

**UCD Humanities Institute Podcast
Series
2016**

**Wartime Attachments: essays on pain,
care, retreat and treatment in the First
World War.**

Series Editor: Barry Sheils



'As good as Mother makes?': Food, Family and the Western Front.

Rachel Duffett, University of Essex

The Reverend Oswin Creighton, who served as a chaplain in the First World War, was immensely frustrated by the fixation with food he witnessed amongst the troops. After yet another disappointingly ill-attended church parade, he wrote in a letter home:

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.

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 contrasted rather sadly with the tepid response to his religious service. The canteen he organised was exceedingly popular with the rank and file soldiers. In an attempt to capitalise upon this captive audience, he twice arranged for the Sunday evening service to be held in the canteen, but became 'rather furious' as the men filed out when it began and returned for cocoa once it was over.ⁱ Creighton's spiritual aspirations for the troops were frustrated by their taste for what he regarded as baser physical needs, a preference that is strikingly apparent from a broader analysis of the writing of the soldiers. The men's accounts are replete with references to food: its quality and quantity, the squandering and pilfering of it, its purchase, preparation and consumption, expressions of gratitude for the parcels received together with suggestions for those yet to come, and descriptions of the voluntary sharing of this most precious resource between the men.

Eating was important to the officers as well, but the role of rank in differentiating military diet is clear from Creighton's letter: men got rations, officers got food and wine. Army tradition and procedures reinforced this separation, visible in each link of the food chain, from the setting of ration scales

for the rankers, to consumption in the barracks' mess halls, which were very different from the officers' messes. On occasion, the conditions of war compelled the two groups to share food supplies and dining space, but this was not normal practice.

The soldiers' songs, diaries, letters and memoirs are full of complaints about the army rations they received. Expectations could be very high, and it is difficult to see how those of Private S.T. Eachus, who arrived in France in June 1916, could reasonably have been met in a theatre of war **[Slide 2]**. Eachus was vehemently critical of army food and wrote in his diary, 'have heard a good deal about German atrocities, but certainly in some respect the British are quite as bad and cruel, for weeks together we have not had a second vegetable, often none at all.'ⁱⁱ Most people, soldiers or civilians, were unlikely to rank the lack of a second vegetable on a par with the 'Rape of Belgium', but the bitterness of the grievance indicates the anger, indignation and sense of injustice that inadequacies in the ration could trigger in the rankers. Lack of food was about more than physical hunger; it signified a lack of general care and concern for men who might lose their lives in their nation's service.

Eating presents a complex and indivisible relationship between the physical and the psychological: 'when humans eat, they eat with the mind as much as with the mouth.'ⁱⁱⁱ For many men, meals became an indicator of the differences between the civilian and military worlds. Even for regular soldiers, there was little similarity between meals in the peacetime barracks and the iron rations consumed in the trenches of the Western Front. The difference was, of course, founded as much on the environment in which the food was consumed, as it was in the actual ingredients supplied. The emotional significance of food combined with its fundamental physical and social importance to provide a locus within which the rankers expressed their concerns, fears and disappointments, as well as their pleasures. Eating carries associations and feelings that have little to do with physiological need or biochemical content, and much do with its emotional and social significance.

The language of food was also one of family. The rankers' repeated reference to food in their letters indicates how fundamental it was to the preservation and celebration of bonds with those waiting at home. The difficulties of emotional expression, the inability to articulate feelings of separation, anxiety and love in letters to their families gave the language of food a telling compensatory significance in the men's correspondence. For many rankers

education had been limited and, despite the aggregate improvements in literacy during this period, any form of writing remained a struggle.^{iv} Whatever their educational attainments, few would have had the literary skills of a writer like Wilfred Owen. The following fragment of a letter home is indicative of Owen's particular abilities [Slide 3]:

I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have perceived it, and in the darkness, felt... No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness' (Wilfred Owen to his mother, 19 January 1917).

Towards the other end of the literacy spectrum was a soldier of the Suffolk Regiment, George Stopher whose (virtually unpunctuated) letters reflect the burden of writing that many men felt [Slide 4]: 'I do not like writing here nothing to talk about and nobody to see only fresh green fields.'

Civilian existence had not prepared the rankers for the discussion of feelings. In the absence of language skills and behavioural acceptability, emotions for many soldiers and their families were implied through food and eating, whether it was a home-made cake posted to a distant son, or the memory of a shared meal. The significance of food in this respect was not exclusive to the rankers, it was important to officers as well; but perhaps it had a special resonance for those whose abilities to articulate their experiences were less developed, whose emotional states could not be made explicit and were better conveyed through other means. Avner Offer writes that, 'Food is rich in codes of communication, memory and emotion' and it was a richness that facilitated loving connections in the letters between the rankers and their families.^v

The youthful demography of the British army meant that letters between mothers and sons were more plentiful than those from men to wives or sweethearts. Food had a particular valence in these conversations, not least because of, as Melanie Klein has stressed, the significance of those very first acts of consumption: the baby at its mother's breast.^{vi} Historically, in families with limited means, mothers made nutritional sacrifices for their children. In a collection of oral histories recalling the nineteenth century, a Mrs Wrigley, remembered, 'I have gone without my dinner for their [the children's] sakes and just had a cup of tea and bread and butter.'^{vii} In the struggle for survival it was mothers who were at the forefront of this domestic battle. It was the women who

selected food purchases, cooked them, and then fed them to their children and husbands; with the children often eating from their mother's own plate. As Ellen Ross has noted 'meals signified maternal service'.^{viii} Home cooking was bound up with identity: a good mother was one who prepared her family's meals from scratch.^{ix} If home-cooked food had a special significance for women, it was likely to have had a corresponding significance amongst the men for whom they cooked.

For many of the new soldiers, food had been a fundamental signifier of maternal care. In a world where there was little time, or perhaps ability, to explicitly articulate affection within the family, food was used to demonstrate love. In *Lark Rise to Candleford*, Flora Thompson recalled that, just before she left home for her first job, her mother gave her a specially baked treat to eat between meals. Food was in short supply at home and anything outside of the usual meals was a rare occurrence. Flora, feeling the momentousness of the gift, 'had a sudden impulse to tell her mother how much she loved her... [but] all she could do was to praise the potato cake.'^x Amongst the working class, then, love was often given and received through the medium of food; and the rankers took this lesson, literally learned at their mother's knee, into the alien military world of the First World War.

There had been strenuous efforts to improve army food after the nutritional failures of The Crimean War, and the basic ration scale certainly appeared generous: particularly at the beginning of the war when all soldiers, whether home or abroad, received the same amount of food. Nevertheless, reductions for those men at home were made within a week of the declaration of war, an indication of the need to reserve the best for those fighting. [Slide 5] By 1917, a frontline soldier was entitled to around 4,200 calories a day – similar to the current British army ration value – reduced to 3,472 calories for those in the lines of communication.^{xi} The army had calculated that soldiers needed a minimum of 3,000 calories a day; lower than this and their effectiveness deteriorated rapidly.^{xii} The frontline ration included: 1lb of meat, the same weight of bread, 3oz of sugar, 4oz of bacon, 2oz of cheese and 8oz of vegetables. The scale was impressively precise. It began with the essential components of the men's diet – meat headed the list – and moved through carbohydrate, fats and dairy to the condiments. Soldiers were entitled to a daily twentieth-of-an-ounce of mustard and one thirty-sixth of an ounce of pepper

If the men had received these stated rations then their complaints would no doubt have been much reduced. The postcard here (from my own collection)

shows a relatively attractive ration distribution – fresh meat and bread as well as the ubiquitous bully [Slide 6]. The rations were not always forthcoming, however, and in January 1918, Captain J.C. Dunn noted in his diary: 'fresh meat, – in practice it has fallen sometimes to 200 lb among eight hundred men [4 oz].^{xiii} Even more common was the inability of the military to deliver the specific foodstuffs prescribed – the small print stated that the army reserved the right to substitute any item should the need arise; and all too often these substitutions were made with items that were unpopular with the men. The key issue was the supply of tinned meat and hardtack biscuit instead of fresh meat and bread, a commonplace alternation, which Fergus Mackain was quick to identify in his series of postcards, 'Sketches of Tommy's Life' [Slide 7]. When it was not an irritant, biscuit was something of a standing joke for many of the rankers. A Bruce Bairnsfather cartoon, in the popular 'Old Bill' series, shows two soldiers crouched round a rather feeble looking fire; the character's pal urges him to 'chuck us the biscuits, Bill. The fire wants mendin'.^{xiv} There were other artistic uses for the biscuit, and dugouts might be decorated with pictures painted upon them.^{xv} Sergeant M. Herring through some judicious carving, created a rather fetching picture frame in which to display a memento of his wife and twin children [Slide 8]. The problem of biscuit consumption was one that concerned many rankers. F.E. Noakes thought that the biscuits resembled those given to dogs, and yet were 'not unpalatable to hungry men with good teeth.'^{xvi} Unfortunately, there were many hungry men *without* good teeth, and at points in the soldiers' service, when in transit or in lines distant from more varied sources of supply, tins of bully beef and hardtack biscuit were the only foods available. When it came to making the most of the available ingredients, much depended upon the camp cooks. A talented and energetic team could really enhance the men's satisfaction with their meals, but talent and energy in the cook house were often in short supply, and the chef's competence was frequently called into question. Walter Holyfield of the 10th Essex complained in a letter to his mother from a camp in Aldershot, 'our cooks are manuals; they'll turn a lump of the finest steak into a rough chip of mahogany in no time at all.'^{xvii} Over the duration of the war, 67,350 men were instructed at Aldershot, with additional Schools of Cookery set up in Great Britain after 1914; another 25,277 cooks were trained at the Schools of Cookery established in France.^{xviii} The preparation of hot meals was especially difficult away from the permanent kitchens. In addition to the standard manual, the Quartermaster-General's Branch issued a booklet *Cooking in the Field* in November 1917, specifically to address such problems.^{xix} The

publication reminded cooks that shortages of fuel could be overcome and were no excuse for reverting to a cold diet, and it provided a number of new recipes – although 'new' is not the most strictly accurate designation. The names of the dishes may have been *novel*, but the ingredients must have induced a sense of déjà vu in the men. Bully beef remained the chief constituent, whether in 'Bread Soup' (bully with bread and stock), 'Spring Soup' (bully with vegetables and stock) or 'Potted Meat' (minced bully with pepper).^{xx} The following recipe for 'Fish Paste' is indicative of the underlying theme of the majority of army recipes [Slide 9]:

8 tins of Bully Beef; 4 tins of sardines; Pepper.

Pass the meat and sardines through mincer twice, and add pepper.
Press well down into a kettle lid, smooth over and pour a little melted fat over the top to give a face.

Cooks were generally unpopular with the men, due to a combination of the poor meals they produced and their relative safety behind the lines (at least this is how it appeared to the front line infantryman); they held a position of considerable privilege, and their proximity to food supplies was a benefit much envied by hungry soldiers. Furthermore, for the majority of the rankers, cookery was regarded as a feminine enterprise, an aspect which compounded the cooks' position on the periphery of 'proper' soldiering: there was a suggestion that only less than masculine men were attracted to such jobs in the first place. The junior clerk George Herbert Hill, an underage recruit, found the sight of men ladling the stew out 'roughly' very off-putting, saying that this, together with the strong, stewed tea and 'too thick' slices of bread, 'compared oddly with... mother's housewifely care.'^{xxi} A number of soldiers used the traditionally feminine nature of the cook's role to pour scorn upon the men that undertook it. A hardened soldier in F.A. Voigt's novel-memoir *Combed Out* sneers 'why, tain't a man's job, it's only old women what goes inter the cook-'ouse.'^{xxii} The motherless, masculine world of the trenches eroded the relative fixity of civilian gender roles, as men assumed tasks that would normally have been performed by their wives, mothers and sisters: laundering, mending, nursing and, of course, cooking. The traditional role of the mother as provider of sustenance meant that cooking retained a specifically feminine quality for the men in the ranks. The cooks themselves, however, sometimes revelled in their introduction to a world from which they

had generally been excluded in civilian life. Some used their new experiences as a point of shared interest in their communications with their mothers. The tyro cook A.P. Burke was proud of his efforts for his officers' latest meal and wrote to his family: 'it was top hole especially the [rice] pudding – that's where I specialize. I remember how I used to break the skin for Ma on Sunday Morning – Ma you will have to watch your laurels.'^{xxiii}

The way in which meals were eaten at home was particularly to the forefront of men's minds when they were first confronted with military eating in the training camps at home [**Slide 10**]. John Jackson, who volunteered in September 1914, recalled the struggle to get food for his first breakfast at a camp in Inverness Castle: 'It was simply a wild scramble, such as respectable people could not imagine, and a very rough introduction to army life. It was no use waiting til the scramble had subsided. That only meant we should get nothing, so, like hundreds of others had to, I scrambled for food.'^{xxiv} Jackson's concern was not merely the shortage of food, but also the rough behaviour required in order to secure any of it. The mess hall was the site of his first confrontation with, as he viewed it, the uncivilised nature of army life, in contrast to the 'respectable' existence that had preceded it. Frank Gray recalled the need to wipe one's plate with bread 'in order to prevent a collision between cold mutton grease and hot plum-duff.'^{xxv} The comments on the unpleasantness of the mess hall indicated that the quantity of available food was only part of the problem: the general melee, the roughness, the lack of cleanliness of plates and crockery were equally disturbing to many. Kitchener's original plans for the new armies had included a mess hall for each training camp, but the expense meant that this facility was frequently withdrawn and the men ate in the huts where they slept – as had been the tradition in the British army for centuries. Perhaps, in the end, it was a more attractive proposition than the dirty mess hall [**Slide 11**].

After the initial rush to the colours in 1914, which had resulted in widespread food shortages in the training camps, the army stabilised its supply chain at home and some soldiers were keen to reassure their families that they were being properly nourished. Charles Cook wrote at considerable length to his parents describing the food in his camp at Dover:

The dinners have mostly been stew or roast beef with potatoes and haricot beans or peas, and the last two days we have had cabbage. The breakfasts have been bacon, liver, cold bacon, tinned fish (this has now stopped though), and kippers. Tea is either jam or cheese

with bread, and today we had some cake. I have bought fruit (apples, bananas and walnuts) cocoa, and tea and cakes regularly.^{xxvi}

Cook's experience was better than many, but his comment regarding the end of tinned fish for breakfast indicates that he didn't regard it as an appropriate foodstuff with which to start the day. He was not alone, resentment of the proliferation of sardines caused some men to refuse to comply with military orders. The level of detail in his description of the food is striking; Cook's mother must have been comforted by the knowledge her son was well provided for by the army. A conscientious mother would surely note her son's attention to his eating and be reassured that he was sufficiently aware of the need for a healthy diet to purchase essential items not forthcoming in the ration, such as fruit. Cook's letter announces both the army's success in fulfilling its obligations to the men, and also his own ability to ensure proper eating for himself whilst away from the care of his family.

Once the men had transferred to the Western Front, despite the exhausting nature of active service, the men often devoted energy to improving the comfort of billets they might find themselves in. Much of this effort was directed to the dining arrangements. A. Reeve noted in his diary that, on arrival, his new billet was 'like a pig-sty', but the men got to work and 'took down a door for a table and made chairs from empty tins. Got a fire going and generally made things more cheerful.'^{xxvii} Rankers' accounts contain numerous references to the contrast between meals eaten in such accommodation and those taken in the mess hall. R.S. Ashley recorded a billet where 'we always laid the cloth for our meals'; if not all the men were needed on working parties, they would cut cards 'and the lucky one would stay behind and have a hot drink ready for the others on their return.'^{xxviii} P.H. Jones was fortunate to be billeted in a farm house where the fleeing occupants had left a sack of potatoes in the attic. On occasion, additional provisions were found, but commonly the food available was the same as that eaten in a camp. It was the surroundings and the manner in which it was consumed that was significant. Jones himself was less enthused by the extra potatoes than he was by the fact that it was '... the first time we have eaten off china plates at a decent table since the war broke out.'^{xxix} In S.T. Eachus' billet, the men procured further trappings of civilisation: 'We have even flowers in neat little glasses upon the table, which little feature is most pleasing and probably encourages a poor appetite and increases a good one.'^{xxx} In environments such as these, men were able to recreate something of their civilian eating pasts, an

impossibility in the barrack mess hall. China, a tablecloth, posies of flowers, were all civilising reminders of the world from which the men had been removed, and a reassertion of the dignity consonant with the proper dining conduct that was denied them in the mess halls.

Food and meals were a way in which the family links and memories could be reinforced and this was especially important at Christmas when the opportunity to echo the domestic rituals taking place across the Channel was most straightforward. The festival provided an opportunity for men to synchronise their actions with those of their families, to build emotional connections between the two fronts in an attempt to sustain the bonds of love and affection in the face of geographical distance. Everyday scenes on the Western Front were hardly conducive, but food nonetheless, especially at Christmas, provided a potentially unthreatening source of synchrony with home. It was a medium through which the men and their families could conjure up a series of experiences and memories, whether through the actual taste and timing of meals, or through reference to foods that had once been enjoyed together. This image from a Christmas 1916 issue of *The War Illustrated*, showing men celebrating the arrival of a homemade Christmas pudding, neatly illustrates the connection between food and memory [Slide 12].

Christmas dinner was the ultimate focal point for a connection with home. It was fixed chronologically and was the foremost celebration for the vast majority of the rankers; even the poorest amongst them would have experienced attempts to make the meal special in their pre-war lives. The soldier knew exactly what, when and where his family would be eating on Christmas Day; unlike other meals, and even other celebrations such as Easter or Sundays, Christmas Dinner was fixed in every aspect. A.P. Burke's letter of 30 December 1916 poignantly captures the longing the men felt at Christmas: 'Never had I pictured home so much before – I could see you all, & although I was having a rotten time it was more than comforting to think you would be so happy at home.'^{xxxix} It is evident from the soldiers' accounts that many of them had made arrangements with their families to synchronise their thoughts in an attempt to bridge the distance between home and trench. Frances Brockett-Coward wrote home in a post-Christmas letter 'I thought of you at 9.30pm [on the 25th] especially as I said I would & uttered a silent toast to you all.'^{xxxix} Similarly, W.H. Petty noted in his diary entry for Christmas Day that he had thought of his wife, Ella, at 9am and then again at 12, when he envisaged her telling their daughter Bidy 'about

Daddy.'^{xxxiii} The importance of the day was the nature of its exact annual replication. Also, the longing for home at Christmas was a feeling that transcended rank, with officers were just as likely to yearn for their families and past celebrations as rankers. Major H.A. Stewart was saddened at the memories prompted by his Christmas Pudding, it was 'something to remind us all of the day which in normal times we spend with so much happiness at home.'^{xxxiv}

As the image from *The War Illustrated* shows, Christmas was a time for food parcels, but it wasn't the only time for significant post: between August 1914 and March 1920, 320,409 tonnes of mail and parcels were shipped to the BEF.^{xxxv} By 1915, four thousand mail bags crossed the channel daily, a number that rose to over fifty thousand a day in the period before Christmas, 1917.^{xxxvi} **[Slide 13]**. Unspoken emotions were integral to the gifts sent to the rankers. It is clear that parcels and their contents helped to occupy the space in correspondence which could not be filled by the less palatable aspects of the men's war experience. In general, men did not want, or were unable, whether in terms of literary skill or emotional anguish, to write home with details of the extremity of their service. As George Stopher's letter indicated [above, slide 3], the tedium of much of army life presented a different challenge to the correspondent. W.V. Tilsley neatly summed up the shortage of suitable subject matter for a man's letters: 'What could one say beyond asking for parcels, exchanging healths, and exhorting the recipient to keep smiling?'^{xxxvii} In this we have an explanation for the popularity of the postcard with its ability to communicate something, but actually say very little? **[Slide 14]**. Many letters became a litany of items required or no longer needed, dependent upon the vagaries of the army's rationing system. Bert Bailey's letter is indicative of the detailed requirements: 'Don't send me any more Oxo or Bovril until I ask you to, Darling, will you. The little pat of butter is always welcome... Good substitutes for things I have asked you not to send would be sardines, pickles, or a bit of cheese.'^{xxxviii} The mundanity of the dialogue was perhaps the essence of its comfort. Parcels permitted families some continuance, even pretence, of an ordinary existence **[Slide 15]**. They gave access to a world where inadequate supplies of pickles or a surfeit of OXO were matters of concern; an imaginative space that was comfortingly distant from the frightening possibilities of the Western Front. For wives and mothers, satisfying their men's needs provided a welcome area of shared interest and safe ground, where the traditionally established role of 'feminine' nurture could be continued despite the wartime separation.

Lack of money could be an issue, and once more the Stopher letters are testimony to the struggle of an impoverished labouring family to sustain the appetites of its two soldiering sons. The letters from the men were full of demands for more parcels, most fiercely articulated by their longing for home baking: 'Please send me some cake or make a nice batter pudding so I can cut a bit and have some butter on it...'.^{xxxix} The offerings of Knightsbridge grocers paled in the presence of a homemade cake, as Kenneth Addy wrote home, nothing is 'as good as mother makes.'^{xl} The desire for food cooked by mothers is a dominant theme in the rankers' references to parcels. B. Britland was delighted with the homemade cake his mother had sent him; he and his friends consumed it swiftly: '... [the cake] melted like snow... we didn't half enjoy it, I can tell you.'^{xli} While C.R. Jones was grateful for the packages his family had posted to him, his letter of thanks included the comment that he preferred homemade cake to the shop-bought one he'd been sent.^{xlii} For the men, unwrapping their packages in trenches, billets and camps, each gift represented a fragment of home, lovingly captured in brown paper and string. The touch and taste of the items reconnected soldiers with their loved ones nutritionally, but also emotionally, stimulating their memory and imagination, allowing them to recreate a picture of family and friends. Unlike letters, where the baldness of love and loss was all too painfully obvious, packages conveyed love in an implicit and comforting form. The gifts formed a connection between the parties, completing an emotional circuit through which affection could flow without the dangerous explicitness of words.

Ironically, whilst so many of the parcels were the quintessence of a deeply personal and intimate relationship, they were simultaneously public property. Their receipt was a matter of celebration, not just for the addressee, but also for his pals. Sharing was both a manifestation of friendship and a practical survival tool. A.P. Burke reassured his family in a letter home that even though their parcel had not arrived and rations were stretched '[I] never go short of anything, there are some good lads here.'^{xliii} Burke was fortunate to receive regular gifts from home; not all men were so privileged. Ben Clouting remembered how in his unit the men had pooled their gifts with two orphans who received nothing, saying that 'it was only fair that those who received parcels from home shared out the contents, particularly food.'^{xliv} His emphasis on food is not insignificant: a packet of cigarettes or candles could equally easily have been divided. There was something elemental in the sharing of food: to witness a neighbour's hunger in the presence of one's own plenty would have contravened comradely sensibility.

In their accounts, the rankers generally portrayed themselves as equitable and generous, with only a few examples of less than exemplary behaviour. Norman Gladden did recall serving in one unhappy platoon where 'it was every man for himself and if anyone went without he got no sympathy'. But he went on to say that this was not his normal army experience.^{xlv} An unwillingness to share food was widely condemned. W.V. Tilsley describes a much disliked man as a "Bleedin' scrounger!", because although not an actual thief, he kept extra bread rations for himself rather than share them with the other men.^{xlvi} Parcels, in particular, were regarded as objects for distribution within a group of pals. Initially, families shared food with their men, who then did the same with their own group of pals. The behaviour of the majority of the rankers reinforces John Bourne's assertion that 'sharing was at the heart of working-class culture. Its importance was learned at home.'^{xlvii} Of course, officers shared food too, whether their parcels or in their messes, but theirs was the sharing of plenty. To offer food to another when the donor had access to plentiful supplies, whether through rank, wealth or both, did not carry the same weight as it did amongst the less privileged rankers. The postcard here shows the men enjoying - and sharing - their food gifts from home [Slide 16].

Sometimes the war facilitated sharing. Jack Ashley wrote in his diary: 'There were a week's parcels and, as two thirds of the men were killed or wounded, there was plenty for everybody.'^{xlviii} The division of the parcels of casualties amongst the living did not always take place, sometimes they were returned to the senders. Mrs Rosamund Wordsworth wrote to Mrs E.D. Stephens the organiser of a Rifle Brigade Comforts Fund to say that, following her son's death, all her parcels had been returned, 'Xmas pudding and all... Our system of postal arrangements is truly wonderful.'^{xlix} It is hard to believe that the loss of a beloved son could in some way be compensated for by the success of post office procedures. P.H. Jones was unable to stomach a plum cake sent by a loving mother to her recently dead son because of the note that accompanied it: "'To dear Reggie with best wishes for a Happy Christmas and a safe return home, from Mother.'¹ The tangible and unequivocal evidence of love made public by loss, was too much for Jones and to eat the cake would have been to intrude upon a still living intimacy.

Yet food from parcels could be of critical nutritional importance when rations were short or inedible. When Hugh Mann was ill with dysentery he could not stomach army rations and the food from home was especially important: 'I got your last fine parcel and the biscuits kept me in life for three days when I could

eat nothing else...'.^{li} Parcels from home, individually gathered and packed by loved ones were regarded as 'the most powerful emblem of sentiment and affection.'^{lii} In addition to the food they supplied, the parcels had a clear emotional content: they were the point of contact between men and their families and a tangible reminder of the world they had left, but to which they longed to return.^{liii} A regular supply of parcels embodied the care and affection that families, deprived of the physical presence of their loved ones, communicated through the postal service. Consequently, an interruption of the supply caused dismay and men would chide their relatives if they felt that they were not sending packages as often as they could or should. C.R. Jones, wrote home wistfully, 'I am rather in the cold because fellows are continually getting parcels...', wondering why he was not in receipt of a similar display of care.^{liv} His earlier letters are a litany of requests, and it is unsurprising that his relatives were unable to meet his demands. The reproachful tone must have wounded them, and it is touching to note that after his death in 1916, before his family gave his letters to the Imperial War Museum, they annotated his complaint with the qualification that they had sent out four to six parcels a month. The poignant afterword ensures that subsequent readers will never doubt their love and concern.

The sharing of food was central to the comradeship that for many men was the sole positive to emerge from their war experience. It was a practice founded in civilian and family life, which for many rankers informed a continuing belief in sharing. Of course, it is probable that the men, both in their actual experience and in their memories of it, tended to imbue family life with a level of comfort and respectability it may not have had in actuality. R. Gwinnell, when confronted with men fighting for food in his camp 'like pigs at the trough', recalled, 'however little food we had at home ... it was always shared to each one to the minutest fraction – and it had to be eaten in the proper fashion of course.'^{lv} Army rationing was, of course, a complex and institutionalised form of sharing, and one that appear to have brought as much resentment as it did satisfaction. In their private eating enterprises, the men aimed to reconstitute the voluntary and equitable sharing of domestic dining. The elective nature of their practices weighted it with a moral superiority, and hence emotional comfort, that army distribution procedures could never emulate. The sharing of food by, not merely amongst, individual rankers was embedded in the British army's rationing processes. Unlike, for example, the American troops, who received individual

ration packs, food was frequently distributed to British soldiers in large units. It was often a whole loaf, a full jar of jam, or a chunk of bacon that then had to be subdivided by the men themselves into single portions. British soldiers took pride in their ability to share food fairly. One NCO recalled the astonishment of American soldiers at the way in which food was issued: "How on earth can you have rations dished out like that? Our fellows would eat the lot.' I said, 'Well, our fellows don't.'"^{vi}

For some historians, the men's lives in the trenches have been viewed as a cataclysmic world apart from the families they had left behind, yet the trenches were, in fact, a space where the men were compelled to replicate the very behaviours of the world they were supposed to have been separated from. Given that some of the behaviours they replicated were in fact not their own, but those of the women in their families, it is debatable whether the acts functioned as comforting memories of domesticity or distressing reminders of the lives they had lost. Eating in the army oscillated between both these moods. At its worst, with the shock of the first camp mess hall or emergency rations in a front line trench, it was the antithesis of home; but at its best, in a shared parcel or a Christmas Dinner, it had even greater power to console that it had possessed in the world before the war. The even-handed division of food was a subject that the rankers referenced repeatedly: it was crucial to their war experience and was reflected upon with even greater fervour in their memoirs. The sharing of food in a just and proper fashion recreated, to some small degree, a microcosm of an ordered, civilised world in the ranks. The element of justice, so often denied the ranker in their position at the bottom of the military hierarchy, could be reinstated in one part of their lives: the equitable apportionment of food.

ⁱ Lawrence Housman (ed.), *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen* (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2002), p. 79.

ⁱⁱ S.T. Eachus, IWM 01/51/1, diary entry dated 16.8.1916.

-
- iii Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil, *Sociology on the Menu. An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 52.
- iv See Jonathon Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (London: Yale University Press, 2001) for a discussion of the advances and limitations of literacy.
- v Avner Offer, *The First World War. An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 39.
- vi Melanie Klein, *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works* (New York: Free Press, 1984).
- vii Margaret Llewelyn Davies (ed.), *Life As We Have Known It by Co-Operative Working Women* (virago, London, 1982), p. 63.
- viii Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil. Motherhood in Outcast London 1870-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press 1993), p. 27.
- ix Anna Davin, 'Loaves and Fishes': Food in Poor Households in Late Nineteenth-Century London', *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (1996), p. 171.
- x Flora Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 379.
- xi *Statistics of Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War* (Naval & Military press, London, 1999), p. 586.
- xii Richard Holmes, 'Battle, The Experience of Modern Combat' in Charles Townshend (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 204.
- xiii Captain J.C. Dunn, *The War the Infantry Knew* (London: Abacus, 1987), p. 434.
- xiv Mark Marsay (ed.), *The Bairnsfather Omnibus* (Scarborough: Great Northern Publishing, 2000), p. 34.
- xv P. Barton, P. Doyle and J. Vandewalle, *Beneath Flanders Field. The Tunnellers' War 1914-18* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004), p. 207.
- xvi F.E. Noakes, *The Distant Drum* (Tunbridge Wells: privately printed, 1952), p. 50.
- xvii Walter Holyfield, Essex Regimental Archive, letter dated 'August 1916'.
- xviii *Statistics of Military Effort*, p. 580.
- xix *Cooking in the Field*, S.S.615 (London, 1917).
- xx *Cooking in the Field*, pp. 17-20.
- xxi George Herbert Hill, *Retreat from Death* (London: Tauris Parke, 2005), p.17.
- xxii F.A.Voigt, *Combed Out* (jonathan cape, London, 1929), p. 55.
- xxiii A.P. Burke, IWM Con Shelf, letter dated 2.4.1916.
- xxiv John Jackson, Private 12768: *Memoir of a Tommy* (Stroud: Tempus, 2005), p. 17.
- xxv Frank Gray, *The Confessions of a Private* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1920), p. 48.
- xxvi Cook, *Letters from a Volunteer*, letter dated 25.10.1914.
- xxvii Reeve, IWM 90/20/1, diary, entry dated 18.1.1915.
- xxviii *War Diary of Pte. R.S. Ashley 2472, 7th London Regiment 1914-1918*, ed. by Philippa Stone (South Woodford, 1982), entry dated 29.7.1915.
- xxix P.H. Jones, IWM P246, memoir, p. 46.
- xxx Eachus, IWM 01/51/1, diary entry dated 11.5.1917.
- xxxi Burke, IWM Con Shelf, letter dated 30.12.1916.
- xxxii Pte Frances Brockett-Coward, London Scottish Regimental Archive, letter dated 30.12.1917.
- xxxiii L/Cpl W.H. Petty, London Scottish Regimental Archive, diary entry dated 25.12.1914.
- xxxiv Stewart, *From Mons to Loos. Being the Diary of a Supply Officer* (London: HMSO, 1916), p. 212.
- xxxv *Statistics of Military Effort*, p. 521.
- xxxvi Howard Robinson, *Britain's Post Office* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 237.
- xxxvii W.V. Tilsley, *Other Ranks* (London: Cobden-Sanderson, 1931), p. 149.
- xxxviii MacDonald, *Voices and Images of the Great War* (London: Penguin, 1991) p. 110.

-
- ^{xxxix} Albert Stopher, Ipswich Records Office, letter to his mother dated 27.10.1915.
- ^{xl} G.H. Addy, *A Memoir of his Son Kenneth James Balguy Addy, Second Lieutenant, Killed in Action October 3rd 1915* (London: privately published, 1916), letter dated 20.4.1915.
- ^{xli} Britland, IWM 88/57/1, letter dated 30.12.1914.
- ^{xlii} C.R. Jones, IWM 05/9/1, letter dated 8.4.1916.
- ^{xliii} Burke, IWM Con Shelf, letter dated 17.12.1915.
- ^{xliv} Richard Van Emden, *Tickled to Death to Go* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1996), p. 92.
- ^{xlv} Gladden, *Somme*, pp. 126-7.
- ^{xlvi} Tilsley, *Other Ranks*, pp. 102 and 160.
- ^{xlvii} Bourne, 'The British Working Man in Arms' in Hugh Cecil and Peter Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (London, Leo Cooper, 1996), p. 346.
- ^{xlviii} Phillipa Stone (ed.), *War Diary of Pte. R.S. Ashley* (South Woodford, 1982), entry dated 19.9.1916.
- ^{xlix} Stephens, NAM 8902-201-1044, letter dated 21.1.1915.
- ^l P.H. Jones, IWM P246, p. 81.
- ^{li} Brid Hetherington (ed.), *Under the Shadow. Letters of Love and War 1911-1917* (Dunfermline: Cualann Press, 1999), letter dated 7.8.1915.
- ^{lii} A.P. Herbert, *The Secret Battle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 83.
- ^{liii} See also Roper, *The Secret Battle* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2009), Chapter Two 'Separation and Support' for a discussion of the significance of parcels.
- ^{liv} C.R. Jones, IWM 05/9/1, letter dated 3.1.1916.
- ^{lv} Gwinnell, IWM 01/38/1, memoir, pp. 68 and 75.
- ^{lvi} Sergeant Perry Webb, cited in Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (St. Helens: Ebury Press, 2002), p. 288.