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# SURVEILLANCE SOCIETY

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The Mass-Observation movement and the meaning of everyday life.

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On January 30, 1937, a letter to the *New Statesman and Nation* announced that Darwin, Marx, and Freud had a successor—or, more accurately, successors. "Mass-Observation develops out of anthropology, psychology, and the sciences which study man," the letter read, "but it plans to work with a mass of observers." The movement already had fifty volunteers, and it aspired to have five thousand, ready to study such aspects of contemporary life as:

Behaviour of people at war memorials.
Shouts and gestures of motorists.
The aspidistra cult.
Anthropology of football pools.
Bathroom behaviour.
Beards, armpits, eyebrows.
Anti-semitism.
Distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke.
Funerals and undertakers.
Female taboos about eating.
The private lives of midwives.

The data collected would enable the organizers to plot "weather-maps of public feeling." As a matter of principle, Mass-Observers did not distinguish themselves from the people they studied. They intended merely to expose facts "in simple terms to all observers, so that their environment may be understood, and thus constantly transformed."

The letter was the first of several manifestos, none of which made Mass-Observation easy to categorize. In February, the group declared, in the journal *New Verse,* that it would establish a new standard for literary realism and liberate poetry from the grasp of professionals: "In taking up the role of observer, each person becomes like Courbet at his easel, Cuvier with his cadaver, and Humboldt with his continent."

The inventors of the new science were Charles Madge, a poet, journalist, and card-carrying Communist; Humphrey Jennings, a Surrealist painter and documentary filmmaker; and Tom Harrisson, a renegade anthropologist more at home with cannibals than with academics. They were a fractious triumvirate from the outset, never even agreeing whether their group's name meant observation of the masses or by them, but between 1937 and 1945 hundreds of people mailed in regular reports of their daily lives. They came from all backgrounds, though young unmarried clerks and schoolteachers were especially well represented. No detail was too trivial. Mass-Observation studied which end of a cigarette people tap before lighting it (fifty-two per cent tap the end they put in their mouths), the nature of women's revenge fantasies in wartime (cut Hitler

into slices for pie; saw off his ankles, sharpen his shins into stakes, and pound him into the earth with a big saucepan), and the number of outdoor copulations on a typical night in the working-class vacation town of Blackpool (four, including one in which an observer participated). The group released a series of quirky books, and during the Second World War its reports influenced the British government's approach to civilian morale and even tax policy. Young, confused, and vigorous, Mass-Observation sought to understand something that anthropology and sociology still took largely for granted: the everyday life of ordinary people.

The first to daydream about an "anthropology of ourselves" was Madge, a young man with a long face, slender fingers, beautiful manners, and a steely will. At Cambridge, he had studied English with I. A. Richards, best known for giving his students unsigned poems to get their unprejudiced responses, and had joined the Communist Party. After Madge left school, Yeats put two of his poems in the "Oxford Book of Modern Verse," and Eliot arranged a day job for him as a reporter for the *Daily Mirror*. On the night of November 30, 1936, London's Crystal Palace—the iron-and-glass home of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and a triumph of Victorian capitalism—burned down. Madge, then twenty-four, had been mixing with England's Surrealists, who, following Freud, saw significance in accidents, and he started to wonder if there could be a meaning in the destruction of such an iconic building. Perhaps, by documenting events that shook public consciousness, one could make society aware of its unexamined myths and fantasies, and thus free to change them. For this kind of liberation, the French Surrealist André Breton had explained, "poetry must be created by everyone." So Madge had started to plan a movement that he called "Popular Poetry," to be spread by "Coincidence Clubs" throughout Great Britain. The fire provided a perfect opportunity, particularly since, soon afterward, the news broke that Edward VIII was being forced to choose between his crown and his not yet divorced lover, Wallis Simpson. Coincidence? Now a double omen hung over Britain. The press had delayed reporting the abdication crisis until the last minute—exactly the kind of society-wide repression that the Surrealists wanted to break.

Madge's chief collaborator was Jennings, a close friend since Cambridge days. Jennings had a nervous habit of eating paper and a mannered way of sucking on sugar cubes. Peggy Guggenheim, one of his lovers, claimed that he "looked like Donald Duck"—she dumped him and took up with Samuel Beckett—but in a 1944 photograph that Lee Miller shot for *Vogue* Jennings appears glamorous and confident. For all his peculiarities, he succeeded at almost everything he put his hand to. In college and after, he designed theatre costumes and sets, and in 1931, at the age of twenty-four, he went to Paris to design in silk. "My balls feel as quiet & rich as the paintings of Poussin in exile," he wrote home to his young wife, yearningly. As the simile suggests, his first and greatest love was painting, and he painted until his money—and his wife's patience—ran out. In 1934, he at last settled down to steady work, making films. For Britain's General Post Office he edited a half-hour history of the British mail, and for Shell Oil he helped out on a commercial about a robot thrilled into life by lubrication. In 1936, he helped to organize the International Surrealist Exhibition, in London, and his connections with the movement made him a natural partner for Madge's new venture.

In a letter to the *New Statesman* published on January 2, 1937, Madge announced that he and his friends intended to crack "the Crystal Palace-Abdication symbolic situation," and asked for help with the collection of evidence. "Only mass observations can create mass science," he wrote, and gave his address.

In Bolton, an industrial town in northern England so bleak that even the riverbed was paved, Madge's letter caught the eye of twenty-five-year-old Tom Harrisson, who was reading the *New Statesman* in the public library because he couldn't afford to buy it. He saw it because the next item on the page was a poem of his, "Coconut Moon," written some three years earlier, in the New Hebrides (the South Pacific archipelago today known as Vanuatu), where he had gone on a zoological expedition. He had ended up staying for two years, studying the natives and establishing himself as a "booze-artist of first rank" with kava, the native drink. He let a chief's wife scarify his chest, and later insinuated that he had participated in a cannibal feast. Judith M. Heimann, in her lively and scrupulously researched biography, "The Most Offending Soul Alive" (1998), writes that this claim was disingenuous, but she does believe that he ate a rotting wood grub offered to him by a leper.

Back in Britain, Harrisson lectured about his experiences, wrote them up in a book, and then found himself at loose ends. Alienated from his peers and about to be disinherited by his father, he decided to go down and out and become a participant-observer of his own country, then mired in the Great Depression. In much the same spirit in which George Orwell went to Wigan, and James Agee to Alabama, Harrisson chose Bolton. He worked there as a mill hand, truck driver, shop assistant, and ice-cream man.

Soon after reading the *New Statesman* letter, Harrisson rode the train to London to meet Madge and Jennings. A witness to the meeting recalled "Humphrey, with his elbow on one end of the mantelpiece, and Harrisson, with *his* elbow on the other end of the mantelpiece, both talking loudly and simultaneously to those present in general, without either of them paying the slightest attention to what the other was saying." Madge was no doubt listening to and for both.

On February 12, 1937, thirty volunteers kept one-day diaries, which Mass-Observation called "day-surveys." They were designed "to collect a mass of data without any selective principle," and the experiment was repeated monthly. In "Humphrey Jennings" (2004), an authoritative and sympathetic biography, Kevin Jackson prints Jennings's day-survey for April 12th: the filmmaker and his wife happen to put on each other's dressing gowns; there's sand in the bathtub because their daughter played in sand the day before; Jennings notices that the bath mat is "untidy" but doesn't do anything about it. It's miscellaneous and trivial, but somehow riveting. By January of 1938, Mass-Observation had collected seventeen hundred and thirty day-surveys, for a total of 2.3 million words.

In the rough division of labor that emerged, Madge took charge of the day-surveys, Harrisson returned to Bolton to continue his up-close study of working-class life, and Jennings was responsible for presenting results. In practice, this meant that Jennings designed the cover of an introductory pamphlet and was the chief editor of the movement's strangest and most poetic book,

“May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937 by Over Two Hundred Observers.”

May 12, 1937, was the date of George VI’s coronation. As Madge and Harrisson explained in one of their manifestos, when George’s brother Edward abdicated, in December, “millions of people who passed their lives as the obedient automata of a system” were suddenly left to decide for themselves what they thought of its breakdown. The coronation was designed to put their anxiety to rest by means of a grand show. But it was a delicate moment for manipulation of the British people—given the use that European Fascists were making of nationalist spectacle at the time—and thus an ideal one for Mass-Observation. The group collected forty-three day-surveys, seventy-seven people answered written questionnaires, and a squad of twelve anonymous observers covered the coronation like reporters—or, rather, like cameras. “By these three methods, three kinds of focus were obtained,” Jennings and Madge explained. “Close-up and long shot, detail and ensemble.”

Jennings’s “film” begins to unspool in the second chapter. It’s around midnight on the eve of the coronation. Euston train station, in central London, is already crowded. There’s a “man drinking beer and eating sandwiches in a telephone box.” In the snack room, another man and his fiancée are playing a game with rolls on the counter. She “says that it is a prejudice that one should always sleep at night time. He begins to sing ‘Night and Day you are the one.’ ” As the observer notes, “Everybody here is talking to nobody in particular,” and there’s a sense of plenitude and humanity—of warm chaos. On the Underground, grownups unscrew light bulbs and, when the train goes into a tunnel, make animal noises. At 3:15 A.M., a prostitute solicits the observer: “I say ‘You look as if you’ve done enough for to-night.’ Reply: ‘None of your sauce, me lad.’ ” The reader feels as if he were eavesdropping on an enormous, citywide party, all the more appealing because the typical partygoer is both in and out of the game—playing along with the mass-produced artifice around him while a practical, ironic self survives inside. Thus, during the service, while no one is looking, an usher at Westminster Abbey smokes a cigarette in the King’s state coach.

In “Mass-Observation and Everyday Life” (Palgrave Macmillan; $85), an insightful new history written in a style that will, unfortunately, limit it to academic specialists, Nick Hubble argues that, by focussing on the crowd’s perceptions, Mass-Observation undercut the nationalist message of the coronation. To one onlooker, the Queen seems to have bed head, and the King looks “bony, frozen-nervous, staring.” Another mistakes the Viscount Craigavon for Princess Juliana. Beside a radio in Nottingham, a hairdresser’s mother weeps and moans, “*Oh*, it ought to be Edward—it—it—it ought to be Edward.”

The subversive power of “May the Twelfth” could not have been too great, however. The book sold poorly, perhaps because it wasn’t as cheap as Mass-Observation had vowed its books would be. Purchasing “May the Twelfth” would have eaten up more than a quarter of a miner’s weekly paycheck. The reviews were mostly favorable, though a few were vicious. “The facts simply multiply like maggots in a cheese,” one critic complained. But Mass-Observation was fun to write about, even if you hated it, and the Mass-Observer soon became a sort of public figure. The *New Statesman* imagined him with “a loping walk, elephant ears, an eye trained to keyholes,” and Graham Greene put one in his 1939 thriller “The Confidential Agent”:

“That’s only Mr. Muckerji—a Hindu gentleman . . . very respectful. . . . He’s inquisitive. That’s the only thing.

Asks such questions."
"What sort of questions?"
"Oh, everything. Do I believe in horoscopes? Do I believe the newspapers? What do I think of Mr. Eden? And he writes down the answers too. I don't know why."

Harrisson sat out "May the Twelfth," writing to a friend, "It was a crazy idea to have it edited by a whole bunch of intellectual poets." Jennings decided that Harrisson was a philistine, and quit. He didn't abandon the ideas of Mass-Observation, however. He began to collect descriptions, in poetry and prose, of machines and the changes they had wrought in human life throughout history. He called the descriptions "Images," and, as he assembled them, he came to believe that they could be read as "a continuous narrative or *film* on the Industrial Revolution," much as he had meant "May the Twelfth" to be read as a film of the coronation. He carried the clippings, which eventually filled twelve notebooks, in a weather-beaten suitcase. When a Surrealist friend asked what was inside, Jennings answered, "Pandemonium." Naming his anthology after the city that Lucifer and his fallen angels forged in Milton's "Paradise Lost," Jennings wrote, "The building of Pandaemonium is the real history of Britain for the last three hundred years."

In contrast to the artiness of the London wing of Mass-Observation, Harrisson's operation in Bolton was rough-and-tumble. Harrisson lived in a working-class house recalled variously as "bare," "bleak," "horrible," "bug-ridden," and "a house like any other in Bolton." Usually, two or three observers lived with him, enslaved by his charisma and his willingness to work sixteen hours a day. Every morning, after reading the newspapers, he issued directives. The photographer Humphrey Spender, younger brother of the poet Stephen Spender, recalled being asked to find out "how people hold their hands, the number of sugar lumps that people pop into their mouths . . . how much people stole things like teaspoons in restaurants, matches, bits of paper." Observers were to count hat pins, list the hymns sung in church, and "try and pinch a copy of the sermon" while they were at it. "Tom literally did say: go into public lavatories and take pictures of people peeing," Spender told an interviewer, years later. The austerity of Bolton frightened Spender, and his empathy for the people sometimes put him on the verge of tears, but the photographs he took there, not published until four decades later, match Walker Evans's in honesty and Helen Levitt's in aesthetic flair.

At odd, late hours, Harrisson treated the staff to fish-and-chips, of which the house stank. The Surrealist painter Julian Trevelyan was invited up from London to make a collage of Bolton, and at night, Trevelyan recalled, he drank beer "in various pubs and watched an all-in wrestling match in a foundry rather reminiscent of some prison of Piranesi, with chains and ladders and pieces of rusty machinery." A coal deliveryman named Bill Naughton volunteered because he hoped Mass-Observation would improve his writing; a few decades later, his screenplay for the movie "Alfie," starring Michael Caine, won international acclaim.

The result of all this activity was a single book, "The Pub and the People," which appeared in 1943, four years after it was written. In Bolton, the book explains, "the pub has more buildings, holds more people, takes more of their time and money, than church, cinema, dance-hall, and political organizations put together." The statistics are thorough. In the course of a single Thursday night, pubgoers drink, on average, 3.16 pints of beer; on a Saturday, the average goes up to 3.45 pints.

The purchase of fish-and-chips climaxes on Friday, the local payday, but the purchase of beer climaxes on Saturday—"what is left in our culture of the old orgy, the recurring unrepression." More beer is sold in the last hour the pub is open than any other. In a group, people drink faster than alone, and the rhythm of the drinking is so deeply felt that they nearly always finish their rounds together, even if they're blind.

The book's principal author was John Sommerfield. A master at blending in, he interviewed no one formally, but merely drank, watched, and listened. He describes "swiggling," the moving of a nearly empty glass in circles, "so that the beer eddies round and round." He notices that "Time—Gentlemen—please!" is always called with the same distinctive intonation. (In the previous decade, Eliot had also noticed this, using it to unsettling effect in "The Waste Land.") Sommerfield explains, with generous quotation, what makes drunk talk sound drunk; shows that classier pubs have fewer spittoons; reveals that darts became popular after the King and Queen played a round in 1937; and, in his exposition of pigeon racing, a popular working-class sport, tells you how to motivate your cock bird (make a cake of sugar, sherry, and seeds, and, before taking him out to race, show him his hen eating it). A woman praises snuff, unforgettably: "Eeee, it's lovely, makes your navel perk like a whelk!" The book celebrates the pub as an active and social form of leisure, a way of life that, Orwell wrote when he reviewed it, was in danger of being "gradually replaced by the passive, drug-like pleasures of the cinema and the radio."

Orwell once described himself as "lower-upper-middle class," and Hubble pegs Madge, Jennings, and Harrisson in the same hole, because all of them were raised with the expectation that they would live like gentlemen, only to discover that their inheritance was tiny to nonexistent, and that they would have to struggle to make a living. No one, however, would have mistaken any of them for proletarians. In a 1961 reminiscence, Harrisson confessed that "in those far-off days, nearly everybody who was not born into the working-class regarded them as almost a race apart." Crossing the social distance raised eyebrows at the time. "Let's go down and see Humphrey being nice to the common people," Jennings's boss sneered, irked by the democratic spirit on his film set. In the past few decades, it has also raised a suspicion in the minds of some critics. Did the leaders of Mass-Observation take an interest in workers merely to express dissatisfaction with their own socioeconomic niche? More bluntly, were they slumming?

Hubble suggests, reasonably enough, that Madge, Jennings, and Harrisson might have had impure motives and transcended them. In any case, one hardly needed a personal reason to take an interest in workers in the nineteen-thirties. The Depression had made workers' misery acute, and, for the first time in history, a country, the Soviet Union, was ruled in the name of its workers. As Fascism spread, it seemed crucial to understand what workers wanted and believed. Not that workers were Mass-Observation's exclusive focus. Tom Jeffery, the author of a 1978 history of the group, is more impressed by their engagement with the lower middle class—the clerks, shop assistants, and schoolteachers who wrote most of the day-surveys. Upper-class leftists usually dismissed these people as "instinctively fascist and carriers of all that was worst in consumer culture," Jeffery writes. Mass-Observation gave them, too, a chance to describe their world.

In the fall of 1938, Harrisson came to London and moved in with Madge while the two researched

a new book, "Britain." They were tracking public opinion about Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who, three times in September, flew to Germany, where he postponed war by giving part of Czechoslovakia to Hitler. Published quickly by Penguin, "Britain" reportedly sold a hundred thousand copies in ten days. At last, Mass-Observation was being written for the people, as well as about and by them.

Chamberlain, who was sixty-nine, had never flown before, and Madge and Harrisson subjected the hero worship surrounding him to a mockery inflected by anthropology: "The combination of his age and his sky-journey made him a father-deity. But his self-sacrificial abasement in going to Hitler made him like the son-deity who descends among the wicked to save them." As always with Mass-Observation, the human eye caught telling details. Before Chamberlain announced from a window in Downing Street that he had brought back from Munich a promise of "peace for our time," he stretched out his arm to silence the people cheering below. An observer noted, "Several in crowd appear to take this for a Fascist salute and stretch forth their arms likewise."

The book took in other aspects of Britain, too. The writers seemed pleased by a "slight case of totemism" that they found in a small mining town, which annually celebrated the sawing off and devouring of a cow's head stuck in a gate. In the Lambeth Walk, a popular dance modelled on a Cockney original, they saw a reservoir of organic antifascism, because the craze for it reversed the usual top-down flow of culture and offered working people an opportunity to express themselves. "It is lovely to be common and let yourself go," one fan explained.

By late 1938, Madge was in love with Stephen Spender's wife, Inez, and wanted to get out of town, so, once he and Harrisson finished writing "Britain," the men swapped houses. In London, Harrisson was supposed to take charge of the national team of correspondent observers, but the task bored him, and his attention soon wandered to a rich married woman with a drinking problem. In Bolton, by contrast, Madge prospered, starting a study of workers' saving and spending habits that impressed the economist John Maynard Keynes. Though Mass-Observation survived for another decade, the constellation that formed it was dispersing.

In a January, 1939, lecture, later published in the journal *Sociological Review*, Raymond Firth, an anthropologist at the London School of Economics, attacked the group at its weakest point: statistics. The samples of people surveyed in "Britain" were small, unrepresentative, and inconsistent, he asserted; he noted that George Gallup's organization had brought scientific polling to Britain. It was the start of a long argument, which Mass-Observation was doomed to lose.

But, just as it was being cast out of science, Mass-Observation had a new birth in art. In March, Humphrey Jennings began to shoot "Spare Time," a documentary about workers' leisure commissioned for the New York World's Fair. It was to have three segments, on workers in steel, cotton, and coal, and for the segment on cotton Jennings returned to Bolton, which he had photographed with his Leica in the old days. He checked in with the Mass-Observation team there, now run by Madge.

This time, rather than a "film" of textual images, Jennings presents a sequence of visual ones, subtly interconnected by sound. While men play darts, for example, the viewer hears the tuning up of a brass band, which appears in the next scene. After the band has come and gone, the music

continues as a boy reads a comic book, his mother removes a shepherd's pie from the oven, and a man takes three racing dogs out for a run behind a factory. As if brought to life from the pages of Mass-Observation's studies, old men in a pub play billiards, an audience watches all-in wrestling, and a man launches some pigeons into flight. Even more evocative of Mass-Observation than any of these details is the film's mood. For a scene of ballroom dancing, Jennings chooses a shot where a woman stoops and fixes the strap of her shoe. At a chorus rehearsal, a woman takes off her scarf with her right hand while she plays the piano with her left, and then keeps playing as a man in the chorus helps her out of her coat, and they begin to sing Handel. Improvisation is a part of life, and beauty emerges naturally from informality.

In the film's closing sequence, a woman cuts slices of bread for her husband's tea, late at night, while he reads a newspaper (headline: "Her Scent Was Bat's Delight"), and the viewer gradually realizes that the man isn't relaxing at the end of his workday but preparing to begin it, in a coal mine. Carrying lamps, miners file into the cage that will carry them down into the pit. As the cage shuts, the narrator says, "As things are, spare time is time when we have a chance to do what we like. A chance to be most ourselves." After a brief pause, the cage descends.

Previously, Jennings had dismissed his films as jobs he did for the money, but when he and his wife went to see "Spare Time," she recalled, "he was so excited that he sat on the edge of his seat in the cinema like a small boy." He had found his style.

In September, 1939, Britain declared war. Mass-Observation asked its volunteers to keep diaries of the experience, and the government hired the group to find out whether its posters were improving morale. "*Your* Courage / *Your* Cheerfulness / *Your* Resolution / Will Bring Us Victory," one poster read. Mass-Observation reported that the pronoun shift was disastrous.

To raise money, Madge and Harrisson wrote a book about this and other wartime observations, "War Begins at Home." They reported that people hated and resisted the blackout, perhaps because the Blitz had not yet begun, and the point of it was not apparent. The dark made people afraid of assault and theft, including the theft of pets. "They do say there is cats in pies," a charwoman in Hampstead explained.

Behind the scenes, Harrisson was campaigning for more government contracts. "I had misgivings," Madge later recalled; he did not want Mass-Observation to degenerate into "a sort of home-front espionage." Hubble reports that the debate over the group's future turned bitter in January, 1940, with Harrisson accusing Madge of being too literary, and Madge accusing Harrisson of a wish to turn Mass-Observation into a kind of political party. They even bickered over whose name should be first on the title pages. In May, Harrisson started to send secret weekly reports on morale to the government; by July, Madge had quit.

When the Blitz began, that autumn, Mass-Observation's founders rose to the challenge separately. Madge's research on saving habits helped Keynes persuade Parliament that workers would not mind having taxes taken out of their paychecks, thus making it easier for Britain to finance the war. Keynes's sponsorship brought Madge into the academic establishment, and he later became a professor of sociology at the University of Birmingham. Jennings directed a series of tender and

resolute propaganda films, such as “London Can Take It” and “Listen to Britain”—the work for which he is chiefly remembered today. In 1950, while location-scouting on the Greek island of Poros, he fell off a cliff and died. Harrisson began the war reporting to the government, which tried to discourage him from sending so much commentary along with his facts, and was later conscripted. In 1945, he parachuted into Borneo, where he led a guerrilla force of native tribesmen, who were thrilled to resume head-hunting, which the British had only recently forbidden. He lived in Borneo on and off for the next two decades and three spouses.

Without its founders, Mass-Observation gradually lost its subversive eccentricity; in 1949, it was incorporated as a market-research firm. Its archives lay unread in a basement until the late sixties, when they were discovered by two historians and brought to the University of Sussex. Madge, looking back at Mass-Observation in 1961, felt thankful that “some sort of a net had been spread to catch that fleeting, glinting apparition, the essence of the time.” In a 1938 radio talk, Jennings had suggested it was no accident that the search for the meaning of everyday life led to history. “Mysteries reside in the humblest everyday things,” he said; they are a kind of legacy, and the poet, by examining them, can extract “an idea of ‘what I am’ from the past.” To share this discovery, he relates it to contemporary experience, “the things that the community knows about, the things that they’re interested in.” Jennings cited, as an example, “The Waste Land,” in which Eliot represents the past as a Christopher Wren church and the everyday as a pub in Lower Thames Street. The poet has to love both in order to connect them, Jennings insisted; “Everything else is snobbery.” ✦