

Book Review

**Nicola Madge, 2025, *Lockdown Life-The Pandemic Experience for Older Diarists*:
Bristol, Policy Press, Paperback, 258 pages, ISBN: 978-1447372530, £27.99**

It is not easy to forget and wipe from our memory the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on us, whether countrywide, or individually in our homes and communities, even though it's a while since the whole phenomenon hit the UK in early 2020. Each of us experienced the time in different ways and probably remember different aspects of that difficult period. Without a doubt though the pandemic and the lockdowns were to transform our daily lives and focused our attention on how the government and the authorities throughout the four nations were addressing the impact on public and personal health.

The media was to play an important role in getting public health information out to us. It was also a conduit for comment and debate on a range of issues such as the scandals of the PPE, the failure of the prime minister Boris Johnson to call the lockdown earlier especially when it was plain to most that the pandemic was global, with reports of people everywhere falling seriously ill and dying.

How can we forget the pressure to find a reliable vaccine, which thankfully came sooner than expected, and then there was the pressure to get millions vaccinated. Older people in residential homes were unable to see their relatives and friends other than through restrictive circumstances such as zoom calls. Many of these residents fell seriously ill and died in residential homes despite the Health Secretary Matt Hancock saying multiple times that the government had thrown a 'protective ring' around care homes. Then it was discovered, against the government's own public health restrictions that there were drinks parties and social gatherings taking place in 10 Downing Street. As a result, the Metropolitan Police issued 126 fixed penalty notices to participants including to the Prime Minister, his wife Carrie, and to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, the man who subsequently became prime minister.

Meanwhile people formed queues outside supermarkets to purchase provisions; whilst we were all advised to wear face masks and keep a distance from each other. Further, most children could not attend schools for weeks and universities and colleges required students to study away from their campuses. These and many more major and minor incidents make up what was taking place in the UK during the first lockdown which was announced by Boris Johnson on 23rd March 2020. The lockdowns, which continued until over a year later, were supported by legislation telling people what they could and could not do. Almost overnight many of our personal rights, and autonomy to make decisions were reduced and removed. It became a retold line that not since the Second World War had citizens in the UK had their movements monitored and curtailed in such a way. It was a time of risk and uncertainty.

Whilst the most vulnerable were directed to ‘shield’ themselves ‘essential workers’ such as those working in supermarkets, the emergency services, and hospital and care homes, together with those collecting and disposing of our rubbish and sewage, and workers ensuring our power and water supplies continued uninterrupted, were expected to keep our vital services operating, often at risk of falling ill to the contagious disease.

What we know less about are the experiences of older people at that time. Medical research indicated that older people were likely to be one of the groups at risk in the pandemic due to their immune decline. This coupled with more underlying health conditions (comorbidities) like heart disease and diabetes meant their immune systems were weaker and less able to combat the impact of COVID-19.

Fortunately, soon after the pandemic gained ground and lockdowns were announced, Nicola Madge a psychologist based at Kingston University, London, developed a research programme focused on capturing the experiences of ‘relatively advantaged older men and women’ living in England, Scotland and Wales. Madge has now published her findings which makes for interesting reading.

Briefly, Dr Madge asked 68 men and women over the age of 70 to keep diaries and on a regular basis inviting them to send these to her. The outcome is Madge has analysed these diaries and published her findings in *Lockdown Life: The Pandemic Experience for Older Diarists* published by Policy Press in March 2025.

The research makes engaging reading with respondents, writing under pseudo names, describing their experiences and reactions over this period. Using a mainly symbolic interactionist framework, with recognition of the political and legal context, and linked with contemporary research and comment the research findings provide a valuable commentary of life for respondents and others during one of the most prolonged and unsettling periods of UK life since 1945.

As a respondent in this research, I can claim no input into how this investigation was constructed or delivered or indeed any contribution to the findings, although I did note some of my diary recordings have been included in the publication. Further, I have no vested interest in the outcome of publication other than to hope it will inform readers of respondent's thoughts and experiences. However, it is possible to make some general comments on Madge's work from a social scientific position and how the work is presented.

I can vouch that the discipline of writing a personal diary was a useful way of reflecting on my life during the different and changing lockdowns. For all respondents it was an opportunity to consider not only one's daily routine and how specific events impacted individuals, but it also provided diarists to comment on how the pandemic was being handled by others, importantly those with influence over our lives and our wellbeing including politicians, the police, medics, and epidemiologists.

By keeping diaries during the lockdowns and how Madge has presented them it is possible to note the changing impact of COVID 19 on respondents, ranging from frustrations to feelings of fear for the future.

Diary keeping for wider consumption has played an important role in recording the life of the public in UK society. For example, Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) was for a

good deal of his life a diary keeper and provides us with vivid accounts of London in the 17th century including the Great Fire of London in 1666, as well as minute detail of daily life. During the last century the Mass Observation movement was founded which gave voice to hundreds of people to describe and comment on their lives. Interestingly, one of the three founders of the movement was the anthropologist Charles Madge, the uncle of Nicola Madge the author of the book being reviewed here.

As Nicola Madge has mentioned in her introduction, literature too is a valuable vehicle for not only presenting commentary on the times they were written but also point to universal themes. See, for example, the work of Shakespeare and Dickens.

Returning to the research presented here there are too many learning points from Madge's investigation and too short a book review to give them full justice. However, one of the findings was that diarists welcomed the government driven daily briefings and were generally thought to have linked citizens with government thinking and action. What diarists felt dissatisfied with was the rationale for the oft changing government priorities and objectives. The reliance, and some would argue over reliance, on the term 'following the science', did not always wash with diarists who wanted greater honesty, and to quote Madge 'conclusions drawn from complicated epidemiological modelling procedures were presented as factual rather than conjectural'. As one diarist commented I wouldn't mind never hearing again 'following the science'.

Overall, this is an important publication carrying details of Nicola Madge's unique research. However, Madge would be the first to comment that this is a particular cohort. They are middle class, white and comfortable people over the age of 70. They were not representative of the country. The respondents were in many ways the lucky ones. Although they were in a group at risk in health terms, they could see out the lockdowns in congenial circumstances. A longitudinal research project that investigated the impact of COVID 19 on a less fortunate, younger and ethnically diverse cohort would make an interesting comparison with Madge's findings.

Nevertheless, as social and political historians begin to write up what happened during the period that COVID-19 was present in the UK during the early 2020's, Madge's work among many others will be a valuable resource.

Review by Keith Popple

Keith Popple is Emeritus Professor of Social Work at London South Bank University. He is co-author with Roger Green of *Neoliberalism and Urban Regeneration: London's communities finding a voice and fighting back* published in 2025 by Bristol University Press.