

**Food**  
THE POLITICS, CULTURE,  
**Will Win**  
AND SCIENCE OF FOOD ON  
**the War**  
CANADA'S HOME FRONT

**Ian Mosby**



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## Introduction

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*Let every kitchen work for victory, for food will win the war*

– Slogan of the Kingston Community Nutrition Council, 1942<sup>1</sup>

*Canada has determined to change the eating habits of a nation, because she has learned that efficient production of food is only half the victory. It takes efficient consumption, too, to give full meaning to the slogan, “Food will win the war.”*

– Saturday Night, December 1942<sup>2</sup>

In November 1944, the Wartime Information Board (WIB) commissioned a poll that asked Canadians what they considered their country’s greatest contribution to the war effort. They were given three possible choices: food, men, or munitions. If the work of later historians of Canada’s Second World War is any guide, the answer should have been clear. Canada’s military and its war industries dominate scholarly analyses of this country’s wartime contributions. With the exception of the work of agricultural economists G.E. Britnell and V.C. Fowke in the early 1960s, the role of food in the history of the war effort is notable primarily for its absence.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, however, Canadians at the time appeared to have held a very different view. Food was selected by 30 percent of those surveyed as being Canada’s most important wartime contribution – a finding that was fairly consistent across regions, occupations, income levels,

and gender. In the same poll, 30 percent chose “men,” and only 24 percent chose “munitions.” In an earlier version of this survey, conducted in 1942, “food” actually trumped the other two choices, at 38 percent, beating “men” by a considerable margin.<sup>4</sup>

The WIB’s question was no doubt leading and simplistic. Yet the fact that so many respondents in two separate polls gave Canada’s food contribution the same weight as the lives of their friends, neighbours, and family members – especially given that the 1944 poll was conducted at the height of combat operations in Europe – suggests that at the very least, the impact of food on the Canadian experience of the Second World War needs to be revisited. During the 1940s, Canadians were well aware that there was much truth to the adage that “food is a weapon of war,” and as we have since learned, the war for food had particularly devastating consequences. Historian Lizzie Collingham has estimated that a staggering 20 million people died of “starvation, malnutrition and its associated diseases” during the Second World War, a number equal in scale to the estimated 19.5 million military deaths. Collingham goes on to argue that the global struggle for food dictated military strategy and did much to decide the war’s outcome – indeed, that it was “one of the driving forces behind some of the worst atrocities committed during the conflict.”<sup>5</sup>

As one of the world’s major food exporters, Canada played a crucial role in the war for food. In a September 1942 radio address, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King told Canadians it was “literally true that after Britain was cut off from European supplies in 1940, her people and her fighting men were saved from starvation by Canadian food.”<sup>6</sup> While the British might not have *literally* starved without Canadian food exports, it was nonetheless very much true that their war effort would have been massively and perhaps even fatally hindered. By the end of the war, official estimates were that Canadian exports accounted for 57 percent of British wheat and flour consumption – down from its remarkable peak of 77 percent in 1941 – as well as 39 percent of bacon, 15 percent of eggs, 24 percent of cheese, and 11 percent of evaporated milk consumed in Britain.<sup>7</sup> In part, this was achieved through unprecedented state intervention in Canadian food production. The federal government had taken direct control over the bulk purchase, sale, and distribution of a range of basic commodities – including sugar, tea, coffee, wheat, and rice – and had also introduced a range of subsidies, price guarantees, and other controls to transform agricultural production. Between 1940 and 1943 alone, wheat acreage in the prairie provinces was reduced by 42 percent while areas sown for agricultural products needed to bridge gaps in Canada’s domestic and export

requirements saw dramatic increases. Feed grain production, for instance, increased by 72 percent over the prewar period while flaxseed production increased by 800 percent and hog production by 250 percent.<sup>8</sup>

All the while, journalists, food and nutrition experts, and government propagandists regularly reminded Canadians that the food front extended from field to table and depended as much on efficient consumption at home as it did on increased production.<sup>9</sup> To free up foods needed for export to Canada's overseas allies and soldiers while preventing unnecessary shortages and the inflationary spiral that had developed during the First World War, the federal government intervened directly in the operation of the nation's kitchens on an unprecedented scale. For example, it rationed meat, sugar, butter, tea, coffee, and preserves under a coupon system; by regulation, it mandated meatless days in restaurants, limited the types of canned goods that could be sold, and prohibited the sale of sliced bread, hot dog buns, and iced cakes. Meanwhile, its newly established Nutrition Division sent out the omnipresent message that more than half of Canadians were malnourished and that poor nutrition was sabotaging Canada's war effort. The government, in other words, set out to transform Canadians' dietary habits through a range of both voluntary and coercive means.

Canada's wartime mobilization on the home front not only led to very real changes in the ways Canadians shopped for, cooked, and consumed food but also transformed the broader symbolism of food and eating. Certain previously mundane or even unknown forms of food consumption and production became embodied with new meanings. Vegetable gardening became an act of solidarity with Canadian farmers and British civilians, while saving fats and bones transformed the kitchen into a munitions factory. Feeding one's family according to the newly created Canada's Official Food Rules emerged as a mother's wartime duty, while reporting the baker to the authorities for selling a loaf of Canada Approved Vitamin "B" Bread above its maximum ceiling price became an important patriotic act. At the same time, the language of food had taken on an increasingly political tone by the end of the war, particularly as more and more Canadians began to articulate a counter-discourse that stressed, not just their *obligation* to follow the rules of wartime eating, but also their *right* to adequate and nutritious food at a reasonable price both during and after the war.

Given the scale of these transformations in the material and symbolic realities of eating – and given the fact that the average Canadian household spent more than 30 percent of its income on food – it should come as no surprise that at the time, Canadians saw food as essential to both their

experience of the war and its eventual outcome. It is, therefore, these broader changes in food *consumption* on the home front that are the focus of the chapters that follow. While this book makes no attempt to reclaim food as Canada's "greatest" contribution to the war effort – or even, like Collingham, to offer a food-centred reinterpretation of the military history of the war – it does attempt to use the seemingly mundane acts of shopping for, preparing, and eating food as a powerful and unique lens through which to reinterpret the history of everyday life on the home front. This is because, even though it is often overlooked by historians, food tends to define the everyday. It is essential to our survival; more importantly, how often and how well we eat has a profound effect on our health and well-being. Because food is a biological necessity, it has therefore played a central role throughout history in the functioning of family, regional, and national economies, often determining the fate of governments, nations, and even empires.<sup>10</sup> But food is also essential to our social, cultural, and spiritual lives. A vast range of fundamentally important secular and religious rituals have developed around food, and in nearly all societies food acts as an essential site in which social distinctions based on region, religion, class, ethnicity, age, and gender are both defined and maintained.<sup>11</sup> In other words, because it is such a complex product of choice and coercion, necessity and pleasure, science and culture, food is an ideal avenue for exploring the profound social, cultural, political, and scientific changes that characterized Canadians' everyday experience of the Second World War.<sup>12</sup>

The following chapters examine how the Second World War transformed the politics, culture, and science of food on the Canadian home front. They differ in their sources and approaches but are nonetheless united in this common argument: food did not literally win the war, but it did much to define the contours of everyday life on the home front, and more importantly, it became a central site where competing gendered visions of the rights and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship were both articulated and contested on a truly national scale. Reflecting this premise, the first two chapters focus on what were, up to that point, two of the most significant attempts by Canada's federal government to intervene directly in ordinary Canadians' eating habits. Chapter 1 examines how warnings of a national malnutrition crisis made by the newly formed Canadian Council on Nutrition led to an unprecedented response by the federal government, one that included the founding of a national Nutrition Services Division and the launch of the Canadian Nutrition Programme, Canada's first large-scale national nutrition campaign. Through an examination of Canada's Official Food Rules (the predecessor to Canada's Food

Guide) and of other forms of wartime nutrition education and advice, this chapter focuses on how changes to the scientific consensus concerning the measurement of malnutrition not only transformed Canada's nutrition professions more broadly, but also became the basis for a public health program that was ultimately less concerned with preventing serious illness than with normalizing an unrealized physical and culinary ideal that prioritized the perceived industrial, military, and agricultural needs of a nation at war.

While Chapter 1 focuses mainly on the federal government's efforts to encourage Canadians to voluntarily change their eating habits, Chapter 2 examines a much more direct form of state intervention in Canada's kitchens. It does so by exploring the different ways in which ordinary Canadians responded to food rationing and price control, two of the main pillars of Canada's wartime command economy. Because coupon rationing was directed primarily at foodstuffs – and because food was the single largest expense for most families – it was at the kitchen table that Canadians most directly and regularly experienced the effects of centralized state control over the wartime economy. Both of these interventions, moreover, were without precedent. During the First World War, Canadians had been able to escape mandatory coupon rationing altogether, and wartime controls on food and other consumer goods were minimal and largely ineffective. The result was widespread shortages and a disastrous inflationary spiral that saw food prices increase by 128 percent over pre-war levels by 1920.<sup>13</sup> It was with this in mind that the Wartime Prices and Trade Board (WPTB) was established on 3 September 1939, only a few days after the passage of the War Measures Act and nearly a week before Canada officially declared war on Germany. The WPTB's mandate was “to provide safeguards under war conditions against any undue enhancement in the prices of food, fuel, and other necessities of life, and to ensure an adequate supply and equitable distribution of such commodities.”<sup>14</sup>

As Chapter 2 will show, fulfilling this mandate was a complex and uncertain enterprise that required an unprecedented level of voluntary cooperation from Canadian women in particular. By examining the major sources of popular support for and discontent with food rationing and price control, the chapter explores how the experience of both these programs transformed popular notions of social and economic citizenship by mobilizing consumers around the responsibilities of both citizens and the state to ensure a wartime marketplace governed by a common goal of “equality of sacrifice” and fairness. In particular, it argues that – contrary to the commonly repeated historical narrative<sup>15</sup> – these programs were

remarkably popular and in fact made an important (and often unrecognized) contribution to Canadians' growing faith in the state's ability to intervene in and manage the postwar economy. Moreover, by rallying Canadian women around the need to protect their rights as both citizens and consumers through their cooperation with (and participation in) the government's wartime economic stabilization program, federal departments like the Consumer Branch of the WPTB actually helped politicize large numbers of Canadian women around issues such as the fair and equitable price and distribution of meat, milk, butter, and other foods. This in turn helped spark an unprecedented wave of consumer protest following the decontrol of food prices in the early postwar period.

Chapters 3 and 4 build on these broader examinations of state intervention into the Canadian diet by focusing on the ways in which the federal government's changing wartime priorities transformed the material realities of food consumption and culinary practice, as well as their symbolic and cultural meanings. Chapter 3 explores the ways in which ordinary Canadians rallied around household food production, conservation, and service on the home front in order to show their support for the larger war effort. Whether by salvaging fats and bones, planting victory gardens, operating active service canteens, or producing Red Cross prisoner-of-war parcels, millions of Canadians – and women in particular – mobilized their domestic space, labour, and skills to contribute to Canada's larger war production goals. Many of these activities rallied the private sphere and feminine domestic virtues in ways that reflected a pervasive and gendered propaganda discourse that stressed women's maternal obligations to nation and empire. But at the same time, such activities also often blurred the distinction between women's public and private roles in ways that highlighted the social and economic importance of women's domestic labour as a key component of the war effort. Chapter 3 therefore argues not only that the state mobilized women's unpaid labour on a scale that has gone largely unrecognized by historians, but also that food production, consumption, and service played an essential role in determining the boundaries of gendered notions of wartime citizenship.

Chapter 4 builds on many of the themes explored in the preceding three chapters by exploring how the larger forces driving Canadians to transform their eating habits were ultimately translated into the everyday language of food culture and culinary practice. In particular, it focuses on the multiple genres of wartime food writing that were produced during this period and ranged from ordinary Canadians' contributions to community cookbooks and the women's pages of their local newspapers to the avalanche

of wartime prescriptive literature produced by food experts, government officials, and advertisers. This chapter explores the ways in which rationing and the identification of certain foods and culinary practices as “patriotic” created a space for a common, pan-Canadian wartime cuisine. At the same time, it examines how ordinary Canadians navigated the contradictions between a wartime discourse of home front sacrifice and the realities of material abundance – realities that became apparent as unemployment declined and disposable incomes grew. And, perhaps most importantly, the chapter argues that, through the production and use of wartime recipes and cookbooks, ordinary women were provided with a powerful and important means of articulating a number of very different visions of wartime citizenship and postwar reconstruction.

Finally, Chapter 5 situates all of these larger changes in the politics, culture, and science of food within broader debates surrounding Canada’s plans for an expanded postwar welfare state. The “discovery” of a national malnutrition crisis by Canada’s leading food and nutrition experts in the early years of the war led to a major expansion of nutrition-related initiatives in Canada. As a consequence, the nutrition question was put to increasingly political uses by a range of different groups. Many of the same scientific tools that had been used to measure malnutrition in Canadian cities, for instance, proved to be valuable resources for left-wing social critics of municipal and provincial welfare and relief policies. And, on a more national level, what we now often call *food security* – defined in part by the achievement of “physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets [a population’s] dietary needs”<sup>16</sup> – was now being articulated by ordinary Canadians as well as by leading experts (such as Leonard Marsh and Harry Cassidy) as one of the most important pillars, if not *the* most important, of any postwar *social security* plan. The growing prominence of nutrition in these often heated wartime debates meant that divisions began to form among Canadian nutrition professionals, with some beginning to use their research to promote a more interventionist welfare state, and others defending the status quo. By examining how nutrition was used in political debates over unemployment relief rates and family allowances – as well as in efforts to establish a national school lunch program – the chapter shows how these debates exposed internal divisions among prominent nutrition experts, divisions that would, ultimately, help destroy the tenuous scientific consensus that had produced warnings of a wartime malnutrition crisis in the first place. This would have profound effects on the careers of many of Canada’s leading nutrition professionals and, more importantly, on the direction

of scientific research and popular nutrition education well into the postwar period.

This book is, first and foremost, a work of food history. Although long unfairly dismissed as a topic unfit for “serious” scholarly inquiry, the past two decades have seen an explosion of interest in food history of all kinds. Whether it has been through studies of individual commodities such as milk, sugar, or salt; examinations of concepts such as hunger and freshness; or much broader social histories focusing on everything from food and the making of national identity to the impact of nutritional science on culinary preferences and practices, recent scholarly work in food history has been impressive in its scope, quality, and interdisciplinary nature.<sup>17</sup> Inspired particularly by recent international scholarship on the social history of food consumption – and, more specifically, on the social history of food consumption during wartime – the research that went into this book used, as its starting point, the kinds of basic questions typically of interest to food scholars.<sup>18</sup> How, for instance, did Canadians’ diets change over time? What forces drove these changes? And how did Canadians themselves respond to these dietary changes?

Until recently, these types of questions have rarely served as the starting point for scholarly inquiry among Canadian historians. Food has been an important component in a range of studies examining topics such as the role of agricultural staples in the consolidation of the national economy, the effects of industrialization on the family economy, and the state’s policies of assimilating and economically marginalizing Aboriginal peoples.<sup>19</sup> Overall, however, the broader social relations of food and eating have tended to receive scant attention from Canadian historians, who have usually left such matters to popular historians, museum professionals, and antiquarians.<sup>20</sup> The recent publication of two edited collections on Canadian food history by McGill-Queen’s and the University of Toronto presses are evidence that this is in the process of changing. But there still have not been any wide-ranging and foundational scholarly monographs on the social history of eating in Canada equivalent to, for instance, Jeffrey Pilcher’s work on Mexico, John Burnett’s work on England, or Harvey Levenstein and Donna Gabaccia’s work on the United States.<sup>21</sup> In fact, very few scholarly monographs have been devoted to the social history of food in Canada, with Steve Penfold’s *The Donut* and Diane Tye’s *Baking as Biography* being two recent notable and impressive exceptions.<sup>22</sup>

This book, then, aims to fill at least a few of the many gaps that exist in the historiography of food and eating in Canada. At the same time, it

engages with a broader international food studies literature – in particular, with the growing field of critical nutrition studies.<sup>23</sup> Although the twentieth century saw Canadians’ nutritional status progressively improve from an apparent nadir during the early years of industrialization in the late nineteenth century – with the Second World War marking an important shift from the hunger and want of the Great Depression – this period was also marked by a scientific revolution in our understanding of the relationship between food and health.<sup>24</sup> This was spurred, specifically, by discovery in the 1910s and 1920s of the connection between what we now know as vitamins and minerals and a number of deficiency diseases, including scurvy, anemia, pellagra, beriberi, and rickets. These discoveries upended a number of long-held assumptions about what constituted human nutritional requirements, not to mention the very notion of what constituted healthy eating. But they also generated an emerging scientific consensus that deficiencies in these newly discovered vitamins and minerals were threatening the health, strength, and productivity of even the wealthiest and most industrially advanced nations.<sup>25</sup> These international developments led to the formation, in 1938, of the Canadian Council on Nutrition, a semi-official advisory body made up of the country’s leading nutrition experts, whose warnings of a national wartime malnutrition crisis would result in the establishment of the Canadian Nutrition Programme and the writing of Canada’s Official Food Rules.

Besides providing a detailed account of what proved to be the formative period for nutrition in Canada – in terms of both its professionalization and the popularization of the “Newer Nutrition” of vitamins and minerals – this book joins a number of recent works in critical nutrition studies by focusing on the broader implications of “official” efforts to define and quantify concepts such as health, hunger, and malnutrition. As a number of historians have argued in recent years, discourses around healthy eating have long been the product not simply of objective scientific knowledge but also of a larger constellation of moral, political, and social meanings and values.<sup>26</sup> And in many ways, Canada’s experience during the Second World War provides an important example. New methods of quantifying and evaluating the nutritional status of large populations were developed during the 1930s. Although these methods helped establish nutrition as a national priority during the war years, they had a number of unintended consequences. Nutrition experts used studies warning of a nutritional crisis that could affect upwards of 60 percent of the population to justify the launch of a national public education campaign highlighting women’s wartime obligations as the gatekeepers of their families’ – and therefore

the nation's – nutritional status. But these same studies also provided powerful ammunition to critics of Canada's exiting social and political order. By exploring the contested place of nutrition within competing wartime discourses concerning the rights and obligations of citizenship, this book provides a number of case studies that explore not only the ways in which nutrition was put to increasingly political uses during the 1930s and 1940s (the subject of excellent analyses by James Struthers and Gale Wills in the Canadian context) but also, and more importantly, how these debates had a direct impact on the scientific consensus within Canada's emerging nutrition professions.<sup>27</sup>

The twentieth-century transformation of the science of nutrition was, of course, simply one among many of the food revolutions that were already well under way by the time war was declared in September 1939. The industrialization of agriculture through the use of tractors, mechanical harvesters, and chemical fertilizers – not to mention the use of what, during the war years, was becoming a growing arsenal of chemical pesticides and herbicides – had already begun on some farms, albeit slowed significantly by the Great Depression.<sup>28</sup> By the 1930s – as a result of developments in transportation and industrial refrigeration – imported fruits, vegetables, grains, meats, and other basic foodstuffs from around the globe were becoming commonplace in many larger Canadian cities, regardless of season.<sup>29</sup> Also, consolidation in industries like meatpacking and food processing had led to the rise of domestic and multinational corporations – Swift Canadian Co., Canada Packers, Kraft Foods, Coca-Cola, and the Canada Starch Company, to name just a few – and these corporations would come to dominate the postwar Canadian marketplace. Many of these companies would oversee what American historian Harvey Levenstein has referred to as North America's "Golden Age of Food Processing" during the early postwar period through the development of a dizzying array of processed convenience foods, which would soon begin to dominate grocery store shelves. But even by 1939, the stage had been set by a whole host of processed, instant, and frozen food products ranging from Jell-O to Kraft Dinner to frozen peas.<sup>30</sup> And while the Canadian consumer landscape had yet to become dominated by supermarkets – those massive, brightly lit icons of consumerist culture that followed the postwar rise of the corporate suburb – independent grocers were already being successfully challenged by large department stores and by the rapid interwar growth of grocery chains like Dominion, Loblaws, and Safeway.<sup>31</sup>

To a large degree, these twentieth-century food revolutions are all associated with the rise of a broader consumerist culture of abundance and,

more specifically, the associated transformation of North American diets (and bodies) during the postwar years.<sup>32</sup> In 1939, however, abundance and choice were by no means the dominant characteristics of Canadians' consumption practices. The large-scale unemployment and underemployment that characterized the 1930s meant that for many families, austerity and hunger dominated their experience of Depression-era eating.<sup>33</sup> Convenience foods and imported fruits and vegetables, for instance, were beyond the means of thousands of Canadian families who were struggling to afford food, shelter, and clothing at all. Added to this was the fact that a large number of Canadian kitchens still lacked even basic amenities like electricity, refrigeration, and running water. In 1941, for instance, only 40 percent of Canadian kitchens had a gas or electric stove (the remainder used wood, coal, or oil stoves) and only 61 percent had indoor running water. Refrigeration was a similar story: 21 percent of households used a mechanical refrigerator, 26 percent still used iceboxes, and as many as 49 percent of homes had no refrigerator at all.<sup>34</sup> These broader trends would see little movement during the war and early postwar years, as factories were increasingly turned over to war production and manufacturers and food processors alike became subject to strict quotas on raw materials and basic ingredients.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, it was needs rather than wants and, as Joy Parr has argued, work rather than leisure that tended to define consumption practices for most individuals and families both before and during the war.<sup>36</sup> It is clear that the culture of "consumerism" that we often associate with the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – a culture that is typically characterized by the production of desire and identity through mass-produced consumer goods and that is, for critics, linked with a kind of liberal (or neoliberal) ideology prioritizing private choice over the public good – is not really applicable to the Canadian home front during the Second World War.<sup>37</sup> Not only was the vast majority of a typical Canadian family's budget devoted to necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing, but, more importantly, the state's intervention and direct control over nearly every facet of the wartime consumer economy led to the emergence of a different popular vision of the consumer as a political actor. This book therefore builds on the work of Lizabeth Cohen, Magda Fahrni, Julie Guard, and others by offering an alternative account of the rise of post-war consumer culture, one that does not simply assume the inevitability of consumerism but instead highlights the efforts of ordinary Canadians – and women, in particular – to articulate and enact a range of very different visions of the rights and responsibilities of the citizen consumer.<sup>38</sup>

As this book will show, it is often impossible to separate the wartime politics and culture of food and nutrition from broader currents of wartime social and political change. The chapters that follow therefore offer a unique perspective on a number of the themes in the social and political history of a period that was marked by an unprecedented expansion of the powers of the federal government and that has long been considered the formative period in the history of Canada's welfare state. As a number of Canadian historians have already established, it was during the war that a new generation of university-trained mandarins in academic fields such as psychology, economics, sociology, and medicine permanently transformed the relationship between citizens and the state by applying new techniques of governance and management in fields ranging from public opinion research to psychological testing, labour relations, propaganda, and – as will be argued in the pages that follow – nutrition.<sup>39</sup> But this book also attempts to build on recent work by Dominique Marshall, Shirley Tillotson, and other social historians of the Canadian welfare state by exploring this larger process of state formation from the perspective of social history as well as that of public policy.<sup>40</sup> It therefore examines how the federal government's wartime interventions into the Canadian diet transformed both the politics and the culture of food consumption and Canadians' broader perceptions of their own social and economic rights as citizens and consumers. In doing so, it points to the ways in which historians of this period have tended to overlook the broader political effects of the wartime command economy and argues that food rationing and other controls on consumption in fact helped contribute not only to Canadians' growing faith in a more interventionist state but also to the rapidly changing political dynamics of the period.<sup>41</sup>

Embedded in these wartime changes in the politics and culture of food consumption were various shifting and contested gendered ideals of wartime citizenship, patriotic duty, and domesticity. As Sonya Rose has argued in the British context, wartime citizenship was never “a single, unitary status, relationship, or practice” but rather a “complex of contested rights, contradictory gendered duties, and ideals of civic virtue.”<sup>42</sup> At no time was this truer for Canadians – and for Canadian women, in particular – than during the Second World War. Women were called upon to “keep the home fires burning” by putting Canadian households on a war footing. At the same time, they were increasingly being asked to enter the previously “male” spheres of industrial labour and military service. In other words, while men were expected to serve their country by either signing

up to fight overseas or engaging in some form of essential wartime production – with those who failed to do either of these risking both their masculinity and their patriotism – women’s wartime duties were more fraught with contradictions. On the one hand, the social and economic importance of women’s domestic labour received unprecedented recognition during the war. Canadian women were regularly told that, to meet wartime production goals, they would need to lead the way by transforming their family’s consumption practices and, just as importantly, by devoting much of their leisure hours to voluntary patriotic work, work that would – contrary to one historian’s characterization of it as “busy work”<sup>43</sup> – provide essential financial, material, and emotional support to allied soldiers, civilians, and prisoners-of-war. On the other hand, the presence of women in uniform and in war industries challenged the male breadwinner ideology that defined men’s and women’s “natural” gender roles in the decades leading up to the war and, as a result, brought into question the social and legal barriers to women’s equality in both the private and public spheres.<sup>44</sup>

Since the publication of Ruth Roach Pierson’s groundbreaking *They’re Still Women After All: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood*, much of the scholarship on the changing wartime social relations of gender has focused on the broader impact these contradictory ideals of wartime femininity had on the lives of the thousands of women who took up the call and enlisted either in the military or as industrial war workers. While early work in this area tended to focus on Pierson’s central question of whether the war was emancipatory for women or was simply a temporary upheaval of the prevailing gender order, more recent work has looked beyond this “either/or” dichotomy by instead exploring the much more complex impact that the war had on women’s experiences and identities both inside and outside the workplace and the military.<sup>45</sup> But far less critical analysis has been devoted to the impact of these contradictions on women’s lives in the domestic sphere. By looking at the war “through the kitchen window,” so to speak, the chapters that follow provide an important perspective on one of the key sites of women’s labour during a period when buying and preparing food remained one of the largest demands on women’s time and energy, whether they had entered the paid workforce or not.<sup>46</sup> And although women’s wartime work in the kitchen did not result in the same kind of radical reordering of gender relations as their new industrial and military roles, the war nonetheless transformed the moral and symbolic worlds of buying and preparing food in a way that made the kitchen an important site for exploring how the often contradictory

“official” visions of patriotic practice and citizenship came up against Canadian women’s actual wartime expectations and experiences.

Food also provides a unique window into shifting popular perceptions of wartime masculinity.<sup>47</sup> Although food and nutrition were widely perceived as decidedly feminine spheres of concern, the language of wartime feeding campaigns spoke to a number of related wartime fears about Canada’s ability to field strong, healthy male soldiers and maintain a productive, efficient workforce. Early in the war, nutrition experts contended that the high levels of malnutrition they were finding in their dietary surveys were in all likelihood a leading cause of the alarmingly high number of Canadian volunteers who were initially deemed unfit for military service because of poor health. They similarly warned that Canada’s so-called manpower crisis was being exacerbated by malnourished – and therefore physically unfit and inefficient – industrial workers. This meant that although the blame for malnutrition tended to be placed squarely on the shoulders of the nation’s wives and mothers, the country’s leading nutrition professionals were nonetheless also able to successfully promote nutrition as a means to protect the kind of virile masculinity needed to win the war on the battlefield, factory floor, and farm alike. Such arguments did much to convince the federal government to allow an unprecedented degree of expert intervention in and surveillance of the diets of soldiers and war workers. Yet as a dramatic 1945 strike by thousands of western Canadian coal miners over insufficient meat rations suggests (see Chapter 2), many men, especially working-class men, also appropriated wartime fears of malnutrition-related physical degeneracy to challenge some of the government’s own policies, including meat ration allotments and unemployment relief rates. Thus, wartime perceptions of the relationship between healthy eating and Canada’s productive and military capacity provide another important perspective on changing notions of gender and citizenship during a time of perceived social crisis.

And, finally, by exploring the war’s impact on the politics and culture of food, this book inevitably examines the social and cultural history of everyday life on the Canadian home front. As evidenced by the publication of scholarly studies like Jeffrey Keshen’s *Saints, Sinners, and Soldiers: Canada’s Second World War* and Serge Marc Durflinger’s *Fighting from Home: The Second World War in Verdun, Quebec*, the home front has generated interest among historians over the past decade. Keshen’s book, for its part, is one of the first attempts to provide a truly national synthesis of many of the broader themes in the social history of the home front, whereas Durflinger’s reflects the growing prominence of scholarly and popular

monographs that examine the war from the perspective of a single community, family, or individual.<sup>48</sup> This book shares Keshen's approach in examining the war as a national experience, not simply a local one – in large part because we cannot fully understand food rationing, price controls, the Canadian Nutrition Programme, and related endeavours without looking at the different ways they were received in communities from coast to coast to coast. The following pages therefore illuminate some areas of life on the home front that have so far gone unexamined while at the same time challenging some of the interpretations of Keshen, Durflinger, and others on the wartime experience of food rationing, the place of scientists in Canada's wartime mobilization, the impact of national conservation efforts like victory gardening, and the state's mobilization of women's unpaid and voluntary labour.

It is always difficult to write a truly national history in a country as linguistically, ethnically, culturally, and geographically fractured as Canada, and in many ways, this is doubly true of food history. Tastes, traditions, and practices differ not just among regions or ethnicities, but also within households and between individuals. This is one reason why I have chosen the federal government's efforts to transform ordinary Canadians' diets during the Second World War as the primary focus of this study. Not only does this focus make for a more manageable topic, but it also makes use of the fact that the war years, perhaps more than any period before or since, saw Canadians become subject to a profoundly centralized system of governance that touched on nearly every aspect of daily life. As one commentator noted in 1945:

The War Measures Act converted Canada overnight from a confederation into a unitary state; the government overrode or supplanted most of the normal procedures of peace; it became the largest and most important employer of labour; it used its fiscal capacity and monetary powers to effect maximum war production, borrowing billions, raising billions by taxation, and then bringing into play a reserve power by borrowing many millions from the banking system to inflate the economy to full war capacity.<sup>49</sup>

So it is precisely because of this centralizing tendency of the wartime state – and the central role played by federally mandated controls on food consumption in Canadians' experience of the war – that this book is able to draw some broader conclusions about the larger national wartime experience of food and eating.

Given this focus on the changing role of the state – and the federal government, in particular – archival research for this book encompassed the records of a number of federal departments at the heart of the most important wartime changes in the governance of food and nutrition. These included, among others, the Nutrition Services Division of the Department of Pensions and National Health (later renamed the Nutrition Division of the Department of National Health and Welfare), the Consumer Section of the Department of Agriculture, the Women’s Voluntary Services Division of the Department of National War Services, the WIB, and the Consumer Branch of the WPTB. However, the goal was also to look well beyond the “official” record of the war to get at Canadians’ broader experiences of wartime eating. Research therefore also examined the archival records of other national organizations that played important official and unofficial roles in facilitating and overseeing these wartime efforts, including the Canadian Council on Nutrition, the Canadian Red Cross Society, the Canadian Home Economics Association, the Federated Women’s Institutes of Canada, the National Council of Women, and others. This research was supplemented by examinations of popular discussions of food and nutrition in the print, radio, and film media. Cookbooks and other forms of culinary literature that have typically been overlooked by historians form an important component of this research. My research also included, among other things, an extensive review of the wartime output of national news and lifestyle magazines such as *Canadian Home Journal*, *Chatelaine*, *Maclean’s*, and *Saturday Night*; academic and trade publications such as *Food in Canada*, *Canadian Hotel and Restaurant*, and the *Canadian Journal of Public Health*; and the film and radio archives of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the National Film Board. I have also examined the wartime women’s sections of newspapers, including the *Globe and Mail*, *Le Devoir*, and the *Vancouver Sun*.

Although something approaching a “national” experience of food and eating did exist in wartime Canada, there were, of course, exceptions. Residents in remote northern communities, for instance, were exempt from the usual rules of coupon rationing because of their need to buy food in bulk during their long periods of isolation in the winter. And it is clear that the wartime experience of Japanese Canadian internees, to name just one prominent example, was clearly very different from that of their non-Japanese neighbours. While there are many similar exceptions that are always important to keep in mind, it is nonetheless true that the vast majority of Canadians shared a number of common experiences of state intervention in their diets. Canada’s Official Food Rules were precisely

that – official rules that, because they were universal, did not distinguish between regional or ethnic eating habits and were as new (and problematic) to Canadians in Cape Breton as they were on Vancouver Island. Moreover, leaving aside the expanding wartime presence of the military, the more than six hundred local Ration Boards that were created during the war often became the most visible local manifestations of the newly expanded reach of the federal government. And, for that matter, because of the thousands of regulations established by the WPTB, Canadians were bound by a common national set of rules governing their food consumption, which meant that a recipe for tealess tea or a butterless, sugarless cake would often have been as useful (and probably as unappetizing) to a home cook in Montreal as it would have been to her counterpart in Halifax or Edmonton.

The Red Cross provided a similar national touchstone for Canadians. At its wartime peak, more than one-quarter of Canadians were members of either the Red Cross or the Junior Red Cross, and there were local branches of both in nearly every region and in both French- and English-speaking areas.<sup>59</sup> Not only that, but the Red Cross regularly partnered with other well-established groups such as the Federated Women's Institutes, the Cercles de Fermières, and the Health League of Canada on a range of campaigns focusing on everything from wartime nutrition education to overseas food relief. This meant that the hundreds of thousands of Canadians who packed POW parcels, contributed to the national Jam for Britain campaign, or attended one of the hundreds of "War Economy Nutrition" classes held throughout the country were at least partly united by their membership in a national organization that crossed most ethnic, linguistic, and even political lines.

Of course, not all Canadians experienced the entry of these national institutions and organizations into their kitchens in the same way, and to reflect that, I have made considerable efforts to capture the ways in which different groups responded to changes in the wartime politics and culture of food and nutrition. I have reviewed multiple genres of popular food writing in both French and English during this period, ranging from community cookbooks from around the country to extensive press and media reviews. This effort has been facilitated by the fact that, perhaps more than in any other period before or since, the federal government was obsessively concerned about tracking public opinion. The widespread perception that poor morale threatened nearly every aspect of the war effort and the need to control information by resorting to massive wartime censorship and propaganda, together generated a range of novel and experimental

methods of opinion gathering throughout the war on the part of the WIB, the WPTB's Information Branch, and other wartime government departments. Most of these efforts, moreover, specifically tracked changes in public opinion towards rationing and other wartime controls. These efforts included hundreds of internal public opinion polls conducted by the newly formed Canadian Institute for Public Opinion; detailed weekly press reviews of more than three hundred newspapers and magazines, which were distributed among a number of key government departments; and a mass-observation-inspired system of field reports by WIB "correspondents" in more than 140 communities. Perhaps just as importantly, these tools included the meeting minutes supplied regularly to the WPTB Consumer Branch by its dozens of Women's Regional Advisory Committees, which, in nearly every region of the country, met regularly to discuss their experiences of rationing and price controls.<sup>71</sup> These kinds of sources, along with interviews, memoirs, diaries, and other sources of wartime memories collected by groups ranging from the Canadian War Museum and the Defence Department to journalists, interested citizens, and volunteer groups, offer an extraordinarily diverse range of perspectives on the broader implications of the government's wartime food policies and programs.

All of this, however, is intended to support a rather basic central argument that, by the end of this book, you will hopefully find convincing, namely, that although food may not have literally won the war, it does provide us with a unique and remarkably powerful means of re-examining and reinterpreting the everyday experience of war on Canada's home front and the long-term impact of a period of profound social, political, economic, and – as it turned out – dietary change.