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Naomi the Poet and Nella the Housewife: Finding a Space to Write from

The Wartime Diaries of Naomi Mitchison and Nella Last

Karen Meschia

- ¹ The name of Naomi Mitchison is well-known to anyone familiar with the literary and political life of 20th-century Britain; much less so that of Nella Last, although it is arguably the case that British television-viewers and listeners to BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* in this early 21st century have greater familiarity with the life and writing of the latter, since the Bafta award-winning television film based on them, *Housewife, 49*, which has received critical acclaim for its screenwriter, the popular British comedian Victoria Wood, and considerable media coverage.¹ My reason for bringing them together and having them converse here is a simple one: both were involved in the Mass-Observation diary-keeping project during World War II and both diaries have subsequently been published in an edited version, albeit in rather different circumstances. By discussing the two in conjunction I shall be attempting to throw light on the general question of the position of British women during that war, as it is revealed through the specific mode of self-representation that the female diary-writer engages in. This gendered approach may also provide a way into wider issues, of enduring and contemporary concern for women's studies, notably how their particular positioning as women intersects or feeds into other dimensions of social positioning such as class or cultural background, for Naomi and Nella, as we shall see, were in many ways, if not geographically during the war, worlds apart.

1. The Mass-Observation project and the fate of the diaries

- ² It is instructive first to go back to 1939, locate the diaries in the wider, original project they were part of and see how such different women came both to be involved in it and,

before coming to the question of what it may have meant to them, examine briefly what status the diaries were conceived as having at the time by the founders of M-O (which is of course before the winds of feminist theory, post-structuralism and post-modernity had begun to gather momentum). Much has now been written about what for some was the groundbreaking originality and generous optimism, for others the methodological sloppiness and class bias inherent in the stated ambition in 1937 of its instigators, Tom Harrisson, Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings, to create “an anthropology of ourselves/our own people”,² to use the oft-quoted formulation. Sheridan et al. provide a detailed, persuasive demonstration of how the methodological debate surrounding M-O from its inception was closely tied in with the concern of a fledgling British School of Anthropology, notably in the person of Bronislaw Malinowski, with consolidating its scientific status and guaranteeing the professionalism of methods used in the study of society (Sheridan 2000, 79-117). Stated bluntly, what was at issue was the amateurism, the lack of explicit methodological framework, in short the ill-defined mix of objective and subjective data making up the M-O corpus, all of which led Malinowski, in his otherwise fairly complimentary preface to the first M-O publication *First Year's Work* (he did, after all, clearly state his belief that “Anthropology begins at home”), to point to the need for “a thorough overhaul of principle and method” (Madge and Harrisson 87).

- 3 In fact, as the pre-war study of Bolton (“Worktown”) illustrates, the M-O founders distinguished between two sources of data: the “trained” (if somewhat sketchily) part-time or full-time Mass-Observers who were sent into the cotton-mills, pubs, dance-halls, shops, markets, religious meetings and holiday resorts to investigate (using questionnaires and door-to-door surveys), observe, photograph and record the everyday life of the local population, and the untrained “National Panel” of volunteer writers who kept diaries—initially on the 12th day of each month—and responded in detail to regular questionnaires or “directives”. In 1937, over 500 respondents were already writing for the National Panel and more than half of them were women.³ The outbreak of war in September 1939 was to confer a new, unanticipated role on the organisation, which would quickly become a valuable source of information about civilian morale, particularly that of women, for the British Government.⁴ It was in this context that from August 1939 diary-keepers were requested to send in full, continuous diaries and this was when Mitchison and Last began theirs.
- 4 Different though they are, each is typical of a type of diarist. The avowed intention, voiced notably by Madge, of giving the middle and working classes a voice was in the event only very partially fulfilled. There are very few first-hand working-class accounts, even fewer from working-class women. The majority of Panel members, contacted by word of mouth or through the press, were drawn from the less affluent layers of the middle classes: teachers, librarians, secretaries, clerks, shopkeepers, students and housewives. Nella Last, the forty-nine year old wife of a Barrow-in-Furness shop-fitter no doubt responded to an advertisement in the Daily Express, began writing in August 1939 and was to continue doing so until 1967, totalling over two million words during World War II alone and 12 million in all, making hers one of the longest diaries in the English language.
- 5 At the same time M-O’s radical, anti-establishment, democratic stance attracted contributors from the left: the Workers’ Educational Association, the New Left Book Club, the Left of the Labour Party and the Communist Party. Naomi Mitchison, ten

years younger, a prominent member of the London literary and political scene and a personal friend of Tom Harrisson, came very firmly into this category. One of “an extended family of highly achieving people” (Benson 1)⁵ belonging to the Scottish Haldane dynasty on her father’s side and of landed stock on both,⁶ she had by 1939 already published seventeen novels, including the highly acclaimed historical piece *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*; she would, in all, complete over ninety works in a range of genres in her lifetime, including three volumes of autobiography⁷ and diaries of her experiences in Vienna and Russia. Her M-O wartime diary runs in total to over a million words.

- 6 Throughout the war, this qualitative material (500 diary keepers, 2500 responses to directives) was received in weekly instalments and analysed by a small but committed team of researchers, who constantly underlined the value of “bringing dead figures to life” (Ferraby 6), or “recording social change [...] at deeper, more significant levels” (Willcock 456). However, faced with the relative impenetrability of such a mass of written material, to be dealt with by so few and amidst increasing doubts as to its scientific value (a 1944 report says “you are continually up against the fact that you can’t prove anything from them” [M-O File Report 1944]), the diaries were gradually left aside in favour of data collection more compatible with quantifiable results. We are now familiar with the subsequent direction taken by M-O and the “wilderness years” from the late 1950s until 1970, when the archive lay unattended in the basement of Mass-Observation (UK) Ltd, until it was transferred in pitiful condition to the University of Sussex on the invitation of Professor Asa Briggs.
- 7 The archive thus began to be reassessed from the 1970s onwards, at a time when the human sciences as a whole were undergoing a radical epistemological and methodological reappraisal. They were taking a cognitive and reflexive turn in sociology through the work notably of the symbolic interactionists,⁸ who underlined the role of common-sense knowledge and of ordinary language, not only in the construction and maintenance of social reality by members of society, but also in the researcher’s hermeneutic task of “penetrating frames of meaning” (Giddens 155), to quote Anthony Giddens. They were taking a semiotic, interpretative turn in anthropology with a Clifford Geertz for whom: “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance which he himself has spun” (Geertz 5), a democratic turn in historiography with renewed interest in “evidence from the underside” (Thompson 8), provided far from the corridors of power through the methodology of oral history. No doubt the strongest challenge came from feminist scholarship, which aimed to correct the “devastating conceptual error”⁹ involved in constructing men’s experience as normative. Thus it was that the long-neglected diaries, particularly those of women, became eminently legitimate objects of attention as central documents in the recovery of female history.
- 8 Now, feminist analyses, following Nancy Chodorow (*The Reproduction of Mothering*. 1981), had frequently underlined the difficulty for women of constituting themselves as unified subjects, their socialisation making them either objects, or fragmented and permeable to others (“self-in-relation”). There is a certain irony in the fact that just as autobiographical writing seemed to be offering a way into the construction of their own subjective identity for women, post-structuralist theory was beginning to wreak its deconstructionist havoc on the very notion of the unified subject. Patricia Waugh wryly sums up the situation:

As male writers lament its demise, women writers have not yet experienced that subjectivity which will give them a sense of personal autonomy, continuous identity, a history and agency in the world. (Waugh 6)

- 9 Meanwhile, for certain feminist theorists, most notoriously Judith Butler, the category “woman” was also up for scrutiny as anything other than a discursive construction:

There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of “the subject” as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women. (Butler 1)

- 10 This new perspective, as Penny Summerfield enlighteningly suggests (*Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives*. 1998), means that any attempt to use lived-experience accounts as historical sources should simultaneously involve close attention to the discursive contexts in which they are deployed; it also reasserts the status of the diaries, first and foremost as textual productions.

- 11 *Nella Last’s Diary*, subsequently re-titled *Nella Last’s War*¹⁰ was first published posthumously in 1981 by editors Richard Broad, television documentary writer, and feminist historian Susie Fleming. A short afterword by Last’s younger son Cliff provides a few very brief biographical details. *Among you Taking Notes. The Wartime Diary of Naomi Mitchison*,¹¹ on the other hand, edited by Dorothy Sheridan, who retired as Director of the archive in 2009, after continuous involvement since 1974, was published in 1985, when Mitchison was still alive and so potentially at least able to provide retrospective comment and editorial advice. In her brief foreword, however, she states her position clearly, showing characteristic lucidity as to the sometimes arbitrary, always selective process at work in the writing both of the original and its subsequent abridged form: “This diary [...] runs to a million words: who is going to read all that? Not me.” The result, she hopes, will be: “a picture of how one family and friends lived during this period of history” (NM 11). This comment, like the title chosen, *Among you Taking Notes*, which clearly evokes the traditional image of the ethnographer at work as participant observer, gives us insight into how Mitchison viewed her diary with hindsight in its historical and ethnological dimension, but it only reveals part of what she, like Nella Last, was engaged in when producing so many hundreds of pages of typewritten or handwritten text.

- 12 Each diary provides a very different prism through which to view the events of the war and how it impinged on the lives of two women; both in some respects tell a similar story. I have chosen two ways into their “capacious hold-all”, to borrow Virginia Woolf’s image,¹² this interweaving of daily events, inner thoughts, general observations and comments on contemporary life that these accounts offer. Looking first at the manifest difference in world-view and lived experience that the two diaries reveal, I shall then examine them as a form of “resistance writing” in the light of a set of themes related to the problematic of women and wartime: those of exile, alienation and imprisonment.

2. Different worlds; a different war

- 13 Their entry for 3 September 1939 finds both women listening to the 9 o’clock news; Naomi records “feeling sick” (NM 35), Nella of taking “more aspirins than I can remember” (NL 3). Beyond this initial similarity, their circumstances are widely

different. Mitchison was already established at the newly acquired family Carradale estate on the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland, where she would remain, apart from occasional trips down to London and Oxford, throughout, permanently surrounded by a large household of regular or intermittent members: her own six children, those of friends, numerous evacuees, visitors, relations, refugees, Free French soldiers, not to mention a substantial house and garden staff and farm workers. Nella is feeling alone in her modern, 1930s semi-detached house: "I'm a self-reliant kind of person, but today I've longed for a close woman friend—for the first time in my life." (NL 2) Her vivid imagination already at work, she recollects the "brooding, faraway look" (NL 27) of World War One conscripts and apprehends her son's departure.

- 14 These opening lines also set the tone stylistically. Sheridan has remarked that all the diaries are written with "a sense of audience" (Sheridan 1990, 7). Insofar as she is addressing M-O, Mitchison writes with the easy self-confidence and familiarity of one speaking to a member of her own caste; first names abound, over 250 listed in the index provided to aid the initially baffled reader. Indeed, on one level her narrative reads as a chronicle of her political and literary life and times, in the manner of a Harold Nicolson: "Lunch with Stevie Smith...met E.M. Forster...a letter from Leonard Woolf about Virginia's suicide... Went to pick up Tom Harrisson and Dos Passos" (NM 115, 118, 146, 164); meetings with Cyril Connolly, Edith Summerskill, Nye Bevan and Jennie Lee (NM 185, 305) are recorded. The index for Nella Last's diary runs to just over 30 names: one or two neighbours, relations, her sons' friends and her Women's Voluntary Service co-workers. She displays greater diffidence and deference in referring to them: "my elder boy", "my younger boy" (they will subsequently be named), "my husband" (he will remain so throughout), "a friend". Her own writing is almost always referred to as "my scribblings", although this self-deprecatory presentation is frequently belied by a remarkably skilful use of narrative devices and a sure eye for descriptive detail.
- 15 Each follows the events of the war but with a very different focus. The extent and diversity of Mitchison's network and her political involvement procure a wide angle of vision. Her view of wartime events is at once distanced, literally—only Glasgow was ever bombed—and intellectually, in her systematic refusal to stigmatise the enemy or to give way to a purely emotional response to the horrors of war,¹³ with much reference to the geopolitical situation, notably the fate of Russia, and the wider debate on the future of international socialism; yet it also has immediacy through the direct public involvement of her family and friends (her husband Dick, a QC, remained in London working for the Ministry of Labour on the Beveridge manpower survey). As her diary progresses Mitchison's attention will turn increasingly to her local community, to the development and management of her farmlands and to the future of Scotland, with a growing commitment to Scottish nationalism.
- 16 Like her social world, Nella's vision of the war is narrower in focus; she is physically closer to home front involvement, experiencing frequent air-raids and with active participation in WVS and Red Cross equipment-producing and fund-raising activities. Her diary retraces much more closely the decisive military moments which were to define the People's War in popular imagination. Her emotional comments on the British Expeditionary Force evacuation of Dunkirk¹⁴ have no parallel in Mitchison's diary. Similarly, her admiration for "gallant Churchill", unsurprisingly, finds no echo with Mitchell, a staunch socialist, who rather records switching off the radio during the King's speech. Nella is no jingoist however; like Mitchison, she had already lived

through the horror of the Great War and both regularly record distress at the evils of war, both for the allies and the enemy.

- 17 Nella Last was not poor; she had a weekly domestic help, a modern house and a family car (kept in a garage, a rare thing then), nevertheless her economic and social circumstances are so vastly removed from Mitchison's that rationing and restrictions take on a qualitative difference which leaves the reader of both with the impression of intergalactic travel, rather than the 300 or so miles between Barrow and Carradale. Mitchison's husband regularly makes the journey up from London by plane, the choice of the right public school for the children (socialism notwithstanding) is a preoccupation, hunting and salmon fishing make up for food shortages: "Graeme & Archie came back with a salmon and various other fish. Then as usual we talked politics for the evening" (NM 44). This is in stark contrast to Nella's "I've just had a breathtaking shock—I'm going to have 5s more housekeeping money!!! [...] I've so adjusted to my £ 3.10s.0d that it does comfortably [...] I'll not spend it, just go on as if I'd not got it." (NL 101-2). This is not to say that Mitchison did not have to face the problems of large-scale catering and housekeeping as we shall see, whereas Nella clearly derived enormous satisfaction from rising to the challenge of providing appetizing food on a shoestring. It is precisely their attitude to such domestic activities that positions them very differently.
- 18 A political radical, Mitchison had already made her name as a committed feminist, through her publications and involvement in birth-control activism. Her diary, as elsewhere, contains recurrent references to what she describes as "the hurting core" (NM 170) of her feminism, suggesting how intimately and painfully she engages with all that it implies. Amongst countless incidents and injustices commented upon (after a visit in 1942 to the Ministry of Mines: "I'm treated almost like a grown man!" [NM 184]), she also describes a Labour Party visit to Huddersfield, bemoaning her failure to convince "these kitchen-proud women" (NM 119) of the merits of communal wartime kitchens and of the need to widen their horizons beyond domesticity:
- We talked about women cooking and washing up day after day; it seemed a new idea to her that it wasn't what one was there for, that it wasn't simply the noblest thing in life to cherish a tired man at the day's end [...]. But it was news to her! (NM 213)
- 19 Had she met Nella she would no doubt have described her similarly, yet the sensual, loving descriptions of meals imagined, prepared and consumed read more like a poetics of the kitchen than a tale of drudgery; reading Nella's diary can be a mouth-watering experience:
- Arthur's birthday [...] My Viennese rolls [...] turned out a lovely golden shell of sweet crust that melted in the mouth, and I put honey on the table to eat with them. I put my fine lace and linen cloth on the table and a big bowl of deep orange marigolds. There was the birthday cake I made before Easter when butter was more plentiful, and for effect I put a boat-shaped glass dish with golden-green lettuce hearts piled in—which were eaten to the last bit (NL 59-60).
- 20 Naomi's remark that "it's so bloody difficult catering" (NM 253) reveals a different attitude, also a characteristically freer use of language, which is matched by the frankness with which she approaches other areas of experience that are either totally absent or mentioned only obliquely in Nella's diary, notably her sexuality.
- 21 Apart from a passing comment on the fact that she and her husband now sleep separately (and that she feels much better for it), references to sex by Nella are few and

far between. Significantly, it is only when prompted to do so by an M-O directive “about the war’s effect on sex” that she raises the matter at all: “Speaking personally, I could only say that, at fifty-one, sex questions answered themselves, war or no war.” (NL 150) The remark does set her musing though, about the dominance and submission inherent in traditional marital sexuality, about her own discovery of birth control as “a decent thing, and not a ‘horrible French practice’” and leads her to question, and wonder, at her young neighbour Margaret’s more direct approach to her sexual relations. Naomi Mitchison celebrated sexual freedom, enjoyed a publicly acknowledged open marriage with her husband and was explicit in other writings about her fairly numerous sexual relationships (without, on the whole, naming names). Her diary includes several passages relating to sexuality, including a remarkably uninhibited description of her own erotic imagination and frequent reference to sexual attraction felt for or shared with various men. Reading erotic artist Eric Gill’s autobiography prompts her own response:

The interstices of my days are full of erotic images. Quite often of course, I use them as current to turn the mills of the imagination. I’m 44 and should know what I’m doing by now. I can think clearly and unresentfully of my lovers in the past, certainly of their naked bodies. (NM 180)

- 22 The reflections that follow this passage underline Mitchison’s awareness of how widely her text strays from the contemporary discursive conventions of female sexuality (“It is always a bore being ahead of one’s time” [NM 181]), with an oblique appeal to her putative readership: “Well let’s hope nobody reads this who won’t try to understand it” (NM 182).
- 23 Different women, different wars, but there is one common central theme which unites them: a keen enjoyment and satisfaction in closely observing and being physically part of the natural world. Both show acute awareness of two distinct rhythms superimposed on their lives: the vagaries of wartime, home and family activities and the slower, more permanent, more intensely pleasurable rhythm of the changing seasons. Nella’s much loved “healing place” (NL 164) of Coniston Lake is described as lyrically as Naomi’s Scottish moorland, providing tranquillity of mind to both, with religious overtones for Last: “There is always such a feeling of miracle in the first flower or budding tree” (NL 185) and skilfully captured moments for Mitchison: “I let Clym go and he bounced off through the bracken, jumping in arcs with the sunlight silvering his outline” (NM 57).

3. Resistance writing: exile, alienation and imprisonment

- 24 It was Elizabeth Bowen who characterised all war writing as “resistance writing” (Bowen 50). Margaret Higonnet suggests that in war literature “it is virtually a rule that the external conflict, which serves as a catalyst of social change and narrative sequence, also becomes a metaphor for inner conflicts and the experience of inner emigration” (Higonnet *in* Cooper et al. 81-82). For Mary-Anne Schofield, the diary, in its piecemeal construction not only reflects fragmented female identity but offers “exilic literature in its purest form” (Schofield *in* Bevan 126). In examining the diaries from this perspective a different reading of the two women’s wartime experience emerges, more positive for Last, less so for Mitchison.

- 25 Carradale as exile is a recurring motif for Naomi Mitchison, in several ways. On the most literal level, she had been reluctant to buy this newly acquired holiday house and equally so to move up there, leaving her intellectually and socially stimulating River Court family home environment, which also implied guilt at being sheltered from the bombing in London: “one feels one should be there” (NM 287) is a regular remark. Despite frequent visits she, like Nella, describes feeling stranded and missing regular, close contact with female friends, notably Storm Jameson (NM 65). This feeling of isolation is compounded by her social status, which makes her a prisoner both of her class and of her sex. Setting up a local branch of the Labour Party and organising the building of a village hall, while bringing her into close contact with the locals, serve only to exacerbate her awareness of the social divide: “I have to sacrifice a good deal in order to live here [...] here I have to be good [...] all around there are men and women waiting to catch me out” (NM 58). In describing social encounters, expressions of her longing to be just “Naomi” rather than the proprietor of “the big house” provide some of the most emotionally charged passages: “I was so glad there were no other people of my social standing with whom I could be lumped and left. I had to be one of the gang” (NM 54); “this feeling of togetherness makes the mind dive into tenderness” (NM 41). Inevitably, her pain and disappointment at being kept in her (elevated) place engender feelings of alienation as powerful as her quite touching joy at being accepted: “I felt I hated my own men” (NM 244) and later: “I felt upset and hated them all” (NM 252).
- 26 As one accustomed to considerable freedom within an egalitarian marriage, her wartime exile will bring home to Mitchison the reality of a continuing gender asymmetry between herself, weighted down with domestic responsibilities, and husband Dick, who is given preference over her to represent the community in a project for which she had been responsible, who refuses to take her farming seriously, who criticises her lack of financial acumen and ducks away from any prolonged discussion with his overemotional wife: “Dick says talking to me is like being dive-bombed, so much I wanted to say” (NM 85). References to feelings of depression and inadequacy multiply as the war goes by. The culmination of Mitchison’s motives for resentment, come at the end of the diary with Dick’s Kettering Labour Party election campaign, when Naomi, who has herself refused an offer to stand as a Labour candidate (“it would be such fun, but of course I can’t [...]. And it’s a winnable seat” [NM 281]), finds herself forced to play the role of supportive, submissive wife. Her confession to feeling “a bit jealous” shows honesty and generosity, given what follows: “I expect I shall have to do women’s meetings [...]. In fact I don’t know much about women’s subjects. And care less. Still there you are. You’ve got to fit in with what they think you ought to be.” (NM 325) She concludes wistfully: “I suppose the next generation will be better.” (NM 326)
- 27 Lastly, she is exiled from the most essential part of herself: her imaginative writing. As a mother of small children, Mitchison had described her ability to dispense with a room of her own, scribbling handwritten text in a notebook perched on a pram, or in the midst of a noisy nursery tea, but at Carradale this ability leaves her. Meeting E.M. Forster during the early years of the war she asks him “should one write novels?” (NM 118) and her diary entries confirm her inability to do so. Tellingly, on 1 September 1939 we read “I shall write my diary and keep sane” (NM 34); subsequent entries map the vicissitudes of this resolution, sometimes despairing: “so depressed I couldn’t even write my diary” (NM 243), “I have my human moments of wanting to talk about myself

—instead of just putting it into this diary” (NM 247), occasionally more upbeat: “I felt for the first time it was worth doing for itself, not just because it was a kind of thing to hold on to” (NM 283-4), often simply weary: “I’m getting awfully tired of this diary” (NM 298). The only feasible outlet for her creative drive seems to be to place it at the service of the local fishing community, turning to them for inspiration to write poetry celebrating their craft and traditional way of life.¹⁵ Likewise, it is from 1943 that her desire to promote nationalism rekindles her interest in Scottish history and her own ancestry and she will feel authorized to embark upon a novel, *The Bull Calves*, but even then, the increasing physical and psychological demands made on her in running the household and farm mean that only when she is away from Carradale is she able to write: “Oh God, I hate coming back. I wrote three and a half chapters in four weeks while I was away, now shall get stuck again.” (NM 260)

- 28 For Nella Last, exile is experienced vicariously in the absence of her sons, Arthur, who is working away, and Cliff, who is called up almost immediately and posted abroad. As for isolation, alienation and imprisonment, they predate the war; references throughout her diary to her former state of captive wife, suffering from bouts of depression, make this very clear. She even mentions a serious breakdown just before the outbreak of the war, which will actually offer her the opportunity to break free from the narrow confines of domesticity and of patriarchal pressure through becoming involved in the war effort outside the home. She joins the WVS and spends several half days a week at the “Centre”, opening a Red Cross shop and running a canteen van, but she also “digs for victory”, keeps hens and salvages and sews indefatigably to make bedding, clothes and rag dolls to raise money. It is above all in writing her diary though, that she is able to create a series of possible counter-narratives of her female identity, symbolically initiated on 4 September 1939 with her announced intention of having her hair cut (NL 3).
- 29 Through the diary’s construction: minute descriptions of the day’s activities, enclosed very much within the female rhetoric of shopping, cooking and sewing, which alternate with sequences of introspection and reminiscence, Nella gradually builds up two pictures of herself, seen either in terms of then and now: “I don’t wonder at my husband being surprised—when I contrast the rather retiring woman who had such headaches and used to lie down so many afternoons, with the woman of today who can keep on and *will not think*” (NL 49), or as co-existing simultaneously, one house-proud, the other indifferent: “There are two distinct ‘me’s’” (NL 136). The obliquely-given description of her former self as someone subject to illness and depression: “I’ve always missed things. Somehow ill health and other circumstances have always beaten me” (NL 72), is gradually displaced in the narrative by a more combative, energetic, confident Nella who wears “too bright lipstick” (NL 49) and refuses to submit to her husband’s moods and possessiveness, at least in the version of herself that she confides to the diary:

I reflected tonight on the changes war had brought. I always used to worry and flutter round when I saw my husband working up for a mood; but now I just say calmly, “Really dear, you should try and act as if you were a grown man and not a child of ten, and if you want to be awkward, I shall go out—ALONE!” I told him he’d better take his lunch on Thursday, and several times I’ve not had tea quite ready when he has come in on a Tuesday or Thursday, and I’ve felt quite unconcerned. He told me rather wistfully I was “not so sweet” since I’d been down at the Centre, and I said, “Well! Who wants a woman of fifty to be sweet, anyway? And besides, I suit me a lot better!” (NL 37)

- 30 As the diary proceeds, Nella verbalises with increasing lucidity and candour the extent of her former alienation and imprisonment:

I thought of the false sentiment my generation had been reared with, the possessiveness which stood as a hallmark of love with no regard for differences in temperament, inclination or ideals—when the “head of the house” was a head, a little dictator in his own right; when a person of limited wisdom, vision, or just plain fear of life, could crib and confine more restless spirits. A little chill fell on me—not from the dusk which was creeping on the garden either. Rather did it blow from the past, when to go anywhere without my husband was a heinous crime—and he went practically nowhere! (NL 288)

- 31 She even retrieves an even earlier version of herself, almost buried, as a born wanderer:

I used to be nearly wild with longing to be off and away. Even now, when wood smoke begins to hang round the chimneys at Spark Bridge or when the thin sweet wind of spring coaxes the primroses out, I have my wild fits [...] [which] changed a busy capable housewife into a wild, caged thing who could have set off without a backward glance. (NL 17)

- 32 Fittingly, this recognition of the frustrated expression of alternative identities is couched in the familiar imagery of dress:

Sometimes I could YELL. I feel I'd like to peel off the layers of 'patience', 'tact', cheerfulness, sweetness that smother me like layers of unwanted clothes. What would I find under all the trappings I'm credited with? I might be surprised! (NL 214)

- 33 Seen in this light, the seemingly disproportionate satisfaction she gains from feverishly undoing old clothes to stitch them up into new ones, and from endlessly recycling scraps of fabric to make rag dolls, become so many metaphors for the recreation of a new self. With this recognition, her resolve strengthens as to her future: “I feel that, in the world of tomorrow, marriage will be—will have to be—more of a partnership, less of the 'I have spoken' attitude” (NL 247), a resolve she records in her diary as having expressed to her husband—in contrast to Mitchison's lost ability to communicate with hers:

I'd rather die than step into the frame you make for me. Do you know, me dear, that I've never known the content—at times real happiness—that I've known since the war started [...] you have at times been very cruel. Now my restless spirit is free. (NL 82-3)

- 34 Interestingly, this reverse image as to the invigorating, emancipating effects of wartime for the two women is curiously duplicated by the representations of motherhood their diaries deploy. Feminist scholarship, with Sandra Gilbert, has commented on the ambiguity of the instrumentalised mother image—both quasi-religious and threatening—in wartime (Gilbert in Higonnet et al. 197-226), however, poet and essayist Adrienne Rich (*Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. 1977) offers a crucial distinction between the subjective experience of maternity, which she celebrates, and the socially and culturally constructed oppressive role of motherhood in a patriarchal society. For both Naomi and Nella, motherhood, with writing, is clearly *experienced* as a fundamental feature of their identity. Nella says at the start of her diary “Next to being a mother, I'd have loved to write books” (NL 11). Naomi did both, and her writing generally, like her diary, reveals the extent to which the two creative processes were intermingled, for one decisive event she records in her diary between 4 and 7 July 1940 is the epicentre from which shock waves permeate the

whole; this was the death, shortly after her birth, of a third daughter and seventh child, Clemency.

- 35 Her account of the event is initially sober and restrained: “It was excessively hard to face. No-one was to blame. Nothing at any point could have been done.” (NM 71) But as she examines the implications, growing despair is apparent, about “work which would have been tolerable and even delightful with the background of a baby—of creation. But intolerable with one’s mind empty and groping”.¹⁶ She confesses to her need to procreate as “an excuse to be out of the war, out of destruction, still on the side of creation; now that’s over”, before concluding, “The only thing I can do is write.” (NM 72) Her comment a few days later negatively recasts Nella’s remark on motherhood and writing: “If only I had my baby I wouldn’t need to write a book that probably nobody wants to read” (NM 73).
- 36 This element obviously sheds further light on the feelings of isolation and alienation expressed throughout, for Naomi, by now 43, is unable to voice to her husband the “animal grief” (NM 85) and the desire for another child, which will recur as a leitmotif of loss and longing throughout: references to jealousy at seeing her daughter-in-law pregnant, to the desire for the “sweet warmth and weight of a baby at my breast” (NM 73), or the River Court nursery gathering dust. The diary is thus also an elegy to a lost child and the end of childbearing, only fully understood by setting it against one scarcely perceptible reference, on the occasion of a hospital visit, to the earlier death of her eldest son from meningitis at the age of nine. “And I kept thinking of Geoff who died after seven operations [...] Only I couldn’t speak of it.” (NM 283)
- 37 Nella, on the other hand, who describes herself with relative equanimity as a grey-haired, middle-aged woman, for whom maternity belongs to the past, with the satisfaction of having raised two sons “who like me” (NL 72), relates in February 1940 how she is entrusted briefly by her doctor with a small, underfed baby to nurture, which she does successfully, remarking with a certain detachment, “The baby is a blessing really, for I think I was getting rather obsessed by the war.” (NL 25) Strangely enough, there is a further, uncanny metaphorical mirroring of this negative-positive image in a springtime incident each describes: Mitchison recounts at great length her feelings of distress and inadequacy at being unable to save a stillborn lamb (NM 276), while Last, on a walk near the native village of part of her family, describes the sense of wholeness and oneness she experiences in meeting and identifying with a small local girl who is successfully bottle-feeding a baby lamb: “I felt with my own people who call babies for their grandams and granpers.” (NL 48)
- 38 The entries at the end of the war, although similarly downbeat, nevertheless reflect the different experience it has been for each; for Last a sense of anti-climax: “I feel disappointed in my feelings [...] I think I’ll take two aspirins and try and read myself to sleep.” (NL 298) For Mitchison, a dry assessment of the war’s deleterious effects: “Well here is the end of the war, and the end of this diary [...] with some of the same people [...] But all older and tired.” (NM 338)
- 39 Reading the diaries as an expression of the social and cultural circumstances of their production foregrounds the distance between these two women; focusing on their wartime testimonies within the problematic of exile, alienation and imprisonment brings to light a strange symmetry and proximity of experience, where, paradoxically, the common ground provided by the creative process of writing and motherhood polarises them differently, negative and alienating for one, positive and emancipating

for the other. It could be argued that the liberating effects of the war were inversely proportionate to the position of each at the outset, on some hypothetical continuum of female emancipation, but such an approach is reductive and fails to capture the essence of these accounts, where every personal victory or failure is a landmark and where no such linearity is perceptible.

- 40 In many ways their wartime narratives are exemplary of the difficulty for feminist scholarship of encompassing the diversity of women's experience in World War II within a unified discourse of personal and social change, but this is precisely what makes them precious as documents in the recovery of female history. Through them a process of retrieval is made possible, giving not only the "thick description" (Geertz 5) which for Geertz is the true ethnographer's task, of women's wartime life, but also revealing the emotional texture of experience: how the minor irritations of shortages and restrictions might fleetingly engulf the rest, to be displaced in turn by the intense pleasure of observing the natural world; showing, without the gloss of hindsight, how the days and weeks went by: "teaching the subjectively perceived truths of female history vividly, eloquently, memorably" (Blodgett 12), inviting us to reconstruct the world in which they originated and to better apprehend its complexity.
- 41 Ultimately though, the wartime diaries of these two women show how each found a space for resistance within the privacy of writing; for Mitchison the need to do so was temporary and contingent and she would in fact subsequently incorporate passages from the 1939 entries of her diary into the final pages of her 1920-1940 memoir, *You May Well Ask*, where, significantly, the very last sentence of the final chapter is "But my baby died" (235). For Nella Last the outbreak of war was the start of an uninterrupted flow of closely handwritten bundles of manuscript which would continue until shortly before her death. In this, as Harriet Blodgett has eloquently demonstrated (*Capacious Hold-All. An Anthology of Englishwomen's Diary Writings.*), she was joining a long line of female diarists who, "[h]aving no careers, commands, or embassies to write of" (Blodgett 3), found, in recording the minutiae of domestic life, a private and personal mode of expression which, precisely because it was outside the confines of the male-encoded language of the wider world, afforded them a form of freedom. She most certainly never envisaged that changing perceptions of the value of such writing would lead her diaries to be published, and could even less have imagined that the figure of Nella Last would become something of a symbol of female emancipation, capturing the imagination of British women, young and old, as it seems to today.

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NOTES

1. This is amply confirmed by Penny Summerfield's research on popular representations of World War II in the article in this issue, which was of course unknown at the time of writing this paper.
2. First used in an exchange of letters to *The New Statesman* between Geoffrey Pyke and Harrison, Madge and Jennings in December 1937-January 1938 after the abdication crisis.
3. The writings of the untrained panel make up approximately 20% of the total archive.
4. In 1939 Tom Harrison wrote: "I believe that women are bearing the brunt of this home-fronted war. I believe that the way they react to the strain may largely determine the outcome. And I see everywhere very little sign that the woman's point of view matters nearly as much as the man's. This war is being led by men and run by men, mostly old men. They are appallingly ignoring women's problems". In "Working women in this war." *Industrial and Personnel Management*. 1939, 253.
5. Her father was J.S. Haldane, the physiologist, her brother J.B.S. Haldane the famous geneticist; her uncle Lord Haldane, Lord Chancellor in the first Labour government of 1924.
6. Lords of Gleneagles from the 13th century onwards.
7. *Small Talk: Memories of an Edwardian Childhood*. (1973); *All Change Here: Girlhood and Marriage*. (1975), published together as: *As It Was: An Autobiography 1897-1918*. (1975); *You May Well Ask: A Memoir 1920-1940*. (1979).
8. See for example Berger and Luckmann (51): "The common objectivations of everyday life are maintained primarily by linguistic signification. Everyday life is, above all, life with and by means of the language I share with my fellow men.""
9. Philosopher Elizabeth Minnich (qtd in *The Personal Narratives Group* 4).
10. All parenthetical references (NL 170) will be to the 2006 edition.
11. All parenthetical references (NM 84) will be to the 1985 edition.
12. . *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (266). Entry for 20 April 1919: "What sort of diary should I like mine to be? [...] I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through [...]"
13. Examples of this detachment: "If we leave [Hitler], the Nazi rule is likely to end within a hundred year [...] that is very little historically speaking." (NM 42); "Would I hate if my immediate family were killed? I don't think so." (NM 59)
14. 5th June 1940. She refers to: "the pictures in my mind of our soldiers waiting, waiting, waiting, on the shores of Dunkirk, wondering if perhaps they would be able to get in the next boats "then later" I felt as if deep inside me was a harp that vibrated and sang" (NL 52,54).

15. *The Cleansing of the Knife* was written between 1941 and 1947

16. Gill Plain (159), in analysing Mitchison's fiction, refers to this mother-writer figure: "This concrete essence of woman as writer or mother provides a reassuring metaphysics of presence to set against war's threat of annihilation."

ABSTRACTS

Northern housewife Nella Last and novelist and essayist Naomi Mitchison were from widely different social and cultural backgrounds but shared one common point: both kept wartime diaries for *Mass-Observation* from 1939 to 1945. This article, after briefly addressing the circumstances in which such different women came to be involved in the same project, examines the two published diaries in conjunction in order to shed light, first, on the effects of World War II on two British women from very different milieux, paying particular attention to what the two accounts reveal of the ways in which social class and gender intersect. Then, approaching the narrations in the light of the all-pervasive wartime themes of exile and alienation, we see emerge a very different reading of the experience of these two women as wives and mothers.

A première vue, Nella Last, obscure ménagère du nord de l'Angleterre, et Naomi Mitchison, célèbre romancière et essayiste, issue de l'aristocratie écossaise, n'avaient rien de commun. Les deux femmes ont cependant apporté chacune sa contribution au projet *Mass-Observation*, en tenant, de 1939 à 1945, leur journal des années de guerre. Après un rapide retour sur les circonstances de cette collaboration, le présent article, en proposant une lecture parallèle des deux documents publiés, s'attache d'abord à examiner l'impact de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale sur deux femmes britanniques de milieux très différents, afin de déceler ce que ces récits révèlent de l'intersection entre genre et classe sociale. Dans un deuxième temps, aborder la narration de leur vécu d'épouse et de mère en articulation avec les thèmes—prégnants en temps de guerre—de l'exil et de l'aliénation, permet de dégager une toute autre lecture de la situation de chacune.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Deuxième Guerre mondiale, Grande-Bretagne, genre, classe sociale, mass-observation, récit autobiographique, autobiographie, maternité

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