

## Chapter One

### Finding the Lost Working Man

Dennis Higton, who worked as an apprentice engineer at the Royal Aircraft Establishment in Farnborough, was 18 years old when war broke out in 1939. In an interview conducted for the British Library he recalled:

I wanted to fly, before I could fly of course, and I'd already lost one or two mates in the air. And whenever I saw a Spitfire I thought, oh, my God, I could do that as well as that, I hope it's not difficult. And I applied to join the air force, you know, formally. I got a real reprimand for the first one, did it again and got a really heavy reprimand, and I thought, well, I don't know, keep trying and they'll give in. And I did it for a third time and of course you have a medical every time you, and of course you're absolutely fit as a flea and enthusiastic. And I got a really – they told me if you do this again we'll send you to prison because, you know, this is – you're in occu – you're in a reserved occupation and that's what you're supposed to be doing, you can't sort of dart off and do a different job because you want to. And I remember saying that my dad wouldn't like that if I was sent to prison, you see... Oh, I wanted to fly. And these things were coming – they're killing people in the streets, you see. Also you'd see your friends who'd joined up and come back from the front or something and I thought, well, damn me. If you're a sensitive chap – and every now and then white feathers were given to people like me, you see, 'cause the person who gave the white feather thought the chap in civilian clothes was a coward.<sup>1</sup>

Like many of his generation Dennis was keen to be in uniform; eager to do his bit and defeat the Nazi menace sweeping across Europe. Indeed, a war of the scale of the Second World

War required a vast number of soldiers, sailors and airmen. Many men volunteered for military services and men aged between 19 and 41, later extended to men up to the age of 51, were liable for conscription. At the peak of armed forces employment in 1944 5 million British men were employed by Britain's three military services. Yet, there were exceptions. Those men who, like Dennis Highton, were employed in jobs which were listed on the Schedule of Reserved Occupations as essential to the war effort were exempt from military service. 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). Dennis was one of the roughly five million men in reserved occupations and one of a total of 10 million men of fighting age not in uniform.<sup>2</sup> Dennis's story highlights the allure of military service and the desperation many of these men and boys felt to be in uniform as well as the persistence with which many attempted to escape the perceived shackles of civilian service.<sup>3</sup> However, generally either because of their age, the young as well as the old, ill-health, or as Dennis notes, their objections to warfare those men left on the home front were considered to be sharply distanced from the wartime masculine ideal. Indeed, the predominant contemporaneous image of the British home front during the Second World War was of a largely feminised space in which women donned overalls and uniforms to replace the men who had left to join the armed forces. Such an image is repeatedly drawn, and therefore reinforced, in current British popular culture.<sup>4</sup> Yet without these men Britain's war could not have been waged. Soldiers, sailors and airmen alone could not win a protracted total war. Men with highly prized technical skills were required to make the bombs, planes and ships the military so voraciously needed. Men were required to ferry cargoes across the globe of goods which could not be made on British soil. Men were required to till the fields so both the civilian population and the military could continue to wage war. Men were required to risk their lives defending Britain's people and property as

bombs rained from the sky. Yet these men are rarely acknowledged, in neither popular culture nor scholarly works. This book, therefore, restores Britain's forgotten workers to the historical record.

British civilian men, to date, have been largely omitted from the historiography of the Second World War which has instead focused on military histories and, in a social and cultural context, shown an overwhelming focus on women's contributions to the war. Despite a huge body of research on women there remains a dearth of social and cultural research regarding men in this period. However, the issue of British masculinity and the Second World War is a burgeoning area of research. 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 perceived by British society.<sup>5</sup> Martin Francis's *The Flyer* has also provided an excellent socio-cultural history of the RAF in wartime.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 occupations. There have been no studies of, for example dockers, shipyard workers, merchant seamen or farmers. This book 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. To do this it focuses on four key wartime occupations: farming, industrial occupations, the fire services and the Merchant Navy. This book 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.

## **The State and the Working Man in War**

War drastically changed the employment landscape in Britain. Partly this was attributable to the increased demand for labour which revitalised many industries, for example shipbuilding, which had seen prolonged atrophy as a consequence of the inter-war period of depression. In addition, the state attempted to place all necessary labour under its control to make best use of the nation's ultimately finite manpower resources.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 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. 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.<sup>10</sup> In April 1940, Robert Richards, MP for Wrexham, stated in the House of Commons:

...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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the preparedness of the British government, the Schedule was subject to constant scrutiny and revision throughout the war. Indeed, in December 1940, the Schedule was radically overhauled in response to William Beveridge's manpower calculations which revealed a critical shortage in the numbers of men available for the military. The process of block reservation by occupation was removed and instead men were reserved only on work which was considered of 'national importance'.<sup>14</sup> In 1941 the government additionally

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 employed in such establishments, regardless of their reserved status, from leaving without a week's notice. Similarly, it prevented their employers from dismissing them except in the case of gross misconduct.

The necessity of maintaining a strong core of civilian labour was widely accepted across the political spectrum with little dissension towards their control and exemption from military service being recorded. Declarations, such as those made by the MP for Stretford in the House of Commons, Anthony Crossley, in February 1939 in response to the public release of the Schedule, that 'The booklet might well have been headed: "You will be serving your country best by being a scrimjack"' were exceedingly rare.<sup>15</sup> Yet, the situation did have its inequalities. Civilian male wages rose by 75% in the course of the war.<sup>16</sup> An estimated income for an unmarried private rank soldier was around £3 a week, rising to around £4 a week after three years' service. The average civilian male net earnings after tax of £5 2s 0d a week in 1942-3.<sup>17</sup> As such what little opposition did occur towards the process of reservation generally centred on the inflated wages, or in some cases the perceived inflated wages, some civilian men received in wartime. In April 1940 Lieutenant-Colonel Amery, MP for Birmingham Sparkbrook, stated in a Commons debate that 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.'<sup>18</sup> Similarly, John Rathbone, MP for Bodmin, stated in August 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.<sup>19</sup>

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 book, therefore, examines the extent to which such views were present in wider cultural depictions.

### **Masculinity and War**

Notions of masculinity, or indeed masculinities, are the central focus of *Men at Work*. While until relatively recently masculinity was seen as a singular constant it 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 time-period.<sup>20</sup> Connell, in the seminal book *Masculinities*, argues for the existence of what is termed ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which ‘refers to a particular idealised image of masculinity in relation to which images of femininity and other masculinities are marginalised and subordinated.’<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> Yet this raises questions about the relationships between different masculinities. Indeed, perhaps the most useful aspect of Connell’s theory to this study is in the exploration

of such relationships. He states ‘different 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.’<sup>23</sup> Connell also states, in conjunction with James W. Messerschmidt, 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.’<sup>24</sup> This certainly seems true of wartime Britain where the uniformed man, while not numerically superior as we have seen, became the pinnacle of British citizenship and every other occupation or wartime role was discussed in relation to it. As Corinna Peniston-Bird notes, during the war, ‘men did not have a choice whether to conform or reject hegemonic masculinity: they positioned themselves in relation to it.’<sup>25</sup> The concept of masculinity as hierarchical, therefore, is one which is central to the conclusions of this book.

Of course, in wartime ‘masculinity’ took on very specific cultural meanings. War, and the violence and ‘heroes’ it produces, has traditionally been linked to definitions of masculinity.<sup>26</sup> War was, and is, conventionally considered a male arena as Graham Dawson notes:

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.<sup>27</sup>

As Nicoletta Gullace states during the First World War ‘military obligation and service to the state gained an ever more authoritative place in measures of civic worth.’<sup>28</sup> However, the industrial-scale slaughter of the First World War undermined faith in this martial masculinity.

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’.<sup>29</sup> 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.’<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> However, despite this arguable shift there remained many constants in the perceptions of manliness and male-behaviour in this period. Working-class masculinity, as will largely be examined in this book, continued to rely heavily on occupation for definition. As Stephen 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.’<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> Such identity was often bound up with notions of skill, hard labour and danger. However, with the depression of the 1930s such a focus became, as Bourke argues, ‘a fragile basis for masculinity’.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, paid work remained the key arbiter of working-class masculinity in the inter-war period. As Susan Kingsley-Kent argues, 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.’<sup>35</sup> 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. Michael Paris, for example, shows how the soldier remained a popular character in boys' comics and stories. He shows that *Boy's Own Paper*, *Chums*, *Modern Boy* and *Champion*, for example, all used war-stories in their pages, with some even setting adventures in the trenches of the First World War.<sup>36</sup> Such focus highlights the continuities in ideals of masculinity in inter-war Britain.

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 phallogocentric ideals are less open to competition from alternative versions of masculinity.'<sup>37</sup> Regardless of the prominent wartime rhetoric of 'all being in it together' there still remained a definite division between combatants and non-combatants.<sup>38</sup> During the Second World War the ideal masculine roles were undoubtedly service personnel, with particular laudation granted to the RAF pilot. Sonya Rose identifies the hegemonic form of masculinity in Britain as a 'temperate masculinity', a mix of the traditional 'soldier hero', as explored by Dawson, and the 'anti-heroic' or 'little man' masculinity which became prevalent during the inter-war period.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> The idealised military hero was certainly brave. Yet 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 military men

despite the dangers which beset them. Moreover, British soldiers, sailors and airmen were depicted as kind and considerate. This was best seen in the depictions of their domestic relationships. Many depictions focused on the military man's home life almost as much as their militaristic exploits to, 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.<sup>41</sup> *In Which We Serve*, *We Dive At Dawn* (Anthony Asquith, 1943), *The Way Ahead* (Carol Reed, 1944) and *The Way to the Stars* (Anthony Asquith, 1945) all focus on the war in a way which juxtaposed the hardships and dangers of military life with domestic life. *The Way to the Stars*, for example, extolled 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, also a pilot, to become engaged regardless of his war-induced doubts as she does not regret her marriage despite being left alone. Domesticity was a central cultural facet and a significant goal of the military man in wartime.

This domesticity impacted upon portrayed wartime gender relations. Culturally, the women associated with the men in the services were predominantly presented domestically or as romantic love interests. As stated in *In Which We Serve*, 'men must work and women must weep.' It was very rare for military wives and sweethearts to be portrayed at work. If she was it was certainly not 'war work': neither in a service nor in industry. As such, these women, culturally 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 auxiliary services. However, these women were not equal members of the military structure. Women were 'auxiliary' to male personnel and so performed more menial roles within military organisations. Such entrenched classifications were 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 Wrens) and the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial

Service) all had major recruitment drives during the war. However, such 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 clear. One ATS recruitment poster, for example, declared 'Fill his place in jobs like these' depicting women in various administrative and mechanical jobs.<sup>42</sup> More emphatically, a WRNS recruitment poster series declared 'join the Wrens and free a man for the fleet'.<sup>43</sup> Such emphasis reinforced unequal gender relations despite the seepage of women in to the military domain.

Of course in the civilian sphere women famously moved into jobs previously considered male, most notably in industry and agriculture. The expectations placed upon women shifted markedly with the coming of war. In this total war all available resources were directed towards the war effort and 'war work' became an expected part of British citizenship regardless of gender. Indeed, the wartime state, in December 1941, took the unprecedented step of making young mobile women liable for conscription. However, as Connell states "masculinity" does not exist except in contrast with "femininity".<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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 civilian occupations could draw on their occupational skill as a source of masculine pride: an issue which is examined fully in the body of the book.

Cumulative historical research, to date, highlights that those men 'left' on the home front were undesirable and to some extent emasculated. Rose states, the ideal of the 'temperate hero' was only available to men in uniform; men in civilian occupations were excluded from this discourse.<sup>46</sup> Peniston-Bird similarly argues that 'remaining on the home front rendered a male vulnerable to both accusations of cowardice and assumptions about his physical fitness',<sup>47</sup> while Penny Summerfield and Peniston-Bird note that men in the Home Guard were often culturally portrayed as overweight, bookish or 'playing' at being soldiers which distanced them from the masculine ideal of the 'soldier hero'.<sup>48</sup> This strong link between masculinity and the military, and the concomitant link between civilian status and emasculation, therefore raises questions about the masculine identities of men who could not fulfil this role, a theme which is explored in the remainder of this book.

## **War and Culture**

The sources available for this study are rich and varied. *Men at Work* predominantly uses the most popular wartime media of film, radio and visual culture. It therefore uses the full spectrum of wartime media shown to the British populace to examine how working men were depicted. Firstly, film is central to this study and the book explores a broad range of filmic sources from State-controlled propaganda films, produced by the Ministry of Information and the Crown Film Unit, to feature films produced by such commercial studios as Ealing and Gainsborough. Despite all cinemas being briefly closed early in the war, film-viewing continued to be an enormously popular leisure pursuit throughout the conflict.<sup>49</sup> Cinema attendance grew from 19 million a week in 1940 to 30 million a week by the end of the war.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> Yet, 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.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the number of films produced dropped in the course of the war. An average of sixty British feature films were produced a year during the war, dropping from 108 films in the immediate pre-war years.<sup>53</sup> 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 American films the popularity of British-produced films soared. Moreover, 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. These films, which were extensively utilised in this study, covered a vast range of topics, including various types of war work. This book, therefore, draws on the opinions presented both by popular entertainers as well as obvious propaganda created by the state.

Moreover, *Men at Work* extensively utilises the underexplored broadcasts of the BBC which reached an estimated 34 million out of a population of 48 million. As noted in a 1941 Mass Observation publication, *Home Propaganda*: '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.'<sup>54</sup> What is perhaps most interesting to this book is the vast range of topics that the BBC broadcast to a huge audience. Within the bounds of this book 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 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*.<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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 book. Radio broadcasts, however, remain an underused 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.<sup>57</sup> This may, in part, reflect the difficulty accessing the material when compared to films. Indeed, these scripts exist now only on microfiche. The result of which is that much of the aural detail is lost and cannot be found. Moreover, 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. Many remaining scripts are marked that they are unchecked against the broadcasts rendering their usage, ultimately, an act of faith. However, as these scripts are the only way to access a cultural medium which was central to the lives of the British public during the war they nevertheless remain invaluable.

Finally, the book makes use of the varied visual culture produced during the war. This includes the fine art commissioned by the War Artist Advisory Committee as well as examining more populist images produced by *Punch* and *Picture Post*, for example, and the overt propaganda images produced by the government. Famously during the war the government attempted to shape British citizens' behaviours through a barrage of posters.<sup>58</sup>

However, the efficacy of poster campaigns has been questioned with suggestions that they were easily ignored or poorly positioned.<sup>59</sup> 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 emphasising the divide between the people and the government.<sup>60</sup> This was largely remedied later in the war although vague exhortations such as 'Back Them Up' still appeared.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup> However, the usefulness of propaganda posters for this book 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. The vast majority of the art created in Britain during the period was created 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.<sup>63</sup> 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 paled in comparison to cinema attendance and newspaper circulation figures. Moreover, war art was very rarely reproduced in newspapers or shown on newsreels again limiting their audience.<sup>64</sup> 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 emphasise. Moreover, by analysing the few images which came to public prominence, and the responses given to them, we can start to understand more of how the war was viewed and understood by the British populace.

Such a broad range of sources are an excellent tool for exploring depictions of gender and gender relations. Yet, of course, this raises the issue of reception. Perhaps the greatest challenge of the research was not the analysis of the material uncovered but instead ascertaining how it was received when it was released. K.R.M. Short notes of film:

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.<sup>65</sup>

However, how to approach such analysis has been highly debated. While 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'<sup>66</sup>, ultimately how to assess the effect of any specific piece on an audience is a contentious issue. Early studies of gender and culture, typified by Laura Mulvey, focused on the issue of spectatorship and the 'male gaze', asserting that women performed and men looked.<sup>67</sup> However, such notions have been widely criticised. Steven Cohan, Ina Rae Hark and Andrew Spicer, for example, reject such notions and contend that masculinity is as much a performance and spectacle as the performance of femininity.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, early 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.'<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup> 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.

This book applies similar 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 historian should also look at other contemporary sources.<sup>71</sup> By triangulating cultural sources with other types of evidence the results produced will be much more robust. In this book, wherever possible, responses to both cultural depictions and to the occupations themselves have been analysed. In the context of this study, this will include

Mass Observation, Wartime Social Surveys, BBC listener research and Home Intelligence. In examining these sources the book illustrates the ways popular culture reflected and shaped wartime opinion about civilian workers.

### **Book Structure**

*Men at Work* is structured around the obvious hierarchy of masculinities present in wartime society. Chapter two begins the book by examining the civilian occupation arguably at the bottom of this hierarchy: the agricultural worker. This chapter explores how this vital wartime role was conveyed to the British populace. Chapter two also explores the influx of female labour, the Women's Land Army, and their impact on representations of agricultural work. Indeed, farming became a diffuse occupation in wartime with ordinary civilians being asked to both 'Dig for Victory' and 'Lend a Hand on the Land' which had obvious consequences on popular conceptualisation of farm work. Finally, this chapter examines the countryside's role in the British psyche, exploring the impact of the ideal of the 'rural idyll' on understandings of farm work.

Chapter three continues the focus on civilian occupations separated from the violence of war by examining perhaps the most clearly war-related civilian jobs; the industrial workers who made the bombs, boots and bullets necessary to fight a successful total war. This chapter explores the state's varied attempts to persuade the British populace of the necessity of industrial work in mechanised warfare and the subsequent ways this was interpreted in wider popular culture. As with agricultural work incoming female labour was central to industry's wartime portrayal and this chapter fully explores how this influx of women altered perceptions of what had previously been considered a hyper-masculine arena.

Chapter four takes a massive step up the masculine hierarchy by looking at Britain's wartime fire services. 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. This chapter explores how the developments of the war affected their portrayal; tracing their depiction from layabouts and buffoons in the phoney war period to blitzed heroes, where they were portrayed in ways which consciously mirrored the portrayal of the military hero. However, this image was highly temporally specific. When the blitz passed, so did their heroic status.

Finally, chapter five focuses on the mercantile marine, the occupation which was quite clearly the apogee of the wartime civilian masculine hierarchy. This chapter examines how war radically altered the depictions of these men, chasing away their image as sexually licentious drunkards to be replaced with a cultural persona of 'people's heroes'. These were the brave men who confronted untold dangers yet faced it with ribald humour and British stoicism. By exploring these various occupations, this book thus highlights the centrality of occupations to perceptions of masculinity in wartime.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> British Library Sound Archive. C1379/41 .

<sup>2</sup> A. Calder (1992), *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico) p.505; M. Donnelly (1999), *Britain in the Second World War* (London: Routledge), p.71.

<sup>3</sup> See also J. Pattinson, A. McIvor and L. Robb (Forthcoming), *Men In Reserve: Civilian Masculinities in Britain 1939 – 1945*.

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> S.O. Rose (2003), *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); P. Summerfield and C. Peniston-Bird (2007), *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

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<sup>6</sup> M. Francis (2008), *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

<sup>7</sup> N. Longmate (1974), *The Real Dad's Army* (London: Arrow Books); W. Taylor (1995), *Conscript: A History of the Bevin Boy* (London: Pentland).

<sup>8</sup> See also Pattinson, McIvor and Robb, *Men In Reserve*.

<sup>9</sup> 'Best Use of Man Power', *The Times*, 25 January 1939.

<sup>10</sup> H.M.D. Parker (1957), *Manpower: A Study of War-time Policy and Administration* (London: HMSO).

<sup>11</sup> HC Deb 16 April 1940 vol 359 cc871-872.

<sup>12</sup> Parker, *Manpower*, p.51.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Information (1941), *Schedule of Reserved Occupations and Protected Work. Revision* (London: HMSO).

<sup>14</sup> Parker, *Manpower*, pp.145-6.; Parker, *Manpower*, 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.; Parker, *Manpower*, p.105.

<sup>15</sup> HC Deb 27 February 1939 vol 344 cc1015-6.

<sup>16</sup> Penny Summerfield, 'The 'levelling of class'' in Harold L. Smith (ed) (1986), *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p.183.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Gazeley, 'Manual Work and Pay, 1900-70', in Nicholas Crafts, Ian Gazeley and Andrew Newell (eds.) (2007), *Work and Pay in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p.69.

<sup>18</sup> HC Deb 12 March 1940 vol 358 cc1027.

<sup>19</sup> HC Deb 20 August 1940 vol 364 cc1232.

<sup>20</sup> S. Whitehead (2002), *Men and Masculinity* (London: Polity), p.15.

<sup>21</sup> F.J. Barrett, 'The Organisational Construction of Hegemonic Masculinity: The Case of the US Navy' in Whitehouse and Barrett (eds.) (2001), *The Masculinities Reader*, (Cambridge, Polity) p.79.

<sup>22</sup> J. Tosh (1994), 'What Should Historians Do With Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth Century' *History Workshop*, Vol. 38, pp.179-202, here p.192.

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- <sup>23</sup> R.W. Connell (2000), *The Men and the Boys* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p.10.
- <sup>24</sup> R.W. Connell and J. W. Messerschmidt (2005), 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept' *Gender and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 6 (Dec., 2005) p.832.
- <sup>25</sup> C. Peniston-Bird (2003), 'Classifying the Body in the Second World War: British Men In and Out of Uniform' in *Body & Society*, pp.31-48. Here p.45.
- <sup>26</sup> R.W. Connell (2005), *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p.213.
- <sup>27</sup> G. Dawson (1994), *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imaginings of Masculinity* (London: Routledge), p.1
- <sup>28</sup> Nicoletta F. Gullace (2002), "*The Blood of Our Sons*": *Men, Women, and The Renegotiation of British Citizenship During the Great War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), p.3.
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- <sup>30</sup> Light, *Forever England*, p.9.
- <sup>31</sup> R. Graves (1929), *Goodbye To All That* (London: Anchor); E.M. Remarque (1929), *All Quiet On The Western Front*, (London: Little, Brown and Company)
- <sup>32</sup> Whitehead, *Men and Masculinity*, p.125.
- <sup>33</sup> J. Bourke (1994), *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.44.
- <sup>34</sup> Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain*, p.10.
- <sup>35</sup> S. Kingsley-Kent (1999), *Gender and Power in Britain 1640-1990* (London: Routledge), p.302.
- <sup>36</sup> M. Paris (2000), *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion Books), p.151.
- <sup>37</sup> Peniston-Bird, 'Classifying the Body in the Second World War', p.32.
- <sup>38</sup> Peniston-Bird, 'Classifying the Body in the Second World War', p.34.
- <sup>39</sup> Rose, *Which People's War*, p.153.
- <sup>40</sup> Rose, *Which People's War*, pp.160-161.
- <sup>41</sup> C. Geraghty, 'Masculinity' in G. Hurd (ed) (1984), *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television* (London: BFI Publishing), p.24.

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- <sup>42</sup> Frederick George Alfred Scott, Auxiliary Territorial Service, 'Fill His Place In Jobs Like These', (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).
- <sup>43</sup> 'Join the Wrens and free a man for the fleet' (Currently held at the Imperial War Museum, London).
- <sup>44</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, p.68.
- <sup>45</sup> Rose, *Which People's War?*, p.188.
- <sup>46</sup> Rose, *Which People's War?*, p.153.
- <sup>47</sup> Rose, *Which People's War?*, p.41.
- <sup>48</sup> P. Summerfield and C. Peniston- Bird, *Contesting Home-Defence*, pp.129-131.
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- <sup>60</sup> P. Lewis (1986), *A People's War* (London: Thames Meuthen), p.120.

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<sup>61</sup> M. Yass (1983), *This is Your War: Home Front Propaganda in the Second World War* (London: HMSO), p.29.

<sup>62</sup> N. Hayes, 'An 'English War'', Wartime Culture and 'Millions Like Us' in N. Hayes and J. Hill (eds) (1999), *'Millions Like Us'?*, p.21.

<sup>63</sup> M. Harries and S. Harries (1983), *The War Artists: British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century* (London: Michael Joseph), p.270.

<sup>64</sup> Harries and Harries, *The War Artists*, p.270.

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<sup>66</sup> A. Jones (2010), *The Feminism and Visual Culture* (London: Routledge), p.2.

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<sup>71</sup> Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic*, p.7.