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RICHARD J. HAMMOND*

BRITISH WARTIME FOOD CONTROL: SOME ADDENDA TO AN OFFICIAL HISTORY

The massive output of United Kingdom official war histories since 1945 has provoked in the profession a certain amount of comment, mostly unfavorable to the official historian. He is suspect on several counts: as a privileged person enjoying access to documents others may not see for fifty years; as a contemporary who *ipso facto* lacks perspective and is bound to lose his way in the mass of material; and as the paid servant of government, liable to develop official sympathies or become amenable to official pressure. “. . . it is difficult,” wrote Mr. A. J. P. Taylor, “to write with detachment of a department of State in which the historian has been living as a member for some years; difficult to criticize those who have shown personal friendship and official generosity; difficult to transcend the conflict of loyalties” (1, p. 7). Professor Herbert Butterfield, in a paper read at Trinity College, Dublin, in December 1948, was, perhaps surprisingly, more emphatic: “I do not personally believe that there is a government in Europe which wants the public to know all the truth . . . governments try to press upon the historian the key to all the drawers but one, and are very anxious to spread the belief that this single one contains no secret of importance . . . if the historian can only find out the thing which government does not want him to know, he will lay his hand upon something that is likely to be significant . . . there are [he went on] ‘independent’ academic historians, yet half-entangled in officialdom, controlled by the Official Secrets Act, even amenable to instructions, and not authorised to tell all the truth they know.” There was no question of crude, direct censorship but rather of “autocensorship”; “a well-run State needs no heavy-handed censorship, for it binds the historian with soft charms and with subtle, comfortable chains. . . . In certain circles near to government a kind of contagious unanimity seems to exist at a certain level, even amongst men who, if we took them at a more superficial level, would say that they were only conscious of being in perpetual controversy with one another” (2).

Nearly two years later, Professor Hancock (as he then was), the editor of the series of official war histories covering the work of civilian ministries, gave a lecture (3) in which he referred to “the creative partnership” between historians and administrators, embodied in these histories, as “something of a stumbling

*The author was for twenty years over all (1942–62) official historian of British food policy and administration in World War II. The greater part of this time was occupied in full-time research on Government documents.

block to some distant critics of 'official history.'" He poked fun at Butterfield's "fancy" of "subtle, charming, formidable officials [who] stroll past the historians at tea parties and let them know, 'with nothing more than a hint or a wink,' what they must not put into their books." He went on to explain in some detail how mechanism had been specifically set up to safeguard the historians' independence; that they had been adjured not to tell a success story, but charged with the duty, to quote an official document, of producing for publication work that was "accurate in fact, penetrating in analysis, balanced in judgment and proportion, clear in statement"; and that the limitations on their freedom to publish (about which more will be said below) had been reduced to the absolute minimum consistent with the security of the State and the conventions of the British constitution. "One might at this point reflect," he observed, "upon a system of government which accepts historical truth as a value to be pursued." Not content with this formal vindication of the "partnership," Professor Hancock went on to argue that it was a boon to the historian faced with an intractable mass of government paper; that consultation with administrators was an invaluable preliminary step toward identifying the problems with which a Department had to deal; and that in any event "distance rather than intimacy is the chief cause of historical error." The historian "needs a warm sympathy as well as a cool head . . . before delivering his Olympian judgments, he should make himself closely intimate with the people of his history and the things they were trying to do."

For Butterfield, the official historian is going for a ride on a tiger and will return inside; for Hancock, the lion has voluntarily lain down with the lamb. It seems to me that both images require substantial retouching, and that after this is done they will take on a family resemblance that at first sight might seem out of the question. It cannot be more than a family resemblance, since the two were not really talking about the same thing. Butterfield was principally concerned with the selection of Foreign Office documents for publication (something that lay outside Hancock's bailiwick) and only incidentally with the history of the war. This is a capital distinction, for as a department of Government the Foreign Office is unquestionably *sui generis*. In the first place, as Mr. A. J. P. Taylor has pointed out (4, p. 75), it is entirely concerned with talk; any administrative consequences of its actions are the responsibility of someone else. (The rare and embarrassing exceptions, like Nyasaland in the 'nineties, only prove the rule.) Secondly, and consequently, its records are comparatively small in bulk and coherent in character; they call for little technical knowledge on the historian's part and have long been his happy hunting ground. Thirdly, it is staffed by specialists who not only put a high value on the secrecy of their operations—all British civil servants are taught to do that—but are likely to have strong convictions, born of expertise, on what may or may not be disclosed without embarrassment. The historian, with his propensity for letting cats out of bags, is the natural enemy of those who prefer their bags shut if only to conceal that there is no cat inside. Better, as Butterfield says, that he should be "unnecessarily militant and even a little ungracious in his militancy" than that he and the Foreign Secretary "should be as thick as thieves, each merely thinking the other a jolly good fellow" (2). Nevertheless the historian is surely bound to concede—though from Butterfield's use of emotive words like "officialdom" it would almost

seem he personally does not—that *some* documents must be withheld from publication for a time, and that in the last resort the Government is the best-qualified—though to be sure imperfect—judge of this necessity. Such an admission of principle would in no way be inconsistent with the exercise of continuous, unrelenting pressure for “more and more of the strategic kinds of evidence.”

The sphere of the United Kingdom civilian war histories was a very different matter. It was inhabited mainly not by diplomats, a class familiar to historians, but by administrators, whose ways are not generally understood. (Moreover, in wartime the professional element among them underwent dilution with amateurs drawn from business and the universities.) Its activities were vast, complex, at times highly specialized—for instance, shipping control: its records voluminous and geographically scattered. Too much is often made, by people unfamiliar with British departmental records (as distinct from the over-rated “high level” material in peptonized form furnished to Ministers for their collective decisions) of the sheer bulk of paper that has to be examined. What they forget is that civil servants themselves need a guide through the maze, and this the historian can also follow—indeed, it might have been made for his special benefit. The device—blessed be the memory of the unknown genius who invented it—consists in making the registered file not merely a record of meetings held, letters and memoranda written, and decisions taken, but actually an instrument of decision—so that action is said to be taken “on the file.” Within the covers of a single file will repose two sets of papers: on the right-hand side the memoranda and correspondence on a given subject, with the latest on top; on the left-hand side a series of “minutes” numbered consecutively in chronological order, in which officials write their recommendations or decisions as the case may be. Thus there is built up within the file a detailed history of the matter in question, which travels round the office to each person involved—including the Minister or the Permanent Secretary if the importance of a decision warrants their intervention. Of course the registered files may not tell the whole story; there is always a residuum of secret or delicate topics that gets diverted to high officials’ personal papers or may not be written down at all. Moreover, wartime staff shortage in registries and the advent of temporary administrators—especially from commerce—who brought with them their own idiosyncratic ways of conducting business, between them at times brought a fine confusion into the system. But sufficient of it remained operative to allow the historian to penetrate well into the labyrinth, even though he might have to use patience and ingenuity to get to its center.

Side by side with unearthing the material goes the problem of making it make sense. In the earliest days of investigation into food control a temporary civil servant was heard to refer scornfully to the historian’s “archaeological” preoccupation with origins. The analogy was unconsciously apt, for the archaeologist’s main concern with the artifacts from a dig is to determine what they were for—or, as R. G. Collingwood would put it, what thought lay behind them. As I suggested earlier, diplomatic documents are at any rate comparatively transparent, falling as they do within the historian’s vicarious experience. Those of war-economic planning and administration are often highly opaque, not only because they may deal with technical problems requiring expert knowledge alien to most

historians, but because they often represent men groping in the dark with what is unfamiliar or imperfectly understood. Situations like these present an especial challenge to the historian, who is worse off in one way than the original actors; they may have managed to take some sort of action without thorough knowledge of what it was they were trying to do, whereas he will have to have grasped this before he can present an intelligible, let alone a critical, reconstruction of their efforts. For him at least, there can be no "muddling through"; hence he is bound, as I have written elsewhere (5, p. xii), to try and think out many of their problems afresh.

So far as the history of British wartime food control is concerned, this quest for intelligibility was rendered incomparably easier by the early start that was made—before the scent was cold—and by the readiness of people in the Ministry of Food to talk freely with the historian and give him technical and other advice. Nevertheless I would hesitate to endorse Professor Hancock's view that investigation ought to *begin* with personal interviews: "If he [the historian] were wise, he would make it his first task not to read paper, but to meet people. He would interview the heads of divisions or sections and ask them some very simple questions: 'What are your main tasks and problems? What used they to be?'" (3, pp. 11–12).

General questions of this sort, in my experience, at best evoke general replies that *ipso facto* are of limited usefulness, and at worst promote mutual bewilderment. The time for the historian to question administrators is when he has already done some homework and so can get down to brass tacks—to the specific points his quarry will be best at answering. Generally I would say, however, that the benefit he gets from moving around inside the Governmental machine consists not in direct help with his professional problems so much as in the ability to gain atmosphere and "feel"—that "attachment" to his subject matter that Professor Hancock well says is the historian's first virtue (3, p. 14).

To the extent that the work of a Government Department is complex and unfamiliar even to participants, so that, as Beveridge wrote of the first Ministry of Food, "no one was truly central; no man could see it all" (6, p. xii)—to that extent the development of anything that corresponds to what is vaguely and perhaps unfairly referred to as "the Treasury view" or the "Foreign Office mentality" is unlikely, and a historian working there is thus less liable to the forms of indoctrination Butterfield had in mind. One might put this another way and say that the very fact that his history is a war history is itself a safeguard of his independence. I shall argue shortly, indeed, that this understates the position. Nevertheless, the official historian is subject to pressures that are the more difficult to identify and resist because they are in no way systematic. One of these is the sensitiveness of the individual civil servant to criticism, whether of the Service generally or of some piece of work in which he has had a part. Quite properly, the text of any official history, before being passed for publication, was circulated for comments to all interested departments, and the historian, as in duty bound, undertook to consider them. Professor Hancock has characterized the process in a spirit of professional optimism: "Whatever the upshot [of discussion on disputed points] the book when it appears will bear more firmly than before the stamp of historical value" (3, p. 17). At best this is no doubt true; but the process

lends itself to abuse of a particularly objectionable sort: namely, that while the magnanimous may raise no objection to severe criticism, the small-minded, if influentially placed, can stir up trouble for the historian on some minor point, perhaps even over a remark not intended to be critical. In one case known to me, a very high official wrote in terms of severe rebuke about a historian's criticism of a speech by a former Minister, when the speech had not even been mentioned in the draft he was attacking. Though this was doubtless an unusual aberration, it is indicative of the emotion the mere confrontation with criticism can arouse in some minds and of the nuisance-value an offended individual may have.¹

Some of the pother that arose when certain draft histories were circulated was undoubtedly due to individual officials' unfamiliarity with the terms of Professor Hancock's "creative partnership." Most laymen, it must be recalled, are accustomed to the kind of history of which the late G. M. Trevelyan was a foremost exponent—history that is primarily not critical, but rhetorical, evocative, and moralizing; many people, too, seem to think it the historian's duty to write in subfusc terms. For some critics, the publicizing of interagency arguments was a rock of offense; for others, the unequivocal language of some histories, redolent of officials' correspondence with one another rather than the terms of Government announcements. It was necessary for the more outspoken among the historians to devise forms of expression that would allow us to convey our meaning without offending official notions of propriety. No doubt the knowledge that offended, though unidentified, *dramatis personae* (or their friends) are ready to jump down the historian's throat is a salutary safeguard against facile judgments on his part; an alteration in a draft may represent an improvement even though it be made from motives of courtesy or by way of obeisance to the Great God Balance. History is not an exact science and its expression lends itself to an infinity of shadings.

Nevertheless, most of the official criticism on drafts was fair and well taken; the remainder was at any rate instructive, and the historian by no means defenceless against it. As Professor Hancock says, the civil servants got used to the rules of the game; to which one must add that this was very largely due to his own part as guide, shock-absorber, conciliator, and educator of both sides. When one considers what Dr. Brian Chapman has called the "pathological secretiveness of British government" (7, p. 321), the latitude allowed the official war historians will seem the more remarkable.

For all that, it is awarding excessive praise to say that the system of government that allowed these histories to be produced "accepts historical truth as a value to be pursued," without adding the qualification "other things being equal." It would be nearer the mark, perhaps, to say that the system accepts the dictum attributed to C. P. Scott, the great editor of the *Manchester Guardian*: "Truth like everything else should be economized" (quoted by Taylor in 4, p.

¹ I myself once spent two hours vainly trying to persuade a senior official that a prewar estimate of shipping prospects, with which he had been associated, and to my criticism of which he had objected (5, p. 65), contained fatal logical flaws. He remarked plaintively that he did not see why I wanted to harp so much on official mistakes, instead of taking them for granted. Evidently, he would not have concurred with Sir Winston Churchill's dictum that the purpose of recrimination about the past is to enforce effective action in the present.

79). But there seems little occasion to evoke general principles in explanation of an exceptional phenomenon. Candor is not the attribute that first comes to mind when one thinks of government; and a display of it suggests a search for specific reasons. In this case one can point to the influence of an historically minded Prime Minister who as early as 1941 set the project going; to the enlightenment of certain individual civil servants and professional historians; and, perhaps most important of all, to the fact that these were *war* histories. In the midst of a struggle for national survival it seemed important to ensure that the lessons of that struggle were made unequivocally clear to posterity. The official historian's work was deemed to be national service: to have hedged it about with prohibitions would have stultified its purpose. Moreover, one objection to the publication of candid official histories of peace-time governmental activities, the danger that they might be exploited by political partisans, was diminished by the wartime party truce. The very fact of war, too, furnished the historian with a generally acceptable criterion by which to judge policy and administration.

Hilaire Belloc once remarked that one only tolerates what is tolerable. The varying accounts of official history presented by Hancock and Butterfield can be reconciled in the light of this truism and of the other, hoarier one: "circumstances alter cases"; the official historian was neither bond nor free, but elastically circumscribed. Thus the withholding of facts from motives of security naturally affected Professor Postan's work on war production substantially, more than it was expected to do when the book was first drafted; others, including my own, it affected hardly at all (except that I was not allowed to publish wartime food stock figures until 1962). Changes dictated by considerations of foreign or colonial policy were in my case few and of a kind that even the Master of Peterhouse might have found acceptable. It was in the field of comment that the inhibitions inseparable from an official affiliation made themselves felt; not that all criticism, even sharp criticism, was objected to, but that every now and then, often unaccountably, one would feel oneself up against a kind of taboo—the negative aspect of Butterfield's "contagious unanimity"—which forbade the raising of certain questions or the pushing of inferences to inconvenient lengths. Thus it was permissible to analyze the deficiencies of prewar planning in a particular sphere, but not to dilate, in the light of them, on the general quality of official thinking. It was permissible to demonstrate the inadequate character of the Ministry of Food's provision against air attack on the scale that was expected, but not to set down the inescapable corollary—namely that the United Kingdom is completely indefensible on the food front against massive nuclear attack. I do not complain about this: I merely record it as a warning to users of even the most apparently candid official history that they should learn to read between the lines.

There is one particular deficiency of the official historian—at any rate in my experience—that stems partly from the nature of his raw material, and partly from the very fact of his being official: namely inability to appraise the performance of the Minister in charge of a Department—as distinct from the performance of the Department itself. It is of course much more important, both from the point of view of the scholar and from the practical point of view, to discuss policies rather than personalities; as Professor Hancock remarked in reply to a reviewer who complained that civil servants were not named in the official his-

tories: "Pen portraits of civil servants may have their day later on; but the historian who is trying to wring meaning from those twelve million files of the Board of Trade has for the present [1951] more urgent tasks to perform" (3, p. 16). In any event, the records do enable one to form some opinion about individual civil servants, even if one may not print it. Ministers of Food, at any rate, were more elusive. Hence a postwar ex-Minister of Food, Mr. John Strachey, reviewing the first volume of the official history, could suggest that its author was not very interested in Ministers (8). This was not so, though it is true that the conventions of the official histories would in any case have operated to minimize personal allusions of any sort. We did not, indeed, push acceptance of the constitutional doctrine that a Minister is responsible for all the work of his Department, to the logical extent of failing to indicate known occasions when Ministers personally intervened in decisions; we did eschew discussing in general the role of individual Ministers. Even if discretion had not dictated this course, the sheer absence of data would have done so for the wartime Ministers of Food.

This might appear to be a sizeable lacuna, for none of the three wartime Ministers was a nonentity, and one—Lord Woolton—was a conspicuous popular success. Yet—as I have remarked elsewhere (9, p. 51)—it is not easy to particularize his influence on the Ministry's work. The appearance of his *Memoirs* (10) in 1959 was therefore to be welcomed as furnishing some first-hand testimony on this score. Unfortunately one has to say that the eighty-odd pages (one-fifth of the whole book) that Lord Woolton devotes to the Ministry of Food are an exasperation to the historian, being niggardly with dates and unreliable on facts. Small slips, like referring to Lord Devonport (the first Food Controller) as Lord Davenport, and implying that Sir Henry Dale was President of the Royal Society in 1940, are not perhaps very important in a "popular" book. Other errors, however, are more serious. The account of the 1943 Egyptian sugar deal, culminating in a generous gesture by Abboud Pasha in which he offered to give the British one million tons of sugar but settled for a loan of sugar instead, makes good reading but loses some impact if one knows that the amount involved was not one million but some 50,000 tons (cf. 10, pp. 235-37, and 11, pp. 719-20). The campaign, also in 1943, for securing extra Nigerian groundnuts by exhortation, launched by the Resident Minister in West Africa at Lord Woolton's instigation, produced for export not 400,000 tons, but less than 200,000 (more than the exports in 1942, but less than those in 1941); a disappointing result due partly to the weather, but partly also, thought Lord Woolton's own oils and fats experts, to the refusal of the Nigerian government to allow a rise in the controlled price to the producer. This rather removes the point of his contrasting the success of Lord Swinton with the "fuss and palaver that was subsequently expended by the Socialist Government on trying to get groundnuts grown in this area" (10, p. 239; 11, pp. 469-71).

Leaving aside these aberrations, it is not unfair to say that Lord Woolton's account of his activities as Minister of Food is impressionistic rather than precise. One is conscious of the avuncular concern for the public welfare, the insistence that the Ministry's public image be benevolent and faintly folksy; one perhaps understands better how the favorable climate of opinion in which the Ministry came to operate was created. But a coherent picture of policy and administra-

tion is wanting; indeed one might easily be led to conclude that Lord Woolton moved amiably through his career as Minister, only vaguely aware of what he was doing and flattered by officials—those same subtle gentlemen described by Butterfield—into exaggerating his personal influence on events. Certainly there must have been occasions, especially at first, when harmless deceptions had to be practised on him. One of these concerned the measures against the black market: “. . . unknown to everybody in the Ministry of Food except the Chief Permanent Secretary I had housed in a separate building a group of men very skilled in tracing defaulters; they were ever on the look-out for organized attempts at dealings in the black market.” This refers to the Ministry of Food’s so-called Central Intelligence Bureau, headed by Sir Charles Tegart. Its existence may not have been known to everybody in the Ministry, but it was known to a number of people including, necessarily, the regular Enforcement Division and the establishment officers, but also others (including the official historian), and was talked about quite freely among senior officials.

I have often wondered whether a change in internal organization by which Lord Woolton set great store—the appointment of a business man, the late Sir John Bodinnar, to be Commercial Secretary in charge of the purchasing departments of the Ministry, with direct access to the Minister—was not another such piece of innocent deception. Sir Henry French, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry throughout the war years, a man whose exceptional force and tenacity had brought him from the very bottom of the civil service hierarchy to the top-most level, acquiesced in this proposal, which he “hated, and told me so” (10, p. 203). He afterwards became reconciled to it; why, it is easy to see if one studies the record in detail. Sir John Bodinnar, it is clear, seldom if ever asserted himself: aware, doubtless, of the delicate position in which he was placed, he deferred on the one hand to Sir Henry, on the other to the experts nominally subordinate to himself. It is difficult to see how he could have acted otherwise, since (*pace* Lord Woolton) procurement could not really be separated from the rest of the Ministry’s activities and, by mid-1941, when this change was made, was as much diplomatic as commercial. What one would like to know, purely as a sidelight on the personalities concerned, is who was really responsible for recommending the appointment of this particular businessman.

The point is the more interesting because Mr. Strachey, in the review already referred to, suggested that Lord Woolton’s principal contribution to food control lay in just this: “he made good appointments.” In point of fact, most of the top posts in the Ministry of Food, whether of administrators or trade directors, had already been filled by the Food (Defence Plans) Department, in the days when Lord Woolton, as he himself discloses (10, p. 179), rated no higher in official eyes than a prospective Area Meat and Livestock Officer for the North Western Region of England—in which his business interests lay and in which he was best known. There were some changes, and some new appointments, during his three-and-a-half-years’ tenure: none (I would say) of the first importance except that of Mr. R. H. (now Lord) Brand and his team at the British Food Mission in Washington; none in which one can detect a personal flair for picking the right man; one at least which was misguided. The (doubtless) competent business man who was made Director of Fish in June 1941 had no knowledge of the

industry he had to control or of the statutory and prudential limitations that surround Government Departments even in wartime, and his operations went right to producing a second fish fiasco, more disastrous than that of 1939 (12, pp. 26-31). Indeed, it was not until the end of 1941, when Lord Woolton had been in the saddle for more than eighteen months, that the Ministry of Food could be said to display sureness of touch over the whole huge field of its operations.

For this the Minister must be held at least partially responsible, for it is more than evident since the publication of these memoirs that he had no very clear or positive notion of administration. He himself says (10, p. 183) "I think I failed to appreciate the difference between policy and administration" (the first the business of Ministers, the second of Civil Servants); and explains that, in consequence he frequently acted first and told his Cabinet colleagues afterward. ". . . on reflection, I realize how little of the major policy of the Ministry of Food was ever submitted to the processes of written memoranda—or even minutes—customary in a government department. This must have been a considerable impediment to the historians . . ." One wonders what Lord Woolton means by "major policy." Offhand, I can think of no genuinely important policy decision in the Ministry that is not amply documented; for many such there exist minutes and notes by the Minister himself.

One can readily understand how, nearly twenty years later, Lord Woolton's most vivid and abiding recollection of his experiences as Minister should concern the first period when, a reluctant recruit in "a political appointment for which I had no experience and—so far as I knew—neither aptitude nor qualification" (10, p. 166), he decided that ". . . I had better waste very little time in applying business methods" (10, p. 180). He found himself up against a civil service machine which had a very different conception of the function of a Minister from his own: "Sir Henry [French] did not say to me that it was the permanent officials who decided the policy as well as the administration of the Department, but it was clear that this was the position, as he saw it, and that my duty was to expound the policy, to explain it to the public, and to be responsible to Parliament for all that was done" (10, p. 171). One ought to qualify this statement by saying that the permanent officials, like the Minister himself, act in all this within the four walls of Government policy as a whole, and with due regard to such Parliamentary and public opinion that may exist. Even so, there remains comparatively little scope for executive action by the Minister, of the kind that "captains of industry" frequently take, or at any rate think of themselves as taking. The process of policy formulation within the bureaucratic machine is a collective one, in which the political chief is frequently no more, despite the deference paid to him, than *primus inter pares*.

To Lord Woolton, who saw himself as personally charged with the job of procuring Britain's food supplies and who wanted to get on with it "uninhibited by the fear of failure," all this was irksome. To Sir Henry French's solicitude lest the House of Commons "blow you out of the water," his reaction was: "Don't you worry about the House of Commons, let's feed the people" (10, pp. 181-82). The "commodity czars" in the Ministry's Supply Department, chafing in civil service, and particularly Treasury, leading strings, were doubtless cheered to have a Minister who thought as they did and would personally hear their com-

plaints. But in the end—so it seems to me—Lord Woolton had to give the machine best. In the early stages his impatience with it was embodied in a penchant for root-and-branch reforms and short cuts. There was the attempt at a frontal attack on milk distributors' profit margins, in the report of the Perry Committee (12, pp. 196–200). There was the campaign for compulsory slaughter of beef cattle, led by the Ministry's Economics Division (5, pp. 175–78). There was the bizarre episode of the National Vegetable Marketing Company for carrots and onions (9, pp. 52–58). There was the vaunted radical reform of the fish trade by a Director chosen from outside it. There was the no less radical egg scheme, which had to be substantially modified before its introduction (12, pp. 76–78). All these resulted in loss of face; some of them at least enabled the civil servants to say, in effect, "we told you so." Points rationing may seem to have been, contrariwise, a case in which the Minister chanced his arm against the overwhelming advice of both civil servants and trade directors, and came out triumphant. But even here the way in which the scheme was ultimately worked represented a frustration of his—and the inventors'—original intentions (5, p. 205), though this was not apparent to many at the time.

By December 1941 this experimental period had come to an end. As Lord Woolton indicates, and as I have written elsewhere (9, p. 52), the diverse elements making up the Ministry of Food—including the Minister himself—had reached a satisfactory *modus vivendi*: "instead of wasting our emotions in conflict with one another we were able to expend them on seeing how we could improve the organization" (10, p. 203). Interestingly enough, in this later phase, perhaps because it coincided with the period of greatest shipping stringency, it was most often the civil servants who proposed radical measures of austerity and the Minister who held them back. The struggle for a pooled National Tea, in which the Department's proposals were rejected five times by Lord Woolton on grounds of public morale (12, p. 719 ff.), shows him at his mellowest, and the Ministry at its most unconventional (where else would one high official, writing to another, say—as I recall—"I must warn you that the Minister has put a thoroughly obstructionist minute on the file"?). But though it was proud to be a Government Department with a difference, a Government Department it remained.

Mr. Churchill (Lord Woolton tells us; 10, p. 177) was firmly of the opinion that "whenever men trained in business had come into Government it had been disastrous," and that Lord Woolton's own success as a Minister was due to the fact that the public regarded him not as a business man but as a philanthropist (rightly, for the young Frederick Marquis had been trained as a social worker before he went into business). Certainly it was as philanthropist rather than business man that he made his mark on the Ministry of Food. The scope for prewar business methods there was limited more by the very fact of being at war than by civil-service idiosyncrasies; the principal way in which a business-man Minister might excel was in oiling the wheels. The philanthropic slant, moreover, that Lord Woolton gave the Ministry's activities was strictly limited; he did not countenance what one may call the Boyd-Orr view of control as the way to a new food millennium, any more than he possessed a comprehensive view of all that was meant by food policy and administration. On the other hand, the shrewdness of many of his contemporary comments on his Ministry's business—

a fair selection of which I tried to include in the official history—reveals a sharper mind at work than one might expect from reading the memoirs. The passage of time may account for this.

If he does not stand revealed as a great Minister of Food (as we are told Lord Rhondda was in 1917–18), the reason may well be that the occasion did not call for greatness. We do well to recall Beveridge's reminder (6, p. 333): "The story of British Food Control . . . cannot fittingly be told in Ercles' vein. . . . The work . . . had to be done and might be done well or badly. But the doing of it reasonably well or moderately badly had no decisive influence." That Lord Woolton was the right man in the right place at the right time, few will be found to doubt. He inherited, it is true, an administrative machine which had already overcome its worst teething troubles and in which he made few significant changes. But it was he who provided it with morale, a good Press, and a sense of mission. He insisted, sometimes to the point of hunting real or imaginary scapegoats, that it serve the public as well as it could. He brought gusto and a sense of fun to an austere task. Lastly, he endeared himself to his staff; his departure to the Ministry of Reconstruction toward the end of 1943 left many with a sense of personal loss such as few Ministers leave behind. (I myself was present at the collective leave-taking in the Ministry's London Office, and can still recall it as a moving occasion.)

Nevertheless, and with all respect, one cannot feel that, without him, wartime food policy and administration would have taken a substantially different course, would have been altered in essential particulars. In the first place (though one would never gather this from the highly personal tone of the *Memoirs*) many important decisions affecting food policy (shipping allocations, for instance) were taken by Ministers collectively at the Cabinet or through Cabinet Committees; many others, not so important at any rate in appearance, by civil servants, without the Minister's knowledge. Secondly, these decisions, great and small, were largely imposed by the progress of the war, so that it is difficult to imagine any Minister acting otherwise. Thirdly, the work of the Ministry demanded such a range of technical knowledge as to make the Minister dependent to an almost alarming degree on expert advice even when, as sometimes happened, that advice was more confident than secure. Dr. Magnus Pyke has pointed out, for example (13, pp. 83–84) that the order of livestock priorities for feed adopted in 1940 was unfair to pigs and poultry, which were placed at the bottom of the list although as converters of feed into nutrients they stand ahead of beef cattle and sheep. "On the basis of a return of nutrients for food fed poultry come second to dairy cows. This conclusion is susceptible to more or less precise mathematical proof"—but it would doubtless have surprised Lord Woolton. *His* experts had moved him to tell a Press Conference in June 1940 that eggs were not regarded as an essential food (12, p. 69). True—as Dr. Pyke admits—his "mathematical proof" omits the crucial question of the kind of food consumed by the animals. But it does suggest that the policy actually adopted was at any rate debatable.

These considerations apply to the other wartime Ministers of Food, Mr. W. S. Morrison and Colonel J. J. Llewellyn, with even greater force; their periods of office were short and—being professional politicians of experience—they were less inclined than Lord Woolton to kick against the bureaucratic pricks. The scope

for personality in modern administration is highly limited; Lord Beaverbrook's trouble-shooting methods at the Ministry of Aircraft Production secured immediate and urgent ends at the cost of general confusion, and the hail of Mr. Churchill's personal minutes to his colleagues was more reverberant (one suspects) than penetrating. (Lord Woolton slyly points out [10, p. 203] that their author did not publish the replies.) Sir Henry French's view of the policy-making function of the civil service is borne out by study of the machine in action: the obligatory anonymity imposed by protocol on the official histories is, it seems to me, much more than formally appropriate to the processes they describe.

One final reflection to end what may seem to have been a rather discursive essay. A perennial fear of the historian is that he may have overlooked some capital piece of evidence or have had it withheld from him. If he approaches official records in the spirit of aggressive skepticism commended by Butterfield, he will constantly ask himself whether the motives there set forth for a particular course of action are true or complete. If he should make friends with those having inside knowledge, he will often hear of occult, sometimes personal, influences at work behind the scenes. Such evidence is easily given undue weight if one forgets the complexity of decision-making in large-scale organizations and the difficulty these have in acting without reasons stated. A proposal, though it originate in caprice or sinister interest, will none the less require to put on the garb of respectability—of reasons that seem good and sufficient—if it is to be adopted. These last, it seems to me, in effect take over the decisive role in policy. The historian in such a case, though he may take legitimate pleasure in unmasking the covert, need not be unduly distressed at the thought that it may have escaped him (or that he may be forbidden to reveal it): he has more important business to hand in the analysis of the overt.

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