**Mass Observation**

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Mass Observation was founded in 1937 by film-maker Humphrey Jennings, poet Charles Madge, and ethnologist and explorer Tom Harrisson. It was originally conceived as a project to capture the dominant image of the day by collecting reports and observing people’s behaviour. The group was influenced by filmic montage, André Breton’s writing on coincidence and the surrealist image, and Bronislaw Malinowski’s theories of ‘participatory observation’ in anthropology. The movement’s methodology quickly evolved from a surrealist-inspired experiment into a more scientifically-orthodox project that was pursued on a wide-scale until 1949. Mass Observation had three distinct periods: an early interdisciplinary period that can be related to Jennings’s involvement; a further period when following Jennings’s departure and Malinowski’s essay in *First Year’s Work*, Mass Observation pursued a more orthodox scientific approach; and a final stage which saw its collaboration with the Ministry of Information and eventual transformation into a market research firm.

The group’s interdisciplinary and experimental approach produced the collaboratively written ‘Oxford Collective Poem’ and *May the Twelfth* (1937), an expansive collection of observations and reports from all over Britain of people’s thoughts, activities, and even dreams during George VI’s coronation. Mass Observation moved towards a more orthodox anthropological approach to their methods following *May the Twelfth*, which was signalled by Malinowski’s essay in *First Year’s Work* that called for more scientific rigour in the group’s methods. This was followed in 1939 by *Britain by Mass-Observation*, in which Madge and Harrisson made some effort to analyze the data they had collected on various habits, including how people rolled their cigarettes.

Through 1937-38, Mass Observation was based in Bolton, taken as a typical northern industrial town and dubbed ‘Worktown’ within the operation. 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 Mass Observation 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 aspect of Mass Observation’s legacy and they have been widely sourced by researchers from many different fields. But the Mass Observation 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 bound up with the subjectivity of the observer. Harrisson was himself an eccentric researcher, viewed with suspicion by more orthodox sociologists and anthropologists of the time.

In 1940, Mass Observation was hired by the Ministry of Information to supply data to help shape propaganda in order to boost public morale. Jennings had left the group after *May the Twelfth*, and Madge followed in 1940 due to increasing disputes between him and Harrisson. Harrisson was called up in late 1943 and served the remainder of World War II in Borneo. By the late 1940s, none of the founders of Mass Observation had any direct involvement in any activities, and in 1949 it became Mass Observation Ltd., invested solely in commercial market research.

Mass Observation’s early experiments provocatively point to a direction they ultimately did not pursue: the ‘Oxford Collective Poem,’ with its three pages of instructions for composition anticipates later procedural work by John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, and *May the Twelfth* is a loose assemblage of quotations and reports with very occasional commentary, which bears a certain structural similarity to Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. Mass Observation’s domestic field research indirectly influenced Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and later the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham’s ethnographic methods. The Mass Observation archive is currently held at the Special Collections Library at the University of Sussex. [link to MO website: <http://www.massobs.org.uk/> ]

List of works:

*May the Twelfth* (1937)

*First Year’s Work* (1938)

*Britain by Mass-Observation* (1939)

*The Pub and the People* (1943)

Further reading:

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.

Hubble, N. (2010) *Mass Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sheridan, D; Street, B.; Bloome, D. (2000) *Writing Ourselves: Mass Observation and Literary Practices*, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

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

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