

## **Rebuilding ‘real men’: work and working class male civilian bodies in wartime<sup>1</sup>**

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The literature on civilian male identities in wartime has largely focused on the ways that masculine hierarchies were reconfigured with the emergence of the ‘soldier hero’ and hence how adult men on the home front denied access to uniformed service felt diminished.<sup>2</sup> As Linsey Robb has recently argued, industrial male workers were largely ignored in wartime, and have been since, in cultural representations.<sup>3</sup> Such status and identity corrosion was demoralising and capable of having a deleterious impact on workers’ mental health and well-being. Many working men in industrial reserved occupations were denied the opportunity to join the forces in wartime and articulated in oral testimonies a sense of feeling worthless and stripped of purpose.<sup>4</sup> This chapter utilises newly-conducted oral interviews from an AHRC-funded Reserved Occupations project undertaken by Juliette Pattinson, Linsey Robb and myself, as well as a range of other evidence, including archived interviews and published autobiographies, to explore the work experience of adult civilian industrial working class men in wartime. In particular, it focuses on how war impacted upon male workers’ gender identities.

Working men experienced subordination to the economic imperatives of war and degrees of emasculation, but also found ways to express, validate and rebuild masculinity in wartime after the ravages of the 1930s Depression. An array of evidence tells a more complex and contingent story of the agency of male workers on the home front. Masculinities were expressed through bodies and war impacted upon reserved workers’ corporeality in myriad ways. Indeed, a wide range of masculinities coexisted in wartime and the job that a worker did was a key factor in positioning men within a fluid status

hierarchy. Civilian working class male bodies in the reserved occupations were regulated, controlled and placed under surveillance in not dissimilar ways to the armed forces and this could be experienced as an emasculating loss of autonomy. Concurrently, in marked contrast to the inter-war Depression working class men were now in demand and valued again in wartime with secure work, full employment and higher wages. Men in the reserved heavy industries and munitions work expressed this sense of reconstructed traditional 'breadwinner' masculinity in their oral testimonies through narratives that expressed pride in the job and their skills and physical capacities, in their earning power and in the performance of their patriotic duty as tough wartime 'grafters' exposing their bodies to greater levels of risk and stress, and stoically enduring the long working hours, higher injury and industrial disease rates that characterised the intensified wartime production regime. These dangers also included the risks of aerial bombardment whilst on the job. The risk threshold was reconfigured and the level of death and disability deemed socially acceptable shifted in wartime. To a degree this reflected *continuities* in workplace culture in which a 'hard man' mode of masculinity was exalted within working class communities, with a deepened sense of wartime patriotic sacrifice grafted on to this.<sup>5</sup> It is argued here that in tolerating and enduring the assault upon the body in the wartime workplace, facing long gruelling working hours in dangerous conditions doing 'war work', working class civilian men performed their patriotic duty and validated their masculinity.

### **Subordinating the body: the imperatives of wartime production**

Bodies are gendered: the male body, as Connell has argued, is a marker of masculinity. It is read as symbolising strength through physicality and furnishing the capacity to both protect and provide.<sup>6</sup> Work was felt and experienced through men's bodies and working class masculinity was embodied in a normative figure expressing muscular strength.<sup>7</sup>

Miners, for example, attracted interest from writers such as George Orwell and Walter Greenwood because of their honed, powerful, well-built bodies.<sup>8</sup> Muscular masculinity was also deemed, however, to represent inner qualities; a fit body was associated with a fit mind.<sup>9</sup> The capacity to tolerate and endure the toll that heavy industrial work imposed upon the body in hazardous, unhealthy, dirty, repetitive and exhausting work regimes pointed to revered working class 'hard man' qualities. Workers gained standing and esteem within their peer group for the ability of their bodies to withstand stress, face up to dangers, show no fear and get the job done. Bodies were also currency during wartime, much in demand and subject to contestation between competing interests, whilst the wartime state found itself drawn in to efforts to harness bodies more effectively to the war effort.

In wartime, a powerful popular discourse positioned those risking their lives as combatants at the top of the hierarchy of male identities, whilst in the workplace, male authority was also undermined and subordinated by the flooding of wartime factories with female 'dilutee' labour. A pervasive sense of civilian masculinity diminished in wartime is referenced frequently in oral testimonies and in the literature, for example in the work of Sonya O. Rose, Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird.<sup>10</sup> There were also other challenges to male autonomy and power in the wartime workplace associated with state intervention – such as the curtailing of collective action with the outlawing of strikes under Order 1305 – and with technological and work organisation changes associated with the shift to mass production and 'Fordism' which threatened workers' rights, cherished skills and traditional ways of doing work. Male workers' bodies were also monitored and protected to unprecedented degrees in wartime, with the state-sponsored extension of company medical, nursing and rehabilitation facilities. This reflected the importance of the labouring body on the home front to the successful prosecution of modern mechanised warfare. Previously, such paternalistic state and private company medical surveillance and

protection was widely regarded as being appropriate for women and children (for example the legal banning of employment underground for such categories of labour), but hardly necessary for 'real men'. In discussing such developments in the US context Stephen Meyer has noted: 'their work became unmanly.'<sup>11</sup>

A series of developments in the wartime industrial workplace certainly challenged traditional hegemonic working class masculinity in the UK. The presence of women on the shop floor increased massively as numbers of female employees surged from 26% of the total employed (1938) to a peak of 39% (1943).<sup>12</sup> In some sectors, such as munitions and light and electrical engineering the remaining working men were surrounded by and having to interact with very different bodies. Many men adapted to this without serious difficulty but for some men this 'feminisation' of work was felt as a threat, raising fears of loss of control over jobs, loss of purpose as the 'breadwinner' and the usurping of masculine roles. Moreover, Fordist, 'scientific' management methods, (including time and motion study), were given a sharp stimulus by the needs of the war economy. This was especially well developed in the munitions, vehicles and aircraft sectors, where labour management guru Anne Shaw headed up a wartime government think-tank on labour efficiency.<sup>13</sup> As such methods told workers how to do their own jobs better, divorced conceptualization (thinking) from execution (the 'doing' of the work), as well as facilitated labour-shedding, the dissemination of such 'modern' ways of organizing industrial work represented opportunities for some whilst being felt by other workers (and especially skilled craftsmen) as deeply threatening, degrading and emasculating. This was all destabilizing, leaving working men to ponder whether there would be a return to the precarity of the 1930s or whether there would be jobs for them after the war and if so, what kind of jobs would be on offer. This raised the spectre of what Charlie Chaplin's prophetic visionary pre-war film *Modern Times* (1936) so beautifully portrayed. Men would be just robotic, servile cogs in

the industrial machine; powerless and subject to the whim of ruthless, profit-maximising employers. The surveillance and monitoring of workers, using the stop-watch, rate-fixers and 'efficiency engineers', caricatured so brilliantly in *Modern Times*, was certainly cranked up in wartime Britain. Workers' bodies, their labour process movements and energy intake and expenditure became subject to unprecedented levels of scrutiny, control, direction and protection.

Before the war working class men typically avoided visits to the doctor unless as a last resort and regularly practiced crude self-medication, basic protection (such as muslin rags used as a dust shield) and rudimentary 'first-aid' administered by fellow workmen in the workplace. Being able and willing to take risks at work, endure discomfort, dirt and pain and not show emotions marked a 'real man'.<sup>14</sup> Stimulants such as alcohol, cigarettes and laudanum-based patent medicines were widely resorted to for stress relief, to numb pain and to rouse flagging bodies.

In wartime, medical surveillance, treatment and rehabilitation extended massively as the state recognized the value of maximizing the efficiency of industrial labour. Manpower was in short supply and, therefore, needed to be maintained. This brought the state into conflict with these prevailing work-health cultures. Health education received a massive boost in wartime, with the state attempting to shape workers' attitudes and behaviour towards their bodies. This was particularly evident in the wartime workplace where the services of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (henceforth RSPOA) were deployed by the state in a sustained propaganda campaign to reduce risk-taking and promote healthy behaviour and 'safety-first' on the job. Whilst targeting all workers, including inexperienced 'green' female dilutees, this campaign identified male workers long acculturated into unsafe, risky and unhealthy behaviour. The reason for this was clear: male workers monopolized the most hazardous jobs where fatalities were

highest and accounted for around 90% of all workmen's compensation payments for industrial injuries, disease and fatalities.

In these efforts to tackle 'carelessness' and macho risk-taking on the job the wartime state missed a trick. The campaign essentially blamed the victims for their injuries putting the onus on personal responsibility – 'he risked an accident'; 'he didn't use eye protection – do you?' – rather than targeting management and work systems. Occupational health expert H.M. Vernon argued that British management failed to foster a strong safety culture noting that just 20% of companies with over a thousand employees in 1945 and less than 1% of smaller firms subscribed to the 'national safety first movement'.<sup>15</sup> This scepticism was shared by Mass Observation in their 1942 report, *People in Production*, in which management were castigated for their 'backward industrial science'.<sup>16</sup> The situation was better in more modern companies and worst in the regions dominated by the older heavy industries where management conservatism and complacency prevailed. In relation to Clydeside, for example, Thomas Ferguson, Professor of Public Health at the University of Glasgow and Medical Inspector of Factories (Glasgow), commented just after the war:

The traditional heavy industry of Scotland - and especially of Clydeside - is apt to be Spartan in its outlook: employers and work-people alike have been bred in a hard school. It would be idle to pretend that Clydeside is accustomed to regard industrial health as a high priority.<sup>17</sup>

Another important manifestation of wartime interest in and control over workers' bodies was the extension of company doctors, welfare officers, nurses and medical clinics to all the larger workplaces, prompted by Bevin's Factories (Medical and Welfare Services) Order (1940). Occupational medicine provided another site for health education and helped to patch up workers affected by the rising incidence of industrial injuries and

diseases in wartime. Such state-imposed company medicine had the most impact in the male-dominated industries where serious injury and occupational disease (such as pneumoconiosis) rates were highest, such as steel-making, heavy engineering, dock work, coal-mining and shipbuilding. The new wartime Mines' Medical Service and the Docks' Medical Service provide striking examples. And this new layer of medical provision was aided by important advances in medical science and pharmacology. For example, the proliferation of x-ray technology in wartime enabled workers' bodies to be scrutinized in new ways, detecting TB and occupation-related respiratory ailments such as pneumoconiosis at earlier stages. For many working men this was double-edged, representing opportunities to maintain and extend working lives whilst also concomitantly constituting a new threat to their livelihoods. For example, tuberculous and pneumoconiotic workers were removed from employment for fear of epidemic cross-contamination and to minimize future workmen's compensation liabilities for companies. Routine medical examinations – aping the military 'medical' – even spread to some of the largest wartime factories. In one such factory in Bridgend, Wales, for example, over 10,000 men were 'medically graded' in 1943 into three categories: 55% were graded 'A', deemed fit enough to have contact with potentially harmful chemicals (such as TNT); 22% were graded 'B', fit to work in other 'non-contact' departments and 23% were graded 'C', as 'unfit', with disabilities such as vision defects, neurosis, heart problems, hernia, bronchitis, pneumoconiosis, rheumatism and arthritis.<sup>18</sup> Here bodies were directly measured according to their wartime productive potential. For male workers the resulting 'grade' provided an index of their masculinity, defining their breadwinning capacities.

The wartime health and fitness education campaign might be interpreted in a similar fashion as being manufactured to maintain and improve bodily capacity in the interests of war production. Certainly pharmaceutical, food and drink companies exploited

the wartime message playing on tropes of keeping fit and maintaining masculine capacities in their wartime advertising. At the same time, these adverts hinted at the vulnerability of bodies to infection, breakdown, burn-out, accidents and fatigue. 'Keeping at it' took its toll on workers' bodies. There was a growing recognition that stress was significant within the wartime reserved occupations as well as within the military. A special investigation into 'neuroses in industry' was established by the government research agency the Industrial Health Research Board in 1944. It reported that of 3000 workers in thirteen wartime engineering factories 8% had a form of disabling neurosis and 16% minor forms, with a quarter to a third of all illness absence caused by this.<sup>19</sup> Mental health was stigmatized, with stress and depression widely considered within working class culture to be something that 'real men' did not experience. Whilst clearly widespread across the civilian population in wartime stress was rarely admitted in male workers' autobiographical accounts or articulated in oral testimonies. Clydeside war worker Willie Dewar commented: 'You never thought about stress then. You just carried on.'<sup>20</sup>

For civilian working men, all this could be emasculating; eating away at their sense of self and independence whilst narrowing their initiative and diminishing their right to deploy their bodies (and neglect and abuse them) as they thought fit, without interference. Much of the tightened wartime surveillance and control over civilian bodies applied to all workers (men and women) but gender influenced how they were felt and perceived. This was because of the prevailing sexual division of labour and the meanings and values attached to industrial work (and especially heavy industrial work such as mining, steel and shipbuilding) as a site for the forging and sustenance of masculinity, including toughness, endurance and physicality.

### **Reconstructing the body: rebuilding masculinities in the wartime workplace**



The Second World War clearly challenged civilian working class masculinities in profound ways. Concurrently, however, wartime developments enabled the strengthening of civilian masculinities, whilst working men were active agents in responding, mediating and shaping their own destinies. Fundamentally, the war provided men with jobs, security and enhanced capacity to provide for their families, reversing the deleterious and emasculating impacts of mass unemployment in the 1930s. This was felt in workers' bodies which again became fit and honed by repetitive physical labour processes (after years of unemployment and irregular, precarious work) and an improved diet, facilitated by rising real incomes and the wartime canteen movement. Workers' bodies were developed through the intensified wartime work regime in a not dissimilar way to how Emma Newlands argues soldiers' bodies were sculpted in wartime.<sup>21</sup> And in wartime male civilian workers were encouraged to stay healthy, safe and identify with fit strong muscular men.<sup>22</sup>

The damaging effects of the inter-war Depression on masculinity and on workers' bodies have been noted in research on Britain and the USA.<sup>23</sup> Marjorie Levine-Clark has commented that mass unemployment meant 'reliance on state welfare [which] marked them as failing to live up to the expectations of full masculine citizenship'.<sup>24</sup> The war changed this. War work quickly soaked up those unemployed (1.8m in June 1938) creating virtual full employment by the end of 1941.<sup>25</sup> The war thus provided ample opportunities for the expression and fulfilment of provider masculinity with job security and empowerment, sustained increases in working hours and overtime, an intensification of work and exposure to more dangerous working (and living) conditions and improving wage rates. Significantly, according to Mass Observation in 1942, male workers were three times more likely than female workers to be working 'excessive' hours, defined as over ten hours a day.<sup>26</sup> Now re-energised worker-providers also had the added layer of respect that they were directly contributing to winning the war. Whilst many young reserved workers

yearned for the forces, their role in wartime production raised their importance and status and eroded the subordination and demoralisation which had been such a feature of working lives in the 1930s Depression in many areas of the country.

How was this articulated in oral testimonies and autobiographies? Stories ranged from the frustrated combatant craving to be in uniform and expressing a poignant sense of diminished masculinity to narratives where emasculation simply did not feature – and our interview cohort of 56 were exactly split down the middle in this respect. Commonly in oral interviews men asserted their masculinity in ‘hard graft’ stories of their endurance of tough working conditions, working long hours in intensified, dangerous wartime work.

D.C.M. Howe, an aircraft fitter at Vickers Aviation, recalled:

Once we started then there were no days off at all. It was seven days a week for days and days on end ... But everyone really got down to it. It was amazing the amount of work ... We used to churn out 24, 25 aircraft in one small place like that ... in a week.<sup>27</sup>

William Ryder, who worked at Woolwich Arsenal, recalled how keen men were for extra hours: ‘I only had two Christmas Days off during the war . . . We often started at six o’clock in the morning and sometimes it was six o’clock at night before you got away and one or two occasions we worked all night.’<sup>28</sup> In an interview conducted for the ‘Voices from the Home Front’ oral history project shipyard worker, Ted Boyle, referred to the war as a ‘nerve-wracking time’,<sup>29</sup> whilst in an Imperial War Museum interview wartime coal miner Henry Barrett recollected: ‘I’ve never seen work like it ... you shovelled coal. You shovelled coal as fast as possible ... It was mad down there’.<sup>30</sup> Some bodies gave up under the strain. In another ‘Voices from the Home Front’ interview Fred Clark, an aircraft wood machinist, recalled: ‘I collapsed meself. 1941. Ulcerated throat and tonsils. Which the doctor said was the first sign of a nervous

breakdown. It was the hours we was putting in ... We wasn't tired, we was just bloody walking dead!' <sup>31</sup> Aircraft factory worker Derek Sims recalled the numbing graft and fatigue of wartime: 'The long, the hours were ... oh they were, they were killers really. ... Yeah, it was, it was very heavy pressure.'<sup>32</sup> Sims recalled his father falling asleep at the dinner table from exhaustion and expressed his toughness and youthful masculine fortitude, by noting of the work conditions: 'we coped with them'. Evident in these personal testimonies are conscious attempts by narrators to define their masculinity by highlighting the pressures of wartime work and other 'duties' on their bodies, the sacrifices that had to be made and the tough conditions that had to be tolerated. They were telling us that hard graft was a manly responsibility and their contribution to the war. Masculinity was endorsed through such sacrifice.

Productive bodies tolerating long working hours and dangerous conditions commanded high wages. During the war male industrial workers earned considerably more than soldiers and whilst there was some wage levelling by gender and skill, at the end of the war wide margins persisted, with male workers still earning almost twice that of female workers.<sup>33</sup> This reversed the fortunes of the most vulnerable groups of male industrial employees during the 1930s recession. Coal miners, for example, rose up the wage league table after dropping back sharply in the 1930s. Thomas Carmichael, a wartime Merchant ship engineer, recalled his wages and war bonus: 'Oh, I was quids in, I was really in the money by that time.'<sup>34</sup> Shipyard worker Charles Lamb recalled with some pride buying his first wallet and being able to save £25 in it over a year during the war.<sup>35</sup> This created some resentment that workers were earning more than soldiers: 'That was a wee bit of a sore point with the Army people' Glasgow draughtsman Willie Dewar recalled.<sup>36</sup> John Thomas Murphy claimed in his 1942 autobiography *Victory Production* that 'it is impossible to move among the soldiers and sailors and airmen of all ranks without hearing scathing

comments on the civilian population: on the munition workers who take home £10 to £15 a week.<sup>37</sup> And wages rose fastest for those manual workers directly doing war-related work. One survey found manual workers' wages had risen by 71% whereas office and administrative staff salaries only rose by 10%.<sup>38</sup>

The regular and fat wage packet was the outward symbol of reconstructed civilian masculinity in wartime. Harry McGregor, a railway engineering worker, made repeated references to higher earnings: 'It was all about money ... I preferred to be in a reserved occupation, you know, because I think the wages were two shillings a day or something like that in the Army, you know. And I was earning more at Hyde Park'. He reinforced this preference with the comment: 'I think most of the Army thought, wished that they were in a reserved occupation.'<sup>39</sup> Similarly, wartime worker Jack Jones reflected in his autobiography:

In many cases it was six, seven days a week of work. I suppose it could be argued that they were doing well financially out of it ... But there was no feeling that it would have been better in the Forces, or alternatively that people were shirking going in the Forces. Young men who were eligible went in, and those who were required to work in the factories, and it was a question of were required, it was essential work in the factories, had to work hard, and long hours. But it wasn't exactly a gift, not to go in the Forces.<sup>40</sup>

The testimonies of McGregor and Jones suggest a considerable degree of comfort in their reserved occupation status and male identities. There is little or no sense of emasculation on display here.

Whilst many young reserved men felt that being in uniform was the only acceptable manly role in wartime, civilian masculinity was validated by reference to bodily attributes,

experience and dexterities: skill; physical prowess; courage; and technical and scientific expertise. These were qualities that were much in demand by the intensified war economy and this in turn enhanced the economic and social value of such men. Without regular work in the Depression many workers' bodies had atrophied – or 'gone soft' as the novelist George Blake put it in *Shipbuilders* (1936). War work enabled muscles to be honed and workers to again be able to extract maximum capital out of their experience, physical strength and capacities and their socialisation into and ability to tolerate hazardous labour processes. Moreover, the wartime dilutees (replacement labour), male and female, required experienced workers to train them and this drew those 'unemployable' older men back in to the workplace. Now these older men were *somebody* again, with war work providing a sense of identity, purpose, belonging and status. The same applied to the many formerly unemployed disabled male workers drawn back into the workplace as a consequence of wartime demands for labour.<sup>41</sup> As Julie Anderson's work has shown, the massive extension of rehabilitation treatment and facilities in wartime (including at the requisitioned Gleneagles Hotel in Scotland for miners) enabled the re-masculinisation of damaged, disabled and compromised bodies.<sup>42</sup> Concurrently, compensation systems and pensions for injury and death of civilians (in the workplace and by bombing) became equalised with the armed forces.<sup>43</sup> This economic validation facilitated the reconstruction of earning power as 'breadwinners', provided enhanced state benefits that replaced the wage for those disabled or widowed, and officially endorsed the idea of an equality of sacrifice in wartime between combatants and civilians.

The war also brought demands for technical skills and for supervision, management and leadership, with upward promotion common for working men from semi-skilled and skilled positions to those of chargehand, foreman, superintendent and, in some cases, manager. With such upgrading, masculine status was enhanced. A deep sense of pride and

achievement in being able to apply their skills, experience and physical capacities to useful war work was very evident across many oral testimonies. Charles Lamb for example commented: ‘They needed shipbuilders, I mean, they, anybody I suppose could fire a rifle, but ... there wasnae any, everybody that could work in a shipyard’.<sup>44</sup> John Allen spoke passionately about the ‘art’ of shipbuilding<sup>45</sup> while shipbuilding worker Alexander Davidson recalled: ‘We took pride in our work, you know. And it had to be good. I mean, you couldn’t be slovenly about something that men’s lives depended on’.<sup>46</sup> V.S. Pritchett’s official history of the shipyards, published in 1946, praises the wartime contribution of the shipbuilders and starkly represents the hegemonic masculinity of such workers.<sup>47</sup> In a similar vein, coal miner William Ramage recalled how he had worked a particularly difficult seam:

I did that for a long time. I was good at it too. That, thirty feet took a bit o’ shifting. There were some o’ the lads that, out by, they wondered why, basically we were making more money than them, you know. One or, one or two o’ them tried it, oh, they were lost. You needed the strength, the skill, the know-how ... It was tough, but it was very rewarding in the fact that we knew we were good at what we could do.<sup>48</sup>

Ramage’s sense of pride in the job, his independence and confidence in his masculine prowess as a producer is evident here. He also alludes to the competitive environment that co-existed with camaraderie within male working class culture. Men strove to produce more than one another; to be the ‘top dog’.

The bodily sacrifice of reserved men in coal mines, steel works and shipyards enabled civilian men to represent themselves as heroic ‘hard men’ making a pivotal contribution to the war effort. Bombing raids added to the risk for workers and enabled the construction of a narrative that emphasised that like soldiers they also faced up to

danger and risk. Peter Henderson, President of the Scottish Trade Union Congress, said of miners in 1943: 'He too is a warrior facing danger every day of his life, his battle being fought under dangerous conditions. Hundreds are wounded daily and at least five are killed on each working day.'<sup>49</sup> The use of the terms 'warrior' and 'battle' linked the work of the miners to the war effort. And risks did rise substantially: work-related fatal accidents rose 28% and non-fatal accidents increased more than 50% during the war.<sup>50</sup> The blackout made matters worse, degrading further the environmental pollution *within* factories (because windows were not to be opened) and raising accident risk levels, for example at the coal mine pit head and on the docks.<sup>51</sup> Shipyard worker Charles Lamb reflected: 'safety first itself was non-existent.'<sup>52</sup> Corners were cut and there was much tacit ignoring and subversion of health and safety rules and regulations during the war. Fred Millican, who was a reserved worker in Vickers Arms factory in Newcastle, recalled: 'health and safety regulations, I would say were, if they existed we didn't know about them.'<sup>53</sup> In these stories reserved men were expressing a dominant high-risk male workplace culture, attempting to reassert their masculinity to be like combatants and perhaps to some extent compensating for any sense of emasculation felt through not being in uniform. Male industrial workers were socialised into high levels of risk and danger, and it became even more acceptable in wartime to mirror the risks taken by those in the armed forces. North British Locomotive apprentice Harry McGregor recalled that this was a taken-for-granted part of wartime working life: 'There were quite a few accidents. You know people got killed in there. And that was it ... You never thought anything about that really. Just worked away and that was it.'<sup>54</sup>

Interviewees frequently made reference to the dangerous nature of the work they did in wartime and the lack of safety provision. These danger and sacrifice narratives almost all included anecdotes about particular injuries sustained by themselves or

colleagues. Alfred Thomas was transferred to Scotland to work in iron forging where he sustained a serious burn to the face. He recounted his story of hospitalisation and treatment, followed by an emasculating transfer to different work, where his face would not be affected by the heat, in which ‘women were working mostly’. His narrative, like many others, referred to a different world where, in his memory, there were little or no safety measures in the workplace compared to the present day where health and safety had, as he put it, ‘gone overboard’. He thereby affirmed his own manliness in these dangerous wartime work spaces.<sup>55</sup> Glasgow draughtsman Willie Dewar alluded to how workers would ignore protective gear such as helmets, gloves or goggles to avoid risking slurs against their manliness from workmates: ‘Oh he’s a “jessie”, you know. A “jessie” was, well, like a woman, you know . . . The majority of them [workers] that was sort of child’s play to wear gloves, “oh no”, or wear glasses, “no, no”, but nowadays you’re forced to do that.’<sup>56</sup> When Americans appeared in some shipyards later in the war they were pilloried for wearing hard helmets, heavy safety boots and gloves by hardened Clydeside workers. Shipyard worker Thomas Stewart recalled: ‘you would scoff at them working with gloves . . . daft!’<sup>57</sup> Peer pressure to ‘man up’ was significant here in a tough work culture that sneered at any refusal to take what were considered to be acceptable and normal risks on the job.<sup>58</sup>

In the most dangerous reserved occupations working men’s bodies bore the scars of their work, and this too could be revered and a source of pride and identification as the embodiment of tough masculinity. Miners’ bodies could be riddled with blue scars from injuries and cuts impregnated with coal dust. Some men showed with evident pride their wounds to the interviewer. Identifying one scar Ewart Rayner was quick to indicate: ‘That didn’t hurt, they just put three stitches in.’<sup>59</sup> Wartime Clyde shipbuilding worker John Allan commented: ‘I’ve got marks on my body from working in the



shipyard.’<sup>60</sup> His narrative focused on the dangers of the job, the toughness required and the lack of any significant safety provision: ‘And you had no safety. They didn’t supply you with gloves. They didn’t supply goggles. They didn’t supply you with helmets. Nothing.’ Allan described in great detail the hazards of shipbuilding work in wartime, including an evocative account of working at heights and on staging and metal beams across the ship without safety harnesses. He recalled how socialised workers were to these dangers: ‘There was a lot of things that happened in the shipyards but the men who worked in the shipyards didn’t call it unusual ... They knew the hazards were just part of the job’.<sup>61</sup> In expressing how this was ‘just part of the job’ Allan was referring to a power dynamic that was almost taken for granted: that management expected the men to accept a certain level of risk and bodily damage as a trade off against relatively high wages. This production imperative co-existed with a work-health culture in which risk-taking was normalised and where it was assumed that men should naturally do the most dangerous work, as with the killing in the armed forces.<sup>62</sup> Men adapted to danger using their own accrued knowledge, intuition and experience to minimise the chances of bodily injury. In response to the question ‘Was your work ever dangerous?’ railwayman Jim Lister commented: ‘Aye but like everything else, you were taught well. You had to watch.’<sup>63</sup> In the wartime workplace, however, these threats were inevitably heightened.

Industrial workers were also exposed to the risks of aerial bombardment, though relatively few workers (firemen and merchant seamen were the exception) appear to have been actually killed whilst on the job. Still, in the first three years or so of the war more male civilians were actually killed than male combatants. To maintain wartime production these dangers had to be withstood, manifest, as Helen Jones has shown, in the increasing practice of voluntarily choosing to continue working throughout air-raids, relying on the factory roof-top ‘spotters’ to warn workers of any critical imminent risk to their particular

workplaces.<sup>64</sup> Concerns over aircraft production led the government to encourage working during raids, with Churchill using the phrase ‘front-line civilian’ to valorise such behaviour through what Jones has called ‘positive labelling’.<sup>65</sup> The persistent focus on air raids in oral testimonies represents a desire to draw upon well-worn tropes of wartime. However, as with the heightened risk of work-related accidents, injuries, breakdown, stress and disease, these evocative narratives of bomb damage, ‘near misses’ and the risk to life and limb of aerial bombing also served to discursively reconstruct masculinities which may have been threatened by reserved men’s lesser status as non-combatants.

Occupational injury and disease rates also increased sharply for women workers during the war. However, the persisting sexual division of labour through the war meant that the risks were different in nature – something endorsed by a chauvinist workplace culture and legitimised by a patriarchal state which retained protective legislation that discriminated against women (as with the ban on employment underground). Female labour was predominately deployed in *subordinate* positions to men in the wartime workplace and the use of their bodies was *restricted* compared to men. In this respect, the superiority of men may well have been deepened by the controlling relationships they exerted over women in the workplace during wartime. Despite significant changes and transgressions, the traditional sexual division of labour remained largely intact during wartime even on the home front. Whilst women took over many men’s jobs across the economy there continued to be large swathes of work, including coal mining, iron and steel works, the railways, docks, heavy engineering, construction and much of shipbuilding, which remained almost totally monopolised by men and continued to be regarded as ‘men’s work’ throughout the war. There continued to be a dangerous work ‘taboo’ which excluded women from the most hazardous and chronically unhealthy and dirty jobs –

including coal mines – which were culturally deemed to be only suitable for men, even during the wartime emergency labour ‘crisis’.

Working class masculinity was also affirmed by reference in oral testimonies to their physical superiority over ‘weaker’ women and over other ‘lesser’ men with less capable bodies.<sup>66</sup> Blue collar manual workers looked down on office workers as effeminate ‘sissies’ – these were ‘pen-pushers’ and ‘gentlemen’s trades’, not doing a real ‘man’s work’ and incapable of a hard day’s physical graft.<sup>67</sup> And manual workers’ status was enhanced in wartime by the greater value placed on physically making things. Thus blue collar workers’ wages rose faster than white collar wages in wartime. Middle class male dilutees had to earn trust and were widely considered as less able. Bevin Boy Roy Deeley recalled: ‘And any hard work some of them would sort of take it off you because we were a bit softer than they were. They were quite tough.’<sup>68</sup> Significantly, William Ryder also expressed his ‘hegemonic’ masculinity by positioning himself in relation to what he regarded as more effeminate middle class male dilutees, commenting: ‘We had to knock them in to shape.’<sup>69</sup> His narrative positioned Ryder as superior, nearer the top of the work hierarchy and affirmed his masculinity in contrast to women workers and other ‘softer’ white-collar employees who were considered less manly.

For working class men, standing up for your rights in work – including facing up to the bosses – was another important marker of masculinity. This signalled toughness, independence and autonomy. Scottish coalminer and union official Alec Mills commented: ‘If you were a weak man you would have did what the boss said’.<sup>70</sup> Talking about his father who was a foundry worker in Falkirk and ‘very red’ Tom Myles recalled: ‘God help the boss that came and interfered with his work.’<sup>71</sup> Collective organisation was a powerful tool to maintain dignity at work and extend workers’ rights. Historically, trade unions were capable of enabling breadwinner masculinity by negotiating higher wage rates and by

keeping women out of skilled jobs, as Cynthia Cockburn's study of the printing trade and Sian Reynolds' account of Scottish bookbinders demonstrate.<sup>72</sup> Unions were strong proponents of the family wage and the ideal of the male breadwinner. Collective organisation – being 'part of the union' – critically bolstered working class masculinity and industrial action, including striking, could be directly associated with manliness, whilst non-unionism ('scabs') was denigrated as effeminate.<sup>73</sup> Wartime circumstances reversed the inter-war collapse in trade unionism. The incidence of strikes, albeit usually short in duration, also rose in wartime, despite their illegality. UK union membership rose from a nadir of less than 4.5m in 1933 to 8m in 1945.<sup>74</sup> The British trade union movement in wartime continued to be dominated by men; a club run by men largely with male interests at its core, as evidenced by lukewarm support for ideas such as equal pay, abolition of the marriage bar and equal access to all jobs. For blue collar workers, the revival of their trade unions and particularly the extension of collective bargaining to the shop floor in wartime (with the proliferation of shop stewards and the Joint Production Committees) were other important ways in which working class masculinities were rebuilt after the ravages of the inter-war Depression. This provided the basis for the entrenchment of the male-dominated trade union movement into British economic and political life in the immediate post-war decades up to the 1970s.

## **Conclusion**

In the hierarchy of wartime masculinities the soldier hero stood at the top whilst reserved men prevented from leaving their jobs inhabited a culturally subordinate or defensive masculinity. But this was negotiated and mediated in a fluid and dynamic fashion by male workers, whilst wartime circumstances provided the backcloth for the re-forging of traditional breadwinner masculinities. How these civilian working men navigated and

narrated this period in their lives when their manly status was under threat has been the subject of this chapter. In critically engaging with the emasculation thesis that dominates current thinking on male identities on the home front in wartime it is argued here that what has been overlooked is the extent to which the war facilitated the reconstruction of traditional breadwinner masculinity that had been so corroded by the Depression. Those who had directly experienced the precarious nature of work, vulnerability of labour markets, loss of employment, low wages (and related poverty), loss of power and autonomy (and the commensurate empowerment of the bosses) and the loss of dignity at work that this entailed were most likely to feel and express this sense of restored breadwinner masculinity in wartime. For reserved men the war brought job security, full employment, economic status, fat wage packets and the enhanced status associated with producing munitions, coal, steel, ships and other products that were vital to the war effort. A sense of pride in their bigger wage packets, their occupational skills and knowledge, physical and mental capacities, the ability to endure long, gruelling working hours and a 'speeded-up', more intense pace of work provided mechanisms for sustained and re-forged masculinities. Crucially the efforts of men in the workplace were also valorised by reference to the risks and dangers they faced in an intensified wartime work regime with higher accidents, industrial disease and exposure to the risk of bombing.

A recurring way of expressing this in oral narratives was as patriotic 'grafters' willing to make sacrifices and expose their bodies to risks to support the war effort. They distanced themselves discursively from effeminate cowardly 'shirkers'. Reserved men's status as tough, resilient, indispensable 'skilled workers' and 'experienced labourers' provided some compensation for not being combatants. In their oral testimonies, recurring tropes were the heightened dangers and risks that they faced and a narrative of patriotic masculinity. A close association was articulated between their industrial work and the

successful prosecution of the war effort. As wartime docker William McNaul recalled: ‘Well I was doing my bit for the war effort. That’s what we were doing.’<sup>75</sup> Reserved male industrial workers on the home front in wartime put their bodies on the line and in the process underlined their masculine capacities, demonstrating that, like combatants, they were ‘real men’.

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<sup>1</sup> For an extended discussion of the issues aired here see J. Pattinson, A. McIvor and L. Robb (2017), *Men in Reserve: British Civilian Masculinities in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), especially chapters 4 and 5. I am grateful to the editors of this volume and to external readers for their comments on earlier drafts of this work, including Emma Newlands, Wendy Ugolini, Geoff Field and Tim Strangleman.

<sup>2</sup> S. O. Rose (2003), *Which Peoples War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p.153; P. Summerfield (1998), *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp.123, 149; C. Peniston-Bird (2003), ‘Classifying the Body in the Second World War: British Men in and Out of Uniform’, *Body & Society*, 9, pp.31-48. Here pp.36, 39.

<sup>3</sup> L. Robb (2015), *Men at Work: The Working Man in British Culture, 1939-1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave).

<sup>4</sup> See Pattinson, McIvor and Robb, *Men in Reserve*, chapter 3. For a study of one important munitions’ producing region see also A. Chand (2016), *Clydeside Masculinities: Men in Reserved Occupations During the Second World War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Hard man’ characteristics in the context of the workplace included being able to tolerate tough, heavy physical work, take risks on the job and endure dangerous and hazardous labour processes and exposure to toxic materials. These conditions were typical of the ‘heavy industries’ that dominated the economy before the war. For a discussion see R. Johnston and A. McIvor (2004), ‘Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries c1930-1970s’, *Labour History Review*, 69:2, pp.135-52.

<sup>6</sup> R. W. Connell (1995), *Masculinities* (Princeton: Polity Press).

<sup>7</sup> G. Mosse (1996), *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press); See also C. Wolkowitz (2006), *Bodies at Work* (London: Sage Publications).

<sup>8</sup> G. Orwell (1937), *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Victor Gollancz), p.21; W. Greenwood (1939), *How the Other Man Lives* (London: Labour Book Service), p.32.

<sup>9</sup> Mosse, *The Image of Man*, p.24. See also I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska (2011), *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health, and Fitness in Britain 1880-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

<sup>10</sup> Rose, *Which Peoples War?*; Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives*; P. Summerfield and C. Peniston-Bird (2007), *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women and the Home Guard in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

<sup>11</sup> Meyer, S. (2001) ‘Work, Play and Power: Masculine Culture on the Automotive Shop Floor, 1930-1960’ in R. Horowitz, (ed.), *Boys and their Toys? Masculinity, Technology and Class in America* (New York: Routledge), p.17.

<sup>12</sup> P. Howlett (1995), *Fighting with Figures: A Statistical Digest of the Second World War* (London: HMSO), p. 38.

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<sup>13</sup> A. G. Shaw (1944), *An Introduction to the Theory and Application of Motion Study* (London: HMSO), p.36; P. Inman (1957), *Labour in the Munitions Industry* (London: HMSO), p.430. Anne Shaw was a British expert in motion study who had pioneered its use at Metropolitan Vickers in Manchester before the war

<sup>14</sup> Johnston and McIvor, 'Dangerous Work, Hard Men', pp.135-52. See also L. McCray Beier (2015), *For Their Own Good: The Transformation of English Working Class Health Culture, 1880-1970* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press).

<sup>15</sup> H.M. Vernon (1945), 'Prevention of Accidents', *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 2:1, pp.1-9, here p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Mass Observation (1942), *People in Production: An Enquiry into British War Production* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), pp.126-7.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 5:1 (1948), p.184. For a wider discussion of management attitudes towards occupational health see R. Johnston and A. McIvor (2008), 'Marginalising the Body at Work? Employers' Occupational Health Strategies and Occupational Medicine in Scotland c.1930-1974', *Social History of Medicine*, 21:1, pp.127-44.

<sup>18</sup> J. P. Elias (1946), 'Medical Grading of the Industrial Worker', *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 3:1, pp.11-4.

<sup>19</sup> R. A. Fraser (1947), 'The Incidence of Neurosis Among Factory Workers', *Industrial Health Research Board Report*, 90 (London: HMSO).

<sup>20</sup> Willie Dewar, interviewed by Arthur McIvor, 9 December 2008 (Scottish Oral History Centre Archive – hereafter SOHC – 050/04).

<sup>21</sup> E. Newlands (2014), *Civilians into Soldiers: War, the Body and British Army Recruits, 1939–1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).



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<sup>22</sup> V. Long (2010), *The Rise and Fall of the Healthy Factory: The Politics of Industrial Health in Britain, 1914-60* (Basingstoke: Palgrave), pp.29-31.

<sup>23</sup> A. Hughes (2004), 'Representations and Counter-Representations of Domestic Violence on Clydeside Between the Two World Wars', *Labour History Review*, 69:2 (2004), pp.169-84; C. Jarvis (2004), *The Male Body at War* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press).

<sup>24</sup> M. Levine-Clark (2010), 'The Politics of Preference: Masculinity, Marital Status and Unemployment Relief in Post-First World War Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 7:2, pp.233-52. Here p.248.

<sup>25</sup> Howlett, *Fighting with Figures*, p. 38.

<sup>26</sup> Mass Observation, *People in Production*, pp.160-1.

<sup>27</sup> Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (hereafter IWMSA), 12882, D.C.M. Howe, reel 1, 1 May 1990.

<sup>28</sup> IWMSA, 19662, William Edward Ryder, reel 1, 10 September 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Ted Boyle, <http://www.unionhistory.info/workerswar/voices.php> Accessed 15 November 2014.

<sup>30</sup> IWMSA, 16733, Henry Barrett, reel 2, 2 July 1996.

<sup>31</sup> Fred Clark, <http://www.unionhistory.info/workerswar/voices.php> Accessed 15 November 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Derek Sims, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 20 February 2013 (SOHC 050/12).

<sup>33</sup> Parliamentary Papers (1942), *Pay and Allowances of the Armed Forces*, Cmd 6385 (London: HMSO), pp.2-3; *HC Deb 10 September 1942, vol 383 cc332-495*; Gazeley, I. (2007) 'Manual Work and Pay, 1900-70', in N. Crafts, I. Gazeley and A. Newell (eds.), *Work and Pay in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p.69; Summerfield, P. (1986), 'The "Levelling of Class"' in H. L. Smith (ed.), *War and*

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*Social Change: British Society in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp.182-3; 186; I. Gazeley (2006), 'The Levelling of Pay in Britain During the Second World War', *European Review of Economic History*, 2, pp.175-204.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Carmichael, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 15 April 2013 (SOHC 050/35).

<sup>35</sup> Charles Lamb, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 3 April 2013 (SOHC 050/27).

<sup>36</sup> Dewar interview (SOHC 050/04); see also Ronald Tonge, interviewed by Linsey Robb 28 March 2013 (SOHC 050/24).

<sup>37</sup> J. T. Murphy (1942), *Victory Production! A Personal Account of Seventeen Months Spent as a Worker in an Engineering and an Aircraft Factory*, (London: John Lane), p.138.

<sup>38</sup> Mass Observation, *People in Production*, p.171.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Jack Jones, <http://www.unionhistory.info/workerswar/voices.php> Accessed 15 November 2014.

<sup>41</sup> S. Humphries and P. Gordon (1992), *Out of Sight: Experience of Disability, 1900-50* (Plymouth: Northcote House Publishers), p.132.

<sup>42</sup> J. Anderson (2011), *War, Disability and Rehabilitation: 'Soul of a Nation'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

<sup>43</sup> E. Newlands (2011), *Civilians into Soldiers: The Male Military Body in the Second World War* (Ph.D Thesis, University of Strathclyde), pp.204-8. See also P.W.J. Bartrip (1987), *Workmen's Compensation in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Avebury), pp.178; 185-98.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Lamb, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 3 April 2013 (SOHC 050/27).

<sup>45</sup> John Allan, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 7 November 2011 (SOHC 050/09).

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Davidson, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 10 April 2013 (SOHC 050/32).

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- <sup>47</sup> V.S. Pritchett (1946), *Build The Ships: The Official Story of The Shipyards in Wartime* (London: HMSO).
- <sup>48</sup> William Ramage, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 29 April 2013 (SOHC 050/43).
- <sup>49</sup> Scottish Trade Union Congress (1943), *Annual Report*, p.80.
- <sup>50</sup> *Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories* (1945), Cmd.6992 (London: HMSO), p.6; H.A. Waldron (1997), 'Occupational Health during the Second World War: Hope Deferred or Hope Abandoned', *Medical History*, 41, pp.197-212; R. Johnston and A. McIvor (2005), 'The War at Work: Occupational Health and Safety in Scottish Industry, 1939-1945', *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 24:2, pp.113-36.
- <sup>51</sup> Tommy Morton interview, in I. MacDougall (2001) (ed.) *Voices of Leith Dockers* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press), p.110; Scottish Mines Inspectors (1945), *Annual Report* (London: HMSO), p.57-8.
- <sup>52</sup> Lamb interview (SOHC 050/27).
- <sup>53</sup> Fred Millican, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 26 March 2013 (SOHC 050/20).
- <sup>54</sup> Harry McGregor, interviewed by Arthur McIvor, 13 July 2009 (SOHC 050/05).
- <sup>55</sup> Alfred Thomas, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 3 May 2013 (SOHC 050/45).
- <sup>56</sup> Dewar interview (SOHC 050/04).
- <sup>57</sup> Interview with Thomas Stewart, 10 June 1996, *2000 Glasgow Lives Project* (Glasgow Museums Oral History Collection).
- <sup>58</sup> See Johnston and McIvor, 'Dangerous Work, Hard Men', p.143; Chand, *Masculinities on Clydeside*, pp.44-46
- <sup>59</sup> Ewart Rayner, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 22 March 2013 (SOHC 050/18).
- <sup>60</sup> Allan, interview (SOHC 050/09).
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>62</sup> D. Walker (2011), “‘Danger was something you were brought up wi’’: Workers’ Narratives on Occupational Health and Safety in the Workplace’, *Scottish Labour History*, 46, pp.54-70.

<sup>63</sup> Jim Lister, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 19 April 2013 (SOHC 050/38).

<sup>64</sup> H. Jones (2006), *British Civilians in the Front Line: Air Raids, Productivity and Wartime Culture, 1939-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp.59-60; 197.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p.197.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Richard Fitzpatrick, interviewed by David Walker, 13 August 2004 (SOHC 022/01); IWMSA, 19662, William Edward Ryder, reel 1, 10 September 1999.

<sup>67</sup> Allan, interview (SOHC 050/09); R. Spedding (1988), *Shildon Wagon Works: A Working Man’s Life* (Durham: Durham County Library), p.47.

<sup>68</sup> IWMSA, 20055, Roy Deeley, reel 1, 26 January 2000.

<sup>69</sup> IWMSA, 19662, Ryder.

<sup>70</sup> Alec Mills, interviewed by Arthur McIvor and Ronnie Johnston, 19 June 2000 (SOHC 017/C1).

<sup>71</sup> Tom Myles, interviewed by Wendy Ugolini, 6 November 2008 (SOHC 050/02).

<sup>72</sup> C. Cockburn (1983), *Brothers* (London: Pluto); S. Reynolds (1989), *Britannica’s Typesetters* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

<sup>73</sup> J. Jones (1986), *Union Man: An Autobiography* (London: Collins), p.17.

<sup>74</sup> A. McIvor (2001), *A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave), p. 201.

<sup>75</sup> William McNaul, interviewed by Linsey Robb, 27 March 2013 (SOHC 050/22).