

Mass Observation Archive

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The Mass Observation (later the Mass Observation Archives) was the idea of three young men, Tom Harrisson, Charles Madge, and Humphry Jennings who, along with a series of collaborators set out to record a huge social research project. The initial project ran from 1937 until the early 1950s. Newer material was collected from 1981 onwards and it still runs today. The Archive is a registered charity in the care of the University of Sussex.

But what exactly was the project? It was set up on a shoestring budget with an army of volunteers to record everyday daily life in Britain. Some of the volunteers kept diaries, others answered surveys and still more submitted letters. Initially, the focus was on the depression, highlighting the impact of food shortages, unemployment, and the fall in living standards. It then looked at the public mood around the abdication of Edward VIII as distrust was placed upon the official reporting of the incident. Their first published report, '*May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937* by over two hundred observers' was published as a book. It was intended to counteract the Government's public image of the abdication.



Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937 by over two hundred observers, ed. Humphrey Jennings, Charles Madge, and others. Publisher Faber and Faber, London, and Boston, 1987 edition.

With the outbreak of World War II, the focus of the project shifted. In August 1939, Mass Observation asked for diaries to be kept by some of the many volunteers they had accumulated. There were no further special instructions given. Therefore the 480 people who responded and kept diaries did not do so in the same format; they showed a variety of content, style, and length. 'Although some people maintained a continuous flow for years on end, other diarists wrote intermittently or for one short period. Most diarists stopped after 1945, although a few carried on well into the postwar years. The last diary received is dated 1967'.¹

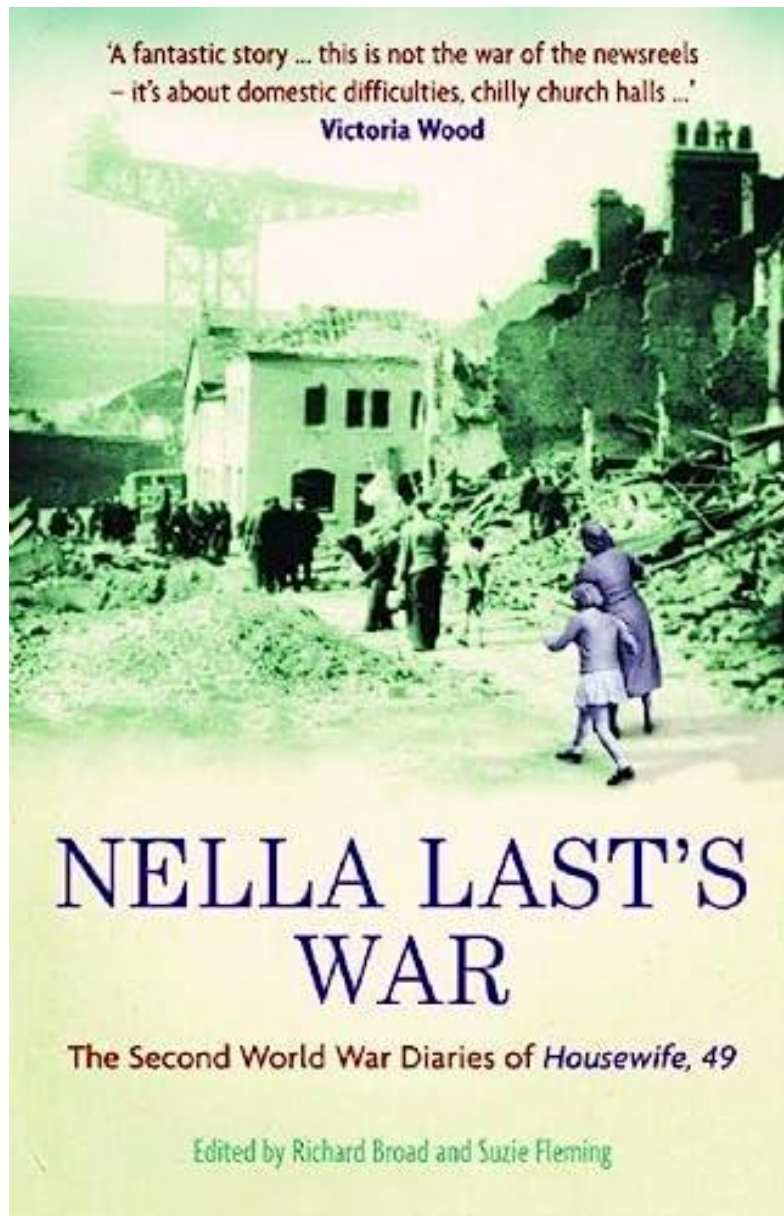
The Archive of the Mass Observation has a lot to offer, especially for those interested in social, cultural, and political history, literature, book history, class history, and psychology. Also, gender history. One of the most famous diaries, that has sections published from the project was the diary of Nella Last.

Nella Last was born in 1889 at Barrow-in-Furness the daughter of a railway audit clerk and his wife. There she lived most of her life, apart from a brief foray to Southampton when her husband was in the Navy. The Mass Observation project gave Nella a new lease on life as her

¹ [Diaries 1939-65 : The Mass Observation diary and directive writers \(1937-1960s\) : University of Sussex](#)

two sons had grown up and left home. Though she had a 'patchy' education she enjoyed writing. The diary charts her daily life, her anxieties about the violence of war, the problems she felt with wartime domesticity, and her frustration with her depressive husband. In 1981, two million words of her wartime diaries were published. The post-war diaries await transcription, editing and publication. Nella Last died in 1968, two years before her death she sent her final diary entry but never knew her work would be read.² Let alone dramatized. In 2006 ITV and Victoria Wood put together a TV movie entitled *Housewife, 49*, which is how Nella headed her first entry at the age of 49 in her diary. It was well received.

²² This is summarised from Hinton, James. '[Last \[née Lord\], Nellie \[Nella\] \(1889–1968\), housewife and diarist](#)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 01, 2017. Oxford University Press.



Nella Last's War. One of Nella Last's published diaries. Nella Last (Author), Richard Broad (Editor), Suzie Fleming (Editor) (2006).

There are hundreds of diaries and letters as part of the Mass Observation archive, all with unique stories to tell and insights to provide a researcher with into life in twentieth century Britain. The archive is now held at the University of Sussex as part of its [special collections](#). You can navigate some of the collections [here](#).

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The Mass Observation diary and directive writers (1937-1960s)

[Diaries 1939-65](#)

[Directive Replies 1939-55](#)

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The Mass Observation diary and directive writers (1937-1960s)

The Mass Observation Archive is made up of various types of material collected both in the early period (1937 - mid 1950s) and the current project (1981 onwards). The earlier phase of Mass Observation has in itself produced several 'layers' of material in accordance to the methods in which material was collected. On this page you can find out more about the Mass Observation diary and directive panel

Personal Writing 1937-65

The founders of the original Mass Observation social research organisation recruited a national panel of volunteer writers to reply to regular questionnaires and tasks.

Diaries

Full personal diaries kept usually on a daily basis by members of MO's national panel. About 500 men and women submitted diaries during this period.

Directives

Answers from members of the national panel to the regular MO "directive" or open-ended questionnaire on a

The left-hand menu allows access to search individual diaries and records.

In 1981 the Mass Observation project began again and continues today. Many new volunteers known as 'Mass Observation correspondents' were recruited from all over Britain. It is interesting to view their current directives which can all be found online by following this [link](#). The project, both in its past and present form assists the historian of twentieth and now twenty-first-century Britain to access the daily lives of everyday people, those whose stories are often lost in grander narratives.

References and Resources:

Mass Observation: <http://www.massobs.org.uk/>

[The Mass Observation diary and directive writers \(1937-1960s\): University of Sussex](#)

The Keep at the University of Sussex: <https://www.thekeep.info/>

Mass Observation Twitter <https://twitter.com/MassObsArchive>

William Pidduck, *Mass-Observation Archive: Papers from the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex* (2004)