The Private Diary and Public History Transcript

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In 2009 the Wellcome Collection held an exhibition titled Identity: Eight Rooms, Nine Lives. One of the eight rooms was the Pepys’ Room, which displayed pages from diaries through history – for example, the seventeenth-century scientist Robert Hooke using a Pisces symbol to mark every occasion he ejaculated; a Boy Scout diary from the 1930s with the single entry, “We had wolf cubs and learnt to skip”; Tony Benn recounting a dream about making a conference speech in only his underpants; and the diary of Clive Wearing, a BBC producer and gifted musician who had suffered a rare form of encephalitis that left him with the inability to form new memories, and who recorded his life as a repetitive series of awakenings from a coma, constantly scoring through previous entries that he had no recollection of writing. The room’s centrepiece was a streaming video of the confessional chair of the “Diary Room”, in which housemates talked “privately” to Big Brother while also being broadcast to viewers. This exhibition suggested that the diary was a capacious, strange and uncategorisable sort of text, with no two people’s idea of it being quite the same.

In recent years, the diary of the private citizen has been a particularly fertile source for historians. Diaries bring together a range of current interests in cultural and social history: the emergence of modern ideas of selfhood, the recovery of overlooked or marginalised lives (particularly those of women, who have often been diligent diarists), and the history of everyday, domestic and private life. Among public historians, Juliet Gardiner, Virginia Nicholson, David Kynaston and others have made extensive use of the diaries of ordinary British citizens in a new kind of “intimate history” of the recent past full of vivid detail and human interest, inspired by a sense, as Nicholson puts it, that “the personal and idiosyncratic reveal more about the past than the generic and comprehensive”. In this lecture I am going to explore the history of British diary keeping since the early twentieth century and some of the ways this diary-keeping habit was encouraged by newspapers, diaries, manufacturers and other media, and I am going to discuss the more recent ways in which these diaries have been imagined as compelling forms of evidence. I want to argue that the nature of private diaries as inherently opaque texts means that they can elucidate but also usefully complicate our understandings of the wider histories of which they form a part.

The exact extent of diary keeping, which is an inherently private and often secret activity, will always remain unknown. Diaries are part of that vast amount of unpublished, mostly hand-written writing by ordinary people, most of which will probably never be made public but which we can assume must have proliferated in the last hundred years or so as literacy rates have risen. The circumstantial evidence does suggest that, in the first half of the last century, more people, and from a wider social range, began to keep diaries. One indication is that more diaries were sold - in 1900, the leading firm, Charles Letts, sold just under a quarter of a million diaries a year, and by 1936 this had risen to three million - although of course, not all diary keepers would have written in these commercial diaries and many who bought them would have kept them simply for appointments.

The new machinery of daily-produced mass culture, such as radio broadcasts and popular newspapers, also often discussed diary writing, advising their readerships or audiences about its art, purpose and etiquette. A recurring theme in these discussions was the extent to which an ordinary, private life might be (or might not be) interesting enough to record. “When a man comes before the Recording Angel it isn’t going to be the sins that he has committed that will worry him; it will be the utter futility of the way he spent his days,” concluded one newspaper article. Others, though, insisted that these mundane details were precisely what a diary should concern itself with, that it was a “horrible and shameful admission” to let your life “pass into oblivion without a word or a sign”. The popular novelist Clemence Dane wrote: “It seems odd that we should have so poor a memory of our passionate forgotten selves. Our lives are serial novels, but we have mislaid the back numbers”.

“Nobody wants to read other people’s reflections on life and religion and politics, but the routine of their day, properly recorded, is always interesting, and will become more so as conditions change with the years,” wrote Evelyn Waugh in a Daily Mail article titled “One Way to Immortality”. “There is no one in the country whose life, properly recorded, would not make a thrilling book.” The lives of “ordinary people” – a phrase which, according to Raphael Samuel, was mainly a coinage of the interwar years – were becoming more visible in an age of mass democratisation and mass literacy. But there was still some uncertainty about whether their lives were noteworthy and whether it was even self-indulgent to write about a life that had no contact with public events or important people.

The Labour MP and peace campaigner Arthur Ponsonby published several popular annotated anthologies of British diarists in the interwar years as well as biographies of John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys. He often spoke on BBC radio about diaries, and was a great proselytiser for the idea that ordinary lives were worth recording. Ponsonby argued that private citizens’ diaries were “human documents of peculiar interest” and potentially more valuable than those of eminent people, because they allowed us to “enter into the trivial pleasures and petty miseries of daily life – the rainy day, the blunt razor, the new suit, the domestic quarrel, the bad night, the twinge of toothache, the fall from a horse”. Ponsonby intended his anthologies and broadcasts to encourage the diary writer, believing that keeping a diary was “within the reach of every human being who put pen to paper”.

The Private Diary and Public History

Professor Joe Moran

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Other diaries discovered published in the interwar years – such as James Woodforde's The Diary of a Country Parson and the Victorian clergyman Francis Kilvert's diaries – helped to validate and re-enchant the routines of daily life. Popular, fictionalised accounts of quotidian life also mimicked the diary form through their serial publication in newspapers or magazines, such as E.M. Delafield’s Diary of a Provincial Lady (1930) which began as a series in Time & Tide in 1929; and Jan Struther’s Mrs Miniver, which first appeared in The Times in 1937 and in book form in 1939, written in the third person but with the form and pace of a journal. These books were affirmations of the domestic and social routines of a certain kind of upper-middle-class woman, either lightly comic in the case of Delafield or lightly lyrical in the case of Struther, and they further reinforced the sense that this sort of ordinariness was worthy of daily witness.

A key chapter of Mrs Miniver begins on Twelfth Night with the heroine dithering over whether to buy a beautiful new diary in green lizard-skin at the extortionate price of 7s. 6d. “An engagement book,” she believes, “is the most important of all those small adjuncts to life, that tribe of humble familiars which jog along beside one from year’s end to year’s end, apparently trivial, but momentous by reason of their terrible intimacy.” For Mrs Miniver, the key consideration when choosing a diary is how much space it gives to the days – “the units which mattered most, being divided from each other by the astounding phenomenon of losing and regaining consciousness”. A fortnight of days per double page is too many, she feels; a week is just right.

Virginia Woolf also recognised that the physical form of a diary, and how much space it gave to days, could constrain what one wrote. In her 1922 novel Jacob’s Room, Clara Durrant begins writing a diary entry “but Mr Letts allows little space in his shilling diaries. Clara was not the one to encroach upon Wednesday. Humblest, most candid of women!” Woolf saw her own diary as a “dear old red-covered book” that could offer material validation of her past life and the continuity of her personality in the face of her worsening depressions and the deepening international crisis. She would often refer to the physical object of her diary in its text, seeing the individual volumes as creating narrative beginnings and end stops in her life. She would cover her diaries with wrapping paper with striking print designs made by the Woolfs’ own Hogarth Press, and she had a penchant for writing in different colours of ink, often mentioning her fascination with fountain pens in the diaries.

Woolf’s interest in the material culture of diary keeping was typical of this period. As Michèle Barrett and Peter Stallybrass have recently argued, it has been common for historians to treat handwriting and printing as distinct from each other, when in fact in our daily activities “printing and writing constantly interact” and well into the twentieth century there was an “explosion of printed forms designed for completion by hand”. Two of the twentieth century’s best-sellers of print culture were the wall-calendar and the diary, both of them “designed to organize and shape manuscript culture. They elicit manuscript, encouraging us to write down future meetings, past events, addresses and telephone numbers – subject always to the material space provided by the organization of the printed page.” The major diary manufacturers in the first half of the century - Charles Letts, Collins, John Walker and Co. and Iliffe - sought to create covetable products with covers in exotic leathers like crush morocco or crocodile skin, gilt foil corners and marbled inside covers. But the main innovation in diary manufacture in the first half of the century, a result of growing market segmentation, was the specialist diary, an extension of the schoolgirl's and schoolboy's diaries first published at the end of the Victorian era. By the 1930s there were thousands of these specialised diaries, with Letts alone publishing over 400, aimed at scouts, motorists, poultry-keepers, wireless amateurs, racing-pigeon owners, bowls players and so on.

All the major diary firms employed teams of researchers to produce data for their preliminary pages: information about the rising and setting of the sun, the phases and eclipses of the moon and more random facts about the length of a solar year or the average speed of a snail. The purpose of a lot of this data was ritualistic rather than instructive: for instance, many diaries still had tide tables, which were of vital importance to the city merchants who bought the first Letts diaries in the early nineteenth century as they awaited the arrival of ships, but mostly redundant by the twentieth century; the notices commonly included about law sitting and dining terms, and Oxford and Cambridge university terms, were useless to the majority of diarists; and much of the ecclesiastical information about minor feast days like Septuagesima and Quinquagesima was a residue from the religious heights of the Victorian era. The eight-year-old Douglas Hurd’s Letts Schoolboy's diary for 1938 was "a formidable document bound in cloth with black loop pencil and world maps, priced one shilling and sixpence. A long section on careers beckons its owner into the 'Indian Police' (medical and riding tests age 19-21; salary from R450 a month) or 'Banking' (salaries being at about £80 and rise, for clerks, to £400 a year). There are tables of Latin, Greek and French verbs, an essay on bicycles, a list of ocean liners, many lists of sports records, and a page for personal memoranda. This showed that our telephone number was Pewsey 50, that I stood at four feet, six inches and weighed five stones, two pounds. Though invited, I did not record my size in collars or hats.” Diaries were conspicuously tactile objects with specific textual and visual conventions. It seems that, for those who kept diaries in these years, the palpability of the traces of a life were an important part of the ritual of diary keeping.

The social research organisation, Mass Observation – and its energetic promotion on radio and in newspapers by its founders, particularly Tom Harrisson - did much to point to the value and significance of diary keeping by private citizens in these years. Initially this was reflected in the form of the day survey its volunteers were asked to complete, with often quite detailed instructions given about what to include, such as the state of the diarist's health or striking dreams they may have had, so there would be some unity in the responses. But just before the
outbreak of war in September 1939, Mass Observation called on its volunteers to write freeform diaries with minimal direction - a pragmatic response to the fact that the organisation was expecting to have to scale itself back in wartime. The numbers of people sending in diaries fluctuated throughout the war and had dropped to 60 a month by the end of it, but nearly 500 kept diaries, of hugely varying lengths and frequency of submission, throughout the war, and a handful carried on until well after it ended.

The Mass Observation diarists were different from ordinary diarists in that they had immediate readers, of a sort. Harrisson, the organisation’s public face, even invited the London diarists to phone him and he sent notes of thanks and encouragement to all the diarists. But although they claimed to read every submission, Mass Observation’s staff made limited use of them. Anonymised extracts were occasionally published in the organisation’s monthly bulletins, and were quoted in some of its book publications. But in many cases, the staff simply filed the diaries by month, gender and surname without looking at them. As Mass Observation’s founders dispersed after the war and it became a limited company specialising in market research in 1949, it still accepted diaries but never used them in its researches. This explanation given by the teacher who gave up writing for them in 1949, after keeping a diary for nine years, is revealing:

Recently I wrote and asked for information. As I lead a very uneventful life, I wanted to know which ... items in my diaries were of use and whether anything different was desired and what could be omitted. I received a polite reply in such general terms as to constitute no answer. It was as if one man said to another in an office “What shall I say?” “Oh, keep the old girl at it, some of it may come in handy.” Soon after that I lost interest ... It was clear to me that the man who replied to me hadn’t looked at the diary I sent with my request for information.

The uncertain direction of Mass Observation’s diary project is reflected in the diary of the best known of its correspondents, the Barrow housewife Nella Last. She began her diary at the start of the war, partly because the Daily Express columnist William Hickey had argued that the Government would find Mass Observation valuable. But Nella’s diary keeping soon became just a matter of routine: she wrote it almost daily, usually late at night, in pencil on loose leaf paper, and on a Friday morning each month, on his way to work, her neighbour Mr Atkinson dropped off the parcel to Mass Observation at the post office.

Nella continued to send entries for the next three decades. For her, and for most of the diarists, Mass Observation was simply a postal address: 6 Grote’s Buildings, Blackheath, SE3 or 21 Bloomsbury Street, London, WC1. Since many Mass Observation diarists wondered about the fate of their diaries, they were naturally interested in what happened at these familiar addresses. In November 1946, on a trip to London to see her son Cliff, she visited the Bloomsbury Street offices but did not go in. The following April another diarist, Herbert Brush, was bolder. As he crossed Bloomsbury Street on the way to the British Museum, he suddenly thought he “would go and see what the office of ‘Mass-Observation’ is like, as that is where my diary-letters end up”. He went up to the fifth floor and had a brief conversation with the organisation’s then head, Bob Willcock: “I questioned the use of my diaries, as they very seldom contain any interesting matter for strangers to read. However, I was told that they were all read, and if anything of interest was there it would be found and noted.”

Last carried on until February 1966 when, aged 76, she wrote her last diary entry, wondering if her writing was ever read and “if the need for it is past now”. Last’s son resented Mass Observation for never telling its longest-serving diarist how well-written and thoughtful her contributions were. But giving this kind of feedback was not what Mass Observation did; in offering little direction but the most minimal incentive to write - an address with the possibility that the diary might be read there - it allowed each diarist to find their own voice and pace of writing and create a body of evidence that might not have existed otherwise. The wide publicity given to Mass Observation, and its sense that the experiences of ordinary people were worth recording, may also have encouraged others to take up the diary habit.

Even without Mass Observation, the Second World War, like the First, seems to have led to a sharp rise in diary keeping, although sales of actual diaries fell because of paper rationing. Total war meant that even those not fighting had their ordinary lives disrupted so they may have seemed extraordinary and worthy of note. “You’re living in days that your children will read about in their history books,” the Daily Mirror reminded its readers in 1941, urging them to keep a diary. Harold Nicolson regularly urged readers of his Spectator column to keep a diary, claiming that the diarist’s ideal audience should be “his own great-great-grandchildren at the age of twenty-five ... I often remind myself, when I write my daily diary, that whereas my great-grandson will not care a hoot what I thought on January 1st, 1942, of our prospects in Libya, he will be much interested to know what I had for dinner that evening, how much I paid for it, and by what means of locomotion I returned to my chambers ... He will want to know by what alchemy margarine-coupons were transformed into underwear, and how one moved or hesitated when the sirens screamed.”

These diary-keeping habits seem to have continued for many after the war. By the early 1950s, diary publishers reported that they had increased prewar sales by more than half. One attributed this to the fact that “in a 42-hour week, everyone has time to write in a diary, and something to write in it”. There was a growing acceptance by the middle of the century of the significance of ordinary experience, how this might be articulated through diary writing, and even how this information might be useful to future historians.

So one reason why historians are now making use of diaries from the first half of the last century may simply be
that there are a lot of them, and it has taken this long for them to be discovered and sifted, usually after the
writer’s death. As a body of evidence, diaries are hard to process because they are often long and diverse in
their subject matter, usually hand-written, and, since they are frequently written in haste, hard to decipher. It is
striking that, for the first 30 years of its life, diaries were the least used material in the Mass Observation archive.
Historians focused instead on the topic collections and file reports, because these were short, indexable and
legible. The archive still stores the diaries together by month, which means that following a single diarist through
the war might mean retrieving 150 archive boxes. As historical evidence, the diary remains stubbornly analogue.
Diaries have largely been excluded from the recent opening up of ephemeral print culture such as newspapers
and magazines to digital access, because handwritten documents cannot (yet) be searched through the
imperfect system of “Optical Character Recognition” that these archives rely on.

The most ambitious recent project to archive private diaries – the Great Diary Project, housed at the Bishopsgate
Library in the City of London – is an attempt to address this deficiency while also making a virtue of the diary’s
irreducibility to digital form. It was inaugurated in 2012 with Irving Finkel’s gift of his private collection of about
1500 diaries from the 19th and 20th centuries and has since invited members of the public to augment the
archive by depositing their own or their relatives’ diaries in it. A curator in the Department of the Middle East at
the British Museum, Finkel saw diaries as a “rescue corner for the human spirit” and believed that their
seemingly banal subject matter would be transformed by time into significance, just as the cuneiform written on
clay tablets in ancient Mesopotamia is now charged with meaning.

Being able to examine a large number of diaries in the Bishopsgate Library, as I was lucky enough to be one of
the first to do earlier this year, certainly adds richly to our understanding of diary keeping. It allows us to see
that the different functions of a diary, as a mnemonic for future appointments and as a vehicle for personal
reminiscence, often overlapped; that even in this most individualistic of genres, diarists were constrained by the
size and format of the diary itself, and the way it divided up days, but that they were also resourceful in
commandeering sections meant for accounts or general memoranda for other purposes, such as Christmas
card lists or summings-up of the year; and that diaries were personalised by their keepers with doodles, cheque
stubs, pressed leaves and bus tickets.

One teenage girl diarist whose work is deposited in the archive, writing from a private school in Cumbria in the
early 1950s, treated her Letts desk diaries as an omnium-gatherum of her life, pasting in cartoons from Ronald
Searle’s St Trinian’s series, pictures of Mario Lanza, theatre programmes and restaurant menus, as well as
adding lipstick marks and stick-figure drawings of school lacrosse matches. While examining the archive’s
diaries, you are reminded that they are marks on a page made by a person: you can see a pencil getting
gradually blunter until it is sharpened, or ink getting fainter until the cartridge is refilled, or furious crossings-out
and underlinings that reflect the mood of a moment. En masse, as Finkel puts it nicely, the diaries add up to a
sort of “mute appeal”, a sense of the weight of numerous lives lived anonymously and mundanely but
meaningfully. It is very moving to be able to witness the commitment of obscure individuals to recording the
trivial details of their lives, if only to themselves.

Since the nineteenth century, as Carolyn Steedman argues, a visit to an archive has been seen as “a
foundational and paradigmatic activity of historians”, and this “cult of the archive” has come to underpin many
historians’ sense of professional legitimacy. The archive combines the proof of intellectual labour completed with a
more emotive sense of actively possessing and resurrecting the past. This idea of the archive as a place that
preserves both an official, authoritative history and a more nebulous psychic past is exemplified in the Great
Diary Project, a public venture that is entirely concerned with the personal and intimate.

As Steedman argues, any decent historian realises the disparity between the archive’s promise to be able to
“locate, or possess that moment of origin, as the beginning of things” and the reality that what has ended up
there is the “tiny flotsam” in “the great, brown, slow-moving strandless river of Everything”. But in the Great
Diary Project, this sense of coming in halfway through the story, or of following a narrative which then peters
out without giving up its secrets, is amplified. One 17-year-old public schoolboy’s diary for 1950 is mostly
punctuated with prosaic entries (“Went to Bournemouth to get trousers etc. Very boring”) before abruptly
hinting at some serious existential crisis (“I feel really unhappy, and feel that I have worried Dad and Mother
which makes me worse… Muddle again. A terrible depression today”) before, just as abruptly, reverting to
mundanity (“My bike developed wheel wobble’). This is how private diaries often read to an outsider. Being
mainly notes to the self, they obscure as much as they explain. And since the Great Diary Project consists
almost entirely of private citizens who have for the most part left little additional public trace of their existence,
there is no way of piecing together the story forensically from elsewhere.

The Great Diary Project surely also derives some of its emotional power from the sometimes accidental way in
which the items have come to be in the collection, perhaps after being rescued from house clearances, car boot
sales or attics after the writer’s death. To a lesser extent, this sense of serendipitous survival also applies to the
Mass Observation diaries because, in the organisation’s first incarnation between the 1930s and 1960s, there
was little systematic thought given as to how they would later be used as an archive. The diaries lay unread for
two decades until the late 1960s when the historian Paul Addison discovered them, along with the rest of the
archive, “all higgledy-piggledy under layers of dust”, with jumbled-up papers in old folders with broken elastic
bands and rusted paperclips, in the basement of Mass Observation’s offices in Cromwell Road, South
In the context of twentieth-century British history, diaries can serve as a useful corrective, in showing the mentalities which have illuminated earlier periods. Yet to create the richly interdisciplinary accounts of the relationship between individual subjectivities and collective resources as they are released but as Stephen Brooke argues, it has meant that “our understanding of post-sciences in the postwar years. Contemporary historians have understandably wanted to draw on these rich statistical and quantitative data accumulated through the expanded role of government and the rise of the social sciences in this way. For the historian of Britain’s recent past, there is almost a surfeit of harder evidence, particularly of sense: they kept regular diaries.

They tended to see themselves as unusual people, distinguished by their desire to self-rhetoric about allowing ordinary people to speak for themselves, “many of the panel members did not think of monosyllabic and then lapsed irrevocably into silence. More dedicated diarists are always a self-selecting and the story of an eternal winter, populated by a strange tribe of initially loquacious people who suddenly became would have to include the vast, forgotten majority that never saw January out. This alternative account would tell the past.

Diaries, it was assumed, were a peculiarly privileged form of evidence that offered a first-hand encounter with the past.

The relationship between the physical object of the diary and its edited, codex form is, according to the French theorist of the diary, Philippe Lejeune, “a veritable Procrustean bed. It is like trying to make a sponge fit a matchbox.” The unedited manuscript of Last’s diary – with its repetitive use of “and” or dashes to connect points, its sparing use of paragraphs or punctuation and its copious use of inverted commas - has a more extempore feel than the published diaries, suggesting something done hurriedly and intuitively late at night. What mattered to Last seemed to be the moment of composition itself, not a notion of how these myriad entries would later link together. The diary as a form is best understood, Lejeune argues, not as a consecutive narrative but as a system of daily habits, a modus operandi. “Before becoming a text, the private diary is a practice,” he writes. “The text itself is a mere by-product, a residue. Keeping a journal is first and foremost a way of life, whose result is often obscure and does not reflect the life as an autobiographical narrative would do.”

To write thousands of diary entries over a long period in this way is an uncommon and even contrarian act. Only a minority of the Mass Observation diarists, already an atypical group in their interest in writing about their lives, made regular contributions over a period of at least two years. A fifth of its wartime diarists stopped after their first entry and another fifth after two to four entries. A truly representative history told through private diaries must now constitute, but she never saw this accumulated text herself, simply posting her entries away each month.

And this is often how Nella Last’s diary is read: as a cathartic, self-actualising narrative with its author, in the words of a recent Daily Mail article, as “the Original Desperate Housewife”. It is not so much that this version of events is wrong, but that it is only one way of reading the story. Last’s surviving diary is incomplete, large parts of 1944 and 1945 being lost at some point before the archive’s arrival at Sussex, which should at least give us pause before extrapolating too much from what survives. Even the diary that remains is so long it is unlikely anyone has read it all. Nella’s entries from the late 1950s and early 1960s, which relate her husband’s worsening depression and her own declining health and growing reclusiveness, have not been published – perhaps because they cannot be shaped as easily as the wartime diaries into a redemptive narrative - and, until this year when David Kynaston cited them briefly in his book Modernity Britain, mainly to demonstrate the effect of the arrival of television in a household ambivalent about it, were unused by historians. In any case, organising Last’s diaries into a continuous narrative is a slightly misleading way of reading them because, like all Mass Observation’s diarists, she did not conceive them in this way. On 30 August 1945, she referred to the “miles” of text her diaries must now constitute, but she never saw this accumulated text herself, simply posting her entries away month.

The idea of the archive as a place that can retain both tangible textual traces and more elusive private desires is now familiar to the British public from the BBC genealogy series Who Do You Think You Are? and other TV history documentaries. The rituals of exploring archives – scanning the shelving, identifying the relevant file, unloosing the archive string, turning the pages carefully with white gloves – are part of the visual connecting tissue of these programmes. In Dear Diary, a 2010 BBC4 series about diaries, Rory Bremner and Victoria Wood were shown roaming the Mass Observation stacks at the University of Sussex. The moment of discovery (perhaps aided by pre-production) showed Wood, who played Nella Last in her own 2006 television adaptation of the diaries, Housewife, 49, hungrily laying her hands on Last’s diary, noting excitedly the embroidery cotton she had used to tie the loose sheets together and the Venus symbol to denote a woman diarist scrawled on its cover. According to other contributors to the series, diaries offered the “intimacy that you can’t get enough of” and “a totally unedited, honest picture of the time”, and they filled “the hole where the history should be”. To write thousands of diary entries over a long period in this way is an uncommon and even contrarian act. Only a minority of the Mass Observation diarists, already an atypical group in their interest in writing about their lives, made regular contributions over a period of at least two years. A fifth of its wartime diarists stopped after their first entry and another fifth after two to four entries. A truly representative history told through private diaries would have to include the vast, forgotten majority that never saw January out. This alternative account would tell the past.

Perhaps the private diary’s value as historical evidence is precisely that it is likely to be idiosyncratic or tangential in this way. For the historian of Britain’s recent past, there is almost a surfeit of harder evidence, particularly of statistical and quantitative data accumulated through the expanded role of government and the rise of the social sciences in the postwar years. Contemporary historians have understandably wanted to draw on these rich resources as they are released but as Stephen Brooke argues, it has meant that “our understanding of post-1945 Britain has yet to be entirely loosed from its moorings in Whitehall and Kew”, and postwar historians have yet to create the richly interdisciplinary accounts of the relationship between individual subjectivities and collective mentalities which have illuminated earlier periods.
confusing randomness and singularity of everyday experience as it is lived through. They help us to see the recent past as an era of still-to-be-decided tensions and contingent moments, instead of a story to which we already think we know the ending. Diaries show us that daily lives are experienced corporeally, as a series of sensual pleasures or discomforts. The recently published Derbyshire wartime diarist May Smith’s heartfelt complaints about “the awful blaring whine” of the air raid sirens and the hard, unyielding chair she has to sit on while listening to long lectures about Combines or the profits of Vickers Armstrong, or Herbert Brush salivating in front of a still life of a pork pie at the Royal Academy summer exhibition in May 1947, convey with great economy that, for most people in this era, news about the second front or postwar export drives was less pressing than empty stomachs or aching bottoms.

In a centrally heated, abundant age in which we are insulated from many of these discomforts, diaries remind us that the past is occupied by countless separate consciousnesses, swayed from one day to the next by their moods and instincts (in which, at least in wartime and from the evidence of diarists, sexual desire seems to rank considerably lower than hunger and dislike of noise, wet and cold). And these diaries seem most interesting to me when their relationship to their historical moment somehow jars with our expectations about social attitudes or popular responses to public events. It is useful to learn that, on 19 June 1940, the civil servant Walter Musto was more saddened by the dilapidated wartime state of Chessington Zoo than by the fall of Paris. Or that a Wolverhampton housewife who kept a diary in the first months of 1941, when news from the war was particularly bad, was far more deeply affected by the inquest into the death of Virginia Woolf. Untroubled by the historian’s reaching after significance, diarists can juxtapose the public and private, the momentous and banal, in striking ways.

In our own age, when openly accessible blog posts and social networking sites host perpetual updates on the mundane details of people’s lives, in ways that would have seemed inconceivable even a generation ago, the long-term, unbending commitment to private diary writing feels like a heroic act. But perhaps there is also a temptation to read this kind of diary through the lens of our own era’s transformed attitudes to self-expression and emotional “authenticity”: the diary as a kind of secular confessional and giver-up of secrets, like that famous chair in the Big Brother house. My sense instead is that private diaries best illuminate their historical moment when we recognise that the key thing about them is that they are private – which makes them odd, enigmatic and, ultimately, unknowable.