

The Home Front in Britain: Images, Myths and Forgotten Experiences since 1914

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The literature of the British home front differs distinctly in both quantity and nature between the two wars themselves. With regard to the Second there is a lengthy tradition of lively debate between the popular idea of ‘jolly cockneys in the Blitz’ and more considered revisionist studies stretching back at least to Angus Calder’s *The People’s War: Britain 1939–1945* first published in 1969. With regard to the First the volumes are considerably fewer and only a handful attempt a general overview. The ‘classic’ text is still Arthur Marwick’s *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* which dates from 1965 with perhaps Gerard de Groot’s, recently updated as *Back in Blighty: The British at Home in World War One*, to challenge it. Though Marwick’s thesis of war as a crucible for social change has been seriously challenged, as the authors point out in their introduction, the idea is a tenacious one in popular versions of both wars.⁽¹⁾ This challenge has mainly focussed on the role of women and this current volume forms a new and notable addition.

The book comprises 13 chapters and a conclusion split seven to six in favour of the Second World War. Only the introduction and concluding chapter look comparatively at both wars and only one, Paul Elliott’s on ‘Non-conscripted masculinities in 1940s British cinema’, is concerned mainly with the role of non-combatant men. This is a deliberate choice of the authors who state that attempting an overarching guide to the home fronts of both wars would be an impossible task but it inevitably raises some questions regarding the similarities and differences of experience between 1914–18 and 1939–45.

Within this self-imposed restriction the book certainly achieves its objects, notably to highlight ‘experiences and lives which have not made it into history books, television dramas or into museums’ (p. 2). It seems highly unlikely that any reader would be familiar with topics as diverse as the safety of munitions workers, women canal workers, the national savings movement and, my own favourite, animal-human relationships in wartime. This is a rich and potent mix of topics that both enhances our knowledge of the wars and, perhaps more significantly, suggests yet more avenues for future research.

The volume commences with editor Maggie Andrews’s relatively broad overview of ‘Ideas and Ideals of

domesticity and home in the First World War' which gives a clear background for the succeeding chapters. Angela Clare Smith then utilises a collection of letters between married couple Jack and Gert Adam to reveal issues around wartime separation and personal relationships. Possibly Smith doesn't utilise Jack Adam's position as a senior NCO as much as she might but the chapter is an outstanding contribution to the increasing number of personal histories we now have from the First World War. The agony of discovering that Jack was missing is vividly conveyed. At first her letters are simply returned then after six months he is officially posted as 'missing' finally being 'presumed killed'. Historians often emphasise the efficiency of the postal service between the home and Western fronts but Smith demonstrates how this must have impacted on a personal level especially for the thousands whose loved ones who never returned.

Inevitably each reader will find some chapters more enlightening than others. For myself I have some significant issues with Janis Lomas's discussion 'Soldiering on: war widows in First World War Britain'. There is often something of a gulf in knowledge and understanding between the military historians of a particular conflict and those who write about its social or cultural consequences. With regard to the First World War this sometimes manifests itself into a total lack of regard by military historians for the major war poets and artists and, on the one hand, a totally outdated interpretation of the military conduct of the war on the other. Lomas begins her chapter by suggesting, I would say quite rightly, that the formation of the Ministry of Pensions in 1916 represented a 'fundamental change and recognition that the scale of this war needed new solutions and structures' however her explanation of the forces that brought about its formation appear dubious (p. 39). She suggests that one reason was the early reliance on the work of voluntary organisations which led to many servicemen's wives becoming destitute and being forced onto reliance on the Poor Law. My own research, especially on the campaigning of organisations such as the Labour Party led War Emergency Workers National Committee, would suggest that the outdated paternalism of this relief and the recognition that government could afford to take up the burden played an even more significant role. Lomas then connects the recognition by government that state action was required to the devastating losses during the Battle of the Somme where '58,000 British soldiers died on 1 July 1916' (p. 45). This is both wrong and perpetuates a long-standing myth. The figure of 58,000 dead is unforgivable in an academic study and it's remarkable it wasn't picked up at some stage in the editing process. The total casualties on 1 July were some 58,000 of which approximately 19,000 were killed. The myth perpetuated is to see 1 July 1916 as the 'watershed' in British attitudes to the war. Such 'clean break' theses are at least as over-simplified as the idea that the war brought about the emancipation of women. Lomas is also hazy on her military ranks she calls Gertrude Adam (the subject of Angela Clare Smith's chapter) an 'officer's' wife. Jack Adam's highest rank was Company Sergeant Major, a small difference one might argue but not in military terms.

Throughout the chapter Lomas regards the way charity and the state treated war widows as representing no significant change from Victorian values 'a continuum of ideas concerning working-class women from the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act onwards' (p. 47). She notes how the rates for 'unmarried wives' were lower than for those officially married; highlights those widows whose pensions were rescinded for immoral conduct and notes that the widow of Harry Farr, notoriously shot for cowardice, was refused a pension. These examples are open to strong debate. The fact that 'unmarried wives' were given entitlement to any pension was hotly debated at the time and is certainly interpretable a major success in breaking down earlier moral barriers. The 939 widows whose pensions were rescinded represent just 0.23 per cent of the total and resorting to comments on the widows of those 'shot at dawn' is again hardly representative of anything. Though there were many flaws to the legislation, the agreement by the state to take over responsibility for both separation allowances and war widows was more another step in the creation of the welfare state rather than a rear-guard reaction by the forces of the Charity Organisation Society against the undeserving poor.

Anne Spurgeon's chapter on worker welfare adds to our knowledge both of the conditions for munitions workers and to that on the developing welfare state or, in this case, some its less progressive elements. There has been fierce debate as to whether the health of the population improved during the First World War or not. (2) Spurgeon's significant conclusion is that 'in most workplaces health and safety declined during the First World War and the steady improvements observed during the early years of the twentieth century came to a temporary halt' (p. 67). Not only this she concludes that welfare provision for women in the workplace was

generally misdirected – at moral rather than safety issues – and characterised by the ‘paternalistic control’ redolent of late 19th-century philanthropy. Her thesis is, given the limited space, convincingly argued and again shows that the overall concept of the War as a driving force for positive social change had many less progressive facets.

Two of the most striking paintings of the home front during the First World War are Flora Lion’s heroic portrayal of Bradford munitionettes ‘Women’s canteen at Phoenix Works’ and Richard Nevinson’s dour and less flattering ‘The food queue’. Karen Hunt may well have had these in mind when she opens her outstanding chapter on housewives in the First World War – the former energetic and patriotic, the latter older, greyer and passive. Her chapter is an attempt to recover some of the history of these hidden housewives whose stories have been significantly neglected by writers more interested in far more exciting tales of munitionettes or VADs. Inevitably her chapter can only scratch the surface in rehabilitating the crucially important role of housewives during the War, a subject that surely demands its own full-length study, but she nevertheless uncovers some revealing gems. One is certainly the considerable role of informal organisations through which women sought to gain some control of their situations such as the Food Vigilance Committees. The role of food supply is another under-researched topic, seemingly mundane but actually of critical importance not only to historians of the home front but to their military counterparts. The food situation on the home front played a significant role in the morale of troops at the front and several writers have emphasised that the German decision to prioritise food supplies for the troops over those at home was a critical error helping lead to the breakdown of morale in 1918.⁽³⁾ As Hunt says ‘the kitchen really was the key to victory’. She also points out a number of significant features when reviewing home front histories, most notably differences in class, the changing nature of the home front as the war progressed and regional variations. The last is a crucial point that often gets lost in some London-centric approaches and she is surely correct in concluding that ‘congested urban neighbourhoods were different to provincial towns, rural villages and suburbia. Although it is still not fully recognised, place framed the experience of all on the Home Front to the point where it might be more appropriate to speak of local Home Fronts’ (p. 86).

The final First World War chapter, by Thomas George, moves on to look at a very different group, women agricultural workers in Wales, before the book shifts its gaze to the Second World War. Paula Bartley examines the career of Ellen Wilkinson during the Second World War and her, on the surface, somewhat unlikely role in Churchill’s government as the ‘Shelter Queen’; later recruiting five million fire guards in the teeth of some considerable opposition. Gillian Mawson’s chapter is an important contribution to oral history being based on the testimonies of 20 women who were evacuated from Guernsey immediately before its occupation. Those that returned to the island faced significant hostility as having ‘run away’ and her stories point to just some of the tribulations faced by refugees even after they are able to return.

Perhaps the most radical contribution in the book is provided by Hilda Kean who looks at the relationship between people and their pets during wartime. The emotional support provided by domestic animals, indeed any role for pets, is not one that has hitherto gained serious historical interest but Kean demonstrates that it is one we should re-examine. Elspeth King and Maggie Andrews’s chapter on women’s attire under the stresses of rationing places their enterprising reactions within the changing nature of fashion, artistic modernism and the strictures of wartime shortages. Barbara Hatley-Broad and Bob Moore’s contribution somewhat parallels that of Thomas George in examining a niche sector of women’s employment, this time women canal workers. Their study sits alongside others from both wars that consider just how radical these gender-busting roles were and concludes that ‘they did not break down any employment barriers that had not already been breached by force of economic or family circumstances in the previous century and a half’ (p. 212). As such their conclusions add to the evidence against the popular mythology of both world wars as significantly aiding women’s employment equality.

Probably the most popular re-creation of the Second World War home front has been the television comedy *Dad’s Army*, soon to receive a significant revival as a feature film. Its characters are obvious stereotypes, exaggerated to the point of caricature. The series is one of the Second World War masculinities examined by Paul Elliott though his chapter is mainly focussed on 1940s cinema. Elliott makes a number of interesting

observations through the portrayal of three male stereotypes named after characters from *Dad's Army*: Jones – the pensioner; Pike – the stupid boy and Walker – the spiv. He sees clear parallels, for example, between the character of Jones and Powell and Pressberger's Clive Wynne-Candy in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*. He also insightfully interrogates the sexual elements in (mainly) comic portrayals. Thus he provides examples of the 'predator' spiv and the, to all intents and purposes, gay couple played by Arthur Askey and Richard Murdoch in *Band Waggon*. Whilst Elliott's choice of Gramsci's concept of hegemony is a useful lens in revealing the nature of the depiction of masculinity I'm not certain that it isn't one that is now becoming somewhat outdated and that might have been modified by reference to models of myth and remembrance – especially within a volume with myth in its title. Though not a criticism of Elliott's analysis I was also struck by how this chapter might also have been an opportunity to draw parallels between the two wars. I'm not aware that anyone has suggested that *Dad's Army* is an accurate portrayal of the Second World War or even of the Home Guard. Yet its First World War counterpart, *Blackadder Goes Forth*, whose characters are no less exaggerated, is often seen as a brilliantly accurate portrayal of the realities of the war.

Rosalind Watkiss Singleton's survey of the national savings movement has some parallels with Karen Hunt's chapter in that it uncovers another vast reservoir of voluntary action during wartime. She utilises oral testimony, memoirs and autobiographies to reveal that participation in the national savings movement was not just an interaction with the state but often an important group activity building social capital within the wartime home front community.

Maggie Andrews's concluding chapter wisely doesn't attempt a synthesis of the preceding chapters but instead adopts a contemporary framework – the home fronts as portrayed in today's popular culture – with which to analyse the changing nature of those fronts. She draws parallels between the attitudes of Britain to the First World War and the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan now all seen as futile and conducted by uncaring leaders. Though this view, and that of the Second World War as a 'good' war, is generally reflected in popular media (especially television), Andrews concludes that ideas may be shifting. Whilst I would agree that a number of the popular depictions of the home fronts of both wars are now showing some signs of greater nuance there are still two large stumbling blocks to a major shift in popular mythology. The first is the complex inter-connection between the idea of the home front and remembrance and this, in turn, leads on to what it is that people are remembering. Here, there is a clear transnational tendency for soldiers to be depicted as the victims of war.⁽⁴⁾ Other nations are increasingly coming closer to the British view of the First World War in this respect and it is the Second that stands out as virtually the only war that is transnationally considered to have been justified.

This book in its wide-ranging survey is certainly 'doing its bit' to challenge some of the misconceptions we hold about the two home fronts, opens up discussion on several hitherto neglected aspects and adds significantly to our knowledge.

Notes

1. For example by Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London, 1987).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. M. Winter, 'The impact of the First World War on civilian health in Britain', *The Economic History Review* New Series, 30, 3 (August 1977) and 'Surviving the War: life expectation, illness and mortality rates in Paris, London and Berlin' in *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914–1919*, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, pp. 487–523; Linda Bryder, 'The First World War: healthy or hungry?' *History Workshop Journal*, 24 (Autumn 1987), pp. 141–57. Glen Matthews, 'Poverty and the poor law in the First World War in Worcestershire', in *The Duty of Discontent: essays for Dorothy Thompson*, ed. Owen R. Ashton, Robert Fyson, and Stephen Roberts (London and New York, NY, 1995), pp. 214–22.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For example Wilhelm Deist, 'The military collapse of the German Empire: the reality behind the stab-in-the-back myth', *War in History*, 3, 2 (April 1996), pp. 186–207 and David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (London, 2011), pp. 430–7.[Back to \(3\)](#)

4. Helen B. McCartney, 'The First World War soldier and his contemporary image in Britain', *International Affairs*, 90, 2 (March 2014), 299–316.[Back to \(4\)](#)
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