

## In this issue:

- News about wartime MO diaries
- A review of 'English Anxieties'
- The manager of Special Collections gets a teaching award for her work with MO
- Extracts from recent MO directives
- Information about how MO is being used for research

## Welcome to the winter edition of the MO Bulletin.....

The winter 2009 Bulletin is testament to what has been an particularly busy year for the Mass Observation Archive.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the start of the Second World War and consequently it is 70 years ago that the first pages of diaries began rolling in at the Mass Observation office. Dorothy Sheridan reflects further on the growing popularity and importance of these diaries in an article in the Bulletin.

At the Archive, we have recorded this significant anniversary by sending out a directive about WW2. You can read some

of the responses to this directive on page four of the Bulletin.

We also report on a well deserved teaching award for Fiona Courage and news about the establishment of a new network of researchers who use the Archive.

I hope you enjoy this issue of the Bulletin.

**Jessica Scantlebury**  
Bulletin editor

For more information on MO events visit [www.massobs.org.uk](http://www.massobs.org.uk) or join our email list [massobs-request@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:massobs-request@jiscmail.ac.uk)

## The Diaries come into their own

Between 1939 and 1965 Mass Observation collected diaries, written by men and women, from all over Britain. Here, Dorothy Sheridan explores their lasting impact.



There was a time when the people who were running Mass Observation in the late 1940s felt a bit weary about all these diaries that had piled up over the years in their offices. What could they be used for in so-called scientific research? They were so personal, so detailed, so subjective, so idiosyncratic, so "unrepresentative" of the population. To make matters worse, some people, like the prodigious Nella

Last just didn't seem to want to stop writing (she wrote until the early 1960s). It's taken a new generation to re-discover and enjoy the MO diaries.

### The latest books

This year, two more diaries have been published: *Dorset in Wartime: the Diary of Phyllis Walther, 1941-2* and *A Soldier in Bedfordshire, 1941-2: the Diary of Denis Argent, Royal Engineers*. Both diaries were researched and edited by Bob and Patricia Malcolmson, the Canadian historians who seem to have fallen in love with the Archive's diary collection. To date, Bob himself has edited or co-edited six MO diaries.

### Older diaries still available

Meanwhile, Simon Garfield's trilogy of diary anthologies (*Our Hidden Lives*, *Private Battles* and *We are at War*) continue to be on sale, as does Sandra Koa Wing's *Our Longest Days* and my *Wartime Women* which was re-published this year. My earlier work on Naomi Mitchison's MO diary, *Among You Taking Notes*, is now only available second hand,

as is the very first MO anthology, *Speak for Yourself*, which I put together in the early 1980s with the distinguished historian, Angus Calder.

*"Next to being a mother I'd have loved to write books"*  
- Nella Last

### "Performing" the diaries

The first dramatization of the diaries was the BBC 4 film of Simon's *Our Hidden Lives* which was shown in 2005.

Nella herself reached a wider public when her wartime diary was used by Victoria Wood for her excellent drama, "Housewife, 49", which was shown on ITV in 2006 and for which Victoria won a BAFTA. Last year at Sussex, a group of undergraduate students, led by their tutor, Sara Jane Bailes, performed the most wonderful play based on the material they had selected from the Archive.

**Article continues on page three**

# Teaching award

In June this year, Fiona Courage was presented with a teaching award from the University of Sussex. Fiona, who is the manager of Special Collections at the University of Sussex Library and curator of the Mass Observation Archive, was given the award in recognition of her excellent teaching.

Fiona was commended for her innovative teaching sessions, that inspire students to look further than the books on their reading lists, and seek their own unique conclusions by



Fiona with a group visiting the Archive

using primary source material. Speaking about Fiona's award, Kitty Inglis (University of Sussex Librarian and Chair of the MOA Trustees) said: "Drawing on her own extensive knowledge of what is contained in the collections, Fiona works closely with academics and others providing them with flexible options and innovative and stimulating models of engaging with our Special Collections as part of their teaching."

Fiona's commitment to delivering engaging workshops to school students and community groups was also praised. Over the past year, Special Collections has hosted group visits from organisations such as, Patcham High School (as part of the Brighton Photo Biennial) to rotary clubs.

## Methodological Innovations

In June 2009, the University of Brighton and the Mass Observation Archive established a new collaborative research network: Methodological Innovations I: Using Mass Observation.

Funded by University of Brighton's Research Innovations Scheme, the aim of the network is to unite researchers across the arts, humanities and social sciences with interests in Mass Observation - in all its forms - in order to share and debate interpretive methods across the disciplines.

In the months since the launch, 140 researchers, including sociologists, historians, anthropologists, writers, artists and curators - ranging from postgraduates to professors - from UK, USA and beyond, have joined the network. Recent discussions have explored historical and contemporary issues in the collecting, archiving and interpreting of everyday life documents of the Mass Observation Archive, such as subjectivity and representativeness.

In addition, the network has also organised two workshops: the first introducing Mass Observation and its methods, and the second focusing on the commissioning, interpretation and analysis of MO material.

The network is co-ordinated by Louise Purbrick and Mark Bhatti, who have both commissioned directives and published widely on the Mass Observation Project, and Research Fellow, Anabella Pollen. Anabella's PhD focuses on MOA's 'One Day for Life' photography collection.

Future plans for Methodological Innovations I: Using Mass Observation include publications on MO methods and methodology, and a final conference, "New Perspectives on Mass Observation", to be held in Brighton on 12 May 2010.

For more information about the network and its events or to join in the discussions, please email Anabella Pollen

[a.pollen@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:a.pollen@brighton.ac.uk)

More information about the network can be found on the project's webpage: <http://www.brighton.ac.uk/sass/research/massobservation/>

# MO and animals

In the summer 2009 directive we asked the Mass Observers to share their feelings about animals. Here are some extracts from the response:

*"I love dogs - but cannot bear the thought that they don't live for ever."* (C3603, male, retired youth and community officer, from Hertfordshire)

*"Sometimes I wonder how many of the welfare terrorists are taking prescription drugs which were, in their developmental stages, tested on animals or, if a test on an animal was the only hope of their own survival, how strong their principles would prove."* (W633, female, retired journalist from Darlington.)



*"We took our two small boys to Whipsnade Zoo in winter, and found the conditions worrying, especially the polar bear, housed in a small stone and concrete enclosure, and evidently distressed."* (M1395, female, Former CAB Adviser from Cobham)

*"When I moved into my own house I bought my husband a little black kitten and we called it Babaphett, Phett for short. He was very mischievous and always getting into scrapes. We treated him like our own child, and spoil him rotten; he could get away with anything. I remember one occasion I kept on calling him and he wouldn't come in, it was late and I went down to the bottom of the garden and looked up and there he was perching on the end of a branch, I called my husband and he climbed up the tree grabbed hold of Phett and handed him down to me, I took the Phett and kept him warm and left my husband in the tree, it was so funny, we still laugh about that now."* (R4365, female, administrator from Birmingham)

## 'English Anxieties' by Tim Brennan

curated by Russell Roberts, John Hansard Gallery,  
University of Southampton, 7 July – 29 August 2009

Artist Tim Brennan's exploration of the MOA is the result of a commission between Photoworks (Brighton) and Ffotogallery (Cardiff) and in association with the European Centre for Photographic Research at the University of Wales, Newport. The project has culminated in an exhibition, 'English Anxieties', and a book of the same name published by Photoworks.

### Annebella Pollen reviews the Southampton exhibition.

Brennan has a background in both Fine Art and Public History and his extensive experience as an artist – working across a variety of media and modes – is concerned with imaginative historical practice outside of the rules of conventional research. The themes of amateur record and unofficial knowledge run through English Anxieties, from its focus on the so-called 'Unprofessional Painting' exhibitions of the Ashington Miners in the 1930s and the studies of controversial archaeologist-turned-occultist T. C. Lethbridge to the aims and methods of MO itself.

Around the walls of the first room, black and white photographs, located by Brennan in the files of MOA, show Ashington painters alongside reproductions of their work. Both Harrison and MO photographer Humphrey Spender were associated with the Ashington Art Appreciation Society, which was intended to encourage the artistic efforts of 'post-men, gardeners, sailors, housewives, etc., etc.' and resulted in exhibitions in Gateshead and Fulham in 1939-40. The project's impulse, and its motto, 'They Paint Their Own Lives', has clear parallels with MO's own founding aims. Brennan cleverly contextualises this project by showing how, in the collage of the archive, newspaper clippings about the 'unprofessionals' rub up against Mass Observers' reports from Royal Academy shows and articles about Hitler.

Brennan's photographs of the content of the Art, Photography, Astrology, and Wall Chalking collections in MO – mixed ephemera and sundry notes

collected by Mass Observers – also feature the archival files and boxes that house them. Users of MO familiar with the laminated table tops of the reading room and the pastel colours of document wallets will find much that is familiar in these images, which Brennan describes as still lives. By juxtaposing archival context with archival content in his photos, showing current researcher record sheets and document serial numbers next to astrological calculations and the obscure pencilled codes of MO's original data organisation, Brennan deliberately draws sometimes unsettling associations between MOA and pseudo-science, adding to the enduring popular representation of MO as a sinister form of surveillance.

The second room of the gallery engages with T. C. Lethbridge's 1940 report, 'Observations of Unusual Phenomena'. This fascinating yet surreal document attempted to decipher coded chalk messages in the Cambridgeshire countryside as evidence of enemy agents preparing for a Nazi invasion. Knowing that military intelligence had concluded that most of these supposed enemy communications were marked by hikers, boy scouts, tramps and schoolchildren, Brennan playfully toys with Lethbridge's ideas by mocking up large-scale maps of his paranoid landscapes annotated with quotations in the form of photographs of MO reports and contemporaneous poetry and mythology texts sourced from Sussex University Library.

MO may be characterised at times by English Anxieties as naive, amateurish and even bizarre, but the creative and often subversive narratives that Brennan uses to connect the disparate material on display evidence how experimental, imaginative and complex MO's methods and outcomes were, and how rich they can continue to be as source of inspiration.



### The Diaries continued....

They called it "Animating the Archive".

### Coming soon

Several more books are in the pipeline. James Hinton is working on the social history of MO but before that comes out, his *Nine Wartime Lives* will be published in January 2010 by OUP. Rather than editing diary texts, James has written a series of biographies based on nine of the diaries. The Malcolmsons are now working on a third volume of Nella Last's diary written in the 1950s. This will be published by Profile Books who published the first two *Last* diaries, *Nella Last's War* and *Nella Last's Peace*. Another Mass Observer's diary is being edited for publication by the writer's own two children and we hope to see the results of their work soon.

### From private to public

It is very unlikely that any of the Mass Observers would have imagined that their diaries would be published as whole books. They knew (or hoped) that they would be quoted in the reports produced by MO at the time. I am sure they believed that their anonymous accounts of everyday life would be useful to social research both during World War Two and immediately afterwards but they could not have envisaged the interest that there is now in them as people. When I have had the privilege of meeting any of the diarists they have always been amazed and pleased that their diaries had survived and were flattered to think that their words were still relevant to people today. They wrote under very difficult circumstances on scraps of precious wartime paper. They sent off their contributions each month to MO's offices and so had no chance of correcting or polishing what they had written. That makes the task of the editor all the more challenging especially when the diary is published under the person's real name. Editors must possess immense skill in editing the diaries and need to exercise considerable sensitivity in talking to those diarists they have traced and to their families.

More information: a full list of publications based on Mass Observation material is available on the website [www.massobs.org.uk](http://www.massobs.org.uk)

## Land Girls

Brighton Museum and Art Gallery have been celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Second World War with an exhibition and programme of events about the Women's Land Army. During the war, over 75,000 women swapped their

pre-war lives to toil in the field and replace the men who had worked in agriculture before being called up to join the military.

The Archive's Development Director, Dorothy Sheridan, spoke at an event on 10th October about a MO diary written by a land girl.

Dorothy was joined by Chrissie Blount at the event. Chrissie, who was dressed in the iconic land girl uniform of a green jumper and felt hat, read extracts from the MO diary of Muriel Green (a pseudonym).

Muriel was a young woman from Norfolk who was stationed during the war to work as a gardener in Somerset. On the 27th May 1941 she wrote:

*"Morning spent at market garden picking rhubarb for contact of local Women's Institute who is coming up this week. Waste of sugar I call it. Of all the foul acid stuff! Afternoon spent weeding the paving-stones again. Several interludes of talking to the staff. All assured me that the paving-stones had not been done since the war. I heartened and thought that the war might be over before they want doing again"*

Extracts from Muriel's diary have been published in the MO diary anthologies: *Speak for Yourself, Our Longest Days, Wartime Women.*



Chrissie and Dorothy

## The 7th Biennial International Auto/biography Association Conference

The Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research at the University of Sussex will be hosting the International Auto/Biography Association Conference from 28th June to 1st July. The topic of the conference is 'Life writing and intimate publics'. For more details please contact the Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research:

[www.sussex.ac.uk/clhlwr](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/clhlwr)

## Family Britain



Following on from the acclaimed *Austerity Britain*, David Kynaston's latest publication uses personal writing (including the MO diary of Nella Last) to create a vivid, but

unsentimental, picture of what every day life was like for British society as it moved away from the painful hardships of post war Britain and into the 1950s. *Family Britain* is out now and published by Bloomsbury

## Wartime Observations

To mark 70 years since the start of the Second World War, and in response to the spring 2009 directive, the Mass Observers have been reflected on the legacy of the war:

*"I watched (for the umpteenth time) a episode of Dads Army. This group of Home Guards bear no resemblance whatsoever to reality but are good for a laugh. I do wonder what later generations make of them. We went in fear of them where I was stationed in 1940/41 as our local Home Guard were a trigger happy lot, not a bit like Dads Army."*(G2134, male, retired civil servant from Cheam)

*"My Dad remembers watching planes fly over Manchester, but he wasn't scared, he was interested. [...]He remembers his father going out on the Home Guard, and the first banana after the war (he is still not keen on bananas)."*(H4235, male, cultural sector consultant from Leeds)

*"A few days after war had been declared, the playing field behind my school was commandeered for use as a site to put a Barrage Balloon. The school could not remain there, and the whole school was evacuated en masse to Bowden in Cheshire [...].Being evacuated was a very big shock to me as it was to many others. I was very unhappy, and became quite ill. My parents decided I would be brought back home, and they would find another school for me to attend."* (M 2061, female, retired state registered nurse from Nottinghamshire)

*"For the years following WWII one could not visit London without seeing bomb sites - usually infested with willowherb; they were part of the landscape. Traces in the form of Pill Boxes of reinforced concrete with slit windows were common for many years following the war, though I don't expect they will last as long as the Martello Towers erected for the Napoleonic Wars! I expect when the last Pill Box is to be demolished some people will object; I shall not."* (V3767, male, retired company manger from Cambridge)

The Mass Observation Archive specialises in material about everyday life in Britain. It contains papers generated by the original Mass Observation social research organisation (1937 to early 1950s), and newer material collected continuously since 1981. The Archive is in the care of the University of Sussex and is housed in the Library in the Special Collections department. The Mass Observation Archive is a registered charitable trust (no 270218) and is recognised by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council as having outstanding national and international importance under the Designation Scheme.

The MO Bulletin is produced periodically. It is distributed to Mass Observers and members of the Friends of the Archive scheme. Why not join our Friends scheme - not only will you be kept up to date with the latest MO related news, but you will also help to support Mass Observation's activities. See our website for further details: [www.massobs.org.uk](http://www.massobs.org.uk) or email [moa@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:moa@sussex.ac.uk)

For research enquiries and visits, please contact Special Collections library.specialcoll@sussex.ac.uk or tel 01273 67 8157.

