

The Stomach for Fighting: Food and the Soldiers of the Great War

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Rachel Duffett has written a fine social history of British rank and file soldiers, or rankers, and their experiences of food during the Great War. She states, 'The ranker's relationship with food was a constant thread, woven throughout his army experience ... every day, wherever he was, a man needed to eat' (p. 229). Since rankers were overwhelmingly from working class and lower-middle-class backgrounds, Duffett argues that food and eating for these soldiers carried particular meanings and associations and evoked feelings and reactions that were different from those of the officers, who were typically from the middle and upper classes. Further, social class was a strong determining factor in perceptions of army food and in the ways in which rankers used talk of food to express their emotions about the war.

Duffett draws on rankers' letters, diaries, memoirs, and other papers gleaned from six different archives plus private collections, printed primary sources from the Imperial War Museum and the National Army Museum, as well as published diaries, letters, and memoirs. The number of individual soldiers represented in this research is impressive and appears ample enough to allow good generalizations. The sources, as Duffett uses them, also demonstrate that while these men belonged to the same social class, they did not experience the conditions of army life uniformly. Of course, as she points out, not all working- and lower-middle-class families lived in exactly the same conditions in prewar Britain, but many generally held values and common experiences in civilian life undeniably affected how large numbers of rankers responded to the conditions of their new lives.

In the introductory chapter, 'Food and war', Duffett rehearses the principal theories of the big-name food scholars in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and history: Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas,

Jack Goody, Sidney Mintz and Marvin Harris, to name a few. Along with studies of British social history and leading work on Britain in the Great War, Duffett lays the groundwork for her argument that food both provides physical sustenance and allows emotional connection and expression.

In chapter two, Duffett provides the background story of British army food provisioning during the 19th century, depicting it as pitifully inadequate. The army was, in fact, the employer of next-to-last resort, slightly preferable to the workhouse. The men who did enlist in this low status job were already malnourished and physically underdeveloped; the army conceded this when it lowered the height requirement, first by three inches (to 5 ft. 3 in.) and later by another two inches, in order to let enough men into the ranks. Army rations did little to improve the health of rankers. Officers, most from the middle and upper classes, were rarely subjected to army rations, and certainly not regularly. While rations had improved by the start of the First World War, eating in the army still replicated the entrenched British class system. Duffett demonstrates the ways in which class, rank, and diet, by and large, remained related throughout the war.

Chapter two also gives us a comprehensive review of the literature on working-class eating habits and family dynamics around meal preparation and consumption in the pre-war era. Dietary conservatism as well as the hierarchy of food entitlement within the family structure would affect how rankers adjusted to army life. For example, husbands and older sons received the choice morsels, often the only cooked hot food; wives and other children ate what was left. Sometimes calories were adequate, but not in every family. In the army, while calories might well be ample, all soldiers were men. Preferential treatment was no longer accorded to men who had grown up knowing only that dynamic. Thus they faced the humiliating prospect of assuming the role that represented the woman's subaltern status. As a result, mealtime could become a free-for-all with fellow soldiers behaving aggressively to secure their shares. Duffett also argues that working-class families did not eat with neighbors or other families, unlike the dinner-party-giving middle and upper classes, and therefore taking meals in the mess hall with large numbers of men would have been unappetizing and unsettling on a cultural level. Many rankers from lower-middle-class homes would have been raised to value the outward appearances that signified their families' aspirations to middle-class respectability, such as a properly set table and appropriate manners. Being forced to eat unfamiliar foods in a rough and dirty army mess served up daily reminders of what these men had lost: the comforting rituals of domestic meals, whatever their inadequacies, and even their freedom.

The British, like the French, believed that the best food for the fighting man was meat, preferably red, and lots of it. The early rations in both armies were over a pound per man per day. When Marcel Proust's butler, Monsieur Albaret, was mobilized in the early weeks of August 1914, his first assignment was to drive a vehicle filled with freshly-slaughtered meat every morning from Paris to the front.⁽¹⁾ In the Christmas 1915 issue of the culinary journal *L'Art Culinaire*, the great French chef Auguste Escoffier referred to 'recent complaints by the troops about the overuse of meat in their rations'.⁽²⁾ (After the army medical corps blamed a variety of health problems among soldiers on their meat-heavy diet, a French parliamentarian proposed a law that required the army to provide at least 200 to 300 grams – or about 7 to 10 ounces – of fruits and vegetables for each soldier every two days.⁽³⁾ This is approximately the weight of two good sized apples.) Duffett gives us insights into the toll on British soldiers' bodies of endless meals of tinned beef and too few fruits and vegetables: indigestion, constipation, diarrhea, vomiting, as well as tooth decay and early stage scurvy. Even the dubiously named army recipe for 'Sea pie' contained tinned beef, not fish. Duffett writes that, by spring 1917, vegetable gardens had been planted behind the lines in the British sector in order to help meet the target of eight ounces of veg per day, but adds that the soldiers' accounts do not substantiate the official record that this was met. 'Vegetables', Duffett writes, pretty much meant potatoes. Official ration tables indicate that soldiers were to receive over a pound of bread per day, but often what they really got was hard biscuits. Duffett tells us that the pre-war working classes could not have afforded any kind of meat with regularity and were unused to eating so much of it ⁽⁴⁾, were suspicious of tinned foods (with the exception of milk), and used vegetables for flavoring rather than for stand-alone dishes. Calorie intake was highly reliant on bread and jam, which was the primary form in which the working classes consumed fruit. This diet, supplemented by tasty fried fish and chips plus other highly-flavored foods such as pickles, herring, and

cheese, was far from what the army served up.

As Duffett turns to food in the home camps followed by food on the Western Front in chapter three, she digs into much of what the book is meant to convey, which is perhaps not so much about army food itself as it is about how food served as a vehicle for self-expression, particularly of emotion. A soldier might write of his wretched and insufficient rations compared to the fineries of officers' meals. Upper-class officers received baskets of foods from the up-market London emporium Fortnum and Mason and pheasants shot on their country estates. Many rankers' families had to sacrifice food from the family table to be able to send even a humble homemade cake. Putting together a package became even more of a burden as prices on the home front skyrocketed. Duffett writes, 'Food became a metaphor for wider injustices in an environment where the ranker's life, not just his diet, lay in the hands of others' (p. 180).

While eating is a physical act, food is charged with memories and feelings. Food represented caring: poor quality food, monotonous meals, and rations that sometimes did not even make it through to the fighting men at the front constituted evidence that the army did not care about them. Every meal, Duffett argues, reminded the ranker of better times. Complaints about the food, too, may have been ways to express feelings of boredom, discomfort, and fear. It is not clear how much army provisioning was botched from incompetence or whether this was simply a very complex operation responding in real time to the unforeseen. Duffett remarks on the absence of official army accounts of provisioning logistics and the food itself. Her research turned up little more than ideal goals in terms of supply line operations, calories, and foodstuffs rather than information based on the reality of how the army handled troop provisions between 1914 and 1918. However, based on other evidence, the author argues that 'the widely held opinion amongst historians of the war that the men were far better fed than in their civilian lives, and therefore pleased with army provisioning, is a belief that has only a limited basis in reality' (pp. 232–3).

The Stomach for Fighting is quite specific in its focus. The author exhausts one particular set of source materials. As a result we now have a comprehensive view of the typical rank and file British soldier's experience of the war seen through the lens of food and the meanings attached to the upheaval in eating that he experienced every day of the war. This is also a significant story about class and war. Much of the well-known writing that came out of the Great War provides an educated middle- and upper-class perspective and deals with different concerns. *The Stomach for Fighting* gives expression to the voices of many ordinary conscripts. This is an important addition to Great War history, but by the fifth chapter out of six the narrative becomes repetitive on a number of points, perhaps owing to its thematic rather than chronological organization. Chapter five ('Eating: the men and their rations') continues to explore feelings, food 'as emotional litmus paper' (p. 147), and we start to feel like we've been here before.

The abundance of statements of food theory occasionally feels like the exercise is a bit forced. In discussing the rankers' dislike of chaotic mess hall dining, noted above, the anthropological theory that Duffett references – that this preference may be linked to feelings of vulnerability sensed by our prehistoric hominid forebears that still linger in the subconscious mind of modern humans – seems superfluous, particularly after her thorough discussion of domestic meals in working-class culture. Presumably the middle and upper classes came from the same hominid stock but they did not have such inhibitions. In at least in one instance, the author's theorizing on the meaning of a specific food seems to go off the rails. When rankers at the front had the opportunity to take meals in local French villages, home cooked by French women in their own kitchens or impromptu eateries, the most popular dish was eggs and chips. Duffett spends the next two pages parsing why rankers would have considered eggs good to eat. Besides the practical reasons (including her own statement on page 52 that eggs were central to the working class diet), which in this instance would have sufficed, eggs provided 'childlike solace', they were 'a taste of maternal care', their 'natural packaging' was assurance of their safety and goodness, and there was 'the reassuring femininity of the egg' (pp. 216–17).

That said, we are convinced that even if army provisioning had been better, rankers' dissatisfaction with army food would have persisted because it often reflected more deeply held class-based notions of the complex meanings associated with food and eating formed during their pre-war lives. Moreover, we

understand how men who had little or no experience of writing about their emotions could use ‘the language of food’ to talk of war to their families. *The Stomach for Fighting* offers other researchers a rich resource to begin to make transnational social and cultural comparisons of army provisioning and the food of soldiers of different combatant nations on the Western Front. Being published so close to the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War, this book could also have a wider appeal, particularly in Britain, but the high price will likely discourage many potential readers.

Notes

1. Céleste Albaret, *Monsieur Proust: Souvenirs Recueillis par Georges Belmont* (Paris, 1973), p. 39. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Auguste Escoffier, ‘De l’alimentation économique et hygiénique des classes laborieuses et du soldat’, *L’Art Culinaire*, December 1915, xv. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Proposition de loi tendant à ravitailler les troupes en légumes et fruits préparés’, *Chambre des Députés*, 1022, 17 June 1915. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. There was clearly a spectrum of working-class experiences in terms of meat in the diet. John Burnett writes that the large amount of frozen and chilled beef that Britain was importing had, by 1902, made cheap and good meat much more available to the working population. *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (Harmondsworth, 1966), p. 135. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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