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'Shirkers', 'Scrimjacks' and 'Scrimshanks': British Civilian Masculinity and Reserved Occupations, 1914–45

Juliette Pattinson

The 'soldier hero', an idealised yet largely imagined conceptualisation of masculinity, is central in popular discourse of the two World Wars.¹ In the First World War, the volunteer soldier was the epitome of manliness, proving his masculinity by his willingness to sacrifice himself in the defence of his family, friends, community and country. Volunteering was met with huge 'social approbation', evident in the film footage depicting cheering crowds that gathered to see the volunteers march off to war.² The manly heroism of those who had served, whether as volunteers or as conscripts, was cemented immediately following the war by the state-orchestrated rituals surrounding the Cenotaph in 1919 and the burial of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey in 1920, as well as by the construction of about 40,000 local memorials.³ The naming of the military dead on these monuments facilitated the emergence of the ordinary soldier as a hero in the dramatic narrative of war, which had prior to the Boer War been the prerogative of military leaders.⁴ Such memorials kept alive the 'soldier hero'. This was bolstered by the deluge of combatant memoirs, plays and poetry collections that were published chronicling the horrors of trench warfare. In the Second World War conscription was implemented immediately, thereby erasing the unique status of the volunteer, and it was the pilot of the Royal Air Force (RAF) who occupied the position at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of wartime roles. The transformation of warfare between 1918 and 1940, during which time air power had become dominant, shaped conceptualisations of what constituted ideal masculinity. The ordinary 'Tommy' of the First World War had been replaced by the more socially elite 'fly boys' in the Second World War as those who embodied manly heroism; 'the few' to whom 'so many' owed so much. Central to the allure of the RAF was the distinctive Air Force blue uniform.⁵ In both wars, military uniform marked out the wearer as a member of one of the armed forces participating actively in the war effort and signified the successful enactment of what R. W. Connell calls 'hegemonic masculinity', that which is culturally exalted albeit never numerically dominant.⁶ To be manly in wartime was, then, to be a combatant.

Such forms of maleness were positioned above other subordinated masculinities, such as the man who remained on the home front. Those who did not serve in the

armed forces were, by implication, considered lesser men. As Lois Bibbings has noted in relation to the First World War, 'all men who were not in the military were, to varying degrees, excluded from exemplary notions of maleness'.⁷ While the 16,500 men (approximately) who applied for exemption on the grounds of conscience were 'particularly marginalised' because they were 'the antithesis of the iconic figure of the soldier', all men not in uniform were susceptible to having their masculinity called into question.⁸ One First World War recruitment poster questioned 'Are you a Man or are you a Mouse? ... a rotter and a coward'.⁹ Non-uniformed men were excluded from popular notions of ideal manliness and risked being seen as 'non-men'. Rendered unmanly by their failure to 'prove' their masculinity through volunteering, civilian men in the First World War were relegated to a subordinate status, suspected of cowardliness, 'shirking', a term that was in use by 29 August 1914 and which entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* later that year, and 'slacking', an expression in circulation by September 1914.¹⁰ There were no monuments erected in the inter-war period to civilian men who maintained services on the home front or provided the means by which combatants could fight, and there was a dearth of civilian accounts.¹¹ Their war stories were simply not regarded, either by themselves or by publishers, as sufficiently marketable. In the Second World War, there was much less cultural disapprobation of civilian men as we shall see but there remained concerns about 'scrimjacks' 'hiding' in 'soft jobs' in order to evade conscription and 'scrimshank' their way out of their patriotic duty.

By failing to fulfil their side of the wartime gender contract by donning uniform and serving in the armed forces, these civilian 'non-men' are rendered invisible. Thus the home front is regarded in both wars as a largely female space in which women donned overalls and uniforms to replace the men who had left en masse to join the armed forces; the presence of young men in British towns, cities and the countryside was rarely acknowledged, either at the time or subsequently. Reverend Dr Andrew Clark, for example, wrote a letter in 1918 stating that his Essex parish of Great Leighs was 'absolutely empty of young men', while Janet Miller, a trainee teacher during the Second World War, recalled in an interview in 2008 that 'There were no men. The men were all in the forces'.¹² However, contrary to popular perception, neither wartime home front was denuded of men; 53.8 per cent of English and Welsh males aged between fifteen and forty-nine did *not* serve in the forces in the First World War.¹³ This was even starker prior to the passing of the conscription act, given that three-quarters of men aged fifteen to forty-nine did not volunteer. Remaining a civilian was not a minority male experience in the First World War. Nor was it in the Second. The ratio of men in industry to men in the forces was 6:1 in June 1940, 3:1 in 1941–42 and 2:1 by mid-1943 for the remainder of the war.¹⁴ Thus, far more men remained at home than were conscripted into the three armed forces. The home front was, then, not devoid of men.

The retention of large numbers of men in employment was a consequence of the highly industrialised warfare of the first half of the twentieth century. Britain, as with all belligerent nations, needed to carefully balance requirements for civilian manpower and military personnel. This equilibrium was achieved by directing essential labour and while all combatant nations became increasingly reliant on female workers, male labour was also subject to varying levels of control. Millions of men in both wars who were in good health and aged within the call-up range were prevented to varying degrees by

the state from joining the forces and remained in their civilian occupations which were considered essential to the war effort. By the Second World War, Britain learnt from the mistakes made during the First when large-scale uncontrolled volunteering into the army in the charged atmosphere of the early months resulted in the loss of skilled men from mines, munitions industries and other essential trades, all occupations vital to the prosecution of the hostilities. It recognised that to fight a protracted campaign, it needed not only soldiers to fight but also civilians to equip them and to maintain rudimentary services on the home front.

This article examines policies directed to, and perceptions of, British civilian men deployed in essential jobs in both wars. It foregrounds the male worker in the Second World War, but makes reference to the wider context of the First World War which was so crucial to lessons learnt. Despite being central to participation and, arguably, victory in both wars, the figure of the British civilian male worker has been forgotten, overshadowed by the prevailing assumption that the men who remained behind were either effeminate cowards who had proffered a conscientious objection to fighting, unpatriotic shirkers who were avoiding military service, physically unfit men who had failed a medical examination or older men who were above the age of conscription. The civilian man also remains largely absent within academic research. Notable exceptions are Laura Ugolini's work on middle-aged middle-class Englishmen during the First World War and Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird's research on the Home Guard in the Second World War.¹⁵ My forthcoming book *Men in Reserve*, co-written with Arthur McIvor and Linsey Robb on working-class men in reserved occupations in the Second World War, seeks to address this lacuna.¹⁶

This article utilises parliamentary debates, cartoons, Mass Observation reports, written testimony and oral histories. Interviews were conducted with fifty-six men aged between eighty-six and ninety-six.¹⁷ The number of men still alive who seventy years ago were engaged in reserved occupations is small and thus the sample was inevitably skewed towards the youngest workers. The vast majority had worked in manual industrial trades as toolmakers, engineers and workers in factories, shipyards and railways. The class profile of the interviewees was thus predominately working class. A relatively wide geographical spread was achieved with two men based in Wales during the war, twenty in Scotland including key industrial centres like Glasgow, ports such as Ardrossan as well as more rural areas including Lochgilphead; and thirty-four in England including cities such as Newcastle, Birmingham and Canterbury, port towns such as Portsmouth and more rural places such as Carlisle, Farnborough and Exeter. Regional identities were key to the ways men configured their masculinities. In areas such as Merseyside, Tyneside, Clydeside and south Wales, which were dominated by heavy industries such as shipbuilding, iron and steel and coal mining, a culture of masculinity circulated that was predicated on hard, dangerous work.¹⁸

The 'badged' and 'starred' men of the First World War

As war was looking increasingly likely in the late 1930s, the British government sought to organise its manpower resources, balancing the needs of industry against that of the forces. It acknowledged that mistakes were made during the First World War when the army expanded at such a rate that it could not be supplied and too great a strain was placed on essential industry as men in occupations vital to the prosecution of the

hostilities were permitted to volunteer. In just two days in early 1915 30,000 miners from Rhondda in south Wales enlisted. They had to be recalled from the trenches in late 1915 and brought back to produce coal.¹⁹ Men were also returned from the front to resume roles in other key industries such as agriculture and munitions. The state was mindful of the consequences of unrestricted mass enlistment, as Ernest Brown, the Minister of Labour, acknowledged in December 1938:

One of the clearest lessons of the Great War of 1914–18 was the necessity for conserving the supply of skilled workmen employed in war industries. During the earlier part of the War great damage was done by the indiscriminate recruitment of men who would have been invaluable in making war material and in maintaining essential services. Indeed, efforts were made to recover men from the Army.²⁰

The government in the late 1930s based many of its manpower decisions on the lessons learnt between 1914 and 1918 including the compilation of lists of occupations that were deemed essential to the war effort.

Changing policies illustrate the state's gradual recognition during the First World War of the importance of skilled workers in key industries. During the period of uncontrolled mass volunteering, the Admiralty sought to acknowledge the contributions of male workers who were manufacturing munitions for the Navy by issuing war service badges and certificates which attested to their importance to the war effort. Within six months, 400,000 had been handed out. Similarly, the War Office distributed 80,000 'On War Service' badges to men working in key armaments firms and in Ordnance Factories (where small arms, ammunition and explosives, crucial for supplying the British army, were manufactured).²¹ From July 1915, the newly established Ministry of Munitions became the sole badging agency. In a context whereby encouragement to enlist was strident, such badges might have defended civilian men against accusations of cowardice and shirking. Yet there were many jobs where the system of badging was not in operation, such as coal mining, and the manpower of these essential industries as we have seen, was being depleted by skilled men's volunteering.

However, many men wished to remain in their civilian jobs. Andrew Clark recorded in his diary in May 1915 the 'indignation' and 'resentment' that local farm labourers felt at 'being badgered to enlist' by women 'pestering them' and noted that all recruitment posters had been torn down in his village.²² Clark also noted that 'hundreds of strong bodied young men' had sought jobs in a local munitions firm to avoid enlisting.²³

To ensure key workers remained on the home front while others were released into the forces, the National Registration Act was passed in July 1915. It sought to ascertain how many men aged fifteen to sixty-five were employed in each trade. All men whose age fell within this range who were not in the forces were required to register, providing details of their employment. As Keith Grieves notes, the register was intended to provide reliable information in order to open up a dialogue about the distribution of manpower.²⁴ It became embroiled, however, as Rosemary Elliott argues, 'with debates about voluntary recruitment and conscription'.²⁵ Labour exchanges starred the papers of young men who were engaged in essential industries. Of the almost five million men of conscription age not in the services, over 1.5 million were in 'badged' and 'starred' jobs. An inventory began to be compiled in October 1915, listing all roles considered vital to the war economy, such as farm worker, coal miner, shipbuilder and

factory worker. Men employed in these trades were regarded as being in a ‘reserved occupation’.

To try to avoid the need for compulsion, the Group (or Derby) Scheme was implemented in October 1915 by permitting men aged nineteen to forty, in starred and unstarred occupations, to declare their intent for future military service. Between 16 October and 11 December 1915, nearly three million men responded, attesting for forthcoming service. Many were in badged, starred or reserved occupations, which were renamed ‘certified occupations’. The four-inch wide armband that was issued to men who had attested made visible their willingness to serve, while the dark khaki cloth aligned them with the volunteer soldier. Those who attested were released back to civilian life until their call up, which would be done according to age and marital status. The first groups called up in December 1915 affected single men aged between nineteen and twenty-two. The public were assured that married men would only be called up once all available single men had gone into the forces. Reginald Gibbs, a thirty-six-year-old science teacher in Hampshire, recorded in late October his receipt of Lord Derby’s letter, which he pasted into his diary, and his intention not to attest:

I certainly do not intend to offer myself as a recruit for the following reasons: (i) I fear intensely death and mutilation such as is likely to befall soldiers in the fighting line. (ii) . . . [T]his call is not being made to defend England, but to defend the Empire in other words to keep our heels in the necks of conquered peoples. (iii) I have six children, whom I wish to keep in bread and margarine and boots.

He also noted the 100,000 ‘fallen heroes of Gallipoli’ and remarked that ‘Lord Derby [? – word made illegible by a mark] politely asks me to help make up the “wastage”. Thank-you my lord. Under these circumstances I prefer to be a live coward to a dead hero’.²⁶ The distinction between the cowardly civilian and the ‘soldier hero’ was so deeply engrained that even men not in uniform used such potent language.

With the passing of the Military Service Act in January 1916 ending the voluntary system of recruitment, the provision of manpower became the responsibility of the bureaucratic state. Single men and widowers without dependent children, who were aged eighteen to forty-one, were liable to be called up for service. Andrew Clark recorded in his diary in March 1916 that ‘horseman’ Albert Wright ‘is a starred man, in a privileged occupation. He married a week ago and is now reported to be glorying over the unmarried labourers that every one of them will have to go before he is called out’.²⁷ However, the policy was extended in April to include married men who had attested, which met with an outcry as there were still single men who were yet to be summoned. One wife whose husband was called up was reported as thinking it ‘unjust that unmarried men should be left at munitions work while skilled workmen, married, are sent straight into the army’.²⁸ Large numbers of starred men employed in particular trades vital to the war effort, who were now issued with a certificate of exemption rather than a badge, were initially prevented from being called up. Unmarried men who were below the age listed in the column next to the job on the inventory of reserved occupations were liable for military service; those above the age were exempt from call up. A ‘blacksmith’ for example became exempt at twenty-five, a ‘foreman’ employed in the mining and textiles industries at thirty, while married men had different ages of exemption in some occupations so as to limit their call up.



Figure 1: Percy Fearon (Poy), 'Sketch Map of the Funk Holes of London', *Evening Standard*, 27 October 1916. Reproduced with permission of the British Cartoon Archive.

Starred men were increasingly made available for the forces as surplus men were 'combed out' of civilian jobs. This provided fertile ground for cartoonists: the *Evening Standard*, for example, published a series of 'Cuthbert' cartoons, the first (Figure 1) dated 27 October 1916, drawn by Percy Fearon, known as Poy, depicting white rabbits disappearing down 'funk holes', lying low in a 'cushey [sic] place' and a 'cushy bed', trying to avoid 'the comb'.²⁹ Inspired by Lewis Carroll's character in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the white rabbits, who were 'feeble' and 'nervously shilly-shallying', served as a symbol of those who deliberately attempted to avoid military duty.³⁰ Indeed, in 1933 the term 'Cuthbert' entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'a slang name for a man who deliberately avoids military service; esp. in the war of 1914–18, one who did so by securing a post in a Government office or the Civil Service; a conscientious objector'.³¹ A poem in *Punch* entitled 'England's call to the Rabbit' instructed them to 'Slack not nor shirk for very shame' nor 'share the Cuthbert's fate,/but chuck your role of coward', in order to 'face the music like a man'.³² The poem makes explicit the unmanliness of cowardly Cuthbert, a slacker who shirked his duty. Such widespread negative constructions of civilian masculinity arguably placed the man on the home front in a precarious position.

Some starred men certainly resisted conscription, wishing to remain on the home front. James Humpfreys, a carpenter, house-painter and bicycle-shop owner, appealed a number of times against his call-up on the grounds that he repaired bicycles for sixty-four villagers and that as he had had twenty-six teeth removed and his gums could not accommodate false teeth, he ate just one meal daily. This caused 'great hilarity' in his Essex village.³³ Removing starred men's protected status and directing them to the forces could, however, cause popular unrest: 12,000 workers in the skilled engineering unions in Sheffield, for example, went on a two-day strike from 16 to 18 November 1916 following the debadging of Leonard Hargreaves, a fitter at Vickers, who was called up into the Army Service Corps.³⁴ Vickers, a heavy metal trades specialist that produced steel, arms and machinery at its Sheffield plant that employed 10,807 men in late 1916, had withheld documents that would have enabled Hargreaves to appeal

against the decision to conscript him.³⁵ The firm's collusion with the military authorities by debadging Hargreaves was deemed a 'deliberate violation of the pledges given' to skilled workers and was regarded as a form of industrial conscription.³⁶ Strike action was ended by Hargreaves' release from the forces. These men undoubtedly had their reasons for wishing to remain in civilian jobs, which are now, 100 years later, harder to recover, given the absence of archived oral recordings with badged workers. However, given the continued potency of the nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology of 'separate spheres' in which manliness was associated with the capacity to provide for one's family, we might surmise that earning a secure wage and fulfilling the breadwinner role from which they derived status and self-esteem were highly prized, as was also the case in the Second World War.

A Schedule of Protected Occupations was compiled, providing differing levels of safeguards to skilled men according to their occupations, ages and medical categories. Reginald Gibbs noted in his diary: 'Thank Heaven! I have got a six-months' exemption. It is lucky for me that coaching up young aristocrats in Mathematics, Science and Engineering is considered very important War Work'.³⁷ In December 1917, the Ministry of National Service began to compile a list of reserved occupations to ensure that industry did not forfeit skilled men, that skilled workers transferred from less essential jobs to ones of national importance and that men could be released for the forces without disrupting vital services and trade. These tended to be manual jobs such as engineering and mining, although some white collar professions were also included such as chemist and teacher.³⁸ Moreover, it was proposed that men in all occupations under a particular age should be liable to military conscription and their exemption certificates be removed. This was eventually put into effect in February 1918 with the passing of the Military Service (No. 1) Act and the Military Service (No. 2) Act passed two months later. The Schedule of Protected Occupations was revised, a 'clean cut' was introduced raising the minimum age of exemption for workers in protected jobs to twenty-three, and two age limits were set for those in non-protected work, below which men were conscripted into the forces. After three years of trial and error, in what was to be the last nine months of the war, the government finally implemented a scheme to balance the needs of industry and the forces, so that, as Gerry DeGroot has noted, 'the army tail no longer wagged the government dog'.³⁹ On the eve of the Armistice, 2.5 million men were officially regarded as being in a reserved occupation.

'Reserved men': civilian masculinities in the Second World War

As a new war became increasingly likely, the government issued a pamphlet in November 1938 informing the public that a list of reserved occupations was being drawn up in case of a national emergency. Sir John Anderson, the Lord Privy Seal (a government office dating back to the early fourteenth century but which by the twentieth century was essentially a ministerial role without portfolio), noted in the House of Commons in December:

It will be made clear that these [reserved] persons can best serve the State by remaining at the work for which they have been trained. That is the form of national service in which they can be most useful, and it is from outside their ranks that the Government will look, at any rate in the initial stages, to find the recruits for all the various Defence services.⁴⁰

The Provisional Schedule listed occupations alphabetically, from 'accountant' to 'zinc manufacture'; nearly 300 in total.⁴¹ There was an assortment of 'white collar' professional occupations, such as architect and pathologist; lower middle-class jobs, such as French polisher and jeweller; and heavy industry trades, such as foundry worker and dock worker. The Schedule covered about five million men. A number printed next to a particular occupation referred to the age at which the worker became reserved. Thus, men employed in these occupations who were at or above the age listed were prevented from enrolling for military service. The lower the occupation's age of reservation, the more important the role. The job of lighthouse keeper was reserved at eighteen, lock keeper at twenty-one, cutler at twenty-three and coastguard at twenty-five, while the role of trade union official was reserved at thirty and shop assistant at thirty-five. Reservation was therefore on a block system: men were automatically reserved en masse if they belonged to particular occupational groups if they were of or above a specific age, irrespective of the exact work in which they were engaged.

The Provisional Schedule was widely commented upon in parliament, by both the national and local press and by trade unions. Anthony Crossley, Conservative Member of Parliament (MP) for Stretford, noted: 'The booklet might well have been headed: "You will be serving your country best by being a scrimjack"', which had close associations with the First World War term shirker.⁴² Conservative MP for Wycombe, Major-General Sir Alfred Knox, questioned: 'Does the right hon. Gentleman realise that this Schedule as it stands at present prevents thousands of patriotic men doing their duty, and also gives an excuse to many others who want to "scrimshank" out of this duty?'⁴³ Some MPs questioned the inclusion of certain occupations, such as chocolate confectioner and gardener: 'Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that an expert rhododendron grower has been refused to be allowed to enlist because he is in a reserved occupation?'⁴⁴ The tone of each of these pre-war comments questioning the patriotism of reserved men makes clear that their position was a precarious one, undermined by representatives of the very institution that prevented their enlistment.

As Britain readied itself for war, the Schedule was frequently modified in preparation for the necessary balancing of military and civilian manpower. At the outbreak of hostilities, the Schedule was quickly implemented, illustrating the government's recognition of the importance of industrial mobilisation; so too was military conscription with the passing of the National Service (Armed Forces) Act on 3 September 1939. In the first three months, 1.25 million men aged eighteen to forty-one, without a conscientious objection, who passed the medical examination and were not engaged in occupations listed on the Schedule, were called up to join the armed service of their choice. In contrast, the mobilisation of industrial manpower was sluggish. Moreover, while the Schedule precluded skilled men's conscription into the forces, it did not guarantee employment on the home front. Despite the 1.25 million men in the services and a further 1.25 million employed in Civil Defence (such as Air Raid Precautions and the Auxiliary Fire Service), three months after the outbreak of war, there were still 1.4 million unemployed men.⁴⁵ Many men who were skilled in a trade listed on the Schedule were without work, some of them had been for many years, having experienced the emasculating effects of the Depression.

The issue of civilian unemployment remained contentious for months. The *Daily Mirror*, in February 1940, lambasted 'the ridiculous situation by which men are forbidden to work, and are at the same time asked to make their mightiest effort ever'.⁴⁶ The

Minister of Labour repeatedly had to respond to MPs' questions about reserved men who were unemployed. Those unable to find employment in their registered category were permitted to find employment elsewhere and from May 1940, men who had been unemployed for two months were allowed to volunteer for any civil defence organisation or armed service. This change was part of a new scheme for the full mobilisation of manpower following the formation of a Coalition Government. The Ministry of Labour and National Service, now headed by Ernest Bevin, a Trade Union official rather than an elected MP, was empowered to control all human and material resources. It was authorised to direct any individual into any form of work and to exercise fully existing but little used powers over essential industries. In contrast to the First World War, in which trade unions were bitterly opposed, industrial conscription was accepted by both organised labour and employers. One of the first policies implemented was to prohibit miners and agricultural workers, many of whom had already left to find better paid employment elsewhere, from working outside their industries. Ex-shipyard workers were also quickly reassigned to the shipyards.

As military manpower needs grew, the numbers covered by the Schedule were reduced. Some occupations were removed from the Schedule, while the age of reservation for others was adjusted upwards so as to de-reserve men. By the end of 1940, few workers under twenty-five were reserved.⁴⁷ From early 1941, all reserved men, with the exception of those in 'scarcity' occupations, were permitted to join the RAF; £47,000 was spent on newspaper advertising for recruits for RAF ground tradesmen and air crews from among men in reserved occupations.⁴⁸ The *Daily Record and Mail* ran an advertisement in September 1941 purporting to be the words of a previously reserved man: 'I was a motor fitter. But I wasn't satisfied – No sir! Thinks I, I'm fighting fit and only twenty-seven. I could be giving it back to Jerry, up there!' The advertisement informed men that 'Even if reserved you can fly with the RAF'. "'I never regretted swapping my old job – important as it was" . . . You won't regret it either if you follow his example'.⁴⁹ The notice identified a list of reserved occupations, such as carpenter, builder, blacksmith and bank clerk, which had released men into the RAF. This indicates a hierarchy of acceptable public service, in which even the state-mandated retention of personnel in specific jobs could be got round through volunteering in the air force. That it was the RAF, rather than the Army or Navy that was permitted was undoubtedly a result of the type of war that had unfolded. The Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940, followed shortly by the Blitz, had taken a heavy toll on air crew and more men were required to replenish that service. For one diarist, an office worker from Ashton-under-Lyme, these advertisements were ambiguous and confusing:

Advertisement in Guardian [newspaper] about reserved men and flying duties; this is very misleading as RAF will not accept reserved men who have not been released by their firm. Very few firms will release their men. Rather unfair to men like myself, who even, given reasonable health, would not be released by their firms. I have tried unsuccessfully 5 times, and was given my present job on the strict understanding that I would not attempt to leave again. Other men tried considerably more often to my knowledge. These advertisements cause disaffection in factories and must gain very few replies.⁵⁰

These advertisements suggested an opportunity to join up but for many this was unattainable. Like this diarist, twenty-eight of the fifty-six men interviewed in 2013 and 2014 tried to evade their reserved status and enlist; only six were successful.

This failure to serve in uniform caused resentment among some interviewees who were frustrated that the state was preventing them from joining up. Thomas Carmichael, an apprentice engineer in Ardrossan, and Walker Leith, an apprentice telephone engineer in Aberdeen, both stated that they were 'stuck' in a reserved occupation, while John Stephenson, who worked on the railways in Northallerton, stated that he was 'fastened down'.⁵¹ These men were static, rendered immobile by the state while many of their peers had been posted abroad. Their desire to serve in uniform in a combatant role superseded the state's avowal of their value. They saw combat as the only acceptable manly role in wartime, resented that the state consigned them, against their will, to a position subordinate to the 'soldier hero', and felt diminished as men in their war work roles. Ron Spedding, who worked in a railway wagon works in Durham, articulated his desire in his memoir:

As very young men [we] had actually looked forward to the day when we could join the armed forces and do our bit for King and Country. We would often imagine and fancy ourselves in a military uniform parading behind a brass band and sporting medals received for courage and valour. We really did believe that the most important thing in life was to fight and destroy the enemy, win the war and earn a share in the final victory and the glory . . . I remember feeling peeved and also a little guilty when some of my friends joyously told me they had been released and were off to join the Air Force.⁵²

Spedding's youthfulness is key to his desire to don uniform, and certainly the men who were interviewed in 2013 and 2014 were the youngest reserved workers, aged between eighteen and twenty-eight when the war ended. None had children and all but seven were single. Middle-aged, married fathers might have been less susceptible to the lure of martial uniform. Certainly, my maternal grandfather, a policeman in London, was frustrated that he had to leave his wife and two young children when he lost his reserved status and was compelled to join the army. For him and many others, being in a reserved occupation was not experienced as emasculating. Indeed, twenty-eight of the fifty-six men interviewed, exactly half, did not attempt to join the services, recognising that the state needed them to continue their work.

Some were very comfortable with their wartime status. Charles Lamb, a Dundee apprentice shipwright, asserted: 'I felt very happy [about being in a reserved occupation] actually . . . I didn't fight against it. No, no I was quite happy, maybe cowardly in one way but I had to think of number one'.⁵³ While Lamb was content to remain on the home front as it suited him, his use of the word 'cowardly' reveals that this negative sentiment overshadowed the civilian man. Others were much more confident, however, in recognising their own worth. John Dickson, a Glasgow shipyard worker, stated that there was 'no point in robbing Peter to pay Paul. Or taking a skilled engineer out of skilled engineering to be a soldier'.⁵⁴ Alexander Davidson, a Portsmouth-based boat builder, similarly asserted 'It was no good having sailors if you'd got nothing to sail them in. If you hadn't got any boats . . . The soldiers couldn't fight without rifles'.⁵⁵ Such accounts reveal that the reserved worker could carve out a place that he considered equal to that of the man in uniform.

Certainly, too many men in the forces and too few workers in munitions would mean that the surfeit of service personnel would be ill-equipped, lacking weapons, tanks, ships and aircraft with which to wage war and the home front would be left without essential supplies. Conversely, insufficient numbers of servicemen and

excessive numbers of civilian workers would lead to stockpiles of artillery, lost battles and increasing numbers of casualties. Or as *The Times* succinctly noted in January 1941: ‘recruits are no use without equipment; equipment is no use without recruits’.⁵⁶

Yet criticisms continued to be voiced. In March 1941, John Profumo, a twenty six-year-old Conservative MP for Kettering, and a commissioned officer in the Royal Armoured Corps, made a provocative statement in the Commons lambasting the reservation policy which was reminiscent of MPs’ parodies of occupations listed on the Provisional Schedule in early 1939:

But has the House thought that there are still in this country great numbers of men who ought to join up – young men like myself, capable, fit, with the muscle but without the will, men who are hiding behind the cloak of what are called reserved occupations? I could lay my hands on many such men, although I would prefer to lay my feet on them. I could give an example such as the man who calls himself a specialised ladies’ corset cutter. Is it more important for us to lace up our female sex than to lace the enemy? Up and down the country there are men who should be joining the Colours before we make all our women into soldiers, sailors and airmen. Let us rout out these people and put them into the Forces.⁵⁷

Inflammatory statements such as this inciting violence towards men who were not in uniform make patently clear that the civilian male faced a continual struggle to establish that he was legitimately not in service uniform. It also created a climate in which white feathers were handed out.

The practice of presenting white feathers from a game cock’s tail, regarded as a sign of inferior breeding, to men of conscription age in civilian clothing has a long history and was particularly widespread during the First World War. Admiral Charles Penrose Fitzgerald commissioned thirty Folkestone women on 30 August 1914 with the charge of dispensing feathers to young men not in uniform with the intention of shaming them into volunteering. Newspaper articles and theatre sketches ensured that the practice spread elsewhere, as recollections about this humiliating act captured in interviews conducted by the Imperial War Museum make evident. George Wilkinson, a chemist in County Durham, was exempted from the forces and was on the receiving end of ‘very hurtful’, ‘very distressing’ ‘rude remarks’ about him not being in khaki, which inclined him to stay at home rather than venture out on to the street where he ran the risk of being ‘insulted’.⁵⁸ John Dorgan recalled that his eighteen-year-old brother Nichol who was working in a reserved occupation in a colliery, received a white feather in an envelope in the post. ‘He got up off the table, white face, went out of the house and that was the last time I ever saw the lad. He left the house and went to the Recruitment agent in Newcastle and joined the Durham Light Infantry’.⁵⁹ This was not an unusual response: before conscription was introduced in January 1916 many men were propelled into recruitment offices having received a white feather.⁶⁰ Nichol’s cajoling into enlistment had tragic consequences as he was wounded in France and subsequently died.

The masculinities of non-uniformed men were called into question when they were presented with feathers or, even more unequivocally, petticoats. These feminised substitutes for khaki uniform underscored the perceived emasculation of such men.⁶¹ By targeting those perceived to have failed in their performances of masculinity, young women were, as Nicoletta Gullace notes, ‘policing manhood’.⁶² The rekindling of this First World War phenomenon occurred with sufficient frequency in 1940 and 1941 to

be mentioned in a 1942 publication.⁶³ When Falkirk-born Tom Myles became eligible for the forces he hoped to join the navy. But because the final figure of his national registration number had been randomly selected in a ballot, he was instead conscripted into the coal mines along with 48,000 young men who were popularly known as 'Bevin Boys', named after the Minister of Labour who devised the scheme in 1944 to substantially increase the numbers of those working in the pits. This came as an 'awful disappointment . . . I can remember how, och, utterly disappointed I was when my papers came in. I just couldn't believe that this was happening'. To this setback was added insult when he was presented with a feather, an episode Myles recalled vividly:

A young able-bodied eighteen-year-old walking in the streets. 'Why are you no[t] in the Army?' . . . To be called a conscientious objector, and the Government made no move to advise people that this was happening . . . There was one [episode] in actual fact. It was a hen's feather, and he came over and put it on the shoulder of my jacket ; . . . I can see and feel that whole episode to this day . . . [T]he way he looked at me.⁶⁴

While Myles 'ignore[d] it and walk[ed] away', these slurs aimed at young men not in uniform could have extreme consequences and a number of suicides were reported. In an attempt to address this issue, the government considered developing a badge for those rejected from military service on medical grounds. It was thought that men precluded from the forces ought, like the badged men of the First World War undertaking essential jobs, to have a visible signifier of their patriotism to ward off accusations of cowardice and shirking. Although such a badge was never introduced, consideration of this measure does suggest that overt shaming of those out of uniform was not uncommon.

Yet none of the fifty-six interviewees recalled any such emasculating episodes: Harold Stranks, who worked in the laboratory at Porton Down, asserted: 'I never detected any animosity at all'.⁶⁵ John Scholey, an engineer at Rolls Royce in Leicester, noted there was 'no stigma attached to it at all' and William McNaul, a Glasgow railway guard, stated 'nobody thought that you were dodging anything'.⁶⁶ A number of interviewees noted that it was understood that some would serve in the forces while others would remain on the home front in essential industry. Timothy Brown, an engineer in Gateshead, recalled, 'I was never sort of picked on and said "Well why are you not in the army?" or anything. There was never any problems. Everybody just seemed to accept you were either working or you were in the forces. Nobody bothered'.⁶⁷ Similarly, Charles Hill, a Birmingham toolmaker, asserted: 'nobody said anything to me . . . [I wasn't] criticised for it. I think it was an accepted thing because the government decided "you do this, you that and you do that". And well, you can't argue'.⁶⁸

The state did periodically revise its decisions, however. A key change which released reserved men into the forces was the replacement in December 1941 of block reservations by occupation with that of individual deferments: a man now had to be doing a vital job in a key establishment in a reserved industry as well as meet the age requirements. Individual deferments could only be granted to men undertaking work of the utmost importance. This combing out of men from essential industries, which was made possible by the mobilisation of women, resulted in a gradual de-reservation by age groups, the disappearance of occupational reservation and the implementation of individual deferment of men according to the importance of their work.⁶⁹ With this change from block reservation to individual deferment, the official policy of reservation

came to an end and the Schedule ceased to exist. A system akin to that used in the First World War, with military service tribunals making decisions about recruits, then went into effect. From 1942, reserved men were required periodically to complete a form giving information about the nature of their duties to ensure that individually they were making an adequate contribution to the national war effort.

The conscription of an as-yet-untapped source of labour was thus key to the ending of reservation. The state initially was reluctant to mobilise women, believing that, as in the First World War, under-utilised male workers would fulfil the labour requirements. However, in 1941, Britain began a measured policy of conscripting women to undertake war work which during the course of the war would go further than any other country, including the Soviet Union. The National Service (No. 2) Act in December 1941 made single women between twenty and thirty liable to conscription, and this was later extended to widen the age range from nineteen to fifty, to include married women and to introduce part-time work. Roughly 7.5 million women were working in industry and the auxiliary forces at its peak in September 1943.⁷⁰ Concurrent with the increasing numbers of women within the labour force was their entry into industries which were previously male-dominated, their increased wages, newly acquired skills, heightened sense of self-worth and the recognition of their value in wartime film and print media.⁷¹ These all had the potential to undermine civilian masculinity. Moreover, in reconstructing their own wartime work in oral history interviews conducted decades after the war, many women either failed to recall the presence of young men on the home front or dismissed their young male co-workers as being not 'fit' to serve in the forces. A secretary employed in the Vickers Armstrong Factory in Blackpool told interviewer Penny Summerfield: 'There was no men. The men were all away' but later recalled that those she worked alongside were either 'older men, over forty five' or 'hadn't passed the medical for the Forces'.⁷² Female war workers had the potential to render the civilian man's masculinity unstable, their presence a continual reminder that women had been drafted to undertake similar work.

Despite these unprecedented changes, male workers still comprised 61 per cent of the wartime workforce, half of whom were labelled 'reserved', and many workplaces – including coal mines, railways, garages, iron and steel works, shipyards and docks – remained masculine spaces and did not witness a surge, nor even a trickle, of women workers. Theirs was still tagged 'men's work'. Moreover, female workers were considered as being there only for the duration and there was a lack of investment in their training: unlike male apprenticeships, which might have lasted up to seven years, women's instruction often lasted just a few weeks. When complicated work practices were broken down to their component parts, fragmentation and deskilling led to devalued status. Women were regarded as unskilled 'dilutees' watering down the concentrated skilled male labour so that it went further. The definition of women's work as largely unskilled undoubtedly influenced the perception of civilian male workers. Moreover, women were often regarded as subordinate to male workers, assisting them with their more intricate work. Mass Observation, the social research organisation formed in 1937 to produce an anthropology of ordinary British people's lives, noted: 'The atmosphere is rather that the women are helping the men and *temporarily* taking over for the men to do something more important. The atmosphere is strictly masculine still'.⁷³ The positioning of women in the background of the poster 'Combined Operations Includes You' makes this evident (Figure 2), as does the line in railway



Figure 2: Harold Pym, 'Combined Operations Include You', The Admiralty, undated, courtesy The National Archives, Kew.⁷⁵

worker Ron Spedding's poem, 'Women also work in this man's domain/To help the war effort, they explain'.⁷⁴

Men's status as breadwinners also remained unchanged as the average wartime earnings of women in comparison to men increased only marginally from 48 per cent pre-war to about 52 per cent by 1945.⁷⁶ Consequently, trade unions, which continued to be male-dominated and prioritised the interests of male workers, were kept on side. The far greater use of women in the Second World War than the First paradoxically resulted in a bolstering of civilian masculinity, since these 'dilutees' reinforced the special value of skilled male workers.

Moreover, there were other ways in which masculinity was enhanced, including full employment, long hours and high wages. In contrast to the Depression, when over 3.2 million men were without work at its peak in the summer of 1932, male unemployment fell from 1.7 million in 1938 to a mere 60,000 in June 1943.⁷⁷ The average working week increased from 47.7 hours in October 1938 to 52.9 hours in July 1943.⁷⁸ 'We work as we've never worked before', noted railwayman Ron Spedding.⁷⁹ This resulted in wages increasing, which was especially rapid between 1939 and 1941.⁸⁰ Essential workers such as those employed in aircraft factories enjoyed wage rises of up to 71 per cent.⁸¹ Moreover, male workers earned more than most soldiers: a newly



Figure 3: Sidney Strube, ‘Put It There!’, The Admiralty, undated, courtesy The National Archives, Kew.⁸⁴

conscripted unmarried private was paid about £3 a week after deductions whereas the average civilian male took home over £5 a week.⁸² Some highly skilled individuals earned double that. In one exceptional case, a sheet metal worker assembling fuselages who was working a ninety-hour week took home £25.⁸³ The Second World War had the potential to shore up civilian masculinity that had been greatly diminished by the joblessness of the 1930s.

Moreover, civilian male workers were depicted positively during the war. Poster campaigns included brawny industrial workers endeavouring to emphasise the importance to the war effort of men on the home front. ‘Put it there!’, for example, depicted a male shipyard worker and a Royal Navy sailor shaking hands, their muscularity crushing a German U-boat (Figure 3). Such posters made visual links between soldiering and working, emphasising parity of service.

This was noted by a Customs and Excise worker at the Swansea docks: ‘The government [*sic*] is drawing a parallel between men in the services and men working on the “Home Front”’.⁸⁵ Documentary films also showed civilian men in a positive light. *Transfer of Skill* (1940), directed by Geoffrey Bell, shows how the skills of craftsmen were applied to war-related work: a pre-war jeweller is shown making precision instruments, a watchmaker produces shell fuses. ‘These are the men behind the front line’, states the narrator. ‘On the skill of their hands we depend to fashion our machines of war’.

Positive representations of manual workers can be found in the paintings of official war artist Stanley Spencer, collectively known as *Shipbuilding on the Clyde*. Despite sketching women workers at the Kingston shipyard in Port Glasgow, all but one of Spencer’s eight paintings featured only male labourers. The paintings were, then, a study of the men, a celebration of the physically tough nature of the work and an acknowledgment of communality, cooperation, collective endeavour and camaraderie. Spencer paints these men as individuals, absorbed in their own personal task. Colour and lighting are used to dramatic effect to interrogate the interplay between man and machine. The *Edinburgh Evening News* commented that Spencer provided ‘a vivid impression of life in a Clyde shipbuilding yard. The hundreds of workers . . . are seen

working like very demons. There are no slackers on the Clyde'.⁸⁶ The reference to slacking suggests that there was no such perception that these men were not fulfilling their duty.

Another way in which the Second World War bolstered civilian masculinity to a greater extent than in the First was through the increased dangers brought about by the Blitz. This put civilians at greater risk, albeit briefly, than some of their contemporaries in the forces, many of whom would have been in non-combatant roles (such as RAF ground crew and Army logistics) or undertaking training far away from battle zones. Casualties from aerial bombing did occur, albeit relatively infrequently, while workers were labouring in factories, docks and on trains, as Helen Jones has stated.⁸⁷ As toolmaker Frank Harvey noted, this happened because 'you always stayed where you worked'.⁸⁸ During a raid on Coventry in November 1940, in which over twenty factories were destroyed, engineering workers were killed at their place of work.⁸⁹ And of course firefighters sustained heavy losses. Enduring risk manfully was another way that masculinity could be affirmed. Ron Spedding refers to 'the occasional bomb/We are sick and tired, but carry on'.⁹⁰ Thus, in addition to working and bringing home a wage, reserved workers confronted the risk of bodily damage and death not unlike their counterparts in the forces, which enabled them to construct manly accounts of stoic endurance.

Conclusion

In both wars, industry was in direct competition with the military for a limited supply of men. The state needed to mobilise labour just as much as it needed combatants to fill the ranks of the armed services. Despite attempts to retain men with essential skills on the home front during the First World War, too many skilled men were able to enlist into the forces. Those men who remained on the home front were derided as shirkers and cowards. Civilian men therefore had to negotiate their relegation to the subordinate status of unmanly 'other'. Whereas errors were made during the First World War, with the government lurching from one manpower crisis to another, a more systematic approach was adopted in the Second. Austen Chamberlain, the Chairman of a First World War organisation that became the Ministry of National Service, spoke of an 'industrial army' being raised which would supply the military forces. While merely rhetoric in the First World War, this became a reality in the Second. As a consequence, men who were prevented by the state from enlisting during the Second World War had largely positive recollections and while some resented being confined to the home front, many were empowered by job security, high wages, female dilutees, positive cultural representations and additional risks from aerial bombing. These were not shirkers, scrimshanking their way out of their patriotic duty. Rather, as Churchill asserted, they were 'soldiers with different weapons but the same courage'.⁹¹

Notes

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