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**Peter Cosgrove**

**The Worktown Photographs of Mass-Observation: from Anthropological Data to Digitalised Images**

**Abstract**

Mass-Observation was created in the 1930s; this was an era that began with an economic slump and concluded with a world war. The founders of Mass-Observation, the anthropologist Tom Harrisson, journalist and poet Charles Madge and documentary filmmaker Humphrey Jennings, aimed to record everyday life in Britain. This 'anthropology of ourselves' culminated in the union of two disparate projects: Harrisson's Worktown in the north of England and Madge and Jennings's National Panel based in London. Their methods of research were innovative and mostly relied on a system of observers. Harrisson's anthropological research in Worktown included photography as a form of data collection. The principal photographer was the photojournalist Humphrey Spender who took around 900 photographs for Harrisson's Worktown project. At the time of taking the photographs were largely ignored and remained in obscurity until the 1970s when Harrisson began exploiting the Mass-Observation archive.

Although the Worktown photographs are predominantly understood in a documentary context, little attention has been given to the photographs as anthropological data or their place in the development of visual research. Hence, this study is part of a small body of research into their use as a form of visual anthropology. The main emphasis is on the production and contemporary use of the Worktown photographs but extends to their afterlife up to their latest trajectory as digital images. It will be argued that the methodology in Worktown was flawed, undermining the photographs as anthropological data. Moreover, that the best explanation for the photographs not being published contemporaneously was fear of litigation. Furthermore, that even if published, the evidence suggests that Harrisson would have imposed his own meaning onto the photographs.

# The Worktown Photographs of Mass-Observation: from Anthropological Data to Digitalised Images

Peter Cosgrove

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of  
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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Instructive it may be to peer through lenses:  
each time we do, though, we should apologise  
to the remote or the small for intruding  
upon their quiddities.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

Founded in 1937, the declared inspiration for the creation of Mass-Observation, a social research organisation, stemmed from its founders' perception of a divide between the non-vocal masses and the organs of power in Britain.<sup>2</sup> Mass society was seen as 'a shapeless and unstructured world [...] whereby the entire society – or certain of its essential parts – becomes mass-like'.<sup>3</sup> For Mass-Observation the problem was that the masses were 'voiceless'.<sup>4</sup> One manifestation of this was that the official interpretation of events, like the 'coronation of George VI on 12 May [1937] as reported in the media, was at odds with what people thought and felt'.<sup>5</sup> Mass-Observation, through the data collected by its observers, intended to facilitate an increase in 'general social consciousnesses'.<sup>6</sup> The aims of the fledgling organisation reflected the idealistic aspirations held by its founders:

[Mass-Observation] does not set out in quest of truth or facts for their own sake, or for the sake of an intellectual minority, but aims at exposing them in simple terms to all observers, so that their environment may be understood and thus constantly transformed. Whatever the political methods called upon to effect the transformation, the knowledge of what has to be transformed is indispensable.<sup>7</sup>

As originally conceptualised, Mass-Organisation could be viewed as either 'an organisation pioneering a particular type of social research [...] or as a social movement with quasi-

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Auden, "I Am Not a Camera," in W. H. Auden, *Collected poems*, Rev. ed. (London: Faber, 1991), 841.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Harnett Harrison, *Britain Revisited* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1961), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Salvador Giner, *Mass society* (London: Martin Robertson, 1976), 124.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Harrison and Charles Madge, *Britain by mass-observation* (London: Cresset, 1986), 7-9.

<sup>5</sup> P. Summerfield, "Mass-Observation: Social Research or Social Movement?," *Journal of Contemporary History* 20, no. 3 (1985): 440.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Madge, Thomas Harnett Harrison, and Julian Huxley, *Mass-observation* (London: Muller, 1937), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Harrison, Humphrey Jennings, and Charles Madge, "Anthropology at Home," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 30 January 1937.

political objectives'.<sup>8</sup> However, while it is acknowledged that Mass-Observation, at least in the 1930s, has some of the characteristics of a movement,<sup>9</sup> it is the premise of this thesis that what made Mass-Observation distinctive was its use of visual anthropology. Indeed, the inclusion of photography as a method of data collection puts Mass-Observation in the vanguard of social research in the 1930s and beyond. Hence, it is from the perspective of Mass-Observation as a social research organisation that this study is based.

The founders of Mass-Observation, all in their mid-to-late twenties, were the adventurer, ornithologist and anthropologist Tom Harrisson (1911-1976), the journalist and poet Charles Madge (1912-1996) and the surrealist artist and documentary film director Humphrey Jennings (1907-1950).<sup>10</sup> In a public proclamation, their joint letter published on the 30 January in the *New Statesman and Nation*, entitled 'Anthropology at home,' announced the birth of Mass-Observation.<sup>11</sup> That Mass-Observation came into existence at all, however, owes much to serendipity. Reacting to the constitutional crisis posed by the anticipated marriage between American socialite Wallis Simpson and King Edward VIII, a head teacher, Geoffrey Pyke, had a letter published in the *New Statesman and Nation* on 12 December 1936 that argued:

Anthropologists and psychologists all over the world are studying the reactions of primitive tribes to sexual situations. There have been concentrated within the last ten days the reactions of the people of the British Empire to a sexual situation. Here in a relatively limited form is some of the material for that anthropological study of our own nation of which we stand in such desperate need.<sup>12</sup>

Without delay, Madge replied to Pyke's appeal with a letter, published in the *New Statesman and Nation* on 2 January 1937, entitled 'Anthropology at home,' which stated that 'some days

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<sup>8</sup> Summerfield, 439.

<sup>9</sup> Hinton considers that the term 'movement' is problematic in describing Mass-Observation since at any one time there would only be around 1000 members and that these would operate in isolation. Even so, as Hinton goes on to argue the social research aims of Mass-Observation 'fit neatly with the broader currents of anti-fascist and progressive politics' prevalent in the 1930s. See James Hinton, *The mass observers: a history, 1937-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 370.

<sup>10</sup> Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and everyday life: culture, history, theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Harnett Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings, and Charles Madge, "Anthropology at Home," *New Statesman and Nation*, 30 January 1937.

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Pyke, "King and Country," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 12 December 1936.

before the precipitation of the crisis, a group was formed precisely for this purpose'.<sup>13</sup> The group behind the letter was made up of left-leaning individuals who met regularly at Madge's home in Blackheath, London.<sup>14</sup> Their expressed aim was to 'observe the workings of the unconscious [...] to occurrences of wide symbolic import'; as with the abdication crisis and the burning of Crystal Palace.<sup>15</sup> Coincidentally, however, the letter was printed on the same page in the *New Statesman and Nation* as a poem by Harrison, 'Coconut Moon'.<sup>16</sup> Harrison's poem, which first appeared in *Savage Civilisations*<sup>17</sup> had been dedicated to his married lover Zita Baker but was submitted to the *New Statesman and Nation* to coincide with the book's publication. Harrison made contact with Madge and it was agreed that their efforts would be coordinated,<sup>18</sup> with the two projects brought into one.<sup>19</sup> What was to become the National Panel was centred in London (Blackheath), led by Madge and Jennings, while the Worktown project, set in 'industrial Lancashire' (Bolton), was led by Harrison.

Both branches of Mass-Observation were part of a paradigm shift in which the focus of anthropology would not just be about people in developing countries but would now include Britain. The contention was that we knew so little of each other, 'of our next door neighbour [...] of conditions of life and thought in another class or district, our ignorance is complete'.<sup>20</sup> More prosaically, Mass-Observation was a pioneering development in the field of social surveys in Britain and would be the first attempt to provide an account of public opinion on major events through to the minutia of daily life.<sup>21</sup> The proposed methodology for the research largely rested on a system of observers, many of whom were untrained. However, professionals were recruited for the visual research in Harrison's Worktown project. This included the experienced photojournalist Humphrey Spender, whose photographs for Mass-Observation were mostly taken in Bolton.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Madge, "Anthropology at Home," *ibid.*, 2 January 1937.

<sup>14</sup> Jeremy MacClancy, "Brief Encounter: The Meeting, in Mass-Observation, of British Surrealism and Popular Anthropology," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 1, no. 3 (1995): 496-97.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 499.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Harrison, "Coconut Moon," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 2 January 1937.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Harnett Harrison, *Savage Civilisation* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937), 387-94.

<sup>18</sup> MacClancy, 499.

<sup>19</sup> Harrison, Jennings, and Madge.

<sup>20</sup> Madge, Harrison, and Huxley, 10.

<sup>21</sup> The leading contemporary anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, described Mass-Observation as a potential 'nation-wide intelligence service'. Charles Madge, Tom Harrison, and Bronislaw Malinowski, *First year's work, 1937-38* (London, 1938).

No compelling reason has been forwarded for the lack of contemporaneous publication by Mass-Observation of Spender's Worktown photographs. At least in the period up to World War II, publication was restricted to just three articles, under the authorship of Harrison.<sup>22</sup> In fact, Spender appears to have been passive in drawing attention to his photography for Mass-Observation and, following several years' engagement with *Picture Post*, by the early 1950s had entirely abandoned a career in photography. Indeed, it is Harrison, arguably, through his exploitation of the Mass-Observation archive in the 1970s, was the most significant advocate in the rediscovery of Spender's Worktown photographs, otherwise the negatives would have remained 'uncut and tightly coiled in their original tins'.<sup>23</sup> During this time Spender maintains that but for Harrison's enthusiasm and encouragement – his conviction that one day the photographs would be published - they might well have been 'thrown away'.<sup>24</sup> As a result of this belated interest in the photographs, Spender is now firmly established as an important photographer of the 1930s; with academic interest in his work ranging from peer-reviewed journals to radio and television documentaries.<sup>25</sup>

The background to the development of Mass-Observation was the aftermath of an epic slump and the run up to world war. This was an era that witnessed hunger marches, interest in eugenics, the rise of fascism, a housing boom and the development of television.<sup>26</sup> It was also an era when radical ideas were realised, as with Mass-Observation. However, in the 1930s other organisations, equally radical to Mass-Observation, came into being. Indeed, Madge and Harrison in their initial publication, *Mass-Observation*, identified contemporary organisations with 'similar aims' to Mass-Observation.<sup>27</sup> One of these was the Peckham Health Centre,<sup>28</sup> which was initiated by the husband and wife team of Dr George Scott

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<sup>22</sup> The only photographs published contemporaneously were of Blackpool. Tom Harrison, "Whistle While You Work," *New Writing* 1 (1938); Tom Harrison, "The Fifty-Second Week: Impressions of Blackpool," *The Geographical Magazine*, April 1938; Tom Harrison, "So this is Blackpool," *Picture Post*, 1 July 1939.

<sup>23</sup> Humphrey Spender, *'Lensman': photographs 1932-1952* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Melville, "An interview with Humphrey Spender," in *Stranger than Fiction*, ed. Robert Melville (1985).

<sup>25</sup> Broadcast documentaries featuring Humphrey Spender include: Ian Potts, "Return Journey," in *A Worktown Production* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1981); Radio 4 Kaleidoscope, "Review of Humphrey Spender's work 'Thirties and After'," (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1982).

<sup>26</sup> Juliet Gardiner, *The thirties: an intimate history* (London: HarperPress, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Madge, Harrison, and Huxley, 60-64.

<sup>28</sup> Stanley suggests that the Peckham Health Centre was considered as a model for Mass-Observation. N. S. Stanley, "'The extra dimension': a study and assessment of the methods employed by mass-observation in its first period 1937-40" (PhD thesis, City of Birmingham Polytechnic, 1981), 35.

Williamson and Dr Innes Pearce, in an attempt to study health as opposed to disease.<sup>29</sup> The full-scale experiment commenced with the creation of a purpose built leisure centre in 1935. As with the methodology of Mass-Observation, Williamson and Pearce's plan was to study people 'in the total environment [...] to provide a scientific basis for enhancing the health of mankind'.<sup>30</sup> Members of the leisure centre were the subjects of the study and were observed in the largely glass structure.<sup>31</sup> The Peckham Health Centre was essentially a 'human research laboratory'. And, not unlike Mass-Observation, the benefits of the research would be returned to the observed.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, however, the Peckham experiment foundered, in part due to the refusal by Williamson and Pearce to adapt their research methods to the 'new trends in social medicine and epidemiology'.<sup>33</sup>

Mass-Observation, over its diverse and complex history, has adapted to changing economic, political and social contexts. During this time, Mass-Observation has passed through three distinct phases.<sup>34</sup> The first phase was from January 1937 to June 1940. In the second phase, July 1940 to 1949, Mass-Observation worked for the Ministry of Information but increasingly became engaged as a market research organisation, both for the government and commercially. The third phase was from 1949 to the present, by which time all three founders of Mass-Observation had departed and during which the organisation became explicitly concerned with market research and was registered as a private company. However, it was only from early 1937 to the summer of 1938 that photography was used as a method of data collection by Mass-Observation. Hence, this thesis is concerned with the first phase, when the organisation was at its most self-directing.

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<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Barlow, "The Peckham Experiment," *Medical History* 29, no. 3 (1985). Interestingly, the main forum for Williamson's ideas throughout the 1930s was the health group of Political and Economic Planning, which was another organisation identified by Mass-Observation as having similar aims. See Jane Lewis and Barbara Brookes, "The Peckham Health Centre, "PEP", and the concept of general practice during the 1930s and 1940s," *ibid.* 27, no. 2 (1983).

<sup>30</sup> F. David Duncan, "The Peckham Experiment: A Pioneering Exploration of Wellness," *Health Values* 9, no. 5 (1985): 40.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Stanley.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis and Brookes, 161.

<sup>34</sup> Stanley, 24.

### Origins and focus of the research

While in no way exhaustive the following are indicative publications that have proven inspirational or yielded insights into a huge lacuna in the understanding of Mass-Observation because of a failure to devote sufficient attention to the photographic dimension.

Essential overviews of Mass-Observation were gleaned from James Hinton's *The Mass-Observers, a History, 1937-1940*<sup>35</sup> and Nick Hubble's *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life*.<sup>36</sup> However, in Hinton's extensive study of the history of Mass-Observation the contribution of photography is barely mentioned, whereas in Hubble's examination of the origins and impact of Mass-Observation he is dismissive of Spender's photography claiming that it 'is not really representative of M-O but of the documentary movement to which they were acting in opposition'.<sup>37</sup> However, this is a critical reading of the 1930s documentary movement in which it is seen as working against social transformation (See Chapter 3 for further discussion on documentary photography). By contrast Stanley's PhD thesis, *The Extra Dimension A Study and Assessment of the Methods Employed by Mass-Observation in its First period 1937-40*, attempts to show that what made Mass-Observation distinct was the willingness to use a range of research methods in its methodology, including artistic forms like poetry, painting and, importantly, photography.<sup>38</sup> However, Stanley's *The Extra Dimension* ambitiously attempts to cover both branches of Mass-Observation (the National Panel and Worktown) and, moreover, all of the artistic and literary methods that were employed. Furthermore, Stanley's focus is not so much on the data generated but more on the potential contribution to qualitative sociology from the adoption of methods pioneered by Mass-Observation. Therefore, for example, no attempt is made to interpret the Worktown photographs or discuss their afterlife, which would have been beyond the scope of Stanley's research.

A more in-depth analysis of Spender is provided by Frizzel in her catalogue to accompany an exhibition of Spender's photographs, *Humphrey Spender's Humanist Landscapes: Photo-Documents, 1932-1942*.<sup>39</sup> In the catalogue, Frizzel puts Spender's oeuvre in its historical

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<sup>35</sup> Hinton.

<sup>36</sup> Hubble.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>38</sup> Stanley.

<sup>39</sup> Deborah Frizzell, *Humphrey Spender's humanist landscapes: photo-documents, 1932-1942* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Center for British Art, 1997).

context emphasising his place within the ‘genesis of British photojournalism’.<sup>40</sup> To this end, in the sections covering the Worktown photographs (Bolton and Blackpool), stress is on the aesthetic over the anthropological. Moreover, Spender is described as a humanist photo documentarian characterised by ‘His commitments to and sympathies with the people whom he photographed’.<sup>41</sup> Such an assessment, albeit revealing traces of superiority in Spender’s attitude, may fit with his oeuvre as a whole but in terms of the Worktown photographs there is only limited consideration of them as visual data for social study. Similarly, and necessarily, discussion on the afterlife of the Worktown photographs is constrained by the brevity of the catalogue and broad scope of the analysis, which extends to Spender’s photographic career as a whole.

More recent publications are David Hall’s *Worktown*<sup>42</sup> and Lucy Curzon’s *Mass-Observation and Visual Culture: Depicting Everyday Lives in Britain*.<sup>43</sup> Hall’s *Worktown*, with a lighter, journalistic tone, provides a social history of the northern branch of Mass-Observation. In spite of the many images in the book, there is just one short chapter on the Worktown photographs called ‘The secret photographer’.<sup>44</sup> However, there is little analysis of the photographs and the focus is more on Spender’s background, motivation and experiences in Bolton. By contrast, Curzon’s *Mass-Observation and Visual Culture* provides an overview of the contribution that painting, photography and collage made to Harrison’s Worktown and generally for Mass-Observation. On Spender’s photographs for Mass-Observation, Curzon, like Frizzell, puts greater emphasis on his Blackpool photographs.<sup>45</sup> In particular, both Curzon and Frizzell analyse Harrison’s 1938 *Geographical Magazine* article, ‘The Fifty Second-Week, Impressions of Blackpool’(which was the only significant published use of Spender’s Mass-Observation photographs in the 1930s).<sup>46</sup> More generally, in keeping with the scope of her inquiry, Curzon confines her analysis to the immediate period of the production and contemporary use of the Worktown photographs.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>42</sup> David author Hall, *Worktown: the astonishing story of the the 1930s project that launched mass-observation* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> Lucy Curzon, *Mass-Observation and Visual Culture: Depicting Everyday Lives in Britain* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Hall, 93-105.

<sup>45</sup> In addition to a chapter in *Mass-Observation and Visual Culture*, Curzon published a journal article on Spender’s Blackpool photographs. See Lucy Curzon, "Another Place in Time: Documenting Blackpool for Mass Observation in the 1930s," *History of Photography* 35, no. 3 (2011).

<sup>46</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion on the *Geographical Magazine* article.

Of general works that include the Worktown photographs, two salient publications are John Taylor's *A Dream of England: Landscape, Photography and the Tourist's Imagination*, along with Ian Walker's *So Exotic, So Homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and Documentary Photography*.<sup>47</sup> In Taylor's *A Dream of England*, the Worktown photographs are viewed from the perspective of Spender and others as 'observer-travellers' who are documenting the living conditions in the industrial North.<sup>48</sup> Contentiously, Taylor takes the view that the Worktown photographs failed to show what Harrison wanted to see.<sup>49</sup> Albeit briefly, an attempt is made to view the photographs as data for visual research but the discussion lacks a methodological underpinning. A similar approach is taken in *So Exotic, So Homemade*, except that Walker posits a relationship between documentary photography and surrealism. With a broad sweep of 100 years and several photographers, Walker's analysis includes the work of Jennings and Spender for Mass-Observation. The photographs by Jennings in the north of England are obvious candidates for this analysis, given his surrealist credentials.<sup>50</sup> Whether the same argument can be made in respect of Spender's Worktown photographs is more debatable. Unquestionably, however, while surrealist themes can be identified in many of Spender's prints, this is not how the photographs would later be used and, as Walker acknowledges, this was not necessarily the spirit in which the photographs were taken.<sup>51</sup>

From the above it is evident that the Worktown photographs have been viewed from the perspectives of documentary and surrealism but not as anthropological data. And it is from this latter perspective that the Worktown photographs are approached in this thesis. More generally, gaps and uncertainties in research remain that lead to questions on the production and use of the Worktown photographs. Moreover, against a background of economic slump, what can be said about the motivations, methods and uses of humanistic photography in the

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<sup>47</sup> John Taylor, *A dream of England: landscape, photography and the tourist's imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Ian May Walker, *So exotic, so homemade: Surrealism, Englishness and documentary photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> Taylor.

<sup>49</sup> This assessment is partly based on Taylor's erroneous attribution of a comment by Tom Hopkinson (an editor at *Picture Post*) to Harrison on Spender's photographs as having "'caricatured' the truth [...] making 'serious' headmistresses look comic or freakish". *Ibid.*, 160-61. The source for the original quote can be found in Humphrey Spender and Jeremy Mulford, *Worktown people: photographs from northern England 1937-8* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1982), 17. Using a similar argument, Curzon asserts that the reason Harrison did not use the Worktown photographs was "they could not reveal Britons as they 'really' were, or rather, they could not reveal them as Harrison imagined they really should be". Curzon, *Mass-Observation and Visual Culture: Depicting Everyday Lives in Britain*, 45. For further discussion on the failure to make use of Spender's Worktown photographs in contemporary Mass-Observation publications see Chapter 5.

<sup>50</sup> Kevin Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings* (London: Picador, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Walker, 118.



1930s? More pointedly, how would such images of people in the depressed areas be used? What was the contemporary understanding of visual methodology? How does Harrison's approach compare with more recent developments in visual analysis? On the issue of materiality, what additional information can be gleaned from physical examination of the original Worktown prints? Also, given the recent prominence of the Worktown photographs, why were they not included in the early Mass-Observation publications? Finally, how are the photographs to be interpreted, some eighty years after their production? These and other questions, both implicit and explicit, will be addressed in the following chapters.

### **Chapter outlines**

Chapter 2 provides the reader with overviews of the initial development of Mass-Observation and the preparatory effort by Harrison in Bolton for the Worktown project in industrial Lancashire. The focus then switches to the career of the principal photographer for Mass-Observation, Humphrey Spender. While acknowledging the failure to include Spender's photographs in the early publications, the final section reviews Mass-Observation's early output in order to illustrate its diversity.

To highlight the innovative use of visual analysis by Mass-Observation, Chapter 3 explores the contemporary role of photography in anthropology. However, in order to provide a context for the Worktown photographs in the field of documentary – including the influence of European photographers - literary and photographic responses to the human condition in the 1930s are discussed. This review section includes consideration of the failure of a proletarian photography to develop in Britain.

The theme of Chapter 4 concerns visual anthropology as a research methodology, especially from the perspective of photo-documentation. A key concern highlighted is the risk of polysemy in photography, both generally and in the absence of fieldnotes. Further methodology-related topics include questioning the claim that Spender's method of surreptitious photography approximated to a form of participant observation. This is followed by the highlighting of concerns arising from the appropriation of Spender's Worktown photographs for political propaganda. The chapter closes with a brief exposition of materiality in photography and the related analysis of several Worktown prints.

Chapter 5 is entirely based on the afterlife of the Worktown photographs. This chapter aims to show that the photographs have had several trajectories, from being virtually ignored to their rediscovery in the 1970s and beyond. It will be argued that the hiatus in using the photographs in Mass-Observation publications was because of libel and not as is sometimes argued, due to a shortage of funds. That said, it will be shown that the original presentation of the photographs by Harrison involved dramatic recontextualisation and manipulation, whereas more recently the images have been presented full-frame and with no obvious manipulation. Lastly, the recent incarnation of the photographs as digitised images viewable on the internet will be discussed. The implications of this new material form for the Worktown photographs are considered from the perspectives of commodification and nostalgia.

Chapter 6, the conclusion will reiterate the importance of seeing the Worktown photographs as anthropological data, while acknowledging their status as documentary images. Moreover, it will be argued that while Harrison sought to apply the methods of functional penetration, the application in the Worktown project fell short of the ideal. Furthermore, fundamental shortcomings in the methodology meant that interpreting the photographs was limited to a surface reading. Regarding Spender's status and background, while his involvement in Mass-Observation was expedient to Harrison's research, there is an inevitable suggestion of a middle-class gaze. At the same time, Spender's clandestine approach exposed him to physical threat and abuse. On the presentation of the photographs, through his editing, Harrison was able to project his own meaning. More recently, digitisation has brought a new material form to the archive, with the potential for a more commercial orientation. Lastly, the best explanation for the hiatus in publishing the Worktown photographs is the avoidance of libel.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **The formation and early history of Mass-Observation and Worktown**

#### **Introduction**

The introductory chapter established that the social research organisation, Mass-Observation, had its origins in coincidences that united three disparate but innovative individuals. Mass-Observation was formed against the background of economic and political strife in the 1930s. Distinguishing Mass-Observation was the willingness to experiment with novel, untested methods of visual research, including photography. The photographs, however, were largely ignored at the time of their production. The Mass-Observation photographer, Humphrey Spender, is now seen as an important documentary photographer of the 1930s. But at least for the Worktown photographs, this is a post-hoc label since they were intended as anthropological data, not as nostalgic images for publication or the gallery wall.

The focus of the present chapter is the early phase of Mass-Observation, its history, ways of working and early output. During this period, the use of photography in anthropology ranged from anthropometrics to exemplary visual research, usually in the developing world. The setting for Mass-Observation's application of photography, however, was Bolton in Lancashire. A professional photographer, Humphrey Spender, was recruited to take the photographs. Although the photographs were largely neglected, the other output of Mass-Observation made the organisation a household name.

The early development of Mass-Observation will be outlined, followed by consideration of the contemporary use of photography in anthropology. Moreover, information on the setting for the photography, Bolton, and the biography of the photographer, Spender, will be discussed to provide a context for this innovative application of visual research. Finally, there will be a brief exposition of the early output of Mass-Observation that illustrates the diversity within the organisation at that time.

### **Mass-Observation: a marriage of methods**

Mass-Observation was developed out of Harrison's anthropological project in Worktown and Jennings's and Madge's aspiration to portray collective mass consciousness.<sup>52</sup> Shortly after its formation, Harrison and Madge set out the 'aims, methods and work' for the newly combined organisation in their pamphlet *Mass Observation*.<sup>53</sup> The pamphlet made it clear that psychology, anthropology and sociology were the sciences of most direct relevance to Mass-Observation. More innovative, however, was the envisaged method of data collection, which was to be in the form of reports from untrained volunteer observers (by correspondence, in the case of the National Panel). Each observer was to 'describe fully and clearly, and in simple language all that he sees and hears in connection with the specific problem he is asked to work on'.<sup>54</sup> Methodologically, the emphasis was on the collection and not the interpretation of data. In practical terms this meant that there was little discrimination of the material collected in terms of usefulness or relevance. As Nick Stanley argues, the refusal to theorise was based on the idea that 'new taxonomies might themselves generate new ways of thinking [...], a priori theorising could itself destroy the potent possibilities of "data dredging"'.<sup>55</sup> The role of trained scientists in Mass-Observation would be to frame 'well-constructed hypotheses to be tested by Mass-Observation methods and to suggest subjects for detailed enquiry'.<sup>56</sup> To further augment objectivity, the pamphlet outlined a role for 'scientific instruments of precision. Photography, film technique, sound recording and physiological tests by experts will provide a check on our observations'.<sup>57</sup> Although such claims to objectivity would now be considered naïve, Mass-Observation's willingness to embrace imaginative research methods like photography presented the opportunity for the formation of an eclectic and original methodology. As Stanley contends, this meant that Mass-Observation included an 'extra dimension': 'the most exciting indeed provocative element that sets Mass-Observation off from other sociological research was the use of artistic methods and approaches'.<sup>58</sup>

For Julian Trevelyan, one of many artists who became involved in the Mass-Observation project, the multidisciplinary methodology of Mass-Observation can partly be attributed to

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<sup>52</sup> Hubble, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Madge, Harrison, and Huxley.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>55</sup> Stanley, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Madge, Harrison, and Huxley.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Stanley, 2.

the disparate talents of the founding trio.<sup>59</sup> He argued that ‘Mass Observation was really the product of three minds, each seeking from it something different, each contributing to it a different technique’.<sup>60</sup> In his portrayal of the three founders of the organisation, Trevelyan contended that for Jennings, ‘it was an extension of his Surrealist vision of Industrial England; the cotton workers of Bolton were the descendants of Stephenson and Watt, the dwellers in Blake’s dark satanic mills reborn into a world of greyhound racing and Marks & Spencer’.<sup>61</sup> By contrast, for Madge, who ‘lived in a beautiful eighteenth-century house at Blackheath, Mass-Observation was a new kind of poetry [...] it was chiefly he who collated the ‘reports’ sent in every month by voluntary observers all over the country[...] Charles was an empirical Marxist who wanted to understand the motives of individuals and to equate them with his own beliefs’.<sup>62</sup> For Trevelyan, however, Harrison was the most charismatic of the trio: ‘Tom had an almost hypnotic power over those who worked for him: he would ask the most impossible things of us and we would do them’.<sup>63</sup> He describes Harrison as ‘the man of action, the anthropologist with the note-book. Not for Tom the eighteenth-century house on Blackheath, but rather the working-class house in Worktown, anonymous, and like those on either side of it’.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Harrison’s northern base was a rundown terraced house; number 85 Davenport Street, Bolton (Worktown).<sup>65</sup> The contrast in accommodation between the two branches of Mass-Observation represented the divide in the movement and was vividly summarised by Harrison as ‘Charles’s [Madge] delightful big house on the edge of Blackheath and my bug-ridden Bolton slum’.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, from the outset, between the founders of Mass-Observation, there was a significant difference in thinking and aspiration. In the case of Harrison’s Worktown project, the application of these methods and approaches was more about science than art - much less so for Jennings and Madge, with their National Panel. One immediate manifestation of this lack of correspondence between the two branches of Mass-Observation was the role to be played by photography, with hardly any involvement at all with the National Panel (see below). More generally, while there was agreement on a role for art in a science of society, the marriage of methods between the two

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<sup>59</sup> Julian. Trevelyan, *Indigo days* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1957).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 82. Also, see Humphrey Jennings, Mary-Lou Jennings, and Charles Madge, *Pandæmonium: 1660-1886: the coming of the machine as seen by contemporary observers* (London: Icon Books Ltd, 2012).

<sup>62</sup> Trevelyan, 82.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>65</sup> Harrison, *Britain Revisited*, 29. The house is no longer extant, having been demolished in the early 1980s.

<sup>66</sup> *World within. A Borneo story* (London: Cresset Press, 1959), 161.

branches of Mass-Observation, was an uneasy one.<sup>67</sup> The initial symbiosis between the contrasting approaches of the key protagonists, Harrison and Madge, was more than likely helped by the vagueness in their objectives for Mass-Observation.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, however, fundamental differences in temperament between Harrison and Madge were decisive in the collapse of their alliance.<sup>69</sup>

### **Worktown (Bolton)**

Harrison's northern branch of Mass-Observation was based in Bolton. In *Britain Revisited*, Harrison declared that 'Worktown equals Bolton, Lancashire. There has never been any pretence about that'.<sup>70</sup> Initially, however, Bolton was referred to as 'Northtown',<sup>71</sup> and only subsequently as 'Worktown'. A similar (if less successful) name change was attempted in respect of a correlated study in Blackpool, using the term Holiday Town. Inspiration for the use of a *nom de plume* in the case of Bolton and Blackpool can be related to an anthropological study undertaken during the 1920s in the United States by the researchers Robert and Helen Lynd in the small industrial town of Muncie, Indiana, which was anonymously referred to as 'Middletown'.<sup>72</sup> Evidently the researchers were concerned at the likely attention that their study would create for the community and indicated that 'it has not seemed desirable to increase this high visibility in the discussion of local conditions by singling out the city by its actual name'.<sup>73</sup> The name Middletown intentionally conveys the sense of typicality for what was considered by the researchers to be a city 'as representative as possible of contemporary American life'.<sup>74</sup> However, no similar claim to representativeness in the sense of typicality is made in respect of the name Worktown. In calling Bolton Worktown, Harrison explained that it is 'not because we take it as a typical town or as a special town but just because it is a town that exists and persists on the basis of industrial work, an anonymous one in the long list of British towns where most of our people now earn and spend'.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, arguably, the name Worktown shares some of the pejorative

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<sup>67</sup> Hinton, 14.

<sup>68</sup> Summerfield, 448.

<sup>69</sup> Hinton, 15-16.

<sup>70</sup> Harrison, *Britain Revisited*.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Madge, Harrison, and Malinowski, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: a study in American culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929). See also Ball State University, "Center for Middletown Studies," Ball State University, <http://cms.bsu.edu/Academics/CentersandInstitutes/Middletown.aspx>.

<sup>73</sup> Lynd and Lynd, 7.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Mass-Observation, *The Pub and the People: a worktown study* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943), 8.

tone associated with the fictional town of ‘Coketown’ from *Hard Times*,<sup>76</sup> which was largely based on the Lancashire town of Preston by Charles Dickens.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, there is a certain irony in the use of the term Worktown in the context of Bolton during the 1930s; the comment by Harrison, many years later, pointing to the high rate of joblessness that pervaded the town is indicative here: ‘in 1936-37 it is fair to say that the whole atmosphere breathed insecurity and dread of unemployment’.<sup>78</sup> On balance, however, perhaps the Mass-Observation team were mindful of the risk of provoking local resentment by using the actual name of the town, as had proven to be the case with Orwell’s negative depiction of Wigan in the *Road to Wigan Pier*.<sup>79</sup>

As with other Lancashire towns, Bolton was greatly affected by the depression of the 1930s. And, many of the subjects in front of Spender’s camera will have been unemployed and dependent on state benefits. In *English Journey*, JB Priestley described the scene that met him on his expedition across Lancashire in the autumn of 1933:

Between Manchester and Bolton the ugliness is so complete that it is almost exhilarating. It challenges you to live there. That is probably the secret of the Lancashire working folk: they have accepted that challenge; they are on active service, and so, like the front-line troops, they make a lot of little jokes and sing comic songs. There used to be a grim Lancashire adage: ‘Where there’s muck, there’s money’. But now when there is not much money; there is still a lot of muck. It must last longer.<sup>80</sup>

At the time of Priestley’s visit to Lancashire,<sup>81</sup> which was heavily dependent on the traditional industries of coal and cotton, unemployment in the county stood at 20.1%.<sup>82</sup> Although masking pockets of severe deprivation, over the 1930s, unemployment appears to have gradually improved such that the percentage of insured persons in Lancashire aged 16-64, who were registered unemployed, fell to 14.3% by the end of 1937. However, during the

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<sup>76</sup> Charles Dickens and Paul Schlicke, *Hard times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>77</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (Minerva, 1991), 729.

<sup>78</sup> Harrison, *Britain Revisited*, 33.

<sup>79</sup> Stephen Armstrong, *The road to Wigan Pier revisited* (London: Constable, 2012).

<sup>80</sup> J. B. Priestley, *English journey* (London: The Folio Society 1997), 216.

<sup>81</sup> Prior to 1974 Bolton was a part of Lancashire, since that date it has been incorporated into Greater Manchester.

<sup>82</sup> William Henry Beveridge Baron Beveridge, *Full Employment in a Free Society. A report* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1944), 325.

same period, the percentage of registered unemployed in the London area fell from 9.6% to 7.1%.<sup>83</sup> This north-south divide reflects the vulnerability in the North-West to old industries facing a global downturn in demand. With 154 mills and related bleach works, Bolton was predominantly a cotton town.<sup>84</sup> Out of a total population of 170,400, the number of registered unemployed in the town was 10,131 in November 1937.<sup>85</sup> This figure does not include the increase in short-time working as a consequence of the depression in the cotton industry. Moreover, many of those out of work were the long-term unemployed; accounting for more than a quarter of the total.<sup>86</sup> Claimants in this category would have exhausted the right to statutory benefits and hence had to undergo the means test for transitional payments.<sup>87</sup> For the long term unemployed in Bolton, administration of the transitional payments scheme was unusually harsh, with a refusal rate of 43% compared with 33% for the whole of Lancashire.<sup>88</sup> In Chapter 4 it will be argued that the punitive sanctions facing the long-term unemployed would have made them sensitive to being photographed in public.

### **Worktown and the preparatory effort**

Prior to the formation of Mass-Observation, Harrison had already undertaken preliminary work in Bolton.<sup>89</sup> At this time, November, 1936, he gave his address as The Levers Arms Hotel, Nelson Square, Bolton.<sup>90</sup> Harrison's research in Bolton commenced shortly before the publication of his book, the bestseller, *Savage Civilisations*, published by the founder of the Left Book Club, Victor Gollancz.<sup>91</sup> In *Savage Civilisations*, Harrison, taking an anti-colonial stance, wrote of his experiences of living and conducting anthropological research in the New Hebrides.<sup>92</sup> Judith Heimann, Harrison's biographer, contended that his choice of Bolton as the setting for an anthropological study was on the basis that the founder of Unilever, William Lever, was born in Bolton and that Lever Brothers 'by setting the world price for copra was perhaps the single most powerful organisation affecting the lives of people in the

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<sup>83</sup> Ministry of Labour, *The Ministry of Labour Gazette* (H.M. Stationery Office, 1935); *The Ministry of Labour Gazette* (H.M. Stationery Office, 1937).

<sup>84</sup> Mike Williams and D. A. Farnie, *Cotton mills in Greater Manchester* (Preston: Carnegie, 1992), 188.

<sup>85</sup> Ministry of Labour, *The Ministry of Labour Gazette*.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Tony Lynes, "From Unemployment Insurance to Assistance in interwar Britain," *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 19, no. 3 (2011): 223.

<sup>88</sup> John K. Walton, *Lancashire: a social history, 1558-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 347.

<sup>89</sup> Judith M. Heimann, *The most offending soul alive: Tom Harrison and his remarkable life* (London: Aurum Press, 2002), 124-27.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 124. The hotel was in the centre of Bolton but is no longer extant, having been demolished in 1949.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-23.

<sup>92</sup> Harrison, *Savage Civilisation*.



New Hebrides'.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, in *Savage Civilisations*, Harrisson highlighted that there was an inverse relationship between the price paid for copra from the New Hebrides and the profits of Lever Brothers.<sup>94</sup> However, this unequal trade did not bring any obvious economic advantages for the working people of Bolton, especially during the depression of the 1930s.

In Bolton, the northern branch of Mass-Observation employed a core team of full-time researchers; albeit paid a pittance, and only 'whenever Harrisson had some money'.<sup>95</sup> Reminiscences from one of the full-time team at Bolton, Walter Hood, illustrate the financial difficulties. Hood, originally from a North-Eastern mining community, who had been educated at Ruskin, but was unemployed in London when he met Harrisson, described 'how it was his job, when funds ran out, to approach Tom Harrisson for cash so that the team could buy fish and chips'.<sup>96</sup> Harrisson, nonetheless, was not averse to 'tackling anyone however eminent for funds or support'.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, in the preface to the 1943 Mass-Observation publication, *The pub and the people*, Harrisson revealed the sources of support that had been made available to the Worktown project: benefactors included two northern industrialists, Sir Thomas Barlow and Sir Ernest Simon, and the publisher Gollancz.<sup>98</sup> Four volumes on Worktown life had been promised for Gollancz but in the event only *The pub and the people* came to fruition.<sup>99</sup> Notwithstanding this support, funding for both parts of the project appears to have been an ongoing concern.<sup>100</sup> Even so, Harrisson was able to persuade others to participate as volunteers such that in Bolton there could be 'sometimes over sixty observers at a time (especially during Oxford and Cambridge University vacations)'.<sup>101</sup> Evidently, Harrisson was adept at persuasion. One of the many friends and others that were persuaded to volunteer time to the Worktown project was the then undergraduate, Woodrow Wyatt (later to become a Labour MP and Lord); he described his experiences of being recruited as a summer volunteer following a talk by Harrisson at an Oxford University club:

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<sup>93</sup> Heimann, 125.

<sup>94</sup> Harrisson, *Savage Civilisation*, 288.

<sup>95</sup> Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan, *Speak for yourself: a mass-observation anthology, 1937-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 39.

<sup>97</sup> Woodrow Lyle Wyatt, *Into the Dangerous World* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1952), 34.

<sup>98</sup> Mass-Observation.

<sup>99</sup> Hubble, 111.

<sup>100</sup> For example, see Madge, Harrisson, and Malinowski, 23-24.

<sup>101</sup> Harrisson, *Britain Revisited*, 26.

Perhaps it would be wrong to say that Tom Harrison appealed for helpers; rather he announced in a grand manner that he would be willing to accept our assistance. I volunteered and was told that I could spend part of my vacation at his headquarters in Worktown [...] He infused everything he did with importance and I felt, working for him, that I was engaged on something significant.<sup>102</sup>

Aside from university recruits, Harrison's branch of Mass-Observation also included local volunteers. Prominent amongst these was the Bolton lorry driver, Bill Naughton, who would later achieve fame as a novelist and playwright.<sup>103</sup> People will have had different reasons for volunteering their time with the Worktown project, as Nick Stanley argues, for Naughton being a member of the Mass-Observation team meant 'a leg-up out of working-class life'. However, this was not generally the case since 'others, especially those who worked part-time in Bolton, disappeared back into obscurity. But for the middle-class members of Mass-Observation, and the Worktown experiment in particular, it provided what can only be described as a living laboratory'.<sup>104</sup> In other words, at that time, given their backgrounds, for the middle-class investigators it was an experience not otherwise available, the opportunity to have contact with the working class.

Several photographers and painters were invited by Harrison to participate in the work of Mass-Observation, predominantly in Bolton (Worktown) and the holiday resort of Blackpool (Holiday Town). However, while Harrison wanted photography to fulfil a role in visual anthropology he had a different plan for the artists and their paintings. Essentially, Harrison wanted to explore the gulf between artist and the people to establish what the 'man in the street' wanted from art and 'then if possible to get the artists to satisfy it'.<sup>105</sup> One manifestation of this idea was for the artists to paint pictures (one of which was a surrealist collage) of Bolton portraying the general scene, 'showing the honest, unvarnished scenery of soot and factory, cobbled street and washing hung out at the back,' which would then be shown to 'working people all over the town'.<sup>106</sup> The artists involved in this endeavour were firstly Julian Trevelyan and Michael Wickham, respectively a surrealist and an impressionist,

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<sup>102</sup> Wyatt, 33-34.

<sup>103</sup> Harrison, *Britain Revisited*, 109-10.

<sup>104</sup> Stanley, 205.

<sup>105</sup> Madge, Harrison, and Huxley, 57.

<sup>106</sup> The paintings and collage were photographed to overcome the practical difficulty of showing the original canvases. See Tom Harrison, "What They Think in 'Worktown'," *The Listener*, 25 August 1938.

followed by the social realists, Graham Bell and William Coldstream.<sup>107</sup> Findings from the experiment formed the basis of a BBC radio talk by Harrison, *Art and the Ordinary Chap*,<sup>108</sup> which was written up and published in *The Listener*.<sup>109</sup> On the basis of the evidence, Harrison concluded that perhaps there was more enthusiasm for contemporary art if it was related to the local environment and that 'ordinary folk are ready to be interested in the most abstruse paintings'. Moreover, the respondents reported that the southern visitors were obsessed with empty streets and factory chimneys.<sup>110</sup> However, Harrison's enthusiasm for this approach to achieving a 'popular aesthetic' was already beginning to wane and his attention now turned to a group of pit-men painters from Ashington, County Durham<sup>111</sup> Mass-Observation's involvement with the Ashington Group culminated in a touring exhibition called *Unprofessional Painting*.<sup>112</sup> Unlike the professionals Harrison had recruited for the experiment in Bolton, these were 'worker artists' who generated their own 'ethos, principles and artistic criteria,' all of which was more in keeping with Harrison's ideal.<sup>113</sup> As for the photographic contribution to the Worktown project, this was to remain in the hands of professionals (See Chapter 3 for a discussion on the lack of a proletarian photography in Great Britain). The main photographers involved with Mass-Observation were Spender, Trevelyan and Jennings (all three of whom painted).<sup>114</sup> However, of these, Spender (brother of Michael Spender, with whom Harrison was already acquainted),<sup>115</sup> with a background in photojournalism, is foremost as the photo-documentarian for the Mass-Observation project.<sup>116</sup>

### **Humphrey Spender**

Given his extensive experience and strong social conscience, there can be little doubt that Spender was suitably qualified to apply the method of photographic data collection envisaged by Harrison for Mass-Observation. An early influence on Spender's photography was his eldest brother Michael who had a passion for photographing railways.<sup>117</sup> Although initially

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<sup>107</sup> Stanley, 117-20.

<sup>108</sup> Hinton, 50.

<sup>109</sup> Harrison, "What They Think in 'Worktown'."

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Lynda Morris and Robert Radford, *The story of the Artists International Association 1933-1953* (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1983), 47.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Stanley, 121.

<sup>114</sup> Morris and Radford, 45.

<sup>115</sup> Frizzell, 26.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>117</sup> One of the prints appeared on the front cover of the *Railway Magazine*. Spender.

impressed by this and similar pictorial photography, eventually, with increasing exposure to the work of other photographers, especially those outside Britain, he became dissatisfied. Spender was a regular visitor to mainland Europe. His parents died when he was sixteen and it was thought appropriate by Spender's maternal grandmother that he learn German (his grandfather came from Frankfurt). He stayed in Germany for a year studying art history and German at the local university in Freiburg-im-Breisgau.<sup>118</sup> While still developing his own photographic style, Spender began to admire the work of European photographers.<sup>119</sup> This included Andre Kertesz, Cartier-Bresson, Hans Casparius, Hoyningen-Huené, Man Ray (an American based in France), and Moholy-Nagy.<sup>120</sup> Other influences on Spender include films, as with Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, Lang's *Metropolis* and Ruttman's *Berlin: the Symphony of a Great City*. The latter film was a documentary produced with hidden cameras and which Spender cited as having 'a formative influence'.<sup>121</sup>

Graduating as an architect in 1934, Spender's architectural career was short-lived and he quickly migrated from the drawing board to the camera.<sup>122</sup> Initially, he ran a reasonably successful photographic studio in central London with a fellow student, Bill Edmiston; much of Spender's work at this time was architectural photography, including covers for the *Architectural Review*.<sup>123</sup> However, following a telephone call from one of the directors at the *Daily Mirror*, inviting one of them to become a 'roving photographer' under the pseudonym of 'lensman,' the partnership with Edmiston gradually dissolved.<sup>124</sup> Accepting the offer, Spender was to spend the next phase of his photographic career taking pictures for H. Rider-Rider, the arts editor of the *Daily Mirror*, of what he described as 'the old mill wheel, the village green with smithy or game of cricket, pretty girl on galloping horse on windswept downs, hair blowing against a background of scudding clouds'.<sup>125</sup> In other words, the assignments for the *Daily Mirror* required pictorial photography. As well as being photographically unsatisfying, Spender's time with the *Daily Mirror* was not a happy one on account of personality differences with Rider-Rider and he was fired in 1938 after refusing to

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>119</sup> Spender and Mulford, 12.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. Spender, 11.

<sup>121</sup> Spender and Mulford, 12.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Spender, 11.

take a comic photograph of the poet Edith Sitwell, with whom he had been introduced a day earlier by his brother Stephen Spender.<sup>126</sup>

While working for the *Daily Mirror*, Spender was ‘induced’ to work unpaid ‘for selected good causes’.<sup>127</sup> Indicative work includes providing photographic evidence that ‘bad housing was a cause of juvenile crime,’ which was an assignment given by an East End social worker who happened to be a friend of Spender’s grandmother.<sup>128</sup> Fulfilling this project meant that Spender had to spend time with a badly housed Stepney family.<sup>129</sup> A further similar assignment included taking photographs of the 1936 Jarrow Hunger Marchers, for the journal *Left Review*.<sup>130</sup> Also, a photograph by Spender of a line of unemployed men in Newcastle, which had been rejected by the *Daily Mirror* on aesthetic grounds, was published in *The Listener* magazine in 1934 to illustrate an article on the causes and reverberations of the Depression.<sup>131</sup> On the basis of this unpaid work and Harrison’s acquaintance with his brother Michael Spender, he was offered the opportunity to become involved with Mass-Observation.<sup>132</sup>

For the Mass-Observation photographs, Spender used 35mm rangefinder cameras. The first photographs were taken with an early Leica. After this was stolen, he purchased a Zeiss Contax 35.<sup>133</sup> Similar in design, these 35mm cameras with their high-quality lenses represented a major technological improvement in miniaturisation that helped to provide the means for the new photographic forms emerging in the 1930s.<sup>134</sup> For example, it was now possible to shoot a sequence of photographs without having to reload the camera with film. However, they would still have required considerable ability to operate. The absence of automation meant that the photographer would have to estimate the light level for exposure (probably using an exposure table). However, the main constraint was the available film speed. Film sensitivity, even with the fastest films of the day, meant that hand-held

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<sup>126</sup> Spender and Mulford, 14. Spender claims to have ‘hovered on the perimeter of the Auden-Isherwood-Spender circle’. Spender, 11.

<sup>127</sup> , 12-15.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Frizzell, 18.

<sup>132</sup> Spender and Mulford, 15.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>134</sup> The new photographic forms included modern photojournalism and new approaches in documentary and fashion. Robert Deane, "The New Photography 1920s–1940s," National Gallery of Australia, <http://nga.gov.au/Photography/>.

photography required relatively long exposures. With flash or supplementary lighting of any description out of the question,<sup>135</sup> the shutter speeds for the kind of photography required for, say, interior shots would have been anywhere between a quarter to a whole second.<sup>136</sup> Consequently, if the subject moved even slightly, the image would have been blurred. This is evident in many of the un-posed interior photographs taken by Spender in Bolton.<sup>137</sup>

Under the direction of Harrison, Spender took some 900 photographs for the northern branch of Mass-Observation; the majority of those photographed were described as ‘working class’.<sup>138</sup> Evidently, Spender felt out of place in Bolton. As already stated, at that time, while the national economy was starting to recover from the depression of the early 1930s, Bolton, along with other areas of the industrial north, was still affected by high levels of unemployment and economic insecurity. This was particularly so in those regions dependent on struggling nineteenth-century industries, as was the case with cotton and coal in Bolton and the surrounding area. For Harrison, however, as an experienced and confident field researcher, committed to a distinct, albeit unorthodox, approach to research, any cultural, social or regional economic differences would have been of little concern. By contrast, Spender describes feeling ‘frightened’ and ‘very much a foreigner [...] if I asked for directions, it was difficult to understand what people were saying’.<sup>139</sup> Trevelyan similarly described being out of place: ‘in Bolton the “snob-screens” of the mind turned against me, and it took the ebullience and vivacity of Tom [Harrison] to break them down; even then he did not always succeed’.<sup>140</sup>

Coming from the relatively prosperous London area, it is not surprising that middle-class photographers and painters invited by Harrison felt out of place in Bolton. However, this sense of being an outsider applied both to visitors north to south and vice versa. As Bill Naughton the author and playwright from Bolton (who also contributed to the work of Mass-Observation)<sup>141</sup> recalled from his first impressions of London:

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<sup>135</sup> However, Spender used flash for three of the pub exterior photographs. Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Worktown Mass Observation archives," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/archives>.

<sup>136</sup> Spender and Mulford, 18.

<sup>137</sup> See in particular the pub interiors. Bolton Library and Museum Services.

<sup>138</sup> Frizzell, 28.

<sup>139</sup> Spender and Mulford, 16.

<sup>140</sup> Trevelyan, 85.

<sup>141</sup> See, for example, Harrison, *Britain Revisited*.

I looked around at the cool-faced Londoners about me, heard the strange accents, and thought about the warm Lancashire faces I had left behind, of the voices I loved, and of my old workmates, and I greatly longed to be back with them.<sup>142</sup>

For Naughton, these north-south differences, between a Lancashire cotton town and the metropolis, permeated all aspects of life:

Compared to Bolton, London appeared an awful place to live in. There seemed to be no proper order, no regularity of life, no mill buzzers signalling folk to get to work, no quiet periods: everybody seemed mindlessly on the go, or on holiday.<sup>143</sup>

Clearly, at that time, visitors from north to south or south to north would have felt out of place. Moreover, any cultural and social differences would have been compounded by the stark economic disparity between the depressed industrial north and the more prosperous south.

Adding to Spender's disorientation in Bolton, Harrison gave little concrete or planned direction. Spender recalls that in respect of photography: there were no 'written directives [just] a general brief to provide information about people's behaviour in all kinds of circumstances'.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, the context and circumstances under which Spender, worked is somewhat vague. For example, the precise duration over which he took the photographs for Mass-Observation in Bolton is unclear. It would appear, however, that from August 1937 to April 1938 Spender made several visits ranging from five days to three weeks, comprising a total of twenty weeks.<sup>145</sup> Therefore, his involvement with Mass-Observation for the Worktown project amounted to less than half a year. Moreover, by October 1938 Spender had started working for the new publication, *Picture Post*.<sup>146</sup> Around the same time, the

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<sup>142</sup> Bill Naughton, *On the pig's back: an autobiographical excursion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 16.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>144</sup> Spender and Mulford, 15.

<sup>145</sup> The time period is taken from the Worktown website, Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Bolton Worktown: photography and archives from the Mass Observation," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/>. The number of visits and total time spent on the Worktown project is based on an interview with Spender by Derek Smith in Humphrey Spender and David Mellor, *Worktown: photographs of Bolton and Blackpool taken for Mass Observation 1937/38* (Falmer, Brighton: Gardner Centre Gallery, University of Sussex, 1977).

<sup>146</sup> Frizzell, 36.

international crisis led to a shift in priorities for Mass-Observation.<sup>147</sup> The loss of Spender's contribution to the visual research in Worktown coincided with Harrison joining Madge in London to 'investigate popular attitudes during the Munich Crisis'.<sup>148</sup> In effect, with the loss of Spender and Harrison, photography as a form of data collection came to an end in Worktown.

Some sense of Harrison's radical approach to anthropology can be gleaned from his *Savage Civilisations*, which encompasses topics from the colonial and economic through to an amusing, albeit Hollywoodesque, episode in which he was commissioned by Douglas Fairbanks Senior to help shoot a film on the Big Nambas (allegedly, a tribe of cannibals).<sup>149</sup> In spite of its unconventional style, however, the book, with some reservations, was warmly received by the academic press.<sup>150</sup> In *Savage Civilisations*, Harrison rejected what he saw as the received view that 'the native way of thinking cannot be understood by the white'.<sup>151</sup> Citing examples of contemporary misconceptions of Hebridean culture, he was at pains to argue that such 'misunderstanding results from our easy confidence, our belief that we are the only civilised ones'.<sup>152</sup> Aside from his prescient indictment of colonialism and associated prejudice, Harrison's main argument was that "going native" was essential if cultural misunderstanding was to be avoided – a methodology which, apparently, also meant not keeping a diary or making general notes:

It is the anthropologist's custom to detach his daily life from the people among whom he is working, to eat his own foods; he should not even wish to dream his own dreams, if he is to see past the notebooks full of intricate and interesting superficials, which he will take home for the benefit of his adolescent science. There is so much of interest that one can spend all day writing notes; but the wood gets lost for the trees. What oceans of error we should have been spared if those who wrote about the "savage," primitive mentality, had done more primitive living!<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Hinton, 60.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Harrison, *Savage Civilisation*, 424-31.

<sup>150</sup> Gladys Bryson, "Savage Civilization by Tom Harrison," *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 2 (1938); O.C.W.F., "Savage Civilization," *The Geographical Journal* 89, no. 4 (1937); A. Irving Hallowell, "Savage Civilization by Tom Harrison," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 196 (1938).

<sup>151</sup> Harrison, *Savage Civilisation*, 342.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.



Harrisson's methodological stance, in not letting note-keeping interfere with his anthropological research in the New Hebrides, was, of course, to be reversed in the case of Mass-Observation.<sup>154</sup>

By the time he arrived in Bolton in late 1936, in spite of his young age, Harrisson was already an experienced and confident field researcher. Some years later, Harrisson was to reflect in revelatory terms the realisation 'that most of the things I had been studying and the methods I had been using, both in ornithology and gradually in ethnology, arose just as much as problems among my "own" people. All over the world, people like me were going to study other civilisations on a scale of intimacy and detail which had not yet been applied in our "civilised" society'.<sup>155</sup> He further added, in ironic clarity, 'why not study the cannibals of Lancashire, the head-hunters of Stepney?'<sup>156</sup> It was on this basis, in the pre-Mass-Observation period, that Harrisson commenced his research in Bolton.

In this early phase there was no hint that photography would be included as a form of data collection. Harrisson's research strategy at this time amounted to a form of participant observation that entailed sampling employment in a range of roles including 'lorry driver, shop assistant, labourer, cotton operative, ice-cream man, and reporter in or to do with Unilever'.<sup>157</sup> However, these work-time links with Unilever extended to other parts of the day. Harrisson recalled, in *World Within: A Borneo Story*, that 'the evenings, necessarily sprinkled with eau de cologne, I sat at the fireside of prosperous Lever relatives, feeling slightly guilty but softly elated'.<sup>158</sup> Harrisson's elation here referred to his perception of having accomplished a methodological discovery (for himself). Specifically, he was excited by the ease with which he was able to 'penetrate other kinds of western society, as societies in which you are from the start in "stranger situation"'.<sup>159</sup> However, after just a few months, this small-scale operation was to be 'transformed under the auspices of Mass-Observation into a huge study of every aspect of life in Bolton'.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> See for example, Madge, Harrisson, and Huxley, 31.

<sup>155</sup> Harrisson, *World within. A Borneo story*, 158.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Hubble, 5.

### The early history of Mass Observation

From the outset, reflecting not least that Mass-Observation comprised two pre-existing projects, the Blackheath group and Harrisson's Worktown, the combined organisation was a marriage of creative and methodological differences. Hubble argues that potential strains in the early days of Mass-Observation were 'held in creative tension by a fluid tripartite structure'.<sup>161</sup> In effect, the organisation (the day-to-day running) of Mass-Observation was such that Harrisson, based in Bolton, was responsible for the Worktown project while Madge and Jennings, based in Blackheath, London, were responsible for the national surveys.<sup>162</sup> There were important methodological differences between the two branches of Mass-Observation, especially concerning the collection of data. For the first two years in Harrisson's Worktown, data collection was by a team of full and part-time observers who recorded what they saw and heard in Bolton but 'did not make a direct interview with anybody'.<sup>163</sup> By contrast, what eventually became the National Panel comprised volunteer observers who chiefly reported their own subjective viewpoints in national surveys.<sup>164</sup> In other words, unlike in Worktown, there was direct contact with the subjects of the research.

The national surveys organised from Blackheath commenced with just a few observers but as more were recruited so too did the amount of data generated. The first survey was conducted on the 12 February 1937 by just 25 observers (the twelfth of the month was intended to tie in with the date set for the Coronation in May 1937); observers were requested to record everything they did between rising and going to bed on that day (in the form of a diary).<sup>165</sup> However, as a result of advertisements in newspapers and magazines public interest in taking part in the national surveys was such that within a few weeks of requesting that people volunteer to become observers more than a thousand applications were received.<sup>166</sup> It was intended that these surveys, initially based on routine events, would be conducted on the twelfth day of each month and the observers, through their diaries, were to 'be the metrological stations from whose reports a weather map of popular feeling can be compiled'.<sup>167</sup> By 1938, however, a total of 1,730 reports amounting to 2,300,000 words had

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>162</sup> Stanley, 8.

<sup>163</sup> Harrisson, *Britain Revisited*, 26.

<sup>164</sup> Tom Jeffery, "Mass-Observation: a short history," (Mass-Observation, Archive, 1999).

<sup>165</sup> Madge, Harrisson, and Huxley, 30-31.

<sup>166</sup> Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, *May the twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys 1937 by over two hundred observers* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1937).

<sup>167</sup> Madge, Harrisson, and Huxley, 30.

been produced; in quantitative terms at least, this meant that the original intention with the Day-Surveys to collect a mass of data had been fulfilled.<sup>168</sup> At the same time, however, as was noted in *First Year's Work 1937-38*, 'those whose job it has been to read and sift these reports at headquarters have thus been bombarded with multifarious fact, a salutary process for the removal of preconception'.<sup>169</sup> This accumulation coupled with a non-discriminative research strategy had the consequence that data analysis lagged data generation by one year. Indeed, both branches of Mass-Observation generated vast amounts of data; this includes the hundreds of photographs taken by Spender which, with a few exceptions, were virtually ignored (or at least not published). In fact the imbalance between data collection and data analysis was such that up to 1949 over 90% of the material 'was never used in the compilation of [Mass-Observation] reports and publications'.<sup>170</sup>

As already indicated most of the observers involved in the Worktown project at Bolton, including Spender, came from a middle-class background. A similar overrepresentation by the middle class occurred with the untrained observers participating in the national surveys. Nevertheless, the potential for subjective bias from untrained observers was acknowledged by Mass-Observation.<sup>171</sup> In addressing this likelihood, observers were required to produce objective reports on themselves and had to be drawn 'from all classes, from all localities and from all shades of opinion'.<sup>172</sup> Mass-Observation's own analysis shows that the majority of the observers in 1937 were middle class, that men significantly outnumbered women, most of the observers were single, and that the largest occupational groups were teachers, students and office workers. In other words, that there was an inherent middle-class bias in Mass-Observation. However, on the motivations of observers, the most frequently cited reason for participating was to 'take part in scientific work for its own sake'.<sup>173</sup> Ostensibly, although based on self-reported statements, for which veracity could not be guaranteed, this motivation suggests that any personal bias will have been minimal. Nonetheless, it still remains that in both branches of Mass-Observation the majority of observers were middle class. In other words, Mass-Observation was not, as hoped, representative of the general population.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Madge, Harrisson, and Malinowski, 47.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Summerfield, 451.

<sup>171</sup> Madge, Harrisson, and Huxley, 51-53.

<sup>172</sup> Apparently, however, there is no mention that observers would have to be drawn from both sexes. See *ibid.*, 31-33.

<sup>173</sup> Madge, Harrisson, and Malinowski, 67.

<sup>174</sup> Spender's positionality is discussed in Chapter 3.

During Harrisson's stewardship (the first two years of operation) the methodology of the northern branch of Mass-Observation included photography.<sup>175</sup> By contrast, for the national surveys, photography was limited to a request in April 1937 for observers to take photographs:

If you have a camera, take some straight snapshots illustrating normal activities in different parts of your environment, home, main streets, back streets, office, place of work, etc. Send them in by May 1<sup>st</sup>, irrespective of their artistic qualities, noting on the back in each case when and where they were taken, with any further explanation that may be necessary.<sup>176</sup>

Surprisingly, given the details of this Mass-Observation Circular (requests like this would later be called a directive), many of the responses received were in fact portrait photographs of the individual observers; these were accompanied, in many cases, with a written statement or notes in which they enter into a dialogue with their own photograph.<sup>177</sup> Had the experiment been successful it seems likely that it would have been repeated, thus adding visual research to the methodology of the national surveys. However, the failure of this request, especially since it involved the use of untrained observers as photographers, would have confirmed that, as alluded to earlier, photography (as with other scientific instruments of precision) ought to be, and in the event would be, undertaken by 'experts'.<sup>178</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, a professional photographer, Spender, was recruited by Harrisson as the principal photographer for the northern branch of Mass-Observation.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Stanley, 83.

<sup>176</sup> Mass-Observation, "Directive, File Reports, A4.3," (Mass-Observation Online: University of Sussex Special Collections, Mass-Observation, 1937).

<sup>177</sup> Unfortunately, few of these photographs appear to have survived. Stanley, 127.

<sup>178</sup> Evidently, it was thought that utilising 'experts' would lead to 'a more rigorous objectivity'. Madge, Harrisson, and Huxley, 35. There is, however, a precedent for amateur photographers fulfilling a documentary role, in the form of the photographic survey movement in England from 1885 to 1918. Elizabeth Edwards, *The camera as historian: amateur photographers and historical imagination, 1885-1918* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>179</sup> Spender was not the only professional photographer involved in the Worktown study. See the introductory chapter.

### The early published output of Mass Observation (1937-1939)

Excluding Spender's Worktown photographs (see later chapters), various reports and magazine articles, the first Mass-Observation publication was *May the Twelfth: Mass-Observation Day-Surveys*.<sup>180</sup> This was published during the first six months of operation and was co-edited by Jennings and Madge. Harrison had no part in *May the Twelfth*.<sup>181</sup> As the title implies, the main focus of the book, which ran to more than 400 pages, was the Coronation Day survey; the remainder of the book covered the 12th of the month day survey for March (under the heading 'Normal Day Surveys'). However, aside from brief summaries, there was virtually no analysis of the Coronation Day observations edited by Jennings. Essentially, the edited reports were allowed to speak for themselves, they amounted to what Hubble describes as a 'textual montage'.<sup>182</sup> Drawing on Jennings's filmic aspirations, David Pocock argues that *May the Twelfth* was the equivalent in prose of 'experiments being made in documentary film'.<sup>183</sup> However, critical reaction to *May the Twelfth* was generally hostile.<sup>184</sup> A particularly stinging criticism was delivered by G.W. Stonier, in the *New Statesman and Nation*, on the 9 October 1937, in which he described 'Mass Observation as the perfect subject for the Marx Brothers'.<sup>185</sup> Criticisms such as this, of *May the Twelfth* and the pamphlet *Mass Observation*, were analysed by Wyatt in another Mass-Observation publication *First Year's Work 1937-38*.<sup>186</sup> For Jennings, however, it appears that the perceived failure of *The Twelfth of May*, which only sold 800 copies, 'helped deepen his dissatisfaction with Mass-Observation'.<sup>187</sup> Jennings, already engaged on a range of other activities outside Mass-Observation, especially documentary filming, departed from the organisation in late 1937.<sup>188</sup> The departure of Jennings led to changes in Mass-Observation; including that in August 1938 Harrison and Madge swapped places, from Bolton to Blackheath and vice versa.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Jennings and Madge.

<sup>181</sup> Jeffery.

<sup>182</sup> Hubble, 120.

<sup>183</sup> David Pocock, 'Afterword' to Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, *May the twelfth: Mass-Observation day-surveys 1937 by over two hundred observers* (London: Faber, 1987).

<sup>184</sup> Jeffery.

<sup>185</sup> G.W. Stonier, "A Thousand Mass-Observers," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 9 October 1937.

<sup>186</sup> Madge, Harrison, and Malinowski, 48-63. The analysis was fairly extensive and comprised a system of headings (e.g. bias, truthfulness etc.) developed from the items reviewed. One of these headings was allocated to each sentence. Sections of items were scored using a system of pluses and minuses, to denote approval or disapproval of the work of Mass-Observation. The results were then tallied, tabulated and interpreted.

<sup>187</sup> Jackson, 196.

<sup>188</sup> Hubble, 7.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

The next major publication, *Britain by Mass Observation*, with sales of over 100,000 in ten days, was by far the most successful Mass-Observation publication in the run up to World War II.<sup>190</sup> Co-edited by Harrison and Madge, *Britain by Mass Observation*, drew on both the national surveys and the Worktown study (including sections on the Munich Crisis and popular entertainment). This publication not only made Mass-Observation a household name but its style marked a departure from the earlier attempts to infuse a sense of academic rigour into the writing to something more akin to ‘popular journalism’.<sup>191</sup> However, it is significant that neither *The Twelfth of May* nor *Britain by Mass Observation* included photographs that had been produced for Mass-Observation. It is ironic, then, that all the observers engaged with Mass-Observation were described as ‘the cameras with which we are trying to photograph contemporary life;’ albeit subjective cameras.<sup>192</sup> Despite the metaphorical allusion, photography was always peripheral to the output of Mass-Observation. Even so, in the recourse to the visual arts in the methodology of Mass-Observation, photography emerged as one of the main methods of data collection.

Besides photography other visual media like film are associated with Mass-Observation. Salient here is Jennings’s documentary *Spare Time*, which concerns the leisure activities of working-class people. Although technically incorrect, *Spare Time* is generally referred to as a Mass-Observation film.<sup>193</sup> In fact, Jennings directed *Spare Time* in 1939 while he was working for the GPO Film Unit, which was after he had left Mass-Observation.<sup>194</sup> Shot in monochrome, the film is set in various locations around the North of England and Wales (including Bolton), with environmental sounds and contemporary music in support. The narrative style of the film shares elements of Jennings’s *Pandaemonium* (published posthumously), in which shots are presented in the form of a montage.<sup>195</sup> The film’s industrial themes of steel, cotton and coal are wholly in keeping with the concept of Worktown. Moreover, although for most of the shots the people filmed would have been aware of the camera nonetheless the film has a naturalistic tone with a distinct, candid quality to the photography. Indeed, *Spare Time* sits comfortably within the Worktown canon. Now regarded as an important first film by Jennings, at the time a sequence with a kazoo band

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<sup>190</sup> Stanley, 90.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>192</sup> Madge, Harrison, and Malinowski, p.66.

<sup>193</sup> See Walker, 110. Both the theme and working title of *Spare Time* (‘British Workers’) can easily be identified with the Worktown project.

<sup>194</sup> Jackson, 210.

<sup>195</sup> Jennings, Jennings, and Madge.

filmed on wasteland drew much criticism from Grierson and other documentary filmmakers.<sup>196</sup> That the kazoo band sequences were criticised as patronising and insulting illustrates the challenge of directing a middle-class gaze towards the working class.<sup>197</sup> There is no way of comprehensively refuting such a charge of condescension.<sup>198</sup> The same charge could be levelled at Spender and others, as will be seen in later chapters.

## Conclusion

Reflecting the disparate talents of its founders, in the pre-war period Mass-Observation was a marriage of diverse methods, resulting in a distinctive methodology that set it apart from other research. These methods included photography. However, photography as a method of data collection was only employed in Harrisson's northern branch of Mass-Observation. The setting for this innovative method was the Lancashire town of Bolton; a town that was still reeling from the effects of the Depression. Moreover, although the photographer, Spender, was well-equipped to take on such an assignment his privileged socioeconomic background, relative to the target population in Bolton, will have been an impediment.

The early output of Mass-Observation received mixed reviews that exacerbated tensions within the organisation, all of which culminated in the exit of Jennings. Moreover, a methodology that put the emphasis on the accumulation of data meant that data analysis lagged data collection by a significant margin; consequently, most of the data generated – including Spender's photographs – were largely unused. Added to which, the departure of Harrisson and Spender from Bolton in 1938 brought the short-lived experiment with photography in Mass-Observation to an end.

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<sup>196</sup> Ian Aitken, *Film and reform: John Grierson and the documentary film movement* (London: Routledge, 1992), 147.

<sup>197</sup> The 1971 gangster drama *Get Carter*, which was set in Newcastle upon Tyne, includes a similar sequence of a kazoo band shot on wasteland. See Steve Chibnall, *Get Carter* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 65-66.

<sup>198</sup> One variant of this form of criticism is the 'doorstep portrait'. This is where the legitimacy of taking photographs that intrude into the lives of the poor and destitute can easily be challenged – even if the objective is to improve the lives of the poor. The risk is that middle-class norms are imposed. See Didier Aubert, "The doorstep portrait: intrusion and performance in mainstream American documentary photography," *Visual Studies* 24, no. 1 (2009).

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Mass-Observation and the use of photography in the 1930s**

##### **Introduction**

In the last chapter it was established that Mass-Observation's pioneering methodology can be related to the diverse talents of its founders. However, tensions within the founding trio were exacerbated by mixed reviews for the organisation's early output. A particularly innovative method that developed out of the newly formed Mass-Observation was the use of photography for data collection. Its use, however, was restricted to the northern branch of Mass-Observation, where it was requested by Harrisson and undertaken by Spender. The experiment with photography was relatively brief and concluded when they both left Worktown. Moreover, as with the bulk of data collected by Mass-Observation, at the time, the resulting photographs were largely unused.

Thus far this thesis has approached the Worktown photography from the perspective of anthropological research. However, the Worktown photographs are invariably viewed from the perspective of documentary and not anthropology. This apparent existence in two different forms requires consideration of both modes of visual research. Moreover, the 1930s was an era of significant hardship, with pathological levels of unemployment and poverty. Developments in documentary photography and ethnographic writing reflect this dynamic and had a role in documenting the impact of the Depression.

To investigate these and other related issues, the background to the inclusion of photography in the methodology of Mass-Observation's anthropological research will be explored, including contemporary use in anthropology. This will be followed by a selective analysis of existing literary and photographic responses (largely documentary) to the economic depression and poverty of the 1930s.

##### **Photography and anthropology**

Even before the formation of Mass-Observation, Harrisson included photography in his research. In 1932 he organised and chose the members for an Oxford University expedition to study the flora and fauna of Sarawak (Borneo), which included an assistant botanist, Patrick



Syngé who doubled as official photographer.<sup>199</sup> First published as an article in *The Geographical Journal* in 1933, and subsequently in book form (1938),<sup>200</sup> Harrisson's account of the expedition indicates that around 600 photographs were taken.<sup>201</sup> The 16 photographs included in the article cover a range of topics from base camps and local inhabitants (heavily posed) to mountain views. The style of photography was constrained by technological limitations as the camera used was a relatively bulky Soho Reflex ¼ plate (4¼x3¼ inch) which, coupled with the shooting conditions and speed of the film used, meant that fairly lengthy exposure times were required for many of the photographs.<sup>202</sup> Hence, only posed or static photographs were possible.

Photographs of a more candid or spontaneous form were included in Harrisson's *Savage Civilisation*, published in 1937, which is a largely anthropological study of life in Malekula.<sup>203</sup> Amongst the book's many plates there are 39 captioned photographs.<sup>204</sup> The photographs cover a range of themes from artefacts to village scenes and portraits. While some are reproduced from elsewhere, the majority of the photographs for *Savage Civilisation* were taken on Harrisson's behalf by Alfred Guthmann.<sup>205</sup> Harrisson provided the rationale for not having taken the photographs himself:

[T]o produce a camera would often have been to destroy my particular line of approach and falsify the position of wandering unwhite white man. The negative record seldom seemed worth the sacrifice of a status that was, ideally, insignificant. Therefore I am beholden to my friend Alfred Guthmann, who came over from Tahiti for a few weeks, and took photos on Malekula.<sup>206</sup>

By implication, as with not keeping notes (See Chapter 2), Harrisson would have seen photography as interfering with his preferred method of anthropology, participant observation. Harrisson saw photography as something separate, an addition to the research methodology and certainly not occupying a central place. Hence, for *Savage Civilisations*, he

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<sup>199</sup> Tom Harrisson, *Borneo jungle: an account of the Oxford University Expedition of 1932* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 243.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> "The Oxford University Expedition to Sarawak," *The Geographical Journal* LXXXII, no. 5 (1933); *Borneo jungle: an account of the Oxford University Expedition of 1932*.

<sup>202</sup> Harrisson indicates that photographs taken in the rainforest required 6-10 seconds at f/22.

<sup>203</sup> Harrisson, *Savage Civilisation*.

<sup>204</sup> No information is provided in the text on the camera, film used or number of photographs taken.

<sup>205</sup> Harrisson, *Savage Civilisation*, 11.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

was content to invite an ‘external’ (to his research) photographer who would presumably have been both visible and significant to the people of Malekula. However, no doubt influenced by the growing trend for social documentary in the 1930s (see below), for the field work with Mass-Observation in Worktown, Harrison identified a more significant role for photography. As recalled by Spender, ‘He believed, as I did, that press photography was largely falsifying and irrelevant. Mass-Observation, on the other hand, was committed to “study real life,” and for this purpose the concealed prying camera was essential’.<sup>207</sup> This volte face is difficult to reconcile with Harrison’s advocacy of participant observation for the research generally,<sup>208</sup> except that again, as with Malekula, Harrison was not averse to inviting a third party to take photographs on his behalf. Moreover, Harrison was using Spender merely as an instrument to collect data. Harrison claimed that along with the other observers in Worktown, Spender was recording ‘on the spot without being noticed so that life continued as if there were no “strangers”’.<sup>209</sup> The reality, of course, is that the observers were invariably strangers. Hence, a candid style of photography emerged as the methodology for Spender to take the Worktown photographs in which there was no attempt at participation.

In spite of the shortness of his time in Bolton, Spender took some 900 photographs under the direction of Harrison. The approach to taking the photographs has been described by David Mellor as approximating that of ‘participant observation’.<sup>210</sup> Probing more deeply, Harrison required Spender, to ‘capture “unpolluted” action and genuinely unconscious “naked” expressions’.<sup>211</sup> But, importantly, Spender, a novice fieldworker and completely unfamiliar with the local culture, was little more than a detached witness. Methodologically, this puts Spender at the complete observer end of the ‘complete participant and complete observer continuum’.<sup>212</sup> Moreover, as will be discussed in the next chapter, an important omission from the photographic methodology employed by Mass-Observation was the keeping of any kind of research record (other than the photographs themselves) of the fieldwork process.

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<sup>207</sup> Spender, 15.

<sup>208</sup> It will be argued in Chapter 4 that the photographic fieldwork employed for the Worktown project lacked a genuinely participative element.

<sup>209</sup> Humphrey Spender and Thomas Harnett Harrison, *Britain in the 30's: photographs by Humphrey Spender* (London: Lion and Unicorn Press, 1975).

<sup>210</sup> David Mellor, ‘Mass-Observation: the intellectual climate’, in Jessica Evans, *The Camerawork essays: context and meaning in photography* (London: Rivers Oram, 1997), 132-44.

<sup>211</sup> Frizzell, 26-27.

<sup>212</sup> Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative researching*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 2002), 92.

Along with photography, Mass-Observation's methodology included poetry and painting. However, it is the photographic legacy of the visual arts component, stemming from the subsequent attention given to the work of Humphrey Spender that he undertook in Bolton (Worktown) and Blackpool (Holiday Town) that increasingly dominates this aspect of the Mass-Observation archive.<sup>213</sup> However, visual anthropology was not unique to Mass-Observation, since photography was already included in contemporary methods of anthropology.<sup>214</sup> Anthropologists of that era would have found guidance on photography in the Royal Anthropological Institute's, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*. For example, in the 1929 edition of the handbook there is a section on using surreptitious methods when attempting to photograph 'shy natives': 'it is well to conceal the fact that the real lens is pointing at them. A dummy lens fixed at the side of the camera and pointed away and at right angles to the natives will make them think that they are safe, the real lens being concealed until the last moment'.<sup>215</sup> However, the rationale for the use of photography in *Notes and Queries* was restricted to the recording of physical characteristics. The function of photography, therefore, was to generate anthropometric data (i.e. physical anthropology) and, moreover, that this would be best captured on an individual portrait.<sup>216</sup>

Examples of a broader role for photography can be found in published ethnographies from the 1920s onwards. The classic work is *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead.<sup>217</sup> Published in 1942, which was later than the Worktown photography, it is nonetheless of the same era since the fieldwork in Bali was undertaken from 1936-1939. In their innovative study Bateson and Mead used photography (still photographs and movie film) to help explore the relationship between culture and behaviour. Of the 25,000 photographs taken, the book contains 759 images on 100 plates.<sup>218</sup> All the photographs were taken with a 35mm Leica camera, which for the most part was fitted with a standard lens. Bateson and Mead claim that only eight of the photographs

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<sup>213</sup> See for example, Spender and Harrison; Spender and Mulford; Frizzell; Curzon, *Mass-Observation and Visual Culture: Depicting Everyday Lives in Britain*.

<sup>214</sup> Stanley, 22.

<sup>215</sup> British Association for the Advancement of Science, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology. Fifth edition. Edited by a committee of Section H* (London, 1929), 371-79.

<sup>216</sup> It was suggested that 'where possible the subject should be given a metric staff to hold'. *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>217</sup> Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese character: A photographic analysis* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1942).

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 49. Bateson and Mead had only planned to take 2,000 photographs, but based on their initial experience this was increased to 25,000. Margaret Mead, *Blackberry winter: my earlier years* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1973), 234.

included in the book were posed and only when necessary was an angular viewfinder employed to photograph more sensitive subjects.<sup>219</sup> However, while this compares with the candid photography required by Harrisson for *Worktown*, there is an important methodological difference; Bateson and Mead worked as a pair. While Bateson was taking photographs, Mead made notes.<sup>220</sup> They argued that ‘it is essential to have at least two workers in close cooperation. The photographic sequence is almost meaningless without a verbal account of what occurred’.<sup>221</sup> In spite of its continuing status as a classic in visual ethnography, *Balinese Character* failed to revolutionise anthropology.<sup>222</sup> However, as Douglas Harper argues, ‘it continues to show the potential of analysis drawn from imagery’.<sup>223</sup> In this respect, as will be argued in Chapter 4, a fundamental problem with the approach to the collection of photographic data in *Worktown* was the lack of fieldnotes.

Away from the influential study by Bateson and Mead, ethnographers would often include photographs as a form of authentication (i.e. evidence of having been there).<sup>224</sup> These photographs would have been directly related to the fieldwork and served ‘presentational and illustrative purposes,’ as opposed to supporting an analysis of the visual aspects of culture.<sup>225</sup> For example, in Malinowski’s *The Sexual Life of Savages*, the photographs typically include the subjects of the research along with contextual information on their natural setting. One of the photographs, however, includes Malinowski, posed and standing with one of his research subjects entitled ‘Ethnographer with a Man in a Wig’.<sup>226</sup> Aside from other meanings that can be read into Malinowski appearing in one of these photographs, the image provides visual evidence of his having conducted the research.<sup>227</sup> Harrisson too included a photograph of himself in *Savage Civilisations*.<sup>228</sup> (Moreover, Harrisson and other Mass-Observation

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<sup>219</sup> Bateson and Mead, 49.

<sup>220</sup> However, as well as the financial implications, the dramatic increase in the number of photographs meant a ten-fold increase in the accompanying notes. Mead, 234.

<sup>221</sup> Bateson and Mead, 49-50.

<sup>222</sup> Reasons advanced for the failure of *Balinese Character* to revolutionise anthropology include that Mead and Bateson set too high a standard for others to replicate and that the book lacked scientific rigour e.g. sampling error. See Douglas A. Harper, *Visual sociology* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 11-17.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>224</sup> Bateson and Mead do not appear in any of the photographs published in *Balinese Character*.

<sup>225</sup> M. S. Ball and Gregory W. H. Smith, *Analyzing visual data* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992), 9.

<sup>226</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *The sexual life of savages in north-western Melanesia: an ethnographic account of courtship, marriage, and family life among the natives of the Trobriand Islands, British New Guinea* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2006). See Plate 68.

<sup>227</sup> See Christopher Pinney, *Photography and anthropology* (London: Reaktion, 2011).

<sup>228</sup> The photograph is entitled ‘The author initiated into Sakau manhood’. Harrisson, *Savage Civilisation*, 240-41. In Harrisson’s earlier publication, *The Oxford Union Expedition to Sarawak*, only one of the images shows members of the research team; but it is not possible to determine whether Harrisson is included. The photograph

observers are included in several of Spender's Worktown photographs).<sup>229</sup> However, beyond the captions there is no direct reference to the photographs in the text for *Savage Civilisations*. In other words, the photographs were used in a supportive, illustrative, role. However, while he would have been cognisant of the guidance on photography in *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*<sup>230</sup> the role Harrison envisaged for photography in Mass-Observation was more ambitious than simply capturing physical characteristics or providing evidence of having been there.<sup>231</sup> In other words, with some reservations, it was closer to *Balinese Character* than contemporary usage in ethnography.

Aside from the association with Mass-Observation's anthropological investigations, Spender's Worktown photography is invariably seen from the perspective of documentary.<sup>232</sup> A distinction can be made between documentary as objective representation and documentary as subjective interpretation.<sup>233</sup> The former is built on the assumption that a photographic image can be an objective record – a true reflection of reality - which has purely informational value. The latter concerns photographic images that are not simply records but through the apparent objectivity of the camera are accorded representational legitimacy. More specifically, 'the photographer's interpretative grasp of his or her subject with the ostensibly objective photographic image secures a status for the work of documentary which places it beyond mere opinion'.<sup>234</sup> A similar distinction is made by William Stott who contends that a document 'gives information to the intellect' whereas a human document 'informs the emotions'.<sup>235</sup> Documents that combine these two extremes 'increase our knowledge of public facts, but sharpen it with feeling [...]. They are social documents, their use is social

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has the caption: 'Poling up rapids in the upper reaches of the Tinjar'. See Harrison, "The Oxford University Expedition to Sarawak," 388. However, in *Borneo Jungle* there are five photographs of team members one of which, a group shot entitled 'The Tuans', includes Harrison. See *Borneo jungle: an account of the Oxford University Expedition of 1932*, 44.

<sup>229</sup> Harrison and other Mass-Observation observers are included in several of Spender's Worktown photographs. Six photographs of Harrison can be found under the search tag 'Tom Harrison'. See Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Worktown Mass Observation archives".

<sup>230</sup> *Notes and Queries* is referred to in the initial Mass-Observation pamphlet. See Madge, Harrison, and Huxley, 50.

<sup>231</sup> As will be outlined in Chapter 4, Harrison's remit for Spender was to produce photographs that could be used in an analysis of the visual dimensions of culture.

<sup>232</sup> Walker, 117.

<sup>233</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices* (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 81-87.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-47.

<sup>235</sup> William Stott, *Documentary expression and thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 12.

documentary'.<sup>236</sup> Specifically, social documentary shows 'conditions neither permanent nor necessary, conditions of a certain time or place [...]. It has an intellectual dimension to make clear what the facts are, why they came about, and how they can be changed for the better'.<sup>237</sup> Lewis Hine, who used his camera for social reform, is an exemplar of this genre of documentary.<sup>238</sup> In contrast, much of what passes for ethnographic photography would be more closely identified with documentary as objective representation. A major difference, however, will be that the anthropologist is going to be less concerned with artistic expression. For example, Gregory Bateson indicated that when it came to the final selection of photographs for *Balinese Character* precedence was given to scientific relevance over photographic merit.<sup>239</sup> In other words, scientific objectivity would be compromised if aesthetic considerations informed the choice of photograph. Moreover, as would be expected in a scientific analysis, the photographs in *Balinese Character* were accompanied by a sizeable explanatory text drawing attention to what is, as opposed to what ought to be. By implication, the photographs were not assumed (or allowed) to 'speak' for themselves, as would often be the case with social documentary. Nonetheless, this overlap between ethnographic photography and social documentary, the idealism underpinning the Worktown project, and the pervasiveness of social documentary in the 1930s,<sup>240</sup> provide a compelling case for exploring a subjective interpretation of the maladies of that era.

### **Literary and photographic responses to the human condition in the 1930s**

At least in terms of Worktown, Mass-Observation can be seen to be part of a growing interest in the living conditions of working-class people both inside and outside the metropolis in Britain. The 1930s saw the emergence of proletarian novels and humanistic excursions by middle-class writers and photographers into the depressed regions of the working-class north.<sup>241</sup> Examples of the former are Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*<sup>242</sup> and Walter Brierley's *Means-Test Man*, set in Salford and Derbyshire respectively.<sup>243</sup> Their working-class authors were writing about the working-class experience of unemployment. They were writing from the 'inside,' that is, working-class writers writing about working-class life. By

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Bateson and Mead, 51.

<sup>240</sup> Stott, 19.

<sup>241</sup> Jeremy Hawthorn, *The British working-class novel in the twentieth century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984).

<sup>242</sup> Walter Greenwood, *Love on the dole* (London: Vintage, 1993).

<sup>243</sup> Walter Brierley, *Means-test man* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1983).

contrast, J.B. Priestley's *English Journey* concerns a humanistic excursion through England in 1933 by a middle-class writer, albeit one born in the northern town of Bradford, that included the depressed North.<sup>244</sup> In his *English Journey*, Priestley found that the effects of the Depression were unequal, with some areas practically untouched. Margaret Drabble, in her introduction to one of the later editions, contends that Priestley's *English Journey*, in examining 'working conditions, unemployment, leisure, pleasure and place [...] opened up a new genre of documentary'.<sup>245</sup> Priestley's venture was much imitated, as with George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which was also published and funded by Gollancz.<sup>246</sup> *The Road to Wigan Pier* was based on a period spent by Orwell living in the north of England in the early part of 1936. The book gave a bleak sociological account of working-class life in Wigan, a town neighbouring Bolton. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell made use of ethnographic research strategies (including, albeit briefly, living amongst working people and sleeping in a 'doss-house'), not unlike Harrison's pre-Mass-Observation phase in Bolton, to research and write his account of life in a town of high unemployment.<sup>247</sup> In essence, Orwell was an outsider trying to get the view from the inside, as he did more radically in *Down and Out in Paris and London*.<sup>248</sup>

Both *English Journey* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* include photographs in some but not all of their editions. Although none were included in the early editions of *English Journey*, the Jubilee edition of 1984 is illustrated by the work of several photographers (the photographs date from the 1930s and are supported by detailed captions).<sup>249</sup> Amongst the eighty plates, there are several photographs by Bill Brandt (see below) and Spender. This includes Worktown photographs by Spender in which they fulfil a documentary role (see above). The photographs that were chosen to illustrate the northern leg of Priestley's excursion around England predominantly convey a sense of optimism and hope; only the images from Brandt

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<sup>244</sup> Priestley. *English Journey* was funded jointly by Victor Gollancz and Heinemann. Gollancz, as already indicated, was both a publisher and important source of finance for Mass-Observation.

<sup>245</sup> M. Drabble, 'Introduction' to *ibid.*, 8. A further example of 'excursion' writing, that included 127 photographs, ranging from industrial decline and human desperation to tranquil and pastoral scenes, is Edmund Vale's, *North Country*. In spite of sections on slum clearance and unemployment, the book has a generally sanguine tone and the writer Vale is at pains to show that things can be better. However, no direct reference is made to the photographs in the text, many of which are from photographic stock agencies, so it seems likely that they were taken for a different purpose. See Henry Edmund Theodorick Vale, "North Country," (London: B. T. Batsford, 1937).

<sup>246</sup> George Orwell, *The road to Wigan pier* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001).

<sup>247</sup> Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: a life* (London: Penguin, 1992), 281.

<sup>248</sup> George Orwell, *Down and out in Paris and London* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001).

<sup>249</sup> See Peter Davidson's 'A note on the text' in *The road to Wigan pier*, xiv.

and Spender give any sense of the misery or despair associated with economic depression. On the other hand, the photographs inserted in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which are mostly of slum dwellings and mining in London, Durham and Wales, comprise unrelentingly grim depictions of squalor and abject poverty. In other words, while they relate to some of the themes raised in the text, none of the photographs were taken in Wigan or the north west of England. Hence the photographs have no direct relationship to Orwell's text. Moreover, no information is provided on the authorship of the photographs and it is not even certain that Orwell had any part in their inclusion.<sup>250</sup> Significantly, however, while the original edition of *The Road to Wigan Pier* included the photographs (thirty-two plates with thirty-three photographs), they were omitted from later editions (apart from the Harcourt Brace edition of 1958) until the Complete Works edition published in 1986.<sup>251</sup> Hence, for both *English Journey* and *The Road to Wigan Pier* it seems that neither author was involved in the decision to include photographs and may not have approved of their inclusion. Moreover, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, it would appear that Spender had little or no obvious editorial control when it came to the use of his Worktown photographs in Mass-Observation publications.

The depression of the 1930s that provided the impetus for proletarian writers like Greenwood and Brierley did not, however, spawn the equivalent in photography. This contrasts with Germany where the Worker-Photographer Movement, which was formed in 1926, had its own publication *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* (the Worker photographer).<sup>252</sup> Its founder, the Marxist impresario, Willie Münzenberg, learning lessons from the socialist pictorial newspaper *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (the Workers' Illustrated Newspaper), sought to avoid relying on 'bourgeois picture agencies'. Hence, with 'encouragement and technical advice' provided to the worker photographers, through the auspices of *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf*, the workers themselves would supply photographs of proletarian life.<sup>253</sup> In Britain, the closest counterpart to *Der Arbeiter-Fotograf* was the *Workers' Illustrated News*, published in December 1929. Through its photographs and text the political stance of the *Workers' Illustrated News* was distinctly anti-capitalist. In the first issue, questions were addressed as to who and what the picture paper is for, with images of the wealthy on one side

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<sup>250</sup> It seems unlikely that Orwell was involved in either the decision to include photographs or the selection included in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. See Peter Davidson's 'General Introduction' in *Down and out in Paris and London*, Complete ed. ed. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1986), xxxii-xxxv.

<sup>251</sup> Peter Davidson, 'A note on the text' in *The road to Wigan pier*, xiv.

<sup>252</sup> Wolfgang Hesse and Manfred Seifert, "The Working Man's Eye," *German Research* 34, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>253</sup> Ute Esilkdsen, 'Photography and the Neue Sachlichkeit Movement' in David Mellor, *Germany, the new photography, 1927-33: documents and essays* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978), 109.



of a page and workers on the other (Illustration 3.1).<sup>254</sup> Specifically, it was declared that the *Workers' Illustrated News* will 'translate the politics of revolutionary class struggle into pictures'.<sup>255</sup> In support of this aim, using what can be construed as an attempt to initiate a worker-photographer movement in Britain, the second issue of the *Workers' Illustrated News* announced that there was to be a WIN Camera Club, with a 'scheme for enlisting worker-photographic correspondents' (Illustration 3.2).<sup>256</sup> However, this idea foundered as the second was to be the last issue of the newspaper.<sup>257</sup>



Illustration 3.1: 'Who Is W.I.N. For?', From the *Workers Illustrated News*, 13 December 1929 (left); and Illustration 3.2: 'W.I.N. Camera Club', from the *Workers Illustrated News*, 20 December 1929 (right).

While the *Workers Illustrated News* was short-lived, in the East End of London the Workers' Camera Club was created in the early 1930s, which merged in 1934 with the Film and Photo

<sup>254</sup> *Workers' Illustrated News*, "Who is W.I.N. for?," *Workers' Illustrated News*, 13 December 1929.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> "W.I.N. Camera Club," *Workers' Illustrated News*, 20 December 1929.

<sup>257</sup> Duncan Forbes, 'The British Workers' Film and Photo League' in Jorge Ribalta, *The Worker-Photography Movement, 1926-1939* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arta Reina Sofia, 2011), 209.

League to form the British Workers' Film and Photo League.<sup>258</sup> In its first manifesto it was argued that 'the time has come for workers to produce films and photos of their own [...] showing their own lives, their own problems, their own organised efforts to solve these problems'.<sup>259</sup> However, this proletarian emphasis was absent from the second manifesto. Moreover, Duncan Forbes argues that the impact and significance of the British Workers' Film and Photo League is somewhat exaggerated.<sup>260</sup> Significantly, as Val Williams argues, 'no recognisable proletarian photography movement emerged in Britain during this period'.<sup>261</sup> This lack of a precedent, in Britain at least, may help to explain why the Worktown photography was not entrusted to 'untrained observers'.<sup>262</sup> By contrast, however, proletarian painting was included (See Chapter 2). More generally, while there was some interest in photographic fact-gathering in deprived communities in Britain in the 1930s, as in Harrison's northern branch of Mass-Observation, the practitioners were evidently not working class.

Bill Brandt, born into an upper middle-class German family in Hamburg, became the most prominent photographer to participate in a humanistic (social) style of documentary photography (albeit briefly) in Great Britain during the 1930s.<sup>263</sup> Paul Delany argues that Brandt, a relative newcomer to England, showed no obvious concern at the degree of inequality across the social classes in Great Britain. Hence, for example, in the collection of photographs that make up Brandt's book *The English at Home*, despite the stark contrast in the living standards of the rich and poor shown in the images, Delany argues Brandt's 'overriding concern is with atmosphere and composition'.<sup>264</sup> A more conciliatory stance is taken by Sheila Corr who argues that Brandt was 'sensitive to injustice but not politically

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<sup>258</sup> John Roberts, *The art of interruption: realism, photography, and the everyday* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 67-68.

<sup>259</sup> The first and second manifestos from Terry Dennett, 'England: The (Workers') Film and Photo League', in Terry Dennett, David Evans, Sylvia Ghol and Jo Spence (eds), *Photography/Politics: One*, Photography Workshop 1979, are cited in *ibid.*, 68.

<sup>260</sup> He describes the British Worker Photography Movement as 'an invention of the 1970s'. Duncan Forbes, 'The British Workers' Film and Photo League' in Ribalta, 206.

<sup>261</sup> Val Williams, *Women photographers: the other observers 1900 to the present* (London: Virago, 1986), 48.

<sup>262</sup> By contrast, however, proletarian painting was included; this culminated in an exhibition called 'Unprofessional Painting'. Morris and Radford, 47.

<sup>263</sup> Paul Delany, *Bill Brandt: a life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004), 14.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 112. Amongst other factors, Delany bases this assertion on the absence of any left-wing sentiment in Brandt's family and that in later life he became an admirer of Margaret Thatcher. *Ibid.* Moreover, for his photographs in *Camera in London*, Brandt appears more concerned with aesthetics than injustice. See the preface to Bill Brandt, *Camera in London* (London: Focal Press, 1948).

motivated to change the system'.<sup>265</sup> Nonetheless, inspired by the Jarrow marchers, who arrived in London on the 8 November 1936, Brandt made an excursion to the north of England visiting Halifax, Sheffield and Newcastle 'showing the sufferings of the Depression in his own distinctive way'.<sup>266</sup> Taken on a single visit of a few weeks,<sup>267</sup> the North is portrayed by Brandt as overwhelmingly dark and industrial in many of these photographs.<sup>268</sup> On documenting personal hardship, although probably posed,<sup>269</sup> the best-known example from the series is the photograph of the 'Coal-searcher going home to Jarrow'.<sup>270</sup> Interestingly, some years later in 1947, the same coal-searcher photograph was used to accompany an article in *Picture Post* as a symbol of national failure and disillusionment with the Labour government that was elected in 1945.<sup>271</sup> It seems that regardless of Brandt's political leanings his photographs of the North, as with the 'Coal searcher,' could often be 'moralised in this way and made into symbols of national decline'.<sup>272</sup> This reinterpretation of Brandt's images has analogies with Harrison's presentation of several of Spender's Worktown photographs (the appropriation of Spender's photographs will be highlighted in Chapter 4).

In some respects mirroring Brandt's photographic career to the end of the 1930s, the Austrian émigré Edith Tudor Hart (née Suschitzky), who had already established herself in 'leftist' documentary work before moving to England in 1933, concerned herself with radical causes in Great Britain and was a committed member of the communist party.<sup>273</sup> However, her political affiliation appears to have increasingly mollified her revolutionary idealism. As Duncan Forbes argues, 'Much of Tudor Hart's published imagery of working-class life is constrained by a reformist contingency'.<sup>274</sup> Her documentary photography during this period included images on poor housing, unemployment and industrial decline in a range of settings

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<sup>265</sup> Sheila Corr, "Brandt Image," *History Today* 54, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>266</sup> Delany, 133-34.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>268</sup> Brandt's photographs of the northern industrial landscape are characterised by a printing style that invariably results in prints of high contrast with dominant shadows, silhouettes and little gradation of tone.

<sup>269</sup> Delany, 134-35.

<sup>270</sup> Corr, 6. In the photograph, utter hopelessness is neatly captured in an unemployed miner's back-breaking struggle of seemingly Sisyphean proportions to push a bicycle, over-laden with coal, up a barren slope.

<sup>271</sup> Delany, 137.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> Val Williams, *Women photographers: the other observers 1900 to the present* (London: Virago, 1986), 50-52. Tudor Hart was also known to be a Soviet spy, see Duncan Forbes, 'Politics, Photography and Exile in the Life of Edith Tudor Hart' in Shulamith Behr and Marian Malet, *Arts in exile in Britain 1933-1945: politics and cultural identity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

<sup>274</sup> , 67.

from London's East End and the Rhondda Valley to Tyneside.<sup>275</sup> A particular technique that Tudor Hart applied in her work was to juxtapose contrasting images.<sup>276</sup> However, a more radical form of photographic montage was practiced by the communist John Heartfield (Hermann Herzfelde) in interwar Germany. He is credited with pioneering the agitprop photomontage, especially his powerful anti-fascist photomontages.<sup>277</sup> Heartfield regularly contributed to several radical periodicals, including *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung*.<sup>278</sup> Aside from photomontage, other aspects of what is described as the 'new German photography' were to have a profound effect on photography in Britain in the late 1920s and beyond.<sup>279</sup> Of particular significance was the influence of the German press photographer Erich Salomon.

Salomon approached photo-reportage using a hidden camera.<sup>280</sup> His 'candid' photographs of political events contrasted sharply with the generally stiff and heavily posed images produced by contemporary news photographers. Moreover, he even took photographs where photography was not permitted (as mimicked by Spender in the pubs of Bolton – see Chapter 4).<sup>281</sup> To capture his revealing images, Salomon resorted to a range of strategies for keeping his camera from view, including concealment in a bowler hat, an attaché case and even bagpipes.<sup>282</sup> However, while Salomon's access to the technological advances of the Ermanox camera was important, it was his method of working 'unseen,' his inconspicuousness, which provided the means to produce his ground-breaking photographs.<sup>283</sup> Indeed, the 'candid' style of photography championed by Salomon would have influenced Spender's approach to the Worktown photographs. Mellor contends that Spender 'pored over Salomon's photographs of

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<sup>275</sup> Williams, *Women photographers: the other observers 1900 to the present*, 52-54. Tudor Hart's photographs were used in publications like the *Geographical Magazine*, *Lilliput* (magazine) and radical books, as with *The Problem of Distressed Areas*, published by the Left Book Club. See, for example, illustration 23, "Living" conditions in 1937' in Walter Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937).

<sup>276</sup> An example of this is used on the cover of *New Homes for Old*, published in 1934, in which she contrasts slum dwellings with modern housing using a montage of photographs. The cover of *New Homes for Old* is reproduced in Williams, *Women photographers: the other observers 1900 to the present*, 53.

<sup>277</sup> Peter Selz, "John Heartfield's Photomontages," *The Massachusetts Review* 4, no. 2 (1963).

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Mellor.

<sup>280</sup> Salomon used an Ermanox 4.5x6cm plate camera, with a large aperture lens - and, unusually for a press photographer, relied on the available light, and was able to capture images of the political elite in a way that had never been attempted before. Erich Salomon, *Erich Salomon* (Millerton: Aperture, 1978).

<sup>281</sup> On one occasion (in England) Salomon took a photograph of the justices of the High Court of Appeals preparing to pass the death sentence. He was unaware that under British law he had committed an offence punishable by a prison sentence; hence the photograph was to remain unpublished for many years. See *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Torsten Palmer and Hendrik Neubauer, *The Weimar Republic through the lens of the press* (Cologne: Konemann, 2000), 399.

dark conference salon discussions between European political leaders [...] while crucially inverting Salomon's social range for inclusion in candid portraiture'.<sup>284</sup> However, for candid photography in these other contexts, and using a 35mm camera, there is a more obvious affinity of style between Spender and the work of another influential émigré to Britain in the 1930s, the Hungarian painter and photographer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.

Prominent in the Bauhaus school, Moholy-Nagy was both a practitioner and theorist of photography. Throughout his career, Moholy-Nagy wrote at length on various aspects of photography.<sup>285</sup> However, it was during a relatively short stay in Britain, from the mid to late 1930s, that amongst other work, Moholy-Nagy secured three photographic commissions: *The Street Markets of London*, *Eton Portrait* and *An Oxford University Chest*.<sup>286</sup> These were photographic studies with strong similarities to Spender's output for the Worktown project. Akin to Spender's transition from pictorialism to social documentary, in *The Street Markets of London*, Moholy-Nagy declared: 'I am convinced that the days of the merely "beautiful" photograph are numbered and that we shall be increasingly interested in providing a truthful record of objectively determined fact'.<sup>287</sup> Moholy-Nagy saw his role as providing a 'photographic report' that can either encourage or correct widely held ideas.<sup>288</sup> In essence, the photographic report was intended to complement the text in the form of visual evidence.<sup>289</sup> In principle at least, this correspondence between photography and other data collection methods would have been shared by Mass-Observation.<sup>290</sup>

Like Spender, Moholy-Nagy used a Leica for the three photographic commissions. This allowed him to 'work rapidly, unobserved and – even in the London atmosphere, or in

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<sup>284</sup> Mellor, 122.

<sup>285</sup> See for example Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, photography, film* (London: Lund Humphries, 1967).

<sup>286</sup> Mary Benedetta, *The street markets of London* (London: John Miles, 1936); Bernard Fergusson, *Eton Portrait* (London: John Miles, 1937); John Betjeman, *An Oxford University chest* (London: John Miles, 1938). In addition, Moholy-Nagy took a number of un-commissioned photographs in Hull when he stayed with his architect friend, Leslie Martin. Terence Senter, "Moholy-Nagy's English Photography," *The Burlington Magazine* 123, no. 944 (1981).

<sup>287</sup> Benedetta, vii.

<sup>288</sup> In the context of markets in London the concern was with 'romantic notions of showmen, unorganised trade and the sale of stolen goods'. Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Moholy-Nagy was at pains to distinguish photography from painting. 'The photographic series [...] is no longer a "picture," it cannot be judged by the same standard of aesthetic values as a picture. The individual picture as such loses its individuality, it becomes part of a larger whole which is the object itself'. C.G. Holme, *Modern Photography 1935-1936* (London: The Studio Ltd, 1936), 18.

<sup>290</sup> See Madge, Harrison, and Huxley.

interiors – with a reliable degree of precision’.<sup>291</sup> Hence, a majority of the photographs for the three commissions are candid. Moreover, there is a class-based theme running through each of Moholy-Nagy’s commissions. For example, in *The Street Markets of London*, which comprises sixty-four photographs, his gaze is predominantly from the perspective of the working class. An example of this is the candid photograph of engaged shoppers at the Caledonian Market (Illustration 3.3) in which an impoverished looking child is juxtaposed with better-dressed shoppers at a market stall.<sup>292</sup> Another example of a candid photograph, also shot in portrait format, is the ‘Medicine Man (Illustration 3.4).<sup>293</sup> Here, Moholy-Nagy has focussed attention on a stallholder who is captured mid-flow selling his quack medicines to engaged onlookers. Moholy-Nagy does not appear to have been noticed. This photograph has similarities with Spender’s short series of market stall images (which, incidentally, includes quack medicine stalls).<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Benedetta, viii.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>294</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Worktown Mass Observation archives".



Illustration 3.3: ‘Laszlo Moholy-Nagy: Caledonian Market: Whatever happens you are sure to enjoy it’ (left). Illustration 3.4: ‘Laszlo Moholy-Nagy: ‘Shepherds Bush: The Medicine Man’ (right).

Outside Britain, an application of photography that was intended to tie in with social research is Margaret Bourke-White’s post-ethnographic picture story on Muncie (otherwise known as Middletown – See Chapter 2) in the United States.<sup>295</sup> Bourke-White’s photographs for the nascent *LIFE* magazine in 1937 followed in the footsteps of Helen and Robert Lynd who had just published a book on their second sociological study in Muncie.<sup>296</sup> Over a period of just 15 days, Bourke-White took several hundred photographs, twenty-five of which were used in the Middletown article. The photographs are largely static and posed, this was because unlike many of her contemporaries, Bourke-White eschewed the 35mm Leica in favour of the large format Linhof view-camera.<sup>297</sup> In accordance with elements of Helen and Robert Lynd’s findings, the *LIFE* article emphasised ‘Muncie’s socioeconomic stratification [...], characterising it as a middle-of-the-road, slow to change community’.<sup>298</sup> However, the editors of *LIFE* magazine framed the article in such a way as to ‘repair the national consensus which

<sup>295</sup> Margaret Bourke-White, "Muncie, Indiana: Middletown America," *Life*, 10 May 1937.

<sup>296</sup> Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: a study in cultural conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937).

<sup>297</sup> Claude Cookman, "LIFE visits "Middletown"," *Visual Communication Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (2011): 206.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

the economic crisis had ruptured'. Specifically, contrary to the findings by the Lynds, the *LIFE* article put a positive slant on an America still reeling from the consequences of the Depression. Given her leftist political stance it is unlikely that Bourke-White wholly shared *LIFE*'s ethos of The American Dream.<sup>299</sup> Indeed, notwithstanding that Bourke-White's Middletown article was subject to editorial ideology, another of her publications, *You have seen their faces* (1937),<sup>300</sup> which was produced less than a year earlier, suggests that when she had the opportunity to exert editorial control a stronger more radical message was conveyed. However, the approach Bourke-White adopted in *You have seen their faces* was the subject of more direct criticism. In this book, produced in collaboration with her husband, the novelist Erskine Caldwell, Bourke-White sought to highlight the conditions in America's Deep South during the Depression. Even so, *You have seen their faces* has been criticised for its 'aesthetic and moral deficiencies,' with comparisons made to 'Grand Guignol' in which Bourke-White's photography 'deformed her subjects and exaggerated their cultural backwardness'.<sup>301</sup> Moreover, criticism has been levelled at the tone of the accompanying captions which, as stated in the foreword, reflect 'the authors' own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed: they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of these persons'.<sup>302</sup> Nonetheless, in spite of these criticisms, the photographs and the writing in *You have seen their faces* will have contributed to a shaking of confidence in the capitalist system, both in the United States and abroad.<sup>303</sup> On the more general point of misrepresentation, a similar charge (see Chapter 5) could be levelled at Harrison for his savage editing of *Britain in the 30s*.<sup>304</sup>

A counterattack to *You have seen their faces* was Mildred Gwin Barnwell's *Faces we see*, published in 1939.<sup>305</sup> Published by the Southern Combed Yard Spinners Association (a group of cotton manufactures in the South), *Faces we see* is replete with positive and optimistic

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<sup>299</sup> Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You have seen their faces* (New York: Arno Press, 1975).

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-19; Bourke-White.

<sup>301</sup> John Raeburn, *A staggering revolution: a cultural history of thirties photography* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press 2006), 213-14.

<sup>302</sup> Caldwell and Bourke-White. An example of one of these imputed quotations accompanies the photograph of an impoverished woman and child: 'Sometimes I tell my husband we couldn't be worse off if we tried'. *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>303</sup> Robert E. Snyder, "Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White: You Have Seen Their Faces," *Prospects* 11 (1986).

<sup>304</sup> Spender and Harrison.

<sup>305</sup> Mildred Gwin Barnwell, *Faces we see* (Gastonia, North Carolina: The Southern combed yarn spinners association, 1939).



photographs<sup>306</sup> and text that strongly imply contentment and freedom from want. A contemporaneous reviewer described *Faces we see* as ‘an attempt by a group of cotton manufactures to refute the assertions of the muckrakers and realists who, within the last decade have invaded the South’.<sup>307</sup> The foreword to *Faces we see* opens with the declaration that ‘None of the photographs in this book was posed [...] and copies can be had upon request’.<sup>308</sup> The tone is one of evidence-backed authenticity, with pages that show images of smiling employees and families who live in pleasant and modern surroundings.<sup>309</sup> Indeed, Barnwell closes the book with the line ‘But in the mill villages evidence of well-being and contentment is reflected in the faces we see’.<sup>310</sup> Propaganda aside, *Faces we see* is a completely opposite picture of life in the South than that portrayed by *You have seen their faces*. For the Worktown photographs too there is evidence of a similar source of bias in favour of employers. Permission had to be sought for the shots of people at work in the mills of Bolton, and Spender recalled that the visits were pre-arranged and supervised, with employees ‘wary and on their best behaviour’.<sup>311</sup> Without doubt this will have compromised the authenticity of Spender’s factory photographs and put a more positive light on the employment conditions of workers in Bolton.

The most ambitious photographic response anywhere to the depression of the 1930s was conducted by the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in the United States. The Resettlement Administration, headed by the social scientist Roy Stryker (who was not a photographer), which mutated into the FSA in 1937, was charged with documenting the crisis conditions of the Great Depression in order to foster support for New Deal relief policies.<sup>312</sup> The many photographers involved, including such luminaries as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, gave the programme a range of photographic styles from which to draw.<sup>313</sup> While developing the FSA programme, Stryker is known to have had discussions with the

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<sup>306</sup> The photographs are by Bill Baker of the North Carolina Department of Conservation and Development. This was a North Carolina state agency; it is now known as the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. See North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, "A History of the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality," North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, <https://deq.nc.gov/about/history-of-deq>.

<sup>307</sup> Francis B. Simkins, "Book Review," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27, no. 1 (1940): 142-43.

<sup>308</sup> Barnwell.

<sup>309</sup> One particular chapter is entitled ‘Meet the Reeses’ in which a picture story is presented of a model family living and working the American Dream. *Ibid.*, 89-103.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>311</sup> Spender and Mulford, 20.

<sup>312</sup> Gilles Mora and Beverly W. Brannan, *FSA: the American vision* (New York: Abrams, 2006), 15.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*

sociologist and photographer Lewis Hine.<sup>314</sup> Like Hine, Stryker had a strong social conscience and ‘believed that photographs had the power to move men’s minds’.<sup>315</sup> The FSA programme produced some 270,000 images, including Lange’s influential ‘migrant mother’.<sup>316</sup> Stott argues that hitherto, documentary photography had been used to embarrass the Hoover administration but ‘when the New Deal came to power, it institutionalised documentary; it made the weapon that undermined the establishment part of the establishment’. Such an analysis fits in with John Tagg’s thesis concerning the instrumental use of photography by the modern state.<sup>317</sup> In Tagg’s view the FSA programme operated ‘within the terms of paternal philanthropic reformism [...] retrieving the relations of deference and power on which Roosevelt’s state corporatist strategy depended’.<sup>318</sup> However, emphasising an archival function of a particular event or period, John Roberts argues that while there is some similarity between the FSA programme and Mass-Observation ultimately they constitute different forms of intervention; in particular, that Mass-Observation was ‘never structurally attached to the state’.<sup>319</sup> Strictly, though, this claim is only applicable to the early phase of Mass-Observation. By April 1940, World War II and financial difficulties had forced a deal with Whitehall, via the newly formed Ministry of Information, in order to keep Mass-Observation afloat.<sup>320</sup> But the relative independence enjoyed by Mass-Observation in the early period did not of itself confer any particular threats to the status quo.

## Conclusion

That Harrison chose to include photography as a method of data collection added to the distinctiveness of the methodology employed in the northern branch of Mass-Observation. Ostensibly, there are parallels between Harrison’s research in Malekula and Worktown; in both instances he requested that a photographer assist with the research. However, in the case of Worktown, photography was used as a form of data collection as opposed to providing illustrations for a book. Hitherto, only limited and narrow use had been made of photography

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<sup>314</sup> Arthur. Rothstein, *Documentary photography* (Focal P, 1986), 35. Hine’s photographs of the exploitation of children in factories taken in the early part of the twentieth century directly influenced legislation against child labour. *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>316</sup> Photographed by Lange in February 1936, ‘migrant mother’ drew attention to the problem of migration. Mora and Brannan, 25.

<sup>317</sup> John Tagg, *The burden of representation: essays on photographs and histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988).

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>319</sup> Roberts, 79-81.

<sup>320</sup> Hinton, 128-29.

in anthropology. Harrisson's use of photography for anthropological research, albeit methodologically flawed, is similar to the work undertaken by Bateson and Mead for *Balinese Character*. Even so, Harrisson's choice of photography for data collection went beyond typical practice in the interwar period. These days, however, the Worktown photographs tend to be viewed from the perspective of documentary and not anthropology. The distinction is significant in that social documentary is essentially subjective. By implication it is tempting to read more into the Worktown photographs than was originally intended.

The adverse economic climate of the 1930s brought forth literary and photographic responses. When combined, photographs would typically be subordinate to the text. The selective review of the photographic responses to the depression of the 1930s indicates that, in England at least, the photographers were not working class. So while there are some instances of working-class authors, the photographers were invariably middle class, reflecting the absence of a proletarian gaze on proletarian lives. Part of the explanation for this outcome is that unlike in Germany, a British proletarian movement in photography failed to develop. Given his background, not surprisingly, Spender would have felt out of place in Bolton. However, the question remains as to whether this cultural and economic divide impacted on the verisimilitude of field work he conducted for Mass-Observation.

Such political and social-documentary photography as there was, during the interwar period, owes much to the influence of German photographers. Moreover, it is significant that there are strong links between Spender and Germany. Furthermore, the candid style of photography adopted by Spender for the Worktown photographs has antecedents in the work of the German photographer, Salomon; who had a photographic style methodologically close to Harrisson's version of participant observation. Surreptitious photography was, however, in a more developed form (assisted by technological change) when Spender commenced his work for Mass-Observation and there is a distinct affinity between his and Moholy-Nagy's candid photography; this is especially so with respect to three commissions undertaken by Moholy-Nagy in the mid-to-late 1930s. Nevertheless, methodological claims around participant observation in respect of the production of photographs with Mass-Observation remain contentious.

Responses in the United States to the dire economic circumstances of the 1930s produced a number of distinctive and powerful images, evident in the work of the FSA and individual photographers like Bourke-White. In nearly all of the cases considered, the photographers seemed genuinely motivated to make a photographic statement expressing concern at what they witnessed. However, it is also clear that the photographs could be reinterpreted to fulfil purposes other than that for which they were intended. Such an outcome raises further questions on issues around the ownership, control and use of commissioned photographs. Invariably, it was political expediency that constrained the work of many photographers in Britain and the United States. Indeed, the FSA was under the patronage of the government. However, by comparison Mass-Observation enjoyed relative independence, at least for the time of Spender's involvement with Worktown,

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Mass-Observation and Photo-documentation**

#### **Introduction**

In the last chapter it was established that the use of candid photography was a new departure for Harrison's approach to anthropological research. But the resulting photographs tend to be viewed from the perspective of social documentary. This is not surprising given the overlap between these genres and the absence of supporting fieldnotes. Also, it was shown that the Worktown project was part of an evolving interest into the living conditions of the working class in the 1930s, albeit with a largely middle-class gaze. Moreover, that the use (and production) of social issue photographs in the 1930s tended to be separate and disjointed from the textual narratives they were intended to underpin. Furthermore, that there were instances of the political context determining the production, presentation and interpretation of photographs.

The focus of the present chapter is Spender's approach to photography for Mass-Observation and the contemporary use of images that were produced. This requires consideration of the method of visual research used by Spender and Harrison, with emphasis on the contentious claim to have applied the method of participant observation. Moreover, given that these are photographs taken surreptitiously, with only a limited attempt at documentation, the potential for misinterpretation and reinterpretation of the images needs to be considered.

To explore these and other related issues an assessment of the method of visual research employed by Mass-Observation will be undertaken, including the scope for problems arising from positionality and polysemy. This will be followed by discussion on the appropriation of Spender's photographs for political purposes. Finally, the potential for the materiality of archive photographs in the Worktown Collection to aid present-day researchers will be highlighted.

#### **Stranger assimilation, insider-outsider status and positionality**

The origin of Harrison's methodology for the Worktown project lies between new ethnology and contemporary anthropology, especially their shared unobtrusive observation

of the everyday “natural” and “social”.<sup>321</sup> Harrison was in the vanguard of the new ornithology. During his final year at school he organised a national survey, involving around 1,300 volunteer observers, of the great crested grebe.<sup>322</sup> This survey was part of the new ornithology, which represented a move away from faunistics<sup>323</sup> ‘towards living animals, their behaviour and ecology’.<sup>324</sup> Mark Toogood argues that there are geographical, organisational and epistemological associations between the 1920s networks of ornithological observation and the amateur ethnography of the 1930s, as represented by Mass-Observation. In both ‘cultures of observation,’ the new ornithology and Mass-Observation, there was a ‘variety of democratization of observation [...] the observer was cast as a local actor gathering knowledge that would become collective national knowledge’.<sup>325</sup> In Bolton, however, as already indicated, although the bulk of data collection was through observation, Harrison employed a core team of full-time researchers (See Chapter 2). By contrast, for the National Panel, data collection was via reports from untrained observers. In other words, as a model for ways of working, the new ornithology has more relevance for the National Panel but far less so for the Worktown project. Hence, while new ornithology represents a starting point, other sources of influence must be included when considering the innovative methodology applied in Worktown.

Two sources of guidance for the Worktown project were the Middletown sociological study by the Lynds, in the United States (See Chapter 2), and the study of unemployment in Marienthal, Austria, by Marie Jahoda and others.<sup>326</sup> Along with the analysis of documents and other data, both studies made use of some form of community participation by the researchers. In the case of Middletown this amounted to living in the city and ‘participating in local life’.<sup>327</sup> In Marienthal, however, the participation was more systematic as the researchers were required to ‘fit naturally into the communal life by participating in some

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<sup>321</sup> Mark Toogood, "Modern observations: new ornithology and the science of ourselves, 1920–1940," *Journal of Historical Geography* 37, no. 3 (2011): 348.

<sup>322</sup> Heimann, 17.

<sup>323</sup> Faunistics concerns the geographic distribution of animals (based on the analysis and collection of specimens).

<sup>324</sup> Toogood.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>326</sup> Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown: a study in American culture*; Marie Jahoda et al., *Marienthal: the sociography of an unemployed community* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972). Both studies are mentioned in Madge, Harrison, and Huxley, 36.

<sup>327</sup> For example, living in Muncie, making friends in the town and ‘assuming local ties and obligations as would any other residents of Middletown’. Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown: a study in American culture*, 506.

activity generally useful to the community'.<sup>328</sup> In other words, the methodology followed in Marienthal was functional penetration.<sup>329</sup> It is particularly significant that both studies, Middletown and Marienthal, used trained researchers which, of course, ruled out the use of unqualified researchers. This helps to differentiate between the two branches of Mass-Observation, whereby Harrisson's Worktown, with its full-time researchers, can be more readily identified with the Middletown and Marienthal studies than the National Panel with its amateur observers. On the more general point, Stanley argues that the template for Mass-Observation is to be found in a paper on fieldwork in social psychology by Oeser.<sup>330</sup> In particular, he refers to Oeser's advocacy of functional penetration.<sup>331</sup> But it is also the case that a less theoretical and more practical model of functional penetration can be gleaned from the Marienthal study by Jahoda and others.

In Bolton the bulk of data collection was through observation, and the method used by observers was succinctly summarised as 'penetrate, observe, [and] be quiet yourself. For our first two years in Worktown we did not make a direct interview with anybody'.<sup>332</sup> The idea was that observers should see and hear 'without doing anything to alter the situation'.<sup>333</sup> In other words, the Worktown methodology used a form of functional penetration but in the event fell short of the rigorous application specified for the Marienthal study.<sup>334</sup> Nonetheless, Harrisson claimed that for the fieldwork generally 'we had to become assimilated into the society we were observing'.<sup>335</sup> In theory at least, this was a form of participant observation, since the Mass-Observation fieldworkers were to be indistinguishable from the people being observed. For the most part, however, this would have been covert participant observation in

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<sup>328</sup> In Marienthal this was achieved using a range of special projects, including a clothing project, political activity and even medical treatment. The idea was that the projects would enable the researchers to gain access to information on the unemployed. Jahoda et al., 5-8.

<sup>329</sup> For a more detailed exposition of functional penetration see O.A. Oeser, 'The Value of Team Work and Functional Penetration as Methods in Social Investigation', in Frederic Charles Sir Bartlett et al., *The Study of Society. Methods and problems. Edited by F. C. Bartlett, M. Ginsberg, E. J. Lindgren and R. H. Thouless* (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1939).

<sup>330</sup> O.A. Oeser, "Methods and assumptions of fieldwork in social psychology," *British Journal of Psychology* XXVII, no. 4 (1937). Stanley contends that Oeser's contribution to Mass-Observation is largely uncredited. See Stanley, 50.

<sup>331</sup> 51.

<sup>332</sup> Harrisson, *Britain Revisited*, 26.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>334</sup> The lack of funds, the turnover of team members and Harrisson's management of the project will have militated against a rigorous application of functional penetration in Worktown.

<sup>335</sup> Spender and Harrisson.

that the investigation would have been concealed.<sup>336</sup> In respect of the photographic fieldwork envisaged by Harrison, which was similarly limited by the absence of any relationship between the photographer (the observer) and the photographed (the observed), the photography served as an efficient method of data collection; this is a view that Spender appeared to share.<sup>337</sup> As argued by the visual anthropologists John Collier and Malcolm Collier, photography has a place in offering ‘the stranger in the field a means of recording large areas authentically, rapidly, and with great detail, and a means of storing away complex descriptions for future use’.<sup>338</sup> Here the camera allows for the collection of independent specimens of data not yet fully understood by the newcomer, with subsequent decoding by a ‘native collaborator in the immediate present, or read significantly by the investigator as knowledge deepens’.<sup>339</sup>

Reflecting in the 1970s on a collection of Spender’s images from the Worktown project, Harrison contended that ‘the photographs are those of the unobserved observer, participating, accepted (sic), unnoticed in living situations’.<sup>340</sup> However, given the lack of involvement, it is difficult to see how the candid style of photography employed by Mass-Observation would have been able to benefit from the participative element of visual anthropology.<sup>341</sup> In other words, while on a superficial level the camera can be used to facilitate ‘a first view of strangers,’ further understanding of a new cultural ecology (as with the recording of data on phenomena that we do not understand, or at least that the photographer as fieldworker does not understand), requires the establishment of a rapport, or its equivalent, with that community.<sup>342</sup> Although efforts have been made subsequently to

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<sup>336</sup> Not all writers accept the simple dichotomy of overt and covert participant observation. See Richard A. Hilbert, "Covert Participant Observation," *Urban Life* 9, no. 1 (1980).

<sup>337</sup> Some idea of the value of the photographs as data can be gleaned from the following extract of an interview in which Spender indicates that “He [Harrison] saw things in them [the photographs] that I have to admit I hadn’t always seen myself [...] He was able to see what we took for granted, ordinary behaviour, in a very interesting way. He would say, ‘you go and photograph that’ and he would know a lot about the social behaviour and rituals that were involved.” Tom Picton et al., "Mass-Observation," *Camerawork*, no. 11 (1978): 6.

<sup>338</sup> John Collier and Malcolm Collier, *Visual anthropology: photography as a research method*, Rev. ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 16.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>340</sup> Spender and Harrison.

<sup>341</sup> As Danny L. Jorgensen suggests, ‘Through participation, the researcher is able to observe and experience the meanings and interactions of people from the role of an insider’. Danny L. Jorgensen, *Participant observation: a methodology for human studies* (Sage Publications, 1989).

<sup>342</sup> Collier and Collier, 19-28.



involve the local community in the interpretation of the Worktown photographs,<sup>343</sup> at the time of their production it does not appear to have been the case. Clearly, depending on the application, such an omission undermines or limits the value of the photographs as research data.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, Spender felt out of place in Bolton. Along with the other middle-class observers, he was an outsider. This can be related to the idea of ‘insiders and outsiders’<sup>344</sup> whereby, in the extreme, insiders and not outsiders have access to knowledge; as with, say, cultural practices and norms. In contrast, it could be argued that there is an advantage in being an outsider. Such is the case made by George Simmel when he suggests that the stranger ‘is not radically committed to the unique ingredients and peculiar tendencies of the group, and therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of “objectivity”’.<sup>345</sup> The ideal then turns on the importance of access to knowledge versus the impartiality of the stranger. As a stranger, Spender will have been able to bring an objectivity to his photographs as compared to someone who was involved in that community. However, as Bateson and Mead argue, photographs alone are not enough, it is essential to have a verbal account of the scene being photographed.<sup>346</sup> In effect, because Spender was working alone and a stranger, his photographic data on Worktown will have been devalued. Moreover, it would also appear that he approached the Mass-Observation photography with a pre-conceived agenda:

I think I do remember consciously having the thought that Tom Harrison might wish to prove various things, but I was not going to get involved in that. I was aware that he was being attacked, very frequently, for trying to manipulate his observations, so I was taking great pains not to produce photographs merely as illustrations to theories of my own or theories Tom Harrison had. I had quite a lot of sympathy with his critics. In fact, I remember having the thought that, in a way, it would be more

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<sup>343</sup> The Bolton Worktown website, administered by Bolton Museum and Archive Service, invites information or corrections relating to the Mass-Observation photographs. See Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Bolton Worktown: photography and archives from the Mass Observation".

<sup>344</sup> Robert K. Merton, "Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 1 (1972).

<sup>345</sup> Georg Simmel and Kurt Heinrich Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe; London: Collier-Macmillan, 1964), 402-08.

<sup>346</sup> Bateson and Mead, 49-50.

interesting to *disprove* what he believed, to prove that he was wrong sometimes, that he was a bad scientist.<sup>347</sup>

Concerns are inevitable with regards to Spender's positionality. This includes his social position, his outsider status in relation to the people of Bolton and partiality with the research. Specifically, it is argued 'that a researcher's social, cultural and subject positions (and other psychological processes) affect: the questions they ask; how they frame them; the theories that they are drawn to; how they read'.<sup>348</sup> For Rose, a starting point in addressing such concerns with her own research is by 'reflexively examining my positionality'.<sup>349</sup> However, as she contends, incorporating this into the research is difficult (or even impossible).<sup>350</sup> Nonetheless, it is inescapable that the photographs produced by Spender will have reflected his position and hence undermined claims to objectivity in this aspect of research by Mass-Observation.

### **Photo-documentation**

Notwithstanding the absence of a genuine participative element in Mass-Observation's photographic fieldwork and issues around positionality, the approach adopted can be seen to form a recognisable visual research method with which to document and analyse a particular phenomenon. A closely related method is photo-documentation. As outlined by Rose:

Photo documentation is a method that assumes the photographs are accurate records of what was in front of the camera when its shutter snapped – 'a precise record of material reality' – and takes photographs in a systematic way in order to provide data which the researcher then analyses.<sup>351</sup>

Importantly, there are two stages to photo-documentation research. First, relevant photographs are taken guided by the research question (Rose cites the example of using a

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<sup>347</sup> Spender and Mulford, 15. However, Spender's account of his working relationship with Harrison is inconsistent. See footnote 337.

<sup>348</sup> Derek Gregory, *The dictionary of human geography*, 5th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 556.

<sup>349</sup> G. Rose, "Situating knowledges: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics," *Progress in Human Geography* 21, no. 3 (1997): p. 305.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual methodologies: an introduction to researching with visual materials*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE, 2012), 301.

‘shooting script’).<sup>352</sup> The second stage, ‘since the photographs do not speak for themselves,’ requires that links be made to the research question; this includes adding fieldnotes - factual information and a commentary - to the photographs and labels along with an iterative coding process in which insights are developed and refined.<sup>353</sup>

For the Worktown project, however, the shooting script was not in the form of a document: as Spender revealed, ‘there were never any written directives’. From Spender’s recollections it would appear that themes were set by Harrison on a daily basis at the 85 Davenport Street headquarters in Bolton. This might be, for example, ‘how people hold their hands, the number of sugar lumps that people put in their mouths in restaurants’.<sup>354</sup> Requests from Harrison might also include less palatable directives that Spender would find unacceptable: ‘Tom, literally did say go into public lavatories and take pictures of people peeing, that I didn’t quite have the courage to do’;<sup>355</sup> in spite of which, it is the case that Spender did take a photograph of two boys urinating in a puddle.<sup>356</sup> However, more generally, the idea was to produce information on people’s behaviour in different situations:

Bus queues, football crowds, people in restaurants, people in pubs, people in church, people walking about the streets, people talking to each other, people not talking to each other, what they were wearing, whether they wore hats, what they wore on their feet – the list was endless, and a great mixture. Tom [Harrison] loaded me with objectives, too many objectives, and it was simply up to me.<sup>357</sup>

Arguably, although based on a verbal directive, Harrison’s methodological approach will have satisfied the first stage in photo-documentation in that the photographs taken will have been relevant to the theme he set for that particular day. In respect of the second stage, however, there was no obvious methodology with which to guide the analysis of the

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<sup>352</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 302-04.

<sup>354</sup> Spender and Mulford, 15.

<sup>355</sup> This is from an interview between Derek Smith and Humphrey Spender in Spender and Mellor.

<sup>356</sup> Spender and Mulford, 39.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

photographs. The most basic information on location and camera settings was not recorded *in situ*.<sup>358</sup> As Spender explained:

I found one of the greatest problems was captioning [...] In the end I just gave up completely, because this was something that made the whole operation clumsy. Then, later, I would try as best I could to caption collaboratively with Tom Harrison, and with other people who might be able to recognise the locations I'd been at. I haven't a clue where those records are now.

Even with an attempt at post hoc clarification, the absence of fieldnotes *in situ* will certainly have made it difficult to interpret the photographs, both at the time of their initial analysis and subsequently. Roland Barthes, in *Rhetoric of the Image*, argues that words accompanying an image can help overcome the challenge of polysemy; whereby a photograph can have many meanings.<sup>359</sup> A linguistic message, as with a caption, can 'fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertainty [...] the text helps to identify purely and simply the elements of the scene and the scene itself'.<sup>360</sup> What this means is that the viewer is guided by the words, which by providing information (e.g. location and context) 'anchor' the image and address the question as to what it is about. However, the reverse is also true whereby text can alter the meaning of a photograph. Barthes, discussing press photography, argues that 'today the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination'.<sup>361</sup> Here Barthes is more concerned with the headline or accompanying text than the caption. Therefore, while the caption can be seen to 'duplicate the image,' the accompanying 'text produces (invents) an entirely new signified'.<sup>362</sup> Even so, aside from any concerns that the linguistic message itself will be open to interpretation,<sup>363</sup> the reliance on memory – especially given that Spender was a stranger in Bolton – or third-hand clarification, will have introduced considerable ambiguity into any meaning that could be derived from the photographs.

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<sup>358</sup> By comparison, Bateson and Mead developed such a comprehensive system of recording fieldwork that some thirty years later Mead claimed to be able to 'place each moment or write captions that include the identification of a child's foot in the corner of a picture'. Mead, 235.

<sup>359</sup> Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath, *Image, music, text* (London: Fontana, 1977).

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>363</sup> Sean Hall, *This means this, this means that: a user's guide to semiotics*, 2nd ed. (London: Laurence King, 2012).

Drawing a distinction between subject and subject matter,<sup>364</sup> while for many of the Worktown photographs the latter would for the most part be determinable, the subject, its theme or meaning, will be open to interpretation. For instance, the subject matter of the photograph may be of a busy street scene and can usually be described accordingly; but the meaning of the same photograph is down to interpretation, which could, say, be on the theme of economic recession, consumerism or prosperity; shaped by choices (e.g. framing and timing) made by the photographer at the time of shooting.<sup>365</sup> A similar dichotomy, based on the idea of twin messages, is employed by John Berger when he too considers the ambiguity of photographs: there is ‘a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning the shock of discontinuity’.<sup>366</sup> Using the example of a photographic portrait, for which the referent (the subject matter of the photograph) is related and deceased, the photograph confirms the painful discontinuity. In contrast, if the referent is a stranger to the viewer, only the first message is considered. Moreover, the first message may be so ambiguous that the event proves elusive; ‘what the photograph shows goes with any story one chooses to invent’.<sup>367</sup> However, this is not to suggest that the camera can lie; quite the opposite. For Berger this is because ‘photography has no language of its own [...] it quotes rather than translates’.<sup>368</sup> Although it is not suggested here that photographs have no role in deception, more precisely, unless manipulated or faked in some way, ‘all photographs have the status of fact’.<sup>369</sup> Hence, in scientific enquiry – as with the Worktown photographs – a photograph can provide information ‘within the conceptual framework of an investigation’.<sup>370</sup> In practical terms this means that a photograph can be used, say, to show whether people wear hats (a photograph of people wearing hats would be irrefutable evidence in this context) but it cannot, for example, give any meaning as to why people wear hats or what it means to wear a hat. On this basis Harrison’s use of photography as a visual research method can be seen to fulfil the supplementary role of providing unquestionable factual evidence on phenomena amenable to photography, as with whether people extend their little finger while drinking tea, but by itself can contribute little to our understanding as to why people might drink tea in this way. In effect, any meaning that could be attached to Spender’s photographs would have

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<sup>364</sup> Terry Barrett, *Criticizing photographs: an introduction to understanding images*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 21-22.

<sup>365</sup> And, of course, there is the mindset of the viewer, which adds a further ambiguity to the meaning that can be gleaned from the photograph.

<sup>366</sup> John Berger and Geoff Dyer, *Understanding a photograph* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 62.

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*

been restricted to the superficial (i.e. photographic quotations). Beyond this, because of ambiguities in their meaning, the research value of the photographs would be severely limited in the context of photo documentation. The extent or otherwise to which the Worktown photographs are polysemous is considered in more detail next.



Illustration 4.1: 'Humphrey Spender, The Vault'.

### **Polysemy and the Worktown photographs**

The implications of polysemy can be readily illustrated using a contentious interpretation of one of Spender's Worktown photographs in Bolton. The photograph (Illustration 4.1), taken from a relatively high vantage point (probably a stairs), shows the vault of a pub with several male customers and two dogs.<sup>371</sup> To the right, a seated male has his hand raised. He, along with two other customers, is staring directly at the camera. They are clearly aware of the presence of the photographer, Spender. It is difficult to discern from the photograph whether the man is gesticulating approval or disapproval towards Spender. Derrick Price's

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<sup>371</sup>The Photographers' Gallery Blog, "From Mass Observation to Big Observation: Anthropologies of Ourselves," The Photographers' Gallery, <http://thephotographersgalleryblog.org.uk/2013/09/06/from-mass-observation-to-big-observation-anthropologies-of-ourselves-jonathan-p-watts/>. The photograph is incorrectly described on the Blog as an 'Ashington pub interior'.

interpretation, in *Surveyors and surveyed: photography out and about*, is ‘This carefully composed, gentle and humorous photograph reveals the influence of both realist photography and surrealism on Spender’s work’.<sup>372</sup> Price’s reading of the photograph, however, is in complete contrast to an interpretation by Harry Gordon<sup>373</sup> in Spender’s *Worktown people: photographs from Northern England 1937-38*:

You see that fellow with his hand up, he’s putting his hand up because he doesn’t want to be identified. He’d be possibly unemployed, but looking at him, and gathering his age, he’d be possibly getting money off Assistance Board. Now if the Assistance Board at that time found out that he were frittering money away on a vessel [... ] they’d stop his money. They were so keen at that time, very keen about that.<sup>374</sup>

Assuming Gordon’s locally informed interpretation to be the more accurate, the image is far from ‘gentle and humorous’. The gesticulating individual is clearly identifiable and would have been anxious to avoid losing his entitlement to Assistance. Moreover, when Spender was asked what he thought was behind the man’s gesture in the photograph, in an interview with Derek Smith in 1977, he said:

This was a threat. This was get out. I probably felt very nervous by the time I had made the exposure and I probably went. I found that once you were noticed, once you were the object of everyone’s attention you were finished.<sup>375</sup>

The man’s adverse reaction to being photographed needs to be seen in the context of the means test regime in Bolton which, as noted in Chapter 2, had the highest refusal rate in Lancashire. A sense of the harshness of life on unemployment benefit in Lancashire during the 1930s can be gleaned from Greenwood’s *Love on the Dole*.<sup>376</sup> Harry Hardcastle, who having made his girlfriend pregnant, now has to get married and has just learnt that he has fallen foul of the means test:

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<sup>372</sup> Liz Wells, *Photography: a critical introduction*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 95.

<sup>373</sup> A member of the local community, Harry Gordon assisted Tom Harrison in 1937 on the Worktown project when he was an unemployed fitter. Subsequently, he provided notes for various photographs that are included in Spender and Mulford.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-27.

<sup>375</sup> Spender and Mellor.

<sup>376</sup> Greenwood.

‘What did y’ say?’ he asked, staring, incredulously, at the unemployment exchange clerk on the other side of the counter.

‘A’ y’ deaf?’ retorted the clerk, pettishly: he added, snappily: ‘There nowt for y’. They’ve knocked y’ off dole.’<sup>377</sup>

Spender will have been aware that taking photographs of customers in pubs would not be welcomed. This is clear from his thwarted attempt to take photographs of drinkers in the Saddle Hotel in Bolton in January 1938. Spotted by the manager, he was drawn into a confrontation that culminated in the involvement of a police officer. Although no legal action was taken, as Spender reported ‘The manager kept on emphasising the point that his customers didn’t want it known that they were in there. So I asked him if the place was so shady that they should be nervous about exposing their presence’.<sup>378</sup> Whether Spender had any inkling of the precarious lives of many of the pub customers he was attempting to photograph would be difficult, if not impossible, to establish. Nonetheless, there would be no question now that photographs taken under similar circumstances do pose ethical issues: aside from the fact that the vault of a pub is private property, consent was not sought by Spender (initially at least) and the anonymity of those photographed could have been compromised.<sup>379</sup> In a similar vein, Raphael Samuel argues that many of Spender’s photographs are ‘images of entrapment [...] nowhere more so than at the pub, where the drinkers are literally cornered’.<sup>380</sup> Notwithstanding their historical value now, on balance, given the intrusion and potential risks for the subjects being observed, in what is essentially a private space, it is debatable whether any visual data on working-class male drinking culture that may result from such photographs could ever be justified.

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<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>378</sup> Calder and Sheridan, 21-22.

<sup>379</sup> Rose, 332-39.

<sup>380</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of memory : past and present in contemporary culture*, Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2012), 331.a





Illustration 4.2: ‘Humphrey Spender, Labour Exchange’.

With other Worktown photographs, polysemy appears at first glance to be less of a problem. For example, Spender’s photograph of the Labour Exchange (Illustration 4.2), dated on the Bolton Museum website as August 1937, self-evidently shows a place where working-age males were queuing in fairly regular lines in front of desks in which the sign ‘New Claims’ can be discerned.<sup>381</sup> Even so, for those unfamiliar with the realities of life in the 1930s, a caption would still be needed to interpret Spender’s photograph as the unemployed queuing in a labour exchange. As Antoine Capet argues, photographs such as these of the unemployed tend now to be viewed out of context. Therefore, while it may be the case that even without a caption, contemporary viewers and readers may have interpreted the labour-exchange photograph correctly, since we view the same image today in a different context (e.g. on a gallery wall or in a glossy art magazine), multiple meanings are possible: the image could be of a large post office or pay day in a large factory.<sup>382</sup> One important implication of this being that similar photographs of the unemployed could be captioned in such a way as to alter the

<sup>381</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Humphrey Spender: Labour Exchange," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/labour-exchange>.

<sup>382</sup> Antoine Capet, *The representation of working people in Britain and France: new perspectives* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 93-105.

interpretation of the image from that originally intended by the photographer. As with the reinterpretation of Brandt's 'Coal searcher' (see Chapter 3), manipulation of the original intent behind a photograph is a 'recurrent problem for the documentary photographer'.<sup>383</sup> In addition, photographs can be cropped or placed in different viewing contexts, further obscuring the photographer's original intentions. Another problem, highlighted by Penny Tinkler, is that 'photographs usually contain more than intended by the photographer and meanings are not reducible to the creator's intentions'.<sup>384</sup> Although Tinkler is more concerned with the reading of a photograph as secondary data in social history research, nonetheless, the main idea holds that intention should not be conflated with meaning.<sup>385</sup> More precisely, a photograph is likely to contain details that are not intentional, as with an 'involuntary feature,' which may have interest for the viewer.<sup>386</sup> For example, that the unemployed men shown in the photograph do not appear too depressed or impoverished as a result of their joblessness could undermine - or be used to undermine - the case for initiatives to address unemployment. However, few images could convey the inordinate suicide and maternal mortality rates, undernourishment, 'hopelessness, apathy, fatalism and often bitter sense of humiliation' that accompanied long-term unemployment at that time.<sup>387</sup> Nevertheless, in financial terms at least, unemployment for some may have been less of a concern; indeed, in places like South Wales almost a half of married men were receiving more in unemployment allowances than for their last job.<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>383</sup> Frizzell, 18.

<sup>384</sup> Penny Tinkler, *Using photographs in social and historical research* (London: SAGE, 2013), 50. It could also be that serendipitously captured detail or events in the background could contribute to the impact of a photograph.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>386</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography* (London: Vintage, 2000), 47.

<sup>387</sup> John Stevenson, Chris Cook, and John Slump Stevenson, *Britain in the Depression: society and politics, 1929-1939*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1994), 96-98.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.



Illustration 4.3: ‘Humphrey Spender, Bank Street (1)’.

Spender’s photograph showing a street scene (Illustration 4.3) is without caption or description in *Worktown People*.<sup>389</sup> On the Bolton Museum website the photograph is described as showing ‘A busy street scene in Bolton town centre’.<sup>390</sup> The photograph is dated 27 September 1937, which must have been a Thursday and hence given the extent of factory employment in the town it seems likely that those in employment would have been less evident, during the day at least. Prominent in the photograph are three individual adult males; one of whom is looking in the direction of the photographer, Spender. The apparently subdued demeanour and stance of the two males nearest the camera contrasts sharply with the two women on the left who are clearly smiling and appear animated and purposeful. Given the extent of unemployment in Bolton, it is probable that the men are unemployed. Moreover, if that is the case, as with Greenwood’s workless protagonist Harry Hardcastle in *Love on the Dole*, they would have had nowhere to go, nothing to do and nothing to spend:

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<sup>389</sup> Spender and Mulford.

<sup>390</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Humphrey Spender: Bank Street," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/bank-st>.

You fell into the habit of slouching, of putting your hands into your pockets and keeping them there; of glancing at people, furtively, ashamed of your secret, until you fancied that everybody eyed you with suspicion.<sup>391</sup>

Analogous to the plight of Harry Hardcastle in Hanky Park, for the many workless men in Bolton, as a result of having unwanted and unrewarding 'time on their hands' from enforced idleness, there would have been psychological and social consequences; the extent of local concern for which can be gleaned from this Mass-Observation's account of the electoral candidacy speech by Bill Hadley at the Labour Party Municipal election meeting held in October 1937:

With regards to the unemployed, it isn't fair that these men who stand at street corners should have no place with a cheap rate where they can play games. After all, it is no crime for them to be out of work to-day.<sup>392</sup>

The problem is that evidence such as this is circumstantial. In the absence of information on the intentions behind the photograph (e.g. the particular theme that Harrison had set for Spender), or even an original caption, it would be all too easy to construct any number of different interpretations around this image. As an illustration, it is plausible that these men are in employment and have a legitimate reason for being in the town centre during a weekday.

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<sup>391</sup> Greenwood, 169.

<sup>392</sup> Mass-Observation, "Observer Account, Labour Party Municipal election meeting, Labour Party, 7-C," (Mass-Observation Online: University of Sussex Special Collections, Mass-Observation, 1937).



Illustration 4.4: 'Humphrey Spender, Bank Street (2)'.

It might be, however, that Spender's assignment was say, to photograph people wearing hats or capturing some other aspect of their appearance. To a certain extent an alternative intention behind the image is borne out by the next photograph in this sequence of two (Illustration 4.4), which carries the same date and description as the previous photograph on the Bolton Museum website.<sup>393</sup> This consecutive photograph appears to have been taken from slightly forward of the same position but with the camera horizontally panned ever so slightly to the right.<sup>394</sup> The scene, nevertheless, is different; only two of the three individual males remain and the refocusing of the camera has narrowed the depth of field rendering them slightly out of focus on the photograph. A younger man wearing a hat is now prominent in the photograph (replacing the older man nearest the camera on the earlier photograph) and his stance and general demeanour suggest a strong sense of purpose and enhanced socioeconomic status relative to the two remaining individual males. However, for this and

<sup>393</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Humphrey Spender: Bank Street (2)," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/bank-st-2>.

<sup>394</sup> There are many examples in the Worktown Archive of where Spender took advantage of the facility afforded by a 35 mm camera to shoot more than one photograph.

many of the other Worktown photographs, for the kinds of trivial data sought by Harrison,<sup>395</sup> it is difficult to explain the elaborate subterfuge of candid photography. The necessity for which, according to Spender, was that ‘if anyone knew they were being photographed then it was a failure, it had to be unobserved’.<sup>396</sup> Notwithstanding their value as candid impressions of life in Bolton at that time, the methods used to produce the photographs as primary data for Mass-Observation appears overblown. However, the next section will consider the apparent appropriation of three of Spender’s Worktown photographs for the purpose of political propaganda.

### **Appropriation and political propaganda**

On methodological grounds, the general approach adopted by Mass-Observation in the 1930s was heavily criticised by contemporary academic social scientists; including that the approach to research was ‘unscientific’.<sup>397</sup> Added to which the independence of Mass-Observation was severely compromised by Harrison’s close ties with the Labour Party in Bolton,<sup>398</sup> a specific example being that through one of Harrison’s Worktown recruits, Walter Hood, as a Labour Party activist, Mass-Observation was able to access the party’s canvas returns; these were needed to assess the impact of canvassing on voting in the Farnworth parliamentary by-election held in January 1938. However, in order to access the canvas returns of the Conservative Party, another Worktown recruit, Frank Cawson, joined the Conservative Party and ‘infiltrated their committee rooms and “borrowed” their returns for the team at Davenport Street to work on overnight’.<sup>399</sup> Beyond this deception, however, and of particular relevance for the visual research element of Mass-Observation, it transpires that three of Spender’s photographs were used as propaganda material under the heading ‘Gossip’ for the local Labour Party in their newsletter, *The Bolton Citizen*, of March 1938 (Illustration4.5).<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Spender recalled in an interview in 1977 that Harrison ‘thought of the photographic side as very important but saw it as pure recording’. See Spender and Mellor.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

<sup>397</sup> Angus Calder, ‘Mass-Observation 1937-1949’ in Martin Bulmer, *Essays on the history of British sociological research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 129.

<sup>398</sup> Hinton, 46-48.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>400</sup> The Bolton Citizen, "Gossip," *The Bolton Citizen* March 1938.

# GOSSIP:

By Andre

At the request of the Editor, "Andre" took out his camera and he now tells his story by pictures:



A MASS TORY DEMONSTRATION AGAINST LABOUR



WHY DON'T THE POLICE REMOVE THE OBSTRUCTION FROM THE PAVEMENT? Are they looking for the "Chief's" extra £200 per year?

## QUESTIONS TO THE EDITOR

"Bessie," our youngest girl is set on going to the pictures. She was there (twice) last week. Do you think it is right? She is only 11. She says all the other girls at her school go, and I haven't minded (it) at 16, but she seems to talk of nothing else and what with that and photos of film stars do you think it is good for the girl?—A.T.

I don't think you have any cause for alarm. Try and keep her interested in other things, doing housework. Going to the pictures cannot do herself any great harm. I should talk to her about the films and show you take an interest. Don't let my account tell her that films are wrong, but try and get her to go to the better ones, historical and adventure films.

We're having a lot of trouble. Annie says it's not fair her having to stay in and do work in the house when her brother goes out as he wants to.—Mrs. Shadwell.

It's all a matter of how you're placed. I don't see any reason why a boy shouldn't help about the house. Surely you can divide the work to be done. If he has the heavy work he will not feel it detract from his masculine pride.

I am sixteen, I am going with a boy who is unemployed. Mother will not let me bring him home. I love him. What shall I do?—Ethel.

Take your mother's advice. That sounds hard, Ethel, but you'll meet many other boys. You're young. Wait until you know more about the world. It's right when taking risks when you are unable to stand on your own feet.

## TORY 'ECONOMY'

AS a result of Labour action, the estimates of a number of committees were referred back at the Council meeting, held on Wednesday, March 2nd. Councillor Lowe, in moving that this action be taken, pointed out that in view of the prospect of an increased rate it was desirable that all the committee's estimates should be considered at the same time. By this method Councillor Lowe contended that if any pruning was necessary it could be done in the order of its importance.

Whilst some of the older members of the Tory Party seemed to show resentment at this intrusion upon established custom and tradition, Councillor Tong, who has a longer vision than most of his confreres, readily accepted the suggestion, and in so doing he stated that he was glad that the members of the Labour Party were now accepting the principle of economy as it had been preached by the Conservative Party for many years.

This challenge was not allowed to (Continued in Next Column)

## Proclamation

### THE "UNITED"

is "UNITED" for the common good of all respectable citizens.

The "UNITED" offers the most up-to-date facilities for obtaining household requirements of every description.

The "UNITED" gives much better value than so-called 20 weeks clubs run by persons who only offer you the choice of one establishment.

The "UNITED" has the largest and best list of shops.

The "UNITED" stipulates that its members must be treated as cash customers.

The "UNITED" issues checks without any charge for postage to new members and regular payers.

SEE THE GOODS BEFORE YOU BUY!  
10/- Shares - 6d. weekly  
20/- Shares - 1/- weekly  
Use your time wisely and improve your prospects by becoming a part-time capitalist.  
Best Terms and Interest in Books.  
For further particulars send n.c. or call—

## THE UNITED CLOTHING & SUPPLY CO. LTD.

2 FOLD STREET BOLTON

(Continued from Preceding Column)

pass unnoticed, and Councillor Clarke reminded Councillor Tong that the rates had increased in spite of the fact that the Conservative Party have been in control of the affairs of the town for more than 30 years.

The Labour Party have always believed in economy, but they have believed that wise spending of the right time is the truest index of real economy. Our views have not changed in the slightest degree, and whilst we are anxious to "prune" any unnecessary expenditure from the estimates, we can state here and now that if any attempt is made upon the conditions of the people, especially in relation to Public Assistance, Relief and Education, we shall fight to the last ditch.

If the Conservatives are really anxious to economise, let them start on the highest paid officials. And, by the way, lest it should pass unnoticed, the sub-committee who suggested that the Chief Constable should receive an extra £200 per annum for his duties as Air Raid Precaution's Officer, consisted of three Tories to one Liberal and Labour. Of course, the Conservatives realise that it must be difficult for a man to live on £1,000 per year. If this is so, let them realise too, that it is infinitely harder for an unemployed man to live on less than £1 per week.



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Illustration 4.5: 'Gossip', The Bolton Citizen, March 1938.

The article in *The Bolton Citizen* was the first time that any of Spender's Worktown photographs were published.<sup>401</sup> Whether Spender was aware of this use of his photographs is unclear as no mention is made to this effect in any of his subsequent publications.<sup>402</sup> Moreover, it is significant that the photographs were published under a pseudonym: 'At the request of the Editor, "Andre" took out his camera and he now tells his story by pictures'. Other than for brief satirical captions under each photograph, as with "'Tory Policy" – All Wind' (for the photograph of breeze inflated clothes hanging on the washing line, with surrealist overtones), there is little by way of accompanying text. Since there is nothing to suggest any partiality in the taking of the photographs, the mocking and sarcastic tone of the captions gives a meaning to these images that was unlikely to have been intended by Spender (at least at the time when they were taken). Even the first photograph, showing a lone speaker with an apparent audience of four (seated with their backs to the speaker) on Bolton Town Hall steps, is fairly typical of Spender's Worktown images. Only the caption, 'A Mass Tory Demonstration Against Labour,' cruelly captures the irony of this ostensibly, poorly attended political speech.<sup>403</sup> However, as highlighted in Chapter 3, photographs can be appropriated to fulfil purposes other than that for which they were intended. Arguably, despite obvious concerns with partiality, the appropriation of these photographs does not diminish their value as primary or secondary data; at least in the contexts of social and historical research.

### **Reproduction, Materiality and ways of working**

Spender used negative film to record his Worktown photographs. This is a photographic technology that meant the potential for endless, almost identical, reproduction of images. Writing in the 1930s, Benjamin, in *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, contended that since many prints can be made from a photographic negative, 'the genuine print has no meaning'.<sup>404</sup> This follows since 'the reproduced work of art [as with a photograph] is to an ever-increasing extent the reproduction of art designed for

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<sup>401</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Worktown Mass Observation archives".

<sup>402</sup> See Spender and Mellor; Spender and Mulford; Spender; Frizzell.

<sup>403</sup> The photograph is the second in a sequence of two, both of which are available on the Bolton Library and Museum Services website. They have the same caption 'Conservative Speech', dated August 1937. The first photograph is taken from almost the same position. It is not possible to determine if any people were standing to the left (i.e. outside the frame) but this would be some distance from the speaker. Moreover, the photograph appears to be full frame (there are film sprocket marks visible on the edges of the photograph on the website) and the photograph reproduced in *The Bolton Citizen* has the same sloping horizon. See Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Humphrey Spender: Conservative Speech (2)," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/conservative-speech-2>; "Humphrey Spender: Conservative Speech," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/conservative-speech-2>.

<sup>404</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-way street and other writings* (London: Penguin, 2009), 237.



reproducibility'.<sup>405</sup> In other words, unlike other art forms, a photograph is not characterised by uniqueness.<sup>406</sup> In an inversion of this idea, Berger explained that hitherto, a work of art like a painting, even if it were transportable, had only one image, which meant that it could not be seen in two places at the same time.<sup>407</sup> The advent of photography, however, whereby paintings can be photographed, has 'destroyed the uniqueness of the image'.<sup>408</sup> This is not simply the case that there would now be many reproductions of the original image. Berger is arguing that the reproduced image, as opposed to the original, will have a different meaning; because of reproduction, the 'meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings'.<sup>409</sup> So while the original image, the original painting, say, in its intended setting, retains its uniqueness, the reproduced images are distorted by the context in which they are viewed; for example, as a postcard or as an image on a television screen. More generally, the original image now has the status as the 'original of a reproduction'.<sup>410</sup> To a certain extent the same idea applies to an original photograph - however defined.

The unique existence of the original (of a reproduction) in modern culture is as an object defined by market value, which depends on its rarity.<sup>411</sup> Therefore, although there can be many copies, the capitalist mode of production resolves the problem of endless reproducibility of the image by valorisation of the original.<sup>412</sup> On this basis writers like Berger can argue that despite the ubiquity of the image through reproduction, nonetheless, the provenance and rarity of the original combine to propel its market value and hence its 'religiosity' or importance through value.<sup>413</sup> As a case in point, an original photograph<sup>414</sup> by landscape photographer Ansel Adams will range in price from \$4000-\$70000, whereas a replica print, while essentially an identical depiction, can be purchased for as little as \$129.<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> However, one of the earliest forms of photography, the daguerreotype, produced unique images. Michael John Langford, *Story of photography: from its beginnings to the present day*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Focal, 1997).

<sup>407</sup> John Berger, *Ways of seeing* (London: Penguin, 2008), 12.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> This valorisation (assignment of a higher value) can be explained by the forces of supply and demand. The supply of original works of art (e.g. by deceased artists) is fixed (or can be restricted in the case of living artists) so if demand increases price must rise. See Ruth Towse, *A textbook of cultural economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>413</sup> Berger, 14.

<sup>414</sup> Defined as a photograph printed from a photograph he shot and developed

<sup>415</sup> The Ansel Adams Gallery, "Ansel Adams Photography," The Ansel Adams Gallery, <http://www.anseladams.com/>.

However, beyond market value, while the image is essentially the same, there may be important differences in the material form of an original photograph.

A corollary of reproducibility in respect of photographs is that they have the status of objects in themselves and can appear in different contexts. This has methodological significance for the Worktown photographs. Considered as an object in itself, the ‘materiality of a photograph has implications for the meaning and significance of the image it bears’.<sup>416</sup> An example of which would be the difference in material form and meaning between, say, a paper-based photograph from the Worktown archive and a scanned copy of the same photograph on a computer screen. That is, the material form of a photographic image, its physical character, is inseparable from the image itself. As Elizabeth Edwards contends, there is ‘interplay between anthropological ideas and the material forms of photographs’.<sup>417</sup> In other words, there are material dimensions that need to be considered when working with historical and ethnographic photographs, that content is ‘moulded’ by the physical attributes of the photograph.<sup>418</sup>

A starting point in considering the materiality of the Worktown images is their production. Unfortunately, however, there is very little background information available.<sup>419</sup> Spender, in an interview in 1977, responding to the question ‘When you took the pictures what happened straight away?’ is reported stating that he ‘would process them and show them to Tom’.<sup>420</sup> In other words, Spender recalled developing and printing the original photographs himself.<sup>421</sup> Otherwise, however, there is a dearth of written evidence, which puts at a premium any information that can be gleaned from the material characteristics of contemporaneous prints. In a categorical sense, the material dimensions of photographs are encompassed by form, presentation, physical traces of usage, and biography.<sup>422</sup> Of particular interest with the original Worktown prints, especially those that were printed contemporaneously are their form and physical traces of usage (presentation and biography will be considered in Chapter 5). Examples here are the format of the prints that would be viewed by Harrison (e.g. the

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<sup>416</sup> Tinkler, 22.

<sup>417</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, "Material beings: objecthood and ethnographic photographs," *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1 (2002).

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

<sup>419</sup> Contemporary evidence is scanty but since the 1970s Spender has been interviewed on several occasions. Examples are Spender and Mellor; Picton et al; Spender and Mulford; Melville.

<sup>420</sup> Picton et al., 6.

<sup>421</sup> However, it is not clear whether this printing and developing took place while he was in Bolton.

<sup>422</sup> Tinkler, 23-24.

dimensions of the prints), or details of any cropping of the images. On this latter point there is written evidence, however, that Spender was certainly not a purist when it came to cropping photographs.<sup>423</sup>

The Worktown archive at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery contains a range of ‘vintage’ and ‘modern’ prints in several archival boxes.<sup>424</sup> Many of the vintage prints will have been printed in the 1930s. The prints vary in size but generally they are relatively modest enlargements (enprints) from the 35mm negatives. Typically, the smaller prints are around 4.4 x 2.9 inches or 4.4 x 3.6 inches; while the larger prints are around 7.0 x 4.5 inches or 7.5 x 4.8 inches. Several of these older prints contain information on the reverse side (see illustrations 4.6, 4.7, 4.8 and 4.9), at least ten of which include basic cropping information; in the form of a thumbnail sketch written in pencil indicating where each photograph was to be cropped.<sup>425</sup> Whether Spender sanctioned this editing of his photographs for publication is unclear but as noted earlier he was not in principle opposed to cropping. Other information on the reverse side of each of the ten prints is a blue ink stamp of Spender’s address in London, with his telephone number and copyright declaration.<sup>426</sup> Most of them include the name ‘Gollancz’ (a reference to the publishing house Gollancz), a circled number, and the measurement 4¾” followed by the date, either Weds 16<sup>th</sup> or Weds 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>427</sup> These photographs will have been intended for publication in *Britain Revisited* (see Chapter 5).<sup>428</sup> A further point of interest is that some of the information on the reverse side of the prints has been obscured. For example, the stamp of Spender’s London address has been blanked out with blue crayon

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<sup>423</sup> Spender may well have cropped the images he showed to Harrison; as he revealed in an interview with Jeremy Mulford: ‘My intention at the time was merely to produce a negative from which I could select a small portion to print as the final photograph – in other words, to treat cropping as entirely legitimate’. See Spender and Mulford, 19. However, significantly, Spender’s Worktown photographs reproduced since the late nineteen-seventies are shown full frame (see Chapter 5)

<sup>424</sup> A vintage print would typically be from the 1930s, whereas a modern print would have been produced in recent years.

<sup>425</sup> A selection of ten of these pictures from the Worktown Collection, held at Bolton Museum and Art Gallery (six of which are of Bolton and the remainder are of Blackpool), include cropping details; these are: BOLMG:1993.2.7 (Box 2); BOLMG:1993.2.21 (Box 2); BOLMG:1993.2.38 (Box 3); BOLMG:1993.2.60 (Box 3); BOLMG:1993.2.76 (Box 4); BOLMG:1993.2.85 (Box 4); BOLMG:1993.2.128 (Box 6); BOLMG:1993.2.129 (Box 6); BOLMG:1993.2.130 (Box 6); and BOLMG:1993.2.131 (Box 6).

<sup>426</sup> The address given is: Humphrey Spender, 23 Ladbroke Gardens W11. The telephone number is Park 9352. According to the London telephone directory, this was Spender’s telephone number during 1938 and 1939 only.

<sup>427</sup> The circled numbers match the plate numbers in *Britain Revisited* and the measurement 4¾” is the page width in inches of plates in this Mass-Observation publication. As for the dates, Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> or Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup>, written on the prints it seems plausible that these were referring to November 1960 - given that *Britain Revisited* was first published in 1961.

<sup>428</sup> Harrison, *Britain Revisited*.

leaving just his name (see illustration 4.6).<sup>429</sup> Further to this, the information on some of the prints has been obscured by tape (see illustrations 4.7 and 4.9).<sup>430</sup> These photographs, with ostensibly redacted details, can usefully be compared to the reverse side of one of the Blackpool prints (see Illustration 4.8).<sup>431</sup> This print has no obscured sections, with the result that Spender's address and that of a business called Euro-Pix are evident. Why such care was taken to obscure the address and other details of Euro-Pix from the prints is open to question.<sup>432</sup> Moreover, it is difficult to be precise about the dates by which the information was added to the reverse side of the prints. It seems likely, however, that the stamp of Spender's address and Euro-Pix will have been added in the 1930s, while the cropping information relates to the publication of *Britain Revisited* so is likely to have been added in 1960.

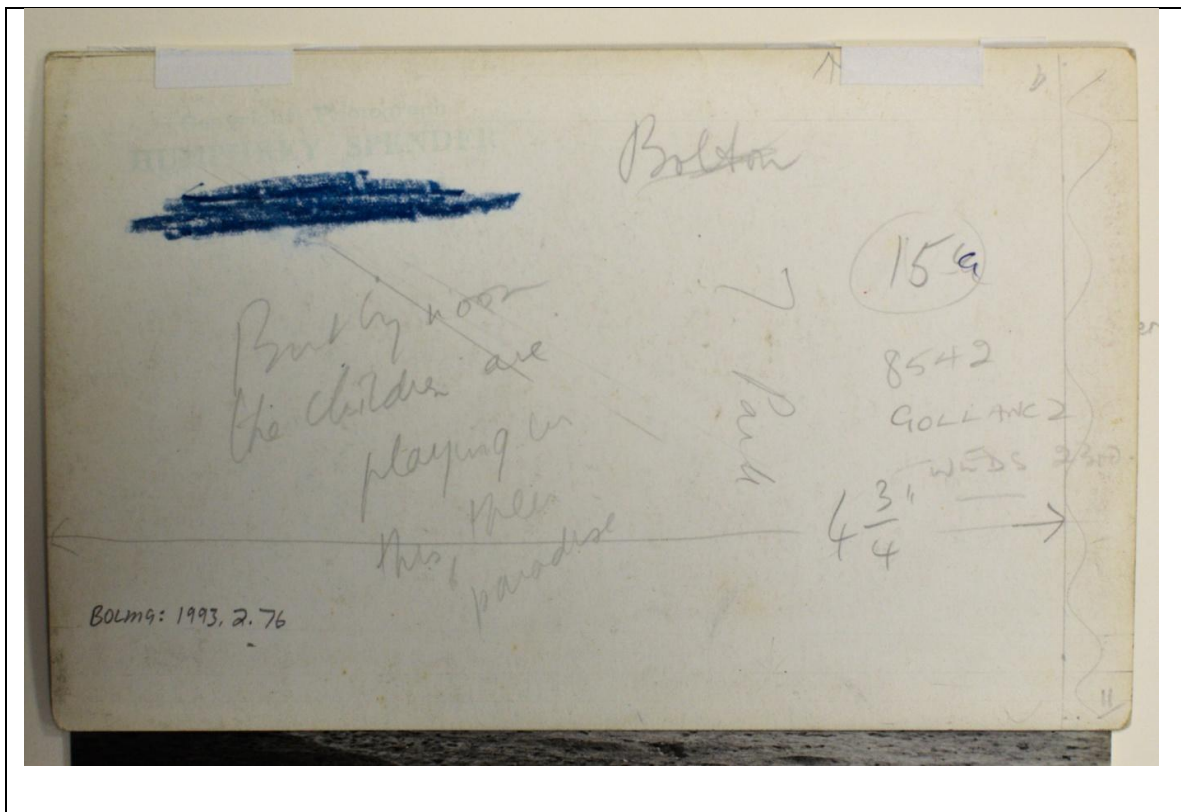


Illustration 4.6: 'Harvest festival. But, by noon the children are playing in their paradise'.

<sup>429</sup> BOLMG:1993.2.76 in Worktown Collection, "Box 4," (Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, 1993). In all likelihood this editing is as a result of Spender changing his address.

<sup>430</sup> BOLMG 1993.2.85 in *ibid.* And BOLMG 1993.2.130 in "Box 6," (Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, 1993).

<sup>431</sup> BOLMG 1993.2.134 in "Box 6."

<sup>432</sup> All attempts to establish whether this was a commercial photographic laboratory or whether it was used by Spender to produce some of the Worktown prints have failed.

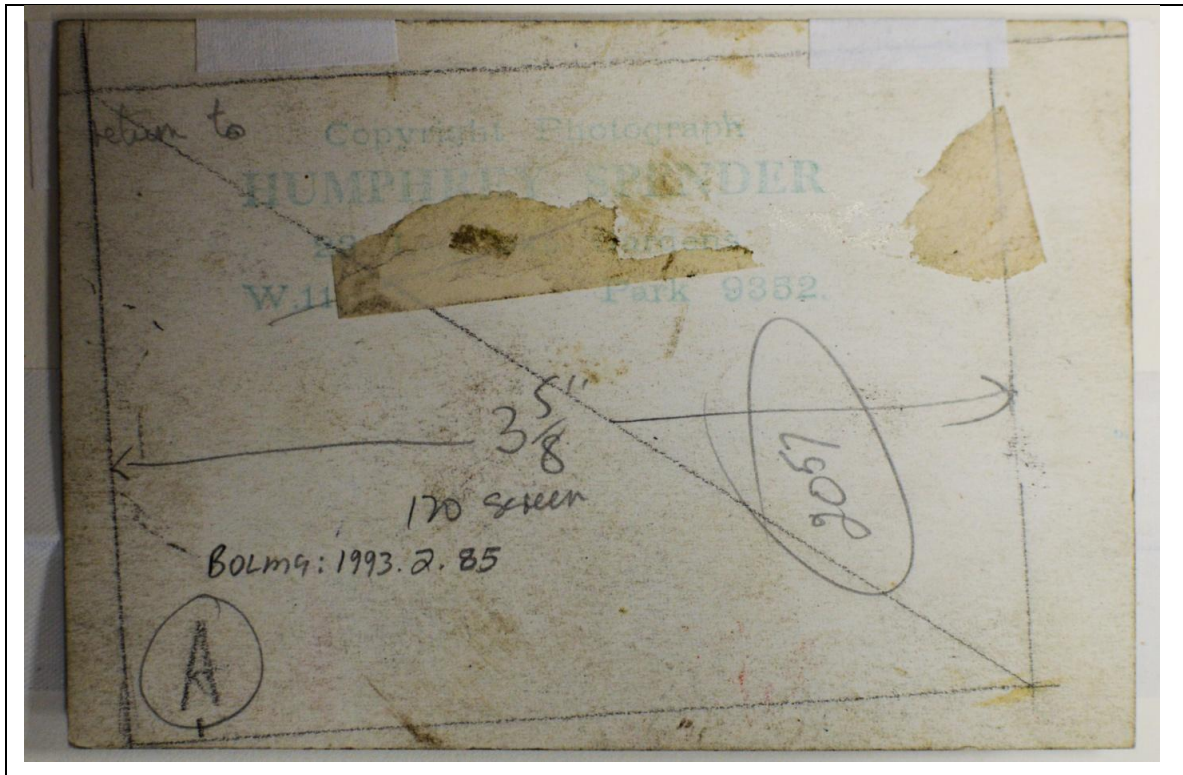


Illustration 4.7: 'Drinking: pub interior'.

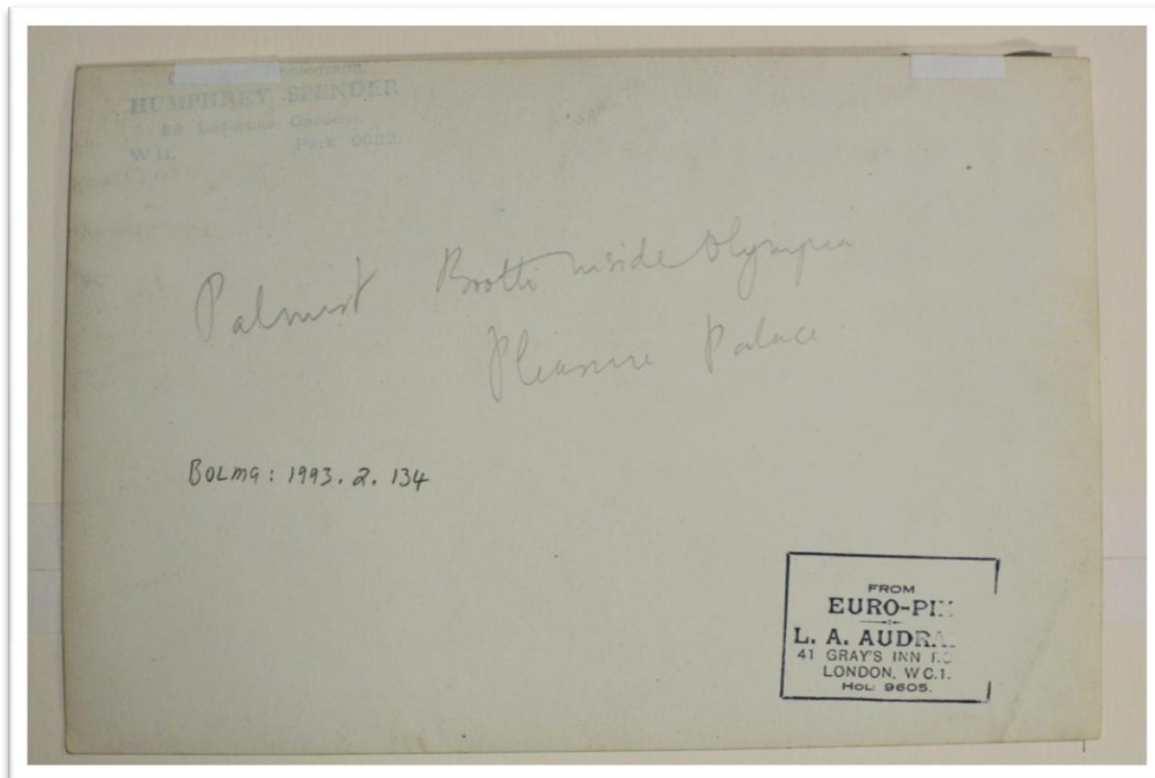


Illustration 4.8: 'Blackpool: palmist booth inside Olympia pleasure palace'.

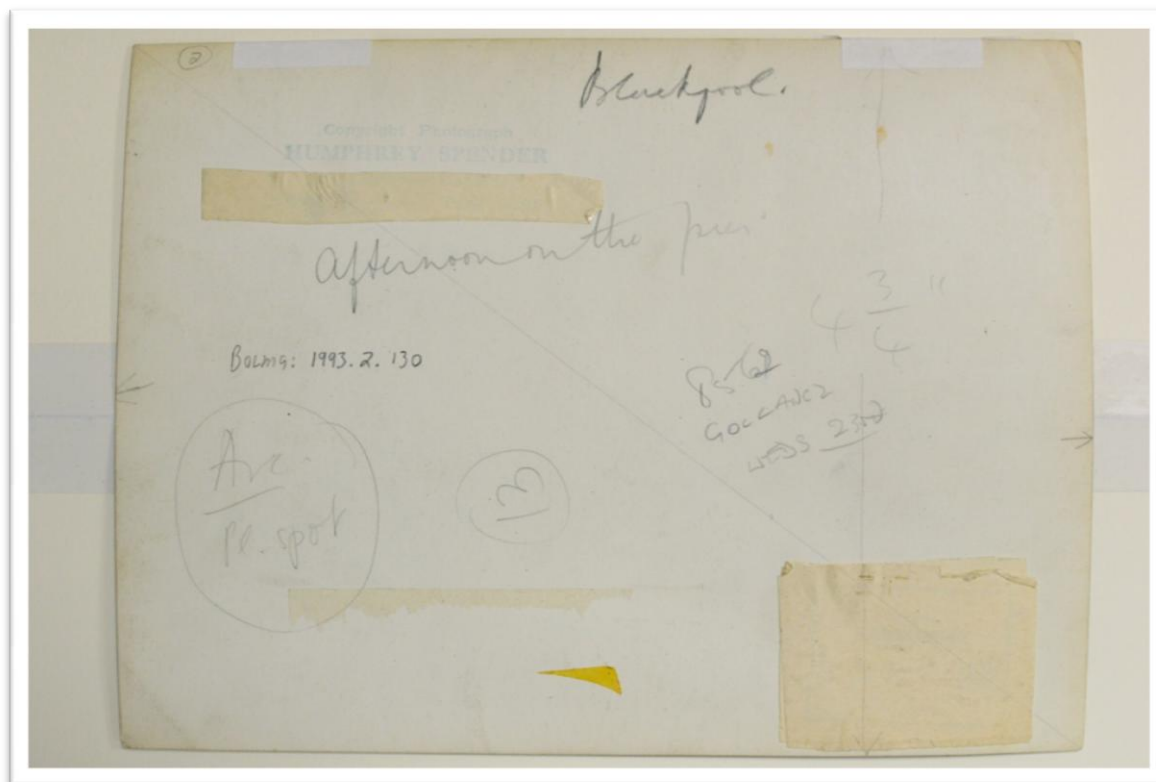


Illustration 4.9: Blackpool: afternoon on the pier'.

Further considerations on the form of the Worktown photographs are the technical and physical choices taken in their making.<sup>433</sup> Such technical decisions 'are important since they contribute to what photographs look like and this has implications for how they are interpreted by the researcher'.<sup>434</sup> In respect of the production of the Worktown photographs as unprocessed images, as was been briefly touched on earlier, information is available on some of the methods used by Spender.<sup>435</sup> For example, he initially used a Leica rangefinder camera but this was stolen so most of the Worktown photographs were taken with a Zeiss Contax 35 rangefinder camera. Just two lenses were used; each with a maximum aperture of f2.8: a 35 mm wide-angle lens (Biogon) and a 50 mm standard lens (Tessar). In other words, Spender did not use a telephoto lens, which meant that he had to get very close to the people that he was photographing. However, the use of relatively short lenses (given their depth-of-field characteristics) meant that it would be easier to keep the important parts of the photographs in focus. Black and white film was used for all the photographs; this was mostly Agfa Isopan I.S.S. though occasionally Spender used Kodak Super X panchromatic film. While technologically advanced for the time, the speed of these films was relatively slow for

<sup>433</sup> Edwards, "Material beings: objecthood and ethnographic photographs," 68.

<sup>434</sup> Tinkler, 129.

<sup>435</sup> Spender and Mulford, 15-21.

hand-held candid photography (approximately 100 ISO/ASA),<sup>436</sup> which meant that under poor lighting conditions it would be difficult to avoid blur in the photographs.<sup>437</sup> Moreover, in order to maintain a reasonable shutter speed, many of the photographs will have been shot with the lens wide open (maximum aperture). As opposed to shooting at a smaller aperture, of say f5.6 or f8, the photographs will appear ‘softer’.

To remain unobserved while taking the photographs Spender often resorted to concealing the camera: ‘allowing the lens to emerge from a very shabby raincoat or similar garment’.<sup>438</sup> In other words, Spender did not always compose the photograph in the viewfinder and instead relied on judgement that he had sufficient coverage of the scene he wanted to capture. Clearly, tight framing of the scene being photographed would have been almost impossible. On other occasions, Spender used a right-angle finder<sup>439</sup> attached to the eyepiece of his camera to take candid photographs.<sup>440</sup> To minimise the grain in the photographs Spender used a fine grain developer<sup>441</sup> but otherwise, unfortunately, as with other aspects of the visual methodology underpinning the Worktown photographs, little has been documented on either their final form (other than what can be gleaned from the extant original prints) or the method of their analysis. Such information that exists on the technical choices made is vague.

## Conclusion

The photographic methodology followed by the northern branch of Mass-Observation approximates to a form of photo-documentation; this would now be seen as a recognisable visual research method. That said, the lack of involvement between the photographer, Spender, the community and the subjects photographed, is likely to have worked against an informed interpretation of the images. In relation to the people of Bolton, Spender was an outsider. Interpreting the photographs, avoiding involuntary features and narrowing the gap between intention and meaning would be less easy for the stranger. Not surprisingly, along with the lack of documentation and captions, polysemy is evident in the resulting images. Moreover, Harrisson’s brief for the photographs was vague, which together with Spender’s intention to disprove Harrisson, inevitably biases the photographic evidence, undermining

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<sup>436</sup> "Films for the Miniature Camera," *The Amateur Photographer & Cinematographer* 1938, 707.

<sup>437</sup> Many of Spender’s interior shots in Bolton are blurred.

<sup>438</sup> Spender and Mulford, 19.

<sup>439</sup> Spender and Mellor.

<sup>440</sup> A right-angle finder is a device that allows for looking downwards into the viewfinder as opposed to the usual direct view.

<sup>441</sup> Spender and Mulford, 18.

confidence in the results. Furthermore, on methodological grounds, the use of surreptitious photography seems out of proportion for some of the themes set by Harrison.

While the appropriation of Spender's photographs in contemporary political propaganda poses ethical issues - coupled with the ethics of photographing people who had powerful reasons for not wanting to be photographed - this need not necessarily diminish their value as unique and important historical evidence. In the absence of documented evidence the photographs themselves, their materiality (the technical and physical choices in their making), can yield important clues for researchers.



## **Chapter 5:**

### **The afterlife of the Worktown photographs**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter it was argued that the method of visual research followed by Mass-Observation approximated a form of photo-documentation but at the pure-observer end of the participant-observation spectrum. Moreover, this and other issues, including unclear research objectives, class affiliations and political inclinations will have given rise to a complex positionality and polysemy in the Worktown images. Together, these sources of bias will have undermined the contemporary value of the photographs as data for the Worktown project. Furthermore, under a pseudonym, images from Spender's field work in Bolton were appropriated for political purposes. More generally, however, it would appear that the original purpose behind the photographs was never fully realised and hence they were largely forgotten.

From their creation in 1937-38, the Worktown photographs have had a succession of different trajectories. The 'rediscovery' of the photographs in the 1970s, led to them being published in books (as collections or individually) and displayed on the walls of photographic galleries. More recently still, digitisation, with implications for widening access and image commoditisation, has meant that the photographs can be viewed online. This forms the basis for the focus of the present chapter, which is to provide an overview of the afterlife of the Worktown photographs. In doing this, attention will be given to aspects of materiality not yet considered along with the valorisation of the Worktown images and the rise in prominence of the photographer Humphrey Spender.

In exploring the afterlife of the Worktown photographs, consideration will be given to their belated dissemination in Mass-Observation publications, the implications of them having an additional material form through digitisation, and their initially contentious but subsequent straight (as in un-manipulated) reproduction. And, lastly, in contrast to their ethnographic status as historical artefacts, an assessment will be made of the Worktown photographs as either commodities or heritage nostalgia.

### **An enigma resolved?**

Aside from their original purpose as anthropological data, there can be little doubt that the Worktown photographs represent an important contribution to British documentary photography, especially of the 1930s. Yet, until the middle of the 1970s, with a few exceptions, the photographs were largely ignored. Already at quite a remove from the time of taking, only two of the many Mass-Observation publications included any of Spender's photographs: these are *Britain Revisited* and the second (and third) edition of *The Pub and the People*, published in 1961 and 1970 (and 1987) respectively. For Frizzell, the consequences for British documentary from the lack of contemporaneous publication of Spender's Worktown photographs can only be conjectured.<sup>442</sup> One consequence is that the apparent embargo represents a missed opportunity for contemporary comment and critique of the Worktown photographs, which inevitably undermines the value of these images as a meaningful representation of life in the immediate period following the Great Depression. Alternatively, however, the hiatus in bringing the photographs to publication can be seen as liberating Spender's prints from contemporary understandings, facilitating a modern perspective on the images.

Several reasons have been forwarded for the apparent failure of Spender's Worktown photographs to be used in Mass-Observation's publications. An often repeated explanation for their omission was the paucity of funds.<sup>443</sup> Spender opined that for Mass-Observation the photography 'wasn't considered to have enough importance to involve the cost of reproducing photographs'.<sup>444</sup> Other reasons forwarded include that they 'posed a threat to Harrison's conception of national identity'<sup>445</sup> or that Mass-Observation's methodology could not read the photographs.<sup>446</sup> Conversely, one of the more obvious candidates for the inclusion of Spender's photographs - given the focus on Worktown and the range of images that he produced on the pub theme - would have been the 1943 edition of *The Pub and the People*.<sup>447</sup> However, this first edition of the book contained no photographs (although there are several diagrams). Conscious of the omission, Harrison explained in apologetic tone that 'It is a matter of the greatest regret that the superb pub photographs taken by Humphrey Spender

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<sup>442</sup> Frizzell.

<sup>443</sup> Amongst other publications, this is mentioned in Spender and Mulford, 21; Spender, 15; Frizzell, 29.

<sup>444</sup> Picton et al., 6.

<sup>445</sup> Curzon, "Another Place in Time: Documenting Blackpool for Mass Observation in the 1930s," 315.

<sup>446</sup> Taylor, 181.

<sup>447</sup> Mass-Observation, *The Pub and the People: a worktown study*.

cannot, under present conditions, be reproduced'.<sup>448</sup> Ostensibly the 'present conditions' referred to the wartime constraint on resources or even censorship.<sup>449</sup> However, an alternative explanation for the erstwhile neglect of Spender's Worktown photographs turns on concern with preserving the anonymity of people photographed. Harrison, in a draft preface for the first publication by Mass-Observation of Spender's photographs, *Britain in the 30's* (sic),<sup>450</sup> argued thus:

It is quite one thing to penetrate society [...] It would be quite another thing to come away and publish the results in a way prejudicial to the person or personalising them, we have never done this [...] Now, after long absence and contemplation, it is possible to come back and write up practically everything we ever did and saw without hurt to anybody. Nevertheless, the observance of anonymity is essential.<sup>451</sup>

In respect of anonymity, Harrison noted that where photographs are involved 'the dilemma is inescapable. You can't put a false name on an identifiable and dateable Worktown scene'. However, when Harrison wrote the draft preface, given the time that had passed since the photographs were taken,<sup>452</sup> anonymity was much less of a concern.

[I]n the 1970 reprint [of *The Pub and the People*] we were able to use these, on lawyer's advice. Indeed, the sort of difficulties which could be raised about publishing such intimacies in those days have lost all possibility of hurt or damage, or even slight upset in the long passage of the years in between. Even those of our subjects who are still alive might have difficulties in recognising themselves.<sup>453</sup>

In the draft preface, Harrison was referring both to the Worktown findings generally and Spender's photographs in particular. On the former the implication was that for ethical and legal reasons, given the difficulties of de-identification, a considerable time interval would be

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>449</sup> Through the Defence Regulation, Churchill's wartime government imposed restrictions on the press; as a consequence, two left-wing publications – *The Week* and the *Daily Worker* – were suppressed. Aaron L. Goldman, "Press freedom in Britain during World War II," *Journalism History* 22, no. 4 (1997).

<sup>450</sup> Spender and Harrison.

<sup>451</sup> Thomas Harnett Harrison, "Draft preface to *Britain in the 30's: Looking at life: the eye and the camera*, Folder 5C, Box 5," in *Worktown Collection* (University of Sussex Special Collections, Mass-Observation, 1973). This draft preface is marked as 'uncorrected spare for file'.

<sup>452</sup> Written in 1973, the time interval would have been approximately 35 years.

<sup>453</sup> Harrison. This draft preface is marked as 'uncorrected spare for file'.

necessary before publication of the remaining field-work results from Bolton.<sup>454</sup> On the latter, however, notwithstanding ethical issues in the taking of the photographs (highlighted in Chapter 4), his concern was that de-identification was simply not possible. In this respect, Harrison was correct in arguing that any infringement of anonymity from publishing the photographs would be negated by the likelihood that the subjects no longer bear resemblance to their former selves.<sup>455</sup> Surprisingly, however, the version of the preface that was finally published omitted this particular passage. Indeed, there is no mention in *Britain in the 30's* of concerns with anonymity or the delay in publishing the Worktown photographs. That said, in the 1970 edition of *The Pub and the People* Harrison briefly highlighted the same concerns in respect of Spender's photographs: 'These pictures could not be reproduced at the time for legal and potential libel reasons, under conditions very different from those of today'.<sup>456</sup> While such aversion to risk is not readily associated with Harrison the same cannot, with good reason, be said for his publisher, Gollancz. This follows from the unwitting publication by Gollancz of a first novel by Rosalind Wade in 1931 entitled *Children be Happy*, 'which led to a spate of libel actions'.<sup>457</sup> Ignorant of the potential risks from libel, Gollancz had approved Wade's manuscript, which contained fictitious events but recognisable characters. As a result, the office of Victor Gollancz Limited was 'snowed under with solicitors' letters'; damages had to be paid, and the book was immediately withdrawn.<sup>458</sup> Deeply affected by this whole experience, Gollancz subsequently insisted that 'every book was read for libel by Harold Rubenstein, the firm's solicitor [...] and Victor demanded enormous libel reports which, at least for some years, he took very seriously indeed'.<sup>459</sup> With a further claim (unrelated) the year after publication of *Children be Happy*, Gollancz will clearly have been mindful of the threat of libel action from publishing any potentially defamatory material.<sup>460</sup> Gollancz's biographer, Ruth Edwards, went so far as to argue that the 'terror of legal proceedings inhibited Victor from publishing some books he felt to be both artistically

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<sup>454</sup> That only one of the four Worktown related (i.e. Bolton and Blackpool) companion volumes to *The Pub and People* commissioned by Gollancz came to fruition is discussed by both Hinton and Hubble. However, neither writer makes reference to any ethical or legal constraints. See Hinton, 55-60; Hubble, 134-35. The text for the 1990 (effectively posthumous) publication of *Worktowners at Blackpool* largely follows the drafts left by Harrison and, apart from the cover photograph by Spender, contains none of the Blackpool photographs. See Gary S. Cross, *Worktowners at Blackpool: Mass-Observation and popular leisure in the 1930s* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>455</sup> Tinkler, 202.

<sup>456</sup> Mass-Observation, *The pub and the people: a worktown study*, 2nd ed. (Welwyn Garden City: Seven Dials Press Ltd, 1970), 7.

<sup>457</sup> Sheila Hodges, *Gollancz: the story of a publishing house, 1928-1978* (London: Gollancz, 1978), 58.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

<sup>459</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*

worthy and capable of helping mankind'.<sup>461</sup> Therefore, while Gollancz may still have been willing to publish on potentially litigious topics, nonetheless, considerable caution would have been exercised with regards to the law on libel. Illustrative here is the publication by Gollancz of Mass-Observation's *War Factory* in 1943.<sup>462</sup> The book centred on a factory in which a Mass-Observer, Celia Fremlin,<sup>463</sup> with the cooperation of the management, worked incognito to get a 'worm's eye view' of the participation of women in wartime production.<sup>464</sup> This top secret factory produced radar equipment for the Royal Air Force and was actually based in the market town of Malmesbury in Wiltshire.<sup>465</sup> In the 1943 edition of the book, both the factory and Fremlin were deliberately made unidentifiable,<sup>466</sup> although, clearly, given the wartime context and sensitivities of those observed the recourse to anonymity in *War Factory* was understandable.

Photographs seldom featured in a Gollancz publication. Two examples discussed earlier (see Chapter 3) are Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* and Hannington's *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*.<sup>467</sup> However, in each case the risk of libel will have been minimal. As already noted the photographs included with *The Road to Wigan Pier* are from a range of credited sources and they are not set in any particular region of the United Kingdom. Moreover, they are largely posed or unintrusive with no readily identifiable people included in the photographs. Similarly, although little information is provided on the images (only one image is credited), it seems likely that only a small risk of libel applied to the photographs in *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*. Unlike Spender's Worktown photographs, there is no sense in which the photographs appear to have been taken surreptitiously, only six of the images provide information on the location and many have clearly been posed.

For obvious reasons, unlike a text, anonymity in photography is generally more problematic and may not be practicable; but as far as the law was concerned, the right to use photographs for which the photographer owned the copyright was, according to the Professional

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<sup>461</sup> Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Victor Gollancz: a biography* (London: Gollancz, 1987), 181.

<sup>462</sup> Tom Harrison, *War factory: a report* (London: Gollancz, 1943).

<sup>463</sup> Recruited by Harrison, Fremlin was a Mass-Observer, with a Classics degree from Oxford, and member of the Communist Party. See Hinton, 171-72.

<sup>464</sup> Harrison, *War factory: a report*, 6.

<sup>465</sup> Hinton, 229-31.

<sup>466</sup> According to Sheila Hodges, Fremlin 'got neither the credit for its authorship nor a penny of the royalties'. See Hodges, 113. However, belatedly, the Cressett Library edition published in 1987 includes a preface by Fremlin. See Celia Fremlin, *War factory* (London: Cressett Library, 1987).

<sup>467</sup> Orwell, *The road to Wigan pier*; Hannington.

Photographers' Association, unambiguous: the photographer 'has sole right in such representations of a scene or object'.<sup>468</sup> Even for photographs taken surreptitiously (as was the case in Worktown) 'no action can be taken, on grounds of copyright, to prevent the use or publication of such photographs'. The restriction, if any, is where the display or use of a photograph transgresses the law of libel: 'exposing the subject, for example, to such notice or ridicule as may prejudice his commercial, social, or official position'. However, Harrison's stated concern, that 'most' of the photographs might be so construed, is perhaps debatable. Nonetheless, there are examples from the Worktown collection for which some form of libel could be seen to apply.<sup>469</sup> Importantly, therefore, unlike with *War Factory*, short of rendering them unusable, there would have been no equivalent means to make the Worktown photographs unidentifiable. Instead, it seems more likely that, given the close relationship that existed between Harrison and Golancz,<sup>470</sup> some kind of agreement had been made on delaying publication of the Worktown photographs until such time as it was deemed safe. Certainly, the more negative media publicity around Mass-Observation, as documented in *First year's work, 1937-38*, would have been conducive to litigation; with observers seen as 'Nosey Parkers' and 'busybodies'.<sup>471</sup> Moreover, for many of the photographs permission would have been sought but on grounds that precluded their publication.<sup>472</sup> Therefore it seems more likely that the concern will have been less to do with money, when it came to reproducing the photographs, and more about the threat of injurious libel actions for Victor Gollancz Limited.

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<sup>468</sup> George Edward Brown, Mackie Secretary of the Professional Photographers' Association, and Alexander Secretary of the Professional Photographers' Association Mackie, *Photographic copyright* (London: H. Greenwood & Co., 1912), 14.

<sup>469</sup> In writing or some other representation, including a photograph, a libel must fall in one of these classes: defamatory, blasphemous, obscene or seditious. G. F. L. Bridgman, *The pressman and the law* (London: Pitman, 1938), 1. A salient example of defamatory from the Worktown collection would be 'The vault' photograph (see Illustration 4.1), in which publication risked exposing someone to 'hatred, ridicule or contempt or causes to be shunned or avoided'. *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>470</sup> After the war Harrison wrote to Golancz and warmly thanked him for his pivotal support: 'You are one of the few people in my life who genuinely, generously and *unfussily* helped me and (poor you) formed me'. Hodges, 114.

<sup>471</sup> Madge, Harrison, and Malinowski, 59.

<sup>472</sup> In particular, any photographs taken on private property would usually require some kind of authorisation. An example of this would be where permission was sought to take photographs in the Conservative Club rooms during the 1938 by-election in Farnworth. To reassure one of the party workers, Spender reported himself as saying 'that the photographs are not likely to be seen by anybody in Bolton, and are only for a pictorial reportage irrespective of any specific election'. Humphrey Spender, "Observer account: Conservative club rooms, Farnworth, Worktown Collection 7-D, The Conservative Party," (Mass-Observation Online: University of Sussex Special Collections, Mass-Observation, 1938). Clearly, had the photographs been published then Spender's words of assuagement would have been meaningless.

### **Publishing history and presentation of the Worktown photographs**

Several of Spender's Worktown photographs were published in other print media, long before their presentation in the Mass-Observation publication *Britain Revisited* in 1961.<sup>473</sup> Aside from their use in Labour Party propaganda, the March 1938 edition of *The Bolton Citizen* (see Illustration 4.5), Spender's Blackpool photographs for Mass-Observation were used to support an article by Harrisson, 'The Fifty-Second Week: Impressions of Blackpool,' which was published in *The Geographical magazine* in April 1938, and 25 of the 26 photographs are credited to Spender.<sup>474</sup> However, Harrisson's 1939 article on Blackpool for *Picture Post*, 'So this is Blackpool,'<sup>475</sup> did not include Spender's photographs<sup>476</sup> or, indeed, any of the Mass-Observation photographs of Blackpool (they are all un-credited).<sup>477</sup> Similarly, of Harrisson's two articles on Worktown published in *New Writing*, 'Whistle While you Work' and 'Industrial Spring,' only the former included Spender's photographs.<sup>478</sup> And of the two photographs that accompanied 'Whistle While you Work' only one was taken in Lancashire, and this is of Blackpool and not Bolton.<sup>479</sup> The only other article published during this period that included Spender's Worktown photographs was by the architect John Piper for *The Architectural Review*, 'Fully Licensed,' which celebrates the Victorian pub (Illustration 5.1).<sup>480</sup> It is evident, therefore, that although Spender was achieving success with his photography elsewhere,<sup>481</sup> few of his Worktown photographs were published in the immediate period following their production. Moreover, nearly all of the Worktown photographs published were of Blackpool and not Bolton.

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<sup>473</sup> Harrisson, *Britain Revisited*.

<sup>474</sup> Harrisson, "The Fifty-Second Week: Impressions of Blackpool."

<sup>475</sup> Harrisson, "So this is Blackpool."

<sup>476</sup> Significantly, Spender would have been working for *Picture Post* at this time.

<sup>477</sup> Photographs in *Picture Post* at that time were not credited. It was only after the war that this policy of not crediting photographers for their work was relaxed. Apparently, two of the contributors to *Picture Post* were German nationals (Felix Man and Kurt Hutton). The policy was seen as necessary to protect the photographers and the relatives that they had left behind in Germany. See David J. Marcou, *The Cockney Eye: Bert Hardy (1913-1995), a neo-Dickensian 'Picture Post' hero* (La Crosse, Wis.: DigiCOPY, 2013).

<sup>478</sup> Harrisson, "Whistle While You Work."; "Industrial Spring," *New Writing* 2 (1939).

<sup>479</sup> The one of Lancashire is taken outdoors on a seaside pier while the other shows a dance hall in London taken with flash. For technical reasons it seems likely that the dance hall photographs taken in Bolton would have been difficult to reproduce in a publication like *New Writing*, given that they were taken without flash and under subdued lighting.

<sup>480</sup> John Piper, "Fully licensed," *The Architectural Review* 87, no. 520 (1940). Many of the photographs used in the article are by Spender, two of which are from the Worktown collection. Other photographs by Spender on London pubs are included in the May 1940 issue of *The Architectural Review*, in an article entitled 'Engraved glass in public houses'.

<sup>481</sup> By 1938 Spender had secured a position with the newly launched *Picture Post*. Frizzell, 36.

The two illustrations immediately below, 1 and 2, which are from Bolton, Lanes., show the modest public house reduced to its typical essentials. The exterior and interior are examples of functional design embellished with ornament in appropriate places; in the one case the moulded doorway and the neatly modelled rusticated corner, in the other the willow-pattern on the beer handles. From such starting-points the public-house style blossomed into a character of vigorous decoration peculiar to itself, and the illustrations on the following pages are selected to show this pub character in its many manifestations, varying as it is bound to do according to location, scale and the type of custom it is catering for: from the village inn, which even though it represents the pub at its least pretentious, usually does introduce a different personality into its vernacular setting in the village street, to the full-blown urban Gin Palace with its wealth of rococo detail.

All the photographs illustrating the latter category, from page 95 onwards, are by Humphrey Spender, with the exception of two by Edwin Smith. The other photographs are by John Piper and J. M. Richards, except numbers 1 and 2, by Humphrey Spender, number 7, by Frances Hope, and numbers 24 and 26, by Will F. Taylor.



Illustration 5.1: 'Fully Licensed', *The Architectural Review*, March 1942.

During this early period, Spender's photographs for Mass-Observation were relatively unchanged for publication. For example, in Harrison's 'The Fifty-Second Week: Impressions of Blackpool,' there is little if any evidence of cropping as the images closely match the 3:2 ratio of the negatives from which they are derived; as is also the case with the single Worktown photograph in Harrison's article 'Whistle While you Work'. At this time, it seems likely that Spender will have been granted some editorial control over the reproduction of his photographs.<sup>482</sup> As for the words attached to the photographs, while no detail is provided in either case on the circumstances under which they were taken, using Scott's distinction between title and caption,<sup>483</sup> there is a marked contrast between the two articles. In 'Whistle While you Work' there is just a brief title that states 'Dancing on the pier' and Spender's name; otherwise the photograph is incidental to the article and open to interpretation. However, with 'The Fifty-Second Week: Impressions of Blackpool' the accompanying captions project the same light-hearted, albeit cynical, tone and emphasis of the article. In essence, the viewer, through text and photographs, is invited to see that

<sup>482</sup> All the illustrations for *New Writing 1* and 2 are indicated as 'Chosen and arranged with the assistance of Humphrey Spender'.

<sup>483</sup> Scott distinguishes the title as 'no more than an identifying tag' and the caption as 'an intervention... forestalling the response of the viewer'. Clive Scott, *The spoken image: photography and language* (London: Reaktion, 1999), 49.



Worktowners, for one week of the year, swap the drudgery of industrial life for the artificial (including the less than salubrious) attractions and delights of Blackpool. This projection is evident in the caption for a photograph showing wording on a wall that includes an arrowed sign for the ‘Headless Woman’ (Illustration 5.2 top): ‘All the wonders, errors and horrors of humanity are offered to the holiday-maker [...] Any girl lucky enough to lose her head can draw the crowds!’ Another example of this kind of intervention is the caption accompanying the photograph for a sideshow featuring a five-legged cow (Illustration 5.2 bottom):<sup>484</sup> ‘If seeing's believing, then for tuppence you can get a minute alongside a cow with five legs’. However, for the 1939 *Picture Post* article, ‘So this is Blackpool,’ Harrison adopted a completely different stance.<sup>485</sup> The tone of the article is again light-hearted but the premise is healthy fun and there is far less highlighting of the bizarre; this is reflected in the choice of photographs (not Mass-Observation) and their captions (Illustration 5.3). House style will be a factor in explaining differences between the articles but of greater significance are Harrison’s editorial predilections. His less than discreet projection of meaning onto the Worktown photographs is a clear indication of how they would have been used in Mass-Observation publications. This will become more evident when considering the captions and editing of Spender’s Worktown photographs in subsequent publications; especially *Britain in the 30's*, published in 1975.<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> As can be seen, the absurdity conveyed by the disquieting signage is enhanced by the banality of the woman knitting in the kiosk.

<sup>485</sup> Harrison, "So this is Blackpool." The tone of the article is in keeping with the house style of *Picture Post*.

<sup>486</sup> Spender and Harrison.

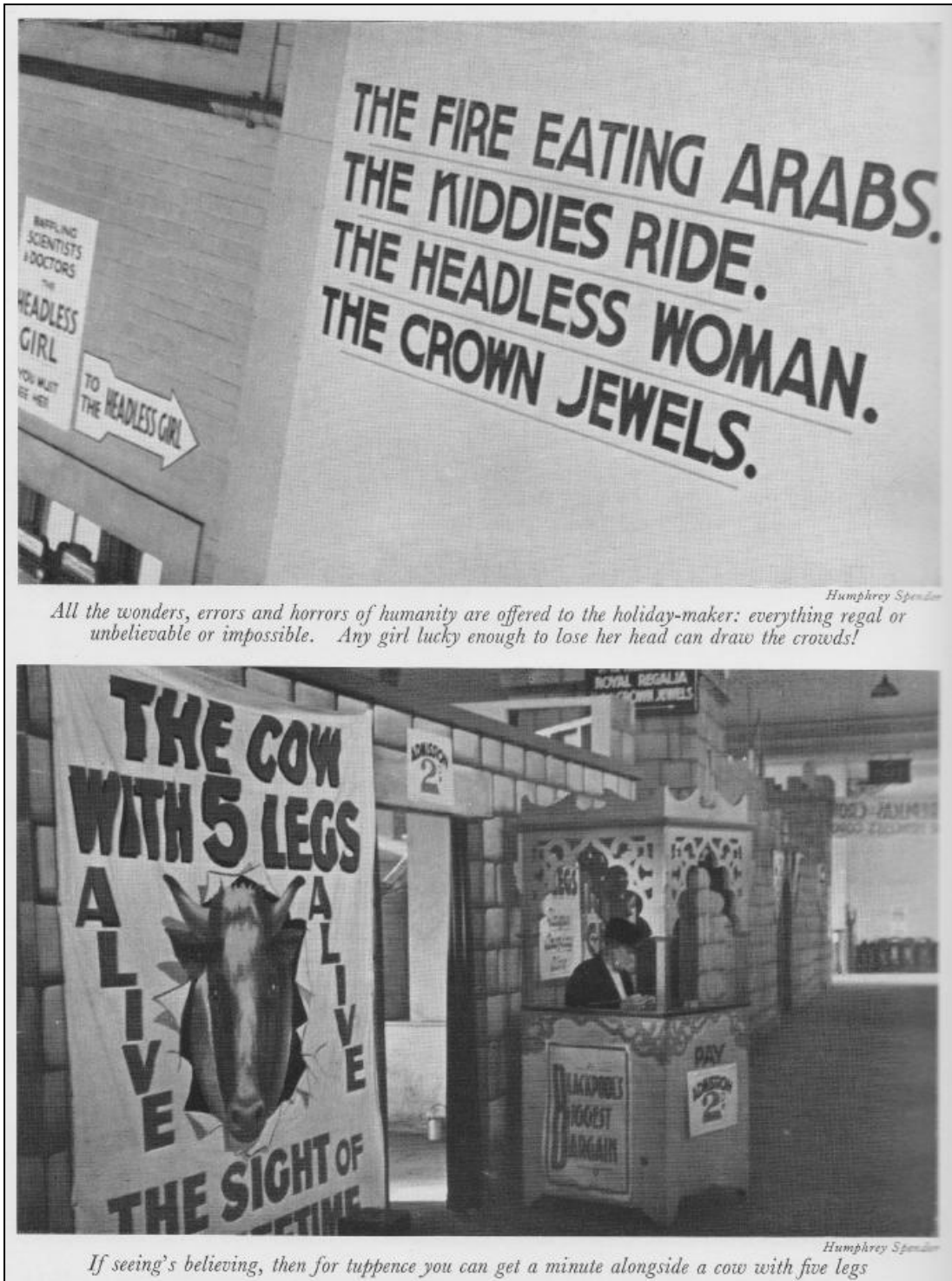


Illustration 5.2: 'The Fifty-Second Week: Impressions of Blackpool', *The Geographical magazine*, April 1938.

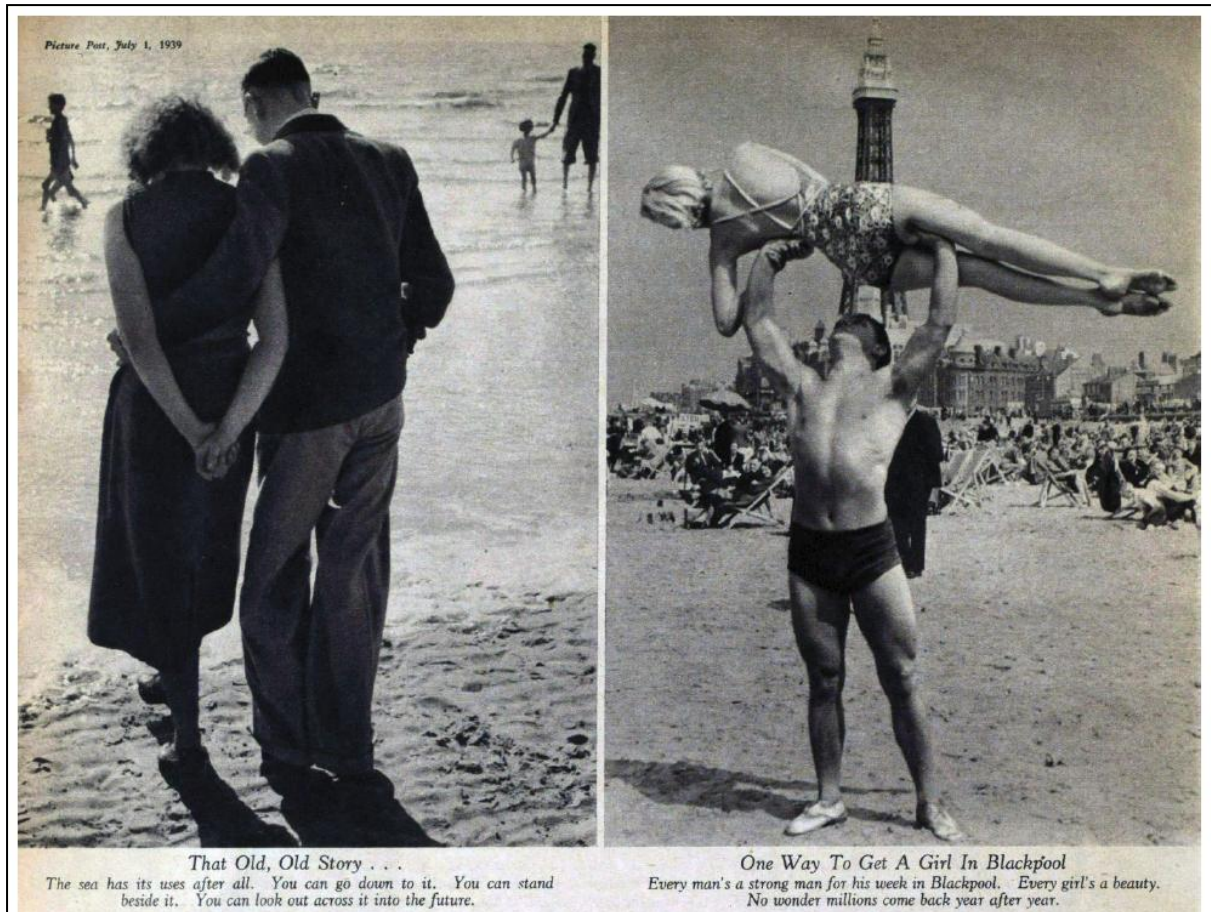


Illustration 5.3: 'So this is Blackpool,' *Picture Post*, 1 July 1939.

The first Mass-Observation publication to use Spender's Worktown photographs, *Britain Revisited*, was published by Gollancz in 1961.<sup>487</sup> Of the 27 photographs in *Britain Revisited*, 18 were taken in Bolton and Blackpool<sup>488</sup> by Spender during the 1930s; the rest are by Michael Wickham from the 1960 revisit organised by Harrison. Each photograph includes a brief title and pages are indicated that link images to related sections in the book (although only limited reference is made to the photographs in the text). The reproduction of the photographs is such that they lack a smooth tonal range, with a loss of detail in the highlights and shadows. Of more significance, however, is the extent to which some of the photographs have been cropped. Editorial cropping can be used to focus attention on a particular part of the photograph or even to fill a predetermined space on the page.<sup>489</sup> The effect of cropping is to change the original context by editing out sections of the photograph (analogous to

<sup>487</sup> In 1953 Spender became a tutor at the textile school of the Royal College of Art; an appointment that marked the end of his career as a photographer. Spender, *'Lensman': photographs 1932-1952*, 22.

<sup>488</sup> Illustration 18 (photograph) is wrongly listed as having been taken in Blackpool.

<sup>489</sup> Although the aspect ratios of photographs in *Britain Revisited* are different, the available space on the page is the same.

increasing the focal length of the lens but without the foreshortening and shallower depth of field). Clearly, cropping has implications for the meaning of Spender's Worktown photographs in *Britain Revisited*.

As discussed earlier (see Chapter 4), at least ten of Spender's photographic prints in the Worktown Collection include basic cropping information on the reverse side indicating their intended reproduction in *Britain Revisited*.<sup>490</sup> Three of these cropped photographs are discussed here, followed by one other salient example from the Worktown collection. The first photograph, with the title in *Britain Revisited* of 'Children's playground' (surely ironic?), shows two shabbily dressed children who blend seamlessly into a despoiled landscape. In the un-cropped version (Illustration 5.4 left)<sup>491</sup> the only trace of modernity is the shadow of a gas street lamp encroaching on an otherwise derelict wasteland. This shadow is cropped out for reproduction in *Britain Revisited* (Illustration 5.4 right).<sup>492</sup> The cropping of this photograph exacerbates an already bleak image of urban wasteland, which appeared to serve as a playground for children in Worktown.

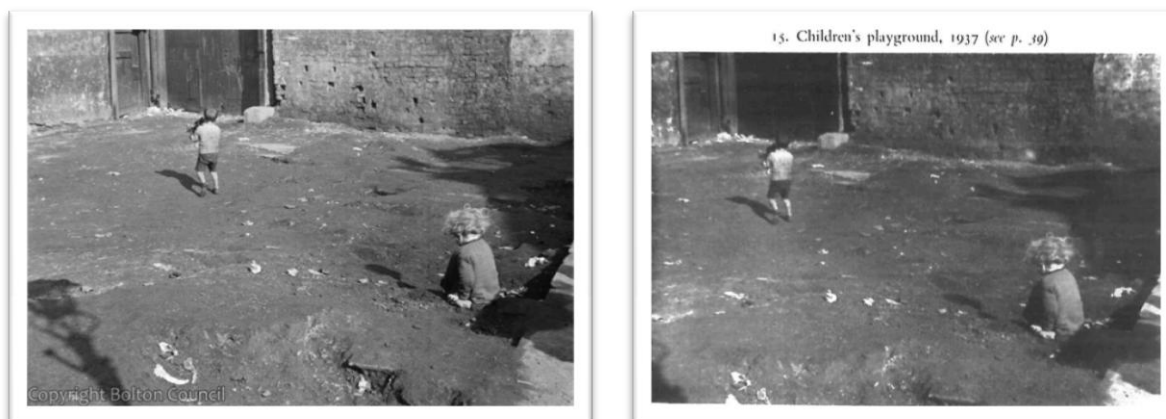


Illustration 5.4: 'Humphrey Spender: Playing on Wasteland', Bolton Worktown Photography and Archives from the Mass Observation (left); and from *Britain Revisited* (right).

<sup>490</sup> The ten photographs in the Worktown Collection have the codes BOLMG followed by: 1993.2.7; 1993.2.21; 1993.2.38; 1993.2.60; 1993.2.76; 1993.2.85; 1993.2.128; 1993.2.129; 1993.2.130; and 1993.2.131. On the reverse side of each print there is a stamp of Spender's address in London and edit instructions written in pencil, including 'Gollancz' followed by the date (either Weds 16<sup>th</sup> or Weds 23<sup>rd</sup>; presumably referring to November 1960, given the publication date of *Britain Revisited*). In addition, there is a thumbnail sketch of where each photograph is to be cropped and the width measurement 4¾" (this is the page width of images in *Britain Revisited*).

<sup>491</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Humphrey Spender: Playing on Wasteland," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/playing-on-wasteland-2>.

<sup>492</sup> The cropping instructions on the reverse side of the print show unequivocally that the shadow from the street lamp was to be cropped out (see Illustration 4.6).

More extreme cropping is applied to an image titled ‘The funeral, 1936’ (*sic*) in *Britain Revisited* whereby the format is changed from portrait to landscape.<sup>493</sup> In the un-cropped version (Illustration 5.5 left)<sup>494</sup> the mourner nearest the camera is shown three-quarter length, with terraced housing and a distant chimney in the background. For the reproduction in *Britain Revisited* (Illustration 5.5 right)<sup>495</sup> the image is cropped at the top and the bottom,<sup>496</sup> consequently the framing of mourners is much tighter, with information lost both on the proximity of the graveyard to local industry and inscription detail on the most prominent of the headstones.

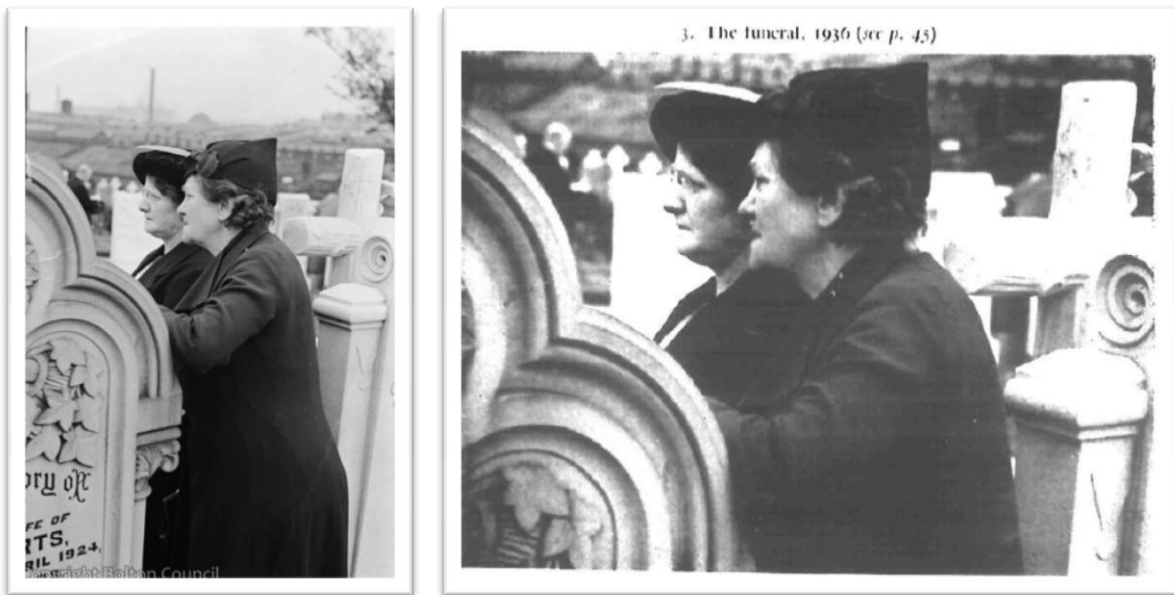


Illustration 5.5: ‘Humphrey Spender: The secular funeral of John Shaw (onlookers)’, Bolton Worktown Photography and Archives from the Mass Observation (left); and *Britain Revisited* (right).

The third example from *Britain Revisited*, for which information is available on cropping, titled ‘Listening to Clem Attlee, Worktown Labour Party (*see p.85*)’, shows a view from the side of attendees at a political meeting. In the un-cropped version (Illustration 5.6 left)<sup>497</sup> the heavily-dressed people at the meeting, in an obviously cold room, appear uniformly attentive.

<sup>493</sup> A possible explanation for the change from portrait to landscape will be to match the orientation of the other photograph on the same page.

<sup>494</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Humphrey Spender: The secular funeral of John Shaw," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/the-secular-funeral-of-john-shaw-10>.

<sup>495</sup> Harrison, *Britain Revisited*.

<sup>496</sup> The instructions for reproduction in *Britain Revisited*, on the reverse side of the print, show that more than half of the image was to be cropped.

<sup>497</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Service, "Humphrey Spender: Labour Party Election Rally," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/labour-party-election-rally>.

For the reproduction in *Britain Revisited* (Illustration 5.6 right)<sup>498</sup> the image is cropped by more than a third from the bottom.<sup>499</sup> As a result of this editing, information is excluded on the body language of the Labour Party supporters and the scale of attendance.<sup>500</sup>

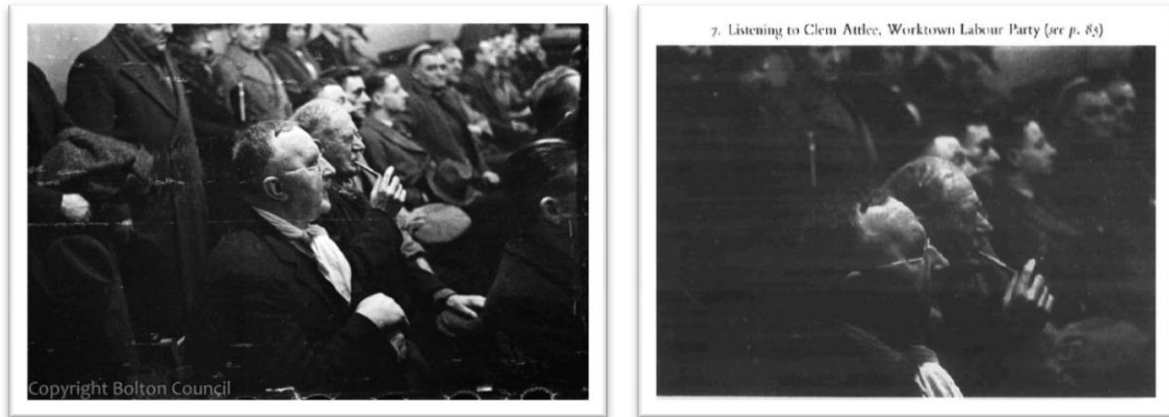


Illustration 5.6: ‘Humphrey Spender: Labour Party election rally’, Bolton Worktown Photography and Archives from the Mass Observation (left); and *Britain Revisited* (right).

A further reproduction in *Britain Revisited* (for which there is no information on cropping) of one of the Worktown election photographs (Illustration 5.7 right),<sup>501</sup> with the title ‘Party propaganda (Municipal election),’ showing several children alongside a political poster, is significantly cropped relative to the full-frame version (Illustration 5.7 left).<sup>502</sup> Given that the aspect ratio is largely unchanged from the full-frame negative, the cropping will have been for reasons of content as opposed to fitting required proportions for publication. Effectively zooming from a wide to a medium shot, the cropping refocuses attention on the children and the poster in the middle section of the frame but excludes key detail on the physical environment (e.g. there is a greater sense of urban claustrophobia in the full-frame version) and conceals that the triangular structure supporting the poster is mounted on a horse-drawn carriage. The cropping of the photograph, along with the loss of detail in the background, isolates the event, a party political campaign, from its social setting and in a sense trivialises efforts to mobilise electoral support from the local community.

<sup>498</sup> Harrison, *Britain Revisited*.

<sup>499</sup> Editorial instructions on the reverse side of the print clearly show that more than a third of the image was to be cropped.

<sup>500</sup> The people standing are less discernible on the reproduced photograph in *Britain Revisited*.

<sup>501</sup> Harrison, *Britain Revisited*.

<sup>502</sup> Spender and Mulford, 99.

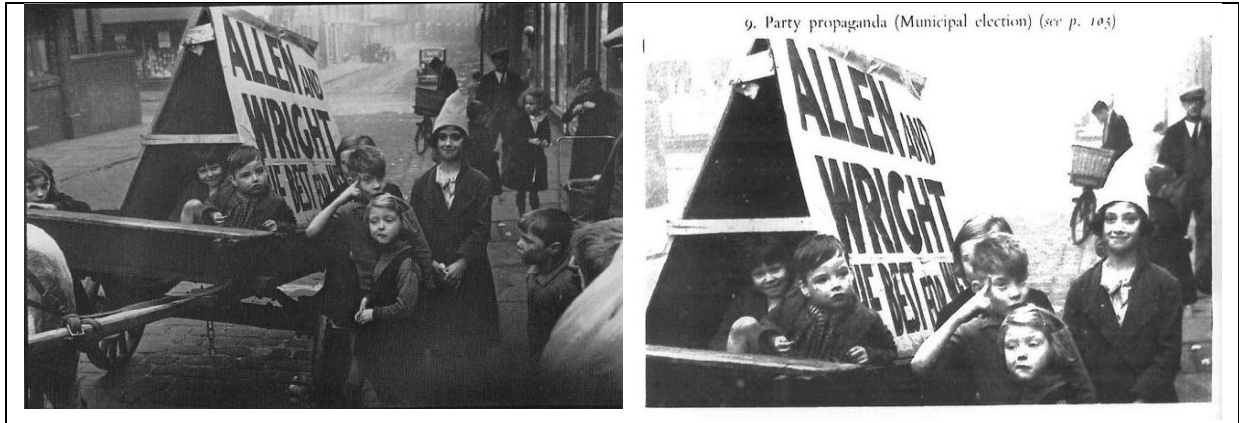


Illustration 5.7: Humphrey Spender: Children at municipal election, Worktown People: Photographs from Northern England 1937-8 (left); and *Britain Revisited* (right).

Following *Britain Revisited*, the next Mass-Observation publication to use Worktown photographs was the second edition of *The Pub and the People*, published in 1970. In this edition, there is an explanatory note by Harrison that includes numbered and brief descriptions of the photographs (they are not titled). Harrison goes on to explain that he ‘selected ten of his [Spender’s] pub pictures [...] as straight documents of pub life as it was then’.<sup>503</sup> Clearly Harrison and not Spender chose the photographs for *The Pub and the People*.<sup>504</sup> As with *Britain Revisited*, the reproduced photographs are again of limited tonal range; consequently, there is some blocking of the highlights and only limited detail in the shadows. Moreover, some of the photographs have been heavily cropped. For the ‘Grapes Hotel’ photograph (Illustration 5.8 right),<sup>505</sup> that ‘shows men in the summer street waiting for opening time,’ the cropping has excluded other bystanders and significantly reduced the scale of housing density; in effect, understating the urban and social context of the pub’s setting. The full-frame version (Illustration 5.8 left)<sup>506</sup> presents the pub as a sunlit escape from the shadowy, terraced housing in the foreground. This is one of the few instances where Spender has attracted the attention of everyone in the photograph.<sup>507</sup>

<sup>503</sup> There are twelve photographs in total: two of which are by Michael Wickham from the 1960 revisit organised by Harrison.

<sup>504</sup> Harrison’s selection includes four of Spender’s photographs included in *Britain Revisited*.

<sup>505</sup> Mass-Observation, *The pub and the people: a worktown study*.

<sup>506</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Service, "Humphrey Spender: The Grapes," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/the-grapes-2>.

<sup>507</sup> This appears to be one of a pair of photographs; in both cases Spender is clearly seen by those he is photographing. The other photograph is in portrait format but taken from a similar position.



Illustration 5.8: ‘Humphrey Spender: The Grapes’, Bolton Worktown Photography and Archives from the Mass Observation (left); and *The Pub and the People: A Worktown Study* (right).

Another heavily cropped photograph from *The Pub and the People* is ‘Standers and sitters [...] early in the evening’ (Illustration 5.9 right).<sup>508</sup> The full-frame version (Illustration 5.9 left)<sup>509</sup> is elsewhere referred to as the ‘The vault’.<sup>510</sup> The cropping of the pub vault photograph has the effect of shifting the viewpoint to the right where the head of the man with his hand raised is now on one of the intersecting points associated with the Rule of Thirds.<sup>511</sup> However, it is not evident why this interaction with Spender should be highlighted. More likely, given that all of Spender’s pub photographs were cropped, the decision was made to get a closer view of the main subjects; in other words, closer to the people being photographed than Spender’s wide-angle lens and surreptitious photography would permit.



Illustration 5.9: ‘Humphrey Spender: The Vault’, ‘Mass Observation to Big Observation: Anthropologies of Ourselves’ (left); and *The Pub and the People: A Worktown Study* (right).

<sup>508</sup> Mass-Observation, *The pub and the people: a worktown study*.

<sup>509</sup> The Photographers’ Gallery Blog.

<sup>510</sup> This photograph, ‘The Vault’, was discussed earlier (see Chapter 4).

<sup>511</sup> The Rule of Thirds divides the frame horizontally and vertically into thirds and ‘ideally’ the focus of interest is at one of the intersections.



Published in 1975, *Britain in the 30s* is significant as the first publication based solely on Spender's Worktown photographs; this marked the starting point in a reappraisal of Spender's contribution to Mass-Observation. By this time, Harrison had been appointed as a visiting professor at Sussex University, where in 1969 he had secured funding from the Leverhulme Foundation for the establishment and operation of the Mass-Observation Archive.<sup>512</sup> Spurred on by this revival of the Archive, Harrison worked (with un-credited support from others)<sup>513</sup> on a Mass-Observation account of World War II, *Living through the Blitz*, which was published posthumously in 1976.<sup>514</sup> It was while working on *Living through the Blitz* that Harrison must have approached Spender with a view to getting the Worktown photographs published.<sup>515</sup> The resulting publication, *Britain in the 30s*, with an introduction and commentary by Harrison, is a limited edition of just 100 copies. Arranged around various themes, including 'Blackpool,' 'A Woman's Work Is Never Done,' 'The Local,' and 'It Was A Lovely Funeral,' the photographs are without titles but in several places text is inserted.<sup>516</sup> The most striking aspect of the reproduction and presentation of the photographs is the severity of the editing and the subjective commentary. For many of the images, large areas are bleached out completely removing information on the context. An example of this is the photograph of an election car (Illustration 5.10 left)<sup>517</sup> in which just a fragment of the original image (Illustration 5.10 right)<sup>518</sup> remains; added to which, the bleached areas are filled with repeated rows of the word 'Rhubarb'.

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<sup>512</sup> Heimann contends that Harrison 'must have been pleased' at this further link between Mass-Observation and the Lever name. Heimann, 368.

<sup>513</sup> The others were former observers and staff members: including Celia Fremlin, Mollie Tarrant, and Bob Wilcock. Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Tom Harrison, *Living through the Blitz* (London: Collins, 1976).

<sup>515</sup> There is a photograph, taken in Spender's studio in the early 1970s, which shows Spender and Harrison selecting photographs for *Britain in the 30s*. See Dorothy Sheridan, Brian V. Street, and David Bloome, *Writing ourselves: mass-observation and literacy practices* (Cresskill, N.J. : Hampton Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>516</sup> The text for themes straddles several pages.

<sup>517</sup> Spender and Harrison.

<sup>518</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Service, "Election Car," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/election-car>.

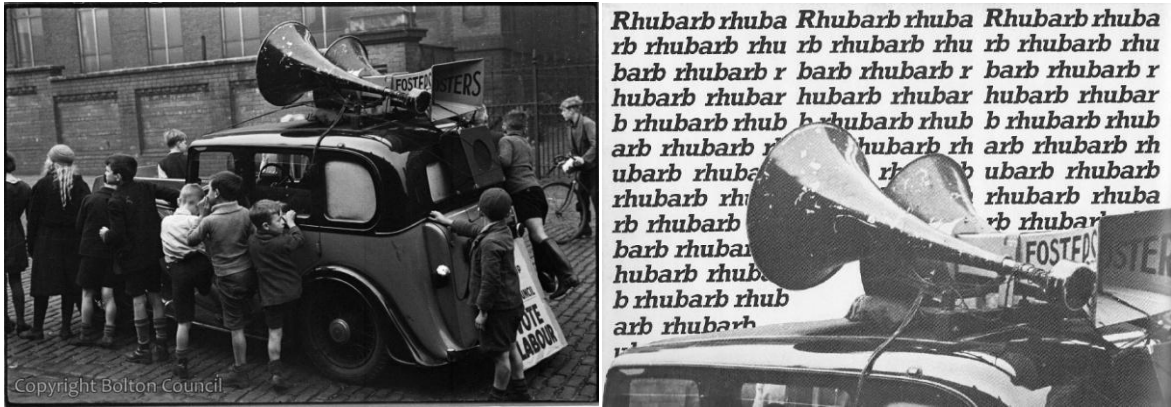


Illustration 5.10: ‘Humphrey Spender: Election Car’, From Bolton Worktown Photography and Archives from the Mass Observation (left); and *Britain in the 30s* (right).

A more subtle form of editing, albeit on a more sensitive subject, is the section on the secular funeral of John Shaw from Davenport Street.<sup>519</sup> There are five photographs of the funeral covering four pages,<sup>520</sup> the first two are of onlookers and the funeral cortege in Davenport Street. The other three photographs are of the same funeral at the cemetery.<sup>521</sup> The aspect ratio for two of the cemetery photographs is extreme and bears no obvious relationship to the available space on the page. The photograph of the mourners (Illustration 5.11 right)<sup>522</sup> has an aspect ratio of approximately 3:1; it is effectively half the width of the un-cropped version (Illustration 5.11 left).<sup>523</sup>



Illustration 5.11: ‘Humphrey Spender: The secular funeral of John Shaw (mourners)’, Bolton Worktown Photography and Archives from the Mass Observation (left); and *Britain in the 30s* (right).

<sup>519</sup> The Worktown base for Mass-Observation was in Davenport Street.

<sup>520</sup> The five photographs were chosen from 11 images of the funeral.

<sup>521</sup> One of these photographs was reproduced in *Britain Revisited*; see Illustration 3 in Harrison, *Britain Revisited*.

<sup>522</sup> Spender and Harrison.

<sup>523</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Service, "Humphrey Spender: The secular funeral of John Shaw," Bolton Council, <http://boltonworktown.co.uk/photograph/the-secular-funeral-of-john-shaw-8>.

More severe still (with less of the image retained than cropped) is the photograph of the pallbearers (Illustration 5.12 right),<sup>524</sup> which is little more than a fragment of the un-cropped version (Illustration 5.12 left).<sup>525</sup> The orientation of the photograph has been changed from landscape to portrait and a mill chimney, hitherto isolated and insignificant, is now more prominent on the significantly narrowed skyline, negating an otherwise semi-rural outlook.

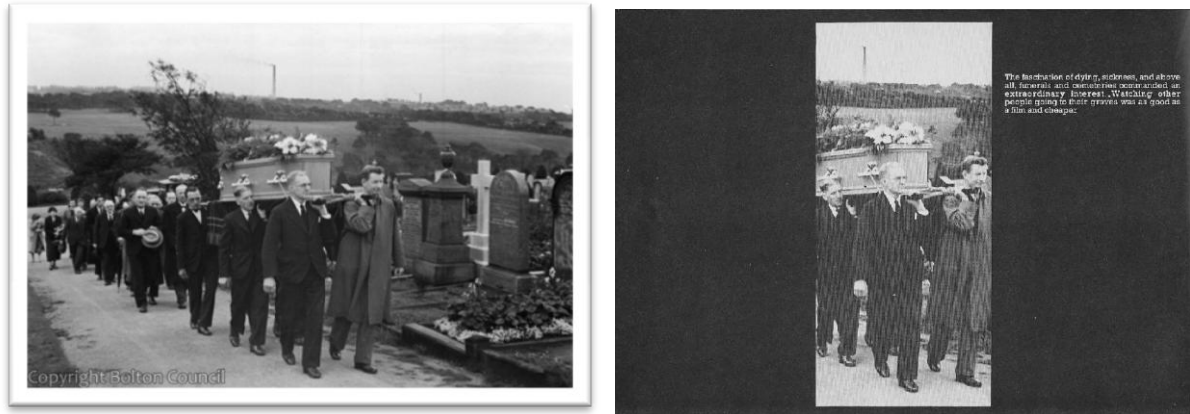


Illustration 5.12: ‘Humphrey Spender: The secular funeral of John Shaw (pallbearers)’, Bolton Worktown Photography and Archives from the Mass Observation (left); and *Britain in the 30s* (right).

Adding to this dramatic manipulation of the photographs is the accompanying text, which imputes a voyeuristic theme. Harrison’s commentary disparages the mourners and onlookers who are following this secular funeral. He makes the assertion that in Worktown funerals ‘commanded an extraordinary interest. Watching other people going to their graves was as good as a film and cheaper’.<sup>526</sup> Convenient to this pejorative assessment of the onlookers is the cropping of the lower half of the cemetery photograph (Illustration 5.11 right), which conceals evidence that many of these funeral spectators are in fact sincere: ‘Each of the mourners was given a white chrysanthemum by one of the gravediggers’.<sup>527</sup> However, while it is not clear if the commentary is referring to photographs taken at Davenport Street or the cemetery; nonetheless, this disturbing re-contextualisation of Spender’s photographs is in some respects comparable to Lesy’s *Wisconsin Death Trip* of unrelated but juxtaposed quotes

<sup>524</sup> Spender and Harrison.

<sup>525</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Service, "Humphrey Spender: The secular funeral of John Shaw".

<sup>526</sup> It seems likely that the idea for Harrison’s claim is based on an observer account of this secular funeral: ‘At least 10 people who were not mourners stood near the whole time, including two women who kept peeping between the gravestones’. Mass-Observation, "Observer Account, Secular Funeral, Funerals, 24-C," (Mass-Observation Online: University of Sussex Special Collections, Mass-Observation, 1937).

<sup>527</sup> A further two more chrysanthemums have been redacted by the cropping and since the angle and crowding would make it difficult to see them all it can only be concluded that this group is composed of mourners. Ibid.

and images;<sup>528</sup> except with the added complexity that in *Britain in the 30s* the juxtaposition is more pointed and the event, at the time of publication in 1975, was within living memory.

In the same year that *Britain in the 30s* was published, Spender's contribution to British photography was finally acknowledged in the collective exhibition *The Real Thing: An Anthology of British Photographs 1840-1950* organised for the Hayward Gallery, London.<sup>529</sup> In the catalogue for the *Real Thing*, Spender is described as having been 'unjustifiably overlooked'.<sup>530</sup> This belated recognition was followed in 1977 by an exhibition of Spender's Worktown photographs, organised by David Mellor, at the Gardner Centre Gallery (now the Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts) at Sussex University. The catalogue for this exhibition, *Worktown: Photographs of Bolton and Blackpool Taken for Mass Observation 1937/38*, with a descriptive chronology and interview with Spender, includes several of the photographs.<sup>531</sup> Significantly, Spender made the selection and all the photographs are printed full-frame with no obtrusive darkroom manipulation.<sup>532</sup> Moreover, unlike *Britain in the 30s*, the writing is appropriate for an academic readership. The increasing awareness of the importance of Spender's Worktown photographs culminated in a special feature on Mass-Observation's photography in the radical magazine *Camerawork*.<sup>533</sup> Other publications of note include a monograph of Spender's photographs for Mass-Observation, *Worktown People: photographs from northern England 1937-8*, published in 1982; followed by *Lensman*, in 1987, which covered his entire photographic career; and an extensive catalogue by Deborah Frizzell outlining Spender's contribution to the development of British documentary and photojournalism, published in 1997. In other words, the perceived neglect of Spender's Worktown photographs had been fully rectified. Significant also, however, is that in the era since Harrison's death in 1976, Spender's photographs have been printed full-frame, with titles and captions in language that is sober and reverential. This includes the

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<sup>528</sup> Historian Michael Lesy juxtaposed a collection of late nineteenth century photographs (taken by photographer Charles Van Schaick of Wisconsin) with disturbing local news reports of the same period. Michael comp Lesy and Charles Van Schaick, *Wisconsin death trip* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973).

<sup>529</sup> Ian Jeffrey and David Mellor, *Real Thing: An Anthology of British Photographs 1840-1950* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1975). *The Real Thing* exhibition was also held at Bolton Art Gallery, 9 August-13 September 1975.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>531</sup> Spender and Mellor. One of the photographs, 'Washday', showing a washing line strung across the back street, is Ashington and not Bolton.

<sup>532</sup> By this time, of course, Harrison had been killed in a road accident (January 1976).

<sup>533</sup> Picton et al.

third edition of *The Pub and the People*, published in 1987, for which the hitherto cropped images are shown full-frame.<sup>534</sup>

### **Digitisation and the Bolton Worktown archive**

Bolton Museum and Art Gallery holds the main set of Spender's Worktown photographs and negatives.<sup>535</sup> As with other photographic archives, the images have been digitised and are available to view online via the Bolton Worktown website. There are, however, significant financial costs in digitising an archive<sup>536</sup> and the cost per photograph can mean that only a selection of images from a collection can be included.<sup>537</sup> Even so, in the case of Spender's Worktown photographs, it would appear that most have been digitised and are available on the Bolton Worktown website, although there are some glaring omissions.<sup>538</sup> On the website, categorisation of the 827 Worktown photographs by Spender is by division into 14 sections.<sup>539</sup> Of these, 130 photographs are of Blackpool, 25 are from Spender's 'Return Journey' to Bolton, which he made in 1983, along with 42 photographs taken by Spender for Mass-Observation in Ashington, in 1938. Hence, there are 630 photographs of Bolton by Spender from 1937-38, which are freely available to view.<sup>540</sup> This is many times more than the number of Spender's photographs included in the *Worktown People* publication,<sup>541</sup> in which the images are divided into just eight sections.<sup>542</sup> The most important development, however, is that as a result of digitisation, as would be the case with other virtual archives, in accessing the Worktown collection viewers encounter the 'photographs as digital images on a computer screen through an institution's portal, rather than as materials in the archive'.<sup>543</sup> In

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<sup>534</sup> Mass-Observation, *The Pub and the people: a worktown study*, 3rd ed. (London: The Cresset Library, 1987). There are nine of Spender's photographs in the third edition of *The Pub and the People*; eight are. Five of these photographs from the Worktown collection were used in the second edition of *The Pub and the People*, but were not shown full-frame, including 'The Vault' photograph. See *The pub and the people: a worktown study*, Plate 7.

<sup>535</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Worktown Mass Observation archives".

<sup>536</sup> Elizabeth Shepard, "Digitizing a Photographic Collection in a Midsize Repository: A Case Study," *Journal of Archival Organization* 2, no. 4 (2005): 72-73.

<sup>537</sup> Martin Lister, 'Photography in the age of electronic imaging'. In: Wells, 343.

<sup>538</sup> At least 15 of Spender's photographs of Bolton, which are included in *Worktown People*, are missing from the website collection. In particular, Spender's The Vault; see Illustration 4.1.

<sup>539</sup> The sections are: Blackpool, Ceremonies, Graffiti, Industry, Leisure, Observers, Politics, Pub, Religion, Shopping, Sport, Street, Work and Ashington.

<sup>540</sup> Although tenuously related to Worktown, two of the photographs in the Politics section are of East Fulham, London.

<sup>541</sup> To date *Worktown People* contains the largest number of Spender's Worktown photographs. See Spender and Mulford.

<sup>542</sup> The sections are: Street Life, Work, Sport, Parks, Drinking, Elections, Blackpool, and Funeral.

<sup>543</sup> Martha A. Sandweiss, "Image and Artifact: The Photograph as Evidence in the Digital Age," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (2007): 197.

other words, unlike the original photographic prints, they take on a different material form.<sup>544</sup> All of which raises concerns with the Worktown photographs over the loss or change in materiality through digitisation and the scope for the host institution to influence photographic meaning.

While a digital photograph can be made with a digital camera, the interest here is with the digitisation of an analogue photograph (film-based) through a process of scanning in order to translate it into a numerical code that can be interpreted by a computer and viewed on a screen.<sup>545</sup> Hence the digital images made from Spender's Worktown photographs comprise pixels arranged on a grid and which are amenable to significant manipulation. An implication of photographic digitisation is that the location of photographic production 'shifts from the chemical darkroom to the "electronic darkroom" of the computer'.<sup>546</sup> In other words, using widely available software once digitised such 'images can be changed by altering, adding or removing pixels'.<sup>547</sup> Essentially, given the nature of digital technologies, for the producer or the copyright owner there is unprecedented control over a digital image relative to an analogue image.<sup>548</sup> In fact, if there were already concerns about truth with analogue photography, then these have been exacerbated following the development of digital technology. These concerns with photographic truth and falsity are part of an epistemological debate in which, as Terry Barrett suggests, there are two major theoretical stances; one of which is realist and the other conventionalist.<sup>549</sup>

Realism, like positivism, assumes an external reality that can be 'neutrally observed by a detached observer'.<sup>550</sup> From this way of thinking a camera is a scientific instrument that can 'itemise objective truths'; hence, relative to other media, photographs have 'an aura of credibility'.<sup>551</sup> By contrast, conventionalist theory argues that realist theory ignores conventions. From this perspective pictorial realism is 'culturally bound'.<sup>552</sup> On a more practical level, for realists digital photography compromises the 'reality base' of photography

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<sup>544</sup> As binary code stored on a server.

<sup>545</sup> Barrett, 160.

<sup>546</sup> Martin Lister, 'Photography in the age of electronic imaging', in: Wells, 318.

<sup>547</sup> Barrett, 161.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid., 166.

whereas for conventionalists it is just another way of producing ‘expressive photographs’.<sup>553</sup> However, initial concerns over the loss of veracity from digital photography have been ‘effectively demolished’.<sup>554</sup> The fact is that even from the earliest days, darkroom editing or other forms of manipulation have been integral to photography.<sup>555</sup>

Given the emphasis on digitising photographic collections, the implications for researchers requiring access to the original (material) documents are not clear.<sup>556</sup> So although digitisation may bring benefits in terms of preservation, in that there is less need to handle the original photographs, nonetheless this investment in creating a virtual collection may compromise investment in the long-term preservation of the source material.<sup>557</sup> Moreover, while there are clear advantages to digitisation, as with a digital image’s capacity for endless identical reproduction and greatly enhanced accessibility through the Internet for researchers and the general public; with technological change, an original format may not necessarily be sustainable in the long-term. The software necessary to interpret digitised images may cease to be available.<sup>558</sup> As a safeguard against such technological change, whereby digital media like a digitised photograph may no longer be viewable, canonical representations can be created.<sup>559</sup> This is about creating the ‘truest version of the source information, in a manner that is easily re-used by researchers’.<sup>560</sup>

As suggested earlier (see Chapter 4), since the photographic prints used by Harrison and Spender were essentially forms of data for the Worktown project (fulfilling their original ethnographic purpose, in 1937-38), they can be considered original images. More precisely, these original prints were made (from the original negatives) at the time of their intended use by Spender. Such a view of an original document is supported by the application of diplomatics to photography whereby although ‘the negative may, in fact, be "the truest record" of what was in front of the lens, it is not the document intended to convey a message

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<sup>553</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>554</sup> Martin Lister, ‘Photography in the age of electronic imaging’. In: Wells, 320-21.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>556</sup> Joanne Sassoon, ‘Photographic materiality in the age of digital reproduction’. In: Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, *Photographs objects histories: on the materiality of images* (London: Routledge, 2004), 201.

<sup>557</sup> Shepard, 79.

<sup>558</sup> Clifford Lynch, "Canonicalization: A Fundamental Tool to Facilitate Preservation and Management of Digital Information," *D-Lib Magazine* 5, no. 9 (1999), <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/september99/09lynch.html>.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid.

<sup>560</sup> RUcore, "Preservation," Rutgers University Libraries, <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/preservation/>.

to an audience'.<sup>561</sup> In other words, at 85 Davenport Street in Bolton, Spender will have shown photographic prints to Harrison and not negatives. This does not, of course, deny the idea of the photographic negative as the original from which endless prints can be made; albeit inexact duplicates.<sup>562</sup> However, from the perspective of authentication (i.e. diplomatics), a negative is only a draft; opening up the possibility of 'multiple original photographic documents [...] based on the same image, but made at various times, for diverse purposes and different audiences'.<sup>563</sup> From this it follows that meaning is more closely related to context than content or form, with digitisation as another 'stage in the life of the photographic object'.<sup>564</sup> Hence, while the original context for the Worktown photographs was as data for Mass-Observation, this has now been superseded by a digitised context in which the images can be viewed online by anyone with access to the Internet.

For the digitisation of archival photographs, scans from negatives are preferred by host institutions to scans from prints; this is because more detail can be recovered.<sup>565</sup> Moreover, negatives have a significantly higher dynamic range than photographic paper, with the best possible scan from a negative containing 'more information than the best possible scan from one of its prints'.<sup>566</sup> By implication, therefore, the scan from a negative will look different than the scan from a print.<sup>567</sup> Added to this, an original print may have been cropped or creatively manipulated in the wet darkroom.<sup>568</sup> Indeed, the techniques of digitisation make it possible for researchers to see detail 'that the original photographers never saw'.<sup>569</sup> In the case of the Worktown photographs, the digitised images from the negatives appear to be full-frame, bearing the same aspect ratio of a 35 mm negative. Moreover, it seems likely that many of the negatives may not hitherto have been printed.<sup>570</sup> Significantly, aside from content, the digital reproduction of the Worktown photographs is such that the images are

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<sup>561</sup> Joan M. Schwartz, "'We Make Our Tools and Our Tools Make Us': Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats," *Archivaria* 40 (1995): 46.

<sup>562</sup> Joanne Sassoon, 'Photographic materiality in the age of digital reproduction'. In: Edwards and Hart, 191.

<sup>563</sup> Schwartz, 46.

<sup>564</sup> Joanne Sassoon, 'Photographic materiality in the age of digital reproduction'. In: Edwards and Hart, 192.

<sup>565</sup> Daniel M. German and Jaume Rigau, "Improving scans of black and white photographs by recovering the print maker's artistic intent," *Computers & Graphics* 33, no. 4 (2009): 509.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>567</sup> It is also the case that in the digital darkroom, scanned photographs (negatives or prints) can be cropped, enlarged, or enhanced to reveal (or even conceal) details.

<sup>568</sup> Typical wet darkroom manipulation includes dodging and burning to, respectively, lighten or darken parts of the photograph.

<sup>569</sup> Sandweiss, 198.

<sup>570</sup> Therefore, even if it were desirable to digitally reconstruct photographs as envisioned by the photographer, this may not be possible if, for example, no original print exists for a particular negative.



shown in a standardised form whereby print borders and the reverse side of original prints (assuming they exist) are not shown.<sup>571</sup> Moreover, the presentation of the images by broad themes on the website imposes a logical structure on the Worktown photographic collection that does not match Harrison's idiosyncratic approach to organising the research (see Chapter 3). This, together with the removal of material characteristics (through digitisation) of the original photographs, will have implications for 'the way photographs are understood'.<sup>572</sup> Specifically, original viewing contexts are lost and attention is focussed on the surface content of the images.<sup>573</sup> At the same time, however, it is argued by Barbara Natanson that 'the digitization of historical images promotes both a broader and deeper analysis'.<sup>574</sup> In particular, this suggests that having access to the Worktown photographs on the Internet, as would be the case with other historic images, provides researchers with the opportunity for a closer scrutiny of archival material than would otherwise be practicable.<sup>575</sup> For example, images can be significantly enlarged, compared side-by-side or even copied and downloaded.<sup>576</sup> Nonetheless, apart from the convenience and greatly enhanced accessibility to the Worktown photographs, by necessity images are viewed through an institutionally administered portal that will reflect the host institution's style of documentation.<sup>577</sup> Indeed, as Joanne Sassoon argues, since digitisation puts the emphasis on content as opposed to context, institutions are effectively 'framing the very way we understand historical source material'.<sup>578</sup> A more sanguine interpretation, however, is that instead of this representing a break, the digital archive is simply another variety of information organisation on a continuum.

Ideally, the host institution of a digital archive, as with Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, would provide viewers with 'thorough contextual and content-based documentation of photographs'.<sup>579</sup> In this respect, within its own interpretative framework, the Bolton Worktown website provides basic but contextual information on Mass-Observation, including its purpose, ways of working and public reaction, along with brief biographies of the founding members (Harrison, Jennings and Madge) and two of the Worktown observers, the

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<sup>571</sup> All of the images appear to be full-frame scans of negatives.

<sup>572</sup> Joanne Sassoon, 'Photographic materiality in the age of digital reproduction'. In: Edwards and Hart, 194.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>574</sup> Barbara Orbach Natanson, "Worth a Billion Words? Library of Congress Pictures Online," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (2007): 106.

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>576</sup> Clearly, however, downloaded Worktown images can potentially exist in other contexts.

<sup>577</sup> Joanne Sassoon, 'Photographic materiality in the age of digital reproduction'. In: Edwards and Hart, 197.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>579</sup> *Ibid.*

artist Trevelyan and photographer Spender. However, the captions supporting the images are essentially new (e.g. they differ from those provided in earlier publications). And no information is provided on the materiality of the source material for the digital images. For example, no indication is provided on the nature of the source material (whether from a negative or a print), its condition or size. Similarly, no information is provided on the resolution of the scans and whether the images have been cropped or manipulated or 'cleaned' in any way in the 'digital darkroom'.<sup>580</sup> Moreover, the images appear homogenised and uniform both by exposure and tonal range. This evident decontextualisation of the photographs will be considered in more detail in the following section.

### **The Worktown photographs: Commodities or nostalgia?**

More than seventy-five years since their taking, and far removed from their original purpose, Spender's Worktown photographs now have a more ambiguous role as pictures of the past. The advent of digital photography has led to a surfeit of photographic images; however, for a variety of reasons images of the 1930s are comparatively rare.<sup>581</sup> Susan Sontag argues that 'rehabilitating old photographs, by finding new contexts for them, has become a major book industry'.<sup>582</sup> A similar sentiment is expressed by Samuel who contends that 'in the 1970s, the taste for historical photographs took root, leading both to the discovery of the work of local photographers, and to the animation of the meticulously preserved, but hitherto unused, caches in the public libraries'. One recent expression of this is the creation of the Bolton Worktown website, which declares that the archive is 'a unique historical document of everyday life in Bolton'.<sup>583</sup> To be sure, the Bolton of 2017 is very different to the town photographed by Spender in the 1930s for Mass-Observation. Amongst many other changes, the textile industry that employed thousands in the 1930s has long since collapsed; and while cotton mills still dominate the Bolton skyline, they have been put to other uses, and a majority of these buildings have been demolished along with more than half of the related terraced houses.<sup>584</sup> Moreover, scarcely anyone photographed by Spender in the 1930s will still be alive. In effect the Worktown photographs provide significant (if not unique)

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<sup>580</sup> Photo-editing software can be used to remove or reduce dust, scratches, stains and other defects that appear on old and damaged photographs and negatives. However, several of the Worktown images on the website are clearly damaged and no obvious attempt has been made at restoration.

<sup>581</sup> Included here are the limits of technology at that time, cost and the deterioration or loss of negatives and prints.

<sup>582</sup> Susan Sontag, *On photography* (London: Penguin, 2002), 71.

<sup>583</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Worktown Mass Observation archives".

<sup>584</sup> The Greater Manchester Archaeological Unit, "Bolton Urban Historic Landscape Characterisation," (Manchester: The University of Manchester, 2008), 18.

historical evidence of a changed world occupied by people long since deceased. But these same images could also be mobilised to comment on the present.

In their current manifestations, especially in their online digital format, the Worktown photographs can be seen from two contrasting but overlapping perspectives; these are as commodified historical images in an electronic database or as thirties nostalgia. The idea of commodification (meaning to subject to market exchange), is an essentially pejorative perspective that can be linked to the recent transformation of the Worktown photographs as marketable commodities.<sup>585</sup> A useful starting point here is Robert Hewison's *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline*; whereby in the late 1980s, 'heritage was a structure largely imposed from above to capture a middle-class nostalgia for the past as a golden age in the context of a climate of decline'.<sup>586</sup> This is about the commodification of the past, 'packaged as a cultural commercial product'.<sup>587</sup> For Hewison, this 'manufactured heritage' is now sold by 'those cultural institutions that can no longer rely on government funds as they did in the past'.<sup>588</sup> While economic necessity seems plausible as an explanation for the proliferation of heritage museums that started in the 1980s,<sup>589</sup> of greater significance here is the parallel 'willingness of museums to publish their photographs and to offer their archives as picture libraries'.<sup>590</sup> On the latter, while not as commercial as a mainstream photographic agency,<sup>591</sup> and notwithstanding the public engagement remit,<sup>592</sup> elements of the commodification of the Worktown photographs are self-evident from the structure and presentation of images on the Bolton Worktown website.<sup>593</sup> Significantly, Bolton Council owns the copyright for the Worktown photographs; and information on commercial or non-commercial reproduction of the Worktown photographs is provided through the 'contact us'

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<sup>585</sup> Dave Beech, *Art and value: art's economic exceptionalism in classical, neoclassical and Marxist economics* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).

<sup>586</sup> Robert Hewison, *The heritage industry: Britain in a climate of decline* (London: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>587</sup> Gaby Porter, "The Economy of Truth: Photography in Museums," *Ten*.81989.

<sup>588</sup> Hewison, 9.

<sup>589</sup> Examples are the Wigan Pier Heritage Museum (no longer extant) and the Merseyside Maritime Museum.

<sup>590</sup> Porter.

<sup>591</sup> A paradigm of this is the Bettman Archive (now owned by Corbis). See: Estelle Blaschke, "Making History a Slightly Profitable Thing: The Bettmann Archive and the Commodification of Images," *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation* 30, no. 3 (2014).

<sup>592</sup> Museums Libraries and Archives Council, "Leading Museums: a Vision and Strategic Action Plan for English Museums," (Birmingham: Museums Libraries and Archives Council, 2009).

<sup>593</sup> It is also possible to purchase some of the Worktown images as postcards or posters.

section of the website.<sup>594</sup> Moreover, all the images are clearly watermarked as ‘Copyright Bolton Council’.<sup>595</sup>

The commodification of images through photographic agencies and picture libraries occurred long before the advent of digitisation. Estelle Blaschke argues that the ‘establishment and management of photographic collections for commercial purposes’ can be traced to the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>596</sup> A principal concern posed by Blaschke is that the institution that sits between the production and the distribution of images is likely to be more of an agent than a simple intermediary.<sup>597</sup> Drawing on the example of the Bettman Archive, which was established in the 1930s, Blaschke takes the view that important pre-conditions for the commodification of images are de-contextualization and the reduction to keywords. A central element here is the extraction of a thematic keyword from the image (e.g. shop, dog etc.) with information on technical characteristics treated as secondary to the exploitation of the images and included merely as part of the picture caption.<sup>598</sup> In many respects, the design and usability of the Bolton Worktown website’s ‘Photo Collection’ section are analogous to Blaschke’s description of the Bettman Archive, with the repurposing of ‘images into viable products’.<sup>599</sup> For instance, the Worktown website presents images via a tag-searchable database<sup>600</sup> and scant information is provided on materiality and original purpose (see earlier). Other than for a brief caption and related subject tags there is hardly any guidance for viewers on aesthetic value or meaning that could be attributed to the images.<sup>601</sup> Although in many places the original sequencing of the photographs appears to have been preserved there is no obvious attempt at a chronological ordering.<sup>602</sup> They are presented on the screen in their various sections as thumbnail images in the form of virtual contact sheets. The emphasis appears to be on the efficient retrieval of images on the basis of classification and

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<sup>594</sup> It is stated on the website that for commercial reproduction ‘Details of our fees will be given on request’. See: Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Worktown Mass Observation archives".

<sup>595</sup> See, for example, Illustration 3.2.

<sup>596</sup> Blaschke.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid.

<sup>598</sup> Ibid., 231-32.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>600</sup> In the first instance images are classified into discrete themes. Within themes, however, tags are presented alongside images that run across themes. For example, there are four tags related to Illustration 3.3; these are ‘buses’, ‘hats’, ‘pedestrians’, and ‘shops’. See: Bolton Library and Museum Services, "Humphrey Spender: Bank Street".

<sup>601</sup> However, as highlighted in Chapter 2, the role of photography in Mass-Observation has never been fully clarified.

<sup>602</sup> Although the date when the photograph was taken is usually included.

keywords.<sup>603</sup> As a consequence, the images are ‘ready to acquire new meanings and contexts’.<sup>604</sup> Significantly, all of Spender’s Worktown photographs are given equal status on the website. For example, there is invariably no mention of Spender’s preferences for a particular image or other background information.<sup>605</sup> More generally, any information that is provided tends to emphasise content, especially location.<sup>606</sup> However, there are instances where the supporting information is contextual, which contributes towards a better understanding of the image; albeit from a given perspective. As with the photographs of workers taken inside an apparently unidentified mill; the accompanying descriptions explain that they were ‘staged’ and it is conspicuously highlighted that the owners of the mill, the Barlow family, helped to fund Mass-Observation in Bolton.<sup>607</sup>

An alternative perspective of the Worktown photographs is of them as a source and trigger for nostalgia in the local community. The contention being that some of the most recent publications<sup>608</sup> and the website for the Worktown photographs<sup>609</sup> have parallels with the deindustrialisation genres of nostalgia discussed by Tim Strangleman.<sup>610</sup> A salient theme here is ‘smokestack nostalgia,’ which can be interpreted pejoratively as an uncritical or sentimental view of the past; typically, this would be in the form of coffee table books of abandoned industrial plant and mills. In the case of the Worktown photographs, particularly on the Bolton Museum and Library website, there is no obvious questioning of the conditions under which people lived. Viewers are invited to see a collection of ostensibly innocuous

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<sup>603</sup> Relative to a typical photographic archive the online Worktown collection has the merit of being exclusively the work of one photographer. So this is not simply a collection of photographs of Bolton in the 1930s, but *Spender’s* photographs of Bolton in the 1930s. Hence while the reduction to themes and subject tags necessarily decontextualises, this is restricted to image content and not the photographer.

<sup>604</sup> Blaschke, 231.

<sup>605</sup> There are a few exceptions, however. Two of the more developed descriptions accompanying photographs are of the ‘Man’s Hair Specialist’, which is described as one of Humphrey Spender’s favourites, and the ‘Quack Medicine Stall’ (one of a sequence of eight such images), and for which there is a related textual observation by Spender. See: Bolton Library and Museum Services, “Worktown Mass Observation archives”.

<sup>606</sup> Most images are accompanied by a map on which the location for the particular photograph is pinpointed. In those instances where the location is not known, the website invites suggestions from viewers.

<sup>607</sup> A further example of supportive contextual information is that which accompanies the images on graffiti: ‘Mass-Observation were interested in graffiti which they saw as being a form of expressive art’. See: Bolton Library and Museum Services, “Worktown Mass Observation archives”.

<sup>608</sup> Spender and Harrison; Spender and Mellor; Spender and Mulford.

<sup>609</sup> Bolton Library and Museum Services, “Worktown Mass Observation archives”.

<sup>610</sup> Tim Strangleman, ““Smokestack Nostalgia,” “Ruin Porn” or Working-Class Obituary: The Role and Meaning of Deindustrial Representation,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84, no. Special Issue -1 (2013).

images from which a surface reading gives rise to a somewhat sanitised impression of the town of Bolton in the wake of the Great Depression.<sup>611</sup>

In contrast to Hewison, Samuel has a more sanguine and less critical view of heritage. He argues that people are no more passive when viewing old photographs ‘than when reading a book [...] People do not simply “consume” images in the way in which, say, they buy a bar of chocolate’.<sup>612</sup> In a similar vein, Strangleman, while acknowledging the risk of a nostalgic interpretation of photographs, cautions against an all encompassing ‘simply nostalgia’ assessment: ‘the manifestations of smokestack nostalgia are symbols of unease in contemporary culture, viewing a relatively stable past as offering some form of fixity’.<sup>613</sup> From this, it follows that it would be too simplistic to characterise all of the interest in the various publications and websites for the Worktown photographs merely as smokestack nostalgia. Nonetheless, as Samuel cautions, alluding to his own initial uncritical approach when he first encountered historical images: ‘the “eye of history” left to itself will be at the mercy of what it sees [...] If we are not to be at the mercy of these images, and if we are to use them to construct new narratives or pursue different problematics, we need to be able to take a critical distance’.<sup>614</sup> A similar point is made by Porter who argues that museums apply particular criteria such that ‘in the photographic archive, the photograph is suspended from earlier meanings or uses in a practice which assumes that the image speaks by, and for, itself’.<sup>615</sup> By implication, therefore, regardless of whether the Worktown photographic archive is understood as a commercial asset or as heritage, in the absence of a critical reading, there is a risk that such images may invoke an imagined past.<sup>616</sup> Otherwise, for example, the hardship of Bolton life in the 1930s, with high unemployment and related poverty, could easily be understated or even negated by a superficial reading of the Worktown images.

## Conclusion

The Worktown photographs have had several trajectories. In the early period the photographs were largely ignored until a limited selection was included in Mass-Observation’s *Britain Revisited* in 1961. This delay in dissemination of the photographs by more than two decades

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<sup>611</sup> Although not stated, by implication, given the emphasis on local geography and requests for comments and memories, the immediate audience will be existing or former residents of Bolton.

<sup>612</sup> Samuel, 271.

<sup>613</sup> Strangleman, 33.

<sup>614</sup> Samuel, 328-29.

<sup>615</sup> Porter.

<sup>616</sup> Strangleman, 28.

has never been satisfactorily explained. However, Gollancz's fear of litigation and corroborative evidence from Harrison suggest that libel and not a shortage of funds was the main reason for their delayed publication in Mass-Observation literature.

The reproduction of the Worktown photographs to the mid-1970s is characterised by minor to drastic manipulation. In particular, Harrison's heavy-handed editing in *Britain in the 30s*, and disturbing recontextualisation, is self-evident. Had things rested there it seems likely that the status of the photographs would have been permanently compromised. However, following the establishment of a Mass-Observation archive at Sussex University, academic interest in the Worktown material, including the photographs, was inevitable.

Digitisation of Spender's Worktown photographs has facilitated public access to almost the entire collection. However, the process of digitisation means that the photographs acquire a different material form, with implications for the way they are understood. In this respect the interpretive framework of the host institution, Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, has decontextualised the Worktown photographs (although not the original prints). Moreover, given the financial pressures facing cultural institutions in the public sector, and copyright of the Worktown photographs held by Bolton Museum and Art Gallery, there is a risk that the portal by which the photographs are accessed fosters a more commercial orientation. Inevitably host institutions in the public sector must strike a difficult balance between commerce, heritage and a critical reading of the past.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

We shall be differently aware, we shall see all things new  
Not as a craze or a surprise, but hard, naked, true.<sup>617</sup>

For good reason, the approach adopted in this work has been to understand the Mass-Observation project as fundamentally anthropological, and the Worktown photographs as data within this general project, while being alert to their afterlives which exceed the original intentions of their maker. Put simply, Harrison wanted to study the ‘cannibals of Lancashire’ much as he had done in Malekula.<sup>618</sup> Nonetheless, such a perspective does not deny the value of the Worktown photographs as documentary images, comparable with other work undertaken in the 1930s. However, while the candid photography employed was intended to comply with Harrison’s advocacy of participant observation, the absence of interaction or involvement with the people of Bolton fell short of the functional penetration promoted by Oeser and practised in Marienthal.<sup>619</sup>

The use of photography distinguished the Worktown project from contemporary anthropology and shares some of Bateson and Meade’s groundbreaking use of visual data for their classic study, *Balinese Character*.<sup>620</sup> However, the lack of supporting information will have contributed to the problem of polysemy making it difficult for Harrison to analyse and interpret the photographs as data. Hence, interpretation of the photographs rests almost entirely on a surface reading. Apart from post hoc attempts to establish basic information for visual analysis, the intention behind the photographs is typically unclear. These methodological problems run counter to the argument that Harrison did not know how to analyse the photographs. It was instead the result of not following an appropriate methodology in the first place. Other than for anthropometric or similar record photography, unless accompanied by fieldnotes photographs have only limited value in anthropological research.

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<sup>617</sup> Charles Madge, “Instructions, V,” in Robin Skelton, *Poetry of the Thirties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), 84.

<sup>618</sup> Harrison, *World within. A Borneo story*, 158.

<sup>619</sup> Jahoda et al.

<sup>620</sup> Bateson and Mead.



Bolton, with its high unemployment and bleak environment, was a challenge for Spender's metropolitan, sensibilities. What Spender brought, however, was experience of the kind of photography required by Harrison. Even so, while he may have wanted to recruit a less-qualified photographer, this will have been problematic given that proletarian photography in Britain had failed to develop. This was unfortunate, since Spender's status coupled with his lack of involvement with the people of Bolton implies a gaze from someone with a privileged background spying and imposing middle-class norms on the less fortunate. Moreover, on those occasions when Spender's camera was deliberately concealed, his photography verged on the clandestine and could be described as excessively intrusive or underhand. At the same time, viewed from Spender's perspective, Harrison's stipulation that he was to take unsolicited photographs of the people of Bolton (often on private property) meant exposure to the risk of physical threat and abuse. Hence, it is debatable as to whether Harrison's approach to visual anthropology was justifiable as a legitimate form of data generation. Even so, there is no denying the insight into life in the 1930s that can be gleaned from the resulting images.

The most recent trajectory of the Worktown photographs is as digitised images that can be conveniently viewed through the portal of Bolton Museum and Art Gallery. Initial concerns that similar transformations could give rise to digital manipulation have proven groundless, not least since darkroom manipulation has been a feature of photography since the earliest days. Of more specific concern, however, is that the interpretive framework of the host institution in Bolton has decontextualised the Worktown photographs. Digitisation has given the images a new material form. This new way of viewing the images will have implications for the way that they are understood and enhance their status as commodities. This commodification, in which the images are accessed via a tag-searchable database, does pave the way for a more commercial orientation of the archive.

In spite of digitisation, the original Worktown photographs can still be accessed for research. This is important since digitised images will have different characteristics and lack other information that can be gleaned from physical prints. The Worktown archive provides a valuable resource for the researcher, especially given the paucity of supporting evidence elsewhere on choices made in the creation, use and dissemination of the Worktown photographs. For example, the reverse side of several prints provides useful information on

cropping for photographs intended for publication, which can give insights into the mindset of the editor.

Since the mid-70s the Worktown photographs have been shown full-frame and with succinct, factual captions. Prior to this, Harrison's excessive editing and subjective commentary allowed him to project his own meaning onto the published, Worktown photographs. This is evident in 'The Fifty-Second Week: Impressions of Blackpool' and *Britain in the 30's*.<sup>621</sup> Based on these and other examples of Harrison's editing, it is likely that Spender's Worktown photographs would not have achieved the recognition that they now enjoy. Equally, Harrison's heavy handedness can be seen as indicative of how the photographs would have been used had the decision been made to include them in Mass-Observation's initial publications

On the failure to use the Worktown photographs in Mass-Observation publications, Harrison offered two explanations: either there was not enough money or because of the risk of libel they could not be published until sufficient time had passed. A definitive answer between these explanations is not possible but there is strong corroborating evidence that Gollancz would have had no hesitation in blocking publication where risk could not be mitigated. Given the publicity surrounding Mass-Observation such risk would have been exacerbated, as any photographs included in their publications would have been scrutinised by the people of Bolton. An alternative and more intractable perspective is that Harrison felt that the photographs failed to reveal his version of life in Britain. As attractive as this explanation is, given the severity of his editing of the Worktown photographs in *Britain in the 30's* and other publications, Harrison could easily have manipulated the images to say whatever he wanted.

It is evident that the original purpose of the Worktown photography, as visual anthropology, has largely been neglected. This is partly understandable given the paucity of information on the research strategy followed by Harrison and Spender in Bolton. However, the default of seeing the Worktown photographs as documentary images understates Mass-Observation's potential or actual contribution to anthropological photography or visual research generally. Hence, there is a need now to focus research on the original purpose behind the Worktown photography as formulated by Harrison. This reassessment will entail revisiting the

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<sup>621</sup> Harrison, "The Fifty-Second Week: Impressions of Blackpool."; Spender and Harrison.

photographs and related material in the Mass-Observation and Worktown archives from the perspective of anthropology. Realignment with Harrison's original intentions will restore the integrity of this aspect of Mass-Observation's visual research. The alternative would be to continue viewing Spender's Worktown photographs as somehow separate and part of a different project. This study, in attempting a broader view of the Worktown photography, from origins to the present day, has only partly met such an investigation. Hence, while it provides a useful starting point in such an endeavour, it can only be seen as a preliminary work in a much larger project.

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