

# A Small Price to Pay

Consumer Culture  
on the Canadian Home Front, 1939-45

Graham Broad



**UBC**Press · Vancouver · Toronto

Sample Material © 2013 UBC Press

## **Studies in Canadian Military History**

*Series editor: Dean F. Oliver, Canadian War Museum*

The Canadian War Museum, Canada's national museum of military history, has a threefold mandate: to remember, to preserve, and to educate. *Studies in Canadian Military History*, published by UBC Press in association with the Museum, extends this mandate by presenting the best of contemporary scholarship to provide new insights into all aspects of Canadian military history, from earliest times to recent events. The work of a new generation of scholars is especially encouraged, and the books employ a variety of approaches – cultural, social, intellectual, economic, political, and comparative – to investigate gaps in the existing historiography. The books in the series feed immediately into future exhibitions, programs, and outreach efforts by the Canadian War Museum. A list of the titles in the series appears at the end of the book.



# Contents

- Illustrations / vii
- Acknowledgments / xi
- Introduction / 1
- 1 Mrs. Consumer, Patriotic Consumerism, and the Wartime Prices and Trade Board / 16
  - 2 Business as Usual: Adworkers and the Coming of War / 50
  - 3 Finding a Place for Wartime Advertising / 71
  - 4 Advertising to Win the War and Secure the Future / 88
  - 5 Buying and Selling Big Ticket Items / 125
  - 6 “The Grim Realities of War, as Pictured by Hollywood”:  
Consuming Leisure / 156
- Conclusion / 182
- Appendix*
- Guns and Butter: Consumer Spending, Inflation, and Price Controls / 196
- Notes / 211
- Selected Bibliography / 247
- Index / 255

# Introduction

*The great tragedy of our time is that no democracy has been able to understand or to accept the demands of total war until their homes were under actual bombing attack.*

– Donald Gordon, *Consumer's News*, May 1942

*Man lives by certain civilizing influences. These include the luxuries of the daily newspaper, art galleries, and fine pictures; music and theatrical entertainment; movie shows; and rapid transit, motor cars, airplanes, time saving appliances, even a knife, a spoon, a few serving plates, an ornament or two for various parts of the house ... To have a good heart for war work, people must have something extremely desirable to fight for.*

– *Editorial*, *Trader and Canadian Jeweller*, April 1942

IN JULY 1942, THE National War Finance Committee placed a remarkable advertisement in *Maclean's*, one of the most popular magazines in Canada. The ad (see Figure 3.1) depicts Adolf Hitler leaning over the shoulder of a woman as she opens her purse. “Go on,” Hitler whispers into her ear, “spend it. What’s the difference?” The copy goes on, “*Canadians ... the time has come when every nickel, dime and quarter you spend needlessly is money spent in the cause of our enemies! NOW, more than any time since this war began, national THRIFT is essential ... From now on, resolve that needless spending is out!*”<sup>1</sup>

The following year, under the tagline “When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler,” a US propaganda poster portrayed Hitler in the passenger seat of a car. Ottawa’s parallel message was that when you went shopping, you went shopping with Hitler – or perhaps *for* him. Until late 1941, the

government had urged mere restraint on the part of consumers, asking at most that they “serve by saving.” But in 1942, it adopted this far tougher line in response to retail sales that continued to rise, threatening calamitous inflation in an economy where many goods were in short supply.

Appearing on the same page as this rather severe admonishment against unnecessary spending, however, were two other ads. One was for Woolrich-brand wool skirts, imported from England, and the other was for made-to-order vacation cottages; that issue of *Maclean's*, like most others during the war, featured dozens of ads for all manner of non-essential products: luxury clothing, cosmetics, soft drinks, and even jewellery. Modern readers might be puzzled by the appearance of ads for imported clothes and getaway cottages alongside propaganda equating such things with treason, but by the mid-point in the war, Canadians had learned to take these contradictions in stride. As one retailer put it the following year, “My inventories are shrinking. Shelves are showing bare spots. Many lines of merchandise are in short supply, and business is booming.”<sup>2</sup>

*A Small Price to Pay* is a contribution to the ongoing effort to produce a history of Canadians’ domestic experience in the Second World War. Some decades ago, the eminent military historian C.P. Stacey mused that “the fog of war has a way of drifting into the historian’s study and getting into his eyes; and when to the grey fog of war is added the golden haze of romance, visibility tends to fall to close to zero.”<sup>3</sup> No doubt, but many historians of Canada have had more clear-eyed vision than that. In the past decade alone, works such as Jeffrey Keshen’s *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers*, Jennifer Stephen’s *Pick One Intelligent Girl*, Serge Durlinger’s *Fighting from Home*, and Stephanie Bangarth’s *Voices Raised in Protest: Defending North American Citizens of Japanese Ancestry* have presented a more discerning view of what Keshen calls “the not-so-good-war.”<sup>4</sup> Beneath the fog of patriotic enthusiasm encouraged by wartime propagandists – and sometimes carried on by misty-eyed sentimentalists of the kind that Stacey warned of – we find that our own “greatest generation” consisted of human beings after all. Petty politics, regional tensions, self-interest and greed, skepticism, and outright cynicism existed side by side with genuine patriotic self-sacrifice in wartime Canada. These very human virtues and vices were also notable features of the subject of this book – wartime consumer culture.

“Consumer culture” refers to the economic, social, and cultural practices associated with the manufacture, marketing, sale, and purchase of commodities. As a generation of cultural theorists and historians of

consumerism has argued, personal consumption became one of the most powerful social and economic forces in the industrial world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> Far more than a mere exchange of goods and services, consumerism became an activity around which governments shaped policies and that transformed the cultural, material, and even spiritual lives of millions of people.<sup>6</sup> Increasingly, consumers bought things not just to fulfill their material needs but also to satisfy an array of non-material desires.<sup>7</sup> People craved fun, comfort, sensual pleasure, improved social status, friendship, affection, and love. As historians and theorists of consumerism have long observed, the emergent consumer culture promised to animate the world of material objects, vesting them with the power to deliver all this and more. As I will argue, wartime consumer culture promised nothing less than to satisfy Canadians' yearning for victory and a prosperous peace.

The pervasiveness of the belief that it is virtuous to want more and better things is a hallmark of modern mass consumer society.<sup>8</sup> One of the recurring subjects of this study is how social tensions arose when the government and patriotic organizations urged savvy and often newly prosperous wartime consumers to buy less and to make do with the things that they already had. Admittedly, "wartime consumers" may seem like an oxymoron. In the hallowed spaces of patriotic memory, non-essential consumption is usually described as having been suspended for the duration of the conflict. Textbooks, television documentaries, and popular histories recount how Canadians "pulled together" to scrimp and save, buying little apart from their meagre rations and Victory Bonds, which they nestled alongside their growing savings, awaiting a triumphant day when their pent-up consumerist desires could be unleashed. Oral histories of the war often dwell on what was new and novel: rationing, shortages, scrap metal drives, and "make-do" reviews, where old clothes were made over into new fashions. Even academic historians have sometimes followed a narrative of home front sacrifice whose origins are found as much in wartime propaganda and subsequent mythologizing as in the actuality of lived experience. Michael Bliss writes that "elaborate controls limited civilian purchasing power, which did not rise above Depression levels" in wartime Canada; J.L. Granatstein contends that Canadians' personal savings rose because "consumer goods were unavailable" on the home front; and Joy Parr, in her important study *Domestic Goods*, concludes that there were merely "few" goods available for consumers to purchase.<sup>9</sup>

production of consumer goods suggest otherwise, but the myth of widespread material deprivation on the home front persists nonetheless. Writing for *Maclean's* after the September 11th, 2001, attacks on the United States, journalist Ken MacQueen reflected on changing social mores since the early 1940s and especially in the consumer habits of civilians on the “home front.” During the Second World War, he stated,

The role of the home front was one of scrimp, salvage, and sacrifice. Victory gardens were planted. Victory Bonds were bought. Hoarded cans, used foil, and scrap iron were made into battleships. Food and fuel were rationed, nylon stockings vanished, even new tires for the family car were a squandering of war resources. It was a penurious kind of patriotism, ill-suited to these modern times.

By contrast, “the war on terrorism ... is a shop-til-you drop proposition,” in which politicians and their corporate allies forge symbolic links between consumption and patriotism while manufacturers devise new consumer products whose purchase promises to deliver, as MacQueen put it, “a body blow to psychopathic terrorists everywhere.”<sup>10</sup>

As this work will demonstrate, however, there is nothing novel about mobilizing consumer impulses on behalf of a military effort, and social memories of “penurious patriotism” reflect only part of Canadians’ war-time experience. When war erupted in September 1939, hardly anyone called on Canadians to make material sacrifices, because hardly anyone believed that such sacrifices would be necessary. In fact, the editors of *Maclean's* expressed the very sentiment that MacQueen, writing for the same magazine, would find so alarming six decades later. They advised readers to “carry on” with their consumer lifestyles, because, they wrote, “the best service that can be rendered is to keep our national economic structure functioning as normally as possible.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout the business press, the most fervently expressed hope was that mobilization for war would result in a renewed surge of consumer confidence and spending after the long, lifeless years of the Great Depression. Such views were echoed throughout the corridors of power in Ottawa. Eager to avoid a repetition of the political and economic turmoil that had engulfed the country during the First World War, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King promised Canadians a war of “limited liability” whose domestic impact would be minimized. This time, he promised, there would be no mass slaughter of Canadians in the mud and blood of the western front, no

conscription crisis to imperil national unity, no runaway inflation that would threaten the ability of Canadian women to feed their families.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the press, the rallying cry was “business as usual” (only better), and millions of Canadians, wary of war but weary of Depression, rallied to it.

Of course, all this was before the succession of catastrophes that the Allies suffered in May and June of 1940. During the so-called phony war that preceded Nazi Germany’s spring 1940 offensives, Canadian mobilization proceeded steadily but without any sense of urgency. For their part, the British treated Canada, in the words of their own official history, as a “purely marginal source of supply.”<sup>13</sup> Following France’s capitulation in June 1940, however, a torrent of munitions orders poured forth from panicked British ministries, and the Canadian government’s own fiscal restraint was, as historian Robert Bothwell put it, “jettisoned virtually overnight.”<sup>14</sup> But if this was a turning point in Canada’s military and industrial effort, many months elapsed before Canadian consumers felt its full impact. For another year, manufacturers, many of whom had laboured, half-idle, throughout the Depression, either added new productive capacity or were able to mobilize partially idle plants to meet military orders without seriously disrupting the flow of consumer goods. From some quarters of the government, calls for greater consumer sacrifice began to emerge in late 1940, but if anything, the “business as usual” rhetoric simply intensified elsewhere. In September 1940, even while the Battle of Britain raged across the skies of southern England, *Chatelaine*, Canada’s most popular women’s magazine, published a special issue whose theme was “shopping to win the war.” Women’s organizations such as the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) and the Federated Women’s Institutes, whose members had often expressed grave misgivings about what they perceived as the excessive materialism and dissolute self-indulgence of modern times, urged Canadians to “buy victory now,” not with War Savings Certificates or through participation in the War Loan, but through the purchase of British-made goods.<sup>15</sup> When G.F. Towers, the governor of the Bank of Canada, called for reduced consumer spending and greater war savings in an address to the Canadian Club during the summer of 1940, he was widely denounced for being premature and alarmist.<sup>16</sup>

So the Canadian consumers’ phony war went on. Although British consumers felt the pinch of war from its earliest days, and Americans did even before Pearl Harbor, Canadians enjoyed two years in which they seemed neither at peace nor fully at war. Granted, throughout 1941 a

growing number of anxious officials began to argue that more severe restrictions on civilian consumption were inevitable.<sup>17</sup> The year was nonetheless the best to date for the production of washing machines, stoves, refrigerators, toasters, and other appliances; furniture store sales were three times higher than they had been just prior to the war; and as late as June 1941, even as the armoured spearheads of the German war machine pierced the Red Army's skin and plunged deep into the belly of the Soviet Union, the editors of *Canadian Automotive Trade* wrote reassuringly that Canada's car business could go on as usual, there being no evidence that immediate changes were required.<sup>18</sup>

Sooner or later, however, the demands of the entire Commonwealth's rapidly expanding war effort, coupled with the American rearmament program's enormous requirements for raw materials, were bound to result in the large-scale rededication of the Canadian consumer economy for military purposes. In the last quarter of 1941, King's government finally ordered drastic cuts in the production of most consumer durables, placed restrictions on consumer credit to curtail installment buying, and imposed sweeping wage and price controls to combat inflation. "We must face the fact," King said over the CBC in mid-October, "that there are not enough men; there are not enough machines; there are not enough materials to meet both the demands of consumers and the demands of war ... We have no choice but to reduce our consumption of consumer goods. To us, too, has come the choice between guns and butter."<sup>19</sup>

The consequences of the large-scale mobilization of the economy for military production are well known, but some of the figures are so striking that they bear emphasis. Between 1941 and 1944, civilian tire production plummeted 96 percent, the output of electric toasters dropped 97 percent, while electric refrigerator manufacturing fell from a high of 64,000 to just 237 – a decline of over 99 percent.<sup>20</sup> For millions of Canadian motorists, the most conspicuous, and subsequently the most memorable imposition, was the government's decision to suspend passenger car production in early 1942.<sup>21</sup> In the preceding two decades, automobiles had become a hallmark of the consumer society. Canadians bought a quarter of a million cars and trucks in the first two and a half years of the Second World War alone. In 1943, by contrast, fewer than a thousand cars were sold to civilians, and the Wartime Industries Control Board's motor vehicle administrator reserved those meagre few for drivers whose jobs he deemed essential to the war effort.<sup>22</sup>

Nineteen forty-two was also the year that coupon rationing, which had never been adopted in the First World War, began. The board imposed rationing for gasoline, sugar, tea, and coffee in the spring and summer of 1942, butter later that year, and meat beginning in May 1943. Provincial governments also legislated a variety of measures, including coupon rationing in some cases, to reduce the consumption of alcoholic beverages – the latter initiative being met with the approval of the nation’s still very vocal supporters of temperance and prohibition, including the leaders of most of the major women’s groups. All this coincided with a doubling of direct personal taxes, which had already increased a bruising sixfold since the beginning of the war, and an immense propaganda effort aimed at discouraging consumer spending.<sup>23</sup> For the remainder of the war, consumers were forced to choose from a narrower range of sometimes inferior goods. Local and temporary shortages, brought on by panic buying or delayed deliveries that occurred for a number of war-related reasons, became an everyday fact of life. Service clubs and patriotic women’s groups that had hitherto supported the “buy British” campaign now worked hand-in-hand with half a dozen government agencies to issue an unremitting deluge of propaganda in the form of public speeches, posters, billboards, advertisements, radio addresses, and documentary films to underscore the importance of combating inflation and preventing any diversion of resources to satiate needless consumer demand. Some of this propaganda, such as the 1942 Hitler ad that appeared in *Maclean’s*, went so far as to equate spendthrift consumerism with treason.

Was this, the union of nationalistic moralizing with apparent consumer deprivation, the “penurious patriotism” to which MacQueen and others have alluded? In part, it certainly was. Against this, however, must be measured the fact that retail sales continued to rise, and that Canadians were bombarded with competing and even contradictory messages. Even after Ottawa suspended the production of many consumer durables and coupon rationing began, private manufacturers and retailers devised ingenious new ways to sell their remaining goods by converting a myriad of wartime anxieties into rationales for continued consumption. For every ad urging conservation and thrift, there were many more that encouraged patriotic shoppers to part with their paycheques – ads whose essential message was that buying, under the correct circumstances, was neither wasteful nor unpatriotic but a meaningful contribution to the war effort, at times even a sacrifice that consumers made for freedom. In so doing,

manufacturers, advertisers, and retailers offered Canadians an additional justification for war. It was not merely for Britain and empire, nor only for nationhood and liberty, but also for free enterprise, for a “selling way of life,” and for access to a future of limitless consumer abundance, where the expectation was not of further sacrifice, but of a hard-earned share in a world of plenty.<sup>24</sup>

Still, it is altogether too obvious to say that the wartime consumer society was, as the overused phrase goes, “contested terrain,” as if there is something exceptional about the discovery that a historical period contains ambiguities, contradictions, and paradoxes. Consumerism has always been attended by disagreements about its propriety, and apart from the contemporary environmentalist critique of consumerism, very little about these arguments has changed over time. In the 1940s, consumer capitalism’s defenders in the business community asserted that it generated prosperity, was democratizing, socially levelling, and even civilizing. Moreover, they suggested, not without a degree of plausibility, that the rise of Nazism, and hence the cataclysm of the war itself, stemmed in part from the Weimar government’s failure to provide for the material wants and needs of Germans. By contrast, many middle-class moralists feared that the excessive pursuit of consumer pleasure led to vice and moral decay, undermining the time-honoured Christian virtues of plain and pious living centred on hard work, thrift, and sobriety. Meanwhile, a body of intellectual critics – which the business press referred to, with an air of contempt, as “university professors” – condemned mass culture and mass consumerism as homogenizing and stupefying. Many of them were Marxists or socialists who held that consumerism was predicated on the exploitation of labour, even as it eroded working-class solidarity with its seductive but ultimately counterfeit vision of human emancipation. What makes the war years of particular interest in the ongoing debate over consumerism is the extremity that these arguments reached. In part, the dispute was about the extent of material sacrifice that people were expected to make in a nation at war. It also fit into a broader debate over the place of consumer capitalism in Canadian society – including whether or not it would have a place, which we sometimes forget was very much a live question at the time.

The study of the wartime consumer economy is also of interest because it highlights the immense economic and cultural influence that the United States already had in Canada by the late 1930s. Historians have tended to emphasize the British character of wartime Canada, with most taking it

for granted, as Granatstein has maintained, that Canada went to war in 1939 because Britain did and for no other reason.<sup>25</sup> Although there is no denying the Britishness of much of English Canada during the Second World War, it is equally true that by the late 1920s, Canadians were awash in a sea of American consumer goods and cultural products. They drove cars, listened to radios, read magazines, cooked with stoves, wore clothing, and applied cosmetics manufactured in the United States or in Canada by American subsidiaries. Hundreds of thousands of Canadians tuned in to American radio stations every night, and the most popular programs on Canadian radio were American ones. As for the movies, the relative dominance of the allegedly crass and degraded products of Hollywood that so alarms Canadian cultural nationalists in the early twenty-first century was as great, if not greater, during the 1940s than in the present day (on this, see Chapter 6).

Still, given the extremity of what was at stake in the Second World War, a reader could be excused for thinking that the study of wartime consumerism is a trivial or even frivolous diversion from weightier matters. It is tempting to observe (and literally true) that ration coupons and consumer response surveys did not defeat the U-boat menace or breach the Atlantic Wall. But it is also important to understand that the politics of personal consumption and their relationship to the war effort were vital aspects of national economic planning and quite central to civilian life on the home front. Politicians, civil servants, businesspeople, heads of voluntary associations, academics, journalists, novelists, poets, advertisers, and indeed everyday consumers added their voices to the throng in a sustained and evolving discussion about the place of consumerism in wartime, and for reasons that are eminently comprehensible. Apart from the immense social and cultural significance of consumerism, personal consumer spending, it is too readily forgotten, continued to account for the majority of economic activity in Canada throughout the war. In *Arms, Men and Governments*, his official history of the King administration's war policies, C.P. Stacey estimated that Ottawa's total war-related expenditure from 1939 to 1945 was \$19 billion.<sup>26</sup> By comparison, retail sales – which are just one facet of consumer spending – totalled just under \$25 billion in the same period. In no fiscal year of the war, not even in 1944, did the Department of National Defence's expenditure surpass retail sales for the corresponding calendar year. In fact, the latter were exceeded by total war expenditure of all government departments,

by the narrowest of margins, only in the fiscal years ending 31 March 1944 and 31 March 1945.<sup>27</sup>

Having said that, there should be no mistaking this work for an economic history of the Canadian home front, although a healthy measure of “hard” economic considerations will be found throughout. Nor is it primarily a study of government regulation of the consumer economy, although inevitably the presence of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board, the agency most directly involved in consumer affairs, looms large over some chapters, much as it did over the transactions made by consumers and retailers. Administrative histories of the WPTB and related agencies such as the Department of Munitions and Supply (DMS), which oversaw military conversion and armaments procurement, have already been written.<sup>28</sup> Rather than an economic history or an examination of policy and administration, then, *A Small Price to Pay* is a study of a consumer culture in time of war. It emphasizes how the buyers, sellers, and advertisers of commodities attempted to negotiate the tensions between satiating consumer desires and meeting the increasing demands for greater sacrifice that emanated from the government and scores of voluntary associations.

Needless to say, any work that attempted to investigate the full scope of regional, class, and ethnic responses to such matters in a country as large and diverse as Canada would require several volumes. Instead, I have attempted something more modest, a sketch of the consumer culture in wartime Canada. Whenever possible, I have used data gathered by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (DBS), WPTB, and other agencies to account for regional and class differences, but I concede that a great deal remains to be said. I have written nothing at all, for instance, about the Far North, the First Nations, or the Métis, and not very much about farmers. In fairness, this work is concerned mostly with those who manufactured, marketed, regulated, bought, and sold consumer goods. In respect to these matters, there is much less to write about the many Canadians who, even at the peak of wartime prosperity, lived without electricity on farms or in small communities in remote regions, far from the shops, restaurants, and theatres that were the mainstays of the rather idealized world of urban middle-class consumerism that is the focus of this work. I hope that some time soon more specialized studies will add perspective to the somewhat two-dimensional landscape that I unveil here.

In addition, my emphasis is on civilians rather than soldiers. As contemporary writers employed it, the term “home front” referred not just to a

geographic location but to all civilian activity undertaken in Canada on behalf of the war effort. Accordingly, Canadians tended not to think of soldiers stationed in Canada as part of the home front. We lack good social histories of Canadian soldiers in the Second World War and especially of the half of the armed forces that never left the country, but it is sometimes forgotten that, even at the height of mobilization in 1944, when nearly three-quarters of a million Canadians were in uniform, over 90 percent of Canadians, including the majority of males of military age, were civilians. Undeniably, soldiers stationed in Canada, including thousands of sailors and airmen from Allied nations, could be enthusiastic consumers, especially of movies, restaurant meals, and certain illegal recreational services that are beyond the scope of this study, but statisticians in Canada did not distinguish between a dollar spent by a soldier and one spent by a civilian.

This illustrates a chief difficulty in undertaking any examination of consumerism: the most elusive aspect of consumer history is frequently the consumer him- or herself. Almost invariably, the people who manufactured, marketed, sold, and regulated goods were more systematic in their record keeping than the people who bought them. Corporate records and trade journals offer insight into the inner workings of the business world; advertisements provide perspectives on the worldview of marketers; newspaper editorials and magazine articles dealing with every aspect of the nation's economy are easily found; and government agencies laid low whole forests to document their doings. But consumers themselves steadfastly refused to anticipate the needs of future historians. Even wartime adworkers and retailers, for all their pseudoscientific pretenses about their ability to activate consumer desires with the ease of throwing a switch, often found themselves powerless to sway customers whose manifold motivations were at times frustratingly inscrutable. As Keith Walden writes in his innovative examination of early-twentieth-century grocery store window displays, "Customers did not confide to diaries or share with correspondents the pleasures of buying a pound of cheese or a jar of pickles. Surviving account ledgers reveal little about human activities in and perceptions of the stores."<sup>29</sup> So it was with wartime consumers. Throughout this work, I have attempted to buttress my arguments with voices of ordinary consumers drawn from letters, diaries, and published oral histories. Admittedly, these are a strictly hit-or-miss affair, for all the reasons cited above. They can provide qualitative evidence and anecdotes concerning

wartime consumerism, but quantitative historians might, and perhaps with some justification, challenge the statistical significance of such remarks.

This is not to suggest that this work will have little to say about “ordinary” consumers – far from it. Indeed, I hope to reveal a good deal about them. It is possible to deduce much about consumer behaviour from a careful study of the reports produced or commissioned by government agencies, including the 1941 census. And though market research and polling might have been in their infancy (or perhaps early adolescence) during the war, a significant number of attempts to elicit the opinion of consumers were made on the home front. These included polls by the new Canadian Institute of Public Opinion as well as numerous efforts undertaken by the WPTB’s Consumer Branch, which served as a liaison between the public and board officials.<sup>30</sup> The results of these quantitative surveys are admittedly rather arid at times, but they are indispensable sources of consumer opinion nonetheless. Finally, it must be remembered that those who worked on the “supply side” were themselves consumers. Adworkers, for example, believed that they knew what made the typical consumer tick in part because they knew what they themselves found appealing. They may have overestimated the extent of their insight into the motivations of the general public (incurable self-importance seemed to be a hallmark of their trade), but the ads they produced may yield what consumer history pioneer Roland Marchand calls “plausible inference” into certain aspects of consumer behaviour.<sup>31</sup> Much the same can be said about the strategies to maintain and even expand consumer spending, despite wartime pressures, that retailers and service providers devised, wrote about in their trade journals, and spoke about in countless conferences.

Most of all, our understanding of wartime consumer behaviour must be anchored to one fact that belies all notions about penurious patriotism: consumer spending in Canada increased by leaps and bounds during the war. France fell to the Nazis, and consumer spending went up. Britain reached out in desperation for Canadian aid, and spending went up. Ottawa and the provinces mandated new taxes, and spending went up. They placed restrictions on the manufacturing of dozens of goods, and spending went up. They imposed rationing, and spending went up. They likened consumerism to treason in their propaganda. And spending went up. Historians have often referred to the post-war consumer boom. I contend that there was instead a *post-Depression* boom that began with the

outbreak of war in 1939. Between 1939 and 1945, retail sales grew by 49 percent, even after accounting for inflation. By comparison, during the corresponding years a decade later, 1949 to 1955, retail sales grew by just 32 percent after inflation.<sup>32</sup> These figures do not tell the whole story, of course, but they do raise serious queries about why the myth of penurious patriotism was adopted in the first place. Over the course of the war, jewellery, women's clothing, and shoe and drugstore sales doubled, restaurant business tripled, and paid admissions to movie theatres leapt from 138 million in 1939 to 208 million in 1944.<sup>33</sup> At Toronto's annual gift show, where wholesalers displayed their wares to the nation's retailers, the number of attendees increased more than sevenfold during the war.<sup>34</sup>

The shortages, too, were not in all cases as sweeping or severe as they are often remembered to be. An examination of magazines and newspapers from the last two years of the war reveals page after page of retail advertising, incorporating all the obligatory watchwords about savings and thrift but featuring such decidedly non-essential items as china, silverware, dinette sets, ice refrigerators, children's toys and games, fur coats, and even diamond rings. Coupon rationing, which did not begin until the war was nearly three years old, applied to only a handful of goods and did little to curtail spending. Polls revealed that the majority of consumers approved of rationing, even in Quebec, and some even hoped that it would continue in some form after the war ended (on this, see the discussion in Chapter 1 and the Appendix). In theory at least, rationing was social levelling in a way that the free market was not. Moreover, Canadians were often exhilarated by the opportunity to serve their country in a risk-free fashion. Having accomplished that, having "done their bit" by buying their rations of sugar and meat and taking their change in War Savings Stamps, many Canadians felt entitled to do some shopping, eat out, and go to the movies, as the retail spending figures clearly reveal. Certainly, most advertising attempted to furnish them with every rationale for doing so.

As for the nation's retailers, the war presented them with many challenges, not the least of which was the requirement to observe a byzantine array of evolving and sometimes conflicting government regulations. Still, for most retailers, sales went up as did profits (though only as far as the ceiling on excess profits permitted), and though they grumbled about regulations, many retailers found that they benefitted from at least a few regulations that they hoped would continue when the conflict ended.

During its final year, as victory approached, many Canadians looked longingly toward a future where their social security would include a share in a world of material abundance, where the world “fit for heroes” that had failed to emerge after the Great War would finally materialize. As one advertisement put it in 1943, the war was “a small price to pay” for the opulent future of limitless, guilt-free consumption that would follow victory.<sup>35</sup>

*A Small Price to Pay* is divided into seven chapters that examine functionally related aspects of the wartime consumer society. Chapter 1 studies the interaction between the female consumer and the regulatory state. Histories of Canadian women at war have tended to emphasize the importance of women’s participation in paid labour and the armed forces. I contend that, from the perspective of the WPTB at least, a woman’s most important contribution to the war effort would be made not in the workforce but in her traditional role as wife, mother, homemaker, and principal buyer for the family: on the checkout line rather than the assembly line. Moreover, I argue that the leadership of some of Canada’s largest and most influential women’s organizations enthusiastically endorsed this view, perceiving varying approaches to consumerism as a means by which women could simultaneously aid the war effort and stake out a greater claim for political and economic equality.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 deal with the crucial topic of marketing and advertising. As the propaganda arm of the system of consumer capitalism, advertising plays an important role in communicating rationales for mass consumption to the buying public. Adworkers, advertisers, and indeed, their social critics believed that it influenced consumers’ buying behaviours, and it may even have done so. It is in advertising’s symbolic tableau that we find the most visible representations of the tensions inherent in the wartime consumer culture. By 1942, it was not uncommon for the readers of magazines and newspapers to find appeals for conservation juxtaposed with ads urging them to spend as a contribution to the war effort. Sometimes they existed within the same ad.

From late 1941, department stores, clothiers, booksellers and stationers, grocers, and other retailers were forced to contend with shortages of varying severity and many new regulations – it would be both tedious and trivial to itemize them all – but they usually profited from the seller’s market. Many consumer durables, however, were simply unavailable after 1941. The production of automobiles, stoves, electric refrigerators, radios, and other big ticket items fell victim to the large-scale diversion of raw

materials and productive capacity for military purposes on both sides of the Canada-US border. Such items may have accounted for a minority of overall consumer spending, but they had had an enormous transformative impact on the lives of millions of Canadians in the years leading up to the war and were important symbols of the modern mass consumer society. Chapter 5 concerns the uniquely difficult circumstances faced by retailers and consumers of durable commodities, and especially automobiles, when their production suddenly came to an end in early 1942.

Chapter 6 concerns the consumption of leisure in the form of public amusements, with a particular emphasis on the most popular form of public entertainment: movie-going. Canadians also went to dances, concerts, live theatre, and spectator sports, but they spent comparatively little on these sorts of pleasures. Ninety percent of their wartime entertainment budget was spent on attending the cinema. It therefore seemed fitting to dwell at some length on movie-going. The concluding chapter considers the relationship between the emerging welfare state and a competing vision of the future – one where economic prosperity would be secured through private enterprise built upon a foundation of personal consumerism. Finally, the book includes a statistical appendix to lend some heft in support of my arguments concerning the wartime consumer boom. Readers interested in a detailed analysis of spending and varying estimates of inflation rates should look there.

Some readers might question the decision to confine my analysis to the war years. A case could be made for beginning earlier, in order to better observe the consumer culture in the late years of the Depression, or for extending the book's focus to 1947 on the grounds that the WPTB's consumer controls did not entirely end until then. But as Graham Greene wrote in *The End of the Affair* – a novel set amid wartime austerity in Britain – a story has neither a beginning nor an end; the writer must pick a point from which to look forward and back.<sup>36</sup> For that purpose, the years 1939 and 1945 are as good as any and better than most.

© UBC Press 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

---

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Broad, Graham, author

A small price to pay : consumer culture on the Canadian home front,  
1939-45 / Graham Broad.

(Studies in Canadian military history series, 1499-6251)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-2363-0 (bound). – ISBN 978-0-7748-2365-4 (pdf).

ISBN 978-0-7748-2366-1 (epub)

1. Consumption (Economics) – Social aspects – Canada – History – 20th century. 2. Marketing – Social aspects – Canada – History – 20th century. 3. World War, 1939-1945 – Canada. 4. Canada – Social conditions – 1939-1945. 5. Canada – Economic conditions – 1918-1945. I. Title. II. Series: Studies in Canadian military history

HC115.B693 2013

306.30971'09044

C2013-904435-3

C2013-904436-1

---

**Canada**

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Publication of this book has been financially supported by the Canadian War Museum.

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

[www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca)