



Creative Writing

The Mass Observation Archive

Bill Greenwell

Dorothy Sheridan is in charge of the Mass Observation archive at the University of Sussex. She's the editor of several mass Observation anthologies and also of writer Naomi Mitchison's war time diary *Among You Taking Notes*. Editing that diary meant reducing it to ten percent of the original. When I met her, I asked her about that process of editing and what she was looking for.

Dorothy Sheridan

I think that I did it in kind of layering, you know, or sweeping through and elimination. So my very first task was to read the whole thing and to make notes and then the next task was to go through it again. It was painful because it got to the point where there were things that I couldn't keep in that I would have liked to have kept in. So what was I looking for? I was looking for reflections by her on her life and on the writing process. Then I was looking for stories. Something that gives a bit of tension. You know, if you just put in 'Got up, had breakfast, went to work', it's not really very interesting. A lot of diaries are very boring. And lots of diarists would admit that including me, who keeps a diary. You're looking for some stories within it, things that happen over a period of time or incidents. That's quite hard because diarists don't help you, really. They don't put in footnotes and explanatory text and say who people are and so on. So you've got to find a story that can stand on its own.

Bill Greenwell

There are some passages in *Among You Taking Notes* which are quite lyrical and which I sort of suspect your eye will have lit upon and you will have thought, I just can't lose that. Do you find yourself, as an editor, sort of lingering over pieces of what you might call slightly finer writing?

Dorothy Sheridan

Yes. Of course. Of course. And Naomi was a poet and a novelist. But that comes up in some of the other diaries too. I was talking to the people editing the post war Nella Last diaries and they were saying that when Nella goes to the Lake District and describes the lakes, she is poetic too. I suppose I'm wanting to do the best for those writers and show that all of them are able to be poetic and creative in the way that they represent their lives, not, maybe not all of them, perhaps that's an exaggeration, but certainly many of the writers that wrote for Mass Observation had that side of them and that gives pleasure, doesn't it? So I suppose I'm looking for pieces of writing that give me pleasure and that I think I ought to share. Things that could make the reader have a kind of emotional response. And of course, that does mean that there's a lot that you do leave out that isn't like that at all. And it may mean that it looks as if the diary's more poetic than it is because, of course, you're selecting those bits and you're giving them priority.

Bill Greenwell

In the case of Nella Last's diaries, do you see the person as being central to what is going on?

Dorothy Sheridan

It's a good question that, because there have been critiques of Nella Last's War that it was framed by the war years since Nella started writing in 1937 and carried on into the sixties and it was the publisher's choice to call it *Nella Last's War*, not hers. And that's part of a kind of violence, you could call it violence, or intrusion of editors and publishers on diaries that don't fit that pattern. You're trying to do many things because you want to attract different kinds of

readers, and the publishers in particular often want 'war' or the word 'war' in the title so that it does seem to sell, I mean, that's always got to be part of what you're doing. But I think if somebody read a diary thinking this was going to tell them all they needed about the history of the Second World War, for instance, then that would be silly. On the other hand, I often think that, if you get a really well written, interesting, personal account of the experience of a particular historical moment, you learn more from that than a dry old history book.

Bill Greenwell

How do you feel about life-writing which is re-drafted?

Dorothy Sheridan

I was talking to some editors of Nella's diary and saying to them, It doesn't really matter in the end what you do because the original diary is still here and if people want to see what she actually wrote herself – after all, she did her shaping too – these edited works are just one version that's come out for a particular public for a particular period in time, just as Nella Last's War is one book, extracts from her diary, just as Housewife 49 with Victoria Wood did another version based on the book but different from the book and with some what you might call creative additions to it which aren't in the book at all. So I see it as, the editing – of course, it may never happen again or not within a generation – but it's just one version, just one version that opens up.

Bill Greenwell

Could you say something, Dorothy, about what you see as the potential for creative writers in using the material in the Mass Observation archive?

Dorothy Sheridan

We have been visited by a number of authors, poets and artists who are looking for everything from actual factual information through to inspiration, even through to plots and I think that one of the great advantages is language: how do people talk to each other? Of course, Mass Observation itself and the people writing are using a written form and authors have to be creative in understanding and making the leaps from written to oral and so on but the words people use, the films they see, the radio programmes they listen to, their fears and hopes, you know, there's so much that's rich in there that would allow the creation of character, the construction of dialogue, knowing what people would have been saying at a particular time, what people would have been wearing. I mean, you often see things that are kind of fixed in aspic which were all designed or bought in 1941 but we all know our lives are overlapping in time, we have things in our lives from the past, we have things from the present, and I think that that allows a creative writer to find more authentic material, raw material. And I've talked to people, even looking for plot devices and it's not just, not just the background but actual character and plot.

Bill Greenwell

It's a small detail but I think the simple things like the slang of the time is captured. And it might seem trivial but it's those little details which can make a narrative come alive.

Dorothy Sheridan

I think you're right. There's lots of little words that they use like 'okidoke' and 'toodleoo' and one of the interesting things is when you're teaching with students about, you know, using diaries, they won't know, they don't know what the acronyms are, they don't know what the slang means. But what you can do then is it helps to heighten awareness of their own language and slang and use of words. One of the things that a lot of young students found amazing was in some material we had about food and eating and mealtimes, just what people ate, how much they ate, what they called the food, that has changed so much, even what they call the meals and when they had them and people coming home in the middle of the day to have dinner and it's, the food and the detail of day to day life can really be quite amazing.

There is something else that I think is significant about using diaries which is that a lot of what we know about the past is relayed to us retrospectively by older people. And what you get from the diary is the person when they're young, or you can get it, I mean, Naomi Mitchison and Nella were in their forties and fifties when they wrote but we do have diaries of much

younger people. And what you do get is the opportunity for a young woman of say, eighteen, to read a young woman of eighteen's diary and I think the age perspective is very significant. So that's another thing that a creative writer would be able to obtain which is the perspective of young people, which you can't do through a lot of oral history because it's so retrospective.