

University of Strathclyde
School of Humanities

‘Fighting In Their Ways’?:
The Working Man in British Culture 1939-
1945



THE FRONT LINE

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requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

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This is the result of the author's original research. It has been composed by the author and has not previously been submitted for examination which has led to the award of a degree.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the depiction of the working man in British culture during the Second World War. It contributes to the existing historiography on the British experience of the war by placing the civilian working man at the heart of the analysis

for the first time. It also expands upon the sociological literature of masculinity by empirically exploring the masculine subjectivities of men not able to enact the ideal, or hegemonic, male role of being in the armed forces. It therefore builds on the work of those historians focusing on the militaristic ideal, for example Sonya Rose and Graham Dawson, by investigating how the working man was represented in light of the overt focus on the armed forces in wartime. Through an analysis of film, radio and visual culture it explores industrial employment, agricultural work, the Merchant Navy and the fire services to understand how profession impacted on depiction in the war years. Furthermore, through Home Intelligence files, BBC Listener Research and Mass Observation files it engages with responses to these occupations and their depictions in order to understand reception as well as representation.

This thesis, then, reintroduces the male civilian worker to Britain's story of the Second World War, arguing that occupation was key to the portrayal of the wartime civilian male. However, while all were central to victory there were sharp distinctions between the different groups of civilian workers. Those men in more sedate occupations which were distanced from the violence and dangers of war, including industrial and agricultural work, were often overlooked in favour of the new, quickly-trained but seemingly competent female workforce. Even when men in these occupations were depicted it was generally unfavourable. They were often shown, for example, to be aged or unfit and so distanced from the image of the young soldier hero. In sharp contrast, men in more dangerous occupations, namely the Merchant Navy and the fire services, were generally depicted in a way which aped the heroic portrayal of the armed forces. They were usually portrayed as brave and courageous in the face of enemy action. Moreover, they were often imbued with the traits of the idealised Briton marking these men as truly British heroes. This thesis, therefore, explores the civilian hierarchy of masculinity as seen in Britain during the Second World War in which danger and action under fire became the measure of manliness.

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List of Abbreviations

ATS	Auxiliary Territorial Service
AFS	Auxiliary Fire Service
ARP	Air Raid Precaution
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
ENSA	Entertainments National Services Association
HC	House of Commons
HL	House of Lords
HMSO	His Majesty's Stationery Office
MAP	Ministry of Aircraft Production
MO-A TC	Mass Observation Archive Topic Collection
MOI	Ministry of Information
MP	Member of Parliament
NFS	National Fire Service
RAF	Royal Air Force
WAAC	War Artist Advisory Committee
WLA	Women's Land Army
WRNS	Women's Royal Naval Service

Chapter One – Introduction

In recalling her experiences of the Second World War during an oral history interview wartime aircraft factory worker, Fiona Thomas, asserted that:

There was no men. The men were all away, and like I say 18 to 45 was the call-up age and that. Most of them were older, over 45, or some who perhaps, something, they hadn't passed the medical for the forces.¹

In making such a statement Thomas brings to light the predominant image of the British home front during the Second World War. It is largely perceived as a feminised space in which women donned overalls and uniforms to replace the men who had left to join the armed forces. Thomas also highlights another common belief: those who were left on the British home front were not 'men' or, at least, were not considered manly. Generally either because of their age, the young as well as the old, or ill-health, these men were considered to be sharply distanced from the wartime masculine ideal. Such an image is repeatedly drawn, and therefore reinforced, in contemporary popular culture.² However, this dominant perception belies the reality of the situation. Even at the peak of armed forces employment in 1945, only 5,090,000 men of a total male working population of 21,649,000 were in the armed forces. 16,416,000 therefore remained on the home front in civil employment. Thus, the ratio of civilian employees to combatants was roughly 3:1.³

¹ P. Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p.121.

² For example, *Goodnight Mister Tom* (Jack Gold, 1998) and the BBC's recent drama *Land Girls* (Steve Hughes, 2009) reiterate the image of a civilian society peopled by women and old men. Even the children's television series *Horrible Histories* (Steve Connelly, 2009) featured a song, 'The World War Two Girls Song', which emphasised that women had to replace 'our men' who were fighting. Similarly, those civilian men who were left behind are often the focus of ridicule: most notably in the classic television series *Dad's Army* (David Croft, 1968) but also more recently in the character of the comically useless policeman, Reg, in *Goodnight Sweetheart* (Robin Nash, 1993).

³ C. Peniston-Bird, 'Classifying the Body in the Second World War: British Men In and Out of Uniform' in *Body & Society*, Vol. 9, No. 4, December 2003, p.34.

While men aged between 19 and 41 were liable for conscription following the passage of the British National Services Act on 2 September 1939, extended to men up to the age of 51 in December 1941, there were certain exemptions.⁴ Those men who were employed in jobs which were listed on the Schedule of Reserved Occupations as essential to the war effort were exempt from military conscription. Reserved occupations covered a large range of jobs, both white-collar professions (such as medicine and dentistry) and blue-collar trades (including electrician, agricultural labourer and docker). Due to the almost constant changes to the schedule precise numbers of men in reserved occupations can not accurately be known. However, *The Scotsman* in January 1939 estimated between six and seven million workers would be reserved in the event of war.⁵ Even with the drastic change to the Schedule which occurred in 1941, when individual deferments replaced industrywide reservations, only 915,000 of the 5 million applications for deferment in that year were turned down leaving over four million in reserved occupations.⁶

However, British civilian men, to date, have been largely omitted from the historiography of the Second World War, which initially focused upon leaders, combatants and military strategies. For example, J.P. Lash's *Roosevelt and Churchill* and Henri Michel's *The Second World War*, both published in the 1970s, viewed the war in military and diplomatic terms.⁷ However, the spotlight has moved during the last thirty years. With the greater emphasis on social history and the influence of feminism, historians have largely shifted focus to consider the social implications of

⁴ J. Gardiner, *Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (London: Headline, 2004), p.82.

⁵ 'Reserved Occupations', *The Scotsman*, 25 January 1939, p.15.

⁶ A. Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1992) p.505; M. Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.71.

⁷ J.P. Lash, *Roosevelt and Churchill, 1939-1941: The Partnership that saved the West* (London: Deutsch, 1977); H. Michel, *The Second World War* (London: Deutsch, 1975).

war. An early example of this is Marwick's assessment that the war brought 'a new social and economic freedom' to British women.⁸ However, this argument was later critiqued by many. For example, Harold Smith's analysis of official policy concerning women enabled a discussion of the extent to which the war liberated women and Penny Summerfield's *Women Workers in the Second World War* concluded that the war hastened women's segregation into lower paid jobs in the post-war period.⁹ The personal testimonies of women were also recorded by historians interested in examining women's subjective sense of self, most notably in Summerfield's seminal work *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*.¹⁰ Such a gender preoccupation is also present in cultural studies of the Second World War. For example, Antonia Lant's *Blackout* and Gledhill and Swanson's *Nationalising Femininity* both focus on the changes to depictions of women and femininity in wartime.¹¹ Despite this huge body of research on women there remains a dearth of social and cultural research regarding men in this period. However, books have begun to emerge on the topic. Notably Sonya Rose's *Which People's War?* and Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird's study of the Home Guard, *Contesting Home Defence*, have both explored the question of masculinity on the British home front as well as considering how certain groups of civilian men were

⁸ A. Marwick, *War and Social Change in the Twentieth Century: A comparative study of Britain, France, Germany, Russia and the United States* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p.16.

⁹ H.L. Smith, 'The Womanpower Problem in Britain during the Second World War' in *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 1984; P. Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

¹⁰ Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*.

¹¹ A. Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); C. Gledhill and G. Swanson, *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality, and British Cinema in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

perceived by British society.¹² Similarly, Martin Francis's *The Flyer* has provided an excellent socio-cultural history of the RAF in wartime.¹³ Additionally, there are a wealth of populist works on the Home Guard and the Bevin Boys, although such books generally fail to engage with notions such as masculinity.¹⁴ However, the overwhelming focus of these studies is on men in specifically wartime roles. To date there has been no systematic study of men who continued in their pre-war roles. There have been no studies of, for example dockers, shipyard workers, merchant seamen or farmers. This thesis therefore fills a gap in the literature by focusing on the men who aided the war effort and maintained the home front by undertaking civilian work.

Specifically, it examines how civilian men at work were represented culturally, as well as responses to such depictions, to understand how such men were viewed and understood in wartime Britain. Given the myriad ways in which men served on the home front, this thesis focuses upon four groups of occupations in order to provide in-depth analysis. The groups selected were industrial workers, agricultural workers, merchant seamen and firemen. These were chosen carefully. The decision was partly pragmatic as these occupations were depicted regularly enough to give a large collection of sources for analysis. Moreover, these groups all had real and tangible links to Britain's successful prosecution of a total war and so make a stable base for comparisons between occupations. However, this does leave

¹² S.O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); P. Summerfield and C. Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

¹³ M. Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ N. Longmate, *The Real Dad's Army* (London: Arrow Books, 1974); W. Taylor, *Conscript: A History of the Bevin Boy* (London: Pentland, 1995).

out a large number of civilian workers. Most notably the occupations analysed were predominantly working-class and so this thesis does not discuss white-collar or middle-class workers. While this absence is lamentable, as these groups are often ignored in social and cultural histories of this period, it was somewhat unavoidable as such workers were rarely, if ever, portrayed culturally during the war.

i. The State and the Working Man in War

War drastically changed employment in Britain as the state attempted to place all necessary labour under its control. In January 1939 Ernest Brown, then Minister of Labour, declared:

In the conditions of modern war it [is] of vital importance that those employed in various occupations should know in what way they could best serve the nation's needs, that they should not through patriotic fervour on the outbreak of war leave those occupations for something else which, though more spectacular, might not be more important.¹⁵

In light of such beliefs the Schedule of Reserved Occupations, henceforth referred to as the Schedule, was compiled by the British government during the 1920s and 30s in preparation for the projected military and civilian manpower needs required to sustain and win a protracted war. The main aim of the Schedule, then, was to ensure that men needed for jobs on the home front, in occupations related both to the production of munitions as well as those necessary for the continuation of civilian life, were prevented from joining the armed forces. Preparation documents from 1938 argued that its intention was:

[To] enable the Services to obtain the man power (both tradesmen and others) required in the early stages of an emergency, whilst at

¹⁵ 'Best Use of Man Power', *The Times*, 25 January 1939, p.13. ¹⁶ National Archives, LAB 25/88.

the same time avoiding, as far as possible, the dislocation of industry by the loss of skilled workmen.¹⁶

H.M.D. Parker in his official history of the war stated that as early as 1922 the first versions of the Schedule were discussed and stated that 'it was decided, that while recent experiences in organising the manpower and resources of the country [in the First World War] were still fresh memories, plans for meeting a similar emergency should be prepared.'¹⁶ This was a key trope throughout the planning stages of the Schedule and beyond. The state, as well as the media, constantly reiterated the need to prevent the mistakes made in the First World War in which unchecked conscription led to a severe shortage of skilled men for necessary jobs on the home front. For example, in April 1940, Robert Richards, MP for Wrexham, stated:

...but it seems to me that the lesson which every nation has learned since the last war is that this war will be won, if won at all, on the home front rather than on the military front... I think that conclusion was come to very clearly by all the nations engaged in this sort of warfare at the end of the last war. It appears to me that in the last war there were two quite different periods, the first being what I may roughly describe as the Kitchener period, when an attempt was made to get everybody into the Army, and the second being what I may respectfully call the Lloyd George period, when it was realised that it was of very little use getting everybody into the Army unless the Army was adequately equipped.¹⁸

On this basis a list of occupations was drawn up by 1925. This preliminary catalogue was revised from 1937 onwards in response to the growing likelihood of war in Europe. Although Parker argues that the Munich Crisis of September 1938 gave greater urgency to the plans, discussions about the Schedule were well under way by mid-1938.¹⁹ After some wrangling, at both a departmental level and also in the

¹⁶ H.M.D. Parker, *Manpower: A Study of War-time Policy and Administration* (London: HMSO, 1957).

¹⁸ HC Deb 16 April 1940 vol 359 cc871-872. ¹⁹ Parker, *Manpower*, p.51.

House of Commons, the Schedule of Reserved Occupations was released to the public in January 1939. It was published in newspapers as well being sent to each household in pamphlet form along with other details about civilian participation in the event of war. The Schedule was organised by occupation and covered a wide range of jobs from those of clear wartime importance, such as engineering and agricultural workers, to those of less obvious significance, including the civil service and trade union executives. Each occupation was given an age of reservation above which recruitment into the armed services was prohibited. The age varied according to occupation depending on the predicted numbers required and the occupation's centrality to the prosecution of a successful war. For example, engineering trades were reserved at 18 but trade union executives were not reserved until the age of 30.¹⁷ Moreover, those in reserved occupations who fell below the age of reservation were generally only permitted to join the armed forces in their trade capacity.¹⁸ Although intended to ensure the maintenance of both industry and the armed forces in times of war, the Schedule was implemented upon its release in January 1939.¹⁹ However, it was not applied to recruitment to the Reservists or the Territorial Army, the result of which was that upon the outbreak of war many men had to be 'combed out' of the military and returned to civilian work.²⁰

Despite the preparedness of the British Government, the Schedule was subject to constant scrutiny and revision throughout the war. This was continually hampered by the relative lack of statistical information regarding men in industry. Although

¹⁷ Ministry of Information, *Schedule of Reserved Occupations and Protected Work. Revision* (London: HMSO, 1941).

¹⁸ HC Deb 27 February 1939 vol. 344 cc909-10.

¹⁹ National Archives, LAB 25/91.

²⁰ Parker, *Manpower*, p.70.

the Wolfe Report of 1940 attempted to rectify this by endeavouring to collate exactly that type of information, it was not until the 1940 Beveridge Report that an accurate picture of the numbers involved in industry was known.²¹

Beveridge's report highlighted some dangerous problems with the state of British industry. He emphasised that the Government's labour strategy would result in a shortage of men for both the forces and industry and advocated immediate and farreaching action.²² Consequently, in December 1940, largely in light of Beveridge's report, the Schedule was radically overhauled in an attempt to ensure both industrial efficiency, of men as well as output, and military strength by ensuring that the fighting services had a sufficient supply of conscripts and volunteers. To achieve this, the process of block reservation by occupation was removed and instead men were reserved only on work which was considered of 'national importance'.²³ Moreover, no man was reserved if his job could be done by either an older man, who was ineligible for military service, or a woman. To implement this, the age of reservation was raised for every occupation a year at a time on a monthly basis to ensure that employers were given plenty of time to replace their workers.²⁴ Also implemented was a Scheme of Protected Establishments, which denoted organisations or firms which were considered to be producing something of national importance and so the employees were prohibited from leaving such establishments. For these establishments there existed a double age of reservation. The higher age applied to those outside the protected establishments and the lower age to those

²¹ Ibid, p.64. This Beveridge Report should not be confused with the infamous 1942 Beveridge Report which attacked the 'Giant Evils' of squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease and proposed widespread reform.

²² Ibid, p.105.

²³ Ibid, pp.145-6.

²⁴ HL Deb 03 December 1941 vol. 121 cc164-95.

within the establishments. For example, the double age of reservation for an electrician wireman was 35/25 and for a boreman and driller 35/18.²⁵ Reserved occupations were also further sub-divided into 'scarcity occupations' and others. The scarcity occupations were defined as those 'vital to the war effort in which the supply of skilled labour is definitely known to be less than the total demand.'²⁶ These jobs were generally highly skilled engineering jobs. Men in 'non-scarcity occupations' who became de-reserved were not necessarily placed in another civilian job and so were liable for military service. In contrast, men in scarcity occupations were treated more carefully and were generally prevented from entering the armed forces and if de-reserved were moved to another workplace.²⁷ Also in 1941 the government implemented the Essential Works Order. It too constricted the flow of workers to ensure the highest efficiency of key establishments during the war. The order denoted those places of work essential to the war effort and prevented those working there, regardless of their reserved status, from leaving without a week's notice. Similarly, it prevented their employers from releasing them except in the case of gross misconduct. However, the sum of these drastic changes was not a huge influx of men to the armed forces, although of course some men were called-up. Instead, many of the de-reserved men were transferred from work of a non-essential nature to work which was considered more central to the prosecution of war.²⁸

Unsurprisingly, these policies did not appear without political debate. Both Hansard and the Ministry of Labour files show much discussion surrounding the

²⁵ Parker, *Manpower*, pp.145-6.

²⁶ National Archives, LAB 76/9.

²⁷ National Archives, LAB 76/9.

²⁸ Parker, *Manpower*, p.161.

above noted schemes. Some criticisms can be found. For example, in the first discussion of the scheme in the Commons in 1938 there were reports of ‘sneers’ towards the Schedule.²⁹ Regarding the recently released National Service booklet Mr Crossley, MP for Stretford, declared in February 1939 that ‘The booklet might well have been headed: “You will be serving your country best by being a scrimjack.”’³³ However, criticisms such as these were rare and occurred mainly prewar, suggesting perhaps that the war silenced any critics. Following the outbreak of the conflict most politicians seem to have appreciated the necessity of cataloguing manpower requirements. For example, Oliver Stanley, then Secretary of State for War, announced to the Commons in 1940 that:

Very wisely before the war a Schedule of Reserved Occupations was prepared. Proper weight was given to the demand of civilian industries, which, in many cases, may prove just as vital a part of our war effort as any of the Armed Services, when a demand was made to ensure that the workers who were vital for the continuance of the important part of our civilian industry should not be taken away.³⁰

However, despite this general acceptance of the necessity of having the Schedule, some did question the perceived ‘easy time’ that men out of uniform experienced. This was especially apparent regarding the issue of pay. In April 1940 Lieutenant Colonel Amery, MP for Birmingham Sparkbrook, stated he wished to emphasise ‘the fact that men who are reserved are reserved only because it is in the nation’s interest to reserve them and that they have no moral right to be in a better position than men in the fighting line.’³¹ Similarly, John Rathbone, MP for Bodmin, stated in August

²⁹ HC Deb 20 December 1938 vol 342 cc2714-274.

³³ HC Deb 27 February 1939 vol 344 cc1015-6.

³⁰ HC Deb 12 March 1940 vol 358 cc1027.

³¹ HC Deb 12 March 1940 vol 358 cc1027.

1940:

[A] point which crops up, time and again, is the disparity between the rates of pay of men and officers and those of civilians. I travelled in the train the other day with an Hon. Member whom I am proud to call my friend. He said it had made him sick to see a man in civilian dress earning £3 10s. or £4, or £4 10s. a week or more, not under military law, working in an establishment next door to a fellow doing exactly the same job, but in khaki, earning only 1s. 6d. a day. The fellow who is in khaki goes back to his barracks and has a job to pay for his extra packet of fags, while the fellow in civilian dress goes to the pub and lets out there every manner of military secret, and nothing whatever can be done about it.³²

Like the disapproval of the scheme in general, these criticisms occurred fairly infrequently but do indicate that some held the view that those in civilian occupations were not being asked to shoulder their fair share of the sacrifice of wartime, especially when compared to the hardships imposed upon those in the armed services. This thesis, therefore, examines the extent to which such views were present in wider cultural depictions.

ii. Sources

A variety of cultural sources were used to ensure a broad range of opinions and ideas were covered. One of the most significant sources used was that of film. Recently film has become the dominant cultural medium focused on with regards to the Second World War perhaps reflecting the ease of access, especially feature films, it offers in comparison to other media. However, it was not until the early 1980s that the possibilities allowed by using film in historical research were realised by historians.³³ It was only with the advent and growth of social history, and in

³² HC Deb 20 August 1940 vol 364 cc1232.

³³ A. Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), p.1

particular cultural history, that the merits of using filmic sources were recognised.

Although many historians were sceptical about the use of film, preferring instead official archived material, through the pioneering work of Jeffrey Richards, Anthony Aldgate and James Chapman the practice became much more accepted. For this thesis, with its focus on cultural representations, the use of film will be an extremely valuable source.³⁴

War undoubtedly changed the production of British films. In addition to the material deprivations which hampered production, studios saw the loss of personnel both in front and behind the camera as technicians and actors were called up or sequestered in to war-related work. Indeed, 2/3 of technical staff were lost to studios in the course of the war.³⁵ Moreover, the number of films produced dropped in the course of the war. An average sixty British feature films were produced a year during the war, dropping from an average of 108 films a year in the pre-war era.³⁶ However, despite these hardships British studios continued to produce films. Indeed, the war, arguably, allowed British film production to step out from the shadow of Hollywood and assert its own identity. Although never quite matching the pull of Hollywood the popularity of British-produced films soared. In contrast to the diminished production power of Britain's commercial studios the State increased their use of film in the war. This mainly centred on documentaries and shorts, 5 to 8-minute films generally shown before the main cinematic feature, produced, or commissioned, by the Ministry of Information and their film production company the Crown Film Unit. As

³⁴ J. Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda 1939-45* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998); A. Aldgate, and J. Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in The Second World War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

³⁵ Lant, *Blackout*, p.25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

such this thesis draws on the opinions presented both by popular entertainers as well as obvious propaganda created by the state. Moreover, these different genres of film are useful for different reasons. Both fiction and non-fiction are useful to show how the British cultural elites sought to portray the war and the ways these elites attempted to shape the behaviours and opinions of the British masses. In addition, cinematic feature films provide an excellent barometer for popularity and allow the historian to understand which messages resonated with the British public. Indeed, as James Chapman such an analysis can provide an excellent insight in to the minds of the 'silent majority' who live little trace on traditional historic records.³⁷

Moreover, despite all cinemas being briefly closed early in the war, film-viewing continued to be an enormously popular leisure pursuit throughout the conflict.³⁸ Cinema attendance grew from 19 million a week in 1940 to 30 million a week by the end of the war.³⁹ Furthermore, a Wartime Social Survey, an ongoing series of surveys started by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research but utilised by the MOI throughout the war, showed that 32% of adults went to the cinema at least once a week and the average adult saw around two feature films a month.⁴⁰ Similarly, the MOI also distributed its output non-theatrically and facilitated over 1200 showings a week of cinematic features as well as their own documentaries by taking screens and projectors to rural areas, factories, schools, farmers' clubs, women's associations and other organisations.⁴¹ As well as reaching

³⁷ Chapman, *The British at War*, p.76.

³⁸ A. Kuhn, 'Cinema culture and femininity in the 1930s' in Gledhill and Swanson (eds) *Nationalising Femininity*, p.180.

³⁹ Lant, *Blackout*, p.24.

⁴⁰ J.P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and their Audiences: Sociological Studies* (London, Dennis Dobson, 1978), pp. 253-269.

⁴¹ H. Forman, 'The Non-Theatrical Distribution of Films by the Ministry of Information' in N. Pronay and D.W. Spring (eds), *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-1945* (Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 1982), p.229.

large audiences, it is arguable that the messages presented in film form were more memorable than propaganda presented in other forms. As well as reaching a much larger audience, newsreels could be widely understood, even by those who were illiterate.⁴² Fougasse, the pseudonym of the prolific artist Cyril Bird, noted that propaganda in poster form had three main shortcomings: 'Firstly, a general aversion to reading any notice of any sort, secondly a general disinclination to believe that any notice, even if it was read, can possibly be addressed to oneself; thirdly, a general unwillingness, even so, to remember the message long enough to do anything about it.'⁴³ In light of this, Philip M. Taylor argues that the spoken word, including film (feature film, documentary and shorts), newsreels and radio, became a much more powerful form of propaganda.⁴⁴ Therefore, because filmic representations of war made by the British reached a mass audience in a uniquely captivating, it is important to examine this representation in relation to civilian workers.

Radio was a similarly popular medium during this period. In wartime Britain, radio was the monopoly of the BBC and was, as Siân Nicholas states, 'a ubiquitous presence in ordinary life'.⁴⁵ The prevalence of radio sets in Britain meant that the BBC estimated that they were capable of reaching up to 34 million people out of a population of 48 million and so arguably had a wider reach than any other cultural medium.⁴⁶ Although heavily critiqued in the early months of the war the BBC

⁴² Chapman, *The British at War*, p.3.

⁴³ P.M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of propaganda from the ancient world to the present era* (Third Edition) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002),p.217.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.217.

⁴⁵ S. Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.12. If the high levels of licence evasion in some areas are taken in to account, this figure might be as high as 40 million.

quickly changed; Siân Nicholas argues that the BBC gradually took on board listeners' opinions as they began to genuinely broadcast what people wanted to hear.⁴⁷ Additionally, radio was accessed in a very different way than, for example, films or newspapers as it had, as Nicholas asserts, 'a uniquely communal role'. People listened at home with family, at work with colleagues and in barracks. Furthermore, they often did so while undertaking a vast number of tasks from cooking and knitting to working lathes and building aeroplanes.⁴⁸ Moreover, as well as being ubiquitous radio was also a much trusted medium, as it was the monopoly of the trusted and reliable BBC, and so was central to how the war was conveyed to, and understood by, the British civilian population. As noted in a 1941 publication from Mass Observation, an ongoing project started in the 1930s to record the 'ordinary life' of Britain, 'the Radio is at present the most trusted of British sources of information, and thus indirectly of much official propaganda. The most potent and immediate method of influencing fifteen million or so Britishers at once is over the radio at nine o'clock in the evening.'⁴⁹ However, radio broadcasts were often employed as a 'secondary medium'. While this may suggest the British populace were not truly listening, as this method of passing on information was much more gradual, it may have proven to be prone to less resistance on the part of the listener.⁵⁰ As Nicholas emphasises: 'the propensity of people who lived through the war to claim were "too busy to listen to the radio"' (even when closer questioning shows

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.6.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.5.

⁴⁹ Mass Observation, *Home Propaganda: A Report Prepared by Mass Observation for the Advertising Service Guild* (London: Advertising Service Guild, 1941).

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.211. ⁵⁵ S. Nicholas, 'The People's Radio: The BBC and its Audience, 1939-1945' in N. Hayes and J. Hill (eds.),

'Millions Like Us'? British Culture in the Second World War (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p.63.

⁵⁶ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, p.121.

quite a different picture) confirms the paradox of a medium too ubiquitous to recall.’⁵⁵

What is perhaps most interesting to this thesis is the vast range of topics that the BBC broadcast to a huge audience. Within the bounds of this thesis it is important to note that radio programmes were made, aimed at and about men, and women, at work. The most infamous of these were the programmes focusing on work in the munitions factories. Factory production was probably the most discussed civilian role on the radio during the war and as well as the infamous *Workers’ Playtime* and *Music While You Work*, there were also innumerable others including *We Speak for Ourselves* and *From Factory to Front Line*.⁵⁶ While these might be the best known programmes for and about workers, most of the key wartime occupations were covered. For example, programmes such as *Battle of the Flames* which explored the role of firefighters in the war were relatively common as were broadcasts which were aimed directly at those in Civil Defence and other civilian occupations.⁵¹ Similarly, such shows as *Shipmates Ashore* and *The Blue Peter* explored and celebrated the role of the Merchant Navy during the war. It is these programmes which are utilised in this thesis.

Radio broadcasts, however, remain an under utilised medium in the study of the Second World War with more focus on filmic sources despite radio’s equal, or arguably greater, popularity and geographical range.⁵⁸ This may, in part, reflect the difficulty accessing the material when compared to films especially given the BBC archives’ lack of cataloguing. The situation is most pronounced with regards to

⁵¹ C.J. Rolo, *Radio Goes to War* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1942) p.118.

⁵⁸ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, p.2.

scripts in which, unless listed in the limited catalogue, either the name of the programme or the name of the speaker has to be known. While much of this information has been discovered from production documents, given the amount of programmes which were broadcast by the BBC in wartime it is likely many have been overlooked. Furthermore, these scripts exist now only on microfiche. The result of which is that much of the aural detail is lost and cannot be found. Despite these scripts being, for the most part, 'broadcast scripts', they obviously omit much of the detail of the voice, accent, tone and background details. Moreover, many of the programmes feature music which is no longer available. Finally, it is an act of faith to trust these scripts especially as many are marked that they are unchecked against the broadcasts. However, as these scripts are the only way to access a cultural medium which was so central to the lives of the British public during the war they nevertheless remain invaluable.

Another extensively used medium was visual culture which included fine art, propaganda and newspaper cartoons. Famously during the war the government attempted to shape British citizens' behaviours through a barrage of posters.⁵² However, the efficacy of poster campaigns has been questioned with suggestions that they were easily ignored or poorly positioned.⁵³ Moreover, the popularity of propaganda posters has also been called in to question. It is well known that the state's early attempts at propaganda were not well received. Its vague 'Go To It' style exhortations were met with disdain and its 'Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution WILL BRING US VICTORY' was met with criticism for apparently

⁵² A. Olsey, *Persuading The People: Government Publicity in The Second World War* (London: HMSO, 1995), p.5.

⁵³ Calder, *The People's War*, p.241; Darracott and Loftus, *Second World War Posters* (London: HMSO, 1972), p.72.

emphasising the divide between the people and the government.⁵⁴ This was largely remedied later in the war although vague exhortations such as ‘Back Them Up’ still appeared.⁵⁵ While posters met with heavy criticism and their advice was often flouted by the public, it seems unlikely, however, that such a barrage of images and messages could have had no effect on the British populace. Nick Hayes, for example, has argued that while propaganda images were unrealistic and railed against, people knew they represented what they *should* be doing and so provided a benchmark for their own behaviour.⁶³ Moreover, it could be argued that while images were not focused on by individuals in the same way as films and newspapers, they were ubiquitous and so people would have been aware, even if somewhat unconsciously, of the images presented to them. However, perhaps the usefulness of propaganda posters lies in the opportunities they offer for the historian to understand how the state sought to persuade the populace to engage in the war effort and, more specifically, how they tried to construct civilian men in relation to the war.

Unlike propaganda posters the fine art of the Second World War is generally overlooked. While some of the images to be discussed, predominantly those of industrial or agricultural work, have featured in historical works those focusing on the Merchant Navy or fire brigades are notably absent. Moreover, art has predominantly been studied by art historians with little discussion from social historians; something which this thesis seeks to rectify. While art will not be given special consideration over other sources, it is still a valuable source in assessing

⁵⁴ P. Lewis, *A People's War* (London: Thames Meuthen, 1986), p.120.

⁵⁵ M. Yass, *This is Your War: Home Front Propaganda in the Second World War* (London: HMSO, 1983), p.29.

⁶³ N. Hayes, ‘An ‘English War’, Wartime Culture and ‘Millions Like Us’ in Hayes and Hill (eds), ‘*Millions Like Us*’, p.21.

opinions and attitudes of the time.⁵⁶ The vast majority of the art created in Britain during the period was done under the auspices of the War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC), a branch of the Ministry of Information. The WAAC commissioned, bought or was gifted 5570 paintings during the course of the war. Moreover, fine art grew in popularity during the war with admissions to galleries increasing dramatically despite the removal of the majority of their major works for safe keeping.⁵⁷ Indeed, this benefitted the artists as many galleries, including London's National Gallery, had showings of the work of the WAAC to fill their empty rooms. The work of war artists was also shipped to provincial galleries. Despite this increased popularity, however, it is likely that the majority of British citizens were unaware of most of the paintings which the WAAC commissioned or received. Regardless of the increase in attendance to art galleries it remained an elite pastime and the numbers still paled in comparison to cinema attendance and newspaper circulation figures. Moreover, war art was very rarely reproduced in newspapers or shown on newsreels so only those who viewed the paintings in person actually saw them.⁵⁸ However despite this, the work of the war artists does provide a useful source for the historian. As much of the work was commissioned by the state it is possible to see which aspects of the war the government were keen to promote. Moreover, by analysing the few images which came to public prominence and the responses given to them by the public we can start to understand more of how the war was viewed and understood by the British populace. Finally, we can analyse how the artists who generally came from the middle and upper classes chose to portray

⁵⁶ P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing* (Reaktion Books, London, 2001), p.19.

⁵⁷ M. Harries and S. Harries, *The War Artists: British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century* (London: Michael Joseph, 1983), p.270.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p.270.

working civilian men, many of whom were working class, and how this relates to dominant discourses and representations in other sources.

Furthermore, several newspapers and magazines were utilised in this thesis in examining both texts and images. *The Daily Mirror* and *The Daily Express* both boasted general circulation figures of over 1 million, while *The Times* had a much smaller readership of around 200,000.⁵⁹ *The Daily Mirror* was a populist and rather anti-establishment newspaper which often pilloried those in power. Indeed, it came close to being closed for publishing a cartoon Churchill thought was too critical of the state.⁶⁰ The cartoons of Philip Zec featured prominently in the paper and often reflected this anti-government stance. In contrast, *The Daily Express* was owned by Lord Beaverbrook, a close friend of Churchill, and so presented a much more positive depiction of the state.⁶⁹ While cartoons and images were not such a key part of the newspaper as they were in *The Daily Mirror*, they were still prominent. In contrast *The Times*, a leading establishment newspaper generally thought of as ‘class press’, those newspaper associated with the British establishment, also placed much less focus on the visual than the *Mirror* or the *Express*. It did however feature occasional photo-galleries which have been utilised in this thesis. The remainder of the newspapers used were Scottish national newspapers. The Scottish press was largely separate from the British national press and only *The Daily Express* boasted a large circulation north of the border.⁶¹ They therefore provide an interesting comparison to other media largely dominated by England. The first two Scottish

⁵⁹ Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War*, p.75.

⁶⁰ P. Kimble, *Newspaper Reading in the Third Year of the War* (London: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1942), p.3. ⁶⁹ Ibid, p.27.

⁶¹ Ibid, p.3.

newspapers to be examined were *The Scotsman* and *The Glasgow Herald* which were broadsheets based in Edinburgh and Glasgow respectively and were similar in style and content to their English counterpart, *The Times*. The last newspaper examined was *The Daily Record and Mail*, more commonly referred to as *The Daily Record*, which was a tabloid that marketed itself as ‘Scotland’s Newspaper’. In addition to newspapers, *Picture Post* and *Punch* were consulted. *Picture Post* was a weekly photojournalistic magazine which began publishing in 1938 and quickly became popular. Despite the paper shortages, its readership increased through the war and by December 1943 it had a weekly circulation of around two million.⁶² Similarly, the humorous and satirical weekly magazine *Punch* was a British institution and its circulation peaked after the war in 1947. The newspapers and periodicals selected, therefore, had a large circulation and so are useful in understanding how the war was presented to vast swathes of the British populace.

Finally, at the outset of my Ph.D it was intended that oral histories would form a crucial and sizeable part of my thesis research. It was hoped that given the lack of contemporary responses to cultural representations from the men depicted that oral histories would form a way of accessing and understanding such responses. This was informed by much seminal oral history research. Primarily, I was influenced by the work of Alistair Thomson and Penny Summerfield who have both explored the interplay between popular culture and memories of war.⁶³ As the work of the civilian working man in wartime Britain plays almost no part in the persistent British story of war I thought it would be apposite to explore how these men

⁶² G. Weightman, *Picture Post Britain*, (London: Tiger Books, 1994), p.3.

⁶³ A. Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living With The Legend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives*, p.104.

responded to their representation or, indeed, lack of representation. However, it became quickly apparent that my imagined results would be sharply different from those actually produced. The first major issue was that of recruitment and despite extensive attempts only four men agreed to be interviewed. All four had worked in industrial occupations although one left early in the war to join the Merchant Navy. Moreover, in doing the interviews it quickly became apparent that the men had no recollection of their occupation being depicted in wartime. None of the interviewees could recall cultural depictions of their occupation even when shown examples. This raises interesting questions about the cultural impact of these sources both at the time and subsequently. It is possible that they were not seen at that time. Moreover, it is feasible that such depictions were seen but not heeded or focused on and so not remembered. Similarly, for many occupations, especially those which were not obviously heroic, their representation was relegated to short articles, obscure films and brief radio appearances perhaps rendering it unsurprising that the men interviewed could not recall them, especially when the 70-year interim is considered.

Furthermore, the issue of access is central. In terms of impact, it must be borne in mind that war conditions meant many workers had reduced access to culture. Letters to *Picturegoer* in 1940 showed that many workers complained that they were missing the best pictures because of a combination of long working hours, the blackout and poor Sunday listings.⁶⁴ Similarly, interviewees argued that they simply did not have the time to consume wartime culture. One interviewee Douglas Gordon, who had worked as an electrical engineer in Manchester during the war, noted:

⁶⁴ M-OA: TC Films 1937-48, 17-5-C, Letters to Picturegoer Weekly 1940. ⁷⁴ Douglas Gordon, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 23 November 2011.

I wasn't terribly aware of very much. When you were working all the time and thinking about the matter in hand by the end of the day you were ready for beddy-byes. Indeed, I had no radio-wireless and my real knowledge of what was going on was surprisingly little in hindsight.⁷⁴

This problem may have been more marked for agricultural workers, many of whom would have lived many miles from a cinema or struggled to find a radio signal. Similarly, although firemen could have found time off to visit a cinema, read a newspaper or listen to the radio, their Merchant Navy counterparts could not afford such a luxury. As pointed out by Tony Lane, the Merchant Navy were at once very much in the war but also simultaneously distanced from it due to a lack of radio, newspapers and films.⁶⁵ It is, therefore, arguable that the long wartime working hours meant these men were left with little leisure time, obviously impacting on the likelihood of their seeing depictions of their own occupation especially given the infrequency of such depictions. In light of such issues it is perhaps unsurprising that it has proved difficult to find sources to shed light on what civilian men thought about their own depiction.

However, despite the onerous working conditions many of these men did have memories of wartime culture. Several mentioned Lord Haw Haw's broadcasts from Germany with one interviewee even doing an impression of Haw Haw's 'Jairmany calling' greeting.⁶⁶ Others still recalled wartime comedy show *Ramsbottom, Enoch and Me* and the ENSA concerts given by Gracie Fields.⁶⁷ This then raises interesting questions about how wartime culture is remembered and moreover *what* wartime culture is remembered. Evidently, popular shows and people

⁶⁵ T. Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p.84.

⁶⁶ John Allan, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 7 November 2011.

⁶⁷ Willie Dewar, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 28 October 2011.

are recollected, while representations of the civilian men at work, which were infrequent and often relegated to more minor cultural media, have been forgotten in the intervening period. It is also possible that such depictions were forgotten due to a lack of cultural reinforcement. While both Lord Haw Haw and Gracie Fields, for example, have been much discussed in post-war popular culture, the male civilian worker has effectively been written out of Britain's dominant wartime story which may also partially explain why these men, and our contemporary popular culture, failed to recall the depiction of their own occupations: in short they do not feature in the popular memory of the war and this has, seemingly, impacted upon their personal memories.

Moreover, much of the focus of the interviews fell on practical matters even when discussing culture. Food formed a central trope in interviewees' stories. Every interviewee made extensive reference to rationing. These ruminations were always unbidden. For example, when asked about the presence of government propaganda in the shipyards John Allan declared the radio could not be trusted in wartime and then stated:

But the worst part of it was during the war: the rationing. Everything was rationed and eh it used to be if you say a queue, you didn't know what the queue was for but you just joined it and say 'what have they got?' 'Don't know'? The folk that were in the queue didn't know but somebody had started a queue. It was either cigarettes or... something that was scarce. So if you saw a queue there was something getting sold that you couldnae go in to the shop. And cigarettes and eggs and things like and butter was rationed... Bananas were non-existent. The children that got brought up there during the war didn't know what a banana was.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ John Allan, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 7 November 2011.

What this perhaps suggests is that material concerns took precedence over others in wartime suggesting they had little time for pondering how they were portrayed in the media. Similarly, references were often made to their experiences of bombing which, again, were never actively elicited. When asked if he ever listened to the radio Willie Dewar, an apprentice draughtsman at locomotive manufacturer North British Locomotive during the war, responded that he listened to the radio when on duty with the Home Guard before explaining in detail about how he had helplessly watched an air raid from a distance while on duty and witnessed the death of a workmate.⁶⁹ Again, a question about culture was answered very practically and with regards to an unexpected area of the war. It may be argued that these men were drawing upon well-worn popular tropes; bombing and rationing are two of the key features in most modern depictions of the war as well as dominating the popular memory of the period. However, it is also likely that these material privations, hardships and dangers form such a central part of their stories as it represented the biggest change to their lives in wartime. While these men, as reserved workers, continued their day-to-day employment, it was the death of friends in bombing raids or the lack of food that really changed their lives perhaps rendering it unsurprising that it is these issues that are recalled 70 years later rather than details of what, for example, they saw at the cinema at the time.

Given the nature of the material gleaned from these pilot interviews it was decided that oral history would no longer form an integral part of the research. Although the interviews provided interesting information and raised important questions about the cultural memory of the Second World War these questions are

⁶⁹ Willie Dewar, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 28 October 2011.

tangential to the original focus of my research and the information revealed in the majority of the thesis. Consequently, this thesis utilises film, radio and visual culture to explore the depictions of the civilian working man in wartime to understand how their depiction reflected discourses on masculinity in wartime.

iii. Masculinity and War

Notions of masculinity, or indeed masculinities, are central to this thesis. The study of masculinities, however, is a relatively recent endeavour in the field of social science. Beginning in the late 1970s and gathering pace throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it has grown to become a sizable field of academic study.⁷⁰ There now exists a large and rapidly growing body of work on such diverse topics as masculinity and crime, family life and the work-place.⁷¹ However, despite this growing interest in the topic, a definition of what masculinity actually constitutes still remains elusive. Biology, Sociology and ‘common sense’ all provide differing and competing conceptions of gender.⁸² However, it is now largely agreed that, although the body must still be considered, gender is not an outward projection of internal sex differences.⁷² It is now widely acknowledged by most researchers that gender is a social performance.⁷³ As Graham Dawson states ‘masculinities are lived out in the flesh, but fashioned in the imagination.’⁷⁴ However, this still means, given the fluid

⁷⁰ J. Tosh, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender’ in S. Dudnik, K. Hagemann and J. Tosh (eds.), *Masculinities and War: Gendering in Politics Modern History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p.44; R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p.28.

⁷¹ S.M. Whitehead and F.J. Barrett, ‘The Sociology of Masculinity’ in S.M. Whitehouse and F.J. Barrett (eds), *The Masculinities Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p.1. ⁸² Connell, *Masculinities*, p.5.

⁷² Ibid, p.22; Whitehead and Barrett, ‘The Sociology of Masculinity’, p.16.

⁷³ R.W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.12; J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁷⁴ G. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imaginings of Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.1.

and malleable social characterisation of what is ‘masculine’, robust definitions of what constitutes masculinity are impossible. This problem is acknowledged by Stephen Whitehead and Frank Barrett when they state:

The nearest that we can get to an ‘answer’ is to state that masculinities are those behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organisation locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus culturally defined as not feminine. So masculinities exist as both a positive, inasmuch as they offer some means of identity signification for males, and as a negative, inasmuch as they are not the ‘Other’ (feminine).⁷⁵

Bob Connell similarly struggles with a definition: “‘Masculinity’”, to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture.’⁷⁶ Although these are hardly satisfying answers it is perhaps the best researchers can hope for.

Moreover, until relatively recently masculinity was seen as a singular constant. This theory has now been discredited and instead, masculinity is now largely viewed in the plural reflecting the fluidity in what constitutes a ‘man’ depending on such factors as culture, class, race, religion, nationality and timeperiod.⁷⁷ This, therefore, raises questions over the relationship between different masculinities. Connell, in the seminal book *Masculinities*, argues for the existence of what is termed ‘hegemonic masculinity’; defined as ‘as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee the dominant

⁷⁵ Whitehead and Barrett, ‘The Sociology of Masculinity’, p.16.

⁷⁶ R.W. Connell ‘The Social Organisation of Masculinity’ in Whitehouse and Barrett (eds.), *The Masculinities Reader*, p.34.

⁷⁷ S. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinity* (London: Polity, 2002), p.15.

position of men and the subordination of women).⁷⁸ Put more simply, hegemonic masculinity ‘refers to a particular idealised image of masculinity in relation to which images of femininity and other masculinities are marginalised and subordinated.’⁷⁹ Drawing on the theories of Antonio Gramsci, Connell uses the expression ‘hegemonic’ to describe the way a social class exerts cultural ‘leadership’ or dominance of other classes in maintaining the socio-political status quo.⁸⁰ Therefore Connell argues that ideal masculinity, though theoretically open to challenge, is maintained as those out with the ideal are unwilling to ‘rock the boat’.⁸¹ Of course the concept of hegemonic masculinity is not without its detractors. Perhaps the most common criticism is that it is usually used uncritically by historians and without proper definition of what they mean by the term.⁸² Similarly it has been critiqued for being vague on the structure of hegemonic control.⁹⁴ While Connell has maintained that hegemonic masculinity is open to displacement and challenge the concept has also been rebuked for presenting a static perpetually reproducing version of the ideal masculinity.⁸³ However, despite these issues, the conceptualisation of masculinity as relational and plural is both valid and helpful to the current research.⁸⁴

Indeed, perhaps the most useful aspect of Connell’s theory to this study is in the exploration of the relationship between different masculinities: ‘Different

⁷⁸ Connell, *Masculinities*, p.77.

⁷⁹ F.J. Barrett, ‘The Organisational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: The Case of the US Navy’ in Whitehouse and Barrett (eds.), *The Masculinities Reader*, p.79.

⁸⁰ J. Tosh, ‘What Should Historians Do With Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth Century’ *History Workshop*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 1994, p.192.

⁸¹ Barrett, ‘The Organisational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity’, p.79.

⁸² Tosh, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender’, p.43. ⁹⁴ Ibid, p.54.

⁸³ R.W. Connell and J. W. Messerschmidt, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept’ *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (Dec., 2005), p.844.

⁸⁴ Tosh, ‘What Should Historians Do With Masculinity?’ p.191

masculinities do not sit side by side like dishes on a smorgasbord. There are definite social relations between them. Especially, there are relations of hierarchy, for some masculinities are dominant, are subordinate or marginalised.⁸⁵ In conjunction with James W. Messerschmidt, Connell also states that 'hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the current most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it.'⁸⁶ This certainly seems true of Second World War Britain where the uniformed man, while not numerically superior, became the pinnacle of British citizenship and every other occupation or wartime role was discussed in relation to it. Therefore the concept of masculinity as hierarchical is one which is central to the conclusions of this thesis.

Of course, in wartime 'masculinity' took on very specific meanings. War, and the violence and 'heroes' it produces, has traditionally been linked to definitions of masculinity.⁹⁹ War was, and is, conventionally considered a male arena. As Graham Dawson states:

The soldier hero proved to be one of the most powerful forms of idealised masculinity within Western cultural traditions since the time of the Ancient Greeks. Military virtues such as aggression, strength, courage and endurance have repeatedly been defined as the natural and inherent qualities of manhood, whose apogee is attainable only in battle.⁸⁷

Indeed, the link between masculinity and warfare is so entwined that John Horne has posed the question: 'War - masculinity by other means?'⁸⁸ However, the First World

⁸⁵ Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, p.10.

⁸⁶ Connell and Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity', p.832.

⁹⁹ Connell, *Masculinities*, p.213.

⁸⁷ Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, p.1.

⁸⁸ J. Horne 'Masculinity in Politics and War in the age of nation-states and world wars, 1850-1950' in S. Dudnik, K. Hagemann and J. Tosh (eds.), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p.31.

War arguably shook conceptions of masculinity and so altered the perceptions of manliness in the inter-war period. For example, Alison Light argues that the post-war period saw a shift from heroic masculinity to ‘an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private’.⁸⁹ She further argues that such a change fundamentally altered how Britain saw itself. Britain began to see itself more domestically: ‘from the picture of the ‘little man’, the suburban husband pottering in his herbaceous border, to that of Britain itself as a sporting little country battling away against Great Dictators, we can discover a considerable sea-change in ideas of national temperament.’⁹⁰ Such a view of a large-scale shunning of war is often supported by a focus on the anti-war literature, such as Robert Grave’s *Goodbye to All That* and Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which became popular in the late 1920s. However, despite this arguable shift there remained many constants in the perceptions of manliness and male-behaviour in this period. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, for example, shows that physical fitness remained a highly desirable male trait across the political spectrum in Britain.⁹¹ Moreover, despite assumptions that celebrations of war had been made unpopular by bloody and horrific trench-warfare the soldier, too, remained a potent symbol of masculinity and manliness. Mike Paris, for example, shows how the soldier remained a popular character in boys’ comics and stories. He shows that *Boy’s Own Paper*,

⁸⁹ A. Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.8.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁹¹ I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, ‘Building a British Superman: Physical Culture in Interwar Britain’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Volume 41, 2006.

Chums, *Modern Boy* and *Champion* all used war-stories in their pages, with some even setting adventures in the trenches of the First World War.⁹²

Similarly, working-class masculinity, as will largely be examined in this thesis, continued to rely heavily on occupation for definition. As Whitehead states ‘paid work has been managed, organised and predominantly engaged in by men, one consequence of which is that it has come to exercise a major influence on definitions and performances of masculinity.’⁹³ Similarly, Joanne Bourke argues that from the 1870s until the First World War due to its relative stability wage labour provided a solid basis for masculine identity.⁹⁴ Such identity was often bound up with notions of skill, hard labour and danger. However, with the depression such a focus became, as Bourke argues, ‘a fragile basis for masculinity’.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, paid work remained the key arbiter of working-class masculinity in the inter-war period. Susan Kingsley-Kent, for example, argues that despite its increasingly unstable basis ‘work conferred a status on working-class men that no other attribute could replace. Certain jobs created a higher manly standing than others, at least for some men, even at the height of unemployment, when most men took any job they could find.’⁹⁶ Moreover, Arthur McIvor notes that after the temporary gender shift in employment during the First World War there was a concerted push to ensure women remained in the home and out of the workplace.⁹⁷ Again, this highlights that in the period under discussion notions of gender were firmly bound up with work. Indeed, it must be remembered

⁹² M. Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p.151.

⁹³ S. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinity* (London: Polity, 2002), p.125.

⁹⁴ J. Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.44.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p.10.

⁹⁶ S. Kingsley-Kent, *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1990* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.302.

⁹⁷ A. McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain, 1880 – 1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.190

that although military masculinity was a strong ideal during the Second World War there still remained possible alternatives. There is some evidence to suggest that workplace pride as a source of masculine identity continued during the war for those men refused entry to the armed forces. For example, Frederick William Johnes, who was denied on health grounds because of being deaf in one ear, stated the men he worked with 'were all excluded from the [Armed Forces] by their disability or their ability, being able to produce something more valuable than being in the army.'⁹⁸ Corinna Peniston-Bird argues that this emphasis on his being able to contribute to the war without being in the services shows that working pride could be an alternative to military pride.¹¹² Much of this thesis focuses on whether or not such an image was afforded to civilian workers in cultural depictions.

However, despite such emphasis the link between ideal masculinity and war became unusually pronounced during the Second World War as the entire British nation turned to one purpose. As Peniston-Bird argues, 'although hegemonic definitions are complex and fluid, during war, these phallogentric ideals are less open to competition from alternative versions of masculinity.'⁹⁹ Despite the prominent wartime rhetoric of 'all being in it together' there still remained a definite division between combatants and non-combatants.¹¹⁴ Indeed, during the Second World War the ideal masculine roles were undoubtedly service personnel, in particular the RAF pilot. In a specifically Second World War context Sonya Rose identifies the hegemonic form of masculinity in Britain as a 'temperate masculinity', a mix of the

⁹⁸ Peniston-Bird, 'Classifying the Body in the Second World War', p.37. ¹¹² Ibid, p.37.

⁹⁹ C. Peniston-Bird, 'Classifying the Body in the Second World War', p.32. ¹¹⁴ Ibid, p.34.

traditional 'soldier hero', as explored by Dawson, and the 'anti-heroic' or 'little man' masculinity which became prevalent during the inter-war period.¹⁰⁰ In light of this, Rose argues that the hegemonic masculinity showed the ideal man with 'traditional' masculine traits such as bravery, courage, physical strength and youthful virility. Yet he was also a humble team-player from 'ordinary' origins that enjoyed the simple pleasures of family life.¹¹⁶ However, Rose states, the hegemonic masculinity was only available to men in uniform; men in civilian occupations were excluded from this discourse.¹⁰¹ This strong link between masculinity and the military therefore raises questions about the masculine identities of men who could not fulfil this role. Using Connell's lexicon the non-ideal masculine role of being in a civilian occupation could arguably be viewed as either subordinated or marginalised. Such an analysis is supported by existing research. For example, Corinna Peniston-Bird argues 'working in a reserved occupation was only acceptable if the individual longed to join the armed forces but nobly sacrificed his desire for the good of the country.'¹⁰² Moreover, she also notes that 'remaining on the home front rendered a male vulnerable to both accusations of cowardice and assumptions about his physical fitness.'¹¹⁹ Such an analysis has also been noted in wartime portrayals of other civilian roles. In *Contesting Home Defence* Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird found that men in the Home Guard were often culturally portrayed as overweight, bookish or 'playing' at being soldiers which distanced them from the

¹⁰⁰ Rose, *Which People's War*, p.153. ¹¹⁶

Ibid, pp.160-161.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.153.

¹⁰² Peniston-Bird, 'Classifying the Body in the Second World War', p.40. ¹¹⁹

Ibid, p.41.

masculine ideal of the ‘soldier hero’.¹⁰³ In light of such depictions this thesis, on other groups of civilian men, furthers our understandings of the non-uniformed man in wartime Britain.

Of course ‘masculine’ occupations can only exist when contrasted against that which is considered ‘feminine’. As Connell states “‘masculinity’ does not exist except in contrast with ‘femininity’”. A culture which does not treat women and men as bearers of polarised character types at least in principle, does not have a concept of masculinity in the sense of modern European/American culture.’¹²¹ However, with a surge of women entering into what, for many, had traditionally been male jobs, the definitions of what constituted male and female work were rendered unstable in wartime.¹⁰⁴ For many men their work could no longer be defined as masculine solely because only men undertook the work. This placed them in sharp contrast to men in the armed forces. Additionally, this raises questions of how men’s portrayed relationships with women in the workplace affected the way they were viewed by the British media and public. Indeed, this influx of women may have undermined the extent to which men in reserved occupations could draw on their occupational skill as a source of masculine pride. This issue is also examined fully in the body of the thesis.

iv. Using Cultural Sources as a Historian

¹⁰³ P. Summerfield and C. Peniston- Bird, *Contesting Home-Defence*, pp.129-131. ¹²¹ Connell, *Masculinities*, p.68.

¹⁰⁴ Rose, *Which People’s War?*, p.188.

Cultural sources are an excellent tool for exploring depictions of gender and gender relations. However, how to read them is often a contentious issue. Amelia Jones, for example, notes: 'Feminism has long acknowledged that visibility... is one of the key modes by which gender is culturally inscribed in Western Culture.'¹⁰⁵ According to John Berger, women are constantly being observed by men and so act accordingly:

She [referring to women generally] has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life . . . Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at . . . [Woman is] an object of vision: a sight . . . Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated.¹²⁴

Similarly, the issue of spectatorship is a widely discussed and controversial issue within the field of film studies although such ideas are applicable to other media. The debate of the 1970s was dominated by feminist theory, typified by Laura Mulvey, and was based largely around Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Mulvey argued that all cinema centred around male desires, focusing on the normality of a male director, and that the basic premise of cinema is that men look and women are looked at. In other words, women are the passive object of the 'male gaze'.¹⁰⁶ However, this conceptualisation of spectatorship, with its emphasis on binary conceptions of gender and its view of masculinity as an unchanging ideal which can be applied to all films and periods of film-making, is highly problematic.¹⁰⁷ Steven Cohan, Ina Rae Hark and Andrew Spicer, for example, reject such notions and contend that masculinity is as

¹⁰⁵ A. Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2010), p.2. ¹²⁴

J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1972), p.46.

¹⁰⁶ L. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.19.

¹⁰⁷ J. Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.18; S. Neale, 'Masculinity as Spectacle' in S. Cohan and I.R. Hark, (eds), *Screening The Male: Exploring Masculinity In Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.9.

much a performance and spectacle as the performance of femininity.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the feminist theory of spectatorship was criticised for focusing only on how men viewed women, paying scant regard to how women viewed women or how women viewed men and almost no regard to the ways in which men viewed men.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, feminist textual analysis has similarly been criticised for focusing on production rather than consumption, Jackie Stacey argues that ‘the questions put on the agenda by feminist theory seemed to bear no relation whatsoever to the questions of general cinema-going habits of women at different times.’¹¹⁰ In light of this, more recent studies of spectatorship and consumption, such as those by Annette Kuhn and Jackie Stacey, have moved away from purely textual psychoanalysis towards gathering actual audience accounts of their experiences.¹¹¹ While not without its limitations, the use of these types of sources enables the researcher to examine both the lived and remembered experiences of the culture-consuming public as well as the texts themselves.

It is the intention of this thesis to apply these methods to the examination of the representation of civilian masculinities during the Second World War. Annette Kuhn, in her study of 1930s cinema, suggests triangulation in order to try to attain robust results when looking at film (although such methods are equally valid with other cultural sources). She suggests rather than looking at the text in isolation, the

¹⁰⁸ Cohan and Hark, (eds), *Screening The Male*, p.1; A. Spicer, *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema* (I.B. Tauris: London, 2003), p.2.

¹⁰⁹ P. Powrie, A. Davies and B. Babbington, ‘Introduction: Turning The Male Inside Out’ in P. Powrie, A. Davies, and B. Babbington (eds), *The Trouble With Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), p.2.

¹¹⁰ J. Stacey, *Star-Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.53.

¹¹¹ Stacey, *Star-Gazing*, p.50; A. Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: Cinema and Cultural Memory* (London : I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), p.3.

historian should also look at other contemporary sources.¹¹² Such methods are also advised by those working with other media. As Peter Burke notes:

The use of images raises many awkward problems. Images are mute witnesses and it is difficult to translate their testimony into words. They may have been intended to communicate a message of their own, but historians not infrequently ignore it in order to read a picture ‘between the lines’, and learn something that the artists did not know they were teaching. There are obvious dangers in this procedure. To use the evidence of images safely, let alone effectively, it is necessary - as in the case of other kinds of source – to be aware of its weaknesses.¹¹³

In response to this Burke, like historians of film, advocates treating a visual source like any other source. The historian should ask why the image was made and who by as well as assessing other issues such as reception. He points out that it is necessary to be aware of the broader context in order to fully understand what is depicted.¹³³ Again, by triangulating visual sources with other types of evidence the results produced will be much more robust. Yet, it must be noted that in this instance responses to cultural depictions were scarce. Given that the many of the occupations examined, especially industrial and agricultural jobs, appeared in the fringes of culture it is unsurprising they failed to elicit much response from the British public. Moreover, as noted with regards to oral histories it proved impossible to locate responses to cultural sources from men in the occupations depicted therefore thwarting the possibility of understanding how the portrayals discussed were understood by and impacted upon the men they showed. However, wherever possible response to both cultural depictions and responses to the occupations themselves have been analysed. In the context of this study, this will include Mass Observation,

¹¹² Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic*, p.7.

¹¹³ P. Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, p.15. ¹³³
Ibid, p.93.

Wartime Social Surveys, BBC listener research, Home Intelligence and film magazines.

Moreover, understanding responses to cultural sources is also complex. Postmodern theorists, namely Barthes in *The Death of the Author*, argue that texts have no fixed meaning. Meanings are entirely dependent on the reader and each reader could potentially have a different reading of the text.¹¹⁴ If this theory is accepted then no firm statements can be made regarding the intent and effects of any text. However, Jill Nelmes argues for a theory of ‘limited pluralism’.¹¹⁵ While she accepts the postmodern view in theory, in reality she argues that it does not hold true. Instead, Nelmes advocates that ‘what we seem to have is “openness of meaning yet determinacy of effect”... in other words, while there is the possibility of many different “readers-as-authors” making meaning, reflecting their personal formations as unique individuals in fact within a given society people share a very similarly constructed sense of social reality.’¹¹⁶ This means that although we can still never be entirely certain of the effect of a source on any given spectator, generalisations can be made.

Moreover, when considering the issue of reception the postmodern approach has been critiqued for forgetting the individual and presenting them as a mere victim of discourse. The Marxist view of cultural production also underplays the role of the viewer as it emphasises a simple top-down method of dissemination.¹¹⁷ Indeed,

¹¹⁴ R. Barthes, ‘The Death of The Author’ in R. Barthes (Translated By S. Heath), *Image, Music, Text* (London, Flamingo, 1982), p.147.

¹¹⁵ J. Nelmes, *Introduction to Film Studies* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.110.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.110.

¹¹⁷ M. Barnard, *Approaches to Understanding Visual Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.198. ¹³⁸ A. Crissell, *Understanding Radio* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp.103-4.

while some early works on propaganda assume that the media, and especially propaganda, worked to impose ideas on the audiences this has now been largely undermined.¹³⁸ As Andrew Crissell contends, the 'general finding is that the media change opinions only if their audiences are predisposed to change - otherwise the effect is one of reinforcement.'¹¹⁸ Moreover, audiences were free to choose what they listened to, read and watched and also to interpret what they heard in their own way. While this does lead to a more difficult job for the historian, it may result in more fruitful and interesting findings to attempt to understand how the people of wartime Britain used and understood the messages presented to them.¹⁴⁰ It is important to remember the viewer, listener or reader was not an easily led dupe but rather was complicit in the meaning-making process.¹¹⁹ As Jo Fox has shown in her article regarding British reactions to the flight and subsequent imprisonment of Rudolf Hess, the public constructed meaning around what they were presented based on their own hopes, fears and needs.¹²⁰ Indeed, media consumption was radically altered by the war context. As well as increased attendance, cinema patrons, for example, also had to endure the effects of war on their viewings. Antonia Lant states:

Familiar conditions of film viewing vanished: screenings were punctuated with air raid sirens and evacuations, and were held in canteens, newly formed Army and Navy Camp Film Societies, factory halls, and mobile vans as often as in the 'ideal' surroundings of the motion picture auditorium.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p.196. ¹⁴⁰

Ibid, p.207.

¹¹⁹ G. Davis, 'The Ideology of the Visual' in M. Rampley, *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Context* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p.171.

¹²⁰ J. Fox, 'Propaganda and the Flight of Rudolf Hess, 1941-1945', *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 83 No. 1, March 2011.

¹²¹ Lant, *Blackout*, p.4.

Additionally, patrons, regardless of where they were viewing the film, had to contend with the journey to and from the screening in the blackout, one of the most omnipresent symbols of war. Similarly, radio broadcasts were heard in factories, barracks and canteens as well as in the home and even newspapers may have been read while in an air-raid shelter while Britain was under attack. In light of this, perhaps the greatest challenge of the research was not the analysis of the material but instead ascertaining how it was received when it was released. K.R.M. Short notes:

After the historian has seen the film, studied its background music, its dialogue... the visual symbolism, and the edited structure, he begins to have some idea of what the film means to him. The extent to which this might also be valid for the person in 1944 who saw the same film depends on how effectively the researcher is able to immerse himself in the period historically and culturally. This is essential for the historian for he is not attempting to assess the film artistically but rather to understand how it reflects its time and produces evidence towards the solution of the historical problem.¹²²

Although explicitly discussing film, Short's observations equally apply to other media.

As well as utilising a broad range of sources, each one has been approached methodically. Andrew Dix, for example, advocates a comprehensive analysis of the whole source. He argues that researchers should not only examine *what* a film, or radio broadcast or image, says but also *how* it says it. He advocates approaching sources 'like literature' - in other words, the researcher should read everything.¹²³

Within a text, elements such as the concept of the 'star', juxtaposition of scenes or images, lighting, framing, soundtrack as well as where the text or image was viewed

¹²² K.R.M. Short, 'Introduction: Feature Film as History' in K.R.M. Short, (ed), *Feature Films as History* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), p.29.

¹²³ A. Dix, *Beginning Film Studies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p.7.

must be considered.¹²⁴ Moreover, Matthew Rampley argues with regard to visual culture:

The notion of visual rhetoric therefore highlights the need to see past apparently innocent qualities such as ‘style’, ‘aesthetics’ or ‘function’ in order to attend to the ways in which the visual environment, visual culture, attempts to draw us into its arguments, into its value systems.¹²⁵

The texts within this thesis, therefore, have not been analysed as examples of art with a focus on artistic merit, style and biography, although these considerations are not completely dispensed with. Instead, this thesis puts the texts and images in a social, cultural and philosophical context in order to help us understand what they can reveal to us about the past. As Richard Howells argues of fine art:

The artist probably did not intend to encapsulate so many cultural attitudes and assumptions in his painting, but that is not to say that they are not there. In so many things in life (and painting is only one of them), we often communicate far more than we deliberately intend.¹²⁶

However, while this may be a constructive way to analyse sources it is not without flaws. Perhaps one of the greatest dangers is to assume that sources represent an actuality. As Peter Burke states ‘the power of film is that it gives the viewer a sense of witnessing events. This is also the danger of the medium.’¹²⁷ Barthes refers to this as the ‘reality effect’.¹²⁸ This is compounded, for example, by the fact that wartime British cinema turned increasingly towards documentaries and dramas often referred

¹²⁴ Ibid, p.28; S. Barber, ‘Fine Art’ in S. Barber and C. Peniston-Bird (eds), *History Beyond the Text: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p.19; S. Kromm and S.B. Bakewell, *A History of Visual Culture: Western Civilization from the 18th to the 21st Century* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), p.7.¹⁴⁶ M. Rampley, *Exploring Visual Culture: Definitions, Concepts, Context* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p.147.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p.147.

¹²⁶ R. Howells, *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Oxford: Polity, 2003), p.26.

¹²⁷ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, p.159.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p.155.

to as 'realist'.¹²⁹ As David Bordwell and Kristin Thomson explain, a documentary is often purported, and therefore believed, to be reliable. They note: 'What justifies our belief that a film is a documentary? For one thing, a documentary typically comes labelled as such. This in turn leads us to assume that the persons, places, and events exist and that the information presented about them is trustworthy.'¹³⁰ Thus, it must also be borne in mind that the many different types of sources carried differing meanings. Newsreels, documentaries, newspapers as well as many radio broadcasts purported to reflect the reality of the war and so may have been viewed as authentic by the audience.¹³¹ Yet feature films, as well as some radio broadcasts, although often made in what was then considered the realist vein, could be allowed more typical fanciful tropes and ideas which would have seemed absurd to an audience in a documentary or newsreel. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that all cultural media were constructions designed to produce a certain effect in the audience. Even newsreels were created using staged or stock footage if no actual footage could be obtained and were subject to censorship restrictions.¹³² However, as the aim of this thesis is not to uncover the real lived experience of those in civilian occupations but, rather, to analyse cultural representations, the fact that all images seen were manipulated is not a hindrance as the research hopes to uncover not the 'truth' about wartime society but instead the idealised and constructed image.

¹²⁹ A. Aldgate, and J. Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in The Second World War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p.12.

¹³⁰ D. Bordwell, and K. Thomson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), p.42. It must be noted that realism is a relative concept and what appeared 'realistic' to wartime viewers may look highly stylised to modern eyes.

¹³¹ Dix, *Beginning Film Studies*, p.23.

¹³² N. Pronay, 'The News Media At War' in N. Pronay, N., and D.W. Spring (eds), *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-1945* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1982), p.201.

v. The Military in Wartime Culture

Given that the civilian working man was regularly compared to the uniformed man it is imperative to understand how the military were portrayed during the war across various media. Unsurprisingly, in wartime Britain the military featured heavily in popular and high culture. They were recurrent topics for prominent war films and the BBC created the Forces Programme to cater specifically to their needs.¹³³ Moreover, despite a greater focus on the Home Front depictions of the military remained prominent in artistic endeavours. However, these were radically different to those produced in the First World War. Although portraiture remained a popular form of veneration, as seen in the work of Eric Kennington for example, depictions of actual battles were markedly different.¹⁵⁶ Gone were the horrifying depictions of bloody trench warfare, replaced with more abstract images of battle. This is perhaps best



Source 1.1, Paul Nash, 'We Are Making A New World'.

¹³³ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, p.53. ¹⁵⁶ Harries, *The War Artists*, p.175.

seen in the work of Paul Nash. For example, Nash's 'We Are Making a New World', painted in 1918, focuses on a broken landscape ruined by the violence of war.¹³⁴ In contrast his 'Battle of Britain', painted in 1941, simply depicts aeroplane vapour



Source 1.2, Paul Nash, 'Battle of Britain'

trails above an idyllic countryside therefore distancing the portrayal of aerial conflict from the true horrors of warfare.¹⁵⁸ Death and destruction was correspondingly muted in other portrayals. For example, in *The Way Ahead* (Carol Reed, 1944) the fate of the film's central characters is left unknown although the film ends with them heading into battle. Similarly, in *The Way To The Stars* (Anthony Asquith, 1945) death is simply marked by the disappearance of a character. Therefore, despite the ubiquitous presence of death in depictions of the military it was neither dwelt upon nor glorified.

Also, again unsurprisingly, there was a great emphasis on the bravery and courage of those in the armed services. For example, *The Daily Mirror* described the men of D-Day thusly:

Our first thoughts in this solemn hour must be with the men of the

¹³⁴ Paul Nash 'We Are Making a New World', 1918 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

¹⁵⁸ Paul Nash, 'Battle of Britain', 1941 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

Allied Armies - who have landed with our banners – the banners of Hope and Freedom – and are determined, despite all dangers and difficulties, to carry them across Europe and in due course to plant them in the heart of Berlin. Some of these men have fought in many lands and have won much glory: Others are newer to the bloody game of war, but are of great heart. The task before them may be stupendous, but they will perform it stupendously.¹³⁵

However, this heroism was worn lightly. Films, especially, which depicted the military often showed the men involved shrugging off the dangers which beset them. For example, in *In Which We Serve* (Noël Coward, 1942) Captain Kinross, played by Noël Coward, informs his men very calmly after they have been torpedoed that ‘we got him. I’m afraid he got us too... I’m afraid we’re going over.’ Such emotional reticence, and fortitude in the face of danger, was common in depictions of the military in this period and served to underline the bravery of the military men despite the dangers which beset them.

There was also a focus on the military body as the site of masculinity. As Sonya Rose notes a physically strong body remained a potent symbol of masculinity during the war, drawing on long-held ideals.¹³⁶ George Mosse argues, for example, that since the Enlightenment a physically healthy body had been equated with desirable inner qualities.¹³⁷ This was clear in wartime culture. Government propaganda posters emphasised the muscular physiques of soldiers. For example, one of ‘The Attack Begins in the Factory’ series fore-grounded two soldiers leaping from a plane with their leg and arm muscles clearly bulging as they head in to an attack against German soldiers thereby linking muscularity with battle.¹³⁸ Such

¹³⁵ ‘Destiny’s Hour’, *The Daily Mirror*, 7 June 1944, p.3.

¹³⁶ Rose, *Which People’s War*, p.163.

¹³⁷ George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.24-50.

¹³⁸ Leslie Oliphant, ‘The Attack Begins in the Factory’ (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).



Source 1.3, 'The Attack Begins In The Factory'

representations were also found in popular culture. For example, *The Daily Mirror* published a cartoon in September 1943 showing Hitler burning down Naples. Behind him rises a figure of a soldier from the smoke with an extremely muscular body. His dagger is poised to kill the deranged image of Hitler.¹³⁹ Clearly here the soldier's



Source 1.4, 'You're not destroying Fuehrer, you're creating!'

¹³⁹ 'You're not destroying, Fuehrer, you're creating!', *The Daily Mirror*, 23 September 1943, p.3.

well-built body represents the strength of the allied forces. Such a representation cements a brawny physique as a symbol of military manliness. It also presents another common trope and suggests that British forces were very much up to the task of destroying the Nazi menace: Britain was in safe hands. This was also commonly presented in newsreels. For example, the Movietone News newsreel *The Battle of the Balloons* (Movietone News, 1940) declared of the Battle of Britain that:

In this and other battles along the English coastline the Nazis have lost on one day 60 planes and the next 62. There's one of them: a dive-bomber that will dive no more. British losses, though distressing, are much less. 16 on the day 60 Nazis were brought down. Dover harbour is still their and British ships still ply where Britannia still rules supreme.

Clearly, such portrayals were created to maintain civilian morale but also emphasise the inexorable greatness of the British military might when compared to the German war machine.

However, while there were obviously similarities in the way the services were portrayed there were also clear differences. The RAF pilot, due to their role in



Source 1.5, "Never was so much owed by so many to so few"

the Battle of Britain, were held up as the pinnacle of manliness and were, rather famously, declared ‘the few’ to whom the British populace should be grateful to.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, the Royal Navy was associated with the middle-classes, epitomised by Noel Coward’s portrayal of a Naval captain in *In Which We Serve*. There were also some attempts to portray the rivalries between the different forces. Such discord between the services is highlighted in *In Which We Serve* when the character of Shorty, an ordinary naval seaman, quibbles with his brother-in-law, a marine, over Christmas dinner regarding the merits and drawbacks of their respective services. However, despite such antagonism, it was more common to portray co-operation between the services. While, as Martin Francis notes after Dunkirk there was severe discord between the men of the army and the air force with many soldiers, and civilians, believing the RAF had failed to protect the vulnerable soldiers on the beaches, this image was avoided in popular culture.¹⁶⁵ Instead cultural representations tended to focus on the rescue by the Royal Navy. In *In Which We Serve* Captain Kinross and the HMS *Torrin* make several trips across the Channel to



“This way, chum!”

¹⁴⁰ ‘Never was so much owed by so many to so few’ (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

¹⁶⁵ Francis, *The Flyer*, p.19.

Source 1.6, ““This way, chum!””

rescue the stranded army for which the portrayed army captain is extremely grateful. Similarly, *The Daily Mirror* published a cartoon depicting a soldier on the back of a sailor wading through the sea away from the burning beach. The caption, ‘This Way, Chum’, highlights the friendship between the services.¹⁴¹

Moreover, such unity was also depicted within the services themselves. It was a common trope in war films, most notably, to portray the presented group as sharing initial antagonisms, usually out with battle, before pulling together seamlessly when necessary. For example, in *We Dive at Dawn*, Eric Portman’s character, Hobson, is universally disliked by the crew of his submarine for his morose and pessimistic attitude: an attitude seemingly reciprocated by Hobson himself. However, in the denouement it is Hobson alone who risks his life by posing as a Nazi soldier then fighting off a number of real German soldiers to ensure the crew has enough fuel and supplies to return to port in Britain. Similarly, *The Way Ahead* depicts a group of civilian conscripts as they are turned in to soldiers. For much of the early part of the film they continually grouse about the conditions in the army with especial derision aimed at their sergeant. However, when on the way to Tunisia their ship is torpedoed and the sergeant becomes trapped several of the men risk their own lives aboard the flaming sinking ship to rescue him thereby highlighting their essential unity. However, despite this show of harmony there remained a strict hierarchy between the ranks. This relationship was generally portrayed as paternalistic. For example, in *The Way Ahead* despite the initial fault-finding of the conscripts they come to respect Lieutenant Jim Perry and follow him in to battle, even apologising for mistakes

¹⁴¹ ““This way, chum!””, *The Daily Mirror*, 1 June 1940, p.3.

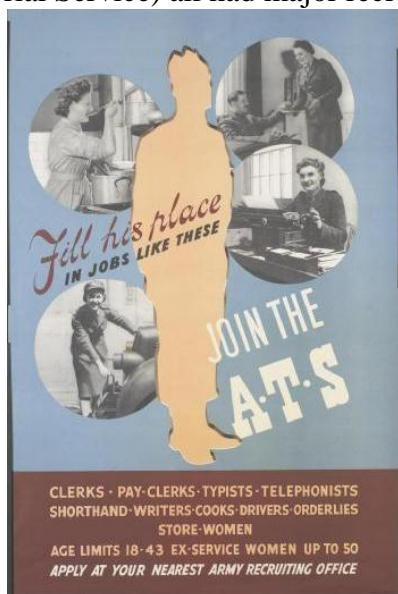
made. In turn he looks after and protects his men. Similarly, in *In Which We Serve* Captain Kinross tells his men that he seeks a ‘happy and efficient ship’ and when one young sailor abandons his post while under attack Kinross chastises himself for his failure to lead rather than castigate the young sailor. Therefore, despite the rhetoric of being ‘all in it together’ there remained a complex set of hierarchies, both between and within the services, in the portrayal of the military.

Moreover, such care and consideration by the military man was not only seen in battle but also on the home front. This was best seen in the depictions of their domestic relationships. Filmic depictions, especially, focused on the military man’s home life almost as much as their militaristic exploits, as Christine Geraghty argues, preserve their human side and ensure the men depicted are not simply portrayed as part of the violent and uncaring war machine.¹⁴² *In Which We Serve*, *The Way to the Stars*, *We Dive At Dawn* (Anthony Asquith, 1943) and *The Way Ahead* all focus on the war in a way which juxtaposed the hardships and dangers of military life against domestic life. For example, Captain Kinross, in *In Which We Serve*, has an ideal middle-class family. His wife has accepted her subordinate position, behind his first love, the ship, and his children are impeccably behaved. Similarly, *The Way to the Stars* extols the virtues of domesticity even in the uncertainty of war. The widow of one pilot, who also has a young child, encourages the character of Peter to become engaged regardless of his doubts as she does not regret her marriage despite being left alone. Domesticity, therefore, becomes a central facet and a significant goal of the military man in wartime. Moreover, this domesticity impacted upon the portrayed gender relations. Filmically, the women associated with the men in the services were

¹⁴² C. Geraghty, ‘Masculinity’ in G. Hurd (ed), *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television* (London: BFI Publishing, 1984), p.24.

generally only presented domestically or as romantic love interests. As stated in *In Which We Serve*, ‘men must work and women must weep.’ Indeed, it was very rare for women to be portrayed at work. If she was it was certainly not ‘war work’: neither in a service nor in industry. As such, military wives and sweethearts, filmically at least, conformed to traditional gender roles.

Of course, somewhat in contrast to this image the state was keen to promote enlistment in the women’s services. However, these women were not equal members of the military structure. Women were auxiliary to the men and so performed more menial roles within military organisations. Lucy Noakes shows, for example, that even the Forces Education Programme reinforced this gender divide.¹⁴³ Such entrenched classifications were also seen in the recruitment posters for the auxiliary services. The WAAF (Women’s Auxiliary Air Force), WRNS (Women’s Royal Naval Service more commonly referred to as the Wrens) and the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) all had major recruitment drives during the war. However, such



Source 1.7 ‘Fill his place in jobs like these’



Source 1.8 ‘Join the wrens and free a man for the fleet’

¹⁴³ L. Noakes, *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* (London: I.B Tauris Publishers, 1998), p.67.

campaigns, to a large extent, reinforced rather than challenged traditional gender boundaries. While Jonathon Foss's recruitment poster for the WAAF declared 'serve in the WAAF with the men who fly' this was rather a disingenuous image of women's roles in the auxiliary services. Other recruitment posters made this even clearer. One ATS recruitment poster, for example, declared 'Fill his place in jobs like these' depicting women in various administrative and mechanical jobs.¹⁴⁴ More emphatically, a WRNS recruitment poster series declared 'join the Wrens and free a man for the fleet'.¹⁴⁵ Both posters, therefore, reinforce unequal gender relations despite the seepage of women in to the military sphere.

Finally, being out of uniform was generally seen as undesirable and civilians were often unflatteringly contrasted against uniformed men. For example, in *Waterloo Road* (Sidney Gilliat, 1945) the character of Ted is a spiv who has bought a fake medical certificate to ensure he is not enlisted in the army. In the course of the film he attempts to seduce Tillie, the wife of an army private, Jim, and is shown to be somewhat of a gangster surrounded by thuggish henchmen. Eventually, Jim tracks down Ted and attacks him violently. Such actions are applauded by various characters in the film and reaffirms the military man's position at the top of the masculine hierarchy. A less violent, but equally damning, scene takes place in *We Dive At Dawn*. At the abandoned wedding of Mike, one of the submarine crew, a civilian man declares 'we've all got to do our bit: you in your sub and me in my reserved occupation.' He is harshly put down with the remonstrations that 'it's a

¹⁴⁴ Frederick George Alfred Scott, Auxiliary Territorial Service, 'Fill His Place In Jobs Like These', (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

¹⁴⁵ 'Join the Wrens and free a man for the fleet' (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

submarine twerp'. While it is suggested that this civilian may have been attempting to woo the would-be groom's fiancé it becomes clear that she has spurned his advances therefore marking him as less attractive than the man in uniform. This confirms the image of the military man as sexually appealing: an recurrent image in wartime culture as seen, for example, in *Millions Like Us* (Sidney Gilliat and Frank Launder, 1943) where the RAF pilot is the love interest and the civilian factory foreman is denied romance. Moreover, in the course of *We Dive At Dawn* the reserved man is decried as only a 'piano tuner' therefore denoting his occupation as decidedly less than masculine and useless to the war effort. In sum, what is clear from these two examples is that the civilian man could rarely compete directly with the uniformed man.

vi. The State and Wartime Culture

The state's relationship to the production of culture changed in wartime and how that change was manifested has been the focus of much debate by historians. Marxists, including John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* for example, have argued that those in power controlled visual ideology in order to protect their own authority.¹⁴⁶ Given that a large proportion of the images presented to the British public during the Second World War were in some way created, or controlled, by the state, this would appear to conform to Berger's point. For example, during the course of the war the state had a greater involvement in the production of filmic sources, not only of documentaries directly commissioned by the Ministry of Information and created by the Crown Film Unit, but also feature films and newsreels. Early accounts of the state's role

¹⁴⁶ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p.166.

emphasise the control it exercised over the film industry. Phillip M. Taylor argues that:

The simple fact of the matter was that any film which appeared on British cinema screens during the war could only do so if it had secured the approval of the British government, and in so far as the specific official body responsible was concerned, this meant the Ministry of Information (MOI).¹⁴⁷

It is true that despite rarely financing films, other than their own MOI documentaries and the feature film *The 49th Parallel* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1941), the state had control over film stocks and the issue of censorship as well as being able to release military personnel for off-screen as well as on-screen roles to help with a film. Whilst not directly controlling the content of these films, the state did have significant input in the flow of information and entertainment to the public.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, in wartime the unique but widespread uses of radio became invaluable to the government and the airwaves were utilised for propaganda broadcasts at both home and abroad. Indeed, it is this relationship between the BBC and the state, or more precisely the MOI, which dominates much of the historiography on the topic. As with film, the reach of the government's role in controlling what was broadcast on the BBC is a point which was debated both at the time and subsequently by historians. *The BBC Handbook* explained that in wartime the role of Postmaster General of the BBC was passed to the Minister of Information whose power extended to 'programme matters, hours of broadcasting and the

¹⁴⁷ P.M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.7.

¹⁴⁸ S. Harper, 'The Years of Total War: Propaganda and Entertainment' in Gledhill and Swanson (eds), *Nationalising Femininity*, p.193.

possible control of the service in an emergency.’¹⁴⁹ Although such measures were never used Angus Calder argued that: ‘The Government, without taking over the B.B.C. directly, reserved the right to order the B.B.C. to broadcast anything it wanted to be heard, and the B.B.C. on occasion fought jealously against orders from the Ministry of Information.’¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, despite the ease in seeing the state as an omnipotent cultural orchestrator this presents a rather simplistic view of the relationships between the state and cultural producers in wartime. Archival work by James Chapman has suggested that the state, with particular emphasis on the MOI, was not as pervasively powerful as was previously suggested. He argues that although it is tempting to see the state as a controlling force behind film-production, films were made which deviated from the state’s desired perception of war. The most notable example is *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1943), a film which Churchill wished to suppress because of its representation of the military.¹⁵¹ Significantly, this film was not prevented from entering production.¹⁵² Indeed, there was a large amount of tension between the state and the largely commercial film-makers in the early parts of the war over who should have primary control over filmic propaganda. Ealing Studios, headed by Michael Balcon, became briefly estranged.¹⁷⁸ Similarly, despite Carruthers’ conceptualisation of the state’s control over film-stocks as binding the film industry to the state with ‘at least “silken cords” if not “iron chains”’, control of this ‘strategic material’ actually fell under the

¹⁴⁹ Rolo, *Radio Goes to War*, p.119.

¹⁵⁰ Calder, *The People’s War*, p.503.

¹⁵¹ J. Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda 1939-45* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998) p.85.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p.83. ¹⁷⁸

Ibid, p.73.

jurisdiction of the Board of Trade, not the MOI. Furthermore, there is no evidence that any arm of the state ever used these powers to prevent a film from being produced or distributed.¹⁵³ Moreover, what perhaps is missing from the earlier conceptualisations of the state's control of film is the extent to which those in the film industry were eager to make propaganda films. Indeed, the estranged Ealing Studios made the 1940 box-office hit *Convoy* (Penn Tennyson, 1940) without any assistance from the MOI yet the film is plainly a propaganda film. Moreover, Jack Beddington, then head of the MOI Films Division, initiated an Ideas Committee in 1942 comprising individuals from the MOI and from the studios, which functioned, as Nelmes describes, as 'a kind of proactive censorship group, where the wartime ideological (propaganda) strategy was formulated.'¹⁵⁴ Chapman argues that this committee eased tensions between the two groups, facilitated production and reintegrated the wayward Ealing through 'good channels of discussion.'¹⁵⁵ This relationship can then largely be conceptualised as collaborative rather than as an almighty state apparatus wielding its omnipotent power. This view is supported by accounts of those involved in the film-making process. The commercial director Michael Powell, for example, asserted:

It must be understood that the way the Ministry of Information worked with commercial film-makers was that [Jack] Beddington would send for one of the well-known film-makers to discuss an idea that the Ministry wanted dramatised, or else we would come to Beddington with ideas of our own. We would discuss with him and the idea would either be approved or not. In our case, because of the unique nature of our creative partnership, it usually was. The point was that these films were financed commercially after having

¹⁵³ S.L. Carruthers, *The Media at War: Communications and Conflict in the Twentieth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p.93; Chapman, *The British at War*, p.253.

¹⁵⁴ Nelmes, *Introduction to Film Studies*, p.44.

¹⁵⁵ Chapman, *The British at War*, p.73. ¹⁸²

Ibid, p.82.

obtained the Ministry's approval of the themes and the general content.¹⁸²

Such descriptions undermine the idea of the state as an all-powerful controller of wartime culture.

A similar argument can be made with regard to radio broadcasting. Although it appears that the government had much authority over the BBC in wartime the BBC actually retained great independence. As Asa Briggs highlights the BBC was a large and disparate organisation which would have made it difficult for even the controller of the BBC to know what was happening in every department. Moreover, individual departments within the MOI and the BBC dealt with each other directly fundamentally undermining the idea of a centrally controlled BBC.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, it continued to largely shape its own programming to such an extent that Nicholas argues that 'over the course of the war the BBC developed from an instrument of official propaganda into a participant in its own right in the propaganda process.'¹⁵⁷ For example, the BBC was responsible for setting the tone of debates and largely responsible for programme content.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, as Briggs states, nearly all of the most popular wartime broadcasts were created by the BBC not the MOI.¹⁵⁹ Programming did, however, contain explicit propaganda such as ministerial talks but it was gradually realised that this was counter-productive as they were often perceived by the listening public as patronising.¹⁸⁷ Instead more practical programmes on such topics as *The Kitchen Front*, *War Savings Review* or

¹⁵⁶ A. Briggs, *The War of Words: The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.22.

¹⁵⁷ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, pp.6-7.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, pp.6-7.

¹⁵⁹ A. Briggs, *The BBC: The First Fifty Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.181.

¹⁸⁷ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, p.100. ¹⁸⁸ Ibid, pp. 70-72.

programmes about fuel consumption were regularly broadcast and were more popular.¹⁸⁸ Moreover, the BBC openly realised its propaganda potential. For example, the general policy on propaganda in 1939-40 was as follows:

The Corporation regards the prosecution of the war as perhaps the most important objective of broadcasting at the present. The contribution of broadcasting to the achievement of this objective consists in increasing generally the moral and material resources of the British public to bear the strain of war and carry the war to a successful end...Moral resources in the widest sense may be increased by any good programme- music, dress, Variety or talks, which serve to induce a calm and cheerful spirit, and, in the narrower sense, by programmes which dealing more directly with war problems, make the issues clear to our audience, and increase their determination to face what is ahead of them.¹⁶⁰

As with film, it is important not to conceive of propaganda on radio as an imposition of the state in all instances. The BBC, as with film producers and journalists, were very much part of the British establishment and so were most likely keen to push British war aims. Perhaps, then, the only way in which the state was able to concretely shape output was through censorship. As with all media output, radio broadcasts were subject to censorship to ensure no vital information fell into enemy hands. However, in 1942 Charles Rolo argued:

[The] Censorship applied to B.B.C. broadcasts does not go beyond the general principle of wartime censorship in Britain; that is to say, it is military not political. So long as no information valuable to the enemy is disclosed B.B.C. speakers are free to say pretty much what they please short of making defeatist or seditious utterances.¹⁶¹

Indeed, Alfred Duff Cooper, Minister of Information from May 1940 to July 1941, was keen to ensure the BBC remained, or appeared to remain, as independent as possible. He argued 'I am all in favour of permitting not only violent statements to be

¹⁶⁰ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/726 Policy – Propaganda - Weapon of War 1939-1940.

¹⁶¹ Rolo, *Radio Goes to War*, p.120.

broadcast by independent persons but criticisms of the Government...I believe it is right that we should keep the B.B.C. as a public forum – in so far as it does not interfere with the prosecution of the war – where all opinion should be freely voiced.’¹⁶²

As is becoming clear, the state, even in wartime, was not one coherent unit. This is also obvious with regards to visual culture. Propaganda posters were often produced by individual ministries and departments to promote their needs.¹⁶³ Indeed, as will be seen, the various ministries had differing ideas on how best to exhort the industrial workforce. Similarly, the War Artist Advisory Committee was often at odds with the rest of the MOI.¹⁶⁴ These tensions make it difficult to conceive of the state as an omnipresent power as has been previously argued. Moreover, *The Daily Mirror* often published images which were very critical of the government. While Churchill did attempt to have the paper suppressed it was to no avail, again undermining the idea of an all-powerful state.¹⁶⁵ In addition, as Peter Burke explains, conceptualising the state in this way also vilifies them. Rather than seeing the state as malevolently attempting to manipulate the populace for their own gains it is also possible to see the state as attempting to present the pertinent issues to British citizens in a ‘simple, concrete and memorable way.’¹⁹⁵ Therefore, despite the ease of assuming an all-powerful wartime state this is an overly simplistic deduction. What this means for the thesis is that no level of government involvement can be assumed in any given cultural source.

¹⁶² Rolo, *Radio Goes to War*, pp.119-120.

¹⁶³ J. Darracott, and B. Loftus, *Second World War Posters* (London: HMSO, 1972), p.5.

¹⁶⁴ Harries, *The War Artists*, p.159.

¹⁶⁵ M. Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.75. ¹⁹⁵ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, p.79.

vii. Thesis Structure

The thesis begins by examining perhaps the most clearly war-related civilian occupations; the industrial workers who made the bombs, boots and bullets necessary to fight a successful total war. Chapter two will show that these men were largely denied a strong masculine image. Despite the praise heaped upon industry, generally by the state, the male industrial worker was either hidden from view, obscured behind the new female labour force, or was shown to be distanced from the ideal form of masculinity through, for example, age and lack of heroic actions. Moreover, given the overt focus on female labour the chapter shows how this denied them a masculine image built on skill and hard labour.

Chapter three continues the focus on the civilian occupations separated from the violence of war by looking at male agricultural workers. To a much greater extent than even industrial workers the male agricultural worker was presented as separate to both the ideal masculine image and the war effort. He was portrayed as an old yokel and was very rarely linked concretely to the war effort and so was presented as somewhat tangential to the prosecution of a total war. Again, the focus on female labour overshadowed any discussion of male labour and as such denied the male agricultural worker an image built on skill and hard labour. Moreover, this image was further compounded by the overwhelming focus on the 'Dig For Victory' and 'Lend A Hand On The Land' campaigns which both presented agricultural work as undemanding as well as shifting the onus of food production away from the farmer to the ordinary citizen. Such an image was reinforced by the idealised image of the countryside in wartime which meant depictions of farming were often bucolic,

thereby separating it from the horrors of warfare and further distancing the profession from the ideal masculine image.

Chapter four focuses on the mercantile marine whose depiction provides a sharp contrast to their counterparts in industry and agriculture. This chapter demonstrates that despite an inauspicious depiction at the start of the war the Merchant Navy quickly rose to the status of heroes. In doing so they were depicted in a way which was highly similar to the idealised depiction of the armed services. They were depicted as brave and courageous in the face of largely military dangers. Moreover, they were shown to have traits of the idealised Briton. They were stoic, kind and had strong domestic ties. Even their gender relationships were markedly different from other civilian occupations. Women were depicted as separate and largely subsidiary to the Merchant Navy which cemented their manly status. Finally, Chapter five looks at a slightly different role in wartime. While the fire service was a reserved occupation the majority of wartime firemen were part of the civil defence organisation, the Auxiliary Fire Service, and so were in a specifically wartime role. However, they were depicted as heroes in a similar way to the Merchant Navy. They too were brave and courageous in the face of danger but retained strong bonds to their domestic lives. Yet, this depiction was more temporally focused than their mercantile marine counterparts. Early in the war the fire services, especially the Auxiliary Fire Service, were openly mocked. It was only during and immediately after the Blitz that their status as heroes was assured. Afterwards, they were largely forgotten.

By exploring these various occupations, this thesis thus highlights the centrality of occupations to perceptions of masculinity in wartime. Therefore, as well

as furthering our conceptions of masculinity and gender relations, not only in wartime Britain but also more generally, this thesis significantly adds to the existing historiography of the British home front during the Second World War. For the first time the depictions of the wartime working man, and reactions to them, have been systematically analysed which serves to deepen our understandings of wartime perceptions of the male civilian.

Chapter 2 – ‘The Attack Begins in the Factory’: The Male Industrial Worker in Wartime Culture



Figure 2.1 ‘The Attack Begins In The Factory’

On June 18th 1940 Winston Churchill was broadcast to the nation, via the BBC, stating: ‘The front line runs through the factories. The workmen are soldiers with different weapons but the same courage’.¹⁶⁶ While this may have been hyperbolic propaganda, presenting an image of equality between the armed services and the industrial worker, Churchill was certainly correct in stating the importance of

¹⁶⁶ HC Deb 20 August 1940 vol. 364 cc1132-274.

industry to the prosecution of war. The Second World War was a ‘modern’ war and as such was reliant on planes, tanks, machine guns, bombs and mines: commodities which could only be produced to sufficient quantities if Britain’s industrial concerns were efficiently harnessed to the war machine. Despite the popular image, both now and during the war, of a largely female industrial labour force, many men remained in industry. Indeed, in shipbuilding, mining, explosives, engineering as well as the iron and steel industries, men remained the dominant workforce despite an increase in the number of women employed in such sectors.¹⁶⁷ It was only the traditionally female-dominated textile industry which had a predominantly female workforce in wartime.³ Despite this huge male industrial workforce historians have generally focused on female labour. Penny Summerfield and Harold Smith, for example, both concentrate on the effect of new jobs and working environments on women.¹⁶⁸ Others, such as Antonia Lant and Sonya Rose, have thoroughly explored how wartime changes impacted on the perceptions of, and expectations placed upon, women.¹⁶⁹ However, while there has been much discussion about the impact of this new female workforce on femininity there has been considerably less discussion about how wartime changes to industry affected the perception of the existing male labour force and masculine subjectivities. Indeed, in the interwar period, as noted in the introduction, industrial work had been highly prized male work with men

¹⁶⁷ Central Statistical Office, *Fighting with Figures* (London: HMSO, 1951), pp.47-53. ³ *Ibid*, p.54.

¹⁶⁸ H.L. Smith, “The Womanpower Problem in Britain during the Second World War”, in *The Historical Journal*, Vol.27, No.4 (1984); P. Summerfield, *Women Workers in the Second World War: Production and Patriarchy in Conflict* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

¹⁶⁹ S.O. Rose, *Which People’s War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); A. Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

drawing pride from the skill, production-rates danger and simply-hard labour.

Moreover, these industrial men were specifically not in the military which was the most praised of wartime male roles. As Summerfield questions 'If wartime heroism and masculinity were embodied in the military man, where did that leave the civilian male worker? Was there a problem about convincing him and the rest of society that he was a necessary part of the war effort and a real man?'¹⁷⁰ Rose has argued that there was some attempt to portray the home front male industrial worker as a hero in line with those in the armed forces.¹⁷¹ However, she fails to consider if such portrayals were successful or accepted. Moreover, while the impact of the incoming female labour force has been considered in terms of skill and trade unionism, research has not considered changes to public perceptions of industrial work. These are the questions this chapter seeks to explore. This chapter, therefore, fills a gap in the historiography. It will further our understanding not only of perceptions of wartime industry but also wartime masculine ideals. It will do this by focusing on two main themes: firstly, the industrial worker's relationship to the war and to the 'temperate hero' ideal as presented culturally and, secondly, how the incoming female labour force impacted on the depiction of this traditionally male domain. This chapter will argue that despite attempts by the state the male industrial worker was generally cast as subsidiary to the armed forces hero, and the war effort, and to have largely been replaced by women.

i. Industry and War

¹⁷⁰ P. Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1998), p.119.

¹⁷¹ Rose, *Which People's War*, p.160.

The centrality of industrial concerns was frequently noted in parliamentary debates during the war. For example, MP Robert Richards stated in April 1940:

One is rather tempted to say that a modern Army does not march on its stomach, but on petrol. Mechanisation of the Army means that behind the soldiers there must be an even bigger army of industrial workers. It is estimated that even in 1918 every soldier required two or three men in the munitions factories behind him. I suggest that nowadays he requires probably five or six men.¹⁷²

Such statements were common throughout the war. This clear connection between industrial production and the military's rapacious need for equipment and fuel rendered industry the most obvious category of reserved occupation. Indeed, both the state and the popular media often constructed an image of reserved occupations which centred almost solely on industrial production. For example, a pre-war government memo detailing manpower organisation in the event of war explained:

At the same time in order to prevent voluntary enthusiasm from going too far [as it was uniformly thought to have done in the First World War] and inducing men to go into the Forces who would be serving the State better in the manufacture of fighting equipment the Ministry of Labour will cooperate with the Military Authorities in securing the rejection of those who must be reserved for essential civil employment, on this basis of a Schedule of Reserved Occupations.¹⁷³

Only two types of men are depicted here: the combatant and the civilian equipping him. Similarly, in 1941 in an article about reserved occupations *The Times* claimed that 'Man-power had to be divided between the fighting services, industry, and the varying services of air defence.'¹⁷⁴ Again, this focuses on industry to the exclusion of all other civilian occupations. However, the blanket term of 'industry' also belies the complexity of the situation. Although, shipbuilding, coalmining, building, aircraft

¹⁷² HC Deb 16 April 1940 vol. 359 cc872-3.

¹⁷³ National Archives, LAB 25/65.

¹⁷⁴ 'The Use of Man-Power', *The Times*, 2 January, 1941, p.12.

production and the production of munitions could all be considered 'industry', all had specific problems and so were given individual attention by the state to ensure high production and the maintenance of a skilled workforce. Most industrial occupations tended to be reserved at a relatively low age, generally eighteen or twenty-one, highlighting their perceived importance to the war effort. Beyond that, treatment by the state was variable. For instance, industrial concerns were ranked according to their value. The production of aircraft, anti-aircraft equipment, small arms, ammunition, bombs as well as factories producing the component parts of these necessities of warfare were, for example, classified 1a, the highest rank. The manufacture of tanks, anti-tank guns, machine guns, ammunition and their constituent parts were ranked 1b. The main outcome of these grades was that higher ranked concerns received first priority for manpower.¹⁷⁵ Even beyond this there were great variations in the experiences of industrial workers. Coalminers' numbers were swelled by the Bevin Boys (young men directed from military conscription to work in the mines) while many industrial concerns, for example aircraft production, were diluted by huge numbers of female workers. Others still were resistant to incoming female labour as seen in the shipbuilding industry. What is then obvious is despite the tendency to discuss 'industry' as a homogenous entity it was anything but and the differences between these industries, specifically differences in perception, will be an issue that will be explored in this chapter.

ii. The State and the Industrial Worker

¹⁷⁵ National Archives, LAB 76/9.



Figure 2.2, 'Back Them Up'

The state's high regard for industry was often reflected in their propaganda attempts. More than any other cultural medium the state's propaganda was keen to promote the necessity of industrial endeavours. From the outset of war the state used posters, with varying degrees of success, to link the production line to the front line. This was notable in the 'Back Them Up' campaign of 1940 which was published by HMSO and presumably commissioned by the Ministry of Information. These posters focused on battle scenes with an emphasis on the technologies of war, tanks and planes for example, in an effort to associate the factory to the war front.¹⁷⁶ These were later replaced by 'The Attack Begins In The Factory' series, as 'Back Them Up' was considered too vague, but they continued to use very similar pictures focusing on the products of the factories in war settings to exhort the industrial viewer by reminding them that military victory was dependent on industrial production.¹⁷⁷ However, both

¹⁷⁶ Frank Wooton, HMSO, 'Back Them Up' (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London)).

¹⁷⁷ M. Yass, *This is Your War: Home Front Propaganda in the Second World War* (London: HMSO, 1983), p.29.

¹⁴ Yass, *This is Your War*, p.16.



Figure 2.3, 'The Attack Begins in the Factory'

of these poster styles were ambiguous: neither explicitly stated how the viewer could 'back them up' or how 'the attack began in the factory', something for which they were widely criticised at the time.¹⁴ More direct commands were also published by the HMSO in poster form. One poster, for example, was titled 'Plain words from Sir Stafford Cripps to Workers and Managers'. Its only picture was of Cripps, then Ambassador to the Soviet Union and recently returned from Moscow in 1941, and focuses on the words of a recent speech:

Each hour of work that you lose, each day that you do less than you might by way of productive labour, whether as a worker or as manager, each machine that is allowed to remain idle when it might be used, each mistake or muddle as to the lack of co-ordination of labour or of material, each article needlessly wasted, makes our total effort less effective and lets down someone somewhere who is offering his life to save for you all the things that you value in life, whether he is in Africa, Russia, China or elsewhere. Your individual effort is your responsibility.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ HMSO, 'Plain Words from Sir Stafford Cripps to Workers and Managers', National Archives, INF 13/124.

Such depictions reveal the exhortative attitude on the part of the state towards the industrial worker but also suggest that the military were making greater sacrifices in the war and, indeed, suggesting the industrial workforce was prone to shirking. Moreover, the reference to ‘someone somewhere who is offering his life to save for you all the things you value...’ suggests a hierarchy of contributions to the war effort, a hierarchy in which the male industrial worker featured below the fighting man. As well as exhortation these posters published by HMSO share another quality: not one of them depicts an industrial worker, either male or female. Their exclusive focus on the military front to the exclusion of the industrial may have undermined their argument that the ‘attack began in the factory’. This suggests, despite government rhetoric, that the industrial worker was considered secondary to the war effort in comparison to those on the front line and suggests a hierarchy of masculine roles in the war.

However, other ministries of the state took a different approach to the encouragement of industrial workers. The Admiralty, most notably, published posters such as ‘The Navy Salutes YOU. British Shipyard Workers. The World’s Best’ which was intended to be displayed in shipyards and depicted a uniformed sailor saluting the viewer.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, the Admiralty published several posters which simply thanked the shipyards. Such outright praise directed at what was a predominantly male workforce was rare in any medium during wartime and was

¹⁷⁹ Admiralty, ‘The Navy Salutes You’, National Archives, INF 2/72.

¹⁷ Strube, Admiralty, ‘Put It There’, National Archives, INF 2/72.



Figure 2.4, 'The Navy Salutes You'



Figure 2.5, 'Put It There'

most likely an attempt to boost worker morale by reminding them of their links to the war effort. Furthermore, the Admiralty often depicted the shipyard worker and the sailor as equals. 'Put It There!' depicted the muscular arms of a shipyard worker and a member of the 'Royal Navy'. Their hands are clasped round a u-boat with a shark's face, strangling the u-boat.¹⁷ Such a message of working together against the Nazi menace was prominent in the posters of the Admiralty. Also published was 'Combined Operations include you' which depicted two scenes. The top showed sailors with machine guns in battle while the bottom image showed a man at a lathe.

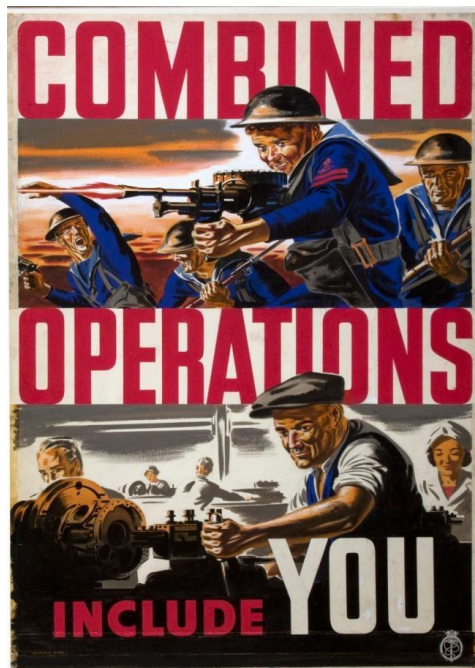


Figure 2.6, 'Combined operations include you.'

The similar positioning of the bodies of the men suggests that these men were to be considered equal. Moreover, Penny Summerfield argues that the presence of the illdefined female dilutees in the background of this poster served to reinforce the industrial worker's masculine identity.¹⁸⁰ This image, however, is again somewhat ambiguous as the presence of the female dilutees may have reinforced the image of industrial work as a female endeavour. Yet, this poster, with its emphasis on outright praise, remains a highly unusual depiction of industrial workers.

Other ministries also attempted to link their workers concretely to the military war effort. For example, the Ministry of Aircraft Production, MAP, used similar tactics to the Admiralty in their industrial propaganda. For example, their poster titled 'The Men Are Ready... only YOU can give them wings' depicts rows of airmen presumably awaiting planes.¹⁸¹ Similarly, they produced 'Thanks for your

¹⁸⁰ Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p.120.

¹⁸¹ Ministry of Aircraft Production, 'The Men Are Ready... only YOU can give them wings', National Archives, INF 2/72.



Figure 2.7, 'The men are waiting. Only YOU can give the wings.'



Figure 2.8, 'Thanks for your help!'

help' which showed a photograph of a pilot shaking hands with a runway construction worker.¹⁸² However, the explicit statement of 'help' does suggest the industrial worker was subsidiary to the young pilot, a sentiment underlined by the pilot's somewhat patronising hand on the older worker's shoulder. However, while this does not promote the same equality of contribution message as seen in the Admiralty's propaganda efforts it does present praise for the male industrial worker.

The Ministry for Fuel and Power also tried to link their industrial workers, predominantly coal miners, to the war effort. They published 'Coal and more COAL is wanted for Britain's War Effort' which featured a cartoon of miners throwing coal at Hitler with the caption 'Hit, Hit, Hitler'.¹⁸³ They also produced 'Miners: The

¹⁸² Ministry of Aircraft Production, 'Thanks for your help', National Archives, INF 2/72.

¹⁸³ Ministry for Fuel and Power, 'Coal and More COAL is wanted for Britain's War Effort' National Archives, INF 2/72.

Battle of the Atlantic is YOUR fight’ which featured as its main picture a u-boat being blown up above six smaller pictures detailing how coal was used in the production



Figure 2.9, ‘Coal and more coal is wanted for Britain’s War Effort’

and use of ships.¹⁸⁴ While not as glowing as those produced by the Admiralty and although they too frequently omit the industrial worker himself, they also attempt to link industrial workers concretely to the war effort. This seems to have been a representation peculiar to this medium. This perhaps reflects the ease with which the state could create a poster to be directed at one specific group of workers. Depictions aimed at a more widely defined audience, such as the presumed viewer of the ‘The Attack Begins in The Factory’ series, were necessarily vague to appeal to the widest possible demographic. However, these posters produced by a specific Ministry to encourage the industrial workers linked to their objectives could be much more

¹⁸⁴ Ministry for Fuel and Power, ‘Miners: The Battle for the Atlantic is YOUR fight’, National Archives, INF 2/72.

specific and so explicitly associated the men discussed to the war effort. Yet the specificity of the depictions meant, by definition, that they were only seen by the small intended audience and as such denied these occupations a wider representation as vital to the war effort.

Moreover, it was largely within the depictions of explicitly obvious wartime industries where the state promoted the vital nature not just of industry but of industrial workers themselves. State focus on industry rarely fell out with factory walls and industrial workers in such obviously war-related occupations often also appeared in short films which centred on industry's role in the war. The workers were often discussed in militaristic terms, most likely in an attempt to link them to the war effort and the masculine ideal. For example, in *Behind the Guns* (Cecil Musk, 1940) industrial workers were constantly referred to as 'an Army without uniform [which] is standing behind the guns.'¹⁸⁵ Moreover, industrial workers could be shown to have a direct link to the war. In *Behind the Guns* the audience is told: 'This war is not only a soldier's war but a craftsman's war, a designer's war, a war of steelworkers, firers, turners, riggers, testers, electricians, inspectors.'²⁴ Similarly, in the Shell film *Transfer of Skill* (Geoffrey Bell, 1940) the viewer is reminded that 'in the days to come a battle may depend on a gun checked by the accurate jeweller's gauge' and that 'the watchmaker does his job and uses his skill just like before but now we need his skill to bring down enemy bombers.' Civilian men's pre-war occupations could thus be vital in wartime. This is also shown in the Crown Film Unit short *Builders* (Pat Jackson, 1942), which is solely about their importance to the

¹⁸⁵ National Archives, INF 6/422.

²⁴ Ibid.

war effort. In this eight minute short, one of the builders claims that his distance from the actual act of fighting in the war made him feel that ‘you don’t seem to be in the war at all’. In doing so he refers to himself ‘scratching about like an old hen’. The voiceover responds:

But of course it’s a lot of poppycock. You’ve only got to look at Lansdowne to see that. Why since you built it three months ago it’s been at full production day and night. We wouldn’t have these [Rifles] or these [Tanks] or these [Tanks] or these [Shells] from Tharkhill. You remember you built it last year. We wouldn’t have had any of these unless you, Charlie, had scratched about like an old hen laying the bricks and you Bob that wallowed in the mud and cleared the site and you George had laid the drains. What you’re doing on these sites you’re building not only factories but the striking power of the whole nation... Each minute of your day brings the downfall of Hitler nearer.

Interestingly here, it was the building of munitions factories, rather than production within them, which linked the builder concretely to the war effort. However, although this film does clearly suggest that those builders, and the factories they built, had a key role in prosecuting and winning the war such films, as with other state propaganda due to their limited releases, were not widely seen.

Similarly, in the Humphrey Jennings Crown Film Unit documentary short *A Diary for Timothy* (Humphrey Jennings, 1946), released in 1946 but documenting the closing days of the war, the narrator explains:

You see this was total war. Everyone was in it. It was everywhere. Not only on the battlefields but in the valleys where Goronwy, the coal miner, carries his own weapons to his own battlefield in scenery which isn’t exactly pretty. If you looked across the countryside of England, that is beautiful, you can see Alan, the farmer, he has spent the last five years of war reclaiming the land and making it fertile. He has been fighting against the forces of nature all his life. And now with a mortal enemy on us he has to fight harder than ever. In London Bill the engine driver looks out of his cab at his battlefield. No longer taking holiday makers to the sea but taking the miner’s coal, the farmer’s crops, the fighting men’s

ammunitions to where they have to go. Goronwy, Alan and Bill are all fighting in their ways.

This clearly portrays civilian men as vital cogs in the war machine again by using militaristic language and so reflects the government's rhetoric about the equal contribution of uniformed and non-uniformed men. The production notes on this film confirm that the filmmakers were consciously making these parallels between these civilian jobs and the armed forces. The notes portray Bill's occupation as a 'vital war job' and more tellingly Goronwy is, when injured in a mining accident, described as in 'permanent danger as compared with temporary as airmen. Casualties in peace and war. Rehabilitation a parallel to airman's.'¹⁸⁶ However, such an image was not, or could not, be sustained. The image of equality is severely undermined during the course of the film. For example, their RAF counterpart, Peter, garners much greater focus and screen-time than any of the civilian workers. Moreover, later in the film a radio broadcast is clearly heard describing the Battle of Arnhem, part of the infamous Battle of the Bulge:

Perhaps I should remind you here that these were men of no ordinary calibre, they'd been nine days in that little space I mentioned being mortared and shelled, machine-gunned and sniped from all around. *For the last three days they'd had no water, very little but small arms ammunition and rations cut to 1/6. Luckily, or unluckily, it rained and they caught the water in their capes and drunk that.* These last items weren't mentioned. They were airborne weren't they? They were tough and knew it.

The hardships suffered by these men are reinforced to the audience when the section marked above is later repeated over sombre music played by the famed pianist Myra Hess. The message is clear: men in the army are not simply tough; they are tougher

¹⁸⁶ National Archives, INF 6/1917.

than 'ordinary calibre' civilian men. This image is further underlined by the fact that the civilian men in the film are shown having dinner served to them by their wives or playing with their children. While domesticity did form part of Rose's conceptualisation of temperate masculinity, the industrial worker was left looking merely ordinary rather than as an 'ordinary hero'. Fundamentally, although repeated attempts were made by the state to show the civilian man as a crucial part of the war effort it was undermined by the irrefutable heroism and bravery shown by those in the armed forces and which those in most civilian occupations could never achieve. This, therefore, positioned them far down the masculine hierarchy.

iii. Popular Culture and the Industrial Worker

The state was also able to shape depictions of the industrial worker in media out with their direct control. In September 1941 the Ministry of Information declared one of its propaganda aims to be to:

Show that what is decisive in modern war is not large numbers of men or the control of large territory, but machine power and that the combined industrial strength of Britain and America and Russia is so much greater than that of any other actual or potential grouping of powers that we can if all workers play their part achieve machinepower superiority over the Germans, and that our sea power will then eventually enable us to fling these forces against Germany at several points with crushing effect. This is our assurance that we can eventually defeat Germany as well as ourselves avoid defeat.¹⁸⁷

This aim appears to have been borne out, to some extent, in the media coverage of the civilian war effort. A BBC internal memo noted:

The Ministry of Production say they would be grateful if in any programme dealing with factory output, the connection between the factory and the battle-front could be indicated in any way we considered suitable, e.g. the direct connection between the work

¹⁸⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/702/6 Policy- Propaganda- File 4a.

done in the tank factory in this country and the tank in action in Egypt; the idea of course being to make the factory worker realise that he or she is taking a real part in actual battles.¹⁸⁸

The BBC appears to have taken heed of such requests in broadcasting such shows as *From Benchfront to Battlefront* and declaring in other programmes, for example, that workers were ‘putting out an extra effort because they know that the machines they are turning out are to protect the bodies of their own sons, brothers, husbands and workmates in the Forces.’¹⁸⁹ Siân Nicholas attributes this BBC focus to the need to maintain and encourage Britain’s industrial workforce which was so central to the war effort:

The poor public image of war industry was a major problem for the government’s industrial mobilisation plans. Once the novelty had worn off, both men and women regarded factory work as unglamorous and mundane compared with life in the Forces. Women in particular found the work dirty, monotonous and unrewarding. This led not only to a shortage of volunteers – though this could be combated by compulsory placement – but, more seriously, to poor morale and, it was feared, low output. As the BBC continued to feature programmes about the fighting forces, a marked resentment grew up among munitions workers, who felt their contribution to the war was being downgraded.¹⁹⁰

However, such programmes designed to praise the industrial front may not have made the intended impact. The need to emphasise the centrality of industry to a military victory was continually highlighted in BBC meetings throughout the war perhaps suggesting that the corporation never felt the message had been clearly established in the public mind. For example, as late as April 1943 an unsigned BBC internal memo noted:

¹⁸⁸ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/702/6 Policy- Propaganda- File 4a.

¹⁸⁹ BBC Written Archive Centre, Title unknown, 14 June 1940.

¹⁹⁰ S. Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front propaganda and the wartime BBC, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.119.

My criticism – admittedly that of a layman – of many Industrial Feature Programmes in the past is that they have failed to create sufficient impression in the minds of the listener either of the nature of the work which they seek to portray or of its importance. Most of them have rightly aimed at giving some idea of the human side of industry, and at conveying an impression of the type of work done. I feel, however, that they have failed, especially in the second of these two objects, because the type of work done has not been presented with an adequate background, either in relation to the particular industry of which it forms a part or to the war production effort as a whole. In particular, I feel that the programmers have failed to create an impression of the importance of the enterprise in which the workers are engaged.¹⁹¹

This perceived failure may have something to do with the nature of the programmes used to discuss industrial matters. It was reported by Listener Research that talks programmes, generally centring on industrial concerns, received small audiences and were regularly avoided by the working classes.³¹ This suggests that the average citizen, industrial worker or not, was not being exposed to these propaganda messages. The same pattern was replicated in other media. Despite the known centrality of industry to the war effort the depictions of industrial workers, especially men, were often pushed to the fringes of culture. They rarely appeared in longer films but instead were relegated to government shorts and were seldom made the subject of literature. This omission from cultural depictions may have been partially attributable to the belief that military subjects worked as better propaganda than industrial ones. Correspondence suggests that the MOI thought military subjects could be used to boost the morale of industrial workers. For example, a letter from MOI minister Arthur Calder-Marshall to the head of the MOI films division, Jack Beddington, stated of *Western Approaches*, a film which focused on the hardships of

¹⁹¹ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/436/2 Policy- Industry (Ministry of Production) Liaison, File 1B. ³¹ BBC Written Archive Centre, R51/268 Talks- Industrial Talks- British Craftsmen- Steel- 1943.

³² National Archives, INF 1/214 pt 1.

the Merchant Navy, that ‘I consider that naval subjects of this type will always be extremely popular and extremely good propaganda, especially for shipyard workers.’³² Similarly, the newsreel series *Warwork News* (1942-1945) was designed to be shown in factories yet continually focused on the military. Although *Warwork News 18* (1943) declared ‘You are sending them the tools’, this message is far from ubiquitous in the series. Instead, the series largely focuses on military subjects. This suggests that, in parallel to Calder-Marshall above, Paramount News believed showing men in the armed forces was a good way of motivating the industrial workforce. However, Brendan Bracken, Minister of Information from 1941 to 1945, advocated placing more emphasis on industry in the news. He noted that the news coverage of industrial output was patchy and let down by a lack of figures and details. He stated that:

We have been doing what we can with the material available to present our industrial war effort through feature programmes, talks, etc., but far and away the best way of bringing home to listeners here and overseas that we as a nation are on the job, in uniform and in plain clothes, is through the news bulletins.¹⁹²

Despite Bracken’s protestations this problem seems to have plagued industry until the end of the war. It was compounded by the security problems around issuing details of industrial outputs and thus consequently industrial topics were often overlooked.

Yet, representations of and about industrial work did appear. Indeed, some of the most infamous and long-running programmes from the BBC in wartime were aimed at industrial workers. Strikingly, however, they were not necessarily *about* those in industry. Both *Music While You Work* and *Worker’s Playtime*, for example,

¹⁹² BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/436/2 Policy- Industry (Ministry of Production) Liaison, File 1B.

were primarily entertainment programmes which very rarely, if ever, discussed workers or their role in the war directly.¹⁹³ This may largely have been due to the BBC's wish to encourage rather than exhort the civilian workforce. It was noted in the BBC's internal correspondence, as well as Listener Research, that exhortations were often unpopular and counter-productive within the workforce as many of the delays in industrial production were out with individual workers' control.¹⁹⁴ Instead the BBC broadcast entertainment programmes in an attempt to break the monotony of the industrial workforce's day with songs and comedy.¹⁹⁵ A BBC wartime pamphlet noted:

Workers' Playtime is a lunch-time entertainment given 'live' three times a week in factories and broadcast to others all over the country. It provides a stimulus of gaiety in the lunch-time break which sends the worker back to bench or machine with new heart to work harder than ever.¹⁹⁶

Despite the prominence of these programmes they arguably did little to improve factory morale and listener research showed that factory workers were largely turned off by many of the programmes aimed at them.³⁸ However, while these programmes may not have discussed the worker directly, or even have been popular, their very existence is telling. No other civilian occupations were granted the same focus as industrial concerns. That these programmes were designed to maintain industrial output, as well as the considerable time and money spent on such endeavours by the

¹⁹³ Music and work have a long history. For example, see E. Robertson, M. Pickering and M. Korczynski, "And Spinning So With Voices Meet, Like Nightingales They Sung Full Sweet": Unravelling Representations of Singing in Pre-Industrial Textile Production' in *Cultural and Social History*, Vol. 5 No. 1, March 2008, pp.11-32.

¹⁹⁴ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/300- Policy- Industry (Ministry of Production) Labour.

¹⁹⁵ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/667 Policy- Propaganda- Factories 1942-43.

¹⁹⁶ A. White, *BBC at War* (London: BBC, 1941), pp.23-4.

³⁸ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, p.121.

BBC, highlights the importance placed on industry, and subsequently the industrial worker, in wartime.

Moreover, industrial jobs could garner great praise. Industrial magazines were keen to shape an image of the industrial worker as central to the war effort. For example, in August 1941 *Man and Metal* published 'The Song of Steel' which included the following verse:

The plunging main is furrowed o'er By
mighty ships of steam
And mirrored rivers glow with light
From ruddy furnace gleam.
So up and fight, you men of steel;
Ring out your battle cry,
And be the victors over all
From earth to sea and sky.¹⁹⁷

Similarly, the BBC's *The Industrial Army*, broadcast in March 1941, noted:

Now this industrial army is something more than a passive force getting on with its job. It's a striking force. In the summer of last year it took the offensive and since then it has won some resounding victories. When the history of these dramatic months can really be written it will be found that something not far short of a miracle was achieved in the factories and workshops of Britain.¹⁹⁸

This overt battle rhetoric and the suggestions of the miraculous nature of industry highlight the high praise that could be directed at industry. This may be largely attributable to the fact that due to the increasing mechanisation of warfare it was industrial occupations which could have the most obvious impact on the war and so were focused upon by the media. This is perhaps best emphasised, as with state propaganda, by the lack of attention with regards to industrial jobs which fell out with factory walls. Prominent films such as *Night Shift* (Paul Rotha, 1942) and *Millions Like Us* (Sidney Gilliat and Frank Launder, 1943) centred on armament factories. Builders and coalminers, for example, were to a lesser and greater extent culturally sidelined in favour of munitions production. The workers in these, or other, occupations may then have felt excluded or undervalued. Indeed, such complaints were recorded. For example, one BBC's Listener Research report noted

¹⁹⁷ Rose, *Which People's War*, p.191.

¹⁹⁸ *People of Britain: The Industrial Army* by A.S. Frere, 16 March 1941.
BBC Written Archive Centre,

that a housewife had complained that: 'Too much fuss made of industrial workers. They're only doing their bounden duty and well paid for same [sic]'.¹⁹⁹ This exclusion of those out with munitions production was an issue raised several times to and by the

BBC. For example, in 1942 Mr CJ Simmonds, Publicity Director for the Board of Trade, wrote to Mr. Sinclair, BBC Liaison to the Ministry of Production:

Civilian industry is thus making a vital contribution to the whole war strategy. On the other hand, the increasing tempo of the war makes the men and women in factories all the more anxious to be producing obvious weapons of war such as tanks and aeroplanes. Further, in the last three years they have seen their industries and factories pruned of a large proportion of their fellow workers. This sets them wondering whether they too should not have gone off to munitions. Admittedly, there is the Essential Works Order to keep them where they are but the worker who is restive is not really a satisfactory or economic proposition.⁴²

However, despite this and notwithstanding sporadic attempts to emphasise more obscure wartime jobs, for example in such shows as the BBC's *Hidden Industries* which was broadcast in 1942 for several months and focused on more tangential wartime industries, media outlets concentrated primarily on munitions production.

Yet, it was generally only the state that made any real effort to encourage, exhort and praise the male industrial workforce reflecting the fact that they were the only media producer with a true vested interest in ensuring high production rates. Despite the efforts of the state the idea that male industrial workers were vital in the prosecution of the war was not a popular one. More frequently they were portrayed, if they were portrayed at all, as the men behind the man behind the gun. Their depicted role was as support to those in the armed services. Despite such

¹⁹⁹ BBC Written Archive Centre, R9/9/7- Audience Research- Special Reports 7- Sound and General 1943.

⁴² BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/300- Policy- Industry (Ministry of Production) Labour.

exclamations from, for example, a BBC memo arguing that ‘we are all, of either sex, in uniform or out of it, now troops’ there still remained a very potent and obvious hierarchy.²⁰⁰ For instance, during the BBC programme *We Speak for Ourselves*, in which Wilfred Pickles, a BBC newsreader specifically used in wartime for his Yorkshire accent, visited factories, one male worker declared:

Well, whether they were trying to or not, they didn’t stop us working! We just go on doing as much as we ever can - everyone’s got that thought well rubbed into him. And we’re glad to do it too. If anyone starts having a rest, we just say “Come on - how about those lads in khakis?” That starts ’em off again - and it has ever since Dunkirk.²⁰¹

This suggests that those in the forces were considered to have it harder than those on the home front and so by consequence considered more important. Moreover, even while trying to emphasise the importance of industry to the war this unequal relationship was made clear. For example, another BBC broadcast from March 1941 declared:

This war is going to be fought out on the sea, in the air, on the soil of distant lands, and perhaps on our own soil. It’s also going to be fought in the factories and workshops of this country. Every man who is building a ship, every man and women working on aircraft, all the men and women making guns and munitions; on their efforts will depend the ultimate victory. It is they who will see that the quality and standard of British equipment will outmatch that of the enemy as it has already done in General Wavell’s victorious campaign. Their spirit, their skill, their craftsmanship, their willingness to endure uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous conditions, their long hours and their unquenchable will to win, will fortify and equip our sailors, soldiers and airmen in the field.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ BBC Written Archive Centre, R51/266 Talks- Industrial Talks- British Craftsmen- Shipbuilding- 1943.

²⁰¹ BBC Written Archive Centre, *We Speak For Ourselves: Sheffield*, 27 March 1941.

²⁰² *People of Britain: The Industrial Army* by A.S. Frere, 16 March 1941.

BBC Written Archive Centre,

While this broadcast did emphasise the skill and endurance of industrial workers, it makes patently clear that these men were ultimately aiding those in the armed forces. As previously discussed masculinity was hierarchical and such statements suggest that the male industrial worker was considered to be far down the hierarchy in wartime.

Industrial workers, after all, had little opportunity for the brave and dangerous actions necessary to be portrayed in any way analogous to the armed services. The one notable exception to this is Ealing's 1942 drama *The Foreman Went to France* (Charles Frend, 1942). The film told the story, loosely based on a true account, of a factory foreman, Fred, who travelled to France, during its collapse in June 1940, in order to retrieve vital machinery. The essential role of industry in the war is suggested early in the film. After watching a British fighter down a German plane in a dogfight in the sky over the factory, Fred remarks 'one of our cannon I bet'. This serves to link the pilot's victory with the workers in the factory who had provided the artillery. However, the majority of the film is a self-confessed 'adventure' through France evading and outwitting Germans and French collaborators. There is a



Figure 2.10, Still from *The Foreman Went to France*, 1942

prominent scene where Fred and his two army associates fight off and kill several fifth columnists. Although getting the machines back to Britain is the ostensible goal

they are barely mentioned in the course of the film and so the message of the importance of industry to the war effort is overshadowed. However, the film's representation of the civilian foreman is striking in two key ways: Fred, played by Clifford Evans, is shown to be very much in charge of his two British Army accomplices, leading the way and persuading them to assist him in his quest, and he is the romantic lead as he flirts his way across war-torn France with the American Ann, played by Constance Cummings. Moreover, the film was praised by *The Times* not for its portrayal of Britain's industrial strength but rather its adventure as well as its representation of the fall of France. It stated: 'Some of the adventures that befall the lorry... have a touch of the fantastic about them, but then the times were fantastic and the films holds a gallant mirror to them and finds cause for hope even in the destruction and ruin it reflects.'²⁰³ This heroic dashing image does distance Fred from the conventional image of the male industrial worker. Yet, as Fred is also distanced from actual industrial work his heroic deeds do little to alter the image of industrial workers in general.

However, while it was rare some attempts were made to portray the industrial man as heroic within factory walls. This is most obvious on the BBC's programmes especially when the men themselves were encouraged to speak as they tended to emphasise risk-taking behaviours.²⁰⁴ It was a common trope for men to stress that they did not rush to down tools when the air-raid sirens went off. One male worker

²⁰³ "'The Foreman Went to France'", *The Times*, 10 April 1942, p.6.

²⁰⁴ Such emphasis was also noted in other industries outside of wartime. For example, R. Johnston, and A. McIvor, 'Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries, c1930-1970s', *Labour History Review*, Vol. 69, No.2, (2004) p.141.

BBC Written Archive Centre,

explained on the BBC's *We Speak For Ourselves* that 'When they're on t'job, nobody bothers about sirens: we don't budge while t'spotters give the alarm. We've saved as much as four hours on a raid, that way.'²⁰⁵ In contrast this behaviour was criticised by the female workers who themselves rarely discussed their own actions during raids. For example, a Mrs McKinnell explained that: 'The men won't stop working when they should do, many of them. One wouldn't take time off from the furnaces because he said ten others and Hitler were relying on him!' While it is apparent Mrs McKinnell is criticising this behaviour the host, Wilfred Pickles, responds to her by saying 'Good Lad, that's the spirit!', which is typical of Pickles' attitude towards such stories, and serves to reinforce these actions as desirable behaviour.²⁰⁶ This suggestion that the men, and men alone, of industry were in danger from enemy bombardment while at work was common. For example, the following was said of those factories which could not be abandoned during air-raids:

In a purely mechanical factory any loss of production can usually be made up by a spurt on the part of operatives after the "all clear" has been given, but in factories where - for instance - smelting is part of the process, this spurt isn't possible unless the smelting side is maintained at full output for the full working time. This means that, in a large number of factories engaged on work of vital importance, a number of people must carry on whatever the circumstances may be... There must be thousands of these people throughout the country, unorganised and ununiformed, yet doing as vital a job of work as a soldier, a sailor, an airman, a fireman, a warden or a Home Guard volunteer. All the reward they'd like is an extra tea ration for aid raid warning periods, as a cup of tea is their second thought after the warning. Their first thought is private.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ *We Speak For Ourselves: Sheffield*, 27 March 1941.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, *In Britain Now*, 30 August 1940.

As Arthur McIvor notes enduring dangerous conditions at work was a key source of masculine pride before the war.²⁰⁸ Indeed, it is interesting to note here that it is the danger these men face in the course of their work, rather than their skill, which singles them out for praise and comparisons to the armed forces. Therefore, such broadcasts could be seen as attempts by the BBC, and the men themselves, to maintain a masculine identity which could be partially based on their brave actions despite their obvious separation from the masculine ideal.

As well as their eagerness to keep working despite dangers there was also a strong message throughout industrial broadcasts regarding the hazards these civilian workers faced. Although avoiding the increased level of civilian death and injury through industrial accidents, for obvious propaganda reasons, there was much discussion of the industrial workers' experiences of, and reactions to, aerial bombardment at home. Furthermore, much emphasis was placed on their resilience and fortitude especially their desire to keep on working despite personal hardships. One worker told Wilfred Pickles, when referring to the period after his own home was hit during the Blitz, during the BBC's *We Speak for Ourselves*, that 'I missed one shift when I was bombed, but I haven't missed a minute these last few weeks. And we're working 72 hours a week, where we only worked 44 before the speed-up. We're getting on with the job at our place - bombs or no bombs.'²⁰⁹ However, this reticence to stop work and resilient attitude was not just an attribute of the depiction of the industrial workforce but rather an attribute of the idealised image of the civilian population of Britain more generally. As Morgan and Evans argue:

²⁰⁸ A. McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain, 1880 – 1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.129.

²⁰⁹ BBC Written Archive Centre, *We Speak For Ourselves: Sheffield*, 27 March 1941.
BBC Written Archive Centre,

The idea of heroism was no longer limited to the singular courageous act; it became a generalised quality of all those who had endured the deprivations and dangers of both combat and the Home front.²¹⁰

This was made apparent even in shows about industry. In *We Speak For Ourselves* one female worker told Wilfred Pickles:

People say it cheers them up a bit to have a laugh now and again, and the poor things need it, some of them. But you don't feel like laughing much, nowadays. Sometimes you feel you want to cry. I saw a woman a bit since. Her house had been bombed and she was coming away with a large picture of Christ in her arms: it was all that she'd found. "They've not broken it Mrs Thomas," she said, "And they've not broken me either."²¹¹

²¹⁰ D. Morgan and M. Evans, *The Battle for Britain: Citizenship and Ideology in the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 57.

²¹¹ *We Speak For Ourselves: Sheffield*, 27 March 1941.

This story was met with applause on the show. What is obvious from this is that the dangers faced by the men, and women, of industry were very much civilian dangers. While the enduring rhetoric of ‘we’re all in this together’ was espoused it was clear that some were more ‘in it’ than others: in uniform, in battle and on the front lines. While the workers embodied the ideal British qualities of stoicism and determination much like the armed services, the nature of the dangers they faced, and the way they experienced those dangers, was very different. While military men could alter their fates by their own heroic actions with guns and bayonets the men in industry were, to a large extent, victims of the war. Therefore, while their role in production may have been decisive in the prosecution of a modern total war they were still very much separate from the heroic deeds needed to attain the masculine ideal of ‘temperate masculinity’.

This separation from the ideal male image was often underlined by the men’s own discussion of their role in the war particularly on the BBC. Some focused on their experience in the First World War mentioning, for example, their role in the Air Force or Army which could be seen as an effort to remind the listener of their manliness and bravery.²¹² However, this was also an admittance of probable age which excluded them from enlistment in the armed services and so distanced them from that ideal. Moreover, there was often explicit emphasis on the older age of the men working in industry. In *We Speak for Ourselves* no man was interviewed who was of the age to serve in the forces and instead emphasis is placed on the old age of

²¹² *Working Together* by S.L. Harlow, 21 April 1941.
BBC Written Archive Centre,

some of the men depicted. The following exchange took place between Wilfred Pickles and one of the factory workers:

Wilfred: You were making shells for t'last war, Peter, weren't you?
O'Connell: Sure, and I was making shells for the Boer War and all!²¹³

While such an exchange may have been intended to reassure the listener that the industrial workforce were seasoned professionals it does paint an image of the industrial worker as aged. Similarly, in another exchange when asked if he knows Halifax well one of the workers responds 'Know it? I was born there. I was working there when the last war broke out.'²¹⁴ Furthermore, it was regularly implied that industry was staffed by women and old men while the armed services was the acceptable role for young and fit men. In a broadcast in the BBC Talks show *Working Together* in April 1941 it was stated that:

Out of these less essential trades and industries is pouring now as from a reservoir a widening stream of qualified labour to supply the needs of the war industries. Simultaneously, women and girls hitherto occupied in commercial and clerical employment and branches of the distributive trades, or doing house work in their homes, are being registered and guided to useful war work. And all through the great fields of industry, including the most vital of munitions trades, the engineering shops, the ship yards and the aircraft factories, there is going on now a steady sifting of the labour force, for the purpose of releasing the younger fit men for service with armed forces, and the organisations of full-time Civil Defence, and filling their jobs with older men or women.²¹⁵

No mention is made here of the necessary skill needed of men in reserved occupations which was typical. Instead, this makes patently clear a young man's role in the war was to be in uniform replaced on the Home Front by women and old men.

²¹³ BBC Written Archive Centre, *We Speak For Ourselves: Sheffield*, 27 March 1941.

²¹⁴ *Ibid* (emphasis in source).

²¹⁵ *Working Together* by George Gibson, 21 April 1941.

While it is unclear if the age profile of industry changed in wartime this focus on older age not only distances these men from the actual ideal male role of the armed forces but also the idealised characteristics associated with that role. While their age may have brought connotations of time-earned skill, youth and virility were key attributes of the ideal wartime masculinity. However, given such depictions of the industrial worker as, sometimes extremely, old these were characteristics from which the men of industry were therefore distanced in cultural depictions.

Moreover, many men in the BBC's *We Speak For Ourselves* focused their narrative on their role in the current war. For example, one factory worker responded to the question 'How are you tekkin' up the war at your place Mr Smyth?' thus:

Sowl, we're taking it great. They're all for knocking Hitler out. What with fire-watching and A.R.P. and drilling with L.D.V., we're feeling fine. Sure, it puts new life into you! A week or two ago. I was a bit late on parade, and I came rushing on to the ground, aye, and I ran three times round it, I felt so fit.²¹⁶

This may be seen as an attempt by this man to link himself to the military ideal and the war effort more generally. It is telling that Smyth places emphasis on his fitness and health, two key aspects of the ideal masculine image, as well as the fact that these civilian roles had a part to play 'knocking Hitler out'. Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird's oral history study of the Home Guard has shown that the men involved took great pride in looking like soldiers.⁶⁰ However, as their study also shows, the Home Guard, both during and after the war, had a largely comical public image. For example, they were often shown to be playing at being soldiers.⁶¹ The

²¹⁶ BBC Written Archive Centre, *We Speak For Ourselves: The Workers of Belfast*, 25 February 1941. ⁶⁰ P. Summerfield and C. Peniston- Bird, *Contesting Home-Defence: Men, Women and The Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.220. ⁶¹ Ibid, p.129. BBC Written Archive Centre,

audience for *We Speak For Ourselves* would have been aware of this image and perhaps the depiction of a middle-aged man running laps around a parade ground would have provoked reactions of laughter rather than admiration. Therefore, despite these men's efforts to portray themselves as part of the war effort it may have been in vain.

As well as being distanced from the image of the soldier hero the act of simply being on the home front may have brought unwanted connotations to the depiction of the male industrial worker. There were few representations of civilian life which provided a legitimate reason for a young man to be out of uniform. Indeed, it was common for the whole civilian population to be conceptualised as singularly female. For example, *The Daily Mirror* published a cartoon in July 1944 titled 'There is no weak link'. This cartoon showed a young housewife, complete with babe in arms, holding on to chains. The links of the chain are tagged 'Army', 'Navy' and



Figure 2.11, 'There is no weak link'

'R.A.F.' while on her apron is written 'civilian population'.²¹⁷ This cartoon clearly reinforces the traditional gender roles of the fighting male and the civilian female: a conceptualisation which leaves little room for the non-uniformed civilian man. This could potentially have further denied civilian men a legitimate reason for being on the home front. Antonia Lant argues:

The filmic Home Front is above all the territory of women: the presence of any men folk there is always carefully explained, usually

²¹⁷ 'There is no weak link', *The Daily Mirror*, 4 July 1944, p.3.

by reference to injury, age, infirmity or illegality. Thus most men of Home Front fictions...diverge conspicuously from [the] ideal construction of masculinity. They are either permanently medically disqualified, wounded, A.W.O.L., draft dodgers, or beyond serving age.²¹⁸

Although Lant is referring solely to film such depictions were repeated across all prominent media. Without reference to their legitimate status on the home front any man portrayed could perhaps have been assumed to fall in to the categories Lant identifies and so ‘diverge conspicuously from [the] ideal construction of masculinity’ as she states. Such fears were voiced, somewhat unsurprisingly, by trade union publications that were keen to shape an image of the industrial worker as vital. For example, the Editor of the *A.E.U.* (Amalgamated Engineering Union) *Monthly Journal* commented on the need to:

Teach the military... the successful prosecution of the war necessitated the maintenance of industry, agriculture and trade... Those of us whose memories carry us back to those days [World War I] still remember the stigma which seemed to attach to men who remained at home to serve the nation in the factories, fields and mines. There were times when reserved and badged workmen seemed to be expected to apologise for their existence because they were not in the army.²¹⁹

Such fears were borne out in popular coverage of the war. There was discussion on radio of the skilled nature of much of the industrial work presented but the concept of reserved occupations was rarely alluded to. Even discussions of skill tended to appear in separate, and little listened to, shows such as *Craftsmanship* and *British Craftsmen* which despite going in to great detail about the skilled nature of the work, generally failed to link this work to the war effort.²²⁰ Similarly, only one film,

²¹⁸ Lant, *Blackout*, p.52.

²¹⁹ Rose, *Which People's War*, p.185.

²²⁰ BBC Written Archive Centre-R51/267 Talks- Industrial Talks- British Craftsmen- Small Arms 1943.

Manpower (Raoul Walsh, 1941), was found to have any reference to the process of reservation. An early script declared:

From every kind of home and from every kind of job, age-group after age-group are called to the colours. Onto this service call-up is imposed the check and counter-pull of the Schedule of Reserved Occupations, the backbone of Britain's call-up strategy. The schedule was operated flexibly, has been constantly revised to meet changing needs, and is now giving way stage by stage to more selective deferment. The first concern of the Government - as shown by the Schedule - was to create machinery by which indiscriminate call-up for the services could be prevented. Thus avoiding the depletion of essential manpower in the vital industries. Without this safeguard, it would be impossible to equip the Fighting Services or to maintain civilian administrative needs.²²¹

The script then went on to explain that essential jobs were not just within the munitions industry but that miners, builders, journalists, film and radio producers, dockers and clothing workers were all necessary to successfully pursuing a total war. It summed up the home front situation by noting, 'the Strategy of Manpower is operating, balancing the call-up for the Services with the retention of vital skilled labour...and meeting the needs of rapidly expanding industry by calling up millions of women, to take essential jobs in the Services, in industry and on the land...'⁶⁷ This presents an image of the home front which incorporates civilian men as vital, not secondary. However, by the time the film reached an audience, such statements had mutated and no longer singled out civilian men as essential and references to the many different jobs which remained essential on the home front were lost. Instead the film exclaimed:

Today, war is total. That means that the whole of the nations' resources must be geared to the war machine - it means that every citizen must play his part; for in this machine war - a war of tanks, aeroplanes, mobile guns, landing barges, and many other complex

²²¹ National Archives, INF 1/215 pt 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

weapons, we need 7 home workers to produce for each one man at war. 7 men and women must work as civilians to make the many things that go to equip and provide for one single fighting man...Each job done by every man and woman today is the result of careful planning, so that the right person does the right job at the right moment. As weapons roll off the weapons line in increasing numbers, the Services call for more men to fight with these weapons, and more workers are absorbed into war industries, so others can be released to fight.²²²

Most obviously essential ‘manpower’ here relates only to production and omits all the other necessary occupations which were required to keep the home front going as well as providing for the armed forces. Also absent is blatant reference to the Schedule, although perhaps it can be assumed the ‘careful planning’ referred to is a reference to the process of reservation. Additionally, the references to male and female workers are conflated therefore denying men any specific male pride in their work. Summerfield argues that due to its complex and changing nature ‘the process of “reservation” was relatively obscure to those affected, as well as to the public generally.’²²³ If we take in to account the huge size of the Schedule of Reserved Occupations as well as its swiftly changing nature we can perhaps see why those in the media did not make blatant reference to it. It can be assumed that some of the audience would know that some men were forbidden to enlist in order to pursue an essential role on the home front in a reserved occupation. Yet, without making it explicit it could be presumed by the viewer or listener that many of the civilian men shown fell into the undesirable categories of men that Lant detailed above. This, again, could potentially have further separated the male industrial worker from the ideal construction of masculinity.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives*, p.118.

Furthermore, the industrial workers' place in the masculine hierarchy can also be understood through the complaints aimed at them. While attempts were made to depict industrial workers as manly and key to the war effort they were often quickly lambasted for their, often perceived, errors in sharp contrast to both the female labour force and the uniformed man who largely remained above reproach. This was most evidently seen in the popular press. Press representations of male industrial workers often centred on complaints aimed at them or at those in charge of them. The cartoons of Philip Zec in *The Daily Mirror*, for example, placed much emphasis on critiques of the state's industrial policy. For example, in July 1941 *The Daily Mirror* published a Zec cartoon entitled 'The Red Tape-Worm - KILL IT!' depicting a male

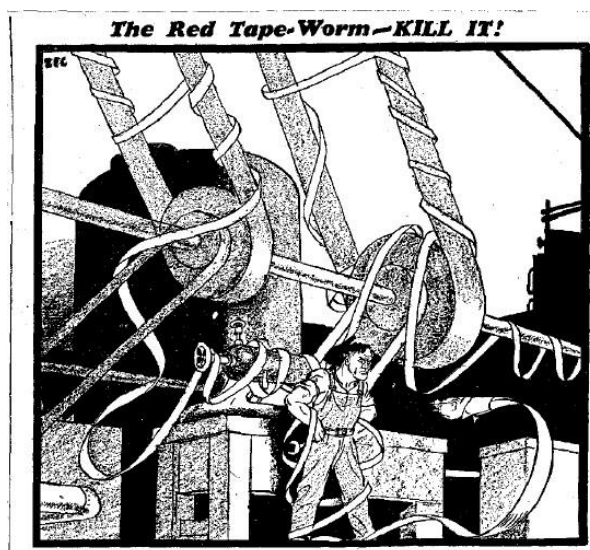


Figure 2.12, 'The Red Tape-Worm - KILL It!'

industrial worker and a machine bound in red tape, an obvious attack aimed at the state and industrial management.²²⁴ What is notable about these depictions of the male worker is that while he was often depicted as strong and heroic, which was rare

²²⁴ 'The Red Tape-Worm- KILL IT!', *The Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1940, p.5.

for industrial workers, he was hampered by others. In July 1941 a cartoon titled

‘Smash

These Fetters’ was published in the newspaper. It depicted a strong, muscular and shirtless man standing in front of an anvil branded ‘War Industries’ with his hands



Figure 2.13, ‘Smash These Fetters’

bound in shackles labelled ‘muddle’.²²⁵ This image suggests that industrial workers, who were strong and capable, were hampered by the confusion created by the state. Similarly, in a 1942 cartoon a strong muscular miner is shown chipping away at coal

²²⁵ ‘Smash These Fetters’, *The Daily Mirror*, 25 July 1941, p.5.



Figure 2.14, “Hey! lady, can’t you read!”

on a plinth marked ‘Victory’ while a diminutive housewife (a ‘wasteful consumer’) takes masses of coal for her house.²²⁶ He is also depicted in a positive way as robust and muscular but he too is hampered by the actions of others. Physical strength had been a key signifier of masculinity in industrial occupations in the years preceding 1939. As Sonya Rose notes ‘physical fitness as an ideal and a set of practices had been growing in importance throughout the century.’²²⁷ Moreover, these depictions which centre on the inefficiencies of the state and industrial management largely mirror the public’s perception of industry. Home Intelligence reports show that the British public were quick to pillory the perceived inefficiencies of the British state. For example, there were regular criticisms regarding the misdirection of labour, the inequalities of payment and other such issues which were outside individual workers’ control.²²⁸

However, this muscular portrayal could also be used against those depicted.

²²⁶ ‘Hey! Lady, can’t you read!’, *The Daily Mirror*, 25 August 1942, p.3.

²²⁷ Rose, *Which People’s War?*, p.165.

²²⁸ Anonymous, Ministry of Information Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No.120, 21 January 1943, National Archives, CAB 121/106.

This was most prominent during the miners' strikes of 1943 and 1944. For example, a cartoon from *The Daily Mirror* from April 1944 depicted a seated miner who is well-built and shirtless, holding a piece of paper titled 'list of miners' present grievances, petty annoyances.' Above him stands Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour, holding a list titled 'The years of slavery if we lose this war'. The cartoon's caption reads 'This list is longer, my friend'.²²⁹ Here the miner's brawny physique highlights not his strength but his idleness and emphasises Zec's point about them shirking their duty to their country over 'petty grievances'. Even out with the



Figure 2.15, 'This list is longer, my friend'

miners' strike *The Daily Mirror* regularly published cartoons which pilloried the perceived failings of the male industrial worker. In January 1943 a cartoon titled 'The alarm clock' was published which played on a story of men who went on strike due to the lack of adequate alarm clocks. The cartoon showed a man asleep in his bed and across him a chain is draped, labelled 'a thousand years if we lose', and at the end of the chain is a manacle daubed with a swastika.²³⁰ Again the message is that

²²⁹ 'This list is longer, my friend', *The Daily Mirror*, 6 April 1944, p.3.

²³⁰ 'The alarm clock', *The Daily Mirror*, 12 January 1943, p.3.

‘shirking’ could result in the loss of the war. Such an image was also replicated in trade union publications. In April 1942 the *Railway Review* published a cartoon



Source 2.16, ‘A tip-to our Sunday Absentees’

which depicted two images. The top image shows a sleeping man being awoken by a suited man. The bottom image shows the same man being awoken by a Nazi soldier thrusting a bayonet towards him. The cartoon’s caption explicitly states that the top option is preferable to the bottom.²³¹ This opinion of these ‘shirkers’ reflects general public opinion as reported in Home Intelligence reports. During the miners’ strike Home Intelligence recorded widespread disdain. For example, in February 1944 the reports recorded:

The miners are widely criticised for their “grasping and unpatriotic attitude” in using the war situation to “force a decision in their favour”. Criticism is particularly strong from the relatives of those in the forces, also from farmers and agricultural workers, who think the miners get greater consideration than they do. A considerable minority, however, and especially working-class opinion, sympathise with the miners, maintaining they “wouldn’t strike without good reason”, and “have been badly treated for years”.²³²

²³¹ ‘A tip to our Sunday Absentees’, *Railway Review*, 17 April 1942 (TUC Library Collections, London Metropolitan University)

²³² Anonymous, Ministry of Information Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No.177, 24 February 1944, National Archives, CAB 121/106.

Other reports noted that striking was a ‘stab in the back’ of the fighting men and also recorded that harsh measures were advocated for dealing with strikers ranging from prison to execution as saboteurs.²³³ Additionally, there were frequent gripes throughout the war about the level of industrial wages when compared to those in the military. One report noted that ‘bitterness is even greater that many of our men are at actual grips with the enemy.’²³⁴ This suggests a perceived sense of inequality of sacrifice on the part of the male civilian worker reflecting the opinion of parliament as seen in the opening chapter. What is noteworthy is that women are never criticised in this way. Even the notable 1943 walk-out at the Rolls-Royce factory in Hillington near Glasgow, which saw several hundred women down tools in demand for equal pay, received no press coverage at the time, with even *The Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the British Communist Party, avoiding comment. Women were generally showered with praise. While the male industrial worker was shown to be hampered by state inefficiencies he was never given the unequivocal commendation which was aimed at women. The same is seen in Home Intelligence reports. While men could be criticised, worry was often expressed for women especially those who had to be sent far away from home.²³⁵ Perhaps from this we can infer that civilian men on the home front were seen to be in a ‘privileged’ position and so were open to greater criticisms for their, perhaps perceived, failings.

iv. The Influx of Female Labour

²³³ Anonymous, Ministry of Information Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No.162, 11 November 1943, National Archives, CAB 121/106.

²³⁴ Anonymous, Ministry of Information Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No.146, 22 July 1943, National Archives, CAB 121/106.

²³⁵ Anonymous, Ministry of Information Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No.120, 21 January 1943, National Archives, CAB 121/106.

Of course, the most infamous feature of wartime industry was not existing male workers but female dilutees. In 1942 the government enacted the National Service (No.2) Act which, as well as extending male conscription, made women liable for conscription for the first time. While industrial work was just one of the options available to women a considerable number of women were drafted to the factories. However, as industrial work was largely disliked by women, with service in the forces seen as more desirable, the state, especially, moved to release propaganda which alleviated women's concerns. Such depictions focused on women to the almost complete exclusion of men. Indeed, despite the fact that nearly all industries remained male-dominated, cultural representations appeared to suggest that industrial concerns had been taken over by this influx of female labour. For example, the MOI short *Night Shift* and the feature film *Millions Like Us* both show rows and rows of women working at machines with only the occasional man seen, usually the foreman. This is underlined by the voiceover in *Night Shift* which states 'nearly 2000 of us girls work in this factory'. The numbers of men working there is not made clear which could lead the viewer to think only the three men shown in the film work in



Figure 2.17, Still from *Millions Like Us*

the depicted factory. Similarly, the only male industrial character focused upon in *Millions Like Us* is the foreman, Charlie, played by Eric Portman. However, he does

no identifiable industrial work but instead harries and chastises his female charges. This, again, suggests that women were bearing the brunt of industrial labour in wartime Britain.

This idea was similarly seen in visual culture. For example, Frank Dobson's *An Escalator In An Underground Factory* depicted scores of women entering a factory contrasted against one lone male figure.²³⁶ Similarly, Dame Laura Knight's *Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech Ring* shows not only Loftus but also a factory entirely populated by women except one vaguely masculine silhouette in the background who given his tie is presumably the foreman.²³⁷ Both these images



Figure 2.18, Frank Dobson, 'An escalator in an underground factory'

reinforce the representation of industrial work as female. Moreover, Knight's painting of Ruby Loftus was one of the most renowned images of the war: it was voted painting of the year in 1943 and consequently was widely published in the

²³⁶ Frank Dobson, 'An Escalator In An Underground Factory', 1944. (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum London).

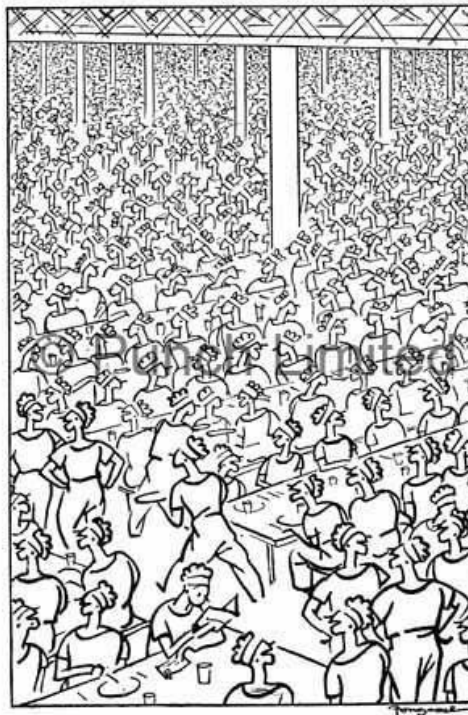
²³⁷ Dame Laura Knight, 'Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech-Ring', 1943. (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).



Figure 2.19, Dame Laura Knight, 'Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech-Ring'

press and was sent in poster form to inspire workers, both of which were rare actions for the works commissioned by the War Artist Advisory Committee. This served to further reinforce the idea of wartime industry as female dominated.

Women's numerical dominance was also seen in more popular images. *Punch* magazine published a cartoon in June 1943 which depicted a factory canteen full of exactly identical women with the caption 'This is just to tell you, dearest Mabel, that you are the one and only girl in the whole world...'. This cartoon explicitly suggests



"This is just to tell you, dearest Mabel, that you are the one and only girl in the whole world . . ."

Figure 2.20, 'This is just to tell you, dearest Mabel...'

that wartime factories were filled with women.²³⁸ Other depictions reinforced the idea that the factory worker was female. *The Daily Express*, for example, published a cartoon called 'Get a load of this' which depicted the British people carrying the 'national knapsack'. While the Home Guard, ARP warden and soldier were male, the industrial worker was female.²³⁹ Correspondingly, on St George's Day 1942, *The Daily Mirror* featured a cartoon that depicted a woman, labelled 'arms worker', placing a sword on the English patron saint as he readies himself for battle.

²³⁸ 'This is just to tell you, dearest Mabel, that you are the one and only girl in the whole world...', *Punch*, 2 June 1943.

²³⁹ 'Get a load of this', *The Daily Express*, 4 December 1941, p.2.



Figure 2.21, 'St George's Day – With a Vengeance'

The image clearly suggested that it was women who were equipping men to undertake a combatant role.²⁴⁰ Another *Mirror* cartoon from July 1943 depicted Ernest Bevin presenting a bouquet of flowers labelled 'Thanks to the women' to two smiling female industrial workers with the words 'increasing production' proclaimed behind them.²⁴¹ This cemented the image that Britain's wartime industrial burden had



Figure 2.22, 'Blimey! – all this and Bevin too!'

fallen almost solely on women's shoulders. Moreover, such images could be repeated at length therefore highlighting a widely-held cultural view. This focus, however, is

²⁴⁰ 'St George's Day – with a vengeance', *The Daily Mirror*, 23 April 1942, p.3.

²⁴¹ 'Blimey! – all this and Bevin too!', *The Daily Mirror*, 1 July 1943, p.3.

unsurprising. The stories of women going into previously male workplaces made, for example, entertaining films, while simultaneously functioning as propaganda to alleviate women's anxieties about working in industry. In comparison, men continuing their day-to-day jobs, which were largely devoid of danger, especially dangers directly related to the war, or excitement, were unlikely to make good entertainment. The tabloid press, for example, often printed photographs of women in what they considered to be unusual situations. For instance, *The Daily Mirror* published a photograph of a girl, titled 'VERY little girl - VERY big job', depicting a female industrial worker who was only four feet four inches and had to stand on a box to reach the machines.²⁴² Likewise, another photograph, again in *The Daily Mirror*, depicted a woman lying on her back inside the caterpillar tracks of a tank adjusting the top section with a spanner.⁸⁹ These images focus on women in what

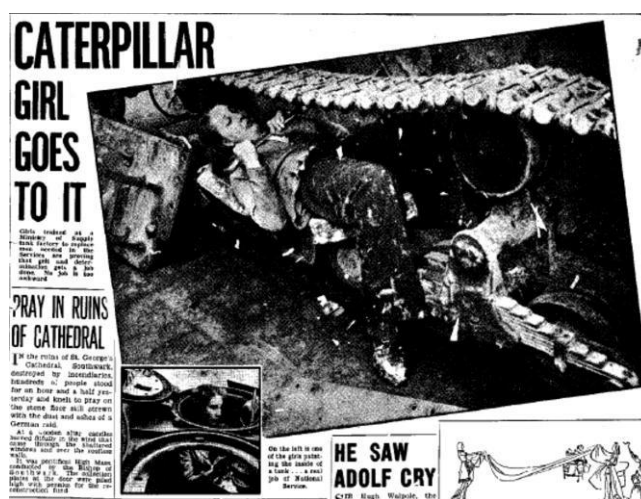


Figure 2.23, 'Caterpillar Girl Goes To It'

was considered an extremely unusual situation; had they depicted a man in the same way, this would not have been newsworthy.

²⁴² 'VERY little girl - VERY big job', *The Daily Mirror*, 20 June 1942, p.1.

⁸⁹ 'Caterpillar girl goes to it', *The Daily Mirror*, 2 June 1942, p.5.

Radio broadcasts similarly focused on women to the exclusion of men. Nevertheless, this emphasis may again be understandable. Many of the broadcasts regarding women were about technical issues, for example childcare and other domestic issues, which were not considered to apply to men and were genuine problems for female workers. The BBC, with its entrenched role in British society, was perhaps the ideal way to discuss these issues and offer advice to the new female workforce. Moreover, there was perhaps a feeling that these women, unused to the rigours of industrial life, would need more encouragement than men who, for the most part, had been doing the work all of their working lives. This is emphasised by the fact that there was a great increase in the number of broadcasts aimed specifically at women in late 1941 and early 1942 with the coming of female conscription which was enacted in December 1941. This focus, however, could have led to a strong image in the public mind that industrial workers were predominantly female. This may have undermined the masculine image of industrial workers' as their jobs were shown to be the preserve of quickly trained women and so destabilised the idea of industrial work as a skilled male occupation.

Moreover, war art similarly failed to concretely link the industrial male to the war effort. Some painters, for example Roland Vivian Pitchforth, concentrated primarily on what was produced rather than the men themselves. Although men are shown, their link to the war effort is weakened due to the fact that they are not central but instead shown in the background in paintings which foreground the products of

industry.²⁴³ In contrast, women engaged in work were central to the paintings of Henry Rushbury and Leslie Cole.²⁴⁴ Moreover, men were often depicted



Figure 2.24, Stanley Spencer, detail from 'Shipbuilding on The Clyde'

in a highly stylised way, as seen in the work of Stanley Spencer and Mervyn Peake, which may have disassociated the men depicted from the realities of war.²⁴⁵

Contrastingly, women were usually depicted in a realistic documentary style as seen in the work of Dame Laura Knight or Ethel Gabain.²⁴⁶ Moreover, women were always shown at work, often identifiable as war work specifically, while men were often shown in a much less defined way. Brian Foss has argued that women's fixed position at work represented their lack of skill and that 'women [were] occupying

²⁴³ Roland Vivian Pitchforth, 'Testing Gun Barrels for Alignment', 1941. (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

²⁴⁴ Henry Rushbury, 'Women at Work in a munitions factory, Blackburn, 1941', 1941. (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London); Leslie Cole, 'Aircraft Production: Women Working on Wings', 1942. (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

²⁴⁵ Mervyn Peake, 'The Evolution of the Cathode Ray (radiolocation) Tube', 1943. (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London); Stanley Spencer, 'Shipbuilding on the Clyde', 1946. (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

²⁴⁶ Dame Laura Knight, 'Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech-Ring', 1943. (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London); Ethel Gabain, 'Working on a Weir Pump Women's Work in the War (Other than the services)', 1941 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

[an] oppressive space as a formal means by which female labourers were categorised as [a] separate and subsidiary.²⁴⁷ However, as women were generally pictured at work undertaking recognisable tasks unlike some abstract depictions of male workers, this may have more firmly linked women in the public mind, or at least those of the public who frequented art galleries, to the war effort.



Figure 2.25, Leslie Cole, 'Aircraft Production: Women Working On Wings'

Such a difference in depiction was also seen in other media. Men's work seen in film was often depersonalised and discussed without reference to the men physically doing the work as we see in the MOI Short *Furnaces of Industry* (Cecil Musk, 1940):

The making of steel is a matter of accurate testing and timing. Throughout the progress of the boat samples of the molten metal are taken from the furnaces for inspection. As the signal comes - the furnace is ready for tapping. The flow dwindles to a trickle, then stops. The pulleys turn and the chains rattle again as the ladle, full of white hot steel, swings through the air to where a line of ingot moulds are waiting like ten cups spread out in a line along a canteen counter where there a lot of thirsty people to be served.

The entire five-minute film continues in this vein without mention of the men who operated the machinery and undertook an essential role in production. However, female workers are very rarely discussed in this impersonal way. For example,

²⁴⁷ B. Foss, *War Paint: Art, War, State and Identity in Britain 1939-1945* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), p.108.

Workers Weekend (Ralph Elton, 1943) described the process of building a plane with much focus on the women workers. For example, it stated:

Back at the fuselage, out at the tail, Vera Butler and her sister Joan, work together all the time. Vera was a lady's companion before she started building bombers two years ago. This is Phillis Evans who was in service as a maid before the war. She's one of them fitting the fabric covering over the frame work. And here is the process of weather-proofing and strengthening the fabric covering over the frame work. The greyish-white material changes to a dull red as the dope goes on. Nine coats are applied but it dries quickly and there's no hold-ups here. It's a habit in this factory to rather brazenly autograph one's work. So we know that "Blondie" has had something to do with this bomber.

The difference between the portrayal of the men and women at work here is stark despite the technical emphasis of both. Of course, links to women's pre-war lives as domestic servants may have been a way to maintain a feminine identity for these women undertaking jobs which could be thought of as 'manly'. As Lucy Noakes notes: 'there was a perceived need to perpetuate [traditional gender roles], in order that the social upheaval of 'total' war should not be too great.'²⁴⁸ However, by not showing men as central to the process of industry, filmmakers ran the risk of not emphasising the message to the viewer that these men are central not only to their individual industries but also the war effort more generally. Again this may make industry seem like the wartime terrain of women only and therefore potentially delegitimize civilian men's place on the home front.

Moreover, although generally denied equal pay for equal work women did step in to jobs which had been previously male. Culturally, it was often stated that

²⁴⁸ L. Noakes, *War and the British: Gender, Memory and National Identity* (London: I.B Tauris Publishers, 1998), p.51

this new female workforce were not only numerically superior to the male industrial workers they worked alongside or replaced but also equally, if not more, skilled. However, this could lead to mixed messages. State filmmakers, for example, tried to balance the need to praise both the existing skilled male workforce and the newly recruited female labour. In the MOI short *They Keep the Wheels Turning* (Francis Searle, 1942) the civilian man is praised for his essential work maintaining road vehicles:

The lorry is given a new life in a repair shop where everything on wheels, every worn part has to be made good. It's a challenge to the repairer to use skill and ingenuity to get them back on the road. He may regard this as civilian work and sometimes feel he'd like a service job but his is essential work and he can be proud of it.

However, this praise is later undermined when it is explained that women were also undertaking this work. Women are not described with the same level of skill; they are 'trained and willing', not skilled and ingenious like the men. However, the voiceover declares at the end of the film: 'The repair shops called for help and the women are giving it to them. Thanks to *them* road transport is standing up to the demands of war.'²⁴⁹ This consequently gives the impression that only women were benefiting that industry and therefore suggests that the civilian men doing the same job were superfluous which could have delegitimized these men's position on the home front. Furthermore, what was more common was the portrayal of women's skill which completely eclipsed, or omitted, that of men's. In the short film *Night Shift* the voiceover explains 'Blondie's been on that six months now and she's as good as any man at her job.' While *Millions Like Us* might have stated 'you can help your country just as much in an overall as you can in a uniform', this only seemed to

²⁴⁹ Emphasis added.

apply to women as almost no men are shown in industry (and those who were depicted were not engaged in work). Equally, in *Night Shift* a woman declares ‘I’d rather be firing them than making them any day.’ This possibility for the destabilisation of gender roles is immediately recouped by the female voiceover who quickly retorts ‘but while we can’t be firing them, we’re putting all we’ve got into making them for the men who can.’ This in turn reinforces conventional gender roles; men fight and women stay at home in support roles. However, as this makes industrial support a female role it therefore, again, has the potential to threaten the legitimacy of the male industrial workers’ position on the home front. Such messages of the superiority of female skill were reinforced by the government. In 1941 Ernest Bevin declared that:

I had calculated that it would take three women dilutees to two men in building up our labour power; but the number of women who have entered industry is 30 per cent higher than I originally calculated. The output of the women, instead of being that of three women to two men, was slightly the other way, compared with production in 1939. The result is that, with the increase in the number of women workers who have come forward and the increase in production now is nearly double what I had estimated it would be in 1940.²⁵⁰

This sort of message, which emphasised the superiority of female labour, was seen throughout wartime culture. In the inter-war period production rates as well as skill had been central to masculine sensibilities. However, such an image was culturally denied in wartime. There were no Stakhanovites.²⁵¹ Even *The Daily Worker* did not build an image of the industrial worker based on his productive prowess. Indeed, increasing production was generally attributed to the influx of women not the

²⁵⁰ Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives*, p.154.

²⁵¹ A worker in the Soviet Union who regularly surpassed production quotas and was specially honoured and rewarded.

increase in working hours and extra efforts made by the existing industrial workforce.

Moreover, much importance was placed, for example, in the BBC's *We Speak for Ourselves* on the women's aptitude despite their relative inexperience in industrial work. A young woman who had been a crane driver for less than six weeks explained 'first time I went up, I felt a bit queer when I looked down, but I go up and down now like a monkey.'²⁵² Another broadcast, *People of Britain*, stated of female workers:

...and they learned it well. Stenographers, clerks, beauticians, hair dressers, corsetiers, housewives, and in fact, some people who never did any harder work than take a bath a few years ago are now building the Spitfires and Lancasters which are redoubtable in the allied air offence. How do they get along in their work? Our informants told us that with a one third increase in personnel, manpower hours on each ship had been cut to one third of what they were three years ago. This was speedily effected by the employment and training of women workers.²⁵³

What is interesting here is not just that these women quickly became the equals of the skilled men who they replaced or were aiding but, instead, it suggests they were actually surpassing them. This could potentially have undermined both a worker's sense of self and his masculinity. Having trained for years in apprenticeships men were suddenly replaced with quickly trained women. Paid work and physical strength had long been considered key attributes of masculine identity.¹⁰¹ Johnston and McIvor, for example, argue that craftsmanship was a prized masculine attribute in the Glasgow shipyards.²⁵⁴ Indeed, although many unions, including engineering

²⁵² BBC Written Archive Centre, *We Speak For Ourselves: Sheffield*, 27 March 1941.

²⁵³ BBC Written Archive Centre, *People of Britain: The Industrial Army* by A.S. Frere, 16 March 1941. ¹⁰¹ S. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinity* (London: Polity, 2002), p.125.

²⁵⁴ Johnston, and McIvor, 'Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies', p.141.

and iron and steel, forged 'extended employment of women' agreements some craft unions refused such a move. The National Union of Sheet Metal Workers and Braziers, for example, refused throughout the war to countenance even temporarily allowing women into their ranks. Even those who did allow women into their professions arguably did so on the understanding that it was a temporary measure for the duration of the war. This could be construed as an attempt to maintain a masculine identity for their profession.²⁵⁵ Men were largely defined by their jobs, especially in this period, and an emphasis on how skilful and irreplaceable these men were could have given them a masculine identity when they were so clearly divorced from the wartime masculine ideal. However, by focusing on women this opportunity was lost and as such may have denied men a legitimate role on the home front. Higonnet and Higonnet use the image of the double helix to explain gender relations during the war: although women may have stepped up to undertake what had been considered men's work and therefore increased their prestige, men had also stepped in to the role of soldier and so equally increased their status. Therefore, women remained subordinate to men.²⁵⁶ However, the male industrial worker had not moved up but had remained static in a job which was now widely considered to be an almost exclusively female endeavour and as such, again, was separated from a desirable masculine image.

Such skewed gender relations were reflected in the romantic perception of the civilian man. The industrial worker very rarely was the focus of amorous

²⁵⁵ G. Braybon and P. Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora, 1987), pp.170-1.

²⁵⁶ M. Higonnet and P. Higonnet, 'The Double Helix' in M. Higonnet et al (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p.34.

engagements. Indeed, the civilian worker in general was often presented as unsuitable for romance during the war. For example, one *Punch* cartoon published in October 1943 showed two women of the ATS seated at a bar as one tells the other ‘I wouldn’t be seen with a civilian, only Harold’s a type that plies you with clothing coupons.’²⁵⁷ Leaving aside suggestions of the loose morals of the women in the



“I wouldn’t be seen with a civilian, only that Harold’s a type that plies you with clothing coupons.”

Figure 2.26. ‘I wouldn’t be seen with a civilian...’

ATS this cartoon clearly states that civilian men were avoided romantically unless they could provide other benefits, in this instance black-market goods. Even when not being explicitly decried, the male civilian worker, and specifically the male industrial worker, was generally presented as asexual. This may have reflected the age bias presented culturally with sexual relationships between older men and young women deemed improper. However, even when romance is suggested it often remained chaste. For example, in *Millions Like Us* there is a flirtation between the foreman Charlie and the upper-class Jennifer. However, their romance is never overt

²⁵⁷ ‘I wouldn’t be seen with a civilian, only Harold’s a type that plies you with clothing coupons’, *Punch*, 13 October 1943.

and indeed is stopped before it really begins. It is likely that the character of Charlie was intended as a 'common' foil to Jennifer's upper-class ways to reinforce the film's message about the mixing of the social classes. However, before any real romance can blossom Charlie tells Jennifer:

The world's made up of two kinds of people. I'm one sort and you're the other. Oh we're together now there's a war on, we need to be. What's gonna happen when it's over. Shall we go on like this or will we slide back. I'm not marrying you Jenny 'til I'm sure.

Charlie is therefore denied the chance to become a focus for a sexual relationship.

When compared to the whirlwind, but ultimately doomed, romance between factory girl Celia and RAF airman Fred, Jennifer and Charlie's relationship looks staid.

Sexual desirability is often considered to be a key component of masculinity but as the male industrial worker was openly, and implicitly, shunned or presented as asexual he was once again denied this masculine image.

v. Conclusion

The state's propaganda was correct: the attack *did* begin in the factory. Britain's industrial workforce was providing the fuel, tanks, guns, planes and bombs which would be invaluable in achieving victory. In light of this industry, especially obviously war-related industries, were lauded regularly. However, such praise largely came from the state and, despite their efforts, the male industrial worker was never highly regarded. Despite some attempts by the state in films and posters to present the male industrial worker as the equal of the armed services hero this was largely in vain. Often the industrial worker was completely ignored and when he was shown he was generally depicted as largely separated from the ideal characteristics of wartime masculinity. His opportunities for brave actions were limited and he was

often portrayed as old or unfit for service and even denied an image which emphasised the routine dangers many industrial workers faced. He was most definitely the man behind the man behind the gun. Moreover, the portrayal of women almost completely overshadowed that of men. Every medium proclaimed them not only to be numerically superior to male workers but also more skilled than the men they worked beside or replaced. Furthermore, although an alternative masculine identity could have drawn on skill or physical strength, as these were potent symbols of masculinity in the interwar years, the overt focus on women and how quickly they had become proficient swiftly undermined any attempt at such a portrayal. Therefore, rather obviously, the cultural depiction of the male industrial worker was sharply distanced from the strong but kind 'temperate' masculinity attributed to the armed forces. Consequently, the male industrial worker was, both then and now, a somewhat forgotten participant in the war, omitted from cultural representations during the war and erased from popular memories of the home front.

Chapter 3 – ‘Digging For Victory’?: Farming In Wartime Culture

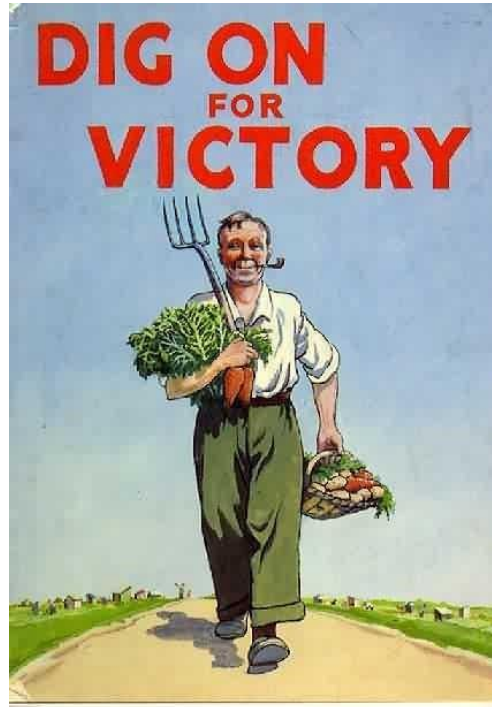


Figure 3.1, ‘Dig on for victory’
(currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London)

In October 1940 Winston Churchill stated ‘We rely on the farmers. We depend on the efforts they put forth in the fields of Britain... Today the farms of Britain are the front line of freedom.’²⁵⁸ And indeed they were. As an island nation Britain had been heavily dependent on shipped imports for much of its food supplies but with the onset of war this became impracticable. Food imports fell from 22 million tonnes in 1939 to just 11 million tonnes a year in 1942. High levels of imports became not only dangerous but impossible as markets controlled by the Axis powers were lost and the high expense of merchant shipping became an unaffordable luxury with respect to the high financial cost of war.²⁵⁹ Clearly, therefore, agricultural output was of central

²⁵⁸ ‘We Rely On The Farmers’, *The Times*, 21st October 1940, p.5.

²⁵⁹ It ought also to be remembered that in the First World War Germany had arguably been defeated in the crop fields rather than on the battlefield. The success of the Allied blockade, which resulted in food supplies dropping by over 50%, created near famine conditions. This was compounded by a lack of fertiliser which led to a decline

importance to the military success of Britain during the Second World War. Despite this centrality, agricultural professions have been little studied by historians. As with industrial concerns what focus there has been, mainly from popular historians, has largely concentrated upon the incoming female labour force: the Women's Land Army. Nicola Tyrer, Bob Powell and Joan Mant, for example, have explored the life of the Land Girl.²⁶⁰ All detail the hardships and hard work endured by these women. Other historians, for example Brian Short and Charles Watkins as well as Angus Calder in the seminal *The People's War*, have taken a more technical approach in investigating yields, wartime pest-control and the government's drive to plough up unused land.²⁶¹ Yet no focus has been given to the male agricultural worker and how perceptions of this traditionally skilled male role changed in wartime. This chapter will therefore fill a gap in our historical knowledge by exploring perceptions of farming, and the male farm worker in particular, in wartime culture. To do this four key areas will be explored. It will begin by examining the wartime role of farming, and the male farm worker, before proceeding to discuss the impact of the influx of female labour. It will then discuss the 'Dig For Victory' and 'Lend A Hand on the Land' campaigns as well as the idealised image of the countryside and the impact these ideas had on the perception of wartime farming. This chapter will argue that the male farm worker was a somewhat forgotten figure in the wartime rural landscape.

in productivity. These two factors combined to create a situation in which the home front collapsed, compelling soldiers to desert and the military hierarchy to request an armistice.

²⁶⁰ N. Tyrer, *They Fought In The Fields: The Women's Land Army* (London: The History Press, 2010); B. Powell and N. Westacott, *The Women's Land Army* (London: The History Press, 2009); J. Mant, *All Muck, Now Medals: Landgirls by Landgirls* (London: Amberley Publishing: 2009)

²⁶¹ B. Short, C. Watkins and J. Martin (eds) *The Front Line Of Freedom: British Farming in the Second World War* (Exeter: British Agricultural Society, 2006); A. Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p.411.

Indeed, despite some efforts to show farmers' central role in the war such endeavours were largely overshadowed by the focus on both women and wartime volunteers.

i. Agriculture and the War

The centrality of agriculture to victory was reflected in the state's policies to maintain, and increase, agricultural output. Ernest Brown, then Minister of Labour, argued in October 1940 that:

We, like they, have to have regard first of all to the possibility of importing the things that are vital to obtain victory, whether machines, munitions, raw material or foodstuffs, and in the light of those possibilities to lay out a programme to get the best use of our own land - not in terms of maximum food production, but of the maximum production which is needed in war-time for sustaining this nation always in health and strength and in the vigour which will bring victory.²⁶²

Agriculture was, as is shown by Brown's statement, clearly considered by the state to be of key importance in wartime and was, therefore, ranked as a priority occupation.²⁶³ Agricultural concerns, however, had started the war with a degree of uncertainty as years of decline were compounded by somewhat of an exodus from the countryside to the towns as men sought the higher wages wartime industry could offer.²⁶⁴ Yet the number of men working on the land actually increased by 60,000 during the course of the war although much of this labour force came from prisoners of war after 1943.²⁶⁵ Moreover, as with other key occupations, severe strictures were put in place by the state to ensure the maintenance of agricultural skills and output. Upon the outbreak of war the age of reservation for men in key agricultural occupations was set at the low age of 21. However, very few men were actually

²⁶² HC Deb 22 October 1940 vol. 365 cc1011-12.

²⁶³ National Archives, LAB 76/9.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ National Archives, LAB 76/15.

removed from the fields for military purposes. Indeed, between 1939 and 1945 only 22,500 men were called-up for military service from agricultural occupations.²⁶⁶ This was largely enabled by the Schedule of Reserved Occupations and the Essential Works Order which as discussed in the opening chapter, barred men from leaving the occupation: all cumulatively highlighting the great importance placed on agriculture by the state in wartime.²⁶⁷

However, the most noted change to the agricultural workforce during wartime was the huge increase in the number of women on the land. Indeed, at the peak of female employment in agriculture in 1943 their presence had more than doubled from the 93,000 present in 1939 to 223,000. This included around 80,000 women of the Women's Land Army.²⁶⁸ The increase in the number of women on the land was so great that a post-war official history of the agricultural front claimed that '[t]he main effect of the war was to expand the existing male labour force with greater dilution from women.'²⁶⁹ However, despite this increase, and contrary to the popular image, male workers still outnumbered female agricultural workers by three to one meaning that, as in the years prior to the war, the brunt of agricultural labour continued to fall on male shoulders. Moreover, as a result of this increase in manpower and the area of Britain under plough, as well as a shift in the crops planted, British agriculture improved its calorific output by 91% and so helped to keep Britain fighting in spite of the severe drop in foreign food imports resulting from the drastically decreased level of merchant shipping.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ HC Deb 18 January 1940 vol. 356 cc221-2.

²⁶⁷ National Archives, LAB 76/15.

²⁶⁸ Central Statistical Office, *Fighting with Figures* (London: HMSO, 1951), p.46.

²⁶⁹ National Archives, LAB 76/15.

²⁷⁰ Central Statistical Office, *Fighting with Figures*, p.67.

ii. The Agricultural Worker and War

The importance of agricultural efforts was rather sporadically covered by the media. Perhaps, somewhat surprisingly given their mainly urban demographic, some of the greatest wartime veneration of the farming profession came from *Picture Post*. The magazine regularly depicted farm work as both a predominantly male occupation, actually placing relatively little emphasis on the female labour force, and a skilled occupation. For example, in August 1942 it published an article entitled ‘Britain gets in the heaviest harvest in her history’ with pictures captioned with such titles as ‘The men who’ve won one of the greatest victories of the war’.²⁷¹ Moreover, this article



Figure 3.2, ‘The men who’ve won one of the greatest victories of the war’

²⁷¹ ‘Britain gets in the heaviest harvest in her history’, *Picture Post*, 29 August 1943, pp.8-10.

was typical of the magazine's stance on agriculture. Early in the war, for example, they published an article by former Prime Minister, David Lloyd George on the importance of farming:

Every department of our war effort is important. Some are vital. But none is more vital than the assuring of an ample food supply so that no foe can drive us through privation into signing a humiliating peace. Of all the lessons of the Great War, this is the one which our statesmen ought to have laid most to heart in their plans for national defence.²⁷²

However, while praise was recorded in popular periodicals the most consistent coverage of the farming community came from broadsheet newspapers. These newspapers gave a comparatively large amount of space to agricultural issues and praised those in agricultural trades, emphasising their necessity to the prosecution of the war. *The Times*, for example, declared in February 1940 that 'the sword and the ploughshare are of equal importance in modern warfare.'²⁷³ *The Scotsman*, similarly, stated in 1939 that 'apart from the actual conduct of the war there is no more urgent question than that of the increased food production at home.'²⁷⁴ Moreover, such sentiments were not merely constrained to the broadsheets. The BBC also made some sporadic attempts at shaping a positive image of agriculture. In the programme *Working Together* it was declared by one farmer that 'The victory may depend on food. I can assure my fellow farm workers of all over the British Commonwealth that the farmers and farm workers of Britain have got their coats off, that they're doing everything they can to help our country in its hour of need.'²⁷⁵ Similarly, it was declared in one *Sunday Postscript* that 'The people in the services and in munition

²⁷² David Lloyd George, 'Use the Land', *Picture Post*, 2 March 1940, p.20.

²⁷³ 'Great Britain in War-time', *The Times*, 19 February 1940, p.3.

²⁷⁴ 'A Vital Role', *The Scotsman*, 6 October 1939, p.11.

²⁷⁵ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Working Together* by B.A. Frost, 3 March 1941.

and many other factories are fighting with the weapons of life. The land itself is alive; and while the tank kills both people and the plants over which it lurches, its cousin, the crawler tractor, grows crops and so keeps people alive.’²⁷⁶ Clearly, high praise was aimed at the agricultural industry in some quarters.

Furthermore, these media attempted to shape an image of farming as a skilled occupation. *The Glasgow Herald*, for example, declared in 1940 that ‘stooking and forking may look easy enough, but there is a knack in both of them that cannot be picked up in a day.’²⁷⁷ Similarly, *The Times* stated: ‘No man who is a skilled farm worker need feel any pricking of conscience in staying on the land and performing his national service in that way.’²⁷⁸ Similarly, the broadsheets, especially, emphasised that ‘the further transfer of young men from the food front to the fighting front is likely to slow down the expansion of food production.’²² This emphasis on skill and its retention could have been an attempt to create a masculine identity for those agricultural workers who were necessarily prevented from embodying the ideal of the military hero. Correspondingly, it was noted in one broadcast of the BBC’s *Farming Today* in May 1940 that: ‘We are not blind to the fact that we farm workers have been placed in a reserved occupation during war-time so that we can make a big effort to keep the people from starving. Those of us who fought in the last war know only too well that ours is a better job than fighting in the trenches.’²³ However, while this does link food production to the war effort it also clearly places the farmer out with the dangers of the armed forces and marks farming out as a ‘better’, presumably

²⁷⁶ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Sunday Postscript* by A.G. Street, 16 August 1942.

²⁷⁷ J.R. Allan, ‘The Farmers Task’, *The Glasgow Herald*, 5 April 1940, p.6.

²⁷⁸ ‘Speeding the Plough’, *The Times*, 11 September 1939, p.9. ²²

‘Ploughshares into Swords’, *The Times*, 15 December 1941, p.5.

²³ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Farming To-Day*, 30 May 1940.

meaning safer and less arduous, job than those in the armed forces. There were also infrequent mentions of farming as a national service. In a BBC broadcast titled 'Growing the Nation's Food' from April 1942, for example, it was stated 'food production is an essential National Service and those who remain in agriculture are reserved because they can render more useful service to the nation than elsewhere. The time of every man on the land is as valuable to the nation as that of a man in munitions work or a shipyard.'²⁷⁹ Rather crucially, however, this script had been changed to read that service on the land was as useful as those 'elsewhere' rather than the original which proclaimed farm work was a 'more useful service to the nation...than [military] service' which, as with industrial concerns, suggests a hierarchy in masculine contributions to the war in spite of the positive rhetoric.

Moreover, it was a frequent trope, as with other civilian endeavours to portray the agricultural front using military terms most likely in an attempt to link farming to the war effort. Rose argues that 'lacking a military uniform, working men stressed the heroic features of their masculinity. They drew upon a language of military battle and a language of working class manhood in their selfrepresentations.'²⁸⁰ Such depictions were notably found in union publications. For example, in February of 1941 the *Land Worker* published the following poem:

Marshal of the Soil
His sword
A tough ash wand
From the corpse yonder,
And his quiet field are the
Fields of his war.
He marshals his panzers – The
tractors;

²⁷⁹ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Growing the Nation's Food*, 3 April 1942.

²⁸⁰ S.O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.195. ²⁶Ibid, p.192.

He trains his commandos –
The land girls and his cowmen
And carters...²⁶

Such references were replicated in broadsheet newspaper discussions of farming. It was common to see references to ‘The Agricultural Front’, ‘The Plough and the Sword’, ‘The Battle of the Acres’ and once, preceding the fall of France, ‘Maginot Line of Food Front’.²⁸¹ One article in *The Glasgow Herald* declared:

It is fashionable to speak of agriculture as a most important weapon of war, the ploughshares now comrade in arms to the sword. It is right enough to think in this way for agriculture has not only a big place in calculations about a war waged so far in terms of trade, but there have been some striving campaigns within the industry itself since the war began.²⁸²

Similarly, *The Times* declared in July 1942 that ‘every sack of corn, every ton of sugar beet or vegetables was yet another nail in Hitler’s coffin.’²⁹ Such imagery was paralleled in other media. A patent example of this is a MOI film short entitled *Spring Offensive* (Humphrey Jennings, 1940), its title a clear reference to the military. This association was made even more explicit by the voiceover: ‘just as we’ve had to mechanise the cavalry so too we’ve had to mechanise farming.’ However, as with industry this attempted praise was perhaps not as strong as intended. Amongst civilians such militaristic references did not make them unusual. Even housewives were reminded that they were part of the ‘Kitchen Front’. Although this was clearly a calculated attempt to make the population feel truly part of the war effort, this perhaps actually served to distance agricultural workers from the ideal

²⁸¹ ‘The Agricultural Front’, *The Scotsman*, 27 December 1939, p.3.; ‘The Plough and the Sword’, *The Times*, 15 May 1942, p.5.; ‘The Battle of the Acres’, *The Scotsman*, 8 September 1939, p.11.; ‘Maginot Line of Food Front’, *The Scotsman*, 16 February 1940, p.12.

²⁸² J.R. Allan, ‘A New Vitality of Farming’, *The Scotsman*, 16 February 1940, p.12. ²⁹ ‘Farmers Eager to Learn’, *The Times*, 20 July 1941, p.2.

military masculinity as without the danger, heroics and bravery necessarily demanded of the armed forces it co-opted them in to the home front's imagined 'fronts' and so categorised them as undeniably civilian.

Although positive depictions of farming could be found, these were rarely as unequivocal as those given to the armed forces or, as will be explored in later chapters, more heroic civilian occupations. In July 1942 *The Daily Express* published a cartoon entitled 'The Unsinkable Ship'. This depicted a U-boat captain looking through a periscope and in its sights was the silhouette of a tractor pulling a plough. The caption, 'Autumn – Day and Night Farming', along with the image suggested that farmers and their role in food production were a vital part of the war effort.²⁸³



Figure 3.3, 'The Unsinkable Ship'

Similarly, in January 1941 *The Daily Mirror* published a cartoon by Philip Zec with the title 'The army still marches on its stomach Mr. Bevin'. The accompanying cartoon depicted a gardening fork stuck in to the ground with a label attached reading 'For Sale. Owner Called Up' – a blatant critique of the state's removal of agricultural workers from the land.²⁸⁴ Both cartoons attempted to explicitly link farming to the war effort, a depiction which was rare for the occupation. However, while these

²⁸³ 'The Unsinkable Ship', *The Daily Express*, 30 July 1942, p.2.

²⁸⁴ 'The army still marches on its stomach Mr. Bevin!', *The Daily Mirror*, 20 January 1941, p.5.

cartoons clearly recognise the necessity of both agriculture and its skilled labourers, they are far from glowing depictions and, indeed, the farmer is not even pictured in one. Moreover, when seen in the context of Zec's regular cartoons pillorying the government's industrial policy, *The Daily Mirror* cartoon could be seen more as a representation of the newspaper's anti-establishment stance rather than an indication of a deep-seated admiration for the farming community. Furthermore, when agriculture was mentioned, its role was often shown as tangential. The MOI short *Spring Offensive*, for example, detailed the countryside's role in the evacuation policy: 'In September 1939 you asked the countryside to provide a safe refuge for your children and security against famine.' *Summer on the Farm* (Ralph Keene, 1943), a short sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture and the MOI, similarly informed its viewers that 'Without the farmers and farm workers, the industrial millions could neither eat nor work.' Both present farming as tangential to the prosecution of a successful war. As seen in the previous chapter the industrial worker was portrayed as behind the soldier in the masculine hierarchy. Such depictions as seen here suggest, in addition, that the farmer was placed behind the industrial man.

Moreover, despite the broadsheet emphasis on agriculture these articles were generally technical in scope. The focus was on acreages to be ploughed, yields to be achieved and fair pricing. Although comparatively large amounts of space were dedicated to farming, little heed was paid to farmers or farm workers themselves. Farming was rarely reduced to the level of the individual and all praise, criticism and exhortations were directed towards 'the farmers' in general. For instance, 'Farmers are now doing their best to ensure that whatever happens, the people will have

enough food' or 'Farmers in this country have every reason to be proud of their war record.'²⁸⁵ Because of this the farmers remained largely abstract and without identity. Without discussion of traits or personality, there could be little to give them noticeable characteristics and so by default could not be shown to conform to the ideal wartime masculine image. Moreover, the broadsheets had comparatively small circulation figures in this period and as such it is negligible how widely their positive depictions of agriculture were seen. However, such depictions were mirrored on other media. The technical focus was replicated on many of the BBC's shows regarding agricultural work. *Farm Record* and *Farming Today*, for example, were broadcast outside peak listening times and were also aimed directly at the farmer with practical advice and discussions.²⁸⁶ Full twenty-minute shows were often dedicated to one particular agricultural issue and were often highly technical and so, to the lay person, very dull. For example, one typical *Farm Record* broadcast in August 1941 explained:

Now's the time to give a grass field a dose of nitrogen to stimulate Autumn growth. Up to 2 cwt. of sulphate ammonia per acre produces an astonishing return from September to early November and it does so without killing out the clover. Probably the extra grazing will be wanted as such, but if not there may be a good chance of making some very useful silage of it.²⁸⁷

In addition to this technical focus these programmes, as with the broadsheets, rarely connected the farmers' efforts to the war so neither the farmers themselves nor any other listeners were subject to a depiction which underlined the importance of food and farming to the war effort. Even *Working Together*, a programme which sought to

²⁸⁵ 'Feeding The Nation', *The Times*, 8 August 1940, p.2.; 'Agriculturalists War Record', *The Scotsman*, 19 February 1943, p.6.

²⁸⁶ BBC Written Archive Centre, R51/168- Talks- Farming Today- Green Pastures 1944-1945.

²⁸⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Farm Record* by H.G. Ganders, 7 August 1941.

show how different occupations aided the war effort, admitted ‘agriculture is treated as the Cinderella of Industry.’²⁸⁸ Such representations suggest that in some quarters agricultural work was considered necessary and menial but without any glory.

However, farming was at least discussed in those media. Other media were typified by a complete lack of focus on agriculture. Such an absence was most notable in the popular press. Indeed, the tabloid newspapers dedicated very little space to agricultural issues, and in the case of *The Daily Mirror* almost nothing at all, despite its centrality to British victory. The following 53-word article, for example, appeared in *The Daily Record* in July 1942:

Figures issued by the Ministry of Agriculture yesterday show that the increase in home production in 1942 over pre-war will save at least 5,000,000 tonnes of shipping this year. Measured in calories net output of home food production will have increased by 30 per cent in the first three years of war.²⁸⁹

This was *The Daily Record*'s entire coverage of this matter. The lowly position of agricultural issues was further highlighted by the fact that on the same page there was a much longer article about an American ice-skater who was being sued which was accompanied by a picture. Most media, therefore, clearly displayed a disinterest in agricultural issues. Tabloid newspaper coverage of agricultural occupations was rare, almost to the point of non-existence. Film representations of agriculture were characterised by absence and infrequent, and weak, praise. Farming was rarely discussed on film and when it was, like industry, it was largely relegated to short films created by and for the state while on radio the BBC only sporadically attempted to link farming to the war effort. Yet, this aversion to agricultural topics is, in some ways, unsurprising. Tabloid newspapers, especially, drew their audiences largely

²⁸⁸ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Working Together* by B.A. Frost, 3 March 1941.

²⁸⁹ ‘Home Front Food Boom’, *The Daily Record and Mail*, 4 July 1942, p.3.

from the urban working-classes and so a lack of focus on agriculture and the failure to emphasise the link between agricultural production and eventual victory was to be expected. This may have been exacerbated by the fact that farming's link to the war effort was less obvious than, for example, the work of the industrial front. This, in turn, may have been further compounded by agriculture's shrinking role in feeding the British nation in the inter-war years as Britain relied more and more heavily on shipped imports for sustenance. Or perhaps a very basic idea may have underpinned this absence: agriculture was, quite simply, dull. For example, production notes show that the BBC actively thought discussions of farming would be too tedious for the average listener. Sir Richard Maconachie, assistant controller of the BBC, when mooting the possibility of an agricultural talk on *Sunday Postscripts* in June 1942, noted 'that the Minister [of Information, Brendan Bracken] has no objection to Street, but wonders whether the Sunday night audience will not be bored by a "talk on agriculture."'”²⁹⁰ Despite protestations that 'Street will not be talking about farming as such, but on the impact of the war on the farming community', there was no talk.²⁹¹ Similarly, a year later the same issue arose but was again decided not to be of interest to the British public.²⁹² It may be for this reason that agricultural occupations were rarely depicted in the wartime media. This cultural disinterest mirrored public opinion. BBC Listener research shows that very few people out with farming communities listened to programmes about agriculture 'more than infrequently' and the BBC attributed this lack of interest to a lack of relevance to their own lives.²⁹³ Similarly, Home Intelligence reports rarely noted any opinions on

²⁹⁰ BBC Written Archive Centre, R51/423/3 Talks- Postscripts- Sunday- File 1c.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Ibid..

²⁹³ BBC Written Archive Centre, R9/5/95- Audience Research- Reports, Sound- 95- Talks Dec 1941-May 1943.

farming and agriculture from out with rural areas. The role of farming in the war was rarely considered by the British public, a stance generally replicated by the media. Yet this cultural absence not only denied the men of agriculture a strong link to the war effort, but also denied them almost any public identity at all. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the farmer failed to be portrayed in a strong and masculine way in wartime.

Moreover, even when male agricultural workers were depicted they were often shown in a way which undermined any attempt at a manly image. To a greater extent even than industrial workers their occupation lacked any real opportunity for wartime bravery other than perhaps rare events such as the finding of downed Nazi pilots. This, of course, separated them from the 'soldier hero' ideal. Additionally, like their industrial counterparts they were also denied an image which drew upon the day-to-day dangers of their occupation. Indeed, they were frequently portrayed, especially in the populist and tabloid press, as yokels. For example, one article on the work of farmers published in *The Daily Mirror* in 1943 was accompanied by a



Figure 3.4, 'Down on Vitamin – Farm'

cartoon depicting a stereotypical farmer: he is portly, middle-aged and ruddy-faced.²⁹⁴ He is therefore very much distanced from the strong, heroic and dashing image of the uniformed combatant. The image of the male agricultural worker as aged was recurrent and the broadsheets, for example, regularly featured photographs of elderly men working the fields.²⁹⁵ Similarly, in late 1939, *Punch* magazine published a series of cartoons depicting 'The Changing Face of Britain', one of which represented agriculture. Entitled 'The Ploughman Homeward Plods...', it depicts two similar scenes. The top image shows a hunched old man, presumably the ploughman of the title, walking over the brow of a hill. The second of the images depicts the same scene but the stooped elderly figure is replaced by an upright and curvaceous member of the Women's Land Army watched, most probably lustily, by several soldiers.²⁹⁶ The difference between the wizened old man and the youthful, and

²⁹⁴ 'Down on Vitamin – Farm', *The Daily Mirror*, 6 December 1943, p.5.

²⁹⁵ 'Work on a East Lothian Farm', *The Scotsman*, 13 October 1939, p.10.

²⁹⁶ 'The Changing Face of Britain: IX- The Ploughman Homeward Plods...', *Punch*, 11 October 1939.

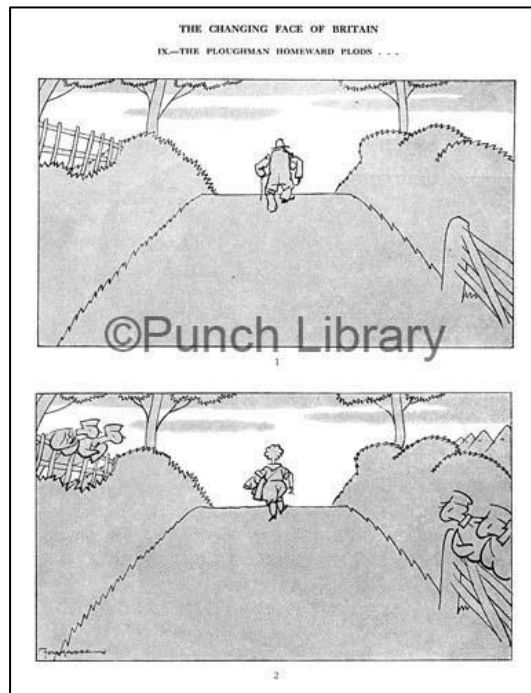


Figure 3.5, 'The Changing Face of Britain'

uniformed, Land Girl is stark. Again, these suggestions of old age and infirmity sharply distance the farming community from the young virile soldier hero. Moreover, this cartoon also highlights another recurrent trope presented during the war. The message is clear: even at this early stage of the war, women were replacing men on the land.

Furthermore, much like industrial employees agricultural workers were subject to constant pressures to increase output. Praise was never simply given in the way it was to those in the armed services or the more obviously heroic civilian occupations. The state's attentions towards the farmer were generally exhortative in nature and posters which were aimed at the farmer or regular agricultural worker were nearly always technical. For example, 'Plan for protein for next winter's milk' or 'The Colorado Beetle: A dangerous foreign potato pest'.²⁹⁷ Such exhortations

²⁹⁷ Ministry of Agriculture, 'Plan for protein for next winter's milk', National Archives, INF 2/60; Ministry of Agriculture, 'The Colorado Beetle: A dangerous foreign potato pest', National Archives, INF 2/60

were replicated in the media more generally. In December 1940 *The Scotsman*, for example, stated:

As a result of the efforts of farmers in the first fifteen months of this war, it is expected that by next spring the acreage of arable land in this country will exceed the peak attained at the end of the last war. Britain to-day is being fed by her farmers to the extent of something like 60 per cent of her consumption. *But, excellent as this achievement is, it is not sufficient.* Every merchant ship sunk, every additional cargo of munitions or war weapons sent to the Mediterranean or elsewhere, is a fresh challenge to those working on farms. The war is being fought on the arable fields of Britain as much as anywhere else; the more they can produce the hope there is of shortening the struggle.²⁹⁸

Such qualified praise was common in the broadsheet press and also infrequently found in the tabloid press. In July 1944 *The Daily Record* stated:

It is inspiring to hear from Mr. Johnston that Scotland has redeemed the pre-war approach of decline in this industry to the extent that she has now under crops 43 per cent more acreage than in 1939; that she can not only feed her own population but exports a million tons in oats, beef, sheep and potatoes. *But there is room for improvement here also.* The vacant acres still available for grazing must be made to produce more and better beef- that beef, for which Scotland is famed south of the Border as it is overseas for its pedigree herds and which has now undergone a “vast deterioration.”²⁹⁹

Even as late as May 1945 *The Glasgow Herald* reminded readers that ‘with the world short of food, there could be no relaxation on the food production front whatever the case on other fronts’.⁴⁷ Such exhortations are in sharp contrast to the unmitigated praise given to those in the armed services. Again, as with industrial concerns, this suggests that because of the less obviously heroic nature of these jobs it was more

²⁹⁸ ‘Ploughing to Victory’, *The Scotsman*, 6 December 1940, p.8. (Emphasis added)

²⁹⁹ ‘Land and Nation’, *The Daily Record and Mail*, 5 July 1944, p.2. (Emphasis added) ⁴⁷ “‘No Relaxation’”, *The Glasgow Herald*, 5 July 1944, p.4. ⁴⁸ “‘This Fertile Land’”, *The Times*, 30 December 1940, p.5.

acceptable to declare their efforts lacking than those whose duty or occupation took them into the line of fire.

This hierarchy was further emphasised as, again like their industrial counterparts, those in agricultural professions were often openly declared to be secondary despite their key role in the prosecution of war. It was often both explicitly stated, and implicitly implied, that the farmers' fundamental role was to aid those who were fighting. As stated by Churchill in 1940, and reported by *The Times*, the farmers' role was to 'liberate the Navy and our merchant shipping for the movement of the considerable armies which will certainly be required'.⁴⁸ This sentiment was replicated, for example, in a 1941 Scottish Agricultural Industries advert which stated 'Farmers – they rely on you – You depend on the Royal Navy to maintain our life-lines and defend our coasts. They depend on you to provide food for those they have left at home... The Navy defend us and they need you too produce all you can.'³⁰⁰

Although the text emphasises the persistent wartime theme of unity and

³⁰⁰ 'Farmers – they Rely On You', *The Glasgow Herald*, 26 March 1941, p.5.



Figure 3.6, 'Farmers – they rely on you!'

working together, the image focuses only upon the Royal Navy therefore showing the agricultural worker to be of secondary importance. This suggests that although they were considered vital, their role was still to help those who could really win the war. This reinforces the notion of a hierarchy of male contributions to the war effort.

iii. Incoming Female Labour

As with industry, perhaps the most widely remembered group of wartime agricultural workers was the incoming female labour: namely the Women's Land Army (WLA). The WLA had been formed in June 1939, largely based on its First World War predecessor of the same name, to help with agriculture in wartime. At the peak of employment in 1944 the WLA employed 80,000 women.³⁰¹ However, these women were not without their critics. Early in the war some sections of the press were

³⁰¹ Central Statistical Office, *Fighting With Figures*, p.46.

somewhat ambiguous towards the newly recreated Women's Land Army. *The Scotsman*, for example, declared in September 1939:

It will be demonstrated, no doubt, as it was in the last war, that farm work is too arduous and too exciting for a considerable proportion of town-bred women but if the land-girl of 1939 is no worse than the land-girl of 1916-18 she will find that farmers are far from despising her assistance.³⁰²

Such ambiguous depictions were replicated in some of the films created by and for the state where, although the WLA are present, they were generally presented as assistants rather than outright replacements. For example, the 1943 MOI short *Summer on the Farm* explained that 'All this picking and packing calls for a lot of extra labour. Some is done by local women, some colleges and schools, some by the land club and some by the Women's Land Army.' Such a depiction suggests that they were not the saviours of agriculture, as was often the case in other depictions; instead they were shown to be one of many groups helping out on the farm in wartime. Similarly, the 1940 Humphrey Jennings short *Spring Offensive* showed farming to be the preserve of men, with only a brief shot of two Land Girls learning to drive a tractor. However, these films were both released by the MOI to limited audiences and as such their message may have had little impact. Indeed, despite some initial reservations it was the female agricultural labour force which was, by a significant distance, the greater focus of cultural attention. In feature films the female Land Girl all but replaced the male farm worker. In *Went The Day Well?* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942) the only agricultural workers depicted are members of the WLA. Similarly, although male agricultural workers are seen in the background in *A Canterbury Tale* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1944), they are never actually seen doing any work while Alison, the female protagonist and WLA

³⁰² 'Women's Land Army', *The Scotsman*, 29 September 1939, p.11.

member, is often shown working alongside other Land Girls. Moreover, the owner of the farm where Alison works is also shown to be a woman. As such, women



Figure 3.7, still from *A Canterbury Tale*.

appeared to have largely taken over from men on the agricultural front. While this contrasts sharply with the image seen in state-produced films, commercial feature films had widespread releases, and certainly wider than those produced by the state. Therefore, the representations shown in them are significant. The key message that was filmically presented to the viewing public of farming, therefore, was that women had taken over. Such messages were reinforced by other media. Government posters regarding agriculture also tended to focus on women. However, as these were generally recruitment posters for the Women's Land Army or exhortations to 'Lend a Hand on the Land', this is easily explained as men were not the target of recruitment. However, very few paintings of men at work in the fields were commissioned by the WAAC while many were commissioned, especially from artist Evelyn Dunbar, of female workers, chiefly of the Women's Land Army.³⁰³ Although these were perhaps not viewed by great numbers of the general public, as with much fine art of the period, they do nevertheless reflect a preoccupation with women which is common

³⁰³ Evelyn Dunbar, 'Milking Practice With Artificial Udders', 1940 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

throughout the war. Similarly, newspapers, especially the tabloid press, also tended to focus on women, often publishing pictures of women, generally highly attractive ones, shearing a sheep or holding a pig aloft frequently with no accompanying article.³⁰⁴ This focus on the female worker, to the almost complete exclusion of the male worker, presented an image of agriculture in which women had almost



Figure 3.8, Evelyn Dunbar, 'Milking Practice With Artificial Udders'

superseded men. As with industry, however, there may have been a very practical reason for this focus on women. Kenneth Clark, head of the WAAC, noted 'The trouble about war pictures of agriculture is that they are rather hard to distinguish from peace pictures'.³⁰⁵ Perhaps then this focus on women can be seen as a way to link the constancy of the rural setting to the new conditions of war. Nevertheless, this focus on women may also have undermined the masculine image of the farmer and farm worker as it weakened male agricultural workers' link to the traditionally skilled male preserve of agriculture.

This may have been further emphasised by the fact that as well as being numerically dominant the WLA were often shown to outstrip men in terms of skill.

One *Punch* cartoon, for example, depicted a farmer being chased by a bull as two

³⁰⁴ Untitled picture of woman with a pig on her shoulder, *The Daily Mirror*, 19 May 1943, p.5.

³⁰⁵ M. Harries and S. Harries, *The War Artists: British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century* (London: Michael Joseph, 1983), p.196.



"Now would be a good time to whitewash his stall, Gladys."

Figure 3.9, 'Now would be a good time to whitewash his stall, Gladys

Land Girls looked on. As the women watch the farmer, one declares that this would be a good time to whitewash the bull's stall.³⁰⁶ The focus here is on the ineptitude of the farmer and the efficiency of the Land Girls. This emphasis on the superior skill of the Land Girl was also found in other publications. For example, one *Daily Mirror* picture spread declared 'THIS IS THEIR HARVEST' above pictures of women, and only women, reaping the harvest. The accompanying article makes patently clear that women were solely responsible for this 'job well done and... service to their country.'⁵⁶ Similarly, radio broadcasts usually emphasised this image of a female labour force and they were generally shown to have taken on the work with an ease

³⁰⁶ 'Now would be a good time to whitewash his stall, Gladys', *Punch*, 25 March 1942.

⁵⁶ 'This is their harvest', *The Daily Mirror*, 6 August 1941, p.5.

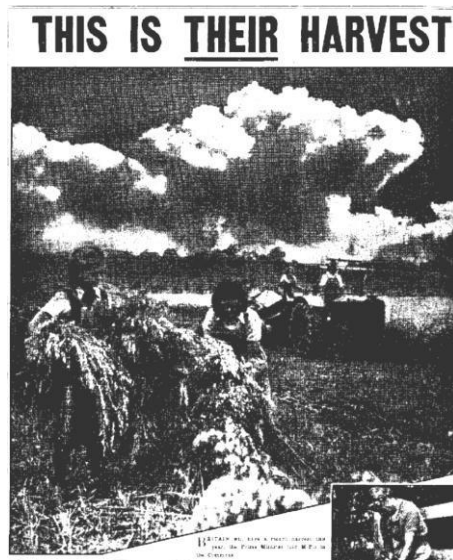


Figure 3.10, 'This is Their Harvest'

which undercut the idea of farming as a skilled masculine occupation. For example, in January 1940 *Farming Today* declared 'Of course there is the Women's Land Army coming forward to take their places. I have heard some excellent reports of the work these girls are doing. More are now completing their training and they'll soon be ready to take their places as milkers, tractor drivers, poultry girls and indeed fill almost any job on the farm.'³⁰⁷ Furthermore, women also appeared on radio shows aimed at the general public rather than technical agricultural broadcasts. Consequently, their representation reached a larger audience. Therefore, it is likely the predominant image of agriculture seen by the average Britain civilian centred on women. It is clear, therefore, that culturally the burden of agriculture had shifted from men to women.

Furthermore, as seen with industrial work, these women were often discussed in a more individualised personal way in sharp contrast to the highly depersonalised and factual way men were represented. When given access to a microphone, by the BBC, women often emphasised personal rather than technical issues. One Land Girl

³⁰⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Farming Today*, 9 November 1939.

declared, for example, in February 1940 in *At Home Today*, a programme about different people and issues in Britain, that:

It was funny the first day I fed the pigs, I really was terrified when they came running straight for *me* as I thought. I got back to the other side of the fence quicker than I had come over, and let my partner get on with the job, but they didn't eat him, instead they clambered round the buckets he carried, it was the food they were interested in not me. When I discovered I wasn't going to be devoured I became very brave and went in to feed some pigs which were fattening in pens, but I wasn't prepared for what happened then. One of the animals that was so anxious to get to the trough pushed his way through my legs and there was I being gaily carried along on the back of one pig, while somehow or another, I balanced the bucket of food I was carrying on the back of another, it certainly was a triumphant entrance. However, I soon learned just how to manage them.³⁰⁸

It is the Land Girl who is the focus of this broadcast. Her story, while obviously amusing, focuses on her in a way which is never seen for male agricultural workers and therefore links women to the war effort more concretely.

iv. Government Campaigns

Yet, perhaps the most remembered aspect of wartime agriculture was not its paid labourers but rather its volunteers. The average British citizen was called upon to both 'Dig For Victory', in their own allotments and gardens, as well as to 'Lend A Hand On The Land' and take a working 'holiday' to help on the farms. The amount of focus on these campaigns, especially by the state, dwarfed the attention given to those who worked in agriculture professionally. The state focused most of its efforts on encouraging the ordinary citizen to participate rather than engaging with the farmer or farm worker. The 'Dig For Victory' campaign sought to encourage British

³⁰⁸ BBC Written Archive Centre, *At Home Today*, 14 February 1940. (Emphasis in original)

citizens to grow food in their own gardens or allotments in order to supplement their rationed diet. As well as its sheer ubiquity the ‘Dig For Victory’ campaign generally implied that the business of growing vegetables was a very simple task. The posters showed full baskets of well-proportioned vegetables and portly men, clearly replete with their own home-grown food, and the posters appeared to imply that there would be very little effort involved. One proclaimed simply ‘Your own vegetables all the year round if you dig for victory now’ and depicted a heaving basket of vegetables.³⁰⁹



Figure 3.11, ‘Your own vegetables all the year round....’



Figure 3.12, ‘Dig for victory’

Another showed a child with a spade and a hoe in an image reminiscent of a child at the seaside, thus implying that even children were capable of the undemanding task of ‘digging for victory’, and indeed, it was ‘child’s play’.³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ Ministry of Agriculture, ‘Your own vegetables all the year round if you dig for victory now’ National Archives, INF 13/140.

³¹⁰ Mary Turnbridge, Ministry of Agriculture, ‘Dig For Victory’, (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

Moreover, the campaign, which although now remembered largely for its striking imagery, was a multi-media campaign which was prominent on both film and radio as well as in poster form. These campaigns, as with posters, generally completely eschewed the farmer or agricultural worker. The MOI five-minute short film *Dig For Victory* (Michael Hankinson, 1941), for example, opened with the following questions:

Do you like standing in a queue for your vegetables or do you think its tiring and a waste of valuable time? Do you ever find your long wait has been useless - that supplies of what you want have run out before your turn comes? It's not the greengrocer's fault. It's up to you.

Food, here, is conceptualised not as a product of agriculture but instead simply as a commodity sold by greengrocers. Despite acknowledging that 'food is just as important a weapon of war as guns', farmers are never mentioned in this short. While there were helpful booklets aimed at home-gardeners which perhaps undermined the idea of gardening as effortless, these were rather less well-known than the striking images with punchy slogans urging the viewer to pick up a spade. Furthermore, the huge emphasis on 'Dig For Victory' may have further loosened the connection in the public mind between farming and food production, as it instead shifted the onus from farmers to the ordinary citizen, and so further distanced the farmer from the war effort.

This idea of farming as a skilled occupation was also ruptured by the common trope of conflating the efforts of the professional agricultural worker and the amateur volunteer. In December 1942 *The Daily Mirror*, for example, published a cartoon which wished a 'Happy Xmas... to all who dig for Victory – Farmers,

Land Girls, Allotmenters, etc.’³¹¹ Yet again the idea of farming as a skilled profession was undermined as no distinction is made between professionals and amateurs. Similarly, the following was broadcast by the BBC in a talk entitled

Britain Speaks:

The farmer, the gardener, the allotment holder don’t pretend that their part in the Battle of the Atlantic is to be compared with the perilous existence and constant courage and endurance of those who bring over food ships and ammunition ships and tankers safely across the ocean from the teeming granaries, the ever busier factories, and the oilfields of the New World. Yet every man in Britain who in his fields grows a ton more of wheat or oats or who in his garden or plot raises a dozen more cabbages or a stone more of carrots than was his wont is supplementing the gallant and resolute efforts of our seamen.³¹²

This broadcast is telling from two perspectives. Firstly, it makes no real distinction between the skilled profession of farming and the amateur gardener growing cabbages portraying them as equal partners in the fight for increased food production which further erodes the idea of farming as a skilled occupation. Moreover, these professionals and amateurs are all working together to ‘supplement’ the work of the Merchant Navy. This again suggests a hierarchy of masculine contributions to the war effort: a hierarchy in which the agricultural worker, like his industrial counterpart, came very much below the heroic Merchant Navy who were depicted as heroes of the seas as we shall see in the next chapter.

The mention of merchant shipping in food broadcasts was a common trope. Encouragements to ‘Lend a Hand’ and discussions of food in general often centred not on the farmer but on the Merchant Navy. For instance, a railwayman talking on the BBC’s *Working Together* noted ‘as we pass through the countryside, we notice

³¹¹ ‘Happy Xmas’, *The Daily Mirror*, 22 December 1942, p.3.

³¹² BBC Written Archive Centre, *Britain Speaks* by Alexander Keith, 28 May 1941.

the millions of acres of pasture land now being ploughed up to produce food-stuffs and so help our merchant seamen in their struggle to defeat the menace of the u-boat and the bomber.’³¹³ Similarly, in another BBC talk entitled *Beating U-Boats with Tractor and Spade*, a telling title in itself, it was stated:

But I do think that this distinctly healthier condition we are in, to whatever it is due, and our increased home production of food, and the unaccustomed physical labour entailed it upon many of us, and the restoration of fruitfulness to our fields are four- we might almost term them by-products of the Battle of the Atlantic, which justify us landmen in pursuing our campaign with our peaceful weapons, the sword and the plough, to aid our gallant countrymen in the Royal and Merchant Navies in the fight they are bound to win.³¹⁴

Again, this presents the farm worker as secondary to both the Royal and Merchant Navies. Such messages were also seen in other media. The state’s campaigns to encourage both self-production and the prevention of waste both often centred on the Merchant Navy rather than the farmer. One poster proclaimed ‘let your shopping help our shipping: plan your meals to avoid waste’ while another stated ‘Use spades not ships: grown your own food’.³¹⁵ No mention is made in either of the fundamental role of agriculture in ensuring Britain’s steady food supply. Clearly an appeal based on the hardships of the Merchant Navy was seen to have more potential than one based on the hardships of the farmer. While the farmer may have been increasing his yields to ensure that both the civilians and armed services of Britain were well fed, the Merchant Navy still carried more emotional sway and were therefore more useful in propaganda terms due to the dangers they faced. Again, it is evident that despite

³¹³ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Working Together by L.Y. Pile*, 2 April 1941.

³¹⁴ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Beating U-Boats With Tractor and Spade*, 7 July 1941.

³¹⁵ Ministry of Food, ‘Let Your Shopping Help our Shipping’, National Archives, INF 13/143; Ministry of Food, ‘Use Spades Not Ships’, National Archives, INF 13/143.

their centrality to the war effort agricultural workers were largely shown to be far down the masculine hierarchy in wartime.

The 'Lend A Hand On the Land' campaign, like 'Dig For Victory', similarly undermined the idea of farming as a skilled profession as it encouraged people not only to grow vegetables on their own but to actively take part in the act of farming. Participants were encouraged to view such work as a 'holiday', making it a forerunner to the highly popular working holidays boom in the 1950s, and indeed the scheme was created by the Ministry of Information partially in response to the restriction on seaside holidays made due to security concerns.³¹⁶ Like 'Dig For Victory', the 'Lend a Hand...' campaign was promoted on many media. One radio 'flash', a short advert between programmes, stated:

There is no finer service which young people can give their country at the present critical time and the fact that the work may often be hard or monotonous is a reason for regarding this help as service in the finest sense of the word. At the same time it has many advantages and attraction — it is a healthy out of doors job which gives boys and girls and insight into the workings of this great industry such they could obtain in no other way.³¹⁷

Similarly, the following 'flash' stated:

Every year since the war began our farmers have steadily increased the acreage of crops so as to maintain our food supplies and release ships to carry the weapons of war. They and their regular workers, with relatively few extra hands, have accomplished Herculean tasks in cultivating millions of additional acres and in growing millions of extra tons of food. This year the harvests, we trust, will be the greatest this country has ever known, and the farmers will need every available boy and girl to help in their gathering.³¹⁸

³¹⁶ S. Barton, *Working Class Organisations and Popular Tourism 1840 – 1970* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.181.

³¹⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/684 Policy- Propaganda- Harvest.

³¹⁸ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/684 Policy- Propaganda- Harvest.

Although decrying the industry as dull and monotonous these two flashes do present agricultural work in a somewhat heroic light and certainly focus on the farmers' role in a way which was rarer in other, more prominent, media for this campaign. Posters were, again, the dominant medium for this campaign. While it must be remembered that these posters served as encouragements to take part, and so it is understandable that they present a cheerful and pleasant view of farming, in general their bucolic

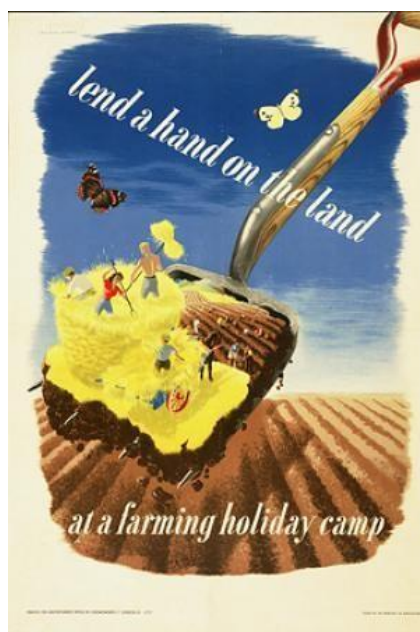


Figure 3.13, 'Lend a hand on the land at a farming holiday camp'

vision may have further undermined the idea of farming as an arduous and skilled occupation. Those who are depicted are good looking, smiling and generally having a jovial time while undertaking farm work. Similarly, children featured prominently in the posters for this campaign which undermines the notions of agriculture as a skilled and arduous occupation. Likewise, in the Crown Film Unit short for the Scottish Office, *Grain Harvest* (Scottish Office, 1944), the main character of Jean rebuffs her colleague's complaints that he does not want to spend his holidays working himself 'to death' by stating 'You're all wrong, Donald. It's grand fun, good food and plenty of fresh air. At night we have sing-songs in the hostel. Sometimes

even a dance.’ Jean goes on to explain that children can also take part before ending the film with a triumphant ‘gosh, we’ll have a grand time.’ This representation is fairly typical of the ‘Lend a Hand’ campaign which was obviously designed to encourage participation in the scheme by showing agricultural work as an enjoyable and undemanding occupation. People were encouraged to view helping on the farm as a holiday and that certainly came through in depictions of their demeanour and in the idyllic setting. Posters to encourage lending a hand always feature bucolic images of pastoral scenes which may have further distanced farming from the general war effort as well as the ideal male occupation of the armed forces.³¹⁹ As a combined effort this campaign, especially when considered alongside ‘Dig For Victory’, had the power to fundamentally undermine the idea of agricultural work as a skilled and arduous profession; it made the job look undemanding and again shifted the burden of food production on to the average civilian.

v. The Idyllic Countryside

Even out with state encouragements to ‘Lend a Hand’, the idea of the bucolic featured prominently. Rural idylls were prominent in the patriotic literature of the day and the countryside became a symbol of England. Connelly argues for what he calls ‘a cult of the English countryside’. He argues that ‘the true glory of the nation was placed in the soil, and the soil of south-east England especially. Bucolic visions of happy peasants in charming cottages, quaffing good ale in merry inns while golden corn waved in the rolling field was the eventual result.’³²⁰ Such an image

³¹⁹ Eileen Evans, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, ‘Lend a hand on the land at a farming holiday camp’, 1943 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

³²⁰ M. Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, Pearson Longman, 2004), p.22.

built on pre-war notions. Both the print media and film-makers focused on the idyllic qualities of working in the countryside in the years running up to the war. For example, *Spring on the Farm* (Evelyn Spice, 1933) presented an image of farm work which centred on lambs, chicks and children set to a background of choral music. Similarly both *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mirror* overtly focused on the beauty of the countryside again with an overt focus on children and small animals.³²¹ As seen during the war there was little or no reference to dangerous and physically demanding work which agricultural occupations truthfully entailed. Rose further asserts that in this period these visions of the idealised countryside came also to represent Britain.⁷² This was made evident in many wartime films, most notably Alberto Cavalcanti's *Went the Day Well?* but also Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale*.³²² Moreover, a Mass Observation survey in 1941 asked the question 'What does Britain mean to you?' The response was often idyllic images of the countryside. As such, Rose argues that this image came to stand for what the British were fighting for.⁷⁴ Such depictions were found in every medium. Newspapers, both broadsheet and tabloid, often published pictures of the countryside, usually printed without attachment to an article, which emphasised both their idyllic and unchanging nature. *The Times*, for example, often published expansive shots of the rolling British, or more specifically Southern English, countryside.³²³ *Picture Post*, too, often featured such images and in May 1945 it published a double-page image of a river winding through two fields with the title

³²¹ 'Introductions on a farm. Hello twins!', *The Daily Mirror*, 3 January 1934, p.15.

⁷² Rose, *Which People's War?*, p.238.

³²² *Ibid*, p.203.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p.203.

³²³ 'The Nation's Food: On a Lakeland Farm', *The Times*, 25 March 1941, p.6.

‘One of the things we have all been fighting for: the well-loved peace and quiet of the English countryside.’³²⁴ The same imagery can be seen in the ‘It’s Your Britain,



Figure 3.14, ‘One of the things we have all been fighting: the well-loved peace and quiet of the English countryside’

Fight For it Now’ poster series which included one poster which featured peaceful golden countryside through which a farmer strolls herding his sheep with his dog.³²⁵

These images in which horses featured prominently were often without tractors or other modern farming equipment. This emphasised not only the peace and tranquillity of the countryside but also separated it from the mechanised world of war. This image of the countryside as unchanging and safe was also found in other media. One BBC broadcast, for example, in May 1942 declared:

I can say that even in war time the May picture is much the same as ever. The countryside is green, green of all shades picked out here and there with a white fruit blossom, on the banks the [missing word] the primrose yellow, and in the woods a mist of bluebells...nothing in this war seems to be able to disturb the placid stable beauty of the English rural scene...These things, Sedgebury Wallop, its cows, its thatch, its church, its inn, its fields, its men, women and children, in fact all the English scene- these things will remain when Hitler’s whistle is but a memory.³²⁶

³²⁴ ‘One of the things we have all been fighting for: the well-loved peace and quiet of the English countryside’, *Picture Post*, 19 May 1945, pp.14-15.

³²⁵ Frank Newbould, Army Bureau of Current Affairs, ‘It’s your Britain – Fight for it now’, 1942 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London)

³²⁶ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Country Days*, 9 May 1942.

Such depictions explicitly separated Britain's countryside from the horrors of war even as experienced by the civilians of Britain. This idea was also emphasised in the written word. *The Glasgow Herald*, in July 1940, declared:

The Countryside is not as 'truly rural' these days. To the casual observer the hills and fields asleep through days of July may seem unchanged by international calamity, but to the initiated the repercussions of war even in the glen are apparent. On the long sloping hillsides and the flay meadows running to the burn where the last year we grew only crops of hay and a few potatoes for consumption there are now lush acres of oats turning golden, row upon row of healthy upstanding potatoes that will nourish a multitude.³²⁷

A similar idealistic representation of the countryside was presented by *The Times* in the same year:

Life goes on as peacefully almost as before the war. There is still the occasional whist drive or dance at the village hall. The church standing at the end of the village road seems a still more serene landmark in a world of strife. Even the sewing party at the vicarage now are knitting socks for soldiers.³²⁸

Despite the ways in which these articles insist that the countryside has changed because of the war this portrayal of 'lush acres of turning golden' is in sharp contrast to the experiences of those in British bomb-torn cities and further still from those who experienced military action. This may have been further cemented by the countryside's role in evacuation. The countryside became a designated safe space far away from the horrors of warfare. This image was trumpeted through every medium. Government posters and films as well as radio broadcasts and newspapers all emphasised the countryside as a safe haven for children while designating the urban as dangerous. Government posters encouraged mothers to leave their children in the

³²⁷ 'On the Lowlands Home Front', *The Glasgow Herald*, 19 July 1940, p.3.

³²⁸ 'Great Britain in War-Time- The Life of a Village', *The Times*, 13 February 1940, p.3.

safety of the rural setting and away from the dangers to be found in the wartime urban landscape.³²⁹ Similarly, films such as *Village School* (Arthur Elton, 1940)

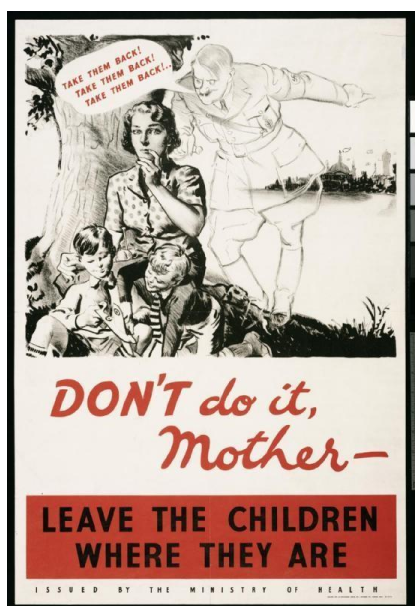


Figure 3.15, 'Don't do it mother...'

and *Westward Ho!* (1940) (Thorold Dickinson, 1940) both depicted children frolicking in the country idyll. This potentially had the effect of distancing the countryside, and so farming, from the horrors of war even as experienced by urban civilians.

Moreover, farming was also explicitly shown, through idyllic images, to be a 'safe' occupation. It was a common visual trope, for instance, to depict military paraphernalia, especially planes, against the backdrop of the countryside to make obvious the stark contrast between the tranquillity of the countryside and the brutality of the war. *The Daily Mirror* published a photograph which it titled 'Reapers and Sweepers' which showed a man in a traditional horse-pulled plough as a squadron of planes flew overhead. In case the juxtaposition was missed the accompanying caption notes that 'And together, both go on to Harvest... One to the

³²⁹ J Weiner Ltd, Ministry of Health, 'Don't Do It Mother – Leave the Children where they are' (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

harvest of peace, the peace and restfulness of nature; The other to the harvest of men's lives on the altar of war.³³⁰ What is evident from this is that the countryside,



Figure 3.16, 'Reapers and Sweepers'

and consequently farming, was clearly perceived to be separate from the war experience. As well as distancing farming from the ideal male role of being in the armed forces, the focus on the idyllic nature of the rural area underlines the image that farming was separated from the true hardships of war.

vi. Conclusion

Churchill was correct: Britain did rely on farmers. Without the increased yields Britain's war experience would have been very different, especially given the high levels of merchant shipping lost to enemy action in the early and middle years of the war. Yet agriculture's centrality to a military victory was rarely acknowledged culturally. Discussions of farming were infrequent and depictions of male farmers

³³⁰ 'Reapers and Sweepers', *The Daily Mirror*, 4 July 1942, p.5.

and farm workers even less so. When they were depicted they were pushed to the fringes of culture and depicted in little-seen government shorts and found in technical and dull radio broadcasts while any praise to be found was weak or ineffectual. This denied them not only a strong masculine cultural identity but gave them almost no identity at all. Moreover, what little coverage male farmers did get often emphasised that they were old yokels thereby firmly distancing them from the dashing image of the brave young 'temperate hero'. Moreover, as with industrial concerns male agricultural workers were very much overshadowed by a glamorous, quickly trained and seemingly highly competent new female labour force. The Women's Land Army garnered not only the media's attention but nearly all the praise aimed at the agricultural profession. This, in turn, may have denied the agricultural profession a strong masculine image based on skill and hard labour. This was compounded by the public focus on both the 'Dig For Victory' and 'Lend A Hand On The Land' campaigns which not only created an image of agriculture as a largely unskilled and undemanding occupation but also shifted the onus of food production from the farmers and farm workers to the ordinary British civilian. As such agricultural workers were largely written out of the narrative with merchant seamen becoming the focus of civilian images to ensure participation in food production and the prevention of waste. Finally, farmers and farm workers undertook their work in idyllic countryside far from the dangers faced by both urban and military populations of Britain. Such separation was extremely evident in wartime culture which emphasised the unchanging and bucolic nature of the British countryside and delighted in comparing it to the violent realities of warfare. In sum, the agricultural worker, although crucial to Britain's war effort, never appeared so to the general public.

Chapter Four – For Those in Peril on the Sea: The Merchant Navy in Wartime Culture



Figure 4.1, 'Nothing Left But to Pull For It', *Punch*, 5 April 1941, p.15

In September 1941 Lord Leathers, then Minister of War Transport, declared to the House of Lords:

There is no need for me to stress to your Lordships how much of our food, our military equipment and our raw materials reaches us from overseas. In addition we have to maintain large and growing forces in distant parts of the world. All this depends on the Merchant Navy. Without the determination and courage of the merchant seamen, our armed forces could not keep the field nor could our people live. It is not an easy life sailing the seas in war-time conditions of black-out and convoy, but the men of the Merchant Navy do not ask for an easy life. They do their duty without fuss or display and no words of mine can indicate the debt of gratitude which we all owe to them.³³¹

As Lord Leathers made evident, the war directly impacted on merchant seamen in a way which was radically different to those in other civilian occupations. They encountered the enemy directly in the seas, facing the perils of torpedo and direct enemy fire, which were otherwise generally experienced only by the armed forces.

³³¹ HL Deb 10 September 1941 vol 120 cc58-59.

Though holding the title of Navy, the crews of merchant ships were civilian men. The British Merchant Navy refers to the maritime register of the United Kingdom and described the seagoing commercial interests of British ships and their crews. Although such endeavours decreased during the war, due to increased danger and diminished foreign markets, an average of 2,500 ships a day continued to traverse the oceanic theatres of war with their cargoes.³³²

However, with the proclamation of war in 1939, these civilian men suddenly found their already dangerous job even more treacherous, as pointed out in the House of Lords in September 1941:

After all, however, the worst sufferers among our civilian population have to endure the brutality of the enemy only for a few days in the year, whereas the whole time that a merchant seaman is at sea he is in danger. If his ship is torpedoed there is no ambulance with a lady driver waiting to take him to hospital, there are no kind people to nurse and comfort him. He has to go in a boat, perhaps in half a gale of wind, and trust to luck ever to get home again at all.³³³

What this statement is obliquely referring to is the high rate of death among those in the merchant service. From 1939 to 1945, 45,329 merchant seamen were killed, wounded or made prisoners of war. When compared with the 73,642 members of the Royal Navy who suffered the same fate while engaging directly in combat with the enemy, it becomes clear that this figure was exceptionally high.³³⁴ Despite this key and dangerous role in Britain's war effort the Merchant Navy have been an underresearched group of wartime workers. This is, however, a much less

³³² Central Statistical Office, *Fighting With Figures: A Statistical Digest of the Second World War* (London: HMSO, 1979), p.43.

³³³ HL Deb 10 September 1941 vol 120 cc37-38.

³³⁴ Central Statistical Office, *Fighting With Figures: A Statistical Digest of the Second World War* (London: HMSO, 1979), p.43. While, of course, it must be remembered that around 40,000 civilians lost their lives in Britain during the Blitz the merchant seamen clearly still faced a higher chance of death.

pronounced absence than seen for other civilian occupations. Notable studies include Tony Lane's social history *The Merchant Seamen's War* which explored the realities of the merchant service in wartime.³³⁵ Moreover, Penny Summerfield's analysis of the cultural memory of the war at sea explores how the Merchant Navy was depicted filmically, largely in relation to the Royal Navy, in wartime and beyond.³³⁶ This chapter builds upon Summerfield's work and is broader in scope, taking in to account a larger set of cultural sources, but narrower in its focus on purely the war years. Moreover, this chapter will focus on the Merchant Navy's relationship to other civilian occupations as well as their relationship to their Royal Navy counterparts. Furthermore, Sonya Rose notes, briefly, that the Merchant Navy were considered 'heroes' yet this is a concept which, until now, has not been rigorously examined.³³⁷ This notion will be scrutinised in this chapter which explores how the Merchant Navy were portrayed and understood in wartime culture, therefore adding to the historiography by furthering our knowledge of this under-researched topic. In doing this the shifting portrayal of the seaman will be considered as well as their relationship to the military and ideal military masculinity. Moreover, the chapter will examine the Merchant Navy's relationship to the wider civilian war effort. Finally, it will consider relationships with women and how that impacted upon depictions of the merchant service. The chapter will argue that despite an inauspicious start on

³³⁵ T. Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

³³⁶ P. Summerfield, 'Divisions at Sea: Class, Gender, Race, and Nation in Maritime Films of the Second World War, 1939-60' in *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 22 No. 3, March 2011, pp.330-53.

³³⁷ S.O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.162.

some media war did bring the status of heroes to the mercantile marine. Moreover, this representation, regardless of suggestions of pity or protection from the Royal Navy, was largely in line with the idealised portrayal of the armed forces.

i. The Merchant Navy and War

With the coming of war the state was forced to take a greater interest in the work of the merchant service than was common in peacetime. Primarily this took the form of organising the convoy system, as used in the First World War, which placed merchant vessels in to groups protected, predominantly, by the Royal Navy. Yet war also forced the state to control the conditions of employment for the Merchant Navy to a greater extent than they had pre-war. Traditionally, despite their value to the British economy and the dangers they faced, merchant seamen suffered from poor conditions, both in terms of employment and physical conditions, especially when compared to their seafaring counterparts in the Royal Navy. However, it was the new dangers, rather than existing conditions, faced by sailors that largely framed debates, and subsequently policies, surrounding the participation and remuneration of merchant seamen in the war effort. As pointed out in a Lords debate:

This war has brought to this nation more than ever before a lively realization of the magnitude of the debt we owe to the Royal Navy. Is it, I wonder, always remembered, when we are voicing our thankfulness, that Great Britain has two Navies – the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy? The former guards these islands, the latter feeds them.³³⁸

³³⁸ HL Deb 10 September 1941 vol 120 cc29-30.

The close relationship that the merchant service had with the Royal Navy, particularly through the convoy system, meant that the ‘disparities, the anomalies, and grievances that they have observed in the treatment of merchant seamen’ became obvious.³³⁹ It was not unusual for the merchant service, even in parliamentary debates, to be referred to as the ‘Cinderella service’ therefore highlighting their perceived status of poor relation.³⁴⁰ Traditionally, merchant seamen returning from a voyage had been effectively made unemployed and so were without pay until they boarded another vessel. This, quite obviously, limited any rest periods and reduced the time men could spend with their families, especially if they lived far from port. This, however, did not go unnoticed by the wartime government. Almost immediately from the outset of war debates began in the House of Commons regarding the perceived poor treatment of those in the merchant service. Debated topics ranged from employment conditions to living arrangements on board ships as well as the creation of mandatory uniforms and medals to be awarded for services rendered.

Most of these inequalities were largely addressed during the course of the war. From 1942 merchant seamen could be awarded the same medals as those in the Royal Navy if they had engaged in what was essentially a sea battle, although they continued to receive civilian bravery medals for other acts.³⁴¹ The issue of uniform, although continually brought up in the Commons, was never ceded, mainly on the grounds that the merchant seamen themselves were apathetic towards the issue.

³³⁹ HL Deb 10 September 1941 vol 120 cc50-51.

³⁴⁰ HL Deb 10 September 1941 vol 120 cc27-28.

³⁴¹ HL Deb 08 September 1942 vol 124 cc310-11.

It was, however, in the realm of employment conditions that the largest changes were made. In 1941 the Merchant Navy were brought under the Essential Works Order. Indeed, an additional order was drawn up to supplement this legislation. Alongside the restrictions placed upon employers and employees by the Essential Works Order, as detailed previously, the Essential Work (Merchant Navy) Order also brought improved conditions to those working in the merchant service. Primarily, merchant seamen were granted continual pay even when on shore, a radical concept for those in the mercantile marine.³⁴² It was declared in the House of Commons that the order had ‘revolutionised the conditions of employment for seafaring people.’³⁴³ The legislation also granted the Merchant Navy other concessions analogous to those given to the armed services. They received reduced travel fares while on leave and four times a year could travel free of cost. Reduced fares were also available for their wives and children to visit if they were in port but could not get home and free travel was also awarded to the families of those merchant seamen who were seriously injured. They were also given concession telegrams and reduced telegram rates anywhere in the Empire, again mirroring the treatment given to the armed forces. The Essential Works (Merchant Navy) Order also attacked the question of manpower. From the outbreak of war those in the Merchant Navy were reserved at the low age of 18 which meant, in theory, that all merchant seamen were prevented from being in the armed services.³⁴⁴ In practice many men were actually released, or left, to join the armed services, mainly the

³⁴² H.M.D. Parker, *Manpower: A Study of War-time Policy and Administration* (London: HMSO, 1957), pp.139140.

³⁴³ HC Deb 14 July 1943 vol 391 cc247-8.

³⁴⁴ Ministry of Information, *Schedule of Reserved Occupations and Protected Work. Revision* (London: HMSO, 1941).

Royal Navy. Indeed, a high number within the merchant service had been in the Royal Navy Reserves. In light of this, and the new pressures placed upon the service, the Merchant Navy, like many other civilian occupations, faced a shortage of manpower. However, unlike other civilian occupations the Merchant Navy could not utilise female dilutees. Instead, men in shore occupations but with sea-going experience were requested to rejoin the Merchant Navy.³⁴⁵ 5,000 men with previous maritime experience responded to this invitation. Moreover, the Essential Works (Merchant Navy) Order required that men aged between 18 and 60 who had been to sea since 1936 register their employment details in order to supplement those volunteers. Those that were not employed in ‘essential’ work were called in to the Merchant Navy. 6,000 men were called in to the service in this way.³⁴⁶ Clearly war wrought huge changes to the conditions of the mercantile marine. However, what these changes best highlight is the increased status and prestige given to the Merchant Navy by the state and also how these changes were specifically created to bring the Merchant Navy’s conditions in line with those given to the most praised of wartime roles: the armed forces. The rest of this chapter will explore if this increased prestige was mirrored in cultural depictions.

ii. The Merchant Marine in Early Wartime Culture

Before the war the Merchant Navy were only rarely depicted culturally. For example, there were only around 40 mentions apiece in both *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mirror* in the six years which preceded the outbreak of war. Moreover, although the press noted the ‘vital’ nature of Britain’s shipping there was no suggestion of the

³⁴⁵ National Archives, LAB 25/92.

³⁴⁶ HC Deb 08 January 1942 vol 377 cc78-9.

heroic portrayal they would receive during the war.³⁴⁷ Indeed, the service was long associated with drunkenness and undesirable sexual behaviours. War wrought dramatic changes of the image of the service. Indeed, immediately from the onset of hostilities the men of the mercantile marine received a favourable depiction from some. In January 1940, when neither the military nor the civilian population of Britain had really been touched by war, the BBC broadcast a talk entitled *Ships Sail On* detailing the hardships and problems of the Merchant Navy in wartime. It told the following tale:

A few days before Christmas I was talking to the Second Engineer of a tramp steamer which was mined in the North Sea a few weeks ago. He had just come off watch and had started that first delicious hour of sound sleep which is the reward of most watchkeepers. Suddenly he was awakened by a loud noise. He found himself on his knees in his bunk, with his bedclothes around his neck, and felt the ship heeling far over with the force of the explosion. His light wouldn't work and he told me of those first few moments of almost panic when, in total darkness, he felt for the familiar floor and found a jagged hole. How he skirted it and found his door jammed, but managed to force it open and helped the others who had been asleep in the same alleyway. He told me of fourteen hours in the coldness of an open boat before being picked up by a neutral ship- the whole crew luckily- all suffering from cold and, strangely enough, seasickness from the unfamiliar motion.³⁴⁸

The show ended by concluding that 'they can't be frightened.'¹⁹ Already the seaman was being displayed as brave and courageous despite the dangers and difficulties of war which beset him and is suggestive of the heroic image bestowed upon the merchant service later in the war.

However, such a brave image was not replicated in contemporaneous films.

³⁴⁷ 'Fleet was short of men in crisis', *The Daily Express*, 14 December 1938, p.5.

³⁴⁸ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Ships Sail On*, 17 January 1940.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Early in the war the Merchant Navy were shown filmically to be in the care of the Royal Navy and as such showed deference towards their military counterpart. The documentary *SS Ionian* (Humphrey Jennings, 1939), filmed in July 1939 but released after the outbreak of war, explained that as merchant ships passed Royal Navy vessels they lowered their flags in a show of deference to the ‘greatest navy in the world.’ Moreover, it also explicitly stated that:

It is the job of the merchant ships to keep our larders full, to increase foreign trade, to take our stores to naval bases and naval ships and to furnish men for the Navy reserves. And in turn the Navy protects the merchant ships, their cargoes, their passengers and their men.

This emphasis on protection and deference can also be seen in the feature film *Convoy* (Penn Tennyson, 1940), which although focusing on the officers of the Royal Navy features the merchant service. In the course of the film Captain Armitage, of the Royal Navy, does praise the merchant seamen. When berating two midshipmen for mocking the merchant vessels they were escorting, he recognises the merchant seamen’s knowledge and experience by stating ‘those skippers were mariners when you were toddling round the park with your nannies.’ However, this faint praise is largely undermined by the content of the film. The only merchant ship shown is the *Seaflower* which is captained by a foolhardy rough old seadog who continually defies the orders of the Royal Navy. This ultimately leads to his death and draws the Royal Navy into battle. Such a depiction reflects the pre-war image of the merchant service which compared poorly to the staid respectable image of the Royal Navy in the same period.³⁴⁹ The unequal relationship between the Royal Navy and the merchant vessels is made explicit in the course of the film. The hierarchy

³⁴⁹ Summerfield, ‘Divisions at Sea’, p.334. There was, perhaps, some amount of truth to this image given the lengthy correspondence between the Crown Film Unit and a boarding house owner who sought repayment when one of the stars, who were actually men of the merchant service, of 1944 film *Western Approaches* fell asleep while drunkenly smoking and set fire to his bed.

between the services is revealed when the Merchant Navy skipper is instructed to take his cap off while in the Royal Navy captain's office. Similarly, Captain Armitage tells the Merchant Navy skipper 'as long as your ship's in my convoy you're under my orders' again making plain the chain of command. However, the merchant skipper is unwilling to cede his authority to the Royal Navy. He refuses to scuttle his damaged ship as ordered and instead uses a covering of fog to attempt to make his own way home. In the process he shows his disdain for the Royal Navy as well as the convoy when he states 'I don't think we need bother with those seacocks any longer. We'd be better off on our own than with that blasted sea circus over there.' Then, as the skipper sings a song which ends with the line 'God bless the Navy but it's a merchant ship for me', he spots a German warship. In signalling for help the Seaflower is spotted and torpedoed by the Germans. His dying words

underline his foolishness in failing to heed orders. He croaks to his ship's mate that 'you were right I ought to 'ave stuck to convoy but I've always been a bit pigheaded.' The message of this film is therefore clear: the Royal Navy were in charge and those who deviated from their control would pay the ultimate price. The incompetence of the Merchant Navy is further emphasised by the absence of any references to its role – their sole representation is as bumbling fools who drag the Royal Navy into battle rather than as a vital component of waging a total war. That *Convoy* was the biggest box-office hit of 1940 suggests its portrayal of the Royal Navy as dashing heroes found resonance with the audience. As James Chapman points out:

The popular success of ... *Convoy* ... suggests that British audiences would accept strong patriotic sentiments and class-bound heroics, particularly in the early years of the war. [It]should not, therefore, be thought of as [an] inferior film, but rather as [an] example of a different approach to combining propaganda with popular entertainment.³⁵⁰

However, early filmic depictions of the Merchant Navy, as will be seen, are sharply at odds with the later increasingly heroic depictions afforded to the merchant service. Yet, the BBC chose a very similar image to portray as late as mid-1941. In July 1941 the BBC began broadcasting a programme designed to celebrate 'the gallant and splendid work being done by the Merchant Navy in this war' and was aimed at the Merchant Navy themselves.²² Although this programme, *The Blue Peter*, was originally conceived of as a celebration of the work at sea of both the Royal Navy and their Merchant Navy counterparts by the time of the broadcast of the

³⁵⁰ J. Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda 1939-45* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), p.184.

first show it had been reduced to a programme solely about the Merchant Navy as their needs were not catered for regularly anywhere else in the broadcasting

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schedules.³⁵¹ Despite the auspicious and laudable aims, the series received much criticism from the start and was replaced after only six months of broadcast. The main criticisms were that the show, despite being envisaged and touted as a mix of entertainment and information, leaned too much towards entertainment.³⁵² The show presented a series of skits interspersed with musical numbers which bore little relation to the life aboard a merchant vessel. Moreover, what little information was presented appears to have been only marginally linked to the work of the merchant service. For example, one programme included a lengthy discussion of the work of small-boat owners at Dunkirk.³⁵³ This style may be responsible for the accusation that the show was designed more for the audience at home than the merchant seaman.³⁵⁴ Moreover, praise was almost completely absent in *The Blue Peter*, another bizarre fault of the show given its initial remit. What little commendation is presented is far from strong. For example, in the first show a barmaid, in a sketch, makes reference, jokingly, to mistaking two Merchant Seamen for 'real sailors'; a joke perhaps designed to remind the listener of the hardships faced by the merchant service.²⁷ An equally oblique example of praise, also from the first show, comes in the form of a comparison to the Royal Navy. The compere states:

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ BBC Written Archive Centre, *The Blue Peter*, 9 August 1941.

³⁵⁴ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44. ²⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, *The Blue Peter*, 5 July 1941. ²⁸ Ibid.

BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44.

Now, as you know, when I was in the last war we did a great deal of service in the Merchant Service and the Reserves, and I always maintained that the toast of the sailor-man today should be the Sea Services, and that's why I like to refer to the Merchant Service as the Navy of Supply, and the Navy of Defence as our Admiralty, so that's how it is I speak of you fellows as the Navy of Supply.²⁸

This praise, again, is not strong, especially compared to other contemporary depictions, and hinges largely on the listeners' perceived high regard for the men of the Royal Navy. Nevertheless, praise for the merchant service, or indeed in-depth discussion of the service, was rare within the programme. Moreover, one of the recurring sketches featured in the show was that of the 'Ship's Narker'. These skits, which were often the first of the show, depicted a moaning seaman, the narker in Merchant Navy parlance, accompanied by his more upbeat friend. The narker, George, was shown to not only moan about everything, including the price of beer, rationing and the lack of sails on ships, but also to be unintelligent. He was repeatedly shown mixing up words or simply not understanding. He calls a bonfire a 'bomb fire' and calls Tutankhamen 'Tooting Common' and fails to grasp the concept of an Egyptian mummy being male. While his companion, Syd, was obviously more worldly and educated, George's stupidity and stubbornness were the focus of the skits. It also played to a, perhaps by then, outdated view of the Merchant Navy such as presented in the film *Convoy*. Far from being heroes of the sea as other contemporary representations would suggest, this man was the butt of the joke and therefore presented as unheroic. However, in contrast to the accepting way in which the merchant seaman in *Convoy* was received this unflattering representation did not go unnoticed. The National Maritime Board wrote to the BBC to complain that:

I have taken some little trouble to find out what the men really think and I am afraid it is not flattering. Last Saturday's effort was a particularly unfortunate one. The portrayal of a British Seaman as

illiterate is hardly in keeping with the facts as known to those of us who are intimately connected with the British Ship Adoption Society and the War Library Service.²⁹

The BBC responded:

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This item is broadcast as a comedy turn and in every case as far the item has been announced as such and therefore must be accepted with that premise. The material for this item has been carefully prepared and care has been taken to offset the seeming illiteracy of one character by the knowledgeable and good sense of the other.³⁵⁵

Despite this defence the 'Ship's Narker' was dropped from later shows. This section of the show perhaps best highlights that *The Blue Peter* largely failed to show the Merchant Navy in the heroic light which it had first intended to do. It also, perhaps, reflects a failure on the part of the BBC to negotiate the traditional image of the merchant seamen with his improved wartime status as will be examined in the remainder of this chapter.

However, it is possible to see *The Blue Peter* as a blip in the BBC's otherwise positive depiction of the Merchant Navy. In late 1941 *The Blue Peter* changed producer as well as department, moving from Talks to the much more obvious department of Variety, and was re-launched in January 1942 as *Shipmates Ashore*. This new programme was recorded in a Seamen's Club, eventually relocating to its own club donated by American donors, and fitted more exactly the brief of a mixture of information and entertainment. Mixed among the band numbers and celebrity guests, such as Leslie Howard and Vera Lynn, were debates and discussions of the

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44.

issues surrounding Merchant Seamen including the issue of uniform and concessions.

The show also featured a weekly 'Ship's Newspaper' which dealt in news exclusively pertinent to the Merchant Navy as well as in the later editions featuring actual seamen George Ralston as the 'Ship's Reporter' who presented a slightly lighter, but still factual, look at the life of the Merchant Navy. This show appears to have been more successful, or at least considered to have been so by those at the BBC, as it ran from 1942 until well into 1946.

iii. 'Soldier' Heroes

After the early months of the war the overwhelming cultural focus on the mercantile marine centred, as with government debates, on the dangers they faced rather than the essential role they played in a successful total war. There were persistent references to men in lifeboats for long periods and the constant dangers which beset convoys as well as tales of injured sailors. In the BBC's *Shipmates Ashore*, for example, The 'Ships Reporter', who had earned the job after being stranded in a lifeboat at sea for 30 days, and the 'Ship's Newspaper' both made these references repeatedly.³⁵⁶ However, on *Shipmates Ashore* this danger was much more muted than in the rest of the BBC's output. This was perhaps due to the fact this programme was aimed at the Merchant Navy themselves rather than a listening public. This muted danger appears to have been a policy consideration from the beginning. For example, in a meeting held in April 1941 it was recorded that:

³⁵⁶ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Shipmates Ashore*, 21 March 1942.

Elwes [from the Ministry of Shipping] asked that the greatest possible publicity should be given throughout the broadcasting service to the great and heroic part in the nation's war effort that was now being played by the Merchant Service; he also requested that too much stress should not be laid on the 'blood and thunder' aspects of their lives, since this was liable to depress the morale of their families and indirectly of the men themselves.³²

However, given the enormous emphasis placed on 'blood and thunder' in not only the BBC's output but also wider culture it is questionable whether the emphasis of

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this one programme could have stemmed that tide. One BBC broadcast, for example, on the different roles in merchant ships explained of the men in the engine room that:

They know that at any moment their engine or boiler room may be hit by a torpedo or a bomb, may become an inferno of scalding steam and flying metal. They know that the chequer plates on which they stand may rise up under them and fling them into the whirling cranks or dash them against the red-hot furnace doors.³⁵⁷

Another BBC broadcast similarly explained:

He goes into battle nearly unarmed. Once in his ship afloat, he has nothing behind him – no rest camps, no place to retire to if things get hot. If his narrow box of a ship is shot from under him there's nothing for it but a cold and merciless sea – in an open boat if he is lucky, perhaps on a carley float [a rubber lifeboat], quite likely in nothing but a lifebelt.³⁵⁸

Such depictions were common across all media. *The Daily Express* published a photograph, for example, titled 'And on the 83rd Day They Were Saved' which depicted three skeletal seamen on a life raft after an extended period adrift at sea.³⁵

³⁵⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Down in the Engine Room*, 12 January 1942.

³⁵⁸ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Courage of Merchant Seamen by George Blake*, 14 November 1943.

³⁵ 'And on the 83rd Day They Were Saved', *The Daily Express*, 22 March 1942, p.4.

BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44.

ATLANTIC LIFE-LINE

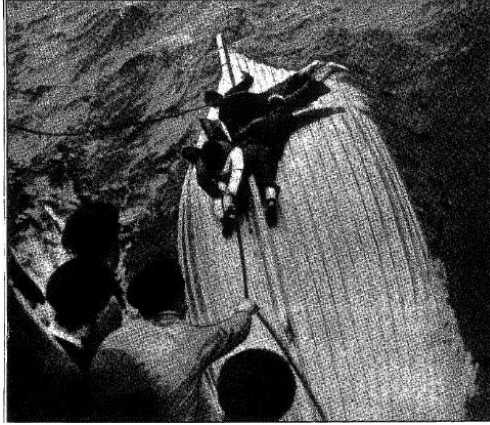


Figure 4.2, 'Atlantic Life-Line'

Similarly, *The Daily Mirror* published a photograph in January 1942 of three merchantmen, at the point of rescue, clinging to the bottom of an up-turned life-

boat.³⁵⁹ The *Picture Post* also dedicated several articles to the hardships faced by the mercantile marine. For example, one article entitled ‘Torpedoed’ devoted four pages to a seaman’s photographs documenting his experiences from when his ship was struck until rescue five days later. However, at no point does the article mention the actual work of the Merchant Navy.³⁶⁰ Moreover, perhaps the most infamous image on this subject was printed by *The Daily Mirror* in March of 1942. The cartoon, responding to the government’s increase in oil prices, depicted a beleaguered merchant seamen clinging to a door in a violent storm at sea. The cartoon was captioned ‘The price of oil has been increased by one penny. Official’. The newspaper argued that it represented a reminder to readers to remember the hardships faced by the Merchant Navy while Churchill saw it as an unpatriotic, and



Figure 4.3, ‘The Price of oil has been increased by one penny. Official’

possibly Fascist-orchestrated, attack on the state in wartime.³⁶¹ Regardless of true intent the cartoon reflected a cultural preoccupation with the extreme conditions

³⁵⁹ ‘Atlantic Life-Line’, *The Daily Mirror*, 9 January 1942, p.5.

³⁶⁰ ‘Torpedoed!’, *Picture Post*, 5 April 1941, pp.14-7.

³⁶¹ M. Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.75.

endured by the merchant service. While these portrayals present the men as very much part of the war it does potentially make them seem like passive victims rather than active participants. Such images implied not only that they had failed in their objectives but also that they were frequently in need of rescue, often by the Royal Navy. However, this constant emphasis did not go unnoticed and was met with some criticism. The Ministry of War Transport, endorsed by the Admiralty, sent a memo in February 1942 to the BBC, and judging by its wording about ‘publicity’ rather than ‘broadcasting’ it appears to have been sent to many companies with responsibilities for propaganda and publicity, complaining about the portrayal of the Merchant Navy. The memo argued that:

It is suggested that, owing to an accumulation of circumstances publicity about the Merchant Navy is creating undue public concern about shipping, is causing unnecessary anxiety to relatives of seamen and is not contributing to the maintenance of seamen’s morals... While stories of gallantry, of boys running away to sea and so forth occasionally appear, most of the Merchant Navy publicity has been focussed on the harassing experiences of survivors in lifeboats. This constant harping on the unhappy adventures of survivors would seem, over a period of time, to have determined the attitude of the public towards seamen so that today they are regarded, not as much as men who have accomplished great things, but rather as men who have suffered a great deal and endured much. The public are sorry for seamen and this feeling may largely account for the ready way in which purse strings have been loosened for Merchant Navy charities and for the underlying criticism that appears in the Press regarding the type, equipment and provisions of lifeboats.³⁶²

While the effect on public opinion appears to be conjecture on the part of the Ministry of War Transport, they rightly point out that most of the representations of the merchant service do focus on the dangers they faced and this, plausibly, could

³⁶² BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44.

have forged an image of the mercantile marine which provoked pity rather than reverence. Yet there may have been more practical reasons for the omission of the successes of the Merchant Navy. The BBC responded to the Ministry of War

Transport's worries as follows:

I hope it will be possible to let the DG [Director General] know that we do everything in our power to get news talks which illustrate the achievements of the Merchant Navy, and we are constantly thwarted by censorship. We received only about a fortnight ago a first-class story of the salvage of a tanker which was drifting into a minefield. This tanker contained 10,000 tons of oil, and it was rescued by a few men from a cable ship. That has been stopped in spite of our renewed request for an examination of the script. I had the final letter only this morning, in fact since this memo began. We had a story which was not unlike this but not so spectacular, that was also stopped. Then there was the story of Caroline and the time bombs- this ship was attacked from the air and several time bombs fell into the hold. The sailor from Caroline gave a magnificent description of going down into the hold and salvaging these time bombs (which went tick tock), and saved the ship from total loss with all its cargo... But we have done quantities of material about the Merchant Navy, although we have lately rather slowed down on the open-boat stories which seem to me to get monotonous. Features Department tell me there is a very good market for them all the same.³⁶³

Despite such practical reasoning from the BBC, the Ministry of War Transport gave their own reasons for why they thought this focus had occurred:

The Press, partly through limitations of space, are more and more inclined to stress the sensational highlights of war and the achievements of the Merchant Navy are too often humdrum and unspectacular. Indeed, most of their highlights only occur in moments of disaster.³⁶⁴

Indeed, while the Ministry of War Transport was correct in detailing the media focus

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44.

‘such moments of disaster’ could also prove to be the moment when the mercantile marine were able to excel and could, rather than create an image of a workforce to be pitied, instead have portrayed the men of the mercantile marine as wartime heroes. For example in 1943, *The Daily Mirror* published a cartoon which depicted a merchant seaman striding across the sea carrying a box of ammunition and a box of food. He is ignoring bombs as they drop around him as he strolls through u-boatinfested waters. This image too shows a pre-occupation with the dangers the seamen faced. However, the box of ammunition, with which he is literally shouldering the burden



Figure 4.4, ‘Praise the men who bring the ammunition’

of war, is larger than the box of food and more prominently in the viewer’s line of vision. Moreover, the title explicitly mentions ammunition not food. This serves to connect the Merchant Navy firmly with the military war effort.³⁶⁵ The message of this cartoon is clear. The merchant seaman is very obviously playing a heroic part in

³⁶⁵ ‘Praise the men who bring the ammunition’, *The Daily Mirror*, 12 April 1943, p.5.

Britain's war effort. The combination of this association and the militaristic dangers faced by the merchant seamen allies him to the soldier hero ideal.

Similarly, in the 1944 Crown Film Unit feature film *Western Approaches* Bob, one of a group of merchant seamen stranded in a lifeboat, explains his experience of what happened when their ship was attacked:

So anyhow I got up and by the time I got up to the boat, half of them was in the boat and half was on the ladder. And up popped Jerry and I thought 'what the hell was that?' I damn soon found out. They opened up on us...Fellas was dropping off the ladder into the water. I seen the fellas in the boat falling down. And just then she took a heave and I must've caught my foot in something and I went down with her. I was going down and down. I could feel the pressure on me here [indicates his side] and in me ears. Then the boilers must've went. I shot up to the top. I had my eyes open and I was looking up. I could see the sky getting brighter and brighter, y'know the top of the water. And I came up to the top and I thought I was an aeroplane. I bloody near came right out of the water. And I looked around me. All that was left was a few spots of oil. Not a damned soul anywhere.

Despite the emphasis on the dangers faced these stories of enemy attack and subsequent survival are almost indistinguishable from those experienced by the Royal Navy. For example the crew in *In Which We Serve* (Noël Coward, 1942) languish in a lifeboat for much of the film, showing a parallel between the exploits of the Merchant Navy and their armed forces counterpart. Danger and death on duty was something experienced primarily by the armed forces and so dying, or coming close to death, on duty not only reminded the viewers of the sacrifices that were made by the men of the merchant service but also suggests they were akin to the armed forces. Spaces inhabited, as well as actions undertaken, are central here. The Merchant Navy worked primarily in battlegrounds and, unlike ordinary civilians,

were not sheltered from the worst of the war. In fact, it was most likely these dangers that set merchant seamen apart from other civilians. It was the most tangible difference between their work and those in less treacherous civilian occupations who were very much separated, as was seen in previous chapters, from the ideal form of masculinity. Therefore, these dangers and proximity to death could have potentially linked the men of the merchant service to the soldier hero and so distanced them from suggestions of pity.

Yet even after the early days of war the depicted relationship between the Royal and the Merchant Navies could be somewhat ambiguous. This is especially apparent in artistic depictions where the focus generally fell on the convoy as a whole rather than on individual members of either the Royal or the Merchant Navies. For example, the work of Richard Eurich, Roland Vivian Pitchforth and John Nash all focus on the convoy in this way.³⁶⁶ The effect of this is difficult to ascertain. It could potentially link the Merchant Navy to the war effort as it shows merchant vessels at sea with the Royal Navy and often, as with the Richard Eurich painting below, shown under attack and so subject to the military dangers of war. However, pictorially the Merchant Navy are not highly distinctive from the Royal Navy especially when seen at a distance. Flags were rarely depicted or were unclear and guns were an equally unhelpful distinguisher as merchant vessels were armed during

³⁶⁶ For example: Roland Vivian Pitchforth, 'Frigates Escorting and Atlantic Convoy', 1944 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London); Richard Eurich, 'Attack on a convoy seen from the air', 1941 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London); John Nash, 'Convoy Scene', Undated (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).



Figure 4.5, Richard Eurich, 'Attack on a Convoy seen from the air'



Figure 4.6, John Nash, 'Convoy Scene'

this period. Moreover, while they were portrayed in battle this is depicted both from the air and at a distance and so it perhaps lacks the drama as presented in other media. While this perhaps is not a poor depiction of the Merchant Navy it is far from the glowing depictions seen elsewhere. However, in other portrayals the unequal relationship was made much more explicit. Some depictions emphasised the Royal Navy's role as protectors. For example, one *Daily Mirror* cartoon from May 1943 depicted a sailor with H.M.S. Littleships emblazoned on his jumper marking him out as a sailor from the Royal Navy. On his back he carries a mine which is tagged 'Axis Menace to Allied Shipping' and between his legs pass the allied convoys.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁷ 'Pocket Atlas', *The Daily Mirror*, 6 May 1943, p.3.



Pocket Atlas

Figure 4.7, 'Pocket Atlas'

This cartoon seems to suggest that the men of the convoys, presumably the Merchant Navy, were protected by the Royal Navy. Similarly, one BBC broadcast declared:

But let me say that the merchant seamen do not forget and will ever remember with deep gratitude what they owe to their comrades in the Royal Navy, and to the brave and ever-vigilant airmen who have shared the responsibility of protecting as far as they could the merchant ships. Many seamen owe their lives, after shipwreck by enemy action, to our air patrols, the Royal Navy, Air Force and Navies of our Allies.³⁶⁸

While this may have been largely true it does present a less equivocally positive image as presented in other media and may have potentially distanced the mercantile marine from the ideal of the 'soldier hero'.

However, such portrayals were extremely rare. There were relatively few depictions, certainly after the first few months of war which suggested that the Merchant Navy were shielded by the Royal Navy despite such an image reflecting the reality of the convoy system. If we return to Sonya Rose's conceptualisation of

³⁶⁸ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Heroes Without Uniforms* by Sergeant Bill Richardson, 8 April 1943.

British hegemonic masculinity during this period being a ‘temperate masculinity’ we can see many similarities between that ideal and the ways that men in the Merchant Navy were regularly represented. The Merchant Navy were frequently depicted in a ‘soldierly’ way. Perhaps this can most obviously be seen in the relationship between the Merchant and Royal Navies as typically depicted later in the war. Instead of the merchant service being shown as a deferential servant and a liability to the mighty Royal Navy, as was seen in early filmic depictions, the two sea services were presented as equals in terms of both seamanship and bravery. Indeed, an MOI short, *Seaman Frank Goes Back to Sea* (Eugene Cekalski, 1942) suggested the differences between the two services were cosmetic only. In the opening commentary of the short the narrator explains that: ‘These are the men of the Merchant Navy. None of the glamour of the Royal Navy, but sailors of the finest type for all that.’³⁶⁹ Similarly, in *Western Approaches* (Pat Jackson, 1944), a docu-drama made by the Crown Film Unit using actual merchant seamen, the captain of a merchant vessel and the captain of the Royal Navy ship controlling the convoy are shown coming to the same conclusions, separately, about the measures needed to preserve a struggling merchant ship. This suggests a parity of knowledge regarding seafaring. Primarily, however it must be remembered that merchant seamen were able to blur the distinction between civilian and military roles by their use of arms. Military action was unquestionably masculine given the combat taboo surrounding women.³⁷⁰ As Rose states: ‘Wars have been among the most gendered of events. Classically, and

³⁶⁹ National Archives, INF 6/559.

³⁷⁰ C. Peniston-Bird, C., ‘Classifying the Body in the Second World War: British Men In and Out of Uniform’ in *Body & Society*, 9 (2003), p.32.

even more pointedly in the period under discussion... soldiering was quintessentially a male civic responsibility.³⁷¹ While not members of the armed services the men of the Merchant Navy were able to mirror the behaviours more readily associated with the military man. Penny Summerfield states that in reality the 'maritime war, then, was fought by the Royal Navy with its secure place in British culture and society, and suffered by the Merchant Navy.'³⁷² However culturally, at least, this clear distinction was somewhat lost. With their use of arms, merchant seamen were able to emulate the actions of their armed forces counterparts. For example, the central crew of *Western Approaches*, those who served on board the Jason who are stranded in a life-boat, are rescued not by the Royal Navy but by a fellow merchant ship, The Leander. In doing so The Leander destroys a German U-boat, therefore displaying behaviour more readily associated with the Navy than the civilian merchant service. The division between the military and civilians is transgressed here. The Merchant Navy are deployed in an active military engagement as opposed to passively transporting cargo. Moreover, as in earlier depictions, there is no discussion of cargoes or the important role of the merchant service but this, instead of failing to highlight their importance, actually makes them almost indistinguishable from their Royal Navy counterparts and so seems to give the two services equal status. The film was unusual for a Crown Film Unit documentary as it was given a cinema release rather than being shown through the non-theatrical film division of the MOI suggesting the topic was felt to be both important and interesting, a suggestion reinforced by the fact it was filmed in expensive and time-consuming Technicolor.

³⁷¹ Rose, *Which People's War?*, p.160.

³⁷² Summerfield, 'Divisions at Sea', pp.334-5.

Consequently, this film depicting the Merchant Navy in a positive way reached a relatively large audience.

This link is made similarly apparent in the Crown Film Unit short *Merchant Seamen* (J.B. Holmes, 1941), which despite being a short was released in cinemas again suggesting a large audience.³⁷³ Early in the film, a young seaman, Nipper, is injured. While convalescing, he expresses his desire to get 'Jerry' back when he is well. When pressed on how he is going to achieve that goal he states that he will join the Royal Navy. He is told 'stay in the Merchant Navy and take a course in gunnery. That'll give you a chance to get your own back.' The film then shows Nipper on his gunnery course. Upon his return to service he destroys a U-Boat, an action which prompts a Royal Navy commodore to remark, 'well, you know, its worthwhile supplying merchant ships with guns. They know how to use them.'⁵¹ Similarly, one typical description in *The Scotsman* declared in 1941:

By time and resolute use of their guns our merchant seamen often preserve themselves from danger, and turn the tables on the enemy. In the month of December there were three cases in which merchantmen fought duels with submarines and had the better of the exchange. They have also been successful against aircraft. Up to the present 27 aeroplanes attempting to bomb merchantmen have been brought down by merchantmen's guns, and 15 other have probably been destroyed.³⁷⁴

By depicting the mercantile marine as armed, and skilfully so, parity between the armed services and the merchant service is emphasised and thereby linking merchant seamen to that wartime ideal.

³⁷³ National Archives, INF 6/332.

⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ 'Merchant Ships' Armaments', *The Scotsman*, 6 March 1941, p.6.

However, while films and newspapers went to great lengths to accentuate the relationship between the services, references to the Royal Navy were rare in the BBC's *Shipmates Ashore* and *The Blue Peter* except for, perhaps, their implied role in convoys. This may have been an attempt on the part of the BBC to create an image of the Merchant Navy which drew on its own merits rather than relying on comparisons to the Royal Navy. For example, in the notes from a BBC production meeting it was noted:

The Merchant Navy are at a disadvantage in this respect. Whatever the trials and hardships of a soldier in the Eighth Army may have been he was at least recompensed by that moment of great satisfaction which followed the victory in Egypt. He knew that at such a time his deeds were fully reported in the Press at home and that his relatives and friends knew that he had a hand in it. So with the Royal Navy and the Air Force. Each have their moments when unquestioned achievements are recognised and there can be no better nourishment to morale than this. It is the way that tradition is created.³⁷⁵

Moreover, in the notes for the reshaping of *The Blue Peter* into *Shipmates Ashore* it was requested by Seymour de Lotbotiniere, then Director of BBC Outside Broadcasts, 'That it be given no Royal Navy flavour.'³⁷⁶ This suggests that the BBC were keen to shape an image of the Merchant Navy which was distinct from their Royal Navy counterparts. However, such a depiction was overwhelmingly contradicted by other BBC programmes. There were, for example, frequent references to the merchant service, actively fighting the war. For example, one broadcast regarding the work of the Merchant Navy declared 'And so we came to port, ready to go out again to fight the u-boats and anything else the Axis can devise'

³⁷⁵ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

and another stated ‘the seafaring men who were fighting the battle of the Atlantic when most of us in Khaki were still in civilian clothes.’³⁷⁷ Moreover, radio depicted militaristic dangers which were not regularly depicted elsewhere. There were, for example, frequent references to men’s experiences as prisoners of war and subsequent escape. For instance, the following is an excerpt is from one seaman’s description of his flight through France:

The nearest we came to recapture was in a famous French city when we tried to cross its main bridge. A German soldier was demanding passports on the other side- we did not see him until it was too late to turn back and we had to do something mighty quick. So, when we were within a few yards of him, I dropped a bottle of French wine which had been given to us by a dear old Frenchwoman, on the white concrete of the bridge. It made a nice big red stain. The German soldier grinned, thinking it was a huge joke that we had lost the wine. He nudged us, heaved us a kick, and said: ‘Nichts Wein’, but he forgot in his amusement, to ask for our passports. We got across safely.³⁷⁸

Such tales of escape and derring-do, alongside other militaristic dangers presented on radio, were more regularly associated with depictions of the armed services and thereby reinforces the link between the mercantile marine and the ideal masculine occupation despite BBC efforts to the contrary.

It was not, however, only the relationship between the services which conferred ‘soldier hero’ status upon the mercantile marine in wartime. The Merchant Navy was depicted as capable of great and heroic deeds as seen, for example, in the Ealing drama *San Demetrio, London* (Charles Frennd, 1943). The film dramatised the true story of the crew of the *San Demetrio* who, after being forced to abandon ship

³⁷⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, *News Talk by An Officer of the Merchant Navy*, 11 February 1942.

³⁷⁸ BBC Written Archive Centre, *The Story of Gerald Riley (Survivor from the MOPAN)*, 26 August 1941.

because of a torpedo attack, re-boarded their flaming ship, put out the flames and steered the damaged oil tanker, and its full cargo, home to Britain. Although the *San Demetrio* begins the film in convoy, the Royal Navy are only briefly seen. However, its representation is dramatic as it focuses on the suicidal sinking of the *Jervis Bay*, one of the most prominent and reported acts of bravery committed by the Royal Navy during the war. The *Jervis Bay* sacrificed itself, and most of its crew, to allow the rest of the convoy the chance of escape from German warships.³⁷⁹ In the film, the *San Demetrio*'s Chief Engineer, Pollard, watches the *Jervis Bay* being outgunned and declares 'I've seen some wonderful things done at sea in my time but...' His sentence trails off suggesting he can find no words to describe the unparalleled act of heroism he is witnessing. It is within this context of selfless bravery that the crew of the *San Demetrio* commit their gallant deeds. Although, perhaps, nothing the merchant service do in the course of the film matches the Royal Navy's suicidal bravery the men of the *San Demetrio* are still presented in a heroic light. The crew of the *San Demetrio* continue to work despite injury and illness. The character of Boyle works until he collapses, and subsequently dies, while Pollard, the Chief Engineer, continues work without sleep and despite an injured hand. Moreover, even when Preston, one of the seamen, is flung across the deck in a violent storm he shrugs off enquiries about broken bones with a short reply of 'naw, none so you'd notice it.' Equally, the crew of the *Jason* in *Western Approaches* are shown to be willing, albeit slightly reluctantly for some, to forego being rescued in order to ensure the safety of their would-be rescuers in the *The Leander*. The captain of the

³⁷⁹ 'Fought Nazi Warship: Let Convoy Get Away', *The Daily Record and Mail*, 9 November 1940, p.8.

Jason persuades his crew with the following speech:

If Rawlston saw the u-boat, and there are plenty of them around here, that boat's as good as sunk. Now are you prepared to see that happen? What about you O'Malley, or you Evans? Or you too Banner? How would we feel if we let that ship come and be sunk in front of us without us doing anything to prevent it? Speaking for myself, I don't want to have it on my mind for the rest of my days.

This is then followed by a scene in which they try to divert attention from The Leander although this ultimately fails. This bravery, gallantry and pragmatic tactical thinking shows the men of the Merchant Navy to display characteristics more commonly associated with the armed forces.

Moreover, bravery was explicitly discussed, not only implied, through brave actions at sea (which, of course, were omnipresent). It was often stated that the act of going to sea knowing the dangers which beset merchant ships was a brave act in and of itself. For instance, in one BBC broadcast, when describing one seriously injured man who had received some brandy it was stated 'He smiled as well as his battered face would let him, took another drink and said "I hope I get luck like this next time I catch a packet." I was struck by his phrase next time. There was no suggestion that he should give up.'³⁸⁰ This was more emphatically stated in other places. For example, George Blake, again on the BBC, stated:

That's my notion of courage- the getting along with the job, in the face of the most ghastly dangers and the most ghastly consequences of mishap; and still getting along with it after more than four years of heavy sinkings and heavy casualties and acute discomfort. With the most profound respect to the armed forces of all the United Nations, I still insist that this is the highest courage of all- this sustained, cold courage: not through some minutes of desperate

³⁸⁰ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Down in the Engine Room*, 12 January 1942.

gallantry, but over years now of protracted risk and frequent horror.³⁸¹

While it is unclear if the ‘years now of protracted risk and frequent horror’ to which Blake refers are a reference to merely the war years or the known hardships of the mercantile marine in peacetime it is likely that discussions of these horrors would have likened them in the public mind to the experiences of the armed forces at war and so to the armed forces ideal.

Such parallels were similarly clear in state propaganda. However, unlike other civilian occupations the main source of praise for the merchant service did not come from the state. Yet while the state’s portrayal of the mercantile marine were not numerous, they were unerringly positive.³⁸² Unlike those in industry and agriculture, who were often harangued and exhorted to work harder, those in the mercantile marine were simply praised. Strikingly, the men are always pictured from below – the classic technique to emphasise the greatness of the subject depicted. Moreover, the men are ruggedly handsome, powerfully strong and so very clearly masculine.

³⁸¹ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Courage of Merchant Seamen by George Blake*, 14 November 1943.

³⁸² Charles Wood, ‘The Life-line is firm thanks to the Merchant Navy’, (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London); ‘To The Merchant Navy – Thank You’, National Archives, INF 3/124.



Figure 4.8, 'The life-line is firm thanks to the Merchant Navy,'



Figure 4.9, 'To The Merchant Navy, Thank You'

Furthermore, as in the second poster pictured above, they are pictured with guns reinforcing their link to the military ideal. What these posters suggest is not only the high regard in which the Merchant Navy was held but also that they were held in higher esteem than their industrial and agricultural counterparts. Where those workers were almost constantly cajoled by the state, the Merchant Navy seems to have been above reproach. This suggests a hierarchy of masculinities during the war in which the merchant seamen featured high above his industrial and agricultural counterparts.

Moreover, rather than the mercantile marine being harangued it was the viewer, or reader, who was constantly exhorted to remember the trials that merchant seamen had endured to bring goods to Britain. As noted in the agriculture chapter, calls to prevent waste and to dig for victory often centred squarely on the Merchant Navy reinforcing suggestions of a masculine hierarchy. However, such emphasis was also found constantly out with state propaganda. Newspaper readers were continually

exhorted to remember, for example, their ‘Debt to Merchant Seamen’.³⁸³ Similarly, the book *Red Ensign*, a wartime history of the convoy, stated:

Day after day this work goes on, that the people of Britain may live. In that unceasing and uninterrupted flow of imports and exports is the concrete and glorious evidence of the persistence of human endeavour. To a British observer there could be no more heartening sight in England during war-time: a sight to lift his heart with pride at the collective effort which has brought about that grand result, and he will do well to ponder on the thoughtfulness, the efficiency and the unquestioning courage that has gone to the landing of single cases of oranges on a Liverpool wharf for English children. A German observer might find something remorseless in that same scene of activity: and to him those busy ships might well be the symbols of that sea-power he had hoped to break but which is itself exerting its own inexorable pressure by sustaining his enemy to victory... Such is the work of the ocean convoys. Their service is noble, and Britain owes them much.³⁸⁴

Similarly, the BBC placed great emphasis on the praise and reward of the men in the Merchant Navy. For example, Vic Oliver, star of the popular radio show *The Hi! Gang*, stated in one *Shipmates Ashore* broadcast:

But honestly and seriously, as the worst sailor who ever crossed the Atlantic on his back, I want to tell you chaps here—and all your pals who will be listening all over the world – how grateful we are to the Merchant Navy. Don’t think because we don’t always talk about it that we don’t know or think about what you are doing to deliver the goods here. We think about you plenty and we welcome no one more sincerely to our shows than the men with the little M.N. badge in their buttonhole. If we can give you a laugh and a song to take away, we feel we have done a little bit to repay you.³⁸⁵

However, most of the praise to be found in *Shipmates Ashore* was more understated.

This seems to have been a matter of policy. In the meetings to shape the new

³⁸³ ‘Debt to Merchant Seamen’, *The Scotsman*, 13 October 1942, p.8.

³⁸⁴ O. Rutter, *Red Ensign: A History of Convoy* (London: Robert Hale Limited, 1943), p.179.

³⁸⁵ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Shipmates Ashore*, 7 January 1942.

Shipmates Ashore in December 1941 it was suggested that ‘it be not directed at showing the landsman what a fine fellow the merchant seamen is. That must be done elsewhere in programme.’³⁸⁶ This certainly comes in the muted praise which is directed at the Merchant Navy. For example, such comments as ‘You can take it from me, people would be only too pleased to acknowledge a merchant seamen’ and ‘I don’t suppose either the ships or the men look so spick and span now as they did in the old days – but they’re doing a far bigger job. We’re just beginning to realise what they’ve been up against’ are common throughout the programme.³⁸⁷ While this praise is understated on *Shipmates Ashore* other parts of the BBC’s programme were more emphatic. For example the following was included in a *Sunday Postscript* by noted ex-seamen Frank Laskier:

If you people will only realise that no matter what you are doing the food you eat, the petrol you use, the clothes you wear, the cigarettes you smoke, that so very many things are brought over by the sailor. We will never let you down; we will go through trials unimaginable. We’ll fight and we’ll fight and we’ll sail, and we’ll bring back your food.³⁸⁸

Such statements which resolutely linked the seamen not only to the war effort but also connect their sacrifice to the listener at home were common on the BBC and other media throughout the war out with programmes aimed directly at the mercantile marine and as such reaffirmed the high esteem the Merchant Navy were held in during wartime.

³⁸⁶ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44.

³⁸⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Shipmates Ashore*, 7 January 1942.

³⁸⁸ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Sunday Postscript by Frank Laskier*, 26 October 1941.

Indeed, huge outrage was displayed when there were slights, or indeed perceived slights, against the men of the Merchant Navy. A scathing and provocative article in *The Daily Mirror*, for example, regarding the poor merchant seamen's badge claimed that merchant seamen were 'being LET DOWN' by 'that tiny badge which many of them feel "ashamed to wear" – it looks so ridiculous'. The article preceded this by stating, specifically of the Merchant Navy, 'if you are serving your country in non-uniformed work it is only fair that you should have some insignia of a job which is often as full of danger and self-sacrifice as the actual fighting.'³⁸⁹ This was a commonly-held view and newspapers, for example, regularly published pieces questioning the lack of a Merchant Navy uniform. A uniform was, of course, representative of the celebrated masculinity and so was an emblem of the brave, heroic and important deeds which the armed forces had undertaken. By demanding a uniform for the merchant service such journalists were calling for the service to be granted a similar status to that awarded to the armed forces.

Such positive opinions were mirrored in the general populace. Mass Observation files show the MOI short *Seaman Frank Goes Back To Sea* was largely disliked. One of the main criticisms of the film was that it failed to show the Merchant Navy, and the dangers they faced adequately. One respondent to Mass Observation referred to the merchant seamen's 'grim struggle which is enacted daily at Sea [sic] he can not stay at home otherwise we will all starve.' This was a message the respondent felt the film had 'failed miserably' to achieve.³⁹⁰ Another respondent

³⁸⁹ 'The Story of 5/8 of an inch', *The Daily Mirror*, 3 February 1940, p.8.

³⁹⁰ M-OA: TC Films 1937-48, 17-8-E, Observers Letters About MOI Films.

even commented that ‘I consider that the action of the National Savings Committee, in playing on our sympathy for the men of the Merchant Navy, is offensive.’³⁹¹ Moreover, Mass Observation files also show that merchant seamen were often applauded when they came on screen during newsreels unlike industrial or agricultural workers who were generally recorded as having elicited no response.³⁹² This positive reaction to the Merchant Navy by the public was regularly recorded. Home Intelligence reports, for example, recorded in February 1944 of the war at sea that ‘Confidence and pride continue, with particular satisfaction at the January joint statement on U-boat warfare. The Merchant Navy is singled out for special praise.’³⁹³ Moreover, towards the end of the war there were frequent indignant remarks made about the fact merchant seamen were not demobbed as the armed services were. In November 1944, for example, reports recorded that ‘Dissatisfaction continues at the Government’s refusal to let merchant seamen rank as servicemen for reinstatement in civil employment.’³⁹⁴ Similarly, BBC Listener Research shows that the mercantile marine were well received on the radio. One typical comment, in response to exseaman Frank Laskier’s appearance on *Postscripts*, was ‘Thrilling, interesting, welltold. It makes us Landlubbers feel mean, even in blitzed Brum.’³⁹⁵ Indeed, the most common criticisms of depictions of the Merchant Navy on radio, as with film,

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² M-OA: TC Films 1937-48, 17-7-g, Newsreel Reports 1939-1940; M-OA: TC Films 1937-48, 17-7-f, Newsreel Reports 1940-1945.

³⁹³ Anonymous, Ministry of Information Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No.176, 17th February 1944, National Archives, CAB 121/106.

³⁹⁴ Anonymous, Ministry of Information Home Intelligence Weekly Report, No.215, 16th November 1944, National Archives, CAB 121/106.

³⁹⁵ BBC Written Archive Centre, R9/5/116- Audience Research- Reports, Sound 166- Talks, *Postscripts* 1941/1942.

were that the BBC had failed to show the seamen's bravery and courage in an adequate manner. For example, one listener asked to comment on *A Tribute to British Seamen* broadcast in 1943 stated 'it was a catalogue of what we owe the Merchant Navy, but not a thrilling programme such as the subject deserved.'³⁹⁶ Together this evidence suggests that the British public saw the service in the Merchant Navy as deserving of great praise and as analogous to the military and so sought for them to be treated in similar ways, an opinion largely replicated in popular culture. Moreover, as well as the constantly positive comments found, attention must be drawn to the fact that such comments exist at all. Industrial and agricultural workers, especially male workers, were rarely discussed in such reports. It is therefore arguable that the work of the merchant service made a much greater impact on the public than their civilian counterparts.

iv. Ordinary Heroes

Parallels between the portrayal of the merchant service and the armed forces were not only seen in their bravery and soldierly antics. The Merchant Navy often displayed, culturally at least, a sense of deep camaraderie which was also a key trait of the ideal image of the armed forces. Christine Geraghty argues that these male relationships were culturally necessary to preserve their human side. She contends that 'there is a danger... of male characters in war films appearing inhuman and uncaring, part of the machinery of warfare. The relationships within the group ensure that there is some way, however restrained, of expressing comradeship, grief and

³⁹⁶ BBC Written Archive Centre, R9/5/9- Audience Research- Reports, Sound 9- Features- June 1943- April 1944.

humour.³⁹⁷ As well as making these men human the depiction of male bonding served to embody another praised quality of the time; group heroism became more prized above individual bravery.³⁹⁸ As Rose states, the ideal man ‘was a team-player with strong bonds to his mates, yet distinguished himself: individuality, not individualism was key to wartime masculinity.’³⁹⁹ Filmic treatments of the merchant service certainly depict this quality of comradeship. Both *Western Approaches* and *San Demetrio, London*, show merchant seamen kindly tending to sick or dying colleagues as seen in the still below. Although this was typically regarded as a



Figure 4.10, Still from *Western Approaches*

feminine role, these men without women had to take on this task. As Joanna Bourke notes, when at war ‘men took over the roles of mother, sister, friend and lover... men nursed their friends when ill; they wrapped blankets around each other as a mother would a child’.⁴⁰⁰ Similarly, the men of the *Jacob*, in *Western Approaches*, are shown caring for their young deckhand, whose age is never revealed but appears to be a

³⁹⁷ C. Geraghty, ‘Masculinity’ in G. Hurd (ed), *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television* (London: BFI Publishing, 1984), p.24.

³⁹⁸ J. Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad’s Army* (Manchester: Manchester, 1997), p.84.

³⁹⁹ Rose, *Which People’s War?*, p.161.

⁴⁰⁰ J. Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Book, 1996), pp.133-5.

young teenager. One man foregoes his meagre water ration while another pretends to keep signalling the SOS, despite the battery having run out, so as not to upset him. And it is he who is first lifted on board the rescue vessel. Moreover, the BBC regularly recounted similar stories of men endangering themselves to save their shipmates. For example, *Shipmates Ashore* told the story of ‘Paddy Goucher’s

Souvenir’:

Bosun Paddy Goucher, Wicklow born, carries a lump of cannon shell in his head. It’s the last of 14 pieces which hit him when he went to the aid of a man during an attack on their coaster by a couple of Nazi planes in The Channel. They took the other pieces out at a London dockside hospital- when Paddy could spare the time. They couldn’t get him to lie down long enough to do it in one job.⁴⁰¹

This story is very telling. Paddy received his injuries not only in combat but saving a comrade – two key tropes of the ‘soldier hero’ concept which forms part of Rose’s conceptualisation of the ‘temperate hero’ – but he also declines treatment and carries on working, thereby reinforcing his manly image by refusing to succumb to injury. Similarly, in 1943 *The Daily Mirror* reported the death of seaman Kenneth Coleman. His shipmate told the paper that ‘As I struggled in the sea trying towards a boat, it was Coleman who pulled me on board. Next day he died... He must have been exhausted when he spent his valuable strength pulling me on board. I will never forget him. He was a man.’⁴⁰² This final sentence is particularly striking: to be considered ‘a man’ Coleman had displayed the attributes of gallantry, sacrifice and comradeship. These actions cumulatively underline the levels of comradeship

⁴⁰¹ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Shipmates Ashore*, 7 January 1942.

⁴⁰² ‘One By One They Died In Lifeboat...’. *The Daily Mirror*, 15 September 1943, p.2.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.153.

displayed in the merchant service and again liken them to the idealised construction of the armed forces in which unit cohesion was key to cultural representations. As well as showing them to be similar to men in the armed forces, this care and comradeship also distances the men from the perceived failings of the Germans. Rose argues that the temperate aspect of the ideal masculinity was a direct response to the notion of the Germans as unemotional and cold-hearted war machines.⁸¹ This was a prominent theme in wartime films, including *Went the Day Well?* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942) which depicted an imagined invasion of Britain by Germany and shows the German soldiers as brutish thugs. This difference is most obviously shown, with regards to the Merchant Navy, in the film *Western Approaches*. The Germans are depicted as bloodthirsty and eager for violence, whereas the British only ever use violence in response to attack. The Germans use the Jason's lifeboat as bait to attack the rescuer and their Captain declares lustily 'what I wouldn't give for another torpedo'. Production notes outline the story:

The lifeboat presents him [the German Captain] with this chance. He is prepared for a patient vigil, maybe for days, in the hope that an unsuspecting rescue ship will come along for him to send to the bottom. There are no histrionics - he arrives at this decision coolly, and in a perfectly detached manner. He looks through the periscope again, and says to himself- "the perfect decoy".⁴⁰³

This cool and detached attitude to death and the way the captain actively seeks to destroy ships typifies the British portrayal of Germans during the war. Moreover, the Germans are shown to have no loyalty to each other. They push and shove each other

⁴⁰³ National Archives, INF 1/213 pt 2.

⁸³ Ibid.

out of the way in the clamour to escape their damaged submarine. However, the shooting script of the film describes the following scene:

Soon there are about ten Jerries treading water around each boat. One of them is supporting a wounded comrade, who is almost exhausted. As is the fellow supporting him, and who, in broken English asked whether his colleague may support himself on the side of the boat. The British seamen realising the exhausted state of the man agree. Gratefully they are thanked by the fellow's friend, who treads water a few feet away. Many are in a very exhausted condition. Soon the wounded man as exhaustion overcomes him, begins to lose his grip on the side of the boat. The two seamen cannot watch him slowly lose consciousness and slip back into the sea. In spite of themselves and their recent experience, they can't help feeling sorry for him... the two seamen catch hold of him and drag him aboard.⁸³

The script goes on to describe how the three crews, two British and one German, work together to put out the flames on the damaged rescue ship *The Leander*, albeit with threats towards the Germans if they do not comply.⁴⁰⁴ Although the scene was probably intended to emphasise the inexorable kindness of the British it also shows the Germans caring for each other. However, this show of German humanity is missing from the final film and the fate of the damaged submarine, and its sailors, are left undeclared. Instead, the German military are depicted as bloodthirsty and selfish when compared to the selfless and essentially peaceful British merchant seamen which again parallels the way the armed forces were portrayed. This bond between the men of the Merchant Navy therefore likens them to their counterparts in the British armed forces while simultaneously distancing them from the perceived weaknesses of the Nazis.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

However, despite the Merchant Navy's increasingly militaristic depiction, the two sea services were never completely identically portrayed. Regardless of their later representations as autonomous heroes, the merchant service was continually shown to be comprised of men of a lower class than the Royal Navy. For example, *Convoy* and *Western Approaches* both depicted upper-class officers of the Royal Navy who are in stark contrast to the 'salty robustness' of the men of the merchant service.⁴⁰⁵ This did not go unnoticed. In unpublished remarks on the film *Western Approaches*, Arthur Calder-Marshall, a MoI minister, stated:

Two of the characters chosen- Benson and Carter- are of a more educated type. It is possible that the dialogue in the boat might be considered in reference to them. That is to say the talk about pubs and women is good stuff but also something of a cliché. We might be able to remind the public that the Mercantile Marine contains people interested in international affairs. I don't mean that these two characters should talk a lot of high-brow guff, but the imaginative texture of the film might be heightened by building up a plan for these characters slightly different from the plan of the others.⁴⁰⁶

Despite these protestations, this representation of merchant seamen never made it in to the final film and the seamen remained salty sea dog clichés, a depiction commonly emphasised throughout the war. However, the effect of this difference between the services changes as the war progresses. While the merchant skipper in *Convoy* has a broad Yorkshire accent which is used to comic effect when he tries to convince the German captain by speaking 'Spanish' ('us neutrali'), in later films, such as *Western Approaches* for example, it serves to make the merchant service look like a collection of 'ordinary' people pulling together in extraordinary

⁴⁰⁵ 'Western Approaches (1944)', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1944, p.140.

⁴⁰⁶ National Archives, INF 1/213 pt 1.

circumstances. This was a recurrent and key trope of the ‘people’s war’.⁴⁰⁷ This also reflects the change in the representation of the common man in film within which the representation of merchant seamen can be placed. Early in the war he was a comic foil but by the end he was the hero.⁴⁰⁸ As well as presenting a change in the depiction of the Merchant Navy this change reflected wider societal changes. As the war progressed there was a shift away from bold jingoism and heroism towards more sober realism and celebration of the ordinary man.⁸⁹ Indeed, as the war progressed the notion that the actions of civilians could be the decisive factor in assuring victory became more prominent. As Geoff Hurd notes the war called for a huge effort on the part of all civilians which meant a ‘rapid and genuine response to the aspirations and demands of subordinate groups and classes in order to win their support for economic and military mobilisations.’⁴⁰⁹ Therefore the concept of ‘we’re all in it together’ was seen in many films in the middle part of the war and the representation of civilians changed accordingly. Indeed, perhaps the Merchant Navy were a greater symbol of the increased valorisation of the working classes which took place in wartime than the Royal Navy, so connected, as they were, with the elite classes. This is perhaps best emphasised by the film *San Demetrio, London* which reported true events but rather than depicting the suicidal heroism of the Royal Navy it depicts the dogged tenacity of the merchant service. As Penny Summerfield states ‘Balcon saw the story of the men of the Merchant Navy, whose technical ingenuity and hard work

⁴⁰⁷ P. Summerfield and C. Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and The Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.106.

⁴⁰⁸ R. Murphy, ‘British Film Production 1939 to 1945’ in G. Hurd (ed), *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television* (London: BFI Publishing, 1984), p.14. ⁸⁹ Ibid, p.180.

⁴⁰⁹ G. Hurd, ‘Notes on Hegemony, the war and cinema’ in Hurd (ed), *National Fictions*, p.19.

brought the tanker home, as more important than that of naval heroism, and decided that San Demetrio rather than Jervis Bay should be the principal subject of his film'.⁴¹⁰ Moreover, the film focuses on lower ranked members of the crew, the Captain having been safely rescued, and decisions were depicted as democratically made rather than dictated by the highest ranking crew members. As such, again as Summerfield also notes, the film reflects the increasingly left-wing politics of British society and so therefore places the Merchant Navy at the heart of it making them symbols of this 'people's war'.⁹²

Such emphasis on the Merchant Navy as heroes in the 'people's war' was reinforced by other aspects of their depictions. They were often shown to have traits readily identifiable with being ordinarily British. Therefore, as well as arguably embodying the soldier hero aspect of 'temperate masculinity', men in the Merchant Navy also conformed to the 'ordinary' aspect of the conceptualisation. As Lant notes: 'Under these conditions there was an acute demand for coherent representations of the nation which could show it to be unified despite its real difference of class, nationality, culture and gender.'⁴¹¹ This sense of Britishness is underlined by the inclusion of many different regional accents. This can also be seen in female recruitment films such as *The Gentle Sex* (Leslie Howard, 1943) and *Millions Like Us* (Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943). Moreover, Summerfield and Peniston-Bird have argued, of the Home Guard, that this national inclusiveness

⁴¹⁰ Summerfield, "Divisions at Sea", pp.338-9.

⁹² Ibid, p.339.

⁴¹¹ A. Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.6.

symbolised Britain as a whole standing together.⁴¹² The same can be argued of the Merchant Navy. *Western Approaches* and *San Demetrio, London* and the BBC's *Shipmates Ashore* all made an effort to include many British accents although this was to the exclusion of the Chinese and Indian seamen who were never depicted culturally. While these men formed a sizable proportion of the merchant service they are excluded highlighting that film makers wished to portray the heroic exploits of merchantmen as purely white British endeavours.⁹⁵ Films, but especially radio, all include a selection of English accents as well at least one Welsh and Scottish character. They were truly British groups, not just English ones. This Britishness was also shown in their actions. In *San Demetrio, London* the crew reacts heartily to the prospect of a cup of tea as seen in the still overleaf. In order to make the tea the Chief Engineer risks blowing the ship up to light the stove, therefore showing its importance to the crew's morale, and one crew member points out to an American that there's 'not much in your line Yank' consequently marking tea-drinking out as a specifically British past-time. Similarly, merchant seamen were shown to be fond of drinking, another typical British male past-time. For example, the BBC's *Shipmates*

⁴¹² Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence*, p.108.

⁹⁵ Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War*, p.27.



Figure 4.11, Still from *San Demetrio, London*

Ashore was recorded in a seamen's club and regular references were made to drinking. Moreover, the following exchange takes place in *Western Approaches* between one of the seamen, Bob, and a journalist, Mr Russell, who happened to be on board when the Jason was sunk:

Bob (jokingly): Well I know what I'd be doing if I was at home now. In fact I know what we'd all be doing. Tell me Rusty what the devil would you be doing?

Mr Russell: It's one-forty now. Going down to Fleet Street, walking into a local and getting a tomato juice.

Bob: A what? A bleeding tomato juice? (laughs)

Unnamed seaman: Did I hear someone talking about boozers? Bob:

Aye, the conversation's slowly returning to normal.

The emphasis of this exchange is clear: 'real men' drink alcohol. Films about the Merchant Navy are littered with references to drinking. For instance, one man in *San Demetrio, London* declares 'What wouldn't I give to be having a pint in the Old Elephant now?' Similarly, as they are pulling in to port at the end of the journey, and the film, another declares his intention to get 'absolutely stinking'. Such an image was replicated on the BBC's *Shipmates Ashore* by the 'Ship's Reporter' and his emphasis on funny stories of life at sea. For example, he reports the tales of men trying to sneak dutiable items into Britain:

One little story I heard this week was that of a chap wanted to get 10 pairs of real Nylon full-fashioned stockings ashore. He put them all on, one on top of the other. Then he put his seaboots on and walked home. When he took off his seaboots at home to give his wife the stockings, there weren't any feet left in them. The BBC won't allow me to tell you what his wife said.⁴¹³

Ralston then ends this section with the point that 'I heard a lot of similar stories, but as there might be a tobacco wallah listening, I better leave them alone.'⁴¹⁴ The effect of this was to portray the Merchant Service as ordinary men who were keen to get one over on authority. As Penny Summerfield notes such a depiction was a carefully constructed image which balanced the more unpleasant aspects of the Merchant Navy's cultural persona with the need to project a unified image in wartime.⁴¹⁵ However, this emphasis on typical British traits gives the impression that these men in the Merchant Navy, were not only heroes but were fundamentally ordinary British men.

The use of comedy also marks these men out as specifically British heroes. Humour and stoicism were two key qualities of British identity in this period as made evident in the well-known phrase 'keep smiling through'.⁴¹⁶ Therefore, merchant seamen's jokes and banter became a sign of strength. Characters, especially on film, were often shown literally laughing in the face of danger. For example, the following light-hearted exchange between the Bosun and the gunner in *San Demetrio, London*, regarding one of their glum shipmates, takes place while under fire from a German warship:

⁴¹³ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Shipmates Ashore*, 3 April 1943.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Summerfield, 'Divisions at Sea', p.12

⁴¹⁶ Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, p.87.

Bosun: Ever seen him smile?

Gunner: Did once. Course it might've just been a touch of wind.

Bosun: Touch of wind? It'd need a whole gale.

This British stoicism is observed in the same film by the American seaman who states 'yeah they're singing alright. Here we are rolling about in the gale in the middle of the Atlantic, u-boats all around, no escort and as far as the British are concerned it still seems to be Saturday night.' The ordinariness of the seamen was also underlined by the perpetual emphasis on the 'the traditional modesty of the seamen.'⁴¹⁷ These men were often portrayed as unwilling to complain. For example, in a BBC Broadcast entitled *Ships Sail On* one seaman was described who had suffered a serious injury to the hand and it was explained that 'you can imagine how for days that hand must have tortured this first-tripper. Yet, he kept his look-out with the others. He never complained.'⁴¹⁸ Similarly, the following was printed in *The Glasgow Herald* in 1943 and notes a seaman's reaction to his being awarded a medal for bravery:

"I don't think I did anything outstanding", he said modestly, after getting over his surprise at the information. "When you are in the Navy you are in and ready to take the worst. Sticking to duty during dive-bombing is all in the day's work"... This reaction, when told of his latest award, was typical of traditions of the Merchant Navy.'⁴¹⁹

Praise for such attitudes, which *The Scotsman* tellingly referred to as 'quiet heroism', became prevalent on the British home front in this period and it is clear that cultural depictions emphasise this trait in the merchant service. Therefore their unassuming

⁴¹⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Ships Sail On*, 17 January 1940.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ 'Merchant Navy Awards', *The Glasgow Herald*, 21 July 1943, p.2.

and stoic nature links them, yet again, to the 'ordinary hero' trope while the emphasis on humour and stoicism underlined their specifically British heroism.

v. Gender relationships

Unlike those in industrial and agricultural occupations the men of the merchant service were not regularly depicted with women yet were still very visibly gendered in cultural depictions. Domesticity was a key part of the 'temperate hero' ideal and clearly applied to the mercantile marine. Although their families were rarely seen, given that most depictions were set at sea, there were numerous attempts to link the merchant service to the domestic world they were physically separated from. For example, in *San Demetrio, London* the Chief Engineer, Pollard, has a daughter about to sit her scholarship exams while the Bosun's wife is pregnant. Yet the sweethearts, wives and mothers of the men at sea generally appear, filmically at least, only in the imaginations of the men who long for home while they are at sea. For example, in *San Demetrio, London* one man declared as he rowed a lifeboat 'What wouldn't I give to be kipped down beside the old woman.' Similarly, in *Western Approaches* a crew member of the rescue ship dies when he is shot by the Germans. Referring back to a previous conversation regarding his desire to get home in time for his wedding anniversary, his dying words are 'Tell the wife, we nearly made that wedding anniversary.' These women are generally never given names and referred to only in the abstract: 'the wife'. Although this depersonalises these women, it also serves to make them symbols rather than characters linking these men in dangerous situations to the home life they long for. However, gender relationships were presented slightly

differently on radio. Both *Shipmates Ashore* and especially *The Blue Peter* featured messages from wives, girlfriends and mothers. For example, one ‘sweetheart’, in *The Blue Peter*, told her boyfriend:

Doreen calling. I hope you are listening. I received your last letter dated June 25th and I am hoping to hear from you soon again. Do you get my letters more regularly now? Keep sending cables darling, they are always welcome. I had a letter from your sister, your people are all well, your brother is in Liverpool. Just had a short holiday. Wish you had been with me. Take care of yourself sweetheart. I miss you terribly and love you more than ever. Bye bye, darling, all my love and may God bring you safely back.⁴²⁰

Similarly, while *Shipmates Ashore* devoted less time to personal messages, and read out messages rather than broadcasting the wife or sweetheart of seamen, the show still featured a regular ‘Personal Column’ in the ‘Ship’s Newspaper’ section of the show. While this new format was more factual and less obviously emotional it still broadcast news of mothers’ operations and sisters’ weddings which were equally as domestic as those broadcast during *The Blue Peter*.⁴²¹ These references not only to romantic love but maternal and sibling affection as well start to place the Merchant Seamen within the ‘ordinary hero’ trope as explored by Sonya Rose.

What is also apparent from the personal messages presented on radio is the ‘traditional’ way in which gender relations were presented with regards to the Merchant Navy. The women giving the message, and it was invariably a woman, (with the exception of a segment in *Shipmates Ashore* which allowed seamen to send messages to other seamen), rarely positioned themselves out with the domestic

⁴²⁰ BBC Written Archive Centre, *The Blue Peter*, 11 October 1941.

⁴²¹ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Shipmates Ashore*, 21 March 1942.¹⁰⁵

BBC Written Archive Centre, *The Blue Peter*, 5 July 1941.

sphere. Even if she did declare her role in the war effort it was often as a domestic help, working in a communal feeding centre for example.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, these women tended to emphasise their concern and care. For example, one wife stated on *The*

Blue Peter:

Hullo George darling, this is a wonderful moment for us both, after over a year's absence, and very kind of all concerned. Mother, Father, Bobby and family are well, and I am too, as usual. All our houses are still safe, through God's goodness...Our prayers are with you all on board, every day. We are so proud of your ship's lifesaving achievements in such dangers. I am longing to see you safely home again, when it is possible sweetheart.⁴²²

Similarly, on *Shipmates Ashore*, while the messages were read out by the announcer rather than by a wife or mother, there were regular messages of support to injured men from mothers, wives and sweethearts as well as reports of new born babies and mothers' operations. The cumulative effect of this perhaps was to reinforce an image of the brave hero of the sea and his waiting wife or mother, a classic female role. A similar picture was drawn filmically. The wives, sweethearts and mothers of those at sea are never referred to as doing any war work and the only tangible link they are ever given to the war is as challenged shoppers, in *Western Approaches*, or bombing victims, in *San Demetrio, London*. As such the relations between men and women remained very traditional with the men as heroic adventurers and women as stay-at-home wives. If we accept that masculinity is 'culturally defined as not feminine' this means that men in the Merchant Navy are shown to be more obviously 'manly' than their counterparts in other civilian occupations. Unlike industrial and

⁴²² BBC Written Archive Centre, *Shipmates Ashore*, 7 January 1942.

agricultural workers, their work remained very much ‘men’s work’ and therefore separated them from women.⁴²³

This ‘traditional’ gender relationship was furthered in *Shipmates Ashore* by the presence of women in the seamen’s club. The first show of the series opened with the declaration that the club was host to ‘30 really lovely girls from a West End show.’ Moreover, in the course of the show the listener was told ‘you should see these seamen deciding which girls they’re going to fight for. But they can’t go wrong today – not with 30 of the loveliest show girls in London.’ and ‘She’s a very luscious 17, boys. Sweet and wide-eyed. As pretty a picture as any seamen ever posted up over his bunk.’ Although this overtly sexual imagery was toned down after the first show as ‘it [was] apt to prejudice the programme’, perhaps reflecting a desire to distance the merchant service from their sexually licentious pre-war image, there remained an emphasis in each episode on introducing the girls in the club.⁴²⁴ For example, ‘It’s off-duty time at the Club and when the lads arrived they found a bunch of pretty W.A.A.F. here waiting for them.’ Similarly, one show opened with the following exchange between the hostess, Doris Hare, and a counterpart in New York, Paula Stone:

Doris Hare: We’re not doing so badly ourselves. Our officers and men are partnered by a whole hangar full of pretty WAAF- those are the girls attached to the R.A.F. Paula Stone: Well I’m glad they’ve been detached from the R.A.F. and taken in to convoy by the M.N., for today!⁴²⁵

⁴²³ S.M. Whitehead and F.J. Barrett, ‘The Sociology of Masculinity’ in S.M. Whitehouse and F.J. Barrett (eds), *The Masculinities Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p.16.

⁴²⁴ BBC Written Archive Centre, *The Blue Peter*, 9 August 1941.

⁴²⁵ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Shipmates Ashore*, 6 November 1943.

In a much more pronounced way than in film these men were being touted as not only ‘ordinary’ husbands and sweethearts but sexually desirable men. This is especially obvious in one show where the host, Pat Taylor, introduced the song ‘I threw a kiss on the ocean’ by stating ‘There are a good many girls who’d like to send greetings, too. We can’t do that, worse luck, but here’s what the girls do say and sing to all you lads at sea – “I threw a kiss in the ocean.”’⁴²⁶ This representation of the Merchant Navy as sexually desirable seems to have been a policy decision. For example, in a meeting in 1941, in preparation for the launch of *The Blue Peter*, the value of emphasising the ‘importance of red blood, virility, masculinity’ was stressed.⁴²⁷ Coupled with the emphasis on the dangers these men faced, the stress placed on the reaction of women to the men of the Merchant Navy does have the potential to make these women look like rewards for their macho adventuring round the dangerous seas. Furthermore, it drastically distances them from the asexual representation given to other civilian workers and cements the merchant seamen’s image as a manly hero.

vi. Conclusion

While the mercantile marine perhaps did not reach quite the same level of praise and admiration aimed at those in the military, given suggestions of protection of the Royal Navy and the pity of the general populace, they were certainly the most exalted of male civilian wartime occupations and they were depicted in a way which paralleled the portrayal of the armed services hero. Despite suggestions of pity they

⁴²⁶ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Shipmates Ashore*, 25 July 1942.

⁴²⁷ BBC Written Archive Centre, R34/460 Policy- Merchant Navy Programmes 1940-44.

largely, culturally at least, conformed to the ideal of the ‘temperate hero’ as conceptualised by Rose. They bravely and courageously faced military dangers and actively fought in the war. Moreover, despite the convoy system essentially placing the merchant service in the protection of the Royal Navy the relationship was presented as largely equivocal and the Merchant Navy were principally presented as the equals of their uniformed counterparts in terms of knowledge and bravery: an image cemented by their use of arms. As such they blurred the distinction between military and civilian. Indeed, with their associations with the common man it is likely that they were used as a symbol of ‘the people’s war’ when their Royal Navy counterparts were so strongly associated with the upper and middle classes. Moreover, they also conformed to the more temperate traits enshrined in the ideal masculine image. They were bonded not only to their mates on board the ship but also were shown to have a strong domestic side. Furthermore, they were shown to have laudable British qualities. They drank tea and pints in great quantities and were always ready with a quip or a song even under the pressure of attack. Furthermore, their masculine status was confirmed by their relationships with women. Far from being supplanted by an incoming female labour force, the women presented alongside the Merchant Navy are largely presented in a domestic or romantic context and generally without any links to the war of their own. What is presented is a largely traditional gender relationship where men fight and women stay at home and wait. Ultimately, it is clear that culturally the merchant seamen were depicted as wartime heroes analogous, if not exactly equal, to the armed forces ideal.

Chapter 5 – Heroes On The Home Front: Firefighting In Wartime Culture



Figure 5.1, London AFS: Men of the Auxiliary Fire Service in London, c.1940 (Currently held in the Imperial War Museum, London)

In May 1941 Herbert Morrison, then Home Secretary, declared:

The House [of Commons] and the country must face the fact that an air attack is not a treat. It is a grim thing. It is an act of war. People who think that it is only a matter of going out next morning and sweeping up the waste paper are quite wrong. Raids are acts of war which create very considerable disturbance. Firemen faced with incidents of the kind I have related deserve our sympathy and support...⁴²⁸

As this makes evident during the Second World War firefighting was a home front civilian job unlike any other. Those ‘heroes with grimy faces’, as Churchill described them, were not only called upon to fight fires, an extremely dangerous job under any circumstances, but also often had to do so while the Luftwaffe were still dropping bombs overhead. The men of Britain’s fire services risked serious injury and even

⁴²⁸ HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol. 371 cc1421-22.

death to protect people and buildings. Yet, despite their obviously dangerous and vital role in the war effort, the fire services have been, as with most other male civilian occupations, little considered by historians despite some popular efforts by authors such as Neil Wallington.⁴²⁹ Sonya Rose does make reference to the men of the fire services being depicted as ‘epic heroes’.⁴³⁰ However, as with the merchant service, this idea has not been thoroughly scrutinised. This chapter will rectify this historiographical absence by exploring the cultural depiction of Britain’s firemen in wartime. It will begin by looking at the official policies regarding the fire services before looking at the fireman’s cultural journey through the war. Firstly, the chapter will examine the depiction of the fire services early in the war before moving on to detail the fireman’s heroic representation during the Blitz by considering such issues as comparisons to the military as well as their domestic and gender relationships. Finally, the chapter will conclude by examining the depiction of the fire brigades once the Blitz had passed.

i. Firefighting and War

Like the mercantile marine, the fire service was an unusual civilian occupation. Not only did they, as previously stated, put themselves in direct danger of death or wounding but they were, at the beginning of the war at least, simultaneously a reserved occupation and part of the voluntary, and largely unpaid, Civil Defence structure. Those who had been in a local fire service pre-war, around 5,000 to 6,000

⁴²⁹ N. Wallington, *Firemen at War: The Works of London’s Fire-fighters in the Second World War* (London: Jeremy Mills Publishing, 1981).

⁴³⁰ S.O. Rose, *Which People’s War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.162.

men, were reserved in preparation for the predicted onslaught of aerial bombings.⁴³¹ However, the predicted scale of bombings meant that these numbers were thought to be insufficient to fight fires on the scale foreseen. Largely in light of the horrific bombings witnessed during the Spanish Civil War there was a widespread belief that, in the words of Conservative politician Stanley Baldwin, ‘the bomber will always get through.’ Consequently, in 1938 the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS) was formed to augment the existing fire fighting structure in time of war.⁴³² The creation of the AFS did not initially change the organisation of the fire fighting service. Instead, firefighting remained organised at the local level with the Auxiliary Fire Service, as the name suggests, acting as support for the existing brigades. Most of the members of the AFS were part-time volunteers, and so kept their paid civilian work, although some were called-up to work full-time in a paid capacity.⁴³³ In 1941 there were around 80,000 full-time members of the AFS and around 150,000 working part-time with this number remaining largely constant until these men were relieved of duty in 1944 and 1945.⁴³⁴ Therefore, many of the terrible and dangerous fires during the night-time Blitz were fought by men who were by day solicitors, journalists, salesmen and labourers. In doing so, 16,000 men lost their lives.⁴³⁵ It was only after the initial Blitz had passed that the system of local brigades was removed and with it the system of *ad hoc* arrangements between brigades to cooperate in times of need.

⁴³¹ HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol. 371 cc1416-7.

⁴³² Wallington, *Firemen at War*, p.6.

⁴³³ *Ibid*, p.6.

⁴³⁴ HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol. 371 cc1413-79.

⁴³⁵ F. Beckett, *Firefighting and the Blitz*, (London: Jeremy Mills Publishing, 2010), p.1. ⁹ HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol. 371 cc1413.

In 1941 both the existing local fire services and the AFS were subsumed in to the National Fire Service (NFS): a centrally organised and controlled organisation.⁹ As reported in the Commons in 1941, this meant that ‘under the Bill local fire brigades will cease to exist as such, and all firemen will be transferred to the service of the Crown and put under direct State control. Their pay, conditions of service and discipline will be regulated by the State.’⁴³⁶ From December 1941, due to the National Service Bill, it also became possible to call up men for the fire services in a similar way to the armed services, although this was mainly used to call up part-time auxiliaries to paid full-time service.⁴³⁷

In a manner strikingly similar to the attitudes towards the Merchant Navy, the fire service was mainly discussed in Parliament in terms of their remunerations, especially in light of the dangers they faced and in comparison to those in the armed services. Like their seamen counterparts, the issues of uniform, wages and accommodation were frequently discussed in Parliament. The consensus within parliament was that in light of the dangers firemen faced they were entitled to comforts, medals and remunerations in line with, if not equal to, those of the armed forces. For example, MP Robert Morrison argued in May 1941:

Nobody will ever be able to understand the logic or reason, if there is any at all, why a soldier who is severely injured or incapacitated for life should be treated better than the fireman who is inside a building when a bomb explodes and is injured and perhaps incapacitated for life. I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend will give his early attention to that question to see that the disability pensions and allowances for sickness, illness and accident to men

⁴³⁶ HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol. 371 cc1421-22.

⁴³⁷ HC Deb 07 August 1941 vol 373 c2077.

belonging to the national fire service shall be at least on the same level as those granted to members of the services.⁴³⁸

Similarly, MP Herbert Williams declared in June 1943 that:

There is one last point I want to raise and that is the position of members of the National Fire Service. We have the Navy, Army and the Air Force which are described as the Armed Forces of the Crown and there are all sorts of institutions which cater for their comfort, canteens and the like. I understand that up to the present members of the N.F.S. are not regarded as being eligible for consideration in Y.M.C.A. and other canteens. Now members of the N.F.S. are combatants in the real sense of the word; they have been exposed to perils of the war of the most awful type and their high standard of courage entitles them to every consideration.⁴³⁹

These two arguments stress the similarities between the dangers and fates suffered by those in the military and the fire service and as such parallel the arguments made regarding the merchant service. They argue that firemen were also ‘fighting’ the war and so deserved the material comforts and rewards which their counterparts in the armed services received. Such emphasis was common in political debate. Despite the similarities between the discussions surrounding the merchant service and the fire service, however, there are some important differences in their remunerations and treatment. Firstly, as Percy Harris MP pointed out, ‘in the fire brigade they [had] the compensation of a picturesque uniform.’⁴⁴⁰ On a more practical level the fire service was given fewer benefits than their seamen counterparts. This can largely be attributed to the fire service’s stationary nature which removed the need for free train journeys and cheap telegrams. Wage rates also seem to have been acceptable as very few discussions appeared in parliament discussing the issue and those that did arise

⁴³⁸ HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol 371 cc1461-62.

⁴³⁹ HC Deb 30 June 1943 vol 390 cc1685-6.

⁴⁴⁰ HC Deb 02 November 1939 vol 352 cc2171.

generally centred on the mechanism of paying firemen under the NFS scheme. A more contentious issue was that of injury payments. Claims were often made for firemen to receive similar injury benefits to those in the armed forces. However, there existed a discrepancy. Firemen who had been in the fire service before the war, and out with the A.F.S., were given full compensation in the case of injury. In contrast, the firemen of the A.F.S. were given only 13 weeks at full pay before being reduced to 35s a week, the same level as any other injured civilian.⁴⁴¹ This discrepancy was rectified with the creation of the N.F.S. which destroyed, bureaucratically at least, differences between the two services. However, it is again obvious that the state considered the fire services to be analogous to the armed forces in wartime.

ii. Firefighting Early in the War

What is most striking about the portrayal of firemen is that it radically changed as the war progressed. In the years leading up to the war firemen were often discussed in the print media. While many of these portrayals were simply factual, merely reporting the presence of firemen at a fire, others portrayed firemen as heroes. For example, one front-cover article in *The Daily Mirror* in July of 1935 reported that ‘Two Firemen Killed in Blaze: Trapped under crashing ruins. Rescue Heroism’. The article went to explain how the firemen had worked tirelessly but in vain to rescue their colleagues.⁴⁴² Despite such an image portrayals of firemen early in the war were

⁴⁴¹ HC Deb 20 May 1941 vol 371 cc1438-9.

⁴⁴² ‘Two Firemen Killed in Blaze’, *The Daily Mirror*, 8 July 1935, p.1.

rare. Many of their depictions were practical in scope, mainly calling for men to come forward and join the AFS as seen below.



Figure 5.2, 'AFS London Needs Auxiliary Firemen Now'

Such depictions reveal very little about perceptions of the fire services.⁴⁴³ Moreover, firemen were almost completely absent in film and newspapers with only calls for men to join the AFS generally published. Firemen did, however, infrequently appear in fine art. Due to the lack of dates and the focus on training exercises rather than actual fire-fighting, we can presume that paintings by Roland Vivian Pitchforth are pre-Blitz. Pitchforth depicted the AFS in several paintings practising with hoses on

⁴⁴³ Frank Newbould, 'AFS London needs auxiliary firemen now', (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).



Figure 5.3, Roland Vivian Pitchforth, *AFS Practice with a trailer pump on the banks of the Serpentine, London* the banks of the Serpentine in London. The images show the men struggling to control their hoses set against a backdrop of a cold wintery day.⁴⁴⁴ The greys and blues of the paintings emphasise the distinct lack of fire and instead present very gentle and serene winter images which reveal very little about how the men were perceived other than perhaps, given their poor hose control, their apparent lack of skill. However, the same cannot be said of contemporary cartoons which openly mocked the AFS for their supposed inabilities and inaction. One *Punch* cartoon in early 1940 showed a brigade captain lecturing an AFS crew declaring ‘A pump and crew must be standing by day and night, fully equipped and ready to leave at a moment’s notice. We never know when we may be called out on a regional exercise.’⁴⁴⁵ Such a portrayal was an obvious attack on the men’s lack of ‘real’ action.

⁴⁴⁴ Roland Vivian Pitchforth, ‘AFS Practice with a trailer pump: On the banks of the Serpentine’, *London*, Undated (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London); Roland Vivian Pitchforth, ‘AFS Practice with a large pump: On the banks of the Serpentine’, *London*, Undated (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).

⁴⁴⁵ ‘A pump and crew must be standing by day and night...’, *Punch*, 5 June 1940.



"A pump and crew must be standing by day and night, fully equipped and ready to leave at a moment's notice. We never know when we may be called out on a regional exercise."

Figure 5.4, 'A pump and crew must be standing by day and night...'

Another similar *Punch* cartoon from the same period showed an 'AFS lecture' which depicted the AFS recruits taking notes as their instructor, holding a petrol can, points to their burning classroom furniture and explains 'And here, Gentlemen, we have



"And here, Gentlemen, we have what is termed a fire."

Figure 5.5, 'And here, Gentleman, we have what is termed a fire'

what is termed a fire'.⁴⁴⁶ Again, this suggests a lack of knowledge and practical experience on both the part of the recruits and those training them. What is clear from both of these portrayals is that, early in the war, the fire brigades, and the AFS

⁴⁴⁶ 'And here, Gentlemen, we have what is termed a fire', *Punch*, 28 February 1940.

in particular, were legitimate figures of fun and seen as distanced from the war.

Additionally, as figures of ridicule it is clear they were not seen as overtly heroic or masculine.

Such depictions seem to have reflected popular opinion. Norman Longmate confirms this, reporting:

The [AFS] firemen who asked in a six-year old girl who had peeped round the door of their station in Chelsea were a little taken aback when she confided in them, "My daddy says you're a waste of public money!" The men from one London AFS station never wore uniform in the street if they could help it because of loud remarks about '£3 a week men doing b----- all', and some joined the forces solely to escape such insults.⁴⁴⁷

Again, this makes evident that early in the war the fire brigades were far distanced from the wartime masculine ideal. Moreover, such a portrayal clearly had an impact on the men of the AFS. Early in the war some AFS members resigned because of their poor treatment and low standing. Indeed, such great numbers of men discharged themselves that the government had to pass an order to forbid full-time members from resigning.⁴⁴⁸ Such actions reinforce the suggestion that the AFS were considered less than manly early in the war even by the men themselves.

iii. Blitzed Heroes

⁴⁴⁷ N. Longmate, *How We Lived Then: A History of Everyday Life During the Second World War* (Pimlico: London, 1971), p.97.

⁴⁴⁸ Wallington, *Firemen at War*, p.47.

After the (first) Blitz had begun in September 1940 there was a marked shift in public opinion about the fire services. Their depiction as layabouts and buffoons was quickly forgotten as German bombs began to drop on Britain. One contributor to an AFS anthology *Fire and Water*, a collection of writings by wartime firemen, noted:

For nine months at the beginning of the war the A.F.S. were in a parlous position, the target of all the sneers of the great unthinking. With few exceptions the press supported this glorious throng, and the references made to us were generally of a derogatory character. At last our day arrived, just as the “small thinking” had said it would, and we all went out did what we were paid to do- namely, to fight fires caused by enemy action. The G.U. (Great Unthinking) were amazed, though what they had expected us to do I cannot imagine. “The Fire Service are heroes,” they cried, and the press took up the cry in case anybody hadn’t heard. “Come in and have a cup of tea,” said all the householders. “Have this one on me,” said the Man in the Bar. “Fireman, you’re a good fellow. Yes, one of the best.”⁴⁴⁹

This dramatic shift in opinion was replicated in the cultural depictions of the fire brigades. During and immediately after the Blitz firemen were depicted in a very high profile way. Although firemen only featured in two wartime films, Humphrey Jennings’ *Fires Were Started* (Humphrey Jennings, 1943) originally known as *I Was A Fireman*, and the Ealing drama *The Bells Go Down* (Basil Dearden, 1943), these two films both focused exclusively on firefighting and their role in the London Blitz. No such depiction was awarded to their contemporaries in ARP, the police or the ambulance service. Both feature films received cinema releases and were seen by large audiences. However, *Fires Were Started* was a box-office hit so when *The Bells Go Down* was released a few months later it was unflatteringly compared and did not fare as well at the box office.⁴⁵⁰ *Fires Were Started* was also a critical success with,

⁴⁴⁹ F.H. Sharples, ‘Brighton’ in H.S. Ingham, *Fire and Water: An N.F.S. Anthology* (London: Lindsay Drummond Limited, 1942); H. Green, *Caught*, (London: The Harvill Press, 2001), p.201.

⁴⁵⁰ R. Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2000), p.40.

one cinema reviewer, from the *Evening Times*, writing directly to Humphrey Jennings to inform him of the high quality of the film:

The more I think over [*Fires Were Started*], the more I regret having been invited to see it with a view to finding out what might be wrong with it rather than what was right. Having had time to sleep on the picture, I find that it has made a very big impression on me, and you will not need my assurance that most films do not stay long in the memory of a busy film critic. Even among the brilliant films being turned out by the Crown Film Unit this one seems to be outstanding and I would like to offer my special felicitation on the remarkable results of your obviously painstaking work on the subject.⁴⁵¹

It is telling, however, that both films were released in 1943. By the time they were released the first Blitz had largely passed and had become mythologized and it is this myth, of a unified Britain stoically standing up to the Nazi bombardment, which these films portray.⁴⁵² Moreover, the fire brigades featured prominently in other media. While the broadsheet press, for example *The Times*, did feature images and articles on the fire services it was the tabloid press including the *Daily Express* and especially *The Daily Mirror* which really emphasised the subject and they reflect firemen's celebrated status during the Blitz. Indeed, their status grew to such a degree that they were considered worthy of the front cover of the popular *Picture Post* in February 1941: a cover which fronted an issue which included a seven-page article regarding the dangerous and heroic work undertaken by the fire services.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵¹ National Archives, INF 5/88.

⁴⁵² J. Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda 1939-45* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), p.176. The Blitz here, as is typical, refers to the period between 7th September 1940 and March 1941. Little Blitzes occurred later in the war with the V1 and V2 bombs.

⁴⁵³ 'Fire-Fighters!', *Picture Post*, 1 February 1941, pp.9-15.

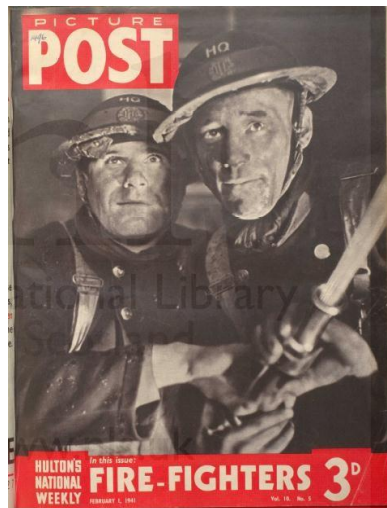


Figure 5.6, *Picture Post* Front Cover

However, in other depictions, such as the fine art depicting Britain's onslaught from the Luftwaffe at the height of the Blitz, more ambiguity could be found. Work of fine art generally depicted a shift in portrayal as firemen started the job for which they were trained as the bombs began to fall but did not focus on the firemen themselves. In the work of Henry Carr and Bernard Hailstone, for example, it was largely the fires and destruction of the Blitz which were the emphasis rather than the firemen. The firefighters exist only as silhouettes or figures in the distance tackling a blaze. While their proximity to danger may have bolstered their masculine image there is little to be gleaned from these representations about the artist's opinion on the fire service. Moreover, the image depicted on radio remains largely unknowable. A great number of broadcast scripts appear to be missing from the BBC's archives entirely, a fact perhaps not helped when it is considered that, especially in comparison to the equally heroic mercantile marine, they were seemingly not overtly focused upon as a topic for broadcast. However, although lack of sources make it difficult to ascertain what representation was presented on radio there is some evidence to suggest a similarly ambiguous depiction was presented by

the BBC as was seen in artistic endeavours. Civil defence workers, as with other wartime occupations, had their own programme broadcast by the BBC titled *Under Your Tin Hat*. The programme was ‘a weekly radio magazine for A.F.S., A.R.P. and W.V.S. workers, firewatchers, and all those who guard the homes of Britain through the night.’⁴⁵⁴ Therefore, unlike other depictions of the fire services these men were depicted as part of the civil defence structure rather than a separate and singularly heroic group. The programme did emphasise the heroic status of men in civil defence for example in such features as ‘Salute to Heroes’ which praised men, and much less frequently women, who had received the George Medal for civilian bravery.⁴⁵⁵ However, this feature focused equally on ARP wardens and ambulance drivers as it did men in the AFS and as such contrasts the exclusively heroic image given to the fire services elsewhere. This was an image reinforced by the talks broadcast on civil defence in the period. For example, in one *Postscript* in November 1942 the Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, declared that:

Well they stood up to it – 57 days solid nights of it without a break in London; nine months of it in all the great cities of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Men and women, boys and girls, Civil Defence workers and citizens, firemen and fireguards, solid in their mutual ties and their common faith, not afraid, lively in thought and action because they were free. 47,000 of them are dead, 56,000 were maimed, two and three quarter million homes smashed or damaged in some degree. But when the enemy had done his worst, they and their country, were still carrying on unbeaten, full of work and fight.³⁰

⁴⁵⁴ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Under Your Tin Hat*, 11 June 1941.

⁴⁵⁵ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Under Your Tin Hat*, 18 June 1941.

³⁰ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Postscripts*, 13 November 1942.

While this is high praise, it not only fails to distinguish firemen from other civil defence workers but also does not distinguish between the work of civil defence and ordinary civilians. This serves to divorce the work of the fire service from a heroic image.

Further separation from the uniformly heroic image was also found in depictions created by the men of the fire services themselves. On all media firefighters were generally only shown hosing buildings or, less frequently, saving a person largely unaffected by the fire therefore distancing their image from the true human cost of the Blitz. However, in the published writings of the men of the fire service they reveal what the experience of being in a burning city was really like. Although the men rarely portrayed themselves as heroes they were quite open with their descriptions of the Blitz. Often these were more graphic than those presented in other media. This may be largely attributable to the fact that many texts written about firemen came from firemen themselves even if the work was fictive. In this regard firemen are exceptional as they were the only group of civilian male workers to extensively depict themselves. One contributor to an AFS anthology entitled *Fire and Water*, for example, described how ‘Men are stumbling out of the fire, vomiting with smoke, groping their way like the blind, as the wind carries swarms of golden spark and shining plumes of flame from one house to another. The air is filled with a sour, sickening stench, the entire sky lit with the glow of a fatal sunset.’⁴⁵⁶ Similarly, in the 1943 novel *Caught* Henry Green described the death of a Blitzed Londoner:

⁴⁵⁶ P. Henderson, ‘December 29th’ in Ingham, *Fire and Water*, p.91.

³² H. Green, *Caught* (London: The Harvill Press, 2001), p.96.

‘And that moment two ambulance men carried a stretcher up. They laid it down. The twisted creature under a blanket coughed a last gushing, gout of blood.’³² Such portrayals of the horrifying human cost of the Blitz were unheard of in other media. However, what is perhaps most surprising is the fact that the focus of the firemen’s tales was generally not the act of firefighting. Henry Green’s *Caught* and the anthology *Fire and Water*, for example, both focus much more on the pre-Blitz era and the friendships and tediums of working in a fire station.⁴⁵⁷ Indeed, most firemen recounted simple and basic concerns rather than tales of heroic deeds. For example, one contributor to *Fire and Water* stated:

During a Blitz one is continually fumbling about in semi-darkness. Unwieldy coils of hose trip you up or squirt vicious little jets into your face, and wet hose has a nasty habit of coating itself with broken glass. Even when you are holding the branch, its principal aim seems to be to wrench itself free; and should you lose your grip for a moment it will lash out at you like an enraged brazen-headed snake, split your skull open or break your arm. Tugging and straining, lifting things up or hold them down, the fireman is engaged in a ceaseless war with exasperating and intractable objects.⁴⁵⁸

Such essential concerns as food and warmth were also commonly found in the writings of firemen.⁴⁵⁹ Similarly, Henry Green’s *Caught* also refuses to let the men presented become heroes. The Blitz is reserved for only the last twenty-five pages of the book and even then it is presented in a somewhat perfunctory manner.

Furthermore, the central plot does not centre on the fire service itself but rather the

⁴⁵⁷ H.S. Ingham, *Fire and Water: An N.F.S. Anthology* (London: Lindsay Drummond Limited, 1942); Green, *Caught*.

⁴⁵⁸ P. Henderson, ‘December 29th’ in Ingham, *Fire and Water: An N.F.S. Anthology* (London: Lindsay Drummond Limited, 1942), p.89.

⁴⁵⁹ D. Dessau, ‘The Passing of the Exmouth, Ingham’, *Fire and Water: An N.F.S. Anthology* (London: Lindsay Drummond Limited, 1942), pp.106-19.

kidnap of one fireman's son.⁴⁶⁰ As such it somewhat subverts the typical heroic image of the fireman presented in the mainstream media. Yet as such books never matched the circulation of either the films or the popular press it is unlikely such an image altered the largely heroic image of the fire services.

Indeed, unheroic or even ambiguous depictions were rare, especially in the period during and just after the Blitz, and it was the image of the fireman as hero, separate from other types of civilian defence, which appears to have garnered the greatest focus. If we begin with the 'soldier hero' element of Rose's conceptualisation of the temperate hero it becomes quickly apparent that firemen, like their merchant seamen counterparts, were largely depicted in this way. Like the Merchant Navy the fire services were often referred to in militaristic terms most likely in an attempt to link them to the prestige associated with that celebrated male role. For example, *Fires Were Started* opened with reminders that 'fires were fought' and that 'in the stress of battle, lessons were learned' showing a conscious effort to link the men of the fire service to the military ideal. Similarly, while conclusions about the representations of the fire services on radio must remain tentative given the scarcity of sources, there is some evidence to suggest they received a heroic depiction similar in style to that established in other media. For example, the BBC broadcast such programmes as *Battle of the Flames*, *Marching On* and *Into Battle* about the fire services.⁴⁶¹ The militaristic titles (and the titles are all that remain) of these programmes suggest that, as presented on screen, the fire services were allied

⁴⁶⁰ K. A. Miller, *British Literature of the Blitz: Fighting the People's War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.98-9.

⁴⁶¹ BBC Written Archive Centre. R34/689/1 Policy Propaganda Labour 1941, 1945-6.

to the armed services. Furthermore, the emphasis on the bravery of the men of the fire brigades was also emphasised by the popular press. Notably, *Punch*, after lampooning the AFS early in the war, began to depict them much more heroically. In September 1940, they published a realistic sketch, telling in itself as they no longer depicted the AFS in cartoon form for comedic effect. The image shows a Blitz scene of destroyed buildings and flames. In the foreground, two firemen are tackling the blaze by plying water from their hoses; in the middle distance, a fireman helps an elderly woman through the rubble; and in the background, other firemen are depicted at work. The caption to the image, 'The Front Line', equates the fire brigade with the military in the dangers they faced and, therefore, also the prestige they received.⁴⁶²



THE FRONT LINE

Figure 5.7, 'The Front Line'

However, all wartime occupations, and civilian undertakings, were linked to the war effort in this way. Yet, unlike their counterparts in more sedate civilian occupations men of the fire services behaved in ways which reinforced, rather than distanced

⁴⁶² 'The Front Line', *Punch*, 25 September 1940.

them from, comparisons to the heroic ideal. As seen with portrayals of the Merchant Navy spaces inhabited as well as actions undertaken are central. While the ordinary civilian was encouraged to shelter during air raids the men of the fire services were duty-bound to head out in to a world of burning buildings and falling bombs. Representations of the fire services often centred on their bravery in such situations. For example, in both *The Bells Go Down* and *Fires Were Started* the firemen are shown rushing up stairs and ladders without any visible hesitancy to fight fires. This is emphasised in *Fires Were Started* as Humphrey Jennings included many shots of the firemen standing with determined and resolute expressions on their faces with fires raging all around them. This bravery was acknowledged at the time. In a review of *Fires Were Started*, *The Times* noted: ‘it is a night terror which does not terrorise those whose duty it is to be abroad in it.’⁴⁶³ Such a brave and heroic image was generally reserved for the armed services and so reinforces the parallels to that wartime ideal suggested by the militaristic language.



Figure 5.8, Still from *Fires Were Started*, 1943

The parallels between the fire services and the armed services were made equally explicit in other ways. In *The Bells Go Down*, for example, the men of the

⁴⁶³ ‘Fires Were Started’, *The Times*, 25 March 1943, p.6.

fire service are largely depicted as the equals of those in the armed services. As depicted in the film, during the ‘phoney war’, the army would not accept recruits. In response two of the film’s central characters, Bob and Tommy, join the AFS as an alternative. During training the fire station chief informs the new recruits:

You’ve got to learn discipline. Its discipline that makes a good army or a good ship’s crew and its discipline that makes a good firefighter. You’ve got to know your equipment inside-out. You’ve got to know the trick of it... In the light and in the dark. So when the time comes you know it like a soldier knows his rifle.

This speech was clearly designed to ally firefighting to the known rigours of life in the armed forces. Such depictions were similarly shown in other media. For example, in December 1941 *The Daily Mirror* published an article entitled ‘The Happy Warriors’ which depicted a naval officer and an AFS firefighter receiving their Christmas presents in hospital. Both had serious injuries to their legs and were depicted side by side, with their stories intertwined.⁴⁶⁴ This served to emphasise the parallels between both the bravery and the fates of those in the military and the fire services – something which is reinforced by the headline proclaiming them both to be ‘warriors’. Additionally, a strong link was often made between the fire service and militarily winning the war. For example, in *Fires Were Started* the men work all night to prevent a ship from catching fire. At both the beginning and the end of the film the ship is shown being loaded with artillery guns and boxes of ammunitions. The significance of these shots is reinforced at the end of the film by a brief scene where the captain is seen making a call to inform an unknown person that ‘No we

⁴⁶⁴ ‘The Happy Warriors’, *The Daily Mirror*, 27 December 1941, p.5.

weren't hit. We'll make it on time.' The production notes show that the intention to have them saving military equipment was a conscious one.⁴⁶⁵ Moreover, even the action of firefighting could be constructed as an indirect form of fighting the war. As Aldgate and Richards note, 'with no sight of and little mention of the enemy, the fires became almost an abstract symbol of struggle, highlighting the qualities that the nation needs at its moment of supreme crisis.'⁴⁶⁶ The combined effect of these depictions is that the fire service was shown in a heroic light, likened to the armed forces and as essential to the war-effort. Again, such depictions link the fire service with the prestigious image more generally reserved for the armed forces.

Similarly, *The Bells Go Down* also shows the fire service to be a maker of 'men' just like the armed forces were perceived to be.⁴⁶⁷ Early in the film Tommy tells Ted, the London Fire Brigade fireman in charge of training the AFS recruits, 'Your old man told us you needed men in the fire brigade.' Ted replies 'We got men in the fire brigade. But they seem to be taking almost anything in the AFS.' As Connell argues, masculinity is experienced hierarchically.⁴⁶⁸ In the war years those in the armed forces were certainly viewed to be at the apex. *The Bells Go Down* seems to suggest that early in the war those in the AFS were considered to be far down in that hierarchy, a suggestion supported by the actual depiction of the AFS early on the war. This insinuation that the AFS recruits were less manly than their London Fire

⁴⁶⁵ National Archives, INF 5/88.

⁴⁶⁶ A. Aldgate, and J. Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in The Second World War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p.237.

⁴⁶⁷ J. Hockey 'No More Heroes: Masculinity in the Infantry' in P. Higate, *Military Masculinities* (Michigan: Praeger, 2003), p.15.

⁴⁶⁸ R.W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p.10.

Brigade counterparts is developed throughout *The Bells Go Down*. The character of Tommy continually refuses to take firefighting seriously and is shown skipping, while imitating a little girl, and sliding down the firemen's pole for fun. Furthermore, when he is late for a fire, and appears in his pyjamas and slippers he argues that 'well someone might have wakened me' to which Ted replies 'We don't provide nannies. Not even for little boys in the AFS.' This suggestion of the AFS being 'little boys', emphasised by Tommy's pyjamas, suggests that those in the AFS were not manly. This is only resolved on the first night of the Blitz, when the AFS are properly tested for the first time and they are able to prove themselves. The night ends with Tommy being fatally crushed by a wall while attempting to save the Station Chief, an act which cements his place as a 'man'. Tommy has finally earned the respect of Ted, who tells his mother 'I was up there. You ought to feel proud.' This active focus on the forging and production of 'men' again likens the fire service to those in the armed forces.

Such links were also made in other ways. As discussed above, fine art tended to eschew emphasis on individual firemen. However, one exception to this, in terms of art, is Leonard Rosoman's *A House Collapsing on Two Firemen, Shoe Lane, London, EC4* which, as the title suggests shows two firemen just before the moment of impact as a building tumbles towards them.⁴⁶⁹ Both the dramatic colours used and

⁴⁶⁹ Leonard Rosoman, 'A House Collapsing on Two Firemen, Shoe Lane, London, EC4', 1940, (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).



Figure 5.9, Leonard Rosoman, 'A House Collapsing on Two Firemen, Shoe Lane, London, EC4'

the way the wall appears to be exploding towards the viewer makes it a very striking image. Unlike other artistic depictions of firemen, the men, and their terrible fate, are very much the focus of this image, highlighting the dangers faced and the very high price often paid by the men of the fire brigades, both of which were paralleled by the experiences of the armed services. Perhaps this is influenced by the fact that

Rosoman himself was a member of the AFS in London and so was keenly aware of the dangers faced. Such images were presented in other media. For example, in Jack

While's book *Fire! Fire!* it was stated:

There is nothing fine enough to say about the way these firemen, officers and men alike, worked at their herculean task, saturated, blackened, and bruised, and physically exhausted to the verge of complete collapse through the long watches of the night. At the docks, in the City, in other main thoroughfares, they doggedly kept on with their work, handicapped by falling walls and shortages of water, but ever fighting and fighting and fighting, sometimes with enemy bombs dropping amongst them and killing or maiming them.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁷⁰ J. While, *Fire! Fire!!: A Story of Firefighting in Peace and War* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1944), p.93.

Tellingly, here, the men of the fire services are described as ‘fighting and fighting and fighting’ while under enemy fire therefore connecting them to the soldierly ideal. A similar image was depicted in *The Daily Mirror* in January 1941 when, for example, it published a double-paged spread entitled ‘All Night They Fought Fires and Bombs and Saved Lives’. Various images were featured of firemen tackling blazes and climbing ladders while surrounded by flames. To reinforce the notion of their bravery a photograph of three men hosing a burning building was captioned ‘in peril of bombs, in peril of falling masonry, of crashing walls... A picture that can be multiplied a dozen times in London when the fire-Blitz is over the city.’⁴⁷¹ Such stories focusing on the dangers these men routinely faced, and their similarity to military dangers, were common throughout the tabloid press and beyond. One BBC broadcast titled *War Commentary*, for example, noted ‘In their everyday life firefighters often face dangers as great as any experienced on the field of battle.’⁴⁸ Such a sentiment was made similarly evident in a scene depicting a funeral in the film *Fires Were Started*. Six men in uniform carry a coffin draped in a Union Jack while bugle music sounds in the background. It is almost entirely indistinguishable from a military funeral. Death on duty was something experienced primarily by the armed forces and so dying on duty not only reminded the viewers of the sacrifices that were made by firemen but also suggests they were akin to the armed forces. This proximity to danger and death was reminiscent of the dangers endured by those in the military and so allied the fire services to the highly lauded armed forces. As

⁴⁷¹ ‘All night they fought fires and bombs – and saved lives’, *The Daily Mirror*, 13 January 1941, pp.6-7.

⁴⁸ BBC Written Archive Centre, *War Commentary by J.L. Hodson*, 1 October 1942.

well as implications of heroism the fire services were often explicitly stated to be heroes. For example, in the Ealing comedy-drama *The Bells Go Down*. The film has one lengthy, and unusual, scene where a drunken soldier questions why firemen got ‘three quid a week for keeping out of the army.’ This scene predates the Blitz and thus depicts a time before firemen had been called upon in a war capacity.

This inactivity results in some of the film’s firemen feeling ineffectual. Bob explains



Figure 5.10, still from *The Bells Go Down*, 1943

‘well he’s right. We haven’t done anything really.’ However, after some debate the scene ends with Brookes, one of the firemen and a former volunteer of the International Brigade who had been on active service in Spain during the Civil War, explaining that:

Our cities are still behind the lines. When someone starts to pin medals on us it’ll mean they’ve moved right up to the front. It’ll mean another Rotterdam, another Warsaw right here in England. They’ll call us heroes if it came to that. I’d rather they went on laughing.

The meaning of this short speech would likely have been obvious to the film’s audience – they would have been well aware that British cities had been bombed and that firemen had been called upon to act as heroes. This scene is unusual as, rather

than stating the importance of the fire service on its own terms, it pits the role of a civilian occupation against the ideal masculine role of the armed forces. Perhaps one explanation for this is that the producers of the film assumed that the comparison would be favourable, based on both the outcome of the film as well as the viewing public's knowledge of the heroic deeds performed by firemen during the Blitz. Such a depiction therefore concretely linked the fire services to the prestige more readily associated with the armed forces.

This heroic image was cemented in other media. Artist Bernard Hailstone was also a member of the AFS and he painted many portraits of the men, and less frequently women, of the fire brigades including his portraits of Frederick Charles Reville and Andrew Nures Nabarro, both winners of the George Medal for civilian bravery.⁴⁷² Both paintings are extremely similar to military portraits and show men in uniform with their helmets under one arm while stood against a plain background. Indeed, other than the specific uniform worn there is very little to distinguish these portraits from conventional military portraits. What this perhaps suggests is that in undertaking confirmed acts of bravery, for which they had been awarded medals, it was deemed appropriate to depict them in a way analogous to the military ideal. This

⁴⁷² Bernard Hailstone, 'Andrew Nures Nabarro, GM, Leading Fireman, Portsmouth AFS', 1941 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London); Bernard Hailstone, 'Frank Charles Reville, GM: Bristol AFS', 1941 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London). The George Medal was created in 1940 to deal with the peculiar situation of the Blitz and was the second highest civilian award for bravery during the war behind the George Cross. Existing medals for civilian bravery were thought to be inadequate given the circumstances.



Figure 5.11, Bernard Hailstone, 'Andrew Nures Nabarro, GM, BEM, AFS'

hints at the high esteem which the fire services were held in at the height of the Blitz. The meaning of the military-style portraits is also underlined by the fact that Hailstone did not depict women in the same way. For example, Hailstone's portrait of Barbara Mary Rendell, a member of the AFS and winner of the British Empire Medal awarded to civilians for their bravery, shows her seated at her desk.⁴⁷³



Figure 5.12, Bernard Hailstone, 'Barbara Mary Rendell, Leading Fireman, Portsmouth AFS'

⁴⁷³ Bernard Hailstone, 'Barbara Mary Rendell, BEM, AFS', 1941 (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London). The British Empire Medal was instituted during the First World War and awarded for civilian bravery or gallantry; during the Second World War, it was awarded for actions of a level below that required for the awarding of the George Medal.

She is clearly at work and her demure seated position is more reminiscent of traditional portraits of women than a person who has undertaken an act of bravery worthy of commendation. Moreover, the inclusion of a telephone links her firmly to the administrative work which was the task ascribed to women in the fire services and so reinforces her femininity by connecting her to the more conventional female role of secretary or clerical worker. Perhaps this was Hailstone's attempt to reinforce her femininity despite her actions which defied gender stereotypes. This is underlined by her well-kept hair and red lipstick. What this highlights is the differing meanings of dangerous actions for men and women. A woman had transgressed gender boundaries and was therefore depicted in an acceptably feminine way. However, men undertaking brave acts are elevated to the same status as the most lauded section of society: the military.

iv. Ordinary Heroes

As well as fulfilling the soldier hero part of Rose's conceptualisation of the 'temperate hero', firemen also were shown to be 'ordinary'. As with both their merchant seamen counterparts and the idealised image of the armed forces there was much emphasis on comradeship in the depictions of the fire service especially by the men themselves. For example, one contributor to the AFS anthology *Fire and Water* stated:

I would rather recall those little touches of good fellowship which marked the early days of the A.F.S. than any of the tragic events which will fill the history books. And I believe the camaraderie of those times, brought about by the emergency and the mingling of all types and classes, will leave a stronger, more lasting impression on

many a man than the scenes of carnage and destruction which every sane mind must wish to forget.⁴⁷⁴

This focus from the men who served was typical. Indeed, most of the writings of the firemen tended to focus on this aspect of their service rather than the horrors of the Blitz, and this emphasis was largely recreated in prominent cultural depictions of the service. In both *Fires Were Started* and *The Bells Go Down* one fireman sacrifices his life to save, or in an attempt to save, one of his friends. In *Fires Were Started* Jacko persuades Barrett to leave him on a burning roof and save himself despite Jacko knowing that there is a chance that it might result in his own death, which it does when the roof collapses. This sacrifice is poignantly underlined later in the film when Barrett finds Jacko's dented and broken helmet. As he looks down at the



Figure 5.13, still from *Fires Were Started*, 1943

helmet in his hands, sombre but dramatic music plays, serving to draw the viewer's attention to the sacrifices made by the fire service. A review from 1961 in *Film and*

⁴⁷⁴ J.H.C. Freeman, 'Put out that light!' in Ingham, *Fire and Water*, p.146.

Filmmaker, as part of its series on classic British films, described Jacko's death as 'A sacrifice that others may live. A symbol of the British patriotic spirit. The willing involvement of the individual in a social act. A day in the life of a wartime fireman.'⁴⁷⁵ A similar image was depicted in *The Bells Go Down* when Tommy attempts to rescue the station chief, who is trapped under some rubble, despite the pair having previously shared a mutual dislike. Both Tommy and the Chief are crushed by a falling wall. Such sacrifice was a key trope of 'the people's war' and was regularly seen in popular culture. In *Went the Day Well?* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942), for example, the lady of the manor sacrifices herself by rushing from the room with a live hand-grenade in order to save the working-class cockney evacuees in the room. As such the self-sacrificial actions of the firemen underline their status as ordinary heroes. Moreover, this sacrifice is not always life itself. In *The Bells Go Down*, the young fireman Bob has to let his own home burn down, a home the viewer has seen him lovingly create with his new wife and colleagues, in order to save a warehouse full of essential war supplies. This again highlights the level of sacrifice made by members of the fire service which has direct parallels to those sacrifices made by the armed forces: loss of home comforts and more pointedly the sacrifice of life for one's country and its inhabitants. These actions cumulatively underline the levels of comradeship and sacrifice displayed by the fire service and again likens them to the idealised construction of the armed forces in which sacrifice and unit cohesion is central to cultural representations.

⁴⁷⁵ National Archives, INF 6/985.

Moreover, men of the fire service were regularly depicted in domestic settings therefore cementing their ‘ordinary hero’ status. As Martin Francis has noted in *The Flyer*, the pleasures of being a father and husband were experienced alongside the necessary military professionalism of being in the RAF.⁴⁷⁶ A similar situation is portrayed regarding firemen. Even out with their work, where they were frequently shown rescuing children and the elderly, these men were often represented as ordinary and kind. For example, they were depicted on their wedding days or with their wives.⁴⁷⁷ Moreover, in *Fires Were Started* one of the firemen, Johnny, is shown play-fighting with his son before he goes to work. Similarly, one memorable photograph in *The Daily Mirror* shows four firemen, in full uniform and one dressed as a clown, at a tiny children’s table wearing party hats surrounded by children. The accompanying article explains that these are the children of their dead colleagues. The article also explains that the men have made them toys.⁵⁵ This article therefore neatly encapsulates both sides of Rose’s conceptualisation. By emphasising the care

⁴⁷⁶ M. Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.85.

⁴⁷⁷ ‘The Fireman’s Day Out’, *The Daily Mirror*, 15 September 1941, p.5.

⁵⁵ ‘Orphan of the (tea) storm!’, *The Daily Mirror*, 4 July 1944, p.1.



Figure 5.14, 'Orphan of the (tea) storm!'

these men have taken of the children it captures the 'ordinary' aspect of the conceptualisation. However, by also focusing on their dead comrades it reminds the reader of the sacrifices made by the fire services and so reinforces the links with the armed forces ideal as discussed above. Similarly, in *The Bells Go Down*, much of the narrative is dedicated to a young fireman's marriage and first child. Bob's colleagues help to make toys for the baby and decorate his new home therefore including them in the domestic sphere. Moreover, an article in *Sight and Sound* in 1969 about *Fires Were Started* noted these men's ordinariness and stated 'the men are richly ordinary in their personal lives and heroic only in their function - they are brave because they perform brave actions.'⁴⁷⁸ This is a succinct précis of Rose's conceptualisation of 'temperate masculinity'. Again, this links the fire service with an image more readily associated with the idealised image of the armed services.

However, this heroic depiction was largely centred on the London fire services. While for example Clydebank, Coventry, Manchester and Birmingham

⁴⁷⁸ National Archives, INF 6/985.

were all bombed, and therefore burned, the fire brigades of these cities were rarely mentioned culturally and were certainly never given the heroic image afforded to the firemen of the capital. Yet this image is largely understandable given that London attracted the most prolonged bouts of attack. However, as with the Merchant Navy there were varied efforts to depict the men of the fire services as fundamentally British heroes. While the overwhelming focus on firemen centred on London there were concerted attempts to show the men of the fire service to be British not just Londoners. *Fires Were Started* and *The Bells Go Down* both include a selection of English accents as well as at least one Welsh and Scottish character therefore attempting to create an image of the entire nation working together against the Luftwaffe's onslaught, a device also used in the depiction of the merchant service, female industrial workers and the ATS.

Moreover, again like their seamen counterparts, they were shown to have traits readily associated with the idealised British citizen. For example, firemen were often depicted as stoic. William Sansom, one of the firemen to have appeared in *Fires Were Started*, described in one BBC broadcast how he was not afraid of bombs:

After all, a bomb's a bomb. It's either going to go off, has, or it's going to take some time about it. If it does, then you're finished. You won't hear it. You might not even see the flash. You probably wouldn't feel it. Just one moment you're standing by your crater and the next you're not. No announcement, no last moments of terror. A clean disappearance. It would be sudden.⁴⁷⁹

This blasé attitude in the face of death and lack of fear is certainly reminiscent of the portrayal of the armed services. Similarly, despite the horrific tales of danger the men

⁴⁷⁹ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Action by William Sansom*, 5 April 1943.

themselves often belittled and undermined the danger they were in. Sansom also noted in the AFS anthology *Fire and Water*:

It was our third job that night. Until this thing happened, work had been without incident. There had been shrapnel, a few inquiring bombs and some huge fires; but these were unremarkable and have since merged without identity into the neutral maze of the of the fire and noise and water and night, without date and without hour, with neither time nor form, that lowers mistily at the back of the mind as a picture of the air-raid season.⁴⁸⁰

Similarly, in the anonymously published memoir *The Bells Go Down* (on which the film of the same name was loosely based), the author noted:

I remember being on the D.P. [a pump] and seeing the A.A. [antiaircraft shell] bursting overhead, and knowing full well that the shrapnel must be coming down in tons and that the bombs might be expected any minute – and I thought to myself: ‘Well I don’t really care any more. I’ll get killed sometime to-night, so what matter when.’ So I just went on working and pouring the water in to the fire.⁴⁸¹

Such images were replicated in more widely seen depictions. For instance, in *Fires Were Started* a bomb explodes while the men are fighting a fire. In response, all the men fall flat to the floor. As they stand up one of the men, Rumbold, laughs and exclaims ‘what a windy lot of bastards we are. That was a mile away’. The men even remain in high spirits the following morning after a full night fighting fires and despite having lost a colleague. After Johnny calls the canteen girl ‘beautiful’, one of the men, referring to Johnny’s soot-blackened face, retorts ‘You look pretty beautiful yourself too mate’ which leads the assembled group to laugh jovially. Such appearances of ‘smiling through’ aligned the fire services with the idealised image of

⁴⁸⁰ W. Sansom, ‘The Wall’ in Ingham, *Fire and Water*, p.120.

⁴⁸¹ Anon., *The Bells Go Down: The Diary of a London A.F.S. Man* (London: Methuen & Co. LTD, 1942), p.94.

the British citizen.

Moreover, in *The Bells Go Down*, even Tommy Trinder, the noted music hall comedian, is not merely a comic turn. He redeems himself from his comic failings, which may have made his character less than manly, by sacrificing himself at the end of the film trying to save the Station Chief from a collapsing building. In light of this the depiction of other civilian men is in stark comparison to those in the fire brigade or merchant service. Unlike the armed forces, firemen and merchant seamen, some civilians appear to have been legitimate targets of mockery. For example, the policemen in *A Canterbury Tale* (Emeric Powell and Michael Pressburger, 1944) have comical officious voices and humorous suspense music plays when they try to catch a criminal. Similarly, in *Went the Day Well?* the policeman is shown to be easily outwitted, not only by the invading Germans but also by the village poacher, and is clearly a slightly comedic character. However, what these different representations suggest is that the presence of danger in an occupation coupled with subsequent necessary bravery meant that those occupations were precluded from being mocked and instead their use of humour underlined their status as 'ordinary' heroes.

Moreover, a key component of 'the people's war' rhetoric was the ordinariness of civilians who could make an extraordinary difference to the war effort. Such an image was conferred upon the fire service by the fact that there was an overwhelming focus on the AFS especially on film. Despite both *Fires Were Started* and *The Bells Go Down* being released in 1943, two years after the creation of the NFS, both films focus on much earlier periods of the war. While this may largely have been to centre the film's narrative on the Blitz, the period in which

firemen's role in the war was most crucial, it also has the effect of focusing on the AFS and the connotations of the heroics of the ordinary man which that brought. This appears to be something the Crown Film Unit, the film production company for *Fires Were Started*, were keen to stress. Promotional materials, for example, for the film stated:

The Cast, who as already mentioned, are all members of the fire service, were picked as representative types from every part of the country: the principal parts are played by Leading Fireman F.W. Griffiths, a cockney taxi-driver who joined the A.F.S. before the war; Leading Fireman Phillip Wilson-Dickson, previously employed in an advertising agency; Leading Fireman Loris Rey, a brilliant sculptor who has frequently exhibited at the Royal Academy; Firemen T.P. Smith, formerly a waiter; Firemen John Barker, a Manchester Business Man, and Company Officer George Gravett, a regular London Fire Brigade man.⁴⁸²

This focus on these men's pre-war roles shows them to be ordinary men as well as heroes and as such places them firmly within Rose's conceptualisation of the ordinary hero.

v. Gender Relationships

Unlike the Merchant Navy the fire service did not remain a singularly male endeavour in wartime. Instead, women were used to undertake some of the necessary tasks. While the most dangerous job of actually fighting fires was always undertaken by men, women were used as telephonists, therefore largely conforming to traditional gender roles. Moreover, they were also employed in the more hazardous job of despatch rider, for example, which took them to the heart of the Blitz. Such jobs were infrequently referenced culturally. For example, on 18 June 1941 during the

⁴⁸² National Archives, INF 6/985.

‘Salute to Heroes’ feature on the BBC’s civil defence programme *Under Your Tin*

Hat the following story was told of a female volunteer for the AFS:

On the night of November 14th during a severe enemy attack on Coventry, Marjorie Perkins was engaged in the Works surgery and on two occasions was blown off her feet by blast and rendered unconscious. On recovery, she continued to render First Aid to injured work people, visiting shelters and other parts of the works to do this, regardless of raging fires and falling H.E. [High Explosive] bombs. Marjorie Perkins showed an outstanding example of bravery.⁴⁸³

While Marjorie was undertaking what could have been seen as a traditionally female role, tending to the wounded, her actions of continuing despite injury and in the face of fire and bombing blur this gender stereotype. Similarly, a later BBC broadcast declared that:

Each available woman had a full and dangerous night’s work. Some ride motor-cycles through the Blitz, conveying urgent messages. Other women may be running field telephone cables- clambering over the roof tops and climbing trees so that lines of communication, destroyed by the enemy, may be at once replaced.⁴⁸⁴

Such radio depictions allowed women to undertake brave and courageous acts in their own right, undermining the idea of the heroic actions of the fire service as being solely the preserve of the manly hero.

However, women played a much more prominent role in the BBC’s depiction of civil defence than in other media. Filmically, for example, roles within the AFS were more delineated along gender lines. In the widely seen depictions in both *The Bells Go Down* and *Fires Were Started*, the main task of the female fire fighters appears to have been to answer the phone and, in the case of *The Bells Go Down*, to

⁴⁸³ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Under Your Tin Hat*, 18 June 1941.

⁴⁸⁴ BBC Written Archive Centre, *Women of the Fire Service*, 16 December 1942.

provide a love interest. Indeed, Susie the only female fire fighter focused upon in *The Bells Go Down*, joined the Fire Service to be near to her boyfriend. Moreover, when suspecting her boyfriend's parents of being trapped under rubble Susie uses her feminine wiles, by pretending to hear shouts, to get a male ARP warden to dig rather than attempt any rescue of her own therefore conforming to stereotypical gender roles.



Figure 5.15, still from *Fires Were Started*, 1943

Women, despite some suggestions of female bravery on the BBC, were much more prominently represented in such a way as to reinforce, rather than upset, conventional gender roles: they are generally shown assisting men as they take on the more dangerous role of fighting fires therefore cementing the fire services' image as manly heroes. Indeed, it is likely that it was this strictly gendered image which partially allowed the fire services their portrayal as civil defence heroes. The ARP lacked the consistently brave actions for heroic portrayal. Similarly, while the ambulance service could have potentially matched the fire services in terms of heroic deeds they were perhaps too associated with civilian injury and death to be overly focused on culturally. Moreover, the work of the ambulance service was less

obviously gendered with women often at the heart of bombing raids tending the wounded. An image of women in such obviously dangerous situations would likely have been unacceptable and so left the fire services as the sole heroic civil defence group. Their work could easily be heroic but was also easily distanced from the human casualties of the Blitz and, perhaps most importantly, their work was acceptably gendered.

vi. Firefighting after the Blitz

Despite the high praise and heroic image of the fire service during and immediately after the Blitz this image was not to last. It is telling the two most prominent depictions of the fire service in war, the films *The Bells Go Down* and *Fires Were Started*, were released very close together in 1943. Given the long lead in time for films it is likely that both were conceived shortly after the Blitz had ceased and appeared on screen only in 1943. As such they form a high point in public interest in the exploits of the fire service. After the release of these films the cultural depictions, on all media, of the fire service declined to almost nothing. This may largely be to do with the fact that after the intense bombing of the Blitz, firefighting was no longer the essential job it once had been and so naturally merited less emphasis in the media. This may have been further compounded by the increased overseas military action of the war after this date which shifted attention from the home front to the battle front. Such disinterest and apathy was largely reflected in the opinions of the British public. For example, in August 1943 it was reported in Home Intelligence reports that numerous complaints were received with regards to the NFS that ‘large

numbers of young men are employed on trivial work.⁴⁸⁵ This suggests not only that the fire service in general were no longer considered to be doing vital and dangerous work but also reinforces the popular idea that young men, especially, should be gainfully employed, presumably ideally in the armed services, while the country was at war and therefore mirrors arguments generally directed at more sedate civilian occupations. Similarly, in autumn 1944 due to heavily decreased threat of air raids the NFS were combed out and again Home Intelligence reports suggest that such a move was welcome by the public ‘due to their long period of inactivity’.⁴⁸⁶ This again, suggested that despite their earlier heroic depictions, the British public no longer viewed firemen in the same way. Ultimately, the fire services’ depiction as heroes was widely drawn from their actions while Britain was under heavy attack from the German Luftwaffe. When the attack ceased, so did their necessity and, indeed their heroic status.

vii. Conclusion

It is clear that at the height of the Blitz, and the period immediately afterwards, the men of Britain’s fire services were largely depicted as heroes. Moreover, this heroic representation was very similar to the depiction more regularly associated with the armed forces. The men of the fire services were portrayed as brave, courageous and subject to extreme danger in the course of their duties – traits and experiences more

⁴⁸⁵ National Archives, CAB 121/106.

⁴⁸⁶ National Archives, CAB 121/107.

regularly associated with the armed forces. Such comparisons between the fire services and the armed forces were often made explicit and therefore linked the fire service with the prestigious image more generally given to the man in military uniform. Furthermore, as well as being somewhat ‘soldierly’ in their depictions the men of the fire services were also shown with more temperate qualities: they had strong bonds to their mates and were often displayed in a domestic setting therefore creating an image of ordinary British men. Again, as with their Merchant Navy counterparts, this was emphasised by their typical British traits and a focus on men from all corners of the British Isles. Indeed, they were perhaps the ideal symbol for ‘the people’s war’. The AFS in particular held connotations of ordinary men doing extraordinary deeds in times of war. Such an image was further cemented as the work was largely gendered therefore making them the most prominent of civil defence occupations and the only one to be truly portrayed as heroes. However, such an image was not sustained after the Blitz. Interest and depictions of the service diminished sharply and, ultimately, left the men of the services distanced from their previous heroic depictions.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

Through an exploration of a vast array of cultural sources, and responses to them, this thesis has shown that occupation was central to conceptions of the male civilian in Britain during the Second World War. What is notable is the general uniformity of portrayal across cultural media regardless of genre. This suggests that the depictions discussed in this thesis represent a set of widely-held views which allows this thesis to make robust conclusions. This research, therefore, has important implications for

both the historiography of the Second World War and understandings of masculinity both in wartime and beyond.

What is primarily clear from this thesis is that war radically changed depictions and perceptions of the occupations examined. For instance, while the rural idyll remained a constant from pre-war to post-war, agricultural work was culturally shifted in wartime from a skilled male, but little considered, occupation to one easily undertaken by Saturday gardeners and quickly trained members of the Women's Land Army. Such a portrayal was prevalent in the state's propaganda but was also shown in popular media such as radio and newspapers. Similarly, industrial work universally became culturally feminised with most depictions centring on the new female workforce. This is in sharp contrast to the pre-war image of industrial workplaces as the space of the overtly manly 'hard man'. Perceptions of the more dangerous occupations were also dramatically altered. The Merchant Navy were converted, culturally at least, from drunken and sexually licentious sea-borne scourges to heroes of the sea as seen, most notably, in such films as *San Demetrio, London* (Charles Frend, 1943) and *Western Approaches* (Pat Jackson, 1944). However it was the fire services who perhaps took the most remarkable wartime cultural journey: at the start of the war they were jeered and mocked; during the Blitz they were widely proclaimed by the print media and the film industry to be the heroes of the home front and then they were largely forgotten when the danger of the Blitz had ceased. Clearly, war changed what was expected of the male in wartime, including the civilian worker, and these changes were borne out culturally. Moreover, while the occupations examined could be loosely grouped in to dangerous and non-dangerous occupations, and therefore heroic and non-heroic, each

occupation patently kept a strong identity of its own in wartime and as such resists such easy categorisation.

As previously noted Penny Summerfield questions the wartime position of the civilian male worker given the overwhelming focus on the military man. She asks ‘Was there a problem about convincing him and the rest of society that he was a necessary part of the war effort and a real man?’⁴⁸⁷ For many occupations the answer to this question is patently in the affirmative. Male industrial and agricultural workers were clearly sidelined in the war years. Regardless of their central role in Britain’s victory these men were, despite some attempts on the part of the state, never truly given a valid role on the home front in cultural depictions. The men in these occupations were generally forgotten or presented as explicitly secondary and when they were depicted it was often unfavourably. Indeed, they were most often portrayed as old or unfit for military service. For example, the BBC often presented an image of the industrial worker as too old to enlist while the print media was awash with photographs of elderly farm workers. Such an image of the civilian worker persists in popular memory today perhaps suggesting their poor wartime depiction meant they were effectively written out of Britain’s wartime story.

Moreover, Corinna Peniston-Bird argues ‘working in a reserved occupation was only acceptable if the individual longed to join the armed forces but nobly sacrificed his desire for the good of the country.’⁴⁸⁸ However, culturally the men in industry and agriculture were, due to the lack of references to their reserved status,

⁴⁸⁷ P. Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1998), p.119.

⁴⁸⁸ C. Peniston-Bird, ‘Classifying the Body in the Second World War: British Men In and Out of Uniform’ in *Body & Society*, Vol. No. 9, Number 4, December 2003, p.40.

even denied such an image of 'frustrated heroism'. In addition, there was a persistent belief in government, the public and the press that men in industrial occupations, especially, were not shouldering their fair share of the wartime burden when compared to the hardships faced by the armed services. In turn this made them susceptible to, often vicious, criticisms highlighting their lowly wartime standing. Clearly, both industrial and agricultural workers were shown to be separate from the wartime masculine ideal therefore supporting Sonya Rose's assertion that the ideal masculinity of the 'temperate hero' was only available to the uniformed man.⁴⁸⁹ However, this thesis also prompts us to question Rose's straightforward analysis. It is correct that the men of the Merchant Navy and the fire services perhaps never reached the apogee of wartime masculinity. The mercantile marine were perhaps too marred with suggestions of pity as suggested by the Ministry of War Transport and evidenced by the overwhelming focus on them languishing in lifeboats. Moreover, the fire services were possibly too fleetingly depicted as heroes to truly be considered the equals of the armed forces. Yet both came very close. On all media the mercantile marine were depicted facing the largely military dangers of torpedo and aerial bombardment. Additionally, they actively fought with weapons against the fleets of the Axis powers. In the very literal sense these men were fighting the war. Moreover, while the men of the fire service were not armed they were also depicted in a way which consciously mirrored the depictions of the armed forces. They too were brave and courageous in the face of enemy action. More pointedly, men in both occupations sacrificed their lives and health for the protection of Britain as seen in

⁴⁸⁹ S.O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.193.

such films as *Fires Were Started* (Humphrey Jennings, 1943) and *San Demetrio, London*. As such they conform to the depiction of the ‘soldier hero’ which forms one part of Rose’s conceptualisation of the ‘temperate hero’.⁴⁹⁰

It is clear that in undertaking these dangerous behaviours the men of the Merchant Navy and the fire services were compared to the highly lauded armed forces. Furthermore, their depiction aped the portrayal of the armed forces in other ways. The depiction of both occupations shows a fixation with ‘ordinariness’. For the Merchant Navy this was a persistent image of the service as a resolutely workingclass occupation, again seen consistently through all media but especially on film, while for the fire service it was found in the focus on their pre-war occupations most notably in *Fires Were Started*. Additionally, both occupations were culturally ascribed the traits of the idealised Briton. Both were depicted as stoic as they used their humour to ‘keep smiling through’. In addition, they had strong bonds not only to their colleagues but to their domestic lives putting them in sharp contrast to the image of the vilified and bloodthirsty Nazi automaton. Therefore, these occupations fulfilled the ‘ordinary’ part of Rose’s conceptualisation of the ‘temperate hero’ more commonly associated with the depiction of the armed services.⁵ Consequently, the evidence of this thesis suggests we should nuance our understandings of the wartime masculine ideal to include those not in military uniforms but who were given access to the prestige associated with those who were.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid, pp.160-1. ⁵ Ibid, pp.160-1.

Furthermore, it is notable that men in more sedate occupations were often depicted as 'ordinary' through, for example, depictions with their families as seen in *A Diary for Timothy* (Humphrey Jennings, 1946). However, without the dangers faced by other occupations they remained merely ordinary rather than achieving 'ordinary hero' status. Yet, they were equally vital in the successful prosecution of a total war. Patently, it was proximity to the specific dangers of war rather than centrality to the war effort which set the men of the fire services and the Merchant Navy apart from their counterparts in other civilian occupations. While in the interwar period workplace skill, strength and productivity had been major sources of masculine pride, such an image was overridden in wartime and replaced with an almost singular focus on bravery under fire. The space in which work was undertaken as well as the occupation itself is central to this issue. The farmer's position in the countryside precluded him from almost any suggestions of heroism. The countryside was a designated safe space, seen in its use as a haven for evacuated children, and was prominently depicted as bucolic and unchanged by the horrors of war in government propaganda as well as the print media and film. Therefore, the countryside, and so the male agricultural worker, was obviously and notably separated from the terrible experiences of war lived by a great number of the civilian population. Even the industrial worker who often laboured in Blitzed cities or towns was perhaps associated with victimhood due to their inability to fight back in any literal sense. In stark contrast the men of the fire services and the mercantile marine professionally only occupied space which was designated as too dangerous for the ordinary civilian. While the average citizen was encouraged to take shelter during an air-raid the fire services were duty-bound to head out to face falling bombs and

collapsing buildings. Similarly, the Merchant Navy traversed oceanic battlegrounds with their cargoes and therefore put themselves in danger of injury and death.

Therefore, it is clear that associations with dangers which exceeded the ordinary civilians bestowed on them great respect. Indeed, it is interesting to note that when the media, for example BBC broadcasts, did attempt to shape an image of an industrial hero they did so through associations with danger cementing that as the measure of masculine validity in the war years.

Moreover, while the press did occasionally attempt to shape an image of male industrial and agricultural workers as both vital and skilled workers this was rare. Instead the wartime media focused on the ease with which new workers, predominantly women, were able to take up this previously skilled work which denied these workers a masculine identity built on skill. This was seen in such films as *Millions Like Us* (Sidney Gilliat and Frank Launder, 1943) and *A Canterbury Tale* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1944). Therefore, despite the fact that many of these jobs were extremely dangerous workers in these occupations were deprived of a cultural identity from two key sources of male pride: dangerous undertakings and workplace skill. Furthermore, what this preoccupation with incoming labour, in conjunction with the overwhelming cultural focus on danger, highlights is that the wartime press focused on what was exciting or interesting. In the exhilarating world of warfare, tales of derring-do were commonplace and stories of the British populace finding new talents for resilience, bravery and courage featured frequently in the wartime media. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that stories of men continuing their pre-war occupations, almost unchanged, garnered little attention while men performing heroic actions while under enemy fire were

omnipresent. It can be argued, therefore, that seemingly sedate occupations were culturally overlooked for the prosaic reason that they were simply too dull.

Obviously in acting bravely in dangerous situations the fire services and mercantile marine became heroes and also had a greater social standing than the men in more sedate occupations. These dangerous situations also clearly impacted on the portrayal of women associated with these occupations. The majority of hazardous actions undertaken by the fire brigades and Merchant Navy excluded women therefore denoting their occupations as singularly masculine or, in the case of the fire services, sharply delineated along gender lines as seen in both *Fires Were Started and The Bells Go Down* (Basil Dearden, 1943). If we accept Whitehead and Barrett's definition of masculinity as 'culturally defined as not feminine' we can see that these occupations were evidently considered more 'manly' than their counterparts in other civilian occupations.⁴⁹¹ In sharp contrast most industrial and agricultural occupations were patently seen as safe enough for women to undertake. Indeed, on every medium male workers were usually completely eschewed in favour of the new glamorous female labour force. It is this aspect of these occupations which most fascinated the wartime media, and arguably the general public, who painted a picture of these jobs as almost entirely dependent on female labour. In wartime these occupations became feminised and so therefore further diminished their masculine standing. Higonet and Higonet's image of the double helix explains gender relations during the war, showing that women remained subordinate to men despite doing 'male' work.⁴⁹²

⁴⁹¹ S.M. Whitehead and F.J. Barrett, 'The Sociology of Masculinity' in S.M. Whitehouse and F.J. Barrett (eds), *The Masculinities Reader* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p.16.

⁴⁹² M. Higonet and P. Higonet, 'The Double Helix' in M. Higonet et al, *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p.34.

However, male industrial and agricultural workers were now in jobs widely considered to be, almost exclusively, female endeavours and as such, again, clearly subordinated to the ideal form of masculinity.

Evidently, therefore, there was a hierarchy of masculine occupations during the war years: civilian men were not an undifferentiated mass. Indeed, rather than the somewhat conception of wartime masculinity offered by Sonya Rose, which simply places the civilian man in dualistic opposition to the military man, the evidence of this thesis suggests the actuality was much more complex with a continuum of masculinities stretching from the home front to the battlefield. This conforms to Connell's theories of masculinity.⁴⁹³ While undoubtedly the 'soldier', or indeed Royal Navy sailor or RAF airman, was at the top of this hierarchy, some civilian occupations came close behind. The frequent explicit comparisons to the armed forces levied at the fire services and the Merchant Navy made clear these occupations were held in high regard. However, the fleeting portrayal of the fire service as heroes suggests their position in the hierarchy was much more tenuous and less assured than the mercantile marine. Moreover, while agricultural and industrial occupations could both be considered subordinate masculine roles, to use Connell's lexicon, they too were not equal. While both were generally overlooked in wartime culture this is much more pronounced with regards to agriculture. Attempts were made, however fleetingly and poorly executed, to link the industrial world to military endeavours suggesting that it was more widely realised how central industrial work was to eventual victory. Such considerations were extremely rare for agricultural

⁴⁹³ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p.28.

workers suggesting their standing was below the male industrial labour force's. As such, a clear hierarchy of masculinities has emerged in the course of this thesis.

What is also clear from this work is that, despite their efforts, the state had little influence over depictions out with their own direct control. For example, with regards to industry many government departments attempted to present the male industrial worker as the equal of the military man. However, this idea was rarely seen out with their own propaganda attempts. The media instead chose to focus on female industrial labour. Moreover, with other occupations the state appears to have reflected rather than set public opinion. For example, the state, like the media generally, were largely unconcerned with the male agricultural worker, only using their propaganda efforts for such quotidian uses as promotion of fertiliser and pest control. Similarly, the state placed little emphasis on the Merchant Navy but what little propaganda they did produce reflected the broadly seen heroic stance granted in more widespread media. Moreover, the state placed even less focus on the fire services yet there was a huge popular focus on these men as heroes. As such this thesis supports the arguments made by recent research which debunked the idea of the wartime state as an all-powerful cultural force.⁴⁹⁴

This thesis, then, has reintroduced the male civilian worker to Britain's story of the Second World War. However, while all were central to eventual victory, there were sharp distinctions between the differing groups of civilian workers and a clear hierarchy in representation. Those who faced specifically war-related dangers in their

⁴⁹⁴ For example J. Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda 1939-45* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998); S.L. Carruthers, *The Media at War: Communications and Conflict in the Twentieth* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

work were lauded as heroes in a similar portrayal to that given to the armed services while those who did not were pushed to the periphery, excluded and culturally replaced with an emasculating female labour force. Ultimately, therefore, only dangerous acts could confer the desired masculine status of 'hero' in wartime Britain.

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