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Seven Lives from Mass Observation: Britain in the late Twentieth Century. By James Hinton. Oxford University Press, New York, 2016. vii + 166pp. ISBN 9780198787136, £25.

Mass Observation (MO), its diarists and its directives continue to fascinate historians of twentieth-century Britain. Coinciding with the eightieth anniversary of the foundation of the social surveying project, James Hinton's *Seven Lives from Mass Observation* is a timely reminder of the richness of the material at the heart of this 'anthropology of ourselves'. Historians tend to have particular expectations of MO histories, envisaging that they will address the dynamics of daily diary-keeping, the mechanisms of the survey and the representativeness of responses. These questions remain important, and much of Hinton's previous work has offered astute answers to them, but they are not the primary focus of this moving and skilfully written book. Rather than simply focusing on methodological issues, this small book is teeming with life. Bob Rust – a lorry driver by profession and the only one of Hinton's respondents who refused his offer of anonymity – describes how academic history has 'nothing to do with real life' (p. 122). Not so with this book. As its rather unassuming title indicates, the book is built around the lives of seven MO diarists, born between the two world wars and writing under MO's second phase (often called the Mass Observation Project) which was launched by anthropologist David Pocock in 1981. Hinton pieces together these seven lives – of four women and three men – reading the archives 'vertically' to extract their responses to particular directives and assemble their life stories. It uses a mixture of the diarists' own inimitable words alongside summaries of their lives. In doing so, this book does not repeat the well-rehearsed methodological debates surrounding MO, but reveals the stories at the core of the archive. As one respondent, social worker 'Stella', states when describing her work with disturbed children: 'the pressure to appear *normal* is a tyrannical social force' (p.77) The same can perhaps be said of MO: rather than flattening people's experiences to make them appear representative, Hinton's book conveys the personalities, writing practices and detailed viewpoints of the respondents, aiming to show these lives in all their 'fullness, ambiguity [and] complexity' (p. 161).

This does not mean that *Seven Lives from Mass Observation* is simply an exercise in biography: it raises several important thematic issues for both historians of MO and twentieth-century Britain. Hinton acknowledges that most people assumed MO writers were liberal, *Guardian*-reading left-wingers and, whilst this book cannot alone dispel that image, there are a consciously wide-range of perspectives on display. Several respondents describe themselves as right-wing or 'emotionally right-wing', with little time for feminism, the development of progressive pedagogy or 'trendy vicars'. Many mourn loss of some kind: of childhood security, codes of morality, working-class identity or a cohesive labour movement. Through these seven stories, one can trace the emergence of several important historical trends: the legacy of the Second World War and the nationalistic overtones of the Falklands; responses to race and immigration from white working-class and middle-class communities; the charged language around the survivor, the victim and the welfare recipient; and the complex intellectual worlds in which 'ordinary' people understood their lives, including their understandings of Marxism and neoliberalism. Some respondents point out that their views were 'out of sync' from the majority, but felt it was even more important that they were captured for posterity. Ageing also emerges as a significant theme. Many writers turned to MO in their middle or old age and Hinton makes the point that it is older people as much as the young (with whom social changes of the 1960s and 1970s are often associated) who live with the consequences of societal change, whether it is the banker ('Sam') who embarked on affairs with women in his amateur dramatics society or the lorry driver (Rust) who in his widowhood began meeting with prostitutes and became an active advocate for a sex workers' union. Older people were also important initiators of social change and activism, as shown by the case of the RAF wife ('Helen') who joined anti-nuclear protests after reading her teenage son's radical pamphlets.

Seven Lives from Mass Observation also makes a contribution toward debates about the nature of late twentieth-century selfhood. The second chapter of *Seven Lives from Mass Observation*, the only one to overtly address historiographical issues or to provide an overarching historical

narrative, sets out key trends and changes in British social life since the 1960s. This ambitious chapter aims to provoke debate and to suggest ‘the diversity of ways... in which the changing culture of late-twentieth-century Britain was experienced’ (p.161). In doing so, it repudiates the idea that neoliberalism was the foremost force in shaping modern subjectivity and presents a panoply of other factors that created the modern self. But rather than adding to conceptualisations of modern selfhood, *Seven Lives from Mass Observation* arguably tells us more about how MO respondents perceived the ‘recent past’. This book contains revealing examples of how late-twentieth century women and men pinpointed and explained particular moments of change since the Second World War. Hinton too is part of this reflection. In the final chapter, Hinton mentions that the first title of this book was ‘My Times: Their Lives’. He explains how the original intention of the book was to understand both his own adult life and the times he lived through by exploring it alongside the lives of others – ‘an eighth life interpolating the other seven’ - but later found it impossible to match the other seven in their frankness and intimacy. But that eighth life is nevertheless present and Hinton encourages the reader to use MO as a lens through which to view and understand their own life too. This book is a thoughtful and highly readable contribution to twentieth-century British history and will be of interest to readers beyond those familiar with MO material.

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