

Food for War: Agriculture and Rearmament in Britain before the Second World War. By Alan F. Wilt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. vi + 262 pp. Index, notes, bibliography. Cloth, \$65.00. ISBN 0-198-20871-5.

Reviewed by Wyn Grant

This study of British food, agriculture, and rearmament during the 1930s emphasizes four interrelated themes. The first is the way in which food and agriculture became closely linked to rearmament in 1936, a link that was of considerable importance during the remainder of the prewar period. The second theme is that the government's preparations in food and agriculture were relatively well advanced when war broke out, although the nascent food ministry was less well prepared than the agriculture ministry. Nevertheless, "the Food ministry was the dominant body running the food programme, and Agriculture was secondary" (p. 221). The third theme is that rural and farm interests understood very well what war would mean to them and their way of life. The interests of the rural community were given due consideration, and the status of organizations such as the National Farmers' Union was enhanced. A conference in 1930 "started the process of formalizing relations between the state and agricultural lobby groups, a process that continued throughout the decade and beyond" (p. 24). The fourth theme is that the role of food and agriculture in the preparations for war deserves more attention.

The book is based on extensive archival research, principally at the Public Record Office, but also at other relevant archives, such as the one at the Institute of Agricultural History in Reading. It is a thorough account that assembles and assesses the evidence carefully. It fills a gap in the existing literature that has been concerned more with the war itself than with the preparations for it.

Despite governmental measures to stimulate agriculture in the 1930s, home production had increased very little by the beginning of the Second World War, and the volume of food imports remained much the same as before. The complexity of the prevailing import regulations is illustrated by the observation that each ingredient in canned fruit salad had its own import duty. The eventual improvements in agricultural output were due more to the land being ploughed up than to gains in efficiency.

The chapter on the influence of the agricultural lobbies is potentially one of the most interesting, given the very special status they enjoyed in the postwar period. The book demonstrates that the emerging topic of nutrition, about which farmers were very suspicious, was not given a high priority by the agricultural ministers, "who were more concerned about bettering

the lot of their constituency” (p. 126). The chapter on lobbies largely confines itself to agricultural rather than food associations for the not very convincing reason that relations between the agricultural ministry and the farming community were fragile, complex, and antagonistic, whereas its dealings with the food industry were cooperative. Nevertheless, the disorganized and under-resourced condition of many of the associations in the food sector meant that government had to intervene to form “emergency associations,” actions that had a lasting impact on the structure of these groups. This topic could have been developed more extensively. The least satisfactory chapter covers “awareness in the countryside,” which examines the national, regional, and specialist press. Is there no relevant material in other sources such as the Mass Observation (the public opinion program in which ordinary Britons were asked to keep diaries)? The criteria for the selection of certain regional papers are not made clear. Not surprisingly, letters to the press from the agriculture community range from the predictable to the bizarre. Thus, the chair of the Milk Marketing Board wrote “that to be prepared for war, ‘the Government must give close attention to [milk], the nation’s premier food’” (p. 161). The chapter suggests that the farming community was less outraged by a speech given by Prime Minister Chamberlain at Kettering stressing the importance of imported food than an earlier chapter had described.

Some of the discussion about Britain sounds a little odd from a U.K. perspective. For example, one would not normally term a political meeting “a government rally” (p. 100). The term “Labourite” (p. 112) is not normally used. Elsewhere, Wilt lapses into a British cliché when he refers to agriculture ministers performing “yeoman service in seeing the effort through” (p. 130). Wilt’s practice of summarizing the obituaries of key individuals, including details of their place of burial, does not add much to the analysis. He criticizes the eviction practices of the War Agricultural Executive Committees, but others have argued that these committees were insufficiently interventionist when dealing with inefficient farmers. The police can hardly be blamed for returning fire when one of their number was wounded by an armed farmer (p. 226). Apart from a passing reference to the 1928 legislation that established the Agricultural Mortgage Corporation, nothing is said on the subject of agricultural finance, which is critical to understanding the performance of agriculture in the interwar period.

This is a meticulous and informative study, which adds to our knowledge of the preparations for war in Britain during the 1930s. It will principally be of interest to those interested in agriculture and food, although students of the development of pressure groups will also find useful material in these pages.

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