

Rachel Duffett, *The stomach for fighting: food and the soldiers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 304pp., ISBN: 9780719084584, £65.00.

Rachel Duffett's *The Stomach for Fighting* is situated within a growing historiography of food history that seeks to understand specifically how people in the past ate; how food, both nutritionally and socially, impacted on their lives. There is a considerable literature focusing on the feeding of civilians during the Great War, generally because the better quality food was requisitioned for the army and rising prices forced a change in the way food was consumed. Other studies have focused on military logistics – how food was obtained, requisitioned and transported. Duffett's work fills a niche between the two: she focuses on what happened to the military's food after it reached its destination, specifically how the men consumed their food and how it impacted on their overall experience of life on the Western Front.

The culmination of her doctoral research, *The Stomach for Fighting* boasts an impressive range of document sources, and draws on a body of solid existing research as Duffett attempts to understand why volunteers would trade their own table for the army canteen. This broad review of literature places Duffett's work in the same vein as that of Derek Oddy, who has written extensively on food history, and J.M Winter, whose *The Great War and the British People* (1987) is still considered definitive. Exploring how food impacted on the rankers' experience of life at the front, she argues convincingly that good food, rather than just simply nutritionally-packed food, could make the day seem brighter whereas unappealing but still nutritionally sound food could remind the rankers of the misery of their situation: 'The daily army food intake was a reminder of all that the military had taken from them'.¹

The book's structure – essentially five essays linked by common themes – has the potential to render the content disjointed, but in this case is effective. Each is easy to read, and self-contained with inclusive endnotes. Well-selected illustrations help Duffett to emphasize her arguments without to overly detailed language – certainly Sergeant Herring's tack biscuit picture frame leaves no doubt as to what such a biscuit might do teeth.² There are drawbacks, however. In particular, there is a great deal of 'signposting' which can prove frustrating in places.

Duffett presents a survey of the military food supply system, showing how even though as serving soldiers, rankers were entitled to extra military calories, this did not necessarily translate

¹ Rachel Duffett, *The stomach for fighting: food and the soldiers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 233.

² *Ibid*, p. 153.

into more food and quite often, soldiers were left for several days without rations due to failures in the supply chain. There is a large historiography of army logistics in the Great War, most of which is confined to economic, political and military considerations.³ Duffett instead largely focuses her efforts on the obtaining of military rations from a serving soldier's point of view. In particular, she discusses the much maligned and often ignored army cook. The Army Service Corps [ASC] had overall responsibility for the rations, and cooks often bore the brunt of the rankers' frustration with unappetising food or recurrent food shortages. Duffett points out that there are few official references to food shortages in contemporary military records and instead relies on contemporary soldiers' songs and letters, as well as war diaries and memoirs. These sources acknowledge a shared experience of war food and Duffett successfully shows how the language of food became a common euphemism for the misery of trench warfare. The odd meals – jam and herrings being one of the most unusual presented – a ranker could expect due to supply issues contrasted with their usual eating habits and with the promises of good food that had enticed so many to join up in the first place.

Apart from the actual food a ranker could expect, Duffett considers the significant daily ritual of eating. The ASC was responsible for food preparation, based on the pooling of a camp's available rations. Duffett offers a satisfactory survey of the ASC's development during the conflict, noting the common belief among rankers that its members were not 'proper' military men. Duffett, however, argues that to the contrary it was more favourable to be a ranker than a cook – to be a cook was a thankless task and while marching, they had fewer rest periods as they had to tend to the ovens and food. Duffett successfully melds accounts from both scenarios to recreate the food supply to the soldiers, and shows how this experience impacted on their emotions of military life.

Whilst noting the differences in the food provided to officers in contrast to ordinary rankers, beyond a succinct summary in the chapter 'Feeding the men', Duffett does not expand on the officers' experience. Consequently scope remains here for more detailed examination, including how food issues affected officer-ranker relations. It is also surprising that, in a monograph dedicated to the consumption of food, there is only cursory attention paid to the subject of food poisoning, a very real concern for both rankers and the authorities responsible for feeding them. The threat and experience of food poisoning could greatly affect soldiers' experiences of army life and is deserving of greater discussion.

³ There is a significant historiography on this subject but one work of interest is Michael Dockrill & David French (eds) *Strategy and intelligence: British policy during the First World War* (London: Hambledon Press 1996).

Overall, Duffett has produced a significant contribution to the historiography of the First World War. Her innovative and interdisciplinary approach of using the language of food, as expressed by serving soldiers, exposes the oversights in the official military record and gives a voice to the lived experience of the soldiers, something often ignored in similar works. The success of her work lies in the fact that the reader can sympathise with the poor fellows sitting in the trenches, surviving on tooth-breaking tack biscuits and ill-looking tins of bully beef. Furthermore, her exploration reveals just how necessary that food delivered both emotional and nutritional benefits was to the war effort. Amongst the plethora of events commemorating the centenary of the Great War, there is at least one conference dedicated to the study of food in the conflict. Duffett's work will enhance and inform such gatherings, no doubt inspiring future research using lived experiences of food.

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