

Food Will Win the War: The Politics, Culture, and Science of Food on Canada's Home Front by Ian Mosby

Brian Osborne

Volume 107, Number 2, Fall 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050644ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050644ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Osborne, B. (2015). Review of [*Food Will Win the War: The Politics, Culture, and Science of Food on Canada's Home Front* by Ian Mosby]. *Ontario History*, 107(2), 276–278. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050644ar>

Food Will Win the War
The Politics, Culture, and Science
of Food on Canada's Home Front

By Ian Mosby

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015. 288 pages. \$95.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-77482-761-4. \$32.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-77482-762-1 (www.ubcpres.ca)

Most historians are familiar with Charles Tilly's provocative statement decades ago that "states make wars, wars make states." The Thirty Years War (1618-48), the Napoleonic Wars, the "Great War," all seemed to support this controversial thesis. Ian Mosby's "Food Will Win the War" provoked me to reflect on Tilly. The Second World War (1939-45) has received much attention in terms of military history, its geopolitical role in subsequent European unification, the schism produced by the Iron Curtain, and the associated stimulus of NATO and trans-Atlantic involvements. In his provocative study, Mosby directs his attention to how the Second World War affected the politics, culture, and science of food on the home front. To this end, his central argument is that wartime food policy underpinned everyday wartime experience and had a long-term impact in a "period of profound social, political, economic" change (20). In particular, Mosby ably demonstrates how the Second World War food policy contributed to an evolving Canadian identity and to "competing gendered visions of the rights and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship" (6).

But this is "first and foremost, a work of food history" with several central questions. How did Canadians' diets change? What drove those changes? How did Canadians respond to these changes? (10). Previous food-studies have directed attention to the staples thesis, the industrialization of the family economy, and the marginalization of



the *genres de vie* of First Peoples. Mosby argues that the social effects of food and eating have received scant attention and attempts to fill the gaps in the historiography of food and eating in Canada by examining the implications of how "food will win the war."

Previous analyses of military power have considered the role of food in the Canadian war-effort and recognized that food was "a weapon of war." Such studies went beyond the significance of Canada as a bread-basket and butcher-shop for our overseas allies and dependents, and also considered food policy as a strategy for sustaining Canadian nutrition, to maintain the national labour and military war-effort. Accordingly, campaigns were directed to nutrition as a patriotic duty with a focus on *strategies* and *tactics* directed at transforming the "material and symbolic realities of eating" (5), highlighting the *battlefields* of the store and the kitchen, and iden-

tifying female *combatants* as “gatekeepers of their families’—and therefore the nation’s—nutritional status” (11-12). This latter concept is an important aspect of this study as, while it exposes the contradiction of women being exhorted to embrace both domestic duties and former male-employment in uniform and industry, it also demonstrates the “complex impact that the war had on women’s experiences and identities both inside and outside the workplace and the military” (15), and on gender roles in general.

This is the context of Mosby’s essential focus in a food-centred reinterpretation of the history of the Second World War: how the mundane acts of shopping for, preparing, and eating food offers a perspective for the reinterpretation of life on the home front” (6). This thesis is developed in successive chapters. It opens with the theme of government intervention in eating habits through nutritional education and public health programs to attain the “culinary ideal” for a nation at war. The focus then shifts to the consideration of more direct forms of state intervention by food rationing and price control, motivated by the goal of “equality of sacrifice” that served to politicize many women on issues of fair and equitable prices and distribution. This is further developed by demonstrating how Canadians’ appreciation of the controls was part of the war effort and, in particular, how the rallying of “feminine domestic virtues” was part of the propaganda of service that contributed to gendered notions of wartime citizenship. How these larger forces were translated into everyday food culture and culinary practice by such genres of food writing as cook-books and women’s pages, as well as government experts, is related to wartime citizenship and postwar reconstruction.

The study then turns to the relationship of this war-time experience to debates on the post-war welfare-state led by left-wing social

critics advocating dietary needs as an essential pillar of social security in an interventionist welfare state. The central argument is that the Second World War had effected a major social transformation of Canadians’ diet and introduced a “profoundly centralized system of governance that touched on nearly every aspect of daily life” (17). An array of government agencies and interventions and a mass of messages from print, radio, and film media had disseminated a set of national rules and expectations that cut across regional, ethnic, and class practices. Memories of the experience of the Depression and the improvements of the Second World War contributed to an expectation of an enhanced post-war social security. Mosby captures this in his analysis of the public reaction to the publication of the “L.B. Pett Diet” in the *Ottawa Citizen* in 1948 (203-8). It suggested a removal of government price controls on foods and consumer goods and threatened a return to pre-war verities. The result was a mass public reaction arguing for “more, not less, state intervention in the postwar market place” (206). Clearly, Canada’s experience with state-interventionism in the national diet had affected public perceptions of the social and economic rights of citizens as consumers and promoted “gendered ideals of wartime citizenship, patriotic duty, and domesticity (14). But Mosby goes further and suggests a changing vision of Canada’s place in the world tied to internationalist duty “to build a new international order free from the chaos and hunger of the 1930s” (206). Again, food is to the fore in the prevention of starvation and hunger overseas. While politicized by the Cold War divide of communism and capitalism, this is still a sub-text of Canada’s current foreign policy interests.

Mosby’s conclusion is clear. The “crucible” of the Second World War created a demand for public engagement in developing different practices in the praxis of Canadian

food production, nutrition, and consumption. Also, it destabilized pre-war concepts of gender, citizenship, and nation and contributed to the pursuit of postwar affluence and plenty by government intervention in the economy and society. I am sure Tilly would agree! For my part, I commend this study for

its innovative insights, its allusion to the well referenced and footnoted scholarship of others on food history and social history, and its supportive images.

Brian Osborne,
Professor Emeritus, Queen's University

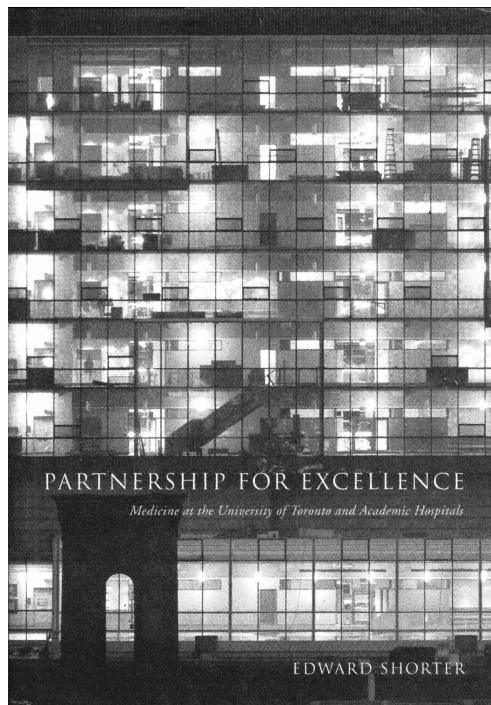
Partnership for Excellence Medicine at the University of Toronto and Academic Hospitals

By Edward Shorter

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 992 pages including appendices. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-44264-595-0. \$65.00 eBook. ISBN 978-1-44266-404-3. www.utppublishing.com)

In his epic tome, *Partnership for Excellence: Medicine at the University of Toronto and Academic Hospitals*, Edward Shorter tackles a daunting topic—the history of the University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine, from its humble beginnings as a provincial medical school for rural farm boys in the late nineteenth century to its gradual emergence as an internationally-renowned research powerhouse. Known for his ability to catalogue the histories of complex medical problems, Shorter yet again is instrumental in producing an encyclopedic text that skillfully tells a complicated story. It would not be stretch to call his 750-page book a definitive history.

Two intertwined themes play a central role in Shorter's history. First, Toronto's gradual transition from a primarily teaching-based institution to a research-driven behemoth, as illustrated by a slew of discoveries, such as insulin and stem cells, that are used as sign-posts to guide the institution's rise. The second theme made this first transition possible because it explores the institution's slow abandonment of the shackles of British gentlemanly science for the more research-



centered approach of American medicine. In order to prevail in the world of research, Toronto would need to adopt a research-focused agenda rooted in the American way of doing science. For this, schools south of the border, notably Johns Hopkins and its emphasis on laboratory science, would be the model.

Shorter suggests that the backdrop to these major themes and a substantial contributor to the University of Toronto's success in the medical world was the institution's "very intimate" relationships with the city's