A WAR UNIMAGINED: FOOD AND THE RANK AND FILE SOLDIER OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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The Reverend Oswin Creighton, who served as a chaplain on the Western Front, was immensely frustrated by the fixation with food he witnessed amongst the troops. After yet another disappointingly ill-attended church parade, he wrote:

It is really extraordinary the part played by the stomach in life. We are paralysed, absorbed, hypnotised by it. The chief topic of conversation is rations with the men, and food and wine with the officers.¹

One of Creighton’s responsibilities was the management of the battalion’s canteen and the enthusiasm he witnessed in the men’s enjoyment of this facility was not replicated in their interest in the religious aspect of his duties. Creighton’s spiritual aspirations for the troops were frustrated by their taste for the temporal, a preference that is strikingly apparent from an analysis of the writing of the rank and file soldiers. The men’s recollections and accounts of the war are replete with references to food: its quality and quantity, the squandering and pilfering of it, its purchase, preparation and consumption, and the voluntary sharing of this most precious resource amongst the men.

Much of the rankers’ writing contrasts with the generally higher emotional register of the established canon of war literature produced by their officers, where fear and grief resonate; for the men, it was the practical details of everyday life rather than the “the pity of war” that was central. The literary legacy of the First World War has tended to ignore the mass of writing produced by its rank and file soldiers, whose perceptions, lack of writing skills and limited reflexivity did not, in general, sit easily with the tragic world of disillusionment portrayed by their more eloquent officers. The narratives of the rankers told the story of the conflict in a different way and illuminated a world where physical hardship and emotional experience became inextricably intertwined.

¹ Housman (2002), p. 79.
This chapter proposes that whilst the rankers’ writing rarely explored explicit emotional states, it did not lack an affective sense. For them, emotion was expressed through the rituals and practices that surrounded the acquisition and consumption of food, in particular the equitable sharing of food. The soldiers’ efforts to share supplies were of nutritional consequence because army rations were often insufficient and unevenly apportioned, but they also had an emotional significance; the men’s letters and diaries indicate the psychological comfort derived from, and the bonds forged by, the giving and receiving of food. They also reflect the bitterness engendered by both shortage and inequality in its distribution, particularly in relation to the diet of their officers. In their postwar recollections, whether in published or unpublished memoirs, sharing was ascribed a special resonance and became a metaphor for the best and, sometimes, the worst of their war experience.

Military historians of the conflict have acknowledged the critical importance of food to the men. In his exploration of officer-man relations, Gary Sheffield cited it as a factor that was of vital importance: “. . . regular supplies of food, drink and tobacco were all important in maintaining the morale of soldiers of all social classes.” Whilst the significance appears to have been accepted, relatively little writing has been directly addressed to its investigation. For example, in Charles Messenger’s recent book, *Call-To-Arms: The British Army 1914–18,* discussion of rations and catering are subsumed in to a brief entry in a chapter on ‘Welfare and Morale’—less than a dozen pages in a book of over five hundred. It is as if the unarguable assumption that food is important to morale has militated against a fulsome analysis of why this is so. Perhaps it is the physiological necessity of food that has handicapped scrutiny. It is a self-evident truth that calories are required in the same way as oxygen, yet food is so much more than ingestion and digestion: eating comes freighted with resonances, emotions and memories that can not be associated with breathing.

The centrality of food that Creighton deplored was, for the rankers, not purely a response to a military environment; it was rooted in their childhood experiences in the working- and lower-middle-class homes from which the great majority of them came. John Bourne has proposed that a working-class upbringing was an excellent preparation for the

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