

***Seven Lives from Mass Observation*, by James Hinton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016; pp. viii + 207. £25.00).**

This book follows James Hinton's 2010 book *Nine Wartime Lives* in its method, form and concerns.¹ In that book, Hinton took nine of the individuals who kept diaries for Mass Observation (MO) during the Second World War, and, devoting nine chapters to biographical studies of each. A central theme of the book was the growth of currents of individualism and democratization in British society: Hinton saw these diarists as in the vanguard of a developing self-reflexivity that would come to be dominant by the late twentieth century. In his new book, Hinton takes seven individuals who contributed to the revived Mass Observation Project (MOP) for twenty-five years or more after 1981 and constructs biographies of each in seven central chapters, in order to explore the social and cultural revolutions of the twentieth century from the perspective of the individual.

Hinton's seven case-studies were all born between 1921 and 1934, and come from a range of backgrounds and occupations. Four are women: the wife of a small businessman from West London, a schoolteacher from South London, a social worker who lived in Surrey and Yorkshire, and the wife of an RAF pilot who lived in Hertfordshire and South Wales. Three are men: a mechanic and manager from North London and Sussex, a lorry driver from North London and Essex and a banker who lived in the south-east.

MO was founded in 1937 to create an 'anthropology of ourselves'; it recruited a panel of Observers to write freeform responses to directives, and then, during the war, asked for diary entries to give a picture of daily life and morale.² MO declined in the 1950s but was started up again in 1981. A new panel of Observers were recruited and were sent thrice-yearly directives on an eclectic array of topics to respond to. The Observers write anonymously, but individuals can be tracked using the code of numbers and letters each is assigned. As Hinton points out, the post-1981 MO project material has mainly been studied horizontally, but in this book he traces individuals

¹ Hinton, James. *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass-Observation and the Making of the Modern Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

² See also Hinton, James. *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937-1949*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

vertically, using their responses to directives over many years to piece together biography and attitudes. This is the central source material of the book. Though the Observers are a self-selecting and far from 'representative' sample of the population, the extensiveness and thoughtfulness of their writing makes the archive a rich resource.

In any case, the aim is not to use these individuals as 'representatives' of wider groups. Hinton gave a compelling defence of his approach in *Nine Wartime Lives*, where he argued that extensive self-narratives like those of the diligent Mass Observers provide vital material to track changing subjectivities and understand the way individuals navigated – and thus shaped – the political, economic, social and cultural changes of their lifetimes. In *Seven Lives* he emphasises again that close study of a small number of individuals can do more than just provide another way of narrating the 'interpretations already established in the researcher's mind' (6): it can also challenge existing analyses and inject more unusual viewpoints into the historical record. Indeed, Len (a mechanic and later manager) wrote with the hope that he might be 'directing future historians to a line of investigation ... not universally considered' (93), and the book is at its best when it is doing just this. Len's story, for example, gives us a view of the progressive teaching methods of the 1960s from the relatively unusual perspective of a sceptical working-class father who wanted a rigorous, old-fashioned education for his sons. Len was enraged by one teacher who told him, 'they were not training young people to be factory fodder. They were being educated to enjoy a richer and fuller experience of life' (95). Len's words give us a sense of how and why some individuals reacted against the growing emphasis on self-fulfilment in postwar Britain.

A central concern of the book is the rise of individualism, and Hinton argues that this had roots in cultural changes associated with the revolutions of what we might call the 'long 1960s', though it was also reinforced by many of the impulses associated with the Thatcherite politics of the 1980s. Hinton moderates his arguments in his previous work, here, suggesting that the desire for reflexive self-fashioning can probably be traced back centuries, at least, and that the MO diarists of the wartime years may not have been such pioneers as he suggested in *Nine Wartime Lives*. What

changed, he suggests, was that people were given more opportunities to record their project of self-fashioning in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Hinton does want to argue that individualism rose and deference declined in the late twentieth century, and this trend is one of the things his sources illuminate, as in the story of Helen, an unsatisfied, Conservative RAF wife, who in the 1960s discovered Labour politics and liberal social values. Helen's story disrupts some typical assumptions relating to 'cultural revolution', however, demonstrating that it was not always the preserve of the young in the sixties. It also shows that the generation gap was not always that large, for Helen said her own children were 'my greatest source of intelligent learning' (85).³

Each of the biographical studies is fascinating, giving an insight into the complex and contradictory internal lives of the individual writers. This sort of source material naturally tends to stress diversity and complexity, but *Seven Lives* is most satisfying when it draws out more general arguments too; for example, in its analysis of how the cultural (particularly gender) revolutions of the postwar period were experienced and understood by a generation born before the Second World War. The men in the book, socialized in a time when what it meant to 'be a man' was assumed to be biologically and culturally timeless, had trouble reacting with much but anger towards 'women's lib'. Meanwhile, all the women in the book were aware of the changes in norms of sex, marriage and gender in postwar Britain, and some were profoundly changed by them (like Helen). For Caroline, the wife of a Thatcherite small businessman, new ideas had much less impact than older assumptions about a woman's role and a woman's duty – though Caroline was pleased when her unhappy daughter-in-law sought a divorce, and reflected in 1991 that the difference between them was 'in the generations and [in] ideas about women could or should do' (35). Even she was not entirely unaffected by new ideas about the rights of women to individual fulfilment. The responses of this generation to post-1968 feminism, the 'swinging sixties', and student radicalism are too often overlooked or caricatured by those who want to see the young as the bearers of

³ An important conclusion also in Todd, Selina, and Hilary Young, 'Baby-boomers to 'Beanstalkers': Making the modern teenager in post-war Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 9 (2012), 451-467.

Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite f.sutcliffe-braithwaite@ucl.ac.uk

revolution. But in this book Hinton makes a powerful case for seeing the men and women of this prewar generation, too, as central to making the twentieth century what it was.

F. SUTCLIFFE-BRAITHWAITE

University College London