

CAMERAWORK



Humphrey Spender

Funeral Cortege Davenport St. Bolton 1938.

Mass Observation
Humphrey Spender Nigel Henderson
The Metropolitan Police Card
Inspection Processing

MASS OBSERVATION

Mass Observation was probably the largest investigation into popular culture to be carried out in Britain this century. It took place between 1936 and 1947.

Mass Observation was established by a small group of upper-middle class intellectuals and artists, but grew to involve around 1,500 observers from all social classes and from all over the country. They amassed a wealth of information on the minutiae of everyday life of the period. During World War II the Government took over M.O.'s fact-collecting organisation for propaganda purposes and to keep in touch with public morale. After the War M.O. became a limited company and turned to consumer research.

Mass Observation described its observers as 'the cameras with which we are all trying to photograph contemporary life' but photography itself played a small part in the project and very little film was shot. Humphrey Spender, M.O.'s 'official' photographer, was only able to spend short periods of time on the project. The work that he did for M.O. remained virtually unknown for almost forty years until the publication of *Britain in the Thirties* in 1975 and *The Real Thing* and *Worktown* exhibitions. The photographs, observers' reports and diaries are now part of the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex.

AIMS AND ORIGINS

"How little we know of our next door neighbour and his habits; how little we know of ourselves. Of conditions of life and thought in another class or another district, our ignorance is complete. The anthropology of ourselves is still only a dream. It is left to the intuitions of men of genius to cope with the unknown mass. Such intuitions are to a human science of the future what cookery is to chemistry. The building up of such a science is an urgent problem for mankind.

"It was with thoughts like these that a group of people started Mass Observation, which aims to be a scientific study of human social behaviour, beginning at home. Such a study has already been begun by anthropologists in the case of primitive peoples, and tentatively by psychologists and sociologists in civilised countries. But in the latter case, the field to be covered is so vast and so apparently nebulous

that the scientists have little more to offer than generalisations on method." (M.O. pamphlet 1937).

M.O. was started in 1937 by Charles Madge, poet and journalist and Tom Harrison, an anthropologist. They and others were aware of the serious gap between what ordinary people, 'the mass', actually thought and what the press, media and political leaders said they thought.

"Mass Observation shares the interest of most people in the actual, in what happens from day to day. Every day the social consciousness is modified by the news reported in the newspapers and on the wireless. The more exciting the news, the more unified does the social consciousness become in its absorption with a single theme. The abdication of King Edward VIII was a focussing point of this kind. The coronation of King George VI is providing another. At such times, our observers will each be watching the social

reactions within their own local environment. They will be the meteorological stations from whose reports a weather-map of popular feeling can be compiled." (M.O. pamphlet, 1937).

These photographs however, together with the detailed written observations, do provide a valuable insight into the late 1930s and show how Mass Observation influenced the development of documentary realism.

In this issue we look at the origins of Mass Observation, its aims, its methods of working, its contribution to the documentary tradition, its shortcomings and its significance to contemporary culture. In the section below we reproduce parts of the first publication of M.O., the pamphlet 'Mass Observation' by Tom Harrison and Charles Madge. This pamphlet, published in 1937, sets out what they were trying to do and gives a clear picture of the ideas which influenced their thinking.

Our interest in M.O. stems from our concern with documentary photography and the British documentary tradition. The founders of M.O. believed that it was possible to document in an entirely objective manner and that the widespread collection of data would 'contribute to an increase in the general social consciousness' (M.O. pamphlet 1937). In fact what they started was never completed and never used in the way they had anticipated.

We believe that to document alone is not enough – the process must be taken further and used to effect social change.

the reports from our observers, carefully filed, will be a reference library accessible to every genuine research worker." (M.O. pamphlet 1937)

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METHOD

M.O. set out to give the masses a voice. It did this in three ways:- firstly by inviting ordinary people to report on their everyday lives in diary form. Secondly by recruiting a team of observers whose role was to watch, listen and document all aspects of ordinary behaviour. Thirdly by involving poets, writers and artists in a subjective role to complement the documentary bias of the observers.

The observers simply collected information – "On this data science will one day build new hypotheses and theories. In the meantime, we must patiently amass material, without unduly prejudging or pre-selecting from the total number of available facts. All this material, all

THE WORKTOWN PROJECT

In 1937 Tom Harrison chose Bolton as a town representative of the industrial north to begin M.O.'s research. This became known as the Worktown project and was extended to include the nearby holiday resort of Blackpool.

Harrison was soon joined by a team of observers and artists including the painters Julian Trevelyan and Sir William Coldstream and the photographer Humphrey Spender. The project lasted for two years.

The photographs by Humphrey Spender reproduced in this issue of *Camera Work* were all taken during this period. They were first shown in 1977 as the Worktown exhibition initiated by Derek Smith, then photographer in residence at Sussex University.

CAMERAWORK

is designed to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas, views and information on photography and other forms of communication. By exploring the application, scope and content of photography, we intend to demystify the process. We see this as part of the struggle to learn, to describe and to share experiences and so contribute to the process by which we grow in capacity and power to control our lives.

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If you have any comments to make or articles, letters or prints you would like to contribute we would be glad to hear from you. Please make sure it reaches us as soon as possible.

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A very public espionage

'I am a camera with the shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.'

Christopher Isherwood in *Berlin Stories* 1938

'The ideal instrument for the job is an ear-plug,' Tom Harrison, one of the founders of Mass Observation, once said. 'See what people are doing. Afterwards, ask them what they think they are doing, if you like.'

Mass Observation was started in 1937 by an anthropologist, Tom Harrison, a poet, Charles Madge, and the documentary film maker, Humphrey Jennings. Harrison and Jennings later died in accidents. Its first book was a 'mass observational' study of May 12, 1937, Coronation day for George VI. Humphrey Jennings 'cut' together a sequence of extracts from the press and reports from observers. It was edited like a documentary film. Meanwhile, Harrison was working with a team of volunteers in Bolton.

'In the early days of Mass Observation from 1937 to 1939,' Harrison told Lionel Birch in 1974, 'when we were studying life in Bolton, we penetrated the environment without anyone realising that we were studying it. We all took jobs locally: I had one with Walls Ice Cream, then in a cotton mill, and as a lorry driver. We were quiet people. You see, if the observer is observed, the observation is probably invalid...'

'And the Blitz. By 1940 we had developed the M.O. structure on a much wider scale. We were ready with a system, and a documentary network of voluntary observers. We had more than 200 of them all over the country keeping day-to-day diaries about what they saw during and after the air raids. Then we had a wider panel of several hundreds, on whom we used to call for specific reports: "This month, report all the graffiti you have seen." Or "This month report everything you hear said about Hitler. About Churchill. About Jews. Or about Americans." We also had between 15 and 30 paid, trained full-time observers, to cover all kinds of special or local situations.'

'We were able to provide a sort of secret service, precisely because we were quiet people.'

Charles Madge recalls that in 1936 he was living in Blackheath, London, near Humphrey Jennings and Stuart Legg, the film makers, and they discussed 'enlisting volunteers for the observation both of social happenings like the Abdication and also of "everyday life" as lived by themselves and those around them. A short letter was drafted to the *New Statesman*, asking those interested to communicate with us at the Blackheath address,' he has written in *The Times Literary Supplement*.

Soon afterwards Harrison 'arrived in Blackheath and told us that he had in hand an enterprise that would complement ours - the quasi-anthropological study of the Boltonians by a team of full-time observers.'

The examination of Bolton, or 'Worktown', is Mass Observation's best known enterprise, partly because of Humphrey Spender's photographs which were rediscovered by Derek Smith and David Mellor. A group of Harrison's friends, artists and social scientists, visited Bolton and Blackpool, gathering a mass of still undigested material. In an introductory booklet to Mass Observation, Harrison and Madge wrote that it was now possible for the artist and scientist to meet on common ground. 'We wish to put this assertion to a practical test.' 'Worktown' or Bolton was that test bed.

They behaved like spies, sitting in pubs with their stopwatches, timing the seconds it took to down a pint. It was a very public espionage. There is only one domestic interior - a child being bathed in a tin tub - in Humphrey Spender's photographs of Bolton; otherwise only pubs, churches, election meetings, side shows, funerals, women window shopping.

Although some Mass Observers - like Harrison - took local jobs, they chose to live together at 85 Davenport Street, Bolton. They did not sleep two to a bed, scratching their flea bites in common lodging houses, like George Orwell in his *Road to Wigan Pier*. It lacked the intimacy of Harrison in Borneo where he lived with a tribe.

Mass Observation chose the cool, mechanical eye. It asked its observers to look at what was in front of them - like so many perambulating cameras. It remained uninvolved, rejecting commitment, remote and alien in the way for which photo-journalists are now condemned.

William Stott has suggested that the camera was a prime symbol of the thirties mind. This was not because the mind was endlessly fragmented but 'because the mind aspired to the quality of authenticity, of direct and immediate experience, that the camera captures in all its photographs.' Mass Observation reports were verbal snapshots.

Before working with Mass Observation, Humphrey Spender took photographs in Whitechapel to arouse fury at the overcrowding, poverty and squalor. His pictures in Bolton could have been examining the quaint customs of the Dayaks.

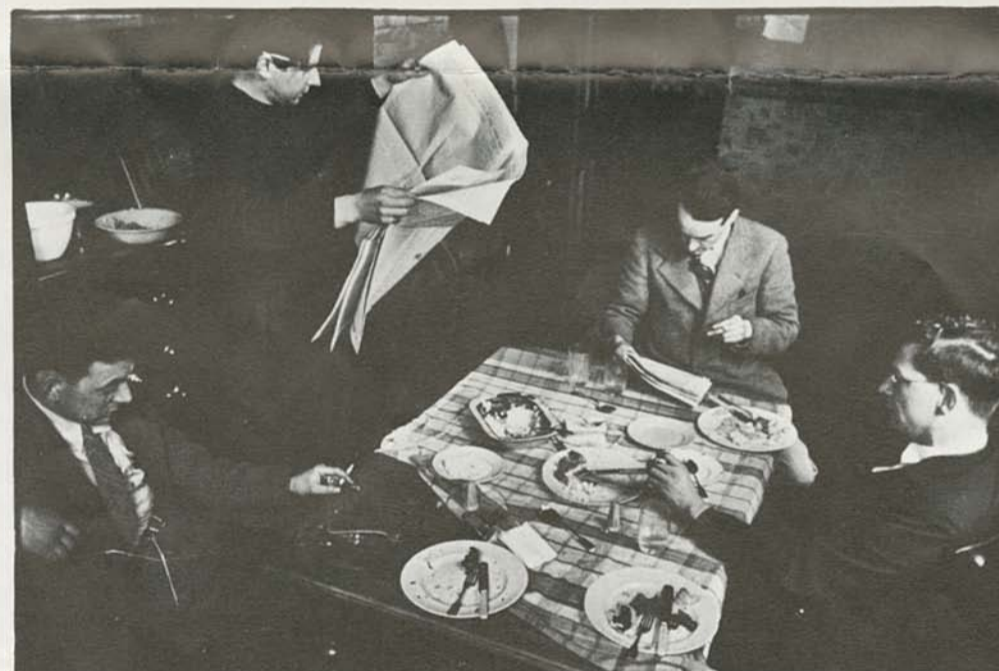
In 1936, Tom Harrison and Charles Madge wrote: 'Mass Observation is an instrument for collecting facts, not a means for producing a

sort of home front espionage.' He did not want to be a spy.

Mass Observation did not want to change the world, they were reformist. They did not examine unemployment in Bolton, infant mortality, malnutrition, housing, health, or any of the parameters of poverty. Their approach was as fatalistic as a photograph. Consider this report from Bolton (November 22, 1938) from the open market: 'Woman 36. Middle class. Dressed in grey hat, coat, brown shoes, low heels, sour face. Small dog in car. Left car. Entered fish market. Bought fish after some minutes argument about price and quality. Came back to car. Went to veg. stall, bought cauliflower, returned car. Came back, looked at several fruit stalls, argued about price of pears -



The painter Graham Bell and photographer Humphrey Spender. On the roof of Bolton Art Gallery 1938.



Kitchen M.O. H.Q., 85 Davenport St. Bolton 1937. (Tom Harrison reading paper)

Humphrey Spender

synthetic philosophy, a super science, a super politics. The availability of the facts will liberate certain tendencies in science, art, and politics, because it will add to the social consciousness of the time. Mass Observation is not a party, a religion or a philosophy, but an elementary piece of human organisation and adaptation. It is one part of a general deflection of emphasis from individual to collective effort.'

'It is not enough in itself to ensure mass regeneration, and has no pretence to being the salvation of anybody, either spiritually or politically. It is each man's job to find his own salvation as best he can. Mass Observation merely proposes to acquaint him with the relevant scientific facts. It is only through knowledge about his environment that man can change it. Whatever the method of change the knowledge is indispensable.'

This political virginity was promptly lost in 1940 when Mass Observation began to work for the Home Intelligence department of the Ministry of Information and Naval Intelligence, reporting on civilian morale. Charles Madge did not approve.

'When he [Harrison] told me that he proposed to place himself and M.O. at the disposal of a government department,' Madge has written, 'rightly or wrongly I had misgivings and said I would prefer to opt out of M.O. rather than join in what (as I then saw it) looked like a

bought six, chose each one, examining them very carefully for bruises, etc. Seven minutes.' (Most of this could have been said better in a photograph.)

Mass Observers were ghosts of those earnest Victorians collecting butterflies, classifying fossils, pressing botanical specimens into their notebooks, but without any theories to tie all the information together. They were part of a documentary movement which worshipped the 'fact'. 'Facts', they believed, would make you free. The back streets of Bolton would be for the Mass Observer what the entrails of the dogfish were for the zoologist.

Many Mass Observations dealt with important things: funerals and the mortality of prostitutes. Others were slightly dotty. A report (November 9, 1937) records one hour's spittoon observation at Crofters Hotel Vault between 9 and 10pm. 'Number of spittoons five - three under table and two near bar. Only two of these spittoons were used during my observations.' Nobody spat in either of the spittoons. Nine matches were thrown, four missed; four cigarette ends, two missed; and ashes missed twice. The time of each throw was noted. Time and motion study was confused with documentary.

Another report (September 5, 1937) combined observation with 'overheards'. (Mass Observers were encouraged to remove those ear

plugs.) 'I arrived at the Victory Hotel at 7.55pm and was surprised to find only one person in the vault, as a rule there are nearly always four in at that time. Up to 8.30pm five people had entered and three matches had been struck. A conversation developed between three males making munitions. Male One was on holiday from London and was working for a firm there making conveyors for the Government. He said: "They're not making all this bloody stuff for nothing, it's only a matter of time before the bubble bursts."

'Male Two: "Well, I don't think another war will start, now that they're getting friendly with Italy and Germany."

'Male Three: "Don't you believe it chum, they're a cute lot of buggers in this country and they're only waiting until they're ready. Why, they're even making the bloody stuff for them that they'll be at war with..." and so on.

The report ended with the inevitable matches: 'From 8.30pm to 9pm ten matches had been struck.'

Observers went out, pencil and stopwatch in hand. Many were bank or other clerks. Reports varied from the flowery prose of the evening class to the objectivity of the police report or George Orwell. Describing the parlour or best room in a pub one observer wrote: 'Windows each end of oblong room. Wallpaper floral pattern. Tiled fireplace - over mantle mirror - adverts - Father Xmas holding glass saying "It's Fullstaff for Me" - another - "Hard work takes it out of a Man. Beer is best" - another of King's Arms, Southport, with photos of interior of this place - another - Southport flower show August 25 '37 with strip Walkers supply licenced bars - framed ad Fullstaff holding pewter pots of foaming beer with print Walkers Fullstaff ales - Smith crisps - Eckersleys Grape Fruit Crush, Craven A card, fair maid smoking, woodbine picture.' There is much more; it continues like an auction catalogue. The detail is photographic.

Mass Observation restricted its investigations to the lower-middle and working classes. Its concept of 'mass' implied a slightly lumpen proletariat different from 'us' intellectuals, artists and scientists living in Blackheath or temporarily visiting Bolton.

In 1976, Tom Harrison could write about the 'mass' in *Living Through the Blitz* (Penguin, 1978): 'They could contribute little more than to muddle through, obey the military law and maybe mutter a little.' This suggests that the real job of winning the war was being done elsewhere. He was writing about an industrial working class without whose munitions no war would have been possible.

The privations of war were not all that bad for the working class, he writes: 'Putting up with discomfort, enduring economic uncertainty and periods of familiar distress, were built into pre-war "working class" experience.' The poor do not mind being poor, they are used to it.

Until 1941, when Germany attacked Russia, authority was afraid of the working class. After Bolton, Mass Observation's most active role was to help control that class by providing information about civilian morale. They were civil spies. Harrison hints at this fear of working class revolt. 'Only one element in the population even began to look as if it could conceivably organise any public opposition to the war: the Communist Party of Great Britain. But it was deeply uncertain of its position, as at first Russia and Germany were "allies". It became the most patriotic of groups once Germany attacked Russia.'

Let Charles Madge sum up. 'In the very beginning [Mass Observation] had a poetic side, a potential which was never realised. In any rigorous sense it was disappointing also on its scientific side, notable more as a trail-blazer and trend-setter than for dependable, organised results and findings.'

Tom Picton

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With thanks to Julian Trevelyan, Humphrey Spender and Anthony D'Offay for permission to reproduce pictures on pages 3 and 6. Research by Derek Smith, Nick Stanley and Shirley Read.

The Worktown exhibition and catalogues are available from the Gardner Arts Centre, University of Sussex.



Leaving the mill. Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender



Canvassing. Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender

Reproduced by permission of Anthony D'Offray



Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender



Cotton weaver. Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender



Canvassing. Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender

Reproduced by permission of Anthony D'Offray



Blackpool 1937

Julian Trevelyan

Mass Observation: The Intellectual Climate

Mass Observation constitutes a substantial but almost entirely forgotten episode in British cultural history at the end of the 1930s, involving photography as well as film and painting. It was an episode that can perhaps be understood as a complex of contemporary forces: populism, statistical social surveys, Surrealism, naive Realism, anthropology, investigative reportage and Documentary impulses. It cannot be characterised simply as an epiphenomenon of the larger Documentary movement in Britain in the thirties; more likely it was the focus and climax of thirties' Documentary in Britain.

One factor is striking amongst the preconditions of Mass Observation's formation: Victor Gollancz the publisher, seeing the success of Documentary books in Britain, and that Documentary was in the ascendant as a genre, was willing to finance Tom Harrisson – one of Mass Observation's (M.O.) three founders – in Bolton in 1936. Once Harrisson was there he also arranged donations from liberal northern industrialists such as Sir Thomas Barlow KBE and Sir Ernest Simon. In the United States it was industrialists such as these who were putting financial backing behind photo-Documentary books like *Faces We See*(1), a book which is an exactly parallel project to Spender's photographs – for it too is concerned with celebrating a people working in an area dominated by the cotton industry, but in North Carolina rather than Lancashire; people at work; at home; their habits and customs.

The search for affirmative images of labour and citizenship was a definite populist component of the Documentary genre at the close of the thirties and on into the forties in Britain and the United States. Many of the inner core of M.O., including some of its founders, even if not actually born in the Empire, were either Colonials or associated with it. Tom Harrisson, for example, was the son of General Harrisson who had built the Argentinian railway system, and had spent all his time in Argentina, which was then virtually a British colony. His son was shaped by the Imperial tradition of exploration and administration despite his subsequent rebellion against paternal and authority figures.

Charles Madge, the poet and *Daily Mirror* reporter, was South African, as was Graham Bell, the Social Realist painter. Expatriate detachment gave them a vantage onto British culture from an imagined 'exterior', alien, territory. Indeed Harrisson encouraged Humphrey Spender to figure himself in the role of exploring ethnographer in a foreign country.

Ethnographical and anthropological aims lay

behind much German photography in the 20s and 30s (behind August Sander, for example) as well as being at the base of the Documentary movement in film in Britain with Grierson's intention to domesticise Flaherty's ethnographic work. Harrisson had first encountered the Spender family on the 1933 Oxford University expedition to the New Hebrides. During this Harrisson saw Michael Spender (the expedition's photographer) record Oceanic patterns of culture by camera. Only in 1937, did Harrisson seek out Michael's brother, Humphrey Spender, as the photographer to survey cultural patterns in Bolton and Blackpool.

But by then there was a different intellectual climate. During the late thirties, the high years of M.O., there was a recoil from Europe (Spain especially) and the World on the part of the younger British intelligentsia, and a return home. The high-bohemian idyll of the Mediterranean no longer had any economic underpinning; colonial adventure had subsided. This recoil to home involved, in part, the exploration of the unknown British interior, already made 'foreign' by the ravages of the Depression, distanced by class barriers and thereby populated by 'a race apart'.

It was no coincidence that this was the sort of imaginary scene with which Raymond Mortimer introduced Bill Brandt at the outset of the photobook *The English at Home* (1936): *One of the pleasures of being English is to return to this country after a longish time . . . for an hour or two you have caught a surprising vision of your country and your countrymen, you have noticed a hundred details that are peculiar to England; you have, in fact, been able to look through foreign eyes. Mr Bill Brandt is British by birth but has spent most of his life abroad . . . shows himself to be not only an artist but an anthropologist. He seems to have wandered about England with the detached curiosity of a man investigating the customs of some remote and unfamiliar tribe.*(2)

By the time Harrisson was settled in Bolton in late 1936 and about to join forces with others to found M.O., the model of the privileged expatriate returning home on a redemptive journey into the British interior was established and, significantly, also established within the marketable and expanding genre of Documentary photo-books. Together with the rise of Documentary as a form and a genre there is also the rise of market research (the first extensive Persil survey by Lintas had been in October, 1933).

As a methodology, asking people questions

about their habits was novel and appealing; public opinion polls were also very rudimentary but were another source for M.O.'s drive to collect facts and statistics from individuals. M.O. was a hybrid phenomenon composed of disparate factors. It amalgamated not only public opinion polls and market research, but also anthropology into a framework where an 'anthropology of ourselves'(3) seemed potential. Endorsement came early for M.O. from Professor Bronislaw Malinowski, the leading anthropologist in England; at least part of the conceptual thrust behind Spender's photograph *The Wayside Pulpit, Bolton* (1937) may be anthropological in origin. At first there is the ironic level – of an uplifting sign for Harvest Thanksgiving in an overwhelmingly gloomy industrialised vista. Beyond this was the anthropological image – the photograph as data,

An Observation. 26.4.1938

Moor Lane Market

There was only Taffy with an audience which comprised of 16 women 22-48 and 9 men 40-55, two children, girls 7, and Observers. Taffy had two men 26, 27, helping Taffy 55.

"Look here Mrs. only 2½d . . . these . . . they've never bin offered at this price before – see feel at 'em only ½d . . . why damn it have your bloody at home or do you want me to give you the damn stuff . . . ?"

"Hello Mrs . . . haven't seen you for a week or two now, how's your hubby? . . . Well ladies here we are, look at these lovely undies, fit for the Queen, in fact they're better than the Queen's, only 1/6d. No dammit I'll treat you ladies, 1/3d – who wants one? Yes there's a lady there; thank you lady you've got a bargain.

as evidence on the manner in which agrarian rituals like Harvest Thanksgiving are sustained in an industrialised society.

Through his advance from Gollancz, Tom Harrisson was living in Bolton in late 1936, making an impressionistic social survey based on his work as a lorry driver and in the cotton mills. At the same time a group of London intellectuals, Jennings, Madge, David Gascoyne, Stuart Legg and Kathleen Raine, the majority of them Surrealists, began the investigation of how contemporary public opinion interacted with widely held phobias and desires. They were interested in events such as the burning of the Crystal Palace which took place at the end of 1936 – what might it signify to the British collective imagination and what psychological and political resonances would such an apocalyptic image have? From a Surrealist and

Freudian point of view public and political images were seen to have an unconscious psychological dimension. And the London group were concerned with constructing meaning from such mass-circularised images of public events or 'fictions' as Walter Lippmann had called them,(4) that were interiorised from newsreels and headlines. Thus the first M.O. publication in June 1937 opened with such a 'fiction' – a facsimile reproduction of the *Daily Mirror's* headline on the abdication of Edward VIII in December 1936.

At the very beginning of 1937 this London group wrote a letter to the *New Statesman*; Harrisson came down from Bolton and they immediately combined. M.O. was formed and immediately appealed through the newspapers for volunteers and observers who would report on their daily lives, fantasies, dreams and work. Harrisson returned to Bolton while Madge directed the London group from Blackheath, Jennings remaining with them for the rest of 1937.

Their book on the coronation of George VI in May 1937, *May the Twelfth*, was their first major composite work and it was primarily arranged by Humphrey Jennings. This was the occasion when candid Leica photography was first pressed into service for an M.O. survey, when Jennings not only noted down all the overheard remarks in crowds, the music and noise of the day that he heard but he also photographed the coronation crowds and their reactions to the day's events. His technique, the same employed by Spender a few months later on his first visit to Bolton, was one of participant observation. The mass observer became akin to the peeping, spying creature 'Public Busybody No 1' announced by the *Daily Mirror* and personified in a photo of Tom Harrisson himself in a mackintosh with notebook in hand squinting through a keyhole.(6)

The point of view was covert: that of the voyeur, the eavesdropper who overheard and oversaw – the point of view from which Spender took the photograph, *Funeral, Davenport St. Bolton*, (1938), by the shoulder of a mourner. The image of 'social detection' began to be important to M.O.'s reputation (a reputation which was to be fuelled by the scandal of social spies in our midst noting and recording everyday life). But as Harrisson and Madge wrote:

in the detection we wish to practise there is no criminal . . . collective habits and social behaviour are our field of enquiry.(7)

It was to be 'A Nationwide Intelligence Service',(8) which discovered, co-ordinated and fed back opinions and views in a mass society. To some extent it succeeded; findings, besides being published in M.O. books and newsletters became widely publicised as a best-selling Penguin Special, *Britain*, in *Daily Mirror* and *Picture Post* features and in frequent BBC broadcasts. And Tom Harrisson quickly became a personality on the newly opened BBC television service.

There seems no question that Tom Harrisson was a charismatic person who acted as publicist and magnet. Members of the London arts/politics bohemia were drawn up to Bolton through his intervention, among them Richard Crossman, Tom Driberg, Julian Huxley and the painters Sir William Coldstream and Julian Trevelyan. He also attracted the interest of men like Walter Hood, an unemployed miner who joined the Bolton social survey.

Bolton was chosen by Tom Harrisson for reasons which illuminate the mentality of M.O. extremely well.(9) He had spent a long while in Melanesia in the South Pacific and discovered that the only thing the natives knew about Britain was the identity of the Unilever combine which had large chemical interests in their island. Fascinated by this commercial and imperial link, he decided to return to Britain, back to the birthplace of Lord Lever – in Bolton – to the source of that particular imperial network.

The symbolic expression of economic forces obsessed him. He found, for example, Lancashire George Formby's hit record *Hindoo Man* meaningful as another cultural interconnection between the contracting staple industry of Bolton, cotton, and the Indian subcontinent with its own burgeoning cotton industry.(10)

In the thirties, during the period of economic depression, a generation of photographers, filmmakers and painters were under severe economic pressures. Amongst the generation of mainly middle-class students who left the Slade or the Architectural Association between 1929 and 1935, many failed to find traditional employment. Humphrey Spender was one of them. Coming from an upper-middle-class background he found himself a job as a newspaper photographer (for the *Daily Mirror*) by 1935; he had become declassé and propelled into the mass media along with such dis-



Wayside pulpit. Bolton 1937

tinguished contemporaries as W.H. Auden, Sir William Coldstream, John Armstrong, Anthony Powell and others.

This moment then, around 1935-7, entailed a shift in self-image for some photographers and painters, a change from bohemian models of the artist to one representing the values of corporate responsibility. It was a shift summarised in Myfanwy Piper's remark, *We are more serious now, not really playboys but agents*.⁽¹¹⁾ In the guise of 'agents' rather than privileged bohemians a greater mobility to cross class barriers was gained. The metaphor of the artist as agent coalesced with that of the reporter, the 'Public Busybody No.1', who investigated the social landscape in the service of a communalist ideology of mass observation.

Something which loomed large in the iconography of arts and letters between the wars was the industrial wasteland, and Bolton appeared to Spender to belong to this iconographic type. It had originated with Eliot in 1922 but Auden refined and systematically developed in his poems the idea of the landscape of Britain as semi-derelict. That iconography of industrial dereliction intrigued Spender because it accorded with much that he saw in actuality on his photo tours for the *Daily Mirror* and later on

Picture Post. In his photographs, industrial ruin or urban decay was presented diagnostically. Although Bolton was not economically devastated its cotton industry was declining and there was 10% unemployment in the town at the time of the M.O. survey.

Making lists or collecting data on everyday mass culture was part of the M.O. ethos of 'social detection'. So much so that data collection was seen by Madge, Harrison and Jennings to be the overriding need in the first year. This was a pronounced drive towards the model of scientific observation of which Harrison's earlier interest in ornithology was one source, combined with an appeal to impersonal technical equipment — especially the camera — to objectively observe and record.

Madge singled out Duchamp as the one modernist who had succeeded in becoming a scientist,⁽¹²⁾ and in this area we should recall Auden's preference, at this time, for 'clinical' writing. Yet 'fact' could be accorded a Surrealist status, too, by the photographers within M.O. Madge and Harrison had admitted the revelatory value of fact in 1939:

the drab and sordid features of industrial life will take on new interest.⁽¹³⁾

The Surrealist aesthetic category of 'the

marvellous' could be attained through direct urban photographs, were found social objects uncovered by surveys could be transformed into Surrealist objet trouvés; a mobile tea van shaped as a giant tea-pot photographed by Julian Trevelyan in Blackpool in 1937 was one such.

Any discussion of Surrealist determinants on the M.O. photography of Spender or Trevelyan returns us to the figure of Humphrey Jennings. He was a most formidable power in British vanguard art in the 1930s; a film-maker, painter, photographer and poet who was admired and had his works collected by leading continental Surrealists — Breton, Aragon and Magritte. Jennings' acute understanding of the effects of photo-mechanical reproduction and the effects of mass circulation photography was made from a standpoint close to that of Walter Benjamin (Jennings actually wrote on the optical unconsciousness along similar lines to Benjamin).

While M.O. may have aimed at the production of American-type photo-books like Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free*, almost all of Jennings, Spender and Trevelyan's photographs taken on surveys went unpublished. They became, especially in Jennings' case, homeless photographs unmarried to the written

statistics and opinions that were being recorded on the occasion the photographs were taken. It was only in Jennings' film *Spare Time* and Spender's *Picture Post* city photo-tours with a journalist — both projects of 1939 — that M.O. fully deployed its methods of domestic anthropology and candid reportage; the war foreclosed further developments.

The kinds of Surrealist photography and poetry that Jennings propounded lie behind other sectors of M.O. activities. Volunteers were from early days often directed towards street graphics — chalkings and graffiti in particular. The Surrealist poet David Gascoyne, as well as Jennings, brought an interest in graffiti to M.O.; writing of him during his enthusiasm for M.O., Kathleen Raine believed: *the poet reassumes the ancient role at once of national prophet and reader of the augures, not from entrails but from, literally, the writing on the walls*.⁽¹⁵⁾

Both Jennings and Spender had been inspired, too, in their photographs by Brassai's portfolio of graffiti photographs that had been published in *Minotaure*, the Surrealist magazine, in 1933.

M.O. was permeated by communalist and populist ideology; its formation was precipitated by the failed populist movement surrounding the abdication crisis in December, 1936. Independent of one another Madge and Harrison, in London and Bolton, recognised the existence of a gap between the actual views of individuals, the 'ordinary' people, and published opinion presented as public opinion in newspapers, radio and newsreel during the crisis. Thereafter M.O. repeatedly foregrounded the 'ordinary chap' and 'ordinary people', the undistinguished members of the mass of the population. They, often lower-middle-class in background, found their habits, work routines and leisure activities valued and recorded through interviews or their own self reports.

The film *Documentarists* among M.O.'s founders, especially Grierson's colleague Stuart Legg, stressed the populist idea of 'citizenship' while Arthur Elton and Edgar Anstey had already (in 1934) placed slum dwellers in front of cine-cameras for the film *Housing Problems*, and let them *tell their own story, virtually make their own film*.⁽¹⁶⁾

Similarly 'nobodies' found a voice through M.O., just as 'nobodies' had been the chosen photographic subjects in the early 1930s of the humanitarian German photographer admired by Spender, Helmar Lerski.⁽¹⁷⁾ For, apart from one or two German emigres arguably no photographer in Britain other than Humphrey Spender had such an intimate knowledge of the modes of German realist photography. Again Spender exactly fitted and reproduced the complex ideology of M.O.

David Mellor

David Mellor was co-organiser of *The Real Thing, Cityscapes and Worktown* exhibitions. He helped Tom Harrison establish the *Mass-Observation Archive* at the University of Sussex where he is a lecturer in the history of Art in the School of English and American Studies. He is currently editing a book of documents and essays on German photography 1927-1933.

FOOTNOTES

1. Mildred Gwin Barwell *Faces We See*, pbd The Southern Combed Yarn Spinners Association, Gastonia, North Carolina 1939 ('the facts in this book were taken from actual mill records [and] from innumerable conversations').
2. Raymond Mortimer in Bill Brandt *The English At Home*, Batsford, 1936, pp3-4.
3. Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Nationwide Intelligence Service*, essay in Charles Madge and Tom Harrison ed. *First Year's Work in Mass Observation* Lindsey Drummond 1938.
4. For a discussion of 'fictions' see the influential opening of W. Lippmann *Public Opinion* 1929 George Allen & Unwin. pp14-19.
5. 'Confronted with these headlines, a nation of 50 millions gasped with astonishment . . .' *Mass Observation*, 1937, p.9.
6. *Daily Mirror* 6 December 1938.
7. *Mass Observation*, p.30.
8. See note 3.
9. See Harrison's own account in *Britain Revisited*, Gollancz 1961, pp.25-6.
10. Interview with the Author, July 1973.
11. Myfanwy Evans, *The Painter's Object*, Gerald Howe, 1937, p.3.
12. *Mass Observation*, 1937 p.26.
13. *Mass Observation*, 1937, p.31.
14. Harrison was impressed by the *Time* review of *Land of the Free* 25.4.38.
15. Kathleen Raine's essay *David Gascoyne and the Prophetic Role* p.48 in *Defending Ancient Springs*, OUP 1967.
16. Edgar Anstey in an interview with the Author, July 1978.
17. Lerski's photobook *Kopfe des Alltags* pbd Hermann Reckendorf 1931, was very influential, not only for Spender but for other British photographers including Barbara Ker-Seymour.



Quack hair specialist. Happy Homes Exhibition. Bolton 1938

Humphrey Spender

Mass Observation: Limited

M.O. is now a London based consumer research organisation. Shirley Read spoke to John Parfitt, Managing Director of Mass Observation Ltd.

What are the links between Mass Observation in the '30s and Mass Observation Ltd now?

The transition to Mass Observation as a company today occurred in a fairly gradual fashion. During the war it became part of the war machine. It was both an instrument of recording the population's reactions in hard times and also for understanding how best to put propaganda over to people. But when the War ended then commercial life began again with the opportunity to sell, as distinct from merely provide, the population with products. A lot of the companies that had been linked, either through interest or even possibly through direct financial help, in the earlier period of Mass Observation began to ask M.O. to carry out surveys for them. The objectives of course being much more precise, and relating to specific marketing problems.

Mass Observation formed as a company in 1948, although its prime purpose was still very much social research. Gradually, because of where its income came from, the work of the company evolved into consumer research – finding out what people want, how the markets are, what sort of products they like, dislike and so on. The real growth of market research began after the War. Mass Observation, because it was already in existence and had a lot of experience of carrying out survey work, along with other companies, in fact evolved consumer research as we understand it today.

What areas do you deal with now?

The research we carry out now differs in relation to the research the original M.O. did in two quite distinct respects. One is that it is much more geared to research for commercial companies, although not by any means exclusively. The other main difference is in research methodology. In the late 1930s research methodology was pretty primitive really. Looked at from a technical point of view one would be very hesitant to adopt the same methods now, largely because of the techniques of sampling – that is how you pick the people that you include in your survey. I think today we have a much stronger understanding of the bias that you can build into surveys if you don't pick your samples carefully. Another difference is in the techniques of gathering information. Basically today the main methods of gathering information are by structured interview, that is you prepare questions beforehand of what you want to ask and then you ensure that everyone in your survey is asked the same question in the same order, so as to avoid bias in the interviewer. It's also of course because you need to tabulate the results efficiently and pre-structured questionnaires allow you to do this. If you have just masses of notes of what people said it is very difficult to summarize the information.

So the difference between research techniques in the traditional days of Mass Observation and now are primarily that we know a great deal more about how to gather information. We're perhaps a great deal less romantic and much more mundane in our methods. But we carry out six or seven hundred surveys a year and there isn't time for the sort of preparation that would have gone into something like the survey in Bolton for instance which was a product of a period of greater leisure in a way. In those days the methods were extremely interesting but sometimes you are left wondering a little whether the technique was perhaps necessarily the best way of getting to the root of the problem. Sitting in pubs listening to what other people say is no doubt fascinating, but you don't know what people who did not go to pubs were saying or you don't really know the seriousness of what they were saying, you can't distinguish between small talk and perhaps a summarization of their real thought.

The surveys, though, were filling an enormous vacuum of ignorance about what ordinary people thought about a whole range of subjects. The fact that they supplied such fascinating and often extremely important information on those things was an enormous step forward in itself. It was information that society badly needed, and I think society has never been the same since. It opened up completely new worlds which, in their turn, must have influenced the way politicians thought, the way planners thought, and so on. So Tom Harrison's achievement is far greater than anything that we achieved on any of our more limited survey work. He was laying the foundation stone which is a totally different

task and calls for different techniques.

So you had a foundation to work from?

Not in any direct material sense. Only in the very general influence which they must have had on all of us without knowing it, which is that we took for granted that you should measure what went on in society. In that period of time thinking about measurements had changed fundamentally from a total lack of realisation that you should measure anything to a point where you assumed that measurement was necessary, and it was only a question of how you did it. So, in that sense, yes, a direct inheritance from the sort of work that was done.

The observers themselves seem to have been very articulate people. Would it be a mistake to see them as average people?

Yes. This is true in two quite distinct respects. The people who were the team were undoubtedly more than averagely articulate and educated, certainly by the standards of the 1930s. The other side of it is the diaries that were kept. People kept diaries to record people reacting to last night's bombing or to the poster on eating more potatoes or whatever. These diaries were all collated in Mass Observation and reports prepared, presumably for the respective ministries to give them some indication of what the population was thinking. I would hazard a strong guess that many, if not all, of the people who filled in those diaries were far more articulate than the population as a whole. Simply because the actual task of filling in your thoughts, writing on paper, sending them on regularly is just something that most people even today wouldn't do. They wouldn't know how to begin. It's a reason why we use structured questionnaires to overcome the problem that if you want to ask questions and you leave it too open ended – as with a diary – it is only the articulate that can give you an answer.

Do you know anything about how M.O. was financed?

Although a lot of it was financed by charities and people interested in what Tom Harrison was trying to do I would imagine that raising the funds sometimes must have been quite a problem. Certainly as far as you can understand from talking with the people who were concerned with Mass Observation in those days the supply of money ran out quite often. I'm sure it wouldn't have deterred Tom who had scant regard for where the next sum of money was coming from. One gets the feeling that people well may have been tramping the streets of Bolton gathering the information and probably for reasonable periods of time financing themselves while they did it in the hope that somehow or another they'd offset their expenses at the end.

Perhaps the opportunity for that kind of research has not occurred again?

Yes, I think that's probably true. In the sense of exact copies of the research Mass Observation did then clearly that's not happening at all. But in the sense of the tradition of exploring things which may have no financial or administrative advantage the commercial companies, who do a great deal of social research, are not in a position to do this. Most of the time they have to know where the money is coming from for a particular job. That leaves a vacuum of serious social studies: - of the way society changes, the way it thinks, the way it views the political structure, its aspirations and its frustrations. All of these things remain unmeasured when they could be measured.

In so far as anyone measures them then there is work that goes on in universities that may well piece together some parts of this. But I think that politicians would prefer not to have things measured because I think they believe they are the links between people and government and if you go around measuring and find that what they are saying is not what people appear to want then clearly that could be embarrassing. Nobody would put the money up to carry out these studies. That, I think, is a great tragedy because we could now – I say we, I mean universities as well as research companies – could in fact do very thorough jobs in the whole area of advising, of providing a link between the population as a whole and the people who govern. For one reason or another people evidently – here I mean the government – don't want the information. Tom Harrison didn't consult any governments, he gave them the information. There lay the difference.

Humphrey Spender: M.O. Photographer

Humphrey Spender was the official M.O. photographer. The following conversation is extracted from interviews with Humphrey Spender by Derek Smith and Tom Picton.

How did you get involved with Mass Observation?

Tom Harrison was searching around for people who would work for nothing and somebody must have coughed up my name as an idiot who would be likely to work for nothing. There wasn't any money, Tom just had no money. I was very intrigued by him himself, he had that kind of magnetic personality. My first connection with Harrison was that he had been with my elder brother Michael on a University exploratory expedition.

He knew you primarily as a photographer?

He knew I was very interested in photography and had probably seen some of my work for the *Daily Mirror* particularly the work which wasn't published which attempted to be a sort of social documentary.

Where would he have seen that?

By coming to the family house and meeting me, saying, 'What are you up to?' He suggested, 'You're a photographer, you've got exactly the right kind of equipment, one of the few people who is using an easily concealable camera, come down to join this team.' He seems to have decided I took good photographs and that I'd be useful to his project and so he got me involved. This was very much a spare time thing as far as I remember. I was working for the *Mirror*.

How did you organise this time? for long stays or at intervals?

I went up at intervals but I tended to stay for anything from five days to about three weeks. I spent about 20 weeks in odd expeditions in all. But I couldn't do a tremendous amount there simply because I was working for free.

Had you visited Bolton before this?

No, never. For the *Mirror* I had been up to Tyneside and had been rather horrified by what I'd seen there. I think my pictures of unemployment on Tyneside were taken before the Bolton pictures and in fact it may have been some of these that made Tom think I was suitable for this.

This was obviously unfamiliar territory. Did you and the others look upon this as some sort of expedition?

I was very intrigued by one thing that Tom said which now of course seems incredibly obvious but didn't seem obvious in those days. It's a theme that's been very much exploited since. Tom said it was that, here we are all studying the behaviour of what we think are simple and primitive peoples, when our own behaviour in our own country is, just as peculiar, just as extraordinary if one stands outside it and watches how people behave. I remember him particularly illustrating that sentence. He pointed to the sawdust on the floor of a pub and the spittoons which were standing around and he said 'Who would think for instance that spitting is a kind of ritual in itself, spitting is a prepared-for ritual? – look at the sawdust. Probably somewhere on the wall you will find a notice which says 'penalty for spitting 40 shillings.'

Would you go out more or less on a set assignment? with a list of things wanted?

He wouldn't actually set them out. He'd get wild enthusiasms like there are 70 religious denominations represented each by a different building in Bolton. He'd say, 'there's Total Immersion, Bethel Evangelical or Four Square' . . . he'd go off into hysterical lists of things and get us all laughing . . . 'all these things need photographing go to Bethel Evangelical, go to whatever you can find, get yourself chucked out.' I did sit and write out the sociological events that obviously had to be covered, not necessarily that I wanted to cover or thought would make good photographs. I used my own initiative after Tom's initial suggestions. All the processional stuff was produced by Tom's own research, he was fascinated by the whole idea of the equivalent of people wearing masks in places like New Guinea.

So this was very much an ordered assignment?

It was to a certain extent an ordered thing but one's own work produced its own sequence. You might for instance have been given the brief of a restaurant, photograph people sipping their cups of tea, the way they are holding their little

fingers out, this then suggests a whole sequence of things, what about fish and chip shops, what about really smart restaurants, what about night-time roadside snack stalls? So immediately you were in for a lot of stuff. And of course when you think of it in that way, these photographs are not adequate – we didn't really do enough. There should have been five photographers working, not one.

Did you treat the work more as reporting or as an artist? Were you considered on a par with Trevelyan and Coldstream?

Tom thought of the photographic side as very important but saw it as pure recording. I was prepared to accept that. I did a lot of drawing and painting as well in Bolton. When I was taking a photograph I found I could visualise what the final appearance would be in the print. I always knew where it was going to fail and since it is my nature to be aware much more of failure than success I would always go on, I would wait and with a lot of patience and I was always aware of the formal qualities of the thing. I was always seduceable by the idea of a 'good' photograph.

Tom said he published fourteen books, presumably at that period. Were your photographs being used at that time?

Only two books used the photographs. Normally, M.O. didn't have enough money and apparently it wasn't considered to have enough importance to involve the cost of reproducing photographs and the curious thing is up till recently nobody has taken very much notice of the photographs.

But did Harrison ever talk about why he was having you take the pictures? What was the reason if he wasn't using them at the time?

He had a really great awareness of history in the making and as an anthropologist he realised how significantly and rapidly our society is changing and how very soon this kind of record would be very valuable.

When you took the pictures what happened straight away?

I would process them and show them to Tom who was always extremely enthusiastic. He saw things in them that I have to admit I hadn't always seen myself. It was his enthusiasm and appreciation that kept me at it. He was able to see what we took for granted, ordinary behaviour, in a very interesting way. He would say, 'you go and photograph that' and he would know a lot about the social behaviour and rituals that were involved.

It seems to me that a lot of the things that the Mass Observers were engaged in, the process of writing endless details and descriptions of how something appeared for example, could have been done much more easily with a camera. I'm surprised that they didn't use photography more.

Tom did want more photographers to work for Mass Observation. He was desperately trying to get photographers to work. But then there weren't nearly so many people who could use a camera in that kind of way. I had done a lot of photography. I had been one of the first photographers to press for the use of miniature cameras when I was with the *Mirror*, in the early thirties and had had quite a lot of experience with the Leica, had already had to go through this secret thing.

Your Bolton pictures are probably very different from what you would have produced on a Daily Mirror assignment?

My Bolton pictures would have been completely useless to the *Mirror*. I can think of three pictures, one of the hair specialist for example, which might have been used for its comic appeal. What tore me to shreds on the *Mirror* was that they gave photographs such appalling captions. Even if I did get a photograph that met all my own requirements they would caption it in such a way that it simply told the wrong kind of story.

I believe you got into hot water at the Mirror through respecting other peoples feelings?

They just thought I was absolutely useless as an ordinary press photographer because they knew I would always have too much inability to override those kinds of feelings.

You were in fact sacked from the Mirror. What was the occasion of your being sacked?

Through my brother Stephen I once had lunch with Edith Sitwell and by some coincidence the



The Vaults, unidentified pub. Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender

next day the art editor got me round and said 'Edith Sitwell is at an exhibition in the Leicester Galleries wearing an unusual hat covered with strawberries or cherries or something. A comic hat. Go and take her photograph, we want a photograph of her looking as comic as possible. In other words the public's idea of an eccentric poetess. Get that as much as you can. I sort of said I feel I can't do that, it just so happens that I had lunch with her yesterday. He said 'what absolute nonsense what I tell you to do you do, if your brother was lying in Piccadilly Circus in a pool of blood you would go and photograph him.' I just said 'not me', so he said 'as far as I'm concerned your job is finished.' Very shortly after that Tom Hopkins got in touch with me and said 'start with us on *Picture Post*.'

An Observation. 15.11.1937

Choice of Job.

Hilda said - quite spontaneously - "I wish I could get out of this mill. I'd like to work in a shop. Marks and Spencers best, but I wouldn't really mind. It's clean and quiet and interesting. They just don't ask you at school, they send you where there's room."

Emily said "I'd rather be in a shop, but my best friend at school came here, so I followed her."

Lily said "I'd rather be in a mill any day." (Her husband is a butcher and there is no need for her to go on working.) She said "I curse it every time I pass the watch-house but I'd hate to go."

Could we talk about specific photographs now? These men on the bus must be the classic Mass Observation image, a literal eavesdropping on their conversation. One can imagine another Mass Observer taking down what they actually said. But what would prompt you to take certain pictures?

Simply the general feeling that I was obliged to take photographs of every day scenes, of people everywhere. Tom literally did say things like go into public lavatories and take pictures of people peeing. That I didn't quite have the courage to do. I took bus rides around, in a way killing time letting things happen. Again this great principle of never fixing anything up, it must be a genuine incident. Very much not what the *Mirror's* policy was of 'laying on', setting up.

Was the funeral a difficult event to photograph?

This was one of the times when my own super respectable conventional attitudes of respect for people in states of sorrow intervened very much. I hated doing it. This was a kind of

exploitation of grief to the extent that things were very difficult, particularly in the churchyard. The great problem to me was that I am a very embarrassed person in public situations, and essentially the whole activity was fraught with anxiety and embarrassment and danger. In many kinds of ways it was a torture. Even now, I often think to myself, 'what a marvellous photograph but thank God I don't have to take it'.

One standard image of a press photographer is of someone who is very brash and will go to any lengths to grab the picture he wants, did you find your sensitivity a handicap to your career?

I was trying to conceal the fact that I was a photographer. Now the world is, in a sense, full of Mass Observation photographers, people who are doing documentary photographs and are trying to conceal themselves.

But the fact that these pictures are candid seems to give them more credibility, nothing seems disturbed or imposed upon the original event.

That was an absolute Golden Rule, if anyone knew they were being photographed then it was a failure, it had to be unobserved.

This shot of the pub "The Grapes" - did you talk to those men?

No. I would have been terrified. The whole difficulty for me, there, was what happens when you talk to them. They are total foreigners, it was acutely embarrassing. In looking at these photographs I tend to think of them as having been so obvious, no better than anyone else's, but if I really think of the tortures I went through...

People would have probably been mystified had you tried to explain M.O.s objectives to them?

They wouldn't have followed the analogy, they wouldn't have realised this was a kind of social survey. Obviously people accept their own behaviour as being totally logical and unmythical.

Did you find the Bolton environment very stimulating?

No I didn't. I found the environment really very depressing.

Was that atmosphere generated by industrial towns?

Yes, generated by poverty and the way my own rather conspicuous function related to it. Of

course it is very difficult to conceal oneself.

In what way? Was it because of your accent?

Yes, for me to go into a North Country pub, and really speaking a completely different language, to be a kind of "hail fellow well met" person was very embarrassing, and for me to be questioned at having taken someone's photograph, "What the hell are you taking it for?" which often happened.

In fact there is a pub interior here with a man raising his hand. What did he say? What was behind this gesture?

This was a threat. This was get out, I probably felt very nervous, by that time I had made the exposure and I probably went. I found that once you were noticed, once you were the object of everyone's attention you were finished. My main anxiety, purpose, was to become invisible and to make my equipment invisible, which is one of the reasons I carried around an absolute minimum of equipment, which was quite often concealed in a dreary old mackintosh. Summing up the relics of feelings toward Mass Observation I think I can remember the main enemy being boredom and tedium and embarrassment and to a certain extent fright, which every photographer is familiar with.

An Observation. 26.11.1937

Wages.

Wages are usually paid about 2.30. The signal for everyone (on cards) to go is the fetching of the overlooker by the watch-house girl. Before that everyone has been getting restless for about a quarter of an hour. People meeting in the passages ask each other "Are wages ready yet?" One of the combers came over to us and said "What's Joe waiting for?"

A criticism some people may make of the Bolton pictures, is that they do not represent any of the poverty that existed at the time. Was this avoidance intentional?

Is it avoided? I think you'll find that Tom has made a revealing comment somewhere about the possibility of getting inside people's homes and of course the main difficulty was always that once you got inside somebody's house then you were no longer taking an unobserved photograph so that necessarily the whole process was long winded and would have taken a long time - one would have to become part of the family. The photograph of the baby being bathed is an exception, this came about through

an introduction from an observer. This lady actually wanted a photograph of her child and invited me inside. Also there was a feeling that the people who are impoverished, people who are out of work simply do not like their state being exposed. In many ways such photographs would have been an exploitation. This was something that I felt very keenly. But had it not been for Mass Observation, I think I would have remained aware of the whole thing, described for example by Orwell, but would have not come into such close contact with this reality.

Were there many people who were removed from that kind of reality?

There were, my kind of class, I certainly came from a privileged background of nannies and governesses. There were always servants in the house, and we were really protected from it, we were actually protected from physical contact. One of Stephen's best poems is to do with the fact that he wasn't allowed to speak to what my parents would have called guttersnipes, and so immediately that sets up a peculiar attraction toward forbidden fruit, toward the common people.

After the war you really gave up photography and worked mainly as a painter and in textiles?

I think the reason I gave up photography was that I imagined it to be too easy, without enough challenge. I realised that technically there were practically no limitations because there are various stages of a photograph at which its possible to manipulate it. I mean one can manipulate it with foresight, by intentionally underexposing or overexposing and then compensating in development, then in the enlarger. You can manipulate it again and marry it to another photograph. You can become altogether very tricky. And I think that this no longer interested me at that time. I realised quite equally that I could continue professionally as a straightforward documentary photographer. Quite honestly I don't know why I didn't - in many ways I wish I had. I just thought I wanted to paint and design.

Humphrey Spender has now received a small subsidy from Eastern Arts Association towards printing from his original negatives. He is setting up a darkroom and hopes to produce a portfolio of his work from the 1930s. Some of his M.O. work and similar coverage of Whitechapel, Stepney and the Hunger Marches has never been printed until now.



The Grapes Hotel, Water Street. Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender



Spectators, home match, Bolton Wanderers Football Club. Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender



Town procession, Sunday. Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender



Street Accident. Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender

*It's no go my honey love, it's no go my poppet;
Work your hands from day to day, the winds
will blow the profit.
The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will
fall for ever,
But if you break the bloody glass you won't
hold up the weather.*

Louis MacNeice, *Bagpipe Music*

The intention of Mass Observation was to promote a progressive kind of indigenous anthropology, one characterised by a sense of urgency and concerned with recording contemporary attitudes. It was to be a barometer registering local atmospheric pressures and disturbances in an international climate of appalling severity. Tom Harrisson, writing in 1975, summarised its origins as being,

... a several-pronged reaction to the disturbed condition of Western Europe under the growing threat of fascism. In particular, M.O. sought to supply accurate observations of everyday life and *real* (not just published) public moods, an anthropology and a mass-documentation for a vast sector of normal life which did not, at that time, seem to be adequately considered by the media, the arts, the social scientists, even by the political leaders.

A large team consisting of some 1,500 amateur 'observers' was quickly recruited, and with the aid of a much smaller team of professional researchers, a countrywide network of listening posts was established in that same year. These were located mainly in working-class areas, because it was in such areas that it was felt that least was being recorded or acknowledged. Perhaps unconsciously, it was another raid, or expedition, into 'unknown England', the 'hidden territories', in the spirit of previous sociological expeditions into the unevenly-lit interior of this country. The intentions of Madge and Harrisson, I believe, were much more partisan and generous than those of many previous surveys. The impetus for their project sprang from an urgent cultural crisis in the country.

To start with, they were obviously affronted by the idea that it was widely considered of no importance that the majority of people in the country had no voice in national affairs, and that their lives were of little interest other than in terms of the economic functions they performed. Working class experience was still, in Dewey's words, experience 'written in water'. In the introductory essay to the Mass Observation book on 'Britain', written and published in 1939, the authors stated this position clearly:

There is ... (a) view of things (not often openly expressed, more often implied or unconscious) according to which there can only be a handful of people who know the facts, it being their job to control the destinies of millions of other people. For these millions it is necessary only to sleep, eat, work, reproduce, and, if they have the time to spare, amuse themselves.

An equally powerful drive to make common cause with the feelings and aspirations of working class people came from a specific crisis of identity amongst many intellectuals of that period, a crisis which drove many of them towards seeing the working class as the only positive source of energy and hope with whom it might be possible to build a better, and uncompromised, national culture. The necessity to 'go back to the people' was a text embroidered on many artistic banners of the period. But how to actually meet the working class? A number joined the Communist Party, others, more simply, went direct to the pubs and the dog tracks. Mass Observation was clearly an organisational expression of the cultural crisis of this period.

This was a movement not just confined to England. Something similar had happened in America at about the same time, and in fact, through Roosevelt's Federal Arts Programme, many important writers, painters and dramatists put their services at the disposal of 'the common people', and the ethnic minorities of America. Mass Observation and the Federal Writers' Project, in particular, had much in common, both in ideological sympathies and techniques, although the latter was much more a direct result of Government intervention. The most memorable single artefact which directly arose from the American project was the James Agee/Walker Evans collaboration, *Let Us Now*

Oppositional Culture: Yesterday and Today



Listening to Clem Atlee. Bolton 1937

Humphrey Spender

Praise Famous Men, a journalistic and photographic portrait of three cotton farming families, and for me personally, still the most extraordinary work of description and understanding of one cultural community by members of another, even though belonging to the same country; yet for all it mattered, they could well have been different countries. It was one of the important achievements of this kind of project to reveal how the capitalist system of productive and social relationships could engender the most extreme styles and possibilities of life within extraordinarily small geographical areas. The best of the American work totally subverted the intentions of its government sponsorship, and in the Agee's case this was explicitly stated:

It seems curious, further, that the assignment of this work should have fallen to persons having so extremely different a form of respect for the subject, and responsibility toward it, that from the first and inevitably they counted their employers, and that Government likewise to which one of them was bonded, among their most dangerous enemies, acted as spies, guardians, and cheats, and trusted no judgement, however authoritative it claimed to be, save their own ...

Both in America and in this country a variety of means of recording people's experiences were used, ranging from direct note-taking, photography, and asking people to keep diaries and/or written reconstructions of particular days or specific experiences. Mass Observation in Britain built a number of books around certain themes, and in the first year books were to be produced with the following titles: *The Pub and the People, Politics and the Non-Voter, How Religion works, and Blackpool: One Week a Year*. But the organisation was also geared and responsive to particular moments of 'state' history and cultural phenomena, and thus were able to record responses which often gave the lie to official accounts and explanations. In the book, *Britain*, for example, they found hostile, booing audiences for Chamberlain's public announcements, where the mass of the British press, and the BBC, in contrast, reported madly cheering crowds. They found other important 'moments' as having quite different meanings for the participants than that assumed by 'orthodox' explanation. For example in an essay, *Two-Minute Story*, they reported their survey in which a thousand observers were simply asked to describe exactly what happened to them during the two minute silence on Armistice Day, November 11th, 1937. One observer's account provides a very powerful account of the 'Silence' in the factory where he worked, which describes an emotion far

different from the self-denying ethic traditionally promoted and associated with Armistice Day:

Every man was still in the positions in which they had been working. Some like me were standing caps in hands. There was one man bending down, his head bowed. There was another man standing on the machine where he had been loosening or tightening some bolts holding the job on the machine. For myself I was standing cap in hand, head slightly bowed. No one seemed to have closed their eyes so I did not close mine. Anyhow I wanted to see what impressions I could gather. A feeling of reverence swept the building and filled the atmosphere. For two short minutes human beings, who were literally parts of the machines they worked, had brought themselves back to men again ...

Similarly, their findings about the effects of the Blitz on major towns and cities - recently published by Penguin as *Living Through the Blitz* - were considered at the time heretical, since they provided strong evidence of a people quite often bitterly divided on class lines, in comparison with the official description of 'one nation united' promulgated by Government propaganda and the British ruling class. Much of the class hostility stemmed from the 'trekking' by senior local government officials and local wealthy people away from cities to private country hide-outs during the heaviest bombing, leaving the rest of the population to face the bombing without any adequate preparations made in advance; local ruling elites simply ditched their civic responsibilities and fled to the safety secured for them by private wealth.

It can be seen, then, that in an important way, Mass Observation revived a radical methodology with regard to the formulating of an historical and cultural movement 'from below'. It is interesting to note that some of the best recent works of historical reconstruction and re-alignment have been based on the material collected by Mass Observation in this country and the Federal Writers' Project in America: Angus Calder's *The People's War* and Julius Lester's *To Be A Slave*, are good examples.

The positions they had established prior to the last war were, however, defeated afterwards by the ideological heavy armoury of the Cold War. In fact so many important initiatives rooted and nourished in that period were killed off in the iron frosts of the long post-war winter. In Britain the dominant head-line became Macmillan's statement that, 'We are all classless now!' And trailing behind the politicians came the new empirical sociologists with the bold new 'embourgeoisement' thesis to prove that the working class had disappeared, and that Ford's at Dagenham, and Vauxhall's in Luton,

were now entirely staffed by members of the new middle class.

The thaw came towards the end of the 1950s and in the wake of Hungary and Suez in 1956, rigid ideological casts and moulds began to break up and the New Left emerged to respond to the new shifts within society. In a period of six years, four books were published which to some extent still provide the maps of the regained territory of enquiry and struggle in use today: 1957, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*; 1958, Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society*, and then in 1961 his book, *The Long Revolution*, and in 1963 E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. All were to a greater or lesser degree concerned with the question of the structure of popular consciousness and the dialectic between the forms and directions given by the dominant ideology, and the forms and directions self-produced by the working class in a state of permanent resistance and struggle. This dialectic remains the concern of those involved in the cultural politics of today.

I remember at the time there being very great hopes for exciting work in this field coming from the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded by Richard Hoggart at Birmingham University in 1964. It was hoped that the Centre would move forward and develop from the work of Hoggart himself, Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, and provide a continuing commentary on the changing strategies of the two opposing forces in the struggle of each to retain and develop its own cultural and political self-identity. I can also remember feeling that despite its impressive and respectably neutral title, the Centre really belonged to the Labour Movement, in the way in which one still thinks that Ruskin despite many reservations belongs to the Labour Movement, and that it would constantly find its problems from the political struggle of the working class movement, and report back to it at regular intervals. I think it regrettable that it decided on a different direction, which seems to have been to secure itself a key position amongst the avant-garde of sociological study, and to address its findings to an academic audience rather than an activist readership embedded in the day to day struggles of the working class. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies ought, in some ways at least, to have learnt from some of the positive achievements of Mass Observation. Maybe the lesson is that it is not possible to base any partisan research project within a university without it becoming in some way distorted by the modes and membership criteria of the parent institution.

To some extent, in contrast, the Ruskin History Workshops have inspired many important initiatives in this area in recent years, and the importance with which they regard detailed personal testimony, and the positive concreteness of oral history, have built up a richness of material upon which a proper working class cultural tradition can be established. Together with this movement, the even more recent proliferation of working class writers' workshops, and local publishing initiatives, means that other new possibilities for the production of a partisan culture allied with other forms of working class experience and struggle are already forming.

It was an important achievement that Mass Observation was able to revive and develop a concern for the significance of working class experience and self-expression in a period in which the opportunities for change seemed almost non-existent. And the forms which they adopted, and in some cases pioneered - photo-reportage, documentary film-making, the production of books based largely on personal testimony and self-reporting - are the very same forms which our modern oppositional culture is reviving as those forms best able to reflect truthfully, and most powerfully, the experience and continuing struggle of working class people in this country.

Ken Worpole

Ken Worpole has taught English in Secondary Schools. For the past five years he has been working at Centerprise in Hackney with particular responsibility for its local publishing project.

Mass Observation Publications

1937: *Mass Observation* by Charles Madge & Tom Harrisson (Frederick Muller Ltd).
May 12th 1937 (the Coronation) by Charles Madge & Humphrey Jennings (Faber & Faber)
1938: *First Year's Work* by Charles Madge & Tom Harrisson (Lindsay Drummond).
1939: *Britain* by Charles Madge & Tom Harrisson (Penguin Special).
1940: *War Begins at Home* (Chatto & Windus).
1941: *Clothes Rationing* (Advertising Service Guild).
Change No.1.
Home Propaganda (A.S.G.) Change No.2.
A Savings Survey (Working Class). (A.S.G.)

Privately printed for circulation.
1942: *People in Production* (Penguin Special, also A.S.G.) Change No.3.
1943: *War Factory* (Gollancz).
People's Homes (A.S.G.) Change No.4.
The Pub and the People (Gollancz).
1944: *The Journey Home* (A.S.G.)
1945: *Britain and her Birthrate* (A.S.G.)
1947: *Puzzled People* (Gollancz).
Brown's and Chester (Lindsay Drummond).
Peace and the Public (Longmans).
Exmoor Village (Harrap).
1948: *Juvenile Delinquency* (Falcon Press).
1949: *The Press and its Readers* (Art and Technics Ltd.).

Meet Yourself on Sunday (Naldrett Press) illustrated by Ronald Searle.
Meet Yourself at the Doctor's (Naldrett Press), illustrated by Ronald Searle.
People and Paint (I.C.I. Publications).
1950: *The Voter's Choice* (Art and Technics Ltd.).
1961: *Britain Revisited* (Gollancz)
1966: *Long to Reign Over us* by Leonard Harris (William Kimber).
1971: *The Pub and the People* (reprint with new Introduction and photographs) (Seven Dials Press).
1975: *Britain in the Thirties - Worktown by Camera* (Unicorn Press, limited edition).
1976: *Living Through the Blitz* (Collins).
A number of other authors have referred to M.O. or

made use of the Mass Observation Archive: - *The People's War* by Angus Calder. *London under Fire* by Leonard Moseley, *The Road to 1945* by Paul Addison, *Astrolgy* by Derek Parker, *How We Lived Then* by Norman Longmate and *Oswald Mosley* by Robert Skidelsky, *The Confidential Agent* by Graham Green, *The Divine Flame* by Sir Alister Hardy, *Into This Dangerous World* by Woodrow Wyatt, *Indigo Days* by Julian Trevelyan, *The Thirties* by Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Thirties* by Julian Symons, *The Age of Illusion* by Robert Blythe, *Kingsley* by C.H. Rolf, *The Land Unknown* by Kathleen Raine, *The Auden Generation* by Samuel Hynes, *Modern Public Opinion* by William Albig, *The Tower of Babel* by Eric Rhode.

Nation, Mandate, Memory.



'It has to be recognised that these photographs are not records of the past. Rather they provide a series of images through which a memory of the past is constructed – in and for the present.'

Looking at these images from Mass Observation the question must be asked – what is at stake politically in our fascination with these dead images? It would be merely cynical to leave them as either a spectacle of the past, or another chapter in art history. Now, as then, the images and texts of Mass Observation form vital parts in the construction of a memory-image of the British nation, and together they demand serious questions about the terms which relate photography to a politics of representation.

The following questions can be asked: *Nation*: what relation exists between the image of 'Britain' and its 'national' aesthetic of 'realism'? And therefore what are the political terms in which photography is thought of in Britain? *Mandate*: what is the social status of the photographer and what command provides the link between a photographic practice and its 'public'? *Memory*: if the camera eye is one "which records in order to forget" (Berger), then what are the terms which govern the entry and disappearance of certain images within our social memory? Can we return to those images and reorder their economy? What are the institutions of social control over the archives of images and texts?

NATION

In the 1920s and 1930s, during an era of imperial disintegration, economic crisis and political unrest in Britain, the idea of the 'nation' re-emerged as one of the few solid, all-embracing social elements. It was reinforced for the first time by the development of the new radio and film technology and by the 'national voice' of BBC radio. As an aesthetic counterpart to political enfranchisement, the thirties' style of 'realism' variously developed in Grierson's state-sponsored documentary films, the Mass Observation photos and the photo-journalism of *Picture Post* created a 'democracy of reality'. Reality seen in this way was fundamentally something shared by all classes which minimised the gap between observer and observed in society. This political and aesthetic style of 'social realism' produced a 'reality' which could be looked at from several points of view, but which fundamentally united them to produce the notion of a shared common sense. Only 'extreme points of view' were difficult to understand, but at least they existed essentially *within the same perspective*. The nation validated itself by its seeming tolerance of these very extremes and by maintaining an equilibrium or balance of views. The unity of the nation's body politic repressed 'sectional' discontent in the name of 'the British people'. Ramsay MacDonald, the former Labour leader and then Prime Minister of Britain's National Government similarly reinterpreted socialism in this

light: "Socialists," he said, "do not speak of 'classes', but of 'the social'."

This ideology of national unity (consensus politics) and its aesthetic anticipation/validation in realism which arose in the 1930s has decisively influenced both dominant and alternative visual practices in this country. Indeed the "social fabric of our nation" has come to be virtually unthinkable without the documentary style of its film-makers, the social realism of its television. But in Humphrey Spender's photographs taken in Bolton in 1937/8 there are perhaps traces of the difficulty of establishing an initial relationship between the exoticism of the Northern working classes (what Spender called 'forbidden fruit') and the all-embracing cosiness of the photographic frame. On the one hand we are called to observe as strangers the savage rituals of a funeral, religious processions, football match and pub; on the other, we recognise the familiar details of clothing and printed signs, which remind us that we are, after all, in England. Spender's painterly precision of vanishing perspective and composition suffice to give us, like the observer in his picture of a funeral, a point of view from which the social event can both be seen and from which the onlooker can be sheltered. The image freezes that moment, which is no longer troubling since it is now kept at a distance. Spender's photographs define the onlooker's position as that of the anthropologist, whose rational observation of the savage and the exotic only confirms his own existence as 'human', and therefore universal.

MANDATE

In this way Mass Observation offered some of the artists and intelligentsia of the period a social mandate on 'the left' but firmly within the consensus of this self-styled national democracy. It restored to certain intellectuals the mandate of a mass audience but without them having to reject the traditional values and function of their own class. This stabilising movement was marked by a massive shift from traditional artistic roles to a new importance of professionalism: painters became film-makers (Jennings), poets became journalists (Madge). In this way the hat of the individual artist was traded in for that of the self-appointed servant and prophet of the newly formed entity 'the public'.

The observers of Mass Observation were ambassadors from one class to another who were to "provide the points from which can be plotted weather-maps of public feeling in a crisis" (1937). They did not see, or were not said to see their role as destructive, but on the contrary as healers of social and political

wounds which had produced what Tom Harrison was later to call a "gap between leader and led, between published opinion and public opinion, between Westminster chatter and Lancashire talk [which had] built an invisible barrier dangerous in our democracy". In this context one might well ask 'dangerous for whom?' If British society was thought to be 'wrong' it was not thought so because its ruling class needed to be replaced, but because of the very danger of extremes or *instability*. It is important to see how a Surrealist concern with the unconscious was re-interpreted with this mandate. A film-maker such as Humphrey Jennings, who was also a member of Mass Observation drew upon a timeless myth of an essential Britishness, a 'national unconscious' which united the nation seemingly without itself being conscious of it. Certain historical parallels between the age of the thirties and of the seventies – mass unemployment and the 'common enemy' of fascism are most often quoted – have led many to talk of a renewal of the mandate offered for artists and intellectuals in the thirties by the British state. It has to be recognised that such a mandate is no longer possible except under a severely nostalgic attachment to a myth of a past.

MEMORY

The third, and most crucial importance of Mass Observation is therefore not so much its existence as a cultural movement in the past, but its contribution to an ongoing process of remembering. M.O. is not merely a series of representations (texts and photographs) but a process of recording, printing, storing and (now) retrieval of those representations.

Analogous to a memory, it has frozen a memory-image of 'Britishness' which has obtained an existence and authority outside history which can be recalled and 'quoted' at will. But it also becomes simultaneously the raw material from which we reconstruct the past in the present.

An urgent task in Britain is to provide the conditions for the re-interpretation of Mass Observation's social mandate and for the possible reconstruction of that memory. But such a call can only be regarded as mere rhetoric unless any guides for action can be given. One might begin with the undoubted attraction of the Spender photographs reprinted in this edition of *Camerawork*. To what extent does their publication merely reproduce those desires for an imaginary past in which 'things were clearer', and 'more visible'? Their presentation might indicate that they 'speak for themselves' without aid of texts in the way that social documentary photography is still held to do by many. They perhaps invite us to recall

Spender's mandate of taking photographs which transcended class interests from a perspective which remains universal in its outlook. One alternative would be to use photography agitational, which at its simplest can mean providing a specific context or political locations for its usage. But a longer term aim would be one of intervening within the system of representations themselves in the style of Dick Jewell's excellent collection *Found Photos*, where the anonymous photobooth portraits are literally relics – discarded fragments of personal memory-images now reorganised by their collector. But in looking at these photographs by Spender and reading these texts on M.O. there is no simple way of uprooting or erasing them from our memory. The assumptions which formed M.O. are ingrained in a whole variety of practices, perhaps most disquietingly in the search for 'British culture' itself. The terms of their construction, the search for knowledge of a national unity, share a common identity. By beginning to question the naturalness of these assumptions we may serve to loosen the knots which bind together those terms of nation, mandate and memory, and so turn their relation into a problem of the present.

Don Macpherson

Don Macpherson is currently editing a book on imagery and forms of cultural opposition in British film-making in the 1930s which will be published by the B.F.I.

TEXTS

Stuart Hall, *The Social Eye of Picture Post, Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, no 2, spring 1972.

Franco Fortini, *The Writers' Mandate and the End of Anti-Fascism*, *Screen* v15 no 1, spring 1974.

John Berger, *Ways of Remembering*, *Camerawork* 10, Summer 1978 *Alternative Photography*, *New Society*, 24 August 1978.

Dick Jewell, *Found Photos*, London 1977.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Allen Lane 1978.

Michel Foucault, *Politics and the Study of Discourse, Ideology and Consciousness*, no 3, spring 1978.

David Chaney, 'A Public Imagery': *Mass Observation and the Coronation of 1937*, unpublished paper for the British Sociological Association Conference, April 1978.

Don Macpherson (editor), *Traditions of Independent Cinema in Britain: The Thirties*, British Film Institute 1978.



Nigel Henderson

Nigel Henderson

Mass Observation played a significant part in the formation of that 'pop' sensibility that is often placed as a product of the 1950s and '60s. Yet it would be difficult to imagine many of the researches of Nigel Henderson in the late 1940s and at the Independent Group in the early 1950s, without some reference to the preoccupations of Mass Observation. As things stand we lack a historical account of the interactions and dynamics of art and photography in 20th Century Britain. Art history and photographic history have drawn up deficient versions of actual developments. Fixation upon monographic approaches has only succeeded in detaching painters and photographers from their cultural context; in severing, for example, any connection between Paul Nash's photography and the continental photography of the New Objectivity around 1930. Thus the work of Nash and others has been presented as if it were generated entirely by its 'author' without any social or cultural imprint.

Similarly, the historical and cultural context around pop art in Britain have been suppressed in favour of descriptions of styles situated around the 1950s and 1960s. But the historical conjunction surrounding Nigel Henderson involves, among other things, Mass Observation's crucial reorientation of photo-montage in the hands of Julian Trevelyan; photographic social reportage and the projects of the Euston Road painters from 1937.

At the close of the 1930s Julian Trevelyan delivered collage and photo-montage from formalist ends by using advertisements and photo-magazines as source material assembled according to random procedures during his stay with M.O. in Bolton. Graham Bell, a friend of Henderson at this time, began to incorporate news-photo images into his paintings around 1938 and worked with Tom Harrison on the issue of wider public accessibility to his paintings. Jennings, Madge and Harrison had all acknowledged the importance of pop culture and its signs - whether on the level of street graffiti or advertisements for Player's cigarettes. These then were some of the nodal points in art and photography before the Second World War, that were to be subsequently developed by Henderson.

Indeed, the position M.O. had reached in mapping industrialised popular and mass culture in the late 1930s may be said to have been transmitted to the late 40s and early 50s through specific works by Nigel Henderson. The strategy behind his photographs of a newsagents shop window in the East End - an inventory of placards and 'Yank' mags

seems very close to the key M.O. procedure of listing shop window items. This photograph was made just after Judith Henderson had collaborated with Tom Harrison on an M.O. study of an East End family.

David Mellor

David Mellor was co-organiser of *The Real Thing*, *Cityscapes* and *Worktown* exhibitions. He helped Tom Harrison establish the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex where he is a lecturer in the history of Art in the School of English and American Studies. He is currently editing a book of documents and essays on German photography 1927-1933.

Dave Hoffman and Shirley Read spoke to Nigel Henderson at his home in Essex. They asked him about the period in the early 1950s when he was living and taking photographs in Bethnal Green.

It didn't occur to me to take photographs when I went to Bethnal Green, I just walked and walked and kept staring at everything. And it occurred to me after a little while that I might try taking a camera with me but it wasn't that I decided I wanted to be a photographer. You know, I've never decided that I wanted to be a photographer. I felt I'd like to try taking a camera with me. And I've still, I'm afraid, this very strong amateur passion. It's a very rude word now for some reason and I'm sorry because I like the word. It means doing things for the love of it and I can't see anything wrong with that.

Were you collecting the pictures of Bethnal Green as source material for your other work?

Yes, that's it. I was trying to collect bits that later I could draw on. Like worn pavement slabs which had a very powerful physical aspect to them, worn and changed by people's shuffling and weight. I've always very much liked collage. Often when one got, you know, an awkward little dog piddling on a lamppost I would think of re-arranging that dog. I used to do all those things. If you encounter photography for yourself and if you're restless you're going to reinvent photography for a while. O.K. so we have rayograms and shadowgrams. It's the obvious way to start.

You did that before you took pictures?

At the same time. I first of all took pictures and gave them to Boots as we all do.

You don't like the fine print?

I don't rate it as important. One is trying to get at something and in my case it isn't a fine print, it's an expressive document of some kind.



Nigel Henderson

You use a lot of clichés don't you?

I love them. They conceal a message of a sort. I've got great boxes of pieces which I pick up, they're what I call disregarded fragments. I used to photograph trivia that seemed powerful to me. The face at the window was a series I was very fond of. There were about four, all about people outside looking in. I used an image from a fag card. There was a bandaged head from a series on first aid, this was a very interesting image and I used it a lot.

Some of them are fairly charged? I was thinking of the Players Cigarette packet - the more you use that the more meaning it has?

Absolutely. And every time they change the pack you want to go and assassinate them because they're bugging about with bits of your private mythology. Charged with meaning these symbols get, don't they? Boars' Head, the St Bruno's head and the old Wild Woodbine. And all the bits you'd find in the street sort of ironed in by feet - highly charged bits. The Surrealists, you see, understood this. I came up at a time when the Surrealists were very very important. They had a certain feeling for the life of the streets and a certain, perhaps rather parlour, feeling for the revolution. But they were poets. But things started to happen round about the end of the thirties. Like the War - when Surrealism was everywhere in a sense. Houses chopped by bombs while ladies were still sitting on the lavatory, the rest of the house gone but the wallpaper and the fires still burning in the grate. Who can hold a candle to that kind of real life Surrealism? It must have spelled the end of it in a way.

You're a propagandist?

I rather think I am. Somewhere I intend to be. But I don't happen to believe in the more programmatic use of photography as an instrument in the class struggle. Let's get that one said. I think we're more complicated. I think in so far as you are an artist you are living with uncertainty. If you joint too programmatic a thing I think you're backing away from the need to find out. This is why I find it difficult to talk too much to the devout - because they know. Artists may be very unsatisfactory people in many ways, but what I like is that they contradict themselves - which you can't do if you're devout. I do like contradiction. If one says something very strongly today, surely if you're an organic creature you're going to be looking for almost the opposite tomorrow. You begin to realise just how much you left out and how interesting the thing which was excluded is. Some people will take a photograph of 'The Workers' and there's almost certainly going to be sparks coming from something, it doesn't

evoke it, I'd rather see that bloke with his carpet slippers and his dog or his budgerigar. The human side is no less the worker, it's just that it's not necessarily such a cliché - it might be more revealing of the man behind the mask of the working garb. He's a soldier in the army of social change. Let's admit that has its importance but it's not my standpoint.

Why didn't you become a photographer then?

It never occurred to me really. I think if I'd been asked to be one, if I'd been offered a job in the early fifties in photography, well, then I would have tried. In fact, I think it got a little near purely by chance when I was asked to take a portrait by a friend, an Irish poet, Bertie Rodgers, *Vogue* wanted a photograph of him. He rang me up and said, 'Will you please do me a favour and take a photograph of me?' Anyway, I met up with him in Holborn and I hadn't much of a clue about what I was required to do. I remember saying, 'Are there any places round here that you really like?' He said, 'Yes, there is a place I feel very drawn to.' It was a kind of blitzed swimming pool. The roof had been bombed in, the swimming bath had filled with leaves - a very romantic situation. But what I spotted when I went in which I liked very much and tried to use as a kind of rune was a sign that said, 'do not run'. It seemed very Bertie Rodgers. I dropped him in the swimming bath amongst the leaves and took a shot of him with this banner saying, 'do not run'. I presented it to *Vogue* who then got in touch with me and said they liked it very much.

The art editor of *Vogue* rang me up and asked me to come and have lunch. He said, it sounded like fame, 'I'd like first look and first refusal on the pictures you take in Italy.' So I spent more money on film than I'd intended and got back with quite a lot of photographs. When I met the art editor he looked a different man and he said, 'I've just been having meningitis' and he said, 'Oh they're all very beautiful.' He didn't - either he didn't really think so or he couldn't look at things. I could have been either. It was very disappointing.

We wanted to ask you about Mass Observation.

I was a little too young for Mass Observation but not too young to pick up some of the tremor, some of the intent of it all. As I say I saw some of their work.

Did you try and link what you were doing with what your wife, Judith was doing at all?

No. Not directly at all. A number of people used to come round. I used to listen to them taking. Judith was being very encouraged by Tom

Harrison. She started keeping notes about the Samuels with Tom Harrison's typewriter and enthusiastic backing. We'd have occasional lunches with him, he'd want to see how the work was progressing and I think he even produced a little bit of cash from time to time for papers and rubbers and typewriter ink. In fact it wasn't published and I think when we came down here she lost touch with him.

Did you meet the other artists who were involved in Mass Observation?

Julian Trevelyan I knew a bit from before the war. Humphrey Jennings I always admired very greatly. He was quite a stimulus to me, then meeting him and having a flaming row because he was so bloody opinionated and dogmatic and so was I. I liked his diverse activity so in a kind of way he was quite a powerful influence on me. I liked some of his stuff, it was all rather classical Surrealism: 'the rose', 'the locomotive', 'the hand'. Rather academic Surrealist imagery he used in a personal way. He was trying to put something down about his vision of England. A poet really. I liked that very much. I was consciously sometimes looking for chunks, bits of typification of Englishness - including the cliché 'British Oak' and all that and I still won't avoid it. It meant something to me.

A number of your pictures you would never have been able to sell at the time?

When in doubt you ought to photograph bus queues and so on just because infallibly the look goes into amber in a way. It's the nature of photography to catch this - the face and the body and the posture have a fugitive aspect and if you just tuck them away and print them in 25 years they will have an infallible interest, be of real historical value.

Nigel Henderson's work can be seen at the Midland Group Gallery, Nottingham from 28 October to 24 November 1978.



Nigel Henderson



Nigel Henderson



Nigel Henderson



Nigel Henderson



Nigel Henderson

Inspection Processing

The only unrepeatable darkroom process is the initial negative development. It is on this stage that much of the quality and even the very existence of a final result depends. Its little wonder then that for many their most paranoid photographic moment is when slipping off the lid of a developed and fixed tank full of irreplaceable films and then gingerly peeling one from its spiral in order to "see what we've got". This article is about that moment but with a fundamental difference - you can see what you've got before its too late.

In the early days of photography the production of a fine negative was as much an art as the production of the carefully worked final print. It would have been a very poor craftsman indeed who operated blindly to the dictates of clock and thermometer. With the advent of miniature film and sensitive panchromatic emulsions it became no longer possible to view comfortably a large flat negative coming up under bright red illumination.

Today most photographers can see no option except complete devotion to the holy tables published by the great yellow god - with the odd incantation over the developing tank thrown in for good luck. This is an unnecessary state of affairs. Film development, as with photographic procedures, is a much less rigid, more manipulable process than is generally understood. Films can be safely viewed before fixation for brief intervals under very dim deep green illumination. By using this development method a moderately experienced processor can obtain the best possible result from any given roll of exposed film. Besides, personal control is more fun than blind obedience any day.

Curiously, almost nothing has been written about inspection development. In any number of purportedly comprehensive technical books and articles on 35mm film development it is completely ignored. In the few instances in which some mention is made the authors universally view this technique as a desperation measure - and then fail to provide sufficient information for its use in even that context.

Despite this fact, inspection development has always been used, or at least available when necessary, in certain corners of the industry. Because of its various advantages, specialist professional processing houses, picture agencies and Fleet Street photo labs commonly work in this way. Critical film is sent in to them from all over the world, taken under every imaginable condition. Their processing can leave no room for chance. Push processing benefits particularly from this method enabling the operator to get just as much information from the underexposed negative as possible. Nowhere will you read, for instance, that developing times as long as an hour in neat Microphen can produce a quite usable image - an image that would be non-existent in the suggested 6 minutes. Using an inspection system it's not necessary to read this information - you can see it for yourself.

Requirements

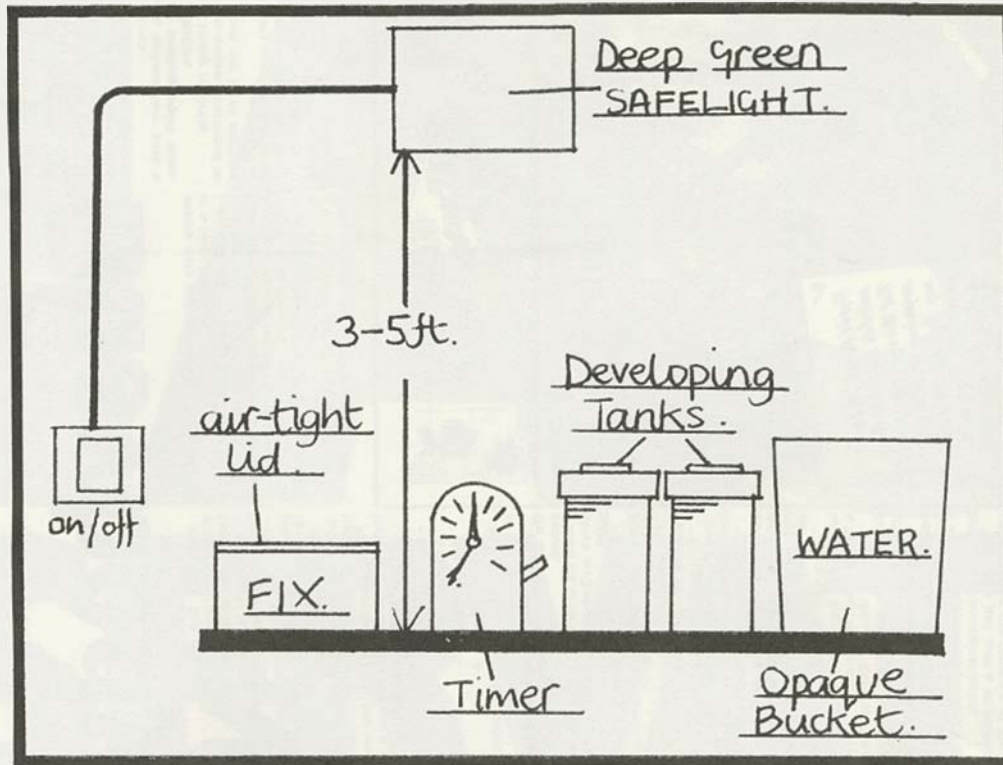
A truly light-tight darkroom.

A safelight fitted with a dark green filter (such as Kodak Wratten series no.3 or Ilford GB908).

Developing tank(s) containing centre load spirals, preferably stainless steel.

An opaque plastic bucket filled with water (65-70 degrees).

A second plastic container for fix. A 'Tupperware' style container with an air tight lid is useful; fix at working dilution can be permanently stored this way.



Full complement of conventional processing equipment.

Process outline

The initial stages of inspection development are identical to the time-and-temperature method. In complete darkness the films are loaded onto their spirals and placed in the developing tank. At this stage all solutions to be used should most conveniently be at the proper temperature. Films loaded, amber printing safelights can be switched on, timer set, developer added, tank agitated, - in short conventional daylight procedure followed except that printing safelights should be used instead of the main light. This allows the eyes to adjust in readiness for inspection. A minute or two before you are ready to have a look, switch the amber safelights off and the green one on. On average film should be inspected about three quarters of the way through the expected development time but this can vary considerably.

When you've decided to inspect, remove the films from the developing tanks and drop straight into the bucket of water. This bucket should be placed in such a way that all the films are in shadow from the green safelight. A tall, vertically sided bucket is an obvious advantage. From this stage each spiral can almost leisurely be fished out and inspected for a few seconds to be popped back either into the developing tank or bucket of fix depending on its condition. After all the films have been transferred to the fix for a sufficient time wash and dry in the normal fashion.

When to inspect

As mentioned earlier, three quarters of the way through development is a reasonable average for inspection. But let's imagine one was developing a few leisurely films taken outdoors on a fine day under the same conditions. Absolutely straightforward. In this instance give the full expected development time knowing that any minor exposure inaccuracy would be well within the film latitude for optimum reproduction. From the water bucket have a quick peek at one of the films just to make double sure

(everybody can make stupid mistakes) before dumping the lot into the fix tank.

If the above fairly closely resembles your picture taking activity an inspection set up probably isn't worth the effort. But let's imagine some rather different shooting conditions. Events are moving fast, you're rushed, pushed. The light is constantly changing - outdoors, indoors, dim hallway, brightly lit room. Suddenly it's over and you're left with a handful of critical films. In this instance, inspection development is a lifesaver. On such a potentially unevenly exposed film inspect halfway through the expected processing time with a pair of scissors at the ready. Their use should be self-evident. A sufficiently developed portion of the negative strip can be cut from the film and fixed while the rest of the roll goes back into the tank to continue cooking. This is a somewhat frantic, messy procedure but it can save important images - and that's the name of the game.

How to inspect and what to look for

Remove a reel from the water bucket and unwind part of the film. On an inconsistently exposed roll it may be necessary to unwind the entire negative strip, but this should be avoided when possible as brevity of inspection is important. Do not hold it against the light or try to look through it - developing film is opaque. Rather examine the emulsion side for a few seconds two to four feet from the safelight. The emulsion surface will appear light and creamy, highlight tones quite black.

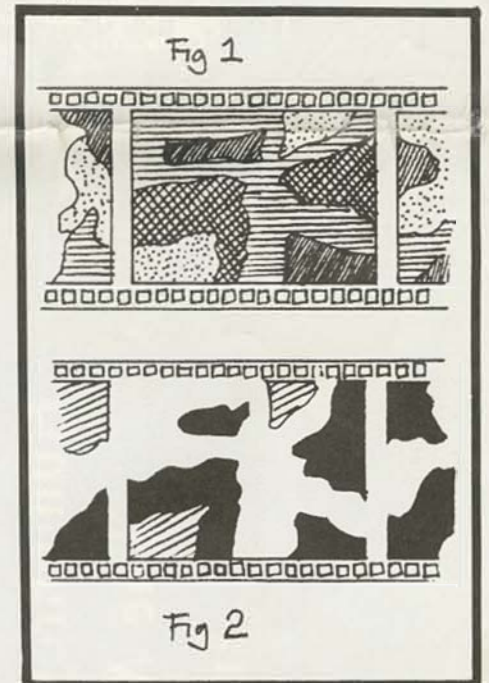
Only through repeated experience can one accurately relate appearance at this stage to the fixed, dried negative seen under room light. However, a few guidelines are worth discussing. As a minimum you should be looking for hard-edged rectangularity of image shape. (Fig. 1) This is to say that the entire image area has a greater density than the base fog level of the surrounding emulsion so that detail will be retained in even the least dense shadow regions. Unfortunately, maximum acceptable development time is a bit harder to describe because it

rests on the apparent blackness of the highlight tones. Experience will teach that a certain black is the limit a film can be cooked before these highlight areas block up with consequent loss of detail. On a badly underexposed film this tone of black might easily be reached in the highlights before shadow areas are recording - in which case its probably time to fix, you've done the best you can. (Fig. 2)

To get a good feel for these parameters it is important to use precisely the same inspection set-up consistently. And remember, don't try and identify individual images on the negative strip. If this is possible, your lighting is much too intense. In whatever way provided, the green illumination should be just bright enough to supply the information described above - and no brighter. In India last year I became rather popular with a group of local photographers by setting up an inspection system in their darkroom. The inspection safelight was constructed from a 15 watt bulb, plenty of black tape and a green plastic bucket. It worked fine.

It is also important to know the subject matter of the film being developed. Lets consider a hypothetical shooting situation - a series of photographs of a few people moving around a dimly illuminated room lit only by an overhead tungsten bulb and one outside window. You are pursuing them about the room, recording their activity from all angles. When the time comes to develop these films the key thing to remember is that window. Under inspection it will show up, included in the image area on some of the frames, as a very black patch. This could confuse you into hurriedly fixing the film trying to save detail in what is, in this instance, merely a light source. Conversely, imagine say a moody portrait lit by a window through which could be seen a grim industrial landscape. This film might need to be developed quite differently.

You may wonder what happens to those films languishing in the water bucket between development and fixation. The short answer is very little. The difference between an un-inspected film fixed immediately after development and one inspected four times over ten minutes is very small and of little practical significance - and that's more times and inspections than you should ever need.

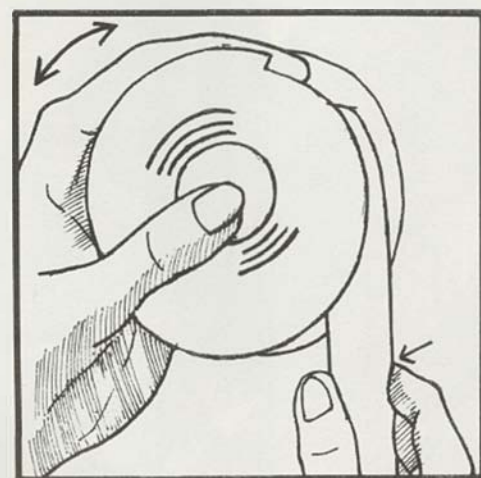


Finally it's worth repeating that the best guide to this entire procedure is your own experience. I would strongly suggest running a number of test films through the whole process before attempting to develop anything irreplaceable. Once learned however, you may never develop an irreplaceable film in any other way. That's it - you're on your own.

Spiral loading

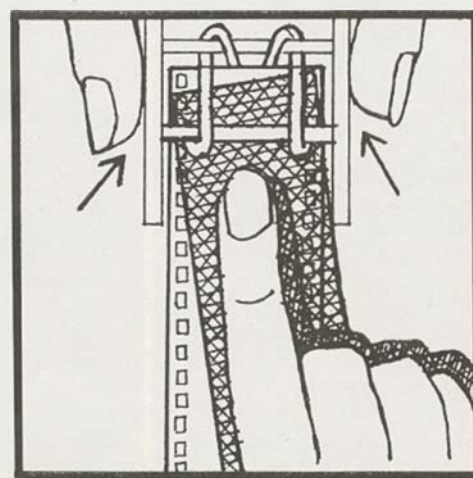
The most serious stumbling block to setting up your own inspection system is likely to be the type of spiral to which you are accustomed. Unfortunately, Paterson type spirals which load from the outside and require the film to slide around the ribs in towards the centre simply don't function as intended when wet. Film can be unwound and wound back onto these spirals in the manner of the centre load variety but this is an annoying, unsatisfactory procedure. Much better to plump for spirals designed to be used in this fashion. Stainless steel centre load spirals operate just as well wet or dry. If you don't drop or step on them they'll last forever, unlike the Paterson variety in which the ball bearings generally begin to pack up after about a year of heavy use. And, once accustomed to the loading procedure you can load a stainless steel spiral in about half the time.

Trim the film squarely and grasp it with the right hand between thumb and forefinger very close to the end, emulsion side down. Your fingers should be pointed straight along the length of film, not at an angle. Hold the spiral in



your left hand between thumb and middle finger.

Find the clip provided in your brand of spiral and insert the end without removing your fingers. Now slide the film from side to side



using the thumb and middle finger of the left hand as sensors to ensure that the film end has seated squarely. When it feels the same to both fingers, you should be O.K.

Now you can begin winding with the right

hand compressing the film slightly between thumb and forefinger and providing a bit of tension between that hand and the spiral. The forefinger of the left hand, as that hand turns the spiral, can be used to ensure that the film is feeding onto the ribs properly. Allow it to just skim the back of the film as you wind. If the film rucks and begins to misfeed that finger should detect it, allowing you to unwind slightly and rewind correctly.

In these diagrams I've tried to illustrate some helpful hints for the successful use of centre load spirals. Naturally all of this activity must be performed in complete darkness. But please sacrifice an unexposed film and go through this procedure repeatedly in the light with your eyes closed, checking if and when something goes wrong. Far better this planned wastage than the heartbreaking loss of important images.

William Wise
Diagrams by Harry Chambers

He and his thousand followers are giving their services to the "DAILY MIRROR"

By TOM HARRISSON

SLASH! ... a shadow in the darkness of an alley ... the sweep of an arm ... a girl screams.

The Slasher.

Does he really exist?

Is he real?

Or is he a fake?

To get to the truth of the whole affair, a Mass Observation unit have been spying in Halifax.

They have been listening to conversations in public-houses and tea shops.

They have even canvassed for opinions from door to door.

This page will tell you what they have found out.

Before we turn to Halifax, let's look at a little "attack" incident at Walworth, London, S.E.

It actually happened a fortnight before the Halifax ripper broke into the news.

Public

For two years TOM HARRISSON has been working on a NEW IDEA.

This young scientist has gathered round him a corps of men and women in different jobs, living in different parts of England. Their job is called MASS OBSERVATION. They note YOUR BEHAVIOUR in a certain set of circumstances, and make reports on it.

During the past weeks Harrisson's men focused on Halifax during the recent outbreak of razor-slashing in that town.

Here he tells some of the incredible findings of his observers.



Busybody

No. 1

On November 25 it was reported that young girls in Walworth were being accosted by a man who asked them if they had dropped a comb. He then followed them and attacked just as they were about to enter their homes.

Mass observers went to Walworth, and these were some of the findings.

Notice them closely, because they have a strong bearing on the slashings which subsequently took place in Halifax.

There was no scare among residents.

Six out of twenty-five women interviewed in the district neither knew nor cared anything about the attacks.

Fifteen of the twenty-five had only read about them in newspapers—proof that there was little "scare" talk about the incidents.

Moreover, observers counted the women who continued to walk through the "attacker" street alone after the incidents.

Twenty-six per cent. of the total number of

women were unaccompanied. Not much sign of a local scare here.

In fact, in streets only a few hundred yards from that in which the attacker operated it was found that residents and passers-by actually knew nothing of the incidents.

Now, these facts had been noted during the days immediately before the Halifax slasher struck for the first time.

With the findings of Walworth, mass observers focused their attentions on the Halifax rippings.

First let's find out what the "slasher" looked like according to what people in Halifax told observers.

These are the compiled descriptions of the slasher.

He is made out to be rather like the average thug of detective fiction:—

"Flat, boxer-like face ... few teeth. Wearing a dirty-coloured raincoat and a grey trilby. ... Moving in stockings feet."

"He has bright buckles on his shoes."

"Black teeth."

"Wears no hat."

"Has piercing eyes."

enters all conversations, mainly humorously. When spoken of seriously, most people think it is not one man.

"Ever since the Phyllis Hirst child murder in Bradford a few weeks ago, there have been isolated attacks on young women, and now the slasher."

"There is the certainty here that the person responsible will slip up by being too bold."

Another observer in a textile mill writes:—

"One man told me that his wife visited a woman who lives on a main street, yet who had the door chained, despite the fact that her husband, heavy and fit, tall, was in the house."

A carrier from Halifax told me that a man hurrying down a hill to catch a bus had been violently struck by a man on the look-out for a slasher.

There are several good instances here to illustrate the effect the slashings had on local people. For instance:

"A woman was nudged rather heavily when waiting in a bus queue. Something dropped from her inside pocket. It was a hatchet!"

"The milkman tells me that he has to shout his identity through his customers' doors before they will unlock them."

"On the Saturday during the height of the slashings a Halifax fish-and-chip shop took only 5s. in takings, instead of between £4 and £5."

This observer adds: "Everybody I've spoken to believes in the existence of the slasher. Many people think there are more than one."



David laugh when he catches me listening. But this is a very special evening. I'm wearing my David frock - his favourite. I wonder if - no, I'm sure will have brought a box of those heavenly Black Magic chocolates. He always does, so

The finest honey, cherries and roasted almonds are shipped with white of egg to give the creamy, "fluffy" textured centre of this delectable Montclair chocolate. Just one of the thrills in every Black Magic box!

Black Magic explained. What is the secret of Black Magic success — the twelve mouth-watering centres! 3,000 people picked these from hundreds of different chocolates. So no wonder Black Magic are even more popular than 6 - a pound assortment. Then the price! Rowntree's sell Black Magic for only 2 to a pound. That's because they waste no money on extravagant tinfoil or decorations. The chocolates are packed simply in smart black boxes — and there are special Christmas caskets at 7/6 and 5/-.

Now take the impressions collected by observers in and around Halifax.

One points out the extraordinary increase in the sale of heavy walking-sticks and knuckledusters.

Read his notes to get a true idea of the terror which stalked abroad in the slasher town at night.

"I was observing people's behaviour in a poorly lit street on the third night of the slashing scare."

"Apparently there was another man who was watching for trouble, too."

"Because about 8 p.m. a girl hurried down the wet cobbled pavement. The sound of her footsteps echoed in the deserted street."

"Suddenly I heard another set of footsteps coming in the opposite direction. The girl crossed the street. The other walker—I could now see it was a man—crossed diagonally to meet her."

"When they were about ten yards apart I saw a figure leap from the shadows and make a vicious attack on the man."

"I heard the dull clink as the blow was struck. The man went down. The girl screamed."

"I ran from my position in a doorway—and helped the girl and the man to pick up the half-drunken pedestrian, that the whole thing had been a misunderstanding."

"The man had used a knuckle-duster, misunderstanding the intention of the man he'd hit."

"It turned out that he was a youth well known in the district, who had crossed the road to ask the girl—who he knew quite well—if he could escort her home through the darkness."

"What did seem cold-blooded to me was that the man who struck the blow was using—indiscriminately, I maintain—this most murderous-looking knuckle-duster."

"Fortunately it landed on the man's cigarette case, partially wounding him."

"Many Halifax men were in possession of these weapons at the time."

Here are excerpts from one—

"The slasher is the topic of the day. He

'HALF-CRAZY CHAP RUNS LOOSE'

And here we come to the report of an observer who raises what is possibly the secret of innumerable other slashings which occurred on the days immediately after the first Halifax incident.

This observer bears in mind the following attacks:

At Brentford (Middlesex), Shepherd's Bush (London), Morion and Irlam (near Manchester), Leeds, Glasgow, Oldham, Bradford, Wakefield, Bolton, Sheffield, Cleethorpes and Sale.

And this is what he says:

"A half-crazy chap runs loose with a razor in Halifax ... and all the half-wits in the country want to imitate him."

But as the days pass we find that at least two of the victims who alleged that their injury was self-imposed.

Added to this, we find that in most reports from Halifax and Walworth the victims were attacked on their own doorsteps or in the immediate vicinity of their homes—the last place it is thought that the cunning mind of a slasher would choose to do his work.

Is the Halifax slasher a fact or a fantasy? As the outcry against him dies down, mass observers are continuing their work—and will in the end, deduce the true answer to that question.

Daily Mirror/Syndication International

'Detective' Tom Harrison peering through a keyhole. Mass Observation as seen by the Daily Mirror in 1938.

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