

John Sommerfield and Mass-Observation

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When the name of John Sommerfield (1908-1991) appears in a work of literary criticism it is usually either in connection with a specific reference to *May Day*, his experimental proletarian novel of 1936, or as part of a list containing some or all of the following names: Arthur Calder-Marshall, Jack Lindsay, Edgell Rickword, Montagu Slater, Randall Swingler and Amabel Williams-Ellis. As part of this semi-autonomous literary wing of the Communist Party, Sommerfield played his full role in turn on the *Left Review* collective in the 1930s, in various writers' groups such as the Ralph Fox Group of the 1930s and the Realist Writers' Group launched in early 1940, and on the editorial commission of *Our Time* in the late 1940s, before leaving the Party in 1956. However, significantly for the argument that follows concerning Sommerfield's capacity to record the intersubjective quality of social existence, he was as much known for his pub going and camaraderie as his politics, with Dylan Thomas once saying "if all the party members were like John Sommerfield, I'd join on the spot" (Croft 66). Doris Lessing came to know him in the early 1950s, after he approached her to join the current incarnation of the Communist Party Writers' Group, and she describes him fondly in her memoirs: "He was a tall, lean man, pipe-smoking, who would allow to fall from unsmiling lips surreal diagnoses of the world he lived in, while his eyes insisted he was deeply serious. A comic" (Lessing 81). This mixture of solid literary-political endeavour and likeability has led to confusion about Sommerfield's class position with critics such as Valentine Cunningham (306-08) and Ian Hayward (48) treating him as a working-class writer. However, the one biographical essay that has been published, Andy Croft's "Returned Volunteer: The Novels of John Sommerfield," informs us that Sommerfield was the son of a self-educated journalist and attended University College School in Hampstead alongside contemporaries such as Stephen Spender and Maurice Cornforth, who later introduced him to the Communist Party in the early 1930s.

The mistaken identification of Sommerfield as primarily a working-class writer of the 1930s has diverted attention away from a significant writing career spanning over half a century, which included another

five published novels – *They Die Young* (1930; published as *The Death of Christopher* in the USA), *The Adversaries* (1952), *The Inheritance* (1956), *North West Five* (1960) and *The Imprinted* (1977) – and at least two more in manuscript;¹ a successful guide to amateur stage-managing, *Behind the Scenes* (1934); his memoir of fighting alongside his friend John Cornford in the defence of republican Madrid against Franco's forces in late 1936, *Volunteer in Spain* (1937); a propagandist novella about a rent strike, *Trouble in Porter Street* (1938); a number of short stories written before and during the Second World War, collected as *The Survivors* (1947); the screenplays to a number of documentary films including *Waverley Steps* (1947); and numerous reports on Bolton pubs for the social research organisation Mass-Observation (MO), culminating in his role as principal author of their book-length study *The Pub and the People* (1943). In particular, his first and last published novels, which are both semi-autobiographical, demonstrate the obvious inadequacies of the terms characterizing the dominant critical strands of his reception and reveal the outlines of a career trajectory in which *May Day* was not the sole highlight but one of a number of significant achievements in successfully rendering intersubjective experience. *They Die Young* is a self-consciously modern novel that utilises a range of explicitly modernist devices to tell the story of its protagonist, Christopher, who works variously in the theatre and in Wall Street before going to sea. Sommerfield's class origins are revealed in a scene where he writes himself into the text as a young man stroking a cat in a café in Montevideo:

Nice cat isn't he, essayed Christopher. Yes charming, replied the young man in a surprisingly English public school sort of voice. Christopher regarded him with new interest, intrigued at recognising one of his class in such an environment, and unable – just because he was of that class – to give any sign of his surprise and pleasure. The young man seemed quite friendly, but very casual [...] His conversation had a more or less sophisticated, rather 'literary' style. Christopher was desperately anxious to find out what he was doing and to tell him what Christopher was doing in such a situation. From cats the talk went to Carl van Vechten, who had written so sympathetically of them, and thence to books generally. He seemed to have read all the books Christopher had, and a good deal more. (269-70)

The scene ends with the man passing his address to Christopher and telling him to look him up the next time he is in London:

Christopher looked at the piece of paper. In an ornamental but not very readable hand was written 'John Sommerfield, 19, Bark Place, Kensington Gardens, London, W.2.' John Sommerfield . . . he reflected. I seem to have heard that name somewhere. . . . (270)

Both the content and the deliberate playfulness here are the antithesis of what proletarian writing is generally taken to entail, which not only supports the argument that Sommerfield's career is more interesting than commonly acknowledged, but also, more importantly, demonstrates a capacity to view himself simultaneously as observer and observed that would come fully into its own in his subsequent fiction and also his participation in MO.

In his final published, semi-autobiographical, novel, *The Imprinted*, Sommerfield fictionalises his life and friends in an attempt to escape from the dominant readings of the 1930s that were forming at the time he was writing. So, for example, the character "John Rackstraw," who represents Cornford, doesn't die in the defence of Madrid but returns back to Britain to get involved in an unsuccessful relationship with "Jean Reynolds," based on Jean Ross (immortalised by Christopher Isherwood as "Sally Bowles"), before being killed in action during the Second World War. Through such games, reminiscent of the playfulness in *They Die Young*, Sommerfield debunks the way that ideological constructions of history draw their authority from depictions of "famous lives". In another scene, the narrator of the novel is questioned about his relationship with "Angus Muir" (Malcolm Lowry) by a researcher who is clearly based on Lowry's biographer Douglas Day. This experience, in combination with his uneasy involvement in the production of an anniversary radio programme about "Rackstraw," leads to the wry reflection that: "With any luck I could be drinking on my dead friends and acquaintances for sometime to come" (41). On one level, therefore, we can detect a humorous self-aware criticism of how easy it is to become complicit with the processes by which ideological factors lead to the historicising of famous literary figures. At the same time, though, by including substantial fictional portraits of equally important but lesser-known people such as the Bloomsbury-group member and close confidant of many of the century's leading modernist writers, Mary Hutchinson, and the owner of the Parton Street Book Shop, David Archer, Sommerfield directs us to hidden, alternative histories and literary networks that contest received literary history. The Parton Street Book Shop, for instance, was the location at which poetry and left-wing politics met in the centre of literary London; where contributors to *Left Review* rubbed shoulders with members of the English Surrealist Group.² It is clear from the details he provides in *The Imprinted* that Sommerfield was familiar with this milieu and knowledge of this involvement illuminates his participation in MO, which I will argue

was the logical extension of the intersubjective style of writing he pioneered in *May Day*.

The idea of MO originated in the autumn of 1936 in a series of meetings held by Charles Madge and Humphrey Jennings at Blackheath, where they both lived, at which friends and fellow poets such as Kathleen Raine (Madge's wife), William Empson, David Gascoyne, and Ruthven Todd discussed coincidences, symbolic happenings, and the idea of "Popular Poetry." Famously, when Madge published a letter about the group in the *New Statesman* of 2 January 1937 it appeared on the same page as Tom Harrisson's only ever published poem, "Coconut Moon." Harrisson read Madge's letter and contacted him. When MO published a follow-up letter four weeks later it was signed by Harrisson, Jennings, and Madge, who have ever since been considered to be the three co-founders and principal driving forces of the organisation. However, the predominance of these three should not be taken as an excuse to regard everyone else involved in the early days of MO as either a dilettante or a hired hand. Sommerfield, for instance, apart from inhabiting the same social and literary milieu surrounding the Parton Street Book Shop as the original group of left wing poets, had also known Harrisson, through their mutual friend Lowry, since the early 1930s and started work at the beginning of MO's Bolton-based "Worktown" project as the director of field research in Bolton. As previously indicated, his own fieldwork involved the study of pubs (which, according to Croft, eventually made him seriously ill from drinking too much beer) and he was the principal writer of the section on "Pub-Goers" in *First Year's Work*, drafted in 1937 and published in 1938, as well as *The Pub and the People*, which was substantially compiled in the first half of 1938 but not published until 1943. Therefore, his written output over the first eighteen months of MO was broadly equivalent with that of the co-founders, which is not entirely surprising as, despite being a similar age, he was a much more experienced author than any of them. Work for the pub study was completed before the summer of 1938, by which time Sommerfield, in common with most of the original Worktown squad, had left Bolton. However, that was not the end of his involvement with MO; he was to resume work with them during 1940 and 1941, when, as part of an investigation into conditions in the forces, he sent Harrisson reports from the RAF bases he was stationed at. Then in 1960, he was part of the team of original observers assembled by Harrisson to return to Bolton to investigate how the town had changed in the intervening years; this study was written up as *Britain Revisited* (1961).

In *The Auden Generation*, Samuel Hynes equivocally acknowledges the paradigmatic status of MO with respect to "the Thirties": "It was at once literary and scientific, realist and surrealist, political and psychological, Marxist and Freudian, objective and salvationist. In its confusions of methods and goals it is a complex example of the confusions of young

intellectuals at the time” (Hynes 279). In the course of discussing MO as a literary movement, Hynes argues that the primary achievement of its first book, *May the Twelfth* (1937), a mass-observation of George VI’s Coronation Day edited by Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge (two of the three MO co-founders) with assistance from others including William Empson and Kathleen Raine, was to demonstrate the numbing repetitiveness of hundreds of pages of observers’ reports: “The founders of MO believed that the mass-consciousness could write a truer and better book than one man with his intuitions; *May the Twelfth* proves that they were wrong – writing will have to go on being an individual activity” (Hynes 286). However, in the thirty years since Hynes’s book was first published, MO’s position within literary history has become firmly established.³ It is not necessary to reject Hynes’s edict that writing is an individual activity, to discuss the possibility that participation in MO might have offered individual writers access to perspectives otherwise unavailable to them. Apart from anything else, some explanation is needed to account for the sheer number of writers who became involved in the project.

Of course, we could possibly reconcile Hynes’s judgement with the involvement in MO of aspirant and beginner writers desperate for the experience and the opportunity to see themselves in print; although the calibre of those falling into this category as listed by Cunningham is impressive (despite his failure to identify the “Bolton coalman” he mentions twice as Bill Naughton):

MO also provided an outlet for striving and ambitious would-be writers: B. L. Coombes; the young Walter Allen, who joined as a twenty-six-year-old journalist; Robert Melville the future art critic, then a commercial clerk in Sparkhill, Birmingham; C. H. Sisson, then an office worker in the Ministry of Labour; J. F. Hendry, then an Assistant Inspector of Taxes in Leeds; Eric Edney (future poet of the International Brigade), then a “musical assistant” in Bulawayo. It’s not at all surprising to discover that the Huddersfield power-loom turner was Fred Brown, author of *The Muse Went Weaving*. It was literary types who signed up; not least among the students involved. The schoolboys included P. N. Furbank; the undergraduates Boris Ford (a pupil of Leavis at Downing College; future editor of the *Pelican Guide to English Literature*), Herbert Howarth (the future literary critic), George Woodcock (anarchist and future friend of Orwell), Kenneth

Allott, Denzil Dunnett (a name familiar to perusers of Oxford literary magazines of the '30s), Alan Hodge. (Cunningham 338)

However, if Hynes is right in implying that MO was the antithesis of writing, why did established writers such as Sommerfield become involved with it? There was nothing aspirant about some of the other writers and literary figures who became mass-observers with him: H. D., Frances Partridge, Jack Lindsay, J. B. S. Haldane, Naomi Mitchison, Gay Taylor, Bernard Spencer and Theodora Bosanquet, the literary editor of *Time and Tide*.⁴ Of these, Mitchison's level of commitment to MO was certainly comparable with Sommerfield's. She became an enthusiastic participant in MO from its formation in January 1937, filling in its day-surveys and monthly directives and then in accordance with their instructions, keeping a diary throughout the Second World War; an edited version of which has been published as *Among You Taking Notes* (1985). Her involvement with MO resumed in 1981, when the contemporary Mass-Observation Project was started up at the University of Sussex and for more than a decade she sent her type-written responses to the directives that are sent out three or four times a year. Therefore, especially when the original Blackheath group is taken into account, it becomes apparent that MO is unparalleled within literary history for being a project which successfully attracted an unusually high level of commitment from a diverse range of writers.

One way of understanding this attraction would be to see MO as providing a solution to what Alick West identified in *Crisis and Criticism*, first published in 1937, as the problem facing writers in the interwar period: "When I do not know any longer who are the "we" to whom I belong, I do not know any longer who 'I' am either" (19). This problem could be glossed as the problem of intersubjectivity in that it is implicitly rooted in an understanding that any individual's subjective perspective and identity can only be understood in terms of both those meanings and values they do share with others, and those they do not. Obviously, this was not just a philosophical question but one that became so politically urgent during the period that totalising systems of thought such as Communism and Fascism attracted millions of adherents. In applying his diagnosis specifically to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* at the beginning of his book, West was identifying one branch of modernism as the symptom of the crisis rather than the solution; it reflected the collapse of relatively stable nineteenth-century conceptions of the relationship between the individual and society amongst the ongoing crisis of capitalist relations that led to the First World War and the Russian Revolution without being able to free itself of those relations. West goes on to distinguish James Joyce's *Ulysses* from this critical judgement by arguing that the significance of its stylistic innovation was that it expressed a new realisation that: "the individual's world is not within the four walls that

protect money, board and bed. His world is his society" (117). However, from West's Communist perspective, the limitation of Joyce's social world was that it ignored production, and the conflicts surrounding it, and consisted only of "numberless acts of consuming, spending, enjoying of things that are already there" (120-21). The goal of the interwar years, according to this reading, was for writers to resolve the problem of how to relate "I" to "we" by extending the modernist trajectory established in the succession from Eliot to Joyce to represent the widest possible range of intersubjective relationships – incorporating individual, class, gender, societal, colonial, media, and mechanised production relationships – characteristic of the modern mass society which had arisen in the West following the First World War. Sommerfield, with his distinctive career trajectory, makes the ideal subject for a case study of both how an interwar writer was able to undertake this process outlined by West and why participation in MO was particularly enabling in this context.

At the age of sixteen Sommerfield left school and worked in various jobs, notably as a carpenter's labourer at the Scene Shop on the Old Kent Road, before going to sea as a dish-washer with the United Food Freight Lines, sailing between New York, Buenos Aires, the West Indies and Liverpool.⁵ This experience informs the second half of *They Die Young*. This work of the twenty-one-year-old Sommerfield is something of a shock to the reader who comes to him primarily from *May Day*. It starts off as a very self-consciously modern tale of bright young things, foregrounded against "the vagaries of variously curved and dimensioned space-time continuums" (65). A sense of disintegration is reinforced by chapter epigraphs which range through sources such as Milton and Heraclitus before abruptly ceasing mid-novel with "Is dissa system?" from Milt Gross's *Nize Baby*. One significant influence is acknowledged by a reference to Aldous Huxley's *Antic Hay*. However, Sommerfield's intentions are most clearly foregrounded in a six-page sequence (66-72) which describes the ongoing events as though they are in novels by, respectively, Arnold Bennett, Virginia Woolf, and James Branch Cabell; a juxtaposition that is presumably intended as a deliberate flouting of cultural distinctions but which also displays a wide-ranging perceptive intelligence of the variety of literary value. The allusion to Woolf could be seen as an implied criticism of modernism or simply a knowing joke: "And the large extent of his thoughts made the climb of these stairs as crowded with incident as an interminable hundred yards in St. James Park as featured in the works of Mrs. Virginia Woolf" (69). The latter seems more likely since, as Tony Shaw has noted, *They Die Young* displays a fairly unrestrained use of modernist techniques including sudden line breaks, ellipsis, typographical devices and an absence of speech marks. Therefore, while Sommerfield might be joking about Woolf, he is not overtly satirising her style; rather he seems to be treating modernism as a default mode for

representing the uncertainties of life after the First World War.

Within this context, and given the manner in which the protagonist, Christopher, increasingly comes to regard himself as an observer rather than the actor of his own life, the scene quoted near the beginning of this article, in which he meets the character “John Sommerfield” in a Montevideo café, may be seen as an attempt to reflect the intersubjective problem of the time. In his uncertainty concerning his relationship to others, Christopher becomes increasingly unsure of himself to the point, at the novel’s close, by which there is nothing left of him “but a dead husk for his puzzled lonely spirit” (318) and the context is thus established for his death in a speeding car, which is also a rebirth, at the novel’s opening: “Swifter than light and thought he had freed himself from dimensions and overtaken the trampling feet of time, so that the past yet lay in the future and he was once again the Christopher of two years ago” (11). The overall structure is therefore one of an endlessly repeating time loop which mocks contemporary notions of “metamorphosis” (240). The novel makes knowing references to “Surréalistes” (88) and Eugene Jolas’s influential journal *transition*, but while Christopher may constantly be at the “point of transition,” he never knows where he is going (227).

The only character who escapes this ceaseless cycle of modern change is Sommerfield himself in what may be seen as a nuanced rejection of a twenties-style modern sensibility. Passages in the novel portray how his real-life experiences at sea led to the development of a political consciousness which would make him become a communist soon after its completion. Watching the loading of bananas at docks in the tropics gives rise to an awareness of the horror of endless labour throughout the life cycle for generation after generation (204-07) which is subsequently connected to his own experience endlessly scrubbing decks as a seaman:

A sense of enormous futility rose in him. All over the world people were spending the greater part of their lives in this manner and, what was worse, unthinkingly accepting it as a reasonable proposition that they should continue to do so. Blind to the futility of their unending pointless efforts, doubtless they were happier, but as long as they continued in their blindness so it would continue for their lives and the lives of their children. (222)

The transformation between the fictional Christopher caught in an endlessly modern picaresque existence and the real Sommerfield finding meaning in the class struggle anticipates the contrast present in *May Day* between the seaman James Seton, who no longer has a real home and eventually dies, and his brother, John, a carpenter at Langfier’s factory,

who finds himself taking on an increasingly leading role as the struggle for workplace demands spills over into the streets. This relationship between the Seton brothers represents Sommerfield's own development from returned sailor into fully-fledged "proletarian" activist. At the same time, *They Die Young* displays the insight that the solution to the breathless circularity of intersubjective modern existence in the 1920s is to somehow change perspectival viewpoint so that what has become meaningless can be made meaningful again: "New York seems romantic from London, London from New York. Surely it might be possible for London to appear mysterious, exotic, and exciting from the middle of Piccadilly Circus, and then how much nicer life would become" (256-57). It was only half a decade later, when writing *May Day*, that Sommerfield was finally able to put into practice this insight that a perspectival change was required. In moving beyond simply alluding to Woolf as a default means of representing modernity and instead directly incorporating the techniques used in *Mrs Dalloway*, he was able to provide a stereoscopic vision of the collective intersubjectivity, including the production and property relations of the factory, of London's inhabitants over the space of three days.

Before that aesthetic breakthrough, however, Sommerfield, or rather *They Die Young* with its uncompromising picture of shipboard life, came to the attention of Lowry, whose first novel *Ultramarine* (1933) was to draw on his own seafaring experiences. While writing *Ultramarine*, Lowry made a point of seeking out the authors of books about life at sea that he admired such as Conrad Aiken and Nordahl Grieg. In the same spirit, he sought out Sommerfield, who, apart from becoming a member of the Communist Party, had married on the strength of the £150 advance he had received for *They Die Young* and was now sharing rented accommodation with his parents and working occasionally once more in the Scene Shop. This was where Lowry turned up late one afternoon dressed in working man's attire with a ukulele and half a bottle of whiskey. They were to become close friends and drinking companions off and on for the next two years until Lowry left for New York in the autumn of 1934. At Cambridge Lowry had been involved with the journal *Experiment* alongside Jennings, Empson, and Raine – the precursor to the Blackheath Group of 1936 – but he also had a circle of university drinking friends that included Harrisson. There is little doubt that Sommerfield and Harrisson first met through Lowry in a London pub sometime in the early 1930s.

Shortly after Lowry left Britain, Sommerfield wrote *The Last Weekend*, in which one of the central characters is based on Lowry. The novel was never published and today survives only as several brief extracts in Day's *Malcolm Lowry* (153-55) but Lowry read the typescript at some point and refers to it in his famous letter of 2 January 1946 to Jonathan Cape defending *Under the Volcano* (1947) against the revisions recommended

by the readers' report:

one day round about New Year's '44, I picked up an American review of *The Lost Weekend*. At first I thought it must be *The Last Weekend* by my old pal John (*Volunteer in Spain*) Sommerfield, a very strange book in which figured in some decline no less a person than myself, and I am still wondering what John thinks about this: but doubtless the old boy ascribes it to the vagaries of the capitalist system (Lowry 14).⁶

It is not clear whether *The Lost Weekend* was the same unpublished novel that Sommerfield later dismissed as "about ideas instead of people" (Croft 62) but Lowry's assertion that it was "strange" suggests that Sommerfield was still experimenting with forms and, as in *They Die Young*, trying to find a way of solving the problem of intersubjectivity. As suggested, this search would eventually result in *May Day*, which was written after the call of the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress for "Socialist Realism" had become known in Britain. On the one hand, the novel's subject matter of factory workers going on strike and joining in a tumultuous May Day march – the annual event, dating since 1890, in which the trade union movement processed through the streets of London to Hyde Park – seems to fit the requirements of the Soviets. However, given Karl Radek's vitriolic attack on Joyce at the Congress, *May Day's* overt usage of modernist techniques has to be seen as a deliberate act of defiance. In fact, one can conclude from the example of *May Day* and other creative and critical interventions, such as West's positive discussion of Joyce in *Crisis and Criticism*, that the British Communist literary intelligentsia were determined to forge a distinctive alternative to Soviet-prescribed "Socialist Realism," or, in some cases, to take advantage of the ambiguity of that term in order to employ it as a cloak for the continued use of experimental techniques.

As Stuart Laing observes, *May Day* is comprised of sections of several pages, each detailing the activities of sets of characters or some aspect of London represented as a single constellation. However, it differs from its literary models of *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway* in that it lacks central protagonists – the autobiographically-based Seton brothers appear no more than at least a score of other characters. While Woolf's novel emphasises the alienation that can be experienced in the city as well as revealing unexpected connections through characters passing in the street or seeing the same aeroplane from different parts of the city, Sommerfield concentrates on the latter devices in order to achieve his political objective of showing everything and everyone to be connected. Laing is right to note that

Beneath these immediate connections and making sense of them is the structure of social

and economic relations which is focused by the involvement of many of the characters, at a variety of levels and in a variety of roles, in one particular factory (Laing 149).

This focus on Langfrier's factory allows Sommerfield to anticipate West's call for a depiction of the social world that focuses on the forces of production and the conflicts that arise around it. Further evidence of a shared British Communist agenda can be seen in Jack Lindsay's claim in *Left Review* that *May Day* was "the best collective novel that we have yet produced in England; the real protagonist is the London working-class" (qtd. in Laing 147).

The consequence of this collective focus, however, is that critics have been able to attack the novel on grounds such as those advanced by David Smith, that Sommerfield's "people are not people but simply ideological chessmen" (66). The sentence from *May Day* that Smith cites in support of his assertion is the following description of the young women working in the factory: "These silly girls with their synthetic Hollywood dreams, their pathetic silk stockings and lipsticks, their foolish strivings to escape from the cramped monotony of their lives, are the raw material of history" (Sommerfield, *May Day* 30). Smith does not acknowledge that this description is part of a long tracking sequence following one of the novel's ninety or so named protagonists through Langfrier's factory in order to show us the whole machine process in terms of the context of the "days and weeks of the girls' lives wasting away": "When they are 21 the factory sees them no more. They would have to be paid an uneconomic wage, so they are replaced by a fresh batch of schoolgirls" (30). The focus then changes from the girls in general to one in particular, Ivy Cutford, who will subsequently lead the deposition to the men which will result in the strike at the novel's culmination. Yet, before that highpoint is reached, we also experience Ivy's journey home from a political meeting to her "lonely little room [... and her] longing to be desired" (99). Her private feelings of discontent are linked to those of another seven or eight million Londoners lying in their beds or looking out of their windows. *May Day* is interesting precisely because it does recognise the kind of individual dissatisfaction that features in modernist texts, like the early stories of Katherine Mansfield for example, but, unlike modernist texts in general, it seeks explicitly to relate the uncertain intersubjective relationships underpinning such dissatisfaction to the capitalist production process.

Laing suggests that *May Day* is directly comparable to MO's *May the Twelfth* in that both are the literary equivalent of documentary films and both bear specific affinities to Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927).⁷ Ruttmann's film and the London montage sequence from *May the Twelfth* both begin with arrival in the city by train, whereas

Sommerfield's novel begins with a traveller arriving from the sea; and all three present "totalising images of the city as a network of communication systems" (Laing 149). Indeed in some ways, *May Day* is an uncanny forerunner of *May the Twelfth*; especially in its prediction of a city-wide bus strike, which actually happened in May 1937 and is commented on by several mass-observers. Rather as MO sought to plot weather maps of the collective unconscious from the imagery of the day, one of Sommerfield's protagonists is "a small cyclone, passing over London in a North-east by easterly direction" (Sommerfield, *May Day* 156). The style that Sommerfield employs to describe the final march on May Day is very close to the surrealist report style that Jennings was to use in *May the Twelfth*:

The marchers broke their ranks to rest. Banners were leaned against walls. The road was suddenly clear. A mounted policeman's horse deposited a small neat pile of dung on the smooth, empty tar surface. (Sommerfield 213).

The open stands are empty. The statue of Byron shines in the rain. The police are reforming their units. (Jennings and Madge 145)

However, this similarity also alerts us to the fact that in the same way as Jennings is as much the protagonist of the London section of *May the Twelfth* as the crowds assembled to watch the Coronation, Sommerfield, himself, remains a central presence in *May Day*. The seafaring and carpentering experiences of the Seton brothers are Sommerfield's experiences but so are those of many other characters in the novel. Laing quotes the following passage to illustrate how the novel's synoptic view of London ranges from the factory floor to the upper-class society of *Mrs Dalloway*:

That's Peter Langfier, thinks Clara. Look how he stands against the wall, melancholy and alone. He wears a sad, a disillusioned air. Now I catch his eye, now I smile at him, a sympathetic smile that tells him I understand, that I too have leaned against a wall, forlorn and melancholy, waiting for someone who does not come.

I have given up hoping that she will come, thinks Peter. But the door keeps opening with a premonitory rustle of women's clothes and every time my heart beats faster for the little space of time it takes to prove that it is not she. (Laing 151; Sommerfield 93)

It is Sommerfield's range of cross-class experience in London – the fact that he personally knew both what it is like to work with his hands or live in a grimy boarding room and what it is like to mingle with newspaper proprietors or the literary intelligentsia – which makes *May Day* so effective in showing the connectedness of modern social life and allows him to triumphantly solve the problem of the relationship between “I” and “We”. The novel's enduring fascination to Londoners, reflected in its most recent reprinting in 2010 as a London Books Classic, suggests that it was and is successful in fulfilling the desire expressed in *They Die Young* that London be made to appear exotic, exciting and meaningful to its own inhabitants. However, it was beginning to become apparent at the time to various people that the very uniqueness of London, with its distinct historical and literary associations, precluded it from being representative of the intersubjective relations of Britain as a whole.

The poet Hubert Nicholson, for example, dismissed the 1937 London bohemian literary lifestyle surrounding Bloomsbury and the Parton Street Book Shop as a hangover from before the First World War; describing an endless party circuit around the pubs and flats, in which one would encounter the same people in various states of inebriation: Calder-Marshall, Empson, Todd, Roger Roughton, Sheila Legge, Dylan Thomas and ubiquitous “Mass Observers”:

Another party. Outside the “Fitzroy” we found one of the Mass Observers, wearing a pair of corduroys (an expensive imitation of workmen's trousers) and a pair of Spanish sandals (designed for sierras, now worn to slop about on wet Soho pavements in winter: a graceful intellectual “tribute of sympathy” to the Spanish people, no doubt!). He was sitting on the pavement, back to the wall, eating fish and chips. It was raining. (186-87)

If Nicholson's tone sounds jaundiced, this was probably because his wife, the artist Molly Moss, was in the process of leaving him to embrace the same lifestyle more fully: “she seemed to be finding pleasure now in the company of the ‘submerged’, the ‘dumb oxen’, who were anathema to me” (205). The mass observer who gave Moss particular pleasure in this London demi-monde was Sommerfield; perhaps it is he Nicholson describes wearing Spanish sandals outside the Fitzroy. In any case, Moss found herself soon afterwards far from the Fitzroy, in Bolton, drawing some of the illustrations for MO's *The Pub and the People*.

Harrison was responsible for the MO operation in Bolton, where he had been living since soon after his return from having spent over a year in the New Hebrides, drawn by the presence of the headquarters of the Unilever combine whose interests spanned the world from the factories

of its hometown all the way to the Copra plantations of the South Seas he had recently departed. Beyond this connection, the attraction of Bolton to Harrison, aside from the incidental advantage of saving him from having to argue with Jennings, was that in its Northern working-class otherness it presented a location from which to view Britain as something more than the tired and decaying remains of nineteenth-century industrial and imperial splendour; it allowed the country as a whole to become exotic, mysterious and meaningful to its inhabitants once again. In coming with Harrison to work in Bolton, Sommerfield embraced a new challenge because he wasn't able to draw on the wide-ranging social experience that he had of his native London. On one level, it is clear that the pub, with its enclosed rituals and routines, provided an ideal location for mass observers such as Sommerfield and Harrison, who came from a different class and geographical background than the locals, to access everyday intersubjective relationships in Bolton. In this context, it is interesting to compare *The Pub and the People*, which Sommerfield principally wrote and compiled with some editorial input from Harrison, with the Jennings-inspired surrealist montage of *May the Twelfth*. While in some ways it loses in interest by being more orthodox in terms of documentary reporting, with facts and maps and diagrams, what it gains is a democratic accessibility that might have increased its potential for impact if it had actually been published at the time it was written.⁸ Crucially, in contrast to all the other books MO published in its early years, it is entirely informed by the research in Bolton and is more overtly political. While the pub is not a site of production in the sense discussed by West, *The Pub and the People* successfully resists portraying it as a site for consumption by explicitly recounting its historical role as, in effect, a working-class public sphere and by analysing it as a site of psychological emancipation from "normal Worktown life" (Mass-Observation, *Pub and People* 82-84, 199). Much of this distinctiveness is due to Sommerfield's literary and political experience, which, as has been noted already, was far beyond that of anybody else employed by MO.

It is possible to view *The Pub and the People* as a continuation of Sommerfield's own body of work: in a double page spread near the beginning, a slab of modernist typographical excess, reminiscent of *They Die Young*, faces a block of *May Day* style reportage (20-21). However, what marks the book out as another significant advance in the interwar quest to solve the relationship of the "I" and the "We" is the subtle manner in which the frame of objective documentary is broken to reveal the presence of Sommerfield and Harrison:

Also, women don't stand at the bar. Again, we have observed one case of this custom being violated. It was in the lobby bar of a medium-sized main road pub. Sommerfield was drinking with

Harrison, and had just been telling him about this tabu, so when it was broken under their noses there was a certain amount of scorn. But knowing that members of local touring companies put up here sometimes, we went up to her and her boy friend. They were discussing their act. They were Londoners, and middle class ones. (144)

One assumes from the narrative logic that this is Sommerfield rather than Harrison writing; regardless, the passage demonstrates the fruitful convergence between Sommerfield's documentary practice and Harrison's anthropological writing. *Savage Civilisation* had clearly acknowledged Harrison's presence as the outsider anthropologist and therefore laid bare the device by which the "primitive" is artificially constructed in anthropological works that attempted to describe "primitive" cultures from an internal viewpoint.⁹ Sommerfield and Harrison's deliberate disclosure of their identities in *The Pub and the People* both humanises Mass-Observation and distinguishes its approach from other contemporary practices of social investigation. On the one hand, the two are aligned with the town folk simply by the fact that they are taking part in the local social activity of sitting in the bar drinking. On the other hand, however, their difference is marked out by their understanding of a wider social world beyond the local. By discussing their reaction to the middle-class female Londoner standing at the bar, they illustrate the complex intersubjectivity at work within the pub and thereby demonstrate that it is not simply an enclosed setting for anonymous participant observation but a site of social interaction.

Another example is provided by the revelation in the edited collection *Britain Revisited* that as part of a "marathon record of an evening's 'overheards'" (Harrison 179), Sommerfield and Harrison were also both present for the conversation concerning "amateur prostitutes" that is recorded in *The Pub and the People*. Sommerfield found a way of writing this up which acknowledged both his presence and individual difference: "The interesting thing about this conversation, notes the observer, is that not one of [the men in the bar] considered the possibility of *paying* for the girls; it was something outside the range of their ideas" (268). Sommerfield's self-conscious reference to his presence can be seen in the aside about the "observer", and his assertion of individual difference in his acknowledgement that he can see beyond the range of the other men's ideas. In this respect, Sommerfield's technique in *The Pub and the People* can be seen as a more pragmatic version of Jennings's deployment of his own textual persona within the montage sequence of the Coronation crowds in *May the Twelfth*. The crucial difference in the two men's practices is that whereas Jennings was using his artistic independence to reveal the independence of the masses (Hubble, *Mass Observation* 126), Sommerfield was using his individual

relationship to the social collective to reveal everyone's relationship to it. The irony is that his very success in doing this has been used as evidence that MO was a form of middle-class voyeurism.

For example, Peter Gurney reproduces one of Sommerfield's reports on a night out in a Blackpool pub, which includes various acknowledgements of his own presence at the scene ("During this Alice is stroking obs.' thigh") before commenting:

The language employed by the observer is very revealing and provides excellent illustration of the double movement of disgust and desire. [...] This is understandable perhaps, as many middle-class men based their knowledge – and fear – of working-class women on contact with prostitutes. (276)

Given that Gurney quotes the passage from *May Day* about "silly girls with their synthetic Hollywood dreams" in a footnote as support for his argument, he had presumably read the novel and therefore must have known that lack of knowledge of working-class women is an unlikely allegation to make against Sommerfield. However, unconcerned by the fact that he is discussing a writer known for his technical proficiency, he concludes:

The links between these two women, their easy and flexible intimacy, is the dominant, if *unintentional* motif; they manoeuvre through different situations, between different men or groups of men, together. They were out to have a good time in Blackpool, probably knew about Mass-Observation and found it entertaining to lead this stranger on and cast him in the role of innocent stooge, an appropriate foil to their vampirish yet comic performance. Sommerfield, for his part, read these signs *literally* and failed to appreciate what were very likely playful deconstructions of male seriousness and status. (279; emphasis added)

Actually, it is Sommerfield's *playful construction* of the report, reminiscent of the playfulness we have seen him to utilise throughout his long career as a writer of fiction, that precisely incorporates the finer nuances of shared and unshared perspectives between the various protagonists, and thus demonstrates the collective class-crossing pleasure inherent to MO in which everyone leaves the pub together: "arms linked" (278). He went on to use his MO reports as the model for scenes demonstrating working-class intersubjectivity in subsequent fiction such as *Trouble in Porter Street* (28-29, 32-33) and *The Inheritance* (92-94; see also Harrisson 194-95); both of which, taken in the whole, include similar constructions of female agency.

The experience of being forced, through working with MO in the unfamiliar environment of Bolton, to find a more basic means of accessing everyday intersubjective relationships, changed the balance of Sommerfield's writing. As we have seen, the tendency to write as an observer was centrally present even in *They Die Young* but it was previously bound up with a kind of narcissistic self-presentation of himself as author in that novel, and what he later termed as "communist romanticism" in *May Day* (Sommerfield, "Author's Note" xix) – the idea that because he has solved his own intersubjective problem, the revolution can now happen. From *The Pub and the People* onwards, he maintains the capacity for reportage that is always present in his work but largely eschews the more dizzying modernist techniques of his earliest novels, in favour of an ostensibly mundane embedding of the observer-narrator figure within the reciprocal relationships that constitute social relations. This change, or rather development, in his writing can be seen in his wartime stories published in *Penguin New Writing*.

For example, the unnamed narrator of "The Worm's-Eye View" (1943), marching back to his barracks in a British military camp sometime in late 1941, is reminded by a change in weather of the second winter of the War. Once back in his hut, he delves into his kitbag for an exercise book and reads an MO-style report he had made a year ago. This reminds him of the standard talk of his fellow servicemen at the time of how good it had been before the war and how enjoyable it would be again after it was finished. His attitude to such talk is now one of cynicism and he is convinced that, with the onset of the third winter of the War, this rosy-tinted view will fade quickly enough. In the poem he is writing, winter becomes a metaphor for war and he comes to question his former purpose for making reports of his life in the forces, which can be seen by implication as a questioning of MO's desire to record everything: "Is there any sense in making notes of such trivialities? It's rather like keeping old bus tickets and theatre programmes for recollection's sake" (17). Here Sommerfield is perceptively marking the possibility under the pressures of wartime of a moment of retreat from an identification with mass politics into individualism.

However, at this point, Sommerfield's narrator is posted overseas to India with another man, Tommy Banks:

Tommy was neat and small, though already he had an incipient little pot belly. You could be quite certain of how he'd be in twenty years time, a prosperous member of the upper working class, mild-voiced, with a soft West country accent, a sensual tubby man little who smiled a lot, still deeply attached to his wife and home, and still possessed of the charm he had now, a kind of *naif*,

open-eyed worldliness (25-26)

Tommy is an incurable optimist and, thrown into his company, the narrator starts to question the limitations of his poem, especially in a climate where “winter as a symbol is meaningless” (31). The narrative tension comes to a head when Tommy at last gets a letter from home after waiting for months. He is so happy that he announces that he will live life to the full on his return without wasting a moment. This prompts the narrator to explain at some length why he thinks conditions after the War will be much worse than before; but Tommy is convinced that “there’ll have to a big change in the way things are run [... because] everybody feels there’s got to be a big change” (32). The narrator argues on to no avail but, later that night, lying out under the stars while smoking his pipe, he experiences a moment of profane illumination as he rejects his own cynicism and comes to the understanding:

For each of us a moment arrives, to some only once in a lifetime, to others often, when we are possessed with an intimation to our own power. And when this comes to whole classes of people at the same time then it is that men make history instead of history making them The past was dead, the future would be as we made it. (34)

On one level, this transformation in Sommerfield’s writing makes him appear much more a socialist realist than he was in the pre-war period. However, to make such a judgement would be to miss the essential point that the context had changed; the individual alignment with the mass that Sommerfield first essays in *May Day* and then achieves through his participation in and writing for MO, as part of an avant-garde in the genuine sense of the term, is now tantalising in reach as ideas of building an equitable society, which eventually gave rise to the more limited form of the Welfare State, gained an unprecedented widespread popularity. That potential societal shift proved to be short lived historically and was marked by successive moments of political retreat and disillusion. Sommerfield amongst others experienced these retreats in such moments as the exodus from the Communist Party in 1956 and the eventual repudiation of even the Welfare State with the election of the Thatcher Government in 1979. Yet it appears that Sommerfield retained the “intimation to his own power” that came from his MO-based understanding of his relationship to humanity as an everyday intersubjective process. Therefore, although *The Imprinted* alludes once or twice to the processes of political retreat, it is not a significant theme and, similarly, while the novel recounts episodes from the 1930s, the tone is not nostalgic. In fact, the narrator of the novel eventually burns his collection of notebooks, cuttings, and Spanish Civil War mementoes – his dead selves – in an affirmation of the future: “There’s always a later on

as long as you're alive" (174-75). It is still essentially the same outlook as the one Sommerfield expressed during the War, stemming from his MO involvement, that once one has solved the intersubjective problem, then it is more important to make the future than endlessly remake the past. This insight offers an explanation for why Sommerfield's foreword to the 1984 edition of *May Day*, in which he might perhaps have been expected to complain about the manner in which the Welfare State and the 1945 political settlement were being rolled back, instead emphasises the social change that had taken place in the intervening years and concludes on the optimistic note that genuine idealism was "still alive and hopeful" (xix). Sommerfield wrote with the confidence of a writer who has accessed the social fabric of our times and knows that as long as a means for expressing the relationship between the "I" and the "We" can be found, then the future will take care of itself.

Notes

1. *The Lost Weekend* written in the 1930s is discussed further on in this article. *Press on Regardless*, about the Second World War in Burma, was written after *The Imprinted* but did not find a publisher: see Croft (67).
2. For further details see Remy (73), Tolley (222-30), and Wade.
3. As testified to, for example, by the regard and significance attached to MO in recent volumes such as Marcus and Nicholls's *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (2004) and Brooker and Thacker's *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* (2009): see Mengham (371-78), Ayers (388-90, 394), Smith (663-65).
4. For H.D, see Zimring (713); for Partridge, see Hinton (227); for the others, see Cunningham (338).
5. Biographical information for Sommerfield is taken mainly from Croft.
6. The details concerning the Spanish Civil War in *Under the Volcano* are mainly taken from Sommerfield's account in *Volunteer in Spain*.
7. *Waverley Steps*, the 1947 documentary about Edinburgh scripted by Sommerfield, also displays strong similarities to *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*.
8. Instead, the book's wartime publication in 1943 conditioned a nostalgic reception. See Hubble, *Mass Observation* (209-10).
9. This so-called functionalist technique was most vigorously defended by Bronislaw Malinowski, who took offence at Harrison's satirisation in *Savage Civilisation* of his methods. Harrison's book begins with a Malinowski-style functionalist account of a New-Hebridean village told from the perspective of one of the villagers but gradually reveals all the ways in which this society is connected to the Western world and the complicity of Harrison's own presence with these colonial relationships: see Hubble, *Mass Observation* (55-58). Victor Gollancz originally published *Savage Civilisation* in January

1937 and the book was chosen as an additional book choice by the Left Book Club for September of that year.

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