaries for Mass-Observation. They should be read as impressionistic introductions to other readings of the same material taking place in other contexts and in other historical moments.

*Dorothy Sheridan*

## 1. Cynthia Penn

### Diarist No 5434

Cynthia Penn lived in Newcastle upon Tyne. She was born in 1894, the eldest child of the family with several younger brothers. She had been educated by a governess and had apparently lived at home until 1939. Her brothers had been well educated. Adrian, of whom she was particularly fond, was a doctor in London - he was later sent overseas in the armed forces. Humphrey, her youngest brother, whom she described as 'very Conservative', worked for the London and North Eastern Railway. Her eldest brother, 'very Socialist', lived in Australia. Her father was dead, her mother still alive in her late seventies. Miss Penn's fiancé, Frank, had been killed in France in May 1918. At the outbreak of war in 1939 Miss Penn was a patient in the City Mental Hospital, Gosforth. She was 'bursting with emotion and trouble' at being there and full of anguish at this 'terrible calamity' of another war. Her diary gives some account of her experiences in the hospital and a later detailed account of her life, from 1941 onward, as a mother's help-cum-nanny and as a carer of livestock (goats, chickens and rabbits) at Ovingham and Haltwhistle in the Tyne valley.

She began her Mass-Observation diary in September 1939 whilst in hospital, probably at the instigation of her doctor-brother and her own doctor, a friend of her brother. She says in September 1939 that a visitor, Tom, 'brought plums, tinned milk, cocoa and a Diary'. She kept this diary with some gaps until September 1944 - the whole of 1940 is missing and also wrote in answers to Mass-Observation Directives. Her diary seemingly had a dual purpose, intended both as a record for Mass-Observation and as part of her therapy. It is sometimes a trifle rambling and her writing is difficult to read but it repays attention. Over several years she gradually reveals her sore feelings at being perceived as an old maid of little use and being disregarded as such by her family. There are also hints of troubled relationships with her mother and yet she says 'I was so fond of them'. She notes wryly that she is fat, has flat feet and is going grey. She is also sore that she was turned down for being too old for Nursery School Training.

Nevertheless, in spite of her anguish over the war, she gradually admits to herself that she is happier than ever before, having a degree of independence; living apart from her family; being of use to the children

she cares for and being liked by them; realising she likes living in the country; making positive plans for the end of the war.

She describes at some length her religious and political doubts and beliefs; deciding by 1944 of the latter that she is a progressive Conservative and is anti-Socialist for she feels that they have slack morals, drink too much and tend to be fanatical. She says she has been told she has a masculine mind, which she disputes. Her diaries contain considerable detail of her everyday life during the war years. In spite of her introspection she can laugh at herself and describes, for example, making a bathing suit out of the top of an old evening dress so that she can bathe in the Tyne with the children on hot summer days.

*Sheila Haines*

## 2. Caroline Blake

### Diarist No. 5399

Miss Blake was 61 years of age when the Second World War began. She kept a diary for Mass-Observation from 30 August 1939 until 28 March 1947, with only a few brief gaps at the beginning and end of this period. Generally she wrote prolifically every few days, filling both sides of the paper with closely typed accounts of her life alone in a bungalow in a village some twelve miles from Brighton.

Born in London of an Irish father and an English mother, Miss Blake trained as a nurse and worked in hospitals in France during the First World War and among the sick in Montenegro in 1921. Between the wars she served as an Army Nurse in the US Army. In 1937, she returned to England, leaving behind a married sister living near New York who died in 1940. A second sister, living in London, was evacuated in 1940 to Sidmouth. Miss Blake had other relatives in Sutton, and twice during the war visited a niece living near Cheltenham.

Miss Blake's memories of 1914-18 and her experiences abroad gave her a keen interest in world affairs and she comments frequently on the conduct of the war, the calibre of the Allied leaders and their strategy and tactics. She shows a particularly strong sympathy for Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia and publicly supports the bringing of Jewish refugees to Britain.

Though she does not claim membership of a political party, she is generally pro-Churchill, but as a national and not as a party leader. She admires Roosevelt but is critical of his appointment of Eisenhower, whom she distrusts, over 'our own seasoned Montgomery or Alexander' (10 July 1943). She bitterly resents the abrupt ending by Truman of Lease-Lend, which she sees as a 'slap in the face for the Labour Government' to discredit them (22 August 1945).

Miss Blake's choice of newspapers - *the News Chronicle and Tribune* suggests that she is politically to the left of centre. She also reads Beaverbrook's *Sunday Express*, which published a letter from her in 1943. She is a woman of strong feelings and opinions who gives practical support to individuals struggling with wartime bureaucracy and this often leads to her writing to national leaders or government departments to express her criticisms of the system.

Miss Blake constantly inveighs against what she sees as social injustice and especially the greed, selfishness and snobbery of the 'rich' who take unnecessary taxis, can afford to buy extra food or clothing coupons, and avoid the call-up or billeting evacuees. She singles out for criticism the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, Gracie Fields (and her 'Fascist husband'), doctors in general (and especially army medical officers), and above all the BBC. She hates the constant playing of classical music - 'Well, Hitler is also music-loving, so was Nero' (22 August 1943) - or jazz; most male announcers; all female announcers and performers: 'silly' comic turns; and the choice of plays. (She was briefly in 1941-2 on the BBC Listener Research Panel.) She is scathing about the Brains Trust, especially when she learns that the 'Brains' are paid '20 Guineas EACH' (13 February 1942). She of course listens to the news but is aware of the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation. She often reports on rumours going round locally, or repeated by neighbours who have been listening to German broadcasts. Throughout the war, Miss Blake refuses to listen to German propaganda but towards the end she hears Lord Haw-Haw himself and is actually tuned in to Hamburg when the English news is interrupted for the announcement in German of Hitler's death.

Nominally Church of England, Miss Blake is not a regular church-goer and could best be described as a doubting Christian (20 May 1943). She is intensely patriotic in her support for the war effort, constantly saving and mending, taking only part of her rations, or sharing them with neighbours. Sometimes she seems over conscientious, as when she does without heating on a cold November day in 1942. She is generous with her donations to charities. On 1 January 1944, she gives a detailed account of all her expenditure during the fourth year of war.

It is a matter of regret to Miss Blake that, when she wants to play her part in the war effort, her offers of help (to accompany children being evacuated across the Atlantic, or to nurse in a fever hospital) are not taken up. She puts this down to having no 'pull' as she is not a 'member of some organisation' (31 May 1943) but in fact her age and poor health (she has high blood pressure and a chronic, if mild, heart condition) must have been against any really active contribution. She does, however participate in a scheme sponsored by the *News Chronicle* to take as guests war-workers needing some respite from the

bombing of London. She is particularly glad to welcome a young Jewish woman to her home (5 December 1940).

Miss Blake's diary gives a full and detailed account of the effects of war on daily life in a village near the South Coast. She tells of contacts with neighbours, some of whom ask her advice (though few seem to become close friends), the sharing or exchange of rations (four eggs for 1lb of sugar), the general strain and frequent sickness, and the somewhat casual health care. She notes the disruption of families through evacuation, separation and bereavement (8 November 1941). There is the added complication when Allied troops, particularly the Canadians, flood into the area, themselves uprooted and fearful of conflict, who seek relief in wild parties and heavy drinking (22 August 1942). There are accounts of air raids and air battles in 1940 and flying bombs in 1944, as well as local manoeuvres which cause death and destruction in nearby towns (including Brighton) and villages. Evacuees, censorship, rations and blackout, ARP and provision of shelters, disruption of postal services and the problems of travelling in wartime are all to be found in Miss Blake's diary.

*Joyce Collins*



### 3. Doreen Green

#### Diarist No 5323

Extracts from this diary have been published in *Wartime Women* and in *Speak for Yourself*. See section on further reading.

Doreen Green first wrote to Mass-Observation, jointly with her sister Muriel, in August 1939, but then continued to write independent entries between February and August 1940, and from April 1940 until August 1941. At the time of starting her diary, she is a single woman, born in 1914. Doreen lives with her younger sister (who also continued to keep a separate diary for Mass-Observation) and her widowed mother, in a Norfolk village. The family run a garage, with the assistance of their male mechanic. They live in a house attached to the business, and they also have a nearby 'Beach House' where they spend some of their weekends and days off. Doreen appears to handle most of the business management: she deals with the accounts and debtors, and runs the garage shop. She also seems to have the main domestic responsibilities, in particular cooking and gardening. Both she and Doreen are active members of the Workers Educational Association and attend regular lectures and discussion groups. She takes a keen interest in current affairs and enjoys talking about, reading, and writing essays on these topics - particularly when preparing for, and during, the WEA Summer Schools held at King's College, Cambridge. These take place during the summers of 1940 and 1941. She provides full accounts of these study weeks which are also spent with Muriel. One gets the impression that she is an intelligent and informed woman who takes an interest in international politics. In April 1940 she starts to read *Mein Kampf*.

Doreen is a member of the International Correspondence Bureau and in April 1940 she begins to exchange letters with a French girl. Due to the nature of her job she writes a lot about petrol shortages, rationing and ration-swindling. She also refers frequently to the public and private fears of invasion and connects some of these points, for example, when she writes about customers trying to store petrol for their escape if the invasion occurs. She connects some of the villagers' fears with Haw-Haw's broadcasts. She mentions air-raids quite frequently and in March 1940 writes about an RAF aeroplane crash on the marshes. The evacuee children and their mothers are also referred to regularly, in

relation to the villagers' attitudes, their living conditions, and friendships.

When writing she is usually conscious of her audience and attempts to record and report overheard conversations for Mass-Observation. She also carries out surveys for them, for example, counting gas masks and recording where people keep them.

In April 1940 she writes a more personal entry. She feels rejected by John her 'best boyfriend' and his mother, and is slighted as 'not good enough' because he has a commission in the forces. She exclaims, 'Are we fighting for democracy? Or aren't we?' Yet resolves 'Thank Goodness I found out before it was too late'. She receives a letter from him in August 1940, and she describes it as 'awkward' because the school teacher is by then interested in her. In April 1941 she learns that John has another girl.

In the summer, she goes swimming - although by June 1941 she is worried about mines on the beaches and in the sea. She starts to teach young people how to play tennis on a court marked out in her garden, and has a number of tennis and games parties for local youths and evacuees during the summer of 1941. At this time she is missing Muriel who has moved to Rutland to work as a gardener. The May entry suggests the move has been made to avoid Muriel's conscription now she is of age. She visits Muriel in Starnford, Rutland, for some weekends, during June and July 1941, and observes some of the differences between towns and villages.

Although her entries finished in August 1941, her sister's continued for another four years.

*Sherry Russell*

#### 4. Irene Grant

#### Diarist No 5296

Extracts from this diary have been published in *Wartime Women*. See section on further reading.

In 1939, Irene Grant is a housewife of 51 from Springwell, Gateshead. Her husband John is also 51 in 1939, and is employed as a clerk in the oxide works run by his younger brother. He had been a soldier in the First World War. Barbara, her elder daughter, who is 21, had to leave secondary school early and has never had a job because she suffers from a serious form of epilepsy. The younger daughter, Jennifer, who is 18 in 1939, is head girl at her school and is hoping to become a teacher.

Irene writes for Mass-Observation from 1937 until 1952. She had been a diary writer since childhood until her marriage and was pleased that Mass-Observation had given her the opportunity to start writing again. Her hand-written entries are frequent and long and this synopsis only covers the years 1939/40. Irene trained as a teacher and indicated that she had been a headmistress of an infants' school before retiring after marriage. She would like to return to teaching but the illness of her eldest daughter prevents this. She appears to care deeply for her family and speaks with concern about her daughters' education and her husband's overwork. She tries hard to provide the best food and clothing possible during the war years and often comments on high prices and profiteering. She has conversations about the quality of food with the Co-op grocer and refuses certain items offered for sale with comments like: 'God help us if we have to use CWS margarine instead of butter'.

Irene and her husband come from large families and there are frequent references to brothers, sisters and cousins and their state of health. The family appears to be left-wing. They read the *News Chronicle* and occasionally the *Daily Worker* as well as reading a variety of topical books. She criticises her husband for 'sounding off' at the slightest thing and wishes that he would listen instead of talking all the time. Irene herself has very strong opinions and she records the conversations she has with a variety of people on subjects such as the state of the war, evacuees, air raids and ARP wardens. She has anti-Semitic views and expresses them frequently. For example, 'the only

slummy house in the area is owned by a Jew', and 'do let us have the truth - Jews own many papers, I blame them for a lot. Look how they are making trouble in Palestine. Down with Jews'.

Irene's main concern is the health of her elder daughter, Barbara. Her diary contains many accounts of the rages and fits that occur and as these become worse Irene describes her 5'10" daughter as '10 stone of fury'. The family discusses what is to become of Barbara as she becomes more difficult to control, but Irene resists advice from family and friends to have her 'put away'. She is convinced that her daughter's epilepsy comes from her husband's side of the family and she starts to analyse illness and any genetic weakness within families. She has a theory that VD in past generations can cause epilepsy, although her doctor denies this. 1940 ends with Barbara being ill while out with her father and it will be of interest to continue research into this diary to discover how the family copes in the future.

*Jacqueline Pollard*

## 5. Doreen Bates

### Diarist No 5245

Doreen Bates's diary opens in September 1940 and continues consistently through to April 1944. The diarist is a single woman, aged 34 (in 1940) who is a Tax Inspector with the Civil Service. The first entries meticulously describe air raids and the damage caused by them, the difficulties of travelling to and from work and the endless delays of trains and buses. Personal details are scant, but gradually a picture emerges and we learn that the diarist lives with her mother and sister, has a love of music and the theatre and is involved romantically with a man referred to as 'E'. She has a highly responsible job and appears to enjoy it.

By January 1941 more facts about the diarist's life creep in and the reader begins to suspect from the unusual times and places of their meetings, that 'E' is married. From the entry on 1 February 1941 it becomes clear that this relationship has become an intimate one. In this same entry we learn that she is to be transferred to Belfast, a move that she finds distressing and attempts, unsuccessfully, to oppose.

In March 1941 she takes up residence in Ireland. It is at this point that it becomes apparent to the reader that she is pregnant, a fact that she regards with quiet delight and a certain down-to-earth humour. On 29 May she visits London for 'an emotional weekend' in which she meets up with 'E', the child's father, breaks the news to her devastated mother and attempts to negotiate 'sick leave' for her confinement.

With the fact now brought out into the open she is relegated to working at home for the duration of her pregnancy. Whilst there is some sympathy for her among her superiors and colleagues it is not thought suitable for her, in the light of her rank, to appear in the public workplace. At the same time her right to paid leave during her confinement becomes an issue.

She returns to London in her late pregnancy where she encounters considerable difficulties in booking herself, as a single parent, into a hospital. Finally she is accepted at a private nursing home, where to her great delight in October 1941 she gives birth to not one, but two children. She rents a house, employs a nanny, and six weeks later, returns to work.

It is her job now that becomes the issue and her fight for her right to it continues over a period of two and a half years and is still inconclusive when the diary is discontinued in 1944. The diary during these years is taken up primarily with domestic details concerning her growing children and her relationship with their father whose love for his new 'family' does not induce him to leave his wife. The last entries of 1944 describe how she buys a house in Wiltshire where the twins live with their nanny, away from the London bombing, whilst their mother commutes weekly to her job in the City. The diarist reveals herself to be content, happy and fulfilled and the reader is left with a deep impression of an independent and strong woman.

*Lizzy Mountain*

## 6. Ella Taylor

### Diarist No 5315

Ella only wrote during the month of September 1939. The entries were brief and do not discuss topics in great detail.

Ella was 44 in 1939 and a school teacher. She seems to be a single woman living alone as she doesn't mention her marital status nor does she mention leaving any family when she is evacuated with her school from Belsize Park, London NW3, to Taunton. The evacuation involved her in making arrangements for billeting her pupils and visiting foster parents. She finds that this gives her a feeling of unreality and comments on her failure 'to co-ordinate various parts of my life'. Ella makes brief comments about conversations she has. One is with a friend on prices being pushed up by panic buying and another about the suitability of starting a family during the war. She talks briefly about some of the problems she encounters during the evacuation. A lady she meets in an hotel had let her house rather than have evacuees in it and intended to stay in the hotel for the duration of the war. One Jewish mother had removed her children from a billet because of 'food difficulties' and another family had a problem with the wife being jealous of two sixteen year old evacuees.

The entries are in short note form and do not explore events or personal feelings in any depth. She didn't continue to write for Mass-Observation after this date.

*Jacqueline Pollard*

## 7. Dorothea Jones

### Diarist No 5250

Dorothea Jones' diary opens in August 1939 when she writes in some detail about blackout preparations in London: 'my Mother made black satin curtains'. Although her writing continues until March 1947, her diary keeping is irregular. Entries are made for a few days at a time again in September and October 1939, for a few days in May, June and July of 1941 and in July and August 1942. There is a break then until June and July 1946 when entries are again sporadic and there is a final entry in March 1947. She describes herself as an actress.

She writes mostly about day-to-day activities and less about personal matters. She expresses concern about rationing and price rises on more than one occasion: 'I discovered that stockings are up 1/-. Their usual 1/6½ d ones will soon be 2/11 d!... and are not fashioned (fully)'.

Her shortage of cash is apparent throughout the years she writes. Perhaps this is because work as an actress is hard to find. In 1941 she describes in great detail her attempts to sell her late grandmother's jewellery and clothes and she is quite outspoken about her anti-Semitic feelings towards one of the possible buyers of the jewellery. She seems to spend a lot of time having meetings (tea or lunch) with friends outside London. On one occasion in 1941 on a visit to Plymouth she describes vividly the bomb damage there.

It is difficult to ascertain her personal life. In June of 1941 she alludes to personal troubles but doesn't say what. From oblique hints in her directive replies (but not in her diary) it seems as if she has recently emerged from an unhappy marriage. Once or twice she refers to 'my man friend'. The trivialities she writes about are noted by herself: 'sorry this report is so trivial but nothing of importance has happened to me'.

She has a sporadic interest in psychology and is in therapy as a pupil of a psychoanalyst in 1941. Several times she mentions that she feels depressed: 'I am wasting my life'. She suffers a nervous breakdown in September 1941 and seeks recovery in Somerset until February 1942. She finds some employment doing 'small parts' in July of that year but still suffers from depression.

In 1946 she attends a spiritualist meeting for 1/-. She sees 'Queen Mary at Electra' on the first night at Gateways Theatre Club.

In July of 1946 she describes her feelings about war and destruction. 'It seems such a pity that scientists who could help so much, invent these things or rather discover them only for destruction. Why everyone cannot work on themselves rather than invent these bloody weapons upsets me horribly... I have felt like hell all day'.

Her entry in March 1947 describes experiences in the summer of 1946 when she had a variety of jobs including looking after mentally handicapped children in Birmingham and working in the post office during Christmas of that year.

The entries in her diary are intermittent and she gives the impression to the reader of being unstable professionally and personally. She ends, though, on an optimistic note by saying that she is going to play the part of Elizabeth Barrett in *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* in Yorkshire and that she has 'had psychoanalysis' in Baker Street.

*Beatrice Sofaer*

## 8. Janet Watson

### Diarist No 5269

Janet's diary contributions commenced just before the start of the Second World War. For the first few months she kept detailed, elaborate entries, probably to relieve boredom due to her being confined to a TB sanatorium. She is a single woman, aged 27, when she begins to keep her diary.

Janet had different political views from her fellow inmates, and she expressed frustration at the lack of like-minded patients and the absence of mental stimulus and political discussion. In June 1940 she was discharged home to London but said she found home life claustrophobic and unsettling.

During September 1939 the preparations for war and the novelty of the situation are obviously uppermost in her mind. She writes descriptive entries in her diary mentioning the frequent bombing and her problem of having to look for lodgings. She expresses cynicism about Chamberlain and is critical of the government. Her concern for possible victims of war (for example in Poland) is evident. She records that her fellow patients are more concerned with immediate problems facing their own families. Janet is exasperated at their expression of high spirits at a social gathering. Throughout October and November she voices her own concern and opinions, but does not mention the plights or reactions of the rest the population. She often talks of being let down and disillusioned, and she feels herself being reluctantly drawn towards a religion.

Throughout December, preparations for Christmas supplanted thoughts of war apart from speculation about the fate of the *Graf Spee* (a German battle-ship which was scuttled in Montevideo Bay in 1939). Later, during a visit from her communist sister, she resumes arguments about Russia and Poland. The entries then cease until June 1940 when Janet learns of her imminent discharge from the sanatorium, and here her apprehension at such a drastic change permeates her diary. She is back at the London family home by 12 June and her diary contributions reveal that she is unsettled. She is also concerned about her father's evacuation with his schoolchildren (he is a teacher).

Janet bemoans the lack of young company in London at that time, due to their being involved in war work, and her concern about the war swings between her own personal conflicts and conflicts between nations. This leads to her feeling worthless and futile.

During the summer of 1940 Janet's preparation for deterioration in wartime conditions continues: she mentions learning to use a stirrup pump, tea-rationing, and the collection of food stores in galvanised dustbins. She goes into detail about petty sugar allocations. The Japanese and the Burma Road figure in the diary at this time, and she also mentions being disturbed by the arguments of a communist friend who comes to play chess. In August there are reports in the diary of air battles, the evacuation of a neighbour's child to Massachusetts, and the introduction of purchase-tax. The air-raid warnings become so frequent that they exact only blasé responses. Also at this time, Equatorial Africa join the war at which Janet asks: 'Do natives vote?'

In September 1940 the diary contains references to the docks being bombed, and Janet describes the preparations in anticipation of bombs exploding in the neighbourhood. No more entries appear after September 1940.

*Mary Hopper*

## 9. June Chivers

### Diarist No 5350

June Chivers only kept a Mass-Observation diary for two months: August and September 1939. At the time of writing, she is living on her own (part from her cat) in a flat in north London. In September, she temporarily evacuates herself to a 'small Essex village' where her sister lives but after only a fortnight, she returns to London. She is a teacher with the London County Council but has been signed off sick because of 'nerves' and seems to be going through an unhappy period. She describes herself as divorced after her marriage was 'annulled'. There is very little mention of close friends or family apart from her sister. She seems to be close to a male Jewish friend who runs a Tuppenny Library. He is married and his German wife, also Jewish, has just arrived in England from Germany.

Her two diary entries are written clearly by hand and are relatively detailed. She writes well on day-to-day life in the first few weeks of war and includes accounts of conversations in shops, observations on clothes and prices, on behaviour in the streets, on the issue of gas masks, on the blackout and on ARP wardens. She is politically to the left and objects to what she sees as most people's uncritical acceptance of politicians. At the time of writing she is 49 years old. There is no indication of why she gave up keeping the diary.

Dorothy Sheridan (*Cynthia Martin read June Chivers' diary and this biography is based on her notes*).

## 10. Rachel Schultz

### Diarist No 5280

Rachel Schultz kept an intermittent diary for Mass-Observation between September 1939 and March 1941 (only eight monthly instalments altogether). She is a single woman, aged 36 in 1939. When she begins her diary, she is living on her own in a flat in London N8 but she leaves it in October 1940 to spend three months in temporary lodgings in Settle, Yorkshire. In February 1941, she moves to a new flat in NW1 1.

She has a number of jobs, some of which appear to be unpaid. She has a secretarial and fund-raising role in an Emergency Child Guidance clinic near Regents Park. She is also engaged in writing a book which in January 1941 is being considered by a publisher. In Settle, between October and December 1940, she teaches classes for the Workers Educational Association. It is not completely clear what her speciality is but it may be psychiatry. In February 1941, she gets a permanent administrative job at the National Council of Social Services.

She does not give very much detail about her friends and relatives but it is apparent that they share her highly educated middle class background. Her father and stepmother live in Bedford and her father commutes to the City each day. They have three evacuees billeted with them. Her stepsister emigrates to Australia at the age of 17 in 1940 and her stepbrother who is classed as 'C3' for call-up purposes is training to be a radiologist. Despite the war, she seems to lead a fairly comfortable life: she enjoys good food and wine and has a busy social life. She reads voraciously, takes the literary periodical *Horizon* and describes herself as 'leftish'.

*Dorothy Sheridan*

*(Cynthia Martin read Rachel Schultz's diary and this biography is based on her notes)*



## 11. Rose Brown

### Diarist No 5342

Rose Brown was born in the USA in 1902 and brought to England in 1904. During the Second World War, she lives in South East London with her husband who is Australian. He is a telephone engineer by profession. Rose is not employed outside of her home.

Rose begins writing for Mass-Observation before the outbreak of war but as war becomes imminent, her diaries overflow with descriptions of preparations for hostilities. Even the entries for August 1939 indicate the seriousness of the preparations: allocations of gas masks, shops cleaned out of blackout material, banks storing files, and plans for evacuating children. She records the almost excessive zeal with which she and her husband try to prepare themselves (her husband falling over the dog to get his clothes during the comic chaos of an early air raid warning in September 1939).

Routine is gradually established with more efficient departures to the Anderson shelter which they have erected in their garden. (They decide to tranquillise the dog.) However, the accumulated effects of disrupted sleep, food shortages and rising prices play on their nerves and Rose begins to have rows with her husband and her parents who live nearby. At one point, she says 'No future, so why bother?' She mentions the dearth of Grapenuts, Force and Post-Toasties (breakfast cereals) but manages to obtain luxuries such as tinned fruit and meat which are jealously guarded. Food parcels and correspondence from Australia are recorded with pleasure.

The diary does include references to the wider situation: there is mention of the air raids on Hull, air fights in the Channel, the invasion of the Low Countries and the evacuation from Norway. She writes about fears of invasion, and the threat giving rise to the issuing of identity cards, the proliferation of the military, the influx of Belgian refugees and the evacuation of children to safe areas.

However, the progress of the war takes second place in Rose's diary to her account of day-to-day life and her own domestic preoccupations.

Watching a fire-fighting demonstration is less exciting than her acquisition of a pair of slacks - very daring articles of clothing. Plum jam making receives the same attention as the progress of the war

although she admits that she is 'getting hardened to raids' by September 1940. The gas and water are often turned off, doors are blown out and the house ruined but Rose keeps up writing in her shelter.

During October 1940, Rose receives a request from Tom Harrison (of Mass-Observation) for weekly reports. Her entries had become much shorter. Harrison's request succeeds in encouraging her to write longer pieces again until she gets a polite reproof for sending in too much detail.

The main characters in the diary are Rose's loyal maid with whom she has quite a close relationship and whose social life is recorded in some detail; Rose's husband who seems to be hard working and conscientious but with whom she continuously rows; her parents - whose main concern seems to be to find a maid for their large house; and the dog - featured in a variety of comic situations. By 1943 the entries are once again shorter but Rose's house is now repaired and she has a new maid.

At the end of all her diary entries, Rose wrote 'Please do not acknowledge these diaries'. At one point, despite having influenza, she insists on going out to post her contribution to Mass-Observation 'so that [her husband] would not see it'. We have to conclude that her participation in Mass-Observation was secret at least from her husband.

*Mary Hopper*

*(Based on her own reading and on notes made by Eileen Noel and Adam Conway. This biography is drawn from a reading of the first three years of this enormous diary and it would be interesting to study the remaining entries. However, preliminary checks suggest that no very major changes occur for Rose Brown during the time she kept a diary for Mass-Observation.)*

## **12. Margaret Bates**

### **Diarist No 5246**

Margaret Bates wrote only one month of diary in 1939 but her directive replies (detailed answers to monthly questions sent out by Mass-Observation) span a two year period (1941 and 1942). The diary is written retrospectively and concerns the diarist's role partly as school party leader in charge of evacuation. She has been chosen for this task because of her work as 'a social worker among schoolchildren' employed by the London County Council. She provides a detailed account of her evacuation work which includes interviewing volunteers, co-ordinating with fellow workers and even a stint at envelope addressing. She describes the people she encounters and the places she visits and includes accounts of the train and bus journeys she makes. Her personal life is referred to fleetingly as she mentions her home where she lives with her parents and her sister in Purley. Her father had been a small importer of textiles from the Continent but a combination of his own ill health and the impact of war conditions has caused the business to 'go under'.

Her directive replies are articulate and to the point. Again in the diary, she uses her work both as a social worker and as an evacuation organiser as a point of reference and is able to give a personal view on the official version (for example, the Ministry of Health's riding on evacuation and the question of financial allowances to people who accept evacuees in their homes). She gives accounts of air raids and describes her own air raid shelter and the arrangements made by her family for sleeping in it. Her political position is socialist and is well-informed on current and world affairs. She reads newspapers as regularly as time allows and always follows the war news on radio. She is often critical of the media for perpetrating jingoistic views and lacking realism. She is a graduate of the London School of Economics. Margaret's sister, Doreen Bates, also kept a diary for Mass-Observation.

*Lizzy Mountain*

## Index

This index is to some degree subjective in that individual diary readers chose to highlight topics that seemed to them to be key items of interest; other readers may have chosen rather differently. Some topics are to be found in many, if not all, of the diaries for example, attitudes towards the war, Germany and Germans; experiences of bombing, coping with food and clothes rationing; anxieties about national and personal problems, and difficult relationships with family members and lovers, in the context of wartime. We have, therefore, not indexed all these separately for fear of swamping the text!

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## Further reading

Two whole Mass-Observation diaries have been edited for publication to date. In 1981, Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming published *Nella Last's War* (Falling Wall Press). Nella Last was a housewife in her fifties who lived in Barrow-in-Furness and kept a diary for nearly 30 years for Mass-Observation. The published version covers only the years of the Second World War. The paperback edition (Sphere) appeared in 1983 but at the time of writing, the diary is out of print.

In 1985, the wartime diary of Naomi Mitchison, *Among You Taking Notes*, was published by Gollancz in hardback and in paperback by OUP in 1986. This was edited by Dorothy Sheridan in consultation with Naomi herself. This diary, also of the war years, is very different from *Nella Last's War*. Naomi was already a successful published writer when she joined Mass-Observation. The diary records her wartime years in Carradale, a Scottish fishing village.

Plans to publish other diaries are already in progress. Lizzy Mountain is currently working on the diary of Doreen Bates, one of the diarists described in this booklet. Sherry Russell is working on the diary of a much younger woman, Muriel Green, also included in this booklet.

Extracts from Mass-Observation diaries have been included in two anthologies: *Speak for Yourself: a Mass-Observation Anthology* (Cape 1984 and OUP 1986) edited by Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan and *Wartime Women* (Heinemann 1990 and Mandarin 1991) edited by Dorothy Sheridan.

An issue of *Feminist Praxis* (due out in late 1991) will contain four papers about Mass-Observation. One of them, by Margaret Kertesz deals specifically with the wartime diaries, one by Liz Stanley deals with the pre-war one-day diary-writers, one by Penny Summerfield deals with the experience of women in wartime, and the fourth one, by Dorothy Sheridan, looks at the use made by Mass-Observation of volunteer writers both during the early phase (1937-65) and during the 1980s and 1990s when the Archive itself recruited new diarists and directive respondents. Further details from the Mass-Observation Archive, the Library, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QL. Tel. 0273 678157.

## Full list of recent Archive publications:

*A Guide to the Archive* (price £2.50) and *The Mass-Observation Archive: a resource for women's studies* (no charge) are available from the Archive. There are also nine small booklets based on the early collections and designed for use in schools. Please write to the Archive for details.

The books listed below should be available in good libraries and the most recent may still be purchased in bookshops. All the titles may be consulted in the Archive at the University of Sussex but are not available for loan.

Broad, Richard and Fleming, Suzie (eds): *Nella Last's War*, Falling Wall Press 1981 and Sphere (paperback) 1982.

Calder, Angus & Sheridan, Dorothy (eds): *Speak For Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology 1937-49*, Jonathan Cape 1984 and OUP (paperback) 1985.

Cross, Gary (ed): *Worktowners in Blackpool: Mass-Observation and popular leisure in the 1930s*, Routledge 1990.

Harrison, Tom: *Living Through the Blitz*, Penguin 1990 (first published 1976).

Richards, Jeffrey and Sheridan, Dorothy: *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, Routledge 1987.

Sheridan, Dorothy (ed): *Among You Taking Notes: the Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison*, Gollancz 1985 and OUP (paperback) 1986.

Sheridan, Dorothy (ed): *Wartime Women: a Mass-Observation Anthology*, Heinemann 1990 and Mandarin (paperback) 1991.

Spender, Humphrey: *Worktown People: Photographs from Northern England 1937-1938* edited by Jeremy Mulford, Falling Wall Press 1982.

Tom Harrison Mass-Observation Archive: *Mass Observation File Reports 1937-1949*, Harvester Microfiche 1983 accompanied by an annotated list and subject index. Available in some UK university and national libraries.

Ziegler, Philip: *The Crown and the People*, Collins 1978.