

## Writing and Reading Diaries in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain

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**Abstract:** Using the diaries of Jean Lucey Pratt as a case-study, the article assesses the impact of the availability of published diaries in mid-twentieth-century Britain on conventions in diary-writing practice. Consideration is also given to the effect of Pratt's involvement in Mass-Observation on her perception of her diary, and to the wider influence of M-O on twentieth-century diary-writing, given that this project troubles the idea of the diary as an individualistic, private form of writing.

On Christmas Day 1934, twenty-four-year-old Jean Lucey Pratt, read back through her diary for the year just ending, an activity that prompted some self-critical reflections:

The major difficulty with which a diarist must contend is this: that since he jots down the day's activities as they occur, he cannot work to any preconceived plan. He cannot collect his facts first, as does the novelist, and from them make a unified and symmetrical pattern. But that doesn't mean he need make no pattern at all. Facts are showered upon him indiscriminately day by day, and these he must sort and arrange into a kind of mosaic which only a biographer may round off and frame. And he must have intuitive knowledge of the values of those fragments which pile up around him hourly. He must know what to choose, and having chosen, how to arrange them in an intelligent and interesting manner. [...] Really, I believe a good diarist is born, not made. And I'm not a good diarist. I always want to say too much.<sup>1</sup>

Her sense of her own short-comings as a diarist did not deter Pratt from continuing to keep a diary and she did so until her death in the mid-1980s. This is not the only moment at which she reflects on what it means to write a diary, or what constitutes a successful diary, and, if the diary is conceived of as a form which has as its goal the revelation of the self to the self, Pratt's critique of her own diary practice may seem strange. Pratt's comments imply that the diary is not simply an

outpouring of personal thoughts but that it is a genre that can be executed with more or less success. This challenges the convention that the diary is likely to have only one implied reader: its author. Considering eighteenth-century diaries, Felicity Nussbaum notes that at this period, ‘the most prolific diarists were individuals with secrets to tell’, and she characterises the diary as a ‘self-reflexive narrative.’<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum suggests that the association of the diary with secrecy persists into the contemporary period: ‘Though the diary is not always strictly secret, it usually *affects* secrecy, and it is often sold today with lock and key.’<sup>3</sup> Pratt’s estimation of her effectiveness as a diarist indicates the extent to which, in the nineteenth and especially the early twentieth century, the diary was increasingly a form that, though it might have been written for private purposes, found a readership through publication. Discussing the fact that in their raw, unedited state, other people’s diaries – even one’s own diaries - can be quite boring to read, Patricia Meyer Spacks suggests that this in fact contributes to the ‘fantasy of intimacy’ between the author and the reader: ‘The special pleasure of conversing about “nothing” belongs primarily to those close to one another, those who share our lives or live in close touch.’<sup>4</sup> It is this quotidian detail, and the illusion of intimacy it creates, that diaries can give us in a much more sustained way than other kinds of autobiographical writing. The possibility of reading other people’s diaries in published form evidently has an effect on the writing of diaries, as is borne out by intertextual references in the published diaries to which Pratt herself refers. The present-day reader of Pratt’s diaries can experience an ‘illusion of intimacy’ with Pratt while reading about her own sense of her connection to other diarists.

The idea of the usually solitary activity of diary-writing forging a connection to a community underpins the best-known twentieth-century British manifestation of the diary: the soliciting and analysing of diary entries that formed part of the activities of Mass-Observation. Founded in 1937 by anthropologist Tom Harrisson and journalist Charles Madge with the stated aim of producing an ‘anthropology of our own people’,<sup>5</sup> M-O sent investigators to look into aspects of daily life in particular communities, as well as recruiting a panel of diarists who were invited to contribute opinions on specific topics via ‘directives’, but who also described their personal experiences in

diary entries submitted monthly to the organisation. This type of prompted diary writing would appear to move the diary definitively from the private to the public sphere, but as Dorothy Sheridan, archivist of the M-O collection at the University of Sussex notes, the wartime entries in particular show a ‘continual slippage’ between ‘what might be defined as “pure” subjective writing on the one hand and social reportage on the other.’<sup>6</sup> Sheridan’s placing of ‘pure’ in quotation marks points to the fact that, even in diaries that present themselves principally as an exploration of the self, that subjectivity will always be embedded in a socio-historical context. As Ella Ophir notes, citing Lynn Z. Bloom’s formulation, ‘“public private” writing’ of a ‘largely self-explanatory rather than cryptic’ kind, is ‘common to many diaries’, even those not explicitly written with a view to publication.<sup>7</sup> This, like Sheridan’s observation, reminds us that the relationship between the public and private aspects of diary writing constitutes a spectrum rather than a binary divide, and these two aspects will necessarily be closely intertwined, even when the diarist is writing in the knowledge that their observations may be made public (albeit, in the case of M-O, anonymously). Pratt, who had kept a diary since she was a child, became a Mass-Observer in January 1940. Indeed, it is because of her involvement in M-O that a selection from her life-time’s worth of diaries was published in 2015.<sup>8</sup>

As Simon Garfield, the editor of Pratt’s diaries, explains, during the years when she was involved with the project, Pratt, in common with many other Mass-Observers, kept one diary to send in every month and another to retain for herself. In the published text, Garfield identifies for his reader which entries belong to the M-O diary, labelling these as the ‘War Diary’, and which do not, though this is also sometimes clear from internal evidence. My concern here is not so much with the contribution Pratt made to M-O, nor with the relationship between her M-O and non-M-O diaries. Rather, in what follows, the published version of Pratt’s diary, especially the entries kept between the 1930s and the 1950s, will be used to explore how, in the early and mid-twentieth century, what might be termed a canon of published diaries came to be formed, and to map the influence of this canon, and of contemporary discourse about diaries on an inveterate diarist such as Pratt. Mass-Observation, as Margaretta Jolly suggests, ‘provides an interestingly particular

development of genre', moving as it does between 'collective terms of reference [...] and the private interrogation into one's mortality that a private diary involves.'<sup>9</sup> But M-O can also be situated as the product of an existing and vibrant culture of reading and writing diaries which was already troubling the fragile boundary between the diary as private and as public discourse.

The majority of diaries published during the early and mid-twentieth century were the work of diarists who were either well-known as authors or who had achieved renown in some other walk of public life such as politics. Still in circulation, often in popular editions, were the works of diarists from earlier periods whose fame among a twentieth-century general readership rested largely on them having kept a diary: Pepys would be one example. Pratt's life, in this context, was 'ordinary'. She was the daughter of an architect. Her mother died when she was very young and her father remarried when Pratt was a teenager. She initially intended to follow in her father's footsteps and went to the University of London to study architecture, but she also nursed ambitions to be a writer. During the war she became an administrator for an aluminium company, and in the late 1950s, after the disappointment of being unable to find a publisher for her novel, she managed successfully to place her biography of the eighteenth-century actress, Peg Woffington. During this period, after her war-work had ended she lived on a modest inherited income, and her diaries often detail her concerns about her finances. She later opened a bookshop in the village of Burnham Beeches in Berkshire, where she had lived alone since early in the war; she also kept and bred pedigree cats. Like Nella Last, the Barrow-in-Furness housewife who was a prolific contributor to M-O both during and after the Second World War, Pratt is a diarist whose writings would have been unlikely to come to light had she not been involved in M-O, but, as I will show, this does not mean that she did not have aspirations to be a published diarist, even before the advent of M-O. As the damning self-assessment quoted above illustrates, even before M-O gave her diary writing an explicitly socio-political purpose, her reading of published diaries was already teaching her to be self-critical about her practice as a diarist.

## **The History of the Diary**

In late November 1952, Pratt was reading James Boswell's *London Journal*, and was prompted to look through her '“library”' of published diaries 'and see what others did on a last Sunday in November':

In 1662 Pepys woke on the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> to find "the tops of the houses covered with snow" [...] Kilvert does not seem to have recorded many last Sundays in November [...] On Sunday November 28<sup>th</sup> 1897, Arnold Bennett's friend Webster told him a true ghost story. In 1914 Barbellion heard a Sir Henry Wood concert at the Albert Hall. Katherine Mansfield seem only to date the first months of the year in her journals.<sup>10</sup>

Pratt's selection includes the work of authors who are known principally as diarists, and diaries that can be seen as supplementing or illuminating other published works. Bennett and Mansfield would fit into the latter category; Pratt also later read *A Writer's Diary* (1953) a selection from Virginia Woolf's diaries edited after her death by Leonard Woolf, describing it as 'enthalling' and writing a review of it to submit to a competition.<sup>11</sup> Francis Kilvert's diaries, published between 1938 and 1940, record the author's experiences as a clergyman in the Welsh borders during the 1870s. Probably the least familiar to a contemporary reader, but a book which achieved something approaching cult status in its day, is W. N. P. Barbellion's *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* (1919). Barbellion (the nom de plume of Bruce Frederick Cummings) was an aspiring author with depressive and at times suicidal tendencies, who managed to secure a research post at the British Museum. He married, but discovered soon after that his recurrent ill-health was the consequence of multiple sclerosis. The journal, published shortly before its author's death, veers between egotism, self-pity and undeniable pathos. Pratt's comparative exercise, a sort of prototype for diary anthologies such as Alan Taylor and Irene Taylor's *The Assassin's Cloak* (2008), which similarly juxtaposes entries for the same date in different years, has the result of putting her own experiences, and her own record of her experiences, into perspective: she spends her own late November evening cleaning up after one of her cats, which is suffering from diarrhoea. Pratt is not unaware of the bathos here; surveying her library of diaries, she notes that she also has a copy of George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody*

(1892), not strictly a diary, but a novel in diary form, which uses the gap between its narrator's self-image and readers' perceptions of him for comic effect, and which also indicates that the diary was an established genre, and therefore susceptible to parody, by the 1890s. But even Pratt's very brief account of the diaries on her shelf reveals her awareness of differences in practice between the published diarists, even as it invites comparisons to be drawn between them: Pepys writes about the weather; Mansfield is lax with dates.

Both Pratt's account of her own 'library' of diaries and evidence from wider publishing practice show that the gap between the writing and publishing of diaries closed during the twentieth century, while diaries from earlier periods retained their popularity and gained new readers via abridgements and cheap editions. Pepys's diaries, for example, were first published in 1825, and popular, abridged editions were in circulation from the early 1900s; *Everybody's Pepys*, edited by O. F. Morshead and with illustrations by Ernest Sheppard, was published in 1926 and reissued in 1947. It is evident that Pratt, who took the *Times Literary Supplement* and read the *Observer* on a Sunday, was a diarist who was well-informed about recent publications in the genre; in the context of other texts from the period that consider the diary as a form, it is only surprising that she does not seem to have read the Woodforde family diaries; selections from two hundred and fifty years worth of a clergy family's accounts of daily life were published from 1932 onwards. Kate O'Brien's study *English Diaries and Journals* (1943), which appeared in William Collins's 'Britain in Pictures' series, characterised these diaries, the best known of which is by the Reverend James Woodforde, as presenting 'one particular England, the one [the Woodforde family] knew and counted on and took for granted as their especial right and pleasure always'.<sup>12</sup> This characterisation is given particular point by the fact that O'Brien is writing for a wartime reader, and echoes William Plomer's discussion of Kilvert's diary, which appeared in the literary journal *Horizon* in 1940, though here it is the Welsh countryside that is the spur for Plomer's reflection. Acknowledging that Kilvert 'left a charming, nostalgic, and rather Hardy-esque account' of a particular ruined house, Plomer goes on to draw a connection between Kilvert's 'allusions to the Franco-Prussian war', his own memories of the 1914-18 conflict, which

are connected to the area where the ruin stands, and the war that is imminent at the time of writing and has begun by the time of the article's publication.<sup>13</sup> This is an historically situated example of the kind of 'fantasy of intimacy' that Spacks identifies as an effect of reading diaries, and it also shows that such a fantasy might not necessarily be pleasurable in its effects. Diaries from the past might console but they can also collapse the distance between the historical past and the present, undercutting the potential for nostalgic escape.

While both O'Brien and Plomer acknowledge the resonance that historical diaries might have to a present-day reader, especially one who is reading in at a moment of historical crisis, the reception of more recent diaries was not always sanguine: both John Middleton Murry and Leonard Woolf were criticised for putting into the public domain writings that were not, it appeared, intended for a wider readership. Surveying the reception of *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf* (1953), the volume which resulted from Leonard Woolf's editing of his late wife's diaries through a focus on those entries directly concerned with writing, Kate Briggs points out that some early critics believed Leonard Woolf to be 'capitalising on a publishing trend' for diaries; she characterises later criticisms of the volume, on the grounds of its partiality, as pointing to 'the danger of over-investing in what we might naively suppose to be the reality, or indeed the truth, of an unexpurgated diary.'<sup>14</sup> Leonard Woolf's selection criteria may raise more questions than they answer, but they are, at least, clearly stated in his introduction to the book. Drawing on Philippe Lejeune's work on the diary, Briggs notes that: 'Diaries are not, in themselves, *already* books', a claim she evidences by pointing to the editorial apparatus that shores up even the 'unexpurgated' edition of Woolf's diaries.<sup>15</sup> A similar argument can be made about Middleton Murry's treatment of Mansfield's literary remains; Valérie Basinée describes the three versions of Mansfield's journal produced by Middleton Murry in 1927, 1939 and 1954 respectively as 'biographical fictions [...] assembled from the fragments of several notebooks.'<sup>16</sup> Like Leonard Woolf, Middleton Murry made no secret of the fact that the published volumes had been constructed via his editorial intervention. Simon Garfield produced a volume over seven hundred pages long from Pratt's life-time of diaries, and he is also careful to indicate his editorial

principles, and, for reasons that are not entirely clear but which certainly give a particular slant to the book, he describes the material as ‘romantic journals’ in the book’s subtitle.

Given her own aspirations, eventually fulfilled, to write a book for publication, it is not surprising that Pratt looked both to diaries by established authors, such as Woolf and Mansfield, and to the works of writers remembered principally as diarists, as potential models. In an entry for 28 June 1948, she reflects: ‘I want this journal to live. [...] I would like it to have a place among the famous diaries of the world, following in the tradition of Bashkirtseff and Barbellion.’<sup>17</sup> Like Barbellion, Marie Bashkirtseff was a widely-read diarist, especially after the original French text, which appeared in 1887, was published in an English version, translated by Mathilde Blind, in 1890. Bashkirtseff was from a well-connected Ukrainian family and travelled widely in Europe, studying fine art in Paris; she kept a diary from the early 1870s until her death in 1884, when she was still only in her twenties. Both she and Barbellion at times express explicitly their hopes for the longevity of their diaries, or address a supposed future reader with a degree of self-consciousness about the writing process. In June 1884, having been diagnosed with consumption, Bashkirtseff records that she has been re-reading her early diaries: ‘I complain in them of I know not what; I have aspirations towards something indefinite [...] I wanted to be everywhere at once!! What vigour there was in it all!!!’<sup>18</sup> An entry from the diaries that she was revisiting gives a not untypical glimpse of her youthful self-estimation: ‘If I should die young I shall burn it, but if I live to be old, people will read this Journal. I believe, if I may say so, that there’s no photograph as yet of a woman’s entire existence, of all her thoughts, yes all, all. It will be interesting.’<sup>19</sup> Judy Simons suggests that the publication of Bashkirtseff’s diary ‘started something of a vogue for intimate confessional reminiscences among well-bred young women with literary aspirations.’<sup>20</sup> However, despite her explicit gendering of her legacy, Bashkirtseff’s writing did not only appeal to women readers; indeed Barbellion identified his own diary-writing project with hers to such an extent that in October 1914 he expressed the fear she had beaten him to the pass, rendering his own diary obsolete: ‘She feels as I feel. We have the same self-absorption, the same vanity and corroding ambition. She is impressionable, volatile, passionate – ill! So am I. Her journal is my



journal. All mine is stale reading now. She has written down all my thoughts and forestalled me.’<sup>21</sup> Barbellion’s comments here point to the diary as a readerly as much as a writerly text: why should he, or anyone else, read his own diary, when Bashkirtseff’s says everything that needs saying? ‘She has written down all my thoughts’: these are quite extraordinary observations, if the diary is thought of as an account of a discrete personality, implying as they do that the self-reflexive, intimate observations of another about herself could substitute for one’s own, and challenging in the process, the very idea of discrete, self-contained subjectivity (to say nothing of Barbellion’s cross-gendered identification).

While Pratt did not live out her youth in the shadow of mortal illness, it is evident that these published diaries would have provided her with examples of how the diary might be considered a work worthy of publication in its own right rather than the adjunct to a larger body of literary work or a supplement to life of public service, and that they might have encouraged her, even prior to her involvement in Mass-Observation, to consider the possibility that her diaries too might be published after her death. She vacillated as to whether or not this was desirable and this was partly a question of whether her writings matched, in interest, the published diaries she had read. In October 1933, Pratt copied into her diary a quotation from Virginia Woolf’s ‘Rambling Round Evelyn’ (1920). This essay was re-published in *The Common Reader* (1925), which is likely to be where Pratt encountered it: ‘The good diarist writes either for himself alone or for a posterity so distant that it can safely hear every secret and justly weigh every motive. For such an audience there is need neither for affectation nor of restraint. Sincerity is what they ask, detail and volume.’<sup>22</sup> Later in that essay, Woolf comments that Evelyn ‘was not an artist; no phrases linger in the mind; no paragraphs build themselves up in the memory; but as an artistic method this of going on with the day’s story circumstantially, bringing in people who will never be mentioned again, leading up to crises which never take place [...] has its fascination.’<sup>23</sup> This illustrates Lejeune’s claim that although the diary may not have an aesthetic function at the time of writing it can be invested with one by subsequent reader, and that, further: ‘Before becoming a text, the private diary is a *practice*.’<sup>24</sup> Part of the efforts of Leonard Woolf, John Middleton Murry, and

indeed Simon Garfield are directed towards shaping this practice into a text. Seen in this light, Pratt demands of herself a kind of discipline that she discerns in some published diaries but which is actually an effect of them having been edited rather than a reflection of their raw form.

For Pratt, however, in the pre-war years, the prospect of possible publication was held in tension with the purpose that the diary served for her both at the moment of writing and later when she re-read it. Re-reading is an important aspect of Pratt's diary practice, and one that that often provokes difficult emotions. In August 1936, prior to embarking on a trip to Europe, she drew up a will in which she specified: 'All MSS, Notebooks, Diaries etc to be burnt please without being read.'<sup>25</sup> By March 1939, she had had a change of heart, after reading some of Mansfield's surviving diaries, and she quotes Mansfield's self-deprecating description of material she had destroyed: 'Shall I ever have the courage to destroy my "huge complaining" diaries? But I still think they are interesting, scientifically, and will not destroy them yet.'<sup>26</sup> The notion that the diaries may have scientific interest, with 'scientific' here implying 'sociological', links to Pratt's mixed feelings about re-reading the diaries herself. Alert to the possibility of using the diaries as the basis for a form of self-analysis, she nevertheless berates herself at times for what she sees as the indulgence of looking through them again. Particularly in the post-Second World War years, she at times seems to construct the diary – both the writing and the reading of it – as almost a shameful habit, and on more than one occasion swears off writing it for a period of months. In December 1947 she regrets having once again read back over her diary and decides, in her phrase, to 'exercise a check' and not write for at least a month; she manages six weeks before venting her frustration about a work colleague.<sup>27</sup> A few years later, wanting to use her diaries as a form of self-improvement, she decides she will only write about her emotions and thoughts and not about the outside world, but this restriction soon proves impossible to comply with. The act of writing takes precedence over the production of a finished text, even if publication is a possibility that is occasionally given consideration: from this perspective, the diary can seem like the ultimately decadent form of writing, especially so for someone like Pratt with ambitions to be a published author. To assert that the diary could eventually be published is therefore a way of projecting a

future utility for writing that seems at times to its author to have little discernible purpose, or to be in some sense wasteful.

These complicated and shifting sentiments receive their most extreme expression in an entry 15 April 1952, shortly after the publication of her book *Lovely Peggy: A Life of Margaret Woffington*, when Pratt comments: 'I will not stop writing my journal. This seems to me potent. It may be a disease, a haemorrhage. I may get nothing more published [...] yet I shall write. I have faith.'<sup>28</sup> Later the same year she records that she has again been writing instructions for the disposal of her diaries after her death, though she notes that if she survives she 'would like to prepare them for publication [...] Once written, they lose [...] their connection with me and take on an identity of their own.'<sup>29</sup> Pratt thus veers between berating herself for wasting time on an unhealthy compulsion, producing material that may never see the light of day and considering the possibility that the diaries may eventually be published in some form, a prospect that would legitimise her writing. In the post-Second World War years, this belief could have been strengthened not only by her achieving some success as an author, with the publication of the Peg Woffington biography placing her, so she hoped, on the path towards a literary reputation, but also by her past involvement in Mass-Observation, which valued even the most mundane material.

### **Mass-Observation and the Diary**

Even before her involvement in Mass-Observation, then, Pratt was aware of the diary as both a record of events and thoughts kept for private purposes and as a literary genre. There were numerous published precedents, both by diarists who had also published other kinds of writing, such as Mansfield, and by writers primarily known as diarists, including Bashkirtseff. Deciding whether a diarist is writing with a view to future publication, is not, however, just a case of identifying the moments when this is stated, in the diary, as an aspiration; I have written elsewhere about Anne Frank's diary: it is clear that although the idea that her diary might eventually be of historical value spurred Frank on to write and indeed revise her diary, it would be

wrong to suggest that her diary ceased to have a more personal function for her once it took on, in her own mind, this historical purpose, nor was this purpose necessarily to the forefront in every entry.<sup>30</sup> Pratt's existing diary and her Mass-Observation diary are not a binary pair of private and public texts, then. While some information about her private life was excluded from the Mass-Observation diary, which remained anonymous until Garfield obtained permission from Pratt's surviving family to publish *A Notable Woman*, she evidently still considered the possibility that her regular diary, quite aside from her M-O contributions, might eventually find a readership.

Written in the knowledge that they will be read by others and, during the war years, in the knowledge that a record of the present historical moment will be of value in the future, Mass-Observation diaries would seem to pose a particular challenge to common conceptions of diary writing as a dominantly subjective practice. As Emma Casey and her co-authors note, observers were 'encouraged to collect social imagery which could be presented in a form of montage that reflected the textured and contradictory, essentially intersubjective, nature of social reality.'<sup>31</sup> Although the organisers requested that the contributors focus on their personal experiences, M-O diarists inevitably commented also on wider social and political events, especially after the outbreak of the Second World War. As an historical or sociological source, M-O diaries have been judged problematic. James Hinton notes that during the war years, M-O 'struggled to convince the social science community that its methods were worth attention.'<sup>32</sup> Considering how the archived material was approached in later years, Tony Kushner suggests: 'The focus of sociology and other social sciences for several decades after the Second World War moved away from the life story focus of the inter-war period and towards the collection of "hard" statistical data on specific problems "scientifically" collected.'<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Margaretta Jolly reflects that 'the single most enduring complaint about Mass-Observation has been its "unrepresentativity", its "subjectivity" and "individuality"', but Jolly argues that its historicity can be conceived differently: "a cultural sociology of writing", she suggests, is "part of the logic of M-O itself."<sup>34</sup>

Scholars approaching the diaries from the perspective of life-writing studies, especially Jolly and Sheridan, have gone beyond the mining of the diaries for anecdotes about wartime life in

order to consider them as texts. Sheridan points out, for example, that while most diarists would be likely to have grasped the difference between subjective writing and social reportage, within the diaries themselves there is ‘no clear cut distinction [...] even where the dominant discourse is meant to be “objective”, there is a significant element of inadvertent self-disclosure or subjectivity.’<sup>35</sup> When Nella Last, one of the first Mass-Observers to have their diary published as a standalone volume, describes her and her husband’s sleeping arrangements in January 1942, she is ostensibly explaining how Air Raid Precautions have affected the household but she is also giving a glimpse of shifting marital dynamics that may or may not be a consequence of the conflict. Last writes that although she still sleeps in the Morrison shelter in the front room, her husband, now that the worse of the raids on Barrow seem to have passed, prefers to sleep upstairs in the bed that they have hitherto shared: ‘I’m often amused at my husband taking a whim to sleep upstairs alone – he would never have thought of such a thing once. I believe he would have been shocked at the idea of separate rooms. I like it – I can write as long as I like, wake up and read if I feel like it and, if I wake early, can put the light on and finish off a letter or have a read.’<sup>36</sup> Last expresses pleasure at these new arrangements because it gives her some freedom in how she uses her time, but it is impossible to disentangle the personal from the practical motives on the part of her and her husband, and to gauge exactly what emotion lies behind the word ‘amused’ in this entry.

Pratt, unlike Last, was already a diary-keeper prior to the advent of M-O, and, as I have noted, continued to write her own diary while sending material to the project, with the two types of entry being distinguished from each other in the published version. The juxtapositions created by this procedure illustrate what we might have already guessed: that, just as, in Sheridan’s view, individual diary entries veer from the subjective to social reportage, so there is no clear-cut line between private and public diaries. The subject is always a subject in history: Pratt’s Mass-Observation diary retains many of the subjective qualities of the personal one, and the personal one by no means ignores the pressures and strains of living through a time of historical trauma.

The transitions between, to use Sheridan's terms, 'social reportage' and 'self-disclosure', are often marked by their abruptness. Take for example the entry in Pratt's personal diary for 27 May 1941:

HMS *Hood* has been destroyed and intense fighting between British and German forces is going on in Crete. The whole Mediterranean situation seems to depend on the outcome of this battle - the destiny of Suez is being decided.

But I am enveloped in my own affairs. My period is two days late, and although I have no cause at all for alarm, I am alarmed.<sup>37</sup>

Pratt knows rationally that she should not be alarmed because although she has been to bed with her boyfriend, they have not had sexual intercourse. In the context of the diary as a whole, what might seem here to be paranoia borne of lack of sexual experience and a patchy sexual education can be read as a roundabout expression of Pratt's desire to have a child despite not being in a settled relationship. Although Pratt had a number of sexual relationships over the course of her life, she never married and had no children. But turning away from grave public events to personal worries could also be a way of deflecting the anxieties that news about the progress of the war is liable to provoke. Given that this is not her M-O diary, a reader might wonder why those wider events are recorded here at all, but this underlines the extent to which, even where intimate feelings and fears are concerned, the grounding of the personal in the historical can be important.

This is one example of gender-specific concerns coming to the fore in Pratt's diary.

Examining a selection pre-war M-O diaries, Liz Stanley considers whether they bear out a 'separate spheres' reading of men's and women's concerns, with men focusing on the public and women on the domestic. Stanley observes that there do appear to be gendered differences in, for example, how food is discussed: 'men, for whom meals simply appeared on tables at the appropriate times are not likely to comment on either this product or the labour which produced it.'<sup>38</sup> The historical exclusion of women from public life has contributed to the perception of the diary as a female form, one in which women can explore aspects of their subjectivity that have no outlet either in the social realm or even in the society of other women. Stanley notices that in the

run-up to the Second World War, men were more likely to write about political events and their likely outcome than were women, but, importantly, once the war begins, the domestic, and particularly the distribution of food, becomes completely politicised, a reminder that, in fact, it always already was, just perhaps not in ways that were immediately legible or scriptable to women at the time. Indeed, according to Stanley, women become more confident in assessing and expressing opinions on political events as the war progresses.

It is fair to say, though, that while historical events find their way into Pratt's personal diary, the more intimate details about her personal relationships, such as this pregnancy scare, are absent from the Mass-Observation diary. Such reticence was not uniformly the case; in her M-O diary, published as *Love & War in London* (2005), Olivia Cockett, who also kept a parallel 'private' diary, though hers has not survived, makes no secret of the fact that she is having a sexual affair with a married man. Rachel Dhonau, a married woman living in North Norfolk, mentions in her M-O diary in February 1942 that soap flakes are now rationed, and glosses this information with a comment that is likely to be surprising to a present-day reader: 'Another article that I use in the practice of birth control. I shall soon have to have a baby because we can't do anything else.'<sup>39</sup> Pratt, though, is more circumspect in what she reveals to M-O. In May 1945 she does include in her M-O diary some extracts from letters sent to her from Italy by her married lover for their historical interest, but she refrains from explaining who exactly he is.<sup>40</sup>

In November 1946, debating whether to continue writing both diaries, Pratt writes in her personal diary: 'this is the real diary. Here I feel free to write spontaneously [...] which is really what Mass-Observation wants (and may in time get from me these diaries too). I must just go on writing them both. The one recording superficial activities, the other inner.'<sup>41</sup> Although Pratt here characterises the two diaries differently, she simultaneously acknowledges the short-comings in her characterisation of M-O: the spontaneous diary is what they 'really' want. Again, the separation of the private and public, or as Pratt puts it here, the superficial and the inner, is shown to be an artificial one. Pratt's main concern is that the diary she sends to Mass-Observation should not contain material that reflects badly on others rather than to protect her own privacy

(though of course harsh judgements of others might also reflect badly on herself); she ceased sending in entries in 1947, at around the time when M-O, following a postwar slump, had made a successful appeal for new contributors.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, her involvement in the M-O project serves to complicate, rather than simplify, the purpose of her existing diary. It is also possible that Pratt is here seeing M-O as a conduit to publication of the diary as a whole, which was eventually, albeit indirectly, the case.

Applying David Trotter's categorisation of early twentieth-century communication technologies to M-O, James Purdon has suggested that the project attempts to bridge the gap between the representational and the connective, or, between 'a supposedly immaterial world of pure information and a material world of practical effects.'<sup>43</sup> The collective nature of the project, manifested, as Purdon notes, not only in the diaries but in other projects the organisation undertook, was a key way of shifting focus from the individual to the group. Although M-O asked its contributors to describe their own experiences, many were at pains to elicit and record in their diaries the views and stories of their workmates, family members, and even passing strangers, taking the 'anthropological' aspects of project seriously; indeed, as Purdon notes, the 'increasing public profile of M-O', along with its formal links to the Ministry of Information, which were being established at the time when Pratt became involved, made it 'a prime target for conspiracy theorists' especially during the so-called 'Invasion Scare' in early 1940.<sup>44</sup> If M-O's request was for individual records that could eventually be mined to form a collective history, many of its contributors, including Pratt, were keen to emphasise the extent to which individual experiences, particularly of war, could not be disaggregated from the collective. The publication of M-O contributors' diaries as stand-alone texts could be seen as refocusing a (perhaps utopian) collective endeavour onto the bourgeois individual subject, but those individual diaries necessarily divert the reader back to their over-arching social and historical context.

## **Conclusion**



On 4 May 1945, in her M-O diary, Pratt describes hearing the announcement that the war in Europe will officially end in the next day or so. She is ‘moved to tears by this historic, this incredible moment.’ She is writing in bed: ‘It’s time I tried to sleep. One of the cats is outside my window wanting to be let in. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow stretch before me. [...] The atmosphere is charged with a release and potentiality. And the bottom sheet, in an exceedingly frail condition from old age and much hard wear, is now torn beyond hope and redemption. I am sick to death of patching worn linen.’<sup>46</sup> The self-consciousness in this juxtaposition of world historical news and the mundane annoyance of a worn bed-sheet would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to convey in any other kind of life-writing. Pratt appears to be aware of the bathos not only of her own concerns as the war end, but also of the clichéd, not-quite apt allusion to Shakespeare. The collision of the self-aggrandising and the self-deprecating is a quality Pratt’s diary shares with many of those that she herself held in high esteem. Her diaries are a rich historical document that cannot quite dare believe it might be important, even while hoping that this could, one day, be the case.

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Lucey Pratt, *A Notable Woman: The Romantic Journals of Jean Lucey Pratt*, ed. by Simon Garfield (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2015), p. 120. This article draws on ‘“This was the present then. This was true”: Diaries, Autobiography and History’, a keynote talk I gave at ‘Writing Herself in the World’, Université Paris Ouest, October 2016. Many thanks to Dr Corinne Bigot and the other members of FAAAM for inviting me to this event.

<sup>2</sup> Felicity Nussbaum, ‘Toward Conceptualizing Diary’, in *Studies in Autobiography*, ed. by James Olney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 128-140 (p. 134).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, ‘How to Read a Diary’, *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 56.4 (2003): 45-62 (59).

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Madge, quoted in James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Sheridan, 'Writing to the Archive: Mass-Observation as Autobiography', *Sociology*, 27.1 (1993): 27-40 (31).

<sup>7</sup> Ella Ophir, 'The Diary and the Commonplace Book: Self-Inscription in *The Note Books of a Woman Alone*', *Biography*, 38.1 (2015): 41-55 (53)

<sup>8</sup> Simon Garfield, who has edited a number of anthologies of extracts from diaries held at the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex, notes that positive reactions from readers to Pratt's writing led him to contact her surviving family members, resulting in the discovery of two hundred loose pages and forty-five exercise books of diary. See Garfield, 'Introduction', in *A Notable Woman*.

<sup>9</sup> Margaretta Jolly, 'Historical Entries: Mass-Observation Diarists 1937-2001', *New Formations*, 44 (2001): 110-25 (125).

<sup>10</sup> Pratt, *A Notable Woman*, p. 563.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 583.

<sup>12</sup> Kate O'Brien, *English Diaries and Journals* (London: William Collins, 1943), p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> William Plomer, 'Kilvert's Country', *Horizon*, 1.3 (1940): 167-71 (169).

<sup>14</sup> Kate Briggs, 'The Making of *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*', *Textual Practice*, 25.6 (2011): 1033-50 (1037; 1038).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Leonard Woolf incorporated further extracts from Virginia Woolf's diaries into the account of her death in *The Journey not the Arrival Matters: An Autobiography of the Years 1939-1969* (London: Hogarth Press, 1969), pp. 87-90.

<sup>16</sup> Valérie Basinée, '“My Many Selves”: A Reassessment of Katherine Mansfield's *Journal*', in *Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism*, ed by Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber and Susan Reid (London: Continuum, 2011) pp. 178-87 (p.179).

<sup>17</sup> Pratt, *A Notable Woman*, p.442.

<sup>18</sup> Marie Bashkirtseff, *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff*, trans. by Mathilde Blind (London: Virago, 1985), p. 676.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.45.

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- <sup>20</sup> Judy Simons, *Diaries and Journals of Literary Women from Fanny Burney to Virginia Woolf* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 1.
- <sup>21</sup> W. N. P. Barbellion, *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1919), p. 139.
- <sup>22</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Rambling Round Evelyn', in *The Common Reader: First Series* (1925; London: Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 110-20 (p. 110); cited in Pratt, *A Notable Woman*, p. 97. *The Common Reader* also contains Woolf's essay 'Modern Fiction', in which 'impressions' are described as a 'shower of innumerable atoms' pp. 184-95 (p. 189). This image seems to me to be echoed in Pratt's diary entry from December 1934, quoted at the start of this essay, in which 'facts' are 'showered indiscriminately' upon the diarist, further suggesting that she may have owned a copy *The Common Reader*. Pratt's copying into her diary of extracts from authors such as Woolf is an example of what Ophir terms 'commonplacing', a practice that historically has links to 'the project of self-cultivation through reading' but which is also often evidence of limited access to books; extracts might be copied from books that had been borrowed from libraries as a way of preserving them for future reference. (Ophir, 'The Diary', 45) In Pratt's case, extracts from books she owned are included in her diary as a prompt to reflection, and so the diary becomes a way of working through, via writing, thoughts that might have been provoked when the material was first read.
- <sup>23</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Rambling Round Evelyn', p. 119.
- <sup>24</sup> Philippe Lejeune, 'The Practice of the Private Journal' (1999), in *On Diary*, trans and ed, by Jeremy Popkin and Julie Rak (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), p. 47.
- <sup>25</sup> Pratt, *A Notable Woman*, p. 146.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 173.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 436.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 548.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 561.
- <sup>30</sup> Victoria Stewart, *Women's Autobiography: War and Trauma* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp. 84-109.
- <sup>31</sup> Emma Casey, Fiona Courage and Nick Hubble, 'Special Section Introduction: Mass Observation as Method', *Sociological Research Online* 19.3 (2014) <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/19/3/22.html>
- <sup>32</sup> Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, p. 287.
- <sup>33</sup> Tony Kushner, *We Europeans? Mass-Observation, 'Race' and British Identity in the Late Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 20014), 13.

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<sup>34</sup> Jolly, 'Historical Entries', 110

<sup>35</sup> Dorothy Sheridan, 'Writing to the Archive', 32.

<sup>36</sup> Nella Last, *Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of Housewife, 49*, ed. by Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (London: Profile, 2006), p. 179.

<sup>37</sup> Pratt, *A Notable Woman*, p. 235.

<sup>38</sup> Liz Stanley, 'Women Have Servants and Men Never Eat: Issues in Reading Gender, Using the Case-Study of Mass-Observation's 1937 Day-Diaries', *Women's History Review* 4.1 (1995): 85-102 (96).

<sup>39</sup> Robert Malcolmson and Peter Searby (eds.), *Wartime Norfolk: The Diary of Rachel Dhonau 1941-1942* (Norwich: Norwich Record Society, 2004), p. 105.

<sup>40</sup> Pratt, *A Notable Woman*, p.353.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 408.

<sup>42</sup> Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, p. 345.

<sup>43</sup> James Purdon, *Modernist Informatics: Literature, Information, and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 106.

<sup>44</sup> Purdon, *Modernist Informatics*, p. 113.

<sup>46</sup> Pratt, *A Notable Woman*, p. 352.