From the Front to the Farm:

A History of the British Agricultural Companies in France, 1916-1919

(Proposal, Working Bibliography and Layman Summary)

By

Thomas Grover
The advent of the centennial anniversary of the First World War has spurred historians to reexamine the events of this conflict, which reshaped the geo-political and economic structures of Europe and North America, laying the foundation for a second world war and whose effects continue to be felt a century later. The written history of World War I appears as immense as the war itself. Historians have written volumes regarding its causes, strategies and battles. Added to these scholarly endeavors are the personal accounts of the combatants. It would seem that nothing more remains to be studied but as the adage states, "where one door closes, another one opens." It is through one of these open doors that I became aware of a little known group of soldiers who fought the war with plowshares and seeds rather than rifles and bullets.

By the beginning of 1917, the war was entering its third year and British leadership faced a potential crisis. Its campaign in the Somme the previous year had cost tens of thousands of lives and resulted in little territorial gains. Troops continued to suffer from low morale as they anticipated yet another long year of hard fighting.¹ Russia’s withdrawal from the war provided Germany with more men to reinforce the Western Front, adding additional pressure on the Allied forces.² Furthermore, poor wheat harvests in 1916 and shipping losses to German submarines placed Britain on the brink of a major food shortage.³

All of these circumstances forced Britain’s military leadership to re-evaluate their war strategies and devise new ones that would allow them to continue fighting and achieve final victory over Germany. In response to the food shortage issue, the Army implemented an agricultural program whereby it would grow its own crops in France, reducing the need for

¹ Aubrey Smith, *Four Years on the Western Front: Being the Experiences of a Ranker in the London Rifle Brigade, 4th, 3rd and 56th Divisions* (London: Odhams Press, 1922), 310.
shipping. This led to the creation of the Agricultural Directorate. The goals for the Directorate were to create an alternate, localized food source for the troops in order to reduce the Army’s dependency on imports for food and forage, to assist the nutritional demands of the servicemen by providing fresh vegetables, and to provide a safe area for British troops to recuperate from the horrors of the trenches by providing rest and constructive, meaningful labor that resembled their civilian lives. Major John McKendrick-Hughes, a Canadian agricultural officer in the British Second Army, summed it up more succinctly: “We were fighting the U-boats. We were a factor in the health of the army.” By the end of the end of the war, nearly 75,000 troops were serving in Agricultural Companies.

Surprisingly, little has been written about this program, its men and its units. Previous scholarship approaches this subject as a non-consequential moment in history or in passing acknowledgment. Such attitudes beg the question: if food is such a vital component to the life and proper function of an army, why have historians largely ignored this topic? The answer is quite simple: historians have been more interested in the recognizable popular aspects of the war rather than the lesser-known narratives. Thankfully, an increasing number of scholars are changing their minds and have begun approaching particular facets of the war as being inherently worthy of study.

To be fair, earlier historical works laid a firm foundation for the study of the Great War; however, their primary focuses were either so large or so narrow in scope that the story of the Agricultural Companies remained unexplored. The first generation of Great War scholars was

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4 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 80-81.
7 Starling and Lee, *No Labour*, 63.
motivated to find the reasons why the war started in order to affix blame. Necessity dictated that this phase of writing omit intricate details in favor of a broad overview; thus, the history of the Agricultural Companies was simply not "big enough" to warrant study. The second generation of Great War scholars focused their attention on the human experience of the war. This narrow approach fixated on individual accounts of the front-line soldiers, their sufferings and the traumas of total warfare. The narrative of non-combatant units growing vegetable gardens in reclaimed battlefields during this era was simply unexciting and devoid of interest. It is the current generation of Great War scholars who have found the freedom to explore unique aspects of history, such as the Agricultural Companies, and share their story with the rest of the world.\(^9\)

John Starling and Ivor Lee deliver an informative account of the British Labor Corps' history in their book, *No Labour, No Battle: Military Labour During the First World War*. Their studies detail the structure and functions of the various labor units within the Royal Army, including the earliest configurations of the Agricultural Companies.\(^10\) Murray MacLean offers a detailed account about these units in his book, *Farming and Forestry on the Western Front, 1915-1919*. Although it is a popular history, MacLean's work is well researched and provides a thorough overview of the Agricultural Companies and their service.\(^11\) Rachel Duffett and Craig Gibson have taken time to write prolifically about food, the Agricultural Companies and their impact on both citizens and soldiers. Duffett investigates the special relationship between troops and their food in her article, "British Army Provisioning on the Western Front, 1914-1918."\(^12\) Gibson turns his attention to the relationship between the British Army and the French citizenry

in his book, *Behind the Front: British Soldiers and French Civilians*. Both authors have helped shed light on the impact that the Agricultural Companies had on British soldiers and French civilians but still do not provide details about the operations of these units.

What, therefore, needs to be learned about the British Agricultural Companies that has not already been explained? The answers reside in the questions that have not been asked. Who was the driving force behind the Army’s agricultural program in France? What were their qualifications? Who selected the land and on what basis was it selected? Who conducted the actual work and what were their qualifications? Why were certain crops chosen over others? How were they distributed among the troops? What were the effects? Above all, why did the British invest so much time and manpower to this endeavor?

I intend to answer these questions by examining period documents and literature. It is my belief that through the use of diaries, period news articles, recordings, discussions and secondary sources from noted historians and economists, I will find the information needed to clarify the purpose and efforts of the Agricultural Companies; thereby, providing a fuller account of their historical role in the Great War. It must be noted that the overall success of the Agricultural Companies is difficult to assess on account of the German counter-offensive in the spring of 1918. Yet, the decision by the British command to continue with the program despite the loss of farms to the Germans indicates that the Agricultural Companies achieved some level of success for leadership to deem the program necessary to the war effort. Therefore, the story of these units must be told so that the men who served in them no longer remain in the “No-Man’s-Land” of history.

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Proposal Bibliography


Working Bibliography

Primary Sources (Books)


Primary Sources (Interviews)

Primary Sources (Newspaper Articles)


Secondary Sources (Books)


Secondary Sources (Articles)


