



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

2 | 2010

Voicing Conflict : Women and 20th Century Warfare

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1253>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.1253

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Penny Summerfield, "Conflict, Power and Gender in Women's Memories of the Second World War: a Mass-Observation Study", *Miranda* [Online], 2 | 2010, Online since 03 July 2010, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1253> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.1253>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.



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Conflict, Power and Gender in Women's Memories of the Second World War: a Mass-Observation Study

Penny Summerfield

- ¹ For those living in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, “‘remembering’ World War II requires no immediate experience of those years” because, as the historian Geoff Eley puts it, “official and popular cultures were pervaded by the war’s presence” (Eley 2001, 818-9). He was referring to the huge number of popular films about the war, mostly British-made although also Anglo-American and American, that was released on screen in those years. These films have had a lively afterlife since the 1950s and 60s as re-releases, on television, and as videos and DVDs. In the late 1960s and early 1970s a clutch of programmes about the war was specially made for television, some of which, such as *Dad’s Army* have been repeated many times since. In the late 1970s, 80s, 90s and 2000s the flow of films and television programmes was less intense but nevertheless persistent.¹ The Second World War has featured on educational syllabi at primary and secondary school level since the advent of the national curriculum in Britain in the 1980s. Every anniversary since at least 1989 has been the occasion for media attention, involving celebration, discussion and reconstruction.
- ² The social research organisation Mass-Observation has contributed to this process of public commemoration. Publications of material from its Archive since the early 1980s have been a response to, and have benefited from, the peculiarly British desire to remember the Second World War. The Mass-Observation Archive houses material collected by teams of observers and panellists over a period of about fifteen years, following the establishment of Mass-Observation (M-O) in 1937 by an anthropologist, Tom Harrisson, a sociologist, Charles Madge, and a film-maker, Humphrey Jennings. The purpose of these pioneers was to create a “science of ourselves” (Madge and Harrisson 1939, 9). M-O took an intense interest in everyday life during the Second

World War, when the organisation flourished in spite of losses of personnel to the Armed Forces and the problem of being based in London during the Blitz. It employed full-time observers to record overheard comments and to interview people in the street. Observers also conducted surveys in factories and (discreetly since it was not officially permitted) in the Forces. M-O had other ways of exploring everyday life in wartime Britain, too. It recruited a panel of volunteers who replied to “directives”—questions about their own experiences of matters as diverse as wartime shopping and changes in sexual morality. M-O persuaded some of these volunteers to keep diaries which they sent in monthly. The diaries are narratives of everyday life, punctuated in some cases by reflections on self and society, war and social change.

- 3 Some of these rich materials have reached a wide audience since the opening up of the Archive to historians and others in the 1970s. Three of the best known M-O publications are Nella Last’s diary, first published in 1981 as *Nella Last’s War: a Mother’s Diary* edited by Richard Broad and Suzie Fleming; Dorothy Sheridan’s *Wartime Women: a Mass-Observation Anthology 1937-1945*, first published in 1990; and Simon Garfield’s *Our Hidden Lives: the Everyday Diaries of a Forgotten Britain 1945-1948*, published in 2004. In addition, M-O material has become the basis for television dramas and documentaries. Notably, Nella Last’s diary was dramatised by the comedian Victoria Wood and broadcast on ITV as *Housewife 49*, with Wood playing Nella, in 2006. These and other M-O publications and broadcasts represent the effects of war, in all their complexity and ambiguity, upon ordinary people. They have become immensely popular.
- 4 The Mass-Observation material collected from 1937-1948 gives the historian the opportunity to pursue questions about the ways in which women and men experienced the war. A rather different question is to ask how men and women have engaged with the omnipresence of the Second World War in British society since 1945, to which Geoff Eley refers. At issue is the circulation of the culturally constructed memory of the Second World War—its impact, responses to it, and popular take up of it. Research on these issues should help us to understand better the dynamics of popular memory. Mass-Observation’s current project, which started in 1981 makes such research possible.
- 5 In 1981, Mass-Observation’s trustees decided to revive one element of the original project. They recruited a new group of volunteer panellists who were prepared to answer a set of questions known (as in wartime) as “directives” and sent to them three times a year. These directives address topics current in the news, such as attitudes to the Falklands War of 1982 and the first Gulf War of 1990-1 (see Noakes 1998). They also ask about everyday life, e.g. gardening practices, friendships, and use of the internet (see, for example, Bhatti 2006). According to the Project’s 2007 Annual Report, M-O’s panellists number in total about 500, include more women than men, more people in the older than the younger age groups, and more from southern England than other parts of the UK. The Report does not comment on the social class or ethnic profile of the respondents, details of which are embedded in the directive replies but not separately elicited by the project organisers, but it is likely that working-class and non-white people are under-represented among the panellists. The M-O Project is a writing project: respondents typically write frankly, reflectively and at length about their personal experiences, views and feelings. It is thus not a surprise to find that the demographic profile of those who participate is “consistent with research findings on

the social practices of writing” (Sheridan 2008, 1). The profile is also similar to that of people who get involved with charities and other voluntary organisations.

- 6 M-O agreed to send out a directive on my behalf in Spring 2009, asking people about the impact of the Second World War on their lives in the years since 1945. This Directive asked panellists for their own experiences of the Second World War if they were old enough to have lived through it, but emphasised that M-O was interested in the impact of the war on everyone, whenever they were born.² By July 2009 about 150 replies had been received. What follows here are the first fruits of analysis of this material, based on scrutiny of 24 replies selected from four generational groupings between the eldest respondent, born in 1917, and the youngest, born in 1988.³
- 7 The panellists were asked to consider what the Second World War “means to you”, an invitation to respond personally and reflectively. The concept of composure is useful in analysing their responses. As applied by Graham Dawson, Alistair Thomson and myself to life narratives, it carries the double meaning of a story that is composed, and a story that can enhance the teller’s sense of psychic well being, their composure (Dawson 1994, Chapter 1; Thomson 1994, 7-13; Summerfield 1998, Chapter 1). Because the replies were all written, they were all *de facto* “composed” in the first sense. They vary in the amount of composure in the second sense that they communicate. The accounts that express the most are the fluent ones by people who enjoy remembering the Second World War and who, even if they acknowledge its negative sides (suffering, death, homelessness, the Holocaust) are confident about the morality of the war from the British point of view—that it was a “just war”. Others, however, evince the opposite of composure in the sense of psychic equilibrium. These “discomposed” accounts express doubts about the dominant construction of the Second World War as a worthwhile undertaking.⁴
- 8 Several of the men’s accounts fall into the first pattern. Describing a lifetime’s engagement with the war enhances their composure. A4127, whom I shall call Anthony, was born in 1962.⁵ He lists no fewer than 120 films about the Second World War that he remembers having seen, and writes of a childhood in which he was surrounded by traces of the Second World War and by conversations in which family and friends referred to it. “Even school education was affected as external toilets in playgrounds were often converted air raid shelters.” Many school teachers had seen active service, and “The main reading material for boys [...] seemed to be ‘Commando’ picture book novels of World War 2 action or even the comics such as ‘Warlord’, [which] revelled in reliving the war. Children rarely played Cowboys and Indians in my area but Germans and British (occasionally allowing the odd American to serve with the British).” Anthony recalls participating in what Michael Paris describes as the “pleasure culture of war” (Paris 2000).⁶
- 9 The work of Graham Dawson on the appeal of military masculinity in British culture makes it unsurprising that war constitutes an important part of men’s sense of self, like it or not (and some of the men did *not* like it) (Dawson 1994, Part IV). As for the women who replied to the M-O directive, World War II constituted part of the subjective construction of their identities in some surprising ways. We shall start by considering respondents from the oldest age group, those born in the 1920s who were young adults during the war, and move through the generations.
- 10 Frances (F1560), born in 1921, writes a fluent account that engages closely with the meaning of the Second World War, but it is one which suggests discomposure and

growing discomfort with the ways in which that war impinged on her subjectivity. One of a large family living near Liverpool, Frances joined RAF Bomber Command as a member of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (the women's branch of the Air Force) at the start of the war, and was stationed at an airfield in Norfolk. "I vividly remember having breakfast with 'the boys' one day and never seeing them again" she writes. "I still have terrible memories of the losses [...] to this day I retain a vivid and deep anger at the loss of life in any war, towards the politicians who still pursue the aim of settling disputes by killing."⁷ She reproaches herself for her lack of understanding as a young woman of the aircrew who were made to sit apart from others in the mess: the men in this group were labelled "LMF" or Lacking Moral Fibre because they refused to fly. Frances writes, "We would glance across at these men with indifference and never with any understanding of the bravery involved in taking a stand against the slaughter [...] at 18/19 years of age I simply didn't know anything."

- 11 The memories that cascade on to Frances's page thereafter are increasingly disturbing. She recalls that a captured German film was shown to those on the airfield to "encourage the feeling of revenge" in British air crews. The film showed "Nazi officers brandishing pistols to shoot their victims waiting beside a huge ditch" and "a small child down there in that ditch clambering among the bodies—she was wearing a little cotton scarf round her head—was she searching for her parents?" Disgusted by the merriment of her colleagues afterwards Frances escaped to the toilets to "weep for that little girl and all those bodies". The theme of unbearable loss continues. "Upstairs in a dark attic is my husband's RAF uniform and his logbook" recording his missions as a night-fighter pilot. "He lost his navigator out of the plane as he was engaged in a 'dog fight' [...] a close friend who fell out of the plane in the dark without a parachute [...] in the panic to get in the air and 'engage with the enemy' his parachute was insecure [...] I remember him clearly, all these years later. Peter! Large, rosy cheeks, happy in his youth."
- 12 These dark memories have an almost surreal, or dreamlike, air about them—the LMF outcasts, the little girl scrambling among the bodies, the dark attic with mementos of her husband's flying career, the friend tumbling out of the plane into oblivion, and Frances's own distress at the time and in the process of recall. They are followed by a splenetic critique of *The Dam Busters*, released in 1955, a hugely popular film about Bomber Command that records the British attempt to bomb three dams across reservoirs in the industrial Ruhr valley. Frances is scathing about the film's "attempt to present the [mission] as a wonderful effort to lessen the duration of the war".⁸ To her, working at the airbase from which dam busting crews actually flew, the film "was a travesty [...]. The crews who lost so many of their mates, who rang me on the phone on their return early in the morning, were absolutely shattered at the terrible loss of life". The preparations had been "undertaken in great secrecy" and to her these calls came as a "terrible shock". She was on the receiving end of the survivors' "deep and agonised realisation that their work was not the success they hoped for and that so many of their friends were killed". She writes of "visiting the Runnymede memorial for the RAF and seeing names of men I remembered years before and having to walk away in despair".
- 13 Although Frances's account suggests that recalling the war is painful for her, and more conducive to discomposure than composure, she ends on an upbeat note linked to one of M-O's contributions to the cultural memory of the war. "To my great pride and joy I bought the original 'Nella Last's War' so long ago and still remember being so

heartened by this brave and insightful ordinary woman! Did anybody see Victoria Wood's TV film based on the book last year? Good as gold! I think I must read the book again to admire that lovely lady and her gradual maturity!" We shall return to the role of Nella Last in women's understandings of the Second World War. For now, suffice to say that Nella was a symbol of hope and a figure of identification for Frances, for whom remembering the Second World War otherwise offered little psychic comfort.

- 14 Erika (F218) was born just after the war, in 1946, to Jewish refugees from Austria and Poland who fled to England in 1939. Erika identifies strongly with the Second World War and actively supports its commemoration. "Being a child born in 1946 my era touched upon the war", she writes. Erika's mother died shortly after she was born, and she was fostered with a non-Jewish family "quite happily", although she remembers feeling torn between two cultures "neither liking the other very much".⁹ Her father "very seldom talked about [his] experiences" although he referred generally to the "evil" in the world. He also cautioned Erika "to never speak of my Jewishness" even though he talked to her about "kosher food, the Sabbath, Passover, Hanuka" and they ate "matzos omelettes" together. In Erika's foster family "recollections from the war weren't discussed at all" but there were signs all around—air raid shelters at school, "the sight of a ration book in the drawer", living off garden vegetables, rabbit pie and pigeon stew.
- 15 In spite of the lack of emphasis on the war in Erika's childhood, it was and remains important to her. She observes Remembrance Day, "there is always a shared spirit with others that attend." In the 1990s she joined a small group which entertained the elderly with wartime songs at old people's clubs and nursing homes, and in the 2000s she took her grandson to Second World War museum exhibits which he loved when younger "but unfortunately as he grew older he found it all boring". In retirement she became secretary to the Women's Section of the Royal British Legion, an organisation committed to assisting and commemorating veterans of war, writing "I respect our men and women who have served." She describes a recent outing with the Legion to visit the Chelsea Barracks and a poppy factory at Richmond, both establishments to help veterans. Erika recalls numerous wartime films and television programmes, including *Schindler's List* (USA 1993), a film about a Nazi industrialist and business man, Oskar Schindler, working in occupied Poland, who saved over 1,000 Jews from the death camps during World War II. She writes that "[I] made myself watch and yes with my Jewish background, it was horrific". As for books, she declares that she only reads autobiographies, one of which stands out for her: "I have bought Nella's Last War [sic] and found it very good [...] I can't remember the name of the documentary on TV but can remember Victoria Wood playing the main part." Erika writes critically of the "futility" of other wars (the Gulf, Iraq) and of the suffering to service personnel that they cause. However, perhaps not surprisingly given her background, the Second World War strikes her as a different type of war. Recalling it contributes to Erika's composure, and Nella Last evidently plays a part in that process.
- 16 It was not the case that all the women were either horrified by the memory of the war, like Frances, or regarded it as a matter for serious commemoration, like Erika. Pauline (F2949), born in 1954, comes closest to describing her own youthful and adult participation in a "pleasure culture of war" in a similar way to Anthony, discussed above. Pauline records a life crowded with references to the Second World War, although without the comic books and playground games which were more specifically

masculine pursuits.¹⁰ Pauline writes, “The Second World has had a huge impact on my life both through childhood and adulthood. Memories of the war featured as part of my upbringing for as long as I can remember.” She describes conversations during “high tea on Sundays” about what her parents and other relatives did in the war and about the Home Front. Remembrance Day continues to play an important part in her life; she has vivid memories of the pill boxes and air raid shelters that littered the landscape in which she grew up in the 1950s and 60s; and she has visited war museums many times. She has also collected Second World War memorabilia, most recently wartime ephemera belonging to her partner’s aunt, a former member of the Auxiliary Territorial Service, the women’s branch of the Army. Pauline presents herself as a receptive audience for media representations: “as a teenager I remember seeing war films at the cinema with my mother who had been in the war”; and she saw them again “at least twice over the years when they were shown on television”. She continues to watch new war films. She is an avid fan of *Dad’s Army* and “also thought the *World at War* was a very good programme, as was *Secret Army*”. Her perception of the Second World War is overwhelmingly positive: “What stands out most for me is the camaraderie of everyone in the war, whether it be those away fighting or those on the home front. Everybody seemed to care about each other.” To Pauline the memory of the war is reassuring: it signifies community and solidarity, a major dimension of the cultural representation of the war at the time and since.¹¹ Pauline’s comments on *Nella Last’s War* also emphasise another received view of the effects of the war: its supposed liberating effect on women. She did not read Nella Last’s diary, but “did see the television programme with Victoria Wood as Nella. The one thing that stood out for me was the independence Nella experienced as a result of the war and how she wasn’t keen to give it up at the end.”

- 17 For Samantha (S4002), born in 1979, it has been more difficult to identify with the Second World War. She opens by stating that “stories of World War II don’t really feature that much in our family” but goes on to relate several. She conjures images of her granddad, who filched airplane fuel for his car while working as a mechanic in the RAF and often “welled up when talking about friends he’d lost”. She writes of her grandma’s life in the Women’s Royal Naval Service (the women’s branch of the Navy) which mainly involved “going out to parties and meeting young men”. She refers to her step-grandfather who was a prisoner of war in the Pacific, and to her husband’s great aunt who, as a ten year old, watched German bombers turn round in the Welsh valley where the aunt lived on their way to bomb Swansea. Despite this busy family history of involvement, Samantha feels that, because none of her relatives saw action, “the stories are pretty much about everyday things” and are not very significant. Samantha describes standing slightly outside commemorative practices: “I usually buy a poppy, but often forget the 2 minute silence.” For her the traces of war are faint: “a few dents in the ground that marked where bombs fell” in the New Forest where she grew up; some buildings missing in nearby Southampton. “I can’t say that any of these things have given me a particular sense of World War II”, even though the great aunt’s memories of watching the planes turning “to bomb a town 40 minutes down the road” has made her aware of “how much the war touched people’s lives”.
- 18 Samantha’s lack of identification with wartime experience is intensified by the war films shown on television. “I can’t really distinguish one from the other—just a lot of grainy black and white images of brave men and women. The films always seem very distant to me—I can’t relate to them at all.” The same is true of the inclusion of the

Second World War on the school curriculum: “it always felt like something that happened a long time ago to people who were nothing like me”.¹² On the other hand, she finds “books and literature that include family relationships and personal fears” more effective than films in creating a sense of connection with the war. She writes that she admired the novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, especially “the section on the soldier’s experience” of Dunkirk, which “felt very realistic to me”.¹³ The only exception to her dismissal of screen representations of the Second World War as alienating is the television production, *Housewife 49*, the adaptation of *Nella Last’s War*. Samantha writes: “it was the story about personal and social transformation that was of interest to me”.

- 19 These repeated references to the figure of Nella Last in the responses to M-O’s directive about the Second World War require further discussion. In the replies analysed so far, four women born at different points in the 20th century, 1921, 1946, 1954 and 1979, spontaneously mention the M-O publication, *Nella Last’s War*, and/or the version presented on television, *Housewife 49*. The connection may in part be circular. People who enjoy reading M-O publications are inspired by them to write for M-O. Wendy (W3994), a woman born in 1972, wrote “I have read several books based on M-O diaries, which led me to take part.” Thus Nella and other M-O diarists act for present-day panellists as both a prompt to remember or imagine the Second World War, and a spur to write for M-O.¹⁴ Nella, however, commands a special affection in the writing examined here. Frances, Erika, Pauline and Samantha write of Nella, respectively, as “brave and insightful”, “very good”, “independent”, and the subject of a “transformation”. Why did she have such appeal to them that she became almost an icon of the Second World War?
- 20 Nella Last (1890-1968) was a woman in her late 40s when she began her M-O diary. She lived in the ship-building town of Barrow in North-West England, and was married to a self-employed carpenter-joiner (see Broad and Fleming 2006). For Nella, writing her wartime diary was an act of self-validation at a low point in her life. In 1939, at the start of the war and the diary, she was suffering from depression and she writes of having had at least one nervous breakdown. She began her diary in response to M-O’s appeal, sending it in monthly and describing herself in the first instalments, with reference to her occupation and age, as “Housewife, 49”. She came to regard diary-writing as her “war work”, although her diary is far from an impersonal set of observations of wartime life. She includes in this intimate document a multitude of details about running her household in wartime: keeping hens; washing; sewing; knitting; cleaning; as well as more unusual activities such as installing an indoor air raid shelter. She also describes the unrelenting, everyday task of cooking tasty and nourishing meals from ingredients that became scarcer as the war dragged on. She writes about her anxieties concerning her sons, particularly the younger one, Cliff, who was called up into the Army shortly after the beginning of the war, and she records her impatience with her uncommunicative, stay-at-home, and controlling husband. Nella also vividly brings to life the voluntary work that she took up during the war, and the people she worked with, at the Women’s Voluntary Service Centre and at a Red Cross shop. She had powers of observation and a flair for writing which apparently found no other outlet. She conjures the distinctive ordinariness of her life in the extraordinary circumstances of war skilfully. It is not surprising that women gain confidence from her diary to write about themselves: *Nella Last’s War* shows them that recording the everyday life of an

ordinary woman is a worthwhile undertaking. It is not hard, it seems, for women to identify with Nella Last and to feel validated by her.

- 21 Dorothy Sheridan, M-O Archivist and Director of the M-O Project, however, wrote that it took her twenty years to do so. Sheridan was 26 years old when she first “met” Nella through her M-O diary, and Nella was 49. Dorothy remembered that even though she valued and respected Nella Last’s testimony in 1974, she did not, at that stage, identify with “or even like her”. Sheridan found Last “rather complacent [...] a little pious and judgmental [...] preoccupied with the domestic minutiae of her everyday life [...] slightly snobbish and superior [...] a self-dramatising heroine of her own little wartime drama” (Sheridan 1998, 3). “Now”, wrote Sheridan in 1997, “I am 49, and, rather annoyingly, Nella has stayed the same age as she was when I first met her.” Re-reading the diary Sheridan found it “moving and insightful. I thought she combined a preoccupation with the domestic with a quite highly developed social and political analysis of the world around her; I found that she was self aware and self critical. I found her struggles over ageing and femininity, as a woman not quite 50, quite poignant. In fact, I found myself identifying with her.” Sheridan drew on the change in her perception of Nella Last to emphasise not only that Last presented multiple identities in the text, but that readers like Sheridan herself “come to the texts from different cultural and historical standpoints”, which change over time, and hence that their relationships with the subject of the texts also change (Sheridan 1998, 4).
- 22 To come back to the respondents to the Spring 2009 Directive, Nella appealed to women like Frances who were older than Last when they first encountered her diary, and also to those who, like Samantha, were much younger.¹⁵ Sheridan emphasises the mutability of her relationship with Last, but other things alter too. Not only are both the subject and the readers of a piece of life writing possessed of multiple identities which mutate, but the wider cultural discourses in which the text is read also develop. Notably, since 1981 when the diary was first published, feminist discourses have gradually entered popular culture. In particular, the idea that the personal is political has gained wider currency. Thus it has become increasingly possible since the 1970s to read Nella’s domestic obsessions, her concerns about her sons, and her account of her difficult relationship with her husband, not as the private preoccupations of a middle-aged menopausal woman, but as the kinds of things all women go through, that are central to gender dynamics, and that matter on the road to the achievement of gender equality.
- 23 There has been, however, a further mediating factor. As we have seen, Last’s diary has been dramatized by the comedian and actress Victoria Wood. First broadcast on ITV in 2006, *Housewife 49* has been repeated many times since. Wood herself plays Nella, portraying her sympathetically as the wife of a silent, grumpy, and unsociable husband. Wood’s Nella cares deeply about both her husband and her sons, she has trouble fitting in with the wealthier volunteers at the WVS who consider themselves socially a cut above the lower-middle-class Last, but she finds satisfaction, happiness and a new sense of herself through her voluntary war work. Wood does not flinch from portraying Nella as rather domineering towards her sons, as well as having a limited experience of life and lacking awareness where they are concerned. In particular Wood implies that Nella’s younger son, Cliff, is gay, and makes it clear that Nella never understands this. Nella makes no suggestion in her wartime diary that Cliff is anything other than heterosexual; but perhaps she did indeed miss the signs. Clifford Last, a sculptor in

Melbourne, Australia, where he moved just after the Second World War and lived until his death in 1991, was not available in 2006 to confirm or deny Wood's interpretation.¹⁶ The point to stress here is that the respondents to the 2009 directive who found Nella Last "brave and insightful", "very good", "independent", and the subject of a "transformation", were responding not only to the diary itself, but also to Victoria Wood's representation of Nella. This was undoubtedly affected by the shifting discourses concerning what it means to be a woman, as well as what the Second World War means in today's world.

- 24 In conclusion, this research is in its early stages and it is too soon to offer confident generalisations about how women have engaged with the omnipresence of the Second World War in British culture since 1945. Nevertheless the replies to the M-O directive of Spring 2009 that have so far been studied are highly suggestive. They indicate a wide variety of responses. It is not only men who have taken part in a "pleasure culture of war". Even though men write more fully of enacting the war in childhood games, there are women who also write of their pleasure in reliving the war, with their parents, in conversation, in visits to the cinema and to museums, in the collection of memorabilia and in their reading. There are also women who actively engage in processes of public commemoration. Identification in such cases is positive and composure is assured. For others, however, shifting perceptions of military violence due to subsequent wars, and the processes of ageing and life review, have led to increasing dis-identification, while some younger female respondents find it difficult to engage with cultural constructions of the Second World War at all. To tease out more fully the differences between men and women in these respects requires further work, as does a more refined account of generational differences. But one generalisation does seem to be safe, namely that women over four generations identify with Nella Last, the Barrow housewife who started writing for Mass-Observation in 1939 at the age of 49. Her Second World War diary, as a written and as a screened text, has assisted the composure of numerous women in the dual sense of facilitating their own life writing and of promoting their psychic well-being.

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NOTES

1. This prodigious flow has included, on the cinema screen: *Yanks* director John Schlesinger, GB, 1979; *Schindler's List* dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 1993; *The Land Girls* dir. David Leland, GB/France, 1998; *Saving Private Ryan* dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 1998; *Atonement* dir. Joe Wright, USA/GB/France, 2007; and on television: *The World at War*, created by Jeremy Isaacs, ITV 1973; *Dad's Army*, created by Jimmy Perry and David Croft, BBC 1968-1977; *The Imitation Game*, Play for Today, dir. Richard Eyre, BBC 24 April 1980; *Secret Army*, created by Gerard Glaister, BBC 1977-1979; *'Allo, 'Allo*, created by David Croft, BBC 1982-1992; *The Blond Bombshells*, dir. Gillies MacKinnon, USA/UK September 2000; *Housewife 49*, created by Victoria Wood, ITV 2006.

2. The M-O Project's Spring 2009 Directive asks for memories of the war passed down through families and communities, reflections on Remembrance Sunday and on traces of the Second

World War in the environment, responses to representations of the Second World War in film, on television and in books, and encounters with the war at school, in the news and in leisure activities.

3. The twelve female panellists whose replies were scrutinised for this paper are: E174 born 1924; F1560 b. 1921; L1625 b. 1922; B2552 b. 1932; D2585 b. 1943; F218 b. 1946; C1191 b.1955; F2949 b. 1954; F3137 b. 1969; H3853 b.1979; S 4002 b. 1979; W3994 b.1972. The testimonies of twelve men in the same age groups were also read for the purpose of comparison.

4. On the concept of “discomposure” see Summerfield 2000.

5. Panellists’ identities are protected by M-O by the allocation of a letter and number. Following the practice of other academics who have used the Mass-Observation Project, I have allocated pseudonyms to those panellists quoted here.

6. *Commando* picture story books about the Second World War were published by D. C. Thompson from 1961 and are still being published. *Warlord*, a weekly comic, was published by D. C. Thompson from 1974 – 1986. Anthony’s testimony is in fact complicated, because although he evidently participated in the pleasure culture of war so vigorously as a boy, and seems happy to relive the details of this culture in his account, he also states that he had since acquired religious convictions “that do not allow participation in warfare”. Work on oral history leads one to expect such seemingly contradictory strands in people’s life narratives. See, for example, Summerfield and Peniston-Bird 2007, Chapters 7 and 8.

7. All the same, Frances writes of the Second World War as “the last just war”. In spite of her assertion that she despises the glorification of war and so will not observe Remembrance Day publicly, she records that she plants bulbs and summer flowers at the foot of her village war memorial, a private gesture towards public remembrance.

8. Frances’s critique is not, however, of the morality of the bombing, which inflicted suffering on the German civilian population with questionable military justification, but of its effects on the air crews. Eight Lancaster bombers were shot down or crashed on the night of the raid, with the loss of 56 men (Ramsden 2003, 93).

9. Erika does not give details of the religion or ethnicity of the family with which she was fostered.

10. Recent research, however, indicates that, whatever the intention of the publishers and the practices of many parents and children, there was considerable circulation of comics between genders in the 1950s and 60s (Young 2006).

11. The respondents analysed so far who lived through the war do not emphasise this aspect of wartime life. In contrast, Pauline (F2949), whose knowledge of the war derives largely from cultural representations, stresses it. This is in spite of the fact that she found out relatively recently from her mother that her father (now dead) “was one of the marines who went to Belsen after the war to rebury the dead”. Her mother divulged this while mother and daughter were watching a film at the Imperial War Museum about Belsen.

12. All the same she admits that the family stories have a relationship to her history syllabus: “After learning so much about World War II at school, it is interesting to hear personal stories that fit into my historical knowledge.” Samantha’s testimony suggests that the reflexive process of writing was causing her to engage more closely with the memory of the war than she had previously been inclined to do.

13. She also refers to *Strange Meeting* by Susan Hill about two friends, one of whom dies, and their families, against a backdrop of war, without apparently realising that it is about the First World War not the Second. She states that it is “the first book that ever made me cry”.

14. Wendy does not specify which M-O books she has read, although she refers to Simon Garfield’s publications, one of which (Garfield 2005) includes extracts from Nella Last’s diary. Sheridan confirms the reinforcing circuit between reading M-O publications and writing for M-O:

“A number of the women who write for the Archive today came to us after reading Nella’s diary” (Sheridan 1988, 4).

15. Frances (F1560) was 60 in 1981 when she bought the original diary and 88 in 2009 when she planned to re-read it. Erika (F218) was 63, Pauline (F2949) was 55, and Samantha (S4002) was 30 in 2009 when they wrote of the impact that Nella Last had made on them.

16. Clifford Last wrote a very brief piece about his mother for M-O, which is included as an “Afterword” to the second edition of *Nella Last’s War*, published by Profile Books in 2006, to coincide with the first transmission of *Housewife 49* (Broad and Fleming 2006, 300-301). He does not refer to his sexuality. The Malcolmsons however, in their “Afterword” to Nella’s post-war diaries, discuss it briefly. They are confident that Cliff was gay, citing an interview with Christopher Last, Cliff’s nephew. They suggest that for Nella “her son’s homosexuality was too painful to contemplate” especially in an era when homosexual acts were criminalised, and that this explains her avoidance of explicit references to it (Malcolmson and Malcolmson 2008, 287-8).

ABSTRACTS

The Second World War is a pervasive feature of British culture, but until now the impact of the popular memory of the war on ordinary people has not been studied. Mass-Observation provides a means to do so. Since 1981 the Mass-Observation Project has recruited a panel of volunteers who answer “directives” several times a year. The Spring 2009 Directive asked questions about the meaning of the Second World War in personal lives since 1945. This paper analyses the responses of some of the women panellists. It reveals that, while the 39-45 conflict is important to some, not all women engage happily with the memory of that war. The figure of the Mass-Observation diarist, Nella Last, however, is a recurring motif in these very diverse testimonies.

La Deuxième Guerre Mondiale reste omniprésente dans la vie culturelle britannique, mais à ce jour, il n'existe aucune étude de l'impacte sur le peuple britannique de cette mémoire populaire. *Mass-Observation* offre les moyens de mener une telle étude ; depuis 1981 le projet *Mass-Observation* recrute des panels de correspondants qui acceptent de répondre à des “directives”, ou questionnaires, plusieurs fois par an. Au printemps 2009, le questionnaire proposé portait sur la signification de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale dans la vie de chacun-e-depuis 1945. Cet article analyse les réponses d'une partie des femmes ayant participé à l'enquête. Il en ressort que, si le conflit de 39-45 occupe une place importante pour certaines, toutes ne se remémorent pas cette guerre avec sérénité. La figure de Nella Last, qui a tenu un journal pour *Mass-Observation*, constitue cependant un motif récurrent de ces témoignages fort divers.

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Mots-clés: mémoire, genre, Deuxième Guerre mondiale, mass-observation, Grande-Bretagne

Keywords: memories, gender, Second World War, mass-observation, Britain

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