

Seven lives from mass observation: Britain in the late twentieth-century

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Abstrak

The book uses autobiographical writing contributed to Mass Observation since 1981 to explore the social and cultural history of late-twentieth-century Britain. Prompted by thrice-yearly open-ended questionnaires, Mass Observations volunteers wrote about their political attitudes, religious beliefs, work, childhoods, education, friendships, marriages, sex lives, mid-life crises, aging, the whole range of human emotion, feeling, attitudes, and experience. At the core of the book are seven biographical essays, intimate portraits of individual lives set in the context of the shift towards a more tolerant and permissive society from the 1960s and of the rise of Thatcherite neo-liberalism as the structures of Britains post-war settlement crumbled from the later 1970s. The mass observers featured in the book, four women and three men, are drawn from across the social spectrum, wife of a small businessman, teacher, social worker, RAF wife, mechanic, lorry driver, banker: all active and forceful characters with strong opinions and lives crowded with struggle and drama. All of them were born before the Second World War, so they experienced the changing shape of post-1960s Britain as already fully formed adults. The honesty and frankness with which they wrote about themselves takes us below the surface of public life to the efforts of ordinary, but exceptionally articulate and self-reflective, people to make sense of their lives in rapidly changing times.