

## Observing the 'Other': Mass-Observation and 'Race'

One of my favourite quotes comes from a Mass-Observation Directive on 'Social Divisions' carried out in Spring 1990. One of the questions asked is 'you always/often/sometimes feel that you belong to a minority in British society, and if so how and in what circumstances?' The Observer responded bluntly that he knew 'damned fine I belong to a minority!' He was a lapsed Catholic of long standing, married to a Jew, a member of Mensa (2% of the population), with no television (2% of the population), and a transvestite. He concluded that 'I reckon I must be pretty well bloody unique'.<sup>1</sup> My own background corresponds very little to these precise categories, but I can claim an equal interest in the subject of 'difference' which has, indirectly, brought me into contact with the Mass-Observation Archive since 1983. I was born in Manchester in a Jewish (though minority reform) family, brought up in a household that consisted of a disabled mother and deaf-blind brother. I thus became aware of different worlds, even in suburban Britain, from an early age. At Sheffield University I studied Economic and Social History in one of the few departments in the country which allowed the study of the subject without a fixation on quantitative methods and the resultant destruction of human individuality through number crunching techniques. Moreover, Sheffield was the only place in Britain where one could study minorities, prejudice, and the irrational in history. When I moved on to doctoral work on British anti-Semitism during the Second World War, the Mass-Observation Archive was the ideal source for my research. I was determined to avoid a top down or institutional approach to the study of racism and intolerance in British society. British radical right groupings have been subject to detailed examination by historians and social scientists. There is no doubting the virulence of their racist ideology aimed at Afro-Caribbeans, Asians, Jews and others, but organisations such as the British Union of Fascists and the National Front only carried the support of a minority of the British population. As a sample of general racial attitudes such fanatics were in no way typical.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, I wanted to look at the reactions and responses of ordinary people towards the Jews and how Jews and non-Jews got on in 'everyday' life. Where did people's attitudes towards Jews come from and did they change over time? What was the relationship between anti-Semitism and British culture? Academic friends told me such questions were all very interesting but how was I going to answer them? The Mass-Observation Archive was my hoped for solution. My somewhat optimistic faith in the organisation proved to be correct - although their work in the late 1930s and through the Second World War was uneven, it became apparent that the interests and concerns of this experimental organisation over forty years earlier were similar to my own.

I used the Mass-Observation Archive extensively for my thesis and the book that came out of it. The groundwork of paid Mass-Observation investigators proved to be of immense help in reconstructing daily life in the East End during the blitz and the evacuation areas and analysing the impact of these momentous aspects of Home Front life on Jewish/non-Jewish relations. Other topic collections on anti-Semitism and politics, and directives/reports on race/nationality carried out in 1939, 1940 and 1943 were of great importance in studying the complex question of the place of 'the Jew' in British culture as well as specific episodes such as alien internment in 1940.<sup>3</sup>

Shortage of time meant that I was only able to sample a fraction of the voluminous war diary material which is such a rich part of the Archive. Subsequently, however, I have been able to use them extensively for a study of the liberal democracies and the Holocaust. The area of the Allies and the Holocaust is a growth area but all the existing literature concentrates on governmental responses and international diplomacy and ignores or simplifies the responses of ordinary people. I believe a social history perspective on this subject is essential. There is an understandable tendency in Holocaust studies - given the scale of the catastrophe - to suggest it is beyond comprehension. There is also a counter-risk of facile comparisons being made with other manifestations of intolerance in the recent past. Yet if no attempt is made to historicise the Holocaust there is a danger of total mystification taking place. By studying the responses of ordinary people in a country such as Britain to the persecution of the Jews some of these problems can be overcome. On the one hand, the difficulty of understanding the nature of the Nazis' extermination policy and of identifying with the victims is made clear by the Mass-Observation war diaries. On the other, the complicated mechanisms by which information was received from official, media and private sources is revealed by the diaries. Questions of 'knowing' and 'believing', which have puzzled those who have studied the Holocaust, are taken from the realm of theory and made concrete by the five hundred people who kept diaries for Mass-Observation in the war.<sup>4</sup>

The use I have made of the Mass-Observation Archive for the two studies outlined above allowed an 'extra dimension' to my work - to use the phrase coined by Nick Stanley in the first major history of the organisation.<sup>5</sup> After many years working in the Archive, it became apparent that rather being an interest of greater or lesser importance, questions of 'race' and racism were of central concern to the early Mass-Observation. I thus decided to embark on an anthology of Mass-Observation with regard to race and ethnicity. The Spring 1990 directive on 'social divisions' added fresh possibilities for this study. The directive produced hundreds of replies, some running into scores of pages. It enabled a detailed analysis not only of attitudes today but how they had changed since the earlier Mass-Observation carried out their work in this area. The rest of this paper will provide a glimpse into this project entitled 'Observing the 'Other''. It offers a sample of both the old and the new as well as the range of material to be examined in the anthology.

### **1. Mass-Observation and the Discovery of the 'other'**

How did Mass-Observation become interested in 'race' and difference in Britain? One is tempted to suggest by accident, but I think the founders with their love of serendipity would be pleased if I added that their open approach almost made its discovery inevitable. I would argue that the whole project, especially as envisaged by Tom Harrisson, was highly racialised from the start. As a 'pop' anthropologist deeply influenced by Bronislaw Malinowski, and with a particular fixation on cannibals, Harrisson was interested in tribal behaviour and the categorisation of groups. Thus in one of Mass-Observation's founding documents written with Charles Madge, Harrisson states:

In the local surveys undertaken by Mass-Observation, the observers will not be visiting anthropologists, but the "natives" themselves. The anthropology of whites requires an unusual objectivity, which can only be assured by covering the whole of the ground.

Ironically, in the light of what follows, Harrisson assumed that the British people were ethnically homogeneous, hence the idea of bringing *in* Chinese and Negroes to observe an English ritual - the Coronation:

'we are already enlisting Observers of all colours and races. The interchange of Observers between different countries and different races is of even more far-reaching importance than interchange between Wigan and Bournemouth, between cotton mill and London office. To see ourselves as others see us is the first step towards objectivity about other races. In our survey of the Coronation, Chinese and Negro Observers will be watching the strange version of King-making which persists in the midst of western innovations. They come from countries where Kingship was no anachronism till western influence subverted and destroyed it.<sup>6</sup>

As an important aside, although Harrisson initially revealed an ethnocentrism in his ignorance of British diversity at home, he also showed an appealing belief in racial equality - not only could whites observe blacks objectively but the reverse was also true. In this he followed Malinowski, who had argued that the Trobriand Islanders could be compared to those in an 'Eastern European ghetto, an Oxford College, or a Fundamentalist Middle West community'. It needs to be stressed that at this point in time, sections of British anthropology were far from freed from assumptions of white racial superiority which had dominated and distorted the discipline before 1914. It was indeed academic anthropologists who were at the forefront of the campaign to isolate or remove the black presence from British ports in the inter-war years.<sup>7</sup> If Harrisson's idea of Mass-Observation observing the white cannibals of Bolton sounds far-fetched, even within the general eccentricity of the organisation, perhaps a glance at the approach of the latest ethnography exhibitions in British museums puts this into a different perspective. In Brighton and Birmingham, the original (and many would argue racist) ethnography displays have been replaced with a multi-cultural approach which presents twentieth century everyday British items with their 'equivalents' from a wide range of ethnic societies without comment or fuss.<sup>8</sup>

With regards to race and ethnicity, therefore, the founders of Mass-Observation started with assumptions of studying British similarity, *not* difference. Nevertheless, one of the items that appears in both the founding letter to *New Statesman* in January 1937 and the list of topics suggested by the early observers themselves was that of anti-Semitism.<sup>9</sup> Why was this included? The reason is not too hard to find in terms of contemporary concerns. Nazi persecution of the Jews was headline news and the issue was alive in Britain with the peaking of Mosleyite and anti-fascist activities climaxing with the Battle of Cable Street in October 1936. But how seriously was Mass-Observation going to take the question of anti-Semitism? Could it just be an oddity, here today and gone tomorrow like the aspidistra cult also listed in the initial letter or another quirky interest such as 'bathroom behaviour'? Alternatively,

was it part of the secret, mystical, magical aspect of British society, hidden at most times but able to erupt at times of crisis - one of the underground themes which so fascinated the founders with their interest in anthropology, psychology, sociology and surrealism? At this stage and perhaps for a further two or three years, the leaders of Mass-Observation and especially Harrisson could not make up their minds. As we will see shortly, a large survey was carried out on anti-Semitism in 1939 with extensive fieldwork undertaken in the East End. I would suggest that all this work quite clearly illustrated that British antipathy towards Jews had domestic roots, yet Harrisson was convinced in September 1939 that the war against the anti-Semitic Nazis would destroy domestic antipathy towards Jews. Yet within only a few months of the start of the war, Mass-Observation were certain that this had not been the case and it was clear that Harrisson's glib earlier assumption had been wrong. Indeed, anti-Semitism became one of the few subjects to be studied regularly and in depth by Mass-Observation, before, during and after the war as late as 1951 when the organisation in its original format went into abeyance.<sup>10</sup>

The decision to locate the anti-Semitism project in the East End was an obvious one. First, this was where anti-Semitism, including its blatant fascist form, was most notorious in Britain. Second, this was still the area of largest Jewish concentration in Britain following the mass immigration from Eastern Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. Third, Mass-Observation had close links with those in the area connected to the University settlement house movement and they continued the tradition of social investigation into this infamous district. A report on the East End survey was written by Mass-Observation, revealing the early organisation's usual endearing mix of the profound and the absurd. Harrisson's influence as ornithologist, as well as explorer of the New Hebrides, is clear:

What are the differences between Jews and Cockneys? How much do they mix up together? Do the differences affect Anti-Semitism?

In asking these questions, we had first of all to make an assumption about the answer. Obviously we had to establish some criteria for ourselves to judge the difference between Jews and Cockneys in observation. We started doing this after ten days' preliminary work, in which the Observers did little more than wander about all over the East End, get into all sorts of places and among all sorts of people, listen and look and discuss. By the end of this period, Observers were able with reasonable accuracy to distinguish a Jew from a Cockney in at least 9 cases out of 10. In all subsequent observations, the Jews and Cockneys were distinguished by physical characteristics, and in borderline cases of uncertainty the people were omitted.<sup>11</sup>

We have moved from seeing Britain as a whole and now, as Harrisson put it in a BBC television documentary on the East End in 1939 (sadly no longer in existence), were embarking on a foreign expedition: 'this East End of London is just as interesting to me as the Arctic or Pacific Islands were when I was an explorer'.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis was now firmly on difference. This, in fact, revealed some of the limitations of Mass-Observation's early vision. The only way of maintaining the fiction of homogeneous Britain was to see places such as the East End (and, in later studies, Tiger Bay and

Liverpool 1) as somehow foreign. There were, according to Mass-Observation, two tribes in the East End: Jews and Cockneys (with a few Lascars and Chinese thrown in to provide further exotica). The Board of Deputies of British Jews had largely financed the East End project and they were far from amused with its findings. A member of the Board looked it over and concluded that the survey should not continue to be funded - not unless, she/he quipped 'it is [thought] worthwhile having statistics showing the relative number of strawberry and vanilla ice-creams consumed by Jews and non-Jews respectively, then of course the investigation had better be continued till the hot weather arrives.' This was all good knockabout stuff, obvious criticisms to which Mass-Observation's often surreal approach left them open. But a more fundamental flaw was revealed by a Jewish East Ender, Julian Franklyn, employed by the Board to examine the report. He stressed that the Jewish-Cockney division was totally false. It did not respond to the reality of pluralism and the complexity of identities in the East End. Referring to himself as a Jewish Cockney, he concluded that the report was based on 'inexpert anthropology', accused Mass-Observation of Bloomsbury Bohemianism, and asked 'who are these innocents abroad?'<sup>13</sup>

Yet there was far more in this survey than Franklyn and the Board recognised. The report and its related research shows the strength as well as the early idiosyncrasies of early Mass-Observation. Harrisson wrote to the Board acknowledging that 'it has... taken some time to get our Observers and technique adjusted to this new problem'.<sup>14</sup> As the historical appendix to the Mass-Observation report indicated, anti-Semitism was hardly a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that the *study* of anti-Semitism in 1939 was practically undeveloped in Britain and elsewhere. As frequently was the case, Mass-Observation started in a naive, literal manner. Anything that was alleged against the Jews had to be objectively and scientifically measured - to the extent of observing the colour of ties worn by Jews (to see if indeed they were more flashy) and their attendance at dirty picture machines (not to mention their tendency - relative, of course to the other tribes in the East End - to whistle in urinals). The voyeuristic tendency within Mass-Observation was brought to the fore with regard to the consumption of pornography. One wonders if the Observers were disappointed to find out that after three hours of analysis of one of the '10 dirty machines [which we] studied in dirty detail' (with such treats as 'Eve's Exercise' and 'That Schoolgirl Complexion'), there were just ten punters - nine of them belonging the Cockney tribe. Jews, Mass-Observation proudly announced, were not, as widespread belief would have it, 'more vulgar-minded than Cockneys'.<sup>15</sup> It is easy to poke fun at this straightfaced approach to the peculiar, but again the context has to be kept in mind. During the 1930s the Board of Deputies and other Jewish bodies spent scarce resources distributing Jewish defence literature. This material, which circulated in the millions and stressed the true level of Jewish involvement in British life, had the explicit aim of combating anti-Semitic accusations that were current at the time.<sup>16</sup> But if Mass-Observation began its anti-Semitism survey by starting out with a rational, common-sense approach - analysing how much of a problem Jews really caused - it found, very soon, that anti-Semitism was not caused by Jewish behaviour. In what might now seem commonplace, but was then decades ahead of its time, Harrisson concluded that 'the whole subject of anti-Semitism appears to

exist on a level not of fact but of fantasy'. Although the fantastic element was not pursued by Mass-Observation to anything like its full potential, it showed the way for the later pathbreaking work of Norman Cohn on the role of irrational belief in history. Cohn has been described as 'the historian of important parts of history that other historians do not reach: the collective myths that underpin the assumptions, prejudices and beliefs which shake and shape human societies'. It is perhaps coincidence that Professor Cohn would carry out this work at the University of Sussex in the 1960s, the later home of the Mass-Observation Archive, but it is surely not accidental that he was one of the paid observers working on the anti-Semitism project in the East End during 1939.<sup>17</sup>

But there is even more to this report that would, in its slightly primitive form, predict research that is now at the cutting edge in the study of race and difference today. Once freed from the restraint of viewing anti-Semitism as a rational response to a real Jewish problem, Mass-Observation was able to dig deep into its roots. One approach was historical - how had the Jews been treated in England and elsewhere from the middle ages? It is worth stressing that in a recent historiographical review, Colin Richmond has highlighted how even today many mainstream historians of medieval England 'blame' the Jews for their own misfortune in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The historical survey carried out for Mass-Observation by a Mrs Dulanty was remarkable for its consistency in seeing the issue as 'the Gentile problem'. Moreover, her overview, although unoriginal in content, is astonishing in terms of very recent work in identifying the issue of racism in the context of the exclusivity of Britishness and the problems of nationalism with regard to ethnic difference.<sup>18</sup>

Taken in tandem with the third segment of the anti-Semitism survey, the similarity with the very best in modern approaches nears completion. By asking the panellists about the origins of their attitudes to a range of minority groups, Mass-Observation was aware of the importance of culture, and in this case, British culture, in the formation of what Bryan Cheyette, Paul Gilroy and other cultural theorists working in the area now call racial representations.<sup>19</sup> Mass-Observation believed that childhood was a crucial stage in the formation of attitudes towards minority groups. Thus as part of the anti-Semitism project in 1939 they carried out a school survey in 1939 obtaining brief essays and sketches from a range of boys and girls. The power of contemporary influences - whether they be high or low culture - Shakespeare as well as comics, the music hall, parents and other relations, friends, popular films, school teaching in a range of disciplines, were clearly evident in these responses in the construction of 'the Jew' (and in this case 'the Negro'). They had to be considered as well as common-sense, everyday observations. Brief excerpts from two of the essays show the strength of racist thought from children who had probably never encountered the minority they were describing, but also the importance of mixed feelings towards 'Others'.

The first was by a thirteen year old female on 'What I Think About The Jews':

Notorious for their supposed meanness, the Jews are now suffering under someone else's meanness. I did not know until recently that the Jews owned the cinemas, and most of the big shops, and hold an important position in the world

of finance in England. Also I cannot imagine how they managed to own the diamond mines in South Africa.

Everyone is sorry that the Jews have no nationality, no land and nowhere where they can live peacefully, and are buffeted from place to place on the face of what is called an earth of humanity.

The second by a twelve year old male, is entitled 'Niggers'. Apart from the range of images evoked, the response is interesting for the writer's unease with racist terminology, even if he eventually succumbs to a word he realises is offensive:

Niggers, or rather Negroes [blackies crossed out] are the inhabitants of Africa and numerous small islands in the Pacific.

The Negroes [blackies crossed out] we find in America are not true inhabitants of that country, they were imported from Africa as Slaves.

The negroes [blackies crossed out] who inhabit Australia and New Zealand are Maoris and came from one of the Pacific islands.

A black person's teeth are usually white, so are the whites of his eyes.

Negroes [niggers crossed out] are keen spiritualists as their songs show us.

When the Slaves became free men they did not return to Africa, but were employed in America.

A nigger has often [usually crossed out] a very good voice.<sup>20</sup>

After only a few months work Mass-Observation realised that attitudes towards Jews were rarely straightforward. First, most people were ambivalent towards Jews and could not be easily categorised as hostile or sympathetic. Second, the role of subterranean influences in society, which owed more to magic than the rational, had to be seen as central to the question:

the whole subject of Anti-Semitism appears to exist on a level of not of fact but of fantasy. Actually Anti-Semitism has not emerged strongly in [our] report, but rather what we may term UNSEMITISM, i.e., Cockney and Jew living together in the same street and often in the same house, but living in different social worlds.

The use of the term 'unsemitism' again shows the far-sighted nature of the report. It in some ways predicts the term 'allo-semitism' used by the Polish critic and novelist Artur Sandauer (and developed further by Bryan Cheyette with regard to representations of Jews in English literature) in rejecting the normal applicability of the terms 'anti-Semitism' or 'philosemitism' to describe most people's views in constructing and dealing with the 'Other'.<sup>21</sup>

There were limitations to the East End project. Not untypically, Mass-Observation had difficulty in assimilating all they had gathered on anti-Semitism and realising its full potential. Perhaps the speed with which they worked and their lack of secure funding offers some excuse for their repeating some of the same errors in the East End during the war. During the blitz, the observers still insisted on seeing the Jews as not just different but as somehow apart from other East Enders. They could not overcome their belief, against all the evidence, that the very nature of the Cockney was rooted in

diversity. This sense of foreignness haunts the reports Mass-Observation made on the two largest black settlements in Britain before the 1950s - Liverpool 1 and Tiger Bay in Cardiff. I will concentrate on the latter, written in 1941 and a reminder of the semi-official role played by Mass-Observation during the Second World War. Its policy orientation means that the usual free-flowing consciousness and unusual flavour of early Mass-Observation is lost and is replaced by a rather arid official tone. In addition, there is a moral rigidity at work - Tiger Bay is damned because it does not reveal 'the normal culture patterns of community interests'. Furthermore, the stress on inter-illegitimacy hints at fears of racial miscegenation that had so haunted the anthropologists referred to earlier involved with blacks in British ports:

Practically every race on earth is represented here in an intricate pattern of inter-marriage and inter-illegitimacy. Half the whole coloured seamen population of Great Britain resides in Tiger Bay.'

And yet the very matter of fact approach adopted, even with its patronising attitude, puts the report ahead of its time in terms of the usual racist sensationalism adopted towards Tiger Bay. Moreover, there is an acknowledgement of the role of white Cardiff, with its blatant colour bars in employment, housing and social facilities, in isolating Tiger Bay. Nevertheless, the report stops short of any real understanding of the dynamics of the community, or, more accurately, communities themselves. Ultimately the report fails to understand that the transience of many of those in Tiger Bay was, ironically, what made them so rooted, so much part of this half square mile area. This was not a foreign area, but a still evolving part of Cardiff history with its origins stretching back a hundred years. But a perspective such as this would be a long time in coming. Indeed, it was as late as 1993 before an 'insiders' history of Tiger Bay was published.<sup>22</sup>

## **2. Mass-Observation and Personal Testimony**

Before moving onto the modern material, I want to spend a little time on the personal testimony gathered by the earlier Mass-Observation with regard to 'race'. One of the most frequent criticisms levelled at Mass-Observation is that its sample was warped in terms of accurately representing a cross section of the British population. It is countered that it is the quality, scale and depth of material gathered that matters. Moreover, it is the very subjective nature of the replies that makes them so useful. I would argue similarly for the material on 'race' - although the absence of what one might now call ethnic minority observers in the 1930s/1940s, and today *is* a limitation. What emerges for the historical material, however, is the frequency with which encounters involving a range of ethnic groups - or the expression of attitudes towards them - were in Britain. Whether Observers came into day to day contact with other ethnic and racial groups, their diaries indicate an interest and occasionally an obsession about their presence. Indeed, this is one of the points I will stress in the anthology by using both the modern and historical material. The assumption is often made - most recently and crudely in the Isle of Dogs by mainstream local politicians - that Britain in the past was a monocultural society

with very limited if not non-existent ethnic diversity. Mass-Observation diaries and directives for the war totally dispel that notion, if, at the same time, they also expose the deep roots of anti-alienism and racism in British culture (as well as the sincere relationships that developed across ethnic and racial divisions).

I will use three examples of Mass-Observation materials. The first two come from the 1944 diaries of a couple 'the Ws' and a directive on Jews carried out in the summer of 1946. In some ways they reveal extreme tendencies towards the Jews - deeply sympathetic on the one hand and genocidally hostile on the other. It should not be assumed that this simply means that it only represents examples of what have been called the authoritarian and altruistic personalities. The hostile comments need to be put into perspective. They were articulated immediately after Zionist terrorists blew up the King David Hotel in the summer of 1946. Nevertheless, they expose how knowledge of what was to become known as the Holocaust, rather than necessarily creating sympathy for the Jews, could in contrast actually be used to further attack them and emphasise their marginality in society. What is also revealing in some of these directives is the honesty of the writer. Many initially outline what they feel they *should* think about the Jews and then slowly relate what they *do* think. The restraint at the beginning of the directives is often totally missing by the end as more and more murderous options are considered. On a personal level, even attempting to place these responses into the context of the emotional reactions to the bombing, they still shocked me like no other Mass-Observation material I have encountered. They are, in their small way, an important reminder that racism is not just a problem on the continent. Moreover, they also stress the genocidal way of thinking in modern European culture. It is always a salutary reminder that many Japanese tourists go to Auschwitz to confirm their belief in the barbarity of European civilisation. In that light, Bosnia is a fitting end to and not an aberration in twentieth century European history. They show how *liberal* antipathy towards minority difference can lead to a fascination with illiberal techniques to remove it:

The Jewish problem is created by the Jews themselves; no-one would interfere with Jews, not even Nazis, if they had not made themselves so conspicuous and hateful

If such a miracle were possible [and] in a few generations, if they dropped their practice about marriage with non-Jews, there would be no Jewish problem. Hitler had another method and I wonder if?

I have always been of the opinion that Hitler's treatment of the Jewish problem was the right one. I mean I should be glad if the entire Jewish nation was utterly exterminated. I should not approve of torturing them, but I think if it were possible to put them all into lethal chambers and destroy the lot it would be a very good thing. The only thing I disapproved of with regard to Hitler's Gas Chamber was that there were not enough, and, what there were, were not very efficiently run.

I am inclined to agree with Hitler that the best solution of the Jewish problem...would be to gas the lot.<sup>23</sup>

At the other end of the tolerance scale are the diaries of the Ws. It is especially through a detailed use of the war diaries that the complexity of ordinary people when dealing with the 'Other' can be illustrated. In this specific case the immense strain of confronting the European Jewish catastrophe is brought home. Reading the diaries has confirmed that information about the Jewish plight was available to ordinary people in Britain during the war - all stages of the persecution are referred to. Moreover, Mass-Observers referred to it in their diaries, especially in 1942 and 1943. The references tail off after mid-1943 reflecting the lack of interest shown in the subject by the British state from that point in time. Few, however, were willing to react to the information. The diaries of the Ws makes clear what was entailed in so doing. Historians have made sweeping comments about public opinion in countries such as Britain and the United States during the war with regard to European Jewry, especially alleging widespread anti-Semitism or indifference. The Ws were unusual in that their concern with the persecuted abroad remained constant throughout the war. Here is Mrs W, a railway clerk, writing in October 1944:

I cannot write what I feel about all this evil. My soul cries out in distress. I am a Jew, a Pole, a Greek, I am all women who are tortured, all children who are hurt, all men who die in agony.<sup>24</sup>

Mr W, a radio operator, gave his reaction to the news concerning the Nazi death camps a month earlier, revealing the problems that such information caused even thousands of miles away from the killing centres:

we hear that they are going to slaughter all the Poles in the concentration camps of Oswiecim & Warsaw... When I first heard about such things, many years before the war, they threw me into a state of sick horror from which it took me as much as a day to recover....Part of my intellect, which regards human life as supremely valuable & the only ultimate good, continually argues with me that I ought now to live perpetually in such a state...But of course it is impossible to live perpetually in contemplation of such things & remain sane. In practice I find I think of them comparatively little. For five minutes or so when I read an account in the newspapers, or my thoughts drift off to something else. Very occasionally, when I laugh, something inside me asks what right have you to laugh in a world where such things are? But it is only for a moment. No doubt it is inevitable & necessary. I tell myself however little I think of these things they have entered too deeply in my heart's core for me to be in any danger of really forgetting them. I hope I am not mistaken. For they appear to make very little impression on most people. One still meets some who try to make out that these stories are not true, that they are lies, or propaganda, or what not. Perhaps this is one of the greatest of problems for civilised life; how is one to combine a sense of universal responsibility with ordinary day-to-day sanity.<sup>25</sup>

A third and most ambivalent (and therefore most typical) example comes from the diaries of Nella Last, perhaps one of the best known Mass-Observation writers. The entry, from May 1947, is significant because it stresses how it could be difficult, but not impossible, to surmount the obstacle of ethnic barriers in an everyday encounter (even if a residue of stereotyping remained intact). Nella Last has just had tea with a Jewish acquaintance, Mrs S, Mrs S's mother-in-law and Mrs S's mother (who was born in Russia):

If anyone had told me I would have felt more "kin" and at ease with two fat old Jewesses than I've felt for a long time with anyone, I'd have been surprised. But we sat and talked of the state of things in general and I felt *very* surprised at their views...I keep thinking of old Mrs S. Her dignity like that of a prophet of old...her broken English as she spoke of her belief in goodness.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. The Contemporary Material

The Spring 1990 directive of the revived Mass-Observation on social divisions had a large section devoted to race and cultural difference, including the questions:

How much do you have regular dealings with people of a different race from your own? Are you in any way at all affected by the difference? How much, would you say, do you encounter real cultural differences and can you describe your feelings in such encounters? How many people of differing race do you meet socially and regularly? Where do you meet?

Is the plural society with cultural diversity a good thing? Should there be limits on the extent to which differences are tolerated? Ideally, would it be better to have uniformity of language and culture? Is there a "British character" or "National identity"? If you think there are, how would you describe either or both? Are there some demands for "rights" which you think are unfounded or dangerous?

It is a large survey with over 400 replies.<sup>27</sup> Such a mountain of material makes generalisations difficult - itself an important point in an area where assumptions are often lacking in subtlety and sophistication. There are, however, some aspects that emerge strongly. First, the honesty and self-searching of the 1930s/40s directives is apparent in this later survey. Respondents often are very aware that some of their views are what might be crudely deemed 'politically incorrect', but they are, nevertheless, frank about their views and their possible origins. Second, the seemingly bizarre aspect of Mass-Observation continues - but perhaps this reflects the real nature of Britain once the surface respectability is removed. Moreover, the complexity of relations and responses to minorities are clearly revealed. In this respect, the reply of a Bristol man is both refreshing for its tolerance it suggests at one level as it is disturbing for the language used at another:

Different races...well, that aint my fault. niggers are contemptious of ME, I dont blame them I HONESTLY DONT.

Indians? I think I would have more in common with a wog than a whoite... spiritually, but since our only local wog is behind the counter of the post office and is POLITE... shows a little GRACE. Ok.

CHINKS? YES, I like chinese people...the best guy I ever met was a triad in a prison hospital ward. He was deported came back. drove a stolen car into a shop. got locked up. I wrote to him. he was very pleased to have been remembered. YOU see - he simply had this QUALITY. what is this integrity. this loveable something about STRAIGHT people?<sup>28</sup>

In its different way, there is much of the sentiment earlier expressed by Nella Last; the challenges and frustrations brought about through difference. Such Mass-Observation testimony provides multi-layered evidence that is rarely considered by those considering questions of race and diversity in contemporary Britain. Yet this is the substance of everyday reality in ordinary people's lives. Third, sociologists dominate the study of so-called 'race relations' in Britain. They have, with few exceptions, ignored the *history* of minority experience in Britain - thus those interested in Afro-Caribbeans and Asians ignore the earlier or contemporary experiences of Jews and other immigrant/minority groups. The argument is often put forward that a specific colonial discourse is at work against those of colour who arrived in Britain after 1945. The experience of earlier white immigrant/minority groups can thus be ignored. I think this analysis is flawed and that the 1990 Mass-Observation material, in conjunction with the earlier material, makes an alternative reading possible. I am not dismissing the colonial factor but would suggest that it needs to be seen as working in combination and intertwined with domestic-rooted traditions of anti- (and pro-) alienism.<sup>29</sup> The following two extracts highlight the importance of discourses and memories in place *before* 1945 for both minorities and the general population today. They show how the past and the present combine through myth and memory in the most complex of ways. They also reveal how perceptions on different sides of an ethnic divide in the same city can vary massively.

The first is from a retired head teacher in Barnsley:

In my early years I lived in Liverpool and had frequent contact with children of other 'races', though I don't like this word to describe people from other parts of the world. I went to school first with two boys of Chinese origin, whose father ran a Chinese laundry. Later, in the late 1920s and early 1930s my schoolfellows also included Indians, West Africans, Arabians, Armenians, Greeks, Portuguese, Lascars and, of course, Jews. It was noticeable that they were different in skin-colour, complexion, habits, religious observances and, in some cases, dress. They all seemed to be accepted into the community at various levels, mainly according to the jobs they did and I cannot remember any trouble between the groups. The area of Pitt Street (Toxteth...) had a large Chinese community where, it was alleged, opium smoking took place and police had to go on beat in pairs. But I didn't find any evidence to support the allegations. I left Liverpool (for college and the army) in 1938 and I had not heard of any "race" riots or bad community behaviour of any racial kind.<sup>30</sup>

The second is by a retired electrical engineer in Hertfordshire:

Being a "minority" in a British society is a very trying experience. As a son of an "alien" I should know....

Both my parents were Dutch. They came to England just before the First War, having eloped from Holland, and married in London whilst still in their teens. My brother was born in London in 1915, and I in Wallasey, Cheshire in 1922.

The period 1922 to 1939 was significant to us: first the stock market crash which took away my father's thriving warehouse and steam transport business in Liverpool, then the advent of "buy British" and hate anyone German or of German origin.

Being of Dutch extraction we were not German: but in the frenzy of mass unemployment, and the growth of German Nationalism - try telling that to other school boys being brought up on the grandness of the British Empire and the loss of British markets to foreigners....

Thus it was as a school boy, particularly when at grammar school I was subject to all the hatred that school boys could muster. Being dressed in tailor made plus fours, and carrying a leather german school bag did not help much. Also my father could speak German, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, fluently - because he was a natural linguist, ergo: he must be a spy also....

Consequently as a lad I suffered severely the taunts of my school mates, an experience which today's immigrants are spared as they are protected, rightly so, by our anti-racist laws. Today we are all more tolerant of "foreigners" especially those from Asia and Africa, and most deserve and appreciate our tolerance.<sup>31</sup>

Fourth, in terms of the study of race in Britain, the historical Mass-Observation material is extremely valuable because so little other material on this subject now exists. Today there is a vast amount of material on contemporary race issues, including opinion polls. Yet even here the modern Mass-Observation material provides that 'extra dimension'. The depth, honesty, detail and complexity of the Spring 1990 survey is of a totally different quality to that provided by the instant sampling of polls. To take one example, there are quite frequent cases in the survey, especially amongst older people, of hostility to race relations legislation. The reason for this is not necessarily that individuals are sympathetic to those that practise racism and discrimination. Nevertheless, they *do* feel patronised by governments who have not trusted the British public to discuss these issues openly and honestly. State policies on race and immigration since the 1960s have often been based on the assumption of widespread popular antipathy to newcomers and minorities. Although the Mass-Observation sample contains some out and out racists, this is far from the norm as represented by the survey. Ambivalence, as was the case in the 1930s and 1940s, is the most frequent response to difference, a factor that the state has failed to understand and legislate for.

In conclusion, I would suggest that whilst for historians the potential of the Mass-Observation Archive on race is tremendous, others interested in the area (and particularly sociologists) need to look at this source. Although the historical material is often clumsy and crude, there is within the Mass-Observation approach a way of analysing the subject matter which was ahead of its time. It is indeed still capable of challenging methodologies that have developed since 1945 in the study of 'race relations'. Moreover, the modern material is also an incredibly rich and original source - even in an area almost swamped in documentation. Together the old and new material show how past and present, and myth and reality have combined to produce the complexity of 'race' issues in twentieth century Britain. In ways that Tom Harrisson and the other founders of Mass-Observation may never have suspected, the British turn out to be the most diverse and interesting of tribes of which the 'white cannibals of Bolton' were only one example.

## Notes

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1. Mass-Observation Archive (M-O A): Spring 1990 Directive: W1125.
2. Tony Kushner, 'The Fascist as "Other"? Racism and Neo-Nazism in Contemporary Britain', *Patterns of Prejudice* Vol. 28 no 1 (1994), pp. 27-45.
3. Tony Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice: Antisemitism in Britain During the Second World War* (Manchester, 1989).
4. Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret* (London, 1980), introduction; Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford, 1994).
5. Nick Stanley, "'The Extra Dimension": a study and assessment of the methods employed by Mass-Observation in its first period, 1937-40' (unpublished PhD, Birmingham Polytechnic, 1981).
6. Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, *Mass-Observation* (London, 1937), pp.44-5; Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, *May 12th: Mass-Observation Day Surveys* (London, 1937).
7. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (London, 1926), p.52 quoted by Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945* (Cambridge, 1993), p.73; Paul Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics* (Cambridge, 1986), chapter 6; Elazar Barkan, *The retreat of scientific racism: Changing concepts of race in Britain and the United States between the world wars* (Cambridge, 1992).
8. See Stanley, "'The Extra Dimension'", pp.41-3 for Harrisson and 'the cannibals of Lancashire'; for 'The New Cultures Gallery' in Brighton, see *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 20 August 1993 and J. Jones Peirson, 'The Colonial Legacy and the Community: the Gallery 33 Project', in I. Karp et al. (eds.), *Museums and Communities* (Washington DC, 1992) for Birmingham.
9. *New Statesman*, 30 January 1939; Madge and Harrisson, "Mass-Observation" p.59.
10. See the correspondence between Harrisson and the Board of Deputies in the Board's Archive, C6/10/26; M-O A: TC Anti-Semitism (4 boxes which finish with the 1951 survey).
11. M-O A: FR 2515 (p.6a); Tom Harrisson, *Living Among Cannibals* (London, 1943).
12. The script is in M-O A: TC Anti-Semitism Box 1 File E.
13. Undated report, 1939 and Franklyn report, 12 April 1939 in Board of Deputies Archive, C6/10/26.
14. Harrisson to Neville Laski, President of the Board of Deputies, January 1939 reprinted at the start of M-O A: FR 2515.
15. M-O A: FR 2515 (pp.11-12 and 25).
16. For example, Sidney Salomon, *The Jews of Britain* (London, 1939).
17. M-O A: FR 2515 (p.26); Cohn described by Anthony Storr in *The Independent on Sunday*, 14 November 1993; Cohn is referred to on p.3 of the report as one of the two full time researchers on the East End project.
18. Mrs Dulanty, 'Anti-Semitism in England' in M-O A: FR 2515 (pp.71-79); Colin Richmond, 'Englishness and Medieval Anglo-Jewry', in Tony Kushner (ed.), *The Jewish Heritage in British History* (London, 1992), pp.42-59.

19. Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English literature and society: Racial representations, 1875-1945* (Cambridge, 1993); Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The cultural politics of race and nation* (London, 1987); James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds.), *Race, Culture and Difference* (London, 1992).
20. M-O A: TC Anti-Semitism Box 1 File C.
21. M-O A: FR 2515 (p.25); Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew'*, p.8.
22. M-O A: FR 788; Neil Sinclair, *The Tiger Bay Story* (Cardiff, 1993).
23. M-O A: DR July 1946.
24. M-O A: D5460, 24 October 1944.
25. M-O A: D5233, September 1944.
26. Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming (eds.), *Nella Last's War: A Mother's Diary 1939-45* (Bristol, 1981); M-O A: D5353, 1 June 1947.
27. M-O A: DR Spring 1990. As a whole, they are longer than the earlier Mass-Observation directives on 'race' and nationalities carried out in June 1939, October 1940 and March 1943.
28. M-O A: DR Spring 1990, O.408.
29. For a typical example ignoring domestic traditions of anti-alienism see Charles Husband (ed.), *'Race' in Britain: Continuity and change* (2nd edition, London, 1987). An important exception is provided by Robert Miles, *Racism after 'race relations'* (London, 1993).
30. M-O A: DR Spring 1990, P.1906.
31. M-O A: DR Spring 1990, B.1406.