Snoop-Women with Notebooks: Naomi Mitchison, Mass Observation, and the Gender of Domestic Intelligence

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The Space Between: Literature and Culture 1914-1945: Snoop-Women with Notebooks: Naomi Mitchison, Mass Observation, and the Gender of Domestic Intelligence

Abstract
Novelist Naomi Mitchison and Home Intelligence head Mary Adams were crucial supporters of Mass Observation’s qualitative approach to public opinion collection, but their efforts were significantly curtailed when the public denounced observers as internal spies. This article traces the backlash against MO’s methodology, both bureaucratically and publicly, uncovering that MO critics were partially fueled by the gendering of its unique methodology. While some considered interviews and surveys tantamount to domestic espionage, the subsequent turn towards quantitative data devalued women’s experiences by favoring institutionalized patriarchal approaches to analyzing public opinion. Within this context, Mitchison’s novel We Have Been Warned similarly presents a clash between these two gendered methods of understanding public opinion. Through its advocacy of subjective epistemology against the fetish for so-called objective data, Mitchison’s interwar novel suggests the importance of gender to debates over data collection and polling.

Keywords: Naomi Mitchison / Mass Observation / public opinion / espionage / gender

Introduction: Fun With Graphs and Charts
During World War II the War Office in Whitehall scrutinized public reaction to the war effort as a priority. After all, such domestic intelligence was a vital precursor to the production of effective propaganda that could, according to an internal memo entitled “Propaganda,” “get [people] to feel what you want them to feel” (War Office Memo). To achieve this goal, Whitehall puzzled over the best means of gathering such ephemeral data, but all avenues led to disappointing conclusions. After considering and rejecting methods like newspapers, straw votes, and questionnaires, the memo concluded with a wistful lament: “Gallup polls might be of use, but do not exist in this country” (War Office Memo).¹ For administrators, public opinion was a crucial starting point for developing popular and effective wartime strategies. But gathering public opinion was a form of domestic intelligence that required infiltrating and exposing private lives for the benefit of war aims. The procedural means of collecting public opinion varied widely, including door-to-door surveys, telephone inquiries, on-the-street interviews, and even overheard conversations. Such exploratory methods evoked controversy; inquisitors pounding on a housewife’s door to ask her opinions about rationing would eventually result in public backlash.
But the War Office and other governmental agencies adopted this risk in hopes that statistical polling might eradicate the opacity of public opinion. For some time, governmental agencies attempted to uncover feelings about politics in a way that adjusted for self-censorship or self-selection; public relations expert Edward Bernays claimed in 1922 that public opinion research was “as yet far from being an exact science” (71). Even decades later, some outside of the polling profession understood the fraught position of statistical science. In her book *The Moral Basis of Politics* (1938), Naomi Mitchison intoned skepticism about the objectivity of scientific writing. While tempted to have faith in data and statistics as supposedly unbiased, she stops herself short of such a suggestion in an enlightening way: “Socially unbiased mathematics is probably usual, though I should never be surprised to find that there too propaganda has crept in; biased scientific writing and for that matter biased research, is certainly not rare (think of what fun one can have with graphs and charts!)” (*The Moral* 155).

Think of the fun, indeed. It turned out that war games in the 1930s and 1940s required sustained domestic morale, predicated on the understanding and mastery of public opinion. But as the pursuit of public opinion continued with dogged resolve, methodological debates took center stage. Specifically, the Ministry of Information had the choice between qualitative and quantitative approaches to public opinion. For the most part, debates around polling practices were arbitrated through the Ministry of Information (MOI), but affiliated organizations were at the front lines of the conflict; groups like the BBC, Mass Observation (MO), the National Institute of Social and Economic Research, and the British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO) often administered surveys, amalgamated data, and defended their methodologies to the MOI, which deployed the data it found most useful. But when examining the contours of these debates, one is inevitably struck by the central role of women in discussions of public opinion data and its methods. While the BBC and MO are often considered the jurisdictions of men like John Reith, Charles Madge, and Tom Harrisson, women in high administrative positions were strategically vital when it came to researching public opinion. Women who took part in the process provided valuable feedback on how polling methodologies accounted for underserved communities, including women and members of the working class. In their roles within the institutions they served, women elevated the voices of those disenfranchised by bureaucratic processes, even if the methods used to include them involved more clandestine methods of data collection. One example lies in Mary Adams, the head of Home Intelligence during part of the war. An understudied figure, Adams used her position to challenge the emergent fetish for quantitative analysis by bolstering the qualitative methods of Mass Observation. The Home Intelligence reports she administered included statistics with restraint, instead using localized reporting to demonstrate public opinion as a complex, intersectional field. Ironically, Adams’s efforts to make public opinion data more inclusive became controversial amongst the very audiences she hoped it would serve.
Aside from Mary Adams, other women also contributed to MO by collecting domestic intelligence and becoming observers for MO. Naomi Mitchison firmly believed in the ability of MO to compensate for what she called the “incomplete data” around what people want during war time, even using encouraging readers of *The Moral Basis of Politics* to become observers themselves (320).³ For her, qualitative sociological methods, which included transcribed conversations and local reporting, captured human behavior at its most “irrational”; Mitchison interpreted such unmediated access to political sentiment as key to rooting out fascism (320). In fact, she recorded her own wartime diary at the behest of MO using these methods, now published as *Among You Taking Notes*. Others around Mitchison, including friends like Zita Baker, also became deeply involved in Mass Observation. Women were clearly invested in the gathering of domestic intelligence about morale using MO’s qualitative sociological methodologies. So it may come as no surprise that women were often the first to challenge the veracity of statistical or quantitative polling, suggesting instead that narrative and qualitative approaches provided a more inclusive, authentic reflection of public sentiment. With Adams in a key MOI position, wartime policies were inflected by the qualitative surveillance methods advocated by women. However, as I will demonstrate, there would be inevitably reaction against qualitative methods, as they threatened the seemingly objective analysis offered by statistical data.

For Naomi Mitchison in particular, the methodological debates around public opinion illuminate her fictional methods in the space between the wars. Mitchison railed against the gendered expectation of political silence; as a rare novel in which she concretely and unapologetically presents a political dystopia set in the present day, *We Have Been Warned* (1935) weighs in on the debate about surveillance methodologies. Ironically, the novel that “ruined Mitchison’s literary reputation” may very well provide the most significant literary insight into the way that public opinion data was collected and understood (Lassner 84). Despite rejecting the novel for publication, Victor Gollancz called it “the first piece of genuinely social art...in our time.” (You May 176–77). Part of this value, I would argue, comes from the novel’s interest in theorizing the potential of quantitative public opinion data. As Mitchison’s novel concludes by suggesting an unforeseen fascistic turn in public sentiment, it upends any rosy vision of England or Scotland as stalwart anti-fascist strongholds. Instead, Mitchison theorizes a political environment in which all the signs of public opinion are terribly misconstrued and an ethno-nationalist tide arises with little notice by experienced politicians.⁴ In other words, the novel highlights the failure of traditional polling methods to unveil unseemly undercurrents of fascism and British nationalism. And while it fictionalizes this tragic misunderstanding of the *vox populi*, I want to suggest that *We Have Been Warned* characterizes a broader skepticism about quantitative polling shared by women like Mary Adams, who were concerned about what public opinion polls and surveys might be missing. For these women, statistical analysis of public opinion not only overlooked the voices of women who were systematically underserved by this method of analysis; quantitative data also flattened the complex, intersectional experiences of citizens that more
qualitative and narrative methods unearthed. Similarly, in *We Have Been Warned*, it turns out that only unconventional data, in the form of a ghostly oracle, can accurately warn protagonist Dione Galton of the right-wing radicalism right under her nose. While Dione and her husband Tom knock on doors to gather information from self-censoring constituents, their constituents' true feelings are hidden away until a ghost informs Dione that her friends had succumb to fascistic ideology. For women in the MOI bureaucracy, no such supernatural forces were available; instead, they viewed qualitative sociological analysis as a way of un-skewing the polls and discovering the real perspectives behind the flat vision of the public they presented.

**The Women Patrons of Observation**

The critique of public opinion data in *We Have Been Warned* has often been overlooked in favor of its scandalous depictions of sex, abortion, and murder. But the first half of the work, less controversial than the second, centers on the political career of Tom Galton, who is hoping to become the Labour MP for the constituency of Marshbrook Bridge. And while he has four children with his wife Dione, he is also a symbolic parent of statistics, which he fondly refers to as “a baby science” (149). Tom is an economics professor, uninspired by his students, and politically motivated by his ideological desire for socialist transformation in the public sphere. But this ideological concern is persistently couched in economical reasoning. During the day he “[tries] to make out what [is] really happening to commodity prices,” while at night he delivers emphatic speeches informed by his knowledge of statistical economics (148). Tom’s political ambitions lead his wife Dione to the town of Sallington to canvass for her husband. It is here where the drive to master public opinion immediately becomes her master; like a political zombie, Dione walks the streets to canvass for her husband, looking at the fronts of houses, asking herself “How would they vote?” (58). To help her husband, Dione captures the most flattened piece of information: who they will vote for. This aim overlooks the broader mission to understand the constituency.

Dione Galton’s exhausting political journey is motivated by two sometimes opposing factors: collecting public opinion to help her strategize her husband’s campaign, and listening to constituents to better understand their concerns. In her enervated state, Dione references the polling card as the motivation that helps her overcome physical depletion: “I don’t think I ever knew what it was to be tired before. My legs and back and mind are all aching. And yet me, me somewhere in the middle, doesn’t mind, doesn’t want not to be tired, doesn’t, above all, want to stop. I am going to do this little bit of Spark Lane that is on my polling card . . . .” (63). The polling card, representing the constituents needed to win the election, produces exhaustion because the quantitative data creates only useless knowledge, as illustrated by the elongated ellipses. Instead, Dione needs an open inquiry into lived experience. Quantitative methods of gathering intelligence are repeatedly contrasted with a need to simply absorb what happens around her and listen to what the constituents say: “What am I doing? Must listen. Must think what to say at the cottage meetings to-morrow afternoon, go over the
statistics in my head” (67). Working on behalf of her husband, Dione is perpetually engaged in a dialectic between the quantitative and qualitative sides of campaigning, landing—as she indicates—“somewhere in the middle.” The narratives she encounters in her daily walks, including the opinions of potential constituents, are juxtaposed with a desire to objectify individuals as data points in the tapestry of a political campaign to survey and control public opinion.

Dione’s equivocations between qualitative and quantifying responses to public opinion adroitly characterize the larger tension around polling research in the 1930s and 1940s. Mass Observation partially sought to excise this anxiety, as it translated scientific objectification of public opinion into a reflexive “anthropology of ourselves” (Britain 10). Mitchison embraced the qualitative and subjective methodology of her friend Harrisson in her wartime diary Among You Taking Notes, the aim of which was “to make of it a picture of how one's family and friends lived during this period of history, what changes they hoped for, and what actually happened” (11, emphasis added). MO was notoriously fascinated by capturing the everyday, which it accomplished through tempering quantitative analysis with a more qualitative form of information gathering in Britain by Mass Observation (1938). As justification for the dialectic nature of MO, Harrisson and Madge argue that scientists are “isolated in a vacuum of ‘pure’ science,” and that people see science as “just another of the forces which exploit them and of which they know little or nothing” (10). Mitchison confronted the views of the average man and woman as she tried to help her husband in the election she fictionalized in We Have Been Warned. As portrayed in the novel, Dione’s interviews with constituents suggest the tension between a perspective of the public fueled by data analytics and one invested in constituents’ stories.

Mitchison’s political experience with her husband’s campaign is an important framework for understanding We Have Been Warned, but so, too, is her involvement with Mass Observation. In 1935, Mitchison and Zita Baker travelled across the American south, talking to impoverished sharecroppers. After this, Mitchison “joined up with Mass Observation” (201). While Mitchison provided her wartime diary to Tom Harrisson, Baker’s connection to MO was both more intimate and more profound. Aside from her romantic connection to Harrisson, she surveyed day nurseries for MO, and was purportedly part of one group that observed outdoor sexual activity in Blackpool (Hinton 333; Sheridan 102). Baker also observed a British Union of Fascists meeting and reported on the events at that meeting (Hall 186). Women in MO were not only crucial to the data collection operations, but also to the group’s viability. Mitchison describes herself as a patron of Harrisson’s, recalling in her memoir that, “I tried to help [young Harrisson], sometimes wondering if it was worthwhile. It was” (You May 201). Harrisson had other patrons as well, including Mary Adams. Adams began her career at the BBC, but when its fledgling television department folded at the start of the war, she left for a position at the Head of Home Intelligence from December 1939 to April 1941 (Addison and Crang xii; Hubble 187). In this role, she was a crucial intermediary between the MO and MOI, the latter of which sought to develop political strategies and propaganda messages based on
MO’s opinion research. Nick Hubble characterizes Adams and Harrisson as part of a “splinter group of like-minded people...struggling to change the MOI approach to propaganda and morale” (174). As early as November 1930, before Adams took her position as head of Home Intelligence, she was “keen to employ M-O” in her operations (Hubble 179).

Adams pushed the MOI towards more qualitative assessments of public opinion, but the bureaucracy resisted, favoring the quantitative methods deployed by BIPO. James Hinton records Adams’s enthusiasm for Harrisson, as she rejected criticism of MO and instead pursued its qualitative methods as a means to provide a “barometer of public opinion” (Adams qtd. in Hinton 179). Arguably, Adams’s interest in public opinion may have begun earlier. It was during her time at the BBC when the organization first began its foray into listener research. There, too, a woman was the unexpected gatekeeper against the fully quantitative analysis of listener opinion; Talks Director Hilda Matheson was skeptical enough of scientific listener research to cite a “deeply rooted mistrust of statistical methods and results...particularly in connexion with matters which cannot wholly be measured in terms of numbers” (Matheson 409). Home Intelligence under Mary Adams similarly fought to maintain the qualitative approach of MO within MOI. And her contribution to the cause was significant. She commissioned a report on by-elections in Silvertown, Leeds, and then eventually commissioned MO’s contributions to the Wartime Social Survey, a daily morale questionnaire for internal MOI use (Hubble 180). This makes it all the more surprising that, for so many, the story behind MO has been a paternal one, with Harrisson and Madge giving life to this sociological project that captured the spirit of the working class in England. But without Mary Adams, a friend in a very high place, MO perhaps never achieves its full importance in the war effort.

But Adams’s experiments in qualitative analysis were short-lived. By September 1940, only five months after the commencement of the Wartime Social Survey, Home Intelligence became financially constrained, much to the dismay of Adams and Harrisson, the latter so much so that he publicly proposed a new Ministry to replace the MOI in *The New Statesman*: “The Ministry of Everyday” (qtd. in Hubble 185). After September, the daily Wartime Social Surveys became increasingly qualitative, as they changed into more generalized weekly reports. But eventually, Adams’ defense of MO’s methods and frustration with budget constraints would lead to her resignation from Home Intelligence in April of 1941, almost one year after the first Wartime Social Survey was published. Since their original internal publication, the Wartime Social Survey have been republished as *Listening to Britain*. And while the Home Intelligence Reports themselves may seem bland, Adams’s editorial input meant that the reports were structurally informed by the MO methods she had championed within Home Intelligence.

The structures of the daily reports of the Wartime Social Survey are noteworthy. The reports typically began with a brief summary, written by Adams, consisting of key events of the day. Thereafter, the
surveys include regional reaction to the news of the day. The final subsection, “Rumours,”
characterized circulating gossip; this column was sometimes replaced by another column as
circumstances dictated. In order of importance, the reports prioritize time, location, and prevalent
beliefs as reported in the public opinion findings. While Adams reportedly adapted some statistical
data from outside sources, at no point is this quantitative data presented in a way that suits its
presumed objectivity. Such statistical data is scarce, and when included it is folded within the lines of
prose, only accessible to those who read the entirety of the daily narratives. By way of example,
Adams’s preface in the July 11, 1940 report suggests “little change in morale,” but cautions that there
is “evidence, however, that cheerfulness is superficial: people are disinterested in the general war
situation and its international implications” (216). In the “Points from Regions” section for that day,
Nottingham’s citizens worry that “villages are inadequately protected against bombs,” while
Manchester’s suggests that “RAF feats cause much satisfaction” (217). This brief sampling of the
reports indicates the regional variance in opinion common in the Wartime Social Surveys. Without a
complete reading of the daily briefings of the regions, it was impossible to get a full grasp on the
variety of rumors and perspectives scattered throughout the country. While nationalized quantitative
statistics might have seemed like the best way to collect public opinion, Adams’s reports suggest that
micro-targeted qualitative approaches provided the most accurate information about the impacts of
war on local communities. But such data required more intimate and intrusive strategies of collection,
including extensive interviews and eavesdropping. As Adams’ suggested, these methods of data
collection were capable of providing a more authentic perspective on war that numerical data could not.

While We Have Been Warned was published years before the MOI commissioned the Wartime Social
Survey, it is striking how Mitchison uses the novel to capture the formal nuance that would
characterize the Home Intelligence reports. In an enigmatic series of vignettes early in the novel, she
describes a Labour Party dinner-dance in a way that hierarchizes its priorities in an analogous
manner to the Wartime Social Survey. Time, “location” and belief are given in that order, as if
reporting the mood of the room through a variety of individual perspectives. An example provides
insight into the visual elements of this type of stream-of-consciousness conceit:

[the] Valetta Tom Galton

They dance this at Labour socials. All over south England and the Midlands. Wonder why it is kept on
when better ones dropped out. Civil servants folk-dance in London and she dons in Oxford. May Day
in the High: all nonsense. Not even William Morris Behind it. (35)

This snippet typifies a series of similar passages, shifting perspective from dance to dance, character
to character. Mitchison thus helps us navigate the tenor of the room, through the “time” of the dance
(the Valetta), and the “location” of the views (Tom Galton). The structure Mitchison includes for the
dances suggests an interest in the discovery of individual experience and its relationship to a collective atmosphere, temporally and historically. The structure of this section is unique and enigmatic in the context of the whole work, but allows Mitchison to suggest the novel’s sociological investments, prefiguring the Wartime Social Survey that Adams would commission from Tom Harrisson a few years later. Deeply informed by her own political pursuits and her knowledge of MO’s sociological approach, Mitchison’s aesthetic concerns are thus continuously rooted in the belief that sociological observation can be a tool for understanding public sentiment.

**Data of One’s Own: The Gender of Qualitative Analysis**

*We Have Been Warned* frames qualitative observation as a concern specifically relevant to women. Tom Galton’s fetish for the numbers represents the larger connection between politics and mathematics, but his pragmatism is a continual foil to Dione’s more eccentric epistemological investments. The novel’s first pages feature Dione Galton reading about Jean MacLean—“Green Jean”—an accused witch driven to death in a snowy grave. As she delves into fantasies of witches in the past, Dione constantly envisions men over her shoulder, judging her chimerical visions. Her thoughts flow quickly from Jean MacLean to her personal life, and even to politics. She imagines having a child after the revolution. But her quixotic daydreaming is abridged by the thought of her practical husband scolding her frivolous train of thought: “She mustn’t think that either: it was romanticising; it was making personal and little something that was so big and so real that she couldn’t think about it properly. What Tom called Realistically. Run away from that, back to Iverary in the seventeenth century” (3–4). Dione runs from the romance of political revolutionary fervor, returning to the story of Jean and the witches, but quickly realizes that this train of thought is no more pragmatic or “realistic” than her last. “‘[W]hat would father think of me imagining all that, father who was a Fraser and a sceptic and one of the foremost Scottish archaeologists of his day! What would he have thought of Phoebe and me for seeing Green Jean in the nursery corridor? Tom doesn’t believe we ever did. But Tom is a lowlander’” (4-5). Dione reports personal experience, only to be rebuked by her practical husband. The novel thus frames the relationship between Dione and Tom as epistemologically oppositional; the types of pragmatic knowledge Tom embraces are at odds with Dione’s more mystical beliefs. Dione trusts the experiences of herself and her sister in opposition to her husband and father, who use science and reason to dismiss the apparition Green Jean. Throughout the novel, Green Jean will suggest this divide; as her predictions become more astute than those of her husband, Jean will validate Dione’s untraditional means of interpreting her political environment.

Just as Jean will eventually unveil the truth of public opinion in *We Have Been Warned*, Mary Adams’s approach was similarly able to unearth prevalent errors in MOI’s purely quantitative approach to public opinion data. Take, for example, the reports collected by Home Intelligence over women’s work in the war effort. In the published version of the Wartime Social Survey, women are
cited as being more “depressed” and “anxious” than their male counterparts about the war effort (19-20). In the Home Intelligence reports, such notes from women are a frequent refrain; it is worth suggesting that Adams herself was even mindful to include the views of women in her reports, given their prevalence throughout the published documents. But the cause of the dissatisfaction was not available to statisticians. Secretary of Home Planning Michael Balfour recalls a particular radio address by the Minister for Labour and National Service, Ernest Bevin, wherein he “call[ed]-up women to industry” (63). What Bevin missed, and that Adams’s reports suggested, was that there were not enough wartime jobs for women to actually take up, despite the encouragement to do so. Unable to locate the work they were told to seek, part of the anxiety women faced was proportional to the lack of real ability to impact the outcome of the war. A Home Intelligence report from 10 June 1940 found that “a constant source of dissatisfaction is the failure of professional and middle-class people (especially women) to become fully absorbed in the war effort. A defect in mobilisation is obvious from many of our reports” (97). A few days earlier, reports from Sheffield suggested that “[g]rowing feeling that women should be given more work; still 2,000 unemployed women in Sheffield” (93). So, women were told to hurry up and wait, a contradictory dictum that had understandable consequences for morale. The failure of mobilization that Adams diagnosed was not intelligible without the qualitative feedback from the regions that indicated this failure in wartime messaging to women.

What women like Adams and Mitchison realized was that scientific objectification of public opinion was neither objective nor apolitical, but had the unintended consequence of silencing voices either left out by traditional polling or unwelcome in its discursive parameters. In We Have Been Warned the prevalence of anti-realist tropes represents Mitchison’s skepticism over so-called objective quantitative analysis. In Mitchison’s novel, Green Jean’s preternatural political prognostications represent a version of reality for which there is no objective or scientific corroboration. And yet, as it turns out, these mystical predictions are more accurate than any political surveillance or intelligence gathering. Mitchison’s aesthetic interest in prophesy mirrors the bureaucratic concerns that women like Adams faced in their roles at the MOI, where their desire to hear the voices and opinions of the disenfranchised often left them scorned and dismissed as cranks or, even worse, domestic spies. The eventual rejection of Adams’s surveillance methods would once again alienate the voices of the disenfranchised and, like Green Jean, these methods would become mere hallucinations in the space of political discourse.

**Snoopers and Witches: The Backlash Against Qualitative Data**

While women did not receive much of the credit for the variance in public opinion surveillance methodologies in the interwar period, they received an excessive amount of blame when these methods received scrutiny. For Mary Adams, in particular, the conflicts over the Mass Observers led to an intense public backlash that was steeped in gender politics. The collaboration between MO and
the MOI was tenuous, and it was the fact of the ethnographic data that led to the breaking point for the partnership. In 1940, the *Daily Herald* heard about Home Intelligence’s surveillance methods. And while the collection of more objective-seeming statistical data went with little comment, the overheard conversations and face-to-face interviews that MO relied upon were highly controversial. According to the *Daily Herald*, under the leadership of Duff Cooper, the Ministry had spied on the British people. They even had a pithy name for the organized espionage: “Cooper’s Snoopers.”

The *Daily Herald* struck fear in the hearts of readers, who were told that Mass-Observers “are now to listen-in to your conversations in public houses, as well as to cross-examine you on your doorstep....the method used by the snoopers, it appears, is to go into public houses, visit rural communities, industrial towns, and other centres of activity, listening, listening, listening” (“Cooper’s Snoopers”). The paper exacted virulent abuse against the project, arguing that the methods of the Ministry invaded the privacy of private citizens. Public rebuke for the MOI’s actions mostly targeted the qualitative methodologies inspired by MO. The *Daily Mail* described the qualitative interviews as “official busybodies...knocking on doors. They ask startled householders all sorts of odd questions” (qtd. in Advertising Service Guild). They mocked the practice as “Door-Bell Science.” The scandal seemed poised to threaten the entire project of public opinion research. A report from the Advertising Service Guild described a fear that the Snoopers controversy would “bring into contempt the science of investigation of public opinion” (Advertising Service Guild).13

Newspapers were also quick to gender the controversy around qualitative sociological research. The *Daily Herald* made a particular point of berating Adams, claiming that these snoopers “come under immediate command of a woman—Mrs. Vyvyan Adams” (“Cooper’s Snoopers”). An internal memo to Adams reports the title of July 25 article by Ritchie Calder at the *Daily Herald*: “Ministry ‘Gossip Column’ is Holding an Inquisition on the Doorsteps” (“Report on the ‘Cooper’s Snoopers’ Press Campaign”). On July 30, an accompanying photo and caption feature Mary Adams, with the declaration “She is O.C. of The Snoopers” (“Cooper’s Snoopers”).14 The attention to Adams’s gender and the coded language around gossip and doorsteps suggest offense that a woman was responsible for violating the inviolable space of the domestic sphere, when she was supposedly the gatekeeper for domestic privacy. Another headline from the *Evening News* corroborates the gendered dimension of the Snoopers’s controversy: “M.O.I. PLEAD NOT GUILTY TO THIS SNOOP-WOMAN WITH A NOTEBOOK—FIRM TRades ON OFFICIAL CURIOSITY” (“Report on the ‘Cooper’s Snoopers’ Press Campaign”). An unexpected source, nose art from an American P-61 Black Widow, registers the sexism of the offense. The plane, “Cooper’s Snooper,” features a nude woman, peeking through a keyhole; the real threat behind the Snoopers controversy was not the espionage, but the reversal of the gaze that it suggested.

Mitchison was something of a “snoop-woman” herself, though her wartime diary was never met with
anything like the public hysteria reserved for Adams or the MOI. In *Among You Taking Notes*, Mitchison’s foreword expresses hope that her wartime observational diary would have not only historical significance, but also cultural and political impact. After providing contextual information on the Scottish town of Carradale and other settings, she reflects on the role of such qualitative and narrative material to evince the cultural zeitgeist: “It reads sadly...because it is full of hope for a new kind of world, for something different, happier, more honest, people who had been cut off from one another by money, power and class structure. It was the same kind of vision that people have all over the world, whenever they began to question the morality of the system they happen to live under” (12-13). Just as Mary Adams noted the failure of domestic British surveillance and propaganda to harness the power of motivated women in the workforce, Mitchison did not shy away from admonishing failed domestic intelligence gathering and propaganda and highlighting their counterproductive impact on audiences. She reports her conflicts with her dentist, who railed against refugees, and the rise of “Nationalist feeling” among the “common people” (81). Such insights are uncorroborated by statistics, but share Mary Adams’s ideological motivations; by recording an uncensored narrative of wartime struggles, Mitchison seeks to give voice those who are underserved and underrepresented by traditional political systems.

Mitchison’s misgivings about her nationalist dentist become key motivations in the conclusion of *We Have Been Warned*. Tom loses his electoral bid in Marshbrook Bridge, after a brutal night of watching the poll returns teeter to and fro. After his loss, the novel’s more controversial elements arise. Dione and Tom find themselves straying from the academic left, and deeply involved in a political far-left murder controversy. Donald MacLean, a self-identified Communist, acts as a political foil to Dione and Tom. A fly in their leftist ointment, he opposes the conciliatory implications of compromise engaged by centrist left politicians. After the election, MacLean confesses to the murder of Daniel Coke-Brown, a right-wing newspaper proprietor (197). In consultation with Tom, Dione agrees to take Donald, disguised as her brother, to Russia, where romance erupts. With perhaps unintended comic irony, the Galtons’ semi-open marriage produces retaliation in the form of Tom’s affair with a beautiful Russian Communist countess. Combining sexual and political turbulence, Tom and Dione are increasingly radicalized while becoming isolated from their home communities. Sallington and Auchanarish become distant memories amidst the passions of Russian Communism and political idealism. Tom and Dione may begin as centrist wonks, but end up as leftist rabble-rousers who abet an assassin. But during this political upheaval, neither Tom nor Dione have observed either their own confused political responses or the emergent ethno-nationalism of their neighbors.

While Green Jean emerges throughout the novel in a variety of contexts, her role in the novel’s concluding pages is the most striking. Dione finds herself pregnant, marking a parallel between herself and Green Jean, who bore a baby before her death. In what remains one of the most
controversial aspects of the novel, Dione seeks out an abortion, coinciding with the Reichstag fire. All the while, there are hints of local disruption, which the narrative glosses over. Dione’s sister, Phoebe, describes someone’s political identification as a means of expressing her own: “Dissatisfied Labor. Like a lot of us” (525). Moments like this suggest, but do not diagnose, the larger political unrest of her friends and neighbors. But the terrifying truth about public opinion comes to Dione quickly in the conclusion of the novel. Walking up to a quiet library, Dione sees Green Jean herself, who states: “I am wanting to help you, Isobel Dione. You have the Campbell Women against you, too...You and your coven are in danger, Isobel Dione” (529). In order to “see” the danger before her, Dione puts her hand on a stone provided by Green Jean. The soothsaying impact of the rock becomes the foundation of the dramatic denouement of the novel.

The pacing of the conclusion is accelerated and unexpected. While much of the prior 300 pages negotiate romantic entanglements and surveilling the ways of Communist Russians, the final section features a series of dream-like sequences inspired by Jean’s fortune-telling rock. The visions suggest that Dione is endangered by the political outcomes awaiting her at home, each worst than the last. The first is a political victory of the left wherein voters embrace the centrist Socialism of the Labour Party. Although Tom declares, “Socialist England...and it’s the Labour Movement that’s done it” (535), Jean warns that this outcome represents a deluded optimism: “[T]his might be happening one day,” Jean warns, “yet maybe it is not even likely” (537). In the second vision, poison gas portentously launches a counterrevolution. Russia is posited as a haven from political oppression.

But this is not the worst of the predications. The final, most ominous, as Jean warns: “You will be wiser to take the full warning that’s been got ready for you” (547). This future entails personal betrayal and the rise of domestic extremism. Tom’s sister shocks Dione by declaring him a traitor, and unveiling her previously hidden fascistic beliefs in an ethnic cleansing of the nation: “We are not like you rebels. We are not concerned with what the foreigner thinks. We are concerned with our English Empire. These executions are necessary. They are a purging. Our country had gone rotten. Now it will be England again” (550). Green Jean’s Mosley-esque vision is startling after a novel characterized by optimistic and revolutionary leftism. The novel suggests, by ending with this nationalist version of the future, that the violent right-wing purge is perhaps a more accurate vision of what is to come than any of the more optimistic versions that preceded it. Still expecting a child, Dione wakes up in a panic from the nightmare of a counter-revolution and her imminent death. That conclusion warns the reader; the alienated leftism of the 1930s may very well be masking a counter-revolutionary oppression. While Tom and Dione were observing their environment using the standard toolkit of political prognostication, they never listened to the stories of their peers, who were increasingly embracing Fascist ideology.

**Conclusion: Qualitative Data as Situated Knowledge**
In her analysis of the problematic neutralization of science as apolitical discourse, Donna Haraway theorizes a feminist scientific praxis, divorced from what she calls “disembodied scientific objectivity” (576). In this model, disembodied scientific objectivity can be replaced with “situated knowledge,” in which experience and subjectivity are dialectically engaged with quantitative data. Women like Mary Adams, and their fictionalization in the form of Mitchison’s Green Jean, show that women were at the forefront of scientific skepticism, promoting an epistemological model built on observation and knowledge situated within the lived experience of ordinary people. While bureaucratic figures like Home Intelligence’s Mary Adams advocated for subjective methods in their administrative positions, Naomi Mitchison explored the implications of this feminist epistemology for aesthetics and politics. Such situated surveillance methods aligned with the work of Mass Observation, and also supported a feminist interpretation of surveillance methodologies. These methods prioritized detailing the experiences of women and the disenfranchised, even if telling these stories was seen as a betrayal of the murky division between public and private lives.

While the desire for “fact” inevitably led to a wider embrace of quantitative analysis, debates over approaches to surveillance would continue to gather steam throughout the 1940s. In a 1942 review of the British Psychological Society Meeting, Henry Durant of BIPO and Tom Harrisson were described debating the future of sociological research, and their disagreement centered on the discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative approaches to learning and analyzing public opinion. Durant reported that “even one figure arrived at roughly marks and enormous improvement, mathematically an infinite gain” (“Quantitative and Qualitative Method in Sociological Research” 517). But for Harrisson, and one would imagine for Mitchison and Adams, this was not good enough. Harrisson argued that the “increased emphasis on this crude quantitative approach...without corresponding developments along other lines, such as observational technique, individual analysis, and penetration study of institutions, is unsatisfactory....Because results are statistically consistent, it does not follow that they do not give a ‘false’ picture. By themselves they may be misleading” (517). Of course, Mass Observation would eventually succumb to the “relentless movement towards large quantitative surveys” in the decades of the 1940s and 1950s (Sheridan, “Reviewing Mass-Observation”). But the early years of Mass Observation, and the work of the women who made it possible, provide us with a vision of a road left untraveled in the story of political polling’s rise to power and prominence. Women like Mitchison and Adams provided an intrepid, albeit futile, defense of the qualitative polling methods promoted by Mass Observation. Adopting observational surveillance strategies as a feminist praxis, their defense of such methodologies was intense. But the precipitous fall of these methods was ironically exacerbated by the gender of its defenders. Critics lambasted Mary Adams not only for being a woman with bureaucratic authority, but for being willing to violate the sanctity of the feminized private sphere. Women may have supported more qualitative surveillance methods to give voice to hesitant citizens, but in doing so, they were also usurping the gaze for themselves. Newspapers lambasted the “Snoopers” as domestic spies, and gender became an important metric for
understanding the significance of the betrayal. But for women who defended qualitative public opinion methodologies, these surreptitious surveillance strategies promised unparalleled inclusivity. Not every person impacted by policies on the home front was going to opt into a mailed survey; in fact, those most disenfranchised by public policy were also most likely to avoid providing institutions with feedback. While government-sponsored surveillance efforts are not a likely location for feminist praxis, Mass Observation’s methods made strange bedfellows of feminism and the MOI. While the public would eventually accuse qualitative public opinion methods of masking domestic espionage, such methods were adopted with goal of inclusivity and diversity in public policy, making the rapid fall of qualitative methodologies all the more lamentable.

**Notes**

1 Gallup was in its infancy on the continent in the years before the war. The British Institute of Public Opinion, a Gallup-inspired polling operation, was founded, but still new at the time (Balfour 72). The anonymous Whitehall Memo also partially praised Mass Observation’s efforts, though it hedged by claiming their information was “slightly suspect” (War Office Memo).

2 While the Whitehall War Office was primarily occupied with military strategies, the sending of a memo about public opinion and propaganda formation suggests that foreign war aims were intertwined with domestic intelligence operations.


4 Recent polling errors have reminded scholars of the importance of the 1930s as a important tipping point for quantitative polling methods. William Davies argues that we might read the “rise of commercial polling in the 1930s” as a means of manufacturing its authority and authenticity. He also sees the contemporary rise of “fact checks” as an anxiety around objectivity in a contemporary context (Davies, loc. 146).

5 In *You May Well Ask*, Mitchison records her time canvassing for Dick Mitchison in Birmingham, which is the town she fictionalizes as Sallington in *We Have Been Warned*. The district Dick Mitchison ran in, King’s Norton, was fictionalized in the novel as Marshbrook Bridge (186).

6 Hubble’s *Mass Observation and Everyday Life* puts the history of Mass Observation in conversation with the rise of “Everyday Life Studies,” whereby the kinds of studies commissioned by MO “pursue aims of social therapy and transformation” through the recording of everyday experiences (11).

7 Adams’s work with the BBC followed her work as a biologist at Cambridge. In 1928, she presented a series of six talks entitled *Problems with Heredity*. When Adams formally joined the BBC in 1930, she
worked as part of the Adult Education program, a group that encouraged the listeners to continually engage with BBC lectures by doing additional reading and talking to friends (Jones).

8 According to Mitchison, Harrisson bemoaned the failure of Labour to adequately assess public taste in its propaganda efforts: “To see the Labour Party spending 50,000 on propaganda without the first bloody idea of what they are doing keeps me awake with intellectual diarrhea” (You May 202).

9 The methodological difference between Mass Observation and the British Institute of Public Opinion was pronounced, particularly in MO’s early days. This is perhaps best characterized by an article in Nature in 1942, recording a debate between the two organizations.

10 Hinton theorizes that Adams’s ‘morale barometer’ was adopted from Mass Observation. It may be worth considering other origins here. In the mid-1930s, when Adams was at the BBC, the organization adapted aesthetics inflected by Mass Observation. Adams’s contributions were part of that trend (Briggs 140). But it also moved to begin sampling listeners along “scientific lines” using what Reith characterized as a “listening barometer” (255). Adams would seemingly adapt some of her view of public opinion from the likes of Hilda Matheson, also a figurehead at the BBC, whose own resistance to purely quantitative analysis was keen and incisive.

11 Michael Balfour records that the Wartime Social Survey was fully rehoused at the National Institute for Social and Economic Research, with more input gathered from regional intelligence officers. The reliance on MO and BIPO were thus externalized from the internal structure of MOI (73). Hinton notes that the cuts to the Wartime Social Survey put pressure on Harrisson to undertake “quantified national random samples,” which he saw as outside of the methodological approaches MO was willing to undertake (188). He also suggests that the resignation of Adams coincided with a sidelining of MO’s work with the MOI, which ended officially in September 1941 (212-216).

12 Phyllis Lassner notes the tension between Dione and her husband along similar lines, writing that “female agency is as inseparable from rationality as the latter is from her emotional responses, but despite the intellectual power Mitchison claims for this combination, Dione is still constrained by male-centered interpretations of the law as well as male-dominated lawlessness” (75).

13 Reportage around the Snooper’s controversy may have muddled the nuance between qualitative and quantitative research, but branded all interviews and questionnaires conducted with real citizens as a type of espionage. The Advertising Service Guild would partner with MO after the MOI contract was concluded. Hinton records the transformation of MO to a limited company in 1949 through the partnership of ASG. MO would turn to more traditional methods of market research after this point, but Hinton warns not to oversimplify the complex relationship between the two organizations (Hinton 216).
Of course, Cooper himself received a great deal of abuse over the controversy, defending the Wartime Social Survey in a “full scale parliamentary debate” (Hinton 182). MO was never a direct target of the snooping controversy, shielded by the WSS itself, which was targeted. This did eventually lead to the disempowerment of the WSS, a result that harmed MO’s work with the MOI (Hinton 183).

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