

BLACKTOWN, MASS-OBSERVATION, AND THE DYNAMICS OF *VOLUNTARY* *ACTION* IN MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLAND*

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the place of class and religion in discourses of voluntary action in mid-twentieth-century England, focusing on an overlooked Mass-Observation survey of the district of Aston in Birmingham. It situates Lord Beveridge's Voluntary Action report in its intellectual and social context, through utilizing the qualitative findings of the Mass-Observation district survey of Aston, elements of which were repurposed for the Voluntary Social Services Enquiry from which Voluntary Action emerged. The article takes a thematic approach, investigating how class and religion was seen and reported by Mass-Observers in the context of Aston. Two key arguments are made: that contrary to overarching narratives of post-war secularization, Christian churches actually remained in a relatively dominant position in terms of voluntary action; and that conceptions of voluntary action fundamentally misread working-class understandings of voluntarism, as well as the wider priorities of the post-war working classes. Drawing attention to the importance of class and religion to patterns of voluntary action evident in the Aston survey, yet less considered in historiographical terms, the construction of elite narratives of voluntary action and civil society are more discernible.*

I

Upon arriving into Aston in October 1946, the Mass-Observer Margaret Quass admitted that her first impression was 'one of utter drabness and depression'.¹ Aston was at that point a large, predominantly working-class industrial district in

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¹ Margaret Quass, 'Personal impressions of Aston', 20 Oct. 1946, University of Sussex, Mass-Observation Archive (SxMOA), 1/2/66/1/B, p. 1.

central Birmingham, home to the Ansell's Brewery and the HP Sauce factory. As Tom Harrisson, one of the founders of Mass-Observation remarked, Aston was in the eyes of Mass-Observers 'the sort of district [one] should expect to find up and down the country'.² It was this perceived working-class typicality that piqued the interest of Mass-Observation for the 1946 survey, and drew the organization back to provide a working-class evidence base for Lord Beveridge's 1948 *Voluntary Action* report, albeit with Aston disguised as 'Blacktown'.³

If unsuccessful in policy terms on publication, *Voluntary Action* has become a significant text for understanding the social place of voluntarism. Voluntary action remained a significant feature of post-war social policy in Britain, and more recently has returned to prominence 'as both partner and critic of government'.⁴ Prompted by the National Insurance Act of 1946, which excluded friendly societies from the new benefit system, Beveridge saw the 1947 proposal of the National Deposit Friendly Society to carry out an enquiry into the future of voluntary social insurance as an opportunity to write the 'third act' of his reports on improving Britain (following social insurance and full employment).⁵ Beveridge gathered a 'distinguished' committee for the 'Voluntary Social Services Enquiry', but as Jose Harris has noted, only the social reformer Violet Markham 'was really well informed about the multifarious inner workings of the voluntary social services'.⁶ This was of no consequence, with the findings 'largely a foregone conclusion', in that Beveridge saw 'the fraternal, charitable and community-policing functions of individuals' as essential to British civil society.⁷ James Hinton has suggested that Mass-Observation specialized 'in reality testing the self-serving rhetoric of those who posed as spokesmen for the popular will', and the *Voluntary Action* report was one such occasion, with Beveridge effectively '[calling] for the restoration of the conditions in which the Victorian pioneers of social advance had worked'.⁸ The Aston survey, therefore, can offer an insight into how elite conceptions of voluntary action and civil society were profoundly influenced by particular interpretations of social surveys. Significantly, 'Blacktown' indicates that Mass-Observation – and later

² Tom Harrisson, 'Aston', 28 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B, p. 1.

³ Draft notes from May 1947 indicate that Aston was the second choice after the mining village of Blaينا in South Wales, though the reasons as to why survey work was not conducted in Blaينا are unclear.

⁴ Melanie Oppenheimer and Nicholas Deakin, 'Beveridge and voluntary action', in Melanie Oppenheimer and Nicholas Deakin, eds., *Beveridge and voluntary action in Britain and the wider world* (Manchester, 2011), pp. 1–9 at p. 4.

⁵ Jose Harris, *William Beveridge: a biography* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1997), p. 454.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 455; idem, 'Voluntarism, the state and public-private partnerships in Beveridge's social thought', in Oppenheimer and Deakin, eds., *Beveridge and voluntary action*, pp. 9–20 at p. 14.

⁸ James Hinton, *The Mass-Observers: a history, 1937–1949* (Oxford, 2013), p. 343; Daniel Weinbren, "'Organisations for brotherly aid in misfortune': Beveridge and the friendly societies', in Oppenheimer and Deakin, eds., *Beveridge and voluntary action*, pp. 51–65 at p. 52.

Beveridge – obscured the importance of religion and class in social organization, which had a considerable effect on popular conceptions of voluntary action.

The 1946 Aston survey was an abortive post-war attempt by Harrison to revitalize Mass-Observation's commitment to social research. Harrison wanted a fresh project to inspire Mass-Observation, planning to write a book from the survey evidence. Hinton has asserted that 'this was Bolton again', with Harrison inviting "old comrades of M-O" to join him for a weekend to observe, paint, and photograph what he described as "a great amorphous, colourless, planless, chunk of working-class Birmingham, but with...lots of corners of excitement and beauty".⁹ Bolton had been the setting of Mass-Observation's most famous project – the 'Worktown' survey, conducted from 1937 onwards. 'Worktown' sought to record 'everyday life' via street conversations, 'overheard' conversations, and survey work. Similar methods were deployed in Aston, intended to portray 'A Constituency and its Constituents' – partly the inspiration of the MP, Woodrow Wyatt, who had worked with Mass-Observation as an Oxford undergraduate.¹⁰ The planned book did not come to anything, but Aston (as 'Blacktown') appeared in print in the evidence base for *Voluntary Action*. Following a preliminary visit in September by Harrison, Aston was decided upon as the survey location. Wyatt secured for Quass a fortnight's accommodation – demanding that the constituency Labour party secretary put Quass up at his mother-in-law's – and utilized his networks to enable her to meet local groups.¹¹ While Quass arrived in Aston in mid-October, Harrison and his 'old comrades' made their visit over a late November weekend. They would visit youth clubs, cinemas, political meetings, and ten churches, in addition to street conversations, and 'overheards'. Though these assorted visits and interlocations by no means provided a complete picture of Aston, they nonetheless revealed considerable social change, as well as an unforeseen level of continuity.

First, the 1946 Aston survey demonstrates the enduring importance of the Christian religion in voluntary action in England, within a mid-twentieth-century working-class district. This contravenes Frank Prochaska's contention that the rise of state-provided welfare 'was both the cause and effect of Christian decline'.¹² Though scholars such as Callum Brown have challenged this view, emphasizing the continued and even increased influence of major Christian denominations in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s, there has been little consideration of how this related to post-war voluntarism.¹³ It may be, as Jeremy Morris has argued, that there is a need to look beyond 'institutional

⁹ Hinton, *The Mass-Observers*, p. 332.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Letter from Woodrow Wyatt to Jim Meadows, 1 Oct. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.

¹² Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and social service in modern Britain: the disinherited spirit* (Oxford, 2006), p. 150.

¹³ Callum Brown, *Religion and society in twentieth-century Britain* (Harlow, 2006), pp. 181–3.

shrinkage' and consider the secularizing trend in contemporary Britain less absolute.¹⁴ In her study of working-class Southwark from the late nineteenth century to the interwar years, Sarah Williams asserted that focusing on 'institutional expressions of religiosity' obscured the continued identification of non-church-goers with Christianity (and in most cases local churches).¹⁵ Churches remained important community spaces in post-war Aston, bolstering Morris's view that scholars should excise 'the notion that modern Britain is inherently unreligious by virtue of being "modern"'.¹⁶ In Aston, Mass-Observers found that religious organizations remained central to both youth work and organized sociability. A visit to the Aston Baptist church alone charted a mixed youth club, Boys' Brigade, and Girls' Brigade units, all with relatively healthy memberships.¹⁷ Ecclesiastical buildings were essential to voluntary work, with spaces such as the mission church of Dyson Hall or the Aston Baptist church crucial to the successful operation of numerous clubs, groups, and voluntary welfare work, adding further weight to Brown's assertion that 'Sunday schools, bible classes, youth fellowships and similar organizations still dominated the life of young people [in the 1940s and 1950s]'.¹⁸ Focusing on religious voluntarism in Aston augments recent work arguing that voluntary action did not fade after 1945, but that the boundaries between what was considered the responsibility of the state and that of civil society shifted.¹⁹ Further to this, it advances a scholarly challenge to narratives of total secularization in post-war Britain.²⁰ Whilst doctrinal religious belief and church attendance may have decreased, the Aston survey indicates that Christianity continued to be a means of community organization for the working classes.

Secondly, and intersecting with the continued importance of religion to organizing, the Aston survey invites consideration of how class fitted into conceptions of voluntarism, challenging some of the conclusions of *Voluntary Action*. The continuation of material poverty after 1945 was evident in Aston,

¹⁴ Jeremy Morris, 'Secularization and religious experience: arguments in the historiography of modern British religion', *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), pp. 195–219 at pp. 196–7.

¹⁵ S. C. Williams, *Religious belief and popular culture in Southwark, c. 1880–1939* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 1–3.

¹⁶ Morris, 'Secularization and religious experience', p. 209.

¹⁷ 'Aston Baptist church', 24 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.

¹⁸ Brown, *Religion and society*, p. 204.

¹⁹ Pat Thane, 'The "big society" and the "big state": creative tension or crowding out?', *Twentieth Century British History*, 23 (2012) pp. 408–29 at p. 409. Key examples of this body of work, both new and old, include G. Finlayson, *Citizen, state and social welfare in Britain, 1830–1990* (Oxford, 1994); Rodney Lowe, *The welfare state in Britain since 1945* (2nd edn, Basingstoke, 1999); Matthew Hilton and James McKay, eds., *The ages of voluntarism: how we got to the big society* (Oxford, 2011); Oppenheimer and Deakin, eds., *Beveridge and voluntary action*; Colin Rochester, *Rediscovering voluntary action: the beat of a different drum* (Basingstoke, 2013).

²⁰ See Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: believing without belonging* (Oxford, 1995); Callum G. Brown, *The death of Christian Britain: understanding secularization, 1800–2000* (Abingdon and New York, NY, 2009); Morris, 'Secularization and religious experience'.

with most residents' complaints focused on poor housing conditions. Despite Harrison's disparaging assessment of evening amusements 'besides staying at home' as limited to the cinema or 'if there was one, a dance', most residents seemed relatively content.²¹ Yet Mass-Observation – alongside Beveridge – seemed to believe that modern social problems derived from a lack of communitarian vigour, as evidenced by Beveridge's emphasis on voluntary action to enable an 'active citizenship' for a healthy civil society.²² This effectively entailed a rejection of the popular desire for 'a home of one's own' that had been increasing since the 1930s, and as Claire Langhamer has noted, Mass-Observation's pre-war survey work had left no illusions that retreating into the 'private world of home' was most Britons' ambition.²³ Given the insistence of working-class interviewees on 'the difficulties of having no running water or baths' in 1946, it raises the question whether Mass-Observation or Beveridge were able to assess effectively the needs of their working-class subjects. The interest of social reformers in encouraging a participatory democracy required a working-class engaged only in 'active and communal' interests, not individual pursuits.

Conversing with the public assistance officer in Aston, Quass was told that welfare officials were overwhelmed with enquiries, 'now that C.A.B [Citizens' Advice Bureaux] are closing down [their] activities'.²⁴ This would appear in accordance with 'declinist' narratives of voluntary action described by Matthew Hilton and James McKay, characterized as the effective abolition of voluntary social service by the state, with public acceptance of this change.²⁵ Yet as Hilton and McKay point out, this 'declinist' narrative is illusory – voluntary organizations 'continued to evolve, adapt and transform' throughout the twentieth century.²⁶ Similarly, Rodney Lowe has suggested that the post-war welfare state was not intended to overhaul wholly voluntary provision but rather to enable organizations to specialize and to 'provide the poor with a basic independence'.²⁷ The Aston survey provides an intriguing illustration of the early stages of post-war change, situating voluntary action in the social context of the mid-1940s.

II

Against the diminished position of Christianity in post-war Britain, it is striking that church networks continued to influence voluntary associations. This stands

²¹ Harrison, 'Aston', p. 1.

²² Harris, *William Beveridge*, p. 455.

²³ Claire Langhamer, 'The meanings of home in postwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40 (2005), pp. 341–62 at p. 360.

²⁴ 'Precis of M-O material on Aston', 16 Oct. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/A, p. 9.

²⁵ Matthew Hilton and James McKay, 'Introduction', in Hilton and McKay, eds., *Ages of voluntarism*, pp. 1–27 at p. 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁷ Lowe, *The welfare state in Britain*, p. 99.

out in spite of Prochaska's assertion that the effects of bombing during the Second World War had 'brought charitable proceedings [within church bodies] to a sudden and deafening end', the disruption to church-going causing a decline in religious charitable activity.²⁸ Yet the Aston survey does not reflect this. Instead, as Sarah Williams found in Southwark, church attendance did not equate with religiosity or even willingness to participate: 'although individuals might rarely step over the threshold of a church from one year to the next, they might none the less have identified themselves with the local church'.²⁹ Despite a Mass-Observer finding the Anglican Aston parish church 'only a quarter full', there was still a collection for 'China Relief'.³⁰ In Birmingham more broadly, Anthony Sutcliffe and Roger Smith argued that following the restoration of peace in 1945, 'the more active members were again able to concentrate on church affairs'.³¹ The churches, then, remained urban cores of voluntarism in the immediate post-war period.

The visits by Mass-Observers to the churches of Aston indicated the integral role that religion continued to play in voluntary action. This was especially true in terms of organized leisure, and even more so when applied to youth activities. In a 1947 draft on the leisure aspects of the Aston survey, it was stated that 'church clubs are easily the commonest sort of socially active organisations; in districts of this kind [working-class]'.³² While we should, as Williams cautioned, avoid the 'crude correlation of symbolic communities...with the structural analysis of class' in thinking about religiosity, the church club clearly had a social purpose beyond doctrinal belief.³³ A further paper on this subject in June 1947 found that 15 per cent of 200 individuals surveyed belonged to a church club 'of some sort'.³⁴ Though the total figure was still fairly low, the numbers enrolled in church clubs were nevertheless higher than other kinds of social clubs. The reasons for this were not elaborated upon by Mass-Observation, but it seems probable that in the mid-1940s religion remained the most obvious organized social network for working people outside of their workplaces, and perhaps more importantly, the costs of joining in were relatively low.

It is true that the relative *institutional* decline of churches should not be understated. Even dynamic religious movements were suffering a decline in membership, with the Spiritualist church in Aston – based on the notion that the dead could communicate with the living via séances – reporting to a Mass-Observer

²⁸ Frank Prochaska, 'The war and charity', in Oppenheimer and Deakin, eds., *Beveridge and voluntary action*, pp. 36–50 at p. 38.

²⁹ Williams, *Religious belief and popular culture*, pp. 157–9.

³⁰ This was British Aid to China, active in Birmingham during the period.

³¹ Anthony Sutcliffe and Roger Smith, *History of Birmingham*, III: *Birmingham, 1939–1970* (London, 1974), p. 257.

³² 'Organised leisure: draft', 1947, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B, p. 2.

³³ Williams, *Religious belief and popular culture*, p. 14.

³⁴ 'Organisation membership in Aston', 4 June 1947, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B, p. 2.

that 'we used to hold more meetings but the Communists have taken over this hall'.³⁵ This sentiment might well have summed up the feelings of many post-war believers. The Spiritualist movement had reached its 'high water mark' in the 1930s, and whilst scholarship on the movement after 1945 is lacking, membership rapidly declined during wartime.³⁶ Similarly, the nonconformist churches failed to recoup their membership post-war in proportion to the increase in population, representing only 14 per cent of the adult population in 1951 as opposed to 20 per cent in 1901.³⁷ In Birmingham as elsewhere, the Church of England had greater success, with an estimated 30,000 adherents by 1957, far outstripping nonconformism.³⁸ In fact, looking beyond the nonconformist churches, there was, as Callum Brown argues, 'something of a religious boom in the late 1940s and 1950s' with extremely high growth in membership of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic church.³⁹ Yet it may be misplaced solely to utilize measurable indices of church attendance or rites of passage (such as recorded baptisms) to read the experience of post-war Christianity. This form of interpretation cannot, Morris has cautioned, 'register the social reach of the churches, nor touch the pervasive nature of popular Christianity'.⁴⁰ It is therefore far more productive to examine what Christian congregations were actually *doing* in the voluntary sphere.

One such example is the Anglican mission church of Dyson Hall, which, though unvisited by Mass-Observers, was represented in the survey by material collected on it. Dyson Hall described themselves on their fifty-year anniversary in 1945 as a 'true family centre' and a 'social enterprise', attributing this designation to their non-profit canteen, which had distributed 'daily jam-jars of hot soup' to families in need, as well organizing clubs for all ages.⁴¹ Units of the Boys' Brigade, Boy Scouts, and Girl Guides, as well as a non-uniformed Girls' Club, and 'Bromsgrove Club' for boys, all operated from the hall premises.⁴² Whilst the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides were not explicitly religious youth organizations, Dyson Hall was the (literal) structure supporting them. Although the Boy Scouts had four times as many members nationally as the Boys' Brigade in 1939, church-linked clubs were more popular amongst older children than the senior sections of Scouting and Guiding.⁴³ The significance of Dyson Hall was best expressed by the vicar, H. McGowan, in his 'final word' to the 1945 publication. McGowan admitted that 'we find ourselves hard put to renovate

³⁵ 'Spiritualist. John's Street', 24 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.

³⁶ Jennifer Hazelgrove, 'Spiritualism after the Great War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10 (1999), pp. 404–30 at p. 405.

³⁷ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), p. 274.

³⁸ Sutcliffe and Smith, *History of Birmingham*, p. 258.

³⁹ Brown, *The death of Christian Britain*, p. 214.

⁴⁰ Morris, 'Secularization and religious experience', p. 198.

⁴¹ *Dyson Hall 1895–1945* (1945), SxMOA1/2/66/1/C, pp. 13, 15, and 37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 25–7.

⁴³ Tammy M. Proctor, '(Uni)Forming youth: Girl Guides and Boy Scouts in Britain, 1908–1939', *History Workshop Journal*, 45 (1998), pp. 103–34 at p. 105.

and re-organize our equipment' but claimed that Dyson Hall was not simply a religious space, but 'a contribution to the social life and welfare of the district'.⁴⁴ Whether in terms of jam-jars of soup or as a 'family centre', McGowan's assertion seemed a reasonable one.

A visit to the Congregational church on Park Road found a large youth club, comprising around eighty members. Having attended a youth club Saturday night dance, the Mass-Observer present wrote that it was a 'jolly and happy affair' with around ninety present and most aged under twenty.⁴⁵ In addition to dances and sporting activities, the Congregationalist youth club organized 'holiday rambles', and a girls' 'Health and Beauty Club', with all members paying 2d a week.⁴⁶ Similarly, Aston Baptist church had a well-attended mixed youth club offering sessions in choir practice, dramatics, literature and sewing, as well as Boys' and Girls' Brigade units.⁴⁷ Adult activities did not receive the same level of detail, but a Baptist church-goer described a 'Women's Monday Meeting' and a 'Men's Class'.⁴⁸ The Mass-Observers' field-notes suggest that religious communities were at the centre of local voluntary activity, in far better health than scholars of religious decline such as Prochaska have allowed.

Visiting the Anglican St Paul's church, a Mass-Observer found few attendees and learned from the priest that 'weekly attendance is poor' at the Boys' Club on Tuesday nights, with local youths 'mainly concerned with football, their sleep...all the same in Aston with the young people'.⁴⁹ By contrast, the 'Girls' Friendly Society' on Thursdays was well attended, with around forty attending the 'spiritual movement', whilst activities focused on 'the development of the body, mind and the spirit'.⁵⁰ A Boys' Brigade unit and Dramatic Society attracted around twenty members each.⁵¹ This apparent vitality stood against the revelation that the local Citizens' Advice Bureau 'used to be open more often but voluntary runners could not afford the time'.⁵² In this light, religious networks may have had greater staying power than the association-minded 'active citizenship' extolled by Beveridge. As Matthew Hilton, James McKay, Nicholas Crowson, and Jean-François Mouhot have remarked, religion remained important to voluntary action throughout the twentieth century, even if simply 'in its ability to provide a pool of believers particularly prone to "joining in"'.⁵³

⁴⁴ *Dyson Hall 1895-1945*, p. 36.

⁴⁵ 'Park Road Congregational church', 24 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ 'Aston Baptist church'.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ 'St Paul's C of E. Lozells Road', 24 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² 'Precis of M-O material on Aston', p. 6.

⁵³ Matthew Hilton, James McKay, Nicholas Crowson, and Jean-François Mouhot, *The politics of expertise: how NGOs shaped modern Britain* (Oxford, 2013), p. 227. The authors remained

One Christian church in particular had a pivotal influence within the lives of congregants in Aston. This was, of course, the Roman Catholic church, which had vastly increased its post-war membership in England: rising from around 500,000 in 1940 to over two million between 1950 and 1970.⁵⁴ In Birmingham itself, the Catholic population rose from over 52,000 in 1940 to 103,475 in 1969.⁵⁵ This extraordinary rise can be attributed to Irish migration to England, bringing 'large numbers of working-class Catholics whose birth-rate was higher than any non-Catholic English social class'.⁵⁶ Though ethnicity was not commented upon by Mass-Observers in the Aston survey work, Birmingham had been a major destination for Irish migrants seeking war work in factories during the Second World War, and it is probable that the Catholic population seen by Mass-Observation included many of Irish origin.⁵⁷ The enlarged Catholic congregation was apparent from the visit of a Mass-Observer to the Sacred Heart and Margaret Mary Catholic church in Aston. Around 350 church-goers were present at the 11am Sunday service – over four times as many worshippers as the next largest congregation, the Baptists.⁵⁸ The priest claimed that the church welcomed some 2,000 adherents across multiple Sunday services. Substantial congregations such as this were partially sustained by discreet pressure applied by parish priests, as well as an 'utterly inflexible attitude to mixed marriages', ensuring a steady flow of converts.⁵⁹

Combined with rigid discipline was a network of Catholic voluntary organizations extending beyond church buildings. This was partly out of necessity. Researching one such organization in Birmingham, the Union of Catholic Mothers (UCM), Sarah O'Brien has noted that a 'painful reality of ethnic segregation' existed for Irish Catholic migrants.⁶⁰ Irish Catholics were stigmatized not simply by the non-Catholic English populace, but also by their English co-religionists, who regarded them in the words of one Irish-born UCM member as 'a little bit second rate'.⁶¹ Unlike Liverpool and Manchester, Birmingham had not received large numbers of working-class Irish migrants prior to the 1940s, with pre-war Catholicism instead centred on a 'respectable' middle-class English Catholic minority. As Gavin Schaffer and Saima Nasar have suggested, the church in Birmingham sought to minimize 'Irishness' to

sceptical of religion as a voluntary force in itself, with the exception of international humanitarian NGOs.

⁵⁴ McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, pp. 285–6.

⁵⁵ Sutcliffe and Smith, *History of Birmingham*, p. 257.

⁵⁶ McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, p. 286.

⁵⁷ Enda Delaney, *Demography, state and society: Irish migration to Britain, 1921–1971* (Liverpool, 2000), p. 142.

⁵⁸ 'Sacred Heart R.C. church', 24 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B, p. 1.

⁵⁹ McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, p. 285.

⁶⁰ Sarah O'Brien, 'Irish women's involvement in Birmingham's Union of Catholic Mothers, 1948–1978', *Midland History*, 38 (2013), pp. 213–25 at p. 218.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

aid absorption, with varying success.⁶² Mary Hickman has argued that this ‘neutering’ of Irish identity in favour of an emphasis on Catholicism was aided by ‘community organizations based on the church’.⁶³ A ‘Mothers’ meeting’ (presumably the UCM), the Society of St Vincent de Paul, a Men’s Club, a Boys’ Club, and a Girls’ Club all operated from Sacred Heart church.⁶⁴ Barry Hazley has characterized these lay welfare groups as part of a ‘regulatory discourse which emphasized the dangers of life in a materialistic urban culture, but that also instructed migrants on how to achieve a distinctive version of migration success’.⁶⁵ The Girls’ Club was looked after by the ‘Young Christian Workers’ (YCW), ‘who contact factory and other employers’.⁶⁶ An international Catholic labour movement, the YCW was founded in Belgium by the priest Joseph Cardijn in 1913, with British branches established in 1937.⁶⁷ By 1948, there were three active sections in Birmingham, with the Sacred Heart branch mentioned by the YCW regional committee to have ‘very good’ attendance at their weekly meeting.⁶⁸

In the Sacred Heart Girls’ Club, meetings ‘[tried] to find out how [young women] look upon Christianity: marriage: home life: family life: dancing: pictures: make-up’.⁶⁹ The activities of the Boys’ Club were rather less Christianized: ‘ping-pong; billiards; darts; boxing; football and swimming’. This emphasis for young women on domesticity and on social spaces in which they might meet a future husband (dancing or cinema dates) accords with Breda Gray’s observation that Catholic women were ‘invited to see [themselves] as having authority within the private sphere’ – and only there – with their Catholicism expressing this limited power.⁷⁰ In the Girls’ Club, YCW team leaders aimed to ‘find out the needs of these girls: jobs for instance – suggesting more suitable work’.⁷¹ It is probable the Boys’ Club were served by the YCW too, in addition to a ‘Family Night’ run by the organization. The intervention of the YCW into the working lives of their co-religionists demonstrates the significance of religion in voluntary action for the Aston Catholic community. Informal

⁶² Gavin Schaffer and Saima Nasar, ‘The white essential subject: race, ethnicity, and the Irish in post-war Britain’, *Contemporary British History*, 32 (2018), pp. 209–30 at p. 221.

⁶³ Mary J. Hickman, *Religion, class and identity: the state, the Catholic church and the education of the Irish in Britain* (Aldershot, 1995), pp. 231–2.

⁶⁴ ‘Sacred Heart R.C. church’, pp. 1–2. The Society of St Vincent de Paul was a lay charity, which operated at both local and international levels.

⁶⁵ Barry Hazley, ‘Ambivalent horizons: competing narratives of self in Irish women’s memories of pre-marriage years in post-war England’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 25 (2014), pp. 276–304 at p. 286.

⁶⁶ ‘Sacred Heart R.C. church’, p. 2.

⁶⁷ Mary Irene Zotti, ‘The Young Christian Workers’, *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 9 (1990), pp. 387–400 at p. 387.

⁶⁸ Correspondence with YCW, ‘Regional council meeting’, 14 Mar. 1948, Birmingham Archdiocesan Archives (BAA), St Chad’s Cathedral, Birmingham, AP 7/3.

⁶⁹ ‘Sacred Heart R.C. church’, p. 2.

⁷⁰ Breda Gray, *Women and the Irish diaspora* (London, 2004), p. 44.

⁷¹ ‘Sacred Heart R.C. church’, p. 2.

social work by organizations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul was essential to Catholic voluntarism, with the society continuing the traditional practice of 'visiting' the poor in their homes and providing hostels for vulnerable young people.⁷² As the parish priest explained: 'people tend to keep poverty to themselves. By visitation needs are discovered and help given wherever possible.'⁷³ Similarly, UCM members 'zealously promoted parish activism', from 'making teas at functions to fund-raising'.⁷⁴ Summarizing organizational membership in June 1947, a Mass-Observation report noted that 'women mention the Catholic Church rather more often than men'.⁷⁵ As Hazley has suggested, this was precisely the point of work undertaken by Catholic voluntary organizations, as they sought to ward off the potential permissive dangers of the post-war British city that might impede 'young women's future roles as wife and mother within the ideal Catholic family'.⁷⁶ Equally, Catholic spaces afforded to women what Charlotte Wildman has described as 'agency and fulfilment', as well as an outlet to develop their own "'pietized" femininity'.⁷⁷ In this regard, churches like Sacred Heart were spaces for female sociability as well as piety.

Whilst a considerable proportion of voluntary action in Aston was religious in character, there were of course non-ecclesiastical alternatives. There had been interest in secular 'community centres' from state and voluntary bodies alike throughout the 1930s, with the National Council for Social Service a strong advocate.⁷⁸ A seeming example in Aston was Burlington Hall. Opened in 1890 as an institute of the Midland Adult School Union, it had as a Mass-Observation rather uncharitably suggested 'degenerated into an old man's social' before becoming a community centre in 1944.⁷⁹ Yet it was not an entirely secular endeavour, with the financial support of the Warwickshire Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends key to the transformation.⁸⁰ In 1945, the centre stated their aim to pursue 'the Social and Educational aspirations of our corporate life, in obedience to a Spiritual ideal'.⁸¹

It is striking that seemingly secular projects in 1940s Aston required religious financing, though the sheer costs of running a community centre might explain this. Burlington Hall was well equipped, with a library, billiard room, kitchen, and a bathing room, as well as four full-time 'social and educational

⁷² Society of St Vincent de Paul, *Work for and with young people* (1947), BAA, AP 5/16, p. 1.

⁷³ 'Sacred Heart R.C. church', p. 2.

⁷⁴ O'Brien, 'Birmingham's Union of Catholic Mothers', p. 218.

⁷⁵ 'Organisation membership in Aston', p. 2.

⁷⁶ Hazley, 'Ambivalent horizons', p. 289.

⁷⁷ Charlotte Wildman, 'Religious selfhoods and the city in inter-war Manchester', *Urban History*, 38 (2011), pp. 103–23 at pp. 122–3.

⁷⁸ Hilda Jennings, 'Voluntary social services in urban areas', in Henry Mess and Gertrude Williams, eds., *Voluntary social services since 1918* (London, 1948), pp. 28–39 at p. 35.

⁷⁹ 'Precis of M-O material on Aston', p. 8.

⁸⁰ 'Burlington Hall neighbourhood centre', 22 Nov. 1946, www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/, Mass-Observation Online (MOO), TC 53–1-H, p. 2.

⁸¹ *A district? Or a neighbourhood? Your help may decide* (1945), SxMOA1/2/66/1/C.

workers'.⁸² The centre supported multiple youth and adult groups, as well as trips away, with the organizing secretary stating that: 'last August we took 170 people to North Wales...some camps were on a family basis – for two weeks'.⁸³ This had included a camp for children with learning disabilities from 'Monyhull Colony'.⁸⁴ Even though members contributed towards costs, a 1945 appeal for funds stated that 'something in the region of £2,000 per year is needed to maintain and develop the work in response to the increasing demands of the district'.⁸⁵ The remark of the organizing secretary that 'we've tried to encourage membership on a family basis' at a shilling a week epitomized the limitations of voluntary subscription. Whereas a municipally run community centre might fund the employment of organizers and running costs from the local rates fund, a voluntary community centre such as Burlington Hall was reliant on a fluctuating subscription pool, and ultimately on benefactors. As the influence of a 'Spiritual ideal' suggests, even with a relatively neutral religious backer such as the Quakers, the often substantial finances and fundraising abilities of religious institutions made them the most likely patrons, as well as influencers.

Studying the lives of working-class men in 1940s London, the sociologist Ferdinand Zweig suggested that 'what the working man dislikes most is preaching, moralising and edification'.⁸⁶ His supposition that the jam-jar of soup given without judgement was preferable to the jam-jar of soup given alongside a sermon may well have been correct. As Zweig went on, 'we must realise that the preaching and moralising are often done by members of other classes, and their motives might be suspect'.⁸⁷ Class and religion entwined through the distribution of faith-based charity, and as the next section will explore, this stigmatizing relationship perhaps ensured a warm welcome to the welfare state from those previously dependent on religious philanthropy in Aston. This said, Prochaska's argument that 'as Christian conviction waned, so too did a tradition of charitable ministration' is misplaced.⁸⁸ The relative vitality of church clubs and extensive use of church buildings in Aston supports Brown, Hazley, and Williams in signifying that the existence of secular welfare did not equate to the non-existence of religious voluntarism. As the example of Dyson Hall indicates, whether people liked it or not, an institution founded in 1895 was operating on near-identical lines in 1946. Even if some traditional voluntary bodies were in a state of 'profound crisis' post-war, the larger churches had the economies of scale and cultural reach that enabled

⁸² 'Precis of M-O material on Aston', p. 8; 'Burlington Hall neighbourhood centre', p. 2.

⁸³ 'Burlington Hall neighbourhood centre', p. 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* The Monyhull Colony was a residential institution in south Birmingham for children and adults with learning disabilities, in existence from 1908 to 1998.

⁸⁵ 'Precis of M-O material on Aston', p. 8; *A district? Or a neighbourhood? Your help may decide.*

⁸⁶ Ferdinand Zweig, *Labour, life and poverty* (London, 1948), p. 62.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁸⁸ Prochaska, *Christianity and social service in modern Britain*, p. 176.

their voluntary activities to continue.⁸⁹ Reviewing organizational membership in Aston, Harrison asserted that ‘the more religious, the more organisations [that the person belonged to]’.⁹⁰ Reasserting the role of religion makes apparent the continuities in post-war voluntarism, contrary to theories of decline.

III

Recording her impressions of Aston, a Mass-Observation remarked that ‘dull streets were not made cheerful even by window pots or light curtains’.⁹¹ This sense of working-class life as desperate and dreary was dominant in mid-1940s England, yet it was limited in scope. Whether as ‘Aston’ in 1946 or as the pseudonymous ‘Blacktown’ in 1947, the belief that the district was an archetypal urban working-class area was what drew Mass-Observation to Birmingham. Yet analyses of working-class life often homogenized working-class experience as one of overwhelming hardship, as well as employing more than a touch of snobishness about ‘dull streets’. Though deprivation was a very real part of working-class experience for many in mid-1940s England, it was not true of all.

This limited conception of the working classes has at times played out in the historiography of voluntary action across twentieth-century Britain, particularly in terms of the decline of working-class mutual aid networks such as clothing clubs and friendly societies. Daniel Weinbren attributes the demise of friendly societies to diminishing popular need for organizations that combined risk-pooling and sociable functions, alongside resentment towards the friendly society habit of ‘[reminding] members that they were obliged to the donor, the brethren of the society’.⁹² Given that the welfare state was conceived of as a ‘broad [community] of risk’, it may have appeared fairer to working people.⁹³ Yet that mutual aid as social welfare originated from a position of working-class weakness, and that the welfare state made such arrangements less imperative, has been at times neglected, as indicated in Prochaska’s lament that state welfare meant that the ‘informal benevolence’ of the working classes was lost.⁹⁴ Equally, the post-war continuities in religious welfare amongst the working classes have been overlooked by scholars writing on voluntary action.⁹⁵ Both the Aston survey and Beveridge presented a restricted view of the relationship of class to voluntary action, epitomized by

⁸⁹ Harris, *William Beveridge*, p. 456.

⁹⁰ Tom Harrison, ‘Notes on Aston organisational membership’, n.d., SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.

⁹¹ ‘Precis of M-O material on Aston’, p. 11.

⁹² Weinbren, ‘“Organisations for brotherly aid in misfortune”’, p. 56.

⁹³ Peter Baldwin, *The politics of social solidarity: class bases of the European welfare state, 1875–1975* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 290–3.

⁹⁴ Prochaska, *Christianity and social service in modern Britain*, p. 161.

⁹⁵ For examples of this inattention, see Jeremy Kendall and Martin Knapp, *The voluntary sector in the United Kingdom* (Manchester, 1996); Justin Davis Smith, Colin Rochester, and Rodney Hedley, eds., *An introduction to the voluntary sector* (London, 1995); Hilton, McKay, Crowson, and Mouhot, *The politics of expertise*.

Beveridge's belief that friendly societies were the 'lower-class guardians' of British liberties – despite evidence to his committee of enquiry suggesting that they were negatively associated with 'moral policing' in working-class culture.⁹⁶

Seeming working-class indifference to 'active citizenship' or 'community' would frustrate Michael Young and Peter Willmott in the early 1950s, as they compared Bethnal Green and the Essex estate of Debden for *Family and kinship*. Yet, as Jon Lawrence has argued, the 'traditional' working-class culture characterized by self-help and solidarity was false, with 'no cataclysmic exodus from mutualistic communitarianism to atomized, materialist individualism'.⁹⁷ Indeed, as Nicholas Deakin has wryly observed, 'the absence of local associational activity may not be sinister; it may reflect satisfaction or sufficient prosperity'.⁹⁸ Further to this, the changing working-class material circumstances of Aston, cinema-going alongside 'staying at home', indicated shifting leisure and living habits that would perplex social and political observers throughout the 1950s and 1960s. This was not unique to Aston or even new to Mass-Observation, as they had charted similar changes in 1930s Bolton.⁹⁹ Lawrence has suggested that from the 1930s, class was increasingly a 'mutable concept' and a view of the working-classes as primarily impoverished was simply not accurate.¹⁰⁰ What did this mean for voluntary action? It may be that the perception of voluntarism encapsulated in *Voluntary Action* and advocated by Mass-Observers such as Harrison was based on a misinterpretation of contemporary society. If so, the 'bad state of housing, congestion, slums and dirt' mentioned by half of the Aston residents were somewhat more pressing issues than the need for a greater array of cultural pursuits or opportunities for providential behaviour, and residents' concerns were not simply a sign of newly embraced individualism.¹⁰¹ Equally, Mass-Observation did not appear to consider the potentially coercive nature of organized sociability – with an obvious example in their investigation the intrusiveness of Catholic voluntarism – and how this might provoke a concurrent working-class desire for greater autonomy. The Aston survey demonstrates how class motivated (and motivates) certain readings of voluntary action.

Ambitious post-war reconstruction plans were put into operation by city councils via the 1944 Town Planning Act, bomb damage acting as the catalyst for clearing away 'slum' areas and rebuilding British cities in a more 'modern'

⁹⁶ Harris, 'Voluntarism, the state and public-private partnerships', p. 17.

⁹⁷ Jon Lawrence, 'Inventing the "traditional working class": a re-analysis of interview notes from Young and Willmott's *Family and kinship in East London*', *Historical Journal*, 59 (2016), pp. 567–93 at p. 593.

⁹⁸ Nicholas Deakin, *In search of civil society* (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 81.

⁹⁹ Hinton, *The Mass-Observers*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁰ Jon Lawrence, 'Class, affluence and the study of everyday life in Britain, c. 1930–1964', *Cultural and Social History*, 10 (2013), pp. 273–99 at pp. 275–6.

¹⁰¹ 'Draft of responses to Aston survey', 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/A, p. 2.

form.¹⁰² Aston was one of five central redevelopment areas designated in Birmingham in wartime planning. More than half the houses in central areas were built back-to-back (terraced houses built without gardens or yards), almost two-thirds had no separate toilets, and overcrowding was rife.¹⁰³ Birmingham City Council took over all houses in the redevelopment area in 1947 – comprising some 30,000 properties – on the basis that almost all were ‘unfit for human habitation’.¹⁰⁴ It was apparent from the accounts of Aston residents that this was indeed the case. A forty-year-old working-class man told a *Mass-Observer* in a pub that Aston needed ‘some up-to-date homes out and away from where all the industry is’.¹⁰⁵ The decaying urban environment of 1940s Aston, and the importance of good housing to the accounts of those interviewed, is paramount when considering patterns of voluntary action in the district.

Responding to the questions of a *Mass-Observer* on the streets of Aston, a twenty-five-year-old working-class woman suggested that she thought that ‘most of the housing should be pulled down’, and lighting provided for the back streets.¹⁰⁶ It may have been that battered terraces were not particularly significant nor complaints about slum conditions novel to the surveying *Mass-Observers*, but it is notable that circumstances of material poverty were not considered when documenting participation in voluntary associations or uses of leisure time. During a visit to the Women’s Section of the Aston Labour Club, Quass remarked that the half-dozen women present spoke mainly of housing: ‘No room for baths and difficult and expensive to get. Geysers are difficult because of the gas pressure. Shilling and penny-in-the-slot meters are a nuisance.’¹⁰⁷ Quass suggested that whilst people were keen to discuss ‘the difficulties of having no running water or baths’, they tended ‘to make the best of a bad job – which I first mistook for mere apathy’.¹⁰⁸

This focus on ‘apathy’ was characteristic of *Mass-Observation*’s broader interest in ‘active citizenship’, heightened by the Bolton Worktown study’s finding that working-class leisure time had shifted from communal to individual pursuits.¹⁰⁹ *Mass-Observation* met this change with trepidation, at times ‘endorsing a simple contrast between a degenerate modernity and a lost golden age of social responsibility and active citizenship’.¹¹⁰ This sort of analysis was commonplace amongst interwar social investigators. In her study of the London County

¹⁰² Jim Yelling, ‘Public policy, urban renewal and property ownership, 1945–1955’, *Urban History*, 22 (1995), pp. 48–62 at p. 50.

¹⁰³ Sutcliffe and Smith, *History of Birmingham*, p. 221.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Conversation Aston’, 23 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ ‘F.25.D’, 23 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Precis of M-O material on Aston’, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ Quass, ‘Personal impressions of Aston’, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ Hinton, *The Mass-Observers*, p. 42.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Council Watling estate in north-west London, Ruth Durant claimed that the removal of working-class families from the ‘old mean street’ meant that Watling could only ever be an ‘artificial community’: a claim repeated by Rosamond Jevons and John Madge in their study of peripheral council estates in Bristol.¹¹¹ These arguments created a dichotomy between an imagined past age of working-class mutualistic communitarianism and the ‘new England’ of consumerist individualism. Whilst detecting a rise in working-class prosperity, Mass-Observation did not recognize that the choices of individuals to go to the cinema or to spend time at home were freely made. Equally, though acknowledging that the ‘chief general grievance’ related to poor housing conditions, Mass-Observers were still inclined to suggest that it was the ‘more alert minority’ that wanted ‘improved entertainment’.¹¹² Given that the Aston survey had identified that ‘a great number were without bathrooms’ and most lavatories were shared, it is perplexing that the Mass-Observers did not perceive slum housing conditions as a greater source of discontent than the uses of leisure time.¹¹³ In seeking to impose their own cultural priorities on working-class areas such as Aston through snobbish judgments about community vitality, Mass-Observation were at one with the wider social reform movement of the mid-1940s, not least Beveridge himself. Whether they recognized it or not, the formal engagement in civil society demanded by paternalistic social reformers was very similar to the coercive features of Aston’s religious communities. Moral policing within the Catholic community helped to maintain the high congregation numbers at Sacred Heart, and the same would be true for ‘active citizenship’.

In conversation with a Mass-Observer, the vicar of St Paul’s Anglican church admitted that while he thought there were too many pubs and cinemas, ‘I don’t really know much about the people of Aston.’¹¹⁴ In spite of immersive fieldwork, Mass-Observers sometimes misread watching a film at the cinema, or listening to the wireless at home, as a rejection of collective action rather than considering that a rise in individualized or domestic leisure pointed to greater economic stability for the working classes. Part of the Aston survey focused on organizational membership – it was this section that was directly repurposed for *Voluntary Action* in 1948 – and Mass-Observation spent a considerable amount of their analysis trying to demonstrate that not belonging to a voluntary organization meant that one was less likely to vote (and therefore was ‘apathetic’).¹¹⁵ In fact, a greater percentage of the non-voting sample

¹¹¹ Ruth Durant, *Watling: a social survey* (London, 1939), p. 15; Rosamond Jevons and John Madge, *Housing estates: a study of Bristol Corporation policy and practice between the wars* (Bristol, 1946), p. 70.

¹¹² ‘Aston. Subjective report’, 15 Sept. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B, p. 2.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ ‘St Paul’s C of E. Lozells Road’, p. 1.

¹¹⁵ ‘Statistics and summary of Aston organisational ties and voting behaviour’, 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/A, p. 1.

were involved in voluntary activities.¹¹⁶ In these calculations, ‘staying in’ was implicitly least approved of – ‘out-door amusements’ such as pubs and cinemas were considered more acceptable, if lower weighted than associational membership. Yet as Claire Langhamer has suggested, ‘a more privatized home life was both dream and reality for...increasing numbers of working-class families prior to the Second World War’, through new municipal and private housing estates.¹¹⁷ Having conducted a 1943 housing conditions survey, Mass-Observation were well aware of this popular aspiration, and found in Aston that young residents wanted: ‘a modern house on the outskirts of the city [with] up to date conveniences, a garden [and] a safe and pleasant area in which their children can play’.¹¹⁸

By setting ‘organizations’ as a leisure ideal, Mass-Observation were consciously recreating patterns of middle-class sociability against the desires of their working-class respondents. Ross McKibbin argues that ‘formal associationalism’ distinguished the middle classes: ‘their obvious propensity to join clubs and associations by way of formal membership and direct subscription’.¹¹⁹ Being a club member had an important purpose for the middle classes – namely, status-building through developing ‘contacts’. In a 1960 study of the largely middle-class district of Woodford in Essex, Michael Young and Peter Willmott found that there were few working-class members of any club, and that ‘most people feel comfortable with members of what they think of as their own social class’.¹²⁰ This formal sociability could be overstated, as informal sociability was still important for the middle classes via smaller, more intimate networks than in working-class areas.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the belief that ‘organized leisure’ was how one should best spend one’s free time had distinctly middle-class connotations. Moreover, the critique of individual autonomy implied by ‘formal associationalism’ related closely to the outlook of Aston churches. An Aston Baptist priest’s declaration that war arose from ‘freedom of choice’ underlines this shared disregard for the individual.¹²²

Although there were plenty of youth clubs in Aston, as well as the organized sociability of the Labour Club, and centres such as Burlington Hall alongside church clubs, Mass-Observation portrayed the primary shortcoming of the district as a need for ‘improved entertainment’.¹²³ Conversely, ‘the most popular all-round social habit’ of cinema-going was regarded as unsatisfactory, whilst the pub was valorized as a model of working-class sociability despite it being in

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁷ Langhamer, ‘The meanings of home in postwar Britain’, p. 351.

¹¹⁸ ‘Aston. Subjective report’.

¹¹⁹ McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, p. 87.

¹²⁰ Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and class in a London suburb* (London, 1960), pp. 96–7.

¹²¹ McKibbin, *Classes and cultures*, pp. 86–7.

¹²² ‘Precis of M-O material on Aston’, p. 1.

¹²³ ‘Aston. Subjective report’, p. 2.

relative decline.¹²⁴ This said, Quass criticized the masculine character of the pub, though she also held the questionable opinion that ‘[working-class] women were over-prone to waste their time gossiping’.¹²⁵ The emphasis on organized leisure or on associational voluntarism over informal pursuits diminished the value of casual sociability such as ‘gossiping’, and neglected the reality that people lived increasingly private lives.

In her 1950s study of Banbury, Margaret Stacey acknowledged that life in working-class terraced streets ‘encourages close social relations with the neighbours but makes it difficult for them to withdraw from one another’.¹²⁶ Similar views were present in Aston, whether in the comment of a thirty-year-old lower middle-class man that back-to-backs should be demolished to ‘give people more privacy’, or that of a twenty-one-year-old working-class woman that ‘I could do with a house. I’m married.’¹²⁷ Given that the latter interviewee was probably living with her mother-in-law, it was an understandable priority. The comment of a sixty-year-old tobacconist that ‘it’s ready-made pleasures [local people are] after. Pictures and dogs’ epitomized the fact people were *choosing* to use their leisure time in diverting ways.¹²⁸ Despite this, a survey report concluded that there was ‘little individual awareness, vitality or cultural inclination’.¹²⁹ The neglect of popular priorities indicated the origins of Mass-Observation as the product of ‘middle-class radicals who saw themselves as more efficient than the Blimpish elites’.¹³⁰ Even if they lacked the pomposity and reactionary views of the upper-middle-class Blimpish establishment, the intellectual middle-class adherents of Mass-Observation were also capable of gliding over the concerns of working people. Though their purpose was distinct, the paternalism of Mass-Observation was not all that different from the parochialism of the Aston churches.

The creation of *Voluntary Action* betrayed an ignorance of working-class approaches to leisure and voluntary action. Selina Todd has noted that mid-twentieth-century social surveys tended to ‘[neglect] the reality that the reciprocal childcare, loans and companionship...were provoked by poverty’.¹³¹ There was a clear logic to statements made to Mass-Observers returning to Aston in 1947 for the Voluntary Social Services Enquiry, such as ‘[charities] should be abolished’ or ‘there should be a new scheme so people

¹²⁴ Ibid.; see Langhamer, ‘The meanings of home in postwar Britain’, p. 352.

¹²⁵ Quass, ‘Personal impressions of Aston’, p. 3.

¹²⁶ Margaret Stacey, *Tradition and change: a study of Banbury* (Oxford, 1960), p. 108.

¹²⁷ ‘M. 30.C’, 23 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B; ‘F.21.D’, 23 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.

¹²⁸ ‘M.60.C tobacconist’, 23 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.

¹²⁹ ‘Aston. Subjective report’, p. 5.

¹³⁰ Hinton, *The Mass-Observers*, p. 370.

¹³¹ Selina Todd, *The people: the rise and fall of the working class, 1910–2010* (London, 2014), p. 176.

don't need charity'.¹³² If the welfare state was, rightly or wrongly, something that working-class people believed they had a stake in, charity was perceived not to be 'theirs' through the stigmatizing relationship involved in its distribution. Similarly, with the establishment of a welfare state, mutual aid – effectively a welfare arrangement formed through communal solidarity – ceased to be relevant.

In a moment symbolizing the problematic relationship of the Voluntary Social Services Enquiry to working-class needs and desires, the largest organized working-class movement – the trade unions – refused to give evidence. This was due to Beveridge's unwillingness to allow any trade union representation on his committee (and therefore some say in the report's outcome). The Trades Union Congress (TUC) had initially been receptive, with the social insurance secretary C. R. Dale suggesting in an April 1947 memorandum to the assistant general secretary George Woodcock that 'it might be unwise to have nothing to do with it', albeit provided the TUC did not empower the 'out of date principles' that 'much voluntary effort at the present time is based on'.¹³³ Beveridge met with the Joint Social Insurance Committee of the TUC on 12 June 1947. Following his withdrawal, a 'full discussion' ensued, with 'serious objections to accepting the invitation [to give evidence to the enquiry]'.¹³⁴ The discussion drew out that the TUC 'had not been consulted in the appointment of the Assessors assisting Lord Beveridge, and were being asked to give evidence to a body that was not sitting in public and was without Trade Union representation'.¹³⁵ The Joint Committee therefore resolved to ask the minister for national insurance for a public enquiry, refusing Beveridge's offer.¹³⁶ Replying to the TUC general secretary Vincent Tewson, the minister for national insurance James Griffiths assured him that 'we already have our hands very full' and that if any enquiry was 'necessary' it was better that it was 'independent' of government.¹³⁷ This could be understood as a tacit indication that the government had no intention of taking Beveridge's proposals seriously and on publication *Voluntary Action* indeed 'rapidly disappeared from view'.¹³⁸

Just as Mass-Observation were selective in reporting the concerns of Aston residents, the genteel circle that Beveridge gathered around him was bound to influence the recommendations of *Voluntary Action*. For Quass, Aston 'proved...the arbitrariness of social classification on sight'. She noted that: 'On several occasions I put women in the "C" category whose husbands

¹³² 'M.40.C', 13 Aug. 1947, www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/, MOO, TC-53-4-B; 'F.30.D', 11 Aug. 1947, www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/, MOO, TC-53-4-B.

¹³³ Memorandum from C. R. Dale to G. Woodcock, 'Voluntary Social Services Enquiry', 29 Apr. 1947, Modern Records Centre (MRC), MSS.292/809.2/5.

¹³⁴ Joint Social Insurance Committee, 'Voluntary Social Services Enquiry', 12 June 1947, MRC, MSS.292/809.2/5.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ James Griffiths to Vincent Tewson, 21 July 1947, MRC, MSS.292/809.2/5.

¹³⁸ Oppenheimer and Deakin, 'Beveridge and voluntary action', p. 1.

turned out to be building labourers or railwaymen, while the “clerical” grades were frequently classed as “D”s.’¹³⁹ Quite apart from the gendered practice of determining class solely on male employment, skilled workers in Birmingham were clearly benefiting from relatively propitious mid-1940s economic conditions. In identifying that ‘there did not seem to be any correlation between occupation and standard of living’, Quass was recording changing working-class life.¹⁴⁰ As Zweig found in conversations with working-class men, ‘for the worker, the term “recreation” is synonymous with freedom’.¹⁴¹ In this light, it seems unlikely that working-class families would be persuaded that their leisure time should be devoted to ‘learning to be useful in the world’, as Beveridge would suggest in *Voluntary Action*.¹⁴² Whilst *Voluntary Action* represented Beveridge’s vision of civil society, the Aston survey saw Mass-Observation fit the ‘new England’ to their own aims.

IV

What, then, is the significance of the Aston survey? It principally demonstrates how present scholarship into mid-twentieth-century British voluntary action has obscured religion and underplayed class. Though associational life was undoubtedly a form of working-class sociability, belonging to clubs or associations had a more limited cultural meaning than for the middle classes, with concurrently fewer organizations. Equally, the coercive character of organized sociability, common to both religious and middle-class ideals, was at odds with newfound working-class autonomy. Yet these explanatory frameworks – focusing on the dynamics of class and religion in voluntarism – have to date remained muted.

Religion remained indispensable to voluntary action in mid-1940s Aston, most obviously through the provision of church clubs. As scholars such as Morris and Williams have argued, the social function of organized religion or religious belief in Aston (which did not necessarily mean active church-going) facilitated this continuity, alongside the growing Catholic population. Religion permeated community relationships in ways that other voluntary services could not, especially within a spatially cramped working-class community. The Men’s Club of the Sacred Heart Catholic church met every night, even if just to play billiards or snooker.¹⁴³ When combined with the coercive aspects of church communities, such regularity could well have ensured stability of donations and voluntary church workers unthinkable for most organizations. Equally, even for denominations in decline, the fact that churches had both

¹³⁹ Quass, ‘Personal impressions of Aston’, p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁴¹ Zweig, *Labour, life and poverty*, p. 45.

¹⁴² Lord Beveridge, *Voluntary Action: a report on methods of social advance* (London, 1948), p. 142.

¹⁴³ ‘Sacred Heart R.C. church’, p. 2.

premises and full-time workers in the form of priests meant that full congregations were not a prerequisite to voluntary activity. Conversely, the funding difficulties of Burlington Hall underlined the limitations of secular voluntary action. This was evident in Quaker financing of the centre, which would remain a common feature of Birmingham voluntarism. Even if the spiritual requirements for Quaker support were minimal, it demonstrates the dependence of voluntary action on either mass membership or major benefactors – often religious in guiding principle – to operate at any scale. It is worth remembering Hilton and McKay's warning that voluntary action should not be analysed as 'something distinct from the world around it'.¹⁴⁴ Being an *active* member of a voluntary organization was a relatively unusual pursuit by the mid-1940s, but it was less unusual to be a church member, and still less exceptional that a church might engage in welfare work or provide a social space. The Aston survey counters the idea that religious activity collapsed post-war as part of a general secularizing trend in England, by demonstrating the importance of religious spaces beyond formal church-going, as well as the social aspects of organized religion. Even if weekly pew numbers declined for some denominations, this did not mean that religiously inspired voluntary action or religious communities vanished.

Zweig claimed that working people 'would resent most bitterly any interference with their right to recreation, or with their freedom to get pleasure in their own way'.¹⁴⁵ Given this, it seems ironic that the preface to *Labour, life and poverty* on publication in 1948 was written by Beveridge, who had seen the manuscript in 1947 'as [he] was beginning [his] Inquiry into Voluntary Agencies'.¹⁴⁶ Though Beveridge rightly asserted that it would be difficult to generalize on the basis of the working men encountered by Zweig (though he did not consider that the problem might lie in the absence of women from the study), it is striking that Zweig's research strengthened rather than weakened his resolve that voluntary action was the missing element in post-war working-class life. Yet for characters such as a market man of forty-four, who paid 11s 6d a week for a 'two-roomed flat with a bathroom, cold and damp' out of a pay packet of £4 12s, had no savings, and could not afford to take holidays, it seems unlikely that a vigorous associational lifestyle would be transformative in the way that Beveridge might have imagined.¹⁴⁷

The remark of an eighteen-year-old working-class man that the houses in Aston were 'too close together' and that 'semi-detached houses are more in my line' was far more characteristic of Aston residents' priorities than the self-improvement desired by Beveridge.¹⁴⁸ Where people did want organized

¹⁴⁴ Hilton and McKay, 'Introduction', p. 26.

¹⁴⁵ Zweig, *Labour, life and poverty*, p. 45.

¹⁴⁶ Lord Beveridge, 'Preface', in Zweig, *Labour, life and poverty*, pp. v–vi at p. v.

¹⁴⁷ Zweig, *Labour, life and poverty*, p. 146.

¹⁴⁸ 'M.18.D', 23 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.

sociability, it was for improved versions of similar things. In a visit to a Friday night dance with a four-piece band, a Mass-Observation was told by a twenty-year-old working-class woman that ‘[the dance was] as good as any, there aren’t many places where you can go’.¹⁴⁹ Given that the dance was held for only two hours between 8pm and 10pm, it is unsurprising that one twenty-five-year-old man suggested that Aston was ‘pretty quiet and reserved’.¹⁵⁰ But it is notable that this response was judged ‘less typical’. Far more common were complaints about housing, and statements of relative contentment with the cinemas and pubs that Aston had to offer.

Crucially, the ‘active citizenship’ that first Mass-Observation and later Beveridge desired in Aston was absent. The structure of both the 1946 and 1947 survey work, though carried out for different purposes, reflected the dissatisfaction of social reformers with the ‘vulgar’ pursuits of the new working classes, and the desire of those reformers that the working classes should use their leisure time to extend the bonds of mutual aid societies, or, preferably, replicate middle-class forms of social betterment. Yet by the mid-1940s, people saw mutual aid societies as obsolete, and were becoming more domestically minded – perhaps freer to choose – in their leisure time. The suspicion of some social reformers that the wireless, football pools, and cinema were overwhelming fraternal sensibilities would be carried over into a wider debate on working-class ‘affluence’ in the 1950s, with the refrigerator and the motor car the new targets for criticism.¹⁵¹ Ultimately, the problem lay in the noisy valorization of ‘civil society’ – characterized by Deakin as the quintessentially liberal aim of free-willed, purposeful association – over the actuality of how people lived and how they wanted to live.¹⁵² This had considerable class connotations, which, as Harris has suggested, is absent from the historiography citing *Voluntary Action*.¹⁵³ Where extensive associational life existed in Aston, it was religious in character and not necessarily free-willed. It is important to state that free-willed, purposeful association had not, and would not, end in Aston or places like it – but the Victorian conditions which inspired this definition of civil society had passed.

Unpublished and overlooked studies such as the Aston survey can add weight to the idea advanced by Lawrence that ‘working people, in their great diversity, remade their lives consciously from the bottom up across the middle decades of the twentieth century’.¹⁵⁴ Such studies place voluntary action in its social context, formed by structural dynamics such as class and cultural phenomena in the form of religion. In a visit to an Aston café on a Friday night,

¹⁴⁹ ‘Dance. Aston’, 22 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.

¹⁵⁰ ‘Draft of responses to Aston survey’, p. 1.

¹⁵¹ Lawrence Black, *The political culture of the Left in affluent Britain, 1951–1964: Old Labour, New Britain?* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 152.

¹⁵² Deakin, *In search of civil society*, p. 9.

¹⁵³ Harris, ‘Voluntarism, the state and public–private partnerships’, pp. 16–17.

¹⁵⁴ Lawrence, ‘Class, affluence and the study of everyday life’, p. 289.

a Mass-Observer found a large group of young people aged between sixteen and twenty-one 'lounging about the chairs and tables drinking tea and eating cakes', with the boys 'fully occupied flirting and trying to make "dates" with the girls'.¹⁵⁵ That this was how the young chose to spend their time did not reflect a mean disposition. More than anything, it signified that in a time of lesser hardships, the working classes were enjoying the liberty to utilize their free time as they wished.

¹⁵⁵ 'Coffee shop mentioned by P.C.', 22 Nov. 1946, SxMOA1/2/66/1/B.