**MASS-OBSERVATION (UK)**

Mass-Observation (or M-O as it is often abbreviated) was one of the most extraordinary manifestations of the documentary impulse prevalent in 1930s Britain. Following the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London, a number of artists and writers were looking at ways in which surrealist concerns could be extended in a social context to explore the mass unconscious of British culture. Chief among these figures were Charles Madge, a poet working as a journalist at the *Daily Mirror*, and Humphrey Jennings, painter, writer, photographer and member of the G.P.O. Film Unit.

Founded by Madge, Jennings and Tom Harrisson in 1937, in the wake of the abdication of Edward VIII, the aim of M-O was to examine the psychology of the nation as expressed in the thoughts and actions of ordinary people. To gain an insight into this psychology, it used reports submitted by volunteers across the country and, most famously, a group of “observers” examining minutely the everyday life of Bolton in Lancashire. With the outbreak of war in 1939, the resources of M-O were increasingly put at the service of understanding the public response to wartime propaganda. After the war, Mass-Observation became a commercial market research firm, but recently its earliest pre-war manifestation has been seen as an innovative precursor to later attempts to create a reflexive anthropology.

Following the King’s abdication, Madge published a letter in the *New Statesman* on January 2 1937, suggesting that a group be set up to investigate the psychological resonance of this event across the country. By chance, his letter appeared above a poem “Coconut Moon” by Tom Harrisson. Harrisson was an anthropologist recently returned from the New Hebrides. Convinced that a study of one’s own culture was as important as that of foreign natives, he was now established in Bolton, Lancashire, doing just that. Harrisson made contact with the London group and, on January 30, another letter in the *New Statesman,* signed by Harrisson, Madge and Jennings, announced the formation of Mass-Observation.

M-O had two strands, both based in the recruitment of observers who would report in meticulous detail on what they saw and heard in the everyday life around them. One strand was a nationwide network of volunteers, co-ordinated by Madge and Jennings. The culmination of this activity was on Coronation Day, May 12 1937, when a wide range of these reports fed into the hefty book: *May 12: Mass-Observation Day Survey*. Immediately, the major problem raised by the M-O method was clear. Though the vast amount of material collected on May 12 was undoubtedly fascinating, it was presented in an inchoate form, deliberately eschewing the secondary effort to analyse what it all meant. Understandably, this led to criticisms from more conventional sociologists and indeed from Harrisson. Jennings soon split from M-O, though its influence can be felt in his poetic wartime documentaries.

The focus of the movement through 1937-38 was on the other strand, organised by Harrisson. This was based in Bolton, taken as a typical northern industrial town and within M-O dubbed “Worktown”. Here, Harrisson recruited both interested locals and visiting young intellectuals to record the life of the town. The observers travelled on buses, visited factories, sat in pubs and went to football matches, all the time recording what they saw and heard. And when the town’s residents went *en masse* for their annual holiday in Blackpool, the observers went with them.

The core activity of M-O was verbal and textual, but there were also a number of contributions by visual artists which are now some of its best-known products. The photojournalist Humphrey Spender came to Bolton to record the inhabitants as unobtrusively as possible. Julian Trevelyan made collages out of the ephemeral material – newspapers and so on – he found on the street, while the painters William Coldstream and Graham Bell made detailed realist depictions of Bolton from the roof of the Art Gallery.

The observers’ reports are the most enduring and fascinating aspect of M-O’s legacy and they have been widely sourced by researchers from many different fields. But the M-O method contained a fundamental ambiguity, for while the premise of the observation was that it would be as purely recordative and objective as it could be, it was of course inevitably shot through with the subjectivity of the observer. Harrisson was himself an eccentric researcher, viewed with suspicion by more academic sociologists and anthropologists of the time. Yet it is this unconventional mix of elements in Mass-Observation – its rich mix of anthropology, reportage, poetry and surrealism - which have in more recent times made it of wide-ranging interest, not only within sociology, but also for artists.

With the outbreak of war, Mass-Observation sought to make a contribution without losing its integrity. Its findings on public morale were for example useful in developing official strategies to engage the population in the war-effort. Madge left the organization during this time and Harrisson was less engaged after he joined the army and left for the Far East in 1944. In other hands, the work of Mass-Observation became commercially driven and, in 1949, it was converted to a privately owned market research company.

After the M-O Archive was donated to the University of Sussex in 1970, the original project started to become much better known and came to be regarded as innovative and progressive. From 1981, the original concept of a panel of observers drawn from across the country was revived and continues to this day.

MAJOR EARLY PUBLICATIONS BY MASS-OBSERVATION

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Calder, A. and Sheridan, D. (eds.) (1984), *Speak for Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology, 1937-1949*, London: Jonathan Cape.

Cross, G. (ed.) (1990), *Worktowners at Blackpool: Mass-Observation and Popular Leisure in the 1930s*, London: Routledge.

Spender, H. (1982), *Worktown People*, Bristol: Falling Wall Press.

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Walker, I. (2007), *So Exotic, So Homemade*: *Surrealism, Englishness and documentary photography*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

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*Here are the details of the images:*

*1. Humphrey Spender: Working Man’s Hair Specialist, Bolton Open Market. Image ref. 1993.83.01.25.*



*2. Julian Trevelyan: Bolton Mills. Collage, 1938."*

