

The Food Companions: Cinema and Consumption in Wartime Britain, 1939-45

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The Second World War has long been the subject of a rich vein of academic writing, and popular interest in the conflict, ever-growing as significant anniversaries are reached, ensures that the war remains a constant in the British public's consciousness. The effects of the war on the home front have been of especial interest, particularly in popular imaginings of the conflict. Indeed, last year's 70th anniversary of the Blitz resulted in a stream of news coverage, both local and national, that reported on the many remembrance services being held across the country to commemorate the impact of the air-raids on the civilian population; while television documentaries evocatively assessed the effects of the Blitz on people living in Britain's most affected cities. *The Food Companions: Cinema and Consumption in Wartime Britain, 1939-45*, Richard Farmer's first book, and published as part of Manchester University's Press's 'Studies in Popular Culture' series, is thus not only very timely, it is also highly pertinent. Investigating the role of food and consumption during the war, and paying particular attention to the impact of rationing on the civilian population, as well as the role of the government in attempting to win public approval on this delicate issue through the use of the Ministry of Food's (MoF) multi-media campaigns, *The Food Companions* provides a highly nuanced and extremely well-considered account of the social, economic and cultural impact of the conflict on British society's home front.

Academic writing on government intervention in public affairs during the Second World War has typically evaluated the role of the main propaganda organisation, the Ministry of Information (MoI). Important works, such as Ian McLaine's general history of the MoI, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II*, and James Chapman's investigation into its Films Division, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945*

, have looked at the organisation's inner-workings, and assessed the various means that were used to promote government involvement in peoples' lives.(1) This concentration on the MoI has, as Farmer states, 'left other government departments somewhat in the shade' (p. 12). Less has been written, for example, on the Ministry of Food (MoF), an arguably equally important organisation in maintaining public support for the war effort. Moreover, the research that has been conducted into the MoF, such as R. J. Hammond's three-volume official history *Food*, and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska's monograph *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939–1955*, has focused primarily on the organisation's administrative duties or economic policies; ignoring the many and varied publicity campaigns that the Ministry ran.(2) Farmer admirably redresses the balance in this ground-breaking book, by evaluating the various publicity campaigns employed by the Ministry that encouraged the people of Britain to not only support (or at the very least accept) food restrictions, but also make the most of their rations, while acknowledging that their deprivations were of a universal nature.

Farmer does appreciate the MoI's central role in propaganda policy, but he ably demonstrates how equally adept the MoF was at promoting key issues to an often fearful population. He also reveals how the MoF, through the leadership of its most popular minister, Lord Woolton, gradually gained the public's trust, allowing the Ministry to initiate a series of restrictions that could have, under less capable hands, led to much consternation and unrest among the British population. In fact, as many contemporaries and historians have pointed out, the MoI was particularly inept in its early years, and a succession of its ministers failed to garner much popular support, leading some contemporaries to label the organisation the 'Ministry of Dis-information' and 'the Ministry of Muddle'.(3) By contrast, the MoF was far more adept at winning the public's favour. As Farmer notes, the MoF successfully got the public on-side by showing a 'degree of sensitivity' towards them, and recognising that overtly didactic propaganda measures would be sure to alienate them (p. 84). Farmer gives Woolton much credit for this. With Woolton at its helm, Farmer argues, the Ministry could rely on a figure eager to promote his image as a man of the people, not some faceless bureaucrat instructing them how to live their lives. As Farmer points out, this helped to establish a 'powerful sense of community' and 'consensus and social unity' among the British public, which tended to override any individual requirements (p. 223).

Interestingly, this assertion goes against the arguments prevalent in a number of recent histories investigating the effects of the war on British society. These works have stressed the negative impact that the conflict had on the civilian population, and document the loss of morale, continuing class and gender antagonisms, increased crime rates and the growth of racism, along with the strained relations in both the workplace and at home that, their authors contend, took priority over any notion of national unity.(4) While Farmer is careful not to view the war as a time when all of society dutifully pulled together in the face of the enemy (indeed, one chapter is devoted to evaluating the ways in which that most divisive of wartime offences – the black market – was portrayed in wartime cinema) he successfully counters the 'conflict' model by revealing how, for the most part, the people of Britain were willing to make a great many personal sacrifices in aid of the national cause. The British public did this partly because, as Farmer points out, the MoF treated them as a 'central component of the war effort' (p. 33). According to Farmer, the public were seen as 'active participants' in the Ministry's publicity strategies, not simply passive on-lookers (p. 31). Indeed, when the MoF did read the situation wrongly – screening out-of-date food information as part of its *Food Flash* campaign in April 1942, for example – Farmer notes that it acted quickly to ensure that such lapses in its publicity campaigns did not happen again.

The MoF used four principal publicity methods – posters, radio (as part of *The Kitchen Front* campaign), the press (*Food Facts*), and film (*Food Flash*) – and Farmer scrutinises these in rich detail in the book's first two chapters. Chapter one explores the Ministry's role as publicist, and through an evaluation of its *Kitchen Front* and *Food Facts* campaigns Farmer reveals how the MoF sought to position food and consumption as an essential part of wartime culture. Chapter two provides a detailed and highly informative analysis of the films commissioned by the Ministry as part of their *Food Flash* campaign. Farmer reveals how keenly aware the Ministry was of the importance of such audio-visual material in the propaganda war, and he skilfully demonstrates the ways in which the organisation sought to use one of the period's most popular leisure

forms, cinema, to gain public support for its campaigns. In fact, according to Farmer, the MoF were so alert to the centrality of cinema to the British public that they frequently employed well-known film comedians such as Tommy Trinder, and Elsie and Doris Waters (in their guise as the popular cockney characters Gert and Daisy) to increase support for their campaigns. The deployment of these performers, Farmer contends, helped to 'embed MoF publicity in the cultural mainstream, as an integral element of popular culture' (p. 35). Intriguingly, many of these stars have long been neglected by mainstream academia, so it is pleasing to see Farmer returning them to centre stage in this book. During the war these performers built up a significant following, and attracted thousands of people into cinemas to watch their antics on the screen; they had major cultural currency in the period – clearly demonstrated by the Ministry's desire to employ them – and should therefore be accorded equally significant currency in any appraisal of popular culture in wartime Britain.

Farmer continues the rehabilitation of these long-neglected performers – along with numerous overlooked films – in the final three, thematically linked chapters of *The Food Companions*. These investigate the representation of food and consumption in wartime film, covering both government-made and commercial ventures. Chapter three positions contemporaneously set films that helped to implement the wartime ethic of communal identity and community solidarity against costume/period films that deployed the 'fantasy of unrestricted consumption' in order to celebrate individual pleasures (p. 122). According to Farmer, contemporaneously set films such as *Eating Out with Tommy Trinder* (1941), *Millions Like Us* (1943), and *Old Mother Riley, Detective* (1943) gave prominence to the role of communal dining (in the form of canteens and messes) in order to promote the paradigms of 'communal consumption' and 'national community' (p. 99). In contrast, costume/period films such as *Champagne Charlie* (1944), *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944), and *The Wicked Lady* (1945) utilised food to 'communicate ideas of pleasure, individuality and indulgence', thus allowing cinema audiences the freedom to enjoy, visually at least, the forbidden pleasures of excess consumption (p. 98). As Farmer notes, these films offered cinema-goers an escape from the current era of extreme austerity into an historical past of conspicuous consumption and sensual gratification. However, as Farmer also states, these films need to be understood as products of their time – the latter years of the war, and the early months of peace. By then, Farmer contends, consumers had 'become less tolerant' of food restrictions, and demanded to taste 'the fruits of victory' (p. 140). Of course, the foregrounding of individual pleasures in these films was ideologically at odds with the majority of British films made during the war period, but, as Farmer point out, by the end of the hostilities such messages were considered far less threatening to the wartime 'national community'.

Farmer's analysis of these ideologically divergent films reveals one of the real strengths of this book: the author's appreciation of the complexities of cultural provision and cultural pleasure. Films could only perform successfully as either entertainment or propaganda vehicles if film-makers got their timing right. This is no more evident than in the series of low-budget comedies made in the middle years of the war that focused on that other great menace to the wartime national community – the black market – which are comprehensively evaluated in chapter four (tellingly entitled 'The rat in England's storehouse'). As Farmer notes, genre films produced earlier in the war had focused on spies, fifth columnists and saboteurs to counter the most immediate threats to wartime society. However, by the middle years of the war illegal food transactions had become the most obvious threat to communal solidarity, leading to the production of a run of films, such as *Gert and Daisy Clean Up* (1942), *Old Mother Riley, Detective* (1943), and *Up With the Lark* (1943), that placed the subject centre-stage in their narratives. These films featured working-class female protagonists – Gert and Daisy, Mother Riley, Ethel Revnell and Gracie West – who were tasked with catching the black marketers whose deeds were portrayed, not just as unlawful, but as an affront to decency and communality. It was, according to Farmer, the speed with which these low-budget films could be produced that led to their success in simultaneously helping to neutralise the threats the country faced, while building on the image of the wartime national community. As he notes, these films could 'refresh their generic narratives' for immediate effect, and thus tap into current debates about 'what it meant to be British in wartime' (pp. 159–60). In these films, then, being British clearly meant supporting the wartime constraints on food and consumption for which the MoF had so successfully campaigned.

While chapters three and four position food and consumption as communal signifiers, Chapter five explores

the ways in which stereotypically British foodstuffs, in particular tea, were used in wartime films to signify British national identity. Farmer convincingly argues that food and consumption practices were regularly employed in British-produced films such as *Went the Day Well?* (1942), *San Demetrio, London* (1943), and *The Demi-Paradise* (1943) to position Britain in relation to its allies, specifically the USA and USSR, as well as its enemies. According to Farmer, food was identified by British filmmakers as ‘a crucial munition, not only on the home front, but also in foreign theatres of war’ (p. 187). In wartime Britain, then, filmmakers and the MoF encouraged the British public to view food and consumption as ‘a gastronomic expression of the nation’s coherence and identity’ (p. 3). Food and consumption were the means by which the nation could define itself against ‘the other’. Crucially, though, Farmer reveals that filmmakers and MoF personnel did not view British national identity as fixed, but fluid. Indeed, he points out that the ‘wartime British persona’ was ‘capable, and perhaps in need, of continual refinement, redefinition and reaffirmation’ (p. 222). That the MoF and British filmmakers could respond to these shifts and continue to produce material that satisfied the audiences’ changing sense of self reveals much about their respect towards the needs of the consumer.

Refreshingly, Farmer exhibits a similar respect for the consumer in this book, thus making his contribution to the historiography of the Second World War particularly welcome. Too often in the past consumers have been identified – by both cultural critics and scholars – as passive dopes, with limited ability to make conscious choices over the way they chose to spend their leisure time. Farmer shows this to be a reductive approach, and thus allows consumers considerable agency in his analysis of their behaviour. Indeed, he recognises that displacements could occur between the ways in which propaganda messages were intended to be read and how they were received by the public, revealing that they were always shaped by the consumers’ individual experiences. According to Farmer, then, food and consumption were in ‘a constant process of negotiation’ during the war period, but nonetheless helped to ‘unite, define and sustain’ the nation (p. 228).

Farmer draws from a wide range of primary sources to assess the cultural impact of rationing and food control on both the government and commercial filmmakers. Government papers, newspapers, trade journals, fan magazines, along with Mass-Observation surveys and surviving interviews from key contemporaries of the period are all used mindfully. Combined with this rich tapestry of primary source material, Farmer’s remarkably incisive analysis of both well-known and less familiar films facilitates the construction of an absorbing and highly compelling picture of British social and cultural life during the Second World War.

The Food Companions is an outstanding book. It provides a comprehensive and wide-ranging account of food and consumption habits in British society during a time of national crisis. Thoroughly researched, elegantly written, attractively illustrated, and frequently humorous, the book should appeal to scholars interested in cultural, film and social history. It deserves to be read more widely, though, not just among academics, but the general public too, and it is hoped that this will be advanced by a speedy paperback publication. Personal memories of the Second World War may be fading as significant numbers of people who actually experienced the conflict are lost, but books such as this help to capture the thoughts and feelings of the British public during this most traumatic period in the country’s history.

Notes

1. Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London, 1979); James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939–1945*, (London, 1998), p. 13.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. J. Hammond, *Food* (3 vols, London, 1951–62); Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption, 1939–1955*, (Oxford, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Chapman, *The British at War*, p. 13.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See, for example, Stuart Hylton, *Careless Talk: The Hidden History of the Home Front 1939–1945* (London, 2010); M. J. Trow, *War Crimes: Underworld Britain in the Second World War* (Barnsley, 2008); Donald Thomas, *An Underworld at War: Spivs, Deserters, Racketeers and Civilians in the Second World War*

(London, 2003).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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