

**ENGAGING WITH ‘THE PRESENT’?  
NELLA LAST’S MASS-OBSERVATION  
DIARY**

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# **Engaging with ‘The Present’?: Nella Last’s Mass-Observation Diary**

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## **Abstract**

Using material from Nella Last’s Mass-Observation diary (1939-1966), I suggest that the relationship which diaries are often assumed to have with ‘the present’ is troublesome. I use examples to show that the assumed synonymy of ‘the moment of writing’ and ‘the moment of experience’ (Stanley and Dampier, 2006) is questionable: Last’s diary-entries neither always follow the strict chronology of the day’s events as they occur, nor concern activities that occur solely on the date her entries are given. These memories are inscribed from Last’s perspective at ‘the moment of writing’, so I look at her present-perspective, set within her broader writing present, as the site from which times are organised in written representation, drawing on extracts regarding her practice of remembering and how these intersect with her ‘moment of writing’. This points up Last’s agency in using or playing with time, in using the present/‘the moment of writing’, and with it the ‘diary-genre’ more broadly, to her own ends. This agency connects with her personal perspective concerning a desire to ‘hold time still’ and ‘take a day at a time’. The discussion concludes by trying to reconceptualise ‘the present’ that Last’s diary invokes, arguing that examining the ‘moment of writing’ as a complicated and ‘thick’ present is instructive on two particular counts. Firstly, it recognises the knotty intersections between the past, present and future, and secondly it is highly contextualised and contingent on the diarist’s location in her writing present. Understood this way, the present or the ‘moment of writing’ denotes a nexus of mind, self and society at a particular time. This represents Last’s ‘subjective lens’ (Jennings and Madge, 1937) through which she navigates her (sense of) place in the world (Mead, 1962) and also locates her within the Mass-Observation project.

## **Key Words**

Diaries, Mass-Observation, Nella Last, war, auto/biography, temporality, time

## **Introducing Diaries and Time: Nella Last’s Diary & Mass-Observation**

Diaries often have an engaging ‘reality effect’,<sup>1</sup> which connects to what they are perceived to contain, to represent, to ‘be’, as well as to assumptions concerning how, when, and sometimes why, they have been written. Popularly, if not always by scholars, diaries and diary-writing are often understood around their assumed

relationships with ‘time’ both inside and outwith the text, with their epistemological positioning resting on ontological claims concerning these relationships (Stanley and Dampier, 2006). An important aspect of this ‘reality effect’ concerns the idea that readers are made privy to ‘the present’ of writing, or rather that the present, albeit ‘an ever-changing present’ (Fothergill, 1974, p. 9), is represented through the text in a broadly undistorted and ‘authentic’ way.

More precisely, diaries are perceived to represent the diarist’s ‘immediate present’ (Nussbaum, 1988, p. 128). Yet, this perception rests a great deal on the idea that ‘the moment of writing’ a diary-entry, and ‘the scene of what is written about’ or the ‘moment of experience’ inscribed in the entry, are in extremely close or even mimetic correspondence (Stanley and Dampier, 2006, p. 26). The perceived immediacy between writing and experience is often related to the conventional chronological temporal structure of diaries, which is usually organised around ‘daily’ writing and seemingly affirmed through dating entries. A ‘day’, as a temporal device used to structure inscribed experience, especially when reassuringly ‘dated’, can be seen to connote ‘authenticity’ because lives are perceived to be organised in ways that use ‘a day’ and other calendar dates as important measures of time. These are crucial to structuring the social, cultural and economic interaction and organisation of individuals and societies, albeit in different ways, not surprisingly featuring in diaries too. Encasing inscribed experience in a day-to-day, chronological format, then, appears to mimic the temporal sequential order of lived experience. This includes ‘narrative time’<sup>2</sup> and is oriented towards the present with no retrospection (Lejeune, 1982, p. 193),<sup>3</sup> written in the present-tense, and further implies that diaries make available a series of ‘ever-changing presents’ (Fothergill, 1974, p. 9) that are as close as possible to ‘real’ experience and the ‘correct’ order of things.

Stemming from these ontological claims, diaries are often treated as ‘fact’ containers, as historical sources of ‘at the time’ information that provide portals to ‘what the present was really like then’. The ‘present’ that is implied by such thinking is uncomplicated, singular and, because it is perceived to be ‘recoverable’ by piecing together information from historical documents, something that in a sense exists outside of any one text. Using diaries to access such a present raises issues concerning the relationship between lived experience and representation with significance for all social researchers using representations of phenomena, whether ‘documents of life’ (Plummer, 2001) or other kinds of materials. Once the complicated rather than mimetic intersection of experience, representation and time in diaries is accepted, then other ways of engaging with and using them become apparent. This in turn shows up the importance of reconsidering and re-conceptualising ‘the present’ with which diaries are assumed to engage, which necessarily requires rethinking the ontological assumptions regarding diaries and their uses that I have outlined above. My case-study shows that the relationship between diaries and ‘the present’ is complicated, not least because diaries are very complexly ‘timed’ writings. It engages with these complexities by re-conceptualising the relationship that one woman’s diary has with ‘the present’; this is, the unpublished, manuscript diary written by Nella Last for the radical social research organisation Mass-Observation (M-O) between 1939 and 1966.<sup>4</sup>

M-O had started work in early 1937, springing out of a meeting of ideas and socio-political ambitions initiated by a letter from Geoffrey Pyke which called for an ‘anthropological study of our own situation of which we stand in such desperate need’ (Pyke, 1936; see Jeffery, 1999). Charles Madge, a journalist and poet, saw the letter and responded to Pyke’s idea and, with Humphrey Jennings and several others,

gathered a group of volunteers who operated from his home in Blackheath, London. Tom Harrison saw Madge's letter and a correspondence ensued, and at the end of January 1937 a letter was signed by Harrison, Jennings and Madge announcing the formation of M-O (Harrison et al., 1937). Initially, Harrison worked in Bolton and Blackpool on an anthropological study of the working classes, whereas Madge and Jennings worked in Blackheath and, after securing volunteers, sent out calls for responses to 'Directives' (which were broad questions on specific topics inviting the respondents to put forward their views) and 'Day-Surveys' or 'Day-Diaries' (which asked respondents to record their activities over a specific day) with those for 12 May 1937 edited and published (Jennings and Madge, 1937). Although Harrison and Madge swapped bases in November 1938, Harrison continued to employ diary methods, asking the organisation's 'National Panel of Volunteer Observers' to write 'Crisis Diaries' in August 1939, which were then converted to continuous diaries, the Wartime Diaries, once war broke out. Entries were to be sent in regularly to M-O's HQ in Blackheath, and Nella Last's diary represents one of over four hundred such diaries that M-O managed to gather from 'ordinary' women and men across Britain.

Like only a small number of the diarists, Nella Last hand-wrote her diary for a considerable period of time. A working-class housewife, living with her husband William and, intermittently, her two adult sons, Arthur and Cliff, in a 1930s semi-detached house in Barrow-in-Furness, Lancashire, Last was born in 1889, hence her use of 'Housewife, 49' at the top of her early entries in 1939.<sup>5</sup> By her final entries, however, Last was writing 'Housewife, 76', for she had written for 27 years, with the last of her instalments written in February 1966, less than two years before she died (Hinton, 2004). To facilitate regularly sending her daily diary-entries to M-O, Last grouped the chronologically-dated entries into sets of seven, mimicking a week

although running from Friday to Thursday. Last's diary is, therefore, superficially at least, structured around the familiar day-to-day chronological framework.<sup>6</sup>

However, within this chronological framing a number of disruptions to 'the present' exist, complicating the assumptions often made about the relationship of diaries with 'the present' and helping to re-conceptualise the present with which diaries are perceived to engage. I have grouped these disruptions into three broad discussion points, although there are important overlaps between them.

Firstly, I shall discuss two examples from Last's diary where the assumed synonymy of 'the moment of writing' and 'the moment of experience' is challenged: one concerns how Last's diary-entries do not always follow the 'strict' chronology of the day's events as they took place; and the other concerns how days outwith the date Last gives to an entry are invoked in these, most especially how her memories of the past are diversely inscribed from her 'moment of writing'. Secondly, I shall discuss Last's 'moment of writing', set within her broader writing present, as the site from which these other days are inscribed. I draw on entries that concern her practices of remembering, and examine how these connect with her perspective at 'the moment of writing'. Using these examples, I argue, thirdly, that Last artfully used or played with time, hence in using the present at 'the moment of writing', and with this the diary-genre more broadly, and that this facilitated her concern to 'hold time still' and 'take a day at a time'. The paper concludes with re-conceptualising 'the present' with which Last's diary engages in light of these discussions.

## **‘The Present’, Writing and Experience**

In terms of content, Nella Last’s diary-entries problematise the idea that ‘the present’ in any easy sense forms their scope. When writing about events that occurred on the day her diary-entries are dated, the order of events written about do not always follow the strict chronology of a day’s events as they occurred, sometimes involving analeptic and proleptic manoeuvres which link to other times in and outside the day (Genette, 1980, p. 35-47). Typically, Nella Last’s entries were internally ordered around temporal markers such as eating times and leisure times. In her entry for 12 August 1960, for instance, after commenting about ‘holiday anxieties’, Last wrote about the work she had been doing in making ‘babies woollies’ to give to Mr and Mrs Higham, whom she had hoped to meet whilst driving on the Coast Road (NL 12 August 1960). Her rendezvous with the Highams was unsuccessful, however, so she left the woollies in the Highams’ front porch. Interestingly, Last mentions in the middle of this diary-entry that Mrs Higham telephoned ‘after tea’ about the woollies. Rather, then, than writing this entry strictly according to the chronology of events, she included the denouement of the ‘woollies and Highams story’ – Mrs Higham’s telephone call – in the chain of events of that particular micro-narrative, abandoning the strict chronology of events but maintaining that of the micro-narrative in a way that makes sense in story-telling terms.

Following this, the entry then re-connects with the main chronology, providing Last’s customary detailing of what precisely she and William ate for tea, which required a short analeptic reach back in time on the same day, as she had already mentioned Mrs Higham’s post-tea telephone call: ‘We had fish for tea ... It was ample for a good tea, with bread & butter & there was sponge sandwich & small cakes’ (NL 12 August 1960). Last then follows this by writing about the choice of

television and/or radio entertainment for the evening (NL 12 August 1960), which, especially in the post-war years of her diary, became the device for narrative closure she typically used and also suggests that she wrote at least part of her entry in the evening. Clearly, then, inscribing events as they chronologically occurred on the day was not a practice Last strictly followed.

Secondly, the events and activities Last's writes about are not strictly confined to the day her entries are dated, either. Other days are invoked, often by her use of proleptic markers at various distances from the 'moment of writing', for instance:

'... as it was so hot I decided I'd better wash the three blankets I'd taken off the beds. I'll be very busy next week & I don't like soiled things lying.' (NL 9 May 1945)

'I should have been one of the tea hostesses at the club meeting this afternoon, but Mrs Higham asked me to change with her, for she will have a magistrate's meeting next month.' (NL 1 March 1954)

'Mrs Higham was delighted with the basket full of slippers, dollies bonnets & shoes & the bunny I'd made, she is going to get a pattern for a monkey from handicraft class ... I want to make toys before next year for the Hospital.' (NL 2 November 1950)

Last's analeptic comments show similar temporal diversity, reaching back into the previous day, the last year, or even back to her childhood around the turn of the century, as in the following examples:



‘We had stewed apricots, & bread & butter. I baked bread yesterday & put some small cakes in the oven, so I’ll not have to bother tomorrow.’ (NL 22 June 1958)

‘I reflected as I did it, that this time last year I’d my husband downstairs – he’d had several weeks in bed, with a thrombosis ‘block’ in his leg. Time seemed slow in passing, but looking back it really doesn’t seem a year ago, time seems to pass so much quicker now – for every one, young or old.’ (NL 18 December 1964)

‘I often think every one nowadays, tends to “look back” wistfully, as if their yesterday held happiness always. Perhaps in those leaguered days of simple pleasures & ways of life it did tend to “ignorance being bliss” – about so much. The first “horror” to enter my life, was the Boxer Rebellion, & as a small child I saw dreadful pictures of scenes in China, when a gamekeeper’s son who had been to Liverpool, brought back copies of the “Police Gazette”. I was old enough to realise there was a different world outside the quiet one in which I lived.’ (NL 31 August 1959)

These examples show that for Last the moment of writing and the moment of experience are not fixed in relation to each other, problematising the idea that her diary-entries automatically engage with ‘the present’ as it occurs. The time in mind, and also the time in pen, do not always tally with the date given to the diary-entry, despite dating being the prime means of claiming ‘I am Here and it is exactly Now’

(Fothergill, 1974, p. 9). And, by not strictly adhering to chronology and by writing about times outwith the day at hand, Last's diary-entries clearly accommodate a capacious representation of time, which points up questions concerning how to comprehend Last's inscriptions in temporal terms, given that her 'moment of writing' does not concern 'the present' in any easy, narrow or portal-like sense.

Thirdly and relatedly, seemingly pushing 'the present' further out of sight is the profusion of inscribed remembered events and activities in the form of various analepses in Last's diary. These backwards glances are far more frequent than forward leaps, which, when combined with the fact that her entries are written mostly in the past-tense, makes the diary generally analeptic in orientation. On this basic level, then, the assumption that diaries simply record a series of 'ever-changing presents' (Fothergill, 1974, p. 9) is problematic. Taking this further and engaging with inscriptions of the 'past' throws up various interesting ideas regarding re-conceptualising 'the present' by providing a way of examining 'the moment of writing', the focus of the next section.

### **The Present as 'The Moment of Writing'**

Examining Last's analeptic inscriptions suggests a number of interesting points. For instance, Last used her diary as a space to reflect on temporal complexities and to question the foundations of the memories she wrote about. Thus in the following extract she writes about the 'knotty-ness' of remembering:

‘The evening seemed to carry on the sweet nostalgic ‘memories’ called up by the lovely music & opening tune of “To Let”<sup>7</sup> – were Edwardian summers warmer, times more gracious? Or only so in memory? “To each his own” – my earliest “Victorian” memories are of being a somewhat “spoilt” crippled child, of plump women who seemed to “jingle” with what they termed “bugle” trimming, a vague smell of caraway seed, quite a few parrots at different houses where we went – how I hated & feared them, dear knows why ... Perhaps the fact I could walk without a crutch when I was eleven, began to go off on business trips with my father when I was 12-15 years or so after Queen Victoria’s death, made for a “lightsome” outlook, a quickened interest in life. The hoof beats in the Forsythe Saga, the perfect perfect production of a land where it was always summer, thrill & hold me as nothing before on the B.B.C. Did fires burn more brightly, people always sing sweetly old ballads, when asked out for the evening, were the “new fangled Viennese Bands” that were brought from London, to big garden parties in the country, so very good, were there so many wild raspas, damp fragrant mushrooms & juicy blackberries – and so many “wild” sweet chestnut & walnut trees, and do children now ever ‘discover’ the rows of Dickens, Thackeray, Dumas, Harrison Ainsworth, Scott, or Bronte, on the higher shelves of book cases?’ (NL 26 July 1947)<sup>8</sup>

Prompted by an episode of The Forsythe Saga that evening on the radio, Last questions the nostalgia of her memories of Victorian and Edwardian times. The emphasis towards the end of this extract shows her awareness that her retrospective memories, and her writing about them, do not represent the past in any unmediated way, which is further indicated in the following from three years later in her diary:

‘Halloween, - my mind roved back to others. I felt a sadness because those days seem so remote, they don’t seem real any more’ (NL 31 October 1950). And, in an earlier entry Last commented on the possible fallibility of memory, writing ‘I don’t remember – it must have been a long time ago, strange how we can forget & other remember our words – strange & a little terrifying too’ (NL 27 December 1940). These extracts suggest that the moment of writing is a moment in which experiences and times are negotiated, rather than replicated.

Also helpful here are Last’s descriptions of both her practice of remembering and, relatedly, the form of her memories: as ‘making a picture’ and as a construction of evocative and sensory multi-faceted written ‘pictures’ or ‘scenes’, respectively.<sup>9</sup> Last, for instance, commented on trying to remember the content of a WVS<sup>10</sup> Gas lecture in order to pass an exam, writing ‘Another Gas lecture today. I’ve always had a funny gift of ‘making a picture’ in my mind & ‘clothing’ words if I want to remember anything’ (NL 26 September 1939). She also used ‘picture-making’ to help her place an old face seen more than thirty years previously: ‘I always ‘make pictures’ in my mind. I suddenly remembered a skinny little white faced boy, & oddly enough a man in half livery’ (NL 13 August 1960). It provided a way for her to recover composure by focusing her mind to avoid the onslaught of an unwelcome tale:

‘[Mrs Burnett] had a mixed up tale of 1000 pound of sugar & personal insults & insecure cupboards ... so dizzy making altogether so I ‘made a picture’ of the rushing river at Sparksbridge & closed my ears- much the best when she gets full steam up.’ (NL 23 January 1941).

It triggered other sensory reactions: ‘The picture was so real I smelled the thin sweet smell of some late yellow roses I had in garden & seemed to feel the cool air through my thin navy & white spotted dress ...’ (NL 11 November 1939). And it was also involved in recollection:

‘Hallowe-en Night, the one who wrote “sorrow’s crown of sorrow, is in remembering happier days,” was quite wrong. It’s when the gay laughter & fun begins to “blur”, like a once gaily coloured picture ... I thought of the last, really happy party – Halloween of 1938, the Hogmany when we had needed to be “kept going”.’ (NL 31 October 1962).

Last’s phrase ‘making a picture’ immediately points to the importance of the present as the locus from which remembering takes place, with the moment of writing not only including writing about memories but also their negotiation and questioning their realism. Diaries are clearly not simply about the ‘here and now’ at the moment of writing, since the past, the present and the future interconnect in complex ways at that moment. These ‘time orientations’ (Mead, 1964, pp. 328-341; Roberts, 1999, p. 22; Schutz, 1973, pp. 214-215), then, are not mutually-exclusive in diary-writing.

A particular memory of Last’s from before the start of WW2 is especially interesting in terms of her inscription of remembering from the perspective of her writing present (Mead, 1959, p. 2). Last wrote about the same memory in her diary on seven separate occasions.<sup>11</sup> Each time the memory is ‘pictured’, Last pulls it away from its place in the chronological order of occurrence and also from the spatial location where the experience originally occurred. In so doing, this repeated memory represents a ‘time out of time’<sup>12</sup> (and a ‘time out of place’). Her memory of having

seen 'naval boys' in July 1938 and their ominous 'looks of beyond' recurs on at least seven occasions over a twenty-year period:

'When I heard Mr Chamberlain's voice so slow & solemn I seemed to see Southsea Prom the July before the last crisis ... There was a "sameness" about [the naval boys] ... It was the look on their faces – a slightly brooding, far away look ... their looks of "beyond".' (NL 3 September 1939)

'... my nonsense [will] perhaps ... take the picture of those naval boys off my mind. It's all right when I'm working & have to keep my mind on my work but if I relax they pass before me.' (NL 7 September 1939)

'... saw Southsea Prom and its throng of "forward looking" Naval boys & men & thought of the nearly 6000 missing off the Courageous.' (NL 20 September 1939)

'... For nights I used to feel I was standing on Southsea Prom watching the naval officers ... go past & trying to understand what they could see that I could not ...' (NL 25 September 1939)

'The wind beat & tore against the window & sounded like waves breaking & set my mind on ships tossing on the wild waters & cold frozen sailors keeping watch ...' (NL 20 January 1941)

‘News of a ship sinking, of men lost used to wring my heart & make me ill with horror. Now I can serve them & laugh & chaff with them ...’ (NL 5 March 1943)

‘... If I get very low, I’m conscious of a queer little ‘fortune telling’ stretch ... [seeing naval boys on the sea front] I wanted to clutch one of their arms, & beg them to tell me what they saw ... “it is the evil thing we will be fighting”. Such a “cut” into my – subconsciousness? – did that episode make ...’ (NL 26 July 1959)

In several of these extracts, Last mentions the ‘at the time’ occurrences that prompt her remembering, writing about the ‘slow & solemn’ voice of Mr Chamberlain (NL 3 September 1939), the wind beating against a window conjuring the sound of waves (NL 20 January 1941), and the feeling of being very low in spirits (NL 26 July 1959). Inscribed from the perspective of her ‘writing present’, then, Last’s ‘naval boys’ memory is ‘made present’ or re-presented in the process of writing.<sup>13</sup> How she does this represents her ‘take’ on things at particular times in her life, pointing up her perspective as a ‘subjective camera’ (Jennings and Madge, 1937). Last uses the memory to connote a sense of foreboding, suggesting that the naval boys’ ‘looks of ‘beyond’ (NL 3 September 1939) foretold the ‘the evil thing [they would] be fighting’ (NL 26 July 1959). Its repetition and, strikingly, her description of it as ‘a ‘cut’ into [her] – subconsciousness’ (NL 26 July 1959), shows the great significance Last affords the memory, and so it perhaps resembles what William Wordsworth’s called a ‘spot of time’, which Pinsky (2007, para. 1) describes as ‘one moment of experience, one memory, [that] can epitomise something central about a life ... the flash of a

recalled minute tells the essential story ...', or perhaps a 'turning-point' moment in her life (Denzin, 1989, p. 14). Last's use of the memory shares echoes too with Woolf's (1976) notion of a 'moment of being', which Stanley (1990, p. 63) describes as '...those apparently crystal-clear collections of memories that are the rafts upon which we link our past and present [social] self ... continually renewed by self-conscious acts of memory and writing'.

Last appears to use the 'naval boys' memory as a point of reference from which to make sense of her past experiences and to help construct meaning around events occurring in her 'writing present'. She largely preserves the shape of her 'naval boys' memory over her diary-writing life, so although she may have refined this in her mind at each telling, it is not reflected in her writing. Indeed, although Last reconstructed the 'naval boys' memory differently in each telling, restructuring the past through the lens of each different 'writing present',<sup>14</sup> - the memory seems remarkably unchanged both in the way it is told and regarding its content over time and is almost a 'fly in amber' moment in Last's diary.<sup>15</sup> This memory possibly, then, constitutes a 'time atom' (Kracauer, 1966, p. 76), reoccurring in the diary in almost precisely the same form, although 'atom' is perhaps too pointed and closed a term. Although there is considerable value in recognising the moment of writing as a site in which complex pasts and futures are reconstructed and made up of multiple 'time perspectives' (Mead, 1964, pp. 328-341; Roberts, 1999, p. 22; Schutz, 1973, pp. 214-215), this is still not complex enough to account for some of the finer 'temporal distortions' (Genette 1980; Todorov 1966), particularly such 'time atoms' in Nella Last's diary.



### **Playing with/in ‘The Present’**

Last seems to play with time in her diary<sup>16</sup> when holding still her ‘naval boys’ memory, an interpretation that resonates with her description of her perspective on how to deal with upheaval and change, wanting to ‘hold each day a little longer’, sweeping back the sea of time to hold the clock back and remain in a state of inertia, as in the following:

‘Cliff did not come home tonight & I’m glad now for I can look forward to it all next week. In his letter he said they have got identification discs & pay books for overseas. I cannot sweep the sea back with my little broom however I try. Soon the sea will be up to my door – my baby will have to go! – like all other mothers’ “babies” & we cannot hold the clock back. I have the feeling sometimes that I don’t want Xmas to come & go – if I could do so I would clutch at & hold each day a little longer.’ (NL 10 November 1939)

Last’s fear of the future and hence her desire to ‘hold the clock back’ and ‘clutch at & hold each day a little longer’ (NL 10 November 1939) appears elsewhere in her diary, as in:

‘Arthur my elder boy thinks it a “wonderful philosophy” of mine to try & “take each day as it comes & do the best I can with it” but its not – its just a kind of fear to look ahead: - a woman who sees all the simple joys turning into luxuries that no amount of money could buy.’ (NL 19 September 1939)

‘I’d like to meet someone nowadays who was not afraid of something or other so don’t worry – just keep putting one foot down after another & you will get along the road however black – few if any can see far ahead & today is the day that matters.’ (NL 10 January 1941)

There is an implied connection, then, between Last’s ‘fear to look ahead’ and her desire to ‘hold each day a little longer’, a connection that is made through her description of her perspective as ‘tak[ing] each day as it comes’ and ‘today is the day that matters’. In other words, she writes that she copes with her fear of the future by focusing on the day at hand and ‘putting one foot down after another’, as:

‘When I heard on the Wireless that the Gov had prepared for a three years war & I felt a queer sick feeling but it passed. We will only have to live of one day of it at a time & I’ll give every hour to Service as long as the War lasts.’ (NL 10 September 1939)

She develops this idea, writing just over a year later:

‘I’ve only heard the remark “I wonder what the New Year will bring” once & by the way it was “hushed up” it might have been an obscene expression. I wonder if everyone is learning to “take a day at a time”. Me, I like to fill my days so full that when I undress I feel I lay, not only my clothes aside but also my day – like a brick on a wall that “protects” me in some way – from thinking & worrying over things that I cannot alter or abate. I thought my ‘wall’ was a new wartime thought but Arthur says I’ve always had it & once

told him that “life itself was a wall & that bricks left out or carelessly laid made the wall less secure & able to stand up to the storms of life”.’ (NL 27 December 1940)

Here Last suggests that there is a more general fear about the future, through her proleptic consideration of ‘what the New Year will bring’. She not only suggests that ‘taking a day at a time’ helps conquer this fear but also that by filling each day as full as possible (and, by implication, writing in detail about every day), she is able ‘not only [to lay her] clothes aside’ when she undresses at the end of the day but also her day itself. The physicality implied in the ‘laying aside’ of her clothes is carried through to ‘laying aside’ her days, and indeed Last was literally able to lay her day aside, by turning over or setting aside sheets of writing paper. This ‘laying aside’ of a day was, therefore, an embodied material practice enacted through her daily diary-writing.

Last complexly used the ‘daily’ assumption of the genre in practising her diary-writing, working with it to achieve her own ends, which signifies something of the flexibility of the diary-genre in fitting people’s needs. Reciprocally, then, writing in the form of ‘a diary’ brings order to Last’s life experiences, structured passing time, and even facilitated the holding of particular moments seemingly still, all organised from her perspective of the writing present. Last clearly, then, used the act of representation in diary-writing to her own ends, with ‘the moment of writing’ being stretchy, capacious and responsive, whether to ‘at the time’ experiences or to the remembered experiences which she ‘made present’.

## **Conclusions: temporality and diaries**

Overall, Nella Last's diary points up many temporal complications. It is not 'immediate' in the sense of there being synonymy between 'the moment of writing' and 'the scene of what is written about' (Stanley and Dampier, 2006), and it exhibits 'infidelities to the chronological order of events' (Genette, 1980, p. 29) and 'temporal distortions' (Todorov, 1966). Together, these features undermine any easy characterisation of 'a diary' as generically of and about 'the present'.

Last's diary, however, also shows that a rather different conceptualisation of 'the present' remains important, one that can be understood by again deploying Stanley and Dampier's (2006) term 'the moment of writing'. This 'moment' points up two important things. Firstly, writing, however close to the moment of to-be inscribed experience, 'takes time', despite this being ignored or dismissed in the 'written at the time, of the time' claim often made about diaries (Fothergill, 1974, p. 40; Rendall, 1986, p. 58). This brings to the fore the importance of how writers and readers make sense of the prototypical temporal distance between writing and experience. Secondly, therefore, my approach to this is to focus on the 'moment of writing' as a 'simultaneous inter-penetration of the past, present and future' (Usher, 1998, p. 22). This undermines the idea that 'the present' can be dislocated from the past and the future in analysis or, indeed, in the representation of experience. In fact, the relationship between these temporal orientations is constructed at this 'moment'. Only then does the diarist write a tailored and responsive representation (and perhaps consolidation) of some of her past, present and projected future experiences. She is therefore actively agentive in constructing time in her diary, rather than her diary being a conduit through which so-called 'reality' (whether past or present) is mirrored.

This more complicated understanding of ‘the present’ is ‘thick’, in a Ricoeurian sense, and can be thickened further still by considering the interconnections between the moment of writing and the writing present in which it is located. The writing present is best seen as the diarist’s broad contemporary location, materially-grounded and influenced by local as well as wider discursive practices and conventions that impact, albeit in a contested and varied way, on how people perceive, read, write, interpret (Smith, 1999; Stanley, 1992; Swindells, 1995). Last’s diary, as with other diaries, is something of a meeting place for such things, a ‘cultural artefact’ (Paperno, 2004; Randolph, 2004) that is the product of the ‘diary-genre’, including its temporal aspects. How people interpret and use such genres is a means of examining such forces (Israel, 1999). And how the diarist responds to and works with these discourses and conventions informs her viewpoint and especially her activities as a ‘subjective camera’ (Jennings and Madge, 1937) for Mass-Observation, forming a kind of ‘subjective lens’ through which the diarist perceives her temporal and social world and through which she interacts with them. The result is a nexus of mind, self and society which denotes her (sense of) place in the world (Mead, 1962), an ‘autobiographical standpoint’ (Pike, 1976, p. 331),<sup>17</sup> and it is this that best encapsulates the complicated ‘present’ I have discussed here around what the ‘moment of writing’ signifies.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Hassam's (1987, p. 442) notion of diaries as 'as if' texts. See also Paperno (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Stanley and Dampier (2006, p. 25). See Ricoeur (1980, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c).

<sup>3</sup> Lejeune (1982, p. 193) suggests that diaries do not fulfil the conditions of autobiography because their narration is not 'retrospectively oriented'. More recently, Lejeune (2001, p. 103) has gone further to suggest that 'a diary is turned towards the future' rather than the past.

<sup>4</sup> Stored at the Mass-Observation Archive, University of Sussex. Last's diary-entries between January 1944 and April 1945 are missing. See also Broad and Fleming (1981).

<sup>5</sup> This was also the title for the docu-drama aired in December 2006 with Victoria Wood as Nella Last, based on the wartime years of her diary.

<sup>6</sup> I echoed this temporal frame in my sampling of a month from every year of Last's diary over the 27 year period.

<sup>7</sup> The third part of the televised version of John Galsworthy's *The Forsythe Saga*.

<sup>8</sup> Emphasis, grammar and spelling in all extracts is transcribed directly from Last's original manuscript diary.

<sup>9</sup> Last's depiction of her practice of remembering as 'making a picture' shares similarities with how Woolf (1976) writes about remembering through 'scene-making'.

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<sup>10</sup> Women's Voluntary Service.

<sup>11</sup> My detailed and particular 'over time' examination of Last's diary enabled me to pinpoint these comments.

<sup>12</sup> See Falassi (1987), especially the chapter by Turner (1987). See also Houben (2002). According to Harkin (1988, pp. 118-121), who draws on Bakhtin (1981), Bourdieu (1977, p. 78), and Heidegger (1982, pp. 257-264), among others, instances of 'time out of time' pertain to a 'habitual chronotope' (circular and repeated) that counters and is not included in the linear 'white man chronotope' which invokes progress and forward movement, as in the latter time is perceived as one-dimensional.

<sup>13</sup> Gunn (1982, p. 17) describes how for Augustine 'autobiography is presencing', and that 'what is made present is not merely a past that is past. What is presented is a reality, always new, to which the past has contributed but which stands, as it were, in front of the autobiographer'. See Heidegger (1982, p. 287) and Morrison (1978, p. 194).

<sup>14</sup> Mead (1959 [1932], p. 2) writes that the 'past must be set over against a present within which the emergent appears, and the past, which must then be looked at from the standpoint of the emergent, becomes a different past' and also that 'from every new rise the landscape that stretches behind us becomes a different landscape' (Mead, 1959 [1932], pp. 9-10).

<sup>15</sup> Carter (2006, p. 54), drawing on Derrida (1996), writes that a diary '... is written to secure a particular moment against the oblivion of forgetfulness'. See Steedman (2001).

<sup>16</sup> See Mace (1998) and Jolly (2001).

<sup>17</sup> Pike (1976, p. 331) suggests that the 'autobiographical standpoint' pertains to 'the fixed, present moment', but I afford it more fluidity.