

Press release from the British Agricultural History Society

The Frontline of freedom: British farming in the Second World War

Farmers served the country well during the Second World War. Food supplies on the home front were maintained at adequate levels: fears of deprivation caused by an Atlantic blockade proved to be unfounded and, with the help of rationing, starvation and malnutrition were entirely avoided. Farming and the countryside themselves were transformed and the dismal conditions of the 1930s, when many farmers scratched a poor living from dog-and-stick farming, were replaced by government investment and farming profits. And at the end of the war there was a national sense of gratitude and a determination not to let the sector slip back into a low price regime. The post-war settlement determined the future of farming for half a century and on terms which were handsomely favourable to farmers.

But was everything as rosy as the post-war writers claimed? This book, drawing together the work of 15 scholars, is the first attempt to discover what really happened during the war. Learning lessons from the First World War, even before September 1939 the British government had decided to adopt a high input regime and put in place the crucial machinery of wartime administration – the County War Agricultural Executive Committees. *The front line of freedom* shows just how closely directed agriculture and individual farmers were in wartime, and the determination with which uncooperative or ‘failing’ farmers might be dispossessed. It describes the tensions between agriculture and the military, showing how the ploughing up campaign added land to the national farm but just at the time when the military were taking it for airfields and training grounds. It describes how the war effort was aided by tractors and other machinery but how close it came to being derailed by a lack of labour: so it pays proper attention to the recruitment of the Women’s Land Army and prisoners of war to assist the farmers. It shows how science was used to aid farming, with research on vermin control and the advocacy of silage. And even whilst the war was being fought, a vision was being developed about the role of agriculture in the post war world.

Most crucially, *The front line of freedom* asks whether the war years saw a revolution in farming. Were there real productivity gains as old pasture was ploughed and tractors were supplied in lavish (but never sufficient) numbers? Or did government merely throw money at farmers who were only too delighted to do its bidding at its expense? Were all the gains in cereal production merely equivalent to the savings made by the more efficient extermination of vermin, as some in the Ministry of Agriculture feared in 1941?

In the end *The front line of freedom* finds the evidence for a wartime revolution in agriculture unconvincing, but it is indisputable that the war years were pivotal in the acceptance of state-directed agriculture at a time when the farms of Britain were, in Churchill’s word, ‘The front line of freedom’.

This revelatory book challenges received wisdom about farming in wartime. It is essential reading for all interested in the evolution of twentieth-century farming and in the historical origins of farming’s present predicament.

The front line of freedom: British farming in the Second World War eds. Brian Short, Charles Watkins and John Martin (Agricultural History Review Supplement 4, £17.50, published 1 Feb. 2007, details from www.bahs.org.uk).

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For Review copies of *The front line of freedom or Agricultural History Review*, contact Meemee Overton (email: bahs@exeter.ac.uk)

Note: The British Agricultural history Society (www.bahs.org.uk) is the leading society for all interested in the history of rural society, economy and landscape. Besides holding conferences, it publishes Agricultural History Review (two parts annually) and occasional supplements to the Review, and Rural History Today, all of which are sent free to members. Annual subscription in 2006-7 is £15.

Website: <http://www.bahs.org.uk/>

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